

The Misses Strachan of Fyvie

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On Tuesday, 19 January 1909 it was “ladies’ night” at the Mutual Improvement Association in Kintore, a village near Aberdeen in northeast Scotland. My great-grand-aunt Christina Strachan chaired the meeting and gave a paper entitled “Women in Aberdeen during the past four centuries.” She quoted “several extracts from council records and old newspapers, some of which were of intense local interest.”

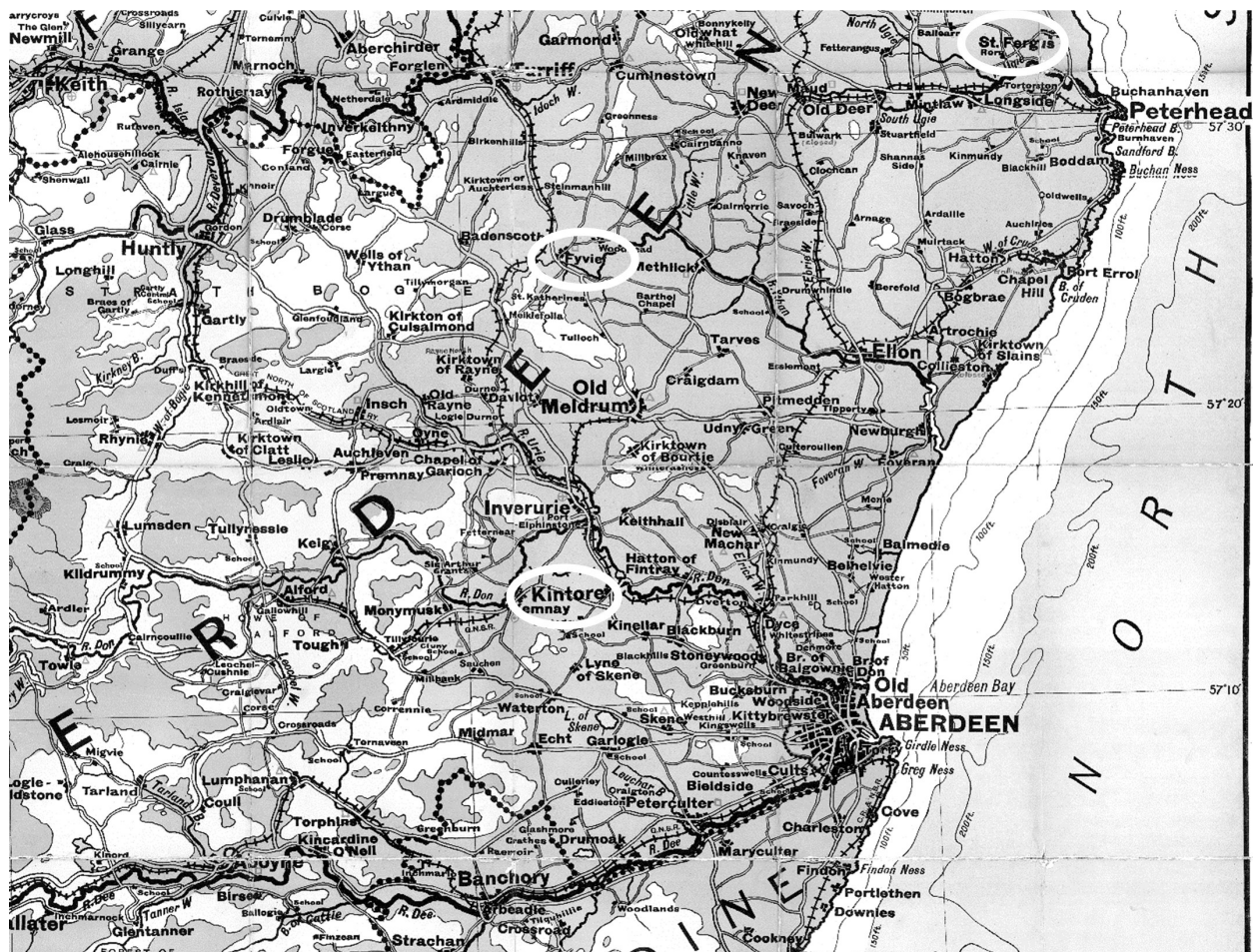


Figure 1: Aberdeenshire showing Kintore, Fyvie, St. Fergus and other places in this story. Map is Counties of Aberdeen, Banff, Moray. London: McDougalls Educational Co., 1930. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.

