

Charles Towsey of Henley upon Thames in the County of Wexford Gentleman

Mary Harriet Sparks

H. B. Moorhouse

# TOWSEY TALES

**NAME:** James Inch Monfries

**BIRTH DETAILS:** 1 December 1875 Balclutha, NZ

**DEATH DETAILS:** 22 Mar.1952 Auckland

**CHART REF:** Towsey Charts B1 & B8

**MARRIAGE DETAILS:** 1st M: March 1909

**SPOUSE:** Dr. Agatha Helena Jane Adams

**MARRIAGE DETAILS:** 2nd M: 26 February 1913 Wanganui

**SPOUSE:** Mary Myllicent Towsey

James Inch Monfries' parents were David Monfries and Flora Inch, who came from Scotland and took up farming in the Otago District, south west of Dunedin.

James' mother's unusual name is a derivation of 'Innes'. This family and the Monfries in Scotland, can be seen on Towsey Chart B8

James' father, David Monfries, kept pretty much to himself; not really participating in social functions, though he was respected as a decent and trustworthy citizen. He was a successful sheep farmer with an 850 acre property at a place called Table Hill.

He was though, involved in the regional highways commission, which managed the construction of roads and adjudicated compensation for farmers affected by a new highway cutting through their land.

James, born in 1875, was the third of their four children.

The first report we hear of James Monfries, seems to indicate either a troubled soul or someone with a passionate desire to not spend his life as a shepherd.

A report in the Bruce Herald Newspaper states that '*a lad named Monfries, about 15 years of age, attempted to commit suicide, while looking after his father's sheep at Table Hill, by cutting his throat. On being questioned as to the circumstances the lad stated that "the fit came on him, and he thought he had to do it". It is generally believed the poor lad was suffering from temporary dementia. By latest advices, Dr. Newall, who was in attendance, holds out hopes of the lad's recovery providing inflammation does not set in.*'

James was in fact 17 years old at the time and the next we hear of him, is three years later, in April 1895 when he, along with his father, elder brother, John and several others, are entertaining the government Minister for Mines, in an attempt to get government backing for a gold mining venture on their land.





James' brother, John Monfries was dead before the end of the year and when his father died in 1898, James sold up the farm and set off as an evangelical missionary, distributing Bibles to the Maoris in the South Island. He resigned from this mission in 1900, then studied medicine, briefly, at Dunedin University, before switching to Religious Studies.

The poorly reproduced photo above, from 1905, shows James Inch Monfries in the back, second from our right, with beard, at the time of graduation from theological college.

He seems to have been a dynamic and intelligent man, though I have no good pictures of him when young.

Most interesting in this picture, are Sister Mildred in the centre with Prof. Dunlop (with mutton chop whiskers), to her left and Prof. Watt to her right. Appearances can be deceptive, but the collective appearance of these three certainly reinforces the stereotype of dour, humourless Presbyterians.

As you will see in this newspaper article, at a meeting of the Wanganui Presbytery in 1907, it was proposed that James Monfries, should be ordained as a Maori Missionary. This is a little confusing and I can only assume that there were different categories of ordination.

At the same meeting, it was stated that within the Presbytery (District), there were 1597 children on the Sabbath School rolls and that about 1100 attended regularly, with 157 teachers.

James, at this time, was still travelling about as a Maori missionary and still distributing Bibles, though by 1909 he seems to have settled into running the farming school at Manunui.

In 1909 he also married Doctor Agatha Adams, who was running the Taumarunui Hospital. During the Boer Wars, she had served as a nurse in South Africa and had studied medicine at Otago University.

As was so often the way of things in those days, after just two years of marriage, Agatha died from peritonitis in 1911 at thirty years of age, whilst giving birth to her first child, who also died.

The tiny newspaper clipping below, from the Wanganui newspaper says a lot more than its few simple words.

## FUTURE OF THE MAORI.

FARMING PURSUITS  
(Special to Herald.)  
CHRISTCHURCH, this day

The Rev. Egerton Ward, who lives at Taumarunui, in the King Country, and who is attending the Presbyterian Assembly in Christchurch, states that the Maori farmer in some parts of the North Island is a success, and that if he can be induced to be thrifty, careful, and industrious, his prospects should be bright and attractive. Mr Ward has lived for many years in Maori districts. He knows the modern Maoris' strong points and weaknesses, and he says that if the present efforts to improve the Maoris' condition and instil into his mind the necessity for personal effort, is continued, the Maori farmer of the future ought to be a valuable settler. When he was speaking to a Lyttelton Times reporter Mr Ward said that he had often heard Europeans refer disparagingly to the Maori as a selfish and mercenary individual. To show the groundlessness of this charge he said that in Taumarunui, which is owned by Maoris, the native landlords have promised to advance the sum of £3000 at 2½ per cent. interest for the purpose of municipal improvements, and well-fed and well-clothed Maori workmen, Mr Ward believes, will compare very favorably with any other workmen in New Zealand. The Maori workman is a strong healthy man, but the Maori drone, who is usually found hanging about the towns and settlements, suffered from ill-health. Large numbers of Maoris in the country districts have cultivated potatoes this year in sunny places on the hillsides, but the blight has caused them a good deal of trouble. The authorities of the Presbyterian Church at Taumarunui have in hand at the present time an interesting scheme to help

