

**CHILDHOOD AT  
INVERKEITHING OR  
LIFE AT A LAZARETTO**

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Childhood at Inverkeithing or Life at a Lazaretto by James Simson

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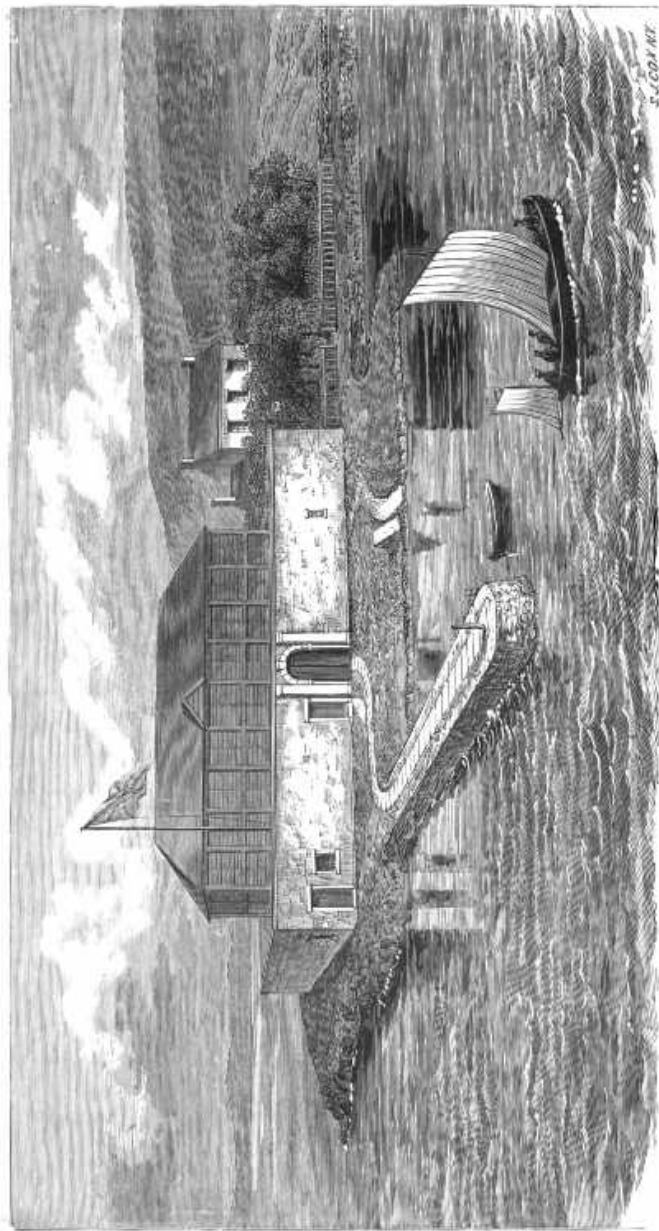
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**JAMES SIMSON**

**CHILDHOOD AT  
INVERKEITHING OR  
LIFE AT A LAZARETTO**





LAZARETTO, INVERKEITHING BAY, FIFESHIRE (1829.)

REMINISCENCES  
OF  
CHILDHOOD AT INVERKEITHING,  
OR  
LIFE AT A LAZARETTO.

BY  
JAMES SIMSON,  
*Editor of*  
"SIMSON'S HISTORY OF THE GIPSIES,"  
*and Author of*  
"CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATURAL HISTORY AND PAPERS ON OTHER SUBJECTS";  
"CHARLES WATERTON"; "THE ENGLISH UNIVERSITIES AND JOHN  
BUNYAN"; AND "THE SCOTTISH CHURCHES AND THE GIPSIES."

..... O! is all forgot?  
All school-days' friendships, childhood innocence? — SHAKESPEARE.

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## PREFACE.

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It is seldom in good taste for a person to speak of himself; on which account (and also because there was hardly occasion for it), I avoided doing it in the little I have hitherto published. The present Reminiscences, I trust, will prove one of the exceptions, for the following reasons, among others:—1st, they refer exclusively up to the time when I lacked three or four months of being ten years of age; 2d, it is upwards of thirty years since I left Scotland; and 3d, three thousand miles separate me from the places alluded to: all of which circumstances, if they do not disarm ungenerous criticism, at least satisfy me in regard to what might otherwise be questionable, if not offensive, even to myself.

