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**Autor:** Balli, Christian

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## The Shipwreck of the „General Grant“<sup>1</sup>

Christian Balli

### Résumé

*Dans la seconde moitié du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, de nombreux Tessinois ont émigré en Californie et en Australie avec l'intention d'y faire fortune. Parmi ceux qui partirent pour l'Australie, on compte trois membres de la famille Balli: Alessio et Antonio quittèrent Caveragno en 1854 et Giovanni partit de Locarno la même année.*

*À cette époque, Alessandro Morinini quitta Gordola et s'établit comme les précédents dans l'État de Victoria. Il se maria avec l'une des sœurs Heasman et devint ainsi le beau-frère de Giovanni Balli. Comme celui-ci, il n'eut pas de chance et connut une fin tragique.*

*En 1866, il s'embarqua avec sa fille Amelia sur le navire «General Grant» avec destination Londres. Après 10 jours environ de navigation, il fit naufrage dans les Îles Auckland, un archipel inhabité situé à 320 km au Sud de la Nouvelle Zélande. Les Morinini ne figurent malheureusement pas sur la liste des quelques rescapés qui, l'année suivante, furent recueillis par hasard et en piteux état par le chalutier «Amherst».*

### Zusammenfassung

*In der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts sind viele Tessiner nach Kalifornien und Australien ausgewandert, um dort ihr Glück zu suchen. Unter jenen, die nach Australien ausgereist sind, findet man drei Mitglieder der Familie Balli: Alessio und Antonio verliessen im Jahre 1854 Caveragno, während Giovanni im gleichen Jahr aus Locarno auswanderte.*

*Zu jener Zeit verliess der junge Alessandro Morinini das Dorf Gordola, um sich wie die anderen im Staate Victoria niederzulassen. Hier vermählte er sich mit einer der Schwestern Heasman und wurde somit der Schwager von Giovanni Balli. Wie dieser hatte er wenig Glück, und es ereilte ihn ein tragisches Schicksal.*

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of “Il naufragio della « General Grant »”, published in “Bollettino Genealogico della Svizzera Italiana” no. 10, Poschiavo December 2006.

*Im Jahre 1866 ging er mit seiner Tochter Amelia an Bord des Segelschiffes „General Grant“ mit Zielhafen London. Nach ca. 10 Tagen Seefahrt erlitt er Schiffbruch vor den Auckland Inseln, einer 320 km von Neuseeland entfernten unbewohnten Inselgruppe. Vater und Tochter Morinini befanden sich leider nicht unter den wenigen Überlebenden, die ein Jahr später zufällig und in schlechtem Zustand vom Fischerboot „Amherst“ aufgenommen wurden.*

In our article on “The Balli Family in Australia and New Zealand” published last year in the Swiss-Italian Genealogical Bulletin no. 9 we mentioned that in 1854 three members of the Balli family emigrated to Australia from the Swiss canton of Ticino<sup>2</sup>. Alessio and Antonio Lotti Balli<sup>3</sup> left Caveragno to board the “Luise” in Hamburg bound for Melbourne, where they arrived on 18 March 1855. Giovanni Balli<sup>4</sup> from Locarno boarded the “Almora” in Liverpool and arrived at Melbourne on 13 February 1855.

In the same period young Alessandro Morinini, born in 1839 to Andrea Morinini, a farmer, and Domenica, née Fabretti, left Gordola<sup>5</sup>. In Australia he also settled in the state of Victoria, where he married one of the Heasman sisters<sup>6</sup> and became Giovanni Balli's brother-in-law. And like the latter he was not very fortunate and met with a tragic end.

As regards Giovanni Balli we recall that he worked as a miner and in 1863 married Marion Heasman (ca. 1842 – 1890) at Daylesford where their first two sons were born, James in 1864 and George in 1865 (George was taken into custody by his maternal grandparents and died at Emerald Hill in 1870). Marion Heasman Balli, pregnant with her third child, boarded the “Taranaki” on 11 October 1866 and set sail for Hokitika in New Zealand, where gold had been

<sup>2</sup> s. (1) p. 24 – 34.

<sup>3</sup> s. (2) Tab. 2 (Holland Branch) and Tab. 5a (Caveragno Branch), (7) p. 17 – 18 and 122.

<sup>4</sup> s. (2) Tab. 5 (Locarno Branch) and (7) p. 18 and 122.

<sup>5</sup> J. Gentilli indicates that he originally comes from Brione Verzasca, but does not specify on which ship he sailed, s. (7) p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> The Heasman sisters were the daughters of William Heasman, a carpenter (\*1820 ca.), and of Jane Elizabeth Elmore /Aylmore (\*1820 ca.).

found and where her son William was born (1867 – 1958)<sup>7</sup>. In the meantime Giovanni Balli was recovering in a hospital in Melbourne where he died of heart failure<sup>8</sup> on 19 May 1867.

With respect to Alessandro Morinini it may be assumed from the documents that he worked in the dairy industry. On 2 December 1862 at Castlemaine he married Anne Amelia Heasman, born in Melbourne in 1846 (whose sister Marion Heasman married Giovanni Balli the following year). Alessandro had a daughter, Amelia, born on 2 May 1864 at Sandhurst<sup>9</sup> with whom he boarded the “General Grant” on 4 May 1866 to sail from Melbourne to London, however, his wife did not accompany them.

