

Clan Matheson New Zealand

Chair's corner

Beannachdan dhuibh.

We were fortunate to have the Chief send us a copy of the Clan Matheson international newsletter 2025 for our summer reading, this in addition to our own newsletter. I trust you enjoyed the reports from all the branches, each with its own story to tell.

I found Canada's report especially moving as it told the same story about the importance of Sir Alexander's visit as we had experienced in New Zealand. The sense of excitement, happiness and drawing Mathesons together around a simple tent in wonderful Scottish settings. Thank you also to Andrew for his record of our branch in 2025, a special year for Clan Matheson in New Zealand, and for his thoughtful comments about our branch in 2025.

There is a report later in this newsletter of our Matheson tent at three Highland games since we were at Hororata in November. The tent continues to provide a welcoming venue for Mathesons.

As expected, the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo was attended by a number of Mathesons and drew very large crowds in Auckland for three nights. After a stirring welcome by Ngāti Whātua Orakei we were entertained by top New Zealand pipe bands alongside the Band of the Royal Regiment of Scotland. We were proud to have our country recognised when the pipe band played Pokarekare ana, and the King of Tonga's Armed Forces Corps of Musicians, a brass band, played Tutira Mai. The man behind me with the wonderful voice sang along with many in the crowd.

The military bands from several countries reflected the focus on the tattoo's theme of 'The heroes who made us' and the 75 years of the Edinburgh tattoo. When we heard the march of 28th Māori Battalion played by the New Zealand Army Band, we thought of our own country's heroes in many wars. New Zealand Matheson military heritage is recorded on our clan website [here](#) and these Mathesons, including those who did return, will be remembered again on Anzac Day. With the increased interest among young people in Anzac Day and its meaning, this record can be a valuable resource for our younger Mathesons. The evening concluded remembering that the heroes sought peace through their bravery.

Sith leat — peace be with you.

Lena Orum

Chair, Clan Matheson New Zealand branch

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Newsletter of the
New Zealand branch of the
Clan Matheson Society

March 2026

Issue 182

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Military service and your family history

by Andrew Matheson

Anzac Day is approaching, a time for remembering New Zealanders who served in war and honouring returned service personnel. For many of your relatives, military service had a profound effect on them and their families over decades or even generations.

Understanding their experiences is an important part of your family history.

We have many resources on our [website](#) about Mathesons who served New Zealand in the First and Second World Wars and the Boer War. You might find your relative listed there, to help you start your research.



The website focuses on Mathesons from New Zealand who served in New Zealand forces. Especially in the First World War, some from New Zealand joined British forces and we tell the stories of a few of them [here](#).

A reader, John Webster, recently wrote in with information about two Matheson relatives of his who served in the British army in the First World War. I've further researched their stories and added an article to our [website](#).

This family shows that globetrotting isn't new. Brothers Ewen and Stewart Matheson went to the USA to work and when war began went to the UK to enlist. Both served in France. Ewen went on to fight in southern Africa and was killed in what is now Mozambique, while Stewart went to Asia and fought in what is now Afghanistan before he returned to New Zealand.

Two sisters were living in South Africa at the beginning of the war, and their widowed mother and another sister left New Zealand to visit them before going to live in Scotland until their return to New Zealand in 1918.

War continued to affect the family in later decades. A nephew of Ewen and Stewart, Kenneth Duncan Matheson, died in Europe while serving in the RNZAF in the Second World War. His story is told on our [website](#). Another nephew, Stewart Wilton Matheson, was a prisoner of war during the same conflict.

Military service echoes down the history of many families, and is part of the tapestry of our family heritage.



Mrs Duncan Matheson, who left Palmerston North with her sons and daughters on a visit to the Old Country in 1914, has just returned to the Dominion, and is staying at Levin. The family spent about a year in South Africa, where her elder daughters, Jeannie and Annie, are residing for a time. Eventually Mrs Matheson, with her youngest daughter, Ruth, arrived in Scotland. The two sons, Stewart and Ewan, joined the British forces. Both were slightly wounded. Stewart was presented by the King with a military medal. Ewan was chosen from 200 applicants as an instructor of natives in South Africa.

