

CHAPTER 13

New Zealand to Australia

William McWilliam was placid, kindly and tolerant, 'a very quiet, spare man' as his granddaughter, Rosina, recalls. Tallish (perhaps 5 feet 10 inches = 178cm) with blue, blue eyes, usually twinkling, he had a neat comely beard and stood straight. He spoke in a cultured, resonant voice, with no trace of affectation or Irish dialect. Throughout many changes and vicissitudes every member of this McWilliam family retained a mellifluous speaking voice with its educated quality. It has been handed on from generation to generation and continues to resist the temptation to succumb to colonial degeneration. William was a man of great probity in his personal life, and of uprightness in business. He and his wife gave an unaffected lead in religious practice and devotion. Horace writes (72):-

Here it was (St Luke's Church, Christchurch, NZ) that my parents used to worship Sunday after Sunday, with all their family, and near our pew would also be Grandfather and Grandmother Barnett. I have a Prayer Book, which they used to use between them, which I greatly prize, as they afterwards gave it to my mother and she to me.

What was William's occupation? His son, Neville, records that when he settled at Christchurch he prospered as a merchant. His oldest living granddaughter writes:- 'When I asked my mother what he did for a living, she would reply, "He was a gentleman"! A copy of William's Death Certificate shows his occupation as that of 'Retired Storekeeper'. On the Birth Certificate of at least two of his eldest sons, Father's Occupation is given as 'Tobacconist'. It seems certain that in Christchurch he owned at least one shop, possibly several and also at various times purchased properties as business investments. Horace writes (73):-

(Early on) Mr Barnett wrote to (my Father) from Christchurch, suggesting that my father should come and start in business in that City, as there seemed to be good prospects for success. My father acted on this advice, and opened a tobacco and fishing tackle shop in Colombo Street, which he carried on until the early months of 1890, when he sold out and moved to Sydney.

The impression one receives is that when he liked a dwelling (and had the cash) he bought it and put tenants in. If he (and presumably his wife, Rosina) continued to be pleased with it, he terminated the lease of the tenants and moved in himself. The number of different addresses at which the McWilliam family lived both in Christchurch and also in North Sydney later gives credence to this supposition. He appeared to be tempted to sell when he had a good offer, just as he was persuaded to buy when a property attracted him. This dealing in housing and shops could justifiably entitle him to be called a 'businessman', or even a 'merchant'. He certainly seemed to be engaged in 'commercial pursuits'. At one time William even undertook a business trip back to England. It was about the year 1886. One supposes that travel was faster by this stage, for sail had been almost superseded by steam by the 1880s. The return journey could be carried out in months rather than years. The truth of the matter is that he was evidently willing to undertake any commercial enterprise at hand which gave promise of a reasonable financial return. His special expertise and experience were clearly in the field of bookkeeping and the management of small business.

The present writer is sure, however, that William owned and ran at least one

shop in Christchurch. As a small boy his father, Horace, used to regale him with a whole series of stories about the time when he (Horace) was a little boy in Christchurch. Every episode started in the back yard of his father's (ie William's) shop. Here Horace found, according to the narrative, discarded cases full of paper and sawdust packing. In these he would discover all kinds of intriguing items (always toys) inadvertently left by his father in emptying the cases. It never occurred to the listener to enquire how it was that his grandfather had been so careless as to leave such valuable and fascinating objects in discarded boxes - not even when in one big case a whole toy steam train was discovered!

In William McWilliam's shop, or one of his shops, as Horace has indicated, he stocked fishing tackle. He was proud of the quality of it and took pains to maintain a high standard. He never undertook his activities by halves. He devoted much time and effort to developing his personal skills in sophisticated fishing ventures. He made a point of organising fishing trips for his customers. He would invite the more affluent of his clients to join the parties. One assumes that he would act as mentor to such groups, or at least to the less experienced among them. The culmination of this activity is recorded in his Obituary, for it reports that he 'hooked the largest trout ever landed in the South Island of New Zealand.'

In 1890, for reasons which will be explored later, the whole William McWilliam family moved to Australia. Actually Rosina and her children sailed in December 1889* and William followed in the succeeding March. Frederick, the eldest son, had already crossed the Tasman. The rest came to settle in North Sydney, ending up after a few months in Arthur Street. They lived there for twenty years. It was here that the youngest child, Norman, was born in April 1890.

