

FROM WHENCE THEY CAME: THE EWING FAMILY FONDS (P018)

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Scottish ancestry is shared among many residents of the Eastern Townships and the stories behind their ancestors' emigration would no doubt be compelling. The reasons for emigration were various and their experience of immigration certainly would have varied as well. The Ewing family fonds at the ETRC Archives is able to tell one of these stories through a relatively small collection of documents, merely 26 textual records. These documents, which are primarily correspondence, span several decades and are able to give a glimpse into life prior to and upon arrival to North America from Scotland. They date from the mid 19th century with a few exceptions that date 1911 and 1931. These letters give an account of what may have caused this family to immigrate, as well as insights into their subsequent experiences. In later years, the Ewing family became quite well established in the Eastern Townships and eventually Montréal. Although the ETRC Archives does not have any documents concerning these latter periods, it is useful to examine the earlier records which give a foundation for what was to come in this family's future.

Creetown and the Emigration Decision

John Ewing and his wife Jean Carter were tenant farmers who resided in Creetown, Kirkmabreck Parish in the Stewartry of Kirkmabright, Scotland. They had eight children, Mary, Isabella, John, Robert, Joseph, Andrew, Margaret and Elizabeth, all of whom were born in Scotland.¹

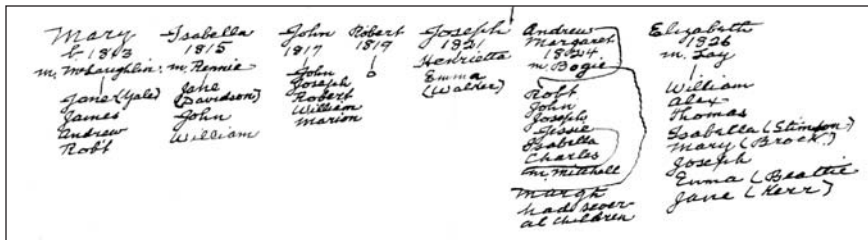


Fig. 1: (P018) Genealogy notes of John and Jean Ewing's children and grand children, ca. 1900.

Following the family's immigration to Canada, Joseph eventually chose to move from Canada to Weaverville, California, which resulted in much of the correspondence in this fonds.

For clarity's sake, the first excerpts were taken from later letters when members of the family returned to Scotland to research their family history. These letters give details as to where the family came from, their life in Scotland as well as some context as to why the family may have chosen to leave. The following two excerpts were written from William Ewing to his Cousin Robert Ewing, both great-grandchildren of John and Jean Ewing.²

Aug. 3 1911, 12 Stockwell Park Walk, London, S.W.

Dear Cousin Robert

I had a good week at Creetown where your father and mine were born and from whence they came to Canada seventy four years ago. Creetown is a snug little town of about two thousand people. It looked as if it would be much less as everything is so closely built. We did not have any difficulty in finding Blackmire farm where all of Grandfather's family were born (except Mrs. McLaughlin who was born in the Parish of Buittle not far away). We found two ladies whose father had taken the farm when Grandfather moved to the Fell farm which was practically a part of Blackmire. One of the ladies went with us to the farm, the same house in which they were all born is still in use.

The farm had a fine lofty situation. It is a very steep ascent to reach it. Both the Blackmire and Fell farms are now used for sheep alone. They are joined with the Kirkmabright farm. A shepherd lives in the old Blackmire farm house. They were glad to show us the house. The same "Byer" was still in use. We visited the old grave yard of Kirkmabright. A very substantial ruin of the old church still stands. It has not been used for about three hundred years. The Kirkmabright church about that time was built over near Creetown. The one that is now used was built three years before our fathers moved away. We attended church in the same building. It is a good one and has a good congregation. Mr. Mair was the minister when they moved. He is buried in the churchyard; I saw his monument. His son is a prominent minister in Scotland, all the relatives have moved away as far as I could find out. The only one I got hold of was Mrs. W. Hughan of Glasgow a descendant of the Candliches who married a sister of Grandfather. I saw tombstones to a number of the Candliches.

