Patrick Copland’s Technician in the 1780s, John King

John S. Reid

Patrick Copland, Professor of Natural Philosophy at Marischal College, employed a technician for several years from 1783, as discussed in other articles on Copland. He may have been the first technician employed in a UK university, at least I’ll make that claim until I hear to the contrary. James Watt operated earlier in the University of Glasgow but he was simply given workshop space by the University to run his business and was not employed by the University, except when making repairs for them.

In my library are a few issues of a publication that I suspect is likely to be a rare survival, though the University library has copies: The Aberdeen Book-Lover. In Vol. VI, Nov. 1929, No. 3 there is an 11-page article by R. Murdoch Lawrance on Robert Wilson, local author and preacher. It seems and unlikely source of information on Patrick Copland’s technician but it turns out that Robert Wilson was a pupil of Copland’s at Marischal College and married into John King’s family. Wilson graduated AM from Marischal College in 1818.

The article contains many details extracted from birth, marriage and death records including those of John King and his family. It is for this reason that it is worth citing here. I’ve included the whole article below. Pages 73-74 particularly concern John King and his family about whom I’ve seen very little elsewhere. There are one or two clocks in existence marked “Jno. King, Aberdeen”, for King took up the profession of his training after leaving Copland. We now know that King was buried on June 7th 1807, aged 46, making him in his mid-twenties when working for Copland. He had married in April 1783 and they had their first son in January 1784, baptised before witnesses Copland and John Bannerman. Unfortunately, the infant died in April. They had a further 8 children. The 7th in the family was Janet (or Jessie) King, born 24th December 1798, who married Robert Wilson. See below for fuller details and much more on Robert Wilson and his own family.
Robert Wilson, A.M.,
Historian and Preacher, Aberdeen

The main object of this contribution to our northern annals is to preserve data collected regarding a now forgotten local historian, Robert Wilson, his connections, and his three literary ventures, while residing in the town of Aberdeen. It has been generally supposed he was a native of Aberdeen, but recent research on the part of the writer proves he was a native of the royal Burgh of Banff, and likewise an adopted son of Aberdeen. A copy of existing documents, now for the first time before the reader, and given, as far as possible, in chronological sequence, accompanied by explanatory notes, will help us to follow his brief career and many accomplishments. Robert Wilson’s standing as a local historian is fairly secure, for, be it remembered, his Delineation of Aberdeen, to which we shall refer in bibliographical detail later on, inspired the late Mr. James Rettie (1812-96) to lay the foundation of his Aberdeen Fifty Years Ago, published sixty-one years ago, on somewhat identical lines; the copperplates which illustrated that invaluable topographical inquiry are still reposing in the archives of a very old publishing house in Aberdeen; and what is more interesting to relate, the said copperplates are, even after the long interval, in a remarkable state of preservation. The excellent drawings for Robert Wilson’s work were made by George Smith, then Art Master in the Aberdeen Academy, sometime situated in Netherkirkgate.

WILSON’S PARENTAGE.

Banff, Feby. 26, 1791: William Wilson and Anne Sinclair, both in this parish, were contracted in order to Marriage, and after regular proclamation, were married by the Rev. Mr. [William] Burgess in Banff. Banff, Augt. 9, 1804.—Extracted from the Parish Register of Banff by John Cruickshank, S. C. [Session Clerk].
Concerning Mr. [William] Burgess, mentioned above, the following extracts from the late Dr. William Cramond's *Annals of Banff*, vol. ii., pages 107 and 109, refer to him. Thus, in 1788: March 16—The Treasurer reported that he had received for seat rents in Mr. Burgess' Chapel (the Relief Church) the sum of £30, which was immediately put into the box (page 107); and 1796: May 11—Mr. William Burgess, late Minister of the Relief Congregation at Banff, made application to be again received into the Church. The Presbytery receive him again into the Church (page 109).

