

PREFACE

George Alexander was a builder in Victorian times. He had properties in Dalrymple Crescent, Findhorn Place, Fountainhall Road, Grange Loan, Mayfield Road and Causewayside. and the family home at 46 Grange Loan. As a result of putting Dalrymple Crescent families online, I was contacted by his great-great-great grandson, who sent me the following essay

Joanne Lamb

INTRODUCTION

The following essay was written by Eleanor Murray Alexander on or about 1988. It was passed on to me by my cousin Judy Filion

Eleanor was the daughter of James Alexander who was the 9th of 14 children born to George Alexander and his wife Ann Murray in Edinburgh. George and Ann's first child was Christian (a.k.a. Christine) Alexander who became the mother of Mary Ann Williams whom we know as Granny May. Christine and James were brother and sister.

Ken Moore, April 2015

MEMORY'S DOOR AJAR

It all began for me, Eleanor Murray Alexander, almost 82 years ago on 12 November, 1906 in 56 Grange Loan, Edinburgh – the beloved house which was my home from the time of my birth for my first 25 years until I left it as Eleanor Murray Cutting on January 1, 1932 to go to India with my husband, Dr. Cecil George Cutting, to start our life together in Chikkaballapura, S. India.

"56", as the home was always affectionately called, was a solid grey stone semi-detached 3 story family house built by my grandfather, George Alexander, Master Builder of the South Side of Edinburgh. He has built his own house, "78" farther along the road from "56" in which he and his wife, Ann Murray, raised 12 children to adulthood and lost two in infancy (Margaret & Elizabeth). That 12 children should grow up and marry and scatter about this world was for that time a tribute to the home care, and especially to my aunt, Christine, who became virtual Mother to this growing brood and largely supervised the domestic arrangements, as Ann Murray was so constantly occupied by the most recent addition to the clan

We have often wondered how they stowed away such a large family in a relatively small house. Remember, it was before bunk beds or sleeping bags had been invented! But all the boys – and there were seven of them to the five remaining sisters, went to boarding school – the Dollar Academy. That establishment must have been way ahead of its time both in its curriculum and in its intake. There were boys from overseas from China and Japan who passed on eastern skills in juggling and acrobatics, etc. The curriculum did not stop at the 3 R's and the traditional classics, but crafts and

hand skills were given a place unusual at that period in time. Drama was encouraged and they built their own stage and made their own properties – a skill that my beloved dad used to great advantage of our various church organizations until the end of his days.

I suppose that one way of avoiding the overcrowding in “78” during holiday times was the evacuation of all the children with the exception of the current baby and the toddler next in line to an establishment at Port Seton, an ideal and quiet coastal spot down the Firth of Forth just beyond Prestonpans. There Aunt Christine would preside over the clutter of youngsters who could enjoy the sandy beaches and sand dunes to their heart’s content. No crowds, no commercialization, the immediate world was theirs to enjoy to the horizon and beyond. How they all got there I have often wondered. No car, no busses. Probably the boys cycled. I suppose the girls, the littlies, were transported by some kind of horse-drawn vehicle along with the necessary linens and a goodly supply of food stores upon which to feed the hungry holidaying crowd.

But to come back to “56” and my entry into life’s stage. Our family Dr., Dr. Russell was not available and so his young assistant Dr. Oliphant Nicholson ushered me into this world. It was an ill-chosen date as it fell on “Lerin Time” in November, one of the busiest time of the year for my Dad – as all the property for which his little office at 1 Fountain Hall Road was responsible had to be reviewed. All rents were due at this half yearly “term” and he would be working late into the night in his tiny little office. No such thing as a typewriter or any mechanical device ever penetrated there. Every entry into the books was made by hand in my Dad’s meticulous handwriting. The art learnt at Dollar Academy in his youth lasted until he was 70 years old.

’56 was almost at the corner of Finthorn Place and only a few yards from our front gate was the “Penny Well”. That was always a bit of a mystery because as far as we know there was never anything to do with a “penny” involved in it. Certainly there was water and a spout, but whether at one time people had to pay for it, or whether it was a penny a wish, or whatever, we never knew.

