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MORISON, William (1663-1739), of Prestongrange, Haddington.

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Constituency

Dates

SCOTLAND

1707 - 1708

PEEBLESSHIRE (TWEEDDALE)

1708 - 1710

PEEBLESSHIRE (TWEEDDALE)

1713 - 1715

Family and Education

bap. 19 Apr. 1663, 2nd but 1st surv. s. of Sir Alexander Morison, MP [S], of Prestongrange by Jean, da. of Robert, 7th Lord Boyd [S]. *m.* (1) 1676, Janet (*d.* 1713), da. of John Rocheid of Craigleith, Edinburgh, 5s. (?4 *d.v.p.*) 3 da.; (2) bef. 1 May 1718, an illeg. da. of Sir John Germain, 1st Bt.*, *s.p. suc. fa.* 1683.[1](#)

Offices Held

Hereditary burgess, Peebles; burgess, Edinburgh 1684, Glasgow 1707.[2](#)

MP [S] Haddingtonshire 1690–1703; Peeblesshire 1702–7.

Commr. union with England 1706; PC [S] 1707–8.[3](#)

Biography

John Morison, the Member's great-grandfather, was a wealthy Edinburgh merchant, whose eldest son was bred to the law and achieved distinction as Lord Prestongrange in the court of session from 1626. Taking his designation from a Haddingtonshire estate acquired from the indebted earls of Lothian, Prestongrange also owned a property of some 13,000 acres in Peeblesshire. His eldest son, Alexander, succeeded in 1631, and was later knighted by Charles I. An important figure both in local and national politics, Sir Alexander served on various committees of war from 1643 and supported the Engagement of 1647. He was fined, but 'lived peaceable', under the Cromwellian regime. A post-Restoration account of his conduct during the Civil War naturally emphasized his royalism. In a petition to the Scottish privy council in 1682 he claimed to be the only person still living who had voted against 'that execrable and horrid act of delivering up his Majesty's sacred person' and had 'signed the Duke of Hamilton's commission when he went with the army to England'. As a Presbyterian, he came into increasing conflict with the authorities, and was fined for failing to support episcopal authority in his locality.[4](#)

One of Sir Alexander's earlier achievements had been to secure a suitable match for his heir, William. This action also brought him into conflict with the authorities, since the intended bride, Janet Rocheid, was under age. Although her marriage to William had long been in contemplation, swift action was necessitated by the death of her father and the interposition of an uncle wishing to marry her off to his own son, who was only nine years old. Janet and William were secretly conveyed to Berwick to be married, staying there 'some two or three months, till she completed her 12 years of age, after which the marriage could not be dissolved'. The

inviolability of the marriage did not, however, preclude prosecution. A total of 10,000 merks in fines was imposed on the guilty parties: William himself being liable for 1,500 merks and 'sent to prison till it should be paid'. His father, though punished via his son's fine, was cleared of all charges, whereas the bride's mother was fined heavily. She was still seeking restitution in 1690, conveniently jumping on the bandwagon against 'arbitrary' rule in the wake of the Revolution.⁵

By the time of his father's death in 1683, William Morison, although not yet 21, had been married for six years and was already a father himself. Entering upon an economically diverse inheritance, he had been brought up to appreciate the advantages of equivocation and opportunism as a means of political survival. He was not a man of high principle, being repeatedly guilty of sharp practice in business, but his Presbyterian background was strong enough to induce a Whiggish cast to his political outlook. During the Revolution, he served as a commissioner of militia, and entered the Scottish parliament in 1690. In 1702 he transferred from Haddingtonshire to Peeblesshire and sat for that county until the Union. Morison had acted consistently with the Court until turned sour by the Darien disaster, having in 1696 invested the sizable sum of £1,000 in the Company of Scotland. He was never truly a member of the Country party, but rather one of the so-called 'honest men' driven into opposition over the Darien issue. In 1700 he subscribed the petition for the summoning of parliament and later presented the Haddingtonshire remonstrance on Caledonia. Nominated by the opposition to the committees of trade in 1700–1, he soon reverted to the Court, accepting the proposal for an address rather than an act of parliament over Caledonia. Morison also remained with the 'rump' of courtiers in 1702 and even followed Queensberry's line on the succession in 1704, when the Duke, finding himself temporarily out of office, was engaged in undermining the 'New Party' experiment. Morison was rewarded, following Queensberry's return to power, with a place on the union commission of 1706 (which was eventually worth £500 Scots) and with elevation to the Scottish privy council in May 1707. In a contemporary squib he was satirized as supporter of the Union, the humour turning upon his physical 'bulk' and alleged stupidity.⁶

