A Unique Family Tree: Worlds Collide at the Dorchester Hotel[1]

A further chapter of Mary Rabagliati's story

In 1940, the Battle of Britain raged for three months as the Royal Air Force tried to fend off the large-scale attacks of the Nazi Luftwaffe. On 2 November, just two days after the end of the battle, Mary's parents eloped. Her father, Alexander Coultate Rabagliati, was an RAF flight lieutenant two days shy of his 26th birthday. Her mother, Rhoda Bourgein (always called Sandra after her marriage), was living and working as a chambermaid at a shabby hotel and pub. The hotel, Ye Olde Thatched House, was located in Essex, just 15 miles from the RAF Hornchurch airfield and on the northeastern outskirts of the heaviest bombing during the London Blitz.

Because the Blitz bombings continued for five more months, Alexander (always called "Sandy") had to rush back to the front. So it was alone that Sandra was invited to travel twenty miles into wartime London to meet her new in-laws for afternoon tea. Their appointment was to meet at the Dorchester, one of the most prestigious luxury hotels in the world. The anxious young bride arrived first and felt awkward waiting by herself in this plush setting framed by imposing marble columns of Titian orange. Years afterwards, Sandra's niece recalls clearly how Sandra spoke about this encounter:

> When the whole Rabagliati clan arrived, Aunt Sandra began pouring out the tea for everyone. But very quickly, there was a gasp. Her new mother-in-law, Julia, reproached her sharply, saying: 'Milk *after* tea.'[2] Aunt Sandra always told this story with much hilarity, laughing at herself for having mistakenly served in the lower-class way. Uncle Sandy was a family wild card, so no one was surprised that he had gone and married someone considered 'unsuitable'. But she was always very dignified under verbal assault or teasing, and also so sweet, funny, and wonderfully warm that she won them all over. Everyone loved her, including my grandmother Julia. But at that afternoon tea, the potential was clearly there for total rejection.[3]

In Britain, where 'more often than not it matters crucially not only to whom one has been born, but where and in what circumstances one has grown up'[4], Mary's own childhood was shaped by

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1 See the end of this document for two images of Rabagliati's family trees.

2 'Putting the milk into the cup first is a lower-class habit.' Page 436, Kate Fox, *Watching the English: the Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*, 2004: London, Hodder. Also: 'It became a sign of wealth to pour the milk in after the tea, as it demonstrated to guests that you could afford the best tea cups.' *Dorchester Collection Magazine*, 10 February 2017.

3 Interview of Margaret Rabagliati Wood, 18 September 2018.

4 Francis Green and David Kynaston, 'Britain's Private School Problem: It's Time to Talk', 13 January 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jan/13/public-schools-david-kynaston-francis-green-engines-of-privilege>.

having family at both ends of the class spectrum. When her father was killed in the war, her mother returned to work as a chambermaid. Mary remembered: 'My mother and I travelled around the country, working in hotels and living in them. We never had a home of our own for long. Hotel kitchens always held a fascination for me and I usually managed to make the staff let me "help" in the preparations for the evening meal.'

Mary's first school was a local one where she recalled: 'I was a real problem child because, apart from never beginning to understand the simple letters I was taught, I never wanted to go out for walks when everyone else had to, but once persuaded to go, I refused to come back to school and there was another dreadful *scene*. I always hated that school, and particularly after the head mistress locked me in a sort of shed. This was a punishment for going into a part of the garden where we were not allowed. I have never forgotten it for I was so frightened I would never see my family again and would be forgotten forever.'[5] Later, however, Mary was able to attend a boarding school, provided for by an aunt of her father's, Catherine Priscilla Rabagliati, always called 'Catrine'. It was this part of her education that taught Mary to speak with the clipped, precise 'cut-glass' accent typical of the British upper classes.

Despite living on the small stipend of all members of ATD's Volunteer Corps, Mary was always as impeccably stylish as she could afford to be. Mary quickly drilled into her housemates the high standards she held, both for personal grooming and for hospitality. It was important to her that no one begin to wash dishes while guests were still at the dinner table to ensure they would never feel they were being rushed home. These high standards were taught by her mother Sandra.

Sandra was born in 1913 under the name Rhoda May Bourgein.[6] Her mother, Marian Willson, was the third of seven children born to a dressmaker. However, Marian's father died when she was about ten years old, leaving the family in straightened circumstances. When Marian came of age, she married Joseph Bourgein, a coal merchant in the Walthamstow district of East London. Bordered by swampy marshland, working-class Walthamstow was where London buses were beginning to be mass produced at the time. The Bourgeins lived in one of the many nondescript terraced brick row-houses. Their home was just three blocks from the Overground St. James Street train station, and adjacent to a cluster of reservoirs that had recently been constructed on wetlands.

Before Sandra was born, her parents had three sons: Joseph, Frank, and Arthur. Sandra recalled, 'When I was born, the nurse said to my father, "Congratulations, Mr. Bourgein, you have a daughter at last." He replied, "I wish it was a horse."' Following Sandra's birth, the couple had one more child, a girl named Mary. The Bourgeins' next-door neighbour at the time wrote about them: 'They sold various grades of loose coal as well as bundles of firewood. A lady, who I remember because of her deformed jaw and bright blue overall, would shovel up the coal onto a huge scale and then transfer it into any suitable container which the customer had bought along. Often, this would be a broken down old pram. The coal shop was also engaged in the delivery of coal and kept the carts and several stamping, snorting horses in the stables at the back. I used to peep through cracks in the wooden fence at these great beasts and watch them flicking their tails to keep the flies off their backs.'[7]

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5 From an undated note by Mary Rabagliati about her personal childhood recollections.

6 <http://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/information.pl?cite=oTAg3UqbbluW8MYNL0QNaA&scan=1>.

