



The Life of  
**Ann Macbeth**  
of Patterdale

by Marjorie Ives

## **Introduction**

This charming and interesting book about Ann Macbeth was written in 1981 by Marjorie Ives who lived from 1910 to 2000 – for many years at a centre of life in Patterdale Parish and taking a particular interest in local history.

Since this book was written there has been a renewed interest in the remarkable work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the 'Glasgow Girls' – Ann Macbeth, Jessie King, Margaret and Frances Macdonald and Jessie Newbery.

There are four Ann Macbeth embroideries to do with Patterdale Church – the Flowers embroidery (illustrated on the front cover of the book), the Good Shepherd and the Nativity (both illustrated within the book) and the Doves of Peace. All belong to Patterdale except the Nativity which belongs to Glasgow. At one time the Nativity was brought every summer from Glasgow to Patterdale to hang opposite the Good Shepherd. However the beautiful Nativity now stays permanently in Glasgow.

## **Author's Note**

When Patterdale Women's Institute (founded by Miss Ann Macbeth and Miss Spence in 1921) reached its Diamond Jubilee in 1981, it seemed a suitable time to produce this tribute to a remarkable personality. The information conveyed in this little booklet has been gathered over many years from Ann Macbeth's own comments; her connection with the Glasgow School of Art; from both friends and relatives and lastly but not least from the people of Patterdale who remembered her with respect and admiration.

**The Life of Ann Macbeth,  
Embroideress Extraordinary  
(Co-Founder of Patterdale Women's Institute, 1921)  
by Marjorie Ives**

Since her death at the age of 73 in 1948, Ann Macbeth's memory has been cherished by the people of Patterdale.

In recent years many visitors who come to the dale have wanted to know more about her and have admired the wall hangings in Patterdale Parish Church.

The Exhibition of her work at Abbot Hall, Kendal in 1979 and a later one of The Glasgow School of Art (1894-1920) in 1980 brought further interest.

1981 being the Diamond Jubilee Year of Patterdale Women's Institute, founded by Ann Macbeth and her friend Miss May Spence, we have gathered together various pieces of information to draw a picture of her in words.

We were fortunate enough to receive personal recollections from her youngest sister, Mrs. Sheila Macbeth Mitchell, now aged 93, to add to those of the dalespeople.

Mrs. Mitchell herself provides wonderful indication of the calibre of the Macbeth Family. At the age of 88, she was the heroine of one of Jacques Cousteau's Underwater Expeditions in the Aegean, shown world-wide on television.

After going down in his 'Diving Saucer' to visit the wreck of the H.M.H.S. 'Britannic' in which she had been a military nurse at the time of its sinking in 1916, she made lively comment.

Having recalled her experiences in the twenties when ladies wore skirts in which to ski, and she had dared convention by wearing men's riding breeches instead, she was ready with her 'trews' for the Cousteau Expedition.

'I couldn't have gone in the mini-sub in a skirt, getting in and lying down on my stomach like that. Everybody would have seen my breeks. It was wonderful down there, everything was so alive. Only the ship was dead.'

Mrs. Mitchell and her husband traced the Family back to 1490 when two Scottish brothers had the monopoly on 'girdles' used in baking. The Primrose Family of Culross had been artistic for generations. Grandfather Norman Macbeth was a well-known painter and member of the Royal Scottish Academy. Three of his sons were R.A.s. Ann's father would sit at his easel inventing machinery.

Ann Macbeth was one of nine children, herself the eldest. One project of the eldest brother was to lay out the earliest American Golf Course at Los Angeles as well as a house beside it. Another sister, a portrait painter, who also did fine drawings was Lady Rigby, wife of Sir Hugh Rigby, distinguished surgeon to King George V. Her brother Allan laid out the earliest French Golf Course at La Boulie, near Versailles and one at Le Sart, near Lille. Others were engineers, artists, golfers.

Ann was born at the time when women were seeking to achieve freedom in a male dominated society. As a girl she seemed to have definite ideas of what she wished to do. An undisputed leader, her hands were always busy making such things as dolls' furniture, toys, costumes for plays and little theatres.

She was fortunate in possessing understanding parents who realised their daughter's potential. It was a case of 'Ann was allowed to do whatever she wished, probably would have done so anyway.' The family motto was 'Never say can't until you have tried.'

