



Past Life in Greek Street, Glebe

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Today Greek Street, always narrow, functions primarily as a one-way thoroughfare. The area from Greek Street to Francis Street lies under the Broadway Centre and the northern end has renovated warehouses, a church of Scientology and some unit development. In the nineteenth century, however, although it was in the heart of the working class end of Glebe, it had a vigorous economic and community life. This came into being in the 1840s. The earlier sale of church lands in this area of Glebe to John Hickey Grose and others in 1828 had not been immediately exploited probably because the issue of transferring ownership from the crown to church and school was not properly clarified until 1842 when ratifying legislation was passed.¹ Division into allotments of a suitable size for 'first rate houses' with frontages to the streets of 25 or 33 feet, had taken place and one or two lots had probably been already sold. The title in 1842 was presented as 'a purchase from the Church and Crown'.

Although the country was sinking into its worst depression yet, leading to the insolvency of men of all ranks — professional, merchant, tradesmen, artisans and unskilled labourers - it was a good moment to sell this land.² The City of Sydney boundaries had finally been set and did not include these areas, which would therefore not be liable for city rates. On the other hand the business centre of the city was moving south and getting from a residence here to work in the city would take, the advertisements optimistically suggested, ten minutes walk. Who could resist sites 'surrounded by excellent roads...there are neither fields, hills nor bad roads to pass'³ Prudently there was no mention of sewers or floods. Some of the allotments had frontages both on Greek and Francis Street giving a

double length suitable for some industrial or business use. Some of them also had wells. Development came slowly. Low's directory for 1844-5 shows only 40 dwellings in the whole of Bishopsgate but bankruptcy gave an edge to the sales.

The undeveloped blocks were joined on the auctioneer's podium by blocks with houses already erected and blocks already sold. In Greek street section 4 lot 3 was 'at the risk' of Mr James John Wood; section 4 lot 3 ditto Mr Michael Corregan' section 4 Lot 14 ditto Mr John Freeman. In 1845 there were still about 60 lots to sell without reserve in Bishopsgate including some that had been purchased but evidently not fully paid. The puff spoke of 'the astonishing improvements already made by former purchasers, as the best proof that an industrious man cannot fail to do well if he lays out his money on that spot, where he can erect a comfortable dwelling at very little expense, and always be able to attend to his work in the City'.

By 1850 a few modest houses had been erected in Greek Street and were being offered for sale. Advertised as : ' A new brick-built house, containing three rooms, with handsome verandah, neatly palisaded, and kitchen at the back. No. 2.-New brick-built house, two rooms, neat verandah, kitchen at the back, the above houses stand upon an area of land 33 by 89, affording thereby every accommodation for extending the out-buildings, whilst the rents are 5s. per week each.'⁴ The sale was initially private but eventually by auction. Three rooms plus kitchen seems to have been the norm for houses in the street but by 1849 some of the properties were being specially erected for particular trades, like bakers and butchers, or structured for business that required horse and wheeled transport and these were often larger. One such advertisement offers 'One House containing four rooms, two on the ground floor, and two above, with large well of water. Also, one small House of two rooms, with large convenient bake-house, capable of baking 4 cwt.

¹ For these legal issues see Gordon W Beckett *A Population History Of Colonial New South Wales: The Economic Growth Of A New Colony* Colonial Press 2013 esp p125

² For an account of this see Max Solling, 'Bishopsgate Estate 1841-1861', *Leichhardt History Journal*, no 1, 1971, pp 14-17 and his other studies of Glebe

³ *The Australian* 5July 1843 p3 and *Sydney Morning Herald* 5,6,7,8,July 1843p 3

⁴ *Sydney Chronicle* 30 Dec 1846

and stabling at the back for three horses, it is bounded upon one side by Mr. Kelly's, and on the left by that of Mr. Pagan's property⁵ Rents were closely related to the number of rooms, four rooms commanding 8s and six ten. Stabling was also emphasised.⁶

James Ellis, an engineer, had a factory on the corner in which he produced such things as sausage machines. There were also small shops and by 1850 shoemakers and soapmakers, omnibus and cab owners, new fangled photographers, as well as the inevitable pubs. Its disadvantages were becoming apparent. Terence McArdell's soap and candle factory produced unpleasant smells although Greek Street did not harbour the really offensive manufactories.

