



# William Smith Nicol

**H**arry Riley was a young schoolmaster working at Kelvingrove in Bridge of Allan when he first met William Smith Nicol. The young Harry had not long previously arrived from his first school in Shrewsbury and was only in his early twenties. He made an instant impression on William with his enthusiasm and interest in his pupils. William was to find out that Harry, like himself, came from a close, supportive family that had risen from humble origins in just two generations, both men being descended from weaver families; the one in Perthshire, the other in Yorkshire.

Harry had been destined for a career in the civil service as a Post Office telegraphist like his father, Horatio and uncle, Frank. Instead of studying for the civil service exams in Bradford, having matriculated from his school in Manningham, he pursued his desire to join the Royal Navy. This, however, was thwarted by his colour-blindness so, following the lead set by his cousin Alfred Midgley in Cheshire, he moved into education qualifying as a teacher with the dogged determination that was later to characterise his approach to schoolmastering. He became a Licentiate of the College of Preceptors at the age of twenty sometime around 1907 and began teaching at a small school near Shrewsbury. A year later he became the Junior Form Master at Kelvingrove; an established private school in Bridge of Allan run by Benjamin Dilworth.

Harry would have taken charge of, among others, the eleven-year-old boarder David Nicol, the only son of William Smith Nicol. David remained at the school during Harry's tenure and probably left after about five years. We have no record of events during David's time at the school or of his relationship with his housemaster but such was the affection that William felt for Harry Riley we can be sure that David left the school a successful and happy pupil. Little did the men know at that time that their bonds of respect and affection were to constitute the basis of the formation of Strathallan School.

William Smith Nicol was born on the 7th of May 1862 at the Aberlady United Presbyterian Manse to the minister David Nicol and Agnes Horn. Interestingly, William's birth was also entered into the Free Church register at Methven in Perthshire by the minister John Wilson. The Nicol family held Methven and its people in great affection. In fact, David Nicol was Methven born, the son of a local weaver, William, and his second wife, Mary Scott. David began his working life as a weaver with his father in the small weaving community of nine cottages in East Methven alongside the weaver families of Ritchie, Brown, Sword, Young and Alison; Ann Alison was, at 97, the oldest resident of the long-standing community. Such cottage industries were the mainstay of rural businesses at this time. David was strongly influenced by the dramatic consequences of the formation of the Free Church and was one of the many hundreds of young men who became scholars and schoolmasters over the next few years. At the age of 32 he was a scholar at St Andrews on course for a career in the church.



William's mother, Agnes, also had connections with Methven. It is possible that she met David there as her father Thomas had moved to work and settle in Methven with his third wife, Helen Murie some five years after the death of Agnes' mother, Agnes Smith, in 1832. In 1851 Thomas, a hedger, was living at Burnside Hamlets in the cottage next to David's older brother, James Nicol and his wife, Catherine. Agnes was brought up with her brother, Thomas at her uncle, David Smith's farm Dove's Loans in Ceres but she later moved with Thomas and his family to Methven. David and Agnes were married on the 13th of January at Collesie in Fife where David was the assistant minister. Their marriage was in advance of their move to David's first, and eventually only, charge as minister in Aberlady, and within the year the couple were living at the manse on the High Street near the new church. Agnes Nicol died at Aberlady on the 25th of March 1893 and David retired, a widower, to Methven with his younger son, Thomas Scott Nicol. However, their new tenure was to be short and William lost his brother Thomas on the 18th of October 1893 at Methven and his father on the 10th of June 1894.

William had lost all his immediate family within a short period. He was living, at the time, in Edinburgh where he had trained in law at Edinburgh University staying with his first cousin, James Nicol and Catherine, his wife. The pair had married in Catherine's home town of Newburgh, in Fife, and then moved to Edinburgh where James ran a house-painting business. By the time of his father's death, William was an actuary working for the Edinburgh Life Assurance Company in their head office at 22 George Street. Here he had seen and met Jessie Hutchison Gibb, named after her mother, who worked next door at the George Street umbrella shop of her father, Alexander. Alexander Gibb had taken over the manufacturing business from his father, John, who had moved to Edinburgh from Dundee some years before to expand the business. The business was a genuine family affair, involving Alexander's uncles and brothers, but he had risen to take overall charge. In 1898 the business had to be moved to 49 Hanover Street by Alexander's son, John, for the construction of the new Assurance building on the old site.

It is clear that the relationship between Jessie and William Nicol began through the proximity of their work places; the families had no other known connections. William proposed to Jessie soon after his father's death and they married in Edinburgh where their first child, Jessie, was born. William was prospering with the firm and moved soon after Jessie's birth to become General Manager of the Edinburgh Assurance office at St Vincent Street in the heart of Glasgow. The family settled at 7 Belhaven Crescent, a prestigious development on the corner of Renfrew Street and Hope Street, where David and Agnes were born just before the turn of the century.



By early 1913, possibly the year that David Nicol finished school, Kelvingrove had ceased to be a viable business for Mr. Dilworth. At the end of the Easter term Kelvingrove was bought by Thomas Braidwood, the owner of Stanley House School in partnership with Lord Moncrieff of Tullebole and the two schools amalgamated under the name of Stanley House. Riley, in common with many of the other Kelvingrove staff and pupils, went over to Stanley House for the summer term.

Harry Riley's unexplained resignation from Stanley House after only one term, in September 1913, led to his move to a half-villa called Glenbrae in the Sunnyside district of Bridge of Allan with his sister May and seven boarding pupils. William Smith Nicol was on hand to provide the loan which secured the birth of Strathallan School. How much was borrowed is not known but it was sufficient for Riley to take out a lease on Glenbrae at the top of Blairforkie Drive. Later, after the move to Forgandenny in 1920, William Nicol's contribution was saluted with the naming of one of the boys' Boarding Houses after him.

William Smith Nicol retired from the Assurance Company in 1918 around the time of the takeover by Commercial Union. He and Jessie moved back to Edinburgh and settled near her family in the leafy suburb of Coates Gardens in Haymarket. He died at home in the evening of 28th April 1925 following a worsening heart condition. Harry Riley made no mention of William's passing but I am sure that he would have been present at the funeral held three days later in Edinburgh. This would have been his final salute to the man who, more than any other, helped him lay the foundation of Strathallan School.

GRMR

