
EMMA M. STIRLING AND HILLFOOT FARM

Mary Louise RIPPEY
Curry's Corner, N.S.
and
Leland HARVIE
NSG Editor



"Photo courtesy of the Horsnell family."

Emma Maitland Stirling was born in Scotland about 1838¹. Her father was Scottish and her mother was American. Much of what we know about her life and mission, caring for poor and homeless children in Edinburgh and Nova Scotia, comes from her own writings. Miss Stirling published a series of illustrated booklets variously titled "Our Children"² in which she describes her work, the homes that she opened in Scotland, the move to Nova Scotia in 1886, details about the operation of Hillfoot farm and the fateful fire that caused her to leave Nova Scotia suddenly in 1895.

It is through other sources such as the 1891 Census which lists the "inmates" of the farm and home at Demsey Corner, marriage records for Kings County and a lengthy court case initiated by the father of three children who were placed in her care that we learn the names of some of the children Emma Stirling brought from Scotland to Hillfoot farm. Most were placed with adoptive families in the Maritime provinces, Québec and the U.S.

In her booklets, which were sold to raise money for the cause, Miss Stirling gives very little personal information. She briefly mentions her childhood home at St. Andrews in Scotland, a brother in the military and the death of an older sister when she was twelve years of age. The source of the family's wealth and her own personal fortune is unknown. She says she first became

concerned for the welfare of a family in the area and began sewing clothing for the children. She involved herself in the affairs of the local school and mentions an accident that left her bedridden for six years with some minor lasting physical disability. In 1876, after the death of her mother, Miss Stirling moved to Merleton, Wardie, Granton near Edinburgh.

She founded the Stockbridge Day Nursery in 1877 which was designed to be a place for mothers to leave their babies and small children while at work. Conditions in Edinburgh were such that she felt compelled to open a shelter and home for children brought to her by fathers in cases where the mother had died or by mothers in situations where they were unable to care for their children themselves.

Older children came into her care suffering from abuse or neglect as a result of poverty or alcoholism and she eventually had eight homes in operation with as many as 300 children at any given time all requiring food, clothing, medical attention and schooling. Donations were gratefully accepted, the Town Council of Edinburgh gave an annual grant and some parents paid a small fee for the care of their children. By far the largest share of the cost was paid by Miss Stirling herself. In 1892 she stated that she had spent £8000 of her own money funding the operation of the children's homes in Scotland and another £2000 in Nova Scotia.

All this activity could not go unnoticed and there were critics who did not regard the operation of her homes favourably. Emma Stirling however was resolute and armed with Christian conviction enlisted influential patrons and directors for her Edinburgh and Leith Children's Aid and Refuge Society, a forerunner of the Scottish National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. She spoke publicly, travelled to London and gave testimony in a trial, lobbied Members of Parliament and is credited with the eventual passage of legislation in 1888 regarding the protection of children.

In 1884 when the homes in Edinburgh became overcrowded Miss Stirling started boarding out children in the country and leased a farm where older boys were put to work. Excursions to the farm were made in the summer months by the younger children.

As early as 1882 she began to make inquiries about conditions in Canada and travelled to Nova Scotia at least once in 1885 looking for a farm where food could be grown and costs reduced.

At the end of May 1886, Emma Stirling embarked with the first group of 23 children assisted by two teens and two other women. They travelled by train from Edinburgh to Liverpool where they boarded the "Caspian" for the Atlantic crossing. After a brief stop in St. John's they arrived in Halifax on the 5th of June³. Temporary accommodation was necessary while final arrangements were made for the farm and modifications to the main building including the addition of a second storey were begun.

A deed⁴ was recorded 12 July 1886 between Charles A. and Elizabeth Taylor of Aylesford and Emma M. Stirling spinster of Edinburgh in consideration of \$4000 Canadian money for two lots, the first of 170 acres and the second of 49 acres "more or less" at Demsey Corner, about two miles north of Aylesford. Over the next several years she planted orchards, built barns, stables, a piggery and a saw-mill employing many local people to manage the farm, supervise the children

and train the older boys who were housed in a separate house on the property.

A second group numbering 36 in total arrived from Scotland at Halifax on the 31st of August 1886 and Miss Stirling went to meet them. They travelled by train to Aylesford and then by wagon to Hillfoot farm. Over the course of the summer many children from the first group had been placed in adoptive homes and applications for children were continually being received. Another group arrived the following year.

Her troubles however had not all been left behind. At the urgent request of the Secretary for the Society in Edinburgh, Miss Stirling returned to Scotland on the "SS Carthaginian" sailing from Halifax on the 8th of November 1886 accompanied by two of the children, James and Robina Delaney.

According to an affidavit filed by Emma Stirling⁵, Arthur Delaney applied in December 1882 for admission of his three children; James age five years, Annie age three and ½ and Robina age 2 to the Stockbridge Day Nursery and Infant House following the death of his wife Mary⁶. Robina Delaney came to Nova Scotia with the first group in May 1886 and James Delaney arrived with the second group in September. Annie Delaney remained in Scotland and was boarded out with other children at Dumfries.

