## BLACK SHEEP AND BLACK ANCESTORS -- THE EASTOE FAMILY AND ABORIGINAL TASMANIA

By Christopher Eastoe

September, 2017

My great-grandmother Janey Eastoe was buried alongside her husband George Eastoe in the graveyard at Christ Church Illawarra. As a boy growing up on the nearby family farm, I had not given the gravestone much thought. It was during one of my return trips from Arizona to Tasmania, the trip I made to attend my sister Helen's wedding, that I noticed some odd things about it. It's a fine, white marble monument, bearing the inscription "Janey, dearly beloved wife of George Eastoe" rather than her full name. This appears to have been inscribed 18 years before the inscription for George Eastoe himself. Furthermore, "Janey" seems oddly informal as a Christian name for a woman who lived most of her life during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

So at Helen's wedding, I decided to ask my late father's surviving sisters (Kathleen, Dorothy, Nancy and Joan) about Janey. They didn't know much, because Janey had died before they were born. Even Gwen, the eldest of the family, did not overlap significantly with Janey. Nonetheless, they did know about a rumor – Janey was "the dark side of the family" – and their mother had told them that one of them might have a black baby. They weren't sure whether Janey might have been of aboriginal descent, or possibly a Pacific Islander. They also knew that there was an uncle Robert, presumably Janey's brother, in Victoria. This meagre information brought to mind two matters I had never understood. At a social occasion at the University of Tasmania in the mid-1970s, someone had told my sister Judith that there was aboriginal blood in the Eastoe family. At some other time, I had been told that I had "a Tasmanian face." It seemed like an interesting project to see what I could find out about Janey, George and their families.

I put together much of what I will summarize below for a reunion of the Eastoe family at Christ Church Illawarra on Easter Day, 2011. Many of my cousins and their families were present. We all went down to the graveyard and stood around Janey's grave as I recounted the story as I had put it together. It turned out that there was one more family story relevant to the research project. My cousin Marie (née Rosier, daughter of Gwen and Allan) recalled a story of Gwen's. Gwen had gone from Launceston to Melbourne on the passenger steamer to visit the family of Uncle Robert. As the steamer docked in Williamstown, she noticed a group of "brown people" waving enthusiastically. They were waving at her, and they were Uncle Robert's family.

Subsequently, Gwen's grand-daughter Sherri Rainbow has researched some very useful documents in Victoria.

To begin, then, it seemed that Janey was black, or descended from someone black. If aboriginal, she might have been Tasmanian or Victorian. Robert von Bibra (Nancy's son) pointed out that his mother had been christened "Nancy Blyth Eastoe". In the previous generation, Aunt Elsie (Granda's sister) had been christened "Elsie Blyth Eastoe". The name "Blyth" was clearly significant in George Eastoe's family, and as Robert pointed out, it is a name associated with Bass Strait islanders who are of Tasmanian aboriginal descent.

The story that follows is based on research I've been able to undertake on the internet. The Tasmanian archives, which have become increasingly easy to search remotely over the past few years, have been

invaluable, but so has the scholarship of Australian history over the last two or three decades. I'm sure there are more clues to find. The story is not just Janey's. It is also the story of the Bass Strait seal hunters, of the aboriginal women they bought or abducted and enslaved, of the decision of an English family to move across the world, and of the marriage prospects of their children in 1860s-1870s Tasmania.

The story has a weak link. There are few or no archival records of the inhabitants of Flinders Island in the 1830s and following years. In a remote place, presumably seldom visited by government officials or clergymen, there must have been scant means of keeping records, let alone arranging for formal baptisms and marriages. The weak link concerns the ancestry of Janey's father. We can find documentation of his name or names in the archives of Victoria, but of his origins we know nothing certain. If he was born on the Bass Strait islands in the 1830s, it is unlikely that there ever was any formal documentation of his birth or ancestry.

## JAMES AND MARIA EASTOE

James (born about 1820) and Maria (née Machen, 18 July 1827, Hingham, Norfolk) Eastoe arrived aboard the ship *Southern Eagle* in Launceston on August 28, 1857, in the company of their children George (age 5) and Elizabeth (age 1). David Eastoe was James's brother according to family lore, but this is not proven by archived information. He was born in a different town or district of Norfolk, and his parents are not listed by the Launceston Immigration Aid Society (LIAS), whereas James's parents are listed. He, his wife Hannah and four children also made the voyage. In England, James and Maria had lived at Reymerston, Norfolk, a hamlet a few kilometers southeast of East Dereham. James's mother Ann Turner Eastoe is mentioned in the parish register in Reymerston (record seen by me, June 1976). James and David were recruited by an agent sent by the Launceston Immigration Aid Society to England in search of agricultural expertise. James is listed by the LIAS as a ploughman, and Maria as a dairy girl. The citizens of Launceston were anxious to ensure a local food supply (Button, 1909, p. 238). There's an oral family story (I think it was Auntie Dot who told me) that James and Maria hired a wagon, loaded their possessions, and set off into the country, camping for the first night just west of Entally House near Hadspen.

