

Chapter Thirteen: Almost Murder

A Chatham Island gathering. From left, at rear, Myrtle Phillips, Kia Riwai, Thelma, Martha and Alice Black, Elsie Dahlberg. In front, Mary Phillips, Les Black, Wati Ashton, Cyril Black, Ngatiki Phillips.



Roy Idiens moves his shop along Waitangi beach to the wharf site for the Tees visit, helped by Pat Prendeville and his horses, 1939.

The night William Gordon Jacobs tried to shoot his wife Jessie with a revolver created far less excitement and horror than the murder two years earlier of Susan, young wife of Wharepa.

However, William Jacobs was a respected builder of solid houses, a hardworking honest man, a good husband by all accounts, and a good father to 11 children, eight of them his own; and had been a settler on Chatham Island for 16 years.

When the Hau Hau prisoners with their chief Te Kooti were sent to the Chathams in 1866, a carpenter was needed to supervise the building of housing for them. William Jacobs was a qualified carpenter who had served some time on whaling vessels as a ship's carpenter. He came from New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, British America, from where many others of such solid stock remained in New Zealand after their time on whaling and sealing vessels.

He had been living at Lyttelton for a time with Jessie Seymour under his protection, as her husband Edward had been drowned in the Molyneux river. They married, and with her three sons from her previous marriage, Charles, Edward, and James Seymour, and infant son Willie, the Jacobs family sailed in March of 1866 on the Despatch to their new quarters on Chatham Islands. The same month, the Hau Hau prisoners were shipped down there.

When the Government work diminished, William worked for Island landownes building their new houses, and Thomas Ritchie's 'Lake House' was one of the first. Several years later, he built his own home, Rangia at the lakeside area now known as Plum Tree. He included bush-f in his building work to supplement his income.

Much of his biography by E.C. Richard 'The Chatham Islands - - People' is confused with the life of his son Willie, whereas Williams' life at the Chathams closed in 1882, after his trial for attempted murder.

Most of the following information has been obtained from reports in the Lyttelton Times of July 14 and July 17, 1882.

This report varies from another verbal narrative, which told of a Martini-Henry rifle being used. According to this story, William had borrowed the gun from a neighbour or acquaintance and while his wife Jessie was cutting firewood, he rested the rifle on a window ledge, aimed, and fired, hitting her in the chest. The bullet was deflected by a rib of her corset/stays.

The Jacobs family lived two or three miles beyond Te One, and among their neighbours at that settlement were David Meikle, (an especially close friend of William's who is said to have come from the same place in Nova Scotia,) Maria Baucke, daughter of the German Missionary Heinrich Baucke, and Constable Richard Rayner, although there was a fair bit of space between individual homes.

David Meikle had settled on the Chathams as a young man, and in 1866 married Te Kahu, a young widow aged 33, but after her death within three years of their marriage, he married 19 year-old Ani Paratene in 1869, (possibly a sister of Charlie Kamo.) Many years later, in 1896, he married an American woman, Julia Bley. (In 1952 Andy and George Hough dismantled Meikle's house and in the lining found the Smith and Wesson revolver which the third, and terribly nervous Mrs Meikle used to hold when answering her door to callers).

Charles Seymour, the eldest brother, had become infatuated with Ani, Meikle's wife, and they had gone off to live together at Te Ngaio, apart from everyone. (They lived together for some years before she died, and Charles later married Marion Cresswell at Christchurch in 1894).

Jessie was a handsome and educated gentlewoman of Scottish birth, a disciplinarian with strict rules on work, behaviour, and housewifery, which was so necessary for a home as well-run as hers. She had instilled in her family a

respect for hard work, God, and family, and gave her children the rudiments of a good education.

A Good Neighbour

Besides all this, she was generous to those less fortunate neighbours, and may have been instrumental in saving the life of Tommy Solomon, as Bess Clough claimed that it was Jessie who supplied the Solomons with the condensed milk to feed Tommy. (In case there should be any doubt that condensed milk was available in the 1880s, Phillip Haines of Nestle Company, Auckland, assured me that it was being produced at that time, and in New Zealand.) All Tommy's brothers and sisters had died within two weeks of birth, so their father, Rangitapua, decided that the mother's milk might be bad, although it's more likely that she was unable to produce enough, if any.

