WELLINGTON'S MYSTERIOUS

'BARON' MOLLWO,

THE THALIO-HISTRIONIC ELOCUTIONARY LECTURER

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WELLINGTON'S MYSTERIOUS
'BARON' MOLLWO

When an old man died in Wellington Hospital on 13 April 1906 there were no relatives on hand to mourn his passing. Yet over the next few days nearly twenty New Zealand newspapers reported his death and some repeated his story. Wellington's *Evening Post* reported thus on 14 April:

> Charles Mollwo, a Russian, who in his time had a varied career, died in Wellington Hospital yesterday. Many years ago he was sufficiently prominent to excite the attention of the governing authorities of his native land, Russia, for he was a man of liberal education, and was not afraid to express discontent with the methods of the autocracy. He became a 'marked man' and had to seek safety in flight, eventually reaching New Zealand. He ultimately settled in Wellington, where his personality won him many friends. Seven or eight years ago he entered the old men's Home. Latterly his health began to fail him, and yesterday his condition became so critical that he was removed to the hospital, where he died a few hours after admission, at the age of seventy-six years. (p.5)

Wellington's *Free Lance* magazine said that after fleeing Russia he had travelled in England and America, teaching French and German, and had lived in various parts of Australia before settling in Wellington: 'His mental vigour was remarkable'. It was a matter of pride with him that his ancestors were French and not Russian. The family name was Mollevoix, which was 'Muscovised' into Mollwo. But his favourite nation was England, and he was proud to be counted a British citizen by adoption and choice.[1]

Oddly enough, there is no record of the death of a Charles Mollwo in the New Zealand death registers. There was no death notice in any newspaper under that name, and the relevant volume of the Wellington Hospital deaths register has not survived. So was that his real name? Who exactly was 'Baron' Mollwo?

Readers of Auckland's *Observer* a few months before might have recalled that Mollwo was then described as being 'as well known in Wellington as the town clock'. He said he was a Russian baron, who had forfeited his estates and fortune by his participation in the liberal agitations of the late 1840s: 'For his actions as a member of the Young Russia party he was driven into exile, and has lived on British soil ever since'[2]

Earlier in 1905 the *New Zealand Times* had published an article by Charles Mollwo entitled 'The Agitation in Russia: An Historical Review', in which he commented on the events of 'Red Sunday' in January that year as a 'prelude of greater things to come'. This article was published only a month before the Japanese victory at the naval Battle of Tsushima in May 1905. In elegant and polished prose, Mollwo described the attempts of the Russian police under Nicholas I to suppress all dissent and discontent. Russians, he wrote, were brought up to regard the emperor as God's all-powerful representative on earth, and his ministers and officials as infallible servants of the emperor. The Russian bureaucracy, however, was thoroughly corrupt, and had forgotten the good of the nation. The Young Russia party of 1849 had comprised young nobles who, having enjoyed a foreign education, had returned to Russia imbued with liberal ideas. The police had crushed them, some being sent to Siberia, while others were forced into exile and lost their estates and possessions.[3]

Readers of the *New Zealand Mail* in Wellington would have known the name of Charles Mollwo for a different reason. During 1903 he had published verses in the Sunday Reading column and 'At the Sign of the Lyre' on such themes as 'Faith', 'Kindness', 'Friendship', 'Fate' and 'Thought'. These were simple sentimental verses, encouraging readers to hope for the best and trust in God. 'Good advice' is a fair sample:

> When the radiant sun is shining
> From the glorious cloudless sky
> Then it is no use repining,
> Life is happy if we try.
>
> With the meadows full of flowers
> Life is but a garden fair,
> Nourished by the summer showers
> Pleasures grow without a care.
>
> Work when done is but a pleasure,
> So combine it with a song;
> To the brim you fill the measure
> Of your joys; they don't last long.
>
> What if threatening clouds will gather,
> Smiles will soon chase them away!
> Never mind the gloomy weather,
> Night is followed by the day.
>
> Thus improve the fleeting hours
> With a spirit free of care;
> Gather all the scented flowers
> Fate may bring you as your share.[4]

A rather different poem in August 1903 in the Liberal newspaper the *New Zealand Times* gave a clue to Mollwo's other interests. 'Fraternity' called for the brotherhood of man, and called on workers to 'Destroy the walls that sordid wealth has built'; 'Be ready, workers, for the battle-call'.

Was real virtue ever bought or sold?
Is honest poverty a glaring crime?
These are doctrines taught by sordid gold,
But reason teaches doctrines more sublime.

She teaches us nobility of mind;
She teaches justice, paves the way for all;
Equality for the human kind,
That is the crown for which we stand or fall.[5]

Some of these verses were copied by Australian newspapers, notably the *Darling Downs Gazette* and the *Maryborough Chronicle* in Queensland during 1903.[6]

In September 1902 Mollwo had given a lecture in Wellington for the New Zealand Socialist Party entitled 'Capital and Labour'. After tracing the history of slavery back to Roman times, and the institution of serfdom to the feudal system of the Middle Ages, he expanded on the theme of unequal relations in history between working men and the owners of capital. He suggested that the only right use of capital was for bettering the condition of the people, but all too often capital was selfishly kept to benefit a small elite class of the wealthy. This was not only the fault of the greedy capitalist, but also the fault of workers who could not band together. Trade unions were fighting for their own interests instead of working as a united body in the interests of all workers. He stressed the need for unity and brotherhood: 'Capital and Labour must go hand in hand'. The reporter drily observed that 'considerable discussion followed'. [7]

Mollwo was clearly a familiar figure in left-wing political circles in Wellington at this time. In the general election campaign of October-November 1902 he moved the vote of thanks after a speech by Arthur Atkinson, the prohibitionist leader and member for Wellington City 1899-1902, and seconded the vote of thanks after a speech by the mayor, J. G. W. Aitken.[8]

Numerous newspaper reports enable us to reconstruct Mollwo's life in some detail for the 1880s and 1890s when he lived in Wellington, and several long interviews purport to tell his earlier life story, but there are some inconsistencies in these accounts, and his silence about his previous career in Otago and Canterbury raises some doubt about his truthfulness. Was he in fact a Russian baron? Had he been forced into exile in

1849? Had he in fact met Marx and Mazzini in London? Or had he constructed a myth about his life that others accepted at face value, and was still being repeated at the time of his death?

We may never know the exact truth about his early life, though there are some tantalising clues to be found as far away as Lübeck and St Petersburg, but we can now trace his New Zealand career, thanks to *Papers Past,* and it is a career both interesting and puzzling.

OTAGO

His first appearance in a New Zealand newspaper occurs in September 1866 when Dunedin's *Otago Daily Times* recorded a Dissolution of Partnership. The company, a partnership of Frank Weber, John Stanley Martin and Charles Mollwo as Weber, Martin and Company, was dissolved. The business would be carried on by Charles Mollwo as C. Mollwo and Company. Mollwo was the only party to discharge and settle all debts.[9]

Frank Weber was a musician who conducted several concerts in Dunedin during 1866. Weber and Martin had announced the opening of their 'Philological and Commercial Academy for Young Gentlemen' in April 1866, with premises in Minerva Cottage, George Street. Subjects taught included: English, Elocution, Orthography and Grammar; Languages, French, German, Russian and Latin; Arithmetic, Algebra and Geometry; History, English and General; Book-keeping, Drawing, Vocal Music and Gymnastics. The fee was three guineas a quarter.[10] In today's money, that would be $384, a large sum for a working man.

However, it would appear that Dunedin was not quite ready for such an establishment, and their advertisement for the start of the second quarter in July 1866 offered reduced fees for Second Class and Preparatory courses. This ad was repeated 24 times during July. Then their profit margin suffered a major blow. Early in August they were fined 20 shillings in the Mayor's Court for 'neglecting to keep clean premises'.[11]

Then came the dissolution of partnership in September. Weber and Martin had apparently decided to cut their losses and move on, leaving Mollwo to run the Academy. Archives New Zealand have record of a Conditional Bill of Sale from Charles Mollwo, school master, to a butcher named Edward Menlove, on 20 September 1866, which suggests that Mollwo had to pledge some of his property to clear the company's debts. The amount owing was £18 5s 5d, and the items included 14 forms, 6 lamps, 1 Wooden Volting [sic] Horse, 1 Horizontal Bar and 1 Jumping Pole. This sounds like a classroom and gymnasium. Mollwo promised to pay one pound a week until the debt was fully discharged.[12]

The Academy of Messrs Martin, Weber and Company has just one further mention in the *Otago Daily Times* in October 1866, when the Dunedin Band of Hope held its inaugural meeting on the premises. Rather than a cottage, it must have been a hall or gymnasium, as 150 people attended.[13] There was no further mention of Mollwo in the newspapers for the next five years.

