



Society of Antiquaries
of Scotland

‘Remember Now Thy Creator’

Scottish Girls’ Samplers, 1700–1872

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CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

Samplers made by girls in Scotland do have some distinctive features not found on samplers from other parts of the British Isles. Until more detailed studies are done on other areas it is not possible to say that Scottish girls made samplers that were distinctive in all aspects. Joanne Martin Lukacher's book on Norfolk samplers is a start, but Norfolk is perhaps a special case because, although it was a wealthy part of the country, it was and still is isolated from much of the rest of Britain. How many other parts of the country would show a similar cohesion of pattern in their samplers is debatable at present. Irish samplers show an alphabet that has not been found in other parts of the British Isles, but it was featured on the pieces found in the Kildare Place books, so may be traced outside Ireland. English samplers in the border areas with Scotland also show family initials but usually they do not give the mother's maiden name initial. There were large numbers of Scots in Newcastle

OPPOSITE. 8.1 Isabella Cook, 1836. There is no obvious evidence that this is Scottish but another, more traditional, sampler by Isabella exists, dated 1835, and from that she has been identified as the daughter of William Cook and Mary Thomson born in 1828 in the parish of Saddell and Skipness, Argyll. This piece in silk on linen appears to be almost done for fun, perhaps to use some of the motifs she couldn't fit onto her other sampler. Both samplers were worked when she was only seven and eight and are of equal quality. 9¼ in (23.5 cm) x 7¾ in (19.7 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

upon Tyne, for example, so this may have influenced the sampler designs of that area.²³⁶ So far it does not appear that Scots emigrants transferred the Scottish elements on samplers when they moved abroad, even when actual pieces were taken with them. Sampler making therefore seems to have been location-specific rather than culture-specific.

Scottish samplers share many motifs with samplers made in the rest of Britain and in other parts of Europe. The area of the Continent with the richest tradition of sampler making is probably the Netherlands. As with samplers made in Britain, many of the motifs can be traced back to sixteenth-century pattern books, but others are unique, based on local traditions. It is therefore strange to see the very Dutch motif of the *Nederlandse Maagd*, or Dutch maiden, on a Scottish sampler. Isabella Cook's sampler is at first sight notable for its zebra, but above it is a crowned woman standing on what appears to be a ladder with a green framework around her (illus 8.1). This represents the Dutch equivalent of the French Marianne as Liberty, standing in the Garden of Holland, a symbol of the ruling house of Orange.²³⁷

Scottish girls used the structure of the traditional sampler in other ways. Rachel Sandil[ands] made an extraordinary piece in 1855 (illus 8.2). It is unclear why she worked the sampler, and indeed if it was made by a girl rather than an adult. She includes the very Scottish-style letters,



ABOVE. 8.2 Rachel Sandi[lands], 1855. 26¼ in (66.7 cm) x 29 in (73.7 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

OPPOSITE. 8.3 May Robert, 1767. George Robert and Isobel Alexander of Bathgate were married in 1747, and promptly baptised their first daughter, Margaret, on 20 June 1748. They also baptised Marrion on 1 April 1750, Isobel on 29 February 1756 (a leap year baby), George on 10 May 1761 and Mary on 22 April 1764. 12½ in (31.8 cm) x 10½ in (26.7 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.



MAY ROBERT 1767 GR LX

Immortal made what should we mind
so much as Immortality
Of beings for a Heaven designed
what but a Heaven the care should be

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OPPOSITE. 8.4 Jean White, c. 1785, has included her parents' initials under a large crown. She was the daughter of Walter White and Mary Cochrane of Barony, Glasgow, baptised on 27 September 1772. 21¼ in (53 cm) x 17½ in (44.5 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

LEFT. 8.5 Agnes Hamilton of Glasgow in 1846 has embroidered several Napoleonic war battles on her sampler, in which members of her family probably served, as well as the more local Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire Fox Hunting Club, apparently founded in 1771. Agnes was the daughter of James Hamilton and his wife Agnes Hatton, baptised on 23 December 1832 in Glasgow. 17¼ in (43.8 cm) x 7¼ in (18.4 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

