

The Genealogy of Sir John William Dawson 1820 - 1899

Motivation

An interest in one's ancestors may be entertained for a variety of reasons. There is the familiar psychological search for identity, and knowledge of one's forebears may help to anchor one's sense both of individuality and of belonging. There are the hopes, usually vain, that a family search will uncover a right of inheritance to wealth or title. For the scholar, genealogy provides an intellectual challenge of some magnitude, sustained by the rather awed realisation that we each one of us has a unique, individual lineage back for millions of years, to the very dawn of life; but we may hope to attach known particulars to but a minute fraction of the sequence. The search for a particular line may fairly quickly immerse one in general historical, social, cultural, geographical and linguistic considerations, and the diligent researcher may well emerge from his family quest with a very decent background in these fields.

Indeed, as I understand it, the goal of a proper genealogy is not simply the enumeration of names in lines of descent, but the placing of individuals in their historical context, by giving accounts of the time, place and circumstances of their individual lives, with an analysis of the effect these considerations had on the lives of the descendants in turn. Only thus may one begin to learn of the formative influences on these individuals. It is hardly necessary to remind Scotsmen abroad of the pull of ancestors in the Old Country on given remote descendants, who may well feel their "heart's in the Highlands", though they've never been there. The general motivation for this account of Sir William's forebears is thus George Eliot's observation that "there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life", and in particular that wider life provided by genealogical background.

Genealogy so conceived is thus rather more than a family tree or chart, which merely lists individuals linked by descent, and a good deal less than history, which, drawing upon ample source material, attempts a comprehensive factual account coupled with considered analysis of the interaction of individuals with their times. A genealogy may indeed span the range between these two very different enterprises, and so it is in the present case: the line begins with a name and a conjectured date and ends with the birth of John William Dawson, who assuredly belongs to history.

General Considerations

We may first consider the varieties of source material the researcher has at his disposal. Much depends upon the renown of one's lineage: one may hope, with the ancient Irish, to get a named descent back to Adam via that most famous and exhaustively studied genealogy of all, the Book of Genesis. Others must rest content with getting the names of four grandparents at most. Particular difficulties face inhabitants of North America, for any extended search back will take one out of the New World altogether, to that country from which one's original immigrant ancestors sailed, which may or may not have suitable records.

In Great Britain, centralised birth, marriage and death records were introduced about the middle of the 19th century -1855 in Scotland. The prime sources before that are the ecclesiastical records, the parish registers, The General Register Office, Edinburgh, provides the following notes:

It is normally a fairly straightforward task to trace a line of descent back to 1855. The civil registers of births, deaths and marriages maintained since then contain full information of events and have comprehensive annual indexes. It is much more difficult to trace events which occurred before 1 January 1855. The records are contained in the old parish registers of births and baptisms, proclamations of banns and marriages, and deaths and burials which were kept by the ministers or session clerks of more than 900 parishes. There are about 4,000 volumes of these parish registers, and there is no general index, although few of the volumes have indexes of their own. The earliest register in the Registrar General's custody relates to baptisms and proclamations of banns for intended marriages in the parish of Errol in Perthshire from the year 1553, but the records are far from complete; for some parishes the earliest register dates from the early 19th century, and for other parishes there are no registers at all. Moreover, such registers as are available relate only to families associated with the parish church, and the standards of record-keeping varied considerably from parish to parish and from year to year. The tracing of lines of descent in these registers may, therefore, prove to be a very difficult task, and to get started it is essential to have some idea of where the events occurred, i.e. which parish registers are likely to record the events.

The Register Office offers the genealogist the immense privilege of consulting the actual manuscript parish records, the sheets being protected by heavier paper. As well as the ecclesiastical records, there are in various libraries a very great many reference books of ancient censuses, tax-rolls; land titles, military records and general historical material. Quite often there is no adequate index in these volumes, and one may go through thousands of pages of such references for the reward of a single mention of one's family name.

But what indeed, as one goes back through time, is one's family name? It is quickly apparent that spelling was not at all constant before the 19th century, and variants abound; some periods were times of particular flux, and in a single decade in the early 16th century, one individual surnamed Davison could have his forename entered as John, Jhon, Johne and Jhone. Similarly, "David Dason, monk of Beaulieu, 1541, is David Davison in 1568, and David Dauson in 1571" [?, p202]. In Scotland, as the machinery of central government - ecclesiastical and civil reached out to the more remote regions, a long succession of perhaps illiterate, often Gaelic-speaking highlanders reported verbally the events of their lives to English-speaking Lowland scribes, and the spelling variations are vast. The very great importance of these written alternatives to phonetic equivalents will be apparent in what follows.

