

Captain George Skea (1840–1909)

My grandfather, Captain George Skea, was one of five known children of Agnes McKay and George Alexander Collison Skae (later "Skea", born illegitimately in 1808 in Stenchaven to Alexander Skae and Martha Collison). George Snr married Agnes on 19th November 1832 in Aberdeen's Shiprow Chapel (United Christian Church) when he was 24 and she was 16. He had gone to sea as an apprentice in 1826 at the age of 17, and his maritime records show that he grew to a height of 5' 6", had fair skin, dark hair and brown eyes, and could write.

George and Agnes had a daughter, Sarah, born in 1834. For the next six years there were no recorded children, though some may have died in infancy, as most poor families in Scotland in the 1800s were having children every two years. Their son George, the subject of this article, was born on 3rd August 1840, followed by Alfred in 1843, a daughter Lamond in 1847, and Mary Ann in 1850.

Life was not easy for Agnes and George. He was variously a seaman, boatswain and mate from 1826–53, and was seldom at home. Somewhere along the way, he lost three toes on his left foot. Agnes was alone with her children in the 1841 and 1851 censuses and at Alfred's baptism in 1843. The family lived in a number of different tenements around Aberdeen, sometimes living near Agnes's brother Alexander and their younger, unmarried sister, Sarah.

Alexander McKay and his wife, Ann, had seven children near in age to those of Agnes and George. Two of their sons, Horatio (1836) and Alexander (1840), must have been especially close to their cousin, George Skea, as some of George's children believed them to have been his brothers. These two boys grew up to be successful captains with the Cunard Lines from the 1860s up until 1903. In 1858, their father, by then a shipmaster himself, could afford to pay for a listing in the Aberdeen postal directory – a sign of middle-class status in those days.

It does not look like George and Agnes Skea ever made it to the middle class. In July 1854, this item appeared in the *Aberdeen Journal*:

Agnes McKay, or Skea, and Sarah Skea, mother and daughter, both lately residing in Holburn Street, were brought up on a formidable indictment of several charges of stealing, or alternatively, the mother of stealing, and the daughter of re-settling [reselling], a great number of various articles of haberdashery, jewellery, etc., purloined from several leading houses in town. The case was reported in our local news a short time since. The elder prisoner pled guilty of theft, except to three articles, and the daughter of reset of theft of two rings. The plea was accepted and sentence pronounced – the mother to be imprisoned for nine months and the daughter for three months.

Agnes was 38 years old, but her signature in the court records is that of a trembling old woman. She was gravely ill. Within three weeks of her imprisonment at the Bridewell Prison, she was transferred to the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. The attending physician was not a surgeon. It is the medical archivist's opinion that the transfer was not for treatment; it was too late for that. Agnes died of uterine cancer on 29th October 1854.

What happened to her widower and their five children?

George remarried five years later, when he was 50. His second wife, Ann Moir, was a 49-year-old spinster (claiming to be 43), of 35 Ann Street, Aberdeen. George called himself a Ship Master on his marriage certificate, although it has not been possible to confirm this with maritime records. He may not still have been sailing in 1859, because he no longer lived near the harbour. On 26th January 1870, George died of liver disease, which he had had for six years. He was 61 years old, and his address was 15 Ann Street, Aberdeen.

Sarah Skea, aged 20 when she was imprisoned in 1854, has disappeared. No further census listings or records of her marriage or death in Scotland can be found. Did she die before the recording of deaths began in 1855? Did she leave the country? The search continues.

Attempting to follow up what little I knew of John Wilson's birth mother, I decided to look for a marriage anywhere in Scotland between an Ann McDonald and a man surnamed Walker, the names John had given on his marriage certificate. For a while, I searched in vain - then, not only did I find one, but I found it taking place in none other than Croy! The bride, Ann McDonald, was aged 26 at the marriage on 29th July 1870, which meant that she would have been about 15 in 1859 when I believed that John was born. I knew that John McHattie, his suspected father, came from Croy. Could it be that the local boy John McHattie had put the local girl Ann McDonald in the family way? Perhaps she, being so young, was sent down the road to Cawdor to have the baby before he was taken away to be brought up by his father's family, apparently by the very understanding Jane McLean, who was soon to marry the father of both Ann's baby and the one she herself was also expecting? Was John McHattie, who died in 1864 of "consumption of 10 years", making the most of the time he had left?

