

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1411

**Of Sheep and a Wolf
(Joseph Deveson)**

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The blackest sheep in my family flock was, as I thought, my Great Great Uncle Joseph Deveson, a farmer's son from Kent. I found he had married a girl not long before the birth of their first child and that he had an illegitimate daughter. Also that he had emigrated to New Zealand via Sydney and had lived in or near the notorious city of Kororarika. He seemed to me to be well worth investigating

Joseph was born in the village of Eastry on 5 February 1808 and, like his brothers and sisters, was baptised in the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin.¹ After his baptism there was no news of him until, at the age of twenty-five he married a girl named Sarah Poole in London.² When their first child, Sarah, was born on 5th October the same year I assumed the pregnancy was their reason for seeking the anonymity in the city. Neither of Joseph's parents were at the wedding but he was not completely cut off from his family. Among the witnesses were his sister Jane and his brother-in-law Henry Downard, husband of his sister Susannah.³

Joseph's father John Deveson was a farmer and market-gardener living near Wingham, in Kent. Two of his sons, Henry and George, were farmers like their father but Joseph chose a different path. He became a carpenter and went into business with a man named John Dines at Shoreditch in London.⁴

A second child, Fanny, was born on 10 March 1836 and after this there is another gap in Joseph's life. Some time before 23 January 1852, the date of his father John Deveson's will, he had borrowed £145 from his brother Richard and an unspecified sum from his brother William and between 1826 and 1839 he migrated with his family to Australia. The next record of him is the birth of a son, George, who was baptised at St Phillips Church, Sydney, on 12 October 1839.⁵

We do not know why Joseph decided to emigrate. His name does not appear either in convict lists or among assisted and unassisted passengers to Australia. Perhaps the carpentry business was not doing well or he may have been recruited by one of the missionary societies seeking god-fearing settlers for New Zealand. Whatever the motive, by the time George, was born Joseph and his family were living in Princes Street, Sydney and during the next three years they moved on to New Zealand. A daughter, Mary Deveson, was baptised in the Parish of Pahia, Auckland, on 18 February 1842, and two years after that, on 27 May 1844, twins John and Emma were baptised in a mass-ceremony at Kororarika, Bay of Islands.⁶

'Kororarika', today named 'Russell', was known as the 'Hell Hole of the Pacific'. It was a sheltered harbour close to the whaling grounds and had everything a sailing master might need. Until the British imposed some sort of order around 1840 it's primary industry was prostitution. This made it a prime target for missionaries and in 1823 the London Church Missionary Society opened its third New Zealand Mission at Pahia, across the Bay from Kororarika. It was a troubled time. There was intertribal warfare among the Maoris and occasional friction between the Maoris and the Missionaries. There was also tension between

the Missionaries and the British Government. The missionaries often had a better understanding of local customs and problems than did the various officials sent out from England and were not afraid to say so!⁷

On 11 March 1845 these tensions snapped. Kororarika was attacked by Maoris, sacked and abandoned. Many inhabitants fled by ship but there is no mention of Joseph and his family. They must have returned to Australia by some means because on 31 December 1848 Sarah Poole died in Sydney. Once again I could find no mention of Joseph or his family in shipping records but family stories suggested he had arrived in New Zealand in a boat he built himself and was engaged in trade between New Zealand and Australia..⁸ If Joseph really had been connected to the whalers, seamen and traders of Kororarika he was a very black sheep indeed! What made me change my mind about him was the entry 'Joseph Deveson, Paroa 1842' in a list of early settlers and the inclusion of his name in a list of 'men of good character liable to serve on juries' in the 1845 edition of the New Zealand Gazette.⁹

After the Sarah's death Joseph moved to Geelong in Victoria. There he fathered an illegitimate daughter, Eliza Amity Deveson whom he acknowledged but for some reason he and her mother Elizabeth Peace Crabtree did not marry. This, of course made him seem a little darker but once again I was wrong. Apparently Elizabeth was the reluctant one because it was not until she married someone else that Joseph himself married. He chose a widow, Elizabeth Connor, at Ballarat and became the proprietor of the Little Bendigo Hotel. Before this he is alleged to have worked first as a goldminer and then a storekeeper but no matter what the occupation he always called himself 'Carpenter'. There is no evidence of an apprenticeship but he was always proud of his trade.

