Women and the Scottish Press – the curious case of Jessie M. King(s)

By Charlotte Lauder, Karen Mailley-Watt

The nineteenth and twentieth century Scottish press is littered with public announcements, reports of civic receptions, and the funerals and obituaries of Scottish journalists, editors, artists and other press 'worthies'. Yet research into the people behind the press is severely lacking and those who radicalised and enriched the industrious and versatile modern Scottish press occupy particularly major gaps and silences in the scholarship. Two women, one a pioneering journalist and the other an internationally renowned artist, were trailblazers in the creation of female artistic and journalistic networks in Scotland. However, both have fallen into relative obscurity in present day Scotland, often viewed through a single lens, or framed by a single narrative – never exploring their complex and multifaceted achievements. They shared the same name – Jessie M. King – and have, for too long, existed on the fringes of research on the Scottish periodical press.

A Popular Novelty: Jessie M. King the Journalist

> *'All through my career I worked on the assumption that, as a writer influencing public opinion, I had a mission – to educate as well as to entertain my readers.'*
> *– Jessie M. King, Journalist*

Jessie Margaret King (1862–1947) was a journalist, writer, temperance campaigner and political organiser, who was born in the village of Bankfoot, Perthshire, to parents William King, a master shoemaker, and Christina King (née Gow), a domestic worker.[1] Her early life was marred by tragedy: between 1864 and 1867, her siblings – Donald, Isa, and Henry – died during infancy from scarlet fever, whooping cough, and pneumonia respectively. As the only surviving child, Jessie was educated at the parish school in Bankfoot and entered Sharp's Institution for teacher training in Perth but was forced to leave after her father's

sudden death in 1880. Remaining in Bankfoot, she worked for a time in the village news agency, encouraged (or perhaps organised) by her uncle James Sprunt, editor of the *Perthshire Advertiser*, who regularly sent her boxes of reading material, magazines and literary reviews to supplement her education.[2] Between 1880 and 1885 she won four prizes for essays submitted to literary competitions organised by the Welfare of the Youth of the Free Church. Collectively, these earned her £25 and four silver medals.[3] In 1881, aged just 18, Jessie received appointment to the office of the *Dundee Advertiser*, Dundee's leading Liberal daily newspaper owned by John Leng. Upon arriving in Dundee, she enrolled in night classes for English composition and rhetoric at University College (now the University of Dundee) between 1882 and 1884 and graduated first in her class.[4]

Jessie moved to Dundee during the era of 'New Journalism', when newspaper companies were hiring female journalists and turning their attention towards women as readers *and* consumers of the press. This phenomenon was particularly fervent in Dundee. In 1888 the W. & D. C. Thomson Company (the precursor to the current-day D. C. Thomson & Company Ltd) hired F. Marie Imandt as 'lady correspondent' for the *Dundee Courier*, followed by sisters Bessie and Annie S. Maxwell.[5] At the John Leng Company, Jessie became the 'lady correspondent' for the *Evening Telegraph* under the pseudonym 'Marguerite'. Her style was described as 'exceedingly attractive, terse, clear, and apt, while her original comments and reflections were judiciously and racily intermixed.'[6] As 'Marguerite', she primarily reported on social events in Dundee and its environs including charity bazaars, society weddings, municipal elections, and political debates. In the mid-1890s, Jessie was promoted to 'household editor' of the *People's Friend*, John Leng's literary magazine that was established in 1869. In the *People's Friend*, she used the pseudonym 'Janette' and provided household advice, domestic tips and food budgets for female readers. As the only female member of the magazine's staff, Jessie helped transition the magazine towards its twentieth-century identity as a women's magazine and promoted it as a source of help and support for working-class women, mothers and domestic servants.

