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Edgar Allan Poe's Relatives?

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By John McInnes

Any tale about Edgar Allan Poe should begin in a graveyard, in this case the old St. Mungo's Kirkyard surrounding Glasgow Cathedral. Visitors may notice that a section of the old north wall of this ancient graveyard has been knocked down to make way for a cobbled road, allowing access to the cars of Royal Infirmary executives. If these same visitors are inquisitive, they will tread the cobbles into another section of the cemetery and see the weathered table-stones and wall plaques proclaiming the burial places of many of Glasgow's merchants and business people. Being an inquisitive visitor myself, I slowly moved along the western wall, reading the inscriptions when my eyes fell upon a stone commemorating John and Jane Poe.

Recognising the surname of one of the greatest writers of 'mystery and imagination', my curiosity was further fuelled by the name 'Galt' as the middle name of John and Jane's son James. John Galt wrote 'The Annals of the Parish' and was a relative of Edgar Allan Poe and although Galt is commonly considered to belong to Greenock he was actually born in Irvine to which town Edgar Poe as a child was brought by his foster parent John Allan after the latter and his wife had taken the boy in on the death of his parents.

Since my hobby is genealogy, I knew that the International Genealogical Index would hold more information and, sure enough, I found John Poe's marriage entry - the year was 1808 and the town was Irvine. While I had the file out I decided to look up the name 'Poe' in the Ayrshire I.G.I. and found to my surprise several folk of that name, all living in close proximity in the Saltcoats-Ardrossan area.

There must, I reasoned, be some connection between these Saltcoats Poes and the Galts and Allans. Yet none of the biographies I had read about Poe even mentioned any Scottish Poes, never mind Saltcoats ones. All of them give Edgar's father as David Poe, an actor and his grandfather as another David - 'General David Poe of Baltimore, originally of Ireland'. But this genealogy was constructed well before official registration and relies heavily on oral-anecdotal

accounts. My new hypothesis suggests that Edgar Allan Poe had relatives in the Saltcoats area who were connected by marriage to the Allans of Saltcoats and Irvine. This would go a long way to explaining why a canny Scots businessman should adopt the child of strangers. But what kind of proof was there of such a link? Once again the answer lay in a graveyard. Old Saltcoats graveyard lies in the middle of the bustling little seaside town, once beloved of holidaying Glaswegians. Billy Connolly used to sing of "going to Saltcoats fur the Ferr" and generations of Glaswegians could vouch for the truth of the song with stories of "rerr terrs' in the gallus wee town.

What most tourists don't know is that Saltcoats was a thriving harbour in the 18th and 19th centuries. Boats plied up and down the Firth of Clyde and a vibrant trade in coal, herring and timber existed with carriers regularly visiting Arran, Ireland and ports up and down the West of Scotland coastline. Such a 'carrier' was David Poe who now lies in Saltcoats kirkyard with his children and wife - Ann Allan.

Here we have that elusive clue which provides the link between the Poes and the Allans. The latter had their humble beginnings in North Ayrshire and went on to build up the world-famous Allan Steamship Company which did its most lucrative trading with Montreal in Canada.

One merchant who used their ships was John Galt, the father of the 'Annals' author, who moved from Irvine to Greenock, the better to conduct his shipping enterprises. His son John had a position in the firm's Montreal office and, with ties of kinship with Allans and Galts, soon amassed his own fortune although he was not really cut out for business. The graves of early members of the Allan and Galt families are in the old Irvine cemetery as is the grave of James Speirs, father of the man who married Frances Ann Poe, daughter of John and Jane Poe.

The interwoven relationships between close-knit business families in the West of Scotland are endless and the modern investigator can never hope to discover them all. When the older members of these families, who knew all the complex relationships of marriage and business, finally passed away, there was nothing to show what those connections had been, apart from musty old marriage contracts and other legal documents and the brief accounts on weather beaten and vandalised gravestones. However, the clues are still there to be found by any diligent searcher who has a 'nose' for a mystery and the perseverance needed to follow unlikely and uncomfortable leads. I say 'uncomfortable' as I often had to hack my way through weeds and undergrowth to get at tombstones which had the clues I needed.

The accepted Poe genealogy takes us back to Ireland in the late 17th, early 18th centuries but the records show Poes living and carrying on their business a mere ferryboat ride away. Ties of kinship and commerce had linked Scotland and

Ireland for decades. Poe's great-grandfather had married a girl called McBride and the McBrides can be found in large numbers in North Ayrshire from the early 18th century onwards.

Apart from the usual difficulties experienced when exploring the life of a famous person, investigation into Poe's life is even more fraught. He was not merely renowned - he was notorious! His death, preceded by several missing days, is shrouded in mystery but what we know of his life tells of excesses. He was an alcoholic and was also reputed to have taken large doses of opiates. He married a child-bride who died long and bloodily of tuberculosis and he then had a strangely close relationship with his mother-in-law. The sensitive nervous system and fragile intelligence which produced the fantastically beautiful and rhythmically energetic poems, as well as the morbid, gothic tales, stemmed from violent alterations of mood and mental states that hovered on the fringes of madness. Such a character was not only a blot on the escutcheon of Victorian families like the Allans and Galts it was necessary that his connection be erased altogether. It is not too fanciful to imagine old Uncle William Galt putting out the word, reinforced by the opinions of his kinsman John Allan, that Edgar Allan Poe was *persona non grata*. John Galt, whose fame rested on the words he wrote, penned not a syllable about his infamous cousin. That is why we are forced to go to graveyards for our story. High up on Glasgow's Necropolis fit the Allan's housed in an impressive mausoleum. Down to the left lies William Galt, native of Kilmarnock and merchant in Montreal. Further down lie John and Jane Poe who started off my search. Nearer the sea, in the old graveyards of Saltcoats and Irvine, lie more of the *dramatis personae*, now unable to speak their lines. Just a little imagination can elicit whispers from these graves: whispers of recrimination, regret and accusation, whispers that tell of how some men build transient empires and steamships while others weave fantastic and lasting edifices of words.

I know Edgar Allan Poe would be delighted that a sympathetic reader of his tales was lured by the mystery of the writer's life and found some hidden truths inscribed on old, moss-covered graves. Edgar Allan Poe certainly visited Irvine around 1815 and went to Arran and Kilmarnock. We are told he had been brought by his foster parents, the Allans, to visit their relatives, It seems inconceivable that young Edgar did not make the five mile journey up the coast to Saltcoats and Ardrossan where lived his own blood relations, the Poes of North Ayrshire.

*Thanks to Jean Boyce of Saltcoats for these Monumental Inscriptions
from the Old Ardrossan Parish Church at Saltcoats.*

In Memory of
David Poe late carrier of Saltcoats

Who died 21st Aug 1799 aged 72 years
And of Ann Alan his wife who died 18th July 1828 aged 72
And of James their son
Who died abroad in the year 1800 aged 18
And also three of their children who died in infancy
Also
Mary Poe died May 25th 1853 aged 63
And of Janet Poe who died 27th May 1861 aged 62

On Reverse

David Poe
In Memory of his daughter
Mary Ann
Who Died on the 24th Feb 1846 aged 15
Also
Ann and Thomas
Who died in infancy
And his wife Margaret Orr
Who died on the 30th Oct 1854 aged 65
The above David Poe
Died on the 7th Dec 1878 aged 91