

# The clan keeper

## a life-changing experience

by James Michael Fleming

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This story was entered in the  
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[Society of Australian Genealogists](#).  
The topic was “my most-admired ancestor”



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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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The ancestor I most admire is Ma Bowen<sup>1</sup>. Throughout a life of adversity, she was determined and resourceful; she created a family culture of thrift, resilience, mutual dependence, kinship and optimism that is still palpable in her descendants 90 years after her death.

During her 67 years she faced trials, tribulations and tragedies including her parent's marriage breakdown when she was a child; a flooded house as a young mother; a horrendous heatwave that killed 61 people in her town; bankruptcy of the family business; the death of three young sons; widowhood at age 42 and with nine children to feed; and taking responsibility for three young grand-children following the sudden death of her eldest daughter.

Alice Clarkson Poulton was born at Botany Road, Redfern NSW in 1860<sup>2</sup>, just weeks after the arrival in Australia of her parents, John and Elizabeth (nee Clarkson)<sup>3</sup>. They had emigrated aboard *Fitzjames* from Burnley (Lancashire) where John had been a labourer.

When Alice was 10 years old her mother decided to leave the family home. Elizabeth Poulton later testified in court that "*her husband had been a regular tyrant to her; she would have left years ago if she could have got money enough...*"<sup>4</sup>.



**The Bowen family, 1892**

**Back: John Henry, Ellen Ruby**

**Middle: Elizabeth Alice, Alice Clarkson nursing John Martin, Ivy May Josephine, James Daniel**

**Front: Albert John**

At just 18 years old, Alice married John Henry Bowen<sup>5</sup> at Coonamble NSW (where her father was now farming, thanks to the land reforms of the 1860s)

The couple's first child, Thomas Martin<sup>6</sup>, only lived for 10 weeks<sup>7</sup> in the winter of 1879 at Dubbo. This may have been what prompted John to give up rural labouring and become a Hawker.

By 1884 the family had settled in Bourke NSW where John opened a fruit shop. Most of their 12 children were born in Bourke<sup>8</sup>, as were many subsequent generations down to the present day.

Six years later their home was inundated by floodwaters after the levee banks around Bourke were breached on 18 April 1890<sup>9</sup>. The young Bowen family joined a thousand others on the high sandhills at North Bourke (4 miles up-river) to camp for weeks while waiting for the water to slowly ebb. On returning to a soaked and stinking town they faced a huge clean up.

In 1896 Bourke endured a devastating heat wave<sup>10</sup>. For three weeks in January the temperature climbed above the Fahrenheit century (37.8°C) every day. The average maximum was 113.8°F (45.4°C). Such was the heat stress imposed on the population that 61 local people died!

The family also suffered financial stress at this time. The country had been in recession for six years and families with little or no income were forced to adopt a subsistence lifestyle based on wild game (like rabbits) and home grown fruit and vegetables. This spelt disaster for the Bowen's fruit shop and John went bankrupt on 15 August 1896<sup>11</sup>. He was forced to return to labouring work.

Worse was to follow in that terrible year as Alice and John's infant son, Thomas William, died<sup>12</sup>.

In 1899 John sought treatment in Sydney for eye trouble<sup>13</sup>. Three years later he was again in a Sydney hospital for eye and lung treatment when he received the tragic news that his eldest son (Albert) had drowned in the McIntyre River at Inverell. The shock was such that John died two days later<sup>14</sup>. Alice was widowed at 42 years old; she had nine surviving children ranging from 1 to 19 years old.

With no welfare, no insurance and no job, Alice just had to cope. She worked hard and relied on her older children to help her. Jim (18) was working as a labourer; Ellen (19), Liz (15) and Ivy (13) did what they could, including dress-making work.

Further tragedy struck ten years later when Alice's eldest daughter Ellen died suddenly<sup>15</sup> of typhoid fever leaving three children aged from 1 to 6 years old. Her husband, George Murphy, could help financially but was not in a position to care for his children personally due to his work as a rural labourer. Alice assumed responsibility for raising three grandchildren: Jack, Ena and Leila Murphy<sup>16</sup>. To them, she was always known as "Ma". She was 52 years old and still had responsibility for six unmarried children of her own.

