



Dental Roots

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In Gaelic Scotland the village or clan blacksmith was known as the 'Gobha' (pronounced gowa), from which came the names 'Gow' and 'Gowan', and son of the smith, 'Mac gobhann', which became 'MacGowan'. With every clan requiring the skills of a blacksmith, the names Gow, Gowan and MacGowan grew in many areas. Most Scots with the surname Gow can trace their roots to Perthshire (as is the case with my tree) or Inverness-shire. It is interesting coincidence that before the advent of modern dentistry, the only option for a sufferer of toothache would have been one of my distant ancestors, the village or clan blacksmith or 'Gobha', who was often also the 'tooth drawer'. My surname 'Gow' from the Gaelic 'Gobha', is not the only link to dentistry in my family tree and in writing this article, I will share some facts, stories and photographs of my ancestors who were Glaswegian dentists.

James Aitken

My great great grandfather, James Aitken was born to a tailor, Alexander Aitken, and a cotton weaver, Mary Cooper on the 1st of January 1860. On the 31st of December 1884, the day before his 25 birthday, James married 27 year-old Maggie Manson (Fig 1). James was recorded at that time as being a 'Family Goods Warehouseman'. Sometime in the late nineteenth century, however, he started a dental practice in the Gallowgate, which was later to be taken over by his son-in-law Leonard (my great grandfather) and where his daughter Benjamina (Minnie) would also practice.



Figure 1 James and Maggie Aitken

The family photograph (Fig 2) is of baby James Gow (my grandfather), being held by his great-grandmother Margaret Manson (nee Omand). Seated on the left is his grandmother, the wife of dentist James Aitken, Maggie. Standing central is his mother, and wife of dentist Leonard B. Gow, Mary Cooper Gow (nee Aitken).



Figure 2 Family group in 1913

*Off to Aitken with your aching tooth.
For Aitken's aching to remove the aching. With skill
and kindness and small charges, Aitken aching cures.*

Figure 3 Newspaper advertisement for James Aitken's practice from around 1900.

Apparently the advertisement (Fig 3) also listed the prices of extractions with and without anaesthetics. Despite the 'smallcharges', many people paid weekly for the more expensive business of dentures. James had a collector who would go door to door to collect the weekly payments. My father recalls the family story (which was perhaps a joke!) that James would sometimes water down the chloroform to keep the costs of the practice down. However, my great aunt Molly Gow remembers her mother saying that James would always bring back presents for his six daughters after travelling to London for dental meetings.



Figure 4 Drumother Drive, 1905

(Photograph reproduced with permission from 'Virtual Mitchell' the Mitchell Library's online photo gallery, <http://www.mitchelllibrary.org>.)

Above is a photograph (Fig 4) of the newly built houses in Drumother Drive (which soon after became known as Drumover Drive) in 1905 (1). James and Maggie's house was No. 46 at the foot of this hill, situated next door to the church (which was built after the houses). When they moved to Tollcross from Dennistoun there were no tenements yet built between Parkhead Cross and their new house. Apparently James was very patriotic and on his daughters' birthdays, he would raise the flag on a flagpole in the garden of his house in celebration.

Following the Dentists Act in 1878, only those who had undergone recognised training could call themselves a 'dentist' or 'dental surgeon' and have their name placed on the Register. A problem with this Act however, was that there was no actual requirement to register so long as any individual practicing dentistry avoided the titles of 'dentist' or 'dental surgeon', with offenders being fined £20. It was the 1921 Dentists Act which finally required that all those who practised dentistry must be on the Dental Register with offenders being fined £100. James however died at the age of 59, on 27th February 1919 in the 'flu epidemic, and before the Act of 1921, and so does not appear in any Dental Register. Nevertheless, James's recorded occupation on his death certificate is 'Dentist', as it was on Leonard and his daughter's marriage certificate on 18th September 1911. Despite the lack of formal training many skilled operators took on apprentices and revealed their secrets and gave instruction on extracting teeth, filling cavities with gold foil and other chair-side practices, only on payment of high fees. James, of course, would not have charged these fees when he apprenticed his daughter Benjamina (Minnie) and his son-in-law Leonard.

