

THE STORY OF A GREAT SCOTS SCHOOL

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THE schools for boys which are of long standing in Great Britain are not easily numbered. There are grammar schools many centuries old; there are the great English public schools founded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; but schools for girls have shorter and less picturesque history. A great exception to this rule is found in a Scottish school in which the education of 930 girls is carried on to-day on the most advanced lines. It was founded and endowed at the instigation of a woman in 1694, and thus from the days of William and Mary till the reign of George V education and training has been continuously provided for the "burgess children of the female sex."

Scotland had in mediaeval times its kings who founded universities for the furtherance of learning, in Reformation times its Knoxes and Melvilles who planned educational schemes, in post-Covenanting times its George Heriots and George Watsons who founded establishments for the care and education of fatherless boys. But records are not fruitful in evidence of provision for the education of women and girls. To Mrs. Mary Erskine, or Hair, came the idea that the daughters of poor but worthy citizens had a claim on the benevolence of those who had money at this disposal. Of Mary Erskine no portrait is known, only her works live after her. She was the widow of James Hair, a "drogist" and burgess of the city of Edinburgh. Evidently the supplying of medicaments to the public was even then a means of amassing a fortune, and the "drogist's" widow was in Scottish phrase "well-left". Mrs. Hair claimed kinship with the Earl of Mar, and preferred that she should be known in matters relating to her benefaction as Mary Erskine. She could not, however, divest herself of the business methods she had learned from association with her husband, and she went about her project on very wise lines. She foresaw that it would be to the advantage of her scheme and those whom she sought to benefit if she associated herself with an organized body of men. Hence she determined to approach the Company of Merchants of Edinburgh, which had been founded in 1681. She secured their co-operation and help in establishing the Maiden Hospital, later

known as the Merchant Maiden Hospital. In Scots phraseology, "hospital" is the term used to designate any building where those who benefit from its endowments are housed, clothed and fed, and in some instances educated.

It seems possible that the Merchants had already some idea of providing for the children of the female sex, for they welcomed Mrs. Hair's proposal and her offer of the interest on 10,000 marks, and straightway suggested that the girls she wished to help might be lodged in part of a building which they had bought on the southern side of Edinburgh. The astute lady consented to begin there, but in a short time she bought the House of Bristo and three acres of ground, and had the establishment removed there. For this, Mary Erskine paid the sum of 12,000 merks (£666:13:4). The scheme had apparently appealed to the imagination of many others, for in 1696 the amount subscribed reached the sum of 32,000 merks, and the names of the Duchess of Hamilton and Lady Hope-toun appear on the lists of those giving to the funds.

Bristo was just beyond the old city wall, not far from the Greyfriars Church, and the situation was a good one, save for the fact that the front door of the house was not protected from the curious pedestrian by any lawn or shrubbery. This fact, doubtless, was the reason for the rule that none of the maidens were to go to the outer door or lean out of the windows, and it led to the dire temptation of certain young men to throw peas at the windows of the sleeping-rooms on the third floor.

For the new establishment a very complete constitution was drawn up by the "Merchants of Edinburgh and Mary Erskine." They were now quite certain that the Maiden Hospital with its "family" of thirty girls was to be a lasting institution, and they provided it with a catholic and representative governing body. The reigning Master of the Merchant Company was to be chairman, and he and the twelve Assistant Masters and the Treasurer were to elect three Assistants to help in the conduct of business. Three ministers of the Gospel in Edinburgh and the suburbs, and four "old" or former Bailies and the "old" Dean of Guild were to be included, as well as nine others who had been Masters, Assistants or Treasurers of the Company, or benefactors, and two of the name of Erskine.

We must admire the calm and precise phraseology of the rules and constitution when we consider that Scotland had been recently a scene of Revolution, and that the Massacre of Glencoe had shaken the people's confidence in the new régime. Notwithstanding the disturbances of the past few years, the Merchants and Mary

Erskine, aware that the trade of the country was good, and that the list of donations kept on increasing, made their elaborate arrangements for the provision of education and training of the family on liberal lines. The rules were probably modelled on those of George Heriot's Hospital, adapted for "children of the female sex." The first requirement of the establishment forecasted the days of Headmistresses, for the constitution laid down that the Hospital was to be in charge of an official to be known as the Governess. To her was committed the control of the teaching and domestic staff, and the girls in the house. Although she had considerable powers over others, her own freedom had its limits, as she must not be a night away from the Hospital without permission from the governing body. The religious instruction of the family was to be supervised by her, but their secular training was to be carried out by schoolmistresses, supplemented if found necessary by masters. The Governess was to be over forty when appointed, and the schoolmistresses twenty-five years of age, and none were to be married nor burdened with children. Does this mean that young widows might apply to be included in the staff of the Maiden Hospital? A female cook and a female steward were provided for, and education in domestic matters was partly in their hands, the dressing of victuals and marketing being specially mentioned. Edinburgh was then somewhat like a present-day French provincial town, and the provisions were bought in the flesh market and the fish market as they still are in the open stalls in French and Belgian and even in some of the British country towns. The statutes of 1702 detail the "office" of the schoolmistresses, and the subjects to be taught include reading, "working" of stockings, lace, coloured and white seam, washing and dressing of linnens (*sic*) dressing of meat, cleaning of houses; the branches in which the help of masters might be secured were writing, arithmetic and the common parts of *Vocal Musick*. The amount of salaries paid to the staff in early days is not recorded, but it is known that in 1765 the Governess received £12 a year in addition to her board and lodging; and that in 1781, in answer to a petition, the salaries of the mistresses were raised to £12 per annum, and the Governess was enriched to the extent of an income of £20.

