

**JOHN McSWEENEY: LABOURER, MINER, FARMER,
PUBLICAN**

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JOHN McSWEENEY: LABOURER, MINER, FARMER, PUBLICAN

Abstract: *John McSweeney was important in the history of Te Aroha mining because he assisted Hone Werahiko in the latter's initial prospecting of the mountain. During the Te Aroha rush he invested in some claims, and later invested in the Waiorongomai field in a small way. After farming for some years, he became a publican in Te Aroha and, later, in Auckland, ending his life in a comfortable financial position.*

Not being a leading member of the community, little is known of his personality, although the personal life of the girl he first wanted to marry did create a brief sensation just before he married someone else.

ASSISTING HONE WERAHIKO

George Stewart O'Halloran, pioneer storekeeper and publican of Te Aroha,¹ in his 1894 memoirs described first meeting John McSweeney a few months before the 1880 rush:

On hearing a Cooee at the river one afternoon whilst I was working away almost choked by Steam digging out a new bath, I went down and sent the punt over for a man waiting on the bank. When he came across he said he was a newcomer or new chum looking for work. As he seemed a strapping young fellow and I had need of some help at the Springs, fencing in a garden, &c, I engaged him. He remained with me for some months when a Maori named Hone [Werahiko] made his appearance... He was not very strong and the work [of prospecting] was too much for him, and he wanted a mate who would go shares with him in anything they might discover. On this, I introduced my man Jack, told him I had nothing further for him to do, that I would pay him up and recommended him to throw in his lot for a few weeks at any rate with the Maori. He consented.²

According to the information McSweeney provided when he married, he first arrived in New Zealand in June 1880. Then aged 23, he was an illiterate farm labourer, born at Kenmore, County Kerry, Ireland, to Daniel,

¹ See paper on his life.

² George Stewart O'Halloran, untitled memoirs (1894), pp. 120-121, MS 1345, Alexander Turnbull Library [punctuation added].

a labourer, and Mary Glavin.³ His death certificate transformed his father into a fishery manager and the place of birth became Tralee.⁴ He may have gone to the Ohinemuri goldfield before arriving at Te Aroha, for a John McSweeney took out a miner's right there at an unstated date in 1880.⁵

From the start, McSweeney was commonly regarded as one of the prospectors.⁶ In 1910 the now-lost *Te Aroha Mail* stated that McSweeney and Werahiko found gold together. 'Old Hand' and 'Fair Play' immediately refuted this claim. The former wrote that McSweeney 'at that time was like a good many of us, on the lookout for a job, and Hone, having got to know him at the Hot Springs', gave him 'the job and a share'. After thus become a shareholder in the Prospectors' Claim, he helped to cut the line for its initial survey.⁷ 'Fair Play' contested the 'prevailing opinion' that McSweeney and Werahiko were 'jointly responsible for the discovery':

Well, now the facts are simply these. Hone Werahiko having found gold applied to the Government for his claim. About a month following, having received his protection, he asked Mr McSweeney to assist him, as he wanted to put in a trench to strip the lead. This Mr McSweeney did, for he had left his employment (which was at O'Halloran's Hot Springs Hotel) and was handsomely rewarded for his services by receiving a share in the mine. Therefore Hone Werahiko was the rightful owner of the title [of] first gold-finder.⁸

These recollections, whilst incorrect about when McSweeney commenced working for Werahiko, confirmed O'Halloran's statement that he was just a labourer doing the heavy digging. McSweeney did not discourage stories that his role had been equally important, for example in 1930, at the Old Identities Day, stating he was 'with Hone Werahiko when

³ Notices of Intentions to Marry 1881, Births Deaths and Marriages, BDM 20/26, p. 285, ANZ-W; Marriage Certificate of John McSweeney, 19 April 1881, 1881/1430, BDM.

⁴ Death Certificate of John McSweeney, 7 March 1940, 1940/21026, BDM.

⁵ Thames Warden's Court, Register of Ohinemuri Miners' Rights 1876-1892, 298/1880, BACL 14441/2a, ANZ-A.

⁶ For example, 'Te Aroha Arrows (From our Special on the Spot)', *Observer*, 19 February 1881, p. 236.

⁷ Letter from 'Old Hand', *Te Aroha News*, 15 November 1910, p. 2.

