

The Mystery of THOMAS CHARLES DARRELLE – Solved!

By Liz McPherson

I have just smashed through a massive brick wall in my family history. Thanks to an enterprising author, John Griffiths, who decided to post his manuscript on the internet, a genealogist, Anne Rooks, who didn't give up and the wonders of modern science, I believe I have now found the true identity of my great-great grandfather.

This is a story of a child being taken from his mother by his father, a childhood in a so-called "industrial school" and hulk or training ship, and TWO name changes. All that remained was to prove the final link.....

Thomas Charles Darrelle

I have been tracing my family history for 32 years, since I was 18 years old. My great-great grandfather, Thomas Charles Darrelle, looked like an easy ancestor to trace. His surname, although often misspelt was at least a little unusual. From his son Reginald's 1894 birth certificate I learnt that 28 year old Thomas was born in Gravesend, England and that he married Charlotte Holding on 9th October 1893 in Melbourne, Victoria. I ordered the marriage certificate and it was straight-forward – Thomas, 28, an Agent, was born in Gravesend, England to Thomas Charles Darrelle (Snr) and Margaret Collins. His father's occupation was listed as "Actor". Both witnesses of the marriage were employees of the Central Methodist Mission of Melbourne. A hunt in the Victorian Death Indexes revealed that Thomas Charles Darrelle had died on 2nd January 1904. The certificate recorded that Thomas was aged 38 years and 9 months and had died of Phthisis. His children were recorded as Reginald Thomas aged 9 and Annie Margaret aged 7. The information regarding his parents names may have been copied from his marriage certificate, they were Thomas Charles Darrelle and Margaret Collins. The death certificate also revealed some other interesting information. It stated that Thomas had lived in Victoria for 31 years thereby arriving aged about 7 years in 1872 or 1873 and, I assumed, with his parents.

This is where the first course of bricks went up. I couldn't find the deaths of Thomas' parents in the Victorian Death Indexes. This didn't bother me too much because I believed I could look again later once I knew their father's names and hunt other states in Australia also. So now I turned to England. There was no trace of Thomas' birth, no trace of his parents' marriage, no trace of the family in the 1871 Census and no trace of them arriving in Australia. Where were they? The wall had increased in height quite quickly. I returned time and time again to the records, trying out all variations of spelling, trying to match up couples in marriage records which sounded similar and ordering incorrect certificates. Frustration would lead me to putting this family aside for sometimes months until I felt confident enough to have another attempt. Sometimes new records would be available and I would go through all the motions again to no avail. Thomas had no history before his marriage!

I had exhausted all traditional methods of genealogy and had to start thinking laterally. I turned to Thomas' daughter Annie who had married a Belgian sailor by the name of Auguste Ackien and migrated to the USA around 1920. The 1930 US Census indicated they were in Pierce, Washington State at the time. I Googled the name Ackien with Pierce and found Bob Ackien, a teacher at a local technical college. I emailed him with the hope of a connection and was successful. Bob was Annie's grandson. Unfortunately Bob did not know much of the family history but he was able to send me some photos of his grandmother and a beautiful one of Charlotte with both Reginald and Annie as small children. I had never seen a photo of Charlotte before. Thinking laterally had at least reaped some rewards!

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Finding further Darrelle family members had inspired me to investigate Thomas once more and I earnestly searched the available records again but to no avail. Nothing seemed to come even close to what I was looking for. I couldn't understand why I could not find even one of the records relating to the family.

One day I was pottering around and decided to Google the name "Thomas Darrell". I came across the manuscript "A History of David Brown" by John Griffiths posted on the web the previous month and the words jumped out at me – "family recollection suggests the boy was known as Thomas Darrell."

Luke Thomas Funnell, alias Fennell, alias Thomas Darrell

One chapter of the manuscript told the story of Luke Thomas Funnell born 3rd March 1858 to Luke and Mary Elizabeth (nee Brown) Funnell who had married in Sydney, New South Wales on 17th January 1857. It seems Luke Funnell (Snr) left Sydney in 1861, taking his son with him and travelling to Wangaratta in Victoria, where he changed his name to Louis Fennell. He seems to have passed off his son as his nephew and called him Thomas Fennell. Louis Fennell bigamously married Louisa Dive in Wangaratta in 1862 and they had eleven children.

The connection between Luke Funnell and Louis Fennell had been painstakingly researched and investigated by Anne Rooks, a descendant of Louis and Louisa. The research took her five years and is too extensive to explain here. It is interesting reading in her self published family history "He Came on a Bullock Dray ... To Start a New Life – The Family History of Louis Fennell (Funnell)." Suffice to say that the more Ann looked into the stories of Luke and Louis the more evidence there was to deduce that they were one and the same person.

But what of the little boy Luke Thomas Funnell or Thomas Fennell?