Alongside her career in journalism, Jessie was politically active and involved in literary, religious and temperance associations. She co-founded the Dundee Women's Liberal Association in 1896, was active in the Scottish Women's

Federation, and held high office in the British Women's Temperance Association.[7] Travel was a regular part of her career: in 1889 she was at the Eiffel Tower Exhibition in Paris, in 1894 she travelled to Antwerp, in 1897 she attended the International Women's Congress in Berlin. She maintained an interest in religious affairs: she was the 'first woman to sit "on the floor" of the House at General Assemblies of the Free and United Free Churches'. Above all else, Jessie's motivations as a journalist were deeply aligned with her activism: 'I was ever hostile to abuses, and helpful to all useful and uplifting movements, were it food reform, rational dress, women's rights, and the widening of the field of women's interests generally.'[8]

Jessie was frequently referred to as a 'pioneer female journalist'. Although there were pioneering female journalists operating before, during and after Jessie's time, she was certainly one of the first women to be recognised in a professional and full-time capacity and the first hired by John Leng. As such, her public profile helped enact a shift in the attitudes of chauvinistic Dundee journalists. Reflecting on the attitudes of male journalists towards her, the 'lady correspondent', Jessie said: 'The men had purveyed the Ladies Column ere the advent of "Marguerite" and were not a little proud of themselves over the fact. Whenever I showed any tendency to self-conceit they used to remind each other, with a twinkle in their eyes, of those early days when they managed very well without me!' However, she soon had the upper hand: 'I chuckled inwardly, and waited until the next fashionable marriage came over the wire, and they approached humbly with a sheet of flimsy to ask if chiffon was a colour, and what "shirred" stood for?'.[9]

Life as a busy journalist took its toll on Jessie. Despite her popularity, she admitted that 'To be a pioneer has its difficulties.'[10] Her personal life suffered at the hands of her hectic schedule. In 1893, she developed crippling insomnia which forced her to cancel plans to travel to the Chicago Exhibition. Despite writing about domestic life in the *People's Friend*, Jessie had no children and did not marry until she was 45 years old, in 1908. Unlike the majority of her working-class female readers, she lived a fairly comfortable life: whilst in Dundee she lived in a flat in St Peter's Street and by 1900 she owned two properties in the village of Wormit, near the affluent town of Newport-on-Tay in Fife.[11]