If this was indeed John Wilson McHattie, how did an illegitimate boy come to be so educated and so able to make his mark in life? The sophisticated flourish of his signature on the documents I had in my possession could only have come from a skilled hand. I knew that the family at Darnaway Castle had taken a kindly interest over the years in the lives of their employees. I already had good evidence that Lord and Lady Moray had, in the 1830s, paid for the medical training at Edinburgh of Dr Richard McHattie, another grandson of James, who went on to make his mark in Australia. I also knew from her obituary that "Lord and Lady Moray took a great interest" in Elizabeth (Alexander's grandmother) and paid her a "last tribute of respect by laying a handsome wreath on her grave" when she died in 1907 aged 103.

Could it be that the family at Darnaway Castle may also have lent a hand to John Wilson McHattie? Had they seen a quiet young boy taking far more interest in working in the castle grounds than learning the family blacksmithing trade and, perhaps, seen to it that he received an education? I knew that John had started his working life for Mackintosh of Mackintosh at Moy, and I had been wondering how he came to start out at such an illustrious address. It really does seem likely that the good folk at Darnaway Castle might have arranged it for him.

My search has been going on for some time now, and I have to feel I may have gone as far as I can in tracking down the link between my great-grandfather Alexander and his "brother John". There really does seem to be no record in existence anywhere of John Wilson's birth. The actual truth may never be known. On the other hand, you never know what new piece of information may be just around the corner. For now, though, I'm content to gaze with the tourists at the floral clock and murmur (just loudly enough for those around me to hear): "Ah yes - Great-Uncle John ...".

Allison Gale

No. 13371

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Alfred Skea was 11 years old when his mother went to prison. In May 1859, three months before his father's remarriage, Alfred boarded a ship called the *John and Mary* as an apprentice seaman and set sail out of North Shields at the mouth of the River Tyne in north-east England. He was not quite 16 years old. Alfred's subsequent fate is unknown. There is no record of his marriage or death in Scotland, and he is not in the 1881 census records for all of Great Britain. He may have died at sea or emigrated to Ireland, Canada, Australia or America, as did many seamen of his day. Much more searching remains to be done.

Larmond Skea was seven years old when her mother went to prison. In 1861, aged 14 but claiming to be 17, she was a woollen factory worker, boarding with the John Thompson family in the Lower Denburn Street tenement in which her father had lived two years earlier. In 1864, when she was almost 17 but claimed to be 18, Larmond married 21-year-old Private James Goodall of the 78th Highlanders. In 1869, she was the informant (signing with an "X") when her Aunt Sarah McKay died. There is no evidence of any children to Larmond and James. He was a tailor after leaving the military, but did not do well. He had already died by 1877, when Larmond died of tuberculosis, aged 29, in the poorhouse of St Nicholas Parish.

Mary Ann Skea was four years old when her mother went to prison. She probably went to live with her aunt, Sarah McKay, because she was with her for the census of 1861, when she was 11, and still there in 1868, when she was 18 and giving birth to an illegitimate son she named George Skea. When she was 22, Mary Ann married a 32-year-old journeyman tailor named William Deans. He was still alive at the 1891 census, but died before Mary Ann. The couple adopted a son named Ramsey and had another named William, born in 1879. Mary Ann's eldest son, now calling himself George Deans, was the informant of his mother's death on 4th December 1902. She was 52 years old and lived in the Aberdeen Poor House.

And our George? He was 13 years old when his mother went to prison, and 14 when she died. He attended Mr Thaines' School of Aberdeen for eight years. At the end of May 1857, two months before his 17th birthday, he began a five-year indenture as a seaman's apprentice. He boarded his first ship, the *Fury*, in July. A small ship with eight crew plus three apprentices, it made six trips along the English east coast between Shields and London while George was aboard. He left the *Fury* in December 1857, and the notation next to his name in the ship's log says: "absconded". His whereabouts cannot be discovered again until 1865, when he left a ship called the *Olive Branch* (crew agreement still missing) and boarded the *Hollinside* in South Shields. According to the *Hollinside's* log, George left his previous vessel "with leave and with liability". Between September 1865 and September 1866, he made a round trip to Bombay with 16 other men and five apprentices. He earned £2 and 15 shillings per month.

Some of George's descendants believe he travelled to the Holy Land with Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) on the *Quaker City*, a steamship which left New York City (crew agreement unavailable) in June 1867. Twain wrote about the trip in a collection of essays that became the book *The Innocents Abroad*. George could not have been aboard the *Quaker City*, because from December 1866 to December 1867 he was the mate on the *Raymond*, which sailed out of Dublin to Alexandria in Egypt, Constantinople in Turkey, and other ports on the Black Sea. Twain was also in Constantinople and on the Black Sea in the late summer and early autumn of 1867. The persistence of this family story and the coincidence of their being in the same part of the world at the same time makes it all the more likely that they met.