Jevons, dividing the society of Sydney into three parts from aristocrats(1) to labourers (3) described the whole area, as

'Bishopthorpe is a newly build second class addition to this part; ⁷. Further on he says to the West of Bay Street this land rises and a marked & agreeable change takes place. Numerous small cottages or well built rows of small houses chiefly of brick or stone are here found. They are pretty newly built and are not unduly crowded while the main streets or at least the corners are occupied by substantial built shops of 2 or 3 stories. Bay Street is wide & well [Page 33] placed for the limited traffic which must pass along it. Of the remainder In proceeding further away from Sydney the appearance of the Glebe still improves. Further there are innumerable small cottages of wood or brick probably built by the inmates, and though very little durable still for the present unobjectionable. Near the angle of Parramatta & Glebe roads is a slight hollow rather densely covered by rows of small houses. Some of these are of third class rank but the rest of the Glebe belongs to the second with the exception of a certain number of first class houses bordering the Glebe Road.

The area had not escaped rates for long. The local Council established in 1859 now had to face

the problems and ongoing costs of infrastructure. In 1860 the culverts in the area were unfit '(from want of capacity) to convey the large body of water which, flows from the University pond during heavy rains. Estimate of the cost of enlarging the same to the necessary size ... Calverts in Grose and Greek street, £42 5s. 3d. each. Francis-street, £52 17s 2d, and Glebe-street, £45. total cost, £182 8a. 8d. 4. ⁸ The streets still had allotments available – in June 1870 one Alexander Dean bought some at 10 s and 11s per foot. ⁹

The Sydney Morning Herald might denigrate the streets and 'undrained, unlevelled, unshaped ways' using the standard slum terms Dickens had made popular but this was an exaggeration. It was an area for the skilled artisan and small business person many of them recent Scottish or Irish migrants who continued to worship in the form of church they had known all their lives. The Catholics like Peter Henratty and John Augustine O'Donoghue contributed quite substantially to the fund for building St Mary's Cathedral.¹⁰ The Scots went to Lang's Scots Presbyterian church for baptisms, weddings and funerals. From the 1860s some of the longer term inhabitants, notably Peter Hanratty and James Ellis took an interest in and played some part in local Council business – calling meetings in their houses to discuss issues.¹¹ They were supporters of David Buchanan, particularly in his time as a protectionist. They were 'working men' but they identified themselves as middle class and would have applauded the view that 'they were of the middle class — it had not been their fortune to be brought up in sloth under academic bower, and whatever knowledge they have acquired was by their own Industry, and they had come out here to labour and do the best they could for themselves.'¹²

From the late 1840s onwards it was a close-knit community and its key figures such as James Ellis and John Martin, many of whom owned several properties in the street, lived there for decades and knew one another intimately. Often there was more than one branch of the family – Mary Ann Martin the greengrocer for example, was related to John, and there were various Ellises. Marriages reinforced these links. When

⁵ Sydney Morning Herald 19 June 1849 p4

⁶ Sydney Morning Herald 24 Jan 1870 p8

⁷ William Stanley Jevons Remarks upon the Social Map of Sydney 1854-8 (album view, State Library Digital Order No. a1760010

⁸ Sydney Morning Herald 7 May 1860 p5

⁹ Sydney Morning Herald 11 June 1870 p7

¹⁰ Freeman's Journal (Sydney, NSW : 1850 – 1932 6 September 1873 p14

¹¹ Sydney Morning Herald 27 November 1862

¹² The Australian 21 May 1840

an indignant Peter Henretty warned in the Herald that no-one should employ or harbour his two apprentices who had absconded they were clearly the sons of his neighbours, Fagan and Munro. When a lad of fourteen tried to pass a base half crown in Mrs Reed's shop her husband had no trouble in finding his father. It was only in desperation that John Martin in 1880 inserted a public notice in the Herald saying he would not be responsible for the debts of his wife Isabella. The inhabitants seemed to observe other conventions of the day – putting notices of weddings and funerals in the appropriate newspapers consulting lawyers and making wills.

