

THE 1853 PORTRAIT OF WILLIAM DICK AND THE UNDELIVERED LETTERS

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Readers of this journal will oft have been made aware of the curious links between serendipity and our increased awareness of veterinary history¹. We briefly present here yet another example.

We have recently been gathering together the available data for the portraits of William Dick, his father John, and sister Mary. Some of this information has already been published^{2,3,4,5,6,7}. One of the least-known portraits of William Dick was purchased in 1907 by the National Gallery of Scotland (Accession number PG 663). It is a watercolour painting on paper, measuring 26.50 x 22.00 cm, signed E. Olden, and dated 1853 (Figure 1). In order to find out more about it, previous research guided us to the exhibition catalogues of the Royal Scottish Academy (RSA) in Edinburgh. In 1854 two watercolour paintings were exhibited in the South Octagon by a Miss Olden; One was entitled 'Portrait of a Gentleman' and the other, 'Portrait of a Lady'⁸. This RSA catalogue lists Miss Olden as 'Elizabeth Olden, 59 Frederick Street, Edinburgh'⁹. No other trace of Miss Olden was found in Edinburgh.

A different line of research recently led us to report that a father and son, each called Robert Olden, had come in 1837 from Cork in Ireland to study veterinary medicine at the Edinburgh Veterinary College in Clyde Street¹⁰. Robert Olden senior had an established wax and tallow chandler business in the city, and had invented, manufactured and was selling a proprietary digestive veterinary medicine; 'Olden's Application for broken knees &c. and causing Growth of Hair on Horses, for the cure of Foot-rot in Sheep, and Sore Teats in Cows'¹¹. Both father and son obtained their qualifications in 1839, with Robert junior winning the silver medal as the student of the most distinguished merit¹². After the exams, Robert Olden senior was the chairman for the Friday evening celebratory dinner to Professor Dick, which was held in the London Hotel, St Andrews Square¹². Between 1840 and 1843 Mr Robert Olden jun. was reported to be one of the examiners of the veterinary students in Clyde Street¹³. In 1843 his brother, George Olden, came to Edinburgh and in 1845 successfully completed his studies at the Edinburgh Veterinary College¹⁴. The following year, the father and his two veterinary sons were listed as veterinary surgeons,

working at 9 Winthrop Street in Cork¹⁵. In 1863 the two brothers, Robert Jun. and George, were working at the same address in Cork¹⁶.



Figure 1.
Professor William Dick, 1793-1866. Founder of the Dick Veterinary College, 1853, by Elizabeth Olden.

The link between Elizabeth Olden and this family in Cork emerged from undelivered letters she and her family had written between 6th September 1844 and 4th March 1848, to her uncle, Jonathan (Jonty) Buck, who worked for the Hudson's Bay Company¹⁷. From these letters, and from the historical research presented in the accompanying notes, we learned that Elizabeth (Liz or Lizzy) was born in 1817 to Elizabeth Buck and Robert Olden. She was one of at least 17 siblings. Her brothers, Robert (or Bob, born 1822) and George (born 1825) were younger than her. No evidence has appeared to either support or refute the suggestion that Elizabeth travelled with her father and brother to Edinburgh to work as their housekeeper between 1837 and 1839 (when she would have been aged 20-22 years). However, such evidence that has been found would indicate against her having accompanied her brother Robert's travels to Edinburgh between 1840 and 1843, or between 1843 and 1845 when George was studying in Edinburgh; she was reportedly 'ailing' nearly all the time between 1840 and 1848¹⁷. Nevertheless, it may be worth noting that Harrietta, Liz's aunt, wrote on 8th February 1848, that Liz was 'going to keep house for Bob at Ballyshannon where he & George are to live'.

Was there background to her artistic talent? Elizabeth's mother was the daughter of Frederick Buck, a noted local artist who specialised in miniatures. Both he and his brother Adam created miniature portraits painted on ivory mounted in elaborate gold cases¹⁷. Their family were silversmiths and jewellers in Limerick and Cork since the early 1700s. Elizabeth's sensitivity to natural surroundings was expressed in a letter, written from her current home, two miles beyond Innishannon on 23 February 1848; it 'is the pleasantest and prettiest place we have ever had'. No paintings by Elizabeth prior to 1853 have yet been identified. However, following her marriage in 1859 to Benjamin Louis Augustus du Gué, she became known as 'Madame du Gué'. It is by that name that she is remembered in her family, where she was always said to have been a talented artist.

In order to place Elizabeth's portrait of William Dick in context, the 1850s was an important decade, artistically speaking, in the life of William Dick. In 1850 William Shiels exhibited his painting of 'Portrait of Professor Dick' in the North Octagon at the 24th Royal Scottish Academy show¹⁸. The following year, Tavenor Knott exhibited in the North Octagon his 'Portrait of Professor Dick – Presentation to him by his Students of the Session 1850-51' at the 25th RSA show¹⁹. Mary Dick was 60 years old in 1851, and two years later, 1853, William Dick was 60 years old⁷.

