

Praise for *Sundowner of the Skies:*  
*the story of Oscar Garden, the forgotten Aviator*

‘Beautifully written, *Sundowner of the Skies* is no hagiography ... This cathartic family history is a profound exploration of inter-generational trauma and its effects on individuals, families and their shared memories’

JUDGES, NSW PREMIER’S HISTORY AWARD

‘A rattling, searing, soulful story that takes flight on the Gipsy Moth wings of the author’s relentless research and willingness to pull back every curtain of this extraordinary man’s life, sometimes at her own emotional peril. I didn’t want this trip to end’

TRENT DALTON

‘Author Mary Garden writes beautifully and honestly of her father, Oscar Garden, a hero from the golden age of aviation when intrepid men in tiny biplanes crossed the globe in flights that startled the world’ GRANTLEE KIEZA

‘An important piece of aviation history and a courageous personal story, vividly told. I found it enjoyable in every way. Beautifully told and bravely too, the width of research is astonishing. *Sundowner of the Skies* should find enthusiastic readers, grateful readers in the aviation world, and thoroughly engaged ones in the wider one’ MAURICE GEE

‘I have just read your book *Sundowner of the Skies* again. What a fascinating story. Your father was an incredible person. That was an extraordinary flight he did from Wyndham, over Halls Creek and then to Alice Springs using dead reckoning alone. I think it took amazing skill to find Alice’ DICK SMITH

‘This bare bones outline of an aviator’s career is simply the skeleton which Mary Garden, with an objectivity rare in a daughter’s account of a father’s troubled life, fleshes out with solid research into family history, recollections from friends and colleagues and extracts from the files. *Sundowner of the Skies* is a fine biography and aviation fans will love every mile of it, while the social historian will revel in the stories of how things were so different’ JIM SULLIVAN, *OTAGO DAILY TIMES*

‘Mary Garden has done us all a great service by bringing to public gaze this fascinating tale about her highly talented but hugely troubled father and the impact he had on her. The *Sundowner* came and went but his story now remains’

ROSS FITZGERALD, *WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN*

‘... maps out a cascade of acrimonious family dysfunction, religious zealotry, bitterness over unequal inheritance, alcoholism, and grudges nurtured for generations. Oscar Garden’s achievements were noteworthy and he deserves to be remembered’

GARRY SHILSON-JOSLING, *AUSTRALIAN AVIATION*

‘It’s no hagiography – warts and all she promises and doesn’t hold back about a man who was much better with planes than people’

JIM EAGLES & MARK FRYER, *NEW ZEALAND HERALD*

‘Mary Garden’s portrait of her father could be read as an attempt to retrieve his lost fame, but it’s probably best read as a daughter’s homage to a father who is at once familiar and a mystery ... Garden’s deep affection for her flawed father shines through’

STEVEN CARROLL, *SYDNEY MORNING HERALD*

‘A searingly honest and well-written narrative, packed with fascinating and surprising detail’ CHRIS CLIFFORD, *FLYPAST*

‘Oscar Garden’s daughter makes no secret of the fact that her father was a difficult person and the exposé of fractured family relationships permeate the whole book from the first page to the last. Oscar was a pilot and he achieved a great deal, but he was also a human being and Mary Garden has held nothing back in telling this story of a man who might for some odd quirk in history, until now, have been labelled “The Forgotten Aviator”’ STUART MCKAY, *THE MOTH*

‘The author has candidly described her father’s life – warts and all. One of her greatest strengths is her ability to write disarmingly of the main characters in her story, including of herself. This style has made this book a great biography of one of the world’s unknown aviators. Mary has done her father Oscar proud. She has assured him of his place in aviation history’ MARTIN PLAYNE, *ANCESTOR*

‘Oscar has arrived. What a triumph. A searingly honest, raw and expressive narrative. He is no longer forgotten and his unique Scottish spirit intact’

MARK CHITTICK

‘It’s a beautiful story of a forgotten figure, sensitively but honestly told’ ROBYN ANNEAR

‘A fabulous book ... which shows painstaking research, including a family tree, and it is all very well written. The story needed to be told’

ROB CHARLTON (FRAES)

