
Robert Murray McCheyne – was he twice engaged to be married?

ROBERT J. DICKIE

Robert Murray McCheyne¹ (1813-1843) is one of the most attractive Scottish ministers in the nineteenth century. Scott has succinctly stated: “Perhaps no minister in the Church of Scotland is better remembered for the saintliness of his character, the anxious devotion which influenced the whole of his short ministry, and the success which everywhere accompanied his efforts as a preacher of the Gospel.”² His sermons and letters have been frequently republished, both in English and in translation, and they are rightly esteemed as classics of the Christian Church. The short and interesting life of this saintly minister has given rise to many articles and books (in several languages) about him and his labours.

We learn many details about the young preacher and his close circle of friends from the first definitive biography written by his like-minded ministerial friend, Andrew Bonar of Collace, a book first issued in two volumes in 1844, a year after McCheyne’s early death.³ It is well

¹ I have opted to spell the surname thus rather than the variants M’Cheyne, M^cCheyne, M^cCheyne or MacCheyne, which all also occur in contemporary official and family documents as well as in literature about the minister. It is clear from nineteenth century documents that *Mc* was replacing the apostrophised prefix in Scottish surnames and from 1831 onwards his Edinburgh University documents use the spelling McCheyne. In references, however, I have retained the original form used by the author.

² H. Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ, Vol. V, Synods of Fife, and of Angus and Mearns* (Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1925), pp. 340-1 (henceforth referenced as *FES*).

³ A. A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M’Cheyne, Minister of St. Peter’s Church, Dundee* (2 vols., Dundee, W. Middleton, 1844). This book has been through many

known that McCheyne died unmarried⁴ and neither Bonar's book nor a much shorter biographical notice by William Norrie⁵ thirty years later relates any close friendship which might have issued in marriage had McCheyne survived. Equally the newspaper articles at the time of McCheyne's death are silent on the matter. Alexander Smellie, a minister of the Original Secession Church, was the first to state as apparently "indisputable" fact that McCheyne was twice engaged in the last five or six years of his life, first to a young woman named Margaret Maxwell around 1837 or 1838, then to Jessie Thain whom he named as the fiancée when McCheyne died in 1843.⁶

Smellie's assertions of the two engagements were propounded in his "popular" biography of McCheyne, issued some seventy years after McCheyne's death. His views have gained considerable currency since then although the name Margaret Maxwell as the first "fiancée" is rarely mentioned. This is in stark contrast to the proliferation of references to Jessie Thain as McCheyne's alleged "fiancée" at the time of his death. The pathos of McCheyne's death and the desolation of Jessie Thain have been intensified by the subsequent discovery and publication of her diary by Murdoch Campbell, minister of the Free Church of Scotland in Resolis, Ross-shire: his introduction to the work added weight to the "fact" of Jessie Thain's engagement. The diary has been issued in four English editions, from 1955 to 1967,⁷ and also in a Dutch translation in 1980.⁸ The uncritical repetition of Smellie's belief that McCheyne was engaged to Jessie Thain at the time of his death appears frequently in biographical notices and in online

editions. For ease of reference, an online one-volume version is quoted in this paper (https://archive.org/details/memoirremainsofr00mche_0). All references to websites in this paper are correct at the time of writing (October 2016).

⁴ *FES*, Vol. 5, p. 340.

⁵ W. Norrie, *Dundee Celebrities of the Nineteenth Century: being a series of biographies of distinguished or noted persons connected by birth, residence, official appointment, or otherwise, with the town of Dundee; and who have died during the present century* (Dundee, W. Norrie, 1873), "Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne", pp. 81-85 (<https://archive.org/details/dundeecelebritienorr>).

⁶ A. Smellie, *Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (London, National Council of Evangelical Free Churches, 1913), pp. 195-202 (<https://archive.org/details/robertmurraymch00smel>).

⁷ M. Campbell (ed.), *Diary of Jessie Thain (The Friend of Robert Murray McCheyne)* (1st edn., Dingwall, 1955; 4th edn., 1967). References in the present paper are from the 3rd edition (Dingwall, 1961) (henceforth referenced as *Diary*).

⁸ M. Campbell (ed.), *Dagboek van Jessie Thain (Een vriendin van Robert Murray McCheyne)*, (trans.) J. Kooistra (Veenendaal, Uitgeverij Kool, 1980). Note that the Dutch "een vriendin" is "a female friend", using the indefinite article, in contrast to the definite article in Campbell's original, "the friend".

resources⁹ although it should be noted that the contention is not supported by two more recent authors who have extensively examined McCheyne's papers in New College Library, Edinburgh.¹⁰

The aim of this paper is to examine the evidence for and against the contentions that Margaret Maxwell and Jessie Thain were McCheyne's fiancées. A related paper will trace the life of Jessie Thain and her family from various extant records and that paper will comprehensively refute Campbell's widely-repeated supposition that she pined and died at the age of twenty-six in 1847, four years after McCheyne's death: in fact Jessie Thain died forty-two years later in 1889, a few days short of her sixty-eighth birthday.^{11, 12}

⁹ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2016) (www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17388). The English Wikipedia article about McCheyne states: "He never married, but he did have a fiancée at the time of his death, Jessie Thain" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Murray_McCheyne). On a website by D. Haslam dedicated to McCheyne the following appears under the "Family and Friends" tab (www.mcheyne.info/family.php): "The question may arise as to whether Robert McCheyne ever contemplated marriage. Although McCheyne never married, he was engaged twice. At the time of his death in 1843, there is evidence that he was engaged to Miss Jessie Thain."

¹⁰ D. Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne* (Bletchley, Authentic Media, 2004); L. J. van Valen, *Constrained by his Love: A New Biography on Robert Murray McCheyne*, (trans.) L. R. Nicolson (Fearn, Christian Focus Publications, 2002). This book was originally published in Dutch as *Gedreven door Zijn liefde: het leven van Robert Murray MacCheyne* (Houten, Den Hertog, 1993).

