2. The Sinclairs Of Pigeon Bay, or ‘The Prehistory of the Robinsons of Ni’ihau’: An essay in historiography, or ‘tales their mother told them’

Of the *haole* (i.e. European) settler dynasties of Hawai’i there is none grander than that of the Robinsons of the island of Ni’ihau and of Makaweli estate on neighbouring Kauai, 24 kilometres away, across the Kaulakahu Channel. The family is pre-eminent in its long occupancy of its lands, in the lofty distance that it maintains from the outside community and in its inventive ennobling of its past. It has owned Ni’ihau since 1864 and, increasingly from the 1880s, when a new generation led by Aubrey Robinson assumed control of the family’s ranching and planting operations, it has stringently discouraged visitors. Elsewhere in Hawai’i there is generally accepted public access to beaches below the high water or vegetation line, but—to the chagrin of some citizens—that is not so on Ni’ihau. There, according to the Robinsons, claiming the traditional rights of *konohiki*, or chiefly agents, private ownership extends at least as far as the low-water mark.¹ Not surprisingly, this intense isolation has attracted considerable curiosity and controversy, not least because the island contains the last community of native-speaking Hawai’ians, which numbered 190 in 1998.²

Philosophical and moral questions have arisen among commentators determined to find profound meanings in the way the Ni’ihauans’ lives are strictly regulated (the use of liquor and tobacco, for instance, are forbidden) and their extra-insular contacts are restricted. That dyspeptic traveller and novelist Paul Theroux, for instance, argues not only that they are locked into a process of degeneration, but, conversely, that the opening up of Ni’ihau ‘could eventually lead to revitalising the Hawai’ian language in the rest of the islands’. In the same vein, others have argued for the Ni’ihauans’ right to have fuller access to ‘civilisation’, even though the Ni’ihauans have consistently shown themselves to be compliant about the allegedly stultifying and exploitative regime under which they live. On the other hand, there are others who support what they see as preserving the Ni’ihauans’ culture, as providing a chiefly substitute and as

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respecting their right to privacy.\textsuperscript{3} That suits the Robinsons. As Helen Robinson, the matriarch of the day, told a researcher in 1983, they cherish ‘privacy and anonymity’ and cannot see how ‘maintaining the strict “seclusivity” of Ni’ihau can be of any great importance to Pacific studies’, or to any other enquirers for that matter.\textsuperscript{4} And as recently as 1998, when the US navy was considering building a small rocket launch site on the island, guidelines for any military activity on Ni’ihau included the provision that ‘any government employees or contractors must be escorted by a Ni’ihau Ranch representative at all times’.\textsuperscript{5}

Even so, it is not as if the Robinsons have eschewed publicity. On the contrary, they have promulgated a widely circulated heroic myth of their dynastic origins.\textsuperscript{6} There is nothing unusual in that. Families and individuals are prone to glamourising their past. To that end, they will invent stories, or happily acquiesce in prevarication for a variety of reasons, perhaps to gain some presumed advantage. Or possibly because it seems to be an appropriate concomitant of the eminence, real or imagined, that they have attained, or to which they aspire. Examples abound, all of them versions of a phenomenon noted by Sigmund Freud and known as ‘family romance’. In Gavin Daws’s words, this ‘involves a fantasy in which the child replaces his dull, ordinary parents by parents of more interest, elegance and power’. Thus, the parvenu politicians Shirley Baker of Tonga and Walter Murray Gibson of Hawai‘i found it expedient to do so in order to reduce the social disadvantages with which they began life.\textsuperscript{7} And in 1911 W.J. Watriama, the canaque patriot from Lifu, styled himself ‘king of the Loyalty Islands’, in order to gain a hearing in Australia for his call for assistance to expel the French from New Caledonia.\textsuperscript{8} Later, the most distinguished of Polynesian scholars, Peter Buck, described the phenomenon elegantly with regard to his own people: ‘many a family newly risen in the social scale has been known to deny the bar sinister that marks its origins’. In the same vein, Buck also quoted the Hawai‘ian historian David Malo’s observation that ‘the expert genealogist is the washbowl of the high chief’.\textsuperscript{9}

