

CREE BOOKLETS
THE CREE NURSERYMEN OF
LANARKSHIRE AND SURREY

by Patricia Yates

Cree Family History Society

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The Cree Family History Society (now Cree Surname Research) was founded in 1991 to encourage research into the history and world-wide distribution of the surname CREE and of families of that name, and to collect, conserve and make available the results of that research.

The series CREE BOOKLETS is intended to further those aims by providing a format in which family histories and related material may be published which might otherwise not see the light of day. A list of current and projected titles, and details of the Society may obtained from:

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CREE SURNAME RESEARCH

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A POSTSCRIPT

It was towards evening, a dark November evening, that we came near the little town of Biggar. The place lies on a sandy bank raised from the wide moss which extends for miles by the edge of the sluggish stream. It is a black, desolate spot, where whaups and snipe whistle in the back streets, and a lane, which begins from the causeway, may end in a pool of dark moss-water. But the street is marvellous broad, and there, at the tail of the autumn, is held one of the greatest fairs in the lowlands of Scotland, whither hawkers and tinkers come in hordes, not to speak of serving-men and serving-lasses who seek hire. For three days the thing goes on, and for racket and babble it is unmatched in the countryside.

From *John Burnet of Barns* by John Buchan

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Mike Spathaky and of Trevor Cree who have compiled and edited information on the Crees; to Beryl Mackenzie for allowing me to quote from her article on *The Cree Nursery at Addlestone* published by the Surrey Local History Council (Surrey History Vol 3, No 4); to William Thomson Cree for passing on much useful information; to Brian Lambie of the Biggar Museum Trust for digging out information on residents of Biggar and on Moat Park Nursery and its owners; and to my cousin, the late Cleland McKenna, whose researches helped me to start off on the right lines.

TO MRS CREE

Hail happy female! still may peace
 Thy future life adorn;
In every virtue more increase,
 And live without a thorn.

Thy prudence shed a lustre round,
 From affectation free;
Nor levity, or murmuring sound
 Is heard from Mrs Cree.

Thrice happy man with such a wife,
 “Whom smiles of love adorn;”
Stranger to domestic strife,
 While many feel a thorn.

She conquers with a winning art,
 And cheers with social glee;
Her growing virtues sweets impart,
 For such is Mrs Cree.

Ye dames whom passion does inflame,
 Drink deeply of her spirit;
Domestic peace, a virtuous name
 Strive daily to inherit.

Dont think the picture false pourtrayed,
 She’s not from failings free;
A moral lesson, wife and maid,
 Go learn from Mrs Cree.

May he whose sky is so serene,
 Feel grateful every day,
Improve the pleasing fleeting scene
 Before it pass away.

Long may the soothing placid smile
 Attract his heart and e e,
Her spirit meek each care beguile,-
 Such charms has Mrs Cree.

by James Affleck, weaver, Biggar (1776-1835)

INTRODUCTION

In the early eighteenth century people became more aware of the natural landscapes around them and, typified by the designs of Sir John Vanbrugh and “Capability” Brown, among others, there was a move away from the formal gardens of the Tudor and Stuart eras towards a more naturalistic design. The estates of the fashionable nobility were laid out with trees, avenues and lakes to imitate nature. Many landowners took to a romantic style embellished with statuary and decorative buildings. This heightened concern for landscape design went hand in hand with an interest in new species of plants, and there was a demand for the introduction of unusual specimens from abroad, thus continuing the plant-hunting which had been pioneered by John Tradescant nearly a century earlier. Many collectors went to the New World looking for new plants for which there was a ready market. As these landowners eagerly modernised their country estates, inevitably some of the new ideas were adopted by less well-off citizens to incorporate into their smaller gardens and there was a demand for men who could advise on and carry out such work.

It was in this climate that John Cree opened his nursery and seedsman’s business at Moat Park in Biggar, in the shelter of the old Motte Hill, in the 1730’s. He may well have had a hand in the development of the Duke of Wigtown’s nearby estates about this time. Certainly his business was well established by 1740, as old billheads dating from then are still in the possession of a descendant. He planted a row of beech trees at Moat Park which survived for many years.

1 JOHN CREE - PROCURATOR FISCAL AT BIGGAR

Our knowledge of John Cree's origins and family are somewhat sketchy. He was born in 1707 but his place of birth and his parents are unknown. According to the records of the International Genealogical Index of the Mormon Church, three John Crees were born in Perthshire in that year, but there is no evidence to suggest which, if any, of these is the correct person. Perhaps the most likely is the baby son of John Cree and "Agness Will" born in Perth. In view of the civic positions he held later in life, it is a reasonable assumption that he was a Scotsman but even this is not certain. He married Rachel Marshall and we know of four children of the marriage: John, the eldest son who became a nurseryman at Addlestone in Surrey, Matthew who took over Moat Park nursery on the death of his father in 1796, William who also went to Surrey to help his brother John, and one daughter Mary, who, according to her brother John's will, married George Brown of Biggar and had a family. If John senior did write a will, as one might expect, it seems it no longer exists.

What is not in doubt, however, is the responsible position that John held in the town of Biggar. He was a Fiscal, the public prosecutor of Biggar, for some years. He was also a member of Biggar Masonic Lodge where his signature and his mark, a gardener's rake, appear.

When, in about 1760, fighting broke out at Biggar Fair between the townspeople and a large family of gipsies, led by William Baillie and his wife Mary Youston, John Cree as Procurator Fiscal was in the front line, as William Hunter describes:¹

The procurator fiscal, Mr John Cree, finding that all peacable means to appease them were in vain, armed himself with a heavy hoe, or what in vulgar parlance is called a "claut," and rushing in amongst the gipsies laid several of them

¹*Biggar and the House of Fleming* by William Hunter, 2nd ed. 1817

sprawling at his feet. Mary Youston, who was engaged in the fray, drew her great clasp knife from her pocket, and made a furious attack upon the fiscal, but this stout and courageous functionary evaded or warded off her blows, and retaliated with such force and effect, that she was compelled to take to her heels. Mr Cree having been reinforced by a strong body of country people, the gipsies were driven out of the town. The Baillies foamed with rage at this rough handling, and particularly at the ignominious repulse of their heroine old Mary, and therefore, in the course of an hour or two afterwards, four of her sons, viz., Matthew, James, William, and John, rode furiously into the town, armed with swords, having their coats stripped off, and their shirt sleeves rolled up to their shoulders, and vowed the direst vengeance on the fiscal, and all who had assisted him in the fray. Not being able to find the fiscal, they rode through the midst of the crowd, brandishing their weapons, and offering to fight any one that dared to oppose them. The fair was a second time thrown into a state of commotion. Screams and shouts were heard on every hand, a number of the more resolute of the country people were preparing to resist the gipsies, and everything betokened a scene of turmoil and bloodshed, when a person ran to the Manse and implored the Rev. John Johnston to make an effort to prevent the conflict and restore peace. This much respected clergyman repaired at once to the market place, and confronted the infuriated gipsies. His presence overawed them, and, by his earnest entreaties, they were induced to leave the fair, but they vowed that they would return at another time, and obtain revenge. In consequence of this threat, a guard was constantly kept on Mr Cree's house for six months afterwards.

Note that the real hero of the occasion is the Minister, while John Cree's robust approach merely inflamed the situation. Compare now the version by John Buchan, inserted into his first novel.² The hero, John Burnet of Barns, is on the run from government forces during the turbulent period before the Revolution of 1688, and is taken in by the Baillie tribe,

travelling in disguise among tinkers, a branded man, with my love and my lands in danger, nay all but lost...

John stays at the gipsy camp near the little town of Biggar while the Baillies go off to the Fair.

The meal was over and I was thinking of lying down for the night, when William Baillie came back. I noted that in the firelight his face was black with anger. I heard him speak to several of his men, and his tone was the tone of one who was mastering some passion. By and by he came to where I sat and lay down beside me...

