

Tracing my favourite ancestor in Australia
Mary Ann BERRYMAN – a secretive woman

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When I first started to research our family it was slow and tedious, with no immediate gratification that we now have with the use of computers and the internet. Instead the research required many letters to government departments and to other researchers. I have embraced the new technology, although as an avid researcher I tediously collect primary documentation to confirm details. I speak to and collaborate with many ‘cousins’ so oral history is often a foundation of my research. In the case of Mary Ann BERRYMAN it was a simple comment that opened some unbelievable doors to her life after a fruitless investigation since 1984.

Mary Ann BERRYMAN has become my favourite ancestor because she stirs up so many different and conflicting emotions in me. On the one hand, I feel sorry for her, so lonely, then I feel cross because of her deceit and lies in her life. Yet I cannot abandon her. Mary Ann was my great-great grandmother, Jessie (McNEILAGE) DENNIS’ niece. My connection as first cousin thrice removed may be considered distant, but over the years I have felt there is infinity, a connection, a knowing.

I was fortunate to have known my great-grandfather Robert DENNIS and great-grandmother Elizabeth (TAYLOR) DENNIS. Robert was born at 28 Bridge Street, Sydney in 1871 and Elizabeth was born in Burratorang Valley in 1874. They met when Elizabeth was 15 in 1889, married in 1896 and remained together until their deaths only six weeks apart in 1962, the year I turned fourteen. I had spent a great deal of time with these two interesting people.

Robert was a teacher and artist; he loved to read and talk, and talk he did about life in Sydney in the 1890s, and also showed me drawings of Sydney Town he had done as a young man. Grandfather, as I called him, also related stories of his mother’s family. Grandfather was fourteen when his mother Jessie (McNEILAGE) DENNIS died in 1885¹. It was important to Grandfather to have contact with his siblings because after their mother’s death their father, unable to cope, split the children up and they then lived with various family members and friends.

Grandfather also desired a relationship with his wider family, hence he kept photographs of cousins, letters and jottings on scraps of paper to try to keep track and remember. My grandmother Marian Maude (DENNIS) KEFFORD inherited most of these objects and she gave the collection to me in the 1980s. In amongst the photographs was a piece of paper written by my great-grandfather. Written about 1943, I call it the ‘Berryman Bits’.²³

It was from the ‘Berryman Bits’ that I began to wonder about Mary Ann BERRYMAN; there were photos of her two sisters, Alice and Jessie, none of Mary Ann. The ‘Berryman Bits’ also has a line through Mary Ann’s name with the words ‘dead both (referring to her children) reared by Mrs Hoskins (sic), Gilgandra – mother’.

Mary Ann was born on 25 October⁴ 1873 at Main Lead, Grenfell NSW⁵. She was the daughter of George BERRYMAN, a miner at Grenfell, and Margaret née McNEILAGE⁶. Mary Ann was the last of the family of seven children and at the time of her birth there were three boys and two girls living with one boy, William George, deceased⁷. William George was the first born and died in Forbes in 1863 aged two years⁸. The next

¹ NSW Births Deaths and Marriages Registry death certificate 1586/1885 of Jessie DENNIS died 5 August 1885 at 20 Cumberland Street, Sydney.

² ‘Berryman Bits’ original held by author.

³ Births Deaths and Marriages Registry death certificate 07286/1944 of Jessie Elizabeth BERRYMAN, died 5 April 1944, Lidcombe.

⁴ Birthday Book entry, Jessie McNEILAGE, original held by author.

⁵ NSW Births Deaths and Marriages birth transcription 08773/1873 of Mary Ann BERRYMAN, born 25 October 1873, Grenfell.

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*.

⁸ Historical Index of NSW Births, Deaths and Marriages Registry 4398/1863.

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five children, Jessie Elizabeth Annette, George, Alice Margaret, William Archibald and Robert Augustus were all registered in Forbes⁹. In 1873 when Mary Ann was born the family lived in Grenfell.

I looked for marriages and deaths in all Australian states to find Mary Ann, with no result. I knew she existed, her birthday was in her aunt Jessie's birthday book, and there is mention of her in her cousin Robert DENNIS's diary in 1888. When her mother Margaret (formerly BERRYMAN née McNEILAGE) HOSKING died in Gilgandra in 1921, Mary Ann is listed as one of her surviving children aged 48¹⁰.

Why had the 'Berryman Bits' stated the children had been reared by Mary Ann's mother if Mary Ann was still alive at the time of Margaret's death in 1921? The 'Berryman Bits' stated that Mary Ann had had two children, the first a girl named Vera Dorothy SYMES and a boy Cyril (?), the question mark denoting that the writer was unsure of the name. I could not find any marriage between a SYMES or BERRYMAN. I tried spelling variations and drew a blank.