Life for the family cannot have been easy in their new homeland, especially for the children. Elizabeth died in 1860 at the age of 4. Maria gave birth to another seven children after arriving in Tasmania. A genealogy web-site (<a href="http://www.myheritage.com/names/george\_eastoe">http://www.myheritage.com/names/george\_eastoe</a>) claims that there were eight children, but I see evidence for nine. The birth records in the TNI give the following list:

William, born 1 November 1863, an unnamed male child, born 21 January 1866, a second Elizabeth, born 22 November 1867, James, born 11 April 1870, and Alfred, born 1 May 1871. James Senior would have been 50 or 51 when Alfred was born.

In addition, there were Robert (died 1872 aged 8 according to the gravestone) and Fanny, who is listed as a sibling in Alfred's obituary (The Examiner, Thursday August 12, 1948, p. 2). A Mrs. Frost of Carrick is listed in the TNI under Marriages as named Fanny Blazely at the time of marriage. She appears to have been née Eastoe, and was Mrs. Thomas Guest about 1878-1881, Mrs. Henry Blazely about 1883, and Mrs. Charles Frost by 1896. There is no TNI record of her birth. She must have been born soon after the family arrived in Tasmania.

Elizabeth (died at age 4 according to the gravestone, possibly the one born in England?), James and Robert are buried in the same grave as their parents at St. Andrews Church, Carrick, having died in infancy or early childhood. The unnamed child presumably died soon after birth. This constitutes a distressing example of child mortality among new colonists in the 1860s and 1870s; five of a total of nine children died in infancy or childhood. Contrast this with the experience of George Eastoe's family born in the 1880s and 1890s. George and Janey had seven children, of whom all survived into old age.

James Senior died at the age of 69 on December 29, 1890, and Maria on September 11, 1904, at the age of 77.

James and Maria lived at Junction Farm, on the north bank of the Meander River just upstream of its confluence with the South Esk at Hadspen. The farm remained under Eastoe ownership until recently, but it was Alfred, their youngest surviving son, who took it over, not George or William.

## **GEORGE EASTOE**

The Tasmania Names Index gives no record of George Eastoe's marriage to Janey Blyth. The web-site <a href="https://www.genealogieonline.nl/en/karens-family-tree/l43117.php">https://www.genealogieonline.nl/en/karens-family-tree/l43117.php</a> states that the wedding was in Victoria in 1880. The TNI does list birth records for seven of their children (again, <a href="http://www.myheritage.com/names/george\_eastoe">http://www.myheritage.com/names/george\_eastoe</a> claims eight children, but I can't find the extra birth record): Helen (born 26 July 1881), Jessie (21 September 1882), Florence (10 November 1883), Agnes (13 March 1885), Robert (29 June 1886), Arthur (4 May 1889) and Elsie (29 February 1892). All seven births were registered in Westbury, not in Longford, probably because Junction Farm lay within Westbury Municipality or because he was living at Forest Lodge on Illawarra Road, which is also in Westbury Municipality (Tasmanian municipalities were established in the 1860s).

As will become clearer below, it seems highly likely that George proposed marriage to a woman who was not of "pure" European descent. Inter-racial marriage must have been subject to social stigma at the time. Why did he take such a difficult social course? Could the supply of eligible white women still have been insufficient after the gold rushes? Perhaps his options as a young man without property or connections were limited. Why did he marry Janey in Victoria? Why didn't he, as eldest son, take over Junction Farm? It seems possible that he did not have good relations with his parents. At the very least, he seems to have been a black sheep of the family.

