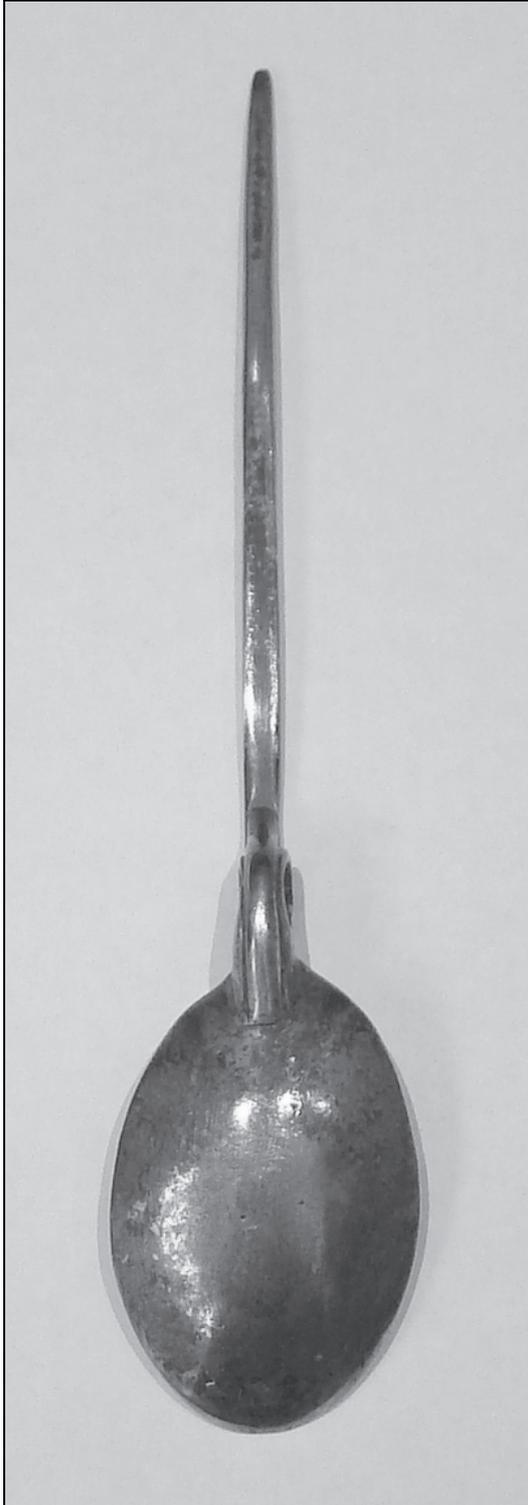


...The Finial...

ISSN 1742-156X
Where Sold £8.50

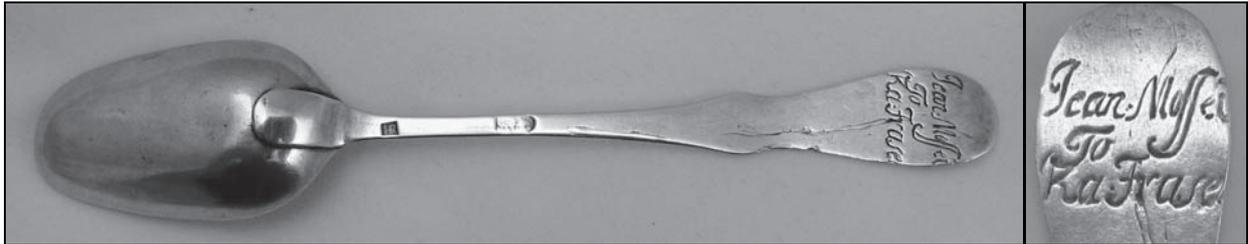
Volume 21/05
May/June 2011



A Big Story From A Little Spoon

By Estelle Quick

There are a number of Scottish fiddle pattern teaspoons, marked 'HR' conjoined in a rectangular or oval punch, which are attributed to one of the Hugh Rosses of Tain. Spoons of this type are generally dated to the mid to late 18th century, and in the absence of marks other than that of the maker it is usually difficult to be more precise. However, one of the 'HR' spoons carries an inscription which enables us to be very specific about its origin, and, unusually, also bears the town mark of St Duthac. The inscription reads '*Jean Moffet to Ka. Fraser*'. It links the spoon to a remarkable woman and a dramatic period of Scottish history.