¹¹ R. J. Dickie, "Jessie Thain (1821-1889) and her family", *SRSJH*, Vol. 7 (2017), pp. 215-250.

¹² Both papers will refer to formal records and other legal documents held by the National Records of Scotland. The following information may guide readers unfamiliar with the records. Old Parish Records (OPRs) comprise the records of births and/or baptisms, proclamations of banns and/or marriages, and deaths and/or burials kept by individual parishes of the Established Church (Church of Scotland) before the introduction of civil registration in Scotland in 1855. The parish minister or the session clerk usually assumed responsibility for record-keeping, but no standard format was employed and information is often sparse, unreliable, and difficult to read. OPRs may record the birth or the baptism or both. OPRs may record the banns (proclamation of the forthcoming marriage) or the marriage itself, or both. Deaths and/or burials were recorded sparsely and sporadically in the OPRs, if at all, and then sometimes only when there was a fee involved for hiring the mortcloth or pall to be draped over the coffin. The system of OPRs was superseded in 1855 with the introduction of statutory national registers of births, marriages, and deaths. OPRs, statutory registers and decennial census returns (which date from 1841) are held by the National Records of Scotland in HM New Register House, Edinburgh, and may be searched online at www.scotlandscotlandpeople.gov.uk.

MARGARET MAXWELL

Alexander Smellie¹³ stated that McCheyne was twice engaged in the last five or six years of his life, firstly to a Miss Maxwell, “the daughter of a Dundee physician”, and then to Jessie Thain prior to his death in 1843 (which occurred some seventy years previous to Smellie’s biography appearing in print in 1913):

There can be no harm in setting down the fact that, in the last five or six years of his life, McCheyne was twice engaged to be married. The details cannot be unravelled with lucidity and explicitness, for those who could have explained them unerringly are no longer with us. *But the fact appears to be indisputable.* About one of the engagements little can be recorded. Miss Maxwell was the daughter of a Dundee physician; and “none named her but to praise”. At a later time she made a happy marriage with Colonel Bethune of Blebo; but it was the peculiar glory of her youth that she loved, and was loved by, this prince among the saints whose life-story we have been studying, “one like to Christ so luminously”. The union between the two was not to be consummated. Her relatives, *as some of their descendants believe*, interposed to prevent it. They feared for that frail body of his, and judged it wiser that there should not be any wedding-bond. *No precise dates can be fixed for these events; but the time may have been 1837 or 1838.*¹⁴

Smellie correctly reported that Margaret Maxwell married Alexander Bethune of Blebo, the *de jure* 8th Baronet Bethune of Scotsraig. He was born in 1824 and succeeded to the title in 1847 on the death of his father, Alexander Sharp Bethune, the *de jure* 7th baronet (1771-1847).¹⁵ Blebo is an estate in the parish of Kemback in Fife, nearly half-way between Cupar and St. Andrews. The wedding took place in St. Peter’s Free Church, Dundee, on 18th September 1849, the

¹³ Alexander Smellie (1857-1923) was a minister of the Original Secession Church. He ministered in Stranraer (1880-1896), Thurso (1898-1900), and Carluke (1900-1923); see R. Morton, “Rev. Alexander Smellie, D.D.”, *Original Secession Magazine*, Vol. 29, pp. 259-265, 291-304, 340-345, 367-372. Smellie was a prolific author of “popular” books covering a wide range of subjects, principally devotional and biographical, but none gives strong evidence of original research.

¹⁴ Smellie, p. 195 (emphases mine).

¹⁵ The baronetcy became dormant on the death of Sir John Bethune, 6th baronet (1729-1780) and was not revived until 1916 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bethune_baronets).

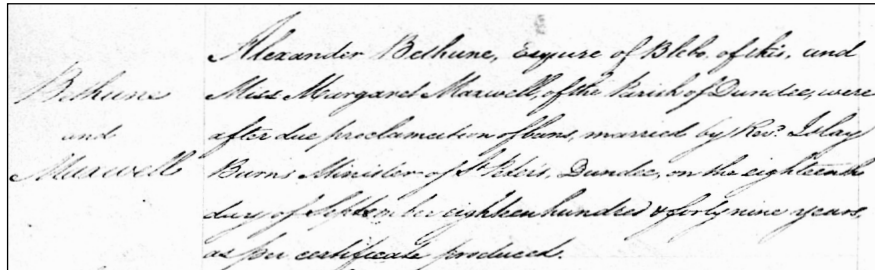


Fig. 1. Entry in the Kemback marriage register for Margaret Maxwell and Alexander Bethune. “Alexander Bethune, Esquire of Blebo, of this, and Miss Margaret Maxwell, of the Parish of Dundee, were after due proclamation of bans [sic], married by Revd Islay Burns Minister of St Peters, Dundee, on the eighteenth day of September eighteen hundred and forty nine years, as per certificate produced.”

[Crown copyright, National Records of Scotland]

marriage ceremony being conducted by Rev. Islay Burns, the successor of McCheyne (fig. 1).¹⁶

The Bethunes were historically connected with stirring events of the Scottish Reformation, and this becomes apparent when the name is pronounced correctly: Bethune (or Béthune) is a French surname and in Scotland is pronounced Beaton.¹⁷ In 1649 Blebo was purchased by Andrew Bethune, one of the Bethunes of Balfour. Two members of that lineage had earlier been Archbishops of St. Andrews – James Beaton (formerly Archbishop of Glasgow) and his nephew David Beaton of St. Andrews (later Cardinal Beaton), the notorious persecutors respectively of Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart.¹⁸ Cardinal Beaton (or Bethune) was the son of the seventh laird of the House of Bethune of Balfour.

