

The "annotated" text of the Dear Mattie letter

DOCUMENT HISTORY

First assembled in 2019, without pages 3&4 and 7&8.

Provided to various parties in early June 2021.

Revised in late June 2021 when the missing 2x2 pages miraculously turned up.

Further trivial tinkering, December 2021.

This letter's writer is Mattie's eldest brother Robert (1847-1888). Her only other brothers alive in 1885 were: Coiler/Collier who is mentioned in the third person in the letter; and James (1851-1907) who died in New Zealand. I was told by a current member of the McCracken family in 2019 that "In 1885, James went to New Zealand and bought a sheep run Hayland in the north Canterbury district. He died at Christchurch NZ in October 1907".

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Calvert Downs Statn

Burketown

1 Sepr 1885

My dear Mattie [*Martha Earle "Mattie" Cudmore née McCracken (1855-1938), who had married the previously widowed Daniel Henry Cashell Cudmore (1844-1913) in 1882*]

It seems such an awful long time since your Letters to me were written (25 Octr & 26 Decr / 84) that you will, long ere this reaches you, have given up all hope of an answer but the fact was that the epistles reached me both at the same time, about the end of June, & as the Mailman started on his return journey in twentyfour hours there was no time to more than answer one from the Pater [*Peter McCracken (1818-1892) of Melbourne*] & as that contained the news of poor Uncle R's death I could not put off replying to it. [*Uncle R must be Robert McCracken, elder brother of Mattie's father Peter, who died on 17th Feb 1885.*] The mail we got before that was some time in January & when we will get the next - the Lord only knows. We can only hope that it will be before Xmas & bring news of the Cup [*meaning the Melbourne Cup — unless the word is actually Clip meaning the wool clip*]

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Your Letters were a most unexpected & very pleasant surprise, as whenever I hear of a relative or friend of mine getting married I at once score out that persons' name from my very small list of possible or probable correspondents, hence my surprise at receiving yours but I hope you will continue to favor me with one occasionally when time and the humour suit you. I had a Letter also from the Mater [*Grace McCracken née Robertson (1822-1889)*] after Uncle R's decease, mostly filled with particulars of his death, funeral Will etc which I answered shortly at the time. Collie [*Coiler(sic) McCracken (1848-1915)*], who used to write occasionally at uncertain intervals has given up altogether & the others I never did correspond with so yourself, the Mater & a chance outsider are all I have to depend on for Letters. If we got anything like a fair supply of newspapers it would not be so bad, but the Mail collects for so long a time in Burketown that when there is any chance of a Mail coming out the accumulation of papers is

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so great that nothing but a waggon would carry the load, & then a few are picked out at haphazard without regard to dates or anything else & those are devoured in a few days. After that a blank for another six months, no books or amusement of any kind except a couple of packs of very greasy cards, the spots on which are almost worn off.

To make matters worse than usual at the present time I must tell you that rather more than four months ago C.F.G. [*almost certainly Charles Fraser Gardiner "of Melbourne", part owner of Calvert Downs at the time, who - with his partners - acquired the blocks unstocked and unimproved in 1883 and bailed out a few years later*] left the Station ostensibly for the purpose of seeing after some loading that had been left behind between here & Burketown when we came out, & was to be back in a fortnight. We who knew him had a very good idea that only the town would pull him up but had no notion of what did happen. He left in April & about the end of June a man turned up with the goods & a mail containing, besides your Letters, communications from him to the effect that he had been hastily

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called to Melbourne but would be back in 8 or 9 weeks from time of writing (middle of May) but up to the present, 19 weeks since he left, except the foregoing, we have had neither word nor sign of him. We are now heartily tired of waiting & a man leaves tomorrow for Burketown, unless he meets G. [*Gardiner*] on the road, not to return without some news of him, good or bad. As you may imagine his wife has a rosie time of it, left in this outlandish place with a lot of the roughest of men of whom she knows nothing & surrounded by Blacks who are only waiting to destroy us unless we have the luck to abolish them first. In one of your letters you say "I hope you have no cause to use pistols". You have very little notion what an exciting time a person has here to preserve his own life to say nothing of the cold lead he has to fire away in the endeavour. Of course no one ever troubles about the effect of said lead, each side buries their own & heals the wounded.

