

Jean Elliot Fay and Robert Elliot

When researching family history it is almost inevitable that one will bring to light some poignant stories from ancestor's lives. Such is the case with two of my relatives; Jean Elliot (she was christened as Jane but known as Jean) and her firstborn child Robert.

Jane Elliot, first daughter and second child of Robert Elliot and Jessie Purves, was born on 15 December 1890 in Ancrum Parish, Harestanes, Roxburghshire, Scotland, in the wee hours of the morning at 3.30 a.m. Her older brother John was born just under a year earlier but sadly died after only eight days. Jane's birth must have brought great joy to her parents and perhaps helped ease their grief over losing their firstborn.

Around the age of 12 or 13 Jean moved to Ireland with her parents and surviving siblings. Two other siblings had died in early childhood. Perhaps it was these losses that prompted her father, Robert, to seek a new life. But more likely it was the challenge of a good job with better prospects when Robert secured the position of Land Steward/Farm Manager for the Longfield's at Castle Mary Estate, Cloyne, Co. Cork, so the family packed their belongings and departed Scotland en-route to Ireland.

Life proceeded as normal for Jean and the Elliot family for the next few years. The next record we have is in the 1911 Census that shows her having secured work as a nurse in the Royal Edinburgh Asylum for the Insane. There were hints over the years of the birth of a child but it is only now in 2014, over 100 years later, that we have pieced the story together. It appears that Jean developed a friendship with a local youth that extended beyond affection and resulted in the damsel being with child, around the end of 1908 or early in 1909. She was sent back to Scotland for her "confinement". In the course of time, on 5 September 1909, she gave birth to a son, and named him Robert; he was born in Colinton, Edinburgh, Scotland. This was an era when the only choice for an unwed mother was to give up her child for adoption, and such was the case for Jean. We are happy to say that instead of giving the child to strangers, he was instead adopted by her cousin Jane Mitchell Guthrie, wife of James Brown. Jane was the daughter of Jane Purves and Adam Guthrie, and granddaughter of James Purves and Jane Mitchell. To simplify, she was a first cousin to Jean Elliot.

Jean returned to Ireland late 1911 or early 1912 to continue her life. She got engaged to an American soldier stationed locally in Midleton and on 7 September 1912 she set sail for America on the Celtic (sister ship to the Titanic). On her arrival at her fiancé's house she was greeted by his wife and children so that was the end of that romance! Jean then moved to Chicago, Illinois where she met and married Charles Elmer Fay, owner of a local boarding house. Jean gave birth to twins but sadly they died soon after birth. She remained childless thereafter.

You would think this was the end of tragedy for Jean but you would be wrong as more was to follow. Young Robert who was growing up happily in Scotland lost his adopted mother Jane at the age of ten. Robert became an apprentice joiner. A few years later, on 12 July 1924, he was tragically killed, at the tender age of fourteen. He was cycling to work when he was struck by a charabanc (early 20th century people carrier) and died instantly from a fractured skull.

Such a loss may have hit Jean even harder, following the deaths of her twins, she could surely have despaired but it seems faith and determination prevailed. One has to admire her courage and tenacity in continuing on with life. Charles, her husband died in 1945, aged 67, and Jean later moved to Florida. My parents George and Daphne Beare were contacted around 1970 by her Church Minister with the information that her health had failed, her finances were rapidly depleting and she needed help. The offer was extended to bring her home to Bandon, and was instantly accepted. Careful nursing by my grandmother, her sister Margaret, soon brought her back to good health and she settled in with my family.

One of my earliest memories is of walking up our yard holding their hands. I was only about three at the time but the memory is clear. Apparently I used to gabble away to them non-stop! Jean continued in good health until her death on 15 October 1974. She had a life filled with ups and downs but happily it ended amongst family. At the good age of 83 Jean Elliot Fay was laid to rest at Kilbeg Graveyard, Bandon.

Rest in peace Jean Elliot Fay. You are remembered for your strengths.