

CLAN MACRAE SOCIETY OF CANADA
ONLINE

Helena Tolmie (nee MacRae)
1840-1881

The life of my great-great grandmother, Helena MacRae, has fascinated me for more than a decade. She was born in Salachy, Lochalsh, Ross-shire in 1840 and married a grocer, Roderick Tolmie in Beauly, Kilmorack, Inverness in 1859 when she was 18 and he was 23.

Roderick and the heavily pregnant, Helena with their two year old, Isabella Jessie McRae, sailed aboard the 627 ton *Rajasthan* in July, 1862 from Birkenhead, England with 269 passengers. They followed the Great Circle route, exploiting the earth's round shape, favourable ocean currents and stronger winds that cut weeks from the old route which had been roughly the forty degree line of latitude across the Indian Ocean from the Cape of Good Hope to Australia.

The disadvantage of the Great Circle route was that it took ships into bitterly cold and stormy Antarctic waters which increased the discomfort of the voyage, as well as exposing them to additional dangers. Reference to these conditions is made in "Fast Clippers to Australia - The Passage Makers" by John Snelson: "Down in these deep latitudes the waves were often 40 feet high, the snow could be six inches deep on deck, and the sails and rigging stiff with ice - terrific conditions for flying through fields of icebergs, some of them five miles in circumference and hundreds of feet high - at speeds close to 20 knots".

Four weeks after departure from England Helena gave birth on board to a son, James. The ship sailed direct to Moreton Bay, Queensland, where the family arrived safely on 1st November, 1862 in time for the hot Australian summer.

Stone on Stone by their late descendant, Prof. Neil Yeates states that, on arrival, Roderick secured a position as a sheep overseer on Wallan Station, West Darling Downs and children Helen (Ella), Mary and Christina, were born there between 1865 and 1868. About 1870 the Tolmies left Wallan for Toowoomba where their last four children, Sarah, Agnes, Roderick and Margaret were born between 1872-1878. Sadly Helena died three years later, at age 39 years, from pneumonia. Oral family history differs as to what happened to Roderick. He either left home and abandoned his children, or was speared by aboriginals.

Roderick and Helena's children, Isabella and James were 21 and 19 respectively at the time of their mother's death. Both never married, and assumed the responsibility of raising their young siblings. James' career included being a teacher, an editor, a Member of Parliament, an Alderman and a farmer. His sister, Helen (Ella), also never married and was Matron of Toowoomba General Hospital. Mary and Christina became teachers, married and had children. Sarah and Agnes both followed Ella in the nursing profession and remained single. Agnes, the Matron of Maryborough Hospital, was awarded an OBE for her involvement in the World War I Women's Memorial, Red Cross and Girl Guides. Sadly, Roderick junior died in his 30's, unmarried. Margaret married Herbert Yeates and brought up her family.

Although Helena did not live long, she bequeathed me a legacy of an ancient heritage. Her ancestry can be traced back to the 15th century in *History of the Clan MacRae*, by The Rev Alexander MacRae, BA.

Snippets of information about her life before marriage can be gleaned from census returns which show that her family migrated in an easterly direction from Lochalsh on the West Coast to Achnault (roughly in the centre of Strath Bran) to the Black Isle in the east. This route is today followed by the railway from Inverness to Kyle of Lochalsh. I am indebted to Mr. Anthony Browne of Inverness who kindly researched these returns and also discovered an advertisement for Helena's father's business:

LOHCARRON ROAD - ACHNANAULT INN

ANGUS MACRAE, INNKEEPER, and Tenant of this Inn, takes leave respectfully to inform Travelers, Tourists, and the Public generally, that he has recently got his House neatly and comfortably fitted up, and well Furnished. His Stables have undergone Repair, and been enlarged, and he pledges himself to strict attention and punctuality to all orders. His Stock of Liquors and Provisions is of the best quality, and the Public may rely confidently on being well and cheaply accommodated.

He will be happy at all times to afford information to Sportsmen, Tourists, and others taking the road, and by the kind and liberal permission of the Proprietor, he is empowered to confer the privilege of Angling on the adjoining Lakes and Rivers, all which are famed for the superiority and quality of their Trout, upon any Sportsman arriving at, or temporarily resident at the Inn.

Achnanault Inn,
Kilcoy Arms, 19th June 1851.

Inverness Advertiser, Tuesday July 8 1851, page 1.

Anthony also copied pages from *Her Majesty's Commissioners of Enquiry into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, 1884* which contains evidence given by Helena's uncle, Duncan MacRae, a crofter born about 1796, in which he states he had been 60 years in Sallachy, having come from Kyle Rhea in the parish of Kintail. He was born in Kintail and his forefathers belonged from original times to Kintail. "There are more of the Kintail people in Australia and America than in Kintail. They expected to improve their circumstances there. It is the money of the Indies that spoiled these parts first - it increased the rents", he said. Duncan gave evidence about living conditions past and present in Sallachy and Kintail. He said his father's brother had fought at the Battle of Sheriffmuir and never came home and that a relative of his father had been at Waterloo.

I am proud to be a descendant of the MacRaes of Kintail. The year 2000 will see me at Eilean Donan for the gathering of the clan.

Gail Dodd

36 Stefanelli Close, Wandi, Western Australia 6167

dodd@iinet.net.au
