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Lenora Jane Frayne

Abstract:

‘Lenora Jane Frayne’ comprises two small sections from a larger work of creative non-fiction and fiction, *Faith, Hope and Stubborn Pride: Searching for Heaven in Aotearoa and Australia* (2016), based on my research into my family history. Much of this larger work is written from traditional research and conforms to the tenets of biographical writing in that statements are supported by facts and evidence. Some sections of the larger work, however, are purely imagined, though inspired by known facts and historical evidence. They are my attempts to cast light where my traditional research provided none. On one hand I have stolen the identity of family members whom I never knew and used them in fictional narratives; on the other hand I have used what facts I could uncover from historical sources to create a biographical narrative. ‘Lenora Jane Frayne’ offers an example of the imagined as well as a more traditional biographical sketch.

Biographical Note:

Jeremy Fisher is Senior Lecturer in Writing at the University of New England after a 40-year career as writer, editor, publisher, and award-winning indexer. A former executive director of the Australian Society of Authors, he remains a strong advocate for authors’ interests. Concerned that authors can profit from the digital economy, he maintains a close interest in this area. A former director of the Australian Copyright Council; currently a director of Copyright Agency Ltd and the Australian Society of Authors. He writes across numerous genres and has been translated into Vietnamese. His most recent novel is *The Dirty Little Dog*.

Key words:

Biography – reimagining – identity – place – Aotearoa

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Between Heaven and Hell

‘Guten Tag, Fraulein Frayne. Willkommen zu Leipzig.’

Lenora accepted the proffered hand and bowed her head slightly to acknowledge the welcome. The train trip from Berlin had not wearied her at all; she had her face to the window the whole trip, keen to see as much of Germany as she could. The country was undergoing such enormous change; so much had happened in the five years since Herr Hitler had become Chancellor in 1933. Even after ten days of constant travelling she was still eager to see as much as she could. Now, Herr Brandt was going to take her to lunch with the members of the Leipzig Eugenics Association, then she was to be given a tour of the city.

Secretly, she enjoyed the attention given her by men such as Herr Brandt, but she never showed much emotion. He offered his arm, which she took as though such manners were commonplace with her, while the porter he had engaged heaved her bags onto a trolley and trundled after them out of Leipzig station.

Herr Brandt had a car waiting; not a taxi, a Mercedes with a driver. He opened the door for her and assisted her inside. He walked around the car and took his seat opposite her while the porter loaded her bags into the boot. They drove off, passing a line of schoolchildren marching in step to some extracurricular activity. They were all in uniform, neat and tidy, unlike the children she taught back in Wellington. While she no longer had to try to drag Maori children into some semblance of civilisation, the white children had been little better. They failed to wear full uniforms and lacked the posture and politeness of the German children she had met on her travels. And they would not wear shoes. It was all in the breeding of course. Germany had made sure that inferior people did not produce children.

“Schön,” she said to Herr Brandt, pointing at the children.

“Ja, die Kinder sind sehr schön,” he replied, a chuckle in his voice. He looked extremely smart and, dare she say, handsome in his SA uniform. They were very soon at the restaurant where lunch had been organised. Herr Brandt introduced her to so many people that she had great difficulty in remembering names but she took note of Dr Werner Catel. He was a paediatrician whose ideas on what constituted healthy children were known to Lenora and her muse in Britain, Caleb Saleeby. He was arguing that disabled children, those with intellectual and physical problems, should be comfortably euthanased, thus ensuring purer German breeding stock and alleviating the state of the cost of their care. Lenora felt Dr Catel had a point, but perhaps he went too far.

Mercifully, she was not required to speak in German at the meeting. She gave her talk in English, hoping that some of her listeners would understand her descriptions of Christmas in summer and her references to the fights between the Maoris and the European settlers.

She spoke of Wellington, describing its harbour and how houses clung to the hills behind the port. She mentioned the birds and the snow-covered mountains, some of them active

volcanoes. When she had finished she was asked how many people a year were eaten by the Maoris, how many windows did she have in her mud hut and whether there were any automobiles in New Zealand. The questions left her unsure how much of what she had said had been understood.

