

My most unusual ancestor – Dr George YOUNG c1726–1803

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My maternal grandmother was the story teller of our family. Her grandchildren assembled around her dining table every Saturday to hear her stories of 19th century characters, living lives far more exciting than our existence as early ‘baby-boomers’, growing up on the suburban fringes of post-war Sydney. Only one story was documented, the story of Maria Isabella FLOCKTON, née CRUIKSHANK, my grandmother’s great-grandmother. Just before Maria died in 1896 she wrote a *Statement*, which today we’d call a brief memoir¹. In part, Maria said she was born on the Island of St Vincent in 1810, was brought to Hammersmith near London as a baby, and was raised in England by family friends after her parents’ early deaths on St Vincent. When she reached her majority she inherited two plantations on St Vincent, ‘Mesopotamia’ and ‘Cummacrabou’. Her exotic story stirred my childhood imagination.

Five decades went by before Maria re-entered my life with a vengeance. Bitten by the bug of family history, I endeavoured to discover all of my mother’s direct forebears, placing a name in every box to create a six-generation family tree for her. Amazingly, I succeeded in that task, but that is another story. Having all those names, dates and places created an immense challenge for me in deciding which was the most unusual of my direct forebears, but I kept coming back to Maria. There she was, sitting at the bottom of Mum’s pedigree chart. Thanks to Maria’s *Statement*, I hadn’t had to work hard at finding her, but why was she born on St Vincent?

The whole notion of that small island in the Caribbean was romantic. James MICHENER had found it so, proved by his best-selling book *Caribbean*. I was intrigued by the notion that Maria was a sugar heiress, with a fortune built on the ownership of slaves. The less said about that, the better. By Australian standards, she definitely qualified as an unusual forebear. Following her story led me to an even more unusual forebear, her grandfather Dr George YOUNG.

Doctors might be regarded as a run-of-the-mill ancestors, but George was different. To me he epitomizes everything that was romantic about the 18th century’s age of enlightenment and the growth of empire². As the first director of the oldest botanical garden in the Western Hemisphere, he had links to Sir Joseph BANKS, and to William BLIGH of Mutiny on the Bounty and NSW Rum Rebellion fame. Discovering our family’s link to Dr YOUNG via Maria was exciting.

On a trip to visit my daughter in London, I located Maria’s baptism record, listing her parents as ‘James and Sarah CRUIKSHANK of the Island of St Vincent’³. The early parish records for the Caribbean have suffered from the effects of a tropical climate, but back in Australia I did manage to find a marriage on St Vincent in 1808 for James CRUIKSHANK, merchant, and Sarah YOUNG⁴. There was also a christening at St George’s Kingstown on 30 April 1772 for Sarah YOUNG, daughter of Dr YOUNG, doctor, and her older brother William christened on St Vincent on 1 May 1771 as a son of Dr YOUNG⁵. Was this ‘my’ Sarah and, if so, who was Dr YOUNG? So few British settlers were on St Vincent at that time that Dr YOUNG’s identity quickly surfaced, via the wonders of Google. To my surprise, much had been written about his work, and fortunately his year of death was given, 1803.

I ordered his will from England and it connected him definitively to Maria by mentioning the names of his two estates on St Vincent, the same as in her *Statement*⁶. His will named his wife as Sarah and, given his emphasis on legal heirs, George and Sarah must have been married although no record of marriage has surfaced. His will also names three children, George, William and Sarah, but no baptism has been found for George junior. Possibly the marriage and the birth of his eldest child took place on another Caribbean island, during YOUNG’s travels to collect plants.

