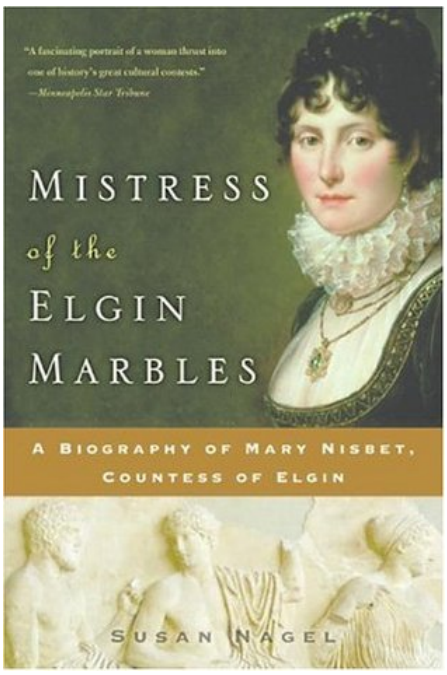

Mistress of the Elgin Marbles: A Biography of Mary Nisbet, Countess of Elgin

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The remarkable Mary Nisbet was the Countess of Elgin in Romantic-era Scotland and the wife of the seventh Earl of Elgin. When Mary accompanied her husband to diplomatic duty in Turkey, she changed history. She helped bring the smallpox vaccine to the Middle East, struck a seemingly impossible deal with Napoleon, and arranged the removal of famous marbles from the Parthenon. But all of her accomplishments would be overshadowed, however, by her scandalous divorce. Drawing from Mary's own letters, scholar **Susan Nagel** tells Mary's enthralling, inspiring, and suspenseful story in vibrant detail.

Mistress of the Elgin Marbles: A Biography of Mary Nisbet, Countess of Elgin Details

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From Reader Review Mistress of the Elgin Marbles: A Biography of Mary Nisbet, Countess of Elgin for online ebook

Lizzie says

Via the Bookperk email. I totally am mainly interested in this based on all the reviews that are like, "Too much about her fascinating life and divorce and groundbreaking for women's legal rights! Not enough about marbles!"

Okay so I had to Wiki what the marbles are about, but still.

Anyway, the deal was sealed by this fabulously incorrect line in Nisbet's own Wikipedia article:

"Bruce divorced Nesbit in either 1807 or 1808, and went on to marry Robert Ferguson of Raith (1777–1846)."

HA

Jennifer says

A little disappointing in that it was somewhat slanted in Mary's favor and didn't discuss the antiquities themselves as much as I had hoped. However, I learned a lot and am overall glad I read the book, so around a 3.5.

To start with, if it hadn’t been for the mention of the Elgin Marbles in the title, I probably wouldn’t have added this to my reading list or sought it out. Unfortunately, there wasn’t nearly as much about the Elgin Marbles themselves as I had hoped, although an appendix reproducing a letter to Mary Nisbet describing the progress of the Acropolis excavations was included. That doesn’t mean I didn’t like the book, and it does include some discussion of the Elgin Marbles, but if you’re more interested in art history go elsewhere.

Mary Nisbet started life as one of the richest heiresses in Scotland and married Thomas Bruce, the Seventh Earl of Elgin and Eleventh Earl of Kincardine. When Elgin was appointed ambassador extraordinaire to the Ottoman Empire, Mary accompanied him to Turkey. Along the way, they began collecting amazing antiquities, including the Gymnasiarch’s Throne (where the judge of the original Olympic games sat). While she was in Constantinople, the sultan became besotted with her, and she was the only Western women invited into Topkapi Palace and the Seraglio. She was also one of the few to meet the Valida Sultana, the sultan’s mother and the power behind the throne.

In addition, Mary helped introduce the smallpox vaccine to the Middle East. She lived at the same time Edward Jenner perfected the smallpox vaccine, and her mother-in-law knew Edward Jenner’s father. Because of this relationship, she was easily able to obtain the vaccine and had her young son and then her entire household vaccinated. This was important because smallpox was epidemic in Constantinople. Because smallpox was epidemic in Constantinople, she saw how many Turkish children in the city suffered and was so moved that she arranged to import large quantities of the vaccine to inoculate them as well. After early successes, she expanded her efforts and ultimately shipped smallpox vaccines to Baghdad, the Persian Gulf, and even Bombay.