After lunch, Herr Brandt and Dr Catel took her around the city in the Mercedes. They drove past the church of St Thomas where Johan Sebastian Bach had worked as Cantor and wrote his beautiful music, and later where Richard Wagner learned his craft. They drove by the University Children's Clinic and Dr Catel spoke of his plans to set up a special department that would take care of the problem of undesirables. Under the current government, he could now see his way clear to providing a means by which the unfortunates could be relieved of their suffering. They were a burden both to themselves and to society, he said, and if there were a humane means through which their suffering could be resolved, then surely it behoved a medical man such as himself to implement such a means.

Lenora offered no comment in response to Dr Catel. She had little need to say anything at all. Herr Brandt and the doctor were able to provide a continuous commentary on their fair city for the more than two hours they drove about it. They also showed her the synagogue and hinted that the building was not long for this world. And so, when they left her at her hotel after effusive farewells, she went up to her room with a sense of unease.

Lenora Jane Frayne

Lenora Jane Frayne (1889–24/12/1943), my great aunt, was the daughter of Michael Joseph Frain and Margaret Frain, nee Bridge. Michael (whose surname was originally spelt as Frayne, a spelling that Lenora had adopted by the time of her graduation as Master of Arts from Victoria University College in June 1919¹) emigrated as a carpenter from Ireland to New Zealand via Australia, where he met Margaret, and gradually developed a business as a builder. One of the major buildings he completed was the Catholic St Mary's Basilica in Invercargill, the city where his children was born. He moved his family to Wellington in 1907 when he won a major contract to extend the parliamentary buildings. At the same time his faith appears to have changed from Catholic to Protestant.

Lenora had two older brothers, Edward Philip John (known as Philip, 1885–1957) and Roderick James (1891–1954), and a younger sister, May (20/5/1900–1978), my grandmother. After completing her schooling in Invercargill and Wellington, she successfully sat for classes B, C and D of the Teachers' Certificate Examinations in January, 1909,² then began her Bachelor of Arts at Victoria University College, Wellington, in 1910 as a part-time student, graduating six years later in 1917.³ She continued postgraduate study and she was also appointed by the Wellington Education Board as sole teacher at Makerua School in November 1917. She took up her duties at the small school near Palmerston North at the beginning of 1918. At that time Makerua was a poor rural area with a large Maori population,

though the school generally had less than 20 pupils. She resigned from Makerua in October 1918.⁴ However, she continued to study at Victoria University College until June 1919, when she was 30 and she was awarded her Master of Arts in History.⁵ The last year of study coincided with her appointment in February 1919 to Eketahuna as secondary assistant.⁶ She resigned from that position on 28 February 1920.⁷

As an adult she continued to live with her parents, her address given on the electoral roll in 1925 and 1935 as the family home in Upland road, Kelburn. The last date is four years after her mother's death. She never married.

Lenora had moved on from her father's former faith to worship at the Unitarian Church in Wellington. It is probably through this connection that her sister May met her husband George Thomas Saker, who was also a member of that congregation. Perhaps both Lenora and George Thomas regarded themselves as free-thinkers, stifled by the monotony and conformity of Pakeha life sixty years after their forebears had arrived. Their means of rebellion was to embrace a faith many others saw as sacrilege since it renounced the Trinity, and accepted only God.



Figure 1: Lenora Frayne (Fisher family archives).