Joseph died in Ballarat on 3 June 1892 and is buried in Ballarat Old Cemetery. In his will he left money to all his children; Sarah, Fanny, George, Mary, Emma and his illegitimate daughter Eliza Amity –now Mrs Henry Viccars. His son John was not mentioned and may not have survived. The remainder of his estate was left in trust to his third wife's daughter, Adelaide Coffey, to be used in the 'best interests' of her mother, suggesting she was in need of some kind of care.

Great Uncle Joseph's life was unconventional but he was not the 'black sheep' I had supposed. Rather, he was an adventurous man who, while prepared to overstep the boundaries of convention, was always mindful of those in his care. His fleece may have been discoloured in a few places but he was certainly no 'black sheep'.

Sadly this is not the end of the story. There really was a 'black sheep' in our family and one not to be spoken of lightly. Joseph's brother Daniel, a retired dairyman, and his wife Elizabeth Collins, had two children; Joseph's niece Sarah born about 1856 and his nephew George born about 1859. On 17 August 1876 Sarah married Charles Othon Kohler at Trinity Chapel, London. He died soon afterwards – probably in 1881 - and in 1887 she married Leonard Bowes Handford.¹⁰

Leonard and Sarah had one son, Archibald James, but Leonard was an alcoholic and the marriage was not a happy one. Although they were living with Sarah's parents he was

constantly threatening violence against his wife and son and eventually Daniel ejected him from the house. Archie was sent away to boarding-school at Bishops Stortford in Hertfordshire and Sarah applied for a judicial separation. Leonard, who had moved to a house just a few doors away, was extremely upset by all this and particularly by the loss of his son. He waited for his wife and mother-in-law as they left Church, shot at them both and then attempted to shoot himself. Although none of them were expected to survive all eventually recovered. Handford was sentenced to 14 years penal servitude with a recommendation for mercy because of his mental state. He died in confinement on the 13 March 1909.¹¹ Elizabeth always wore a high collar around her neck to hide the scar where the bullet had entered. I don't know what happened to Sarah but Archie, the innocent cause of the crime, visited his father in prison at least once and all his life never touched any kind of alcohol.¹²

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¹ Christening and Baptismal Records, 1747 – 1812. Kent Family History Records Fiche 859.

² On 29 June 1933, at Holy Trinity Church, Newington, Surrey. London, England, Marriages and Banns 1754-1921, Ancestry Transcription. Accessed 30.5.2014.

³ London, England, Marriages and Banns 1754 – 1921 Ancestry Transcription. Accessed 10.11.2009.

⁴ Guildhall Library, Records of Sun Fire Insurance 1836. National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey England. ref. no. MS11936/555/1241174

⁵ NSW Baptism Transcription (Early Church Records). ref. no. vol. 23A No243.

⁶ Baptisms Solemnized in the Parish of Pahia 1842 p. 68 and Baptisms Solemnised in the Parish of Kororarika 1864 . Register 680 p.13. Anglican Archives, Auckland.

⁷ Richard Wolfe, Hell-Hole of the Pacific, Penguin 2005. pp. 7-9 and passim. Also Letters from the Bay of Islands ed. Caroline Fitzgerald, Penguin 2004. pp. 1-23 and passim.

⁸ Letter from researcher Lorraine Nicholls/Sinclair, Australia, one of Joseph's descendents.

⁹ 'Roll of Early Settlers and Descendants in the Auckland Province Prior to the end of 1852. Centennial Memorial Publication 1840, Auckland Public Library. Also New Zealand Government Gazette Auckland , Monday, March 3, 1845, p.35.

¹⁰ British Newspapers 1710-1953 London Daily News 22 August 1878. Transcribed Findmypast. 1881 Census transcribed Ancestry, accessed 2.2.2010. Free BMD Marriages and Deaths.

¹¹ He died in the Workhouse Infirmary of 'tubercle of the lungs'. Death Certificate , Kennington, Lambeth, London, 1909.

¹² Personal recollections. xxxxx [edited by SAG]