

An Autobiography

By

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Early Life In Scotland

Sitting down at the age of eighty-four to give an account of my life, I feel that it connects itself naturally with the growth and development of the province of South Australia, to which I came with my family in the year 1839, before it was quite three years old. But there is much truth in Wordsworth's line, "the child is father of the man," and no less is the mother of the woman; and I must go back to Scotland for the roots of my character and Ideals. I account myself well-born, for My father and my mother loved each other. I consider myself well descended, going back for many generations on both sides of intelligent and respectable people. I think I was well brought up, for my father and mother were of one mind regarding the care of the family. I count myself well educated, for the admirable woman at the head of the school which I attended from the age of four and a half till I was thirteen and a half, was a born teacher in advance of her own times. In fact. like my own dear mother, Sarah Phin was a New Woman without knowing it. The phrase was not known in the thirties.

I was born on October 31, 1825, the fifth of a family of eight born to David Spence and Helen Brodie, in the romantic village of Melrose, on the silvery Tweed, close to the three picturesque peaks of the Eildon Hills. which Michael Scott's familiar spirit split up from one mountain mass in a single night, according to the legend. It was indeed poetic ground. It was Sir Walter Scott's ground. Abbotsford was within two miles of Melrose, and one of my earliest recollections was seeing the long procession which followed his body to the family vault at Dryburgh Abbey. There was not a local note in "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" or in the novels. "The Monastery" and "The Abbot," with which I was not familiar before I entered my teens. There was not a hill or a burn or a glen that had not a song or a proverb, or a legend about it. Yarrow braes were not far off. The broom of the Cowdenknowes was still nearer, and my mother knew the words as well as the tunes of the minstrelsy of the Scottish Border. But as all readers of the life of Scott know, he was a Tory, loving the past with loyal affection, and shrinking from any change. My father, who was a lawyer (a writer as it was called), and his father who was a country practitioner, were reformers, and so it happened that they never came into personal relations with the man they admired above all men in Scotland. It was the Tory doctor who attended to his health, and the Tory writer who was consulted about his affairs.

I look back to a happy childhood. The many anxieties which reached both my parents were quite unknown to the children till the crisis in 1839. I do not know that I appreciated the beauty of the village I lived in so much with my own bodily eyes as through the songs and the literature, which were current talk. The old Abbey, with its 'prentice window, and its wonders in stonecarving, that Scott had written about and Washington Irving marvelled at--"Here lies the race of the House of Yair" as a tombstone--had a grand roll in it. In the churchyard of the old Abbey my people on the Spence side lay buried. In the square or market place there no longer stood the great tree described in The Monastery as standing just after Flodden Field, where the flowers of the forest had been cut down by the English; but in the centre stood the cross with steps up to it, and close to the cross was

the well, to which twice a day the maids went to draw water for the house until I was nine years old, when we had pipes and taps laid on. The cross was the place for any public speaking, and I recalled, when I was recovering from the measles, the maid in whose charge I was, wrapped me in a shawl and took me with her to hear a gentleman from Edinburgh speak in favour of reform to a crowd gathered round. He said that the Tories had found a new name--they called themselves Conservatives because it sounded better. For his part he thought conserves were pickles, and he hoped all the Tories would soon find themselves in a pretty pickle. There were such shouts of laughter that I saw this was a great joke.

We had gasworks in Melrose when I was 10 or 11, and a great joy to us children the wonderful light was. I recollect the first lucifer matches, and the wonder of them. My brother John had got 6d. from a visiting, uncle as a reward for buying him snuff to fill his cousin's silver snuffbox, and he spent the money in buying a box of lucifers, with the piece of sandpaper doubled, through which each match was to be smartly drawn, and he took all of us and some of his friends to the orchard, we called the wilderness, at the back of my grandfather Spence's house. and lighted each of the 50 matches, and we considered it a great exhibition. 'MY grandfather (old Dr. Spence) died before the era of lucifer matches. He used to get up early and strike a fire with flint and steel to boil the kettle and make a cup of tea to give to his wife in bed. He did it for his first wife (Janet Park), who was delicate, and he did the same for his second wife until her last fatal illness. It was a wonderful thing for a man to do in those days. He would not call the maid; he said young things wanted plenty of sleep. He had been a navy doctor, and was very intelligent. He trusted much to Nature and not too much to drugs. On the Sunday of the great annular eclipse of the sun in 1835, which was my brother John's eleventh birthday, he had a large double tooth extracted--not by a dentist, and gas was then unknown or any other anaesthetic, so he did not enjoy the eclipse as other people did. It took place in the afternoon, and there was no afternoon church.