During the summer of 1853 a new lecture room had been created at the Clyde Street veterinary school and the old classroom was soon to be converted into an enlarged museum²⁰. A new dissecting room, better reading-room and library were to be provided soon thereafter. It was sometime in 1853 that Elizabeth Olden painted her portrait of William Dick, perhaps as a birthday gift from the Olden family. It could reasonably be presumed that her watercolour painting of a 'lady' might well have been of Mary Dick; both were exhibited in 1854 at the RSA⁸. In 1857 Clark Stanton exhibited in the entrance room at the 31st RSA exhibition²¹ his design for a 'Bust of Professor Dick, Founder of the Edinburgh Veterinary College, To be executed in Marble, and presented to Mr. Dick, as a Testimonial from the Members of the Veterinary Profession.' The following year, in 'Sculpture', the completed 'Bust in Marble of Professor Dick, Founder of the Edinburgh Veterinary College - a Testimonial to be presented to Mr. Dick from the Members of the Veterinary Profession' was exhibited at the 32nd RSA exhibition²².

Elizabeth's painting of William Dick seems to be highly competent. The style is realistic, and the pose could perhaps be described as cautious or attentive. Why have no other portraits by Elizabeth been recorded? Were they largely made of friends and just given away? Was a diary kept by Elizabeth that might have recorded their creation? Is there a style link to paintings still held by the family or their friends?

With respect to Elizabeth's painting in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery²³ it was not recorded from whom it was obtained. We do not know when Elizabeth first came to Edinburgh, and for how long did she remain in town? The Olden family were well known to the Dick family, so might she have been their house guest in 1853? Did she give the two paintings to William and Mary Dick in 1853/54? Indeed, where is the painting of the 'Lady' now? Perhaps someone in the Veterinary community knows.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Dawn Williams of the Crawford Art Gallery, Cork for the very helpful leads we were able to follow up. We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Julie Lawson of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, and the permission given to print PG 663. The financial support of the University of Edinburgh and the Balloch Trust for this study is gratefully acknowledged.

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- 1 From Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serendipity>; Accessed 22 August 2020) we learn that the first noted use of "serendipity" (derived from the Sanskrit *Siṃhaladvīpāḥ*) was by Horace Walpole on 28 January 1754. In a letter he wrote to his friend Horace Mann, Walpole explained an unexpected discovery he had made about a lost painting. It is curious that 100 years later it helped track down the 'lost artist' of a known painting.
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- 3 MACDONALD, A.A., WARWICK, C. & JOHNSTON, W.T. 2005. 'Locating veterinary education in Edinburgh in the nineteenth century'. *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, New Series, 6, 41-71.
- 4 MACDONALD, A.A. and WARWICK, C.M. 2013a. 'Early teaching of the 'Veterinary Art and Science' in Edinburgh'. *Veterinary History*, 16, 227-273.
- 5 MACDONALD, A.A. 2013b. 'The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies – what's in a name?' *Veterinary History*, 17, 33-65.
- 6 MACDONALD, A.A. & WARWICK, C.M. 2018. 'A wee blether with Mary Dick'. *iScot*, March, pp. 20-29.
- 7 MACDONALD, A.A. & WARWICK, C.M. 2019. 'A wee blether with Mary Dick'. *Veterinary History*, 19(4), 341-369.
- 8 *The Exhibition of the Royal Scottish Academy of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, MDCCCLIV. The Twenty-eighth*. Edinburgh: Printed by T. Constable, p. 30, item 540 and p.31, item 559.
- 9 A Mrs Gibson was resident of 59 Frederick Street, Edinburgh in 1853, 1854 and 1855. It would seem possible that she rented room accommodation to visitors. Post Office Directories. It is perhaps not surprising that the same address is currently being used as a Bed and Breakfast establishment.
- 10 MACDONALD, A.A. 2020. 'Clyde Street 1833-1841: the veterinary teaching and learning environment'. *Veterinary History*, 20, 272-306.
- 11 <http://www.limerickcity.ie/media/01%2019%2039.pdf> (Accessed 22/8/2020); Olden, Robert & Sons, wax & tallow chandlers & soap manufacturers, 3 Grand Parade & 4 Duncan St. Cork. SLATER'S 1846 DIRECTORY Cork City, Ireland.
- 12 Edinburgh Veterinary College. *Caledonian Mercury*, May 2, 1839, p.3, col. 5.
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- 14 PRINGLE, R.O. 1869. 'Memoir', In: Dick, W. *Occasional Papers on Veterinary Subjects; with a Memoir by R.O. Pringle*, Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and sons.
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- 16 Olden, Robert & Geo., vet. surgeons, 9 Winthrop Street, Cork. <http://www.corkgen.org/publicgenealogy/cork/potpourri/corkancestors.com/1863Corkdiectory2.htm> (Accessed 22/8/2020).
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- 18 *The Exhibition of the Royal Scottish Academy of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, MDCCCL. The twenty-fourth*, Edinburgh: Printed by H. & J. Pillans, p. 19, item 300.
- 19 *The Exhibition of the Royal Scottish Academy of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, MDCCCLI. The twenty-fifth*, Edinburgh: Printed by H. & J. Pillans, p. 19, item 328. <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/william-dick-17931866-216020> (Accessed 23/08/2020).
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- 21 *The Exhibition of the Royal Scottish Academy of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, MDCCCLVII. The Thirty-first*. Edinburgh: Printed by T. Constable, p. 33, item 699.
- 22 *The Exhibition of the Royal Scottish Academy of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, MDCCCLVIII. The Thirty-second*. Edinburgh: Printed by T. Constable, p. 37, item 765.
- 23 The painting by Elizabeth Olden came into the collection of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery following payment of three guineas.

Figures

Figure 1. Professor William Dick, 1793-1866. Founder of the Dick Veterinary College, 1853, by Elizabeth Olden. National Galleries of Scotland, PG 663.

DID YOU KNOW? Imposthume – an abscess (archaic noun)