

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020

2031 The Elusive Mr Stockand

by Gordon Hughes

The Elusive William Stockand

William Stockand emerges from the mists of mid - 19th century Orkney to marry Isabella Firth¹ in 1850². He fades into anonymity. Isabella gives birth to a daughter in 1853³.

I have been on the trail of William Stockand.

Stockan⁴, with various interchangeable phonetic spellings, may be a single origin surname from the farm of Stockan in the parish of Sandwick on the main island of Orkney⁵. This group of islands is off the north coast of Scotland and much of their heritage and dialect derives from the Viking settlers who started arriving in the 9th century.

There are baptismal records of seven William Stockans born between 1800 and 1833⁶. Death records revealed an eighth potential William⁷. I started the process of elimination.

By the 1841 Scottish census there were three possible Williams, all in Orkney. Of these one came to Australia^{8 9}; one went to The United States^{10 11} and the other is the candidate for marrying Isabella Firth. Born on the 24th August 1828 in Sandwick, the son of Peter and Jannet Stockan¹², he is a 15-year-old agricultural labourer in 1841¹³, lodging in a bothy close to Skaill House, Sandwick, where the principle landowner of the parish lived¹⁴. His parents and seven siblings are on the nearby farm of Unigar¹⁵.

Many young Orcadians signed up with the Hudson's Bay Company in search of employment and adventure. Established in 1670 it traded fur, timber and coal from the Canadian North West. They recruited men who sought to escape the poverty and overcrowding of small tenant farms in Orkney. Orcadians were used to harsh weather and hard work. William Stockand,¹⁶ in return for his outward passage and a cash advance, signed a five-year contract with the company through their agent in Stromness, Edward Clouston, probably in September 1850¹⁷.

I looked at William's timeline and contrasted it with Isabella Firth's. An interwoven pattern began to take shape.

On the 27th September 1850 Isabella Firth marries William Stockand at her family farm of Wasdale in the parish of Firth¹⁸. The celebrations would have taken place at one of the low stone and thatch barns¹⁹ which were once typical of the islands. Wasdale served this area with a quarterly cattle market and associated informal ale house²⁰. This market also provided an opportunity for socializing and courting²¹ by more than just those who came to sell and buy cattle. This may be how William and Isabella met.

Their time together was short. Three weeks after the wedding, on October 15th, William Stockand, aged 21, together with other recruits, sails from Kirkwall on board the *Queen* for Gravesend²², a port on the Thames, downstream from London.

He leaves Gravesend for Vancouver Island on *The Tory*²³. He shares a crowded steerage cabin with five other young Orkney men, four of whom are also called William. Nicknames or last names must have been the rule, except perhaps for Christopher Finlay, at 17 the youngest occupant of cabin six²⁴.

In the 1851 Scottish census there is no record of William; Isabella is living back home at Wasdale²⁵. William Stockand arrives in Vancouver in May 1851²⁶. Part of the time he works as a labourer. Records indicate he may have been a crew member of the brig *Una* when it was driven ashore at Neah Bay in Washington State on Christmas day 1851²⁷.

In the New Year William is on the move again. He manages to get himself transferred onto the crew of the *Norman Morison* and leaves on the 21st January 1852 for Gravesend. The ship arrives on the 12th June, 1852²⁸.

Sometime in July 1852 Isabella becomes pregnant.

William leaves London on the *Norman Morison* on the 20th August 1852, but this time he is recorded as a passenger²⁹, possibly because he jumps ship to travel to Orkney and breaks his contract. He arrives back in Vancouver in January 1853 and he is last recorded by the Hudson's Bay Company receiving 1854-1855 wages as a non-contracted labourer³⁰. After this he disappears from company records.

Had William returned to Orkney in 1852 to fetch his wife and, if so, why did she not go? Did she think that he had not established himself adequately and wanted to wait a bit longer, or had she decided life in the harsh conditions of North West Canada was not for her? Perhaps she awaited his return, or a summons that never came. Did he lose touch with his wife and was he drawn into the unruly world of mid-19th century North America? He may simply have died, undiscovered or unrecorded.

On the 19th April 1853 Isabella gives birth to her only child Margaret Garson Stockand³¹.

By 1861 Isabella and her daughter are lodging with her elderly aunt in the small cottage of Cadis, high on the hillside a half hour's walk east of Wasdale³². She stays there for the rest of her life and records herself as married until at least 1871³³. In 1881 she is a widow³⁴.

Isabella Stockan, dies in 1898³⁵ and is buried in the local kirkyard in an unmarked grave overlooking the shore³⁶. Of her husband no further record has yet been found, in British or North American archives.

I know that William was born to Peter and Jannet Stockan in August 1828. I also know that William Stockand married Isabella Firth in 1850, and that William Stockand sailed from Orkney to Vancouver in 1850. Finally, I know that Isabella had only one child and died a widow.

Although there is no irrefutable proof that this is one and the same William Stockand, the circumstantial evidence is strong and my hunt for genealogical proof and his fate continues.

