

Notes on John Stevenson and Eliza née Kennedy

(Great-grandparents of John, Peter, Margaret, Randle and David Major)

John Stevenson born: c1852, Craigduff, Co.Down, Ireland.

Eliza Kennedy born: 25 April 1849, 'Mountpanther', near Clough, Co. Down, Ireland.

Marriage: 13 March 1874, Church of Ireland, Seaforde, Loughinisland parish, Co.Down, Ireland.

Arrived in NZ: 26 July 1874, Port Chalmers, in the 'Peter Denny'.

Children:

Thomas William, born 2 January 1875.

Eliza, born 27 October 1876.

Mary Ann, born 6 October 1878.

*Sarah Jane, born 12 September 1880.

Susan, born 2 August 1882.

John Kennedy, born 23 March 1884.

Ellen, born 19 April 1886, died 26 July 1886.

Allan [sic] (Nellie), born 5 October 1887.

Robert Ellis, born 21 October 1890.

*Grandmother of John, Peter, Margaret, Randle and David Major

Eliza Stevenson, née Kennedy, died: 4 August 1912, Waianiwa.

John Stevenson died: 1 March 1936, Waianiwa.

John Stevenson's birth and forebears

John Stevenson was born in the townland of Craigduff, Co. Down, Ireland, in about 1852, the son of Thomas Stevenson, described as 'labourer' on John's marriage certificate. John was a blacksmith, serving his apprenticeship at the famous Harland and Wolf shipyards, Belfast. At the time of his marriage in 1874 he was living in the cathedral city of Downpatrick, Co.Down.

Eliza Kennedy's birth and forebears

Eliza Kennedy, John's wife, was born on 25 April 1849 at Mountpanther, a large country house in the townland of Knocksticken near the town of Clough in Co. Down, Ireland, the daughter of William Kennedy (and Elizabeth Owens, according to a Mormon informant). Eliza's obituary (transcribed in the Mormon Pedigree Resource File DVD #130) states that William held 'an important position' in the household of James Allen who owned and occupied Mountpanther at that time. Eliza was born a twin to her brother Robert, and was William's third daughter in a family eventually reaching 11.

Mountpanther (or Mount Panther) was one of the most important Georgian houses in Ulster. In 1770 it was described as: '...an elegant new brick house, remarkably well

built, four and five rooms on a floor...large, lofty and well finished.' The house had a chequered history culminating in the roof being removed in the 1960s by the then owners to render it uninhabitable so that they would not have to pay council tax on the property. It is now (2009) a magnificent ruin.

Marriage

Eliza Kennedy and John Stevenson were married on 13 March 1874 in the Church of Ireland (i.e. Anglican) parish church, Seaforde, Loughinisland, Co.Down, less than two months before departing their homeland. At the time of her marriage Eliza was still living in the townland of Knocksticken.

Migration and life in Invercargill

The Stevensons travelled to New Zealand, along with 361 other immigrants, on the 'Peter Denny', disembarking at Port Chalmers on 26 July 1874. According to Eliza's obituary:

They immediately came south to Riverton, where Mr. Stevenson found employment with the late James McIntosh, of Strathmore, a worthy colonist. There was only one house Otautau at that time.

Country life did not suit the tastes of Mr. Stevenson, so the following January they came to Invercargill, where he soon found work. On 1 February 1875, their first child was born, on the site where the 'Black Doctor' lived.

The reference to the Black Doctor is intriguing. This character, possibly a convict escaped from Tasmania, is described by R. Carrick in his 1892 publication *A Romance of Lake Wakatipu* as follows:

He was popularly known as the "black doctor," and a striking character in real life he most undoubtedly was. He was a tall, gaunt, black-grained figure, standing six feet some inches high. He went about armed with an axe, carrying himself, as well as the axe, with the martial dignity of a hero in romance.

At the time the first immigrant settlers arrived in the area, the Black Doctor was already well established in a house on the banks of the Waihopai River near the present Dee Street.

Eliza's obituary continues:

Shortly afterward, Mr. Stevenson purchased a section in Appleby, and erected a house, which they occupied for five years.

This ¼ acre lot was purchased by John on 18 June 1878. When, in February 1883, he decided to sell the property it is described in the newspaper advertisement as:

Section 12, Block 5, Appleby, corner of Ythan and Grace streets, opposite the Schoolhouse, fenced with pickets and live hedge, fruit trees, well and pumps, on which is erected a very comfortable 2-roomed cottage, with scullery and stables at rear.

The owner being out of town the instructions are to sell. Title L.T. Act. A most beautiful situation. Inspection invited.

It would seem that the section, or at least the northern half of it, didn't sell at this time, as the certificate of title for this part shows John Stevenson selling it as late as August 1909. An old cottage, much renovated and modernised, still (2010) stands

on this section at 239 Ythan Street; this could well be the Stevenson's original dwelling, where Sarah Jane was born in 1880.

