

Alexander John McDONALD 28-10-1861 to 16-6-1937- & **Jessie McDONALD, nee SHERIDAN**

Biography as published in 1985 & 1995

Alexander John was the eighth child and fourth son of Ewen and Rachel McDonald, and was born at Lower Finnis. His grandparents were Christina and Donald McLean.

The year was rich in historical events. In the United States, Abraham Lincoln became president, and the Civil War broke out. In England, Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert died of typhoid, and Charles Dickens wrote *Great Expectations*. In Australia, Burke and Wills were found dead at Coopers Creek; copper was discovered at Wallaroo and Moonta in South Australia; anti-Chinese riots occurred at Lambing Flat goldfields in New South Wales; commercial pearling started in Western Australia. The first Melbourne Cup was won by Archer and also in Melbourne, Helen Porter Mitchell, the future Dame Nellie Melba, was born.

In his father's diaries of 1864-65 there are various references to Johnny, aged about three years at the time. On March 2, 1864 Ewen wrote: *'Took very unwell this morning, Mrs. went to Strathalbyn with Joney with bad throat. Came home late at night. Johnny better.'* On March 18, 1864: *'Annie & Miss White to Milang & Johnney & I went and met them halfway. Giff loaded winnowing machine & grosseries. Let the horses run away. Lost some things.'* In the 1865 diary on February 20 he wrote: *'Self & Mrs, Mary James Joney to Milang.'* On August 17: *'Johnney laid up with the cold.'* On 20 September: *'Johnney got a dog from Cameron.'* On September 26: *'Mrs, Annie Flora Johnney & baby to the tea meeting. Mrs came home from the tea meeting 10 o'clock AM'*

Nothing is known of his schooling. It is probable that he attended the Finnis school or was taught by a governess. When the family travelled to Victoria in 1874, John was only 12 years old and no further schooling was available there until 1877 when Noradjuha State School opened. He worked with his father and brothers on the combined family farm. Known as Jack, he grew into a tall powerful man called Big Jack. On November 27, 1889, at the residence of Mrs. George Sheridan of Clear Lake, Jack was married to Jessie Sheridan by the Horsham Presbyterian minister, the Reverend Thomas Gray. The attendants were the bride's friend, Miss Nellie Scott of Clear Lake, and her brother George Sheridan. Jessie was the only daughter of George and Christina Sheridan, nee McRae, and was born at Cavendish, Victoria, on January 8, 1867.

Jessie's father, George Sheridan, had come to Australia about 1855 and obtained work as a shepherd on Mt Rouse Station near Penshurst, Victoria. He was the son of Arthur and Margaret Sheridan, nee Munro, storekeepers of Belfast, Ireland. At South Hamilton on September 21, 1857, and according to the rites of the Presbyterian church, he was married to Christina McLean, nee McRae, a 22-year-old widow with one son. George signed his name, and Christina made her mark. They lived at Mt Rouse and had a family of seven; Alexander; Frank born in 1861; Donald, 1863; Patrick, born on St Patrick's Day; Jessie, 1867; George; and Margaret who was born in 1871 and died soon after birth.

George died of cancer of the tongue at Hamilton Hospital on April 15, 1871, aged 41 years, and was buried in Cavendish cemetery. Christina was left destitute with a young family and had no option but to place Frank, Donald and Patrick in a Catholic orphanage at Sunbury, Victoria. With the younger children she eventually went to live with her McRae relatives at Clear Lake south of Horsham.

Jessie Sheridan was among the first pupils enrolled at Clear Lake State School No 2135 when it opened in 1879. She was placed in grade four, and her brother George in grade three. School was in the Wesleyan church until a school building was erected in 1882.