⁸ Letter from 'Fair Play', *Te Aroha News*, 15 November 1910, p. 2.

gold was discovered'. When searching the creek he found gold-bearing quartz,⁹ implying that he was as competent as Werahiko as a prospector.

He shared in the glory of the discovery: just before the proclamation of the field, when 'Te Aroha gold fever' was at its height, 'Johnny McSweeney and other prospectors' who were at Thames 'were the heroes of the hour'.¹⁰ At the beginning of December, he rode to Thames 'with the intelligence that the Prospectors have stripped the reef for 12 feet, and that the stone shows gold the whole distance. He rode post haste, and accomplished the distance in four and a half hours'.¹¹ In 1938, 'with no little pride' he showed the *Te Aroha News* a watch chain with a quartz pendant containing gold veins which he said 'came from the ridge to the south of the Bald Spur', meaning Prospectors' Spur. It was 'one of the first good specimens'.¹²

INVESTING IN MINING

O'Halloran recalled that, after the rush, 'my man John could have sold for £1000'.¹³ He did profit from his involvement, but not by that amount. Kenrick allotted him two of the ten shares in the Prospectors' Claim, the smallest holding. When this was reported, it was noted that he had 'represented [Adam] Porter¹⁴ from the first',¹⁵ meaning he had worked his share. Before opening day, he made a quick profit, selling a quarter of his interest for £110 to a fruiterer, a contractor, and a draper, all of Thames, and an eighth-interest for £80.¹⁶ Another eighth interest must also have been sold, for he transferred only a half to the Aroha Company, formed in December 1880 to work this claim, giving him 666 of the 12,000 scrip shares.¹⁷

⁹ *Te Aroha News*, 5 December 1930, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Thames Star*, 23 November 1880, p. 2.

¹¹ *Thames Star*, 3 December 1880, p. 2.

¹² *Te Aroha News*, 28 February 1938, p. 5.

¹³ O'Halloran, p. 121.

¹⁴ See paper on his life.

¹⁵ *Thames Star*, 17 November 1880, p. 2; *Auckland Weekly News*, 20 November 1880, p. 9.

¹⁶ *Thames Star*, 20 November 1880, p. 2.

¹⁷ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Register of Te Aroha Claims 1880-1888, folio 150, BBAV 11567/1a, ANZ-A; *New Zealand Gazette*, 30 December 1880, p. 1796.

McSweeney also had shares in three other claims. One was the Eureka, an unsuccessful mine.¹⁸ Apparently more promising was the Morning Star; when floated as a company in January 1881, he had 415 of the 12,000 shares and was a director.¹⁹ In 1881, he acquired an unknown number of shares in the Smile of Fortune.²⁰

MATRIMONY

His sudden wealth meant he was regarded as a prize matrimonial catch. ‘Our Special on the Spot’, who sent snippets of Te Aroha gossip to the *Observer*, in mid-February 1881 heard that he was ‘to be married in a few weeks to Miss Bella Moore. Johnny, who is a broth of a boy now six months out from the ould sod, is building a nice little house about four miles from here’.²¹ The gossip writer had failed to discover the true situation, which was aired in the Thames police court on Tuesday, 8 March, the morning newspaper headlining its report ‘A Young Woman in Trouble’:

Isabella Moore, a prepossessing young woman, was charged on the information of her uncle, Andrew Moore,²² with having stolen from his dwelling-house 1 clothes box, 1 looking-glass, 2 portraits and frames, 2 pairs of scissors, 1 cotton stand, 1 bead mat, and 2 glass tumblers.

After the police deposed to having found these articles in the room she occupied in the house of Michael Conroy, a painter,²³ she ‘denied having stolen the goods; she said most of them had been given her by her grandmother. She was an orphan, and had lately been working at Te Aroha’. At which point in the proceedings, the police prosecutor ‘withdrew from the case, as he did not think there had been a case of larceny’.

¹⁸ Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Register of Te Aroha Claims 1880-1888, folio 182, BBAV 11567/1a, ANZ-A; for details of its prospects and failure, see chapter on this mine.

¹⁹ Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Register of Te Aroha Claims 1880-1888, folio 153, BBAV 11567/1a, ANZ-A; *New Zealand Gazette*, 20 January 1881, p. 111; *Thames Star*, 5 January 1881, p. 2.

