

Robinson McNally (Roy) Malseed letter from Ireland 12-19 June 1956

In 1956, Robinson McNally (Roy) Malseed traveled to England, Ireland, and Scotland and wrote several letters to his family to document his journey. He wrote the following account of his travel and search for family history in County Donegal. It has been transcribed from a typewritten copy provided by Ian McLeod of Tasmania. Ian was given a copy by his first cousin once removed, Erica Mather of Tyrendarra, Vic. Erica had received it from Rick Cowan of The Entrance, NSW, who had it from his mother, Roy's daughter Marjory. It was probably transcribed to type by Roy's daughter Nancy. The document is transcribed here as accurately as possible. Small comments or corrections are inserted in brackets. Longer comments are added as footnotes. A couple of minor punctuation corrections were directly made.

The source of comments is indicated by initials in parentheses:

(RM) = Robert Malseed of Albuquerque
(IM) = Ian McLeod of Tasmania

Roy refers to "Letterkenny" as "Letter Kenny" (the first time as a pun) and to "Rathmullan" as "Rathmullon" throughout the letter. He also refers to "Rathmelton" which is a proper, but alternate, spelling for "Ramelton". Ordnance Survey maps use "Rathmelton", but most records that I see use "Ramelton". He also refers to the old Malseed farm at "Aughavennon". The official Ordnance Survey maps from the 1830s until the present spell this townland "Aghavannan". It is also spelled this way on the property records from 1858 to at least the mid 1900s. However, some records use the spelling given by Roy, and also "Aughavennan" and "Aughavannen" are commonly used. (RM)

Robert Malseed of Albuquerque has photos of all the gravestones mentioned in this letter.

Letter 11 I think, anyway,
Letter Kenny whatever the
number.

Tuesday, 12th June, 1956.

Mother dear and all,¹

Here I am, and despite all my nervousness, being so hospitably treated in Eire. I rose at 5 a.m. and Wojt took me round to the hospital for a couple of boiled eggs and toast, and then drove me the 20 miles or so to Birmingham Air Port to catch the plane for Belfast, then on in the train to Londonderry where Ira [McKinney (RM)] and family met me in a lovely new car, their welcome shining like the car, so I felt very relieved. I had thought it would be courtesy to call on Wojt and included seeing him on my way through to Scotland. He gave me a terrific welcome and I find he would have been really upset if I had missed him out. He had kept his holidays clear so that he could drive me round England and Scotland and had nominated Saturday, 7th July, as the starting date, to be sure I would be on hand. Well, he has a nice Austin, and it is handy to have a car and a doctor to look after me, so after some thought I decided it would be better to cancel my program and come across to Ireland. That meant writing immediately to Edinburgh to get my mail re-addressed here, and to the Bank to hold all new mail until further instructions; phone the airport for a seat and Ira to say I was coming across. I have also a very cordial invitation to see the Macauleys, still I have 27 days to cover before Wojt is free, and I don't think wandering round Ireland will take all that time, but we'll see what is to do. Wojt says Mrs. McLean, now of a Polish name, was concerned that I hadn't contacted her in London, so people are looking out for me. Wojt drove me about 100 miles sight seeing Birmingham.

Wednesday, 13th June, 1956.

Letter Kenny is 20 miles from 'Derry. I was driven here and a nice dinner of grilled chops prepared for me. Later Ira drove me round to Rathmelton and Rathmullan, where grandfather Malseed² spent his youth. To my delight a big banner was extended right across the road way, at the entrance to the village, and on it was written "Cead Mile Failte" i.e. "100,000 welcomes to you". Luckily I had my camera with me, so stood under the banner and got Ira to take my photo. Farther along more bunting was being erected by the villagers, so went across to thank them for their kindly welcome on my return to the land of my fathers after 107 years' family absence. I gathered from the locals

¹ Roy referred to his wife as "Mother". (IM)

² Grandfather Malseed is John Malseed, born 4 Apr 1823. (RM)