¹ Maria Isabella FLOCKTON’s *Statement*, England c1894, copy held by author

² Desmond, Ray, *Dictionary of British & Irish Botanists & Horticulturalists*, Taylor & Francis, London, 1977, p682

³ Parish Records, St Paul Hammersmith, Film X048/003, London Metropolitan Archives

⁴ Parish Records of St George’s, St Vincents, transcribed by Richard & Lillian J Ross, LDS Film 1162485, Items 1-4, Blackburn Family History Centre

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Will, George Young, 21 February 1804, PROB 11/1405, ordered through UK Wills Online <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/> accessed 30 November 2011

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By now Dr George YOUNG had me well and truly intrigued. The potted histories found via Google describing him as an army surgeon and keen horticulturalist left many gaps. For example, had he attended university? An email to Scotland eventually obtained a result and, aided by army records, my opening paragraph of his story now contained new information about him:

Britain's Seven Years' War against the French commenced in 1756, soon after George YOUNG graduated as a Master of Arts from the University of Glasgow in 1754⁷. His education proves that his family had money but his name is a 'common' one and his origins remain unclear, except that he was born around 1726⁸. He commenced duty with the British Army's 48th Regiment of Foot as an Apothecary's Mate on 22 July 1758⁹. The Regiment had long been in America but in July 1758 was engaged in the renowned siege of Louisbourg (now Nova Scotia, Canada), suggesting that YOUNG lived here in 1758¹⁰. The Regiment then participated in the capture of Quebec in 1759¹¹, now as Surgeon to the Regiment, George YOUNG was part of Lord Albemarle's Expedition to Havana, on the Caribbean island of Cuba¹². The War ended in 1763 and on 2 February 1764 YOUNG was granted MD status by his alma mater, seemingly based on his impressive practical experience in the field of battle¹³.

His known appointment to the Garrison of St Vincent as Surgeon at its military hospital was now factually dated to 27 February 1764¹⁴. The island, newly ceded to Britain, had formerly been the home of French plantation settlers, a small native population of 'Yellow Carib' Indians and a large group of 'Black Caribs', descended from shipwrecked and escapee African slaves¹⁵. A colonial official present on St Vincent in 1763, Sir William YOUNG, was a possible kinsman¹⁶.

Compiling the next part of George's story was made easier by the astonishing number of books written about the botanic gardens at St Vincent. It is famous for being the first such garden in the western hemisphere, and famous as the place where the breadfruit tree was brought from the Pacific to the West Indies in January 1793 by William BLIGH, of mutiny on the *Bounty* fame¹⁷. Days and weeks spent reading books at the State Library of Victoria and reading digitised copies of old books on the internet turned up the following snippets relevant to George YOUNG's career:

In 1765 Governor Robert MELVILLE visited St Vincent. MELVILLE was a member of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in London, [the Society] a group recently joined by the botanist Joseph BANKS. George YOUNG appreciated MELVILLE as 'a lover of botany and a man disposed to encourage every undertaking that may tend to public utility'¹⁸. MELVILLE and YOUNG discussed the Society's offer, to anyone interested in establishing a botanic garden in North American colonies, of a 'premium' [reward] for articles raised in those gardens which would benefit the trade and commerce of Britain¹⁹.

⁷ Young, George MA 1754, MD 1764 'practised Medicine and Surgery several years in the Army', University of Edinburgh minute 2 February 1764

⁸ Parish Records, Hammersmith, Film X048/003, London Metropolitan Archives, gives his age at death in March 1803 as 76 years

⁹ Drew, Robert, Editor, *Commissioned Officers in the Medical Services of the British Army, 1660-1960*, The Wellcome Historical Medical Library, London, 1968, p29

¹⁰ website [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/48th_\(Northamptonshire\)_Regiment_of_Foot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/48th_(Northamptonshire)_Regiment_of_Foot) accessed 4 December 2011

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Drew, *op cit*, p38

¹³ Young, George MA 1754, MD 1764 'practised Medicine and Surgery several years in the Army', University of Edinburgh minute 2 February 1764

¹⁴ Dossie, Robert, *Memoirs of Agriculture and Other Economical Arts*, 3 vols, London, 1768-82, Article IX, p196; and Drew, *op cit*, p38

¹⁵ Young, Sir William, *An Account of the Black Charaibs in the Island of St Vincents*, Frank Cass, London, 1971, p18

¹⁶ Oral family history avows a connection to a family of West Indies Governors, and Sir William Young was Governor of Dominica in 1772

¹⁷ Howard, Richard A, *The St Vincent Botanic Garden – The Early Years*, pp18-19, Harvard University website <http://amoldia.arboretum.harvard.edu/pdf/articles/476.pdf> accessed 30 November 2011

¹⁸ Dossie, *op cit*, p197

¹⁹ Premiums Offered by Society, No 339, Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce Journal 1762, pp79-80

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Recognising YOUNG's skill and perseverance, MELVILLE promised to procure a plot of land for a garden at St Vincent, provided YOUNG would take care of it²⁰. The garden had high strategic priority, facilitating the economic development of Britain's overseas possessions by allowing experiments in acclimatisation of basic foodstuffs and medicinal plants to be undertaken in the tropics²¹.

