

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020**

## **2008 A Master of Elusion: Thomas Gray**

**by Jennifer Oswald-Sealy**

## A Master of Elusion – Thomas Nepean Gray

He was the stuff of legends in our family. My great grandfather Thomas Nepean Gray was all we children aspired to be when we listened to our grandfather's stories. A father of nine, kindly and generous, he was a pioneer in the South Gippsland area of Victoria. His contribution to public life was diverse, spending time as Alberton Shire President and owner of the Ship Inn Hotel at Port Albert as well as being involved in sporting clubs, dramatic societies and education.<sup>1</sup>

*“there was hardly anything that moved – in a social, commercial or political direction – that did not move all the better and look the brighter for the genial presence and encouraging assistance of T.N. Gray”<sup>2</sup>*

When I became interested in family history in 1992 Thomas was one of the first ancestors that I chose to investigate. I visited my local bookstore and purchased Janet Reakes' "A to Z of Genealogy" to use as a guide. On the back cover she said *“If you like.... detective novels and the thrill of the chase you'll love genealogy.”* And how right she was. Thomas Nepean Gray has involved me in a twenty-five-year investigation of his past. Initially without a computer, research was very different from today. I ordered certificates for births, deaths and marriages and spent many hours in libraries scrolling microfilms and viewing fiches. I also contacted family members for help. One second cousin in Victoria had the original newspaper cutting of his obituary which added numerous details to his achievements. Another second cousin in England was invaluable in obtaining records, often visiting record offices in person as we continued to search for our elusive Thomas Nepean Gray. My husband and I travelled to regional historical societies both in Victoria and Yorkshire seeking to verify information about him and we became expert at finding graves as we followed Thomas's trail.

The first roadblock I met was finding his birth. Discrepancies were many on the Australian certificates relating to Thomas Nepean Gray<sup>3</sup>. His age varied, giving different years for his birth. He always gave his birthplace as Yorkshire and his father's name as Thomas Gray, a farmer. Another constant was his mother, Jane Whitelock. There were no marriages of a Thomas Gray and Jane Whitelock in Yorkshire nor a birth for a Thomas Gray around 1834. My cousin and I suspected he must have changed his name. Finally, on a visit to North Yorkshire County Record Office in 1994 my cousin found the marriage we were seeking – Thomas Greathead of the parish of St Mary Lambeth County of Surrey and Jane Whitelock of Ellerton in this parish [Downholme] married on 6 April 1830.<sup>4</sup>

So now knowing that his name at birth was Thomas Greathead our investigation moved to London and a search of the Lambeth Archives found that our Thomas was baptised on 5 May 1831 at St Mary Lambeth and that his father was a cheesemonger.<sup>5</sup> The question remained as to why T.N. Gray changed his name. What year did he come to Australia? The first mention of him in Australia is 1871 when he arrived in Stockyard Creek, Victoria as a result of the Gold rush.<sup>6</sup> He was employed as a mining agent for Mr Emerson, a solicitor who specialised in mining cases.<sup>7</sup> Unable to find his shipping records I enlisted Jan Worthington's help and in 1996 she found that Thomas Greathead left London on the Essex, arriving in Melbourne on 10

November 1869.<sup>8</sup> He stepped off that ship as Thomas Nepean Gray. I wonder whether he chose the name Nepean as the Essex sailed into Port Phillip Bay past Point Nepean?

Why did he come to Australia? For three generations the eldest son had been named Thomas Greathead. Was he escaping this heritage or was he hiding a secret? Had he been married before? He was 43 when he married 17-year-old Mary Ann McGlead in Foster on 13 September 1874.<sup>9</sup> Numerous searches showed that he had not been married prior to this.

Fortunately for my quest for the truth, the age of the computer and my acquisition of one made searching a whole lot easier and Thomas's story began to reveal itself.

T.N. Gray's father Thomas Greathead received an early inheritance from his father<sup>10</sup> and left a farming life in Swaledale, Yorkshire to try for a better livelihood as a cheesemonger in London. At the time of the census in 1851 Thomas Greathead [1796 – 1864]<sup>11</sup> and his son Thomas Greathead [1831 – 1900] were cheesemonger and cheesemonger's assistant in the shop of Greathead and Co. at 58 Mount Street Lambeth.<sup>12</sup> The coming of the railway to London and changes in the marketing of cheese badly affected the business<sup>13</sup> and Thomas senior declared himself bankrupt on 16 October 1855.<sup>14</sup>

In 1858 Thomas Greathead junior applied to join the civil service, looking for a new career for himself. He gave his date of birth as 7 April 1831 which appears to be the only time that he was ever truthful about his age.<sup>15</sup> His father died in 1864<sup>16</sup> leaving Thomas alone in London.

In July 1865 Thomas Greathead, a clerk at the War Office, was found guilty of forgery in the Central Criminal Court London.<sup>17</sup> He was sentenced to five years penal servitude.<sup>18</sup> Four years later on 28 June 1869, Thomas was released from prison with early release due to good behaviour.<sup>19</sup> He made the decision to migrate to Australia, leaving the shame of his conviction behind him.