Mollwo next appears in Lawrence's *Tuapeka Times* in 1872. Lawrence was a Central Otago gold rush town, near Gabriel's Gully, where gold was first discovered in 1861. It was said that in 1862 there were twice as many people looking for gold in the Tuapeka Stream than lived in Dunedin. By 1872 the rush was over, and most of the miners had moved on, leaving a small town of shopkeepers and blacksmiths. Mollwo gave the second of a series of lectures on Russia from 1830 to the Crimean War: 'The lecturer having been connected with political movements in his native country in 1849 is up to the mark in the full sense of the word'. The lecture had included 'a good quantity of anecdotal lore' and Mollwo seemed 'not to want in energy'.[14]

He apparently repeated this lecture series in October 1872. His lecture on Russia under Nicholas I and Alexander II was delivered in the Commercial Assembly Rooms in aid of the Beaumont School, where he was a teacher: 'Mr Mollwo is a Russian gentleman who took a prominent part in several political movements in St Petersburgh, and whose opinions became so obnoxious to the Government that he was compelled to seek safety in exile'. The newspaper remarked that he seemed 'thoroughly well-versed' in his subject.[15] His second lecture in the series was postponed, however, 'Mr Mollwo being indisposed'.[16]

His next lecture series in 1873 was in aid of the Tuapeka Athenaeum. One shilling was asked for admission to a lecture on 'Nicholas I of Russia: his Reign at Home; and his Influence Abroad; with particular relation to the Crimean War'.[17] About 30 people paid their shilling, though the reporter thought the quality of the lecture deserved a greater number: 'Probably the bleak weather kept many away'.[18]

The Lawrence paper was more effusive in its praise: 'Mr Mollwo, for a foreigner, has a wonderful command of the English language, and his pronunciation is almost perfect'. The lecture was interesting and 'excellently delivered'. The lecturer had taken a prominent position in the Young Russian party: 'Several of the incidents connected with the Young Russian party of twenty years ago were placed before the audience in a very forceful and pathetic manner'.[19] Unfortunately, the poor attendance meant that, after deducting an allowance for lighting the hall, only a small sum was given to Mollwo. The newspaper proprietor Mr Ferguson had even withdrawn his charge for advertising the lecture.[20]

In November 1873 the same paper reported that Mollwo had been appointed teacher to the school at Blacks, also known as Ophir, after the resignation of the previous teacher, Henry Dixon. His lecture at Lawrence had been 'greatly admired'. However, Henry Dixon then wrote an indignant letter to the editor denying this statement. He had no intention of resigning and the school was well-supported by the parents. The editor apologised, and explained that he had obtained his information from a trader who said he knew Mr Mollwo.[21]

Mollwo started publishing verse in the *Otago Witness* in 1875. 'There is a God' and 'Creation's Sermon' appeared in December, but earlier in August a message that his verses were too late for that issue gave his name as 'Charles Mollwo, Horseshoe Bend'. This was a mere village further up the Clutha River, north of Lawrence. He had another verse, 'Labour's Praise', published in August 1876.[22]

He appears to have spent the latter half of 1877 making a lecture tour of Central Otago. In July he gave a talk on the Reformation, 'Luther's Labours', to a 'large and attentive audience' at Coal Creek Flat, north of Roxburgh. This was in support of the Coal Creek School.[23] In October he was in Clyde, where his talk was advertised as 'Woman and her Influence on Man'. Mollwo was described as a speaker 'of rare ability'. But charging two shillings for front seats and one shilling for back seats he was unlikely to attract a large audience.[24] He then moved on to Cromwell, where he lectured on the Eastern Question. His extensive knowledge of the subject apparently 'took his hearers by surprise'.[25] He took the same lecture to Arrowtown and Queenstown in November: 'Baron Mollwo has been lecturing here lately': though his manner was 'masterly' his audiences were 'very small'.[26]

He had better luck in the town hall at Clyde, where he attracted 40 people who left the hall 'highly satisfied'.[27] But he had small audiences again in Naseby and Mount Ida before moving north to Palmerston and Oamaru.[28] This was in spite of a recommendation by the *Otago Daily Times* that his lecture on the Eastern Question was 'worth hearing'. In Oamaru he lectured in the Masonic Hall on 6 December.[29] But his departure from Palmerston was commented on at length by the *Palmerston Times* and repeated in the *Mount Ida Chronicle*:

> If, in fact, the bland genial Baron would act upon the hint we would give he would hardly deem it advisable to again leave the township without paying the printer and bill-sticker, or for the use of the Town Hall in which he lectured . . . The departure of the 'genial baron' from Naseby was so sudden and unexpected that he had not time to say 'Good-bye' or 'I will call again'.

In repeating this item, the *Otago Daily Times* described him as 'an itinerant lecturer who lays claim to the name of Baron Charles Mollwo', which suggests that there were some who suspected he was not all that he claimed to be.[30]

CHRISTCHURCH

Mollwo next appears in Christchurch, where he wrote an erudite and elegant letter to *The Press* in October 1878. This was a comment on the recent Berlin Congress of June-July 1878 which ended the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-8. Mollwo declared that Communism in France, Socialism in Germany, and Nihilism in Russia were all 'children of the idea of equality'. The French Revolution had seen the triumph of this ideal in 1792, but the Terror had only succeeded in replacing 'the arrogance of the aristocracy' with 'a tyranny insupportable and degrading'. In legislation the French had 'substituted wanton, demoralising lawlessness for that liberty which they pretended to preach'. The French Communists had proved themselves 'daring disorganisers of existing institutions', and in 1871 had turned the streets of Paris into 'rivers of blood', including that of women and children. They had done 'more mischief' even than the Prussians in their long siege of the city. Socialism in Germany had been a great disappointment, as its leaders, though men of education, had proved 'selfish to the utmost'. As for Russian Nihilism, Mollwo said he would treat upon that subject in another letter.[31]

No such letter on Nihilism appeared, however, and nothing more was reported of 'Baron' Mollwo for two years. He later claimed to be 'well-known on Banks Peninsula', and to have worked in Kaituna Valley. He may have spent these years as a tutor to the sons of Thomas Hodgson Parkinson, who had bought the homestead block of the Kaituna Valley Run in 1875. William Birdling bought the adjacent block near Lake Forsyth.[32] Birdling's name appears in a later story by Mollwo.

In October 1880 Mollwo repeated his Eastern Question lecture in Christchurch at Mr Gee's schoolroom. It was first advertised for 29 September, but was called off because very wet weather deterred all but a handful of people. The mayor said 'Baron' Mollwo would give his lecture on 8 October.[33] Though admission was only one shilling, 'a somewhat limited audience' attended to hear Mollwo give a short survey of Russian history from Peter the Great to the present day and Russia's relations with Turkey. He gave examples of 'all the prevailing venality and corruption' in Russia, and concluded by expressing his opinion that the East would never be at peace until the Turk had been expelled from Europe. The vote of thanks by Mr Gee was carried 'with acclamation'.[34]

Mollwo next advertised a lecture on 'The Reformation as a Medium for Civilisation' on 16 October at the Orange Hall, but there was no report of this lecture in either of the Christchurch dailies.[35] Perhaps he had been too hopeful in charging two shillings for front seats.

His next appearance in the newspapers was in 1881 from the Christchurch Magistrate's Court. Charles Mollwo, alias 'Baron' Mollwo, alias Zambinski, was charged with 'soliciting alms' under the 1866 Vagrant Act. His case was twice remanded, while witnesses were sought, and he finally appeared before Magistrates Pilliet and Prins on 31 December 1881. Now he was charged with having no visible means of support.

Dr Courtney Nedwill deposed that Mollwo had come to his house on 10 December with a begging letter. From the kind of letter it was, Nedwill thought that in all probability he had a dozen others of the same kind. Mollwo had mentioned the names of Dr Julius von Haast, director of the Canterbury Museum, and the Reverend Charles Fraser, minister at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church. Nedwill said if he could bring him some evidence of the truthfulness of his statement he would give him some money. Mollwo later returned with a letter signed by Reverend Fraser. Nedwill thought he recognised the signature, and, on the strength of this, he gave Mollwo ten shillings. However, Nedwill later saw Mollwo begging from Dr Turnbull and William Montgomery.