On one of their few vacations, they visited Greece, where Elgin had already sent artists to make sketches of the art and plaster casts of the sculptures. On this trip, which took place before the recovery of the Elgin Marbles, he received permission to remove antiquities from Mycenae, Corinth, and Olympus. Using her influence with the sultan, Mary also got permission to remove the Elgin Marbles and even more artifacts for Elgin. Some people have speculated that it wasn't just Mary's charms that enabled her to obtain so many artifacts, and that the Ottoman Empire (which controlled Greece at the time) was actually engaging in a form of psychological warfare the Ottoman Empire (which controlled Greece at the time) was giving permission for so many antiquities to be removed as a way of reminding the Greeks who was in power by giving third-party foreigners – the British and the French – carte blanche to destroy their cultural heritage. This was an angle I had not considered before, and I found it interesting to speculate on how much the removal and/or destruction of so many other antiquities was prompted by similar motives (especially the recent demolition campaign by ISIS).

There was some interesting information included about the Elgin Marbles in particular and the Parthenon in general. One thing I didn't realize was that the Parthenon had been a target for centuries. In the fourth century, the Visigoths sacked Athens before proceeding to Rome, and heavily damaged it. In the fifth century, a group of Christians gutted the east end to convert it into a church, and in the mid-1400's invading Turks converted the church into a mosque. They used the remainder of the site as a powder magazine, and when a Venetian shell hit the magazine, most of the Acropolis exploded. A year later, the Danes got involved and started removing the heads from some of the metopes, and the structure sustained even more damage well before the Elgins got there. This turbulent history would suggest there might have been something to the arguments from Elgin's supporters, who said the only way to preserve the marbles was to remove them from the site and send them to Britain.

I also didn't realize that the Elgins' activities were controversial almost from the moment they began. Several contemporaries were appalled at the extent of what the Elgins were taking. Nicholas Biddle (an American statesman and financier) was so disgusted that when a ship loaded with Greek marbles went down at sea, he wished Elgin would have gone down with it (the marbles were subsequently recovered by divers soon after the accident). Lord Byron denounced Elgin as a "vandal" and then published "The Curse of Minerva" in further protest. Other opponents not listed in the book included Sir John Newport (the Chancellor of the Exchequer of Ireland) who complained, "The Honourable Lord has taken advantage of the most unjustifiable means and has committed the most flagrant pillages," and Edward Daniel Clarke, who witnessed the removal of some of the metopes, called it a "spoliation." He added that "the form of the temple has sustained a greater injury than it had already experienced from the Venetian artillery." Indeed, the Parthenon was permanently damaged from their removal. On the other hand, Elgin believed he was rescuing the artwork from neglect and any further damage, and was providing a service to the world, especially artists and educators. Some of his contemporaries agreed that the only way to save the marbles was to send them to Britain. Parliament also came down on Elgin's side, concluding that the marbles were deserving of "asylum" under a "free government."

The book also gave some interesting insights into both British and Turkish societies, especially the way they treated women. Contrary to popular belief, the Ottoman Empire was in many respects less sexist than its British counterpart. "Turkish women often received quite better treatment than their European counterparts. They were entitled to inherit half of what any man could, and that created significant female-controlled wealth…Contrary to English law at the time, when a woman married her property did not automatically become her husband's." (page 109). In divorce cases, a Turkish woman retained custody of any daughters, while any sons went with the husband; under English law, the custody of all children automatically went to the husband I'm not sure how much Mary Nisbet knew about the Ottoman laws, but if she had that knowledge surely would have haunted her later in life.

