

Who's the Daddy?

Hugging the west coast of Scotland there is an unbroken line of islands known as the Hebrides. This archipelago was the home of my x3 great-grandparents Neil Gillies and Agnes McDougal before they set sail from Oban, Scotland aboard the St George on 4 July 1838, never to return. The couple, with their infant son Dougald, arrived in Australia over 4 months later on 15 November.

The immigration papers describe Neil as a native of Scotland, County of Argyle, Parish of Kildalt[on], the son of Alexander Gillies, a cattle herder and his wife Mary Cameron. It states he had turned 34 on 15 August 1837.

Kildalton is in the south of the Isle of Islay in the Inner Hebrides. Kildalton is the anglicised form of the Scots Gaelic *Cill Daltain*, which has been translated as 'church of the foster son', apparently a reference to the 'disciple whom Jesus loved', the apostle John. There stands in the grounds of the old church a magnificent Celtic cross, the Kildalton Cross.

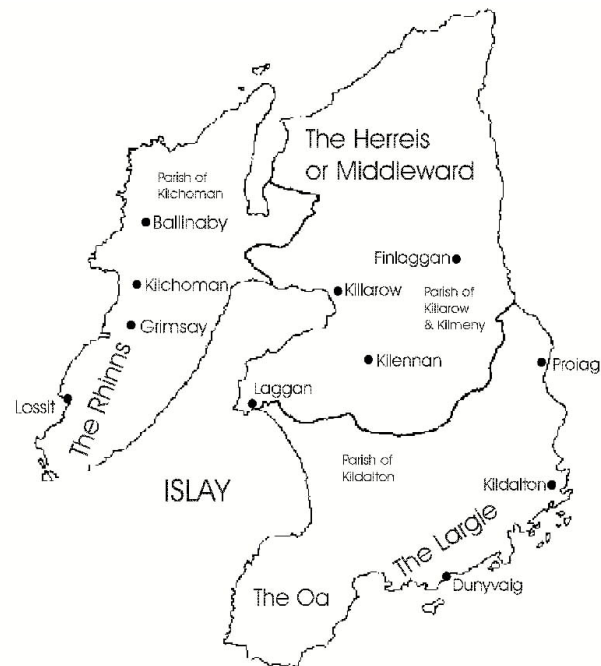


Figure 1 Gillies grave, Kildalton Old Church

I had the pleasure of visiting Islay with my mother and brother a few years back and saw the cross and derelict mediaeval church. Whilst the church has been abandoned since before the 18th century burials continued in the grounds well into the 20th century and I was able to find the grave of Neil's parents Alexander and Mary¹. Buried along with Neil's parents is one of their grandchildren an Alex Weirⁱ, a nephew of Neil. In the grave beside themⁱⁱ can be found a Mary Gillies along with her husband Duncan Weir, their son's Robert and Neil Weir and granddaughter Flora Weir.

¹ There are some researchers who argue that at some point Neil's parents moved to Kilmalie 150 miles to the north, on the mainland of Scotland within the same county of Argyle. I believe the Alexander Gillies and Mary Cameron of Kilmalie are a different couple. See www.ancestry.com/mediaui-viewer/collection/1030/tree/21151116/person/320129009773/media/ac42bdcc-e8af-41d6-94d3-0fdc5fd0a106?_phsrc=whC1482&usePUBJs=true&galleryindex=2&sort=-created

From the Kildalton parish records, along with Neil Gillie's baptism on 8 March 1803, there are three other children baptised by parents 'Alexander Gillies and Mary Cameron', almost certainly siblings of Neil; Donald baptised 8 April 1804; John baptised 9 February 1806 and Mary baptised 30 October 1808. Through these records and the gravestones, we can determine with reasonable confidence that Mary wife of Donald Weir was Neil's sister.



Figure 2 Weir grave, Kildalton Old Church

In the 1861 census Mrs Mary Weir, now widowed, is living at Callum Road, Kildalton with her only two surviving children, Alexander born circa 1834 and Robert born circa 1837, both unmarried. But, along with their domestic servant Mary Wilkinson, there is a fifth person in the household on census night recorded as Mary Weir, 11 months, the daughter of widow Weir. I'm sure there is an error here in that the subsequent census records what appears to be the same girl, now aged 10 but described as widow Weir's granddaughter.