Annie Vincent testified that she had seen Mollwo begging in Sumner, where he had given her a letter for her employer, Mr Jones. On the strength of this, Jones also gave Mollwo ten shillings. Dr von Haast said he had known Mollwo for about eighteen months. He had come to ask Haast about delivering a course of lectures. Haast had advised him that lectures would not be a financial success in Christchurch. On 11 December Haast had received a letter from Mollwo asking him to write him a character reference for Mr Savage, as that gentleman would give him enough money to leave town. Mr Savage, licensee of the Scotch Stores, also gave Mollwo ten shillings, and Mollwo had given him a receipt.

The newspaper report went on: 'The accused, in very good English, said he had been teaching all last winter, but it was not enough to live on'. He was well known on Banks Peninsula, and had been up country looking for employment.

The two magistrates were not impressed, and sent him to the Lyttelton Gaol for three weeks with hard labour.[36]

The *New Zealand Police Gazette* gives us further details of the convicted vagrant.[37] Charles Mollwo, alias Labinsky, claimed to be a native of Russia and a teacher of languages, born in 1830. He was of average height for the 1880s, five feet five and a half inches (165 cm). He was of sallow complexion, with dark brown hair turning grey. His eyes were dark slate, his nose was broad and his mouth wide. He was bearded, with two small blue spots over his left eyebrow, and his right little finger had once been broken. But the most startling detail of his appearance was that he lacked all his upper

front teeth except one. Was this the result of poor oral hygiene, or had they been knocked out in a fight, or perhaps deliberately by the Russian police?

After his release from prison, Mollwo appears to have returned to Banks Peninsula, for in September 1882 he was brought to Christchurch Hospital with 'a very severe flesh wound'. He had been working on George Bevin's station at Kaituna, and had been bitten by a sow.[38]

On his release from hospital in October, Mollwo wrote an elegant letter of thanks to the *Lyttelton Times*, expressing his 'heartfelt thanks' for the 'kindness and unremitting attention' he had been shown by every member of the hospital staff during his six weeks' stay. He was especially grateful to Dr Robinson and Mr Brown, and the female nurses of Ward 5. He also wished to thank the Male Warder of Ward 1, Mr F. Hancock.[39]

WELLINGTON

Mollwo's lecture on Nihilism finally gained an airing in Wellington in August 1885. The three years after he left Christchurch Hospital remain obscure, though in a later letter he claimed to have done harvest work at Waimate and to have worked at the unemployed camp at Waiho. (There was no such camp at Waiho on the West Coast in the 1880s, so this may be a misprint for Waiau in North Canterbury, or Waihao near Waimate.)

Wellington's *Evening Post* notified its readers on 20 August that a lecture on 'Nihilism' was to be given in the Lyceum Hall on Sunday night by 'Baron Mollwo, a Russian exile'.[40] The *New Zealand Times* said he had 'just arrived in this city' and ran several ads for the lecture.[41] Public interest in Russia had been heightened in 1885 by the Anglo-Russian conflict in Afghanistan, and fears that the Russian fleet might threaten New Zealand ports. The government was concerned enough to start building coastal defences, of which Fort Jervois (1895) in Lyttelton Harbour is the most spectacular example.

In its report of the lecture, the *Evening Post* said that he had attracted a large audience and the lecture had lasted nearly an hour. Mollwo had referred 'in no flattering terms to the reigning family and the autocratic government of Russia'.[42] The *Times* said that the Lyceum Hall had been offered to Baron Mollwo to repeat his lecture.[43] However, the Wellington correspondent of the *Wanganui Chronicle* had not been impressed by the Baron's lecture, finding it 'singularly dry and uninteresting'.[44]

Instead of repeating his lecture in Wellington, Mollwo took the train over the spectacular new (1878) Rimutaka Incline railway to Masterton in the Wairarapa, where he addressed 'a very enthusiastic audience' on Nihilism on 6 September. However, this

was on a Sunday, and he was summonsed by the police for taking money at the door. The Masterton correspondent of the *Evening Post* breathlessly reported that 'As a fact the Baron took no money, but lectured under the auspices of the Free Thought Association. The case is to be heard tomorrow, and is likely to cause a great deal of excitement'.[45]

Mollwo must have been delighted by the free publicity the police had given him, and promised a second lecture on the Eastern Question. When he appeared in the Masterton Magistrate's Court on 8 September, the police dropped the charge, on instructions from the Minister of Justice in Wellington.[46] The local Masterton paper promoted the second lecture thus: 'The much-police-supervised and interfered-with Baron Mollwo will deliver his pet lecture on the Eastern Question at the Theatre this evening . . . if the baron handles this as he did his previous discourse, a real treat may be looked for'.[47]

It was not the Minister of Justice who had stopped the prosecution of Mollwo but the Premier himself. In Parliament, John Ballance revealed that the instruction had come from the Department of Defence, who were anxious not to irritate the Russian government. The legal reason for the withdrawal was that the offence was regarded as trivial and did not come within the provisions of the Police Offences Act.[48] The *Otago Daily Times* published a verbatim account of the Baron's appearance in the Magistrate's Court, in which Sergeant McCardle was reprimanded by the magistrate for obeying the directive from Wellington, as this could be seen as political interference with the judiciary. He thought the sergeant should have proceeded with the charge even though it was a trivial offence with a maximum penalty of one pound.[49]

From Masterton Mollwo went to lecture in Greytown, and then in Woodville, before returning over the Rimutaka Incline to lecture in Lower Hutt on 1 October.[50]

After his triumphant lecture tour of the Wairarapa, Mollwo was suddenly plunged into destitution. In October 1885 he applied to the Wellington Benevolent Society for charitable assistance, claiming that his agent had deserted him in Masterton, with the proceeds of his first lecture.[51] This was news indeed, and several papers repeated this item.[52]

However, his agent responded quickly, writing to the *New Zealand Mail* with his side of the story. He said he had met Baron Mollwo at the unemployed works at Waiau, and had been persuaded that his was a case that required assistance. The agent had fed, clothed and boarded Baron Mollwo, bearing the whole expense for six weeks. His lectures had proved a financial failure, and almost ruined the agent, who took the last pound or two that remained to seek employment. Members of the Secular Society had taken up a small collection to assist the Baron. Mollwo had turned up again in

Wellington and told his former agent that he had found work but had no working clothes. The agent had found him the necessary articles.[53]

The *Timaru Herald* was happy to print the Baron's letter to the Benevolent Society:

> I place before you a simple but truthful statement of my case. I arrived in New Zealand some 15 years ago, landing in Otago, where I commenced a private school, which I kept for eighteen months; failing, however, I had to give it up. I then went to Canterbury where I taught in a private family for ten years consecutively in Kaituna Valley [in fact, two]; but they not having the means to pay me I had to look for other work. I then commenced looking for harvest work, last harvest having obtained some work at Waimate, and seeing no further employment for me, I made my way to Christchurch and joined the unemployed at the Waiho, where I stopped until the works were closed.
>
> I fell in there with a young man who represented himself as connected with the Free Thought Association in Christchurch, and offered to introduce me as a lecturer to them. I consented to do it. I appeared first in Christchurch and was well received. [No mention of his court appearance or sentence served in the Lyttelton Gaol.]
>
> We both came to Wellington, where I lectured twice in the Lyceum, and then went to Masterton. In the latter town my companion left me without my knowledge, not paying for his two weeks' board, and taking the money from my first lecture with him.
>
> It is unnecessary to dwell on my mishaps here, as they are only too public. I finally arrived in Wellington without the means of support, and was compelled to appeal to public charity.
>
> Had I the means of coming to Christchurch I would soon make my way to Banks Peninsula, where I could live as long as I liked. If I could only get enough to furnish me with a suit of working clothes I would at once leave town and look for work up country. As I am, however, nobody will give me any work

Mollwo had waited on members of the Benevolent Society and handed the chairman, Mr Wardell, a synopsis of half a dozen lectures which he had delivered in Wellington and the Wairarapa. Rabbi Herman Van Staveren said it was 'very queer' that a gentleman with such widespread knowledge should come before the committee. Mr Danks suggested that the Baron should be employed at the Corporation yards at stone breaking. It was decided to grant him a week's board and lodging, on the understanding that he worked at the Corporation yards.[54]