"Listen and I'll tell ye what happened the day at the fair. We tinker-folk went aboot our business, daein' ill to nane, and behavin' like dacent, peacable, quiet-mannered men and women. The place was in a gey steer, for a heap o' Wast-country trash was there frae the backs o' Straven and Douglasdale, and since a' the godly and reputable folk thereaways hae ta'en to the hills, nane but the rabble are left. So as we were gaun on canny, and sellin' our bits o' things and daein' our bits o' jobs, the drucken folk were dancin' and cairryin' on at the ither end. By the by down the Fair come a drucken gairdner, one John Cree. I ken him weel, a fosal, black-hertit scoondrel as ever I saw. My wife, whom ye know, for it was her that lookit after ye when ye were sick, was standin' at the side when the man sees her. He comes up to her wi' his leerin', blackgairdly face, and misca's her for a tinkler and a' that was bad, as if the warst in our tribe wasna better than him.

"Mary, she stands back, and bids him get out or she wad learn him mainners.

"But he wadna' take a tellin'. 'Oh, ho, my bawbee joe,' says he, 'ye're braw and high the day. Whae are you to despise an honest man? A wheen tinkler doxies!' And he took up a stane and struck her on the face.

"At this a' our folk were for pittin' an end to him there and then. But I keepit them back and bade them let the drucken fule be. Syne he gaed awa', but the folks o' the Fair took him up, and we've got nocht but ill-words and ill-tongue a' day. But, by God, they'll pay for it the morn." And the captain looked long and fiercely into the embers.

"I hae a plan," said he, after a little, "and, Master Burnet, I want ye to help me. The folk o' the fair are just a wheen scum and riddlings. There are three o' us here, proper men, you and myself and my son Matthew. If ye will agree to it we three will mount horse the morn and clear oot that fair, and frichten the folk o' Biggar for the next twalmonth...

"If the three o' us mount and ride through the fair there will be sic a scattering as was never heard tell o' afore i' the auld toun. And, by God, if that gairdener-body doesna gang wud wi' fricht, my name's no William Baillie."

²*John Burnet of Barns* by John Buchan, Edinburgh 1898

So plans were laid for the three of them to dress in crimson suits for their affray the following morning.

When we came near to the head of the street we halted and consulted. The captain bade us obey him in all and follow wherever he went, and above all let no word come from our mouth. Then we turned up our sleeves above the elbows, drew our sword and rode into the town.

At the first sight of the three strange men who rode abreast a great cry of amazement arose, and the miscellaneous rabble was hushed. Then, in a voice of thunder, the captain cried out that they had despised the gipsies the day before, and that now was the time of revenge. Suiting the action to the word he held his naked sword before him, and we followed at a canter.

I have never seen such a rout in my life. Stalls, booths, tables were overturned, and the crowd flew wildly in all directions. The others of the tribe, who had come to see the show, looked on from the back, and to the terrified people seemed like fresh assailants. I have never heard such a hubbub as rose from the fleeing men and screaming women. Farmers, country-folk, ploughmen mingled with fat burgesses and the craftsmen of the town in one wild rush for safety. And yet we touched no one, but kept on our way to the foot of the street, with our drawn swords held stark upright in our hands. Then we turned and came back; and lo! the great fair was empty, and wild, fearful faces looked at us from window and lane.

Then, on our second ride, appeared at the church gate the minister of the parish, a valiant man, who bade us halt.

“Stop,” said he, “you men of blood, and cease from disturbing the town, or I will have you all clapt in the stocks for a week.”

Then the captain spoke up and told him of our wrong and insult of the day before.

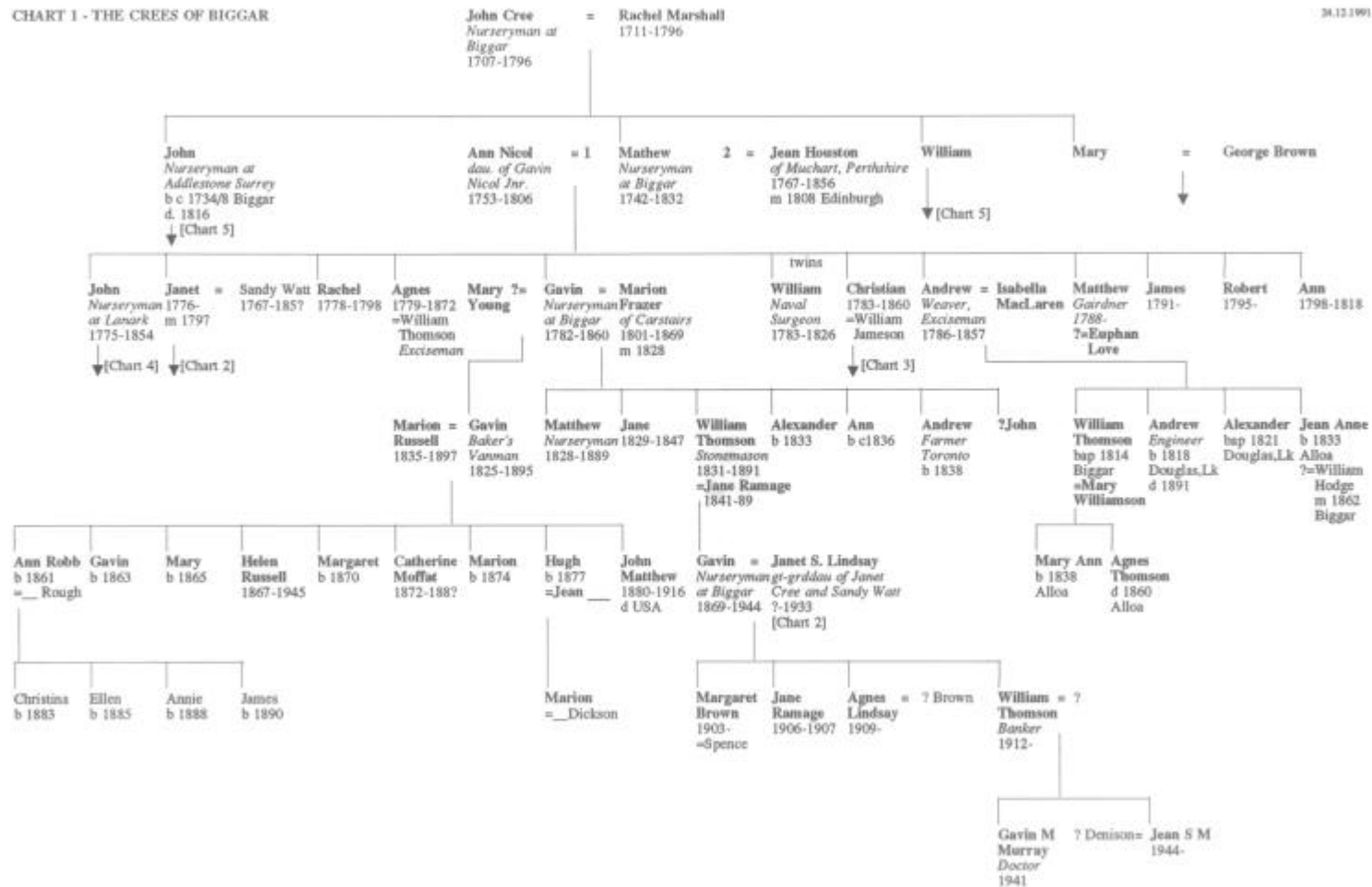
At this the worthy man looked grave. “Go back to your place,” he said, “and it shall be seen to. I am wae that the folk of this town, who have the benefit of my ministrations, set no better example than puir heathen Egyptians. But give up the quarrel at my bidding. ‘Vengeance is mine, and I will repay,’ saith the Lord.”

The similarity of detail, down to the rolling of shirt sleeves, makes it certain that Buchan took the incident lock, stock and barrel from William Hunter’s account, and kept even the names and location in order to give local colour and authenticity to his first novel. But, either through inexperience (Buchan was about nineteen when it was published) or through a wanton vindictiveness towards the Cree family, he turned

John Cree from a procurator fiscal into a *blackhertit scoondrel* and a *drucken gairdner*. Hunter’s historical account gives no justification for this and it understandably incurred the considerable anger of the Cree families of late-Victorian Biggar.

CHART 1 - THE CREES OF BIGGAR

24.12.1991



2 MATHEW CREE - BARON BAILIE

When John and Rachel died in 1796, within a month of each other, the business, still flourishing, was taken over by their second son Mathew. Mathew was born in 1742 and married Ann Nicol, also a native of Biggar. Ann's father and grandfather had also been prominent citizens of the town and her grandfather, Gavin Nicol, was mentioned in parish records as the keeper of the Church plate in about 1700. She had two brothers, another Gavin and Richard who was the Biggar postmaster and who seems to have been a local eccentric as he is remembered for keeping a golden eagle in a tree outside the post office.