Specific Considerations

In tracing the ancestors of Sir William, the starting point, naturally enough, is his own autobiographical account [1, p5]; it reads as follows:

My father's people were agriculturists in the north of Scotland, connected with an old family, the Dawsons of Crombie, but being descended from a younger branch, were themselves of the class of well-to-do tenant farmers. The tradition was that the family originated with an Irish officer, who had come over in the interests of James the Second, and who, when the effort to excite a rising in favour of the exiled king had failed, consoled himself by marrying a Scottish maiden dowered with some landed property. He was a Roman Catholic, and the family continued for some generations to adhere to the old faith, and to Jacobite politics. My grandfather was said to have been present, as a stripling, on the side of the Pretender at Culloden Moor, but having escaped that dangerous day, afterwards married a Protestant wife, and in his later days went over to her religion; and their children were educated as Presbyterians.

A slightly different version of this information is given by Professor O'Brien [3, p61], as follows:

William Dawson was descended from an old Scottish family, a family with a long heritage of Jacobite politics and Roman religion. Dawson tradition had it that, as a young boy, Dawson's grandfather had fought for the Pretender at Culloden. This fortunate forebear had escaped that bloody field and, afterwards, had married a Protestant wife and raised a family of Presbyterian children. In his later years, it was, said, the former Jacobite was himself converted to Presbyterianism.

In addition to these textual accounts, we have the Genealogical Tree drawn up on January 1 1881 by Sir William's son, William Bell, giving lines of descent of some 150 individuals [2]. This invaluable

document is also most frustrating, for his "Authentic Family Records and Original Information" are not given, and there are no dates at all. Thus Sir William's forebears, seemingly readily forthcoming, are in fact very elusive, for reasons which will become apparent in the course of this genealogy. We have however a framework of ancestors, from the time of James the Second to Sir William, on which to construct our account.

A Wrong Track

Let us consider first the most entrenched of the family traditions: that we originated in Ireland. Irish genealogy is hampered by the catastrophe of 1922: insurgents in the Four Courts, Dublin, barricaded the windows with State Papers and parish records, and when an incendiary ignited the building, the priceless documents of Old Ireland, the core of the country's history and heritage, went up in flames. The situation is by no means hopeless, however, as is pointed out by Rosemary ffollott [?, p257]. Indeed, searchers in the Irish documents have the superlative two volume work of Margaret Falley [?] to guide them, and much may be done. Thus we may approach a considerable Irish literature, in search of our putative antecedents. As noted above, Sir William gave the tradition that "the family originated with an Irish officer, who had come over in the interests of James the Second". William Bell's Genealogical Tree of 1881 names him: "Tam" or Thomas Dawson from Dublin County, Ireland". Complete army lists of King James' forces in Ireland are available; Thomas Dawson is not on them (the index is incomplete: each regimental list has been individually checked). Irish wills survived 1922; searches have been made of every Dawson will since 1576, and a relevant Thomas Dawson is not included, as testator or beneficiary. Neither is he to be found in the more general literature [?].

There are undoubtedly numerous Dawsons in Ireland: how did they come to be there? Some, of course, are indigenous Irish, originally Gaelic-speaking; they may likely spell their name O'Dea, which comes from O'Deaghaidh, pronounced O'D(y)aw, and thus leading to the variant Dawson in English [?, pp112-113]. The vast majority of Dawsons in Ireland, however, are Cromwellian, and later settlers. According to Rosemary ffollott [private communication], "Most of the Irish Dawsons stem from the big influx of Dawsons into Monaghan/Tyrone in the first half of the 17th century, from whence they spread in all directions. Mostly they were Anglican, with a few Presbyterian branches." She goes on, referring to Sir William's account: "I am most surprised that one of them was supporting James II. He must have been a sad trial to his relatives!" In [?, p166] reference is made to "the notorious Cromwellian anti-Papist, Alderman Dawson". All of this hardly squares with Sir William's assertion that his Irish ancestor was a Roman Catholic. And indeed the further one searches the Irish literature, the greater grows the conviction that there was not, and could not be, a single individual in Ireland in the 17th century who satisfied all of Sir William's observations; that is, the account is inconsistent, and hence cannot be true. We must choose either the possibility that the family were named Dawson (spelled so) and hence were English, Protestant settlers, or that they were a different, more closely Gaelic-derived, spelling, Catholic, and perhaps not Irish at all, but "an old Scottish family".

