

CHAPTER 8

The Family at Roscommon

In summary, it can be said that the likely situation of the McWilliam family was that, at some stage between the years of 1812 and 1844 (more precisely probably between 1833 and 1836), John McWilliam returned from Scotland to County Roscommon. If it was after 1832 it would have been with his new wife, Rebecca. John and Rebecca (nee Moss) were married in London at 'Old St Pancras', he aged twenty-one and she one year younger. It would seem that the name of this church, as shown on the Entry of Death, was a corruption of 'St Pancras'.

In his book, London (65), Arthur Mee writes:-

... in Pancras Road we came upon a brick which is thrilling to see, for it is a Roman brick from the ruins of one of our oldest churches, the church dedicated to St Pancras by St Augustine (first Archbishop of Canterbury, AD 597) at Canterbury. The brick is in the nave of St Pancras's little old church of St Pancras, a 13th century church remodelled last century in the Norman style.

It could well be that it was here, in this little old 13th century church, that John McWilliam and Rebecca Moss were married. The year would have been c.1833. Did John's parents attend the service, one wonders? Were his parents, Alexander and Anne and family all on their way back to Ireland at the time? Did John's father and mother in fact leave Scotland at all? The only clue to the answer to the last question is that William never made any reference to his grandparents being at Roscommon. Maybe they remained in Scotland. These and other questions are easy to ask but at this distance of time seem impossible to answer.

We can speculate further and wonder whether John transferred to Ireland first and, having arrived there, sought employment with his distant kinsman, the landlord of the 'Clanricarde estate'? Or did he arrange in advance to go and work on the property? He might conceivably have been invited by Lord Ulick John or his lieutenant to come.

Whatever the answers to these questions might be, we are able to be sure that John and Rebecca were living at the Lodge of this estate when their second son, William (born 1844), could first remember. We know little of Rebecca. There is some confusion, in the records, even about her given name. The copy of the certificate of Entry of Death gives her name as Rebecca McWilliam clearly enough, but her husband's shows it as Jane, and her son's (ie William's death certificate) as Rachael. Philip Walker-Taylor, one of her oldest great-grandsons, maintains that it was Mary. Looking at all the evidence, the present writer is convinced that her name was Rebecca, possibly Rebecca Jane, but certainly Rebecca.

What has come to light is that she was born in England at Stony Stratford, a town in Bedfordshire some 40km NNW of central London. She was of Jewish descent, but presumably of Christian religious persuasion. Her date of birth was between 2.8.1813 and 2.8.1814. Her father was a farmer by the name of Thomas Moss and her mother was Rebecca (nee Grace). She died in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 2 August 1901 aged 87 years, eight of her eleven children surviving her. See Family Tree Chart on page 28.

Her husband, John, was born, as already recorded in Scotland during the calendar year 1812 (or on one of the last three days of the year before). He died on 28 December aged 69 years. We have an informative and interesting glimpse of the man through the eyes of his daughter-in-law, the mother of Neville McWilliam. He wrote:-

My mother who was "English to the backbone" in both church and state... had much respect, but little liking for the old gentleman. From what my mother told me, my grandfather appears to have been what would have been termed "a loyal Irishman". He appears to have had little time for the English, whom, from his extensive reading of history, he regarded as the authors of all Ireland's woes.

This great-grandson of his, from his recent extensive reading of Irish history, is strongly inclined to agree with him - Sorry Rosina !

At this stage it is possible to ascertain the names of only seven of John and Rebecca McWilliam's children. The oldest was one of the family who failed to emigrate to New Zealand, for there is a definite report that John (Junior), who was born about 1838, remained in Ireland. In any case, he died in London. The year of his death is given as 1910, making him about 72 years at the time of his demise.

The next child of John and Rebecca was Mary, the latinised form, Maria, after being used, it seems. This name was pronounced in the old manner, such as to rhyme with the word afire. Her brother, William, in reminiscing about her in his old age to his granddaughter, Fanny Morrisby (nee McWilliam) and her brother, Ronald, used often to refer to 'your great-aunt Maria'. She was the one who married Arthur Albert Pantham and more will be recorded of her (and him) later. In the meantime it is perhaps sufficient to say that she was born on 10 April 1842 and died on 6 February 1919 at New Plymouth in New Zealand. She was buried in Hawera Cemetery.

