

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022

2222 What Mary Kate Said

by Sue Bulbrook

What Mary Kate said

Every time I cross the Hawkesbury Nepean River, its majesty takes my breath away. Each journey draws me to my forebears who twice attempted to endure life on “the beautiful, the beautiful the river”ⁱ. Both attempts at survival alongside this enormous life force were ineffectual. The river was the victor. Consequently, my mother’s grandmother, Mary Kate Tompkins, instructed her sons to, “Always keep your hands clean at work, Son.”ⁱⁱ I come from Mary Kate Tompkins, my mother’s paternal grandmother. Mary Kate was adamant her sons were not going to depend on the river.

My family’s first encounter with the river was when James Styles settled his family at the Nepean. James had arrived in the NSW Colony as a convict on the *Scarborough* in 1790. He was granted an absolute pardon in 1795 and enlisted in the NSW 102nd Foot, NSW Corps. He married Mary Wilson in 1811 at Windsorⁱⁱⁱ and was appointed town constable there in 1811^{iv}. In 1823 James and his family had left the Nepean River and moved to Sydney, where he was granted a lease at Lot 20, Upper Pitt Street^v. James’ family included his stepdaughter, Eliza Jane Leonard, Mary Kate Tompkins’ grandmother. As a 2year old, Eliza Jane had arrived in the Colony in 1806, accompanied by her convicted mother, Mary Wilson.^{vi}

In 1822 Eliza Jane Leonard and Joseph Emmes married in Sydney^{vii} and Eliza Jane never lived by the river again. Her daughter, Elizabeth Jane Emmes, born in 1828 in Sydney^{viii}, was mother to Mary Kate Tompkins.

Unlike her mother, Elizabeth Jane Emmes was not brought up on the Hawkesbury Nepean River; she was brought up in the hustle and bustle of Sydney Town. Her father, Joseph Emmes had been granted an absolute pardon in 1820 and purchased a shop in George Street, Sydney^{ix}. When Elizabeth Jane Emmes married John Tomkins in 1856 in Sydney^x her father, Joseph Emmes, was visiting family in Honolulu^{xi} and her mother had died four years previously^{xii}.

A young John Tomkins and his convict mother, Anne Dunne arrived in Sydney in 1832^{xiii} and his convict stepfather, James Tomkins, in 1820^{xiv}. In 1835 they married at Castlereagh^{xv}. I have a copy of their marriage certificate.

Soon after Tomkins married Elizabeth Jane Emmes a “p” appeared in Tompkins^{xvi}. Was this a breaking of the dirty past and cleansing of yesterday? And yet, Elizabeth and John were drawn back to the river life after their marriage. This was where the work was; carting and farming, dirty work, survival work. Thus began my family’s second encounter with the Hawkesbury Nepean River. My mother’s grandmother, Mary Kate Tompkins, was born as the eighth child in this family in 1866^{xvii}, on the river.

Do you know the Hawkesbury Nepean River, Dyarubbin, or “yam river”^{xviii}? Do you know its moods? It runs around reaches and corners for more than 100km beginning somewhere near Robertson in the NSW Southern Highlands and settles at Broken Bay, north of Sydney^{xix}. Almost annually, it surges and becomes an uncontrollable deluge of water. Prior to the 2022 floods, Grace Karskens wrote, “The greatest and most terrible flood on the

Hawkesbury-Nepean in recent times occurred in 1867 when the river at Windsor rose 63 feet (19 metres) above its normal summer level, and at Penrith to 27.5 metres above sea level.^{xx} This 1867 flood was the beginning of the end of my family's liaison with "the beautiful, the beautiful the river"^{xxi}.

The 1867 flood occurred following Mary Kate's birth. The consequence of this event is found in this newspaper article - "A farmer, named John Tompkins, living some distance down the river has lost everything."^{xxii} Family folklore supposes John's father, James Tompkins, drowned in this disaster as there is no record of his death. Some European families stayed on the river: the Tompkins family surrendered, and moved north, to the gold fields at Gulgong, where John Tompkins worked an approved gold lease with Lambert and Co^{xxiii} and the family lived at Red Hill^{xxiv}.

However, after a life spent scraping and trudging for work and money, John Tompkins died in 1879^{xxv}. Mary Kate was 13yrs old. It would be reasonable to assume Mary Kate's elder brothers, Henry and George, supported their mother and siblings after their father died, although oral history has always mentioned Mary Kate's mother, Elizabeth Tompkins, nee Emmes, being an excellent seamstress^{xxvi}.

The year 1894 saw Mary Kate Tompkins marry William Rudolph Bentzen, at Gulgong, NSW^{xxvii} and, I suspect, river life became a reminiscence for Mary Kate. William Rudolph was a bank manager^{xxviii}, where it is reasonable to say he was able to keep his hands clean! The Bentzens had three sons, all born in Gulgong, the youngest being my maternal grandfather, Thorvald Eames Bentzen^{xxix}

In 1907 Mary Kate and William Bentzen moved their family from Gulgong to Paddington, Sydney^{xxx}. It was her husband's squeaky clean and orderly career that Mary Kate is remembered for! You see, my grandfather, Thorvald Eames Bentzen, was told by his mother Mary Kate, "Always keep your hands clean at work, Son." Her father had been a "dirt farmer" on the River^{xxxi} and Mary Kate would have none of that for her three sons. They all worked in the commercial world and all kept clean hands.

