



A herstory of Morva

It could never be said of Morva that she rushed into any of life's stages prematurely. Marriage, motherhood, shifting from the family home, entering a nursing home and death were all events that she experienced much later than her contemporaries. By outliving those who knew her in other roles, Morva has left a decades-long memory of a quiet sweet old lady focussed on her garden and news of her grandchildren and her social contacts arranged around this meeting. There was, of course, much more to her than that.

Morva's ancestry is 100% Scottish – the clan Gunn provided both her parents. The Gunns descended from the Norse King Gunnir, who raided and settled the north of Scotland over a thousand years ago, at about the same time as the first Maori were settling New Zealand. The heart of Gunn territory was Caithness, in the far north of mainland Scotland, although the clan and its septs were also well represented in the Shetlands and Hebrides. The Gunns were notorious for their warlike behaviour and conducted violent feuds with many of their neighbours – quite a contrast to the pacifism that Morva embraced throughout her life.

The Gunns were finally subdued and lost their lands, and many became crofters, or subsistence tenant farmers. Morva's paternal grandfather, David Waters Gunn was one such when he was a victim of the Highland Clearances conducted by the landowner, the resentfully-remembered Duke of Sutherland. As a young man, David was forced from his croft at Kildonan, a location on the River Helmsdale now marked only by the current Duke's hunting lodge, and initially moved to Latheron, on the Caithness coast now home to the Clan Gunn Cultural Centre. But it was the lure of gold in far-away New Zealand that brings him into our story. In 1861 he emigrated to the goldfields – the West Coast, as

far as I can ascertain. Ironically, Kildonan had its own gold rush a few years later but by then David had become a permanent settler in this country.

In due course David married and had a family. One of his sons, Angus Martin, became a builder, and a strongly-committed Methodist. Around 1900 Angus married Frances Gunn, descended from the Shetland branch of the clan, so as a Gunn, Morva was definitely “double barrelled”. Angus and Frances had three children – quite a small family for the era – Ron, the eldest, Keith, the youngest and Morva the girl in the middle, born in 1909. Morva was born in Wellington but while she was very young the family returned to Cobden, near Greymouth, where her parents had married.

However, the opportunities of Auckland’s urban expansion beckoned the young builder and his family, and they had relocated to Takapuna, on Auckland’s North Shore, by the time Morva started school. Angus was entrepreneurial as well as hard-working and developed an off-shoot of the building business, making pre-cast concrete products for fences and other domestic uses. Some of his products can still be seen around the older parts of the North Shore today. Eventually the family home at 50 Lake Road had to be shifted across the road to provide room for the burgeoning concrete business.

When Morva reached high school age in 1923 her education required her to take the Takapuna Steam Tram, which stopped outside the gate, to the Bayswater Wharf, thence a steam ferry to Auckland, and then an electric tram up Queen St to the Auckland Girls Grammar School. I wish my school journeys could have been as interesting!

Family life for the Gunns revolved around the Takapuna Methodist Church and as she grew older Morva became deeply involved in the Methodist Bible Class movement, something which was to profoundly influence her later life. Other Takapuna Methodists with whom the Gunns had strong social as well as commercial ties were the Wilsons (of Wilson and Horton) – I think Gunncrete blocks still fence in what became the Crippled Childrens Home – and the Winstones, also known for concrete products. Mrs Wilson organised the Girl Peace Scouts after a visit by Lady Baden-Powell in the early 1920s, and Morva became part of the first troop of what are now know as Girl Guides.

Morva did well at high school and went on to university study, enrolling in the Home Science course at far-away Otago University – a big step, but one in which she was encouraged by her parents. However, tragedy struck the family – as Morva was preparing for the academic life Angus became ill, and after Morva had been at University only a few months he died of stomach cancer, in 1928. For a while Frances carried on the business in association with Angus’s cousin, and is in the electoral roll of the day as a concrete block manufacturer – probably the only woman so listed. However the onset of the Depression took its toll and the business was forced to close.

Nevertheless, Morva persevered with her studies. She lived at Studholme Hall – named after the wealthy farmer who endowed the Home Science faculty for – in our eyes - outrageously sexist reasons. University life saw her become a member of the Student Christian Movement, in addition to continuing her Methodist Bible Class connections.

Both organisations tended to be on the liberal, or even radical, side of protestant Christianity of the day, particularly in relation to social issues and peace and war.

Upon graduating after three years study Morva faced the job market at the height of the Depression. Even though teaching, like all occupations, faced cutbacks she was fortunate in getting her first job as a home science teacher at Waitaki Girls High, not too far away in Oamaru. Among her pupils was one Janet Frame, who Morva remembered for her mop of bright red hair. We know, however, that home science wasn't one of Janet Frame's favourite subjects!

After a few years at Waitaki, Morva obtained a position at Thames District High, and continued involvement with the Methodist Bible Class and SCM. It seems as though it was around this time that she became committed to Christian pacifism which grew out of the Bible Class movement. An enduring friendship with another teacher, Myrtle Ginn (later Woodley) and the charismatic pacifist Ormond Burton were major influences.