## SAMUEL BLYTH

Samuel Blyth (who occasionally spelled his name "Blythe" or "Bligh") was born in Kirby le Soken, northeast of Colchester in Essex, England, on 9 March 1792

(http://www.annapizzey.ic24.net/blyth%20data/d134.htm). He and his nephew William both emigrated to Van Diemen's Land. Their destinies in the colony could scarcely have been more disparate. Nephew William married the daughter of William Crowther, a man of privileged place in the society of Hobart Town (http:// www.abc.net.au/tasmania/stories/s1328033.htm). The match suggests that the Blyth family was of good repute in England. Samuel, on the other hand, found his way to the Furneaux Group where he joined the company of seal hunters, a group of renegade Englishmen and others of traditionally bad reputation – but who may have included several who simply sought a quiet life (Cameron, 2011). What could this imply about his life up to that point? He seems to have been

another black sheep. He arrived in the islands by the 1830s (possibly some time before the 1830s), rather late in the episode of hunting of seals, which were already so depleted in numbers as to make hunting non-viable as a livelihood (Cameron, 2011). His arrival in the islands may have had more to do with finding an out-of-the-way refuge. There we find him assuming responsibility for an aboriginal woman by the original name of Meeterlatteenner in the 1830s. The government, through its agent George Augustus Robinson, was attempting to put an end to the cohabitation of sealers and their women. There were presumably no legal marriages within the Furneaux Group society; combining that offense against 19th century morality with the government's policy towards the Tasmanian aborigines explains the campaign to separate the women and any children into the Wybalenna settlement on Flinders Island, and send the menfolk elsewhere, regardless of whether any caring relationships actually existed. Robinson makes no mention of Meeterlatteenner in his diaries before about 1839, although he mentions several other aboriginal women who lived as slaves or consorts of the sealers (Plomley, 1966); perhaps Blyth had her well-hidden when Robinson visited the islands. Eventually, Blyth was forced to leave Meeterlatteenner at the Aboriginal Establishment at Wybalenna. He subsequently moved to Victoria. The source https://bassstraitto1850.wordpress.com/biographies-of-people-living-in-orvisiting-bass-strait-to-1850/ gives a precise date, 21 May 1837, for Meeterlatteenner's transfer to Wybalenna.

Samuel married Polly Munro, a full-blood member of the Port Phillip tribe in Victoria, in 1845. The Rev. Thomas Reibey visited Polly in Victoria in 1863

(<a href="http://www.annapizzey.ic24.net/blyth%20data/d134.htm">http://www.annapizzey.ic24.net/blyth%20data/d134.htm</a>) and described her two pretty daughters, Elizabeth (born 1845 or 1846) and Emma (born 1849). Samuel's marriage to another aboriginal woman after losing Meeterlatteenner suggests a caring marriage, leaving me to conjecture that Blyth may well have cared about his relationship with Meeterlatteenner before being forced by the Van Diemen's Land government to terminate it.

An internet catalogue of the Blyth family in the antipodes (<a href="http://www.lchr.org/a/38/gq/wga5.html">http://www.lchr.org/a/38/gq/wga5.html</a>) lists an eldest male child born to Samuel Blyth – a boy, first name not recorded, born in 1835. The list states that the boy was born to Polly Munro, but this is probably incorrect. In 1835, Blyth would have been living with Meeterlatteenner in the Furneaux Group

(https://bassstraitto1850.wordpress.com/biographies-of-people-living-in-or-visiting-bass-strait-to-1850/). The boy's mother is very likely to have been Meeterlatteenner. Samuel Blyth died in 1855, in Creswick, Victoria although <a href="http://www.annapizzey.ic24.net/blyth%20data/d134.htm">http://www.annapizzey.ic24.net/blyth%20data/d134.htm</a> suggests that he may have died in northern Tasmania. The same source states that in 1849, Samuel was living on Preservation Island. Elizabeth and Emma eventually moved to the Furneaux Group; however, Tindale (<a href="http://www.cifhs.com/tasrecords/growthofapeople.html">http://www.cifhs.com/tasrecords/growthofapeople.html</a>) give's Elizabeth's place of residence as Robbins Island. Did they choose to live on the islands because they found the society there kinder to people of mixed race than English society in Victoria? Such is suggested by Merry (2003), and the long and obsessive discussion of matters relating to people of mixed English and aboriginal descent in Bonwick (1870) is evidence of social discomfort about them.

Meeterlatteenner was a member of the Coastal Plains people, whose lands occupied the northeast corner of Tasmania. Cameron (2011) gives a detailed account of the lifestyle of this clan. Meeterlatteenner was born about 1811, and was captured as a girl (early 1820s?) near Piper's River by

the seal hunter Michael McKenzie from the Furneaux Group

(https://bassstraitto1850.wordpress.com/biographies-of-people-living-in-or-visiting-bass-strait-to-1850/). The same source tells that she was known in the islands as Sall, Sally, Thompson's Sall, Rebecca and Menerletterner. She was passed from McKenzie to James Everitt, then seized by James Thompson. After Thompson drowned, she lived with William Procter, and then with Samuel Blyth. While some of the aboriginal women in the company of the sealers may have been obtained by barter or other form of agreement with the men of the Coastal Plains and other peoples (Cameron, 2011), Meeterlatteener was abducted by force and enslaved.