You can perhaps remember hearing Grandfather tell of the hasty building of the house on the Fell farm when he and the landlord did not agree in regard to Blackmire. This was about five years before they came away. Some of the old people remembered hearing about it – none were old enough to remember. I saw the foundation of the house at Fell

farm. It is now all down. I had a picture of it or part of it that was used as a house until a short time ago. I took a snap of the house where our fathers were born. I do not know how it will come out.

It is a very interesting part of the country about Creetown. It is the scene of Walter Scott's "Guy Mannering".

My wife and I are having a splendid trip. We shall start back on the 22nd. We hope you can come to see me sometime and I shall try to tell you all I know of the old home.

Kind regards to you and yours

Yours Cordially,

Cousin William³

12 Stockwell Park Walk, London, Eng.

Aug. 21 1911

Dear Cousin Robert

I have just had the snap shot of the Blackmire farm house printed and enclose you one. I could not get the whole house very well but got most of it. My wife and the shepherd are standing at the door. The roof is slate and I think probably the same as when our fathers lived there. The old fireplace is still in place but has a cooking arrangement in it.

With very kind regards to you, your wife and daughter

Cordially William Ewing

P.S. We have had a fine trip. We expected to start back tomorrow but the strike has held up the shipping we hope to get started back as soon as the strike has just been settled.⁴

These two examples not only give a detailed picture of where the family came from but they also provide hints as to why they left, particularly in the first letter in which William mentions hearing his grandfather refer to disputes with the landlord. William further elaborates on this memory and his visit to Creetown

Fig. 2: (P018) Photograph of Blackmire farmhouse depicting Mrs. William Ewing and local shepherd, 1911.



in a letter to his nephew Joseph in 1931. Joseph was travelling to England, and William was hoping that Joseph would also have the opportunity to visit Creetown.

The Blackmire farm seemed to be well known, as the first person I asked said everybody knows the Blackmire farm. It is, I would think about two miles east of Creetown, on an old Roman road which goes up a steep hill. It is not, or was not, used except for foot passengers, and so we drove by a more level road. We took a lady with us whose father occupied Blackmire farm after your great grandfather left for Canada. I asked her if she knew the Ewings. She said Oh no, I am only seventy five and was not born until some time after they left. All my father's brothers and sisters were born in the house then standing, and occupied, except possibly Mrs. McLaughlin, the mother of Mrs. Yale.

I think my grandfather moved from Blackmire a short time before coming to Canada in 1837. There was some dispute in regard to increase rent and he built a house on some land near. The house he built had recently been removed. All the country is the scene of Scott's most famous novel.⁵[...]

Although the family had apparently relocated to another farm five years prior to emigrating, this dispute was most certainly a key factor in the Ewings' decision to leave. Marjory Harper author of *Adventurers & Exiles: The Great Scottish Exodus* mentions that emphasis is often placed on the dramatic, enforced emigration of the Highlands and, as a result, Lowland emigration is frequently left under-examined. Similarly to the Highlands, Lowland emigration was often the result of changes in the agricultural sector which commercialized farmland and resulted in higher rents. This left tenant farmers unable to pay their rent or, alternatively, barely able to pay and with a future of hard work and little room for economic success ahead of them.⁶ Many tenants and farm labourers began to recognize that a bleak future lay ahead of them if they chose to stay in Scotland, and the prospect of owning farmland in Canada would have only increased in appeal.⁷ Given the climate, this reasoning behind the Ewings' departure is further reinforced by the letter of recommendation below.

Kirkmabright, 18 March 1837

These are to certify that the Bearer John Ewing has been known to me for nearly twenty years – during the greater part of that period he has rented a large farm upon the Estate of Kirkmabreck in this County, under my management – latterly however owing to [illegible word] by the failure of others he has been compelled to rent a farm more comfortable to his means. He has ever been an industrious tenant and is well acquainted with all agricultural pursuits. Having a pretty numerous family getting up in the world he is desirous of emigrating to Canada, where there is a

larger field for his and their labour in hopes of then better providing for them all. Should his means enable him to acquire land of his own, he cannot fail to succeed in his undertaking from the general knowledge he possesses but if his means are not adequate for this in the first instance, I have little doubt but that he and his family will give satisfaction to any one in whatever they may engage with as I know of no family more respectable in their *course[?]* of life.

