

# **Croker Prize for Biography**

**Entry 1517**

**Looks like Hopelessness**

## Looks like hopelessness

To misquote Oscar Wilde's *Lady Bracknell*, "to emigrate once may reveal initiative; to emigrate twice looks like hopelessness"<sup>1</sup>. In 1883, Charles Fleming took his family from Scotland to Australia in order to escape poverty, pollution, disease and premature death. But why, having established a good life in Sydney, did he uproot his large family twenty years later to move to New Zealand?

Born on 10 February 1854 at Coatbridge, Scotland<sup>2</sup>, Charles Fleming was the second of four sons and a daughter born to Elizabeth (nee Taylor) and Angus Fleming, a "waggoner".

Coatbridge was then the most polluted town in the United Kingdom because it was at the very centre of the fast-growing coal, iron and steel industries of Glasgow<sup>3</sup>. Living conditions were notoriously bad<sup>4</sup>, with overcrowding and a high incidence of infant mortality. As David Bremner wrote<sup>5</sup> in 1869:

"Though Coatbridge is a most interesting seat of industry, it is anything but beautiful. Dense clouds of smoke roll over it incessantly and impart to all buildings a peculiarly dingy aspect. A coat of black dust overlies everything. ... From the steeple of the parish church ... the flames of no fewer than fifty blast furnaces may be seen."

Apart from the adverse effect that this must have caused to the residents' physical health, it may also have had a depressing effect on their mental health, including that of Angus Fleming and his son Charles.

Angus had to compete against other waggoners for haulage contracts with the large Glasgow industries. His income would therefore have been low and unreliable<sup>6</sup>. When his second son William was born in 1859, Angus was a sawyer, having given up his haulage work. Presumably, this new profession paid regular and reliable wages.

When Charles was 11 years old, his youngest sibling (Matthew) was born<sup>7</sup>. By this time his father had left the family home, never to return<sup>8</sup>. Charles' mother Elizabeth was left to raise her surviving children alone. She was fortunate to receive assistance from her brother, Matthew Taylor.

Despite the family's poor circumstances, Charles received a good elementary education and was ultimately apprenticed as an iron moulder<sup>9</sup>, his lifelong profession. His younger brothers William and Angus were similarly apprenticed as a riveter and an iron moulder respectively<sup>10</sup>.

When he was 23 years old, Charles married Margaret Scott Ballentyne who was a year younger<sup>11</sup>. Their eldest son, Charles Taylor Fleming, was born exactly a year after the wedding<sup>12</sup>. Two years later a second son, Thomas, was born.

In 1881, the following year, Charles' mother died and he became head of his extended family<sup>13</sup>. Unfortunately, his infant son Thomas died a few months later<sup>14</sup>. It is likely that his father died about this time too<sup>15</sup>.

Emigration appealed to Charles and Maggie as a way to a better life<sup>16</sup>, so they emigrated to Australia in 1883. Charles' brother Angus and sister Jane followed soon afterwards<sup>17</sup>.

Charles, Maggie and their surviving son boarded *Eastern Monarch* (Captain White<sup>18</sup>) on Friday 20 July 1883 bound for Townsville. The ship carried 534 emigrants<sup>19</sup> and a cargo of steel rails for the Queensland railways. Charles kept a daily diary<sup>20</sup> during the action-packed voyage. On day 25 as the ship neared the equator he had the pleasure of recording the birth of his third son William.

On day 3 the ship had missed being wrecked on a hidden rock by just one boat length. Some weeks later it endured a furious gale in the Atlantic Ocean. The cargo of steel rails eventually shifted and, with every roll of the ship, threatened to smash the hull apart.

“had it not been for the brave men below who managed to a certain extent to jam and bind (the rails) down nothing could have saved us from a watery grave.”<sup>20,</sup>

Some of the passengers expressed a desire to call at a port in order to better secure the cargo. The drunken captain replied that “*he would land us in townsville or hell!*”!

On day 94, as *Eastern Monarch* sailed serenely up the eastern coast of Australia, sickness broke out.

“at a quarter to 6 o'clock this morning a little girl died ... she was buried at 9 this morning and shortly after the funeral another little boy was brought on deck for air and layed in a sling bed and at 10 o'clock as i was passing i saw him die his poor mother fell back into my arms in a faint ... and in the evening another little girl died about 9 o'clock”<sup>20</sup>.

In all, ten children died of measles and typhoid fever. Fortunately, young Charles and infant William were unaffected. Perhaps Charles had developed natural immunity from close contact with his brother Thomas who had died two years earlier.

The next day the ship entered Townsville's Cleveland Bay but due to the sickness on board the health officer (Doctor Ahearne) refused to grant pratique<sup>21</sup>. The whole ship's company was forced into quarantine on nearby Magnetic Island for a week.

For the Fleming family, mercifully spared from illness, the days under canvas on the warm island beach provided a welcome distraction. It allowed them to become somewhat familiar with their new homeland before the business of finding work and accommodation had to be tackled.

