

Newcastle Family History Society: A Beginning and a Bible from Bendolba

By Noeline Kyle

It seems a long time ago now that we sat in my lounge room in Turnbull Street, Merewether (Newcastle, NSW) and began what is now a thriving, active and professional Newcastle Family History Society. Seems? It was a long time ago. I wrote the following to congratulate everyone in the Newcastle Family History Society for their 25th birthday in 2007. In these busy times it is great to think that so many people still do take the time to work for the community in the this wonderful field of history, family and heritage.

Looking at some of my early research into my mother's family, the Kirkpatricks, I can only wonder now at my naivety, vagueness and lack of proper research skills! Re-reading letters I wrote from Turnbull Street in 1979, it is patently clear that I needed a lot more knowledge, all of which came much later, to really do the job well. It took more than twenty years to write a biography of my great grandmother making that the focus of the Kirkpatrick family.¹ I was, of course, like everyone else working full-time, taking care of family, involved in other community activities and coping with all of the vagaries of modern life. It was not until I semi-retired from university work in 2001 that I was able to publish that first family history although the researching of it had been done over more than two decades. My mother's health had declined by then but she did see *Memories & Dreams* in print before she died in early 2005 although poor eyesight and a fading memory meant that she never read it. She carried it around however quite pleased with the photograph of herself in it as a young woman and very proud of the story of her grandmother and their Irish origins.

¹ Noeline Kyle, *Memories and Dreams: A Biography of Nurse Mary Kirkpatrick*, Mullumbimby, 2001.

That first meeting in my house at Turnbull Street grew out of a WEA course I had offered in 1982 and the students who came along made up the ranks of the first members of the Newcastle Family History Society. We had no idea then of how significant a path we were blazing but what we lacked in expertise we made up for in enthusiasm and energy. I enjoyed every moment of those first meetings as we moved on to make the society more organised and more substantial through the good work of Don Barker, Ted Harrison, Nancy Edge and many others.. We didn't know it then but all over Australia in city suburbs and country towns similar rookie family historians were gathering together to form new societies. It was, and we were, part of that great upsurge in family history research in the Western world and for many of us a new world of libraries, archives and later the internet, opened up to provide access to and integration with one of the most compelling life journeys we would ever have: a journey into the past, our family's past.

I left Newcastle in late 1983 and began my academic career at Wollongong in 1984 where I was, not surprisingly, part of the beginning of the Illawarra Family History Group. As a professional historian I also wanted to make a contribution to family history and support its further development. I published *Tracing Family History* in 1985 and *We Should've Listened to Grandma: Women and Family History* in 1988. But it was my growing interest in *writing* family history that began to absorb me from this time. With a colleague Ron King, I published *The Family History Writing Book* in 1993. There was not a great rush to buy any of these books and as perhaps it was not yet time for family historians to look up from that seductive research journey and think about writing. A move to Brisbane and a new position at QUT in 1991 brought me into contact with the Queensland Family History Society and it was here in the mid 1990s that I organised my first writing family history

interest group. Over the next ten years I concentrated on teaching, facilitating and supporting the more professional writing of family history through seminars, workshops, writing groups and publications. It has been a joy to talk to and learn from family historians along the way. And my latest books *Writing Family History Made Very Easy* and *How to Write and Publish Family Stories in 10 Easy Steps* have emerged from these years.²



And the Bible from Bendolba? Well, after 25 odd years of research into the Kyle family finally I found a family Bible. Only recently have I been able to complete any significant research on the Kyle family and on the two brothers, Michael and Henry Kyle, who eked out a precarious living in early Bendolba near Dungog. My original ancestor was Henry and he died in 1859. His wife Esther (nee Sherlock) re-married and left the district with their later family history now found elsewhere. Michael stayed in the district. He died at Lochinvar (1900) and is buried in the grounds of the Roman Catholic Church. His wife Mary Ann (nee Cassidy) died

² Noeline Kyle, *Writing Family History Made Very Easy*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2007. Noeline Kyle, *How to Write and Publish Your Family Story in 10 Easy Steps*, NewSouth Books, Sydney, 2011, available from New South Wales University Press at 20% discount, click on the link: <http://www.newsouthbooks.com.au/code13/p2751>

in 1923 at Hornsby although she lived much of her later life around the Port Stephens/Maitland district. I had a phone call from Ken Carlton, who grew up in Dungog, but who now lives in Lane Cove. He had the original Bible which had belonged to Michael Kyle. Someone had given the Bible to his son and luckily for me Ken was able to rescue it and through a series of phone calls finally found me. I was delighted to finally have something in my hand that actually belonged to that family.

There was nothing in the Bible to tell me anything that I do not already know. I have long ago obtained the birth, death and marriage certificates that have sorted out the lives of these early ancestors. But this large leather bound Bible dated 1847 and printed in Dublin tells me something about their faith and their need to have this heavy book and its stories with them at all times. I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been to carry at a time when most people walked or rode horses. But I can imagine that they sat at night by flickering lamplight and read its well-worn pages. Perhaps it was the only book they had. Henry and Michael Kyle were poor young Irishmen from pre-famine Roscommon. This Bible was likely their most precious possession.

I have written the Kyle family history since then,³ the story of the Bible the opening chapter. I am currently writing a memoir of childhood...the writing of two family histories, one from my mother's family and the other from my father's line, has opened up many other stories of women and children that I now want to write.

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³ Noeline Kyle, *Music, Myth & Memory: a Kyle Family History*, (with Joyce Lawson), 2008.