After leaving the *Raymond*, George was hired for two months as the only mate on a smaller ship, the *Savannah La Mar*, sailing out of Newcastle to Kronstadt, Russia, off the Baltic Sea. There were only eight men on this ship – all, except the captain, younger than 30. George was 27 and earning £5 5s per month.

In September 1868, George became the first mate on the *Magdala* and began an 18-month journey to South Africa, with stops in France, India and Belgium. According to the crew agreements of that time, most ships started out with one cargo for a particular destination, and

had their owners' permission to take on other cargo when they got there. The *Magdala* stayed in South African waters for several months. In addition to the captain and the first mate, there were ten young men on board, one of whom was a problem. In the ship's log, the captain describes repeated threats and hostilities against himself or George Skea from the acting second mate, Thomas Young. They were at sea off the Cape of Good Hope, and the captain was concerned because there were no leg-irons on board with which to restrain the man. He consulted George about what to do, and the two of them decided

for the safety of my crew's life and the Mate's and the safety of the ship and cargo, me and the Mate intended to lead the 2nd Mate to think it would be all right when the ship arrived and did intend to keep a good lookout for the 2nd Mate to prevent further trouble.

They made it back to Marseilles, France, where Young was discharged in October 1869. The rest of the crew, except for the first mate and the steward, were also replaced. The ship continued to work in European waters until March 1870 – George was sailing on the *Magdala* when his father died in Aberdeen in January 1870.

From October to December 1870, George, now aged 30 and earning £6 9s per month, served as second mate on the *T.E. Forster*, probably his first steamship. He sailed between England, Germany, France and the Netherlands. There were 24 crew, aged from 15 to 60. In 1871, George worked for two months each on two more steamships: he was third mate on the *Abwick Castle*, sailing to Alexandria, and was second mate on the *Hastings*, sailing between England, Ireland and Malta.

Sometime in 1871, George Skea fathered a son whom he named George. The birth record has not been found, but the fact of his existence is confirmed by his living descendants. It is likely that he was born in North Shields, South Shields or Liverpool, and that his mother's name was Mary Ann Smith. No marriage record for Mary Ann Smith and George Skea has been found; but the birth and death records of their second son, John, exist.

George became the first mate on the *Levanter* in November 1871. He was aged 31, and the other 29 men on board were aged from 19 to 48. From England, this sailing vessel travelled to Martinique and Trinidad in the West Indies and to Bremerhaven, Germany. The captain was four years younger than George and apparently not as experienced. Before they left Grimsby, nine men had deserted. The ship's log is full of entries about drunkenness, men refusing to work and threats against the captain. George Skea always signs the log beneath the signature of the captain. After the end of June, it is George who has written the entries. Two examples:

Thursday, 11th July 1872, 1 AM

Lat. 44° 28' N, Long. 41° 13' W

Blowing a heavy gale, the ship rolling heavily, some tiers of barrels washed adrift – had to cut away the bulwark to let them go overboard to prevent them from breaking the pump station or hatch covering. (signed) George Skea, Mate

Sunday, 14 July 1872, 5 PM

Lat. 45° 6' N, Long. 38° 30' W

W. G. Sherborne, Master, and James Moffatt, Steward, went on board the Bergen Charles Lambert off and for Hartlepool as passengers, the Master being in a very low state of mind leaving I. George Skea, in charge. (signed) George Skea, Acting Master

George was the acting master for the rest of the journey. Perhaps this experience convinced him that he could be a shipmaster – for, when he left the *Levanter* in October 1872, he enrolled in the Marine College at South Shields, obtaining his Captain's Certificate in 1873.

In September, aged 33, George Skea signed on as second mate for the *Warree*, a steamship with a crew of 20, bound for Africa. He was to earn his highest salary on record: £9 a month. When they arrived at Bonny River, on the west coast of Africa, the ship's log indicates that six crew members were transferred to other ships to be sent home, and one man died of "African fever". On Monday morning, 29th December 1873, off Benin Bar, this entry was made:

George Bowmaker, Captain, and George Skea, Second Mate, went onboard the S. S. Senegal to proceed up the coast for the benefit of their health as advised by the Doctor of the S. S. Senegal.

In December 1873, with George still in Africa, Mary Ann Smith gave birth in Tynemouth to a son named John Ingram Skea. The birth certificate says that his father was George Skea, Ship Master. Sadly, this baby died eight months later in Plaistow, London.

