

## Tracing the steps of my most travelled ancestor

David ROBERTSON

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My most travelled ancestor has to be my great-grandfather, David ROBERTSON, who was born in Scotland, married in New Zealand, had issue in New Zealand, California USA and Victoria Australia, settled in Fiji for about 15 years, and died in Melbourne Victoria.

I first began serious research in 1960. I knew that my father, William Kenneth ROBERTSON 1899-1953, and his siblings had been born in Fiji, where his parents William ROBERTSON and Emily May Gordon JOHNSTON, had married in 1885. I obtained all the relevant certificates from Fiji, however the names of William ROBERTSON's parents were not shown on the marriage certificate.<sup>1</sup>

I then wrote to two of my aunts, and one replied that her father William had some sisters named Bella, Kate, Nellie and Bessie – all supposedly born in Victoria. I wrote to the Government Statist but had 'no record' results. Eventually I realised that these were just nicknames, and succeeded in obtaining certificates for Isabella 'Bella' Cameron 1854 Melbourne, Catherine 'Kate' Jane 1858 Ballarat, and Helen 'Nellie' Lethem 1861 Ballarat. A bonus was a certificate for Georgina 1857, also in Ballarat, but no Bessie so far.<sup>2</sup>

From these amazingly detailed Victorian certificates<sup>3</sup> I could now begin to trace the steps of my most travelled ancestor – my great-grandfather whose name now was revealed as David ROBERTSON.

David's birth on all certificates was shown as Leith, Scotland with an approximate birth date of 1817-1818. The Scots Ancestry Research Society found his birth, 7 January 1818, to a William ROBERTSON, cooper<sup>4</sup>, and Helen MEIKLEJOHN. Four other siblings were also noted: William, Robert Cockburn, Helen and Isabella. David was not at home in the 1841 census<sup>5</sup>. This perhaps indicated that he may have left Scotland by then, very possible given the next piece of vital information on these certificates – his marriage.

David had married in July 1843 in Wellington, New Zealand Fanny McCALPIN<sup>6</sup>. The marriage certificate gave the same details as the following newspaper entry dated 6 September 1943.<sup>7</sup>

*On 11th July. Mr David Robertson, formerly of Leith, cooper, to Fanny, daughter of Mr Richard Macalpine, formerly of Portsmouth.'*

I consulted many sources in an effort to locate David's arrival in New Zealand, without success.<sup>8</sup> I had noted that on Isabella's 1854 birth certificate there were five living issue. I thought that these five would have been born in Wellington. In fact, four of them were: William 1844 (my grandfather), David Richard 1846, Robert 1848 and Fanny Maria 1849.<sup>9</sup> There was still a missing child.

Meanwhile, contact with First Independent Church of Wellington, the Karori Congregational Church<sup>10</sup> brought forth some interesting detail on David ROBERTSON:

*28th December 1842: It was proposed that David Robertson be accepted into membership of the Karori Congregational Church, Wellington.*

<sup>1</sup> Certificates of marriage and birth from Government of Fiji.

<sup>2</sup> Certificates from the Victorian Government Statist.

<sup>3</sup> A typical birth certificate shows names of parents, their ages, marriage date and place, birth places, and previous issue!

<sup>4</sup> Cooper = barrel maker, but for this family, according to a researcher, listed as corkcutters and wine coopers to distinguish them from barrel makers for salted herrings.

<sup>5</sup> SARS correspondence 1963 and 1975 [I have found more siblings since].

<sup>6</sup> Originally McCALPEN, then McCALPIN, later McALPINE etc.

<sup>7</sup> Certificate and newspaper entry from Alexander Turnbull Library, NZ and *Wellington Spectator* [also from [www.paperspast.natlib.gov.nz](http://www.paperspast.natlib.gov.nz)]

<sup>8</sup> Petone Settlers Museum, Wellington Public Library, Alexander Turnbull Library, National Archives.