Margaret Bethune (née Maxwell) predeceased her husband. She died on 2nd December 1890 and was interred in Bideford, Devon. Her husband survived her by almost ten years: he died near Inverkeithing

¹⁶ OPR Marriages 282/00 0230 0291 Dundee. 433/20 98 Kemback. In keeping with the custom of the times, the wedding is also recorded in Kemback (OPR Marriages 433/20 98 Kemback). The Dundee register entry identifies her as “dau[ghter] of John Maxwell MD”.

¹⁷ The Scottish surname Beaton has multiple other origins, however. In addition to its origin from the Norman-French noble family of Béthune, from the city of the same name in Pas-de-Calais, other derivations are from the mediaeval personal name Beaton or Beton, as well as an anglicised form of the Scottish Gaelic surname MacBheatha (also anglicised as Macbeth).

¹⁸ www.saint-andrews.co.uk/blebo/about.html. David Beaton was the Archbishop of St. Andrews and also the last Scottish cardinal before the Reformation; he was killed by Protestants in St. Andrews Castle in 1546.

on 10th May 1900 and was buried (along with his only son and eldest daughter) in the family grave at Kemback.¹⁹ The Bethune family gravestone understates her age at death in 1890 as sixty years (whereas she was sixty-four) – a not uncommon misrepresentation on monumental inscriptions of that era.

Smellie also correctly identified Margaret Maxwell as “the daughter of a Dundee physician”. John Maxwell, MD, lived in Jamaica and returned to Dundee in the 1820s to live out his days at 21 South Taystreet [*sic*]. There is no evidence that Dr. Maxwell continued to practise medicine on his return to Dundee²⁰ but *Dundee Directories* name him as a member of the “Weekly Committee” of Dundee Infirmary²¹ in 1824 and as an “Ordinary Director” of the city’s Eye Institution (founded in 1836) in Murraygate until his death.²² Dr. Maxwell had amassed great wealth and at his death in 1859 at the age of ninety-five his estate was valued at £16,703 12s. 9d., approximately £1.9 million in present-day value.²³ He was survived by his wife, Elizabeth Stormonth, and six children (one surviving lawful son, four lawful daughters, and an illegitimate child in Jamaica): his will made provision for all six of them and their children, together with the mixed-race mother of his child in Jamaica.

Margaret was the fourth lawful daughter of John Maxwell, identified in his will as the youngest of his family. She was born in

¹⁹ www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=117880298.

²⁰ Maxwell’s name never figures in the list of Physicians and Surgeons published in *Dundee Directories*, and similarly he is not named in “The Medical Establishment” (pp. 56-71) in H. J. C. Gibson, *Dundee Royal Infirmary 1798-1948: the story of the Infirmary with a short account of more recent years* (Dundee, William Kidd & Sons Ltd., 1948).

²¹ “Dundee Infirmary was run by its Governors, who met four times a year. Its day-to-day operation was carried out by a Weekly Committee, consisting of eighteen Governors, half of whom retired every year. The committee regulated admissions and discharges, dealt with smaller financial matters, and regulated procedures. Every Thursday morning at eleven o’clock, the poor sick of the town would also gather at the Infirmary’s gate, bearing with them a subscriber’s letter of introduction and recommendation. They were met by the attending surgeon whose decision on whom to admit was reviewed by the Weekly Committee. The roll was called every morning and evening and all absentees – who often included wayward nurses! – were reported to the duty members of the Weekly Committee during their daily patrol to ensure everything was in order.” N. Watson, *Dundee Royal Infirmary, 1798-1998* (Dundee, Stevenson (Printers) Limited, Dundee, 1998), p. 3.

²² In *Dundee Directories*, Dr. John Maxwell is listed as an “Ordinary Director” from 1838 to 1858.

²³ Legal records Wills and testaments Reference SC45/31/15 (Dundee Sheriff Court). The calculation of present-day value is derived from the Bank of England’s Inflation Calculator (www.bankofengland.co.uk/education/Pages/resources/inflationtools/calculator/flash/default.aspx).

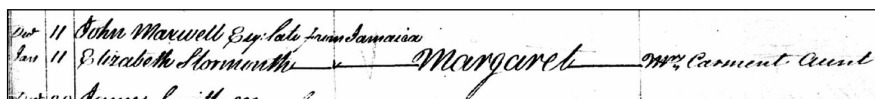


Fig. 2. Birth and baptismal register entry of Margaret Maxwell.
[Crown copyright, National Records of Scotland]

Dundee on 11th December 1825 and was baptised a month later on 11th January 1826.²⁴ The birth and baptismal record confirms her parents as “John Maxwell Esq: late from Jamaica” and “Elizabeth Stormonth” and notes that she was named after an aunt, Mrs. Carment (fig. 2).²⁵

Identifying the date of birth is crucial to the critical examination of Smellie’s contention that Margaret Maxwell was the first fiancée of Robert Murray McCheyne. Smellie was vague in specifying when the putative engagement occurred: “No precise dates can be fixed for these events; but the time may have been 1837 or 1838.” Clearly at that time Margaret Maxwell was a child between eleven and thirteen years old. In nineteenth century Scotland it was possible for girls to marry at twelve years and for boys at fourteen.²⁶ McCheyne was born on 21st May 1813 and would have been aged between twenty-three and twenty-five in the relevant time period. Whilst it is theoretically possible that he could have married a girl of Margaret Maxwell’s age it seems highly unlikely, to say the least, for a respectable minister of the Gospel to form a relationship with and to become engaged to such a young person.

Smellie does not name the descendants of Margaret Maxwell’s relatives who were his informants. It is clear that the dates they suggested for an engagement were erroneous. It is just conceivable that a close friendship and engagement could have taken place (and been broken off on account of his well-known ill health) somewhat later – she was seventeen when he died at the age of twenty-nine on 25th March 1843 – but it is difficult then to accommodate Smellie’s further postulate of a subsequent relationship to Jessie Thain – a relationship which was sufficiently close to lead to a second engagement before his death.

