

SARAH BENNETT (*America*, 1831)

by

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At her trial at the Old Bailey, London, on 28 October 1830, Sarah BENNETT was found guilty of stealing a watch, two seals and a key (total value of £7.0.6d) from the person of a working-man by the name of John NEWTON. She was sentenced to transportation for life.¹

She arrived in Van Diemens Land (VDL) on *America* (2) in May 1831. Her conduct record reveals that the offence for which she had been transported was not her first. Previously, she had served time in London for vagrancy. She was described as being five feet two and a half inches tall, with a pale complexion, a large round head, dark brown hair, dark hazel eyes, a short broad nose, and short round chin which was ‘fleshy underneath’. She was known to be a prostitute and had been ‘on the town’ for at least two years. She stated upon arrival that she was twenty years old and single. She was unable to read and write. She was a house servant.²

Upon arrival, Sarah was assigned as a servant to a young man, twenty-three year old George STEELE, at Hamilton, about forty miles north-west of Hobart, Within a very short time her behaviour had brought her to the attention of the colonial authorities.³

Steele was the son-in-law of Dr. Edward Foord BROMLEY who had arrived in VDL in 1820. Then 44 years of age, Dr. Bromley had been appointed to the post of Naval Officer, Hobart, a role in which he also acted as the colony’s treasurer. However, in 1824, he had been stripped of office after being accused of stealing a large sum of money from the colony’s coffers. In disgrace, he had returned to England in 1829 and had not returned. Soon after his departure, his daughter, Eliza Henrietta BROMLEY, had married Steele and had taken him to live with her step-mother, Mrs. Sarah BROMLEY, the wife of the former treasurer, at ‘Montfort Farm’ at Hamilton. Still only in her early thirties, Mrs. Bromley had been struggling to manage the property on her own and was pleased to have a young man there to help her. Steele had quickly become known as Mrs. Bromley’s ‘overseer’.⁴

At the time of Bennett’s assignment to Steele, another convict, Ann GREEN (also *America*, 1831), had been assigned as a house servant to Mrs. Bromley. It was not long before the two

¹ Old Bailey online: www.oldbaileyonline.org; reference t18301028, accessed 23 September 2019.

² CON40/1/1, image 161.

³ CON40/1/1, image 161.

⁴ For a full account of Bennett’s service and absconding from ‘Montfort Farm’ and the scandal that enveloped Mrs. Bromley see Bradmore and Carter. (2016). *Sarah Bromley: Success, Sorrow and Scandal in Van Diemens Land*, Maldon, Victoria. Published by the authors.

convict servants noticed what they believed to be scandalous happenings taking place at 'Montfort Farm'.⁵

On 24 October 1831, both Bennett and Green absconded and together made their way to the neighbouring town of Bothwell where they complained to the Police Magistrate, Mr. D'Arcy WENTWORTH, that 'Montfort Farm' was a 'debauched house' - and a 'most improper place' in which to live. Under oath, they said that they had witnessed 'improper scenes' between Mr. Steele and Mrs. Bromley, that they had seen the pair lying together on a sofa, and that on one occasion they had seen them in bed together while Steele's wife, Eliza, was in the next room. Bennett also swore that Steele had attempted to molest her.

Police Magistrate Wentworth was not sure whether he should believe the two convict women. He was an experienced official and knew that convict servants who had absconded, as Green and Bennett had done, frequently made up such stories about their masters and mistresses in order to escape punishment for their own misdemeanor in unlawfully leaving the place to which they had been assigned. Nevertheless, although he had every right to do so, Wentworth decided against returning the women to 'Montfort Farm'. Instead, he sent them back to the Cascades Female Factory at Hobart to await assignment elsewhere. In addition, he forwarded a report about the alleged happenings at the Bromley residence to Lieutenant-Governor George ARTHUR at Hobart.

Thus, before she had been in VDL for six months Bennett's name was known to the highest authority in the colony. This situation was heightened early the following year when Wentworth arrested Steele, charged him with the attempted rape of Bennett and hauled him off to prison to await trial for that offence. It is not known whether Bennett gave evidence against Steele at his trial but, in any event, he was eventually found to be not guilty of the charge of rape and allowed to return to 'Montfort Farm'. In the meantime, Bennett had been reassigned to a Mr. AIRD in whose employ she seems to have remained for about twelve months without causing trouble.