Morison's presence in the union commission, from which members of the Squadrone were excluded, indicates that he was not of that group, though he has been erroneously classified as such by one modern historian. He was certainly connected by kinship with members of the Squadrone, such as William Nisbet*, William Bennet* and Lord Strathnaver (William Sutherland*). A party-political connexion did not exist, however. As his mother's executor, Morison was engaged in a protracted legal dispute with Nisbet (see NISBET, William) from 1695 to 1719, finally losing his case on appeal to the Lords. Morison was Bennet's uncle by marriage, but there is no evidence of political co-operation beyond some ineffective mutual aid in the election of 1710, when neither was returned to Parliament. The connexion with Sutherland, a sometime Squadrone peer, appears to have operated in a contrary direction. Instead of Strathnaver's marriage causing Morison to be drawn into Sutherland's political circle, the son-in-law, according to one contemporary, was 'chiefly guided' by Morison and the Court peer Lord Glasgow, whose own son married another of Morison's daughters. The stronger pull in this instance, as in others, was towards the Queensberry connexion. The Jacobite agent, Scot, hit the nail on the head when he described Morison as 'a weak, but rich man, expecting a patent of honour, and entirely managed by Queensberry'.⁷

Morison, therefore, was already well connected when he entered Westminster politics, and his letter of introduction from Sir Alexander Rigby* to Robert Harley* emphasized that he was 'considerable both in fortune and alliances'. An early mark of recognition is apparent in his appointment on 10 Nov. 1707 to the committee on the Address, but no speech by him is known in this Parliament. He stood successfully for Peeblesshire in 1708 and returned to London intent on securing a private bill for improving a harbour near Prestonpans, previously known as Newhaven or Aitcheson's Haven, but which had gradually assumed the proprietorial description, Morison's Haven.⁸

The potential advantages of Morison's Haven were considerable: this period witnessed a nearby and successful example of industrial and trading development, financed by the Earl of Winton, at Cockensie and Port Seton. The salt-panning industry was already well established on the Firth of Forth, and, like Winton, Morison had his own saltworks, the second largest in the locality. Morison was also involved in exploiting local coal reserves, which brought him into conflict with other landowners. In addition to these industrial enterprises, he obtained parliamentary sanction for an annual fair and weekly markets at the Haven. But the most innovative project was a glassworks which he developed from about 1696, in partnership with several other adventurers. He thereafter gained important privileges from the Scottish privy council, which were ratified by act of parliament in 1698. These included exemption from customs and excise, and a nine-year monopoly of production and ban on imports (with minor qualifications) for mirror, coach, moulded, and window glass: types that 'were never heretofore manufactured within this kingdom'. An important rider to the act, however, stipulated that Morison and his partners were to furnish 'as good and as cheap glass' as had been sold in London or previously imported. The business was carried on amicably till the autumn of 1699, when most of the shareholders surrendered their interests to Morison, allegedly in return for £10 p.a. for eight years. Thereafter he assumed sole management, and in 1700 petitioned unsuccessfully for the right to levy 'an imposition for building an harbour at Morison's Haven'. Meanwhile, he became embroiled in a dispute about paying for the shares and defaulted on some of his creditors.⁹

