

# Sir James Douglas' School Days

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Mystery still surrounds Sir James Douglas' birth and childhood, but of his school years in Scotland something can now be said with a fair degree of accuracy.<sup>1</sup>

Born, it would appear, of an attachment formed by a Glasgow merchant, John Douglas, to a lady of Demarara (now Guyana), James (b.

<sup>1</sup> The most thorough study of the Douglas family yet made is W. Kaye Lamb, "Some Notes on the Douglas Family," *B.C.H.Q.*, vol. 17, Jan.-Apr. 1953, pp. 41-51. His conclusion that James Douglas was born in Demarara in 1803 is now generally accepted. Although Douglas' contemporary, John Tod, stated that Douglas was born in Jamaica, no evidence has been found to support this. First, it should be noted that Douglas on his trip to Europe made no remark whatever when visiting Kingston, Jamaica, which would indicate that he had once lived there. Further, no trace of the Douglas or Ritchie families (Ritchie being, supposedly, the maiden name of Douglas' mother) has been found in records in Jamaica, though a good deal of searching in the archives in Spanish Town (Kingston), in The Jamaica Institute, Kingston, and in some church records of the early 19th century was carried out. Local newspapers and the long runs of the *Jamaica Almanack*, which contains lists of inhabitants, lists of government officials, business firms, etc., by parishes, were consulted, as well as registers of wills and the "Feurtado Manuscript" (MS, Jamaica Institute), an early attempt at writing the history of Jamaica. Nowhere were the Douglas or Ritchie families found, while Douglas and, occasionally, Ritchie were names found in the Colonial Office Guyana Files, P.R.O., CO 111. Besides, it is a fact that Douglas' grandmother left his daughters a legacy in Demarara and that his father has been identified with a member of a Glasgow firm with interests in Guyana. Also, there lives in Georgetown, Guyana, a family named Sholto-Douglas which claims to be related to a Sir James Douglas. One of the most prominent members says he is a great grand-nephew of Sir James, which reopens the question of either Alexander having returned to Demarara after leaving the fur trade or of the second brother mentioned by John Tod and nowhere else mentioned. Unfortunately, numerous efforts to obtain properly documented information from the Sholto-Douglas family have been unsuccessful, and in view of the fact that at least two other Sir James Douglases lived in the 18th and 19th centuries, this claim must be treated with much caution. One James Douglas, admiral (1703-1787), had a plantation at Weilburg in Demarara (D.N.B. p. 1237; and letter to the writer 29 October 1976 from National Maritime Museum, London) while another (1785-1862), though not known to have interests in the West Indies, did bear the family name of Sholto-Douglas (D.N.B. p. 1239). Numerous requests for further information from Demarara concerning younger members of Sir James' family—for example, marriage of his sister Cecilia Eliza (b. 1812), or christening of her daughter Cecilia Eliza Cowan (m. in Victoria in 1858)—have been made through various officials in Guyana, but these remain unanswered.

1803) and his older brother Alexander (b. 1801 or 1802) were brought to Scotland while very young, educated there and then placed in the service of the North West Company — Alexander in 1818, James in 1819. In 1809, John Douglas had been married in Scotland to Jessie (Janet) Hamilton. But since Alexander and James had a sister, Cecilia Eliza, who was born in 1812,<sup>2</sup> it seems logical to assume that John Douglas returned to Demarara in 1811 or 1812 (presumably to settle matters relating to his first “family”), and that he either brought back the boys when he returned to Scotland or made arrangements for them to follow. The departure of a John Douglas about the end of June 1812 is noted in the *Esquebo & Demerary Royal Gazette* of June 6.<sup>3</sup> We can, of course, only conjecture that this was James' father, but the arrival of John Douglas and the children in Scotland sometime in the summer of 1812 seems more than likely. It would bring the boys “home” in time for the school term.

