



# **From Felon to Freeman: A Convict's Reclaimed Life**

## **Speculative Biography and Exegesis**

by

**Jeffrey William Reaney**

Thesis

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## **Abstract**

This PhD consists of a speculative biography that follows the life of a convict named William Coombe, who was transported from England to Australia in 1835. The narrative recounts his life journey from a small English village through his crime, trial, transportation to and assignment in, Australia. It relates the story of his re-entry into society after gaining a conditional pardon, thus assisting to close an identified gap in convict literature. The speculative biography drew together the elements comprising his redemption: work, family, social and political activity, and other pursuits he followed in building his future. His life demonstrated that convicts could successfully rehabilitate, 'the stain' could be expunged and ex-convicts could make a productive contribution to society. The story also provides insights into Queensland's colonial history and the role of convicts therein.

The exegesis explores speculative biography and the scholarly debates associated with colonial convict history. The main research questions revolve around better understanding how and why the speculative biography has been used to write the past, then how and why the creative artefact conforms and sometimes differs to this contentious biographical sub-genre. The exegesis also asks what are the key fictional and historical techniques authors typically use when mobilising this sub-genre and what specific challenges and obligations were encountered when doing so. Using the Practice-led research methodology, the exegesis offers a critical explanation of how the research questions were addressed and answered, thereby adding to the store of knowledge regarding the application of utilising the speculative biography in producing historical works within various contexts.

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Jeffrey William Reaney

June 2020

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Last but not least, thank you to my mother's long-time friend and relative, Cathie Tennent, great-granddaughter of William Coombe, who first brought his convict past to my attention and allowed me to photocopy several official documents she possessed pertaining to his life in servitude.

Jeffrey William Reaney

June 2020

## **DEDICATION**

I wish to dedicate this PhD to the following people:

To the long-dead convicts, who often endured bitter deprivation and harsh treatment in building the infrastructure of the new colonies in Australia.

To those who had the task of overseeing and guarding the convicts, an unenviable task so far from home. They were also victims of the times.

To the Aboriginal inhabitants of the Moreton Bay District at that time in history, whose lives were significantly impacted by European encroachment on their traditional lands.

To the free people, and those who became free, for the hard work they did in opening up the country, thereby enabling future development which paved the way for prosperity that positioned the colonies for nationhood.

Jeffrey William Reaney

June 2020

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# From Felon to Freeman: A Convict's Reclaimed Life



A pair of Australian 19th century convict leg irons

Source: 'Australian Colonial convict leg irons used in Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania)', in *Carters price guide to antiques* [Online]. Available at <https://www.carters.com.au/index.cfm/index/1532-leg-irons-convict-relics/>

A Speculative Biography on the life of William Coombe,  
transported to Australia as a convict in 1835

## 1 The Beginning

Stretching between the Bristol and English Channels, the county of Devon is driven like a wedge between Cornwall to the west and Dorset and Somerset to the east. This picturesque land of peaceful valleys, verdant hills, and huge granite rocks was inhabited in ancient times by Neolithic people who migrated from the southern coast. Working their way along the rivers to the highlands, they cleared extensive areas of oak forests, creating the wide desolate moors that still hold their closely guarded secrets. Fertile valleys are watered by a federation of rivers, sometimes meandering and at other times jostling among weathered rocks, bringing life as they weave through the green tapestry of this rich land.

Several bustling sea-ports frequented by local fishermen for centuries lie along its southern coastline, where sandy shores are punctuated by rugged, lofty cliffs. Surprisingly, palm trees grow in the Torbay area, testimony to the mild maritime climate. Over millennia, the people mined limestone and granite for building, wood-coal, variegated marble, and tin. They grew barley, wheat, corn, root vegetables and fruit trees, especially apples, from which great quantities of cider have been brewed since before time was measured.<sup>1</sup>

But in the early 1800s many people who dwelt in this beautiful land were living in increasing wretchedness and desperation. The introduction of new machines spawned by the Industrial Revolution had forced numerous agricultural labourers out of work and the system of land enclosure tossed people off land their forefathers had farmed for centuries. During this troubled period John Coombe married Mary Mortimore in the small village of South Tawton as the summer of 1807 was dying.<sup>2</sup> It was just before the wheat harvest,<sup>3</sup> when leaves on the trees began fading into the beautiful shades of yellows, reds and browns that heralded the approach of winter.

In 1809 their marriage was blessed with a son they named William.<sup>4</sup> He grew up a sturdy and intelligent boy, learning to read and write, unusual among rural lads in those days.<sup>5</sup> On leaving school, he moved into farm work, the path followed by most young men throughout Devon.<sup>6</sup> As his experience grew, he mastered an array of tasks valuable to secure the future of an agricultural labourer. During the next few years he worked on several farms throughout the district and developed friendships in nearby villages. He cultivated a special friendship with one young lady and in the spring of 1828, he married Grace Manning in All Saints Church at Winkleigh, where they set up home.<sup>7</sup>

The following years were not easy for William and Grace but they weren't unkind either. He was a steady worker with a reputation as an able hand. A daughter Mary was born in 1829, as winter was retreating and local people were harvesting parsnips and sowing carrot seed.<sup>8</sup> The following year, at the height of summer as the sheep shearing was ending and the wheat harvest beginning, a son William entered their family.<sup>9</sup> The feasting, music and dancing in the evenings on Exmoor during the communal shearings were as nothing in comparison to the air of celebration in the Coombe household at Winkleigh.<sup>10</sup>

The progress of the Industrial Revolution brushed across Winkleigh in 1832 and slammed into William Coombe's gut like a closed fist. In late September, after the wheat harvest had finished, his employer informed him, 'Yure contract shan't be renewed next year. Best y' seek a new appointment.' This situation was common for agricultural labourers around Michaelmas and had happened to him before. He nodded glumly, thinking, *Now I've got two children to feed and clothe, as well as me 'n Grace.* He trudged home and broke the news to her, adding somberly, 'It's shapin' up to be a bleak Christmas, unless I c'n snare a new appointment.'

He didn't waste any time moping over the situation. The Giglet Fair would be held at Okehampton any day now and employers would be looking for skilled workers for the following year.<sup>11</sup> As dawn exposed the treetops the following Monday Grace wrapped a piece of cheese and a hunk of bread in a clean neckerchief for him. He kissed her goodbye and gently placed the whisper of a kiss on the foreheads of his sleeping children. Crossing the kitchen, he took a harness rein off its wooden peg behind the door, slung it over his left shoulder and closed the door softly behind him. He leaned over and picked up his reaping hook resting on a large stone. Retrieving his shovel from where it rested against the wall, he hoisted it over his left shoulder together with the rein and began the three hour walk to Okehampton.

When he reached Hole Hill he threw himself down against the foot of a large elm tree and untied the bundle. After swallowing several mouthfuls torn from the bread accompanied by a sizable piece of cheese, he secured his larder and hurried on. Before entering Okehampton he turned off the road and trod through long grass to the bank of the Okement River, where he found a shady spot. Having slaked his thirst, he resumed his journey and arrived at the town. Although still early, people were about and it seemed that a busy day was developing. Heading up Fore Street he crossed over the East Okement River and followed a woman, obviously seeking a domestic position, carrying a mop

over her shoulder. Gazing around, he saw two men talking together, each lazily holding a whip. *Probably carters*, he surmised.

When the harvest was finished and the grain stored, farmers usually terminated their employees' contracts. If they didn't manage to find work elsewhere they'd return next year, threadbare and hungry, eagerly seeking a job regardless of the wages offered. He thought disgustedly, *The bloody farmers must know men have families t' feed. Don't they care?* He selected a spot by the Town Hall, close to the hopeful carters. Standing his shovel against the wall, he draped the rein over it and in front, positioned the reaping hook on the ground. He hoped these symbols would inform prospective employers that he could reap, plough, and hand-till the soil.<sup>12</sup>

Sitting on his heels against the wall, he contemplated how different his life was compared with those who'd attend Barnstaple Fair, and those who participated in the celebratory stag hunt on Exmoor. *It's like they live in another world*, he mused. *And why does that fair open with the mayor hoisting a glove up a pole?*<sup>13</sup> His thoughts drifted to Dartmoor, where people would be rounding up the season's foals and ponies to sell at the Bampton Pony Fair.<sup>14</sup> *All celebratin' and gatherin' wealth and `ere I am, tryin' to get a job jist so I c'n feed me family.* As he considered his condition, Christmas began to mutate from a season of joyfulness and celebration to a time of want and misery.

All day his eyes wandered continually along the street, trying to read the faces of the passersby, hoping to catch the glance of a prospective employer. As the shadows lengthened and the crowd thinned, he took up his implements and neckerchief and returned to the grassy spot by the river. After eating half the bread and cheese, washed down by a long draught of Okement water, he rolled himself up in his coat and slept until the first light of morning.

After finishing the food and slaking his thirst, he trudged back into Okehampton and positioned himself in the same spot as before. He noticed that the woman with the mop wasn't there today and neither was one of the carters. Around mid-morning a well-dressed craggy featured man approached him and struck up a conversation.

'Where do you live?'

'Winkleigh, sir.'

'Done a bit of work with those, have you?' gesturing to the tools against the wall.

'Yes, sir. I have indeed.' He mentioned his previous employer and added, 'I c'n reap, plough, use hand tools, do fencin', an' other types o' work.'

His inquisitor responded, 'I farm at Broadnymmet. My name is Thomas Prickman and I need someone skilled at different kinds of rural work. You'll find my wages fair. Will you take the position?'

'Yes, sir. I will indeed. Thank you.'

They shook hands.

His new boss added, 'Some work needs doing before next sowing season – building repairs and fencing – can you start in a week's time?'

'Yes, sir. I can.' He thought, *Even if the money's the same as the previous job what does that matter. I've secured a position.*

Obtaining work before Christmas was a surprising bonus. He trod lightly along the rutted roads and lanes back to Winkleigh. He grinned as he entered the cottage and Grace almost broke down. Lifting her off her feet then twirling her around the kitchen, he said 'Begin packin'. We're movin' to Broadnymmet. A house awaits us.'

After breakfast the following morning he set out for his parents' home at South Tawton to borrow a horse and cart. After walking in a southerly direction for some time he veered east towards North Tawton before striking due south for South Tawton, arriving there within three hours of leaving Winkleigh. After talking awhile over a cup of tea, he harnessed the Clydesdale to the cart and bidding farewell, arrived home by dinner<sup>A</sup> time. Grace had packed their things and after a hasty meal they loaded the cart. Apart from the table and chairs, a child's crib, the dismantled bed and a couple of rustic cupboards, the load comprised clothes, bedding, kitchenware and crockery, farming tools, and every skerrick of food in the house and what could be retrieved from the garden, including seedlings. After the children were placed securely, they set out eagerly for their new home.

The horse plodded unhurriedly along the southern road, severely rutted in places by carts and wagons. After passing through North Tawton, William turned the horse eastward along a narrow but well-used lane for about three miles before halting at Broadnymmet in front of the manor house, or Barton.<sup>B</sup>

Thomas Prickman emerged from the house. 'Hello, that's your cottage there,' pointing to a nondescript dwelling among several bordering the lane's northern side.

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<sup>A</sup> The midday meal was called dinner by the lower classes whereas the upper classes called it lunch. The lower classes called the evening meal tea and the upper classes called it dinner

(<https://www.ft.com/content/cddae7d0-552b-11db-acba-0000779e2340>)

<sup>B</sup> A Barton is the name given to farms where barley had been grown originally as the principal crop.

'Thank you, sir. This is my wife Grace and our children.'

'Pleased to meet you, madam. I hope you enjoy living here.'

Grace nodded, smiling. Turning the cart around, William stopped at their new home. Grace didn't allow the appearance of the cottage to dampen her spirits. It was constructed of cob, a mixture of earth, lime and straw, then whitewashed. William noticed that the roof consisted of wheat straw, which had a shorter lifespan than the water reeds often used for thatching.<sup>15</sup>

'You unload the cart and keep the children outside with you while I make the place liveable,' Grace directed William.

'Where d' ya want this?' William asked later, half carrying and half dragging a cupboard inside the cottage.

'Jist over there,' Grace gestured, barely lifting her eyes from her cleaning. William progressively shifted their belongings inside and they were settled in by nightfall. After breakfast next morning he set off for South Tawton to return the cart. His mother entreated him, 'Won't you stay for dinner, William?'

'No thanks, Ma. I'd better go. The day's changin'.'

As he walked north along the high street towards Taw Green, cloud steadily enveloped the sky and a cool wind sprang up. *This is jist like me life*, he thought. In recent times, the bleakness of life caused by uninvited circumstances had made him feel helpless, carried along like an autumn leaf on a windy day, just like the leaves blowing across his path. He pulled his coat around him more tightly as rain threatened from the grey expanse overhead.

Night closed in early, overtaking the weak light in the dismal sky as he continued north from Taw Green along a narrow lane, but he knew the lanes and landmarks like the back of his hand. The recent full moon was waning into the last quarter and the overcast sky shrouded its illumination.<sup>16</sup> The lane turned sharply east opposite Taw Green Copse and he followed it until it joined a road running north-south. Turning left, he navigated a dark patch of wood before turning right into the narrow lane called Cocktree Throat. Light misty rain began falling. Pulling the collar of his coat close around his neck and hugging his arms to his ribcage he hurried on.

He turned left at the next crossroads and headed towards North Tawton but about a mile before the village he struck out towards the right on another road. *Curse this rain. I can't wait to get warm.* Nobody was out and about; they were all huddled around their fires. Approaching Stone Cross, he

walked past the road leading to Sandford Barton on the right, continued beyond the lane on the left that led to Nichols Nymett and entered the next lane on the right that went to Broadnymett. Grace was relieved to see him when he entered the cottage.

'I was beginnin' t' worry.'

'It's alright. I'm `ome now.'

After breakfast next day William said 'Let's see the village,' so they walked the three miles to North Tawton, young William sitting on his father's shoulders. Although a typical agrarian village on the River Taw, there was a woollen mill that manufactured serge cloth at Taw Bridge, providing much-needed employment, as did a large tanning yard.<sup>17</sup> Horses, sheep, and occasionally cattle, were sold in the village square.<sup>18</sup> Near the major landmark, Saint Peter's church,<sup>19</sup> the remains of an ancient moat indicated that this site was the seat of the Valletorts, the first family who held the manor as an ancient demesne of the Crown.<sup>20</sup> The Coombes walked by the old water mill, built near the spot where Dumnonii tribesmen watched the Romans splash across the River Taw to establish a fort they called *Nemetostatio*, meaning the road-station of the sacred groves,<sup>21</sup> a millennium before the village was recorded in the Domesday Book.<sup>22</sup>

The family settled into life at Broadnymmet, and the fencing and repairs to several outbuildings provided welcome income but after that was completed, there was no paid work until the sowing season began. William busied himself fixing up their cottage to ensure it was water- and wind-proof before winter. He and Grace became good friends with their neighbours, Alexander and Ann Croote, whose youngest son often played with the Coombe children. Josias and Catharine Austin and their six children lived in the last house along the lane. The three men all worked for Thomas Prickman, and became firm friends on the job also.

As the earth warmed, William stepped into his proper role as a husbandman. He helped plough most of the land for sowing wheat, oats and barley and ploughed smaller patches for cultivating root crops, mainly carrots and turnips. Another daughter, Jane, was born in mid-Autumn 1833, when the trees were splashing their palette of colour all over the countryside.<sup>23</sup> He and Grace tried to stretch his wage, low as it was, to accommodate their growing family but their efforts were becoming increasingly futile.<sup>c</sup>

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<sup>c</sup> An agricultural labourer's wage would support a wife and two children. The struggle of living intensified with the number of children beyond that.

When William was laid off after the harvest, the helpless, empty feelings of two years ago returned and he found it increasingly difficult to banish them from his mind. Calamity loomed when farm machinery spread stealthily throughout the county, and William became concerned that his job, always precarious, might fall victim to the indomitable march of industrial progress. It was hard to accept that situation, as North Tawton had been a market town for over five hundred years.<sup>24</sup> The chances of finding a new job seemed more limited now, particularly after the harvest was over, when many men would be thrown out of work and it would be almost four months before sowing began again.

He decided to look for work around South Tawton, where he'd spent his boyhood years. He informed Grace, 'P'raps I c'n pick up some part-time employment an' odd jobs before Christmas. It's worth a try.' He knew, though, his options were limited. Bundling some clothes into a shirt, which he then tied with a length of twine, he gathered a few hand tools: reaping hook, knife, axe and shovel, and after a simple breakfast he kissed Grace and each of the children goodbye and set off to walk the eight miles to South Tawton.<sup>25</sup> If work was available for a well experienced farmhand, or around South Zeal, half a mile away, or at nearby Sticklepath, he intended to be there.

He arrived at the village of typical Devon thatched cottages, looking tidy and crisp with rendered, whitewashed walls. The Seven Stars Inn looked inviting but he didn't have any money anyway. He'd left the little he had with Grace so she could buy food for herself and the children. It wasn't much, but he knew she would stretch it out. As his gaze floated back to the road, less than a hundred paces away he saw Church House, which served as the parish Poor House.<sup>26</sup> He shuddered at the thought of his family ending up there in the near future, and hastily dismissed it.

Just beyond Church House stood Saint Andrew's Church but turning right just before there, William walked down the side road that led to his parents' modest cottage.<sup>27</sup> He reflected that South Tawton hadn't changed much. In fact, it had never changed. It had always comprised the church, Church House, the vicarage, the inn, various farms and several cottages. Not situated on any major route, a market had never been established and there weren't any secondary industries. Yet it was pleasantly situated on a knoll in the valley below Cosdon Beacon, an imposing landmark atop Cosdon Hill, where the first inhabitants carved mysterious marks in the rock and often lit warning fires upon its summit.<sup>28</sup>

The village hugged the banks of the small River Taw at the northern end of Dartmoor Forest, while almost eighteen miles to the east the busy town of Exeter sprawled under the austere presence of Rougemont Castle. Of more than six thousand acres of land comprising the parish, over a quarter consisted of woods, open pasture and forest.<sup>29</sup> Local people had always farmed the land north of Dartmoor and wool had made the village rich in the past.<sup>30</sup> Although South Tawton hadn't changed much its wealth appeared to have diminished.

William had confided to Grace, 'If I can't obtain a firm position, I'll try findin' work on daily hire' but he knew that was a last desperate measure. At least staying with his parents meant he didn't have to pay for lodgings. Every Saturday evening he walked with eager steps to his wife and children in Broadnymmet and every Sunday night he trudged the almost eight miles back to his parents' cottage. By doing this, he could arrive at daybreak on Monday morning at farms where a hand might be needed. There were eight hamlets within a five mile radius of Saint Andrew's Church: Itton, Tawgreen, Whyddon Down, Gooseford Week, Fulford, Ramsley, Dishcombe, and South Zeal.<sup>31</sup> *Surely I c'n find a position somewhere in the district*, he thought. But a wife and several children couldn't be supported even on a full time labourer's wage. Without having rights of common, it was very difficult for a man to scrape a living for his family on waste – virgin heath, marsh and woodland – so despite the low wages the only alternative was to work for others.<sup>32</sup> He faced increasingly limited choices. Poverty, squaring up to him each morning like a relentless adversary, was slowly winning the battle.

Grace, more than six months pregnant, was managing the children on her own apart from Sundays, and they weren't happy days anymore. They had been living a borderline existence on small quantities of bread that Grace baked from wheat, oats, or barley, which she carefully ground, accompanied by cheese and root vegetables, whatever she could find.<sup>33</sup>

She asked him one Sunday, 'When did we last eat meat, Will?'

'Don't know, can't remember', he replied.

'Me neither. Pity ya wouldn't do somethin' about it.'

'I'm tryin', woman. What d' ya think I'm doin' every day over at South Tawton?'

Such repetitive arguments meant that home wasn't the familiar cocoon that shut the world out anymore. He knew from talking with Josias Austin and Alexander Croote that their situation wasn't any better. Josias and Catharine had six children to feed and Alexander had a toddler, although his eldest son had found work. Over a period of weeks the three formed a plan to achieve a welcome change in their circumstances.

Late on Saturday afternoon 17th January 1835 William left his parents' house at South Tawton and began walking to Broadnymmet. Things were going to change for them now. This weekend the Coombe family would eat meat. The sharp knife inside the folded hessian bag under his coat gave him an unusual sense of being in control. Although the light rain would reduce the likelihood of being seen, if it continued the ground would hold tracks. *It's cold enough t' snow*, he thought as he hurried on. The others would be waiting at Stone Cross. Nobody had seen him pass; their doors were closed and their fires were warm.

As he approached Broadnymmet two men fell in beside him, exchanging greetings in low voices. The winter night was falling swiftly as they stealthily approached Thomas Prickman's farm. A pinprick of light shone through a lower floor window of the Barton, just discernible against the enveloping blanket of darkness. In urgent whispers they decided not to proceed further and moved surreptitiously towards the boundary hedge between the lane and the Prickman farm.

Thomas Prickman wasn't a large landholder, but he had more than many others in the district. He farmed at Broadnymmet and owned acreage at Cross Parks at Bondleigh on the River Taw, a couple of miles north of North Tawton, farmed by a sub-tenant, John Rattenbury.<sup>34</sup> Compared to many, Thomas Prickman was doing well. The conspirators had reasoned during their weekend discussions, 'Surely he won't miss a couple o' sheep, not with what he's got.'  
'Na, 'e's got plenty.'  
'Aye, he won't even notice a couple missin'.'

Alexander selected the best spot where a breach could be made in the hedge. Like most boys, he began his working life when he was ten years old thirty-one years before, as an apprentice husbandman to George Powlsand of Broadnymmet.<sup>35</sup> He knew every inch of the terrain in daylight or darkness. He whispered, 'Ere's a good spot' and the other two went to work. With their hands and knives they made a gap in the hedge large enough for a man to squeeze through. Once inside the hedge, they huddled together, surveying the landscape. They knew that in winter sheep began night grazing earlier<sup>36</sup> and with the temperature likely to fall to the mid-thirties overnight, the animals should be about.<sup>37</sup>

They skirted along the hedge, stooping low, exchanging furtive whispers. Then their searching eyes found their quarry – two unsuspecting sheep, slightly separated from a small flock, grazing quietly about thirty yards away and close to the hedge. A whispered plan was hurriedly formed. It was dark

enough now to leave the camouflaged safety of the hedge and step into the field a little. The three men fanned out and began walking quietly towards the sheep. As they came near, the animals began to move away nervously. Carefully, the men gradually separated them from the flock, steering them towards the end of the field.

Although initially a bit edgy, the sheep settled and allowed the men to approach quite closely. Slowly but surely, they were gradually herded into the corner of the field. Speaking soothingly, the men managed to keep both sheep calm, although the first time they lightly stroked their backs, they felt each animal's frame ripple in a shudder. Eventually, Alexander and Josias manoeuvred themselves into position for the kill. They timed it well. At the same moment, each man threw his sheep to the ground, dropped upon it and pinned it to the earth with his legs. Each instantly sliced his knife across his animal's throat, severing the major artery. William immediately passed a hessian bag to each of them, which they roughly stuffed into the sheep's mouths, shoving the bag hard down their throats to muffle the plaintive sounds of death. Soon all was quiet. The sheep had died quickly, making little noise.<sup>38</sup>

Deft hands soon had the sheep skinned and began the messier job of gutting them. Alexander kept watch while William and Josias were occupied with that task, done quickly too, but roughly. 'Hist! The Barton!' came Alexander's urgently whispered word of warning. They spun their heads around and peered into the darkness towards the manor house. Only a hundred yards away, a small patch of light revealed the opened front door. William's heart seemed to flutter up into his mouth. He and Josias quickly stuffed a sheep's body into each bag and hoisted it across their shoulders.

Abandoning the entrails in their haste, Alexander hurled the skins into the adjacent turnip field then the three scuttled back along the hedge until they found the gap they had made. While Alexander strained his eyes nervously towards the Barton, Josias and William scrambled through the gap, each dragging his bag through behind him. Alexander then followed. Without speaking, almost running, they hurried along the lane until they arrived at Alexander's cottage. With hearts thumping they looked back along the lane. They strained their eyes but the blanket of darkness revealed nothing nor was there any noise.

Alexander slid his knife between the door and doorframe, tripped the latch and opened the door. He motioned to Ann to retire to the bedroom where their infant son William was sleeping, and waited for her to exit before beckoning the other men inside.<sup>39</sup> He bolted the door and repositioned the

candle. Work now began in earnest on the wooden table in the kitchen of the tiny two-roomed cottage. Shadows played along the wall as, still speaking in whispers, the men butchered the carcasses into manageable portions that could be split up evenly between them. As William and Josias stuffed their share into the bags that had stifled the gurgling sounds of the dying sheep, they hastily bid each other farewell and melted into the darkness towards their homes.

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- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> 'England, Marriages, 1538-1973, index, FamilySearch William Coomb (*sic*), 1828' [Online]. Available at <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/N2TV-CTG> Accessed 30 June 2012.
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- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Capturing the Harvest Spirit' [Online]. Available at <http://www.whitedragon.org.uk/articles/harvest.htm> Accessed 26 January 2012.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> 'Thatching Materials' [Online]. Available at <http://thatchingadvisoryservices.co.uk/helpful-info/thatching-materials/> Accessed 9 January 2012.
- <sup>16</sup> 'Moon Phases for London, England, United Kingdom in 1835' [Online]. Available at <https://www.timeanddate.com/moon/phases/uk/london?year=1835> Accessed 5 February 2012.
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## 2 Capture and Trial

By mid-morning Thomas Prickman was not a happy man. One of his shepherds, James Partridge, while settling the flock for their morning grazing, noticed the grass disturbed and trampled in a far corner of the meadow. On investigating, he found in the bloodstained grass the scattered intestines of the two sheep and the bloody skins<sup>1</sup> in the adjacent turnip field. He ran back to the manor house, blurting out the news to his master. Thomas ran to the spot with Partridge and surveyed the scene. Panting for breath, his face contorted with rage, he exclaimed angrily, 'Whoever is responsible for this outrage will pay for it!'

He strode back to the house and testily instructed his hind,<sup>A</sup> Oliver Sampson,<sup>2</sup> 'Saddle two horses,' while he briskly ascended the stairs to his bedchamber. Throwing off his everyday attire, he hastily dressed as befitted a man of his standing. Descending the stairs, he walked purposefully to the stables. He mounted as Sampson cupped<sup>B</sup> for him and after Sampson hastily mounted, the duo rode hard to North Tawton to report the matter to the Parish Constable. John Luxton Seward served diligently in that unpaid role,<sup>3</sup> which provided small allowances<sup>4</sup> to augment his normal work<sup>5</sup> as an agricultural labourer.<sup>6</sup>

'Constable! Constable!' Prickman shouted as he dismounted.

Seward walked down the path to meet him. 'How can I help you, sir?'

'My property was violated last night! Two of my sheep were killed and the meat stolen. The thieves must be brought to justice! The Chief Constable of the Hundred needs to be notified immediately.'<sup>7</sup>

John Seward replied, 'I don't think he needs to be involved at this stage, sir. I'll see what I can do before involving that worthy gentleman.'

'Don't you understand that this blatant assault upon the property of the landed gentry has to be brought to a decisive conclusion or a dangerous precedent could be set?'

'I understand that well, sir.'

'Are you aware there's been village talk recently of incidents of machine breaking in neighbouring counties?'

'I am, sir.'

'Law and order are being challenged all across south-western England!'

'It does appear so, sir.'

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<sup>A</sup> The term *hind* was commonly used in early nineteenth-century England to describe a farm worker or servant.

<sup>B</sup> Cupping referred to a member of the lower class cupping his hands together at around knee to thigh height so his master could stand upon them to mount his horse.

'I want swift action!'

'I agree that swift action is required and swift action you shall have, sir.'

'You will have no objection if I leave Oliver Sampson to assist you in your investigations?'

'Not at all, sir.'

Seward knew that Prickman's last request was to ensure that he wouldn't share in the booty after locating the culprits. With a wife and four children to feed some extra meat certainly wouldn't go astray in the Seward household.<sup>8</sup>

Three women at Broadnymmet were not happy either. Catharine Austin<sup>9</sup> and Grace Coombe were furious at their husbands' foolhardiness, returning home the previous night with bulging sacks over their shoulders. Ann Croote nursed a quivering fear over her home being used as a distribution point for the trio's ill-gotten gains. *It was good that little William was asleep when they entered the house*, she thought. Catharine and Grace were both thankful their children were asleep too.

When William had arrived home with his sack a shocked Grace whispered fiercely, 'What `ave ya done? Thank God the children are asleep! They mustn't find out; a loose word could send ya to the gallows! And what will `appen to us if yure taken? How c'n I raise the children on me own? What were ya thinkin'?'

'Ya wanted meat, didn't ya? Well, `ere it is. Cook it up.'

Shaking her head from side to side, Grace stoked the fire and added wood before taking a large pot from the cupboard.

A similar scene had played out in the other two households. After urgent whisperings and muffled angry words, the women cooked the booty. The sudden supply of meat would normally have been reason for celebration, but apprehension hung in the air like the smell of a musty blanket.

Grudgingly, each woman scraped the meat off the bones and packed it into any containers they could find.

John Seward was a level-headed, methodical and practical man. He reasoned to Oliver Sampson, 'To kill two sheep would take at least two men, perhaps three. Is there any such likely lads around Broadnymmet?'

Sampson replied, 'William Coombe, Alexander Croote and Josias Austin are firm friends. They often spend time talkin' together.'

‘Hmm. I don’t think Coombe and Croote have ever been in trouble but Austin was suspected of sheep stealing once.<sup>10</sup> I think perhaps a visit to Austin’s house would be a reasonable place to begin the investigation,’ mused Seward.

He had to start somewhere. Besides, he couldn’t stall a man like Thomas Prickman, particularly in his current state of mind and with the man’s servant following him like a shadow.

On arriving at Josias’s house, he cautioned Sampson, ‘Let’s take a careful look around first, before making our presence known.’ As Seward examined the ground wet from the previous night’s rain, he informed Sampson quietly, ‘Here’s boot tracks, let’s follow them to see where they go.’

The tracks led to a straw rick.<sup>11</sup> Sampson remarked, ‘That’s interestin’. The tracks lead here and then go back again. Whatever for?’

Kneeling down and parting the straw at the point to which the footprints led, Seward’s fingers touched what felt like a hessian bag. He separated the straw still further and dragged the bag out, tightly held closed by string. After quickly untying the bag, he and Sampson looked wide-eyed at each other. The bag contained small pieces of mutton, freshly salted.

Standing and lifting the bag, Seward passed it to Sampson asking ‘What do you think?’

Lifting the bag up and down, Sampson ventured, ‘About sixty pounds.’<sup>12</sup>

‘I agree.’

Retying the bag and returning it to Sampson to carry, he strode to the front door of Austin’s house. When Josias answered the knock, he froze, startled. The Parish Constable stood there, and beside him, Oliver Sampson held the bag of salted mutton so recently concealed in the straw rick. Noticing Josias’ feet were shod, John Seward instructed him, ‘Please step outside.’ Numbed, Josias tried to make his leaden feet respond as the Constable took his arm and steered him to the muddy footprints that led towards the rick.

Seward commanded, ‘Place your foot carefully in one of these muddy imprints’ and as Austin obeyed, he and Sampson saw that his footwear corresponded perfectly with the tracks to the rick.<sup>13</sup>

Austin knew they did. Not releasing his hold on Austin’s arm, Seward said, ‘Please come with us,’ and Josias knew he didn’t have a choice. Chained at the wrists, Josias was led on foot to John Seward’s house, where the men chained his ankles to the axle of the Parish Constable’s cart, as the village didn’t have a round-house or cage. Gathering another set of chains, Seward and Sampson struck out for Alexander Croote’s house. Skirting around the cottage, they didn’t find any evidence to indicate his involvement in the crime. When Alexander answered Seward’s knock, Seward explained, ‘Something happened close by last night and we would like to talk to you about it. May

we come in?' Alexander realised to refuse permission would seem very suspicious so stepped back and gestured to enter, hoping they wouldn't notice his quivering hands.

Seward said, 'Two of Mr. Prickman's sheep went missing last night. We are trying to find if anybody saw anything. Where you out and about last night, by chance?'

Alexander shook his head vigorously. The visitors exchanged glances, both realising Croote hadn't been as diligent in trying to conceal his share of the booty as Austin. The cottage harboured a faint odour of the previous night's work so Oliver Sampson headed to a cupboard from which it seemed to emanate. On opening it, he discovered a leg of dressed mutton, and next to it about thirty pounds of meat in a sack, cut into small pieces and salted. He found more salted mutton similarly cut up in an earthenware stean<sup>c</sup> and about six or seven pounds of melted suet in a pan.<sup>14</sup> Trembling and in tears, Ann Croote watched despairingly as her husband was taken from the house and escorted in chains to join Austin under the cart.

Seward said to Sampson, 'So far so good. But was William Coombe involved as well?'

The two prisoners hadn't volunteered any information. Returning with another set of chains, the men reconnoitred the surroundings of William's cottage but didn't find any external evidence to indicate his participation in the crime. William answered the knock on the door and Seward explained their business. Entering the house, they exchanged a quick glance on encountering traces of the same tell-tale smell as in Croote's cottage. They soon located a leg of dressed mutton and a similar quantity of small pieces of salted meat in a sack, stored in a cupboard.<sup>15</sup>

'Where did you obtain this, Mr. Coombe?' John Seward asked.

'From a friend,' William replied.

'Your friend must have a lot of meat, to give this much away. What is your friend's name?'

William looked at the floor and shrugged his shoulders. He was chained and taken into custody. Grace, tight-lipped and acutely conscious of her children's questioning eyes, watched sullenly as the procession departed. On the way, William felt the heavy weight of his conscience and decided to come clean and confess to the crime. Before being confined beneath the cart, he said to Seward, 'There's somethin' else y' should know.'

'What's that?'

'There's a stean full o' mutton 'id in a 'edge in me garden.'

The two men went there and retrieved the final proceeds of the crime.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>c</sup> A stean is an earthenware jar, pot, or similar vessel.

Striking a bargain with Sampson for about thirty pounds of the mutton, Seward sent him home to his master with the remainder. When Oliver Sampson delivered the news and the meat to his master a pacified Thomas Prickman smiled. 'It was a good day's work,' he reflected, adding, 'He's a good man is John Seward, a good man,' making a mental note to thank him and to commend him to the Chief Constable of the Hundred the next time they met.

That evening, John Seward prepared his report of the crime for the Justice of the Peace and included Thomas Prickman's strong insistence that the perpetrators be tried at the Assizes held at Rougemont Castle rather than at the Quarter Sessions convened at the Guildhall in Exeter.<sup>17</sup> He laboured over his administrative duties while his wife prepared a meal of mutton and vegetables for the three guests under the cart.

The following morning, after the shivering men breakfasted on bread and cheese, they were helped into the cart that would call at the Justice of the Peace's house before travelling to the prison at Exeter. After the cart departed, Jane Seward half-filled the two steans with mutton, intending to pay a quick visit to Grace Coombe and Ann Croote.<sup>18</sup> She placed a similar amount into a small hessian bag to give to Catharine Austin and kept the remainder for her own family.

The three men barely spoke during the journey, even when left alone while John Seward reported to the Justice of the Peace. Each dwelt within his own thoughts, festering in his stupidity, feeling the shame, enduring the judgement of self-recrimination and smarting over irresponsibility to his wife and children. The glum trio hardly noticed their changing surroundings, finally arriving at Exeter. While John Seward went to the Court to claim his fees,<sup>19</sup> they were escorted to a night-cell in the Devon County Gaol, situated across the Longbrook valley from Northernhay Castle.<sup>20</sup>

William was pleasantly surprised to discover that his bed was supplied with three blankets and a rug to combat the winter chill.<sup>21</sup> Being daytime, the door was left unlocked so he wandered about to familiarise himself with the surroundings. He found the day-room and passing through, entered the exercise yard. Most men were lolling about and talking among themselves, while a few were exercising by walking around the compound. The gaol held men who were awaiting trial and others who were serving their sentences. He struck up a conversation with a man from Okehampton.

'What's the food like?' William asked.

'Not bad. Ya get a pound and a half of white bread every day and ten pounds of patatas a week.'<sup>22</sup> His eyebrows raised again at such a regular supply of food.

‘Ow’s it been f’ ya?’

‘Aw, I’ve done it tough. Worked the treadmill, beatin’ hemp for makin’ rope.<sup>23</sup> Lookin’ forward to goin’ home now.’

His words thudded into William’s heart like a hammer. He thought, *‘Ome, I mightn’t ever see `ome again. I could even be `anged.* Driving these thoughts down deep, he said to his new companion, ‘Aw, well. I wish ya all the best.’

The days spiralled into one another and the Broadnymmet men settled into a drab routine. Weeks passed until the men had spent two bleak months in the Devon County Gaol as they waited anxiously for their trial. They had so far eluded diseases, the major one being typhus, which had earned the epithet of *gaol fever*.<sup>24</sup> But William couldn’t elude his memories, the ones that haunted him in the night hours. The ones about Grace. He so missed her warm inviting body. And their unborn child, would it be another son? Sorrowful and tormented, usually sleep finally came.

The season of Lent was approaching and the Western Circuit Assizes would soon be held at Rougemont Castle. The prison’s rumour mill began churning after word filtered in that Baron Gurney was appointed judge at the Assizes. The three men listened intently to the stories with growing apprehension.

‘Wasn’t it Baron Gurney who made that fella Wren, I think `is name was, yeah, George Wren, into the Uckfield martyr two years ago?’

‘Yeah, it wuz `im. `E ignored the jury’s recommendation for mercy after Wren was found guilty uv rick burnin’.’

‘That’s right. Gurney was determined to see Wren `anged and `ang `e did, I remember it wuz in winter.’<sup>25</sup>

‘Only six months ago at the Old Bailey, `e sentenced that postal worker to death, Robert Nichols, for takin’ money out of a letter, even though the Sergeant put in a word about Nichols’ good character before that.’<sup>26</sup>

‘And `e sentenced George Bell to death last October, for stabbin’ `is ex-girlfriend. She lived but Bell still swung from a rope.’<sup>27</sup>

‘Yeah, and even James Betts, who only stole a mare, got transported for life.’<sup>28</sup>

‘And `ow about that twelve-year-old boy the Jury found guilty of stealin’ but recommended for mercy. Six people spoke up for `im but Gurney sent `im across the sea for seven years.’<sup>29</sup>

A deep gloom settled over the three men and they talked less among themselves, each dwelling within the miserable loneliness of his ever-darkening thoughts.

While they waited listlessly in the County Gaol, the Lent Western Circuit Assizes began on Tuesday 17th March. The jurors, who sat on all cases, were sworn in before Justice Gurney. They were reputable men, held in good standing by their peers and by the Justices.<sup>30</sup> For the first two days the jury heard cases that consisted mainly of petty thievery and assault. A similar case would be placed before them the following morning.

William was woken roughly by a kick to his lower legs accompanied by an order 'Get up! Get to breakfast quick!' Hurrying to the mess hall, he joined the other two Broadnymmet men and about a dozen others. After a hasty breakfast, the group, designated *General Delivery from the Gaol*, were chained hand and foot and ordered into a cart, which rumbled to Rougemont Castle.<sup>31</sup> As they approached, William felt his oppression deepen. The cart stopped in a cobbled courtyard where the old prison pit used to be. 'Get down! Hurry up!' one of the guards bawled at the prisoners, who shuffled across the courtyard to the double doors that guarded the flagstoned entrance to the building.<sup>32</sup> They were halted there until one of the guards inside brought word as to which prisoners the Court required. Their turn wasn't long in arriving. 'Austin, Coombe and Croote! Step forward!' The three men were led to the courtroom and herded into the dock.

The Chairman, William Courtenay, started the proceedings but William's eyes were still drinking in his surroundings as the trial began. His body jerked when their names were spoken. The Chairman read out, 'Josiah Austin, thirty-five, Alexander Croote, forty-one, who can neither read nor write, and William Coombe, twenty-five, who can read and write, are charged with stealing, on the night of the seventeenth or early on the morning of the eighteenth of January last, at Broadnymmet Barton in North Tawton, two fat wether sheep, the property of Thomas Prickman.'<sup>33</sup> The jury members leaned forward as Mr. Tyrrell, the prosecutor, read the meticulous report prepared by John Seward, detailing the progress and results of his investigation. Oliver Sampson identified the skins of the unfortunate sheep, valued at fourteen shillings each.<sup>34</sup> It was a cut and dried case and there was little that Mr. Bird, appointed for the defence, could say. The jurors needed scant discussion to arrive at a verdict of guilty.<sup>35</sup>

Having been tried and convicted, the prisoners stood in the dock anxiously waiting for their sentence to be decided. Justice Gurney deliberated, aware of the criticism of harsh sentencing that the new humanitarianism, which bore as its crowning achievement the abolition of the slave trade, had evoked.<sup>36</sup> There was no doubt that the three men who stood before him with their fate in his hands were guilty. He cared less about their blood being on his conscience than its stain upon his career if he sentenced them to be hanged. He grappled with that dilemma while the three men waited, the

courtroom hushed. William, dreading the maximum sentence, was sweating and could barely breathe.

Finally, Justice Gurney's right hand moved and the three men followed its path. Their eyes never left his hand as he dipped the quill into the ink well and wrote the punishment in the trial record. In a calm, matter-of-fact voice, he then spoke, 'Each of you is sentenced to Third Class punishment, to be transported for life for sheep stealing.' William heaved a long sigh; at least he wouldn't hang. Lowering his eyes, Justice Gurney dipped the quill into the ink well again and penned an additional sentence at the bottom of the page, stating the reason for his decision in altering forever the fate of the men and their families; *They looked like strong labouring men so I decided to dispatch them to the Colonies.*<sup>37</sup> They were led from the Court and never saw their loved ones again.

Three days later, in the lonely cottage at Broadnymmet, Grace gave birth to their fourth child, a daughter she named Elizabeth, who became known as Betsy.<sup>38</sup> She would never meet her father.

- <sup>1</sup> Trewman's Exeter Flying Post 1835, vol. LXXIII, no.3625, Thursday March 26, p.4, Westcountry Studies Library, Exeter UK.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Amos, Denise 2010, 'Police and Policing', Thoroton Society of Nottinghamshire [Online]. Available at <http://www.nottsheritagegateway.org.uk/themes/police.htm> Accessed 16 June 2012.
- <sup>4</sup> Walton, Jack 2003, *The last farewell: Devon convicts transported to Australia 1782-1821*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne.
- <sup>5</sup> 'The Constable' [Online]. Available at <http://www.mkheritage.co.uk/nppm/constable.html> Accessed 27 November 2010.
- <sup>6</sup> '1841 Census' [Online]. Available at [http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=view&r=an&dbid=8978&iid=DEVHO107\\_251\\_253-0115&fn=John&ln=Seward&st=r&ssrc=&pid=1369265](http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=view&r=an&dbid=8978&iid=DEVHO107_251_253-0115&fn=John&ln=Seward&st=r&ssrc=&pid=1369265) Accessed 23 June 2012.
- <sup>7</sup> 'North Tawton' [Online]. Available at <https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/DEV/NorthTawton> Accessed 9 January 2012.
- <sup>8</sup> '1841 Census' [Online]. Available at [http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=view&r=an&dbid=8978&iid=DEVHO107\\_251\\_253-0115&fn=John&ln=Seward&st=r&ssrc=&pid=1369265](http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=view&r=an&dbid=8978&iid=DEVHO107_251_253-0115&fn=John&ln=Seward&st=r&ssrc=&pid=1369265) Accessed 23 June 2012.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Parish of Sampford Courtenay Marriage Records' [Online]. Available at <http://www.findmypast.co.uk/records/parish-records/details/M/514177925?e=M&fy=1815&tY=1825&bY=1798&sn=AUSTIN&iFnsV=false&fns=JOSIAS&cy=DEV&rC=18&locale=en> Accessed 23 June 2012.
- <sup>10</sup> 'UK, Prison Hulk Registers and Letter Books, 1802-1849 Record for Josias Austin' (p. 24A) [Online]. Available at [http://search.ancestry.com/browse/view.aspx?dbid=1989&iid=31791\\_221375-00488&pid=132633&ssrc=&fn=Josias&ln=Austin&st=g](http://search.ancestry.com/browse/view.aspx?dbid=1989&iid=31791_221375-00488&pid=132633&ssrc=&fn=Josias&ln=Austin&st=g) Accessed 23 June 2012.
- <sup>11</sup> Trewman's Exeter Flying Post 1835, vol. LXXIII, no.3625, Thursday March 26, p.4, Westcountry Studies Library, Exeter UK.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Walton, Jack 2003, *The last farewell: Devon convicts transported to Australia 1782-1821*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne.
- <sup>18</sup> '1841 Census' [Online]. Available at [http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=view&r=an&dbid=8978&iid=DEVHO107\\_251\\_253-0115&fn=John&ln=Seward&st=r&ssrc=&pid=1369265](http://search.ancestry.com/iexec?htx=view&r=an&dbid=8978&iid=DEVHO107_251_253-0115&fn=John&ln=Seward&st=r&ssrc=&pid=1369265) Accessed 23 June 2012.
- <sup>19</sup> Amos, Denise 2010, 'Police and Policing', Thoroton Society of Nottinghamshire [Online]. Available at <http://www.nottsheritagegateway.org.uk/themes/police.htm> Accessed 16 June 2012.

- <sup>20</sup> 'Devon County Prison' [Online]. Available at [http://www.exetermemories.co.uk/em/\\_organisations/prisons-devon.php](http://www.exetermemories.co.uk/em/_organisations/prisons-devon.php) Accessed 28 April 2012.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> 'George Wren of Uckfield, Sussex' [Online]. Available at <http://www.selectsurnames2.com/wren2.html> Accessed 11 January 2011.
- <sup>26</sup> 'The Proceedings of the Old Bailey: Sessions' House, Old Bailey, October 16, 1834, Ref. No. t18341016-1' [Online]. Available at <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?path=sessionsPapers%2F18341016.xml> Accessed 11 January 2011.
- <sup>27</sup> 'The Proceedings of the Old Bailey: Sessions' House, Old Bailey, October 16, 1834, Ref. No. t18341016-5' [Online]. Available at <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?path=sessionsPapers%2F18341016.xml> Accessed 11 January 2011.
- <sup>28</sup> 'The Proceedings of the Old Bailey: Sessions' House, Old Bailey, October 16, 1834, Ref. No. t18341016-11' [Online]. Available at <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?path=sessionsPapers%2F18341016.xml> Accessed 11 January 2011.
- <sup>29</sup> 'The Proceedings of the Old Bailey: Sessions' House, Old Bailey, October 16, 1834, Ref. No. t18341016-13' [Online]. Available at <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?path=sessionsPapers%2F18341016.xml> Accessed 11 January 2011.
- <sup>30</sup> 'Assizes: Western Circuit: Crown Minute Books 1730-1971', Series reference ASSI 21/58, The National Archives, Kew, UK.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> 'External entrance to Courtroom precinct at Rougemont Castle' 2005. Author's photograph.
- <sup>33</sup> Trewman's Exeter Flying Post 1835, vol. LXXIII, no.3625, Thursday March 26, p. 4, Westcountry Studies Library, Exeter, UK.
- <sup>34</sup> 'Assizes: Western Circuit: Crown Minute Books 1730-1971', Series reference ASSI 21/58, The National Archives, Kew, UK.
- <sup>35</sup> 'Devon Quarter Sessions - Easter 1835 [DRO - QS32/122]' [Online]. Available at <https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/DEV/CourtRecords/QS32-122> Accessed 27 November 2010.
- <sup>36</sup> George, Dorothy 1931, *England in transition*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, UK.
- <sup>37</sup> 'Western Circuit Assizes Lent 1835, Home Office: Judges' and Recorders' Returns', Piece reference HO 6/20, The National Archives, Kew, UK.
- <sup>38</sup> 'Parish Records Collection: Baptisms' [Online]. Available at <http://www.findmypast.co.uk/records/parish-records/details/B/501069819?fy=1837&sn=COOMBE&iFnsV=false&fns=ELIZABETH&rC=11&route=X&locale=en> Accessed 30 June 2012.

### 3 Life on the Hulk

On Wednesday 15th April 1835, the timeworn horse-drawn van carrying the despondent prisoners and their bored guards rumbled through ruts in the gravel road beside the Thames. Approaching Woolwich, William's gaze fell upon the hulks lying strewn across the river like flotsam, ugly and unloved by all except the government. Dark green river weed adorned the hulls near the waterline and in places remnants of rotting ropes drooped over the side. Each sported a motley collage of bedding and clothes dangling above the deck, drying in the early spring sunlight. Transforming the river into a floating shantytown, it was reminiscent of the Far East to sailors who had journeyed to those faraway lands.<sup>1</sup>

As a farmhand, William was accustomed to all kinds of smells but he recoiled at the stench coming from the hulks, caused by the large number of prisoners living at close quarters. The foetid odour permeated the river bank. A low buzz of indistinct voices was punctuated occasionally by a sharp order from an overseer or a shrill curse from a ragged group of yellow and black-clad men working at their tasks along the river's edge. The constant activity on the southern bank of this open sewer called the Thames was completely different from the slow pace of life in South Tawton, or even at Exeter. He located the dockyard, then his eyes narrowed and his forehead creased as he surveyed the maze of industrial buildings. His eyes swept unbelievably across workshops, warehouses, wood yards, barracks and foundries.<sup>2</sup> Turning from the cacophony and movement of humanity, he gazed across the river. It was much more peaceful there; few people lived among the marshes hugging the northern shore.

The van slowed and stopped. 'Austin, Sellers and Osborn! Get down!' Alexander and William watched in silence as their companions were handed over to four guards and marched towards the shore, off which the hulk *Ganymede* lay at anchor. That was to be their temporary prison until transportation. The van trundled onward then stopped again. William observed the *Justitia*, the gun ports facing land sealed up, anchored off the bank close to the arsenal. Almost a hundred and sixty feet long, she presented a foreboding sight. He thought, *I `ope I won't be on the lower deck, but I don't fancy me chances.*

Observing the arsenal, he was amazed at *Long Tom*, the twenty-one-foot gun standing at the gate. He followed the man ahead of him into a lighter<sup>A</sup> manned by convict rowers and their guards, to transport them to their floating prison. The guards who had escorted the party from Exeter had found a shady spot and were leaning against the side of the van talking, totally disinterested in the proceedings after transferring their charges to the guards from the hulk.

The convicts pulled on the oars until they drew alongside a rope ladder hanging from the ship's side. One by one, the men ascended the ladder and stepped onto the deck. William looked about and saw half a ship. The *Justitia's* rigging was gone, systematically dismantled after her sails were removed. Then her three masts had been stripped from her<sup>3</sup> and also her rudder, rendering her totally unseaworthy.<sup>4</sup> All her guns had been plundered and given to another. Built of Indian teak, the only capability this once-fine lady of the sea possessed was to float. Anchored to the riverbed, she was every bit as much a government prisoner as any of her miserable cargo.

William stiffened at a barked order up ahead, 'Take your clothes off!'

About twenty seconds later, the order was repeated in a demanding bellow, 'Take your clothes off! All of them!'

A muffled curse followed a sound like a slap and William knew he had better not be tardy in obeying orders. Shuffling forward, fingering the buttons of his shirt, he removed his clothes, thankful to be rid of the vermin-infested rags he had worn for months. They joined a growing pile on the deck before being unceremoniously shoved over the side by a convict wielding a broom. Stark naked in broad daylight, William lifted his eyes and noted that others shared his embarrassed discomfort.

The first two prisoners were ordered to stand in two large tubs of water placed off to one side. He couldn't remember when he had last bathed and when his turn came and he stepped into the tub the water felt good. His body stiffened again as a convict tending the water tubs rapidly and roughly applied a slab of wet soap all over his body then scrubbed vigorously with a stiff brush. The humiliation and the pain almost brought him to tears. He winced and saw blood on his skin, oozing from where lice had lived during the previous months.<sup>5</sup> Then another man, wielding a pair of scissors like a trophy of war, cropped as much hair from his head as possible. The Devon County Gaol had taught him that you just did what you were told; swallow your pride and get over it.

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<sup>A</sup> A lighter is a flat-bottomed barge used for loading and unloading ships, usually offshore, or for carrying cargo over a short distance.

They stood together until all were bathed and then were marched over to a large wooden chest. Watched by the guards, a convict worker reached into the chest and drew out a linen shirt and a suit of clothes and handed them roughly to each man. His grin exposed several missing teeth as he did his task, chuffed that he had landed such an easy job. William realised wryly why the convict uniforms were called magpie suits. One side of the coat and trousers was either black or perhaps a dark navy blue and the other side was yellow.<sup>6</sup> He would be easily spotted if he escaped but at least the clothes were new and vermin-free, for the moment anyway. His body and mind relaxed as he dressed and he joked with Alexander, 'Y' look better with clothes on.'

The moment was broken by a bawled order 'Get in line!' He moved into single file behind Alexander and in front of Thomas Prouse. They were marched about twenty yards to the blacksmith, who fitted out each man with a set of leg irons. After Alexander was ironed, William stepped forward and stood silently as the smithy did his job, riveting an iron ring on each of his ankles. Each ring was connected by eight links to a central ring, to which the smithy fastened a leather strap that attached to a belt William was ordered to tighten around his waist. This held the links up to prevent them from dragging on the ground. Then knee garters were fitted, from which a strap was attached to the basils and buckled in front and behind.<sup>8</sup> This caused the weight of the irons, about twelve pounds on each leg, to scrape irritatingly against his calves.

They were then formed up again and the guards marched them along the deck to where a man sat at a small, decrepit wooden desk, upon which stood an inkwell, a worn quill and the list from the Devon County Gaol containing the names, sentences, and characters of the new arrivals.<sup>7</sup> 'Croote! You're number one one thirty. Coombe! You're number one one thirty-one. Prouse! You're number one one thirty-two.'<sup>8</sup> The overseer smiled broadly as he informed the group, 'You are now a number; you don't have a name anymore,' and escorted them below to their quarters.

Stooping slightly as he entered the prison, William squinted and the dim light revealed two rows of cells running the entire length of the deck, separated by a walkway between the rows. Each cell accommodated ten to sixteen prisoners, but all were currently empty as their occupants laboured at backbreaking tasks on shore or on the river. Barred doors opened onto the central passage so the guards could observe the convicts from the passageway.<sup>9</sup> Each cell had a number and groups of cells formed wards, which varied in size according to the number of occupants. William, Alexander and Thomas were allotted the same cell.

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<sup>8</sup> The basils were the part of the leg irons that were fastened around the ankles.

Alexander suggested, 'Let's stick together; remember what they said in the gaol.'

'Yeah, good idea,' agreed Thomas. 'After lights out it could be anything goes: quarrels, fights, thievery.'<sup>10</sup>

Men drifted into their cells after six o'clock and terse introductions were exchanged. A bell rang at six-thirty and the prisoners clanked towards the kitchen, located on the upper deck. The eerie noise of the rattling chains was disturbing initially, but William soon became used to it. Each prisoner grabbed a tin bowl, spoon and pannikin from a bench: their bowl was three-quarters filled with a murky soup containing pieces of ox cheek and peas, with a couple of pieces of hard biscuit that the soup would soften. This became their breakfast and midday meal five days a week. Meals on the other two days consisted of oatmeal porridge, bread and cheese. They received two pints of beer daily four days a week and filtered river water the other three days. Each ward chose a delegate daily, who inspected the day's rations to ensure their quality and quantity. So although the food lacked variety, it was wholesome and provided the energy the prisoners needed.<sup>11</sup>

Back below decks, a couple of their cellmates drifted off and Thomas asked the others, 'Where have they gone?'

'School,' he was informed.

'School?'

'Yeah. It's held at night.'

William said, 'I c'n already read and write.'

Alexander commented, 'I'm too old for it.'

They talked about home and what the future might hold.

About ten minutes after the others returned a bell rang, signalling them to line up for the final muster of the day before lights-out at nine-thirty. After being checked off, the prisoners went back to their cells to struggle into their hammocks. William took a few attempts to master it. He eventually swung his legs in by holding onto the far side with his right hand while sitting on the hammock and, grasping his chains as short as possible with his left, simultaneously swung his legs up while lifting them by the chains. Then he shuffled around gingerly trying to get comfortable. The rattling of chains as each man hoisted himself into his hammock was deafening. Vile oaths and curses assaulted his ears until this nightly exercise was over. Soon a guard, his solitary candle eerily portraying his features, walked methodically along the passageway locking the cells and snuffing the candles along the passage. William slept fitfully.

He awoke next morning to a faint clattering sound, as the cooks prepared breakfast. He thought, *It must still be dark, but it couldn't be any darker than this floatin' `ell-`ole.* The others began to stir and soon all were awake before the bell sounded for get-up. Fifteen minutes later they were lined up along the passageway for the first daily muster. If anybody was missing, a couple of guards went to his cell to check whether the prisoner was slacking, sick, or dead. If found slacking, he was taken to the open deck to be flogged, usually twenty-five lashes. Fortunately, everybody was accounted for.

Muster completed, the prisoners lined up for breakfast. After eating, the Devon men cleaned their mess gear and assembled with the others to be allocated brooms and buckets for deck cleaning. The *Justitia*, not renowned for cleanliness, now had one of the decks washed every day. Completing this by six forty-five, they went below and stowed their hammocks, ready for work at seven o'clock.<sup>12</sup> There were four hundred men aboard the *Justitia* and everyone was allocated to a work gang unless sick.<sup>13</sup> William and his companions were assigned work ashore.

Before leaving the ship guards inspected the men to ensure no one was hiding anything. The searches were conducted meticulously, because if anything was found on a prisoner later, the guard who had searched him was held responsible.<sup>14</sup> These guards were selected mainly because of their brutal nature. Conscious of their positional power and afraid of being perceived as not doing their job properly, they terrorised the prisoners by their cruel and tyrannical behaviour. William realised he needed to walk quietly around them.<sup>15</sup>

Ashore, William took the opportunity for a closer look at *Long Tom*, standing as if guarding the arsenal, challenging any daring to enter. 'You there! You're here to work! You three new ones, grab a hoe here and join the gang weedin' the lanes between the mounted guns.' It was monotonous work but as William kept a steady pace the time passed until the bawled order at noon, 'Stop work!' Standing his hoe against a gun, he joined others at a lighter which returned them to the hulk. After a similar meal as the previous night, he dozed in shade on the deck until one o'clock, to be rudely awakened by a kick to his leg, accompanied by, 'Get to the lighter!' by a guard wielding a drawn cutlass. The guards continually walked among the convicts, to prevent escapes and to ensure nobody slackened off.<sup>16</sup>

Arriving at the workplace, the guards sheathed their cutlasses and relied on a large, stout stick to discipline the convicts. They needed little provocation to use it, as William saw when a convict retorted sullenly when given an order. Flying into a rage, the guard lashed out repeatedly around the

convict's head and shoulders. Even when the man lay insensible on the ground the guard still rained blows upon his unconscious body.<sup>17</sup> William decided *I won't buck the system. I'll jist do what I'm told.*

There were usually ten men in the gang, although William found the number varied depending on the task. A free overseer, an officer of the Board of Ordnance, supervised them, assisted by the guards.<sup>18</sup> They worked until six o'clock, then were ordered to return their hoes and depart for the hulk. William stood in line to have his chains checked. Roped together, they boarded the lighter and were returned to the hulk.<sup>19</sup> Upon boarding, guards examined their irons again to ensure nobody had tampered with them while onshore and they were searched again.<sup>20</sup> On the surface, these procedures seemed commendable. However, the guards had an ulterior motive for conducting thorough checks.

Relatives and friends were encouraged to visit the prisoners and bring them clothing and food. They also gave them money, with which the convicts bought extra food from street hawkers and bribed the guards for easier working conditions. The on-board search after a day ashore would reveal who had money, and the searching guard might satisfy the convict's desire for a softer life in exchange for it. The men from Devon didn't receive any visitors; Devon was too far away.

Two things helped relieve the monotony of hulk life. All convicts were required to wash and shave on Saturday evenings to be suitably prepared for the Lord's Day.<sup>21</sup> William didn't mind that; he felt better after washing and it staved off attacks from vermin. He didn't mind the church service on Sundays, either. It brought back boyhood memories of Sundays in South Tawton.

The different types of work he was given also provided some relief. After the lanes at the arsenal were finished his gang assisted the turfman's gang under the direction of sappers<sup>c</sup> in repairing the Proof and Practice Butts, large mounds of earth against which the guns were practiced.<sup>22</sup> Then the gun carriages needed to be relocated so the men manoeuvred them into position. After that job was finished, they worked indoors at a rocket-shed. Although William didn't have any experience with firearms or military weapons he cleaned shot, knocked rust scale from shells and filled them with scrap iron. He thought ironically, *'Is Majesty's beginnin' t' rely on me more an' more f' the good o' the country.*

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<sup>c</sup> Sappers are soldiers who are employed in constructing trenches, fortifications, and similar military constructions.

