

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2023

2306 An Irishman's Proposition

by Catherine Clarke

The Irishman's Proposition

When my great-great-great-grandfather, James Montgomery Hannay, died in Palmerston North in 1898 he was buried in an unmarked grave under the name of 'Paul Leigh' in the Terrace End Cemetery.¹ His death certificate stated that he was an engineer, born in Scotland, also known as Paul Leigh and had married Lucy McEwen in New York about 1853.² Not one of those details could be verified.

Their first daughter, Mary Lilias Louise Hannay, was baptised (age 5) in Toronto in 1859.³ The family story is that Lucy had a dreadful temper and after a second daughter (Ida) was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1864,⁴ Hannay absconded with his eldest daughter and came to New Zealand. The couple reconciled when Lucy visited New Zealand but parted after only ten days, Hannay saying her temper was still foul after twenty years.

What was the truth in this story? Had it been distorted out of all proportion as it was handed down from his granddaughter to her granddaughter? Over time, records have come to light that flesh out this family myth.

After her husband's desertion Lucy styled herself as Lucy Stuart, widow, and in an interview with the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* in 1901 she also adjusted her timeline to enhance her story:

*Mrs Stuart was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, but came with her parents to New York when 7 years of age, and was reared and educated in that city. She was married when quite young, and a few years later left a widow. Soon after the death of her husband she entered into active religious and charitable work. Her first experience was in San Francisco, where she was for eight years city missionary with the First Presbyterian church.*⁵

Lucy then claimed that from 1874-77 she was the "matron of the government Indian school at Lapwai, on the Nez Perce reservation" until forced to flee "to escape massacre at the hands of Chief Joseph" who went on the war path. In fact, Lucy had left Lapwai much earlier and by 1874 was working in a printing office in Portland, Oregon.⁶

Lucy (Louisa) was born in 1836 in Edinburgh,⁷ and immigrated to New York (age 16) with her parents Alexander and Janet McEwen in 1853.⁸ Her father (a hatter) is listed in the Toronto tax assessments for 1854. These records also place James Hannay in Toronto from 1857-59.⁹ Lucy's death certificate states she was married (aged 19) in Toronto.¹⁰

The Hannay family of James, Louisa and Lilla (age 3) then appear in the 1860 census in Covington, Kentucky where James was working as a reporter, but this time his birthplace was recorded as Ireland.¹¹

Mr James Hannay and Miss Lilly Hannay arrived in New Zealand on *The Queen of the North* from London in 1866.¹² Hannay stayed about ten years in Takaka where he was engaged as the sole teacher at Lower Takaka School from 1868-69.¹³ His teaching methods were recounted by Albie in *Speaking a Silence*:

The next master at the school was Hannay, he was a Yank, and like the others he lived behind the partition at the end of the school room. But you know what? Hannay nailed his bunk across the end nearest the school and bored a hole through the partition, so he could look into the school. Then about once or twice every three months he'd line the kids up and get them into school, then he'd say to Dad's older brother, "You take th'arithmetic, I've got tickdollaroo this morning." That's what he'd say. Dad never knew what it meant, whether he had diarrhoea or whether he was tight with whisky or what. But anyway then the kids would be at school, old Hannay would go off into his room and then there'd be a great disturbance

with kids throwing things at each other. And you'd see a bloodshot eye, full of whisky, looking through this hole in the partition. He'd be back on the booze out there...

And he had a whitlow on one finger, it used to go blue. I suppose it was sore, but if he bumped it he'd blame a kid and belt him. It was rough, but that was the schooling in the old days.¹⁴

By 1875, Hannay was working on the Collingwood goldfields and operating as the de facto medic for injured miners, a position he found 'thankless and troublesome'.¹⁵

Prior to her marriage with Douglas Hastings Macarthur in 1875,¹⁶ Lilly Hannay made contact with her mother by placing an advertisement in the *Newark Daily Advertiser*.¹⁷ When Lucy visited the following year,¹⁸ James Hannay left the Takaka district and apart from the brief reconciliation with Lucy when they (re)married in Sydney in 1892,¹⁹ his whereabouts between 1876 and his death are unknown. With the correct names of his parents from this marriage document, I eventually traced his origins back to family of woollen merchants in Belfast.²⁰

