

**Notes on Thomas (Elliot) McChesney**  
**and Sarah Jane née Stevenson**

(Grandparents of John, Peter, Margaret, Randle and David Major)

**Thomas McChesney born:** 31 August 1843, Dailly, Ayrshire, Scotland.

**Catherine Ewing born:** c1839, Edinburgh, Scotland.

**Thomas McChesney arrived in NZ:** 4 September 1864, Bluff, with parents, in 'Sevilla'.

**Catherine Paterson née Ewing arrived in NZ:** 4 September 1864, Bluff, with husband James Paterson, in 'Sevilla'.

**Sarah Jane Stevenson born:** 12 September 1880, Appleby, Southland.

**Thomas McChesney married:**

(1) Catherine Paterson, 10 April 1868, Invercargill, Southland.

(2) Sarah Jane Stevenson, 27 May 1915, Invercargill.

**Children:**

(1) Nil

(2) \*Eliza Euphemia, 7 January 1913, Goulburn, NSW, Australia.  
Thomas, 31 August 1915, Invercargill, Southland.

\*Mother of John, Peter, Margaret, Randle and David Major

**Catherine McChesney, formerly Paterson, née Ewing died:** 3 November 1906, Invercargill.

**Thomas Elliot McChesney died:** 11 January 1920, Invercargill.

**Sarah Jane Randle, formerly McChesney, née Stevenson died:** 11 May 1953, Invercargill.

**Thomas McChesney's birth and forebears**

Thomas McChesney was born on 31 August 1843 in the small coal-mining village of Dailly, Ayrshire, in the lowlands of Scotland, the son of John McChesney and Elizabeth née Elliot, both natives of the village. *[See separate essay on John McChesney and Elizabeth née Elliot.]*

**Migration**

Because of the steady mechanization of the cotton trade, employment for hand-loom weavers, including John and Elizabeth McChesney, had become precarious by the 1860s. So bad was the situation in Ayrshire that in 1863 a petition seeking free passages was sent to the New Zealand government by the Girvan Hand Loom Weavers' Emigration Society.

Apparently, only the recently-created province of Southland responded to the weavers' plea. The ship 'Sevilla' was chartered, at a cost to the provincial council of £1,113, delivering 249 immigrants (including 83 children) – the 47-year-old John

McChesney with Elizabeth and their 10 living issue amongst them – to Bluff on 4 September 1864.

### **Life in a new land**

John and Elizabeth established their family home on the corner of Dee and Lewis streets, Gladstone, Invercargill, where John found work as a labourer working on the roads. As there were no public schools in Invercargill at this time the younger McChesney children attended private establishments, while the older ones would have immediately looked for employment.

Thomas McChesney, aged 21 when he arrived with his parents in New Zealand, soon joined the police force in Invercargill, and also for a time served as a warder in the local gaol. His obituary in *The Southland Daily News* includes the following information and anecdotes about his early years in the town:

The late Mr McChesney was of extraordinary stature being at least 6ft 6ins in height, and when a young man distinguished himself as an athlete, frequently carrying all before him in the hammer-throwing and shot-putting contests at the local sports gatherings.

When in the police force he was a terror to the evildoer and especially useful as a guardian of the public at a time when law and order were not respected as they are today. On one occasion a criminal of great physical prowess got into the hands of three constables, who were unable to master him, and Tom McChesney...brushed them aside, lifted the man bodily and carried him into the gaol.

Another degenerate member of society was dealt with in similar fashion: Constable McChesney caught the man in the act of burglary, and rushed to close with him. The latter drew a revolver, but Tom McChesney was on the alert and dealing his arm a heavy blow he felled the fellow to the ground.

### **Thomas McChesney's first marriage**

On 10 April 1868, Thomas McChesney, aged 24, married Catherine Paterson née Ewing, whose first husband, James Paterson, a grocer, had died seven months previously; Catherine was about 29 years old. [See end-note for further information about the Patersons.]

