



Kidd, D (2014) The Scottish Life Archive. In *Scottish Archives Vol. 20* (2014) pp.123-133. Scottish Records Association.

ISSN: 1353-1964

<http://repository.nms.ac.uk/1646>

Deposited on: 27 July 2016

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Around the Archives

The Scottish Life Archive

Dorothy Kidd

I am grateful for this invitation to write about the Scottish Life Archive (SLA) at the National Museums of Scotland; partly because it gives me an opportunity to publicise our collections, but especially because it has made me reflect on how the Archive developed, where we are now and how it may evolve in the future. The opinions in this article are mine alone.

In 1959 the late Professor Alexander Fenton (1929–2012) joined the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland to set up the Country Life Section, charged with the remit of developing collections that would enable the eventual opening of the Scottish Agricultural Museum at Ingliston in 1982. Along with the three-dimensional artefacts he and his colleagues were collecting for the future Museum, documents, photographs, bibliographical references, newspaper cuttings, first-hand accounts, interviews and anything else relating to them were also gathered. He had the foresight to organise a finding aid for these two-dimensional and oral artefacts. Its arrangement meant that they were not only creating a huge resource to aid their own research, exhibition and publication work, but also one that could simultaneously function as a public resource and as a way of promoting the development of the collections (Plate 1).

This finding aid was initially organised around the subject headings covered in the *General Views of Agriculture* and *Old and New Statistical Account* for each Scottish county.¹ Every item collected was briefly described on a record slip, given an accession number in the case of an original document or oral history interview, and copied and referenced by its negative number in the case of a photograph, and then filed in ring-post binders, first by Subject and then by County. This meant that researchers, whether staff of the Museum or non-specialist visitors could find everything – from bibliographic references, through dictionary definitions of regional names for things, to images, first-hand accounts and documents on a specific subject – all in the one binder. None of this sounds particularly unusual now, and indeed other Curators at the time were also collecting this type of material, but Sandy had the vision to organise it in

¹ The *General Views of Agriculture* for each Scottish county were published by the Board of Agriculture for Great Britain between 1793 and 1816, while the *First (Old)* and *Second (New) Statistical Account* were published in the 1790s and 1830s respectively (see: <http://edina.ac.uk/stat-acc-scot>).



Plate 1 Alexander Fenton chatting with John Smith, farmer at Mumrills, Laurieston, Falkirk, Stirlingshire, in 1968. Many items from the farm are now in the collections of the National Museums of Scotland.

a way that made it truly accessible. A colleague once described it as a ‘sort of scrap book’, and that does give a flavour of the range of material assembled, albeit in an organised manner. Most research was simple, the filing system only being a hindrance if looking for information on a place rather than a topic, when several dozen ring binders might have to be explored. Another area that could cause difficulty was that some items might fall into more than one category. This required those writing up the record slips to create as many cross-references as they felt the item required. So, for instance, a photograph of a group of women gathering potatoes might be filed under ‘Potatoes’ and also ‘Farm Workers’.

By the time I came to work at the Museum in 1985, the collection comprised about 80,000 photographs and countless bibliographic dictionary entries and newspaper cuttings, accessed via around 500 ring binders. Over the next decade, changes consisted principally in widening the scope of collecting, mirroring the developing responsibilities of the Museum and the specialist interests of its staff, to include Scotland’s maritime, urban and industrial story, as well as its rural one. It saw the adoption of a standard classification system when creating new subject headings,² and the use of current oral history recording

² Museum Documentation Association, *SHIC*, the *Social History and Industrial Classification* (Sheffield, 1983). See also: <http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk/about-collections-trust/history>.

equipment. The purchase of a video camera, however, never justified itself because its one significant outing – to video a retired tailor, who had donated a significant collection of shop fittings, demonstrating how to fit a gentleman for a suit – showed the Curators involved that filming was not where their skills lay!

Collecting, then as now, was done through loans of photographs for copying, donations, fieldwork by Museum Curators and others, and a very small number of purchases. The following is a brief summary of the significant collections acquired by the late 1990s.

