

THE BELL FAMILY IN NELSON

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ARRIVAL FROM WANGANUI: William Gordon Bell arrived in Nelson with his family in 1847, five years after the foundation of the settlement. They had spent the previous six years in Wanganui, endeavouring to establish a home and farm in a climate of Maori hostility to the land buying proceedings of the New Zealand Company agents. They had finally come to a decision that a move to another district was the only viable option. Nelson was a New Zealand Company settlement, and replacement land for the abandoned Wanganui farmland was able to be negotiated.

WEST INDIES AND SCOTLAND: William Gordon Bell was then 62 years old. His wife, Alziere, was 70. The daughter of a French naval surgeon and a West Indian mother, she had married Scottish owner of the Bellevue Estate, Carriacou, West Indies. After his death Alziere married William G Bell who was the estate manager. A daughter, Margaret, was born in 1811. The prospect of the abolition of slavery and market competition depressing the sugar price was making the economics of the estate doubtful, and the family returned to Scotland. Here more children were born, Mary 1815, James 1817, Elizabeth 1818 and William Gordon, the Younger in 1820. The family lived and farmed near the village of New Abbey not far from Dumfries in the southwest of Scotland.

TO NEW ZEALAND AND WANGANUI: In 1839 the decision was made for the whole family, including Mary's husband, James Wallace and their two young children, to come to New Zealand. Son James, now 21, wanted to come as a surveyor working for the New Zealand Company, Margaret was in poor health, and no doubt Alziere found Scotland cold. But what a momentous decision; the conclusion that life in Scotland was less than comfortable and lacked prospects is inescapable. They sailed from Liverpool on the *Lady Lilford* and reached Australia early in 1840. William Gordon Bell sought land there, but drought and frustrations in land negotiations persuaded him to move on to New Zealand, with his cows, working bullocks, implements and seeds. The *Lady Lilford* brought them to Wellington on 16 March 1840.

He first used his plough on fellow passenger James Watt's land at Miramar, in an attempt to grow wheat. Not surprisingly the crop was poor and William Gordon Bell sought out better land, purchasing some near Wanganui from the New Zealand Company. After a reconnaissance, the cattle were walked up the coast, with care being needed at the major river crossings. The family and effects followed by schooner. 50 acres were under cultivation by the time they had to leave for Nelson. The family were still together, apart from James, who had had adventures in the Wairarapa and was moving to Otago to help with the survey for the new settlement, and the Wallaces, who did not move immediately to Nelson.

FIRST YEAR ON THE WAIMEA EAST FARM: The land William Gordon Bell obtained from the New Zealand Company was in what became Lower Queen Street, Richmond, on the eastern corner of Swamp Road. Daughter Bessie (Elizabeth), who was to spend a lifetime as a

practical farmer, kept a diary of day to day events of the first year here. It reveals the constant hard work of a pioneering family establishing a farm from scratch. The two daughters, Margaret and Bessie, their younger brother Willie, and a hired hand, Harry Tunnicliff, assisted their father with most of the work. During the month of August a house was built and the family moved in. In the early months there was much use of the bullock drawn plough.

Flax had to be grubbed, gathered and burnt, posts and rails carted from a nearby wood and fashioned into stockyards and pig pen, and crops sown.

Neighbours donated some assistance with the early ploughing. By the end of September Margaret had made the first cheese. By November potatoes were planted, more fencing erected to prevent the cattle from straying, and drainage ditches dug and bridged. Even today it is easy to see how necessary were these latter tasks. There was no work on Christmas Day; the hired man spent the day in the Ale House. The neighbours came first footing at 5 am on New Year's Day, bringing suitable refreshment with them, and no work seems to have been done that day.

The early months of 1848 were taken up with harvesting the cereal crops and helping neighbours with their harvest. Sunday dinner on 6 February saw them eating their own new potatoes. By late summer grass was being sown, firewood gathered and threshing of cereal crops continued. Income was earned from the sale of cheese to a Nelson shop, barley to a Nelson brewery and stock were traded at sales. There was a cart road to Nelson for transport of produce and infrequent visits by William Gordon Bell to the bank, for Grand Jury service and for settling the ownership arrangements with the New Zealand Company. Sundays were visiting days and in March young and old enjoyed a couple of days at the races.

