

**Far from Ventnor:
John Frederick Bligh Livesay - Canadian Journalist**

Some Ventnor people have made their lives and their names many miles away from this town, although some, like Fred Livesay who made his name as a Canadian journalist, are now unknown in their home town.

John Frederick Bligh Livesay (known as Fred) was born in Ventnor in 1875. His family lived on Madeira Road in *Cromartie*, a house built by his architect father, John Gillatt Livesay. According to Fred, his father was often called 'Micawber' within the family, because of his constant precarious financial situation. As well as working as an architect and builder and as the Ventnor Town Surveyor, John Gillett Livesay was a local reporter for *The Times* of London, and also had an independent income from the Ventnor Gas and Waterworks - but this was invariably mortgaged ahead, so not much got into the family budget. He was thus constantly on the lookout for new projects - for example an attempt in 1898 to get permission to erect a restaurant and Turkish baths in the area now filled by the Cascade.



As a young child Fred had been sent to live in Ireland with wealthy relatives of his mother, but this did not work out well and he returned home to Ventnor. When he was sixteen he witnessed the wreck of a steamship off Ventnor, and his account of this was published in *The Times*, perhaps due to his father's connection with the paper, which sparked an interest in writing. His family seem to have discouraged him from a career in journalism, saying that the stammer from which he suffered would be a problem, and in 1895, aged 20, Fred turned his back on Ventnor and emigrated to Ontario in Canada.

He spent his first few years in Canada earning his living, like many immigrants, in the lumber industry, but eventually he got his break in journalism, becoming sports editor on the tiny *Regina Leader Post* (he got the job, according to his daughter, because he understood British soccer). In 1903 he moved to Winnipeg as telegraph editor on the *Winnipeg Tribune*, where he met and fell in love with Florence Randal, a fellow journalist - they married in 1908. Florence was a well-known writer and a published poet, who had spent a year in South Africa during the Boer War, one of forty Canadian teachers sent there to educate Boer children held in concentration camps.



In the early years of the last century, news stories were sent round the world by telegraph (or 'wire') and a good news agency providing a stream of stories was invaluable to newspapers. In 1907 Fred became General Manager of the Western Associated Press Agency, which later merged with two other agencies to become a national news gathering service, Canadian Press. Fred Livesay's eye for a story and the ability get it out quickly were legendary, and he clearly had a way with words: his years as a Canadian lumberjack had given him what was later described as a *breathtaking command of explosive language which he occasionally used when big news broke or a crisis developed*.

In the 1900s the wire network used by the press was so important that the Canadian government paid an annual subsidy to help maintain it, and in 1924 the Minister of Labour took advantage of this to suggest that news coverage of a big coal strike should be 'slanted' by the agency to favour the government. Fred wrote a stinging letter back to the minister refusing this proposal. There was no money from the government to support the cost of the wire that year, but the newspapers voted at their annual meeting never again to accept a subsidy from any government.

During the First World War Fred went to Europe as a war correspondent, and on his return, indignant at what he saw as the small recognition of Canadian bravery on the battlefield, he wrote 'Canada's Hundred Days', the story of the Canadian Expeditionary force, which was published in 1919. A second book, his autobiography 'The Making of a Canadian' was published after his death.

Fred died in 1944. His daughter Dorothy (shown right) became a poet like her mother Dorothy, and both women, are now much better known than Fred, but he was highly respected in his time. His obituary described him as *the guiding genius of the Canadian Press for 20 years [who] built an empire on a spool of thread - a copper thread of thousands of miles of telegraph wire . . . over which flows, in endless stream, the news of the world.*"