The gang worked at various tasks around the arsenal for several weeks. One night William said to Alexander, 'I'm workin' `arder than a labourer on the `ighways but the work's not as `ard as a common labourer.'

'Yeah. These bloody chains make it feel worse. The food's much the same every day but at least there's enough uv it.' The *Justitia's* Captain allowed the convicts to plant vegetables in plots near the arsenal to augment their diet and occasionally William was pleasantly surprised to find a potato in the bowels of his soup bowl.<sup>23</sup> Those were special days.

Gradually, William became familiar with hulk and river life. He never wandered near the stern of the ship because that was the officers' quarters and any convict loitering there was assumed to be criminally inclined and a flogging awaited the curious soul.<sup>24</sup> He stayed clear of the above-deck forecabin also. That was reserved for sick prisoners so the smells and infected air could be carried away by the slightest breeze.<sup>25</sup> Convict transports, called bay ships, sometimes sailed upriver to collect drafts of prisoners from the hulks. Those prisoners would begin a new life in a far-flung penal colony. William identified the transports by the number of soldiers on deck, more than the usual twenty or so on a hulk.<sup>26</sup>

In August 1835, while working on a lighter raising gravel and mud from the Thames about a mile below Woolwich because the main channel was drifting towards the centre of the river, William saw a bay ship anchor beside the *Ganymede*. The *Layton*, undertaking her second voyage to Australia, was transporting prisoners to Van Diemen's Land and he didn't know that Josias Austin was among them.<sup>27</sup> When the lighter was loaded, the gang returned to the embankment at Woolwich Warren, berthing near the end of Target Walk. While William and his workmates rested, other convicts threw the mud and gravel into wheelbarrows and pushed them throughout the Warren to be sifted and spread.

Although the work was hard William liked being in the open air. He was glad he wasn't assigned to the *Justitia's* laundry because vermin swarmed on the filthy shirts and the wash-house became infested. Those convicts scrubbed every shirt inside and out four days a week. The shirts were hung from lines strung all over the ship, creating the shantytown vista he saw on the day he arrived. When dry, the shirts were ironed and folded and the cycle began again.<sup>28</sup> William liked his work much better.

One evening the guards seemed more hostile than usual and conducted an even more thorough examination than normal. After their inspection, the prisoners were instructed to remain on deck. A low buzz permeated the atmosphere as the men exchanged mumbled questions and furtive glances. The Captain shouted, 'Silence! I will explain the reason for this change of routine. A lad from this vessel, who attends a tradesman employed in the dockyard, stole tools from his master and tried to sell them. The prospective purchaser became suspicious and the boy was apprehended.' Two guards then dragged a trembling boy before the Captain.

'What were you going to do with the money from the sale of the tools?' demanded the Captain. The boy's whispered reply forced the Captain to lean forward to hear.

'Buy beer!' the Captain exclaimed. He then gave a short lecture on the consequences of thievery.

The guards roughly stripped the lad and tied him face down across a cask, with his feet and hands stretched out as far as possible.<sup>29</sup> A guard who had been merrily swishing a birch rod looked towards the Captain and received his nod. The guard cut the air forcefully and brought the rod down across the boy's back. The lad squealed like a wounded pig. The next stripe criss-crossed the first one and the boy screamed from deep within his belly. The guards laughed uproariously as the flogging continued. After twenty-five stripes, the boy, his face streaked with tears and his back sporting bright red welts, blubbered as he was led away. The guards licked their lips in anticipation of what was coming next.

The Captain moved to another serious matter. 'During the evening inspection, it was discovered that a convict had attempted to file away the chains around his ankles and was presumably intending to finish the job tomorrow. This is a very serious misdemeanour.' Several guards brought the convict forward, unceremoniously stripped of his clothing and stretched likewise across the cask, in readiness to be stroked by the dreaded cat o' nine tails. The same guard now held the whip and glanced at the Captain, who gave a curt nod. The guard brought the cat down with all the force his upper body could muster, leaving a nest of welts across the prisoner's back but not drawing a sound from him. Waiting five seconds, he repeated the blow. On the sixth blow the cat cut the skin and blood began flowing. William, standing fifteen yards away, felt his skin crawl and cringed inwardly with every blow. After twenty lashes, as he turned his face away from the gory spectacle and the gleeful grins of the guards, something struck him in the side of the face. Rubbing the spot, he brought his hand down and saw blood on his fingers and a piece of torn skin. He fought the urge to retch. After the punishment, the Captain ordered the prisoner to be double-ironed and placed in

solitary confinement for a week in a tiny cell called the Black Hole.<sup>30</sup> A subdued mood pervaded the evening meal.

The Chatham smack<sup>D</sup> would occasionally pull alongside the *Justitia* and take off a batch of boys from Woolwich for Chatham. None of the boys wanted to go to Chatham, as discipline on the hulks there was more severe than at Woolwich.<sup>31</sup> Besides, mixing with convicts on the *Justitia* enabled them to learn all types of villainy and the finer points of the flash language.<sup>32</sup> By confining men and boys in crowded conditions on the hulks, the government created perfect schools for criminals.

The three wondered where they might be sent. William said, 'Not to Bermuda, I `ope.' Alexander shook his head. 'Me neither. They say the climate's deadly and any man sent there probably won't make it.' Thomas ventured, 'I think it won't be long before we know; the minister's been hintin' that in his sermons lately.' Thomas was soon proven right. At the morning muster on 25th August 1835 the Captain read out a list of three hundred and twenty convicts who were to be transported to Port Jackson, in New South Wales and William and Alexander's names were among them. These convicts were instructed to assemble on deck after they had stowed their hammocks. Breakfast was rowdy that morning, as most were jubilant at leaving the hulk, even if their future was uncertain. William too, was happy to be off the hulk, but apprehensive at what might await him in a strange country. Not all prisoners on board hulks found a new life in the colonies. Some unfortunate wretches were either too old or sick to make an overseas trip and if serving a life sentence, died on the hulks.

After washing the deck and stowing their hammocks, the Port Jackson cohort gathered on the top deck, where the minister gave a farewell speech. This kindly man spoke straight down the line. He encouraged them to live an honest life, speaking of the blessings and rewards that would accompany a reformed lifestyle. But he didn't pull any punches in warning them of the consequences a life of crime would bring. The speech appealed to their better feelings and William felt a lump forming in his throat and glancing around saw several men wiping their eyes with their shirtsleeves. The minister spoke of the opportunities awaiting those who completed their time and obtained free citizenship in their new land, and how, with hard work, sober living, frugal habits, perseverance, and maintaining their integrity they could build a new life.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>D</sup> A smack is a small sailboat with one mast rigged like a sloop or a cutter, generally used as a coaster or for fishing.

Then they were ordered to remain on deck because the Surgeon-Superintendent from the *John Barry*, the ship transporting them to Port Jackson, was coming on board to inspect them and their quarters. Under instructions from the Admiralty, the Surgeon-Superintendent had sole control over and responsibility for the convicts during transportation.<sup>34</sup> James McTernan arrived, inspected the convict deck, and walked down the line of convicts, meeting their gaze with unflinching steely, blue-grey eyes. The men were ordered below to their quarters while McTernan examined the hulk records to acquaint himself with any matters deserving attention.

The British government attempted to salvage some dignity for the convicts and avoid disgrace to its own name by laying aside one penny per week for each prisoner, so they were not technically worked as slaves. On securing his release, a man could claim the accrued sum by proving his identity to the proper authorities.<sup>35</sup> William decided that his penny per week, now totalling one shilling and ten pence, would be better in his pocket than in the government coffers. *Besides*, he thought, *if I don't claim it now, maybe I won't be able t' later when England's be'ind me.*

He approached an officer, who asked, 'What do you want?'

'Sir, could I please speak to the Captain,' replied William, amazed at his own boldness.

'Wait here.'

The officer returned about ten minutes later, 'The Captain will see you now.'

Following the officer, William was even more surprised when the Captain acknowledged the amount, and taking a tin box from his desk cupboard, counted out the sum and upon William signing a receipt, gave it to him.

The Captain said, 'I wish you well in your new land.'

William mumbled 'Thank you, sir' and returned below decks. He felt he was beginning to understand how the system worked, but couldn't articulate it as yet.

Convict indents were prepared before embarkation and provided a detailed description of each convict's characteristics. The convict's name and six measures of their human capital – age, sex, literacy, occupation, height and deformities – were listed. Literacy was defined in terms of those who could both read and write, read only, or neither read nor write. Personal information on conjugal status, religion, number of children, and colour of skin was provided. Each convict's criminal background included a detailed description of their crimes, sentences, and the ship which transported them and later their date of arrival in New South Wales. All was recorded in the indents.<sup>36</sup>

Mid-morning had arrived when the *John Barry* 'fourth'<sup>E</sup> anchored beside the *Justitia*. The convicts were assembled on the quarter-deck and formed into two lines, then two smiths detached their irons. After five months, the removal of twelve pounds from each leg created a weird sensation. William's legs felt ridiculously light and he had trouble planting his feet where he wanted them. They were formed into groups, which were transferred by small boats to the *John Barry*, where they were guarded by a detachment of the 28th Regiment<sup>37</sup> under Lieutenant Colonel French.<sup>38</sup>

After a roll-call they were allotted to their messes. Each received his personal cooking, eating, and drinking utensils and a small keg for storing water. 'Number them according to your mess,' they were told, followed by, 'Come and get your blankets.'<sup>39</sup> After listening to an address by the Surgeon-Superintendent they were ordered below, where singing broke out among them. After hurried agreements were made regarding sleeping arrangements William examined his surroundings, noting where the water and the pumps were located so he could refill his water keg when necessary. He thought wistfully, pressing his lips together and blinking rapidly several times, *It seems nobody's petitioned on me be'alf so it's goodbye t' England and me family forever.*<sup>40</sup> He felt grief stirring deep within and unable to stop it, spasms wracked his gut and he sobbed like a child. The spasms eventually eased but tears still streamed and ran down his cheeks. Embarrassed, he looked around but nobody was gawping at him. They were captive to their own memories and some were lost in their own tears.

That evening a seaward breeze sprang up and the *John Barry* began making her way to the sea.

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<sup>E</sup> On this occasion, the ship was referred to as the 'fourth' because she was about to depart on her fourth voyage to the colonies.

- <sup>1</sup> 'Port Cities London: Hulks' [Online]. Available at <http://www.portcities.org.uk/london/server/show/ConNarrative.56/chapterId/429/Prison-hulks-on-the-River-Thames.html> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>2</sup> 'History of Woolwich' [Online]. Available at <http://www.ideal-homes.org.uk/greenwich/assets/histories/woolwich> Accessed 19 February 2011.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Tall Ships Explained' 2016 [Online]. Available at <https://www.sailboston.com/2016/12/tall-ships-explained/> Accessed 10 March 2011.
- <sup>4</sup> Rowland, David n.d., 'British Prison Hulks' [Online]. Available at <http://www.oldpolicecellsmuseum.org.uk> Accessed 18 March 2015.
- <sup>5</sup> Derrincourt, William 1900, 'Old Convict Days (Chapter VIII)', Louis Belke (ed.), The New Amsterdam Book Company, New York [Online]. Available at <http://www.kenscott.com/prisons/prisonerexp.htm> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Port Cities London: Hulks' [Online]. Available at <http://www.portcities.org.uk/london/server/show/ConNarrative.56/chapterId/429/Prison-hulks-on-the-River-Thames.html> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>7</sup> Evans, Lloyd & Nicholls, Paul (eds.) 1976, *Convicts & colonial society 1788-1853*, Cassell, Stanmore, NSW.
- <sup>8</sup> 'Convict Hulk Registers: *Justitia* Hulk, Woolwich 1803-1836', AJCP M4880, Film ENG Gen 18, p.264, Australian Institute of Genealogical Studies, Blackburn, VIC.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Aboard the Hulks: A Voyage to Nowhere' [Online]. Available at <http://vichist.blogspot.com/2010/04/aboard-hulks-voyage-to-nowhere.html> Accessed 27 December 2010.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Derrincourt, William 1900, *Old Convict Days* (Chapter VIII), Louis Belke (ed.), The New Amsterdam Book Company, New York [Online]. Available at <http://www.kenscott.com/prisons/prisonerexp.htm> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Aboard the Hulks: A Voyage to Nowhere' [Online]. Available at <http://vichist.blogspot.com/2010/04/aboard-hulks-voyage-to-nowhere.html> Accessed 27 December 2010.
- <sup>13</sup> Derrincourt, William 1900, 'Old Convict Days (Chapter VIII)', Louis Belke (ed.), The New Amsterdam Book Company, New York [Online]. Available at <http://www.kenscott.com/prisons/prisonerexp.htm> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>14</sup> 'Aboard the Hulks: A Voyage to Nowhere' [Online]. Available at <http://vichist.blogspot.com/2010/04/aboard-hulks-voyage-to-nowhere.html> Accessed 27 December 2010.
- <sup>15</sup> Derrincourt, William 1900, 'Old Convict Days (Chapter VIII)', Louis Belke (ed.), The New Amsterdam Book Company, New York [Online]. Available at <http://www.kenscott.com/prisons/prisonerexp.htm> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>16</sup> 'Port Cities London: Hulks' [Online]. Available at <http://www.portcities.org.uk/london/server/show/ConNarrative.56/chapterId/429/Prison-hulks-on-the-River-Thames.html> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>18</sup> 'Aboard the Hulks: A Voyage to Nowhere' [Online]. Available at <http://vichist.blogspot.com/2010/04/aboard-hulks-voyage-to-nowhere.html> Accessed 27 December 2010.
- <sup>19</sup> Butler, J Marjorie 1974, *Convict by Choice*, Hill of Content Publishing Company, Melbourne.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> 'Port Cities London: Hulks' [Online]. Available at <http://www.portcities.org.uk/london/server/show/ConNarrative.56/chapterId/429/Prison-hulks-on-the-River-Thames.html> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> 'Early American Crime' [Online]. Available at <http://www.earlyamericancrime.com/convict-transportation/end-of-transportation/convict-hulks> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>26</sup> Derrincourt, William 1900, 'Old Convict Days' (Chapter VIII), Louis Belke (ed.), The New Amsterdam Book Company, New York [Online]. Available at <http://www.kenscott.com/prisons/prisonerexp.htm> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>27</sup> 'Layton voyage to Van Diemen's Land, Australia in 1835 with 271 passengers' [Online]. Available at <https://convictrecords.com.au/ships/layton/1835> Accessed 23 August 2018.
- <sup>28</sup> 'Aboard the Hulks: A Voyage to Nowhere' [Online]. Available at <http://vichist.blogspot.com/2010/04/aboard-hulks-voyage-to-nowhere.html> Accessed 27 December 2010.
- <sup>29</sup> Derrincourt, William 1900, 'Old Convict Days (Chapter VIII)', Louis Belke (ed.), The New Amsterdam Book Company, New York [Online]. Available at <http://www.kenscott.com/prisons/prisonerexp.htm> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>30</sup> 'Port Cities London: Hulks' [Online]. Available at <http://www.portcities.org.uk/london/server/show/ConNarrative.56/chapterId/429/Prison-hulks-on-the-River-Thames.html> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>31</sup> Derrincourt, William 1900, 'Old Convict Days (Chapter VIII)', Louis Belke (ed.), The New Amsterdam Book Company, New York [Online]. Available at <http://www.kenscott.com/prisons/prisonerexp.htm> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>32</sup> McLachlan, N 1964, *The memoirs of James Hardy Vaux: Including his vocabulary of the flash language*, Heinemann, London.
- <sup>33</sup> Derrincourt, William 1900, 'Old Convict Days (Chapter VIII)', Louis Belke (ed.), The New Amsterdam Book Company, New York [Online]. Available at <http://www.kenscott.com/prisons/prisonerexp.htm> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>34</sup> 'Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Transportation' [Online]. Available at [http://digital.slv.vic.gov.au/view/action/singleViewer.do?dvs=1548987366231~729&locale=en\\_US&metadata\\_object\\_ratio=10&show\\_metadata=true&VIEWER\\_URL=/view/action/singleViewer.do?&preferred\\_usage\\_type=VIEW\\_MAIN&DELIVERY\\_RULE\\_ID=10&frameId=1&usePid1=true&usePid2=true](http://digital.slv.vic.gov.au/view/action/singleViewer.do?dvs=1548987366231~729&locale=en_US&metadata_object_ratio=10&show_metadata=true&VIEWER_URL=/view/action/singleViewer.do?&preferred_usage_type=VIEW_MAIN&DELIVERY_RULE_ID=10&frameId=1&usePid1=true&usePid2=true) Accessed 27 December 2010.

- <sup>35</sup> Derrincourt, William 1900, 'Old Convict Days (Chapter VIII)', Louis Belke (ed.), The New Amsterdam Book Company, New York [Online]. Available at <http://www.kenscott.com/prisons/prisonerexp.htm> Accessed 5 December 2010.
- <sup>36</sup> Nicholas, Stephen (ed.) 1988, *Convict workers: Reinterpreting Australia's past*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.
- <sup>37</sup> 'John Barry' [Online]. Available at <http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~garter1/johnbarr.htm> Accessed 30 January 2011.
- <sup>38</sup> 'Free Settler or Felon' [Online]. Available at <http://www.jenwilletts.com> Accessed 30 January 2011.
- <sup>39</sup> Hasluck, Alexandra 1991, *Unwilling emigrants*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, WA.
- <sup>40</sup> The Register of Criminal Petitions HO19/6 [Online]. Available at <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C8883> Accessed 30 January 2011.

## 4 The Voyage to Australia

The friendlier waters of the Thames gave way to a choppy swell as the *John Barry* manoeuvred its way around by Sheerness and headed up the Medway towards Chatham. She dropped anchor there, and on 31st August took aboard convicts from the hulks *Euryalus* and *Fortitude*.<sup>1</sup> Having gathered her complement of felons, she weighed anchor and sailed back down the Medway into the open sea. Rounding North Foreland, she headed south before taking a westerly course around England's southern coastline. She anchored at Torbay to take aboard food supplies and fresh water, unobtainable from the Thames but available from the Naval Reservoir at Brixham.<sup>2</sup> Soon after arrival, bumboats<sup>A</sup> manned by local peddlers hawking their wares and foodstuffs came alongside. Few convicts had anything to spend but those who did were allowed to buy. William decided he would save his scant funds for now.

The *John Barry* rode comfortably at anchor in Torbay harbour under a bleak sky, although the grey choppy sea slapped incessantly against the boards of her hull. While provisions were sourced for the voyage the convicts began settling into shipboard life. William couldn't miss seeing a long list of offences nailed to the wall of the prison deck, with their due punishments. He decided soberly, *I won't do any o' those things; it's not worth the risk.*

The Headquarters Contingent of the 28th Regiment was travelling to New South Wales on the *John Barry*. Among the passengers was Vincenzo Chiodetti, Bandmaster of the 28th Regiment, accompanied by his wife.<sup>3</sup> When William became aware of the identities of their fellow voyagers via below decks gossip he mused, *It'd be good t' `ave some music durin' the voyage.*

This was the *John Barry's* fourth voyage to Australia since her inaugural journey in 1819.<sup>4</sup> The Master, Captain John Robson, felt confident in the ship and his crew of twenty-one mariners, mostly experienced and capable men.<sup>5</sup> Captain Robson was no stranger to the voyage to the Australian colonies, or to the *John Barry*. The previous year he had sailed her from London to Van Diemen's Land on her third voyage carrying convicts, and then sailed up to Sydney before heading home to England.<sup>6</sup> Robson knew the southern currents well and could read the southern stars. He knew the danger of the Roaring Forties, the vicious gales that could spring up suddenly and roar like a banshee through those southern latitudes, that could strip a ship of its sails and rigging and shatter masts before a man could shout 'God save the King.'

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<sup>A</sup> A bumboat is a small vessel carrying provisions for sale to moored or anchored ships.

Captain Robson was pleased to be leaving England in September, before the onset of the British winter and traversing the chilly Southern Indian Ocean in summer, although the winds between latitudes forty to fifty were generally forceful and treacherous and he had yet to know a calm sea there.<sup>7</sup> In James McTernan he had an able and conscientious man looking after the convicts and Robson felt he could work well with him. Their lines of responsibility had a degree of overlap, as the Surgeon-Superintendent served as ship's doctor for the sailors also. Robson was aware that in matters seriously affecting the health and welfare of the prisoners Surgeon-Superintendents were empowered to give orders to the master of a convict ship.<sup>8</sup> He reasoned that providing good food and water would not offer occasion for any issues to arise between them during the voyage.

James McTernan was a good man, honest and conscientious, and he was no pushover. On board the *Ocean* on his first voyage to Australia in 1823<sup>9</sup>, he became aware of a plot to seize the ship and placed the five ringleaders in irons until arrival.<sup>10</sup> He had his charges' welfare at heart and his job was to deliver them fit and healthy and if that meant being cruel to be kind then so be it. He found in Captain Robson a man after his own heart. McTernan was no stranger to the colonies either. He was a Surgeon in the Royal Navy and had served as Surgeon-Superintendent on five previous voyages to the Australian colonies.<sup>11</sup>

The Surgeon-Superintendent anticipated a successful voyage, but lurking in his mind were fears of what he referred to as 'the invasion of my old enemy, the Cholera.'<sup>12</sup> He fervently hoped it wouldn't arise on this trip so he determined to take all necessary steps to ensure it didn't. William had heard stories about cholera in the gaol at Exeter and on the hulk and had thought about it occasionally. McTernan implemented a regimen from the outset to minimise the likelihood of outbreaks of diseases. He inspected each cask of provisions when opened, to detect any deficiencies in quality or quantity.<sup>13</sup>

McTernan was determined that the *John Barry* would be a clean vessel and so he moved quickly. On the first day, he formed the convicts into seven divisions of forty-six men and allotted to each division a specific morning each week to muster on deck at daylight. William and Alexander were in the first division, which was not allowed to present in shoes or stockings because their work consisted of washing the decks, operating the pumps, and filling the bathing-tub buckets. By seven o'clock all the convicts had bathed.<sup>14</sup>

As on the hulk, there was always a mad scramble for the dunnies<sup>B</sup> after breakfast. There were only two to serve over three hundred prisoners, plus the heads, which were dangerous to use unless the weather was reasonably calm. The heads comprised an open platform with holes cut in it and lashed to the bowsprit. People squatted over a hole and defecated or urinated directly into the sea and any residue that landed on the platform was rinsed off with a bucket of salt water.<sup>15</sup> Shortly after breakfast William joined the other men in his division, mustered with their legs and arms bared for examination, each one presenting his blanket and pillow for inspection. Then, weather permitting, they moved to the forecastle to air their bedding, under the watchful eye of the Chief Boatswain.

While these activities were taking place, the division of the previous day cleaned and maintained the prison's water-closets and stoves. They also ensured that the windsails<sup>C</sup> were positioned correctly so that both the prison and sick bay received a continuous draught of fresh air.<sup>16</sup> Two stoves were kept burning day and night in the prison; these dried and moved warm air around below decks. The slop buckets from the previous night were carried from the prison<sup>D</sup> to the stern and their contents dumped overboard. When doing this job, William clamped his lips tightly together and turned his head away from the load each time he drew a breath but it didn't help much. On one occasion when working with Alexander, William grimaced. 'D' y' know a better way o' doin' this?' Alexander shook his head vigorously. 'Only the same way yure doin' it.' 'Y' not much 'elp', William joked.

Every time William stepped on deck while the ship lay at anchor in Torbay harbour, he was confronted with the proximity of his native land, County Devon. His gut tightened and his throat constricted at the constant reminder that he would never set foot there again. It was so near and yet so far away. He barely heard the shouts of the guards, the mariners and the merchants manoeuvring their heavily loaded wagons into position for unloading. When he felt his grief rising and about to spill from his eyes, he looked to the top of the masts, always amazed at their height; so thick at deck level but needle-thin at the top. Standing on the deck, he felt the hard boards beneath his feet and thought of his boyhood, walking in the lush countryside around South Tawton. His mind travelled there and images of the past began crowding out his present reality.

Farm work was a hard life but in hindsight it was more bearable than this. At least he was a free man then, living in a humble but comfortable cottage with his three children and his wife, her swollen

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<sup>B</sup> A dunny is a colloquial term used to describe a toilet.

<sup>C</sup> A windsail was a long funnel of sailcloth suspended from a stay in the rigging, directing fresh air below the deck.

<sup>D</sup> The deck on the ship which housed the convicts' sleeping quarters was known as the prison.

belly portending another arrival. His grief overflowed and the tears ran; he would never see her or their children ever again. The joys of life had been simple, but satisfying. He remembered their laughter as his only son William said funny things while learning to talk. For a while his memory rested on their wedding day at Winkleigh. It seemed so long ago but he remembered every detail vividly: the smiles, the laughter, the joy, the people. He suddenly realised he would never see any of them ever again either. The tragedy of what his life had become struck hard, like a kick from a horse.

Pulling himself together, he tore those thoughts away and his memory travelled back to South Tawton. The familiar landmark of the church tower at the end of the village floated in and he found these were safer thoughts. He stood outside the church for a while, built with massive Norman stones, then turned away and meandered past the poorhouse. Built in the 1400s, it was a haven for widows left destitute through either a husband's death or transportation. In his daydream he strolled down the main street, pausing outside the Seven Stars Inn, looking up at the thatched roof, contemplating whether to enter through that familiar threshold that even now was beginning to fade. He decided to pass on. Perhaps the knots on the windsail needed checking.

William and Alexander, while working on deck, watched incredulously at the never-ending supply of foodstuffs and other stores being brought on board. Close to sailing day, there were added crates of vegetables and bottled porter, and then baskets of bread – more bread than either of them had ever seen – to be used during the first leg of the journey to Teneriffe. Finally, on 21st September 1835 with 321 male prisoners the *John Barry*, crowded with foodstuffs, other supplies, and its different classes of humanity, weighed anchor and turned her bow southward, heading into William Coombe's great unknown.<sup>17</sup>

William lay in anguish in his hammock that night, overcome by the finality of the departure. Arm over his eyes, he wept, as he whispered goodbye to his family. 'Farewell, me darlin'. I'm sorry I did this t' ya. Please forgive me.' A flood of tears. 'Sorry, Mary. I'm sorry, Will, be a strong boy f' y' Ma.' Another flood of tears. 'Goodbye Jane, me love.' And then there was the baby he'd never seen. He felt that it might have been a girl. 'Goodbye, sweetheart. Da loves ya.' Another flood of tears. After his emotions had subsided somewhat, his thoughts turned to his parents. What a disappointment he must be to them. 'Goodbye, Ma and Da. I'm so sorry I brung disgrace on our family. Can y' ever forgive me?' Another flood of tears. His mental torment finally gave way to fitful sleep.

James McTernan rarely delegated his responsibilities and supervised the convicts closely. Under his watchful eye they adhered to a scheduled program of exercise and regular cleanliness. Nevertheless, the early days did not augur well for the voyage. McTernan's fears of his 'old enemy, the Cholera' raising its ugly head appeared to be justified soon after leaving England. Although only a few convicts presented at the sick bay with bowel complaints, the ailments were very severe. The treatment he used consisted of scruple<sup>E</sup> doses of calomel to begin with, followed by five grains<sup>F</sup> of antimonial powder and three of calomel every six hours. This treatment brought relief in two days at most and many within two hours.<sup>18</sup> His deadly adversary appeared to be held at bay.

Land was sighted three weeks after leaving Torbay as the Canary Islands came into view.<sup>19</sup> Sailing around the north-eastern tip of the largest island, Teneriffe, the *John Barry* skirted along the rugged and steep coastline and dropped anchor in the port of Santa Cruz. The ship's boats had scarcely departed for shore to source supplies of fresh water, fruit, meat and wine before the bumboats arrived, their owners working their way along the ship, peddling their wares. Looking on, William was amazed at the speed of the haggling process and how quickly the peddlers would close a sale for even a halfway decent offer. A non-commissioned officer was assigned to supervise all sales and his task was to ensure that buyers were charged fair prices and obtained good value for their money.<sup>20</sup>

He bought a cluster of tropical fruit he had never seen before. He pulled one of the fruit from the central stem from which each bunch radiated like a row of thick yellow fingers, peeled the skin off and began eating it.

Alexander found him and asked, 'Whatever are they?'

William replied, 'They're called bananas,' and wrenching another one from the stem gave it to him, adding, 'They're good.'

Alexander peeled it and took a mouthful. His eyes rounded and he smiled as he chewed, saying,

'Yure not goin' t' take these below, are ya?'

'I'll need ya t' protect me if I do,' laughed William. 'Ere, 'ave another one. I won't be able t' relax me guard once we go below.'

While in port, James McTernan continued the convicts' regimen. The weather was pleasant, averaging eighty-two degrees during the day and dropping to around seventy at night.<sup>21</sup> Every morning William awoke refreshed. After four days in this idyllic location the ship weighed anchor

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<sup>E</sup> A scruple is a measure of apothecaries' weight equal to 20 grains or 1.296 grams. Three scruples make 1 dram.

<sup>F</sup> There are 7,000 grains (gr) to one pound (lb).

and proceeded south on the next leg of her long journey. As she sailed parallel to the shore, William noticed the harsh coastline was broken occasionally by fine sandy beaches, providing a welcome contrast to the otherwise unfriendly vista.<sup>22</sup>

Approaching the Equator, the menacing sky and the restless wind began unleashing their power and white spray lashed the open deck. William rubbed his stinging eyes and moved uncomfortably as his salt-encrusted clothes rubbed aggravatingly against his skin. In response to the harsh weather McTernan ceased the convicts' daily regimen and ordered them to be confined below decks. Normally, the prison was unlocked at daybreak so that the three men who cooked could begin their duties and all were mustered back in at sundown<sup>23</sup> As the storm grew in fury some prisoners, exhausted from seasickness, sat on the floor clutching their hammocks, while others maintained their balance by holding the ropes of theirs. Some, including William, grasped the prison bars and clung on for dear life as the ship rolled and tossed. He felt powerless, as in a wild nightmare that wouldn't end. The stench of vomit was suffocating, but then the situation worsened as he felt and smelt a warm stream of decaying food and stomach bile soak through his shirt on his lower back and run down his legs. A man tenaciously grasping the ropes of a hammock behind him couldn't hold back any longer.

Impossible to control the urgency flooding from his own stomach, he pressed his face into the bars and spewed into the passageway. Although occupied with his heaving gut, he became aware of widespread panic beginning to pervade the choking atmosphere. The crashing sea reached a crescendo as it battered the ship and the boards creaked loudly. They twisted under the onslaught of the waves and seawater forced its way through the gaps between the boards and jets of water surged into the prison. As the water rose from ankle to knee deep and kept rising, men wailed in terror, some cried like babies, some swore blindly, some cursed everything they could think of cursing, some rediscovered a long-forgotten faith in God and prayed for the first time since childhood. However, William felt strangely removed from the terror of it all. He was too sick to care much at that moment but the thought crossed his mind, *If the ship goes down we'll all drown like rats.*

Other prisoners obviously thought the same. An uproar arose and grew rapidly to a climax. Like an erupting volcano, a stinking mass of sweaty, terrified men made a rush upon the hatch in a desperate hope of gaining the deck. The sentry over the hatchway discharged his rifle and at the alarm Captain Robson barked an order to the marines, 'Stand to your arms and shoot the first man

who appears.' He then shouted to be heard above the elements to the miserable terrified crowd below the hatch, 'If the ship goes down, everybody on board – officers, crew, and convicts – will go to the bottom together, in a huge wooden coffin called the *John Barry*!<sup>24</sup> Now man the pumps to discharge the water in the prison!' It was already thigh-deep. The panic exhausted its momentum as the reality of the situation stared the men starkly in the face. It dawned on them that they needed to cooperate or it was likely they would all die.

Although the crisis subsided the rough weather continued and seasickness became prevalent throughout the ship, sparing neither convict nor freeman. Unable to cook to feed the prisoners, those on kitchen duty soaked stale pieces of bread and biscuit in a mixture of water and wine to soften them and to give some small flavour to the bleak fare so that body and soul might stay together. The circumstances increased the Surgeon-Superintendent's concern of an outbreak of disease and therefore increased his efforts to prevent it. His strenuous attempts proved successful, as with the exception of the single case of typhus and one of apoplexy, neither serious nor continued illness prevailed on board the ship.<sup>25</sup>

After several long days the weather eased and daily activities returned to normal. William was able to use the heads again during the day and managed to catch up with Alexander.

'How'd ya go?' inquired Alexander.

'Ended up alright, apart from bein' spewed on,' William responded.

'Yeah, me too.'

'Move along there!' quickly ended their fledgling conversation and they separated to return to their duties.

On Wednesday 28th October the *John Barry* was becalmed. The north-east trade wind steadily fell away and all but deserted the vessel. As she drifted, Captain Robson noticed two other vessels moving slowly towards his ship, both flying American flags. The smaller ship, the missionary vessel *Louvre*, eventually drifted quite close, to the point where a shouted conversation could be exchanged across the water.<sup>26</sup> Robson ordered that a boat be lowered and crew rowed him and Lieutenant McDonnell over to the *Louvre*.

On boarding, they were offered refreshments by the Reverend Howard Malcom of the American Baptist Missionary Society. They learnt that the *Louvre* had sailed from Boston on 22nd September and was carrying twenty-two missionaries to minister to the Telugu people in India.<sup>27</sup> Reverend

Malcom discovered that the *John Barry* carried convicts bound for Sydney, the main town in the British colony of New South Wales. Looking across the water he saw the convicts swarming over the deck and climbing into the rigging, trying to catch a better view of his ship. William had clambered up the rigging also, to a vantage point about fifteen feet above the deck. Clinging with one arm through the rigging and shielding his eyes with the other, he surveyed the style and trappings of the smaller ship. Reverend Malcom, an astute man, noted that men under arms stood on the deck as sentries over the convicts, in the latter's rare opportunity to engage in an exhilarating act of freedom. He also noticed several officers on the quarter-deck, which indicated the presence of troops on board.<sup>28</sup>

Having made the missionaries' acquaintance and promising a treat the next day, Robson and McDonnell returned to the *John Barry*. Mid-morning the following day Vincenzo Chiodetti mustered the musicians on deck with their instruments, as the *Louvre* manoeuvred as close as possible to the *John Barry*, despite virtually no wind. Chiodetti struck up the band, which played for over an hour, enthralling all within earshot. As the music swelled and died away in heaving and exquisite cadences, sometimes lively and joyful, plaintive at other times, and sometimes rising into martial pomp, William felt exhilarated and refreshed.<sup>29</sup> The rawness of his broken heart felt soothed and when the music ended his peace lingered.

Nevertheless, loneliness enveloped him in its embrace during the night hours, when he lay awake listening to his companions snoring. Grace never snored. He remembered nights when he used to lie awake and her soft breathing, familiar and comforting, eventually lulled him back to sleep. The last six months he'd been lonely and now he missed her terribly, particularly her body at night. He tried to wrench her memory from his mind but then his thoughts strayed to their children and then the daggers drove deep. Often he cried, hoping that everybody else was asleep. When thoughts of his family had abated his parents took their place. What did they think of him? Some nights were worse than others but finally, merciful sleep would overtake him.

The wind returned and their journey resumed. The *John Barry* eventually rounded the Cape of Good Hope and sailed into the southern seas. So bitterly cold were the mornings that many plaintive convict voices prevailed upon McTernan to relinquish his daily regimen. However, his unshakeable belief in its salutary effects overruled his feelings of compassion for the convicts' shivering limbs so it continued, much to William's chagrin as he vigorously rubbed his freezing arms. In fact, the regimen proved so successful that McTernan resolved to implement this program of strict discipline on future

voyages in convict ships, so effective had it proven in comparison to his five previous voyages to the Australian colonies.<sup>30</sup>

In January 1836 after passing through Bass's Strait the *John Barry* turned northward and headed for Port Jackson. James McTernan wrote in his report, *Upon the whole I think I never enjoyed more freedom from disease or illness notwithstanding the unpropitious commencement and that immunity may be mainly attributed to the following system from which I never deviated.*<sup>31</sup> He then described the prisoners' regimen he employed during the voyage. Apart from the storm encountered off the west coast of Africa, the weather was generally mild. The thermometer ranged between ninety and forty, and they endured a few hot days in the tropical regions but experienced some chilly mornings in the Southern Indian Ocean.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the immovable guardians of Port Jackson, the North and South Heads, came into view. Among those on deck, William was relieved to see land again after staring so long at the empty sea but the country wasn't like anything he knew. The beautiful shades of green were not there; it seemed that the forest had been washed with olive green and grey. He watched apprehensively as the *John Barry* steered a course towards the Heads and passing through, entered safe anchorage. His feelings changed to admiration of such a magnificent harbour as he observed the various ships moored within its safe confines. Although not close enough to shore to see distinctly, he didn't recognise the trees. *They must be different from the ones back 'ome*, he thought.

His eyes surveyed the buildings in the distance. It looked like a miniature village scattered around the shoreline. Drinking in the scene, he wondered how different life might be in this country compared to familiar surroundings in Devon. As the ship glided through the mild swell towards Circular Quay, all noticed the prison hulk *Phoenix*, anchored in a bay on the north shore. As Governor Brisbane stated, its presence in this stretch of water called either Hulk Bay or Phoenix Bay<sup>6</sup> provided a powerful symbol of the strength and terror of the colony's police. Its presence served as a sobering reminder for the free people on board that they were entering a prison colony.<sup>33</sup>

Since departing London one hundred and forty-five days had elapsed; one hundred and eighteen days since leaving Torbay. The *John Barry* arrived in Port Jackson on 17th January 1836 with eighty-nine free people, comprising sixty-nine associated with the 28th Regiment,<sup>34</sup> twenty mariners and three hundred and twenty male prisoners, only one having died on the voyage.<sup>35</sup> An eighteen-year-

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<sup>6</sup> This bay is now known as Lavender Bay.

old mariner had died on the journey, apparently after having eaten too much, and a fifty-two-year-old convict named Morgan Davies died after suffering paralysis and debility. Their future was gone. Gazing upon the new land, William wondered what future awaited him.

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- <sup>2</sup> 'Napoleon in Torbay' [Online]. Available at <https://www.torbay.gov.uk/media/8998/napoleon-in-torbay-1815.pdf> Accessed 4 May 2013.
- <sup>3</sup> 'John Barry 1836 cohort' [Online]. Available at <http://www.jenwilletts.com> Accessed 30 January 2011.
- <sup>4</sup> 'Claim a Convict' [Online]. Available at <http://www.hawkesbury.net.au/claimaconvict/search.php> Accessed 30 January 2011.
- <sup>5</sup> 'John Barry', in Col Sec: Reports of Vessels Arrived, 4/5210 Jan-June 1836' [Online]. Available at <http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~garter1/johnbarr.htm> Accessed 30 January 2011.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Shipping Intelligence', *The Sydney Monitor*, 17 September 1834, p. 2 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/32147177> Accessed 4 May 2013.
- <sup>7</sup> Elligett, T D 1930, 'Down in the Roaring Forties: The Cruise of the Junee', *The Argus* (Melbourne), 11 January 1930, p. 3S [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/457834> Accessed 4 May 2013.
- <sup>8</sup> Brooke, Alan & Brandon, David 2005, *Bound for Botany Bay: British convict voyages to Australia*, The National Archives Kew, UK.
- <sup>9</sup> 'John Barry 1836', in *Convict Ships, in Free Settler or Felon?* [Online]. Available at <http://www.jenwilletts.com/ConvictShipsJKL.htm#JohnBarry36> Accessed 6 April 2013.
- <sup>10</sup> Brooke, Alan & Brandon, David 2005, *Bound for Botany Bay: British convict voyages to Australia*, The National Archives Kew, UK.
- <sup>11</sup> 'John Barry 1836', in *Convict Ships, in Free Settler or Felon?* [Online]. Available at <http://www.jenwilletts.com/ConvictShipsJKL.htm#JohnBarry36> Accessed 6 April 2013.
- <sup>12</sup> Surgeon Superintendent's Log, *John Barry* 1836. The National Archives, Kew, UK.
- <sup>13</sup> Brooke, Alan & Brandon, David 2005, *Bound for Botany Bay: British convict voyages to Australia*, The National Archives Kew, UK.
- <sup>14</sup> 'Convict Ship John Barry 1836', in *Free Settler or Felon?* [Online]. Available at [https://www.jenwilletts.com/convict\\_ship\\_john\\_barry\\_1836.htm](https://www.jenwilletts.com/convict_ship_john_barry_1836.htm) Accessed 30 January 2011.
- <sup>15</sup> Walton, Jack 2003, *The last farewell: Devon convicts transported to Australia 1782-1821*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne.
- <sup>16</sup> Brooke, Alan & Brandon, David 2005, *Bound for Botany Bay: British convict voyages to Australia*, The National Archives Kew, UK.
- <sup>17</sup> 'John Barry 1836', in *Convict Ships, in Free Settler or Felon?* [Online]. Available at <http://www.jenwilletts.com/ConvictShipsJKL.htm#JohnBarry36> Accessed 6 April 2013.
- <sup>18</sup> Surgeon Superintendent's Log, *John Barry* 1836. The National Archives, Kew, UK.
- <sup>19</sup> 'Powerhouse Museum: Objects from the collection of the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney Australia' [Online]. Available at <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=238337> Accessed 6 April 2013.

- <sup>20</sup> Brooke, Alan & Brandon, David 2005, *Bound for Botany Bay: British convict voyages to Australia*, The National Archives Kew, UK.
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- <sup>22</sup> 'Tenerife: Island of Eternal Springtime' [Online]. Available at <http://www.red2000.com/spain/canarias/tenerife/index.html> Accessed 28 November 2010.
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- <sup>25</sup> Surgeon Superintendent's Log, *John Barry* 1836. The National Archives, Kew, UK.
- <sup>26</sup> Malcom, Howard 1839, 'Travels in south-eastern Asia: Embracing Hindustan, Malaya, Siam, and China', 10<sup>th</sup> American edn, *American Baptist Publication Society* [Online]. Available at <http://archive.org/stream/travelsinsouthea00malc#page/n7/mode/2up> Accessed 4 May 2013.
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- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Surgeon Superintendent's Log, *John Barry* 1836. The National Archives, Kew, UK.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> 'Hulks in Australia' [Online]. Available at <http://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au> Accessed 18 April 2015.
- <sup>34</sup> 'John Barry', in Col Sec: Reports of Vessels Arrived, 4/5210 Jan-June 1836' [Online]. Available at <http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~garter1/johnbarr.htm> Accessed 30 January 2011.
- <sup>35</sup> 'Convicts to Australia: A guide to researching your convict ancestors' [Online]. Available at <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipNSW2.html> Accessed 30 January 2011.

## 5 Arrival and Assignment

Before the ship berthed the convicts were ordered below decks. William heard intermittent shouts of the ship's officers as they gave orders to furl the sails and lower voices as the crew conversed together. Huddled in the prison, the convicts listened to the deep rattle of moving chain as the anchor hurtled to the harbour floor. The free passengers eagerly viewed the new country from the vantage point of the upper deck.

With the ship secured and the gangplank in place, Captain Robson and James McTernan received the Colonial Secretary's deputy and responded to the usual official questions regarding the voyage. Captain Robson handed over the documentation he'd received from the captains of the hulks from which the prisoners had been despatched. It consisted of a list of the convicts, as furnished by the gaols in which they had been confined, and included details of their conduct while on the hulks.<sup>1</sup> The most important information McTernan reported was that the ship had a clean bill of health and neither cholera nor any other infectious diseases had broken out and only two people had died. The document was then pushed across to him for his signature, followed by that of John N Robson, Master. The Tide Surveyor T Jeffrey signed also, and after the Colonial Secretary's deputy initialled it, the paperwork was completed, apart from the Convict Muster allowing disembarkation.<sup>2</sup> Following these formalities, the Colonial Secretary's deputy made the necessary appointment to go on board the following day to muster the convicts and to hear their complaints, if any.<sup>3</sup>

While administrative affairs were being conducted, the Band of the 17th Foot Regiment, departing shortly for India, had assembled on the wharf and as the Headquarters and Band of the 28th Regiment walked down the gangplank, struck up a rousing welcome. After the music had waned and introductions concluded, the new arrivals were invited to dine with the Officers and Band of the 17th Foot at the *Robin Hood*, a well-known local establishment owned by Mr William Jones. The customary festivities were enjoyed in mutual good fellowship until a late hour, after which the Band escorted the newcomers to their barracks.<sup>4</sup>

Local convicts grudgingly unloaded the stores and equipment from the ship's hold. When that job was almost finished the following day, the *John Barry* convicts eagerly mustered on deck in the divisions allotted at the voyage's commencement. William glanced around as he heard a commotion behind him. Notwithstanding James McTernan's report, one more fatality occurred on the *John Barry*. A convict, sixty-five-year-old William Lees, fell from a ladder and plummeted down the

hatchway from a height of twelve feet to the floor of the lower deck.<sup>5</sup> James McTernan was called immediately but the unfortunate man was dead. He had survived almost five months at sea and finally had seen the new country but died just before setting foot on his new homeland.

Although no convict had any complaints to offer the Colonial Secretary's deputy, they were forced to wait longer before disembarking. The Convict Indents needed to be completed before formally transferring the prisoners from the custody of Captain Robson to Governor Bourke of the Colony.<sup>6</sup> The Muster Master held the convicts' records so he commenced shipboard interrogations. The convicts were formed into two straight lines, which crawled along slowly as two men at a time were processed. When William's turn at the desk arrived, he found that many of his details were already entered but he still had to answer questions flung at him. This deliberate strategy by the authorities was an attempt to catch the convicts out in a lie, which wouldn't be possible if they simply had to agree that the information was correct.<sup>7</sup>

`What's yer name?'

`William Coombe, sir.'

`What ship did ya arrive on?'

`The *John Barry*, sir.'

`We're now in January of what year?'

`1836, sir.'

`What County are ya from?'

`Devon, sir.'

`What's yer occupation?'

`Farm servant, sir.'

`What crime did ya commit?'

`Sheep stealin', sir.'

`And yer sentence?'

`Life, sir.'

`What year were ya born?'

William had to quickly dredge his mental swamp and finally responded, `1809, sir.'

`And what was the date of yer trial?'

`It wuz at the March Assizes. I think it wuz around 19th March 1835, sir.'

`Hmm. Stand up straight!'

William, slightly startled, thought he must have been slouching. However, he soon found the reason for the command when a man standing beside the desk moved behind him and placed a measuring rod against his back.

‘Five feet five and three-quarter inches,’ he bawled to the penman, who dutifully recorded it and intoned, still writing, while occasionally looking up at William, ‘Complexion ruddy, hair dark brown, eyes hazel.’ The man with the measuring stick now leant it against the wall behind the desk and returned to stand beside William, who wondered what might happen next.

‘Open yer mouth wide!’ the man bellowed into his ear. As William did so the man grabbed William’s upper and lower jaw and peered intently into his mouth. He roared, ‘Lost the canine teeth in the upper jaw; has a scar on the right jaw.’<sup>8</sup>

Releasing William’s mouth, he ordered, ‘Take yer shirt orf!’

William quickly removed his shirt. The man, whom he supposed was the Inspector, closely examined his arms and upper body, while shouting information for the penman to record.

‘Small mole on the upper right arm; five small moles below the left elbow!’ William listened in surprise. He didn’t know these things himself.

‘Three scars on the back of the forefinger of the left hand; three slight scars on the ball of the left thumb!’ He dropped William’s hand, saying, ‘Put yer shirt back on!’

The penman continued to question William as he fumbled with the buttons.

‘What’s yer religion?’

‘Protestant, sir.’

‘Can ya read an’ write?’

‘Both, sir.’

‘Married?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘How many children?’

William’s memory momentarily faltered. He was about to say three but checked himself.

‘Four, sir.’

‘What are they?’

‘One son an’ three daughters, sir.’<sup>9</sup>

The formalities completed, the convicts could finally disembark. The Muster Master instructed the prisoners, ‘Follow me!’ and they marched through the streets of Sydney Town to Hyde Park

Barracks.<sup>10</sup> William looked around inquisitively as strange sounds reached his ears. Men who looked like him were conversing in unfamiliar languages. One sounded familiar, and he remembered their short stopover at Teneriffe. He was told later that there were many Europeans in Sydney Town besides English: Spaniards, Germans, Italians and French. Strange-looking men from other countries were there, too. Men from China wore their hair plaited in a single pigtail down their back, often reaching to their waist. Dark-skinned men with heavily tattooed faces had startling appearances. William learned they were New Zealanders, and was informed that other similar men were called Otaheiteans. There were other dark-skinned men and women too, many of whom walked around either naked or near-naked. He was informed that these were the local natives of New South Wales.

And there were ones just like him; convicts. They weren't hard to spot. The Government gangs slouched along in single file, being marched to their work. Others apparently not assigned to gangs walked by unattended, which William, now accustomed to a rigorously supervised life, struggled to comprehend. He was puzzled at their dress. He learned later that different prison garb indicated the length of time the convict had been in the colony. Some were dressed in grey or yellow jackets and duck overalls (the magpie crowd) while others wore white woollen Parramatta smocks and trousers. All clothing was daubed heavily with broad arrows, and usually a couple of letters and various numerals, in combinations of black, white, and red. At one stage they passed a jail gang, shuffling along sullenly with their leg-chains jangling.<sup>11</sup>

Suddenly William was startled by raucous laughter that filled the air; it reminded him of a mob of drunks but it didn't come from ground level. Surprised, he saw that three birds in the branches of a large tree were making the noise. He stopped to look, as did several others. Struck by the stark realisation that this was a strange land far from home, he wondered what other strange sights and sounds he might encounter.

The Muster Master didn't share their amusement. 'Get moving, you lot! Catch up!'

They quickly closed the gap in the line but William continued surveying his surroundings. He caught his breath as he spied a wooden frame in a yard beside what seemed to be an official building. A gallows! He could almost feel the rope around his neck as he thought of how narrowly he had escaped that fate at Exeter. It was evidently an ever-present threat here as well.

The Principal Superintendent of Convicts, Frederick Hely,<sup>12</sup> customarily attended Hyde Park Barracks to muster newly-arrived felons before the Assignment Commissioner arranged for their distribution throughout the colony.<sup>13</sup> The convicts didn't have long to wait before the assignment process began.

The Superintendent arrived with the Commissioner for the Assignment of Convict Servants and they conversed with the Muster Master. A waiting penman officiously made himself comfortable at a desk in a corner of the large room. William surveyed the room, noting the trestle tables and long stools against a far wall, which indicated its use as a mess hall. The penman carefully opened his inkbottle to record the allotment of these latest arrivals. After studying the Convict Indents, Hely and the Assignment Commissioner classified the newly-arrived convicts. The majority were to be distributed among the settlers as assigned servants, the remainder to be retained in government employment. Due to the generally good behaviour of the prisoners during the voyage, none were to be sent to penal settlements. Because of the number of settlers occupying farming land to the north around Hunter's River, a contingent of one hundred and eight prisoners was earmarked for that part of the colony.<sup>14</sup>

When the Assignment Commissioner called his name, William briskly stepped two paces forward. 'You are assigned to Francis Forbes Esquire, in the District of Merton. Stand over there,' he pointed. While waiting, he ruminated that at the age of twenty-seven, he was about to embark on a new, though involuntary, stage of his life in the Colony of New South Wales, which already housed more than twenty thousand convicts.<sup>15</sup> He suddenly felt sweaty and a bit shaky as he realised that his life over the next several years was going to be determined largely by his master. He needn't have been overly concerned, for although his master's name didn't mean anything to him, it was well known throughout the colony. Francis Forbes had been appointed Chief Justice of New South Wales in 1823 and was given a land grant near Muscle Brook<sup>A</sup>. He named his property *Skellatar*, after his ancestral site in Aberdeen, Scotland.<sup>16</sup>

Unaware of the assignment system, William didn't realise that his master had paid the government one pound for his clothing and bedding. Therefore, he was pleasantly surprised when a local convict working for the government store handed him two jackets, three coarse linen shirts, and two pairs of duck<sup>B</sup> trousers, all neatly folded. Three pairs of shoes and a hat completed his annual allotment of clothing.<sup>17</sup> After the first year he would receive at six-monthly intervals a new jacket, trousers, a pair of shoes and a cap.<sup>18</sup> A good blanket and a palliasse,<sup>C</sup> which were considered the master's property, added to his astonishment.<sup>19</sup> He was pleased to feel the thickness of the blanket as he unfolded it, then after stacking his issue of clothing on it, he refolded it carefully and placed it at his feet. Others

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<sup>A</sup> There are different spellings of Muswellbrook in this narrative, depending on the way the town was spelt at the particular time.

<sup>B</sup> Duck is a durable, closely woven heavy cotton or linen fabric.

<sup>C</sup> A palliasse is a thin straw mattress used as a pallet.

joined him at regular intervals during the next couple of hours, including John Campbell, Thomas Mathews and Ambrose Parker, who were assigned also to Francis Forbes.<sup>20</sup>

When assigning convicts, distinction was rarely made according to the offence committed, the period of the sentence, the age or character of the convict. The main determinant used for selection was their previous occupation.<sup>21</sup> As William had been an agricultural labourer, he was considered eminently suitable to fulfil similar duties for Francis Forbes. To be located far from Sydney Town meant he would be spared the temptation of getting involved in the wrong crowd there.

Fortunately for William, Francis Forbes was a humane man and so was his Superintendent. As the process of assignment continued, William cocked his head at hearing unfamiliar names of areas, districts, or settlements. Some sounded attractive, such as Brisbane Water, Invermein, Raymond Terrace and Maitland, the second largest town in the Colony. Other names sounded very British, such as Newcastle, Scone, Butterwick, Singleton and Merton, where he was assigned. There were also Paterson, Cassilis and Vacy. Some carried the impression of expansive or wild places, having names like Patrick Plains, Port Stephens, Peel River and Hunter's River, while others like Dungog and Wollombi defied classification.<sup>22</sup> *P'raps they're native names*, he thought.

The assignment process completed, they were ordered to move the tables and stools back into position in readiness for a meal. William chewed the meat in the stew slowly, savouring every mouthful. The bread was quite fresh, great for mopping up the liquid and he made sure he got all of it. The convicts were quickly formed up again and marched up a flight of stairs that led to a long corridor, which had door-sized openings at regular intervals along both sides. Groups of four men were ordered into each room, their sleeping quarters for the next couple of days. The rooms were sparsely furnished; each contained four roughly-constructed beds. Their guide said matter-of-factly, 'Settle in but don't get too comfortable. You'll be travelling to the Hunter River by steam packet on Friday night.' William thought, *Steam packet? What's that?* He threw the palliasse and his new belongings on one of the beds. Lying there that night, he reflected, *'Ow quick things change! The voyage is be'ind me now. What'll the next couple o' weeks bring?* He lay awake for a while, tormented by memories of Grace and his children, his nightly torture accompanied only by the uneven snoring of his companions.

Just after seven o'clock on Friday night, the one hundred and eight prisoners arose from their early evening meal, gathered their belongings, and were marched by an officer and twenty-five soldiers

towards the lonely end of George Street, overrun by dogs and with narrow paths leading off in several directions. They arrived at a wall enclosing the premises of Robert Campbell, owner of Campbell's Wharf, from which the steamer would be departing. They entered a wicket,<sup>D</sup> crossed a yard littered with all kinds of paraphernalia relating to waterborne commerce, and descended to the wharf, where the steamer awaited the arrival of her nervous passengers.<sup>23</sup> A northern road had been constructed but it was still easier and quicker to sail up the coast, particularly if prisoners needed to be transported.<sup>24</sup>

A montage of strangers crowded the wharf but not many were embarking on the steamer; few relished sharing the journey with so many convicts. Usually servants would be there dutifully carrying their master's baggage, while others would be saying teary goodbyes to friends or family, or excitedly wishing them farewell. There were some, for inexplicable reasons of their own, who just liked to hang about wharves and jetties. However, there were others whose behaviour William recognised from the time he had spent in the gaol at Exeter, on the *Justitia* moored in the grimy Thames, and on the voyage out. These were the opportunists, who slunk around the wharves waiting for an unsuspecting person to take their eye off their baggage for a brief moment, and then they would have their 'chance'. Waiting to board, William checked his possessions then pulled his arms tighter around them.

He was startled by a blood-curdling whoop from one of the ships in the harbour. His body froze and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck bristle. As he looked around at his fearful companions, one of the soldiers said, 'Just New Zealanders doin' their customary war dance.' William shivered involuntarily, thinking, *I'm glad I'm not on that ship*. The warlike sound continued for some time but it seemed to have a structure, as if a type of play. The war song died away, to be replaced by a beautiful male voice from another ship singing what seemed to be a love song, which wafted caressingly to the shore. The soldier volunteered, 'Probably Otaheitean.'<sup>25</sup> William nodded, thinking, *He must've been in Sydney Town f' quite a while*.

As the bells on the vessels in the harbour rang the hour of eight, the passengers traversed gingerly the uneven planks stretched between the safety of the wharf and the gently rocking deck of the steamer. William stepped cautiously onto the planks then crossed the abyss. On reaching the deck, he dodged deckhands who were bustling along, attending to one task after another as the Captain barked out a succession of familiar orders to them.<sup>26</sup> The prisoners' officer ordered them to go

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<sup>D</sup> A wicket is a small door or gate.

below, and as William escaped the chaotic scene above, a decoupage of human activity met his eyes below deck.

Eyes adjusting to the dim light, William observed a double row of bunks lining the walls of the vessel, some already occupied. A few men were enjoying leftovers from tea; they must have managed to pocket some extra bread or a chunk or two of now-cold meat. Throwing himself on an unoccupied bunk, William casually observed the scene. Some were already asleep and were snoring, while others were taking off their jackets, ready to turn in. When the required head of steam was reached the order was given and the paddles began propelling the craft across the harbour. William was lulled to sleep by the time the vessel cleared the Heads.<sup>E</sup>

He awoke after daybreak to a low hubbub and ascended the deck, surprised to see the boat was rounding a distinctive headland. He asked a soldier leaning on the rail, 'What's that called?' 'Nobby's,' the soldier replied. This huge guardian to Newcastle's harbour was awaiting the lighthouse lantern brought by the *John Barry*. He noticed the half-completed breakwater intended to unite Nobby's with the shoreline, until the Government decided the huge expense of constructing it wasn't worth the doubtful outcome when completed so had abandoned the project. His first impression of Newcastle was that it was a singularly unimpressive village, consisting of run-down houses that appeared to be placed in no particular order, but just plonked down willy-nilly as if by a huge uncaring hand.

The steamer entered the harbour and moored alongside the stone wharf built in 1804.<sup>27</sup> William scanned the waiting crowd. *Same sort o' people as Port Jackson*, he thought. A few waited to welcome home family members and friends while others were there to collect goods from the steamer. Then there was the other group of bored souls, seeking some recent news or an item or two of delectable gossip. The officer took William Johnson and Henry Small<sup>F</sup> ashore to transfer them to the Gaoler and then have a quick breakfast in the available three-quarters of an hour.

William felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Thomas Mathews.

'Thomas! 'Ow are ya?'

'Good, even better soon. We're bein' given bread and cheese shortly.'

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<sup>E</sup> Sydney Heads, at either side of the entrance to the harbour.

<sup>F</sup> Henry Small managed to stick at his assignment for four and a half years until 26 July 1840, when he finally had enough and absconded. He managed to elude the authorities for more than three years before he was apprehended on 10 November 1843. His escapade wasn't held against him too severely, as he was granted a ticket-of-leave on 6 May 1846, only two and a half years later.

`Let's go. Don't wanta miss out.'

They returned below decks to receive their share and afterwards William managed to score a tin pannikin of hot black tea. As he was finishing it, someone remarked, 'The Blue Peter's up'<sup>G</sup> and those ashore began returning to the steamer. At nine o'clock the paddles began moving again and the steamer resumed her journey up the Hunter. William stayed on deck now, his eager eyes drinking in the scenery. At times the river was quite expansive and he surveyed banks of virgin forest, behind which rose thickly wooded hills. At other times the river constricted and the steamer sailed between an impenetrable wall of trees, blocking out whatever lay beyond. Occasionally he saw a cottage in a small clearing, and that evidence of human habitation temporarily blunted the almost overpowering feeling of how small he felt against the majesty of the thick bush. Europeans had settled in the Hunter Valley and began taming the stubborn scrub with axe and hoe over a decade before, but the bush didn't submit easily to the encroachment of civilisation.