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that a new young priest was also coming to the village that day, so telling them to inform Father X that I also shared his welcome, we went on our way. Last night the Hattricks [Hatricks (RM)] came in; Willie, Miss Violet a daughter of 11 who once wrote a nice letter to Fe - she was much more shy and quiet than Fe. Willie Hattrick is 6'2" and a real Malseed to look at, though Ira grinned when sometimes I would ask him to translate what Willie said to me, for I am blessed if I could catch a word. Willie has a Fairy Tree at his place for me to see. It appears that if you were to harm a Fairy Tree, some serious evil would come on you. Willie has not seen any fairies there, but it has been handed down to him that it is a Fairy Tree and so is treated as such. Trees and timber are scarce in Ireland, and it is only right that a reputed Fairy Tree should be treated with respect. Coal, too, is scarce and expensive. There is talk of closing the Belfast-Derry Railway and using motor transport only. I flew over the Isle of Man en route here yesterday and they do tell me that centuries ago two Irish giants had a fight. One tore up a big piece of the soil and hurled it at his foe. He missed and the piece fell into the sea and formed the Isle of Man. The hole made where he tore up the sod filled with water and became Lough Neagh. I saw both places and true enough they are very similar in shape and size. It could be, I suppose! Outside each coach on the train was painted The Red Hand, Badge of Ulster. It seems that far back in the history of Ireland, O'Neill and another chieftain O'Donnel, decided that the land should belong to the first one who laid hand on it. Approaching it by sea, I think, O'Neill saw that his rival would reach it ahead of him, so taking his sword he severed one hand, and threw it on to the land, thus acquiring it for himself. Since then the Red Hand has been the Badge of Ulster!

Then we passed through the towns of Coleraine (2 syllables), Ballymena and Ballymoney. I am informed that Bally is Irish for Town, hence Mena town and Money town. I thought of Mena Harris, the teacher, at Ballymena.

Ireland is a glorious green island, much greener and more lush than England, but not nearly so trim or neat. Here Ira has a very complete home neatly carpeted and furnished throughout, and from the dining room window near which I am writing, I can view a hillside rising from their courtyard and completely mantled with glorious trees of various greens, a truly magnificent sight. The factory is close at hand, but I have not yet seen over it. Unfortunately, Nancy's box of Australian sweets are in my case in London, as are Nina's³ Irish addresses, but I am arranging to forward the sweets to Northern Ireland for Ira to collect there. I was given a hot water bottle last night, and being very tired, slept in till 8.30 a.m. Could have had breakfast in bed, but got up for it. They are very sweet to me. I have an idea they are going away for the weekend, so expect I shall be moving on to the Macauleys who are also at present absent, but left word I was not to miss out their place as they wished to return the kindness they received at our place in Melbourne. Tell Nina, the McKinneys have that Christmas gift of Aborigine Motif plate rests she sent, and treasure them. They showed me them, but use them only on special occasions. They have a very sincere regard for Nina, tell her, and they treasure her memory. Two interesting sights I saw on my journey here were

1. Irish peasants digging out peat in little tile or brick shapes and stacking it to dry for fuel, and
2. an occasional Irish woman, with a shawl or rug carried over the head and reaching down to the waist. They looked very quaint and made me wish to secure a photo of them.

This afternoon Ira took me out to investigate the Malseeds' murky past. First, we called on Robert John Stewart, a relative in his 84th year. He is a son of Rachel Malseed. Rachel was a sister of Henry and James Malseed. James was husband of my old Aunt Eliza. Cousins married, and Sam Malseed and Stewart were 2 of their sons. Robert Stewart looks very like Sam and is definitely a Malseed. R.J. Stewart has 4 sons and a daughter all married. One is head teacher of Ballykelly. I got a lot of information that I have written down and won't weary you with here. The daughter-in-law told me I'd find the sons forninst the cottage. Forninst I find means opposite. He told us where grandpa's old home - now a wreck - stands. Nina was misinformed by Hugh Osborne I think. Hugh Osbourne is another Malseed relative and his wife Jean was a Robinson and was very interested when I told her my Robinson relative on Mother's side came from Armagh, as that was her birthplace too. We took Hugh Osbourne with us and were to return "for a cup of tea". Remember Nina's letter telling of her famous dinner at the Osbornes? Well, we passed slob land, i.e. land reclaimed from the sea by building a dyke. One Malseed worked on this and was granted some of the slob. Then on to the old home wreck and its big barn which is still in use. I took a photo and Ira took one I'll call the "two wrecks", as I stood beside the old home. I pictured grandfather and grandmother, brave young people setting out to pioneer in the far new world - taking their few chattels down the lane with them and setting out