# SUNDOWNER OF THE SKIES

The story of Oscar Garden  
THE FORGOTTEN AVIATOR



**Mary Garden**

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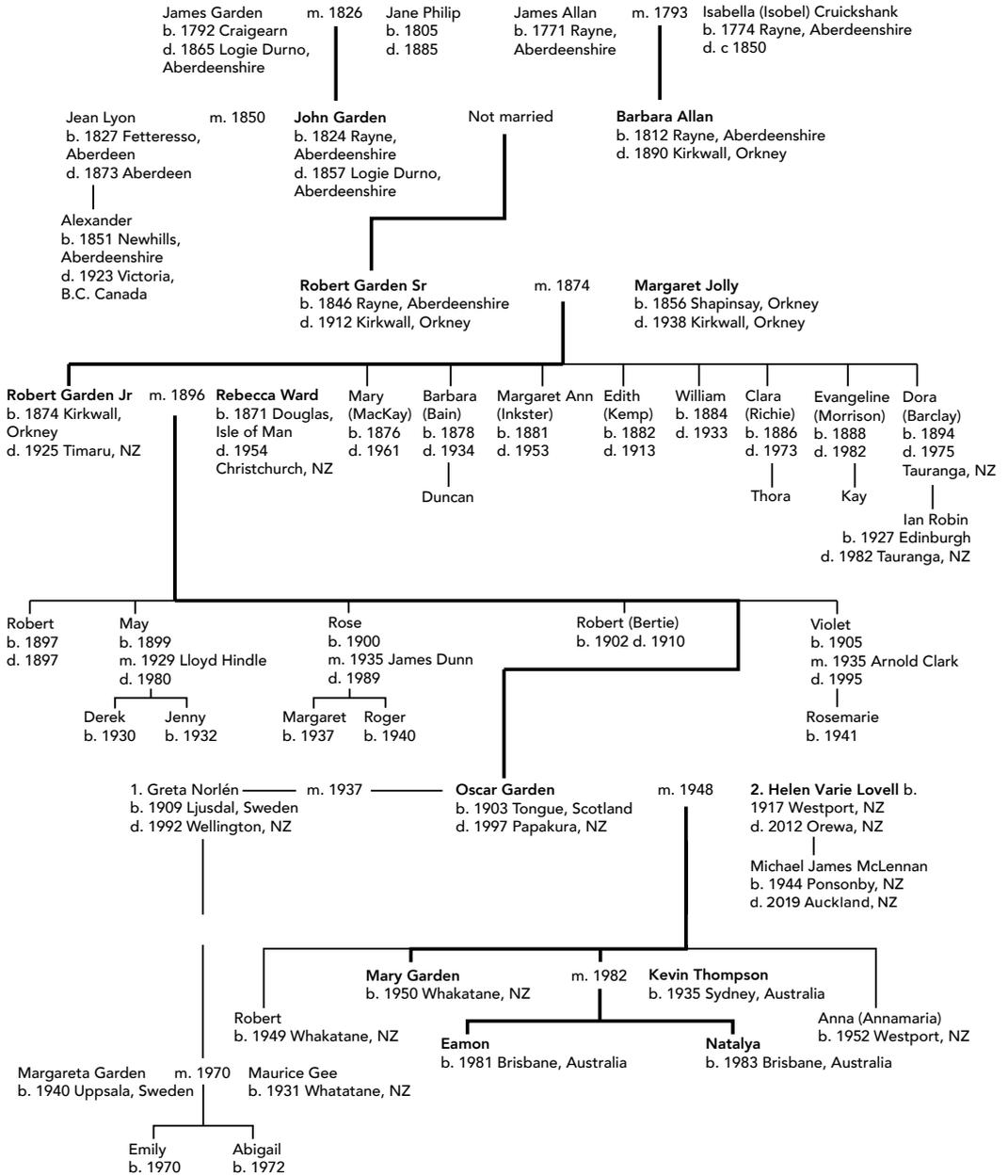
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Front cover: Oscar Garden flying to Essendon aerodrome, Melbourne, on 10 November 1930.  
AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.

Back cover: Passengers and crew disembarking from the TEAL Short S30 flying boat ZK-AME at Mechanics Bay, Auckland. Photograph by Whites Aviation, March 1947. Ref: WA-05916-G, ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND.

*Here you go, Mum. Warts and all.*

# GARDEN FAMILY TREE



Helen Lovell's siblings  
 Kathleen Loyola Carey b. 1913, d. 2011  
 Margaret Olive b. 1915, d. 1986  
 Brian Lawrence b. 1924, d. 2012  
 Evelyn (Lyn) b. 1930, d. 1940

Sundowner: An Australian swagman who arrives unexpectedly out of nowhere on sundown, and disappears the next morning. The *Sun* newspaper called Oscar Garden *Sundowner of the Skies* after he flew into Wyndham on 4 November 1930 after his last hop on the flight from England.

Kia Ora: A Māori term which is used as a greeting but it also means to wish someone or something good luck. Oscar Garden named his Gipsy Moth plane *Kia Ora*.



Postcard portrait of Oscar wearing flying costume.  
Taken in England, July 1931.

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## Author's note

My father, Oscar Garden, was once a famous aviator. He achieved notoriety in 1930 when he became the youngest and most inexperienced pilot to fly solo from England to Australia. His flying career went on to span 17 years, and in 1943 he became Chief Pilot and Operations Manager of Tasman Empire Airways Limited (TEAL), the forerunner of Air New Zealand. Some of the pilots he trained said he was the 'Father of Air New Zealand'.

When he was alive the idea that someone might write a book about him came up in conversations. He seemed quite keen on the idea, although he was adamant that his son-in-law, Maurice Gee, should not write it. Maurice, an acclaimed New Zealand author, is married to Margareta, my father's daughter from his first marriage. My father reckoned there was too much sex in his books. Not that Maurice could write much about the sex in my father's life. According to Mum, they only had sex a few times and after she became pregnant with my younger sister, Anna, that was it.

In the 1990s, I had toyed with the idea of writing a book about my father, which would mean going over from Brisbane to Auckland to interview him at length. But I didn't. I couldn't afford it, for a start. By then I was a single mum struggling to bring up two children. As well as airfares, I would have to pay for a motel room, as my father could not cope with visitors. And I was ambivalent. Until I embarked on this journey, I knew little about his flying days. Was he really *that* famous, and worth

writing about? He seldom talked to me about anything, except to bark orders. He commanded our family as if he was still the captain of a flying boat. And I remember overhearing someone (perhaps it was Aunt Ola, my mother's sister) talking about his epic solo flight from England to Australia in 1930 and calling it, 'a lot of fuss about nothing'. Mum used to downplay it too, by saying, 'He was only the fourth, you know.'<sup>1</sup>

But in 1992 I did write something, not that the results were encouraging. I wrote an article – essentially an overview of his flying years – drawing on some newspaper and magazine articles, extracts from aviation books and a few interviews. I sent a draft to my father to check. He was chuffed and scribbled a few corrections in pencil in various places. I posted the final version to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and mentioned I had photos that could be used if they were interested. We were all taken aback by the type-written reply: 'The Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* thanks you for submitting the attached contribution but regrets he is unable to make use of it. Unfortunately, the SMH doesn't publish fiction.' I didn't try to find another home for it.

