

THE GREAT FAMILY MYSTERY: WHO WAS JAMES YAPPA?

To forget one's ancestors is to be a brook without a source, a tree without root.

Chinese Proverb

By Ken Swadling

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In 2006, my sister **Daphne** was chatting to her friends at a meeting of her quilting club in Rockhampton, Queensland, when another lady, **Margaret**, mentioned that her Scots great grandmother had married a Chinese man in Queensland in the 1860s. Daphne immediately stopped what she was doing: "So did *my* Scots great grandmother!" Given the overt racism towards Chinese in 19th Century Australia, Daphne and Margaret thought such a mixed marriage would have been very unusual. They immediately thought they must be descended from the same great grandmother.

After investigating both family trees, we found there was no relationship.

However, we were able to prove that not only did the two Scotswomen know each other in Gayndah, but our great grandmother had named one of her children after the other Scotswoman. And it doesn't end there: our great grandmother's granddaughter married Margaret's great grandmother's grandson.

There were at least five Scotswomen married to Chinese men in Gayndah at that time, one of whom witnessed our great grandparents' marriage. There is a certain amount of serendipity involved in genealogy but, even so, it was a remarkable coincidence to discover this information from a chance remark made 140 years after the event, leading to further revelations.

Our Great Grandmother was **Ellen Miller**, born in Girvan, Ayrshire, Scotland, on 19 May 1850.¹

She was a remarkable woman. She married twice, once for expedience and once for love; she raised twelve children, lived a long and productive life, and died as a matriarch revered by her many descendants. She was a pioneer, not only of colonial Queensland but also of multiculturalism in Australia, over a century before that concept existed and at a time when mixed-race marriages would have been unimaginable.

Ellen's family lost their livelihood in Ayrshire and emigrated to Queensland in 1863 as assisted migrants.² They left poverty behind only to find themselves just as badly off in their new home.

Ellen was indentured as a domestic servant to **James Yappa**, a Chinese boardinghouse keeper, in Gayndah. According to family lore, she married James in return for his settling a debt which her family owed.³ It's possible they may have had to repay part or all of their assisted passages to the Queensland government and the Parish of Girvan.

The assertion was often made that Chinese men bought their European wives. This may have been the result of misunderstanding: in European society, the bride's parents provided a dowry but in Chinese society the bridegroom gave gifts and money.⁴

Under Colonial law, foreigners couldn't own land or businesses in their own names unless they were naturalised as British citizens. Chinese men commonly ran businesses for which their British-born wives held the licence⁵ but we don't know if this applied to Ellen and James.

Because James was Chinese, he was regarded as heathen by Christians and he would never have been allowed to marry in a church. The marriage took place at the District Registrar's Office at Gladstone on 7 May 1866. James was 28; Ellen was 12 days short of her 16th birthday.⁶ Neither Ellen and James nor the two witnesses to the ceremony, **John O'Sing** and **Mary O'Sing**, could sign their names; they "made their marks" on the certificate.⁷ John was Chinese and Mary was Scottish.

James is an enigma. Any information we might have had about him has vanished following the deaths of his children and grandchildren. His marriage certificate gives his place of birth as Amoy (now Xiamen) but that may only have been his port of departure from China. We don't know his parentage or

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date and place of birth or how and when he arrived in or departed from Queensland. There are no known photographs of him, no family anecdotes have survived and there's no information on the public record apart from his marriage, naturalisation, electoral rolls and the births of his six children.⁸

It's possible that some of the children from Ellen's second marriage, to an Irishman, were embarrassed by their Chinese connections and took steps to erase James Yappa from memory.

There's a family anecdote concerning one of the daughters from Ellen's second marriage, who aspired to high social standing. She would invite the town's genteel ladies to social teas at her home. Her half-brother, **Willie Yappa**⁹, who of course had Eurasian features, used to wait until a function was well under way and the ladies were sipping their tea from dainty teacups and nibbling their cucumber sandwiches, then he would turn up in his working clothes and hammer on the front door, shouting, "Sis! Sis! How about a cuppa?"

James disappeared without trace by about 1891. No death certificate for him has been unearthed. No incoming or outgoing passenger lists can be found with his name on them. He isn't listed in the records of the Gayndah cemetery or any of the North and South Burnett District cemeteries, Maryborough cemeteries or Brisbane City Council cemeteries under the names of Yap, Yappa, Yab, Yaba or Yabba.

His name doesn't appear in the Australian Death Index. Searches of the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum and Goodna Asylum records were fruitless. When admitted to asylums, there was a great deal of secrecy and often the person was not publicly spoken of again but there would still be a death record in the Queensland State Archives.

