

THE GIRL

IN

'THE CHINESE COAT'

John Munnoch. 1879 – 1915

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Just before the start of Society meetings, there's always a great buzz of conversation – everyone chatting to their neighbour and catching up with the news. But do you ever take time to have a look at the artefacts from the Smith's collection which are on display here: the casts from the Stirling Heads; the plasters from the statue of Robert Burns on Dumbarton Road; the beautiful stained glass windows from Springbank House; the examples of different art work on the back wall; the little beaver above the door, the traditional sign of a gentlemen's hatter's business; the little clock made by Andrew Swan, the Victorian clock and watchmaker whose business was at 8 Port Street and who lived near here in Clarendon Place; and a painting, *always* a painting from the Smith's own collection. On display this evening is 'The Chinese Coat', and this is what I'm going to speak about.



The painting is called 'The Chinese Coat' and is the work of a local man, John Munnoch, who was born in Stirling on 23rd September 1879. His father, Michael, a journeyman slater, was married twice, firstly (in 1858) to Catherine Sneddon, by whom he had four children – William, Robert (known as Bob), Michael, and James (known as Jim). Catherine died just five weeks after baby James's birth, and

Michael remarried in 1867. His bride this time was Helen Paterson and there were seven children of this marriage. The first child, born in 1868, was called John, but he was not the artist. That little boy died in 1875, and the first son born after his death was named after him. This was the artist. In between John the first and John the second came David, Margaret, Peter, and Helen (known as Nelly), with another son, Alexander, born in 1884. The family moved away from Stirling to the Bathgate/Broxburn sometime between 1884 and 1900. However, sometime around 1910/11 John was admitted to the Edinburgh School of Art, where he was a frequent prize-winner. This included travel scholarships, which may perhaps help to explain the Italian influence seen in some of his work. In 1914, John was on a sketching holiday in Holland with his friend Henry Taylor Wyse, a leading figure in the Scottish Arts and Crafts movement, when the First World War broke out. They returned to Scotland and early in 1915 John volunteered and found himself in the 5th Battalion (the Queen's Edinburgh Rifles) of the Royal Scots. He left Scotland around the 9th of March, and by the end of June he was dead, killed at Gallipoli on 28th June, although the family were not informed for a further three months.

The painting was gifted to the Smith in 1936 by John's sister-in-law, widow of his brother Peter. Over the years, the Smith has built up a file on John as resources became available – art books, newspapers, and now of course the internet. In the late 1980's, one of John's nephews, a son of his sister Helen (or Nelly) came to the Smith to see the painting. He told staff that the model for the painting was John's fiancée. He knew that she had been a teacher but, unfortunately, he did not know her name. Have you ever tried to research someone whose name you don't know? It's a problem with its own unique difficulties. For one thing, where do you start?

You can't look up an obituary because ... you don't know who they were. You can't search for a Birth, Marriage, or Death Certificate because... you don't know who they were. You can't check a Census because ... you don't even know where they were, far less who they were. None of the Smith's material on Munnoch mentioned a fiancée; his mother, yes; his sister, yes; but a fiancée, no. So, sadly, it seemed as if the young woman was destined to anonymity, deprived of the dignity of identification or of being her own person, but to be known simply as 'The Girl in 'The Chinese Coat' or 'John Munnoch's fiancée'.

Fast forward now to 2008, when I was in the midst of the Postgraduate Diploma in Genealogical Studies at the University of Strathclyde. One Friday I was through in Edinburgh at New Register House and had occasion to visit the National Archives of Scotland next door. One of the headings on the computer menu caught my eye; it was 'Soldiers' Wills'. By chance, I had been reading an article about these in Volume 10 of 'Scottish Archives' (the Journal of the Scottish Records Association) in which the author tells us that before a soldier went to war he was required to write his will, usually, but not always, on a special page included at the back of his paybook. Most were very short, just a few lines or even, in some cases, just a few words – 'Everything to my mother' for example, and signed and dated. For some inexplicable reason, John Munnoch's name came into my mind so I typed it in, and this is what appeared on the screen.

'Of the goods I possess I wish my brother Peter to take all, in return for his great goodness to me, including my copies which I wish him especially to keep. He might give one or two to my brothers Alec and Bob, and also to Nelly my sister, and Jim my half-brother, and I would wish him to give anything he thinks of my goods to my sweetheart Jessie

McGregor of 130 Bridge St. Alexandria, as a reminder of myself.'

This was very exciting, and I scuttled back to New Register House to find out what became of Jessie. Like many young women who lost their menfolk in the Great War Jessie never married. She died in 1951 at 130 Bridge Street, Alexandria, where she had been born and where she had lived all her life. The Censuses of 1901 and 1911 reveal her occupation as 'Drapery saleswoman', and on her Death Certificate she is recorded as having been a 'Ladies' Outfitter', not a teacher after all, unless a Sunday School teacher. Once I'd passed the information to the Smith, that seemed to be the end of the story. But it wasn't the end of the story. Not long afterwards, only a few weeks in fact, the Smith staff were contacted by a London dealer who was offering for sale a Munnoch painting 'Portrait of a Young Woman'.



Once she saw it, Dr King, the Director of the Smith, realised immediately that this matched the model in the painting and that this is indeed Jessie herself. So at last we now know who she is and what she looks like and she can be acknowledged in full.

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