

## **‘Quite unique in his cemetery’: Sir James Caw’s gravestone**

*Dennis Smith*

Sir James Lewis Caw (1864-1950) is a significant figure in Scottish art history, as a curator, critic and art historian. He was also, perhaps not coincidentally, married to the eldest daughter of the artist William McTaggart RSA (1835-1910) and a practising artist in his own right. After a spell as curator of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery he was appointed director of the National Gallery of Scotland (as it then was) in 1907 and remained in post till 1939, retiring at the age of 75. Both through his acquisitions for the Gallery and as art critic of *The Scotsman* for seventeen years he did much to shape artistic taste in Scotland. His book *Scottish painting, past and present, 1620-1908*<sup>i</sup> provided the standard history of Scottish art for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the words of Duncan Macmillan, it ‘inspired and informed Scottish readers for over eighty years’<sup>ii</sup>. Caw also produced monographs on Ramsay, Raeburn, Sir James Guthrie and – not least – his father-in-law William McTaggart. This article sets out to solve a minor puzzle about Sir James’s burial and to throw light on some of his family and artistic connections.

Newington Cemetery in south Edinburgh was originally called Newington Necropolis but also features in old records as Echo Bank Cemetery or the Southern Cemetery. (A few elderly residents still talk of ‘Eckiebank’ but Echo Bank as a locality was effectively obliterated by the development of Prestonfield housing estate. Perhaps Prestonfield has a more prestigious ring.) The cemetery was established as a commercial venture in 1846 and subsequently laid out by the architect David Cousin (1809-1878). Cousin joined the Free Church after the Disruption of 1843, a break which must have undermined the established system of parochial graveyards. Allied to population growth, this stimulated demand for new and more gracious facilities. From the 1880s the cemetery benefited from the proximity of Newington Station on the South Suburban Railway. It continued to operate well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but with diminishing space for new lairs the business became ever less profitable and eventually changed hands. There are still locals who remember Newington as an immaculately run cemetery, but after a rejected application to develop the site for housing the thwarted owners allowed the grounds to run wild. Some cemetery records were destroyed by fire. Problems accumulated, including a fatal accident in 1982 when a teenager jumping into dense ivy was crushed by a falling gravestone. In 1994 the council acquired the site by compulsory purchase.

Since then Newington has been managed both as a cemetery (existing lair-holders still have rights of burial) and a wildlife site (for a couple of years a solitary peacock, strayed from Prestonfield House, added a touch of local colour). The council provides basic maintenance and health and safety concerns have led to the systematic levelling of monuments that show signs of instability. In recent years there have been moves in the community to restore this once-proud Victorian establishment and publicise its cultural and natural attractions. On Doors Open Day 2014 visitors were invited to stroll and explore, with ten graves highlighted for their biographical, historical or aesthetic interest. Here begins the mystery trail.

One of the first stones selected was that which commemorates William McTaggart, his two wives and eight of his children. (Sources differ as to whether he had fourteen or fifteen children in all.) Apart from the fame of McTaggart himself, the stone is notable for a lovely sculpted roundel portrait of his first wife Mary Holmes (died 1884). (*See illustration 1*). One bonus of Doors Open Day was the discovery that this sculpture is the work of John Hutchison RSA (1832-1910), a near-contemporary of McTaggart and a long-standing colleague in the Royal Scottish Academy. The last of McTaggart's daughters died as recently as 1991 and a cache of family memorabilia was subsequently donated to Bonnyrigg and Lasswade Local History Society. (Both McTaggart and Caw lived for many years in Lasswade.)

Immediately next to the McTaggart grave stands a strikingly lettered stone with the inscription *To the / Memory of Dame / Annie Mary Caw / 1864-1949 Daughtr / of Wm McTaggart / R.S.A. and wife of / Sir James L. Caw / LL.D : H.R.S.A. : Histor- / ian of Scottish Art / 1864-1950*. (*See illustration 2*). More than one visitor, reading this, commented on the family loyalty that saw Dame Annie buried next to her parents and siblings; some also enquired about the fate of Sir James himself. The wording is puzzling. If Sir James was buried with his wife, surely it would be usual to say so? Dark thoughts flickered about family disharmony.