*Manawatu Times 17 April 1918,
ironically the very day Ewen was killed*

A summer of Highland games ...

by Rodger Matheson, Eden Matheson and Lena Orum

Highland games in New Zealand each have their own unique character. For Clan Matheson we also experience some special features in common as we:

- help to make connections through Facebook
- respond to visitors' interest in family history, and
- see an opportunity in special evening events.

It's a joy to see the connections being made among Mathesons as a result of the photos taken at these events that we post to our [Facebook group](#). Glimpses of Matheson relatives visiting their clan tent or marching in the clan parade are often enough to start a virtual discussion. We will continue to make this opportunity available for Mathesons.

Another feature is that people attending Highland games do have a deep interest in their Scottish family heritage. Not surprising really! Often they are drawn into our clan's tent having spotted the very detailed map of clans. We welcome these visitors who might say "My mother's father was a (name) — is this a clan?" Then we show them the wonderful family history resources available on the Matheson website. We look at clan maps, books about tartans and of course Wikipedia and clan websites for clans' details.



Since being at Hororata in November, Clan Matheson has been at three Highland games: Waipu, Turakina and Paeroa. Each of these has an event the night before, which Mathesons wanting another opportunity to enjoy their Scottish heritage could join.

At Turakina a lament to pay respects to early settlers is played in the early evening at the nearby cemetery. The official opening of the games then takes place. In Waipu, there is the Helen McGregor memorial piping competition for pipers to 'flair their fingers', playing whatever they like for 8 minutes. At Paeroa local Scots gather at the RSA clubrooms in the evening and enjoy a haggis ceremony and share their anticipation of the games the next day.

Also in common is the warm invitation to all clans and support for a lively clan avenue that is offered by the hosts of the Highland games. Clan Matheson says thank you. We look forward to these events each year.

New Year's Eve 2025 at the Waipu Highland Games began with local Mathesons joining the street march, under our clan banner, onto the Caledonian grounds and past the hosts, Clan Davidson. Mathesons came to our tent to reminisce about catching up with our clan during Sir Alexander and Lady Matheson's visit earlier in the year. They were pleased to reconnect with our clan again.

... a summer of Highland games

With the fine weather Turakina Highland Games had the dancing competitions on site, and this always brings a good turnout. The historic country setting draws everyone into the music, dancing, the games and children's athletics. Matheson visitors to our clan tent made some connections across the North Island.

Valentine's Day at the Paeroa Highland Games and Tattoo was a very different day. The Clan Matheson tent provided shelter for all from the persistent rain, and from there we all had a good view of the caber tossing in the distance. The day was spent in relaxed conversations about the lives of our Matheson ancestors, about what our younger family members know of Mathesons and perhaps attending the 2030 international gathering in Scotland.

This year the clans and band parade was cancelled as the rain was just too heavy — a sad change from the beautiful day in 2025 when Sir Alexander and Lady Matheson led the clans into the official opening.



“... the weather did not impact on the warmth of the Matheson welcome”



The weather this 'summer' had a serious impact on many Kiwis across the country. Paeroa was struck by heavy rain too, but no wind thankfully. However, this year the Highland games in Turakina and Waipu benefitted from balmy days. In our clan tent the weather did not impact on the warmth of the Matheson welcome.

We look forward to seeing you in our Matheson tent next summer.

Summer may be over — or might never have happened this year — but you can still catch up with the Matheson tent before winter comes.

Visit us at the national pipe band championships in Taranaki this month. See page 9 for details.

How did Lake Matheson get its name?

by Andrew Matheson

There's reasonable consensus about how a famous lake in New Zealand obtained its Matheson name, though as often is the case there is still a mystery involved.



New Zealand's most famous Matheson place name is the scenic lake on the West Coast. Published sources are pretty consistent about how it got its name, though one alternative theory has been floated.

I've recently come across efforts by an early member of Clan Matheson New Zealand to find out more about the name's origins, and have combined this with recent research.

The majority of evidence points to the lake being named after an early storekeeper in the area called Murdoch Matheson.

Perhaps the definitive guide to the origin of place names in this country is *Place names of New Zealand* by the publisher and prolific author A W Reed. Based on decades of research, this was published in 1975 and has been revised several times since.

