# Annie Gordon Baillie: Victorian era’s queen of swindlers uncovered in new podcast and book



Born in 1848 to a Scottish farm servant, Annie Gordon Baillie emerged from a life of poverty to become one of the most infamous con women of the Victorian era. Despite her illiteracy and lack of formal education, Gordon Baillie employed her charm and cunning to orchestrate elaborate frauds that spanned continents. Her story is now the focus of the BBC Sounds podcast and Radio Four programme, "Lady Swindlers," hosted by Lucy Worsley, shedding light on the intricate details of her exploits.

Gordon Baillie's early foray into deception began in Dundee, where she accumulated significant debts shortly after moving there at the age of 20. From these humble beginnings, she quickly expanded her criminal repertoire. She is notorious for her attempts to relocate crofters from Skye to marshland in Australia, a scheme that ultimately failed when the islanders rejected her proposals. Another audacious undertaking involved the creation of fictitious charities, including a purported school for Protestant girls in Rome, through which she successfully embezzled substantial sums before fleeing to live lavishly across Europe.

Historian Rosalind Crone, a contributor to the podcast, noted that Gordon Baillie's ingenuity lay in her ability to exploit legal loopholes. During the Victorian era, laws often required proof of intent before declaring debts as fraudulent, a gap that many, including Gordon Baillie, recognised and exploited. Crone remarked, “She is interesting because she gets away with it for so long,” highlighting how Gordon Baillie’s various cons were particularly creative, tapping into established social networks for financial gain.

Her exploits caught the attention of many, including Sir Richard Duckworth-King, a retired admiral who unwittingly funded her lavish lifestyle, leading to the equivalent of millions in today’s currency being siphoned from his resources. Local newspapers, such as the Evening Gazette in Aberdeen, aptly dubbed her the "Queen of Swindlers," noting her audacity and charm. One report even provocatively suggested that there had never been such a bold figure in her line of work, describing her as a woman with “a face of brass” alongside notable looks that aided her deception.

Ultimately, Gordon Baillie's exploits were too grand to remain concealed. She was apprehended on June 23, 1888, after an extended manhunt led by Detective Inspector Henry Marshall. His assessments of her character—labelling her "extraordinary" and one of the "greatest swindlers in the country"—painted a picture of a woman who combined cunning with charisma in a way that was almost theatrical. Her arrest led to a five-year prison sentence, during which public interest in her story surged, as evident from sensationalist media coverage of the time.

Upon her release in 1892, Gordon Baillie, now a figure of public intrigue, found herself embroiled in further trouble. Her next transgression involved the theft of paintings, which earned her an additional seven-year sentence. Following this, she sought a fresh start in America under the alias Louise J.F. Bailie; however, her past continued to haunt her, with reports suggesting she ended up in a New York workhouse—her life of glamour and charm having faded into obscurity.

The legacy of Annie Gordon Baillie serves as a reminder of the darker sides of social ambition during the Victorian age, where the public was both captivated and repulsed by tales of deception. As historian Rosalind Crone articulated, historical figures like her often oscillate between being perceived as antiheroes and villainous swindlers, reflecting society’s complicated relationship with notoriety and fame.

Her life story, vividly captured in the forthcoming book "The Adventures of a Victorian Con Woman: The Life and Crimes of Mrs Gordon Baillie," authored by Mick Davis and David Lassman, offers an enriching exploration of the dynamics of deceit, class, and gender in a period marked by significant social upheaval. As the podcast and book bring her story back into public consciousness, the fascination with such characters reminds us how history can often resurrect those once forgotten.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2
2. Paragraphs 3, 4
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6. Paragraph 7
7. Paragraph 7

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14739211/The-Victorian-lady-swindler-40-aliases-convinced-admiral-sugar-daddy-tried-island-crofters.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.libroworld.com/9781526764867/> - This page provides information about 'The Adventures of a Victorian Con Woman: The Life and Crimes of Mrs Gordon Baillie,' a book by Mick Davis and David Lassman. The book delves into the life of Annie Gordon Baillie, a notorious Victorian-era con artist who used over 40 aliases and defrauded various individuals and organizations across multiple continents. Born in 1848 in Peterhead, Scotland, she rose from poverty to become a charming socialite, all while orchestrating elaborate schemes that spanned four decades. The book offers a comprehensive account of her fraudulent activities and eventual downfall.
3. <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/the-adventures-of-a-victorian-con-woman-mick-davis/1137594169> - This Barnes & Noble listing details 'The Adventures of a Victorian Con Woman: The Life and Crimes of Mrs Gordon Baillie,' authored by Mick Davis and David Lassman. The book explores the life of Annie Gordon Baillie, a Scottish-born con artist who, despite being born into poverty and illiteracy in 1848, became one of the most notorious female criminals of the Victorian era. Utilizing over 40 aliases, she defrauded merchants, aristocrats, and charitable donors across Europe, America, and Australasia. The narrative covers her rise, fraudulent schemes, and eventual capture.
4. <https://www.sundaypost.com/fp/annie-gordon-baillie/> - An article from The Sunday Post titled 'The Honest Truth: How Peterhead-born Victorian fraudster Annie Gordon Baillie swindled her way round the world' provides an in-depth look at Annie Gordon Baillie's life and crimes. Born in 1848 in Peterhead, Scotland, she was an illegitimate and illiterate woman who used her charm and intelligence to become a wealthy socialite. The article details her various cons, including defrauding merchants, aristocrats, and charitable organizations across multiple continents. It also discusses her eventual arrest and the legacy of her fraudulent activities.
5. <https://www.frometimes.co.uk/the-adventures-of-a-victorian-con-woman-frome-historians-latest-book-is-out-now/> - This article from Frome Times announces the release of 'The Adventures of a Victorian Con Woman: The Life and Crimes of Mrs Gordon Baillie,' authored by Mick Davis and David Lassman. The book offers a comprehensive account of Annie Gordon Baillie, a notorious Victorian-era con artist born in 1848 in Peterhead, Scotland. Despite her humble beginnings, she became a charming and wealthy socialite, all while orchestrating elaborate fraudulent schemes across four decades and three continents. The article highlights the book's exploration of her life and crimes.
6. <https://www.waterstones.com/book/the-adventures-of-a-victorian-con-woman/mick-davis/david-lassman/9781526764867> - Waterstones provides a detailed overview of 'The Adventures of a Victorian Con Woman: The Life and Crimes of Mrs Gordon Baillie,' a book by Mick Davis and David Lassman. The book delves into the life of Annie Gordon Baillie, a Scottish-born con artist who, despite being born into poverty and illiteracy in 1848, became one of the most notorious female criminals of the Victorian era. Utilizing over 40 aliases, she defrauded merchants, aristocrats, and charitable donors across Europe, America, and Australasia. The narrative covers her rise, fraudulent schemes, and eventual capture.
7. <https://www.pen-and-sword.co.uk/The-Adventures-of-a-Victorian-Con-Woman-Hardback/p/18522> - Pen and Sword Books offers information about 'The Adventures of a Victorian Con Woman: The Life and Crimes of Mrs Gordon Baillie,' authored by Mick Davis and David Lassman. The book provides a comprehensive account of Annie Gordon Baillie, a notorious Victorian-era con artist born in 1848 in Peterhead, Scotland. Despite her humble beginnings, she became a charming and wealthy socialite, all while orchestrating elaborate fraudulent schemes across four decades and three continents. The article highlights the book's exploration of her life and crimes.