I began to search for the children, with limited success. As the 'Berryman Bits' gave me some information regarding Vera's marriage, the NSW Historical Index for marriages was used to look for a marriage between Vera SYMES and a Mat FAIRLEY. The marriage transcription was received with great excitement and while it did answer some questions it posed many more.

The information I received from the marriage transcription of Vera Dorothy SYMES [sic] and Matthew Dale FAIRLIE [sic] intrigued me. Matthew gave his occupation as soldier, which has been confirmed by military records held by NSW State Records, and Vera gave her birth place as Ontario, Canada. Her parents are listed as 'Geoffrey Symes (deceased), occupation Journalist'¹¹, and Mary Ann as 'Mary Millicent Berriman'. I received the marriage transcription in 2006 and felt dismayed, names and births not consistent, but I felt I was on the right track. As I could not find the births of Vera and Cyril, I began to imagine situations. Was Mary Ann a mistress?

I needed a death certificate for Mary Ann, but I did not know under what name she died. Prompted by the 'Berryman Bits' I had looked for Mary Ann's death from the early 1900s under the presumption that she must have died before her mother as she supposedly reared Mary Ann's children. I widened the search after obtaining Vera's marriage certificate as I had to assume Mary Ann was still alive in 1916¹² and then searched up to the 1930s after it was confirmed by her mother's death details that she was alive in 1921.

Some years ago I uploaded my family tree on ancestry.com. I was nervous about doing this because of the debate about the pros and cons regarding the potency of internet information, and I agree with the negative aspects of this form of research. On a positive note, I received an email from a young man named Glen via ancestry in February 2012. He wanted to know my relationship with Mary Ann BERRYMAN and told me he was her great-great grandson. Finally a descendant of Mary Ann's had made contact with me!

By 2012 I had only found Mary Ann's daughter Vera, having had no success in finding anything about Cyril. Vera had had two children, Dudley Dale FAIRLIE born September 1916¹³, and Dorothy FAIRLIE born in 1920. Unfortunately both Dorothy and Vera had died following the birth. At that point, I still had no marriage or death information on Mary Ann BERRYMAN.

⁹ Historical Index of NSW Births, Deaths and Marriages Registry.

¹⁰ NSW Births Deaths and Marriages Registry death transcription 19145/1921 of Margaret HOSKING died 27 December 1921, Gilgandra Shire.

¹¹ NSW Births Deaths and Marriages Registry marriage transcription 2191/1916 of Matthew Dale FAIRLIE and Vera Dorothy SYMES, 17 March 1916, Canterbury NSW.

¹² *ibid*

¹³ NSW Births Deaths and Marriages Registry birth certificate 40715/1916 of Dudley Dale FAIRLIE born 29 September 1916, Campsie.

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I had a phone call from Janice, daughter of Dudley FAIRLIE and mother of Glen, who said she had never known her grandmother Vera. Her parents, Dudley and Mary HANLEY, had parted when Janice was about four so she had limited knowledge of her father's family. During the conversation Janice told me that when she was very little she was in Sydney and her mother had pointed out an old woman with a walking stick, saying '*see that old lady over there, that is your great-grandmother.*' She also told Janice not to say a word and not to go near her. Janice thought the old lady lived around Newtown and believed she was Mary Ann. I started to do the sums again. Janice was born in 1950 and said she was about five or six when that encounter took place. I had still been searching far too early for Mary Ann's death!

With no married name to go on, I searched the NSW BDM historical index from 1956 to 1960 with just the given names of Mary Ann plus parents' names, and up popped Mary Ann WATKINS, death registered 1959 in Sydney and parents' names George and Margaret. I ordered a transcription of Mary Ann WATKINS' death and to my delight it was Mary Ann BERRYMAN¹⁴. It confirmed that her father was George BERRYMAN and her mother Margaret McNEILAGE and noted she was born in Grenfell NSW. She had two marriages, the first when she was 22 to George Theodore Augustus known as KEIGHTLEY in Sydney. The second marriage was when she was 57 to James Alexander WATKINS. There was no issue from her second marriage, but the union of Mary Ann BERRYMAN and George Theodore Augustus KEIGHTLEY produced three children. At the time of Mary Ann's death in 1957 it was unknown if they were living or deceased.

A million questions were in my head! Why was Vera's surname SIMES when George's name was KEIGHTLEY? Why didn't the informant from the Registrar General's office know whether the children were living or deceased? Why was Mary Ann's death not registered until 11 February 1959 when she died on 30 December 1957?¹⁵ We are now looking for 3 children.

