



Watson Shennan, Runholder

In the story of land settlement in Otago and Southland there is generally a central personality around whom the pattern of history must be woven from the beginning.

One such man was Watson Shennan, and his story is of epic proportions and very hard to cover in a few words.

Shennan, aged 22, and his brother Alexander came up the Otago Harbour by whaleboat from Port Chalmers in 1857 and was not impressed by the village of Dunedin where there was no welcome. They had left Melbourne 14 days before on the brig *Thomas and Henry* 243 tons.

The Shennans had left Scotland for the purpose of engaging in sheep farming in New Zealand, and, after a short stay in Dunedin Watson set out in December 1857 on horseback to explore the hinterland in search of good sheep country. This led to his acquiring several large runs in Otago Central including Galloway, Moutere and Puketoi, introducing stud merino sheep, founding a famous pedigree flock, then moving to another run at Conical Hills, Tuapeka, and retiring in 1904 to the fine mansion he built in High Street, Dunedin.

The Shennan family in Scotland were renowned farmers and many generations inherited this skill. Watson was born on 19 January 1835 and became one of 11 children, 8 sons and 3 daughters. Five of the sons came to New Zealand and the three daughters married farmers and they also came to New Zealand.

When he married in 1885 Watson's bride, Grace, was the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, and when he retired in 1904 he became a member of First Church, and in his will he left five hundred pounds to the Presbyterian Orphanage at Andersons Bay. These details suggest the staunch, rather than the fervent churchman.

The main reason why so many sons emigrated seems to be in the size of the family farm, 200 acres could not provide a living for such a large number of sons.

In 1858 Shennan secured sheep from a farmer in Clutha and introduced the first sheep run in the Dunstan area, at Galloway. He purchased sheep in Wellington, landed them at Oamaru, Moeraki and Port Chalmers and drove them to Central Otago. To improve the quality of his sheep he secured 87 stud merinos from Europe, transported them to Port Chalmers on the Oliver Cromwell, and thence to Waikouaiti, losing only two on the whole journey. These were the first stud merinos to be imported into Otago.

There is much more to his story as a runholder which comes to an end when he retired to Dunedin in 1904. He built a mansion, designed by R A Lawson, with a ballroom in the basement, and named it *Threave*, after a family home in Scotland. He was known as a kind man.

He died on 14 October 1920 and is buried at Andersons Bay cemetery. His wife Grace lived for another 23 years.