

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2023

2322 Maria's Myth

by Andrew Palmer

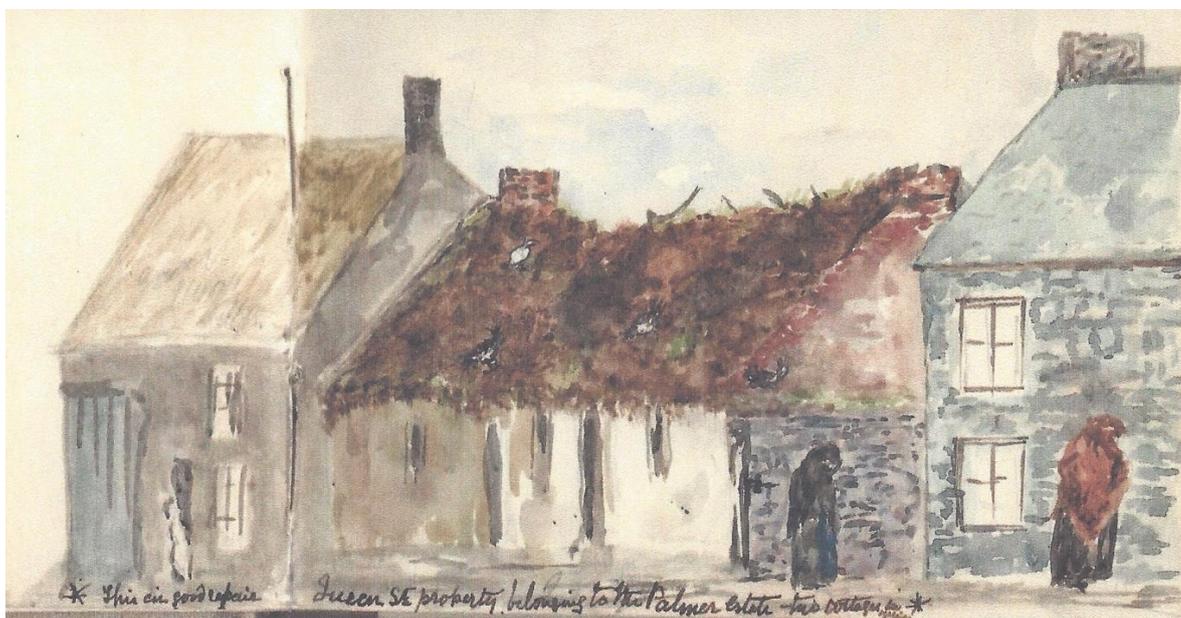
Maria's myth.

In the days before the internet and genealogy websites, the skill and tenacity of the researcher were critical to a successful search. Unfortunately, in the case of our Palmer family, the research of an otherwise industrious and diligent genealogist in the early 20th century added a false branch to our family tree. It remains the subject of debate between family members to this day. I wonder what attitudes and prejudices influenced her misinterpretation of the original documents?

Our family's researcher, Maria McBurney, had twin passions – watercolour painting - particularly of flora and fauna - and researching the history of the Palmer family. Born at Wollongong in New South Wales on 24 May 1859,ⁱ she married Dr Robert McBurney in Brisbane on 22 May 1874, before settling in Mackay, where he was the first surgeon-superintendent of the Mackay District Hospital.ⁱⁱ After the untimely death of her husband, Maria joined her daughter, Laura Preedy, in London in 1907, where Laura's husband had been sent by the New South Wales government.

As a recognised colonial watercolour artist, Maria embraced the life of a sophisticated colonial in London. She based herself at the Ladies Empire Club at 69 Grosvenor Street in the fashionable Mayfair district.ⁱⁱⁱ Her artistic skills were recognised when three of her flower studies were accepted for the Franco-British Exhibition in 1908.^{iv} Maria was also accorded 'the honour of an acceptance of a picture by the Royal Academy'.^v

During her years in London, Maria travelled extensively throughout Europe, the United Kingdom and Ireland researching her ancestors. Her sketchbook illustrates her visit to Durrow in Queen's County (now County Laois) and Birr in King's County (now County Offaly). It contained numerous watercolour paintings of houses and other buildings relevant to the Palmer family.^{vi} The sketchbook even included a sketch of the 'Palmer window' in All Saint's church in Snodland, Kent, where our branch of the family is believed to have lived before being transplanted to Ireland.^{vii}



Painting of houses in Durrow from Maria McBurney's sketchbook.