By ten o'clock they reached a small group of buildings called Morpeth, beyond which navigation became impracticable. They were ordered to disembark, emptying the steamer in preparation for taking passengers for her return journey to Sydney Town. As the convicts were being lined up in twos William asked Alexander, 'We're goin' ta walk? But `ow far?' Alexander pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders. The magistrates throughout the district had informed settlers of the impending arrival of convict servants so when the convicts arrived in Maitland after the few miles' walk the town was alive with settlers eager to collect their cheap labour. While waiting for proceedings to begin, the officer singled out groups of prisoners assigned to the same master and instructed them to wait in their group off to the side. Despite clammy hands and stomach flutters, William determined he would make the best of his fate, whether good or ill, and that helped settle him down.

Besides William and his three companions assigned to Francis Forbes, eight others were assigned to landholders in the Merton district. William keenly monitored the proceedings, as he dearly wished to say a final goodbye to Alexander Croote, who it transpired was the only convict assigned to the Wollombi district.<sup>28</sup> Across the sea of faces, William's eyes followed Alexander as he was leaving with his master, and Alexander turned looking for William. Their eyes met and they waved to each other. Then Alexander was gone. William fought the mist rising in his eyes and the lump forming in

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<sup>G</sup> The Blue Peter is a blue flag with a white square in the centre, raised as a signal to recall crews and to announce that the ship is about to sail.

his throat, as the last tenuous link between him and home was now severed. He turned to occupy his mind with following the proceedings. Some masters hadn't arrived to claim their servant, so a magistrate handed these men a piece of paper on which he had written their master's name and the name of the property. He pointed out which road to take, instructing them to check with anyone they met on the road that they were heading in the right direction, until they arrived at their assignment.

A man had been standing by waiting for a lull in the proceedings and now he approached a magistrate and engaged him in conversation. The magistrate turned and pointed to where William and the other three prisoners were standing. The man nodded, shook the magistrate's hand and walked over to the four convicts. He informed them, 'My name's Chambers, Superintendent at *Skellatar*.<sup>29</sup> Follow me.' He walked off and each man hastily picked up his bundle of belongings and hurried after him. Turning the corner, he said, 'Throw your belongings into the cart and jump in.' After driving along a couple of streets, Chambers halted outside the store of a general merchant and after alighting and tying up the horses, said 'Stay here' and went inside. After about ten minutes he returned and instructed the four men, 'Get down and follow me.'

The store smelled of different grains and other unfamiliar aromas William couldn't identify. An assortment of metal cooking and household implements hung wherever space could be found on the walls while dressers and display cabinets seemed to hold every item imaginable. They didn't have much time to marvel at the variety of goods or to indulge in conversation, as Chambers instructed them, 'Load them onto the cart,' gesturing to several bags of flour and sugar and two chests of tea. After making two to three trips each they had the cart loaded and Chambers told them to climb up on it and ride on the bags. As the cart wound through the streets towards the outskirts of town, the hubbub grew fainter and Maitland shortly faded into the distance as they began to travel north-west to their final destination, *Skellatar*.

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- <sup>3</sup> 'The Parliamentary Report on Transportation (1838): Extracts from the Molesworth Report of 1838 describing conditions for the convicts' [Online]. Available at <http://www.victorianweb.org/history/transport.html> Accessed 27 December 2010.
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- <sup>7</sup> Frost, Lucy & Maxwell-Stewart, Hamish 2001, *Chain letters: Narrating convict lives*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, VIC.
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- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Hyde Park Barracks Museum' [Online]. Available at [http://www.hht.net.au/museums/hyde\\_park\\_barracks\\_museum](http://www.hht.net.au/museums/hyde_park_barracks_museum) Accessed 18 December 2013.
- <sup>11</sup> 'Peter Cunningham RN 1827, *Two Years in New South Wales*,' in Shearer, J D 1976, *Bound for Botany Bay: Impressions of transportation and convict life*, Summit Books, Dee Why West, NSW.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Superintendent of Convicts, later Principal Superintendent of Convicts' [Online]. Available at [http://search.records.nsw.gov.au/agencies/1650?series\\_created\\_page=2](http://search.records.nsw.gov.au/agencies/1650?series_created_page=2) Accessed 18 December 2013.
- <sup>13</sup> 'The Parliamentary Report on Transportation (1838): Extracts from the Molesworth Report of 1838 describing conditions for the convicts' [Online]. Available at <http://www.victorianweb.org/history/transport.html> Accessed 27 December 2010.
- <sup>14</sup> 'John Barry 1836 cohort', in *Free Settler or Felon?* [Online]. Available at <https://www.jenwillets.com/searchaction.php?page=3&surname=&ship=john%20barry%201836&firstname> Accessed 30 January 2011.
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## 6 Life in the Hunter Valley

With Maitland faded behind them, the cart travelled north-west towards Patrick Plains along a rough road that began life as a dray track. The alluvial river flats around Maitland merged into rich flood plains around Singleton, which they passed through late in the afternoon. Heading north-east on a bridle track, they followed the route pioneered by Captain Pike's drays. Chambers intended to camp overnight at Fal Brook ford on Glennies Creek, a popular resting place for travellers.<sup>1</sup> Night was closing in when they arrived so Chambers gave the men jobs straightaway. He had Ambrose Parker open a bag of flour and sent John Campbell to fetch water from the creek. He detailed William and Thomas Mathews to unhitch and hobble the horses while he started a fire. Chambers then mixed some flour and water in a bucket. They organised their bedding while waiting for the fire to make coals and then Chambers showed them how to make damper, the staple fare of Australian bushmen.

As they were washing down the hot damper and salted beef with a couple of pannikins of strong black tea, Chambers answered questions about *Skellatar*.

'How big is it?' Thomas asked.

'About ten thousand acres.'

'What!' exclaimed William. 'I've never 'eard of a farm that big in England. D' y' manage it yerself?'

'An overseer of the shepherds assists me,' Chambers replied.

'Are other convicts there?' Ambrose ventured.

'Yes, usually thirty-five or thirty-six.'<sup>2</sup>

'What sorta work d' they do?' John asked.

'Mainly look after the stock – sheep and cattle – and grow wheat and some corn.'

'What happens if a convict misbehaves?' Ambrose queried.

'Some do occasionally, then they're sent before the local magistrate who usually despatches them to gangs or public works. If not sentenced to labour in irons on the roads, they could be imprisoned or placed in solitary confinement.'

The four men listened soberly as Chambers continued. 'Magistrates have the power to sentence a convict to fifty lashes with the cat o' nine tails for misdemeanours such as drunkenness, disobeying orders, neglecting their work, using abusive language to their master or overseer, or any other disorderly or dishonest conduct, including absconding.'<sup>3</sup> He warned them, 'You can expect hard work initially, like clearing bush and felling timber, but if you work well and behave yourselves, you'll be

given lighter work with more variety.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the billy<sup>A</sup> was empty. William felt tiredness overtaking him and turned in for the night.

After breakfasting on the usual damper, salted beef and tea, they hitched up the horses and travelled along a dray route heading north-west and, passing through a property called *Ravenworth*, followed the track blazed by the Segenhoe party in 1825.<sup>5</sup> It led to Muscle Creek, but they would turn off at *Skellatar* before there. Drawing closer to *Skellatar*, William was impressed by the lushness of the river flats. Part of the country was lightly timbered and the soil appeared to be rich. He thought the countryside equalled the most improved English meadows.<sup>6</sup>

After about four hours the track opened to reveal the homestead. It was an unimposing structure for the Chief Justice of the Colony, but Francis Forbes only visited occasionally. Single storey and built of wooden slabs, the homestead was roomy and comfortable. The slabs were of box timber, each nine feet long and ranging between nine inches and a foot deep, and edged off at each end to two inches wide. They stood in a gutter two inches wide made in the bed log with a mortising axe, then the top wall plate similarly detailed was placed over the top of the slabs and secured each end by poles set in the earth, thus providing a secure dwelling.<sup>7</sup>

Several slab huts close to the homestead were occupied by farm servants who were free men. The convicts' huts were about a hundred yards away. Each hut accommodated three men who worked with the stock, which Chambers informed them would eventually be their main task. Considering his crime, William thought it ironic but he did have experience with sheep. *Skellatar* ran about twelve hundred sheep, comprising around five hundred wethers and the rest ewes and lambs, as well as over fifty short-horned Durham cows with about thirty calves. Also, there were nearly a hundred steers and heifers, the Durham bull, breeding rams, four horses used for saddle or draft, and a team of working bullocks. William noticed several types of poultry scratching around the homestead and the nearby huts, and the smell wafting from a low building some distance away betrayed it as a pigsty.<sup>8</sup>

Chambers pulled the horses up beside the storeroom behind the house. Ordering the men to unload the cart he unlocked the door, entered and began rearranging the contents so the new produce could be stowed. As the men carried the bags in, Chambers instructed where to put them. After the tea chests were stored, all climbed onto the cart and proceeded to the dozen or so convicts' huts,

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<sup>A</sup> A billy, or billycan, is a tin can used for brewing tea over an open fire.

which were constructed like a small village laid out in a rough square. Chambers stopped the cart and pointing to a hut, said to John Campbell, 'There's a spare bunk in that one for you,' and pointing to the hut beside it said to the others, 'That one's empty; you three can share it.' The men dragged their belongings off the cart and entered their new home.

Thomas spoke first. 'It's not fancy, but should keep the rain and wind out.' Constructed like the homestead but with rougher workmanship, the top plate supported a roof of poles overlaid with a covering of bark.<sup>9</sup> Previous occupants had filled gaps in the upright slabs with a mixture of mud and straw to prevent ingress of the elements. A foot above the stone floor, three wooden slatted platforms serving as beds were constructed around three walls. Each threw his palliasse, blanket and clothes on a platform. William felt it would be sufficiently comfortable after a hard day's work.

A three-inch metal ring half an inch in diameter was forged to a bolt that was fastened through a leg at the end of each bed. William asked Chambers, 'What's that for?'

Chambers replied, 'If I find that any man entertains the temptation of becoming a "runner" and vanishing during the night I'll chain him by one ankle when he goes to bed every night and fasten the chain to the ring. Don't worry; if you prove trustworthy you needn't be concerned about it.'

William acknowledged soberly, 'I'll remember that.'

As they walked to the storeroom to collect their rations as Chambers had instructed, they noticed on their left a large building, perhaps a wool-shed, and another resembling a barn. They determined to check these out at their first opportunity. Arriving at the storeroom, they surrendered what little money they had and Chambers entered the amount in a book. He assured them, 'It will be kept safely until you either receive a pardon or acquire a ticket-of-leave.'<sup>10</sup>

He informed them, 'Francis Forbes, Colonel Dumaresq on *St Heliers*, and other Upper Hunter landowners give their convict servants the same quantities of rations, clothing, housing and indulgences. Regulations fix the food entitlements at twelve pounds of wheat, or the equivalent in flour and maize meal, seven pounds of mutton or beef, or four and a half pounds of salt pork, and two ounces of both salt and soap weekly,<sup>11</sup> but convicts on *Skellatar* receive ten pounds or more of flour, eight pounds of beef or mutton, indulgences such as tea and sugar frequently, or in their place two quarts of milk per day, an indulgence of two ounces of tobacco per week, the stipulated allowance of two ounces of soap and salt, and the annual allotment of clothing.'<sup>12</sup> So you needn't worry about not being well looked after.'

While weighing out their supplies, he informed them, 'Collect your weekly rations after work each Saturday. Remember that tea, sugar and tobacco are indulgences over and above the requirements and can be withdrawn if you misbehave, without me violating government regulations. But extra supplies of food can be given for exceptionally good behaviour or hard work.'<sup>13</sup> He added, waving his left hand, 'Those who have particular skills, like the farm butcher or the blacksmith, receive allotments above the ordinary.'

William asked, 'What d' they get?'

'When a pig is slaughtered the butcher has the right to keep its heart. Men who shoulder additional responsibilities are also allotted extra rations because of that. For example, the shepherds' overseer and the shepherds who keep watch at night.'

Ambrose asked, 'What if a man doesn't use tobacco?'

Chambers replied, 'Supplying tobacco helps to maintain a contented workforce and I wouldn't mind if a man traded his allotment with others for something else he considered more desirable.'<sup>14</sup>

He instructed them, 'You'll begin work tomorrow. Be fed, dressed for work and standing outside your huts by seven o'clock. You can look around the property but don't go near the homestead or enter any other hut but your own unless invited.'

After stowing their supplies in their huts, they took a look inside the barn. It was an imposing structure, formed of slabs fifteen feet high. Peering into the semi-darkness, William recognised familiar farming implements.

An assortment of agricultural tools rested just inside the door to the left. Similar tools and a wheelbarrow usually stored there were currently being used. The cart that had brought them from Maitland was housed there and its harness hung on a wooden peg on the wall nearby, with a leading harness on an adjacent peg. A bullock dray rested against one wall while a town-built horse dray was garaged behind it. Bags of grain, mostly wheat but some corn, were stacked on a raised platform against a rear wall, while feed rooms occupied the space under the grain loft. In front of the feed rooms was a timber floor and border, used for threshing grain with a flail, although some land owners in the district had imported a threshing machine for this purpose.

Just then a worker wheeled a barrow into the barn. He removed agricultural tools and stacked them against the wall.

'Hullo,' said Ambrose, 'we're just new and lookin' around.'

The worker introduced himself as James and wiped his brow. 'The bullock yokes, bows, and chains are usually stowed on the dray but are up-country at present, along with the big timber chain.<sup>15</sup> Men are fellin' trees and clearin' scrub to open up more land for grazin' so the bullocks and all that equipment are there.'

'How much land's been cleared?' inquired Thomas.

'A fair bit. Over a thousand acres has been cleared and divided into paddocks.'<sup>16</sup>

William pointed, 'Is that a water cart with the big cask mounted on the tray?'

Their new acquaintance spun around to follow William's finger. 'Yeah, it is. That cask holds two hundred and fifty-two gallons. You'll find a harrow<sup>B</sup> and a scarifier<sup>C</sup> is stored here when they're not in use, as well as a moulding plough<sup>D</sup> and two ordinary ploughs.<sup>17</sup> G'day now.' And, slinging a couple of tools over his shoulder, he headed back to his work.

They passed a building with bails that suggested it was a dairy and William poked his head inside another structure nearby that contained instruments he didn't recognise. He later became familiar with the circular tobacco stairs and lever presses used for pressing both cheese and tobacco. They inspected the woolshed, entering via the opening the sheep were driven through before being brought up onto the shearing floor. William walked across the slatted floor and into the adjacent partly-divided room, in which a huge slatted table occupied pride of place. The shorn fleeces would be thrown across this table to be inspected by the boss of the board. A baling press stood in a corner of the room. William noted the races the shorn sheep were thrust into, exiting the shed into the paddock beside it. Voices wafted across from the convict huts, so they wandered back to theirs and prepared their evening meal. The slaughter house and the salting tubs could wait for another day.

William, Ambrose and Thomas decided they would pool their rations and maintained that arrangement the whole time they lived together on *Skellatar*. Their meals were basic, but adequate and satisfying. After receiving their weekly rations they gave themselves the luxury of having cuts of meat for a few meals and then made stews to stretch their supply over the week and to stave off spoilage. On their first working day they were breakfasted and dressed by seven o'clock, waiting outside the hut door before the bell rang that summoned the convicts to work. Breakfast leftovers, stashed in a billycan with tea and sugar in tin pannikins, comprised their dinner. Chambers

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<sup>B</sup> A harrow is an agricultural implement consisting of a heavy frame with either iron teeth or upright discs, used to break up ploughed ground into finer pieces or to cover seed with earth.

<sup>C</sup> A scarifier is a cultivator with prongs for loosening the soil without turning it over.

<sup>D</sup> Commonly called a mouldboard plough. In more recent times, a moulding plough is one that has a curved metal plate that turns over the earth from the furrow.

introduced them to a man named Ned, who carried several axes over his shoulder. Ned patted the axe handles. 'You'll be felling timber for the next little while. Come with me.' He brought the axes down from his shoulder and instructed them, 'Take one each.' Chambers motioned to John Campbell, standing with his hut's other occupants and already becoming emotionally distant from the other three, 'You take one, too'.

Hoisting their axes, they followed Ned across fenced paddocks holding sheep and cattle until they came upon recently cleared open country. Several men working nearby waved to them and they returned the greeting. Ned explained, 'They're freemen grubbin' out tree stumps before buildin' fences.'

William said, 'They look the same as us,' to which Ned replied, 'They do; ya can't tell `em apart, most times. Next Sat'dy arvo you'll see that they get the same rations as you.'<sup>18</sup> They continued walking for over half an hour before the roughly cleared country began changing to patches of woody scrub with stands of eucalypt forest.

After discovering that none of them had experience in tree-felling, Ned instructed them on how to hold and swing an axe, how to assess the best approach in felling each tree, how to gauge where it would fall and what to do when the fall was imminent. He selected a patch of timber for each man and set them to work, saying, 'I'll come back at smoko time to see how ya goin'.' Although William approached the task with trepidation he decided which way he wanted the tree to fall, then chopped a 'V' in the fall side until he reckoned he'd removed sufficient timber. He then shifted to the opposite side and attacked the trunk. He paced himself like a cat wielder,<sup>E</sup> realising his wind and his hands wouldn't last to the end of the day if he didn't, and there was no escaping work tomorrow.

The tree started creaking. He continued chopping then ran several yards backwards as it toppled majestically to the forest floor, thudding down with earth-shuddering force and throwing up a cloud of dust and leaf debris. He then heard a tree creaking over to his left as Ambrose felled his first one. He searched out his next tree and repeated the process. When Ned arrived he started a fire, put the billy on, then called to them, 'Knock orf f' smoko.' Afterwards he ensured the fire was out then walked with them individually to inspect their handiwork, offering advice where it was warranted. He said, 'I'll bring a file to ya hut after work and it's to each man's advantage to keep his axe sharp.' So it became a custom after tea to talk while taking turns sharpening their axes.

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<sup>E</sup> A flogger wielding a cat o' nine tails would pace himself for the flogging so he wouldn't become worn out before the job was done, usually resting for around five seconds between delivering each stroke.

Every morning they had to muster to ensure all were present to work, except on Sunday mornings when they had to attend Divine Service held in the barn. As a clergyman was rarely present the service usually comprised the Superintendent reading Bible passages. After several months they had cleared a large patch of forest, cleaned up the logs and snigged them behind the bullock team with the big timber chain into a cleared spot. The gang of freemen had moved in behind them, grubbed out the tree stumps and now began sawing the felled trees into fencing material. William found that his life became a tapestry woven from strands of his relationships, his work, the security of being settled in the same place, and the predictability of routine.

One day Ned told them, 'Tree-fellin's over for a while, boys. You'll help with sheep washin' soon, before the shearin' starts.' The following Monday they joined others and walked a draft of about a hundred sheep to a creek that flowed into a tributary of the Hunter. Before the sheep were driven into the water, William was given a staff about seven feet long and waded through the creek. He moved into a line with other men near the far side to prevent sheep from scaling the opposite bank. The sheep were to enter the water and swim downstream for about fifty yards, where other men were stationed in the water to force them out where the creek bank provided a good exit point.

William tried to focus on the task but with shivers wracking his body and chattering teeth it wasn't easy, although by the time the first draft left the water he wasn't feeling too bad. When they were herded towards the paddocks near the woolshed, a second draft was forced into the water and the process continued until the entire flock had been washed. After every second draft headed towards the woolshed paddocks the men were allowed to leave the water for a short break.

While crossing the centre of the creek William heard a splash but didn't take any notice until he saw a man on the bank pointing frantically, wide-eyed and unable to speak. He turned and saw Thomas struggle to the surface then disappear under the water. Apparently, he'd fallen into a deep hole in the creek bed. William hesitated, not knowing what to do; he couldn't swim! He was frightened to move closer in case he too fell into the hole. Thomas broke the surface again and William instinctively held out his staff, shouting 'Grab it, Thomas!' Thomas managed to clutch it with one of his thrashing hands and William pulled him over. He helped his coughing and spluttering friend regain his feet in the shallower water. With arms around each other's shoulders they splashed and stumbled towards the bank.

Cold and shivering, they were greeted with a jubilant hurrah and half a pannikin of rum each to warm them, which was accepted gladly. Francis Forbes never allowed spirits to be given to men on his farm, except during the sheep-washing season. He understood the effect of cold water on the men and was happy to provide them with spirits to counter it.<sup>19</sup> Hot damper followed, washed down with black tea. A warm feeling crept into William's stomach and chest and radiated to his limbs. His clothes still gripped his skin though, clammy and cold, clinging like ivy to a tree trunk.

Although being in the water was a miserable task William enthusiastically participated in any type of work involving sheep. He became used to sheep work, which was easier than tree felling and provided a welcome relief from it. He had seen a couple of unskilled men who were good workers rewarded by being trained in shearing. They began by practicing on dead sheep under the watchful eye of an old hand but had to endure jibes by their peers, who took great delight in warning them, 'Be careful! She's gettin' away.' They progressed to shearing live sheep about to be slaughtered. Others learned to dress meat by offsideing to the butcher and some learned different skills by assisting other tradesmen.<sup>20</sup>

William enjoyed growing things so he asked Chambers, 'D' y' think I could work in the garden and the orchard?' Chambers was amenable to William's request, as labouring with a hoe was done almost exclusively by convicts<sup>21</sup> but said, 'There's not enough work for another man to be full-time in the farm garden. I can give you three days a week in the garden and the other three days you'll have to stay in the tree felling party.'

'Thank you, sir. I agree to that.'

Chambers added, 'If you wish, you could earn wages by working half a day on Sundays tree felling. It pays ten shillings an acre, the standard rate for servants of the Crown.<sup>22</sup> I'll mark out an acre and when you've cleared it I'll place ten shillings in your account.'

'Thank you, sir. I agree to that too.'

He'd resolved, *I won't reject any reasonable offer or it might not come again.*

William welcomed the change and that Ambrose and Thomas supported his decision made the transition easier.

Thomas said, 'If there's paid work in tree fellin' I'd be happy to get amongst it too.'

Ambrose echoed his statement, 'Me too, that'd do me.'

They asked Chambers and he gave tree felling work to Ambrose and Thomas as well and so they worked near each other on Sunday afternoons. One Sunday evening, as William was felling his final

tree for the day, he saw Ambrose walking towards him, having finished his work. As the tree began to creak and crack, William ran a few yards uphill to get well out of the way. Watching it fall, he saw Ambrose running towards him with his axe high above his head. Bewildered, William raised his axe to ward off the blow but then realised Ambrose was fixed on something behind him.

Ambrose swung his axe to William's left. William, his heart thumping almost out of his chest, turned and saw a large brown snake convulsing in a slithering mess of death throes not a yard behind him. If he had taken one more step backwards he would have stepped on it. Shaking and panting, he managed, 'Thanks, Ambrose, thanks. Y' frightened me. I didn't know what was 'appenin'.'

'Yeah, that's alright. Let's take a closer look.'

Brown in colour and yellowy cream underneath with scattered orange blotches, it was the first time either of them had seen a snake up close. On prising its mouth open, they couldn't see any fangs until Ambrose forced a small twig into its upper jaw and drew it down to reveal a long curved fang that rested along the snake's jaw. William gasped, 'It looks wicked, an' deadly.' They told Thomas later, and after that they always were careful in the scrub.

After a few months the vegetable garden showed signs of William's hard work and persistence and he had almost an extra ten shillings in the bank. He'd constructed a trellis from thin saplings lashed together with twine, upon which bean plants were thriving. Cabbages were growing steadily and he had cleared the weeds and long grass that had encroached upon them like a high tide on sand dunes. Several pumpkin vines trailed off into the grass around the perimeter of the plot, which supplied enough vegetables for those living on the property.

So much had happened since William had left Devon; it seemed that part of his life had been a dream that he couldn't quite grasp hold of, yet neither tear away from. Sitting around at night, the three men often talked about their old lives but the memories didn't end after the talking ceased. There were tormented nights, in the loneliness of his bed, when his thoughts turned to Grace and to the children they had made together. He wondered, '*Ow is she farin' without me? Is she spendin' `er long nights alone, too? `Ow is she makin' a livin' for `erself and the children? `Ow are they growin' up?*' He thought especially of the little one he had never seen and knew deep in his heart those days were over. However, he couldn't help remembering the tender moments and so would force his mind to dwell on his future freedom. Happy visions of the future helped drive away the aching gulf of the past that time could only ease, not erase.

Convict life was hard and William knew that he worked harder than others who were domestic servants or mechanics.<sup>F</sup> Nevertheless, he was better fed than he had been in Devon and he was earning some wages as well. All taken into account, the life of an assigned convict wasn't much different to that of free servants back in England.<sup>23</sup> He sharpened his axe after work on tree-felling days and Sunday evenings, while in the afternoons after working in the garden he picked up odd jobs for wages. Other men with the required skills fixed pots and pans or mended shoes and clothing. Some sat on homemade wooden stools or chairs outside their huts, plaiting whips or weaving cabbage tree hats, for which they hoped to find buyers.<sup>24</sup> Whenever William saw anyone sitting outside he took the opportunity to chat and solicit information, particularly about the district and the type of work currently in demand.

Some convicts longed to get off the property just to experience a change and these often craved the Superintendent's indulgence of issuing a pass so they could leave *Skellatar* on Sunday without incurring official retribution. They usually travelled into Muscle Brook, returning with stories of how the town was coming on and the state of the inns. William decided he would rather work and save money towards the day he received his ticket-of-leave. Then he would be earning wages for all the work he did and could even travel out of the district, provided he carried his ticket-of-leave passport. He looked towards the future, knowing that increased wages would improve his living standards, he could choose his master and leave him if he desired to, and he would be no longer subjected to the risk of being flogged.<sup>25</sup> Not that he performed his daily work in fear of receiving a flogging, but the very real threat of having his back scratched by the dreaded cat o' nine tails was always there. He was unaware that change was coming to *Skellatar* and that his future as a free man would hinge on providential timing.

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<sup>F</sup> The term mechanic was used to describe a tradesman.

- <sup>1</sup> 'Passages to the North-West Plains' [Online]. Available at [http://www.mudgeehistory.com.au/earlysettlement/passages\\_p11.html](http://www.mudgeehistory.com.au/earlysettlement/passages_p11.html) Accessed 28 October 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Report from the Select Committee on Transportation' 1837 [Online]. Available at <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=iklDAAAAcAAJ&dq=fitting%20out%20a%20convict%20ship&pg=PA18&ci=166%2C580%2C734%2C904&source=bookclip#v=onepage&q=fitting%20out%20a%20convict%20ship&f=false> Accessed 30 November 2013.
- <sup>3</sup> 'The Parliamentary Report on Transportation (1838): Extracts from the Molesworth Report of 1838 describing conditions for the convicts' [Online]. Available at <http://www.victorianweb.org/history/transport.html> Accessed 27 December 2010.
- <sup>4</sup> Hirst, John 2008, *Freedom on the fatal shore: Australia's first colony*, Black Inc, Melbourne.
- <sup>5</sup> Dunlop, Eric Wilfrid 1967 (first published in hardcopy), 'Macqueen, Thomas Potter (1791–1854)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University [Online]. Available at <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/macqueen-thomas-potter-2420/text3213> Accessed 16 December 2013.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Passages to the North-West Plains: Occupation of the Upper Hunter' [Online]. Available at [http://www.mudgeehistory.com.au/earlysettlement/passages\\_p11.html](http://www.mudgeehistory.com.au/earlysettlement/passages_p11.html) Accessed 28 October 2013.
- <sup>7</sup> 'Over the sea from Skye: The story of Alexander Anderson', in *The Genealogist*, September 2013, pp.5-8.
- <sup>8</sup> 'Sheep and cattle sale', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuesday 9 July 1844, p. 3 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/12409803> Accessed 28 October 2013.
- <sup>9</sup> Mitchell, Cecily Joan 1973, *Hunter's River: A history of early families and the homes they built in the Lower Hunter Valley between 1830 and 1860*, The Administrator of the Estate of Cecily Joan Mitchell, 793 Hunter Street, Newcastle West, NSW.
- <sup>10</sup> Hirst, John 2008, *Freedom on the fatal shore: Australia's first colony*, Black Inc, Melbourne.
- <sup>11</sup> 'The Parliamentary Report on Transportation (1838): Extracts from the Molesworth Report of 1838 describing conditions for the convicts' [Online]. Available at <http://www.victorianweb.org/history/transport.html> Accessed 27 December 2010.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Report from the Select Committee on Transportation' 1837 [Online]. Available at <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=iklDAAAAcAAJ&dq=fitting%20out%20a%20convict%20ship&pg=PA18&ci=166%2C580%2C734%2C904&source=bookclip#v=onepage&q=fitting%20out%20a%20convict%20ship&f=false> Accessed 30 November 2013.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Hirst, John 2008, *Freedom on the fatal shore: Australia's first colony*, Black Inc, Melbourne.
- <sup>15</sup> 'Sales by Auction', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday 21 January 1846, p. 3 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/678054> Accessed 28 October 2013.
- <sup>16</sup> 'To be let or sold', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Friday 10 May 1844, p. 3 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/1519412> Accessed 28 October 2013.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Sales by Auction', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday 21 January 1846, p. 3 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/678054> Accessed 28 October 2013.
- <sup>18</sup> Hirst, John 2008, *Freedom on the fatal shore: Australia's first colony*, Black Inc, Melbourne.

<sup>19</sup> 'Report from the Select Committee on Transportation' 1837 [Online]. Available at <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=iklDAAAAcAAJ&dq=fitting%20out%20a%20convict%20ship&pg=PA18&ci=166%2C580%2C734%2C904&source=bookclip#v=onepage&q=fitting%20out%20a%20convict%20ship&f=false> Accessed 30 November 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Hirst, John 2008, *Freedom on the fatal shore: Australia's first colony*, Black Inc, Melbourne.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas, Stephen (ed.) 1988, *Convict workers: Reinterpreting Australia's past*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.

<sup>23</sup> Evans, Lloyd & Nicholls, Paul (eds.) 1976, *Convicts & colonial society 1788-1853*, Cassell, Stanmore, NSW.

<sup>24</sup> Hirst, John 2008, *Freedom on the fatal shore: Australia's first colony*, Black Inc, Melbourne.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

## 7 Change comes to *Skellatar*

New Year 1837 started with promise, as they usually do, but an inauspicious atmosphere soon rested upon *Skellatar*. John Campbell didn't report for morning-muster on 14th January. He had been morose and although William and the others had tried to cheer him up they were generally unsuccessful. It was apparent he'd absconded and Chambers reported his disappearance to the Magistrate for Patrick Plains<sup>1</sup> when next at Singleton on 1st February. Discussing Campbell's disappearance, William echoed the other men's feelings, saying, 'I can't see that this will do 'im any good.'

Ambrose replied, 'He was in a better position than us. He only had a seven year sentence.'<sup>2</sup>

Thomas added, 'He could apply for a ticket-of-leave after only four years.'<sup>3</sup>

Ambrose responded, 'And he only had two years t' go.'

They pursed their lips and shook their heads at such a foolish action.

Francis Forbes had been on sick leave and retired due to ill health in July 1837. His deteriorating health prevented him from travelling much and therefore spending time at *Skellatar*. The topic on everybody's lips was whether he might sell the property and what that might mean for them. The freemen wondered whether they would still have a job if the property changed hands. For the convicts, would they still would have a place there or would they be assigned to a new master? If so, would their new master be kind or cruel? These unanswered questions destabilised daily life.

William was treated well on *Skellatar* but James Mudie, a landowner and magistrate in the Hunter Valley, had that year published a book titled *The Felonry of New South Wales*. Its contents revealed extreme social bigotry towards convict servants and emancipists<sup>4</sup> so William was unsure about how he would be treated elsewhere in the valley.

He heard stories from convicts who had visited Muswellbrook as to how the town was growing and although news of local events occasionally tempted him to leave the property to see the world beyond, William stuck to his original plan. He worked in his spare time and saved his money, as he was always a frugal man. Such things could come later. Life moved in a rhythmic cycle with the seasons. He enjoyed working in the garden, seeing new life grow and tending the plants. Sometimes he worked in the orchard, pruning the trees and checking for signs of pests. Tree felling ended during 1837 and he was assigned to prepare the land for growing crops. He spent Sunday afternoons and some weekday evenings breaking up new ground, for which he was paid one pound four

shillings for every sixty-five rods he completed. Later, he earned six shillings and eight pence for every acre and a half of wheat he hoed.<sup>5</sup> He kept one goal in his sights; acquiring his own land.

*Skellatar* was a hive of activity and speculation was rife in mid-1838 when Sir Francis Forbes<sup>A</sup> was granted a license for depasturing stock beyond the boundaries of the Colony.<sup>6</sup> The subject became a topic of discussion among William and his friends during their evening meal.

‘Where d’ ya’ reckon they’ll be goin’?’

‘Dunno. They say it’s the Liverpool Plains. That’s north, isn’t it?’

‘Think so. Are they just takin’ sheep?’

‘Far as I know, but I dunno `ow many.’

‘How long will it take `em t’ get there?’

‘Dunno. Chambers reckons they’re gunna foller the track to the pass William Nowland found through the Liverpool Ranges above Murrurundi in ‘27 an’ strike out north-west from there.’<sup>7</sup>

‘Where are they gunna water the stock?’

‘Page’s River, `e says.’

Eventually, six shepherds prepared for the trip with three hundred sheep. As they departed, with two shepherds riding in front of the mob, one each side, and one at the back accompanied by another driving the mess wagon, and dogs barking, men shouting, sheep bleating, and a growing cloud of dust, William and other farm workers gave them a loud hurrah, waving their hats in the air.

The following year, the notorious Jew-boy Gang, bushrangers who had operated around Dungog, Maitland and Wollombi, moved into the Upper Hunter. On 21st December 1840, they ransacked the Horsley’s house on their property *Woodbury* at Hexham. The gang took money, jewellery, silver plate, guns and ammunition, and were well away by daybreak, when a messenger took news of the robbery to Captain Day, the Police Magistrate at East Maitland.<sup>8</sup> He armed civilians and chased the outlaws past the Paterson River as far as Edward Cory’s property near Vacy, where darkness hid the outlaws’ tracks. Morning light revealed them and Day, forging ahead, caught up to the leader, Edward Davies the Jew-boy, scouting alone on the Dungog side of Wallarobba Hill. In the ensuing duel, the Jew-boy put a bullet through Day’s hat and galloped off. The gang bailed up St Aubin’s Arms Inn in Scone<sup>9</sup> and later robbed Richard Dangar’s store and the manager, twenty-three-year-old John Graham, was shot and killed attempting to prevent the robbery.<sup>10</sup> The news travelled quickly

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<sup>A</sup> A knighthood was conferred on Francis Forbes in April 1837. Source: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/forbes-sir-francis-2052>

throughout the district, and everyone on *Skellatar* was on edge. The reign of terror that accompanied the Jew-boy Gang had arrived in their locality.

Davies was popular with assigned convicts, mainly because when he robbed a homestead he often broke out the rum for the servants. His popularity rose to hero status when he flogged a squatter at Wollombi at the public triangles with the public flagellator's own 'cat' but the killing of young Graham lost him considerable favour.<sup>11</sup> After leaving Scone with loaded packhorses the gang travelled to Page's River where they bailed up the clientele at Atkinson's Inn before striking out for the Liverpool Ranges.<sup>12</sup> But the clock keeping time on the gang's freedom was sitting on one minute to midnight; Day's party caught up with them on their way to the Liverpool Plains on 16th March 1841, and a dramatic shootout and capture ensued at Doughboy Hollow near Murrurundi.<sup>13</sup>

When this news reached *Skellatar* a week later, William remarked to Ambrose and Thomas, 'I wonder whether John Campbell became a bushranger?'

'Who knows,' replied Thomas, 'It's not for me.'

Ambrose stated emphatically, 'Me neither. I'm goin' t' stick it out and serve me time so I c'n be free again; truly free, not free but on the run.'

'I'm with you,' William agreed.

Horse racing was a popular pastime in the district and attracted widespread interest from all classes of society. The major event in the racing calendar was the Muswellbrook Plate, offering prize money of twenty-five sovereigns.<sup>14</sup> The property added breeding racehorses to its activities that year and a groom was appointed to look after those operations and horse talk became a regular part of any conversation.

'Have ya seen the new stud, a mottled chestnut called *High Flyer*?' Thomas asked.

'Yeah,' William responded. 'E's seventeen 'ands an' the newspaper said 'e's got great bone structure and really strong muscle power.'

Ambrose added, 'I wuz talkin' to the groom yestiddy. He reckons this High Flyer is a sure foal-getter. His stud fee is four pounds a mare.'<sup>15</sup>

'Shhhoo'. William said. 'I never wanted to be a 'orse before.' The others broke into wide grins and guffawed.

Christmas at *Skellatar* in 1841 was a sombre occasion. Word had been received just before that Sir Francis Forbes had died on 8th November. Only fifty-seven, he was survived by his mother, his wife

and his two sons, David and Frank.<sup>16</sup> All on Skellatar wondered what the future held. Now their uncertainty bordered on fear.

After the initial shock of their employer's death subsided, routines continued but everyone knew that changes were coming. *High Flyer* was standing again in 1842 but due to the prevailing economic conditions the stud fee was reduced to three pounds per mare, including groomage and good paddocks provided.<sup>17</sup> William continued his work in the garden and pruned the out-of-season fruit trees, prepared ground for sowing, and helped with the wheat harvest in October, as well as doing any available paid work in the evenings and on Sunday afternoons. He received training in working bullocks, which wasn't entirely new, as he had snigged logs with the bullock team when tree felling. He remained fixed on his long term goal; obtaining his freedom and buying his own land.

One night as William, Thomas and Ambrose sat around the fire after their evening meal Ambrose said, 'Remember I applied for a ticket-of-leave a few months ago?' They both nodded and he carefully removed a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. 'Chambers didn't send me into town yestiddy; I had somethin' to collect. I wanted to surprise yez.' William and Thomas gaped, transfixed by the paper. They stared as Ambrose unfolded it. 'Here it is,' he said, feigning nonchalance as he pointed to the date '26th August 1843.'<sup>18</sup> 'Ambrose!' William exclaimed, still astonished and with a smile as big as a dray. 'Ya ticket uv leave!' 'Ambrose!' repeated Thomas incredulously. 'Ya free!' William added, 'An' now ya free!' Ambrose settled the conversation down somewhat, 'Well, not exactly, but I'm on me way to complete freedom.'

If there had been some rum they would have had a celebratory drink or two. Although Ambrose's status had changed, strict controls accompanied a ticket-of-leave. Ambrose sighed, 'I'm still a convict under the law an' if I can't support meself or neglect me work, or misbehave in any way, they c'n take it orf me an' I'm back t' bein' a convict again, to either private assignment or a government gang.'<sup>19</sup> Anyhow, no matter, I c'n go on me own hands completely now, but the magistrates will be keepin' an eye on me. Even though I'm not classed as a free man I c'n earn a free man's wage. Chambers said he's happy fer me t' stay on.'<sup>20</sup>

Ambrose had applied for a ticket-of-leave before Thomas and William, who were both 'lifers'. His sentence was only fourteen years, along with his father and a brother, for stealing eight pieces of

cotton from a warehouse in Lancaster,<sup>21</sup> so he was eligible to apply after six years.<sup>B</sup> Being 'lifers', William and Thomas had to serve eight years before they could apply so they began calculations.<sup>22</sup> Their eight years would be up in January 1844 but as the administration was slow and *Skellatar's* future uncertain, they both decided to apply immediately for a ticket-of-leave.

William asked Chambers, 'C'n we please get some uv our money out, sir?'

'What are you going to do with it?' Chambers wanted to ensure it would be spent wisely.

'We wanta apply for our tickets-uv-leave so we need t' pay the fee t' the clerk for preparin' them.'

Chambers raised his eyebrows. 'Alright. You'll need passes as well. I can have them for you next Wednesday.' The passes stated their names, their journey's departure, their destination, and the number of hours for which the pass would be in force.<sup>23</sup> Without a pass, they could be arrested as suspected escapees. The following Wednesday found them submitting their applications at the Muswellbrook Court House.

The Magistrates' Bench in Muswellbrook approved William's application in November 1843, allowing him to remain in the District of Muswellbrook, but his ticket-of-leave wasn't officially processed until 15th March 1844<sup>24</sup> and Thomas's was processed fifteen days later.<sup>25</sup> After one of his periodic visits to Muswellbrook, Chambers astounded William and Thomas by handing them a pass for the following day. 'Here, you'll need this. There's something each of you needs to collect from the Court House.' He wore a faint smile.

They looked at each other, sporting wide grins. 'Thank you, sir. Could we please collect our savin's now?'

Their request was in accordance with the common understanding that convicts were entitled to hold property they'd acquired after coming to the colony,<sup>26</sup> although officially, felons weren't allowed to acquire or hold any property until they had obtained a Pardon from the Governor or Lieutenant Governor.<sup>27</sup> Chambers replied, 'You can. The money you've earned has been set aside.'

The following day they collected their tickets-of-leave and read them several times, their faces beaming.

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<sup>B</sup> Ambrose wasn't aware that two other brothers had been transported since his own misdemeanour. Thomas, fifteen years old, was currently imprisoned at Port Arthur, in Van Diemen's Land. He was sentenced to seven years in 1839 for stealing a handkerchief. After obtaining his freedom, he travelled to New South Wales searching for Ambrose and found him. Neither married and they lived and worked together for the rest of their lives ('Transportation Substituted for death (1832) in a reform of Peel's Act to Consolidate the Penal Laws (1827)', in Evans, Lloyd & Nicholls, Paul (eds.) 1976, *Convicts & colonial society 1788-1853*, Cassell, Stanmore, NSW.)

William said, 'We orter celebrate.'

'Yeah, why not?' agreed Thomas. 'Let's go halves in a gallon o' rum.'

'Good idea. We c'n take it back an' celebrate with Ambrose.'

The stoneware jug was nursed carefully on the return journey and they celebrated together until well into the night. Each had his dreams to share, and share they did, with everyone adding their bit to ensure future success. A new day dawned for William, illuminating his dreams.

These events were unfolding during what were later called the lean years of the 1840s. New South Wales endured a severe financial slump that became Australia's first major depression. The Paterson River had stopped flowing in 1843 and many of the large landholders along the river were ruined. Bankruptcy hovered like an expectant vulture over many farms and businesses, and loss of confidence in the economy was pervasive. So prevalent was bankruptcy that the Police Court News in the *Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser* installed an extra column titled *New Insolvents*.<sup>28</sup> The *Sydney Morning Herald* also had a column titled *Insolvency Proceedings* and a section for *New Insolvents* was incorporated at the bottom of that column.<sup>29</sup> In the same year the Governor, Sir George Gipps, introduced the Insolvency Act to provide relief to people who became insolvent and a Depression Relief Fund was established. At a sale held at Paterson for J G Dawson, good cows brought only three to four pounds each, and working bullocks fetched only four to four and a half pounds each. Horses couldn't be sold; nobody wanted to buy them.<sup>30</sup>

Sheep were sold for sixpence and sevenpence each in the Hunter Valley, and if someone was willing to buy a property's entire flock the property was sometimes given with the sale.<sup>31</sup> Sheep were boiled down for the fat and *Skellatar* boiled down surplus of their own flock and offered the service as a sideline to others. Chambers continued to employ Ambrose as a ticket-of-leave man because work was available and labour in short supply, as transportation of convicts to New South Wales had ceased in 1840.<sup>32</sup> The three men continued to share the hut and life went on as normal, but a cloud of uncertainty hovered over their situation. Prices for stock, produce and labour formed a regular topic of conversation, as it did throughout the Colony. Although ostensibly a free man, Ambrose still had to attend musters at least once a month and Divine Service every Sunday.<sup>33</sup>

William and Thomas approached Chambers hesitantly. 'Sir, could we stay on an' work for wages, like Ambrose?'

Chambers tilted his head back thoughtfully before meeting their hopeful gaze. 'Yes, but nobody knows what the future holds for *Skellatar*, so I can't make any promises as to how long the

arrangement might last. The trustees have asked me to compile an inventory of the farm stock, so perhaps they might sell it all in the near future.'

Conversations taking place at the Office of the Australian Trust Company in Sydney ensured the arrangement would be short-lived.<sup>34</sup> On 10th May 1844, the *Sydney Morning Herald* advertised that the Estate called *Skellatar* near Muswellbrook, containing a residence and appropriate buildings, was available to be let or sold. The property comprised ten thousand and forty-nine acres of land, of which fifteen hundred were enclosed and divided into paddocks, and enquiries could be directed to the Office of the Australian Trust Company at Church-hill.<sup>35</sup> The writing wasn't on the wall yet for William and his companions but the pencil was being sharpened.

Another advertisement providing detailed information followed on 29th May, this time on the *Herald's* front page, informing interested parties that the property could be separated into two portions of five hundred acres each for the annual quit-rent of ten shillings, and another portion of two thousand, five hundred and sixty acres for the annual quit-rent of two pounds and eleven shillings. Enquirers were directed to the Sydney Office of the Australian Trust Company.<sup>36</sup> On reading this, William thought, *I can't jist drift along; I need t' plan me future.*

For his plan to succeed he needed to work a broader area than just the Muswellbrook district and he knew that ticket-of-leave holders had to remain in their district unless they received a Magistrate's permission to relocate.<sup>37</sup> He discussed his intentions with Ambrose and Thomas, and then with Chambers to gain the benefit of his extensive management experience. He proposed to purchase a dray and several horses, which were selling dirt cheap, and begin a cartage business servicing the Upper Hunter Valley. Chambers confirmed, 'It's a reasonable course of action, but remember things haven't shown any signs of improvement. But if you go ahead, while I'm Superintendent I'll throw *Skellatar's* haulage work your way because our bullock team and equipment might soon be sold.'

Two days later William visited the Court House in Muswellbrook and applied for a ticket-of-leave passport that would allow him to travel over a wider area. He attended local auctions and soon purchased a suitable dray for five pounds. Chambers allowed him to use *Skellatar's* bullock team to collect it and bring it to the farm. He searched for good equipment at auctions and soon he'd acquired enough yokes, harnesses, reins and hobbles for a ten-horse team. Although horses were easily obtainable, he was after strong horses and was prepared to buy one at a time if necessary. He visited farms in the area and attended auctions, usually walking or hitching a lift on a passing cart, which proved to be a way of obtaining local news. He always took a bridle and a halter with him

because he preferred, if possible, to buy two horses at a time. He would ride one back to *Skellatar* and lead the other. He acquired sound horses and never paid more than four shillings for any of them. Within two months he had all the gear he needed to begin his business and it had cost him less than ten pounds.

On 17th June 1844 the Muswellbrook Bench recommended that he be allowed to travel between Murrurundi and Maitland with a team for twelve months but he was confined to the Muswellbrook district until he received the passport. He knew if he kept out of trouble there shouldn't be a problem in extending it. He worked out of *Skellatar*, living in the hut and pasturing his team on the property for as long as he could while he searched for a place to live and keep the team. He did haulage jobs for *Skellatar* and after completing his business in Muswellbrook, walked around town and struck up conversations with the stock and station agent, the storekeeper, and any general merchant that might need some cartage work. *Skellatar* men had acquired a good reputation and his business grew slowly and provided him with a modest living. He read the *Sydney Morning Herald* on a regular basis, as any significant change affecting *Skellatar* could mean corresponding adjustments of life-changing dimensions for him.

On 9th July 1844 the *Herald* advertised a sheep and cattle sale at *Skellatar*. The auction was scheduled for midday Saturday 13th July at the rooms of Davidson and Rudd in Sydney. The stock was being sold peremptorily, by order of the Trustees, so it appeared they intended to clear the farm out. Finally, it was happening. He caught up with this news only the day before the auction. If all the stock was going, it was inevitable the land would soon follow. *I'm goin' t' really `ave t' do somethin' now*, he thought.

On offer were a thousand and eighty mixed ewes and lambs; seven hundred and ten wethers between three and four years old; ninety-one Durham cows, three to four years old also, sixty of which were broken in; and fifty-eight calves between four and ten months old. There was also about three tons of tallow from boiling down sheep. Buyers needed to pay twenty-five percent cash deposit on the fall of the hammer with the remainder paid before an order for delivery would be given and the stock had to be removed by 27th July. It was now urgent that William receive his passport!<sup>38</sup> The following week he enquired at the Muswellbrook Court House and the clerk informed him, 'It will come through in due course. You will simply have to wait.'  
William took a couple of steps towards the door then turned. '*Skellatar*'ll be sold shortly an' I'll need it t' earn a livin'.'

The clerk's attitude softened, 'Call in weekly to check whether it's arrived.'

William ensured that his team were kept well separated from the other stock on *Skellatar*, as over the following weeks new owners took possession of most of the farm's animals. He checked with the Muswellbrook Court House at every opportunity. Finally, his application was approved on 26th August and he collected the ticket-of-leave passport a week later. The way had now opened for him to expand his business activities. He gradually obtained work further afield, travelling to other towns in the Upper and Lower Hunter River districts. As at Muswellbrook, after completing his business in each town he visited the local stock and station agents, storekeepers, and general merchants to try to win more haulage work. He often had a quiet drink in one of the many pubs in Maitland while his team rested in the camping grounds. He especially frequented the Spread Eagle Hotel on the Great Northern Road, where he collected useful information regarding potential customers and the general economy.<sup>39</sup>

William didn't mind that his passport wouldn't permit him to travel the Maitland-Taree road, as he heard stories in Maitland of carters being pulled up by the police around Dungog, Paterson and Clarence Town and questioned intensely, sometimes losing valuable time. Even free men were regarded with suspicion because the Jew-boy Gang's treasure hoard had never been found. Every gang member had taken with him the secret of the hoard's location to the gallows.<sup>40</sup> The police therefore, anticipated that attempts would be made to locate the gang's booty so for several years after the gang members had been hung every stranger was a suspect and needed to carry endorsed credentials before being permitted to travel.

He was spending fewer nights in the hut with Ambrose and Thomas and knew that the time had come for a final break. One night he said to them, 'The times approachin' when I'll be leavin'.'  
Ambrose answered, 'Yeah, we realise that.'

'What're ya goin' t' do?' William asked Ambrose.

'Think I'll just go on workin' here an' if I hafta leave *Skellatar* I'll look f' work somewhere else.'

Thomas looked up from sharpening his axe. 'Yeah, me too.'

After breakfast a week later, the men hugged and shook hands, wishing each other, 'All the best f' the future.'

They all teared up as William turned to leave. He called in to see Chambers on his way out.

'I'm leavin' f' good now. Thanks f' all ya `elp.' William extended his hand.

Chambers said, 'You're a good worker. You should do well. I wish you all the best.'

‘Thanks. See ya later.’

As he drove his team south William felt that a chapter in his life had ended and a new one was beginning.

He built a one-room hut on the banks of the Hunter just outside Singleton, which was reasonably central between Muswellbrook and Maitland, where he obtained most of his business. He often carted wheat and maize from properties along the main road to Sempill’s mill, or one of the other flour mills in Maitland, returning the bags of flour to the landholders the following week.<sup>41</sup> The hut was eight feet square, built of thin slabs four feet long laid horizontal between upright poles. He cut mortices into the poles on one side of the hut and sank two short poles into the floor to build a wooden slatted platform for a bed, similar to those on *Skellatar*, only without a metal ring attached for a chain! There was sufficient feed for his team around his camp and plenty of fresh water, so he thought the location would suffice for a while. He was very careful with his money because work became scarce at times, but he was meeting expenses and enjoying a reasonable, though simple, standard of living.

As the depression tightened its grip throughout the Hunter Valley some wealthy landowners increased their holdings at the expense of others’ misfortune. In December 1845, Dr George Bowman, who originally established *Ravensworth*,<sup>42</sup> purchased *Doolooganmala* on the Talbragar River, previously owned by Major Druitt. He also bought *Rotherwood* on the Talbragar River, and Turee and Croppy Creeks, previously owned by Richard King, and *Skellatar*. He tightened up on people travelling on the latter property by placing a notice in the *Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser* in January 1846, informing all that ‘the only public road through the Skellatar Estate is that leading from Muswellbrook to Jerry’s Plains and Singleton, known as the New Line.’<sup>43</sup> William resigned himself that taking shortcuts through *Skellatar* were over.

In February the *Sydney Morning Herald* advertised that Bowman was offering for rental the portion comprising two thousand, five hundred and sixty acres, which included the ‘commodious cottage, barn, wool-shed, and office complete, and a large garden having a choice description of fruit trees’, with possession to be given on 1st March.<sup>44</sup> *Skellatar’s* days as a large, viable property appeared numbered and William felt that his days in the Hunter Valley were numbered too. He heard from many travellers around Maitland of the opportunities at the Moreton Bay Settlement and he pondered a possible move to the northern reaches of the Colony. It would be a big step; he had only

ever known the Hunter Valley since arriving in Australia and with little knowledge about Moreton Bay it was difficult to make a decision.

But conversations during the next couple of months pointed towards the opportunities at Moreton Bay. William could feel the depression in the Hunter Valley wrapping itself steadily around him and stifling his business like a carpet python. He made a momentous decision. He would pull up stakes in the Hunter and head up north. When next in Muswellbrook he visited the Court House. The clerk recognised him. 'How are you going?'

'Good, but I'm plannin' t' leave.'

'Where to?'

'The Moreton Bay District.'

'Oh, I hear it's coming on up there. You'll need to fill out an application to transfer. Bear in mind that it could take up to six months before your ticket-of-leave is transferred and also, you'll have to collect it at Moreton Bay.'

'That's alright.' William didn't mind. The die was cast now; he had taken this huge step and was happy to collect his new ticket-of-leave there. He completed the application.

Work remained reasonably steady throughout the year. His needs were little, apart from food and new clothing occasionally, and he saved whatever he could. He did any repairs to the harness or yokes himself. Checking at the Muswellbrook Court House in June, he received the welcome news that the Magistrate's Bench had approved his application and had altered his ticket-of-leave to Moreton Bay on 24th April.<sup>45</sup> His plan was falling into place and he decided to keep working for a few more months and to travel north later in the year, to arrive in Moreton Bay by Christmas. He already felt disconnected from the Hunter; his sights were set firmly on Moreton Bay.

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- <sup>4</sup> Mudie, James 1964, *The Felony of New South Wales*, Walter Stone (ed.), Lansdowne Press, Melbourne.
- <sup>5</sup> Nicholas, Stephen (ed.) 1988, *Convict workers: Reinterpreting Australia's past*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.
- <sup>6</sup> 'List of Individuals who have obtained Licenses from the Colonial Treasury for depasturing Stock beyond the Boundaries of the Colony, from 16<sup>th</sup> to the 22<sup>nd</sup> June, 1838, inclusive, on payment of the established fee', *The Australian* (Sydney, NSW), Tuesday 17 July 1838, p. 2 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/36854127> Accessed 28 October 2013.
- <sup>7</sup> 'Hunter and Northwest Pages: Early Expeditions' [Online]. Available at <http://www.upperhunter.org/expeditions/index.html> Accessed 9 January 2014.
- <sup>8</sup> Mitchell, Cecily Joan 1973, *Hunter's River: A history of early families and the homes they built in the Lower Hunter Valley between 1830 and 1860*, The Administrator of the Estate of Cecily Joan Mitchell, 793 Hunter Street, Newcastle West, NSW.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Hunter Valley Bushrangers: The Jew-boy Gang' [Online]. Available at [www.jenwilletts.com/jewboygang.htm](http://www.jenwilletts.com/jewboygang.htm) Accessed 10 January 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Pilcher's Cave – The Forgotten Jew Boy Gang: Where is their booty hidden?' *Windsor and Richmond Gazette*, Friday 17 April 1925, p. 2 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/85903643> Accessed 28 October 2013.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Hunter Valley Bushrangers: The Jew-boy Gang' [Online]. Available at [www.jenwilletts.com/jewboygang.htm](http://www.jenwilletts.com/jewboygang.htm) Accessed 10 January 2014.
- <sup>13</sup> Mitchell, Cecily Joan 1973, *Hunter's River: A history of early families and the homes they built in the Lower Hunter Valley between 1830 and 1860*, The Administrator of the Estate of Cecily Joan Mitchell, 793 Hunter Street, Newcastle West, NSW.
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- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> 'Migrants – William Coombe, convict on John Barry – 1836' [Online]. Available at [http://www.coombe.id.au/mig/William\\_Coombe\\_1836.htm](http://www.coombe.id.au/mig/William_Coombe_1836.htm) Accessed 18 January 2014.
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- <sup>32</sup> Evans, Lloyd & Nicholls, Paul (eds.) 1976, *Convicts & colonial society 1788-1853*, Cassell, Stanmore, NSW.
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- <sup>45</sup> 'William Coombe', Ticket-of-leave No. 44/848, noted 'Altered to Moreton Bay' 24 April 1846 46/2433. Copy supplied by protagonist's great-granddaughter.

## 8 From Felon to Freeman

In August 1846 William called at the Muswellbrook Court House.

‘Hello, there!’ the clerk greeted him.

‘G’day! I’m jist inquirin’ about me ticket-of-leave.’

The clerk shuffled among the papers on his desk. ‘It should arrive at Moreton Bay within three months.’

‘C’n I get a pass t’ travel to Moreton Bay without worryin’ about gettin’ arrested as a suspected escapee?’

‘It’s too early for that yet. I can issue you with a pass in about a month.’

‘Thanks. I’ll call back then.’ He hoped his impatience wouldn’t show in his voice.

He went to the tinsmith Nathaniel Stringall’s workshop, where he bought a slim waterproof tin, made specifically to store tickets-of-leave.<sup>1</sup> The purchase was a deposit on his future.

He eagerly devoured every piece of news he could obtain about Moreton Bay. He learned that Sir Francis Forbes had sailed with John Oxley in 1823 to inspect Port Curtis and Moreton Bay as possible sites for a penal colony. The following year Oxley returned with soldiers and established a temporary settlement at Redcliffe, which was transferred later to Brisbane, the largest town at Moreton Bay.

The impending move occupied his thinking so much that it was often difficult to focus on his work. Although steamers direct from the Hunter to Moreton Bay had been infrequent, the steamer *Tamar* had begun operating between Sydney and Moreton Bay every second Thursday, so he planned to travel to Sydney and depart from there.<sup>2</sup> He intended to take *The Rose* to Sydney from Morpeth on a Tuesday morning then catch the *Tamar* to Moreton Bay on the Thursday.<sup>3</sup>

The men in the Spread Eagle Hotel were always chatty. William lowered his glass. ‘C’n ya tell me anythin’ about Moreton Bay?’

‘Not much.’ His acquaintance drained his pint. ‘The penal settlement closed when they stopped sendin’ convicts there in 1839.’

‘But free settlers c’n live there now, right?’

‘Yair, they’ve been able to for about the last four years.<sup>4</sup> Thinkin’ o’ goin’ there?’

‘I’m considerin’ it.’ William thought, *Brisbane’d be a good place t’ settle. A new town t’ make a new start an’ build a new life.*

He was impatient to get started and in the third week of September visited the Muswellbrook Court House again.

The clerk, holding a piece of paper, rose from his desk and walked towards William. 'Here it is.' He pushed the paper across the counter.

'Thank you, sir!'

'All the best for you up there.'

William grinned broadly. 'Thanks.'

He walked out, securely clutching his travel pass. A prospective purchaser wanted to buy his team and equipment as a going concern and their paths would cross within a few days. He was anxious to finalise the sale; then he could leave. Before departing his camp, William packed his cooking utensils and billycan, and rolled his clothes up in his blankets, tied a piece of rope around it all and threw the swag onto the dray. He wouldn't be returning to Singleton.

The sale was concluded at the Spread Eagle Hotel the following Thursday. William had a respectable reputation among his clientele and that goodwill, combined with the excellent condition of his team and equipment, had put twenty-four pounds in his pocket.

William asked the buyer, 'C'n I 'itch a ride with ya t' Maitland?'

'Yep! That ya can.'

After farewelling his friends and acquaintances he left; his adventure had begun.

Arriving at Maitland they shook hands and parted company. William paid for a hotel room and deposited his swag there. He returned to the street, where he bought a leather pouch and belt, and a piece of soft, tanned leather. Returning to the hotel, he rolled up his cash in the leather, transferred it to the pouch and taking off his shirt, fastened the pouch across his chest, nestling it under his left armpit where he could always feel it, safe and secure.

He bought the latest *Sydney Morning Herald*, as it had wider coverage than the *Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser*, and searched for news about Brisbane. That night in his room, William dwelt upon the type of work he would do when he arrived. Thinking about *Skellatar*, he realised the risk inherent in running only sheep or cattle, or just growing wheat. Because people need to eat daily, he decided greater security lay in buying a small acreage of good soil that would support a diverse range of small crops. He remembered the satisfaction of working in the garden and orchard at *Skellatar*. He enjoyed doing that kind of work and would try for it in Brisbane so he could gain knowledge of the local area, the soil and the rainfall before buying his own land.