In the case of the Robinsons, the traditional version of their past smacks of the novelistic imaginings of a Barbara Cartland, and is without a hint of the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} \textit{Honolulu Advertiser}, 18 April 1998.
\item \textsuperscript{6} See Appendix, ‘Sinclair Bibliography’.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Peter H. Buck, \textit{Vikings of the Sunrise}, New York, 1938, p. 24.
\end{itemize}
subversive irony of a Jane Austen. It runs as follows. In 1824 Captain Francis Sinclair RN, aged 27, the son of Sir George Sinclair MP and a relative of the Earl of Caithness, 'over six feet two in height' and said to be the handsomest man in Scotland, married Elizabeth McHutcheson, the beautiful 19-year-old daughter of one of the leading citizens of Glasgow. So dainty was she that her husband could span her waist with the thumb and forefinger of his two hands. In 1815, after the battle of Waterloo, Sinclair had distinguished himself with some masterful seamanship when bringing the Duke of Wellington triumphantly back to England. Subsequently, Sinclair joined the Inland Revenue Service (true). In this position he is said (unreliably) to have spent a considerable amount of time travelling by coach between Edinburgh and London on government business. Then, and this is true, having joined a colonising scheme operated by the New Zealand Company, in 1840 he migrated to New Zealand aboard the barque Blenheim, accompanied by his wife and six children, plus Elizabeth’s brother John.\[10\]

In some versions of his story Francis is linked not only to the Iron Duke but also to Lord Nelson. They cite him as having served in the battles of Copenhagen (1798), the Nile (1801) and Trafalgar (1805), and contend that he went to New Zealand to take up a land grant awarded by a grateful government to distinguished ex-naval officers. One account has him being ‘given thousands of acres’.\[11\]

The flawed sources, the standard references, from which most of the foregoing is drawn do, however, also help direct the Sinclair chronicle across a few patches of somewhat thicker factual ice, especially from 1840, although they still lack precision. Fortunately, though, there are other less partisan sources, published and archival, available to provide material from which ancestral pretensions may be disproved and from which an account of events from about that date may be constructed that is more reliable, detailed and complete than one derived substantially from family tradition. The following narration draws extensively on these.

Francis Sinclair was the son of George Sinclair, a master mariner of Prestonpans. Given his father’s occupation, his own later attested aptitude for sailing and an eventually thrice-demonstrated ability at boat-building (despite the loss of his craft the Jessie Millar), it is likely that Francis was familiar with the sea well before he left Scotland, although there are no details to prove it. One authority on maritime history surmises that

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at Stirling [between Edinburgh and Glasgow] as an excise officer he would have been familiar with the customs cutters on the Firth of Forth as well as vessels on the Clyde. The style of the Richmond, Sisters and Jessie Millar suggests he was building small ships resembling those whose design, tonnage and capabilities he knew and had probably sailed himself.\textsuperscript{12}

In any case, it is as an excise officer that Francis enters the historical record, via the marriage register in 1824, aged about 26. Sixteen years later, now with a family, he enters it again, this time as a member of a party of Scottish emigrants, many of whom had been recruited by the laird Donald McDonald of Skye, who was also immigrating to New Zealand with his family.\textsuperscript{13}

Departing from Greenoch near Glasgow on 25 August, the Blenheim reached Wellington, at the base of the North Island, on 27 December of 1840. From the beginning, Francis showed himself to be energetic and enterprising. As he told his brother William on 3 February 1841:

\begin{quote}
I have bought a boat and I think that I shall be profitably employed with her till we get our place. The day after we landed I took a cargo of deals [sawn timber] from Petone to Wellington with her. G[eorge], J[ohn] and I started in the evening and landed them the next morning at six o’clock, and we had £2-5-0 for our job. It was the first and I was afraid to load heavier until I saw what she would do. I left J. and G. loading her to start on Monday morning at two o’clock and I shall (weather permitting) make three trips next week at £3 each, perhaps four. So we shall not starve in the interim. There is, however, a great deal of people here in consequence of the surveying stopt and the Gents not getting their land. We will, however, go ahead.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

True to his word, within a few months Sinclair shifted his family to the fledgling settlement of Wanganui, 200 kilometres north on the west coast, hoping to obtain a parcel of land to which he had bought an entitlement before leaving Scotland. Maori resistance to the New Zealand Company’s operations, though, foiled that scheme. There, as elsewhere within much of the Company’s putative domain of over 20,000,000 acres, opposition to land alienation and the obstruction of surveys by hostile Maoris impeded settler occupation of the land. Besides, individual blocks, even when shown on charts, were not always readily identifiable or in conformity with the topography. And there was still the

\textsuperscript{12} Letter, Amodeo to Laracy, 2 Mar. 2001.
\textsuperscript{14} Sinclair to William, 3 Jan. 1841, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, fMS Papers 460.
question of establishing legal title to a block. As a step to that end, in 1842 a land commissioner was appointed to investigate the New Zealand Company’s claims. That was no easy task. As one commentator observes, '[William] Spain first had to establish the title of the sellers to the property which had been sold—a difficult task since the Maori often disputed amongst themselves as to their respective rights—and then find out whether the sale itself was legitimate'. Thus one settler who had arrived on the Blenheim with the Sinclairs, James Brown, did not formally obtain his land in the upper Hutt valley, north of Petone, until 1853.

