

*Tracing my favourite ancestor in Australia*  
**Substance and Shadow: James Langley BENNETT**

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A correspondent to the *Riverine Grazier* of Hay, New South Wales, wrote in 1880 of his journey following the Murrumbidgee River, and passing through Darlington Point, of which he said, ‘... it seems a very thriving township. The founder ... is Mr. J.L. Bennett who, I am informed, settled down here all by himself, building a store and getting a postoffice [sic].’<sup>1</sup> The writer had been misinformed in one respect: James Langley BENNETT was not the ‘founder’, as the settlement had been established for over ten years before he came to it around 1876. However, he was storekeeper and postmaster, and a prominent townsman, with an active interest in the young town’s progress. The *Riverine Grazier* article, being *almost* correct, can be seen as a kind of metaphor for my experience in researching this man’s story; so often *almost* attaining the desired data but encountering a ‘brick wall’ instead. The substance of James Langley BENNETT lies in his well-documented years in Darlington Point, while the story of his earlier life has proved to be shadowy and nebulous, always just beyond one’s grasp.

My interest in BENNETT is long-standing, and to such an extent that I have accorded him the status of ‘honorary ancestor’. My roots lie in Eastern Europe, places impenetrable until recent years, and the absence of accessible forebears of my own balanced out BENNETT’s lack of descendants, all his children having died in infancy – fair exchange. Our connection is strengthened in that I live in the house that once was his; inhabiting the same rooms, looking out over the same stretch of river, engenders a sense of family. The house was bought by my husband’s parents from BENNETT’s widow in 1922,<sup>2</sup> and is known as Benlock, a name said to be a conflation of BENNETT’s name and that of his wife. A family myth? I wondered, and hoped to discover.

Newspaper advertisements for BENNETT’s business show he was established in Darlington Point by 1876, but it was a local history from neighbouring Carrathool that informed of his previous whereabouts, employed on Toganmain Station.<sup>3</sup> The records of this pastoral property are held by the Mitchell Library, Sydney, and I sought them out in high hopes, only to find that those prior to 1876 had been destroyed by fire.<sup>4</sup> The same Carrathool history mentions an outbreak of dysentery on Toganmain in 1873, and this tied in with a headstone in Darlington Point cemetery inscribed with the names of three BENNETT children. Obtaining the birth as well as the death records of these three Bennett children established that it had indeed been BENNETT and his wife Clara on whom this tragedy had fallen.<sup>5</sup> More sorrow lay ahead for this couple – a stillbirth in 1875.<sup>6</sup> It would have been two heartbroken people who made the move into town some time after that, to new surroundings without painful memories.

The birth records supplied Clara’s maiden name, TUCKER, and the date of the marriage: 10 July 1866 at Exeter. A major stumbling block was encountered when no record could be found of the marriage – Exeter or anywhere else in the United Kingdom – which thwarted any possibility of learning the birthplaces and antecedents of James and Clara.<sup>7</sup> I was already in possession of Clara’s death certificate, but that only threw up more questions; of this, more later. In an attempt to pin down when the couple had arrived in the Australian colonies, ships’ passenger lists were searched. A James BENNETT and Clara BENNETT were found, passengers

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<sup>1</sup> ‘A Trip to Temora’, *Riverine Grazier*, 6 October 1880.

<sup>2</sup> Certificate of Title, Volume 1744, folio 12, Land Titles Office of New South Wales.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline Merrylees, *Brave Beginnings: A history of the Carrathool district*, printed by *Riverine Grazier*, Hay, 1983, p30.

<sup>4</sup> Robertson Family, *Toganmain, Telleraga and Brewarrina Stations: pastoral records, 1835-1986*, Mitchell Library, Sydney, MLMSS 4997.

<sup>5</sup> Birth Certificates: Clara Elizabeth Beatrice BENNETT, 15 November 1869 Reg No 10993; William Henry BENNETT 17 April 1871 Reg No 11383; Ada Mary BENNETT 20 December 1872 Reg No 11947.

Death Certificates: William Henry BENNETT 7 December 1873 Reg No 04583; Ada May [sic] BENNETT 8 December 1873 Reg No 04584; Clara Elizabeth Beatrice BENNETT 16 December 1873 Reg No 04585, NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages.

