

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022

2220 Frances Reed Pioneer of Burke

by Jim Fleming

Frances Reed was the matriarch of a large pioneer family that played a significant part in founding the town of Bourke in far-western NSW.

During her childhood in England, her Irish father Benjamin Heazle (a sergeant in the British Army) fought against Napoleon's forces at Merxham, the siege of Antwerp and the subsequent storming of Bergen op Zoom in March 1814¹. After he returned, the family lived an itinerant lifestyle in England (8 postings), Scotland (5), Ireland (3), Gibraltar and Malta². Nevertheless, Frances knew exactly where she had come from and passed on to her children and grandchildren that she had been born at Canterbury in 1812 and that her mother was Elizabeth Wilson³.

Margaret Ann Wilson (possibly an aunt or cousin) witnessed Frances' marriage to James Reed (a private in her father's regiment) at Monkwearmouth (Sunderland) on 28 June 1830⁴. The young couple was immediately posted to Kephallonia in the Ionian Sea². Upon their return to England, their first child was baptised William at Portsmouth on 24 April 1831⁵.

During the next five years the regiment had three postings each in England and Ireland². By the time the family embarked with the regiment for Australia aboard the *Earl Grey* in 1836⁶, two more sons had been born (John Benjamin⁶ and James⁷) but their brother William had died.

The Reeds served for seven years at Linden⁸, Windsor⁹, Illawarra⁹ and finally Sydney¹⁰ before the regiment was posted to India in 1843⁹, but Frances and James elected to settle permanently in Australia.

For the next two decades Frances raised their children in central Sydney while James worked as a grocer¹¹, a constable¹² and a labourer¹³. The family grew with the birth of Alexander (1837)⁸, twins Prudence¹⁴ and Sarah (1839)¹⁵, Eliza Emily (1841)¹⁶, Sarah Ann (1844)¹⁷, Prudence (1846)¹², Frances (1848)¹³, George Charles (1851)³, Mary Ann (1852)¹⁸ and Jane (1856)³. Unfortunately, the twins died in childhood. Frances and James may have eventually run a hotel or boarding house¹⁹.

By 1856 their son James had moved to Wellington in central NSW²⁰ at the western edge of the nineteen counties that comprised the "limits of location." Permanent settlement outside these limits was not permitted until 1861 when government policy changed to allow selection and purchase of land in non-settled areas. Frances and her family decided to take advantage of the opportunities that this offered. After initially joining their son at Wellington, Frances and her husband journeyed by bullock wagon to Bourke, a further 420 kilometres north-west.

Bourke comprised just a few cabins, a goods depot and two pubs²¹. Supplies came by wagon from Maitland (720 kilometres away) or by unreliable paddle-steamer from Adelaide (about 3,000 kilometres by river). Immediately on arrival, Frances had to call on her life experience and resourcefulness in assisting at the birth of William Wright in November 1862, just the eighth birth recorded in the district²².

Despite her worldly background Frances faced significant new tribulations in this hot, dry, dusty and very isolated fledgling town. There were very few women²³ but plenty of wild

men. Even the newly arrived policemen were erratic, with Constable Elliott having shot and killed Sergeant Webb a year earlier²⁴.

She had wisely left her younger children in the care of their older siblings in Sydney and Wellington. Nevertheless, soon after 19-year-old Sarah Ann married Michel Brennan in Sydney on 8 January 1863, she and her husband brought the rest of the family to Bourke¹⁸.



Frances Reed with John Benjamin and Eliza Reed, circa 1879.

Frances purchased land on the corner of Darling and Glen Streets on 18 December 1863²⁵ and her husband bought three adjacent blocks a year later²⁶. They also selected eighty acres of land at Oxley's Tableland (40 kilometres from Bourke)²⁷ where they built a successful hotel called the Mountain House²⁸. Frances soon earned a reputation as a good hostess and was lauded for her clever technique of preserving butter (by burying it)²⁹ while James earned plaudits for his ability to source fodder for guests' horses and bullocks during times of drought³⁰.

She was a member of the Anglican Church and provided supper for the congregation after the opening of the new church on 26 August 1874³¹.

Nevertheless, the challenges of the frontier lifestyle continued for many years. In 1871 bushrangers took refreshment at the Reed's Mountain House hotel unaware that they were being surrounded by a party of police who had tracked them from the Murrumbidgee District.

They were captured when they emerged³². Seven years later, constable James Murphy (Frances' son-in-law) was severely bashed with a stirrup iron by bushranger Captain Midnight³³, who later died from wounds received in a gunfight with Bourke police while trying to again elude capture³⁴.