But Francis was less patient than Brown, a former weaver from Paisley. After several months of cooling his heels within the confines of the embryonic settlement of Wanganui, he returned to Petone. There, with much ingenuity and with the aid of his sons and brother-in-law (our main informant on the matter), he set about building a boat. Later, family mythology would have it that at Petone the Sinclair’s enjoyed the special protection of a Maori chief who stuck a spear in the ground outside their house as a sign of his favour, but that is sheer make-believe. The story of the boat, though, a 30-ton schooner, is well attested. Named the Richmond, it was launched on 11 August 1842. The newspaper report of the event contains the earliest identified usage of the appellation ‘Captain Sinclair’. The next month the Richmond went into service as a cargo vessel. In this guise it made five voyages plus an exploratory trip down the east coast of the South Island.

Then, between February and May 1843, Sinclair made three voyages to Banks Peninsula in the South Island to relocate three Scottish families—including his own—that had decided to take up land there instead of waiting for it to become available within the existing domains of the New Zealand Company. There were already a few Europeans in the area, including some French colonists who had settled at Akaroa in 1840, and claimed to have bought most of the peninsula from the Maoris. The first of the newcomers, the Deans, settled inland on the plains, but the less-monied Sinclairs and Hays, who followed them, settled (squatting at first) on the shore of an inlet that whalers had named Pigeon Bay.

17 von Holt, Stories, pp. 8–9.
In the larger history of settlement this Caledonian incursion was portentous. ‘In this way’, noted a contemporary, ‘Lord Stanley’s [that is, the Colonial Secretary’s] project for discountenancing the further colonization of the Middle Island will be thwarted’. Not that that worried the ‘Pre-Adamites’, as the early migrants to what would become the province of Canterbury were labelled after formal settlement began there with the arrival of the ‘Pilgrims’ in 1850. Their concern was to begin farming. Accordingly, the Richmond was soon sold to an Australian settler, W.B. Rhodes, for 18 cattle, of which Ebenezer Hay, who had bought a third share in the vessel before leaving Wellington, claimed six. Francis, who was to spend much of his time trading between Banks Peninsula and Wellington, thereupon built another schooner, the Sisters. He then sold this in 1845 to the French colonisation company, which claimed to have bought the whole of the peninsula from the Maoris, for 150 acres. Francis himself described the transaction:

last voyage, when I was at home, the French Company was completing the purchase of the Peninsula, and arranged to pay away my schooner to the natives as part payment, selling me the little bay in which we are settled for her and a small balance more; so that the very thing that I had prepared for our removal has been the means, in the hands of a merciful and kind Providence, of fixing me down in perhaps the sweetest spot in this favoured country.

Unfortunately, Francis and his son George, together with two other young men, were drowned in May 1846 when their newly built vessel, the Jessie Millar, foundered somewhere north of Kaikoura. They were en route to Wellington with a cargo of dairy produce for sale—the details of which are given by John Deans in a letter reporting the death of ‘a Scotchman named Sinclair’—and not, as his grandson would later assure posterity, because Francis ‘had received a letter from the Governor asking him to attend a conference’. The poet Denis Glover has recorded the event in some sardonic verses:

Captain Sinclair fashioned a schooner
In a peninsula harbour
That the dairy produce, the great cheeses,
Might the sooner repay his labour;
But he tempted too much the Pacific
And was drowned with his lad,

18 The New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator, 26 April 1843.
20 Knudsen and Noble, Kanaka of Kauai, p. 73.
Distressed by this loss, Elizabeth retreated with her remaining family to Wellington for a couple of years, but recovered to emerge as a matriarch. She returned to Sinclair Bay, as their particular site was known, in 1849, and soon began building a fine house that would be named 'Craigforth'. Over the next 17 years the farm flourished and expanded (it eventually comprised 782 acres). And the family grew up. The daughter Jane married a widowed master mariner, Thomas Gay, captain at various times of the whalers Offley and Corsair, in 1849. And, in 1853, Helen married Charles Barrington Robinson, a dishonest and dissolute former magistrate. Rev. William Aylmer, the Anglican vicar of Akaroa, officiated. Two years later, however, Helen parted from her husband and returned to 'Craigforth' with their son Aubrey. The family history notes the parting but, while commenting complaisantly on his professional and social status, does not touch on Robinson’s character, nor on the fact that he was violent towards his wife. Nor does it mention a bold expansionary venture by Frank Sinclair and his uncle, John McHutcheson. In 1856 they took up a run of 10,000 acres in the newly opened-up inland plain of the Mackenzie Country. But the land, densely covered in heavy matagouri thorn bush proved too difficult to work, so they relinquished the run within two years. Then, in 1863, probably because she could not obtain sufficient land to keep her family both properly occupied and cohesive where they were, and also possibly prompted by the personal discontent of Frank and Helen, Elizabeth decided that the time was right for the family to have a fresh start somewhere else.

