Until as recently as February 2025 the Nesbitt/Nisbet Society publication of "Two Ladies of Dirleton" was available online but for some reason the hyperlink was deactivated.

As can be seen the Forward states the book can be freely copied for the purpose of private research and accordingly I am doing so.

Tom Minogue 24/02/2025

Two ladies of Dirleton

Mary Nisbet, Countess Elgin

The Hon. M.G. Constance Nisbet Hamilton Ogilvy

by Stephen Bunyan

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Mary, Countess of Elgin

(From a miniature by Henry Bone, R.A.)

I. Mary Nisbet Hamilton Ferguson, Countess of Elgin

One of the most fascinating and influential individuals in the history of Dirleton parish must surely be Mary Nisbet, who became the Countess of Elgin and later Mrs. Nisbet Hamilton Ferguson. She is of interest because her story still poses some unanswered questions. She fascinates for the role she played in an age when women were very much expected to be submissive to their husbands, and because much of the present attraction of Dirleton and Stenton villages is her legacy.

First let us look at Mary's background. She was born in 1777 and was the only child of William and Mary Nisbet of Dirleton. At first sight this may not seem particularly impressive. The daughter of a simple country laird; but William Hamilton Nisbet was more than that. The family had benefited over a long period from a series of heiresses and their inheritances. William Hamilton Nisbet himself inherited the properties of Dirleton and Innerwick from his father, and from his mother he inherited the Biel estate including the bulk of Stenton parish. His mother's other property at Pencaitland passed to his younger brother John Hamilton of Pencaitland. William married Mary Manners, the grand-daughter of the 2nd Duke of Rutland, but as daughter of the son of the Duke's second marriage. She was herself an heiress and inherited the estates of Bloxholm and Alford in Lincolnshire.

Mary, as the only child of such a marriage, was a young woman with great prospects. It is strange that a family with such a background and with such possessions had not been ennobled. The reason for this is probably to be found in the staunch Jacobitism of the Nisbet family. It was inevitable that the hand of a girl with such prospects would be sought in marriage by suitors anxious to gain control and possession of her inheritance.

Mary was obviously brought up as the centre of a devoted family. She was certainly indulged, but at the same time clearly stood in awe of her mother. She comes through in Mary's letters as a woman of strong views, but there is a directness and frankness in the letters which demonstrates a close relationship between mother and daughter. Mary's affection for her father also shows, not least in her tendency to refer to him by the nickname Sir Philip O'Kettle. Mary was brought up at Archerfield for which she had a great affection. During these years her father had improved both the house and the estates. By 1789 she had grown into an attractive young woman of

twenty one, dark, lively and with a shapely figure. She played the pianoforte, loved reels, played whist and read novels. She was the centre of attraction in Edinburgh society. We can readily believe it: apart from her lively disposition, the idea of which is supported by a glance at portraits of her, she had the enormous attraction of being the heiress to vast wealth. We are told she had suitors. It would be extraordinary if she had not.

A serious attempt was made to secure her hand by Thomas, 7th Earl of Elgin and 11th of Kincardine. The Earl was described as interested in rewards, recognition and honour. Such a man could not afford to marry carelessly. He may have been in love, he may have been fascinated by Mary, but he was certainly attracted by her dazzling prospects. He could offer her an ancient line, a title, a great position; he had the prospects of a great career but needed what she could offer in return - the prospect of a young family and the apparent certainty of great wealth. Elgin was born in 1766 and had succeeded his brother at the age of five.

The Elgins are an ancient family but their estates and income did not match the status of their title. Elgin's personal horizons had already been enlarged by the patronage of his kinsmen, Lord Bruce of Tottenham and Lord Ailesbury. In 1782, he came north to St. Andrews. In 1785, he went to Paris and then spent a year in Dresden. This was an anxious time for his mother who, having carefully nurtured the Earl during his minority, was anxious about his prospects. She knew that he was dependent on the strait-laced Ailesbury's influence, which might be withdrawn if Elgin fell from grace. Elgin now manifested an interest in three directions. He applied for a commission in the Guards. His family did not consider this wise. A commission was granted but he was given extended leave. He started to develop Broomhall, which had been carefully managed during his minority and almost at once imposed extra financial burdens on the estate, and he got involved in Scottish politics, in particular the election of the Representative Peers in 1790. He tried to take a line independent of Dundas who controlled Scottish political life. This was a dangerous line to take. Fortunately for his own future, in the end he came into line with Dundas.