Mathew and Ann lived at 51, High Street, Biggar, and they had a large family of twelve children. Of these the eldest son, another John, opened a sister nursery in the neighbouring town of Lanark about 1800 and will be mentioned more fully in the next Chapter. Gavin, the second son and fifth child, became the next nurseryman in Biggar and will be dealt with in Chapter 3.

The third brother, William, became a naval surgeon and died, apparently unmarried at the age of thirty-nine. There are several references to William in Naval records. He appears in the muster book of the San Domingo in 1812, which states that he had joined the ship on the 2nd of May "by warrant". He was paid off the San Domingo in 1814 with seniority from 1805. A letter from his agents to the Admiralty in 1827 gave his address on half pay as Biggar in 1825 and stated that he died in November 1826. It is reported that,

*Jane Rae, Mrs Affleck, once went to retrieve her husband from a carousal at the Biggar Masonic Lodge, and was thrown bodily downstairs by "Dr William Cree", one of the Wardens.*³

This would seem to be the same William, and she the wife of James Affleck the Border poet.

Andrew, Mathew's fourth son and eighth child, led a more varied life than some of his brothers and sisters. He was mentioned in the Roll of the Clydesdale Volunteers in 1808 as a weaver, aged 22, with fair complexion, grey eyes and red hair. His eighteen year old brother Mathew appeared in the same roll as a "gairdner" with the same physical description. The red hair of the Crees persisted and my own grandmother, Eleanor Cree, three generations later, plus three of her five children and two of her three grandchildren all had red or auburn hair. Andrew himself married Isabelle McLaren and, after the birth of their eldest son, William Thomson, in Biggar in 1814, they moved to Douglas, Lanark, where Andrew worked as a weaver and two more sons were born.

Later in life Andrew gave up weaving and became an exciseman, and the family moved again, this time to Alloa in Clackmannanshire. Here in 1836 they had a daughter, Jean Anne. Soon after Jean Anne's birth, their eldest son, William Thomson Cree, married a Mary Williamson in Alloa, and the birth of his first child, Mary Ann is recorded in 1838. An Agnes Thomson Cree who died in Alloa in 1860 may have been another daughter, either of Andrew or of William.

In addition to two more sons, James and Robert, whose births were recorded in 1791 and 1795 respectively, but about whom nothing else is known, Mathew and Ann also had five daughters. Janet the eldest married Sandy Watt in 1797 and had five children. Of these one daughter, Agnes, married John Lindsay. Two sons of John Lindsay and Agnes Watt became Bailie and Provost in Biggar and a granddaughter was to marry another Gavin Cree.

The second daughter, Rachel, died unmarried at the age of twenty-one. Her next sister, Agnes, married an exciseman named William Thomson who was reputed to have "considerable means". The marriage was childless and when William Thomson died young, the widowed Agnes lived with her uncle Richard Nicol - the one with the

golden eagle! Agnes and William Thomson were not forgotten by the Cree family and their names reappeared several times in succeeding generations.

Christian, the fourth daughter, married William Jamieson and had six children, three of whom died in infancy. She herself lived to the ripe old age of ninety-five, and when she died she had numerous descendants in five generations. Some of these families are said still to live in the same district. The youngest child of Mathew and Ann, also named Anne, died in 1818 aged nineteen.

In addition to running the family nursery, Mathew acted as Baron-Bailie to the Flemings and Elphinstones for twenty-seven years. William Hunter⁴ describes him as,

one of the most mild and conciliatory magistrates that ever exercised authority in Biggar, or anywhere else. His common advice to disputants was, "Tak a gill and 'gree;"... He was long an elder in the parish church. His only acting colleague in this office, for many years, was John Pairman, who was generally denominated The Elder. These two worthies were great cronies, and had many a pleasant confabulation over a single glass of whisky punch; for they were remarkably circumspect in their conduct, and never exceeded in their potations.

Mathew Cree died on 7th July 1832

Ann Cree, née Nicol, herself died in 1806 aged fifty-three. The border poet James Affleck (1776-1835) composed a poem dedicated *To Mrs Cree* in which he praised her for her sympathetic and prudent disposition and her serenity - qualities she must surely have needed as the mother of twelve children. The poem is undated but is most likely to refer to Ann. After her death, Mathew married again, this time to Jean Houston of Muchart in Perthshire, who had a young daughter from a previous marriage.