Jessie's children arrived at two-yearly intervals, and Helen (also referred to and registered at her marriage as Ellen) was the first to be born on the Chathams. Then came Hannah, Gordon, Letitia, Mary, Jessie, and lastly, John, who was born in 1880, afflicted with Down's Syndrome, and physically and mentally handicapped.

This may have sparked the dark episode in the household, as she claimed that William began to use most abusive language towards her shortly after John's birth, and continually for nearly two years afterwards. For the third time within this two-year period, she left her household and sought refuge with Maria Baucke.

Maria's cottage was a long building, divided into two rooms by a curtain. One room was used as a bedroom, while the other was a kitchen-cum-livingroom.

Staying with her were two of her brothers, Frank and Edward Baucke, as well as Willie Jacobs, Edward (Ted) Seymour, Jessie, and the four youngest Jacobs children, who had been sent two by two by their father over the previous two days to be with their mother. (Maria was

engaged to Ted Seymour, and they married on August 14, 1882, after the trauma of William's trial and sentence).

The night of Tuesday, March 7th 1882 was cold, wet, and stormy. Jessie had been staying at Maria's on this occasion for just over two weeks. On this night, the large group was enjoying the warmth of a fire. Maria was playing the accordion, with Jessie and her son Willie sharing the low bed-cum-settee. The thunder and lightning had been raging for some time, until about 8.p.m. there was another explosion as a bullet was fired through the back window of the house, and hit Jessie in her left breast, coming out under her armpit.

She leapt up, screaming that her husband had shot her, and leaned on the table in the middle of the room, only to see a second bullet hit the table and ricochet off through the curtaining into the next room, and hear a third and fourth bullet fired, which lodged in the window sill and back door post, to be found and handed to the constable later.

Bleeding profusely, she sank to the floor, while Willie ran out of the house to try to apprehend his father, but failing that, had gone to the house of the constable, Mr Richard Rayner.

Constable Rayner arrived some time after 10 that night, and proceeded to gather up the four bullets which had been fired from a revolver. He did not see Jessie, who was being tended to by Maria Baucke until Doctor Cooper arrived.

Mr Rayner spent the next day, Wednesday, gathering the evidence he knew would be required at the inevitable court case, and with the help of John Matthew Todd, Edward Moore, and Alexander Shand, each being armed with revolvers, they arrested William Gordon Jacobs at 10.a.m.

It was four long months before William Jacobs was brought to trial at Lyttelton. In the criminal sessions on Thursday, July 13, 1882, before His Honour Mr Justice Williams, he was indicted for shooting with intent to injure,

and with intent to murder, Jessie Jacobs. The witnesses, too, had been brought to New Zealand.

Mr Duncan appeared for the crown, and Mr Holmes, with Mr Wilding, appeared for the prisoner. Then began the questions, with answers reported in the Lyttelton Times on Friday, July 14, 1882.

Two witnesses, 14-year-old Ellen (Helen) Jacobs and 19-year-old James Seymour had been stricken with scarlet fever soon after their arrival in New Zealand. They had been attended by Dr J.H.Townsend, who told the court that they were quite unable to be moved, had temperatures of more than 100 degrees, and it would be another four or five days before they were well enough to give their evidence. This evidence, which had been taken on oath before two justices and in the presence of the prisoner, was finally given in written depositions to the court.

Ellen's deposition stated that her father had returned to his home after the shooting, and spoken with her, telling her what he had done, that all the island would be after him next day, and that what he had done had been for his children's sake, and God would reward him for it. She added that her father had threatened her mother, but had never struck her.

The deposition from James Seymour stated that once before Mrs Jacobs had left the house in consequence of quarrels.

In evidence from Mr Rayner, district constable and clerk of the Bench at Chatham Islands, the revolver used was an old one, and the bullets of unusual size. It may have been a Deane and Adams.

[Note: Adams was an English pistol maker. In 1855 the British Army adopted the Beaumont-Adams percussion Revolver Pistol. This was basically an Adams design of cap-and-ball revolver with a double-action firing lock designed by Beaumont. Adams then developed a conversion system for this pistol, using a new cylinder, rammer and loading gate, so as to convert the weapon to breach-loading, and this was

adopted for British service in 1868. A solid-frame metallic cartridge revolver was produced by Adams and this was widely adopted by police and military forces.

