

An Orkney Love Story

The MacDonald and Dishon Families of Orkney



By Mavis Moore and Patricia Dishon. Submitted by Brian Dishon, Member No 2620

James Neil McDonald was born in the Manse at Stenness in 1867. His mother, **Phillias McDonald (nee McKay)**, was a friend of the minister's wife and had been visiting her when the baby made a sudden appearance!

Phillias was born in Walls around 1835, the daughter of **William McKay**, a farmer, and his wife, **Jessie McKay**. **Phillias** married **William McDonald**, a seaman, of Burnhouse, North Walls and had four children to him, **Williamina** born in Walls in 1861, **John Sinclair** born in Stromness in 1863, **William** born in Leith in 1866 and **James Neil McDonald** as above.

Phillias and **William McDonald**, with their children, moved to Leith, the port of Edinburgh. Leaving the clean air and healthy lifestyle of a farm on Orkney and moving to a tenement in the docklands of Leith was to prove fatal to **Phillias**. She died there in their house at 15 Couper Street, of British cholera, in 1868. She was aged 33 and her baby son, **James Neil**, was just eleven months old. **Phillias** was buried in common ground in Rosebank Cemetery, Pilrig Street, Leith, far from green, fertile Orkney.

Unable to raise four young children on his own, in the port of Leith, **William McDonald** took them back to Orkney to be raised by **Phillias's** parents and sisters, on their farm at Lower Ellibister.

Later, **William McDonald** was to emigrate on his own to Canada and become a ship's pilot in Paget's Sound, Vancouver, B.C. leaving his children behind in Orkney.

After their grandfather **William McKay's** death, the two younger children, **William** and **James Neil McDonald**, moved with their grandmother, **Jessie**, and their unmarried aunts to Hamar farm, above Stromness. Their sister, **Williamina McDonald**, no longer lived with them as she had married. Sadly, her husband was lost at sea and she then emigrated to Canada to keep house for her father, **William McDonald**, in Vancouver. Their older brother, **John Sinclair McDonald**, left Orkney in 1880 bound for Australia and nothing was ever heard of him again.

James Neil McDonald went to school in Stromness and his best friend there was **John William Dishon**. **James** often visited his friend in his house in Stromness and there he met **John's** big sister, **Catherine Elizabeth Douglas Dishon**, who was two years older than **James**.

They fell in love.

James McDonald trained as a ship's carpenter at the Ness shipyard. In 1884, when he was 17, he decided to leave Orkney to seek his fortune abroad. Before he left **James** asked 19 year old **Catherine Dishon** to marry him. **Catherine** accepted, but said she could not leave Orkney while her mother still needed her.

Catherine had been born to **Robert Traill Dishon**, an able seaman, and **Robina Traill Dishon**. The two were cousins and it

is believed they eloped because of family disapproval. They were married in Manchester in 1863 and then returned to Orkney to face the music. They had three children, **Catherine** born in 1864, **John William** born in 1868 and **Robert Currer** born 1870.

Robert and **Robina Dishon's** marriage seemed to be a true love match as **Catherine** kept a hand-made rug that her father had made for her mother on one of his voyages. It was done in needlepoint with two hearts and the sentiment "Ever Thine". Tragically, **Robert Traill Dishon** had been lost at sea in 1883, the year before **James McDonald** had proposed to **Catherine Dishon**, leaving **Robina** a widow.

Catherine Dishon was a skilled tailoress, her brother, **John William**, was an apprentice watchmaker and her brother, **Robert Currer**, was still at school. Obviously, **Catherine** was the main breadwinner in the family and times were very hard.

Having accepted **Catherine Dishon's** promise to marry him sometime, **James Neil McDonald** set off to seek his fortune. He travelled to London, in 1884, and boarded the windjammer **Ruthin**, to sail to Australia. For four years he went adventuring there and in New Zealand, Hawaii, Canada and in parts of California and Nevada. He settled permanently in the States in 1888 when he was 21 years old. He worked in mining, in tunnel and bridge construction and possibly on building a dam in Nevada.

Over all these years he and **Catherine** wrote to each other and sent photographs and gifts.

James was keen to better himself, so went to school to advance his knowledge of bridge and tunnel construction. He learned to speak with a typical American accent! He changed the spelling of his surname from McDonald to Macdonald to make it clear he was Scottish, not Irish, as there was great prejudice against the Irish in the States at that time. He was anxious to improve his social status and so joined the Masonic Lodge, which was at that time a prestigious WASP group.

He left California in 1895 when he was 28 years old. He went to visit his family in Canada and then returned to the States and worked as a foreman on a tunnel construction crew in Republic, Washington. Republic was a frontier town in the north-eastern part of this State, about twenty miles south of the Canadian border.