Reed noted that: "In the early 1870s there was a combined butchery and store run by two partners, Murdoch Matheson and McLellan, at Gillespie's Beach. The lake bears Matheson's name." Elsewhere Reed notes that McLellan's name is attached to a nearby stream.

The New Zealand Geographic Board is the statutory body responsible for approving, assigning and recording place names. It has assigned Lake Matheson as the official name for the lake, and follows A W Reed in linking the name's origin to the storekeeper Murdoch Matheson.

An early Westland National Park booklet about Lake Matheson backs up this story: "During the early 1870s at the gold-mining settlement of Gillespie's Beach there was a combined butchery

and store run by Murdoch Matheson and a partner named McLellan. They ran stock on the Cook River flats and no doubt when mustering did a lot of involuntary exploration of adjoining areas. McLellan Creek is crossed on the road to Gillespie's Beach and the lake is named after Matheson."

Tracking down the name's origin

In family papers I have found a summary of efforts made in late 1985 and early 1986 to confirm the origin of Lake Matheson's name. It's likely this was carried out by either my father Roy Matheson, co-founder of the New Zealand branch of the Clan Matheson Society, or by Aisla Matheson, another co-founder and then editor of the Clan Matheson newsletter in New Zealand.

This was the pre-internet era, of course, so armed with 30-cent stamps the correspondence began. The first target was the authority for place names.

Place names in New Zealand are recorded and assigned by the New Zealand Geographic Board, which was established in 1946. It replaced an honorary body of the same name, set up in 1924 but which was advisory only and had no statutory basis or function.

... how did Lake Matheson get its name? ...

The New Zealand Geographic Board replied in December 1985 to say that as far as the name of Lake Matheson was concerned: “Regrettably, the Geographic Board’s records appear to be lacking in this respect, probably because the name was no doubt in existence before the creation of the Honorary Geographic Board in 1924. Thus the name has never been questioned or examined by the Board”.

That’s not quite correct. While the name was certainly in use before the Honorary Geographic Board was formed, a 1948 *Gazette* notice includes Lake Matheson as one of the names that had been approved by the honorary board (in 1945) and thus was adopted as approved by the statutory New Zealand Geographic Board when it was formed. So at some point the honorary board had examined the name of the lake and approved it.

List of Place-names approved by the Honorary Geographic Board of New Zealand

Department of Lands and Survey,
Wellington, 14th July, 1948.

PURSUANT to subsection (2) of section 17 of the New Zealand Geographic Board Act, 1946, it is hereby notified that the Schedule hereto contains the list of place-names approved by the Honorary Geographic Board of New Zealand prior to the passing of the said Act.

R. G. DICK, Surveyor-General,
Chairman, New Zealand Geographic Board.

SCHEDULE

Year.	Name.	Survey District.	Land District.	Remarks.
1945	Matheson (lake)	Gillespie	Westland	Block XVI.

New Zealand Gazette 29 July 1948 (montage)

The library suggested contacting the Westland National Park headquarters, and the Chief Ranger himself replied in March 1986:

“One of our park historians is certain that the lake is named after the Murdoch Matheson who ran a butchery and store at Gillespie’s Beach. She has no further information ... Murdoch Matheson ran his stock in the region of the lake and it is presumed that he discovered it — perhaps when chasing stray cattle”. Yes, in those days national parks had historians.



“One of our park historians is certain that the lake is named after ...Murdoch Matheson”

The 1985 letter from the New Zealand Geographic Board quotes Wise’s *New Zealand Guide* linking the name to Murdoch Matheson, and recommends approaching the Alexander Turnbull Library.

Our researcher did that, and received a reply in February 1986: “I have very little to add to what you already know about the naming of Lake Matheson. A W Reed’s ‘Place names of NZ’ reinforces the theory that the lake was named after Murdoch Matheson”.

An alternative theory

Our researcher’s interest had started when enquiring at Dunedin Library about the naming of Matheson’s Corner in West Otago. The library suggested, without citing any evidence, that “It is even possible that Matheson’s Corner was named after Dougal Matheson of Strath Taieri, a well-known explorer and local government figure. His story, and that of his family, are recorded in ‘East of the Rock and Pillar’”.