Arthur Delaney requested the return of his children after learning that two had been taken to Nova Scotia. He later claimed in an affidavit that he had paid regularly toward their upkeep although admitted to being unemployed and claimed that he visited regularly as did his sister and mother. Miss Stirling held a very different opinion as to the character of Mr. Delaney and after five months in Scotland returned to Nova Scotia in April 1887 with all three of his children.

In August 1890 the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia in Halifax ordered that the bodies of the three children be produced. Emma Stirling's defence was that the children were no longer in her care, that they had been given to respectable persons who undertook to bring them up. James Delaney was placed in June 1887 with Rufus DeWolf of Middleton but had since run away. Annie Delaney was placed in January 1888 with Mrs. Jones "of or near" Grand Metis, Quebec after staying for a time with John Tuttle of Pugwash. Robina Delaney was placed about the same time with Mrs Smith Blacklock of Little Shemogue, New Brunswick and then with Mrs. Raworth of "Black Point or Black Rock", New Brunswick.

Miss Stirling explained that it was her practice to make enquiries of a minister and a magistrate in the neighbourhood as to the character, sobriety, and church membership of the families where her children were placed.

From the 1891 Census for Demsey Corner, Kings County we learn the names of many more children brought from Scotland to Hillfoot farm.

Name	Age	Birthplace	Birthplace of father	Birthplace of mother	Religion	Occupation
Stirling, Emma	53	Scotland	Scotland	America	Presbyterian	Farmer & founder of Home
Clem, Ida	26	NS	NS	NS	Baptist	House Keeper
Smith, Margaret	20	NS	NS	NS	Meth.	Teacher in private school
Johnson, Agnes	24	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	Cook
Kelman, Mary	18	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	Laundress
Voss, Hellen (widow)	56	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	House Keeper
McKiver, Hugh	18	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	Gen. Labour
Duffy, John	18	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	Gen. Labour
Wilson, John	17	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	Gen. Labour
Dempey?, Mary	16	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	Chamber maid
Mooney, Agness	15	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Mooney, Christeene	13	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Maguire, Maggie	13	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Harper, Davina	12	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Dryden, Mary	12	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Watson, Janet	11	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Foster, Bertha	7	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Isnor, Amanda	8	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Isnor, Hattie	6	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Ramsey, Ethel	6	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Wells, Alice	4	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Watson, John	14	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	

Name	Age	Birthplace	Birthplace of father	Birthplace of mother	Religion	Occupation
Fraser, William	13	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Greenwood, William	11	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Hodge, John	11	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
McKay, Benjamin	10	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Dryden, William	9	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Collins, David	8	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Dorey, James	8	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Black, William	7	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Frashure, William	8	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
McCleish, Bobbert	6	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Mattison, William	6	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Gray, George	5	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Duncan, Alex'r	5	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	
Cowan, John	5	Scotland	Scotland	Scotland	Presbyterian	

A search through marriage licenses for Kings County yields eight individuals with place of birth identified as Edinburgh, Scotland. It is not certain that they were all brought over by Emma Stirling but some of the names correspond with entries from the 1891 Census.

12 May 1879 at Kentville Presbyterian Church, William E. WEBSTER age 22 bachelor, jeweller, born Kentville, resident of Kentville, son of Edmund and Margaret Webster, farmer, married Gordon C. LEITCH age 19 spinster, born Edinburgh, dau. of James Leitch, accountant. #25/1879

8 Dec 1896 at Kentville Baptist Church, David M. KINSMAN age 26 bachelor, farmer, born Coldbrook, resident of Canard, son of Lemont and Amelia Kinsman, farmer, married Elizabeth A. COLLINS, age 18 spinster, born Edinburgh Scotland, dau. of John and Elizabeth Collins, printer. #114/1896

24 Apr 1897 at Aylesford Baptist Church, George P. COLE age 26 bachelor, labourer, born Lunenburg, resident of Lunenburg, son of William and Mary Cole, farmer, married Agnes C. JOHNSON age 25 spinster, born Edinburgh Scotland, resident of Aylesford, dau. of Robert and Agnes Johnson. #29/1897

25 Aug 1897 at Upper Canard Baptist Church, Arthur S. CLARKE age 31 bachelor, farmer, born Edinburgh, resident of Upper Canard, son of Alexander and Edith Clarke, farmer, married Edith M. SHEFFIELD, age 22 spinster, born Upper Cannard, dau. of Albert and Mary Sheffield.

#56/1897

21 June 1898 at Kentville Methodist Church, Frank BENT age 24 bachelor, farmer, born Bridgetown, resident of Kentville, son of John and Elizabeth Bent, farmer, married Jemima WILSON age 24 spinster, born Scotland, dau. of James and Jane Wilson, cooper. #52/1898.