Although Morison had long contemplated a scheme for improving the Haven, the immediate stimulus was the threatened loss of his trading privileges under the Union. He petitioned Lord Treasurer Godolphin (Sidney†) in March 1708, claiming protection under article six of the treaty. This claim, however, did not accord with the general recommendation made by the Scottish excise commissioners, who were eager to 'bring all the subjects of the united monarchy to as exact an equality as possible'. The government's response was simply to allow most of these claims to languish without any precise determination, while the revenue officers continued to levy imposts as necessary. The fact that Morison's monopoly had reached the end of its nine-year term added to the impression that his other privileges ought to be curtailed as well. Concurrently with this negative reaction, the Treasury authorized a remission of 'feu, blench and other duties' for 19 years, back-dated to 1706. This was merely a political sweetener, since these remitted duties totalled £354 Scots, whereas in a single year Morison's exemption from customs and excise had been worth over £37 sterling. His eagerness to revive the earlier scheme for harbour duties and road tolls was therefore understandable. On 22 Dec. Morison was named to draft a bill for repairing and improving the harbour, its fort and approaching highways, which he duly presented on 11 Jan. 1709. On 18 Jan., however, John Cockburn, the Squadron Member for Haddingtonshire, wrote to the Marquess of Tweeddale, an influential local magnate:

I have by smooth ways kept this [bill] from being pushed till I should inform myself perfectly about it, that I might lay it more distinctly before the shire, and I hope they will let me have their directions what part I shall act in it. Laying duties upon goods coming into this harbour and upon land carriages, especially in a place where so much of the landed men's farms pass, may fall heavily upon some of our old neighbours thereabouts, but I have brought [Morison of] Prestongrange to be easy as to that, and he is willing to pass all farms.

Cockburn promised to act as a channel of communication and to co-ordinate parliamentary proceedings. He also informed Tweeddale that Hon. Sir David Dalrymple, 1st Bt.*, had 'sent down informations' against the bill from Edinburgh: 'they are mightily against it . . . for fear it take the trade from Leith, but this is no objection to us'. On the contrary, Cockburn argued that if the bill could be managed so as to get 'the public engage[d] in it, in that case it will rather be our business to promote than oppose such a thing'. Four days later he sent up a 'form of petition . . . to direct the method', but left the actual content to be decided locally, only expressing a strong desire for hard facts rather than mere assertions against the scheme. On 2 Feb. the town council of Edinburgh approved its own petition against the bill, 'not only by reason of the duty it imposes upon all ships coming to the said harbour, but especially upon account of the imposition on land carriages and travellers passing through the adjacent parishes of the county of Haddington to this city'. The granting of 'such extraordinary privileges' to 'a mean and obscure village which contributes not six pence to the support of the government' was highly objectionable, particularly since this amounted to a 'design to compliment a private gentleman at the expense of the whole royal burghs who pay a sixth of the cess of the nation'. Morison's bill was emasculated in committee, as Cockburn gleefully reported on 10 Feb.

We this day in committee went through the bill and . . . cut out of it all that relates to highways, so there now only remains his duty . . . upon all ships coming into his harbour, which indeed I was not very earnest in opposing for I think it will be rather a just punishment upon him.

Since it would cost Morison an estimated £120 to have the bill passed, and because the duties would probably discourage ships from using the harbour, Cockburn deemed this to be 'a warning for others not to push for unreasonable things'. Morison attempted to undo the changes, but Cockburn thwarted his efforts to have the bill recommitted by presenting three petitions against it on 16 Feb. (from Edinburgh, Edinburghshire and Haddingtonshire), immediately before the presentation of the report from the second-reading committee. This tactic prevented Morison from seeking recommitment and produced an order for the petitions to be heard at the bar of the House on 10 Mar. Instead of wrecking the bill entirely, Cockburn obtained leave to withdraw the petitions on 9 Mar. thereby causing the order for the following days' proceedings before counsel at the bar to be discharged. Taken by surprise and outmanoeuvred, Morison 'had no time to set any new project afoot'. The bill was ordered to be engrossed on the 10th and six days later passed its third reading without any significant alterations. The statute empowered Morison and the trustees to appoint collectors and levy a range of harbour duties from a halfpenny to a shilling. Following his personal disappointment, he participated little in parliamentary affairs. He supported the Court, however, over the impeachment of Dr Sacheverell. Defeated 'by a considerable majority' in the 1710 election, he was not re-elected until 1713, when he made sure of his return by standing for Peeblesshire and Sutherlandshire, the latter on the interest of Lord Sutherland. Once it became clear, however, that Morison had regained Peeblesshire, the other

seat was vacated. As an elector, Morison demonstrated a clear preference for Whig candidates: he was marked by George Lockhart* as a sure voter for Sir David Dalrymple in Edinburghshire; and he voted for Cockburn in Haddingtonshire, earlier differences notwithstanding.[10](#)