Our gate had a latch which kept it shut but for close friends and relatives who were let into the secret and could put their hands over and release the latch. It was an easy entry. Others had to wait for the response to the front doorbell when one of the household would come and, with the wire-pull hand release from the front door, admit you through the gate to go up the three steps to the pavement before the two steps up and into the house’s big wooden front door.

Two yards further was the glass door – a stained glass medley which admitted you directly into the lobby or front hall which bent around in an L shape to the front of the stairs. Just inside the glass doors on the left was the door to the big dining room which was overlooked and presided over, as it were, by the huge and larger than life portraits of the Alexander grandparents George and Ann (which now as heirlooms preside over “Greenacres”, Jim & Christine Alexander’s home in Wicken Bonhunt). Next to that was the telephone table and chair which was such a joy to my mother whose deafness at an early age was probably responsible for inherited deafness in my brother George and myself. Sister Alice never seemed to be affected. Mother found that the telephone was a lifeline as she could hear her friends talking in solo on it better than a visiting call. She must have had one of the earliest hearing aids available. No little thing in the ear as today, but a cumbersome black box –

about twice the size of today's transistor - which she had to cart around with her and place it on a table of chair beside her, facing whoever of her friends she was chatting with during the time. Next, around the corner towards the stairs was the "jam pantry" with its shelves well stocked with homemade preserves and other goodies.

Next to that was the shoe cupboard, so called because when you opened the door you were faced with rows and rows of pigeon holes which housed the family's snow boots, galoshes, lace up boots and all types of footwear. This was a very capacious cupboard as it ran several yards in to the right and ended up in a decreasing curve down, formed by the bend in the stairs that went up above it. It was generally referred to as "the glory hole" which it was indeed. It had a fascination for me, being an ideal place for imaginative games. The only light came from a tiny little square window letting out to the narrow side passage down the outside of the house. This little recess was no doubt enhanced by the fact that to find anything in its depths one had to proceed by flickering taper or carefully guarded candle & candlesticks. No wonder it had an aura of mystery about it.

Across the lobby at the other side of the stairs was an archway leading in to the back premises, the big roomy kitchen with scullery attached, a domestic loo and the little back parlor or den where we usually had our meals except when everyone was home together and we couldn't all get around the table, or we had visitors in for meals. Opposite the parlor door was the dish cupboard where all the china was piled up on deep shelves.

The stairs were long, curving and shallow stepped with a wonderful swing to the bannisters that made for a delightful slide on our tummies or our seats. How we never didn't break our necks I don't know but none of us ever did. At the top of the stairs was the door into the drawing room which would, in today's parlance, be the lounge or sitting room. It was a large spacious room, much larger than the dining room below it, as it also incorporated a good deal of the space over the entrance hall and lobby. An excellent setting for Mummy's "At Home Days" when she entertained her lady friends. But more of that later.

Across the landing from the drawing room were two north facing bedrooms: 1- the spare room or the guestroom, and 2 -Mummy & Daddy's bedroom furnished in light oak for the bed, the chest of drawers and big mirrored wardrobe, all made by Daddy's skilled carpenter's hands. They were all of the highest professional standard. What a labor of love that must have been as he prepared for his marriage to his beloved Jessie Flatt. Where my Dad learnt his skills I do not know - whether or not he was apprenticed to some other firm I never heard, but skills he certainly had as was evident by the silky finish of those Oakwood pieces in their bedroom. (That heirloom suite of furniture went eventually to my brother George's home - but what happened to it when my sister-in-law Jean Alexander left her home in Coulson I have no idea).

Off that first floor landing was the bathroom - cum loo. It had no wall window, only a higher funneled shaft going right up through the attic story to a skylight in the roof - so high and remote that even at midday there was only a dim religious light!

The steep carpeted wooden stairs led off from here up to the top flat. There, the north bedroom was brother George's domain. My sister Alice and I shared the south bedroom with the dormer window out onto the roof. From the left side you could catch a glimpse of a bit of Arthur's Seat. From the right side you could see a fraction of Blackford Hill and the Bridal hills.