7 From information collected by Paul de St Croix.

Then World War I broke out. Sandra's father Joseph, having travelled to France as a soldier, fell in love with a French woman and decided to remain there. Marian, abandoned with five young children, had a very hard time making ends meet and began working as a domestic servant. Sandra later wrote, 'I scarcely remember my father, who deserted us when I was about five. My older brothers and my younger sister and I were all brought up on this "let's hate dad" campaign, especially the girls, who were instructed that all men are evil liars and rotters and only out to have their way with women before leaving them. When I was older, I repeated this to one of my boyfriends, who said "I would like to meet your mother. She's not far wrong!" And we fell about laughing.'[8]

Shortly after Sandra's wartime marriage to Sandy Rabagliati, he was assigned to command a Royal Air Force squadron based in Malta, as noted in Winston Churchill's war diary: 'On June 7 1941 RAF fighter unit 46 Squadron has been ordered to remain in Malta. The Squadron arrived yesterday as part of "Operation Rocket", landing on the Island temporarily en route for the Middle East. The 24 Hurricanes should have departed today for Egypt along with 15 others. However, Squadron Leader Sandy Rabagliati, DFC, has been informed that 46 is to remain in Malta to strengthen the Island's fighter force.'[9] Sandra gave birth to their daughter Mary Catherine on 12 January 1942. Just eighteen months later in July 1943, Sandy was killed in action. Years later, Sandra wrote about that time in her life:

> When my husband was posted 'missing-presumed killed', I was left with a small daughter and a small pension. We had had no fixed abode — it had been a war marriage and I had been a camp follower. I was invited to stay with various friends and relations, but realised that eventually I would have to find a residential job with a salary. One of my friends suggested that I apply for the job of curator at Chequers, the country seat of the current Prime Minister. The present curator, Miss Lamb, was in charge of catering, bookkeeping, etc. She wished to retire as she did not want to serve under anyone but Winston Churchill. I was still numb with grief but, encouraged by my friend, I agreed to an interview.
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> I was then invited to spend a weekend at Chequers. My first impression of the house was disappointment — it was not particularly beautiful and it was not as grand and large as I had imagined an Elizabethan manor would be. Miss Lamb was very gracious and dignified, and I wondered if perhaps I should have used less make-up! I was shown over the house by Lammy (as she was called), starting with the large galleried hall, which seemed to me very dark and cluttered. The most interesting thing was the Visitors' Book (which I was not asked to sign) containing the signatures of many world famous people. The house was unimpressive and very cold. Rumour has it that on one occasion a top security meeting was held in a bathroom by famous foreign dignitaries wearing overcoats!
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> In the evening, according to custom, sherry was served in Miss Lamb's sitting room, attended by army officers on guard and several other people, including one of Mr. Churchill's daughters. Everyone was very friendly to me, and I did not realise until later that I was being vetted by a committee.

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[8] From an undated note by Sandra Bourgein about her personal childhood recollections.

[9] Record found by John Bourgein (a nephew of Sandra Bourgein).

Later that night, we were all requested to attend a film show in the long gallery. It was more like a summons. We all sat at the back of the room. After some time, the lights were dimmed, and there strode in a short, stout gentleman wearing a dressing-gown, holding a glass, and smoking a large cigar. It was the Prime Minister with his entourage. The film was 'The Four Feathers', which I had already seen. Everyone around me groaned, 'Oh, not again!' Apparently, it was a firm favourite with our host. I was feeling very tired, and during a noisy bit of the film, I slipped away and went to bed.

By the next day, I knew that I did not really want this job. The house was very isolated and not really the best atmosphere for a small child. Also, it entailed a great deal of responsibility, which I might have welcomed, but in another frame of mind and without a small child to consider. So I was not disappointed when Miss Lamb told me that, after some deliberation by the committee, it was decided that they could not appoint me because I was too young, too attractive — and also that my foreign name, Rabagliati, could arouse suspicion among the natives![10]

Following her weekend at Chequers, Sandra returned to residential hotel work. After a period of moving from place to place, she found a residential job at the Central Hotel of Royal Tunbridge Wells, a spa town in the south east of England where thousands of buildings had been damaged by World War II bombing. Mary recalled of those years:

Until my mother married again, I was an only child, and possibly quite spoilt. On my fourth birthday, I was given a pair of silver sandals. I remember quite distinctly Mummy stuffing the toes with cotton wool because they were much too big but I insisted on wearing them. Once Mummy went up to London for a day and I was left in the charge of a girl called Bertha. I told Bertha I was going downstairs to stir the soup as the staff allowed me to 'help'. But instead, I walked out the front door and virtually 'ran away' for a few hours. I walked a couple of hundred yards away from the hotel until I found a taxi man with his taxi. I asked him to take me for a ride, which to my disappointment he refused to do, especially as I had no money. Whilst I was pleading, a lady came up to us and offered to take me to her home for tea with her. I accepted, and off we went. Luckily, the lady's kindness was genuine and I was not kidnapped or suffered any ill treatment — as I could quite easily have. Instead, I was given a wonderful tea, and afterwards she took me round her garden and gave me a strawberry plant, which afterwards gave at least three strawberries.

All this time, poor Bertha must have been driven nearly mad with worry over her charge who had completely forgotten Bertha. When I was finally brought home, we found Bertha in the act of ringing the police. Her relief must have been enormous, for she was hardly cross with me at all. I had been living in the company of old people who spoilt me. As I was becoming very finicky with my food, Mummy decided to send me to boarding school where I would meet children my own age, learn to eat what was put before me, and do what I was told. At first, I was terribly unhappy at having to leave Mummy, and Mummy was probably quite worried herself about me. But boarding school did me a world of good.[11]

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[10] From an undated note by Sandra Bourgein about her personal recollections.

[11] From an undated note by Mary Rabagliati about her personal childhood recollections.