Photographs, including those of:

- William Easton, a St Monance professional photographer between about 1890 and 1920 depicting life in Fife fishing villages, and St Monance in particular.
- H. B. Curwen, archaeologist and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. Taken from 1901 to 1904, they include images of life on Foula, Shetland and photographs of sculptured crosses and churches in northern and western Scotland.
- Cathcart collection. Photographs of life in the Uists, taken *c.* 1897–1904.
- Robert Sturgeon, postmaster on Coll, Argyllshire from 1889 until his retirement in 1942. A keen photographer, he recorded life on the island and a collection of his glass plate negatives covering the period *c.* 1890–1910 survived, was copied and then returned to the island.
- Mary Ethel Muir Donaldson, born in Surrey in 1876 of a Scottish family, she visited Scotland annually as an adult and eventually came to live here permanently. She designed and built herself a house at Sanna in Ardnamurchan in 1925 and lived there until it was gutted by fire in 1947. She travelled extensively in north-west Scotland and wrote on Scottish history, and Scottish church history in particular. She was a skilled photographer and seems to have specialised in topographical scenes and in portraits of her neighbours at Sanna, of people in Morar and Arisaig, and of those she met on her travels. Her collection of glass negatives and original prints was split after her death and is now divided between our collections and those of Inverness Museum and Art Gallery (today the Highland Photographic Archive). Of particular note among the Scottish Life Archive's collections is a series of photographs recording the building of Sanna Bheag, her home in Ardnamurchan (Plate 2).
- Alasdair Alpin MacGregor, born in mainland Inverness-shire in 1898, he was brought up there and in Edinburgh. He spent most of his working life as a freelance writer and photographer, travelling and writing about Scotland, and the Hebrides especially. He was a frequent contributor to *Country Life* and one of his most interesting and difficult assignments must have been when he was *The Times* correspondent for the evacuation of St Kilda in 1930. Following his wishes, his widow donated his collection of photographs and a complete set of his published works to the National Museum of Scotland. His personal papers are held by the National Library of Scotland (NLS). It was one of his stipulations that



Plate 2 Mary Ethel Muir Donaldson pulling 'Green Maria', the cart in which she transported her photographic equipment. Taken in Argyll, c.1910–20.



Plate 3 Outside the Post Office, St Kilda, Inverness-shire, taken in 1930 by Alasdair Alpin MacGregor.



Plate 4 David and Agnes Innes taking lunch in their caravan 'Golden Eagle', c.1950-54.

his name should be spelt ‘correctly and in full’ with any publication of his photographs (Plate 3).

- *Scotland’s Magazine*, which was published between 1928 and 1975, first as the *SMT Magazine* of the Scottish Bus Group and later by the Scottish Tourist Board. Upon privatisation of the Scottish Bus Group in 1989, a very large collection of photographs and a complete set of *Scotland’s Magazine* were donated to the Archive. The photographs were taken between the late nineteenth century and 1975, although the majority date from the 1950s and 1960s. They provide, along with the magazine articles, a wealth of information on working life, craftspeople, leisure, technological developments and famous places and people.
- David Innes, a professional photographer, who, with his wife Agnes, undertook much work for *Scotland’s Magazine*. He also left his large collection to the National Museum. This collection is particularly strong in photographs taken from the 1930s to 1950s, concentrating especially on working life in Scotland (Plate 4).
- The Enterprising Scot, a huge collection of negatives and slides taken all over Scotland during 1984 and 1985 – a sort of snapshot of the country – for inclusion in the exhibition of the same name that marked the amalgamation of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland with the Royal Scottish Museum to form the National Museums of Scotland (Plate 5).
- Contemporary Collecting, which during the early 1990s produced a collection of documents and photographs illustrating the working lives of six people working for Lothian Health Board and of the staff at the Blue Circle Cement works in East Lothian. These were included in two touring exhibitions, ‘A Picture of Health!’ and ‘Working Lives’, in collaboration with other museums in Scotland. At the time, colleagues and I hoped that this collaborative approach to collecting, based on the Swedish Samdok³ model, would be the way forward for contemporary collection and documentation. In fact joint working petered out after those two exhibitions, but as you will read later it has recently been revived (Plate 6).

Much of the work of cataloguing the very large collections held by the Archive, and those of photographs in particular, has been undertaken by dedicated volunteers who have over the years also produced place- and subject-index catalogues to the Alasdair Alpin MacGregor, *Scotland’s Magazine*, David Innes and other collections. These catalogues are available to consult in the Archive’s Search Room and the NMS Library. Copies can also be emailed or posted out to researchers on request.

The Scottish Life Archive has tended to be viewed as a photographic collection, both from within the Museum and by outsiders. This is definitely

³ The Swedish Samdok network for contemporary studies and collecting was founded in 1977 and operated until the end of 2011. See: <http://www.sverigesmuseum.se/samdok/in-english/>.



