

ADKIN: GEORGE LESLIE

Known as: Leslie or Les

Born: 26 July 1888, Wellington

Married: 14 December 1915

To Elizabeth Maud Herd (1890 – 1975) in Hastings

Died: 21 May 1964, Wellington

His ashes were scattered over the Kapiti Coast, north of Wellington

Leslie's Parents were:

William George Adkin: b. 1856, Diseworth, Leicestershire, England
d. 13 September 1946 (buried Tiro Tiro Rd cemetery,
Levin)

and

Annie Jane Denton: b. 10 October 1865, Wellington, New Zealand
d. August 1916, Wellington

William and Annie were married on 29 September 1887, Wesley Methodist Church, Wellington.

Leslie, who was the eldest child, had 6 siblings:

Edith Clare (1890-1980) married James Caldwell Gardner

Gilbert Denton (1892-1918) married Ivy Bennett

Dora Isobel (1894-1982) married Ronald Joseph Law

Ethel Marjorie (1896-1983) married George Broomfield

Kate Vivian (1900-1986)

Clifford (1902-1979) married Tui Mona Dyer

Leslie and Maud had 2 children:

Nancy Florence (1916-1964)

Clyde Goulding (1918-1996)

Beginnings

Leslie's father, William, was born in 1856 in Diseworth, Leicestershire, the son of Joseph and Elizabeth Adkin, yeoman farmers, and grew up in a time of agricultural depression. He was intensely religious, a devout Methodist, and attended church twice each Sunday.

He was sent to the nearby town of Castle Donington where he was apprenticed to a draper, then to Ashby de la Zouch before his move to London to further his career. Together with a couple of friends, the decision to emigrate to the colonies was put into action. William had always cherished the goal of land ownership, a dream impossible for him to achieve in England.

After a short period working in Sydney, Australia, William crossed the Tasman to Wellington. Here he was employed from 1881 to 1885 at the burgeoning department store of Kirkcaldie and Stains Limited on Lambton Quay, before venturing into business with two work colleagues, one of whom, unusually for the time, was a woman. This firm of Warnock, Kelly and Adkin operated at the north end of Lambton Quay and by 1888 had opened a branch on the southern side of The Square in Palmerston North. (Later, after Mrs Kelly had left the partnership in 1892, and then William in 1900, the business became Warnocks, well-known as a men's and boys' outfitters).

During his Wellington-based years, William met and married Annie Denton, who was a second-generation member of a well-established early settler family.

New Opportunities in Horowhenua

After the completion of the Wellington and Manawatu Railway Company's line through Levin, the land for the township and surrounding area was put up for sale in Wellington, by ballot. William, having visited his preferred site (now Queen Street East, Levin) had made a choice of three blocks for which he and Annie each submitted an application on 18 February 1889. Annie was successful with one of the ballots and they became landowners, acquiring 100 acres.

Over the next nine years, while still in Wellington, land was cleared for farming to commence and a rather grand home, "*Cheslyn Rise*", pictured below, was built costing just over £1100 for house, stables and fencing. It was open for public viewing one Saturday in 1898 before the family, now comprising five children, moved in.



Leslie's Education and Early Interests

Leslie was the eldest child and, now 10, was enrolled at Levin School (these days the site of the Adventure Park) riding there on horseback. His secondary education followed in 1903, for two years as a boarder at Wellington College. He was highly influenced by the headmaster there, JP Firth, along with Aubrey C Gifford, a mathematician and scientist, and others who sowed the seeds of his later interests. While Leslie was not a great player of team games, he was a keen swimmer, although could not match his classmate, Bernard Freyberg! The extra-curricular activities available - debating, first aid, camping, tramping and photography - widened his horizons.

There was a familial connection to photography also. Frank Denton, a successful Wanganui photographer, was his uncle. While at college he would have had the opportunity to keep in close contact with his maternal relatives, the Dentons, who lived at Fern Hill on The Terrace, across the city from the college. They were a characterful family, committed members of the Wesley Church congregation, with diverse interests particularly in relation to nature and science.

