

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2023

2316 The Runaway – Looking for Sarah

by Deborah O'Mullane

The Runaway - Looking for Sarah

Sarah fell in love with a young aboriginal man who worked for her father. The family were not happy. The only way they could be together was to run-away. The lovers' plan was discovered so they had to leave quickly, taking two horses and only the clothes they wore. Sarah and her siblings were renowned horse men and women. The couple were pursued by Sarah's father and a couple of brothers through the bush to the coast where Sarah and her lover planned to take a steamer north. It was frightening, but Sarah made it and headed north. Her family disowned her. Sarah made a new life for herself as a devoted midwife and even had a hospital wing 'up north' dedicated to her.

This abridged version of the 'Sarah' myth was told by Mum. I loved the romanticism, adventure and pure adrenaline-pumping excitement of this tale. We could hear the thundering hoof beats and whip of branches and leaves as the lovers fled.

So many questions. Mum didn't know where Sarah ended up, or what happened to her lover, but she recalled another story that Sarah was kidnapped and she died, her lover murdered. Sarah was related to Nanna Mac, Mum's maternal grandmother, maiden name Alexander from Pericoe in the far south of NSW. Little did I know my curiosity about this tale would unearth a treasure trove of stories, more mythical than myth, achingly sad, romantic, awe inspiring, humbling, surprising and horrifying.

Enter Mr Google.¹ First hit, the Towamba Historical Society² and information beyond my wildest dreams; links to resources,³ a thesis,⁴ oral interviews,⁵ reminiscences of an old neighbour,⁶ excerpts from an Alexander family history, family trees for two generations.⁷ Both included a Sarah.

The first Sarah(I), my great, great aunt, was the second child of Robert, a lifer⁸, (surprise) and Mary Theresa, a free Irish Catholic.⁹ Born 5/6/1839¹⁰ at Moruya, Sarah¹ died, aged 61, on 7/2/1901¹¹ at Parramatta. The family moved to Genoa in 1841/42 when Sarah¹ was a very young child. History says they were the first white settlers and that there were issues with some, but not all, local tribes.¹²

¹ <https://www.bing.com/search?pglt=43&q=Pericoe+Alexander>

² <https://www.towambavalleyhistory.webhive.com.au/alexanderfamily.htm>

³ [Monaro Pioneers](#)

⁴ A Place called "Pericoe": a history of the Alexander families of Genoa, Victoria and Pericoe NSW, Major thesis for Diploma in Family Historical Studies, 1994, Max Ryan

⁵ *The Forgotten Corner Interviews*,

⁶ Alexander Weatherhead

⁷ *A Journey Through Time*, compiled by Noelene O'Connor and Kathy Jones

⁸ [Monaro Pioneers](#); NSW State Archives

⁹ [Monaro Pioneers](#); NSW State Archives

¹⁰ [Monaro Pioneers](#)

¹¹ NSW BDM 2716/1901

¹² *A Journey Through Time*, compiled by Noelene O'Connor and Kathy Jones

The Towamba website held the old, and deeply disturbing, myth that Mum alluded to, *'an Alexander girl was taken by a local tribe, and unable to cope, she died'*. Her father *'subsequently arranged a posse and shot all of them'*.¹³

Sarah 's death certificate held an answer to her disappearance, and a shock - she died in the Hospital for the Insane, Parramatta.¹⁴ NSW State Archives produced a lead in the Colonial Secretary's correspondence,¹⁵ Sarah was an inmate, not a midwife. NSW Health¹⁶ gave me permission to review Sarah 's medical records.

She was admitted to Tarban Creek in 02/1858¹⁷ aged eighteen, later transferred to Parramatta Lunatic Asylum.¹⁸ Her Father's petition states that she was of *'unsound mind'* and that he was *'desirous of procuring her admission ... in order that she may there have such Medical care and attendance as ... ensure her eventual recovery.'*¹⁹ Both doctors who examined Sarah noted she *'would likely benefit by medical treatment in Tarban Creek'*.²⁰ On her admission, *'It is a year since she became affected with lunacy ...supposed by herfather to be ... the offspring of disappointed affections'*²¹ and *lather states that she is inoffensive but playful and occasionally a little mischievous. The case is both more inveterate and constitutional than her father cares to confess.* Ten days after admission, *'reported by persons who have known this girl since her birth that she has been little better than an idiot all her life'*.²³ Later records state, *'absolutely insane,' 1881, 'still very insane,' 1882, 'very demented, extremely stupid,' 08/1886.*²⁴ No visitors are ever recorded for Sarah1.

