



## NIFHS News 28 December 2020



### Sleigh Bells Ring ...

So here we are in the last month of 2020, and what a year it has been. We have lost much along the way but we have learned new skills and the importance of keeping in touch. Well done to all our branches and members who have made the effort to keep the Society functioning and providing the excellent service it has done for 40 years. Thank you to you all. Reflecting on the image above, was Santa the first Zoomer?

Speaking of Santa, did you know he is buried in Co Kilkenny? I only learnt that recently. Have a look on the website - [www.stnicholascenter.org](http://www.stnicholascenter.org) if you don't believe me. That begs the question, who leaves the presents under the tree each year?

In this month's Newsletter, some interesting information about the book, *The McIlwrath Letters*, how to transfer DNA results, upcoming events in 2021, a word search for when you get the chance to relax over the holiday, but in this contrary time, we start with the Bottom Line.

Merry Christmas to you all and a Healthy and Happy New Year.

*Evelyn*

### The Bottom Line

The Society has been working to adapt to the challenges presented by the recent restrictions to protect personal and public health. Branch Meetings in physical locations have had to stop. Zoom Meetings have taken their place. To facilitate easier renewal of Branch Membership, this year an online option for doing so was introduced. About 55% of Branch Members used this method. As well as the obvious benefit of less paper form filling and handling, the work for Branch Treasurers is eased - with fewer postage costs, fewer trips to post office and/or bank. Currently Branch membership is at 99% of last season's level. Thank you for the support of Branches in this challenging season.

As the latest edition of *North Irish Roots* has been sent out renewals of Associate Membership for 2021 can be accepted online - go to [Associate Membership Form page](#). There has been an encouraging response to the recent invitation to renew. Thank you for getting it done early.

### Stop Press

Our Shop service is suspended until the end of January 2021 following the recently increased restrictions on travel and contacts to protect personal and public health. All orders received before 22nd December 2020 have been despatched.



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### The McIlrath Letters Revisited

A short introductory talk on the book 'revisited'.

Prepared by Alison Tait for the October 2020 meeting of the Killyleagh Branch

The book *The McIlrath Letters* is a family history in letters from New Zealand to Ireland from 1860 until 1915. It was published by the Killyleagh Branch of the NIFHS in 2009.

The Editorial Committee:

John Bassett, Chair

Annette McKee

Bertie Forsythe

Cecil Hawthorne

The series of 64 letters was carefully preserved by Mary McIlrath of Killinchy, Co Down. They detail the progress of Mary's great uncles James and Hamilton McIlrath, the McIlrath brothers, who emigrated in 1860 to New Zealand via Australia. The series of letters describes their work and achievements over 55 years.

The references to other emigrants, mentioned by name, from Killinchy, whom they met in NZ, are both genealogically and historically valuable. The news, messages and greetings included in the letters from the McIlrath brothers would have been read and widely circulated to relatives, friends and neighbours, drawing the community 'at home' closer to the community on the other side of the world.

Reading these letters today, with their personal style and content, it is easy to imagine those men writing home over 150 years ago.

How the book came about -

On a cold December evening over 30 years ago the Killyleagh Branch of the NIFHS was holding its 'Annual Member's Night'. The pre-Christmas member's night was an informal affair when branch members brought along items of personal interest to show and share the story - similar to our present style of pre-Christmas meeting.

There were a number of interesting objects and family heirlooms, however, when it came to the turn of Miss Mary McIlrath of Killinchy to show what she had brought, she modestly said "I don't know if these are of any value but they might be of some interest". She produced a folder of neatly arranged letters from her two great uncles James and Hamilton McIlrath from South Island New Zealand.

John Bassett said the letters were a revelation! 64 letters which detailed the progress of the brothers' lives from leaving Ireland in 1860, until Hamilton died in 1915, had been carefully preserved at the family home in Balloo by a niece.

The Killinchy area of Co Down is a predominantly agricultural region lying a mile or so from the shore of Strangford Lough and approximately 15 miles from Belfast.

