

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022**

## **2207 Nature or Nurture?**

**by Kerry Close**

## NATURE or NURTURE?

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6 September 1778<sup>1</sup>

The man knelt in the shallow, murky water of the River Cherwell under Napper's Bridge<sup>2</sup> and peered around several times. Confident that he was camouflaged in the shadows, he hurriedly dug a deep hole in the stinking mud and buried the large cloth-wrapped bundle,<sup>3</sup> weighing it down with heavy stones. Ensuring it was well hidden, he memorised its position then rose to his feet, trousers and boots sodden. He wiped his muddied hands on his rag of a handkerchief and, pulling his old coat more tightly around his shoulders and his tattered cap a little lower over his eyes, he scurried away.

Suspicion of him, however, was already afoot at the home of Sir Bankes Jenkinson in nearby Headington where a quantity of silver-plate had gone missing. Our villain had been cleaning the house locks there a day or two previously and staff had noted that he 'had been particularly attentive to the Butler's Pantry, the Repository of the Plate', slyly questioning a servant as to its value. After he was reported skulking near the bridge, and with the loot recovered from the mud by the constabulary,<sup>4</sup> the jig was up. He was arrested and charged with grand larceny<sup>5</sup> and numerous burglaries from London to Manchester.<sup>6</sup> Thomas Storer, alias Timothy Sampson<sup>7</sup>/Simmons<sup>8</sup>, was about to have the book thrown at him.

Oscar Sherwin describes the 18<sup>th</sup> Century as a 'brutal, bawdy, filthy, stinking age...an age in which life was terribly uncertain',<sup>9</sup> and for Thomas, born about 1748 in overcrowded London,<sup>10</sup> perhaps such a description rang true. Little is known of his early years, but from the age of 30 he served time for his crimes on the hellish hulks on the Thames,<sup>11</sup> as well as in the Stygian gloom of Lincoln Castle,<sup>12</sup> a fortification constructed by William the Conqueror<sup>13</sup>. But even this formidable stronghold couldn't deter Thomas from his nefarious ways. Evidently resourceful, this 'old and most notorious Offender' made his daring escape from it in 1782 and headed for Birmingham where he was eventually recaptured as he slept, shopped by 'two Ladies of easy Virtue.'<sup>14</sup> With pick-lock keys as well as pistols in his possession,<sup>15</sup> he had been well-equipped for further villainy and a possible bloody showdown. Seven years transportation to the new Colony in New South Wales<sup>16</sup> was his grim punishment...or, ultimately, his unforeseen reward.

And so, confined in the claustrophobic bowels of the Third Fleet's *Albemarle*<sup>17</sup> as it lurched its way across the vast ocean, Thomas, my 4<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather, lay wretched and frightened, forlornly pinning his hopes on a future filled with sunny skies, a full belly, perhaps even the companionship of a wife and family. Adding to the misery, 32 of the 282 male convicts died en route, including two supposed ringleaders of a thwarted mutiny who were hanged on board as a dire warning to the rest. No doubt, when the ship reached Sydney Cove on 13 October 1791 after a harrowing 200-day voyage,<sup>18</sup> immense relief washed over Thomas.

Three months before Thomas's arrival in NSW, a drama unfolded in Ireland which was to have ramifications for Thomas in Sydney. A trio of brazen women, including one Mary Curran, boldly held up and robbed the Wicklow Mail at pistol point. Subsequently tried and convicted of highway

robbery at Dublin Assizes, their death sentences were mercifully commuted to transportation for life to New South Wales. They arrived in 1793 in the *Boddingtons*<sup>19</sup> which, coincidentally, also experienced a threatened mutiny.<sup>20</sup> Mary was about to storm into Thomas's life.

Although they never married, Mary and Thomas embarked on a relationship which, in 1798, caused Mary to apply for a warrant for the 'maintenance of two bastard children', declaring that Thomas was 'dissolute, drunken and disorderly', that he had beaten and ill-treated her a fortnight after she had given birth.<sup>21</sup> In 1809, three months after my 3<sup>rd</sup> great-grandmother, Charlotte, was born,<sup>22</sup> an exasperated Thomas was pleading with the Judge Advocate for some measure 'to restore tranquility of mind to one who has long been made miserable by an abandoned, villainous woman.' When he referred to Mary as his 'late housekeeper', she maliciously laid waste to his large cabbage patch!<sup>23</sup>

Despite his turbulent domestic situation, or because of it, Thomas wisely toed the line in his public life. He established a blacksmith's forge on land he leased in O'Connell Street,<sup>24,25</sup> garnering the support and respect of 'all the officers and respectable persons in the Colony',<sup>26</sup> while Governor Macquarie appointed him to a 4-man committee to survey and value the Rose Bay salt pans, and also Simeon Lord's premises on Windmill Hill (now Observatory Hill) which the Government wished to purchase for its own use.<sup>27</sup> He was granted £10 towards a wheat mill<sup>28</sup> and £8 for a 'steel mill'.<sup>29,30</sup> He drew cattle from the Government herd<sup>31</sup> and was later issued with a publican's licence for his 'Crown and Anchor' establishment.<sup>32</sup> The 1814 Muster records him as a free man.<sup>33</sup>

In 1810 Thomas escaped Mary's clutches by tying the knot with another convict.<sup>34</sup> When he died in July 1821 after a long illness,<sup>35</sup> he was remembered as a man of 'good character'.<sup>36</sup> Sadly, Mary's drowning in a ditch in Hunter Street just 10 days later, elicited a more ignominious response – she was, according to the *Sydney Gazette*, 'a victim of that horrid colonial calamity – drunkenness.'<sup>37</sup> Unlike Thomas, she seemed incapable of shedding her shameful past.

