

Showdown at the Blue Bell Inn

by James Michael Fleming

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This story was my entry in the
2020 Croker Prize
essay competition run by the
[Society of Australian Genealogists](#).

The topic was “*my most elusive ancestor*”
about
Elizabeth Clarkson born 1834

The judges said

Showdown at the Blue Bell Inn is a fitting title for a tale that commences with an emotionally-charged recount about a runaway wife who is pursued by her husband and forced to return home before she can make good her planned escape aboard a steamer from Sydney to Melbourne. The balance of the biography examines her life up to that point before finishing with her eventual successful escape ... followed by her complete disappearance.



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Researching: Bowen, Flowerdew, Gardner, Gordon, Grady, Hanrahan, Jolliffe, Kemp, Kessey, Murphy, Poulton, Press and so many more!

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John Poulton's controlling manner was affecting their marriage so badly that Elizabeth Clarkson had decided to secretly leave him. She later told a Sydney court that he "*had been a regular tyrant to her*" and that "*she would have left him years ago if she could have got money enough to have paid her travelling expenses and that of her child.*"¹

On Thursday 16 December 1869, 35-year-old Elizabeth arose at 5 am and made breakfast for her lodger (Samuel Oliver) before he left her Penrith house at his usual time. After her husband arose at 5:30 she surreptitiously advanced the clock by 30 minutes, so that he left for work earlier than normal. This allowed Elizabeth and her daughter Alice time to board the train for Sydney just before it departed at 7:45 am.

Samuel met them on board, having already loaded her trunk (meticulously packed the day before with a tent, bedding, clothing and jewellery). After observing her husband's behaviour for many months, he was assisting her escape.

Their next step was to immediately board the steamer *Dandenong* that sailed from Sydney for Melbourne every Thursday. To fund her journey, Samuel had paid his back rent to her (rather than to John).

On arrival at work, John noticed Samuel's absence and became suspicious. Returning home, he found both the house and his wife's wardrobe empty. After making enquiries, he boarded a Sydney train at 4:20pm. He was now in hot pursuit.

Meanwhile, the well-made plan began to go awry. Elizabeth and Samuel had arrived at the wharf only to find that the ship was delayed by a day. They were forced to book into the nearby Blue Bell Inn, registering as Mr and Mrs Watson.

John was lucky. On his very first reconnoitre of the wharves he spied Samuel sitting outside the Blue Bell Inn! He soon discovered Elizabeth and Alice inside and realised what was afoot. Thinking quickly, he called a constable and had Samuel arrested for larceny, accusing him over unpaid rent and possession of Elizabeth's trunk.

He coerced Elizabeth and Alice to accompany him to Redfern where they stayed the night with Hannah Ashworth, his sister. Next morning, he compelled them to return with him to Penrith.

Elizabeth Clarkson was born in the Lancashire hamlet of Fulwood Row in 1834, the third of nine children to Robert Clarkson and Alice Singleton².

Elizabeth was (like her father) working as a cotton handloom weaver³ when her mother died in 1850⁴. While mechanised looms had long dominated the industry and reduced weavers' incomes, handloom operators were hanging on grimly by specialising in higher quality products. Her family's rural location also provided seasonal work on nearby farms to supplement this meagre income.

A year later, her father married Ann Poulton⁵, a spinster whose family had lived next door for many years⁶. Both the Poulton and Clarkson families had originated in the nearby hamlet of Fernyhalgh⁷. Elizabeth was already friendly with Ann's younger sister, Hannah, who married John Ashworth (a painter from Habergham Eaves⁸) in November 1850⁹.

Four years later, twenty-year-old Elizabeth married¹⁰ John Poulton (an agricultural labourer¹¹) who was a younger brother of both her stepmother (Ann) and her married friend (Hannah). Their son Thomas was born¹² and died¹³ in 1856; while a second son John was born in 1858¹⁴.

Incomes for handloom weavers and agricultural labourers were ever-decreasing. So, when John was offered better-paid work in Australia, they decided to emigrate.

Isabella Tattersall paid 21 guineas for the families of both Hannah Ashworth and her brother John Poulton to emigrate to NSW so that the men could work for her husband (James) on railway construction projects¹⁵. John Ashworth had previously worked with Isabella's father (James Watson), a painting contractor¹⁶. Both families sailed on the *Fitzjames* in 1859¹⁴. Unfortunately, Elizabeth's infant son John died at sea.

Each family settled in the Sydney suburb of Redfern where Elizabeth gave birth to a daughter (Alice Clarkson Poulton) on 23 March 1860¹⁷.

Soon afterwards, the NSW government decided to extend the railway line from Penrith westward across the Blue Mountains. In 1863 railway construction contractor William Watkins started to build piers for a railway bridge across the Nepean River and also the zig-zag trackway that would raise the rail line from the bridge up the steep Lapstone Hill on the other side¹⁸. Watkin's construction manager, James Tattersall¹⁹, employed John Poulton on his team for these contracts²⁰.

The Poulton family therefore moved to a small block of land at Penrith. They could now supplement John's wages by raising animals and by taking in lodgers. However, this constant workload stressed John and affected his behaviour. For example, he became very assertive in protecting his land from wandering stock, impounding stray horses and cattle and prosecuting his property rights²¹. Far from the boy next door that she had married, he had become overbearing, resulting in the breakdown of their marriage.