W.B.I. Gordon

Procurator fiscal of the Stewartry of Kirkmabright⁸

Given Mr. Gordon's reference, Canada did seem to be a practical choice for John's large family. Although it is impossible to know, the family surely would still have held some anxiety or reservations concerning this long and daunting trip. And perhaps with this in mind, John sought at least one other letter of recommendation, from his minister stating his high moral character and his membership to the church.⁹ In further preparation, they also requested a letter from a representative of Joseph's school, stating his proficiency in all subjects.¹⁰ Clearly John felt that having the references of recognized citizens of the county would be of some help to him on his prospective voyage and subsequent arrival.

The Trip and Arrival

The trip from Creetown to Grosse-Île took approximately 53 days.¹¹ John kept very brief notes during the family's trip where he was mostly concerned with the directions and force of the winds. However, he does mention other pertinent details once the proximity to their destination increases.

We sealed [sic] from Creetown on the 21st April 1837 [...] and came into the river and sailed on the 28th with a faire [sic] wind and came in sight of Holyhead . Wind faire [sic], cleared the Irish land on the 2nd, wind faire [sic] very calm, wind

That the bearer John Ewing, is a member of this parish and resided in it for many years. That he was married during his residence in this parish to Jean Carter his present wife. That his daughter Mary was born in this parish and baptised by me. And that the said John Ewing and Jean Carter his wife did during their residence in this parish uniformly maintain irreproachable character as far as is known to me, and left it free from scandal or grounds of Church censure and in full communion with the Church. Witness my hand
 Alexander Crosbie Minister
 Broughty Alliance
 18th April 1837

In looking into the parochial register of the parish of Broughty, I find it there recorded that Mary Douglas daughter of John Ewing and Jean Carter is born was born on the 26th day of May 1810
 Alexander Crosbie Minister
 Broughty Alliance
 18th April 1837

Fig. 3: (P018) Letter of recommendation from Alexander Crosbie regarding John Ewing, 18 April 1837.

west on the 5th. [...] A vesel [sic] in seight [sic] the first we sae [sic] from [when] we left the Welsh cost [sic]. [...] Came in sight of Newfoundland, wind faire [sic] 26th. Calm and foggy on the 3rd. A heavy geale [sic] wind south and we cleared Cape Breton, 4th. Wind Northwest on the 5th, which continued till [sic] the 9th, when we entered the St. Larance [sic]; wind faire [sic] and arrived at Grosse Isle 12th¹².

Unfortunately, there are no documents that contain information on what their experiences were like upon their immediate arrival as well as what these processes may have been. From what we do know, the family settled in the Durham, Drummond County, Quebec, and eventually Melbourne in Richmond County. During this time, John and Jean's third son Joseph Ewing relocated to the Weaverville, California, evidently for further work prospects. These letters between John and Jean and their son Joseph date 1856–8, approximately twenty years following the family's immigration to Quebec.



Fig. 4: (P049) Village of Melbourne, Richmond County, Quebec, ca 1900.

1st February 1856

Dear Father and Mother

I received a letter from you a few days ago which gave me great pleasure to hear that you were still enjoying good health, which is the greatest blessing God can bestow upon us. This was the second letter we have received from you within the last year. Your other letter I answered soon after I received it which I am surprised you have not received, God

forbid that I should ever forget myself so far as to neglect writing to you from such motives as you ascribed to me in your last.

Dear Parents there is nothing here in my solitude so far removed from you which does me so much good as to write you and receive letters from you which I should likewise more frequently. [...]

