

Agness Allan

Agnes Allan was born in Ulster where her family had settled after leaving Ayrshire, in Scotland, during the Stuart religious persecutions. Agnes claimed that her family was related to the founder of the Allan line of steamers. Agnes did not change her name on marriage and family legend has it that,



MR. J. ALLAN.

instead, John changed his, out of gallantry for his wife. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Scottish society in the Highlands suffered severely from the collapse of its system of chiefs and fighting clans. As the population increased, overcrowding occurred and subsistence farming did not meet food needs. In order to create space for sheep farming many major landowners evicted crofters, sometimes burning their cottages.

She married John Allen who was born in 1791 in 1820. He changed the spelling of his name as Agness refused to change hers.



JOHN ALLAN, M.P.

After his parents died he ran away, aged 9, to the Navy where he served on the *Speedy* (Lord Cochrane) and then as Able Seaman on the *Aboukir* (Captain Thomson), discharged in 1815 at the age of 18. He settled at Irvine, working as a weaver and agricultural labourer until 1820 when he married Agness Allan and moved to

Kilmarnock.

The Allans were weavers and small farmers and in 1842 John and Agnes emigrated to New Zealand with their four sons and three daughters. They were not simply seeking to escape the poverty and tense political situation; another reason for leaving was to found a church in which they could worship, in their own way, without interference. They were religious dissenters and had attended the Burgher Kirk, in Kilmarnock, one of many sects that split from the Church of Scotland during the 18th century.

On 4 July 1842 Agness and her family which then included 7 children sailed from Cumbrae on the barque *New Zealand*, for NZ, arriving in Nelson¹ on 3 November 1842. John apparently had a small property at Richmond. They moved on to Otago in 1844, over 3 years before the official settlement was established. This was largely related to difficulties with land title in Nelson, difficult economic conditions and the so called Wairau Massacre². The voyage was not quite as expected. Soon after leaving Nelson John Allan fell ill, and they put in to Picton to consult the doctor for a man-of-war which was anchored there. As this boat was also going on to Otago, and then to the Chatham Islands, and as John had been a man-of-war's man, the captain offered to take him and his wife on to Otago so that he might have the attendance of the ship's doctor en voyage. After leaving Picton a fair wind for the Chathams sprang up, so the captain decided to go there first. Consequently, Agness Allan was the first white woman to visit the Chatham Islands. IT is not clear whether she saw this as an achievement!

¹ Note there was another pioneering Allan family consisting of David Allan (1838-1920) and his wife Agnes Allan (1830-1915) who was an great horse rider and midwife based in Collingwood. No connection has yet been made.

² This incident occurred on 17 June and had a profound impact in terms of settler uncertainty despite the Maori having right on their side.



The Allans initially lived at Andersons Bay but in 1850 moved to the Taieri where James built a house on the farm he called Bellfield. He became the first elder of the East Taieri Presbyterian Church and in 1854 a member of the first Otago Presbytery

He died in August 1863.

Agnes Allan survived her husband by twenty-eight years, and died at Bellfield on 10th April, 1891, at the advanced age of ninety- six years. Joseph Anderson has described her thus:

“She was a typical woman for a new country. Of rather under-sized stature, she was active and wiry, maintaining her activity of mind and body until the end of her long life. When I was a child of two-and-a- half years of age I was staying at Bellfield, when Grandmother took me home to Port Chalmers. We left the Taieri in the morning with the bullock sledge that was going as far as Dunedin, where we stayed the night with James Allan. During the afternoon I got lost - a frequent occurrence. As there was a great fear that I might wander into the surrounding scrub and bush, a search party was organised. When I was found, Grandmother rushed up and caught me in her arms, declaring: “I will never lose sight of him again until I place him in the charge of his mother.” Next day when we again started on our journey she said I walked bravely for a mile or two, and when I grew tired she carried me on her back for the remaining seven miles! All I remember of the journey was that when we entered Port Chalmers, my brother John, with another small boy, came to meet us, and from my high elevation on grandmother’s back I was throwing down a biscuit from a paper bag to each of the boys.

“Some time after we had removed to Waiwera she decided on coming out to see us. Without sending word, she stepped onto the public coach that passed Bellfield in the morning and arrived at the Waiwera Hotel after dark on the same day, where she stayed over night. Next morning an obliging shepherd who had his sheep rounds in our direction piloted her over some deep creeks and through the open tussock country for the three miles from the hotel to Kelvingrove.

“In the early Taieri life she was looked upon by her neighbours as truly ‘a mother in Israel.’ Whenever sickness occurred the cry at once arose: “Go for Mrs Allan.” I can remember seeing gathered at Bellfield a number of mothers getting their children vaccinated.

“When her death took place the attendance at her funeral was one of the largest of any that ever took place in the Taieri, and was probably exceeded only by that of her son, James Allan, of Hopehill, who died a few months after his mother.”

Extracted from Grafters All available on this site.

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