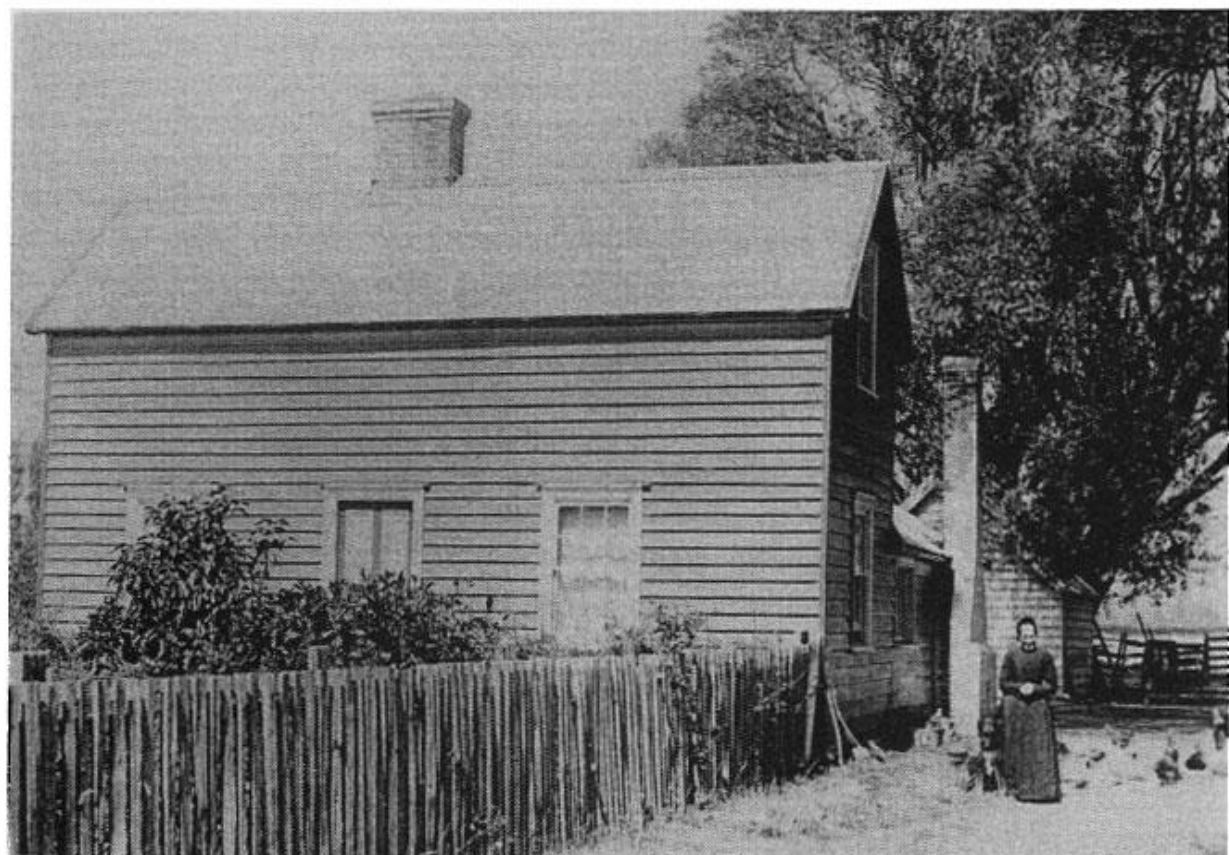
LAND HOLDING RECORDS: In 1849 a census return records that the family had a wooden dwelling house, with a shingle roof, and an outbuilding. The holding was listed as 100 acres, 42½ cultivated in wheat, oats, barley, grass, potatoes and garden. Livestock numbered 3 horses, 40 cattle and 1 pig.

This same year, William Gordon the Younger married Eliza Morley. She had arrived in Nelson in 1842, aged 18, accompanied by her brother. By 1846, she had had the tragic misfortune to suffer the loss of her fiance, her young son and her first husband, all by drowning.

The New Zealand Company ceased to exist in 1850, and the following year Crown Grants were issued to its land purchasers. William Gordon Bell's grant was for 110 acres which appears to be the original farm, now named Bellevue, Sections 167 and 169 and a smaller piece to the west of Swamp road, part of Section 198. Also recorded is a grant in the name of WG Bell the Younger, of a smallish acreage of land adjacent to the Waimea River, a few kilometres inland from Bellevue (part of Section 200). The year 1851 also marked the death of Alziere, buried at Fairfield, Nelson.

The Crown Grant to William Gordon Bell for two areas totalling 1900 acres in the Upper Motueka valley, now Golden Downs, is dated 1852. The smaller area was river flats

immediately downstream of the Motueka River gorge. This was purchased with the proceeds from the sale of the West Indian estate. James Bell, now married to Mary-Ann Caradus, who had arrived with the first Dunedin settlers in 1848, sold up in Dunedin and came to Nelson to run the property.



