

Mars, Mammon and Venus in British India: Tasmanian Family Connections

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My grandfather Henry Claye Watson's family links with India go back to the formative years of the Raj in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Born in Calcutta in 1870, the son of Lieutenant Colonel William Watson of the 9th Bengal Native Infantry, and Isabella Fowke, the impoverished granddaughter of a second generation nabob, he came to Tasmania as a two year old orphan. Proud of his family links to British India, he named his Nabowla properties *Calcuttville* and *Fowkestone*. However it appears that he was largely unaware of his links to the Fowke, Maskelyne, Walsh and Clive family members who played significant roles in the military, mercantile and cultural life of eighteenth-century India.

Watson and Furlonge Family Emigration to Tasmania

My grandfather, Henry Watson, was born in Calcutta in 1870 of English parents. He arrived in Tasmania from England in 1873 as an orphan with his adoptive parents, his cousin Laura Furlonge (nee Ryves) and her husband Charles Furlonge. His father, William Claye Watson, an officer in the Bengal Army, had died in Calcutta in 1869 aged 53, of 'febris Intmt with Agonic decline of the heart & kidneys', and had been buried in Fort William. His mother Isabella returned to England where she died of tuberculosis two years later aged only 32. Her father, Charles Fowke, the son of wealthy nabob, Francis Fowke of Boughrood Castle, Radnorshire, had migrated to Braidwood, New South Wales in 1866 to join other members of his family.¹

It seems that both Charles Furlonge and Charles Fowke had fallen on lean times and had migrated to the colonies in order to better their financial circumstances. Charles Furlonge wrote an account of his experiences as an emigrant which was published under two separate titles.² He seems to have been an indifferent farmer.

The Furlonges initially settled on a ninety acre property at Myrtle Bank, adjacent to properties later taken up by the Skemp and Bulman brothers.³ Skemp refers to Charles Furlonge as 'a retired civil servant from Ireland – one of the Dublin Castle gentry' and goes on to write that he 'lost all he had, including his commuted pension, in a wild cat mining venture, and the Myrtle Bank property passed into the hands of a trading bank.' However he would have retained the carriage of Henry Claye Watson's Bengal military orphan's pension, initially £24, rising to 44 guineas annually.⁴ The boundaries of his old property, now a timber plantation, are still intact. The Furlonges then moved down the hill to the Lisle goldfields and later settled closer to Nabowla after the Lisle gold rush ended.

Henry Watson served in the police force until 1897. During that time he selected land at Nabowla following the end of the gold rush, married Ada Grace Wadley of Bracknell in 1894 and built his first home *Calcuttville* south of the railway line, between Lisle Creek and the Little Forester River. The nearby railway siding came to be known as *Little Calcutta*. He called a second Nabowla home *Fowkestone*, where Henry and Ada raised a family of twelve and which he farmed until his death in 1943. He was evidently proud of his Indian connections although his knowledge of them would have been rather limited.



Ada Grace Watson (nee Wadley) and Henry Claye Watson (1894)

The Watsons in nineteenth-century India

My grandfather first became aware of his parentage, Indian birth and adoption rather late in his youth when he applied to join the police force and was obliged to produce a birth certificate. He apparently only then discovered that his deceased parents were Lieutenant Colonel William Claye Watson of the Bengal Army and Isabella Henrietta Fowke, daughter of Charles Fowke who had migrated to Braidwood a few years before his own parents' deaths.

My great-grandfather, William Claye Watson, was born in 1817. Like his son Henry, he was born in Fort William, Calcutta. He was 21 years older than Isabella Fowke, who presumably had travelled to India, like many other young English women before and after her, to seek a husband, a practice that continued into the twentieth century. They married in 1861. He had entered the Bengal Army as an ensign in 1839 and followed in the Indian Army footsteps of his father (Lieutenant Colonel) Richard Augustus Clay Watson, two uncles, and a grandfather, (Major) William Watson, who had joined the East India company army in 1768 following service in the British army in the West Indies. William Watson married Catherine Clay(e) in 1780, probably in Calcutta and fought in the Mahratta Wars, apparently with distinction, being formally presented with 'a highly caparisoned white charger' by the colonel of his regiment.⁵ The East India Company, Bengal, and Indian armies generally had a better structured promotion system than the British Army, where commissions were for sale to the highest bidder.⁶ Despite the lower professional and social status, this would presumably have made Indian Army service attractive to minor gentry like the Nottinghamshire Watsons.