That said, during the next six years – from the time of her arrival in May 1831 and early February 1837 - Bennett was charged with re-offending sixteen times.⁶

Most of these offences were relatively minor: leaving the premises of the families to whom she had been assigned without permission, staying out all night, behaving in a disorderly manner in the street, disobedience of orders, neglect of duties, insolence, and insubordination. On a number of occasions, she was merely reprimanded or admonished. At other times she was dealt with more harshly. Usually, her masters and mistresses, obviously not amused by her behaviour, would return her immediately to the Female House of Corrections where, at various times, she was kept in solitary confinement, locked in a working cell, allowed only bread and water for ten days and made to labour at the wash-tubs. On two separate occasions, magistrates gave orders

⁵ Ann Green: CON40-1-3 Image 263

⁶ CON40/1/1, image 161.

that she was never to be assigned at Hobart again and that her future assignments should be to families living ‘in the interior’. These orders, however, seem not to have been carried out.⁷

But Bennett’s most serious offence, perhaps, occurred in 1836. On 9 May of that year she became embroiled in a heated argument with a Mrs. CUTTS, to whom she was assigned at the time. Very soon, the argument had turned into a bitter physical fight, during which Bennett knocked Mrs. Cutts down. Charged with assault, she was gaoled for three months. A report of the incident in the *Colonial Times* described her as ‘a fine strapping spinster’, adding that the incident was ‘a real up and down’ in which both parties exhibited ‘divers marks and scratches’ but Mrs. Cutts ‘got the worst of the affray’. Afterwards, Bennett was again returned to the Female House of Corrections, the magistrate ordering her to be kept with Class 3 prisoners there – the worst of the worst, many of them violent and some quite unsuitable for assignment or release into the community.⁸

Bennett’s last recorded offence occurred in February 1837. Assigned to a Mr. BROWN at the time, she was charged with being insolent and having neglected her duties. Once more she was returned to Female House of Corrections, the magistrate ruling that it should be at least two months before she became eligible for assignment again.⁹

It is interesting to speculate upon why Bennett never offended again after February 1837. Two reasons suggest themselves. The first is that she is likely to have met a man by the name of Edward PICKLES, himself a former convict, at about that time and they had applied for permission to marry.¹⁰ The prospective marriage might have been enough to keep her out of trouble. They married at St David’s, Hobart, on 12 March 1838.¹¹ The second reason is that on 18 June 1839, Bennett was granted a ticket-of-leave. This was followed by a conditional pardon on 3 March 1842.¹² Undoubtedly, her disposition would have been improved by being a free woman again.

Bennett’s husband, Edward Pickles, was an interesting man. He had arrived at Hobart aboard *Roslyn Castle* on 16 December 1828 after being convicted of the theft of a quantity of worsted goods on 17 July of that year. He had been sentenced to transportation for a period of seven years. He was thirty-six years old.¹³

At the age of sixteen he had joined the army and had served with distinction in the 33rd Regiment of Foot. He had been with the regiment when it took part in the famous Battle of Waterloo,

⁷ CON40/1/1, image 161.

⁸ CON40/1/1, image 161; see also *Colonial Times*, 17 May 1836, p.8.

⁹ CON40/1/1, image 161.

¹⁰ Permission to marry:

¹¹ Marriage: RGD36/1/3, 1838/4068.

¹² ToL: *Hobart Town Gazette*, 21 June 1839; CP: *Hobart Town Gazette*, 4 March 1842; 8 September 1843.

¹³ CON18-1-22, image 234.

where he had been wounded. (His name is shown incorrectly as ‘Private Edwd PICKLE’ in the Waterloo Medal Roll, 1815.)¹⁴ As was customary at that time, he had been stripped of his medal when he was found guilty as charged at his trial.

Upon arrival at Hobart, Pickles had given his trade or calling as ‘soldier, quarryman and well-sinker’. In all respects he seems to have been a model prisoner. His conduct record reveals that he only re-offended once in the colony when, in 1838, ten years after his arrival, he was fined five shillings for the relatively minor crime of being drunk. In December 1832, he had been granted a ticket of leave and in July 1835 he was declared ‘free by servitude’.¹⁵

After their marriage in 1838, Edward and Sarah Pickles seem to have lived quietly on a leased farm at Brandy Bottom near Jerusalem, Tasmania, for the next thirty-five years, their convict pasts almost forgotten. Neither was ever in trouble with the law again.