Bellevue, Richmond, Nelson Provincial Museum

DECLINING YEARS OF WILLIAM GORDON BELL: The rest of the 1850s decade appears to have been troublesome. Money was raised by mortgage on the Bellevue property. Section 200 was sold, and strife between father and son caused the Upper Motueka property to be sold to Robert Hooker in 1860, but money was left in it on mortgage. James left to try goldmining at Waikoropupu, near Takaka, where WG Bell the Younger appears to have gone as early as 1859, if the electoral rolls are to be trusted. Old William Gordon Bell was probably becoming more difficult for his family, as he seems to have suffered a stroke about 1860, and he was but a shadow of his former self for his last four years. On his death in 1864, the *Nelson Examiner* remarked how “the clear ringing voice and vice-like grip of the hearty old Lowland farmer” was missed, and concluded, “His work as a man and a colonist will be conceded by all who

knew him; and any country which can boast a number of men of the same stamp may justly feel proud."

THE SECOND GENERATION TAKES OVER: Bellevue was now in the hands of the second generation. James and William Gordon Jnr returned with their growing families to share the estate and apparently expanded it over the next decade or so. Details are somewhat sketchy, and the death by misadventure of William Gordon Bell Jnr in 1870 at the age of 49 was another tragic blow for Eliza Morley and her young family.

The family's holdings in 1882 are clearly stated in the published Return of Freeholders for that year. James Bell farmed 70 acres, presumably Bellevue, because that was his residence and James Bell Jnr, his son, farmed 125 acres, probably another purchase, possibly financed partly by a mortgage taken out in 1878 on Bellevue. Elizabeth Bell separately owned and farmed 99 acres at Hope (Overton), and Eliza Morely Bell owned 47 acres, her share of Bellevue, but lived at this time in Masterton.

This second generation lived out their days on these Waimea acres which they had worked so hard to develop. Margaret had earlier married Bernard Gordon in New Zealand, but he had returned to Scotland without her. She lived with Elizabeth at Overton until her death in 1882, when she was buried beside her parents at Fairfield. Eliza Morley died in 1897 and was buried beside William Gordon Jnr in St Alban's Churchyard Appleby, close to Bellevue. Alongside is the grave of a first cousin, Thomas Bell Smith who died while on a visit from the United States in 1888.

The Wallaces had land in the Wai-iti valley, beside the railway line, and Mary Wallace died in 1899, two years after her husband. James Bell survived into the new century passing away in 1902. His sister Elizabeth, the last to go, in 1909 and both were buried in the Richmond cemetery. Elizabeth's house, Overton, in Aniseed Valley Road, renovated and still very much in use, is a striking memorial to the pioneer generations.

DISPERSAL IN THE THIRD GENERATION: The next generation were more numerous and tended to seek their livelihoods and opportunities out of Nelson, which was by now, in the New Zealand context, a small, somewhat sleepy, agricultural settlement, with predominantly small holdings on limited land. The horticultural expansion which was the economic salvation of the small farm was yet to come.

More exciting things were happening in the cities and the now more rapidly developing North Island. The elder sons of James, James Jnr and Thomas, and Eliza Morley's eldest, Winham Morley, headed to Murchison and the West Coast, an adjacent developing area, and all three used their Waimea land inheritance as a source of capital by mortgage. Thomas Bell returned to Richmond from Murchison following the death of his first wife, Eliza, in a Wellington tram accident in 1907, and some of his family have remained in the Nelson district.

Another long standing resident was Alziere Jane Grierson, youngest daughter of James, married to Louis Palmer. Their house, The Gables, still stands in Waimea West, a grand reminder of its era. Some of James Jnr's descendants are still on the West Coast. Most of the

other descendants of this third and later generations are now widely scattered throughout the country and, like most New Zealanders, are urbanised by occupation, career and residence. A few enjoy the present opportunities for work or retirement in Nelson

References:

E Jerningham Wakefield, *Adventure in New Zealand*, details events in Wellington and Wanganui.

Louis Ward, *Early Wellington*, repeats the Wellington details.

TW Downes, *Old Whanganui*, gives more detail on Wanganui events.

JNW Newport, *Footprints*, mentions Golden Downs and Belgrove.

Cyclopedia of New Zealand, Vol 5, Nelson Marlborough, West Coast, 1906 articles on James Bell Jnr and Elizabeth Bell.

RCJ Stone, *Young Logan Campbell*, discusses Scottish immigration to Australia and relates Campbell's move to New Zealand.

Nelson Provincial Museum has records of death notices, jury lists, electoral rolls, cemetery records, 1849 Census, 1882 Return of Freeholders.

Nelson Lands and Deed Office has landholding records.

Family papers, including Elizabeth Bell's diary and sundry letters from the 1840s to the 1880s and later letters with reminiscences were collected by the late Christian Bell who used them to comprise a private account of the family history.

Jean Williams took over all this material and produced a booklet, *The Bell Family Affair*, containing a family tree and history, and a history article in the *Nelson Evening Mail*, 19 May 1984. This material is now with the present writer.