As far as can be judged at this distance of time William continued much as he had done in Christchurch. It seems that he owned a shop, or shops, as well as various houses. He certainly worked in a shop, a butchers shop, in North Sydney at one time however briefly. It is said that he operated the till and sometimes wrapped the meat, but he surely had no skills in the butchery trade. The thought was that, if a tenant was experiencing poor trading conditions, he would lend a hand in order to help the retailer improve his takings and thereby meet the arrears of rent.

It is certain that the gold fever attacked William once more, for there is an authenticated account of his travelling to the Kalgoorlie gold fields in the 1890s when there was a rush there, following discovery of promising payloads in 1893. He went and stayed long enough to obtain some return. It is tempting to assume that the bank failures and the resulting financial depression of that same year (1893) may have been a factor in influencing William to travel to the diggings once again. It is a pointer to the whimsy of the man that, practical businessman that he was, William's sojourn in Kalgoorlie was remembered by his family for the wild flowers he sent back to them. Noted for the beauty and variety of its native flora, Western Australia still today attracts visitors from near and far to view the magnificent wild blooms. William pressed specimens and included everlastings in the series of floral presentations he made to the members of the home front. It is revealing thus to see the aesthetic, poetic side to this man; one does him the courtesy of assuming that the family also received from him the necessary wherewithal for daily living.

There is a gap before the next direct news of William. He evidently carried on in North Sydney until some stage before the year 1910. On 29 December of the previous year his second son, Horace, had married Ruth Marchant Barnes at Grafton. William was prevented from attending the wedding for he was in New Zealand. He wrote the following

* Actually the family sailed from the Port of Lyttelton on 19 December in the S.S. Hauroto.

letter from Waimana, Bay of Plenty (south-east of Waihi), North Island. Although its contents is diverse, it has so much of relevance to his story and his personality that it is quoted in full.

February 24/1910. My dear Horace, Your welcome letter of 14 Janry reached me last Saturday. First let me say that I was very sorry my cable wire was too late to reach you on your wedding day. Your mother has written me all about it - the wedding - and I suppose you know that she is delighted with Ruth, our new daughter. Give her my love.

And now to answer your questions. Yes, I am in excellent health, never better in my life. You say you hope I am happy; well, I am not. The place is very backblocky, and there are no nice people, with the exception of the Schoolmaster and his wife. Re finance. I am in debt. Still owe £150 towards the purchase of the business, and I owe my merchants probably £300. I have put just about £1000 into the business up to now. Of course I hold a good stock, but my bad debts are unfortunately heavy - somewhere between five and six hundred pounds. My duties are very light as a J.P. I have never been called upon to take the Bench up here, for which I am thankful; but I am trying to sell out. I have a probable purchaser, who was here a few days last week seeing what sort of a business it was. He said, when going, he was quite satisfied, but could not give me a decided answer for a few days. I have not heard from him yet, but I may get his letter by the mail on Saturday. We have only one mail a week here. I don't think I am making money here, but I don't think I am losing any, so that is how business stands at present.

You will, of course, know by this time that Fred was over for a health trip in New Zealand. I went to Auckland to see him, and we had a very good time together. We had several invitations to different houses and warehousemen's club and made members of the latter while in Auckland.

Your Nephews and Nieces are very nice and entertained us with pride and pleasure. Fred went back delighted with his trip and very much improved in health.

Your journey from Grafton to Mungindi (Horace's first parish) must have been very trying, especially so to Ruth, but there is nothing better than a little roughing experience now and again. No matter what position one holds, it is well that he should know something about what the other fellow has to go through at times. Your Parish is evidently a large one and I don't think you will see all your parishoners every week. But never mind, one can only do one's best.

It is needless to say that I should very much like to be near you all but I am frightened to venture a second time at business in any part of Australia. If I am fortunate enough to sell my business I should most likely make a fresh start in some civilised part of the North Island and get Mater and the girls over. Keeping two homes is not a paying concern, but of this later on. I have not got rid of this business yet and may not be able to do so. At the present time I have no person to help me. I engaged a young man from Wellington but he found it too quiet and only stayed two weeks. I had a servant but she left after three months - too quiet. At present I have a Maori woman who comes every Monday and does my washing and a little cleaning up, but she is no good - too dirty. There are a lot of Maoris here, and they are good customers, so long as one gives them no credit - and they are always asking for it. I can understand their language a bit, sufficient to know what they want and I can speak it well enough to tell them the prices of every article. I have had

a lot of interruption in this letter, mostly by Maoris; they are in and out all the time.

