

6. Poodle in a Canvas Bag : Two Odd Renfrewshire "Domestics"

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Introduction.

Domestic violence is, sadly, very common. It need not be physical, at least to start with, but the results can be quite shattering in eventual emotional and physical violence. Two odd and very sad stories from Renfrewshire show just what can happen, and there are very odd twists to each tale.

Poodle in a Canvas Bag.

Archibald Ferguson was a well to do Glasgow publisher who lived in Sutherland Drive, Pollokshields, with his elderly and fragile wife. Their house was called "Dornoch" and was their own very peculiar, very stressed world. Both Archibald and Edith were poorly, the older woman was quite a burden on the sickening Archibald, who was frankly delusional and unstable by 1953.

Archibald Ferguson had been an interesting character, the managing director of Brown, Son & Ferguson, publishers of Brown's Nautical Almanac as well as the Nautical Magazine. The firm had been active since about 1853. It seems Archibald was feeling a hundred years old himself but still going out to the office daily, escaping "Dornoch" and his wife and the barking of Edith's French poodle "Rags".

Edith Ferguson had been quite active at one time, busy about the garden and home and yet still found time to walk "Rags" two or three times a day in Maxwell Park. By early 1953 Edith was confined to the house and garden, she was chronically deaf, more and more forgetful and the highlight of her day was time about the garden at "Dornoch". Edith spent her day playing with the dog, and anecdotal evidence suggests it ruled the house.

About the only thing to brighten the day for Archibald and Edith was Grace McLeod, the daily help, she arrived at "Dornoch" about 7.30am and generally joined the Fergusons for a cup of tea as they had breakfast. Grace was quite aware of the strains in the home, aware that Archibald spent most of his time trying to avoid Edith and the dog.

Archibald had found things a little easier in late March 1953 as his elderly wife stayed in bed till after breakfast, with the dog beside her. She was quite feeble, almost stone deaf and Archibald hated the shouting matches to make himself heard as "Rags" would join in. The dog's barking caused the neighbours to complain. Edith stopped coming to breakfast and the pair became more and more reclusive in their own parts of the house. Archibald's delusional activities extended to home and office and Grace McLeod worried.

On the 24 April 1953, to Grace's surprise, Edith came down stairs to breakfast. Grace took her usual cup of tea and the pair sat together around 8am. Archibald was in and out of the room planning to go to the office. Grace cleared the dishes and went through to the kitchen. Edith remained with her dog and began a rather feeble tidy up. Archibald was about the passage between the kitchen and the dining room

and Grace kept busy in the kitchen. Suddenly there was an almighty crash and the sound of breaking china, shouts, barks, bedlam, then sudden silence. Grace hurried back to the dining room and found Edith on her knees, bloodied and collapsing over "Rags" who was on the floor with her head smashed in. Archibald was not about and Grace took to her heels and ran next door to No.10 Sutherland Avenue where a Mrs Fairman phoned 999.

What was a domestic tragedy saw Archibald quickly arrested for murder. It seemed he had killed her because he thought she could no longer cope. He had crept up behind the very deaf Edith and smacked her about the head with a hammer as she struggled with crockery at the side board. "Rags" got involved as the old lady staggered under the blows and Archibald also lashed out at the French Poodle. He took out all his anger and frustration on the unfortunate animal. It seems this upset the local police particularly badly and the smashed body was quickly stuffed in a canvas bag and carted off to the police mortuary.

The tragedy at Sutherland Avenue really shook the neighbourhood. Few, if any, of the neighbours had appreciated what the Fergusons' world had become. Medical investigation showed that Archibald had been out of sorts quite sometime and most thought him quite insane at the time of the crime.

In court, Archibald Ferguson was a feeble, sad and tremulous character, grey-haired and bespectacled. Police were kind to the old man, helping him in and out of the docks and during the evidence of the medical experts a police inspector held Archibald quite gently in his seat. Archibald Hunter Ferguson (68), a once important Glasgow publisher, was found unfit to plead due to reasons of insanity, an "agitated melancholia" of some standing, a victim of his circumstances.

The human drama passed poor "Rags" by, she lay in the mortuary canvas bag. The local police were really very put out by what had happened to the dog and as no one seemed to care, they arranged its burial with the superintendent of the dog and cat home at Corkerhill. Four "big men" stood vigil for "Rags" as she was buried in a neatly dug hole.

The Ferguson tragedy is a comment on the privacy of middle class neighbourhoods, where mental collapse had been totally hidden in the guise of keeping up appearances. The inability of many to care about others has not improved, even with all the social safety nets of today. The neighbour's noisy pet dog is seen as a nuisance rather than a warning or a life and death concern.

The Paisley Dog Man.

Another tale of madness was that of Francis Sutherland, whose life as a "pet dog husband" beggars belief for its mental cruelty. Again circumstances created a situation that saw a marriage collapse in paranoia. In Francis' case it was his first marriage. Christine, his daughter by that marriage, split from her father with not the slightest idea of what was happening when he began to chase another woman, Mary.

Francis Sutherland was a sad fixated character who met Mary in the Paisley pub of which she was landlord. She owned it, controlled it and was a dominant woman. Francis was impressed, even obsessed by her, wanting to become her pub waiter. He quickly became the general dogsbody, with Mary taking him around like her wee pet.

The daughter by the first marriage had not the slightest idea of what was going on, for she had lost track of her dad by October 1958, and certainly did not know of the nuptial terrorism that kept Francis subjected from January 1959. At least he had his 'kennel', a condemned tenement in Stock Street.

Mary denied she was even married to him and had two male friends to service her every need. They visited regularly and when they did so Francis was put out of the house, told to go on the street and amuse himself. When he complained Mary hit him and began to smack him regularly, locking him in the house when she went out, abusing him verbally and physically.

Mental bullying and cruelty went on throughout 1959 and into 1960 and Francis became utterly dependent on her for food, for money even and was given 4/- (20p) a day for his personal needs. He still adored her, though she detested him and made it very plain that she thought him a scruffy useless wee dog.

Why Francis put up with such treatment is surprising but a long period of mental insecurity, going back over two decades, left him unwilling to escape his controlled world. In May 1960 he snapped and lashed out. Having overdosed on drugs, he waited for her return to the flat and stabbed her over and over again. He promptly took ill and collapsed over her saying how he loved her, over and over again. Francis was in such a terrible state that, for the time, he received the most lenient sentence possible of six years. At the High Court in Glasgow the presiding Lord Strachan voiced real concern over this odd cruelty case and that no one had caught on to what had been happening.

What of daughter Christine? Once aware of the marriage she was more than concerned, but Mary kept her well away. However she was soon haunted by nightmares about her dad. Christine was one of those whose dreams too often came true and one night she woke terrified, telling his husband that Francis had stabbed the cruel Mary to death.

Conclusion.

These two sad 'domestics' raise many issues and clearly show how relationships are at the best fragile. Both Archibald and Francis were seriously disturbed to some, but this fails to acknowledge that they were victims too. Marital discord knows no social boundaries and whether in the green and pleasant villa land of Pollokshields, or the back streets of Paisley, fear and loathing is a cruel equaliser and a dog will have his day.

Source Material

The above was derived from a long term project studying the incidental violence and impacts on social history in the west of Scotland. Sources have been newspapers, police reports and personal histories as clues to prejudice and perception in parochial law and order.