The local newspaper "The Federal Standard" in Chiltern reported on Friday February 15th 1867 that Thomas Fennell had attended the Wangaratta Police Court on Tuesday 12th February 1867 where his "uncle", Lewis Fennell, said he could not keep him from stealing and asked that his nephew be sent to the Industrial School. It was later agreed to send Thomas to the Industrial school for a period of 5 years and that his uncle was to pay 6 shillings and 6 pence per week for his keep.

The Children's Registers of State Wards in the Colony of Victoria – Vol 1 Pg 605, No.2197 states;

Fennell, Thomas - Born 1858, Victoria. Church of England
Able to read and write indifferently
Committed 13/2/1867 by Wangaratta Branch
Admitted 23/2/1867 to Princes Bridge
(Receiving House) Term – 5 years
Cause – neglected
Father: Luke Fennell, Wheelwright (Dead) and mother dead
Health good and vaccinated against Small Pox
To Sunbury Industrial School on 25/2/1867
To Nelson [a training ship] on 14/10/1868
Licensed out to Mr. R. Singleton, Civil Servant, Malvern,
Victoria on 22/12/1871. Discharged on 6/9/1872
Recommitted 6/9/1872 for 2 years

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The Children's Registers of State Wards in the Colony of Victoria – Vol 8 Pg 135, No.6416 states;

Fennell, Thomas Recommended 6/9/1872 by Melbourne Branch for 2 years.
 To Mr. R. Singleton, Civil Servant, Malvern
 Expiration of term – 6/9/1874

[At the time there was a Robert Singleton living in Malvern who was Secretary of Railways.]

The Sunbury Industrial School where Thomas spent most of 1867-8 did not have a very good reputation. It was overcrowded and it was reported that every child was infested with scabies. Mortality in the Industrial schools was recorded as eleven percent in 1865 which had improved to seven percent in 1866. Newspapers at the time report "ravages of eye diseases". Being transferred to the training ship Nelson in October 1868 may have been a fortunate move for Thomas.

The Argus (Melbourne newspaper) reported on Saturday 23rd December 1871 the "Speech Day on Board the Nelson". The article described the annual school examination of the boys of the industrial and training school on board the Nelson which had taken place the day before (the day Thomas Fennell was licensed out to Mr. R. Singleton).

There were 70 or 80 boys in the third and fourth classes. The article noted that the boys "were all dressed in their best uniform, and generally had a bright and wholesome look about them". The boys put on displays of reading, grammar and even singing. The fourth class understood "what was meant by latitude and longitude, and its power of computing time at different points by longitudinal differences." It was evident that the boys had received a variety of education as "The fourth class was also very good in questions of superficial and cubic measurement, and by its application of mental arithmetic to the solution of cost, as governed by fractional quantities." They had received religious instruction during the year and had also put on a display of their shoemaking and tailoring. Thomas must have been quite a student as a T. Fennell was one of four boys in the fourth class to receive a prize.

But this is the last we hear of Thomas Fennell in official records. Ann Rooks had contact with a grandson of Louis Fennell who claimed that the child used the surname Darrell. Interestingly, a George Darrell was a famous actor and playwright in Australia during the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s. Is this where the name came from and could it be why my Thomas Darrelle named his father as an actor?

DNA Testing

So I was left with two Thomas Darrell(e)s - one with no past and one with no future. I believed the only way to prove the connection was through DNA testing but it would not be able to be a Y-chromosome test as my father's mother was the only child of Reginald Darrelle – therefore breaking the chain of Y chromosomes. I then discovered Autosomal DNA testing which tests genes on both the mother and father's sides therefore not requiring a continuous run of male or female ancestors. However, at the time testing was still quite expensive and as I would require my father and also a descendant of the Funnell/Fennell family to be tested the cost was going to be prohibitive.

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I continued researching Thomas Darrelle in the hope of finding more information about him in new records – but no luck. I was also aware of my father's increasing age and the need to get the most potent DNA sample possible. Fortunately, the cost of DNA tests has gradually reduced and I decided it was now or never. I had my father tested in September and approached Anne Rooks for the best possible match from the Funnell/Fennell family and came up with Ronald Fennell, a great grandson of the common ancestor Luke Funnell. Ronald was more than happy to participate and assist in solving the mystery.

Today I decided to check the data base and Ronald's results were in! I started scanning down the pages of matches, looking for my father's name, Page 1 – no luck, Page 2 – oh dear, not as close a match as I thought, Page 3 – oh no, where do I go from here, Page 4 – damn, I will have to start researching Thomas all over again, Page 5 – Scream! There is my father's name as a match to Ronald with the most likely relationship as 3rd to 5th cousin. I burst into tears and start sobbing uncontrollably – 32 years of research and I finally know the story of Thomas. I am a blubbing mess, bursting with happiness. The wonders of modern science have proven what before was just hearsay in my family folklore. Now, for a weekend updating my family tree!!

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Sources

A History of David Brown (1750-1836) and Family by John Griffiths
<http://www.davidbrown1801nsw.info>

He Came on a Bullock Dray...to Start a New Life – The Family History of Louis Fennell (Funnell) by Anne Rooks (self published)