Born at Sea

Emma Dewson

There is a corner on Willis and Dixon Streets in Wellington where a well-known public house once stood. The pub is long gone, but within view if you stand at the crossroads is an old church, a stylish restaurant and a new hotel which offers overpriced accommodation to out-of-towners. A shop selling adult toys operates on the other corner.

Most Wellingtonians pass through the windswept intersection on their way to somewhere else. The pub, the Te Aro Hotel, opened there in 1863, when a Mrs West held the licence. Developers demolished the building in the 1960s. Within its beer-clogged walls, gadabouts and older men soaked their time in whisky and poker.

Afterwards, they stumbled home through the crowded and dirty alleys of Te Aro Flat to the embarrassment of the colonial administration who didn't expect old-world trouble in the young colony. When the pub was built, Wellington was a wooden town by the sea. Eight-thousand inhabitants basked in the honour of being in the nation's capital and movers and shakers planned a bright future.

The town spilled over at Te Aro and Thorndon, which were linked by a narrow beach lined with mostly timber-framed shops. The hills around the town dragged under the weight of fallen trees and grazing sheep. The beach, Lambton Quay, joined with Willis Street at Clay Point, still a popular meeting spot for women who now know it as the jeweller Stewart Dawsons. Littered with the debris of shipping, the beach also gave access to the growing number of shops and hotels in Willis Street.

Until recently, I knew little about the Dewson side of my father's family. One of them had a connection with this old pub, the Te Aro. They were woodturning cabinetmakers who eventually ended up in Wanganui. My grandmother bandied about the names Thomas, William and Florence with a familiarity that belied the hardship of their lives. I knew they came from Birmingham and I imagined them making staircase banisters and side tables.

Like thousands of others, they flocked to Wellington in the 1870s as part of Premier Julius Vogel's scheme to import skilled tradesmen. New Zealand required those who could help build the new infrastructure needed to move the settler society forward. They tried their luck in the capital and my great-great-grandfather Arthur Dewson carved the coat of arms on the new Government Buildings in 1878. I look at it today and wonder what he might think of the Beehive over the road and the acres of reclaimed land.

The old newspapers have told me this. One night in 1894 the Te Aro Hotel brimmed with drinkers and gamblers. While it had a reputation, it was not all dreadful. The billiard saloon was one of the best in Wellington. Workers from workshops and stores met to drink after work. The central Willis Street location was a stopping point for labourers heading home to the growing suburbs of Mount Cook and Newtown.

Families fresh off the boat flocked to poorly drained and crowded Te Aro Flat, the bad end of town. Filth and disease spread as the streets filled with human and cart-animal waste. Brothels sprung up in Ghuznee and Vivian Streets. Raids revealed women plying their trade as city officials hurried to pass bylaws to suppress these houses of ill-fame.

Here sat the Te Aro Hotel. The publican, McArdle, an 'extremely disgraceful' West Coast Irishman, had been charged many times with encouraging underage youths to gamble on his premises. Mostly he'd been let off with a warning and a fine.

This night, a young woman a few days short of her twentieth birthday was drinking at the Te Aro with a friend. Women didn't usually drink in public bars, but Hindalena and Ruby did. They surged out onto the pavement when a brawl unfolded. As the men punched and kicked, they jostled with the crowd for a better view. In the days before television, a nasty scuffle could be the entertainment of the night.

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For James Wallace, a Christchurch businessman, it had been a hard night. He'd had some liquor and was in no mood to see fighting. He moved in to break it up and Hindalena jostled him. When the fight died down, his gold pocket watch was missing. He accused her. It had been gifted to him twenty years earlier and he valued it at £30.

Hindalena had a very different story. She and Ruby met Wallace on Willis Street and he went with them to the Te Aro to have a drink. After a few hours, Wallace could hardly stand. She sent him on his way, giving directions to Cuba Street where his brother-in-law lived. Wallace gave her the pocket watch.