³Brian Lambie of Biggar, personal communication

⁴*Biggar and House of Fleming* by William Hunter, 1st edition 1862

CHART 2 - THE JAMIESON FAMILY

24.12.1991

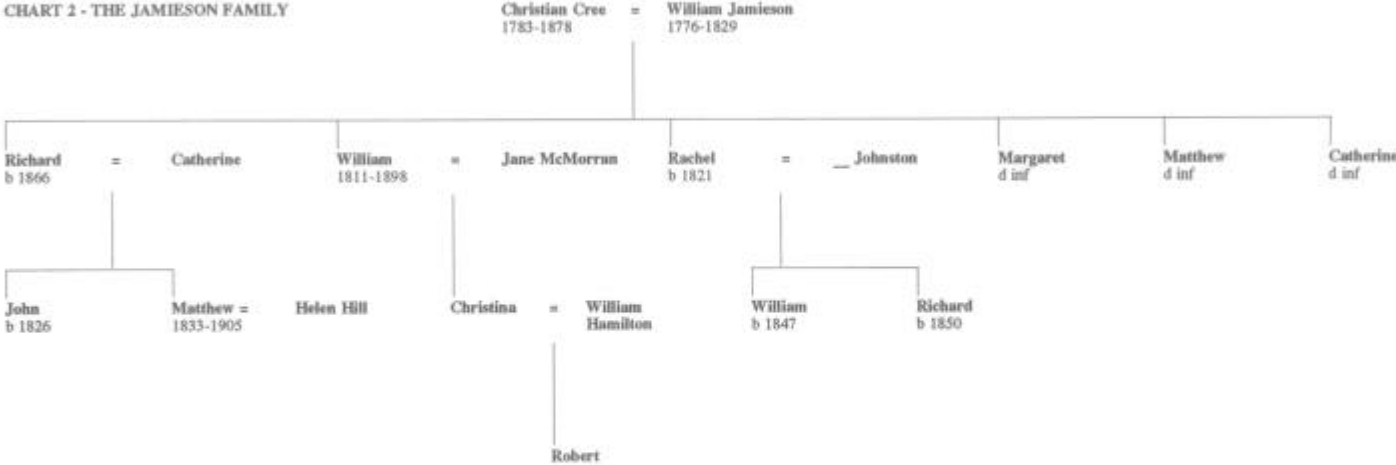
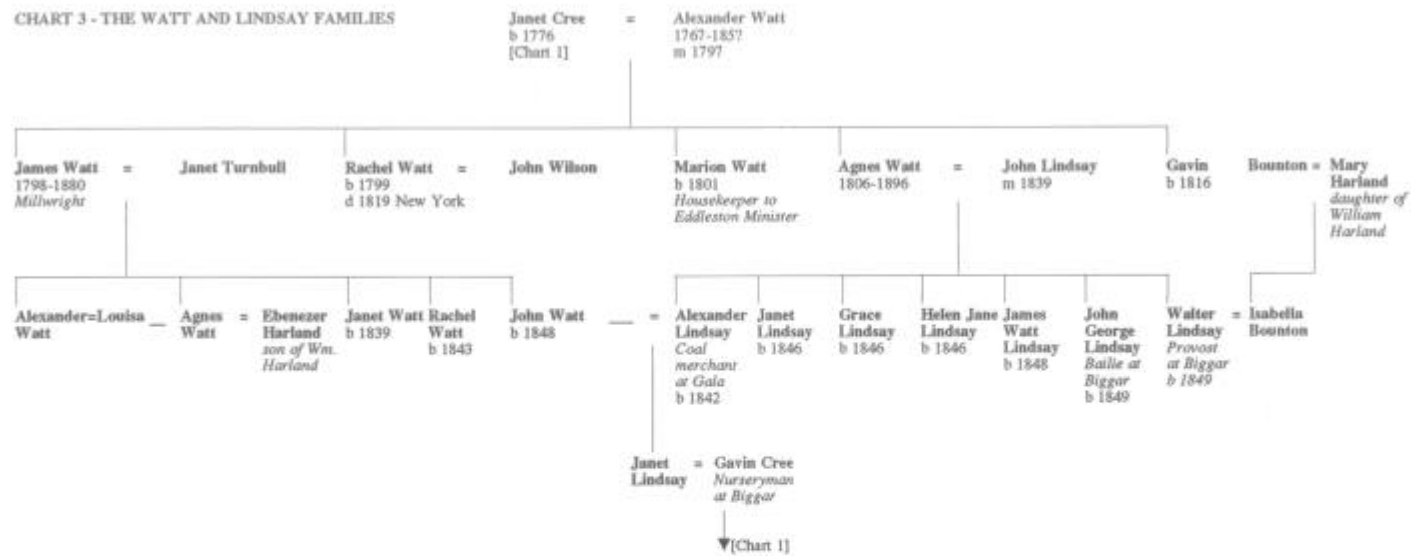
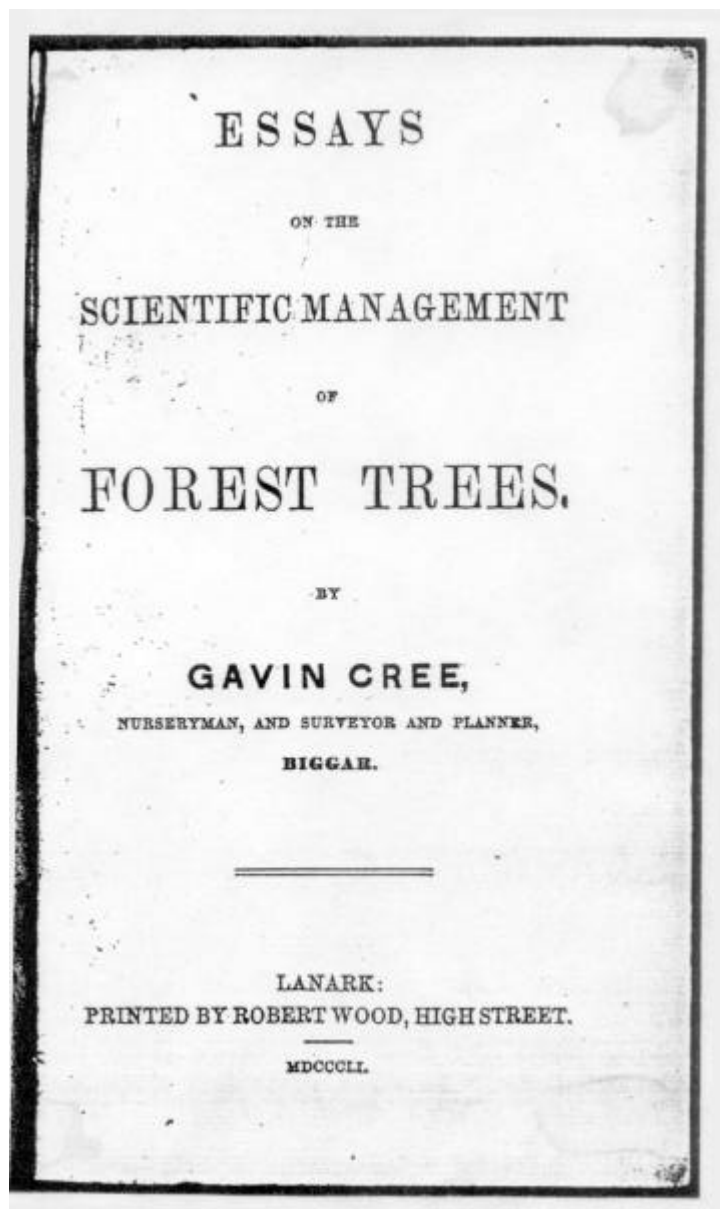


CHART 3 - THE WATT AND LINDSAY FAMILIES

24.12.1995





3 GAVIN AND MARION CREE AND THEIR DESCENDANTS

Gavin Cree, Mathew's second son, succeeded him as owner of Moat Park nursery. He became a well-known nurseryman, and in particular was an expert on the pruning of forest trees.

One of the first trees on which he experimented was the most noted in Biggar. It was usually styled the De'il's Tree; and every youth firmly believed that on very dark nights evil spirits were wont to hold their rendezvous under its shade; and therefore a great amount of courage was requisite to pass it after nightfall. Mr Cree procured a ladder and saw, and, greatly to the amazement of young and old, cut off bough after bough, regardless either of fiend or fairy, and left it one of the most stunted and uncouth objects that could well be conceived.⁵

He published a treatise on the subject and was awarded a gold medal for this by Prince Albert, the Prince Consort, in 1856. His expertise was in demand among local landowners and he was consulted by several large estates near Edinburgh in this respect. There is a family tradition that he was appointed to prune the trees in Princes Street Gardens in Edinburgh, but the worthy citizens were so incensed by what they considered as his destruction of their trees that the unfortunate Gavin had to be taken into police custody for his own protection. In time, however, the benefits of his work became apparent and he was recalled to finish the job.

It seems that Gavin's work involved garden design and land surveying as he owned a fine set of surveying instruments. He also was secretary of the local Farmers' Club and was a member of the Whipmen's Society. This latter organisation seems to have

⁵*Biggar and House of Fleming* by William Hunter, 1st edition 1862

existed mainly to organise an annual event in June, when the younger generations took part in races and sports, although it may have had a more serious function as a benefit society. In 1812 he was appointed paymaster to the French prisoners who were held at Biggar, and was well known for the stories he could tell about their activities.

William Hunter also relates that Gavin Cree held the rank of sergeant in the corps of the Lanarkshire Yeomanry Cavalry, and regularly for many years, attended the musters on Lanark Muir.

Gavin lived with his family in School Green in Biggar, edging on the Kirkstyle. However this house was demolished in 1847 when the parish school was built near the site, and the family moved to 55, High Street near the one-time home of his parents. A few years later the nursery grounds were also moved from Moat Park to Station Road and a United Presbyterian Chapel was built on the original site in 1865. Much later, presumably as Biggar expanded, the nursery was again moved to its outskirts near Loaningdale on the Elstrickle Road.

Gavin was married to Marion Frazer of Carstairs and they had seven children. There is a possibility of an earlier, undocumented marriage, as there is a reference to a Gavin Cree born at Skirling in 1825, the son of Gavin Cree of Biggar and Mary Young of Skirling, with no mention of the baby being illegitimate. We do not know of any other Gavin Cree in Biggar at this time, and it is perhaps significant that none of the sons of Marion Frazer was named after his father. The younger Gavin remains something of a mystery. He did not appear to be involved with the nursery and worked as a baker's van-man. He married Marion Russell and descendants of their eight children still live in the district. A story has been told of a severe but unexpected blizzard on 23rd January 1868 when Gavin Cree was out with his van delivering loaves around the countryside for his employer John Graham the Baker:

On this terrible Friday... when the wind and snow became irresistible he somehow found a more bielly spot behind a high hedge, tethered his horse and ensconced himself among the hot loaves inside the van.

When Doctor Pairman and Baillie the Roadman (a descendant of William Baillie the gipsy captain perhaps?) reached the place where Gavin was holed up,

they could perceive nothing but a huge wreath of snow, moulded into an uncommon shape, to which a horse was apparently linked. But thinking a human

tragedy had occurred they made close investigation, and were surprised to hear a "god in the car" shouting out in the true vernacular "I've taen nae skaith, doctor - juist let me bide and dinna fash!!" Good old Gavin!⁶

However we must now return to Gavin Cree, the nurseryman, and his wife Marion Frazer. The sixth of their seven children, Andrew, emigrated to Canada and became a farmer at Ballinafad, a few miles from Toronto, where he had a large family.

