

### Thomas Eather & Sarah McAlpin

Sarah had come to this wild and lonely but strikingly beautiful place just six years after the voice and footsteps of the intrepid explorer John Howe had disturbed the silence of these broad expanses. It was inhabited then only by tribes of Aborigines carrying spear and boomerang. To her was awarded the honour of being the first white woman to travel the precipitous and awe-inspiring track across the ranges from the Hawkesbury to settle at the Bulga.

At Saint Matthew's Church, Windsor, in 1824, Sarah McAlpin had married Thomas Eather. It was a double wedding with Thomas' elder brother Robert and his bride Mary Lynch. Sarah was born on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1805 in Sterling, Scotland to Peter McAlpin, who had been a Sergeant in the Army, but having been invalided out was now a blacksmith. Her mother was Elizabeth Elton. The McAlpin family decided to immigrate to Australia, arriving on the 'General Graham' in 1812. Their Scottish born children were Sarah, Peter and William, but Catherine joined that at Windsor in May 1814.

Thomas Eather, born at Windsor on 1 October 1800 with his twin brother Charles, was the son of English parents Thomas Heather and Elizabeth Lee. Their surname eventually became Eather. Others of their family were Ann, Robert, Charlotte, John, Rachel and James.

Young Thomas learnt the trade of shoemaker but was interested in a life on the land. In 1826 he left a man in charge of his shoemaking business in Richmond while he looked at possibilities on Saint Patrick's Plains.

Thomas Eather was accompanied by Sarah's brother William Glass McAlpin, then a boy of 16 and an Aboriginal guide. Sarah put them up a fine lunch, shed a few tears over them and off they went. The journey was made on foot from Richmond through Colo, Putty and Howe's Valley, leading a reluctant bullock as a pack animal. In some places the track was so steep that he had to be relieved of his burden and the packs man-handled down. Delighted with the rich fertile land at the Bulga, they retraced their steps to Richmond.

In the same year, 1826, they returned, Thomas Eather bringing his family. Although horses were extremely scarce and expensive at this time, bullocks were preferred as they were safer. Their hooves were cloven and could grip the steep ground where horses could slide. A riding bullock was found for Sarah, who rode holding her small son Thomas in front of her with one hand, her courage with the other. Her husband walked and led the bullock. William McAlpin again made the tiring tramp, this time with young Billy Freeman, aged 14. Some packs were carried on their backs and on two pack bullocks.

A number of Aborigines and dogs completed the party which started the one hundred mile trek. Marked trees were the only guide they had, but the Aborigines were masters of the bush. They had trade routes right through the mountains where they traded with other tribes for such things as the best stone for axe heads and flints. Aborigines acted as guides for many explorers and travellers in the Colony. Their devotion to duty, their

courage in dealing with strange tribes, was spoken in the highest terms by their leaders. Pioneer dogs went along to give warning of dangers on the track and to work stock on their arrival at the Bulga.

At last the party arrived at the foot of the Bulga mountains. On the western side of where a creek from the Inlet runs into Wollombi Brook they made camp. Later a substantial slab dwelling was erected to replace a bark hut. This was the first Eather home which they named 'Richmond'. Sarah was to know the many privations of the lonely bush. She could tell some interesting but not always joyous experiences of those bygone days.

When the Eathers arrived there was a camp of 300 Aborigines near where they settled. These rightful people of the land proved extremely helpful to the pioneers once they trusted them, as far as they could trust anyone of white skin.

Thomas took up a clearing lease. He was also overseer for his sister Ann's husband, Joseph Onus, who was running cattle on his large land grants along the creek. The Eathers typified the kind of settlers who were prepared to face the future in a practically unknown district, and to seek life's joys and sorrows together.

A daughter Elizabeth had been born to Thomas and Sarah on Christmas Day 1825. It was decided that she was too young to be taken to the Bulga, so she was left with family at Windsor. Sarah missed her baby but she had young Thomas, born 27 September, 1824. Fear of sickness or accident was always with her. Then on 25 October, 1827, at isolated Bulga, she gave birth to Charles. Annie arrived on 18 August, 1829. Elizabeth by this time had been collected from Windsor. Other children were born later at the Hawkesbury.