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ABOVE. 8.6 More a picture than a sampler is this one by Elizabeth Anderson from about 1790–5. Worked in silk on linen, the design of the border reflects the delicate embroidery found on women’s garments of the period, such as kerchiefs, and she uses a greater variety of stitches. She was the daughter of James and Penelope Anderson and was baptised on 20 August 1779 in Elgin, Moray, where her father was an excise officer. Her parents’ initials are neatly tucked up at the top under crowns and the other initials include those of her siblings. Mrs Hog was probably her teacher. 14 in (35.6 cm) x 16 in (40.6 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

OPPOSITE. 8.7 Ann Ross, 1766. 23¼ in (59.1 cm) x 19½ in (49.5 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

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but then works some unusual rectangular patterns that look rather like garden beds and bands of the same trailing motifs repeated in four bands, as well as a small representation of the Hippodrome in Kensington, London. She also makes reference to a seventeenth-century Puritan divine, Henry Burton, Rector of St Matthews, Friday Street, London. It is a beautifully worked piece and, except for the fact that she ran out of space for her name, well planned.

Other girls worked samplers that are partly pictures. May Robert in 1767 includes figures representing the story of Elijah fed by ravens, after the Old Testament story in I Kings 17:4 (illus 8.3). May has also included, along with the ravens, various birds and butterflies and a peacock, as well as a twisted stem band and the verse that starts ‘Immortal made what should we mind’, the author of which has not so far been identified. As well as her name and the date, May records her parents’ initials as GR (in black) and IA.

Jean White, born in 1772, probably worked her picture sampler in about 1785 (illus 8.4). She has a beautiful floral border enclosing the scene of a girl sitting on a bank under a tree apparently playing a musical instrument. She may represent one of the senses, hearing, which is usually portrayed as a musician. Also in the picture are a deer, some insects and a flowering bush. Above in two cartouches are the Ten Commandments in the Scottish style. Between them is a large crown with initials and her name. Jean was the daughter of Walter White and Mary Cochrane of Barony, a parish that is now part of Glasgow.

Agnes Hamilton used her sampler to record events that obviously meant something to her (illus 8.5). After the obligatory alphabets and numbers she has embroidered the names of various sea and land battles of the Napoleonic wars, including Copenhagen, Camperdown and Badajoz. She names John Hamilton, Lanark and James Hamilton, Malta, as well as the 42 Highlanders and the Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire Fox Hunting Club, ending with Tally Ho, Hark Forward. Agnes worked her sampler in 1846 in Glasgow.

But who knows what inspired Ann Ross in

1766 and IT is p.iv in 1815 to embroider their samplers, which are both packed full of small motifs that hint at a narrative that only the girls themselves knew (illus on p.vi and illus 8.7). Ann’s has an obvious Adam and Eve, carefully labelled, but around it are various other figures and animals, including some rather tame lions. Above is a man in contemporary dress appearing to herd sheep, and a man and woman under a tree, probably based on shepherd and shepherdess motifs that can be found on printed linen and cotton furnishing fabrics of the period or on ceramics. At the bottom is a stone house and more animals, birds and trees. There are no family initials and the identification of this as Scottish is not confirmed. IT, though, had definite Scottish connections and although she did not work her name there are plenty of initials. At the top either side of a rose bush is a man in a tartan kilt facing a man with black face and hands and wearing a natty straw(?) hat. Below is a man in tartan trews with sword and cocked hat facing a woman in a striped dress. In the centre is a version of a familiar saying, ‘Be kind to all, familiar with few and only intimate with one’. Below are bands with peacocks, other figures, lots of little black dogs and huntsmen. At the bottom is a five-bay house on the left with a clock tower motif on the right and what appears to be a shrine with a figure in the centre. IT was eleven when she made the piece in 1815. The verse has not been traced.

Discussed and shown here is only a small selection of the samplers that have been seen over many years. Only by being able to view a large number of pieces is it possible to make connections, to start to identify motifs that Scottish sampler makers favoured, and to suggest possible schools or teachers. But the samplers still retain many secrets and it is doubtful if these will ever be fully interpreted. It is to be regretted that so many samplers have been detached from their background. Anyone who owns a sampler that they know was made by a member of their family, even if it was someone who never married and has no direct descendants, should be proud to have such a tangible reminder of the life of their ancestors. If you can recognise all the initials or names on the piece, record them for future

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generations to know. Private collectors in the past and today have rescued samplers from the rubbish heap or bonfire, and museums preserve and display them, but they were made by the hard work of little girls, perhaps some with love, and viewed with pride by parents; they should be remembered by us, their descendants and inheritors.