²⁴ OPR Births 282/150 310 Dundee.

²⁵ Margaret Stormonth was the wife of David Carment (1772-1856), minister of Gaelic Chapel, Duke Street, Glasgow (1810-1822) and Rosskeen, Ross-shire (Established Church 1822-1843, Free Church 1843-1856). *FES, Vol. VII, Synods of Ross, Sutherland and Caithness, Glenelg, Orkney and Shetland, the Church in England, Ireland and Overseas* (Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1928), p. 69.

²⁶ The Age of Marriage Act 1929 (19 & 20 Geo. V. c. 36), an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom, increased the age of marriage to sixteen.

The discovery that Margaret Maxwell could not have been McCheyne's fiancée makes Smellie's language incongruous:

It was the peculiar glory of her youth that she loved, and was loved by, this prince among the saints whose life-story we have been studying. [. . .] The union between the two was not to be consummated. Her relatives, as some of their descendants believe, interposed to prevent it. They feared for that frail body of his, and judged it wiser that there should not be any wedding-bond.²⁷

Hence I conclude from the available official documents that Smellie was incorrect in stating that Margaret Maxwell and Robert Murray McCheyne were engaged to be married around 1837 or 1838 and that it is highly unlikely that they were engaged at a later date.

JESSIE THAIN

Bonar's biography makes it implicitly clear that the Thain family of Dundee were close friends of McCheyne. Mrs. Janet Thain was one of his principal correspondents and four of the Thains' sons are mentioned in the book.²⁸ The family of John and Janet Thain consisted of seven children, two girls and five boys. The eldest daughter, Janet Davidson Thain (born 31st July 1821), is better known as Jessie Thain.

In examining the contention that Jessie Thain could have been McCheyne's second fiancée, I will cover the references to her in Smellie's biography of McCheyne in conjunction with evidence from other books and documents.

Smellie (1913) is the first source for the "fact" that Robert Murray McCheyne was twice engaged to be married. His contention that Margaret Maxwell was McCheyne's first fiancée has been examined in the first part of this paper. Smellie then attempted to establish that McCheyne was engaged to Jessie Thain at the time of his death. He writes:

²⁷ Smellie, p. 195.

²⁸ D. W. B. Somerset, "The Thains of Blairgowrie", *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 110 (2005), pp. 142-149 (archive.fpchurch.org.uk/magazines/fpm/2005/FPM-May-2005.pdf). It should be noted that the Thains' principal residence was Dundee, where John Thain's extensive business interests lay: the house and estate named *Heath Park* in Blairgowrie was the family's country retreat from around 1837 to 1858.

In 1839, however, in a letter from Alexander Somerville [to McCheyne], some suggestive sentences occur: “I beg you will remember me with much affection both to your father and mother. I would say the same, if I dared, of a friend of yours” – and the word “friend” is doubly underlined – “but I suppose you would not allow me. I am dumb; but I sometimes hear of You (plural).” The allusion now, *in all probability*, is to Miss Thain, of Heath Park, near Blairgowrie.²⁹

Smellie gives no justification for drawing this conclusion from the teasing allusions to the unnamed friend, however. Over seven pages of the biography he cites various facts about the Thains together with quotations from letters and suppositions, none of which substantively proves that Jessie Thain was McCheyne’s fiancée.

After giving some brief details of the Thain family, Smellie then quotes extensively from a letter of Janet Thain (Jessie’s mother) to McCheyne before he departed for Palestine in 1839. He then highlights Janet’s following remarks:

Poor Jessie has felt your absence all along very much; and, now that it has come to this crisis, she is cast down. [. . .] She has been anxious to have a class in your Sabbath school, which Mr. Caird superintends. She feels that she is able to do very little, but should like much if she could be of any use in this way, while we are in town, which will be for some time yet.

The Thain family attended the ministry of John Roxburgh at St. John’s Parish Church in Small’s Wynd, a few yards from their property in Park Place.³⁰ St. Peter’s was some distance away on Perth Road. There is no indication of any ulterior romantic motive to Jessie’s wish to lead a Sabbath school class there, superintended by Edward Caird, one of McCheyne’s elders. To Janet Thain’s letter McCheyne simply answered:

I shall be quite delighted if Jessie is able to take a small part in the Sabbath school. She knows it is what I always told her – not to be a hearer of the Word only, but a doer.³¹

²⁹ Smellie, p. 196 (emphasis mine).

³⁰ The Thains became members of St. Peter’s only after McCheyne’s death.

³¹ Smellie, pp. 197-198.

After writing about the ill-health of Jessie Thain's brothers, Smellie states:

It may be, then, that the sister [Jessie] was not physically robust. The letters which passed between her and Robert McCheyne were destroyed by the friend into whose possession they came; perhaps it was best that curious eyes should have no chance of prying into such attachments and sanctities. There are no references, in anything written by relatives, to throw light on the problem why the engagement was protracted so long, and, when all was past and over, was deprived of its crown of marriage. Was it that her health, fragile and precarious like his own, forbade the union? Or, when his life closed somewhat suddenly at last, were they looking forward still to that wedlock which was not to be theirs? We only know that the ties which bound him to her and to the members of her family continued unbroken.³²

Smellie raises the issue of Jessie's health in the context of her family. Her sole sister (Elizabeth) had died of "water in the head" (hydrocephalus) and two of her brothers (Johnnie and James) had died of intestinal tuberculosis.³³ Jessie's diary refers to episodes of unspecified ill-health, some for a short spell (which temporarily unfitted her for attending church),³⁴ and others of longer duration, and she indicates that she had a chronic respiratory condition.³⁵ Nevertheless, she continued to attend meetings, visit friends, lead a Sabbath school class, and undertake tours of the neighbouring countryside. Smellie's conclusion that her health was "fragile and precarious" cannot be sustained, and

³² Smellie, p. 200.