With love to you both I remain Your affect father W McWilliam.

One slip is apparent in the above letter. When William is with his eldest child, Fred, in Auckland, he writes to Horace, 'Your Nephews and Nieces are very nice...' He must mean MY nephews and nieces... There would have been Fanthams or Cunninghams in Auckland at that time, and almost certainly no McWilliams - at least none who were nephews and nieces of Horace. It is not credible that Fred would have had some of his children with him. William was particularly fond of one of his nieces, Vena,* the youngest daughter of Emily. He was to visit her again and probably saw her this time.

In spite of his misgivings William did return to North Sydney. It seems that he then went back again to New Zealand after four years in NSW, for his newspaper Obituary states:-

From 1914-22 he spent most of his time in Auckland and the North Island of New Zealand where he was engaged in commercial pursuits.

The present writer is dubious about this latter assertion. Perhaps the supplier of the information for the Obituary confused the earlier (1910) sojourn in NZ with a later one. Remember that for one thing William turned 70 years of age in January 1914. Rosina Howells (nee Levick) recalls staying with William and his wife in North Sydney about the year 1913/4. This fact bears out the belief that he returned to Sydney after his venture at Waimana. The present writer remembers visiting the couple in Sydney in 1921, thus the Obituary would need some trimming at least, if not altering. By early 1924 William and Rosina, together with their youngest, were living in McLaren Street, North Sydney. Their youngest daughter, Ruby, came to stay with them in August that year.

William made a trip to New Zealand again after Rosina's death in December 1924. The year may have been 1928. Horace writes (74):-

(My father) paid a visit to Auckland, to one of his niece's (Vena's) home, a daughter of my Aunt Emily - his sister. This amiable young woman and her very kind husband (Jack Weatherell), who was a highly respected Chemist in Auckland, invited my Father to visit them whenever he cared to come. He decided to go over to them for a prolonged holiday and set off in due time. While he was staying with his niece and her husband, Ian McWilliam, the third son of my brother, Fred and his wife, Maudie, happened to be in business in NZ at that time. He went to see his Grandfather on several occasions, and on one of these he invited his Grandfather to join him in a business trip, which he was soon to make, right through from Auckland to Wellington, and then, to cross over to the South Island, and go on with his business, calling at Christchurch, and all the other towns down to Dunedin. Father jumped at this opportunity to visit his old city and meet once again his two sisters, Mrs Cunningham and Mrs Moore, my aunts Emily and Maggie respectively. Ian has since told me of that interesting trip, and of Father's bright and interesting companionship... When my Father returned... I recall asking him about his visit to Christchurch. He replied by telling me that the City had improved considerably but was still the same beautiful place as it had been in the old days. As to his sisters, he said that he was disappointed in them. When I asked him for the reason for this statement, he said they were so old looking, and not at all like they used to look. He forgot that it was nearly 30 years since he had seen them, and that age makes a big difference in one's appearance in 30 years.

* Lovina Aveline Phyllis Brookes, then Weatherell (nee Cunningham) 1891-1938.

A moving confirmation of William's visits to his favourite niece, Lovina ('Vena') is at the same time a confirmation of the lovable nature of the man. The only surviving son of Vena, Archie Brookes, writes (September 1986) that his mother's uncle, William McWilliam, several times stayed with his family in Auckland. 'We all loved this tall, slim, bearded old gentleman who kept us enraptured with tales of the gold fields.'

William spent most of the last year of his life in the homes of his two eldest sons, first with Horace at Lawson and then with Fred at 'Sunnyside'. On one of his many pedestrian jaunts in the nearby streets of Kogarah he was knocked down by a motor vehicle. The scratches and bruises seemed little more than superficial at the time, but the experience, on top of an incipient general physical decline, must have been a factor in hurrying his end.

