

A Pattern of Mysterious Events and Places



*At first it wasn't easy to imagine a time when I hadn't
existed, but from the talk of my parents that time of dreaming
took on a pattern of mysterious events and places.*

‘BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS’

In the week before Bill Pearson's death, his long-time partner Donald Stenhouse initiated a discussion about the handling of his ashes. Bill's mind was lucid, but cancer's final stages had induced extreme lethargy, and for a long time his response was a thoughtful silence. So Donald spoke first, proposing to take some of the ashes to the ancestral place Bill had come to identify with most strongly, the ruined village of Doire-nam-fuaran – ‘The Grove of the Spring’ – in the Scottish Highlands. Bill answered with a smile and nod, seeming, Donald thought, both appreciative and contented by this solution. But a moment later he spoke for the first time, adding quietly but firmly, ‘And Greymouth Technical High School.’”

Bill Pearson's memories of his loved mother, Ellen Pearson, explain this unusual association of places. Her father, John McLean, dreamed of a better life and departed Doire-nam-fuaran for New Zealand in the 1860s to find it. He settled in South Canterbury and bequeathed to his small corner of the Canterbury Plains an obscure reminder of his Highland origins – the place name ‘Dorie’. Some seventy years later, while Ellen lay gravely ill in Greymouth Hospital, her son was

rewarded for a year of unparalleled academic success by being named dux of his high school. Two days later she died, indelibly marking Pearson's triumph with tragedy, and forever associating the two events in his mind.

JOHN MCLEAN'S BAPTISM is entered in the Applecross Parish Register as taking place on 18 March 1840, when 'Murdoch Maclean resider at Dorry-na-fuaran and his spouse Helen Maclean had a child baptized by the name of John'.² At the time, Applecross Parish encompassed some twenty square miles of Ross-shire in the Northwest Highlands. Even today this starkly beautiful countryside yields little to its inhabitants; in nineteenth-century Scotland, landscape and landowners combined to ensure that even in the best of times the tenants of Doire-nam-fuaran would struggle to eke a living.

At the time of John McLean's birth his village was an anomaly, a traditional runrig farm of the sort largely eradicated across the rest of the Highlands by landlords determined to 'alter the underlying relation of land and people: to re-align tenants in new social groups; and to force industrial experiments on traditionally agricultural groups'³ – a set of practices captured under the umbrella of 'Highland clearance'. The usual runrig farm was a small agricultural hamlet communally farmed by a group of impoverished tenant families each entitled to a fixed fraction of the arable land, which was periodically reallocated amongst them. The 1841 census shows 37 households and 197 people living at Doire-nam-fuaran, a respectable number when the entire district of Applecross had a population of less than three thousand.

The catalyst for John McLean's departure is unknown, but his motives would have been the same as many thousands of Highland Scots who faced bleak futures as chattels subject to the capricious whims of their landlords, and so risked everything in the hope of a better life in the colonies. The inscription in his new Gaelic Bible – 'John McLean London 27th May 1862'⁴ – dates his departure, for he was only passing through London, and he quickly found passage on a ship to New Zealand. Once there, McLean obtained work as a shepherd in the South Island for the New Zealand and Australian Land Company – an Edinburgh-based corporation set up to acquire property – freehold and leasehold – in Australasia. He rose to be head shepherd in the district of Acton, south of Canterbury's Rakaia River, 'on land that only a few years before was the territory of the Ngai-Tahu'.⁵ The Acton properties, sited on some 80,000 acres near the mouth of the Rakaia, ran up to 40,000 sheep.⁶

It would be sixteen years before John McLean was in a position to buy 'enough land to enable him to marry (at 39), raise a family and live comfortably as a small farmer'.⁷ He acquired his first 149 acres as a grant under land regulations that

empowered the Canterbury Association to dispose of millions of acres of land formerly in the possession of the New Zealand Company, and before them, Ngāi Tahu.⁸ When McLean took possession of his farm on 11 July 1879, he named it 'Dorie' after his home village. Just weeks later, on 2 September, he married Mary Ann Harrison (25) in St Paul's Presbyterian Church, Christchurch.⁹

Mary Harrison, Bill Pearson's maternal grandmother, was the daughter of Thomas Eager Harrison who farmed at Hollyfort, about four miles inland of Gorey in the north of County Wexford, Ireland. The history of Thomas Eager Harrison's forebears and descendants graphically illustrates the impact of the Irish diaspora on the country's most impoverished citizens. The pressure to leave effectively orphaned Thomas. His parents emigrated to America in 1826 with their five oldest children, leaving Thomas, aged two, to be raised by his uncle – a hard decision that probably saved his life given the high mortality rates of young children on such voyages.

