

Early Memories

My earliest memory though hazy in detail is distinct in fact. I must have been four years old and I was standing at the foot of the stairs of the building in Burgess Street¹ in which I was born at 9.00 am on the 5th November 1910. I have the impression that I was standing there with my Mother and somebody else, and it is significant that what occasioned us standing there was watching a lorry depart with our furniture to a new address at 10 Dock Street². Mother, so far as houses were concerned must have had a strong nomadic streak in her as until the last house she stayed in was purchased for her at Afton place she never stayed in any one house more than 5 years. In a family of Eight of which the first-born died in infancy I was number six with two years separating each of us. By the time I arrived on the scene Dr Beveridge, the family Doctor who delivered us all, was beginning to look on it as a bi-annual habit requiring his attention. We were on the whole a healthy family for Mother often recalled the Doctor wisecrack that confinements were the only time he saw her. So by the this time Burgess Street was well down the list of homes she had occupied. By the time I was twenty, when Afton Place was purchased, I had lived in five houses. They were all in Leith. At least she limited the range of her wanderings.

My Father was a seaman and was often away from home for long spells, so far as we were concerned the longer the better, but he used to claim that when he arrived off his ship at Leith he just followed the first flitting to find out where he was living now. If he came out of the docks with a Shipmate and met a flitting he would say "Oh, that's probably Jess moving again. I wonder where are we staying now?" He sometimes wondered if she was trying to lose him. No one would have blamed her if she was. We moved from Burgess Street to Dock Street then to Coburg Street then to Bernard Street and finally to Afton place between 1913/14 and 1929. I am quite sure I was four at the time as we were staying in Dock Street when I started school at the age of five.

That day too is still quite clear in my memory. I was not at all happy about it and I can remember Dump and Chrissie dragging me along tearfully, and impatiently waiting at the Palace Cinema door, opposite the Fish quay, while through my tears I retied my bootlace. We were on our way across the town to Links Place

¹ Now demolished. It was opposite Lamb's House

² The removal must have been in 1914 the year the Great War started

School. There must have been at that time still a great choice so far as schools were concerned as we passed a few schools on our walk to get to Links Place. There was a strong family connection. All had started their education there and I still clearly remember my doleful first day in the Headmistress's class and the fact that she was called Miss Morgan. Miss Morgan was an institution. She had instituted the education of my two elder brothers and my two elder sisters. However I was not there long as shortly after there must have been an educational reorganization and a beginning of that creeping bureaucracy which in all things increasingly decides it knows what is best for, not each, but every individual. I was moved to Coburg Street School much to Mother's indignation. It was really much more convenient and was to become more so as we were within the usual stipulated five years to move to Coburg Street itself, almost next to the School. A much larger School, and though I don't remember my first teacher there I can remember Miss More who took us through most of the Primary and whom I remember as an elderly, firm no nonsense Woman. She was probably under forty but seemed old to us. In our rude songs she was always old Miss More as in the parody

'There is a happy School
Far far away
Where old Miss More stands
Teaching like a fool.
If I had her on my knee
I would give her one two three
Then she wouldna punish me
Twenty times a day"

We were passed by her in our final year to Mr. Moncur who had to prepare us for secondary education. I was a pupil at Coburg Street during the years of the First World War. The Water of Leith was on the other side of the Street and on its banks was Hawthorns shipyard. Our studies day by day were accompanied by the sound of the hammering of riveters on the steel plates of the latest ship of a quite considerable fleet of coaster type ships, which were born there. It also boasted the loudest and shrillest work horn in Leith. It blew every time a shift started or finished. I don't know why the whole of Leith had to know about it. On the question of noise pollution of which we are today so sensitive I often think that noisy as modern traffic can be it must have been much noisier when I was a child. For instance there were a number of shipyards and ship repairers clustered

within a small area round the Water of Leith and the foreshore, with the accompanying Engineering shops in adjacent streets and all were extremely noisy establishments. There were very few motor vehicles on the street but the horses and carts which trundled the cargoes from Leith Docks to various destinations were all iron shod wheels and hooves rattling over granite setts or 'causeys' as we called them. And as there was far more shouting of wares in the streets from coalmen, fishermen, milkmen, etc they really had to have strong lungs to be heard above the noisy clatter. There were no cars but every other person rode a bike and every bike had a bell and as a matter of course you rang it incessantly just to let everybody know what a good bell you had. You can imagine the noise of tramcars which in those days were an economic public service and seemed to run along Bernard Street every two minutes and the drivers seemed to have a compulsive mania to keep clanging their warning bells. True there was no exhaust pollution from motorcars but there was exhaust pollution from the constant stream of horses which were not in any sense sanitation trained.

Our family business was in Bernard Street. A very busy street just outside the Docks and I've often thought back to the daily chore of dusting the chocolate bars, unwrapped – even the whipped cream walnuts- before setting them out in their boxes on the counter. These tiny specks of straw coloured dust were really specks of horse dung blown on the wind. There were constantly recurring epidemics of one sort or another.

Our family of seven could be considered in two halves from my standpoint; the three eldest Andrew, Isa and George – always called Dump- and the four youngest Chrissie, myself, John and Jimmy. Chrissie I suppose linked the two halves. In the house I was definitely in the lower half with only John and Jimmy below me to bully, though Jimmy as the last was always the baby and maternally protected. Apart from the aforementioned for some time during my early childhood there was added to the household the family of my Mother's brother Uncle George. He had been married to a Newhaven woman called Barbara Flockhart but she had died either just before or shortly after the start of the war. His eldest son John stayed with Grannie Jameson, the others, George – nicknamed Bunce – Bella and Robert spent some time in a children's home and then for varying periods stayed with us. Bella was always a problem and other arrangements had to be made for her. I can't remember what. Robert, who was the same age as me, and Bunce who was ages with Dump stayed with us until Uncle George returned from the war and married a woman from Clitheroe in Lancashire. He brought her home to Leith and set up house at 10 Shore, Leith

and brought his family together again. His wife was a devout Catholic and Uncle George also became Catholic but the family resisted all efforts to bring them into the same faith except for Robert. It was not a happy arrangement and eventually his wife persuaded my Uncle to return to Clitheroe with her and set up home there. He became butler in the Priest's house. John, the eldest didn't go with them but married and lived in Leith until he was killed in a motoring accident. He had one son called Josse. Robert and Bella went but Bella continued to be a problem and was flung out of the house when she became pregnant to a farmer. She returned to Leith and her son was born while she stayed in the Salvation Army Home. She eventually married a seaman and for all I know is still living in Leith.

Bunce refused to go with his parents and appealed to my Mother to let him stay with us for as far as he was concerned Mother was the only mother he had ever known. So he stayed as one of the family until he married. Strangely enough he married a catholic but in this case she turned and became a devout protestant and regular church attender. They lived in Bernard Street until he died.

Looking ahead he says Isabella stayed in a two roomed house at 59 Bernard Street, above the shop but only used one room. The shop was in the pend and Jessie (aged 10) told her mother it was empty and persuaded her to take on the rental.

Isabella persuaded Jessie to share the house at 40 Bernard Street above the Bank. It had 5 bedrooms. He does not seem to give a date for moving into 40 Bernard Street