³³ Details are given in R. J. Dickie, "Jessie Thain (1821-1889) and her family", pp. 215-250.

³⁴ *Diary*, pp. 16 (1st January 1844), 17 (14th January 1844).

³⁵ *Diary*, p. 28 (entry of 28th February 1844): "Felt lately (which was perhaps owing to my being rather feeble for the past fortnight) that I might soon be called away." Later that year, the entry of 2nd November (pp. 47-48) states: "Was taken ill last Thursday, and confined to bed for a few days; but the attack was much milder than those of the past years. I am almost well again." In 1845, there is a further reference to prolonged ill-health in the entry of 6th April (pp. 55-56): "I am not permitted to visit the House of prayer. Indeed I have only been once within the courts of the Lord's House since the middle of January owing to a tedious illness. Was better a fortnight ago and was out once at church; but have relapsed since and am still very weak. Although my illness has not been very severe, yet it has been long continued. Great exhaustion accompanies the cough."

indeed Jessie survived to the age of sixty-seven, dying eventually of bowel cancer in Torquay on 18th July 1889.³⁶

Smellie is vague about the existence and subsequent destruction of correspondence with McCheyne: “The letters which passed between her and Robert McCheyne were destroyed by the friend into whose possession they came; perhaps it was best that curious eyes should have no chance of prying into such attachments and sanctities.” Whatever may or may not have happened to correspondence in Jessie’s possession at the time of her death, copies of chastely romantic correspondence between McCheyne and other previous “girlfriends” are preserved among his papers. Leen van Valen refers to “love songs” and *canzonettas*,³⁷ often composed on “Valentine’s Day”. The majority of these poems date from 1829 and 1830, when McCheyne was aged sixteen or seventeen. Van Valen names five young women as recipients of his lyrical efforts, two of whom (Constance Bullen and Mondego Mary Macgregor) appear to have had a significant place in his affections; he continued to send them poems in the 1830s, after his conversion. David Robertson additionally mentions a Miss Collier from Fife as a “girlfriend”.³⁸ Copies of romantic correspondence with these young women were not destroyed from McCheyne’s papers after his death, and it would seem strange that correspondence to and from a fiancée would be singled out for destruction.

Only one letter from Jessie Thain was available to Smellie, written to Eliza McCheyne, the minister’s sister, after the publication of Bonar’s biography. Dated April 1844, Jessie writes:

“You ask me what I think of the *Memoir and Remains*. Mr. Bonar kindly sent Mamma a copy. I began it the evening it came, and, as I could not rest until I had read it, finished the *Memoir* next day. Although it seemed very, very precious, yet my first feelings were those of great regret – that it was so short, and thus the half has not been told. But as I had read it so hurriedly, and had only a confused idea of it, I am reading it over again, and enjoying it much more than the first time. It is fine indeed, most savoury; and don’t you feel it very quickening, dear Eliza, to see what the dear subject of it attained to? O, to have such a sight of sin as he had,

³⁶ General Register Office, Registration District Newton Abbott, 1889: Death in the Sub-district of Torquay, No. 396.

³⁷ Short, light songs, especially in the Italian style of the seventeenth century.

³⁸ Van Valen, pp. 38-39, 57; Robertson, pp. 97-99.

and to prize the Blood of sprinkling as he did! His great longing after holiness is a marked feature throughout the book, his desire being ever to be made 'as holy as a pardoned sinner could be made.'" Then she reverts to her disappointment over the brevity of the record. "Don't you think it was a pity to fill up the volumes with old publications, when there was so much new material? We have heard one or two say that they thought his friends would publish a third volume of letters. Have they any ground for saying so?" And yet, and yet, *the gold of that land is good; there is bdellium and the onyx stone* [Smellie's italics]; and, "O, I trust that the *Memoir* may be widely blessed!"³⁹

Smellie seems to completely overlook the significance of what is written in this letter. Bonar had presented a copy of the *Memoir* to Jessie Thain's mother, not to Jessie herself. Given the attention to formal protocol in the middle of the nineteenth century, it would seem incredible that Bonar would fail to pass a complimentary copy of the *Memoir* to a bereaved fiancée. And indeed there is nothing in the letter to hint at a deeper relationship between Jessie and McCheyne. The content centres on her delight with what has been published and a desire to see further material issued in due course.

Smellie concludes the section referring to Jessie Thain in the following words:

Clearly, there was no slackening of the affection; and these two were husband and wife in spirit if not in actual experience. But God, it would seem, wished him to remain a maiden knight, dedicated to Christ and eternity. He could not drink his fill at the springs of any human soul; he touched the earthly love close, then stood away. For Heaven was looking on him from its towers.

It is clear that Smellie draws unwarranted deductions from the material he had gleaned about this young woman. His forced poetic strain is simply that: it has no basis in a sober analysis of the material he presents.

Jessie Thain's diary was not available to Smellie. Before considering that material it is reasonable to enquire whether any other primary source material available in the nineteenth century could have cast light on the relationship between Jessie Thain and McCheyne. Principal among these is a letter written by Mrs. Thain to McCheyne's

³⁹ Smellie, pp. 201-202.

mother after his death from what is now known as epidemic louse-borne typhus fever.⁴⁰ Typhus was endemic in the overcrowded and insanitary conditions of the households which McCheyne visited. He contracted the illness during the course of his pastoral work – the incubation period is one to two weeks – and the first symptoms became apparent on 13th March 1843. His condition deteriorated and he died from the infection twelve days later on 25th March. Four days afterwards, Mrs. Thain’s detailed letter to Mrs. McCheyne included the following:

My poor Alexander, he will be feeling deeply, having lost the best friend he had on earth. [. . .] Jessie is quite overpowered. She will write her dear friend Eliza as soon as she is able.⁴¹

Elizabeth Mary McCheyne, commonly known as Eliza, was the elder sister and *de facto* housekeeper of the minister. There was a particularly close bond of love between her and Jessie Thain – this is evident in Jessie’s diary (*vide infra*). Perhaps Mrs. Thain’s letter is remarkable for what it does not say: there is no reference to any past or present close relationship (let alone engagement) between her daughter and Mrs. McCheyne’s son.

