

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022

2208 There's No Other Way ...

by Roland Bannister

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Croker Prize for Biography 2022 - Society of Australian Genealogists

THERE'S NO OTHER WAY ...

Where did I come from? Easy ... the corporeal 'I' descends from lines of English immigrants. Half a dozen were convicts, the rest were free. Most eventually settled in the Hunter. The first were a pair of 5g maternal grandparents - both felons - transported on separate Second Fleet ships and met and married in Sydney. A pair of 3g maternal grandparents - he a convict - settled near Paterson by about 1830. All came to Australia by boat: there was no other way. Over the next century all streams on both Mum's side and Dad's moved to Newcastle seeking relief from economic depression, isolation, and the vagaries of climate and weather that plagued family farmers.

Questions about from whence comes the inner 'me' are not so easy. Yet I do have clues as to who 'I' am and how I got to be 'me'. Eliza Bannister (née Elliott), my paternal great grandmother left a diary of family life, a document which I know well now that I have transcribed it, a task I began with a sense of duty and a sense of enquiry but which progressed to become an act of love: a love of the people in the diaries; Eliza and her deceased husband William Henry Bannister, and their ten children; my father and his ten siblings, my fabulous aunts and uncles. While the diary records snippets of the lives of ordinary people, they add up to an extraordinary epic about where I came from, and who I am.

Eliza's daily diary entries - all 200,000 words of them - are a pretty tedious read, but in transcribing them I was drawn deeply into family life in Graman, Howell and Tingha in the Inverell district at the time of the depression of the 1890s, and of the Federation Drought.

Fourteen years old Eliza and her parents and three siblings travelled from their home in Paddington, London, to Botany Bay on the *Lord Hungerford* in 1855.¹ When she and William Henry Bannister married in the 'Free Church, Macquarie Street Sydney' in 1863² Eliza had been '... for some time in the employ of Lady Denison, wife of the Governor of NSW'.³ We can speculate that the couple met in Sydney, and when William went to manage Nee Nee station, near Dirrinbandi in southern Queensland they kept in touch by mail. But how - we might ask - did Eliza and William court, at that distance, and How did he travel Sydney for the wedding? And how did the newlyweds return to Nee Nee?



Eliza Bannister (née Elliott)

The birth registrations of their children show that they left Nee Nee to live at Anvil Creek, NSW from 1868 to 1873 and from there they made conditional purchases of two 40 acre land portions fronting Redbank Creek,⁴ at Graman and there they endured the vicissitudes of farming life.

Sometime after William's death in 1898 Eliza took her family to the Tingha tin fields, firstly to the ephemeral mining village of Howell and then, in about 1906, to Tingha itself, a flourishing new town where Eliza exercised her religious faith, taking her children to the Church of England, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Catholic churches on special occasions and her core church - the Salvation Army - on Sundays. They even attended the open day at the Chinese Joss house.

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On her death in 1921 the *Inverell Times* described Eliza as an 'old and respected resident of the District'.⁵ Eliza bequeathed to her descendants tangible values and world views: a strong love of family tradition, a tradition evident in her own life. Eliza demonstrated a generous nature in 'taking in' and raising an orphaned girl;⁶ her encouragement of family music making resonated down the generations to me who spent much of my working life as town band director and music educator in Glen Innes and Wagga Wagga. Eliza's values were in good measure those of the Salvation Army, and many of her descendants are Sallies. I'm not, but the hairs on the back of my neck do stand on end when I hear a Sally band. Eliza's diary sketches a picture of everyday farming life in Graman, and life in Howell and Tingha where her son Herbert - my grandfather - contracted his bullock team's hauling services to the mines.

There is in Eliza's diary jottings an appreciation of friendship among women, a love of community life, an enjoyment of the beauty of the Australian bush, and stoicism in the face of the isolation and hardship she - a widowed Englishwoman living in remote rural Australia - endured.

Eliza's grandson, my father, demonstrated a practical ability in country tasks, an inheritance for which I am grateful. Dad taught me - among other wonderful things - how to butcher a chook, and how to straighten used nails and flatten old, corrugated iron to use in building a shed. I served a carpenter's apprenticeship and worked in the trade for seven years before I became a musician.

My love of rural Australia, practical work, family, music, and the arts has antecedents in Eliza's life.

Where did I come from? prompts the question Who am I; the 'I' of my senses and sensibilities, my character, my likes and dislikes, my interests, my personality: all the things of my thinking and feelingful life. Each of us is shaped by elusive eddies of genetic inheritance, personality, relationships, society and culture that lend structures and order. The 'me' of my ninth decade is a me moulded by the inchoate and configured by those who came before. There is no other way.

¹ SANSW NRS 5316/4-4792 Lord Hungerford, 20 March 1855,

² NSW BDM Marriage Registration Transcription, Ref. No. 1863/261

³ *Inverell Times*, 11 Feb 1921 p.5

⁴ NSW Land Registry Services, *Parish of Redbank 1881* (map), <http://hfv.nswlrs.com.au>

⁵ *Inverell Times*, 11 Feb 1921 p.5

⁶ Bannister, Roland, *Saving Grace: an Orphan Girl in Graman, Howell, and Tingha, NSW, 1898-1912*. (Newcastle NSW: Self-published, 2020)