In due course the following entry appears in the *Banff Baptismal Register*—“1791: Robert Wilson, lawful son of William Wilson, stocking weaver in Banff, by his wife Anne Sinclair, was baptised December 10th, before witnesses—Robert Wilson and Andrew Wilson.” It is surmised that the last-named witness was Andrew Wilson, architect, who built the present Banff Parish Church, and whose portrait adorns the interior of the Session House; he died 3rd March, 1827, aged 76 years, being the last of his father’s family. The re-opening of Banff Parish Church after extensive reconstruction that has occupied the entire past twelvemonth, was an historic event that will make the first Sunday of 1929 (January 6th) a memorable one in the ecclesiastical annals of the town and parish. A very full account of the impressive re-opening service was given in the *Banffshire Journal*, Tuesday, 8th January, 1929.

CLASS ATTENDANCES AND TESTIMONIALS.

Four certificates which lie before me are in the following terms:—


(2) The Bearer Mr. R. Wilson was a Bursar in my class of 1809, and a most excellent and diligent student. William Ogilvie. King's College, August 17, 1818.

(3) No. 42. Marischal College and University, Aberdeen, Natural Philosophy Class. P. Copland, P. 1818-1819. Robert Wilson, Student; and

(5) These certify that the Bearer hereof, Mr. Robert Wilson, attended the different classes in the Academy for the space of three years immediately preceding Martinmas, 1808; and during that time gave the greatest satisfaction to all his teaching by his attention, proficiency, and good behaviour. He appeared to me on all occasions to have good abilities for learning, and his application was uncommon. Given at Banff, this 10th day of July, 1815, and attested by John Cruickshank, Master of the Academy of Banff.

A headstone in Banff Parish Churchyard records that “John Cruickshank, A.M., who for upwards of forty years discharged the duties of Rector of the Academy of Banff with fidelity and success, died on the 3rd July, 1830, in the 71st year of his age.” The Banff Kirk Session Minutes contain this entry—“1858: May 14—Rev. Dr. Cruickshank, Minister of Fyvie, as a mark of respect to the memory of his father, who was Rector of Banff Academy for upwards of forty years, bequeatheds £200 to found two Cruickshank Bursaries at Banff Academy.”

(6) These certify all whom it may concern that the Bearer, Robert Wilson, attended the Class of Moral Philosophy and Logick in Marischal College, Session 1813, 1814. That he applied diligently and successfully to his various studies, was exemplary in his behaviour, and acquitted himself in every respect in such a manner as to merit my approbation. Given at Marischal College of Aberdeen this third day of May, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Fourteen, by George Glennie, Mor. P.P. Endorsed: Mr. Robert Wilson.

(7) Marischal College, Aberdeen, 13th August, 1818. I hereby certify that Mr. Robert Wilson, teacher in Aberdeen, attended the third Mathematical Class (for the higher parts of that science) last session of college, having previously attended the first and second Mathematical Classes under Mr. Cruickshank, my
assistant. That he applied steadily and acquired a competent knowledge of all the branches taught during that course, and appeared to me to possess a considerable genius not only for that study, but for general science, and a laudable desire for the acquisition of knowledge, and for understanding thoroughly whatever subject he directed his attention to; And I further recommend him as a young man of steady religious principles, strict integrity, and unexceptional morals; and as a person who has been usefully employed for some years in the instruction of youth in this place.

Robert Wilson graduated Master of Arts at Marischal College, Aberdeen, 9th September, 1818, and his Diploma was duly signed by William Laurence Brown, LL.D. [Principal of Marischal College]; Patrick Copland, LL.D. [Professor Natural Philosophy]; Robert Hamilton [Professor of Natural Philosophy]; John Stuart [Professor of Greek]; William Livingston, M.D.; George French; James Kidd, L.L.O.O.P.; James Davidson, M.D. [Professor of Civil and Natural Philosophy]; and George Glennie, D.D. [Professor Moral Philosophy].

