

From Drawer to Archive: the Blackie Family Collection

Ali Clarke, Hocken Collections, University of Otago

In the Blackie family farmhouse, beside the Matau branch of the Clutha River, near Kaitangata, was a large table. Into a drawer in that table went all sorts of pieces of paper, from tickets and receipts to letters and notebooks. Over more than a century and three generations, the oldest items were pushed to the back of the drawer as new items were added; a collection of fascinating items detailing the life of the farm, the family and the district accumulated.

Those papers form one part of a wonderful collection of Blackie family papers and photographs, donated to the Hocken Collections by Judith Robinson over the past few years. We have recently completed full arrangement and description of the collection, which is now listed on our online catalogue, Hākena (Reference: ARC-0329).¹

The Blackie family, originally from Dundee, began its connection with Otago in 1848, when James Blackie arrived in Dunedin on the *Philip*



Figure 1: An undated photograph of the Blackie family farmhouse near Kaitangata. The farm was named Pendreich. Reference MS-4443/149.



Figure 2: Among the oldest items in the collection are these three manuscript books of music. One is named Alex Laing; there are dates in the 1810s near to some tunes. They include many traditional Scottish tunes. At first we wondered if they were for the bagpipes, but now suspect they may be for the violin. We welcome any further thoughts on that! Reference: MS-4456/180.

Laing as first school master of the Otago Free Church colony. He started a school in Dunedin, but became ill with tuberculosis; he went to Sydney late in 1850 and died there early in 1851.

He had bought land for a farm near Kaitangata and, after various legal complications, his brother Davidson Blackie, plus wife Margaret Pandrich and four children, migrated to take up the land, arriving at Kaitangata in 1860. Three generations of Blackies ran the farm, while some family members branched out.

Davidson Blackie's son James was an early student of the University of Otago and the first graduate of the local Theological Hall – he served as a Presbyterian minister in Cromwell and Lumsden and large surrounding

Figure 3: A ticket for the Blackie family's voyage from Liverpool to Auckland in 1859. They travelled from Dundee to Glasgow by train, then by steamer to Liverpool, on the *Shooting Star* to Auckland, then by coastal ship to Dunedin. Reference: MS-4456/184.

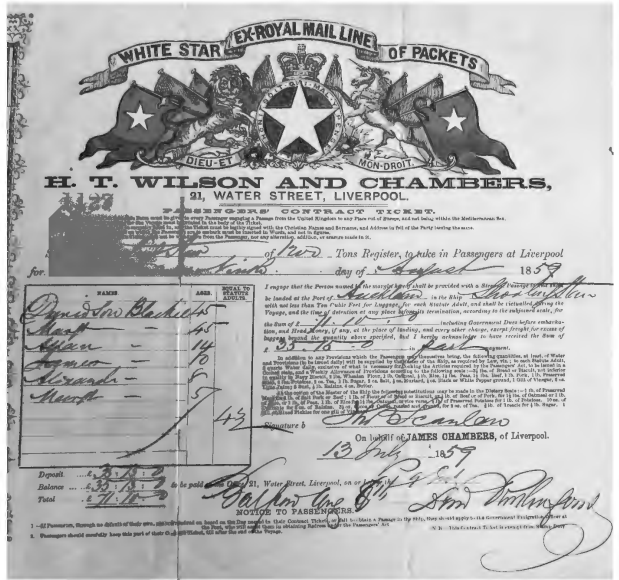


Figure 4: While there are many World War 1 letters in the collection, this is something rarer: letters from the South African War. James McDonald was a ploughman for the Blackies. He headed to war as a bugler with New Zealand's 5th contingent to South Africa, writing home to his employer, Alexander Blackie. Reference: MS-4456/074.

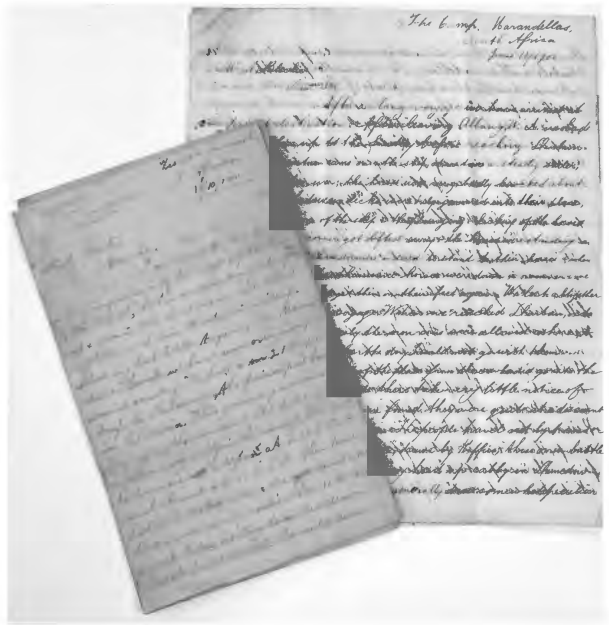




Figure 5: Perhaps the oldest photograph in the collection is this daguerreotype, dating from around the 1840s or 1850s. It is thought to be of Alexander Blackie (1788-1874), father of James and Davidson Blackie, and his second wife, Mary Henderson.
Reference: MS-4443/217.

districts until his early death. His widow, Jeanetta Blackie, was first principal of the Presbyterian Women's Training Institute (later known as Deaconess College), and one of his daughters, Agnes Blackie, was a long-serving physics lecturer at the university. Davidson's son Alexander worked on the family farm, talking a couple of years off in the late 1870s for an extensive world tour.

Alexander's daughter Nell was a physical education teacher and inspector, while his daughter Rhoda completed a home science degree and had a long career at Southland Technical College. Nell and Rhoda both retired back to the farm, where they lived with their brother Davidson and sister Pansie. Another part of the family was in North Otago. Margaret Blackie (Rev. James and Alexander's sister) married William Dewar; they farmed near Maheno and had a large family. Two of their sons, Alexander and Davidson, were killed in World War I.

The collection is wonderfully rich and it is only possible to highlight a few of its treasures here. There are many letters between family members and friends in New Zealand and Scotland, and also cousins in the USA, describing life in those places. There is an unusually full set of papers relating to Davidson and Margaret Blackie and the children's migration from Dundee to Otago, including their tickets, and some older items they brought with them (music, old family ledgers, school books). There are many accounts and receipts for farms and households. The papers of individual family members vary according to their work and

interests. Among the items relating to the University of Otago are Rev. James Blackie's 1870s student notebooks, Rhoda Blackie's 1910s home science essays and Agnes Blackie's reminiscences of her life as a student and then lecturer of physics from the 1910s to the 1950s. There are many items relating to World War I, including letters from various family members and friends on active service. A large collection of photographs ranges from 1840s and 1850s daguerreotypes to twentieth century studio portraits and informal snapshots.

We are very grateful to Judith Robinson, whose late husband Keith Robinson was a grandson of Rev. James and Jeanetta Blackie, for the donation of this collection.

Endnotes

1. Häkena, Blackie Family: Papers. Hocken Collections. Accessed 27 March, 2018. http://hakena.otago.ac.nz/scripts/mwimain.dll/144/DESCRIPTION/WEB_DESC_DET_REP/SISN%205486?sessionsearch