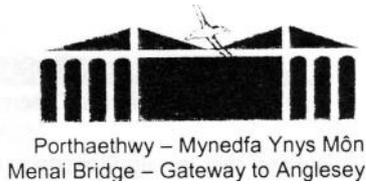


ATGOFION O'R BORTH

Cymdeithas Ddinesig Bro Porthaethwy

Menai Bridge and District Civic Society

MEMORIES OF MENAI BRIDGE



Mae Cymdeithas Ddinesig Bro Porthaethwy yn diweddarau ei chofnodion, ffotograffau a'i Gwefan er mwyn ei gwneud yn haws i'r aelodau eu gweld. Byddwn yn ceisio ychwanegu at y rhain yn gyson drwy gydol y flwyddyn ac yn cyhoeddi pigion gyda'ch Cylchlythyr. Mae croeso mawr bob amser i gyfraniadau newydd, yn ogystal â help i adnabod pobl yn y lluniau.

Ewch i'n Gwefan yn www.menaibridgecivicsociety.org.uk

Menai Bridge and District Civic Society is updating its records, photographs and Website to make them more accessible to members. We will try to add to these regularly throughout the year and publish extracts with your Newsletter. New contributions are always welcome, as is help with identifying people in photographs.

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Memories of Menai Bridge

Volume 19

The McKie Family of Bangor

In her article on Bangor's Glanadda Cemetery in the last edition of *Gwreiddiau Gwynedd Roots*, Sheelagh Williams mentioned an intriguing grave with its incomplete inscription. All that remains of this large stone cross is the base, which has fallen, concealing part of the inscription. Only the following rather puzzling words are now visible:

"In loving memory of our dear daughter Muriel who died in a Japanese Camp Nov. 14, 1944 aged 44, the devoted wife of C.P. Gregory, The Hollies, Bridport. Also of Will, her loving husband who died Feb 7, 1961 aged 102 years. Also our dear son Ronald Seaton who died Aug 11, 1899, aged 3."



A search through the pages of the *North Wales Chronicle* and various internet sources has shown that in fact, the grave-stone commemorates William and Edith McKie and two of their three children.

William McKie was born in Bangor in 1858, the son of an engine driver. He was educated at Friars School and was a chorister at Bangor Cathedral. On leaving school, he started work as a clerk at Penrhyn

Quarries, eventually becoming their Chief Clerk. He had a great passion for cycling and often cycled to Corwen and back to check the condition of the road for the Cyclists' Touring Club. On one occasion he cycled from Liverpool to Bangor, via Llangollen, on a penny-farthing.

In 1892, he married Edith Smith of Lis-card, Cheshire, the daughter of a Birkenhead merchant. They first lived at *Bryn Gwynedd*, in The Crescent, Upper Bangor, but by 1911 they had moved to *Tan-y-Coed*, at the lower end of Bangor High Street. Their first child, Phyllis Violet, was born in 1893. She graduated in chemistry at Bangor University, and during the First World War was part of a team of women researchers at Bangor investigating the use of chemicals in explosives. Violet

was described as one of the most prominent women chemists of the war years, and the twelve scientific papers she published were regarded as a significant contribution to the war effort. She moved to University College London in 1920, where she continued her research and was awarded a PhD. In 1929 she became a lecturer at Westfield College, London until she was appointed Principal of St. Gabriel's Teachers Training College, Camberwell in 1943, a post she held until her retirement in 1956. She was unmarried and died in Chichester in 1991.

William and Edith's only son, Ronald Seaton, was born in 1896 and sadly died aged only three. Their youngest child, Muriel, was born in 1902 and like her sister, graduated at Bangor University. She was awarded a BLitt followed by an Oxford MA. In October 1938, at Bangor Cathedral, she married Charles Pressley Gregory, the son of a London postal worker.

Following the wedding, the couple set off for a short honeymoon in Cornwall before sailing for Kalantan on the Malay Peninsula where Charles was a senior manager of a rubber plantation. They looked forward to a happy life in the Far East, but after the fall of Singapore in February 1942, the region was occupied by the Japanese. All European residents were interned, most of the women in camps on nearby islands, and the men mostly on the Malay mainland. Muriel was sent to Muntok camp, on Banka Island off the southern tip of Sumatra. In December 1943, her parents received a letter stating that she was: "Safe and well. Longing for news. Lost all luggage. Don't worry. We live in houses, get plenty of fresh air and sunshine and medical attention. Have our own hospital. Health is good. We are in good heart and spirits. I dig and weed the garden which helps to pass the time. There are many nice people in the camp, some good musicians, and we even manage a concert, now and then. We are now allowed to write for the first time. We do our own work. I hope to be able to write again."

But the letter was dated 17 March 1943; had Muriel written these words simply to comfort her worried parents or was the letter written under duress? The women who survived the camp described a very different scenario. Muntok was regarded as the most notorious camp in the region, very similar to that depicted in the much acclaimed television drama series, *Tenko*. The women were in fact housed in insanitary conditions in large sheds with hardly any clean water. Malaria and a dreadful illness known as 'Muntok fever' were rife. No more was heard of Muriel until the end of September 1945 when her parents received the tragic news that she had died at Muntok, 14 November 1944, after 33 months internment. She was one of the 78 women who died at the camp during the war. They were buried decently in a graveyard, each grave marked with a cross, but in the 1960s, the land was needed for a large housing development. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission re-interred the military personnel in a new graveyard, but incredibly, the civilian dead were ignored, leaving no trace of their resting place.

Soon after the war, Muriel's husband, Charles, returned to the UK, settling in Bridport, Dorset, where he died in 1951. They had no children.

Muriel's mother, Edith McKie died 19 December 1950, aged 85, and according to her obituary in the *North Wales Chronicle*, she had studied art before her marriage and for a few years taught art at Bangor County School for Girls. She was very active

in the British Red Cross and the WRVS in Bangor, especially during the First World War when she worked tirelessly at Llwyn Eithin Rehabilitation Centre in Ffriddoedd Road. She was a talented pianist and for many years, served as a committee member of the Bangor Music Club.

William McKie died 7 February 1961, aged 102, having spent his last three years at Ceris Nursing Home, and enjoyed good health until his final few months. He had been a guest of honour at the Quartercentenary celebrations of Friars School in 1957 and was described as the school's oldest Old Boy and Bangor's oldest citizen.

David R. Price, Bangor, January 2013.

Editor's note. Some later research about Muriel Gregory and the Camp she was in, in Sumatra.

Long after David Price wrote the article above a Peace Museum was built at Muntok together with a Memorial stone. The website at <http://muntokpeacemuseum.org/> gives the full story. This makes grim reading but I'm so glad that all have now been remembered with care and dignity.

"The new Muntok Peace Memorial Museum at Kampong Menjelang, the site of the former Women's prison Camp, was opened in September 2015. The land for this Museum has been donated by the people of Kampong Menjelang and the building work has been undertaken with donations from former internees, their families, Australian Nurses' families, the Malayan Volunteers Group, and BACSA, the British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia. A concert featuring the music of the original Palembang Camp Women's Vocal Orchestra was sponsored by MVG and held in UK in 2013. Funds from this concert have bought equipment for the school at Kampong Menjelang and have also provided a plaque with the names of the people who died in Muntok prison Camps and who are believed to still be buried in the town.

The Muntok Heritage Community has a strong interest in the history of Muntok and the plight of those who suffered in the Camps. They would like visitors to learn that war is harmful and to try to prevent it from happening again."

Judy Balcombe, Melbourne, September 2015

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Company Number 10903556

A 'small charity', HMRC Charities ref. number EW89939.

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