I have previously alluded to the pathos of McCheyne’s death and the desolation of Jessie Thain as this is represented in Campbell’s introduction (1955) to Jessie’s diary. Given the eminence – and, indeed, pre-eminence – of McCheyne, it is natural to enquire about contemporary reports of the bereavement of his alleged fiancée. Bonar and Norrie say nothing about a devastated fiancée. Equally, the many column inches of newsprint in local and national newspapers at the time of McCheyne’s death make absolutely no reference to a grieving fiancée. On the death of Jessie’s father, John Thain, in 1866, the *Dundee Advertiser* noted that “he was the intimate friend of M’Cheyne – his house was a second home to that saintly man”;⁴² once again there was no hint of any relationship between Jessie Thain and McCheyne, as might have been expected in the article if any engagement existed.

The *Diary of Jessie Thain* was published in 1955, over forty years after Smellie’s biography. Murdoch Campbell, the editor of the *Diary*,

⁴⁰ This illness is not to be confused with typhoid fever, a gastro-intestinal infection contracted from contaminated water or food. Typhoid fever resulted in the death of Jessie Thain’s brother Rev. Alexander Thain in 1862 (Statutory Deaths 282/02 0978).

⁴¹ Cited in Van Valen, p. 427.

⁴² *Dundee Advertiser*, Tuesday 19th June 1866, p. 2.

evidently subscribed uncritically to Smellie's view that McCheyne was twice engaged. He further contended that Jessie Thain, "this lovely but frail flower, on which so many adverse influences had left their mark, was cut down in the morning of her days. She pined for a while under a wasting sickness till the Lord took her away to the land where sorrow is unknown."⁴³ As previously mentioned in this paper, his romanticized supposition of an early death is refuted by the fact that Jessie Thain survived fully forty-two years after the end of her diary.

The diary begins on 31st December 1843, nine months after McCheyne's death, and Campbell erroneously postulated that Jessie Thain herself died shortly after her final entry – an unfinished sentence – of 12th August 1847.⁴⁴ Like many other Victorian diaries, this diary contained reflective entries not intended for the eyes of any but the writer. The opening sentences of her very first entry make this clear:

I have often intended to note down things of interest to me; but have through much procrastination, never yet fulfilled my intention. I would now wish to do so, that I may not forget my own multiplied evil doings, or the manifold mercies of the Lord. . . . The Lord grant that whatever is recorded here may be faithfully done, according to His own blessed mind and will, and that all may be to His glory through Jesus Christ our Lord.⁴⁵

In the second diary entry, on 1st January 1844, there is a very brief allusion to the grief of the past year. However, it is clear that there is no overweening sorrow and the diary entry simply applies the adverse providences to a legitimate spiritual exercise: "Although I have met in the year that is past, with what has cost me many a sorrowful hour, yet how much is there of cleaving to the dust – how little of a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better."⁴⁶

It is in such a personal reflective diary, if anywhere, that one would expect to find evidence of a close relationship. The year when the diary began – 1843 – was a momentous one for the family. The Disruption of the Church of Scotland had taken place on 18th May. The Thain family

⁴³ *Diary*, p. 11.

⁴⁴ *Diary*, p. 12.

⁴⁵ *Diary*, p. 13 (entry of 31st December 1843).

⁴⁶ *Diary*, p. 17 (entry of 1st January 1844).

had been heavily involved in these unfolding events, with John Thain using personal supplies of sailcloth from Dundee and wood from his Blairgowrie estate to form a temporary (but very adequate) place of worship for the newly founded Free Church of Scotland congregation in the village. Furthermore, the Thains' close family friend, Robert Murray McCheyne, had died just weeks before the Disruption. However, in the diary, the principal matter of note for Jessie beginning her diary on the last day of the year was a lengthy reflection on her recent admission as a communicant church member in November and celebrating the Lord's Supper with Eliza McCheyne at her side in Rattray Free Church on 31st December, the first time the sacrament had been dispensed in that church.⁴⁷

Campbell's *Introduction* to the diary contains a number of statements which are open to challenge on the basis of what is actually written in the diary:

Certainly her references to McCheyne's death in her Diary are strongly suggestive of a relationship nearer than that of a pastor to his flock. Spiritual affection for those in whom we see the image of the Lord is an ennobling grace which may not always be free from pain; but the love of Jessie Thain for Robert McCheyne, while holy and intensely spiritual, appears also to have the additional marks of the fond and reciprocating attractions of nature. One cannot but admire the delicacy and refinement with which she touches on this subject. Her denied and crucified affections for one who, if death had but spared him, might have shared her life, brought her unrelieved sorrow. The anniversary of his death left her prostrate with overwhelming grief. Her visit to his grave left her stunned and confused. Even the sight of St. Peter's spire, "where the goings of our God were so mightily seen" opened afresh the wells of her grief. This lovely but frail flower, on which so many adverse influences had left their mark, was cut down in the morning of her days. She pined for a while under a wasting sickness till the Lord took her away to the land where sorrow is unknown.⁴⁸

Jessie repeatedly uses the first person plural possessive pronoun in referring to McCheyne: "our dear friend", "our friend's remains",

⁴⁷ *Diary*, pp. 13-16 (entry of 31st December 1843).

⁴⁸ *Diary*, pp. 10-11.