When I came across this little slice of Aberdeenshire life reported in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal*,¹ I was busy with my “Five Lassies fae Fyvie” project—researching the lives of Christina Strachan and her four sisters. Christina was the youngest of nine Strachan siblings; their parents John (1822–92) and Christian (1832–1908) were the third generation of Strachan tenant farmers at Cardenwell farm in Fyvie. The Strachans were well-known in the community and were deeply involved in the local Free Church. Two of Christina’s brothers, James and Robert, became Free Church ministers and professors. Eldest brother John was a church elder and sat on the parish council and the school board. He took over the farm tenancy after the death of their father in 1892, retiring as the last of the Cardenwell Strachans in 1923.² Researching the family over the years, I easily found evidence of the achievements of the Strachan men, but details of the lives of Christina and her four sisters were more elusive. I wanted to give the sisters an equal place in my family story.

As I sat my computer accessing all kinds of online resources to trace the lives of my Aberdeenshire women, I thought of Christina, more than a century ago, poring over dusty newspapers and council records to prepare her presentation. She must have noticed, as I had, that even into the 20th century women seemed to disappear into the social fabric. They were daughters, wives, mothers or spinsters, earning a mention in the local newspaper only if they broke the law or participated in community or church events. They gave birth to children that were reported only as a son or daughter of a father.³

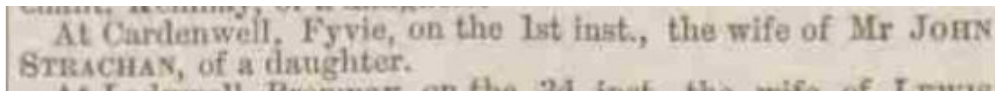


Figure 2: Birth notice for Christina Strachan, *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 7 July 1875.

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Indeed, it was a rare find that allowed me to identify Christina as the chair of ladies’ night—mostly I chased a multitude of mentions of “Miss Strachan” through various local newspapers, struggling to confirm family ties and distinguish the Strachan sisters from one another.

Mutual Improvement Associations were found in many small communities at the time.⁴ They were informal groups who met to share information and debate topics of the day—politics, literature, religion or general knowledge—at a time when educational opportunities were limited for many. They were often associated with religious controversy and liberal thinking, so it was fitting to find an educated young woman from a Fyvie farming family with strong connections to the Free Church chairing ladies’ night, and a good place to begin this story.

What would Christina have found in the Aberdeen council records and old newspapers going back four centuries? Perhaps she started with the “witchcraze” in the late 16th and early 17th centuries,⁵ regaling her audience with grand descriptions of witches escaping imprisonment, or the strangulation and burning of those found guilty of “convening with the devil.” Looking

into women's lives in the 18th century she may have consulted the *Enactment Books* (minutes of Aberdeen town council)⁶ and found slightly more modern drama in women being banished from the burgh for keeping loose and disorderly company.⁷ She may have talked of the "Damn' Rebel Bitches"⁸ who supported the Jacobite rebellion in 1745, perhaps even mentioning a Margaret Strachan from Aberdeenshire, one of the "Whitehaven Three" who escaped after being captured when the rebels occupied Carlisle. For the 19th century her theme of woman and bad behaviour likely continued, as newspapers of the day still often only featured crime and punishment or trivial domestic aspects of women's lives. Her talk may have featured Kate Humphrey, who in 1830 murdered her sleeping husband and was the last woman to be hanged in Aberdeen.⁹ Getting to the later decades of the 19th century, Christina may have been able to put a more positive spin on women's lives, when opportunities to train to be nurses or teachers were becoming more common. In the 1890s Scottish universities, including Aberdeen, opened their doors to women, and I am sure she was proud to include in her presentation a mention of her sister Elizabeth, who was one of the first four women to graduate from Aberdeen University in 1898.

