



### **Jessie Wheeler, nee White: c1830-1901**

Many of Dunedin's first settlers were Scottish immigrants and so was Jessie Wheeler but the circumstances leading to her arrival in New Zealand were a little different to most. Certainly not what she might have imagined for herself growing up in the Market town of Airdrie, Lanarkshire.

Jessie was born Jessie White around 1830 in Airdrie in the Parish of New Monkland. The town, (population in 1831 of 6594) being advantageously on the road from Glasgow to Edinburgh carried on the principal trade of weaving but other industry included a Tannery, brewery, cotton factory and an extensive distillery,

Education in 1835 was provided by a parish school. There were four other schools within the parish built by subscription and also eight private schools. The charge for reading was generally 3 shillings per quarter with additional charges for extra subjects. Jessie at age sixteen had only reading ability. Her limited education, while by no means unusual for the times, tends to suggest her family circumstances were humble

Like a great many young woman Jessie went into domestic service, employed as housemaid. What factors led her to leave her position and

travel to Anglesey in North Wales we do not know but it was a decision that would have far reaching consequences

On the 24th November 1849 Jessie White, resident of Bodedern, appeared in the court at Beaumaris, Anglesey to answer the charge of breaking in to the premises of John Hughes, Shoemaker of Hen Bandy, near Bodedern and stealing articles of clothing, eight and a half sovereigns and other sundry items. The burglary took place overnight, while the occupants slept and there were no witnesses. Five men, all in their twenties were also charged

John Hughes gave details of the break-in and identified stolen articles of clothing located at Beaumaris and the village of Llangefni near Bodedern. The papers described the offenders as a "gang" but what Jessie's role was in the proceedings is not made clear

A young woman of 19 years of age, a diminutive 4ft 11 inches tall Jessie had not previously been convicted of any offence. These factors apparently carried no weight with the judge and jury who sentenced her to ten years transportation, the same punishment as her co-offenders. One of the accused, James Emmanuel Crabb suffered impaired vision as a result of a steam engine explosion, in consequence he had to be led about at night. The idea that he took part in the break-in and burglary of an occupied unlit dwelling at night was definitely stretching the grounds of probability, but he also was found guilty.

Jessie shared the same surname as another accused, William White and it is possible that they were related. Her recorded details at the time of transportation state that her father's name was John and that she had a brother William and sisters named Elizabeth and Mary. As well as her small stature Jessie is described as having sandy hair, blue eyes, a small nose and wide mouth and bore no distinguishing marks or scars.

Crime does not exist in a social vacuum. Poverty predictably begets theft. Four fifths of all

transportations were for crimes against property, a great number simply for "theft of wearing apparel" or food. Many thefts were spontaneous, desperate and often bungled efforts to relieve want and hunger. British prisons of the period were massively overcrowded and many convicts awaiting transportation were kept on "hulks", decommissioned naval warships, rotting at anchor, until the government decided where to send them. From 1841 to 1850 around 26,000 convicts were sent to Van Dieman's Land. The idea that by getting rid of criminals Britain would get rid of crime was doomed to failure because the causes of crime were rooted in social injustice: in poverty, unemployment, inequality and want, and the draconian laws of the times.

Jessie left England as one of 170 female passengers onboard the vessel "Emma Eugenia" which arrived in Hobart 7th March 1851. Growing opposition by Tasmanian settlers brought about the abolition of transportation to Van Diemen's Land in 1853. The convicts were generally kept on board for the first few days following their arrival in port. The Surgeon - Superintendant of the vessel then delivered his report to the Colonial Secretary. The report included a list of his charges names, occupations, details of their conviction and their conduct during the voyage. Settlers were advised prior to the transport ships expected arrival to allow them to apply for convict servants who were assigned according to their trades and behaviour. Those unable to be assigned, any who became pregnant, female incorrigibles, or those undergoing punishment were sent to the female factories at Hobart, Cascades or Launceston. The majority of convict women spent some time at the Cascades Female Factory as it was the main place for their reception and imprisonment.

Assignment was a lottery. A good or harsh master was largely the luck of the draw. Some female assignees complained they were "treated like dogs and worked like horses". Most convicts were resigned to their fate and waited out their time. Marriages between convicts were not

discouraged but special consent was required. On the 16th September 1851 Jessie applied for permission to marry Robert Paul, who had arrived in Hobart in August 1850, transported on the vessel "Maria Somes". It appears permission was denied as the marriage was never registered. Perhaps this was the trigger that prompted Jessie, six weeks later, to abscond. When recaptured she received the punishment of four months hard labour in the women's factory at Hobart.

