

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2021**

**2122 Fifteen Words**

**By Sarah Hewitt**

## Fifteen words...

Fifteen words started it all. Fifteen words on an Administration which I had purchased in my youthful naïveté. Fifteen which words said:

"The marriage of the said intestate with Fanny Venn having been dissolved by Decree Absolute..."<sup>i</sup>

Fifteen words which lead to the story of a woman who, up until then, was expected to have had a normal upper middle-class life of marriage and children. Fifteen words that were my most unexpected research finding.

Fanny Venn was born Fanny Keeling in 1837 in Tottenham, Middlesex (now London) to John Keeling 1796-1884) and his wife Maria nee Howard (1800-1880). Her father was a "Colonial Produce Broker"<sup>ii</sup> and the family lived an upper middle-class life. This included spending time with her grandmother Ann Keeling (nee Robinson) (1760-1856) at the Keeling home in Broxbourne, Hertfordshire<sup>iii</sup>.

On 7 January 1858 she married William Webb Venn (1838-1896), son of William Webb Venn (1812-1894) and Jane Wilson (1807-1884) at St Mark's Church, Clerkenwell. William was a notary public and worked for the firm established by his grandfather John Venn and Sons. In his spare time, he was a member of the London militia.

The newly-weds lived in Tottenham and then Manor Park Lee, London. Nine months later they welcomed their first daughter Florence Marion (1858-1941). She was followed by a son William Eustace (1861-1922) and a second daughter Ethel Mary (1865-1867).

In 1865 William Frederick Ebbs (c.1836-1880) entered their lives. Ebbs was a surgeon (often used as a catch-all phrase for doctor) and an "intimate friend" of the family as well as their "medical attendant". He occasionally would stay overnight at their home.

On the 20 June 1868, William left the Venn house to inspect his troops. Fanny also left the house saying she was going to visit her sister Marion-Howard Francis (1833-?) in Northampton, some 70 miles away. A few days later William went looking for her. She was not to be found in Northampton, but was traced to Dublin, Ireland in the company of Ebbs. There they had been living as husband and wife for five weeks.

William immediately sued for divorce<sup>iv</sup> citing adultery which has occurred not only at in Dublin but at their home in Manor Park Lee. Meanwhile Fanny and Ebbs decided to leave the country for Australia. Newspapers reported "Mr Venn met them at the docks as they were about to embark and gave Mr. Ebbs a good thrashing"<sup>v</sup>.

William had claimed damages from Ebbs in the divorce case. However, "considering that there was little chance of recovering such, and thinking he had taken his damages out of the co-respondent by the pounding he had given him, the claim was abandoned"<sup>vi</sup>. William was granted a *decree nisi* on 8 May 1869. The *decree absolute* to follow on 16 November 1869.

It is unlikely Fanny and Ebbs spent any time in Australia. Ebbs is found advertising his services in Oamaru, New Zealand in March 1869<sup>vii</sup>. Living together as husband and wife, it is likely that it wasn't long before Fanny got pregnant. This would explain why in early September 1869, they took a trip to Dunedin, over 110km's away to get married<sup>viii</sup>. If there was a pregnancy, no live child was born from it. It is not known how much Fanny knew about the divorce proceedings back in London. The decree absolute was yet to be granted so her marriage to Ebbs was slightly bigamous.

Fanny and Ebbs had a son Charles Frederick Ebbs in July 1870 in Oamaru. In early 1871, they moved north to Wanganui (now Whanganui) where they lived on Victoria Avenue "opposite the English Church"<sup>ix</sup>. There they had a daughter Alice Emily (1872-?). While little is known of her activities, she was a member of the Christ Church Choir<sup>x</sup>.

Two years after arriving in Wanganui, in April 1873, the family returned to Britain on the *Zealandia*. An advertisement to auction their furniture and household items states they are "leaving for home on important business for a few months"<sup>xi</sup>.

They returned to Ireland and lived in Co Waterford. On the death of his youngest brother in 1876, Ebbs inherited some of the family estate - Leabeg at Newtownmountkennedy, Co Wicklow. Ebbs died there in 1880 aged only 44<sup>xii</sup>.

Fanny's father John Keeling died in August 1884. He left an estate of £40,618 1s 8d<sup>xiii</sup> - a fortune worth millions in today's terms. His six surviving children appear to have been divided into two groups - the "good" ones and the "naughty" ones. The naughty ones got a small annuity. The good ones split his fortune. Widowed Fanny's annuity may have been very useful.

In December 1885, Fanny and her Ebbs children left Ireland for Preston, Lancashire. There they stayed with Ebbs' sister and brother-in-law Elizabeth Martha Ebbs Sibthorp and the Rev Henry James Myler Sibthorp. There she met her third husband.

Fanny married William Henry Phillips (1843-Bef 1911) in 1886 in nearby Ashton-on-Ribble. They had no children, but he had a daughter Ethel Marian (1876-1959) from a previous marriage. Phillips was a "licensed lay reader" and appears to have travelled around a lot. In 1901 they were living in Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire.

Tragedy was to strike Fanny in July 1908. Her son Charles committed suicide by taking prussic acid in Bath, Somerset. Testimony from Phillips suggests he may have been estranged from his mother as they had not seen Charles for some time<sup>xiv</sup>. The inquest also found that he was an alcoholic. Everything suggested he was an unhappy soul.

By 1911, Phillips had died and Fanny was living in Banwell Somerset with her stepdaughter Ethel. It was there she died in 1915.

Fifteen words. Fifteen words opened up a life that involved travelling half way around the world. And back again. Fifteen words that had taken one husband to three and a life that was most unexpected.

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<sup>i</sup> Administration of William Webb Venn, 8 May 1896.

<sup>ii</sup> 1851 Census

<sup>iii</sup> 1841 Census

<sup>iv</sup> The National Archives of the UK; Kew, Surrey, England; Court for Divorce and Matrimonial Causes, later Supreme Court of Judicature: Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Files; Class: J 77; Piece: 85; Item: 858, 1868.

<sup>v</sup> 'Venn v Venn and Ebbs', *The Times* (London), 10 May 1869.

<sup>vi</sup> 'Venn v Venn and Ebbs', *The Standard* (London), 10 May 1869.

<sup>vii</sup> 'Business Notices', *North Otago Times*, 19 March 1869, 1.

<sup>viii</sup> New Zealand Marriage entry for William Frederick Ebbs and Fanny Keeling, 1869/1569

<sup>ix</sup> *Wanganui Herald*, 11 May 1871, 4.

<sup>x</sup> Harding and Denton Photograph Collection, National Library of New Zealand, Photograph of Christ Church Choir includes Fanny and Ebbs.

<sup>xi</sup> 'Sales by Auction', *Wanganui Herald*, 29 March 1873, 3.

<sup>xii</sup> Ireland Civil Registration, Death Entry for William Frederick Ebbs, 1880, South Dublin.

<sup>xiii</sup> National Probate Calendar, Entry for Keeling John Esq, 1884.

<sup>xiv</sup> 'The Widcombe Suicide', *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 23 July 1908, 8.