Dear Parents, I am sorry that my long talked return home has been again put of [sic] for another year. I intended being home to see you last fall but owing to heavy losses I am again deprived of the pleasure of seeing (you). [...] Our wheat crop was likewise a failure so that altogether was an unlucky year for me but if God grants us health I feel confident we will return within this year. You cannot be more anxious to see us than we are to see you. I am glad to hear that Robert has recovered his health and returned home. I hope he will now settle down somewhere among you and go at farming. I think he must be tired keeping tavern by this time and likewise satisfied that it is a poor business to make rich at. I had one letter from him since I have been in this country, he talked of coming to California. I could not advise him to come for the season that before I left home I talked to him about going at farming and he said he could not stand the work, how farming in Canada is no work compared to work in California if a man is without means to start himself in something. A hard working man can make money but it has to be done by hard work or capital and expenses are so high if a man is not making something he will soon go through. We have had a very severe winter for two weeks it was about as cold as you have it in Canada and the snow was about eighteen inches deep for a month so after this winter I think we will be able to stand a Canadian winter. [...] I have become quite a farmer and can drive the oxen and plow as well as any of them. I am going to extend farming operations this year. I will have about twenty five cows in spring and am going to try making butter and cheese which I think will pay very well. [...] I have one man hand at farming which I pay eight hundred dollars a year. Expenses are very high, still with good luck it will pay. [...] We received several Montreal papers from you for which I am obliged to you; we get New York papers plenty but very little from Canada. [...] Hoping this will find you enjoying good health and that God may spare you both until I have the pleasure of seeing you.

I remain your loving son,

Joseph Ewing¹³

Although the above letter may give more information on what life was like in California as opposed to Canada, what can be gleaned from these is the difficulty the family would have experienced by being so far a distance from one another. Joseph is plainly anxious to visit his father and mother but his economic situation will not allow for it. Clearly this trip would have been quite costly as, relatively speaking, Joseph seems to be faring quite well. His farm business is growing

despite losses and he can afford hired hands. Joseph's brother, Robert, is struggling as well in his effort to find a profitable means of work. However, what is most emphasized in the letter is that Joseph yearns for further contact with his parents. The postal system between the two countries was not the most reliable and it is clear that Joseph depended on letters to reassure himself that his parents were still living and hopefully that he would have another opportunity of seeing them. In the following letter he reaffirms these sentiments and further reinforces the notion that he had relocated to California solely for the purposes of work. Weaverville, California was known for being the home of a gold rush during this time and, despite the fact that Joseph ended up farming as his father did, this may not have been his original intention. He most certainly saw this relocation as a means of improving his wealth, especially in consideration of his immense dislike for the country which is further elaborated upon in this subsequent piece of correspondence.

24 February 1857

My dear Parents,

You will doubtless think I have been very neglectful in not writing sooner. I delayed sometime trying to make arrangements to go home last fall but failed in doing so and it was out my power to go however much I desire to see you and now for three months this is the first time I have had an opportunity of finishing a letter. We have had a very long and severe winter, having been snowed in now three months and the ground still nearly covered with snow but it is going fast now. We are not here as you are in Canada prepared with sleighs, our only mode of travel here is on horseback and goods of all sorts, farm produce even hay is packed to market on mules and this winter the snow has been so deep roads have been entirely shut up. I am still farming and had pretty good crops last year but have been unable to market any yet on account of the bad roads. Prices are not so high as they have been here. Wheat and barley are worth about three dollars a bushel and potatoes about the same.

Dear Parents I hope by the next fall I get home to see you. You may think by my long stay in this country that I like it but it is not so, the country is healthy and indeed all that could be desired but the government I detest, news boasts liberty is all humbug. You do not know how anxious I am to return once more to see the British flag flying which I hope to do before long and then to live and die under its protecting folds. I intend selling out the first chance I get and this country cannot hold me long. My children are now growing up that it is time they were in school. The eldest is now nearly six years we are teaching her at home, she learns very fast and is very fond of her books. We have had an addition to our

family since you last heard from me. It is a a boy; he is now 3 months old and grows fine. My children all grow well and enjoy excellent health. My little girls talk of their Grandpappa and Mamma almost everyday are very anxious to see them. I was glad to hear by your last letter that were still enjoying good health and my earnest prayer to you is that He may prolong your lives and grant you good health until I see you. You mentioned that all the family were well and doing well which I was glad to hear but Robert you said had again gone into the tavern keeping which I was sorry to hear. I am afraid he will never do any good while stuck to that accursed business. I was in hopes he had got tired of it. Henrietta joins in sending our kind love to you likewise to brothers and sisters and all the family of nephews and nieces that are now so numerous I neither know names nor number of them. Remember us to all hoping this will find you all enjoying good health as it leaves me and soon to hear from you

