

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY

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No High Life for Susannah

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When James Pryor died penniless in the Maitland Benevolent Asylum in 1885, his grandson William recorded that James' 'history during his latter years has been a sad and disgraceful one and should prove a terrible warning to the living.' Whereas James had been a highly respected Maitland resident and church member, 'suddenly he fell – fell so low that many of us were ashamed to hear his name mentioned,' and his substantial property 'saved by the hard labour of his sons and himself – was squandered on the young female who fell with him, for he had left his wife.'¹

If we accepted the sanctimonious judgement of a grandson who was indignant at being deprived of his inheritance, we might dismiss the 'young female' as some floozy or gold-digger who lived the high life with James, leaving him destitute. That was far from the truth about Susannah, who devoted herself to the love and care of seven of James' children.

Susannah's life was tough from the time of her birth in Maitland NSW in 1844,² until her painful death in Sydney in 1904.³ Her father Thomas Moore was a cruel and violent character, frequently before the courts and imprisoned on charges of brutal assaults upon neighbours, a police officer and women.^{4,5,6,7} The children lived in fear of their father's drunken rages when he would threaten them and inflict grievous bodily harm upon their mother.^{8,9}

When Susannah was one year old, her grandmother Hannah Moore, the widow of an Irish convict, married 45-year-old James Pryor,¹⁰ an immigrant farmer from Hertfordshire England,¹¹ who by then had seven surviving children from two deceased wives. The family worked hard to establish a successful dairy and agricultural business,¹² and after eighteen years of marriage, James and Hannah retired to a remote property outside Maitland called 'The Wilderness'. Hannah, being lonely, invited Susannah to stay. Susannah, no doubt being eager to escape from her abusive father, accepted the invitation.¹³

I cannot say whether James was kind or coercive towards his vulnerable 17-year-old step-grand-daughter, but he readily admitted responsibility for her pregnancy.¹⁴ Hannah was unforgiving, and Thomas Moore, describing his daughter as his 'servant', sued James in the Supreme Court for rendering Susannah unable to work.¹⁵ Consequently James was forced to sell his property to pay Moore and the court costs.¹⁶

James in his mid-sixties was short, bald, tattooed and blind in one eye,¹⁷ but was probably the most acceptable choice for young Susannah compared to being a destitute single mother or returning to her outraged family. The couple fled to Bathurst with baby Grace,¹⁸ but found no peace. Soon after the birth of their second child, Patience,¹⁹ James was arrested at the behest of the Moore family for desertion and non-payment of maintenance to Hannah, and was committed for one year to the notorious hellhole that was Maitland Gaol.²⁰

Susannah and James had five more children in Bathurst, all registered in the name of 'Moore',^{21,22,23,24,25} at the Stewart Street address of James Prior (*sic*).²⁶ Their seventh child was born when James was 81 years old. By that time his health was declining and James was becoming a burden to his young family. He returned as a 'prodigal' father to his unwelcoming older sons in Maitland who committed him to the Benevolent Asylum where

he died of bronchopneumonia and 'decay of nature' at age 85.^{27,28} James' 'legitimate' family did not acknowledge Susannah and her seven children on the death certificate.

Susannah took her seven children to Leichhardt in Sydney, where she undertook dressmaking from home to support her family that had by then adopted the surname 'Pryor'.^{29,30}

Soon after James died, Susannah 'Moore' married John York,³¹ a brass musical instrument maker from Manchester England. John however proved to be a disappointment. He left after spending a couple of years in Susannah's house, went bankrupt, and died in Melbourne.³²

Tragedy struck when Susannah's beloved first-born daughter Grace lost her first child, Myrtle at ten months of age.³³ The following year Grace died suddenly at age 24,³⁴ leaving her four-month-old daughter Ivy in Susannah's care. Susannah was again heart-broken when Ivy died of an acute illness at fourteen months of age.^{35,36}

Susannah York suffered a slow and agonising decline as tuberculosis gnawed at her lungs and spinal cord.³⁷ After she died in 1904, Susannah's children published heartfelt tributes to their dearly beloved mother.³⁸ Susannah's eldest son, my great-grandfather Henry Jacob Pryor, is remembered as a fine and enterprising coach-builder of strong moral character. He never told the story of his mother, which remained a family secret for 150 years. Henry Jacob was part of a close-knit family whose exemplary characters attested to the devotion of a mother who gave her children the best upbringing in difficult circumstances.

It is a tough life for a woman born into domestic violence, whose life choices are limited by a society that devalues women, and who bears the brunt of moral judgement and the pain of abandonment, bereavement and illness. It is a strong woman who rises above such circumstances to live a life of dignity, leaving a legacy of love.

¹ Fletcher, EM. *Parallel Lines: A History of Our Families in Europe and Australia*. NH Fletcher, Publisher, Canberra, 2009. pp.12-13

² Baptism certificate of Susannah Moore, Parish of Maitland, NSW, 1846, registration no. 424

³ Sydney Morning Herald, 3 June 1905, p.10

⁴ Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser, 17 October 1846, p.4

⁵ Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser, 1 August 1855, p.2

⁶ Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser, 20 August 1855, p.3

⁷ Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser, 8 February 1866, p.2

⁸ Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser, 6 February 1866, p.2

⁹ Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser, 4 June 1870, p.3

¹⁰ NSW Early Marriage Transcription, registration no. 31 V84/1845

¹¹ Assisted Immigrants Passenger Lists, NSW, Australia, 1838, May, Orontes

¹² Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser, 17 December 1863, p.4

¹³ Empire (Sydney), 23 May 1865, p.5

¹⁴ Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser, 10 September 1864, p.3

¹⁵ Empire (Sydney), 23 May 1865, p.5

¹⁶ Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser 18 June 1865, p.4

¹⁷ NSW Police Gazette, 7 June 1865, p.211

¹⁸ Empire (Sydney), 23 May 1865, p.5

¹⁹ NSW birth registration 5691/1866, Patience Moore

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- ²⁰ Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser 26 January 1867, p.4
- ²¹ NSW birth registration 6298/1868, Henry Jacob Moore
- ²² NSW birth registration 6498/1872, Susanna Moore
- ²³ NSW birth registration 7154/1875, Laurina J Moore
- ²⁴ NSW birth registration 9354/1879, Clarette Lucy Moore
- ²⁵ NSW birth registration 10795/1881, John Herbert Moore
- ²⁶ Bathurst electoral rolls, 1869-1879
- ²⁷ Fletcher, EM. *Parallel Lines: A History of Our Families in Europe and Australia*. NH Fletcher, Publisher, Canberra, 2009. p.13
- ²⁸ NSW death certificate 1885/11596, James Pryor
- ²⁹ Sands Directory, Sydney, 1882, p. 205
- ³⁰ Sands Directory, Sydney, 1886, p. 233
- ³¹ NSW marriage registration 2349/1886, John York and Susannah Moore
- ³² Evans, A. *Playing On: John York and the Sydney Brass Musical Instrument Factory*. Sydney Journal Vol.4, No.1, 2013. pp.66-85. UTSePress, Sydney
- ³³ NSW death registration 1888/5281, Myrtle Grace Mihell
- ³⁴ NSW death registration 1889/5404, Grace Mihell
- ³⁵ In Memoriam. Sydney Morning Herald, 14 April 1890, p.1
- ³⁶ NSW death registration 1890/6762, Ivy Hope Mihell
- ³⁷ NSW death registration 1904/5809, Susannah York
- ³⁸ In Memoriam, Sydney Morning Herald, 3 June 1905, p.10