Deane and Adams: The name under which the percussion revolvers of Robert Adams were sold. It arose from Adams' partnership with John Deane and his son John Deane Jr. . . . which company was set up to exploit Adams' various patents covering rifles and revolvers. The firm displayed revolvers at the Great Exhibition of 1851, and the subsequent interest in these and in the exhibits of Colonel Colt led them to concentrate on pistol production. Its acceptance by the British Army as the Deane and Adams Pistol set the seal of approval on it, and it was widely sold for several years.

— *"The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Firearms," Ian V. Hogg.*

Bad Feelings

Rayner, continuing, testified that Meikle's wife left her husband and lived with Charles Seymour; that Meikle and Jacobs were on friendly terms; that he did not know that Meikle would not allow Mrs Jacobs or any of the Seymours to cross his land; that Meikle had a revolver, as did most of the settlers after the scare with regard to the Natives, and that he saw two guns on Jacob's premises.

(The 'scare with regard to the natives' referred to the 1872 plot by a small group of Maori chiefs, foremost being Ngawharewiti, Apitea, and Wharepa, to kill all whites on the island. The chiefs had arranged a great runanga (meeting) at Maipito on September 18 1872, where two Moriori had been asked by Thomas Ritchie to attend and report back to him. A letter from Wharepa to a relative at Taranaki telling of the massacre plot had been intercepted by Resident Magistrate R.J. La Nauze, who ordered the Ritchie brothers, Thomas and Robert, to gather all white residents in the vicinity of Thomas's Lake House home at Kaingaroa and give them shelter, at the same time arming themselves. This order so

alarmed the whole white population that all who could, from Waitangi, Te One, Owenga, Wharekauri, Maunganui and Te Whakuru, (but not Pitt Island,) brought any guns they had, and with their households lived in refugee-camp conditions for three weeks under Thomas's roof. This frightening episode barely 10 years prior to the present court case was still fresh in the minds of every white person on the island, and all who could still kept guns in their homes.)

While the stays (corset) had been produced in Court at the Chatham Islands, they were apparently not produced in the court-case at Lyttelton, probably as a matter of delicacy of those times. This corset was an undergarment made of cotton or calico, akin to the present-day girdle, but braced with ribs of whalebone or metal. Worn to pinch in the waist and raise the bosom, giving the traditional 'hour-glass figure,' the ribs would have extended half-way up the breasts, with the garment top then concealed with swathes of lace or such material falling over the neck-line of the outer garment.

It was one of these ribs of the stays which Doctor Cooper considered the bullet had touched, causing it to glance off at an oblique angle, and exit under the armpit. Had it not been impeded by the stays-rib, the bullet must surely have entered her heart.

When Jessie took the stand, she was "accommodated with a seat." She told how the ball from the revolver had entered the top of the left breast, and went out under the armpit. Dr Cooper had attended her for fourteen days, but that the wound had not healed for almost a month. She had left home "on account of the abusive language my husband made use of to me." Messages had been received from her husband through her daughter Ellen. Her husband had objected to giving her her children, but not to her leaving. They had lived unhappily for two years. William had once threatened to take her life, and that of her eldest son

Charles, but that he had never struck her. It had been a year and nine months before she left him.

Poison Threat

Then followed Mr Holmes' questioning, and her description of the relationship between Meikle and their family. Meikle was a man of strong feelings who claimed that Jessie had threatened to poison him, among several other unkind acts, which Jessie vehemently denied, not having seen the man for over two years.

He was a particular friend of her husband's, said Jessie, and her husband had blamed her unjustly for the liaison between her son Charles and Meikle's wife, and this was the difference between her and her husband. She told him that she had used her influence on three different times to persuade Charles to give up Mrs Meikle, but without success. According to her husband's account, Meikle himself was to blame for his wife leaving him.

Willie Jacobs testified that his father had often practiced shooting at trees and a sugar bag with a revolver like the one produced. He confirmed his mother's evidence.

Doctor Samuel Cooper remembered attending Mrs Jacobs on March 8th. She was much exhausted from loss of blood. There were two wounds, at point of entry and point of exit. He considered that the bullet had touched a rib (of the stays), and glanced off obliquely through the breast.

He added that "the wound might have been attended with bad consequences, . . . and that Mrs Jacobs told him she did not want any more attendance."

