

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022

2219 The Very Artistic Genealogist

by Andrew Palmer

The Very Artistic Genealogist.

Where do I come from? A simple question, but in the case of my family, the answer is frustratingly incomplete as I have struggled to comprehend my family lineage, just as my cousin Maria did over a century ago.

Maria Emma Palmer, who was born at Wollongong New South Wales to Edward and Jane Palmer on 24 May 1859 was my first cousin, twice removed.¹ The families of both her parents had emigrated to the burgeoning colony of New South Wales in search of better opportunities for their families.

Maria married Robert McBurney at St Mary's Church, Kangaroo Point Brisbane on 22 May 1874.² They made their home in Mackay, where he was the first surgeon-superintendent of the Mackay District Hospital.³

Not content to be just the doctor's wife, Maria used her considerable skill as a watercolour artist to record the beauty of her local landscape and its animal life. She was recognised as an exceptional painter and was lauded for her 'paintings of Australian flora and fauna, mostly of those around Mackay'.⁴ Three of her flower studies were accepted for the Franco-British Exhibition in 1908 and she was accorded 'the honour of an acceptance of a picture by the Royal Academy'.⁵

In 1884, Robert McBurney took his wife and daughter on a trip 'to the USA, UK and Ireland, a great adventure for the time' before returning to practice medicine in Mackay until 1899, when the family left Mackay.⁶ McBurney had been suffering from ill-health for some time and died in 1899, whilst working as a ship's doctor.⁷

Maria's daughter, Laura, married Walter Preedy in Sydney on 22 November 1904. Shortly thereafter, they left Sydney for Preedy to take up a position in the New South Wales Agent-General's office in London.⁸ Maria joined them, hoping to experience a more sophisticated artistic life in London, whilst undertaking further research on her other love – the genealogy of the Palmer family.⁹

Maria warmly embraced the lifestyle of a colonial in Edwardian London, promoting and exhibiting her paintings 'of the brilliant tropical foliage and flowers of North Australia'.¹⁰ She led a very active social life, regularly attending functions at the Austral Club in London or entertaining friends to tea at the Ladies Empire Club, when not travelling or undertaking family research.¹¹ In London, her twin passions of painting and family history truly intersected.

From 'England, she contacted the family of Carleton Reeves Palmer in Roscrea, Ireland, attempting to identify common ancestors.¹² She also wrote to her only surviving uncle, Henry Palmer in Maryborough, Queensland, seeking his recollections of living in both Birr and Durrow in Ireland as a youth and possible family connections. His response was unhelpful – merely a suggestion that she contact 'a solicitor in Birr named Julian I think who did some work for Father'.¹³

On two occasions, Maria visited both Birr and Durrow researching her family story. In a sketchbook of paintings entitled *A visit to Durrow Queen's Co and Birr King's Co April 16th 1907*, she depicted scenes from her family's past.¹⁴ A report in the social pages noted she had 'just returned from a visit to King's County, Ireland' in November 1910.¹⁵ She also travelled to Snodland in Kent, as her sketchbook includes a sketch of the Palmer window in All Saints church.



Watercolour from Maria McBurney's sketchbook of Palmer's property in Durrow.

She recorded her research in *A Few Notes of the Palmer family pedigree etc*, contending that her ancestors descended from some of the prominent Palmer families in Kent.¹⁶ She also concluded that Henry and Robert Palmer left Kent and purchased Ballyknocken Castle in Ireland in 1664 - 'the first of the family of Palmers to settle in Ireland. They were officers serving under Oliver Cromwell and our ancestors'.¹⁷ The integrity of her research is underpinned by her access to records in the Public Records Office, Dublin, which was later destroyed by fire.

Her conclusions echo our oral family story, but her pedigree provides no conclusive evidence that our ancestors came from Kent to Ireland in 1664 or that Thomas Palmer, the earliest ancestor that we can confidently claim, is descended from Henry and Robert Palmer.

Where do I come from? Although illuminating and thorough, Maria's extensive research does not provide an answer. It remains as elusive as ever - the conundrum unresolved!

¹ Baptism certificate No. 950 Vol 35 issued by Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages Sydney, 23 May 2022.

² Mackay Mercury and South Kennedy Advertiser, 16 May 1874, p2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 169858834.

³ https://www.mackayregionalbotanicgardens.com.au/about/history_of_the_lagoons/kaliguil. Accessed 15 November 2020.

⁴ Daily Telegraph (Sydney), 15 March 1935, p13. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 246698538.

⁵ Brisbane Courier, 18 June 1908, p7. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 19524303.

⁶ Information board on Robert McBurney held by the Mackay Family History Society Inc.

⁷ Mackay Mercury, 16 May 1899, p2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 170070030. Information board held by Mackay Family History Society Inc.

⁸ Evening News (Sydney), 18 April 1905, p7. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 114051297.

⁹ Australian Town and Country Journal (Sydney), 19 April 1905, p43. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 71501439.

¹⁰ British Australian (London), 14 May 1908 cited in Brisbane Courier, 18 June 1908, p7. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 19524303.

¹¹ Brisbane Courier, 18 June 1908, p7. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 19524303. Catholic Press (Sydney), 25 June 1908, p13. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 105167255. Queenslander (Brisbane), 23 January 1909, p12. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 23597355. Daily Telegraph (Sydney), 24 July 1909, p15.

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 238321811. Brisbane Courier, 27 October 1909, p7. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 19591956. Daily Telegraph (Sydney) 11 December 1909, p19. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 238222328. Catholic Press (Sydney) 10 February 1910, p20. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 105020092.

¹² Letter from Carleton Palmer to Maria McBurney, 30 October 1907, letter from Carleton Palmer to Maria McBurney, 19 December (no year shown), letter from Grace Isabella Palmer to Maria McBurney, November 21 1909.

¹³ Letter from Henry Palmer to Maria McBurney 17 January 1908.

¹⁴ Sketchbook of Maria Palmer.

¹⁵ Queenslander (Brisbane), 5 November 1910, p15. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article> 22287118.

¹⁶ *A Few Notes of the Palmer Family pedigree etc* by Maria McBurney, citing references from *The County Families 1864* by Edward Walford and *A Display of Heraldry* by John Guillim.

¹⁷ *A Few Notes of the Palmer family pedigree etc* by Maria McBurney