Joseph Ewing

P.S. I forgot to mention the boy's name, it is William Joseph¹⁴

The following letter is the final portion of correspondence available between Joseph and his parents.

Weaverville, February 21, 1858

Dear Parents,

I received a letter from John a short time ago by which I learned that one letter had at least reached you from me which encourages me again to write you. For believe me however anxious you are to hear from me, I as anxiously watch the arrival of every mail to bring a word for me from home and loved ones now far away. For however far the distance or long the home removed from you this is no home for me but still the land of the stranger.

I was glad to hear that you were enjoying good health although John speaks of my dear mother being more afflicted than she had been.

Dear Parents, I feel very anxious to go home to see you but it is not possible that I can yet for a season but my earnest prayer to God the giver of all blessings is that you may be spared until I again see you – we are able in his hands and know not the hour that we may be called hence.

Dear parents I suppose that last letter you had from me was the first information you had of the birth of my son and now this will tell you of his death. He died on the 14th January lacking a few days of being 14 months old. He was a beautiful boy and surely God never more forcibly impressed his image on clay than he did on that sweet boy but he was not long for this world. Death and parting from those we love under all circumstances is hard but some cases are harder than others and surely ours was very hard. The dear child was running around the house in

perfect health when an accident threw him into the fire and he was so badly burned that he expired in 24 hours. It has been a severe blow on us and especially on Henrietta; she grieves over it very much. The little girls both enjoy excellent health and grow fast, they talk often of their Grandpapa and Grandmama and their cousins and are anxious to go home to see you. I am very anxious likewise to get them home to school.

Henrietta and I both enjoy good health for which we have great reason to be thankful indeed ever since we have been in this country we have enjoyed excellent health. I will write to John by this same mail in hopes that one of the letters will reach its destination.

Henrietta joins me in sending our kind love to you likewise to our mothers sisters and all friends and hoping this will find you enjoying good health and that god may spare us all to meet again

I remain your loving son

Joseph Ewing

Write soon as I am anxious to hear from you, JE.¹⁵

It is unfortunate that this last piece tells of such tragedy but from other sources we know to a certain extent how the family who stayed in Quebec progressed. It appears as though Joseph remained in California as there are descendants of the family in California to this day.¹⁶ John Ewing I and Jean's first son John Ewing II¹⁷ (1817–1904) also had a son named John III (1844–1906)¹⁸ and it his family that appear most frequently in texts. John II most likely followed in his father's line of work, but his son, John III studied to become a teacher of elementary school¹⁹ and eventually served as the Registrar of Richmond County and as Mayor for at least four terms beginning in 1896.²⁰ He had four children with his wife, Mary L. Armitage.²¹

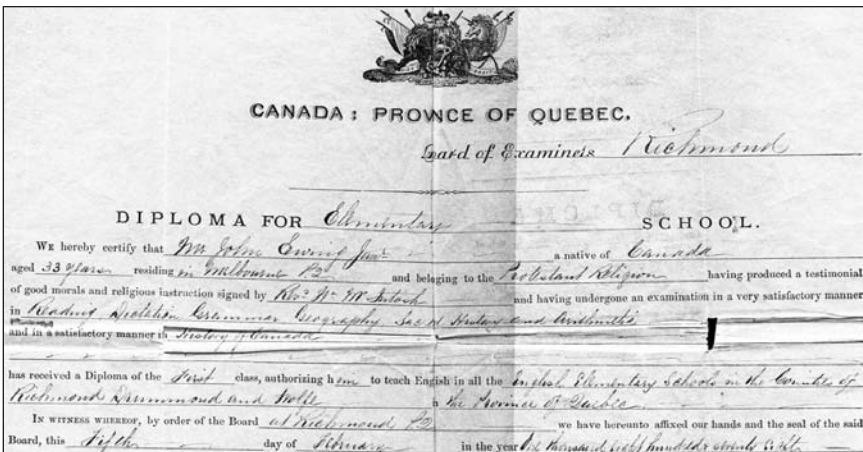


Fig. 5: (P018) Teaching Diploma awarded to John Ewing, 1878.