Christina Strachan was 33 years old and a teacher at Leylodge School in Kintore when she gave this presentation. Ending her talk with "modern times," perhaps she reflected that she and her sisters represented the changing times of the first decade of the 20th century. Women were no longer to be only wives, mothers, or spinsters working as domestic servants, they could also choose to go to university, train as teachers and participate intellectually in society. This is the story of five Misses Strachan—Margaret, Annie, Mary, Elizabeth and Christina—accomplished women, contributing members of society and each remarkable in her own right.

Margaret Strachan (1861–1925)—*Responsible elder*

Margaret was the second of the Strachan children and the oldest sister. She and two of her sisters became teachers, but they each had a different path to qualification, reflecting the changes in education that were rapidly occurring in Scotland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Margaret trained within the first decade of the secular compulsory education system that came into effect with the 1872 *Education (Scotland) Act*, and before women were admitted to Aberdeen University. She first served an apprenticeship as a pupil teacher at Fyvie Female School, before taking the entrance exam for Aberdeen Free Church training college in 1879.¹⁰ The college, also known as the Normal School, had opened in 1875 as both the Free and Presbyterian Churches tried to retain some control of the religious aspects of teacher training in the new system.¹¹ She passed first class, which granted her entrance to the college and possibly a small bursary. She left Fyvie at the age of 19 and went to live as a lodger in Old Machar parish in Aberdeen,¹² close to the training college. Figure 3 is a group photo from the college in 1881, showing 33 women students and 5 male faculty. No names are given, but Margaret is likely among them—I can only amuse myself looking for family resemblances.

After qualifying, she taught in Newcastle-on-Tyne for a period, before returning to Fyvie in 1885 to take up a post at Meiklefolla School.¹³ By 1901¹⁴ she was living at the schoolhouse in Keithhall, teaching at the public school, then in 1903 she was appointed as a teacher at Leylodge School in Kintore, shown in Figure 4. She later became headmistress there, a position she held until her retirement in 1923.¹⁵

Margaret's teaching career spanned more than 40 years, from a time when "school boards had an aversion to appointing women even to headships of small schools, and the average female salary was scarcely more than half that of the male,"¹⁶ to reigning as headmistress of a school for several years. She never married. After retirement she lived at the home of her brother John, who had by then retired from Cardenwell farm. His will, dated 1823, left provisions for Margaret to continue living there, but she predeceased him in 1925 at the age of 64.¹⁷ In her own will, made the year before her death,¹⁸ she left small legacies to each of her surviving brothers and to her married sister Mary, and small sums to four nieces. Everything else went to her as yet unmarried sister Elizabeth, with instructions to share personal items with Mary. Ever the senior and supportive sister, she clearly wanted to ensure that the women in the family were taken care of.