In 1950 when Mary had just turned 8, Sandra met Victor de St Croix at the Tunbridge Wells Squash Club. They married on 25 August that same year. Victor already had two sons, Tim and John, both older than Mary. In 1951, Victor and Sandra had a baby named Paul, so Mary's tiny family had rapidly grown to include three brothers. Victor worked as a manager for British Belting and Asbestos. His son Paul describes him as having been 'old school and a real gentleman, very well educated and polite, and quite traditional and conservative in his views — unlike Mum! Dad and Mary generally got on really well, although Mary could be very challenging and rather unforgiving if conversation strayed onto contentious territory or if Dad asked a naive or awkwardly phrased question. I also think that Mary probably felt reassured that Dad was such a rock of stability in Mum's later life.'[12]

Mary continued to be educated at boarding school, entering the Moira House School, which was situated on the coast of the English Channel. Founded in 1875 as a place where girls could receive more well-rounded education than was common at the time, its motto was 'Other people matter'. The school's philosophy was that no punishments were needed because 'intelligent and knowledge-loving children' should not need to be reminded of their duties.[13] Mary, however, put this philosophy to the test. Her assessment of herself as 'a real problem child' was borne out by an exasperated letter from the school's principal to Sandra when Mary was 15:

> I am afraid that Mary is in trouble again. On Sunday afternoon and evening, they are only allowed walks *with permission* as there are a great many undesirables hanging about then. Last night after supper, however, Mary and three of her friends took French leave and went off unknown to anyone in direct defiance of this. Mary tells me that she herself suggested it. They need a sharp lesson. Latterly, Mary has taken the attitude to the staff when she has broken rules: 'Well, what can you do about it now?' So she must see that something *can* be done. When *will* she learn to behave?[14]

The following year, Mary left Moira House School in order to prepare her A-level exams at Guildford Technical College, south west of London. Another student there, Penny Heath, remembers her lifelong friendship with Mary having begun there: 'Mary was commonly known as "Ragbag" at the time. We had a lot of fun, although I remember Mary as being the more serious one of us two. After we both left the Tech, I heard nothing of her for the next year or two until her mother rang me very worried. She was afraid that Mary was "becoming a nun in some organisation near Paris!" When Mary visited her mother, my husband and I had lunch with them and a friend, and Mary explained ATD Fourth World to us. I always remember her pleasure with our disagreement to the friend's suggestion that the poor should have a restricted number of children.

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[12] Letter from Paul de St Croix to D. Skelton, 18 September 2018.

[13] 'Moira House Girls' School - 140th anniversary video', <http://www.moirahouse.co.uk/celebrating-140-years-of-history/>.

[14] Letter from Mona Swann, principal of Moira House School, Eastbourne, to Sandra de St Croix, 22 July 1957.

Our long association with ATD probably started there.'[15]

Despite Sandra's initial confusion about Mary's path in life, she too was won over and wholeheartedly supported Mary's work over the years. In one interview towards the end of her life, Mary said, 'What influenced me was my mother's example. She was from a poor background. She taught me the pride that poor people have and how to stand up for the little people. Even if she, like all mothers, worried about me being happy, she gave me a lot of support in my commitment to ATD.'[16] Mary's younger brother Paul agrees that their mother believed in Mary's work:

> Mum was immensely proud of Mary. Of course, there were definitely periods where Mum would like to have seen a lot more of her — and when Mary did come home she was often completely exhausted. There were also times where Mum may have secretly wished that Mary had a family and children of her own. Having said that, everyone in the family knew from quite early on that this was to be Mary's life's work, so we learned to support her in any way possible. Dad was also very interested in Mary's work. I would imagine that her descriptions of her world and work must have caused him to re-evaluate some of his conservative views over the years.
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> Mum always proudly used the term 'working class' to describe her background. She always voted for the Labour party and was often outspoken in her defence of the underprivileged, and her disdain for what she saw as the ignorance and paternalism of the rich and privileged. As a teenager, I recall many occasions where we visited friends' houses for drinks (quite common in the late '50s and '60s) and where Mum (fuelled by more than a little whiskey) would end up in a heated argument with other guests or her hosts (predominantly middle-class Tories) about equal opportunities in education, or women's rights, or the 'obscene' immorality of excess profits and empty office buildings, or why the banks should be nationalised. … Both Mum and Dad were hugely supportive of Mary's work with ATD Fourth World.

Although Mary's own father was killed when she was a baby, she did spend many childhood holidays visiting the large Rabagliati family, hosted by either her Great-Aunt Catrine or her godmother, Patricia Capon Rabagliati, who was married to a first cousin of Alexander's. With this side of her family, Mary grew up hearing an almost inexhaustible trove of stories about their background. Among Mary's Rabagliati ancestors were intercontinental travellers, social reformers, and connections to a well-known novelist and a fictional action hero.

The ancestor who brought the Rabagliati name to the United Kingdom was Giacomo Gaetano Francesco Rabagliati, who was born in Genoa, Italy in 1797 the son of a tailor. Giacomo described himself as 'the nineteenth of twenty-three children,' only three of whom lived to adulthood. After the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Giacomo took part in the failed 1821 liberal insurrection — which led to his exile. Next, he joined the liberal constitutionalists in Spain under General Mina until the French King sent in 1823 an expeditionary force the '100,000 sons of Saint Louis' which led to the fall of Barcelona and Giacomo's capture by the French. Giacomo became one of over 10,000

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[15] Letter from Penny and Tony Heath to Tom and Shaeda Croft, 18 February 2017.

[16] Sève, André, 'Mary, volontaire à ATD Quart Monde,' La Croix, 21 December 1989. [The same interview was later published in Sève's book *Le Manteau de Martin: 43 dialogues sur le partage*, 1991, Paris: Centurion.]

prisoners brought to France and was held as a prisoner of war in Montpellier.