(8) I have known Mr. Robert Wilson several years, and esteem him as a gentleman of great moral worth and excellence, and of amiable and agreeable dispositions and manners. From his talents, education, and studies, as well as his practice in tuition, I consider Mr. Wilson well qualified to conduct the studies of youth in most branches of education, and am convinced he will acquitted himself of any duty he undertakes to the satisfaction of his employers and to his own credit.—James Bentley, Prof. of Oriental Languages, King’s College, Aberdeen. At Invercanny, Kincardineshire, 13th October, 1823.

(9) October, 21, 1824: I fully agree to the above certificate and subscribe accordingly James Kidd, D.D., L.L.O.O.P. I have much pleasure in adding my testimony to the great moral worth and excellent talents of the above-mentioned Mr. Robert Wilson.
—John Murray, one of the Ministers of Aberdeen.
Aberdeen, October 14th, 1824. I have been acquainted with the bearer, Mr. Robert Wilson, for a considerable number of years, and have always understood him to be of pious, sober, and industrious habits; and to be diligent in prosecuting various branches of education, especially with a view to qualify himself for the work of the ministry.—Samuel McMillan, Minister. Endorsed: To Mr: Robert Wilson, Teacher, Aberdeen.

Rev. Samuel McMillan, of the United Presbyterian Church, St. Paul's Street, Aberdeen, was born in the Parish of Kirkoswald, Ayrshire, 1775; studied at Glasgow College; ordained Pastor of the Relief Church, Aberdeen, 1807; died 11th January, 1864, aged 89 years; buried at St. Nicholas Churchyard, Aberdeen; and his wife, Catherine Glennie, died at Rosemount Place, Aberdeen, 17th December, 1850, aged 64 years (tombstone inscription). He was the author of numerous publications on Biblical subjects that are now nearly forgotten, except by a small band of local collectors.

Aberdeen, Ocr. 22nd, 1824. I have known Mr. Robert Wilson for several years past, and have always esteemed him as a young man possessing piety, talent, and learning, which under God might fit him for the work of the ministry. It affords me pleasure to recommend him to ministers and people of any denominations.—Signed Richd. Penman, Minister. Endorsed: Mr. Robert Wilson, teacher, Aberdeen.

Rev. Richard Penman was born in the village of Symington, near the town of Biggar, in Peeblesshire, on the 29th December, 1777. He left Arbroath for Aberdeen, September, 1814. In 1831, George King, Aberdeen, printed for him a Memoir of Mr. William Brown, late Minister of the Gospel, Inverary. A headstone in St. Clement's Parish Churchyard, Footdee, Aberdeen, bears "In memory of the Rev. Richard Penman, for 20 years Pastor of the Congregational Church, Frederick Street, who died 5th Feby, 1841, aged 63 years: erected by his widow and family. His son, James F. Penman, Pastor of the Church in Peterborough, died 9th April, 1838, aged 28 years. And Margaret Gilmour, spouse of the above Revd. Richard Penman, who died the 26th

(12) Mr. Robert Wilson, A.M., has several years resided in Aberdeen as a respectable classical and mathematical teacher, also for some time was a highly esteemed member, trustee, leader, and local preacher among the Wesleyan Methodists, from whom, above twelve months since, he voluntarily withdrew, but in a manner perfectly honourable to himself, and from the Managers of the Wesleyan Chapel received an unanimous vote of thanks for his gratuitous services, at the same time expressing their high opinion of the integrity, judgment, and assiduity he displayed while in office among them, and their regret that he was inclined to withdraw from gentlemen who have long known him. I have had the most unequivocal testimonies of the respectability of his talents and character, therefore, although I have not enjoyed the pleasure of acquaintance with him much more than twelve months, I have no hesitation in recommending him as a man of irreproachable character, deserving patronage in his profession, and am happy to consider him within the circle of my friends.—Benjamin Andrews, Wesleyan Minister, Aberdeen, Octr. 25th, 1824.

