

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2023

2310 My Father Had a Spanish Ancestor

by Helen White

My Father had a Spanish Ancestor.

The myth of exotic Iberian blood in the family helped to obscure, and deflect, the perceived stain of a convict connection. An intriguing story but difficult to prove, or disprove, in the days before the internet. Following the cessation of transportation in 1853, Tasmanian (and 'mainlander') descendants invented many and varied stories to hide their antecedents, but usually they just didn't talk about it. The early use of 'native born' as a descriptor was one of the first ways a person could obscure their convict ancestors. Our family used a Spanish connection, and the myth was perpetuated in local history books.ⁱ

I knew very little of my father's family, he insisted that he didn't know anything and wasn't interested in family history. When I approached an uncle, my father's brother, he steered me towards their mother's family of free settlers.

After my father died, I discovered the truth of his paternal line. His grandfather was a convict from Somerset, who arrived in Van Diemen's Land on 29 July 1828, aboard the ship *William Miles*. He had been convicted of burglary, this being his third offence he was sentenced to death but due to his age, about 15 years, the sentence was commuted to life.ⁱⁱ He was one of the lucky ones, in the time between sentencing and arriving in Van Diemen's Land he became literate; schooling was offered for young offenders on some hulks and sometimes continued aboard ship on the voyage. In 1843 he was given a free pardon and settled into a quiet life as a shopkeeper in Bothwell, Van Diemen's Land. He married convict, Ann Burn (*Nautilus*), 20 years his senior and established a haberdashery amongst other businesses.ⁱⁱⁱ When his wife died John White married Mary Allen – she of the exotic blood.^{iv}

Mary Allen's mother was Julia Antone/Antonio, eldest daughter of Charles Antony/Antonio, free settler of unknown origin and Mary Doolan/MacDuel (*Canada*), an Irish convict.^v Here was the source of the 'Spanish' blood. Charles Antony (23 *sic*) married Mary MacDuel (18) on 30 November 1817, only 3 months after her arrival in Van Diemen's Land.^{vi} She was most probably assigned to him for the remainder of her sentence, which would have been completed in November 1822.^{vii} The earliest convict records were not always kept or have not survived the passing of time.

Unfortunately, the marriage didn't survive the completion of Mary's 'sentence' and in 1823 and she absconded from her husband's house.^{viii} Efforts to trace the lives of the 4 children have proved difficult, an assumption that they were taken into the orphanage from about 1827/28 is not substantiated by the existing records, although Julia's marriage in 1832 (aged 14) was with permission of a guardian.^{ix,x} What role Mary played in the lives of the younger children is not known at this time.

The use of an 'alias' was not unusual amongst the convicts, however the 'fictional' surname given by Mary at her marriage may have been a mishearing of her pronunciation of her name, or an attempt to hide her marriage to a 'darky'. (This derogative term would have been in general use at the time, and I use it here to give context.) Mary Doolan/McDuell was illiterate – she signed with a mark, not so her husband who signed his name Charles



This family photo of Julia Antonio shows her dark skin.

Antony on the marriage record and other ‘official’ documents. (There are various spellings of the surname, Antony/Antonio/Antone the latter is the modern usage.) The use of the Antoni spelling on his headstone may have encouraged the myth of Spanish blood.^{xi}

Charles Antonio may have landed in Sydney as early as 1811.^{xii} Certainly he accompanied Edward Lord first to England, then upon Lord’s return to NSW, to Van Diemen’s Land in 1816. Soon after this, possibly with Lord’s influence, he acquired a grant of land in the district of Pittwater.^{xiii} Recent research into the naming of a local landmark has unearthed references to him as ‘Black Charley’ named so by a traveller calling on him.^{xiv} He settled with his wife on his selection, at what is now Orielton; as a neighbour of Lord’s. Unfortunately, financial, and legal trouble over the next few years saw him struggling to retain his land. Once Mary had ‘eloped’ in 1823, Charles finally lost his grant and apart from a couple of brushes with the law, the rest of his life is not recorded. Even his death is marked only by a headstone – no official death record exists. Is it possible that this lack of official record was due to his dark skin? Along with the indigenous peoples of this island, was it his skin colour that allowed his very existence to be omitted from ‘official’ records? Is this the reason his children also have few records?