Plate 5 Interior of Ravenscraig steelworks, Motherwell, Lanarkshire, 1985-86. From the Enterprising Scot collection.



Plate 6 Paper bag used at the Blue Circle Cement factory, Dunbar, East Lothian.

not the case. By the Millennium, significant collections of around 10,000 documents and of first-person or oral history interviews included *Scotch Myths*, a remarkable collection assembled by film-maker Murray Grigor, with his late wife Barbara, also a film-maker. Their collection had culminated in the provocative touring exhibition and publication, *Scotch Myths*, questioning a Scotland portrayed by kitsch and romantic stereotypes. It was purchased for the national collections in the early 1990s and includes everything from postcards, whisky labels and film posters to books, cartoons and public house advertising material. Another large collection of documents is the papers of the Greenock firm of agricultural suppliers Macfarlan and Shearer – cataloguing the hundreds and hundreds of documents was one of my first tasks when I joined the National Museums. The collection is a wonderful record of one business and its products, suppliers, customers and staff. Tediously describing each item taught me both that no job is too big to attempt and how to look for information in the smallest piece of paper. The Scottish Women's Timber Corps collection, assembled in the early 1990s, includes first-hand manuscript accounts and oral history interviews with former members of the WTC, as well as items of uniform, some tools and documents, and photographs relating to the women's time in the Corps. More recently, the Curator of the National Museum of Rural Life (NMoRL) at Kitchside, East Kilbride, has carried out the same sort of collecting and documentation with former members of the Scottish Women's Land Army.⁴ These examples are just a flavour of the items in the collections – the interests of anything from one individual to a large business may be found there. What they all have in common is a connection to the three-dimensional artefacts in the Museums' collections, and often their acquisition can be directly linked to the research for a Museum exhibition or publication (Plate 7).

Then came the digital age, closely followed by the Millennium and with them the Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network – SCRAN⁵ – and other Lottery-funded projects on a grand scale. SCRAN enabled the National Museums to digitise and make tens of thousands of its object records available online, including about 9,000 from the Scottish Life Archive. Although the anticipated financial bonanza in the form of reproduction fees that was promised hasn't materialised, we most certainly have had a revolution in how much is available remotely, relatively easily and to a potentially worldwide audience.

While the Archive was entering the digital age thanks to SCRAN, other organisations were also making the most of Lottery funding to enable a host of projects that have subsequently been offered to and found a repository in the SLA's collections. *The Scotsman* newspaper started to digitise its photographic archive through SCRAN; the Worker's Educational Association collected *Salt*

⁴ E. Edwards, *Scotland's Land Girls: Breeches, Bombers and Backaches* (Edinburgh, 2010).

⁵ <http://www.scran.ac.uk/info/aboutscran.php>.