Thomas	b. 27.09.1824	d. 06.04.1909	m. Eliza Crowley
Elizabeth	b. 25.12.1825	d. 05.05.1884	m. 1 Thomas Onus, 2. H. Rutter
Charles	b. 25.10.1827	d. 02.11.1892	m. 1. Eliza Hough, 2. Martha M. Ridge
Annie	b. 18.08.1829	d. 11.07.1918	m. Edwin Young
Peter	b. 19.02.1831	d. 01.02.1911	m. Charlotte Eather Williams
William	b. 08.08.1832	d. 1904	m. Ann Senior
Sarah	b. 25.08.1834	d. 19.02.1926	m. William Eaton
Charlotte	b. 13.10.1836	d. 23.12.1918	m. Laban Thomas Guest
Robert	b. 26.11.1839	d. 16.11.1839	
James	b. 13.12.1840	d. 19.09.1934	m. 1. Victoria Pryke, 2. Isabella Nowland
Susannah	b. 09.06.1842	d. 19.08.1848	
John Rowland	b. 14.11.1843	d. 15.01.1923	m. Hannah Ann Crothers
Catherine	b. 11.06.1846	d. 26.10.1928	m. William Henry Taylor

The days of the large land grants were coming to an end. On 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1829 Thomas Eather sent a memorial to Governor Darling requesting a grant of land. He stated that he was on a clearing lease, had been at Wollombi Brook for four years, had a wife and four children and employed four free servants. In March 1830 he sent another memorial.

By 1829 Thomas was running 150 horned cattle and two mares on a squatterage on the Liverpool Plains occupied by his brother Robert. These were probably cattle and their increase given to him by Joseph Onus. Until the 1850's stockmen were mostly given cattle and rations instead of wages.

On 15<sup>th</sup> March 1831 Thomas Eather was given authority to take possession of a 100 acre land grant on Wollombi Brook at the Bulga. He had already completed the conditions required on his clearing lease, leased it to a tenant, and moved his family back to Richmond to make his headquarters there. After survey by Assistant Surveyor Dixon, Thomas received the deeds of his land grant dated 23 April, 1841.

Thomas Eather took up a holding next to his brother Robert of 16,000 acres which was located on the Namoi River six miles east of Baan Baa. It was known as 'Henriendi'. Thomas' second son Charles, born at the Bulga in 1827, was sent to Henriendi in 1841 and twenty years later was given the station.

Due to disastrous droughts, Charles became bankrupt in 1871. Henriendi passed into the possession of his elder brother Thomas, the little boy who had ridden the bullock to Bulga in 1826.

This Thomas married Eliza Crowley at Richmond on 27 May 1843. She was the daughter of John Crowley and Jane Charlotte Bryant. After their marriage they came to Richmond at the Bulga to live. Thomas added to his father's land by lease and purchase. He farmed, ran cattle and grew fruit.

In the 1860's he sold wine grapes to Alexander Munro at his famous Bebeah vineyard on Maitland Road for six pounds per ton, cash on delivery. Of course Munro gave him a few bottles of the best to take home with him. On the road home this summer day, Thomas looked upon the wine not wisely but too well, which was his undoing. Eliza had to help him out of the cart. After she had lectured him on Munro's immoral wine trade and threatened to leave him, he did the only thing he could - he went back to growing table grapes.

Thomas and Eliza and their descendants moved between Bulga and Henriendi. Trips between the two centres took two weeks each way in a spring cart, braving the terrain and threat of bushrangers.

As the result of a petition, the first Post Office at Bulga was established at 'Richmond' in February 1878 with Thomas Eather in charge.

John William, the eldest child of Thomas and Eliza, born 8 March 1845, was the only son to reach manhood. Peter Mack and Alexander George and a sister Mary Jane, died in childhood. Jane Charlotte married Samuel Partridge and Sarah Elizabeth became Mrs Ashton Clark.

John William Eather married Harriet Clark, a daughter of Catherine and James Swales Clark of the Bulga on 31 January 1872. They lived at Meerea which in Aboriginal means beautiful mountain. Their home was a large rambling slab and weatherboard structure built in three sections.

Harriet was a skilled horsewoman. Riding side-saddle she could jump a horse over a fence with a baby in her arms. Aboriginals taught her to swim underwater right across the Cockfighter Creek. She understood their language and could converse with them.