Accordingly, Craigforth was sold and, in March 1863, 12 members of the family set out with their furniture and livestock, under Gay’s command in the Bessie, leaving the name Mount Sinclair as a mark of their sojourn in the area. Elizabeth, though, also left her two brothers, John and the recently arrived William, behind in New Zealand. Six months later the family came to Honolulu. Then, in 1864,
in the aftermath of the Great Mahele of 1846 to 1855, by which traditional Hawai’ian communal land holding was replaced by individual freehold tenure, the Sinclairs bought Ni’ihau from King Kamehameha V for $10,000.28

The tale of the Sinclairs and of their peregrinations has been often told, but always partially and often with marked inaccuracies. The latter is especially the case with the extensive American literature on Ni’ihau. There, in contrast to the earlier and more matter-of-fact New Zealand tradition, which is grounded in memoirs recounting the European settlement of Canterbury, it is buoyed by the dashing figure of Francis, ‘Captain Sinclair’. It has become part of the romantic myth of Hawai’i, and the ‘human interest’ dimension of the story—enhanced by roseate embellishments, flattering falsehoods and convenient silences—has tended to prevail. Whereas the New Zealand literature concerns a family that had still to make its mark, the Hawai’ian writings relate to a family that has become ‘successful’. That is, until 1988. From that date, probably in response to the reservations (equivocal as they are) appended to the 1985 edition of Ida von Holt’s family history, the Sinclairs have at last ceased to be romanticised, if not ignored, by commentators on Ni’ihau.

The conduit, if not the creative source, of the severely distorted view of the past, which entered the public domain when the oral account that presumably existed within the family was recorded in print, was Anne Knudsen. Her brother Francis, though, was not immune from grand delusions, either. He claimed to be heir to the Earl of Caithness.29 The youngest of Francis and Elizabeth Sinclair’s children, Anne was not yet two years of age when they reached Wellington in 1840, and was only seven when her father died. She was not well placed to be a first-hand authority on early family history. But she was also the most reluctant of the family to leave New Zealand. Perhaps that was conducive to nostalgia? After marrying Valdemar Knudsen, the Sinclair’s neighbour from ‘Waiawa’ on Kauai, in 1867, she remained near the family centre for the next 30 years. She died in Hollywood in 1922, having outlived all her siblings. Like her sisters, she had married a financially well-off man who was appreciably older than herself.

Critically for the transmission of her version of events, two of Anne’s children wrote works of family history drawing on stories derived from her. These have, in turn been plundered by other commentators, including a grand nephew.30 Besides many uncritical newspaper stories, there have also been numerous

treatments in magazines and books, a disconcerting number of them having links (and therefore an academic imprimatur?) to the staff or press of the University of Hawai‘i.\textsuperscript{\textdegree}31

There was once a chance that the Hawai‘ian tradition of Sinclairography might be launched by Somerset Maugham. According to his first biographer, Wilmon Menard, in 1969, Maugham heard the Sinclair story from Aubrey Robinson, Anne’s nephew, in the Union Saloon in Honolulu in 1916, and intended turning it into a novel. Moving on to Tahiti, however, his attention was seduced by the story of Paul Gauguin, which he published as \textit{The Moon and Sixpence} in 1919.\textsuperscript{\textdegree}32 Following that false start, the Sinclair story did not come into print in its subsequently well-known and glamourised form until 1928. Then, appropriately, it was in an article on Anne herself in a celebratory volume called \textit{Women of Hawaii}:

Her father was Francis Sinclair, who as a young man entered the British navy and attained the command of a man-of-war at the end of the Napoleonic era.