Maria's family research was focused on formal records and genealogical reference books in the famous libraries in both Dublin and London.^{viii} The knowledge gained from these sources was supplemented by information from members of her own family and possible family members residing in the United Kingdom or Ireland who shared the Palmer surname. Her research drew on both scholarly research of available genealogical records and oral family history.

The origin of our family myth lies in this research conducted by Maria in England and Ireland, which she summarised in a hand-written document that she called 'A Few notes of the Palmer family pedigree'.^{ix} Maria credits her aged uncle, Richard Elliott Palmer, who had been born in Birr before emigrating to Australia in 1840, as a general source of the information. However, she acknowledged that the information was given 'some years ago to one of my sisters (and) as he was then very old, and they are from memory (it) may account for them not being very clear'.^x

Maria concluded that her great-grandfather, Thomas Palmer, 'married the daughter of the wealthy Rev'd George Stoney, well known for his great charities'.^{xi} This statement has been proven to be wrong. Contemporaneous genealogical records and notices in the press reveal that Thomas Palmer of Durrow married Letitia Phillips on 3 November 1770.^{xii} In fact, it was Robert Palmer Jnr of Stragh in the Queen's County who married Miss Stoney, daughter of George Stoney in May 1770.^{xiii} Although both Robert and Thomas Palmer lived in Queen's County, they were not related.

Ossory marriage licence records and the family trees of the Phillips family and most on the Palmer side, correctly record the marriage of Thomas and Letitia. The clincher in disproving Maria's conclusion, is the contemporaneous written record of a petition by Henry Palmer, Attorney of the Court of Exchequer, to the Honorable Society of the King's Inn in Dublin, to take Richard Elliott Palmer as his apprentice. The document includes Richard Elliott Palmer's petition, in which he acknowledges he is 'the second son of Thomas Palmer of Danesfort in the Queen's County, Esq and Letitia Palmer otherwise Philips, his wife'.^{xiv}

Maria McBurney was a very careful and diligent genealogist. Overwhelmingly, her research on the Palmer family is validated by documents now available on family history websites or genealogical databases. Her manuscript frequently records the sources of information which underpin her conclusions and the research reflects the considered analysis of primary records by a skilled researcher. This measured and scholarly approach is at odds with her interpretation of the marriage link between the Palmer and Stoney families. What motivated her misinterpretation?

To me, the most plausible explanation for Maria identifying Rebecca Stoney as her great-grandmother was that Maria was influenced not by her own research but by what she saw as the high social status of the Stoney family and an urge to have such a well-connected family in her family tree. Her interpretation required her to ignore the inconvenient fact that the name of Miss Stoney's husband did not match that of her great-grandfather. In doing so, Maria would have acted contrary to her own genealogical instincts and breached one of the pillars of scholarly research – interpreting the facts based on source documents not personal prejudice.

Despite the most compelling evidence to the contrary, the myth has been perpetuated to this day and the issue remains contentious. Who knows what future generations of Palmers will make of it.

ⁱ Baptism Certificate of Maria Emma Palmer, born 24 May 1859, Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages New South Wales, Number 950 Vol 35.

ⁱⁱ Anon, 'Marriage', Mackay Mercury and South Kennedy Advertiser, 16 May 1874, p2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sketchbook of Maria McBurney.

^{iv} Anon, 'For Women', Daily Telegraph (Sydney), 18 June 1908, p4.

^v Anon, 'Social', Brisbane Courier, 18 June 1908, p7.

^{vi} Sketchbook.

^{vii} Sketchbook.

^{viii} 'A Few notes of the Palmer family pedigree', unpublished manuscript by Maria McBurney

^{ix} 'A Few notes of the Palmer family pedigree'

^x 'A Few notes of the Palmer family pedigree'.

^{xi} 'A Few notes of the Palmer family pedigree'.

^{xii} *Church Marriage Record of Ossory Marriage licences*, (<https://rootsireland.ie>) and Freeman's Journal, November 24 to 27, 1770, p150c.

^{xiii} Freeman's Journal, May 3 to 5 1770, p39ab.

^{xiv} Petition to the Benchers of the Honourable Society of King's Inn, 11 January 1800.