Granted permission to leave, he travelled to Calais, under the close supervision of the administration of the newly restored Bourbon monarchy of Louis XVIII, and left for England on 26 May 1824, only after having a Spanish revolutionary song confiscated from his papers.[17] Now a political refugee, he moved to Scotland. Advertising his services in the *Kelso Mail* and *New Scotsman* newspapers,[18] he is said to have gone to Abbotsford, the home of the novelist Sir Walter Scott, in order to teach him Italian.[19] By 1830, Giacomo had moved to Edinburgh where he taught Italian, Spanish and French at the Scottish Naval and Military Academy.[20]

A decade later, Giacomo married Caroline Anne Ogilvy Kinnison, whose father John Kinnison was the School Master at Lecropt,[21] with whom he had several children. Around 1851, Giacomo and Caroline moved to Dublin, Ireland, where Giacomo again advertised his services teaching Italian and Spanish.[22] Later he returned to Genoa where he is recorded as

> living with his sister in the late 1850s, described as a 'retired soldier'. By 1861 he was living in Soho, London, teaching as he could. In 1868, he was run over by a horse-drawn tram on Piccadilly. Soon afterwards, he died in London's Poland Street Workhouse,[23] aged 71. Designed for 'the able-bodied poor', this workhouse ran a spinning and weaving industry in which residents were required to work.[24]

Giacomo and Caroline's third child, Giacomo Giovanni Silvester Rabagliati, also left Scotland. When he died, at the young age of 32, he was described as 'late of Lima, Peru'. The tale of his departure from there was scandalous. Unfortunately, he got the daughter of a local dignitary 'into the family way' and then took refuge in the British Embassy, with a crowd outside baying for his life. It is said that 'they wrapped him up in a Union Jack, and smuggled him out of the country'. Later, when staying with his brother in Bradford, he did it again with one of the maids – 'but they blamed it on the gardener'. Neither of these stories have been proved but they remain in family folklore according to Giacomo and Caroline's great-great-grandson Duncan Rabagliati, who adds: 'A century later, Peru elected a prime minister named Raúl Ferrero Rebagliati. I feel sure there must have been a family connection but no link has been proven yet.'[25]

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17 Archives Nationales (France) F/7/6748 Dossier 6 - 1822-1829 (Italiens du dépôt de Montpellier).

18 Kelso Mail 7 June 1827; The Scotsman 5 December 1827.

19 'Pen Portrait No. 20. ACF Rabagliati', *Yorkshire Notes and Queries*, November 1905, and Obituary, Andrea Rabagliati M.D. F.R.C.S., 20 December 1930, British Medical Journal.

20 See Rosslyn Macphail (2024), 'From Fighting Napoleon to the Scottish Military Academy: The Life of Captain John Orr', Pen & Sword Military

21 For more details about Lecropt School, its curriculum and discipline at the time - See Sessional Papers of the House of Lords 1841 Vol VII, 'Answers made by Schoolmasters in Scotland to Queries Circulated in 1838 by Order of the Select Committee of the House of Common on Education in Scotland', Printed, page 253.

22 See Saunders's Newsletter, Dublin e.g. 6 January 1853, 30 March 1855.

23 As per death certificate from October 1868.

24 <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/StJames/>.

25 Interview of Duncan Charles Rabagliati (a great-great-grandson of Giacomo Rabagliati and Caroline Kinnison) on

The man who would become Mary's great-grandfather was an older child of Giacomo and Caroline: Andrea Carlo Francisco Rabagliati. As a young man, he too travelled to South America. He was sent to live with his mother's brother, the Reverend John Kinnison, in British Guiana (the present-day Co-operative Republic of Guyana). One of Andrea's descendants grew up hearing that 'he was so deeply disillusioned at being made to sell coloured water from his uncle's shop to the native population and to pretend that it was medicine, that he returned to Scotland'.[26] Thanks to the support of a benefactor, Mrs. Elizabeth Honeyman Gillespie, he was able to study medicine and philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, where he was eventually awarded first-class honours in both subjects. He then married Helen Priscilla McLaren whose family already figured prominently among Scottish campaigners for women's suffrage and the abolition of slavery.

Helen's mother, Priscilla Bright McLaren, 'could be considered an early Scottish Emmeline Pankhurst'.[27] Her work for women's suffrage was recognised in 2018 with the inscription of her name as one of fifty prominent activists on the plinth of the statue of Millicent Fawcett, which is the first statue in Parliament Square honouring a woman. Priscilla's father, Jacob Bright, was a Quaker who began his working life as a weaver but eventually started his own cotton mill, collaborating with his wife Martha. They believed in educating girls and ran debate clubs and essay societies for their eleven children. As a young adult, Priscilla kept house for her widowed brother John Bright, raising his daughter. Although John eventually became renowned for his public speaking, his first attempt at it was memorably bad:

> It was as a member of the Rochdale Juvenile Temperance Band that Bright first learned public speaking. These young men went out into the villages, borrowed a chair off a cottager, and spoke from it at open-air meetings. John Bright's first extemporaneous speech was at a temperance meeting. Bright got his notes muddled, and broke down. The chairman gave out a temperance song, and during the singing told Bright to put his notes aside and say what came into his mind. Bright obeyed, began with much hesitancy, but found his tongue and made an excellent address.[28]

With Priscilla at his side, John was elected to Parliament as a radical liberal opponent of the privileges of the wealthy. John's key accomplishment was overturning the Corn Laws, which protected the interests of the landed aristocracy and raised food prices.[29]

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27 March 2018 and correspondence from D. Rabagliati to D. Skelton on 22 Sept. 2025.

[26] Letter from Duncan Rabagliati to D. Skelton, 31 July 2017. See also 'Local Worthy of the Week: Mr Andrea Rabagliati, M.D., F.R.C.S.', Bradford Weekly Telegraph, Friday, December 16, 1910 – which states that Andrea 'devoted himself first to a commercial career, but in his youthful enthusiasm, he decided that he had conscientious scruples against the strenuous struggle for success in that field of operations.'

[27] Langan, Paul, 'Enigmatic Ilkley Politician Remembered in Special Lecture', Ilkley Gazette, 19 April 2007 <http://www.ilkleygazette.co.uk/news/1338943.Enigmatic_Ilkley_politician_remembered_in_special_lecture/>.

[28] The Encyclopaedia Britannica (1910-1911), 11th edition, 'Bright, John', page 567.

[29] For further reading on John Bright, see:

- Cash, Bill (2012). *John Bright: Statesman, Orator, Agitator,* London: J.B. Tauris & Co.
- Trevelyan, George Macaulay (913). *The Life of John Bright,* 4th Edition. London: Constable And Co. Ltd.
- Mills, Joseph Travis (1935). *John Bright and the Quakers* (2 Volumes), Methuen.