A marriage was found between George Theodore Augustus KEIGHTLEY, Gentleman, and Mary Millison Bowen BERRIMAN. Parents for Mary Ann are listed as George BERRIMANN and Margaret BOWEN¹⁶. This had to be them.

On the death transcription of Vera (SYMES) FAIRLIE, place of birth was given as Brunswick, Victoria, not Canada as had been given on Vera's marriage details. We began to search the Victorian Historical Index for children with parents George and Mary. We found a Vera Mabel STEPHENS born 28 June 1896 at Benalla¹⁷ and another girl Clarice Unita STEPHENS born 16 September 1898 in Melbourne¹⁸. The parents are given as George STEPHENS and Mary Millicent STEPHENS formerly BOWEN. Here was BOWEN again, but why STEPHENS? That question is still not answered. The date and place given for the parents' marriage on both birth certificates is exactly the same as those given on George and Mary Ann (BERRIMAN) KEIGHTLEY's NSW marriage certificate. The final confirmation that this was our BERRYMAN/SIMES family came with the death of Clarice on 24 January 1899. Aged just 4 months she died in Grenfell NSW, Mary Ann's birthplace, and her mother Margaret's place of residence. Clarice died under the name of Clarice SYMES and her father is listed as George Keightly [sic] SYMES and mother Mary BERRYMAN.

So from a search that began in 1984 with hints from the 'Berryman Bits' it has been possible to piece together Mary Ann's life. While the reason for all the different names is not fully understood, it is known that

¹⁴ NSW Births Deaths and Marriages death transcription 00607/1959 of Mary Ann WATKINS died 30 December 1957, Lewisham.

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ NSW Births Deaths and Marriages marriage transcription 02479/1895 of George Theodore Augustus KEIGHTLEY and Mary Millison Bowen BERRIMAN 31 May 1895, Sydney.

¹⁷ Victorian Births Deaths and Marriages Registry birth certificate 4984/1896 of Vera Mabel STEPHENS 28 June 1896, Benalla.

¹⁸ Victorian Births Deaths and Marriages Registry birth certificate 54262/1898 of Clarice Unita STEPHENS 16 September 1898, Melbourne.

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George was still married to Jessica (BADDELEY) SIMES in New Zealand when he married Mary Ann BERRYMAN in May 1895 as Jessica filed for divorce in October 1895¹⁹.

The 'Berryman Bits' stated that *'Mr Symes had given Mary Ann £100 to travel from South Africa, he remained behind and was killed in a hotel fire'* and it has been confirmed that George SYMES died at the Victoria Hotel in Craddock, South Africa from accidental burning²⁰.

Cyril SYMES has also been found, along with one of his grandsons, Ray. Cyril died as Jack Cyril SIMES in 1973 with no parents named on his death certificate, however it does state that he was born in South Africa²¹. His usual place of residence was given as a property called Rossmore at Burren Junction NSW. Janice, Mary Ann's great-granddaughter, rang the property and spoke with the owner Margaret who had known Jack. Jack's birth in South Africa in 1901 has been located and, although he is unnamed, his parents' names are given as George Theodore Augustus SIMES and Mary Millicent BERRYMAN, born in Australia²². In George's death notice his children are listed as Vera Mabel and Cyril Lindsay.

The story is not finished. We know that Mary Ann was back in Australia by 1909 but how did she and her children return and when? The biggest questions are poignant:

- When Mary Ann died why was there no contact with her family? When Probate was finally declared in 1959 the Public Trustee noted *'no other information can be ascertained as to the deceased's next of kin'*²³.
- Why did Janice's mother point out Mary Ann in the 1950s yet not want to speak with her?
- Why did the rest of the family, including my great-grandfather, Mary Ann's cousin Robert DENNIS, not know where she lived or indeed whether she was alive?
- When Mary Ann died in 1957 she had a son Cyril and his daughter Doris and her family living, and a grandson Dudley FAIRLIE and his children.
- In the list of Mary Ann's assets is a bank account in the name of Mary Ann WATSON – another name!

Mary Ann WATKINS (formerly KEIGHTLEY aka STEPHENS/SIMES/SYMES née BERRYMAN) died of cardiac failure and malnutrition. She was 84 and no-one was there for her. Why?

¹⁹ *Taranaki Herald* 5 October 1895 Divorce Court <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?d&cl=search&d=TH18951005> accessed 27 September 2012.

²⁰ Death of George Theodore SYMES, 29 July 1904, Craddock, South Africa, entry 235.

²¹ NSW Births Deaths and Marriages Registry death certificate 59259/1973 of Jack Cyril SIMES, Wee Waa.

²² Birth of unnamed child, 8 April 1901, Woodstock, South Africa, Entry 556/01.

²³ Probate declared by the Supreme Court of NSW 1959.