

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2023

2311 Through His Actions an Ordinary Man Busts a Myth

by Patricia Deering

Through His Actions an Ordinary Family Man Busts a Myth

One of my great grandfathers was born in 1860. Two thirds of his life was consistently spent in the Mannus/Tumbarumba area in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains. He was variously listed as a miner, labourer, selector and farmer¹. Family presented him as an uncaring person that spent an amount of his life stealing stock - one story has it that he died in goal.²

I have examined records matching information with other people who had the same or very like names³. I have examined what he was doing and where he was at different times to work out what kind of person he was by his actions.

In his lifetime the Mannus/Tumbarumba area it was still pretty lawless, life was tough and isolated - communication was difficult. Mannus Station was a world to itself offering everything needed by a farm worker. It was like a little village of its own, having a blacksmith, baker, workshop, about 6 to 10 workers cottages, and, an application existed for a rural school.⁴

If you were a young man of these times and environment this would look good. Your wife had somewhere to live, there was a community for company, assistance with birthing and to work on the station jobs together. This was attractive especially if he could carry on with a bit of mining (as was available on the Mannus creek). An uncaring person? It sounds like a person who is making a considered decision.

Considering isolation it would be very tempting to create your own idea of what was happening at a place like Mannus if you were not on the inside – if all you knew were snippets - communities might be very tempted to fill in the gaps. It would be easy to “socially convict” a person if truth was unavailable. Further, the owner of Mannus, Robert McMicking, disliked visits from local constabulary⁵. However, he was known for not putting up with dishonest staff/workers and they would be given their marching orders⁶.

My great grandfather married twice - firstly in 1885⁷ and then in 1896⁸. His first marriage was to a girl who already had a child – the father was known and chose not to support his child, but our great grandfather still married her. That’s not the actions of a man who is uncaring and a bit of a criminal. The couple had a further five children but sadly his first wife died in childbirth with the arrival of their fifth child. Unfortunately this death meant the breaking up of the family in 1893. The girls went to the maternal side of the family and the boys with their father, the babe, to a sister of the mother. The boys followed in their father’s footsteps by becoming a miner and a farmer in the area where they had grown.

¹ 1891 New South Wales Australian Census; Australian Birth Index; Australian Marriage Index

² Australian Death Index 1787 – 1885 registration date 1940 no.22856

³ <https://convictrecords.com.au>; 1881 Joseph Murphy in New South Wales, Australia, Gaol Description and Entrance Books, 1818-1930; Joseph Babon in the New South Wales, Australia, Police Gazettes, 1854-1930

⁴ NSW department of lands

⁵ R. G. McMicking Collection – family files quoted by P Turnbull

⁶ https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/files/20164601/19594811_report.pdf

⁷ Australian Marriage Index 1884/3517: Terrington to Terrington, Jan Doughty Hewitt 2003 p135

⁸ *ibid*

The breaking up of the family is a very sad part of the story and he made unsuccessful attempts to have the girls return to live with him. When the girls went to live with the maternal grandparents they were going to a “nice” house – it had eight rooms, with a separate kitchen and laundry⁹. Compared to workers cottages on Mannus¹⁰ it must have appeared lovely. They were only 5 and 7. At some stage the attempts to have his children join him must have ended in court because on his first born daughter’s wedding certificate an appointed guardian signed to give permission for her to marry in 1904¹¹.

Maybe, at the time, it was convenient for people to weave a story about our great grandfather. Very easy in light of the surname being the same as criminals. In the time of his lifespan in the Mannus area, there were at least five other people with the same name living in New South Wales - committing such crimes as habitual drunkenness, inflicting grievous bodily harm, horse and cattle theft, manslaughter¹². However our great grandfather continued to work on the Mannus station and area as both a selector and leaseholder of land for grazing cattle¹³.

In 1896 he married his second wife¹⁴. This was the person who had come to assist with the young boys. Perhaps this was too soon after the death of his first wife. However, several sons became policemen after they had served in the Great War – not the children of an uncaring criminal father.¹⁵

During his second marriage he was developing his farm and in 1902 he was approved as a selector. An application for another 123 acres of grazing land was approved.¹⁶ In 1904 a son from his second marriage was born - on the birth registration he gave his occupation as grazier. This was a point of pride for him¹⁷.

Mannus was very important to him for he used this for a middle name of one of his girls from his second marriage. When he moved from the Tumbarumba area he called his new home in Bowral “Manus” where he lived quietly for twenty four years.¹⁸

In summary I think that great grandfather had a hard but fortunate life, at times isolated and sad. I have no evidence that he was uncaring or a criminal. However, he appears as a pragmatic man of his times, perhaps with an attitude of “getting on with it”. This may have led to some people misjudging in an environment that was ripe for the creation of a “reputation” for this ordinary family man.

I would like to note that his obituary speaks very well of him, and his first born daughter had his portrait hanging in her lounge room throughout my childhood, speaking very well

9 Terrington to Terrington, Jan Doughty Hewitt 2003 p92

10 Home of Burleton and Stella Peard in the early 19th century. Photographed 2014 at Mannus

11 New south Wales, Australia Marriage Register Reg no. 3221

12 NSW criminal court records accessed on Ancestry 2023

13 NSW census 1891, 1901

14 Australian Marriage Index 1788-1950 Reg no 3998

15 Riley family history - <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Reily-27>

16 Wagga Wagga Advertiser, Thursday 24 July 1902. Page 4.

17 The New South Wales Pioneer Index: Federation Series 1889 - 1918

18 (1941, January 3). The Southern Mail (Bowral, NSW: 1889 - 1954), p. 2.

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article118889270>

of him on our many visits together. A big turnaround from the time of her marriage and having a guardian sign the permission to marry and not her father.¹⁹

¹⁹ <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article11888927>; Personal experience 1952 - 1973