The couple's first son was Lieutenant Colonel William John Ewing (1877–1936) who was appointed Clerk Circuit of Richmond in 1899 and entered into insurance and fire insurance in Richmond. He eventually followed in his father's footsteps and was appointed Registrar of Richmond County in 1908. He joined the Canadian Militia and went overseas as second in command in the 117th Eastern Townships Battalion.²²

William John's younger brother Joseph Armitage Ewing (1872–1946) studied law at McGill and graduated with honours in 1897. Throughout his law career he was a part of a few practices, one of which eventually became known as Ewing & McFadden. He was also the assistant author of the treatise, "Canadian Company Law" by W.J. White. Some of his other accomplishments include serving on the executive of the Canadian General Council, acting as Commissioner for the Province of Quebec, and finally serving with the Montreal Heavy Brigade of Artillery where he was eventually promoted to Major.²³

Ideally, this fonds would contain letters to fill in the holes of this story but, as is often the case in archives, gaps remain. What can be surmised is that the family was presented with a difficult situation and emigration became a means of avoiding economic failure. In spite of promising prospects of Canada, the trip and arrival would no doubt have presented trials and we can only speculate as to what may have happened upon arrival. Even so, the later letters between Joseph and his parents hint at the struggle many families would have experienced in their effort to improve upon themselves whilst being so far away from one another. What we do know is that this family did come to be successful and were able to eventually achieve the success that emigration initially promised.

NOTES

1. Certificate of births of Ewing family, 18 April 1837 (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).
2. Additional punctuation has been added to the transcriptions to improve readability.
3. Letter, William Ewing to Robert Ewing, 3 August 1911 (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).
4. Letter, William Ewing to Robert Ewing, 21 August 1911 (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).

5. Letter, William Ewing to Joseph Ewing, 4 June 1931 (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).
6. Harper, Marjory, *Adventurers & Exiles: The Great Scottish Exodus* (London: Profile Books 2004), 61.
7. Harper, 62–3.
8. Letter, W.B.I. Gordon to John Ewing, 18 March 1837 (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).
9. Letter, Alex Crosbie to John Ewing, 18 April 1837 (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).
10. Letter, David Meir to unknown, 21 August 1911 (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).
11. Travel notes, John Ewing, 21 April 1837–12 June 1837 (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).
12. Travel notes, John Ewing, 21 April 1837–12 June 1837 (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).
13. Letter, Joseph Ewing to John and Jean Ewing, 1 February 1856 (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).
14. Letter, Joseph Ewing to John and Jean Ewing, 24 February 1857 (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).
15. Letter, Joseph Ewing to John and Jean Ewing, 21 February 1858 (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).
16. Amy Ewing provided this information in an email to Emily Potter dated 13 January 2012.
17. Generational suffixes have been added to clarify the text.
18. *Saint Francis District Births 1815–1879* (Montréal: Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec 1991), 350.
19. Certificate, John Ewing, 1878, (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).
20. Newspaper clipping unknown, ca 1900 (P018 Ewing family fonds, Eastern Townships Resource Centre, Sherbrooke, Quebec).
21. *Saint Francis District Births 1815–1879*, 350–1.
22. Smith, A.T., and S. Husk, eds, *The Tread of Pioneers: Annals of Richmond County and Vicinity, vol. 2* (Richmond: Richmond County Historical Society, 1968) 225.

23. Newlands, A.J., ed, *Prominent People of the Province of Quebec in Professional, Social and Business Life, 1923–24* (Montreal: Thos. V. Bell Ltd. Printers, 1924).

