

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1409

**Sailing Unchartered Waters -
the wreck of Master Mariner**

William Whitfield

Without convicts, murderers or felons in a family of generally sober and industrious immigrants, there is no doubt that the blackest sheep in my family's flock was the master mariner William Whitfield. He eclipses all other ancestors with his winning incapacity to conform to the role of a responsible breadwinner for his wife Mary Ann and their four children or make sound decisions. Ultimately, William died a lonely and miserable death from alcoholism at the age of 43 in a Yorkshire lunatic asylum, leaving his wife to rue the day he joined the McCallum flock. Pages in the family bible were excised, photographs destroyed and William's name rarely passed their lips except in admonition. The only surviving evidence of his behaviour was his shameful reputation and his sea chest, a silent witness to his life.

Discovering William's story was challenging, especially as he had given false information on Australian maritime, birth and marriage documents or just left the spaces blank. Despite his date and place of birth in England being obscure, fate decreed that this black sheep would not escape the scrutiny of posterity. A fragment of an 1890s reply to Mary Ann's plea for help from his wealthy brother James Whitfield in Cumberland included invaluable family references and bore the letterhead of James' slate and building business in Workington. It came to light in 1975 and in time, evidence verifying William's black sheep reputation emerged.¹

Deprivation, trauma, hardship and loss in his first decade would have contributed to William's undoing. His mother died from tuberculosis in 1854 when William, the second youngest of eleven children, was three.² Then, in separate incidents, two sisters drowned in the Derwent River. William was ten when his father died as a result of a horrendous accident at the Seaton Iron Works. In 1861³ The profound impact of Mary's death is indicated by the image William had tattooed on his forearm showing a gravestone engraved with the poignant words 'In Memory of my Mother'.⁴ With no role models for family life, William was perhaps doomed.

When his father died, James Beeby Whitfield, William's oldest sibling was just back from the Victorian diggings with a fortune in gold.⁵ Illegitimate, he was apparently blessed with superior genes acquired at his mother's place of domestic servitude in 1834 but despite his character, wealth and best efforts, James was unable to protect William and his other surviving siblings from adversity and their own poor decisions while going from strength to strength himself as a wealthy merchant and a notable and philanthropic public citizen in the Cumberland port town of Workington.

In 1864, James ensured that 13 year old William had a livelihood by sending him off to sea. It was a brutal life but in 1876 William gained his Master's Certificate of Competency in New South Wales and won the heart of a Scottish lass, Mary Ann McCallum, daughter of a well-to-do Mittagong coach builder. It seemed a case of strength of character overcoming adversity.⁶

At 25 years of age, William's future career as a black sheep was not evident. In fact his hard life had bred fortitude. He survived a shipwreck off the Victorian coast near Port Campbell in 1877.⁷ His bravery and skill saved lives, if not his ship 'Young Australia'. Rising above his lack of education, William also proved himself capable of mounting a convincing defence before the Marine Board Inquiry.⁸ However, adversity would continue to stalk William and his future response was generally to seek solace in the bottle.

William was not the only black sheep in his English family and some siblings vied with him for the title of the blackest sheep. With a sister's illegitimate son cohabiting with his uncle's deserted wife, a ménage à trois, an attempted murder and headlines in the Workington paper about 'Good For Nothing People', it seems the Whitfields had a propensity for misery and dysfunction.⁹ Some rose above it; others succumbed.

Having embarked on marriage in 1879, new responsibilities were placed on William then master of the 85 ton topsail schooner 'Prima Donna'.¹⁰ Auspiciously, three months after his marriage, William became the registered owner of 'Prima Donna' but all did not prosper. Despite Mary Ann's father John McCallum helping financially, William was in debt to the tune of £1247.¹¹ Then just five months later in November 1879, the ship was extensively damaged after being hit by a gale off Bustard Head near Gladstone.¹² James Whitfield lent his brother £900 for repairs but it did not compensate William for lost earnings and costs nor steer him clear of his creditor's demands.¹³ The ship was sold and William, humiliated, was engaged as third mate on coastal steam ships.¹⁴ Early dreams disintegrated and William's serious drinking began. That and his long absences were increasingly problematic and Mary Ann's expectations were not met. The black sheep was emerging.