Jean Moffet or Moffat was born in about 1665, the daughter of a Selkirkshire farmer. She grew up during a turbulent period for the church in Scotland. Her family were Covenanters, supporters of the National Covenant drawn up in 1638 in opposition to Charles I's religious innovations. Jean herself went before the courts several times for refusing to attend the Episcopal church, and eventually in 1685 her family was turned off their farm because of their continuing defiance. Her father was outlawed and Jean was arrested. Along with others who shared her beliefs she was imprisoned in Edinburgh, then forced to walk for several days, without overnight shelter and with little food, to Dunnottar Castle, where the prisoners were crammed into a dark and damp vault. There was so little room that they were literally pressed against each other, and even death was not a way out. Corpses were left to rot among the living, who were also subjected to other forms of ill treatment by their keepers.

Among the other prisoners at Dunnottar was John Fraser of Pitcalzean near Tain, who had been arrested at a Covenanters' meeting in London and spent several months in Newgate prison '*in a common nasty room near the vilest malefactors*' before being sent to be tried in Scotland. Fraser and others were ill and weak because of the conditions they were being kept in and the lack of food and water, and some of the prisoners became so desperate that they tried to escape. Most of them were recaptured and subjected to terrible punishments as a result of which several died.

After two months the prisoners were given a further opportunity to renounce their beliefs, but Jean again refused. A fellow prisoner, Janet Linton, wrote to her husband in July 1685: "*I have had the fever, my body is very weak, ... bless the Lord on my behalf ... He has kepted me from denying His name before a godless generation*". In August 1685 the surviving prisoners, despite their weakened condition, were forced to walk 80 miles to Leith. Here they were told that they would be freed if they took the oath of allegiance, otherwise they would be banished. More than 40 men including John Fraser and 19 women including Jean Moffat refused to take the oath. They were handed over to George Scott of Pitlochrie to be transported across the Atlantic to work as slaves in his plantations in New Jersey, never to return to Scotland under pain of death.

The prisoners from Dunnottar, and others who had been held elsewhere, set sail from Leith in the *Henry & Francis* on September 5th 1685. It was a terrible voyage. Their provisions were rancid before they left port. There were savage gales and rough seas. Fever broke out killing many, including George Scott and his wife. The captain of the ship tried to divert to Jamaica in order to get

a higher price for the prisoners as slaves, but bad weather drove them ashore in New Jersey on December 13th. They had been at sea for 14 weeks and more than 30 of the prisoners had died. Jean Moffat and John Fraser were among the survivors.

They were not welcomed at their place of landing and were pursued as slaves by George Scott's son-in-law. But the people of a town a few miles away took them in for the winter and they were eventually declared free by the judges of the province. They made their way to New England, settling in Waterbury, Connecticut, where John Fraser was licensed as a preacher and he and Jean Moffat were married.

By 1689 the situation at home had changed. William and Mary were on the throne and the Frasers were able to return to Scotland. John Fraser became the minister of Glencorse near Edinburgh, but in 1696 moved to Alness, where a Gaelic speaking minister was needed. He was now not far from his home at Pitcalzean and remained at Alness until his death in 1711. He suffered ill health as a result of his experiences until the end of his life. There is a plaque to his memory inside the now roofless church.

Jean was married again, to George Gordon, minister of Cromarty. Hugh Miller, who admired her for her staunch beliefs, wrote that she '*at an extreme old age, retained much of the beauty of youth*'. Despite this some of the local folk called her '*Luggie*' because there was a rumour, with no basis except that they were never visible under her hair, that her ears had been cut off during her imprisonment. George Gordon died in 1749 and although Jean's date of death is unknown she cannot have long outlived him.



John and Jean had two sons and two daughters. The older son, John, died not long after his father and is remembered on the same plaque. James, the younger, became a theological thinker in his own right and wrote a number of books including *A Treatise on Sanctification*. He was minister of Alness from 1726, and married the daughter of Donald Macleod of Geanies. John and Jean's daughter Katherine married John MacArthur, who was minister of Logie Easter near Tain from 1730 to 1744. After her husband's death she retired to Pitcalzean.

Which finally brings us back to the spoon. At some time, perhaps during the 1740s, Jean Moffat must have asked Hugh Ross to make the spoon for her daughter Katherine Fraser, as a gift from mother to daughter and from one minister's wife to another. This means that it is a relatively early example of Scottish fiddle pattern, and is the work of Hugh Ross II. It is interesting as an example of Tain silver, but remarkable as the vehicle for the story of a woman who held to her beliefs and lived through persecution, horror and exile to end her days in peace in Easter Ross.

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