

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1516

Granny Greenhalgh

My immigrant ancestor's story is actually two stories, the fantasy and the reality. Caroline Greenhalgh, known in her latter years as 'Granny' Greenhalgh, was, by all accounts, especially her own, a most remarkable woman. So strong was the force of her personality that she was believed to be 108 years old when she died (not true), and more than three decades later her descendants were fighting over the inheritance of a fortune that had never existed anywhere except in Caroline's imagination. Caroline invented a whole fantastical background for herself, but her achievements were real enough as an early settler and pioneer in the north of the colony of New South Wales, where she earned a reputation as the smartest cedar dealer on the Richmond River.¹

In the fantasy version of her life, Caroline was born in 1804, the daughter of Lord Panton of Kent, and a relation of the Duke of Wellington. When she was young her father died at the great age of 114, and her mother was remarried to the wealthy John Coats, of the cotton manufacturing family. In 1815, at the age of 11, Caroline witnessed troops passing over London Bridge, having been despatched to fight the French at Waterloo.² She ran away from home due to disagreements with her step-father and became a nursemaid to the young Princess (later Queen) Victoria. She once 'borrowed' the Princess' jewels when going to a dance, and got into trouble for it.³

In 1822, at age 18, Caroline sailed on the ship *Red Rover* in one of the first batches of free immigrants to the colony of New South Wales, accompanied by her friend, the famous philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts. Caroline had secured a position as a lady companion to Governor Brisbane's wife, but on the voyage out she met Joseph Greenhalgh, another free settler, and they were married on arrival in Sydney. By 1837 Caroline and Joseph had a large family, and she was 33 years old. That year they travelled north to the Richmond River, and were the first white settlers in the district.⁴ Such is Caroline's account of her early years and her advent to the Richmond, and she apparently told her children as they grew up that she had a claim on the fortune of the Coats family.⁵

In the real, and more prosaic version of her life, Caroline was born on 4 January 1822 in Whitechapel,⁶ the daughter of Joseph Panting, a carpenter. At the age of 18 she was brought out to New South Wales as a Bounty immigrant by one John Marshall, and she arrived in Sydney on the ship *Lady McNaughton* on 16 December 1840.⁷ Soon after, on 8 March 1841, Caroline married Joseph Greenhalgh,⁸ an ex-convict,⁹ at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. Twins were born to Caroline and Joseph in Sydney, but died in infancy.¹⁰

In 1843 they travelled to the Richmond River in a small schooner, and joined the sawyers' camp at Gundurimba, which was the centre of the cedar trade on the Richmond.¹¹ Situated near the confluence of two tributary creeks, which flowed through hundreds of acres of thickly wooded hill country, the site gave access to the best cedar in the north. Huts were built and the women and children lived there while the men worked up the tributaries cutting cedar.¹² In those early days on the Richmond there were no bullocks for hauling timber and rowing boats were the only means of transport. Cedar was felled and rolled onto sawpits, where it was cut into fitches with pitsaws, then tipped into the river and flooded to the boats. It was customary for the sawyers, when working in the hills, to stack the cedar logs they had cut on the bank of some distant creek and then return home to wait for the next flood

to carry them down to the river.¹³

Great torrents of water swept down from the mountains three or four times a year. With the first drop of rain the excitement in the cedar camps rose as the sawyers got ready for the 'running out'. Dampers were cooked, beef was boiled and the men started out on their long walk to the hills. When the flood came down with a roar they sprang to life and, shoving the logs into the swift-flowing current, they plunged in afterwards to guide them downstream. Clinging to the branches on the banks or riding astride the logs, they eased them over the snags or pushed them out from the overhanging vines. It was dangerous work following the logs down to the 'stop', or chain, which was placed at the mouth of the creek, and many men were drowned.¹⁴

Caroline and Joseph's next seven children were born at the Richmond River between 1847 and 1864,¹⁵ and the family moved about where the cedar trade took them. Once they had a fire they never allowed it to go out, and when shifting their camp from place to place carried a lighted booyong stick which smouldered all the time. Times were very hard in those days and Caroline and her family often went a week without any regular food. Others were even more hard up. Many could not afford to buy clothes and wore trousers made of cornsacks.¹⁶ While Joseph worked as a cedar getter, Caroline acted as the unofficial doctor and midwife to the settlers on the Richmond River.¹⁷

In 1874 Joseph died, leaving Caroline a widow.¹⁸ In order to support her family, she put her accumulated knowledge of the cedar trade to use and became a cedar dealer. Cedar dealers performed an important service for those engaged in the industry. They bought the logs for cash, so that the cedar getters did not have to wait for them to be shipped to Sydney to get their money. Caroline, now known as 'Granny' Greenhalgh, soon earned a reputation as the smartest dealer on the river. Whenever a schooner came up the river laden with logs she was often to be seen there, looking for flaws and picking out the best cedar she could find for a Sydney or Melbourne buyer.¹⁹