In December 1849, when Thomas was in his twenties, he married seventeen-year-old Ruth Butler of Banogue at the nearby Parish Church of Kiltennel. They had fourteen children in quick succession, eight sons and six daughters, thirteen of whom progressively emigrated. Twelve settled in New Zealand, one in America, and a lone daughter, Charlotte, married and remained in Ireland. The reason for the vast majority selecting distant, undeveloped New Zealand when the United States, Canada and Australia were also taking immigrants is chain migration, where an early migrant acts as an anchor, and 'then brings out friends and family'.¹⁰ The Harrison family anchor was Henry (b. 1852) who arrived in New Zealand in 1876 after a 111-day voyage on the *Soukar*, his passage paid as an 'assisted migrant with the occupation of Ploughman'.¹¹ Mary Ann and her younger brother William Harrison – Bill Pearson's first eponym – followed Henry in 1876 on the ship *Cardigan Castle*. After a slow voyage punctuated by storm and delayed by illness and a lengthy period of quarantine, the pair made it to the South Rakaia district of Canterbury, where Henry had established himself in close proximity to John McLean's farm. For two and a half years, until she married John McLean, Mary likely kept house for her brothers.

Bill Pearson's maternal grandparents had eight children who survived past infancy. At least one baby died soon after birth, a boy named William Harrison McLean, Pearson's second eponym. The first surviving child, a daughter born in 1880, was named Mary after her mother but was always Aunt Molly to Pearson. Next came two sons, Murdoch, born in 1882, and William Henry (Willie), born in 1883. The sons, a particular source of parental pride in this era of male succession, lived tragically brief lives: Murdoch died aged three of inflammation of the bowels and Willie died aged ten of peritonitis in 1894. At least one of the deaths was

attributed to eating green fruit, and later generations of McLean children and grandchildren were warned to be careful lest they suffer a similar fate. Pearson's mother, Agnes Ellen McLean (Nell), was born in 1886, the year Murdoch died. She was followed by Ann Jane, born 1887; Thomas (Tom), born 1889; John Murdoch (Jack), born 1890; and Hubert, born 1892. The McLean children had many cousins on nearby farms, and their busy social lives included trips by gig to one family occasion or another, or to local farming events: 'my mother had won those red and gold cards in the chiffonier drawer, from old A. & P. shows, first prize for scones, first prize for sponge-cake, second for gooseberry jam, highly commended'.¹²

Every parent in the district understood the importance of education if their children were to succeed in the colony, not least John and Mary McLean. In 1886 – the year Molly turned six – McLean played a key role in the establishment of a district school by donating a two-acre section of the southeast corner of a new block of land he was purchasing. When he took possession of the land on 17 March 1887, he transferred the two acres to the Education Board for the nominal sum of ten shillings.¹³ Acton School opened in February 1888 with eleven pupils, among them Mary and Willie McLean. John became the founding chairman of the school committee and held the post for two years. In May 1888 'it was unanimously agreed to change the name of the school district from Acton to Dorie', in appreciation of his efforts and generosity.¹⁴ Pearson's mother, Ellen, started at Dorie School three years later, on 2 February 1891.

Meanwhile, John McLean continued to enlarge Dorie Farm by purchasing adjoining sections, and by the early 1890s his property covered almost 460 acres. But he wanted land closer to the township of Rakaia, and in the early 1890s he sold Dorie and acquired 300 acres bounded on its western edge by Rakaia town, and bounded to the north by the southern bank of the Rakaia River.¹⁵ Ellen, who was nine, shifted with her siblings to Rakaia School; and although they were still living on a farm, the McLean children now participated fully in town life, something impossible out at Dorie, a dozen miles towards the coast by gig.