the Maori to realise the possibilities in front of him. They have spent about £1000 in obtaining 250 acres of land at Matapuna, on the Wanganui river, about two miles from Taumarunui. It is intended to use the land as an agricultural farm, on which young Maori men will receive a practical training. Dairying is the principal subject that will be dealt with, but the young men will also be taught general farming, and how to keep accounts and books, so that they may go on to their lands in the possession of useful knowledge. The Rev. J. I. Monfries, a farmer of experience and ability, will take charge of the institution. Committees of the Assembly are now dealing with the whole question of farming instruction for Maoris, and it is believed that in a short time a workable scheme will be in operation. Mr Ward states that he and other missionaries are deeply grateful to the Government, to the officers of the Maoris' departments of the State, and to the Young Maori Party for the efforts now being made to improve the position of the Maori race. Those who know the Maoris well believe that their material salvation lies in the settlement of the Maoris on the land and the abandonment of the old communal system of society. The cultivation of large areas of Maori land is retarded at present owing to the want of roads and bridges. Many Maoris hope that during the present session of Parliament the great Maori question will be settled with some degree of finality. The recent attempts to consolidate the Maori land laws is appreciated, but there is a feeling, which Mr Ward shares, that instead of trying to unravel the extraordinary tangle it will be better if the difficulties connected with vested interests could be overcome, to start afresh and have a law which could be easily understood by ordinary mortals.

*1st November 1909*

The Presbyterian Maori Mission Farm at Matapuna, near Taumarunui, under the Rev. J. I. Monfries, is doing good work in giving a practical farm training to native lads, of whom half a dozen are in residence at the present time. The farm is one of 200 acres of excellent land with 40 acres under cultivation and 1000 fruit trees planted. Accommodation has been provided for 20 boys.

*30th October 1912*



The Rev Monfries, of Manunui, is spending a few days in town.

Wanganui Chronicle 6th June 1912

talent, good looks and accessory dog, she would, to use the parlance of the day, certainly have been a good catch, so we must assume that she was not too bothered.

Apart from the excuse of looking after her father, she may well have thought it nicer to maintain her independence.

Anyway, it is fair to assume that, having previously been married to a strong, competent woman, James Monfries was not the sort of man to try to keep his wife in a servile position, so perhaps this helped Mary in her decision to marry the Reverend Monfries, in February 1913.

This of course meant that Mary would be moving up to the teaching farm near Taumarunui, which begged the question as to what to do with father...

Although Mr. Towsey expressed his regret at having to leave Wanganui, I wonder if perhaps, at 70 years of age, Arthur might be thinking that retirement in the country was looking like a good option; maybe playing whatever wheezing little excuse for an organ they had up there in Taumarunui.

I have heard that after their marriage, James and Mary Monfries lived on a farm at Taringamotu, which is just north of Taumarunui, but still within easy commuting distance to the training farm at Manunui. Perhaps they wanted a little more privacy in which to bring up their children.

James and Mary Monfries wasted no time in building a family, which they seem to have done with the sort of organizational efficiency otherwise utilized in turning out trained Maori farmers.

Their first child, Violet Jessie Monfries, was born in March 1914. Their second, Flora Jean, was born two years later. Two years after that, came their third; Mary Veda and their last, who apparently did not survive infancy, was Joline Hope in 1920.

None of these births were officially recorded, giving a

somewhat pioneer image of Mary giving birth alone in a log cabin amidst the mountains of the King Country.

I do not know when exactly, but before too much time had passed, Arthur decided that he wanted to be closer to the bowls club.

I noticed one reference to him going down to Wanganui to play, but his solution was to move to Cambridge, which he might have chosen because there was a position available as church organist; a task that would not have been too taxing and, more importantly, because they had a good bowling club.

In about 1920, the Monfries family also moved close to Cambridge, to a place called Monavale, where they leased a farm. They must have stayed there until the early 1930s when, because of the financial pressures of the Depression, they moved to a smaller farm at Cambridge, on the Hamilton Road.

It says that either through contact with her cousin, Egerton Ward, or through Egerton's direct initiative, Mary Towsey, living in Wanganui, had been introduced to the widowed James Monfries.

We can speculate as to why, at 35, Mary was still not married. With her fine education, singing



James Inch Monfries circa 1920s



Circa 1922: A. J. Towsey at bowls club with granddaughter, Violet Monfries

At some point in the lives of the Monfries family, perhaps when farming their small plot near Cambridge was simply not profitable enough, James studied to become a County Engineer; managing the building of roads.

It was whilst doing this job, that he jumped off the running board of a moving truck and the jolt somehow dislodged the retina in one of his eyes, leaving him blind in that eye. For some reason the other eye then also went blind in sympathy and he spent the rest of his life sightless.

The family moved up to Auckland, where James learnt Braille and basket work at the Blind Institute.

James and Mary spent the rest of their lives in Auckland, in the suburb of Sandringham.

Of James's two sisters, Flora married Charles Forsyth in 1896 and spent her whole life close to where she had been born. Abigail worked for some time as a teacher in Taumarunui, before marrying John Currie in 1922. They also then moved up to Auckland.

Of Mary and James Monfries' three daughters, Violet married James Francis, but quickly decided that she preferred the single life, remaining that way for the rest of her long and healthy life; dying in 2005 at 91 years of age.

Mary and James's second daughter, Flora Jean, married Arthur Edward Macgregor Laird in 1940. They had three sons between 1940 and 1944, all of whom are still living.

Flora died in 1991. Her husband died in 1980.

Mary Veda Monfries, who was born in 1918 at Taumarunui, married Nelson Bowman Body in 1943. They had two sons and a daughter.

Mary Veda died in 1997 and her husband died in 2000.

James Inch Monfries died in March, 1952 at 77 years of age. Mary Monfries, née Towsey, died just four months later at 75 years of age.



**James & Mary Monfries circa 1950**