

**SEARCHING FOR ANNIE MASEFIELD: A
FAMILY HISTORY JOURNEY**

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Introduction

I never knew my maternal great grandmother Annie Elizabeth Sulman, nee Masefield. She died at her Sydney home aged 85 on 26 December 1949, a day after I was born.¹ From my mother Diana Carment and various other relations, however, I heard much about her as I grew up. Diana looked after some of Annie's papers, including diaries, letters and photographs.² The second wife of the Sydney architect, town planner and patron of the arts Sir John Sulman, at the age of six or seven Annie was adopted as an orphan into Sydney's wealthy Walker family during 1871. Her life after then is quite extensively documented³ and was well known to her family. In addition to having four children with John and being the stepmother for the three children from his first marriage, she was active in the Red Cross and other charities, published two well-received books of Australian wildflower photographs,⁴ and was Vice-President of the New South Wales Women's Liberal League.⁵

Her earlier childhood and family background, on the other hand, were largely unknown. My grandfather Tom Sulman was unable to provide the names of Annie's parents for her death certificate. My mother, who lived with Annie during the mid 1940s, knew rather more. She told me that the latter's father George Masefield ran a school in a house near Sydney's Kings Cross that later became part of the Belvedere Hotel. Her mother Annie was a daughter of the shipwright Andrew Summerbell, whose family was well established in Sydney but according to Diana definitely included no convicts. Diana also said to me, no doubt repeating what she was earlier told, that Annie Sulman's parents both drowned and George Masefield's friend the recently widowed businessman Thomas Walker and his sister Joanna then adopted her as a companion for his only child Eadith (later Dame Eadith Walker).

¹ New South Wales Death Certificate, 1949/024419, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Sydney, 23 February 2010.

² Many of these are now in the State Library of New South Wales. See Sir John Sulman Papers, ML (Mitchell Library), MSS 4480 and Sulman Family Papers, ML MSS 9218.

³ Zenaida S. Edwards, 'The Life and Work of Sir John Sulman 1849-1934', Doctor of Philosophy thesis, University of Technology Sydney, 2006 includes much well researched information on Annie.

⁴ See her entry in *Who's Who in Australia 1947*, The Herald, Melbourne, 1947, p 772. Her books on wildflowers should not be confused with those of her stepdaughter Florence Sulman.

⁵ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 June 1914.

For a long time I accepted this information. When, however, doing research on an entirely unrelated topic at the State Library of New South Wales about 25 years ago I noticed on the reference shelves copies of early marriage records from St Philip's Church of England in Sydney. On checking them I discovered that Andrew Summerbell married Catherine Barrett on 23 May 1826. What particularly attracted my attention was that Catherine used a cross instead of a signature.⁶ Further research quickly revealed that Catherine was a recently released Irish convict.⁷ Although initially not altogether happy with the revelation, my mother accepted it. She had no recollection of Annie ever mentioning that her maternal grandmother was a convict and suspected she knew nothing about it.

These early discoveries made me want to find out as much as possible about Annie's background and life before she went to the Walkers. My more recent experiences in researching and writing family history⁸ and innovative work by Australian historians such as Tim Bonyhady,⁹ Graeme Davison¹⁰ and David Walker¹¹ have also convinced me that there are creative possibilities when a professional historian explores her or his own ancestors' lives.¹² In particular, it allows effective use of a personal perspective and voice in weaving stories about the historian's family into a wider context in ways that complement amateur family historians' and genealogists' valuable work. While I rather sporadically undertook my research, I embarked on a still continuing journey made much easier in recent years with the coming of online resources such as Ancestry.com and the National Library of Australia's Trove. Although this paper is a report in progress for what I hope will be a

⁶ The marriage is officially recorded in New South Wales. Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1995, Church of England Marriages, 405, vol 44B, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Sydney, 18 March 2010.

⁷ 'James McClelland's Convict, Pioneer and Immigrant Series of Australia, Names of All Convicts Arriving in Australia 1st January to 7th August 11919, and If Recorded, Their Physical Description', Sydney, 1986, MS, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

⁸ David Carment, *From Scots to Australians: The Carment and Inglis Families 1672-1976*, the author, Sydney, 2013, <http://dcarment.com/2013/03/27/from-scots-to-australians/>, accessed 3 February 2016.

⁹ Tim Bonyhady, *Good Living Street: The Fortunes of my Viennese Family*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2011.

¹⁰ Graeme Davison, *Lost Relations: Fortunes of My Family in Australia's Golden Age*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2015.