In 2005, I decided to have another go. The notion of writing a book was even more out of the question, for by then my father was gone. He died in 1997. I'd left it too late to talk to him about his life. Mind you, had I talked to him, it is unlikely I would have extracted the truth out of him; that is, the full story. He wasn't much of a talker and, as I was to discover, he often exaggerated and sometimes lied to the press. Besides, talking about feelings was strictly off-limits in our household. I doubt whether he would have told me how he felt about the things that had happened to him as a child and during World War I.

But I was curious about his 1930 flight from England to Australia, and, after researching it, I realised my mother was wrong. Even though my father had not broken any records, what he did was remarkable. He was the first aviator to risk landfall at Wyndham and the first to fly over the harsh deserts of central Australia. He also broke a record for

novice aviators. So, I wrote a long-form feature article on this flight and submitted it to *The Australian Financial Review* (AFR). The editor, Chris Short, replied: 'Mary, it's not our usual fare but I've read it a couple of times and it has a growing appeal. I think I can find a home for it.' The article, 'Sundowner of the Skies – Mary Garden takes flight with her father' was published in the centre mid-spread pages of the AFR's Easter edition, 24–28 March 2005.

There was a huge response. I received emails from people all over the world. Deepak Somar, a retired pilot for Air India, said, 'I consider your father's solo flight from England to Australia in 1930 the single most sustained feat of courage in aviation, since he had little flying experience, he did the maintenance himself, and navigated with just an old-fashioned compass. It would make a good movie.' Rakesh Sharma, the first Indian astronaut into space, said it was an awesome story, describing Oscar as the 'magnificent man in his flying machine'. He pointed out that 'only a very few could appreciate the extent of my father's commitment and the enormity of his achievement.' Ian Mackersey, a New Zealand writer acclaimed for his deeply researched and revelational biographies, including those of aviators Jean Batten and Charles Kingsford Smith, wrote: 'He was a remarkable man. Because he was so low-key about it, his aviation career is little known here.'

I was hooked. I decided to write other articles. However, a book still seemed out of the question. Even though the internet had arrived, a Google search revealed only one entry on Oscar Garden, a piece in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*<sup>2</sup> compiled in 2000 by my half-sister, Margareta Gee, and Stephen Berry, a former flight attendant for Air New Zealand. Ray Richards, a New Zealand literary agent who had been a distinguished navy flyer in the Pacific War, wrote to me in 2006, saying, 'The *Australian Encyclopaedia* appears to have only one line for Oscar Garden. That's in a four-page chart of landmarks in Australian aviation! He's a forgotten hero, perhaps waiting to be reconstructed in a biography.'

I began researching his life – combing microfilms of old newspapers and magazines, sending queries to librarians and archivists, and placing requests for information on various aviation online forums. I subsequently had articles published in newspapers such as the *Southland Times*, *Timaru Herald*, *Otago Daily Times*, *Christchurch Press* and *Bay of Plenty Times* as well as Scotland's *Northern Times*. I wrote articles that were snatched up by aviation magazines in Florida, California, South Africa and Australia, as well as *New Zealand Geographic* and *New Zealand Memories*. At the end of each I included requests for information about my father. At one stage I wondered whether I was overdoing it. Wouldn't people become sick to death of hearing about my father? Bruce Cavanagh, curator of Gore Museum (New Zealand), reassured me: 'Don't worry. We can't get enough of stories of Oscar Garden. Can't wait for your book.'

As well as emails from aviation buffs and aero philatelists<sup>3</sup>, I heard from people whose relatives – an aunt, grandmother or uncle – had gone for a joyride with my father during his 1931 tour of New Zealand. They'd send handwritten letters and enclosed photographs. Air New Zealand paid for me to fly to Auckland to interview some of the surviving TEAL pilots. Bill Salt, a retired pilot and engineer, contacted me. He had owned Bay Aircraft Services at Mt Maunganui, New Zealand, and 25 years ago, in amongst paperwork, came across the logbooks<sup>4</sup> for *Kia Ora*, the Gipsy Moth plane my father flew to Australia. Bill had kept them all this time but was about to sell them (along with other aviation paraphernalia) when he read one of my articles in an aviation magazine and decided they would be better back with our family. Remarkably, he was living at Caboolture, a 20-minute drive from my home on the Sunshine Coast. I felt as if I had entered Aladdin's Cave. As well as discovering gems from my father's flying days, there was a treasure trove of his own family history, especially that of his grandfather.

However, there are gaps in my story. It was difficult to piece together much of his personal life up to the time he married my mother, Helen

Varie Lovell, in 1948. He had not kept in touch with the friends he made in Christchurch and Sydney in the 1920s, and he was not close to any of his early aviation peers. During the TEAL years (1940–1947) he kept to himself and was regarded as a loner. He never kept diaries and seldom wrote letters, although I managed to track down some he wrote to his mother, Rebecca, in the 1930s and a few he wrote to his parents when he was a young child at boarding school in Scotland. Rummaging around the National Archives of Scotland, I also stumbled upon Rebecca's petitions to Scotland's Supreme Civil Court after she'd run away from Robert, her husband. I obtained my father's file from the New Zealand Defence Force, and found to my surprise that it contained letters Rebecca had written between 1934 and 1937 to Prime Minister Michael Savage and the Minister of Defence, John Cobbe. She kept requesting that they see if they could find a job for 'my boy'. For a while my father had been 'stuck' in England, at first unemployed and then, when he did procure a flying position, hankering for work in New Zealand or Australia. He found the English winters unbearable.