In the 1840s, when the abolitionist Frederick Douglass travelled to Britain to speak about slavery and racial discrimination, Priscilla made sure that John's daughter Helen, still a young child, had the chance to meet him. Frederick was the guest of John Bright and his sisters on the last night of his stay in 1847.[30] This made a lifelong impression on Helen Bright Clark[31], who grew up to volunteer with the Freedman's Aid Society, which helped establish former slaves in independent life. Helen also hosted Douglass at her home on his second journey to the United Kingdom in the 1880s.[32] Priscilla's belief in the equality of women and men also influenced Helen, who persuaded the Quaker Society of Friends that women and men should hold discussions together instead of having the women's group report to the men's group following separate meetings.[33]

When Priscilla was 31, John remarried, freeing her to accept a suitor she had previously turned down. The man she married, Duncan McLaren, was a widower who already had five children. His grandparents were crofters farming the Scottish Highlands in Argyllshire near Dalmally. The youngest of ten children, Duncan at age 12 walked down from the Highlands on his way to become apprenticed to a merchant in Dunbar. Despite having only two years of schooling, he was eventually able to open his own draper business on the Royal Mile opposite St Giles Cathedral.[34] After being elected to the town council, he saved Edinburgh from bankruptcy and set up the first network of free schools there. He and Priscilla had three children together. In the same year that their daughter Helen Priscilla McLaren was born, Duncan was elected Lord Provost of Edinburgh. In that role, he took initiatives to open private gardens and museums to the general public. He also shortened the opening hours of pubs in an effort to counter alcohol abuse.[35] At the age of 65, he was elected to Parliament.[36]

When Priscilla married Duncan, the Quaker Society of Friends expelled her, which was their policy toward anyone who married a non-Quaker. (This policy changed in 1861, less than fifteen years after her marriage.) The expulsion of Priscilla made her brother John furious. For her part, however, she simply ignored it, continuing to attend Quaker meetings,[37] which she told Duncan were better suited to his five young children than other kinds of church services.[38] Duncan's own

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30 Mills, J. Travis (1935), *John Bright and the Quakers,* Volume 2, page 221.

31 Helen Bright Clark was a first cousin of Helen Priscilla McLaren, who would become Mary Rabagliati's great-grandmother.

32 Lewis, Reina and Sara Mills (2003), *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader,* Taylor & Francis, page 107.

33 Crawford, Elizabeth, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866-1928,* London: University College London Press, 1999.

34 The Scotsman, 'City owes a great debt to its lord of the manor', 24 August 2011 <https://www.scotsman.com/heritage-and-retro/retro/city-owes-a-great-debt-to-its-lord-of-the-manor-909190>.

35 Pickard, Willis, 'The Member for Scotland: Duncan McLaren and the Liberal Dominance of Victorian Scotland', Journal of Liberal History 69 Winter 2010–11 <https://liberalhistory.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/69_Pickard_Duncan_McLaren.pdf>.

36 For further reading on Duncan McLaren, see:

- Mackie, J.B. (1888), *The Life and Work of Duncan McLaren* (two volumes), Thomas Nelson and Sons.
- Pickard, Willis (2011), *The Member for Scotland: A Life of Duncan LcLaren,* John Donald (Birlinn).

37 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priscilla_Bright_McLaren>.

38 Interview of Duncan Rabagliati on 27 March 2018.

background was as a religious Dissenter. He had long argued against a clerical tax that paid stipends only to ministers of the established Church of Scotland, but not to Presbyterian ministers who had seceded from that church.[39] At a time when anti-Catholic campaigners were protesting a government grant to a Catholic college in Ireland, Duncan's view was that the state should treat all religions equally by not funding any church.

Priscilla's lifelong work for women's suffrage included hosting many campaign meetings in her home. She served as president and co-founder of the Edinburgh chapter of the National Society of Women's Suffrage. Her step-daughter, Agnes McLaren, joined her in this work, serving as the chapter's secretary and also as an executive committee member of the Central Committee for Women's Suffrage.[40] Despite opposition from her parents, Agnes challenged the exclusion of women from practising medicine. By moving to France where women were being admitted to medical schools, she became the tenth British woman to graduate as a doctor.[41] On travelling to India, Agnes learned that custom there forbade women to be treated by male doctors. She established the Medical Mission Committee which funded the recruitment and training of female health care professionals in Rawalpindi (located in the Punjab province of present-day Pakistan).

Like Priscilla, Agnes did not hesitate to challenge religious authorities. At the age of 61, she converted to Catholicism. Through her work in Rawalpindi, however, she later discovered that Catholic Canon Law then prohibited religious sisters from practising medical care. She promptly petitioned the Pope to lift this restriction. Although Agnes died in 1913, seven years later Pope Benedict XV granted a special dispensation for a woman to work as a medical missionary in India. In 1925, a protégée of Agnes' was able to found the Medical Mission Sisters, a congregation dedicated to healthcare for low-income women and children worldwide.[42]

To return to the direct ancestors of Mary Rabagliati, it was in 1877 that Agnes' half-sister Helen McLaren married Dr. Andrea Rabagliati. He was then established as the house surgeon at Bradford Royal Infirmary, so Helen moved to Bradford, in the Yorkshire region of England. The couple had five children. Andrea was later invested as a fellow in the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and became well known for his books recommending a vegetarian diet and eating only two meals a day for health and longevity. Of Helen, historian Jo Stanley writes:

> Helen began doing charitable work, first at the Royal Infirmary, and then in a variety of causes around health and welfare, including at Bradford Samaritan Society, which provides after-care for Infirmary patients. Helen was also an active organiser of the Bradford Girls School, which was a partly feminist initiative. With her husband and others, she co-founded

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39 See Pickard, Willis (2011), op. cit.

40 Letter from Jo Stanley to D. Skelton, 22 August 2018.

41 Interview of Duncan Rabagliati on 27 March 2018.

42 For more details on Agnes McLaren – see:

- Burton, Katherine (1946). *According to the Pattern; The Story of Dr Agnes McLaren and the Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries.* New York: Longmans, Green.
- Gottschalk, Janet (2001). *She Stepped Out of Her Class: The Life and Times of Agnes McLaren.* Publisher: Medical Mission Sisters, London.
- 'Dr Agnes McLaren'. British Medical Journal. 26 April 1913.

