

CHAPTER I

Introduction

In late July 1906, Christina McGee, my grandmother, boarded a train in Coatbridge, Lanarkshire, and headed for London and Southampton. Christina was 36 years old and bound for a new life in South Africa. On the third finger of her left hand was a sapphire and diamond cluster engagement ring; in her baggage were two items of personal value, a new family bible and a 1904 copy of the works of Tennyson. The former was a farewell present from a family friend, Sarah Agnew; the latter was a gift from another, John B Roberts. Both books are inscribed with her name (in the case of the *Tennyson*, spelt wrongly) and a date - July 24th.

How Christina had come to meet her future husband and how their courtship was conducted is unclear. She had moved to Coatbridge with her parents only in the late 1890s, having lived since 1877 in Clackmannanshire. Frederick Bell, whom she would marry on August 17th, had been born near Coatbridge but he was almost twelve years older than Christina. Moreover, according to family lore, he had spent the best part of the past two decades in Africa.

Christina embarked ⁽¹⁾ for Cape Town on July 28th on the RMS *Briton*, at 10,248 tons the largest vessel of the Union-Castle Mail Steamship Company's fleet and capable of completing the voyage from Southampton in 15 days. This was the same ship that, in 1905, had carried my father's uncles, John and Andrew Greenfield, back to Port Natal with Andrew's new bride, Isabella Nicolson. The *Briton* had already had two near mishaps during her career since 1897. In June 1898, she ran aground off Portland Bill and in 1902, according to the *New York Times*, was blown ashore in Algoa Bay on the Cape Coast and '*narrowly escaped destruction*'.

Christina's voyage was, however, as far as I know, without dangerous incident and from Cape Town, she travelled upcountry by train to the Transvaal - to New Kleinfontein, near the township that was to become Benoni. She married Frederick at the Presbyterian Church of Boksburg. ⁽²⁾

Benoni and Boksburg were towns whose names, along with that of Johannesburg and the neighbouring Brakpan, would soon go down in history as hotbeds of sedition and revolution. Before two decades had elapsed, the sound of explosions would be heard in their streets, aircraft would swoop low over their buildings spraying them with machine gun fire, and armed mineworkers would clash with fellow citizens, the police and state troopers in an outpouring of violence rarely seen in a British colony.

In *Tapestry - the Story of a Family*, I traced my father's forebears from the beginning of the 18th Century until the middle of the 20th. Descended on his father's side from the Lockharts who had settled in the Lowlands of Scotland shortly after the Norman Conquest, he was born in the Republic of South Africa but spent more than half his life in Coatbridge, a town in Lanarkshire that attests to both the triumph and the tragedy of

post-Industrial Revolution Britain. His mother's forebears had their origins in the district of Edinburgh and it was there that chance and the lure of the city brought their families together.

I always intended to tell the story of my mother's family too but felt that it deserved a book to itself. Much of her life was also, by coincidence or by fate, concerned with Coatbridge, as was a large part of mine. However, to deal with the ancestry of both parents in one volume would have been too complicated.

My research into my father's family turned up some 30 surnames and more than 70 individuals, not counting the siblings of my direct ancestors! By studying their records only, I would be less likely to make mistakes. Moreover, the resulting product would, I believed, be more readable. I have discovered since that two of my four maternal great-grandparents were born *before* three out of my six ⁽³⁾ paternal *great-great*-grandparents, which would have made a nightmare of managing the generations.

Moreover, my mother was an only child, thus there were no first cousins to consult or use as sounding boards for my conclusions. I knew almost nothing about my maternal grandfather other than his name, that he had gone to Africa and that he had died there. I decided *Tapestry* had to end where it did or it might never have been published at all.

I believe it was the right decision. Many of the conclusions I reached in respect of my paternal ancestors were supported by dates and documented references to brothers, sisters and more distant members of the family, as well as from family lore. The same degree of support was just not available for my maternal ancestors before the middle of the 19th Century. On the other hand, I grew up knowing a great deal about the McGee family to which my grandmother Christina belonged - not all of it

entirely accurate as it happens. I knew several of her siblings as great aunts and uncles. Both my mother's forenames had derived from her maternal line - Agnes from her great-grandmother, Annie from her grandmother. And if there was one Christina McGee then the chances were that there was another Christina somewhere in their tree. These facts ought to be of help in tracking the family back through time. So I reasoned.

It did not turn out that way. Although I made some progress, there were several dead ends and, I believe, more mistakes in the registry of births, marriages and deaths than was the case with the Lockharts and Greenfields. But there was serendipity too. Whilst some of the material I uncovered on my journey does not relate directly to my mother, it is as much part of her story as any list of ancestors, aunts and uncles. It belongs to the history of the early 20th Century and makes a wonderful backdrop to her life.

I believe the journey was worth making. Though my reconstruction is incomplete, I hope it gives flavour to ages no longer part of living memory.

Who then were these *McGees*, and what brought them to the 'Iron Burgh'? Who were the *Bells*, and what chance of fate drew the two families together? And how were the lives of their children shaped by the romance and the turmoil that was South Africa?

Chapter Notes

¹ Since I completed the proofs of *Tapestry*, all outward passenger lists from the UK, 1890-1960, have been put on line at www.findmypast.com. Passenger lists from before 1890 are not readily available. It appears many were destroyed; those that do exist are not classified in any form that would make research practicable. It was no surprise that I could find no record of my *paternal ancestors'* movements between 1890 and 1900, as I was sure they had emigrated in the 1880s.

² In 1906, Benoni had neither the status, infrastructure nor amenities of a town. The Presbyterian was one of several churches in Boksburg but probably the only one of its denomination for miles around.

³ This was explained in *Tapestry*. My paternal grandparents were first cousins.