Once in Australia he became a pillar of South Gippsland society and only used his skills with the pen to assist miners and the less privileged by writing letters to help them deal with the authorities and with legal matters.<sup>20</sup> He has still left me a few unsolved puzzles to work on but that is part of the joy of genealogy.

This master of elusion remains a family legend.



Figure 1: T.N. Gray [in frockcoat] outside Ship Inn 1887-1897. Original: Port Albert Maritime Museum

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<sup>1</sup> From these Beginnings - History of the Shire of Alberton [Victoria] by John Adams Gray Thomas N. pages 114,123,127.148

South Gippsland Shire Historical Society Biographical card no.50 Gray T.N. [Thomas Nepean] obtained 1996

<sup>2</sup> In Memorium: The Late T.N. Gray – The Gippsland Standard. Undated original in possession of Margie Fitchett 1995

<sup>3</sup> Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages Melbourne, Victoria 94/6351 Port Albert 1900 Register Entry no. 184 Date of death: 8 September 1900

See endnote 9 for marriage certificate details

<sup>4</sup> Parish of Downholme, page 12 of new register, entry no. 34 viewed at North Yorkshire County Record Office by Max Hadfield 1994

<sup>5</sup> St Mary Lambeth Parish Register page 290 entry no. 2315 viewed at Minet Library London by Max Hadfield 1994

<sup>6</sup> Wednesdays Closest to the Full Moon. A History of South Gippsland by Barry Collett. Chapter 5 A Gold Town Close to Fabulous Wealth pages 77 - 97

<sup>7</sup> Wednesdays Closest to the Full Moon. A History of South Gippsland by Barry Collett page 78 and page 94

<sup>8</sup> Jan Worthington – Worthington Clark Pty Ltd – Genealogy Research & Computer Services 1996 Victoria, Australia, Assisted and Unassisted Passenger Lists 1839 – 1923 Public Record Office, Victoria, page 213 Of 244 Accessed on [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) 2020

<sup>9</sup> Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages Melbourne, Victoria 93/113913 Gippsland Register 1874. No. in register 33

<sup>10</sup> Will Thomas Greathead [1768 – 1850] Proved 1 February 1851 Yorkshire England, Probate Records 1521 – 1858 reference no. RD/AP1/202/18/1. Accessed on [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)

<sup>11</sup> England, Births and Christenings 1538 – 1975 Salt Lake City, Utah FHL Film no. 207559 Familysearch.org Thomas Greathead baptised at Marske, Yorkshire 16 March 1796 No. MNZB-X31 For his death see endnote 16

<sup>12</sup> U.K. Census 1851 HO107 Piece 1571 Folio 523 Page 1 – viewed at Minet Library, London by Max Hadfield 1994

<sup>13</sup> The Cheesemongers of Teesdale. A talk given by Catherine Ryan to the Upper Dales Family History Group in May 2018

Blundels, Richard and Tregear, Angela [2006] From artisans to “factories”: the interpenetration of craft and industry in English cheese-making, c1650 – 1950. Enterprise & Society, 7[4] pp 705 - 739

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<sup>14</sup> Perry's Bankrupt & Insolvent Gazette October 27, 1855 page 808. British Library Newspapers accessed through Find My Past 2018

<sup>15</sup> [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com) Civil service evidence of age entry 6856 009. Received from Jan Cooper of [www.greathead.org](http://www.greathead.org) on 24 July 2013.

<sup>16</sup> General Register Office 1864/Q2 Lambeth Volume 1d Page 236. Certificate no. DXZ 413029 - 1997  
Date of death: 12 April 1864

<sup>17</sup> England & Wales, Crime, Prisons & Punishment 1770 – 1935 Transcription. The National Archives series HO8 Piece no. 180. Prisoner number 8410. Accessed through [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com) 2016  
Sheffield Weekly Supplement to the Telegraph 15 July 1865. British Library Newspapers accessed through [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com) 2016 BL-0000250-18650715-045

<sup>18</sup> England and Wales, Crime, Prisons and Punishment 1770 – 1935 [National Archives London] Pentonville Prison Registers Vol. 3 series HO24 piece no. 18 from [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com) 2016

<sup>19</sup> England and Wales Crime, Prisons and Punishment 1770 – 1935 Prison Registers Series HO8 Piece no. 180  
Accessed through [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com) 2016

<sup>20</sup> In Memorium: The Late T.N. Gray – The Gippsland Standard. See endnote 2. Yarram and District Historical Society have a microfilm of The Gippsland Standard for this date. It is not available on Trove. I have approached the Society for a copy but they are not operating due to Coronavirus. I intend to get a dated copy for my records in the future.

I would like to thank all those who helped with my Thomas Nepean Gray journey of discovery, especially Max Hadfield, Margie Fitchett and Jan Cooper of [www.greathead.org](http://www.greathead.org)