

Finding the family of John Coten - the search for answers

A summary of how the journey to find John Coten's family unfolded. Written by Hilary & Dick Tulloch.

Meg had written her memoir in the early years of her retirement. When she had been in Europe as a young woman, she had stayed with several of her paternal relatives, the Porters and the Bests, in Ireland and her maternal relatives in Scotland, the Leishman and Robertson families. These provided the family stories that Meg's boys grew up with.

But what of their father's family? John's death when his sons were so young meant that this connection was broken. Meg had tried hard to discover his family to let them know of his death but wherever she looked, she drew a blank. As Ned and Jim grew up and had families of their own, they too tried to fill this gap in their history, researching Coten families around the world. Meg understood their need to establish their paternal ancestry and supported them in their search for answers.

It was in September 2017 that fate stepped in. Ned, on a business trip to London, visited his cousin, Dick Porter. Here he met Dick's daughter and her husband. Staying with them and invited along were Natasha's in-laws, introduced as being keen family historians. At once Ned found himself telling the story of the long search for their elusive Coten ancestors. As anyone with an interest in family research will know, a few tantalising facts create an irresistible challenge. Ned was warned that there is always a chance that research among family mysteries may turn up unwanted history.

Assured that Ned and his family were aware of the risks, the Tullochs returned to Dublin with Meg's notes of possible leads into John's past. Knowing that the search for Cotens had not led anywhere, clues were sought elsewhere in the family.

Meg's notes told of Cambridgeshire connections, in particular Ely, military connections, a sister called Helen, a possible New Zealand experience, a Catholic mother, Katherine Imelda Coady from Killarney, Ireland, and a father called Edward John. Meg also noted that John was born in 1928. Although Meg had made these notes many years after John's death, it was these clues that provided a base from which to begin research.

'Katherine Imelda Coady' was the first clue because it was an unusual combination of names.

After online searches around the world, Catherine Amelda Coady born in 1884 at Stafford, New Zealand, seemed the most likely match. She was the daughter of Maurice Coady, originally of Glenmore, county Kilkenny, Ireland, who died in Wellington, New Zealand, on 1 September 1914, and his wife Catherine Mary O'Brien who died in Wellington on 1 October 1933.

Maurice and Catherine, both Roman Catholic, had seven children, two boys and five girls; one of the girls died in infancy. Research into the lives of these Coady children led to the discovery of some interesting military connections with possible similarities to Meg's recollections of John's family stories.

Catherine Amelda Coady married in 1927 after working as a postmistress at Kawhia, North Island, New Zealand. Her husband was a farmer, Edward John Graham, born in England in 1877 at Salisbury, Wiltshire. After living in various parts of New Zealand, he settled, in 1939, at Rangiri, Otaki, on the west coast of North Island, about 100 kms north of Wellington.

Edward, or Ted as he was known, had first arrived in New Zealand in February 1886 with his father and sister. He was travelling under the name Edward John Hanson. Edward's mother's name was

Helen Wise, whose family came from March, near Ely, Cambridgeshire. Helen had died in Cardiff, Wales, before John Hanson travelled to New Zealand with two of his children, Edward and Helen.

Edward John Graham died on 20 March 1950 having made his will, dated 28 March 1949. A copy of the will was lodged with his probate papers at the Probate Court in Wellington in May 1950. The will, after a few bequests, names his wife, Catherine Amelda, as sole beneficiary. In the event of her dying before him, Edward's will named their two children, Maurice Joseph Graham and Helen Wise Graham as beneficiaries in trust.

Looking further into the Coady/Graham/Hanson family, their names and origins, suggested that this might be a possible family for John Coten. However, it still left many questions unanswered so further research was needed before contacting Ned and Jim.

Catherine Amelda Graham made her will a few days after her husband's death. It was dated 23 March 1950. When she died, on 13 March 1959 in Lower Hutt, a northern suburb of Wellington, her will was lodged with the Wellington Probate Court in May 1959. In that will, she appointed her daughter, Helen Wise Graham, and her son, Maurice Joseph Graham, as joint executors and trustees, with the estate to be shared equally between them.