Back Home to Levin, Pursuing Photography



Leslie on the family farm in 1906 (Kete Horowhenua)

As expected by his father, Leslie started full time work on the farm in 1905 and began in the same year two of his lifelong habits – the keeping of a diary and taking photographs. The latter was a passion which, at times, tested the patience of many, particularly youngsters who were expected to hold a pose for however long it took to achieve the desired image! He was famous for his artistically arranged subjects and many of his photographs have been used as advertisements, on book covers and as illustrations within numerous books and articles. Enlargements of his work grace many public spaces in his home town of Levin as well as private homes. His images of the sailing ship '*Hydrabad*', which ran aground at Waitarere Beach in 1878 and was clambered over by several generations of children, are extremely popular and are great conversation starters.

Today, the Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa, holds the bulk of Leslie Adkin's photographic collection (over 7,500 images) as well as his diaries through the Alexander Turnbull Library and it is possible to access most of his work digitally. According to a great grandson, Phil Noble, his photographic work is considered one of the best produced by a New Zealander and is highly regarded internationally.

The Tararuas

Also from 1905, Leslie began seriously exploring the Tararua Ranges whenever his farm work made it possible. In 1909, he completed the first recorded crossing of the ranges from Levin to Masterton, and over the years added a series of pioneering journeys establishing east-to-west crossing routes.



Setting out on a Tararuas tramp, Leslie is second from right (Te Papa archive)

He was co-author of the first comprehensive map of the northern ranges with more detailed maps following, all beautifully captioned. He wrote five papers relating to the Tararuas' structure and geology, with many theories about their formation, believing it was due to a west-to-east movement of the earth's crust which buckled, creating parallel ridges and valleys. He presented his papers at meetings of the Philosophical Society in Wellington but finally withdrew them after a referee declared them 'based on too slender evidence and also, in part, erroneous'. They were filed away for 39 years then refined and reappeared; by this time mainstream thinkers were in close accord!

He named parts of the ranges including Mt Dora (for his sister) and Mt Lancaster (for his fellow tramper, Ernest Lancaster).

Farm Work, Marriage and Family Life

When Englishman William Herd, a Wellington architect, bought a farm in Bruce Road, Levin in 1909, he apprenticed his son Ralph to early settler James Prouse to learn farming. He also sent two daughters, Maud and Gertrude to keep house. Ralph became friendly with the Adkin brothers Leslie and Gilbert, through their membership of the YMCA and the Herd and Adkin families became acquainted. Maud and Leslie became even more friendly! Eventually this led to marriage and their own family. However, as Leslie was still trying to gain his own income from a difficult block of land and the Herd family had moved on to Hawkes Bay, it was several years before the couple became formally engaged.



**A romantic snapshot of Leslie and Maud in Hastings, 2 years before their marriage
(Te Papa collection)**

World War I came along too at this point (August 1914), but Leslie avoided being enlisted because of a hammer toe which, it was considered, could have restricted his marching capabilities. Brother Gilbert, with a keen interest in the territorials, did enlist.

Left to concentrate on matters at home, with his father's help, Leslie arranged to lease a block of land and have plans prepared for a house to be built. By the time he was finally able to marry Maud in December 1915, he was living in a whare on the North Block which he had cobbled together from a couple of old sheds. This was the home of the newly-weds for a few weeks until their house

was completed. In her later life Maud used to say that those weeks were the happiest of her life.

The following year, 1916, was a very full one. Leslie was busy with his own block, developing his house and garden and continuing to help his father at '*Cheslyn Rise*'. Maud became pregnant and in December Nancy Florence Adkin was born. His mother, Annie, fell ill and following surgery and a lengthy convalescence at Fern Hill in Wellington, she died in August.

Then in August 1918 the family received the news of Gilbert's death from wounds in France. For several years Leslie didn't engage in very much geology – other matters were paramount. Pregnant again, Maud delivered their second child, Clyde Goulding Adkin in November 1918. The Armistice celebrations on 11 December were somewhat muted for everyone as the influenza epidemic had struck New Zealand by that time.

So, from 1912 to the mid-1920s, Leslie restricted himself to interests closer to home - family life, farming, and Mangahao.