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Although G. was out in this country before & had then some experience of the Blacks, it has not profited him much in this venture. Instead of obtaining the services of a couple of civilised niggers, for the purpose of tracking and so on, a necessary he often spoke of, he let plenty of opportunities slip through his fingers on the road & came all the way here without one. Then, still more seeing the necessity for having "thieves to catch thieves", he was continually talking of the matter & when he went away was going to bring some back with him but the "Myalls" in the meantime, finding we were unable to (without Black assistance, & having none,) to hunt them down became quite cheeky killing cattle & horses within a few miles of the camp & even getting on adjacent rocky hills & shouting & gesticulating defiance at us. Killing odd ones or even twos or threes is no good, they are

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never missed & nothing but a wholesale slaughter will do any good. For instance some time ago our team was on the road & at night was camped with another team having about 40 horses in all. In the night the Blacks attacked the horses wounding three of ours & killing three of the other peoples. The damage was discovered at daylight in the morning & as soon

as ever horses could be saddled their tracks were followed from where they had cut up the horses, through the wet grass, about 8 miles to their camp on a Lagoon. There were five rifles and a Blackfellow with a knife & tomahawk & the result was out of a possible 200, 90 killed & wounded on the camp besides what wounded escaped. That Black with the tommy [*tomahawk*] was a perfect artist equal to any two guns in the quantity he polished off

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The consequence is that for the next 12 months or more that road will be as safe as the one to Mt Alexander [*Mt Alexander Road is a major road in Melbourne's inner northern suburbs (where the McCracken family lived), thus named because its original destination was the gold fields of Mount Alexander (now known as Castlemaine).*] & so wld our Station & cattle be, if they got a like dressing [*a semi-archaic usage?*] here. But as I said before neither G nor the blackboys have turned up & great is the loss following thereon. As to the country it is very different to what you have about the Darling [*Mattie and her husband lived on their sheep station "Avoca", on the Darling River near Wentworth*], all stony hills with good flats on the rivers & creeks, lightly timbered & abundantly watered the main rivers of course having permanent water & nearly every creek having one or more large holes kept constantly full by springs in many cases causing a stream for two or three miles when the water disappears underground perhaps to break out again further down. From what I have seen and hear there is not much fear of droughts, in your meaning of the term, up here.

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More or less it rains every year during the wet season that is from Nov to Mar inclusive & the rest of the year you might as well expect the Millenium as a shower of rain. From the Mater's Letter I learn that Maggie & Bella had come down country & (horrible thought) that Allie is to be married to that Ape Johnnie Langtree^[*] & Maggie to some fellow Riley McHarg [*or McKay or McKaig?*], skinflint as he was & without constitution would have been better than this, because he would have died in a reasonable time but little leatherskin will never die. I was very glad to hear that at the time of writing Dan & the family (especially Paul) & yourself were so well & hope you have "kept on doing it" so with love to all I remain
Your very affectionate Brother
Bob

Mrs D.H.Cudmore, "Avoca"
Wentworth NSW.

* An RMN comment that is almost certainly irrelevant apart from the likelihood that the McCracken and Langtree families (and Gardiner family perhaps) were based in the same part of Melbourne and would have known each other well. The name Langtree also appears in a letter Bob McCracken wrote to Mattie from Mount Poole Station (far north-west NSW) on 20th November 1881, as per a typed copy found among the remnants of Peter Alvin Cudmore's papers in late March 2021. One small paragraph:

I am glad to hear that Jeannie has thought better of the name she was going to call the youngster, as there is a quite sufficient touch of "Ginger" about the Langtree family, without putting a name to it.

- "Ginger". Probably some sort of euphemism, with the "without putting a name to it" added to ensure Mattie understands whatever oblique reference is being made.

- "Langtree family". Jeannie (I believe the double-n is the correct spelling) McCracken (1853-1915) is a sister of Mattie and Bob. She married Charles William Langtree, with whom she had four children: Peter McCracken L (1879-1896); Charles Henry L (1883-1916) who died on The Somme; Charlotte L; and Jean Robertson L.

Robert Niall
15 December 2021