

Where the coolabahs grow

by James Michael Fleming

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This story was my entry in the
2021 Croker Prize
essay competition run by the
[Society of Australian Genealogists](#).

My congratulations to the competition winner, Michele Bomford, for “*Conduct Unbecoming*”
about her GG-granduncle Matthew Burnside, available here:
<https://sag.org.au/Annual-Croker-Prize-for-Biography>

The topic was “*my most unexpected research finding*”
about
William Kemp born 1826

The judges said

Where the coolabahs grow meticulously documents a wide range of sources as a basis for a well-researched story unearthing aboriginal heritage in a stockman’s parentage. It presents a very interesting story that puts a spotlight on aspects of aboriginal life in nineteenth-century Australia. Well structured, the biography traces William Kemp’s challenges through his life after his mother, a member of the Mowgee clan of the Wiradjuri nation, died when he was still a child.



Jim Fleming is a retired Customs Manager and lives on Sydney’s lower north shore. He began researching his family history in 1983 and has been a member of the Society of Australian Genealogists for 35 years. Aside from genealogy he enjoys travelling and sings baritone in two choirs.

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

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Where the coolabahs grow¹

Croker Prize 2021 - My most unexpected research finding.

William Kemp 1826-1897

William Kemp was a stockman and blacksmith who, with his wife Emma Elliott, raised a family of sixteen children before he died at Coonamble Hospital on 29 April 1897, aged 71 years². Superficially, he lived the life of a typical currency lad who grafted a living using the skills of a station hand that had seemingly been absorbed during childhood like the nutrition in his mother's milk. But his story is much more interesting because of the unexpected fact that his mother, known to him as Mary², was a member of the Mowgee clan of the Wiradjuri nation.

Mary had survived the brief Bathurst War of 1824 when Wiradjuri resistance warriors faced a detachment of the 40th Regiment under martial law. Their leader Windradyne had taken a large party to Parramatta where he sued for peace. Her tribe thus lost their lands and their means of making a traditional living³.

Mary had entered a relationship with Isaac Kemp (a convict from Sussex⁴) that may have been part of her clan's strategy to peacefully integrate outsiders into their world. According to research by Phillipa Gemmell-Smith⁵:

Offers of sexual relationships with women were encumbered with intricate kinship relationships and expectations of continuing obligations to [her] kin ... as a means of bringing newcomers into appropriate relationships with country.

Two years later, William was born on the Blackman family's *Cooyal* station near Mudgee² where his father was a stock keeper⁶. Isaac worked there on and off for twenty years, even after he gained his ticket of leave in 1828⁴. He and Mary probably had a hut in nearby Kemp's Valley. Mary must have died before William's tenth birthday because Isaac married Margaret Murphy in 1836⁷ and Sarah Shervington in 1839⁸. Consequently, he did not absorb his aboriginal heritage but instead spent his childhood learning the skills of a stockman from his father.

When Isaac finally got his pardon in 1842⁹, he bought a dray and bullocks and reverted to his earlier work as a carrier¹⁰. William probably acted as his off sider, slowly traversing many bush tracks.

William worked most of his adult life on cattle stations in the Macquarie Marshes near Quambone. He probably first journeyed to this area with his father carrying supplies for the Blackman family station *Nugal* near Walgett.

In July 1855, father and son were in Dubbo at the same time as George Gibson¹¹, an ex-convict who had become a wealthy station-owner based in the Marshes¹². He may have hired Isaac's bullock dray to bring his newly arrived sister (Frances nee Gibson) and her teenaged children (Emma and George Elliott) from Sydney to Mudgee¹³.

While her mother and brother stayed in Mudgee, Emma continued to Gibson's station (*The Molle*) where she was to be a companion to her aunt and governess to her cousins. But things did not work out¹³.

In November 1856, Emma eloped with William Kemp who had probably been working on nearby *Canonba* station on Duck Creek. They married at Montefiore¹⁴ (Wellington) before continuing east to the familiar Mudgee District where their eldest son (William) was born in 1857¹⁵. Two years later, Emma's mother Frances (a nurse and midwife) was present for the birth of her granddaughter Frances at *Warrangee* station (near Rylstone)¹⁶.

Isaac Kemp was run over by his dray and killed at Cobbora (between Dubbo and Dunedoo) on 11 April 1857¹⁷. Before the news reached William, the police had informed their superiors in Sydney that "he has no relative as next of kin in the Colony" and the Supreme Court had promptly authorised the Curator of Intestacy to administer the estate¹⁸.

William's solicitor provided a copy of Isaac's 1856 will¹⁹ but the embarrassed official, referring to William as "a half caste son of the deceased", reported that "I am unable to say whether [the will] was executed prior to the death of the deceased"²⁰. The clear implication was that William was multi-racial and therefore unreliable and had probably forged the will. Thus, William was denied his inheritance. The net proceeds from the sale of Isaac's dray and bullocks was paid into the NSW Treasury and his fourteen horses were not accounted for at all²¹.

Soon afterwards, Bathurst detectives investigated the written allegations of Mr Joseph Cope that William Kemp, Pat Donohoe and Thomas Sinden were cattle thieves²². He wrote that "this William Kemp is a half caste and is supposed to be good for some more [stolen cattle]" and suggested that they target William first as he would probably give up the others. Nothing came of this except that Sinden sued Cope for libel and won damages of twenty-five pounds.

These incidents illustrate that William almost certainly experienced racial prejudice and associated bullying throughout his life. This could explain why his family moved around so much during the early years of his marriage. Between 1861 and 1868, seven children were born on *Merri Merri Creek*²³, *Mobala*²⁴, *Mungrabambone*¹⁵, *Carrabear*²⁵ and *Quambone*²⁶ stations.