<sup>9</sup> Details of births from Alexander Turnbull Library, NZ government and Karori church [William's birth was registered 1840/171 – First Ind Church held by Alexander Turnbull Library Ref Msx 0046 – it is now online at [www.bdmonline.dia.govt.nz](http://www.bdmonline.dia.govt.nz)]

<sup>10</sup> Joyce Roll, Secretary, Karori Church generously copied relevant detail from the minutes as shown in italics here.

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*David was on a special committee set up to prepare plans for the erection of a church building ... it was proposed a weekly subscription of one penny from as many persons and each member should be taken.*

*David gave 12 pennies at that meeting.*

*1843: Early in this year, another church meeting at which it was proposed, seconded by David Robertson, that 'Mrs McAlpin be a probationer for church fellowship'.*

*3rd April 1843: Mrs McAlpin received as a member. [I feel that this must be David's future mother-in-law Maria McAlpin]*

*29th May 1844: meeting at which Brother Robertson was appointed one of two auditors for the church accounts. Sister McAlpine was also at the meeting.*

*16th June 1844: Baptism of David's first child, William.*

*4th June 1847: Baptism of David's second child, David Richard [born 1846].*

*2nd April 1848: Sister McAlpine and Brother Robertson were among the members who resigned with the pastor, apparently over some disagreement and then no further entries were seen.*

David's name appeared in the militia list for 1848, and in jury lists from 1845 to 1850, the last listing in February of that year.<sup>11</sup>

Where was the fifth child born? I studied each of the certificates again, and made an important discovery. Georgina's 1857 birth certificate listed six living issue, Catherine's 1858 certificate had seven living issue, but Helen Lethem's 1861 certificate listed seven living and one deceased! This meant a child had died between 1858 and 1861. I then found that Ellen Lethem ROBERTSON, aged eight years, died on 1 June 1860 in Ballarat. The most exciting information, which would come from no other source, was her birth place – San Francisco.<sup>12</sup> She would have been born between June 1851 and June 1852. I have not been able to obtain any birth record due to the records destruction in the 1906 earthquake.<sup>13</sup>

The only shipping record from New Zealand that seemed likely to me was the one below,<sup>14</sup> given the date and the name 'McCalpin' which could easily have been his brother-in-law, George:

*'Feb 19th 1850: Barque "Thames" for San Francisco. Passengers – Mr...Robertson ... McCalpin...'*

Did the discovery of gold in California in 1848 influence David's move there? His return to Melbourne by 1854, then to Ballarat by 1857 also coincided with gold discoveries. David may have been interested in making money from the increased population rather than mining himself.<sup>15</sup> Gold rushes usually led to an extreme shortage of labour – skilled and unskilled – and so high prices were paid for labour of all kinds.<sup>16</sup>

In Ballarat, David was again involved in community affairs. On 22 March 1865 he was elected to the council, having gained 565 votes. On the 10th August he retired by rotation, and was re-elected with 574 votes. He remained in the council until 14 August 1868 when he retired by rotation.<sup>17</sup>

Two years after Ellen's death, on 23 August 1862, David suffered another tragedy when his wife Fanny, aged just 36, died from peritonitis.<sup>18</sup> We puzzled over her death certificate. Apart from her name, age, death and burial detail and that she was married, other family data was 'unknown'. How could the Congregational Minister, the 'friend'<sup>19</sup> who was the informant and who also performed the burial, not know David's name and

<sup>11</sup> Wellington Public Library 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Death Certificate for Ellen; her sister, Helen Lethem [1861] was obviously named after her.

<sup>13</sup> Vital Records Dept, San Francisco, via email 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Wellington Public Library 1992.

<sup>15</sup> Strangely enough, he was a 'miner' on Elizabeth's 1864 birth certificate, 'share broker' on John's in 1869, but all the earlier ones from 1857-1861 still a 'cooper'.

<sup>16</sup> *Mainstreams in Australian History*, Munday & Grigsby, ch 9, 10. Most histories tell of huge numbers leaving their jobs, farms, businesses etc. and flocking to the gold fields.

<sup>17</sup> Ballarat Historical Society.

<sup>18</sup> Death Certificate registered the same day as her death.

<sup>19</sup> He was so described on the certificate.