“this is a wild looking place with great hills covered from head to foot with stones the half size of the Eastern Monarch and the trees growing out from between them, i have walked over a good bit of the island and i have seen a good many cockatoos and other beautiful birds but no monkeys”<sup>20</sup>.

After unsuccessful attempts to find a job in Queensland, Charles eventually found employment at Mort's iron foundry in the Sydney suburb of Balmain. Recognising his outstanding skills as an iron moulder, his employer soon allocated to Charles the iron foundry's most unusual and difficult projects. He was very proud, therefore, to be chosen to make the mould that was used to cast the figurehead for the new Sydney Harbour pilot vessel

*Captain Cook* in 1892. Sculpted by Sydney artist Nelson Illingworth, the figurehead portrays Captain Cook shading his eyes with his right hand while staring resolutely ahead, with his telescope tucked under his left arm. The great seafarer's body morphs at the waist into intricate iron filigree work along the bow of the vessel.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported<sup>22</sup>:

“The bow will be surmounted by a bronze figure-head of the great navigator Captain Cook, after whom the vessel is named. The figure ... was cast by the contractors in one piece with great success. It is the first attempt that has been made in statuary



founding in the colonies”.

**Charles Fleming's figurehead on *Captain Cook*, Sydney Harbour**

Picture: Searle, E.W. (Edward William) Source: National Library of Australia:

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-vn4654518>

According to Fleming family lore<sup>23</sup>, Charles expected to get some recognition from his employer for the successful cast of the figurehead and, when that recognition was not forthcoming, he resigned his job and emigrated to New Zealand. The truth, however, is more complex. In fact Charles' emigration to New Zealand occurred more than 11 years later.

It seems that, while Charles was peeved at the lack of recognition he received in 1892, it was another incident in 1901 that sparked his decision to emigrate a second time. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported:

“An Important Invention – An invention that is claiming a large amount of interest just now from the shipping community has been turned out at Mort's Dock and Engineering Works at Balmain by Mr Charles Fleming, the foreman ironmoulder ... For years he has worked on the experiment, and recently he joined (a body of brass to another body of cast iron) in such a manner that it is said to be impossible to separate them ... The inventor, in conjunction with Mr Thomas, late manager of the Atlas Works, has taken out a patent in the United Kingdom.<sup>24</sup>”

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It was claimed that the application of this invention to, for example, ships' propellers would save ship-owners much expense<sup>25</sup>.

Of course, any patent on this new technique would lawfully belong to his employer, not Charles personally. So, despite having been granted some measure of recognition for his invention, Charles' dissatisfaction with his employer grew stronger over the next two years. Charles' mood was, no doubt, darkened further by the deaths of his first two infant grandsons at this time<sup>26</sup>. And so, it may have been a sense of despair about his life and work in Sydney that prompted him to initiate the emigration of almost his whole family to New Zealand in 1903 or 1904<sup>27</sup>.

Charles was employed by "The Foundry" in Thames, New Zealand for many years. Despite an ever-expanding family of descendants, he is reputed to have suffered black moods as he grew older. He died on 17 August 1928 aged 74 years<sup>28</sup>. His wife, Maggie, died two years later. They are buried together in Shortland cemetery, Thames.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Importance of being Earnest* Oscar Wilde, 1895.

<sup>2</sup> Birth Certificate, Charles Fleming, 4450/1854, Parish of Old Monkland, Lanark, Register of Births and Baptisms, General Register Office, Edinburgh.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in the 20 years before Charles' birth, iron production in the area grew from 37,500 tons per year to 540,000 tons.

<sup>4</sup> Glasgow's population grew rapidly in the years before and after Charles' birth. According to [understandingglasgow.com](http://understandingglasgow.com), the population of Glasgow was estimated as 77,000 in 1801; 147,000 in 1821; and 762,000 by 1901. This growth had occurred without adequate provision for housing or public health, especially in the earlier years.

<sup>5</sup> David Bremner, *The Industries of Scotland; their rise, progress and present condition*, Adam and Charles Black, Edinburgh, 1869.

<sup>6</sup> The family was poor. They moved from house to house regularly, as evidenced by the children's birth records and census records.

<sup>7</sup> Birth Certificate, Matthew Taylor Fleming, 122/1865, Western District of Old Monkland, Lanark, Register of Births and Baptisms, General Register Office, Edinburgh.

<sup>8</sup> He had not died, so maybe he was struggling with his mental health. Angus had endured a wretched childhood. His father (also Angus) died when he was just 6 years old and was given a pauper's burial. His younger brother and sister died within a few months of his father's death. His remaining sister died when he was 3 years old.

<sup>9</sup> Iron moulder was a highly-skilled job that involved making a mould by tightly packing damp sand around a wooden pattern. Once the sand mould was cured, the pattern was removed leaving a hollow in the packed sand into which molten iron was poured; thus producing a cast-iron object in the shape of the original pattern.