After this second separation, Lucy went to live in Mildura, Victoria.²¹ In 1896 she attempted to sue her eldest daughter for maintenance under the Destitute Persons Act²² claiming she had no means of support, but in 1897 she returned to San Francisco with more than \$30 in her possession.²³

A possible reason for Hannay's alias, Paul Leigh, became apparent when I discovered "A Strange and Eventful Tale" in *The Daily Times*, Chattanooga from 1874.²⁴ Lucy had gone public with a melodramatic version of finding her long lost daughter and claimed that Hannay had not only absconded with his daughter, but with \$3000 of his employer's cash when he was sent to New York to buy a printing press.

The newspaper wryly concluded: *The stockholders of the late American Union of this city...whose money Mr Hannay used in the manner stated above in January 1866, may feel a mournful satisfaction in knowing what became of their funds. As according to the Irishman's proposition a thing is not lost when you know where it is, they are now \$3000 better off than they thought they were.*



The formidable Lucy Stuart with her daughters and granddaughters 1889.

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- ¹ <https://www.pncc.govt.nz/Services/Cemetery-and-cremation-search>
- ² NZ Death Certificate, 25 July 1898/3727.
- ³ *Ontario, Canada, Roman Catholic Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials, 1760-1923*. Ancestry.com.
- ⁴ Obituary, *Feilding Express*, 28 July 1948.
- ⁵ *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, 20 June 1901.
- ⁶ *Idaho Signal*, 25 July 1874 and 1 August 1874.
- ⁷ 1836 MCEWEN, LOUISA (Old Parish Registers Births 644/1 Glasgow) Page 426 of 547 and 1851 MCEWAN, LOUISA (Census 899/ 2/ 51) Page 51 of 52. ScotlandsPeople.
- ⁸ *Glasgow, 2 July 1853, New York, Passenger Lists, 1820-1957*. Ancestry.com.
- ⁹ *Canada, Ontario Tax Assessment Rolls, 1834-1899*. <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/4130007>
- ¹⁰ NZ Death Certificate, 28 Oct 1911/8181.
- ¹¹ *1860 United States Federal Census*. Ancestry.com.
- ¹² *NZ Herald*, 12 June 1866. <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH18660612.2.4>
- ¹³ Chapman-Cohen, G. (1949). *Early Takaka and the Lower Takaka School : a history, 1860-1949*. Printed by R. Lucas & Son (Nelson Mail) Ltd, p.29.
- ¹⁴ Hunt, Christine, *Speaking a Silence*, A.H Reed, Wellington, 1981, pp 122-123.
- ¹⁵ Coroner's Inquest Proceedings, R24347476, Archives New Zealand.
- ¹⁶ NZ Marriage Certificate, 15 Nov 1875/2672.
- ¹⁷ *Newark Daily Advertiser*, 18 July 1874.
- ¹⁸ *NZ Herald*, 3 Jan 1876 <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH18760103.2.3>
- ¹⁹ New South Wales, Australia Marriage Certificate, 26 April 1892, 573/1892.
- ²⁰ Marriage of John Hannay and Elizabeth Montgomery, *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 17 December 1831.
- ²¹ 'ARRIVALS' *The Mildura Cultivator*, 11 June 1892, p.10. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article76589565>
- ²² *Feilding Star*, 22 May 1896 <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/FS18960522.2.24> and 21 Nov 1896 <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/FS18961121.2.11>
- ²³ *Miowera*, 13 Sep 1897, *British Columbia, Canada, Border Entries and Passenger Lists, 1894-1905*, Ancestry.com.
- ²⁴ *The Daily Times*, Chattanooga, Tennessee, 7 June 1874. <http://chattanooga.advantage-preservation.com/viewer/?t=33888&i=t&by=1874&bdd=1870&bm=6&bd=7&d=06071874-06071874&fn=the+daily+times+usa+tennessee+chattanooga+18740607+english+3&df=1&dt=4&cid=2679>