¹¹ David Walker, *Not Dark Yet: A Personal History*, Giramondo, Sydney, 2011.

¹² Also see John Rickard, 'Pointers to the Future of Family History', in *Australian Historical Studies*, vol 33, issue 3, September 2013.

more substantial study, Davison rightly observes that in ‘family history even more than other forms of history’ the journey ‘matters as much [as] the arrival’.¹³

The Masefields and Summerbells

Annie Sulman’s father George Robert Masefield was born at Bewdley, England on 4 December 1830, the son of George (1794 or 1795-1847) and Elizabeth Masefield (1798 or 1799-1863).¹⁴ George was a schoolteacher and his son George Robert also became one. Contrary to what various family members told me, I found no relationship between George Robert and the Poet Laureate John Masefield although it is possible they were distant cousins.¹⁵ Probably during the late 1850s George Robert migrated to Sydney. On 7 May 1862 in a Church of England ceremony he married Annie Summerbell at Sydney’s St Andrew’s Cathedral Church.¹⁶

Annie Summerbell was born at Sydney on 27 January 1845, one of Andrew and Catherine Summerbell’s eight children.¹⁷ Andrew was an entrepreneurial shipwright who for many years had his own shipyard at Summerbell’s Wharf, Millers Point¹⁸ and mostly lived at nearby Windmill Street. He was baptised at Heworth, England in 1795,¹⁹ arrived at Sydney in 1822 and died at his Windmill Street home in 1857.²⁰ As mentioned previously, he married Catherine Barrett at Sydney in 1826. Catherine was born at Cork City, Ireland, in either 1805 or 1806, the daughter of a mechanic. She had at least one brother, John, who was transported to Australia for life

¹³ Graeme Davison, ‘Speed-relating: Family History in a Digital Age’, in *History Australia*, vol 6, no 2, 2009, p 43.9.

¹⁴ Masefield family register, held by Heather and Lea Sulman.

¹⁵ See Constance Babington-Smith, *John Masefield: A Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978. Neither George nor his father is mentioned in Geoffrey B. Masefield, *A History of the Senior Branch of the Masefield Family*, the author, no place of publication, 1975.

¹⁶ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 May 1862.

¹⁷ New South Wales Baptism Certificate, 303 Vol: 30A, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Sydney, 19 November 2014.

¹⁸ Shirley Fitzgerald & Christopher Keating, *Millers Point: The Urban Village*, Halstead Press, Sydney, 2007, pp 32 & 60.

¹⁹ FamilySearch.org – Search, http://www.familysearch.org/eng/Search/frameset_search.asp, accessed 12 February 2010.

²⁰ New South Wales Death Certificate, 1857/000708, Registry of Births Deaths Marriages Sydney, 20 February 2010.

in 1818.²¹ Catherine soon joined him. In 1819 she was sentenced at Cork City to seven years' imprisonment. Her occupation then was a servant. No offence is recorded (the Irish court records were destroyed in 1922) but it was almost certainly theft. She was one of 121 female convicts on board *Lord Wellington* that reached Sydney in January 1820.²² In 1822 she was working as an assigned servant.²³ Following receipt of her ticket of leave in February 1824,²⁴ she was a housekeeper²⁵ before being granted her certificate of freedom in March 1826.²⁶ She died at Windmill Street in 1873, being buried with Catholic rites at Petersham Cemetery.²⁷ So far as I am aware none of her children was a Catholic.

Life at William Street

Following their marriage George and Annie Masefield lived initially at 3 Devonshire Terrace, William Street, Sydney, where George ran one of Sydney's numerous small and often short lived private schools. A son, George Andrew Masefield, was born

²¹ Family.Search.org – Search, http://www.familysearch.org/eng/Search/framest_search.asp, accessed 12 February 2010; Barretts of Cork City – General – Family History & Genealogy Message Board – Ancestry.com; <http://boards.ancestry.com/localities.britisles.ireland.crk.general/7741/mb.ashx?pnt=1>, accessed 13 February 2010; New South Wales Death Certificate, 1873/001164, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Sydney, 20 February 2010.

²² Lord Wellington 1820, <http://members.iinet.net.au/perththds/vonvicts/confem56.html>, accessed 17 November 2005; James McClelland's Convict, Pioneer and Immigrant Series of Australia; Ancestry.com.au – New South Wales and Tasmania, Australia, Settler and Convict Lists, 1787-1834 – Catherine Barrett, http://search.ancestry.com.au/content/viewerrpf.aspx?h=94048&db=HO10Lists&iid=IMAUS1787_114219-0037&sp=0, accessed 21 February 2010.