We know that James at least — and most probably both boys, for he refers to more than one student having shared his boarding home — went to school in Lanark. Secretive as James was regarding his childhood and family, we do have a few clues in his “Travel Diary of 1864-65,” for he visited Lanark when after retiring he took an extended trip to Europe. His private letter book<sup>4</sup> also gives us a few indications. Nowhere does he give the name of the school, but he does refer to “Mr. Gillespie's comfortable little cheather [*sic*] covered cottage,”<sup>5</sup> and Mr. Gillespie may be

<sup>2</sup> The burial register of Christ Church Cathedral, Victoria, gives her age as forty-seven when she died in 1859.

<sup>3</sup> Vol. VII, no. 482, 6 June 1812; a few numbers of this *Gazette* are interspersed in the Colonial Office correspondence books of Guyana. See CO 111, # 12, P.R.O., London. It was evidently the custom of the Secretary's Office to publish lists of persons intended to quit the colony, presumably so that outstanding claims could be settled. Occasionally mention of a family and servants was added to the names in the list, but not in the case of John Douglas, either because, if this is indeed Alexander's and James' father, the children did not travel with him, or, more likely, because discretion prevailed. The *Gazette* also publishes notices of sailings, and several ships taking passengers did indeed sail early in July — none in late June — for England and for Scotland, but no passenger lists appear to exist for the period and no Captain's log which might possibly — though not probably — have mention of passengers has been found to date. CO 111 # 12 revealed no other mention of John Douglas, though several firms (not, however, J. T. & A. Douglas & Company, the company believed to have been that of John and his brothers Thomas and Archibald) bearing the name of “Douglas” were mentioned. The CO correspondence file contains little on individuals save for some Dutch citizens whose business interests were affected by the Napoleonic wars.

<sup>4</sup> Both MSS, Public Archives, Victoria.

<sup>5</sup> Journal of trip to Europe, hereafter Travel Diary, 1864-1868, p. 56. “Sir James Goes Abroad,” *B.C.H.Q.*, vol. 3, 1939, pp. 283-92, gives much valuable information based on this Travel Diary.

identified as James Gillespie, "Doctor" or assistant teacher — the staff usually numbered two — at Lanark Grammar School from 1789 to 1833, who almost surely had been one of James' teachers.

The Lanark Grammar School<sup>6</sup> was an old foundation, originating as a two-teacher, fee-paying school for boys in 1150, and was under the control of the Abbott of Dryburgh. Since Lanark was a royal burgh, the school was independent of the control of neighbouring great Lords. The tithes of Lanark parish were the financial basis for the running of the school, which was to charge fees at a moderate level. Until the Reformation, when the town council replaced the church in the management of the school, teachers were Chaplains attached to the Church and, as was normal, all teaching was based on Latin. Until the second half of the 18th century the sons of rich landowners sat side by side with sons of merchants in the city, and with sons of craftsmen, workers of wood or leather, weavers and smiths — the poorer boys being helped by bursary grants providing maintenance and clothing. In general, however, the fees discouraged the attendance of boys from poor families.

In the 19th century, Lanark had a population of about 3,000, having grown rather slowly and, in fact, declined in importance since the foundation of the school in the Middle Ages. The numbers of the school roll remained more or less constant at about 80 or 90, occasionally 100, until well into the 19th century. The school still continues, though it has moved several times. It is now a Comprehensive School, serving a wide area, and has nearly 1,800 pupils on the roll. The building in the Castlegate which housed the school when Sir James was a pupil and which had been in use since about 1640 was abandoned in 1841, which perhaps explains why Sir James does not specifically mention it. In 1888 the school buildings then in use were destroyed by fire and, from all evidence at present available, early records, including those of Sir James, were lost.<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately, however, we have a good deal of information about the curriculum of the school. For a young man who entered the fur trade at the age of sixteen, James Douglas was undoubtedly soundly educated. He had obviously had good training, not only in English and French, but also

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Mr. A. D. Robertson, retired headmaster of Lanark Grammar School, for most of the information concerning the school, some of which, also prepared by Mr. Robertson, was forwarded by the present rector, Mr. Peter Logan. Since the material sent by Mr. Logan was also prepared by Mr. Robertson I will quote "A. D. Robertson, May 1976" only. Mr. Robertson is the author of *Lanark: The Burgh and its Councils* (Dumfries: Blacklock-Farries & Sons, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, and letter to writer from Peter Logan, Rector, Lanark Grammar School, 5 May 1976.

in bookkeeping<sup>8</sup> — for his business sense and knowledge of accounting soon made him a success in the North West Company and later in the Hudson's Bay Company.