Before daybreak on Tuesday he slung his swag over his shoulder and left the hotel to walk the three miles to Morpeth. He was settled comfortably on board when the *Rose* began her familiar journey down the Hunter towards the sea. He walked up on deck and ambled to the front of the vessel and there, standing at the steamer's bow, drinking in the balmy early morning of late September, with the fresh smell of the water mingling with the fragrance of blossoming trees on the riverbanks, he realised he had never felt so free in his life. Damn what was written on the piece of paper in the tin in his swag; he was free!

Surveying the banks, he noticed the forest had thinned and the hills behind were not as thickly wooded as eleven years before and there were more houses. The bush, like a defeated and pitiful enemy, evidenced the onslaught of civilisation. He felt a tinge of sadness remembering the awe he had felt scanning the virgin bush then, its moody silence conveying its majesty, its embracing canopy concealing its secrets. Nobody seeing the country now from the river could experience the feeling that arrested his senses back then. An hour after leaving Morpeth the *Rose* docked alongside the stone wharf at Newcastle, with the usual quayside hubbub as folk disembarked and others boarded. Although the town was larger since William's first visit, he was still unimpressed.

Within the hour the *Rose* departed, passed Nobby's headland and headed southward. It was such a magnificent day he stayed on deck enjoying the sea views, despite his traumatic experience on the *John Barry*. It seemed that his old life had been lived by someone else, someone familiar yet strangely distant, a feeling like meeting up with a former workmate and not remembering his name. He went below, ate some bread and cheese he'd bought in Maitland and then dozed until evening. After eight o'clock the *Rose* berthed at the Hunter River Wharf in Sydney. William disembarked and set off to find lodgings.

He spent the following day wandering around Sydney, absorbing the sights and sounds but his mind was usually hundreds of miles northward. He located the wharf from which the *Tamar* would depart for Moreton Bay and bought a ticket. Returning to the boarding house, he sat down at the small writing table with a piece of paper and a pencil. When he eventually received his conditional pardon, he would be treated as a free man but the condition attached was that if he returned to Great Britain or Ireland he would be deemed an escaped felon, as his life sentence remained current in England.<sup>5</sup> He knew he could never go back and, as for his marriage, after seven years' absence convicts were classed as being dead, although the pardon condition remained.<sup>6</sup>

He sat for some time, struggling with his thoughts, wrestling with memories, arguing with himself. It was eleven years since leaving England and Grace may have remarried and had other children. His eldest daughter Mary could be married by now. Many times before he wanted to write to Grace, but never found the courage. Nevertheless, now he was closer to being a free man, he decided to write to her. Perhaps their marriage could be salvaged, perhaps he could offer her something as recompense for the lost years that were his doing. Now came the hard part: what to say, how to span the years, could his words be honest enough, would she forgive, will the letter even find her? By the light of the room's solitary candle, he grappled with himself as much as with the words. Eventually, he began to write.

'Dearest Grace,

I hope you and our children are in good helth. I am truely sorry for what I did. I ask for your forgiveness of my stupid act. I love you and the children. It is good here and I will soon be a free man owneing my own land. I will then bild a house and farm my land. I have done the law all the time since I came here. Will you and the children join me in Moreton Bay, New South Wales? I have saved enough money to pay for your passage and theres.

Your loveing husband,

William.'

He sealed the letter and not knowing where she lived, addressed it to 'Grace Coombe, care of the Minister of the Church at Winkleigh.' Being Grace's hometown, he reckoned that if the Minister didn't know of her whereabouts, he would find someone who would. Relieved at finally having written to her, he settled in for a good night's sleep.

Next morning he boarded the *Tamar* well before departure time. Passing through the Heads around nine o'clock William said a silent farewell to Sydney. He sauntered to the bow and scanned the sea northward. By midday she passed Broken Bay and, although quite warm on deck, the mild sea breeze made it comfortable and he stayed there for hours, going below to eat. After eating more bread and cheese accompanied by a couple of pieces of roast beef, washed down with black tea, he spent the afternoon searching for news about Brisbane in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He thought

suddenly of his parents, who provided him with a basic education. The paper fell to his lap as his eyes misted. *What a blessin' t' be able t' read. If I wuz like Alexander or Josias, I couldn't learn anythin' unless some kind soul would read t' me.*

After tea, he settled in his bunk. As the steamer rocked, his mind drifted to the voyage from England. What a difference his life was now compared to the dreadful squalor then. Those days were just a bad memory now. In their place a new life was opening to him, as broad in its promise as the view from the deck. One bad decision almost destroyed his life but he had tried to make every decision since then a good one. His thoughts meandered to Grace and the children but those memories were painfully raw having recently written the letter. He forced them away and dreamed of a future that didn't include ships or chains.

Friday morning heralded another beautiful day and after breakfast William ventured on deck. He spied spray jetting skyward from large dark shapes on the sea several hundred yards away. Squinting, he pointed. 'D' y' know what they are?'

A fellow traveller leant against the rail. 'I think they're whales.'

William never imagined anything could grow so enormous. Their huge backs rolled in the swells of the warm coastal water and then one breached. For a couple of seconds its magnificent tail seemed like a huge monument that had erupted from the sea and then it was gone. William stared at the spot for several minutes but the phenomenon wasn't repeated.

His attention shifted to flying fish skimming above the surface close to the steamer. Captivated, he watched for a long time and saw dolphins as well before going below for dinner. Afterwards he re-read his *Sydney Morning Herald*, which was becoming an afternoon habit. He was dozing on his bunk when the *Tamar* passed the coast near Port Macquarie and by evening it passed Smoky Cape.

Around three o'clock Saturday afternoon the *Tamar* passed by Yamba, where timber had been harvested since the 1830s.<sup>7</sup> William spent time chatting to other passengers, hoping to learn more about Brisbane. After midnight the steamer passed Cape Byron and at daybreak on Sunday cleared Point Danger, named by Cook when he changed course to avoid lava reefs running three miles out to sea from Mount Warning.<sup>8</sup> He was on deck immediately after breakfast; this was the day they would berth at Moreton Bay. The *Tamar* steamed northward along the Isle of Stradbroke, passing Point Lookout, and prepared to pass through the South Passage into Moreton Bay.<sup>9</sup>

The shifting sandbars always presented a threat but weren't a problem for the shallow-draught paddle steamer. She passed by the pilot station established at Amity Point in 1825<sup>10</sup> and crossed Moreton Bay, heading up the inside channel. From his vantage point at the bow, William's hungry eyes strained to see landward. As the *Tamar* drew closer to land, what at first resembled a dark wall at the sea's edge became dense jungle clothing the shoreline. Unlike longer-settled Sydney, the country appeared raw and primordial, with rainforest cloaking most of the river flats around the bay.

When the *Tamar* drew close to the mouth of the Brisbane River Captain Allen slowed the steamer to a crawl and stationed a crewman on the bow to test the depth of water with a pole. The river's entrance was shallow and sand shoals there moved frequently, as the Captain discovered during a trip in June. On that occasion the *Tamar* grounded at the river's entrance and Allen suffered the humiliation of the *Experiment* coming alongside and taking the mail from Sydney and passengers who declined to wait for the forthcoming tide to float the vessel off the bar.<sup>11</sup>

As the *Tamar* ambled upriver William observed thick rainforest garlanded with flowering vines, which covered the banks and decorated the primeval landscape. Unfamiliar bird calls came from the forest and at the river's edge a salt-water variety of water lily rested on the surface. He looked to the ridges beyond and saw ancient forests of gums, bloodwood and ironbark while stands of pine and Moreton Bay fig trees adorned the flats closer to the river,<sup>12</sup> although he didn't know their names then. The country looked so rich, he felt he had made the right decision in leaving the Hunter.

The steamer berthed at South Brisbane, alongside the Hunter River Steam Navigation Company's wharf which had recently undergone extensive improvements. The wharf now occupied the full river frontage into deep water, an agent's house and offices had been constructed, the wool stores had flooring installed and a newly-built fence protected the property against theft.<sup>13</sup> The wharf had been built the previous year, replacing Macintyre's gum tree, to which the steamers tied up until a dispute between the company and the tree's owner ended that arrangement.<sup>14</sup>

The *Tamar* had made excellent time. William and forty other men looking for work filed off the vessel, greeted by a motley collection of rough-looking men, squatters searching for labour, which was extremely scarce in the colony's northern districts. Three to four hundred men had been required for the recent lambing season and that need had scarcely been met. Men happy to live in the bush easily obtained £25 per year working as shepherds, with abundant rations provided.<sup>15</sup>

William wasn't interested in travelling up country to chase sheep down dry, broken gullies. He wanted to buy agricultural land close to town, where a ready market existed for fresh fruit and vegetables.

A squatter approached him. 'Lookin' fer a job upcountry, are ya?'

William lifted the front of his hat. 'No, I'm seekin' a position close by.'

A man nearby, his face a ploughed paddock, weathered and chiselled by the elements, overheard the conversation and approached William. 'G'day, I'm John Davidson. I've recently bought wanna the first blocks o' land in South Brisbane an' I wanna employ a good man to help me clear it and begin producin'.'<sup>16</sup>

William told Davidson about the type of work he'd done in the Hunter. He added, 'I wanta eventually buy me own land an' settle in the area.'

Davidson saw William as a steady man. 'I c'n offer employment f' two years an' after that you c'n do watcha like.'

After discussing wages they shook hands on the arrangement.

They weaved through the hustling traders who crowded the waterfront, and climbing onto a horse cart they rumbled and rocked along dusty and badly rutted Melbourne Street, one of the six streets in South Brisbane, which was surveyed and subdivided in 1842.<sup>17</sup> As they lurched along, Davidson warned William, 'Always be alert f' thieves an' outlaws.' At these words William's arm rested more firmly against the leather pouch nestling against his skin under his armpit. Within a couple of blocks they passed several makeshift hotels and houses of ill-repute. Tough-looking cowboys hung about, squatters from the Logan River, Darling Downs and other godforsaken places at the far reaches of the Colony, men used to living in primitive conditions. The few streets and wharves of South Brisbane, with some outlying huts on land yet uncleared and surrounded by jungle, was civilisation to them. The hotels and brothels welcomed their custom but some squatters had built town houses for their seasonal trip to the big smoke.<sup>A</sup>

Horses and bullocks were everywhere. Horses were either carrying weary squatters to the hotels or ferrying their drunken owners wherever the horse decided, their insensible snoring riders seated in the saddle with their arms around the horse's neck. Bullock teams hauled logs from nearby forests, timber-getting being one of the main industries of South Brisbane. Suddenly, Davidson glanced back into the cart. 'Quick! Getcha swag from behind ya an' hold it on yer lap.' Three Aborigines

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<sup>A</sup> 'The big smoke' is a colloquial expression meaning a city or large town.

approached from the opposite direction. Without understanding the reason for Davidson's instruction, William did so and when the cart approached the Aborigines they bailed Davidson up.

'Got any tucker,<sup>B</sup> boss?'

'Na, no tucker,' Davidson replied.

'Got a few bob, boss?'

'Na, right outa that, too.'

After peering into the empty cart, they passed by on the way to their camping ground on the riverbank.<sup>18</sup>

The cart continued along Melbourne Street, passing the few houses built on the flats cleared by convicts twenty years before. A convict chain gang cleared and cultivated three hundred and fifty acres where Stanley, Grey and Hope Streets now were and eastward from Peel Street, using the South Brisbane swamps to irrigate the maize planted to support the population across the river. The convicts, overseers, and supplies crossed the river by boat from William Street and their track, which joined the Aboriginal one leading to Woolloongabba, became Russell Street in 1842. William noted that the convicts' maize hillocks still flourished on the flats, so the land obviously continued to support the crops, although untended for so long.<sup>19</sup> He thought, *Hmmm, could be good soil 'ere.*

Melbourne Street petered out and the bush took over but a track westward led to a deep waterhole, where Davidson stopped to allow the horse to drink.

He grinned. 'This waterhole's the main water supply f' South Brisbane an' it's in me front yard. I've applied f' exclusive rights t' sell the water.'

Other horses and their riders were drinking from the waterhole so William understood Davidson's wish to profit from it. They continued on and stopped outside a rough shelter serving its purpose until Davidson completed his house.

Davidson showed William around the property, talking as he went. 'This area's becomin' known as West End. Gettin' the house finished is the main thing. Until that's done we'll hafta sleep in the makeshift lean-to an' cook on an open fire in front uv it.'

Although William liked John Davidson, there were some things nobody else could be trusted with and the first chance he was alone, he dug a hole beside the fireplace and buried the leather pouch that held the means to his dream, covering the spot with a couple of recognisable stones. He settled into a rhythm of living with his employer, working on the house and alternating with clearing and

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<sup>B</sup> Tucker is an Australian slang word that means food.

planting. He began developing relationships with other residents of South Brisbane and West End, which together with those of Kangaroo Point amounted to less than four hundred Europeans.<sup>20</sup>

Each Saturday William bought a copy of the local newspaper, the *Moreton Bay Courier*, which had commenced in June that year and in the 24th October edition a column headed *TICKETS-OF-LEAVE* caught his eye.<sup>21</sup> He read, 'The following tickets-of leave, for this district, are now lying at the Police Office, Brisbane, ready to be delivered to applicants, viz. :-' and there followed ninety-two names, one of which was his.<sup>22</sup> Another vital piece of his plan fell into place.

John gave him leave the following Monday to collect his ticket, so early that morning he walked down Melbourne Street towards the river then turned east onto the Aboriginal track that led to Woolloongabba. Following it for a short distance he arrived at the ferryman's hut. It was exhilarating being out on the river at that time of day, but the reason for the trip made it more so. Stepping off the ferry, he walked lightly along William Street, passing by a small enclosure on the riverbank which housed tombstones inscribed with the names of officers attached to the different regiments during the penal era.<sup>23</sup>

Turning right into Queen Street, he passed the residence of William Thornton of Her Majesty's Customs and D L Brown & Co's warehouse. He crossed George Street and passed the Post Office, arriving at government buildings used as police barracks, watch house and cells. The final edifice in this cluster was the Court House. Mounting one of the impressive stone stairways on either side of the large archway forming the main entrance,<sup>24</sup> he collected his ticket-of-leave from the Police Office housed inside the Court House.<sup>25</sup> Outside on the stairs, he held it by both hands and, after reading it, brought it to his lips and kissed it.

Placing his folded ticket-of-leave carefully in his jacket pocket he walked down the steps, but froze as a shriek tore the late spring air. Floggings on the triangle weren't a common occurrence anymore, but some poor wretch in the yard behind the court house was getting his share. Suddenly, he remembered the clanking of chains and the floggings on the *Justitia*, moored in the Thames all those years ago. It shocked him to realise he wasn't yet free of that system and that such a thing could still happen to him. He felt as though the irons were on his legs and his stomach churned.

He clutched the handrail, white-knuckled and confused that after nearly thirteen years in Australia he could be so affected like this. Pushing back against the memory of those horrors, he turned and

walked shakily back up the steps. Re-entering the Police Office, he enquired in a subdued and quavering tone, 'Am I able t' apply f' a conditional pardon?'<sup>c</sup>

'Certainly, just complete this form.'

He did so then and there and returned to put in half a day's solid work in the orchard, trying to forget ghosts from the past .

By early 1847 William and Davidson had rendered the house liveable and had established a small orange orchard, which Davidson planned to expand later. Whenever William walked past the old lean-to he glanced casually to where the fire used to be but he was checking whether the tell-tale stones guarding his future had been disturbed. After moving into the house William considered his nest egg would be safer leaving it where it was. The orchard expanded as the year progressed, as more land was cleared and trees planted. In October he was required to attend the annual ticket-of-leave muster at the Police Office otherwise he would forfeit his ticket. He didn't experience any problems in having it renewed as he hadn't misbehaved and had worked steadily since arriving in Brisbane. Life continued in its established routine, another year rolled around, and when he attended the ticket-of-leave muster the following year it was renewed again.

Meanwhile, John Davidson's application for exclusive rights to sell the water from his property had been granted. Men who had travelled considerable distances with drays and horses called there, eager for water and thus his financial position improved steadily. Some local Jagara people also bought water there and hawked it to South Brisbane residences, selling it at a profit.<sup>26</sup>

William continued working for John Davidson, establishing the orchard and attending Divine Service every Sunday, a habit formed as a requirement of his ticket-of-leave status on the Hunter. He read the *Moreton Bay Courier* every Saturday, with an eye on the land sales. In mid-1848 he attended a Government auction to see how things were done. So he wouldn't be tempted to make any rash decisions, he left his nest egg safely ensconced under its stones. The bidding was very competitive; many people were after land. He reasoned that he should attend the next auction with money in his pocket. Otherwise, all the good land near the town might be taken up. He didn't want to move further out, into unfamiliar country.

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<sup>c</sup> This was the only category of pardon for which convicts with life sentences could apply.

The next auction was scheduled for Wednesday 23rd August and Davidson gave him leave to attend. William dug up his nest egg and sighed in relief when he found that nothing had been affected. He arrived at the Court House twenty minutes early and found that the venue was already three-quarters full. His heart sank as the room filled and he fought to maintain a positive attitude as the sale began. The town lots were dispensed with first, and although the auction was well attended, the bidding wasn't as spirited as previously. One of the four town lots in North Brisbane, the most desirable location to live, didn't attract a single bidder. The three town lots in Ipswich all sold and then the sale moved to the suburban lots on offer in South Brisbane.<sup>27</sup>

The first three lots offered, all small blocks of three to four acres, didn't attract a bidder. He wanted larger acreage than that. There were seven more blocks to be auctioned and their size increased as the sale progressed. A fellow named Pendergrass bought the next two lots, of seven and eight acres, and Henry Rieley bought the next eight acre lot offered. The next lot of nine acres didn't interest anybody but William opened the bidding on the following allotment, Lot Eight, a block of thirteen acres and thirty-two perches. He knew the block. Although a swamp covered the lower end of it, the land was fertile and the swamp provided plenty of water; the block wasn't far from the river either. The bidding finally stopped at thirty-three pounds, and it was his! For the first time in his life he owned land!<sup>28</sup>

He was on a roll now and didn't want to bask in the victory of the purchase. He knew how long it would take to pull income from the land by growing vegetables and consequently, how much he could afford to spend on another block if he wished. And he did. He began bidding on the next lot comprising thirteen acres and three roods and at the knock of the hammer at thirty-four pounds, seven shillings and sixpence it was his. The final block didn't attract an offer and the sale ended.<sup>29</sup> After the sale, William waited his turn with the other purchasers, who settled with the auctioneer and provided their details for the title deeds to be drawn up. He could scarcely believe that his long-held dream was unfolding and left the building with his mind full of thoughts and plans vying for space.

He was still a convict and convicts weren't permitted to own property but that technicality was often overlooked, particularly in a frontier town like Brisbane. The authorities wanted the town to develop stability and that stemmed from the occupation of landholders and small businesses. Although more than five months eventually passed before the title deeds were transmitted for registration for Lot

Eight,<sup>D</sup> William was on his block the first free day he had and every free day thereafter. He cleared a patch of scrub so he could build a hut to live in and store his tools, as he did near Singleton four years before. Who cared about technicalities? He had waited years for this moment and now it had finally arrived! He wasn't going to waste time! He had been laying the foundations for his new life for the past two years; now he could begin shaping his future in earnest.

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<sup>D</sup> It wasn't advertised until 10th February 1849 that the title deeds for Lot 8 were transmitted for registration.

- <sup>1</sup> 'Muswellbrook residents 1830s-1840s', in *Free Settler or Felon?* [Online]. Available at [www.jenwilletts.com/muswellbrook\\_history.htm](http://www.jenwilletts.com/muswellbrook_history.htm) Accessed 26 August 2015.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Moreton Bay – 30 July 1846' [Online], Available at [http://www.pbenyon.plus.com/Gazette/Misc/Moreton\\_Bay.html](http://www.pbenyon.plus.com/Gazette/Misc/Moreton_Bay.html) Accessed 25 April 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Steam to Clarence Town, William River', in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday 29 May 1844, p. 1 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/12418073> Accessed 28 October 2013.
- <sup>4</sup> 'Brisbane History Timeline 1823 to 1859' [Online]. Available at <http://www.brisbanehistory.com/timeline.html> Accessed 18 January 2013.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Conditional Pardons', in *Convicts to Australia* [Online]. Available at <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/res-11.html> Accessed 23 August 2014.
- <sup>6</sup> Biggs, John 2011, *Tasmania Over Five Generations: Return to Van Diemen's Land*, Forty Degrees South Publishing, Tasmania.
- <sup>7</sup> 'Yamba NSW 2464' [Online]. Available at <http://www.wilmap.com.au/nsw/nswtowns/yamba.html> Accessed 7 June 2014.
- <sup>8</sup> 'A Dangerous Point: Fingal Head and Point Danger' [Online]. Available at [http://rupertgerritsen.tripod.com/pdf/published/A\\_Dangerous\\_Point.pdf](http://rupertgerritsen.tripod.com/pdf/published/A_Dangerous_Point.pdf) Accessed 8 June 2014.
- <sup>9</sup> 'History of STRADDIE' [Online]. Available at <http://www.stradbrokeislander.com.au/history.html> Accessed 14 May 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> 'Moreton Bay – 30 June 1846' [Online], Available at [http://www.pbenyon.plus.com/Gazette/Misc/Moreton\\_Bay.html](http://www.pbenyon.plus.com/Gazette/Misc/Moreton_Bay.html) Accessed 25 April 2014.
- <sup>12</sup> Kidd, Ros 2000, 'Aboriginal history of the Princess Alexandra Hospital site' [Online]. Available at <http://www.linksdisk.com/roskidd/general/g2.htm> Accessed 18 January 2013.
- <sup>13</sup> 'Moreton Bay – 14 June 1846' [Online], Available at [http://www.pbenyon.plus.com/Gazette/Misc/Moreton\\_Bay.html](http://www.pbenyon.plus.com/Gazette/Misc/Moreton_Bay.html). Accessed 25 April 2014.
- <sup>14</sup> Davies, Alfred George 'Pioneer steamships in Queensland waters', Paper read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Queensland, 31 March 1936 [Online]. Available at [https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/data/UQ\\_207854/s18378366\\_1937\\_3\\_1\\_5.pdf?Expires=1549163196&Signature=Qhvlqw5ZP-Qy-QjDVS1x3oOi1AEuwc2adbyUovaJndqfAfwulplMhcq~kZMqBE-mAzdwv6bghsUxqAObftdW-Fw0WEyXcQFhCIK4S~sTtD4sL~VEZ2vJxKzyNqpDTsKrkzpj47j7zFv0us2e7Sux3flg78U0guvduUHwgvb0BbSZVC GnbDzWSn2gF77vQuMTODc1uUOa-UUfk7hLntE7DC8vCKcYU5zT0cQlDwHwXvjtM3zxXLckipw3hZ-69R8e7DS6ndn7AB~1Ytdn9M727m4ESavuEu3ZYF3N4tTuSd15qTgFakG4UNlaXFD3gGymjOe3R4CLHQCqk97 uboDA &Key-Pair-Id=APKAJKNB4MJBjNC6NLQ](https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/data/UQ_207854/s18378366_1937_3_1_5.pdf?Expires=1549163196&Signature=Qhvlqw5ZP-Qy-QjDVS1x3oOi1AEuwc2adbyUovaJndqfAfwulplMhcq~kZMqBE-mAzdwv6bghsUxqAObftdW-Fw0WEyXcQFhCIK4S~sTtD4sL~VEZ2vJxKzyNqpDTsKrkzpj47j7zFv0us2e7Sux3flg78U0guvduUHwgvb0BbSZVC GnbDzWSn2gF77vQuMTODc1uUOa-UUfk7hLntE7DC8vCKcYU5zT0cQlDwHwXvjtM3zxXLckipw3hZ-69R8e7DS6ndn7AB~1Ytdn9M727m4ESavuEu3ZYF3N4tTuSd15qTgFakG4UNlaXFD3gGymjOe3R4CLHQCqk97 uboDA &Key-Pair-Id=APKAJKNB4MJBjNC6NLQ) Accessed 5 May 2014.
- <sup>15</sup> 'Moreton Bay – 30 July 1846' [Online], Available at [http://www.pbenyon.plus.com/Gazette/Misc/Moreton\\_Bay.html](http://www.pbenyon.plus.com/Gazette/Misc/Moreton_Bay.html) Accessed 25 April 2014.
- <sup>16</sup> Kidd, Ros 2000, 'Aboriginal history of the Princess Alexandra Hospital site' [Online]. Available at <http://www.linksdisk.com/roskidd/general/g2.htm> Accessed 18 January 2013.

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- <sup>18</sup> Kidd, Ros 2000, 'Aboriginal history of the Princess Alexandra Hospital site' [Online]. Available at <http://www.linksdisk.com/roskidd/general/g2.htm> Accessed 18 January 2013.
- <sup>19</sup> 'The Old Windmill Brisbane - Convict Punishment to Observatory' [Online]. Available at [http://www.brisbanehistory.com/windmill\\_and\\_treadmill.html](http://www.brisbanehistory.com/windmill_and_treadmill.html) Accessed 18 January 2013.
- <sup>20</sup> de Vries, Susanna & de Vries, Jake 2003, *Historic Brisbane: Convict settlement to river city*, Pandanus Press, Brisbane QLD.
- <sup>21</sup> Coote, William 1882, 'History of the Colony of Queensland vol. 1' [Online]. Available at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks14/1400241h.html> Accessed 5 May 2014.
- <sup>22</sup> 'Tickets-of-Leave', *The Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 24 October 1846, p. 3 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/3714386?searchTerm=Coombe&searchLimits=sortBy=dateAsc> Accessed 15 April 2014.
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- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> 'William Coombe' Ticket-of-leave No. 46/2433, 24 April 1846. Copy supplied by protagonist's great-granddaughter.
- <sup>26</sup> Kidd, Ros 2000, 'Aboriginal history of the Princess Alexandra Hospital site' [Online]. Available at <http://www.linksdisk.com/roskidd/general/g2.htm> Accessed 18 January 2013.
- <sup>27</sup> 'LAND SALE', *Moreton Bay Courier*, 26 August 1848, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/3716059/541162?> Accessed 23 August 2014.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.

## 9 Unfolding the Dream

Within six weeks William had built a hut, complete with hinged door and a lockable bolt; his tree-felling experience at *Skellatar* proved invaluable for this job. He then began the demanding work of clearing land for growing vegetables. Civilisation gradually emerged on this corner of Grey and Russell Streets in South Brisbane, although the raucous noise from across the road on some nights belied that. John Davidson had built a barracks fifty feet long for John Williams, from slabs obtained from Burnett Swamp, when Williams's humpy proved too small to house the squatters and their men from the Darling Downs. Providing only bare essentials, the bunks in this 'hotel' were laid out in rows along the walls; William was glad he wasn't part of that rowdy scene.<sup>1</sup>

In mid-April 1849 John Davidson called on William as he worked on his block.

'G'day, William. How's it all goin'?'

'Good. Gettin' there.'

'I've just come back from across the river. There's a piece a paper waitin' for ya t' collect from the Police Office.'

William dropped the hoe. 'Me pardon?' he asked incredulously.

'Dunno, but ya better go an' pick it up in case they might send it back,' teased Davidson.

'Thanks, John. I'll do that t'morra.'

The next morning William strode along Melbourne Street to the ferry, called 'The Time Killer' because of the agonising slowness of the journey. It seemed an age before it finally berthed at the Commissariat Wharf.<sup>2</sup> He hastened along William Street, skirting the cows grazing there and turned right into Elizabeth Street, his mind focused on this moment for which he had waited years. He passed by the Commissariat Store and turned into Queen Street, sticking close to the buildings to avoid the bullock teams. When he reached Lachlan McLean's blacksmith shop, he crossed the street and mounted the steps he hoped he would never climb again. He walked up to the counter. 'Me name's William Coombe. I've been told there's a document 'ere f' me.'

'Do you have identification?' the clerk asked.

William pulled his ticket-of-leave from his shirt pocket, unfolded it and laid it on the counter.

'Mmn-mn.' The clerk seemed satisfied.

He then handed William the most important document in the world, his conditional pardon, dated 1st February 1849.<sup>3</sup> On returning to his hut, he took from the roughly-made bush cupboard the slim

waterproof tin in which he stored his ticket-of-leave. Sitting on the bed, he took the conditional pardon from his pocket and carefully, almost tenderly, unfolded this treasure and placed it in the tin.

William had never been one to waste time; his penal servitude had taken enough. On leaving the Police Office he read a notice that the Court would revise the electoral list on 9th May. With the pencil provided he added his name to those already there, and it was among the sixteen listed in the *Moreton Bay Courier* of Saturday 28th April who wished to be placed on the electoral list. He was relieved that his name wasn't among the twenty-six that had received objections.<sup>4</sup>

Another milestone had been reached in his journey back into society. He was a free man, he owned land that was fully paid for, would soon be yielding crops, and he was a registered voter. But he was lonely. It was over two years since he had written the letter to Grace. During the past year he had checked regularly for mail but disappointment grew each time he heard, 'Sorry, Mr Coombe, there's nothing here for you.' He became resigned to the possibility that he may never receive a reply. He was only in his early forties, fit and healthy, and time was passing. He decided he needed a wife. His old life in England was dead and gone. He didn't deny the memories of Grace and their children but that life was so far away now, like a hazy dream. Their faces were beginning to fade. The terms of his conditional pardon meant that he could never return to England so there was nothing for it but to start a new life here in his new country.

The grapevine informed him that the best way to obtain a wife was to meet immigrants at the wharf. The shortage of unmarried women ensured that new arrivals would be married quickly and a man would lose his chance if he didn't seize the opportunity. Therefore, he had to make his pitch as women stepped off the boat. Many attested to this so William resolved that he would do it. He had hesitated when the *Fortitude* arrived in January but now realised he had to take this step or his chances of marrying would be limited.

On 1st May William waited nervously on the wharf as lighters berthed carrying the two hundred and twenty-five passengers from the *Chaseley*. Among those was a young woman carrying two bags and accompanied by two small children. She waited near him. There didn't appear to be a husband close by so William smiled and said 'Hello.' She smiled and replied 'Hello, sir.'

'Yer children are very well turned out,' William ventured a compliment.

'Thank you, but they're not mine. I'm not married. They belong to my friend Mrs Dickens. I'm a maid for Mr and Mrs Butler from Cork, who owns one of these bags.'<sup>5</sup> She gestured with her foot.

Knowing she was unmarried sparked his interest keenly. He liked her smile, open face and friendly manner. He introduced himself. 'I'm William Coombe an' I'm a free man.'

She looked him up and down. He was almost average height, she guessed around five foot six, and although quite a bit older than she was, he looked quite fit and muscular. His hazel eyes seemed to be kind and the creases that ran from near the sides of his nose down past the edges of his mouth spoke to her of someone who laughed often. He had a full head of dark brown hair that was just beginning to grey at the temples. All in all, he didn't look too bad. 'Are ya here to find labour?' she asked.

William swallowed hard and replied extremely self-consciously, 'I'm 'ere t' try t' find a wife.'

Seeing her raised eyebrows he explained the local situation and she nodded understandingly. He told her, 'I've long 'eld a dream uv ownin' land an' now I 'ave two blocks that I'm clearin' an' gettin' ready to plant with vegetables an' orchards.'

The young lady seemed suitably impressed at his industry and perseverance and confidently introduced herself. 'I'm Johannah Murphy from Macroom in County Cork in Ireland, and I might be interested in gettin' to know such a man as that.'

Introductions followed when Joseph Butler, Robert Dickens, and their wives joined them on the wharf. William learned that the *Chasely* immigrants suffered from the same negligence concerning lack of arrangements as those who had arrived on the *Fortitude*. Robert Dickens complained, 'After coming all this way we find out we're on our own and there's no land grants for us.'<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Butler added, 'A really poor situation. When the ship anchored at Amity Point on the island called North Stradbroke, we had to pay to be brought here into Brisbane on the shallow-draught lighter. We were told our fare didn't cover this final part of the journey.'

Robert Dickens continued, 'It appears the only thing we're going to receive from the government is temporary accommodation in an empty barracks. It might have been different if Dr Lang<sup>A</sup> was here with us, but apparently he couldn't come.'

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<sup>A</sup> John Dunmore Lang was a Scottish-born Australian Presbyterian minister, writer, historian, politician and activist. He was a staunch supporter of populating the Australian colonies with free settlers and arranged for six ships containing free immigrants to sail to the eastern colonies of Australia. Initially, Dr Lang was to accompany the immigrants in the *Chaseley* but stayed in England to ensure Queensland's interests were secured in a new constitution being framed for the proposed new state.

William offered, 'I'll go with ya t' the barracks an' `elp ya settle in.' He didn't want to let this woman out of his sight. After the newcomers were made comfortable, William left them, promising, 'I'll call by in a couple a days to see `ow ya goin'.' This he did, and over the next several weeks he became firm friends with the Butlers and the Dickenses, and romance blossomed between him and Johannah. On one visit in mid-June he said to her, 'I've got somethin' really important t' talk with ya about.'

Her quizzical look indicated, 'Say on.'

Clearing his throat, he began nervously. 'Well, ya know I'm twice yer age, but I'm fit an' `ealthy, an' well set up, ownin' me own land and gettin' it ready f' producin'. Would ya consider givin' me yer `and in marriage?'

Johannah looked at the floor then met his eyes. 'Well, I'd have ta receive the blessin' of Mr and Mrs Butler, `cause as you say I'm quite young an' if they agree they'll be losin' an accomplished maid. But if they agree, I'll accept yer proposal.'

On 2nd July 1849, Robert and Elizabeth Dickens were witnesses to the marriage as the Presbyterian Minister, Thomas Mowbray, solemnised William and Johannah's vows in the front yard of William's partly-constructed home in Grey Street.<sup>7</sup> It was a small event; the only others attending were John Davidson, Joseph Butler, his wife, and the Dickens's children. After the ceremony they went over the river to the Dickens's cottage in North Brisbane and enjoyed a celebratory meal together. After exchanging goodbyes, William and Johannah left to celebrate their marriage alone. As William's new home wasn't yet livable, he'd extended the width of the bed in his hut to suffice for a few months. Meanwhile, Johannah would have to cook over a fire encircled by stones beside the hut's entrance.

William's days consisted of tending his vegetables, clearing land for more plantings, and working on the house, which he completed by December 1849. It wasn't too soon, as Johannah stretched her hand across the table to him on Christmas Day, and looking into his eyes said, 'I'm with child, Will.' He dropped his fork. 'Are ya sure?'

She nodded emphatically. 'I wanted t' be sure before I told yer.'

William's face lit up. 'Ope it's a boy.'

She was an amazing young woman, scarcely twenty years of age, without any family and in a strange country. She had barely left footprints on the dusty streets when she had married a man more than twice her age and was now carrying his child.

On the first morning in August 1850 Johannah awoke in the early hours, the bed saturated from her broken water. She shook William's shoulder. 'Will! Will! Me water's broke.' He stirred awake and shifted her in the bed and made her comfortable. After dressing, he lit the fire and made a pot of tea and they talked until morning. He fetched the local midwife and she bustled him outside, where he was bored yet couldn't stray very far. Mid-morning a small pair of lungs shredded the air as their daughter Mary Jane entered the world.<sup>8</sup> Venturing into the house, he knocked on the bedroom door and was invited in. Johannah looked tired, but serene. He thought how beautiful she was, then his eager eyes turned towards the small bundle she nursed on her left arm. Gently opening the bundle, his eyes rested lovingly on his baby daughter. Newborn babies never ceased to amaze him with how flawless everything was, even down to the perfectly formed fingernails. Kissing Johannah, he said, 'What a miracle life is.'

Their life settled into a routine and William acquired a reputation as a knowledgeable market gardener.<sup>9</sup> His potatoes, carrots, cabbages, turnips and beans were of good quality and much in demand so he earned a reasonable living. He bought three cows and ran them between the gardens and the swamp, milking them daily. John Davidson said one day, 'When me and me orsider built the first buildin' in South Brisbane, John Williams's store, we thatched the roof with reeds from your place. From down there.' He waved his arm towards the swamp.

William followed his arm and scanned the expanse of reeds in the area now known as 'Coombe's swamp' and saw a business opportunity.<sup>10</sup> 'Mmm. There's plenty there an' 'ouses are goin' up.'

On Sunday evening 13th October William saw a big storm brewing as it moved towards Brisbane from the north-west. It veered around to the south and soon the town experienced its fury. Lightning flashed and thunder cracked as he and Johannah raced through the house closing the windows. Huge hailstones clattered against the glass and carpeted the ground. Johannah stood rocking Mary Jane as William peered anxiously outside, worried about the state of his crops. Finally, the storm eased and he ventured out to survey the damage. On his return Johannah asked, 'How're the crops?'

'Alright, mainly. Not as bad as I feared. The cabbages and beans took most uv it. Could I 'ave ya dressmakin' measure?'

She fetched it and he went back outside.

On re-entry he said, 'I found a 'ailstone nine an' a 'alf inches round.'<sup>11</sup>

The following afternoon a storm of similar ferocity hit, this time breaking three window panes, smashing most of the cabbages and causing deep ruts in the gardens. Wednesday brought another storm, not as violent as the previous two but still with hail.

William spent Thursday repairing the gardens; he retrieved washed-away soil and built it up around the plants. On the positive side, all the creeks, waterholes and swamps were full and teeming with birdlife. Part of the fence around the Roman Catholic Church had been blown over and many houses had more windows broken than his; the *Moreton Bay Courier* and the building beside it together had thirty-four panes of glass broken<sup>12</sup> so there was plenty of work for tradesmen. The following month all citizens were elated when the Bank of New South Wales opened; It had been difficult for William and all residents to be without banking facilities.<sup>13</sup>

New Year 1851 entered harshly, especially for five-month-old Mary Jane. On 1st January the thermometer reached a hundred and one degrees and Johannah watched over her, fanning and wiping her face with a wet cloth. Johannah had never known weather like this. William sat around, not keen to do much in the exhausting heat. The political climate heated up also, with the labour shortage occupying centre stage. A meeting was called for 11th January for those, chiefly stockholders, who favoured separation from New South Wales and convict labour. As William supported both issues, he attended the meeting, at which the *Moreton Bay and Northern Districts Separation Association* was formed.<sup>14</sup>

Around this time gold fever began to grip Moreton Bay residents. The steamer *Eagle* brought news of Hargreaves' discovery of gold at Bathurst on 23rd May and a month later sixty-six steerage passengers left for Sydney. In an effort to prevent the labour shortage from worsening, nine hundred pounds was raised, to be given as a reward to whoever found a local field equal to Bathurst. Reports at the end of July stated that a goldfield had been discovered on the Darling Downs, and in August, that a fine specimen of auriferous quartz was sent from Moreton Bay to Sydney. William read with interest the newspaper stories about the gold discoveries. Small rushes took place around Brisbane with an odd assortment of mining tools, including a colander and a baby's cradle, but no gold was found.<sup>15</sup>

A rumour swept Brisbane that a 'reputable source' had stated that gold had been found on Canning Downs<sup>B</sup> and specimens were sent to the celebrated geologist Reverend W B Clarke. A Government

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<sup>B</sup> Canning Downs is where the town of Warwick now stands.

surveyor found gold on the Darling Downs at Thanes Creek and word spread that gold had been discovered in payable quantities in the Wide Bay District. Further reports told of fresh discoveries at Mount Brisbane and Widgee Widgee, but men still continued to leave Moreton Bay. On the Logan River, a station owner about to begin shearing found that his labour consisted of himself and only one shearer.<sup>16</sup> The New South Wales Government became alarmed at the number of men leaving the northern districts and declared they would send Edmund Hargreaves to Moreton Bay early in 1852.<sup>17</sup> William followed keenly the newspaper articles and local gossip, thinking, *P'raps I'm missin' out on somethin'*.

- <sup>1</sup> Knight, John James 1892, 'Bold Speculators', in *The Queenslander* [Online]. Available at [http://www.brisbanehistory.com/pre-separation\\_history\\_3.html](http://www.brisbanehistory.com/pre-separation_history_3.html) Accessed 18 January 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> Morrison, Allan A 1962, 'Brisbane One Hundred Years Ago' [Online]. Available at [https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/data/UQ\\_212643/s00855804\\_1962\\_1963\\_7\\_1\\_72.pdf?Expires=1549662041&Signature=ZDelzCRyNOAKtJkPEOWG8Zb3pj2ji-VTnlVhir2SzFtxdqDEN5WyH~tED3Qk6vqs4QU~6GQsN43SnHkwm7AYHRZIN5Jazzf3UkeSRbE7n4EBNV89SZdFJpMz0OSGUKPwxDL~-PVgQNR4HBtmsSv9QQ8R~3tFvZflG~wSR~8ZdqXVUufDvIrOhwKFR4W~JFh90cvz4hced0r9jk8KDD8ilaiOv3dPLwl-di5LKYKX9Em~9xAHXeFbMLbE~PG7fSqwQ8eeblkP5q6lMbl0e4N4jSVvwPyFeb6KVkuykqNuuyxeghPY7ViHyhXtGyclk0Pgcd4mZ340whyzSunzQ\\_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJKNBj4MJBjNC6NLQ](https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/data/UQ_212643/s00855804_1962_1963_7_1_72.pdf?Expires=1549662041&Signature=ZDelzCRyNOAKtJkPEOWG8Zb3pj2ji-VTnlVhir2SzFtxdqDEN5WyH~tED3Qk6vqs4QU~6GQsN43SnHkwm7AYHRZIN5Jazzf3UkeSRbE7n4EBNV89SZdFJpMz0OSGUKPwxDL~-PVgQNR4HBtmsSv9QQ8R~3tFvZflG~wSR~8ZdqXVUufDvIrOhwKFR4W~JFh90cvz4hced0r9jk8KDD8ilaiOv3dPLwl-di5LKYKX9Em~9xAHXeFbMLbE~PG7fSqwQ8eeblkP5q6lMbl0e4N4jSVvwPyFeb6KVkuykqNuuyxeghPY7ViHyhXtGyclk0Pgcd4mZ340whyzSunzQ_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJKNBj4MJBjNC6NLQ) Accessed 5 January 2015.
- <sup>3</sup> 'William Coombe', New South Wales Conditional Pardon No. 49/393, 1 February 1849. Copy supplied by protagonist's great-granddaughter.
- <sup>4</sup> 'Electors – Claims and Objections', *Moreton Bay Courier*, 28 April 1849, p. 3 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/3708599> Accessed 23 August 2014.
- <sup>5</sup> 'William Coombe (1807-1878)' [Online]. Available at <http://medicalgentlemen.co.uk/aboutbow/broadnymett/coombe> Accessed 12 July 2014.
- <sup>6</sup> Coote, William 1882, *History of the Colony of Queensland*, vol. 1 [Online]. Available at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks14/1400241h.html> Accessed 5 May 2014.
- <sup>7</sup> 'William Coombe and Johanna Murphy' Marriage Certificate No. 629, 2 July 1849, Queensland State Archives, Brisbane QLD.
- <sup>8</sup> 'Mary Jane Coombe' Birth Certificate, *Queensland Pioneers' Index 1829-1889*, vol. 18501393, ref 50.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Directory of Moreton Bay Region 1850/51', Queensland State Library, Brisbane QLD.
- <sup>10</sup> Knight, John James 1892, 'Bold Speculators', in *The Queenslander* [Online]. Available at [http://www.brisbanehistory.com/pre-separation\\_history\\_3.html](http://www.brisbanehistory.com/pre-separation_history_3.html) Accessed 18 January 2013.
- <sup>11</sup> 'The Weather', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 19 October 1850, p. 2 of 5 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/541660?> Accessed 23 August 2014.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Coote, William 1882, *History of the Colony of Queensland*, vol. 1 [Online]. Available at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks14/1400241h.html> Accessed 5 May 2014.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## 10 Gold, Farm and Family

Notwithstanding the shortage of labour, 1852 opened full of promise. John Williams, the first free settler in South Brisbane, had opened a coal mine in 1848, south of the river about four miles from Wolston. After being worked for four years, the seam dipped and was flooded by the river. He then commenced another pit at Moggill, north of the river about sixteen miles from town. This proved successful and that year he established a depot in Brisbane to sell his coal, and, as it appeared more plentiful than gold, Heed and Boyland opened another coal mine on the western bank of the Bremer River near Ipswich.<sup>1</sup>

The School of Arts building was completed that year, as was an Evangelical chapel, a Wesleyan chapel, and a Presbyterian church at South Brisbane. The coast near Cabbage Tree Creek was assessed and interest grew in starting a settlement at Sandgate, subsequently surveyed by September.<sup>2</sup> A market was proclaimed and trustees were chosen. William welcomed this initiative because it would provide a regular outlet for sale of his produce. As the government had promised, Edmund Hargreaves arrived and the townsfolk's spirits rose in anticipation of a huge discovery of gold. However, disappointment followed. Hargreaves made an ordinary journey by the usual routes to the main townships on the Darling Downs, returned through Cunningham's Gap to Ipswich and on to Brisbane. Instead of locating gold, the trip resembled a scenic tour and Hargreaves' eventual report attracted considerable criticism.<sup>3</sup>

But local attention wasn't diverted for long from the two vexing issues of separation and transportation. In May, William attended a meeting of the Northern Districts Association (NDA), at which Arthur Hodgson moved the adoption of a petition to Queen Victoria for separation, which included receiving exiles. The NDA was flogging a dead horse in pursuing transportation, as Dr Lang had advised Moreton Bay residents. He wrote that the discovery of gold had ended the possibility of any part of eastern Australia becoming a convict colony and that they needed to concentrate their energies on separation.<sup>4</sup>

Brisbane's population continued to increase due to the arrival of free immigrants, which meant more people needing food. William visited the wharf when ships arrived, looking to hire farm workers.<sup>5</sup> The *Maria Soames* reached Moreton Bay on 4th July with two hundred and eighty-one immigrants, most fleeing the Irish famine. Over half were married couples with children but there were fifty-eight bachelors and fifty unmarried females aboard.<sup>6</sup> A week later all had been landed and

lodged in the Depot and within a few days two hundred and four had obtained employment. Most were pleasantly surprised that, contrary to reports back home, the district was not as wild as stated nor was the population composed almost entirely of convicts.<sup>7</sup> A fortnight later the *Argyle* arrived with two hundred and fifty-three immigrants<sup>8</sup> and three weeks later the *Meridian* with two hundred and thirty-four aboard.<sup>9</sup> Another month later the *Rajahgopaul* brought three hundred and fifty-one immigrants, mostly labouring folk from Ireland, of whom thirty-seven men and seventy-four women were unmarried. This was good news for the colony's bachelors and good news for William seeking labour.<sup>10</sup>

Rumours were flying that an extensive goldfield had been found at Bingara Creek, a tributary of the Gwydir River, where the tableland terrain falls away to the drier western country. This was within the expected boundary of the new Northern Province after separation so Brisbane was agog, particularly after a report to the government by the Commissioner of Crown Lands, Mr Bligh, was made public.<sup>11</sup> He stated he had picked nearly three pennyweights<sup>A</sup> of gold out of a dry creek bed with a penknife in two and a half hours and the following day picked out half as much in half the time.<sup>12</sup>

The report asserted that a man named James Watson sold twenty-two ounces of gold, including a four ounce nugget, all obtained with a tin dish and a shear blade within five days. Also, that another man had scraped out a pound of gold in two days using only an iron spoon and a knife, and another party had won about thirty-five ounces. The *Courier* printed a letter originally published in the *Maitland Mercury*, stating that a Samuel Turner had won gold from every dishful of earth he took from the riverbank and in dragging his foot free from the mud, found a five-and-a-half-ounce nugget under his boot. Another letter from a George Hammond stated that one party obtained six pounds of gold that week and an old man had won twenty-three ounces with a tin dish and a spoon working just six feet of ground. Hammond had staked two claims on the same gully and obtained seven ounces the first day he worked one of them.<sup>13</sup>

Gold fever broke out and soon parties were heading for the Gwydir. Diggers left Brisbane first but by mid-August several storekeepers were preparing to leave also. The *Courier* reported that an Abraham Cohen brought one hundred and forty ounces of Bingara gold to Maitland in late August.<sup>14</sup> In early September the paper reported that an Ipswich man returned from Bingara, having cleared

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<sup>A</sup> A pennyweight is approximately one twentieth of an ounce.

eight hundred pounds' worth in three or four weeks.<sup>B</sup> Parties heading for the field passed through Warwick, and reports stated that hundreds there were talking of going and that the town was likely to be deserted. Constables at Drayton went on strike, hoping to win a pay increase, and the price of flour had risen to five pounds and sixteen shillings per bag.<sup>15</sup> The colony was awash with all kinds of activity disrupting the normal flow of life.

William had been absorbing the stories about gold being discovered and discussed his thoughts with Johannah. By this time Mary Jane wasn't quite two years old and Johannah was pregnant again. He lowered his teacup. 'We'll soon 'ave another mouth t' feed. 'Ow would y' feel if I made a trip down t' Bingara t' try me luck?'

Johannah stopped knitting and gathered her thoughts. 'How can ya go away now? Ya hafta be here when the baby comes. And ya can't be away too long otherwise the crops'll suffer.'

'If it's as good as reports suggest, I wouldn't 'ave t' be away long at all t' do well.'

'Alright then, but ya can't give it more than a fortnight.'

He made arrangements to join a party leaving on 1st October and the group of seven left Brisbane early that morning. William decided to take just a pair of full saddlebags. He took enough flour, sugar and tea to last a month, and some meat, bread and cheese to eat over the next few days. He also carried a pick, a shovel and a metal dish; the latter would serve culinary as well as prospecting purposes.

Following the road along the Bremer River Valley, they passed through Ipswich and not stopping, headed south-west and halted a couple of hours later for dinner. Spirits were high, each man voicing the dreams swirling in his head of his soon-to-be-won wealth. They resumed their journey and made camp around six o'clock beside a small stream. William dismounted with enormous relief. He hadn't been on such a long journey by horseback and his backside needed a break. He hoped he would last the distance and wouldn't become too saddle sore to continue.

After the evening meal, they sat around talking over their cups of tea. William asked the leader,

'What's the name o' this stream, Bert, d' y' know?'

'Dunno, but I'd say from its westerly flow, it could be a tributary of the Warrego.'

Nobody else knew either, and as the talk petered out, each wrapped himself in his blanket and slept soundly. After a quick breakfast next morning, they were back on the road south-west and continued riding until they arrived at Warwick around dinnertime.

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<sup>B</sup> This amount represented more than 30 years of wages at the time.

One of his companions, looking around the street, remarked, 'I'm surprised at the size of this place.' William, always an avid reader of land sales in the *Courier*, replied, 'Yeah, me too, considerin' the first land sales were 'eld only two years ago.'<sup>16</sup>

After dinner they struck southward, making camp about an hour before dark. Again, William was very relieved to dismount but felt he was adapting to the saddle.

The party broke camp early the following morning and in a couple of hours arrived at Quart Pot Creek, a tributary of the Severn River.<sup>c</sup> Nobody knew how deep the creek was so one man volunteered to cross first. About a third of the way across, he slipped off the horse and clung to the saddle as the horse began swimming. He remounted several yards from the far bank as the horse's feet found the creek bed. Another man entered the water and William followed him in. He found it easy to slip off and cling onto the left hand side of the saddle as his mount began swimming. As all followed the first man's example they reached the opposite bank safely.

Dismounting, they checked their saddlebags but the water hadn't affected their provisions. Their clothes dried as they followed the primitive road that snaked southward through warm temperate rainforests of coachwood, sassafras and lilly-pilly. The calls of olive whistlers and golden whistlers in the thick undergrowth hugging each side of the track serenaded them as they travelled. They camped that night at Tenterfield Station, where to William's surprise there was a Post Office and a hotel, Georges Inn, where they all enjoyed a pint before turning in for the night.<sup>17</sup>

Continuing south the following morning, they made good time riding through moist forests of tall eucalypts that covered the higher ridges and slopes. They stopped to eat at midday after crossing Deepwater River, a tributary of Mole River.

William called out, 'Ay Bert, d' y' know 'ow this river got its name?'

Bert laughed. 'Na,' and turning to the others, 'Did anybody's horse get water above its knees?'

Around mid-afternoon they passed through Dundee on the Severn River, which boasted a flour mill and the *Golden Fleece Hotel*. They didn't stop there though; all were impatient to push on towards the goldfield.

Late afternoon they pitched camp at A C Mosman's property *Furracahad*. William strolled to the general store and struck up a conversation with a local. Surveying his weather-beaten face, William smiled. 'Nice little place, this.'

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<sup>c</sup> Quart Pot Creek later became the location for the town of Stanthorpe.

‘Yair, it’s nice, and little, but that’s gunna change.’

William cocked his head. ‘Howzat?’

The local scratched his neck. ‘They surveyed the place last year and we ‘eard that a township’s been drawn up. Gunna call it Glen Innes.’<sup>18</sup>

‘Ohhh, must be gunna go ahead then. Been nice talkin’ t’ ya. See ya later.’

They broke camp an hour after daybreak next morning, their fifth day of travel. William was feeling edgy; he was fed up with riding. He was really looking forward to getting to the goldfield the following day.

As they rode westward across the tableland, William noticed the countryside was changing. The moist forests gave way to open woodlands of white and yellow box, with the occasional stand of red gum or kurrajong. As they descended the western slopes the country became drier and the temperature rose. Before midday they arrived at Green Swamp on the Macintyre River, a popular stopping place for bullock teams. The following year a store, an inn and a flour mill would be established there and four years later the settlement would assume the more attractive name Inverell, after a Gaelic word meaning ‘meeting place of swans’.<sup>19</sup> After a hasty meal they resumed their journey westward. Rubbing his chin, Bert said ruefully, ‘I doubt if we’ll reach the goldfield by nightfall.’

William was champing at the bit to begin digging but resigned himself to another day in the saddle. Wincing, he stood in the stirrups for short distances to ease his increasingly sore backside. Later in the day the party veered southward and when the sun hung low halted at Myall Creek, scene of a massacre of Aborigines fourteen years earlier.<sup>20</sup> It had water so they camped there, spirits buoyant, knowing the goldfield was less than a morning’s ride.

The men woke early; each had a spring in his step and was in exceptionally good humour. They broke camp and headed south-west for *Bingara* station on the Gwydir River. By mid-morning they came across other groups of hopeful diggers, new on the field and yet to commence digging. They headed up Bingara Creek, encountering men with wary eyes and dirty clothes.

Bert asked one who seemed reasonably talkative, ‘How many diggers around here?’

‘Aw, no more’n a ‘undred. Most of ‘em ‘ave moved up to the ‘ead of the eastern branch of the Bingara, and some ‘ave started workin’ the ‘ead of a creek called Courongoura. It springs within a few yards of the ‘ead of Bingara an’ flows into the Gwydir.’<sup>21</sup>

‘Much water in the Courongoura?’ William asked.

‘Na. Mosta the diggin’s are dry diggin’s.’

‘What d’ y’ reckon, fellas?’ Bert asked the group.

One said, ‘Let’s try our luck on the Bingara.’

Another, ‘Yeah, that’s where they reckon the gold wuz bein’ found.’

They all agreed, so on finding a section of creek that wasn’t occupied, set up a campsite and unloaded their gear. William’s relief on finally getting out of the saddle was indescribable, as was that of most of the other men who were unaccustomed to riding long distances. After being fortified with a cup of tea, each man set up his claim along the creek. William methodically inspected the section of creek he intended working.

Before leaving Brisbane he had chatted with an old prospector, who told him how to look along both banks of a creek and judge how the water flowed. Gold being a heavy metal, it would lie in the creek bank where the water flowed around an outside bend and would lodge in the upstream side of the bend on the opposite bank. He also said that gold could often be found among the roots of the bigger clumps of grass growing on the banks in those areas of the creek. One had to dig out carefully the clump of grass then wash the dirt from the roots in the pan. Then he should put the clump of grass back in the bank so it would continue growing to prevent erosion.<sup>22</sup>

William put his acquired knowledge into practice and began digging the silt at the base of the creek bank. He decided that if he didn’t find any gold within two feet he would move along. By early afternoon he had worked several feet along the bank at that depth and had washed several dozen pans of earth but hadn’t found even a speck. After dinner he refilled his canteen from a clear stretch of the creek and continued working. Occasionally, his hopes were raised by finding ironstone in the pan. That black sand-like substance was almost as heavy as gold so was often an indicator that gold could be present.<sup>23</sup> But ironstone was all he found. Nobody else fared any better than he had so the atmosphere around the campfire that night was subdued but hopes were still high that big nuggets were there, just waiting to be found.

The camp stirred just after daylight. William awoke to a steaming billy on a crackling fire. After a quick breakfast of damper and meat washed down with black tea, he gathered his tools, canteen and pan and continued working along the outside bank of the creek to a depth of two feet. By mid-afternoon he had worked that side out and began working the inside bend of the creek, achieving

the same results; no gold but the occasional ironstone in the pan to provide the incentive to keep going. Talk around the campfire that night revealed that nobody had found any gold.

As William worked the inside bend of the creek the following morning he heard sharp words exchanged further downstream. Recognising one of his companion's voices, he downed tools and headed there, to find the others seemingly angry about something. A government officer, who was Commissioner Bligh although none of them knew it, stated emphatically, 'I'm telling you, you all have to buy a mining licence!'

Bert responded, just as emphatically, 'And I'm tellin' you we won't! We only just got here and none of us has found any gold yet!'

William, who was standing behind the others, spoke up loudly, 'An' I'm tellin' ya too that none uv us is goin' t' buy a minin' licence!'

Bligh realised he wouldn't make any headway and retreated while some of the men spat in his direction as a parting gesture. Conferring together, they vowed they wouldn't buy a licence unless they found payable gold. Returning to work, William continued along the inside bank of the creek. By sundown he had finished that section too but still hadn't struck any gold. The mood around the campfire that night was sombre, peppered with flashes of anger against government miscreants and newspaper reporters. The next morning the sky clouded over and by midday it began to rain. William worked his way along the bank he'd just finished, digging out the larger clumps of grass and washing the soil from the roots in the pan. He still hadn't found any gold. And he was wet.

Friends working further upstream passed him on their way back to camp.

'We're gunna `ave dinner while it's rainin'. P'raps it might ease orf by the time we finish eatin'.'

William joined them, however, by the time dinner was over the rain appeared to be setting in.

William said, 'Me clothes are already damp so I'm gunna keep goin'. After all, there's nothin' else t' do 'cept sit around.' He worked until late afternoon but colour in the pan eluded him. Tired and sodden, he trudged back to camp, finding all quite dejected. The weather added to their discontent.

The next day was overcast with occasional rain squalls as William headed upstream to work the large clumps of grass on the outer bank of the creek. By evening, cold, wet and miserable and still unsuccessful, he decided he'd had enough. Dry wood was in short supply so the smoky fire didn't help much in warming them or drying their clothes. He rose wearily the next morning, still damp, and decided to scout along the creek to see how others were doing. It was raining lightly and the

creek was flowing such that it was unsafe to work in anyway. Picking his way along the watercourses emptying into the creek he stumbled across small groups of diggers, some of whom had found gold fairly close to the surface.<sup>24</sup> Most groups were not finding enough to cover their food supplies. He found just one party, working the same claim since the rush commenced, who were earning more than their rations. They informed him that around five thousand men had been there and had left. He came upon a party of disappointed diggers from Port Philip, who had nurtured expectations founded on newspaper reports and who were enraged at their meagre findings. He discovered that these and other parties had also refused to pay for a miner's licence.<sup>25</sup>

That night the party discussed their plans. After tossing some ideas around, they decided to travel on to the Peel River, as others from Brisbane had done.<sup>26</sup> William begged off, saying, 'I `afta return `ome, me missus is goin' t' `ave a baby soon.'

After breaking camp next morning they loaded up their horses, shook hands and departed. He wasn't sad as the goldfield vanished behind him, and he wished luck upon the one hundred and forty souls who remained there.<sup>27</sup> By mid-morning he crossed Myall Creek and camped when he reached Green Swamp. Next morning he forded the Macintyre, which was about eighteen inches deep, and headed east towards *Furrahad*.

Arriving by mid-afternoon, he found several travellers talking outside the general store, laden packhorses nearby. As he dismounted they gathered around him, asking questions about their destination, the goldfield. Their faces became crestfallen as he relayed his experience and some obviously didn't believe him. That didn't bother William; he thought, *They'll find out soon enough*. They were going there anyway so he said, 'Well, I wish ya more luck than I `ad.' His provisions were lasting well, so not needing anything from the store he took a swig from his canteen and rode on. He made Dundee before nightfall and after a simple meal, hobbled his horse before turning him out and headed for the Golden Fleece Hotel to have a quiet drink.