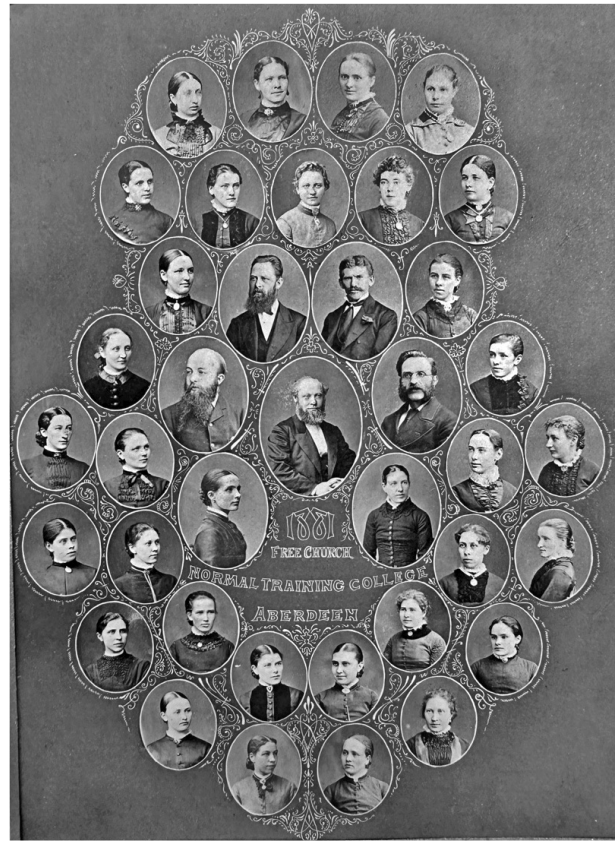


Figure 3: Class photo from Free Church Normal Training College, Aberdeen, 1881. Photograph album collection, UCLA Library Special Collections.



Figure 4: Leylodge Schoolhouse where Margaret Strachan lived for many years. Photo © Andrew Wood (cc-by-sa/2.0)

Annie Kerr Strachan (1868–1909)—*Lost to the family*



Figure 5: Annie Kerr Strachan, c. 1888. Author's collection.

Unlike several of her siblings, Annie, my great-grandmother, was rarely mentioned in local newspapers. I know little of her early life, except that she was musical. Passed down to my granny, my mother and then to me is Annie's bound book of sheet music, for piano and singing, with pieces in it dating back to her childhood and originating from music dealers in Aberdeen, Edinburgh, London and Newcastle, probably brought back from the travels of her brothers and sisters. At the age of 20, Annie married Gavin Catto, farmer at neighbouring Lendrum, Monquitter on 5 June 1889.¹⁹ They had only been married 18 months when Gavin died suddenly²⁰ in December 1890 of "abscess of brain, 3 days." After his death, Annie lived for a

time with her brother James, who was the Free Church minister in St. Fergus. The 1891 census²¹ lists Annie and her sisters Margaret and Christina living at the St. Fergus manse; Margaret is listed as "housekeeper" and Annie and Christina as "farmer" and "scholar" respectively. I like to think that this was a gathering of the sisters to support newly widowed Annie.

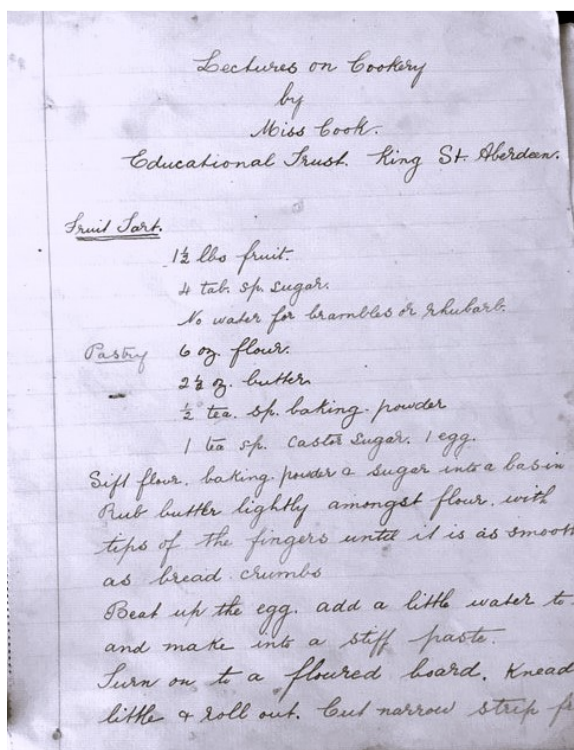


Figure 6: First page of Annie Strachan's notebook from the School of Domestic Economy. Author's collection.

