

Ted and Harry Molteno

Cynthia Payne (nee Stanford)'s Recollections of her Great Uncles

Uncles Ted and Harry, on returning from their years at Cambridge,¹ bought the farm of Glen Elgin at Elgin.² Here they started in a small way, growing oats on poor soil and hilly fields. Peaches did very well in this type of soil and [with its] climate of hot summers and very cold winters. Being a man of big ideas, Uncle Ted saw great prospects in this, and after the First World War they started exporting peaches to England. The peaches were shipped from Cape Town docks and the industry grew, with the result that the government decided to establish refrigerated sheds at the docks. But in their ignorance they froze the fruit with the result that the peaches arrived in England looking lovely but with a consistency of cotton wool. This wrecked the reputation of South African peaches. Uncle Ted brought a case for damages against the government. This lawsuit dragged on for years and Uncle Ted finally lost it. When things began to go wrong, he offered his lawyer some strychnine (as a stimulant)!

Kathleen Murray, their niece, also farmed at Elgin and also started growing fruit, instead of keeping bees and pigs as she had been doing.³ She said it was she who first thought apples would be a better export fruit than peaches, and not Uncle Ted. In this argument I would not dream of taking sides and it probably was a mutually generated idea. However this may be, the apple industry of Elgin started and grew to its now enormous proportions. Harry was a very good organiser and became an expert on apples. The two brothers were an excellent combination, Uncle Ted with his large and inspired ideas and Harry the practical man able to put them into execution. They bought up large tracts of ground at Elgin and even as far afield as Genadendal and Touws River.⁴ Their undertaking became the largest privately owned fruit farm in the world.

Ted's generosity

Uncle Ted loved being spontaneously generous. On one of my mother's visits to Cape Town, she arranged a lunch at Stuttaford's with the uncles and some of their oldest friends.⁵ At the end of lunch, Elsie Buchanan,⁶ who was rather hard up, announced that she wanted to buy a new winter coat. They all

¹ Seven of Sir John Charles Molteno's sons and daughters were educated at the University of Cambridge, as well as numerous of his grandchildren. John himself had had to leave school aged fifteen, following the premature death of his father and the consequent necessity of helping support his mother and younger brothers and sisters.

² Elgin is an upland valley surrounded by mountains some 35 miles from Cape Town. It became the place where several members of the Molteno and Murray families started farming just after 1900. Three generations of the family, led by Ted and Harry, have contributed hugely to developing the valley's massive apple and deciduous fruit export business.

³ Kathleen Murray was the younger daughter of Dr Charles and Caroline Murray. A remarkable woman, there is a lovely description of her pioneering fruit growing exploits by Marion Cran in her *The Gardens of Good Hope*. This will be posted on this website shortly.

⁴ Touws River is on the edge of the Karoo. Genadendal (the Valley of Grace, or Mercy) is mainly renowned for as the Moravian mission station that served the local Coloured population.

⁵ Stuttafords was for many years Cape Town's premier department store.

⁶ Elsie Buchanan (nee Lindley) was a kind of relative. She was the daughter of Bryant Lindley, who was the uncle of Lucy Lindley Molteno, Charlie Molteno's American wife. Bryant, whose father Daniel Lindley had been an early American missionary to the Zulus in the 1840s, was born in Natal and, on growing up, decided to live in South Africa.



Harry and Ted Molteno (with Con Pare), Glen Elgin, 1940s (as they were when Cynthia stayed with them)

accompanied her to the ladies' coat department and Elsie asked to see some moderately priced coats. When they came Uncle Ted said they were dreadful - 'Bring something better.' Elsie waffled and protested. However, when the 'better' came, Uncle Ted again turned them down with scorn. Elsie became more agitated when the third lot was discarded and she was in despair. However, Uncle Ted continued to scorn them and said only fur coats would be good enough. And one of these, he approved. Of course, poor Elsie was now totally in despair, wailing 'Ted, I can't afford this sort of thing', to which he replied, 'Of course you can', produced his cheque-book and bought the fur coat. I have often wondered what Elsie did with this so unsuitable garb for her rather humble way of living!

Mules or Tractors?

Shortly after the War,⁷ an optimistic young man arrived at the farm and attempted to sell a Ferguson tractor to the uncles. This was a new type of venture and practically unheard of. The young man did his best and seemingly made no progress. Finally he was about to depart when Uncle Ted said, 'Well, that will be all right, bring me five next week'.