Waianiwa

In 1879 John had bought land (Section 6, Block 2) in the district of Waianiwa, about 20 kms north-west of Invercargill; the ½ acre section cost him £15 according to the *Southland Times* of 23 November 1879.

In January 1881, when John applied again to the Waste Lands Board, this time to lease or purchase a few acres of rural land on which to graze a cow, he complained of the high price of sections in Waianiwa township (£30 per acre), and, as the newspaper goes on to report, 'this high price, he considered, prevented the sale of the township, of which he was the only inhabitant!' The family had moved there the previous year.

It can rightly be said that John Stevenson was the founder of the township of Waianiwa. John Cutt in *Rainbow Waters* (1982), his history of the district, records:

It was at the insistence of the local blacksmith, John Stevenson, that the Waianiwa village was surveyed. He applied to the Waste Land Board early in 1879 for the survey to be undertaken as a means of attracting settlers to the region....

In 1881, Stevenson again successfully applied for a further survey.... The land was divided into five-acre sections and sold at the rate of £5 each. At this time the original [half-acre] sections were reduced [from £15] to £5 and this proved to be more favourable for settlement. [p.103]

[In 1881,] Stevenson set up the smithy on the corner section beside Paterson's and built the home now occupied by Graham and Barbara Haywood. [p.125]

John Stevenson's character

About the man himself, John Cutt tells us that John Stevenson 'became known as one of the most colourful characters in Waianiwa and had a violent temper with frequent outbursts of rage'. This opinion is borne out by the number of court cases in which John was involved. He first appeared in the Invercargill Police Court on 4 January 1888 charged with using insulting language but was fortunate to have the case dismissed on the grounds that 'it was a trivial one and provocation had been given'.

On 11 May the next year the *Southland Times* reported at length on a meeting of creditors of a bankrupt Waianiwa farmer, at which John was present. The bankrupt roundly denied that he owed any money to John, and called him 'a d---d liar', declaring that John had been paid everything he was due. As the bankrupt continued to dispute with John, the bankrupt's lawyer advised his client: 'Don't demean yourself to talk to such a fellow. You are degrading yourself by doing so.' Another lawyer present objected to this comment and was told sharply to mind his own business. The verbatim reporting is then interrupted by the following parenthesis:

At this point began an altercation of an entirely personal nature between Messrs Wade and Henderson [the lawyers], the latter applying epithets the reverse of complimentary to his learned brother; while references to each other's private affairs were freely passed.

The official Assignee cut in with: 'If there are any further meetings in this estate I shall certainly have a couple of good policemen present.' This did not help matters and the 'wordy warfare' continued for some time further before the chairman was able to regain control and adjourn the meeting. The final outcome for John is not reported.

Next, John Stevenson was charged with allowing three of his cows to wander on the railway line (*Southland Times*, 18 September 1891). His lawyer attempted to get the charge dismissed on a technicality, but the magistrate would have none of it and eventually, after the relevant Acts had been searched, John was convicted and fined 10s with 7s costs.

On 3 March 1899 John Stevenson is reported as suing two people for money he said was owed to him; one case was dismissed but he got the £4 3s for plough repairs that he claimed from the other customer. Then, in October 1905 he applied to the magistrate to have a neighbour bound over to keep the peace, claiming that the man had 'used insulting and threatening language to him on the public road'. The defendant absolutely denied using the language complained of and his wife supported him, but the magistrate found for John and bound the man over as requested.

And two years later, according to the *Otautau Standard and Wallace County Chronicle*, 29 October 1907, John was sued by a cartage contractor for £2 owed for work done. The magistrate ruled that as only part of the contract had been fulfilled payment could not be demanded until the work had been completed, so John came out of that one also as the winner.

In his book, John Cutt writes that, despite animosity, John Stevenson:

quickly built up a strong reputation as a capable blacksmith carrying out the full range of metalwork required by the early settlers. The Stevenson plough, which he produced in large numbers, was sold in many parts of New Zealand and won numerous awards at ploughing matches in the days of the horse-drawn plough.

Three sons, Thomas, John K. and Robert, assisted in the business.

John Stevenson clearly had a talent for invention. A variation of the 'Stevenson plough' is referred to in the *Southland Times* of 7 May 1890, where it reports that 'John Stevenson, of Waianiwa, has applied for a patent for a lever-wheel drain plough'.

As well as being the local blacksmith, John Stevenson was the Waianiwa postmaster from 1881-1892 (with Eliza doing the work). And for a time the church services (Presbyterian) were held in the Stevenson smithy!

Stevenson children

John and Eliza Stevenson produced nine children in all, eight of whom lived to attend Waianiwa school. The nine were:

- **Thomas William**, born 2 January 1875; will filed for probate 23 February 1953, Invercargill.
- **Eliza**, born 27 October 1876, died 31 January 1899, buried in Wallacetown New Cemetery, Block I, Plot 115.
- **Mary Ann**, born 6 October 1878; never married; died 16 January 1946, buried in Wallacetown New Cemetery, Block I, Plot 115.