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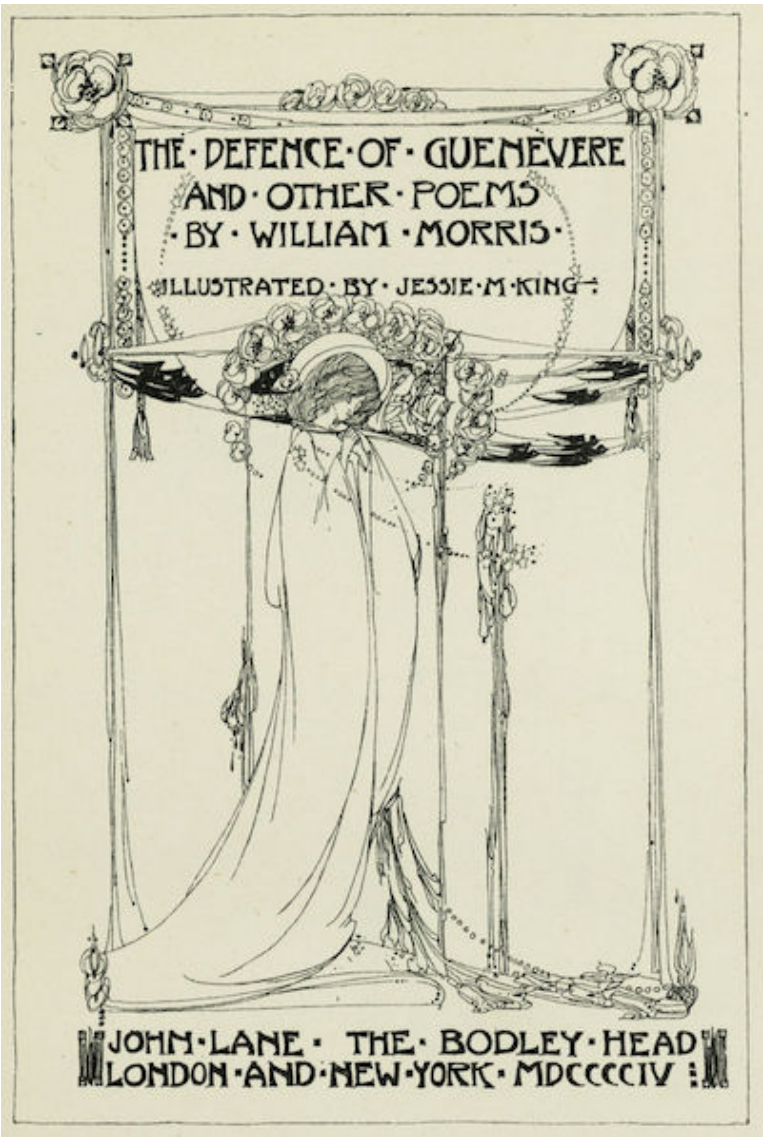
connections within the Dundonian literary élite garnered her praise and warm commemorations. Readers remembered her unique journalistic style: 'That exceptionally gifted pioneer woman journalist […] wrote fine literature in admirable form, and in uplifted moods. Studious readers looked for her articles. They revealed an original mind and fancy, shrewd sense and wide reading.'[12] Her dedication to Scottish literature was life-long. Between 1913 and 1914 she co-founded the Robert Nicoll Centenary Committee with local Auchtergaven and Bankfoot residents to repair the local poet's memorial monument, and authored a memorial volume on Nicoll, published by John Leng.[13] In Dundee, she was a member of the Dundee Literary Society, the Dundee Burns Club, the Ruskin Reading Guild, and the Reading Circle of Newport-on-Tay. She was a close friend of local Dundee litterateurs including Andrew Stewart (1842–1900), editor of the *People's Friend*, the poet Alexander Anderson, aka 'Surfaceman' (1845–1909), and biographer Jean L. Watson (1823–1885), and regularly holidayed with them at Stewart's house in Broughty Ferry. She wrote letters to the *Scotsman* defending the Scots language and dialect poetry, and in 1934 she donated three volumes of Anderson's poetry to the Haddington Public Library.[14] Jessie died as Mrs William C. Batey in 1947 in Aysgarth, Yorkshire, having moved to her husband's hometown of Newcastle after their marriage, and her ashes were scattered in Vicarsford Cemetery, in Newport-on-Tay.

Communicating from the Fairies: Jessie M. King, the Artist and Illustrator



The Defence of Guenevere: cover illustration by Jessie Marion King

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Jessie Marion King (1875–1949) was a free-spirit, artist, and teacher, doused with a sprinkling of the ethereal, who has left a rich and important imprint on Scotland's art world. Born in Bearsden into a conservative and religious family headed by her father, Rev. J. W. King, a church minister, King, like many women of the period, was discouraged from pursuing an artistic career. Her parents were worried that undertaking an artistic career would mean make her an outsider, living a 'bohemian life', and one not suitable for a minister's daughter.[15] Although

often categorised as a ‘Glasgow Girl’, King was so much more than what this categorisation denotes. She was a renowned international artist, illustrator, supporter of women’s suffrage and founder of a colony populated by women artists and producers.

In 1892 she enrolled at The Glasgow School of Art (GSA) under the Directorship of Francis Newbery (1885–1946). King was certainly in good company, with a large cohort of women students including Ann Macbeth, Annie French (1872–1965) and her life-long friend Helen Paxton Brown (1876–1956). During her time at GSA, King developed her now renowned style of drawing, filled with delicate lines and intricate patterns which would come to adorn a fine selection of books produced by Scottish publishers. In 1898 King won a national silver medal for her illustrations depicting Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia*. Her break-through commission came in 1898 when the German Department store owner, Georg Wertheim, who also owned the Berlin publishing firm Globus Verlag, wrote to Fra Newbery at GSA asking for an artist who could work in the new Glasgow Style.[16] Newbery suggested twenty-three year old King to undertake the commission helping to further elevate her book career in book illustration.