It is a fight over a will that best illuminates the life of a community in which many of the witnesses had lived for decades. The testator was John McDonald, a carpenter by trade and at the time of his death on 10 September 1886 at least eighty and probably 83 years old. Much earlier he had built five houses in Greek street that brought him in £2-10-00 a week and had lived in one of them with his second wife Catherine for at least forty years. He had not worked as a carpenter for the last thirty. He was not the most desirable of neighbours, one woman describing him as 'the terror of the neighborhood'. He was seen as a mean man who 'would turn a halfpenny over several times before spending it;' but lavish when on a drunken spree. Judge Windeyer in summarising the case said 'There was ... much evidence of a reliable character to show that he was at times a complete nuisance to his neighborhood by his drunken habits and bad language, and that he was at times a terror to it by his violence and by threatening mischief with a knife, whilst at others he was the laughing stock and butt of children in the streets.'¹³

In 1879 he had made a will basically leaving all he had to his wife's daughter Margaret. This had taken very high-class legal services. He had gone to the most prestigious lawyers (and distant Glebe neighbours) Allen and Allen, instructing Arthur Allen. Unusually, it was prepared by counsel and the executors were Margaret's husband William Kerridge and James Spring. Although he told people he was leaving his property to his wife and Maggie the will itself did not mention his wife.

Around 1883 his wife was living with her daughter and was evidently incapable of intelligible speech. He for a time lived there too but developed a suspicion that his stepdaughter

and her husband were trying to poison him and returned to Greek Street where for a time he lived in a shed, which was draughty and uncomfortable, in a four poster bed under which ran a sewer. The neighbours did not show any signs of liking him and clearly thought his memory was failing, but they looked after him as he grew more feeble and apparently had long conversations with him. For a time he lived with Mr and Mrs Murphy who were his tenants before going to one of his other houses. His stepdaughter gave up attempting to visit him after he abused her, but her sons, who called him grandfather, still went and took him food she had prepared. This he would not eat – but he passed it on to Mrs Murphy's children who suffered no ill effects. He also visited his wife but was heard to say they won't kill you.

In 1884 Mrs Murphy called Dr McKellar to see him and McKellar tried to disabuse him of the idea that his stepdaughter was trying to poison him describing his as 'a wicked old man' but no-one could dissuade him and he became fixated on cutting his stepdaughter off from her promised inheritance. He suggested to Mrs Murphy that he leave it to her, but she did not think he was of a fit state. Another person who came to see him from her own residence a mile away and later organised for 'a little girl' to look after him was Alice, the widow of his deceased carpenter friend Mr Watson, who had been his associate in all his sprees and she was less disturbed by question of fitness.

On September 4 1885 McDonald went to Allen and Allen and after obtaining advice that he did not need to have possession of the older will to make a new one, one of the clerks there drew it up on the spot and had it witnessed the same day. The clerks involved claimed that he seemed both mentally and physically alert and they had no qualms about the new will that left everything to Alice Watson. He then lived for a further year before dying on 10 September 1886 by which time Alice Watson had moved into the house. On his death bed he refused to see Mrs Kerridge. The Kerridges and Alice Watson then went to law over the property. Catherine McDonald's death in 1887 removed one problem. The case was first heard in the Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction in March 1887 before Sir William Manning who decreed for the Kerridges. Alice Watson appealed and it ended in the Supreme court in February 1888 before Justice Windeyer and Justice Foster.