In summer we had two services--one in the forenoon and one in the afternoon. In winter we had two services at one sitting, which was a thing astonishing to English visitors. The first was generally called a lecture--a reading with comments, of a passage of Scripture--a dozen verses or more--and the second a regularly built sermon, with three or four heads, and some particulars, and a practical summing up.

Prices and cost of living had fallen since my mother had married in 1815, three months after the battle of Waterloo. At that time tea cost 8/0 a lb., loaf sugar, 1/4, and brown sugar 11 1/2d. Bread and meat were then still at war prices, and calico was no cheaper than linen. and that was dear. She paid 3/6 a yard for fine calico to make petticoats. Other garments were of what was called home made linen. White cotton stockings at 4/9, and thinner at 3/9 each; silk stockings at 11/6. I know she paid 36/ for a yard of Brussels net to make caps of. It was a new thing to have net made in the loom. When a woman married she must wear caps at least in the morning. In 1838 my mother bought a chest of tea (84 lb.) for 20 pounds, a trifle under 5/0 a lb.; the retail price was 6/0--it was a great saving; and up to the time of our departure brown sugar cost 7 1/2d., and loaf sugar 10d. It is no wonder that these things were accounted luxuries. When a decent Scotch couple

in South Australia went out to a station in the country in the forties and received their stores, the wife sat down at her quarter-chest of tea and gazed at her bag of sugar, and fairly wept to think of her old mother across the ocean, who had such difficulty in buying an ounce of tea and a pound of sugar. My mother even saw an old woman buy 1/4oz. of tea and pay 11/2d. for it, and another woman buy 1/4lb. of meat.

We kept three maids. The cook got 8 pounds a year, the housemaid 7 pounds, and the nursemaid 6 pounds, paid half-yearly, but the summer half-year was much better paid than the winter, because there was the outwork in the fields, weeding and hoeing turnips and potatoes, and haymaking. The winter work in the house was heavier on account of the fires and the grate cleaning, but the wages were less. My mother gave the top wages in the district, and was considerate to her maids, but I blush yet to think how poorly those good women who made the comfort of my early home were paid for their labours. You could get a washerwoman for a shilling or 1/6 a day, but you must give her a glass of whisky as well as her food. You could get a sewing girl for a shilling or less, without the whisky. And yet cheap as sewing was it was the pride of the middle-classes women of those days that they did it all themselves at home. Half of the time of girls' schools was given to sewing when mother was taught. Nearly two hours a day was devoted to it in my time.

A glass of whisky in Scotland in the thirties cost less than a cup of tea. I recollect my father getting a large cask of whisky direct from the distillery which cost 6/6 a gallon, duty paid. A bottle of inferior whisky could be bought at the grocer's for a shilling. It is surprising how much alcoholic beverages entered into the daily life, the business, and the pleasures of the people in those days. No bargain could be made without them. Christenings, weddings, funerals--all called for the pouring out of strong drink. If a lady called, the port and sherry decanters were produced, and the cake basket. If a gentleman, probably it was the spirit decanter. After the 3 o'clock dinner there was whisky and hot water and sugar, and generally the came after the 10 o'clock supper. Drinking habits were very prevalent among men, and were not in any way disgraceful, unless excessive. But there was less drinking among women than there is now, because public opinion was strongly against it. Without being abstainers, they were temperate. With the same heredity and the same environment, you would see all the brothers pretty hard drinkers and all the sisters quite straight. Such is the effect of public opinion. Nothing else has been so powerful in changing these customs as the cheapening of tea and coffee and cocoa, but especially tea.

My brothers went to the parish school, one of the best in the county. The endowment from the tithes or tithes, extorted by John Knox from the Lords of the congregations, who had seized on the church lands, was more meagre for the schoolmasters than for the clergy. I think Mr. Thomas Murray had only 33 pounds in Money, a schoolhouse, and a residence and garden. and he had to make up a livelihood from school fees, which began at 2/ a quarter for reading, 3/6 when writing was taught, and 51 for arithmetic. Latin, I think, cost 10/6 a quarter, but it included English. Mr. Murray adopted a phonic system of teaching reading, not so complete as the late Mr. Hartley formulated for our South Australian schools, and was most successful with it. He not only used maps, but he had blank maps--a great innovation. My mother was only taught geography during the years in

which she was "finished" in Edinburgh, and never saw a map then. She felt interested in geography when her children were learning it. No boy in Mr. Murray's school was allowed to be idle; every spare minute was given to arithmetic. In the parish school boys of all classes were taught. Sir David Brewster's sons went to it; but there were fewer girls, partly because no needlework was taught there, and needlework was of supreme importance. Mr. Murray was session clerk, for which he received 5 pounds a year. On Saturday afternoons he might do land measuring, like Goldsmith's schoolmaster in "The Deserted Village"--

Lands he could measure, terms and tides presage,
And even the rumour ran that he could gauge.