Lieutenant Colonel William Clay Watson and Isabella Henrietta Watson (nee Fowke)

Passages to India: The Fowke, Walsh, Maskelyne and Clive families in India

The earliest mention of the Fowke family in India is of Randall Fowke (1673-1745) who was in the Honourable East India Company's service in the 'gunroom crew' of Fort St George, Madras, in 1701.⁷ He married Anna May, the daughter of 'a Portuguese gentleman and a native of Bombay', sired four children, became a trader in diamonds, and rose to become second in council to the Governor of Bengal.⁸ His three surviving sons, Edward, Joseph and Francis, were all born in Fort St George, entered the service of the Honourable East India Company and traded privately on their own accounts. Joseph was sent to England and privately tutored at the family's *Brewood* estate by Dr Samuel Johnson, with whom he maintained contact throughout Johnson's lifetime.⁹ Joseph returned to Madras in 1736 where he traded in opium and diamonds, together with the younger John Walsh, a member of another old Honourable East India Company family who in 1750 was to become his brother-in-law.

John Walsh's father Joseph, previously deputy Governor of Bencoolen, Sumatra, had been dismissed for maladministration and had returned to England in 1726 under a cloud. He was appointed a Free Merchant by the Honourable East India Company in Madras and became secretary to Governor Thomas Pitt but again apparently blotted his copybook by financial malfeasance and died suddenly in 1731. His widow Elizabeth (nee Maskelyne) died shortly after, leaving her surviving children, John and Elizabeth, in comfortable circumstances from the residue of their father's estate. John Walsh returned to Madras as a 17-year-old Writer in 1742.¹⁰

Two years later, his 17-year-old cousin Edmund ('Mun') Maskelyne, also arrived in Madras as a Writer for the Honourable East India Company, just a few months before

another young Writer arrived, the 19-year-old Robert Clive. Walsh, Maskelyne, Clive and the older Joseph Fowke formed a close association which was to last all their lives and which was consolidated by two marriages between their families.

In one of the 'ripping yarns' of the early Raj, Clive, with Mun Maskelyne, Jack Walsh and two others, disguised themselves as Muslim labourers and escaped from Fort St George shortly after Madras fell to the French in 1746. They managed to reach Fort St David unscathed after skirting French-occupied Pondicherry and several days of 'boys' own' adventures. Maskelyne and Clive then both enlisted in the Honourable East India Company army as ensigns. This was the beginning of Clive's meteoric military and political career.¹¹

Three years later, we get a picture of the Anglo-Indian life of the English girls who travelled to Bengal and south India in search of suitable husbands from the letters of Eliza Walsh who had followed her brother John to Fort St David. In 1749 she wrote to her aunts, Jane and Sarah Maskelyne, in England that she enjoyed 'being carried about on a palanquin by four servants with an armed soldier in front & a boy on hand to smooth her petticoats'. In the following year she added '(it is) just like living in a country town in England but in a much grander manner'.¹²

In 1750, Eliza Walsh married the much older Joseph Fowke, thus becoming grandfather Watson's 2nd (2X) great grandmother. Her brother John Walsh became my 4th great-granduncle and his cousins Mun, Peggy and Nevil Maskelyne became my first cousins – six generations removed.

In 1752 Eliza Walsh, now Eliza Fowke, and her cousin Edmund, now Captain Maskelyne, persuaded his orphaned sister Margaret (Peggy) to come out to Madras from England. Eliza Fowke wrote that Mun:

had laid out a husband for Peggy if she chooses to take so long a voyage for one, that I approve of extremely, but then she must make haste, as he is in such a marrying mood that I believe the first comer will marry him.¹³

Clive had apparently been much taken with her portrait on a locket belonging to her brother Edmund.¹⁴



Margaret (Peggy), Lady Clive (nee Maskelyne) (1735-1817), circa 1760.

Margaret Maskelyne arrived in 1752 in a party of hopeful young women which included Philadelphia Austen, Jane Austen's aunt.¹⁵ Margaret married Robert Clive the following

year and returned with him to England several days later, despite her allegedly 'being prevented from being beautiful by her too large nose and too thick eyebrows'.¹⁶

Clive had by this time made a reputation as a bold and successful military leader in the battles of Arcot, Arni, Kaveripak and Trichonopoly, as well as already having accumulated a considerable fortune – a far cry from his starting salary of £10 a year (plus free board) offered by the Honourable East India Company seven years previously.

In 1750 Clive, now 29 years of age and promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, returned to India as deputy governor of Fort St David together with Margaret and several young cousins including Jane Kelsall who was later to marry another lifelong Clive supporter, Henry Strachey. War with France had been resumed and in 1756 Calcutta fell to Suraja Dowla, the French-allied Nawab of Bengal, responsible for the so-called 'Black Hole of Calcutta'. Clive and Admiral Watson (no relation) recaptured Calcutta early in the following year, 1757.