In 1812, when James presumably entered the school, the rector was James Gardiner, who held that position from 1786 until his death in 1813. Gardiner had been well trained by one of the most remarkable of the rectors, Robert Thomson, who had been rector from 1745 to 1786. The reputation of these two outstanding teachers had caused the school to prosper, for pupils came from beyond Lanark and its neighbourhood — even from abroad. When James Gardiner died the town council advertised for his replacement and these advertisements give a very good picture of the school curriculum. The “new Rector was expected to teach Latin, Greek, French, the Principles of Mathematics, Geography and Book-Keeping. It would be his duty to supervise the lower classes but to give most of his attention to the older boys and to the more advanced subjects.”<sup>9</sup> The school hours in summer were 7 to 9, 10 to 12 and 2 to 4; in winter they were 9 to 12 and 2 to 4. The private hour for writing and arithmetic was to be from 12 to 1 and for French, Mathematics and other extra studies any time after 4 p.m. The fees were set individually for each subject, leading one to believe that not all courses were taken by all students. The school numbered then about 100 boys, a few being boarders.

The teaching of French in the school followed academic lines, stress being placed on grammar and the reading of extracts from literature. There was little conversation. However, any intelligent boy in Lanark at that time had opportunities to learn French as a living language outside the school, for a number of French prisoners of war were quartered in Lanark until after the peace which followed the Battle of Waterloo. Apparently they moved freely about and were on quite good terms with the local inhabitants. A few of them, in no hurry to return home when free to do so, remained and at least one was still giving private lessons in French long after the end of the war. (The family tradition that James studied French with an “émigré”<sup>10</sup> is thus explained.) Very likely, young

<sup>8</sup> In 1826 he was described by William Connolly, the Chief Factor in New Caledonia — and to be his father-in-law two years later — as having “a good education” (see *The Letters of John McLoughlin*, Third Series, 1844-46, E. E. Rich, Editor, The Champlain Society, 1944, p. 310). Governor George Simpson in 1832 described him thus: “. . . tolerably well educated, expresses himself clearly on paper, understands our Counting House business and is an excellent trader.” *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>9</sup> A. D. Robertson, May 1976.

<sup>10</sup> Walter N. Sage, *Sir James Douglas and British Columbia*, University of Toronto Press, 1930, p. 16.

James Douglas supplemented the academic French of school with oral work in his spare time, for his knowledge of French went far beyond what he might have acquired in the fur trade.

Whoever his teachers were they had laid the groundwork well. For instance, over forty years later, when the then Sir James visited his half-sister Cecelia Hamilton Douglas in Paris during his first European journey, he repeatedly attended the theatre with her. In his diary he described his enjoyment of the plays, which he would not have done had he not understood the language well, and it is obvious from comments in the Travel Diary that he understood subtleties of the language.<sup>11</sup>

It is tempting to speculate what influence, if any, the proximity to New Lanark had on the education of James Douglas. Robert Owen was in many ways at the height of his fame during the boy's school days in Lanark; his cotton mills, where enlightened management was a model, were only a mile from Lanark, as was his new school — opened in 1816 — with its emphasis on singing, dancing and “learning through joy.”