My mother felt that her children were receiving a much better education than she had had. The education seemed to begin after she left school. Her father united with six other tenant farmers in buying the third edition of "The Encyclopedia Briannica," seven for the price of six. Probably it was only in East Lothian that seven such purchasers could be found, and my mother studied it well, as also the unabridged Johnson's Dictionary in two volumes. She learned the Greek letters, so that she could read the derivations, but went no further. She saw the fallacy of Mr. Pitt's sinking fund when her father believed in it. To borrow more than was needed so as to put aside part on compound interest, would make the price of money rise. And why should not private people adopt the same way of getting rid of debts? The father said it would not do for them at all--it was only practicable for a nation. The things I recollect of the life in the village of Melrose, of 700 inhabitants, have been talked over with my mother. and many embodied in a little MS. volume of reminiscences of her life. I hold more from her than from my father; but, as he was an unlucky speculator, I inherit from him Hope, which is invaluable to a social or political reformer. School holidays were only a rarity in harvest time for the parish school. At Miss Phin's we had, besides, a week at Christmas. The boys had only New Year's Day. Saturday was only a half-holiday. We all had a holiday for Queen Victoria's coronation, and I went with a number of school fellows to see Abbotsford, not for the first time in my life.

Two mail coaches--the Blucher and the Chevy Chase--ran through Melrose every day. People went to the post office for their letters, and paid for them on delivery. My two elder sisters--Agnes, who died of consumption at the age of 16, and Jessie, afterwards Mrs. Andrew Murray, of Adelaide and Melbourne, went to boarding school with their aunt, Mary Spence, lit Upper Wooden, halfway between Jedburgh and Kelso. Roxburghshire is rich in old monasteries. The border lands were more safe in the hands of the church than under feudal lords engaged in perpetual fighting, and the vassals of the abbeys had generally speaking, a more secure existence. Kelso, Jedburgh, and Dryburgh Abbeys lay in fertile districts, and I fancy that when these came into the hands of the Lords of the congregation, the vassals looked back with regret on the old times. I was not sent to Wooden, but kept at home, and I went to a dayschool called by the very popish name of St. Mary's Convent, though it was quite sufficiently Protestant. My mother had the greatest confidence in the lady who was at the head of it. She had been a governess in good situations, and had taught herself Latin, so that she might fit the boys of the family

to take a good place in the Edinburgh High School. She discovered that she had an incurable disease, a form of dropsy, which compelled her to lie down for some time every day, and this she considered she could not do as a governess. So she determined to risk her savings, and start a boarding and day school in Melrose, a beautiful and healthy neighbourhood, and with the aid of a governess, impart what was then considered the education of a gentlewoman to the girls in the neighbourhood. She took with her her old mother, and a sister who managed the housekeeping, and taught the pupils all kinds of plain and fancy needlework. She succeeded, and she lived till the year 1866, although most of her teaching was done from her sofa. When my mother was asked what it was that made Phin so successful, and so esteemed, she said it was her commonsense. The governesses were well enough, but the invalid old lady was the life and soul of the school. There were about 14 boarders, and nearly as many day scholars there, so long as there was no competition. When that came there was a falling off, but my young sister Mary and I were faithful till the day when after nine years at the same school, I went with Jessie to Wooden, to Aunt Mary's, to hear there that my father was ruined, and had to leave Melrose and Scotland for ever, and that we must all go to Australia. That was in April, 1839.

As I said, I had a very happy childhood. The death of my eldest sister at 16, and of my youngest sister at two years old, did not sink into the mind of a child as it did into that of my parents, and although they were seriously alarmed about my health when I was 12 years old, when I developed symptoms similar to those of Agnes at the same age, I was not ill enough to get at all alarmed. I was annoyed at having to stay away from school for three months. When the collapse came Jessie had a dear friend of some years' standing, and I had one whom I had known only for some months, but I had spent a month with her in Edinburgh at Christmas, 1838, and we exchanged letters weekly through the box which came from Edinburgh with my brother John's, washing. It was too expensive for us to write by the post. Well, neither of our friends wrote a word to us. With regard to mine it was not to be wondered at much--she was only 13--but the other was more surprising. It was not till 1865 that an old woman told me that when Miss F. B. came to return some books and music to her to give to my aunt in Melrose, "she just sat in the chair and cried as if her heart would break." She was not quite a free agent. Very few single women were free agents in 1839. We were hopelessly ruined, our place would know us no more.

