

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020**

**2018 Francis Cottrell - Artist**

**by Peter Sinclair**

## Francis Cottrell: Artist of Adelaide

Sometime in the 1870s, from some port, on some ship, my great grandfather Francis Cottrell, an artist, sailed to Melbourne<sup>1</sup>. His first documented appearance was as a new father in a modest Victorian cottage in Garden Street, South Yarra with his partner Rebecca Abrahams. They lived beside the jam factory, then owned by the “Red Cross” Preserving Company, a bustling enterprise employing 230 people.<sup>2</sup> On 20<sup>th</sup> June 1880, a baby boy arrived, also named Francis Cottrell.<sup>3</sup> Although no number in Garden Street appears on the birth certificate, from later photographs,<sup>4</sup> I see a worker’s cottage with a narrow verandah bordered with wrought-iron filigree. No Cottrell appeared in the Sands and McDougall directory for the street<sup>5</sup>, so the couple was boarding or renting. Rebecca Abrahams, formerly Levy, was recorded as aged 27 and born in Birmingham, UK, but her true history is uncertain. She was probably born in Worcestershire, England in 1849 to Nathan and Louisa Levy<sup>6,7</sup>, arrived in Melbourne with her family on the South Carolina in 1857<sup>8</sup>, then married James Abrahams in October 1869<sup>9,10</sup>. Francis, the father, was listed as aged 27, born in Amsterdam, Holland; however, I found no record of his birth there and his death certificate in 1886 shows his age as 38. He was possibly born in Birmingham in 1847<sup>11,12</sup> and later became a “native of London”<sup>24</sup>. Francis and Rebecca left no marriage record.

The couple next appeared in Adelaide, its Victoria Square intersected by Grote and King William Streets into four quadrants with lawns and walking paths shaded by pine, oak and pepper trees. Horse-drawn carts and carriages rolled through following the square’s opening to traffic in 1883<sup>13</sup>; the central statue of Queen Victoria appeared a decade later. On the western edge of the square in Grote street is Globe Chambers, little changed from its depiction in Ernest Gall’s 1896 photograph.<sup>14</sup> Here was Francis’s studio, home to him, Rebecca and the baby. Alas, the next record is of Rebecca’s death on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1883 from puerperal septicaemia.<sup>15</sup> Fifteen years later, a curious item appeared in the Hebrew Standard<sup>16</sup> enquiring after Rebecca’s history and explicitly mentioning Francis Cottrell.

After Rebecca’s death, baby Francis Cottrell, born in South Yarra, was raised and cared for by a kindly lady, Mary Anne Smith<sup>17,18</sup>. When he later became a successful delicatessen owner and property investor in Glenelg, “Grandma Mary Anne”, now widowed, lived with the Cottrell family until the end of her days.<sup>19</sup>

Within a year or two, Francis married Kezia Francis of Glenelg<sup>20</sup>. They had a daughter named Kezia in September 1885 who died of pneumonia after ten weeks<sup>21,22</sup>. By then, Francis’s artistic career was blossoming, as was his notoriety. In February 1885 he was a witness in an



*Francis Cottrell, Artist. Scanned from family photo, most likely in Adelaide 1880-85.*

arson case in the Supreme Court, reported in five thousand words of scrupulous detail in the *Express and Telegraph* newspaper<sup>23</sup>. Francis confirmed the movements of the accused, Frederick Staer, whom he had known for two years. He, Staer and another man, Sykes, had been drinking in the International Hotel in Rundle Street until an hour and a half past the eleven o'clock closing time. They then made their way to the Marquis of Lorne Hotel in Pirie Street to try and get another drink but were unsuccessful. The party eventually broke up when Sykes' wife saw him at 12:45 am and called him home!

Francis's studio mirrored his artistic personality; the Advertiser in January 1886 said it was, "the abode of one whose art oozes out at every point for his room is covered with designs for wall decorations done in oil ... also many studies in red chalk of the undraped figure"<sup>24</sup>. In 1885 Francis and Kezia were living at Glenelg, as their infant daughter was born and died there. However, his late-night, city carousing may have seen him living partly at his studio.

In March 1886, a Francis Horace Cottrell of Glenelg, artist, was declared bankrupt<sup>25</sup>; was this the same person?

The Parliament of South Australia had launched a competition for a portrait of Sir Robert Richard Torrens, famed for his work on the *Real Property Act* and the system of Torrens land titles. Entries were judged in 1885, the year after Torrens' death, with the first prize of £150 not awarded but the second, of £75, given to a Mr MacCormac. A bustle of letters to newspaper editors ensued as Adelaide's art community pronounced on the quality of the winning entry and the conduct of the competition. Francis entered without success, evident from the rejected portrait of Sir R R Torrens in his studio<sup>24</sup>, so he too wrote to the *South Australian Register* accusing MacCormac of changing his picture after other entries were publicly displayed<sup>26</sup>.