I was, however, able to procure transcripts of several interviews: one by Eric Tucker, a retired Operations Manager of British Airways; another by Ken Ellis (New Zealand Radio and Television), and interviews done by Margareta Gee and her daughter Abigail. My father wrote two feature articles: 'My flight to Australia: with Oscar Garden over the Hinkler route', *New Zealand Free Lance*, 3 December 1930, and 'Garden's story: How 'plane capsized; nearly killed at Munich; peril of ocean hop; thrills in the desert', *The Sun* (Sydney), 9 November 1930. Unless cited, all personal quotes are from these letters, interviews and articles.

My recollections of my father and my childhood may differ from those of other family members, but nobody has a monopoly on the shared past. Thankfully, in the decade before she died, I spoke to Mum for countless hours and wrote down her recollections and shared with her my finds. She hoped my book would be a 'warts and all' account, which was strange

coming from someone who never wanted neighbours knowing what was going on and who once – when I was an adult – shut the windows because she thought I was laughing too loudly. My father would not have been happy about the skeletons I uncovered, nor my mentioning his failures as a father and a husband. He would have only wanted people to know about ‘the good bits’, his self as a pioneer aviator. And yet history, going back, can be a healing process. Digging up his past and going on this journey helped me, and my mother, understand in part why he became who he was.

## My Sister’s Book

Soon after the first edition of *Sundowner of the Skies* was published in June 2019, my sister Anna (Annamaria) began writing her own book. I first heard about *Oscar Garden: A Tale of One Man’s Love of Flying* on 18 October 2020, the day before its release. No-one in the family, apart from my brother Robert, knew about it.

It was a huge shock, and I felt betrayed.

Anna wrote on the NZ Booklovers site, ‘I disagreed so strongly with my sister’s rendition of my father that I put pen to paper and wrote furiously, putting together my tale on Dad.’ Yet the draft manuscript of *Sundowner of the Skies* had been given to family members, including cousins, for feedback. No-one had come back to me and challenged anything I’d written about Dad or said he was ‘not like that’.

*A Tale of One Man’s Love of Flying* is a hagiography - excessively flattering and ignoring many of Dad’s faults, especially his cruel streak.

In January 2019 I gifted my extensive collection, including Dad’s logbooks, photos, letters and newspaper clippings, to Auckland’s Museum of Transport and Technology. It was a treasure-trove, and Anna accessed

it. I was surprised to see many of the same photos, letters and anecdotes that I used in *Sundowner of the Skies* pop up in *A Tale of One Man's Love of Flying*.

My sister says in the author's note, 'It took only eight months to write the basics.' Unfortunately, I discovered that her book is riddled with factual errors, especially errors regarding dates and ages, and even includes some of Dad's tall tales. I made plenty of mistakes when I first set out on my journey in 2005. I realised Dad often exaggerated, came up with stories that were not true or was mistaken on some points. If articles or books on aviation history are to be of any value, they require meticulous research and fact-checking, especially with regard to sources.

A number of my articles on this family saga have been published. One is reprinted in the Afterword on page 252. In this I write, '*Oscar Garden: A tale of one man's love of flying* is the book he [Dad] would have wanted,' as it glosses over his character flaws. On reflection, I'm not so sure. Dad was a perfectionist. He liked to get things right; he liked dates and figures to be correct.

N.B. In the 1980s my sister changed her name from Anna to Annamaria, the name under which her book is published. In my articles I call her Annamaria. In this book, I have left her name as Anna, which is what Dad and Mum always called her, as have Robert and I.



*Whenever I hear a small plane droning overhead, I think of my father. Sometimes I imagine him sitting up there, perched in the cockpit. It has been like this for as long as I can remember.*



Oscar in the cockpit of *Kia Ora*, his De Havilland Gipsy Moth aircraft, on arrival at Mascot Aerodrome, Sydney, on 7 November 1930, after his solo flight from England to Australia.

## Introduction

In the early morning of 16 October 1930, Oscar Garden set out from Croydon Aerodrome in South London in a second-hand, open-cockpit Gipsy Moth. On his feet he wore carpet slippers, and he had half a dozen sandwiches on his lap. His plan was to fly to Australia. He was 27 years old and had just learnt to fly, with a mere 39 flying hours under his belt. There was only one person there to see him off – a representative of the Vacuum Oil Company, who had agreed to provide fuel supplies of Plume and Mobiloil at his planned stops along the 12,000-mile route.

At that time, the flight from England to Australia was considered to be ‘the most formidable feat in aerial navigation and the sternest test of pilot and machine’.<sup>5</sup> Many aviators failed; some lost their lives. If Oscar’s father’s flying instructor, First Officer Reginald James Bunning, an ex-wartime pilot, had known of his plan he would have tried to talk him out of it. Bunning only found out after he had left. He told reporters Oscar was foolhardy and didn’t have a hope in Hades.

It is difficult today to imagine the courage, endurance and foolhardiness of pioneer aviators. Apart from the compass, they had no instruments, relying on dead reckoning and their wits. They had to fly at low level through turbulence, dust storms and the darkness of tropical storms. They would sit hunched up in their tiny cramped open cockpits for hours at a time with no protection from the weather. They had no radios or toilets.

Miraculously, Oscar made it. Eighteen days after leaving Croydon, he landed at Wyndham Aerodrome in Western Australia. He was lucky to survive the trip, as he had several forced landings, including a spectacular crash in darkness near Jhansi in central India. He found himself hanging upside down in the seat's safety straps listening to petrol dripping out from the rear tank and watched with horror as a local Indian ran towards him with a hurricane lamp. Like most of the people he encountered, the Indian spoke no English.

