



JESSIE LOVE MOIR

First female Provost of St Andrews

Jane Claydon

I hate men

(Did Jessie Moir really hate men?)

In an interview in March 2001, Professor Donald Watt recalled that Jessie was heard to make this statement.¹ Apparently, as she spoke to *someone about the wickedness of the Town Council she took her walking stick, hit it against a tree and proclaimed **I hate men!***

Jessie Love Moir: First female Provost of St Andrews

Jessie Love Moir was the daughter of James Moir, and Jean (Jane) Love. James was born in Blairgowrie and Jean's family were from Beith, in Ayrshire. Jessie's grandfather was John Love, of Threepwood, a landowner, who acquired Auchencathie Tower. He was a Justice of the Peace, a commissioner of supply and a road trustee.

Jessie was born in March 1893 at 20 Ann Street, Partick, Glasgow. She had a twin brother, George Hart Moir. He died in Selkirk, in 1925.

Jessie also had two older brothers. Alexander James Moir, was born in 1888 at Hillhead, Glasgow but died in 1898. Andreas August LeCoq Moir, was born in Glasgow in 1890 and he died in Wynberg, Gauteng, South Africa, in 1956. Andreas gained the Royal Aero Club Aviators Certificate: 1st class air mechanic certificate in March 1917.² A younger brother, Robert Bruce Oliphant Moir was born in Glasgow in 1897. He was killed in action in France, in 1917. His rank was recorded as 2/Lieutenant: Highland Light Infantry Battalion: 3rd Battalion. Robert was buried at Loos Memorial at Dud Corner Cemetery, Nord-Pas-de-Calais, France.³

Jessie attended Glasgow High School for Girls,⁴ prior to entering St Leonards School in September 1906. She was placed in Abbey Park South. This boarding house occupied the Regency side of Abbey Park, the original building, which gave the house its listed status. (Abbey Park was demolished in 2014.)

Jessie's contemporaries in Abbey Park South included: Annie Hindle, from South Africa, who was one of the founders of Benenden School, Norah Harris who qualified as a doctor and her sister Mildred, who trained at Madame Bergman Österberg's Physical Training College in Dartford, Helen Hope Mirrlees, from Natal, who became a poet and Eleanor Sharp, from Balmuir, on the outskirts of Dundee, who was an early international lacrosse player.⁵

Jessie had been at St Leonards for a year when the Foundation Stone of the new St Leonards School Seniors Holiday and Convalescent Home, in Abbey Walk, was laid, on 24th June 1907 by Julia Grant, the Headmistress.⁶ Jessie would have passed this building several times a day on the way to and from school from Abbey Park South.

An account of the event in the *St Leonards Gazette* in March 1908, quoted the inscription on the stone but also informed that the Foundation Stone concealed what might, today, be called a time capsule:

*The stone covers a sealed package, containing current coin of the realm, and copies of the Gazette of the term and of local newspapers.*⁷

Later, as a Senior, Jessie was among the many who supported the Holiday and Convalescent Home by sending useful gifts of clothing for the children.

By March 1908 Jessie is mentioned in a *St Leonards Gazette*, representing Abbey Park South at hockey. She played cricket for the house team that summer. She bowled out an opponent but, ignominiously, was then bowled

¹ Interview with Professor Donald Watt, 13th March 2001. SAPT archive

² See postscript

³ Family information from Ancestry.com and *St Leonards School Register 1905 - 1911*

⁴ Application form for St Leonards School

⁵ St Leonards School archive

⁶ The home, originally opened in 1903 in Woodburn, adjacent to the East Sands, was funded by the SLSS and it cared for many deprived children from Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and many other parts of Scotland, until 1952

⁷ *St Leonards School Gazette* March 1908.

for one, by the girl who went on to introduce women's lacrosse to the USA. In the autumn, Jessie played lacrosse for her house and a year later, in 1909, became captain of Abbey Park South. It was the second most important role in the boarding house and she was responsible for organising games for about 24 girls, on a daily basis. By July 1910 Jessie was included in 'Show Drill', a group of girls who were considered proficient at Swedish gymnastics and who, on occasion, performed for parents and guests of the school. In the Autumn Term 1910 Jessie was selected for the school 2nd lacrosse team and, by January 1911, Jessie was a member of the school 1st hockey team. She played in a practice match against the Scottish Ladies International XI. Jessie was considered *a very good, reliable player: she passes well and with good judgement.*⁸

On 1st February 1910 Sir Ernest Shackleton opened the New Science Buildings⁹ at St Leonards and delivered a lecture, to a large and enthusiastic audience, in the school hall.¹⁰

Jessie left school just after her 18th birthday at the end of the Spring Term 1911. Jessie's obituary published in the St Leonards Gazette in 1988 stated that she was:

unable to fulfil her ambition to be a games mistress as her father would not permit it.