Next to our room was the small cell like room that was the maid's bedroom where slept the current "Maggie from Selkirk" or "Lizzie from Bathgate". Those were the days when a living-in maid was the norm for most families. Opposite George's room was the "cistern room" and a tiny, dank "glory hole" with no vestige of any window loo on the ground floor, but with a mystery all its own, as often one could hear the gurgle and plop of the household water supply emanating from it as one passed the door.

Such was my home – the beloved "56" of blessed memory. How fortunate I was to have such a haven of happiness as my home. It was a house of happiness and hospitality with an ever open door. There was a feeling of serenity about it. Voices never seemed to be raised, nor tempers lost. Even the trauma and tensions of the dark days of World War One did not upset the tenor of its peaceful ways. A child who has been brought up in the security of such caring love has received a gift which nothing in later life can take away.

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When I came upon the scene in November, '06, my brother George was just almost 12 years old and our sister Alice almost 9. So I was indeed an 'afterthought' and an object of great interest and amusement. I am told that brother George would arrive home in the afternoons from his prep school "Viewpark", soaking in sweat – having run all the way home to be in time to 'play with the baby' before she was bathed and bedded.

When one's memory proper begins to function is a very doubtful point, but certainly not before 4 or 5 years old. But there is no doubt that a 'pseudo memory' is part of everyone's makeup – when incidents that have been repeatedly related have become so much a part of one's past that they have taken over and assumed the function of a memory. Certainly the following incident falls into that category. George and Alice had just returned from a spell in the Fever Hospital as they had both been suffering from scarlet fever (How I didn't catch it from them I can't think). They were both seated on the stairs and I was put down at the far end of the lobby from them. Of course I immediately crawled towards them at my fullest speed! Every time I got near the foot of the stairs I was lifted and put back to start all over again. Surely a very early lesson in frustration. How times have changed. One never hears of cases of scarlet fever nowadays, not even diphtheria. How many of the old regular diseases have been eradicated thanks to the strides in medical knowledge. But still, much has to be done and new problems like AIDS appear on the horizon alas.

My childhood was the era of the "Calling Card" when every lady had her packet of little pasteboard "cards" which she carried about with her or in her handbag and she would leave one at any house at which she called. If the lady of the house was "out", then she owed you a "Call".. On each "Calling card" was inscribed the owner's name and address and some cryptic message such as

“at home – first Tuesday”, or “2nd Thursday’s – or even 2 days, e.g. “2nd Wednesday & 3rd Fridays”. One would then know that if you went to call on any of those days in the month you would find your hostess “at home”. You would meet other mutual friends also “calling” and be able to exchange news with them as well and partake of tea and homemade scones and other tasty goodies prepared for the occasion. It was a good social custom and kept people in touch and saved many fruitless journeys when you missed the object of your visiting.

I well remember the extra baking and cooking going on in the kitchen in preparation for Mother’s “At home” days and how the family enjoyed the extra “eats” – if they had not all been consumed by the visitors! As a small girl not yet at school would be dressed in my 2nd best and have my hair “brushed & proper” so that I could be called in to shake hands with the ladies! I might even be asked to recite for their entertainment probably one of the R.L.S. poems from his “Child’s Garden of Verse”, e.g. My Shadow” or “Up in a Swing” – taught to me by George or Alice. (Not the party pieces that in later life in S.C. M circles, or after Kodai theatre parties I came to be associated with “The Wee Cock Sparra” or “Dear Georgie” or “The Baby that Went Down the Plug’ole”!!!

The only grandparent I ever knew was my Mother’s Mother, Mary Ann Flett who lived in No. 16 Fountainhall Road. It was a little ground floor flat almost directly opposite my Dad’s office at No. 1 Fountainhall Road. I remember Grammy Flett as a gentle old lady with whom I would be left when my family was off on some ploy that I was considered too small to join in. She lived to a good old age – she must have been in the later eighties, but she never went grey or white but kept the beautiful corn gold of her hair until she died. I envied her that beautiful hair coloring but none of us inherited it, alas! Fairly soon after her marriage to James Flett, the doctors had ordered him to take a long sea voyage for the sake of his health. So she set out with him on the long journey to New Zealand. That was a long journey in those days – three months or so at sea. It must have been a daunting prospect.