My connection with authorship proceeded incidentally from having come into possession of a MS. on the Gipsies, left by my father, who collected the matter of it, at the urgent request of Sir Walter Scott and William Blackwood, mainly between 1817 and 1831,\* while residing at the Lazaretto; and in regard to which, Sir Walter Scott, in a note to *Quentin Durward* (1831), said that "it is to be hoped this gentleman will publish the knowledge he possesses on so singular a topic." And it is partly in relation to this work that I have prepared these Reminiscences, as alluded to in the Appendix. It was also with this object in view that I published *Contributions to Natural History and Papers on Other Subjects*; so that what I wrote in *The Scottish Churches and the Gipsies* was strictly true:—"As regards myself, I am so incidentally connected with authorship as not to own it, except to a very few personal friends; to withhold a knowledge of it from whom would be almost equivalent to denying it" (p. 15).

In the Preface to *Contributions, etc.*, I said:—"I would have added to them but for the difficulty in finding subjects (or leisure to develop them), that have not been treated before, or treated in such a way as to require to be corrected, and placed on another and more permanent foundation than heretofore." This remark does not very inaptly apply to the present publication, for the reminiscences of a person under ten years of age—whatever they might be—cannot but be more or less interesting, provided that they are minute, circumstantial, and accurate; in all of which re-

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\* "History of the Gipsies," p. 64.—I brought the work down to the date of publication.



spects they will speak for themselves. It makes little difference if they are given from memory many years afterwards.

A publication like this, so far from being common, is hardly conventional; for which reason it may be objected to; but, on the other hand, it may be taken as a precedent that will lead to others of the same kind.

It has often been asked, At what age is a child, at least in a general way, responsible? As regards myself, I do not remember when I did not consider myself responsible; and I have no recollection of having pleaded the "Baby Act" on any occasion. The development of a human being from childhood to mature age, however interesting, is foreign to this work, except that it may be said that he is only a "child of a larger growth," whose relation to a parent never ceases. Some people have little definite recollection of their existence while under ten years of age, and not much more of their boyhood. My removal from the neighbourhood of the scenes depicted had the effect of leading me to look back on them, and having them indelibly impressed on my memory. To such as remember the events of their childhood, in a semi-rural place, what I have told of mine will doubtless prove attractive; whatever may be said of purely town-brought-up people, or such as, "caring for none of these things," are for the most part engrossed in their callings, and the amenities connected with their positions in life. It is astonishing how deficient many seem to be in the mental flexibility that enables others to look back and forward, and throw themselves into positions besides those they had been long and carefully trained to fill.

Humanity is so uniform in the principles of its physical and moral and even its social nature that a description of it, in its leading features, might serve for one age as well as another; and generation has succeeded generation almost as if they had never been, except that latterly each has left little more than "stray notices" of its existence, that are not always reliable. In that respect, is it not possible that the descriptions of the places given in the Reminiscences can be preserved, where there would otherwise have been a blank?

In childhood a person is in many ways greatly indebted to others; but allowing for that, it may be said that in his "controversies" with his fellow-creatures the principal means that are necessary to his ends are his tongue and fists, and his legs when things come to the worst: how different from the complicated relationship in which he stands in that respect to them in after-life!

NEW YORK, 4th January, 1882.

## REMINISCENCES

OF

### CHILDHOOD AT INVERKEITHING.

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ON the southern side of the narrow entrance to the inner bay or harbour of Inverkeithing — commonly called the West Ness — stood a Lazaretto, which was finally discontinued as a Government quarantine establishment in the autumn of 1835, when it was sold to an Edinburgh lawyer for £200, but burdened with an annual feu duty of £20. It comprised a wooden and a stone building, inside of a stone wall probably twenty feet high at some parts of it, and a dwelling-house, close to the west side, in which I was born on the 4th of January, 1826.

After leaving the place in September or October, 1835, I was told by one of the old boatmen that, before this establishment was erected, a ship laid alongside of the pier, sunk into the sand by stone, and served the purpose of a Lazaretto; and that when the Lazaretto proper was built this stone was partly used for building dry dykes, while the rest was thrown into the sea, on the east side of the wall mentioned; which latter information satisfied a curiosity that I always had as to the meaning of the stone being there. I was also told that this ship, on being taken to Leith, was lost on the sands a little to the west of Cramond island.