³ Nancy was Roy's eldest daughter, Nina, his youngest. (RM)

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by cart maybe to embark at Londonderry. I wondered if I and my family would even have been born had they not thus bravely faced the future. Then off we went to the churchyard, grave hunting. Right inside the gate was a Malseed stone of Les Roberts' uncle (Les of Perth) aged 87 years, Sergeant of Police died 1947 [1946 (RM)] Nov. and wife in '48 aged 66. At the back of the church I found a real find, a group of 3 graves together. In the centre lie, I believe, my greatgrandparents, James and Anne MOLSEED (note spelling) of Aughavennon (the place of the wrecked home adjoining Rathmullan), who died respectively 15th March, 1881, and 28th December, 1891⁴, and of Mary Doah [Doak (RM)], their daughter. No ages given unfortunately. Beside them lie Wm. Molseed (one of the mahogany sea chests you may remember was labelled MOLSEED), died 13th June [10 March (IM)] 1851, aged 29 years, also his daughter Mary who died 13th June 1851, aged 5 months (a tragedy), also his daughter Elizabeth Jane Aitken who died 7th December, 1887 [1897 (RM)], aged 46 Years. In grave on left lie: "In loving memory of our beloved Mother, Elizabeth Hartt⁵, (2 t's) wife of Charles Hartt, Royal Navy, who died 7th November, 1899, aged 52 years, also of their daughter and her [our (RM)] sister Isabella Maude who died 17th March, 1897, aged 15 years[)]. (These are people of Lil Hart of Vancouver, Canada.⁶) A separate grave for Henry Malseed died 2nd December, '33, aged 76 years and dear wife Catherine died 24/11/47, 64 Years. I took 2 photos of the 3 group graves and one of the church and the graves. There is an old Dame type of school still going, which they would have attended over 100 years ago. The church was open and I inspected it. It is the Church of Ireland - an equivalent of Church of England, and would be their place of worship. So you see, I found what none of the previous explorers did. Unfortunately I can't get at the church records⁷. There are 4 old Malseed spinsters in Derry, daughters of Stewart Malseed (Francis McKinney's grandfather was William and his siblings were Stewart and Rachel. This Stewart was father of the 4 spinster Malseeds, Minnie [probably Mary Jane (IM)], Sarah, Rita [or Rachel (RM)] and Lizzie, recluses and very difficult to meet, but I'll try. Dr. Malseed and a merchant Malseed - 2 brothers, also live in Derry and I'll try them. We returned to the cup of tea at Hugh and Jean Osbourne's. It was High Tea in style. She asked me at tea time if I would like some SCOLLIONS. I had her repeat it - then asked did she say "stallions". Even the pompous Hugh laughed. Scollions [scallions (RM)] are spring onions over here. She teaches a private school of 20 pupils and he has a little grocery. We go to Port Nablagh [Port na Blagh (RM)], Ira's coastal home, on Friday evening, and expect to meet Dr. Malseed who is holidaying nearby.

Ira has been a real hero with me and is nearly as pleased as I am with the success we have had in the research so far. He has postponed his trip in order to help me, and of course we go everywhere in the A40 Austin which he handles beautifully. I thanked him and told him of the Christmas lollies [candies (RM)] he sent Nina.

Friday, 15th June, 1956.