Elgin had already had a brief introduction to diplomacy and when in 1791 someone was urgently needed to go to Vienna, Elgin was sent. It was useful experience. Elgin returned to Broomhall and started to rebuild it in 1796. He employed Thomas Harrison who built in the Greek style. This project was opposed by his mother on grounds of expense. In 1794, in response to the Government's wishes, Elgin formed a Battalion of Fencibles. To do this, he borrowed £6000 and served in Ireland until November 1795 as Lieut.

Colonel. It seemed an unnecessary extravagance but was to prove a useful investment for his career.

In December 1795 Elgin was sent to Berlin as Minister Plenipotentiary. The purpose of the mission was to strengthen the support of Prussia against revolutionary France. Meanwhile, his mother became governess to Princess Charlotte, a role which she filled with success and which gave Elgin a link with the throne. Elgin returned in 1798 and continued his developments at Broomhall. Such a policy was expensive and so Elgin found the emotional needs, financial pressure and need for an heir were all pushing him towards marriage. Meanwhile he was given Royal encouragement to put himself forward as a prospective ambassador to Turkey. He did so and was appointed. In the nine months before he left, he courted and, on the 11th of March 1799, was married to Mary Hamilton Nisbet. Mary's father settled £10,000 on her, not in cash but in the form of a non-negotiable bond which provided interest only.

Elgin was certainly an eligible husband. He was a nobleman. He had begun a promising career in which he had negotiated with emperors and kings. He was polished and well educated, and a member of the House of Lords. He was building a fine mansion and developing a fine estate. There was some question over the soundness of his finances and possibly over his financial judgment, but that was the price the Hamilton Nisbets perhaps expected to pay. Mary, after all, had vast expectations. There was some drama at the wedding when Mary was upset and Bishop Sandford temporarily stopped the proceedings. The marriage was, however, completed and within four months Mary was pregnant.

Mary's heath and probably her pregnancy gave cause for concern, and Elgin offered to give up the appointment to Turkey. Mary and her parents agreed he should not do so. Meanwhile Harrison, his architect, had inspired Elgin with a zeal for Greek sculpture. Elgin built up his suite to go to the East. It reflected his cultural interests. He tried but failed to get Turner, the great landscape artist, to go with him. He had the Rev. J. Carlyle, Professor of Oriental Languages at Cambridge who was to look for ancient texts, and Dr. Hector McLean who was to study the small pox and plague. He had two secretaries, William Richard Hamilton, the son of the Vicar of St. Martin's in the Fields, and John Philip Morier. He had a chaplain, the Rev. Philip Hunt who became a tutor to Mary. Elgin had chosen his suite well, but it was expensive.

In addition, he employed the artist Don Tita Lusieri, otherwise known as Giovanni Battista and two formatori, makers of plaster casts, and two architects, and took a chamber orchestra from Rome. They also had some personal servants. Elgin was expected to meet these expenses, and the cost of the many gifts he was expected to make, from his salary of £6,600 per annum. Grenville refused to increase this salary, which was largely paid in arrears. Elgin had also hoped for an honour, but was unsuccessful in this. He was made a Privy Councillor in 1799, but did not get an order of chivalry. A vacancy in the Order of the Thistle went elsewhere.

Here then we have Mary as a young bride, at a time when Britain was involved in a major war, going not to one of the civilised capitals of Europe, but to Turkey of which little was known. What was known might be thought unlikely to appeal to a gently reared girl, brought up in what was more or less Jane Austen's world. It was no doubt an adventure, and Mary was preparing to enjoy it or endure it. Her letters home are astonishingly frank and wide ranging. In Portugal she met a doctor who knew Archerfield and commented on the improvements her father had made there. Moving on to Gibraltar they chased possible prize vessels. At Gibraltar she commented freely on an elderly charmer, General O'Hara, and then at Naples speculates about what father would think of Lady Hamilton (Nelson's dearest Emma). She also wrote to her mother saying she had told Elgin he could tell bad stories to her father. The Elgins were received by the Queen of Naples at a fete in the Chinese manner which had cost £6000, a vast sum then. Even before she arrived she was encouraging her mother and father to come out on a visit to Constantinople, a most astonishing suggestion in view of the circumstances of the time.

Soon the Elgins arrived in Turkey. They were received in great style. They were greeted by the Selim, a warship with 132 guns and 1200 men. Lavish gifts were exchanged in various ceremonies. She lists some of the presents she had received: a pelisse worth £500 and a gold filigree coffee pot set with rubies and pearls. Despite the attitudes of the country, Mary managed to be involved and in due course captivated Turks both male and female. On her visit to the sister of the court Pasha she sent for her pianoforte and taught the women to dance Scottish reels. Her obvious success made her unpopular with the other European women. A Turkish poet wrote "Her sugar lips are breeding smiles divine and overspread the world with heaven's shine". Mary also had to concern herself with more mundane problems. They had a large house which she had made comfortable at a cost of £2000. She found that she had to provide for a large household. She talks of 30 "Hottentots" which soon after increased to 60. She is prepared for her mother's visit and asks

her mother to bring a box of singing birds for the Sultana. Despite her extravagances she is concerned that people may have had to pay to receive letters which had not been franked. Getting letters franked by a member of Parliament was almost an obsession of the gentry of the period.