> St Catherine's Home as an early sort of hospice. She was also involved for 27 years in St. Monica's Home for unmarried mothers helping "fallen women". [43]

Assessing Helen's character, Jo Stanley writes: 'Used to leadership, she was very determined, to the point of bossiness. At the same time, she could be sweet. She was very bright, well-mannered, hospitable, and generous.' (A century later, every facet of this portrait would also describe Helen's great-granddaughter Mary to a tee.) Like her relatives, Helen was prominent in local women's politics — except that unlike them, she broke away from the Liberal Party, causing Stanley to call her 'this suffragist-who-wasn't-quite'. In 1886, a bill was introduced in the House of Commons to grant Home Rule to Ireland. The bill was defeated and it caused the Liberal Party to splinter apart. Helen became a Conservative in the same year that one of her brothers was elected to become a Liberal member of Parliament.

Helen was frustrated with the close quarters of their family's home in Bradford. As a sickly child, she had travelled several times for health cures to the town of Ben Rhydding, just north of Bradford. In the 1890s when three of her children were still very young, Helen returned to Ben Rhydding where she designed a new family home named Whinbrae.[44] During World War I, suffragists were divided on the question of whether or not to persevere in badgering the government for women's right to vote. Helen found it regrettable that the war had broken out, but preferred to support the government in wartime. She used Whinbrae to shelter Belgian refugees, a service for which the King of the Belgians awarded her the Médaille de la Reine Elizabeth in 1918.[45]

That same year, partial women's suffrage was granted, benefiting women over the age of 30 who had graduated from university, owned property, or paid rent of at least £5 each year. Helen met the criteria and was allowed to cast her first vote at the age of 67, although she was frustrated by the limited choice of candidates on the ballot. Helen spent twenty-eight years as president of the Ben Rhydding Women's Unionist Association. Just two days before her death in 1934, Helen's civic contributions were recognised with her investiture as a Member, Order of the British Empire.[46] Her obituary said:

> With a dignified platform manner, she was a speaker who always held the attention of her audience. She never trimmed her sails to popularity. Holding very firm views on the political situation, she advocated them in the most outspoken manner. Her conversation never dwindled. Her sincerity won for her the respect even of those who were most violently opposed to her opinions. She had little patience with those who were self-seeking or praise-looking or slack or undecided. She had the power of commanding devotion and inspiring

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[43] Letter from Dr. Jo Stanley to D. Skelton, 22 August 2018.

[44] Letter from Dr. Jo Stanley to D. Skelton, 22 August 2018.

[45] <http://www.ilkleygazette.co.uk/news/1338943.Enigmatic_Ilkley_politician_remembered_in_special_lecture/>; see also

- Brown, Caroline and Mark Hunnebell (2014). *Ilkley and The Great War Paperback – Illustrated*, 15 Dec. 2014, Amberley Publishing

[46] Letter from Jo Stanley to D. Skelton, 22 August 2018.

energy.[47]

Again, this description could apply word-for-word to her future great granddaughter.

Among Helen and Andrea's children was Catherine Priscilla Rabagliati, who would become Mary's Great-Aunt Catrine. When Mary was a child, this great-aunt was serving as an alderman on the Westminster City Council. In 1955, Catrine was elected mayor of the Metropolitan Borough of Paddington, becoming the first woman mayor of a London borough. She served two terms. Her great nephew recalls 'she was so good to me and many of her great nephews and nieces, especially with those at boarding school with parents abroad'.[48]

Catrine's youngest brother, Cuthbert Euan Charles Rabagliati (always called Euan), also became renowned. In 1914, when World War I began, Euan was 20 years old and had just become a licensed air-plane pilot. Already commissioned as a lieutenant, he became one of the first military pilots anywhere in the world. Posted to France ten days after Britain declared war on Germany, he was credited with the Royal Flying Corps' first ever shooting down of an enemy aircraft. Of the rudimentary state of that era's technology, Euan recalled: 'It was very difficult aeroplane to fly because the torque was very severe. When taking off, you had to have a very great deal of rudder to counteract the torque, and equally on landing to prevent you spinning when coming down. Generally, it was much disliked. It needed a great deal of concentration, but it certainly worked.'[49] By the end of the war in 1918, Euan had been promoted to wing commander with the acting rank of lieutenant colonel and awarded the Military Cross, the Air Force Cross, and the French Légion d'honneur. One of his citations read:

> For conspicuous gallantry and skill, when, accompanied by Second Lieutenant Vaucour, they carried out a reconnaissance over Valenciennes and Douai. They had to fly in thick cloud for nearly the whole distance, and several times their aeroplane got into a 'spin'. The pilot, however, succeeded each time in righting his machine, and they reached their objective and carried out the reconnaissance at 2,800 feet under very heavy fire.[50]

Following the war, Euan began amateur race car driving. One of his brothers owned a 1926 Bentley Red Label Speed car, which Euan drove at top speed down Buckingham Palace Road. In 1929, Euan came in twelfth in the first Irish Grand Prix. The following year, when Euan was competing in the Double Twelve Hour Race at Brooklands, he lost control of his car, skidded. When a competitor's car crashed into his, Euan spun off the track and into the watching crowd killing two people and injuring twenty. Euan spent time in a coma and needed a silver plate inserted into his skull. This accident led to a law requiring that race tracks display signs warning that 'motor racing is dangerous'.[51]

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47 *Ilkey Gazette* of January 1934 as cited in Dr. Jo Stanley's research.

48 Letter from Duncan Rabagliati to D. Skelton, 10 April 2018.

49 Audio interview, Imperial War Museum, 'RABAGLIATI, CUTHBERT E C (ORAL HISTORY)', <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80021542> .

50 The London Gazette (Supplement), 2 November 1915, page 10891.

51 Greenhalf, Jim, 'Daring raid stunt inspired iconic James Bond moment in Goldfinger', 18 February 2015 <https://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/tahistory/featuresnostalgiapasttimes11801711.Daring_raid_stunt_inspired_iconic_James_Bond_moment_in_Goldfinger/>.