Oscar became the fifth aviator to complete a solo flight from England to Australia. Even though he was the youngest and the most inexperienced, at 18 days his flight was the third-fastest after veteran pioneer aviators Charles Kingsford Smith and Bert Hinkler. Hinkler took 15 days in 1928, and Kingsford Smith, who left England a week before Oscar, took 10 days. They both had flown during World War I and each had over a decade of flying experience before their flights. Oscar just beat Amy Johnson, who had taken 19 days earlier that year. She had had several crash landings over Burma (now Myanmar) and Thailand. And he easily beat Francis Chichester, who departed in December 1929 but took 41 days due to a crash landing in Libya.

The day after Oscar reached Australia, *The Sun* reported:

*Oscar Garden, the casual flier, blew in to Wyndham yesterday evening, after his last hop on the flight from England. Kingsford-Smith [sic] has dubbed himself a Vagabond of the Air. Garden, then, is the Sundowner of the Skies. The airman took Wyndham by surprise. There was no definite news there that he would arrive, and the landing ground at 'Three Mile' held no welcoming crowds. His arrival was not actually known until a motorist brought the news to town from the landing ground.*<sup>6</sup>

'Sundowner of the Skies' became a nickname that stuck to Oscar throughout his life. Not that it was used on a day-to-day basis. It would

crop up in the press when someone managed to track him down, even years after he had turned his back on the world of aviation.

Sundowner describes an Australian swagman who arrives unexpectedly out of nowhere on sundown and disappears the next morning. The name suited Oscar perfectly. He was forever on the move. Even though he was born in Scotland, at the time of his initial flight to Australia, he had also spent time in the Isle of Man, Manchester (England), Australia and New Zealand. When he finally settled in New Zealand, he moved house countless times.

Oscar was one of the few survivors of those early years of long-distance flying. Many died in crashes, including Hinkler, Kingsford Smith and Johnson. Of those who survived, he was one of a handful who went on to a career in commercial aviation. He worked first in England and then in New Zealand where, in 1943, he became Chief Pilot and Operations Manager of the fledgling airline TEAL, the forerunner of Air New Zealand. By then he was considered 'one of the most capable airline pilots in the world' and 'one of the British Empire's most noted and experienced commercial pilots'.<sup>7</sup> He left TEAL in 1947, three years before I was born, and became a tomato grower in Tauranga, in New Zealand's Bay of Plenty. He never flew a plane again.

After that, he was soon forgotten. In 1979, Ian Driscoll, a noted aviation writer, pointed out that 'Oscar Garden must be the most unnoticed of New Zealand's airline pioneers.'<sup>8</sup> What puzzled me was: if he was that famous and successful, why was he forgotten? And if he was so successful at navigating the skies, why was he such a failure on earth and at family life? Mum had always described him as 'a bastard of a father. And a bastard of a husband.'

He was certainly not my hero when I was growing up. My aim was to leave home as soon as possible, to get right away from him and my odd, dysfunctional family. 'The mad Gardens,' Mum called us. They were Scots, after all, she'd add.

# MAP OF ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND



## CHAPTER 1

# Merchant Prince of Orkney

Oscar was a Scotsman. Even though he lived in New Zealand for most of his life, he still considered himself a Scot and, more importantly, a Highlander. Our Gardens have been Highland Scots for centuries. One researcher claims we can be traced back to a John Garden born in 1480, whose son George was sent by James I to Denmark in 1589 to deliver the marriage treaty to Princess Anne, and that another ancestor, Beatrix Garden, was maid of honour to Mary Queen of Scots.

Oscar was born in Tongue, a small village of about 500 people in the far north of mainland Scotland, once an historic crossroad for Gaels, Picts and Vikings. His date of birth was 21 August 1903 – just months before the Wright brothers inaugurated the aerial age with their first powered flight. While few would have heard of it, I've known about Tongue since I was a child. It was one thing about my father that made me smile. The name tickled my fancy. One Christmas, a Scottish relative (it may have been his aunt Dora) sent us a board game, that had a large map of Scotland on it. We would throw dice and move little metal cars around to various towns. Tongue was there, right up the top. This board game is the only thing of my childhood I still have. I picked it up from my mother's place

one day after I had children of my own. It was remarkable that she still had it, given that she was good at getting rid of things. As was Oscar. The only things he kept from his past were bits and pieces from his flying days that he stored in a camphor laurel chest.

In 2005, after Scotland's *Northern Times* published one of my articles on Oscar, I received an email from an Allan Burr, who subscribed to that newspaper online. Allan, a doctor, was living in Buderim, on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, a short distance from where I was living at the time. I met up with Allan for coffee. Incredibly, he had also been born in Tongue and spent summers working in one of the stores that my great-grandfather Robert Garden Sr, a merchant trader in Orkney, had established years before. In 1974 he had cared for one of Oscar's sisters at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. Later, at Deception Bay in Queensland, he had a patient who had been an employee of Robert Garden Sr.

Allan said the thing that struck him more than anything else was that a pioneer aviator could have sprung from Tongue. Tongue of all places. Tongue is in the Shire of Sutherland, a bleak and isolated part of Scotland. To this day there are no airports in Sutherland. The land is rugged and sparsely populated. At the time of Oscar's birth, there were about 19 dwellings surrounded by crofting country – crofts were units of agricultural land on large estates, and rented from the landowner.

The area was ravaged during the Sutherland Clearances – the forced and brutal evictions of small crofters by the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland between 1806 and 1820. Sutherland suffered more from the clearances than in other parts of the Highlands. Houses were destroyed or burnt, and people starved or froze to death. Some people were given small allotments in coastal villages where they tried to scrape a living by fishing; others were given assistance to emigrate to North America and Australasia. It has been said that the Highland Clearances left scars on the psyche of Highlanders for generations to come. Even for those who went away, there was an incredible sense of nostalgia and empathy

with their former homeland, and also a high degree of romanticism. This was evident in my father. We were given constant reminders of Scotland throughout our childhood. One of our few family outings was the Christmas Carnival at Tauranga's Soundshell at Memorial Park. There would be marching by the local Scottish Pipe Band as well as Highland dancing. I have always found the sound of bagpipes haunting and rousing; no doubt it was for my father.