²⁰ *Waikato Times*, 26 April 1881, p. 2.

²¹ ‘Te Aroha Arrows (From our Special on the Spot)’, *Observer*, 19 February 1881, p. 236.

²² See Magistrate’s Court, *Thames Advertiser*, 13 July 1878, p. 3.

²³ See *Thames Advertiser*, 15 January 1880, p. 2, Magistrate’s Court, 27 October 1888, p. 2, 4 July 1896, p. 2, 28 February 1899, p. 3.

Andrew Moore deposed that he issued a warrant against the girl.... Accused was his niece, and had been living in his house.... He was a carpenter, and was a single man. Accused had been his housekeeper. He did not know when she left his house, as he was away at Te Aroha. He believed she left because she did not care about marrying a young man at Te Aroha. He did not press the suit; on the contrary he was rather averse to it.... Witness being a carpenter was to arrange about the erection of a house at Te Aroha for the young couple; but was not to get the job of putting it up.... He only resolved to take steps against the girl on Monday morning [the previous day]. His sole motive was to get his goods back. On Sunday witness and McSweeney, the young man referred to, did not go to see the girl at Conroy's. Witness went himself.... He denied that he and McSweeney had laid the charge to coerce the girl into the marriage. He believed conscientiously that she had stolen the goods. He had no malice against the girl. He was not told to take out a summons against accused.... The album produced was his property. McSweeney gave it to his niece once, but she refused it, and McSweeney gave it to witness. Some of the articles produced belonged to McSweeney, who left them in his charge.

The magistrate, Harry Kenrick,²⁴ 'was surprised that a man like Moore should have laid such a charge against his niece. From the evidence it appeared to him that the girl had been led to believe the goods taken were her property, and the case would therefore be dismissed, with costs against the informant'. When the defendant's counsel, Joshua Cuff,²⁵ asked if his client left 'without a stain on her character', Kenrick replied, 'Certainly'.²⁶

The *Thames Star*, under the headline 'A Frivolous Charge', gave more details of Andrew Moore's evidence, in part unwillingly extracted, about the relationship of his niece and McSweeney:

My niece lived with me. She had been in service at O'Halloran's [hotel]. She is not living with me now. I was about five days away at Te Aroha. I do not know why my niece left. I believe the girl left because she was averse to marrying a young man who was giving her money. I was not pressing her to marry the young

²⁴ See paper on his life.

²⁵ For his life at Te Aroha, see *Thames Advertiser*, 5 January 1881, p. 2, 5 May 1882, p. 2, 9 October 1882, p. 2, 7 May 1883, p. 2; *Waikato Times*, 26 February 1885, p. 3; *Te Aroha News*, 23 January 1886, p. 7.

²⁶ Police Court, *Thames Advertiser*, 9 March 1881, p. 3.

man.... The marriage was not being forced upon her.... Mr McSweeney and myself were not making arrangements for sealing the fate of my niece.... My niece told me that the reason she left was because she did not want to marry McSweeney.

Asked whether he would swear that taking out the warrant was not an arrangement with McSweeney ‘to have her arrested, in order to force her into the marriage’, Moore did so swear, claiming not to know that the normal way to obtain goods was to take out a summons. When explaining how each item had been acquired, Kenrick ‘interfered, saying that he was surprised to see a man of Mr Moore’s intelligence should have brought his own niece up on such a frivolous charge. There was not the slightest suspicion the girl stole the articles’. After reproving him for casting a slur on her character by having her arrested, he ordered the goods returned to Isabella, for ‘there was not the slightest suspicion against her’.²⁷

According to the *Thames Star*, Moore’s case

excited considerable unfavourable comment among the habitués of the court, and their disapproval of his laying such a damaging and unfounded charge against his own flesh and blood, was demonstrated in various ways, anathemas, epithets, and other uncomplimentary terms being applied to the complainant in the case. It was entirely a family affair,

and should never have been taken to court.²⁸ A local poet, who forbore to give his name, set ‘A Romance’ to the tune of ‘Cork Leg’:

At Aroha lived Meinheer von Muir,
Who every morning said, “I’m sure
My niece I’ll marry to a nice young boor.”
Ri too ral loo ral ido.

“Macstinger’s the man who’d marry the girl,
Although no doubt he is a churl,
And sure enough his hair don’t curl.”
Ri too ral loo ral ido.