<sup>10</sup> The Fleming family was recorded at 690 Springfield Road, Barony, Lanark in the Census, Scotland, 1881.

<sup>11</sup> Marriage Certificate, Charles Fleming and Margaret Ballentyne, 34820/1877, Shettleston, Lanark, Register of Marriages, General Register Office, Edinburgh.

<sup>12</sup> Birth Certificate, Charles Taylor Fleming, 106/1879, Bridgeton, Glasgow, Register of Births and Baptisms, General Register Office, Edinburgh.

<sup>13</sup> Death Certificate, Elizabeth Fleming, 160/1881, Bridgeton, Glasgow, Register of Births and Baptisms, General Register Office, Edinburgh.

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- <sup>14</sup> Death Certificate, Thomas Ballantyne Fleming, 1012/1881, Bridgeton, Lanark, Register of Births and Baptisms, General Register Office, Edinburgh. The cause of death was *hydrocephalus acutus*, a common complication of measles infection.
- <sup>15</sup> The fate of Charles' father Angus is murky. The last definitive record of him is the birth certificate of his son Angus on 4 June 1862. While Angus is recorded as father for the birth of his last child (Matthew) in 1865, the birth was actually registered by his wife's brother, Matthew Taylor. Angus does not appear with his family on either the 1871 or 1881 Scottish censuses (or elsewhere on the censuses, as far as can be ascertained). And yet his wife's 1881 death certificate lists (under spouse details) "*Married to Angus Fleming, Wood Sawyer Journeyman*", indicating that he was still known to be alive at that time. Three years later he was described as "deceased" on the marriage certificate of his son Angus on 18 July 1884 (GRO Scotland 210 at Bridgeton in 1884)..
- <sup>16</sup> Despite the massive industries centered on Glasgow, the 1880s heralded hard times. The new steel industry was starting to replace the iron industry where the Fleming men had their skills. The Scottish iron industry peaked in 1871, employing 40% of the workforce. By 1878 iron production was falling, replaced by steel. Two million Scots emigrated to the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand between 1841 and 1931. A further 750,000 emigrated to England.
- <sup>17</sup> Jane married Adam Hood Phillip in NSW in 1887 (NSW Registrar of Marriages 2055/1887). Angus married Martha Duncan in Glasgow in 1884 (GRO Scotland 210 at Bridgeton in 1884). He died in Sydney on 15 March 1887 and is buried in Rookwood cemetery (NSW Registrar of Deaths 481/1887 and memorial card in the author's possession). Angus and Martha's only child (Angus) died soon after his father (NSW Registrar of Deaths 2021/1887).
- <sup>18</sup> Captain White was a highly-strung man. On the second day he flew into "*a great passion*" and, producing a revolver, "*swore by the living God he would shoot the first man that would disobey him*". Charles gave him the benefit of the doubt: "*i believe him to be a very passionate but a good captain*". This sanguine opinion was to change radically! On day 39 – "*and as for the captain I never heard such a swearing fearless man*". Day 54 – "*our Captain which i believe now to be a thorough ass*". Day 61 – "*the captain who is a drunken empty fool*". Day 99 – "*the captain raised his revolver so close to my face that i had to hold it back, he placed it to the mans head and shouted you vilain i've a good mind to shoot you, the captain is childish and goes on like a madman*".
- <sup>19</sup> *The Brisbane Courier*, 26 September 1883, pages 4-5.
- <sup>20</sup> Charles Fleming's emigration diary is held by Mrs T Flynn of Napier, New Zealand, his great-granddaughter. A facsimile copy has been published: *Townsville or Hell!*, Charles Fleming (edited by James Michael Fleming) – available for purchase from Blurb.com at <http://au.blurb.com/b/3596424>.
- <sup>21</sup> *Warwick Argus*, 17 November 1883, page 2
- <sup>22</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 December 1892.
- <sup>23</sup> Oral history from Reginald Bruce Fleming, born 1929.
- <sup>24</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 April 1901.
- <sup>25</sup> The claim was that ship owners could reduce expenses by making parts (like propellers) partly from iron, rather than being fully cast in the more expensive bronze.
- <sup>26</sup> Charles' two eldest grand-children (sons of Charles Taylor Fleming and his wife Ada Grace Flowerdew) died as infants. Charles G Fleming was born in 1901 and died at Orange the same year (NSW Death Certificate 2604 in 1901). John F Fleming was born in 1902 and died at Balmain North the same year (NSW Death Certificate 12763 in 1902). Their ten-year-old sister Ada was to die when struck by a car in Orange on ANZAC Day 1921.
- <sup>27</sup> Only his oldest son, Charles Taylor Fleming, remained in Australia.
- <sup>28</sup> Information from his gravestone in Shortland cemetery, Thames, New Zealand.