MY MEMOIRS

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My Memoirs

By

AMELIA ANN WILLIS

Dedicated to
My Grandchildren

The Writer at 17

My Memoirs

By

A. A. WILLIS

Well, my children, you ask for a story of my life, so I will try to tell you what scraps of it I can remember. There is nothing very oustanding about it, but perhaps these few memories of my childhood days, which I remember more clearly, may interest you.

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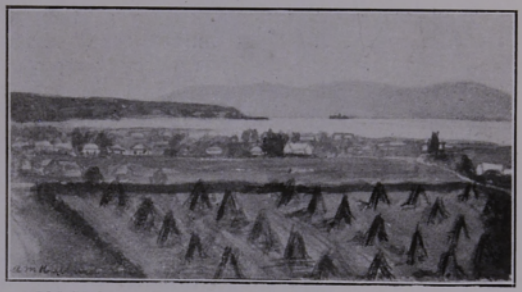
The first thing I remember was the earthquake in 1855. Father said to Mary McCormack, out maid, "Bring out that child," so Mary ran upstairs and carried me down. I was the only child sleeping upstairs then. We all slept that night outside, under the trees. I happened to go back to Nelson about thirty years after, and a Mrs. King, who was living in our old house, showed me the great cracks still in the brick walls.

My father, the Rev. Nicholson, and my mother came out on the "John Wickliffe" in 1848. This was the first ship to bring any Scottish settlers to Dunedin. These settlers wanted to have a flag to celebrate the occasion of having arrived safely and starting the new

Scottish settlement, but had nothing with them that would suit, so mother came to the rescue. She had her wedding dress with her, which was made of white water-silk, but had been dyed, before coming out to the colonies, a royal blue. This the ladies on board made into a flag and it hung on a hill in Dunedin until it went to ribbons, then each of the old settlers kept a little piece.

One of my father's shipmates was Thomas Arnold, son of Dr. Arnold, of Rugby School



Old Nelson, from Botanical Hill, in the 60's. Hop fields in the foreground.

fame, and in his book, "A Wanderer's Life," which mentions his trip to New Zealand in the "John Wickliffe," he describes my father and mother as he knew them. Father, a strong boisterous man, while mother was always so quiet, gentle and kind to all.

Soon after arriving at Dunedin, father and mother came to Wellington, where father was rushed with babies waiting to be christened. One of them was Sir James Mills, now head

of the Union Steam Ship Company. They then went on to Nelson, where he founded the first Presbyterian Church.

The little church, as I remember it, was a square building with the pews all round the walls and a space with plain seats in the middle, where the prisoners sat. My father went up a flight of steps to the pulpit. The pew-holders opened little doors to go into their seats, and the old verger carried round a little square box on the end of a stick for the collection.

We had no musical instrument in the church, so the verger used to have a tuning fork, which he tapped to start the congregation singing. When the first organ was installed everyone got up and walked out, as some of the older Presbyterians thought it quite wrong to have it.

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On the way to the Post Office was a Maori Pah, and we youngsters used to love to go and watch the Maoris cooking their tea, and to poke round generally. The food all looked so good, especially their "dampers," which made our mouths water for some. We would have asked them for some in a minute, but the maid who was with us would not allow it, much to our disappointment.

Although we did not have much to do with the Maoris, we found that in some ways they behaved like gentlemen in their wars, very different from our enemies of the Great War. They used to look after the women and chil-

dren prisoners and feed them, which is a feather in the cap of the Maori.

Talking about the prisoners—one day there was a big bush fire in the reserve on the hills, and as it was getting too close to some of the dwellings, the prisoners were called out to help. They all worked so hard and so well that they were given their freedom.

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We lived in a brick house, which father built himself, at the top of Collingwood Street, and called it "Alicebrae," after my mother.

I remember that my elder sisters read somewhere that the people in Germany slept under feather beds, so they thought they would try it. They bundled us all into a big bed one night and put a mattress on top of us; we soon fell asleep, and when mother found us some time afterwards, some of the little ones were nearly suffocated.

Mother, as I remember her, was quiet and gentle, but with a very strong character. One day I did not want to go to school, but mother was firm—she just led me down the path out on to the street and banged the gate shut with a click, then, without looking to see what I did, she walked straight up to the house and inside. No fuss or bullying, but showed me plainly what I had to do. I thought it over for a minute and then decided perhaps I had better go to school, so off I went.