The teacher who would most influence James scholastically was the rector chosen in 1813, John Harkness, who continued the good work of his predecessors and was highly esteemed in the community. Practically all the tuition James received must have been from him, though it is possible that James Gillespie may have helped in teaching Book-Keeping. It is significant that Gillespie is the only name mentioned in Sir James' account of his short stay in Lanark in 1864. By the time James entered Lanark Grammar School Mr. Gillespie was nearing sixty and was to continue in the employ of the school for some years after, until his antiquated and inefficient methods forced the council to offer him a pension larger than his salary and thus “retire” him.<sup>12</sup> He seems to have been badly prepared for his task, being unable to teach Latin or French, and even his teaching of primary subjects led parents to complain. His “eccentricities” were legion and legendary. Probably they were due to his highly nervous disposition which led him to laugh and cry at the wrong times. Often when leading his pupils in prayer he ended with a flood of tears, while on a famous occasion at a meal following a funeral he gave such a long grace that he “ended with a fit of laughter.”<sup>13</sup> What school boy would not, however, delight in such antics?

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, and Travel Diary, section on travels in France, especially 28 September and early December 1864, pp. 73ff.

<sup>12</sup> A. D. Robertson, May 1976. Gillespie's contract, as was normally the case, was *ad vitam aut culpam*, and he could not be legally removed. He died in 1847.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite his obsolete methods and his unpredictable reactions to solemn occasions, he was loved by all. He had a heart of gold, taught Sunday school (reading and writing) for some thirty-five years without payment and was said to be "good-natured, kindly, conscientious, full of good works and of irreproachable character."<sup>14</sup> His friendly disposition led children to cluster about him. On Saturdays it was his custom to sally forth wearing his low-brimmed hat, a long blue great coat and a ruffled shirt and carrying a silver-mounted cane — a kind of Johnny Walker figure — and visit the homes of his pupils. His kindness leads one to suppose that if Sir James especially mentions him it is because he had spent many happy hours with this memorable and lovable man.

James Douglas does not appear to have ever been a resident pupil at the school, for in a letter of 9 November 1867 he writes of Janet Glendinning, daughter of Mrs. Glendinning with whom he boarded at Lanark.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, we know a good deal less about the Glendinnings than about his school. There were several families by that name in Lanark but it has not been possible to identify with which James lived.<sup>16</sup>

It seems from Sir James' correspondence that there was at least one daughter in the family. She seems to have been a little older than him, perhaps in her teens when he arrived, and to have been the "idol of a knot of little fellows" like himself attending school in Lanark and boarding with her mother. Many, many years later, he referred to her as "dear old Jenny" and recalled that when he was "a very little fellow" she had plunged him "head over heels" in the Clyde — no doubt after a lot of teasing — and that it had "at least for a time cured him of all longings for cold baths and deep water."<sup>17</sup> That he had long forgiven her for this drastic cure is evident, as at the same time he was writing to direct his

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Mr. [The Reverend Andrew] McGlashan, Minister, Lanark, Private Letter book, p. 36. Also in Sage, *Sir James Douglas and British Columbia*, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> A. D. Robertson, retired headmaster of Lanark Grammar School, in a letter and notes of 25 May 1976, mentions a Mrs. Robert Glendinning (the spelling is at times Glendining and Glendening. I have used that employed by Sir James in writing to his bankers, Messrs. Smith, Payne & Smith's; Private letter book, 11 November 1867, p. 37.) the widow of a lawyer known for some reason as "Old Hell," of Hyndford House. A daughter married the Rev. Mr. Menzies, "a powerful Lanark Minister." Mr. Robertson thinks this unlikely to be the family. Another family ran the Clydesdale Inn or Hotel, where Sir James stayed in 1864. This family is also unlikely for he made no remark about this inn having been his former home. Finally, a Robert Glendinning was attending the school as a "bursar" in 1817. He was the son of a weaver; but James only mentions Mrs. Glendinning and her daughter.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Mr. McGlashan, 9 November 1867, Private letter book, p. 36.

bankers to forward the Reverend McGlashan, Minister in Lanark, £5 on his behalf and with his best wishes "towards Janet's [*sic*] relief."<sup>18</sup> In the letter to the Reverend Mr. McGlashan he recalls that Mrs. Glendinning, Janet's

dear worthy Mother had a comfortable home, but I believe she fell into poverty after we left Lamark [*sic*], as our board was probably the most valuable part of her income. I wrote my Father on the Subject, and tried to assist them, but our attempt[s] proved unavailing [*sic*] as we could get none of our friends to send their children to Lamark [*sic*] for education, having lost its former high reputation as a preparatory training school for College.

