



## *Museum Musings*

Prepared for distribution at the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.  
Issue of Friday, May 30, 2014

### **A Prized Presbyterian Picture, or, The Painting in between Icon and Iconoclasm**



**“The Ordination of Elders in a Scottish Kirk” by John Henry Lorimer, 1891**

**In the process of clearing out its building this past year, the congregation of Wychwood-Davenport Presbyterian Church, Toronto, offered this painting to the Museum. The church has been sold to a developer. As of May, 2014, the congregation will meet in a nearby senior citizens’ building for its regular worship services. The artwork above hung in the Kirk Session/Board Room of Wychwood Presbyterian Church for many decades.**

The Museum Advisory Committee was quite thrilled to welcome into its collection within the past year something which has been considered to be one of the icons of the Presbyterian denomination. It is the lithograph shown above under which its flowing script confidently assures the viewer that it is a rendering of “The Ordination of the Elders”. John Henry Lorimer (1856-1936) created the painting in 1891. The perspective that the artist has taken is that of a photographer. The sense of reality is unquestionable.

Quite a few references in the cyberworld certainly would lead one to believe that the painting is a faithful depiction of an ordination service in a Presbyterian Church in Scotland. There is even an online store from which one can purchase a reprint which accepts the artist’s title as an accurate description of the occasion.

...if it hadn't been for the article written by the Rev. Robin Mitchell and published in the Mar. 1976 issue of *The Scots Magazine* that had found its way into the Museum's collection, the Museum Advisory Committee might very well have believed it too.

As Rev. Mitchell notes in the caption under the painting, "In this celebrated painting, all is not quite as it seems... This is in fact not what it shows and its title ought to be **"The Constitution of the Kirk Session Before Communion"** (pg. 597).

The nature of the painting is much closer to studio than it is to church setting. Indeed, all of the subjects were summoned to the drawing room of the summer home of the artist's family. Kellie Castle is situated between the villages of Pittenweem and St. Monans in the East Neuk ("nook" or "corner") of Fife. Within the drawing room, he captured the likeness of all those who would *appear to be* credible renditions of Presbyterian Church members and office-bearers. Within the group of "elders" there was: a corn-cutter and lime quarry worker; a mason; a carter (delivery person with a cart); a blacksmith/veterinarian (one and the same person); and a scythe-cutter/general labourer. That only accounts for five of the people who posed as elders. The sixth one is the one on the minister's right. He is a composite – he has the body of James Smith and the head of David Wilson! Although Wilson worked in the shale mine at Spalefield, Anstruther, James Smith's occupation is not known.

Even the minister is a composite! His head was that of Sheriff Russell of Jedburgh, a scholar and a friend of the artist's father, while his arms and hands were those of a Mr. Stewart, an Edinburghian joiner.

The church itself did not exist as depicted. It also is a composite rendering. The pulpit was John Knox's from St. Andrew's Kirk, St. Andrew's, the window was from Old Restalrig Church, Edinburgh and the pews were those as found in the Old Meeting House, Barnyards, Kilconquhar (which had since become known as Lindsay Hall).

The irony about this group of "elders" is that only one of them was an office-bearer in the Presbyterian Church. The second man on the minister's right was a deacon in the local Free Kirk. The disturbing irony is that local tradition maintains that the others seldom entered a church -- much less were active in one!

Given the fact that elders were ordained for life, it would seem unlikely that the congregation would have called the selection of men depicted. For at least two of the men in their advanced years, their ordination would more closely have resembled term eldership!

Nevertheless, the author of the article posits that the artist captured the simplicity and solemnity of an order of worship – albeit not an ordination service – within the Presbyterian Church in Scotland during the latter two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Credit: National Galleries of Scotland

The following article written by the Rev. Robin Mitchell was printed in *The Scots Magazine* in its issue of Mar. 1976.