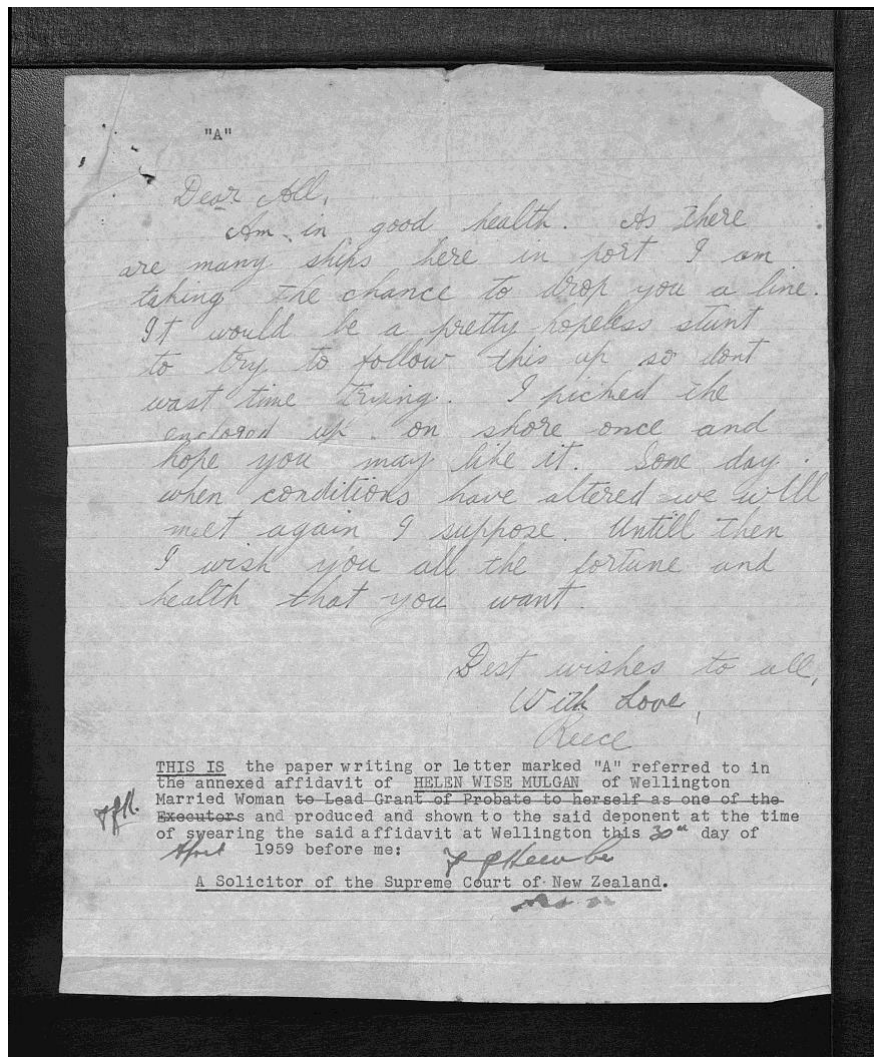
Maurice Joseph Graham had gone to Australia. He was recorded on the ship's manifest for SS *Eastern* which departed on 18 August 1948 from Bluff, at the southern tip of New Zealand bound for Sydney. He had declared himself aged 20, born in New Zealand and a general labourer.

By the time of her mother's death and subsequent probate, Helen had married. In her affidavit, attached to the probate papers, she confirms that she is the daughter of Catherine Amelda Coady and stated that the deceased had only two children, herself and Maurice Joseph Graham.

In this affidavit, dated 30 April 1959, Helen Wise Mulgan went on to say:

'The whereabouts of my said brother are not known. He was born in 1928. He suffered Asthma from childhood and after secondary school education he was not able to take up regular employment on this account. He wished to take up open-air life on account of his ailment and went to Australia in the beginning of 1948. He wrote regularly to us at the family home until about the end of that year and then his letters ceased. It has always been his intention to travel about the world and I verily believe that if still alive he has been travelling in various parts of the world ever since.

'That the only communication that either myself or my mother has received from my said brother since about the end of 1948 (the lawyer has noted, yet the will is dated 1950) is a letter which he sent her enclosing a small gift namely an ivory paper knife engraved in Oriental characters and in which letter he suggests that we could not locate his address. I say that I would know of any further communication which had been sent to my mother from my said brother since the year 1948 and that this is the only communication. I have found the said letter (which is undated) among my mother's papers after her death and the same is annexed hereto and marked "A".'



Letter from Maurice 'Reece' Graham

Part of this letter, without the signature, helped prove that Maurice Joseph Graham and John Francis Coten were the same person. Meg was able to identify the writing as John's hand.

Having looked for so long, Ned and Jim were keen to see all that had been discovered in the search for their father's identity. The detailed accounts that they received unveiled extensive families in England, Ireland and New Zealand. It was the revelation of close family, Helen's family, in New Zealand that was most exciting.

Jim contacted Helen Mulgan in New Zealand by telephone. What a shock to speak to an unknown nephew! It was difficult to take it all in but Helen bravely overcame her reservations and identified a photo of John as being her long-lost brother, Maurice, who had left New Zealand in 1948.

The results of DNA tests, already taken in both families, confirmed the genetic link. Now, at last, Meg's 'boys' were able to trace all their family lines but, most valuable of all, the connection has been made to their aunt and there are cousins to share the future with.