Says Mac, “I’ll give you a hundred pound,
And add to that a piece of ground;
Oh! All will be glad as a merry-go-round.”

²⁷ Magistrate’s Court, *Thames Star*, 8 March 1881, p. 2.

²⁸ *Thames Star*, 8 March 1881, p. 2.

Ri too ral loo ral ido.

Meinheer agreed to sell his niece,
But she, poor girl, had little peace;
Her uncle had sold her, his friend to fleece.

Ri too ral loo ral ido.

At last, in sorrow and sad despair,
Whilst beating her breast and tearing her hair,
Straight from her home the girl did tear.

Ri too ral loo ral ido.

The end of it was, it was brought into Court,
And a frivolous charge 'gainst the girl was brought;
Saint Andrew wished an injury wrought.

Ri too ral loo ral ido.

But, behold! he reckoned without his host,
For Cuff, he sent him from pillar to post,
Until at last he gave up the ghost.

Ri too ral loo ral ido.

Says Kenrick, "This is a most frivolous charge;
A man like Meinheer should not be at large,
The case is dismissed, the girl's discharged."

Ri too ral loo ral ido.

Then sad Meinheer did eat the leek,²⁹
And paid the costs - [home did]³⁰ sneak;
By Jove! The Meinheer's intellect's weak.

Ri too ral loo ral ido.

The case is o'er, the case is done,
And Meinheer caused such lots of fun,
He'll ne'er more go to Court, as sure as a gun.

Ri too ral loo ral ido.³¹

Both reports of the trial suggested that McSweeney was so anxious to marry Isabella that he pressed his suit too strongly, forcing her to flee from Te Aroha to avoid his importuning. As he was not called to give evidence, his version of events went unrecorded. Any disappointment in love was soon

²⁹ 'To be forced to address unpleasant consequences': Jonathon Green, *The Cassell Dictionary of Slang* (London, 1998), p. 388.

³⁰ These two words are impossible to read, but this is the possible sense of the line.

³¹ Anon, 'A Romance', *Thames Star*, 8 March 1881, p. 2.

assuaged, for two months after the trial the *Thames Star* heard ‘that Johnny Sweeney, the Te Aroha prospector’, was ‘married at last. An old Waikato settler showed him the photo of his daughter, and Johnny at once said he would marry her. He flew on the wings of love to the Waikato capital and two days later was a benedict’.³² The wedding was held at the Catholic Church at Ngaruawahia on 19 April, six weeks after the court case. His bride, Mary O’Connor, was a domestic servant aged 19, five years his junior. Like him, she was illiterate and was born in County Kerry, at Glenbeck. Her father, Jeffrey, was a labourer, and her mother was Catherine Shea.³³ Jeffrey O’Connor (sometimes Geoffrey) had been at Te Aroha on opening day and was a shareholder in two claims.³⁴ He usually lived at Ngaruawahia, where in 1882 he owned land valued at £100 and had a further three acres in the Waipa district worth £35.³⁵ He remained a labourer and contractor all his life.³⁶

Despite the speed with which McSweeney married, it seems to have been a happy marriage; certainly it was fruitful. Eleven children, six boys and five daughters, were born at regular intervals: in 1882, 1884, 1886, 1888, 1891, 1893, 1895, 1898, 1900, 1902, and 1904.³⁷ The birth of their

³² *Thames Star*, 5 May 1881, p. 2.

³³ Notices of Intentions to Marry 1881, Births Deaths and Marriages, BDM 20/26, p. 285, ANZ-W; Marriage Certificate of John McSweeney, 19 April 1881, 1881/1430, BDM.

³⁴ Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Miner’s Right no. 347, issued 25 November 1880, Miners’ Rights Butt Book 1880, BBAV 11533/1a; Register of Te Aroha Claims 1880-1888, folio 164, BBAV 11567/1a; Plaintiff Book 1880-1898, 21/1881, BBAV 11547/1a, ANZ-A.

³⁵ *A Return of the Freeholders of New Zealand ...* (Wellington, 1884), p. O 3; see also Auckland Lands Board, Minute Book 1884-1887, Minutes of Meeting of 21 October 1886, p. 270, BAAZ 4019/2, ANZ-A.