Mary gave birth to Lord Bruce on 5th April 1800.

At this stage mention of the Greek marbles begins. Greece was a Turkish possession at the time. Mary reported that Elgin had set up a staff at Athens to assess and record antiquities. It consisted of six painters including Giovanni Battista, the two formatori, and six others. Already they were dreaming of a house between Piccadilly and Park Lane to show off their collection of Greek antiquities. Mary's mother and father spent a year with them in Constantinople and left in May 1801, to return via Athens. Mary, left in Constantinople, was forlorn without them and suffered from chokings and fever. She spent the summer in Bouyouk Dere, a pleasant village where her health improved.

Meanwhile, the Hamilton Nisbets in Athens had caught the antiquarian fever. The Archbishop of Athens presented them with the Gymnasiarch's Chair from the ancient games, which despite sinking with the Mentor eventually came to Biel, where it remained until recently. They carved their names on the Parthenon and left a space for Mary and the Elgins in their "Athenian Club". Mary caught the enthusiasm. She, like her father, had been against the expense of the formatori hunt, but now she wrote to her mother reporting Elgin's glee that Mr. Hamilton Nisbet had entered into the spirit of the project. Elgin was no doubt hoping for financial support from his father-in-law. Meanwhile, Mary concerned herself with the purchase of porphyry of the finest kind, and red granite from Alexandria for building projects at home. These she asked Admiral Lord Keith to send home as ballast.

In July 1801 she reported to her mother that Elgin had received the permit authorising his entry into the Citadel, to copy and model anything they could, to dig the foundations, to erect scaffolding and to bring away marbles that might be deemed curious. A discussion of how Elgin and his agents interpreted that permission is not properly a part of an account of Mary, nor is this the place to assess the contribution to scholarship by Elgin's party. It should be noted, however, that Mary remained an enthusiast and used her charm to get the navy to carry back marbles to Britain. From Athens, she wrote that they hoped the Nisbets would help smooth the way for the careful handling of the marbles at the British ports.

One other important aspect of Mary's stay in the Near East was her support for Dr. Scott's vaccinations for smallpox. Lord Bruce and Mary, the new baby, and many of the household were vaccinated. The Elgins were enthusiasts because Jenner's father was the Dowager Countess's chaplain, and because the Hamilton Nisbets had met a doctor in Vienna who told them about it. He had studied under Cullen in Edinburgh. The Elgins were responsible for making vaccination acceptable in Turkey, and they established a staging post for the vaccine to go to India. This is remarkable when one remembers that Jenner's discovery was as recent as 1796.

Mary now wanted to travel. She planned to go to Egypt, but like so many young mothers, did not know what to do with the children. She wished she could send them in a balloon, another new invention, to her mother. This planned trip came to nothing. She heard her parents were going to Paris. She replied she would like to be ambassadress there, but was to go under very different circumstances. In April 1802 she went to Athens. They had an interesting time and their enthusiasm for antiquities increased. Mary took charge of a party of fifty to return to Constantinople, leaving Elgin to follow. It was bravely done, yet from the heart came the cry "What would I give to transport myself to Archerfield?".

By the time she got back to Constantinople, she was far advanced in her third pregnancy, and Matilda was born two weeks later. Meanwhile, Mary was involved in the family hobby of building. In an earlier letter, she had denied removing the Biel plans, and during these years her parents were enlarging the house at Biel. The decision had been taken to build an embassy, the English Palace, at Constantinople. Mary wished it had been taken earlier. What an amusement it would have been, and how she would have liked to give one grand fete in it. However, it was being done at last, and it was being built as a copy of Broomhall, the Elgin's mansion in Fife.

Mary was also concerned with her expenses. She had attempted to reduce expenditure, and in January 1802 was able to report that she had brought expenses down from £8,472 the previous year to £4,847. One of the economies was to dispense with Elgin's chamber orchestra, although its leader Polloti stayed on for his keep, but without pay. Her mother had asked her to do two things. One was to get some Maltese slaves released. She or Elgin achieved the release of 136, valued at £40,000. The other was to learn Italian which she was doing.