What a wonderful time they are according me here in Letter Kenny, bless their dear hearts. Yesterday morning I inspected the sweets factory and saw the new £5,000 machine that had been added in one section recently. Then in the afternoon, we went out in the Austin. Visited one place they had never seen previously i.e. Grianan of Aileach, the reputedly "most interesting relic of antiquity" in Ulster. This unique circular fort occupies the summit of Greenan Mountain, 802 ft. high, a point which commands very fine views over the surrounding country and of Loughs Swilly and Foyle. At the distance it looks like a water tower on top of the mountain, but is indeed a great round fort of stone 17 ft. high and 13 ft. thick at its base. Inside it is like a great circular tank 77 ft. in diameter. The wall is terraced and you can walk round inside the fort at various heights on the terraces. G.A. means The Palace of Aileach was built about 1700 B.C. It was at one time the residence of the O'Neills, Kings of Ulster, and Ptolemy wrote of it in the 2nd Century. It is well preserved and terrifically interesting. Then we went on to Buncrana [Buncrana (RM)], the nearest sized town to Letter Kenny (which has a population or 3,000 odd, very odd in some cases) inhabitants, partly to show me where my forebears must have had to cross Lough Swilly en route to Londonderry when migrating to Australia, and partly to buy me a 12/6 book written by Swan, a local, depicting the highlights of all Donegal. Thence we drove through quaint villages away on to Londonderry and visited 4 old maid

⁴ The gravestone is incorrect. The church record shows 1890. (IM)

⁵ The name on the gravestone is Margaret Hartt. She was a sister and cousin to the Malseeds who had emigrated to Australia. (RM)

⁶ Lil Hart refers to Elizabeth McLucas Hartt. (RM)

⁷ In 1990, Ian McLeod did have the church Secretary copy down many Malseed/Molseed/Hartt records. These have been supplemented by data from PRONI and GRO. Robert Malseed of Albuquerque has this information. (RM)

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sisters "girls" of 70 to 80 years, Minnie, Sarah, Rita or Rachel and Lizzie Malseed, daughters of Stewart, son of another Stewart Malseed. They are almost recluses and reputedly difficult to interview, but they were pitifully grateful for my visit and complained that no-one - including Nina - came to see them. Their own fault really, though we didn't point that out. It was most interesting to meet them and they thanked me so gratefully for calling. Said no one sent them a paper of our centenary. I said I would, had I known of them. Indeed I must send one, on my return, as also one of Mother's Melbourne cards when I return to London. We travelled many miles through delightful country, seeing much more than even Nina saw. Then on returning Harold Macauley got us on the phone - a most cordial invitation to Omagh. If Ira wouldn't bring me, Harold would drive up for me. He had spoken highly to Ira of our hospitality in Melbourne, much exaggerated I fear. Well, Ira promised to drive me down when I am ready. Meanwhile, we are preparing to leave after lunch for Port-na-Blagh, the country residence, for the weekend. I'm embarrassed with kindness. Irish whisky before bed and a hot water bottle, you mustn't get up for breakfast, you look tired, as indeed I was and no wonder, it is all so exciting. Young Davidson⁸, one of the factory⁹ employees, is Frances' nephew, son of a Malseed mother. I am tracking them all down and feted like an Emperor. Macauley inquired so kindly about you all. The only thing missing, is no letters yet, but they'll come, I hope from Edinburgh. I question like mad and every effort, is made to find the answers. General history, geography, folk tales, family history, especially my group from Aughavennon and Och-a-Ven-non - a lovely sound isn't it? We'll have to give our place that name and startle the natives by heading our letters with it when I return. They are all enthusiastic over my interest and one would think Ira was a Malseed, he is so helpful, while Frances is kindness personified, and the dead image of Gwen Emerson!¹⁰

Saturday, 16th June, 1956.

