

Notes on George Major and Sarah Esther née Wallace

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

George Major born: 6 February 1869, Norton, Northamptonshire, England.

Sarah Esther Wallace born: 8 March 1875, Wanganui.

Married: 30 April 1901, 4 Lowther Street, Wanganui.

Children: Joseph Wallace, born 25 January 1902, Wanganui.

George William, born 22 February 1903

Reginald Charles, born 3 March 1904

Norton Spurdle (Snowy), born 10 September 1906, Wanganui.

*Elliott McKane, born 10 November 1910, Wanganui East.

Esther Maude, born 30 December 1912, Wanganui East.

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

George Major died: 15 November 1948, Stratford, Taranaki.

Sarah Esther Major née Wallace died: 1 January 1951, Stratford.

George Major's birth, migration and early life in Geraldine

George Major was born on 6 February 1869 in the village of Norton, Northamptonshire, England, where his forebears had lived since about 1730 when an Alexander Major had moved to Norton from Newnham, not far away. George was the first child of Charles Major and his wife Harriett née Maud of the nearby village of Byfield, who had been married in Norton on 13 October 1868.

While George was christened in the Norton parish church (four months after his birth), the family must also have had some association with the small Methodist chapel in the village, as John Major holds a Bible inscribed to the five-year-old George by the members of that fellowship on his leaving for New Zealand with his family. The small stone font used by the Norton Methodists is now owned by David Major and has pride of place in the chapel in David's Wairarapa homestead.

In 1874, George travelled to this country with his parents and younger brother Albert Charles on the ship 'Ballochmyle', arriving in Lyttelton on 1 June of that year. After three weeks in the Christchurch immigration barracks, the Majors were moved to Ashburton, where their third child, William, was born.

While in Ashburton the family experienced a dire event probably precipitated by extreme financial hardship: Charles and Harriett stole a cheque, were arrested, and in April 1875 Charles was sentenced to six months' imprisonment with hard labour, probably in Christchurch; Harriett was discharged.

How, during this time, Harriett managed to keep herself and three children in the essentials of life is hard to imagine. George was six years old when his father went to prison, and probably at school. The playground torment and general ostracism that he must have been subjected to doesn't bear thinking about.

However, some time after Charles's release in October 1875 the Majors moved from Ashburton and by September 1876 were living in the township of Geraldine in South Canterbury, where Charles was able to find employment as a farm labourer – his occupation in England.

George no doubt attended primary school in Geraldine (the school records were destroyed in a 1907 fire), and began his working life there – following in his father's footsteps if his later occupation is anything to go by.

George's only claim to public attention while in Geraldine would appear to be the incident reported in *The Timaru Herald* of 8 February 1889. Under the heading: 'MAGISTERIAL. Geraldine—Wednesday, Feb. 7th. Before C.A. Wray, Esq., R.M. [ie, Resident Magistrate], we read:

George Major was charged with bathing in the Waihi river in view of the public from the Waihi terrace. Defendant did not put in an appearance, but wrote admitting the offence. Fined 5s and costs.

Mt Peel Station

Possibly George had been attempting to clear his head with a good douche of cold water after celebrating his 20th birthday. Or maybe it was a last swim in a favourite water hole before he headed up-country to the Acland's Mt Peel station on the Rangitata River – a wages book for Mt Peel shows that a George Major worked there as a cowman from 14 March to 2 July 1889, and Elliott Major, George's son, recalls family talk of their father working for the Aclands after leaving school. (However, there were a number of Major families established in the area, including at least one other George.) Certainly, George's brother William is listed in the Mt Peel wages book (1887-1892), and possibly Albert, also, worked there.

Charles's death; Harriett's re-marriage and death

A crucial series of events in the life of the Major family occurred about this time: Charles died on 2 September 1891 of 'Chronic Disease of Lungs, and Asthma', coupled with 'Exhaustion'. George, the eldest child, was 22; there were six other children ranging down to a seven-year-old son; probably three of the children were still dependent and living at home at the time of Charles's death.

Harriett quickly re-married – seven and a half months later, on 18 March 1892. Her new husband was a widower, James Crafer, with a number of children of his own. The wedding took place in the Salvation Army officer's quarters, Geraldine, conducted by the officer. Ten years later, Harriett Crafer, formerly Major, née Maud, died in Geraldine on 16 May 1902, aged 56, predeceasing her second husband.