The National Archives have no records for that period and the Queensland State Archives have no files relating to him. There are no inquests or coroner's reports and therefore nothing suspicious in his disappearance.¹⁰

Ellen and her children proudly lived in Gayndah and were often mentioned in the Burnett newspapers, so were fully accepted community members. There's no evidence of scandal or embarrassment. Ellen is listed in the 1890s Post Office Directories in Gayndah by herself, as a dressmaker.¹¹

When Ellen's and James's son **David** married **Lucy Blackwell** in 1897¹², newspaper notices mentioned him as James's son without describing James as deceased. Marriage notices of the day usually listed the father as deceased, where relevant.¹³

We know so little about James that we don't even know his real name. The Queensland State Archives provide typed transcripts of marriage certificates but in 2011 I requested a photocopy of the original certificate. If James's "mark" was actually his signature in Chinese script, we may have discovered his Chinese name. Alas, all signatories signed with an "X".

To a westerner, Chinese names are complicated. A common misconception is that Chinese names appear in the same order as European names: given names first, then family name. But the order for Chinese names is clan or family name, then one or (usually) two given names.

As a result of western misunderstanding, many Chinese Anglicised names became a western given name and one of their Chinese given names as their surname. Thus James's name might have been Yap Pa or Yap Ah. We don't know if Yap was his family name or if both names were his given names. Yap is one of about 100 common Chinese family names but there are many variations, such as Yab or Yip, depending on region and dialect. The way Yap is spelled in English isn't necessarily the way it's pronounced in Chinese and different dialects have different variations of the same words.

Chinese names are always pronounced in full, so it would have been easy for Yap Pa or Yap Ah to become Yappa. If his family name started with "J", it may have been corrupted into James as the closest corresponding sound in English.

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Also, "Ah" isn't really a name. Because all names have a meaning, the "Ah" is often inserted between the family and given names to avoid confusion: it indicates that the next word is part of the person's name. Thus if James's name was Yap Ah, there should have been another name after "Ah".¹⁴

There's a Yappar River, a tributary of the Norman River in Queensland's Gulf country.¹⁵ That area wasn't settled until the late 1860s, by which time James was a boardinghouse keeper in Gayndah so it's unlikely to be connected to him.

There's also a Yabba Creek, a tributary of the Mary River, close to Yabba Vale, south of Gympie.¹⁶ Yabba is a corruption of Yapper, which is the indigenous name for the currajong tree.¹⁷ So that scotches another false lead.

James must have left Ellen not once but twice, the first time in 1875,¹⁸ destination unknown. If he wasn't heard from for a continuous period of seven years, his death could legally be presumed. But if he re-appeared during that time, Ellen would still have been legally married to him.

In James's absence, Ellen formed a relationship with **Jacob Bunting**. Their first two children, **George** and **Susan Bunting**, were born on 10/3/1878¹⁹ and 20/6/1880²⁰ respectively.

James must have returned by June 1881 because his youngest child, **John Yappa**, was born on 6/3/1882²¹.

He must have left again by 1891 at the latest because Ellen and Jacob were married on 2 April 1898.²² She couldn't have married earlier without risking a charge of bigamy. So they waited for another seven years. This time James never returned.

Ellen and Jacob had six children, all born before they were able to marry. Their children's names were registered as Yappa (later changed to Bunting) because Ellen was still legally married to James.²³

She gave birth to 12 children in a little more than 22 years. She was pregnant for nine out of every 22 months, on average, between the

ages of 17 and 40 and she spent nine years, or almost 10% of her overall life, in pregnancy. These figures don't take into account any miscarriages or stillbirths which may have occurred. Her oldest child was born 22 years before her youngest. All her children lived to retirement age, which was uncommon enough to be remarkable for the times.

By 1940, when Ellen was 90, her descendants numbered 12 children, 46 grandchildren and 63 great grandchildren, totaling 121 direct descendants in her lifetime thus far.²⁴ In the remaining five years before she died, more grandchildren and great-grandchildren would have come into the world. More than seven decades later we will surely number in the many hundreds.

She was physically small but a very lively person, even in old age. She cooked, sewed and carried out normal domestic duties until shortly before she died.²⁵ She never lost her Scottish accent and possessed a keen wit. Her house was a regular meeting place for her descendants, all of whom she knew by name, and she was known to all as "Grandma". She is remembered as a friend to everyone in need.

She died five days before her 95th birthday on 14 May 1945, dearly loved and desperately missed by her extended family.²⁶

And James Yappa? The great family mystery remains unsolved.

