

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020**

## **2026 The Professor of Natural Philosophy**

**by Natalie Lonsdale**

## The Professor of Natural Philosophy

An “*Incorrigible Son*” cried the headline in Bell’s Life London and Sporting Chronicle.<sup>1</sup> “*George Sampson, a youth of about twenty years of age, was charged with robbing his father, Mr. George Bentley Sampson, professor of natural philosophy, of Chelsea. Mr Sampson regretted that it fell to his lot to press a charge of felony against his own son.*” My 4x great-grandfather George Bentley Sampson had been called out of London for a few days. While away, his eldest son George, angry that his father would not set him up in business, had stripped the family home of all valuables, including pawning two of his sister Henrietta’s dresses.<sup>2</sup> Of most distress to my great-grandfather was the theft of his most precious library, “...containing valuable works on philosophical subjects; these were all gone...”<sup>3</sup>

What fascinating insight into the life of one of my most elusive ancestors, Optician, Professor and Gentleman, George Bentley Sampson.<sup>4</sup> George was born in the village of Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, in 1789.<sup>5</sup> He married twice and fathered five children. His first wife, my 4x great-grandmother Henrietta Grey, is just as elusive. I can find no records for Henrietta other than her marriage certificate from St Luke’s Church in Kensington, and her death certificate, recording her death from an infection at her home in Chelsea in 1826.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, Henrietta died before the English census began recording the names and birth details of all household members. Henrietta left behind five children, the youngest of whom was three-year-old Henry Martin, my 3x great-grandfather. Henry emigrated to Australia in 1852, to search for his fortune on the Victorian goldfields.<sup>7</sup> Of particular interest is the couple’s youngest daughter Margaret Sampson. Margaret married into the aristocratic Barton

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Police Intelligence’, *Bell’s Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 30 May 1830, n.p.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Sunday and Tuesday’s Posts’, *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 3 June 1830, n.p.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Police’, *London Evening Standard*, 26 May 1830, n.p.

<sup>4</sup> Death certificate for Henry Martin Sampson, died 8 August 1896, ‘Australia, Death Index, 1787-1985’, Ancestry.com, Accessed 26 April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Census record for George Bentley Sampson, aged 62, Rugby, Warwickshire, England, 1851 England Census, Class: HO107; Piece: 2069; Folio: 317; Page: 19; GSU roll: 87333, ‘1851 England Census’, Ancestry.com, Accessed 3 April 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Death certificate for Henrietta Sampson, died 26 October 1826, ‘London, England, Church of England Deaths and Burials, 1813-2003’, Ancestry.com, Accessed 29 March 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Passenger List for Henry Martin Sampson arrived Port Phillip Bay, February 1852, per Duke of Bedford, ‘Victoria, Australia, Assisted and Unassisted Passenger Lists, 1839–1923’, Series: VPRS 7666; Series Title: Inward Overseas Passenger Lists (British Ports), Ancestry.com, Accessed 21 May 2020.

family of Ireland.<sup>8</sup> Margaret's son Daniel Fitzgerald Pakenham Barton would rise to become the H. B. M. Consul-General in Geneva Switzerland.<sup>9</sup> He married one of Queen Victoria's goddaughters,<sup>10</sup> Victoria Alexandrina Julia Peel, granddaughter of Sir Robert Peel, who twice served as Prime Minister of England.<sup>11</sup> Victoria's lineage was filled with Lords, Ladies, Earls, Dukes and Duchesses, going all the way back to King Henry III of England and Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland. Daniel, a great music lover, was responsible for designing the beautiful Victoria Concert Hall in Geneva and gifting it to the people of Switzerland in honour of Queen Victoria.<sup>12</sup>

George Bentley Sampson specialised in the physics of electromagnetism. I have found a number of newspaper articles about his tours around England lecturing on electricity. A night of experimental lectures on electricity, galvanism and electromagnetism in Wales, in 1841, received a glowing report in the local paper. After giving a brief history on the science involved, George proceeded to use "*...a variety of beautiful experiments...who for neatness and success in manipulation has rarely found an equal. The phenomena of electrical attraction and repulsion were very pleasingly and satisfactorily exemplified.*" The reporter was also impressed by the number of women in attendance, writing; "*Sweets to the sweet,*" *as the poet says; descriptions and the natural history of the sweetest gems of the field must, it is needless to say, be congenial to those who are themselves "Nature's fairest flowers."* *The assemblage of female attraction on the above occasion speaks highly for the borough of Leominster.*"<sup>13</sup>

George ended his days lecturing on natural philosophy at Rugby College in Warwickshire. He resided at a boarding house while away teaching.<sup>14</sup> Hannah, his second wife<sup>15</sup> remained in

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<sup>8</sup> Marriage record for Margaret Sampson and Daniel Barton, married 30 April 1846, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Reference Number: dro/140/a/03/004, 'London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1921', Ancestry.com, Accessed 26 May 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Death record for Daniel Fitzgerald Pakenham Barton, died 8 April 1907, The National Archives of the UK; Kew, Surrey, England; Consulate, Geneva, Switzerland: Register of Correspondence, Births and Deaths and Various Papers; Class: FO 778; Piece: 15, 'UK, Registers of Births, Marriages and Deaths From British Consulates, 1810-1968', Ancestry.com, Accessed 29 May 2020.