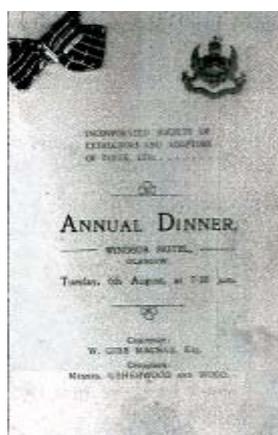


Figure 5 Front page of menu for the Annual Dinner of the Incorporated Society of Extractors and Adaptors of Teeth Ltd, 1912

He was a member of the 'Incorporated Society of Extractors and Adaptors of Teeth Ltd.' - a title which studiously avoids the words 'dentist' or 'dental surgeon'. Margaret Birnie (whose mother, Margaret, was the eldest of James Aitken's 6 daughters) gave me a 'Toast List and Menu' (Fig 5) from the annual dinner of the 'Incorporated Society of Extractors and Adaptors of Teeth Ltd' on Tuesday 6th August 1912. James Aitken himself gives the 'health of secretary' toast. The duet pianists 'The Misses Aitken' featuring in the 'Toast List', were his daughters (Margaret and Jean), and the singer Mrs Jeanie K. Warnock (nee Aitken) was his sister. It was Jeanie who introduced her niece Mary (James' daughter) to the young Leonard B. Gow (details of whom are to follow) at a Methodist Church function near the Kelvin Hall. Jeanie and her husband adopted a son, Edward Tull Wamock, the best man at Leonard's and Mary's wedding, who also became a dentist and worked in Aberdeen.

Benjamina ('Minnie') Manson Aitken

Minnie, one of James Aitken's six daughters, followed in her father's footsteps and became a dentist, which for a woman in the 1920s must have been quite unusual. In contrast, I recall being informed as a student that our graduating year (1999) was the first from Glasgow to have more females than males (with approximately 2/3 of the year being female). My great aunt Molly recalls of her aunt Minnie, "I think she only

really worked part time in the Gallowgate practice. She eventually married a Mr Percy Watt and emigrated to the South Island, New Zealand, but as far as I am aware she didn't continue to practice dentistry there."

Margaret Birnie, daughter of Minnie's sister Margaret recalls; "My mother Margaret did book-keeping for my grandfather James Aitken at his business, between 1910 and 1919. She told us how she acquired a rather nice little chair, perhaps modelled after a spinning chair. A woman in the stair across from the dentist's office was being harassed by someone, and grandfather came to her rescue. To repay him she offered to teach my mother (who had an artistic bent) to do still life painting on wood. The woman showed mother how to stain the chair and paint grapevine leaves and bunches of grapes on the back and seat. The autumn coloured design looks very attractive on the dark background. Then it was sealed with shellac perhaps, or varnish." Great aunt Molly recalls that her mother Mary would also work in the practice at times, helping to set-up denture teeth in the workshop. There were dental mechanics employed in the workshop which had several large boilers used in the construction of the dentures. Many years later, probably when she was in her 70s, Mary visited a dentist to have a new set of dentures made, and exclaimed, "Now, I don't want a set of piano keys!"

Leonard Bullion Gow



Figure 6 Leonard B Gow

Leonard Bullion Gow (Fig 6) was the third child born to James Drummond Gow (shipbroker) and Margaret Bullion and was born at 51 St. Vincent Street, Glasgow on the 30th January 1887. Leonard originally worked as a shipping clerk and lived for a short spell in Liverpool after he married 22 year-old typist, Mary Cooper Aitken, at the United Free Church, Bath Street, Glasgow on the 18th. September 1911. Mary was the daughter of dentist James Aitken and Maggie (nee Manson). Both of Leonard's parents had died before he was married at the age of 24. An arrangement was made and Leonard and Mary came back from Liverpool to Dennistoun (where they lived at 142 Ingelby Drive for many years). Leonard began working in his father-in-law's practice in the Gallowgate and remained there until his retirement in the late 1950s. They had three children: -James (Jim) Aitken Drummond Gow (my Grandfather), Margaret Manson Bullion Gow and Mary (Molly) Aitken Gow.