But what of the children of the female sex for whom the house and the staff were provided? The little girls to be admitted must be over seven and under eleven years of age. Those eligible for election must be daughters or granddaughters of "such who are or were of the order and calling of Merchants, Burgesses of Edinburgh, or ministers thereof, and suburbs, or have been Governors

or benefactors to the Hospital." No particular provision was made that the children were to be orphans, but it was clearly intended that those admitted to the Hospital should be in need of help. A few orphans who could pay their way might be admitted, and their privilege was to sit at meals with the Governess at the high table. One can imagine that the better endowed children may not have valued this distinction as much as the governors expected. The diet to be provided for the Governess and her family was detailed with great exactitude in the rules of a later date—1733. Porridge and milk formed the constant breakfast; summer and winter supper was slightly varied by the serving of barley and milk, porridge and ale, bread and ale. Tea and coffee were, of course, unknown. Dinners were composed of one dish. Beef was supplied three times a week in summer, four times in winter; on other days the diet was of eggs, milk, bread and butter, and ale. In spite of the provision of ale, no record exists of protesting parents or of the consequent downfall of the burges children. Ale was in these days a mild and nourishing beverage, drunk by all classes from an early age. Mary Erskine and the Merchants did not make special regulations as to the dress of the family, but the later governors put on record their sumptuary laws. Once in two years each girl received a Sunday's gown of Orkney stuff, preferably blue or green. Due regard to the figures of the girls was given in directions as to stays and linnen (*sic*); aprons were dealt out to protect their gowns. Each girl was to have three handkerchiefs and an under-petticoat of thick blue flannel or blue Stirling serge. Night mutches (caps) and day were to be part of the Hospital outfit, and three pairs of shoes and two pairs of stockings, knitted by herself, were considered sufficient for the yearly equipment of each girl. In 1742 the Governess of that day appealed for cloaks for her family to wear at church. The appeal was granted, but it was stipulated that the price of the cloaks must be saved out of the petticoat account. The shade of Mary Erskine surely did not dominate the meeting at which this niggardly decision was made.

Ere Mary Erskine passed from the world in which she had seen the realization of her dream, the last Scots parliament had passed an Act in favour of the Maiden Hospital founded by the Company of Merchants and Mary "Erskine". She lived to see the Hospital flourish, to learn that the enterprise was financially supported by an imposing list of donors which included many who had held high office in Scotland, sympathizing nobles, and merchants of Rotterdam who apparently approved of the efforts of their Scottish compeers. Not the least interesting entry in the list is the name

of one described as a domestic servant. Moneys were well invested, and the family increased. Mary Erskine lived to see the union of parliaments, but she was probably dead before the first Jacobite rising in 1715. One of her last gifts to the Hospital was the great tablecover of tapestry, probably intended for the table round which the governors met. To-day it hangs, guarded by glass, in the large hall of the Edinburgh Ladies' College.

Until 1818, the Merchant Maidens continued to occupy the house in Bristo, ruled in the old way with few alterations. The governors seemed to become harder, less human in their amendments and additions to the constitution and rules. Wives of governors were asked to visit the Hospital and with their husbands to question the family and the staff so as to elicit information as to the keeping of the rules. In spite of rules, certain members of the family, two years before the French Revolution, went over the wall on a Sunday evening to meet some young men who had broken into the garden, and on one New Year's Day three girls dined with some young men in a tavern, and later drove in a coach to another tavern where they stayed till nine o'clock. The punishment on both occasions was solitary confinement, but the result was the removal of the Hospital to a more secluded situation. Ground was bought from a woman proprietor in a district still known as Lauriston, about a quarter of a mile away. On this a building with a classic front was erected, and the family were removed there in 1818. It was surrounded by high walls, and a grass park lay between the house and the common ground still known as the Meadows. This new establishment accommodated about a hundred girls, and the staff must have been increased in proportion, as the Merchants and Mary Erskine had decreed that mistresses were to have only twenty girls in their charge. In 1850, it is stated that the subjects taught were English, French, Writing, Arithmetic, Geography, Music, Dancing, Drawing and Needlework. The years of the Hospital were numbered, and the Merchants of Edinburgh decided that a new order must prevail. In 1870 the Merchant Maiden Hospital became a day school, and in the following year the family was transferred to a building on the north side of Edinburgh, henceforth to be designated as Edinburgh Ladies' College, but to be affectionately known as Queen Street to all those who have sat in its classrooms.

The Merchant Maiden Hospital was converted into a day school for boys as a successor to George Watson's Hospital, and Queen Street has been enlarged and improved on a scale unforeseen by the Merchants of 1870. The pupils pay fees, although there are

bursaries and endowments for those who require financial help or are of outstanding ability. A few years ago parents of the modern children of the female sex were asked to clothe them in blue, but without stays, blue flannel petticoats or cloaks for Sunday. Mary Erskine has never been forgotten, and two hundred and thirty-eight years after her pious act of foundation the Maidens of to-day meet annually to commemorate the gratitude of many generations to a great Scotswoman.*

*Miss Tweedie, Headmistress of the College and a former Dux, was among the party of Headmistresses visiting in Canada last spring.