He distinguished himself immediately after the battle of Waterloo when he was conveying the Duke of Wellington home to England after his great victory over the Corsican. His ship, on which the Duke was a passenger, encountered a frightful gale in the English channel and was saved from being dashed to pieces on the cliffs of Dover by the superior seamanship of Captain Sinclair who personally took the wheel and guided the vessel safely to port. In recognition of this achievement, the Duke presented Sinclair with a handsome travelling desk which became a treasured heirloom in the Sinclair family.

Captain Sinclair resigned his commission in the British navy about 1840. Then he, with his wife, who was Elizabeth McHutcheson, and their young family, including the infant daughter, Anne, went to New Zealand to direct large landed estates which he had acquired there.\textsuperscript{\textdegree}33

This story was repeated in the the second edition in 1938. Most of it also occurs in \textit{Stories Of Long Ago} by Anne’s daughter Ida, first issued privately in 1940, and again in 1953 and 1963, before being formally published in 1985. The story

\textsuperscript{31} See Appendix.
\textsuperscript{33} George F. Nellist (ed.), \textit{Women of Hawaii}, Honolulu [1928], pp. 157–159. This is a companion volume to the third volume (\textit{Men of Hawaii}) of Nellist’s \textit{The Story of Hawaii and Its Builders} (Honolulu, 1925).
also appeared, substantially unchanged, in two 1984 volumes: Notable Women of Hawaii, in entries on Elizabeth and Anne; and, History Makers of Hawaii, in an entry on Anne.  

Given the apparent authority long conferred on this version by regular repetition, how could so many commentators not but accept it? One answer, at least, to that question is that they did not consult any archival records or the substantial—and independent—New Zealand literature bearing on the Sinclairs.

In the light of these other sources, as has already been indicated, a more mundane, if no less honourable, story emerges. Thus, Francis’s father is not to be confused with the Sir George Sinclair MP who was prominently associated with the New Zealand Company, (and whose son Dudley, remorseful after declining a duel, shot himself in Auckland in 1844). Nor was Dr Andrew Sinclair, Colonial Secretary in New Zealand from 1844 to 1856, a relation. As for his alleged naval career, Francis, born in 1797, was too young to have served with Nelson or to have commanded a vessel at the time of Waterloo (1815). Indeed, in an appendix to the 1985 edition of von Holt’s book, Ruth Knudsen Hanner, Anne’s grand-daughter, concedes that he was not in the navy at all. She thereby also gives the lie to a sentimental extension of the family myth, to wit that Anne’s father and father-in-law were both present at the battle of Copenhagen, although on opposing sides. At the same time she is concerned to retrieve any lost ground. Thus, she compromises her concession by surmising that Francis was in charge of a merchant ship which was commandeered by the ‘Iron Duke’ to take him on a ‘hurried’ and ‘secret’—and historically fictitious—journey to England. To this end she invokes the gift of the inscribed writing desk, for which no evidence exists and which is said to have been stolen from Francis during one of his business trips. Still, it fuelled naive imaginations. ‘As a child’, wrote von Holt, ‘I would dream of finding it in some old curiosity shop’.

As for social status, the Sinclairs were undistinguished. While clearly ‘respectable’ and migrating as ‘capitalists’ (that is, prospective landholders) rather than as ‘labourers’, according to the rubrics of the New Zealand Company’s colonisation scheme, they were, moreover, scarcely prosperous. They travelled steerage in the 374-ton Blenheim, not in the cabin like the McDonalds, and their

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34 See Appendix.
36 von Holt, Stories, pp. 157–158. None of Wellington’s biographers report a ‘secret’ visit to England. The battle of Waterloo was on 18 June 1815, and his first visit after that was in July 1816. See, for example, Elizabeth Langford, Wellington: the years of the sword (New York, 1969) and Thomas Dwight Veve, The Duke of Wellington and the British Army of Occupation in France, 1815–1818 (Westport, Conn., 1992).
37 von Holt, Stories, p. 6.
initial prospects were modest, if inflated by optimism and energy. Far from having been assigned an estate, Francis had in 1839 purchased a £100 land order from the Company, entitling him to select 100 country acres and one town acre from its putative domains in New Zealand, when they became available for occupation. The same payment, though, also covered the cost of passage for the family. To benefit further from that provision, and also to sidestep the Company’s discouragement of unattached labouring men, Elizabeth’s 24-year-old brother John was included among the Sinclair children. Four years were subtracted from his age to conceal the subterfuge. John, who soon reverted to his own name, eventually became mayor of, for him, the appropriately named town of Blenheim.