Enthusiasm and the generous giving of herself continued throughout her life.

Ann was born at Bolton, Lancashire in 1875 from whence the family moved to St. Anne's. The children attended a Dame School run by six Scottish sisters and their Aunt who excelled in Literature, Music, Violin, Painting, English teachers instructing them in Mathematics and Languages. Her father kept a small yacht on Windermere so most holidays were spent in the Lake District.

Their parents were Scottish Presbyterians, but together with other Scottish families in the area they helped to build the Congregational Church. There being no Presbyterian Church near them they usually went to hear the best preacher available.

Mrs. Mitchell wrote that 'In those days one's father didn't dream of training his daughters to earn their own living as it would have reflected on his ability to keep them,' but Ann was allowed to go to Glasgow where two of her uncles lived who would be able to keep an eye on her. There in 1897 she enrolled for the Life Class, under Francis Newbery, at the Glasgow School of Art. Later her sister Alison, 22 years her junior, was able to train for and become a Doctor of Medicine.

At the end of two years she had gained excellent Class Passes in Life Drawing and Design also receiving a prize for Needlework, and after a further two years she became Assistant Instructress to Mrs. Jessie Newbery who had started the Embroidery Class in 1894.

The Newberys realised that Miss Macbeth's talents were outstanding. She only had the use of one eye due to Scarlet Fever in childhood, but she impressed everybody with her originality of thought. Francis Newbery wrote that she seemed unaware of her exceptional qualities. Her modesty and generosity were well-known.

In 1902 she gave a special course of instruction in Embroidery at the Helensburgh Day School Company's Schools and in 1904 was appointed to the 91(d) class for teachers.

At Helensburgh she horrified them by insisting they made their own designs. Firmly refusing to accept the conventional methods of teaching children 'white seam sewing' she encouraged the use of coloured threads and gay stitchery.

In 1906 she included Metalwork, followed by Bookbinding Design in which she continued until 1911, having become Head of the Department in succession to Mrs. Newbery, in 1908 becoming a member of the Staff Council.

At that time she lectured widely in Scotland and England on the Teaching of Needlework, one result of which was the joint production with Margaret Swanson of Educational Needlework. This was used in schools in Scotland and Canada and translated for use in Japan. Decorative Leatherwork was another skill which she taught at the Summer School at St Andrews in 1911.

During 1912, she was awarded the Diploma of the School of Art and began teaching ceramic art. She was also asked to represent the School in the Students' Careers Association for Women. In 1912 she was appointed Lady Warden.

In 1914 she drew up a programme for the National Froebel Union for their proposed Diploma Course in Handwork. One of her early orders was to design everything for a large tea-room above the cinema at Nottingham. Carpets which were made fadeless by Morton's of Carlisle, china and the waitresses' dresses. In Miss Cranston's famous Glasgow Tea-room there would always be some of her needlework on exhibition.

In 1916 she went to North Wales to lecture at Bangor University. Also during the Great War she sent a student to Reading to organise needlework and pottery as employment for wounded soldiers and schoolchildren.

She obtained Diplomas from Paris, Tunis, Ghent, Budapest and Chicago. She visited Austria with Mr. Donald searching for good weaving information. Material was obtained from Donald of Dundee, threads from Clarks and wool from Paton and Baldwins, all of whom shared in the expenses of Exhibitions in stores around the U.K.

Her belief was that Art that stood still was retrograde. She fiercely contended that the applied arts were more important to the lay mind than pictures or sculptures which are too costly or less useful. She undoubtedly helped in establishing the classes for appreciation of Art in schools today.

Yet there was, for all her driving force, a sensitivity that made her achievements a delight. She wrote several textbooks on needlecraft, and as a foreword to A. Knox Arthur's 'Embroidery Book' wrote, 'One may embroider poems, another may embroider prayer and praises for her church, another may beautify a woman's garments or sing a little song in stitches for a baby's robe.'

Her holidays were often spent in Galloway or in the Lake District, to which she returned more and more, eventually to retire to Patterdale. When a younger sister was ill in Hampshire she made the long journey from Westmorland in order to be with her for a brief half-hour before returning.

As she walked about Patterdale she was quickly recognised in her flowing cape, her skirt possibly vivid scarlet and emerald green, wearing long necklaces, her small dog Jove by her side.