In January 1803 the Elgins left Constantinople with their children and two paramanas, native nursemaids. Elgin had been ill all winter and had treated

himself with mercury, which had affected his nose. He had been better in Athens, but by the end of the year had deteriorated again. At Malta they made what was to prove a tragic mistake. They sent the children home on the Diana and decided to travel through France. They spent Holy Week in Rome and Mary talked to Lady Beverley about her feelings for Elgin. Checkland suggests Mary could not confide in her mother because she was far away and because she was straitlaced. The former is certainly true, but most young women would welcome a tête-à-tête, which would no doubt be preferable to a letter. She had not yet met Ferguson and from the frankness of her other letters, it seems likely she would be willing to discuss a problem in general terms. When they got to France, the political situation changed and all travellers were imprisoned. The Elgins were befriended by Napoleon's cousin, Sebastian, but to no avail, not were other efforts on their behalf any more successful.

During this period Mary and Elgin went through a difficult time. He was depressed and she was concerned about his health, the safety of the children, and the state of Elgin's finances. She was also pregnant again. She was consoled by news of the safe arrival of the children. She urged her parents to take them to Archerfield and urged that her mother should not risk coming to France and particularly without her father. "Go to Scotland and make Nelly Bell and Peggy Nisbet greet ower my bairns. Tell Nelly to hurl them in the clothes basket as she did me" (Nelly was paid £3/10/- p.a. at Archerfield in 1784). She was pleased to hear about the purchase of Ninewar in 1803. The Elgins stayed at Barrèges which they found boring, and then moved to Pau which they found better and where they got a house for £60 p.a. Elgin, however, was unjustly blamed for the maltreatment of French prisoners by the Turks when he had their conditions improved. He was also treated more harshly because of the way a French general was treated in England. In November Mary went to Paris to work for his release, but in December he was imprisoned in the castle of Lourdes. Mary was concerned for his health and persuaded Tallyrand to persuade Bonaparte to release him from there. At the beginning of 1804, she wrote a letter to her mother saying how unhappy and depressed she had been for various reasons.

Mary had now become involved in the emotional triangle which was to bring disaster. Robert Ferguson of Raith was in Paris and helped to work for Elgin's release, but he also fell in love with Mary and wooed her fiercely. William was born in Paris on 4th March 1804, by which time Ferguson had gone home. He still wrote passionate letters. He and Elgin were exact contemporaries. Elgin was a Tory; Ferguson a Whig. He and Elgin were close neighbours, but Raith was a more prosperous estate than Broomhall.

Mary tried to shake him off and wrote saying she could love him no more. She returned to Elgin. She shared his mother's concern about the finances of Broomhall; she wrote to his mother about Elgin's nose, and she studied classics under Hunt. Ferguson meanwhile had gone to Archerfield to give the Hamilton Nisbets news and to convince them the Elgins really had tried to be released from France. In April, baby William died and his embalmed body was sent home to Dunfermline, where Ferguson represented the parents at the funeral.

Mary's emotions continued to be confused. She returned to Elgin and within a month of William's death, she was pregnant again. But she knew that Ferguson had affected her, and when Elgin urged her to go home without him, she told him he was destroying her by forcing her away. She should perhaps have been more explicit at that stage. Mary went back to her parents' house in Portman Square, London, and while she was there she was safe, until she moved to 60 Baker Street. Ostensibly she was looking forward to happiness with Elgin. She may have wanted to get away from her mother. Whatever her motives, she created an opportunity for Ferguson which he exploited. Ostensibly he was working for Elgin's release; in reality he was wooing his wife. By December he was putting Mary under pressure. They discussed the pressures Elgin had subjected her to. Elgin had admitted in Lourdes that he had put the marriage under strain. Lucy was born on 20th January 1806, and Mary wrote to Elgin saying she would not become pregnant by him again, and she became Ferguson's mistress. Elgin did not take the letter seriously, especially as he received further letters of reassurance. Her parents knew nothing of all this.

Elgin was released in July 1806, and matters came to a head. Mary maintained her ban on intercourse but offered to live with him otherwise. Elgin refused this arrangement and Mary went to Archerfield with the children. Apart from the problem with his marriage, Elgin was concerned about his own health and his finances. On the question of the marriage, Elgin wrote to Lady Beverley and asked her to intercede. As Mary insisted friendship was all she had to offer, he stopped writing. In September he came north to persuade her. He opened a letter from Ferguson to Mary which, having been unclearly addressed, was accidentally put in his mail. He confronted Mary, she confessed, he informed Mrs. Hamilton Nisbet and so put the house in a turmoil. Elgin then departed for Broomhall, leaving behind his horses, coach and groom.

Despite all this, he was willing to continue the marriage, but only on the basis of a full normal marriage. For whatever reasons, Mary could not face