They settled in Oamaru just south of Timaru in the South Island. They lived there for the best part of ten years and my Mum Jessie Jane Grinton Flett and her younger brother Alexander Alan Flett were both born there. My grandfather ran a drapery business, but when my Mummy was about seven or a little older, the little family set sail for Britain and settled in Edinburgh. Where they first lived in Edinburgh I don’t know, but later they certainly moved to Grange Loan to one of the houses on the opposite side of the road to No. 78. It was there that romance began to blossom between James Alexander & Jessie Flett who had become friends with the Alexander sisters, particularly her namesake Jessie. Unlike the large Alexander clan, there were only the two Flett children – Jessie and her younger brother who was always called Alec.

When grown to adulthood, Uncle Alec went to some bible college in England and became the Rev’d A.A. Flett. He thereafter went to South Africa and served as a pastor there. I never knew under what auspices he went to South Africa, whether he was ever attached to any Society or Missionary group or was simply a freelancer. Certainly he moved around a lot. At one time he was working in the diamond mining area and in many parts of the Orange Free State, as it was known in those days. Letters came from Kimberly, Vryburg, Bloemfontein, Klerksdorp and latterly from Johannesburg. It was there that my sister Alice went out to join him for a couple of years at the end of the 1914-1918 war. Alice had left school in the early years of that war and had done a year’s

domestic course at Atholl Crescent, commonly known as the “dough school” after which it became a military hospital in Dangour. So it must have been in the early 1920’s that she sailed off to South Africa to be a house keeper and cook in Uncle Alec’s bachelor establishment.

Uncle Alec had always walked with an awkward limping gait and Alice told us that the African natives always referred to him in their native language. The cause of the limp I never knew. Whether it was from an accident or something dating from his early childhood. Maybe a malnutrition thing, tho’ I think that unlikely, but I do not know. Uncle Alec was a very loveable, friendly and likeable kind of man and Alice was very happy to go on this S. African adventure.

While she was away, five of her friends formed the “Alice Club”. They met in each other’s homes to read her letters and exchange news of her. The five were: Jean Russell, Peggy Miller, Queenie Cameron, Maimie Duff, and Isabell Ross. The mothers of these girls were not to be outdone by their daughters and they formed a close knit group that usually met in our house. They became firm friends and kept up the “Alice Club Mothers Association” long after Alice came home from South Africa.

At their meetings there was always much fun and laughter when Mrs. Duff could be persuaded to read their teacups. At that time, no teabags were in use, so there were plenty of tea leaves left in the bottom of the cups to form interesting and suggestive patterns. Mrs. Duff certainly was a character. Indeed, in Scottish Parlance, she might well have been termed a “Spey wife” – one who had the gift of 2nd sight – of powers not given to the average human being. I remember on one occasion while Alice was still in South Africa how in reading Mum’s cup she said that she saw Alice toiling up a steep hill to a big red building at the top. When the next letter from Johannesburg told us that Uncle Alec had been in the General Hospital for some temporary ailment, it was the big red building that Alice had been toiling up the hill to visit him.

A couple of years after Alice returned home from S. Africa, Uncle Alec married a widow – May – who had a young daughter named Win. They made a happy family, but sadly after Uncle Alec’s death, we lost touch with them which was a pity.

My father, James Alexander, although 9th in the family, was the one who followed his father George into the construction building and property business. He took over from his father and administered for most of the family what had been bequeathed to each one in the line of the property (many of the houses actually built by my grandfather). So he became the hub of the family. And so it was that in my childhood cousins from South Africa or Canada or the U.S.A. would turn up for shorter or longer visits to the “Old Country”, either for some course of study or just in search of their roots. It was the same Office and Building Yard that my grandfather used where my Dad worked all his days. The Builders Yard stretched from Fountainhall Road behind the tenements of Mayfield Road and had a carriage drive-in off Mayfield Road just south of the main entrance to Mayfield Church where I was both baptized and married.