In Port-na-Blagh, at 10 a.m. just out of bed, sitting forinst a lovely peat fire, the first I've seen in a neat parlour looking out over an arm of the Atlantic Ocean at a rocky cape called Horn Head and dreaming dreams of Ireland's murky past. A cold hazy morning, sea birds flying lazily by, a splendid night's rest behind me, a newly cooked lobster before me, and possibly a salmon of the fishermen were successful last night while I slept! I must mention the Jackdaw outside too. Ira drove us down yesterday afternoon to this delightful weekend residence, neat, sumptuously furnished, and ideally situated on the sea front. No sooner arrived, than the little Irish maid, Mary, red haired and complexion all roses and cream, set out the evening meal. Then out in the Austin to explore the surrounding country through leafy lanes, past stone walled farms with little thatched, white washed cottages, struggling farms and donkey drawn carts. This is Ireland, this is, and our immediate destination was Doe Castle; one of the most interesting remains of its kind in the country, and though in 1905 it was occupied, it has since been neglected and is now in ruins. Protected by Sheep Haven, an outlet of the sea on one side, It has been the scene of many bloody combats on the land side beyond its moat and battlements, in the few hundred years since it was built, and I read with great interest of the fights which ranged round it, and the tragedies and romances enacted inside. Nearby, on the site of an old Franciscan Monastery, is an ancient graveyard, with the graves of many of the chieftans [sic (RM)] of Donegal. One particularly interested me, for the slab on the wall shows the elaborately and beautifully carved cross and arms of MacSweeny. It is said to be one of the only two known to exist in Ireland. The last of the fighting then was in the time of Wm. of Orange. The spokesman for the 4 old Malseed maids said the original Malseeds came over from Holland with Wm. of Orange - at any rate I am satisfied that is the time of their settlement in Donegal and that that is how and when they came.¹¹ They need not necessarily be of Dutch extraction for William would have more British than Dutch troops with him. I must do more reading into William of Orange exploits. Leaving that we drove round to the Capuchin Franciscan Abbey a couple of hundred years old, set in glorious park land, with trees and great flowering rhododendrons on all sides, a training monastery, preparing young Irish priests for missionary work, its splendour and comforts contrasting with the poverty of the surrounding farm cottages. Off the beaten track we drove past bogs where men were cutting and stacking peat for fires like this one that smells so sweetly and burns so warmly. I am astounded that after all these centuries there is still an abundant supply of peat to burn, though it now costs up to £3 a ton delivered. At 9 p.m. in the long twilight, the men were still at the peat, and

⁸ Robert (Bert) Davidson, son of Jessie Malseed. (RM)

⁹ The factory mentioned here and elsewhere is the Oatfield Sweets Factory in Letterkenny. (RM)

¹⁰ Gwendolen May Emerson (1907-1980), daughter of Emma Caroline Cowan Malseed. (RM)

¹¹ Malseeds were in Donegal long before William of Orange took his army to Ireland in 1689/1690, e.g. John Molsed, plantation settler in 1614, and Archibald Malseed listed on the Hearth Money Roll of 1665. (RM)

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moulding¹² the potatoes. The land is dominated by mountains, prettily outlined in pastel shades of brown and blue in the waning twilight. One, most attractive of these 2,000 feet mountains, is Muckish, a delightful name, and we drove up to it. Until recently sand has been blasted from its summit and exported for glass making in England, but competition from Belgium has caused this work to cease. The farms round here until recently worked by tenant farmers who paid rent to the often absentee landlord, are all ringed by stone walls instead of fences, carefully built stone walls, as are the buttressed stone walled sides of the roads and the bridges - erected by poor workmen who received 10d. a day for their long arduous toil. The walls and the shame of their victimization by grasping landlords live on, and they are part of the soil and the history of unhappy Ireland now.

Sunday, 17th June, 1956.