Francis was a talented and accomplished artist with many works in progress; he had studied four years with the Belgian master Jean-François Portaels at the Brussels Academy<sup>24</sup>, most likely starting in 1874 when Portaels returned to Belgium from his travels<sup>27</sup>. Many of Francis's paintings have disappeared, but those which remain are from the last two years of his life. His studio held a portrait of Mr J H Symon's children and Kezia retained at least five of Francis's works after his death. *The Musicians* was painted in 1886 and donated to the Art Gallery of South Australia by Deane Miller<sup>20</sup>; three men cluster in the corner of a room playing violin, flute and clarinet, two of them sitting at a table with a large tankard and a small glass of spirits in easy reach. In June 1886, Francis finished a large portrait of Sir Josiah Symon, later hung in Old Parliament House in Canberra, earning him 100 guineas<sup>28</sup>.

Tragically, Francis's artistic output accompanied a lifestyle that ruined his health; he died on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1886 of cirrhosis of the liver and dropsy<sup>29</sup>. Here was a life talented, notorious yet elusive.

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<sup>1</sup> From Unassisted passenger lists (1852-1923) Record Series Number (VPRS): 947 there are two Mr Cottrells and two Mrs Cottrells arriving in Melbourne before 1880; the other 18 have first names not Francis. The Mr and Mrs Cottrell arriving on the *Tanjore* in February 1877 are a couple and Francis is most likely travelling alone, following his training in Brussels. There are no records specifically for a Francis Cottrell or an F Cottrell.

<sup>2</sup> Stephens, T. and Dale-Hallett, L. (2008), "Jam Factory - Factory & Companies Timeline in Museums Victoria Collections", <https://collections.museumvictoria.com.au/articles/2686>, Accessed 07 April 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Birth Certificate for Francis Cottrell, 20 Jun 1880, South Yarra, Victoria, Australia, 163, Births in the District of South Yarra, Colony of Victoria.

<sup>4</sup> "Children in Garden Street, South Yarra", c 1951.

<sup>5</sup> "Melbourne and Suburban Directory for 1880", Sands and McDougall, Melbourne, 1880, p 184.

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<sup>6</sup> MyHeritage Family Trees:

Rebecca Abrahams (born Levy)

Birth: Circa 1849 - Worcestershire, England

Parents: Nathan Levy, Louisa Levy

Husband: James Abrahams

Children: Nathaniel Louis Abrahams, Nathaniel Louis Abrahams, Abraham Abrahams, Henry Alfred

Abrahams, Julius Abrahams, <https://records.myheritagelibraryedition.com/research/record-1-471628681-2-972/rebecca-abrahams-born-levy-in-myheritage-family-trees>.

<sup>7</sup> This Rebecca Levy, who married James Abrahams in 1869, is the closest match found to the Rebecca who appears on my grandfather's birth certificate<sup>3</sup>, although the link is not conclusive. Between 1870 and 1876 they had five sons, two of whom died as infants and two who reached their eighties. It is possible they separated, and Rebecca met Francis Cottrell in the late 1870s when he arrived in Melbourne.

<sup>8</sup> "Rebecca Levy arrival Melbourne," Nov 1857, Melbourne, Vic, Inwards Unassisted Passengers to Victoria 1852-1923, <https://records.myheritagelibraryedition.com/research/record-10858-213572/rebecca-levy-in-inwards-unassisted-passengers-to-victoria>.

<sup>9</sup> "Marriage of James Abrahams and Rebecca Levy," 6 Oct 1869, Melbourne, Vic, 04658, Australia Victoria BMD historical index: Marriages 1836-1920, [https://archive.org/details/AustraliaVictoriaBmdHistoricalIndex\\_104](https://archive.org/details/AustraliaVictoriaBmdHistoricalIndex_104), Accessed 24 Jan 2020.

<sup>10</sup> "Marriages Abrahams - Levy," The Herald (Melbourne, Vic. : 1861 - 1954), Melbourne, Vic, 7 Oct 1869, p 2, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/244907415>, Accessed 24 Jan 2020.

<sup>11</sup> If the age on Francis's death certificate is more reliable than on his son's birth certificate, he was born in 1847-8 and the only UK match is one in Birmingham<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> "Birth of Francis Robert Cottrell," 11 Oct 1847, Birmingham, Warwickshire, Vol 16, p 285, England & Wales Births 1837-2006, <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=BMD%2FB%2F1847%2F4%2FAH%2F000659%2F011>.

<sup>13</sup> "Opening of Victoria Square", Evening Journal (Adelaide, SA : 1869 - 1912), Saturday 1 December 1883, page 6, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/198385833>, Accessed 7 April 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Gall, Ernest, "Victoria Square, Adelaide", c 1896, State Library of South Australia, PRG 631/2/141, <https://www.catalog.slsa.sa.gov.au:443/record=b2060495~S1>.

<sup>15</sup> Death Certificate for Rebecca Levy, 28 Feb 1883, Adelaide, 8185, Register Births, Deaths and Marriages, SA.

<sup>16</sup> Hebrew Standard of Australasia (Sydney, NSW: 1895 - 1953), Friday 2 December 1898, page 8, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/121637591>. The short piece said, "Information is desired respecting the early history of one Rebecca Levy, who married a Mr. Cottrell, and also the names of her parents."