Five more children were born during a decade of stability at *Bokemah* station where William worked as a blacksmith between 1869 and 1877²⁷. But he also had to bury his mother-in-law Frances Gibson there in 1870²⁸ and his daughter Elizabeth in 1877²⁹.

William and Emma's first grandchild (Edgar Kemp) was also born at *Bokemah* in 1877³⁰, son of their eldest daughter Frances Kemp and station owner Samuel Elliott (who was middle aged and married). It was probably this breach of trust that prompted William to move his family once again. His last two children were born at *Emby* station in 1879 and 1881³¹. In his later years, the family settled in the town of Coonamble.

Emma survived him by 34 years³², by which time their dynasty included 130 grandchildren, 90 great-grandchildren and three great-great-grandchildren³³.

Despite losing his aboriginal culture, William Kemp successfully integrated into colonial Australia and raised a large family out where the coolabahs grow.

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- ¹ The title is taken from the poem *The Dying Stockman* by AB (Banjo) Paterson
- ² Death Certificate, William Isaac Kemp, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, NSW, No 17 4464/1897.
- ³ Michael Pearson, *Bathurst Plains and beyond: European colonisation and Aboriginal resistance*, published in *Aboriginal History*, Volume 8, 1984
- ⁴ Isaac Kemp, *Convict TOL Butt*, (NSW State Archives), 18 Aug 1828, No. 28/170
- ⁵ Philippa Gemmell-Smith, *Mountain Beings, Relationships with land in the Oberon district 1800-1900*, PhD Thesis, University of Sydney, 2018
- ⁶ *Colonial Secretary - James Blackman Jr*, 14 June 1823, page 519, Archives Office of NSW. Also - *Colonial Secretary - James Blackman Jr*, 26 July 1824, page 327, Archives Office of NSW. Also - *Colonial Secretary - James Blackman Jr*, 16 May 1825, page 322-3, Archives Office of NSW.
- ⁷ NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, *NSW Marriage records*, 333/1836.
- ⁸ NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, *NSW Marriage records*, 379/1839.
- ⁹ Isaac Kemp, *Conditional Pardon*, (NSW: Colonial Secretary), 1 Jan 1842, 43/57
- ¹⁰ Kemp, Isaac 1857 file 2042 (Probate Packets), NSW State Records, Kingswood, NSW. Will dated 27 Aug 1856.
- ¹¹ Patriotic Fund - 18th List, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 Jun 1855, p8.
- ¹² John Leslie, *From Stockyards to Streets, the story of the founding of Coonamble*, Newcastle, NSW: Reg C. Pogonoski Pty Ltd, 1950.
- ¹³ Joan McKenzie, *Gibson's Way, the story of a pioneer of the Macquarie Marsh Country*, Coonamble, 1993.
- ¹⁴ Marriage Certificate, William Kemp and Emma Elliott, 10 November 1856, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, NSW. 1856/10.
- ¹⁵ Lorraine Voigt, *The Kemp Family History*, 5 Kenworth Street, Brassall, Qld, 4305: Lorraine Voigt, 1992.
- ¹⁶ Birth Certificate Vol 1859 No 9942, Frances Kemp, (15 August 1859), NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages.
- ¹⁷ Death Certificate, Isaac Kemp, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, NSW, Vol 1857 No 9.
- ¹⁸ Kemp, Isaac 1857 file 2042 (Probate Packets), NSW State Records, Kingswood, NSW. Affidavit of Constable James Samuels, 24 Apr 1857. Order of the Supreme Court dated 8 May 1857.
- ¹⁹ Kemp, Isaac 1857 file 2042 (Probate Packets), NSW State Records, Kingswood, NSW. Undated letter from Stuart Darby to Alfred Pickwood.
- ²⁰ Kemp, Isaac 1857 file 2042 (Probate Packets), NSW State Records, Kingswood, NSW. Memoranda written by Alfred Pickwood (Police Office Dubbo) on 8 May 1857 and 24 May 1857.
- ²¹ NSW Government Gazette No 96, 13 Jul 1858, page 1091, retrieved May 4, 2021 from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page12610236>
- ²² Monday March 22nd, 1858. (1858, March 27). *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal (NSW: 1851 - 1904)*, p. 2. Retrieved May 23, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article64377272>
- ²³ Birth Certificate Vol 226 No 7043, Emily Kemp, (20 Jun 1861), NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages.
- ²⁴ Birth Certificate 7923/1864, Lucy Kemp, (1 May 1864), NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages.
- ²⁵ Birth Certificate No 763, Henry Isaac Kemp, (1 May 1864), NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages.
- ²⁶ Birth Certificate No 902 8651/1868, James Kemp, (1 May 1864), NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages.
- ²⁷ Birth Certificate Vol 1869 No 10207, Sydney Edward Kemp, (9 December 1869), NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages. Birth Certificate No 706 1872, Ada Louisa Kemp, (1 May 1864), NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages. Birth Certificate No 2209 10607/1877, Marita May Kemp, (1 May 1864), NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages.
- ²⁸ Death Certificate, Frances Pirie, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, NSW, Vol 1870 No 3353.
- ²⁹ Death Certificate, Elizabeth Kemp, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, NSW, 4825/1877.

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- ³⁰ Birth Certificate No 21 11460/1877, Edgar Kemp, (26 Nov 1877), NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages.
- ³¹ Birth Certificate 22587/1881, Edith Ivy Kemp, (18 Jun 1881), NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages.
- ³² Death Certificate, Emma Kemp, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, NSW, Vol 1931 No 19973.
- ³³ Country News (1931, December 14). *The Sun (Sydney, NSW: 1910 - 1954)*, p. 5 (Final Extra). Retrieved May 23, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article224276980>