<sup>6</sup> Birth Certificate: unnamed BENNETT 9 July 1875 Reg No 12816, NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages. No death record was found, but regarding stillbirths the NSW Registry advises: ‘At times, stillborn babies have been registered as a birth, a death, or both.’ <http://www.bdm.nsw.gov.au/births/stillbirths.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Databases searched: [www.ancestry.com.au](http://www.ancestry.com.au), [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk), [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org), [www.gro.gov.uk](http://www.gro.gov.uk), [www.findmypast.com.au](http://www.findmypast.com.au) – all without result; also enquiry made through [www.genfindit.com](http://www.genfindit.com), again without positive result.

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on the *Golden Sea*, arriving at Melbourne, 27 November 1866.<sup>8</sup> Far from conclusive without further corroboration, but at least in the right time frame, between the supposed marriage date and the eldest child's birth, 1869 in New South Wales. Tracing the ship from the London end of the journey proved not possible, as records of outgoing passengers commence only from 1890.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the family tragedies, BENNETT soon had a business established in Darlington Point, and to the extent of opening a branch store on the southern side of the river. A prominent advertisement appeared in the *Riverine Grazier* announcing this, the business being described as Post-Office Store, 'shipping, forwarding, insurance, and general commission agent', as well as agent for businesses in Wagga Wagga and Melbourne, including steamship owners William McCulloch and Co.<sup>10</sup> He became active in community life, including the FreeSelectors' Association, Farmers' and Settlers' Association, a committee protesting the closure of the local Court of Petty Sessions and, later as Federation approached, the Federal Association.<sup>11</sup>

Amid all this optimism and progress BENNETT suffered another loss when his wife Clara died in 1895. Little can be learnt from her death certificate except that she had been ailing for three years. Her parents names and father's occupation are makred 'Not known'.<sup>12</sup> This could be interpreted either that BENNETT, the informant, did not know, or that *Clara herself* did not know, which possibly indicates a childhood in an institution. Clara thus remains one of the shadowy aspect of James' story.

As postmaster, BENNETT was included in the Public Service Lists for that period, and this listing supplied his birth date.<sup>13</sup> I'd had his death certificate for over thirty years, tucked away with the only known photograph of him, but this was the first I knew of his date of birth, 17 June 1838. Using this date, together with his father's name and the birthplace recorded on his death certificate – Isaac, and Lancashire – I set about locating his birth record. My frustration mounted when I was unable to find a record that corresponded sufficiently to indicate it was the correct one, even when the search was extended to all English counties.<sup>14</sup>

Unwilling to be defeated I turned to the English census, each of which is wonderfully informative, with each individual of a household named, together with their age and relationship to the householder – wife, son, lodger, servant, etc.<sup>15</sup> I searched the 1841 census for an Isaac BENNETT with a son James around three years old. Nothing fitted. I next searched using the mother's name, Bessie (as shown on James' death certificate) and any variant – Betty, Elizabeth, etc. – with a 3 year old James, in case the father was living elsewhere or had died since the child's conception. Again, no luck. The exercise was repeated using the mother's maiden name, CASSON, in the possibility that James had been illegitimate, registered under another name. Another dead end, at which point I was obliged to set the search aside – for a while.

Life goes on, and in 1899 BENNETT, aged sixty-one, married again: Bessie THORNE, twenty-seven years his junior, and with two young sons who would perhaps lessen the void of his own childlessness.<sup>16</sup> As the second 'supporting player' in BENNETT's life, some background on Bessie was called for. Knowing the names of her sons, Oscar and Albert, I found records of their births in Manly, New South Wales, and also of Bessie's

<sup>8</sup> Initial search on [www.ancestry.com.au](http://www.ancestry.com.au) database, then Index to Unassisted Passenger Lists to Victoria, 1852–1923, Fiche 262, p.001, Public Records Office Victoria.

<sup>9</sup> National Archives of the United Kingdom [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-person/passengers.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-person/passengers.htm)

<sup>10</sup> *Riverine Grazier* 3 July 1876. Further advertisements appeared at intervals.

<sup>11</sup> Free Selectors' Assn. *Riverine Grazier* 19 March 1878; Farmers' and Settlers' Assn. *Narandera Ensign* 24 February 1899; protest committee *Narrandera Argus* 24 May 1895; Federal Assn. *Narandera Argus* 22 July 1898.