Mangahao

The building of a dam for power generation just north of Shannon created a great deal of interest, not least with Leslie Adkin. By 1918 the plan had been accepted by the government and in late February 1919 Leslie joined a considerable crowd at an open day on the site. He was fascinated by the explanation of the scheme and managed to acquire a map of the project.

When he next visited the site, he noticed a potential problem – that one of the abutments for the main dam would not be on solid rock as planned due to changes in the course of the river level over time. By his December visit, project staff were sinking test pits to find solid ground and in January workmen told him those tests had been unsuccessful even when the line of the dam was moved upstream.

He was unable to access any official information about the problem. After taking measurements and levels he prepared a paper which he presented at a science congress a week or so later where there was considerable interest in his theory from the Board of Science which had the role of lobbying the government for the funds for the project.



Mangahao construction photo taken by Leslie (PICRYL Public Domain Image)

During his next visit to the site, he found the engineers now inclined to his theory. The dam contractor overheard him chatting to the workmen and, not knowing his name, asked if he knew who Adkin was as he had been unable to trace him in government or professional engineering records. From then on, Leslie became an honorary member of the team, known to engineers as well as workmen. He recorded progress by map and photograph, was a welcome guest at the cook house and a guide to parties of interested locals.

An intimate view of the roots of the mountains was gained through his frequent use of the tunnels as short cuts and with the diversion of the river through a bypass tunnel. The photographs taken on his frequent visits of every facet of the work have left a remarkable legacy of the project and those who worked on it.

By the time of the official opening on 3 November 1924, Leslie was quite a celebrity and praise was heaped upon him in many newspapers and articles – *"there are few sheep farmers who make the study of geology a hobby but young Adkin – George Leslie Adkin – has done so with regard to the Tararua Ranges towering above his home"* said one. In another he was praised for his *"unswerving faith and determination"* in asserting his theory about the Mangahao gorge and for his photographs.

His salute to the audacity of the project is shown in his photograph below (from the Te Papa collection) of two linesmen in acrobatic pose on a pylon that crossed a paddock at 'Cheslyn Rise'.



Tramping Club

Tramping in the Tararua Ranges became very popular in this era, and a number of attempts at crossing the range to the Wairarapa were made. As mentioned earlier,

Leslie was in the expedition, along with the much older Ernest Lancaster and Henry France, who made the first successful tramp from Levin to Masterton in 1909.

By 1927 even more people were showing a keen interest in the hills and bush on their doorstep, both locally and from further afield. Inevitably, there were mishaps and narrowly-avoided tragedies as trampers explored, and this led to the following advertisement appearing in the Levin Chronicle on 7 May:

"A meeting will be held in the YMCA Rooms on Wednesday May 11, at 8pm of all interested in the Tararua Ranges, and with a view to the improvement of their accessibility from Levin, providing facilities for visitors to the ranges and the formation of a tramping club or some similar association. A cordial invitation is given to those willing to assist to attend this meeting." GL Adkin; HG Kerslake

About 90 people attended. Mr Kerslake chaired the meeting which elected a 19-member committee and set out the objectives of the club. Leslie Adkin, who had addressed the meeting, backed up with a sketch map, was elected vice president while his good friend Ernest Lancaster was voted in as president. By February 1928 the enthusiastic members had cleared a track and the first hut was completed. Over the years members not only worked on tracks, huts and club pursuits but were also the only source of search and rescue teams.

Leslie was Patron of the club from 1946 until his death in 1964.

Explorer and Fossicker

Over the years, as more land went under the plough, a number of Maori artifacts surfaced – literally. As the plough moved through the soil, it or the ploughman's foot would often strike an adze or some other tool. These and other 'finds' were often stored away in boxes or cupboards in many farmers' homes – it became a fashionable pastime and items were often traded in similar style to collected postage stamps. Leslie actively encouraged his sister and brother-in-law, Dora and Ron Law, with their collection and often photographed the collections of other ardent fossickers. This practice would not be countenanced today and although many items were 'preserved' in amateur museums, many were lost.