When his Honour summed up, which took close to an hour, the jury retired at 5.20 p.m. They returned at 6.30 to ask several questions, again retired, but had failed to agree by 10.30 p.m. They were locked up for the night and next day brought in a verdict of guilty, with a recommendation to mercy on account of Jacobs' advanced age and previous good character.

He was sentenced to eight years' penal servitude at the Lyttelton Gaol. William was an exemplary prisoner, and served less than the eight years of his sentence.

After his release, he returned to the Chatham Islands, where he spent several years doing the work he knew best. He lived at Te One, some suppose with his good friend David Meikle. A grandson, Archie, recalled visiting him there when he was a very small boy, remembering him as a nice old man with a beard and a glass eye, which was true, as it was found out that he had lost an eye on one of the whaling ships during a fight in his youth.

Charlie Seymour told David Holmes that William helped his son Willie clear up the mess when the 'Jessie Readman' went ashore at Taupeka with a full load of wool in 1893. Willie helped cart the wool, while his father William helped with smoko. He boiled the billy!

He eventually left the island soon after the turn of the century and died at Whangarei on February 1, 1903, aged 73, according to the death certificate.

It is supposed that a group from his homeland of Nova Scotia had settled at Waipu, just south of Whangarei, and he had gone there to join them.

Jessie continued at the Chathams, raising her family, but moved into Waitangi in her old age. John died when quite young, and Willie Jacobs married Abner Clough's daughter Annie in 1890, while James Seymour married Alice Shand in 1888.

Jessie made a remarkable recovery from her terrible wounds, and her indomitable spirit kept her going for 40 more years, until she died aged 83 at Wellington on September 29, 1922.

All her children had received baptism in the Anglican Church, and at St Augustines when it was built.

On reflection, there may have been a more profound and passionate reason for this crime, about which we can only speculate, and which has been suggested by descendants.

For two such upright and moral people to come to this impasse supposes a cause and effect which could not be brought to public notice either privately or through the courts.

With the trauma of bearing a handicapped child, and the fear of further such children, Jessie may have withdrawn herself from her husband, leaving him with feelings of hurt, rejection, anger, and frustration at being denied his conjugal rights, while not understanding her deep fears.

The affair between her son Charles and the wife of his friend Meikle gave him a focus on which to vent his anger.

But of course, such things were not spoken of in those days, nor understood. A wife had no choice in such matters, unless she was of strong character, and prepared to suffer domestic upheaval.

Thanks to a great-granddaughter, Adrienne Bullock, for copies of Lyttelton Times reports, and for checking the draft of this chapter.

Chapter Fourteen: The Old People

Roimata

When Roimata died in early January 1954 at the Taranaki Hospital, her obituary referred to her as the "Grand Old Lady" of Urenui.

Last of the real old kuias of the district, Roimata Wi Tamihana, or Grennell, was born on the Chatham Islands about 1862, and was one of the chiefly families of Ngati Mutunga of Urenui, and Ngati Maniapoto of the King Country, but of Ngatitooa of Otaki and Kapiti Island.

Her father was Wiremu Tamihana, who was a deacon of the Church of England in the Chatham Islands for many years and her mother was Makerete Tere Te Maunui, a direct descendant of Tuwhareiti, sister of Rehetaia, who was a direct ancestor of Sir Peter Te Rangihiroa Buck and also of Te Arahū, Roimata's paternal grandfather. Her mother's sister, Heeni, was the first wife of Naera Pomare.

Hamiora Raumati of Urenui was a close relative on both the Ngati Mutunga and Ngatitooa sides and was brought up by Roimata's maternal uncle, Hamiōra Te Herepounamu.

In October 1878 several hundred Ngati Mutunga left the Chathams and returned to Urenui to join Te Whiti O Rongomai. Roimata was with them, her father having left the Anglican service out of sympathy for Te Whiti.

Roimata had one child, Henry Grennell, who married Mary Te Ripa, a daughter of Tikao. Tikao was one of the leading chiefs of the Canterbury Ngai Tahu.

Airini Grennell, who directed the women's session at Radio station 3YA at this time, (1950s) was a granddaughter.

Roimata was a staunch follower of Te Whiti and supporter of the King movement, and visited Turangawaewae for the tangi for Princess Te Puea in October, 1951.

— details from the Daily News, New Plymouth,