The Majors move north: Wanganui

Probably in 1892, and certainly (according to the Wanganui electoral roll) by October 1893 both George Major and his brother Albert had moved from South Canterbury to Fordell in the Wanganui District, their occupations being given as 'labourer'. What motivated this drastic change of scene is impossible to tell, but with their father dead and mother safely re-married the Major brothers would no doubt have felt free to move to wherever employment opportunities and wage rates seemed best. Fred Ellery, James Crafer's grandson, suggests that the Major brothers, followed by Crafers, took up 'bush-whacking' – tree-felling – clearing land for farming.

In the 1897 *Cyclopedia of New Zealand* Fordell is described as 'a station on the New Plymouth-Foxton section of Government Railways, thirteen miles south-east of

Wanganui and 138 from Wellington.... The township contains a population of 151, and the outlying districts, where there are many grand farms, 187 additional.'

In early 1894 the brothers shifted into Wanganui town, living in Taupo Quay along the west bank of the Whanganui River. Two years later the electoral roll shows an Ernest Edward and a William Major, both labourers, also living in Taupo Quay – two of the three younger brothers of George and Albert.

Albert Major married Jessie Whetton of a Peel Forest family in Trinity Methodist church, Wanganui, in October 1897. As the bride had, at the time of the wedding, been in the city for only three days, it can be assumed that the relationship had started before Albert moved north at least four years previously. Then, on 18 January 1898, the elder Major daughter, Alice Harriett, married her step-brother Arthur Crafar, also in Wanganui. Both Alice and Arthur gave Aramoho, now a suburb of Wanganui, as their usual place of residence.

By 1899 Ernest and William Major had moved out of town, but George, Albert, and his new wife Jessie, were still in Wanganui, all living now along River Bank (since re-named Somme Parade) in Aramoho.

George's marriage

George married in 1901. In completing his Notice of Intention to Marry, dated 27 April, he gave as his 'usual residential address' Mangamahu, a small settlement in the middle reaches of the Whangaehu River, stating that he had lived there for two months and that he was a farmer, ie, a farm labourer like his father.

George Major was 32 when he married Sarah Esther (Essie) Wallace, 26, in Wanganui on 30 April 1901. The event even gets to be reported in the local newspaper: the ceremony, we are told, was performed by the Wesleyan (Methodist), Rev. W.R. Tuck, in Essie's home in Lowther Street. The bride received gifts from the Aramoho Wesleyan Sunday school and choir, and is described as having been a valued member of the latter, so it is possible (given George's Methodist background) that it was in that setting, rather than at the Salvation Army as family tradition has it, that George first saw his wife-to-be. Essie's training was as a dressmaker, a skill she put to good use throughout her married life.

The Crafars move north

It is interesting to note that some time in the 1900s Arthur Crafar's brother, Hercules, moved from Canterbury to Fordell, and ran a profitable carrying business in the lower Whangaehu valley area until his death c1934, aged 55. And to complete the picture, by March 1906 James Crafer himself, father of Arthur and Hercules, step-father of George and the other Major offspring, and a widower since Harriett's death in 1902, was working as a market gardener in Wanganui; he would have been about 70 years of age. Crafar descendants are now corporate farmers, at times controversial, in the region west of Lake Taupo.

George and Essie's children

George and Essie produced six children in all:

- **Joseph Wallace**, born 25 January 1902, Wanganui; married Rita Gladys Beatson, 16 January 1930, Stratford; Stone's directories for 1937 till at least 1940 list Wallace as hall porter, 18 Dorset Avenue, New Plymouth; died 16 December 1975, New Plymouth.

- **George William**, born 22 February 1903; married Ida Clarice Shaw, 26 October 1926, Eltham, Taranaki; Stone's directories for 1928-1933 list George as farmer, Waikino, Waihi District, and for 1936 and 1937 as farmer, Mangatoki, Taranaki; died 15 June 1970, Mt Maunganui, Bay of Plenty.
- **Reginald Charles**, born 3 March 1904; attended Rawhitiroa School and Hawera High School; married Maxine Robson, 1930; Stone's directories for 1936 and 1937 list Reginald as town clerk, Upper Hutt; died Whangarei, Northland.
- **Norton Spurdle** (Snowy), born 10 September 1906; married Pearl Hodge, 1930; died 1970, Waitakere City.
- **Elliott McKane**, born 10 November 1910, Wanganui East; married Eliza Euphemia (Greta) McChesney, 29 December 1937, Wellington; Stone's directory for 1940 lists Elliott as 'captain, 34 Yule Street, Kilbirnie, Wellington'; died 11 August 1981, Christchurch.
- **Esther Maude**, born 30 December 1912; married Tom Weir, 3 June 1939, Stratford; died 7 January 2001.