As the twentieth century approached, it must have seemed to John McLean that his settler dream had become a reality. If he had remained a tenant on a subsistence farm in the Scottish Highlands, he could not have prevented his village being razed to the ground, and he would have had very little to offer his descendants. But in more egalitarian New Zealand he had become a landowner and man of standing, bequeathing property for a school and assisting his future generations by farming with his sons and doing everything possible to ensure his daughters would make good marriages. Indeed, a striking photograph taken around 1905 indicates John and Mary McLean had done their best for Molly, Ellen and Ann. The portrait shows the young women classically posed, the epitome of

Edwardian refinement, educated, confident and, by the standards of the colony, cultured. Both Molly and Ellen painted and Ann attended Canterbury College, completed a degree, and trained as a teacher. Ellen's few surviving paintings show boldness and originality, strongly suggesting some formal training.

However, despite doing everything in their power to provide for their descendants, John and Mary's best efforts were overtaken by the Depression. The great slump undid everything they had worked for. It thwarted their ambitions for their children, impoverishing some, and led to the loss of the Rakaia farm in 1934. With it went any hope Ellen Pearson might have had of a substantial inheritance. In the years of her worsening illness, no windfall relieved her need. Witnessing his mother's stoic and prolonged struggle undoubtedly influenced Bill Pearson's views on social justice, the function of art, and the practice of politics.

John McLean, who lived to ninety-four, had never relinquished ownership of the farm to his children. Perhaps, at first, because one farm amongst three sons is the perfect equation for discontent. Perhaps later, because he remained, to the end, an obdurate man:¹⁶

They said he could do the sword dance at eighty. The only grandparent I ever saw, he was remote and forbidding to a boy of six; almost ninety, his full beard still a dark grey, and staring fiercely through me: "Now, come over here and don't annoy your grandfather."

It isn't known what it was like for McLean's sons working for their father, but it may be significant that Pearson's Uncle Jack removed himself early on by marrying at twenty-one and leaving home to work as a railway man. He became a stationmaster in the North Island and died in the early 1940s, not much over fifty years of age. Jack's departure left Tom (Pearson's favourite uncle) and Hubert to run the farm with their father. Tom, oldest by three years, had been working on it since leaving Rakaia School, as had Hubert. But Tom had been brought up to believe he would inherit the farm, or at least be given responsibility for its management. No one had anticipated a war.

Tom was twenty-five in 1914 and he quickly enlisted as an engineer. He took part in the landing at Gallipoli, from where he was hospitalised with a septic arm that took a year to recover. After transferring to the artillery, he took part in the Battle of the Somme and Passchendaele. He was wounded but survived the war and was discharged on 26 February 1919 after four years and 47 days of service. When he returned home, it was to find Hubert performing his role on the farm, and his father unprepared to alter the new arrangement. Bitter, and unwilling to lose status to his younger brother, Tom abandoned the farm and retrained as a

builder. He found work in Timaru with Peter Hunter, the husband of his sister Molly. It was also in Timaru that he married Lillian Russell, built a home, and they began a family.

Pearson's Aunt Molly had a happy marriage to Peter Hunter, despite the stress of his building business failing during the Depression because of his unwillingness to lay off any employees. Forced to sell his Timaru home, Hunter convinced Tom McLean to go gold prospecting and both families relocated to Arrowtown to sluice a claim. Molly, and Tom's wife, Lil, made the best of the situation, spending three summers up the Arrow River and returning to Timaru to stay with family during the winter. Lil McLean described those years as 'some of the happiest of their lives. They had very little. They lived off the land, eating strawberries and apricots that the Chinese had planted years before.'¹⁷ But eventually Molly tired of living in the hills with her children and returned to Timaru to run a boarding house. Hunter returned also, and was in the process of building them a new home when he died of cancer around 1940, leaving Molly to support herself.