Characteristically ready to make the most of their chances, and adept at helping create opportunities for themselves, the Sinclairs had already made a promising start by the time Francis was drowned in 1846. And it was consistently their worthy qualities, rather than any suggestion of high rank, that, even in colonial society, caught the attention of commentators. For all that Francis’s demise was lamented by the Governor, George Grey, and by the peripatetic Anglican bishop, George Selwyn, who had himself stayed a night with the Sinclairs in 1844, it was because he was regarded as a good type of settler rather than—as Anne’s daughter, followed extravagantly by Menard, contends—because of any particular eminence. Already, on the voyage to New Zealand, one diarist, the wife of a doctor, had noted ‘Sunday 6 September 1840. Emigrants had prayers and a portion of the Bible read to them in Gaelic. We had the same in English by

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39 Francis’s land order is in the National Archives of New Zealand, Christchurch, Canterbury Association papers L and S 40/2, no.35. For accounts of the company’s land allocation system, see Burns, Fatal Success, pp. 100–102; Taylor, Ensign Best, pp. 45–46; Michael Turnbull, The New Zealand Bubble, Wellington, 1962, pp. 10–19.
40 This was brought to my attention by Mavis Donnelly-Crequer, who compared the passenger list of the Blenheim with relevant birth, marriage and death records.
a very respectable steerage passenger of the name of Sinclair from Stirling’. In 1844 a government official visiting Pigeon Bay spoke in similarly appreciative terms:

I was invited by Mr Sinclair to rest at his house. His family is an example for settlers. Everything necessary for their comfort was produced by themselves—two young girls even making their own shoes. Mr. S. told me that he bought very few things; as his family—a wife, three sons, and two daughters—were able to do all the work required. They all appeared happy and contented; and as they resided on land which the natives had sold bona fide, they had never been annoyed in any manner by them.

So, too, did Bishop Selwyn:

I found some Scottish settlers of the right sort; living in great comfort by their own exertions, making everything for themselves, and above all, keeping up their religious principles and usages though far away from any ministerial assistance. The name of the family is Sinclair; I spent the evening [16 February] with them and conducted their family prayers.

Later, in 1851, Charlotte Godley, the wife of the founder of the Canterbury settlement, would also write of their Swiss Family Robinson style of life:

We went to stay the night at Mrs Sinclair’s; I have told you about them and about the two daughters who came to stay here, at the time of our regatta. They are very nice simple people, excessively Scotch and old-fashioned, and live a regular colonial life, according to one’s old ideas of it; plenty of cows, and milk and butter and cream, and doing everything for themselves; they have not a servant in the house. They have just built a pretty new house in a most lovely spot.

These comments are similar in tone to those of the travel writer Isabella Bird, who visited the Sinclair’s at Makaweli in 1874:

The household here consists first and foremost of its head, Mrs [Sinclair], a lady of the old Scotch type, very talented, bright, humorous, charming, with a definite character which impresses its force upon everybody. [Wearing] a large, drawn silk bonnet, which she rarely lays aside, as light in her figure and step as a young girl [she looks] as if she had

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44 Shortland, Southern Districts, pp. 269–270.
stepped out of an old picture, or one of Dean Ramsay’s books. [And they all lived] much such a life as people live at Raasay, Applecross, or some other remote Highland place.  

None of these nineteenth century records—including an interview in 1893 with his grandson Francis Gay—glamourise Francis Sinclair, but they do acknowledge the authority within the family of his widow. That was, however, probably severely tested by Anne’s resistance to leaving Pigeon Bay. She was being courted by a young Scotsman named James Montgomery at the time. The opportunity to shift, though, was not of the Sinclair’s own making. Rather, it was presented to them with the scheme for building a tunnel through the Port Hills to link the inland town of Christchurch with the anchorage at Lyttelton. The Sinclair property lay to the east of Lyttelton, and was heavily wooded. In October 1862, therefore, George Holmes, the principle contractor, bought it in order to obtain timber for construction purposes. The price was £8707.

Armed with money from this windfall, Thomas Gay went to Melbourne to buy what would be the family’s ‘Ark’. In 1863 he returned to Pigeon Bay with the Bessie, a three-masted barque of 262 tons. Then, in mid-March, after refitting, and with its assorted Sinclairs, Gays and Robinsons aboard, plus furniture and farming equipment and some livestock, the Bessie cleared Lyttelton for Victoria in British Columbia, about which they had apparently heard promising reports. Travelling via Tahiti (3–11 April), they reached their destination in early June, but were were disappointed. Victoria at that time was still little more that a fur-trading post, potential farm land in the region was covered in heavy forest and the indigenous people seemed less appealing than the Maoris. Consequently, after investigating settlement prospects, the group decided to look elsewhere. They even, it seems, contemplated returning to New Zealand. But, on the advice of one Henry Rhodes of the Hudson Bay Company, who had a brother in Honolulu, they decided first to consider Hawai‘i, which may previously have been visited by Gay in the course of a voyage to the Bering Strait in 1851. Thus it was that on 17 September 1863, after 28 days out, the Bessie dropped anchor in Honolulu. ‘On going down to the wharf’, Rev. Samuel Damon, the port chaplain, ‘was surprised to find the trim barque with its large party on