The *New Zealand Times* added the detail that exception had been taken to his use of the title 'Baron'. There was no proof that he was entitled to it, so the Benevolent

Society would not use it: 'It seemed incongruous that a real live Baron should be reduced to breaking stones for his rations'.[55]

Mollwo's misfortunes continued. He took lodgings in a house that had a fire and was burned down. He claimed that he lost all his possessions while trying to save those of others in the house. He therefore wrote to the Benevolent Society asking for a loan to buy another suit of working clothes. But the committee decided to take no further action.[56]

Destitute and unemployed, Mollwo was rescued, appropriately enough, by the Rescue Lodge of the Good Templars, attached to the Star of Newtown Lodge No.24. This was one of several new temperance lodges in Wellington in the 1880s established to assist their members with sickness and burial benefits during the 'long depression' of that decade in New Zealand.[57] By March 1886 Mollwo was not only a member, and presumably accepting their support, but he was on a committee to promote 'Public Harmony' evenings.[58] In May 1886 he was elected one of their officers, as Worshipful Secretary.[59] As WS Brother Mollwo he helped to organise an open Harmony Meeting in the Athenaeum Buildings on 10 May, which attracted a 'fair attendance'. Mollwo contributed a talk, 'The Influence of Woman on Man', which was 'well-received'.[60]

In June 1886 Mollwo was named in a long list of lecturers for the Young Men's Christian Association as a teacher of French and German.[61] This presumably brought him a small income, and he tendered his resignation from the Rescue Lodge, but the committee urged him to reconsider, in view of the 'good service' he had given. At a meeting in July, 'at the unanimous request of the brethren present', he agreed to resume his duties as Worshipful Secretary.[62]

At a meeting in August, WS Brother Mollwo was one of the officers present when 'harmony was entered into and kept up with spirit until the close of the meeting'.[63] Though he again attempted to resign in September, he was again persuaded to stay on, and in December 1886 'Professor Mollwo delivered the first of his elocutionary entertainments in the Temperance Hall, Adelaide Road'. James Toomath was the chairman, and the audience was 'small but appreciative'. This was the first of a series of entertainments for the youth of the district, also aimed at paying off the expense of building the hall and library.[64]

The Star of Newtown Lodge held another evening of entertainment in January 1887 in the Temperance Hall in Adelaide Road, where Brother Mollwo gave two recitations and read his essay on 'Capital and Labour'. The lodge was committed to providing cheap entertainment for the district for only sixpence admission.[65]

Mollwo remained active in the lodge throughout 1887. In January he was elected a trustee of the Rescue Lodge.[66] He kept offering a lecture series, with proceeds to the lodge, but his elocutionary entertainments were more popular. In February he performed (with Mr Savage on the violin) at a concert and dance evening that was

declared a 'success'. Also on the programme was a 'Nigger Farce' by Messrs Trimmer and Parker.[67] In March, after Herr Geyger had performed on the zither, Mollwo recited 'The Templar's Creed' and also gave a second recitation.[68] A few days later Mollwo represented his lodge at a grand gathering hosted by the Star of Wellington Lodge for their naval brethren of the 'floating lodge' from HMS *Nelson*, a Royal Navy warship then visiting Wellington.[69] He performed twice more that month, latterly at the Lyceum Hall, scene of his first Wellington lecture.[70]

Still under the auspices of the lodge, Mollwo ventured further afield in May, giving his Nihilism lecture in Johsonville and his lecture on Woman in Porirua.[71] Then he moved up the line to Feilding, giving his lecture 'The Influence of Woman on Man' in the Foresters' Hall.[72] In August 1887 he donated eight novels to the Wellington Free Library in lieu of a cash donation; the mayor had given two guineas.[73]

The next few months are blank, but in December 1887 he returned to the Wairarapa and gave his lecture on Woman and a new one on 'Land and its Proprietors' in Masterton's Theatre Royal. This was part of an evening of 'comic and sentimental recitations', with musical items by Mr Keisenberg's orchestra.[74] There is no mention of the lodge, and it looks as if Mollwo had revived his hopes of earning a living as an itinerant lecturer and entertainer.

However, we know nothing of his movements during 1888. He next appears in Hastings in March 1889, combining two of his lectures as 'Nihilism and the Eastern Question'. He was described as Baron Charles Mollwo, 'a Russian gentleman who prefers not to live in Russia', and the lecture as 'matured opinions expressed by a gentleman who is a traveller and a scholar'.[75] The ad for his Napier lectures on the following page boldly promised 'Baron Mollwo's Thalio-Histrionic Entertainment' in Waterworths's Hall on 20 and 22 March. Thalia was the Greek goddess who was also the muse of comedy and lyric poetry.

Mollwo was dogged by bad luck. His first lecture in Napier had to be postponed, as he had met with an accident and sprained his ankle. He was staying with his new agent, T. Olson, at Te Aute.[76] Once recovered he moved on to Waipawa, where he was to appear in the Oddfellows Hall, but a group known as the Musical Auctioneers purchased his right to the hall on his first night. When he gave his lecture on the second night of the booking, an audience of eight and just four shillings was the result.[77]

The next two years of his life are blank, but he may have remained at Te Aute, perhaps enjoying the hospitality of his new agent Mr Olson, for in November 1891, at a concert to raise funds for the school, his recitation 'The Bachelor's Friend' apparently brought the house down.[78]

The years between 1891 and 1896 are also blank, but he was back in Wellington by March 1896 when he gave recitations as part of a Penny Reading by the Forward

Movement. This was well-attended, despite 'wretched weather'.[79] The Forward Movement had its origins in London, and combined religious, charitable, philanthropic and adult education aims. The movement had been started in Wellington in 1893 by the Reverend William Albert Evans and the Reverend G. H. Bradbury.[80] The wife of the Reverend Evans had been, as Miss Kate Edger, the first woman in the British Empire to graduate with a BA degree in 1877, followed by an MA from Canterbury College in 1881. She had a lifelong career in progressive social and educational causes, campaigning for women's suffrage and the temperance movement.[81]

In August 1896 Charles Mollwo applied successfully for naturalisation as a New Zealand (and therefore British) citizen. He claimed to have been born in Archangel, Russia, about 1830. He gave his occupation as a teacher residing in Wellington.[82] Citizenship entitled him to vote, and the Wellington Electoral Roll for 1896 lists him as a teacher living in Macdonald Street. This is the steep little dog-leg street that links Dixon Street with The Terrace. It still has several of the two- and three-storey wooden houses that made it a boarding-house street in the 1890s.

Mollwo does not appear to have revived his friendship with the Rescue Lodge, but instead firmly attached himself to the New Zealand Workers' Union. He gave recitations at their social evenings in the Forward Movement Hall throughout 1896.[83] His popularity was such that in November he was awarded a Complimentary Concert by the leading local talent of Wellington. (This meant that he was given the proceeds of the evening.) Admission was sixpence for adults and threepence for children.[84] There was a 'moderately large' audience, with some 'excellent musical items' and 'an autobiographical sketch' by the evening's beneficiary.[85]

His new sponsor was the Reverend W. A. Evans, who presided at a repeat of his Eastern Question lecture in the Forward Movement Hall in December 1896. In reporting this lecture, the *Evening Post* described Mollwo as: 'A Russian baron who in his youth elected to abandon his estates and go into exile rather than be a party to perpetuating the system of serfdom and who has since kept himself in touch with the history of his native land, and has been in intimate association with the leading spirits of Revolutionary Europe'. Mollwo gave 'an excellent sketch' of the history of Eastern Europe from the time of the arrival of the Turks at the Bosphorus to the present day. His remedy for the Eastern difficulty was that of Mazzini; broadly speaking, the establishment of a constitutional government covering the area of the old Byzantine Empire, and the division of the rest of Europe into a group of republics. In his vote of thanks, Reverend Evans asked Mollwo to return and speak about his personal reminiscences of Marx and Mazzini.[86]

The *Observer* gave further details of Mollwo's life early in 1897:

> Baron Mollwo, who was lecturing the other day in Wellington on the Eastern Question, is a man with a history worth hearing of. He is the son of a Russian baron who was Governor at Archangel, but in the course of his education at a German university for the Lutheran ministry he imbibed socialistic notions, with the result that on coming of age and inheriting his father's estates, he and a number of other young liberal noblemen proposed to liberate the serfs on their properties. To do this, it was necessary to petition the Czar Nicholas. The only answer they received was to be summoned to the Winter Palace at St Petersburg, and there were arraigned and browbeaten about their dangerously advanced ideas, and threatened with Siberia and confiscation of their property if they persisted in their treasonous designs. All the young property-owners decided thereupon to abandon their estates, and leave to the Government the responsibility for their serfs, and, dressed as women, they escaped to England.[87]

Mollwo made good his offer to the Reverend Evans and advertised a lecture 'Men I Have Met' for 11 January in the Forward Hall. The *Evening Post* reported this lecture as follows:

> After a tribute to the poet Heine as the inspirer of the revolutionary movements of Europe in 1848-9, the lecturer told the story of his own relinquishment of his Russian barony and estates and choice of exile rather than continue owner of the serfs whom the Tsar refused him permission to liberate, and then proceeded to give reminiscences of the other Continental patriots with whom he became associated in London. In the course of his career Mr Mollwo had two personal meetings with Tsar Nicholas, and was personally acquainted with Mazzini, Marx, Engels and other political teachers of note. Of all these men and their characteristics he gave graphic sketches.

The vote of thanks was proposed by the secretary of the Forward Movement, an accountant David Ernest Beaglehole [father of the noted New Zealand historian John Cawte Beaglehole, editor of Cook's Journals], and seconded by the Reverend J. R. Glasson.[88]

Thanks to the wonders of the electric telegraph, this report on his lecture 'Men I Have Met' was copied by *The Worker* in Brisbane, Australia, on 30 January 1897, in a column entitled 'Stray Notes'. It seemed remarkable that Wellington, New Zealand, had 'a real live Baron'.[89]

Later that same month Mollwo advertised a lecture on 'Capital and Labour' for 20 January: 'All members of the Trades and Labour associations specially invited'. It was a free public lecture, with a collection. Thanks to numerous counter attractions – there was an Industrial Fair in Wellington that week – his audience was 'much smaller than the merits of the lecture deserved'. He discussed four great Russians, Gogol, Dostoieffsky, Turgenev and Tolstoy as 'Russia's Apostles of Freedom'. Claiming to have met the last two, Mollwo was able to 'brighten his account with many vivid touches'.[90]

Then it was back to the weekly social meetings of the Forward Movement and the weekly concerts of the New Zealand Workers' Union, at which Mollwo became a familiar figure with his 'elocutionary recitations'.[91] Several of the Union meetings were chaired by a rising union official David McLaren, who was later the first independent Labour MP in New Zealand (Wellington East 1908-11) and president of the first New Zealand labour Party in 1911.

At some time during 1897 Mollwo was accepted as a resident (also termed an inmate) of Wellington's Home for the Aged Needy, up the hill behind Wellington Hospital, off Adelaide Road. This had been established in 1888 by voluntary donations and a legacy from Joseph Burne. Several of its trustees were the same men who had been on the board of the Benevolent Society when they interviewed Mollwo back in 1885: J. Danks, H. S. Wardell and the Reverend H. Van Staveren. Opened in 1889, the Home was a substantial brick and Oamaru stone building with capacity for 30 residents in 18 double rooms. It was supported by voluntary donations. Mollwo had at last achieved his dream of free board and lodgings.[92]

More details of Mollwo's life and a personal description appeared in the *Cromwell Argus* in November 1897, supplied by the Wellington correspondent of the *Southern Standard*:

> A Chat with a Nihilist. In visiting the Home for the Aged Needy at Newtown the other day, I met one whose career, as related by himself, is extremely interesting. He is the second son of a Russian nobleman, and therefore bears the title 'Baron'. He is a Socialist and an Anarchist.
>
> He is a stout, thick-set man, with a bullet-shaped head, a rather intellectual forehead, and bright grey eyes that sparkle again when he talks about his native country.
>
> He speaks good English, but his accent, his vivacious manner, and gesticulations, indicate his foreign extraction.
>
> His story, in brief, is this. He was born in 1830. When about 18 years of age, he joined a number of Russian patriots who formed the 'Young Russian Party'. They were a little band of generous enthusiasts who came into prominence about 1846. For the most part they were sons of nobles, well-educated, imbued with a love of free institutions, liberty, progress, and everything that comes under the comprehensive word 'Liberal'.
>
> They began to look on the autocracy of Nicholas I with the utmost abhorrence. The tyranny of the Tsar, the glaring and notorious venality of the tribunals, the sycophancy and brutality of the police, and, above all, the sufferings of the lower classes, kindled in their hearts a fierce fire of indignation. But the one

point upon which they concentrated their energies was the emancipation of the serfs. Those who are acquainted with Russian history will remember that this actually took place on 19 February 1861, when the law was signed by Nicholas and 40 million serfs were liberated. Some historians give all the credit for the emancipation of the serfs to Nicholas, and, in a lesser degree, to the nobles, but Baron Mollwo assured me that the whole of the credit was due to the Young Russian Party. When the movement began, he says, attempts were made to smother it. The party petitioned the Tsar to emancipate the serfs, but were told that any attempt in that direction would be considered as treason.

At this gentle hint, which seems to have had a marked effect, those of the party as could do so took to flight. It was just as well they did, for shortly after that they were summoned to appear before a Tribunal, and were officially exiled and sentenced to be sent to Siberia. Mollwo liberated the serfs on his estate, which was confiscated, and, disguised as a woman, escaped to England.

During the Crimean War he went to Constantinople as correspondent for a Socialist paper in Germany. In 1856, when peace was declared, according to his account, he went by order of his party to Paris to watch the proceedings of the Treaty between France and England on the one hand and Russia on the other. He states that his party was instrumental in endeavouring to have inserted in the Treaty a secret clause in accordance with which the Tsar was to grant to his people a Constitution and the emancipation of the serfs.

In 1862 the Baron returned to Russia under an amnesty. Two years later he joined the Nihilists and was sent by them on business to London. He served his time with the Nihilists' Club but subsequently broke away from it.

In 1864 he came to New Zealand and resided for some time in Otago, where he took a great interest in politics, several of his writings appearing in the *Otago Witness* above his own name and *nom de plumes*.

He informed me that after 60 years of age a Nihilist is retired from active service and is left out of the ballot. He still communicates with his club, but deprecates its methods, for, in his own words, he thinks that 'in a quiet legal manner we will obtain our rights far quicker than by the unlawful and extreme methods of the past'.

The circulation of French and German literature of a revolutionary character has made a great impression on the educated people of Russia, and he believes that Socialistic ideas are making tremendous strides.

The impediments to it are the great power of the nobility and the dense ignorance of the lower classes. His views on political economy and philosophy are broad. He believes that Socialism is a practical application of Christianity,

> that Christ was the greatest of all Socialists, and that the day will come when there will be a better state of affairs not only in Russia but also throughout the civilised world.
>
> 'I will not see it', he said, 'you may see some of it, but I have had the satisfaction of knowing that I have helped to sow the seed'.
>
> The Baron spoke long and enthusiastically about Mazzini the Italian revolutionist, whose motto of 'Italia Liberata' was afterwards changed to 'Munda Fraternata' when his operations were extended to France, Germany and Russia.
>
> Mollwo was a pupil of Lascelle, the German socialist. About Count Tolstoy, the great Russian author and patriot, he spoke with the warmest enthusiasm. The names of other Russian notabilities, including Sontoff and Kropotkin, were mentioned, and curious tales were told about the stirring days of the 'forties and 'fifties.[93]

While there seems no reason to doubt the sincerity of Mollwo's political sympathies, it is hard to judge the veracity of the rest of this story. Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-64) was a notable German socialist, a friend of Marx and Engels in 1848 and founder of the first German socialist party. He sent some worker delegates to London in 1862, and they returned with more radical left-wing ideas. There were certainly Socialist and Nihilist groups active in London in the mid-nineteenth century, but whether Mollwo was sent as a correspondent to Constantinople, or lobbied at the Paris treaty talks for the emancipation of the serfs, are claims impossible to verify.