YOUNG wrote: 'For the first two or three years, little else was done but clearing and fencing in the ground'²². He then attempted to procure and grow the plants of specific interest to the Society but, unfortunately, the tyranny of distance meant that his successes usually came after the Society's deadlines, and he missed out on the prizes²³. But by 1772 he had collected and planted a diverse and commercially productive garden²⁴. He had created a place of scientific importance, and remarkable beauty, revealing his aesthetic discernment.²⁵

The breadfruit project was set in motion in 1772, while YOUNG was still in charge of the garden.

Valentine MORRIS, MELVILLE's successor, wrote on the subject to BANKS, recently returned from his famous voyages of discovery with James COOK²⁶. YOUNG's work was certainly known to BANKS and they probably met towards the end of 1772, when YOUNG visited London and reported on his impressive progress²⁷. YOUNG informed the Society that MELVILLE met all the expenses of the garden during his term as Governor, but after that it was chiefly YOUNG who paid the bills²⁸. YOUNG sought the Society's help in maintaining and properly supporting the garden:

If it is not obtained, I am afraid, it will fall to the ground, after all that has been done. For it is a great chance, whether the surgeon, who may succeed, will have any taste for botany; or whether he will forego his practice among planters and their negroes, to take care of it.²⁹

At this point I requested, and was fortunate to receive by post from the Society in London, copies of the minutes of various meetings of the Society and the Board of Colonies and Trade. These showed that George was unaware that he had been elected as a corresponding Member of the Society and was therefore ineligible for pecuniary awards³⁰. After much discussion, it was decided to award George YOUNG the Society's highest form of recognition, a gold medal, rather than his hoped-for bounty of fifty guineas³¹. Disappointed, YOUNG quickly returned to St Vincent from where he wrote a letter declining the honour of being a corresponding Member of the Society³². Having sacrificed his own financial position for almost a decade for the public good, with no future prospect of the burden being lifted, in 1774 he relinquished his role as director of the garden.³³

²⁰ Dossie, op cit, p197, and Harvard University website <http://amoldia.arboretum.harvard.edu/pdf/articles/476.pdf> accessed 30 November 2011

²¹ Naro, Nancy Priscilla S, *Imperial Palms Over Colonial Gardens*, Revista/Review Interamericana, Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico, Recinto de San German Vol 29, 1999 online at www.sq.inter.edu/revista-cisla/volume29/naro.pdf accessed 4 December 2011

²² Dossie, op cit, p197

²³ Dossie, op cit, pp198-9

²⁴ Howard, Harvard University website, op cit, p13, citing a 1773 publication by John Ellis entitled *Some Additional Observations on the method of Preserving Seeds from Foreign Parts, for the Benefit of our American Colonies, with an Account of the Garden at St Vincent, under the Care of Dr. George Young*, in which a catalogue of Dr Young's plants is published

²⁵ Howard, R A, *Modern Problems of the Years 1492-1800 in the Lesser Antilles*, 1975, *Annals of the Missouri Botanical Garden*, 62(2): 371, on JSTOR Plant Science website <http://plants.jstor.org/person/bm000037027> accessed 30 November 2011

²⁶ Smith, Edward, *The Life of Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society*, Cambridge University Press, 1911, p123

²⁷ Dossie, op cit, pp195-205

²⁸ Dossie, op cit, p203

²⁹ Dossie, op cit, p204

³⁰ Minutes of Colonies & Trade, 22 December 1772, p2 and 5 January 1773 p3

³¹ Minutes of Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, London, 6 January 1773, pp40-41 and 17 February 1773, p57

³² Minutes of Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, London, 12 May 1773, p92

³³ Date from Desmond, op cit; and refusal from Naro, op cit

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YOUNG now devoted himself to medicine, and to managing his ‘Mesopotamia’ and ‘Cummacrabou’ plantations, acquired around 1777³⁴. However his old passion simmered and he exchanged plants with another keen botanist, General de BOUILL, Commander of the French forces in Martinique³⁵.

