

*By Mary McLean, nee Buckingham, great grand daughter of Annie(nee Haldane) and Jeremiah O'Brien. This tale won third place from 66 entries at the July 2006 Dan Davin Literary Awards, a short story competition to write about an aspect of Southland's history. Passed on to you, with Mary's permission, by Christine McKenzie.*

## **Annie.**

On the afternoon of the day after the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month, 1918, Annie was skimming cream. She liked to swoop across the basins of milk in time with the sound of the waves lifting and then as they broke raise the skimmer full of cream and let the trickle of milk dribble down to accompany the back wash of the surf. It was a soothing, satisfactory chore; one that she usually did straight after milking, so that she could scald the basins ready for the day's new supply. This morning, however, on her way back from the cowshed she saw Jeremiah stooped over in the vegetable garden, trying to thin. His arthritis had worsened so much that he was unable to kneel for any length of time. She stayed to help and together they weeded and hoed. By the time she'd attended the hens and ducks and geese, boiled the copper and hung out the wash so that it could dry on this balmy Spring day, it was time for lunch. Hence the late start in the dairy. She had all the surplus cream ready for churning when she heard the school bell from the settlement on the hill high above do a crazy disjointed tolling. Then a whole cacophony of sound erupted. Milk cans were being banged, pots and pans clashed together; she could even hear the wild shrieks that the Highland Scots yelled while dancing the Schottisches, First Sets and Alberts when the school doubled as a hall.

For a moment she thought disaster; another shipwreck, perhaps, although the sea was as docile as it ever was on this isolated and desolate coast, earthquake, invasion? The last was improbable but a clue. The War must be over. They were all celebrating. Annie felt

the panic, the gorge that rose in her throat whenever the War was mentioned. It was two years since Andrew had been killed in France and she'd taught herself to cope with the pain of it, but the loss of someone so enthusiastically alive, so handsome, so teasing, meant that even Jeremiah's and the other children's love could not make up for the dearth of fun and laughter that seemed to have died with her second son.

Maude and Terrence appeared. They'd been picking up sticks left from a bush burn, so that swedes could be planted in a paddock near the settlement; No one's favourite job, and another reason to miss Andrew. Still, that was why her youngest son had returned from North Queensland where the sun always shone, to the mud and storms and cold of this Southernmost farm.

"A ceilidh," yelled Maud. "The War's over."

Terrence looked at his mother, uncertain of her reaction. "It really is over," he said. "The boys will be coming home." Then, seeing her stricken face wished the words unsaid.

"You'll away up to the school? They're planning to start off with a dance as soon as the milking is done."

"In that case I'd better be doing some extra baking," from long habit Annie kept her voice emotionless.

"And it might be a good idea to run the cutter," Jeremiah emerged from the verandah.

"They're already away. And if the hotel's run out of barrels, we might investigate some of those wisps of smoke in the bush." Terrence like the rest of the district knew that not all smoke came from burn offs, although so far they had convinced the excise men it was so. It was after all the peaty taste of the water that gave the hooch its distinctive flavour.

Jeremiah turned to Annie.

“They’ll all be expecting you there,” he said gently.

“I know,” she tried to sound brisk. “So I’ll build up the range and be getting some scones and pikelets and a cake on. Then there’s some churning waiting to be done.”

From long experience she’d found that by keeping herself busy any melancholic thoughts could be suppressed, but she also knew that they would return and the only way to deal with them was to have some time away and alone. There was a small cove around from the cave where, when they were first married, supplies were rowed from the sailing ships that plied the southern coast. From there a pulley to the house winched the stores up the cliff. Just below, wind and rain, and in really stormy weather, the sea itself, had scoured out a hollow that comfortably accommodated her person. The huge expanse of coast; black cliffs, treacherous reefs, swirling kelp, teeming rock pools, pounding waves was spread before her. For it was the ever restless sea that helped her understand and cope with her feelings. She didn’t remember, being only a year old in 1858, the “Strathallen” and the voyage from the Scotland, but she suspected her psyche was indelibly imprinted with the moods and rhythms of the sea. All her earliest senses must have been attuned to it.