Mother died when I was five years old, leaving a large family of young children. The

home was broken up then, and father went to live near Blenheim and I was boarded at Mrs. Sait's private school.

It was just before this that my sisters took me to school one day, but I didn't want to stay, so went over to Mrs. Hawke's, who lived near the eel pond. She was busy cutting up feathers for a mattress, and childlike, I said, "What's that for?" and she answered, "Oh, for a pudding." I was so offended, because I knew it couldn't be that, I hated her ever after.

A little girl we used to watch when she went for walks with her mother, always wore an "ugly." As she was an only girl, I suppose her mother didn't want her face covered with freckles and wanted her to look beautiful always. Perhaps I had better explain an "ugly." Well, besides the usual poke bonnet, a little hood was fixed to the front of the poke and opened and closed like the hood of a pram, and came well out over the face.

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From now on, my escapades seemed to come tumbling along, and I was always getting into hot water somehow or other.

About 1855, Mr. Smith and his large family arrived from England, and Miss Elizabeth Smith opened a private school. Soon after, she married a Mr. Sait, and they moved into the Harley's house, a big house with a lovely garden, with a pond and bullrushes. We used to go there every day to school until I went as a boarder.

Mr. and Mrs. Sait were most hospitable and always giving pleasure to the young in every way they could.

I remember a tall brass man that used to stand on Mrs. Sait's mantelpiece, and Mr. Sait told us that "when the gun at the forts was fired every day at noon, this man would get down off his stand and walk to the end of the mantelpiece and back." So one day we went in and stood waiting for the gun to go off, which it soon did, and we looked and looked at the brass man, and he didn't move! We called to Mr. Sait and told him about it, and he said, "Oh, well, he couldn't have heard it or I'm sure he would have."

Another little incident happened at Mrs. Sait's one day. For dinner the maid brought in a nice hot roast duck with only one leg, so Mr. Sait asked her where it was, to which she replied, "I don't know, sir." The next morning, after breakfast, the maid called to Mr. Sait to come down and look at his ducks in the yard. He came down and saw them all standing in the sun on one leg with their heads tucked under their wings, and she said, "That's where your duck came from yesterday." Mr. Sait just waved his arms and called out, and they all put down their other leg and toodled away. "Perhaps if you had said 'Shoo' yesterday, the other leg would have appeared," said the little maid.

Mrs. Sait once said to me, "Now you watch where that hen goes when she come off her nest," so I stood waiting, and presently she came off and I ran into Mrs. Sait, saying,

"The sitting hen has come off his nest and he has gone down to the water."

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Those daisies in that bouquet remind me of a favourite bonnet I had when I was about seven or eight. It was a poke bonnet with a blue ribbon round it, and had little double pink daisies all under the poke, with blue ribbons that tied under my chin.

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Once, when I was quite small, I remember Mr. Sait taking me for a walk to see the hop

The Matai River.

fields just across the river, a very pleasant walk for those who liked the smell of the hops. The river was in flood, and the only bridge over it was a couple of narrow planks. Somehow I slipped and fell into the water, and the only thing I could think of was that I had not done the little job I had been told to do that morning. It filled my thoughts all the time

was bobbing about in the muddy water, and gradually going down stream. Although it seemed an age, it was only a few minutes really, before Mr. Sait had pulled me out with his stick. There I stood, a sorry sight, with my best Sunday dress all dripping wet and dirty. We went back home as fast as we could.

I remember one day in Sunday school all was quiet and no one looking, so I got down off the high seat and knelt on the floor and

Old Church, Nelson

looked at all the legs hanging down—some fat, some thin, some long, and some short. The temptation was too great, I could not help reaching out and pinching one of them. There was a scream and I was soon discovered, taken out and spanked hard, but I had enjoyed the fun, anyhow. The owner of the pinched leg was Kate Watts, afterwards Mrs. Ledger.