The Battle of Plassey, for which Clive is best remembered, followed in the same year and was won by guile rather than by military force. Colonel Clive, his paymaster John Walsh, now Lieutenant Colonel, the Honorable Company, its victorious army and navy all benefitted enormously from the ensuing financial settlement and distribution of the defeated Nawab's rupees, jewels, gold and silver plate. Mir Jafar, the Nawab's commander, who had been persuaded to withhold his support from the Nawab during the battle, became the new Nawab as part of the arrangement with Clive. Clive acquired a controversial annuity 'Jagir' of £27,000 (around half a million dollars equivalent today) from Mir Jafar and in addition collected a similar amount as a lump sum. All together it is estimated that some 125 nabobs repatriated an average of £145,000 each after the Battle of Plassey.¹⁷

The Return to England

Robert Clive returned to England in 1760 in poor health but with a fortune in addition to his annuity. The plundering of Bengal by the British after Plassey led to great hardship among the Indian population, to corruption and to abuse of office by both Honourable East India Company and native Bengal officials. It also contributed to Clive's political difficulties, his subsequent fall from grace on his return to England and to dissension inside the Honourable East India Company between the Hastings and Clive camps. Popular reaction against the perceived greed of 'John Company' and its nabobs fuelled tension between the Company and the English parliament, led directly to William Pitt's *India Act of 1784* and finally to the end of the Company's rule and the official beginning of the British Raj in 1858.

John Walsh had become Clive's private secretary and army paymaster in the 1750s. After the Battle of Plassey he too retired to England in 1759 with a considerable fortune, equivalent to about \$10 million in today's money. He became MP for Worcester in Clive's interest.¹⁸ Walsh never married but kept a succession of mistresses. He supported the radical politics of the European enlightenment, the French and American revolutions and befriended free speech advocate and libertine John Wilkes.

He also pursued scientific interests with distinction. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS) in 1770 and won its prestigious Copley Medal in 1773 for his pioneering experimental work in France on electric fish, a sea change from his adventurous and roistering days with Clive and friends in India.

Walsh's certificate of election to the Society described him as 'a gentleman well acquainted with philosophical and polite literature, and particularly versed in the natural

history and antiquities of India'. More candidly perhaps, he was later described as 'a man of great courage, gross appetites, abrasive manners and high intelligence'.¹⁹



Colonel John Walsh MP FRS (1726-1795)

Walsh's experiments anticipated the better known work of Galvani and Volta and he has been nominated by science historians as one of the forgotten founding fathers of modern neurophysiology and biophysics. Unfortunately, he neglected to publish his crowning achievement, which was to draw a spark (in the manner of his acquaintance, fellow gentleman scientist, and Fellow of the Royal Society, Benjamin Franklin) from an electric eel, thus demonstrating its electrical character beyond all doubt. He had, however, demonstrated the effect to Joseph Banks and other Royal Society colleagues, no doubt thinking this to be sufficient unto the day.²⁰

Walsh remained a close advisor and confidante to Clive until Clive's death in 1774. Edmund Maskelyne died in England a year later, at the age of only 47. He had accompanied his brother-in-law as Clive's aide-de-camp on his third and last Indian tour of duty as Governor of Bengal from 1764-67.

His sister Peggy Clive lived another 43 years, until 1817. She renewed a childhood interest in astronomy, assisted by her brother the Reverend Nevil Maskelyne FRS, 'The Seaman's Astronomer', who had become the Fifth Astronomer Royal in 1765.

Maskelyne opposed the premature introduction of the marine chronometer and developed the alternative lunar method of longitude determination for East India Company and Royal Navy ships, founded the *Nautical Almanac & Astronomical Ephemeris* (still used today) and, like his cousin John Walsh, won the Society's prestigious Copley Medal. Maskelyne's medal was awarded for astronomical observations of the deflection of a plumb bob by *Schiehallion*, a Scottish mountain. He is said to have 'weighed the earth' by this means.²¹



Rev Dr Nevil Maskelyne FRS (1732 – 1811)

Maskelyne took the side of the ‘men of science’ against the ‘fly-catching Macaronis’ – typified in the popular satirical press of the day by Solander and President Joseph Banks – in the politics of the Royal Society, prefacing what was to become a longstanding division between mathematicians, astronomers and physicists on the one hand and natural scientists on the other.²² He played a major part in the astronomical and navigational planning of Cook’s first Pacific voyage to observe the transit of Venus, and his second and third voyages to test marine chronometers for the determination of longitude.

The island of St Helena, administered by the East India Company as a convenient port for home bound East Indiaman clippers, attained transient astronomical importance as a result of Halley’s and Maskelyne’s observations there. It became one of the first southern hemisphere observatory sites for observing and cataloguing bright stars for navigational purposes.