Mollwo certainly seems to have been comfortable at the Home for the Aged and Needy. Early in 1898 he wrote to the papers to thank Mr and Mrs Short for their 'kindness and consideration' to the inmates of the Home.[94] He was still walking down the hill to attend meetings of the Forward Movement, where he occasionally gave recitations.[95] In October 1898 he wrote to the trustees of the Home, offering to give a lecture to raise funds to furnish the newly-built north wing, but Messers Danks, Powles and Van Staveren politely declined his request.[96]

Also in 1898 he had his photographic portrait taken, and it won first prize in its section at an exhibition of the Wellington Camera Club. The photographer was M. Buckley Joyce, and the portrait was entitled 'Peering into the Dark Past'.[97] Unfortunately, no trace has been found of this photograph.

The photograph was remembered by a journalist two months later: 'Christmas Day in the Old Folks' Home . . . A keen-eyed man scanned me curiously as he passed to his seat. I am told that he is Baron Mollwo, a Russian. A photograph of his head was one of the best at our recent Camera Club's exhibition'.[98]

He gave more recitations (one hopes they were new ones) for the Brotherhood of Labour and the Star of Newtown Lodge of the Good Templars during 1899 and when the Wellington Literary and Debating Society visited the Old Folks' Home in August, with vocal items and a banjo duet, Baron Mollwo insisted on joining the entertainment with another of his recitations.[99] His interest in politics was undimmed, and in December 1899 he proposed the vote of thanks at Arthur Atkinson's election meeting in the Victoria Hall.[100]

In time for Christmas that year Mollwo published a long fictional story 'Saved by a Woman', which may or may not have contained elements of his previous lecture of that title. The setting was a flood-bound evening in the homestead at Kaituna Valley on Banks Peninsula, where Mr William Birdling was the host. To help pass the time, with tobacco and whisky, one of the party, 'Russian Charley', was asked about his past, and told a curious story. He claimed to be a Ukrainian Cossack from Novoi-Tcherkask [modern Novocherkassk, near Rostov-on-Don, between the Sea of Azov and the Caspian Sea] who was sent to college, where he discovered a talent for languages, and soon became adept at French, German and English. A wealthy cousin took him on a tour of Europe, and in 1862 he entered a German university where he imbibed new ideas and dreamed of freeing the serfs. His parents died and he inherited the estates, which had been left in the care of his guardian. During the Crimean War he had contact with English journalists visiting the region.

One of his fellow students was a young woman, Mary Dubroseff, daughter of the owner of a neighbouring estate. They fell in love and both became deeply involved in political activism and a secret society at the university. As he could speak English, he was selected to visit the headquarters of the society in London, but the authorities were tipped off and he was arrested. Sentenced to exile in Siberia, he was visited by Mary who exchanged clothes and enabled him to leave the prison disguised as a woman. Together they were finally able to find their way to London where they were married. From London they sailed to make a new life in New Zealand.[101]

There was much more to the story than can be conveyed in this brief summary, but it shows that Mollwo had a real talent for story-telling. Some elements may be related to his own life, but rather than be taken simply as autobiography the story may be better viewed as Mollwo's wishful thinking, wistfully creating the romance with a happy ending that had eluded him in real life.

The turn of the century found New Zealand at war in South Africa. Contingents of enthusiastic young men had gone to help the British Empire fight the Dutch farmers known as Boers for control of valuable gold and diamond mines. Now that he was a British citizen, Mollwo was caught up in the late Victorian mood of patriotic jingoism that swept through New Zealand. The Wellington volunteers for the Boer War were trained in Newtown, near the Old Folks' Home. His contribution took the form of verses: 'Baron Mollwo, Russian by birth but British by adoption, has just published in

aid of the More Men Fund a series of verses that express the spirit of patriotism as warmly as could any born subject of Her Majesty'.[102]

Now aged 70, according to his own account [but more likely only 64], Mollwo seems to have been as energetic as ever, repeating his talk 'Woman's Influence on Man' for the Wesleyan Literary and Debating Society in April 1900. [103] He even put his hand up to become Reporter for the Star of Newtown Lodge, and gave them another recitation.[104]

Yet more details of his life appeared in a profile published in the *Free Lance* in October 1900:

> An interesting personage with a romantic career, long resident in Wellington, is Baron Mollwo, formerly well-known as a lecturer, and who occasionally bursts out in that line still. Born a Russian nobleman, and heir to considerable estates and bands of serfs, he became, in early youth, one of the young Russian liberals who resolved to give all their serfs their liberty. And when warned by Czar Nicholas that such an act would be viewed and punished as high treason, they nevertheless did the act of emancipation and fled the country in disguise. England's hospitable soil afforded the brave Baron an asylum, and there he acted as interpreter in the Russian court of the Great Exhibition of 1852. [In fact, 1851] Once settled in London, he became one of the famous band of revolutionary refugees, of whom Garibaldi, Mazzini, Karl Marx and others, were notable members.
>
> By and by an amnesty was issued, which enabled Mollwo to return to Russia, but his forfeited estates were not returned and he had to earn his living as a teacher of languages. While thus employed, he fell in love with one of his pupils – the daughter of a wealthy Russian – and became engaged to her in marriage. But his dreams of bliss were cut short by the arrest of both father and daughter on suspicion of being connected with Nihilism. After the fashion of those days, both the prisoners were hustled off to Siberia. The girl fell down on the road, dying from exhaustion, and when her father stopped to kiss her for the last time he was shot dead by one of the Cossacks. Small wonder that the bereaved lover then became a Nihilist in real earnest, and soon made Russia too warm to hold him. Exile again becoming his lot, he finally wandered out to New Zealand.
>
> The baron's sterling character and wide knowledge of men and things are much appreciated by those who have the pleasure of his acquaintance. Though over seventy years of age, he is more active than many men of fifty.
>
> If you want to get an emphatic and candid expression of opinion, just ask him what he thinks of the Czar Nicholas.[105]

On the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, Mollwo seconded the loyal resolution of sympathy passed by the Wesleyan Literary and Debating Society at its February meeting.[106] At their May meeting, an evening of impromptu speeches was announced, and Mollwo was one of the first to volunteer.[107]

His recitations and talks about elocution continued into 1902, and now included pieces of his own composition. [108] Then, as we have seen, came a repeat of his lecture 'Capital and Labour' in September 1902 and his string of sentimental verses in 1903 and 1904.

After the publication of his article 'The Agitation in Russia: An Historical Review' in April 1905, Mollwo returned to writing verse. 'Success' appeared in the *New Zealand Mail* on 26 April, 'The Battle with Fate' on 24 May, 'Fortune' on 12 July, and 'Sabbath Bells' on 19 July. One of his verses, not located in any New Zealand newspapers, appeared in the *Darling Downs Gazette* in Queensland on 11 March 1905: 'In Memoriam' was a comment on the recent riots in St Petersburg. Just months before his death in 1906, he was talking of writing a series of articles for one of the Nelson papers about recent events in Russia.[109]

Though the Wellington newspapers reported his death, a search of Death Certificates online failed to find any mention of a Mollwo, nor yet a Mollo, Mollno, Labinsky or Zambinsky, in 1906. Unfortunately, the Wellington Hospital Deaths Register for 1906 has not survived.

Had he finally confessed his real name? Perhaps his true life story may have been even more interesting than the 'Baron Mollwo' persona he had invented in New Zealand.

The discrepancies between his letter to the Wellington Benevolent Society in 1885 and the newspaper interviews of 1896, 1897 and 1900, especially the latter, cannot help but arouse suspicion in the mind of the cynical historian. It looks as though he was changing and embellishing his life story with each successive interview. The interview of October 1900 seems to have been influenced by his fictional story of December 1899.

Most damaging is the evidence of the Magistrate's Court in Christchurch in December 1880 and the *New Zealand Police Gazet*te for 1881 that he had been using an alias, either Labinsky or Zambinski. This does not suggest an honest man, but rather a confidence trickster or a fraudster. Was one of these his real name, and had 'Baron' Mollwo been his invented identity?

His claim that his father was a Governor of Archangel is not supported by the published lists of Governors, Military Governors and Governors-General of that northern Russian port on the White Sea. The name Mollwo does not appear anywhere in those lists; nor do those of Labinsky or Zambinski.

Genealogical websites available through Ancestry.com contain just one Carl or Charles Mollwo. Carl Andreas Hermann Mollwo was born on 26 December 1836 and christened in the Parish of St Marien, Lübeck, on 29 January 1837. His parents were Ludwig Mollwo and Johanna Christine Charlotte Mollwo. He next appears in the Lübeck Citizenship Register in 1862 as a Doctor of Medicine aged 25.