Matthew, Gavin's eldest son, who was born in 1828, inherited the nursery on his father's death in 1860. He never married but advertisements exist headed *M. and J. Cree* which suggest the existence of another son John although no record has been found of his birth. There is, however, a marriage of a John Cree with a Margaret Rose at Lanark in 1855 which could be him. When Matthew died in 1889, his nephew, the only child of his brother William, a stonemason, and Jane Ramage took over the business. This Gavin, the last Cree nurseryman in Biggar, had trained as a gardener and worked for a time at the McMorran nursery in Lanark, before being called home on the death of his father, William. He married Janet Lindsay, the great-granddaughter of Janet Cree and Alexander Watt (see Chart 3), and they have surviving descendants. In 1896 Slater's Directory for Scotland mentions Gavin Cree *nurseryman and manure deliverer* of Biggar. Some time after this the business finally closed down after five generations in Cree hands, but the fine row of beech trees planted in the 1730s by the first John still stood at Moat Park as a fitting memorial to a talented dynasty.

⁶Unpublished memoirs of Dr Robert Pairman (1818-1873) by his son Dr Tom Pairman, New Zealand c. 1932.

This item appeared in the Hamilton Advertiser in November 1892:

CANADIAN SCENES AND INCIDENTS

MEETINGS WITH SCOTCH PEOPLE

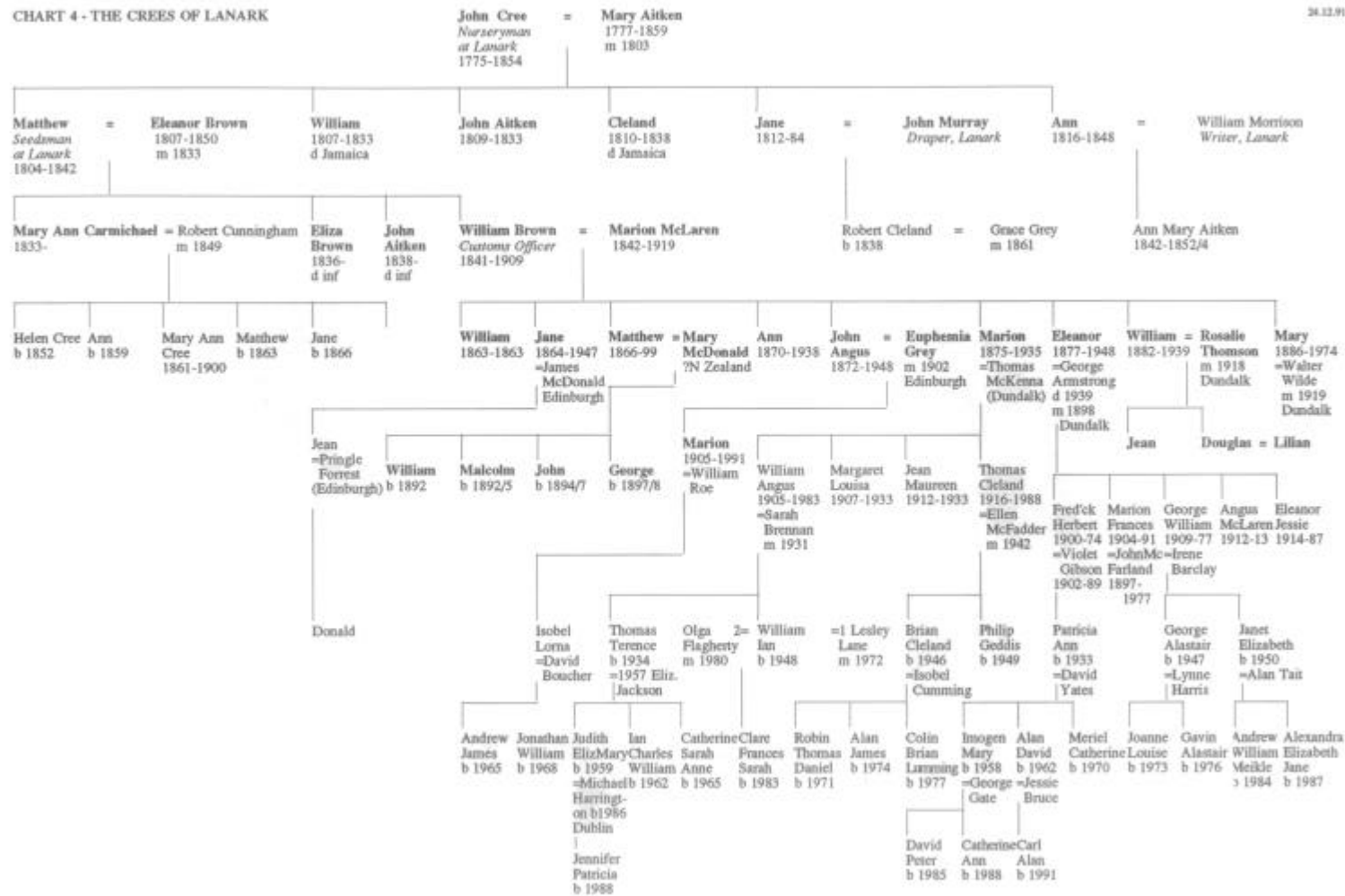
AT BALLINAFAD

The County of Wellington is one of the largest and most important in Upper Canada, and contains some of the most beautiful and variegated scenery to be found in the Dominion. Some of its leading men, to whom its agricultural development is greatly indebted, are from the south of Scotland. One of the most prominent of these is Mr Andrew Cree of Ballinafad, son of the late Gavin Cree, nurseryman, Biggar, who was one of the best known men in the border counties of Scotland. On reaching Ballinafad village, 36 miles west of Toronto,, we asked an old Highlander, if he knew a Mr Cree in that neighbourhood. His face was instantly wreathed in smiles, and he exclaimed with great alacrity, "Andrew Cree! oh, ay! everybody kens Andrew Cree: he's one of the leading men in this pairt of the country." He told us that his residence was two miles distant. Proceeding thither we made up to a man standing at the end of his house at the road-side, and looking as if he had plenty of time at his disposal. On speaking to him he said, "I've surely seen you somewhere." We replied that that was very likely, as we had often been there. He looked as if he did not know whether to take that as a joke or not, and then said, "Where do you come from?" We replied from Biggar. "Biggar!" he said, "I used to go to Biggar Fair wi' my faither when I was a laddie; div ye ken Wattie Toward?" We told him that we had been well acquainted with Mr Toward from our earliest days, and that he was a general favourite with all the Biggar people. "Ay! man," he said, "he was a fine man, Wattie; we used to stop wi' him when we ga'ed to the Fair." We asked him what his name

was, and where he came from. He said his name was Watson, and that he came from Ecclefechan. "Then," we said, "you would know Thomas Carlyle, the great writer, who was a native of Ecclefechan." "O yes," he replied, " I kenned baith him and his faither." We told him that we knew a brother of Carlyle's, and two nephews, at a farm about a mile from Ecclefechan. "Eh, man! did ye?" he said, "I was a year and a half there when I was a laddie." After telling him about Mr Toward's family, we proceeded on our way, and meeting a man on the road, asked him for Mr Cree's. He pointed across a field to a house, finely embosomed amid trees, and said, "Yonder's his house." Then he added, "Ey, but he's an awfu' man to speak; ye canna get in a word wi' him at a'." We replied that that was a hereditary endowment, for that his father had a great flow of language. A look of awe overspread his face, and he asked, "Did ye ken his faither?" We replied that we knew him intimately, as we had been brought up almost next door to him. "Ey! man!" he said, "that's extraordinary, to think that ye kenned Andrew Cree's faither!" On reaching Mr Cree's house, and seeing that he did not recognise us, we thus addressed him, "Have ye a book called *A new system of pruning forest trees* by Gavin Cree, Esq., of Biggar, Scotland." If ever a man was petrified with astonishment, that man was Mr Cree at that moment. He gasped for words, and at last said, "No I hav'na it." We told him that it was a great work, and that we would like to get it, and that we thought from his name being the same, he might be a relative of the author's and might have the book. "Ay!" he said, "he was my father." We told him that we had known both his father and him in the Schoolgreen at Biggar. It then dawned upon him who we were, and he expressed himself as quite overjoyed at our visit. Mr Cree has a large, and beautiful, and well watered estate; and his woodlands are so extensive that his father could have spent a lifetime in practising therein his new system of pruning forest trees. He stands high in the estimation of his community, and takes an active part in the public business of the district in which he lives.