Meeterlatteenner was one of 15 Tasmanian aborigines who, in 1839, accompanied George Augustus Robinson to the new Port Phillip settlement, where Robinson was to be Protector of the Aborigines. She no doubt took her 4 year old son with her. Meeterlatteenner remained in Victoria, dying there some time before 1842 (Johnson and MacFarlane, 2015, p. 277). What became of her son at this stage is not known.

#### **POLLY MUNRO**

Polly Munro also had some history in the Furneaux Group. She was a full-blood member of the Port Phillip tribe in Victoria, and was abducted with her mother (known as Margery) to the Furneaux Group by George Meredith and James Munro, in about 1835 (Fels, 2011; see also <a href="http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/annapizzey/data/d134.htm">http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/annapizzey/data/d134.htm</a>). She was therefore in the islands at about the time when Samuel Blyth's son was born, but is said to have been living with James Munro at that time. She returned to Victoria in the late 1830s or early 1840s; I would suggest that she most likely travelled with George Augustus Robinson when he took Meeterlatteener and other aborigines to Port Phillip in 1839.

## A SECOND SAMUEL BLYTH/BLIGH?

Johnson and MacFarlane (2015) related the arrival of "the Irishman Samuel Bligh" on Flinders Island in 1851. He lived there long enough to find a wife among the community of Tasmanian aboriginal descent, and have children. Eventually he abandoned his family and went to the Victorian goldfields, never to return to Flinders Island. He is said to have left many descendants in the islands, many of whom were christened with "Blyth" as a middle name.

It is remarkable that two Samuel Blyths (the spelling is not important) should have made their way to the Furneaux Group. Johnson and Macfarlane (2015) do not mention the senior Samuel Blyth at all, but Samuel senior is well documented in other sources (as noted above), and is said to have gone to the Victorian goldfields. The junior Samuel could have been the senior Samuel's son, who would have been approximately 16 in 1851. However, he is not Janey's father according to the Victorian archives. He

may even be spurious, a muddled piece of history. The Blyth descendants in the Furneaux Group could be descendants of Emma and Elizabeth Blyth.

## JANEY BLYTH

Janey's maiden name was Blyth, the spelling used on all seven birth records for her children. On the records for Florence and Agnes, her full name is listed as "Jane Tasmania Blyth". From this we may conclude that she was born in Tasmania, or into a family that identified itself with Tasmania, rather than into a family with original ties to Victoria. She was born in about 1858, according to her gravestone, two years after the name of Van Diemen's Land was changed to Tasmania. She died on December 22, 1910 and was buried on Christmas Day. I know of no extant photograph of her (although we have a very fine photo of George, probably dating from the 1890s).

Family tradition points to Janey's being of mixed racial origin or black. While there were many European colonists of the name Blyth (<a href="http://members.tassie.net.au/~rteirney/wga4.html#1373">http://members.tassie.net.au/~rteirney/wga4.html#1373</a>), only Samuel senior is reported to have associated closely with aborigines (Tindale, <a href="http://www.cifhs.com/tasrecords/growthofapeople.html">http://www.cifhs.com/tasrecords/growthofapeople.html</a>).

We have Janey's marriage certificate. She married George Eastoe on September 1, 1880 at St. Matthew's Church, Prahran. The officiating clergyman took the trouble to record the names of George Eastoe's parents accurately, but not so with Janey's. He wrote her father's name carelessly as something like "John Blyt" and neglected to include her mother's name. At the end of the month, the Melbourne *Age* published an announcement of the marriage, with Janey's father named as "Wm. Blyth of High-street, Prahran." Janey was his third daughter.

The marriage records pose intriguing questions. Why did the Blyth family wait a month before publishing the announcement of the wedding? What was Janey's father's actual name? The father's name given in *The Age* is unlikely to be false if the family placed the notice, and yet how could the rector have made an error in the presence of Janey? Why was the rector of St. Matthew's church so careless in recording Janey's parentage?

My conjecture is that Janey was the granddaughter of Samuel Blyth (the senior, and very possibly the only, Samuel Blyth), and the daughter of his male son, unnamed in one document, but very likely named William, or William John. She would have been born when that son was about 23 years old. Janey's parents, in giving Janey the second name "Tasmania", demonstrated an attachment to Tasmania, despite living in Melbourne – and that is the best piece of evidence we have for relating her father to Samuel Bligh and Meeterlatteenner. Another conjecture: Samuel Blyth's young son, after his mother's death in about 1842, eventually went to live with Samuel and his new wife Polly Munro, and had left home by the time of Thomas Reibey's visit to Polly Munro.