Despite Euan's head injury, he remained a member of the Army Reserve of Officers throughout the second World War. This time, however, his role was not in the air but in the MI6 Secret Intelligence Service. He infiltrated espionage agents into Denmark and the Netherlands. One of Euan's World War II actions in particular has been immortalised in a unique way. In 1941, he was responsible for Operation Contact Holland. The Nazis had based their coastal defence forces near the Hague at Scheveningen. Dutch agents working for Euan knew that every Friday night the Nazis held rowdy festivities in the Palace Hotel of this seaside resort. They decided that the best way for a spy to sneak in would be for him to pretend to be a drunken party-goer. The method they chose became world famous when their real-life stunt was copied by James Bond in the movie 'Goldfinger'. Bond emerged from the water at night wearing a wetsuit, only to strip it off revealing a tuxedo beneath it. In 1977, when Euan was 85, that wartime intelligence feat was again dramatised on film, this time as part of the biopic about one of the agents involved. In *Soldier of Orange*, Euan's role was represented by a character named 'Colonel Rafelli'.[52]

Euan and Catrine had three brothers. Victor was a barrister, and Silvestro spent twenty years in Egypt, ultimately as director of the Serum Institute at Zeitoun.[53] It was the oldest of these five who would become Mary's grandfather: Andrea Francis Honeyman Rabagliati, called Andretto. He followed his father into the medical profession and became an expert on tropical diseases. In 1908, Andretto married Julia Bright, his second cousin. Because of his professional expertise, they decided to move to a tropical country. They visited Sri Lanka but decided against settling there and travelled on toward Australia.

In 1911, it was in Australia that Julia gave birth to their oldest child, who they named for Andretto's mother, Helen McLaren Rabagliati. Because they lived in a rural setting where Andretto was often away from home to tend to his patients, it fell to Julia to muck out the stable regularly. After their daughter was born, Julia told Andretto she refused to care for both the livestock and the family. This led them instead to settle in Durban, South Africa, where their next two children came into the world.[54] In April 1914, Mary's father was born: Alexander Coultate Rabagliati, called Sandy. When the first world war broke out a few months later, Andretto was posted in France and East Africa.[55] The family's youngest child was Francis Anthony, born in 1920 after the war had ended. Andretto returned to Durban but also continued to travel to Nairobi. In both places, he set up nursing home clinics. On one occasion, while traveling on a boat from Durban to England, Andretto was credited with saving the life of another passenger on board: Her Royal Highness, Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester (sister-in-law of King George V). Her memoirs refer to Andretto as 'the World's expert on infectious diseases'.[56]

When Sandy was 15 years old, in 1929, his father died of cancer at the age of 50. Not wanting to remain in Africa without Andretto, Julia moved with the children back to Great Britain. A few years

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[52] Duns, Jeremy, '"Dutch Courage", Debrief: The Online Playground of Spy Novelist Jeremy Duns', 21 April 2010.

[53] Letter from Duncan Rabagliati to D. Skelton, 21 September 2025.

[54] Interview of Margaret Rabagliati Wood, 18 September 2018.

[55] Letter from Dr. Jo Stanley to D. Skelton, 22 August 2018.

[56] Duchess of Gloucester, Princess Alice (1983), *The Memoirs of Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester,* Collins, ISBN 0-00-216646-1

later, however, when Helen married Charles Gaitskell, the two of them decided to move to Kenya where they began farming and raised their four children. Francis too moved to Kenya, although in his case it was a decade later, after his Royal Air Force service in World War II. Despite losing his right eye when his plane was shot down early in the war, he continued to fly. Because of his vision, he was no longer assigned to combat but to flights ferrying personnel or equipment. These missions took him to Egypt, Sicily, India, and Kenya. On one occasion he flew Emperor Haile Selassie from Kenya to Ethiopia. After the war, his vision was a barrier to the medical career he had imagined. So instead he got a degree in agriculture. Francis then settled in Kenya, working for the Agriculture Department there to advise farmers. Anne Marshall, a farm manager in Kenya, married him in 1954 and they had four children.[57]

Sandy, perhaps inspired by his Uncle Euan's career as a military pilot, decided to study aircraft engineering when he was 21. He joined the Royal Air Force in 1935 and was sent for a three-year posting to India. When World War II broke out, Sandy had returned to Europe and been promoted to Flight Commander. In 1940, Sandy was credited with destroying nine enemy aircraft: four Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter planes; three Messerschmitt Bf 110 twin-engine heavy fighters; one Junker Ju 88 twin-engined combat aircraft; and one Dornier Do 17, a fast light bomber, sometimes called 'the flying pencil' for its evasive abilities. He also damaged four additional aircraft.

On 22 October 1940, Sandy was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross medal. His marriage to Sandra Bourgein took place on 2 November — but six days later he was back in the sky, destroying another fighter plane. That December, Sandy was assigned command of a squadron. Travelling via Gibraltar, he took his squadron to Malta, where he was based until March of 1942. During his year in the Mediterranean, his squadron destroyed eleven enemy aircraft: four Macchi 'thunderbolt' fighter aircraft; two Messerschmitt Bf 109s; two Fiat CR.42 Falco sesquiplane fighters; one Stuka dive bomber; and one Savoia-Marchetti three-engined medium bomber. They also damaged seventeen more aircraft. Ten of those were 'flying boat' seaplanes designed to land on water, all damaged in a single attack on Sicily.[58] On 31 October 1941, he was awarded a ribbon bar to add to the Distinguished Flying Cross medal.

The same week that his daughter Mary was born in Great Britain, Sandy's squadron in Malta destroyed a triple-engine float-plane. That March, Sandy was called back to the United Kingdom to do tactical work at HQ Fighter Command. To avoid travelling through war-torn Europe or North Africa, his journey took him via Egypt to South Africa before sailing north on the Atlantic Ocean. In Britain, after several months of tactical work, he took a course at the Royal Air Force staff college. He was then appointed Station Commander at Fairwood Common, located on the coast of Wales where Sandra came to live with Mary in temporary housing.

