

# **Croker Prize for Biography**

**Entry 1413**

**Black sheep, dark horse:  
the double life of Henry Curran**

*Information is requested concerning the present whereabouts of Henry Curran, who is 49 years of age, 5 feet 10 inches high, dark complexion, dark hair, dark-brown beard whiskers and moustache, grey eyes (slight cast in left one), straight nose; a produce merchant; a native of County Fermanagh, Ireland. He is accompanied by a woman named Letty. They are supposed to have left Brisbane for Melbourne in October, 1887, but strict inquiries have since been made by the police there and no trace of them can be found. Inquiries instituted at the instance of his wife Ann Curran, Ernest Street, South Brisbane. Information to the Officer in Charge of Detectives. 20th May, 1889.<sup>i</sup>*

What leads a man to betray his wife of 23 years, abandon his seven children in Queensland and disappear across the sea with a married woman much younger than himself, change his name obliquely to Smith and raise another family in San Francisco? Henry Curran, my great-great-great grandfather, was such a man. His deception might never have been exposed if his deserted wife had not reported his disappearance. It was only after many years of fruitless searching that I found him - not in the lonely, untended grave of a boundary rider in the outback as I had once suspected - but in a 'missing friends' notice published in a Queensland police gazette.

Henry Curran was born in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh in or around 1836, by his own admission the son of John and possibly Ann Curran. Henry could read and write, so his education was sufficient. If his life was not hard enough to discover, another Henry Curran - also from Enniskillen - emigrates to Australia at around the same time, and complicates what might have been an otherwise fairly straightforward matter. It is only through a process of elimination that we can separate these two parallel lives, the lives of my ancestor and his unwitting double<sup>ii</sup>. It has to be assumed that my ancestor, unlike his double, made his own way to Australia before his marriage in 1864, when he first appears conclusively in the records.

Testifying to the priest that he was 28 years old Henry Curran married Ann Weldon<sup>iii</sup> at St Mary's Church, Ipswich according to the rites of the Church of Rome on 16 April 1864<sup>iv</sup>. Eight children were born to them over the next 12 years<sup>v</sup>. In a flourish from May to December 1874 Curran advertised himself in the *Queensland Times* as a "family grocer, wholesale and retail produce storekeeper" with his business premises on Brisbane Street, Ipswich. In October 1874 he had purchased a 32-foot lot in the bustling town, most likely these same premises. But Curran was soon to fall on hard times. In 1878 he was declared insolvent and a trustee appointed by the Supreme Court in Brisbane. The hard times and brushes with the law continued, for in 1885 Curran was charged on summons for 'exposing goods for sale' on Ernest Street in South Brisbane. He pleaded guilty and a magistrate fined him 43 shillings and six pence<sup>vi</sup>.

It may have been his business as a produce merchant and grocer that led him to the mysterious woman Letty, with whom he eloped in 1887. Although he was certainly a

deserter Curran was not quite a bigamist because there is no evidence he ever married Letty. If such a marriage was ever contracted in San Francisco, then any record of it was likely destroyed in the catastrophic earthquake and fires that consumed the city in 1906. Letty was born Anna Letitia Pfeil in 1860 in Prahran, Victoria. She was the daughter of Johann Schnellan Pfeil, a German immigrant from Hesse-Kassel and his Irish wife, Ann Connelly, who came from Enniskillen. In apparently undue haste in 1878 Letty married a Cantonese grocer, James Loung, who was living at 118 Elgin Street, Carlton<sup>vii</sup>. The marriage, by licence, was conducted at the manse of a Presbyterian minister in East Melbourne and witnessed by Letty's father. No record can be found of a divorce, or of Loung's death. It seems Letty, like Henry, was running from something.

They certainly ran. In 1900 we find them in San Francisco. By this time Henry has changed his name to Henry Curran Smith, is a hotel and saloon-keeper and on the census form he claims to have been married to Letty for 20 years. He states he was naturalised after emigrating in 1886<sup>viii</sup>. He also lied fulsomely about his age, stating he was 50 and born in 1849. Four children, three daughters and a son, were born to them between 1887 and 1895. The San Francisco earthquake covered their tracks sufficiently and we find no records of the births of the children except those in the census or of Henry's naturalisation. Of the four children born to Henry and Letty, only the eldest daughter leaves descendants. So, what became of my ancestor's double? Henry Curran, boundary rider, died of asthma, pneumonia and asphyxia at Victoria Hospital in Barcaldine in the Queensland outback, on 20 May 1892.