When her children had grown up and were no longer reliant on her to support them, Caroline retired from the cedar trade and was employed as caretaker of the Lismore Council Chambers in 1879. She held this position for the next quarter of a century, finally being forced to retire in 1904 due to the infirmities of her age. Fiercely independent, she refused to accept the old age pension and continued to earn her own living by sewing and making paper ornaments and other articles. Despite failing hearing and memory she still wheeled a small handcart to town almost every day with unfaltering step. She also kept various pets, including a few Skye terriers, a monkey, a cat, two possums and several parrots. She disliked publicity, and on the occasion of the visit of the Governor of New South Wales, Sir Harry Rawson, to Lismore she refused to sit for a photograph when His Excellency requested one after a brief conversation with her.²⁰

In her latter years Caroline moved to a little cottage close to St. Mary's Convent, where she resided by herself. Despite all the entreaties of her sons and daughters to live with them, she was determined to do for herself. She said was quite happy under the care of the good Sisters of the Convent, and many times her daughters would

come away crying because she would not let them do anything for her.²¹

On the night of 3 August 1913 a kerosene lamp in Caroline's cottage exploded and set her on fire. Her neighbours ran to her cottage and extinguished the fire. Finding her burnt from head to foot, they wrapped her in a blanket, and sent for a doctor and her relatives, who arrived soon afterwards. The doctor ordered her immediate removal to hospital. Caroline was perfectly conscious, and, in spite of her terrible injuries, protested against being removed from her house. Even when she had been prevailed upon to be taken away she carefully instructed her daughter to see that her house was properly locked up. She was taken to hospital, where she died several hours later,²² aged 91. Caroline was thought to be 108 years old, and that age was recorded on her death certificate²³ and inscribed on her tombstone.²⁴

In a bizarre sequel to the fantasies Caroline spun around her life, a dispute erupted in 1949 between several of her descendants as to which of them was the true heir to her 'fortune'. This was believed to consist of £15,000,000, and supposedly devolved on the descendants of Caroline, as step-daughter of John Coats.²⁵ Of course the argument was entirely academic and no one actually inherited this fortune, since Caroline's claim to it was entirely fictitious. The strength of people's belief in these tales over so many years however, stands as testimony to the remarkable immigrant, pioneer and story-teller known as Granny Greenhalgh.

¹ Daley, Louise Tiffany, *Men and a River: A History of the Richmond River District 1828-1895*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1968, p. 38.

² 'Woman's world – a remarkable centenarian', *The Brisbane Courier*, 14 May 1904.

³ Told to the author in 1992 by his grandmother, Mrs Rose Wright, a great granddaughter of Granny Greenhalgh.

⁴ Letter from Mrs Rita Torenbeek to the author dated 2 July 1996.

⁵ Involved tale of £15M', *The Northern Star*, 17 March 1949.

⁶ 'Caroline Amelia Elizabeth Greenhalgh', Richmond River Historical Society Inc., provided to the author on 3 March 1996, p. 5

⁷ State Records NSW, Index to Bounty Immigrants, 1828-1842, Ship Lady McNaughton, Caroline Amelia Elizabeth Panting, 16 December 1840, Vol 32, p. 875, Reel 416.

⁸ NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Marriage Certificate, Joseph Greenhalgh & Caroline Panton, 8 March 1841, No. 3496, issued on 28 July 1993.

⁹ State Records NSW, Joseph Greenhalgh, Guildford, 1827, No 33/1180, 29 October 1833, Certificate of Freedom, [4/4318], Reel 991.

¹⁰ 'Burning fatality: "Granny" Greenhalgh succumbs to her injuries – a very long life sadly terminated', *The Northern Star*, 4 August 1913.

¹¹ 'Pioneer history: Trials and tribulations – hominy and treacle', *The Northern Star*, 6 August 1926.

¹² Daley, Louise Tiffany, 'Men and a River', *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ 'Caroline "Granny" Greenhalgh – early cedar dealer in Lismore', Richmond River Historical Society Inc., provided to the author on 3 March 1996, p. 5. These were Mary Ann, born 1847, Joseph, born 1849, Matthew, born 1852, John, born 1854, Rosetta, born 1855, Caroline, born 1858, Vincent, born 1859, Louisa, born 1862, and Ellen, born 1864.

¹⁶ 'Pioneer history: Trials and tribulations – hominy and treacle', *The Northern Star*, 6 August 1926.

¹⁷ Letter from Mrs Rita Torenbeek to the author dated 2 July 1996.

¹⁸ NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Joseph Greenhalgh, 9 September 1874, No. 468, issued on 2 October 1992.

¹⁹ Daley, Louise Tiffany, 'Men and a River', *op. cit.*, p. 38.

- 20 'Woman's world – a remarkable centenarian', *The Brisbane Courier*, 14 May 1904.
- 21 'Burning fatality: "Granny" Greenhalgh succumbs to her injuries – a very long life sadly terminated', *The Northern Star*, 4 August 1913.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Caroline Greenhalgh, 3 August 1913, No. 472, issued on 5 October 1993.
- 24 Letter from Mrs Rita Torenbeek to the author dated 2 July 1996.
- 25 'Involved tale of £15M', *The Northern Star*, 17 March 1949.