Preliminary research on the internet only increased this uncertainty. No immediate record emerged of Sir James's funeral but Web searches led to the online inventory of the C. d'O. Pilkington Jackson papers in the National Library of Scotland which contained a cryptic reference to a 'Sir James Caw memorial stone'. Memories of that sculptor's monumental tribute to Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn evoked images of a similar – no doubt more modest – tribute to Sir James that might remain to be discovered.

The archives of the Royal Scottish Academy quickly resolved one doubt. On 6<sup>th</sup> December 1950 the Secretary, James Cowie, sent a printed note to his fellow Academicians intimating that Sir James's interment would take place at Newington Cemetery at 3.10 p.m. the following day. But a lingering doubt remained: Sir James might still occupy a separate grave at Newington. Happily the Pilkington Jackson papers in the National Library of Scotland <sup>iii</sup>, once consulted in the flesh, revealed the full story, with its sad twist. The archive also illustrates the efficiency of business practices in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when a correspondent could write one day, confident that his letter would be received and answered the following day, allowing him to respond further on day three.

On 8<sup>th</sup> January 1950 Sir James wrote to Pilkington Jackson enquiring about a memorial stone for Dame Annie. The ensuing negotiations were three-sided because contractual issues had to be routed through a firm called Memorials and Sculpture Ltd in London, but matters still proceeded quickly. On 19<sup>th</sup> January Sir James told Pilkington Jackson that the stone had 'to be simple to be appropriate' for his late wife. By the 28<sup>th</sup> he had visited Pilkington Jackson's office and was able to confirm the style of lettering and the precise lay-out of the words on the stone. On 2<sup>nd</sup> February Messrs Allan and Sons Ltd of Piershill Granite Works submitted a quotation of £14 for the stone plus £6 for its erection. Pilkington Jackson then quoted Memorials and Sculpture Ltd a price of £44 for stone, carving and erection, not including the

‘cemetery charge’ of £4. By 18<sup>th</sup> February Sir James had agreed an over-all price of £61 10/-. By 28<sup>th</sup> March the stone was ready for collection and erection. But it was only on 17<sup>th</sup> April that Sir James wrote in a shaky hand that he had ‘managed to go & see it. It looks very well I think & I am very well pleased with it. The superintendent ... says it is quite unique in his cemetery ... so many thanks to you for all your skill & care.’

There is a sad postscript. In his initial letter of 8<sup>th</sup> January Sir James had specified the wording that he wanted added after his own death: *Also in memory of / Sir James L. Caw L.L.D., H.R.S.A., etc. / Husband of Dame Annie Caw / B. 1864 : D. 19XX*. For whatever reason, these wishes were not carried out. Pilkington Jackson knew about this wording but his contractual obligations ended with the payment of his bill in mid-April. Eight months later Sir James was dead. Perhaps his executors knew nothing of his wishes. Perhaps they had other ideas. (According to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*<sup>iv</sup> Sir James, who was childless, left an estate of £7184 14s. 4d). Considering the care lavished by Sir James and Pilkington Jackson on the design of the stone it is an aesthetic anti-climax that the sole addition – Sir James’s own dates – is left-justified rather than centred. Perhaps this article, together with the renewed flourishing of Newington Cemetery, will make some belated amends. At least we now know beyond doubt where Sir James is buried and who created the ‘unique’ stone.

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<sup>i</sup> James L. Caw. *Scottish painting, past and present, 1620-1908*. Edinburgh: Jack, 1908. Reprinted Bath: Kingsmead, 1975.

<sup>ii</sup> Duncan Macmillan. *Scottish art, 1460-1990*. Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1990. p.11

<sup>iii</sup> National Library of Scotland, Acc.7445. All the facts and quotations in the next two paragraphs come from box 22, file 521 in this archive.

<sup>iv</sup> Jill C. Mackenzie, ‘Caw, Sir James Lewis (1864–1950)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/75568>, accessed 1 Sept 2015]

### *Sources and acknowledgements*

*Quotations from the Pilkington Jackson archive by permission of National Library of Scotland. Many thanks to the archivists at the Royal Scottish Academy for information about the intimation of Sir James’s funeral. The William McTaggart family collection ca.1880 – ca. 1986, owned by the Bonnyrigg and Lasswade Local History Society, is on deposit in Midlothian Council Archives, reference GB584/WM.*



Fig. 1. McTaggart Family Gravestone. Newington Cemetery.



Fig. 2. Caw family gravestone with the inscription to Annie. Newington Cemetery.