Two months after the showdown at the Blue Bell Inn, Samuel went on trial. Against John's wishes, Elizabeth gave evidence that Samuel had paid his rent to her; and that she had directed him to take charge of her trunk. The jury could not agree a verdict, so Samuel was discharged¹.

Elizabeth eventually succeeded in leaving but was unable to take her daughter. Alice and her father later moved west to Coonamble. She married there in 1878²² and founded a large dynasty in western NSW²³. John died at Coonamble in 1887²⁴.

But what happened to Elizabeth? Where did she go? What name did she use? How did she make her living? When and where did she die? Unfortunately, the answers remain hidden 150 years later.

Elizabeth Clarkson was born into a poor family living in an obscure hamlet. She spent years struggling to gain control over her life. Having finally succeeded, she covered her tracks so well that, frustratingly, they continue to elude us to this day.

1 *Larceny*, Law Gazette column *Metropolitan Quarter Sessions*, Sydney Mail, 5 February 1870, p. 14.

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- 2 1841 England Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc, 2010. Class: HO107; Piece: 554; Book: 2; Civil Parish: Lancaster; County: Lancashire; Enumeration District: 8; Folio: 5; Page: 2; Line: 13; GSU roll: 306936.
 - 3 1851 England Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005. Class: HO107; Piece: 2268; Folio: 592; Page: 6; GSU roll: 87293-87294.
 - 4 Death Certificate, Alice Clarkson aged 36 of Broughton, Preston District Vol. 21 p. 369, Lancashire BMD.
 - 5 Marriage Certificate, Robert Clarkson and Ann Poulton, Preston District Vol. 21 p. 621, Lancashire BMD.
 - 6 Both families are recorded at Fulwood Row on both the 1841 and 1851 census – see endnotes 2 and 3.
 - 7 A total of 34 Clarksons and 20 Poultons were baptised in St Mary’s church at Fernyhalgh between 1775 and 1833, including Elizabeth’s:
 - husband - "England Births and Christenings, 1538-1975", database, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:NPLN-TQW>), Joannes Poulton, 1830;
 - older sister - Ibid (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JWDB-L8T>), Anna Clarkson, 1833;
 - father - Ibid. (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:NPLN-1MQ>) Robertus Clarkson, 1809;
 - grandfather - Ibid. (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:NPLN-YBW>), Thomas Clarkson, 1786; and
 - father-in-law – Ibid. (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:NPLN-T8N>), Joannes Robertus Poulton, 1785.
 - 8 1851 England Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005. Class: HO107; Piece: 2252; Folio: 224; Page: 15; GSU roll: 87275.
 - 9 Marriage Certificate, John Ashworth and Hannah Poulton, Burnley District Vol. 21 p. 228, Lancashire BMD.
 - 10 Marriage Certificate, John Poulton and Elizabeth Clarkson, Preston District Vol. 8e p. 567, Lancashire BMD.
 - 11 1851 England Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005. Class: HO107; Piece: 2268; Folio: 382; Page: 6; GSU roll: 87293-87294.
 - 12 Birth Certificate, General Register Office, UK, September Quarter 1856 in Preston, Vol. 8e, p. 463.
 - 13 Death Certificate, General Register Office, UK, December Quarter 1856 in Preston, Vol. 8e, p. 317.
 - 14 Passenger List, *Fitzjames*. Persons on bounty ships to Sydney, Newcastle, and Moreton Bay (Board’s Immigrant Lists). Series 5317, Reel 2480. State Records Authority of New South Wales, Kingswood, NSW.
 - 15 Immigration Deposit Journal, State Records Authority of New South Wales; Series: 5264; Reel: 2669; Number: 2824.
 - 16 Tattersall – Watson Marriage Record, 18 Nov 1850, Holy Trinity Parish, Habergham Eaves, Lancashire sourced from Ancestry.com. Lancashire, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1936 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012. Original data: Lancashire Anglican Parish Registers. Preston, England: Lancashire Archives.
 - 17 Birth Certificate, NSW Births, Deaths and Marriages, Sydney, 1860/3058.
 - 18 *The Story of the New South Wales Railways*, EC Rowland, Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Australian Historical Society, Part V, Vol. XL, 1954.
 - 19 “Five pound reward”, Advertising column, Sydney Morning Herald, 19 Mar 1869, p1, accessed through Trove - <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/13192860>
 - 20 John Poulton worked on the construction of the zig zag railway - Oral history from his daughter Alice Clarkson Poulton through her grand-daughter, Ena Ruby Murphy, recorded in 1990.
 - 21 Various newspaper Notices, including Sydney Morning Herald, 12 April 1866, p. 1; NSW Government Gazette (15 October 1867; 27 December 1867); and Sydney Mail, 8 February 1868, p. 1.
 - 22 Marriage Certificate, NSW Births, Deaths and Marriages, Sydney, 1878/2830.
 - 23 Death Certificate, NSW Births, Deaths and Marriages, Sydney, 1927/022759.
 - 24 Death Certificate, NSW Births, Deaths and Marriages, Sydney, 1887/11006.