William was appointed pilot at Port Curtis, Gladstone in 1882, allowing him more time with his family but new challenges arose.¹⁵ Living at Gatcombe Head on the exposed southern tip of Facing Island in primitive conditions and isolated when William was away, meant that life was far from idyllic for Mary Ann. As well, William accidentally shot a Gladstone bank manager's son on the island.¹⁶ His drinking increased and that may have been the cause of William running a 2000 ton steamer aground near the Auckland Point cattle wharf. The incident culminated in his resignation as Port Curtis pilot.¹⁷

Subsequently employed by the Australian Steam Navigation Company in the coastal trade, William's frequent absences and numerous family relocations to Queensland ports put further strains on the Whitfield marriage. The arrival of a fourth child in 1886 exacerbated the situation. The baby was named after his wealthy English uncle James Whitfield, indicating William's affection for his protective brother but James could not save William from his blunders.¹⁸ Imagining that he had his brother's entrepreneurial skills, but disregarding his lack of capital, William took risks in the hope of being master of his own ship again. He planned to start a line of schooners to run between Sydney and Mackay but instead, failure found him ignominiously working on a small steamer 'Scout' plying the waters between Brisbane and the Northern Rivers of NSW for the South Brisbane Sawmilling Company.¹⁹

While there were shorter absences from home, tensions increased and the marriage unravelled. William was fortunate to successfully beach 'Scout' at Byron Bay during a severe gale but with severe damage, he was without an income during repairs. Then in July 1887 William had to relinquish his command of 'Scout' when the Commercial Code of Signals was mysteriously thrown overboard while the ship was docked in Brisbane.²⁰ Was it the result of a drunken night? Just months later, the couple separated permanently, Mary Ann moving to Mittagong while William headed north undertaking risky ventures in the Torres Straits.

William was officially awarded his Pilotage Exemption Certificate at Thursday Island in 1891.²¹ The port was notorious for its drunkenness but William successfully delivered small pearling luggers from Sydney, with some smuggling on the side and piloted ships through the treacherous reefs.²² Real disaster struck though when William grounded the 780 ton 'SS Franklin' at the entrance of Townsville Harbour in June 1893.²³ It was the end of his maritime career. Black sheep have a capacity to compound their mistakes so the master mariner decided that he would do well to buy The Royal Hotel in Parkes NSW with no expertise and dependent on a prospective inheritance of £1800 from his wealthy English uncle Jacob Beeby who had left an estate of £20000.²⁴ The inheritance did not materialise, bequeathed instead to Jacob's trustworthy nephew James Beeby Whitfield.²⁵

In anticipation of his windfall, William borrowed from a friend Henry Lane and bought stock from Wine and Spirit Merchants in exchange for useless promissory notes.²⁶ Within five months a writ was issued to declare William bankrupt. Any black sheep would seek evasive action and within days, William absconded on board a ship for England, still hoping to collect his inheritance. Within the black sheep there were however elements of decency. Henry Lane received the entire £600 raised from the sale of the hotel.

Within six weeks of his arrival in Hull, William was admitted to the Kingston-Upon-Hull Lunatic Asylum. His death in September 1894 was attributed to inherited insanity and drunkenness.²⁷ There was no estate for his family, though Mary Ann optimistically contacted William's relatives in England. Disappointed and destitute, she and the children continued to depend on her McCallum relatives. She outlived William by 50 years, bitter to the end about her black sheep of a husband but one wonders if he was in fact also a victim rather than a fully accredited black sheep. His sins were as much of omission as commission and perhaps his aspirations were more honourable than the documents suggest. Nevertheless, as the outcomes of William's actions and decisions, rather than his intentions constitute our only evidence, condemned he must be.