I'm not quite sure what became of this Mary. It is possible she is the 22-year-old Mary Weir in the Hay household at Ardbeg House working as a cook and domestic on census night 1881. If so, her grandmother was recorded alone that census residing in the same village. I've not been able to identify any further records for Mary however I think it's fair to deduce that Mary was the daughter either of Alexander or his brother Robert Weir. But which one?

In the years after the 1861 census both brothers went on to marry and have families of their own. Curiously enough both had daughters named Mary.

Trying to establish paternity for Mary has proved a significant challenge. On Islay around 1860 there were a number of girls born with questionable or disputed paternity.

Looking at other trees on Ancestry I identified a Marion Currie of Islay, daughter of Catherine Currie where the father was often given as Robert Weir. This girl married a John McDougall in November 1881. At first glance I thought this must be the same Mary, granddaughter of Mrs Mary Weir detailed above.

However, it soon became apparent there were a few problems with this theory. In particular that people had this Marion born in 1862, and that being the case she could not possibly have been the girl with her paternal grandmother on census night the year before her birth.

While there is a birth record for a Marion Currie, daughter of Catherine with no father recorded born in Portinellen, after the 1861 census, there is also a Mary Currie, daughter of a Marion, born 27 Nov 1859 in Kildalton, no father recorded. And my next thought was that this girl was the 'Marion' daughter of Robert Weir, husband of John McDougall. But, as will become apparent this doesn't work either.

At this point I will recount the various children in order of birth who have come into (and out of) the frame for the elusive Mary Weir, granddaughter of my ancestor's sister. The 1861 census was taken on the night of the 7th. My Mary was described as 11 months old which puts her birth at late April to May 1860.

Births before the 1861 census.

On the 27th of November 1859 at Kildalton there was born a Mary Currie, the daughter of Marion (sometimes Sarah)² Currie, no father recorded. This girl would have been 16 months old, not 11 months old at the 1861 Census. In any event she is recorded elsewhere in the 1861 census as Mary 'McGilveroy' the granddaughter of Alice Currie née McNab. On Census night 1861 this Mary's mother was in the Dixon household at Dunbritton Cottage in Govan, Renfrewshire, where she worked as a servant.

In the 1871 census, Mary, this time with the surname Currie, is again living with her grandmother at Frederick Crescent, Port Ellen in the parish of Kildalton. After this, I can find no other records for her. In 1871, along with her on census night was her half-sister Alice Wright Wyatt, born 1864. Alice was the daughter of Samuel Whitcomb Wyatt who died just a year after her birth. It is very likely that Samuel and Marion Currie never married. Mary's half-sister Alice died at the age of 25 in 1889.

I have ruled this Mary out as the granddaughter of my Mary Weir because she is accounted for in separate 1861 and 1871 census records and, based on the 1861 census, there is every chance that her father was a man named McGilver[a]y.

Another Currie daughter

There is another daughter of a woman named Currie born before the 1861 Census. This girl was named Catherine and born on 4 November 1859 at Kilmeny, Islay making her 17 months old on census night 1861. This girl's mother was also named Catherine Currie and her father was recorded as Angus Smith. Angus and Catherine were not married and their daughter was brought up by the Smiths.

In the 1861 census Catherine is with her grandmother, Mary Smith née Fletcher and in the 1871 census she's with her uncle John, the younger brother of her father Angus. In the 1881 census she is again with her Smith grandmother and in 1882 she married an Alexander McClellan. Although born before 1861 this girl is clearly not the Mary Weir I'm looking for.

However, Catherine Carrie-Smith had a half-sister named Marion Currie born on 12 June 1861 two months after the 1861 census was taken. This is the girl referred to above. That many trees record this Marion as the daughter of a Robert Weir points towards her being the girl I'm looking for but there is a circle to be squared here.