But it wasn't just his nostalgia. As Margareta, my half-sister, pointed out, 'I always felt he was trapped in north Scotland. Strange things happen to kids when their parents split up.' When I was growing up, I knew little about my father's Scottish childhood; I only knew his parents had separated. And that his grandfather had been disinherited from the Garden fortune. That Garden fortune was amassed by my great-grandfather, Robert Garden Sr. His story is a remarkable one: born into poverty, he became one of the wealthiest traders of Orkney and north Scotland, earning himself the moniker 'Merchant Prince of Orkney'.

Robert was born in 1846 in Rayne, a small village about 26 miles from Aberdeen, nestled in the foothills of Bennachie. Family rumour suggests we are related to one of the Bennachie colonists who were subjected to the Highland Clearances in 1859 but this is yet to be substantiated. His parents were also born in Rayne: John Garden in 1824 and Barbara Allan in 1812. I had assumed they were married, as this was indicated in various documents. Barbara's death certificate had her as 'widow of John Garden – General Labourer' and in the 1881 Census she was listed as 'widowed'. However, after extensive searches I was unable to locate a marriage certificate. In fact, there was none, as they never married. Eventually I located the local parish record of his birth:

*1846 August 17 John Garden and Barbara Allan had a son in uncleanness named Robert, baptised on 21st December before witnesses Robert Allan [Barbara's brother] and John Philip [John's uncle]*

SUNDOWNER OF THE SKIES



‘In uncleanness’ means illegitimate. This is not big deal these days, but to have a child out of wedlock in Scotland back then was a source of great shame and was condemned by the community. Robert would have been called a bastard child. Such was the shame that families went to great lengths to keep their secret under wraps, and they would lie about it, as Barbara did, simply pretending she had been married and had become a widow. It is not known why John and Barbara did not marry, as there would have been pressure for them to do so. However, there was quite an age difference – Barbara was 13 years older than John. She was 35 years old, and to be unmarried and have her first child at that age is unusual.

It is not known how they met; perhaps Barbara was working as a servant on the farm where John was working, and the pregnancy was the result of a casual encounter. It is also unusual that he allowed his son to take his surname. It is likely that he left her to fend for herself as a single mother, soon after the birth. I have no idea if Oscar knew that his grandfather was illegitimate; if he did, I doubt whether he would have told me.

However, John Garden had another child who had a luckier start in life. A few years after Robert’s birth, he married Jean Lyon, and their son Alexander was born in 1851. By then John was working as a brewery carter, a wine merchant. I managed to track down the great-granddaughter of Alexander, Barbara Yablonksi, now living in Canada. Barbara has a keen interest in family history, and she, too, had been searching in vain for John Garden and Barbara Allan’s marriage certificate. John died in 1857, and the cause of death is stated as ‘supposed to be drowning by falling into the Denburn River – not certified’. Perhaps he was drunk, as I was finding that alcoholism coursed through the Garden tree. As Eoin MacGillivray, one of my distant cousins, pointed out to me, ‘Denburn is not too wide a

Opposite: My great grandfather Robert Garden Sr in his kilt. He was born into poverty in Rayne, Aberdeenshire, and became one of the wealthiest men in north Scotland. c 1880.

burn and I would have thought he must have been very drunk to manage that or was helped!

Barbara and Robert lived with her mother, Isabella, for some years in Rayne. Barbara and Isabella worked as stocking knitters; knitting was a thriving cottage industry in rural Scotland at the time. Next door to them lived Barbara's older brother, Robert Allan, his wife and their four children. Robert Allan was renting a small croft of 6 acres. It would have been a hard life in very harsh conditions; they would have worked long hours for meagre rewards and had a poor diet. There was a local parish school, so presumably Robert Garden would have gone there for a few years and learnt to read, write and do basic arithmetic.

The family then experienced upheaval. Isabella died, and Robert Allan and his family emigrated to Canada. In 1856, at the age of 10, Robert Garden went to work on a farm at Culsalmond, about three miles from Rayne, where he became what was known as a herdy boy, tending cattle and sheep. He eventually left the farm and returned to Rayne to live with his mother, now a washerwoman. There he worked as a roof slater.

Evidently Robert was thinking of following his uncle and emigrating to Canada with his mother, but a chance conversation was to change their lives. The story goes that in 1873 Robert met an Orcadian who complained to him about the scarcity of shops in the rural districts of Orkney, and the high price and lack of variety of goods. Orkney is an archipelago a few miles off the north coast of Scotland. Robert had a brainwave. He thought of the pedlars that serviced his little farming community, and he had an idea: he could do the same in Orkney. So he sailed to Kirkwall, the largest town and capital of Orkney. According to anecdotal evidence, he arrived in Kirkwall with a barrow-load of onions.<sup>9</sup>

He was soon travelling the country roads with a horse and wagon, selling goods such as groceries and hardware items at a small profit. He also traded in kind and would accept items including eggs, butter, woollen socks and vegetables, which he would then sell on. His travelling shop

– fitted with shelves on the inside and racks on the outside – was an instant success, and by the end of the year he had acquired more horse-drawn wagons, as well as a six-horsepower steam traction engine, which ‘puffed around the mainland roads much to the astonishment and delight of the natives, and to his own profit’.<sup>10</sup> He then opened a grocery store in Kirkwall, and it was here he met Margaret Jolly, whose parents owned a shop around the corner. The Jollys obtained their supplies from Robert.

