



**Bringing the Past to the Future**

# THOSE WERE THE DAYS

NEWSLETTER OF THE UPPER CLUTHA  
HISTORICAL RECORDS SOCIETY INC.

(Upper Clutha includes Cardrona, Albert Town, Luggate, Queensberry, Tarras, Hawea,  
Makarora, Wanaka and Lakes Wanaka and Hawea)

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## **"BIG JOHN" - A CANNY SCOT**

His family was "stony broke" when they left the small Isle of Coll (a small Hebridean island just off the Isle of Mull in Scotland), in 1840 yet when he passed away in Oamaru in 1902, John and his siblings were amongst the wealthiest of families in NZ.



**THE LATE HON. J. McLEAN.**

John McLean ("Big John" – sometimes "Big Jock") was born into relative poverty about 1818 and 18 years later his father died suddenly leaving his mother Mary along with her three sons and two daughters.

After a while, they emigrated to Australia and headed to the goldfields at Bendigo and Ballarat. They staked their claims, opened a small store and eventually acquired two sheep runs – farming had been in their blood on Coll. Their main income appears to have come from acting as goldbuyers – purchasing gold directly from the miners and then shipping it off to the banks and selling at a profit. They acquired other farms but then heard of the money that could be made in NZ. They sold up and crossed the Tasman with 500 ewes and some cattle to Lyttleton. They were accompanied by Fan So, a Chinaman who had warned them of a planned robbery of their gold in the goldfields and the McLeans looked after him for the rest of his life.

John and his brother Allan purchased sheep runs around Christchurch and the Waimakariri. Their first home was built opposite what is now known as McLeans Island. In 1855 the brothers took up 30 - 40,000 acres of leasehold from the Government and named it Lagmhor after their birthplace on Coll.

In 1858, John heard from passing Maoris of a great tract of land where “no white man had trod” – not quite right! He was guided up the Lindis and onto the top of Grandview Mountain where, like Surveyor John Thomson before him, viewed a huge tract of land stretching as far as Cromwell from about where the Morven Hills Station is located – some 400,000 acres in all. He applied to be granted a Licence to Depasture but the Waste Lands Board was reluctant to grant a single licence for such a huge land area and split it into four areas with the condition that no single applicant could hold more than one area. Not a problem to a “Canny Scot” – the McLean family ran everything as a family unit so on 3 Sept 1858 John McLean was granted a licence for Run 235 of 82,000 acres, Alexandrina, his sister, was awarded Run 236 of 120,000 acres, Allan got Run 237 of 66,000 acres and Robertson got Run 238 of 84,000 acres after initially being awarded to a Mr Trotter. So the family had 352,000 acres between them. They were all to be developed and managed by John and Allan. They named the combined area Morven Hills Station. Morven was the name used during the 1700s and 1800s for the area on the Scottish mainland now known as Morvern. The Morvern Hills were probably the last land McLeans saw of their Scottish homeland as they sailed by, on the way from Tobermory on the Isle of Mull.

Returning to the Licences, the next matter the McLeans urgently needed to attend to was stocking the land. This had to be done before the Lands Dept Inspector arrived or the Licences could be forfeit. There is a story that goes the rounds that Big John used some subterfuge. Like a true-blue Scotsman he was partial to a drop of *uisge-beatha* (gaelic for “the water of life”) - now

known as whisky. When “the officer arrived to complete his report on the land and the stocking, he was received with true Highland hospitality. The next day he was taken out to a vantage point and there saw hundreds and thousands of sheep as far as the eye could see. Again the hospitality of the night left nothing to be desired but as they emptied the bottle, John’s shepherds were busy moving the stock to another block. The next day, that was the block that was viewed and it too, was well stocked.” The process was continued until the Officer was satisfied. How true the story is cannot be verified. Records do show an increase in stock numbers from 18,000 in 1860 to 82,000 in 1868. In 1874 when the McLean’s tenure finished, the numbers had reached 135,134 though this was probably a peak before the rabbits arrived. The McLeans had more sheep than any other family in NZ.

The McLeans also had to build dwellings for themselves, managers and shepherds and many other farm buildings. The most prominent one is the 34 stand Woolshed built, it is thought, about 1876 and is still in very good order.



**The Woolshed**

John introduced 4 fallow deer to the Run in 1867 but they halved their number by two coming off second-best with a foreign (to them) obstruction called a fence.

Apparently the other two prospered and bred. In 1870 John then purchased a small number of red deer. The red deer also prospered and additional deer were purchased and released over the following years. Ultimately they were there for deer-stalking enthusiasts.

The huge runs now started to be broken up into smaller units.

During his tenure, Big John delegated most of the management of the Station to his very capable managers and in 1867 he was appointed to the NZ Legislative Council until he resigned in 1872. Travel became an issue and in 1869, John purchased Redcastle (1000 acres) in the northern part of Oamaru where he built a home. This is about 500 metres in a straightline from where I lived my first 24 years of my life. Most of you will know it now as St Kevins College.

John also represented the Oamaru Town Electorate on the Otago Provincial Council from 1871 to 1876. He also held other positions on committees in the town. He never married.

When he passed away in 1902, he left a bequest to the town of Oamaru, paying for the clock and chimes on the Oamaru Post Office building. He left a large estate of £224,182 (over \$80 million buying power in today's terms). He is buried in Christchurch.

His full story is extensive and cannot be completely covered in this short newsletter. Further reading can be undertaken in the following books that I have referred to:

Sheep May Safely Graze by G P Duff

Snow in the Lindis by Madge Snow

Aspiring Settlers by J H Angus

.... and do not forget Paperspast!