### **“The Ordination of the Elders”**

**Summary: In this celebrated painting, all is not quite as it seems...**

One of the memories I have of boyhood days is of the picture that hung on the vestry wall in my father’s church at Davidson’s Mains in Edinburgh. It depicted a grey-haired minister with outstretched arms pronouncing the benediction on the elders gathered round the Communion table. It made quite an impression upon me.

Many years later, a copy of that picture came into my own possession. It was soon after I went to Fife as a minister at Kilconquhar and Colinsburgh. Lady Nairn of Cupar sent me the picture with a note saying that the original – “The Ordination of the Elders” – was painted by the artist, the late J. H. Lorimer, in the village of Barnyards, which is part of Kilconquhar.



**John Henry Lorimer, ca. 1900**

Permission: © National Portrait Gallery, London\*

This piece of information aroused my interest and I began immediately to try and find out if some of the elderly residents in the parish remembered any of the circumstances connected with the painting.

One line of enquiry led to another until I found someone who was alive at the time it had been done and who remembered clearly many of the details connected with it. He was Mr. W. Wheeler of Arncroach, a man as far as I remember in his eighties, and he was able to name the local people who posed for the artist and to supply me with some fascinating background stories about them.

Mr. Hew Lorimer and Captain Christopher Lorimer, nephews of the artist, provided helpful information and guided me to the National Gallery in Edinburgh where I saw the beautiful original and a letter from Mr. Lorimer, written to the Director in 1930, giving details of the persons and places brought together in the picture.

Most of the work on the painting was done in the drawing-room of Kellie Castle. The room was transformed temporarily into a studio. The “elders” were all local men chosen by Mr. Lorimer as suitable subjects for the Ordination ceremony.

The “minister” was Sheriff Russell of Jedburgh; the girl on the right in the pew was Jane Kinnear of Arncroach, and the man behind her was a neighbour called David Lindsay. The boy whose ear is seen was D. P. Chalmers, a nephew of the artist; and the old women on the left was an un-named Edinburgh lady.

The pulpit was John Knox’s – at that time in St. Andrew’s, and it was brought by consent of the authorities into the open so that the artist could paint it. It is now in St. Salvador’s, the University Chapel of St. Andrew’s.

The window is from Old Restalrig Church, Edinburgh, and the pews were in the Old Meeting House, Barnyards, Kilconquhar, now known as the Lindsay Hall. This, in fact, is the only connection the picture has with the parish of Kilconquhar.

John Henry Lorimer painted the picture in 1891, but the idea was conceived some time before, and some sketches which he made of the figures beforehand, published in 1899 in the July issue of the “The Artist”, reveal the care he took in preparing for the project.

The completed work was exhibited the same year in the Royal Academy, London, and in 1893 Aitken and Dott published a photogravure of it, as a result of which it became known to and greatly admired by a wide public.

At the turn of the century, the original belonged to Emerson Bainbridge, M.P., of Achnashellach, Rossshire. It then passed into the hands of Mrs. H. J. McGarth (presumed to be a daughter of Mr. Bainbridge), and in 1922 she offered it to the National Gallery of Scotland, whose Trustees took final possession of it when Mr. Lorimer died in 1936.

In his letter to the Director of the National Gallery, Lorimer tells how he tried two heads for the minister before finding in Sheriff Russell of Jedburgh the ideal subject. Sheriff Russell was a friend of the artist's father and a distinguished scholar. He posed only twice for the picture – at 1 Bruntsfield Crescent, Edinburgh.

Lorimer brought in a joiner called Stewart, a frequent visitor at 1 Bruntsfield Crescent, to pose for the minister's outstretched arms and hands.

No mention is made of the old woman on the left of the picture but she is presumed to be an Edinburgh lady.

Jane Kinnear, the young girl with the pretty face, was one of a number of sisters who lived with their parents in Arncroach. She was allowed off school to pose for the artist in Kellie Castle on condition that he taught her Latin and French. This he faithfully did, and when Jane married and became Mrs. Dall and had a family she taught her own children the Latin and French she learned from Lorimer.