(13) Aberdeen; 4 November, 1824. The Bearer, Mr. Robert Wilson, a member of St. Paul’s Chapel, eminently qualified both as a philosopher and a divine, as well as an instructor of youth, has all his life been remarkable for steady piety and unsullied virtue; and I think him a person worthy to be admitted into the holy order of Deacons or Priests.—James Cordiner, Minister of St. Paul’s Chapel, Aberdeen. Endorsed: Mr. Robert Wilson.

The writer of the foregoing testimonial, Rev. James Cordiner, M.A., son of Rev. Charles Cordiner, St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, Banff, was author of (1) Masonic Unity: A Sermon, 1816: (2) A Voyage to India, 1820; and (3) For the Benefit of the Shipwrecked Fund: A Sermon, 1820; all published at Aberdeen, and now scarce items in local authorship.

(14) The bearer, Mr. Robert Wilson, attended the first
Mathematical Class in the Marischal College and University, under my tuition, during session 1814-15, and the second Mathematical Class during session 1815-16. His conduct as a student deserved the highest praise, and his progress in the study of mathematics was not equalled by any of his classfellows. For the last ten years, during which I have been intimately acquainted with him, he has been much employed as a teacher of youth in various branches of learning and science, in which especially he has displayed great skill and industry, and, at the same time he has been making constant progress in his own improvement. His moral conduct has always been exemplary. I believe him to be a gentleman of abilities far above mediocrity, and one whose utmost exertions will ever be directed towards a faithful discharge of the duties of any situation in which Providence may place him. The above is certified at the Marischal College, Aberdeen, this fifth day of November, One thousand eight hundred and twenty-four, by John Cruickshank, Professor of Mathematics. Endorsed: Mr. Robert Wilson.

KING-WILSON MARRIAGE.

At this point we furnish genealogical notes on the King family, into which Mr. Robert Wilson afterwards married. John King,* clock and watchmaker, Aberdeen, and Jean King, were married 26th April, 1783, by Mr. William Gordon, in St. Paul’s Chapel, Aberdeen (Marriage Register). They had issue as follows:

(1) Peter King, born 21st January, baptised 25th January, 1784, by Dr. John Gordon, before witnesses—Professor [Patrick] Copland and John Bannerman (St. Paul’s Baptismal Register). He was buried at St. Peter’s Churchyard, Aberdeen, 14th April, 1784 (Burial Register).

(2) Jean King, born 17th April, baptised 21st April, 1785, by Rev. William Gordon, before witnesses—John Duncan, flax dresser, and Alexander Barron, woolcomber (Baptismal Register).

*The said John King, aged 46 years, clockmaker, Tanfield, was buried at St. Peter’s Churchyard, Aberdeen, June 7th, 1807 (Burial Register).
(3) Anne King, born 14th March, baptized 18th March, 1787, by Rev. William Gordon, before witnesses—John Allan, mason, and John Duncan, flax dresser (Baptismal Register).

(4) Alexander King, born 12th February, baptised 20th February, 1791, by Rev. Roderick MacLeod (Baptismal Register).

(5) Elizabeth King, born 29th January, 1793, baptised 3rd February by Dr. MacLeod (Baptismal Register).

(6) John King, born 9th October, baptised 21st October, 1795, by Rev. Alexander Alcock (Baptismal Register).

