

Finding the family of John Coten – How we found the elusive Answers

Also written by Hilary & Dick Tulloch about meeting Ned Coten and the subsequent work to uncover decades of mystery.

In September 2017 we first met Ned Coten at the London home of Meg's nephew, Dick Porter. Dick is our youngest son, Coryn's, father-in-law. Our great interest in family history was well known by Dick as we had enjoyed educating our daughter-in-law Natasha on her's and our son's shared Irish ancestry. It was at that enjoyable lunch meeting that Ned explained the challenges that he and Jim had experience in trying to discover more about their father John Coten's family. They had spent several years looking for their elusive Coten history but without success and by the end of that lunch his tales had stimulated our interest in the hunt. We were very careful to caution Ned that if we did discover something, it might not be what they wanted to hear. Ned accepted this possibility and with that gave us a few brief notes that told of what Meg had recalled of the little bits that John told of his family history.

We looked at Meg's notes in the knowledge that Ned and Jim had already spent many years looking for Coten connections without success. So we looked at the notes to see if we could find another way into the story of John Coten. 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 Coten. We also knew from Meg's notes that John was born in about 1928. Meg had made these notes many years after John's death but we were sure that they contained some good clues for our research.

We started our research with the fact that his mother's name was Katherine Imelda Coady, a unique name and hopefully there would not many others with that name.

After a lot of negative searches, we finally discovered a CATHERINE AMELDA COADY who was born in Stafford, New Zealand, in 1884. 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. We researched the lives of these COADY children and discovered some interesting military connections which could have had possible similarities with 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 1877 in Salisbury, Wiltshire, England, and, after living in various parts of New Zealand, he settled in 1939 at RANGIURI, OTAKI, on the west coast of North Island, about 100 kms north of Wellington.

We discovered that Edward John had first arrived in New Zealand in February 1886 with his father and sister, but was travelling under the name EDWARD JOHN HANSON. Edward John's mother's name was HELEN WISE, whose family came from March, near Ely, Cambridgeshire. Helen had died in Bristol before Edward John's father brought him and his sister to New Zealand.

EDWARD JOHN GRAHAM died on 20 March 1950 having made his will, dated 28 March 1949, which is contained in his probate papers lodged at the Wellington Court in May 1950. The will, after a few bequests, names his wife, CATHERINE AMELDA, as sole beneficiary. EDWARD's will went on to name their two children, MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM and HELEN WISE GRAHAM as beneficiaries in trust should CATHERINE AMELDA predecease him.

The names and origins of several of the characters in this Coady/Graham/Hanson family all suggested that we might be on to a possible family for John Coten. However, although we thought that this all very positive, it still left to many open questions for us to tell Ned and Jim of these discoveries. We needed to find more so carried on searching.

When CATHERINE AMELDA GRAHAM died on 13 MARCH 1959 in Lower Hutt, a northern suburb of Wellington, her will, dated 23 March 1950, 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.

By the time of the Probate HELEN WISE GRAHAM had married and was named as HELEN WISE MULGAN. In Helen's affidavit, attached to the probate papers, she confirms that she was 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:

'That 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.

