

James Wanlass, a “Foundling” in 1825?

Family tradition holds that our James Wanlass (1825-1895) was abandoned by his parents. Although the stories vary, the common theme seems to be that he was found, wrapped in a nice blanket with a note, which gave his name and stated that the parents could not take care of him. Tradition said that he was raised partly in an institution for poor and abandoned children, and partly by a family named Ramsay.

When the newspaper archives of “The Scotsman” for the years 1817-1950 came online, I decided to see what they said about foundlings during James Wanlass’s early life. At first I looked for specific references to the name Wanlass (in its various spellings) and the name Ramsay. Having no success, I switched to looking for articles about foundlings and poor-houses. Here’s a summary of my findings:

Abandonment of children was common in Europe. A treatise on Foundling Hospitals by M. de Chateaufneuf was cited¹, suggesting that about 1/4th of babies born may have been abandoned by their parents during the early 1800s. I found some interesting newspaper articles describing the foundling problem. Instead of saying a child was “abandoned,” the contemporary language said a child was “exposed.”

There was a foundling notice² in the newspaper that sounded very much like our family tradition, but the occurrence was almost 18 months after the birth date used by our James Wanlass.

MALE CHILD EXPOSED
ON SATURDAY NIGHT LAST, the 26th instant, a MALE CHILD,
seemingly about Six Weeks Old, was laid down at the door of a
house in Milne’s Square, wrapped up in a piece of flannel and an
old red shawl.

Any person giving such information as may lead to the
discovery of the unnatural Mother, or others concerned in this
crime, will receive a Reward of TEN GUINEAS, on applying at the
office of the EDINBURGH CHARITY WORK-HOUSE, No. 1,
Milne’s Square.

Edinburgh, 28th May, 1827.

Notice that this child abandonment was considered a crime, with a substantial reward for discovering who did it. Ten Guineas then amounted to the value of about \$1,400 now.³ It is significant that the baby boy was left at a house on the same street as the Edinburgh Charity Workhouse. Obviously the intent was for the baby to be delivered to the charity workhouse.

Another newspaper article⁴ tells of a mother abandoning a year-old child. The child in this case was probably born about a year before our James’s traditional birth date.

¹ The Scotsman – Saturday, 9th of July 1825, page 7, “Foundling Hospitals.”

² The Scotsman – Wednesday, 30th May 1827, page 4, “Male Child Exposed.”

³ Calculation made using <http://www.wilkiecollins.demon.co.uk/coinage/coins.htm> and <http://www.measuringworth.com/ppoweruk/>

⁴ The Scotsman – Saturday, 29th October 1825, page 6, “Police Court”

POLICE COURT

Yesterday, a woman [a prisoner arraigned in court because] ...upwards of a twelvemonth ago she had the misfortune to have a natural child, whose father having left the country, she put it out to nurse with a respectable woman. She then changed her lodgings, and kept herself concealed from the nurse to whom her infant was intrusted.

One day, however, the two accidentally met, when the woman insisted upon the prisoner taking home her child; this she decidedly refused to do, saying that she could not maintain it; the other told her she might get in into one of the Charity Workhouses; and with that view took her to the proper officer, who gave her the usual certificate, desiring her to go to an elder to get it signed by him.

The two women then parted, the prisoner having the child in her arms; but, instead of going to the elder's as she had been desired, she exposed the babe in the Grassmarket, and took flight. The child was found stretched out at length on the bare ground, by one of the sergeants; and the prisoner herself was soon after taken into custody....

...Upon the Magistrate's threatening to send her to Bridwell [jail?], the [mother] coolly replied that he might do so, but as for the child, he never would compel her to keep it.

The Edinburgh Charity Workhouse opened in 1743. By 1778 it could accommodate 484 adults and 180 children⁵. It was only one of the “poorhouses” in Edinburgh at the time. The abandoned child, James Wanlass, may have been put into such an institution. About the time James was born, the Edinburgh Charity Workhouse put out a bid request⁶ for contractors to supply about 73,000 pound-and-a-half loaves of bread in a year's time, or about 200 loaves of bread per day. It also wanted 200 pairs of men's shoes, 300 pairs of women's shoes, and an unspecified number of children's shoes. It obviously was a big institution. Our James Wanlass might have once lived there. Education of children was part of the poorhouse's responsibility:

The boys and girls who are inmates of the Workhouse shall, for three of the working hours, at least, every day, be instructed in reading, writing, arithmetic, and the principles of the Christian religion, and such other instruction shall be imparted to them as may fit them for service, and train them to habits of usefulness, industry, and virtue.⁷

“Inmates” may have experienced crowded conditions and unpleasant discipline. Family tradition says our James Wanlass ran away from the institution where he had been living. His stay there must have given him a valuable basic education. He was known to have very good handwriting.

⁵ See “Scotland” under “Poor Laws” in the index of <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/>

⁶ The Scotsman – Saturday, 17 December 1825, page 4, “CONTRACTORS WANTED”

⁷ See “Children in the Workhouse” under “Children & Education” in the index of <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/>