Married life and work

The 1902 Wanganui electoral roll (closed 25 October) shows Albert and Jessie Major as residing still in River Bank, Aramoho, with the addition now of Sarah Esther, wife – and the deletion of George! George is to be found on the Rangitikei roll listed as 'farmer' and living at Koeke, Hunterville, but both George and Sarah are included also on the No.1 Supplement to this roll (closed 4 November 1902) listed as: 'Major, George, Pohonui, farmer' and 'Major, Sarah Ethel [*sic*], Pohonui, married'. It is likely that George with his new wife had moved to a position in Koeke soon after their wedding, that Essie had returned to Wanganui on becoming pregnant with their first child and had remained in town for some months after the birth in January 1902. Later that year she must have rejoined George, now living at Pohonui some six or so kilometres south of Koeke.

But by March 1903 they were again living apart, as the Rangitikei electoral roll of that date has Sarah (probably pregnant again) still in Pohonui, with George back at Koeke. Itinerancy, separation and insecurity were to characterise their marriage during much of George's working life.

Elliott Major recalls his father speaking of working on the farm of a Mr Collier. Henry Collier, Wanganui's leading musical personality (and father of the painter Edith Collier), had purchased a section of the Rangiwaea Block, between the upper Whangaehu and Turakina valleys, probably in November 1898. This Collier farm was situated about 12 kilometres north of Koeke. It is possible that George worked on this property – W(h)akarua, as it was later called.

The October 1905 Wanganui electoral roll reveals that George and Esther and their rapidly increasing family had left the rural hinterland and by that date were again living in town, at 14 Lowther Street (along the road from Essie's parents), though George is still described as 'farmer'. By 1908 the family had shifted to Wilkie Street, Eastbrook (ie, Wanganui East), where they stayed for some years. Maude Weir, Elliott's sister, told that during this Wanganui sojourn Esther took in dressmaking and George laboured as a shearer on properties up the Whanganui River and, in the off-season, at bush-felling – hard and dangerous work.

Going by the admission records of the Midhirst School, it was in August 1914 that the next move took place, when George took up employment on a farm along lower Denbigh Road, just out of Midhirst, Taranaki; *Wise's NZ Post Office Directory* – always a year or so out of date – lists George Major as a farmer, Midhirst, in its 1916 to 1918 issues.

Launching out – Rawhitiroa

Then in mid-1917, after three years in Denbigh Road, George and Essie took the fateful step of taking up a farm of their own: 234 acres in the Rawhitiroa district, seven or so kilometres east of Eltham, leased from Gordon Bowers and William Hewitt for a term of five years from 1 July 1917. The legal description of the property is 'Sub-division 2, Section 46, Block XI of the Ngaere Survey District'. The yearly rental was £410 16s 3d to be paid in quarterly instalments. Also, probably to fund the lease, George took out a mortgage with William Hewitt.

Section 46 had first been farmed, in 1895 or '96, by George Moir. In 1901 the *Hawera & Normanby Star* reported (5 March) that Moir was 'one of the first settlers to try a root crop in the swamp, putting in potatoes, and a prolific yield was obtained'.

In 1917, when George took up the farm, the Ngaere Survey District consisted largely of drained swamp land full of stumps and dead trees. The earlier history of the area is summarised by James Belich in his book *I Shall Not Die: Titokowaru's War*:

Te Ngaere was a vast swamp ... with an island of solid ground at its heart on which stood three villages. It was a legendary fastness of the Ngati Tupaea hapu of Tangahoe [*a Ngati Ruanui sub-tribe*], said to have 'engulfed' a taua of 500 Waikato warriors generations before.

In March 1869 Colonel George Whitmore had led a force of colonists and kupapa Maori through Te Ngaere to the island villages, moving across the swamp along a path of hurdles made by the troops as they went, using branches and flax. Whitmore was in pursuit, unsuccessfully as it turned out, of the great Ngati Ruanui general Titokowaru.