In chronological order William came next. His birthday was 17 January 1844. Neville McWilliam asserts that his birth was in the following year, the year after 'the calamitous potato famine'. Neville is in error here, for there is abundant evidence that it was 1844. William always gave this year as his date of birth; his death certificate confirms it; as does his obituary and his mother's death certificate. In any case the potato blight first appeared in Ireland in the year 1845 and lasted for four years which, if Neville was right, would put William's birthdate as 1846 or even later. Thus it seems certain that it was the year before, not after, the first year of the potato crop failure. William died in Sydney on 7 October 1930, aged 86 years. We have more information about him, his wife Rosina and their descendants than any other of the children of John and Rebecca McWilliam. It will be presented in due course.

Another daughter of John and Rebecca McWilliam was 'Maggie', this no doubt being a sobriquet for Margaret. She married a man by the name of Moore and lived in Christchurch, New Zealand, at least for a time. Rev. Horace McWilliam, one of her many nephews, writes of her in his memoirs (66):-

(My McWilliam grandparents) lived in a small house (in Christchurch) in this well-settled, narrow thoroughfare, opposite to which house was a two-storey one, which my grandparents owned, and in which their married daughter and her husband and family lived (Mr and Mrs Moore).

In the same account he tells of his father visiting two of his sisters in Christchurch many years later, one being Mrs Moore, 'my Aunt Maggie'. Joyce Reeder Harris*

* Joyce is the granddaughter of Emily, one of Maggie's sisters.

writes in a recent (1983) letter: 'I know my Mother's first cousin was Arthur Moore here in Auckland and was manager of South British Insurance. (He) seems to have been very well known in this City but he and his wife, Pearl, have both passed on.' Regrettably this is the only trace we have of that family.

The only other child of John and Rebecca McWilliam whose record is available was Emily. One of the four female 'issue' still living, as shown on Rebecca's Death Certificate, was born about 1849 and it seems more than likely that this was Emily. She married James Cunningham and then, on his decease, his brother, Richard. She had ten issue in all, and, like her sister Mary, led a most interesting life. The mother of Joyce quoted in the last paragraph was one of the children. There is much concerning her to recount in the proper place.

Of the other six children of John and Rebecca McWilliam nothing has been discovered. Two presumably died in infancy, or at any rate, before their father whose demise, it will be remembered, was in 1881. These two children may well have been born between 1851 and 1858. The interval between the successive years of birth of all the other children is two years or three years. The only exception is between the one born in 1851 and the one born in 1858 which is a span of seven years. In summary the years of birth of John and Rebecca's offspring and the putatively assigned children's names are: 1838 (John junior), 1842 (Mary), 1844 (William), 1846 (male), 1849 (Emily), 1851 (male), 1858 (female), 1860 (female). It should be pointed out that these dates could be in error by one year. Dates of birth of issue are not shown on death certificates. What is given is merely ages in years at the time of the deceased's passing. It will be recalled that on John's death certificate he is shown as having nine surviving issue (ie in 1881) while on Rebecca's (1901) the number of surviving issue is recorded as eight. The inference has been drawn earlier that one son died between these dates.

The picture we have, as we look over the scene in the province of Connaught, Ireland, during the period from about the middle of the 1830s to 1860, is a lodge at the entrance to one of the estates of the holder of very extensive lands. This landholder, perhaps for some of the time, resides in the imposing mansion on the property. At other times he is living in his main dwelling, his castle, Portumna, in county Galway. For some of the year at least he is in London, for he is a Cabinet member of government and, of course, a member of the House of Lords. He is the Earl of Clanricarde. One of his stewards who manages the estate in Roscommon is a junior, perhaps distant, relative. He is John McWilliam and he and his wife, Rebecca, and their eleven children inhabit the gatehouse.

By 1850 the terrible potato blight and the memory of its calamitous consequences are beginning to disappear. Some of the children at the lodge are starting to attend school. John, Mary (Maria) and William are old enough to be classed as of school age. It is a local school, presumably in the town of Roscommon itself. The Reader will appreciate that there were (and are) several towns in Ireland with the same name as the County in which they are situated. Thus the town of Galway is located in County Galway, Cavan in County Cavan and Roscommon in County Roscommon.