It is of some interest, in view of this logical inconsistency, to determine how the "Irish story" became entrenched in the family. Mrs. Lois Winslow-Spragge, who knew both Sir William (her grandfather) and William Bell (her uncle) well, gives the following account [private communication]:

More recently I have heard from my cousin (also your aunt) Cristall Dawson that several years ago she joined a club in Montreal, and there met a Mrs. Harold Dawson. After meeting her a few times, she (Cris) got the idea that her husband might be related to her (unfortunately he had died a few years before). One night Mrs. Dawson invited Cristall to her house to meet a man who had just come from England and who was of the Dawson family and related to her husband. At this time Mrs. Dawson brought forth some old photos of her husband's, several of a fine castle-like house, one of a crest and another of an old gentleman. When the stranger saw these, he exclaimed "Why this is the original house of the

Dawsons in Dartree, Ireland". Then it quickly flashed to Cristall's mind that she remembered well a certain Maggie Crow from England who came to visit her father [William Bell Dawson] in Montreal some time ago [perhaps as long ago as 1881], when she told him she had recently been over the beginnings of the Dawson family and found the oldest link went to Dartree Ireland, where the Dawsons had their abode. So when the stranger from England mentioned Dartree, Cris in astonishment said "Why that's the place Maggie Crow spoke of!". Further, Mrs. Harold Dawson went to Ireland herself and sent me a post card of Monaghan (Monaghan County) and in the centre of the town the post card shows an obelisk to the Dawsons with their name carved on it. Cristall also says there is a Castle Dawson on the North side of bough Neagh in an old map I have.

Thus the Irish idea originated with Maggie Crow (a collateral descendant), and there is quite sufficient information in this account to enter the literature.

The solution is in Pine's *New Extinct Peerage* [?, pp97-98], in the entry for Dartrey. The complete line of the Monaghan Dawsons is given, and it is altogether clear that they are not the ancestors of Sir William. The Thomas Dawson on William Bell's Genealogical Tree is undoubtedly "Thomas, of Termonmaguirke, Co. Armagh, and ancestor of the Dawsons of Charlesfort", who was born sometime before 2 December 1680. This "wrong track" provides us with two salutary lessons: first, identity of surname is no guarantee at all of ancestry: it is a perhaps natural, but in the event altogether untenable, assumption that there is a link between well-known Dawsons in Ireland in the 17th century and well-known Dawsons in Canada in the 19th; secondly, the propensity to trace one's line back to ancestors of nobility is to be resisted: William Bell was evidently unable to resist it, either in tracing Sir William back to Baron Dartrey of Dawson's Grove, co. Monaghan, Ireland, or in linking ("probable line of descent") "Miss Gordon" (this is Elizabeth Gordon, as we shall see) to the famous "Jock" Gordon (a connection with "Jock" or "Tam" is what all the Gordons relish, but most got their surname in the traditional Scottish clan manner, by being tenants on the vast Gordon estates).

The Quest Engaged

Since we were not Irish supporters of James the Second come over to raise rebellion in Scotland, perhaps we were indigenous Scots nevertheless given to rebellion. It is plausible to start with Sir William's father, James, who, according to his son, emigrated from Scotland to Nova Scotia in 1811, aged 21 [1, pp6-111]; this gives his year of birth as 1790. However, it is further plausible to take James' own evidence concerning his birth, in a letter to his grandchildren, George and Anna [5, p16]: "When your Grandpa was a little boy about 2 or 3 years old, the following occurrence took place (about the year 1787)...". This gives his birth as 1784-85. However, following the lead given by Sir William [1, p 6] "... but my father had to be apprenticed to a tradesman in the neighbouring town of Huntly", we can enter the parish registers for parishes around about Huntly, Aberdeenshire. But many hours search through many volumes and over many years proves vain: there is no James Dawson born 1784-1790.