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- ¹ Baptisms (OPR) Scotland. Firth and Stenness, Orkney. 21 October 1826. Firth, Isabella
- ² Marriages (OPR) Scotland. Firth and Stenness, Orkney. 27 September 1850. William Stockand and Isabella Firth.
- ³ Baptisms (OPR) Scotland. Firth and Stenness, Orkney 19 April 1853 Margaret Garson Stockand.
- ⁴ The spelling of Stockan/Stockand does vary in official documents for the individuals named in this essay. Spelling is used as recorded and therefore is not be consistent
- ⁵ Lamb, Gregor. (1981) Orkney Surnames. Edinburgh, Paul Harris Publishing. P. 58.
- ⁶ Births and Baptisms (OPR) Scotland. Sandwick, Stromness, Birsay. Orkney. 7 boys by the name of William Stockan, 1800-1833. The nearest recorded birth prior to 1800 in the OPR of a William Stockan is 1768
- ⁷ Deaths (SR) Scotland. Parish of Sandwick, Orkney. 24 June 1872. William Stockan aged 74. 030/33
- ⁸ Census Records. Scotland. Stromness, Orkney. 06 June 1841. William Stockan [son] ED9, property 50. Orkney Family History Society <https://orkneyfhs.co.uk/census/census.php>
- ⁹ Queensland Early Pioneers. Travel & Migration, Migration. William Stockan 1859. https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=ANZ%2FQFHS_QSLNDEARLYPIONEERS1824-1859%2F135854
- ¹⁰ Census Records. Scotland. Harray, Orkney. 06 June 1841. William Stockan [son] ED6, property 16. Orkney Family History Society <https://orkneyfhs.co.uk/census/census.php>
- ¹¹ USA Census 1870. Washington State. Chambers Prairie, Thurston. William Stockan. <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=USC%2F1870%2F004268772%2F00445%2F017>
- ¹² Births (OPR) Scotland. Sandwick, Orkney. 24 August 1828. Stockan, William
- ¹³ Census Records. Scotland. Sandwick, Orkney. 06 June 1841. William Stockan ED3, property 23. Orkney Family History Society <https://orkneyfhs.co.uk/census/census.php>
- ¹⁴ Census Records. Scotland. Sandwick, Orkney. 06 June 1841. William Watt [head] ED3, property 25. Orkney Family History Society <https://orkneyfhs.co.uk/census/census.php>
- ¹⁵ Census Records. Scotland. Sandwick, Orkney. 06 June 1841. Peter Stockan [head] ED3, property 28. Orkney Family History Society <https://orkneyfhs.co.uk/census/census.php>
- ¹⁶ Possibly of Unigar. The Hudson Bay records of Edward Clouston have not yet been located
- ¹⁷ Beattie, Judith Hudson, and Bass, Helen M. eds. (2003) *Undelivered Letters to Hudson's Bay Company Men on the Northwest Coast of America, 1830-57*. Vancouver, UBC Press. P. 465. At least two Orcadians who sailed with William Stockan signed on in Stromness on 1 September 1850
- ¹⁸ Marriages (OPR) Scotland. Firth and Stenness, Orkney. 27 September 1850. William Stockand and Isabella Firth
- ¹⁹ Firth, John. (1920) *Reminiscences of An Orkney Parish*. Stromness, W. R. Rendall. P.57
- ²⁰ Firth, John. (1920) *Reminiscences of An Orkney Parish*. Stromness, W. R. Rendall. P. 119
- ²¹ Gray, Jock. Farmer, Wasdale, Firth. Orkney. September 1968 and September 1969. Conversations
- ²² Beattie, Judith Hudson, and Bass, Helen M. eds. (2003) *Undelivered Letters to Hudson's Bay Company Men on the Northwest Coast of America, 1830-57*. Vancouver, UBC Press. P. 465
- ²³ Beattie, Judith Hudson, and Bass, Helen M. eds. (2003) *Undelivered Letters to Hudson's Bay Company Men on the Northwest Coast of America, 1830-57*. Vancouver, UBC Press. P. 414
- ²⁴ Beattie, Judith Hudson, and Bass, Helen M. eds. (2003) *Undelivered Letters to Hudson's Bay Company Men on the Northwest Coast of America, 1830-57*. Vancouver, UBC Press. P.391
- ²⁵ Census Records. Scotland. Firth and Stenness, Orkney. 30 March 1851. FIRTH, Isabella (daughter). ED2, property 41. Orkney Family History Society <https://orkneyfhs.co.uk/census/census.php>
- ²⁶ Beattie, Judith Hudson, and Bass, Helen M. eds. (2003) *Undelivered Letters to Hudson's Bay Company Men on the Northwest Coast of America, 1830-57*. Vancouver, UBC Press. P. 414
- ²⁷ Watson, Bruce M. (2003) Orcadians (and some Shetlanders) who worked west of the Rockies in the fur trade up to 1858. Unpublished document. 49/M [1939] P.74. Accessed online at Orkney Family History Society <https://orkneyfhs.co.uk/docs/resourcedocs/38/HBayCo%201828-58.pdf>
- ²⁸ Ibid
- ²⁹ Ibid
- ³⁰ Ibid
- ³¹ Baptisms (OPR) Scotland. Firth and Stenness, Orkney. 19 April 1853. Stockand, Margaret Garson

³² Census Records. Scotland. Firth and Stenness, Orkney. 07 April 1861. FIRTH, Isabella (lodger) ED3, property 5. Orkney Family History Society <https://orkneyfhs.co.uk/census/census.php>

³³ Census Records. Scotland. Firth and Stenness, Orkney. 02 April 1871. FIRTH, Isabella (head) ED3, property 29. Orkney Family History Society <https://orkneyfhs.co.uk/census/census.php>

³⁴ Census Records. Scotland. Firth and Stenness, Orkney. 03 April 1881. FIRTH, Isabella (head) ED3, property 7. Orkney Family History Society <https://orkneyfhs.co.uk/census/census.php>

³⁵ Deaths (SR) Scotland. Parish of Firth, Orkney. 10 December 1898 Isabella Stockan 017/1 11
https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/view-image/nrs_stat_deaths/5066100?return_row=0,

³⁶ Scotland. Orkney Family History Society. BMDs, Strays etc. Events-Burials. Firth Burial Register 1887-1942. Isabella Stockan, 13 December 1898. This entry shows Cadis, or Cadiz, as her usual residence.
https://orkneyfhs.co.uk/docs/resourcedocs/1/Firth_Burials_Register_1887-1942.pdf