Back in Scotland in that same year, 1895, his sweetheart **Catherine's** mother, **Robina Traill Dishon**, died on Inchkeith Lighthouse, in the Firth of Forth.

Robina Traill Dishon's father, **John Dishon**, had been a sea Captain and had sailed on the *Expert*, but was lost at sea in 1864. Her mother was **Catherine Dishon (nee Mowat)**. **Robina** had two brothers and one older sister, **Janet Taylor Dishon**. Her brother, **John Rae Munro Dishon**, also became a ▶

◀ Master Mariner. In 1862 he persuaded his mother to allow him to take his young brother, **Joseph Peacock Dishon**, on a voyage with him. Tragically, **Joseph Peacock** was washed overboard on the voyage. **John Rae** went out of his mind with grief and his crew had to tie him up to restrain him from jumping into the sea after his brother. They kept him locked up until they reached port. Later, Captain **John Rae Munro Dishon** was also lost at sea when the steamer *Sidra* went down with all hands on a voyage between Malta and Port Said in 1874.

Having lost her father, her two brothers and her husband to the sea, **Robina Traill Dishon** was determined that neither of her sons would ever go to sea. When **James Neil Macdonald** had left **Catherine Dishon** with her mother back in Orkney, **Robina** had already apprenticed her older son, **John William**, to a watchmaker in Stromness and, when he was old enough, she apprenticed the other son, **Robert Currer**, to a baker in the town.



John William Dishon and Robert Currer Dishon with their sister Catherine Elizabeth Douglas Dishon about 1899 before she left for the USA.

In spite of **Robina's** best efforts the call of the sea was in the blood. **John William Dishon** became a steward on the *Princess Louise*, served at sea with the Northern Lighthouse Board and then became a Lightkeeper on Inchkeith in the Firth of Forth in 1894.

His brother, **Robert Currer Dishon**, joined the Merchant Navy and sailed the world. The **Dishon** family in Edinburgh still have oriental ware he brought back from his voyages.

James Neil Macdonald had continued to plead with **Catherine Dishon** to come out to the States to marry him all through these years. But now **Catherine** was faced with another dilemma. With both her brothers gone that would have meant leaving her mother alone in Stromness. So she put off going but still **James** waited for her.

While **John William Dishon** was serving on Inchkeith Lighthouse his brother, **Robert Currer Dishon**, left the sea and settled in Edinburgh, returning to his trade as a baker. For some time **Robina** and **Catherine Dishon** divided their time between the two brothers, keeping house for both until **Robina** died on Inchkeith in 1896.

Catherine could have gone to the States to marry **James Neil**

Macdonald then, but she was apprehensive after the long years of separation. She was now 32 and had last seen him when she was 19 years old!

She continued keeping house for both her brothers until an old friend of the family told her – “Your brothers will never be able to marry if you don’t go out to your young man.”

Catherine took courage and decided to go to the States. (The old friend was right. Within three years of **Catherine** leaving Scotland both her brothers had married, **Robert Currer** to **Jessie Clark McLean** in 1900 and **John William** to **Jessie Campbell** in 1902.)

Catherine set sail from Glasgow, in 1899, bound for New York. She had arranged to meet **James Neil Macdonald** in Spokane, Washington and she made the long journey across country by train, going the whole way in a chair car. She had bought a whole ham and a loaf of bread which she carried in a basket. The conductor took pity on her and made her tea in his quarters.

On board the train she met a Presbyterian minister, and when she told him she was meeting a young man in Spokane, whom she had not seen for fifteen years, he told her that if **James** did not turn up he would take her on to his own mother in Oregon!

James was waiting on the platform at Spokane. The minister asked if that was her young man. **Catherine** said she did not know! She had last seen him when he was a boy of 17 and he was now 32 years old. His hair had turned very grey and he had put on some weight. Fortunately, she finally did recognise him!

Catherine and **James** stayed in Spokane for two weeks until their marriage could be arranged. They were married in the local United Presbyterian church by the Rev. Spalding on the 4 July 1899, the date having been chosen deliberately by **James**. They were given a wedding breakfast in the home of a Mr & Mrs Robert Ames. Mrs Ames was a niece of John Davie, an Orcadian they married to meet in the congregation the Sunday before they were married.

After the wedding, **James** and **Catherine Macdonald** drove north to Republic in a horse-drawn buggy. He was working in a



James and Catherine Dishon) Macdonald on their wedding day, 4th July 1899 in Spokane, Washington. USA.

mine there called Knob Hill. One wonders what **Catherine** thought about this rough frontier town after life in Orkney and Edinburgh. **James** built them a wooden cabin in Republic where they lived for five years. Four children were born to the couple there. Sadly, ▶

◀ two of these children, **John Joseph** and **James** died in infancy. Their third son, **Robin Roy Macdonald** was born in 1902 and their daughter **Jessie Isabella Macdonald** in 1904.