It was two steps down from the gate of 1 Fountainhall Road and into the tiny office tucked into the right-hand corner of the Builders Yard. The little front office was really tiny and could not

accommodate more than 3 or 4 people at a time. A big desk took up most of the space in front of the window looking out into the yard. There sat John Ingles, the clerk, whose job it was to make out the bills and rent claims and deliver and collect the said rents. He had worked there for so many years that he seemed like part of the furniture.

Behind this little front office was a tiny room behind which was Dad's special den. There he drew up his plans for new buildings or alterations to existing property. The sloping drawing board desk was almost shoulder high under the skylight window. Dad stood at it for hours on end, working on his blueprint plans – each one clear and meticulous in detail.(I often used to think that William & Janet's beautiful mapping skills had come directly from this gift of my Dad's)

Opposite the office on the left hand side of the entry were the open sided wood sheds where there were stacks of wood - from floor to ceiling - where lengths of cut timber in all different lengths and thicknesses were stacked can, in retrospect, smell the incomparable smell of maturing timber farther down the yard. Right across from it was the 'joiner's shop'. This was an upper story with rough wooden steps without any handrail leading up to it. I was always a bit wary of those open steps as I had been told that my beloved big brother George had fallen from them when he was a small boy. But once up them there was the joy of playing with the clean curly wood shavings and again the nostril tickling smell of freshly cut wood.

Under the joiners shop in the center of the yard was the mechanical circular saw. This was something that early on one treated with respect and kept a safe distance from it. One of my earliest true memories was of my father's accident with it. He had been working at the saw and somehow slipped his footing and nearly lost several fingers of his left hand. Typical of my father, he wrapped the hand up and started walking to the Royal Infirmary to the Outpatient department. Some friend found him sitting on a wall looking white as chalk and helped him across the meadow to the Infirmary where they stitched up his hand and sent him home to #56 by cab. That happened at the end of one of Mother's "At Home" days and it made a vast impression on me. To this day I never hear the screeching sound of a saw mill without experiencing a shiver going down my spine.

Behind the sass mill and to the right hand side of it was the long low room with windows overlooking the jobbing gardeners "Nursery Garden" that lay next door to Dad's office. This long room had to be seen to be believed. It was an extraordinary cross between a jumble sale and Aladdin's Cave. Everything – but everything - including at times the kitchen sink was to be found there. Daddy in his building business would at time have to empty and dismantle big houses for rebuilding or alterations. As Daddy was the world's greatest hoarder. This long room at the back of the yard was full of the innumerable things that were "too good to throw away" or "would sometimes come in useful". You can imagine what a treasure trove this collection of junk was to the amateur theatrical people where they could find "period" pieces for their plays, etc.

This trait of N.T.A.A. (Never Throw Anything Away) was something that I inherited from Daddy and which was further enhanced by my Froebel Kindergarten training and also by living in a third world country even cartons and empty bottles were of commercial value.

So my beloved husband and family have suffered under this troublesome hoarding mania and I have been subject to much tearing and leg pulling about it all my days. I well remember how daddy carefully carried home a huge box of crystal prisms and dangles that were retrieved from some stately home and how I helped him wash and clean them. Then he spent many, many evening hours patiently matching them and fixing them to form a complete circle for the central light in our dining room. We were all inordinately proud of his feat of patience and diligent application. I was fascinated by the flashes of rainbow colors that came when the direct light caught the crystals. Even today, when the direct sunlight catches the diamonds in my engagement ring and there are flashes of ruby, emerald, and sapphire. Or when the sun strikes Jenó's lovely crystal dangling in the window of "184". It throws rainbows onto the walls. My mind flashes back to that old chandelier in the dining room at "56" so many long years ago.

At the back of the joiner's shop and the saw mill and the Aladdin's Cave room, the yard had a wooden fence partition with a padlocked gate in it. This gave entry to the "Back Yard" which was just open to the sky and had a driveway entry from Mayfield Road opposite and just south of Mayfield Church. Presumably this part of the premises must have been used for loading and unloading building materials, etc. In my time, my father never had any transport of his own. He would have to use other contractors for such needs, but I imagine that in my grandfather's time this backyard probably housed stables, horses and vehicles of his own.