It was a surprise one day when a new dental patient of mine in East Ayrshire asked if I had a 'Gow' relative who had been a dentist in Glasgow, as her first dentist had been a Mr Gow in the Gallowgate. She was delighted to discover that her new dentist was the

great grandson of her first dentist. Then when it sank in, she was horrified. "Do you know how old that makes me feel?" she exclaimed. She had been a young girl of 10 when she visited him in Glasgow and could vividly recall the old practice. Interestingly she later told me that her uncle (a Mr Pollock) was a dental technician and actually made dentures for Leonard. Leonard's practice would probably have mainly been extracting teeth and constructing vulcanite dentures, but great aunt Molly still has a few gold fillings inserted by her father 50 or 60 years ago. My -grandmother, Madge A. Gow (nee Steel) and grandfather, (Jim Gow) had their last remaining teeth removed by Leonard and a full set of dentures constructed each. To complete a full cycle, the final set of dentures my Granny wore from 1997 for seven years before passing away in 2004 were made by her grandson (me) in the 3rd year student clinic with some help from Granny's favourite Scottish singer, a certain Alasdair Gillies. She was very proud of her teeth. The photograph below (Figure 7), taken in July 1934, shows 'Quigley's' pub at 542 Gallowgate, and the 'Hardware & Drysaltery' at 544. Sadly, this whole building was demolished many years ago (2)



Figure 7 The Gallowgate in 1934

The practice was number 546 and is unfortunately just off shot to the left. The surgery was one floor up, with the close entrance on the corner of this tenement block. The brass plates at the close end were polished regularly by the cleaning lady. Molly recalls a story from many years ago. "My father had his practice in quite a deprived area in the East end of Glasgow. He had the habit of taking a handful of pennies with him when he went to work on a Saturday, which he would handout to local children. Of course, I got my Saturday penny too! One Monday morning, however, a young boy who had been ill that weekend and missed out on his 'Saturday penny' turned up at the practice door boldly exclaiming in front of a full waiting room, "Mr Gow, you owe me a penny!" Although he was a good dentist, he wasn't a wealthy man", she said. "People in Glasgow in those days struggled to pay for their dental treatment. Leonard would often feel sorry for people who came to him with toothache but could not afford the extraction and would often take the offending tooth out on the promise of payment the following week. Of course, many did not make good their promise!" Leonard had a Tuesday afternoon off but worked every other day from 10am to 8pm, with a long break in the middle of the day. Although he never played enough to be a great golfer, he enjoyed it. Robbie Allan, grandson of Leonard's brother John (Jack) Gow, told me that Leonard and John were actually playing a round of golf at Muthill Golf Course in Perthshire on the day the First World War broke out. Leonard encouraged his three children to play also. Molly recalls being taken to play nine holes in Alexandra Park early on Saturday mornings before breakfast. They would come back and enjoy a treat

of bacon and eggs before Leonard would go off to work. When he wasn't at work on a Saturday, and subsequently when he retired, Leonard liked to go to Ibrox to watch the Glasgow Rangers. This support of Rangers was passed down the generations to my grandfather and father, and so is not surprising that I now have a season ticket for Ibrox.

Great aunt Molly recalls that in the run up to 1948, her father was very much in favour of the proposed National Health Service, although apparently many of his colleagues at the time were far from convinced. When the NHS came into effect, however, many changed their minds as business was booming, for people who previously could not afford new teeth were suddenly streaming through the doors. Leonard would travel to London in his role as the Secretary for the West of Scotland branch of the Incorporated Dental Society who presented him with an engraved silver cigarette case, (inscribed "Presented to Leonard B. Gow Esq. by the West of Scotland Branch of the Incorporated Dental Society, Nov 1949"). My father recalls that Leonard smoked unfiltered, full strength Army Club or Capstan cigarettes and his wife Mary (my father's grandmother) would get irritated by the fact that the cigarette would dangle from the corner of his mouth, with the ash length growing. "He wouldn't flick the ash in an ashtray. The ash would just fall wherever it fell". My father says that he cannot remember his grandfather wearing anything other than a shirt and tie and jacket, (Fig 8).