24 May 1899 at Berwick Methodist Church, John N. ROBERTSON age 23 bachelor, painter, born Kentville, resident of Kentville, son of John and Prudence Robertson, blacksmith, married Lizzie MCIVER age 23 spinster, born Edinburgh Scotland, dau. of Patrick and Margaret Mclver, shoemaker. #40/1899

6 Aug 1900 at Upper Canard Presbyterian Church, Martin J. NIEFORTH age 24 bachelor, farmer, born Seaforth, Halifax Co., resident of Lower Canaan, son of George and Susan Nieforth, occupation fishing, married Jennie P. WILSON age 23 spinster born Edinburgh, dau. of Alexander and Jennie Wilson, coal merchant. #51/1896

6 May 1903 at Berwick Baptist Church, Hugh MCIVER age 29 bachelor, machinist, born Edinburgh Scotland, resident of Berwick, son of P. and Maggie Mclver married Pearl PRIMROSE, age 18 widow, born Harbourville, dau. of Charles and Jennie Morris, customs officer. #25/1903

One additional name came to light in a second court case⁷. Despite the best efforts of Emma Stirling to secure good homes for her children, she received distressing news concerning Grace Fagan of Nictaux Falls. She went immediately to the authorities and succeeded in having charges brought against Robert S. Parker, farmer at Middleton and Samuel Nelson Miller, a medical doctor, for "intent to unlawfully procure the miscarriage of a certain woman, to wit one Grace Fagan". Arrests were made on the 30th of March 1895.

On the night of 3 April 1895, a fire of suspicious origin destroyed the Big House at Hillfoot farm occupied by twenty-six people including Miss Stirling, six servants and nineteen children all of whom barely escaped with their lives. Their clothes, furniture and possessions were lost in the blaze. Two days later, Emma Stirling and party left by train for Halifax and departed from Nova Scotia on the 19th of July never to return.

The trial was held in the summer sessions of the Supreme Court at Annapolis Royal and the verdict by a panel of twelve jurors recorded 20 June 1895 was "Not Guilty".

In deeds recorded at Kings County⁸, in April, June, July and October of 1896 Miss Stirling "formerly of Aylesford, now of Coatesville, State of Pennsylvania" sold sections of the farm to Samuel Bowlby, William Horsnell (great-grandfather of the author, Mary Lousie Rippey), Peter Innes (assignment of mortgage), William B. Graves, and Lambert O. Neily.

Emma Stirling started another home in Coatesville, Chester Co., Pennsylvania called "Drumpellier" where she died on 2 September 1907⁹. The main dwelling was later used as a private hospital before being demolished and the estate sold for building lots. The 1900 U.S.

Census¹⁰ for Coatesville lists only three children in her care at that time.

Stirling, Emma M. b. Dec. 1838 age 61 Scotland, father b. Scotland, mother b. Pennsylvania
Fraser, William O. b. July 1882 age 17 Scotland, father b. Scotland mother b. Scotland
Foster, Bertha b. Sept 1883 age 16 Scotland, father b. Scotland mother b. Scotland
Martin, Jessie S. b. May 1888 age 12 Scotland, father b. Scotland mother b. Scotland

She was known in the community as a philanthropist and a bit of an eccentric. She left money to the “orphans”, to Chester County Hospital, and to the Florida Humane Association in Tampa where she wintered. Another publication of interest, “An Account of the Pavilion Church and Reading Room for Sponge Fisherman, both white and colored, on the Gulf of Mexico at Bailey’s Bluff, Pasco County, Florida founded by Emma M. Stirling, March 1900” published in 1902 illustrates her continuing interest in the welfare of those less fortunate. She was truly a remarkable woman.

Sources:

1. 1891 Census of Canada, Nova Scotia, Kings County, div. L1 (Demsey Corner), Fam. #74.
2. *Our Children No. II* by Emma M. Stirling. 1887 Colston and Company, Edinburgh; *Our Children in Old Scotland and Nova Scotia, Being a History of her Work by Emma M. Stirling, The Founder of the Edinburgh and Leith Children’s Aid and Refuge Society. Founded 1877* Published 1892, John Haddon & Co., London; *Our Children in Old Scotland and Nova Scotia with sequel...* Published 1898, C. N. Speakman, Coatesville Pa.
3. *The New Star*, Kentville, 12 Nov 1886, page 1. “A Nobel Work - Refuge for Destitute Children”
4. Kings County Deeds, Book 51, p. 663 (1886)
5. RG 39C, Vol. 396, #3071, Supreme Court of Nova Scotia, In the Matter of a writ of Habeas Corpus issued by the Queen at the instance of Arthur Delaney against Emma M. Stirling on the 4th day of October 1889.
6. 1881 Census of Great Britain, Midlothian (Edinburgh), Vol. 685-3, District 2, p. 13.
7. RG 39, Vol. 7, #3 (1895) The Queen vs. Parker & Miller
8. Kings County Deeds, Book 68, p. 65, p. 215, p. 379, p. 412, p. 513 (1896)
9. Letter dated 10 March 1999 from Mike Geary, Directory of the Coatesville Public Library with information from the Chester County Historical Society.
10. 1900 U.S. Federal Census, Chester County, Pennsylvania, Vol. 59. E.D. 51, Sheet 4, Line 38.