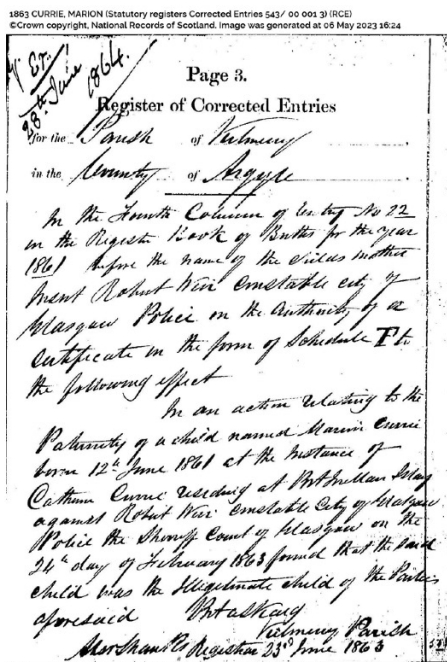
As I mentioned above I thought there was some confusion between this girl named Marion Currie daughter of a Catherine Currie, and the Mary Currie born earlier to a Marion Currie. That 'Mary' is accounted for elsewhere in the census record and is not a 'Weir'.

² According to www.whatsinaname.net '... the Gaelic Mór can be Anglicized as either Marion or Sarah [and we]... have consequently classified Marion and Sarah as synonyms since the equivalence appears to be widespread, in Scotland at least.

Catherine's second daughter named Marion Carey, born June 1861 has a notation to the left of her birth record which reads-

D--- of Paternity
See Register of Corrections
Vol--- p3
26 June 1863

I've copied the relevant page of the Register of Corrected Entries below which confirms that the Sherriff Court of Glasgow found on 24 February 1863 that Robert Weir, a constable with the City of Glasgow Police was the father of Marion Currie, daughter of Catherine Currie of Portinellen, Islay.



Unlike her older half-sister who went to live with her father's family, Marion grew up with her mother, her maternal grandmother and her mother's older sister. By 1871 the family had left Islay and relocated to Greenock, Renfrewshire. In the census of that year they are living at 2 Dellingburn St. Greenock East where Marion, aged 9 is recorded with the surname Weir. Her mother, Catherine Currie is in the household as is grandmother Marion Currie, her Aunt Ann[ie] Currie and a cousin, Donald Currie.

In 1861, before Marion's birth this family had been in Islay living at number 2 Portinellen in the Parish of Kilmeny. Marion's cousin, Donald was recorded in the census as 'Peter' which is how he is named in the birth register and, as referenced above, Marion's half-sister Catherine Smith was elsewhere on the isle living with the Smith family.

In the 1881 census the family is living at 30 Kelly St, Greenock West. Marion Weir is recorded as 19 years of age. The household is now headed up by Annie Currie, the elder of the two sisters. Grandmother Marion Currie had died in 1876. Cousin Donald was in the household as was Marion's mother. On Census night there is a visitor named Mary Bell, aged 22 and born in Islay. She is very likely a relative since Marion's late maternal grandmother had the maiden name of Bell. Six months after the 1881 Census was taken Marion Weir married John McDougall, born 1856.

Marion McDougall née Curry-Weir was clearly the granddaughter of Mary Weir née Gillies and the daughter of her son, Police Constable Robert Weir. However, Marion is not the granddaughter Mary Weir of the 1861 and 1871 censuses. It seems inconceivable to me that this Mary living in Islay with her grandmother could be the same Marion who was born 2 months after the 1861 census, and in 1871 is recorded living with her own mother in Greenock.

Still none the wiser

I can only conclude that Mary Weir née Gillies had [at least] two grandchildren in addition to those born to her sons Alexander and Robert and their respective wives. Marion born 1861 was clearly the daughter of Robert. But the verdict is out on which of the two brothers was the father of Mary born 1860.

Glenn Palmer

gatp63@hotmail.com

London

7 May 2023

ⁱ The gravestone at Fig.1 reads - This is the Burying place of Alexander Gillies and Mary Cameron his wife. Also Alex Weir their grandson. He died 9th Aug, 1903 aged 69 years.

ⁱⁱ The gravestone at Fig.2 reads -Erected - by - Robert Weir - In memory - of his father - Donald Weir - who died Dec. 1854 aged 54 years - His brother Neil - who died 4th May 1856 aged 17 years - His daughter Flora - who died 3rd Feb. 1869 aged 4 years - His mother Mary Gillies - who died 25th July 1890 aged 79 years - The above - Robert Weir - who died 20th Nov 1923 aged 85 years - A beloved grandfather