After being looked after in a home for a couple of months William passed away at Dulwich Hill, Sydney on 7 October 1930 aged 86 years. The present writer attended his funeral, viewing beforehand the face of the old man in his coffin at Wood Coffill Funeral Parlours at the corner of Falcon and Miller Streets, North Sydney. Thoughts ranged over the experience of knowing this kindly, tolerant grandfather who had the happy knack of making those close to him feel that he thought they were important and destined for great achievements. Why! He was well into his eighty-seventh year when he came out and played cricket with this same writer and bowled away to his batting with fine spirit and a natural off-break. It was only a few days before when his daughter-in-law, wife of a Rector who was soon to retire because of failing eyesight, had looked out the kitchen window at William sitting in the sun: 'Goodness! There is Father reading the newspaper, and not even bothering to wear his spectacles.'

William's wife, Rosina, was a contrast. It is said that the marriage of opposites is likely to result in the most harmonious partnership. William and Rosina celebrated their Golden Wedding in 1920 in evident accord and contentment. Whereas he was mild, tolerant and accepting, his wife was alert, inclined to be carping and intellectually always 'at the ready'. Those who were near to her tended to have more respect for her than affection. She set a high standard for herself, and her own, regarding comportment, conversation and mental functioning. Those who do not suffer fools gladly need compensating traits. Rosina had many virtues, but tolerance of noetic error or overlooking an intellectual solecism were absent from her list. The present writer recalls that he once rashly informed Rosina that he 'knew' his multiplication tables (he had just had his seventh birthday). There was, of course, only one outcome from such an audacious claim: he was commanded to recite them, ie the Seven Times! Something seemed to become mixed up around about 'seven times eight'. Disaster!

Rosina's counterbalancing qualities were many, however. The very fact that she could manage such a large, and let it be said, handicapped, family and lead them to attain educated, fulfilling lives, speaks volumes for the extent of her innate devotion to, and affection for, all its members and her determination that they should all walk in the path not only of righteousness, but also of achievement. For example, consider the amount of trouble (not to mention the expense) she took over treatment for the visual defects of her children. Horace wrote (75):-

When I was about nine my mother took me down to Dunedin to consult Dr Lindo Ferguson concerning my sight, which was showing signs of weakness in the left eye. Not being fully satisfied with his report, of signs of a Cataract, she took me over to Melbourne, where she consulted other specialists. They concurred with Dr Lindo Ferguson's diagnosis, and advised her to get him to operate, as he had suggested. All I can recall of that visit to Melbourne is, that we stayed with friends or relatives at Emerald Hill (now South Melbourne) which was then quite a good residential

suburb. We also paid a short visit to Ballarat, where relatives of my mother lived... We returned to Dunedin, and we remained there after the operation for about a month.

Horace also described how his mother, some years later, took her son Neville, 'over to Sydney, to a boarding school', where one assumes he received special treatment for his ocular condition. Indeed there is good reason to believe that one of the main considerations which determined Rosina to move with all her family to Sydney was the expectation of better medical attention for the 'health' problems of her children. Their health worries were, of course, no more and no less than defective vision and on the basis of population size alone the medical and associated paramedical facilities could be assumed to be superior in Sydney. Be that as it may, it was with the obvious concurrence of William and the decisive determination of Rosina that the family migrated, as we have seen, to New South Wales mainly for 'health' reasons.

The arrival of her youngest child, the only one to be born in Australia, Norman Carrington, presented an extra burden for her and test of her motherly devotion, because he too was sightless from birth. He was to be under her immediate care and fully dependent on her until her death 35 years later.

She must have been lonely at times, for, as has been recounted, William was often away for long periods, to places such as Kalgoorlie and New Zealand, as well as Britain. One is forced to draw the conclusion that William left most of the upbringing of the children to his wife. That she managed so successfully in spite of great handicaps, is her panegyric and her enduring monument.

Rosina's life came to an end in her seventy-third year on the thirtieth day of December 1924. She lies buried at the Northern Suburbs Cemetery, Sydney. The seventeen-year-old bride had led a full yet demanding life and, undaunted by circumstances, she had never lowered her standards. She had her reward savouring the achievements of her sons, daughters and grandchildren which gave her great satisfaction.

References

- (72) McWilliam, Horace. Page 3. See (66), page 39.
- (73) Ibid. Page 3.
- (74) Ibid. Page 86.
- (75) Ibid. Page 4.