In 1924 Leslie bought his first car – driving lessons were included in the price – which aided his passion for exploration. From 1926 to 1944 he made 140 excursions in search of the Maori past; to collect and verify the written and oral lore of pre-European Maori in Horowhenua and link it to the land.

During this time, he read the manuscript of *Te Hekenga* written by Rod McDonald and Ewart O'Donnell. He was fascinated by the stories but disappointed that exact positions were not adequately recorded. He realised that with his mapping and photographic skills he could take the stories and present them in a unified form. Later, with the help of Rod McDonald he was able to record the sites of those stories. He continued his explorations along the dune belt between Lake Horowhenua and the coast, then south to Manakau and Otaki in 1931-32 when the first of a number of skeletons was found buried along the Otororoa ridge. He was convinced that these were the remains of an earlier tribe which he called the "Waitaha" people.

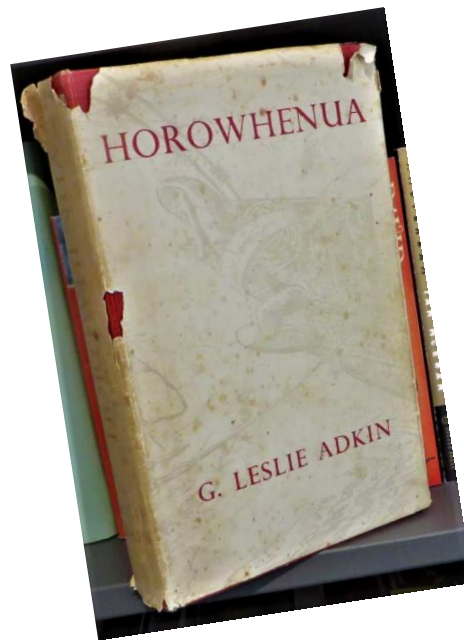
During the period 1933-36, due to the state of his farming finances, he could only spend about six days per year on the project and was burdened with mounting debt.

Much to the disgust of his father, William, Leslie abandoned the lease of the Sonoma block and by then concentrating on the 100 acres of Woodside he was able, with his son Clyde, to make more profit than the two blocks had produced together. However, Leslie's pedantic, dour nature became too much for Clyde who then sought other work and later enlisted in the army for war service.

His Magnum Opus – “Horowhenua” – and an End to Farming

In 1937-38 Leslie renewed his study on the Muhunua West area and between 1942 and 1944 there was a last flurry to fill in gaps and finish the manuscript for a book. The 450-page volume “*Horowhenua*” was subsequently printed and published in 1948 by the Government Printing Office, becoming a valuable resource for future historians and researchers of the archaeology, topography and etymology of the region – Leslie's magnum opus.

By this time Leslie and Maud had moved to Evans Bay, Wellington, and he was working for the Geological Survey branch of the DSIR; he was now being paid for work he loved doing and which previously had to be accomplished when he had spare time from his farming life.



He relished this period of his working life and retired from the department in March 1955 at the age of 67 years.

Final Flourishes

He then embarked on further "geological adventures" in his new territory of Wellington and up toward Levin. "*The Great Harbour of Tara*" was published in 1959, a treatment of the Wellington region similar to that of "*Horowhenua*". He was in great demand as a guest speaker, especially after this book came out. He was active in many organisations that spawned the rise of the conservation movement: the New Zealand Ecological Society, the Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand, and the National Historic Places Trust.

On the councils of the Polynesian Society and of the New Zealand Archaeological Association, Leslie was a controversial figure, arguing for the amateur enthusiasts who formed the bulk of the memberships.

Battling cancer by now, Leslie was forced to give up any further quests, and he died in Wellington Hospital on 21 May 1964, aged 75.

According to his biographer, Anthony Dreaver, Leslie's "ashes blew in the wind over Kapiti Island towards the Tararua Ranges, scattered from a light aircraft by his daughter Nancy." Tragically Nancy died only four months later.



Maud and Leslie in their happiest of times, March 1917 (Te Papa collection)

Researched and written for Heritage Horowhenua by Marjorie Law