

CHAPTER 9

Emigration

In about January 1930, some ten months before his death, William McWilliam was persuaded to sit down and put in writing some record of his early life. The result was a page and a half of recollections, written in pencil, still in the possession of the present writer. The first paragraph started:-

I was born on 17th January 1844, in Ireland. I got a fair commercial education and being just entering manhood and seeing a poor chance of doing anything for my betterment I made my mind up to go to New Zealand. When father saw that I had my mind made up to go he sold the farm and the whole family migrated to New Zealand in 1862. I was not long idle and I was offered a position of Book Keeper in a fairly large business at Leithfield...

In endeavouring to be succinct William has left us asking many questions. One feels fairly safe in proposing that he saw only a poor chance of doing anything for his betterment for several reasons. He would have bitter recollections of the disastrous potato crop failure some dozen years before. The threat of recurrence would be frequently in his mind and no doubt the calamity formed a frequent topic of conversation within the family. The parts of Ireland reproduced in paintings and photographs look lush and attractive enough, but there is a large percentage of the land which consists of poor soil, and the Province of Connaught has much more than its fair share of the latter. In any case it was all in the possession of the few great landlords like the Earl of Clanricarde and any tenant ownership was only the right to tenancy. Peat bogs and rocky outcrops may make pretty pictures and inspire moving poetry but wealth rarely emerges from them, even for the individual who owns them. To an ambitious young man of 18 prospects in Ireland to better oneself were dim indeed in 1862. Torn by religious strife and beset by a variety of 'troubles', not least a distant and uncertain government in London, the Emerald Isle held out little promise for the exercise of enterprise and the rewards of risk-taking.

The outlook in New Zealand, at least as seen from the perspective of central Ireland, was vastly different and certainly more exciting. For one thing gold had been found there and a rush was in full swing. This fabulous country was a land of opportunity for someone willing to work hard and take a chance. Land was plentiful, and the life free and easy, with no overpoweringly rich landlords or centuries-old customs to stifle ambition or choke enterprise.

Either the 18-year-old William was very persuasive or the rest of the family, and John McWilliam in particular, were affected by the same kind of dissatisfaction with life in Ireland as William. It seems to us such a gigantic step in these days of settled security. The uncertainty of what lay ahead in New Zealand, as well as the length of the voyage out would have been strong deterrents. That they came only attests to the confidence the group must have had in the accuracy of the favourable reports they had heard, or indicates the baleful nature of conditions back in Ireland. Perhaps their coming simply demonstrates the vigour of the adventurous spirit within them. Maybe it was a combination of all three compelling motives.

The quotation from William's short memoir (1930) suggests that they all came out together, or at least in the same year. This appears unlikely. Several reasons

can be advanced for doubting it. For one thing it seems definite that John, the eldest son, stayed in the United Kingdom. Then the official record shows that when John, the father, died in 1881 he had been in the Colony of New Zealand for eighteen years. Subtracting this figure from 1881 we obtain 1863. In view of the fact that fractions of a year are disregarded and that it would have taken the ship about a year to reach New Zealand from Britain, it is entirely possible that both John and his second son, William, left Ireland (ie began their migration) in 1862, as stated by William. The situation is, however, different with regard to Rebecca. When she died in August 1901 she had been in New Zealand for 36 years according to her Entry of Death. Thus she would have arrived in the year 1865, a couple of years after her husband. No doubt all the younger children were with her. The baby, a girl, would have been no more than five in 1865. But what of the two elder girls, Mary and Emily? Mary would have been about 23 and Emily about seventeen. There is reason to believe that Emily voyaged to New Zealand perhaps with her husband-to-be, James Cunningham. Thereby hangs a romantic tale which will be recounted shortly.

It seems reasonable, therefore, to amend William's account and say that most of his family emigrated to New Zealand over a period of several years in the 1860s, including certainly William, his parents and his five sisters, Mary, Emily, Rebecca, Lucy and Maggie. Two brothers and a younger sister may well have travelled to New Zealand with their mother. One can hardly imagine a five-year-old girl, or even sixteen- and fourteen-year-old boys, being left behind on their own in Ireland.

In looking for a more precise date for the arrival of the individual members of this family group, we note first of all that, apart from writing that 'the whole family migrated to New Zealand' there is no other reference by William to his father, or any other family member, being with him and settling in the new country. In fact William's second son, Horace, in his Memoirs (68) gives the impression that William was on his own when he arrived. He writes:-

Apparently he (William) disembarked at Dunedin, in the south of New Zealand, and then must have travelled by coach to Greymouth, on the west coast of the South Island of New Zealand. It seems he knew someone there (ie in Greymouth) for I remember his telling me that a friend of his in Greymouth advised him to go further north to find employment as a clerk, as gold had been discovered there, and a big "rush" had set in.

In fact Neville McWilliam puts the matter clearly and succinctly in writing to his brother, Horace, on 5 February, 1948:- 'Father preceded his family to New Zealand'.

As for the eldest girl, Mary, it can be stated with confidence that she was in Christchurch in 1865, for the simple reason that she was married in that city on 10 April of that year. This is in satisfying harmony with the statement on her Mother's Death Certificate that she (her mother) had been in New Zealand for 36 years when she died in 1901. Thirty-six years before 1901 is the year 1865.

It is worth stressing again that the information appearing on a copy of an Entry of Death should be regarded with some reserve. Much of the detail may be taken as correct but it is usually obtained from the memory of a surviving relative, such as a son or daughter reporting a death at the Registrar's office. Questions are answered without formal proof of the figures supplied, like dates of birth, ages of children of the deceased and his/her period of time in the country. The result is that the reporting relative, without references to turn to, and generally in no state of mind to be precise, gives a figure or a date in a perfunctory manner. Such data do, however make useful corroborative evidence and if confirmed from other sources may be accepted with

confidence.

There is an interesting corroboration of her father's occupation; the copy of the Death Certificate of Mary and also that of her father himself both show his occupation to have been that of Contractor. Emily's Death Certificate, however, lists him as a farmer.

The question remains: did Emily travel with her mother and Mary and arrive in New Zealand with them, or did she undertake the voyage on the same ship as her future husband? It is just conceivable that she did both. More of this intriguing matter anon.

Reference

(68) McWilliam, Horace. Page 1. See (66), page 39.