There were also the regular difficulties posed by droughts, dust storms, heat waves, floods and economic recessions. The 1890 flood was a particular trial for Frances, now 78 years old. The town was inundated and she and hundreds of others had to live in tents on higher land at North Bourke for months before returning to a town now coated with stinking, disease-ridden mud³⁵.

Frances died five years later³. She had endured much tragedy during her lifetime. Her younger brother James died during an epidemic in Malta in 1824³⁶; she buried three of her own infant children; and seventeen grandchildren pre-deceased her. Perhaps the bitterest blows were the drowning of her 7-year-old grandson William John Reed in the Darling River at Bourke on 7 October 1865³⁷ and the death of his only sibling, 15-year-old Frances Eliza Reed, when her clothes caught alight at Bourke on 8 July 1875³⁸. Their broken-hearted parents (John Benjamin Reed and Eliza nee Green) both died within five years³⁹.

Despite these sorrows, Frances' life story is one of a resilient and resourceful woman whose initiative and enterprise helped to forge a better life for her ten adult children and ninety-one grandchildren. She was one of a few strong, brave women who helped found the town of Bourke. Her descendants (including the Brennan, Farrell, Gibb, Johnson, Maxwell, Murphy and Whye families) honoured her with a prominent memorial stone in Bourke cemetery.

¹ 55th Foot Soldiers, "UK Regimental Registers of Service," digital image, The National Archives, Kew, Ancestry.com (www.ancestry.com: online 12 January 2022), WO25, piece 421, 55 Foot; citing The National Archives, Kew. Also - War Office, "Length of Service Pensions, Admission Books," digital images, Fold3, Ancestry (www.fold3.com: online 14 January 2022), WO117, piece 03: 1832-1839; WO97, 1809-1832, piece 901.

² 80th Regiment, "Record of Stations 1793-1905," digital images, AJCP, Trove (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-1379847382>).

³ Death Certificate, Frances Reed, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, NSW, Vol 1895 No 4274.

⁴ James Reed and Frances Heazle marriage, 28 June 1830, in Bishop's Transcripts, DDR/EA/PBT/2/182 number 587, St Peters church, Sunderland (Monkwearmouth), Durham.

⁵ Baptisms 1828-1837, CHU 5: page 25, William Reed, 24 April 1831, St John's church, Portsea, accessed through FindMyPast.

⁶ Surgeon's Journal: "Earl Grey" 1836, (MS, 1836); ADM 101, Archives Office of NSW; Kingswood.

⁷ Baptism Register, 5 April 1835: page 42, James Reed, St Philips church, Manchester.

⁸ Baptism Register: number 321, 10 July 1837, Alexander Reed, Christ Church, Cumberland.

⁹ 80th Regiment, "Diary 1793-1897," digital images, AJCP, Trove (<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-1379847325>: online 14 January 2022).

¹⁰ St James church (Sydney, NSW), Baptisms, FHL film number 993952, Sarah Reed, 1 Dec 1829; digital index, Ancestry (www.ancestry.com.au: online index 31 January 2022).

¹¹ Low's City of Sydney directory for 1844-45.

¹² Baptismal Record: Reed, Prudence, Vol 31, (30 August 1846), NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Sydney

¹³ St James church (Sydney, NSW), Baptisms, FHL film number 993935, Frances Reid, 2 Jul 1848; digital index, Ancestry (www.ancestry.com.au: online index 1 February 2022).

¹⁴ NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, *Index to NSW Births and Baptisms*, (Registry of BDM), 518/1839 V1839518 23A.

¹⁵ St James church (Sydney, NSW), FHL film number 993952, Sarah Reed, 1 Dec 1839; digital index, Ancestry (www.ancestry.com.au: online index 31 January 2022).