The only long holidays I had in the year I spent at Thornton Loch, in East Lothian, 40 miles away. I did not know that my father was a heavy speculator in foreign wheat, and I thought his keen interest in the market in Mark lane was on account of the Thornton Loch crops, in which first my grandfather and afterwards the three Maiden aunts were deeply concerned. My mother's father, John Brodie, was one of the most enterprising agriculturists in the most advanced district of Great Britain. He won a prize of two silver salvers from the Highland Society for having the largest area of drilled wheat sown. He was called up twice to London to give evidence before Parliamentary committees on the corn laws, and he naturally approved of them, because, with three large farms held on 19 years' leases at war prices, the influx of cheap wheat from abroad would mean ruin. He proved that he paid 6,000 pounds a year for these three farms--two he worked himself, the third was for his eldest son; but he was liable for the rent. On his first London trip, my

aunt Margaret accompanied him, and on his second he took my mother. That was in the year 1814, and both of them noted from the postchaise that farming was not up to what was done in East Lothian.

My grandfather Brodie was a speculating man, and he lost nearly all his savings through starting, along with others, an East Lothian Bank, because the local banker had been ill used by the British Linen Company. He put in only 1,000 pounds; but was liable for all, and, as many of his fellow shareholders were defaulters, it cost 15,000 pounds before all was over, and if it had not been that he left the farm in the capable hands of Aunt Margaret, there would have been little or nothing left for the family. When he had a stroke of paralysis he wanted to turn over Thornton Loch, the only farm he then had, to his eldest son, but there were three daughters, and one of them said she would like to carry it on, and she did so. She was the most successful farmer in the country for 30 years, and then she transferred it to a nephew. The capacity for business of my Aunt Margaret, the wit and charm of my brilliant Aunt Mary, and the sound judgment and accurate memory of my own dear mother, showed me early that women were fit to share in the work of this world, and that to make the world pleasant for men was not their only mission. My father's sister Mary was also a remarkable and saintly woman, though I do not think she was such a born teacher as Miss Phin. When my father was a little boy, not 12 years old, an uncle from Jamaica came home for a visit. He saw his sister Janet a dying woman, with a number of delicate-looking children, and he offered to take David with him and treat him like his own son. No objections were made. The uncle was supposed to be well-to-do, and he was unmarried, but he took fever and died, and was found to be not rich but insolvent. The boy could read and write, and he got something to do on a plantation till his father sent money to pay his passage home. He must have been supposed to be worth something, for he got a cask of rum for his wages, which was shipped home, and when the duty had been paid was drunk in the doctor's household. But the boy had been away only 21 months, and he returned to find his mother dead. and two or three little brothers and sisters dead and buried, and his father married again to his mother's cousin, Katherine Swanston, an old maid of 45, who, however, two years afterwards was the mother of a fine big daughter, so that Aunt Helen Park's scheme for getting the money for her sister's children failed. In spite of my father's strong wish to be a farmer, and not a writer or attorney, there was no capital to start a farm upon, so he was indentured to Mr. Erskine, and after some years began business in Melrose for himself, and married Helen Brodie. His elder brother John went as a surgeon in the Royal Navy--before he was twenty-one. The demand for surgeons was great during the war time. He was made a Freemason before the set age, because in case of capture friends from the fraternity might be of great use. He did not like his original profession, especially when after the peace he must be a country practitioner like his father, at every one's beck and call, so he was articled to his brother, and lived in the house till he married and settled at Earlston, five miles off. Uncle John Spence was a scholarly man, shy but kindly, who gave to us children most of the books we possessed. They were not in such abundance as children read nowadays, but they were read and re-read.