In 1902, she won a gold medal at the Turin International Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art for her illustrations for the book *L’Evangile de l’Enfance*.[17] By 1905 she had carved out a reputation as one of Britain’s leading illustrators for an array of publishers produced in her distinctive ‘wirework style’ which shares the distinctive stylistic traits of the Glasgow Style now commonly popularised by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and The Macdonald sisters.[18] King produced illustrations and book cover designs for numerous publications including *Don Quixtote* (1905), *A House of Pomegranates* (1915) and *Kilmeny* (1911).

In 1900 she became a teacher at GSA, teaching design of bookbinding and later in ceramics.[19] Upon her marriage to the Glasgow designer E. A. Taylor (1874–1951) in 1908 she was required due to the Marriage Ban to revoke her teaching position at the school. However, ever the trailblazer, King kept her maiden name for professional purposes and purchased property in Kirkcudbright, in Dumfries and Galloway. From 1911, King and Taylor lived at 16 Rue de la Grande Chaumiere in Paris while continuing to exhibition an array of watercolour and black and white illustrations at the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts.[20]

The Kirkcudbright property, which consisted of a house with a row of smaller cottages, would later form the Green Gate Close Artist colony.[21] Although Kirkcudbright is perhaps most widely associated with artists known as the 'Glasgow Boys', after permanently relocating there in 1915, King welcomed an influx of women artists, designers and creatives who visited or permanently stayed at Green Gate Close from all over Scotland. Such artists included Lena Alexander (1899–1983), Cecile Walton (1891–1956), Anna Hotchkis (1885–1984) and King's best friend Helen Paxton Brown. The community also hosted prominent women in the suffrage movement including Vera 'Jack' Holme (1881–1969) who was an actress, out-and-proud lesbian, aid worker with the Women's Hospitals and the Pankhursts's personal chauffeur.

King was extremely active in the Kirkcudbright community and organised entertainments, pageants, and fundraisers. In 1917, as part of the Literary Society, King and her husband organised a night of entertainment to raise funds for the Scottish Women's Hospitals. The entertainment consisted of 'a series of living pictures, historical and illustrative of old ballads and songs.'[22] She even left her distinctive and playful mark on the Paul Jones Café in the town. The café, which was named after the famous buccaneer of the area, was designed in King's whimsical style with the outside window of the eatery designed like a prow of a ship. King even designed the waitress's uniforms aptly dressing them up as pirates![23]

Through her social and professional interactions, it is apparent that King was an agent of connectivity often actively linking different pro-woman networks together. She was heavily involved with The Glasgow Society of Lady Artists and The Scottish Society of Handicrafts; exhibited widely with organisations including the Royal Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts and The Scottish Society of Artists; and ran a sketching school on Arran with her husband.

Ever the teacher, King wrote and illustrated a variety of books and textbooks throughout her life including *Little White Town of Never-weary* (1917) and the Batik instruction manual, *How Cinderella was able to go to the ball* (1924). She also produced a serious of books which recorded the architecture of Scotland's cities and towns including *Dwellings of an Old World Town: Culross, Fifeshire* (1909), *Grey City of the North* (1910) and *Kirkcudbright* (1934).[24] In the 1911

publication of *Glasgow The City of the West*, King records important buildings and areas of the city including the Gorbals, Bell Street, Drygate and the Saltmarket. Each illustration is supplemented with a short blurb about the area depicted and with many of the buildings not recognisable, or missing in 2020, King has created a perfect and ever-lasting snapshot of Glasgow in 1911.