Inside the pub the atmosphere was anything but quiet. Men had gathered there from little camps scattered along the Severn and all were on their way to make a fortune. William found the situation amusing; he was respected, almost venerated, as an old hand although he had spent just over a week at the Gwydir and had nothing to show for it. He gave advice when asked, and attracted a group of avid listeners as he related how to judge the likely places to find gold by studying the flow of the creek. The room became quiet as he spoke, and as he relayed how to dig up and wash the big clumps of grass every ear hung on his words. It seemed none of these hopeful diggers had any

experience at gold prospecting. A couple of groups each bought him a drink so he stayed longer than anticipated.

He slept soundly and woke to the magpie's song. After breakfast, he packed up and crossed the shallow river and headed north. He arrived at Deepwater River while the sun was still low in the morning sky. Forging it, he continued north, keeping a vigilant eye on the bush alongside the road for any Ngarabal people, who had acquired a reputation for being hostile towards Europeans. Although he heard they'd quietened down since a brutal massacre eight years ago after a shepherd was speared, he felt vulnerable riding on his own.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, he couldn't shake the feeling of being watched as he travelled.

He had dinner at Tenterfield Station and finished off with a pint from Georges, where he spoke with several hopefuls heading for the diggings. When evening fell he was still a couple of hours south of Quart Pot Creek so decided to make camp and cross in the morning. He drew rein on the creek bank before mid-morning and, knowing what the crossing entailed, removed his feet from the stirrups on entering the water. As the horse began to swim he slid off the saddle and clung on but to his surprise the saddle slipped around and instantly his head went underwater.

Time seemed to stand still as he looked up, seeing sunlight and sky through the water, its surface so near yet unattainable. Just when he felt he couldn't hold any longer what little breath he had, his feet touched the creek bed as the horse crossed over into shallow water. He pushed violently upward, drawing a huge gasp of air as his head broke the surface. After several such breaths the horse gained the creek bank and he fell onto the grass exhausted. It was several minutes before he recovered sufficiently to stand and retighten the saddle with trembling hands, in shock at how close death had come. Remounting, he continued his journey to Warwick, where he camped overnight.

In his first waking moments William fancied he could smell Johannah's hair and that made him feel closer to home. Heading north-easterly, he camped that night beside Warrill Creek, a tributary of the Bremer. It took a while for sleep to come. His thoughts were filled with seeing Johannah and Mary Jane and it felt as if home was just around the next bend in the road. He quickly had breakfast and set off, passing through Ipswich as stores were opening, and rode through the Bremer River Valley, not stopping until he dismounted under the big fig tree behind his house.

Johannah hurried to meet him, exclaiming, 'I'm surprised yer back so soon!' Falling into his arms for an embrace, he hadn't realised how much he'd missed her. Releasing her, he removed the saddle, unloaded the saddle bags and put the horse into a lower paddock. Over a cup of tea, with Mary Jane on his lap, he told Johannah of his travels and the situation on the gold field.

Her fingers played with the edge of the tablecloth. 'Have ya got it out of yer system?'

'Yeah, the gold bug's gone. From now on I'll concentrate on the farm and me family.'

She clasped those words to her heart. After Mary Jane went to sleep on his lap, he tenderly carried her to her cot then he and Johannah made love and slept. He woke late in the afternoon and walked over the farm, noting where work needed to be done over the next couple of weeks. When news travelled that he'd returned from the Bingara goldfield, a reporter from the *Moreton Bay Courier* called to interview him.<sup>29</sup> William told his story, hoping that starry-eyed diggers might think twice before depriving the town of their much-needed labour.

Christmas was a quiet affair. As Johannah could give birth any day, the Butlers and Dickinses visited on Boxing Day, each family bringing enough food so Johannah didn't have to prepare anything. After dinner, the women talked together about children generally and babies specifically, while the men talked about gold, labour, politics and produce. It was a good time of catching up for them all.

Shortly after daylight on New Year's Day 1853, Johannah's water broke and William fetched the midwife. Several hours later Mary Jane had a sister, who was named Elizabeth Mortimer, her second name in memory of William's mother's maiden name. It was a good birth; everything went smoothly and mother and baby were both in good health. William was grateful for that, yet disappointed, as he wondered when he was going to have a son to help him on the farm as he grew older.

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- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Pioneer days, farming at West End, and long forgotten crimes 9 May 1925', in 'Some old reminiscences by an old resident, September 1922' [Online]. Available at <http://www.chapelhill.homeip.net/FamilyHistory/Other/QueenslandHistory/SomeOldReminiscences.htm> Accessed 11 August 2014.
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- <sup>7</sup> 'The Immigrants', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 17 July 1852, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/542090> Accessed 27 September 2014.
- <sup>8</sup> 'Shipping Intelligence', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 24 July 1852, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/3716100> Accessed 27 September 2014.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Shipping Intelligence', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 14 August 1852, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/3709012> Accessed 27 September 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Shipping Intelligence', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 18 September 1852, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/542149> Accessed 27 September 2014.
- <sup>11</sup> 'The Northern Gold Fields', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 21 August 1852, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/542131> Accessed 27 September 2014.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> 'Northern Gold Fields', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 28 August 1852, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/3709653> Accessed 27 September 2014.
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- <sup>16</sup> 'Warwick – the beginnings' [Online]. Available at <http://www.everywherehistory.com/warwick-the-beginnings/> Accessed 4 October 2014.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Royal Hotel, Tenterfield, NSW' [Online]. Available at <http://publocation.com.au/pubs/nsw/tenterfield/royal-hotel> Accessed 4 October 2014.
- <sup>18</sup> 'Glen Innes, NSW' [Online]. Available at <http://www.aussietowns.com.au/town/glen-innes-nsw> Accessed 4 October 2014.

- <sup>19</sup> 'Inverell, NSW' [Online]. Available at <http://www.aussietowns.com.au/town/Inverell-nsw> Accessed 4 October 2014.
- <sup>20</sup> 'The bloodstained birthplace of racial justice', in *Australian Places* 2010, p. 186, Reader's Digest, Surry Hills NSW.
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- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> 'Northern Gold Fields' *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 28 August 1852, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/3709653> Accessed 27 September 2014.
- <sup>25</sup> 'The Northern Gold Fields' *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 23 October 1852, p. 3 of 4 [Online]. Available at <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/3708606> Accessed 27 September 2014.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> 'Bluff Rock' [Online]. Available at <https://www.tenterfield.nsw.gov.au/community/aboriginal-community/bluff-rock> Accessed 18 October 2014.
- <sup>29</sup> 'The Northern Gold Fields' *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 23 October 1852, p. 3 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/3708615/542170> Accessed 27 September 2014.

## Chapter 11 Becoming a Citizen

With another mouth to feed William cleared land to grow additional crops and continued selling reeds from 'Coombe's swamp'. He employed local Jagara people to cut the reeds, which roofed several homes in South Brisbane.<sup>1</sup> He planted fruit trees, mainly for home consumption, and the surplus could be sold when the trees matured. He started with a couple each of orange, mandarin, lemon, lime and banana, telling Johannah, 'We'll be eatin' orf these by the time Mary Jane starts school.' Reed cutting ceased temporarily, when the 1853 flood at Ipswich affected low lying areas of Brisbane also. The Bremer rose twenty-five feet in the highest flood for almost a decade, causing considerable damage on the western tracks.<sup>2</sup> Floodwater affected the lower end of William's property but his crops growing on higher ground were unharmed.

The Coombe household was a hive of activity on the morning of 20th February because the latest addition to their family was being baptised. The previous day Johannah had baked and ensured that everybody's clothes were clean and ironed. They departed at a quarter to ten.

'Can you take Mary Jane?' asked Johannah, cradling Elizabeth in her arms.

William nodded, hoisting Mary Jane against his shoulder. They walked the short distance to the newly-built weatherboard Presbyterian Church in Grey Street, to be met by Robert and Elizabeth Dickens. The men shook hands.<sup>3</sup>

'Big day, William!' Robert ventured.

'Yeah, another one,' William responded laconically, thinking of the son he didn't have.

Elizabeth relieved Johannah of her namesake and cuddled her lovingly. They entered the church and after exchanging greetings, Thomas Mowbray, the minister who had married them, performed the baptismal service.<sup>4</sup> All then returned to the Coombe residence for tea and refreshments. Thomas Mowbray stayed only a short while due to other commitments.

Early in 1853 Johannah asked William, 'Did y' hear that a horticultural society's been formed and is plannin' an inaugural show in July?'

'Yeah, I did, and I'm doin' some plannin' meself.'

'Gunna display?'

'I think we orter. Should be good advertisin'.'

As show day approached, they inspected their vegetables regularly and chose some excellent specimens. On Monday afternoon 11th July they picked, washed and carefully packed their finest.

Early next morning William hitched the horse to his cart and loaded the produce while Johannah organised the children.

The ferryman emerged from his hut, greeting them with, 'Goin' to the show, are ya? Y'orter win a prize with those vegies.'

William beamed. 'Ope so,' as he unloaded their produce onto the ferry and tethered the horse at the adjacent camping ground.<sup>5</sup> Alighting on the north bank, William carried most of the produce while Johannah carried the remainder and Elizabeth too. Mary Jane, now almost three, had to walk.

At the School of Arts, Johannah exclaimed, 'Doesn't the hall look fabulous!' It was decorated with a huge variety of cuttings from indigenous flowering shrubs and plants. Growers were arranging their produce, assisted by committee officials. After registering, William and Johannah were shown their spot and began arranging their produce to create the best possible display. After setting up, they strolled inquisitively among the exhibits. The hall breathed anticipation and a buzz of excitement permeated the air. Wandering through the hall, William experienced a cathartic release from his convict past. It seemed as if his previous life had been someone else's story, an interesting but troubling account of a life that he had read somewhere, lurking at the edge of memory. The stain of his former life suddenly seemed cleansed and he felt that he was a member of respectable society again as he rubbed shoulders with Lord Henry Scott and Lord Schomberg Ker, who were accompanied by the Government Resident.<sup>6</sup>

The Show Committee ran a food stall so they bought dinner and sat outside on the grass, chatting with other exhibitors. Talk centred on the usual topics: weather, labour and prices, and several of the women 'oohed' and 'aahed' over Elizabeth. Awards were announced mid-afternoon, and Johannah heard her name called. She was ecstatic. 'Me cabbages won best in show!'

William exclaimed, 'Yi've won two pounds prize money, to boot!'

Mouth agape, she looked excitedly at William before bursting out laughing.

When the announcements were over, she commiserated, 'I'm sorry y' didn't win anythin', darlin'.' 'That's alright. Me patatas got a mention as bein' very fine.'<sup>7</sup> They returned home in high spirits.

Politics was never far from daily life and William was relieved that his name remained on the electoral roll following a Magisterial Court revision in August.<sup>8</sup> Also around that time, the Colonial Secretary sent a letter stating that no finance would be granted to any settlement not incorporated under the Municipalities Act.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, a meeting was held in mid-December at the School of Arts to consider whether to petition for the Corporations Act to be applied to Brisbane. As the owner of a

small enterprise, William attended, willing to vote for anything that would increase the population and develop the town.

He usually had no trouble finding farm labourers, as six immigrant vessels arrived in 1853, increasing the population by over two thousand. The O'Neill's from County Clare, Ireland, who immigrated that year on the *John Fielding*, found their first work on William's farm.<sup>10</sup> All newcomers were soon absorbed into the workforce and a new Immigration Act that placed harsh restrictions on immigrants didn't help alleviate the labour shortage. Scarcity of labour meant wages were high but still the district was prospering and the town kept growing. Sawmills and a fellmongery<sup>A</sup> began operating, and factories manufacturing soap, candles, beer and soft drinks were established that year. The fertile land provided good returns to agriculturalists, proven by Donald Coutts reaping thirty bushels of wheat to the acre on his farm at Bulimba. Brisbane now had four banks: the Joint Stock Bank, the Union Bank of Australia, the Bank of Australasia, and the Bank of New South Wales.<sup>11</sup>

One night in early 1854 as they climbed into bed Johannah announced coyly, 'I'm with child again.' William was elated, hoping for that elusive son. Around this time the family developed the habit of taking walks on balmy summer evenings. With Elizabeth in arms and the family holding hands, they would meander through the rainforest to a creek that flowed out of the swamp into the river. Sometimes they would see swarms of fireflies hovering over the creek; a major reason they went there. They would follow the creek until they reached the forest of native pines that fringed the river.<sup>12</sup> At times they would hear the rhythmic chanting of Aborigines at a bora ground less than two hundred yards away, where ceremonial and initiation activities were performed. The women made sounds by beating sticks upon drums of tightly folded skins resting on their knees or by slapping their thighs.<sup>13</sup> Aborigines swam the river to attend corroborees there<sup>14</sup> and often William and Johannah would see the glow of fire-sticks as hundreds travelled along pathways through the bush at night.

There were less than four hundred and fifty Europeans living in South Brisbane but William never felt under threat.<sup>15</sup> The local Aborigines saw him regularly and his Indigenous workers knew him to be a fair man so there wasn't any animosity. William saw Jagara people frequently in the swamp at the low end of his property, catching water rats in nets. They called that part of South Brisbane Kurilpa, which meant 'a place for rats', and thousands lived in the dense vine scrub and swamps there.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>A</sup> A fellmongery is a business that deals in animal skins, especially sheepskins.

Aborigines gathering tucker in the swamp didn't bother William and weren't doing any harm; they just waved to each other and practiced live and let live.

William continued working hard on his farm, supplying the growing town with fruit and vegetables. Produce from South Brisbane was becoming renowned as specialties 'grown on the rich flats across the river'.<sup>17</sup> On 4th February William displayed his produce in the second show held by the Moreton Bay Horticultural Society, again receiving special attention for his fine potatoes and maize, but still no prize money came his way.<sup>18</sup> It didn't matter; his reputation had been established for fine produce.

In March the whole town waited eagerly for the arrival of the New South Wales Governor, Sir Charles Fitzroy. He landed in the bay on the 20th in the man-of-war *Calliope*, stayed at Captain Wickham's residence at Newstead overnight then rode into Brisbane the next day. William joined the welcoming crowd, eager to glimpse the man who had signed his Conditional Pardon. The locals felt that Brisbane was finally being regarded by the government in Sydney as more than a far-flung dependency and they felt truly valued and proud of their town. After the Governor's visit, Mr Moore, director of Sydney's Botanic Gardens, visited Brisbane to examine the state of the old Botanic Gardens and to assess the requirements for restoration.<sup>19</sup> The area, originally planted by convicts in 1825 with crops to feed the convict settlement, was selected in 1828 by the botanist Charles Fraser to become a public garden.<sup>20</sup> However, since then it had been used as commonage<sup>B</sup> by local residents and had become neglected.

The Moreton Bay Horticultural Society held an exhibition every six months and in July William finally cracked the prize money, winning one pound for his cauliflowers.<sup>21</sup> Being heavy with child Johannah didn't attend this time. On 6th August 1854, their daughter Joanna Alice was born. William fought to conceal his disappointment. He loved his daughters but the long-hoped-for son eluded him. It didn't matter, he kept telling himself, trying to convince himself that it really didn't, but it did. All he could do was to keep trying for a son.

For a welcome break from the never-ending farm work, William walked to the river sometimes to watch the rowing competitions held regularly between the Europeans and the Aborigines. Rowing had become Brisbane's chief inter-racial sport, which the Aboriginal teams usually won. On one occasion, the race of the day was between Aboriginal-manned four-oared canoes. William was

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<sup>B</sup> Commonage is land owned by a town upon which local people pasture animals.

among those cheering for the locals, but the Amity Point team won and collected the prize of two pounds and ten shillings.<sup>22</sup> It was a good race and William appreciated this pastime so close to home.

The demand for labour eased slightly in August, when two immigrant ships arrived in the bay. The *Monsoon* and the *Genghis Khan* brought three hundred and four, and four hundred and seventy-four immigrants respectively. All found employment and so labour shortages continued. The *General Hewitt* arrived in December with a further three hundred and thirty-one people, who were rapidly absorbed into the workforce.<sup>23</sup> Although Brisbane was growing rapidly, there were few public amenities. No theatres, musical or public entertainment existed. There weren't any cabs, and just a few hotels. There was little that people could spend their money on apart from buying land. Streets were barely passable and residents had to fill potholes in with stones if they wanted them fixed. They had to make roads themselves if needed. The amount of traffic was increasing, indicated by the annual tolls on the ferries, which had been sold for three hundred pounds. After many applications the Government appointed a road surveyor, Mr Vigors, for the district.<sup>24</sup>

William's market gardening business thrived and he invested in another block of land in January. He attended a public auction at the Police Office and bought allotment number fifty of seven acres, one rood and six perches for eighteen pounds, four shillings and fivepence. A grazier from the Darling Downs, J P Wilkie, bought allotment number forty-nine consisting of just over ten acres beside William's property, and John Davidson bought an additional two blocks at this sale also.<sup>25</sup> William searched for extra workers to expand his farming interests. Labour was exceptionally scarce and those who bought land expecting to employ others to work it often saw their property remaining idle. There was insufficient housing and rents were extremely expensive.<sup>26</sup>

William still sourced farm workers by meeting boats at the wharf. On 10th May 1855 three hundred and ninety-seven immigrants brought to Australia by the *John Davis* arrived in Brisbane from Sydney in the brig *Palermo* towed by the river steam boat *Hawk*.<sup>27</sup> Those who didn't meet immigrants at the wharf seldom obtained labour, as the numbers arriving were insufficient to meet demand. During this year seven ships arrived from Britain, adding around two and a half thousand to the population, along with four ships from Germany, bringing approximately another thousand. One of these vessels, the *Aurora*, attempted to enter the bay by the South Passage but went aground on the seaward side of Moreton Island and was completely wrecked. Fortunately, no lives were lost.<sup>28</sup>

The *Moreton Bay Courier* relayed news of the Crimean war, in which Britain and France were allied against Russia. The newspaper published an impassioned plea for subscriptions towards the relief of British widows and orphans, after which a Patriotic Fund was established. Mr W Butler Tooth gave a hundred pounds, which inspired others to contribute and two thousand, five hundred and seventy pounds, fourteen shillings and fourpence was gathered from people in the Moreton Bay and Wide Bay districts.<sup>29</sup> William's business was doing well enough now that he donated two pounds and Johannah one pound through the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, of which they were members.<sup>30</sup>

William's neighbour, Wilkie, owned Daandine station near Dalby. He had moved to Brisbane only that year and had begun cultivating portions forty-five as well as forty-nine at South Brisbane, comprising around thirty acres altogether. One of his employees at Daandine, Frederick Ward, brought some horses from there to the farm at South Brisbane. Wilkie was away at the time so Ward asked William for a job and began working with William's Aboriginal employees in the swamp, cutting reeds. A few days later William was harvesting carrots when he heard agitated Aboriginal voices. He realised they belonged to his workers and strode towards them. When he met them they were all talking at once but he calmed them down enough to enable one man to speak.

'That white fella, he try on my missus. She 'it 'im, 'e 'it 'er back. 'E run away.'<sup>31</sup>

William told the woman's husband, 'Y' come with me, alright.' To the others, 'Other fellas all go back t' work.'

Together they went to Wilkie's property and found it deserted. William's employee pointed to the ground. 'Fresh 'orse tracks, boss. 'E gone.'

Ward had saddled up one of the horses and ridden off. There wasn't anything more they could do and the woman's husband was obviously angry and frustrated. William felt that way too so he put his arm around the man's shoulder and simply said. 'I'm sorry.' Their eyes met in a mutual understanding as one man to another. They walked back side by side to William's place, where William said, 'Wait a bit,' and entered the house. He returned with assorted vegetables in a hessian bag and gave it to the man, saying 'Give these t' yer missus an' tell 'er I'm sorry for what 'appened.' 'Thanks, boss.'

When they reached the spot where he'd been working he added some carrots to the bag. 'Thanks again, boss.' The man walked towards the swamp to resume cutting and stacking reeds and William returned to his carrots.

William heard later that Ward had ridden back to Daandine, where he had stolen a fresh station horse and with a companion had ridden south to the New England district, where the pair began cattle duffing. Later, while imprisoned on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour, he escaped and began his career as the notorious bushranger 'Thunderbolt' and was eventually shot by police at Uralla in New South Wales in 1870.<sup>32</sup>

In April 1855 Johannah said matter-of-factly, 'I'm with child again.'

William raised his eyebrows. 'I dunno whether I should hope for a son in case I put a mouk<sup>c</sup> on it.'

With children aged four, two and nine months, Johannah's days were full. William decided to extend the house so he visited William Pettigrew, one of the *Fortitude* immigrants, who started the first steam sawmill in Brisbane on the riverbank in William Street.<sup>33</sup> William intended saving costs by felling the trees himself and having the sawmill dress them. Parts of his property were still covered by dense rainforest of hoop pine, kauri, and piccabeen palms. Native orchids, staghorns, and elkhorns clung tenaciously to their graceful trunks and giant ferns grew from the forest floor. On the open woodland that bordered part of the swamp grew stringybark, mahogany, ironbark and other eucalypt trees.<sup>34</sup>

Having agreed on a price, William inspected a stand of hoop pine and selected several trees that would serve as the frame, flooring and planks for the extension.<sup>35</sup> He then chose two fine specimens of kauri; their timber would be used to make furniture.<sup>36</sup> He spent afternoons felling the trees and hired a bullock driver to snig the logs out of the bush. He paid the ferryman to float them across the river, then Pettigrew's men took them to the sawmill. After milling, William had the timber ferried across in bundles and collected them in his cart. He laid it out to cure for several months, estimating he would have two new rooms built before the baby arrived.

He was fortunate in having his timber milled when he did. Scarcely a month after collecting it Pettigrew, who was sleeping on the premises, awoke between three and four o'clock on Sunday morning 8th July to find a fire well alight. People rushed to his aid and by carrying buckets of water from the river prevented the fire from spreading to nearby buildings and to the stacks of timber lying all around but the mill was burnt to the ground. Saws were twisted and warped and machinery damaged considerably. The mill's destruction was a major loss for Brisbane and a subscription began immediately to help Pettigrew rebuild.<sup>37</sup> The fire became the catalyst for calling a public meeting within two weeks to form a Fire Brigade and to purchase a fire engine.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>c</sup> 'Mouk' is a colloquial Irish expression that means a curse.

Other civic initiatives were proceeding also. William was annoyed to hear that the Botanical Gardens committee of management had excelled in its zeal to protect the gardens by locking the gates on Sundays. Many townsfolk weren't happy, as a stroll through the gardens was an enjoyable pastime on Sunday afternoon and William's horticultural eye took more than a passing interest in how the gardens progressed. Others joined the newly formed Brisbane Rifle Corps but he wasn't interested in that. He and Johannah attended the first public entertainment in the colony, a concert by the celebrated violinist, Miska Hauser.<sup>39</sup> The music enthralled them, and they were equally spellbound by the circus that year.<sup>40</sup> It was in a huge tent, and as a woman galloped in a circle standing on the backs of two horses, one foot on each horse, their incredulous eyes never left the arena. Joanna was only a baby, but Mary Jane and Elizabeth's eyes seemed the size of saucers as they watched the daredevil feats. It was a topic of conversation for days in the town.

One day in October Johannah said, 'Y'd betta fetch the midwife.'

The woman duly arrived and William retreated outside; he knew the drill by now. When he heard the first scream erupt from a small pair of lungs, he waited to be summoned, hoping against hope that the new arrival might be his long-awaited son. The midwife finally appeared, smiling broadly. 'Y' c'n go in.'

Johannah looked tired but radiant. As he walked to the bed, she drew the rug aside from the baby and said, 'Here's ya son.' William's eyes travelled down the little body, his eyes lit up and his face was split by a broad grin that a mob of sheep could have been driven through.

They named him John, after William's father, and everyone was ecstatic at the new addition to their family. Mary Jane fussed over him like a little mother and Elizabeth took great interest in him too. Johannah was busy on 24th October, as the following day their son was being baptised. She selected clean clothes for everyone and neatly pressed them with her smoothing irons, wrapping a strip of an old blanket around her working hand against the heat. She baked a cake and iced it for the festivities afterwards. The next morning William hitched the horse to the cart – his family was too large now for them to walk – and drove to the Presbyterian Church in Grey Street.<sup>41</sup> Their friends the Dickenses had crossed the river to share in their happiness.

Robert Dickens extended his hand. 'Congratulations! At last, eh?'

William shook his hand. 'Yeah, at last. What a wait.'

Elizabeth Dickens was already nursing the baby. After the baptism they went to William and Johannah's to continue celebrating. That afternoon all was well with the world. In a quiet moment,

William took stock of his life and counted himself very fortunate in how he had fallen on his feet. He'd worked hard, and still did, but life was bringing its rewards. His thoughts drifted to his family in England and he realised he would not know them now. More than twenty years had passed and he wondered what they were doing with their lives and how Grace had coped without him. He didn't know she'd had two more children as a result of selling her body to make ends meet, as other wives were forced to do after their husbands had been transported.<sup>42</sup> It was better he didn't know.

When a local man named Dunne died following an accident, a collection was taken to assist his widow. William, considering his own fortunate circumstances, contributed five shillings towards the eventual total of fourteen pounds and two shillings.<sup>43</sup> Working among his vegetables on 15th December, he heard a cannon fire down near the river. He ran to the bank to see the steamer *Boomerang*, decorated with flags, making its way upriver. The English ensign was flying at the peak with the Russian flag beneath it. The crew and passengers were cheering, almost drowning out the brass band on board playing martial, patriotic music. A crowd gathered on both banks and cheered loudly at each firing of cannon as the steamer came up the river. Everybody on the steamer and on the river banks was cheering, including William, although he didn't know why. Word soon spread like wildfire that Sebastopol in the Crimea had fallen to the British.<sup>44</sup> It seemed to William that it was a good omen to usher in the New Year.

- <sup>1</sup> Kidd, Ros 2000, *Aboriginal History of the Princess Alexandra Hospital Site* [Online]. Available at <http://www.linksdisk.com/roskidd/general/g2.htm> Accessed 18 January 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> Coote, William 1882, *History of the Colony of Queensland*, vol. 1 [Online]. Available at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks14/1400241h.html> Accessed 5 May 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Brisbane's Historic Churches – VII – The Park (Presbyterian) Church' *The Brisbane Courier*, Saturday 14 January 1905, p. 12 of 16 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/19334218> Accessed 25 October 2014.
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## 12 Citizenship Consolidated

Brisbane's population's aired their grievances with the New South Wales government in 1856 at a public meeting on 8th March. William attended the small but rowdy meeting, which appointed a committee to inform the Government of public works requiring attention. These included the gaol, the Moreton Bay lighthouse, and two semaphore telegraph stations. William was surprised the meeting wasn't very well patronised; a sign of community apathy. He had a personal grievance he decided to air and spoke up. 'I bought two blocks o' land in 1848. Although the title deed f' one o' the blocks was transmitted f' registration early in 1849, I've never got the title deeds. It's over seven years now since I fully paid f' both blocks. I've made enquiries to the Police Office an' the Court 'Ouse, an' I even wrote a letter t' the Colonial Secretary's Office in Sydney, but still nothin'.' William's complaint opened a Pandora's Box. Many voices chimed in with a similar story. Security of land ownership suddenly became an important issue and the meeting resolved to petition the Colonial Secretary to make delivery of title deeds to landowners a high priority.

An official letter arrived in mid-May and William tore it open, hoping for news about his title deeds. He was astounded to read that he was called for jury duty on 25th May. He thought, *Jury duty?* He had previously been serving a life sentence. How times had changed! It stirred deep feelings within him, strong feelings confirming that he fitted well into his community. The stigma of 'the stain'<sup>A</sup> had gone, vanished, as if it had never existed. This letter seemed to be society's validation of the cathartic experience he had at the horticultural show over two years ago. He had become a well-respected member of the community to the extent he was considered fit for jury duty. On the appointed day he arrived at the Court House to find he was one of twenty potential jurors summoned. Eight were culled and he was subsequently sworn in.<sup>1</sup>

William listened intently to the evidence surrounding a charge of forging a cheque and after the case concluded the jury was treated to dinner at the Sovereign Hotel. William couldn't suppress a slight grin when he discovered the second case concerned the alleged disappearance of a quantity of wool from the wool store, considering that years ago he had assisted in the disappearance of two entire sheep.<sup>2</sup> The jury was discharged the following day and William reflected on this interesting experience on the way home on the ferry.<sup>3</sup> As a farm labourer in Devon his understanding of society's mechanisms had been extremely limited but since being in Australia he had learnt so much

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<sup>A</sup> The 'convict stain' was a term that denoted those who had a convict heritage and so became the reason for their being ostracised from 'respectable' society.

by running a cartage business, bidding at auctions and buying land, managing a farming enterprise, and now serving on a jury. He thought of Grace and his children in England; he was so far removed from there now. The ferry arrived at the bank and his mind returned to the present needs of the farm, having been absent for a day and a half.

He heard rumours occasionally about gold deposits being found and parties would set out to locate the latest El Dorado but eventually return unsuccessful. He was unmoved by such rumours; he remembered the Bingara diggings and knew how the size and quantities of nuggets was exaggerated with every repetition of the story. Growing quality vegetables and fruit provided more financial security than chasing illusory gold along washed-out gullies but he couldn't blame people for trying.

An economic depression developed as the year progressed and a mental depression settled upon the population as well, deepening as the district suffered under a long, severe drought.<sup>4</sup> Although there was still sufficient water in the swamp to keep the farm going, he decided that if it began drying up, he would harvest and sell all produce, mature or otherwise, and cart enough water to keep the fruit trees alive. It was ironic that this season was upon them just as land ownership for many was confirmed. The newspaper on 16th August carried a long list of title deeds ready for delivery. Scanning the page, William was frustrated to find his name wasn't there. The following week another long list appeared and this time his name was there.<sup>5</sup> It was the longest list of deeds in one year since 1846.<sup>6</sup>

To take their minds off the drought, often William and Johannah took the children across the river after church to stroll through the Botanic Gardens. Comprising twenty-seven acres with a long river frontage, it was a delightful place for a relaxing walk. They meandered along numerous paths, resting occasionally on one of the bamboo seats. It was at these times that they talked about the farm, their family, and plans for the future while the children played on the grass. There was a rustic bridge to a beautiful little island, decorated with fanciful rock-work<sup>7</sup> and the children thought it was like something out of a fairy tale.

William considered that separation from New South Wales would develop the district and to keep informed of progress he attended a meeting on 11th September at the School of Arts, at which Dr Lang was guest speaker. Further south, bitterness against separation was growing as rapidly as Moreton Bay folks' enthusiasm for it. One antagonistic comment from Sydney ventured that the revenue of Moreton Bay was hardly sufficient to support a corporal's guard in a watch-house.<sup>8</sup> Then

news was received that Her Majesty's Government had determined upon separation. Two decisions remained; the southern boundary and apportioning the public debt. All Brisbane was ecstatic. Both sides of the river were festooned with flags, more flags than he and Johannah had ever seen. Heavy rain and strong wind lashed the town, muting the celebrations.<sup>9</sup> William hoped it wasn't an omen regarding the future.

A week later he attended a public meeting that adopted an address of gratitude to the Queen and to those who had persevered with the issue, especially Dr Lang. However, proclamation of the new colony was delayed for nearly three years by administrative delays in both Australia and England, hindrances by the New South Wales Government whenever possible, and ministerial changes in England. Towards Christmas William read in the *Courier* that a branch of the Supreme Court with a resident judge was budgeted for Moreton Bay next year.<sup>10</sup> The new colony was on its way to becoming self-sufficient.

The first Presbyterian Church in Queensland had been built just a stone's throw from William's farm and a school was conducted in the building on weekdays.<sup>11</sup> Mary Jane had begun school there last year in 1856 and this year Elizabeth began prep school. She left home excitedly holding her big sister's hand while Mary Jane carried a small basket with sandwiches and oranges for their dinner. Joanna and John, too young for school, wistfully watched them leave. Johannah said to William, pressing her lips together so that the dimples in her cheeks showed and cocking her head to give that look that said *I couldn't help it, I'm with child again. P'raps it might be another boy.* William smiled, nodding. *'Yeah, 'ope so. It'd be good t' 'ave another son t' 'elp work the farm.'* However, on 18th August he and Johannah were blessed with another girl they named Rebecca.<sup>12</sup> Although William dearly loved his daughters, looking around the table at mealtime he thought how much he needed more sons. John looked such a lonely little boy surrounded by his four sisters.

A full-time farmhand was employed clearing land and planting a variety of fruit trees William had grown from seed bought from Hockings, the seedsman in North Brisbane.<sup>13</sup> His reputation for excellent produce continued to grow; his and neighbouring properties were used by agents to locate lots offered in land sales. For example, in June an advertisement for a land auction near his farm described his and three neighbouring properties as *'cultivated grounds'*<sup>14</sup> and in March 1858 his and a neighbour's property were described prior to another land sale as *'the well-known and productive properties of Messrs. Coombes and Grimes...'* Allotments offered were all less than an acre each, much smaller than his blocks.<sup>15</sup>

In June William was working at the river end of his property when he heard a commotion at the ferry. He investigated and saw a woman trying to board the punt. The ferryman's wife and an employee had hold of her arms and were pulling her back. It appeared she hadn't paid the full fare, as William heard the ferryman tell the woman she couldn't board until she paid 'tuppence'. The woman attacked the employee with her parasol, striking him two or three times about his head and shoulders. He wrenched it from her, breaking it and gashing her hand in the process. She screamed abuse at the ferryman's wife, Mrs Marsen, calling her a 'dirty lying bitch', and a 'stinking bitch'. William heard her scream at Mrs Marsen 'to wash her face, she was like a black gin'.<sup>16</sup> The following Saturday found William in the Court House, giving evidence as a witness to the disturbance at the ferry.<sup>17</sup> He simply told the Court what he had heard and was happy to get back to his farm.

In July the *Courier* created feverish excitement by announcing a new gold field at Canoona, thirty miles north of the tiny settlement of Rockhampton and seven miles from the Fitzroy River.<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, Gladstone and the Port Curtis area were almost emptied of workingmen and ships were leaving from Melbourne and Sydney, crammed with hopeful diggers.<sup>19</sup> William was disinterested; he'd seen it all before. However, it was in his interest to attend a meeting about establishing regular communications between Rockhampton and Moreton Bay, beginning with a steamer and at least two schooners. Exaggeration regarding the size of the field appeared to be rife so he spoke up. 'The amounta gold reported so far isn't much when ya look at the numbera diggers on the field.'<sup>20</sup> This observation was true, but the crowd seemed intoxicated by the rumours and didn't take any notice. Listening to the discussions, he realised his words hadn't been given a second's thought. He heaved a sigh, shook his head, and left the meeting before it concluded.

Like a cyclone crossing from the sea to land, the initial euphoria of diggers in the new rush soon abated, degenerating to either hopeless resignation or smouldering anger. William wasn't surprised; he remembered Bingara. With thousands of people camping on the riverbanks at Rockhampton, the government sent officials there to establish local departments plus a small police force. A site was surveyed for a township and the subsequent land sale held in November offered many lots, which nearly all sold.<sup>21</sup>

Around the time when the gold rush was announced Johannah had an announcement of her own. 'I'm with child again. Are ya happy?' William laughed. 'Course I'm 'appy. This one 'as t' be a boy. The rulesa chance 'ave gotta be in me favour.' On 15th December 1858 they had another daughter whom they named Isabella.<sup>22</sup> The older girls were ecstatic, fussing over the baby so much Johannah

had to often shoo them away. William had to work at concealing his disappointment and frustration. Their family now comprised five girls and one boy. He mused, *At this rate, I'll still be workin' the farm when I'm old an' grey.* Joanna Alice began prep school the following year. She felt so grown-up, walking to school between her two big sisters, hand in hand.

The most momentous news their father heard in 1859 reached Brisbane on 10th July. An Order in Council<sup>B</sup> conferred upon Queensland the status of a new colony. The town erupted in jubilant celebrations in equal proportion to the sullen grumbling from down south over the possible apportionment of the public debt. The Clarence and Richmond Rivers and the New England district remained in New South Wales, which generally suited their populations. Sir George Ferguson Bowen was appointed the first Governor of Queensland.<sup>23</sup>

William voted at the election of Queensland's first Municipal Council on 12th October, and at its first meeting John Petrie was unanimously elected Mayor. Just before Christmas, the Governor of the Australian colonies, Sir William Denison, issued a proclamation constituting sixteen electoral districts in Queensland, allotting to them a total of twenty-six members. When the colony's first census was taken a year later, William was surprised that there were only one hundred and seventy-six adult males in the South Brisbane electorate.<sup>24</sup> The area's growth since he had settled there suggested the number would be larger. The Governor, Sir George Bowen, was expected by year's end and as there wasn't suitable accommodation for him, the best residence in town named *Adelaide House*, built by the Petrie's and belonging to Dr Hobbs, was loaned to him.<sup>25</sup> Important citizens busied themselves with forming a reception committee, preparing addresses and arranging entertainments, eager to show their appreciation for the inaugural Governor.<sup>26</sup>

A trooper was stationed on the bluff at Sandgate to watch for the *Cordelia*, the frigate transporting the Governor. At half past six on Friday evening 9th December, the trooper thundered across the Breakfast Creek bridge at full gallop shouting at the top of his lungs, 'The Governor is coming! The Governor is coming!' But there wasn't any hurry. The *Cordelia* was too large to sail up the river so she anchored in the bay, waiting for smaller vessels to come and collect the Governor and his entourage.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>B</sup> An Order in Council is an Order that has been approved personally by the Queen at a meeting of the Privy Council.

At nine o'clock the following morning, dignitaries, officials, and the welcoming committee departed on the *Breadalbane*, escorted by the *Bremer* and the *Hawk*, to meet His Excellency the Governor, who was given a seventeen-gun salute from the *Cordelia* as he departed. Upon landing in Brisbane he received a twenty-gun salute. William and his family joined virtually the entire population of Brisbane, who had turned out to meet the Governor. A temporary stage had been erected on the riverbank in the Gardens and facing the river was a triumphal arch sporting a large sign declaring 'Welcome Sir George'. It was decorated with a square and compass, the scales of justice, a wreath interlaced with flowers and evergreens, and crowned by a palm tree.<sup>28</sup>

After a series of addresses from almost everyone who was somebody, William and most everybody else were bored witless. The official party moved along George Street, Queen Street, and Adelaide Street to the Anglican Deanery. William and Johannah struggled to keep the children close as the crowd surged along. Judge Lutwyche administered the oath to the Governor on the first floor balcony, after which Herbert, the Colonial Secretary, read the Queen's Commission appointing Sir George as Governor. The Governor's Acting Private Secretary, A O Moriarty, then read the proclamation, already declared in London and Sydney, which was the final act separating Queensland from New South Wales. The Governor then spoke and was cheered enthusiastically.<sup>29</sup> As the crowd dispersed, William and Johannah checked they had all their children and headed home.

William continued improving and expanding the farm to support his growing family. One day while working near the river he spotted a barge moving slowly. The men on board hauled submerged logs and debris from the riverbed with sturdy ropes attached to large grappling hooks. *About time*, he thought, *the river needs dredgin'*. River traffic had increased with the population and four steam sawmills serviced the booming building industry. Those, like himself, who supplied life's essentials, prospered. The local soap manufacturing company made five tons of soap in 1859, and the candle factory fifty thousand pounds weight of candles.<sup>30</sup>

In January 1860 it was John's turn to begin prep school. Mary Jane was now in grade five and clucked over the younger children like a mother hen as they all left for school. Johannah watched them leave and felt a surge of pride in her eldest daughter. Mary Jane held John's hand and ensured that Elizabeth and Joanna didn't lag behind. Johannah thought that Mary Jane would make a good mother when her turn came to raise a family.

The Council hadn't begun road building yet and the streets were just passages between overgrown allotments. Boggy in the rainy season, the long grass hid tree stumps, a hazard for anyone travelling by cart. The Coombe children were careful of stumps, which could easily graze shins or cause a nasty fall. There was also the risk of being tripped by the nooses older boys made by tying handfuls of long grass together. The Council attempted to improve the roads at the perimeter of the settlement by using convict labour, while Council workers struggled to improve the roads within the town. Convict teams worked at Breakfast Creek, Windmill Hill, the road to Milton, and from Kangaroo Point to One Mile Swamp on the south side.<sup>31</sup>

In April William supported a candidate for election to the first Queensland Parliament, George Edmondstone, whose major plank in his campaign was manhood suffrage.<sup>c</sup> He contended that as all men contributed to the state, all should have the right to vote for their representative in parliament. Road improvement, education of all children, and building a toll bridge across the river, were other items which garnered Edmondstone considerable support.<sup>32</sup> William loved the idea of a bridge across the river because he could then cart his fruit and vegetables to the north side of town with a minimum of fuss. Edmondstone was elected to the Legislative Assembly and William awaited the fulfilment of his promises.<sup>33</sup>

William became a man of means and people in the community often sought his assistance. A man known to him, Samuel Skinner, called to see him one day.

'G'day, William'.

'G'day, Samuel. 'Ow ya goin'?''

'Not bad.'

After chatting for ten minutes about crops, prices and the weather, Skinner asked, 'C'n I borrow yer dray?'

'Yeah, that should be alright. I won't be usin' it f' a little while.'

Skinner used the dray for some time before returning it, and when William went to use it he found one of the wheel boxes damaged. It appeared Skinner had continued using it without checking that the wheel boxes had enough grease to lubricate the axles sufficiently. William stewed on this for a while and after he and his employee, Patrick Maher, finished work at midday on Saturday 21st July, they joined Skinner at Page's public house at South Brisbane for a drink.<sup>34</sup> William had worked

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<sup>c</sup> The right to vote was not extended to all males at the time. There were age, length of residency, and financial requirements that needed to be met before a man was allowed to vote in elections.

himself up about the matter and decided to take Skinner to task. Before they had ordered drinks William accused Skinner angrily, 'Ya wrecked me bloody dray!' Skinner responded, 'Yer a damned liar!'

William lashed out and knocked Skinner down with one blow. Maher stepped in. 'Call my boss a liar?' and kicked Skinner in the head while he was on the floor. His heavy work boot struck Skinner's jaw and scattered a couple of teeth over the bare boards. William's rage had abated and he said to Maher, 'We betta leave.' Half a dozen men drinking there heard the commotion and seeing what had happened, ran out in pursuit. They caught up and it seemed that William and Maher would be severely outnumbered in a brawl. However, the police arrived in the nick of time, spoke to the two men and allowed them to leave. William didn't mention anything of the incident to Johannah.

In the meantime, Skinner had found a doctor, who diagnosed that his jaw was broken. Later that afternoon Johannah said inquisitively, 'Will, there's two policemen comin' here.' William went to the door.

'William Coombe?'

'Yeah.'

'We have a warrant for your arrest. Come with us, please.'

Johannah was shocked and confused as William left with the police. Joanna asked her, 'Mummy, where's Daddy goin' with the policemen?'

Johannah tried to make light of it for the children's sake, replying, 'The policemen came to Daddy for help and he's gone with 'em to help 'em.'

William arrived home Monday afternoon and faced a barrage of questions from Johannah. He related the events to her and when he'd finished she asked, 'What happens now?'

'We've been released on bail 'cause the case couldn't go ahead. Skinner can't give evidence at the moment with 'is jaw the way it is.'<sup>35</sup> Skinner later decided not to press charges and William realised he had placed his family and livelihood at risk in one uncontrolled moment. That he had previously been a lifer wouldn't have looked good for him in court. William occupied society's middle strata, along with other farm owners, general merchants, self-employed tradespeople, clerical workers and lower level employees in the legal profession. Most disputes taken to court arose from within this section of society.<sup>36</sup> William had another brush with the law in early 1861. A neighbour, Margaret Connolly, considered it quite a serious matter when William's cattle found their way into her corn crop and took him to court. He was ordered to pay her two pounds and ten shillings plus costs.<sup>37</sup>

Of the four Coombe children who attended school, the younger two, Joanna and John, often didn't return to the classroom after the first break, preferring to wander in the bush. They chased butterflies, snuck up on colourful birds to get a close look at them, followed tracks to discover which animal had made them, and generally passed the remainder of each school day carefree and having fun. Life wasn't fun for some other children, though. A man named George Ness died suddenly, leaving a widow and small children in dire financial straits. William donated ten shillings to a public subscription organised for Mrs Ness and her children.<sup>38</sup>

Under Queensland's Education Act of 1860, communities were required to contribute one-third towards the construction cost of new school buildings. William couldn't see any point in contributing when the children already attended a local school, albeit sporadically. Many parents found it difficult to raise the one-third contribution so the regulation was relaxed and the South Brisbane Primary School was constructed in 1864 on two acres of land fronting Cordelia and Merivale Streets. Its construction phase attracted local interest, being a two-storey brick building, and often the Coombe children joined other locals in walking there to check on its progress.<sup>39</sup>

In November the previous year Johannah had uttered that now familiar phrase, 'Will, I'm with child again,' to which William responded teasingly, 'That's alright, as long as it's a boy.' On 15th May 1861 she presented William with a long-awaited son they named James Mortimer, his second name being William's mother's maiden name.<sup>40</sup> William couldn't contain his joy, sprouting a grin from ear to ear. The following year Rebecca commenced prep school and at the beginning of 1863 Isabella commenced. During the day James was home alone with his mum and not having to share her time with siblings he became quite a privileged little boy.

Land in South Brisbane attracted increasing interest, and one day William noticed a surveyor and his chainman surveying land beside his block and driving in survey pegs. He struck up a conversation. 'G'day! Whatcha doin'?'

The surveyor looked up, a smile creasing his sunburnt face. 'G'day! This block's bein' subdivided into smaller blocks. They're gunna build houses on `em. Get in early an' buy some an' y'll make a few quid later when ya sell `em.'

William scanned the pegged land. 'I'll think about that. Thanks.'

Considering this, William decided to buy another block for farming before the remaining valuable farm land was subdivided for building allotments. He purchased a seven acre block described as

allotment number Thirty-eight in South Brisbane.<sup>41</sup> It proved a wise decision, as only five months later in August, an auction was held to sell twenty-eight allotments beside his property.<sup>42</sup>

Houses began occupying the land around William's farm as wealthy squatters from the Brisbane hinterland and the Darling Downs built their town residences in Hill End and West End. They were attracted by the river frontage and the close proximity to the race track they had built at South Brisbane, almost beside William's farm. It began near the intersection of Grey and Melbourne streets and circled around part of Coombes' Swamp that ran almost the entire length of Melbourne Street. The swamp became a deep waterhole between Edmonstone Street and Manning Street and served as the water supply for South Brisbane residents.<sup>43</sup> Then in March 1864 another sale offered quarter-acre building allotments in the vicinity of William's property, near the bend in the river.<sup>44</sup> South Brisbane was now a township.

William counted himself fortunate he had another son, as Johannah couldn't seem to fall pregnant after having James.

Then in September she announced, 'Will, I'm with child again.'

'Gunna present me with another boy, are ya?' he jokingly replied.

During the final months of her pregnancy Johannah began having bad dreams and sometimes awoke screaming, waking William. They were both worried and discussed what this phenomenon might mean. When Johannah went into labour on 24th March 1865, William sent for a doctor. He wanted more than a midwife attending Johannah this time because of the dreams. Waiting in the kitchen, his blood chilled as he heard Johannah scream. Another followed shortly after. The girls, extremely upset, grabbed their pillows and ran from the house. Huddling together behind the big Moreton Bay fig in the backyard, they held the pillows over their ears to stifle the sound of their mother's screams. James sat on William's lap in the kitchen, holding onto his father as though his life depended on it as Johannah kept screaming.

Finally, all was quiet. William listened intently for a baby's cry, but it didn't come. The doctor walked from the bedroom with a crestfallen face and said sadly, 'I'm sorry. They're both gone.'<sup>45</sup> William stared blankly at the doctor, his mind not able to process the statement. He couldn't think and his whole body felt numb. He said weakly, aching, 'Gone? Gone? But she's only thirty-two! 'Ow could she go? We've got seven children. Gone? 'Ow c'n it be?' James implored, 'Daddy, where's Mummy gone?' William, barely comprehending, answered, 'Mummy's gone to 'eaven.' He broke down and hugged his son, his tears saturating James's shirt. The doctor left quietly and the watching girls

returned to the house. Seeing their father, they didn't need to be told of the outcome and rushing to their rooms and throwing themselves on their beds, buried their faces in their pillows and sobbed their hearts out.

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- <sup>2</sup> 'Brisbane Circuit Court', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 31 May 1856, p. 3 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/543224> Accessed 23 August 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> 'The present severe drought', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 23 August 1856, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/543326> Accessed 23 August 2014.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Title deeds ready for delivery', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 23 August 1856, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/543326> Accessed 23 August 2014.
- <sup>6</sup> 'The Hon. Thomas Holt', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 23 August 1856, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/543326> Accessed 23 August 2014.
- <sup>7</sup> 'Brisbane Botanic Garden', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 23 August 1856, p.2of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/543326> Accessed 23 August 2014.
- <sup>8</sup> Coote, William 1882, *History of the Colony of Queensland*, vol. 1 [Online]. Available at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks14/1400241h.html> Accessed 5 May 2014.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> 'Brisbane's historic churches-VII: The Park (Presbyterian) Church' [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/19334218> Accessed 5 January 2015.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Rebecca Coombe' Baptism Certificate, Registration No. 57/B 000426, Register of Baptisms, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>13</sup> 'Orange Trees' *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 20 June 1857, p. 1 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/542991> Accessed 9 January 2015.
- <sup>14</sup> 'Sale by Auction', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 20 June 1857, p. 3 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/542991> Accessed 23 August 2014.
- <sup>15</sup> 'R. Davidson, Auctioneer and General Agent', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 6 March 1858, p. 3 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/543381> Accessed 23 August 2014.
- <sup>16</sup> 'Police Court', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 12 June 1858, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/543538> Accessed 31 January 2015.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> 'Gold at Rockhampton', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Wednesday 28 July 1858, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/543586> Accessed 31 January 2015.
- <sup>19</sup> Coote, William 1882, *History of the Colony of Queensland*, vol. 1 [Online]. Available at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks14/1400241h.html> Accessed 5 May 2014.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>22</sup> 'Isabella Coombe' Baptism Certificate, Registration No. 59/B 000830, Register of Baptisms, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>23</sup> Coote, William 1882, *History of the Colony of Queensland*, vol. 1 [Online]. Available at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks14/1400241h.html> Accessed 5 May 2014.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> 'Your Brisbane: Past and Present' [Online]. Available at <http://www.yourbrisbanepastandpresent.com/> Accessed 25 April 2014.
- <sup>26</sup> Coote, William 1882, *History of the Colony of Queensland*, vol. 1 [Online]. Available at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks14/1400241h.html> Accessed 5 May 2014.
- <sup>27</sup> Morrison, Allan A 1962, 'Brisbane One Hundred Years Ago' [Online]. Available at [https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/data/UQ\\_212643/s00855804\\_1962\\_1963\\_7\\_1\\_72.pdf?Expires=1549662041&Signature=ZDelzCRyNOAKtJkPEOWG8Zb3pj2ji-VTnlVhir2SzFtxdqDEN5WyH~tED3Qk6vqs4QU~6GQsN43SnHkwm7AYHRZIN5Jazzf3UkeSRbE7n4EBNV89SZdFJpMz0OSGUkPwxDL~PVgQNR4HBtmsSv9QQ8R~3tFvZfIG~wSR~8ZdqJXVUufDvlrOhwKFR4W~JFh90cvz4hced0r9jk8KDd8ilaiOv3dPLwl-di5LKYKX9Em~9xAHXeFbMLbE~PG7fSqwQ8eeblkP5q6IMbl0e4N4jSVvwPyFeb6KVkuykqNuuyxeghPY7ViHyhXtGyclk0Pgcgd4mZ340whyzSunzQ\\_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJKNB4MJBNC6NLQ](https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/data/UQ_212643/s00855804_1962_1963_7_1_72.pdf?Expires=1549662041&Signature=ZDelzCRyNOAKtJkPEOWG8Zb3pj2ji-VTnlVhir2SzFtxdqDEN5WyH~tED3Qk6vqs4QU~6GQsN43SnHkwm7AYHRZIN5Jazzf3UkeSRbE7n4EBNV89SZdFJpMz0OSGUkPwxDL~PVgQNR4HBtmsSv9QQ8R~3tFvZfIG~wSR~8ZdqJXVUufDvlrOhwKFR4W~JFh90cvz4hced0r9jk8KDd8ilaiOv3dPLwl-di5LKYKX9Em~9xAHXeFbMLbE~PG7fSqwQ8eeblkP5q6IMbl0e4N4jSVvwPyFeb6KVkuykqNuuyxeghPY7ViHyhXtGyclk0Pgcgd4mZ340whyzSunzQ_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJKNB4MJBNC6NLQ) Accessed 28 February 2015.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Coote, William 1882, *History of the Colony of Queensland*, vol. 1 [Online]. Available at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks14/1400241h.html> Accessed 5 May 2014.
- <sup>31</sup> 'Employment of Prisoners', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Tuesday 21 February 1860, p. 2 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/544300> Accessed 7 February 2015.
- <sup>32</sup> 'To George Edmondstone, Esq.', *Moreton Bay Courier*, Saturday 28 April 1860, p. 4 of 6 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/544472> Accessed 7 February 2015.
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- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Coote, William 1882, *History of the Colony of Queensland*, vol. 1 [Online]. Available at <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks14/1400241h.html> Accessed 5 May 2014.
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- <sup>38</sup> 'Subscription List', *The Courier*, Brisbane, Thursday 31 October 1861, p. 4 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/538532> Accessed 14 March 2015.
- <sup>39</sup> 'Brisbane State High School' [Online]. Available at <https://apps.des.qld.gov.au/heritage-register/detail/?id=601222> Accessed 28 February 2015.

- <sup>40</sup> 'James Mortimer Coombe' Baptism Certificate, Registration No. 61/B A00632, Register of Baptisms, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>41</sup> 'Real Property Transfer Notice', *The Courier*, Brisbane, Thursday 20 March 1862, p. 1 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/47300> Accessed 14 March 2015.
- <sup>42</sup> 'This Day, August 30', *The Courier*, Brisbane, Saturday 30 August 1862, p. 3 of 4 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/47872> Accessed 14 March 2015.
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- <sup>44</sup> 'South Brisbane. For Sale', *The Courier*, Brisbane, Tuesday 15 March 1864, p. 4 of 5 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/539057> Accessed 14 March 2015.
- <sup>45</sup> 'Johanna Coombe' Death Certificate, Registration No. 1865/2241, Register of Deaths, General Registry Office, Brisbane.

## 13 Life and Death

William didn't remember much about the days following Johannah's death. He recollected a few snippets from the funeral, but the events immediately after that terrible day when his life and his children's lives were thrown into a chaotic maelstrom of disbelief and grief, that day that destroyed his plans for the future, passed in a sorrowful blur. Robert and Elizabeth Dickens were a tower of strength during that dark time, visiting regularly, preparing meals, and ensuring a myriad of things were attended to, but they had a family of their own. No-one could be there during the lonely nights, when William longed to roll over and feel Johannah's warm body in his arms. Eventually, he dragged himself around the farm and tried his best to run it. He had a tribe of mouths to feed as well as several employees to oversee and he felt keenly the weight of responsibility upon his shoulders.

As the long weeks passed he settled into something like a routine but worried constantly about the children. He got them off to school but they rarely stayed there long, and his time was divided between caring for the younger ones and looking after the farm. He plodded dully through 1865 but when 1866 arrived he began to think like the William of old, the William who imagined possibilities and worked towards their reality. He began to wonder what the year would bring. Would his depressed mind still govern his days, or would the year close in anticipation of a bright future? His thoughts drifted even to the possibility of finding another wife.

The Dickenses visited one crisp day in early July. Elizabeth Dickens, disturbed at the state of the house, rolled up her sleeves and cleaned and tidied the place. She said strongly, 'William, you need a wife or a housekeeper, and either would be better than none at all.'

William nodded several times. 'Ya right, Elizabeth. I know ya right.'

She looked him squarely in the eye. 'There's a young widow in North Brisbane who's got two daughters aged three and two. She lost her husband tragically just over a month ago. She needs somewhere to live and might be prepared to work as a housekeeper for room and board, and perhaps a small wage.'

William hesitated before replying, looking out the window at the orchard, the rows of crops, and the swamp in the background. 'It'd be good t' `ave the `ouse clean an' tidy, and a woman in the `ouse might be good f' the girls.' Turning back to Elizabeth, he asked, 'Would ya mind followin' up on this an' see if she's interested? I'd be `appy t' talk to `er.'

Elizabeth smiled. 'I'll do that.'

Just over a week later Elizabeth arrived at the farm with the woman and her children. Catherine Heagarty seemed a likable and capable woman. Being Irish, the lilt in her voice reminded William of Johannah. After discussing arrangements, she agreed to keep house for William for her lodgings and five shillings a week, and moved in within two days. As time went by, they discovered they got along quite well. William was appreciative of the orderliness of his home and how Catherine apportioned tasks to the girls and persuaded them to accept responsibilities. He considered that, as he wasn't yet sixty, still fit and healthy, perhaps he might stand a chance with this thirty-year-old woman. When the children were in bed, usually they sat around the fire talking about everyday happenings, their respective pasts and uncertain futures. Before Christmas Catherine planned ahead, preparing special foods and making items of clothing for his children and hers as presents. William admired her qualities and considered he would be a fool not to ask for this woman's hand in marriage.

After the children were in bed on Christmas Eve, dreaming about next morning's presents, William and Catherine were sitting around talking about the preparations for dinner tomorrow. The conversation developed into an overview of the year, which evolved into speculation about next year.

After a little while William cleared his throat, looked down at the floor and began hesitantly. 'Ahhh, Catherine... I realise I'm a lot older than ya, but I'm still fit an' 'ealthy, an' I'm well orf enough that I c'n look after ya, an' the children.' He heaved a nervous sigh, and lifting his eyes to meet her gaze, asked, 'Would ya consider marryin' me?'

Catherine lowered her eyes and rested them on her hands folded in her lap and spoke quietly, measuring her words. 'I know you've been watchin' me, an' I've been watchin' you, too. I've noticed the times you spend with the children and I've seen how hard you work to provide for them. I'm aware of the difference in our ages, but I consider you're a good man, William Coombe. You've treated me and my children fairly and I think I know you well enough. I'll accept your proposal.'

When all were gathered around the table next day for Christmas dinner, William announced, 'Catherine an' I `ave somethin' t' tell yez.' The children stopped talking. He smiled, looking around the table at each in turn. 'We've decided t' get married.' After a stunned silence, they all talked excitedly, each one thrilled. It was a wonderful Christmas. The house became a hive of activity as Catherine and the older girls decided what to wear to the wedding and much sewing and trying on of dresses carried on into the New Year.

As William looked at his girls preparing for the wedding he realised they were becoming young women. Mary Jane was sixteen and had been working as a milliner for two years. They had celebrated Elizabeth's fourteenth birthday on New Year's Day, and Joanna was twelve. Of the younger ones, Rebecca was nine and Isabella had just turned eight. The boys were growing up too. John was eleven and a good help on the farm, while James was five and about to begin school. Catherine's eldest daughter, also named Catherine, was four and Mary was two and didn't really understand what was going on but was caught up in the excitement that filled the house.

Although William and Catherine had decided to be married at the General Registry Office, everybody wanted to look their best for the occasion. Catherine had prepared food for the celebration over several days, and on the morning of 12th January 1867, the house was abuzz as the girls helped each other dress and ensured that their clothes were just right. In between organising themselves, the older girls helped the younger ones, checking on them every so often and making little changes to their outfits. William checked the boys after they had dressed and decided they looked good enough and instructed John to help James tie his shoelaces while he hitched the horse to the cart.

When everybody was ready they piled into the cart, bumping their way through the ruts along dusty Melbourne Street to the river. When informed of the occasion, the ferryman offered his hearty congratulations. A few heads turned as they walked along Queen Street to the General Registry Office, where they were met by the Dickenses and the Butlers, and two of Catherine's friends, Susanna Dewson and Levinia Loford. The ceremony didn't take long then William signed his name in the book, Catherine made her mark with a scrawly x, followed by Susanna and Levinia signing as witnesses.<sup>1</sup> The happy couple and their entourage then took the ferry across to South Brisbane to enjoy a hearty celebratory meal at the Coombe residence.

Although everyone shared in William and Catherine's happiness, Elizabeth Dickens was subdued, remembering the wedding celebration for Johannah almost eighteen years ago. The intervening years had sped by so swiftly, but now Johannah was no more and another woman shared William's life. It wasn't a bad thing, just different, and the rush of memories flooding back brought melancholy feelings she tried hard to conceal. Elizabeth was thankful when Robert eventually suggested they leave. By that stage William's girls had changed out of their good clothes and had begun to clean up. William and Catherine were both thinking of what the night held for them.