The trouble began when, after a string of difficult pregnancies (all with surviving children), Mary decided she didn't want to have any more children. However, Elgin wanted a dynasty, and the only son to survive to adulthood was sickly and suffered from seizures caused by mercury poisoning. All of the other children were daughters. The only forms of birth control at the time were dependent on male initiative, and the impasse led to a sexless marriage. It didn't help that Mary was also involved in an affair with one of Elgin's best friends (who had agreed to use birth control), and when Elgin found out he initiated what became an acrimonious high-profile divorce case. Ultimately, the divorce went through, and while Mary managed to keep her fortune (which was unusual for the time), she lost custody of all her children.

Britain did not start changing its laws until 1839, when the Custody of Infants Act was passed. This law gave women who were going to live apart from their husbands the right to apply for custody of their own children, as long as those children were under the age of seven. And it wasn't until 1882 that the Married Women's Property Law was passed (in the United States similar laws were enacted much earlier), which gave women legal authority over any property they had brought to the marriage.

Another thing I liked was the detailed "Chronology" section, which helped provide a broader historical context to the events of Mary Nisbet's life; it includes not only political events but also artistic and literary events (e.g., Jane Austen was a contemporary and wrote and published both Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility during Mary's lifetime, and the first public performance of Beethoven's Eroica was also in the same time frame).

One final note: "Elgin" is pronounced with a hard "g". Good to know.

Tony says

Nagel, Susan. MISTRESS OF THE ELGIN MARBLES: A Biography of Mary Nisbet, Countess of Elgin. (2004). ****. This is a fascinating look at Miss Nisbet who came from a family that was one of the richest in all of Scotland, and later married Lord Elgin (Remember...It's a hard "g") and went on to become one of the most famous women of her time. When her husband was appointed as England's ambassador to Turkey, Countess Elgin so impressed the sultan, Selim III, that she was allowed access to areas in the capital of Constantinoble that no other Western woman had ever seen. She was also instrumental in getting permission for her husband and his staff of artists to draw the artifacts that abounded in Turkey and Greece. At the time, Greece was under the control of Turkey, so the sultan's permission gave them carte blanche throughout the whole territory. Later, when Lord Elgin began to acquire the collecting bug, Mary got the necessary permits from the Sultan to remove artifacts for transport back to England. Lord Elgin became almost pathologically maniacal in his desire to collect these artifacts to amass his own collection and spent money like it was water. He assumed that he could tap into his wife's money to cover his debts, but her money was too well protected for him to do so, so he lived under the constant onus of debt. This ultimately led to trouble later on in their marriage and to a disastrous divorce case which became the talk of England and France. Of course, it wasn't the money. Lord Elgin accused his wife of adultery with his friend Robert Ferguson, and took legal action to take their children away from her and to attach her money. He got the children, but not the money. In her lifetime, she was able to assist in the introduction of smallpox vaccine into Turkey and Greece where the death toll from that disease was atrocious, cut a deal with Napoleon regarding the ransom of her husband, and arrange for the dismantling and shipment back to England of the frieze sculptures of the Parthenon, later known as the Elgin Marbles, and which are now in the British Museum. A fascinating read from this author that is made even more so by her access to personal letters of the principal players. Recommended.

Ann says

The life of Mary Nisbet, Countess of Elgin, later Mrs. Ferguson, whose fame rests on two very different facts : 1. while living in the East with her ambassador (first) husband, she was responsible for the logistics of the removal and shipping of the Parthenon friezes (the so-called Elgin marbles, currently the object of a heated debate about whether they belong to the UK or to Greece) and 2. she was sued for divorce by her first husband after he found out about her adultery with family friend Ferguson.

Mary Nisbet grew up as the beloved daughter of a wealthy and well-connected Scottish family. She married the ambitious Lord Elgin and moved almost immediately with him to Constantinople, where he was ambassador to the court of the Ottoman emperor Selim III. These were dangerous times, with Napoleon ravaging Europe, North Africa and Russia. While Lord Elgin occupied himself with conventional diplomacy (and spending Mary's money), the beautiful and vivacious Mary contributed to the luster of the English embassy by giving parties and offering hospitality. High-ranking officials and relatives of such befriended her, and she was able to penetrate into aspects of Constantinople society that had always been closed to Western women (such as visiting the harem and being spoken to by the Sultan). During this long stay, Lord Elgin began to collect antiquities in earnest, and spending huge sums to have them moved, packed and shipped home. Often it was Mary who had to take care of the practical side of things, including convincing British naval officers to carry these bulky and heavy statues on ships that were strictly intended for military use (and therefore in direct contravention of the orders of the British military hero, Lord Nelson). Mary was an indefatigable letter writer and we get most of these descriptions from her own pen.