³⁶ Auckland Hospital, Register of Admissions 1870-1885, folio 68, no. 287, ZAAP 15287/2a, ANZ-A; *Waikato Times*, Kirikiriroa Road Board, 22 December 1885, p. 2, 12 August 1886, p. 2; *Waikato Electoral Roll, 1890*, p. 23.

³⁷ Birth Certificates of John McSweeney, November 1882, 1956/133189; Jeffrey McSweeney, 28 April 1884, 1884/4148; Daniel Bertram McSweeney, 13 October 1886, 1886/19454; Jeremiah Harold McSweeney, 24 November 1889, 1889/17449; Catherine (Kate) McSweeney, 7 February 1891, 1891/16743; Mary Ethel McSweeney, 23 May 1893, 1893/6236; Honora (Nora) McSweeney, 6 July 1895, 1895/16228; Edith Gladys McSweeney, 21 January 1898, 1898/2117; Joanna Violet McSweeney, 3 January 1900, 1900/3448; Percy Kenneth Oscar McSweeney, 1 January 1902, 1902/13248; Claude Patrick McSweeney, 11 February 1904, 1904/783, BDM.

first child, John, born in November 1882, for some unknown reason was not registered until 1956, when an aunt provided a statutory declaration.³⁸ One son, Percy, predeceased his parents when aged 23.³⁹

SUBSEQUENT INVOLVEMENT IN MINING

McSweeney retained only peripheral involvement in mining. He gave his occupation as miner in December 1880 and the following month,⁴⁰ and in late April 1881 attended a meeting of shareholders of the Smile of Fortune and Morning Star claims at Te Aroha.⁴¹ Early the following year, when his occupation was given as labourer, he worked for wages in a Waiorongomai claim.⁴² In March 1882, when an owner of the Queen was in Auckland, McSweeney worked his share for five days; two years later he had to sue for £2 5s, which should have been put to his credit at a store. When the case was heard, he had become a farmer.⁴³ He may well have been the McSweeney, first name unstated, who tendered unsuccessfully to drive in the Colonist in 1888.⁴⁴ His only other involvement in mining was to purchase 1,000 of the 150,000 shares in the Bendigo Company in 1912.⁴⁵ Like many with brief mining experience, he claimed to understand the local geology, in 1938 informing the *Te Aroha News* that he had 'the greatest confidence' in the reefs. 'One of these days you'll have a bonanza here'.⁴⁶

EARNING A LIVING, MOSTLY AS A FARMER

³⁸ Birth Certificate of John McSweeney, November 1882, 1956/133189, BDM.

³⁹ Death Certificate of Percy Kenneth Oscar McSweeney, 5 October 1926, 1926/10320, BDM; Death Notice, *New Zealand Herald*, 6 October 1926, p. 1.

⁴⁰ *New Zealand Gazette*, 30 December 1880, p. 1796, 20 January 1881, p. 111.

⁴¹ *Waikato Times*, 26 April 1881, p. 2.

⁴² Te Aroha Magistrate's Court, Civil Record Book 1881-1884, 10/1882, BCDG 11221/1b; Plaintiff Book 1881-1893, 82/1910, BCDG 11224/1a, ANZ-A; Te Aroha Magistrate's Court, *Waikato Times*, 4 March 1882, p. 2.

⁴³ Magistrate's Court, *Te Aroha News*, 22 March 1884, p. 7; note also Te Aroha Magistrate's Court, Home Warrant Book 1883-1928, 13/1884, BBAV 11498/1a, ANZ-A.

⁴⁴ *Te Aroha News*, 2 June 1888, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Company Files, BADZ 5181, box 226 no. 1332, ANZ-A.

⁴⁶ *Te Aroha News*, 28 February 1938, p. 5.