(7) Janet (or Jessie) King, born 24th Dec., 1798, baptised 10th January, 1799, by Rev. James Deans (Baptismal Register). The Marriage Register of St. Paul’s contains this entry: “Mr. Robert Wilson, Preacher in Aberdeen, and Miss Jessie King there, daughter of the deceased John King, watchmaker, were married in her mother’s house, 22nd August, 1822, by the Rev. William Wilkinson, before witnesses—John Ramage and Alexander King.” They had issue, of whom (1) Robert Wilson, gunmaker, Aberdeen, of whom a headstone in St. Peter’s Churchyard is inscribed—“Erected by Catherine Wright in loving memory of her husband Robert Wilson, late Gunmaker, Aberdeen, who died 19th October, 1886, aged 63 years. Also of her mother, Catherine King or Wright, who died 11th April, 1887, aged 82 years;” and (2) John King Wilson, born 12th April, baptised 23rd May, 1826, by Rev. H. S. Beresford; Alexander King and Mrs. King, sponsors (St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Aberdeen, Baptismal Register). Mr. Robert Wilson, “Pendennis,” 12 Whitehall Road, Harrow, Middlesex, stated in a communication to the writer, dated 4th June, 1928, that he has in his possession a Burns Birthday Book, which records the date of his father’s birth as having taken place on the 12th May, 1826.

(8) Charles King, born 8th April, baptised 26th April, 1802, by Rev. James Deans (Baptismal Register).

(9) Catherine King, born 5th October, baptised 21st October, 1804, by Rev. James Deans (Baptismal Register).
WILSON-KING BURIAL RECORDS.

(1) Spital; 19th September, 1836. Received for the interment of Mrs. Wilson, in St. Peter’s Churchyard [Aberdeen]—Lair and Registration £0 3 0; making the grave 5 feet deep, £0 2 6. Settled—Alexr. Clark. [This entry refers to Anne Wilson, wife of William Wilson, who was buried at North Dyke, Lair 55—Burial Register]. (2) Jessie King, née Wilson, died at Hardgate, Aberdeen, and was buried at St. Peter’s Churchyard, July 27, 1875, aged 76 years (St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Aberdeen, Burial Register). An Alexander King, merchant, Aberdeen, died at his late residence in the Hardgate, Aberdeen, 28th June, 1845, aged 52 years; buried in St. Peter’s Churchyard (Ibid.); John K[ing] Wilson, grocer, Hardgate, Aberdeen, purchased ground in the cemetery named, Lair North Dyke 55, 1st April, 1851 (Ibid.); and (3) a headstone in St. Peter’s Churchyard, Aberdeen, surrounded by an iron railing is inscribed: “Erected by John K[ing] Wilson in memory of his son James S. Wilson, who died 28th March, 1851, aged 2 years and 8 months; and his mother Janet King or Wilson, who died 24th July, 1875, aged 76 years; and Barbara Gunn Aberdeen, wife of Charles F. Wilson, engineer, Aberdeen, who died 10th January, 1885, aged 24 years. Also the above John K[ing] Wilson, who died [at 43 Springbank Terrace, Aberdeen] 24th December, 1890, aged 63 years.”

CONTRIBUTIONS TO LITERATURE.

The publications of Robert Wilson, M.A., were as follows:—

(1) A Defence of the Methodists, in a Letter addressed to a Clergyman of the Church of Scotland. To which is added the Arminian’s Creed. Size 8 x 5 in. Pp. 4; preface dated Aberdeen, 27th November, 1819; imprint: sold by the Author; D. Wyllie, Union Street; and the Methodist Preachers. This pamphlet, printed by Messrs. D. Chalmers & Co., Aberdeen, is bound with others in the Thomson Collection, Vol. 88, housed in the United Free Church College Library, Alford Place, Aberdeen.

(2) An Historical Account and Delineation of Aberdeen. Embellished with beautiful engravings of the principal bridges, public
buildings, and sacred edifices in and about the City. Printed for and published by James Johnston, Union Street, Aberdeen, 1822.