The marriage certificate describes Thomas as 'Constable' and Catherine as 'Grocer' – she, no doubt, having taken over the grocery business from her husband. Thomas soon transformed himself from policeman into grocer, and ran the business, sited on the corner of Spey and Dee streets, for the rest of his life. The Invercargill electoral roll as at 1 September 1870 includes: 'Name: McChesney, Thomas; Place of abode: Spey Street; Nature of [voting] qualification: leasehold; Property: corner of Spey and Dee streets, grocery store and dwelling house' – it would seem that, at first, Thomas and Catherine lived above or behind the shop. It is interesting to see that by 1890 Thomas was describing himself, in *Stone's Directory*, not as a simple grocer but as a 'wine, spirit and general merchant'.

The electoral roll for 1877-78 (correct at 1 September 1877) is the first to list a freehold voting qualification (as well as the leasehold) for Thomas, describing the properties as 'shop, corner of Spey and Dee streets, and Section 5, Block 62, Invercargill'; presumably he and Catherine still leased the shop but also had purchased a residential section in Spey Street. The official *Return of Freeholders* of October 1882 values Thomas's town land at £500 (and shows that he possessed also some country land, less than an acre, worth £45).

This was not, however, the section on the corner of Spey and Deveron streets on which was situated the large house that remained the family home until after the death of Thomas's second wife, Sarah, in 1953. This section, presumably with the house on it, was purchased by Catherine McChesney in November 1893; on her death it passed to her husband Thomas, and on his decease to Sarah. Sarah bequeathed the whole of her estate to her children Thomas and Eliza in equal shares. Eliza with her husband Elliott Major and their children then occupied the house for a year before it was sold in February 1955. In 2010 the section was the site of the office and shop of Ideal Electrical Supplies.

By 1953, this house was full of furniture, ornaments, etc. of the Victorian and Edwardian periods that had accumulated over a number of lifetimes, some of it being of Paterson provenance. Much of this heritage was disposed of in 1954 and over the years following, but some furniture, paintings, silverware, vases and other ornaments, a few documents, and a collection of photographs still remain as treasured heirlooms of the Major family.

During the years of his first marriage Thomas became active in the Oddfellows Lodge and was a member of the Southland Caledonian Society.

At some point during his adulthood Thomas informally added 'Elliot' to his name in honour of his mother, whose maiden surname it was. 'Thomas Elliot McChesney' is first found on the 1913 birth certificate of his daughter Eliza, but neither of his marriage certificates record this full name.

Catherine died on 3 November 1906, aged 67, after 38 years of marriage to Thomas; there were no children – as there had not been of her first marriage. Catherine is buried – along with both of her husbands and Sarah Jane Stevenson, her successor as Thomas's wife – in the Eastern Cemetery, Invercargill, Block 3, Plot 19.

It is clear from her will that Catherine alone had held the freehold to the two properties (Invercargill town, Block LXII, Section 5, and Block LXIV, Section 11), worth at the time of her death £1,368. Catherine also had considerable savings, and her estate in total was valued at £10,867/19/2 – all bequeathed to her husband. If he had not been before, he was certainly now a wealthy man!

### **Thomas McChesney's children, and second marriage**

At the time of Catherine's death Sarah Jane Stevenson was employed in the McChesney household as a domestic servant. After his wife died, Thomas retained Sarah as his housekeeper. *[For Sarah's early life see essay on John Stevenson and Eliza née Kennedy.]*

It must have been a cause of great consternation and dismay to Thomas and Sarah when in mid-1912 Sarah found herself to be pregnant. To add to the stress, her mother was terminally ill, dying in early August. In order to keep the matter secret, Sarah went or was sent to Goulburn, New South Wales, to give birth. The child, a girl, was born on 7 January 1913, probably in Nurse Wallace's private hospital, 37 Montague Street, Goulburn, and registered as Eliza Euphemia Stevenson. Sarah, the mother, was 32 years old; Thomas, the father, 69.

