

# Family history research

by Andrew Matheson

## Passenger lists

Given that all our Scottish ancestors reached New Zealand by sea (or by air, for much more recent immigrants), you might think there would be a record of every arrival. But unfortunately it's not that simple.

Passenger lists may or may not exist, and there can be conflicting records for a particular voyage. Passengers may be listed only by surname and initial, by surname only, or not named at all. Worst of all, there is no central register of passenger arrivals.

Unless you know the region or port of arrival and the approximate arrival date, searching for a relative is like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. Knowing the name of the ship is really helpful, because even though many made repeated journeys to New Zealand this allows a focussed search.

Archives New Zealand has a good [guide](#) to what records are available, and where they might be found. The records held in Wellington are being transcribed by volunteers and are available free on [FamilySearch](#).

Many city or regional libraries have a guide to the passenger records they hold, for instance for [Nelson](#), [Canterbury](#) and [Otago](#).

There is a good directory of passenger arrival information on [Rootsweb](#), which while useful does demonstrate the fragmented way shipping records are to be found.

In the 1920s a shipping reporter called Henry Brett compiled many of his articles in two volumes published as *White Wings*. He was keen to record as accurately as possible the ships, their voyages and passengers travelling to New Zealand between about 1840 and 1900. The two volumes are available on Ancestry.com and also at the New Zealand Electronic Text Collection (volumes [1](#) and [2](#)).

Obituaries of early settlers sometimes name the immigrant ship, and knowing this name (and hopefully the arrival date) you can check this against passenger lists to find out about other family members. Sometimes early published histories record details of a person's arrival in New Zealand.

*Another of the landmarks of Otago has just been removed in the person of Mr Charles Robertson, father of Mr James Robertson, grocer, Princes street; who died at his residence, Melrose, on the 8th inst., at the advanced age of 86 years. The deceased arrived in Otago by the ship Larkins in June 1849, from Airdrie, Scotland, although originally a native of Bo'ness, Stirlingshire. In Airdrie he occupied a leading position*

*Otago Witness 12 September 1885*

*Charles Robertson's daughter Margaret, who also arrived on the Larkins, married Angus Matheson in Dunedin in 1852*

The first sighting of Mrs. Matheson by Mr. Matheson is rather worth recording. Margaret Burnett had gone to work on a sheep run where Angus was shepherding. He was using his binoculars the day she arrived and happened to train them on her. He said to his mate, 'Who's that? She's the girl I'll marry,' and he did. She was a very good-looking girl, with beautiful brown hair, blue eyes and fair complexion. She came to New Zealand at the age of nine in the ship *Helenea* and lived with her parents at Wyndham.

*A romantic story about a different Angus Matheson, from the 1962 publication Waikaka Saga*

## Departure records

For later migrations you may have more luck in finding evidence of when someone left their destination. Ancestry.com has indexed UK outward passenger lists for 1890 to 1960, and has also specialised lists such as for convicts and early Scots emigrants to North America.



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## Stopping en route

Many emigrants went first to Australia, and later to New Zealand. For example, the early Waipu migrants did that. Many seeking their fortune in the Victorian goldfields came to Otago, or later the West Coast, when new finds were made in New Zealand in the 1860s. Australian passenger records are often very useful, though remember they are kept separately by each state.

Ancestry.com has indexed many of these.

## Scottish emigration records

You may be able to tie Scottish emigration records to New Zealand immigration records. When researching my McLeod ancestors, who lived at Balchladich in Assynt, I found an intriguing comment in a letter written to a manager of the Sutherland estate in Assynt.

On 25 April 1859 Alexander McKenzie, the ground officer for Assynt, wrote to Evander McIver, the factor or owner's manager:

two of John McLeod Balchladich sons left per mail Gig a fortnight ago for New Zealand.

I knew that one of John's sons, Alexander McLeod, was last found in the Scottish census in 1851, suggesting that he might have emigrated. Another son, John, was also missing from the next census in 1861.

Knowing the approximate date of their arrival in New Zealand made searching easier. It also helped that they were assisted immigrants (to Canterbury), as records for assisted migration schemes are quite thorough.

As part of an organised migration scheme, the *Mary Anne* arrived in Lyttleton on 4 August 1859. On board were John McLeod and Alexander McLeod, travelling together, both from Sutherlandshire. The ship had left London on 26 April 1859, about two weeks after the two brothers left Balchladich on the mail coach.

Further confirmation is that when John McLeod died in Christchurch in 1919, his birthplace was recorded as Sutherland and his time in New Zealand 60 years. Do note, though, that while death register information is useful, it isn't always reliable. Bereaved people telling the undertaker what they had heard of their relative's earlier years isn't always accurate.

One organised Scottish emigration scheme might be useful to you. The Highland and Island Emigration Society was a voluntary organisation set up in 1852 by private subscription with the aim of alleviating destitution in the Highlands by promoting and assisting emigration. Between 1852 and 1857 the society assisted 4,919 men, women and children to leave western Scotland for Australia. Passenger lists from this migration are available on [ScotlandsPeople](#). Although this scheme was limited to Australia, some people may have later moved on to New Zealand, particularly as part of the gold rushes in the 1860s.

## Passports

Findmypast has a [database](#) for UK passport applications from 1851 to 1903. Few of our ancestors are likely to have had passports, as they were generally not required for travel until the early 20th century. As confirmation of that, the database lists only 70 results for Matheson.

## Research guide

A library, museum and archive centre in East Lothian has a useful [guide](#) to the history of emigration (and immigration) in Scotland, with links to relevant websites.

Single Men.		
2 Mr. Mc.Leod	22	Alexander McLeod
John	20	John

*Alexander and John McLeod,  
on the passenger list for the *Mary Anne* in 1859*



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### A case study in making wrong assumptions

Researching some of my English ancestors shows how inconsistencies in shipping records can make a family historian's life difficult. I knew that George Palmer arrived in Nelson on the *Cresswell* in October 1856, accompanied by his second wife Elizabeth Mary Palmer and some children. But how many, and who?

George had two children with his first wife before she died: Robert George and Roseanna. George and Elizabeth had one child before they left England, Emily Mary, and another was born during the voyage: George Creswell, the middle name being a useful confirmation of the ship.

Soon after the *Cresswell* arrived in Nelson, a local newspaper published a passenger list that described the family as "Mr and Mrs Palmer and three children". Another list online describes the family as "Palmer George, Mary [Elizabeth's middle name], Robert, 2 children".

With two sources saying that only three children arrived, and being able to locate information about only two of them in New Zealand, I then jumped to the conclusion that one child had remained in England, perhaps with George's mother, who seems to have taken the children in after George's first wife died.

I worked on that assumption for a long time. But after much further investigation I found that all four children had arrived in New Zealand with their parents on the *Cresswell*. The discrepancy in the number of children recorded seems to have resulted from the infant George Creswell Palmer (my great-grandfather) simply not being noted. He was too small to count!

If you know of any other good sources of passenger lists, please tell others through our [family history forum](#) or Clan Matheson New Zealand [Facebook group](#).