The only positives in her notes were *'good physical health, enjoyed herfood and slept well.'*²⁵ At some point she stopped speaking,however *'would sing at night.'*²⁶

Sarah1 survived 43 years in a place Dr Frederick Norton Manning described in 1868 as *'unfit as a residence for those mentally afflicted,'*¹²⁷ but there was no-one to mourn her death, Sarah1 had outlived all her family. Her father's death certificate²⁸ named Sarah1, but not his will,²⁹ and she is not named on her mother's death certificate.³⁰ Sarah1's death certificate³¹ contained no personal information, her history was forgotten, until now.

¹³ A Place Called Pericoe, Max Ryan

¹⁴ NSW BDM 2716/1901

¹⁵ NSW State Archives, Colonial Secretary Correspondence

¹⁶ NSW Health, Access Letter

¹⁷ NSW State Archives Records - Colonial Secretary Correspondence

¹⁸ NSW State Archives, Tarban Creek Asylum Records

¹⁹ NSW State Archives, Colonial Secretary Correspondence - Petition of Admittance

²⁰ NSW State Archives, Colonial Secretary Correspondence - Doctors' Letter

²¹ NSW State Archives, Tarban Creek Asylum Records

²² NSW State Archives, Parramatta Asylum Records

²³ NSW State Archives, Parramatta Asylum Records

²⁴ NSW State Archives, Parramatta Asylum Records

²⁵ NSW State Archives, Parramatta Asylum Records

²⁶ NSW State Archives, Parramatta Asylum Records

²⁷ [Parramatta Lunatic Asylum: 1848-1878 | Parramatta History and Heritage \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.nsw.gov.au/parramatta-lunatic-asylum-1848-1878)

²⁸ NSW BDM 3667/1864

²⁹ NSW State Archives, Probate Records

³⁰ NSW BDM 5377/1879

³¹ NSW BDM 2716/1901

Nana Mac's sister was Sarah2, born on 12/9/1860,³² two years after Sarah1's admittance to Tarban Creek. Eldest of thirteen siblings to John {Sarah1's older brother) and wife Elizabeth, Sarah1's presence must still have been felt as Sarah2 was named after her because of John's great affection for his sister.³³

John ran a 6000 acre farm including cattle, a dairy of 300 cows, horses and 40 acres under crops.³⁴ The thirteen children had some form of education, however schooling at this time was not compulsory,³⁵ work on the farm always took precedence,³⁶ and is shown in that Sarah's sister Barbara could not sign her name,³⁷ and by the ages of the siblings on their marriages.³⁸

Sarah2 married one of her father's workers, Joseph Harmer in 1878³⁹, pregnant with the first of two sons.⁴⁰ She had eight younger siblings, with another five to come.⁴¹ Sarah2 then disappears until I found Max Ryan's whole thesis in SAG's Library.

Sarah2 is the runaway! Joseph deserted her and their sons, she took up with an older man {William Howard), the family disapproved, there was a fight, the couple fled on horseback, leaving her sons behind, pursued by her father and two brothers.⁴² Sarah2 and William outran them, caught a steamer at Tathra heading north.⁴³

When Sarah2 became Sarah Howard, information flooded in from official records⁴⁴, the local Historical Society⁴⁵ and Trove.⁴⁶ Sarah2 had four daughters,⁴⁷ became a renowned, certified midwife,⁴⁸ practised for fifty years and delivered her last baby at 86 years of age. She received her memorial and was a local legend.⁴⁹

Little did I know a myth could lead to a far more fascinating 'real' family history.

³² NSW BDM 6817/1860

³³ *A Journey Through Time*, compiled by Noelene O'Connor and Kathy Jones

³⁴ Australian Town and Country Journal, 30 April, 1898; A Place Called Pericoe, Max Ryan

³⁵ [History of NSW government schools](#)

³⁶ NSW State Archives, Pericoe School File; Letter from Teacher M.A. Armstrong re attendance, 13/8/1888; The Armidale Chronicle, Sat 20 June, 1914; Child Slavery on Dairy Farms, p. 4; Northern Star, Education Dept Memo to Teachers, Fri 8 March, 1918, p.4;

³⁷ NSW State Archives, Probate Records

³⁸ NSW BDM - Marriages

³⁹ NSW BDM 2980/1878

⁴⁰ NSW BDM 9555/1878, 13766/1880

⁴¹ NSW BDM - Births

⁴² A Place Called Pericoe, Max Ryan

⁴³ A Place Called Pericoe, Max Ryan

⁴⁴ NSW BDMs, NSW State Archives

⁴⁵ <https://www.kurrajonghistory.org.au/>

⁴⁶ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/>, Sarah Howard Kurrajong

⁴⁷ NSW BDM 22814/1885, 29489/1894, 6694/1897, 34934/1900

⁴⁸ NSW State Archives, Nurses Index

⁴⁹ Windsor and Richmond Gazette, 21 March, 1962, District Pioneer Remembered