On the minister's immediate right hand in the picture is John Keddie of Arncroach. John was a contractor for cutting corn with a scythe, and he and his wife harvested many an acre of land in the vicinity of the village. He was also employed in the local lime quarry, now closed.

Next to him in the middle is John Walker who was a mason to trade. He was a hard-working man, proud of his trade and of a retiring disposition.

The "elder" next to him on his right is a composite character. He has the body of James Smith and the head of David Wilson! Wilson worked in the shale mine at Spalefield, Anstruther, but there is no mention of James Smith's occupation. He seems to have been quite a character because Mr. Lorimer tells at length of an occasion when his mother called on Smith in his last illness. Mrs. Lorimer expressed her sympathy with the old man in his loneliness.

"Me lonely?" he replied. "What for should I be lonely 'wi the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost in the bed beside me?"

Now for the men on the minister's left. The one standing nearest to him is David Smith the village carter. Mr. Lorimer had an unexpected difficulty with this man. If you look closely at the picture, you will see that his eyes are open and not shut like the rest. He refused to shut his eyes for anyone except the Almighty!

Next in the middle comes the tall figure of James Bennet, the local blacksmith and unofficial vet. He seems to have been the most outstanding man among the six. Mr. Lorimer refers to him as "a very refined man, maker of iron gates and candlesticks". An Edinburgh lady who spent her childhood holidays at Arncroach told me that Bennet was held in high esteem locally and that his smiddy was a magnet for old and young.

But there is more to tell of James Bennet. He was widely known as a man possessing unusual skill with sick animals. He had begun his studies as a veterinary surgeon but had to discontinue them when the uncle who was financing the course died. In spite of this, Bennet became known far and wide in the East Neuk [of Fife] and beyond for his skill at diagnosing and curing animal diseases that trained vets failed to deal with successfully.

He could not charge fees, but the farmers paid him well and subscribed money for the purchase of a pony and trap to enable him to go on his rounds. He worked in the smithy in the mornings and went out on his rounds in the afternoon.

One story has come down through the years regarding a "test case" which proved Bennet's outstanding ability. A farmer called in the official vet to treat a sick animal. He is reported as having diagnosed the trouble as anthrax. The farmer was not satisfied and called in Bennet. Bennet said that it was definitely not anthrax. A professor from Edinburgh was then summoned and he supported the local "official" vet. The animal ultimately died and the post-mortem revealed that Bennet was right. It is little wonder that farmers placed such faith in the unofficial vet's skill.

Last of the six elders on Bennet's left is Robert Grant, a general labourer, but renowned for his prowess with the scythe. Those who worked with him in the harvest fields used to "get him talking" so that they could have a rest from keeping up with him. They said that he could "lay the corn down like a carpet".

And finally there is David Lindsay, the man in the pew behind Jane Kinnear. He was a general labourer who did draining, ditching, hedging and "cutting meedie hay gress" – meadow hay grass.

What a fine selection of men the "elders" make! Each face has character. Each one looks the part. The picture breathes the atmosphere of the simple service of Ordination in the Presbyterian Church.

Yet not one of the men in the painting was an elder! Only John Walker, second on the minister's right, held office in the church. He was a deacon in the local Free Kirk. Tradition has it that the others seldom darkened the church door. Yet in spite of this most people would agree that J. H. Lorimer could not have made a better selection of men for his impressive and moving picture.

**Source:**

Mitchell, (Rev.) Robin. "The Ordination of the Elders" in *The Scots Magazine* (Mar. 1976), pgs. 597-600.  
Rev. Mitchell began his ministry in the pastoral charge of Kilconquhar and Colinsburgh, Scotland in 1954.

\* *National Portrait Gallery* website.

<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/use-this-image.php?mkey=mw163748>

Permission for use granted Apr. 23, 2014

**National Presbyterian Museum**

415 Broadview Avenue

Toronto, Ont. M4K 2M9

*Located in St. John's Presbyterian Church, corner of Broadview Ave. and Simpson Ave.*

416-469-1345

presbyterianmuseum@presbyterian.ca

www.presbyterianmuseum.ca