No doubt because of its unsuitability for settlement, the swamp had not been included when the rest of Taranaki was confiscated by the Government in 1865, and was not purchased by the Crown from its Maori owners until 1894, almost 30 years later. Speaking of the situation then, a writer in the Rawhitiroa School centenary booklet (1998) says:

It was clear that before the land in Rawhitiroa could become viable, much draining had to take place. At the time the block was offered for settlement [*in 1895*], the Government made a guarantee to construct all outlet drains, as well as a number of smaller drains to assist in draining the swamp lands. Some drains reached depths of 12ft and 14ft width at top. The circuit drain was constructed 6ft deep, 3ft wide at the bottom and 7ft wide at the top. As the drains were dug, the peat swamp would sink, and in some places the sinkage reached four feet [*1.22m*].

As the swamp dried out, fire became a hazard with peat burning two or three feet down over an ever-widening area for weeks or months at a time until the winter rains could extinguish it; and yet the land had to be cleared and the felled trees, brushwood and old stumps disposed of – most easily by burning. Even so, as late as the 1930s many fields in the block were still covered in stumps and dead wood. As land was drained and cleared, grass was sown and the area fenced to take dairy

cattle. For some 60 years, until it closed in 1966, a local cheese factory took the butterfat produced.

George, Essie and the children took an active part in the social life of the little Rawhitiroa community. In April 1918 George was elected to the school committee, becoming chairman in April 1921, and adding to this the secretaryship at the AGM the next year, at which time the newspaper reported that 'the finances showed a very satisfactory credit balance' and 'the report was an excellent one and was adopted without discussion'.

Essie's wide range of expertise was shown in the prize list of the local flower show in 1924 when she was awarded:

- 1st and 2nd prizes for ferns
- 1st and 2nd prizes for a bowl of flowers
- 3rd prize for a collection of sweet peas
- 2nd prize for a seed cake
- 1st prize for a family cake
- 1st prize for bread
- 2nd prize for nut bread
- 1st prize for pound cake
- 1st prize for honey (extracted)
- 2nd prize for a collection of pickles
- 1st prize for a collection of sauces
- 1st prize for a collection of chutneys, and
- 2nd prize for 'article from kerosene tin'!

Other members of the family were also named in the list:

- George: highly commended for table potatoes, and 1st prize for butter beans.
- Wallace: 1st prize for a bridal bouquet, and 2nd for a collection of asters.
- Norton: 2nd prize for the heaviest swede.

Wallace was especially active as the pianist at dances and other gatherings, with Essie occasionally assisting with the catering, and Elliott was a regular prize-winner at inter-school competitions for Boys' and Girls' Agricultural Clubs.

Initially, in the agricultural boom conditions generated by the Great War, all must have gone well for George, as his lease on the farm was renewed at the end of the five years. But then recession hit in 1921 and the rural boom ended abruptly. Tom Brooking in his *Milestones: Turning Points in New Zealand History* (1988) states that probably more marginal farmers were weeded out during the period 1921-25 than at any other time in New Zealand history. An indication that George Major was feeling the pinch is that, in November 1924, he was taken to court by the Eltham County Council for non-payment of a debt of £26 11s 5d; the magistrate ruled in favour of the council and George had to pay up with costs.

Commodity prices picked up from 1924, but this was too late to save George Major. In mid-1926, having not paid his rent since 1923, George walked off his Rawhitiroa leasehold with nothing to show for all his high hopes, courageous risk-taking and nine years of hard labour and meagre living by himself, Essie and their children. He was 57 years old. Maude recalled that the family left the farm with only the car and a few pieces of furniture. When they got to Eltham Essie had to go into the *Eltham Argus* office where Wallace worked and ask him for sixpence to buy a loaf of bread.

What had happened? The recession was certainly a major factor, but other farmers in the area survived. Was it that George's land had been too difficult to farm? But it was taken over from George as a going concern and is still in production to this day. Or that the family had just too many mouths to feed? But the sons were strong, young men, who worked on the farm or earned a living elsewhere bringing money into the family purse. Or was it that George, despite the mortgage, simply did not have enough capital for the machinery, fertilizers and other inputs needed for successful agriculture on that difficult soil?

Whatever the reason, the total failure of this immense effort by George to lift himself and his family out of the economically vulnerable working class into the financially independent agricultural yeomanry must have deeply marked the rest of his life. There could be no second chance; George had risked all and lost all, in fact, more than all – on 3 February 1927 George, with no assets and debts totalling £1,265 (more than three times the annual rent for the farm), petitioned the Supreme Court sitting in New Plymouth to declare him bankrupt. The personal disappointment and humiliation of this disaster, quite apart from its effect on the family's standard of living, must have been devastating.