The great British Education Act of 1870 with its policy of 'free, secular and compulsory' education was still twenty years away. In Ireland the Chief Secretary (Lord Stanley) had introduced in September 1831 a national school system. The eminent Australian educational historian, AG Austin, writes (67) of it:-

To administer the schools a Board of Commissioners for National Education had been established, though the local administration of each school was

* One of these was Lucy McWilliam, who married a man by the name of Kennard. Another was Rebecca who died (1878) unmarried as the result of a fall from a horse in her twenties.

left to the 'patron', the person who originally sponsored the school and put it in connection with the Board. The essential feature of these schools was the attempt to bring together children of all sects for a general literary education which, while Christian in spirit, was undenominational.

In addition to achieving a reasonable compromise on the vexatious religious question, the Irish National system was a marked improvement on what had gone before. The plan included the setting up of a model school for practical teaching and some effort was made to prepare the teachers adequately. Textbooks and references were prepared and these raised the general standard of education wherever they were in use. These Irish schools were of such superior quality that the system soon developed a world-wide reputation, reaching as far afield as the Colony of New South Wales. The basic idea was that, though the property of the school was not vested in the Board of Commissioners, the school received a grant-in-aid for salaries and books, provided it pursued the normal National School program.

It seems reasonable to assume that it was such a school that the John McWilliam children attended and that it was located in the vicinity of the town of Roscommon, if not actually in the town. In later life William McWilliam used to reminisce about his school days. William was evidently something of a teacher's pet, for he used to perform well in class and all schoolmasters like a successful achiever. As a result of his close relations with the teacher he received his help against the taunts and bullying of the Catholic majority. One day it was announced that the Board Inspector was to visit the school officially. When the great man arrived he stood in front of the class and asked the schoolmaster if he taught poetry. An affirmative answer produced the order to have a pupil recite a poem. The teacher promptly called on William McWilliam to repeat the verse of Wordsworth's famous Ode, *Intimations of Immortality*, beginning, 'There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream...' William related that, though he knew the poem well, the tension of the awesome occasion drove every word out of his head. The bemused William stood in embarrassed silence and then collapsed in disgrace. The favour of the master was lost and he was no longer sheltered from the abuse and torment of the Roman Catholic children.

This anecdote tells us incidentally that John McWilliam and his family members were certainly Protestant. We know, of course, that William and his immediate descendants were staunch adherents of the Established church. We also learn from this school-days account that William, in spite of his mental lapse at a critical moment, was academically successful. His life-long habit of reading and his interest and high achievement in the intellectually challenging game of chess are pointers to his academic and noetic abilities. As his obituary report puts it: 'His prowess as a chess player was marked by victory over former chess champions of New Zealand and New South Wales.' When he came to New Zealand he studied the Maori language and became fluent at it. He had an intimate knowledge of Maori rites and customs.

In January 1930, aged 86, he was staying with his son and family at the seaside town of Kiama. A circus troupe settled in the adjoining showground. In his walks around the area William discovered that several of the acrobatic performers were Maoris. To their delight he immediately spoke to them in their own tongue. They responded with enthusiasm and it became a daily ritual for William to visit the performer's caravan and have discourse with them in their own native language.

The present writer recalls William spying one of his school history books. He promptly made a request to borrow it. It was Walter Murdoch's The Making of Australia and William revelled in it, praising its literary quality and its factual presentation.

Perhaps his interest in matters of the intellect led him to choose a wife from an academic family, the story of which will appear in due course.

William claimed in his usual modest way towards the end of his life that he had had what he called 'a fair commercial education'. No doubt he stayed on at the local Irish National school, as did his brothers and sisters, till he reached the end of the curriculum provided. Whether or not this included a 'commercial' course in today's sense of the word is unclear. The only alternative which one can imagine is that he could have attended a more advanced course in some bigger city in Ireland, though there is no reference to such in any of the records. It is worth noting in this connection that there are several references to the reputation of the McWilliam family when it settled in New Zealand as being highly respected and well educated people, this applying to the girls as well as William.

References

- (65) Mee, Arthur The King's England LONDON, Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, London, 1937. Page 568.
- (66) McWilliam, Horace By Rough Paths and Smooth. An unpublished autobiography. 1951. Page 4.
- (67) Austin AG Australian Education. Pitman & Sons, Melbourne. 1961. Page 33.