I was sent to the English Church while I was at boarding school, and the most inter-

esting part of the service to me was during prayers, for then, instead of saying my prayers too, I used to peep round at all the people near by. Some I remember so well were—Mr. Alex. Sclanders and Captain Clousten and Mr. and Mrs. Collins. Mrs. Collins always wore a "coal-scuttle" bonnet. Two Miss Paul's and the Butts also sat near us, and Mr. and Mrs. Bagshaw, too. Mrs. Bagshaw was rather stout and carried a fan and bottle of scent. Others were Mr. David Johnston, Collector of Customs, and the Harleys, all well-known people.

Another thing that attracted me in church was to see Mr. Travers say his prayers into his hat. He used to hold his bell-topper over his nose when saying them. He was an old solicitor of Nelson and later came to Wellington to live.

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There were not many Scottish families at that time, but the few there were, were hard-working, true, and the best of friends. One large Scotch family, the McRaes, were pioneers. One in particular was Nehemiah McRae, Mrs. Jessie Firth's father, who was a dear and lovable boy.

When I was about three or four, he would be about ten years; he used to carry me about on his shoulder. One night, after I had been with by mother and father to spend the evening with his people, he carried me all the way home, and I sang to him—

"Jeremiah, Jeremiah, blow the fire, puff, puff, puff,
All the money you have got is stuff, stuff, stuff."

His sister Sarah was equally as lovable. Nehemiah afterwards married Miss Aitken, daughter of Mr. George Aitken.

Another dear old family was the family of Captain Scott. As I used to watch him coming down the church his face reminded me of eating sour gooseberries, but really he was a dear old man. He had two daughters, and one married a Gibbons, founder of Hope Gibbons and Co. Captain Scott's boat was named "The Spray," so we children christened one of our cows "The Spray," after it.

Dr. Renwick was another old identity, too.

Captain Nicholson, of Stoke, was no relation, but a great friend, of the family. Many happy days have I spent in his garden, eating his raspberries and any other fruit we could find, and stealing his cream from the dairy.

The Archbishop Redwood's family lived at Brightwater, and were well known for their racehorses.

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One day, after school, I fell asleep in the classroom and was not found for some time. Mr. Sait, who was a Mason, was holding a meeting in the room, and they didn't discover me till it was all over. They were very surprised, of course, but all the same they didn't offer to make me a Mason. Nevertheless, I must have been one of the first women to attend a Masonic meeting, but as I was only

five it was not a very serious matter to the Masons.

Some time after this Mrs. Sait had a party one evening, just for grown-ups, they in one room and we few boarders in the next. We children were anxiously waiting for supper time to come. We began to get restless and I was dying to have a peep at what was going on at the party, so crept outside and got a gimlet. I then began to screw and screw into the wall, which was not very thick, till presently we heard a scream from the next room and soon discovered that my gimlet had gone into a lady's back, who happened to be sitting just there. The lady was Mrs. Eyes, wife of the Superintendent of Blenheim. Needless to say, we children were packed off to bed supperless.

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A tin penny—how we valued it! The ones we usually had given us were stamped with "S" for Sclanders. This merchant had his name stamped on them to pay to his clerks. The tin pennies were the only ones then, and it was some time afterwards before the copper ones reached New Zealand.

One day I was spending the day at Mr. Beatson's farm, and we children were sent out into the paddock to pick peas. Mr. Beatson's eldest son had gone to town and soon he came home and out into the field where we all were, carrying a little bag and looking very proud and excited. He called, "Come and see what

I have," and he held out the little bag. We all rushed up and he opened it and showed us a heap of brand new copper pennies! He gave us one each of these beautifully shiny new pennies, and I felt a very proud person taking it home to show the others. That was their first appearance in Nelson.

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A great favourite with every one was Mr. Poynter, a Magistrate, who was very stout.

Often, when we went out for our walk we would meet a woman who was slightly insane. For the fun of hearing the silly things she would say, we asked her all sorts of things. One day we said to her, "How are you to-day?" and she answered, "I would be better if I hadn't to carry John Poynter on my head always."

Yet another little incident occurred in church one morning. Just as Bishop Hobhouse began to preach, two men got up and walked out of the choir. Next Sunday, when the Bishop began, he said, "Not till those two men have left can I speak." All was silence and no one moved, so the Bishop dismissed the service.

Another day, one Sunday evening, when I was about nine, we were all waiting anxiously for the gun to be fired at the Barracks. Some of the Taranaki refugees of the Maori War were being brought to Nelson in the boats "Lord Worsley" and "Lord Ashley" for safety, and to be billeted by the people. The

gun was to be fired when their boats arrived. We children all crowded down to the water's edge to see them, but were quite disappointed that we could not take anyone home with us, as our house was already full.