Eventually it was time to return home to England, but Lord Elgin decided to make a detour through France, figuring that the political situation was finally stable enough. But no, Napoleon decided to imprison/ house-arrest all British in France, and it took years for Lord Elgin to be released. Mary, being pregnant and less important than her husband, had more freedom to move. The separation proved fatal to the marriage : Lord Elgin became convinced that his wife was gallivanting around instead of working to secure his release. Their fourth child, born during the captivity, died young. And Mary, miserably pregnant and then going through a hellish delivery of her fifth child, decided she was done with the business of producing heirs for Lord Elgin. When Lord Elgin opened a love letter intended for Mary, he realized she had been carrying on at least an emotional affair and sued for divorce. He wanted the children and he wanted her fortune (he himself, being a second-generation spendthrift, had little personal fortune left). He got the children but not Mary's fortune. The divorce proceedings were an enormous scandal but Mary married Ferguson and they lived happily ever after, being active in progressive politics, profiting from the post-Napoleonic wars economic boom, and traveling around pacified Europe.

I enjoyed the book, and the background to the dispute surrounding the Elgin marbles was interesting. The extracts from Mary's letters are fun to read, and they offer a fascinating view into the pump and circumstance of the Ottoman empire. Much of the book, especially towards the end, is an enumeration of family relations and visits to various estates and popular destinations.

Robin says

There were some things that the author did very well in this book, including painting a vivid portrait of the

social vivaciousness of Mary Elgin, illustrating the character of Lord Elgin, and developing a solid story of a failing marriage. But still, this book left me wanting more—more about the marbles themselves, more about the legacy and relevance of the marbles today, more about Mary as a woman after her return to England. I also found myself thinking that maybe Nagel's portrait of Mary was rather skewed toward the positive. The verdict: enjoyable, but somehow not completely satisfying.

Beth says

great biography...ever wonder what life was like in 1800 as a super rich British young woman married to a politician? Me either, but I sure know now! Well worth reading, and learning about historical 'STUFF".

Katrina says

Nagel paints a fascinating image of Mary Nisbet. Many facets of Mary's life are intriguing: her wild success as an ambassador's wife; her mastery of the art of letter writing; her benevolence as a land owner and land lord; her early advocacy for vaccinations; her interactions with Napoleon and succes in procuring the release of her husband imprisoned by the tyrant; finally, her failed marriage and estrangement from her children, both which were, allegedly, due to Lord Elgin. Reading this biography makes the reader think Mary is a saint and a martyr.

However, the title and cover art lead the reader to expect a discussion of the Marbles as well, not just of Mary Nisbet. Not only is the amount of time spent on this aspect disappointing, but the coverage is unfortunately severely biased. At least Nagel could have presented simply the facts and allowed the reader to decide for him/herself if the Elgins were rescuers or plunderers.

Mary is described as traveling the world rescuing its treasures from neglect, yet Nagel at best glosses over and often fails to mention the irreparable damage done to the antiquities: for starters, some were shattered while being extracted; some were lost forever when one of her ships sunk enroute to England; the Marbles were left to rot behind Lord Elgin's house in the damp climate of Enland while waiting to be purchased; the British Museum damaged the Marbles while "cleaning" them with harsh chemicals. It is hard to know for sure if neglect by the Greeks, the Venetians, the Christians or the Turks was truly any worse, or to argue if the Marbles would be in a better or worse state had they been left in Athens. It is impossible to change history and see what might have been.

Knowing the extremely biased and one sided nature of Nagel's presentation of the Marbles' issue, it is hard to trust her presentation of all the aforementioned fascinating aspects of Mary Nisbet.