The extended family rallied to support one another through another very difficult time. Her grand-daughter Ena remembered<sup>17</sup>: "*(Uncle Harry, Ivy's husband,) used to get eggs for his breakfast and we used to love eggs. He always let us dip our bread in it.*" And: "*we used to have drives to get the rabbits to help keep everybody*".

She also recalled<sup>17</sup>: "*We didn't get much (but) we never ever felt as though we didn't have much. Uncle Con used to ... come home with all the pennies and divide it up amongst us (kids) ... I remember once we all got eight pence and we thought we were made!*"

Ma Bowen's experience and example created a family culture of mutual support for generations to come. For example, Jack Murphy paid school fees for his younger sister Ena. Later on Ena and Leila would, every year, make a huge parcel from their families' surplus clothes and shoes and mail it to Jack's family where it was eagerly anticipated. Ena also took some of Jack's children into her home for extended periods, including Marie, Jimmy, Pat and Cathy. When Aunt Ivy died young, her youngest son Joe Williams was "adopted" by Leila's family for his remaining years of childhood. When Ena was gravely ill, Marie took Ena's grandchildren into her home for several weeks.

Ma Bowen died on 27 November 1927 and is buried in the Bourke cemetery<sup>18</sup>. Her grand-daughter Ena recalled<sup>17</sup>: "*We still lived in that old house when Ma died ... I remember (my Aunt) wanting to buy her a smaller house and she wouldn't move. I used to be dying to move! I remember Ma saying one day, 'Oh, people who move all the time: don't pay their rent!'*".

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- <sup>1</sup> The title *The Clan Keeper* is taken from a poem of that name by Darlene Doll Smith - [http://www.poetrysoup.com/poem/the\\_clan\\_keeper\\_663343](http://www.poetrysoup.com/poem/the_clan_keeper_663343).
- <sup>2</sup> Birth Certificate, Alice Clarkson Poulton, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1860/3058.
- <sup>3</sup> Passenger List *Fitzjames*, 1860, Archives Office NSW Reel 2139, [4/4796]. Also "Immigrants per Fitz-James", *Empire*, 23 February 1860, <http://nla.news-article64097764.3>.
- <sup>4</sup> "Larceny, Sydney Quarter Sessions", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 February 1870 page 2, <http://nla.news-article13199836.3>.
- <sup>5</sup> Marriage Certificate, Bowen-Poulton, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1878/2830.
- <sup>6</sup> Birth Certificate, Thomas Martin Poulton, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1879/12172.
- <sup>7</sup> Death Certificate, Thomas Martin Poulton, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1879/5139.
- <sup>8</sup> Birth Certificates, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages: Albert John (Dubbo 1881/11335); Ellen Ruby (Timbregongie 1882/12216); James Daniel (Bourke 1885/15378); Elizabeth Alice (Bourke 1887/16628); Ivy May Josephine (Bourke 1889/16282); John Martin (Bourke 1892/7390); Lillian May (Bourke 1893/7593); Thomas William (Bourke 1896/1951); Alice Mary (Bourke 1897/10638); Cornelius Patrick Joseph Bede (Bourke 1899/1660); William Bede (Bourke 1900/29852).
- <sup>9</sup> "Bourke 1890 – Nil Desperandum", Mrs Glover, *History of Bourke and District, Volume 1*, Bourke and District Historical Society, October 1966.
- <sup>10</sup> "The Fatal Heat Wave", *The Western Herald and Darling River Advocate*, 29 January 1896, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article104104740>.
- <sup>11</sup> "In the Supreme Court of NSW, In Bankruptcy, Notice to Creditors", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 August 1896, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article14062892>.
- <sup>12</sup> Death Certificate, Thomas William Poulton, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1896/1138.
- <sup>13</sup> "Bourke Branch", *Worker*, 25 February 1899, <http://nla.news-article145900024.3>.
- <sup>14</sup> "Father and Son", *Manilla Express*, 11 January 1902, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article191805468>.
- <sup>15</sup> Death Certificate, Ellen Ruby Murphy, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1912/4939.
- <sup>16</sup> Birth Certificates, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages: John Henry George (1906/32611); Ena Ruby (1908/22558); Leila (1911/13624).
- <sup>17</sup> Ena Ruby Kessey, Oral History sound recording circa 1990 by Halvene Therese Fleming.
- <sup>18</sup> Death Certificate, Alice Clarkson Bowen, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1927/173.