Lenora was interested in theosophy, the spiritualist movement influenced by *The Secret Doctrine* written by the American spiritualist Helena Blavatsky. She gave a lecture on education and theosophy at the Wellington branch of the Theosophical Society in September 1926, just a few days after the birth of her niece Cecil Aimeé Margaret Saker, who would later become my mother.⁸ Lenora said she ‘thought of education as the training and development of the personality in the service of the Ego. Tagore had said that man’s history was the history of man’s journey to immortality in quest of his own soul. The Theosophical Society should be looked upon as the greatest force for education in the world to-day. It was teaching the world as children were taught in school — step by step. It stood not only, for universal brotherhood, but for the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science, and the development of the occult powers latent in man. To realise that in the smallest child were the germs of divine powers added a wonderful dignity to education, while adding immensely to the teacher’s sense of responsibility. It seemed, however, a pity that examinations should still, in many cases, be regarded as “the be-all and the end-all here.” Examinations had their uses, but true education should be placed on a wider basis. The dignity of man as a soul deserved the best conditions during the formative period. Above all, the “slum home” should be done away with. No school life could entirely do away with the influence of home life.’⁹

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With such strongly articulated views, Lenora must have carried this philosophy over into her own teaching. She demonstrated the 'wider basis' of education through her involvement with the Wellington Basketball Association, for which she acted as umpire. Basketball at that time was the name given to what we now call netball. Even at 41, she was being rostered to umpire up to three rounds on a wintry Wellington Saturday afternoon.¹⁰

Later in life, Lenora lived and travelled to and from, and within, Europe frequently. She travelled to her first port of travel, Sydney, on the *S.S. Zealandia* on 30 September 1932 and returned to Wellington on the *S.S. Monowai* on 13 December, 1932.¹¹ Another trip commenced on 26 October 1933 with Lenora aboard the *S.S. Wanganella* bound for Sydney and foreign lands further on; she returned to Wellington on Christmas Day 1933 on the *S.S. Maunganui*.¹²

The University Women's Club, of which she was a member, wished her good wishes for further overseas travel in February 1936 at a very sprightly party that included theatrical and musical performances, as well as an 'excellent' supper. Lenora had been staying at the Sakers' Karori home while preparing for her journey.¹³

She left Wellington on *S.S. Makura* on 4 March 1936, a Wednesday. By May 1936 Lenora was in London for the summer, then in July she joined a party touring Holland.¹⁴

A year later in July 1937, Lenora was studying social welfare work in London under the influence of Caleb Saleeby (1878–9/12/1940).¹⁵ He had trained as an obstetrician and was a strong advocate for better public health, including the banning of alcohol. Saleeby was an active proponent of eugenics in his early years, when he argued that whites were superior to blacks. In 1924, he founded the Sunlight League which advocated the health benefits of sunlight (perhaps a little too much) and clean air.

Lenora herself must have been the source for a 1937 *Evening Post* item that detailed an exchange she had had while lecturing on New Zealand to branches of the Ethical Union and the Hammersmith Conservative Association, amongst others. 'Once, when explaining the difference in seasons, Miss Frayne said that in New Zealand the festival of Christmas was kept in summer. A lady interrupted, asking, "But how do you manage about Christmas cards, with their icicles and snowflakes?" The lecturer answered this question as tactfully as possible, but she was completely floored by her second inquiry, "And is it Christ's birthday just the same?"'¹⁶

She was in Germany in May 1938, visiting Berlin, Nuremberg, Munich and Oberammergau 'and some delightful days were spent in the Black Forest'. After a fortnight in London, she travelled through France and Switzerland to Italy where she visited Stresa, Lake Maggiore, Venice, Florence, Rome and Naples. She set sail for New Zealand on the *S.S. Rangitane* on 21 July.¹⁷

She had returned to Wellington by September 1938 when she gave a talk to the League of Nations Union about her travels. The meeting's primary aim was to discuss the unfolding

situation in Europe.¹⁸ What she was doing in two fascist countries on the eve of World War II can only be imagined. However, some of the health beliefs of the Nazis were not dissimilar to those of Saleeby, and they also shared a strong interest in eugenics.

She died in 1943 at the age of 54.