She had several Quaker friends in the dale including Miss Fry, Miss Healey, Mrs. Pollard and Miss Jupp with whom she liked to attend the Meeting House. Another local companion was Miss Allbright. Heaton Cooper, the Lakeland artist, would often call in whilst in the vicinity.

One of her sisters said that her voice was 'so high-pitched, up-and-downish, Scots-cum-English,' and that 'Ann was so understanding as well as good.'

Patterdale became her home in 1921, although she still travelled up to Glasgow and all over the country teaching and inspiring.

It was in 1921 that she and Miss May Spence together started the Women's Institute. Miss Spence was short and stout, Miss Macbeth tall and slim, a complete contrast.

A young woman in the time of William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Hubert Parry, it is possible that she would have been affected by their work. She too designed stained glass windows, one being dedicated to a member of the Grenfell Mission to Labrador in Bradwell Church, near Yarmouth; another in Newcastle, also in colleges.

Always Ann Macbeth kept herself busy. Her work on altar frontals etc., banners (one double-sided one was presented to the President of the British Association by Glasgow Corporation in 1901) or her paintings on pottery which gave personal and particular joy in Patterdale.

There are many houses and families possessing these heirlooms. A christening, a golden wedding or even the winner of the baby show would bring forth a specially decorated piece with the name and date. These she

fired in her kiln. The family tree examples are of significant interest as the youngest arrival would be shown as a tiny leaf on one of the branches. One year her own small nephew Angus won first prize at the Baby Show. With kindly thought, Ann painted a plate for every child who was a competitor.

Her generosity was proverbial. One had to be careful in admiring anything for she gave willingly. Many a neighbour in the dale was particularly grateful to her when the weather was bad as she would go out of her way to collect and deliver their newspapers, even giving her own copy of a magazine before she had read it.

Once when she took her sister Sheila to Belgium on holiday they arrived home with twenty two (unneeded) blouses, merely because Sheila had admired them in shop windows.

Her home, High Bield in Hartsop, she had built to help the builder who had been ill and couldn't do regular work and also 'it was for her nephews and nieces - to escape from their parents' she said with a chuckle. She herself did not occupy it very much, although the Mitchells spent a whole summer there on leave from India. It is perched high on the rocks above the village.

She stayed or made her home in several houses in the dale, one being 'Wordsworth Cottage'. From there came inspiration for her two large wall-hangings for which she is particularly honoured in Patterdale.

Looking towards the fells above Hartsop she embroidered the scene using wool and silks with Christ in the foreground as a Shepherd. At His feet are sheep and spring flowers. The subtle blending of colour and the panoramic design is of endless interest. As she looked at the landscape she captured its spirit, even altering the expression on a lamb's face to please one small boy of the village.

It is called both 'The Good Shepherd' and 'The New Jerusalem.' Hubert Parry's music which he set to William Blake's words of 'Jerusalem' would have been fairly new at that time. He had died in 1918 and Ann embroidered the notes of his music beneath the scene. It was completed in 1936 after eighteen months work.

'Jerusalem' is the 'battle hymn' of the Women's Institutes and since Miss Macbeth and Miss Spence (who lived to be 100 years) started the Patterdale Branch in October 1921, very apt.

The panel was taken on exhibition to London, where Queen Mary saw it. A quote from Miss Macbeth's letter to a friend was 'It pleased me greatly it went to London. It created a pleasant break away from the dignified convention of Queen Mary's usual manner. . . for the old lady suddenly burst into song as she read the music of Blake's hymn.'

Her fatal illness in Carlisle lasted but three weeks. One of the many tokens of caring from the dale was given by John Dickinson of beautiful camellias, from the Nursery Gardens, Patterdale. Her ashes were scattered in Patterdale and a tree planted by the Women's Institute in remembrance. On the Easter Sunday after her death, the dalespeople filled the Church with the flowers she loved and had portrayed in her wall-hangings.

### Publications:

Educational Needlework (with Margaret Swanson)	1911
The Playwork Book	1918
School and Fireside Crafts (with May Spence)	1920
Embroidered Lace and Leatherwork	1924
Needleweaving	1926
Countrywoman's Rug Book (recently reprinted in California)	1929