Aboriginal women showed Harriet how to make dilly-bags, not that she ever wanted to do it: Instructions First catch a possum, then kill it. Put it out in the sun to ripen. Then the fur will easily pull off in handfuls. Make the fur into a thread by rolling it on a bare thigh. Then weave the thread into a dilly-bag.

Kerosene tins were much prized by the dark people to make buckets. The women collected the lids. When they went hunting they would bang them together like cymbals to frighten wallabies. As they bounded from their cover, the men would kill them with a boondi (a tree root with a knob on it) and break all the bones. Their accuracy and power was impressive. The young men pulled form for the Eathers. They then had great fun throwing corn cobs using kerosene tin lids as shields.

Children of the marriage of John William and Harriet were Reginald, Arthur, Aimee, Gerald, Alexander, Ivo, Hope, Elizabeth, John Thomas and Laura.

Reginald married Harriet Maria Cousins, a great grand-daughter of Alexander Munro. Arthur's wife was Jean Pankhurst and Ivo married her sister Grace. Alexander's wife was Millicent Sylvester. Laura was the only girl to marry, being Mrs Alfred McMullin. The unmarried daughters lived at the old home on Meerea and Arthur built a new house there. Alex had a new home on Richmond.

Gerald, at age 32, met with a tragic accident in November 1911. He was chasing a fox at Henriendi when his horse fell (as a result of stepping in a hole HJB), throwing him heavily against a tree. His body was brought back to Bulga to be buried at St. Mark's churchyard. Ivo Eather enlisted in World War 1 and was crippled by a shot through his pelvic bone. John was wounded on the side of his head by shrapnel, but apart from this he arrived home safely from the war. His mother knew that he would come home because she saw a vision of his funeral, and that funeral was at Bulga. But fate was yet to play its hand. John Thomas Eather was caught in the belt of a threshing machine at Meerea in June 1920. He was only in the 28<sup>th</sup> year of his life.

In the year 1944 there was a partnership division of properties, Henriendi, Milgarra, Meerea, Dural and Harparary owned by Reginald, Arthur, Alexander, and Ivo. Arthur, his wife and sons Jim, David and Archie left Bulga to live on Milgarra at Bunnan.

Meerea passed into the ownership of Alexander and was worked in partnership with his nephew Ian, whom he had reared. On Alexander's death in 1959, he left Meerea and Richmond to Ian. Ian, the son of Reginald Eather, was born at Henriendi. His mother died in 1924 when he was three years old. Alexander and his wife who were childless,

took him to live with them at Bulga. The older children, Jack, Jean, Molly and Betty stayed with their father.

Since 1944 the use of Meerea changed from just grazing cattle to citrus growing, table grapes, lucerne, sheep for wool and wine grapes. the latter became the main source of income.

During the year 1995 Ian sold Meerea to Mr John Peschar, a Newcastle businessman. Ian and his wife formally Betty Teelow from South-West Queensland, had reached the age where pressure of work had become too great. Their sons were settled in other work and could not take on the day to day running of a property.

It was extremely sad for the Eathers to leave Meerea. Ian and Betty's children were the sixth generation on the original Eather land, and Ian will always feel sadness that it fell to him to sell it. They then purchased a new home near Maitland.

Ian's son Rhys, who is (a) qualified wine maker, suggested they form a family wine company, purchasing fruit to make wine under the label 'Meerea Park'. Son Garth, is the promotions man for the company. This wine has enjoyed great success, winning gold medals and trophies at major wine shows. It is now sold all over Australia and six overseas countries.

It gives Ian great joy for the world to be reminded of the wine making success of his Great-Great-Grandfather, Alexander Munro of Bebeah. The Eather's very top quality wine is marketed under the Alexander Munro label made by Meerea Park. Ian is sure Alexander Munro would approve of Rhys and the honour he is paying his memory.

The name Meerea is still an Eather family name and lives on, becoming known all over the world.

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These photocopied hand-written notes were given to me by Jenny Scholes of Singleton when Mum (Heather Jean Eather Barton) and I met with Jenny in Singleton sharing family history. I have typed them today to preserve and share the history.

25<sup>th</sup> June, 2014

Heather Lynette Barton May