... how did Lake Matheson get its name? ...

We know this suggestion about Matheson's Corner isn't correct, as it is named after Norman Matheson who had a farm adjacent to the corner that took his name. Norman's story has been told on our [website](#).

The Dunedin library letter also says, again without any supporting evidence, that Dougal Matheson "gave his name to Lake Matheson". It's likely that the library had again referred to the book *East of the Rock and Pillar*. Published in 1949 as part of the Otago centennial, this history of the Strath Taieri and Macraes districts includes reference to a Matheson family prominent in the area: Murdo and Christina Matheson and their descendants. We profiled Murdo and Christina in the [December 2023](#) issue of this newsletter.

Dougal (as his name was usually spelt) Matheson was their son, and there are articles about him in the [September 2025](#) and [December 2025](#) newsletters. Dougal farmed in Otago for most of his life, apart from a few years in the 1890s at Lake Ohau (near Otago but actually in Canterbury).

East of the Rock and Pillar states that "While living in the Mackenzie country, before coming to settle in Strath Taieri, he did considerable exploratory work in South Westland, where Lake Matheson, famous for its reflections of Mt Cook and Mt Tasman, is named after him".

In his 1975 family history, which is available on our [website](#), Dougal's son Elliot Hugh Matheson repeats that while living at Ohau Dougal loved exploring unknown country, and that he "is credited with discovering and giving the name to the beautiful Lake Matheson".

Other family sources consider that Dougal didn't 'discover' the lake when he was living at Ohau, but during the six years he spent working at Cecil Peak from late 1875 to 1882 as it's thought that he explored further afield from there.

It's likely we'll never know a definitive answer. In the 1890s Lake Matheson was a long, untracked distance across the Southern Alps from Lake Ohau, and in the 1870s it was further and even less tracked from Cecil Peak on the shores of Lake Wakatipu.

In the next issue we'll share what we know about Murdoch Matheson, the storekeeper at Gillespies Beach. It's not much. If you have any family links to Murdoch or know anything about him, please get in touch.

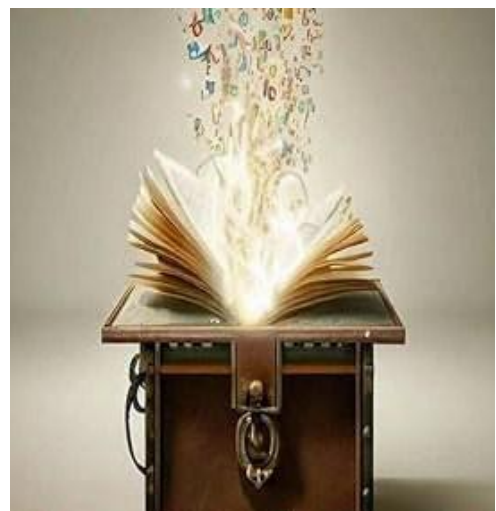
And how did Lake Matheson become so well known? An enterprising photographer from Wellington and some entrepreneurial business owners on the West Coast played a key role.

A treasure trove of information

If you want to go back and read an article you remember from the Clan Matheson New Zealand newsletter, or would like to see if there has been an article on a topic you're interested in, then you're in luck.

On our website there's an [index](#) to all the articles in the newsletter since we moved to the A4 format in 2018. That's 31 issues.

You can then read the article by downloading a copy of the newsletter from our [website](#).



Delving deeper into your family's past ...

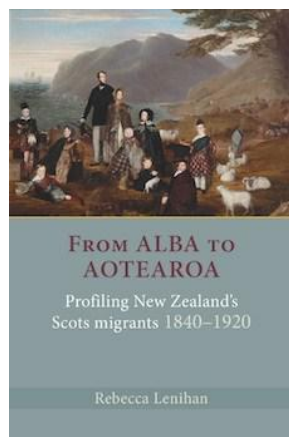
You've traced your family back to your great-grandparents and found that they migrated to New Zealand in the 1880s. Congratulations. You've uncovered a rich part of your family's story.