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- ¹⁶ Anglican churches (Sydney), page 8, St Michael's church, Wollongong, number 113, Eliza Reed, 7 Nov 1841; Sydney Anglican Church Diocesan Archives, Sydney.
- ¹⁷ St James church (Sydney, NSW), Baptism, FHL film number 993955, Sarah Ann Reed, 26 May 1844; digital index, *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com.au: online index 1 February 2022).
- ¹⁸ "Death of Mrs. M A Farrell," obituary, *The Western Herald, Bourke*, 9 July 1934, page 4; online image, *Trove* (: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article141971352> 10 February 2022), Newspapers and Gazettes.
- ¹⁹ Advertisement, *Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney*, 24 November 1858, Notice re board; online image, *Trove* (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/>: online 23 January 2022), Newspapers and Gazettes; National Library of Australia.
- ²⁰ NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, *Index to NSW Marriages*, (Registry of BDM), 2076/1856, James Reed and Eliza Bend, Wellington.
- ²¹ Telegraphic Intelligence. (1862, October 23). *Empire (Sydney, NSW : 1850 - 1875)*, p. 5. Retrieved February 18, 2022, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article60517985>
- ²² Bourke and District Historical Society, *History of Bourke Journal*, (Bourke NSW: Bourke and District Historical Society, 1966-1992), First Births at Bourke volume, William Wright, 27 November 1862.
- ²³ Lyne's "Industries of NSW", (1881), quoted on page 61, volume 7, *History of Bourke Journal*, (Bourke NSW: Bourke and District Historical Society, 1966-1992).
- ²⁴ General Intelligence. (1861, December 12). *The Golden Age (Queanbeyan, NSW : 1860 - 1864)*, p. 2. Retrieved February 18, 2022, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article30631974>
- ²⁵ NSW land deed, Town of Bourke, lot 2, section 11, volume 10, folio 147, NSW Historical Land Viewer.
- ²⁶ NSW land deeds, Town of Bourke, lots 3-5, section 11, volume 38, folios 7, 28 and 29, NSW Historical Land Viewer.
- ²⁷ NSW Land Transfer, CPs 1 and 7 of 1869, book 378, numbers 473 and 474, NSW Historical Land Viewer. Also - "Approved Claims for Pre-emptive Leases," notice, *NSW Government Gazette, Sydney*, 10 June 1870; online image, *Trove* (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/>), Newspapers and Gazettes.
- ²⁸ Publicans' Licenses, page 624, *NSW Government Gazette*, 15 Mar 1870, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article223287323>.
- ²⁹ Sydney Mail newspaper, 11 November 1871, page 1168 quoted on page 447, volume 10, *History of Bourke Journal*, (Bourke NSW: Bourke and District Historical Society, 1966-1992).
- ³⁰ "Bourke," news article, *Maitland Mercury, Maitland*, 11 November 1865, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page140505>; online image, *Trove* (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/>: accessed 28 January 2022), Newspapers and Gazettes.
- ³¹ *The Anglican church in Bourke and District*, Brother Richard Stamp, page 156, volume 1, *History of Bourke Journal*, (Bourke NSW: Bourke and District Historical Society, 1966-1992).
- ³² Clever Capture of Bushrangers. (1871, June 20). *Evening News (Sydney, NSW: 1869 - 1931)*, p. 3. Retrieved February 19, 2022, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article129971809>
- ³³ Brewarrina (Darling River). (1878, September 21). *Australian Town and Country Journal (Sydney, NSW : 1870 - 1919)*, p. 39. Retrieved March 15, 2022, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article70594925>. Murder of Sergeant Wallings. (1878, October 1). *Mount Alexander Mail (Vic.: 1854 - 1917)*, p. 3. Retrieved March 15, 2022, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article199007276>.
- ³⁴ Capturer and Death of Sergeant Wallings' Murderer. (1878, October 16). *Glen Innes Examiner and General Advertiser (NSW : 1874 - 1908)*, p. 2. Retrieved March 7, 2022, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article217825647>.
- ³⁵ 1890 flood, various articles and authors, pages 111-124, volume 1, *History of Bourke Journal*, (Bourke NSW: Bourke and District Historical Society, 1966-1992).
- ³⁶ Ancestry, *Bur: Heazle, James 1824 at Malta*, son of Benj Heazle, Sergeant 80th Reg, Military Records of Baptisms, Confirmations, Marriages and Burials, 1813-1957.
- ³⁷ "Boy Drowned," News article, *Empire, Sydney*, 24 October 1865; online image, *Trove* (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/>: online 27 January 2022), Newspapers and Gazettes; National Library of Australia.
- ³⁸ "Bourke," News, *Maitland Mercury, Maitland*, 22 July 1875, page 3; online image, *Trove* (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/> : online 1 February 2022), Newspapers and Gazettes. "Reed," Death Notice, *Clarence & Richmond Examiner, Grafton*, 8 August 1875, page 4; online image, *Trove* (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/>: online 1 February 2022), Newspapers and Gazettes.

³⁹ NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, *Index to NSW Deaths*, (Registry of BDM), John Benjamin Reed, 5516/1881; Eliza Jane Reed, 4610/1879.