Sketch of the Brisbane River looking towards the wharf and buildings on Short Street, Brisbane c. 1889, SLQ

¹ 1895 letter from James Beeby Whitfield, 'Builders' Merchant' of Workington to Mary Ann Whitfield. An attachment provided the address of his nephew Joseph Whitfield, 'Joiner and Plumber' of 2 Ansbury Street Hull who had written to James on 8 October 1894 to inform him of William Whitfield's death. Joseph and his wife had cared for William after he returned to England in poor health and admitted him to the Sculcoates Asylum.

² Death Certificate of Mary Whitfield, 12 February 1854.

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- ³ Death Certificates of Jane Whitfield 18 December 1854, Margaret Whitfield 26 November 1856, and John Whitfield 8 April 1861.
- ⁴ Sculcoates Lunatic Asylum, Admission document, William Whitfield, September 1894, East Riding of Yorkshire Archives and Record Service, Kingston-Upon-Hull.
- ⁵ Obituary of James Whitfield, *Workington Star*, 18 June 1900.
- ⁶ State Records Authority of New South Wales: Shipping Master's Office; *Passengers Arriving 1855 – 1922*, NGS 13278, [X131-133], reel 431. Marriage Certificate of William Whitfield and Mary Ann McCallum, 6 March 1879.
- ⁷ *Australasian Sketcher Vol. 5 p. 52*, 7 July 1877, ML Sydney
- ⁸ *Warrnambool Standard*, 19 June 1877 p. 2. *Sydney Morning Herald* 18 June 1877 p. 5.
- ⁹ *West Cumberland Times*, Wednesday 29 October 1884.
- ¹⁰ William first commanded 'Prima Donna' on 15 June 1877, his first engagement after the wreck of 'Young Australian'. Like 'Young Australian', 'Prima Donna' carried sugar for the CSR Company from Mackay and other Queensland ports to Sydney and Melbourne.
- ¹¹ National Maritime Museum Library, Sydney, Australian Register of British Ships, Port of Sydney, Number 15/1874 'Prima Donna' Registration 2 June 1879.
- ¹² *Sydney Morning Herald* 25 November 1879.
- ¹³ 1895 letter from James Beeby Whitfield to Mary Ann Whitfield.
- ¹⁴ Vessels included 'SS Keilawarra', 'SS Lady Bowen' and 'SS Wentworth'.
- ¹⁵ Queensland Government Gazette Vol. XXX 1882 p. 367. Winifred Davenport, *Harbours and Marine - port & harbour development in Queensland 1824-1985*, Department of Harbours & Marine, Brisbane, 1986 p. 146
- ¹⁶ The boy was taken to Rockhampton and progressed favourably, *The Brisbane Courier*, 24 January 1883 p. 5
- ¹⁷ *The Morning Bulletin*, 22 July 1884 p. 5. *The Morning Bulletin*, 28 October 1884 p. 4.
- ¹⁸ Birth Certificate of James Archibald Whitfield, 10 September 1886.
- ¹⁹ *The Morning Bulletin* 28 June 1886 p. 5. *Clarence River Examiner & New England Advertiser*, 26 February 1887 p. 4. *Northern Star* 23 March 1887 p. 2.
- ²⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 February 1887 p. 10. *Northern Star*, 23 March 1887 p. 2. *Brisbane Courier*, 2 August 1887, p. 8.
- ²¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 May 1891 p. 4. *Brisbane Courier*, 7 June 1891. J. Foley, *Reef Pilots - the history of the Queensland Coast and Torres Strait Pilot Service*, Banks Bros. & Street, Sydney, 1982, p. 42.
- ²² *The Morning Bulletin*, 10 June 1891 p. 6..
- ²³ *The Brisbane Courier*, 27 July p. 5; *The Brisbane Courier* 23 August 1893 pp 3& 4.
- ²⁴ State Records NSW, Deposition of Henry Lane, Supreme Court Bankruptcy William Whitfield 8459.
- ²⁵ Will of Jacob Beeby, 27 October 1891; Probate granted 6 February 1892.
- ²⁶ State Records NSW, Deposition of Henry Lane, Supreme Court Bankruptcy William Whitfield 8459.
- ²⁷ Evidence from Joseph Whitfield, Case History No 2928, Sculcoates Asylum Records, Hull Archives, Yorkshire.