“our beloved friend”, “our late beloved friend”, and “our invaluable friend”,⁴⁹ whilst only once using the singular in “my valuable friend and kind counsellor”.⁵⁰ Lest it be thought that Jessie was given to using the plural “our” by way of affectation in place of “my”, it is clear that she regularly used “my” and “our” in an appropriate way throughout the diary. Furthermore, on each of the five cited occasions when “our” is used in relation to McCheyne it is clear that she is appropriately using the plural form.

It is clear that Jessie was strongly attached to her minister. Campbell is indeed correct in highlighting the sorrow she expressed. A number of entries confirm this and these have been grouped for ease of discussion.

Jessie was aware of significant dates in her own family relating to McCheyne’s visits.

Tuesday last brought some things to my remembrance – being a year that day since our dear friend [footnote: Rev. R. M. McCheyne] was here.

From this brief note, she makes the following application:

How ignorant we are of what a day will bring forth, for how little did I then dream that I was not to see his dear face again till the Lord Jesus shall come and all His saints with Him. May I be gladdened by the thought of the next time I hope to see him. Oh that our next meeting may be at the right hand of Jesus – when I trust to be part of His crown of joy and rejoicing in the Lord. And may I continually offer up what he did when last I saw him – “May all, O Lord, we think and do and say be sprinkled with blood, and be pleasing in thine eyes.”⁵¹

Again, reflecting on the second anniversary of Johnnie Thain’s death, she writes:

Two years that day it was since dear Johnnie departed “to be with Christ, which is far better”. The events of that day were rising up before me, among others the evening visit of one who was so faithful and yet so tender and sympathising in the home of sorrow.

⁴⁹ *Diary*, pp. 18, 32, 33, 46.

⁵⁰ *Diary*, p. 31 (entry of 16th March 1844).

⁵¹ *Diary*, p. 18 (entry of 18th January 1844).

Once again she concludes this entry by making a brief spiritual application to herself.⁵²

Significant dates in McCheyne's life also reminded Jessie of the loss of her friend.

It was a year that day according to the day of the week, since my valuable friend and kind counsellor took sick of his last illness. It appears two or three years to me instead of one.⁵³

On the first anniversary of his death, she wrote:

It is not easy to put down this date, for it is a year to-day by the day of the month (although last Saturday by the day of the week) since our beloved friend entered into rest. He no more feels a weak body, nor does he mourn over his own sins and over the sins of others. He has no longer sorrows to weigh down his tender spirit. He has been a year before the Throne, in the presence of that Jesus whom, not having seen, he loved. To him to live was Christ and to die was gain. But, Oh it seems to me like two or three. The Lord Himself make up to me what I have lost in him; for the more I see of others the more do I feel persuaded that I shall never see his like again.

This is perhaps the closest she comes to asserting a special closeness to McCheyne, but it is far from asserting a romantic relationship. And far from dwelling on her loss on the anniversary of his death, her diary goes on promptly to record how much she had enjoyed teaching her Sabbath school class.⁵⁴ A year later, on the second anniversary of her minister's death, her expression of remembrance contains no hint of any special relationship to McCheyne and is simply a reflection on the spiritual benefit she had derived from his ministry.

It is two years since our invaluable friend entered into rest. It was an event which must ever be a solemn and affecting one to me. The Lord took to Heaven one who had been blessed more to me than all else in the world besides. Thanks be unto Thy name, O Lord, for all Thou didst for him and by him, and for all that my poor soul received from Thee through him. And may my remembrance of him, although often sorrowful and sometimes as

⁵² *Diary*, p. 29 (entry of 28th February 1844).

⁵³ *Diary*, p. 31 (entry of 16th March 1844).

⁵⁴ *Diary*, p. 33 (entry of 25th March 1844).

if to crush my spirit, ever humble and quicken me, and urge me on in the way of life.⁵⁵

Meeting people who had been associated with McCheyne also elicited sorrow.

When Mr. Patrick Millar came in on Saturday night, could not help being at different times much affected because of his being associated with dear Robert McCheyne and having not seen Mr. Millar since his death.⁵⁶

Similarly, revisiting sites associated with McCheyne evoked grief.

Went to Dundee, where I have not been for a year past. I wanted to be present at dear Isabella Williamson's marriage on Wednesday evening. The sight of St. Peter's spire, as we drove into town quite upset me. During the few days I was there, in the midst of everything else, the thought was constantly present before me that he was away. Walked in the afternoon to the dear spot where our friend's remains rest, and felt so overcome while standing there that I couldn't realise anything; but, oh, how applicable are his own words to himself: "The precious dust beneath that lies, / Shall at the Voice of Jesus rise, / To meet the Bridegroom in the skies, / There, there, we'll meet again." With lingering steps and wistful looks I left the spot and even the outward walls of that dear church touched many a cord [*sic*] in my bosom and told many a tale to my aching heart.

It is clear that she was not overwhelmed as her diary entry immediately turns to the joy of her friend's wedding.⁵⁷ A later visit to St. Peter's for a communion season elicited similar distress: "It was so overcoming to be in St. Peter's again. I felt very much agitated and confused, but more calm and composed in the afternoon." She heard Mr. Bonar preaching there on consolation but there is no reference to personal grief for the late minister. After a further account of the services she concludes: "Notwithstanding the sad change in St. Peter's I still felt the place blessed, and different from any other church I had been to. It was good to be there."⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *Diary*, p. 55 (entry of 25th March 1845).

⁵⁶ *Diary*, p. 31 (entry of 18th March 1844).

⁵⁷ *Diary*, pp. 32-33 (entry of 23rd March 1844).

⁵⁸ *Diary*, pp. 36-39 (entry of 29th April 1844).