In these early readings the Calvinistic teaching of the church and the shorter catechism was supported and exemplified. The only secular books to counteract them were the

"Evenings at Home" and Miss Edgeworth's "Tales for Young and Old!" The only cloud on my young life was the gloomy religion, which made me doubt of my own salvation and despair of the salvation of any but a very small proportion of the people in the world. Thus the character of God appeared unlovely, and it was wicked not to love God; and this was my condemnation. I had learned the shorter catechism with the proofs from Scripture, and I understood the meaning of the dogmatic theology. Watts's hymns were much more easy to learn, but the doctrine was the same. There was no getting away from the feeling that the world was under a curse ever since that unlucky apple-eating in the garden of Eden. Why, oh! why had not the sentence of death been carried out at once, and a new start made with more prudent people? The school in which as a day scholar I passed nine years of my life was more literary than many which were more pretentious. Needlework was of supreme importance, certainly, but during the hour and a half every day, Saturday's half-holiday not excepted, which was given to it by the whole school at once (odd half-hours were also put in), the best readers took turns about to read. Some book selected by Miss Phin. We were thus trained to pay attention. History, biography, adventures, descriptions, and story books were read. Any questions or criticisms about our sewing, knitting, netting, &c., were carried on in a low voice, and we learned to work well and quickly, and good reading aloud was cultivated. First one brother and then another had gone to Edinburgh for higher education than could be had at Melrose Parish School, and I wanted to go to a certain institution, the first of the kind, for advanced teaching for girls, which had a high reputation. I was a very ambitious girl at 13. I wanted to be a teacher first, and a great writer afterwards. The qualifications for a teacher would help me to rise to literary fame, so I obtained from my father a promise that I should go to Edinburgh next year; but he could not keep it. He was a ruined man.

Towards Australia

Although my mother's family had lost heavily by him, her mother gave us 500 pounds to make a start in South Australia. An 80-acre section was built for 80 pounds, and this entitled us to the steerage passage of four adults. This helped for my elder sister and two brothers (my younger brother David was left for his education with his aunts in Scotland), but we had to have another female, so we took with us a servant girl--most ridiculous, it seems now. I was under the statutory age of 15. The difference between steerage and intermediate fares had to be made up, and we sailed from Greenock in July, 1839, in the barque Palmyra, 400 tons, bound for Adelaide, Port Phillip, and Sydney. The Palmyra was advertised to carry a cow and an experienced surgeon. Intermediate passengers had no more advantage of the cow than steerage folks, and except for the privacy of separate cabins and a pound of white biscuit per family weekly, we fared exactly as the other immigrants did, though the cost was double. Twice a week we had either fresh meat or tinned meat, generally soup and boudle, and the biscuit seemed half bran, and sometimes it was mouldy. But our mother thought it was very good for us to endure hardship, and so it was.

There were 150 passengers, mostly South Australian immigrants, in the little ship. The first and second class passengers were bound for Port Philip and Sydney in greater proportion than for Adelaide. There was in the saloon the youthful William Milne, and in the intermediate was Miss Disher, his future wife. He became President of the Legislative Council, and was knighted. There was my brother, J. B. Spence, who also sat in the Council, and was at one time Chief Secretary. There was George Melrose, a successful South Australian pastoralist; there was my father's valued clerk, Thomas Laidlaw, who was long in the Legislative Council of New South Wales and the leading man in the town of Yass. "Honest Torn of Yass" was his soubriquet. Bound for Melbourne there were Mr. and Mrs. Duncan, of Melrose, and Charles Williamson, from Hawick, who founded a great business house in Collins Street. There were Langs from Selkirk, and McHaffies, who became pastoralists. Our next cabin mate, who brought out a horse, had the Richmond punt when there was no bridge there. All the young men were reading a thick book brought out by the Society for Promoting Useful Knowledge about sheep, but they could dance in the evenings to the strains of Mr. Duncan's violin, and although I was not 14, I was in request as a partner, as ladies were scarce. Jessie Spence and Eliza Disher, who were grown up, were the belles of the Palmyra. Of all the passengers in the ship the young doctor, John Logan Campbell, has had the most distinguished career. Next to Sir George Grey he has had most to do with the development of New Zealand. He is now called the Grand Old Man of Auckland. He had his twenty-first birthday, this experienced surgeon(!) in the same week as I had my fourteenth, while the Palmyra was lying off Holdfast Bay (now Glenelg) before we could get to the old Port Adelaide to discharge. My brother saw him in 1883, but I have not set eye on him since that week in 1839. We have corresponded frequently since my brother's death. In his book "Poenama," written for his children, there is a picture of the Palmyra, with an account of the voyage and the only sensational incident in it. We had a collision in the Irish Sea, and our foremast was broken, so that we had to return to Greenock for repairs, and then obtained the concession

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