<sup>17</sup> Mary Anne and her husband, Charles, a carpenter, returned to Adelaide in 1882 after some years in the country. They lived first in Angas Street near Victoria Square, where they likely met Francis, then in Drayton Street, Bowden not far from the Hindmarsh Church of Christ Chapel, which Mary Anne attended.

<sup>18</sup> "90 Years Old Today, Still Sews for the Poor", The Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1931 - 1954), Adelaide, SA, 25 April 1934, p 11, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/47553528>, Accessed 18 Jan 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Len Wilksch, et. al., "Wilhelm Wilksch Family History 1805 ~ 1973", The Wilksch Family Reunion Committee, Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide, 1973, p 66. Francis Cottrell, the artist's son, married Ida Mathilda Wilksch in Adelaide in 1909, lived for eight years in Broken Hill, where my mother Elsa and uncle Frank were born, then moved to Glenelg. Francis owned a ham and beef shop (delicatessen) in Jetty Road and invested in several properties which he leased to tenants. He bought a home in Malcolm Street in a new subdivision, Dunleath, and the family lived there until the mid 1960s; Francis died in 1945. Mary Anne was widowed in 1902 and lived in Malcolm Street, close to and later with the Cottrells at no 21, where I grew up. She died on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1937, aged 93.

<sup>20</sup> Graeme Deane Miller, "The Musicians," 24 Jun 2002, Art Gallery of South Australia. This is a note accompanying the donation of this painting by the late Deane Miller to the Art Gallery of South Australia and provided to me by the Gallery:

"Painted in Adelaide in 1886 by FRANCIS COTTRELL died September 7th 1886, Adelaide aged 38 years. The date and place of his birth are uncertain, but according to the St. Catherine's register, a Francis Cottrell was born in 1847, and baptised in St. Phillip's Church, Birmingham 08.11.1847. His parents were Francis and Esther.

There is no record on ship's passenger lists of him arriving in South Australia. He married Kezia Francis of Glenelg. They had a daughter, Kezia, born at Glenelg and who died of pneumonia 1.12.1885. Francis and Kezia lived in Victoria Square, Adelaide, and he died there on 7th September 1886, and was buried at West

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Terrace Cemetery the following day. In 1887 Kezia married Robert Clark, they were my Grandparents. The painting has always been held by the family and was given to me in June 1972 by my Aunt, Dorcas Roberta Innes Clark, she being the last surviving child of Kezia and Robert. There were 5 pictures by Cottrell in my Grandparents house. A still life of similar size and frame hung with The Musicians in the dining room. Two watercolours, of which I have one, hung in a bedroom and a portrait of Kezia as a young woman, in oils, was not hung. We do not know where these other pictures are. They seemed to disappear when my Aunt moved into a nursing home.”

<sup>21</sup> “Birth of Kezia Cottrell,” 8 Sep 1885, New Glenelg, SA, 360/423, Registration Certificates for Births, Deaths and Marriages, District of Adelaide.

<sup>22</sup> “Death of Kezia Cottrell,” 26 Nov 1885, New Glenelg, SA, 150/353, Registration Certificates for Births, Deaths and Marriages, District of Adelaide.

<sup>23</sup> “Supreme Court—Criminal Sittings: Staer’s Case”, Express and Telegraph (Adelaide, SA: 1867 - 1922), Adelaide, SA, 2 Mar 1885, 4, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/208343405>, Accessed 3 Apr 2020. The public was concerned by many recent fires in the city, suspected to be the work of “incendiarists”. In this case Staer was convicted and sentenced to fourteen years hard labour.

<sup>24</sup> “The Artists and Studios of Adelaide,” South Australian Advertiser (Adelaide, SA: 1858 - 1889), Adelaide, SA, 1 Jan 1886, p 6, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/36320208>, Accessed 10 May 2019.

<sup>25</sup> “Insolvency Court,” South Australian Register (Adelaide, SA: 1839 - 1900), Adelaide, SA, 31 Mar 1886, p 7, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/50187713>, Accessed 3 Apr 2020. The occupation, location of Glenelg and 1882 arrival in Adelaide are suggestive, but the name Horace appears nowhere else in relation to my great grandfather.

<sup>26</sup> “To the Editor,” South Australian Register (Adelaide, SA: 1839 - 1900), Adelaide, SA, 12 Sep 1885, p 7, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/44945380>.

<sup>27</sup> Wikipedia, “Jean-François Portaels”, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-François\\_Portaels](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-François_Portaels), Accessed 8 April 2020.

<sup>28</sup> “Portrait of Mr. J. H. Symon, M.P.,” South Australian Register (Adelaide, SA : 1839 - 1900), Adelaide, SA, 25 Jun 1886, 5, Accessed 3 Apr 2020, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/44567590/4047041>.

<sup>29</sup> “Francis Cottrell Death,” 07 Sep 1886, Adelaide, SA, 157/316, South Australia Deaths 1842-1972.