Now she had to make sense of her life, that of her parents, of Jeremiah and her own children, in particular, on this of all days, Andrew’s.

It all began at Waikawa, the harbour once considered a site for the new “Edinburgh of the South,” before Dunedin was decided on, but still the preferred location for her father’s future sawmill and homestead. It wasn’t finished, in fact the attic rooms of the three-storied home never were, when Annie, just a toddler, and her mother and siblings arrived. She was told, frightened by the Maori greeting them, she had hidden under her mother’s

crinoline skirts; later she remembered their kindness and the presents they brought. There were beautifully woven flax baskets full of kuni kuni, kereru, and the occasional titi. She still had a water worn piece of agate shaped like a fish, with streaks of blood red, green and creamy white running through it, that an old lady had given her. There was also a whole fern embedded in petrified wood but she hadn't valued that so much as the creeks and coast abounded in similar specimens. They did not seem to resent her family being there, despite the fact that it was the earlier sealers and whalers who had decimated their numbers by introducing pakeha diseases against which the Maori had no immunity. Some, in fact, worked at the mill. Perhaps inter-marriage had helped and also been responsible for the lack of conflict and the respect both races had for one another.

Her other early memories were of the bush and the harbour, sneaking into the school room where a governess presided for the first few years, and the huge dining room where the workforce ate. From the original two men who accompanied the family from Scotland, plus a crew member who deserted from the schooner that delivered them, she was able to eventually count twenty workmen. There was the awe with which she regarded the turning water wheel. It drove the mill machinery much of which, like the joinery for the house, had come from Scotland. Sometimes, however, she watched her father making replacement cogs from Rata; their magnificent blooms dominated the bush around the harbour when they first arrived and every January since. Other women, or children, apart from her brothers and sisters, were a rarity, but it was a busy happy time; which was why, she thought, she still liked to plan and accomplish as much as she could in daylight hours.

Then came the desolation, the hardship, dreams abandoned. Too many ships went down with the family's hard won timber cargo or on occasion their stores. Bankruptcy loomed. So did starvation. Annie remembered scavenging for shellfish, trying to eat paua, which they called "mutton fish," and not then knowing to mince or bash it first. There was the time her brothers walked to Clinton to each carry back a bag of flour. She thought they were away a week. The largely futile searches for pukaki eggs. The birds themselves were tough to eat. Perhaps that explained her pride in her own poultry. When a girl in the district was to marry she always provided her with a clutch of eggs and the laying mother. The ducks and geese muddied the often sodden pasture but Jeremiah hadn't minded despite the pride he had in his farm.

She supposed it was because in his homeland the native Irish were forbidden to own land, or a horse over \$5, go to school, vote or practise their religion. That was why it was such a thrill for him to be able to buy land even though he needed to continue augmenting their income by goldmining and road building. It explained too why a horse was kept solely to transport their eldest children up the hill and down its steep face to cross the Six Mile estuary, so called because they had another six miles of sandhills and beach to ride before they reached the school at the Waikawa end of Porpoise Bay. The prospect of the return trip was less intimidating for him to contemplate than his own schooling in the illegal "hedge schools" of Limerick where he had taken his turn watching for the authorities who would shoot the often itinerant teacher, on sight. Priests met a similar fate.

Annie worried about the long days, the times when high tides meant the horse had to swim the estuary, and the atrocious weather. It was only in real blizzards that Jeremiah allowed the children to stay home.

It also explained why practising his religion was so important to him. Unlike three of her sisters who had been married at the family homestead at Waikawa by the Rev. James Henry from Wyndham, Annie made the tedious journey to Invercargill. There, on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1880, she and Jeremiah were married at the wooden church of St. Mary's, which predated the Basilica. She also had to promise to bring up her children as Catholics. Dutifully she heard their catechism. The rote answers came back to her.

“Why did God make me?”

“ To know Him, to love Him, to serve him in this life, so that I may be happy with Him forever in Heaven.”