The newlyweds settled into a comfortable lifestyle. The underlying sexual tension both had felt during the past few months had dissipated and the atmosphere was relaxed. Catherine had a system operating already with the older girls and William concentrated on working the farm. James commenced school and on afternoons and weekends John helped his father, who looked forward to the time when he could turn the farm's operations over to his son.

William and Catherine's marriage wasn't the only one in the Coombe household in 1867. Mary Jane had been seeing a man thirteen years older than herself but William couldn't disagree with that, considering the age difference in both his marriages. Besides, an older man should be better positioned to support a wife and family, even if Patrick Lowrey was only a labourer. The wedding date was set for 13th December and Mary Jane spent several months in preparation. Elizabeth, already Mary Jane's confidante, shared in all the bride's uncertainties about her big day and future life. The ceremony took place in St Stephen's Roman Catholic Church, as Patrick was an Irishman from Castlewood in Queen's County.<sup>2</sup> William didn't mind; one church was as good as another to him.

Catherine was quiet and introspective during the wedding ceremony, as vivid memories returned of her marriage to John Heagarty, also in St Stephen's, only eight years before. Her mind drifted back to that joyful day; she had expected to spend her entire life with him. As the minister droned on, Catherine became lost in her memories, her bridal dreams, her shattered life. She realised that deep within she was still trying to come to terms with the capriciousness of life, its uncanny ability to barge into one's surroundings with a rush of events that overturns the stability of daily routine and changes it forever. Absorbed in her musings, she became aware that William was tapping her elbow. Jolted back into the present, she joined the other wedding guests in standing as the bride and groom passed by in the aisle.

The wedding celebration was held at William and Catherine's house. Catherine took the opportunity to announce that she and William were expecting their first child and was delighted at the joyful responses of their guests. Their son William Mortimer was born on 2nd May 1868.<sup>3</sup> William was elated; he had another son! He regained the spring in his step, notably absent since Johannah's death. The sun seemed to be brighter, the grass greener. The air wasn't as dusty either, chiefly because the races weren't held nearby anymore. The track had been abandoned, as the graziers who supported the racing were in the grip of a depression following the crisis of 1866.<sup>4</sup>

William settled comfortably into his revitalised life. Sometimes he would stand outside the house and look out over the farm, feeling a huge sense of satisfaction as he surveyed the work of his hands. He was immensely thankful for his good fortune, coupled with hard work and sound planning, which had brought him this life. He speculated on the grinding poverty that would have been his lot had he remained a farm labourer in Devon. Although he'd endured several living hells: in the gaol at Exeter, on the hulk *Justitia* moored in the Thames, and on the *John Barry* on the voyage to Australia, they were old and fading memories. He had no regrets of the years spent assigned on *Skellatar* in the Hunter Valley, as that had propelled him into his new life.

He had grown into respectability along with South Brisbane, now evolving into a far different locality than when he'd arrived there. Life and times had changed so much. Now he rarely saw Aborigines walking along their time-worn tracks in the scrub beside the river. The reeds still grew in the swamp and occasionally he would exchange a wave with an Aborigine whom he recognised from years ago, searching for food there. Like him, they were growing older too. Nobody wanted the reeds anymore. Most new houses were roofed with wooden shingles while the more expensive homes had tiled roofs. No matter; his farms were producing healthy vegetables for Brisbane's expanding population and his orchards were bearing good quantities of excellent fruit. He had capable workers who respected him. Life was good all round.

One night as they sat in the parlour Catherine lowered her embroidery. 'Will, there's somethin' I want to talk to you about.' Her earnestness caused William to lay aside his newspaper. She heaved a nervous sigh. 'Will, I don't know whether you've noticed, but I've never been really happy in this house. I always feel as though I'm sharin' it with Johannah: her memories, her furniture, her children, her husband. Could we get a new house built, for us?'

William nodded several times. 'Fair enough. I c'n understand 'ow y' must feel an' I want ya t' be 'appy.'

They built a spacious new home on a part of his block facing Stanley Street and moved into it in March 1869. Catherine now felt she had a house of her own. It hadn't been anybody else's beforehand and she had chosen the furnishings. She had put her own stamp upon it.

Life was smiling upon the Coombe family. The older girls seemed infatuated with William Mortimer, whom they called Willie to differentiate between him and his dad. They fussed over him and Catherine was never short of assistance to look after him when she needed to get on with other work. On 14th June rain began falling and intensified throughout the day. It rained continuously for

four days, swelling creeks and cutting communication with Gympie. The mail coach was washed away at the Durramboy Lagoon and three horses were drowned, the driver lucky to escape with his life. The sea became so tempestuous that steamers couldn't depart from Brisbane.<sup>5</sup> During this bout of severe weather, Willie developed a cold.

On 20th June Willie's cold worsened and he began coughing, a hoarse cough that drained the energy from his little body. Catherine prepared drinks for him of warm water, freshly squeezed lemon juice, and a heaped teaspoon of honey. However, his cough became worse and his breathing laboured. Two days later his condition deteriorated so Catherine took him to Doctor Cannan, who performed a thorough examination. 'Your little boy is suffering from croup.<sup>6</sup> Keep him upright and don't let his head sink down towards his chest. Ensure his chin is kept forward. Apart from that, continue as normal and the illness will take its course.'

Doctor Cannan called early the following morning to check on Willie, but improvement wasn't noticeable. Catherine sat all night, holding her son upright in between short periods of restless sleep, speaking soothingly to him and praying. At intervals she prepared the drink she gave the children when they had coughs and colds, but he couldn't drink much of it. Mostly she worried. Willie seemed so weak, so limp, so lifeless. William didn't sleep well either and got up twice during the night to see how they were. The doctor had said, 'Although it's a dangerous disease at this stage, it passes fairly quickly. However, the cool nights brought on by the wet weather are certainly not assisting his recovery.'

After breakfast William tried catching up on some sleep and then intended nursing Willie while Catherine slept. He had only been asleep about an hour when he was awakened by Catherine shrilly calling, 'William!' 'William!' Leaping out of bed, he stumbled to the living room, where Catherine was sitting in a chair nursing Willie. Tears streaked her face and her wet hair was sticking to her cheeks. She looked up at him and through her weeping said, 'I was worn down by tiredness, I dozed off and just woke up and Willie's gone.' She looked down at the little body still warm but lifeless in her arms. She broke into sobs and William put one arm around her shoulder as he felt Willie's forehead and checked his neck for a pulse. He couldn't believe it. His new lease on life had turned to sand and ran through his fingers. Then his heart went out to Catherine and he loved her in that moment as never before. He cradled her head gently, put his head beside hers and held her for what seemed an eternity.

He finally released her and taking Willie, sat down in a chair across from her. He looked upon the now calm and peaceful but lifeless face of his son, the son he would never see grow up, the son who would never help him on the farm, the son he would never teach about the soil, the son he would never show how to graft a fruit tree or prune it, the son he would never see grow into a strong and confident young man. Wracked by sobs, he covered Willie's face with the blanket and wrapped his body in it. Crossing the floor, he helped Catherine to her feet and guided her to their bed.

William placed Willie's body at the end of the bed and lay down beside Catherine, holding her until she drifted off to sleep. He lay there for some time, agonising whether losing Willie was divine retribution for his stupid act of years ago, when he committed that foolish crime that took him away from his wife and children in Devon. His English son William had lost his father then. Was that the reason that William had lost his Australian son William now? Tormented and emotionally drained, he sank eventually into a merciful sleep. When he awoke after midday Catherine was still sleeping, exhausted by her broken sleep and worry during the last couple of nights. The children were quiet in the house, each nursing their own anxiety.

When Catherine arose around one o'clock and prepared dinner not much was said; the entire family was in a state of shock. After eating, William left with Willie's body for the undertaker. Catherine declined going, her reddened eyes full of sorrow. 'I can't bring myself to go, and besides, the other children need me here.'

The undertaker Joshua Ebenston sent two of his men, James Graham and Edward McKenna, to dig the grave in the Roman Catholic Cemetery, which Catherine had requested, while William visited Doctor Cannan to have Willie's death certified.<sup>7</sup> The funeral was a sombre affair, as funerals invariably are, but this one more so than usual. Nobody else attended: just William, the two diggers and their employer. Ebenston had arranged enough funerals to say a few words that seemed right. The men seemed awkward; William was subdued. It was a lonely place.

William walked home in a surreal state of mind. It didn't make sense, how the loneliness of the cemetery had transmogrified into the business of everyday life in a matter of moments. People he passed couldn't see his aching heart. Death had not only taken his son, but dreams that William would never realise were taken with him. When he arrived home he walked into what seemed an empty house. Everything was quiet. Over the following days he and Catherine tried to bring life back to normal. In talking about Willie, they both thought that perhaps the cool air so close to the river had contributed to his death, so they decided to build a new home on a part of their block facing

Hope Street. They would rent out their current home, Catherine's dream home, which now held sad memories.

Some brightness eased into their lives later in the year when Elizabeth married John Moran, a farmer from Strokestown in County Roscommon, Ireland. In common with marriages at the time, he was seventeen years older.<sup>8</sup> The reception was held at the Coombe residence and happiness filled the air. It was a good day that lifted everyone's spirits. When undressing for bed on Christmas Eve Catherine threw her arms around William's neck. 'We're havin' another baby!' He smiled and hugged her. 'I 'ope it's another boy but anyway, as long as it's 'ealthy I won't mind.' They moved into the new house in April and on 14th July 1870 Catherine gave birth to a son they named Michael Joseph.<sup>9</sup> He was strong and healthy, which relieved them greatly. The girls fussed over him as they had with Willie and his doting parents often felt a tinge of sadness; Willie's memory was never far away. Catherine and William found new hope in Hope Street and when Michael turned one year old they held a birthday celebration for him, even though he was too young to understand.

The following month, during the time of the cold winter wind that people called a lazy wind because they said it didn't go around you but blew right through you, Michael developed a cold. Fearful of where it might lead, Catherine rugged him up and plied him with lemon and honey drinks. She became panicky, and William became quite nervous, when Michael developed a hoarse cough, the sound they remembered and dreaded. Although they followed the instructions given by Doctor Cannan, his condition worsened and he became weaker as the illness wore his ravaged body down. On 26th August, the third day after Michael developed the cough, William sent for Doctor Jaap, who arrived after dinner. He diagnosed that Michael was suffering from croup<sup>10</sup> and gave them much the same instructions that Doctor Cannan had given them for Willie.

William and Catherine felt they were reliving a bad dream. The children were apprehensive and moved quietly around the house. Michael's coughing sounded extra loud in the gloomy atmosphere. Early in the night, Catherine offered, 'I'll stay up while you go to bed.' Taking a look at Michael, William replied gratefully, 'Alright. Wake me at midnight t' change shifts.' Troubled in mind, he slept restlessly. He was awakened by a gentle shaking on his shoulder. Catherine whispered, 'Will, it's ten minutes after midnight.' He struggled to wake up properly but in a couple of minutes took Michael from her and headed to the living room, leaving Catherine to try to catch some sleep.

William sat through the night, listening to his son's laboured breathing, interspersed by that accursed cough he had grown to hate. He tried giving Michael some fluids but without much success. The room gradually became lighter as the sun edged further over the horizon, cancelling the shadows darkness had created. He sat there until Catherine rose and came into the living room. She stooped to kiss him and Michael, and went into the kitchen to prepare breakfast, after which William returned to bed. He woke around three in the afternoon, to find Michael's breathing more laboured than previously. William suggested, 'Let's `ave an early tea. It could be a long night.' Catherine agreed. William was nursing Michael just after eight o'clock, talking with Catherine, when Michael had a bout of coughing. Although now used to hearing it, their hearts tore each time it happened. This time, though, Michael didn't breathe afterwards. He just stopped breathing. It was over. He had gone.

William looked at his son in disbelief then looked at Catherine. Both their mouths were open in shock and puzzlement, and fear filled their eyes. Gingerly, Catherine came over and sank to her knees, and reaching a trembling hand to Michael's face she caressed it before moving her hand to his neck to feel for a pulse. There was none. She and William clutched each other and sobbed, their tears of grief intermingling until William relaxed his grip and Catherine rose slowly to her feet. Tenderly taking Michael from William, she extended a hand to him as he rose and they went to bed and tried to sleep, weary in body and emotionally exhausted.

When the children were told the next morning, they accepted the news numbly; their bottom lips quivered and large tears rolled down their cheeks. Joanna was now sixteen and volunteered, 'I'll look after the children if you want t' go t' the funeral with Dad.' Catherine accepted gratefully. She hadn't gone to Willie's funeral but wanted to go to Michael's, mainly because she felt this second funeral would be a huge emotional hurdle for William to overcome on his own. They left just after ten o'clock and after calling on Doctor Jaap to issue a death certificate, continued on to the undertaker. Joshua Ebenston looked surprised when he saw William and extended his heartfelt commiserations when he learned the reason for their visit. He instructed an employee, Augustin Balf, to gather tools and head for the Roman Catholic Cemetery while he walked there with William and Catherine.<sup>11</sup>

They found the plot where Willie had been buried scarcely two years before and Balf began digging, as William and Catherine wanted Michael buried with his brother. When the grave had been dug, Ebenston said what needed to be said and read some scriptures from the Bible about hope beyond

this life. William shook hands with him and they went their separate ways, leaving Balf to fill in the grave. As he walked to the ferry with Catherine, William realised that he felt his age. He was now sixty-four and felt worn down and life weary. The deaths of his two sons in infancy had dried up his usual enthusiasm for life. A large chunk of his future plans had been buried with them and suddenly, he felt old. He tried to drag himself out of this mental morass, knowing that Catherine deserved better. She had lost her only two sons and was still a young woman. Having an old and useless husband to look after was an additional burden she didn't need.

William began slowing his life down and took a back seat in working the farm. John was sixteen and had grown into a strong, strapping young man. William employed him fulltime now and preferred to give him the run of the farm while he provided advice whenever John asked for it. He and Catherine were financially secure enough not to have to work but when there wasn't much left to do around the house William couldn't resist getting dirt underneath his fingernails.

In mid-1874 Rebecca, now almost seventeen and working as a house servant, came into the living room when William and Catherine were talking and sat down in a chair. William asked, 'Y' want somethin', love?'

Looking at both of them in turn, Rebecca responded sheepishly, 'I'm pregnant.'

William's brow furrowed and he grimaced as if he had a headache. He ran his calloused fingers backwards and forwards through his grey thinning hair several times. 'Does the young man know?'

Rebecca stared resignedly at the floor. 'Yeah, I told him and I haven't seen him since.'

William looked across at Catherine and read her eyes. 'Well, what's done is done but y've got our support, we'll stand by ya.'

It was decided that Rebecca could live in the Stanley Street house, with Isabella for company if she wished. Isabella was a year younger and the two girls were very close. William and Catherine helped them move in and when Rebecca's time drew near, Isabella rushed around to Hope Street to fetch Catherine, who acted as midwife. On 20th December 1874 Rebecca gave birth to a son she named Patrick John. A month later Catherine accompanied Rebecca to the Registry Office as a witness to register the birth; Rebecca signed her name by making a rough x on the record.<sup>12</sup> Rebecca, Catherine and William had discussed her future and it had been mutually agreed that after weaning Patrick, he would be brought up with William and Catherine's family. By this arrangement, Rebecca could work to support him and also stand a better chance of finding a husband. Nobody voiced the likelihood

that Patrick might ease the loss in William and Catherine's souls and fill the aching void left by the deaths of Willie and Michael.

Not long after, Rebecca met a twenty-five-year-old bookbinder named John Molloy, whose parents had emigrated from Rohan in King's County, Ireland, when he was eleven years old. John lived in South Brisbane with his parents. Romance blossomed and they planned to be married after mid-year so Rebecca decided she would cease breastfeeding Patrick after six months. On 20th July 1875 the family was arrayed in their finest attire in St Stephen's Cathedral for John and Rebecca's wedding. John's friends, William and Elizabeth Newell, witnessed the ceremony, after which Rebecca made an x on another piece of paper, as did William Newell, while Elizabeth signed her name.<sup>13</sup> William was relieved that Rebecca had landed on her feet after a bad start and allowed the newlyweds to settle into the Stanley Street house until they could buy a place of their own.

On 20th May 1876 Rebecca and John had a daughter they named Mary Louise.<sup>14</sup> A few months later they moved into a house they bought in Vulture Street. By the end of the year Rebecca was pregnant again and on 28th June 1877 she gave birth to a son they named Anthony William.<sup>15</sup> About a week before the baby was born John began having fevers intermittently for no apparent reason, and tenderness developed in his groin, which became increasingly painful. He didn't worry too much about it initially, as he was occupied caring for Rebecca. She had her hands full after the birth: in caring for a newborn, a one-year-old, and a husband who was now debilitated by a mystery illness.

On becoming aware of John's condition William walked the several blocks to John and Rebecca's house each day to see how they were coping. Often John's mother, Elizabeth, was there and she also helped Rebecca with the children and housework. John's condition deteriorated until he couldn't work and his parents called Doctor Andrews. After examining him, the doctor looked puzzled. 'I'll come back tonight to take a blood sample.' He did that and returned the following afternoon while William was there. They were seated around the kitchen table and Doctor Andrews, with the utmost seriousness, looked intently at John. 'Your illness is caused by a mosquito bite, which has transmitted parasitic worms into your bloodstream.'

The family exchanged surprised glances, astounded at this news. Rebecca asked, 'How long will it be before John gets better?'

Their senses reeled when the doctor said sadly, 'I'm afraid there's no known cure. I'm sorry.'

They were all speechless, incredulous at his words. John sat there shaking his head, unable to believe what he had just heard. A fortnight after his son was born, John died on 13th July 1877.<sup>16</sup>

Rebecca fell apart. She needed physical support at the funeral and relatives looked after the children. Catherine was devastated as old wounds reopened and chafed raw, of the time when she, with two young children, had lost her first husband. She tried to be strong for Rebecca's sake but felt washed out. Rebecca stayed overnight with John's parents. Over the following weeks it became plain that she wasn't coping. On his daily visits, William was concerned that the house wasn't kept and it seemed that neither Rebecca nor Mary were eating properly. Rebecca was adamant she didn't want to live anywhere else but it was obvious that something needed to be done. As William and Catherine were already looking after Patrick, he approached Anthony and Elizabeth Molloy and found they shared his concerns.

They offered, 'We'll talk to Rebecca about whether we might be able to take Mary off her hands for a while.'

'Thanks very much,' William responded earnestly. 'I'd really appreciate that.'

They did and Rebecca gratefully accepted, realising that looking after two young children was beyond her capacity to cope. She knew life would be easier with just the baby. Even so, the grief of shattered dreams and the unending drudgery of daily demands was crushing. William patiently coaxed her along, hoping she would rise from the black depths of despair. As time wore on, her appearance became more dishevelled, her hair more untidy, her body thinner, and her face gaunt. Although only twenty years old, she looked older.

Something had to give and finally it did. On 2nd March 1878 Anthony died, only eight months old. Medical help hadn't been sought and Doctor Hancock, who examined his body, identified the cause of death as inanition; basically, weakness caused by lack of food.<sup>17</sup> Rebecca had neglected Anthony to the point of death by starvation and this dreadful situation jolted her out of her grief-fuelled fog towards the reality of life as it should be lived. After a simple and very subdued burial at the South Brisbane Cemetery, at which everyone seemed ashamed, each nursing their own sharp slice of guilt over what they could have done to prevent this tragedy.

William insisted, 'Rebecca, ya comin' back 'ome t' live with me an' Catherine.'

Rebecca nodded in assent. 'Alright.' She had finally realised she wasn't able to look after anyone, not even herself.

It was fortunate that Rebecca agreed to return home, to be cared for until she could handle life again. For the past couple of months William had found it challenging to walk the distance to her home each day. Now over seventy, even the most basic exertion required quite an effort. He

couldn't do any work about the farm anymore and John was running it singlehandedly. Most days he rose late and confined his activity to either inside the house or close by. He spent long hours reclining in a squatter's chair on the verandah, his memory idly flicking through the chapters of his life. And what a life it had been, from a felon to a freeman. He thought of his parents, no doubt long dead. He wondered if they had written him off after he committed the crime. And what sort of life had his comrades, Josias Austin and Alexander Croote, found in Australia? Had they remarried and had second families, as he had done? And his mates on *Skellatar*, Ambrose Parker and Thomas Mathews, how had they fared?

His first wife Grace; he wondered if she was still alive and if so, what kind of life did she have after he was transported? His children; how had they turned out? And were they able to rise above the adverse circumstances caused by losing their father? So many questions. He would never know the answers. The bad times had faded long ago: his imprisonment in Exeter Gaol, the squalor of life on the hulk, the nightmare journey to Australia on the *John Barry* during that terrible storm. He remembered fragments of those times, though. He recalled his sense of awe when he first saw *Long Tom*, the twenty-one-foot gun that stood at the gate of the arsenal at Woolwich, and the height of the masts on the *John Barry*, higher and straighter than any tree he had ever seen. And the flying fish skimming above the surface of the waves as he travelled from the Hunter to Moreton Bay so many years ago; how unusual they were!

Then his memories came to rest on Johannah, with whom he thought he would spend the rest of his days. She had been robbed of her life. Fate was cruel. His consciousness drifted to noises within the house, hearing Catherine in the kitchen, and he was thankful beyond measure for the hand he had been dealt. Although circumstances of his own making had stolen his first wife and death had stolen the second, stolen children of his third wife, and stolen a grandchild, life overall had been abundant. Australia had given him a life that wouldn't have been possible if he had lived in England. What a story! He spent his days in a reverie, re-reading the pages of his narrative. On 18th June 1878, while engaging in this now familiar pastime, William Coombe quietly left this life behind.<sup>18</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> 'William Coombe and Catherine Heagarty', Marriage Certificate, Registration No 1867/B001983, Register of Marriages, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Patrick Lowrey and Mary Jane Coombes', Marriage Certificate, Registration No 1867/B002280, Register of Marriages, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>3</sup> 'William Mortimer Coombes', Birth Certificate, Registration No 1868/B008522, Register of Births, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>4</sup> 'The bushranger *Thunderbolt* once worked at Hill End', *The Courier-Mail*, Brisbane, Saturday 24 June 1950, p. 2 of 16 [Online]. Available at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/49728325> Accessed 18 January 2013.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Weatherzone' [Online]. Available at [http://forum.weatherzone.com.au/ubbthreads.php/topics/63071/Re\\_SE\\_QLD\\_NE\\_NSW\\_list\\_of\\_ECL\\_f](http://forum.weatherzone.com.au/ubbthreads.php/topics/63071/Re_SE_QLD_NE_NSW_list_of_ECL_f) Accessed 20 March 2015.
- <sup>6</sup> 'William Mortimer Coombes', Death Certificate, Registration No 1869/B5014, Register of Deaths, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Author's photographs of their tombstones.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Michael Joseph Coombes', Birth Certificate, Registration No 1870/B011552, Register of Births, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Michael Coombes', Death Certificate, Registration No 1871/6894, Register of Deaths, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Patrick John Coombes', Birth Certificate, Registration No 1875/18344, Register of Births, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>13</sup> 'John Molloy and Rebecca Coombes', Marriage Certificate, Registration No 1876/1853, Register of Marriages, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>14</sup> 'Mary Louise Molloy', Birth Certificate, Registration No 1876/B/20838, Register of Births, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>15</sup> 'Anthony William Molloy', Birth Certificate, Registration No 77/B022282, Register of Births, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>16</sup> 'John Molloy', Death Certificate, Registration No 1877/11572, Register of Deaths, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Anthony William Molloy', Death Certificate, Registration No 78/B012064, Register of Deaths, General Registry Office, Brisbane.
- <sup>18</sup> 'William Coombe', Death Certificate, Registration No 1878/2426, Register of Deaths, General Registry Office, Brisbane.

# Exegesis

Speculative Biography

and the crafting of

‘From Felon to Freeman: A  
Convict's Reclaimed Life’

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

This story began when a chance puff of wind blew the leaves of history aside for a moment and uncovered fragments of a story that had lain undiscovered for more than one and a half centuries. The fragments, enigmatic life traces of a man who was born over two hundred years ago and who had died over one hundred and forty years ago, needed to be gathered and sorted so that a story could be written to reclaim his lost life. Lee's (2009, p. 5) crisp definition of biography as 'the story of a person told by someone else' suggested the most appropriate method to adopt, and Brien (2017) states that 'there is both creativity and art as well as research and knowledge involved in writing a biography' (p. 22).

The work is constructed as a speculative biography, a sub-genre of biography. A developing and still moderately narrow field of study, speculative biography overcomes the limitation of primary data, which conveys little of a person's life and nothing about their inner life (Frost & Maxwell-Stewart 2001). Brien (2015, p. 1) describes speculative biography as 'the most contentious of biographical sub-genres' due to the virulent criticism that has been levelled at biographies that rely upon conjecture and speculation in their construction. Such 'speculative biographies' have attracted such criticism because they have shifted from a purportedly factual, historical style of writing to embracing a more imaginative and, therefore, non-historical approach. Nevertheless, Brien asserts that the sub-genre 'proclaims the central role of authorial interpretation in biographical writing' (2015, p. 1). She further states that in using this sub-genre, the account generated from the evidence is extended and supported 'by using speculation as a means of inserting into the narrative those biographical elements without which the biographical subject's life story is incomplete' (Brien 2017, p. 16).

Lindsey (2016a, in 'The Convict's Daughter: Speculations on biography', p. 4) affirms Brien's view, stating that speculative biography 'offers both a welcome respite from the binary of the history/fiction debate as well as a rich set of interpretive possibilities with which to evoke historical characters'. The historian Hayden White acknowledged that history did not consist of merely recounting a story by stringing facts together but that writing history relied on 'conventional narrative forms and the imagination' (University of Rochester, 2009, p. 1). The artefact is as historically accurate as possible and using the speculative biography sub-genre provides a means of reconstructing William Coombe's rich life in its historical context, and demonstrates that history and fiction are not distinctive elements of a mutually exclusive binary.

Morrison (2018) holds the opinion that four stages comprise a speculative biography: factual record, historical material, interpretation and speculation. These four stages were followed progressively in completing this project. First, all factual records were sourced and then relevant historical material was researched. The material obtained from both stages was interpreted and evaluated for their suitability for inclusion in the narrative, and then reasoned speculation was used to link the material together to form a narrative. He stresses that a speculative biography is not a fictitious biography, nor an historical novel, nor a lie, but an art. Working from a platform of reality, the author constructs reasonable speculation through known information, giving the work dual characteristics of fiction and authenticity, as the biography is closely related to historical details.

The artefact assists in addressing an issue revealed by the literature review and raised by several historians, who identified a gap that exists in convict literature in relation to the lives of convicts after they exited the system. Each of the following sources make similar statements: that convicts often faded into obscurity after their release (Brooke & Brandon 2005; Evans & Nicholls 1976; Gibbings 1961; Hergenhan 1993; Hughes 1986; Robson 1965; Shaw 1977; Smith 2008). Hergenhan (1993, p. 4) stated that both Robson and Shaw 'leave largely unexplored the implications of the terms of re-entry into society and the inner effects of convict experience'. Recent research has provided some data on the lives of convicts after they secured their freedom, and this has the capacity to provide a springboard for further speculative biographies (Kippen & McCalman 2015). As the narrative explores William Coombe's post-penal life, it will assist in contributing to greater knowledge in the convict literature. Insights into aspects of daily life at Queensland's beginnings add to the store of that State's early history during the protagonist's lifetime, which spanned a period of intense social upheaval in both rural England and colonial Australia.

When considering the mechanics of how to manage the marriage between the 'speculative' and the 'biography', I remembered from my business training the famous saying coined by the Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping, 'crossing the river by feeling the stones'. It referred to China's policy of moving ahead with economic reforms slowly and pragmatically (South China Morning Post 2002). In the artefact, the factual elements are like stepping stones across a river. There are many of them and some are spaced further apart (chronologically) than others. However, the river is crossed successfully by constructing small speculative bridges that are relevant and suitable for the historical stepping stones because the speculative bridges are largely supported by established facts used in different contexts, which therefore achieve congruency with the facts that have been established regarding the protagonist's life. The narrative has not strayed from the historical record but has

rather filled in gaps where historical records do not exist and never would had existed, because even the significant day-to-day events of a person's life are seldom recorded.

Further research revealed that similar metaphors have been used by other writers of speculative biographies, such as Brock (1999, p. viii) who wrote that 'the facts formed a line of buoys in the sea of my own imagination'. Lindsey (2018, p. 3) referred to 'archival gaps', which 'are like stepping stones upon which we leap from one firm fact to the next'. It seemed, therefore, that a speculative biography would be a useful biographical sub-genre to utilise for the story, and the exegesis could demonstrate how this sub-genre could be utilised to craft a rich and historically-informed narrative. If completed successfully, the project would assist in confirming the important place of speculative biographies in creative writing.

### **1.1 My attraction to this area of study**

The seeds of this project began as informal research into an aspect of family history. Over the years I had taken an interest in researching family history and I resolved to discover where each of my ancestors, who were not born in Australia, had originally come from. Eventually, I found this information on all but one; a man named William Coombe. I discovered from microfiche records that he married in Brisbane in 1849. As I had previously obtained marriage certificates from the 1870s for other ancestors I knew that information concerning their parents' original locality was shown so I applied for a copy of his marriage certificate. However, when it arrived the format was different from those of thirty years later and no such information was provided. So, by the year 2000 I had struck a brick wall in my quest for the origin of this particular ancestor.

Gittings (1978) described the obstacles biographers face – 'the dead distance of past years' coupled with 'the inevitable loss of the major part of the evidence and material' (p. 17) – and how these two major deterrents can be overcome by our enthusiasm towards the quest and our belief that telling the life story of a particular person is desirable and worthwhile. Kendall (1965, p. 14) announced that 'the fundamental emotion that powers biographical practice is surely the desire to mark, to keep alive, the passage of a man by recapturing the life of that man'. Although a brick wall dominated my view, preventing further progress, that desire kept the quest alive but dormant.

Motivation to locate this ancestor was re-ignited due to a chance remark by one of my mother's friends, whose friendship stretched back sixty years. She had recently discovered that their

grandmothers were sisters, daughters of a convict named William Coombe. She had copies of some documents, which she allowed me to borrow and photocopy. This opportunity opened up a broad new area of research. I now had a copy of his convict record: which listed his crime as sheep stealing; his description and other personal details; the name of the ship in which he was transported to Australia (the *John Barry*); and the date of transportation. A copy of his Conditional Pardon and Ticket-of-Leave was there also. This serendipitous discovery re-ignited a longing to discover his story, which led to broader historical research concerning the transportation era, the convict system, and conditions prevailing in England in the 1830s – political, economic, social and technological – spawned by, and evolving by-products of, the Industrial Revolution.

I brought to the study a strong interest to find out more about this man's life, for two reasons. Firstly, he was my great-great grandfather and I could now discover his origins. Secondly, I felt that in some way I owed him a debt not to have him disappear unknown into history but to perhaps tell his story. Over ten years of informal research into his life story was also brought to the project, begun in 2010, comprising information gained from several resources while on holiday in England in 2005, including obtaining copies of official documents from the National Records Office in Kew, London.

## **1.2 The issue driving this inquiry and why it matters**

The literature review revealed that although a considerable body of literature is available on the convict era in Australia, several historians have noted that convicts often faded into obscurity after their release and nothing more was known about their lives. Hergenhan (1993, p. 4) points out that both Robson and Shaw 'leave largely unexplored the implications of the terms of re-entry into society and the inner effects of convict experience'.

Writing William Coombe's story as a speculative biography offered the possibility of creating a realistic portrayal of convict life and perhaps could re-create his thoughts and the motivation for his decisions and actions. Primary research sources indicated that 'the stain' could be expunged and tying known events together by well-considered speculation could shed greater knowledge and understanding on his contribution to Queensland's development after he exited the penal system, thereby assisting to address the lacuna in the literature.

### 1.3 The research questions posed by the project

The research questions that the project intends to answer are detailed below.

- 1) How and why has the speculative biography sub-genre been used to write the past, and could it be utilised successfully to explore William Coombe's life in colonial Queensland after his release from servitude?
- 2) How and why does the creative artefact conform and sometimes differ to elements of a speculative biography?
- 3) What key fictional and historical techniques do authors typically use when mobilising a speculative biography to relate someone's life story?
- 4) What specific challenges and obligations were encountered during the project?
- 5) What kind of knowledge gained through the processes of reflection and reflexivity during the writing of the artefact and exegesis argues for the benefits of speculative biography for future projects?

If the speculative biography proved to be a suitable vehicle to relate William Coombe's story, it could probably be utilised successfully by other biographers to document the life of a convict after they exited the penal system. The sub-genre has been used successfully in other contexts, for example Steven Scobie's *And forget my name: A speculative biography of Bob Dylan* (1999) and Duncan Hamilton's *The unreliable life of Harry the valet: The great Victorian jewel thief* (2011) (both cited in Brien 2015). Kiera Lindsey utilised the sub-genre in the colonial Australian context to write *The Convict's Daughter* (2016b). Hannah Kent has written two speculative biographies, *Burial Rites* (2013) and *The Good People* (2017). The former is set in Iceland and the latter located in Ireland. The nascent sub-genre of the speculative biography is steadily becoming more popular as a literary vehicle by which to tell life stories.

The techniques I learned during the process of bringing the project to completion may assist others who may conduct similar research and write speculative biographies in the future. As the artefact would also provide insights into aspects of daily life at Queensland's beginnings, it will contribute to

the store of early Queensland history as it intersected the protagonist's life, which evolved in parallel with that of the young colony.

But the thought lingered; *had William Coombe's story been told before?* Perhaps by another name but with many of the facts being generally the same. Was his story sufficiently different from others that have been exhumed (figuratively) from the graves of their long-dead owners, to be of interest to posterity? I began work on a literature review to find the answer to that question. After reviewing material written about Australia's convict era, including biographies about particular convicts and autobiographies by convicts who exited the system and told their story, I became convinced that William Coombe's story is quite different from others and warrants its own place among the existing literature.

#### **1.4 Structure of the exegesis**

The exegesis consists of five chapters and this section is the last in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 consists of the literature review, which begins with the field my work occupies, details the parameters of the literature review, and then comprises four major categories: a) *Overview of the convict era*, in order to 'place' the story in the correct context by discovering what that period of Australian history was really like; b) *Personal reflections by those who lived during the convict era*, in order to capture more intimate details of everyday life experienced by convicts; c) *Narratives by those who lived after the convict era*, although convicts were still living when one of the authors published his work (Clarke 1977, originally published in 1874), while another gathered information to inform his account from an old man who had lived with convicts who had endured the indignity of wearing chains (Smith 1944); and, d) *The hidden lives of the convict era*, those whose (partial) stories have been preserved, although they may not be widely known. These are accounts of ordinary people, stories which are usually submerged under the surface of history, but are very important in understanding that particular period of history and the impact the socio-cultural and political-legal elements of those times had on the lives of those who lived during that era. The four categories will provide a broad and valuable scope by which to interrogate the works pertaining to the Australian convict era.

As speculative biographies share part of their literary space with historical novels (explained in Section 2.10), the literature review will then widen by offering exemplars from works of historical fiction. A gap in the existing body of work is identified and the contribution the artefact offers to convict literature is specified. A selection of autobiographies and biographies are then evaluated,

and the facets of these that informed me of aspects that could be applied (or not) in the writing of the artefact are discussed. Chapter 2 finishes with a review on the journey of the speculative biography, followed by an examination of the sub-genre, which served the purpose of the discovery and accumulation of knowledge that would assist in writing the artefact (Harper 2008).

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology employed in creating the artefact, and discusses the suitability of the approach used, which is Practice-led research. It provides information about the continuing process of researching the topic and gathering relevant data. Practice-led research involves the nature of practice and results in new knowledge that informs practice. Its primary focus is to advance knowledge about practice, or within practice. This approach includes practice as an essential component of its method (Candy 2006). The outcomes of Practice-led research should develop the individual practice and also the practice of the field, resulting in building theory related to the practice so that new knowledge or insight is gained (Niedderer & Roworth-Stokes 2007).

The research questions presented in Section 1.3 are addressed in Chapter 4, beginning with results and observations, followed by a discussion about the learning gained and its possible application. This chapter ends with some personal reflections concerning my experiences of the art of writing gained during the process. In Chapter 5, the Conclusion begins with a summary of the project, then discusses the project's contribution to the field of convict literature and its significance. Various writing techniques utilised in the creation of the artefact are then summarised, followed by challenges and obstacles which were encountered in the process of conducting research and how these were resolved, which may help other authors. The chapter concludes by suggesting possible fruitful areas for future research. A Reference List completes the thesis.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 The field my work occupies

Much convict literature has tended to be broad-brush historical works but speculative convict biography, such as my project, has begun to increase in relatively recent times. A notable example is *The Convict's Daughter* (Lindsey 2016b), which relates the scandalous elopement of a young native-born woman in Sydney in the 1840s, set against the class tensions and political ambitions at the time of the second elections for the Legislative Council in New South Wales. Brooke and Brandon, in *Bound for Botany Bay: British convict voyages to Australia* (2005), partly reconstructed stories of two convicts from official records but stated that when those convicts obtained their freedom, 'their lives became less visible and we can only speculate about the intriguing gaps' (p. 136).

The speculative biography drew together the elements comprising William Coombe's reclaimed life: work, family, social and political activity, and other pursuits he followed in building his future, in accordance with Ni Dhuill's (2012) view that life writing is the 'master hybrid' that communicates 'across differences of genre, discipline, medium, and cultural and historical context' (p. 4). As such, the story contributes to the area of Queensland's colonial history and the role of emancipated convicts in its social fabric.

### 2.2 The parameters of the literature review

The convict era spans a substantial portion of Australia's history since European settlement (eighty-one years in two hundred and thirty-two is 35 percent). As the Reference List for this exegesis attests, a sizeable amount of formal literature, historical novels, and to a lesser extent, biographies, exists for this period of the Australian narrative. I concluded, after searching the catalogues of several Melbourne suburban libraries, the State Library of Victoria and the Mitchell Library in Sydney, that the number of life stories of individuals who lived during this period is small in comparison with the body of literature. The literature surveyed dated from between 1837 and 2019, comprising convict autobiographies and biographies, scholarly works on convictism and early Australian history by historians and historical works by other authors, historical and contemporary. Other literature examined included the historical fiction genre and various types of biography. The media used by the types of works examined include books, online journal and newspaper articles,

other online articles, and research students' theses. The following section provides an overview of the convict era from the literature surveyed.

### 2.3 Overview of the convict era

This section provides an understanding of the convict era in Australian history, which was essential in positioning the protagonists' life in the socio-cultural and political environment existing at that time. *With Shame Remembered* (Beatty 1962) provides reminiscences of the early days of the colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. The book is separated into topics, providing details of conditions pertaining to the lives of female convicts, escapees, Australia's first hospital, conditions at Norfolk Island, and escape attempts by convicts. Social and marriage customs are described, and an overview is furnished of the lives of notable emancipists. Factual material for the author's re-creation of the seamy side of Australia's history – vice, brutality, immorality, cannibalism, and treatment of the Aboriginal population – are mainly supplied by quotations from contemporary eye-witnesses. The title is evocative of a national stigma that Australia has often accepted and borne over the years.

Hergenhan (1983) states that several attempts have occurred throughout Australia's history to either play down or suppress the convict past as shameful, but Shaw in *Convicts and the Colonies* (1977) presents a balanced and insightful view of social, economic and political conditions that exerted pressure on Britain to attempt the founding of, and to maintain, its far-flung penal colony. The reformatory aspects, as well as the deterrent features of the system are discussed, and the author subjected convict records to rigorous scrutiny, settling many of the longstanding arguments concerning the criminality of their characters.

Edited by Frank Crowley, *A New History of Australia* (1974), comprises twelve chapters written by different authors. The work provides a large scale history of the nation via a chronological account of development in Australia from 1788 to 1972. It presents the role played by institutions and personalities in the 'Mother country' during the early stages of the fledgling nation. Crowley stated in the Preface that the work 'has also involved a radical re-thinking of traditional interpretations of nineteenth-century Australian history, and pioneering interpretations of Australia's development in the twentieth century'. His reported anger at the publication of the 1828 Census in 1980 (Smith 2008) suggests perhaps a personal lingering aversion to 'the stain', which may have influenced the decision to write a 'new' history of the nation.

A former Australian Prime Minister, Paul Keating, echoed the post-World War 2 phrase coined by A A Phillips (Hesketh 2013) when he spoke about Australia's 'cultural cringe' in Parliament (1992), referring to Australia's collective inferiority complex in relation to Britain (and arguably other countries also). Abhorrence of 'the stain' was a commonly held paradigm, as Robson (1988, quoted in Smith 2008, p. 322) stated that 'the convict experience was denied its voice as history as the result of a vast conspiracy of silence and shame'. Brian Elliott, in the introduction to the 1977 edition of Marcus Clarke's classic *For the Term of his Natural Life*, refers to 'the national rejection of convictism' that has rendered the convict as 'no more than a picturesque and quite interesting ghost' (p. xxviii). However, convicts were people struggling to find their place in a new land chosen not by them but for them and each one generally lived out his or her life narrative through days of drudgery, fear or deprivation.

*Convicts and Colonial Society 1788-1853* (Evans & Nicholls 1976) opens with a very useful section on interpreting historical documents and details how to assess such documents in order to verify their authenticity, establish their reliability, analyse their content, and assess their significance. It details the developments in convict policy, and that of penal laws as they affected the settlement of New South Wales. Excerpts from the report of the Molesworth Committee of 1837-38 are provided, and Maconochie's experimental marks system that he employed on Norfolk Island is explained. The book gives details of the impractical probation system that replaced the assignment system and a considerable quantity of statistical analysis on many aspects of the Australian convict population is supplied. The authors assert that attempts were made to follow up the categorisation of convicts by observing their careers after transportation, but that these studies are incomplete (p. 11).

*Transported: In Place of Death* (Sweeney 1981) paints a vivid and sometimes horrifying picture of convict life. It provides interesting and valuable information on the day-to-day life of convicts, their living and working environments, and the government regulations that controlled their assignment and working conditions. Similarly, Wilson (1981) in *Convict Australia, 1788-1868: A social history*, provides insights into conditions under which the poor in England lived compared to conditions under which the convicts lived. She provided statistics relating to the price and type of basic foodstuffs and the wages set for convicts' performance of various types of manual labour.

Robert Hughes's story of convict transportation to Australia, *The Fatal Shore* (1986), provides a thorough study of Australia's convict era during the first eighty years of European settlement. Hughes attempted to achieve a balance between historical research and a colourful literary style,

supplying little-known anecdotes and mini-narratives of people's lives that provide a tapestry of life in the convict era. This book echoes some of the material provided in Evans' & Nicholls' (1976) earlier work. However, Smith (2008), who traced the lives of 1,100 convicts, asserts that the book helped perpetuate the prevailing ignorance about the nature of convict society, as Hughes used traditional nineteenth-century sources that helped confirm the distorted nationalist version of the convict era, rather than sourcing information from the convict archives. Nevertheless, Hughes states the sources he investigated in the Introduction and that these included 'convicts' testimony – in letters, depositions, petitions and memoirs – about their own experiences' (p. xiv).

In *Australian Colonists* (1993) Inglis weaves additional insight into the social fabric of that time by relating the public holidays enjoyed by the Australian population, sports played and other recreational pursuits, the religious climate, and the growth of schooling. The author also details the rise of political activity as the dying penal colony shrugged off her juvenile chains of empire and embraced the dawn of her own style of democracy. Brooke and Brandon's work *Bound for Botany Bay* (2005) focuses on the human side of transportation, capturing the hazards and surprising pleasures of the journey in fascinating detail.

The literature reviewed above proved a very useful foundation for the writing of the artefact, as it provided an understanding of Australia's convict past from several perspectives. These included balanced and insightful views regarding the social, economic and political conditions of that era, which enabled the narrative to be situated within the societal framework of that time. Excerpts from the report of the Molesworth Committee of 1837-38 provided valuable insights into the the role played by institutions, and the administrative conditions upon which the convict system was based. Information pertaining to the day-to-day life of convicts, their living and working environments, added to the store of knowledge. Together, this information provided a sweeping overview comprising the macroenvironmental factors of that era, the specific institutional environment of penal administration, and the experiences of individuals living within that society. Advice on accessing, interpreting and evaluating historical documents, coupled with these different perspectives, provided a broad landscape in which to analyse and situate information discovered in the following three sections of the literature review.

## 2.4 Personal reflections by those who lived during the convict era

After gaining a broad understanding of the convict era I examined personal reflections by those who lived during that time, to 'drill down', as it were, into individual life experiences. Some convicts decided they had a story worth telling and despite the prevailing culture, left accounts of their life for posterity. However, it is impossible now to make measured assessments as to the accuracy of their stories, either because of fading memory when they were written, a fertile imagination, or substantial editing. Nevertheless, their narratives appear more plausible than outlandish. An ex-convict, under the pseudonym Jack Bushman, related vivid stories of his life, which appeared in serialised form in the *Moreton Bay Courier* in 1859 (Bushman 1859). The narrative spanned his life in England prior to committing the crime, his incarceration in the Australian convict system and life during his subsequent release.

However, his experience was vastly different to William Coombe's and unlike Coombe, who successfully re-integrated into society, Bushman lived on its outer fringes, ending his days living in a humpy with an Aboriginal woman. The convict known only as Davis (1843), left a description of his time spent as a convict at the dreaded Macquarie Harbour in north-western Tasmania but did not relate events of his prior or subsequent life. Snow (1846) recounted details of his voyage as a political prisoner from Canada to Tasmania and the experiences during his eight years in the convict system. On his release, he returned to North America and vanished into obscurity.

James Tucker, transported to Botany Bay in 1827, provided a first-hand account of convict life in *The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh* (O'Neill 1970), an Australian classic originally written in the 1840s. It narrates in vivid detail his adventures beginning as a thief in London, through his trial and time spent on a hulk, the voyage to Australia, his life as a convict under assignment to a settler, a dramatic escape, survival with Aborigines, and eventually a conditional pardon, after which little is recorded apart from a couple of paragraphs that provide scanty details of his untimely death. Tucker describes convict life from his own experiences clearly; the first-hand account relating the relentless struggle for adequate food, shelter, and warmth. Hergenhan (1993) described this work as the only novel of real merit written by a convict.

Robson (1965) and others reached the conclusion that the majority of convicts were urban thieves with previous convictions. Repeat offender James Hardy Vaux (McLachlan 1964) recounted how the convicts on a hulk would strip their best friend of his last halfpenny if given half a chance to do so.

Hergenhan (1983) states that it is possible that Tucker and Marcus Clarke may have written the only convict novels that drew directly on the painful experiences of colonial exile while at the same time each giving their novel a transferred embodiment; Tucker fantasizing a re-entry into the society which cast him out, and Clarke's *His Natural Life* expressing the hopelessness of entertaining such a fantasy.

James Mudie offered a different perspective in *The Felonry of New South Wales* (1964), first published in 1837. He escaped responsibility for a major fraud in England and through connections was granted land in the Hunter Valley in the 1830s, with one hundred convicts as servants and labourers. He became a landowner and magistrate, and his account sheds light on the unsavoury world of internal politics in the young colony. Confirming my impressions, Hirst (2008) asserts that Mudie's world of two castes, emigrants and the combined group of convicts and ex-convicts, was 'far from being reality' (p. 155). Smith (2008, p. 336) supports this view, citing Hirst's passionate plea to historians (1983) 'that there was no colonial ruling class'. However, when reading accounts about people such as Mudie, MacArthur and Wentworth, one cannot but reflect that attempts were certainly made to create one.

Professor Manning Clark's extensive foreword to *Settlers and Convicts* (Harris 1986, written in 1847) begins with 'This work is one of the best descriptions of the way of life and the values of those men who helped to build the colony of New South Wales by the labour of their hands. Yet it appears to contain as much fiction as fact' (p. v). However, he later states of the author, 'Yet he was a wonderfully sharp observer of the world he knew' (p. xiii). Hirst (2008, p. 24) affirms Manning Clark's opinion, stating, 'As an observer of particular episodes, life-styles and work situations Harris has no equal, but we will have cause to question some of his broader generalisations and judgements on society in New South Wales'.

Although lacking insight from within the convict system, Harris, a free man, conveys a significant amount of eyewitness information about early life in the colony, including the convict system of discipline, the low moral character of the police force, and the incompetence and tyrannical behaviour of the magistracy. Harris also describes at length the breakdown of relationships between the Europeans and Aborigines, the negative effects of alcohol on the community generally and the state of lawlessness that prevailed at that time. His first-hand accounts highlighting the social and judicial constraints that governed the lives of people in the 1840s make this a very insightful and informative work.

Another contemporaneous author, J F Mortlock, who in 1864 penned *Experiences of a Convict* (1965), had a fine eye for detail and possessed an excellent memory. He provides authentic descriptions of events and people, and the editors of the book have referenced historical records that prove the truth of his statements. Life on a prison hulk and shipboard life during transportation are described vividly. He writes extensively of life in Van Diemen's Land and relates events and aspects of flora, fauna, and topology during a trip to New South Wales. He experienced almost every aspect of the penal system, including detention with hard labour, working in a convict gang, and as a wardman in a convict dormitory. As he progressed through the stages in the probation system he became a constable and a watch-house keeper. His education won him work as schoolmaster, clerk, and storekeeper, then as his freedom of movement increased he obtained a licence as a hawker. His intimate knowledge of, and broad experience within, the convict system, which was unusually extensive, provides a window through which to observe many aspects of this period.

## **2.5 Narratives by those who lived after the convict era**

As the literature review progressed, I felt a growing need to 'question the basis of legends and to listen for the stories that had been suppressed' (Sheridan 2011, p. 7). *Shadow over Tasmania* (Smith 1944) is an interesting narrative based on stories gathered from convicts themselves, written following many conversations the author had with an old man who had lived with several 'old lags', a term used for convicts who had served time in irons. The author debunks the hoary myths of savage chained criminals flogged for the amusement of sadistic guards. He explains the ticket-of-leave system and relates how convicts were afforded the opportunity to utilise their skills.

Smith (1944) repudiates the picture of convict life painted by Marcus Clarke in *For the Term of his Natural Life* (1977), insisting that certain aspects of historical reality have been exaggerated for the purpose of providing a good story, an opinion supported by Robert Hughes in *The Fatal Shore* (1986, pp. 601-602). Louis Becke, the nineteenth-century editor of the convict William Derrincourt's autobiography *Old Convict Days* (1975), was also critical of the fictional nature of Clarke's work (although it was based on factual occurrences), as were Frost and Maxwell-Stewart (2001). Inglis (1993, p. 15) stated that Clarke 'began to reanimate its (*convictism's*) enormities in a novel'. In contrast to the sensationalist focus adopted by Clarke, Smith (1944) provides valuable insight into the reality of convict life.

Most of these authors hold the opinion, which is difficult to refute, that Clarke drew upon the worst examples of the system and implied that such were the norm. Smith (2008) asserts that Clarke's novel created the stereotype of convict life and notes that Clarke was defensive about criticisms of his portrayal of the convict experience. Hergenhan (1983) points to evidence from Clarke's life and journalism and suggests that his imaginative identification with the convicts derived from elements in his own colonial experience that he found painful.

Nevertheless, it could be claimed that Clarke's novel brought the convict experience and the harshness of the system out of the shadows of the national psyche and into the consciousness of many Australians. Hergenhan (1983), while acknowledging that the novel presents a selective picture that distorts the history of the convict system, states that *His Natural Life* may not necessarily distort the historical forces expressed through that system. Notwithstanding the novel's melodrama and its plot's unlikely coincidences, it is perhaps the best novel produced in nineteenth-century Australia. Clarke's novel fits snugly into the historical fiction genre, replete with the principal characters having fictitious names.

In what is arguably the other great Australian novel of that era, Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms* (2005) is written in the first person with the chief protagonist as narrator. The novel provides considerable insight into Australian life in the 1850s. The author lived in that time period, having arrived in Hobart in 1831 at four years of age. He became a squatter and later a police magistrate in several country districts, so his life experience provided validity to the novel, which offers an insight into the lives of squatters, struggling small farmers, shanty-keepers, landladies, police, diggers, and Captain Starlight's faithful part-Aboriginal servant.

Recounted by his daughter Constance Campbell Petrie, *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences of Early Queensland* (1981) provides fleeting insights into the day-to-day life of individual convicts in the Brisbane locality from 1837. Attitudes of particular convicts towards certain people are related, providing some insight into 'the inner man' living beneath the coarse rough clothing. Parts of the book relate stories of the Aboriginal people amongst whom Petrie was brought up and with whom he enjoyed a close relationship. He learned their language and habits, and many of his experiences with their manners, customs, traditions, myths and folklore are detailed.

*Convict Workers: Reinterpreting Australia's Past* (Nicholas 1988), is based on a detailed analysis of records of 20,000 male and female convicts, one third of all those transported to New South Wales

between 1817 and 1840. It reinterprets the past by examining the convict system from an economic perspective and Nicholas asserts that the system was managed by an intentional process that produced a high level of efficiency from convict labour. His research indicated that convicts were better fed, clothed, and had better access to medical treatment than not only the other slave-type labour economies examined, but also than the free working poor in England at that time.

Evans and Thorpe (1992) claimed that Nicholas's usage of official documentation was quite naive. Nevertheless, Nicholas's view is supported by Brooke and Brandon (2005), who assert that 'for many convicts, regular diet, medical care and clean surroundings actually provided them with the (*sic*) better conditions than they had ever previously enjoyed' (p. 12). Kent and Townsend (1996, p. 180) also claimed that convict rations provided a 'far better diet than labouring men could expect in Southern England'. Cox (1984, p. 62) affirms this statement by referring to Home Secretary Melbourne's heartless treatment of the 'starving agricultural labourers in southern England after the riots of 1830'.

I gradually came to the conclusion, from reading the books above, that so little is known of individual convicts because their lives were quite ordinary (provided they kept out of trouble) and that when they were freed they continued to live much as they had before. It cannot be disputed that a percentage of convicts were treated exceptionally brutally in ways that stagger belief by today's standards, yet the colonial lifestyle of 'gentleman convicts' such as John Grant is equally difficult to comprehend (Cramer 2000). The degree of liberty enjoyed by assigned convicts such as Joseph Mason (Kent & Townsend 1996), whose account provides valuable insights into living and working conditions of convicts under assignment, is astounding. As Smith (2008) states, '...Australian history rests on many assumptions that can mislead a researcher. Through experience I also discovered the best guide to the reality of the convict era were the prisoners' (p. 6).

## **2.6 The hidden lives of the convict era**

I began researching what I termed 'the hidden lives of the convict era', referring to those convicts who dropped completely out of sight after they obtained their freedom. *John Graham, Convict* (Gibbins 1961) describes Graham's life from the time of his trial but the narrative largely skips over his time spent in servitude to concentrate upon the details of the significant part he played in the rescue of Eliza Fraser from Aborigines on the southern Queensland coast. The book ends with 'So ends the story of John Graham; of what he did subsequently or whither his fortune led him there is

no record' (p. 140). This outcome is a common one among convicts who exited the system. Citing the transported Welsh workingman's hero, Lewsyn yr Heliwr, Smith (2008) states that he vanished from history with the help of 'Australian historical amnesia' (p. 105).

Although some accounts have survived, memory of 'the stain' was usually suppressed as ex-convicts passed into unwritten history and their stories died with them. Evans and Nicholls (1976) acknowledge the difficulties of following up case histories in detail (p. 12) and Hughes (1986, p. xi) states, '...the idea that the convicts might *have* a history worth telling was foreign to Australians in the 1950s and 1960s'. Ruhen, in the introduction to Shearer (1976) constructs in a few pages the story of an ex-convict who spent his entire lifetime partially submerged beneath society's consciousness. So has it likely been with many others.

Nevertheless, some notable autobiographies and biographies have been written. *The Memoirs of James Hardy Vaux* (McLachlan 1964) provides a vivid account of life in early nineteenth-century England with Vaux leaving a first-hand record of time spent on a hulk. An habitual criminal, he never rehabilitated and endured three voyages of transportation to Australia and his memoirs provide a very useful description of early life in New South Wales. However, corroboration from other sources of the material in this text is especially necessary, as Vaux later disowned the work; it having apparently been severely reconstructed by Justice Barron Field 'en route to a publisher' (Frost & Maxwell-Stewart 2001, p. 47).

In *Old Convict Days* (1975), William Derrincourt related the story of his arrest, trial and incarceration on the same hulk at Woolwich as William Coombe, separated by just a few years. It is an excellent first-hand account with a chronological structure similar to the type employed for this project, but William Derrincourt's life was spent in different locations than that of my protagonist. Moreover, unlike Derrincourt, Coombe did not commit his experiences to paper or by word of mouth to anybody, which is why I initially formed the opinion that writing a biography would present considerable difficulties.

Alexandra Hasluck constructed an interesting narrative in *Unwilling Emigrants* (1991), woven from material gleaned from the accidentally-discovered letters of an English wife to her convict husband in Australia. The fortuitous unearthing of these letters make audible the otherwise unheard voices of the desolate couple and furnishes an interesting facet to the transportation era. Historian Graham Seal (2006) unearthed further information in England on this couple's story and constructed an

historical narrative that eloquently conveyed their situation and added more pieces to the incomplete jigsaw puzzle of their lives.

Inga Clendinnen's work *Dancing with strangers* (2003) spans the years from European settlement until 1840, weaving a thoughtful and engaging story although references to convicts are related within an historical context only. Even the bold escape by William Bryant, who sailed a small boat from Sydney to Timor with his wife, children and four other convicts, was afforded only one paragraph that provided the bare historical details. His wife Mary, who returned to England where she was granted an unconditional pardon, 'faded from the newspapers and from history, on her return to Cornwall' (Hughes 1986, p. 209). This is yet another example of a convict sinking into anonymity after they exited the system. However, the increased usage of speculative biography as a literary vehicle has ensured that her story has become well-known in recent years (Cook 1999; Currey 1963; Erickson 2004; Hausman & Hausman 2011; Keneally 2019; King 2004; Veitch 1980).

Jack Walton's *The Last Farewell* (2003) provides a record of men and women from Devon who were transported to Australia up until 1821, fourteen years before my protagonist. It details the prevailing economic conditions and the prison system in Devon during that period and explores linkages between unemployment and crime. It also describes several voyages to Australia and supplies useful information on the mechanics of the court process and social details in Exeter. Parts of Walton's work provided useful background material for this project.

Smith (2008) states that 'the Australian story was always one of character and interpersonal relations rather than sweeping themes' (p. 59). She asserts that conducting an extensive appraisal of individuals is the way to uncover 'the drama, tragedy, comedy and pathos – the "colour" – that so many Australians thought their history lacked' (p. 59). I began forming the opinion that convict history was generally slotted into one of three dimensions: either excused, buried in silence, or romanticised. The completed project makes a worthwhile contribution to the convict story: a speculative biography rooted in historical fact, which seeks to convey accurately the spirit, manners, and social conditions in early Queensland. It also aims at credible detail and fidelity of the life of William Coombe, including constructing his inner life, his thoughts and emotions, as realistically as possible.

Convict labour built the colony's infrastructure and in many cases its emerging industries and businesses as well (Roberts 2011). As Professor George Wood stated most unpopularity when

delivering a paper to the Royal Australian Historical Society in Sydney in 1921, 'The most important founders of New South Wales were the convicts' (Smith 2008, p. 11). The information unearthed by family historians and the knowledge created thereby 'sheds light on convict criminality and character, on the impact of experience as a prisoner, as well as broader economic and social issues. It also reconnects convicts to the national narrative from which they were dropped for fear of "the stain"' (Smith 2008, p. 4).

Smith (2008) asserts that the shame engendered by scaremongering activity by the anti-transportationist lobby caused the collective national amnesia referred to previously. Basically, they defamed the country and much of its population by exaggeration of the facts and plain straight-out lies in an effort to end transportation (Barst 2012; Causer 2012; Roscoe 2016; Smith 2010). Such activity has caused a grave disservice to Australian history, to the point that even some records and photographs of convicts were either destroyed, or attempted to be destroyed, in an effort to extirpate the dreaded 'stain' (Hasluck 1991; Shergold n.d.). I considered that this project could make a significant contribution to the existing literature and produce a work of historical and cultural value by reconstructing William Coombe's life story.

The idea of telling a convict story is not new. In 1842 Eliza Churchill 'bought her freedom with a convict narrative' (Frost & Maxwell-Stewart 2001, p. 79). She told her story by responding to questions asked of her by a committee appointed in 1841 by Sir John Franklin, Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land, to inquire into female convict prison discipline. But the convicts are all dead now. How can their story be told, and who can tell it? By recording John Grant's letters and extracts from his journals verbatim, Cramer (2000) allows him to speak for himself and captures the intimacy of his eyewitness account. However, very few convicts would have been as prolific a writer as Grant.