Their individual stories are part of your heritage, but what about the background to those stories? Your ancestors were part of a larger migration to this young country. Why did so many Scots shift to New Zealand? What degree of 'Scottishness' did they bring? How homogeneous was the Scottish community in early New Zealand?

These questions have been the subject of a surprising amount of academic research in this country. If you want to delve more deeply into the context of your ancestors' migration, there are plenty of places to look. As academic works the books listed here aren't necessarily easy bedtime reading, but they are very valuable if you want to learn more about the background setting to your ancestors' migration to this country.

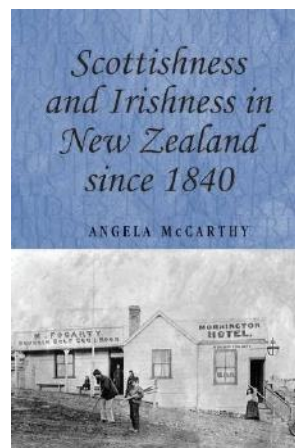
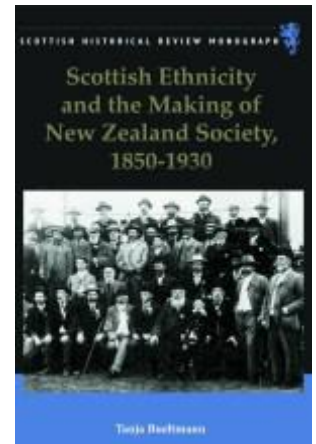
You can use a National Library [search facility](#) to find out which libraries have these books.

From Alba to Aotearoa: profiling New Zealand's Scots migrants 1840–1920, by Rebecca Lenihan (2015). Analyses where in Scotland the migrants originated, when they travelled and in what numbers, who they were and where they settled in New Zealand. Based on a PhD thesis, which is available [here](#).



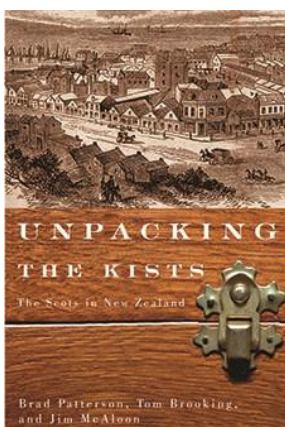
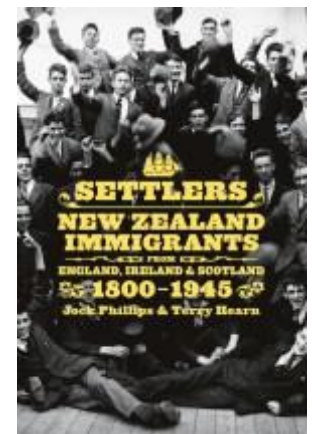
This work looks at the process of Scottish settlement here, the legacies it left in economic and cultural terms, and a demographic profile of settlers. ('Kist' is a Scottish word for a chest used for storing clothes and linen, something the migrants would have brought with them.)

Scottish ethnicity and the making of New Zealand society, 1850–1930, by Tanja Buelmann (2011). Analyses how Scottish immigrants negotiated their ethnicity in New Zealand, and also how that ethnicity fed into wider social structures. Concludes that Scots contributed disproportionately to the making of New Zealand society.



Scottishness and Irishness in New Zealand since 1840, by Angela McCarthy (2010). Examines the distinctive aspects that insiders and outsiders perceived as characteristic of Irish and Scottish ethnic identities in New Zealand, and how these changed over time.

Don't forget *Settlers: New Zealand immigrants from England, Ireland and Scotland, 1800–1945*, by Jock Phillips and Terry Hearn (2008). This very readable analysis is based on research of records in order to build up a detailed picture of immigrants to New Zealand from Scotland, England and Ireland in the 19th and early 20th century. We reviewed it in the March 2023 [issue](#) of this newsletter.

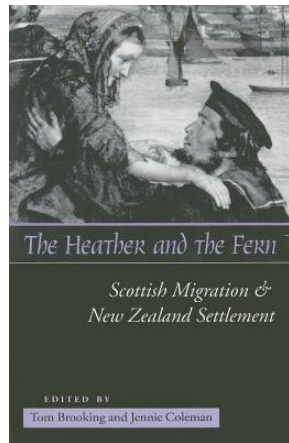


Scottish migration to New Zealand, a Marsden Fund-financed project, was largely reported on in *Unpacking the kists: the Scots in New Zealand* by Brad Patterson and others (2013).