Margaret Jolly was born in 1856 in Westhill, Shapinsay, one of the islands of Orkney and a few miles north-east of Kirkwall. The Jollys had also come up to Orkney from Aberdeenshire and managed to work themselves up to owning a farm of 106 acres. They eventually sold this farm and moved to Kirkwall. Shortly after meeting Robert, Margaret became pregnant. Sex outside of marriage was fiercely frowned upon during this time, and yet, for some unknown reason, they waited seven months before getting married. They married in September 1874 and their son, who they also named Robert, was born two months later. Unlike his father, he was not born out of wedlock, although he came pretty close.

Robert Sr bought a large house in 18 Bridge Street, Kirkwall, and his mother came up from Aberdeen to live with them (she stayed until her death in 1890). From a life of poverty, they were now living in luxury – a 14-roomed house. They not only had two servants, but also a boot man and a horseman. Robert and Margaret had eight more children, including another son, William; their youngest, Dora, was born in 1894.

In 1890, Robert also bought the Kirkwall Hotel on Bridge Street, turning it into a retail and wholesale business complex, with separate departments for groceries, furniture and other goods. The complex also had an aerated waters factory making lemonade from local spring water, a seeds and manure store, a weaving business and a bakery. The building had historic significance having been built in 1433 and at various times been home to several earls. As well as establishing other stores – mainly grocery and bakeries – in other towns on Orkney, he also built a row



Robert Garden Sr and his family in Kirkwall, Orkney, in 1894. His eldest son (my grandfather), also called Robert, is standing at the back. William is at the front. Dora, the youngest, is sitting on her mother's lap. Dora's son Robin moved to Tauranga, New Zealand, in the early 1950s. Dora settled there in the late 1960s.

of terraced houses, called Garden Street, to accommodate his workers, which he let at very low rents. (These houses still exist today.)

Apart from his growing family and business success, it seems all was not rosy in the Garden life. According to Eoin, a distant cousin, the Jollys owed Robert Garden a substantial amount of money. As the story goes, they obtained a loan and then bought their supplies direct from Aberdeen instead of Robert. Evidently, Robert was furious about this and was seen ripping their sacks of supplies down at Kirkwall harbour. Eoin says, 'There was bad blood between them after this ... apparently he was not the nicest of men.'

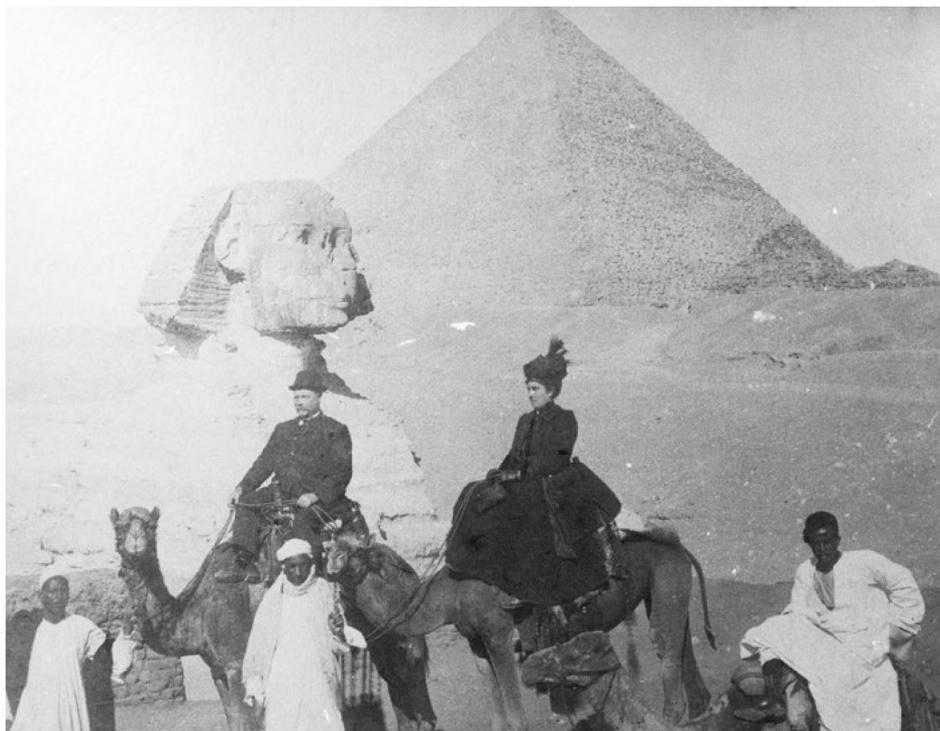
Robert realised there was an untapped market in the north and west of Sutherland, one of the most desolate and sparsely populated parts of

Scotland, and he established a string of shops around the coast – most were simple buildings of corrugated iron and wood – with the most prestigious store at Tongue. He clearly made an important contribution to sustaining communities in the north-west of Scotland. One local described him as ‘a wheeler-dealer and shrewd businessman who conducted often complicated business dealings informally, usually with nothing in writing; such deals might typically be sealed with a handshake.’<sup>11</sup>

His most brilliant idea was floating shops. In 1884 he bought a schooner, *Zuna*, and converted it to a floating shop, with departments for drapery, groceries and agricultural requirements. A succession of boats followed. These were used to service Orkney, Shetland and the north of Scotland, and down the west coast as far as Ullapool. To access islands that had no piers, the ships would anchor in the harbour, and in response to a signal, a dinghy would go to shore to ferry customers out to the shop. Alexander MacLeod<sup>12</sup> recalls the two floating shops that made monthly visits to Tanera Island, off Scotland’s north-west coast. He said he would gather winkles and be given a few shillings, or he would barter them for sweets, biscuits or chocolate.