Andrew had done the knowing, loving, serving bit. Whether or not, the second applied she had no idea. Jeremiah didn't doubt it. Nor did Mrs. Casey who lived further up the coast. She had lost four sons in the War, so in theory her anguish should have been four times greater than Annie's. But one cannot put a measurement on grief. She knew they'd all derived some solace from the priest stationed in Gore. He stayed with the Caseys as well as Jeremiah and Annie whenever there was a fifth Sunday in the month so that he could minister to these, his furthest flung parishioners. It was a three day trip on horseback for him, but Annie relished the opportunity to meet with neighbours and provide meals for all. She still did that on Sundays. Jeremiah was particular about observing a day of rest even though there could seldom be a service. He replaced his work boots with his highly polished best to match his Sunday suit. Often the family,

(Dennis, Elizabeth and Terrence were married now,) or her siblings and neighbours came to visit but the whole district knew they were welcome; their hospitality, she knew with some pride and satisfaction, was legendary. Annie usually had a roast goose, or sometimes a non-laying chook, wild pork or mutton with the lashings of vegetables Jeremiah was so meticulous in providing; another Irish legacy. His parents must have survived the famine that decimated the Irish population in the forties, but the tales still haunted him. Their orchard was enormous too; apples, pears, quince, plums and cherries thrived, providing there was shelter. With the sea so close, frosts were rare and snow a novelty. They even picked a few apricots and peaches. And the gooseberries, currants and raspberries were legion. Pudding for the big mid day meal on Sundays was always fruit and custard or junket with cream in Summer; a steam pudding in Winter.

They enjoyed visiting too. Annie's sister Marion lived the closest. Thomas, her husband, who put much of the district's events to rhyme, and Jeremiah had been friends since their goldmining days. They were regarded as the fathers of the district since they had been established long before the Settlement was surveyed. Now, with the increased population, they had a school close by and Marion and Thomas also ran a Sunday school and held services on Sunday, so the sisters tended to see one another during the week. Frequently instead, Annie and Jeremiah spent Sundays at her brother James's home near Curio Bay where there was always music. There was a remittance man, the "noble British peer," in one of Thomas's poems, whose piano playing, when sober or nearly sober, aroused unbidden emotion in Annie. She didn't understand it, or how music so different to that she was used to, could add this extra dimension to her life. Always she was reminded of some trait of Andrew's.

Mostly however they took turns to sing or play duets. Sometimes they went back to the old homestead where her mother still lived with Lily, Annie's youngest sister. But it was tricky catching the tides both ways of both estuaries and as their family grew, too many to fit in the dinghy needed to cross the Waikawa.

There was a coach road now from the end of Porpoise Bay along the estuary to Waikawa, but when Andrew was due to be born there was only a bridle track. Annie shuddered remembering his imminent birth. There'd been a cold Easterly and the high tide at the Six Mile had further chilled her ride to her childhood home. Drizzle obscured obstacles on the track and visibility had been zilch when she rowed across to the homestead. To compensate huge fires had been built and also, she supposed, to heat water for the birth. Andrew had been born only a few hours when the old house caught fire. For some reason she'd been alone, but she quenched the fire unaided. There was only the baby to share her panic and eventual success and relief. Maybe that was why she and Andrew had always shared a special bond. The Easterly returned as she made her way home, but the baby wrapped in a sheepskin and tied to the saddle in front of her, was warm. So was Jeremiah's embrace when she eventually arrived, but he also took time out to thank God. Annie was inclined to think her own efforts had something to do with it. Although she couldn't share his religion, she appreciated the comfort it brought. And she felt it must have helped the poor souls on the Tararua when that ship struck a reef at Waipapa and 131 people drowned. It was just a year after they were married. The bush telegraph worked quicker than official channels and Jeremiah joined the few other, (at that time,) locals who came to see what they could do to help. There was nothing practical. The ship struck in the early hours of morning and during the day the seas came

up. Some were swept from the deck; others clung to the masts where lanterns were hung as night approached and no rescue craft appeared. The anguished spectators on shore could only listen to their cries for help but as the night wore on they heard above the roar of the surf the faint sound of singing. The doomed victims of yet another wreck on the Southern coast were singing hymns! It was only when the voices became weaker that Jeremiah's baritone boomed to them the words of "Faith of Our Fathers," and then "Hail Queen of Heaven." When he came to "save us from perils of the sea," there was a faint chorus echoing back but by the time he was imploring "Pray for the sinner, pray for me," the lights had disappeared and there was only the sound of the wind keening and the waves breaking.