The Lazaretto was three stories high, and was built throughout of the best Memel timber. It was placed upon a number of square stone supports, some of which were continued inside of the building to the begin-

ning of the roof, to steady the structure. The stone used inside appeared to be of a soft and inferior quality, yet doubtless suitable for its purpose, as it was not exposed to the weather; but for about three feet from the ground on the outside it was of a harder and better description. The building had thus an almost clear open space under it, sufficiently high to allow a child to move about by slightly stooping. Its three floors were not solid, for between each plank was space sufficient to admit the shoe of a child, who had to be careful in walking that its feet were not caught in the intervals. The sides and ends of the building were composed of a frame, and slats that opened and shut laterally; so that the structure could be thoroughly ventilated from below and all around, and have its contents exposed to the air outside. The size of the building was that of the machine shop of Mr. Scott, erected some time after 1835, for I was told that its roof was the identical one that covered the Lazaretto.

The only use that I can recollect the Lazaretto being put to was to receive a quantity of what I afterwards understood to be bags of rags, which were landed at the pier from lighters, and I believe broken up and ventilated, to remove the contagion which they were supposed to contain. The stone building, back of the wooden one, was apparently intended for passengers; but it was never

used, within my recollection, for any purpose but housing the labourers; and its only furniture consisted of the slats of three beds, built into the walls of the room in which they slept. There was a rigid quarantine observed. The food of the men was passed in through an aperture in the wall, on what looked like the half of a barrel cut lengthwise, with shelves, on which the food was placed; and this on being turned on a pivot reached the inside, when the outside door was locked. Water was poured into a chamber attached to the large door, and caught from a pipe inside. Coals were shovelled, almost thrown, through a door—no one being allowed to approach within a certain distance on either side. The wall had two doors; a small one for passengers, and a large one to admit merchandise on hand trucks, along a flagged way from the pier till it reached hoisting apparatus connected with the building. About half a dozen steps led to the building itself, and three or four led from it to the stone building behind it. In the S. E. corner of the enclosure was a small, dilapidated stone building that apparently had been used as a temporary smithy; and near the N. E. corner was a small wooden erection attached to the back of the superintendent's office and boatmen's watch-house, which were entered from the outside of the wall. Attached to the entrance to the wooden building, on either side of it, was a shed built of stone. Inside of the stone wall were various trees which I need not describe.

At this time there were five or six hulks, mostly ships of the line dismantled, anchored in St. Margaret's Hope, a little below Limekilns, that were also used for quarantine purposes. The *Dartmouth*, a large-sized frigate, which formed part of the fleet commanded by Lord Exmouth in his attack on Algiers, remained, for years afterwards, the only hulk. The rest disappeared under

circumstances unknown to me, excepting the last of them, which I remember seeing, in tow of a steamer, passing Barnbougle Point, as I stood on the highest part of the garden of the school-teacher, in the summer of 1835; and I could not help contrasting the wonderful difference between a large ship of war when full rigged and when used as a hulk.

The Lazaretto had been practically discontinued for some time before I remember it, for I recollect my mother saying that she had lost a large bag of feathers which she had omitted to remove out of it when the labourers entered it during the cholera, in 1832. My father let his house outside, for one season, at least, to Mr. Elias Cathcart of Auchendrain, Ayrshire, for sea-bathing, and removed with his family to the house inside the wall. It was his wife who made the pencil drawing of the place from a photograph of which the frontispiece has been prepared. In 1835 the trees in front of the dwelling-house, when viewed from the East Ness, covered everything but the chimney tops; and the drawing having been made from the same place, it would appear that the view was taken about 1829.

The first recollection of people must necessarily be connected with something outside of the daily routine of their existence, and that presents salient points. Thus I recollect being lifted into a large boat of a light, tar-like colour, that was hauled up to the beach at the west side of the pier; and that is all I remember of it. From this I conclude that my memory does not extend beyond that. The next occasion was finding myself in the kitchen of the old farm-house—or rather row of one-storied houses—at the Cruicks, without knowing how I got there, or how I left it; and being gently and kindly shaken by a strange woman inside, who said, "Fat the de'il's the matter wi' the bairn?" This was Nell, wife of Charlie, a stonemason.