Last years in Bengal

In 1755, Joseph Fowke, one of the more colourful eighteenth-century Fowke family members, whose own grandfather was Portuguese, reportedly provided an eye witness account of the Great Lisbon Earthquake in a letter to his brother Frank:

Everywhere candles were being lit to mark All Saints Day. The churches were full of worshippers. Everything was normal and the bells rang out just after 9am. Then, there followed a rising roar, the ground shook abruptly ...²³

The quake levelled two thirds of the city, killing 50,000, inspired Voltaire's satirical novel *Candide*, and is believed to have accelerated the enlightenment and anti-clericalism which swept Europe in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Joseph had returned to England after the Battle of Plassey with Walsh's sister Eliza and their three children, Francis, Margaret and Arthur. Following the early death of Eliza in the 1760s, he went back to Calcutta in 1771 in an attempt to recoup a fortune lost in high living and gambling, having refused the Governorships of both Madras and Bengal because they carried no emoluments. Dr Johnson, his former tutor, said of him: 'He was a scholar and agreeable man and lived very prettily in London until his wife died. After her death he took to dissipation and gaming and lost all he had'.²⁴

The children appear to have been cared for in England by their uncle Jack Walsh and aunt Peggy Clive. Joseph's son Francis returned to Bengal in 1773 at the age of 18 as a Writer, followed three years later by Margaret, presumably in search of a husband. Joseph and other traders opposed Governor Hastings' reforms and Joseph, encouraged by Francis, attempted to impeach him for corruption. Hastings retaliated by putting Joseph and Francis on trial for conspiracy in 1775. During the trial Hastings expressed his own view of Fowke: '[he has] a violent and morose temper; and, while under that influence, too apt to insinuate actions ... to base and bad motives in others'.²⁵ Eliza had written of her husband: 'He has a good humour and is not extremely apt to fall into passion, but when he does so, it is to a degree of madness ...'²⁶

Father and son were acquitted but a prominent Indian, Maharajar Nuncomar, was found guilty and summarily hung. This was regarded as judicial murder by influential figures in England and led to Hastings' seven-year-long trial (and eventual acquittal) by the English Parliament.

Joseph was an enthusiastic amateur violinist with conservative musical tastes. He loathed the newly invented clarinet: 'This Clarinet D'Amor [is] a coarse instrument, worse to my ears than the grunting of Hogs.' He also inveighed against the 'noisy modern music' of Haydn – 'the Prince of Coxcombs', preferring the earlier music of Corelli, Geminiani and Handel.²⁷ Francis and Margaret (Tippey) shared their father's musical interests and were prominent in the musical life of Bengal until their return to England in 1786.²⁸ They also appear to have inherited an interest in languages and mathematics, probably from their mother's side of the family. Francis invented a form of shorthand, was fluent in Persian and published a number of papers on the structure of language. One of his grandsons, Colonel Francis Fowke RE, a distinguished military engineer and inventor, designed the Royal Albert Hall rotunda, the Natural History Museum and other notable public buildings.²⁹ Margaret is reported as having 'an interest in conic sections [which] was almost voluptuous'.³⁰

John Walsh bequeathed his considerable estate to his niece, Tippey, who in 1787 had married John Benn, her brother Francis' former assistant in Benares. Francis had been the British Resident there on a number of occasions despite repeated dismissals by Hastings.

Armed with his wife's inheritance, John Benn accepted the offer of a baronetcy and Margaret Fowke became Lady Benn-Walsh, adopting her benefactor uncle's name. Their son John Benn-Walsh became the first Lord Ormathwaite in 1868. He contributed an unpublished memoir of his mother to the British Library.³¹ This, together with the extensive correspondence between her father Joseph, her mother Eliza, their children, and other members of the Fowke, Benn, Walsh and Maskelyne families contributed to the Library by Capt Fowke's son, Frank Rede Fowke, one time Assistant Secretary of State for Science, constitute an invaluable archival resource.³²

Francis was also offered a Tory baronetcy at the end of the century, but is reported as saying that he would rather have a good string quartet.³³ He built *Boughrood Castle*, a Georgian manor house, on land bought from John Walsh in Radnorshire near the Welsh border and lavished money on 'quartet parties' and other musical pursuits, leaving little (but sufficient) for his fifteen children to quarrel bitterly over. His son Charles, my great-great-grandfather vainly contested his father's will before migrating in reduced circumstances to Braidwood, NSW, with two of his children to join his sister Elizabeth Bell in 1866.

His daughter Isabella, my grandfather's mother, had been obliged to enter domestic service in Wales before she travelled to Bengal and married William Watson in 1861. Sadly, her short married life in Bengal was followed by an even shorter widowhood following her return to England in 1872. Her orphaned son, my grandfather, apparently remained largely ignorant of the colourful history of his mother's family.



Henry Claye Watson (1870-1943), 1917.

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