Suddenly it is all there! The key, the crucial evidence, is that James was not born Dawson at all, but Deason: James Deason, father John Deason, mother Isobel Mitchel, born in Ordiquhill parish on 23rd April 1789 [?]. In quick succession seven of his nine siblings surface in the registers [?], some Deason, some Dawson, mostly Protestant, but John b1774 was baptised Catholic and amazingly recorded in the Presbyterian register. The birth entry for James shows the actual place he was born, Overtown in Ordiquhill, and the very farmhouse stands yet, the building now very much as it was then. Their homeland is farmed to this day, in Rothiemay and Ordiquhill, and the land they trod is as they trod it; rural Scotland changes slowly, and a modern descendant can, with little effort of imagination, go back to John Deason and Isobel Mitchel in Overtown on the Spring day when their next-to-youngest son was born.

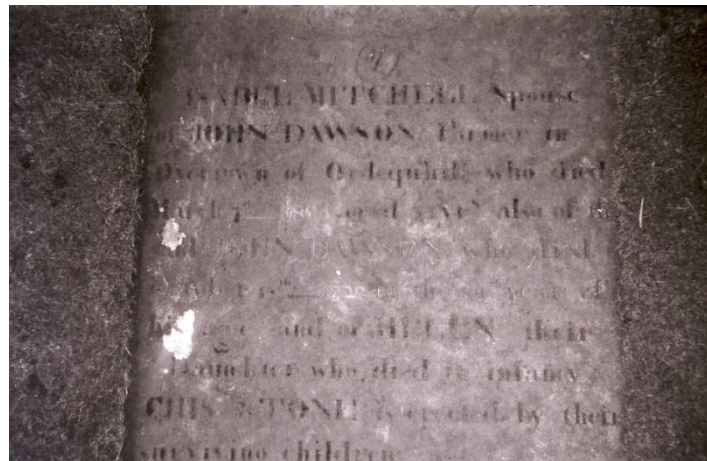
Crucial Ancestors

James' father, John, is the centre of that most compelling of all the family legends, for "present, as a stripling, on the side of the Pretender at Culloden Moor", he helped put up that last resistance of gallant Highlanders against the encroaching English, before Scottish independence went down, and Old Scotland disappeared forever. All the immortal stories, sung by Scotland's greatest national poet, Robert Burns, and chronicled by her greatest writer, Sir Walter Scott: "breathes there the man, with soul so dead" who does not today feel his heart go out to Gaelic nationalism in the Highlands. The cause was glorious, but alas, John was not on the field at Culloden.

To be present, even as a stripling, he would have to have been born no later than the late 1720's. The registers generally run out altogether, or become very fragmentary, before they get that far back, and John is not in them (so far as exhaustive search can tell). But his sister Elizabeth is; we get all the right leads: "Deason: Elizabeth, lawful daughter to James Deason & Elizabeth Gordon in Oldtown was born 9th August 1739 & baptised by Mr John Tyrie, Popish Priest, witnesses Peter Gordon & Elizabeth Askew"; all this ties in both with William Bell's Tree [2] and the Catholic tradition. The search for John, frustrated in the long and painstaking scrutiny of barely legible parish registers, goes back to the land, and there in the tiny hamlet of Ruthven, Aberdeenshire, is the greatest discovery of all: in the incredibly lovely old churchyard, dominated by the bell-tower, the "Wow o' Riven", of the now derelict church, and inside the church, right by the stone effigy in full armour of "Tam" Gordon, is the grave of the Dawsons, for three generations. Their headstone reads:

In Memory of

ISABEL MITCHELL Spouse of JOHN
DAWSON farmer in Overtown of
Ordiquhill who died March 7th 1805
aged 53 yrs also of the said JOHN
DAWSON who died October 18th 1822
in the 80th year of his age and of
HELEN their daughter who died in
infancy. THIS STONE is erected by
their surviving children. Also of Janet
Wilson spouse of John Dawson farmer
in Overtown who died 7th July 1833
aged 39 and of their son John who died
28th April 1848 aged 29 also of the said
John Dawson who died January 30th
1857 aged 78 years



So there it is: born in 1742, John was four years old at Culloden, and even the hard-pressed Clansmen would disdain that stripling's contribution. He grew up, our John, to be a man who "was noted for his stature and strength, lived to a great age, and was regarded in his parish as a man of vigorous intellect, strong good sense, and sterling integrity." [1, p5]. Who could ask for more than that, for one's ancestor? The man who is vivid in my imagination is an amalgam of Sir William's description and those sterling men in George Eliot's novels, Adam Bede and, most of all, Caleb Garth. Of all the men in the family, it is John I most pay homage to; the Victorians had very great virtues, but now, in the latter half of the 20th century, with all our problems, it is to that honest farmer that my heart goes back.