The marriage of Pearson's Aunt Ann foundered on a rocky relationship. She was twenty-eight when she left teaching and settled down with twenty-one-year-old Frank Kesteven, but he turned out to be a 'lovable rogue' and philanderer, and they separated when their youngest child Nancy was seven. Pearson's Uncle Hubert remained at home as his siblings married and departed, a bachelor working the property alongside his father. Nothing is properly known about him. The most that can be said with certainty is that he never married, remained with his parents until they died, executed their wills, and of necessity in his mid-forties ceased being a farmer and became a civil servant in Wellington. It is believed he died on a train while commuting to work sometime during the Second World War. He named Molly as his next of kin.

Hubert was with his mother, Pearson's grandmother Mary Ann McLean, when she died on 5 April 1924 at the County Hospital of Ashburton. She was seventy, and had been married to John McLean for forty-five years. McLean would outlive his wife by a decade. The facts of the old patriarch's death aren't completely known, but the narrative some of his grandchildren heard is appropriately dramatic. The story goes that near the end of his life a cinder from a steam engine set fire to a field of grain just prior to the harvest. John and Hubert hurried to extinguish it by beating the flames out with damp sacks. 'My grandfather, being Scots, with that hot-headedness the Scots have, decided that wasn't quick enough so he tried to stamp it out, probably with footwear that wasn't suitable, and he got badly burned in the feet and up the lower legs.'¹⁸ The burns weren't immediately fatal, but shock, complications, and possibly a stroke, ultimately caused his death in Ashburton's Tuarangi Home for elderly men in June 1934, aged about ninety-four.¹⁹

John McLean's descendants often wondered just how his farm came to be lost. Bill Pearson heard that Uncle Hubert, who had been assigned power of attorney when his father became ill, inherited the farm and lived there in a relationship with a woman who passed herself off as the housekeeper. Shortly after old John's death it was revealed that Hubert was in financial strife, a situation he resolved by selling the farm, paying his debts, and, according to family mythology, disappearing 'into the wide blue yonder' with the housekeeper and any remaining money.²⁰ Pearson also heard that Uncle Tom wanted the family to take Hubert to law to see what could be recovered, but his sisters were adamantly opposed, fearing the disgrace should the family's dirty laundry be aired in public.

An advocate for the maligned Hubert would point out that the records of relevant land transactions and John McLean's probate offer a different interpretation of events. They suggest that the bulk of responsibility for the loss of the Rakaia farm falls squarely on John McLean himself; and that the account of the old man's valiant but futile efforts to stamp out the flames consuming his fields, only to be consumed himself, is a terrible metaphor for the way he lost everything he had spent his life building. While it is true that the farm was in financial strife, the debts do appear to have been more of John McLean's making than his youngest son's (Hubert's role in advising his father can only be speculated upon). It is possible that Hubert was unaware of the parlous state of the farm's finances – or indeed that John had sold it one month earlier – until he had been sworn in as executor of his father's will and received his first inkling of the extent to which the property was mortgaged.

Hubert didn't sell the farm; it was his dying father's final act. On 7 May 1934 Richard Vinton Burrowes offered John McLean fourteen pounds five shillings an acre for all 307 acres of his land, a total of £4,378; on 26 May McLean accepted the offer; on 15 June he was admitted for palliative care to the Tuarangi Home in Ashburton; and on 25 June he died.²¹ Whether or not Hubert was aware of the sale before 28 June when he was sworn in as his father's executor is unknown. What is certain is that he had nowhere to turn. Almost the entire amount Burrowes had agreed to pay was owed to State Advances to discharge the mortgages. In addition, two charging orders had been entered against the farm.²² In 1934, by the time the mortgages and charging orders on the land had been discharged, all that remained of a lifetime's risk and effort was £194, of which Hubert received £97, and his five siblings, Bill Pearson's mother included, a little over £19 each. At forty-three, Hubert McLean was suddenly without a livelihood and, rightly or wrongly, forever tainted by the loss of the family land. If John McLean was a proud and obdurate old man stamping vainly on flames when he remortgaged the property, then he surely died with the tragic knowledge that his life's effort had been for nothing.