49 von Holt, Stories, p. 25.
51 Lyttelton Times, 7 Jan., 6 Feb. 1863.
board, with a beautiful old lady at its head, books, pictures, work, even a piano, and all that could add refinement to a floating home, with cattle and sheep of valuable breeds in pens on the deck’.  

Coming ashore, they rented a house in Honolulu as a base from which to search for a suitably large tract of land for farming, and eventually decided on Ni’ihau. In thus settling in Hawai’i they were, incidentally, following a path blazed by certain other ambitious Scottish migrants from New Zealand: notably, Harry and Eliza Macfarlane who settled at Waikiki in 1846, and Thomas Cleghorn who arrived in 1851 and who’s son, Archibald Scott Cleghorn, later married Princess Likelike, the sister of King David Kalakaua. Archibald became the father of Princess Kaiulani.

But the Sinclairs did not sever their links with New Zealand abruptly. Twelve days after arriving at Honolulu, Thomas Gay departed for Lyttelton with a cargo of sugar, molasses, rice and salt. He returned on 30 May 1864 with a cargo of coal from Newcastle in New South Wales, but left again for New Zealand in July with a cargo of 70 mules. That voyage was to be less successful. On reaching Auckland early in August, Thomas and his brother William were arrested, and charged with having assaulted an insubordinate seaman named Charles Boyle. After being held in custody for nearly two months they came to trial on 27 September and were found guilty. They were sentenced to six months imprisonment but, following a petition for clemency to Governor Grey, from certain ‘southern gentlemen’, including Anne’s former beau, they were released in 1865. Thomas thereupon sailed the Bessie to Newcastle, apparently intending to sell her there. But, on 9 February, before that was accomplished, he died of pneumonia, probably contracted in prison.

Even so, sporadic contact with New Zealand continued. In 1866 Francis, now aged 32, returned there to marry his cousin Isabella, daughter of William McHutcheson, and in 1902, following her death in 1896 or thereabouts, he married her widowed sister Williamina Shirriffs. Meanwhile in 1881, Anne had brought her husband and five children to spend a year in New Zealand,

54  Pacific Commercial Advertiser, 24 Sept. 1863; The Friend, Oct. 1863, p 80; Bird, Six months, p. 202; von Holt, Stories, pp. 30–31. Isabella Bird, and the commentators who follow her on the matter, are mistaken in stating that the Bessie had previously called at Hawai’i after leaving Tahiti.
57  Lyttelton Times, 29 August 1866; information provided by Mavis Donnelly.
mostly in Auckland. That same year Francis bought a 12-acre property known as ‘The Pines’ in the Epsom district of Auckland. He held it until 1893, although for how long he lived there is unknown. In 1883 he passed the management of the family’s estates in Hawai‘i over to his nephews Aubrey Robinson and Francis Gay; in 1885 he was in London with Isabella, overseeing the printing of her book *Indigenous Flowers of the Hawaiian Islands*; and, when his mother died in 1892, aged 92, he was living in California. Later he settled in London, and devoted his time to writing about the Pacific, often under the name Philip Garth. He published five volumes of poems, essays and short stories. An amiable young itinerant, his character ‘David Kinross of the *Lapwing*’ is not unlike Louis Becke’s ‘Tom Denison’. Francis Sinclair died on the island of Jersey on 22 July 1916, aged 83, and his sister Anne, 24 years a widow, six years later. With that the emigrant adventure that began in Scotland in 1840 came to its close. But the Gorgon’s teeth of imaginatively enhanced stories about her family’s past that Anne had imparted to her children were just about to come into flower. Enemies of fact, they would continue to bloom vigorously for six decades.

