

Robert disappears

There is a generation of my father's family that I have barely mentioned in these stories. His uncles and aunts. They were born in Alexander Street in Ballymena to Robert and Eliza McWilliams between 1871 and 1884. Two of them, Thomas and James were alive when I was a youngster.



Alexander Street c 1934

Robert, my great grandfather, was born about 1821 and died in 1886. He appears to have done a disappearing act. To have become invisible to the rest of his siblings. For whatever reason contact was lost and as a result I grew up around cousins I never recognised or knew. We had no stories of relatives that emigrated to north America, nor any from those that remained. 'He was married twice,' was all we ever heard about Robert. It carried an air of censure.

James, one of Robert's brothers, had emigrated to north America in the 1850s and settled near Ottawa. Around 2007 Nancy Howard, one of James' descendants, with her

husband Robert researched their family tree. They recorded and detailed hundreds of 'cousins' in North America and Ulster – many of them living in and around Ballymena. Robert's sparse record notes his name, and the year of his birth and death. Nothing else. And none of us.

Robert married for a second time in 1867. To Elizabeth Bamber. Lizzie was twenty-one years his junior. Both were from the rural townland of Kildowney some six miles north of Ballymena. Robert was a labourer while his father William, who died some thirty years earlier, had been a weaver. Robert's marriage witness, Jane McWilliams, most likely a daughter from his first marriage, his new wife Lizzie and her witness Jane Craig, all signed the marriage documents with an X. They could not write.

A few years before Robert and Lizzie were married, the Ulster Revival of 1859 garnered tens of thousands of converts, mostly into the Presbyterian churches in County Antrim. When their church could not accommodate these converts a new one was built nearby. West Church was completed in 1863, built in dressed, black basalt stone.

While you can only speculate on Robert's first marriage and his life before it, I have a hunch that he was a convert during the fervent religious times. A reformed sinner, perhaps, with a newfound religious zeal. He certainly had a passion for his faith with its strict Sunday observance and prescribed Christian life. He expected the same from his family.

His son Hugh, my grandfather, had a similar strong faith, and all of his children were believers in his Presbyterian mould. Including my father who, as a Faith Mission preacher, spent time evangelising in Scotland and the south of Ireland. Later to become a church elder. And on to the next generation and my own upbringing in the same church, the subject of some earlier blog posts.

Robert had six children by his second marriage, Robert, Elizabeth, Thomas, Hugh, Catherine and James and in 1901 they lived on Alexander Street. Robert junior married Maggie Allen, and in the early 1900s they moved to Belfast. Hugh was the only other one to marry. Hugh was a coachbuilder and has appeared in other stories in this blog.

The other four remained unmarried. After Robert's death around 1905, the family moved to nearby Greenvale Street. Lizzie was a flax spinner in the Braidwater Mill. Thomas

was a shoemaker. Catherine was a dressmaker of some renown, although at the time of her death, she was a housekeeper. James was a cabinet maker. My father never spoke much about his aunts and uncles, although they lived only ten minutes walk away from our home. As far as I know, he had little contact with them.



Greenvale Street 1953 Coronation celebrations (possible some McWilliams are in here)

There is an odd silence from their generation, from their lives. Whether introverted or subdued, they seem to hold few surprises. There are no photographs. No stories, except of the illnesses of their later years. Only a few of Thomas's shoemaking tools survived.

Their lives appear constrained. By their father's puritanical influence? By the perceived sharp focus of The Saviour on their daily lives. Lives lived for the prize of eternal salvation. And later, burnished by an evolving northern Protestant culture and its insular love of our 'wee Ulster'.

In 2020 I took a DNA genealogy test. To my surprise, I made a quick connection with the branch of Robert's family that had emigrated to Canada in the 1850s. Robert and Nancy Howard gave me a copy of their family tree. It had hundreds of McWilliams with lots of detail. They put me in touch with cousin James McWilliams in Cullybackey. And suddenly our connection was much broader and deeper, with threads of emigration and movement that seemed to be missing.

Robert, their research indicated, had four siblings: James who emigrated to Canada, and the others, Margaret, John and Thomas who remained and married in and around Ballymena. Robert's parents William and Martha, and grandparents, James and Margaret, were noted, all buried in the Old Graveyard in Ahoghill. I can now add Robert and Eliza's family, and then the rest of us.

The DNA test would later throw up another surprise, but that's for a later blog. The next one will include the details from this story.

End