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When I was ten years old I left Mrs. Sait's school and went to live with my father in Renwicktown. I stayed two years and was then sent back to Nelson to Mrs. Fraser's private school.

One thing I remember Mrs. Sait saying before I left was that if I learnt etymology, syntax and prosody, she would give me a party. So I set myself to learn them off by heart and duly had my party.

Soon after this the Government started schools in New Zealand and called for teachers. After a most rigid examination, Mrs. Sait was appointed headmistress of the Nelson School. They gave her a large brick building belonging to the Church, which was afterwards used as the Boys' Grammar School. Mrs. Sait was an excellent teacher.

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Beside the "eel pond," in what is now the Queen's Gardens and where the Academy of Fine Arts building is situated, was a boys' school, with Mr. Ball as headmaster at that time.

The old Boys' College was built in Manuka Street, where Mrs. Dr. Renwick's house now stands, and Mr. Bradshaw was headmaster. Mr. Hawke, his assistant, we knew, and his widow, who is about ninety-nine years old, still lives.

Later, Sir David Munro bought the Boys' College and rebuilt it for his own residence. The new college was then built on its present site, Dr. Greenwood being the principal.

The Greenwoods were highly educated people and brought up a large family, all a credit to their parents and to the country they lived in. At one time Dr. Greenwood was Editor of the "Nelson Examiner."

I remember going to the college for lots of jolly parties and suppers.

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Mr. Alfred Fell and family, who lived near my old home, later built a big place near Brook Street Valley. They lived there till they all went back to England for a long trip.

I must say a few words here about Captain Fraser and his family, who came from Home to settle in Nelson beside his niece, my mother. Captain Fraser was the son of Alex. Fraser, solicitor, of Edinburgh. The only grandson now living is Judge Fraser, of the Arbitration Court. Captain Fraser left the English Navy and joined the East Indiamen.

He was gifted with second sight, and one night on board his boat he had a very vivid dream of his sister at Home. He dreamed that she died, and it was just as real as if he were there. When he got up he put down the time and described it just as he had seen it. He was on a homeward journey then, and when he arrived, before going on shore, he draped his sword with black crepe, as was the custom for mourning. The old man-servant met him at the door and started to tell him his sister had died, but Captain Fraser told him he already knew about it—his dream was perfectly true in every detail.

The Frasers belonged to the Lord Lovatt clan.

Major Richardson and Sir David Munro were two whom I remember so well. A favourite attitude of Sir David's was, when standing talking, to have his fingers and thumbs gripping the lapels of his coat. He was a courtly old gentleman.

Another worthy family who lived next us were the John Gullys. Mr. Gully, the talented artist whom everyone knows, was beloved by all. His wife was always busy with some charitable work. One of his daughters, Fanny, was my dearest chum at school and in after life. Many a happy time do we still have together talking over old times, our schooldays, with the tea parties and dances and old friends, etc. Fanny afterwards married the late Mr. Robert Lee, for many years Chief Inspector of Schools.

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To come back to my boarding school days at Mrs. Fraser's private school. We had Mr. John Gully to teach us drawing and painting and a dancing master came once a week. Some of my chums were Miss Kennedy, who was all eyes and too shy to speak, the Misses Georgie and Blanche Bush, and last, but not lease, Fanny Gully, who was always so very prim and proper.

One jolly picnic we had was out at Tahuna Beach, and we were having such a good time we did not notice the tide creeping up and up, covering a small patch of sand at the foot of the rocks that we had come over in the morning. The water was almost waist-deep, so we had to scramble up round the rocks with nothing to hold on to but little bits of rock that often came off in our hands. I remember feeling very frightened of falling into the sea that was splashing on the rocks below us, but we at last reached safety, all none the worse for the scramble and having enjoyed the fun of it.

My music was never very brilliant, but one piece I was always playing was "The Power of Love Waltz," a great favourite at the dances then.