By report and by inference, a good deal may be learned of John. Sir William describes his occupations [1, p5]: "He acted as a burleyman, or appraiser of grain, in his parish, and was often consulted as an arbitrator in differences arising amongst his neighbours." James Pirie gives further details [4, p129]: "Sir John's family history may be briefly traced. His grandfather, John Dawson,

was at one time tenant of the farm of Auchincrieve, parish of Rothiemay, and two sons and a daughter were born there. He left Auchincrieve about 1772, and became tenant of the farm of Overton, parish of Ordiquhill, where other members of his family were born: two sons and several daughters. One of the sons born at Overton was James, the father of Sir John." In addition, we may infer a number of points. John was, as pre-requisites for his responsibilities as a burleyman, both literate and numerate. His language was certainly English, perhaps exclusively: his son James spoke no Gaelic, we know [1, p8]. That John was a man of central importance in the community is clear, not only from Sir William's testimony, but also from the circumstances of his burial. As was noted above, he is buried inside the church, which is unusual enough, but is especially so for one born Catholic. No other, more ancient, stone is in evidence (some, inspected by Pirie over 100 years ago, are obliterated) and none is to be expected: John was the first of the male line to be Presbyterian and hence eligible for burial at Ruthven.

It is to be noted that "John Dawson farmer in Overtown" returned a goodly way to be buried at Ruthven, and this was not because he was converted; the parish church at Ordiquhill is but a few hundred yards from Overtown, and John's daughters are buried there (Isobel, Elizabeth). The men all returned to Ruthven, and this can only be because the main family homestead is there. Even to-day Ruthven is only a few dozen houses and farm buildings, and in the 18th century it was, on the evidence of the registers alone, largely peopled by Dawsons, of one big family. The main dwelling, the Miln of Ruthven, where so many of the family lived in the 18th century, stands to-day, and up until very recently, I understand, a John Dawson farmed there. The building now houses only animals, converted to this use by a newly arrived "outsider", much to the disgust of the long-established residents. Their feeling is based on the conviction that the Miln is the premier dwelling in Ruthven, and it does seem to be the place where the senior Dawson family lived, at any one time. But in that "Dawson town" (re. Robert W. Service), only one of the very numerous kindred gave rise to progeny of world renown: John Dawson, defying the family preference for elder branches and his own circumstances, became something just somewhat different from his family contemporaries. Sir William said of his father, James, that "he was, indeed, no ordinary man:", and the words are, in truth, equally applicable to his grandfather, John.

How did this come about? It must be the central problem in any family history which traces an evolution from humble antecedents to great fame to discern the crucial influence, the major contributory factor (among perhaps many others). In the present instance, there is but one plausible force of sufficient magnitude to transform a long line of rough farmers, much given, as we shall see, to armed rebellion, into those great 19th century scholars, and that force was Presbyterianism, in the person of Isabel Mitchell. Born just at mid-century, on "January 10 1750"; the parish register contradicts, but is evidently preferable to, the gravestone. This woman, over three decades, civilised the Dawsons: before her, they appear on lists of rebels [?, pp26-27], or as men disarming [?, pp170-173]; after her they are professional men [1, p6], and scholars and educators. Think on it: before her, every male Dawson was a tenant farmer, of doubtful literacy; after her, every man of son James' line, for six generations to the present day, has lived the life of the mind. Well may we all echo, and amplify her gravestone: In memory, in most loving memory of Isabel Mitchell spouse of John Dawson farmer in Overtown of Ordiquhill.