Research statement

Research Background

This project in its whole, *Faith, Hope and Stubborn Pride: Searching for Heaven in Aotearoa and Australia* (Fisher, 2016) sits within the 1904 Creative Writing category for Excellence in Research in Australia (ERA) and combines a number of genres to form a family history narrative. Historical and biographical writing traditionally requires the support of documentary evidence, but here I have combined that approach with one that uses fiction. I have stolen identities of family members I never knew and given them a fictional voice. The research question is, can the process of writing imagined stories of my forebears combined with more traditional biographical writing explain to myself and to readers more about my forebears' lives and how they have influenced me and my immediate family? This is significant in terms of the lost histories of families who have undergone emigration, then in my own case further immigration, and where knowledge of earlier generations has been forgotten or is unknown. In post-colonial societies such as Australia and New Zealand, where reparations to the original inhabitants of the invaded lands or to children sent out to abusive institutions rightfully dominate discussions of cultural loss and displacement, the effects of willing emigration are overlooked. Creating a life in a new land challenged generations of a family. In the entire work I attempt to document or show these challenges to the families from which my parents came in the hope that this adds to an evolving discourse about cultural identity in post-colonial societies.

Research Contribution

The two sketches in 'Lenora Jane Frayne' differ in approach and genre. With the first, while there is some documentary evidence to support the fact that my great aunt, Lenora Jane Frayne, whom I never knew and whose existence was revealed only when I sorted through old photographs after the death of my mother in 2003, was in Germany in 1938, the story is an imagined piece. The second documents the facts that I have discovered about Lenora Jane Frayne using traditional research methods and delving into a variety of historical records, as shown in the endnotes. Using this knowledge, and inspired by the photograph that accompanies 'Lenora Jane Frayne', I then imagined my great-aunt making a visit to Leipzig. The first fictional sketch shows her embracing some ideas of her time that are now contentious, my purpose being to offer contemporary readers, who may not be familiar with mid-twentieth century historical events and viewpoints, a sympathetic view of a woman who

was both a product of and ahead of her time, a view that the historical records neither support nor refute.

Research Significance

The significance of this research is that it pushes the boundaries of biographical and historical writing in post-colonial societies such as Australia and New Zealand by allowing imagined lives to assist in filling in the gaps in the lost histories of families challenged through emigration to frontier environments. Biography is not always considered creative writing, so this paper explores and expands the possibilities for the acknowledged use of creative licence in biography

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Endnotes

¹ *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume XCVII, Issue 143, 19 June 1919, Page 8.

² *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume LXXVII, Issue 43, 20 February 1909, Page 9

³ *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume LXXIX, Issue 78, 4 April 1910, Page 3; *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume XCIII, Issue 128, 30 May 1917, Page 7.

⁴ *Dominion* (Wellington), Volume 12, Issue 19, 17 October 1918, Page 4.

⁵ *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume XCIV, Issue 118, 15 November 1917, Page 8; *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume XCVII, Issue 143, 19 June 1919, Page 8

⁶ *Dominion* (Wellington), Volume 12, Issue 117, 11 February 1919, Page 4.

⁷ *Dominion* (Wellington), Volume 13, Issue 106, 29 January 1920, Page 6.

⁸ *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume CXII, Issue 69, 18 September 1926, Page 5.

⁹ "Theosophical society," *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume CXII, Issue 70, 20 September 1926, Page 6.

¹⁰ *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume CIX, Issue 101, 1 May 1930, Page 21.

¹¹ *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume CXIV, Issue 79, 30 September 1932, Page 9; *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume CXIV, Issue 142, 13 December 1932, Page 12.

¹² *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume CXVI, Issue 152, 26 December 1933, Page 10; 'New Zealand, Archives New Zealand, Passenger Lists, 1839-1973,' database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:KLYG-VNH> : accessed 9 September 2015), L Frayne, 25 Dec 1933;

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¹⁴ *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume CXXI, Issue 125, 28 May 1936, Page 18.

¹⁵ *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume CXXIV, Issue 32, 6 August 1937, Page 14.

¹⁶ *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume CXXIV, Issue 88, 11 October 1937, Page 14.

¹⁷ *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume CXXVI, Issue 20, 23 July 1938, Page 18.

¹⁸ *Evening Post* (Wellington), Volume CXXVI, Issue 71, 21 September 1938, Page 11.