While the British were diverted by the American War of Independence, the French pounced, and Dr George YOUNG was a member of the Council of St Vincent when it capitulated to the French in June 1779³⁶. British forces retreated to nearby St Lucia, where YOUNG was on the army payroll as Physician³⁷. Local farmers on St Vincent began encroaching on the garden, growing cotton and tobacco³⁸. A hurricane in October 1780 wreaked further destruction on YOUNG’s creation³⁹.

When the war ended the ageing YOUNG returned to St Vincent on half pay⁴⁰. In 1784 Joseph BANKS approved YOUNG’s recommendation that Alexander ANDERSON, formerly his assistant surgeon on St Lucia, become the garden’s new director⁴¹. ANDERSON was made responsible for its restoration and, unlike YOUNG, was given full financial backing from the British government⁴². ANDERSON’s heritage from YOUNG was at least 348 different kinds of plants but, as an excellent networker, ANDERSON eventually attracted for himself nearly all the credit for the success of the garden⁴³. Both men were friends, however, and would have shared the excitement when BLIGH’s ship arrived with the breadfruit seedlings in 1793⁴⁴.

George YOUNG suffered minor damage to his plantations during a vicious rebellion against the British in 1795-96⁴⁵. He is next found in retirement at Hammersmith, near the treasured plants he’d sent from St Vincent to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. Aged seventy-six, he died there on 11 March 1803, his age indicating his intelligence and lifestyle choices, since most Europeans living in the Caribbean succumbed early to the excesses of alcohol and tropical diseases⁴⁶. His wife Sarah died at Hammersmith in 1814⁴⁷.

The granddaughter Maria eventually became the sole heir to George YOUNG’s plantations and slave workforce⁴⁸. Years later, Maria’s granddaughter Margaret FLOCKTON (my g-g-aunt) inherited George’s passion. An international award for botanical artists was established in her name in 2004, honouring her work over many years from 1901 at Sydney’s Botanic Gardens⁴⁹. George YOUNG’s name and achievements should not be forgotten either.

³⁴ Governor Valentine Morris disposed of Crown Lands without reference to the Council of St Vincent, Public Record Office, Kew, Ref T 1/529/176-177 of 4 September 1777

³⁵ Howard, JSTOR website, op cit

³⁶ Harburn, Todd E & Durham, Rodger, *A Vindication of My Conduct*, Heritage Books, 2002, p154

³⁷ Will, George Young, 21 February 1804, PROB 11/1405; and Drew, op cit, p38

³⁸ Howard, JSTOR website, op cit

³⁹ Hulme, Peter & Whitehead, Neil L, Editors, *Wild Majesty – Encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the Present Day, an Anthology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992, p202

⁴⁰ Drew, op cit, p38. Consistently, Young was not included in the Annual British Army Lists for 1784 as an officer of the hospitals with the troops in North America or the West Indies

⁴¹ Howard, Harvard University website, op cit, p15

⁴² *ibid*, p15

⁴³ *ibid*, pp16-17

⁴⁴ The friendship with the ANDERSON family is mentioned in Maria Isabella FLOCKTON’s *Statement*, England, c1894

⁴⁵ Young, op cit, pp116-119; and The Young Collection of Manuscripts, Mss Wind.t.1, Vol5, p3, Rhodes House Library, Oxford

⁴⁶ *London Times*, 12 March 1803, p3, col d; and Parish Records, St Paul Hammersmith, Film X048/003, London Metropolitan Archives

⁴⁷ Transcription of George and Sarah Young’s headstone at St Paul Hammersmith

⁴⁸ Maria Isabella FLOCKTON’s *Statement*, England, c1894

⁴⁹ Royal Botanic Gardens & Domain Trust website http://www.rbg Syd.nsw.gov.au/friends/Who_we_are/friends_21st accessed 4 December 2011