

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2021

2117 I Now Pronounce You Man and Wife

by Mandy Gwan

I now pronounce you Man and “Wife”.

Genealogical research inevitably uncovers many surprises. What often makes these discoveries so surprising is that they were never intended to be unearthed by future generations in the first place. Significant efforts can be made to hide a scandal: the black sheep of the family is disowned, or certain events are simply never discussed - all in an attempt to eradicate a past shame from a family's history and preserve its pride. However, with the development of the digital age, it is easier than ever before to uncover documentation that shines a light on these family secrets and leads to some unexpected, perhaps even shocking, research findings. While researching the life of Charles George Gwan, one such finding was revealed.

Having been under the impression that his marriage to Frances Emma Smedley was his first and only marriage, a search on Trove provided evidence to the contrary. George – as he was always known – married Frances on 20 January 1940 at his and his parents' residence in Erskineville, Sydney. They were married under Anglican rites; he was forty-two and would turn forty-three in a matter of days, and Frances was twenty-three.¹ Hoping to find an engagement or marriage notice in a newspaper, a search of “Charles George Gwan” was undertaken. Instead, a series of articles pertaining to the divorce of George and a woman by the name of Juaneta Irene Rossa Buckley appeared in the search results.²

It might be expected that unearthing a marriage that had never been hinted at in family folklore was a relatively minor research surprise – multiple marriages are not uncommon - but on reading these articles, the reason for its secrecy became more evident.

At the age of twenty-eight, George married Juaneta (aged twenty-one) on 25 February 1925.³ Immediately after the Methodist ceremony, Juaneta suggested that she should reside with her friends for a month and George should return to his parents' home, promising him they would look for their future home together after the month had passed. However, Juaneta did not fulfil her promise and despite George's repeated attempts, she refused to live with him. She claimed the marriage had been a mistake and should never have happened.⁴

In a final attempt to have his marriage presume some semblance of normality, in May 1927 George took the matter to court. News of his unusual circumstance was not confined to Sydney, but was also reported in far-flung country towns. According to a report on the case in the *Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser*, George petitioned for the

¹ Marriage certificate of Charles George Gwan and Frances Emma Smedley, 1940, Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, New South Wales, 6048/1940.

² Spelling variations between 'Juanita' and 'Juaneta' exist in the records. For consistency 'Juaneta' is used here due to multiple historical records recording her name as the abbreviated pet-name 'Neta'.

³ Marriage certificate of Charles Givan [sic] and Juaneta I. R. Buckley, 1925, Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, New South Wales, 585/1925.

⁴ 'They were Married Two Years but Never Lived Together; Curious Divorce Story', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 May 1927, p. 10, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article245746587>; 'Marriage Never Consummated', *North West Champion*, 6 June 1927, p. 6, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article185526169>; 'Marriage Never Consummated', *Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser*, 27 May 1927, p. 2, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news->

restitution of conjugal rites. The judge was aghast and ordered Juaneta to return to her husband.⁵ She defied the court's order and refused to live with her husband.⁶

The reason behind Juaneta's decision to marry George and then refuse to be his wife has not been unearthed in any historical documents nor discussed amongst George's descendants. It could be assumed from the initial newspaper coverage of the debacle that George himself was never made aware of her thinking. When questioned by the judge in the matter of seeking restitution of conjugal rites, George was asked that specific question and admitted he had no answer.⁷

Perhaps his bride's hesitancy – fear, even – was racially or politically motivated. George was the son of George Wing Lee Gwan and Catherine Lum Tin. George senior had migrated to Australia in the early 1870s from Canton, China; Catherine was the half-Chinese daughter of Lum Tin (also a migrant from Canton) and his wife of English-Irish descent, Lavinia Hampton.⁸

The refusal of his wife to make a life with him eventually drove George to file for divorce and on 6 February 1930 – his thirty-third birthday – he was once again a free man.⁹ Or so he thought. Further research into Juaneta Buckley-Gwan's fate after her divorce from George revealed another bizarre and unexpected tale.

Although it would be another ten years before George remarried, the same year her divorce from George was final, Juaneta married Norman Lang, registering her maiden name as Buckley, not Gwan.¹⁰ The couple had homes in various Sydney suburbs and lived for a time in the Blue Mountains, but eventually came to reside at 44A Oatley Avenue in the southern Sydney suburb of Oatley – three houses away from George and his new bride, Frances, who were living at number 36. The earliest record discovered of the Langs living in Oatley is the electoral roll of 1943.¹¹ George and Frances Gwan moved to their Oatley home sometime between their marriage in 1940 and the death of George's father at the residence in 1942.¹²

⁵ 'Married but a Bachelor: Peculiar Legal Puzzle', *Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser*, 24 May 1927, p. 3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article192070391>.

⁶ 'In Divorce: Gwan vs Gwan', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 December 1928, p8, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16517414>.

⁷ 'Married but a Bachelor: Peculiar Legal Puzzle'.

⁸ Birth certificate of Charles George Yee Hing Gwan, 1897, Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, New South Wales, 1427/1897; Birth certificate of Catherine Lum Tin, 1875, Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, New South Wales, 9628/1876; Baptism of Lavinia Hampton, 8 June 1851, St Luke's Parish Register, Liverpool, County of Cumberland, New South Wales, p. 37, Ancestry.com; Death certificate of Lum Tin, 1928, Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, New South Wales, 9284/1928.

⁹ 'In the Courts Today', *Daily Pictorial*, 6 February 1930, p. 10, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article246112559>; Divorce papers for Charles George Gwan and Juanita Irene Rossa Gwan, 7 February 1930, NRS-13495-7-[13/13514]-863/1928, Divorce and matrimonial cause case papers, State Archives and Records, New South Wales.

¹⁰ Marriage certificate for Norman H. Lang and Neta I.R. Buckley, 1930, Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, New South Wales, 4826/1930.

¹¹ Australia, Electoral Rolls, 1903-1980, for Norman Harold Lang, Neta Irene Rossa Lang, Frances Emma Gwan, Charles George Gwan, Ancestry.com.

¹² Death notice of George Gwan, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July 1942, p. 10, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news->

Whether the Langs knew prior to their move to Oatley that they would be living in such close proximity to the Gwans will probably never be known. However, both couples remained at their Oatley Avenue addresses in excess of twenty years, with the Langs mysteriously moving to the nearby suburb of Kingsgrove for approximately five years and then returning to 44A Oatley Avenue in 1954.¹³ There must have been a degree of tolerance, or even forgiveness, between George and Juaneta for the Langs to willingly return to Oatley Avenue and remain at that address until Juaneta's death in 1964.¹⁴

George passed away on 20 February 1960 in his Oatley home, leaving his forty-three year old widow to raise their two teenaged sons and infant daughter.¹⁵ Although he effectively lost five years of his life in a farcical marriage, the twenty years he spent with Frances, who loved him and embraced his Chinese heritage, are presumed to have been worth the wait.

An unexpected research finding can, while conceivably bringing shock and disbelief, also instil a pride for one's ancestor. The descendants of Charles George Gwan are proud of his tenacity. They are proud of the capacity he displayed to recoup his self-respect and live a happy and meaningful life after a cruel humiliation he never deserved.

¹³ Australia, Electoral Rolls, 1903-1980.

¹⁴ Ibid; Juanita Irene Rossa Lang, Australia Cemetery Index, 1808-2007, Ancestry.com.

¹⁵ Death certificate of Charles George Gwan, 1942, Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, New South Wales, 7086/1942.