Endnotes:

¹ *Ellen Miller b. 19/5/1850 and Baptized 23/5/1850: Microfilm OPR 594/3 Page 592.*

² *Passenger list, Rockhampton, Liverpool to Keppel Bay, 18/6/1863-13/10/1863.*

³ *Daphne Lorraine Gottke, formerly Sorensen, née Swadling, Ellen's great granddaughter through the Yappa line, always understood this to be the case, as did Robin Harvey, Ellen's great grandson through the Bunting line. These two branches of the family are widely separated and had no personal contact for decades, so this must be a long-standing perception.*

⁴ *Rolls, E., Sojourners: The Epic Story of China's Centuries-Old Relationship with Australia, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 1992, p.187.*

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⁵ Ibid., p.130.

⁶ Information from marriage certificate. (In England, the 1823 Marriage Act made the legal age for marriage 14 for boys and 12 for girls, with parental consent. That law remained unchanged until 1929, when the minimum age was raised to 16 for both sexes. Presumably, England's laws also applied to her colonies.)

⁷ Ellen Miller m. James Yappa, 7/5/1866, Qld marriage record, #C403 44.

⁸ Queensland Electoral Rolls Gayndah-Burnett Electoral District 1876 (Fiche #48), 1877 (Fiche #58), 1878 (Fiche #70) and 1879 (Fiche #82).

⁹ William Robert Yappa b. 11/8/1874, Qld birth record #C550.

¹⁰ Report of research by Ms Christina Ealing-Goldbold, State Library of Queensland Information Services, 10 November 2016.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² David Yappa m. Lucy Blackwell 23/1/1897, Qld marriage record, #C243.

¹³ Report of research by Ms Christina Ealing-Goldbold, State Library of Queensland Information Services, 10 November 2016.

¹⁴ Information provided by Sang Ye, Chinese-born husband of Susan Trevaskes, great great granddaughter of Ellen and James Yappa, 17/6/1995.

¹⁵ Hema Australia Easy Read Roads & 4WD Atlas, Map 16 G6.

¹⁶ Ibid., Map 8, A7.

¹⁷ Information supplied by Ms Rochelle Bull, Local History Officer, Gympie Regional Libraries.

¹⁸ Taking gestation periods into account, James couldn't have left before May 1875 because his second youngest child, Agnes Yappa, was born on 20/2/1876.

¹⁹ George Bunting, formerly Yappa, b. 10/3/1878, Qld birth record #78/000301.

²⁰ Susan Bunting, formerly Yappa, b. 20/6/1880, Qld birth record #80/000399.

²¹ John Henry Craig Yappa b. 6/3/1882, Qld birth record #16355/524.

²² Ellen Yappa, née Miller m. Jacob Bunting 2/4/1898, Qld marriage record #242/28848.

²³ All information on Jacob Bunting's children kindly provided by Robin Harvey, Ellen's and Jacob's great grandson.

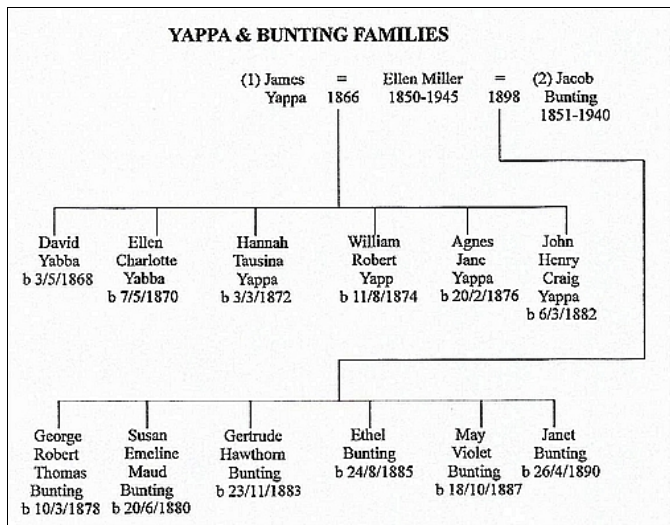
²⁴ Rockhampton Morning Bulletin, 30/12/1940.

²⁵ Letter from Woodleigh Yappa, great grandson of Ellen and James Yappa, to author 4/2/1980.

²⁶ Ellen Bunting, formerly Yappa, née Miller d. 14/5/1945, Qld death record #2109/8555. Ellen and Jacob are buried in the same grave - Section K, Plot/Niche 599 - at Maryborough Cemetery, Walker Street, Maryborough, Queensland.



Ellen and Jacob Bunting with their youngest child, Janet (Ownership: this is a long-held family photograph, provided by the author.)



This chart was devised by Ken Swadling ■