- **Sarah Jane**, born 12 September 1880, Appleby, Southland; married Thomas McChesney, grocer, 27 May 1915 then, after his death, William Randle, electrical engineer, on 16 November 1921; she died in Invercargill on 11 May 1953.
- **Susan**, born 2 August 1882; 1915 married Thomas Robinson, orchardist, and lived in Stoke, Nelson; died 1960.
- **John Kennedy**, born 23 March 1884; married Elizabeth Morton Grieve; died 9 September 1962, buried in Wallacetown New Cemetery, Block V, Plot 130.
- **Ellen**, born 19 April 1886, died 26 July 1886, buried in Wallacetown New Cemetery, Block I, Plot 115.
- **Allan** [So in the civil birth register, but known formally throughout her life as Ellen or Helen, and informally as **Nellie**], born 5 October 1887; never married; died 12 January 1962, buried in Wallacetown New Cemetery, Block I, Plot 115.
- **Robert Ellis**, born 21 October 1890, enlisted in 16th Reinforcements and died 25 November 1916, Capetown, South Africa.

In April 1897 and April 1898 John Stevenson was elected chairman of the Waianiwa school committee in what would appear from the *Southland Times* report to have been, in 1897 at least, rather fraught circumstances.

The death of Eliza, the eldest daughter of the family, in 1899 would have been traumatic for them all. The funeral was reported fully in the *Southland Times* of 10 February 1899, and was said to have been ‘one of the largest ever seen in the district.... The girls who had been her schoolmates formed an avenue, and as the coffin was borne past each one placed a bouquet on it; the scene being very impressive’.

John, his wife Eliza and their daughters Mary and Nellie remained in Waianiwa for the rest of their lives. Eliza’s obituary includes the information that she (rather than John) ‘kept the Post Office for eleven years, and no hour was too late or too early for her to attend to the public’. Eliza is described as ‘a deeply religious woman’, who ‘didn’t [just] tell her children to go to church – she went herself’!

Deaths of John and Eliza Stevenson

Eliza née Kennedy, died on 4 August 1912 in the family home, Waianiwa. The notice in the *Southland Times* states ‘after a long illness, borne with Christian fortitude, Eliza, the beloved wife of John Stevenson, aged 63 years’. Her obituary claims that she was Waianiwa’s oldest resident, having lived in the district for 32 years, and informs us that her funeral ‘was largely attended’.

John died on 1 March 1936 and is buried with Eliza in the Wallacetown New Cemetery, Block I, Plot 115. He is described in his will as retired blacksmith and farmer, owning five sections in Waianiwa township, totalling almost 11 acres of land.

In the will, dated 25 January 1934, John assigned his two living sons token legacies – £40 to Thomas, while John, the younger, was given a gold watch, gold medal and the family Bible, as well as being made an executor of the will and paid manager of the family farm. All of John’s estate was to be sold (the farm at the discretion of the executors) and the income plus all income from the farm divided between John’s two spinster daughters, Mary and Nellie, in the ratio of 70/30. It would be interesting to

know why Mary was so favoured; she was bequeathed also all of John's photographs.

Sarah Stevenson's early life

Sarah Jane Stevenson, John and Eliza's fourth child, attended Waianiwa School for six years, passing the 6th Standard in November 1895, and leaving school at the age of 15 to take up domestic duties. In early 1899, aged 18½, she left home and moved to employment in Invercargill. The first letter she received from her mother has been preserved:

[original spelling and punctuation retained]

Waianiwa April the 5th 1899

Dear Sarah,

i am very glad to hear that you like your Place and also to now that you are well we are all well at home but we do think it abit lonely since you went away i do wich Mary could get a Place for to Keep you company we were glad that tom went intow town to see you it was late when tom got home on Saturday night it was one oclock he was very tired when he came home tom Jack Robert Susy and i went to Church on Sunday it was a lovely day Sarah Dear do not think long and be carfull not overdo yourself working i do wish Mary was back to woork again it would be so nice for you both the weather is not so good now i do hope in goodness you will Keep well and there is no fear you will get on well father went to winton on Tuesday it was late when he come home i hope you will get home every month to see us there is nothing strange to tell you since you went away i hope you will not think long and you will get to church Dear Sarah i think this is all i can think of now father tom and all of the rest joins with fond love to you and remain your

affonate Mother

Eliza Stevenson

if you want a Pair of slippers get them in Steads and you can get Boots mended yours E Stevenson

little wones is very good little Ellen is going to write to you

good by write soon again

The next extant record of Sarah would appear to be her signature as a witness to the will of Catherine McChesney made on 1 November 1906 (two days before Catherine died): in a neat and demure hand she wrote 'Sarah Jane Stevenson, domestic servant, Invercargill'. It would seem from this that Sarah must have been employed in the McChesney household at least during the final illness of the woman whose place she would eventually take.

[For the rest of Sarah Jane's life story, see Notes on Thomas (Elliot) McChesney.]