²³ Carol J. Baxter (ed), *General Muster of Land and Stock Muster of New South Wales 1822*, ABGC, Sydney, 1988, p 23.

²⁴ *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 12 February 1824.

²⁵ Carol J. Baxter (ed), *General Muster List of New South Wales 1823, 1824, 1825*, ABGR, Sydney, 1979, p 24.

²⁶ State Records of New South Wales, Index to Certificates of Freedom, CF no 145/5118, 30 March 1826, item 4/4424.

²⁷ New South Wales Death Certificate, 1873/001164, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Sydney, 20 February 2010; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 August 1873.

there on 30 January 1863.²⁸ Annie Elizabeth Masefield was the next child to arrive on 13 June 1864.²⁹

A newspaper advertisement on 3 September 1864 advised that:

*Mr. MASEFIELD begs to announce that he has REMOVED from Devonshire-terrace, William-street, to "Belvidere House", Upper William Street-South. His pupils now have the advantage of a large paddock, forming part of the premises; and also the run of a considerable tract of adjoining bush land.*³⁰

Located high on a hill, the house was rented. The Womerah people were traditional owners of the site, which from 1810 was part of the Thomas West estate. The house later became a wing of the Belvedere Hotel at 81 Bayswater Road that was demolished to make way for a road tunnel in 1969.³¹ Annie Sulman's cousin Elizabeth Summerbell, also born in 1864,³² wrote to her in 1934:

*I sometimes look at Belvidere. It is still in a good state of preservation. When I first remember it...it had an immense tract to the right extending to I think near Barcom Avenue, which is the foot of Bayswater Road, close to where the Stadium now is ...Great big gum trees were on it and at one time we saw a party of Aborigines camping on the grounds...In those days Chinese gardens came after it to where the White Court Tennis Club now is.*³³

Belvidere House was not, however, a happy home for the Masefields. Three-year-old George Andrew Masefield died on 8 March 1866.³⁴ Later that year, on 16

²⁸ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 February 1863.

²⁹ New South Wales Birth Certificate, 1864/0011478, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Sydney, 23 February 2010.

³⁰ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 September 1864.

³¹ Gaby Naber, *The Truth about my Fathers: A Memoir*, Random House, Sydney, 2004 (2002), pp 28-29 & 44.

³² Australia, Birth Index, 1788-1922 – Ancestry.com.au, http://search.ancestry.com.au/cgi-bin/sse.dll?_phsrc=nAn39&phstart=successSource&uscPIBjs=true&gss=angsI&new17rank=1&msT=1&gsfn=Elizabeth&gsfn_x=0gsin=si, accessed 1 September 2016.

³³ Elizabeth A. Summerbell to Annie Sulman, 27 August 1934, Sulman Family Archive.

³⁴ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 March 1866.

August his mother Annie Masefield died aged 22 at Belvidere House of meningitis ‘after a protracted illness’. She was buried with Church of England rites at Randwick Cemetery.³⁵ George married again on 20 June 1868 to Adah Cornelia Ann Smith (1838-1899), daughter of Reverend Elijah Smith, a Church of England clergyman.³⁶ A week later, Belvidere House was advertised as:

*Belvidere House, Classical and Commercial Academy for Young Gentlemen, conducted by Mr. G. R. Masefield. Only twenty pupils received. Day-scholars, 4 guineas per Quarter. Boarders as per arrangement. The domestic comfort of boarders will receive personal attention of Mrs. Masefield.*³⁷

George’s sister Mary Scott assisted Adah with juveniles’ classes for a time.³⁸ George and Adah’s daughter Adah Lizzie Masefield was born at Belvidere House on 14 April 1869.³⁹ While this must have been a joyful event, on 22 September 1869 George was officially made insolvent,⁴⁰ which meant that he was unable to pay debts or meet expenses. A severe fall in July 1869 that left him unable to teach for a while⁴¹ may have precipitated a financial crisis that George, like many other members of Sydney’s precariously based colonial middle class facing similar situations, lacked the resources to overcome. Although classes resumed at what was now called Belvidere House Academy in October 1869,⁴² in January 1870 there was a public auction of ‘Superior Household Furniture, Desks, &c’ belonging to George’s insolvent estate.⁴³

Later that month George’s home and school moved to smaller premises at Ellora Cottage, Upper William Street,⁴⁴ where he taught ‘Young men desirous of

³⁵ New South Wales Death Certificate, 1866/000986, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Sydney, 13 February 2006; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 1866.