⁷ The Second World War, 1939-45. Mechanization of farming only really got under way in the second half of the 20th century.



Harry Molteno with his beloved sheepdog, mid 1960s

Uncle Ted had a passion for Lincoln cars. When one showed signs of age, it would be moved to a side garage and a new one purchased. He never traded in a car as they were looked on as part of his family and, when too worn out, would be taken to his car 'graveyard'. I wonder if there are still any valuable old cars left there.

The uncles all rode motorbikes in my early youth. Uncle Ted was always a danger to other traffic. He once had a puncture in the back wheel of his motorbike which was parked in Kimberley Road at Kalk Bay. He set to to mend the puncture, but dropped all his tools down the storm-water drain which had a grill over it. All attempts to retrieve the tools failed until Mother thought of me. I was flattened on the grill and my arm squeezed through. With a great stretching effort, I finally got the tools out. I must have been six years old at that time.

Luminal and the dangers of self-medication

Unfortunately Uncle Ted's medical knowledge led to the disastrous result that he liked to prescribe for himself and began to use Luminal to calm himself down at night.⁸ He finally became addicted to this drug. He was taking about five grains every night to help himself sleep. This affected him physically and mentally. He had always had a quick temper, but now, if roused to anger by anything, would become totally possessed. These episodes were very frightening and only Uncle Harry could deal with them. His kidneys were finally also affected by the drugs. He had a prostate operation; the hospital refused him

⁸ Luminal, according to the website <http://www.webmd.com>, is a barbiturate used as a short-term treatment (no more than two weeks) for sleeplessness and the relief of tension, and on a longer term basis for the control of seizures. It can become addictive and sudden withdrawal, especially where it has been used for a long period, can trigger a seizure and even death.

the Luminal because of his kidneys – disregarding the withdrawal symptoms, and he flew into an enraged state and had a stroke, which was fatal.⁹

I stayed with them for some time and often visited them. I always got on very well with them. Uncle Ted and I had some great arguments, which we both used to enjoy very much. He was inclined to be very critical of people – especially of his relations. One day he was strongly criticising someone and turned to me for agreement. I, however, said I did not like criticising people, whereupon he burst out laughing and said I was the greatest critic he had.

The uncles, in their large way, each owned a very big (and very smelly) English sheepdog. These dogs were each given an enormous bone every evening and these they ate before the fire. One evening a fight over the bones broke out in the midst of where we sat. I took shelter on a bench on one side but with wild shouts the uncles joined in, each seizing his large armchair and hurling it at the dogs. It was the best dog fight I have ever attended. There was a large sofa in the room, and to their delight one evening they moved it for some reason and out from under its seat a shower of old bones descended – the remains of the dogs' bones stored there by rats! They considered it a very good thing that there had not been an outbreak of plague.

They decided to build a very big cold storage plant near the railway station. This was considered by the experts to be an impossible project as no such sized cold store had been built anywhere in the world. However the work was given to their engineer, Mr Griffiths, and the store was built and proved totally successful. Since then more and bigger cold stores have been built, two of them by the uncles.

Marriage forbidden

Uncle Ted maintained that there was mental instability in the family and would not allow any of his brothers and sister to marry. This was very bad luck on Uncle Harry who would have loved to marry his 'girlfriend' and have a home and family. He used to visit her regularly in town, but they never married.¹⁰

The uncles were very interested in and keen on Tolstoy and his ideas of free love. They joined a community organised by him in Holland. This was before they returned to South Africa to start farming.

I got a great deal of joy out of the uncles and they were very generous to me. In fact without them and their help, we would not have had the money to buy the ground and build our home at Lakeside.

⁹ This account of Cynthia's throws important light on one side of Ted Molteno's personality. He was always a hugely energetic, forceful, not to say domineering, man. He also got into disputes and bad-tempered exchanges with other members of the family. In the light of what Cynthia tells us here of his use of Luminal, it seems entirely possible that this unattractive aspect of Ted's behaviour may have been caused, at least in part, by his use of this drug.

¹⁰ Neither Ted nor any of his three brothers and sisters married. This was in stark contrast to their 10 half-brothers and sisters, all of whom except for Betty married and had children.