

Murdoch McLeod

In July 1939 The People's Journal featured a visitor to Dundee from Australia - Murdoch McLeod. He was a successful flour miller in New South Wales, Australia, and was then 83 (1).

He said he was a Logiealmond boy, but that when he was 13 he had decided to run away to sea. He was bored working for a book binder in Perth and was inspired by the 'Swiss Family Robinson'. He stole a rowing boat and went down the Tay with the tide as far as Invergowrie, dined on strawberries, walked on into Dundee and stowed away on a boat bound for the Baltic. The crew discovered him before they sailed and the captain took him to the magistrates who sent him to the training ship Mars.

Murdoch McLeod's story started for me in January 2020 when we went to a small exhibition called 'Sons of the Mars' on HMS Unicorn (which is the third oldest ship afloat in the world, and now permanently moored in Dundee harbour). The exhibition concluded with Murdoch McLeod as one of the successes of the Mars experiment. (2)

When Murdoch joined the Mars in October 1869, it had only just arrived in the Tay, and was moored across the estuary from Dundee, off Woodhaven pier in Fife, to begin a new career as a training ship and home for homeless and destitute boys. Murdoch joined as Number 15 – and that was what he was known by on board until he left at the age of sixteen. Although his was not the first name in the admission book, he was the first to join voluntarily, so the article in the People's Journal was headed 'He was No.1 Boy on the "Mars" '.

It had been launched in 1848, an 80-gun, two deck ship of the line. It saw service as a supply carrier and in coastal defence and was later fitted with a screw propulsion system. In the 1860s it was given a new role as a sail training ship to turn boys into seamen for the Royal Navy and Merchant Marine. The boys were largely the homeless and destitute victims of a rapidly growing industrial city. (The training ship was a variation of the Industrial School, offering an alternative to imprisonment for street children.)

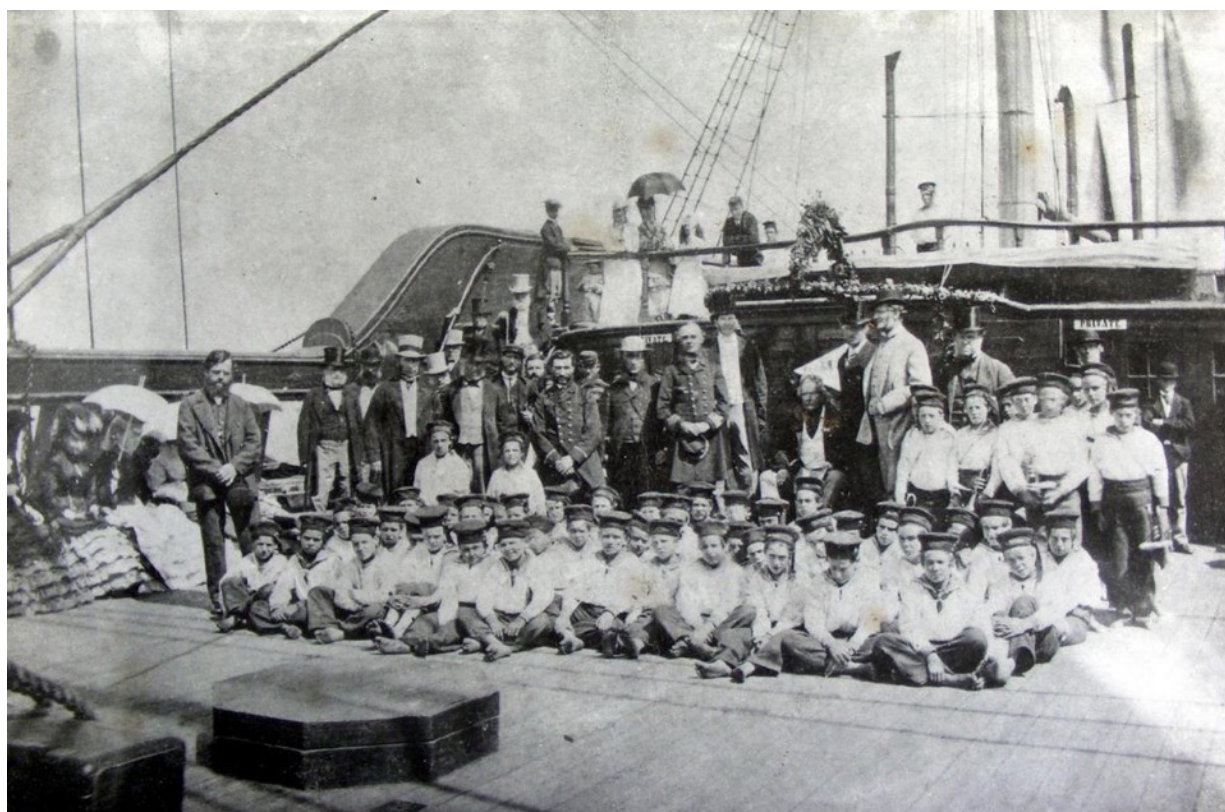
The Admissions Book records that Murdoch McLeod was 13 years old, 4 foot 10½ inches tall, stout, with a fair complexion, brown hair, hazel eyes and a straight nose, and had an anchor and thistle on his left arm. He could read and write, was intelligent and in good health. It also named his parents as Murdoch and Helen McLeod, and says they were dead. In fact, his father was Robert McLeod and both parents were alive. The Dundee Magistrates' court charged him with 'destitution' and being 'an idle wandering orphan', and sent him to the Mars until he was sixteen. He said later to a journalist that when his father learned of his situation, he sent him a very irate letter, 'which ended by saying that I would have all the nonsense knocked out of my head very soon now that I was "in the hands of the Philistines"'. He added, 'During the next few years. I often thought of those words.' (3)