Piper (2003) refers to the penal analogy used by Atkinson when discussing the need to balance historical interpretations of transportation through incorporation of the convict voice. Atkinson uses the clever imagery of historians walking on the top of the gaol with the warders whispering in their ears. He does this because the authorities have created the records upon which interpretations are based. But he asserts that occasionally one must go down to the level where the convicts are and listen to their muted whispers. In fact, he has called for more studies focused on the individual convict and on the system at the local level (Atkinson 1999). My speculative biography relates the previously unknown story of an unwilling emigrant who grappled with what fate had thrown at him

and strove to better his condition and lead a normal life in a society that provided opportunities for his children to grow and prosper.

Hergenhan (1983) states that the detailed studies of Robson (1965) and Shaw (1977), while having added considerably to the knowledge of convict origins and administration, revealed the complexities and variations inherent in the convict experience that render generalisations difficult. Also, he asserts that some historians consider that the convicts have not been seen as they really were. This is due to the nature of the historical research, as the necessity of generalising and categorising naturally tends to overshadow individual experience, thereby limiting investigation into the lives of convicts.

Researching the origins of convicts and categorising them into groupings of class, age, occupation, and so forth inevitably restricts unearthing their personal stories, which provide insights into the interplay of individual personality and circumstance and on the individual's inner life. Therefore, Hergenhan (1983) argues that historical studies and convict fiction should be considered as complementary rather than competitive. He further states that through imaginative re-creation, fiction can provide a living picture to complement the studies of historians, which necessarily have different aims.

## **2.7 Exemplars from works of historical fiction**

Historical novels share part of their literary space with speculative biographies. Both forms are set in the past and usually have a main protagonist; both can transport the reader into the past. A key difference between historical novels and speculative biographies is the author's ability in the latter to get inside the subject's mind, but perhaps the most definitive difference is that speculative biographies are essentially factual. They carry a discipline of accuracy to honour the subject, whereas historical fiction ranges widely along the truthfulness spectrum (Knight 2017). Writer's Digest University, in 'Definitions of Fiction Categories and Genres' (2020), claim that there is a strong resemblance between the two literary forms. However, the major difference is that characters in an historical novel may be fabricated and then placed into an authentic setting, whereas the characters in a biographical novel are people who have actually lived. Therefore, considering the similarities explained above, at this point the literature review will be widened by offering exemplars from works of historical fiction.

I read several historical novels in order to become better acquainted with the genre. *Ramses: The Battle of Kadesh* by Christian Jacq (1998) began by describing the character of a bit player who is never again mentioned, which seemed an odd introduction to the novel. The author created a sense of place and then created a scenario in the first chapter that permeated the remainder of the novel; Egypt at war with the Hittites. In the second chapter, he built a sense of place first then introduced the character. As new characters emerged, the author expanded the plot by locating each person's place in the story.

Set in Egypt, Wilbur Smith's *River God* (1993) begins with the author creating a sense of place before introducing characters. He builds the character of the narrator and as the story unfolds the narrator provides insight into his psyche. Smith expands and unfolds the plot gradually, adding sub-plots as the scope of the narrative widens. During these activities, the narrator weaved an understanding for the reader of the characters of each individual introduced into the plot.

*Girl With A Pearl Earring* (Chevalier 2000) is set in 17th century Delft in the Netherlands, based upon the artist Johannes Vermeer's celebrated painting of the same name. The novel is written in the first person with the protagonist as narrator, and the author has successfully reconstructed life as it was then. The activities of everyday life are never boring, and Chevalier has a skilful ability of providing vivid descriptions of the characters' faces and facial expressions. Carefully building and controlling atmosphere, she has dexterously woven a perceptive, poignant, and passionate story that captivates the reader and holds their interest throughout. A reviewer stated that the novel explores 'the dynamics and moralities of art and the artist, their claims on life, life's claims upon them and the struggle of women to find their own values and place in a male hierarchy, specifically in a 17<sup>th</sup> century painter's world' (Eder 2000).

In her historical novel *The Rossetti Letter* (2007), Christi Phillips adroitly employs a dual narrative structure, alternating a story of sensuality and political intrigue in 17th century Venice with a present-day story of a Ph. D. candidate racing against the clock to complete her thesis in Early Modern History. The author states that a 'lack of definitive evidence... allowed for much invention on my part' (p. 436). However, she further stated that 'the characters' lives, concerns, and milieus are rooted in research of the period'.

Thomas Keneally's *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967) is set ostensibly in early Australia, although the text does not state that specifically. Dialogue is written in the vernacular of the period, which often

causes difficulty in understanding events that are unfolding. Through the characters, the novel explores the inequality in the relationship between those wielding power through an entrenched system of brutal authority and those in servitude to it, who often search deep within their psyches in an effort to understand their own motives and desires and how to tailor their responses.

In *The Generations of Men* (1966), Judith Wright detailed the history of her family, based on diaries, letters, and personal memories. She reconstructed the past to give insights into the hearts and minds of her ancestors as well as provide a record of events. Their lives consisted chiefly of unending toil in comfortless isolation, enduring economic depressions, poor seasons, illness, and the ever present seasonal dangers of fire, flood and drought. It is a well-written narrative, as one would expect from a writer with such a reputation as a poet, and she brings the past to life in an engaging journey for the reader. Kenneth Cox (1984) reconstructed the lives of four generations of his ancestors, the first of whom was a convict, by adopting the first person point of view to tell each of their stories.

Bryce Courtenay's historical novel *The Potato Factory* (1998) is a very descriptive narrative of the seedier side of life in a shadowy world inhabited by coarse, cruel people engaged in various nefarious dealings in order to scratch out a bare existence among the nineteenth-century London slums, and later at Hobart Town in Van Diemen's Land. Even so, the characters are engaging and provoke the reader's sympathy as they struggle continually against the challenges of life and the heartlessness of their fellow man. Some of Courtenay's supporting characters were more caricature than character, which tended to strain the budding relationship between author and reader. He didn't tell the reader everything, but left some small gaps in the narrative open to conjecture, which was an interesting method of drawing the reader into the story and 'owning' part of it. The contemporary dialogue works well, including elements of the 'flash language', although some unfamiliar colloquial expressions are not explained in footnotes. In the William Coombe narrative, I have attempted to assist the reader by providing footnotes explaining either unfamiliar slang words or archaic terminology.

In *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), Patrick White wrote a narrative based on the true story of Mrs Eliza Fraser (although using pseudonyms), who, following a shipwreck, lived among Aborigines on the southern coast of Queensland before being subsequently reunited with Europeans. He crafted authentic dialogue for the various classes of characters in the narrative, and illuminated their emotions and thoughts. I have attempted to capture the characters' speech and thoughts by using

dialogue spoken in General Australian, which had been established by the 1830s as a result of dialect levelling that occurred between the various English and Irish dialects (explained on p. 231).

*The Men That God Forgot* (Butler 1975) reconstructs the story of the ten convicts who in 1834 at Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour in rugged south-western Tasmania, seized the ship the *Frederick* and sailed it to Chile. The author has artfully woven an enthralling historical novel over a foundation of facts. The dialogue is skilfully written, portraying authenticity in the interactions between the characters, both convicts and their masters, and later the Chileans. He paints a portrait of each man's personality, capturing their moods and emotions well. It leaves the reader sympathizing with the escapees and wishing that history could have taken a different course for the remaining felons.

*The Sole Survivor* (Morris 1992) is closely based upon the life of James Morrill, the sole survivor of the wreck of the *Peruvian*, which in 1846 ran aground on a reef 560 nautical miles east of Great Keppel Island in Central Queensland. Morrill was the only one who survived long-term and lived with Aborigines for seventeen years, becoming fully integrated into Aboriginal life. The author paints a vivid picture of the seafarers' ordeal and obviously conducted considerable research on the Aboriginal way of life: day to day living, familial relationships, and specific ceremonies held at certain times and seasons.

Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2006a) is an historical novel about an ex-convict who was transported to Sydney and eventually settled on the Hawkesbury River (Grenville 2019a). This work is discussed in greater detail on pages 204-205. Although the historical novel genre has been widely used in the past to tell the story of a key protagonist, speculative biographies are becoming an effective way of telling the life stories of people who lived in earlier times who, although not famous, lived interesting lives (to us today) in interesting times. Kiera Lindsey wrote *The Convict's Daughter* (2016b), a speculative biography on the life of a family member during a period of dramatic social and political change in Australia's colonial days. Other examples of a sub-genre of biography are Hannah Kent's two historical biographies *Burial Rites* (2013) set in Iceland and *The Good People* (2017) located in Ireland.

## **2.8 What my speculative biography will add to the field**

In *The Convict Settlers of Australia* (Robson 1965) information is presented on certain individual convicts but, as is commonly the case, little is revealed about their post-penal life. One account

states, 'Ankin received a ticket-of-leave in 1838 and was freed in 1840, at the age of twenty-seven. Nothing more is known of him' (p. 106). On the same page, Robson comments, 'How does the preceding description of convict life in Van Diemen's Land square with accounts published by convicts? There are not many of these, and what there are generally reflect very unusual aspects of the convict system because the writers were men of higher education than the vast majority of prisoners'. Additionally, '... nothing is known of prisoners' careers once convicts were out of the hands of the administration...' (p. 111). The speculative biography of William Coombe adds to existing knowledge of convicts' post-penal lives and their contribution to society, particularly via his reclaimed life in early Brisbane, as the story covers the last thirty years of his life as a free man, ending in his death.

As mentioned previously, many historians have drawn attention to the lack of information available about convicts after they exited the penal system. A number of ex-convicts obtained notoriety by becoming successful early in Australia's history: George Guest, Henry Kable, Simeon Lord, Mary Reibey, Samuel Terry and James Underwood (Hamlyn 1977; Hughes 1986). However, their stories were recorded chiefly because their lives surprisingly repudiated the commonly held belief that convicts were irredeemable, and little else is known of the post-penal lives of 'ordinary' ex-convicts. Smith (2008) conducted a survey in 2004-05 and found that in a sample of one hundred convict descendants, eighty percent were unaware of convicts in their family line before they began their own research. I also was in that category before beginning my research into William Coombe's life.

Atkinson (1999) and Duffield (1999) agree that the lives of individual convicts are enormously fruitful to study. Their mutual opinion is supported by Frost and Maxwell-Stewart (2001, p. 135), who state that such research enriches 'our understanding of the relationship of convict narrative to convict lived experience'. Duffield (2001) remarks on the limited, representational way in which historians have deployed narrativity to frame historical writing. Frost and Maxwell-Stewart (2001) agree with his view but state that this need not disqualify narrative as a legitimate means of securing past experiences. They add that 'the intellectual challenge faced by anyone who wants to narrate convict lives is epistemological: what meanings can we legitimately attach to the documents (textual or material) which are the source for knowing the past?' (p. 41). They support Somers' view that narrativity needs to be reframed to recognise that 'social life and human lives are themselves "storied"' (Somers 1997, p. 87). Somers holds the opinion that narrative and narrativity are 'concepts of social epistemology and social ontology' and that it is through narrativity that human beings come 'to know, understand, and make sense of the social world' (p. 82). Each individual uses

this knowledge and understanding gained through narrativity to construct his or her social identity (Somers 1997).

Smith (2008) declares that convicts sailed into oblivion when they left Britain. In most cases, convicts' names and stories faded into a collective national unconsciousness in Australia. Despite the implications of such neglect for ongoing research, she states that 'when detailed individual research is combined with the extended genealogical information of family historians, an amazingly full picture can be created of people who have been known to Australians only as percentages in categories' (p. 108). I created such a picture of William Coombe by reconstructing his life as accurately as possible, in accordance with Ni Dhuill's (2012) assertion that a biographer remains within generally a representationalist or reconstructive model when providing information about, and perspectives on, a past life.

The project explored various aspects of convict experience through reconstructing William Coombe's life. It will contribute to the limited store of knowledge of post-penal convict experience by constructing a reasonably complete picture of his life following his re-entry into society, accomplished through a factual, comprehensively researched, and informed speculative biography. The artefact details his journey through his crime, trial, transportation and assignment and then his re-entry into society during the early days of settlement in the Hunter Valley and later in Brisbane, after gaining a conditional pardon. Writing of the story will reveal suitable techniques to employ in constructing a speculative biography and perhaps new practices will be discovered in the writing process in order to extend the potential of the sub-genre.

## **2.9 Select evaluation of autobiographies and biographies**

I had enjoyed reading numerous publications that could realistically be termed speculative biographies over the years simply for their story but had never mentally categorised them as such. For example, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is based upon the true story of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor cast ashore upon an uninhabited tropical island. Virginia Woolf described the writing of *Orlando* (1993, first published in 1928) as a 'writer's holiday' (Preface, p. xlv), in which she weaves a literary fabric of history, biography and fantasy. This allowed her to comment on the nature of identity, the nature of truth, the authenticity that may or may not attach itself to biography and the construction of women through history, mainly in European society. She used the novel to interrogate several views of art, society and gender, using very descriptive text.

Tommy Tenney's re-creation of the biblical narrative of Queen Esther titled *One Night with the King* (2004) is cleverly written, beginning in the third person omniscient mode relating a contemporary pre-bridal family ceremony in Jerusalem, participated in by direct female descendants of the protagonist's female companion. The final chapter reverts to this mode. The rest of the novel is written in the first person in the voice of the protagonist, via a letter written to the female ancestor of the present-day bride. Major incidents in the narrative are congruent with the biblical account and with historical records, but an anachronism surfaced when a violin was mentioned, as research revealed that violins were first made in Italy in the early sixteenth century (Schoenbaum 2013). When my story had Johannah ironing clothes, I researched when irons were invented, to avert the inclusion of an anachronism.

I also realised that I needed to carefully observe details regarding times, and also the relationship of times to distances so that travel times recounted in my biography are realistic. Therefore, when relating William Coombe's voyage between Sydney and Moreton Bay, I learned from historical records how long that particular vessel took to make the trip, and from that calculated the approximate time he would have passed known landmarks along the coast. When he joined an expedition to the Bingara goldfield on the Gwydir River, I calculated the distance that men would travel each day on horseback, and from that carefully chose the location at which the party would likely make camp each night. I described his homeward journey from the Gwydir using the same method, to ensure travel times were realistic.

As I read biographies and autobiographies of convicts' lives I discovered that these focused generally on external factors and that internal ones appear to be quite rare. The convicts' stories largely related historical events, which stunted development of the protagonist's character, if any development occurred at all. Such works included: James Tucker's first-hand account of convict life in *The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh* (O'Neill 1970, first published in 1929); ex-convict Jack Bushman's stories of his life, which appeared in serialised form in the *Moreton Bay Courier* (Bushman 1859); ex-convict J F Mortlock, who in 1864 wrote *Experiences of a Convict* (1965); ex-convict William Derrincourt's autobiography *Old Convict Days* (1975, first published in 1899); and repeat offender James Hardy Vaux's autobiography *The Memoirs of James Hardy Vaux* (McLachlan 1964). First published in 1819, this work is recognised as Australia's first full-length autobiography and its accompanying *Vocabulary of the Flash Language* is considered to be probably the first dictionary compiled in Australia (Fink 1967).

Gentleman convict John Grant's writings (Cramer 2000) provided an insightful description of life in New South Wales between the years 1804 to 1811. He wrote letters mainly to his mother and sister Matilda in England and also kept a journal for over five years in which he wrote of the significant people he encountered, including three governors of New South Wales. Assigned convict Joseph Mason's account (Kent & Townsend 1996) shared valuable insights into the living and working conditions of convicts under assignment, as well as farming and horticultural practices of that time period. He details vividly his encounters with Aborigines and describes clearly the Australian flora and fauna he discovered during his explorations.

Reviewing these life stories was very significant in crafting the artefact, as it raised consciousness of the necessity for character development and of the importance of averting anachronisms, which is discussed on the previous page. I attempted to develop the protagonist's character over time, as he experienced new situations in life. For example, at the beginning of the story he was ignorant as to how society worked. His focus in life was to obtain farm labouring work in order to feed his family. One poor decision resulted in transportation to Australia. Throughout his convict years I endeavoured to show that he developed a long-term view of owning land and that he was a determined person whose perseverance in realising his dream finally paid off, step by necessary step. He gradually learnt how society operated, becoming a small businessman and later a farmer, and developed greater social awareness and community respect. The ways in which he thought and acted reflected the stage of his character development at each particular time period in the story.

## **2.10 The speculative biography: discussion on the journey of the sub-genre**

Although recognised as a relatively recent and still developing sub-genre of biography, earlier narratives could quite possibly today be categorised as speculative biographies. Brien (2015, p. 5) discusses the biographical strand within microhistory, which is defined as a 'detailed historically based investigation of a small-scale subject or topic – such as a single event, community, family or person.' Many biographers declare that they have been considerably influenced by various schools of historical writing and have utilised historical methodologies, and the microhistorian's usage of speculation and fictional techniques to produce interesting narratives clearly demonstrates a close relationship between microhistory and the speculative biography (Brien 2015).

A Chinese author, Wu Cheng'en, in the sixteenth century wrote *Journey to the West*, about the life of a seventh century pilgrim named Xuanzang (Plaks 1987). In 1831 Victor Hugo wrote *The Hunchback*

*of Notre-Dame*. Set in 1482, this novel has been praised for its accurate depiction of medieval Paris. *Hereward the Wake: Last of the English*, published in 1866, describes how the eleventh century Anglo-Saxon rebel becomes the leader of the English resistance against William the Conqueror. *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*, written by Howard Pyle in 1883, made the English rogue a medieval icon. On the American front, in 1889 Mark Twain wrote *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (Medievalists 2015) and H Rider Haggard wrote *The Saga of Eric Brighteyes* in 1890, one of the first novels set in the Viking Age. Although classified as historical novels and not speculative biographies, the methodology of their creation carries the seeds of this sub-genre of biography.

Various stories have been written that have Anne Boleyn as the protagonist (Phillpott 2011): Jean Plaidy's *Murder Most Royal* (1949); Margaret Campbell Barne's *Brief Gaudy Hour* (1949); Evelyn Anthony's *Anne Boleyn* (1957); Jane Lane's *Sow the Tempest* (1960); Norah Loft's *The Concubine* (1963); and Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001). Conducting voluminous research enabled American author Arthur Golden to write *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) in the first person voice of the geisha (Broske 1999). Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* (1997) is also written in the first person and narrated by the Biblical character of Dinah (Stuart 2003). These historical novels and fictional autobiographies have shared parts of their creative fabrication with the development of the speculative biography. For example, the historical novels and fictional autobiographies are based upon facts, to either a greater or lesser degree, and both require a certain measure of speculation to be employed to carry the story along, as with speculative biographies.

The sub-genre of the speculative biography received greater exposure with the publication of Stephen Scobie's aforementioned *And Forget My Name: A Speculative Biography of Bob Dylan* (1999). Andrew Motion wrote *Wainwright the Poisoner* in 2000, employing a mode of fiction and biography, yet the Man Booker judges identified Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and its sequel as historical novels, which limited or excluded recognition of the books as speculative biographies, into which they could just have easily been categorised (Vicars 2016). The nascent sub-genre of the speculative biography vies for literary space with other sub-genres which have emerged from biography, such as the biographical novel or fictional biography. Vicars points out that Stephen Greenblatt's work *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare* (2005) combined historical evidence with an imaginative writing methodology, while other works such as *Louisa* (1987) by Brian Matthews and Peter Ackroyd's *Dickens* (1990), incorporated fictional sections, yet this has not prevented their

recognition as nonfiction biography. The lines between these various forms of biography are finely drawn at times.

The exploratory journey on the development of the speculative biography detailed above revealed the contribution that various schools of historical writing have made to the evolution of the sub-genre as a legitimate literary vehicle. As I probed the landscape that historical novels have inhabited, and observed the biographical strand running through microhistory, it heightened my awareness concerning the influence that historical and fictional methodologies have exerted on the development of the speculative biography. This strengthened my conviction that a speculative biography could be fabricated successfully by combining historical evidence with an imaginative writing methodology.

### **2.11 The speculative biography; discussion on the sub-genre and how it informed the artefact**

Historical, including literary, biography had been seen since the late nineteenth century as an illegitimate form of scientific enquiry (Klein 2002, cited in Monot 2012), due largely to the view held that it was a remnant of nineteenth-century hermeneutical historiography that relinquished its dependency on facts, scientific methodology and the archive and therefore renounced its academic legitimacy (Kaplan 1994). However, in Monot's opinion, the last two decades have witnessed somewhat of a convergence of biography and historiography, to the point where 'an epistemological gap that had previously hindered the liberal use of biography in historiography, and devalued literary biography as a minor branch of speculative history' has been bridged (p. 659). Vicars (2016) states that the historical novel has proved to be a suitable literary vehicle for relating stories of people's lives and that the biographical novel has emerged more fully from this genre.

The uncomfortable scholarly dilemma between speculative and historical narratives lies in the fact that the boundaries of each cannot be delineated and anchored in formal terms, as the percentage of fact and speculation in each author's work differs, even in other works by the same author. Therefore, it is difficult to provide an answer to the question of how much speculation in a narrative is acceptable for it to still remain true to its historical foundations. This was the conundrum I grappled with, detailed in Section 3.1. Evidence concerning historical events, leading to constructed facts relating to the event, are discussed in Chapter 3 (Methodology).

Faruqi (2009, p. 1) quotes 'New Historicist' Stephen Greenblatt, who stated,

In the most fully realized historical novel, the historical figures are not merely background material or incidental presences but the dominant characters, thoroughly imagined and animated. They are at the centre of our attention, and their actions in the world seem to carry the burden of a vast, unfolding process that is most fully realized in small, contingent, local gestures. Those gestures are ordinarily hidden from official chroniclers, but they are the special purview of the historical novelist.

Translated into an individual context, this is an apt description of my speculative biography, as my protagonist forms the centre of the narrative and the 'small, contingent, local gestures' connected with his life represent a microcosm of the 'vast, unfolding process' that ground inexorably onward through the lives of thousands involved in the convict diaspora to Australia.

Nikolaj Arcel, writer and director of *A Royal Affair*, a film set in eighteenth-century Denmark, said in an interview, 'You have to be true to reality but the further you come from what happened the harder it is to get reliable information' (Buckmaster 2012, par. 5). This is why reasoned speculation is necessary in order to write the biography of someone who lived in the nineteenth century, but extensive research into many aspects of that era must be conducted for the speculative component to be 'reasoned' accurately. Robert Graves wrote *I, Claudius* (1934) as an autobiography (Goodreads n.d.) and Colleen McCullough wrote her Masters of Rome series, which spans a writing period from 1990 to 2007, using actual historical characters (*Masters of Rome* n.d.). My speculative biography is populated with actual historical characters living out their lives in the prevailing social, cultural, economic and political contexts of their times.

In 1850, Alessandro Manzoni wrote that novelists differed from historians in that they provide 'not just the bare bones of history, but something richer, more complete. In a way you want him to put the flesh back on the skeleton that is history' (de Groot 2015, par. 2). This process holds true for speculative biographies also, in that the speculative element clothes the skeleton of the biographical data collected on the subject. Griffiths (2009, p. 1) stated 'history and fiction are a tag team, sometimes taking turns, sometimes working in tandem, to deepen our understanding and imagination'. Leys (2007) contends that historians and writers of historical fiction grasp truth via 'an imaginative leap' (par. 11), arguing that history records echoes of events, not the events themselves. Therefore, imagination of necessity comes into play to augment memories and facts and so 'the historian and the novelist both must invent the truth' (Leys 2007, par. 16). These writers' 'imaginative leaps' are my 'speculative bridges' between facts.

Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* (2005), in which she explored ways in which early interactions between Aboriginal people and white settlers on the Hawkesbury River might have occurred through the fictional account of a freed convict whose character is a reflection of her ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, was fiercely criticised by some eminent historians (Grenville 2007). The nature of the issues included the rival claims to authority of history and fiction, historical accuracy, the value of empathetic identification with persons in a bygone era, and the differing aims and writing strategies of novelists and historians (Sheridan 2011). However, Grenville explains clearly the process of writing the book in an effort to allay concerns regarding the apparent overlap between history and fiction in an effort to avoid territorial disputes with historians (Grenville 2019b). My speculative biography, in which I have taken pains to ensure the veracity of the historical details, demonstrates that convicts were able to self-rehabilitate, to live useful and productive lives for themselves and their families and to contribute to society.

Smiley (2015) argues that any history book is a construct based upon the author's theory of what happened and the research must be congruent with the theory or the text is not logical and therefore does not make sense. In her opinion, a novelist's task is to see the world from the character's point of view, to imagine simultaneously what the author and subject are thinking and feeling, what is different about them from the perspective of what has changed over the intervening years between the time of subject and author, and the way people perceive things over the passage of time. Phillpott (2011) showed that Slotkin (2005) had already postulated this view in his 2005 paper *Fiction for the purpose of History*, in which he asserted that all history writing requires an imaginary, and therefore, fictitious, representation of the past. He further argued that in principle, a novel could have a research basis as good as, or better than, that of a scholarly history and that a novelist's account of history may be truer and more accurate than a work produced by a scholarly historian.

McKenna (2006) implies that a complementary relationship between history and fiction may exist in perceiving and comprehending the past. Australian novelist David Malouf stated, 'The only way of grasping our history – [...] the only way of really coming to terms with that is by people's entering into it in their imaginations, not by the world of facts, but by being there. And the only thing really which puts you there in that kind of way is fiction ...' (McKenna 2006, p. 99). Literary theorist Dorrit Cohn also supports this view. She states that Tolstoy's *War and Peace* demonstrates that fiction 'enables a writer, first and foremost, to render historical happenings by way of the personalised and momentary experience of individual human beings' (1999, p. 151). These scholars do not diminish

the importance of history but acknowledge that there are equally valid ways of understanding past events and people in bygone eras.

Hergenhan (1993) asserts that the need to generalise and categorise in historical accounts has tended to overshadow and curtail the individual experiences of convicts. Creating groupings on the basis of age, class, occupation and so forth has further restricted the interplay of individual personality, circumstances and the inner life of convicts. He suggests that fiction, through imaginative re-creation, can provide a living picture to complement historical accounts, which satisfy a different goal. Vicars (2019) holds the opinion that employing fictional elements in writing does not require discarding historical perspectives but utilises a different method of working with the evidence (Vicars 2019). In *Biography and History*, Barbara Caine (2010) asserts that historians now value biographical writing because they appreciate its potential to contribute to ethnographic projects and to produce micro-histories.

Historical characters may also manage to transcend time and speak from their own perspective in a way that readers can understand and which evokes a relevance that contemporary readers can relate to (Tomlinson n.d.). A well-written speculative biography is capable of performing the same function. Hergenhan (1983) offers a similar view, asserting that convict fiction has played a major role in sustaining a dialogue between the past and the present, thereby showing that the convict era is part of the dynamic of Australian history. As such, it is not a shameful period in Australia's history to be hidden away, but a collection of heroic stories that recount the triumph of achievement over adversity. He suggests that two parallel strands emerge from a study of convict fiction. Firstly, its themes are given individual expression and secondly, a continuity of concerns and methods in Australian fiction emerges which is not often acknowledged. Prison society is an effective focus for the expression of these concerns. Convict fiction persistently shows life 'on the edge' and not just geographically.

Prison society creates a particular intensity and urgency to the themes of social change, which is a continuing concern of convict fiction. For example, Marcus Clarke claimed that his aim of writing *For the term of his natural life* was for 'the social purpose of helping to prevent such atrocities ever happening again' (Hergenhan 1993, p. 48). Although written in 1874 after the convict system had ended, crime and punishment was still a hotly debated topic in Australia and Europe at that time (Hergenhan 1993). Individuality in the expression of theme in convict fiction is demonstrated in the way each work carries the imprint of the interaction between the individual author and the historical

period in which the novel is set. Hergenhan (1993) posits whether Clarke's novel may be a projection of the author's own experience, as Clarke was an unwilling immigrant, displaced from English upper-class society and bearing a sense of exile from the privileged classes. He asserts that during times when Australia wallowed in cultural inferiority it was considered that a 'local' quality was something the nation had to rise above, yet a local quality, in the sense of expression via a speculative biography through particular facts and images of someone living in a specific time and place, can be 'part of the life-blood of art' (Hergenhan 1993, p. 170) .

Expressions of convict fiction vary between writers whose work revolves around an individual protagonist and those who emphasise society as the chief determinant of action with individuals taking representative roles. Convict fiction is markedly 'social' in emphasis, in that it stresses the social representativeness of characters and groups. Part of the continuity of convict fiction is the continued and varying degrees of liberty taken with realism, particularly concerning historical 'fact'. As discussed on pages 181-182, several authors (Frost & Maxwell-Stewart 2001; Hergenhan 1993; Hughes 1986; Inglis 1993; Smith 1994; Smith 2008) hold the opinion that although Clarke's novel was based on factual occurrences, he drew upon the worst examples of the system and implied that such were the norm. Louis Becke, editor of William Derrincourt's autobiography *Old Convict Days* (1975) during Clarke's era, held that opinion also. Though realism is a strong force in convict fiction, it is generally not as dominant as it has sometimes been thought by proponents of social realism. Hergenhan (1983) argues that convict fiction demonstrates a persistent faith that Australia has a 'usable' past, not simply a nationalistic one, but one that invites continued imaginative exploration as a way of defining the present.

Booth (2014) claims that biography is often termed a subset of history and my narrative of William Coombe is constructed as a speculative biography, which has emerged as a sub-genre of biography. Edel (1957, cited in Brien 2017) maintained that 'all biographical narratives include a measure of speculation on the part of their authors' (p.15). He added, 'What we hope for from most biographers is informed speculation' (p. 14). Brien (2017) echoes this view, stating 'speculative biographers diligently work from the available evidence, but feel free to make what might be termed as "educated guesses" to fill biographical gaps' (p. 15). For example, Butler (1974) provided meat upon the dry bones of history in reconstructing the life of her convict ancestor James Austin (1776-1831).

Magedera (2014) uses the term 'parabiography' to describe non-standard biographical techniques of adding emotion and colour to 'chronologically ordered fragments and multiple perspectives' (p.

277). Saunders (2016) avers that imaginative writing in a biographical context makes the two major contributions of increasing verisimilitude in the narrative and promoting identification with the protagonists. Brien (2015, p. 1) states that 'Speculative writing strategies can produce biographies that are rich, appealing and thought-provoking, historically-informed narratives of real lives and experience'. Kail (2010) asserts that the protagonist should be 'rendered complex and perhaps contradictory, and may even be deconstructed in some way,' but maintains that '*everyone else* (his italics) in a biography is a coherent, straightforward, integrated agent who can be quickly summarised and located' (p. 8).

Benton (2005, p. 44) asserts that 'Biographies offer models of how others live, face challenges, and cope with change; they are prime sites for studying ourselves.' He adds that life writing provides detailed pictures of widely different ways of living and offers some clues to how an individual sense of identity might be shaped, lying between history and fiction. He states that some writers hold the view that biography is an unstable genre because it is seen to lack theoretical foundations and that most readers read biographies for the life story, but that is why I wrote the narrative: for readers to enjoy William Coombe's life story, to be informed of that period in Australia's history, and to stimulate the desire for further reading and storytelling about that era.

Booth (2014) supports my view, asserting that 'Biography should be read intertextually, socially, and historically rather than as a small canon of linguistic icons about individuals' (p. 3). Monot (2012) states that 'Bate and Churchwell explicitly locate the proper worth of biographical narratives in the meaning that is attributed to them by a community – readers, viewers, scholars, society at large' (p. 663). Readers can mentally travel with the author and the protagonist/s to places they may know of, or have been to, although at different times or places. A story about real places, travels, and lives invites readers to journey along with the characters, seeing the landscape and vicariously sharing their experiences portrayed from a third-person perspective (Booth 2014).

However, Kail (2010) cautions against making identification a specific goal in biographical writing, contending that it contains and also minimises the possibility of profound historical difference. In a nutshell, his view is that rather than writers constructing a narrative from information obtained from various sources, every piece of information should be analysed in order to draw the narrative out of each. In his opinion, such historical analysis would lead to the making of historical knowledge if writers adopted this method. His view is similar to that of Lindsey (2018), who uses the process of dwelling with the sources to ensure that her 'imaginings are deeply embedded within and informed

by the historical record' (p. 12). She states that having such respect for the archives earns us 'the right to write our subject our way' (p. 13). Clough (1996) sounds an alert that we frame situations and events through our own perceptions and create them accordingly. Richardson (2014) concurs with this view, asserting that our values and worldview are reflected in our writing style.

British historian Keith Jenkins (2009) states that historical narratives will always contain personal bias because such projects are a personal construct and that truth is never found, but always created. Therefore, evidence cannot speak for itself and requires the author to assemble facts from available evidence and give them meaning. Because it is imperative that awareness is maintained regarding the possibility of personal biases stealthily permeating the narrative, the writer needs to walk a fine line between developing their 'writing voice' and injecting excessive personal bias into their work. Although it is impossible to know what my protagonist and other characters may have been thinking, what their motivations were, or what emotions were affecting them in various situations, I created the characters' values, motivations and emotional responses from my understanding of human nature, which is reasonably predictable regardless of the time lapse between then and now. Stow (1979, quoted in Hergenhan 1993, p. 139) implied that 'men and women, and society, do not basically change, they are not subject to any historical process in a crucial way'. Also, reading through the Book of Proverbs in the Bible reveals that human nature can be quite predictable regardless of the passage of time. Therefore, realising that human nature is reasonably consistent in similar situations regardless of the time period, assisted greatly in assessing the characters' motivation in various circumstances and thereby creating their behaviours.

Jenkins (1999) holds the view that the formation of the past is dramatically influenced by a writer's present perspectives and that it is impossible to represent the past as it actually was. Susanna Scarparo (2005, p. 159) echoes his view, contending that 'it is impossible to represent the past as it really was'. Nevertheless, if a writer judiciously creates facts from primary data and places characters in historical events obtained from secondary data while guarding against biases, then a reasonable representation of the past should be able to be reconstructed. I acknowledge the view of Frank Ankersmit (1994), who argues that historical writing and historical proof are self-referent procedures that are unable to be verified. However, I maintain that historical evidence can be interrogated by another researcher and if a different set of facts are arrived at, then the reason for the variation can be investigated. The result may be to create a more complete view of the past, or perhaps to identify hitherto unknown biases in either, or both, versions of the 'facts'.

However, evidence sourced from archival sources has been processed in a written form and could contain cultural meanings or inaccuracies that may lead an unsuspecting researcher to translate the evidence into facts that may be somewhat distorted (Munslow 1997). During my research, I discovered, in examining nineteenth-century English census records and birth, death and marriage records in both England and Australia, that slight variations in family details existed from decade to decade, presumably depending on the education, understanding or the hearing of the person recording the details in the document. Therefore, known traces of the past obtained from facts deduced from evidence already gathered must be used to either verify or disregard new sources of information, which is a view shared by Munslow (1997). In creating knowledge via the narrative form, writers need to be conscious of biases creeping into the story because of their own predetermined views, their cultural nuances, or their own lived experiences (Munslow 1997).

According to Ni Dhuill (2012), attacks on biography have been made generally towards one of three areas: (a) on its tendency to distract readers from what is considered the proper business of literary criticism; (b) on the genre's role in supporting a bourgeois model of individualist subjectivity; and, (c) on its problematic but often misconceived status as illusion and fiction. In Benton's (2005) opinion, the most convincing definition of biography occurs in Lyndall Gordon's (1994) description of Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, which she describes as 'a lasting imaginative truth based on a selection of facts' (p. 329). Benton further states that although biography is different to fiction in purpose and content, similarities exist in the selection, interpretation, and technical presentation of the life story. Benton adds that these factors must illuminate and not distort the purpose and content. He claims that because the skills of narrative are essential to quicken the life on the page, writing biography involves 'invention of a convincing identity' as well as interpretation (p. 44).

Ni Dhuill (2012) states that biography maps the work of culture onto the person and enfolds the person into the work of culture. Arguing that 'Biography resists classification; the types are too many and too various', Benton (2005, p. 48) asserts that the phrase 'life story' 'embodies the tension between historical representation and narrative discourse.' He refers to 'the seemingly impossible task for biography of welding together the verifiable evidence of action and events with the more elusive, more speculatively fictitious, yet more insightful, probing into personality' (p. 54). This speculative biography offers readers particular examples of convict and colonial life, drawn from the protagonist's actual life, from which readers might learn about elements of early Australian history that are not easily available by other means.

Therefore, the aim of the project was to discover whether this sub-genre could be utilised successfully to explore William Coombe's life as a felon, and then as a freeman in colonial Queensland after his release from servitude. Achieving this aim would necessitate constructing his life story using primary and secondary sources, creating speculative 'bridges' by which to fill the gaps between primary sources, and attempting to build his character through creating situations that would elicit mental and behavioural responses so readers could identify with him as a person. The approach and techniques used are elaborated on more fully in Section 3 'Methodology'.

The completed work will help to address the identified paucity in convict literature of convicts' lives after they exited the penal system and also will answer the question of whether 'the stain', the supposedly irredeemable tendency to break the law, could be expunged in William Coombe's case. The artefact will contribute to the store of early Queensland's history as well. It will confirm whether the speculative biography sub-genre would be a suitable literary vehicle to use to relate William Coombe's story. Writing the story as a speculative biography also offered the possibility of creating a more realistic characterisation of convict life than is normally portrayed and could try to capture his thoughts and the motivation for his decisions and actions.

Although some biographies lean towards social history, this was not something I wished to highlight. William Coombe lived in a time of massive societal and political change and I traced his life through that period as it was 'shaped through a unique blend of considered decisions, particular circumstances, and sheer chance' (Benton 2005, p. 55). I tried to step inside his mind and understand how and why he made the decisions he did, how he recognised and solved problems, what his general attitude was to others and to life in general. Working from the judicious assumption (discussed on p. 202) that human nature is reasonably consistent in similar situations regardless of the time period, I used my own attitudes as a measuring stick against which to measure the protagonist's responses in different situations. I then incorporated my understanding of these elements of his character into the artefact so that the final work consisted of historical facts linked together by realistic speculation in comprising a speculative biography.

I read Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2006a) and one reviewer commented positively upon the voices she had given to the characters, but stated that her characters were not developed sufficiently to be convincing (Hathcock 2006). He elaborated further by expressing that their minds were either blank or clichéd, with the result that although the book was an historically accurate novel, the characters were like mannequins. In attempting to avoid such issues I tried to develop the

inner life of my characters: getting under their skin, inside their brain, discerning what their motivations may have been. As with the creation of the protagonist's responses, the technique I used for other characters is explained on page 205. Grenville's reviewer spoke of the problem inherent in an historical novel as to how the author can represent a consciousness that is distant, in years and conceptually, from their own. This problem is also discussed on page 205 and evidence shows that human nature can be quite predictable regardless of the passage of time (p. 200). However, a lack of understanding of unfamiliar concepts creates an additional layer of complexity in character development.

I needed to penetrate my characters' minds and try to see their world through their eyes. Without being overconfident, I considered that I was capable of doing that. I grew up in a regional area and before furthering my education later in life worked at several blue collar and labouring jobs, in which I performed various kinds of manual work and mixed with many types of men, so I was reasonably confident that I could accomplish this aspect of the story. In reading *The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh* (O'Neil 1970), I found that, while coping with the nineteenth-century vernacular, I could understand the characters' motivations that gave expression to their actions. That increased my confidence that I could successfully develop my characters' inner life.

I enjoyed reading *Searching for the Secret River* (2006b), Kate Grenville's account of working on the novel, more than the novel itself, because of the following reasons. She knew the bare bones of her ancestor's story, as I did of mine. As I read through the book, I identified with so many aspects of her journey, having experienced the same issues. I felt a sort of authorial kinship with her, as someone physically removed from her quest but observing it empathetically from a distance. As Falconer (2006) stated in a review, the account is fascinating for anyone interested in the writing process. Like Grenville, I too walked the 'echoing polished limestone' (Falconer 2006, par. 9) of the Public Records Office in Kew, London, endured false starts by locating confusing records of other people with the same name as my ancestor, the frustrations I encountered feeling that I was never going to be able to find that key historical record that would enable me to continue the narrative with confidence that the historical details were correct.

As Holmes (2005, originally published in 1985) did, when I conducted research in England I went directly to the original materials and to the places. Holmes writes of this process as 'a continuous living dialogue between the two (biographer and subject) as they move over the same historical ground' (p. 66). I walked where I suspected William had walked and saw the places I knew he would

have seen. Polack (2014, p. 526) states that it is necessary that such an internalisation of characters and their historical context occurs in order to provide 'the emotional pathway for the writer herself to enter into the world of the novel' as well as offering a 'pathway to the readers into the foreign world'. Keen (2006, p. 221) refers to this process as the 'triangulated empathetic bond', which creates author empathy and this contributes to the creation of textual beings. Engelen and Rottger-Rossler (2012, p. 3) define empathy as 'a social feeling that consists in feelingly grasping or retracing the present, future, or past emotional state of the other'. I sought to capture my protagonist's thoughts, feelings, and emotional states, albeit one hundred and seventy years removed.

However, Padmore (2017) asserts rightfully that a writer can never truly represent the past because we did not live in that period in history. Stocker (2012, p. 310) supports this view, stating 'Authenticity is a negotiation between the evidence available to the writer, the reader's existing understanding of the period and the imaginative power of the author, which combined, can only present the spirit of an era, rather than its actuality.' But we must try, or nothing will be written and past lives, through which so much can be learnt about people and the times in which they lived, will lie undiscovered in the past. Zable (2005, p. 10, quoted in Padmore 2017) states that 'No matter how much detail the writer accumulates, there comes a point when he must enter the time and place he is depicting, and into the minds and shoes of the characters, and allow them to take him into the unknown.' This is the technique he uses to merge with his characters and I used a similar technique in writing the artefact (discussed on the following page).

I acknowledge that some things will never be known. For example, which parrot really was Flaubert's (Barnes 2009)? What were the contents of the letters between Flaubert and Juliet Herbert, burnt by Ed Winterton (Barnes 2009, p. 46)? What knowledge about the family was contained in the letters written to my great-grandparents by their relatives in Denmark, thrown into the fire by my aunt's cousin because she couldn't understand the language? What was the extent of the family rift that followed? How did William Coombe actually speak? Some things will never be known. This presents the necessity of creating realistic, considered, judicious speculation so that the story can be told.

Frost and Maxwell-Stewart (2001) claimed that narrativity needs to be reframed to recognise that 'social life and human lives are themselves "storied"' (p. 41). In a narrative, behind the words that mean what they say, lies another story as to why those words are said. I engaged in Holmes's 'continuous living dialogue' (2005, p. 66) with the protagonist by visiting his birthplace, the courtroom where he was tried, and the final port in England from which the ship departed. By

immersing myself in this way in the geographical locations, mulling over historical facts and creating speculative links, I discovered that these factors blended into scenes in an emerging story.

The process was similar to that which a reviewer of *His Natural Life* stated; 'The scene passes before the eyes of an imaginative reader as plainly as if he were seated in the pit of a theatre' (Hergenhahn 1993, p. 48). I became an unseen observer, watching the characters, listening to what they said and understanding the reasons behind their words and actions. It was as if I was actually there, and this method greatly assisted in writing the story and in constructing the dialogue, as I was 'hearing' the voice that had evolved in my mind for each character. I found that I felt their emotions: happiness, anger, sadness, disappointment; and was surprised at how much I identified with the characters. I didn't 'become' each character, although at times it seemed that I actually was the protagonist, but I felt in such close proximity to the characters that I shared their feelings, as if we were close friends.

Grenville discusses details of technical issues such as point of view, voice and dialogue (Grenville 2019b). As when she visited the UK and walked the very streets and wharves that her ancestor had, when I visited the small village where William Coombe was born, little appeared to have changed there since he walked the two streets flanked by thatched-roofed buildings, dwarfed by the Norman church. In Exeter, I walked across the very flagstones he would have walked across on the day of his trial, and stood sadly in the courtroom where he and his companions were tried. The empathetic connection is why I enjoyed Grenville's book. I had been on the same journey, returned empty handed from emotionally exhausting dry gullies and in others found gold. I had done that too.

Proach (2011) states that accuracy is paramount in writing historical fiction and the most difficult part of writing historical fiction is authenticity, which is found in the details. The term 'authentic' is used 'either in the strong sense of being "of undisputed origin or authorship", or in a weaker sense of being "faithful to an original" or a "reliable, accurate representation"' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2014, p. 1). I accept the fact that my speculative biography lacks the authenticity provided by first-hand accounts such as those of ex-convict Jack Bushman's stories of his life in *Passages from the Life of a 'Lifer'* (Bushman 1859), William Derrincourt's autobiography in *Old convict days* (1975, first published 1899), Yvonne Cramer's *This beautiful, wicked place* (2000), based on the letters and journals of John Grant, political scapegoat-cum-gentleman convict, and James Tucker's first-hand account of convict life in *The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh* (O'Neill 1970, first published in 1929).

Nevertheless, the story I intended to write about William Coombe's life would not have its authenticity in the weaker sense compromised, as I attempted to locate all items of primary data available, and to corroborate, wherever possible, all the data obtained. However, the narrative can only partly capture his actual voice. Although having researched information on the Devonian dialect he would have spoken, I considered that my insufficient knowledge would detract from the authenticity of the work if I attempted to use it consistently (BBC 2005). As Fleming (2004, p. 2) counsels, 'When we convey dialect, we should use a light touch to keep the text readable and so as not to parody our characters'. The language my working class characters use is General Australian, which had been established by the 1830s as a result of dialect levelling that occurred between the various English and Irish dialects (explained on p. 229).

Authenticity has been a perennial thorny issue surrounding historical works (Stocker 2012). In Stocker's opinion, authenticity can be achieved via a careful negotiation between the factual evidence the writer possesses, the reader's existing understanding of the time period in which the novel is located, and the author's imaginative capabilities. She cautions that such a work, however, cannot capture actualities but can only present the spirit of an era, which is possibly why Mantel (2012) advised writers to accept the fact that authenticity is unattainable. Therefore, I concluded that if I made the narrative as authentic as I could by locating all the available evidence, speculating where necessary by drawing on historical evidence of the economic, legal, political, socio-cultural, and any other significant aspects of that era, and if readers accepted the story as authentic, then I would have achieved my goal. Padmore (2017) supports my conclusion, holding the view that authenticity, rather than being an unqualified attribute of the text, is actually the text's effect of the reader's perceptions, as neither author nor reader can literally step back into the past.

Historians hold concerns in relation to how readers are able to differentiate between truth and speculation and wonder how a line can be drawn between the factual past and authorial speculation of it (Cathcart 2015). This concern is echoed by Padmore (2017) who states '... the distinction between real and imagined in the historical or biographical novel is not clear nor easily resolved' (p. 5). It would indeed be difficult to draw a generic line between real and imagined elements because of the diversity of narratives constructed containing both fictional and historical components, whether speculative biographies, historical novels, or any other works based on historical events. It would seem more logical to judge each individual work according to where it is located on the history-novel spectrum, which Knight (2017, par. 9) calls the 'truthfulness spectrum,' referred to later in Section 3.1.

Phelan (2017) claims that substantial empirical evidence exists proving that both speakers and audiences distinguish between reports of the actual and inventions of the non-actual. He further states that where fictionality is concerned, invention usually arises from an interaction between the actual and the writer's imagination and that fictional content rarely, if ever, floats totally free from the actual. Barber (2010) avers that using the imagination is required when constructing narrative because information is inevitably incomplete. Therefore, speculative reasoning is necessary to construct a background to the narrative, in providing causal connections between events, and in constructing the characters' motivation. Doetschman (2011) asserts that writing biography requires flexible inquiry and creative presentation.

It has been argued that all narrative forms, as well as history, have an equally legitimate purchase on the past (Ankersmit 1989; Jenkins 1991; Munslow 1997; Oakeshott 1983; White 1973). In asserting that no historiographical account can claim to be objective, Harlan (1989, p. 587) states that historians 'cannot strip themselves of their inherited prejudices and preconceptions' because these factors make understanding possible. The techniques and strategies used by historians and imaginative writers are much the same according to White (1978), and Barber asserts that writers of both genres utilise the same source material. Furthermore, Barber continues that it is 'difficult for a plausible biographical narrative to be assembled without conjecture, speculative gap-filling, and other subjective intrusions' (p. 167).

Anyone who writes about historical events must of necessity engage in reasoned speculation in an attempt to gain greater understanding of the subject in order to extract further knowledge from it and to write a plausible narrative about it. The use of reasoned speculation based upon incomplete facts is particularly noticeable in the field of paleontology. For example, the skeleton of the hominid 'Lucy', purported to be almost 3.2 million years old, has been reconstructed from an assortment of several hundred fragments of bone, representing forty percent of a complete skeleton and an artist's representation of what she would/may have looked like has been developed, based on the available evidence ('Lucy's Story', n.d.). Grounded in known skeletal facts, her cause of death has now been speculated upon but this finding has not been accepted by some paleontologists (Feltman 2016). This scenario sounds familiar if transposed into an historical narrative context.

I disagree with Lackey's (2016, par. 8) sweeping assertion that 'What we get in a biographical novel, then, is the novelist's version of life and the world, and not an accurate representation of an actual person's life'. My point is that my speculative biography has not strayed from the historical record

but has rather filled in gaps where historical records do not exist and would never had existed, because even the significant day-to-day events of a person's life are seldom recorded. As Lindsey (2018, p. 5) wrote, 'And so, with few records to guide me from one fact to the next, I drew upon historical context to speculate and inform my imagination in ways that allowed me to re-create what was otherwise an unevenly recorded colonial life.' Holmes (2005) reflected that one must remain true to the dead fact while producing the living effect.

Padmore (2017) states that 'A voice that is perceived to be authentic is one way to establish a reader's belief in the character and events portrayed' (p. 4). However, the emotional and cognitive experience of imagining how another may feel and reason presents the very real danger of projection, which is unconsciously cloning ourselves onto the character, imbuing their thoughts and perceptions with our own. If this occurs, the character may say whatever we want to hear (Davis 2004). Jenkins (2003) suggested that it was impossible for anyone to gain true insight to minds from the past and cautioned his fellow historians regarding this.

Greenblatt (1988, p. 1) makes an interesting observation, stating 'It was true that I could hear only my own voice, but my own voice was the voice of the dead, for the dead had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves, and those traces make themselves heard in the voices of the living'. Considering that the protagonist's daughter was my mother's grandmother, and that there are various sayings, mannerisms, and values that have filtered down through the family over time, it is possible that his voice could have been re-created speculatively, although his thoughts, feelings, mannerisms and values have inescapably been filtered through my own mind. Of course, it is impossible for anyone to know exactly how he thought or felt or how he spoke, but I have tried to make room for him to tell his own story wherever he can, and to assist him to move out of the shadows at the margins of history so both readers and myself can see and hear him more clearly.

It is unfortunate that William Coombe did not leave any letters or a diary by which his voice could be heard. I had to discover ways by which his voice would be able to speak through the pages. It has been discussed on page 206 how I engaged in what Holmes describes as a 'continuous living dialogue' (2005, p. 66) with him by visiting key geographical locations where he would have been at different stages of his life. From conducting primary research, I understood his family circumstances, his vocation and the various locations in which he had lived (Weiland 2015). From this background, as his character and elements of his personality developed, his voice began to flow out of his personality (Weiland 2013). He had some primary education but being a country boy dropped his

itches, whereas other characters did not do so to such an extent, as I endeavoured to have each character develop a unique voice and to maintain consistency in their voices throughout the narrative. I also read the story through out loud in order to try to hear the characters speak as readers would hear them (Foxe 2017). I tried to make room for him to occupy centre stage in his own story wherever he spoke.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Methodology for this project

The project, a speculative biography, traces the life of a convict named William Coombe who was transported from Devon, England, to New South Wales in 1835. The methodological framework adopted for the project is creative Practice-led research (PLR), which Bacon (2016) describes as a form of creative research having a nebulous nature and flexibility, lending itself to 'the process of unearthing knowledge while creating art' (p. 236). Skains (2018, p. 85) states that 'Practice-led research focuses on the nature of creative practice, leading to new knowledge of operational significance for that practice, in order to advance knowledge about or within practice.' McNamara (2012) asserts that good Practice-led research necessitates a complex, back-and-forth interaction between the creative artefact and the exegetical research framework. He further states that the researcher is forced to consider how each component can produce knowledge, thereby providing unique understanding and insights. Webb (2015) avers that language and technique are the tools of the creative writer's trade and Bacon (2016, p. 236) asserts that 'the artist who is also a scholar is able to craft a piece of work that is both original and accessible to readers through a dissertation that addresses important elements of the investigation and reflection'. Therefore, Practice-led research appeared to be a very applicable methodology to use to interrogate my project.

Eminent historian Hayden White coined the term 'emplotment' to describe the act of imposing historical meaning on historical facts by the author making choices in storytelling (Genzlinger 2018). In an interview, White stated that 'a fact is a statement about an event', therefore 'facts' may not necessarily provide a complete or even an accurate picture of an historical event (White n.d.). Hutcheon (1988) asserts that the author constructs facts from granting meaning to texts and traces of historical events. She argues that all kinds of orders and systems that exist or have existed are human constructs that have been created. White (2000) supports this view, claiming that historical facts are by necessity invented because the evidence of an event or the availability of data are not provided pre-packaged as 'facts'.

The distinction between fact and fiction is often not clear, as the various types of historical narratives employ a combination of both, to varying degrees along what Knight (2017, par. 9) refers to as the 'truthfulness spectrum' by the utilisation of literary techniques (Greenacre 2017). Because historians have expressed strong concerns regarding the fictional element in historical novels and

speculative biographies, this scholarly dilemma has been discussed extensively in Section 2.11. Techniques used by myself and other authors are discussed later in this section.

Writing a speculative biography would be the means of reconstructing the protagonist's life by creating a narrative based upon available evidence which could be translated into facts as accurately as possible. The completed work would offer readers a view of his life and the historical era in which he lived. It carried the possibility of informing readers of a convict's life as he worked at rebuilding it after exiting the penal system and conveying the way life was lived in mid-nineteenth-century Brisbane.

As time progressed, it appeared possible that a speculative biography could be constructed using primary data sourced from documents such as birth, death and marriage records, court transcripts, shipping and convict records, land records, and newspaper accounts supplemented by historical material on the times in which William Coombe lived. In gathering historical evidence I conducted meticulous research in three Australian states and two English counties. Before leaving Australia I contacted the UK Public Records Office and informed the staff of the date I would be in London and what documents I wished to see. This time-saving technique resulted in obtaining the information I needed in just one day, as the documents had been located beforehand and set aside for my perusal.

I joined a genealogical library in Melbourne and so obtained access to all their catalogued material and genealogical databases, which would have been cost-prohibitive if I were to subscribe to them all personally. Receiving advice concerning researching from longstanding family history researchers was another benefit gained at that library. English birth, death or marriage certificates were not required but Australian certificates were ordered from the relevant state government. Obtaining copies online proved cheaper than ordering hard copies. Searching *Trove*, the Australian online library database aggregator hosted by the National Library of Australia, was invaluable in locating every mention of the protagonist's name in thirty years of newspaper editions. Newspaper articles also carried details of land sales as well as general news involving the protagonist. The technique called triangulation (explained on p. 236) was used to identify his English family out of four possible families.

When I began writing, I decided to begin the narrative by first establishing a sense of place for the reader by providing a perspective of Devon historically, geographically, and anthropologically before

introducing any characters. I had read Jill Ker Conway's *The Road From Coorain* (1992) and was impressed by how she set a sense of place in the first thirteen pages of the book. Where gaps existed in the story, I relied upon historical material based upon the times in which the protagonist lived, including economic, social, and political conditions. I bought relevant books in secondhand stores, as prices were cheap and passages could be highlighted and notes made in margins, which was not possible with books borrowed from a library. Also, the books were instantly available if reference needed to be made to them later. Other books were borrowed from libraries. The majority of journal articles were sourced from the Internet, as were other electronic resources. The biography is grounded in historical fact, and the speculative components elucidate the possibility of what may have happened, arrived at by considered opinion based upon informed research and knowledge of human nature.

Achieving completeness in gathering facts is persistently elusive, as day-to-day events in the life of a person who died 140 years ago are inevitably incomplete. When I thought I had obtained all documented evidence concerning his life additional information came to light later. When all known facts had been assembled in chronological order the gaps then needed to be linked to them with speculative, but realistic, possibilities in order to lend continuity to the narrative. Benton (2005, p. 49) states, 'The biographer cannot play around with time; the chronology of the life is of central importance'. I agree, and the protagonist's birth is recorded on page 2 of the artefact and the last chapter ends with his death. Therefore, the chronological events discovered via primary research provide the major structure for the storyline. I realise that the story need not be linear and that a risk exists that the narrative can become a basically lifeless chronology but I guarded against the possibility of that happening and considered that tracing the protagonist's life via chronology would be the best approach to use.

Brien (2017) states, '... by basing their subjective conjecture, empathy and imaginings on the documented facts (and making clear when any conjecture is not thus grounded), biographers can speculate but still ensure their texts are classified as non-fiction biographies' (pp. 21-22). As the speculative components in the biography are grounded either in documented facts or on actual events of which I am personally aware, I considered it unnecessary to signal speculative passages in the story and also, that such insertions would break the flow of the story and inject an undesirable disjointedness to it. Documented facts are referenced clearly so if a major event is not referenced, it is highly likely to be a speculative component in the story but based on extensive research or

personal experience. By the latter statement I mean that the event either happened to me or to someone else in the family and I have inserted the event into an appropriate place in the story.

As I had already gathered an assortment of information before formal research began, I estimated that a wide range of official historical documents could be used to uncover specific information on my protagonist; from this I could faithfully re-create his life. In addition, historical works regarding certain geographical areas could be utilised that would provide an accurate backdrop for his activities. By melding the primary and secondary sources and making considered speculations where gaps existed, I could not only re-create his story but also make a significant contribution to the available knowledge and understanding of such men's lives. I drew confidence from the notion that 'every act of historical creation involves an imaginative leap and an act of projection' (Stevens 2008, p. 228).

I researched general information on the geographical areas in which my protagonist lived, and the social, economic and political conditions in those locations at that time. In the process of assembling a mental picture of the times he lived in and his apparent character traits and personality, I gradually became able to mentally step inside the character, to think what may have been his thoughts, and then step back outside the character and write in the third person omniscient narrative mode. This process and the techniques used are discussed on page 205. I am well aware that narrativity carries with it 'the moral stance of the biographer that is central to the process of interpreting and judging the subject's life story' (Benton 2005, p. 51). As a direct descendant of the subject I felt keenly the obligation to form the personalities of my protagonist and other characters as accurately as possible. Indurain (2009) states that an historical work is 'an invitation to history, an invitation to broaden our knowledge of our own past and, in short, our knowledge of ourselves' (p. 5). This was my aim while working my way through the above process.

A foundation was prepared for the artefact by conducting a literature review, which revealed a gap in convict literature identified by several historians. That is, there was a dearth of research into convict's lives after they exited the penal system. Therefore, the original intention of writing a narrative of a convict ancestor's life expanded as the question formed as to whether an artefact could be produced that would explore William Coombe's life after his release from servitude. Therefore, his entire life, and not just the time spent as a convict, would need to be investigated. This expansion gave rise to another factor identified by the literature review. Many authors have referred to 'the stain', a term used to denote the perceived stigma attached to the character of

convicts, emancipated convicts, or those having convict ancestry (Bolton 2003; Crockett n.d.; Heathcote 2018; Jackman 2009; Lambert 2002; Maxwell-Stewart & Oxley n.d.; Reynolds 1969; Smith 2008; Tranter & Donoghue 2003; Williams 2015), to name but a few. The term carried the connotation that the negative character qualities that caused a person to commit their crime were unchangeable, thus rendering them irredeemable and therefore incapable of re-integrating successfully into society following their release from servitude.

When the term 'convict stain' was applied to specific people it provided a reason to exclude them from 'respectable' society. Descendants of convicts also often carried the stigma and endeavoured to hide their convict ancestry, as society harboured the fear that genetic contamination would be inherited from convict ancestors (Williams 2015). James Mudie, a landowner and magistrate in the Hunter Valley, who wrote *The Felonry of New South Wales* published in 1837, firmly believed that convicts and emancipists (freed convicts) forever carried 'the stain' and therefore possessed an inherent capacity for lawbreaking. Lambert (2002) holds the opinion, formed by interviews with amateur genealogists, that a preoccupation with 'the stain' was mainly confined to the past, although some in the older generation today still exhibit concern regarding it. Institutional concern was revealed dramatically throughout the 20th century by the practice of destroying federal census data.