It is noteworthy that the main point Sir William makes about Isabel is that she was pious [1, p6], and indeed the Dawsons came to cultivate piety, to a degree. But that was not the only, or the most important, contribution which Isabel Mitchell brought to the Dawson line: she brought with her an incalculable influence and the subsequent outlook and development of the family- Presbyterian education. At the main centre-lines of my genealogical charts, the mid-18th: century, there are many dozens of Dawsons/Deasons/Dassons, siblings or cousins all, living in and around Ruthven, and the most striking single feature is that, of all the family then alive, Isabel is the only Protestant. Now this is hardly the place to enter into a discussion of the respective merits of the Catholic and

Protestant religions, on which entire libraries of books have, been written, but for our present purposes only one simple point need be made. The Catholics of that time, and had always, supported an educated, Latin-oriented clergy, and an ignorant laity; while the Presbyterians, with their central emphasis on Bible-reading, pursued an alternative policy, resulting in a literate laity. The Presbyterians founded and ran the village schools, and later many of the colleges and universities, both in Scotland itself and in the lands to which Scotsmen emigrated [3, p71], and the consequences by the end of the 18th century were colossal and indeed revolutionary, in a sense quite different from that current at the outset of that critical century in the country's history. For it is a truism, often overlooked, that once you teach a man to read and write, even though his diet initially be exclusively Leviticus, Isaiah, and the Gospels, he can then go on, to read anything, and to think for himself. It was this educational heritage, "the pearl beyond any price", which Scotland and Presbyterianism enabled Isabel Mitchell and John Dawson to bequeath to their descendants.

Remote Forebears

With the attempt to chronicle the ancestors of John b 1742, this genealogy enters an atmosphere altogether different from the settled agricultural life we have heretofore been considering. It is not at all the intention, or presumption, in this brief family history to give any general account of that extraordinary half-century during which, after nearly two millennia of striving, from the Romans onwards, to contain or subdue the fiercely nationalistic Scots, an occupying English force ground down the Scottish people, as long before the Welsh were overcome, to impose a reluctant homogeneity on this island. The Act of Union of 1707 was a political fiction, just on a par with the contemporary fantasy that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and the constant ferment and strife, erupting in the risings of 1715 and 1745, showed clearly that the inhabitants of this island north of the Firths of Forth and Clyde had no desire to accept government from London. In that part of Scotland we have been considering, the people, under the suzerainty of two of the most powerful Scottish leaders, the Duke of Gordon and the Earl of Huntly, were Jacobite and Catholic almost to a man: the "List of Papists" of 1704 [?, p xxxvii] shows 362 in the vicinity of Gordon Castle alone.

A word of justification must be given, in this genealogy of Sir William with the avowed goal of showing the influence of his antecedents upon him, for an emphasis on the "long heritage of Jacobite politics and Roman religion" (apart from completeness of the account), and it is this all biographies of Sir William centrally emphasise his relish of controversy, and his determined, indeed impassioned, life-long defence of his increasingly minority scientific and religious views; where else, I ask rhetorically, did this extraordinary resolution in the face of increasing opposition come from, if not from his ancestors of the Jacobite period.

Our quest increases in difficulty by orders of magnitude when we attempt to discover details of John's father, James. From the birth dates of the two of his children we have record of, Elizabeth b 1739 and John b 1742, we may infer James' birth as early 18th century, say c.1710. The parish registers generally run out by this far back, and our great good fortune with John, gained by going back to the land, is here denied us. The family before John were, as we know, Catholic, so they went to chapel. There are two, within walking distance from Ruthven: Mortlach and Haddoch. Not one stone remains atop another at either site, much less are there any legible gravestones. The chapels were built of un-mortared stone, and their substance resides now, I suspect, in the stone walls delineating the surrounding farms. A point of some importance is that James, like his son John, who married "a daughter of the Laird of F'rendeaght" [1, p 6], seemingly married "above his station", if Elizabeth was really a "main line" Gordon (a considerable search through the vast collection of Gordon papers has not enabled me to determine this). Alternatively, and I incline to this interpretation, marrying a Gordon shows that James, like John, as we have seen, was more than just an ordinary farmer.