McSweeney had little success in obtaining contracts for public works, tendering unsuccessfully to drain a street in Waiorongomai in 1888 and for work for the Waitoa Road Board in 1900.⁴⁷ According to a story that has come down his family, McSweeney got into a dispute with the council over how wide to dig a certain drain. He disagreed with their estimate, ‘and told them it would be too narrow and that he would be able to pee halfway across the drain’. On being called to order, he replied: ‘Yes, and if I hadn’t been out of order I could pee the whole way across’.⁴⁸ In 1909, he became, for the only time, a shareholder in a non-mining company, the Thames Valley Printing Company, which published the *Te Aroha Mail* and *Morrinsville Herald*.⁴⁹

Aside from these attempts to make a living, his main source of income was farming. In 1882, he owned just over 100 acres at Te Aroha West valued at £200.⁵⁰ After the ranger inspected his deferred payment selection in 1886, he received a Crown Grant.⁵¹ In September 1883, when he was living on his land, he described himself as a settler and farmer.⁵² In that month, when a distress warrant was served on him by a shopkeeper for the modest sum of £5 3s 5d, the bailiff recorded ‘Nulla Bona’,⁵³ indicating there were no assets to seize. In 1889, he purchased a 65-acre leasehold farm at Te Aroha West for £28, for which he paid £8 per annum in rent.⁵⁴ The following year, he attended a meeting at Waihou to consider establishing a creamery.⁵⁵ On occasions he camped on part of his land, for in 1892 he and

⁴⁷ *Te Aroha News*, 18 July 1888, p. 2; Waitoa Road Board, *Waikato Argus*, 28 November 1900, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Margaret Hall [a great-granddaughter] to Philip Hart, 28 February 2021, email.

⁴⁹ Company Files, BADZ 5181, box 239 no. 1406, ANZ-A.

⁵⁰ The exact amount was 100 acres 2 roods 32 perches: Auckland Lands Board, Minute Book 1884-1887, p. 282, BAAZ 4019/2, ANZ-A; *A Return of the Freeholders of New Zealand*, p. McC 65.

⁵¹ Auckland Lands Board, Minute Book 1884-1887, Minutes of Meeting of 2 December 1886, p. 282, BAAZ 4019/2, ANZ-A.

⁵² Te Aroha Magistrates Court, Civil Record Book 1881-1884, 146/1883, BCDG 11221/1a; Plaintiffs 1881-1893, 146/1882, BCDG 11224/1a, ANZ-A.

⁵³ Te Aroha Magistrate’s Court, Home Warrant Book 1883-1928, 15/1883, BBAV 11498/1a, ANZ-A.

⁵⁴ *Te Aroha News*, 8 June 1889, p. 2.

⁵⁵ *Te Aroha News*, 25 June 1890, p. 2.

another landowner reported several items of bedding and clothing stolen from their tent at Te Aroha West, probably by a passing swagger.⁵⁶

In 1894, O'Halloran described McSweeney as 'a substantial farmer.'⁵⁷ Three years later, he ran 22 sheep but soon sold them.⁵⁸ At the Te Aroha Agricultural and Horticultural Society Show held in January 1900 he won first prize for a pen of yearling heifers and another first prize for the best pair of farm horses.⁵⁹ Three years later, he was a steward for dairy produce and other items, and a member of the society's stock committee.⁶⁰ In 1902, his bank manager described him as being 'in sound position'.⁶¹ Eight months later, when his stock were unencumbered, he had sold his Te Aroha West farm for £900 and was 'looking for a larger place as he has a working family'. Within a month, he had bought a 300-acre farm at nearby Manawaru for £3,300, taking out a loan for part of the price.⁶² In 1905, when his permitted overdraft limit had risen from £5 to £6, an indication of his modest financial dealings, he was a dairy farmer with a capital of around £1,500.⁶³ He would be recalled as 'a well-known settler'.⁶⁴ His eldest son took up a 97-acre farm at Waiorongomai.⁶⁵

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⁵⁶ *New Zealand Police Gazette*, 6 April 1892, p. 50.

⁵⁷ O'Halloran, p. 121.

⁵⁸ 'Annual Sheep Returns', *AJHR*, 1897, H-23, p. 27; 1898, H-23, p. 25.

⁵⁹ *Thames Star*, 30 January 1900, p. 4.

⁶⁰ *Auckland Weekly News*, 12 February 1903, p. 33, 28 May 1903, p. 32.

⁶¹ Bank of New Zealand, Ohinemuri Branch, Half-Yearly Balance Book, 30 September 1902, Report on Advances, Bank of New Zealand Archives, Wellington.

⁶² Bank of New Zealand, Paeroa Branch, Manager's Memoranda Book 1902-1914, p. 59, entries for 19 May 1903, June 1903; see also Property Sales, July 1903, Bank of New Zealand Archives, Wellington.