Jessie also alludes to her reaction to Bonar's biography of McCheyne. Her letter to Eliza has been noted previously in connection with Smellie's biography. The diary records:

We have had a sight a few days back of the second volume of R. M. McCheyne's *Remains*. Felt the letters sweet and profitable. When looking into the book yesterday forenoon it opened at two different places, where he speaks plainly and faithfully of Achan's idols, and besetting sins. Oh Lord although Thy servant be dead, may he yet speak with power to my soul and grant that I may desire above all things not only that the guilt of all and every sin may be washed away, but that the power of them may be subdued also – every thought being brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. Oh to be willing to part with everything for Him, although it be a right hand or a right eye.

Papa brought out copies of the two volumes last evening and, being not very well to-day, have read all the *Memoir*. Although I cannot but regret it is so much condensed, still, what is of it, is very precious and as I went along, felt it very quickening. Oh to see sin, to prize the blood of sprinkling and pant after holiness as he did. With Paul I would say, "This one thing I do forgetting the things that are behind . . ." Oh Lord lead me in the footsteps of the flock. Make me to be a follower of them who through faith and patience are now inheriting the promises.⁵⁹

Once again it is clear that Bonar gifted the copies of both books to the Thain family, not to Jessie. This reinforces the strong sign that Bonar did not acknowledge that there was any "special" relationship between Jessie and McCheyne. Further, the language Jessie used after reading the *Memoir* for a third time is entirely devoid of any indication that he was her fiancé:

To-day finished reading his *Memoir* for the third time. O Lord grant that this record of Thy faithful servant's journey through this vale of tears may be greatly and universally blessed of Thee, especially to those who are engaged in the glorious work of the ministry; that by it they may be led to cultivate greater holiness of

⁵⁹ *Diary*, pp. 34-35 (entry of 28th March 1844).

walk and conversation, and to long more for the glory of Jesus in the salvation of souls.⁶⁰

Not only is the entry entirely devoid of feelings for McCheyne on a highly significant date – the second anniversary of his death – it is almost incredible that a bereaved fiancée had read the *Memoir* of her loved one on only three occasions in the space of one year since publication.

There is an aphorism that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”. However, it is accepted that “in some circumstances it can be safely assumed that if a certain event had occurred, evidence of it could be discovered by qualified investigators. In such circumstances it is perfectly reasonable to take the absence of proof of its occurrence as positive proof of its non-occurrence.”⁶¹ The evidence from the language in Jessie Thain’s diary seems to indicate that there was no evidence of an engagement. If there were any doubt on the matter, one entry seems to clinch the argument that they were *not* engaged. At first sight it is a simple statement of fact in an early entry in the diary on Thursday 18th January 1844: “Tuesday last brought some things to my remembrance – being a year that day since our dear friend was here, and whom we then saw for the last time.” McCheyne no doubt led a busy life and in February 1843 he made an evangelistic tour to the north-east of Scotland. This lasted virtually the whole month and he returned somewhat exhausted to his flock on 1st March.⁶² There is no record of correspondence with Jessie Thain during this time, and self-evidently no face-to-face meeting after 16th January.

McCheyne’s final illness lasted twelve days. The seriousness of his decline was obvious to all from the outset. The day after he fell ill and consulted his doctor, “the congregation came together for their weekly prayer meeting. Constant prayer was made on behalf of their beloved teacher. The church building remained open the following few evenings so that the believers could come together to pray for his recovery.” Within a few days his father had travelled from Edinburgh to see him, friends gathered to visit him, he was sinking fast and “a great dismay prevailed over the city. [. . .] Everywhere prayer meetings were held. On the Thursday evening, St. Peter’s Church was once again full, but also

⁶⁰ *Diary*, p. 55 (entry of 25th March 1845).

⁶¹ I. Copi, *Introduction to Logic* (New York, Macmillan, 1953), p. 53.

⁶² Bonar, pp. 163-164.

the following evening many gathered to pray for him. The agreement was to use the school building for this purpose, but the overflow was so great that people had to take refuge in the church.”⁶³ Where was Jessie during this time? Blairgowrie is relatively close to Dundee, a matter of twenty miles (31 km) by a road frequently travelled by the Thains. The absence of Jessie from Dundee is telling: it is virtually inconceivable that a fiancée would fail to hasten to the side of her beloved in his dying days, especially as she had last seen him two months previously. Furthermore, her diary nowhere expresses regrets or remorse about the lack of contact during those months, and gives no hints at any reason detaining her from visiting Dundee during the final twelve days of his life or from participating in the obsequies.

It seems clear that Smellie has provided no substantial evidence to back up his assertion that Jessie Thain was McCheyne’s fiancée and he has certainly overlooked evidence which contradicts his conclusion. The discovery of Jessie Thain’s diary has lent no support to the hypothesis and contains evidence which positively undermines the theory.

CONCLUSIONS

Smellie introduced the world to the story that Robert Murray McCheyne was engaged – not once but twice. Official documents make it clear that McCheyne was not engaged to the first putative fiancée, Margaret Maxwell, who would have been thirteen years old, at the most, at the time Smellie suggests they were engaged. Whilst a strong bond existed between McCheyne and the Thain family, there is equally no credible evidence to support the contention that Jessie Thain was his second fiancée – and on the other hand there is much evidence to overturn the hypothesis. In this conclusion I concur with Robertson and Van Valen that there is no evidence that McCheyne was ever engaged to be married.⁶⁴ The belief that he was engaged to Jessie at the time of his death has become firmly entrenched in McCheyne literature and it is hoped that the present paper will go some way to correcting this misapprehension.

⁶³ Van Valen, pp. 416-419.

⁶⁴ Robertson, p. 98: “There is no evidence of an engagement.” Van Valen, pp. 250, 251: “There was talk of an association between him and Jessie Thain, but no evidence for this has ever appeared. [. . .] He had a spiritual bond with Jessie, but whether they meant something more to each other is not apparent from the letters.”