A beautiful day after the wet and rain of yesterday which, however, did not prevent us running 100 miles round exploring this end of Donegal, and it didn't prevent me from having lovely fried steaks from a beautiful salmon, the only one the fishermen were able to catch in their all night fishing, or some of the lobster that the local school master brought in. But gastronomic treats were mild compared with the aesthetic side of the day when we motored up and down mountain sides, mountains shrouded in mist and rain and covered too with brown low growing heather, just ready to burst into bloom, with patches of honeysuckle, wild Irish rose, fuchsia hedges and carpets of grass in the valleys studded with buttercups and daisies. We climbed heights, stopped the car, and gazed enchanted over panoramas of Loughs, sandy beaches, glens, peaceful rivers and clear mountain lakes - all the rough grandeur of Donegal. It is a primitive country where the native peasants struggle hard to scratch a living out of very small holdings. Most live in very tiny stone cottages, with thatched roofs and white washed walls. One delightful sight was of 4 porridge bowls set out to cool on the little roof of the projecting porch in the front of one cottage. I almost expected to see Father Bear and family, and little Goldilocks round the corner near by. Indeed, I saw a number of red-haired goldilocks among the little colleens, for red is a common colour for the descendants of Red Hugh O'Donnell once the King of Ulster. We cracked jokes, and chattered of the folk lore and customs and tragedies of the places we viewed. Ira told me of the death of one voracious, lustful landlord who had angered the tenants with his wickedness. Driving home one night in the dark round the bend on a tree covered mountain side abutting an inlet of the ocean, he and his driver were held up and shot with pistols. His two assailants who were never apprehended, escaped unscathed by boat from the inlet. His successor landlord, was a kindly man, much loved by his tenants, who raised a monument to his memory. Then in pre-historic times, there was a Pirate King, Balor-of-the-Mighty Blows, and the Evil Eye who represented the Powers of Darkness. It was foretold by one of the Druids that he would be murdered by his grandson. Balor had an only child, a daughter, whom he kept confined in a castle, constantly guarded by 12 women who never told the girl anything of sex. A McKinney [Mac Kineely (RM)], clad in women's clothes, met her, and demonstrated practically all the 12 guardians had failed to explain, with the result that triplets were born to her. These Balor threw into the sea, but one was rescued, and eventually learning of his grandfather's treachery, met him and thrust a red hot poker through his eye and thus slew him fulfilling the Druid's prophecy. You may not believe this tale, Mother dear, but as proof of it, there is a great white quartz stone with a blood red streak running through it - the blood stain of Balor¹³. This stone is raised on an ancient man-made pillar so that the doubters and the uninitiated may see the evidence with their own eyes. The event took place 1200 years B.C. and is still remembered. This famous Cloghaneely [Cloghaneely (RM)] Stone with its red veins has given its name to the Parish, and is a much visited antiquity. I took a photo of it to convince you of its truth! We visited old tombstone lined churchyards and saw ancient quaintly written and spelled memorials, graveyards with separate sections for Catholics, Paupers and Protestants, and special places of dignity for landlords, though Death the Great Leveller, had made them all equal. We saw little donkey teams, with paniers, or as they say here, creels, hung across their backs, carrying peat from the bogs. I mustn't forget to tell you of another lovely Irish custom. I have a glass of sweet Irish buttermilk each day. The only complaint I have is that I am overfed. They believe I am a descendant of those giants of old and the food is all so tempting. Today the sun is shining over the port outside the window, and the mists of mystery that shrouded all yesterday, so that I saw as through a glass darkly, have now disappeared, and today I get a

¹² "Moulding" refers to piling up additional dirt on the growing potato plants. (RM)

¹³ There are many variations of the stories about Balor. The only version of this story that I found mentioning the stone said that Balor decapitated Mac Kineely on the Cloghaneely Stone before he himself was killed by his grandson. Thus the blood was Mac Kineely's. (RM)

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very different viewpoint. This in the country where lived the Great St. Columba, born about 521 A.D. near by, a great Christian missionary, though St. Patrick's date is 420 A.D. much earlier.

Monday, 18th June, 1956.

Did 100 miles touring yesterday round Errigal, a weird Mountain and Bloody Foreland, after Presbyterian Church in morning. Left early for Letter Kenny today. Very disappointed no home letters yet from Edinburgh. Got first 33 photos printed and they are excellent. The camera is a beauty all right! Cold and wet again today. Coming near end of stay here, must not wear out the wonderful welcome I have had, every care and comfort is accorded me. Rather downcast over lack of home mail that may be gone astray. Fortunately a letter from Nina to the McK's was waiting over [our (IM)] return, written 8th June, and she warns them I'm in England! I was glad to read it and they to receive it.

Tuesday, 19th June, 1956.

No letters today so will post this. Perhaps Bank N.S.W. [Bank of New South Wales (RM)] didn't forward to Edinburgh. I'm so glad I saw Nina's letter and all seems well at home. Visited Rathmullan and Rathmelton again yesterday on more Malseed research. My visit here is nearing its end and I must go along to Macauleys on the next stage. Letter from Wojt wants to know the exact time and place when I return to England so he can come and pick me up, and he is looking forward to our trip. I haven't needed my own car at all so far, and am overwhelmed everywhere with kindness and hospitality.

Love to all, Dad.