The Mars could accommodate up to 400 boys at a time., though there were not so many in the early days when Murdoch was there. The lives of the boys were highly regimented with the ship run on Admiralty lines and strict punishments. They slept in hammocks on the lowest deck and were kept busy, with classes in English, Maths and Geography in the morning, and in the afternoon practical studies like shoe repairing, tailoring, wood work, metal work and seamanship.

The training ship Mars taken from Woodhaven (2)



An early photograph showing the patrons and supporters of the Mars with the staff and boys in 1870 when Murdoch was one of them (2)



Sports and music gave the boys opportunities to entertain on and off the ship, and a possible career as a bandsman. There was a regular summer camp at Elie and a variety of competitions, entertainments and visits.

The boys had a tough life and Murdoch must have pushed the boundaries. His Report of Conduct and Character in School in 1871 records '2nd class for conduct, very intelligent, but sly and badly behaved', and six months later '1st class for conduct, very active, clever and improving'. He told the journalist that many a time he was slung across the cannon and lashed with a rope's end. Summer 1871 was eventful. In July he fell overboard from the port gangway and was lucky to be rescued by one of his colleagues who seized a lifebuoy and swam to him; it was a considerable drop to the water and a strong tide was running. In August he failed to win a medal in a swimming match and the next night he took a lifebuoy, got into the river and swam to Newport pier and then on to Tayport – about six kilometres. There he was apprehended by the constable, dried out and returned to the ship. He claimed to have fallen overboard.

He left the Mars when he turned 16 and joined the Royal Navy for five years and then the merchant service for ten. He gained his master's ticket aged 27. The article in the People's Journal indicates some of the adventures he had and the places he visited. He tells a good story.

- malaria in British Guiana, and overseeing a sugar plantation there as his ship had left
- years on clippers in the China trade
- ship on fire so they had to toss kegs of gunpowder overboard
- injuring the cook who charged him, but getting let off as the British Consul in Fuchow, now Fuzhou, was a son of Lord Mansfield, the laird of Logiealmond! (In the 1890s the Consul was R W Mansfield)
- attacked when helping to bury a Canton Chinese crew member in Fuchow territory
- accidentally killing a Finnish mutineer who was trying to escape to the gold diggings in South Africa, and again getting off, this time thanks to his Perthshire accent!

In his twenties he joined Lund's Blue Anchor Line on steamships between England, South Africa and Australia which carried passengers and cargo. He married Ada Cawte in Sydney two years later, and became a captain with the Australian Coastal Service. By the time he was 38 he was ready to leave the sea. He started a new career in flour milling, becoming manager, partner and then owner, and remained active in the industry for forty years. He was very successful in New South Wales, managing mills in Dubbo, Narromine, Gilandra and Wellington. He was reputed to run the mills like a ship, precise and efficient. (4)

Murdoch and Ada lived in Wellington and had five children, three girls and two boys, though one of the boys died young. They built a fine house; single storey, shady, with Art Nouveau features and called it 'Logiealmond'. He collected clocks. He was twice mayor of Wellington, and was very generous in his contributions to the town; providing sporting trophies for swimming, tennis, bowls and cricket, sculptures and a monument to John Oxley the town's pioneer founder, war memorials at the school, the mill and the cemetery, and contributions to the Presbyterian Church and the Horticultural Society.

When he retired and moved to Sydney after his wife's death, he gave 'Logiealmond' to Wellington as a cottage hospital. The Hospital Board sold it in 1950, used the funds for X-ray equipment, and it became a private home again.