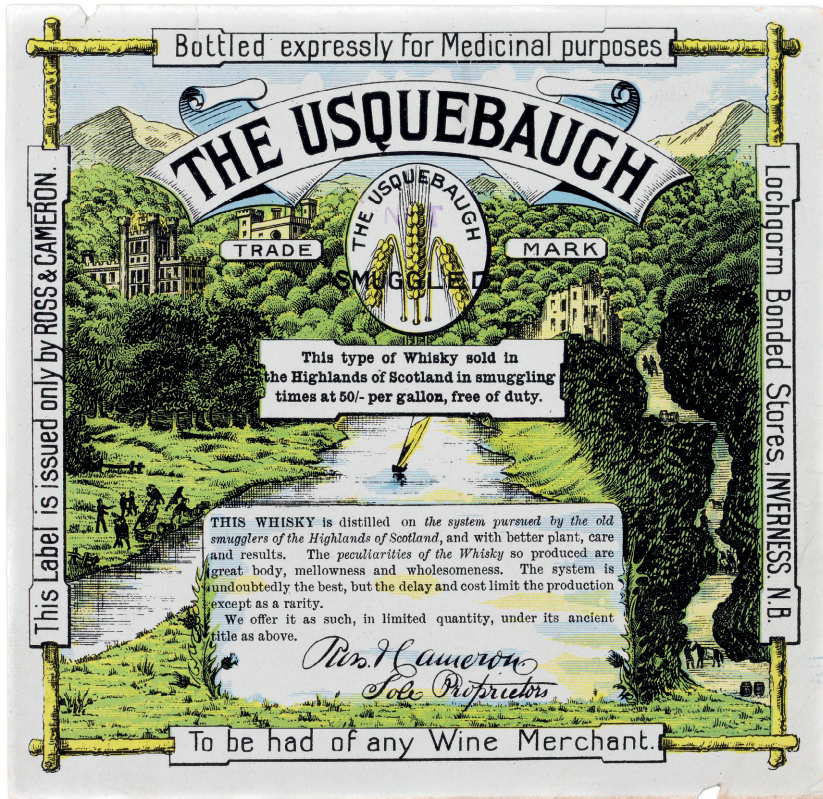


Plate 7 A whisky label from the Scotch Myths collection, purchased by the National Museums in 1994.

of the Earth,⁶ a three-year adult education project which made oral history recordings and gathered life stories to reflect the ‘rich diversity of the lived experience of Scotland’s people in rural, urban and island communities in the last half of the 20th century’; OurStory Scotland,⁷ a Scottish Charity that ‘collects, archives and presents the life stories and experiences of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community in Scotland’, was established; and the Forestry Commission undertook an oral history project culminating in a publication on Whitelee Forest,⁸ relating to the people living

⁶ H. Mitchell, *Salt of the Earth: A Scottish Peoples’ History* (Edinburgh, 2001).

⁷ <http://www.ourstoryscotland.org.uk/archiving/index.htm>.

⁸ R. Tittensor, *From Peat Bog to Conifer Forest: An Oral History of Whitelee, Its Community and Landscape* (Chichester, 2009).



Plate 8 Fieldwork photograph, taken during the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games, on 1 August 2014.

in the Whitelee Plateau where the counties of Ayrshire, Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire meet.

Large collections like these do not always come with support, either financial or in kind. The Laings of Blairgowrie collection, for example, represents a century's worth of business by a family of professional photographers and fortunately this was a joint collecting project with Perth Museum and Art Gallery and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS). Nonetheless, SLA volunteers in Edinburgh have had to work their way through the selection, restoring and cataloguing of around 80,000 negatives. At the same time, volunteers at the NMoRL at Kittinghside have been doing a similar job with around 60,000 negatives from *The Scottish Farmer* journal.

In the field of contemporary collecting and recording, especially, I believe that the new digital age has truly made us understand that our collections are indeed part of a 'distributed national collection' resource. In 2014 for instance, deemed to be in the endlessly repeated slogan on BBC Radio Scotland 'a year like no other', the SLA contributed to the recording and collecting of two significant events: the Commonwealth Games held in Glasgow and the Referendum held on 18 September. Together with colleagues at Glasgow Life, the NLS, Dundee Museums and others, the SLA has truly collaborated to record these two events

for the nation: Glasgow Museums led on the Commonwealth Games with NLS leading on the Referendum. Without them the National Museums' resources would simply not have been able to record or collect the range of artefacts, personal accounts, printed ephemera and digitally created assets that working together has enabled us to do. For the first time we tested the idea of a having a common email address, CollectingtheReferendum@nls.uk, so that we could all share information easily. I very much hope that this is just the beginning of more collaborative recording and collecting projects in the years to come, and that like Sweden, where Samdok had its core funding removed at the end of 2011, individual specialists will come together to continue what they see as an efficient, supportive and productive way of working (Plate 8).⁹

As we move further into the 21st century, more and more of our existing 'real' collections will be digitised and made available online. In the case of new acquisitions, digitisation will probably take place very soon after they are collected; while an increasing amount of material that relates especially to contemporary collecting and recording is likely to be 'born digital'. This may lead to the shrinking of the public search room and its finding aids to just an area in which to see original artefacts – for the few researchers who will still want to see the 'real thing' – as anyone can access (almost) anything from (almost) anywhere in the world. To make an appointment to visit the Archive please contact us by telephone: 0131 247 4076 or email: d.kidd@nms.ac.uk.

I hope that, like the rest of the Museums' collections, those of the Archive will continue to develop and hold clues to the lives of individuals, workplaces, institutions, families and communities throughout Scotland. Most of us will not get a lengthy obituary or a headstone, but all of us can probably have at least one artefact in a Museum, as a mark of our existence and a glimpse into our lives.

⁹ B. Axelsson, 'The Poetics and Politics of the Swedish Model for Contemporary Collecting', *Museum & Society*, 12, no. 1 (March 2014), 14–28. See: <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/museumsociety/documents/volumes/axelsson.pdf>.