The great tragedy, of course, in not finding James in any of the birth, marriage or death registers is that there is now no certain evidence as to who his parents were; we must rely on alternative conjectures, as indicated below. But though James is not directly in the registers, he appears on a number of occasions as a witness (i.e. godparent or sponsor) at the baptisms of nephews and nieces, all born at Ruthven, showing they were all "family". This research leads to a great find, for in the Historical Search Room of the Scottish Record Office (next door to the General Register Office) is the oldest by far surviving Catholic register, full of Dawson/Deason/Dasson entries in a good hand; the priest was John Gordon, very likely the brother of one or other of the two, nearly contemporary, Elizabeth Gordons. At the Record Office, unlike the Register Office, which supplies only extracts, one can get Photostats, either positives or negatives (one is often easier to read than the other), of the actual register entries, so the exact record, spelling, handwriting and all, is obtainable. There are really lovely entries for the marriage, on August the 10th 1749, of the younger Elizabeth Gordon to John Dasson in Miln of Ruthven (with all four parents given!), and subsequently for the birth of their children, Mary Dawson b1750, Thomas Dasson b1754, and Ann Dawson b1756. We shall return to these prolific registers for our conjectures on James' parents.

We have one last resource from which to learn of James - the general historical literature. Going into this, we find, on an English list of "rebels" after the '45 the crucial entry: "James Dawson Wright Kinminity Banff Private man & hired out Lurking" [?, pp 26-27]. It is just possible: it was not Sir William's grandfather but his great-grandfather who was at Culloden! This entry, more than any other single piece of evidence, really supports the "long heritage of Jacobite politics". The spelling is not just right, since they were mainly Deason/Dasson then, the trade of wright does not quite square with the farming tradition, and the location, Kinminity, is a bit far from Oldtown, where, the registers show, James was living in 1739 and 1750. Would he leave his family of at least two and perhaps four children (Elizabeth, John, James & William) to fight at Culloden and be "on the run" afterwards? It is definitely possible, even probable - they were fervent Scots nationalists, but rather less than certain.

Further into the general literature, a list of Papists in the whole of NE Scotland in 1704 [?, pp xxxi-xxxviii] holds much promise, but Cairney, the parish where Ruthven is located, is not given, and there are no Deason/Dawson entries elsewhere. However, great hope lies in the lists of proceedings under the Disarming Act 1716: the Scots were prevailed upon, after the Act of Union of 1707 and the Jacobite rising of 1715, to hand in their weapons [?, pp168-1731]. A family surfaces: the Deasons of Airtloch, a few miles from Ruthven. And finally at last we get the most copious printed family source of all, the List of Pollable Persons within the Shire of Aberdeen 1696, in which emerges overwhelming evidence that we are "an old Scottish family". A veritable vast multitude of ancestors are chronicled, everyone over the age of 16 in 1696, and in particular there is a lovely entry for the same family of the Disarming Act: "William Deason in Backside of Arclach, another subtenant, and Elspet Smith, his wife (of no free stock); John Deason, their son, of twenty-two years of age; and William Deasone, another son, of twenty years of age". It is extraordinary enough to get this amount of detailed information on a single family from two printed sources, but they appear yet again; much earlier, in *The Book of the Annualrentaris & Wedsettaris Within the Schirrefdome of Abirdein 1633*: William Deasone, in Artlache [?, p124. This man, an adult in 1633, may well have been born at the turn of the century, and it is here, nearly 400 years ago, that any plausible connection with Sir William's family line runs out. We can trace the name in English back to Medieval times [?, p202] and in Gaelic - Macdhai - to legendary times, but this has no demonstrable connection with us.

As was noted above, in the absence of direct register evidence, we must have recourse to plausible conjecture for the parentage of James b c.1710. We have considered the printed evidence concerning his forebears and have put some emphasis on the Artloch/Arclach Deasons. It would of course be of great help if the printed sources could be related to the registers, and it is this

ubiquitous family that gives us the corroboration: on "June ye last 1689 Wm Deason in Artloch & Elspet Smith" registered in Huntly the baptism of their son Alexander. From everything that is known of them, I take it as exceedingly probable that one of the Deason brothers, John b1674, William b1676, or Alexander b1689, was James' father. The name spelling is identical, they are the right ages, they are geographically right, and they are Catholic, Jacobite farmers. Neither I nor any of the professional genealogists I have consulted can either strengthen or weaken this case, despite the most assiduous efforts. I thus believe the evidence to be tight enough to justify including the entire Arclach line on the genealogical charts, which thus gives us our first known ancestor William Deacon b.c.1600.