But why Goulburn? It is likely that, in such a delicate matter, Sarah would be sent to be looked after by a relative – a Stevenson, a Kennedy or possibly a McChesney. The 1913 electoral roll (for Werriwa) lists two Stevenson families living in Goulburn at that time. Also, in 1947 the new maternity wing of the Goulburn public hospital was named Ruth Stevenson House in honour of the woman who had been the hospital's

matron for the previous 25 years. There were, therefore, Stevenson families in Goulburn, possibly related to the Waianiwa branch, and who could have taken Sarah into their care in her time of need.

By November 1913 Sarah had returned to New Zealand with the baby, who on 14<sup>th</sup> of that month was officially registered in Invercargill as Eliza Euphemia **McChesney**.

Sarah had obviously renewed her association with Thomas – to the extent that early in 1915 she found herself to be again pregnant. So this time, on 27 May 1915 Thomas McChesney and Sarah Jane Stevenson were married in the Registrar's Office, Invercargill. Thomas, their second child, was born three months later on 31 August.

This second child was habitually favoured by his mother. Possibly it was the shame and humiliation that Sarah suffered at the time of Eliza's birth that led to her strong resentment of her first child. *[For the early life of Eliza McChesney see essay on the children of Sarah Jane Stevenson.]*

### **Thomas McChesney's death**

Thomas McChesney died on 11 January 1920 in his Spey Street house, less than five years after his second marriage. On his death certificate his occupation is given as 'Merchant', and his age as 77 (actually 76). He is buried in the Eastern Cemetery, Invercargill, Block 3, Plot 19.

It is sad to note that on Thomas's death certificate and in his will it is stated that he has only one living issue – a male. It was not until three years after his death that Sarah took the necessary steps to legitimate the birth of her first child, Eliza, by then 10 years old.

### **Sarah's second marriage**

On 16 November 1921, 'in the Bride's residence, 189 *[sic]* Spey St, Invercargill', Sarah Jane McChesney, aged 41, married William Randle, a 37-year-old bachelor, qualified and employed as an electrician. Seven months later, on 11 June 1922, she gave birth to James Robert Randle, the only child of that marriage. The Spey Street house was now home to Sarah, her new husband, and her three children: Eliza (9½), Thomas (almost 7) and their half-brother, the baby James.

### **William Randle: separation and death**

Electoral rolls indicate that Sarah and William Randle stayed together only for 10 years or so, until the early 1930s – the 1935 Invercargill roll records Sarah in the Spey Street house, with William at 74 Deveron Street. Judging from the primary schools he attended it would seem that James stayed with his father; certainly when James applied to enlist in the air force in February 1941 he gave as his usual address 122 Don Street, Invercargill, where his father was by then living – and it was his father's name he put down as his next-of-kin.

Not only did Sarah and William live apart from this time, but even communication between them seems to have ceased: each separately acknowledged condolences on the death of their child, James, killed in 1943, and their own death notices, obituaries and wills do not so much as mention a spouse. They did not divorce, however. From William Randle's will it can be deduced that, at some time, he had had a serious liaison with at least one other woman, and this may have been the cause of the breakdown of the marriage.

William Randle was killed in a car accident in Mataura on 7 April 1952, and is buried alone in the Eastern Cemetery, Invercargill, Block 34, Plot 261. The report of the accident in the 9 April 1952 edition of the *Otago Daily Times* gives the following detail:

One man died from severe head injuries and two others were injured, when a motor car hit a gate post at Mataura just before 10 o'clock last night [i.e. 7 April]. **Dead:** William Randle, 74 Deveron street, Invercargill....

Mr McKee was driving towards Invercargill along the main road. When negotiating the saleyards' corner at Mataura he swerved to avoid a dog which crossed the road. The car left the road, hit a gate post, and after turning over several times, came to rest on its hood in a ditch....

The injured were treated by Dr I. Woodhouse, and taken to the Gore Hospital. Mr Randle died just before midnight from multiple head injuries....