No birth registration or record of baptism of children born to the couple has been found. However, when Edward died in June 1873 the informant to his death certificate was ‘William Pickles, son’. The records are unclear about the exact year of the son’s birth but the death entry in TPI Digger of the only ‘William Pickles’ in VDL at that time indicates that he was born in 1836.¹⁶ But was William the son of Sarah Bennett?

Although there is no evidence that she gave birth to a child, it seems likely that she was. There appears to have been no other woman in Edward’s life in the colony. Moreover, the pattern of offences on Bennett’s conduct record suggests that this could have been the case. There were four offences in 1832, four in 1833, three in 1834, three in 1836, and one in early 1837 – but there were *none* in 1835!¹⁷ Was that because Bennett was pregnant to Pickles and consequently less inclined to want to absent herself from the houses in which she was employed, stay out all night or act in a disorderly manner in the street? It is a reasonable explanation.

When Edward died in June 1873, *The Mercury* announced his passing in this way:

A Waterloo veteran, Edward PICKLES, who for the last 40 years has lived in the district of Jerusalem, ended his ‘strange eventful history’ on the 8th inst, in the above named township. The deceased, who was born in 1783, was at several engagements in the Peninsula and received a wound at Waterloo. For some breach of discipline he was deprived of his medal, and sent across the sea. He arrived in Tasmania about 1822-23 and a few years after located himself in the Jerusalem

¹⁴ <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/waterloomedal/>

¹⁵ CON18-1-22, image 234.

¹⁶ William Pickles, death: RGD35/1586/1879

¹⁷ CON40/1/1, image 161.

*district, where he remained till the time of his death. He was known as an honest man.*¹⁸

It seems likely that it was Sarah's marriage to this 'honest man' that rescued her from further degradation and misery.

As it happened, however, Sarah (Bennett) Pickles's life ended sadly. She passed away at the age of sixty on 5 December 1873, just six months after her husband.¹⁹ On 5 September 1873, she had been admitted to the Hospital for the Insane, New Norfolk.²⁰ She was obviously suffering from an advanced form of dementia. In a letter dated 1 September 1873, Dr. Robert BLYTHE, the medical practitioner who recommended her admission to the hospital, informed the authorities there that he had personally examined Sarah and was of the opinion that she:

*... is a lunatic and a proper person to be taken charge of and detained under care and treatment ... on the following grounds: That she is thoroughly incoherent in her answers, does not know her age, where she came from, or anything regarding her recent life. She says that her husband (who died recently - about two months ago) has been dead for eleven years and, in fact, is insane in every subject save for an occasional more sensible remark in a long course of rambling talk.*²¹

Continuing, Dr. Blythe said that Sarah had been in her present condition for 'about a month or six weeks' and that the supposed cause was 'the death of her husband'. The doctor was of the opinion that she was 'not suicidal' and 'not dangerous to others'. He concluded his assessment by saying that she had no known relatives in the colony.

No children are mentioned on Sarah's death certificate and William Pickles - known to be Edward's son - was not the informant to it. The informants were the New Norfolk Hospital authorities. So, where was William Pickles when Sarah died? Was she really William's mother? The answers to these questions might never be known.

It is fair to say that Sarah (Bennett) Pickles's early life was an unhappy one. She was obviously a troubled young woman when she arrived in VDL as a twenty-year old convict in 1831, and her difficulties continued for the best part of a decade afterwards. But it is comforting to think that she might have found some years of peace in her marriage to an 'honest man' who was obviously held in high regard by all who knew him.

¹⁸ *Mercury* (Hobart), 14 June 1873, p.4.

¹⁹ RGD 35/390/1873, New Norfolk.

²⁰ New Norfolk Asylum Admissions Register: <https://stors.tas.gov.au>

²¹ <http://search.archives.tas.gov.au/default.aspx?detail=1&type=l&id=HSD285/1/2321> and <http://stors.tas.gov.au/HSD285-1-2321>