

# The Scottish Empress of Morocco

Take a stroll along the sleepy streets of Muthill in Perthshire, and you might be lucky enough to spot a descendant of the village's legendary former resident – Helen Gloag – Empress of Morocco. Her remarkable life, which saw her transformed from a blacksmith's daughter to a glamorous empress, via a Barbary pirate or two, reads like a real-life fairy tale. The only difference is that Helen's story has no ending. No one knows for sure what happened to the adventurous Scottish lass after the death of her Sultan.

Helen Gloag was born in the village of Wester Pett, near Muthill in Perthshire in the year 1750. Her father, Andrew Gloag was a blacksmith; however her mother died when she was still a child and her father remarried. Helen and her step-mother did not get on well and matters came to a head in 1769 due to Helen's friendship with a farmer in the area.

Many Scots were taking the opportunity to travel to the Americas to start a new life in a new land at this time and Helen saved some money before setting off with some friends for Greenock, to sail to North Carolina. Disaster struck however, when the ship that Helen and her friends were travelling aboard was attacked by Salle Pirates off the coast of Spain with all on board being taken captive. Helen and the other women on board were taken to Rabat in Morocco, where the pirates would make their living by selling captives into slavery. In the slave market, Helen caused considerable interest from would-be purchasers as she was young and strikingly beautiful. An astute businessman saw an opportunity and bought Helen, before gifting her to the Emperor of Morocco, Sidi Muhammad ibn Abdullah – a deeply religious man, well known for his wisdom and diplomacy. Sidi Muhammad very quickly fell in love with the young Scottish lady and married her, also giving her the title of Empress of Morocco. During the years of their marriage, Helen bore Sidi Muhammad 2 sons.



A fabulous beauty, with a lustrous mane of auburn hair and green eyes, Helen soon became the Sultan's favorite wife. Today, many of the flame haired residents of Muthill and nearby areas such as Crieff are thought to be direct descendants of Helen's family.

Helen is credited with having influence which secured the release of many British seafarers from the pirates' grasp. She was also able to send letters and gifts back to her family in Perthshire and her brother Robert visited her in Morocco on a number of occasions. Empress Helen's husband, Sidi Muhammad was a skilled diplomat and was the first head of state in the world to recognize the United States of America after the war of independence from the United Kingdom and also the first leader to sign treaties with the U.S. guaranteeing their ships safe passage through sovereign waters.

In 1790 however, Sidi Muhammad died and his son by another lady, Mawlay Yazeed (also known as Mad Yazeed) seized the throne. Yazeed's first priority was to dispose of any potential rivals to the throne, and his attention quickly fell upon Helen's two sons. It is said that Helen sent a plea for help to the British Navy, who dispatched a gunboat to Rabat, however help arrived too late and Helen's sons were already dead, murdered by Yazeed's forces. After this time, nothing is recorded of Helen although there are varying tales of her suffering the same fate as her sons, or a return to Britain, or a different narration of a monument having been erected in Rabat in memory of a Scottish Empress, implying that she survived the chaos of the time. The name Gloag is still a common name in Perthshire giving a living link to these events from the past.

Helen's story inspired novels such as bestseller *The Fourth Queen* by Debbie Taylor. Historians and scholars have studied her life; she has also been the subject of numerous articles and exhibitions.