By the time of the San Francisco earthquake, in 1906, **James** was working on the Western Pacific Railroad in Eastern California and Western Nevada, and **Catherine** and the children were living in a rental house in Reno, Nevada. **James** came home whenever possible, but once when he took seriously ill while away from home his company did not inform **Catherine**. When the regular pay cheques did not come **Catherine** feared the worst. She rented a large house in Reno and took in boarders, and when, many months later, an emaciated **James** returned home he found her taking care of herself and the children. No wonder he waited fifteen years for her!

The family moved around depending on **James's** work. They lived for a time in Niles, California and in Oakland, in the San Francisco Bay area.

In 1926, **Catherine**, and her daughter **Jessie Isabella Macdonald**, paid a visit to Scotland to see her brothers, **John William** and **Robert Currer Dishon**, whom she had not seen for twenty seven years.

Shortly after they returned to the States **James Neil Macdonald** ▶ retired from railroad work and bought the Richfield Service Station in Lincoln, California. **Catherine** disliked the heat of Lincoln, so in 1929 they sold the station and bought a house thirty miles away in Sacramento. **James Neil Macdonald** died there four years later in 1933. He was 69 years old and after his death his ashes were scattered in San Francisco Bay.

After **James** died, **Catherine Macdonald** rented out their house and moved back to the Oakland area, where she lived with close friends, who were Christian Scientists, and then moved in to housekeep for her son **Robin Roy Macdonald**.

In 1936, she returned to Sacramento to help her daughter, **Jessie Isabella Covington (nee Macdonald)**, who was expecting her sixth child and stayed until **Jessie** found a teaching post near Lincoln in the fall of 1937.

During the last ten years of her life **Catherine** began to fail. She moved between Oakland and the Lincoln area where her daughter lived. For some of that time she shared a room with her

granddaughter, **Mavis Anne Covington**, who listened with rapt attention as **Catherine** related tales of her childhood in green Orkney, which left **Mavis** with a lifelong fascination for the islands that her grandmother loved and never forgot.

Catherine Elizabeth Douglas Macdonald (nee Dishon) died in 1947, having outlived her husband, **James**, by fourteen years – the end of An Orkney Love Story.

The **Macdonald** and **Dishon** surnames died out in the family in America, but the Orcadian genes still cascade down through the descendants of **Catherine** and **James**, through their son, **Robin Roy Macdonald** and daughter, **Jessie Isabella Covington**. The line continues through the families of **Mavis Moore (nee Covington)**, her **Covington** brothers, **William, Neil, Richard, Franklin** and **Lincoln** and the family of **Ronald Roy Macdonald**. There are now over forty descendants in the States. The **Dishon** name continues in Scotland and Canada through the descendants of **John William Dishon**, the lightkeeper.

In 1941 **John William Dishon's** son, **Alexander (Sandy) Campbell Dishon**, was posted to Sule Skerry lighthouse, which had its shore station in Stromness. He, his wife, **Ethel (Betty) Dishon (nee Fea)**, and their two sons, **Alexander (Eddie)** and **Brian**, lived in the lighthouse building in Stromness from 1941 to 1946. The **Dishons** had returned to Orkney and the story had come the full circle. ■



Sule Skerry Lighthouse, Orkney.



SENTENCED TO TRANSPORTATION TO VAN DIEMEN'S LAND

A request from Colette McAlpine

If your research has come up with any woman who suffered this fate Colette McAlpine would like to hear from you.

Colette is a volunteer with the Female Convicts Research Centre (www.femaleconvicts.org.au) and also the Founders and Survivors (www.foundersandsurvivors.org).

They are currently trying to connect the female convicts who were transported to Van Diemen's Land (Now Tasmania) with

their birth and marriage families in the UK and their descendants in Australia.

Colette and her colleagues are busy searching for gaol and trial records together with newspaper stories about these women and they hope to transcribe all the records they find into a database, bringing together the woman, her family and all information pertaining to her. This would be invaluable in giving family historians and academics a better understanding of the female experience of the convict system.

Much of the information required will be contained in records held in Great Britain and Ireland and access to these is beyond our capacity. We are hoping, therefore, that family history researchers will be interested in researching the lives of some of the women who were transported from these areas.

Membership of www.femaleconvicts.org.au costs nothing and gives free access to the database. All work is done by volunteers.

If any of the OFHS members are interested Colette will send them a list of the women from their part of the country.

Colette has only found two women transported from Orkney at this stage

MARGARET SINCLAIR in 1839 and MARY PRIEST also in 1839

You can reach Colette at <colette.mcalpine@gmail.com> ■