Mr. Nathaniel Edwards gave a big ball just before I left school, at which I made my debut. My dress was of white muslin with ruchings round the bottom of the skirt, and little puff sleeves. I wore a white ribbon tied round my hair with the curls hanging round my shoulders; wore short white gloves, and carried a fan. A grand dance was that, with a most

delicious supper. We did not get home till daylight, as some of us went for a walk after it! I thought I was quite grown up after that.

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I remember going to see the first sod turned for the opening of the railway between Nelson and Brightwater. This opened up the Port Road, and a good highway was formed. A great celebration did we think that, but I have lived to see many wonders since—some being the telephone, electricity, motor cars, wireless, and lastly, aeroplanes. I heard through the wireless the description of the trip and landing of Kingsford Smith and party in the "Southern Cross" as it was taking place on the 11th September, 1928, the first plane to cross the Tasman Sea.

Another early wonder was the first weaver in Nelson, Mr. Alex. Blick, who spun his own material for suits, tea-towels, etc. The suits were all dyed the one colour, and because there was no cotton used in the weaving, they soon became very baggy.

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Another old celebrity I must mention was old *"Pelorus Jack," so well known to all those crossing from Wellington to Nelson in the old days. One friend of mine told me how she had come from Sydney and was not going back

*Pelorus Jack was a famous fish that escorted all boats through the French Pass.

without seeing "Pelorus Jack." Early one morning as she was coming across, the captain called out that it would soon be time to see him, so she jumped up and ran down to her husband's cabin (as she thought) and pulled and tugged a big toe she saw sticking out of bed, saying, "Tom, Tom, get up at once and come and see 'Pelorus Jack.'" The answer came, "What the d——l are you doing, and who are you?" She had gone into the wrong cabin in her excitement and very soon got out and ran up to see the great dolphin on her own. There he was, the famous "Pelorus Jack," leading the ship to safety, as was its custom for years and years, until he died of old age.

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Everyone was in fearful dread of Burgess and his murder gang. They travelled the country, killing anyone they thought had gold with him, many times finding they were mistaken. One day a poor innocent old man, known as "Jimmy," happened to meet them in the bush, and the murderers knew he had no gold, but thought he would go back to Nelson and report them, so they calmly shot him and buried him there. They were a heartless gang if you like.

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Church Hill was occupied mostly by the Barracks, from which a gun was fired every day at noon to set the time. The church in these days was just a small shed on the sum-

mit of the hill, but afterwards a very pretty wooden cathedral was built in its place. Now even that is being demolished and a fine building in stone is to replace it.

Looking down Trafalgar Street from the church steps, it was just a wide rough road with a deep ditch on the right-hand side. Each shop or house had a little bridge across it to the street. One of the shops, Webb's, the

Old Trafalgar Street, from Church Hill, in the 60's

tailors, had a huge old grape vine growing over the front of it.

An old landmark was Dr. Bush's windmill. It was built at the end of Trafalgar Street, near the present Post Office site, for working his flour mill; but for some reason or other, it never did its duty and stood there idle for years.

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Before I left school we saw the new Boys' College being built, and watched the operations from our windows with great interest.

I was sixteen when my education was finished at boarding school, and I went to live with my sister, Mrs. Hill, in Dunedin.

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As I passed through Wellington on my way to Dunedin, I stayed with the Dometts. When we first knew Mr. Alfred Domett in Nelson, he was an author. He afterwards became Commissioner of Crown Lands, then Premier of New Zealand.

Old Windmill, erected by Dr. Bush, on Maitai River, in the 60's

I stayed in Dunedin till I married Alex. Willis, then a Government official. We were married from my sister's well-known old house, "Montecillo," and after five or six years we moved to Wellington with our five children, and my husband was appointed Secretary to the Cabinet and also Clerk of the Executive Council, under Sir William Jervois. We travelled up in the "Penguin," which was later so sadly wrecked off Cape Terewhiti.

A few years after, we moved to Dr. Bennett's house in Johnsonville, where we lived for twenty-one years.

We lived at Island Bay for a time, and after my husband's death, I came to Wadestown. My family numbered thirteen, all growing up but one, and they are now scattered in Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

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Five of my boys and one daughter went to the Great War, all returning save one, who died of wounds in France.

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I began this story from the age of five, and am now seventy-eight years. I don't think there is anything more of interest to you that I can remember, but hope these few little incidents will serve to show you how some of my childhood days were spent.

WILLIS, A.A.

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