This statement agrees with the information supplied by the Lanark Grammar School. Largely because of the long-lived and inefficient, if lovable, Mr. Gillespie, the school did fall on evil days. Mr. Gillespie's financial needs caused him to continue teaching until his eighties and the pension he then received for some fourteen years was a drain on the slim resources of the school. Gillespie, however, was not the only one to blame for the decline of the school. New schools were being created and new educational methods introduced, and the grammar school found it harder each year to compete, especially as the town council, its income still derived from dues, rentals and fines, largely medieval in structure and not in line with the rising costs of the early 19th century, was hard pressed to find sufficient funds for good salaries.<sup>19</sup>

Where did young James spend his school vacations? We have little in the way of clues beyond comments in the Travel Diary of 1864-65 in which Sir James mentions several Douglasses — his "family." He makes one reference to "Mrs. Robert Douglas of Orbiston," who remains unidentified, and several references to "Mrs. Douglas of Douglas Park." Douglas Park had once been the property of the Hamiltons of Orbiston — though no link has been found with Jessie (Janet) Hamilton who married John Douglas, James' father — and was sold in 1800 to Gilbert Douglas, a West India merchant of Glasgow who had large plantations in the West Indies, on the Island of St. Vincent. Gilbert Douglas in 1794 had married Cecilia Douglas, sister of John Douglas and older by one year than her brother. After Gilbert's death, without issue, in 1807, his widow added to the estate of Douglas Park the remainder of the ancient estate of Orbiston, of which some ruins remained. She combined the

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, and letter to bankers, p. 37. Sir James repeated the gesture in 1870. See Private letter book, 22 January 1870, p. 183.

<sup>19</sup> A. D. Robertson, May 1976.

properties into one, to which she gave the name of Orbiston House. There she died, in 1862, aged ninety-one, before Sir James' visit in 1864. But presumably the property had remained in the hands of the Douglas family. Douglas Park, or Orbiston House as Mrs. Gilbert Douglas preferred to call it, was on the banks of the River Calder about midway between Bothwell and Hamilton, and consequently close to both Glasgow and Lanark. It is interesting to note that it was on part of the original Orbiston estate that Robert Owen erected some buildings, one described as "singular," where he attempted to carry out his "New System of Society." The experiment ended in failure and the buildings were destroyed.<sup>20</sup>

Since Sir James makes particular mention both of Douglas Park and Orbiston it seems reasonable to presume that he had known the estate in his youth. A few references to his uncle Thomas Dunlop Douglas, who lived until 1879, also suggest that James saw something of him in his school days, but one cannot be certain how much or how little the small boy from Demarara was welcomed by his father's people. The fact that he and Alexander were found careers in the fur trade of North America rather than in the West Indian trade, although their father's firm survived to the 1860s,<sup>21</sup> should not be taken, however, as a *necessary* indication that they were pushed out of sight, for the sugar trade, by the late 1820s, was already experiencing difficulties, which the probable emancipation of the slaves would only increase.

Be that as it may, the years which James Douglas spent in Scotland, presumably from 1812 to 1819, seem to have been happy ones. Comfortable and secure in the affection of the Glendinning household, acquiring a good education for his rank and enjoying the friendship of the inimitable Mr. Gillespie, the young James spent a youth not unlike that of other sons of "colonial" families.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Podmore, *Robert Owen, A Biography*, Augustus M. Kelley, New York, 1968, reprint of 1906 edition, pp. 359, 372 and *passim*. The experiment lasted about two years, 1825-27; and information provided by William Lind, Secretary, Business Archives Council of Scotland, 14 April 1977. Some of this information came from the Strathclyde Regional Archives (Incorporating Glasgow City Archives).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*