In May 1943, their family relocated to Norfolk on the east coast of England, where Sandy became the Wing Leader at the Coltishall military station. On 6 July 1943, he was leading his squadron on a strike near the coast of the Netherlands when his plane was shot down by a flak ship in the North Sea. His brother Francis happened to also be based at the Coltishall. Being part of an Air Sea Rescue Squadron, he requested to hunt for Sandy — but to no avail. Alexander Rabagliati's death, at the age

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[57] From notes written by Margaret Rabagliati Wood for Duncan Rabagliati's genealogical research.

[58] 'The Airmen's Stories – F/Lt. A. C. Rabagliati', The Battle of Britain London Monument <https://www.bbm.org.uk/airmen/Rabagliati.htm>.

of 29, is commemorated on the Runnymede Air Forces Memorial west of London.

As she grew up, whenever Mary spent time with her Rabagliati relatives, her cousin Margaret described a unique dynamic around her: 'There was always a kind of electricity around Mary. It can't have been easy for her to be Uncle Sandy's daughter. Because he died so very young and was a war hero, there was always extra attention lavished on Mary.'[59]

As Mary grew up, her Rabagliati relatives surrounded her with abundant family lore that was far scarcer on the Bourgein side. On all sides however, Mary knew she came from a family of strong women. And this has continued into the younger generation because Mary's niece Tania de St Croix (Paul's daughter) has spent her life pursuing social and environmental justice as an activist and youth worker. Now teaching at King's College London, she developed an innovative social sciences module that involves regular collaboration with ATD Fourth World.

[59] Interview of Margaret Rabagliati Wood, 18 September 2018.

BOURGEIN - DE ST CROIX - FAMILY TREE OF MARY RABAGLIATI

Joseph Samuel Bourgein
1880 - 1964

Marian Willson
1881-1959

Elsie Maud Leagas
1908-1982

Frank Bourgein
1904-1966

Victor de St Croix
1907-1992

Rhoda 'Sandra' Bourgein
1913-1997

Alexander Rabagliati
1914-1943

Grace Bradberry
1908- ?

Joseph Walter Bourgein
1902-1992

Arthur Bourgein
1910-1947

Reginald Akehurst
1915-2002

Mary Louvain Bourgein
1915-2001

Leslie Oswald-Smith

Brian Bourgein
1939

Margaret Bourgein
1941

Barbara Bourgein
1936-2025

John Bourgein
1943

Alan Bourgein
1949

Marilyn Wilson
1949

Judith Bulman
1943

Peter Akehurst
1941-2021

Lyda Paez Pumar Solovioff
1932-1997

John de St Croix
1936-2020

Tim de St Croix
1937-2014

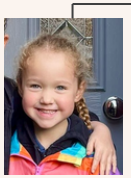
Claire Gibbard
1970

Paul de St Croix
1951

Ingrid Forsberg
1948

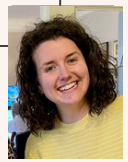
Mary Rabagliati
1942-1992

Alan Rickman
1984



Cleo Rickman
2021

Ruby Rickman
2019



Claire Bourgein
1984

Sarah Bourgein
1982

Jason Akehurst
1966

Roderick de St Croix
1966

John de St Croix
1969

Cassie de St Croix
2001

Ella de St Croix
2003

Tania de St Croix
1975

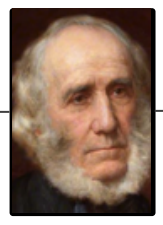
Thomas de St Croix
1977

RABAGLIATI - MCLAREN - BRIGHT
FAMILY TREE OF MARY RABAGLIATI

Jacob Bright
1775 - 1851

Martha Wood
1788 - 1830

Priscilla Bright
1815 - 1906

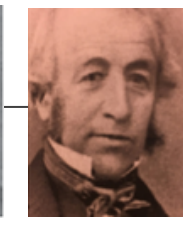


Duncan McLaren
1800 - 1886

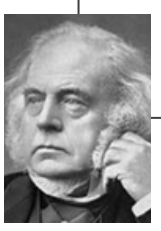
Christina G. Renton
1813 - 1841

Grant Aitken
1804 - 1833

Margaret Bright
1818 - 1890



Samuel Lucas
1810 - 1895



Rt. Hon. John Bright MP
1811 - 1889

Elizabeth Priestman
1815 - 1841

Jacob Bright MP
1821 - 1889

Laura Elizabeth Polchin
1854 - 1933

Rt. Hon. Sir Charles Bright McLaren MP
1st Lord Aberconway
1850 - 1934

Helen Priscilla McLaren MBE
1851 - 1934

Andrea Carlo Francesco Rabagliati
1843 - 1930

Walter Stowe Bright McLaren
1853 -1912

Eva Marie Müller
1952 - 1921

Dr Agnes McLaren
1837 - 1913

Lord John McLaren MP
1831 - 1910

Ottilie A. Schwabe
1838 - 1914

Helen Priestman Bright
1840 - 1927

William Stephens Clark
1839 - 1925

Sir Henry Duncan McLaren MP
2nd Lord Aberconway
1879 - 1953

Christabelle M. MacNaughten
1890 - 1974

Andrea Francis Honyman Rabagliati
'Andretto'
1878 - 1949

Julia Bright
1878 - 1960

Duncan Silvestro Rabagliati OBE
1880 - 1962

Lucy Evershed Dale
1878 - 1969

Herman Victor Rabagliati
1883 - 1962

Marguerita MacLeod
1885 - 1969

Catherine Priscilla Rabagliati 'Catrine'
1885 - 1973

Cuthbert Euan Charles Rabagliati
1892 - 1978

Charles Laurence 'Laurie' Gaitskell
1903 - 1977

Helen Rabagliati
1911 - 2009

F/Lt. Alexander Coultate Rabagliati DLC
'Sandy'
1914-1943

Rhoda Mary Bourgein
'Sandra'
1913-1997

Francis Rabagliati
1920-2014

Anne Marshall
1921 - 2015

Mary Catherine Rabagliati
1942-1992