On 12th February 1852 Jessie gave birth to an illegitimate son whom she named William. Women were not compelled to name the father of their offspring. Mother and baby stayed in a designated yard in the factory until the baby was weaned, at between 3 and 9 months. The mothers were then returned to the other yards of the female factory and the babies were cared for by other weaning mothers. There was a high infant mortality rate due to early weaning and unhygienic conditions in the prison. Those children who survived to age 2 or 3 were sent to the orphan schools in Hobart until they were reclaimed by their mothers or old enough to support themselves. Life in the factories is described by historians as a vegetative misery and religious leaders and prison reformers claimed convict women responded gratefully to any gestures of compassion or attention.

The birth of William perhaps gave a new focus to Jessie's life for apart from a period of six months hard labour for insolence no other misdemeanors are recorded. Jessie was recommended for a conditional pardon on the 29th of May 1853 and in 1855 she was granted permission to marry free man William Wheeler, a labourer from Berkshire, England. The ceremony took place in the Anglican Church of St. George, Hobart. William was aged 30 and Jessie 22. Unable to write both parties signed the register with an X. Jessie's long awaited pardon was finally approved on 20th May 1856. A son John (her father's name) was born to the couple later that year. Mary, their first daughter, born 1858, lived just two years. A second daughter Hannah was born in 1860.

Jessie and William were free in the general sense of the word but everywhere were reminders of Jessie's former life of servitude. They decided to put the past behind them and the family, now numbering five, embarked for Dunedin, New Zealand. William Wheeler was born in Berkshire but Jessie's Scottish roots probably influenced the Wheelers in choosing the predominantly Scottish settlement of Dunedin for their new home. Jessie and William arrived in Dunedin in December 1862 and the family lived initially in Union Street. William Wheeler, late of Hobartown received a sentence of 7 days goal for stealing eggs. (Otago Police Gazette 1st Nov. 1865). Another 5 daughters and a third son Arthur were born in Dunedin.

William worked as a labourer and also as a flesher (butcher). The Wheelers moved to Great King St. and it was from this house on 31st December 1874 that Jessie's first son William married Irish immigrant Mary Ann O'Brien. The Wheelers next move was to North East Valley where the Wheeler children attended Mr. A. McLeod's school which was held in the North Dunedin drill shed. It was a great source of pride that the Wheeler girls regularly distinguished themselves in their school examinations. Results published in the Otago Witness show Sarah, Grace and Lucy all achieving well. In 1875 Grace received the only prize awarded in the school for her recitation of "Grey's Elegy."

Life in New Zealand had brought opportunities for advancement for William and Jessie and a "Return of the freeholders of New Zealand", compiled in 1882 showed Jessie Wheeler held property to the value of 200 pounds in the Borough of North East Valley. In October of 1882 William was taken ill and after seven days he succumbed to pneumonia. He died on 20th October 1882 and is buried with Jessie.

Jessie did not let her lack of education hold her back and she opened her own business in Frederick Street as a storekeeper and general merchant. She also owned residential property in Athol Place. Jessie was always there in support of her family especially when things

were difficult. No-one knew better than her what it was like to endure hard times. Wretched convict, family woman, hard working colonist, successful business woman. All of these labels can be applied to Jessie Wheeler at different periods of her life. Jessie triumphed over events that would have crippled weaker persons and her legacy is the many successful descendants who carry her genes in their veins.

Jessie died of enteritis and lung congestion on the 26th November 1901. She was aged 72 years. She is buried with her husband at Dunedin's Northern Cemetery.

It was the prevailing view at the time of Jessie's conviction that criminals begat criminals but statistics were to prove this a myth. In Australia, crime records showed that the first generation of native born children of the transportees were the most morally conservative and law abiding people in the country. Many of their parents were transported for very trivial offences. Such people were not habitual criminals but humble folk without much opportunity and in circumstances of appalling poverty. However, to moralising observers, simply to be a former transportee or "ticket of leaver" as they were often called was regarded as evidence of wickedness. Little wonder that Jessie was at some pains to conceal her identity. Her son William's death certificate states that Jessie's maiden name was Hobbs while other children and Jessie herself, declared it to be Hamilton. Evidence supports it indeed being White as recorded on her transportation record. As we her family, like thousands of Australians outgrow our self-consciousness of this dark time in British history we will eventually feel comfortable in acknowledging this strong woman.

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