The next time George Skea appears in available written records is in early 1882. At the census in April 1881, he was probably at sea, because his son, George, is listed as a "guest" in the household of a widow named Margaret McLachlan in Glasgow. The nine-year-old's mother had presumably died by then, although there is no record of her death in Scotland.

Some descendants were told that George Skea travelled with Henry Morton Stanley on his African expedition to find Dr David Livingstone. Stanley's first expedition began in Zanzibar, on the east coast of Africa, in January 1871, when George was just boarding a ship in England for a journey to Egypt. George was not in African waters again until September 1873. By early 1873, Stanley had already found Livingstone, and Livingstone had since died. However, Stanley was involved in an African war in January 1874 and had travelled to Cape Coast Castle, on the west coast of Africa, sometime during the fall of 1873. The Scottish 42nd Highlanders participated in that war between the British and the Ashanti tribe. On 1st January 1874, the *S.S. Senegal*, probably with George Skea still aboard, was in Lagos, about 325 miles east of Cape Coast Castle. Stanley's journey inland began on 6th January.

Stanley returned to England in February 1874, and in August he sailed to Zanzibar. There were three other white men on his next expedition across the continent of Africa, beginning that November; but none was named George Skea. At the end of that expedition, in August 1877, Stanley and 80 of his followers sailed on four different ships around the southern tip of Africa back to Zanzibar, where he boarded a steamer for his return to England in December. Stanley sailed back to Zanzibar in January 1879 and hired his loyal native followers to help him in the development of the Congo. With them, he sailed around the north of Africa to the mouth of the Congo, via the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, between May and August 1879. Although George Skea did not appear to work on passenger ships, it is not known where he was during these years, and conceivably he could have been on any one of the ships taken by Stanley in his travels. By then, Henry Morton Stanley was a very famous man. If George Skea had met him, he most certainly would have told his children.

In April 1882, when he was 41, George joined the crew of the *Anchoria* as fourth mate. He told the captain that his previous employment had been on the *Aline*; but a maritime archivist has not found him listed in any of the *Aline's* crew agreements from 1877-82. The *Anchoria* was a 4,167-ton steamship that sailed between Glasgow and New York with a crew of 100 men or more. George was promoted to third mate, and made five round trips between April and December 1882. The day he boarded for his fourth trip, 19th September 1882, is also the day he married Eliza Taylor Lea in Govan, Glasgow. She was 32 and from Birkenhead, near Liverpool. Her descendants were told that she was related to the Lea & Perrins Worcester Sauce family, although the 1881 census shows her as a servant in Barnston, Cheshire.

Following his service on the *Anchoria*, George began his first official appointment as captain on a small steamship called the *Ardgowan*, which he guided through voyages in the "home" or "coasting" trade from 1882-5. He sailed from England to Belgium, France, Ireland, the

Netherlands and Wales. He had a crew of 12 to 15 men between the ages of 16 and 52. Like his father before him, the captain was seldom at home with his family. He was at sea when his son, Wallace, was born on 9th July 1883, and also when Wallace died 13 days later.

George Skea's name does not appear in the Lloyd's Register of Captains after 1885. This means that he did not serve as a captain or mate again, and it is not known if he continued to go to sea. In October 1886, his son, George, sailed for Australia on the *Lizzie Bell*, to begin fulfilling his four-and-a-half-year indenture as an apprentice. Young George, now 15, was seasick for the entire three-month voyage, and when he reached Melbourne he was one of 11 crew members who deserted the ship. He hid in the Australian bush and eventually found work as a sheep-shearer and opal-gauger. He told his grandson that his father had disowned him because of his desertion. He never left Australia, and died there in 1944. His hospital records say that his mother was Eliza Taylor Lea – possibly the only mother he knew, and for whom he had been an only child until he left home.



When George and Eliza's next son, Alfred, was born on 30th September 1887, George was an ironmonger – and, when their daughter, Nancy Marie Lea, was born on 4th June 1889, he was a "Jeweller Master". Both these children were born in Bootle, just north of Liverpool, where Eliza's family lived. On 10th June 1890, Eliza died of acute peritonitis at the age of 40, and George was left with two children under three years old.