Lübeck in Schleswig-Holstein was the main port of the medieval Hanseatic League, and its trading links extended north to St Petersburg and westwards to London. Ludwig Heinrich Mollwo (1725-82) was a Ratsherr (town councillor) of Lübeck. That family's favourite male first name throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was Ludwig, with the occasional Jakob. The German historian Ludwig Mollwo (1869-1936) of Hannover, who wrote about Frederick the Great in the 1890s and in 1913, may be a descendant of these Lübeck Mollwos. His son Erich Mollwo (1909-1993) was a notable German solid-state physicist.

If the Carl Mollwo born in Lübeck in 1836 really is our man, where did he train to be a doctor of medicine? Where did he become so fluent in English, and Russian? The answers may lie in the wider Mollwo family.

The only Mollwo who turns up in Australian newspapers (apart from Charles and his verses) is a death notice in 1884 for 88 year old Wilhelmina Korn (née Mollwo), widow of George Ludwig Korn, a merchant from Hamburg.[110] She could have been an aunt or a distant cousin.

Mollwo is an unusual name, and it turns up in only two other places apart from Lübeck: London and St Petersburg. Mollwo occurs 17 times in nineteenth century British Census returns, mostly after 1870. There is no Charles Mollwo, but Alexander C. Mollwo and Ivan Herman Mollwo appear in the 1866 and 1870 Census returns respectively. The latter is worth noting, for genealogical research has found a Johann Herman (Ivan Ivanovich) von Mollwo who was born in Riga, Latvia, in 1807 and died in London, England, in 1870. (geni-com)

The same genealogical source has a Mollwo family in St Petersburg. Nicolai Mollwo (1809-1870), born in St Petersburg, occupation *Kaufmann* [trader, dealer, merchant], was the son of Jacob Nikoldevich Mollno and his wife Christine. Nicolai was twice married. His first wife, Amalie, had a son, Jakob Robert George von Mollwo in 1838, and a daughter Elizabeth von Mollwo in 1840. His second wife was an Englishwoman, Priscilla Yates; the marriage took place in the British chapel in St Petersburg. She gave birth to Nicolai Thomas Mollwo in 1853 and Marie Mollwo in 1856. They did not have the 'von' before their surnames.

The German 'von' for Jakob Robert and Elizabeth is noteworthy, suggesting that their mother came from a Prussian noble family. The Russian nobility did not use the title 'von'.

According to a book by J. Jepson Oddy, *European Commerce, shewing new and secure channels of Trade with the Continent* (London, 1805), one of the larger import/export companies based in St Petersburg was that of Mollwo and Sons. (p.131) The German language newspaper *St Petersburgische Zeitung* for 1837 mentions this company, 'Mollwo und Sohn', on p.518 of its collected volume.

It seems likely that the Mollwo merchants in St Petersburg had originally come from Lübeck, and that the Mollwo males who appear in the British Census returns were descendants of their London agents. Johann Hermann von Mollwo was the brother of Jakob Bernhard von Mollwo whose children were called Samuel, Marie and Gertrude Charlotte. These names suggest an English mother, and links between the Mollwo families in London, Lübeck and St Petersburg.

Though born in Lübeck, our Charles Mollwo probably had kinship ties to both London and St Petersburg. His fluency in English, and the fact that he spoke with very little accent, and could write such elegant English prose, strongly suggests the London connection and an English education. Or was his mother another English wife in the Mollwo clan? In the 1850s, when he was of student age, London was a major centre for medical education with its big teaching hospitals of Guy's, St Thomas's and St Bartholomew's, and University College, London.

In London it was not at all improbable that he met Russian exiles, and he may even have met Lassales, Marx and Mazzini, as he claimed. (Many other people have claimed to know Marx in London.) But the two meetings with Czar Nicholas now look somewhat improbable, and the whole Russian side of his back-story may have been invented. Much of his historical detail could have been acquired from books or newspapers.

However, his fluency in Russian, German and French points to a continental connection. The story that he studied for the Lutheran ministry at a German university may contain a grain of truth, except that it may have been medicine rather than theology. Berlin and Munich were emerging as the great laboratory-based centres of medical education, but older smaller universities such as Göttingen, Würzburg and Heidelberg were attracting medical students from all over Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. Perhaps in Berlin he met young Russian noblemen excited by socialist ideals who had been forced into exile, and heard stories of freeing serfs and escapes in disguise. If he had kin in St Petersburg he may have acquired his fluency in Russian there, or from his father. My hunch is that his father was not a Russian baron, but more likely a Lübeck merchant who traded back and forth between St Petersburg and London.

We still have no clear idea of why he came to New Zealand. Was he an early remittance man, sent as far away as possible with a little money, to rid his family of a

shameful scandal? Or had he really run foul of the Russian police in St Petersburg and been forced to flee in disguise? When and why did he lose his front teeth?

New Zealand afforded him ample opportunities to profit from his assumed Russian title, yet the evidence from the Otago newspapers is that he was a singularly unlucky lecturer, making meagre profits from small audiences. He must have been intelligent and quick-witted, but was obviously no businessman. Instead of branching out in a new direction, he kept repeating the same failed tactic of public lectures. And he seemed to repeat the same old lectures, year after year, in different places.

What his career demonstrates is the relative fluidity of nineteenth century New Zealand society, especially in post-gold-rush Otago. There he was taken at his word, and respected for his knowledge of languages and Russian history, yet was unable to make a living either as a teacher or as an itinerant lecturer. Doubts about his true identity began to appear in the North Otago newspapers, and he moved on rather briskly. In Canterbury he appears to have worked on a farm on Banks Peninsula before turning up in Christchurch, where his brush with the law and his spell in the Lyttelton Gaol robbed him of respectability: with a criminal record, he would never again be able to get a job as a school teacher.

He finally found his refuge in Wellington, where he attached himself to a lodge, and then to the Labour and Socialist political movements. People took him at his word, and repetition of his story gave him at last a sense of identity and some slight importance. He obviously enjoyed an audience, and had a sense of humour. Like many confidence men, he may have enjoyed fooling most of the people most of the time.

He must have had charm, to win friends among the lodge and union circles in Wellington, and to be asked to reconsider his resignation from the Rescue Lodge. They tolerated his repeated recitations, and he was invited to move votes of thanks at election meetings. That suggests some degree of trust and acceptance by clergymen and earnest political people.

He was lucky in his timing. New Zealand towns and cities had matured greatly since the 1860s, and the long depression of the 1880s had given rise to a range of charitable and benevolent institutions. They now provided a safety net of sorts for the down and out of society. As a naturalised New Zealand citizen, Mollwo would have been eligible for the Old Age Pension from 1898. His last years may well have been his best, with regular meals and a bed at the Home for the Aged Needy, and a circle of accepting if not admiring friends in Wellington's socialist movement.

Or was he simply a lovable old rascal who had made his way by sponging from friends and strangers alike, until he finally dropped anchor in congenial surroundings? There are three interesting gaps in what we know about him. He never claimed to be a doctor of medicine, and nowhere is there any mention of a woman friend, or of alcohol, in his life story, except in the fictional story he published in 1899. As far as we

know, he was a loner, who made just enough use of others to get by. If he was a con-man, it was on a very small and personal scale. He did not, as far as we know, embezzle a business or set up a new church to milk the gullible faithful, as Arthur Bently Worthington did so spectacularly in 1890s Christchurch.[111]

My own guess, for what it is worth, is that he was born in Lübeck but grew up in St Petersburg with his Russian-based cousins and their English mother, and was sent to Germany for his education. There he became involved in the socialist agitations of the late 1840s, and had to flee to London to shelter with his English cousins and study medicine. This reconstruction would account for his fluency in German, Russian and English. He was back in Lübeck in 1862, to be listed on the Citizenship Register, but soon after set sail for New Zealand. His respectable merchant family in Lübeck may have disowned him for his politics and refused to have him back, or there may have been a medical scandal and they paid him to go as far away as possible. New Zealand in the 1860s was remote enough, and from 1861 it had the added attraction of gold. Hence his arrival in Dunedin. There is no Mollwo among surviving passenger lists, but in the hectic days of the gold rush thousands arrived at Port Chalmers and Dunedin without being noticed by the newspapers. He may have tried his hand at panning for gold, and decided it was too much hard work in the winter. Then came the Academy in Dunedin, and the rest of his life we now know fairly well.