A large number of farming families had been brought over from South West Scotland by Sir James Hamilton and Sir Hugh Montgomery in the 1600s to settle in the Killinchy area of Co Down. Many of the farms are still in the ownership of these families - such names as McIlrath, Moorehead, Auld, Heron, Hogg (all mentioned in the book).

Some 13,000 miles away in South Island, New Zealand, approx 30 miles from Christchurch on the rich Canterbury



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Plain, lies another 'Killinchy' so named by the large numbers of families who arrived there in the 1860s from Co Down and settled.

James and Hamilton McIlrath were born in the late 1830s on the family farm in the town land of Balloo, approx. 1 mile from Killinchy village. They were sons of John McIlrath and Jane Logan. The boys were educated at the local school and the family were staunch members of the Non Subscribing Presbyterian Church in Killinchy.

James and Hamilton were fortunate to grow up in the 1850s in the years following the Irish famine, when local landlords and agricultural societies were making great efforts to improve livestock and the cultivation of green crops.

In the absence of formal agricultural education, these efforts would have been greatly discussed and acted upon by the local tenant farmers. The Down Recorder notes in 1858, and referring to the Killinchy farms, that "their cattle shows, and their ploughing matches are 'patterns' to all Ireland".

Emigration was a live issue throughout Co Down in the 1850s and the McIlrath brothers coming from the well regarded Killinchy area had much sought after transferable skills.

Local newspapers of the time printed news of emigrant ships leaving Great Britain for the 'New World' and in 1855 the Down Recorder reported that the 'New Era' was about to leave Greenock, Scotland with emigrants on board, bound for Wellington, NZ. Reputable shipping agents stressed how well the emigrants would be cared for.

On arrival in New Zealand, The Archbishop of New Zealand and other eminent visitors to the ship expressed how satisfied they were with the vessel. Other ships of the period which carried emigrants to Australia and New Zealand were the 'Charlotte Jane', 'The Stag', 'The Egmont', 'The Dover Castle', 'The Queen of Commerce', From the passenger list *The Gananoque*, which sailed in Feb 1860, are the names - Gabbie, Heron, Osbourne, Cooper, McNeilly, Douglas, Kerr. A few months later James and Hamilton McIlrath joined them on the emigrant trail. With an older brother at home who would inherit the family farm and no certainty that there would not be another famine in Ireland, there was a strong attraction to following others to new opportunities.

James and Hamilton sailed to Australia from Liverpool on the 'Donald McKay'. The 'Donald McKay' was built in Boston in 1855 by the shipbuilder of the same name and for many years was the largest ship in the world. With 17,000 yards of sail, the 'Donald McKay' averaged 83 days on 6 consecutive voyages to Australia.

On arrival in Melbourne, Australia, the brothers were drawn at first to the Caledonian gold fields. With the onset of a New Zealand winter, they decided to return to what they knew best, farming, and were fortunate to obtain land south of Christchurch. Numerous emigrants left Killinchy in the same decade and settled in the same area. With hard work the area was transformed into land of the highest quality, and a new 'Killinchy' came into being.

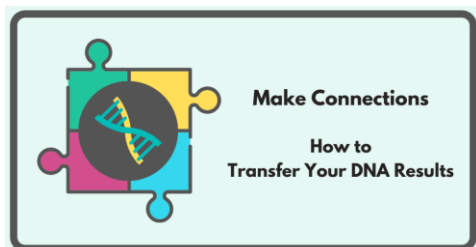
The McIlrath Letters is a great read and I would recommend it to anyone interested in emigration to New Zealand or Australia in the mid 1800s, as the letters contain interesting information about the journey on board the 'Donald McKay', arrival in Australia, the necessity for strict quarantine arrangements and how the ship was decontaminated and crew changed before it's next voyage. It is interesting to read about the risk of spreading infectious diseases and the precautions taken at that time.

Copies of *The McIlrath Letters* are normally available for sale from the NIFHS online shop and from Killyleagh Branch Chairman or Secretary.