Size 7.5 × 4.5 in. Pp. viii + 227 + [i]; printed by Andrew and John M. Duncan, printers to the University, Glasgow; the book dedicated by the Publisher “To the Nobility and Gentry, composing the United Meeting of the Counties of Aberdeen, Forfar, Banff, and Kincardine,” dated Union Street [Aberdeen], 18th June, 1822. Two previous publications dealing with the history of Aberdeen are referred to in Wilson’s book, Walter Thom’s *History of Aberdeen*, in two volumes, issued in 1811, and William Kennedy’s *Annals of Aberdeen*, also in two volumes, published in 1818. It is interesting, however, to observe that the *Delineation* was the pioneer illustrated history of Aberdeen, and was drawn up on different lines from previous writers of the city. In an advertisement the publisher “trusts that the haste with which the work has been brought through the press, owing to the unhandsome attempt of another bookseller to crush this undertaking, will form a sufficient apology for any mistakes and imperfections which may have unavoidably crept in.” In 1821 the population of Aberdeen was quoted as 44,796 persons, and an illustrated history of the city was welcomed. James Johnston, bookseller, Aberdeen, was a subscriber for John Leslie’s *Interesting Anecdotes*, published at Aberdeen, 1822.

(3) *Divine Sovereignty*, a small 12mo sized publication, apparently published 28th February, 1827, and there is preserved a list of six ministers who received 100 copies among them. They were: Rev. William Clegg, formerly of Liverpool, now of Bradford, Yorkshire, 24 copies; Rev. V[alentine] Ward, Leeds, formerly of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 22 copies; Rev. T. Mollard, Durham, 12 copies; Rev. R. Pelter, Macclesfield, now of Nottingham, 10 copies; Rev. W. Robson, Carlisle, now of Keighley, Yorkshire, 10 copies; and Rev. P. McOwen, Manchester, formerly of Hull, 24 copies. The list referred to is signed “E. W.”

One of the ministers who received copies, *viz.*, Rev. Valentine Ward was for some time a Wesleyan Methodist Church Minister in Aberdeen. In 1818 he purchased, on behalf of the Congregation,
the Episcopal Chapel in Longacre vacated by St. Andrew’s Congregation. Mr. Ward’s weakness seemed to have been a passion for erecting Chapels without giving due attention to the wherewithal to pay for them, and he earned the unenviable reputation of being a creator of Chapel debts. The Longacre Chapel was for a long period the centre of Methodist activity in Aberdeen. From 1818 to 1873 it served the Congregation as a Meeting-house, and many of the most sacred memories of Methodism in the city are bound up with the old building.

The writer has not yet perused a copy of Divine Sovereignty, and it has evidently got lost in the literature of those past days; but we learn from a memorandum from Messrs. Fisher, Son, & Co., booksellers and publishers, London, dated November, 1832, that there still remained a large number unsold. These were subsequently sent to a Mr. Wright, and the consignment consisted of 66 copies 8vo boards, 65 copies 12mo boards, and 214 copies in sheets, and, adds the said Messrs. Fisher, Son, & Co. “there will be a few more to return or pay for.”

It now remains to be added that Robert Wilson, who, according to the Aberdeen Almanac, 1827, was engaged in private teaching in Huxter Row (a thoroughfare which was swept away when the imposing pile of Municipal Buildings were erected), died at Aberdeen, and the Burial Register of St Peter’s Churchyard, Aberdeen, contains this entry—“1828: August 23, Robert Wilson, aged 35 years, teacher, Aberdeen.” His age, however, should be 36. The Marriage Register of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Aberdeen, designates him a clerk in 1826; his widow appears in the Aberdeen Directory for the first time, 1846-7, as “Mrs. Robert Wilson, grocer, Newbridge, Hardgate.”

Although there is now no dearth of north-east students in various branches of historical research, or of clubs formed for printing manuscripts on the same inquiry, it is well to remember with gratitude Robert Wilson’s Delineation of those by-past days, as a contemporary account of the history and topography of the city of Aberdeen. His descendants, too, may justly be proud of this work, which contains numerous elegant engravings of our public buildings, some of which are, fortunately, still in existence.

R. Murdoch Lawrance.