At around the time of the outbreak of the War, Morva moved to Wellington for some on-going medical treatment, and taught at the Petone Tech. She and Myrtle boarded with the Burtons at the Methodist Manse at 22 Webb St and the two women became publicly active in pacifist activities in the tense and difficult early war period. The recently-published history of the Christian Pacifist Society records Morva Gunn as a regular street corner speaker for the CPS. However, she escaped arrest and moved to Christchurch for a new job at Christchurch South Intermediate in 1941.

Moving to Christchurch was not of course an excuse to opt out of pacifist activity. The city was, in fact, a major centre for anti-war activity and Morva became attached to a group around Anglican pacifist Thurlow Thompson. It is perhaps an indicator of Morva's age that she remembers Thurlow's son, the late Richard, as a high school student at the time. Other prominent pacifists in the group were Quakers like John and Muriel Morrisson and John Johnson – and rationalist Lincoln Efford. Morva and Lincoln met at a meeting in the Thompson's flat in Gloucester Street, right next door to the present WEA Centre and the hall which bears Lincoln's name.

Christian Pacifist activity was essentially driven underground for most of the war, with many men imprisoned for the duration as military defaulters. Lincoln's fragile health made him ineligible for military service so he was able to remain out of prison and maintain high-profile pacifist activity throughout the war. This included standing twice as a peace candidate in Parliamentary elections – in 1941 and 1943. Morva was an active helper in both campaigns.

At about this time, perhaps with Thurlow Thompson's influence, Morva embraced Anglicanism and became a communicant member of Trinity Church at Avonside. Her peace activities continued, and she also became involved with other activities as a result of her relationship with Lincoln – for example she was for a period the Librarian for the Esperanto Society. In 1946 she attended the large Pacifist Conference that Lincoln organised in Christchurch.

It was John Johnson, however, who precipitated her last career move to Hawera High School, with the words “this is your job – apply for it”. So ensued what was to be a short absence from Christchurch.

Morva and Lincoln married in 1948 in Hawera (his health had stabilised enough for him to take on full time employment as Secretary of the Canterbury WEA, even though his life expectancy was thought to be only a few years). She returned to this city to be a full-time home-maker when she became a mother at the age of 40. It was around this time that she ceased being an Anglican and started attending the Quaker meeting – apparently because Lincoln found that an easier fit with his own rationalist beliefs.

After enduring, as many families had to at that time of housing shortage, temporary accommodation with various relatives Lincoln and Morva bought a near-new home in Windermere Road in 1952 with financial help from Morva’s mother. It remained her home until 1988. Developing the quarter-acre property was a passion which they worked at diligently. Murray was born in 1954, when Morva was 45. Lincoln’s health continued to be highly variable, however. He came close to death in 1956 and required drastic bowel surgery. He bounced back from that but succumbed to leukaemia in 1962. Morva believed that over-exposure to X-rays during his many previous treatments may have caused it.

Left with the sole care of her two sons, Morva carried on undaunted. She managed largely on a widow’s benefit and the produce of the large garden which she continued to develop. She valued and joined in the activities of the Quaker Meeting, although she didn’t formally join the Society of Friends until quite late in life – something else not to be rushed. Her many friendships within the Meeting – with John and Muriel Morrison, Jim Cashin, Americans Joe and Agnes Myers and many others – kept her focus broad and gave her support in raising two adolescent sons who must have created concerns at times. She was an earnest spiritual enquirer and took part in many discussion groups within the meeting. The copious notes she made which have survived show an enquiring mind which remained active into old age. Nor did she lose interest in peace activities – I have clear memories of her doggedly pursuing our local National MP around a meeting room to get a straight answer about some aspect of the Vietnam War during the 1966 election!

Morva also took care to create an interesting and stimulating life for her two fatherless sons. She took our schooling seriously – including getting Gordon Troup’s help to correct my failing performance in the year of Lincoln’s death. She also took us on cheap outings during the school holidays – to factories and even on board ships in Lyttelton – something that would be impossible nowadays.

When her sons moved away, married and had their own families she continued to maintain the large property in Windermere Rd. Only when she was 79, in late 1988, did she move to her brand new unit in Greers Road. Fitting out the small house with her own choice of light fittings and drapes, and developing a new, albeit much smaller, garden seemed to give her a new lease of life. For many years she did seem indestructible,

although failing eyesight and other problems did require increased visiting support from the Nurse Maude organisation. It was only in April last year, at the age of 96, that her support needs finally forced a change to permanent rest home care, at WesleyCare in Harewood Road, still in the Papanui – Bishopdale area where she had lived for the last 53 years. Even there she took part in outings and other activities and remained generally alert and interested in her grandchildren's exploits. Her final health breakdown occurred only a month ago, and after a period in Princess Margaret she was transferred to the hospital facility at WesleyCare. She died peacefully in her sleep at about 4 am, on Monday, 25 September 2006.

Brent Efford