Through the years, George must have maintained his connections to Aberdeen – for, on 8th January 1891, in Liverpool, he married Agnes Laird Hobbs of 24 Rosemount Place, Aberdeen. Agnes was 23 and George was 50; but, even though he had left Aberdeen before she was born, their families probably knew each other. In 1863, Agnes's parents were living in the same tenement at 15 Ann Street where George's father died in 1870. His father's second wife had lived in the same tenement, at 35 Ann Street, where Agnes's grandmother lived. Agnes was the seventh of eight children of John Hobbs and Margaret Ingram. Only her eldest sister Ann and youngest brother Alexander remained in Aberdeen. Of the others, John died in infancy, Joseph and his family settled in South Africa, Nellie and her family and the unmarried Margaret came to the USA, and David became a Church of Scotland minister in Glasgow.

George and Agnes's first child, Florence, was born on 21st July 1891 in Bootle. George was a "Master Mariner" at the marriage and on Florence's birth certificate. By 1894, they had moved to Aberdeen, where their first son, Horatio McKay Skea, was born in his grandparents' home on 3rd May. George was now a "Shipmaster in the Merchant Service". Ethel Margaret was born at 81 Westburn Road on 20th January 1898, and Sidney was born at 13 Mid Stocket Road on 20th October 1899. These addresses are all granite tenements which are still standing.

According to information passed on to family members, George and Agnes were in the USA at some time during the 1890s – probably between 1894 and 1898, because Nancy remembered it, and she was not yet five years old when Horatio was born in 1894. She told her son that the family had a difficult time: Americans ridiculed their accents, and when they went back to Scotland they were so poor that they had to survive on a gruel made of oats and hot water. They had returned to New York for good by the time the youngest son, Edwin, was born on 6th April 1903, on Windsor Terrace in Brooklyn. Agnes was 35 and George was 62. The Brooklyn Directory listed three addresses for George Skea, Optician, between 1900 and 1905: 11 Poplar, 146 Nassau and 299 10th.

According to family lore, George Skea had a business on Maiden Lane, in Lower Manhattan, in the early twentieth century. It is variously described as a jewellery shop, a sporting goods store, a pawnshop or a swap shop. Inquiries to the county and city archives of New York have turned up no record of this business; however, this means only that it was not a partnership and that George did not own the building in which the business was located. The family did own things that could have been taken in trade from seamen; for example, they had a parrot which offended the ladies in the neighbourhood with its foul language.

Although George had disowned his son in Australia, and nobody else in the family seemed to know of his existence, there must have been some contact between the two. The junior George in Australia remembered mailing a package of opals, for which he had never been paid, to his "brother in New York", and he was in possession of a business card which read:

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(ROYAL NAVAL RESERVE.)

Nautical Optician, Jeweler, Diamond Dealer,
ETC., ETC.

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86 E. Third Street	
Windsor Terrace,	BROOKLYN, N.Y.

In his mid-sixties, George Skea may have achieved some measure of financial security: there was money to pay for formal photographs of Agnes and himself and of their three daughters, looking well-dressed and lovely. Soon, however, everything fell apart: on 22nd December 1907, Agnes died of heart trouble. She was 40 years old, the same age Eliza had been when she died. George was now 67; Alfred was 20, Nancy was 18, Florence was 16, Horatio was 13, Ethel was nine, Sidney was eight and Edwin was four.

Perhaps George thought his older children were responsible enough to take care of the younger ones. Whatever his thinking, it was probably clouded by pain. On 12th July 1909, this article appeared in the *Brooklyn Daily Times*:

SHOT HIMSELF ON GRAVE

Retired Soldier Sought Death in Greenwood Where His Wife Was Buried

Despondent since the death of his wife 18 months ago, Capt. George H. Skea, a retired British army officer [sic], who lives at 86 East Third Street, Parkville, attempted to end his life yesterday by firing a bullet just over his heart while standing over his wife's grave in Greenwood Cemetery. Ambulance Surgeon Murray, of Seney Hospital, attended the wounded man, who was later taken to the institution. His wife died on Christmas, 1907, leaving seven children. Yesterday the captain took two pots of flowers and placed them on his wife's grave and then shot himself. At the hospital today it was said that Capt. Skea was doing nicely and would probably recover.

George did not recover. He died on 14th July and was buried in the same unmarked grave in the Brooklyn cemetery in which Agnes lay.

I am one of George's 22 American grandchildren, and in 1997 I found and visited this grave site and left my name at the Greenwood Cemetery office. Within six months, there was another visitor to the cemetery: George's Australian great-grandson, George Skea, who was led there by the information on the business card he had found in his grandfather's effects. After learning of the existence of his American relative, he contacted me – and, 90 years after the Captain had died, these two descendants of his met in the summer of 1999 and rejoined the branches of the family of Captain George Skea.

Nancy Skea Severance No. 7836

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