She liked to think he had helped assuage their fear, the terror of imminent death. Perhaps it had been so for Andrew too, stuck in the mud and filth and squalor of the trenches in France. Memories of home must surely have helped him endure it. As thinking back was helping her to know she could cope with the evening ahead.

Already the setting sun was turning the wild waters of Fouveaux Strait a shimmering burnished gold. The hump of Ruapuke Island loomed in front of the shadowy hills of Stewart Island. Bluff Hill was a sharp pyramid silhouetted against a sky streaked with gold and purple, pink and red and green. Soon the lighthouses at Waipapa and Dog Island would send out their individual warning beams. It was time to go home.

She was stiff as she unfurled her legs. Old age was creeping insidiously upon her, but she knew ascending the cliff and then the hill would limber her up. She could see Jeremiah reading in the long Southern gloaming, as she approached the house. That was his way of coping. Newspapers, "The Southland Times," "The Southland Daily News," and the

“Otago Witness,” came regularly now and were read assiduously, but it was his cherished books that Jeremiah most often turned to. Annie had browsed through Thomas Carlyle, Edward Gibbon and Edmund Burke, but found little to interest her. She much preferred the action of her cowboy books which also had the advantage of being easily procurable. They had a background she could identify with even if it were somewhat more exotic than her own; the characters were very good or very bad, the storyline uncomplicated and the ending satisfying albeit predictable. In them Andrew would have been a “goodie” and therefore not have died.

They both liked playing cards and Annie toyed with the idea of suggesting a hand when Jeremiah rose and sat her down beside him.

“Did you find some sort of reconciliation down there?” His eyes were concerned.

“I think so but I still don’t understand why he wanted to go,” Annie’s voice was truculent. “You’d just arranged to buy Mt. Florence for him. He had everything going for him here and God knows, you of all people know, we owe the British nothing.”

“That’s really the reason behind it all. We came here to be free, to grab the opportunity to live a life without oppression; to make our own laws and our own way. For security. It didn’t work for your parents; they were too isolated and too soon. But it has for their children. Look how established they all are now. As it has for us.”

“Then why couldn’t Andrew,” she spoke his name without choking, “be content with security?”

“Because once you have it, you tend to take it for granted. You want other things, like excitement and adventure. Look how Terrence kept running away from school and how I had to keep hauling him back. Three times wasn’t it? And only because he learned there

was a world beyond farming and fishing and sawmilling. That's why he went to Australia and New Guinea and all those other places. Only marriage and children made him see the importance of security as Dennis also discovered. But Andrew had no commitments. The War was his big opportunity to see the world. He had the luxury of choices. He would have been miserable if he'd stayed, always regretted it.

Now some good news. Terrence told me tonight that he and Nance and the children are staying. They're not going back to Australia. You'll have the children quite close at Mt Florence."

"But what of them? asked Annie. "If our generation worked for freedom and security and our children wanted adventure and excitement, what will our grandchildren aspire to?"

"I think they'll opt for peace. They'll not want to repeat the horrors of this war."

"Will that be enough? Won't they get bored?"

"No. Because their's will be a totally different world. There are flying machines now, and motor cars, electricity. Who knows what new inventions will eventuate, what challenges they will face and embrace. Talking of embracing.....but we should away to the school. The others left an hour or so back. The jobs were done in record time," he grinned. "Besides I would like the pleasure of the supper waltz with you and if we don't leave soon we may miss out. Even worse we may miss Thomas reciting his victory poem!"

"I'll away to change then," but as she spoke Annie knew it was not just her clothes that would be changed. And winning the War was not the only victory.