The farm is now (in 2009) owned by Keith Evans; its postal address is 576A Rawhitiroa Road, RD 18, Eltham 4398. Unfortunately, the farm house and whare occupied by the Major family were burnt down a few years ago and the remains buried under an enlarged platform on which a new house has since been built.

On the move

From Rawhitiroa the family moved first to a farm in upper Waingongoro Road, Cardiff, near Stratford, but here the work for George lasted for not much more than four months. This and further family moves are indicated by the school admissions record for the youngest Major child, Maude:

from Rawhitiroa School (records destroyed in a 1945 fire);
to Waingongoro School, Stratford District, 13 July 1926 – 26 November 1926;
to Ratapiko School, Inglewood District, 1 February 1927 – 6 May 1927;
to Toko (records destroyed in a 1929 fire).

Maude started at Ratapiko School two days before her father filed for bankruptcy; at this time he was employed as a labourer on a farm at Tariki along the Ratapiko road, a job that lasted for three months.

Toko

The 1928 Stratford electoral roll marks the next episode in the saga with the entry: 'Major, George, Bird Rd, Stratford, share milker'. John Major's account explains that George found work on a farm owned by Mr F. Hunger (of Swiss German descent), off Bird Road, south-east of Stratford, with George to receive one third of the income from the butterfat produced. Going by Maude's school record, this move probably took place in May 1927, the Hunger farm being just across the Patea River from Toko. Maude remembers crossing the river by the swing bridge and walking along the railway line to Toko with Elliott to attend the evening Bible class at the Presbyterian church, and dances in the village.

As the Great Depression hit the NZ economy after 1929, the Major family learnt to live on eels caught in the river and blackberries gathered on its banks, as well as by maintaining a large and productive vegetable garden. Maude added: 'We had mutton as Dad did kill a sheep now & again. Artichoke soup which I go[t] sick of in

the winter we had that, I believe every day. Dad grew them for the Pigs & we helped the Pigs to eat them. It was hard going but my mother was a good manager & we made the grade, Praise the Lord.'

On the move again

But Mr Hunger, no doubt feeling the pinch himself, decided 'to take over his holding again, and consequently the Major family had to move on'. This distressing event must have happened before December 1931, as the Egmont Supplementary Roll, compiled for the election held on 2nd of that month, has George and Essie living in Hastie Rd, off Opunake Rd in a farming area west of Stratford, with George once again described simply as 'labourer'. Luckily, by this time only Maude was still living at home, and she was in paid employment. Margaret Murray, Maude's daughter, recalls her mother speaking of working in Pettigrew's seed and plant shop in Stratford during these years.

Stratford

How George and Essie kept themselves solvent over the next few years is not clear, but by the end of August 1933, when George was 64 years old and Essie 58, the electoral roll indicates that they were living in the township of Stratford, George now describing himself as a gardener. John Major records how this happened:

The family were without a home, but fortunately Reg, third son of the family, was working at the Borough Council Office in Stratford and knew of a house available for rent in Juliet Street, Stratford, just beside the railway line and near the swing bridge and the Patea River. The rent on the house was ten shillings a week.

Final years and deaths

The youngest son, Elliott, had started attending the Salvation Army in Stratford, probably in 1930. A few years later this led to a strong sense of calling to Salvation Army officership, and in March 1934 Elliott entered the Army training college in Wellington. This was somewhat against his parents' wishes. However, in later years George and Esther were proud of their Salvation Army officer son, and themselves attended meetings of the Stratford Corps.

George and Esther remained in their small cottage at 161 Juliet Street for the rest of their lives. John Major remembers:

It was in this house the grandchildren often had holidays and remember their grandfather for his garden, his compost heap and his habit of setting lines for eels sometimes in the evenings. He had a workshop in the backyard and used to roll his own cigarettes there. Grandma Esther is remembered for her interest in listening to Parliament, her cooking, dressmaking, Women's Division of Federated Farmers and Salvation Army meetings.

George died on 15 November 1948, three months short of his 80th birthday, and Esther on 1 January 1951, two months before her 76th. They are buried together in the Kopuatama Cemetery, 5km outside of Stratford along SH43*.

Their house, owned by NZ Railways, was removed c1955 when the narrow bridge across the Patea River was replaced and the south end of Juliet Street widened to allow two-way traffic.

*From the main gate turn left past the toilets, then right along the grass path between rows 3 and 4. Proceed to row 64 (seen on right) and the grave is the fifth plot straight ahead.