This comment provides an insight into her family life. Jessie's father, James Moir, was a partner in the law firm of Moir, Forbes and Guy. He was the third occupant of the Chair of Conveyancing, a part-time post, at Glasgow University, a role he accepted in 1899.¹¹

The family must have been very conventional and strict as, by 1911, at least seven girls from St Leonards had already headed south to train at Madame Bergman Österberg's Physical Training College, in Dartford, Kent. The list included Muriel, daughter of the very popular St Andrews doctor, Dr John Moir.¹² The Dunfermline College of Hygiene and Physical Training, modelled on very similar lines, had been established in 1905. This institution might also have been a possibility for Jessie. Other St Leonards girls at this time were being allowed to go to university, attend college or study abroad. Just a cursory glance at the house hockey team lists in 1911 provides the names of many girls who were given considerable freedom, for example, Margaret and Kitty McKane, (later Kitty Godfree) who played tennis at Wimbledon and Kathleen Doman who was instrumental in starting the Women's Cricket Association.¹³

It is worth noting, when Jessie left school in 1911, Helen Archdale, a St Leonards Senior, who also attended the University of St Andrews, was becoming well known as a militant suffragette. (Helen, was the daughter of Alexander Russel, The Proprietor of The Scotsman, and his wife, Helen Evans, one of the Edinburgh Seven, the first group of women to study medicine at a British University.)¹⁴ In 1910 during the general election, another Senior, Margaret Mackworth (later Lady Rhonnda) also a notable suffragette, broke through a police cordon in St Andrews and jumped onto the running board of Prime Minister Asquith's car. Margaret attempted to destroy a postbox in Newport, in Wales in 1913 and had been imprisoned. Louisa Garrett Anderson, petitioned the Prime Minister in 1910 to allow women to have the vote. She spent a month in Holloway Prison in 1912 for breaking a window but, within two years, in September 1914, she went to France to set up a Women's Hospital in Paris.¹⁵

These three suffragettes, whose mothers were all pioneers in their own fields, had received a similar education at St Leonards to Jessie and their work, as activists in a national movement (although condemned in many circles), was in stark contrast to the expectation that Jessie should return to Glasgow and undertake 'home duties'. A family album indicates that Jessie was able to continue her interests in needlework and horse riding. Her relatively dull existence reflects the family's traditional values and their financial situation. Jessie's father must have felt he should provide for his family and continue to do so after his death.

⁸ *St Leonards School Gazettes 1908 - 1911*

⁹ The architects were Messrs Gillespie and Scott

¹⁰ *St Leonards School Gazette* May 1910

¹¹ <https://www.universitystory.gla.ac.uk/biography/?id=WH2206&type=P>

¹² Jessie Moir was not related to the Dr John Moir's family in St Andrews

¹³ *St Leonards School Gazette* May 1911

¹⁴ These seven students were granted their medical degrees from Edinburgh University, 150 years later, in 2019. Helen Russel (Evans) was the first Chairman of the St Rule Club in 1896

¹⁵ In 1915 Garrett Anderson returned to London to help set up Endell Street Military Hospital

Jessie's father died on 31st December 1915. His obituary in *The Scots Law Times* stated:

*In the work of his Chair Professor Moir found congenial scope for his scholarly inclinations.*¹⁶

He was an academic and at that time, the family lived at 9 University Gardens, Glasgow. This house was built by John James Burnett in the late 1800s and now houses the Scottish History Department of the University of Glasgow.¹⁷ Probate suggested Professor Moir left £2,185¹⁸ which, although comfortable at that time, was not a fortune. It seems that, Jessie, as an only daughter, clearly had no choice but to be her mother's companion.

A press cutting containing an article by Louise Petrie, *Tea with Miss Moir*, from an unknown newspaper dated 1953, is very informative and is a good source of information about Jessie's later life. It helps to document Jessie's path, back to St Andrews, in 1930. The article states that Jessie worked at Beardmores' munitions factory in Glasgow, during WWI¹⁹ and later nursed at the Erskine Hospital.

Again, it is important to be aware that other school contemporaries were tackling war work abroad. Louise Fraser, who undertook her medical training at St Andrews University, worked in Serbian hospitals as a dresser, alongside Helen Douglas Irvine from Grangemuir, near Pittenweem.²⁰ A large number of Seniors took it in turns to work at the St Leonards Hut in Harfleur, in France. Others were based in Romania, Russia, Malta, India and even Mesopotamia. These girls had been given many more opportunities than Jessie.