The account the court determined was straightforward. Until about 1842 he was

¹³ The case is given in great detail in *Sydney Morning Herald* 9 and 10 March 1887 pp7,9

unmarried and he then married Catherine who was a widow with a thirteen year old daughter, Margaret, who subsequently in 1856 aged 19 married William Kerridge a widower of 33. McDonald 'gave her away' and was apparently satisfied with the union even though the wedding took place in the Church of England. It was claimed, but not proved, that the money for building the houses had come from loans from Catherine. Certainly the unrelated executor of the first will testified that McDonald thought 'Maggie had the most right to it' – which was corroborated by other residents.

The Supreme Court, after hearing all the evidence again, agreed with William Manning's conclusions although not for quite the same reasons. In particular they 'entirely [acquitted] the plaintiff, Mrs. Watson, of exercising any undue influence over the testator, and [saw] no grounds for even suspecting that when performing such kindly services as she rendered to the testator about the time he made his will she made any use of her opportunities to improperly bias his mind in her favour to the disadvantage of those in whose favour he had already made a previous will.' They put remarkable limits on what coercion meant in law citing various legal precedents and especially Cockburn to assess the degree of mental power that was necessary. As, however, he was, they judged, clearly suffering from an insane delusion and his apparent sanity was misleading.

The Kerridges however had not won entirely. The costs of the appeal and also all the costs of the suit had to be paid out of the estate. What this left is unclear. What we should also notice, however, is that the story accepted by the court omitted a great deal. John McDonald was a very common name — there were twenty in the lists of professions in the 1880 Sands Directory — but as it happens we can identify this one through his second marriage. He was one of a large number of McDonalds who came as John Dunmore Lang's bounty migrants on the "Midlothian" that sailed from the port of Uig, in Loch Snizort in Skye on 7th August, 1837. At that time he had a wife, Margaret (nee McQueen) and five children and was described as a stockman. When they arrived they went to Dunmore and in 1840 Margaret gave birth to another child and both died. In 1841 John was still at Dunmore, in August signing the petition the Highlanders brought against Lang. He then must have returned to Sydney where in 1842 he married the recently widowed Catherine Buchanan (nee Lamont) at the Scots Kirk in Sydney. At that time she had two children, Hugh and Margaret. McDonald was forty and his oldest son Roderick was 21 and his oldest

daughter Rachel nineteen both of them old enough to fend for themselves, as, at a pinch, could his twins, William and John who were fifteen although Mary and Ann were still young as were Catherine's children. In the next ten years they nearly all married at the Scots Kirk. Rachel married John King in 1844, Roderick Margaret Fraser soon after and then in 1851 Hugh Buchanan married his stepsister Ann and John McDonald, Frances Moore.

The younger John stayed in Glebe but died at 58 just before his father in 1885 and Hugh Buchanan was also dead by the mid 1880s. Where the others were and whether they had offspring is less clear but their existence may explain why the 1879 will had to be phrased with such care. It is noticeable that in 1904 there was still a McDonald living at 19 Greek Street, when his wife killed herself by imbibing carbolic acid. The law about testaments in the late 19th century might give the testator almost unlimited power to bequeath property where they chose but there was a strong legal expectation that they should take into account 'natural affection and the claims of relationships.'

There is one further possibility. Max Solling has referred to the many different accents that would have been heard in the area but the migrants on the *Midlothian* were Gaelic speakers. Some had no English. On the ship and when they first landed in Sydney services were held for them in Scots Gaelic and the practice continued where they settled near Dunmore. Several of the Irish in Greek Street were similarly migrants from areas like Donegal where Irish was commonly spoken — and the two languages while distinct were intelligible one to the other. Although there was only a tiny minority of Gaelic speakers in Sydney, did McDonald and his wife talk to each other and to friends in Greek Street and round about in a language other than English?