Murdoch McLeod as a Sea Captain in the late 1870s
From 'Clocking On with Murdoch McLeod', by Cheryl & John Mudford 1989 (4)



McLeod's Flour Mill, Warne Street, Wellington, NSW
From Wellington Historical Society (4)



Twenty years ago, or perhaps longer, we were passed a letter from NSW addressed to Logiealmond Chamber of Commerce asking if we could explain why the enquirer's house was called Logiealmond, and here at last is the answer.

Murdoch McLeod returned to Britain several times, including in 1903, 1933 and 1939. In 1903 he went round the world looking at flour milling, particularly in Europe and North America. On that trip, after going to 'dear old, smoky, grimy London', he went Scotland, and commented that 'one old water mill he visited in Drumtochtie was exactly as it was 35 years before' (Drumtochtie was the fictional name of Logiealmond in the popular novels of Ian McLaren). On his trip in 1933 he was awarded the Freedom of the City of London through his membership of the Honourable Company of Master Mariners. (It had become a livery company in 1926, the first to be formed since 1746). On the next visit he arranged for a memorial stone to his maternal grandparents in Chapelhill cemetery, inscribed 'In memory of Alexander Leitch B.A. born Logiealmond 1792 died 1867 and his wife Isabella Crichton born Amulree 1807 died 1890. Erected by their grandson Murdoch McLeod Sydney Australia' (4). He died in Sydney in his daughter's house in 1946 aged 89.

Murdoch McLeod is quoted in newspapers in Britain and Australia with the stories of his achievements and adventurous life, but hardly mentions his parents. He did, however, put a notice in the Wellington Times NSW of the death of his 'beloved father', Robert McLeod, aged 80, in Plumstead, Kent, England. He often remarks on his origins in Logiealmond and he must have lived there long enough to have a Perthshire accent. However, he was not born there, or even in Scotland.

The census and other sources like birth certificates can add a little to the picture of his life. He was born on 15th June 1856 in Bloomfield Road, Plumstead, Kent, the son of Robert McLeod, engine smith at the Woolwich Arsenal, and Helen, formerly Leitch. His parents had married in the adjacent Debtford parish church earlier that year and were buried in Plumstead cemetery in 1895 and 1913, so spent most of their lives in London, though both were born in Scotland. I would not be surprised to find that Murdoch had erected a memorial stone for them as he had for his grandparents at Chapelhill.

Murdoch was still living with his parents in Plumstead in 1861 when he was 4 years old, but it seems likely that he spent most of the next nine years living with his mother's parents, Alexander and Isabella Leitch in Logiealmond. They rented five rooms in a house next to the pub in the village of Harrietfield where Murdoch would have attended the local school. His grandfather worked as a contractor and agricultural labourer, and later a land measurer in the early days of Ordnance Survey mapping. Alexander was the son of the local doctor and the gravestone records that he had a B.A., but they do not seem to have been well off. Their children started work young as did Murdoch with the book binder in Perth, and from where his well-publicised adventures began.

Murdoch McLeod was a very successful and generous man. As well as the many donations he made to the town of Wellington NSW where he built up a flour milling business, he remembered his time on the training ship Mars. When it was closed as a training ship for boys, sold and broken up in 1929, the gold medal he had provided for the best boy each year, was transferred to another charity for boys in Dundee. He aimed to provide some treats too: ex-Mars boy Tom Mullardy recollected that at Christmas 'there was a shilling block of chocolate per boy from a fund set up by a 'former pupil' who'd become an Australian millionaire.'

References

- (1) The People's Journal, Saturday, July 8, 1939
- (2) Sons of the Mars exhibition was based on research by Douglas Gordon, published in 2013 as 'We'll Send Ye Tae the Mars', and, for the exhibition in 2019, as 'Sons of the Mars'. These books give the background to the ship, the need, local support, and the lives of the staff and boys
- (3) The Angus, Melbourne, Australia, 2 August 1933
- (4) The Wellington Historical Society has provided an extensive collection of newspaper references and photographs. The book, "Clocking On" with Murdoch McLeod and the Castlereagh Flour Mill, 1989, by Cheryl and John Mudford records and illustrates the history of the flour mills
- (5) Chapelhill Graveyard & Logiealmond Cemetery Memorial Inscriptions, West Stormont Historical Society, 2005, grave 11

Rosalind Pearson

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The memorial stone Murdoch McLeod erected to his maternal grandparents
in the burial ground at Chapelhill, Logiealmond



Murdoch McLeod's house "Logiealmond" in Wellington NSW
From realestateview.com.au