Although the two Jessies were born only years apart, were married in the same year, travelled to the same places, and led similarly independent and self-sufficient lives, it is not apparent that they ever met or were aware of each other. However, without a personal archive for each woman, this is merely speculative. They were different in style and approach to life. Jessie the artist was far more avant-garde, a true free spirit with a sprinkling of fun and mischief. Jessie the journalist was religiously observant, a dutiful daughter, literary socialite, and temperance campaigner. They differed in background: Jessie the journalist was from a poor, rural and working-class family, whereas Jessie the artist was born into a large, comfortable and middle-class family. However, at their core, they shared a common belief that women should be free – politically, socially, and economically – and, above all, that women should be at the forefront of the Scottish press through the art of writing or illustration. Their impressive societal connections and life experiences demonstrate the interconnected lives of the women behind the Scottish press and the important role that the press played in the artistry, creativity, and autonomy of women. Ultimately, these two women have left an indelible mark, each in their own way, on the history of Scotland's press.The nineteenth and twentieth century Scottish press is littered with public announcements, reports of civic receptions, and the funerals and obituaries of Scottish journalists, editors, artists and other press 'worthies'. Yet research into the people behind the press is severely lacking and those who radicalised and enriched the industrious and versatile modern Scottish press occupy particularly major gaps and silences in the scholarship. Two women, one a pioneering journalist and the other an internationally renowned artist, were trailblazers in the creation of female artistic and journalistic networks in Scotland. However, both have fallen into relative obscurity in present day Scotland, often viewed through a single lens, or framed by a single narrative – never exploring their complex and multifaceted achievements. They shared the same name – Jessie M. King – and have, for too long, existed on the fringes of research on the Scottish periodical press.

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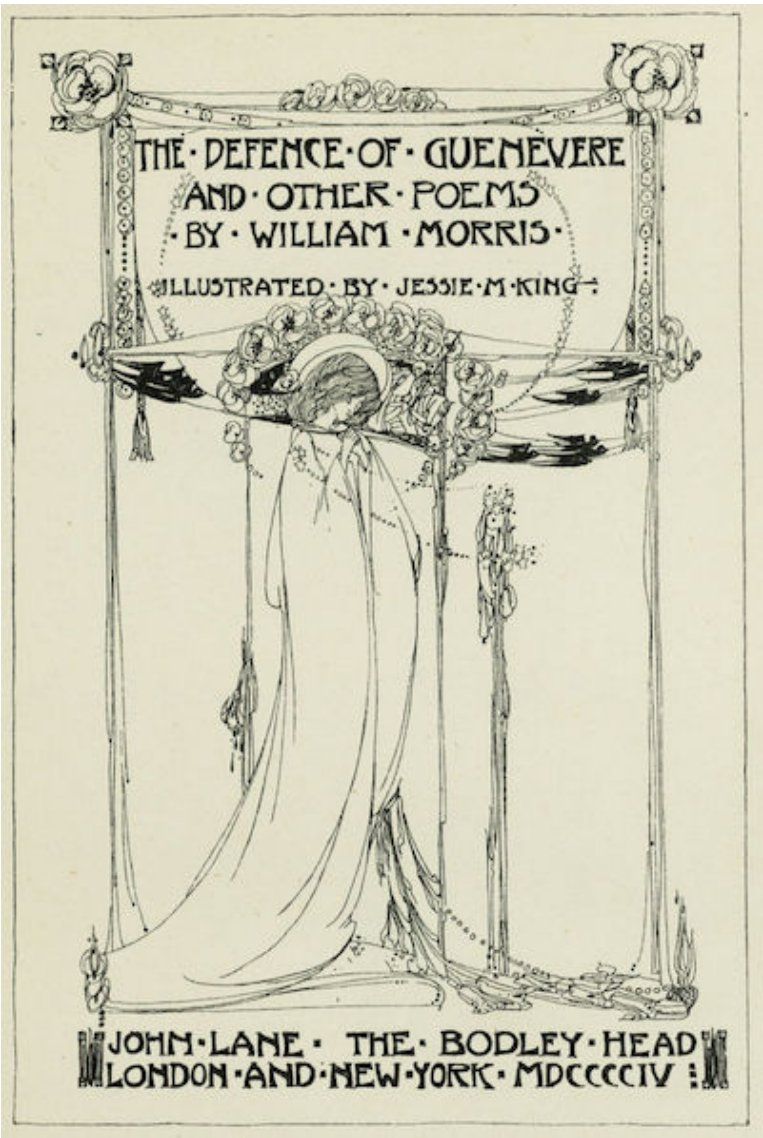

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(c) The Bottle Imp