There is an informal snapshot of my great-great-great grandfather Henry in the possession of his American descendants, taken a few years before his death in 1915. His youthful face seems open and kind, belying his complicated double life. Photographed on a stoop in the fading light of a Californian afternoon, Henry wears a hat, workman's gear and a light greying beard. Letty smiles cheekily in a photograph from around the same time; both seem to be at peace with themselves. Henry died on 19 October 1915 and was buried in an unmarked grave in Holy Cross Cemetery in Colma, a necropolis in the San Francisco Bay area. Letty died six years later. Rather than be interred in the same grave her last wish was to be cremated and her ashes scattered off Melbourne in the waters of Port Phillip Bay.

A true survivor, Ann Curran outlived them all. But Henry's desertion was just one of many great shocks in her long life. Only two of her children managed to survive her. Tragically her second daughter Bessie died in 1917 of a cerebral haemorrhage at the Hospital for the Insane at Goodna, west of Brisbane. Her eldest daughter Rose Ann had also endured her fair share of tragedy; widowed at 27 with four children when her first husband was killed in a freak accident on a moored ship in the port of Brisbane<sup>ix</sup>, she then lost two sons at a young age from her second marriage in 1901 and 1911. Rose Ann was alighting from a tram at Newstead in Brisbane's inner north when she was hit by a truck on 25 March 1930<sup>x</sup>. She died later in hospital. Ann died a week later on 1 April 1930 at Nazareth House, a benevolent home established in 1925 by the Catholic Order of the Sisters of Nazareth, and was buried with her youngest son Francis at the South Brisbane Cemetery in Dutton Park<sup>xi</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> Queensland Police Gazette, 1889, p 225.

<sup>ii</sup> This double of my ancestor came to Australia aboard the *Coldstream* in 1863. According to the ship's manifest Henry was 19, a labourer and native of Enniskillen. His father was Thomas and his mother Elizabeth, and when Henry emigrated, his father was still alive. The immigration deposit journal establishes that this particular Henry Curran came assisted after a £5 deposit was paid and lists his native place as 'Mullaugheen', which is certainly Mullaghmeen, a townland north of Enniskillen in the parish of Magheracross adjoining the border with County Tyrone.

<sup>iii</sup> Ann emigrated to Moreton Bay with her mother and two sisters aboard the *Persia* in 1861, following her older brother Patrick and his wife who came in 1857.

<sup>iv</sup> Marriage certificate of Henry Curran and Ann Weldon, 16 April 1864, file number 1864/C161, Queensland State Archives. Issued at Brisbane 2 August 1999. Certified copy in possession of author.

<sup>v</sup> Only two of the Curran children were officially registered at birth, Elizabeth and Mary Ellen; the baptismal records of St Mary's Church are the only proof we have of the births of the other five children. Most of the children were baptised within days, suggesting that Henry and Ann closely observed their Catholic faith. 'Mrs Rodgers', the nurse who delivered Mary Ellen, was formerly Bridget Weldon (known as Bidy), Ann's older sister.

<sup>vi</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 3 September 1885, p3.

<sup>vii</sup> Marriage certificate of James Loung and Anna Letitia Pfeil, 24 September 1878, Public Records Office of Victoria. Certified copy in possession of author.

<sup>viii</sup> 1900 United States Federal Census, San Francisco, San Francisco, California; Roll 107; p 4A; Enumeration District: 0304; FHL microfilm: 1240107.

<sup>ix</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 14 October 1896, p 4.

<sup>x</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 9 April, 1930, p 16.

<sup>xi</sup> Death certificate of Ann Curran, registered 3 April 1930, file number 1930/B10609, Queensland Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. Issued at Brisbane 22 October 1999. Certified copy in possession of author.