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the fact that there were children? After all, 8 children, one of whom was 12 months old, would surely be rather obvious! Were they all in such trauma that no one gave attention to filling out a death certificate? More detail was given in the newspaper announcement<sup>20</sup>: “*On 23rd August at her residence Dawson St. Fanny, wife of David Robertson. California and New Zealand papers please copy.*” Fanny was buried in the same grave as her daughter, Ellen.<sup>21</sup>

Not surprisingly, David married again within six months of Fanny’s death, on 24 February 1863. He married Elizabeth COGDON, spinster, aged 33, in Brighton, Melbourne, the ceremony being witnessed by Elizabeth’s siblings Emily and John Montague COGDON.<sup>22</sup> David and Elizabeth were both shown to be resident at Ballarat, so maybe they married in Melbourne for family to be present. A further two children were born to David by Elizabeth – Elizabeth in 1864 [‘Bessie’ – at last] and John Ernest in 1869.<sup>23</sup>

A newspaper report in Ballarat, May 1871, explained how my grandfather came to be in Fiji. The article indicated that David had bought land in Suva, Fiji. He was described as being an ‘*old resident, once a Ballarat councillor and leading speculator. He had brought up a large family despite some heavy reverses.*’<sup>24</sup>

My most wonderful genealogical experience comes from spending four months in Suva, Fiji in 1992, finding a wealth of detail about the family which, otherwise, I would never have known, including photographs of David, his sons William and Robert, and two sons-in-law, Manwaring FRASER (who married Fanny) and George MORGAN (who married Isabella).<sup>25</sup> I found announcements of marriages for four of his children, the death of one son, baptisms of 28 of his Fiji born grandchildren, and infant deaths of five of his grandchildren.

David may have bought land in Suva, but he lived most of the time in Levuka, then the capital of Fiji, situated on the tiny island of Ovalau, to the east of the main island of Viti Levu. The family also had connections with a place called Vuni Vesi, in the province of Tai Levu. This is on the east side of the main island of Viti Levu, just north east of Suva. Their arrival:

*Port of Levuka: ‘Carl’ Brig 200 tons from Melbourne. Passengers ... Mr and Mrs Robertson, Mrs Cogdon. Arrived June 28th [1871].*<sup>26</sup> [note that Mrs should be Miss Cogdon]

Shipping list: [A = adult, C = child]<sup>27</sup>

*David Robertson A, Elizabeth Robertson A, Elizabeth Robertson C, Ellen Robertson C, Fanny Robertson A, Georgina Robertson C, Isabella Robertson A, John Robertson C, Kate Robertson C. Also Miss Emily Cogdon A.*

I have not been able to locate conclusively the arrival of the three elder boys, William, David and Robert.

An early notice 1 July 1871 announced a “Levuka Ladies College” by Mrs David ROBERTSON and Miss COGDON [David’s wife and sister-in-law]. Then a later notice on 1 February 1873:

*Ladies School Levuka. Course of Instruction comprises English in all its branches, French, Drawing, Music- vocal and instrumental. Miss Cogdon is prepared to give music lessons either in her own or pupil’s residence.*<sup>28</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ballarat Historical Society [some years ago and I have not kept their letter nor the date and name of the newspaper].

<sup>21</sup> Viewed and transcribed by Wendy Fletcher, whose husband is a 2xgreat-grandson of David and Fanny.

<sup>22</sup> Marriage certificate from Victorian government.

<sup>23</sup> Birth certificates from Victorian government.

<sup>24</sup> Ballarat Historical Society.

<sup>25</sup> I spent time in Archives looking at Government Gazettes, Blue books, Council papers, and at the Library viewing films of Fiji Times etc. Photos of early settlers were all thumbnail sizes in a foldout section at the back of *Cyclopedia of Fiji* and were numbered. The Fiji Museum printed them in a larger than postcard size.

<sup>26</sup> Fiji Times 1 July 1871.

<sup>27</sup> [www.prov.vic.gov.au](http://www.prov.vic.gov.au)

<sup>28</sup> Fiji Times February 1st 1873.

