

CHAPTER 11

## Emily

Emily Cunningham survived her sister, Mary ('Maria') Fantham, by four years and four months. She was seven years or so younger. She was born in Roscommon, Ireland, probably in the year 1849. The designation of her birthplace on a copy of Entry of Death harmonises with the account given so far of the history of her parents, John and Rebecca McWilliam, their family and their movements.

A romantic tale is associated with Emily's advent to New Zealand and, as promised (page 41), it will now be related. Her granddaughter, Joyce Reeder Harris, (nee Harkness) writes (c. 1980):-

Now re Emily McWilliam - she was engaged to Dick (Richard) Cunningham in Ulster but eloped with his younger brother, James, to Christchurch, New Zealand. They married and had nine or ten children. James died early...

This quotation prompts various comments. The first is to say that it is interesting to note that Richard (Dick) Cunningham came from Ulster. Ulster is, of course, the neighbouring province of Connaught, but the nearest part of the county of Roscommon to the nearest part of Ulster (county Fermanagh) is a distance of rather more than 20 kilometres and the town of Roscommon is some 170 kilometres as the crow flies from Belfast. It is easy to imagine Dick and Emily becoming acquainted, maybe Dick's farming interests or other occupation taking him to Roscommon from whatever part of Ulster he lived in. It is possible to exercise fantasy further and to hypothesise that Emily, after the betrothal to Dick, returned to visit Dick's family home in the northern province. There, one may assume, she met Dick's brother, James. Maybe James showed out well in contrast, in the young woman's eyes. By this time, the scenario might have been as follows. William was already in New Zealand. The young people, James and Emily, now head over heels in love, conspire to run away to that far country and be married, in spite of Emily's engagement to Dick. Do they voyage on the same ship? The Reader may decide for himself: what the official record shows is that Emily and James Cunningham were married in Christchurch, New Zealand. No date is given but Emily is recorded as being 18 years of age at the time, thus making the year about 1867.

If it is correct that Mary came out with her mother and was married to AA Fantham in 1865, what was going on during the intervening two years between the weddings of the two sisters? Did Rebecca McWilliam leave her sixteen-year-old daughter, Emily, in Ireland and voyage to New Zealand in 1865 with Mary? With mother, father, elder sister and brother all out of the way in New Zealand a switch of fiances and an elopement would have been easier (and therefore more likely). An 'elopement' involving travelling on the same ship as mother (Rebecca) and a two-year long wait on arrival at Christchurch, would have been an anticlimax to the story and thus the word 'elopement' would seem something of a misnomer.

Actually James and Emily Cunningham had ten children and James would have died in the 1890s. No doubt Dick heard of the decease of his brother and, in true romantic story style, decided that his first love was the woman for him, in spite of the lapse of something close to thirty years. Presumably he had remained unmarried in the interim. Another inference is that he bore no lasting grudge against Emily for 'ditching' him and marrying James. Anyway the facts are that Emily married her late



husband's brother, Richard ('Dick') Cunningham, when she was aged about 47, ie approximately the year 1896. The ceremony took place, according to the Entry of Death Certificate, in Auckland.

It is regrettable to have to report the anticlimax. Joyce Reeder Harris's narrative goes on:-

I don't think the second marriage was a great success and Uncle Fred (Emily's eldest son) moved his mother and family to Calliope Road, Devonport. The Aunts (ie Emily's daughters) never liked their step-father - they called him "U.D." (Uncle Dick).

Devonport is just north of Auckland, close to the City.

In verification of the sad ending to Emily's second marriage, here is part of a memo by her grandson, Scott Harkness (1980):-

Dick, as the second husband was known, was a particularly clever man who was dux of his college or university in Ireland and was a landscape gardener of repute, but his marriage did not last long, as he was an alcoholic and absolutely uncontrollable when in his "cups". When the marriage broke up Nana (Emily) Cunningham left Christchurch, bringing all her family to Auckland.

Derek Cunningham, a grandson of James Cunningham, reports that the university which Richard attended and at which he gained such distinction was Trinity College, Dublin. The oldest and most prestigious university in Ireland, this top tertiary institution of learning is named in a manner slightly confusing to those used to English universities and their nomenclature. Oxford University, Cambridge University and the rest consist of a number of colleges (twenty or so) and the sum of these, together with certain statutory entities, administrative groups and so on make up the corporate university. In Dublin the actual name of the whole university is 'Trinity College', itself made up of a number of units or colleges, in the English sense. Strictly the formal name is 'Trinity College, the University of Dublin.'

Regarding the origin of the Cunningham family, Joyce Reeder Harris writes:-

The Cunninghams (and McWilliams) and others were Scottish people sent over to Ulster, Ireland, by Cromwell in 1660(?) to quell the Catholics and they settled there. There was a General Cunningham in a later generation in charge of the British Army who was reputed as being a relative.

As has been argued, the McWilliams were perhaps going to Scotland at that time (1653), if they went at all, and they returned to Ireland about the beginning of the nineteenth century. No doubt Joyce is right, however, when she writes that the Cunninghams were part of the 'plantation of Ireland' which certainly went on under Cromwell (and other earlier rulers). Cromwell died in 1658, consequently it would have been a little earlier than stated that the Cunninghams settled in Ulster, or maybe it was under the scheme of dispossession which he and his predecessors had instigated. It was King James I (1603-25) who gave a great fillip to the system of attempting to protestantise Ireland by introducing loyal and hard-line anti-papists.

The descendants of the three siblings, Mary Fantham, William McWilliam and Emily Cunningham, are listed in subsequent Chapters and some detail of their biography is recorded where it is known.