### **Sarah's interests and activities**

Sarah's obituary in an Invercargill newspaper tells that 'throughout her life [she] was prominently associated with many cultural organisations in the city', and continues:

Mrs Randle was keenly interested in horticulture and her garden exemplified her love of flowers. Up till about two years ago [*i.e. until she was about 70*] she was a prominent exhibitor of flowers and vegetables at shows conducted by the Invercargill Horticultural Society.

Another of her activities and one in which she secured marked success was in preserving fruit, and in this connection was a prominent exhibitor and judge at shows held throughout the province. Further afield Mrs Randle's preserves were exhibited at the Dunedin Exhibition in 1925-26 and later in Canada [*in the Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto, 1926, at which she won a gold plaque*].

She was keenly interested in lodge and ambulance work throughout her lifetime, and was a foundation member of the Loyal Hearts of Oak Lodge, Invercargill, and the local branch of St. John's Ambulance.

In her later years Sarah joined the Cooneyites, a secretive Christian sect of many names, questionable methods and doubtful orthodoxy. However, Margaret, Eliza's daughter, remembers her mother saying that Sarah's joining the Cooneyites caused a marked change in her for the better in her attitude towards Eliza, for which she was grateful.

### **Sarah Randle's death**

Sarah Jane Randle, formerly McChesney, née Stevenson died of stomach cancer on 11 May 1953 at the age of 72, and is buried in the Eastern Cemetery, Invercargill, Block 3, Plot 19, along with her first husband Thomas and his first wife Catherine.

Sarah's membership of the Cooneyites would explain why her burial was not performed by a minister of religion – the entry for her in the official register of deaths includes only the names of two witnesses.

## **The Paterson Heritage**

Though not biological ancestors of the Major family, James and Catherine Paterson, were highly important as transmitters of property that was of significant consequence in that family's life. The Paterson heritage made possible the move, the desire for

which must have been a prime factor in the decision of the Majors and the McChesneys to migrate from England and Scotland to New Zealand: that great move, almost impossible in Europe, from the restrictions and impoverishment of working class life to middle class 'respectability'.

Catherine was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, c 1839, the daughter of Robert Ewing and his wife. Robert Ewing was a printer by trade and had died before Catherine was married, at the age of about 14, to James Paterson, aged 25, a brewer by trade, on 6 September 1853 in South Leith, Scotland.

The Patersons arrived in New Zealand on 4 September 1864, travelling on the 'Sevilla'. The McChesney family were also migrating on this voyage, and this, no doubt, facilitated the later marriage of Catherine to Thomas McChesney after the death of James Paterson, grocer, on 9 September 1867 at the age of 39. James and Catherine had had no children.

The fact that the Patersons travelled steerage on the 'Sevilla' – in the family quarters with the McChesneys and other of the 'Girvan weavers', so almost certainly as assisted immigrants – suggests that they were not wealthy when they left Scotland. However, they must have brought sufficient capital with them for James to set himself up as a grocer, and in the brief three years of life left to him after their arrival in Invercargill he seems to have developed a successful business, providing the foundation for Thomas McChesney's subsequent career and comfortable life-style.

Thomas took over the grocery on his marriage to Catherine some months only after James's death. By so doing he made in a moment the huge socio-economic leap from working-class, low-waged policeman to financially independent, self-employed businessman, a solid member of the petit bourgeoisie. Thomas remained proprietor of the grocery for the rest of his life, and he prospered. By 1877, he and Catherine were able to purchase a freehold residential property, later exchanged for another, more conspicuous, section where they furnished a grand Victorian villa in the grand Victorian manner.

On Catherine's death Thomas inherited her remaining property and financial interests, there being no children of that marriage either. When Thomas died intestate the Public Trustee divided his wealth between his second wife, Sarah, and their two children, Eliza and Thomas.

Sarah bequeathed all her property to her children, still including much of Paterson provenance, and on the death of her son Thomas, who had not married and had no children, all of his property was inherited by the remaining child, Eliza.

And so, from the seed planted by James Paterson and nurtured through her long second marriage by Catherine and her husband Thomas McChesney, eventually Eliza McChesney, her husband Elliott Major, and their family achieved the status and security that comes from the possession of sufficient wealth.