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25 April 1873: Death of David's second son, David Richard, who would have been 27.

*'Death 25th April 1873, David Richard Robertson at Nu Vuni Vesi, Tai Levu, 2nd son of D. Robertson Esq. J.P. late of Ballarat, Victoria.'*<sup>29</sup> [Cause unknown as no certificates available; civil registration began in 1875].

In 1879 a government school in Levuka was opened. Both of David's younger children, Elizabeth 'Bessie' aged 15 and John 10 were enrolled with Bessie later listed as a teacher (1880).<sup>30</sup> Further records were really entertaining with regard to his grandchildren, thus:

*Report of Levuka School 1887 and 1888*<sup>31</sup>

*Class 2: Isabel Robertson, failed reading, passed writing, arithmetic, good for grammar.*

*Class 3: Trissie Fraser, passed Reading, Writing, Arithmetic. Good grammar, poor geography.*

*Class 3: Gertie Morgan, 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>. Pass reading and writing, failed arithmetic, indifferent grammar.*

On early jury lists David was shown as a 'gentleman'. In 1883 he moved to Suva, no doubt due to the shift of the capital to that city, and was shown to be the 'owner of a house'. In the 1884 Jury list he was an 'Overseer'.<sup>32</sup>

With one exception<sup>33</sup> a family exodus from Fiji, mostly to Melbourne but one to Sydney, occurred between the years 1880 to 1890.<sup>34</sup> It may have been prompted in part by the severe economic depression and many hurricanes during 1885-1890.<sup>35</sup> Other factors would have contributed, like education for the grandchildren and health. I cannot imagine how they survived so many years there without air conditioning, dryers, electric fans and refrigerators!

David and Elizabeth settled in Melbourne, where John married in 1890, Georgina died of epilepsy in 1898 and Nellie remained at home, no doubt caring for her parents until just after they died, marrying in 1903.<sup>36</sup>

David's wife Elizabeth, or Bessie as she was also called, died on 21 September 1900 of heart failure.<sup>37</sup>

*'Roberston. On the 21st inst, at Brighton, suddenly, Bessie, dearly beloved wife of David Robertson, late of Ballarat and Fiji, and sister of the late John Cogdon, P.M. [Police Magistrate] Ballarat and Fiji papers please copy. No flowers.'*

David died on 31 December 1900 at 15 Victoria Parade, Fitzroy from gangrene of the leg.<sup>38</sup> He had moved to the same street as his daughter, Kate Kirsten whose husband Albert was the informant on the death certificate. David died a week before his 83rd birthday, having had 11 children and 44 grandchildren, 30 of whom were born in Fiji. He was buried in the same grave as Elizabeth and Georgina in the Independent Section of the Boroondara Cemetery in Kew, Melbourne.

David ROBERTSON's long and interesting life would have been greatly enriched by his many travels. He cared for a large family, suffered many bereavements but always maintained his devotion to church and civic affairs. I feel honoured to be his great-granddaughter.

<sup>29</sup> *Fiji Times* April 30th 1873.

<sup>30</sup> Government Blue books, Archives Fiji. Elizabeth, the mother, was also called Bessie but in most records from Fiji was shown as Mrs D. Robertson. Also the record stated a Miss B. Robertson as the teacher.

<sup>31</sup> Council Papers 1887 and 1888, Fiji Archives.

<sup>32</sup> Royal Gazettes, Fiji Archives.

<sup>33</sup> My grandfather, William remained until 1908 when he brought his family to Melbourne. Sadly, he returned to Fiji to settle affairs and died there of a heart attack.

<sup>34</sup> Evidence from shipping records, and births in Sydney and Melbourne, along with details from Fiji.

<sup>35</sup> *Fiji Times* (noted during research but date of paper omitted).

<sup>36</sup> Certificates or family knowledge for all these events.

<sup>37</sup> Melbourne Argus 24 September 1900, via a cousin Jane Ellis (great-granddaughter of John Ernest) and death certificate.

<sup>38</sup> Death certificate from Victorian government.