

The emergence / location of the "Dear Mattie" letter

In the 1980s or thereabouts I began exploring my family genealogy, starting from a lot of work that my father's elder brother had done. This led me to the Cudmore family, to which I am very distantly related because my g-g-grandfather's eldest sister, Margaret Nihill (1811–1893), married Daniel Cudmore (1811–1891) in Ireland in early 1835. Later that year the entire Nihill family including Daniel emigrated to Australia, initially Tasmania, moving to South Australia after a couple of years. I had never heard of the Cudmores until I began my genealogical diggings. I gradually uncovered heaps (and heaps) of them, and entered them all into my genealogical database.

In the mid 1990s a senior member of the branch of the Cudmore family living near Quirindi NSW (whom I had met as part of my diggings) contacted me. He had decided that "someone" needed to document the history of the Cudmore family in Australia. He had commissioned Elsie Ritchie, an historian based in Sydney, to do the job. He wanted me to help Elsie by passing to her all the Cudmore family tree information I had accumulated. I did this, after which I gradually became increasingly involved with other aspects of her work.

One of Elsie's starting points for her task was the knowledge that a Peter Alvin Cudmore had already done a lot of Cudmore research over a very long period, with the intention of weaving it all into a book. Unfortunately Peter had died before he could get much beyond the research stage, but he had assembled a huge amount of documentation. Elsie and I approached Peter's widow and son to request access to all the papers. This was granted. We were loaned a huge mountain of papers. These were lugged to OfficeWorks, where a pair of photocopiers were commandeered and run red-hot, making two copies of everything. I got one set, Elsie got the other, and the originals were immediately returned to Peter's widow.

Elsie and I ploughed through our piles, completely independently but in frequent telephone contact to discuss things and compare interpretations. One of the items that caught our separate attentions was the "Dear Mattie" letter. How could it not have? We discussed it at length, and debated whether its content should be included in Elsie's book. We decided that since it concerned a person who was not a member of the Cudmore family by either blood or marriage it should not be.

Elsie's book, *"For the Love of the Land — The history of the Cudmore family"*, was privately published in 2000. A few years after that I decided to clean up my papers. Since all the photocopies were single-sided they could be used as scrap paper, so I divided them up between myself and my two daughters. Then forgot about them.

A few years later again, Geoffrey Blainey, Keith Windschuttle, John Howard and others began pushing their "black-armband" views of Australia's colonial history. This reminded me of "Dear Mattie". I decided it was time the letter saw the light of day, as some small counter to the black-armeders. My copy was long gone, so I rang Elsie and asked her if she remembered it (of course she did – vividly), and whether she could locate it. Unfortunately she could not, so I was unable to take things further.

Fast-forward to September 2019. I was babysitting for one of my daughters. My granddaughters had earlier been scribbling / sketching on scrap paper and there were sheets all over the place, with some of the "artworks" sellotaped proudly to a window. I decided a

bit of a clean-up was in order. As I went to peel one particular sketch off the window to throw it away, the light coming in from behind it meant I could faintly see a very full, neat double-page of copperplate handwriting on its other side. For some reason I began reading it. After a few lines I realised it was from my dismembered trove of Cudmore stuff, and after a few more lines I realised it was a page from "Dear Mattie". Then it suddenly hit me that it was the actual page that talked about the massacre. I could not immediately find any more pages of the letter, but after my daughter got home she pointed me to the small remnants from the pile of scrap paper I had given her about a decade and a half earlier. I searched through this, sheet by sheet, and managed to find the first (double) page of the letter. But nothing more.

A few days later, after discussing these discoveries with Elsie, I contacted Peter Cudmore's son Richard to ask about the "originals" of his father's papers (his mother Valerie having died some years earlier). He told me that he had them, but they were in a very disorganised and much depleted state. His mother had developed Alzheimer's disease, and this had caused her repeatedly to go through her husband's papers, each time "rearranging" (ie disarranging) them and throwing some out. Richard said I was welcome to come and look through what remained of the papers, but added "don't get your hopes too high".

Peter's son is a farmer, and lives in rural Victoria. I was unable to go immediately. Then summer came, and because he was very busy I put my visit off until after the summer. Then came Covid-19, and Victoria's many lockdowns.

In late March 2021 I managed to visit him at last. He had not been exaggerating: the papers had nearly all gone, and those that remained were thoroughly intermingled with other of Peter's records (also decimated). I spent about four hours looking through everything, and "Dear Mattie" was not there. I did however find two other documents perhaps relevant to the mission.