Electoral Registers record Jessie was living with her mother at 63 South Street, St Andrews in 1930. The *St Leonards Gazette* in 1988 provides an outline of Jessie's work before World War II:

she spent from 1930 until the last ten years of her life actively involved in the community. Before the 2nd World War she formed the Women Voluntary Service and, as Billeting Officer, dealt with the mothers and children evacuated to St Andrews in 1939.

In 1931 Jessie reconnected with St Leonards and attended an alumni event. By 1936 she had been invited to serve on the St Andrews Seniors Committee and a year later she was elected a member of the St Leonards School Seniors Committee.²¹

Jessie set sail to Tenerife in April 1933 with a cousin, Janet Mary Love Harrison and her young son John, who lived at Little Hayes, St Andrews. This holiday followed the death of Mary's husband in 1932 and illustrates the close bond Jessie had with her extended family.

In 1942 a vacancy occurred on the Town Council and Jessie was co-opted as a Town Councillor. *The St Leonards Gazette*, in November 1942, recorded that Jessie had been *appointed an interim Councillor of the Town Council of St Andrews. She is also Billeting Officer for evacuated children and Hon. Treasurer of the Nursing and Child Welfare Association.*

The *St Leonards School Gazette*, a year later, in November 1943 stated *Jessie Moir has been appointed a Justice of the Peace*. Following her appointment, Jessie was asked to account for the rise in juvenile delinquency. She blamed working mothers and suggested children of school age suffered as a consequence.²² Jessie became the first woman Bailie in 1949.

¹⁶ *The Scots Law Times* February 5th 1916

¹⁷ <https://www.universitystory.gla.ac.uk/building/?id=102>

¹⁸ Ancestry.com

¹⁹ *The St Leonards School Gazette* February 1916, stated *Jessie Moir has been trained for munition work and works at the week-end to give the regular workers a rest*. Petrie in *Tea with Miss Moir*, recorded Jessie had helped to make '18 pounders' at Beardmores.

²⁰ *Blackwoods Magazine* 1915 and *A History of Scottish Women's Hospitals*, edited by Eva Shaw Maclaren, published in 1919. (Louise Fraser's name is not mentioned in this book but parts of her diary, published in *Blackwoods Magazine*, are included.)

²¹ *St Leonards School Gazettes* 1930 - 1938

²² *SAPT Women of St Andrews. Published 2001*. (Mary Bentinck Smith, Jessie's Headmistress, was the first St Andrews Lady Justice of the Peace.)

After her mother's death in January 1951, Jessie sailed to Cape Town, four month later, to visit her brother, known as Gus, at his home in Cape Province.²³

A year later *The Courier and Advertiser* announced, on page 4 of their publication, issued on 10th May 1952, Jessie Moir had become the first lady Provost of St Andrews. Subsequently, *The Weekly Scotsman* in May 1952 provided a further insight into Jessie's views on juvenile delinquency and she was quoted as saying:

Nowadays it is too often no mere 'pinching' on the impulse of the moment but deliberate house breaking. The reason for this- and she was emphatic about it- is not the one usually given 'Daddy being at war' but rather Mummy being out at work...

Another evil of the times was that children were given too much pocket money.

Further details about Jessie's life are contained in *Tea with Miss Moir*.²⁴ Petrie recorded that Jessie was the first woman to have a full seat on the University Court at St Andrews. It was an ex-officio position and she represented the town at all functions ceremonies and meetings.²⁵

Petrie's article written two years after the death of Jessie's mother in 1951, suggested Jessie, found she was now able to give more time to public work. The Child Welfare Clinic in North Street had Jessie's support and she was amongst the early members of the Women's Voluntary Service.

Petrie described Jessie as:

*tall and distinguished, with smooth white hair framing her fresh complexion, she did n't set out to break any barriers, things just turned out that way. When she finished her education at St Leonards she returned to Glasgow to settle down at home with her mother. Jessie had said: In my generation only daughters weren't expected to seek a career. Their place was at home.*²⁶

The phrase 'only daughters' is the key as many of her peers at school had been allowed to study and work outside the house.

The Courier and Advertiser, on Friday 16th April 1954, published a photograph of Provost Jessie Moir handing over the keys of the Town Council's 1000th municipal house to Mr and Mrs W. Park, 41 Tom Morris Drive. The report said that the official opening was attended by members of the Town Council.

