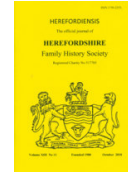


FAMILY HISTORY WITH A TWIST

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Do you ever get sidetracked from your main focus when doing your family history research? I did when doing one of my routine trawls for new information which led me into an interesting sideline which I call 'Fact or Fiction?'. Here's what happened.

As I mentioned in my article 'Learning from Newspapers' (*Herefordiensis* Vol XV No 7), I regularly check the British Newspaper Archive for recent updates that mention my name. Currently the archive has nearly 70 million pages. So there's plenty for family historians to get their teeth into. Here are three stories that I've uncovered during my research.

Ned Skyrme – Witness to Murder

During one of my regular searches in June 2023 I came across an intriguing search result which mentioned a Ned SKYRME who with his poaching pal "Tom the Snowdropper" witnessed a murder. Now, although I have a few Edward Skyrmes in my database, I don't have a Ned.

Further reading revealed that the article was Chapter XXVII 'The Poacher Tramp', published in a supplement to the *Hampshire Post and Southsea Observer* of 5th June 1896. The chapter was from the story 'Alan Cottingham' by R.T.CASSON (author of Bonnie Mary and other stories).

Who was R.T.Casson? He doesn't appear in any of the usual book catalogues, nor on lists of authors. However, using genealogy websites and the clue that he might be Scottish, I'm fairly confident that he was Robert T Masson, born in 1861 in Keith, Banffshire, now Aberdeenshire.

Censuses show that he was a newspaper reporter who lived with his wife Annie in Govan. Obviously his work was syndicated to newspapers across the country.

The Story of Ragged Robyn

The above discovery reminded me, that a year or so ago, while doing a similar exercise I came across references to Robyn Skyrme. Again I don't have a Robyn in my database, and the stories I found were all dated 1945 and were reviews of the novel of this name by Oliver Onions. Unlike Casson, Oliver Onions is much better known. There is a Wikipedia entry for him and a list of some 40 novels he had written, mostly in the period 1900-1934 after which there was a gap.



One reviewer wrote:

"It is a long time since we heard from that rare and sensitive writer, Mr Oliver ONIONS, but the craftsman of 'Little Devil Doubt' and 'Good Boy Seldom' can still write most of us clean off the bookstalls. His hand has lost none of its cunning."

My namesake is mentioned in the first sentence of the book:

"Young Robyn Skyrme, trudging along by the side of the sea-wall with his pack of tarred cloth on his back, was secretly glad of the feel of his pistol in his pocket."

The novel is set in the Lincolnshire Fens in the late 17th century, where Robyn got into a feud with smugglers. We learn that he lived with his parents, John and Margaret.

Who was Oliver Onions? Again, genealogy websites filled in the details. In fact Oliver was born on 13th November 1873 in Bradford as George Oliver Onions. He moved to Fulham London in his late teens or early 20s where he married writer Berta (Amy Roberta) RUCK in 1909. She too has a Wikipedia page. The couple lived at Hampstead in 1911 and at 53 Queens Gate Gardens, Kensington in 1921. In 1918, George legally changed his name to George Oliver, but continued to publish under the name Oliver Onions. In later life the couple moved to Aberdovey, Merionethshire which is where he died on 9th April 1961.

From High Society to Convicted Criminal

Another story, though this time based on fact is the 2011 book 'Whatever Happened to Trixie Skyrme?' by Jennifer Green. There are many newspaper articles about one of Trixie's aliases, Josephine O'Dare, in the 1920s. For example the *Philadelphia Enquirer* has a headline on 26 September 1926 "Mystery of the Racing Queen who went Broke".

Who was Trixie? She was Theresa Agnes Skyrme born at Wellington, Herefordshire in 1899, the daughter of labourer John Skyrme from Canon Pyon and his wife Mary née Riley. She was described as "the most dangerous and unscrupulous adventuress that Scotland Yard had ever had on their books". On being sentenced to 4½ years in prison the judge pronounced:

"The world in general and London in particular, is rid of one of the most remarkable and dangerous women of this or any other century."

Trixie's life is brought to life by Jennifer Green's docudrama. Although she puts words into the characters' mouths her background material is true to the many

facts. Unfortunately, "Jen the Pen" as she was affectionately known died in February 2018, but not before she gave a talk to the Society about Trixie.

Interestingly there is a serendipitous connection with one of my other activities. I volunteer as a guide and walk leader at Greenham Common Control Tower. Jen's last book before she died was 'A Small Nuclear Fallout' about three Greenham Common Peace Women.

So much has been written about Trixie Skyrme that it warrants a future article in this journal.

From Fact to Fiction

The question that these stories raise, at least for the first two, is why do authors choose my name for their characters?

It's not a common name, and I'm intrigued to find the connection:

- Robert T Masson – I've over 2,500 Skyrmes in my database, but only one has ever lived in Scotland. He was a musician who lived in Aberdeen for a few years around 1891. Was this the connection?
- Oliver Onions – No Skyrmes lived in Lincolnshire until later in the 20th century. But did George or Berta (née Ruck) know a Skyrme? I do have an Agnes Ruck from Canon Pyon in Herefordshire who married Albert Skyrme of Vowchurch in 1910. Berta was born in the Punjab and brought up in North Wales. Was there a family connection to the Rucks of Herefordshire?

Since neither author is around to ask, I'm still bemused as to how our family name ends up as characters in novels. This is an unusual slant on family history research.

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