Although Robert Garden became Orkney’s and north Scotland’s biggest merchant of the day, he was not just focused on business success. Not surprisingly, considering his impoverished beginnings, he was very generous and helped many Orkney and north Scotland crofters to buy their holdings. He also played an active part in public life and served as a councillor on Orkney County Council, where he advocated for increased allowances to the poor, especially for widows and orphans. He was also involved in the restoration work of the famous Magnus Cathedral, known as the ‘Light in the North’, founded in 1137 by the Viking Earl Rognvald.

Robert had a fascination for the travels of some of the Norse Earls of Orkney. Between 1906 and 1909 he and Margaret travelled extensively, visiting Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Morocco, Canary Islands and the Near East (now referred to as the Middle East), including a trip to



My great grandparents, Robert and Margaret, in Egypt, 1909.

Jerusalem. He sent back regular reports published in *The Orcadian*, which were later published in a book *Old Cities and Old Countries*. Copies were leather-bound, and I am lucky to have one in my possession. Considering his limited and basic education it is remarkable that he could write so well.

Robert thought Old Cairo was ‘the most undesirable place on the earth to live in. The sanitary conditions are shocking, signs of poverty, filthiness, degradation are on all hands.’ He describes it as ‘overcrowded and such tumble-down buildings and hovels as one could not expect to see anywhere. People and animals are huddled together so that in some cases you could hardly tell which is which.’

Robert’s writings show the influence of his puritanical Presbyterian faith. In one report, he writes that he was shocked to see young American ladies with ‘faces artificially polished and coloured and their eyebrows blackened’. And he railed against the evils of drink, condemning the

scenes of drunkenness he encountered in Aberdeen before they left. Yet he must have known his older son (my grandfather) was an alcoholic. Robert Garden Jr died in 1925 when he was only 50, and his death certificate states cause of death 'chronic alcoholism for 36 years', which suggests he had had a drinking problem since the age of 14! Robert's younger son William was also an alcoholic and died in 1933 at the age of 49 – surprisingly, his death certificate also states cause of death to be chronic alcoholism. Perhaps he had managed to conceal his alcoholism from his father.

On 4 September 1912, Robert died at the age of 66 after a short illness. The cause of death was 'dilation of heart; gangrene of feet for 28 days'. Some said he had worked himself into the ground. There was an outpouring of grief in the community. On the day of his funeral, flags flew at half-mast on public buildings and on all vessels in the harbour. Members of his staff carried the coffin to his grave in the churchyard of St Magnus Cathedral. The headstone of Robert Garden states that Barbara Garden, his mother, was a widow, even though we now know she was never married and he was illegitimate.

*The Scotsman* wrote that Robert Garden was identified with the trade and life of the county as no other man had been, and his success was phenomenal. The full-page obituary in *The Orcadian* noted:

*Mr Garden's name has been a household word in every parish and island in Orkney for wellnigh 40 years, and the news of his death will evoke a widespread feeling of regret, for he has been universally held in high esteem not only for his incomparable ability as a business man, and but also for his deep and practical interest in the welfare of Kirkwall and the county generally ... His love of work, combined with the gifts as an organiser, the originality of his ideas, and the courage which he brought into his undertakings, pre-eminently fitted him for a successful business career.*

He left a fortune of £821,795, worth today about £77,340,000.<sup>13</sup> A few days before his death, Robert Jr got his clerk John Mooney, who had begun working for Robert in 1884, to draw up a will. In this, he left his business empire to his wife and their youngest son, William. My grandfather, his eldest son, received about £8000, worth today about £752,900. Embla Mooney, John Mooney's daughter, recalled: 'To his son, Robert, with whom he had always quarrelled, and to his daughters, he left legacies. Robert as elder son was advised by lawyers to contest the will, but no flaw was found in it.'<sup>14</sup> At the time of Robert Sr's death, Robert Jr had been married to Rebecca Ward for 16 years, but they had separated in 1910, which no doubt played a role in embarrassing the family. The story I heard from a cousin was that Robert was disinherited from the family fortune because of this separation. Mum said, 'They hated Rebecca [my grandmother] you know. It was such a scandal at the time, separating like that.' However, Embla's letter does not mention this being a reason for the disinheritance.

I have no idea of the nature of the conflict between Robert and his eldest son, but the disinheriting is harsh and cruel. Such acts are a kind of final payback, a blow from the grave. His son would have felt rejected and unloved. And Robert's younger son William repeated his father's pattern. In 1903, William married his first wife, Barbara, who was eight years older than he was (an age difference unusual for the time) and had a seven-year-old illegitimate child. They were an unlikely match. Barbara was to have eight children with William but died in 1915 during childbirth. William went on to marry Robina, with whom he had six children. A few years before he died in 1933, Maggie Garden, one of his daughters of his first marriage, wrote, 'He doesn't seem to care the least little bit for his first family at all, but takes a very keen interest in the welfare of the second.' William left his estate to the children of his second wife, which not surprisingly intensified the bad feeling between the two families. Such unfair bias popped up in later generations. Rebecca would

disinherit her two eldest children. And my father took no interest in my two children, the grandchildren from his second marriage, but always had a keen interest in the two granddaughters from his first marriage.

Although Robert Garden Sr remains a legend in Orkney, the troubles that beset his family are not mentioned in any of the articles written about him. They were never discussed in our family. We were only given a sanitised and distorted version. Before I began my research, I knew only the rags-to-riches story, the tale of the poor herdy boy who became a wealthy merchant trader. I did not know of the marital conflict between my grandparents, let alone my grandmother's petitions to Scotland's Supreme Civil Court, except snippets from Mum who said there were 'so many tensions in that family, so much bitterness'.

My mother always said my father had not a chip on his shoulder but a huge plank. This disinheritance from Robert Garden's fortune was certainly the bottom layer. The bitterness, laced with envy toward the wealthier Gardens, also infected his siblings, seeping through the generations.