One reason for Morison's anxiety to gain a seat in the 1713 Parliament was the privileged status of Members in proceedings for debt. The extent of his financial difficulties was considerable. He had a poor head for business and may also have been a gambler (though this latter supposition rests on a report that Morison was once seen in company with the infamous rake Colonel Francis Charteris and the inference that he had been ruined by him). Relationships within Morison's family were strained by shortage of money. In 1716 the court of session 'discerned an aliment' to Morison's heir 'in proportion to his father's estate; and refused to sustain the father's offer of alimentering him in his family, on account of the notoriety of his treatment'. These domestic pressures, together with the death of his first wife, may have contributed to Morison's lacklustre performance in Parliament: he was not active in committee work and his only recorded vote was on 12 May 1714 in favour of extending the schism bill to cover Catholic education. Classed as a Hanoverian by Lord Polwarth and as a Whig in the Worsley list, Morison signed the Privy Council's proclamation of George I on 1 Aug. 1714. He did not stand again for Parliament and by 1733, as a consequence of his rising debts, was made a 'close prisoner of the Fleet' with his estates in sequestration. One of his many liabilities was in the form of a bond, the security of which was guaranteed by duties on goods passing via Fleet ditch. This channel, however, had been gradually 'filled up with mud and become useless'. Since it was nothing more than a 'common nuisance' and a hazard to health, an Act was obtained for reclaiming the Fleet ditch as building land. A timely petition from prison by Morison obtained a saving clause to protect what remained of his investment and he managed somehow (perhaps as a consequence of his petition) to secure a release from prison. But he never escaped from debt. He died abroad in 1739, leaving among his creditors Lord Sutherland, who set in train a viability study for refurbishing the now-derelict saltworks at Morison's Haven. Prestongrange was sold off, leaving only his wife's inheritance, Craighleith, which had already descended to their son. Of all the schemes initiated by four generations of Morisons, therefore, the only one to outlast William was the product of his youthful and clandestine marriage of some 60 years earlier.[11](#)

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Author: David Wilkinson

Notes

- [1.](#) *Hist. Scot. Parl.* 509–10; *Nisbet's Heraldic Plates* ed. Ross and Grant, 135–6; *Scots Peerage* ed. Paul, v. 171; *Services of Heirs* (1 ser.) i. 1710–19, p. 19; *Scot. Rec. Soc.* iii. 197, 231; xxxi. 40; *Post Boy*, 3–5 Nov. 1709; *Retours*, Haddington, i. 352; Edinburgh, i. 1296; Peebles, ii. 190; SRO, David Fearn mss GD1/576/8, Joseph Blake to Andrew Hutchinson, 1 May 1718 (*ex inf.* Mrs J. Turnbull).
- [2.](#) *Hist. Peeblesshire* ed. Buchan, ii. 386; *Scot. Rec. Soc.* lix. 359; lvi. 277.
- [3.](#) *APS*, xi. app. 162; SP57/27 pp. 3–6.
- [4.](#) *Hist. Peeblesshire*, 385–6; *Scot. Rec. Soc.* lxxvi. 155; xxxi. 40; Brunton and Haig, *Senators Coll. Justice*, 275; *Trans. E. Lothian Antiquarian and Field Naturalist Soc.* x.

92–132; W. M. Morison, *Decisions Ct. of Session*, 13402–3; *Retours*, Haddington, i. 136; Edinburgh, i. 691; Peebles, ii. 92; *APS*, vi(1), 52, 200, 560, 766, 813; vi(2), 30, 102, 820, 846; viii. 243; *Reg. PC Scotland*, 1676–8, p. 656; 1681–2, pp. 398–400, 423, 726; Add. 21422, ff. 370, 488; F. D. Dow, *Cromwellian Scotland*, 122, 157–9, 311; *Acts and Ordinances of Interregnum* ed. Firth and Rait, ii. 875–83, 882; *CSP Dom.* 1655, pp. 71, 140; W. Fraser, *Earls of Haddington*, ii. 314; Fountainhall, *Hist. Notices* (Bannatyne Club, lxxxvii), i. 349, 351, 353; H. Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, 389; *Scot. Hist. Soc.* xiv. 10.