³⁶ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 June 1868; Adah Masefield (1838-1899) – Find a Grave Memorial, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&Grid=43287694>, accessed 9 February 2016.

³⁷ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 June 1868.

³⁸ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 January 1869. She married twice, on the second occasion at Sydney to Frederick Hammon during 1876. She died at Sydney in 1886. See *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 1876 and *Evening News*, 28 July 1886.

³⁹ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 April 1869.

⁴⁰ State Records of New South Wales, Insolvency Index, 09836.

⁴¹ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 July 1869.

⁴² *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 & 4 October 1869.

⁴³ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 January 1870.

⁴⁴ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 January 1870.

improving themselves'.⁴⁵ During early February 1870 Adah Masefield advertised for a 'good servant (Protestant)'.⁴⁶ Misfortunes, nevertheless, continued. Adah Lizzie Masefield died on 26 February.⁴⁷ Ellora Cottage was advertised as being for let in early March.⁴⁸ These events together with his earlier accident clearly took a heavy toll on George's health. On 17 September 1870 he died at the Hospital, Gladesville. Described on his death certificate as 'Schoolmaster (lunatic)', the causes of death were '(a) Mania (b) Yellow softening of the brain'.⁴⁹ The latter condition was normally due to haemorrhage or inflammation.⁵⁰

Even before her father's death, Annie was spending time with the Walkers. Between the 1820s and the 1860s Thomas Walker and other members of his family had commercial interests and lived in or very close to Millers Point, where they knew the Summerbells.⁵¹ Millers Point had no direct road connection with the rest of Sydney until 1859, which meant that its residents felt socially as well as physically separated. They formed a maritime community of wharf owners, traders and manual workers living quite closely together where people of all social classes frequently mixed.⁵² Through the Summerbells the Walkers also probably knew George Masefield. On 27 January 1870 Annie arrived at Hobart on the ship *City of Hobart* with Thomas Walker's wife Jane and their daughter Eadith.⁵³ They left again for Sydney on 1 March 1870.⁵⁴ Jane died in December that year and during the following year Thomas brought his sister Joanna from Scotland to look after the nine-year old

⁴⁵ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 January 1870.

⁴⁶ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 February 1870.

⁴⁷ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 February 1870.

⁴⁸ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 March 1870.

⁴⁹ New South Wales Death Certificate, 1870/005775, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Sydney, 13 February 2006.

⁵⁰ Softening of the brain – definition of softening of the brain by the online Dictionary from Datasegment.com, <http://onlinedictionary.datasegment.com/word/softening+of+the+brain>, accessed 26 March 2010.

⁵¹ Fitzgerald & Keating, *Millers Point*, pp 21, 24, 25, 32, 55-57, 60; Patricia Skehan, *The Walkers of Yaralla*, Hippo Books, Sydney, 2000, chs 1-18; Annette Lemercier, email to David Carment, 24 November 2014. I am grateful to Annette for drawing my attention to useful sources.

⁵² 1840 – MILLERS POINT, <http://millerspointcommunity.com.au/1840s>, accessed 31 July 2016.

⁵³ *The Mercury*, 28 January 1870.

⁵⁴ *The Mercury*, 2 March 1870.

Eadith, an only child.⁵⁵ Once at the Walkers' large new home and estate at Yaralla on the Parramatta River at Concord, Joanna adopted Annie as a companion for Eadith. During 1871 Adah Masefield brought Annie to Yaralla to commence her new life there. An exact date cannot be confirmed but it may have been in October.⁵⁶ No official record exists, as until 1923 New South Wales did not have a legal adoption system.⁵⁷ Adah subsequently moved with her widowed mother to England.⁵⁸

Aftermath

The impact of the events just described on Annie remains unclear. Many of them she would not have known about or remembered while her recollections of others were understandably sketchy and sometimes inaccurate. It is very likely that she was never told about her grandmother's convict background or her father's insolvency and death in a lunatic asylum. As the historian Tanya Evans argues, it is often only through the techniques and outcomes of family history that such 'secrets and lies' are uncovered.⁵⁹ James Walker's voluminous diaries that include many descriptions of Annie between the late 1870s and the 1890s provide few clues⁶⁰ although there is one tantalising 1889 entry that simply notes his cousin Joanna Walker told of 'how she

⁵⁵ J. MacCulloch, 'Walker, Dame Eadith Campbell (1861-1937)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol 12, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1990, p 356.