The “General Grant” was a modern, comfortable sailing vessel belonging to Messrs. Boyes, Richardson & Co. of Boston (U.S.A.), and the Morininis occupied a cabin for what should have been a very pleasant crossing to Europe. Unfortunately, after 10 days at sea, the ship was wrecked near the Auckland Islands, a deserted archipelago situated about 320 km south of New Zealand. Due to thick fog and little wind, the ship could not avoid striking the rocks of the archipelago. The strong current pulled the ship into a huge cave where it was flooded by the icy Australian waters<sup>10</sup>. This happened on 14 May 1866. Of the 80 passengers and crew there were initially 15 survivors, 6 of whom were passengers, but later their number was reduced to 10.

Unfortunately, the Morininis were not listed among the survivors, who included one woman, and who were rescued the following year on 21 November by the whaling brig “Amherst”. They were all dressed in rags and malnourished. On 10 January 1868 the group arrived at Bluff Harbour in New Zealand from where they then left for Melbourne, the harbour the “General Grant” had embarked from a year and 9 months previously. It seems that the ship had been carrying an enormous cargo of gold and many expeditions tried to find the wreck without any success. The mystery surrounding the “General Grant” persists to this day<sup>11</sup>.

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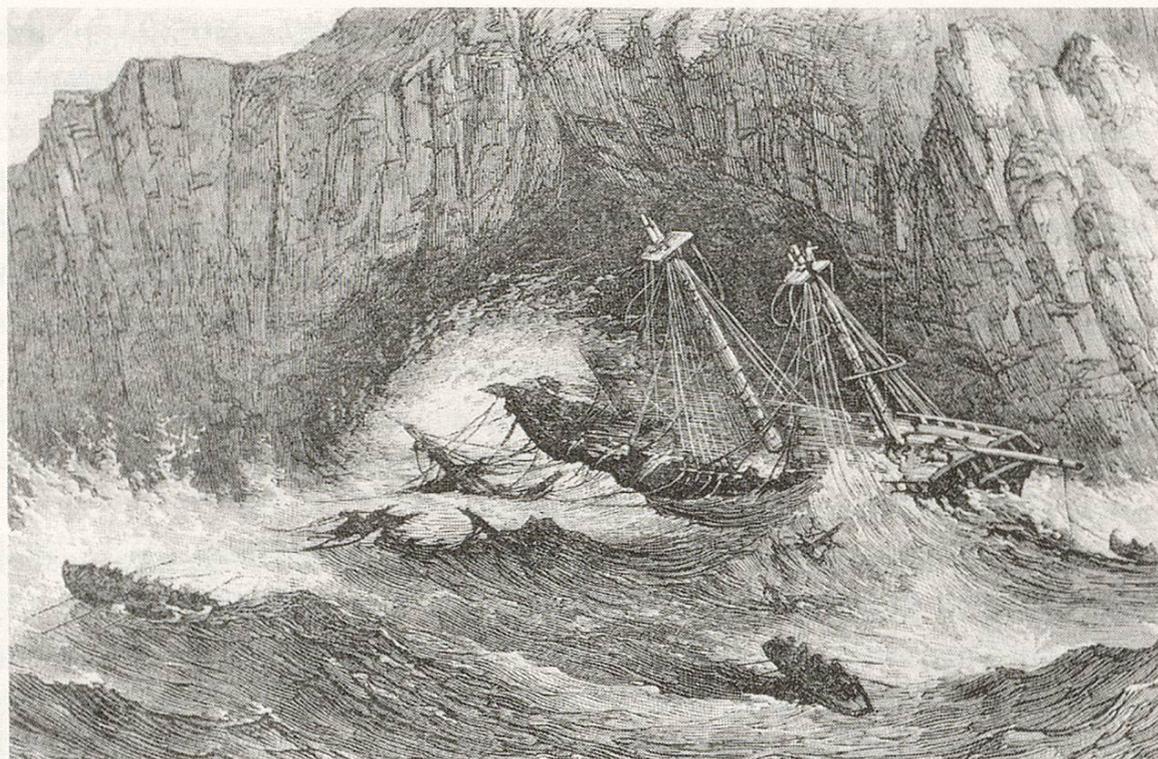
<sup>7</sup> William Balli was adopted by William Caldwell (1844 – 1928), second husband of Marion Heasman Balli. William assumed the surname of his stepfather and thus his descendants are known by the surname of Caldwell in New Zealand today.

<sup>8</sup> Death certificate gives the cause of death as “morbus cordis”.

<sup>9</sup> Sandhurst is the former name of Bendigo, s. (3) p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> s. (6), (10) p. 4, (11) p. 376 and 382, (12) p. 464.

<sup>11</sup> s. (4), (5), (8) and (9).



*The shipwreck of the "General Grant" on the Auckland Islands; ref. (11)*

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Information obtained from:

*Yvonne Izatt*, The Genealogical Society of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia  
(whom we thank for her thorough research)

Christian Balli est né en 1951 à Zurich et a grandi au Tessin. A l'Université de Fribourg, il a obtenu la licence en économie politique (1974) et en droit (1979). Au service de la Confédération, il travaille en tant que juriste dans le domaine du droit national et international des eaux. Il vit avec sa famille à Wabern (BE). Citoyen de Cavigno (actuellement Cevio, TI), il a décrit dans différentes publications les origines de sa famille et sa diffusion en Europe et outre-mer. Il est membre de la Société Suisse d'Études Généalogiques (SSEG) et de la Società Genealogica della Svizzera Italiana (SGSI) et, dans ce domaine, il a des contacts en Suisse et à l'étranger.