## THE DNA RECORD

My DNA, as analyzed by Ancestry.com, shows a relationship with a "cluster" of families from the Scottish borderlands, despite the fact that we have no tradition of an ancestor who moved to Australia

from Scotland. House of Names (<a href="https://www.houseofnames.com/blyth-family-crest">https://www.houseofnames.com/blyth-family-crest</a>) states that the name "Blyth" first appeared in the borderlands, specifically in Berwickshire, near Lauderdale.

Ancestry.com does not find a relationship between any elements of my DNA and Australian aboriginal DNA. The reason for this is simple – they have no Australian indigenous database to compare with.

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On the reliability (or otherwise) of internet genealogy sites:

http://www.myheritage.com/names/florence\_eastoe is unreliable, and gives the impression of having been assembled in a hurry. For instance, there are two closely adjacent entries for Florence Minnie Eastoe, daughter of George and Janey. In one case, Janey is said to have been born in 1855 in Campbell Town. There was indeed a Jane Blyth born at about the right time in Campbell Town (LINC Tasmania) In the other, she was born in 1858 in England. The date 1858 agrees with her gravestone (although her marriage certificate implies that she was born in 1855 or 1856), but neither location may be correct. The claims elsewhere on the "My Heritage" web site that James Eastoe and George Eastoe each had eight children may be similarly unreliable.

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https://talis.ent.sirsidynix.net.au/client/en AU/names/ Consulted Oct. 2015

The Launceston Immigration Aid Society

http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~austashs/immig/ef-imm.htm Consulted Oct. 2015

Tindale, N., Growth of a People, <a href="http://www.cifhs.com/tasrecords/growthofapeople.html">http://www.cifhs.com/tasrecords/growthofapeople.html</a> Consulted Dec. 2015.

## Photos and documents:

- 1. George Eastoe, taken about 1890s? There seems to be no extant portrait of him with Janey.
- 2. Obituary of Alfred Eastoe, from The Examiner, Launceston..
- 3. Marriage notice of George Eastoe and Jane Blyth, The Age, Melbourne
- 4. Death notice of Jane Blyth, from *The Examiner*, Launceston.
- 5. The Eastoe family at Junction Farm, from a collection of the Westbury Historical Society, reproduced on the LINC Tasmania web site. No date is given. Information with the photo says that the house was built in the 1830s by a previous owner of the farm, and was demolished and replaced in the 1930s. It looks like a 19<sup>th</sup> century photo. If so, James and Maria Eastoe could be in it (although nobody looks very old), and possibly even George and Janey if they were visiting for a family occasion.
- 6. Marriage certificate of George Eastoe and Janey Blyth, from the State Archives of Victoria.
- 7. Genetic analysis, showing a connection between Christopher Eastoe and the borderlands of Scotland. This area (Lauderdale in Berwickshire, precisely) is said to be the original home of the Blyth family (<a href="https://www.houseofnames.com/blyth-family-crest">https://www.houseofnames.com/blyth-family-crest</a>). Aboriginal ancestry did not emerge in the DNA test, but this is most likely because aboriginal data are not represented in the Ancestry organization database.



Examiner (Launceston, Tas.: 1900 - 1954), Thursday 12 August 1948, page 2

## **OBITUARY**

Miss Florence Aspinnil, Lattobe, on Frich; Aspin Miss Florence Aspin M

National Library of Australia

http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article52645092

## Trove:

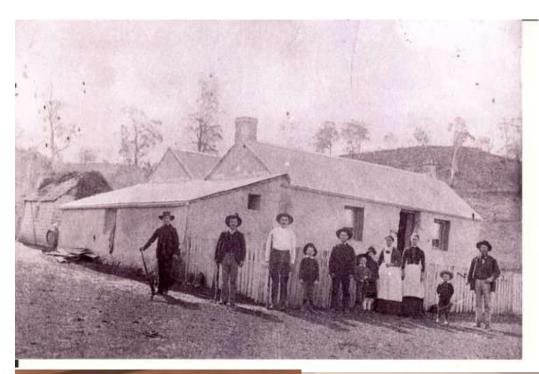
I located a marriage notice in *The Age*, VIC, 27 September 1880 about Geo http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/202153261.

# From *The Examiner*, Launceston, Dec. 28, 1910:

DEATHS.

EASTOE.—On the 22nd December, at the residence of her sister (Mrs. Machen, Leslie-street. South Launceston), Jane, dearly-beloved wife of George Eastoe, of Illawarra, aged 52 years.

http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/50453626.



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