In 1892, their father John Strachan died, and Annie returned to Fyvie. Widowed and without an income, she enrolled in the School of Domestic Economy, which had opened in 1891 in Aberdeen.²² Annie's notebook from that time, shown in Figure 6, and class timetables,²³ indicated that she attended as a part-time student sometime between 1894 and 1897. Her goal was probably to find employment as a cook or domestic servant, or perhaps as a teacher of "the science of domestic economy." According to her notebook she learned to cook a wide variety of meat, puddings and good Scots fare during her time there, but she never applied her skills to paid employment as she married Adam Logan, my great-grandfather, in 1897.²⁴ He was 20 years her senior, an itinerant farm worker, recently widowed and the father of six children. Annie quickly became pregnant, and she and Adam left Fyvie, spending several years moving around the UK to wherever Adam could find work as a dairyman.²⁵ The Strachans were clear in their

disapproval. Annie died in 1909 at the age of 42, shortly after giving birth to her 8th child,²⁶ and after her death her siblings had no further contact with her husband and children. Lost to the Strachans, she lived on in the Logan family as a beautiful mythical figure, talked about rather sadly by my grandmother, who was only three when Annie died.

Mary Manson Strachan (1870–1947)—*Married with children*



Figure 7: 1920s postcard of Thomson Street, Aberdeen. *Aberdeen history and photos from the past, Facebook.*

Mary was perhaps the most conventional of the sisters. She lived and worked at Cardenwell farm until well into her twenties, then spent some time as housekeeper to her brother James when he was the Free Church minister in St. Fergus.²⁷ At the age of 30 she married William Riddoch, a travelling salesman from Keith.²⁸ A photo of their wedding can be seen at Fyvie Heritage.²⁹

Mary and William lived the rest of their lives at 38 Thomson Street in Aberdeen, raising four children.

One daughter, Jeannie, followed in the footsteps of her aunt Lizzie, graduating in 1933 from Aberdeen University and becoming a teacher.³⁰ Neither Jeannie nor her sister Margaret married—they lived together in Aberdeen in a house owned by Jeannie. Mary died there in 1947.³¹

Elizabeth Stephen Strachan (1873–1952)—*Clever and arty*

Elizabeth, known as Lizzie, attended Fyvie Female School in her early years, then in 1886 she was awarded the Mather Bursary,³² which allowed her to attend Albyn School, a private all-girls school in Aberdeen. By 1891 she was living as a boarder with a family in Aberdeen³³ and studying at Gray's School of Art. Consistently a high achiever, she won various awards for her artwork there.^{34,35} In 1894 she placed 81st in the Aberdeen University bursary competition. In announcing the bursaries that year, the university principal noted “the remarkable phenomenon of a number of ladies who have found their way amongst us in a way which should make the young gentlemen look to their laurels.”³⁶ Perhaps not satisfied with her placing, Lizzie declined the bursary and took the exam again the following year. This time she placed 62nd and was awarded a bursary of £15 pounds (worth ~£1700 today).³⁷ Lizzie graduated with a Master of Arts (MA) degree from Aberdeen University in 1898, one of four lady graduates “capped” for the first time in the University's history.³⁸



Figure 8: *Aberdeen Journal*, 2 April 1898. britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. Copyright British Library Board.