⁵⁶ Skehan, *The Walkers of Yaralla*, p 108 refers to 'letters sighted in private files' regarding Annie's arrival at Yaralla but gives no further details. The letters do not appear to be in the various Walker family collections at the State Library of New South Wales. Patricia Skehan & Jill Hodder in their semi-fictional *Where the Blue Wattle Grows: Spooky Stories from Yaralla*, P. Skehan Publishing, Sydney, 2006, pp 11-12 give the date as 31 October 1871. Adah Masefield and her mother are recorded as travelling to Hong Kong in *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, 7 November 1871.

⁵⁷ Adoption – Glossary Term – Find & Connect – New South Wales, <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/ref/nsw/biogs/NE00959b.htm>, accessed 14 August 2016.

⁵⁸ Adah Masefield (1838-1899).

⁵⁹ Tanya Evans, 'Secrets and Lies: The Radical Potential of Family History', in *History Workshop Journal*, vol 71, issue 1, Spring 2011.

⁶⁰ J. T. Walker Papers, MLMSS 2729, State Library of New South Wales. I employed Nicole Cama to search the papers for me.

came to adopt Annie Masefield, & a happy event it has been and turned out for them both'.⁶¹

Annie kept in contact with her stepmother⁶² and it is possible that she also did so with her paternal aunt Mary until both died before the end of the nineteenth century. She later named her youngest child John Masefield Sulman and collected information and objects regarding her Masefield and Summerbell relations.⁶³ It is, however, plain from a variety of sources that Annie's sense of attachment to the Walker family was far more powerful than it was to the Masefields and Summerbells. In most respects Annie's life with the Walkers was extraordinarily happy. A diary she kept for much of her adult life includes detailed biographical notes on various Walkers and greatly less on her blood relations.⁶⁴ Joanna Walker, she wrote, was a 'mother to me in all but name'.⁶⁵ It was through the Walkers that she met her husband John Sulman. Sulman's biographer Zeny Edwards suggests that the Walkers actively encouraged the relationship between them and their 1893 wedding celebrations were at Yaralla.⁶⁶ Thomas Walker, who died in 1886, left Annie income from a large trust fund⁶⁷ while she also inherited 30,000 Pounds from Joanna Walker in 1890.⁶⁸ That is roughly equivalent, using Thom Blake's program for calculating historical money rates in Australia, to almost four million Australian Dollars today.⁶⁹ It is not surprising in these circumstances that her memories of childhood focussed on the years after 1870 rather than her traumatic experiences before then.

Conclusions

⁶¹ Walker Papers, diary 6 May 1889.

⁶² Edwards, 'The Life and Work of Sir John Sulman 1849-1934', vol II, p 146

⁶³ Evidence includes notes and cuttings in her diary held by David Carment, copies she made of portraits of her Masefield grandparents held by various family members and the details on the Summerbells provided, apparently at Annie's request, by Elizabeth A. Summerbell in the letter of 27 August 1934 cited earlier.

⁶⁴ Annie Sulman, diary.

⁶⁵ Skehan, *The Walkers of Yaralla*, p 108.

⁶⁶ Edwards, 'The Life and Work of Sir John Sulman 1849-1934', vol II, ch 12.

⁶⁷ Skehan, *The Walkers of Yaralla*, p 80.

⁶⁸ Walker Papers, diary 27 April 1890.

⁶⁹ Posting calculations,

<http://www.thomblake.com.au/secondary/hisdata/calculate.php>, accessed 10 February 2016.

In common with many family histories, my research on Annie commenced as a personal and possibly self-indulgent response to long-standing curiosity. Some historians argue that this ‘satisfies a need to search for roots in a postmodern and uncertain age’.⁷⁰ Graeme Davison sees it as a ‘quest for personal identity’.⁷¹ I hope, though, that my brief account suggests that there are other reasons why it can be worthwhile for a historian drawing on her or his own memories and accessing private and public sources of information to record and understand an ancestor’s life. Aspects of Annie’s childhood story illuminate themes in colonial Australian history such as class and social mobility, convictism, education, family, economic changes, gender, identity and work. The story also allows an exploration of memory, periods, places, individual personalities and personal relationships. But, as is frequently the case in other areas of historical research, limitations of sources pose serious problems. In spite of all my efforts to uncover Annie’s childhood and set it in a broader context, there remain many unanswered and probably unanswerable questions. These not only concern gaps that cannot be filled but also, much more importantly, how and what she thought. The family history journey to which Davison refers is often one that never reaches a final destination.

⁷⁰ Tanya Evans & Patricia Curthoys, ‘Family History, Identity and Public History: Writing a History of the Benevolent Society in its 200th Year’, in *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol 37, no 3, September 2013, p 285.

⁷¹ Davison, *Lost Relations*, p xii.