CHART 4 - THE CREES OF LANARK

24.12.91



4 THE CREES OF LANARK

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Lanark was a fast developing town. In particular the town of New Lanark, nearby, which was founded as a cotton-spinning centre in 1784 was the site of a social experiment when Robert Owen became manager of the mills there, and tried to establish a model community with superior housing and social services. These included the first infants' school in Britain which was established in 1816. The added prosperity the cotton mills brought to the whole district made Lanark an ideal site for a new venture by the Cree nurserymen. Consequently when John Cree, the eldest son of Matthew Cree and Ann Nicol of Biggar, who was born in 1775, founded a nursery at Bloomgate, Lanark, he had every prospect of success. John's testament written in 1845 described the land he owned and indicated that several new tracts of land were added to the original nursery in the early 1800s. The fact that the Bloomgate nursery did not remain in Cree hands for longer than the lifetime of John and his wife Mary Aitken, whom he married in 1803, reflects, not on their business abilities, but rather on the great amount of family misfortune they suffered.

Of John and Mary's six children, only one survived them. Jane or Jean, their elder daughter, had married John Murray, a draper of Lanark, in 1836. By the time her father wrote his testament in 1845 she was a widow with one young son, Robert Cleland Murray, and may well have been running her late husband's business. John's second and fourth sons, William and Cleland Cree, both died in Jamaica, William at Potosi Estate in 1833 aged twenty-six and Cleland at Montego Bay in 1838 aged twenty-eight. We do not know whether they had gone to Jamaica to collect plants for their father or, perhaps more likely, because as younger sons they had no prospect of an inheritance at home. As far as is known both died unmarried and without issue. The third son, John Aitken Cree also died young in 1833, aged twenty-four.

John and Mary's youngest child, Ann, was single when her father wrote his testament, but married William Morrison, a writer or solicitor of Lanark in 1848, and sadly died in childbirth in the same year leaving a baby girl, Ann Mary Aitken Morrison. This occasioned John to write a codicil to his testament to ensure that Ann's inheritance would be kept in the family should her baby daughter not survive. Little Ann was still alive four years later when her grandfather added another codicil to his will directing how the nursery stock was to be divided after both he and Mary had died, but it seems she died before 1855.

Matthew Cree, John and Mary's eldest son stayed in Lanark to help his father in the business. Born in 1804, he married Eleanor Brown, the daughter of John Brown and Ann Armstrong of Berwick-on-Tweed, in 1833. Of their four children only two were alive when grandfather John wrote his testament in 1845. The elder, Mary Ann Carmichael Cree, who was born in 1833, married Robert Cunningham in Biggar at the early age of sixteen and had a number of children in the succeeding years. The younger, William Brown Cree, was only ten months old when his father died in 1842 and lost his mother, Helen Brown, on her early death only eight years later.

As a result the aging John and Mary Cree took their orphaned grandson into their home and cared for him for a number of years. By 1857, Mary, then widowed and in poor health, could no longer cope with a fifteen year old grandson and William went to live with Mary Ann Cunningham, his sister. He was too young to take over the nursery when his grandmother died two years later and the business apparently had to be sold. It is believed that the McMorran nursery which flourished in Biggar later in the century was a continuation of John and Mary's business, and that there was a connection between the two families. Certainly John's nephew, William Jamieson, the son of his sister Christian, married a Jane McMorran, so one of her relatives may have been the buyer.

Thus the story of the Cree nursery at Lanark ended but the line continued through William Brown Cree, Matthew and Eleanor's son. William, in his retirement, kept a notebook in which he entered all he knew of his family history. All of the contents which it has been possible to check from other sources have proved to be reliable. The notebook contained details of his ancestry, as far as he knew it, his own career, and his own children - dates of birth, christenings, and even smallpox vaccinations, including the names of the doctors who carried them out.

William's wife was Marion McLaren whom he married in Alloa, Clackmannanshire, in 1863, giving his occupation as a clerk in Glasgow. Marion was the daughter of

George McLaren, a ploughman who had already died by the time of her wedding, and Jane Hallum, his wife. Both her parents originally came from Perthshire around Kincardine by Doune. It is interesting to note that William's great-uncle, Andrew Cree had also married a McLaren, and had settled in Alloa, working as an exciseman, as William himself did later. One wonders whether Isabelle and Marion McLaren were related, how William met his bride, and why he too joined the customs service. However he continued to work as a clerk for three years after his marriage and then was appointed outdoor customs officer in London in 1866. He went to London alone, leaving Marion in Alloa with their eighteen month old daughter Jean. Marion joined him six months later with Jean and two month old Matthew. Their stay in London only lasted for a year and his notebook relates how they left Irongate Wharf in London, on board S.S.Oscar for Leith in December 1867, to take up an appointment in Greenock.

While the family lived in West Greenock, two more children were born, Ann in 1870 and John Angus in 1872. Then in 1874 they were transferred to Leith, followed by William's promotion to Principal Coast Officer in Musselburgh a year later. In these two places the last four members of the family arrived, a son William in 1882 and three daughters, Marion, Eleanor and Mary in 1875, 1877 and 1886 respectively.

William's career now took him away from Scotland for the second and last time, for in 1890 he was sent to Dundalk in Ireland, again as Principal Coast Officer, where he served for sixteen years. He retired in 1906 and was awarded the Imperial Service Medal in recognition of forty years service.

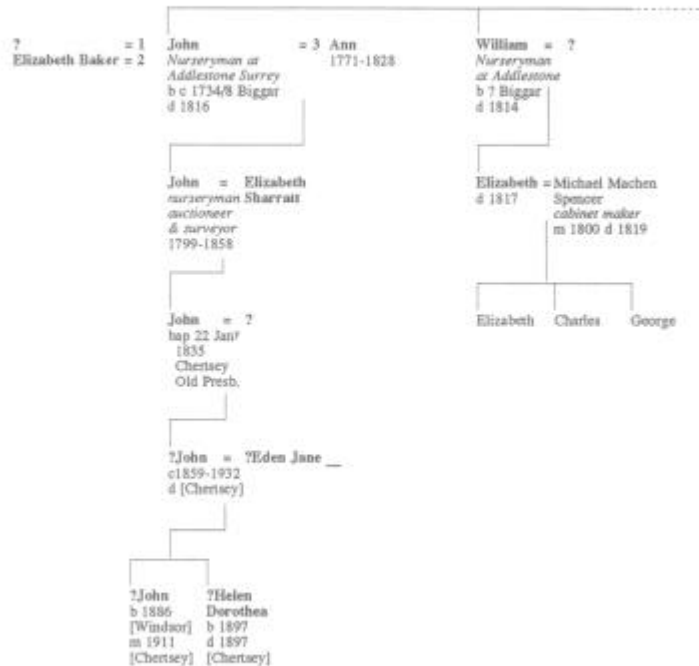
As William had moved around so much during his working life, his children were widely scattered. Jean and John Angus both married in Scotland, Jean to James McDonald and John to Euphemia Grey in Musselburgh. Both had families. John was a teacher of woodwork and taught for some years in Accra, Ghana and also in Tipperary where his daughter, Marion, was brought up. In retirement he lived in Edinburgh. William's eldest son Matthew went to New Zealand. There is a family tradition that he was a seaman, but I have not been able to verify this. He married Mary McDonald, said to be "of Montrose" and they had four sons, William, Malcolm, John and George, before he was accidentally drowned in Wellington harbour at the age of thirty-three. His widow lived in Dunedin for some years⁷.

⁷ See Chapter 6.

The remaining members of William's family went with their parents to Ireland. Ann did not marry and remained near her brothers and sisters - a mainstay in times of trouble. Marion married Thomas McKenna in Dundalk and had four children. Both her daughters died in early adult life, but there are many descendants of her two sons living.

Eleanor married George Armstrong, the young headmaster of a local school, which was affiliated to Dundalk Presbyterian Church, and they lived in Dundalk till about 1912. Four of their five children were born there. Then George, who had assumed a teaching career at the age of nineteen, when the early death of his father left him responsible for nine younger brothers and sisters, decided he wanted a change. Like his father-in-law, he joined the customs service. After short postings in Portadown (County Armagh), and Killarney, they settled in Belfast.