By 1895 the Scottish universities included education courses in the curriculum, so with art college credentials and an MA degree³⁹ under her belt Lizzie was qualified to teach art and languages without going to training college as her sister Margaret had done. But like Margaret, she moved several times for teaching opportunities. Her first appointment after graduation was as teacher of modern languages at Rothesay Academy.⁴⁰ From 1900 to 1901 she was teaching in Invergordon,⁴¹ and then she spent some time living in London,⁴² possibly with her brother James who was minister at Belgrave Presbyterian Church.⁴³ By 1909 she had taken a post as a teacher of drawing at Kirkwall Burgh Public School in Orkney. She stayed there little more than a year, returning closer to home to teach art in Kirriemuir in 1911.⁴⁴ During the First World War she was recognized for her efforts in raising funds for the Red Cross in Banff, where she was probably living and working.⁴⁵ In the 1920s she was employed by the Aberdeenshire Education Authority but the details of the schools she taught at remain elusive, despite several searches of teacher records⁴⁶ and newspapers. The 1921 census lists her living back at Cardenwell with her brother John and

his wife, perhaps taking a summer break from teaching.

In 1928, aged 53, she married James Cardno,⁴⁷ a farmer from St. Fergus whose first wife, also a teacher, graduate of Aberdeen University, and possibly a friend of Lizzie's, had died in 1927.⁴⁸ Lizzie died in Aberdeen in 1952, the last of the Cardenwell Strachans.⁴⁹

Christina Ann Nicol Strachan (1875–1917)—*Almost had it all*

Christina also trained as a teacher. By the time she left school, the universities were playing an increasing role in teacher training, but the Free Church was vigorously opposing the changes, particularly the new Queens Studentship scheme, which was directing the top students away from the church-controlled training colleges and into universities.⁵⁰ Family pressure may have influenced Christina, who chose not to follow Lizzie to university. In 1896 she took first place in the entrance exam for the Free Church training college in Aberdeen⁵¹ and was awarded a bursary of £18. The previous year, she had also won a top prize from the Donaldson Prize Fund for Pupil Teachers, which encouraged teachers to be qualified in religious education, and liberally bestowed prizes on mostly young women.⁵² She was a pupil teacher at York Street School in Aberdeen while

at college, then after completing the two-year curriculum she took a post in Helmsdale, a small northern village in Sutherland.⁵³ In 1900 she was appointed as an assistant teacher at Hermitage School in Helensburgh. She reportedly had “excellent testimonials” and was “an able and energetic teacher.”⁵⁴ By 1908 Christina was an assistant teacher at Leylodge School in Kintore, living with her sister Margaret who was headmistress there.⁵⁵ She was an active participant in the Mutual Improvement Association, regularly presenting papers on a variety of topics. I was mildly shocked when I discovered that in 1910, she participated in an inter-society debate on “Votes for Women.”⁵⁶ She supported the negative side, arguing that the “admission of woman into political life would militate against her success in her true and natural sphere—the home,” adding that “the interests of women are today well looked after by men.” The case against granting the franchise to women prevailed by 34 votes to 30. Dissonant indeed, but I decided to believe that she was honing her debating skills rather than presenting her own views!

In 1916, at the age of 40, she married George Anderson,⁵⁷ a farmer from the Kintore area. In February 1917 she died in a drowning accident⁵⁸ at their farm at Kilduthie, near Banchory. Family lore suggests that she was pregnant. A tragic end for the sister most likely to have it all.

After my great-grandmother Annie’s death, no one in my family branch had any contact with the Strachans. Then, in 1990, my mother responded to a letter in an Aberdeen newspaper from a Strachan relative living in Canada who was looking for information on the Fyvie Strachans. My mother exchanged some family information with the letter writer and learned the story of Christina’s death. Lizzie Strachan Cardno had written in a letter⁵⁹ to a cousin that Christina’s death “was due to an accident and a very simple one at that. She was out milking the cow on that Wed morning, the cow she was milking kicked her pail. She went in the dark, up to the edge of the mill pond, to clean it, stumbled or turned dizzy and fell into the ice-cold water.” She was found barely alive and died later that morning.

A sad note to end on, but I felt a renewed sense of connection to this Strachan family that my granny and my mother talked about. How enterprising and even a little brave these Misses Strachan seemed, leaving home at a young age to pursue further education, moving all over the country for work, participating in intellectual and community events, and rejecting some of the norms of the times. The Strachan lassies have found their place in my family story.

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