Matters such as the subterfuge about John McHutcheson’s age and name change, the scurrilous character of Charles Robinson and the criminal conviction of Thomas Gay have not hitherto figured in the various tellings of the Sinclair story. Indeed, they are inherently incompatible with the tone of the Hawai‘i-generated literature. Even so, why draw attention to them, or to the Sinclair’s relatively humble origins, or to any other flaws in the received narrative? The main reason is that, contrary to the ‘repel all boarders’ position stated by Helen Robinson 1983, the Robinson’s do not ‘own’ their own history, or even that of Ni‘ihau or of the Sinclair’s. For these are all parts of other, larger and still evolving histories, not least that of the European colonisation of the Pacific, and so have something to contribute to an understanding of the events with which they are concerned. No history can be ‘owned’, but is the common property of all—even if it concerns Ni‘ihau and the Robinsons. That the Robinson’s are

61 Francis Sinclair’s main publications are: *Ballads and Poems from the Pacific* (London, 1885); *Where the Sun Sets: memories from other years and lands* (London, 1905); *Under North Star and Southern Cross* (London, 1907); *From the Four Winds* (London, 1909); *Under Western Skies: life pictures from memory* (London, 1911). *Lapwing* was also the name of a trading vessel that operated out of Fiji. Dorothy Shineberg, *The People Trade: Pacific Island labourers and New Caledonia, 1865–1930*, Honolulu, 1999, p. 20.
free, and quite properly so, not to cooperate with enquirers if they so choose is a different matter from what may or may not be of historical significance to any of those enquirers.

Besides, the infusion of Sinclair mythology, that amalgam of domestic phantasies, into the corpus of publicly available historical commentary obliges any serious enquirer to subject it to critical scrutiny. When private belief is transubstantiated into what purports to be objective fact, it thereby comes within the ambit of general curiosity, which is not subject to any inherent restraints.

A further, if somewhat extraneous, justification for attempting to clarify the history of the Sinclairs is that it offers a clear and salutary warning of the need for exercising particular care when dealing with what is too often euphemistically described as ‘oral history’, when what is really meant is ‘the oral record’. ‘I/you/he/she believe(s)/think(s)/say(s)’ do not equate with ‘it was’, no matter how firmly a notion is held or how often a story is told. That ‘cogito ergo erat’ is no less fallacious than ‘cogito ergo sum’ is widely recognised. Thus, Jane Austen expressed misgivings about the reliability of oral transmission in *Persuasion* when she has Anne Elliot counter a would-be informant ‘My dear Mrs Smith, your authority is deficient … we may not expect to get real information in such a [bendy] line. Facts or opinions which are to pass through the hands of so many … can hardly have much truth left’. 64 Oscar Wilde aired a similar view 1895 in *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

Miss Prism: Memory my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry about with us.

Cecily: Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened. 65

Certainly that was the case with Anne Sinclair Knudsen’s story of her father. Nor was imaginative largesse restricted to her own family. Thus, her son Eric confidently writes that Knud Knudsen, Valdemar’s father, ‘was appointed President of Norway by the King of Denmark, and held that office until Norway seceded from Denmark in 1818’, and the 1928 epiphany of family mythology describes him as being ‘president of the Norwegian Legislature from 1814 to 1818’. 66 In fact, from 1810 to 1852 Knud was mayor and chairman of the town council of Kristiansand, a settlement on the south coast of Norway, (and not to be confused with Kristiania, the capital, which was to be renamed Oslo in 1925). 67 As for Norway itself: Sweden annexed it from Denmark in 1814, and

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64 *Persuasion*, London, 1818, many subsequent editions, Chapter 21.
65 Act Two.
held it until it became independent in 1905. But such detail, such precision, found little place in a family history concerned to devise and foster a usable European past. That history was one that complemented the success of the migrant Sinclair–Robinson–Gay–Knudsen clan in the Pacific.

Appendix

Sinclair bibliography

A list of works which recount in some measure the history of the Sinclairs up to 1863. * denotes work with authorial or publication links to the University of Hawai‘i.

1. The matter-of-fact tradition
   a. New Zealand publications

1883
Jacobson, H.C., Tales of Banks Peninsula, Akaroa (3rd edn 1914).

1900

1901
Guthrie Hay, H.L., Annandale, Past and Present, 1839–1900, Christchurch.

1915
Hay, James, Reminiscences of Earliest Canterbury (principally Banks Peninsula) and its Settlers, Christchurch.

1937

1938

1948
1949


1957


1990


1994


b. Hawai’ian publications

1988


1989


1990*


1998


c. Published elsewhere

1992

2. The romantic/inventive tradition

1928

1940

1944

1953

1963


1969

1981


1982


———, ‘To Find Niihau: “a bonny island of our very own”’, *Oceans*, vol. 15, no. 5 (Sept.–Oct.).
1984


* Peterson, Barbara Bennett (ed.), *Notable Women of Hawaii*, Honolulu.


1985


1987