William, the youngest son of William and Marion Cree, married Rosalie Thomson and had two children. He was a member of Dundalk Rowing Club and in 1921 coxed the boat in which his nephew, Frederick, son of George and Eleanor Armstrong rowed and won the under-age race in the Dundalk Regatta. His sister Mary, the last of the family, who was a small child when they moved to Ireland, stayed at home with her parents and after they died, married Walter Wilde a businessman in Abbeylisk Co Laoghis. There were no children of the marriage and Walter's business failed in the turmoil and bad feeling after the partition of Ireland, as did that of his brother-in-law Thomas McKenna. He then found employment in Clara, Co Offaly where he and Mary lived for the rest of their lives. Mary used to relate how, as a young woman living with her parents, she contracted appendicitis and the family doctor operated on her on the kitchen table at home!



5 THE CREES OF ADDLESTONE

I have spoken of the great interest in new plants introduced from abroad, especially from the Americas, in the introduction to this booklet. One of the most enthusiastic gardeners of the eighteenth century was the Princess Augusta, the mother of George III who lived at Kew Palace. She started the development of the gardens at Kew which led to the famous Botanic Gardens we know today. The first director of the gardens was Sir Joseph Banks and his head gardener was a Scot named William Aiton. John Cree, the eldest son of John, nurseryman and fiscal of Biggar, joined this distinguished company some time before 1760 to train as a horticulturist. It is known that John Cree junior collected plants in Carolina in the early 1760s, and supplied some of these to Princess Augusta at Kew. A letter from Dr. Alexander Garden, a physician and amateur botanist of Charlestown, South Carolina to Mr. John Ellis, a London merchant and his agent, mentioned John. He was to be in charge of a shipment of plants and Dr. Garden described him as *sober, careful and industrious with some small smattering of Botany*. John must indeed have had more than a smattering of Botany, as to ensure the survival of the specimens he brought back during a long sea voyage called for considerable skill and knowledge. Some of these specimens are now preserved in the Natural History Museum.

We know that John founded his nursery at Addlestone in about 1765, although some early records described him as “of Woburn” so he may have been employed there after leaving Kew. Addlestone was near the Wey Navigation Canal and the Thames so the nursery was well placed for transporting orders more efficiently than could have been done by road. A year later he was supplying newly-introduced plants to Princess Augusta and he apparently went abroad collecting in 1767 and possibly again later. He also brought plants home to propagate in his own nurseries. In particular he tried, unsuccessfully, to introduce a blueberry from America. He

probably saw it as a better variety of the bilberries and crowberries of his native Scotland but found that the English climate did not suit it. The Addlestone nursery prospered throughout the remainder of the eighteenth century. John held land in the angle between the High Street and what is now Station Road by 1814 while his brother William who had come from Scotland to join him, held an area of four acres between Green Lane and Prairie Road, known as Pond Close nursery, and lived in Prairie Road nearby. A further tract of land, next to that of William, was held by a William Keddie who may have been a foreman in the business originally and have later become a partner. The receipt forms for the business in 1816 were headed "Cree and Keddie - Nursery and Seedsmen". John lived at 24-26 High Street in Addlestone where he owned six cottages.

We know nothing of William Cree's family life except that he had one daughter, Elizabeth, but John married three times. The name of his first wife is not known and he married, secondly, Elizabeth Baker in Godalming in 1781. Both these marriages were childless and his only child, also named John, was the son of his third wife, Ann, born in 1799 when his father was over sixty - possibly even sixty-five.

John, like his father in Scotland, played an active part in the local community. He was a trustee of the Alwyn's Lane Nonconformist Church in Chertsey, which was also known as the Scots Church. He joined the Chertsey and Thorpe Volunteers in 1803, during the Napoleonic wars. Later, in 1815 he was listed as one of the committee members of the Chertsey and Egham Bible Society, and he is also described as collecting land and window taxes and poor rates for Chertsey.

When the elder John died in 1816, his only son was sixteen years old and his will appointed two neighbouring nurserymen, who were obviously friends, to act as executors and to manage the business until young John came of age. These two were Hugh Ronalds of Brentford and Robert Donald of Woking. The will also mentions a sister in Biggar as a beneficiary in the event of the death of the widow and son - the only indication we have that the three Cree brothers had a sister.

The younger John took full control of the nursery in 1821. We do not know where he received his training, but the detailed catalogue he produced in 1829 showed that he was no mean botanist. The catalogue listed five thousand plants, with their common names as well as their botanical names and gave cultural instructions. Loudons Gardeners Magazine in 1830 described the nursery as having more herbaceous plants than most country nurseries and as being inferior to none in general arrangement. John's seed shop, hot-houses, dwelling house and all about him were given high

praise. A Lombardy grape, flourishing on the end of the house, and a prickly pear cactus which fruited in the open every year were given special mention. Clearly, John's business was large and well managed.

John himself became a member of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1832, and a handsome mallow, *Malva Creeana*, was named after him. Like his father, he took an interest in public life and served on various committees. It also seems that he inherited his father's duties of collecting local taxes as, on his own death in 1858, the duties passed to his own son, a third John.

John married Elizabeth Sharratt and their son was born in 1835. Thereafter it is not clear what happened to the family. A fourth John (1869-1932) may have been the great-grandson of the founder of the nursery, and a fifth one born in 1886, a likely candidate for the marriage of a John Cree in 1911 at Chertsey, may have been his son. However there seems to have been another John who died, also in Chertsey, in 1919 aged twenty-five and who must have been born about 1894. A baby girl named Helen Dorothea was also born in 1894 and died in the same year. An Eden Jane Cree who died in Chertsey in 1905, aged forty-six, may have been the wife or sister of the fourth John. By this time there was no longer a Cree nursery in Addlestone. In spite of his apparent success and the praise he received it seems that the second John was starting to run his business down as early as 1828 when he mortgaged and later sold various properties. In 1838 he sold the last piece of nursery land and was listed in local directories by 1839 as an auctioneer. In 1845 he was described in the Post Office Directory for the Home Counties as "Cree, John, Auctioneer and Surveyor, Addlestone". By this time there were two other nurseries in Chertsey and Addlestone, so it is not obvious why what appeared to be a flourishing business came to an end so early. One can speculate that John was better suited to the academic aspects of his work than to the practical ones, that the competition became too strong for him, or that he lost interest in the venture, but this can only be guesswork.

There are several other pieces of information about John's later life. On April 1st 1845 he was appointed Clerk to the Board and Assistant Surveyor, but on April 30th the same year he was described as a Late Surveyor of the Highways for Chertsey when he was ordered to hand over roadmen's tools in his charge. In July a meeting of the Board took place at which a summons was taken out against him to force him to hand over the balance of funds still in his hands. Clearly John was a well-known and respected citizen so it seems that his undoubted botanical ability was not matched by a head for figures. Perhaps this explains the failure of his business.

Meanwhile William Cree of Pond Close Nursery had died in 1814 and left his business to his only daughter, Elizabeth, the wife of Michael Machen Spencer, a local cabinet maker. After her death in 1817 Michael took over the nursery and it passed to their three children on his death two years later. Their last surviving son, Charles Spencer, sold the land in 1837, a year before the second John sold his.



6 A NEW ZEALAND CREE FAMILY⁸

On 3 May 1887 the barque *Queen Mab* left Glasgow at the start of a three month voyage to New Zealand. She was a handsome square-rigged sailing ship of a thousand tons register with an iron hull, and was under the command of a Captain Brown. In addition to her 1600 tons of cargo she carried about forty passengers, four in saloon or first class and the rest travelling steerage. The crew included one Matthew Cree, a young sailor from Edinburgh, the twenty-one year old eldest son of William Brown Cree, a customs officer and descendant of the Cree nurserymen of Biggar. Among the steerage passengers were two young women travelling to make a new life in New Zealand. They were Annie Malcolm from Brechin and Mary Ann McDonald, aged twenty-three and variously said to be 'from Perthshire' and 'of Montrose'. During the voyage a close friendship was to develop between Matthew and Mary Ann.

The *Queen Mab* was towed from her berth in Glasgow to the Gareloch where she adjusted her compasses and was then towed straight out to sea. She cast off the tug on 4 May at Ailsa Craig and continued her journey under sail. The first week was fine with winds which were light and southerly but then became northerly and led her into the north-west trades on 13 May. Generally these were light and dropped a fortnight later leaving her becalmed for four days. No doubt neither passengers or crew were busy at this time giving opportunity for the friendship between Matthew and Mary Ann to deepen.