Victoria says

I was really hoping to learn more about the Elgin Marbles but really they were almost an aside. It was wonderful to learn more about Mary Nisbet, but I find there's a bit of bias in the recount. She's too perfect/innocent. It's almost non-human! I'm wondering if the source material came from her side of the family?

Duntay says

Too much mistress, not enough marbles...

Kathleen says

This biography of Mary Nisbet was so delightfully readable that I had to keep reminding myself it wasn't fictional. I am grateful that this well spoken, charismatic, intrepid, young heiress Scotswoman consistently engaged in copious amounts of correspondence which survived her. Author Susan Nagel has successfully structured her book as to give the reader plenty of context for the circumstances under which Mary crossed paths with numerous notable personages , Lord Nelson of Trafalgar fame, Napoleon (yes, that one), Selim III, to name a few.

Though it is with mixed feelings that I consider the wholesale acquisition of extensive Greek relics and architecture, by her husband, Lord Elgin and herself, one can't help but wonder if they HADN'T done so, would any of those priceless artifacts survived to present day. I think, not.

And as a final teaser, not a spoiler ... the old saw "to live well is the best revenge" was exemplified in Mary's ultimately happy life with her soul mate. She certainly deserved that hard won life.

Rebecca says

Heavily based on the countess own diaries and letters - which of course makes it a bit biased (most people are after all biased when it comes to themselves, it would be strange if they weren't). But it is after all very clear that this is the case, so I don't see that as an issue at all. The only drawback with that, is that when there is less letters to base the story on, you don't get as much insight and details into what is really happening - thus much of the book covers her time in the Ottoman Empire and the travels home, when she had reason to write many letters home. This is perhaps the most obvious when it comes to (view spoiler) Not the fault of the author, though, of course.

Alice says

Elgin and Mary

A beautiful Scottish Heiress marries the handsome young Earl of Elgin. He becomes the Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire and they set off together, madly in love. Unfortunately this is real life and not a romance novel although it starts out that way. Several things work together to break up this ideal union. First Elgin becomes a victim of his doctors who are prescribing mercury for his headaches (later this will kill his son) causing ulcers and disfigurement. Secondly he refuses to take any action to spare his wife continuous pregnancy and she has 5 kids in 6 years. Lastly he spends money like it's going out of style. That's Mary's money. Of course he considers it his. This ultimately leads to a divorce which is highly unusual for the

period and the process is very enlightening showing the extreme bias against women and legal inequality of status that existed. Very good research. Highly recommended.

Penny Cipolone says

Interesting read about a woman who was clearly ahead of her time. Whether you agree with the "borrowing" of the Elgin Marbles or not, the story behind Lady Elgin (Mary Nesbit) and their removal to England is a fascinating story of how a woman can work behind the scenes and do much more than she is given credit for. Most of the book is more about Mary's life than the Parthenon episodes. It can be a slow read, but sections are fascinating when viewed in the light of the rights of women in 18th and 19th century England. Mary Nesbit has been pretty much forgotten by historians, but as the largest land-holder in Scotland for many years, she deserves a place among the world's women who controlled their own destiny.

Jamie says

The writing was good and you got a vivid picture of this family and this woman's life and personal battles, but there was a sense of distance that kept me from loving it as much as it deserved. I can't quite put it into words, but while some books might put you right up beside the biographer's subject to experience everything with them, Nagel only manages to get you in the same room as them, watching the proceedings as just another party guest.

Cherise Wolas says

An interesting read about a woman greatly ahead of her time, who also lived through many of the most major events in the 1700s and was directly involved in them. It provides a real flavor of how life was lived by the richest at that time. Mary Nisbet, ultimately one of the largest landowners in Scotland, lived a fascinating life. Her marriage to Count Elgin, their time abroad, their marriage, children, her diplomatic feats, is recounted here. Much is taken from her personal letters (and what letters were intended to do at that time fascinated me), and so naturally there is a bias, but she's charming and interesting, and I learned a lot. The ongoing historical issues surrounding the Elgin marbles, and their potentially wrongful removal to England, is barely touched on, and in Count Elgin's defense, he wanted to save these and other antiquities from destruction, but it's an interesting look into the time and people at the top in that world.