As yet, it has proven difficult to trace my 4<sup>th</sup> great-grandparents' roots, but I can only generously assume that their crimes were driven by poverty, desperation and hopelessness, particularly in Mary's case, when the future for impoverished, uneducated, single women was bleak. Although not condoning her actions, I admire her imagination and feistiness, and am proud of Thomas's determination to overcome his criminal ways.

So, where did I come from? The genetic melting pot is huge and the mix unpredictable, but the hope is, that between nature and nurture, integrity will prevail.

And so far, I haven't stooped to highway robbery!

- <sup>1</sup> *Derby Mercury* 18 September 1778 p.3, British Newspaper Archive
- <sup>2</sup> *Northampton Mercury* 28 September 1778 p.4, British Newspaper Archive
- <sup>3</sup> *Derby Mercury* 18 September 1778 p.3, British Newspaper Archive
- <sup>4</sup> *Northampton Mercury* 28 September 1778 p.4, British Newspaper Archive
- <sup>5</sup> *Oxford Journal* 6 March 1779 p.3, British Newspaper Archive
- <sup>6</sup> *Northampton Mercury* 18 July 1789 p.2, British Newspaper Archive
- <sup>7</sup> *Manchester Mercury* 5 March 1782 p.4, British Newspaper Archive
- <sup>8</sup> *Derby Mercury* 12 December 1782 p.4, British newspaper Archive
- <sup>9</sup> *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*: Vol.5, No.2 (Jan.,1946):  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3483581>:
- <sup>10</sup> *Derby Mercury* 18 September 1778 p.3, British Newspaper Archive
- <sup>11</sup> *Oxford Journal* 18 July 1789 p.3, British Newspaper Archive
- <sup>12</sup> *Stamford Mercury* 12 December 1782 p.4, British Newspaper Archive
- <sup>13</sup> Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln\\_Castle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_Castle)
- <sup>14</sup> *Derby Mercury* 12 December 1782 p.4, British Newspaper Archive
- <sup>15</sup> *Stamford Mercury* 12 December 1782 p.4, British Newspaper Archive
- <sup>16</sup> Ancestry.com: Australian Transportation Convict Registers-Third Fleet 1791 for Thomas Storer:  
List of Convict Transports >1790-1791 (Second Fleet and Part of the Third Fleet) p.53
- <sup>17</sup> Ancestry.com: New South Wales, Census and Population Books, 1811-1825 for Thomas Storer:  
Population Muster, 1814 p.96
- <sup>18</sup> Convict Ship Albemarle 1791. *Free Settler or Felon*, Willetts, J. (n.d.)  
<https://freesettlerorfelon.com/convict> ship albemarle 1791.htm
- <sup>19</sup> *Of Infamous Character: The Convicts of the Boddingtons, Ireland to Botany Bay, 1793*:  
Author: Barbara Hall 2004
- <sup>20</sup> Convict Ship Boddingtons 1793. *Free Settler or Felon* Willetts, J. (n.d.)  
<https://freesettlerorfelon.com/convict> ship boddingtons 1793.htm
- <sup>21</sup> *Of Infamous Character: The Convicts of the Boddingtons, Ireland to Botany Bay, 1793*, pp.52-53:  
Author: Barbara Hall 2004
- <sup>22</sup> Ancestry.com, New South Wales, Australia, St. John's, Parramatta, Baptisms, 1790-1916 for Charlotte Storer:  
Vol 01, Baptisms, 1790-1825; Marriages, 1789-1823; Burials, 1790-1825 p.427
- <sup>23</sup> *Of Infamous Character: The Convicts of the Boddingtons, Ireland to Botany Bay, 1793*, p.54:  
Author: Barbara Hall 2004
- <sup>24</sup> Ancestry.com, New South Wales, Australia, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1856:  
Special Bundles, 1794-1825, p.1430
- <sup>25</sup> TROVE: The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (NSW: 1803-1842) 31 Oct 1818 p.4
- <sup>26</sup> STORER Thomas, Index to the Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1825:  
Ship: Per *Albemarle* Citation: [4/1832], File no. 368A, pp.6-12, Start Date: 05/07/1822
- <sup>27</sup> Ancestry.com, New South Wales, Australia, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1856:  
Copies of Letters Sent: Local and Overseas, 1809-1813, p.140
- <sup>28</sup> Ancestry.com, New South Wales, Australia, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1856:  
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- <sup>29</sup> TROVE: The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (NSW:1803-1842) 18 Mar 1820 p.2
- <sup>30</sup> TROVE: The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (NSW: 1803-1842) 31 Oct 1818 p.4
- <sup>31</sup> Ancestry.com, New South Wales, Australia, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1856:  
Special Bundles, 1794-1825, p.166
- <sup>32</sup> TROVE: The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (NSW:1803-1842) 11 Jul 1818 p.2
- <sup>33</sup> Ancestry.com, New South Wales, Census and Population Books, 1811-1825 for Thomas Storer:  
Population Muster 1814, p.96
- <sup>34</sup> Ancestry.com, Australia Marriage Index, 1788-1950, Volume Number: V A
- <sup>35</sup> TROVE: The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (NSW:1803-1842) 28 Jul 1821 p.4
- <sup>36</sup> STORER Thomas, New South Wales State Archives and Records, Index to the Colonial Secretary's Papers,  
1788-1825, Ship: Per *Albemarle* Citation: [4/1832], File no. 368A, pp.6-12, Start Date: 05/07/1822
- <sup>37</sup> TROVE: The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (NSW:1803-1842) 4 Aug 1821 p.3