Abhorrence of 'the stain' was a commonly held paradigm in Australian society and increasing colonisation by free settlers amplified society's consciousness of its supposed danger. Boyce (2008) states that free settlers were 'outraged at the suggestion that the moral degeneracy of convictism had corrupted their carefully constructed society' (p. 237). Abolitionists, the term given to those who exerted political pressure to have convict transportation ceased, played upon society's phobia of 'the stain' and highlighted the threat convicts posed to life and property. However, their tactics were frequently dubious and their claims unsupported by evidence. Analysis of the records suggests that these claims were either wild rumours or wilful lies told with the intention of advancing the abolitionists' cause (Causer 2012).

Nevertheless, fears of 'the stain' were founded on genuine concern, as Robson (1965, p. 9) pointed out regarding the convicts that 'certainly one-half, and probably two-thirds, had formerly been punished, usually for forms of theft'. Tranter and Donoghue (2003) state that the persistence of the 'hated stain' among older Australians is evidenced by its generational effects and that their findings support the claim that the phenomenon was, to an extent, a socially constructed identity. This issue

gave rise to the question as to whether William Coombe overcame the social construct of 'the stain' and managed to successfully re-integrate into society after regaining his freedom.

As this project originally began life as an historical novel I had read reasonably extensively about that genre and had conducted an extensive literature review of publications in the field. However, Hibbert, Coupland & MacIntosh (2010) state that 'there are also possibilities for reflection to be guided by someone (or something) other than the researcher' (p. 51). My supervisors suggested that the final work would present better as a speculative biography, a term that was unfamiliar to me. I took that advice and it soon became clear that 'Reflexivity involves a process of on-going mutual shaping between researcher and research' (Attia & Edge 2017, p. 1). Mann (2016) echoes this definition, describing reflexivity as comprising 'mutual shaping, reciprocity and bi-directionality' (p. 28).

Embracing the speculative biography genre and the necessary development of new techniques resulted in 'shifting insights, emergent goals, and evolving methods in the pursuit of findings more significant than those that initial research questions might have foreseen' (Attia & Edge 2017, par. 14). Characterisation in particular demanded close attention and improvements continued through to the post-examination revision process. The original research questions were redesigned to interrogate the interaction between the exegesis and the artefact using this sub-genre as the vehicle for the story.

The main question that the artefact would answer was whether the speculative biography sub-genre could be utilised successfully to explore William Coombe's life as a felon, and then as a freeman in colonial Queensland after his release from servitude, and if so, how. Using Practice-led research to create a speculative biography would reveal also whether this sub-genre of biography would be a suitable literary vehicle to use to relate his story, thereby providing more knowledge about the application of speculative biographies.

I realise that using the speculative biography 'further exposes the potential of investigating and revealing the subjectivity, creativity and fallibility of the biographer in his or her task of narrative construction alongside the more human aspects of the biographical subject' (Brien 2015, p. 14). Nevertheless, I consider that the finished work conveys accurately the spirit, manners, and social conditions of this era of British and Australian history, within which nestles William Coombe's life in realistic detail and fidelity. The interspersed and interwoven components of factual elements and

realistic, informed speculation created an iterative cycle of reflection and reflexive action common in Practice-led research. Such cycles informed the process of writing in creating the artefact (Bacon 2016).

Writing in the speculative biography sub-genre required greater use of dialogue than was originally intended in an historical novel. More character development was necessary in order to build the characters' personalities, particularly the protagonist's, as the style of dialogue for each character was inextricably entwined with their personality. Decisions needed to be made regarding each character's style of speaking, as discussed on pages 205 and 229. It proved difficult to maintain consistency in each character's speaking style while writing and constant revision was required when writing dialogue to ensure that consistency was preserved.

I found the speculative elements in the narrative reasonably easy to write, as I drew on true life experiences in other contexts. For example, the cause of death of the protagonist's wife Johannah in Chapter 12 is not shown on her death certificate. Therefore, I made an assumption that she died in childbirth, a common cause of female deaths during that time period. Remembering a family story of my grandmother and her sisters' reactions at the death of their mother in childbirth, I wove that experience into the story. In other parts of the narrative little happened apart from the usual humdrum of life so using the technique of accretion something exciting or dangerous needed to be inserted to liven up the story. William's near-drowning at Quart Pot Creek in Chapter 10 was created from a combination of two childhood experiences of mine. One, when I swam to the bottom of a diving pool and running out of air, only just made it back to the surface and two, when I didn't tighten up the surcingle of my saddle sufficiently and the saddle slid around the horse when I attempted to mount.

In Chapter 6, I based the incident in which William rescued his workmate from drowning on the time when I saved a young boy from drowning in a similar context, a deep hole in a creek. His rescue by another workmate from a snake in the same chapter happened to me, when a workmate killed a taipan that was directly behind me. He ran towards me with a shovel above his head and I thought that he intended to hit me with it. If I had taken one step backward I would have stepped on the snake. So creating the speculative elements in the artefact flowed quite smoothly. I did not have to make anything up, as the events had happened previously. They merely needed to be transposed into a different context in which their occurrence was sufficiently realistic.

Bacon (2016, p. 237) warns of two major flaws in producing an artefact with an accompanying exegesis. 'First, the artist who is also a scholar must find synergies in their dual roles of creating art in practice as an artist and unearthing knowledge as an academic. Second, it is an experiential approach that does not offer a single or consistent methodology in its application.' Unearthing knowledge resulted from information obtained in interrogating the sub-genre and applying that knowledge to constructing the artefact, which in turn confirmed the suitability of the methodology used and the speculative biography sub-genre as an appropriate literary vehicle to use in relating a person's life story.

Norton (2013, p. 72) states, 'creative writing is the artistic manifestation of disciplinary engagement'. Guntarik, van de Pol & Berry (2015) acknowledge that there sometimes is a struggle between fact and truth because facts rarely tell the whole story. Therefore, part of the whole truth is missing and these gaps must of necessity be filled by 'moments of imaginative place, a kind of improvisation and space' (p. 7). Dewey (1991, quoted in Yoo 2017) held the view that 'meaning grows out of a series of natural chains or threads or connections as "our (de-constructive) reading and (re-constructive) writing" act as tools for investigating our questions' (p. 453). Practice-led research proved to be an eminently suitable methodology to use for this project.

In *Captain Thunderbolt & His Lady* (2011) Baxter stated that she wrote the story in the narrative, literary, or creative non-fiction style (p. 342). It differed from the third person omniscient mode used in my project, as at times she framed questions to the reader, for example, concerning the fate of Mary Ann's husbands (p. 59). She also used the words 'probably' and 'possibly' (p.58) and statements such as '...Bryden must have groaned...' 'Presumably Thunderbolt also knew...' (p. 223) to denote places in the narrative where facts were apparently unavailable and therefore speculation was used, but the style is not omniscient. She used backstory technique in the book's opening pages to inform the reader of important points of the characters' history and other aspects of the story's elements that helped establish the setting. However, Klems (2013) cautions that care is needed not to overdo backstory, flashbacks, character musings and recollections or exposition, otherwise the narrative's forward momentum may be impacted. I provided backstory in the first two pages of the artefact, which helped to provide a background for future situations that occurred in the protagonist's life.

Sometimes Baxter revealed the future state of a character or an area: '...the young Robert Ramsay Mackenzie, later a Scottish baronet and Queensland politician' (p. 27); '...a windy mountainous track

that would later become known as Thunderbolt's Way' (p. 256). Marele Day (*Mrs Cook* 2003) also adopted this technique: 'On his return from the voyage, Mr Wales would go on to become master at the Mathematical School at Christ's Hospital, an inspiring teacher to his pupils, one of whom was a boy called Samuel Taylor Coleridge' (p. 181-2). This technique was used in the William Coombe narrative as well: 'Grace gave birth to their fourth child, a daughter she named Elizabeth... She would never meet her father' (p. 23); and, 'The following year a store, an inn and a flour mill would be established there and four years later the settlement would assume the more attractive name Inverell...' (p. 116).

Baxter used cumulative syntax to build scenario: 'She saw the miners swarming over the ridges and down the mountain glen, setting up their tents among the swamp oaks lining the Turon's banks, lighting the fires that sent bluish streams into the sky, smoke signals that gave hope to exhausted travellers that they were nearly there' (p. 58). Similarly, in the artefact (p. 92), 'He walked up on deck and ambled to the front of the vessel and there, standing at the steamer's bow, drinking in the balmy early morning of late September, with the fresh smell of the water mingling with the fragrance of blossoming trees on the riverbanks, he realised he had never felt so free in his life.' Day (2003) created a similar scene when using this technique: 'Standing at the bow of the ship, with harlequins of light sweeping across the water, Elizabeth felt the clenched fist of her heart relax and open out' (p. 291).

As in William Coombe's narrative, Day wrote *Mrs Cook* in the third person omniscient mode. For example, concerning her protagonist, 'She remembered nothing of the journey back to London, nothing of Christmas or New Year, except the cold suffocation of snow and ice' (p. 269). Writing in the omniscient mode, the narrator is aware of the thoughts and feelings of all the characters in the story (Wiehardt 2019). An example in the artefact is, 'William didn't remember much about the days following Johannah's death. He recollected a few snippets from the funeral, but the events immediately after that terrible day when his life and his children's lives were thrown into a chaotic maelstrom of disbelief and grief, that day that destroyed his plans for the future, passed in a sorrowful blur' (p. 150).

Day makes effective use of imagery, defined as the use of 'figurative language to create visual representations of actions, objects and ideas in our mind in such a way that they appeal to our physical senses' (Literary Devices 'Imagery' n.d., par. 1). She writes, 'Though it was a cold November day, it was nothing compared to the winters in Canada, to the sleet and sea ice and howling winds

that whipped straight through the cold weather clothing, the skin, flesh and bones, and chilled a man's very marrow' (p. 73). There is a similar passage in the artefact: 'He knew the danger of the Roaring Forties, the vicious gales that could spring up suddenly and roar like a banshee through those southern latitudes, that could strip a ship of its sails and rigging and shatter masts before a man could shout 'God save the King' (p. 40).

She also used anaphora to good effect. This technique involves 'the deliberate repetition of the first part of a sentence in order to achieve an artistic effect' (Literary Devices 'Anaphora' n.d., par. 1). For example, 'Faith was a weapon, faith was a directive of life. Faith was the sea that surrounded Elizabeth' (p. 256). An example from the artefact is: 'He looked upon the now calm and peaceful but lifeless face of his son, the son he would never see grow up, the son who would never help him on the farm, the son he would never teach about the soil, the son he would never show how to graft a fruit tree or prune it, the son he would never see grow into a strong and confident young man' (p. 156). Yourcenar (1951, p. 205) used this technique also, 'Our effort has been compromised in advance by too many greedy procurators and publicans, too many suspicious senators, too many brutal centurions.'

I also used the technique of parallelism, in which components in a sentence or adjacent sentences that are grammatically the same or similar in their construction, sound, meaning, or meter are utilised (Parallelism n.d.). Examples from the artefact are: 'Willie seemed so weak, so limp, so lifeless' (p. 155); and, 'I always feel as though I'm sharin' it with Johannah: her memories, her furniture, her children, her husband' (p. 154).

Peter Carey (2019) used several literary techniques used by the other authors reviewed. He too used anaphora: '...men who had their leases denied for no other crime than being our friends men forced to plant wheat then ruined by the rust men mangled upon the triangle of Van Diemen's Land men with sons in gaol men who witnessed their hard won land taken up by squatters men perjured against and falsely gaoled men weary of constant impounding...' (pp. 442-3); and, 'At that time he would see his child again. At that time he would release his mother. At that time these people would occupy their own land...' (p. 469). He made use of metaphor: 'Rowe were a cunning old fox' (p. 111); and '...Harry Power. I followed the old wombat...' (p. 152). He also utilised simile, '...illuminated by a glow like the inside of a baker's furnace' (p. 153), and alliteration, '...in the damp dripping dawn...' (p. 298). The artefact also made use of metaphor: 'His new lease on life had turned to sand and ran through his fingers' (p. 155); simile, 'encroached upon them like a high tide on sand dunes' (p. 72); and alliteration, 'the gleeful grins of the guards' (p. 33).

In *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951), Yourcenar used alliteration also, as on page 204, '... stirred by the spectacle of that solitary form...', which is a shorter example than one in the artefact (p. 112), '... interest grew in starting a settlement at Sandgate, subsequently surveyed by September.' She utilised repetition to good effect in order to add emphasis to an emotionally charged scene. After the death of Antinous she repeats the short sentence 'Antinous was dead' in paragraphs on pages 171, 172 (twice in paragraph 1), and in paragraph 2. In the artefact (p. 43), at the protagonist's departure from England he is wracked with grief at the realisation that he will never see his family again. The phrase 'A flood of tears' appears followed by 'Another flood of tears' three times within the same paragraph, to add emphasis to the depth of his anguish.

I utilised several techniques used in storytelling in constructing the artefact. One technique was scene setting and the story contained multiple settings, such as the physical location. Examples are: when the protagonist was a free man in England; in gaol at Exeter; his trial; imprisonment on a hulk in the Thames; the voyage to Australia; assignment in the Hunter Valley; operating a haulage business around the Muswellbrook area; the journey to Queensland; participating in a gold rush in the New England area; and his life as a free man in Brisbane. Time was another setting, involving the particular details of the time in which he lived. The social milieu was another setting that changed throughout the story, as the protagonist mixed with agricultural labourers in rural Devon, convicts in Exeter Gaol, on a hulk, on board ship during the journey to Australia, when on assignment in the Hunter Valley, and among citizens as a free man in Brisbane. Plot developments and character developments corresponded to changes in the setting (LitCharts n.d.) such as the births and deaths of children, other family issues, and his life as he aged.

The beginning of chapters usually set the scene for the subsequent events in the chapter. Chapter 1 opened with narrative summary but action began on page two. Chapter 2 opened with a burst of action, which set the scene for the tension that followed in the chapter. Chapter 3 began by engaging with specific visual, aural and olfactory details when the protagonist was thrust into unfamiliar surroundings. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 began with narrative summary, as the surroundings in these chapters were totally new to the protagonist's experience so needed a small introduction (Rosenfeld 2011). Chapter 7 holds uncertainty so the first paragraph captures that uneasy feeling, thereby setting the scene for the rest of the chapter. Chapter 8 begins with optimism, which continues throughout the chapter. Chapters 9 and 10 open with narrative summary, to provide information regarding the story to follow. Narrative summary opens Chapters 11 and 12 but action begins in the second paragraph in each chapter. Narrative summary also opens Chapter 13 and life begins coming into the story as the protagonist slowly rises out of his depressed state.

Another storytelling technique I employed was characterisation. In Kate Grenville's *The Lieutenant* (2008) I saw how she built her protagonist's (Rooke) character: shared his dreams, things that he liked, his fears. She showed how he felt when in certain situations. She used the flashback technique, causing Rooke to reflect occasionally on the larger scheme of things and to reminisce of his childhood experiences, family life, and his boyhood. I used this technique in the artefact in conjunction with asyndeton, which is a technique that omits conjunctions in a series of words, phrases or clauses, used to create a more concise, dramatic effect ('Asyndeton Examples' n.d.). An example is: 'Catherine was quiet and introspective during the wedding ceremony, as vivid memories returned of her marriage to John Heagarty... As the minister droned on, Catherine became lost in her memories, her bridal dreams, her shattered life' (p. 153).

In *The Convict's Daughter* (2016b), Kiera Lindsey steadily developed her protagonist's character from that of a strongwilled yet socially awkward girl to become a capable and confident young woman. After introducing the protagonist, I began weaving aspects of his character by creating a picture of his behaviour and his thought processes. I then tried to expand his character by having him express his opinions and ideas, and engaging in conversations with other characters in the story and then attempting to show how others responded to his personality (Literary Devices Editors n.d.). For example, the protagonist entered the narrative as a farm labourer with poor social skills, which his time as a convict exacerbated. He developed new skills, both manual and social, as a convict on assignment then became a small businessman after obtaining his ticket-of-leave. He became a landowner and small crops farmer upon obtaining his freedom. During these changes in his life his character continued developing and he became more confident, assertive and socially comfortable as time went on.

Roger McDonald, in *Mr Darwin's Shooter* (2009), wrote in very descriptive prose when describing characters' facial features, particularly when he described the son (p.48) and father's (p. 49) faces in detail. I had used William Coombe's experience from which the convict indents were created to describe his features (p. 54) but as this duty was performed quite perfunctorily, I decided to describe his and other characters' features more descriptively. As an example from the artefact (p. 106), 'Her eyes looked him up and down. He was almost average height, she guessed around five foot six, and although quite a bit older than she was, he looked quite fit and muscular. His hazel eyes seemed to be kind and the creases that ran from near the sides of his nose down past the edges of his mouth spoke to her of someone who laughed often. He had a full head of dark brown hair that was just beginning to grey at the temples. All in all, he didn't look too bad.'

McDonald used simple but imaginative language, via simile, to describe somebody who had ‘... a nose like a lump of pear-wood nailed to a door’ (p. 458). An example from the artefact, using metaphor, is on page 96, ‘A man nearby, his face a ploughed paddock, weathered and chiselled by the elements, overheard the conversation...’ Like other authors, he made effective use of cumulative syntax to build scenario, ‘Was it to tend his memorial days on a range of land overlooking river flats where corn-tassels whispered, and white herons rose from an estuary and winged their way south along a line of misty surf?’ (p. 588). An example from the artefact has been provided on page 218. In his biography *Dickens: Public Life and Private Passion* (2002), Peter Ackroyd used anaphora: ‘It had to be mastered. It had to be organized and controlled. It had to be given a formal shape; an artistic shape’ (p. 11). He also used alliteration, ‘...painted his portrait during this period...’ (p. 133), as did Dickens, ‘...Dickens adverts to “the shameful cases of disease and death from destitution”’ (Ackroyd 2002, p. 144). Examples of these techniques used in the artefact are provided on pages 219 and 220 respectively.

Compression was another technique used, by which I attempted to show the reader what was happening rather than tell them. Trimming the story down by eliminating unnecessary words and making sentences more efficient and implying information rather than providing explicit detail creates greater audience involvement. This technique results in more emotional investment on the audience’s part, therefore delivering a more powerful impact (Gilmore 2013). An example from the artefact is, ‘Light misty rain began falling. Pulling the collar of his coat close around his neck and hugging his arms to his ribcage he hurried on’ (p. 6).

The creation of dialogue enabled relationships to be developed more fully, which helped to explain and characterise how the protagonist felt about certain issues and about how his relationships with others were managed. To describe characters’ facial expressions when in certain situations, I transported myself mentally into the character/s in each particular scene and stood before a mirror, examining my facial expressions and bodily stance. From that exercise, I then attempted to describe the character’s facial expressions and body language in the narrative. For example, in Chapter 13 when William nervously proposed to Catherine, I tried to put myself in William’s place, imagining that the vicissitudes of life that he had recently endured had happened to me. I asked myself the questions, ‘How would I broach this conversation? What would I say and how would I say it? What would I say if proposing to a woman half my age? I would have to state the positive aspects that I could offer.’ The conversation between them and the accompanying body language flowed from those imaginings.

Dialogue was made more effective by using action beats, which add more detail and therefore more meaning to a conversation (Luke 2019). They can be used to control pace, to develop characterisation, and to add descriptions of people and places ('Beats in dialogue' 2018). Using action beats helps the writer to 'show' rather than 'tell'. Examples from the artefact are, 'William hesitated before replying, looking out the window at the orchard, the rows of crops, and the swamp in the background.' (p. 150); 'Her fingers played with the edge of the tablecloth. "Have ya got it out of yer system?"' (p. 121); 'The surveyor looked up, a smile creasing his sunburnt face. "G'day!..." (p. 144).

Hyperbole, a technique that uses extreme exaggeration to make a point or show emphasis ('Hyperbole' 2020) has been used occasionally in the artefact, such as, '...his face was split by a broad grin that a mob of sheep could have been driven through' (p. 131). Personification is another literary technique used, in which something is given human attributes (Personification n.d.). An example from the artefact where this technique has been used is on page 92, '... the virgin bush then, its moody silence conveying its majesty....' I also employed the technique of accretion by creating further incidents and dialogue around actual events that were sparsely recorded, or in places where the mundane aspects of daily life would be enriched by some excitement being injected into the story to evoke sensory experiences for the reader (Vicars 2019).

I found that I often drew upon my own experiences when in particular sections of the narrative I had exhausted the data and needed to fill historical gaps by speculative imagination. Such personal experiences included horse riding, William's near-drowning at Quart Pot Creek in Chapter 10, rescue of his workmate from drowning and rescue by another workmate from a snake in Chapter 6, or events that had involved family members. The death of the protagonist's wife Johannah in Chapter 12 drew from the experience of my grandmother and her sisters on the death of their mother. Johannah's daughters' reaction was that of my grandmother and her sisters as young girls at that time. This technique conforms to what Schabert referred to as a 'responsible imagination', which 'as a rule respects the known facts, yet is free to interpret them, enlarge upon them and supplement them according to the certainties of the empathic act' (Schabert 1990, p. 147). These supplementary facts, which actually happened but not necessarily to the protagonist, did not detract in any way from the factual material surrounding his life.

The question I needed to answer was at what point along the history-novel spectrum did I want to position my speculative biography? I considered the answer lay on the historical side of the midway

point of the spectrum. That is, I resolved that I would remain as true as possible to historical fact but also wanted to bring the protagonist 'to life' by imbuing him with a personality and having him engage with other characters in authentic situations which occurred or could have occurred at that particular time period. In other words, I wanted to be as historically accurate as possible, yet not have the historical information overwhelm the characters, a criticism of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Reviewer Stevens (2006, p. 1) stated that she 'slogged through the vast wastes of expository dialogue that comprise Dan Brown's best seller *The Da Vinci Code*....' I wanted to create an interesting story about the life of an interesting character, set against the historical backdrop of nineteenth-century Australia.

The finished work is the culmination of an almost twenty-year journey of piecing together the varied and puzzling information of the protagonist's life and times so that a coherent story is finally produced that aligns as closely as possible with the factual data unearthed on the journey. Although as historically accurate as possible, there were times during the course of the narrative when necessity required considered judgements to be made due to the unavailability of sufficient historical data. This is why the narrative takes the form of a speculative biography. As the artefact straddles a fine yet occasionally fuzzy line between historical fact and judicious use of fictional speculation, I conducted a literature review of period and contemporary historical accounts, novels, autobiographies and biographies.

I collected and borrowed books about colonial Australia, the transportation era, and about the social conditions in England in the early 1800s. The books provided secondary data, while visits to two genealogical libraries, several Australian State Libraries, an English County library, and the National Records Office in Kew, London, furnished primary data. I visited the court room at Exeter Castle where the protagonist and his two accomplices were tried and sentenced, walking across the very same flagstones he had walked across one hundred and seventy years earlier with chains around his ankles.

I also visited the village in which he was born, South Tawton, and these activities helped develop a sense of place as I gained some understanding of the physical surroundings in which he lived. Insights were obtained into parts of his daily life by seeing the same buildings he had seen. I felt that in a certain way I was seeing through his eyes, but I was aware that I didn't have anywhere near the familiarity or depth of understanding that he had when he had seen those elements of village life: the church, the stone building, even the pub had been there in his time. I also visited the places

where he had lived and worked in New South Wales and Queensland, which assisted in developing a sense of place at the Australian end.

General records, which detail the prevailing socio-cultural conditions and attitudes during that period of history in both England and Australia, are available, as are records regarding the macro- and micro-economic circumstances existing at that period of history in both countries. Historical records exist concerning the convict system and of the early days of settlement in the Hunter Valley and at Brisbane.

Scrivener (2000) provided some benchmarks for a creative work. He stated that it: a) is not derivative or imitative of another's work; b) can be described as a response to a set of on-going issues, concerns and interests; c) is usually rooted in a cultural context; d) manifests cultural issues, concerns and interests; and, e) contributes to human experience and knowledge. I considered that writing a speculative biography would fulfil all those criteria, for the following reasons: a) William Coombe's story has never been told before and is not based upon another convict narrative; b) it helps to fill the identified lacuna in the literature concerning convicts' lives after they exited the penal system; c) it is situated in the cultural context of Australia's convict past; d) it manifests the cultural issues of convict emancipation, attempted extirpation of 'the stain', and the struggle of those who sought separation of the northern part of the colony from New South Wales; e) it provides a window into the experience of convict life during and after incarceration, and contributes to knowledge of Brisbane's early history.

### **3.2 The suitability of the approach used**

As William Coombe apparently did not leave any written material, writing his story as a biography at first seemed too difficult and I wanted to maintain historical veracity. I considered that to be imperative, to respect his memory by recreating his life as faithfully as possible. Yet, I realised the difficult task that lay before me if I attempted to create an historical record of his life, due to the relative paucity of primary data spread over many years. Birth, marriage and death records were available, also shipping and convict records. A search through thirty years of newspaper publications revealed occasional mentions of his name in connection with farming and social pursuits. Nevertheless, I found comfort in Alder's statement that 'Only when historians are obliged to work between the documents and fill in the gaps – for there are always gaps – do the imaginative faculties

become engaged in storytelling, and only then can we paint the true picture of an age' (Alder 2004, pp. 707-8).

William Coombe's life was explored and re-created successfully using the speculative biography sub-genre. The previous section explained, with examples, how I used some key fictional techniques in writing the artefact, techniques that authors typically use when mobilising a speculative biography (or a fictional work) to relate someone's life story. Sections 2.10 and 2.11 discussed the developmental journey of the speculative biography sub-genre and explained how and why the sub-genre has been used to write the past, providing examples from the crafting of the artefact.

Vicars (2019) holds the opinion that it is profitable to use such an approach to write a biography, as a key advantage exists in that it holds the capacity for imaginative exploration and also close focus of the protagonist's life. He states that in the absence of detailed or balanced evidence, both the inner and outer dimensions of a person's life can be explored, which I did in writing the speculative biography. The creative artefact conforms to the composition of the sub-genre in that it is based on historical evidence, with the facts linked together by speculative bridges, as detailed in the Introduction.

The speculative component, comprising the protagonist's 'emotional responses, thoughts and motivations' is congruent with the composition of the sub-genre (Brien 2015, p. 4). Other speculative elements are historically-based and the fictional element is quite subdued. For example, in Chapter 10 the protagonist did travel to Bingara to search for gold, which was confirmed by a newspaper article following an interview by a reporter. Where the party camped each night is speculative, but is based upon how far a horse was likely to travel in a day and the location of settlements and properties existing at that time. I have consistently applied these writing techniques to bring life to William.

The finished work will make a contribution to knowledge, particularly in the realm of convict literature, by exploring William Coombe's life after his release from servitude. The artefact also will make a meaningful contribution to the store of early Australian, and particularly Queensland's, history and it provides evidence that the idea of 'the stain' as an irremovable social stigma was expunged from William Coombe's life after he regained his freedom. That his story has been told in the form of a speculative biography suggests that this sub-genre may be suitable to use for future works of this nature, utilising the tools and techniques discussed in the previous section.

I believed that the characteristic research stance of objectivity, control and distance could be achieved and given scholarly, as well as reflective, consideration leading to reflexive action in the accompanying exegesis, which then could be applied to the writing of the artefact. Arnold (2005) states that creativity is expressed in the act of initiating the artefact and also in the reflective process and the scholarly dialogue, which Krauth (2011) terms a parallel text. Although control is difficult to attain in qualitative research, I endeavoured to maintain control and objectivity by rigorous examination of evidence that was collected, sorted, evaluated, and its subsequent assembly into useable facts. I tried to satisfy the demand that the researcher remains distant and balanced on the collected data by making accuracy of translating evidence into facts the primary consideration in the research process. After the known facts were assembled, imagination provided the thread that linked the facts together.

I therefore felt comfortable in the work taking the appropriate form of a speculative biography. As historical fiction focuses on human consequences of historical events, which may encompass embarrassing moments, loss of life, loved ones and personal property, or relate the effects in one's life that flow from personal choices that are made, it seemed logical to present William Coombe's life as a speculative biography strongly based upon historical facts (Hoffman 2002). Historical research blended with well-considered fictional elements culminating in a speculative biography afforded the opportunity for flow-on benefits, such as possible publication of non-fiction scholarly journal articles, essays and lectures, as well as an expanded writing career (Owens 2016).

In Clandinin and Connelly's (2000, in Owens 2016, p. 143) opinion, the research conducted is more a sub-genre of narrative enquiry described as arts-based, and arts-informed, narrative enquiry. They contend that the arts-based segment consists of 'identifying, reviewing, and analysing relevant resources and texts and develops into arts-informed text construction in the form of,' for example, my speculative biography. They also state that the artefact so constructed is often accompanied by 'an exegesis explaining the relationship between the research and the creative writing process.' This information further confirmed to me that I had selected the most suitable form of research methodology for my work in progress.

Owens (2016, p. 144) asserts that using narrative enquiry (in this form) as the research methodology when intending to write historical fiction 'allows the reader a degree of textual reflexivity that generates meanings greater than the sum of the parts' and that the work provides an individual experience for the reader, as it affects their understandings, perceptions, and feelings. I hoped this

would be one result of the project, as I would like readers to consider elements of convict life beyond stereotyped images.

Actually, the work is written within the constructivist worldview, which defines reality as socially constructed or created through social practices, interaction, and experiences (Creswell 2007). Elkind (2004) agrees that constructivism accepts reality as a construct of the human mind, produced through people's interaction with their experiences in the real world and so, reality is perceived to be subjective. Therefore, all constructed meanings represent the reality seen through William Coombe's eyes and his view would be markedly different from that of Judge Baron Gurney, who sentenced him to transportation, and from the guards and overseers on the hulk, soldiers on the convict ship, or the superintendent at the property to which he was assigned in New South Wales. As constructivism disputes the idea that there is a single methodology to generate knowledge, writing William Coombe's story in the form of a speculative biography and not as any other established form of literary vehicle also demonstrates the constructivist worldview.

I felt confident that I could produce a work of historical and cultural value if I traced William Coombe's life from farm labourer in England to felon in Australia, and then reconstructed events of his life following his release from convict servitude. My research had revealed that at the time of his arrival in Brisbane less than four hundred people were living on the south bank of the Brisbane River, so he lived there in the very early days of settlement of Queensland's capital city. Given the historical period in which he lived, I thought his story could be made deeply interesting, and I wondered what else I might discover in the course of tracing his life. I also was aware that I needed to produce a work that examiners and peers would judge worthy of publication (Arnold 2005).

A speculative biography overcomes the limitation of primary data, which conveys little of a person's life and nothing about their inner life (Frost & Maxwell-Stewart 2001). For example, the protagonist's attitudes, emotions, hopes and dreams could be described as accurately and vividly as imagination would permit in conjunction with describing known events surrounding his crime and trial. Although lacking the degree of authenticity provided by a first-hand account, a speculative biography need not lack authenticity, as I intended to locate as much primary data as possible in the course of preparing the story. Flesh could be made to grow over the bare bones of historical details by employing a 'subtle mix of memoir, history and speculation' (Grenville 2006b, p. 147).

Sarricks (1999) asserted that for a work of historical fiction to be successful, the historical details must be accurate, characters must be authentic, the storyline should be recognisable, and the pace should unfold in a leisurely manner but in such a way that keeps readers interested. Knight (2017) states that a book must be energetically paced, and the reader should not become bogged down in too much detail in the wrong places. Accordingly, I deleted tangential historical details that were not strongly related to the events happening at that point in the story. The narrative has a recognisable storyline as the biography of a person's life.

The factual foundations of the work were not compromised because I based speculation on known historical details, which imparted richness and life to the narrative due to the authenticity that this methodology would produce. I emphatically disagree with the strong but myopic view expressed by Gardiner (2015) that authenticity is a myth and simply an expected form of the genre. She further seeks to refute the 'idea that fiction can somehow capture the actual experience and voice of people in the past. It's nonsense' (p. 2). I strongly contend that my speculative biography of William Coombe adequately captures his actual experiences as accurately as possible and brings richness to his life, the time he lived in, and its portrayal throughout the narrative.

As for writing the story, I decided that writing it in the first person would be a difficult method to sustain. I considered that I did not have enough knowledge of the language used in that period and would need to know the variations in the vernacular used by the different classes in society for the work to maintain its integrity. I had read the historical novel *The Secret River* and remembered thinking whether passages in that work in which the characters spoke reflected accurately the vernacular of the times or not. I therefore discarded that alternative as being too difficult to sustain.

British convicts would have spoken in a variety of English accents, depending on where they had lived. Eriksson (2018) claims that the Australian accent developed as the different dialects merged and assimilated, a process called dialect levelling, in which the unique characteristics of the various accents were slowly lost. Moore (2012) asserts that the major features of the accent that was developed, called General Australian, were established by the 1830s and continued to be spoken by the majority of Australians. Therefore, it seemed that this accent would be the most suitable to use for the common man, such as convict labourers. For characters who enjoyed a higher social standing, such as the clerk at the Muswellbrook Court House (p. 84), the tone and vernacular differed to the degree that would be expected of a more highly educated person. As General Australian's homogeneity is the

most marked feature of the Australian accent (Australian English 2020), the protagonist's relocation from the Hunter Valley to Moreton Bay would not present any linguistic barriers.

I read Judith Wright's book *The Generations of Men* (1966), which detailed her family history and which was written in the third person narrative form. I considered that I could write in this manner more comfortably, as the third person narrator outside of the story, yet using dialogue to add depth to the characters' personalities. Therefore, I decided to construct the story in the third person omniscient narrative mode. Writing in this mode would enable me to capture the protagonist's, and other characters', perspectives and emotions.

I titled the project *From Felon to Freeman: A Convict's Reclaimed Life*. I made this decision after reading an article published in *The Queenslander*, which related events of Brisbane's earliest beginnings. The author set April 1839 as the turning point for Moreton Bay from that of a convict settlement to a free colony. He stated, 'It was in May that the heavy cloud which had hovered over the Settlement for sixteen years lifted and revealed to view not the exclusive haunt of the felon, but a home destined for the freeman' (Knight 1892, par. 21). He said this because in April 1839 all criminals, except those who the authorities considered necessary to remain and assist in surveying and other government work, were removed.

The development of Brisbane from 'the exclusive haunt of the felon' to 'a home destined for the freeman' (Knight 1892, par. 21) at that large-scale level mirrored William Coombe's experience at a personal level within that steadily transforming society following his arrival there seven years later in 1846. In fact, the *Moreton Bay Courier* (1860, 21 February, p. 2) reveals that convicts were still employed on public works around Brisbane in 1860, when William Coombe's children were growing up there. I considered that the development of Brisbane and William Coombe's re-integration into its evolving society occupied parallel journeys at a corporate and individual level respectively, and that is why I chose that title for the project.

## Chapter 4 Findings

### 4.1 Results and observations

The completed speculative biography provides the story of my protagonist's adult life, resurrected from the ashes of convictism to a successful and respected member of the community. During the journey, I became much more aware of that era of Australian history and how people lived during that time. In the process of constructing the biography I learnt more about the art of writing than I had previously known. The project also afforded the opportunity to gain greater expertise in researching, particularly in sleuthing through many different types of information sources as a detective would. Then after gathering evidence, the mental machinations that needed to take place in order to verify, classify, and then use the facts as effectively as possible and mentally construct characters' inner lives and place myself in the plot as an unseen observer, as it were. I had not previously appreciated the time it took to work through this stage of the writing process.

Once the records had yielded the details of William Coombe's English family, the official fragments hinted at a very sad story for his wife and children left behind to fend for themselves. I found that he and his family were not domiciled in South Tawton, where he was born, but had spent most of their lives in two other nearby villages. He married at Winkleigh and was working at Broadnymmet, near North Tawton, when the crime was committed. This discovery resulted in my undergoing a paradigm shift in relation to the framework of his pre-penal life that I had mentally developed. I had supposed that he had lived all his life at South Tawton, as people rarely travelled far from home in those days, unless they entered the military. These new facts required adjustments to be made to parts of the artefact that had already been written in order to maintain veracity of the narrative. As Barnes (2009, p. 90) stated, 'How do we seize the past? How do we seize the foreign past? We read, we learn, we ask, we remember, we are humble; and then a casual detail shifts everything.'

As well as research into primary and secondary sources informing the artefact, the amount of research I carried out on literary genres, particularly in relation to historical novels, biographies, and speculative biographies, was very valuable in furthering my understanding of these genres and sub-genre respectively, and their development over time. This research in particular did much in forming the exegesis, which in turn informed the writing of the artefact. Although I have always been an avid reader, I now have a much greater respect for authors and appreciation for what they encounter as obstacles to their progress. My understanding in relation to the elevated level of perseverance

required to bring a book to completion has been enhanced considerably as a result of completing the project.

Adding to the store of convict literature regarding convicts' post-penal lives, particularly the protagonist's in colonial Brisbane, and which literary vehicle would be the most suitable to utilise to tell his story, became the major research question to which several other research questions were attached (see Section 1.2). These are restated below and responses to each are provided.

Responses to the questions posed by the project are discussed in the following pages.

- 1) How and why has the speculative biography sub-genre been used to write the past, and could it be utilised successfully to explore William Coombe's life in colonial Queensland after his release from servitude?

Frost & Maxwell-Stewart (2001) state that a speculative biography overcomes the limitation of primary data and using this sub-genre as the vehicle by which to tell William Coombe's life story enabled his attitudes, emotions, hopes and dreams to be described as accurately and vividly as imagination would permit. The speculative component served to augment the recorded events concerning his life. Although lacking the degree of authenticity provided by a first-hand account, this speculative biography attempted to preserve authenticity, as all available primary data was painstakingly located through meticulous research and carefully evaluated, supplemented where necessary by historically-accurate considered speculation.

Speculative biography, informed by Practice-led research and the iterative cycle of reflection and reflexivity, comprised an integral process in informing the artefact. Information gained in interrogating the sub-genre was applied in constructing the artefact, and the completed project demonstrated that speculative biography could be used as an appropriate literary vehicle to relate William Coombe's life story. The project confirmed that the sub-genre would be suitable to use for future works of this nature.

This speculative biography makes a contribution to knowledge of Australian convict history by exploring William Coombe's life after his release from servitude. It also makes a meaningful contribution to the store of early Australian, and particularly Queensland's, history, by recreating his life story during the pivotal period of Queensland's birth as a state. The narrative provides conclusive

evidence that the social construct of 'the stain' could be expunged from ex-convicts' and their descendants' lives by the example of William Coombe's successful re-integration into society. The project also endeavoured to offer a more realistic characterisation of convict life than is regularly portrayed in contemporary films and in novels such as Clarke's *His Natural Life*. It also tried to reach the heart of the protagonist's being by speculatively creating his thoughts and the motivation for his decisions and actions through the use of a variety of literary techniques.

2) How and why does the creative artefact conform and sometimes differ to elements of a speculative biography?

The creative artefact conforms closely to elements of the sub-genre, in that as much evidence as possible was gathered on the biography subject's life, examined for its veracity and carefully converted into facts. I mentally perceived the facts as stepping stones crossing a river that represented the story. In chronological sequence, some are spaced further apart than others. Therefore, to ensure continuity of the story, I had to construct speculative bridges in order to link the facts together to continue the writing process. Similar mental imagery has been used by other speculative biographers, such as Brock (1999, quoted in Brien 2015, p. 12) who wrote that 'the facts formed a line of buoys in the sea of my own imagination'. Lindsey (2018, p. 3) referred to 'archival gaps', which 'are like stepping stones upon which we leap from one firm fact to the next'. So construction of the creative artefact conformed closely to the methodology employed by other speculative biographers.

If evidence of a person's life is scanty, such as the early years of the aviator Millicent Bryant, encountered by James Vicars (2019), the amount of reasoned speculation will naturally need to be greater than in a biography for which considerable evidence is available. I had gathered a reasonable amount of evidence on William Coombe's pre-penal, penal, and post-penal life and I was comfortable with the available facts. In considering at what point along the historical fact-speculative spectrum I wanted to position the speculative biography, I decided to position it on the historical side of the midway point of the spectrum. That is, I resolved that the story would be as historically accurate as possible, yet not have the historical information overwhelm the character. I hope I achieved that desire sufficiently well, but the work may differ to other speculative biographies in perhaps having a greater historical component than some similar works.

Nevertheless, informed, well-considered speculation was used where necessary and I hope that the 'speculative bridges' have been constructed sufficiently well to bring the protagonist 'to life' by imbuing him with a personality and having him engage with other characters in authentic situations which occurred or could have occurred during his life. In attempting to create a happy marriage between the 'speculative' and the 'biography', the bridges were constructed of facts, which while not concerning the protagonist personally, are historical stepping stones used in other rivers and therefore resonate well within the era in which the story is set.

3) What key fictional and historical techniques do authors typically use when mobilising a speculative biography to relate someone's life story?

Several techniques that authors use in storytelling were utilised during construction of the artefact. One technique was scene setting and the story contained multiple settings in England and in Australia, as detailed on page 220. Time was another setting, as was the changing social milieu throughout the story. The births and deaths of children, other family issues, and his life as he aged also affected the setting. Plot developments and character developments corresponded to changes in the setting (LitCharts n.d.).

Another storytelling technique employed was characterisation, explained in detail in Section 3.1. A recurring aspect of his character was his determination to own his own land but this perhaps mercenary aspect of his character was offset by his fatherly heart which became exposed at the death of his sons (pp. 155-6 & 158). His tenderness towards his wife became apparent also at these times. Compression was another technique used, by which I attempted to show the reader what was happening rather than tell them, thereby endeavouring to create greater audience involvement in the story (Gilmore 2013). An example from the artefact is, 'Nobody had seen him pass; their doors were closed and their fires were warm' (p. 10).

Creation of dialogue is another technique used that enables relationships to become developed more fully, which helped to explain and characterise how the protagonist felt about certain issues and about how his relationships with others were managed as well. I also employed the technique of accretion, used by authors to create further incidents and dialogue around actual events that were sparsely recorded, or in places where the mundane aspects of daily life would be enriched by some excitement being injected into the story. Also, sensory experiences were evoked for the reader by

having the protagonist horse riding, surviving a close encounter with a poisonous snake, saving a workmate from drowning and emerging from a near-drowning incident himself (Vicars 2019).

In 2013 I purchased two courses that I considered would assist in developing my writing skills. One course was titled *Writing Creative Nonfiction* (Mazzeo 2012) and the other *Building Great Sentences: Exploring the Writer's Craft* (Landon 2008). The information in these courses proved invaluable for the improvement of my writing. The contents of Mazzeo's course confirmed to me that the third person omniscient mode was the most appropriate narrative perspective to adopt for the artefact. Landon's course encouraged me to become more adventurous with sentence construction and I developed an awareness of where opportunities might exist in the narrative where I could use cumulative syntax to create suspense. A paragraph on page 77 provided such an opportunity: 'As they departed, with two shepherds riding in front of the mob, one each side, and one at the back accompanied by another driving the mess wagon, and dogs barking, men shouting, sheep bleating, and a growing cloud of dust, William and other farm workers gave them a loud hurrah, waving their hats in the air.' Another usage of this technique is on page 92, and has previously been provided as an example on page 218.

Several historical techniques that authors typically use when mobilising a speculative biography to relate someone's life story were utilised. Initially, as much primary data that could be located was retrieved and, when information proved to be inconclusive and could not be verified by normal means, triangulation was employed, by which associated historical details about a particular event are grouped together to construct a balanced fabric of verified facts (Frost & Maxwell-Stewart 2001). This technique was used to locate the protagonist's English family, explained on the following page. The gathering of secondary data consisted of reading literature relating to the era in which the protagonist lived, which led to the use of historically-accurate considered speculation. This technique has been used by Kate Grenville (2006b), who stated that she utilised a 'subtle mix of memoir, history and speculation' to add flesh to the bare bones of historical details (p. 147).

Sarricks (1999) asserted that for a work of historical fiction to be successful, the historical details must be accurate, characters must be authentic, the storyline should be recognisable, and the pace should unfold in a leisurely manner but in such a way that keeps readers interested. How my speculative biography meets these conditions has been detailed on page 229. When constructing speculative parts of the story, I sometimes applied elements of personal narrative by using events that had occurred in either my own life or in the lives of family members. Such personal events

included the sensory experiences previously mentioned. Events in the lives of family members included the death of the protagonist's wife Johannah in Chapter 12.

4) What specific challenges and obligations were encountered during the project?

Historical facts were constructed based upon the veracity of the evidence. However, I occasionally found in official documents such as birth, death, and marriage certificates that names were misspelt, such as Coomb; Coombe (the correct spelling); and Coombes (used more widely in later years in Australia). The protagonist's wife's name was often spelt either Johanna or Johannah. In such cases, I used consistent spelling throughout and relied upon the earliest and most consistent form of spelling as the correct version.

I originally was unaware that William had remarried after Johannah's death and had lost two infant children in the new marriage. I encountered a considerable amount of frustration in positively locating his English family. The reason was because both his first and family names are quite common and the birth and marriage records indicated that he was one of four possible William Coombes who were married and who lived in that area of Devon at that time. This challenge was finally resolved by recourse to the convict records, which established his correct family by listing the number and sex of his children, of which only one family in the Devon records had that combination in their children. This was an example of using triangulation, defined as 'the inter-weaving and juxtaposition of historical details into a patterned narrative chorus of verified facts' (Frost & Maxwell-Stewart 2001, p. 105). This technique is often assisted where necessary by historically-accurate considered speculation. The discovery of new knowledge necessitated rewriting parts of the artefact in order to maintain veracity with the historical facts, which is detailed on page 231.

As a direct descendant of the protagonist, during the course of the project I felt keenly an obligation to construct as accurate an account of his life as possible, and to form realistic personalities of the protagonist and other characters. Therefore, as well as locating primary data concerning his life, I read books, articles, and period newspapers which provided details of the prevailing socio-cultural conditions, politics, law, economic situation, and attitudes during that period of history in both England and Australia. I searched digitised copies of the *Moreton Bay Courier* in Trove over a thirty-year period in an effort to locate every mention of his name in the newspaper, from his arrival in Brisbane to his death. When all known facts had been assembled in chronological order the facts

were then linked together with speculative, but realistic, possibilities in order to lend continuity to the narrative.

- 5) What kind of knowledge gained through the processes of reflection and reflexivity during the writing of the artefact and exegesis argues for the benefits of speculative biography for future projects?

Reflexivity is defined as 'an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process' and this process involves 'reflection upon what is happening in terms of one's own values and interests' (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2008, p. 1). Writing the story in the speculative biography sub-genre required the accumulation of knowledge of literary techniques developed by writers of historical fiction, and other techniques that I developed as ways of giving the protagonist and other characters greater life. An iterative cycle of reflection upon the material I had written and how the knowledge of fictional writing techniques could be used to achieve greater effect became an integral process in informing the artefact and of making changes to sections already completed.

As well as applying the knowledge gained of fictional writing techniques by incorporating such techniques in crafting the story, the manner in which reflection and reflexivity were informing the artefact and exegesis was impacted by the changing and increasing understanding that was developing when grappling with the theoretical definitions and parameters of the speculative biography sub-genre and its relationship with the broader genre of biography and the partial overlap with the historical novel genre. The iterative process of using reflexivity and reflection to refine elements of the writing process also allows readers a degree of textual reflexivity that enhances their individual experience, as it affects their understandings, perceptions, and feelings (Owens 2016).

Writing in the third person omniscient mode proved very useful, as it enabled me to determine the characters' motivations, then create their behaviour, and also to inform readers of the future state of a character or an area: for example, that Quart Pot Creek was to become the future site of the town of Stanthorpe (Chapter 10). Various writing techniques were researched and used, including backstory, in order to provide context in various situations; cumulative syntax to build scenario; imagery, to assist the reader to better imagine specific scenes; parallelism, which helps to make an idea clear and easy to remember, and also shows that each repeated structure is of equal

importance; scene setting, which creates a sense of place and time in which the action of a story occurs; characterisation, creating a description of the distinctive nature or features of someone; compression, to write more tightly and crisply; and accretion, in which I added situations to the story in order to build more life and excitement.

Anaphora, which involves repetition of the first part of a sentence to achieve a heightened effect was another technique utilised, as was simile, metaphor, and alliteration. Asyndeton, a technique that omits conjunctions in a series of words, phrases or clauses, was used to create a more concise, dramatic effect and hyperbole, where extreme exaggeration is used to emphasise a point, was also used occasionally. Personification, a technique in which something is given human attributes, was also used in constructing the artefact. Dialogue was made more effective by using action beats, which add more detail and therefore more meaning to a conversation and helped me to 'show' rather than 'tell' parts of the story. Further explanation of these techniques, with examples from the artefact, are provided in Section 3.1.

Most of the techniques used in the narrative are used regularly by writers of speculative biographies, historical novels, and other fictional works. I used my own attitudes and behaviour as a guide by which to measure the protagonist's and other characters' responses in different situations (discussed on pps. 200 & 202). This made it easier for me to understand the rationale for characters' decisions, problem solving, general attitude to others and to life in general. I then incorporated my understanding of these created elements of character into the story. The 'mirror' technique explained in Section 3.1, that I developed to help describe characters' facial expressions and body language in particular situations in order to 'show' rather than 'tell', proved useful in creating the artefact. Drawing on true life experiences that had occurred in other contexts was an effective way to create speculative events by transposing these events into a different context in the artefact in which their occurrence was sufficiently realistic to carry the story.

Practice-led research and the iterative cycle of reflection and reflexivity comprised an integral process in constructing the artefact. Information gained in interrogating the sub-genre and researching writing techniques were applied in creating the artefact, and the completed project demonstrated that speculative biography could be used as an appropriate literary vehicle to relate William Coombe's life story. Therefore, the knowledge gained during the process of successfully completing this project indicates that such knowledge would definitely be of benefit if using the speculative biography sub-genre for future projects of this nature.

## 4.2 Learning gained and its possible application

It is conventionally accepted that the exegesis is a conjoined text accompanying the artefact and serves the purpose of proving that while the artefact is a work of art, the exegesis is art as knowledge and therefore satisfies that part of the doctoral tradition (Webb & Melrose 2013). Although the artefact is the creative component of the dual texts and the exegesis is theorised and empirically based (Owens 2016), exegeses are also being presented in very creative ways (Krauth 2011). The exegesis should answer questions in relation to the artefact, such as assumptions underpinning the research, intentions, data sources and analytical processes (Lal, Suto & Unger 2012).

Jackson and Marshall (n.d.) assert that the role of the exegesis is to provide a comprehensive explanation of the purpose of the project and to detail the literary techniques and decisions that were made during the creation of the artefact. The exegesis has addressed the above criteria. Andersson and Beveridge (2007) of Edith Cowan University instructed research students to critically examine their creative product in the light of contemporary theory and practice and suggested that writers may explore the influences, ideas, decisions, materials, technologies, events and theories which inspire, inform, restrain or facilitate the process and production of their work. They state also that both a reflective and reflexive voice should be used when writing an exegesis.

My exegesis meets these criteria, as reflection on genres and methodologies, careful thought and evaluation as to which would be the most suitable genre to adopt in writing the narrative and the usefulness or otherwise of methods used in the writing process were eventually arrived at and continued to inform the progress of the work. Reflection led to reflexivity, examples of which occurred when researching about speculative biography during construction of both the creative artefact and the critical exegesis. How each was informing the other was impacted by the changing and increased understanding that developed when grappling with the theoretical definitions and parameters of the speculative biography sub-genre and its relationship with the broader genre of biography and a certain degree of overlap with the historical novel genre.

I was satisfied that the exegesis was generally addressing the matters stated by the aforementioned authors and that my observations were written in a reflective and reflexive voice, depending on the particular situation. I was aware that some parts consisted mainly of what Bourke and Neilsen (2004) refer to as 'first order journal work', comprising an informal and anecdotal form of journal work, and there were occasions throughout the exegesis where I employed this type of discourse. However,

my usage of this discourse was deliberate as I considered that it was the best method by which to provide the background to, and to relate the beginning of, the writing project. On other occasions throughout the exegesis I judiciously utilised this discourse to create a linkage when shifting to 'second order journal work', a more formalised type of journal writing that is self-conscious, evaluative and critical on different aspects or topics (Bourke & Neilsen 2004), as I considered that it helped to provide context that carried the material comfortably from one train of thought on to the next subject.

The critical exegesis positioned the original creative work as a speculative biography, a sub-genre of biography, specifically with those stories that seek to re-create the convict experience in early Australia. In so doing, the exegesis addressed questions of the meaning of authenticity in speculative biography as well as the research and writing processes that I engaged in while creating an original story based upon historical fact, which explored the life of a convict during his servitude and following his release. I discovered that little is known of individual convicts' lives. Therefore, the critical exegesis and the narrative recorded the systematic process of discovery as I journeyed into the dimly lit recesses of historical records.

The critical exegesis also related the process of turning historical evidence into facts and recounted the questions that confronted me as I sorted through incomplete information, and the rationale for decisions I made during the process of writing the artefact. The exegesis also contained my reflections upon the process of writing, which assisted to situate my thoughts and ideas within relevant scholarly literature as I began to write William Coombe's story, and as I reflected upon the books I examined during the literature review process. It also explored the various techniques used by fictional and historical writers, techniques which I utilised in endeavouring to craft the fraught marriage between the 'speculative' and the 'biography'. The exegesis, written mainly concurrently with the artefact, served as a foundation by which to guide its development. The processes involved in completing this project and the learning I have gained have furnished useful experiences in preparation for me to engage in future works of this nature.

### **4.3 Personal reflections**

Although there was a considerable amount of work involved in rewriting the narrative from its original incarnation as an historical novel to a speculative biography I am pleased with the finished work. The story exudes much more life in its current mode than previously and I have grown closer

to the protagonist and other actors in the process of developing their characters, crafting their personalities, fashioning their behaviours and creating their dialogue. I have also learnt about the various writing techniques employed by fiction writers and enjoyed finding places in the narrative in which the different techniques could be used.

Writing the final chapter produced a paradox, in that I called the chapter *Life and Death* and although a new life did unfold following a family tragedy, the chapter ended by detailing the deterioration of the protagonist's life culminating in his death. Historical records conveyed sad stories of the loss of children, a relatively common phenomenon in those days. I found it emotionally draining to write of the loss of two sons, each only one year old and about two years apart, as I lost three children (before birth) and writing about the protagonist's loss of children triggered an emotional response that indicated to me that I hadn't yet been fully healed of those losses. I was using emotional empathy here to re-create William's utter grief, and this approach can become a valid part of extending the potential of speculative biography writing that develops the inner life of characters by getting much closer to them.

It was a very sobering and muted experience to write those passages, as memories returned to the surface that had been buried in the back of my mind for many years. I had shared their tragedy, which enabled me to write, 'He looked upon the now calm and peaceful but lifeless face of his son, the son he would never see grow up, the son who would never help him on the farm, the son he would never teach about the soil, the son he would never show how to graft a fruit tree or prune it, the son he would never see grow into a strong and confident young man. Wracked by sobs, he covered Willie's face with the blanket and tenderly wrapped his body in it.'

## **Chapter 5 Conclusion**

### **5.1 Summary of the project**

The research project comprised a speculative biography accompanied by a critical exegesis. The artefact related the story of William Coombe, an English convict transported to Australia in 1835. Applying a chronological timeline, the narrative re-created his life experiences prior to committing his crime and then traced his journey through the legal, prison, and transportation systems and his time in penal servitude. It related his gradual emergence from convict life via obtaining a Ticket-of-Leave, then a Conditional Pardon. Following his freedom, his reclaimed life as a respected member of the South Brisbane community as a renowned vegetable grower is recounted. His family life, comprising two subsequent marriages and several children is narrated, culminating in his death. The sub-genre of speculative biography was interrogated and selected as the most suitable literary vehicle by which to tell his story.

### **5.2 This project's contribution to the field and its significance**

The artefact provided insights into aspects of daily life as it was in colonial New South Wales and Queensland, and will add to the store of early Australian, and particularly Queensland's, history as it intersected the protagonist's life, which spanned a time of extensive social change in both rural England and colonial Australia. The project will help to address the acknowledged lacuna in the existent research by relating his re-integration into society as it has woven together the elements comprising his revived life – work, family, social and political activity – with the prevailing social, cultural and political conditions during the early days of settlement in the Hunter Valley and particularly in Brisbane. The speculative account of William Coombe's life will also help to dispel the stereotyped images Australians generally have about the convict era by the re-creation of the protagonist's experiences through the vicissitudes of his life. Finally, the project makes a strong case that a biography is a valid form of creative writing as I have imagined beyond the facts.

Regarding the exegesis, while several established fictional writing techniques were utilised in creating the artefact, there were a few techniques that I applied in the speculative biography sub-genre that perhaps may be original. It has been known that human nature does not basically change over time so is therefore reasonably predictable regardless of the time period in which the narrative is set (Stow 1979, quoted in Hergenhan 1993, p. 139). Therefore, when speculating on characters'

motivation and behaviour in particular situations, I used my own attitudes and behaviour as a benchmark against which to measure the protagonist's and other characters' responses in different situations (discussed on pps. 200 & 202).

I used another technique that I had not read in any of the literature when needing to describe characters' facial expressions and body language. I transported myself mentally into the role of the character, immersing myself in the story at that particular point and stood before a mirror, examining my facial expressions and bodily stance. From that exercise, I then described the character's facial expressions and body language in the narrative by showing instead of telling (explained on p. 222). When creating speculative elements in the narrative, particularly when using the accretion technique, I drew on true life experiences that had occurred in other contexts. Therefore, real life events merely needed to be transposed into a different context in which their occurrence was sufficiently realistic to carry the story (explained on p. 216). These techniques discussed above may be useful for other writers to utilise when describing characters' reactions in certain situations and when creating fictional incidents in speculative biographies or historical novels, and arguably make a contribution to the crafting of speculative biographies.

In attempting to create a harmonious relationship between the 'speculative' and the 'biography' and to maintain continuity of the narrative, I constructed 'speculative bridges' based on historical facts. Although these facts did not concern the protagonist personally, they serve the purposes of linking the facts and maintaining the momentum of the story, and resonate well within the era in which the story is set. Although not a new contribution to the field, this method, used by other authors of speculative biographies, confirms the usefulness of the method when writing in this sub-genre.

Some of the challenges and obstacles that I encountered in the process of conducting research may help other authors when conducting primary research. I have related my approach to solving issues such as lack of consistency in names in official documents, and people who had the same names and who lived in the same time period as the subject being researched (detailed on p. 236). The necessity of maintaining an iterative cycle of reflection and reflexive action common in Practice-led research, particularly when revising sections of the artefact when hitherto undiscovered facts are located, is discussed and other authors can learn from such experiences.

The exegesis outlined my motivation for researching this topic and the literature review identified a gap in the literature that the artefact assists to address, namely, details of the lives of convicts after

they exited the system. Did the protagonist have the social stigma of 'the stain' expunged and re-integrate successfully into society? The artefact proclaims a resounding 'Yes'! The exegesis also explored the speculative biography sub-genre, discussed the suitability of locating the work as a speculative biography, and a methodology chapter explored the suitability of the selected approach to researching and writing the artefact. A selected survey of historical autobiographies, biographies and novels is included also.

The project delivered the results I had set out to attain; to write a speculative biography of William Coombe's life journey 'From Felon to Freeman'. A secondary result is to relate life in that era as accurately as possible. In my own journey, I evolved into a more competent researcher and writer and in the process learned much more about Australian colonial history than I had known previously.

### **5.3 Areas for fruitful future research**

As the completed project confirmed that a speculative biography was a suitable literary vehicle to use in the writing of past lives, it follows that writing the stories of particular convict's lives, or the life of any historical figure, would be a fruitful area in which to engage in future research by utilising this sub-genre. For example, as a snippet on page 80 in the artefact, the Parker brothers' (one of whom worked with the protagonist in the Hunter Valley) story would be interesting to pursue. There were tens of thousands of convicts so there will be many untold stories that would be worthwhile researching and writing. But not only convicts, the lives of other historical figures – drovers, miners, aboriginal leaders, politicians, explorers, women living in the patriarchal society of their day, and many other lives – would prove stimulating projects to engage in. All such stories would add threads to the historical fabric of our nation.

A future project I am planning is to research the life of a little known but historically important Australian bushranger and Practice-led research methodology may be the most suitable approach to use, as it informs the researcher concerning the continuing process of researching the topic and gathering relevant data. Depending on the amount and quality of the primary research that will be discovered, I will consider whether writing the work as a speculative biography will be the most suitable literary vehicle to use. Writing in the third person omniscient mode affords the writer the ability to know all the relevant knowledge concerning the characters' thoughts, motivations, attitudes and behaviours. Writing in this mode would enhance the development of personalities and therefore assist in the creation of authentic dialogue. Many life stories could utilise the methodology

and fictional techniques that have been used in writing this speculative biography on the life of William Coombe.

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