I come from Mary Kate Bentzen nee Tompkins, a River girl, granddaughter to a River family, daughter of a dirt farmer, wife of a commercial agent, mother to a CBC bank manager, grandmother to my mother and a woman who always carried her bank deposit book in her handbag: she was never going to be without money.

ⁱ Winton, Tim, Cloudstreet, Penguin Imprint 1992, p.2

ⁱⁱ Oral history, author's mother, Mrs Maureen Upfold (nee Bentzen)

ⁱⁱⁱ St Matthew's Windsor, 1810-1856, #2364, p. 110 (seen by author at Kuringai Historical Society). Also, Australian Biographical and Genealogical Records, Series 1, 1788-1841, published by A.B.G.R. in association with the Society of Australian Genealogists, Sydney, 1992, p.429; Styles, James

^{iv} <https://trove.nla.gov.au> - The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (1803-1842), 12th October 1811, p. 1

^v Australian Biographical and Genealogical Records, Series 1, 1788-1841, published by A.B.G.R. in association with the Society of Australian Genealogists, Sydney, 1992, p.429; Styles, James

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- ^{vi} Mary Wilson; arr 11 April 1806, Sydney NSW per *William Pitt*. Australian Biographical and Genealogical Records Series 1, 1788-1841, published by A.B.G.R. in association with the Society of Australian Genealogists, Sydney 1992, p.479; Wilson, Mary
- ^{vii} Marriage Leonard and Emmes, 4 December 1822, St Philip's CE, Sydney NSW; Ancestry.com. *Australia, Marriage Index, 1788-1950* [database on-line]; source citation *NSW Pioneer Index*; author also has photocopy of original marriage by Banns, 13/6290.
- ^{viii} Elizabeth Jane Emmes, b 4 February, 1828, Australian Birth Index (1788-1992), V1828349 12; Ancestry.com; *The New South Wales Pioneers Index: Pioneers Series 1788-1888*
- ^{ix} A.B.G.R. Series 1, 1788-1841, published by A.B.G.R. in association with the Society of Australian Genealogists, Sydney 1992, p.127, Emmes, Joseph
- ^x <https://www.ancestry.com.au> Australian Marriage Index 1788-1950, Registration No.791; married 23 December 1856, Christ Church Sydney; *The New South Wales Pioneers Index: Pioneers Series 1788-1888*; See also <https://trove.nla.gov.au> – The Empire (Sydney, NSW: 1850-1874), 24th December, 1854
- ^{xi} <https://trove.nla.gov.au> – The Empire (Sydney, NSW: 1850-1874), 24th December, 1854
- ^{xii} <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/203797846/eliza-jane-emmes>; 2nd February, 1852; gravestone restored by family, St Stephens' Camperdown.
- ^{xiii} Anne Dunne and son John, aged 3yrs, arr *The Hoogley*, 1831. Sent to Female Factory at Parramatta. Convicts Index 1791-1873 Citation: [4/4340; Reel 999]
- ^{xiv} James Tompkins, arr *Agamemnon*, 1820, 7 year sentence, [General Muster List of New South Wales 1823, 1824, 1825.](#)
- ^{xv} Author has photocopy of Banns Marriage Certificate No.96, married by Henry Fulton in the Parish of Castlereagh, 16th April, 1835.
- ^{xvi} As evidenced by marriage certificate above (endnote xv), and newspaper article (endnote x) and continuous use of "p" in Tompkins.
- ^{xvii} NSW BDM's, #14633/1867, Penrith NSW (born 12th November, 1866 – author has copy of birth certificate).
- ^{xviii} Karskens, Grace, *People of the River*, Allen & Unwin 2020, p.45
- ^{xix} Wikipedia source (apologies!)
- ^{xx} Karskens, Grace, *People of the River*, Allen & Unwin 2020, p.261
- ^{xxi} See Winton endnote #1
- ^{xxii} <https://trove.nla.gov.au> – Queanbeyan Age, 5th July, 1867, p.2
- ^{xxiii} <https://trove.nla.gov.au> – New South Wales Government Gazette, 1832-1900, Fri 19th February, 1875 (Issue No. 38), p. 496
- ^{xxiv} <https://trove.nla.gov.au> – Govt. Gazette NSW, 4th February, 1874, #28 Supplement, p.372
- ^{xxv} NSW BDM's, 7094/1879, Gulgong
- ^{xxvi} Oral history, author's mother, Mrs Maureen Dagmar Upfold (nee Bentzen)
- ^{xxvii} NSW BDM's, #3990/1894, Gulgong
- ^{xxviii} Photocopy of marriage certificate #3990/1894, Gulgong
- ^{xxix} NSW BDM's, #321355/1899 Gulgong (11th July, 1899)
- ^{xxx} Oral history, as told to Mrs Maureen Upfold (nee Bentzen) by her father Thorvald Eames Bentzen
- ^{xxxi} Oral history, as told to Mrs Maureen Upfold (nee Bentzen) by her father Thorvald Eames Bentzen