### A FISHY STORY

Ian McCrone, the reporter for the column named Alpine News in the Otago Daily Times (now an important record of life in the 1980s etc in the Upper Clutha), wrote in 1992 about a fisher visitor who decided that an abundant source of fish was reason enough to stay for a while. Some readers who were around in 1992 may remember.

"A White Heron has 'adopted' the Wanaka Trout Hatchery and shows no sign of returning to its usual home on the West Coast. The bird will walk through any open door and perches on the rim of big concrete tanks where rainbow trout fry, now 10cm long, are being raised for release in Lake Dunstan.



The sight of the heron drives the fish to shoal at the opposite end of the tank and the edge is too high above the water for the bird to make a successful strike.

But he will have a stab at any straggler. According to the hatchery attendant, Peter Bates, he comes to work to find the heron waiting on the roof for him to open up most mornings. .... "It comes in through the door as soon as my back is turned. Once it managed to get through a half-open window very early in the morning. It will

stay on the edge of the tanks until you get too close. I have to keep moving it outside. It keeps coming back. It shows no sign of returning to Okarita.

The heron has accounted for some mature trout up to 30cm long in open ponds at the hatchery. It spiked them through the head or gills. Some proved too big to swallow. It also thwarted the wire-netting covers on other outside ponds, though it makes a hopeful patrol of these areas when it tires of "fish-watching" indoors."

The hatchery is no more but in December 1992 some 10,000 fingerlings were released into Lake Dunstan followed by a further 15,000 early the following year. It is not known what became of the heron. Anyone know?

Of course, over the years there must have been hundreds of 'tall tales' around the Upper Clutha of the one that got away or the size of the fish. The following photo from our files is proof of some that did not get away – and the size!



### JO'S NOTES AND UPDATES

Expertise and help in all forms is greatly appreciated from anyone. The Past Perfect database we operate was started about 2013 with the help of Librarian Julie Stretch, as our initial guide in cataloguing. Through the Volunteer Central website Erena Barker made contact

and joined our working team and has become our database manager using her previous expertise gained while working for the Otago Museum. She continues to inspire us all to record consistently correct data entry, correcting previous entries she spies and teaching us the better query methods. Best of all she has the ability to get the best from the Past Perfect system of archiving by connecting the types of files we find the most useful.

We do need someone with a couple of hours to spend each week, to assist Erena. Full training will be given and you do not have to be an expert in data entry. Can you help out? Contact me (Jo) on 021 104 0405.

Scanning files is continuing: we would also appreciate added assistance with this if you have time? It is a relatively simple process and once the initial training is given, you can choose what day and time suits you best.

### 100 YEARS AGO

Strychnine poisoning for rabbits has been tried locally by several land-owners, some using carrots and others oats. Some good results have been obtained, but not as good as was hoped for. The end of bunny is not yet. One advantage obtained from strychnine poisoning is that practically all the carcasses are found, the rabbits not travelling any distance after taking the poison. With skins at present prices this is a consideration.

Editor's note: I shudder at the thought of spreading strychnine around these days!

## SOME HELP PLEASE

25 August 1919:

On Friday last a welcome home social was tendered to three of our returned soldier boys—Privates E. Barker, G. Morris, and H. Collings. The night was both dark and wet, but notwithstanding this the crowd was large enough to fill the hall. Everyone seemed pleased to see the boys again, and they got a warm reception.

Erena discovered the following set of photographs in our archives but with no record of who the ladies are. We believe they were taken at an "Over 70s Dinner". If you recognize any of the photos, please email us at [uschrSOC@gmail.com](mailto:uschrSOC@gmail.com) or leave a note for us at the Library, quoting the reference number on the appropriate photo. E.g. WB1825

15 Sep 1919:

A succession of rather severe frosts has been followed by cold south winds, and as a result there is little growth at present. A few weeks warm weather would give an abundance of grass, owing to the soaking the ground received during the winter, which was unusually wet.



## SCOTTISH 'MATTERS'

I decided to give my Irish ancestry a rest and pick on my Scottish ancestry for a change. As it is raining today .....



If the writing is a bit unclear :- "OF COURSE IT STOPS RAINING. HOW ELSE WOULD WE KNOW WHEN THE SUMMER IS OVER!"





## ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS

The annual subscription remains at \$10 (which in reality is a very small amount compared to other organisations).

**Please - Subscriptions for this financial year are now due.** Please pay these via internet banking if at all possible. The account number is 03-1739-0012311-00 and record your name in the Reference Field. It makes the Treasurer's job that much easier. If you cannot pay by internet banking, drop your payment into the Library on a Wednesday morning (9-11am) when the Records Room will be open.

## WHO ARE WE?

**President:** Graham Dickson

**Vice President:** Jo Wilton

**Secretary:** David Simmers

**Treasurer:** Ken Allan

**Committee Members:** Ken and Margaret Thomlinson, Bruce Foulds.

The Society was established in 1985 and Incorporated in 2010, to collect and preserve records and images of the history of the Upper Clutha region and make them available to members of the public. The records are held in a special room in the Wanaka Library and a team of volunteers provides research assistance (appointments are necessary) to members of the public who may be looking for their family history or for persons searching for aspects of NZ history. Copying costs apply.

Please contact a Librarian at the Wanaka Library who will pass on the request, or send us an email to [uchrsoc@gmail.com](mailto:uchrsoc@gmail.com).

The Society is Incorporated and is a Registered Charity. Funding is reliant on the assistance of a variety of community funders and individual gifts. Donations are very welcome, as are new members.

**Donations may be made to our bank account 03-1739-0012311-00 with the reference – Donation. As we are a Registered Charity, donations over \$5 are tax deductible – please ask for a receipt.**

Membership Subscriptions for year ending 31/3/2020 are \$10-00.

**Website:**

<http://www.uppercluthahistory.org/>

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