Figure 8 Mary and Leonard Gow

When he retired Leonard played less golf but became a keen bowler with Whitevale Bowling Club. My father fondly remembers playing bowls with him, and his mum, dad and aunts. He was also for many years an elder and session clerk in Trinity Duke Street Church in Dennistoun where he was well respected. My father says that he does not remember his grandfather working (as he was quite young when he retired) but remembers him as a gentleman, never seeing him upset, angry or flustered. He died in 1970 and his obituary appeared in the BDJ as follows:

LEONARD BULLION GOW

Mr Leonard Bullion Gow died on July 27, 1970, aged 84. He succeeded to the dental practice of his father-in-law in the east end of Glasgow, retiring about ten years ago.

He took an active and very effective part in the affairs of the Incorporated Dental Society, West of Scotland Branch, being their Secretary for many years, and President for one year and was elected a Life Member of the I.D.S. about 1947. For a time he

was on the council of the West of Scotland Branch of the British Dental Association. Many dentists were greatly helped at that time by his sage advice and kindly counsel.

In the First World War he served in a horse regiment. In the Second World War he acted as secretary and organiser of the dental first-aid post, housed in the Glasgow municipal buildings, where he did a splendid bit of war service.

An active churchman, Mr Gow was an elder in his kirk for 50 years—latterly being the senior elder—and was for a while session clerk; he also represented the session in the Glasgow Presbytery of the Church of Scotland.

Leonard Gow was a friendly man and had many friends. A man of wide interests, who had his priorities right, he was able to influence a correct decision on many debatable subjects by a wise line of thought. He found his recreation on the bowling green.

Our sympathy is extended to his widow, son, two daughters and his brother.

W. G. C.



Figure 9 Mary Gow and baby Michael

Michael Alan Gow

Mary Cooper Gow (nee Aitken) (Figure 9) is the same lady who is standing in the photograph (Figure 2). Her father, husband, sister, cousin and great grandson she is holding (me!) were all dentists. As it happened I made my decision to become a dentist before I was aware that any of my ancestors were in the profession. When I was growing up my neighbour was Bill Smith. One day in the late 1980s (some 100 years after my great great grandfather James Aitken would have started his practice in Glasgow), when I was about 12 or 13 years old, I was walking with Bill and his dogs in the fields near Eaglesham. Bill asked me what I wanted to do when I left school and I said that I thought that I would perhaps go into medicine or law. Bill offered to show me around the Glasgow Dental Hospital if I was interested and following my mother's encouragement, I took him up on his offer. I can recall vividly the moment that I first thought that I would like to become a dentist. I was standing next to Bill in his office at Glasgow Dental Hospital, both wearing our white coats (Bill had lent me one of his for the day). I felt very important and grown up and, after my day in the Dental Hospital, my mind was made up. Bill retired while I was an undergraduate, but attended my graduation ceremony in 1999. I was very proud to stand with him for the photograph below, (Fig 10), both in our Glasgow University gowns.



Figure 10 Michael Gow and Bill Smith

My father (Dr Alan Leonard Gow) is a medical practitioner (although after reading a draft of this article he joked "I should have been a dentist!"). He has an interest in hypnosis, and now lives and works in B.C., Canada. My interest in hypnosis began after I spent two months with him in Canada in 1997 when undertaking my 3rd year student elective project on the topic of dental hypnosis. In 2004 I graduated with a 'Masters in Hypnosis Applied to Dentistry' from University College London, and have recently become Vice-President of the British Society of Medical and Dental Hypnosis (Scotland). From the early clan 'Gows', to my more recent ancestors in the 19 and 20th centuries, I can truly claim to have "dental roots" and I now carry the family tradition of dentistry into the 21st century in a general dental practice in Kilmamock.

Acknowledgements: - Many thanks to Molly Gow, Margaret Birnie and Dr Alan Gow for their anecdotes, facts and photographs. I would like to thank Bill Smith for initiating my interest in dentistry, and for his advice and support over the years. I would also like to thank all my family but especially my mum (Lynda Clark), without whose strength and support I would never have pursued my studies and graduated in dentistry at all.