Whatever the truth about Charles Mollwo, alias Labinsky or Zambinski, he was clearly a well-known and respected figure in left-wing circles in late Victorian Wellington. He would be amused to think that more than a century after his death a retired History professor became intrigued by his life and traced his career through the old newspapers. He would smile at the thought that he had taken his darkest secrets with him to the grave. We still have his letters to the newspapers, and some account of his speeches. His sentimental verses, however, would scarcely qualify him for inclusion in an anthology of New Zealand poetry.

ENDNOTES

[1] *Free Lance*, 5 May 1906, p.3.

[2] *Observer*, 25 November 1905, p.4.

[3] *NZ Times,* 1 April 1905, p.12.

[4] *NZ Mail,* 17 February 1904, p.27.

[5] *NZ Times,* 29 August 1903, p.11.

[6] *TROVE,* Australian newspapers online.

[7] *Evening Post*, 25 September 1902, p.5.

[8] *NZ Times,* 29 October 1902, p.5; *Evening Post,* 5 November 1902, p.2.

[9] *Otago Daily Times* (hereafter *ODT*), 6 September 1866, p.1.

[10] *ODT,* 9 April 1866, p.7.

[11] *ODT*, 8 August 1866, p.5.

[12] Archives NZ, R25752392, DAAC 27319 D9, 25/1040.

[13] *ODT,* 22 October 1866, p.4.

[14] *Tuapeka Times,* 12 September 1872, p.7.

[15] *Tuapeka Times,* 31 October 1872, p.7.

[16] *Tuapeka Times,* 14 November 1872, p.7.

[17] *Tuapeka Times,* 17 July 1873, p.4.

[18] *ODT*, 30 July 1873, p.5.

[19] *Tuapeka Times,* 31 July 1873, p.7.

[20] *Tuapeka Times,* 5 November 1873, p.4.

[21] *Tuapeka Times,* 5 & 15 November 1873, pp.2 & 3.

[22] *Otago Witness,* 14 August 1875, p.14; 11 December 1875, p.19; 26 August 1876, p.19.

[23] *Tuapeka Times,* 4 July 1877, p.3.

[24] *Dunstan Times,* 12 October 1877, p.2.

[25] *Cromwell Argus,* 30 0ctober 1877, p.4.

[26] *Lake Country Press,* 1 November 1877, p.2; *Cromwell Argus,* 6 November 1877, p.6.

[27] *Dunstan Times,* 9 November 1877, p.2.

[28] *Mount Ida Chronicle,* 17 & 24 November 1877, p.2; *Otago Witness,* 17 November 1877, p.3.

[29] *Oamaru Mail,* 5 December 1877, p.2.

[30] *ODT,* 20 December 1877, p.2.

[31] *Press,* 8 October 1878, p.3.

[32] L.G.D. Acland, *The Early Canterbury Runs,* 4th edition (Christchurch, 1975), p.334.

[33] *Press,* 29 & 30 September 1880, p.2.

[34] *Press,* 9 October 1880, p.4.

[35] *Lyttelton Times,* 14 October 1880, p.1.

[36] *Lyttelton Times,* 1 January 1881, p.3.

[37] *New Zealand Police Gazette 1881*, p.25.

[38] *Lyttelton Times,* 5 September 1882, p.4.

[39] *Lyttelton Times,* 17 October 1882, p.5.

[40] *Evening Post,* 20 August 1885, p.2.

[41] *NZ Times,* 21 August 1885, p.2.

[42] *Evening Post,* 24 August 1885, p.2.

[43] *Evening Post,* 25 August 1885, p.2.

[44] *Wanganui Chronicle,* 26 August 1885, p.3.

[45] *Evening Post,* 7 September 1885, p.3.

[46] *Evening Post,* 8 September 1885, p.2.

[47] *Wairarapa Daily Times,* 8 September 1885, p.2.

[48] *New Zealand Herald,* 11 September 1885, p.5.

[49] *ODT,* 12 September 1885, p.4.

[50] *Wairarapa Standard,* 16 September 1885, p.3; *Evening Post,* 26 September 1885, p.3.

[51] *Wairarapa Daily Times,* 14 October 1885, p.2.

[52] *Lyttelton Times,* 15 October 1885, p.4.

[53] *NZ Mail,* 16 October 1885, p.12.

[54] *Timaru Herald,* 27 October 1885, p.2.

[55] *New Zealand Times,* 4 November 1885, p.2.

[56] *NZ Times,* 6 January 1886, p.2.

[57] *Cyclopedia of New Zealand, Wellington District* (1897), p.415.

[58] *Evening Post,* 23 March 1886, p.2.

[59] *Evening Post,* 4 May 1886, p.2.

[60] *Evening Post,* 11 May 1886, p.2.

[61] *Evening Post,* 7 June 1886, p.2.

[62] *Evening Post,* 6 July 1886, p.2.

[63] *Evening Post,* 3 August 1886, p.2.

[64] *Evening Post,* 31 December 1886, p.2.

[65] *Evening Post,* 7 January 1887, p.2.

[66] *Evening Post,* 19 January 1887, p.2.

[67] *Evening Post,* 25 February 1887, p.2.

[68] *Evening Post,* 1 March 1887, p.2.

[69] *Evening Post,* 4 March 1887, p.2.

[70] *Evening Post,* 12 & 24 March 1887, p.2.

[71] *Evening Post,* 2 May 1887, p.2.

[72] *Feilding Star,* 23 May 1887, p.2.

[73] *Evening Post,* 12 August 1887, p.2.

[74] *Wairarapa Daily Times,* 7 December 1887, p.2.

[75] *Hawkes Bay Herald,* 15 March 1889, p.2.

[76] *Hawkes Bay Herald,* 22 March 1889, p.2.

[77] *Daily Telegraph,* 11 April 1889, p.3.

[78] *Hawkes Bay Herald,* 24 November 1891, p.2.

[79] *Evening Post,* 24 March 1896, p.3.

[80] *Cyclopedia of New Zealand: Wellington District* (1897), p.406.

[81] *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*: Kate Edger.

[82] Archives NZ, Naturalisation Register, 1896/2563/33, p.35; 25 August 1896.

[83] *Evening Post,* 1 June 1896, p.4; 15 June 1896, p.5; 29 June 1896, p.5; 24 August 1896, p.4; 14 September 1896, p.4.

[84] *Evening Post,* 31 October 1896, p.6.

[85] *Evening Post,* 3 November 1896, p.6.

[86] *Evening Post,* 15 December 1896, p.4.

[87] *Observer,* 2 January 1897, p.18.

[88] *Evening Post,* 12 January 1897, p.5.

[89] *TROVE* Australian newspapers online.

[90] *Evening Post,* 2 February 1897, p.5.

[91] *Evening Post,* 15 June 1897, p.4; 13 September 1897, p.4; 20 September 1897, p.4.

[92] *Cyclopedia of New Zealand, Wellington District* (1897), p.359.

[93] *Cromwell Argus,* 16 November 1897, p.3.

[94] *Evening Post,* 4 February 1898, p.4.

[95] *Evening Post,* 2 August 1898, p.5.

[96] *NZ Times,* 7 October 1898, p.2.

[97] *NZ Times,* 13 October 1898, p.3.

[98] *Wairarapa Daily Times,* 30 December 1898, p.3.

[99] *Evening Post,* 22 April 1899, p.4; 18 August 1899, p.4; 4 October 1899, p.5.

[100] *Evening Post,* 5 December 1899, p.5.

[101] *Evening Post,* 23 December 1899, p.3.

[102] *Evening Post,* 16 March 1900, p.5.

[103] *NZ Times,* 21 April 1900, p.4.

[104] *NZ Times,* 26 April 1900, p.5.

[105] *Free Lance,* 13 October 1900, p.3.

[106] *Evening Post,* 4 February 1901, p.5.

[107] *NZ Times,* 3 May 1901, p.5.

[108] *Evening Post,* 13 June 1902, p.6; 19 July 1902, p.5.

[109] *Observer,* 25 November 1905, p.4.

[110] *The Herald* (Melbourne, VIC), 30 May 1884, p.2.

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[111] See chapter 12 in Geoffrey W. Rice, *Christchurch Crimes and Scandals, 1876-99* (Canterbury University Press, 2013), pp.171-92.