... delving deeper into your family's past

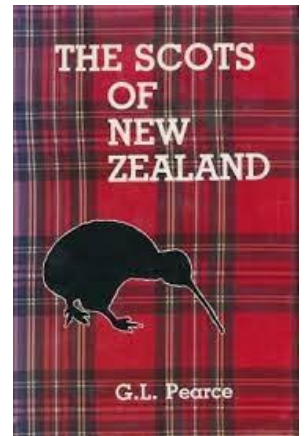
The heather and the fern: Scottish migration and New Zealand settlement, by Tom Brooking and Jennie Coleman (2003).

A collection of essays on many aspects of Scottish settlement in New Zealand, including individual stories. It covers both nineteenth and twentieth-century migration and includes chapters on the Scottish diaspora, bagpipes and Burns.



The Scots of New Zealand, by G L Pearce (1976). A general history of the Scots in New Zealand.

Just as an aside, there were many guides to prospective immigrants in the 19th century. One was in Gaelic: *Gearr-chunntasan air New Zealand: air son feuma luchd-imrich* (1872). Copy [here](#).



Scottish emigrants to New Zealand, 1840–1880: motives, means and background, a PhD thesis from the UK by Rosalind McClean (1990). Available [here](#).

The thesis asks who the emigrants were who left Scotland for New Zealand, why they travelled 15,000 miles to Britain's furthest colony when other established destinations were closer and cheaper to reach, and how were they enabled to go.



If you want to get serious about Scottish studies, you can subscribe to the journal [International Review of Scottish Studies](#).

Clan Matheson in Taranaki

Bands from across New Zealand and Australia will compete over two days at the 2026 New Zealand Pipe Band Championships. Inglewood will host 56 pipe bands on Friday 20 and Saturday 21 March 2026, making it the largest pipe band competition event outside of Europe.

Friday events will include bands showing their skills in the competitions circle. Saturday morning will see the parade through the streets of Inglewood and the top bands playing in the circle.

Clan Matheson has organised the event's "clan avenue", and you can catch up with others at the Clan Matheson tent.



Venue 1 Elliot Street, Inglewood. Times 9 am to 5pm each day. There is a modest entry charge, and tickets are available from [Humanitix](#). Gate sales are available at slightly higher costs.

News and events

Look out for the Clan Matheson tent

You can catch up with Matheson kinsfolk at the national pipe band championships and find out more about what Clan Matheson does in New Zealand, and perhaps meet some long-lost or never-met cousins.

Taranaki

This year the New Zealand [national pipe band championships](#) will be at Inglewood on Friday 20 and Saturday 21 March 2026.



International Clan Matheson gathering

After a really successful international Clan Matheson gathering last year, plans are being made for another gathering in Scotland in July 2030. You'll be able to meet the Chief of Clan Matheson, Sir Alexander Matheson, and other Mathesons from all around the world.



Other New Zealand events

Don't forget that Scottish-related events in New Zealand are listed on [The Scottish Banner](#). Check it out for news of upcoming events, or promote your organisation's activity there.



How to connect with us

Clan Matheson New Zealand

We are the New Zealand branch of the international Clan Matheson Society. Our objectives are to:

- foster an interest in Matheson heritage
- forge links between people in New Zealand with Matheson heritage, and between them and kinsfolk in other countries
- help people with Matheson heritage find out more about their family history and family stories

Clan Matheson New Zealand

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www.clanmatheson.org.nz

[www.facebook.com/groups/
ClanMathesonNewZealand](http://www.facebook.com/groups/ClanMathesonNewZealand)

International Clan Matheson Society website

www.clanmatheson.org

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Chief's Lieutenant for New Zealand

Andrew Matheson

Chief's Deputy Lieutenant for New Zealand

Blair Matheson

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We welcome any support you can provide, whether a one-off donation or a regular payment.

Make your donation to:

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