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### Transfer your DNA Results



As part of the preparation for the recent Really Useful Family History Show, Martin McDowell compiled several free Guides on how to transfer your DNA results between some of the available commercial databases. These "How to" Guides are now available within the DNA section of our website - [www.nifhs.org/dna/uploading-your-dna](http://www.nifhs.org/dna/uploading-your-dna)

### Something for 2021

The next **Scottish Indexes Conference** will be held on Saturday 30 January 2021.

Here are the titles that are confirmed so far:

'Sharing Your Family History Online' by Chris Paton, genealogist at [scotlandsgreateststory.co.uk](http://scotlandsgreateststory.co.uk)

'Beginning Scottish Research' by Emma Maxwell, genealogist at [scottishindexes.com](http://scottishindexes.com)

'The importance of getting your facts straight (in order to tell your family story)' by Helen Tovey, editor at [family-tree.co.uk](http://family-tree.co.uk)

Fiona Musk, archivist at NHS Grampian Archives will also be joining us to share an insight into their holdings.



Representatives from Glasgow and West of Scotland Family History Society and the University of Stirling Archives and Special Collections will also be presenting.

As with the previous conferences it will run from 7 am UK time until 11 pm UK time, showing each presentation twice. The presenters will take questions after their presentation and there will also be two hour-long Q&A sessions throughout the day.

### FamilySearch announces free global virtual genealogy event: RootsTech Connect 2021

Find out more and book at - [RootsTech.org](http://RootsTech.org).



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**GENEALOGY WORD CHART**

ALL THE WORDS RELATE TO FAMILY HISTORY  
David Nicholl, Newtownabbey Branch

S	T	N	E	R	A	P	D	N	A	R	G	R	O	Q
U	N	E	W	S	P	A	P	E	R	S	A	L	P	S
S	T	O	W	N	C	Y	R	E	C	O	R	D	S	T
N	L	A	N	D	H	G	O	C	B	V	G	E	T	S
E	C	K	H	M	U	O	N	E	H	W	R	A	I	I
C	Y	R	C	A	R	L	I	M	F	I	A	T	T	L
F	O	O	R	P	C	A	N	E	A	L	V	H	H	R
I	E	M	A	S	H	E	T	T	M	L	E	E	E	E
N	E	J	E	O	E	N	E	E	I	S	Y	B	S	G
D	R	T	S	U	S	E	R	R	L	V	A	R	W	N
S	T	R	E	E	T	G	N	Y	Y	W	R	I	A	E
Y	X	Y	R	O	T	C	E	R	I	D	D	C	L	S
F	I	N	D	M	S	H	T	R	I	B	S	K	L	S
T	S	A	P	Y	S	E	G	A	I	R	R	A	M	A
R	O	T	S	E	C	N	A	E	T	A	B	O	R	P

- |               |                   |                     |
|---------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1. ARCHIVES   | 11. FIND          | 21. MAPS            |
| 2. ANCESTOR   | 12. MY            | 22. NEWSPAPERS      |
| 3. BRICK      | 13. PAST          | 23. PROBATE         |
| 4. WALL       | 14. FAMILY        | 24. PRONI           |
| 5. BIRTHS     | 15. TREE          | 25. PROOF           |
| 6. CENSUS     | 16. G R O         | 26. PASSENGER LISTS |
| 7. CEMETERY   | 17. GRAND PARENTS | 27. RECORDS         |
| 8. CHURCHES   | 18. GRAVEYARDS    | 28. RESEARCH        |
| 9. DEATH      | 19. GENEALOGY     | 29. TOWN            |
| 10. STREET    | 20. INTERNET      | 30. LAND            |
| 11. DIRECTORY | 21. MARRIAGES     | 31. WILLS           |

To find all the words you must walk forwards and backwards, climb the ladder,  
and come down the ladder, also come down the stairs.  
Double barrelled ones are close to each other. One goes round a bend.

Happy Hunting !