- [5.](#) *Reg. PC Scotland* 1676–8, pp. 127, 619–24; Fountainhall, i. 147; *Scot. Hist. Soc.* ser. 3, xlvii(2), pp. 254–5.
- [6.](#) *APS*, ix. 29, 137; x. 193; xi. 21, 139, 170; info. from Dr P. W. J. Riley on members of Scot. parl.; P. W. J. Riley, *King Wm. and Scot. Politicians*, 136, 173, 179–84; *Darien Pprs.* (Bannatyne Club, xc), p. 373; *Crossrigg Diary*, 4; NLS, ms 14498, ff. 82–83; P. W. J. Riley, *Union*, 93; Boyer, *Anne Annals*, iii. app. 41; *Cal. Treas. Bks.* xxii. 120; *HMC Var.* v. 273.
- [7.](#) R. Walcott, *Pol. Early 18th Cent.* 235; *EHR*, lxxxiv. 521; NLS, Sutherland mss Dep. 313/556, mar. settlement, 4 Oct. 1705; W. Fraser, *Sutherland Bk.* i. 395; *HMC Laing*, i. 425; SRO, Biel mss GD6/1389/1, mar. contract of William Bennet; *Morison v. Nisbet et al.* (1718); *Morison v. Scot, Scot, Nisbet et al.* (1719); *HMC Lords*, n.s. x. 302–4; Morison, *Decisions*, 2413, Fountainhall, ii. 353–4; *APS*, xi. 437; SRO, Ogilvy of Inverquhar mss GD205/36/6, Morison to Bennet, 8 Dec. 1710; Lincs. AO, Yarborough mss 16/7/1, Daniel Defoe to Godolphin, 26 June 1708; *Scots Peerage*, iv. 206; *Orig. Pprs.* ed. Macpherson, ii. 11.
- [8.](#) *HMC Portland*, iv. 455.
- [9.](#) *Trans. E. Lothian Antiquarian Soc.* xviii. 45, 69; *Scot. Geographical Mag.* lxxxii. 153–62; *Jnl. of Henry Kalmeter's Travels* ed. Smout, 41–42; *Early Travellers in Scotland* ed. Hume Brown, 166, 216; *Reg. PC Scotland* 1690, pp. 116–17, 314, 522; *Scot. Hist. Soc. Miscellany*, i. 405; Scott, 389; *APS*, x. 180, 231, 337; *Morison v. Smith, Burton et al.* (1719); *HMC Lords*, n.s. xii. 511–12.
- [10.](#) *HMC Lords*, n.s. vii. 581–2, 589; *Cal. Treas. Bks.* 58, 60, 62, 121–3, 128; Add. 70051, discharge to Morison, 28 Aug. 1708; NLS, ms 14415, ff. 170–1, 174–5, 184; ms 7021, ff. 155, 159; *Extracts Edinburgh Recs.* 1701–18, p. 166; *Statutes*, ix. 105–7; *Scots Courant*, 3–6 Nov. 1710; *Lockhart Letters* ed. Szechi, 70; SRO, Haddington sheriff ct. recs. SC40/68/3, pp. 10–15.
- [11.](#) A. Carlyle, *Anecdotes*, 2; *Cal. Treas. Bks.* xxiv. 390, 572; *Cal. Treas. Pprs.* 1708–14, pp. 180, 187, 191, 617; Morison, *Decisions*, 410; SRO, *Court of Session Productions* (List and Index Soc. special ser. xiii), 18; SRO, *Gen. Reg. Sasines*, 614–15; *Trans. E. Lothian Antiquarian Soc.* xviii. 56; *CJ*, xxii. 59, 140; *Case of William Morison* (1732) [sic for 1733]; *Statutes*, vi. 124; Boyer, *Pol. State*, viii. 118; *Hist. Scot. Parl.* 510; *Scot. Rec. Soc.* iii. 197; *Services of Heirs* (1 ser.), i. 1700–9, p. 18; i. 1710–19, p. 19.

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