In June 1894, Hindalena Dewson, a well-spoken young dressmaker, appeared on a charge of larceny before ten male jurors in the Wellington Supreme Court. Single and without family in Wellington, Hindalena used her skills as a dressmaker to earn money. Like other women, she worked in cramped conditions for little pay.

Hindalena sewed fitted dresses for ladies, usually to order, and also made mantles, robes and cloaks for wealthier customers. The ladies supplied the fabric, so she only needed equipment to set up in business. Other dressmakers preferred to work in their employers' homes, fitting dresses as they sewed them, but Hindalena usually worked in her rented rooms.

My great-great-aunt Hindalena represented herself in court. She had implored Ruby to give evidence, but Ruby never showed up. This court appearance was not Hindalena's first. On a trip to Auckland the previous year, she had been convicted of theft, but got off without a jail sentence.

James Wallace stood up, smoothing his frock coat as he glanced towards the jury. "I saw that young woman for the first time when she knocked into me outside the Te Aro Hotel," he said, pointing at Hindalena as she stood downcast in the dock. "She took the opportunity to relieve me of my gold pocket watch. I was trying to act as a peacemaker to an ugly scrimmage."

The judge gestured to Hindalena that she could reply. "Mr Wallace gave me the watch to keep until he could pay me for an improper act," she stammered, turning towards the jury as she spoke.

The jury whispered amongst themselves. An outraged Wallace flinched. He denied he had paid Hindalena to sleep with him.

John Griffiths, a pawnbroker, came forward and told the court that Hindalena had sold him Wallace's watch. "She brought the watch into my shop on Ghuznee Street and asked for an advance payment of £1," he said.

Hindalena had fibbed and said she got the watch from her son. Griffiths presumed Hindalena had stolen the watch. He asked her to come to the police station with him, but she refused.

Detective Campbell of the Wellington Police walked into the courtroom. He had gone to the pawnshop and arrested Hindalena when she wouldn't go to the station with Griffiths. Her bail was set at £50. When he'd questioned Hindalena, she'd told him that a young man she didn't know had sent her into the pawnshop with the watch.

Hindalena had not told the detective that she had slept with Wallace and that he paid her with his pocket watch. She had no qualms about outing Wallace, but she wanted to steer clear of the reputation that small-time prostitutes like her had as troublemakers and degenerates. And she wanted to avoid a conviction for theft.

God-fearing Wellington townsfolk baulked at the high numbers of young women who turned to prostitution to earn extra money. Houses of ill-fame were one thing, but girls wandering the streets brought unseemly behaviour out into the open.

In court, Hindalena told the jury what had really happened because she hoped it would get her off her theft charge. Being convicted of stealing property held a more-serious sentence than soliciting for money.

"It is a melancholy thing that the young woman finds herself in such a wretched position," the judge said. "I hope something can be done to help her." But he had no

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suggestions. The jury found Hindalena guilty of stealing Wallace's gold pocket watch and the judge sentenced her to three months in the Terrace Gaol with hard labour.

In September 1894, a thin and pale Hindalena got out of jail. She went straight back to work as a dressmaker. In 1896 she married William Heappey, a labourer, in Marton. The couple lived in Halcombe, a small town between Marton and Feilding. Hindalena gave birth to a baby boy named William the following year.

But Hindalena found it difficult to stay out of trouble entirely. One Thursday night in 1898, she went for a walk down Victoria Avenue in Wanganui, the town's main street. Her husband often drank down the street at the Rutland Hotel and she was on her way to meet him. A young man she knew met her and they chatted. Hindalena threw back her head and laughed, smiling broadly at the man. He took her arm and they walked off down the street together.

From a window at the Rutland, Hindalena's husband William saw the pair walking arm-in-arm. He ran out of the hotel, throwing off his coat and chucking it onto the muddy ground as he crossed the street. He lashed out at the man, who stood with his arm still interlocked with Hindalena's, hitting him in the left eye. Blood streamed down the man's face as he ran off down Victoria Avenue with William in pursuit.

By the time the chase ended near Freeman Jackson's sale yards, Hindalena had caught up with the two men. She tore at William, ripping his shirt and slapping his face. He hit back. As they struggled, the young man slunk off down the street. William and Hindalena parted, each going in a different direction.