⁶³ Bank of New Zealand, Paeroa Branch, Half-Yearly Balance Book, 31 March 1905, Report on Advances, Bank of New Zealand Archives, Wellington.

⁶⁴ *Te Aroha and the Fortunate Valley: Pioneering in the Thames Valley 1867-1930*, ed. F.W. Wild (Te Aroha, 1930), p. 277.

⁶⁵ Piako County Council, Te Aroha Riding, Valuation Roll, as at 31 March 1911, folio 193, BBBC A150, bundle 218, ANZ-A; Thames High School Archives, Thames. [He was sometimes referred to as John Jr; see, for instance, *Te Aroha News*, 25 June 1908, p. 2.]

In September 1908, *Te Aroha News* welcomed McSweeney as the licensee of the Grand Hotel because he had been ‘for many years well and favourably known throughout this district’.⁶⁶ He immediately improved the hotel, both inside and out.⁶⁷ In March 1909 he paid £147 10s for the publicans’ booths at the Paeroa races, an arrangement cancelled after No License won the vote there.⁶⁸ Whether by design or error, he under-paid some of his staff, leading to a successful prosecution against him in 1914.⁶⁹ In that year, an old man was found in scrub near Waiorongomai ‘in a semi-unconscious state, and in a very emaciated condition, being only skin and bone’. When he was brought to their hotel, McSweeney and his wife ‘did all they could to make him comfortable’ before he was sent by ambulance to Thames.⁷⁰ In mid-1915, they sold the license of this decaying hotel,⁷¹ but in October the *Te Aroha News* wrote that their ‘many friends’ would ‘be glad to learn’ that they were returning to Te Aroha to take over the Palace Hotel.⁷² In 1938, McSweeney told this newspaper that he had ‘many vivid memories of the days when I kept the Palace Hotel’, but did not repeat any.⁷³ He did not occupy this hotel for long, for in January 1916, when living in Auckland, his occupation was ‘Late Hotel proprietor’.⁷⁴ The following year, he was recorded as being a dairy farmer living in Mt Albert.⁷⁵

In 1920, when recalled as ‘formerly a well-known boniface in Te Aroha’, he was living at Devonport.⁷⁶ He sought, in July 1921, to exercise the power of sale in the mortgage he had arranged in August 1915 over the

⁶⁶ Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Register of Mining Privileges 1894-1910, folio 59, BBAV 11500/2a, ANZ-A; *Te Aroha News*, 29 September 1908, p. 2.

⁶⁷ *Te Aroha News*, 19 January 1909, p. 2.

⁶⁸ *Te Aroha News*, 13 March 1909, p. 2, 18 March 1909, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Te Aroha Magistrate’s Court, Civil Record Book 1911-1914, 46, 61/1913, BCDG 11221/3a, ANZ-A.

⁷⁰ *Te Aroha News*, 19 January 1909, p. 2.

⁷¹ Statement of John McSweeney 15 July 1921, The Mortgages Extension Act 1919, BCDG 17481, box 30, no. 456, ANZ-A.

⁷² Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Register of Mining Privileges 1894-1910, folio 59, BBAV 11500/2a; Registrations 1919-1922, no. 3085, BCDG 11288/7a, ANZ-A; *Ohinemuri Gazette*, 7 June 1915, p. 2; *Te Aroha News*, 4 June 1915, p. 2, 1 October 1915, p. 2.

⁷³ *Te Aroha News*, 28 February 1938, p. 5.

⁷⁴ Te Aroha Magistrate’s Court, Plaintiff Book 1893-1918, 4 /1916, BCDG 11224/1b, ANZ-A.

⁷⁵ *Wises’ NZPO Directory, 1917* (Auckland, 1917), p. 1630.

⁷⁶ *Te Aroha News*, 3 March 1920, p. 2.

Grand Hotel, under which Margaret Lawless⁷⁷ was required to pay £3,500 in August 1920 but instead had only paid £2,000. 'I have been seriously embarrassed financially' by her default and 'unable to purchase other property which I was particularly anxious to purchase for the benefit and advantage of myself and my family'.⁷⁸ The file does not reveal whether he received the money owing.