After the cessation of transportation and well into the 1900’s people in Tasmania didn’t ask too many questions about their ancestors for fear of turning up a convict and the story of Spanish blood allowed Julia’s dark skin to pass in the Bothwell community with few questions.

Two hundred years have passed since the birth of Julia Antonio in 1818 and the myth is now uncovered. As the great-great grand-child of Julia Antonio, my DNA test has discredited the myth of Spanish blood, my ethnicity is principally north-eastern European and the British Isles, but matches to descendants of Julia’s siblings, has confirmed that Charles Antonio hailed from the Sub-Continent (South Asia) and may have been Sri Lankan, Tamil or Indian.

So, with the passing of time and change of attitudes, one is left to ponder the mind-set of our ancestors. In their minds was it preferable to be of either Anglo, or even European descent, regardless of the convict background, than to descend from an Indian/Asian ancestor? In society’s eyes at the time, well into the 20th Century, this was certainly the attitude that predominated, hence the cultivation of this family myth.^{xv}

ⁱ Webb, Gwen; *Gateway to the Highlands*; Self-published; undated

ⁱⁱ Convict Records for John White; *Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office*; <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/tasmanian-archives>; *Tasmanian Names Index*; NAME_INDEXES:1445457; *Conduct Record* = CON31/1/45; *Description List* = CON18/1/21p88 & CON23/1/3p; x. *Muster Roll* = CSO1/1/306 Page 7366;.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marriage between John White & Ann Burn, 10 April 1842, solemnised at Bothwell; *TAHO*; Tasmanian Names Indexes; *Marriage RGD 37/1/2 no 1390 Registered at Hamilton*.

^{iv} Marriage between John White & Mary Allen, solemnised at the home of R Allen, 1 October 1863; *TAHO*; *TNI*; *Marriage RGD37/1/22 no 8 Registered at Bothwell*.

^v Julia Antone daughter of Charles & Mary Antone, baptised on 29 November 1818, born 01 Nov 1818; *TAHO*; *TNI*; *Births RGD32/1/1/ no 646 Registered in Hobart*.

^{vi} Marriage of Charles Antony to Mary Macduel on 30 Nov 1817; *TAHO*; *TNI*; *Marriages RGD36/1/1 no263 Registered in Hobart*.

^{vii} Convict Records for Mary Doolan; *TAHO*; <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/tasmanian-archives>; *TNI*; NAME_INDEXES:1388085; *Conduct Record CON40/1/3 p 12*; *CON13-1-1 Image 82 = List of Convict Women per Canada*.

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- viii Advertisement 'My wife, Mary Antoney, having eloped from her home ...'; National Library of Australia (TROVE); *Digitised Newspapers Hobart Town Gazette and Van Diemen's Land Advertiser* (Tas.: 1821 - 1825), Saturday 15 March 1823, page 2.
- ix Antonio, Julia (7) and Mary (5) - mother a common prostitute; *TAHO*; <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/tasmanian-archives>; *CSO1-1-918 p86, (Z1781)*;
- x Minutes of Meetings of the Committee of Management; *TAHO*; <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/tasmanian-archives>; *SWD24 p227-228 - Kings/Queens Orphans School (TA148)*.
- xi Antoni, Charles, d 21 May 1843, age 55 years; Bothwell General Cemetery; *TAMIOT*; TFHS
- xii *Claims and Demands*; NLA (TROVE); Digitised Newspapers; *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (NSW: 1803-1842) Saturday 25 May 1811 page 1*.
- xiii 'Mr E Lord & Family ...'; NLA (TROVE); Digitised Newspapers; *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (NSW 1803-1842) Saturday 5 February 1814 p2*.
- xiv Who was Black Charlie? *Tasmanian Historical Research Association*; Journal August 2022; Vol 69 No 2 p54. (Ref. Robert McNally Journal; Transcription supplied by Prof. Pam Sharp; Robert Hogan and Sarah Randles; Original held National Library Ireland; MS13264/5).
- xv Alexander, Alison; *Tasmania's Convicts, How Felons Built a Free Society*; Allen & Unwin; 2010, p1-4.