On 30 May the breeze picked up again and they crossed the equator the next day before running into the south-east trades of the southern hemisphere, which carried

⁸ This Chapter was first published in Cree News 17 (October 1999)

them across the Atlantic to the coast of Brazil. On 13 June the winds became light and variable as the *Queen Mab* made her way south and then eastward back across the Atlantic. They sighted the island of Tristan da Cunha a week later and crossed the Greenwich meridian eleven days after that. Thereafter the prevailing westerlies carried them round the Cape of Good Hope and on through the Southern Ocean at a brisk speed. Meanwhile Matthew's shipboard romance developed apace.

Eventually on 1 August they approached New Zealand having seen no sign of any other ships since passing Africa. They were again becalmed for several hours just south of Dunedin and entered Port Chalmers, near Dunedin, the next day. The ship was towed across the harbour bar, met by the Government steam launch and cleared to land after the passengers had been declared free of infectious disease by the local medical officer.

Annie Malcolm disembarked at Dunedin but Mary Ann McDonald stayed on the ship and went to Wellington where she found domestic work in the home of the Governor General. Matthew Cree also left the *Queen Mab* at Wellington and got a job with the Union Steamship Company which operated steam ferries linking all the New Zealand ports. However he stayed in touch with Mary Ann and three years later, in April 1890, they married. They made their first home in Wellington. By this time Matthew's father William Brown Cree had moved to Dundalk in Ireland on promotion to Principal Coast Officer, taking most of his family with him. Only one daughter remained in Scotland.

Early the next year Matthew and Mary Ann's first son, William Matthew, was born in Wellington, followed eleven months later by his brother Malcolm McLaren. Matthew's work on the ferries took him away from home for long periods and Mary Ann, left at home with her two baby boys, often felt very lonely. By 1893 another baby was on the way and Mary Ann's friend Annie, now Mrs Robert Sellar, suggested that the family should move to Dunedin. As Matthew travelled round the coast it did not really matter where he lived and there would be more company for Mary Ann there. Consequentially the Crees went to live in Brook Street, Dunedin, very close to the Sellar family. Here a third son, John, was born in February 1894 and a fourth, George, in 1896. Mary Ann must have been even busier now but she had friends to make Matthew's absences more bearable. Finally in February 1899 a baby daughter, Marion, arrived.

After Marion's birth Matthew decided it was time to look for a shore-based job to enable him to spend more time with his wife and children. He left the Union

Company's ferry, the *Te Anau*, where he was said to be popular and respected, and went to the same company's offices in Wellington. Here an old hulk, the *Arawata*, was anchored in the harbour and used as a lightship, and one of Matthew's duties was to go out each evening to light the lanterns and again each morning to put them out. For this purpose he was supplied with a small sailing dinghy of a rather unusual design. Not only did it have an iron-weighted centreboard and was ballasted with pig iron, but it also had fins to stabilise it and prevent it from capsizing in heavy seas. This made it very stable under most conditions but it did mean that if it became waterlogged it would sink quickly.

By 30 October Matthew had been looking after the *Arawata* for a fortnight. He had arranged accommodation for the family but they had not yet joined him. That evening he set off in his dinghy for the lightship, but as he left the unsettled weather developed into a furious storm. Next day the local papers were to be full of accounts of ships having to take shelter and being unable to reach Wellington. As the storm raged a lady living near the quayside called the police to say that she had seen a man in a small sailing boat apparently trying to reach the *Arawata*, but that his boat was continuously turning round in spite of his efforts to control it. Several people with sailing experience advised the police that the boat was in no danger, and Matthew's instructions were that he was to turn and report back to shore if weather prevented him from reaching the *Arawata*. In view of the weather no-one was surprised when the lanterns on the *Arawata* were not lit, but Matthew did not appear on shore. They started to become anxious when men working at the Manawatu station along the coast reported hearing someone calling from the sea. They went to the waterside but could not hear or see anything. Consequently the police tried to summon the Union Company's launch, the *Snark*, to investigate. Unfortunately the *Snark* was some distance away and could not get back quickly. Two policemen searched the shoreline in the storm, an unenviable task, till one in the morning, but found nothing.

Next morning the *Snark* made a thorough search of the area. There was no sign that anyone had reached the *Arawata* on the previous night and the only thing they found was the rudder of a small boat some distance away. This was later identified as belonging to Matthew's boat, but no other wreckage was found and Matthew's body was never recovered.

Back in Dunedin Mary Ann and her five young children faced a bleak future. An appeal was launched by the minister of St. Stephen's Presbyterian Church where the family worshipped, and the people of Dunedin responded generously. Contributions, ranging from a few pence to quite substantial sums of money, poured in and the

resulting fund was sufficient to help Mary Ann to raise and educate her children, though money must always have been in short supply. She obviously also kept in touch with her father-in-law as his family records contained a group of school photographs, cut out of the *Otago Witness*, a local newspaper, showing the boys with their classmates in 1903. It is possible that he had given her some financial help.

In the next few years the children all grew up and started working. William became a typesetter, Malcolm a butcher and George a painter and paperhanger. Only John followed in his father's footsteps and became a seaman. Marion who was said to have a very sweet tooth found work in the local lollipop factory. It would be nice to be able to say that the family's hard times were over, but it was 1914 and, like so many others, their lives were to be disrupted by the First World War.

When the war came William stayed at home to support his mother while his three younger brothers joined the New Zealand forces. They fought at Gallipoli and in Europe throughout the war years. While the boys were fighting in Europe there was trouble in Dunedin. The great flu epidemic reached there in the autumn of 1918 and there were so many patients that a local church hall had to be used as a makeshift hospital ward to cope with them. Both Marion and William became seriously ill and had to be hospitalised. Marion recovered but William died in hospital early in December aged twenty-seven.

Meanwhile John had been badly wounded at the front in the closing weeks of the war. He was transferred to England to the Military Hospital at Walton-on-Thames in Surrey. Here, according to New Zealand sources, he was visited by some of the Dundalk Crees. By this time William Brown Cree and his wife Marion had died and I have been unable to find out who was kind enough to make the long winter journey from Ireland to Surrey to bring some comfort to a nephew or cousin they had never met and who was far from home. Unhappily John died of his wounds early in 1919 and he is buried in Brookwood Cemetery in Woking. The inscription on his grave is reproduced above.

John was posthumously awarded the Military Medal for gallantry in action. The medal was presented at a public meeting in Dunedin but Mary Ann was too distressed to attend and Marion had to represent her mother at the ceremony.

The homecoming of Malcolm and George followed. Malcolm had survived the war years relatively unharmed but George had been severely gassed and shell-shocked and, although he lived until he was sixty-nine, he never fully recovered. None of the

four Cree brothers ever married.

Marion however married Archie Percy Meikle, known as Percy, and they had three daughters. Her eldest daughter, Mary, remembers her grandmother, Mary Ann, as a little sad Scottish lady who lived with them from the late 1920s till her death in 1932. She never regained her spirits after the loss of her sons and had lost touch with her Irish relatives.

I have been trying to trace Matthew's family for some years and, having found Mary and her husband George McKenzie via the Internet, I am grateful to them for providing me with the information on which this account is based. Although it is a sad story, it is lightened by incidents of kindness and can end on a happier note. Marion's three daughters all married and between them produced fifteen children. There are now a number of grandchildren so the descendants of Matthew and Mary Ann are flourishing in New Zealand, though they no longer bear the name of Cree.

37770
Lance Cpl.
J. CREE M.M.
Canterbury Regt.
31 January 1919, age 25

A POSTSCRIPT

In November 1981, The Scotsman reported that to commemorate the start of conversion work on Moat Park Church, Biggar, which was to become a heritage centre for the Upper Clyde and Tweed valleys, beech trees were planted overlooking the building's Burn Braes Park site. These were replacements for the beech trees planted by John Cree in 1730, as only one of the original trees was still standing. The tree-planting ceremony was performed by Mr W. Thomson Cree, the only son of Gavin Cree, the last nurseryman in Biggar.

Also recently in Addlestone, an office block was planned on the site of John Cree's family home in the High Street to be named "John Cree House" in memory of the founder of Addlestone Nursery.