On 27th November 1954 Jessie delivered a talk, *St Andrews for Scotland* on the radio for the BBC's General Overseas Service. The fee paid was 2 guineas. The broadcast was designed to link Scots around the world to celebrate St Andrew's Day. Her opening words were:

*It has fallen to my lot, as Provost of St Andrews, to send a greeting to our brethren overseas*²⁷

An unattributed newspaper cutting, which featured a cartoon drawing of Jessie, mentioned the event. It stated Jessie did not play golf but she had planned to become a games mistress but her father held strong views that a daughter should stay at home.²⁸

Jessie concern re housing in St Andrews was mentioned in *The Weekly Scotsman* in May 1956. She is quoted saying:

*I don't know which I'm more sorry for – the young married couples who can't get houses or the old people who have sons and daughters with families landed on them.*²⁹

²³ Ancestry.com and a family album

²⁴ SAPT scrapbook B703. Newspaper article, dated 25th May 1953, by Petrie, *Tea with Miss Moir*

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ SAPT scrapbook B703, *Tea with Miss Moir*

²⁷ *The Citizen* November 27th 1951

²⁸ Unknown newspaper 1954

²⁹ *The Weekly Scotsman* 15th May 1952

Petrie pointed out that housing was one of Miss Moir's pet schemes on the Council *and she believes care should be exercised to prevent sprawling planning to the south for that might spoil much that is characteristic of St Andrews.*³⁰ (Jessie's views might well resonate with residents of the town today.)

Tea with Miss Moir mentioned the routine at home in Glasgow, when Jessie completed her education at St Leonards, *included helping with the entertaining of guests of academic standing.*

This experience must have been useful in her later role as Provost as Petrie explained:

*Her provostship gives her a direct say in matters relating to the University, and a remote connection with the Royal and Ancient that highly select body that remains a stronghold of male domination, are merely functions she fulfils as they are expected of her.*³¹

Petrie also revealed that Miss Moir had never thought of entering public life but, when she took on her role as Provost, she:

*had called on every householder. In a fortnight she had walked through a pair of stout Oxford shoes. The very nature of the work demanded personal contact and soon she knew everyone in the city she had loved as a schoolgirl...*³²

Jessie's obituary in the *St Leonards Gazette* in 1988 recorded:

She was particularly concerned with housing problems and the welfare of war widows and children.

In recognition of Jessie's work, in connection with improving the housing situation in St Andrews, Moir Crescent was named after her in about 1973.

The transcript of the interview with Professor Donald Watt revealed he was a member of the 1920 Club³³ as was Jessie Moir. This organisation was founded during the time of Sir James and Lady Irvine. Members met in evening dress to read plays. Professor Watt remembers passing Jessie on South Street and she bowed to him, when she recognised him as someone from the Club.

In addition to all this public work Jessie also was a member of the St Leonards School Council from 1945 until 1968. She was actively involved in Council meetings and served on the House Committee, the Gardens' Committee and the Queen Mary's Library Committee.³⁴ Jessie was made a Vice President of the St Leonards School Seniors in 1953.

Jessie's last appearance at St Leonards was in October 1977 when she attended the school's Centenary celebrations. They included the opening of a new Junior Library, in Queen Mary's House, by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother.³⁵

Articles about Jessie's life frequently make mention of Jessie's wish, when she left school, to train as a games mistress. It is unclear whether this was a comment which was often reprinted by journalists whether she spoke about it herself. Jessie clearly had a very strong social conscience and appeared to enjoy her public life in St Andrews however, she was probably disappointed that her early interest in pursuing a career, using her energy and interests, had been thwarted by social and family conventions.

Sadly, Jessie spent the last ten years of her life in hospital and she died in Cupar on 21st November 1987, aged 94.

³⁰ *Tea with Miss Moir* 25th May 1953

³¹ *Ibid*

³² *Ibid*

³³ Interview with Professor Donald Watt, 13th March 2001. STPT archive. (Founded in 1920, the St Andrews 1920 Club folded in 1969.)

³⁴ St Leonards School Council minutes 1946

³⁵ St Leonards School archive

Post script

A google search produced a website advertising an archive of items connected to Jessie's brother:

AN ARCHIVE OF ITEMS relating to **Andreas August Le Coq Moir** of the Royal Flying Corps, who saw service during twenty one operational flights towards the end of the First World War, the lot consisting, among other things of the 1914-18 medal and the Great War medal awarded to 23232 Sergeant A.A. Moir R.F.C. together with his medal for bravery in the field, his Royal Flying Corps jacket, a leather jerkin, his cap with R.F.C. badge, a leather pilot's hat, a pair of leather gauntlets, a pair of goggles with wool trim, also a photograph of Sergeant Moir next to an early bi plane, a further photograph of Sergeant Moir in his Royal Flying Corps uniform, further documents, booklets etc. to include technical notes for the Royal Flying Corps, a British Empire aviators certificate dated 14th March 1917 with a photograph of Sergeant Moir, a Royal Air Force certificate of service and discharge etc.

I am extremely grateful to Jane E Harrison, Jessie's goddaughter who very generously provided an invaluable insight into the life of Jessie Moir and allowed me access to her family album and memorabilia.