<sup>12</sup> Death Certificate: Clara BENNETT 19 June 1895 Reg No 8679, NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages

<sup>13</sup> *Public Service Lists, 1898–1903, Post and Telegraph Masters*, State Library of NSW, Reel 3613, p189.

<sup>14</sup> Databases searched: [www.ancestry.com.au](http://www.ancestry.com.au), [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk), [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) and [www.findmypast.com.au](http://www.findmypast.com.au) Correspondence was also conducted with the Lancashire Family History Society, Lancashire UK in hope of their having access to records not available online.

<sup>15</sup> 1841 Census of England, UK Census Collection on [www.ancestry.com.au](http://www.ancestry.com.au)

<sup>16</sup> Marriage Certificate: James Langley BENNETT and Beatrice Marea [sic] THORNE 23 August 1899 Reg No 05938 NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages.

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marriage to Edwin THORNE in 1884.<sup>17</sup> Incidentally, her maiden name was BULLOCK, which neatly supplied the ‘-lock’ part of the house name ‘Benlock’.

While the image of Clara remained a hazy outline, that of Bessie soon took on a livelier aspect. During a session of idle internet ‘trawling’ I entered ‘Thorne’ as a keyword to search the NSW State Records website, and discovered a divorce file dated 1896.<sup>18</sup> Bessie’s subterfuge in calling herself a widow is understandable, given the social attitudes of the time. A later examination of the actual file revealed more, including that there had been an older child, Edwin Thomas, who died at the age of seven years,<sup>19</sup> and that Oscar and Albert later changed their names to BENNETT by deed poll – almost certainly an endorsement of their relationship with BENNETT.

BENNETT may have become more light-hearted with a new wife, and is mentioned in reports of the social life of the district. He took part in a comic skit at a local concert, and the couple were among the guests at two weddings of sufficient prominence to be fully reported in Narrandera papers.<sup>20</sup> He nevertheless maintained his community duties, which included as Chairman of the Aboriginal Protection Board, making a presentation to a soldier returned from the Boer War, and in his capacity as Justice of the Peace, conducting an inquiry into an accidental death.<sup>21</sup>

In another capacity, as Chairman of the School Board, BENNETT mentioned he had been a teacher himself in northern England. Armed with this clue and with renewed optimism, I sought evidence of this, only to find that teacher registration in England commenced in 1914.<sup>22</sup>

In 1908, a month after his ninth wedding anniversary and his step-sons now young men of 21 and 20, James Langley BENNETT died, the cause of death being bronchitis and ‘senile heart’.<sup>23</sup> Mindful of his civic duty almost to the last, a few months earlier he had stood for election to the recently constituted Murrumbidgee Shire Council, one of five candidates in C Riding, but failed to be elected.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Birth Certificates: Oscar William THORN [sic] 1331/1887 and Albert Sidney THORN [sic] 13706/1888.

Marriage Certificate: Edwin Joseph THORN [sic] and Bessie Marion BULLOCK 8 July 1884 Reg No 03418 NSW Births Deaths and Marriages Registry.

<sup>18</sup> *Divorce file No. 2103, 1896. Edwin J. THORNE v. Bessie M. THORNE.* State Records of NSW.

<sup>19</sup> Birth Certificate: Edwin Thomas THORNE 12256/1885; Death Certificate: Edwin Thomas THORNE 7968/1892 NSW Births Deaths and Marriages Registry.

<sup>20</sup> Comic skit, *Narandera Argus* 15 December 1899; PETHYBRIDGE–LANDER wedding *Narandera Argus* 28 February 1902; HARRISON–CUMMINGS wedding *Narandera Ensign* 27 January 1905.

<sup>21</sup> Aboriginal Protection Board, *Narandera Argus* 15 May 1903; Presentation to Sgt. E. J. Cummings *Narandera Argus* 24 October 1904; Accident enquiry; Death Certificate Thomas David Ryan 7 March 1905 Reg No 1556 NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages (Ryan died in a fall from a bridge being constructed across the Murrumbidgee River).

<sup>22</sup> School Board, *Narandera Ensign* 12 December 1903.

<sup>23</sup> Death Certificate: James Langley BENNETT 3 September 1908 Reg No 9742 NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages.

<sup>24</sup> Murrumbidgee Shire Council, *Minute Book 1908*, entry for 15 January 1908.