On March 5, 1889 Jessie had been an attendant, with Donald Sheridan, at the marriage of her brother Frank to Agnes Sarah McLachlan of Melbourne. Mrs. Ethel Lugton, nee Scott, of 38 Natimuk Road, Horsham, remembered her sister Nellie's friend Jessie: "*She was a lovely girl, everyone liked her, seemed to be good at everything. She loved gardening and reading, especially the poets Byron and Keats. The Sheridans had a farm at the back of the Clear Lake cemetery.*" Jessie is remembered by her children and all who knew her as sweet, kind and gentle. Jack and Jessie selected land on the west side of the Wimmera River, in West Wail area, once part of the Polkemmet Station. This station had been owned in the 1840s by W. Hamilton and Thomas Baillie and had been named after the Baillies' family seat, Polkemmet in Scotland. The anthropologist Aldo Massola in his book *Journey to Aboriginal Victoria* describes how the Aboriginal tribes of that area, in the early settlement days, stole sheep and drove them off into caches among the trees and thick scrub along the Wimmera River. The ford over the river at Polkemmet, near the original homestead, became a resting place on the Gold Escort route between the Mt Alexander diggings and South Australia.

The present Arapiles Shire office has no rate book prior to 1895 and the rate book of that year for the north riding shows that Jack occupied allotments 51 and 51A in the Parish of Duchembegarra. This land is now owned by the Ellis family of Pimpinio. Jack also leased approximately forty-five square miles of the Little Desert which formed part of his north and western boundaries. This area is now a national park with access from Dimboola.

Jack's first home was in the boundary rider's hut brought from Mitre Lake. It was added to as the family grew. Later they built a mud-brick and sapling house. These dwellings were literally on the bank of the Wimmera River on the almost inaccessible west side. The development of railway and roads was on the east side. The family endured many floods and when one was imminent would station their buggy and horses in a shelter on the other side of the river and row across. This shelter can still be seen. One year there was a big flood which inundated the house and dissolved the mud bricks, exposing the sapling uprights. The family retreated to the woolshed and for three days ate white turnips cooked in a kerosene tin. In summer the river frequently became just a series of waterholes.

They called their property *Wyn Wyn*, the name of an early neighbouring squatter's run, meaning 'a thin mallee stick for poking out possums'. Jack ran four to five thousand sheep on his combined holdings, with cattle, pigs, and crops of barley and Federation wheat. He was the first in the area to have shearing machines. He also operated a small sawmill driven by a steam engine and with it had cut the timber for his house and sheds. His daughter Jean remembered that one year her father went to the Melbourne Show and returned with a machine that made flour and oatmeal.

There was a salt lake on allotment 51 and to augment income the family would harvest and sell salt. Water level in the winter would be a couple of feet and as it lowered with the advancing summer they would watch carefully for a four-inch depth and a northerly wind which warmed the water, causing the salt to rise to the surface like candle-grease. The wind blew the salt to the eastern side of the lake and there they pushed it into heaps with scrapers made by Jack. It was bagged on the hottest day when the moisture content was lowest. Later it was carted to Horsham and sold for 2/- a bag.

Jessie's mother, Grandma Sheridan, came to live with the family and died in 1905 while they were still living at *Wyn Wyn*. She had been married previously to a Mr. McLean and had one son, James, by that marriage. James became a 'mallee cocky.' Because of a horse-riding accident in her youth resulting in an injured foot, Grandma walked with the aid of a crutch. She helped with the children, the cooking and the endless sewing needed to clothe the family. Her grand-daughter Jean remembered Gran telling her that she had come to Australia in a sailing ship from Scotland.

When schooling was needed for the children, Jack and other settlers formed a committee and were responsible for the establishment of the West Wail State School No 3329. It was held in a gatehouse purchased from the Victorian Railways by this committee. The Education Department agreed to provide staff, and the first teacher was Charles V. Cecil, a young man of 18 years. He arrived by train at Pimpinio and was then driven to the McDonalds where he

was to board,by the owner of the general store. This was an exciting day for the children. The school opened on May 2, 1899 on the north-west corner of West Wail timber reserve.

The family attended church services at Duchembegarra and the children were baptised at the Natimuk Presbyterian Church. The family consisted of five sons and daughters all born at their home *Wyn Wyn*. Lindsay William, the sixth child, died in infancy and was buried at Polkemmet.