In 1922, he became licensee of the Windsor Castle Hotel in Parnell, and another four years later of the Exchange Hotel in the same suburb.⁷⁹ In May 1928, he was still running this hotel.⁸⁰ When he finally retired has not been traced, and perhaps he never did completely retire, for when he died at this hotel, aged 84, his occupation was recorded as publican, not retired publican.⁸¹

SPORT

Whilst living in the Te Aroha district, he was for a time a vice-president of the Te Aroha Tennis Club and president of the Piako Rugby Union.⁸² When he revisited in 1920 he was recorded as having 'the probably unique distinction of not having missed a Te Aroha race meeting in the long stretch of thirty nine years'.⁸³ In 1938, it was stated that he had attended the races for 37 years;⁸⁴ did this mean that he had attended every meeting in the twentieth century?

LITERACY

⁷⁷ See paper on Thomas Lawless.

⁷⁸ Statement of John McSweeney, 15 July 1921, The Mortgages Extension Act 1919, BCDG 17481, box 30, no. 456, ANZ-A.

⁷⁹ *Te Aroha News*, 21 September 1922, p. 2; Death Notice, *New Zealand Herald*, 7 October 1926, p. 1.

⁸⁰ Probate of John McSweeney, Probates, BBAE 1570/166/40, ANZ-A.

⁸¹ Death Certificate of John McSweeney, 7 March 1940, 1940/21026, BDM.

⁸² *Te Aroha News*, 17 September 1908, p. 2, 25 May 1914, p. 2.

⁸³ *Te Aroha News*, 3 March 1920, p. 2.

⁸⁴ *Te Aroha News*, 28 February 1938, p. 5.

McSweeney was never able to write his name.⁸⁵ He may have been able to read at a basic level, as suggested by a 1914 report about his being charged with under-paying hotel workers:

McSweeney, of Te Aroha, had received a notification in connection with Arbitration Board business, and it bothered him. He took his notification to the office of Clerk of Awards, slapped it on the counter, and desired to be informed of its meaning. The clerk explained. In the course of his explanation the clerk remarked, "But it is adjourned 'sine die', Mr McSweeney." Mr McSweeney instantly demanded, "Who's he?" and a titter arose from the innumerable Latin scholars with a knowledge of the back of the dictionary.⁸⁶

Lack of education was not an obstacle to his being elected a member of the Te Aroha West School Committee in 1895.⁸⁷ Either he or his eldest son, another John, was elected to the Manawaru School Committee in 1907.⁸⁸ It was certainly John Jr. who was secretary of the Waiorongomai School Committee in 1917 and 1918.⁸⁹

DEATH

McSweeney died at the Exchange Hotel in Parnell, in 1940, aged 84. After suffering from myocardial degeneration for three years, he died of heart failure.⁹⁰ Mary had predeceased him.⁹¹ The estate was valued at £8,338 6s. His most prized possession, the gold watch with the chain containing the sample of ore from the Prospectors' Claim, went to his eldest

⁸⁵ See Te Aroha Magistrate's Court, Registrations 1919-1922, no. 3085, BCDG 12288/7a; Will of John McSweeney, 4 May 1928, Probates, BBAE 1570, 166/40, ANZ-A.

⁸⁶ *Observer*, 21 November 1914, p. 4.

⁸⁷ *Te Aroha News*, 27 April 1895, p. 2.

⁸⁸ *Te Aroha News*, 25 April 1907, p. 2.

⁸⁹ *Te Aroha News*, 7 May 1917, p. 2, 26 April 1918, p. 2.

⁹⁰ Death Certificate of John McSweeney, 7 March 1940, 1940/21026, BDM; *Auckland Star*, 7 March 1940, p. 1.

⁹¹ Death Notice, *New Zealand Herald*, 8 March 1940, p. 1; Death Certificate of Mary McSweeney, 1928/656, BDM.

son.⁹² 'It was discovered too late that his trusted granddaughter who looked after all his financial [dealings] had been embezzling his money'.⁹³

CONCLUSION

John McSweeney acquired early fame through his assistance to Hone Werahiko. He also incurred some brief notoriety over his thwarted passions before he married someone else. In all other respects his life was typical of the time, working up from being a labourer to being a farmer and then a successful publican in his later years, ending up in a comfortable financial position. Not bad for an illiterate man.

⁹² Probate of John McSweeney, Probates, BBAE 1570, 166/40, ANZ-A.

⁹³ Margaret Hall to Philip Hart, 26 February 2021, email.