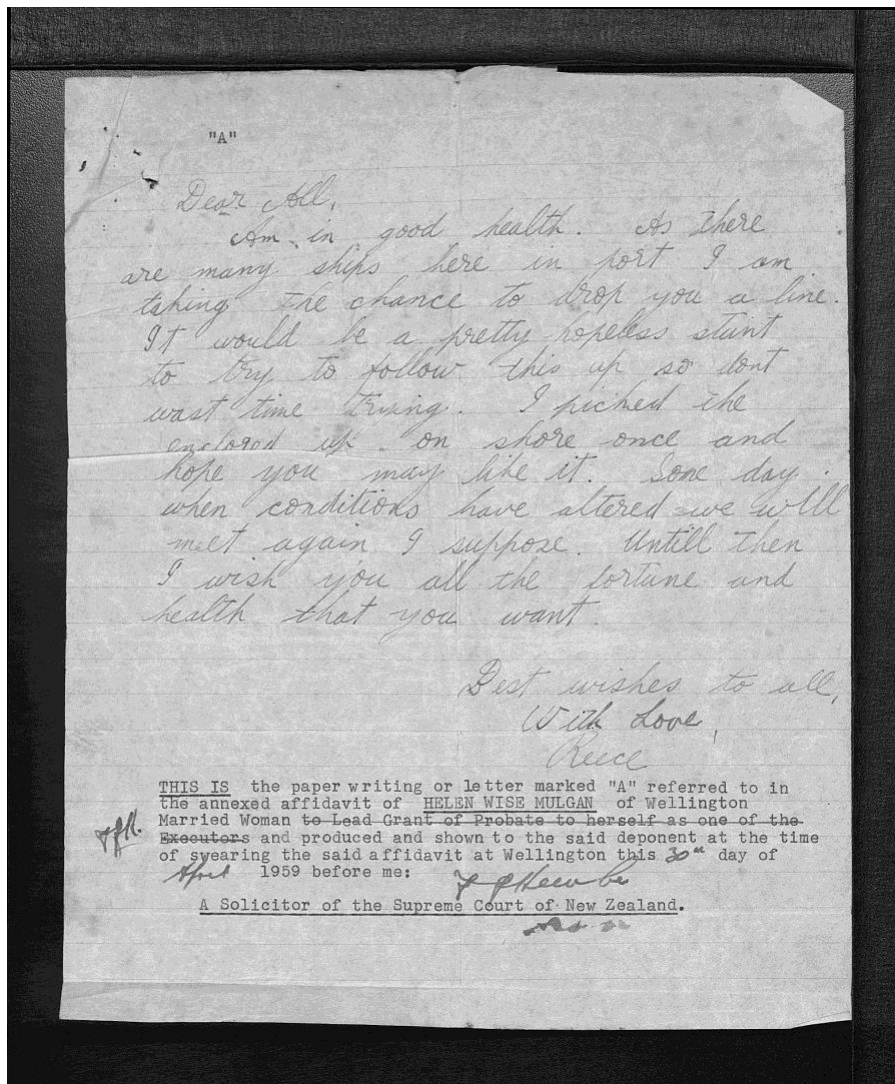
'That the only communication that either myself or my mother has received from my said brother since about the end of 1948 (the lawyer has noted, yet the will is dated 1950) is a letter which he sent her enclosing a small gift namely an ivory paper knife engraved in Oriental characters and in which letter 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".'

We discovered that on 18 August 1948 MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM departed Bluff, on the southern tip of New Zealand, for Sydney on board SS Eastern and the ship's manifest records:

GRAHAM, MAURICE JOSEPH, age 20, General Labourer, born New Zealand, destination port Sydney.

We finally thought that we had enough of a story to think about telling Ned and Jim of our discoveries. But first we wanted to see if the handwriting in letter that Maurice Joseph Graham wrote in the 1950's might be recognised by Ned, Jim or Megs as that of their John Coten.

This was the letter that Reece sent to his mother in the 1950s, from which we sent a small extract.



We sent the young Rece's letter to Ned on 31 Oct at 9pm AEDT and only a few hours later we had an excited message back to confirm the similarity of the writing and asking us what else we had discovered. The link seemed to have been found after all those years and so we told Ned and Jim of all our discoveries.

About five days later Jim contacted Helen Mulgan in New Zealand, who bravely overcoming the shock of being contacted by to her an unknown family, confirmed that a picture of John looked like her long-lost brother who had left New Zealand in 1948. Over the next month DNA tests within the family which all fully confirmed the genetic links and so thankfully the research did indeed lead to the happy result of a family reunited.

Nephews now have an aunt, sisters-in-law were connected, and there are cousins to share the future with.