<sup>10</sup> 'Fashionable Marriages', *Illustrated London News*, 19 November 1887, p.2.

<sup>11</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, 'Robert Peel', <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Peel>, Accessed 3 April 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Concert Media, 'Victoria Hall', <http://concert-media.com/fr/venue/vhall>, Accessed 7 May 2020.

<sup>13</sup> 'Leominster Mechanics Institute', *Silurian, Cardiff, Merthyr, and Brecon Mercury, and South Wales General Advertiser*, 22 May 1841, p.3.

<sup>14</sup> Census record for George Bentley Sampson, aged 62.

<sup>15</sup> Marriage record for Hannah Dodd, married 3 January 1831, 'England, Select Marriages, 1538-1973', Ancestry.com, Accessed 21 May 2020.

the family home at Wandsworth in London, only a short walk from the River Thames. George died there in 1855.<sup>16</sup> Hannah continued to reside in the home with her two widowed siblings John and Mary until her death in 1863.<sup>17,18</sup>

George Bentley Sampson was educated, and his family appear to have had connections, but his origins remain a mystery. I can find no trace of his past or parentage other than the record of his birth in Stoke-on-Trent in the 1851 English census records.<sup>19</sup> The closest I can come, is to a Joseph Simpson and his wife Tominson, who baptised their son George Simpson, in the village of Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent in 1789.<sup>20</sup> Many questions remain. How did a man, if born into humble circumstances in eighteenth century England, rise to become an educated gentleman? What is the likelihood of his daughter marrying into gentry? If, however, George Bentley Sampson was of a more noble birth, why is there no documentation of his life prior to his marriage to Henrietta Grey in 1808?<sup>21</sup>

Since commencing this biography, I have uncovered even more intriguing facts about George Bentley Sampson's family. Such as the identity of a mysterious child, recorded as a 'visitor' in the Sampson household in the 1851 English census.<sup>22</sup> The young five-year-old Margaret Hannah Sarah Wadman, was in fact, the illegitimate daughter of George's eldest daughter Henrietta Mary.<sup>23,24</sup> Margaret had been born in Bristol, Somerset in 1845.<sup>25</sup> Three years later,

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<sup>16</sup> Death register entry for George Bentley Sampson, died Q3 1855, 'England & Wales, FreeBMD Death Index, 1837-1915', Ancestry.com, Accessed 21 May 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Census record for Hannah Sampson, aged 76, St John Hill Road, Wandsworth, London, 1861 England Census, Class: RG 9; Piece: 371; Folio: 37; Page: 29; GSU roll: 542625, '1861 England Census', Ancestry.com, Accessed 21 May 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Death record for Hannah Sampson, died September 1863, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Reference Number: DW/T/0532, 'London, England, Church of England Deaths and Burials, 1813-2003', Ancestry.com, Accessed 28 May 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Census record for George Bentley Sampson, aged 62.

<sup>20</sup> Baptism record for George Simpson, baptised 28 June 1789, 'Staffordshire, England, Extracted Church of England Parish Records, 1538-1839', Ancestry.com, Accessed 22 May 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Marriage record for Henrietta Grey and George Bentley Sampson, married 27 September 1808, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Reference Number: p74/luk/202, 'London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1921', Ancestry.com, Accessed 26 May 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Census record for Margaret Hannah Sarah Wadman, aged 5, St John Hill Road, Battersea, London, 1851 England Census, Class: HO107; Piece: 1577; Folio: 130; Page: 18; GSU roll: 174813, '1851 England Census', Ancestry.com, Accessed 26 May 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Death certificate for Margaret Hannah Sarah Le Gould died 14 January 1890, 'Australia, Death Index, 1787-1985', Ancestry.com, Accessed 21 May 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Death certificate for Henrietta Mary Anne Taylor, died 27 September 1891, 'Australia, Death Index, 1787-1985', Ancestry.com, Accessed 21 May 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Death certificate for Margaret Hannah Sarah Le Gould.

her mother Henrietta Mary, married Scottish architect Thomas Taylor.<sup>26</sup> The couple had two children together, and then to my great surprise in 1852, the family, along with the now seven-year-old Margaret, emigrated to Australia. The family spent a number of years in New South Wales and Queensland before migrating to Victoria.<sup>27</sup> In 1868 Margaret married Civil Engineer Louis Le Gould in Sydney,<sup>28</sup> the couple had seven children. Margaret died in St Kilda, in 1890.<sup>29</sup> Her death certificate records her as a Lady. There are few clues as to the identity of her biological father, and as to whether she was a Lady of monetary means or a titled Lady, that too remains a mystery. Another family history brick wall waiting to be cracked.

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<sup>26</sup> Marriage record for Henrietta Mary Ann Sampson and Thomas Taylor, married 11 November 1848, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Reference Number: p89/mry1/220, 'London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1921', Ancestry.com, Accessed 26 May 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Death certificate for Henrietta Mary Anne Taylor.

<sup>28</sup> Marriage certificate for Margaret Wadman and Louis Le Gould, married 8 February 1868, 'Australia, Marriage Index, 1788-1950', Ancestry.com, Accessed 29 May 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Death certificate for Margaret Hannah Sarah Le Gould

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