It is necessary, however, to note the alternatives. We have heretofore relied heavily on William Bell's Tree of 1881, supplementing it considerably and departing only on "Thomas Dawson from Dublin County, Ireland", for the conclusive reasons given above. If, however, we take the, at the time, unusual first name Thomas seriously, then Thomas Dasone in Longlay [?, p453] is a possibility. This possibility is strengthened by assuming James Deason in Oldtown and John Dason in Miln of Ruthven to be cousins, for the name is carried on in Thomas Dason b1754. But if we assume James and John to be brothers, then John's marriage record shows his parents and, on the assumption, James' to be Andrew Dason and Mary Murray. We may then suppose this Andrew Dason to be the same as one of the Pollable Persons in 1696 or, alternatively, suppose Thomas Dasone in Longlay to be his father, which is supported by the paternal grandfather naming-tradition. As a further alternative, if we apply this naming convention to James' father, he would be John (assuming our John b1742 to be James' eldest son); this leads us either directly to John Deason b1674 in Arclach, or more generally to one of the numerous Johns in 1696. In my opinion, none of the alternatives carries more weight than the Arclach conjecture.

The reader whose patience has by now not been exhausted by the multi-complexities of genealogy will perhaps have come to entertain a reasonable "family feeling" for those multitudes of ancestors of the 17th and 18th centuries. If all the collateral lines are considered, e.g., the numerous Marnoch line, beginning with the intriguing "double marriage" in 1678 of siblings to siblings, there are many hundreds of people involved. Perhaps many of these are among those designated vaguely by William Bell as "North of Scotland Dawsons" or "Aberdeenshire Dawsons", and perhaps many of them are newly discovered. If one really immerses oneself in the data, the feeling of one tremendous family is overwhelming. For instance, for almost three centuries the men of Sir William's line are all named John, James, or William (and he himself two of these!). The place names recur over and over - our people all literally lived within walking distance of one another. As a consequence of this geographical compactness, there is considerable interrelation of subsequent generations; for instance, Sir William and his wife share a great-grandfather (Rankine). The instance of this I like best is that in 1773 William Deason married Elspet Smith in Glass, as exactly a century earlier his probable great-grandfather William Deason had married Elspet Smith in Arclach in the same parish! But from James b1789 onwards, that once highly compact community has spread to the ends of the earth. This account is for all those who trace their ancestry through Sir William to that tight family in rural Scotland, for we, with him, share its abundant inheritance.

Acknowledgements

It gives me great pleasure to record my indebtedness to my Cousin Lois, Mrs. Edward Winslow-Spragge, Sir William's grand-daughter and the biographer of George Mercer Dawson, who in a lengthy correspondence provided me with a wealth of information, ideas, leads, tradition and family folklore and who possesses, or has now donated to McGill University, an unrivalled collection of post-1820 family source material. I am also most grateful to the Reverend Robert S. McLeish, the present incumbent of our ancient parish, who first directed me to James Pirie's invaluable book [4] and provided much other helpful guidance. Throughout my very long and often difficult searches in

the General Register Office Library, Edinburgh, I received every kindness and much detailed assistance from the very competent staff, especially Miss Harkness; all genealogists may be continually thankful for the staff's care of the priceless old parish registers. On several points of information and for corroboration of my findings, I am grateful to two professional genealogists, Miss Patricia M. Baxendine, Director of the Scots Ancestry Research Society, and Miss Rosemary ffoliott, Editor of *The Irish Ancestor*. I should also like to pay tribute to a work, no word of which is herein quoted, whose spirit pervades the enterprise: C.P. Sanger's essay "The Structure of *Wuthering Heights*". Given only the two explicit dates in Emily Brontë's great novel, Sanger gave the entire time structure of the work and provided lines of descent of all the principal characters. This he did by very careful reading of his source material and the application of a tight logical methodology; it is just these components which are required to structure a genealogy and, so far as it is successful, they are what have guided this account of family origins.

Webmaster's note: I have been unable to definitely identify all the references contained in the above text e.g. [1, p5]; the second number is the page number (5 in this example); the first number references a particular volume; the following are the volumes referred to:

1. Autobiography of Sir John William Dawson
2. Family tree drawn up by William Bell Dawson ([W.B.Dawson Family Tree](#))
3. Professor O'Brien
4. James Pirie

Unfortunately, a number of references contain no specific volume reference at all e.g. [, p202]