William and Lena Heappey appeared together in the Wanganui Magistrate's Court five days later. The police charged them with threatening behaviour in a public place. Sergeant Ellison, who had spoken to the couple on the night of the struggle, told the judge that he had already warned Hindalena about walking alone at night. She had ignored his advice.

"We do not want such unseemly occurrences between husband and wife in our main street," the judge said. "I think Mrs Heappey has been the cause of the trouble in this instance and I therefore fine her £2 and costs 12s and 6d."

Ship's surgeons always said babies born at sea were lucky. If they survived the long sea journey to New Zealand, they had a good chance of making it to adulthood. Infant death was common on the arduous, cold and damp voyage.

Passengers found the deaths of babies at sea the hardest to take. 'A little infant child, whose soul to heaven has gone, One who has never done a wrong from the time that it was born,' wrote aspiring poet Harry Gibson, a passenger on the *Hindostan*, when it sailed from London to Dunedin in 1874.

A newborn baby had died on board, its small body wrapped in a sheet and buried at sea.

But the Hindostan, 'a proper dirty looking craft inside and outside', returned to New Zealand the following year and sailed into Port Nicholson in May. It carried another baby, born at sea a few weeks earlier. When Harriet Dewson gave birth to the baby in the steerage cabin, she named her Elizabeth Hindalena after the vessel. In her life she would be called many things, but rarely Elizabeth.

The Cottage on Cambridge Terrace

One evening last winter I walked along Cambridge Terrace in central Wellington hoping to imagine how the street looked in the 1870s when my Dewson relatives lived there. Cars whizzed past as I walked, looking around for skerricks of the area's past. But the tiny

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worker's cottages that lined it are long gone and asphalt now covers the once-muddy thoroughfare.

A car yard and a KFC outlet share company with a formidable statue of Queen Victoria. From her spot between Cambridge Terrace and its twin, Kent Terrace, she watches as boy racers drag-race each other to the Basin Reserve and partygoers make their way to Courtenay Place. The aroma of pad Thai hangs in the air. I pass the Oriental Thai Restaurant on the Vivian Street corner and my stomach lurches to attention.

Outside the Cambridge Hotel, near the Courtenay Place corner, backpackers smoke cigarettes as they shiver in the crisp July air. They chat in foreign languages as I walk through the door into the hotel's foyer. The bar looks warm and welcoming after a recent makeover.

Groups of young patrons linger around tall wooden tables as I order a coke at the bar. I laugh to myself as I remember how my workmate drinks at the Cambridge for the express reason that he can fake a good Argentinean accent.

"So I'll swagger up to the bar, you know, and kind of order in my Argentinean lingo," he admitted one day in the tea room. "You know the one."

"Yeah, we're familiar with it," I replied.

"The girls love it!" he smiled.

"What happens if this trick of yours comes off? Can you keep the accent up? What about your family from Stokes Valley?"

"Um, yeah, I never said it was foolproof." He went back to his sandwich.

Around the walls of the Cambridge Hotel are a series of photographs of the old days, from a time when horses and carts ploughed up and down the terraces on their way to the beach near Waitangi Park. But these pictures didn't give me any more clue about the lives of my Dewson relatives. I would have to find out more.

Mrs Waters, of the Wellington Ladies Benevolent Association, found the four Dewson children in a decayed, one-bedroomed cottage on Cambridge Terrace in 1879. A neighbour had complained to the association that the children seemed uncared for, even destitute, and that they should see what they could do for them.

A muddy, cart-wheel tracked bog, Cambridge Terrace opened the way to Newtown. Waste and rubbish littered the small creek that separated Kent from Cambridge Terrace. Large numbers of new immigrants lived in cottages along both roads, many in abject poverty.