(1) A typed copy of part of another letter to Mattie that included a probably-PAC-added footnote "see also Blacks Let.No 126. P.M.McC" which Elsie believed was probably a reference Mortlock librarians had added to the original of the letter, and therefore could well be referring to the letter we are seeking. (But see below — the Mortlock Library has since said that this reference is not one of theirs.)

(2) A slip of typed paper headed "(part letter from Grace McCracken n.d" which includes "another letter from Bob owing to someone passing that way", and "sorely troubled with the wild blacks", and "Gardiner". [I take "n.d" to be shorthand for "not dated", but I could be wrong.]

On 6th April 2021 I emailed a request (slsaRT39685) to the State Library of South Australia (with which the Mortlock Library has been merged), asking about the references and related matters. I received a detailed but negative reply the same day: the Library has no record of those letters, and said that the annotations would not have been theirs. This request was a follow-up to a more general one I had sent in July 2019 (slsaRT34102).

Where had Peter Cudmore come across the original letter?

I still suspect he found it in the State Library of South Australia, for the following reasons.
» Peter Cudmore did use the Mortlock Library as part of his researching.

- » Two decades ago I spent a day or so researching in the Mortlock. My recollection is that at least some of the "Cudmore papers" I scavenged through did not seem to have been gone through by any systematic librarian / archivist.
- » Mattie (Martha Earle McCracken) married Daniel Henry Cashell Cudmore. One of their sons was (Sir) Collier Cudmore, who was the source of at least some of the Cudmore papers in the Mortlock Library.

If it is not in the SLSA, where else could it be? The only other possibility that comes to mind is that the letter has been retained in a collection of personal family papers by one of Mattie's descendants. My efforts to find out whether such a collection exists (or EVER existed after the bulk of the family papers were put into the Mortlock Library) have so far got nowhere.

The above describes the situation as at the end of May 2021. At that stage Elsie and I decided we had taken things as far as we could, and it was time to "put it all into the public domain". We emailed the letter pages (the two double-pages, 1&2 and 5&6), our annotations on those pages, and a wad of our related material to:

- » Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (the indigenous group who are custodians of the land that includes Calvert Downs);
- » the Shire of Burketown;
- » the people who maintain the web site <https://australianfrontierconflicts.com.au/>; and
- » the group at the University of Newcastle that has an ongoing interest in such things.

At Elsie's suggestion, on the same day we also sent it to various of Mattie's direct descendants on the extremely slight chance that one of them might be able to add to it. These people all replied in the negative. Then, on 24th June (2021) one of them must have had some sort of epiphany: *"I have a photocopy only and these are the reverse pages of what you had previously sent. It is of poor quality and the page numbers appear only on 2, 5, 7 at top left hand margin on my photocopy. I had it with some papers of interest that I have come across when tidying up boxed information from our Renmark days. Our family was in Renmark (15 years) while the children were growing up in the 1980's. I was surprised to find it there and cannot remember when I first received the photocopy or in what circumstance I would have it. Perhaps on an occasion when my parents visited us they brought it up to show us? Perhaps I had located it later and placed it there for safe keeping?"*

We then had the entire letter, albeit only as photocopies. Every so often the toast lands butter-side up.

We sent the additional pages to the same parties as are mentioned above. We also directly contacted Professor Lyndall Ryan, the person leading the group at University of Newcastle. Professor Ryan was most enthusiastic, and said she would ensure that the information was properly recorded and publicised. The result of this can be seen at

<https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/detail.php?r=1040>

Professor Ryan later told us that "Dear Mattie" was the only first-hand account her group has come across. [The above website was closed to new entries in late 2022, but will continue to be maintained indefinitely.]

A final, semi-flippant, comment. If one were anthropomorphically inclined, one might say that the Dear Mattie letter has been trying to be rediscovered for over a hundred years.

Robert Niall

Document history. The date of this document's original production is lost in the sands of time. It has since undergone the following updates.

11Oct22	Something trivial and since forgotten.
11Jun23	Added URL for the entry on the Uni of Newcastle's massacre map.
10Jan24	Added Prof Ryan's comment about Dear Mattie being unique.
25Feb24	Added comment about the Newcastle University massacre map being closed to new entries.
26Oct25	A small number of extremely minor rewordings.