About 1908, Jack won a contract to build a bridge over the Wimmera River about 1½ miles south of the house. This would give settlers easier access to school, roads and towns. He cut the timber himself. During construction all available hands were conscripted and the children remembered that Uncle Bill Raggatt was included. When the job was completed the shire engineer arrived to inspect and found the bridge to be eighteen inches higher on one side of the river than the other! The story is a favourite not only with Jack's family, but those relatives still in the Horsham area. Jack's explanation about the difference in height was that it matched the level of water because water on one bank had dropped to fill a hole.

In 1912, Jack and Jessie sold *Wyn Wyn* and moved to a farm at St Helens Plains, east of Horsham. A few years later they moved to Lara, near Geelong but the combined effects of World War One, drought conditions and stony ground forced them to sell. Three sons had volunteered during World War One, Hugh, George and Ian. A11 served with the AIF overseas and all returned home.

Jack became manager of a large sheep station, *Nerrin Nerrin*, about five miles south of Streatham in Victoria's Western District. This was owned by Mr Agar Wynne, solicitor and politician who was Member for St Kilda in the Legislative Assembly from 1917 to 1920. During that time he was Attorney-General, Solicitor-General. and Minister for Railways. Another man, Sam Womersley, was manager of the bloodstock breeding on the property. Jack's son Neil said the reason the family eventually left *Nerrin Nerrin* was that his father had a dispute with the boss about five or six sheep given as rations to the shearers who were held up during a very wet shearing season. Jack then managed an arab and shetland pony stud for a Mrs McLean at Yan Yean, north of Melbourne. Jack and Jessie retired to a house they bought in Myer Street, Geelong, Victoria.

One of their oldest grandsons, Lindsay White, remembered his grandfather's speech having a slight Scottish twang. Grandfather also owned about 400 head of prize poultry. One day young Lindsay let red roosters run with the white hens. The resulting crossbred chickens led to a painful punishment. Jack died on June 16, 1937, aged 75 years, two months after his brother Angus died in Sydney. He is buried at Geelong. Jessie died six years later, on November 11, 1943, aged 76 years, and is buried at Geelong.

Children of Jessie and Jack :-

1. <i>Hugh</i> Sheridan McDonald	Born 12-9-1890	Died 12-10-1980	Biographies 5181
2. Christina May McDonald	Born 5-5-1892	Died 21-8-1981	Biographies 5182
3. <i>George</i> Wallace McDonald	Born 20-6-1894	Died 5-8-1961	Biographies 5183
4. <i>Ella Jean</i> McDonald	Born 12-5-1896	Died 22-2-1983	Biographies 5184
5. <i>Ian</i> Douglas McDonald	Born 24-5-1898	Died 6-3-1963	Biographies 5185
6. <i>Lindsay</i> William McDonald	Born 23-7-1900	Died in infancy	Biographies 5186
7. <i>Rachel</i> Annie McDonald	Born 17-11-1902	Died 27-11-1949	Biographies 5187
8. <i>Neil</i> Alistair McDonald	Born 4-2-1906		Biographies 5188

- SOURCE : This biography was from page 195 of "History of Ewen & Rachel McDonald & Descendants" by Jill McDonald which was originally published in 1985. It was republished as part of "The History of Donald & Christina McLean and Their Descendants" in 1995.
- COLONIALISTS : Christina and Donald McLean and their ten children migrated from Argyllshire to South Australia in 1837. This was in the earliest years of the colony. The McLeans initially settled near Adelaide where they grew the first wheat crop in SA. Then in about 1840 they pioneered the Strathalbyn area. There are now well over 20,000 descendants spread across Australia and elsewhere.
- CHANGES : Please contact us with additions, corrections or suggestions about any part of this family tree.
- CONTACT : Visit our website www.christinaanddonaldmclean.com or Strathalbyn Museum phone 08 8536 2656 to discover more about your family – and about privacy and copyright.