When Mrs Waters arrived at the cottage with the city inspector Mr Johnson, a small boy with ripped and dirty clothes opened the door. Thomas Dewson, aged 11, held a tiny whittled wooden boat, intricately detailed in local totara. The other children appeared behind him. Nine-year-old Arthur, the spitting image of his older brother, thin as a rail with dark hair, and the boy's sisters, Annie, aged seven, and five-year-old Hindalena.

Thomas appeared to be in charge of the other children. His parents were nowhere to be found. Mrs Waters bailed up the children, taking a few of their clothes with her. She then deposited them at a nearby benevolent house while Mr Johnson set off to find the parents.

The children's father, Arthur Dewson, had recently gone partially blind in both eyes. His work as a cabinet maker suffered and he could no longer get enough work to support his young family. In 1879 he also appeared in court charged with disturbing the peace. Perhaps he defended himself. The publican of the White Hart Hotel, where Arthur often drank, came at him yelling, "'I'll strangle you, you bastard." Arthur grabbed a hold of the publican's whiskers, pulling out a fair share of them. He was seriously injured in the process.

The children's mother Harriet, unable to cope without her husband's income, tried to go out to work herself. The work available to married women was confined to domestic labour in rich households, keeping a boarding house, laundry work and baby farming. But, twenty years later, the care of other people's children would be less common after a number of babies disappeared under Minnie Dean's care in Southland.

Single women took all the shop work, so Harriet resigned herself to taking in laundry and going out cleaning for a pittance in one of the big houses on Wellington Terrace.

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After Mrs Waters and Mr Johnson took the children away, Hindalena and Annie were sent to Burnham Industrial School near Christchurch. The girls were supposed to stay for three years at the school for naughty and abandoned children.

The school, built in 1874, looked like something from Jane Eyre's school days. Turreted and laced with mossy, reused bricks, its two storeys housed its inmates in a succession of damp dormitories. Small windows criss-crossed by wrought-iron bars made the outside world seem remote.

The inmates slept in narrow two-foot-wide beds, over twenty to a room, in long dormitories, with creaking beams, dust and cold blighting their night's sleep. They maintained the gardens around the building as part of the school's goal to turn them into children of 'good character' who could fill domestic positions in wealthier homes around the country.

Under the Neglected and Criminal Children Act 1867, industrial schools were set up as residential institutions for the care and education of neglected children. But often they were used inappropriately as orphanages and reformatories. Girls, who were taught cooking and sewing, would be assigned to domestic tasks when they were let out. Boys would be taken out on the farm to be taught a man's work.

Thomas and Arthur, still just eleven and nine, went out to work for a local businessman in Wellington. Their father reclaimed them two years later, but couldn't afford to pay much to feed, clothe and house them.

Most traces of the girl's lives at the industrial school are gone. The records show that Annie disappeared from the school in 1881, when she was eleven. She ended up in Tasmania after marrying Charles Fry in New Zealand in 1885 at the age of fifteen.

The trail on Annie's sister Hindalena goes cool after she left Burnham. I now know her to have had many more adventures. But scribbled in pencil beside her name in the school's register is the word 'Escaped.' We might never know what happened to Hindalena until she reappears in the court pages of the Wellington newspapers in her late teens.

Thomas and Arthur went to Wanganui, where their father's brother, Uncle William, lived. William Dewson worked as a woodturner and ran a boarding house at St George's Gate, by the river. While Arthur raced trains and worked as an assistant to the builder A. G. Bignell, Thomas carved banisters and emblems for the Red Lion and Fosters Hotels. In his spare time, he whittled apples out of native timber to give away as gifts. The penny dropped when I thought about the skillfully-carved wooden apple we found when we tidied up my grandmother's house when she died seven years ago.

In 1920 Thomas won a national competition to carve ceremonial panels for a rebuild of a 100-year-old waka, then housed at the Wanganui Museum. Carved in the museum's basement, the new panels on the waka Te Mata o Hoturoa received praise from local rangatira, despite Thomas being Pakeha. On visits to the museum as a child, I would run my hands along the waka's beautiful, intricately engraved wooden edges and feel the cold, smooth wood beneath my fingers. I never knew until much later that my great-great uncle Thomas had made them.

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