**Finding the life of Amity Moreton Thompson born 1824 at Moreton Bay:
Researching in the 21st Century – by Stephanie Ryan, State Library of Qld**

This discussion reflects an attempt to find out not only what happened in the life of the first white child born at Moreton Bay but also to examine what we can find out about her in the current electronic environment. It also includes a consideration of the extent to which we can trust the information uncovered and what would make it more credible and valuable.

**The initial settlement at Humpybong Moreton Bay 1824**

The brig *Amity* brought the first settlement to Moreton Bay in September 1824. It consisted of government officials, convicts, soldiers and their families, a group of about 70 people. They settled at Humpybong on the Redcliffe Peninsula 14 September. Over the next weeks two white children were born: Amity Moreton Thompson, daughter of Corporal Robert Hay Thompson, and Charles Moreton Miller, son of the Commandant Henry Miller. As there was no clergyman to baptise them, both children were christened in Sydney the following year.

**The beginnings of the controversy over the first white birth**

As the settlement’s centenary approached, the birth of the first white child was seen as a significant event to be commemorated. Corporal Thompson had left Australia with his regiment. Commandant Miller had settled in Australia as had his Moreton Bay born son. Professor Cumbrae-Stewart claimed: “It is confidently believed that he [Charles Moreton Miller] was the first white child born at Moreton Bay, and therefore the first Queenslander”.[[1]](#endnote-1) As first Registrar and Librarian of Queensland University, and founding member and president of the Queensland Historical Society, he was seen as an authority. Was his statement, which he repeated often during the centenary celebrations, correct?

**Amity Moreton Thompson’s request to the Minister of Lands 1889**

In March 1889 Amity Moreton (then known as Emma) Wright wrote to C B Dutton, the Secretary of Public Lands, Queensland, enquiring about 500 acres of land she believed she had been given as Moreton Bay’s first born white child. She gave her current address: 12 Eldon Street, Warrington in Lancashire. She provided a brief overview of her life from her Moreton Bay birth to going to India.[[2]](#endnote-2) Her land claim could not be verified.

**Investigating the first born white child of Moreton Bay**

During the 1980s John St Pierre of the Redcliffe Historical Society went to Sydney to check this conflicting information via the baptismal register and discovered that although Charles Miller had been christened first, 22 October 1825 and Amity Thompson the following day, Amity had been born first, 21 September 1824 and Charles, 5 November 1824. Her footsteps in time became a source of interest. Not only was the Redcliffe Society interested but so also was Ken Blanch, a journalist. He took up the issue in the *Sunday Mail* wherehe urged that “a thorough examination of her life would be a fitting Queensland Day project”.[[3]](#endnote-3) In the *Courier Mail* he later wrote, “Whether Amity had children of her own, where she lies buried, and where her descendants, if any, are today all matters that remain a mystery”.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Some information can now be easily checked. The early NSW baptisms for the two first white children born at Moreton Bay are on microfilm in State Libraries,[[5]](#endnote-5) identified using the index of the NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages.[[6]](#endnote-6) Corporal Thompson went to Tasmania after Moreton Bay where the birth of his son, James was recorded 14 March 1827. It is now scanned on the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office website.[[7]](#endnote-7) He then went with the 40th regiment to India in 1829 where he died and was buried in Bombay, 26 October 1833 according to *Familysearch.[[8]](#endnote-8)* Amity Thompson married John Trevett of the 2nd Queens Own Regiment 1 October 1838 in Bombay,[[9]](#endnote-9) as shown by the scanned copy of the marriage entry on the database, *Findmypast*. In 1841 John Trevett was in Deesa, Gujarat India according to the British Army worldwide index of that year.[[10]](#endnote-10) The clear path then ends.

**Finding Emma (Amity Moreton) Wright’s steps 1880-1900**

However, Amity Moreton Wright, formerly Trevett, born Thompson had left a significant trail in her letter of March 1889 published in the Australian newspapers in June of that year. The obvious next item to search was the 1891 census available on *Ancestrylibrary.com[[11]](#endnote-11)* or *Findmypast[[12]](#endnote-12)* for those with the surname Wright at 12 Eldon Street, Warrington. An Emily (not Amity) Wright, nurse, born at Moreton Bay, lived there with her husband John Wright, a file smith. A search of the 1881 census for Wright at that address provided the same details but the 1871 census showed John Wright’s first wife, Rachel with their daughter. A search of the English records at *FreeBMD*[[13]](#endnote-13) revealed that Rachel had died in 1879 and John Wright’s daughter had married in 1868. Her married name linked her to him in the 1901 census where she was living with her widower father, in Warrington. It therefore seemed likely that Amity Moreton, now known as Emma, had married John Wright between 1879 and 1881 and that she had possibly died between 1891 and 1901. A further search of *FreeBMD* showed that in 1880 she had married John Wright as Emma Jane Thompson, a widow, in Warrington, which is where she died in 1900 as Emma Wright.

**Finding Emma (Amity Moreton) Thompson’s steps 1841-1880**

It had been fairly easy to discover that Amity Moreton Wright was formerly Emma Thompson and that she was a nurse. Using her name, age and place of birth it was now possible to locate her as a nurse and a widow, at the Liverpool workhouse fever hospital on Brownlow Hill in the 1871 census. This in itself was interesting. Florence Nightingale had been involved in establishing trained nursing for the first time, outside London, at the Liverpool Hospital. In 1865, with the support of the philanthropist, William Rathbone, Florence Nightingale set up a trained matron, Agnes Jones, and a dozen or more skilled nurses with assistant nurses at the Brownlow Hill Workhouse Infirmary, replacing unskilled nurses. Various fevers pervaded Liverpool as a result of the poor living conditions in such English cities following the Industrial Revolution. Agnes Jones, who worked tirelessly, died of typhus fever in 1868 leaving the Brownlow Infirmary in a confused state. Where did Emma Thompson fit into this hospital context? How is it that she was in Liverpool and what was her training? It might be possible to find out more from the Liverpool Record Office. Unfortunately, the relevant records are not online. An enquiry to the Record Office resulted in a reply stating that there are no registers of nurses as such for the workhouse infirmary. The minutes of the Workhouse Committee, which governed the workhouse, might mention her appointment but they would require a lengthy search.

There were other questions. How and when did Amity Moreton Thompson arrive in Britain from India? What were the steps in her life from the time of her marriage in 1838 to 1871? What happened to her first husband, John Trevett, after 1841 when he was in India? I joined internet mailing lists for India and Warrington. Information was forthcoming and swapped around. We found more possible footprints.

**Help from mailing lists**

Noel Clark of the India list explained that John Trevett’s regiment, the 2nd Foot, was involved in the Southern Mahratta Campaign in 1845, and in January 1846 they arrived back in England from Bombay. On 28 February, they were stationed at Chichester. It is possible to follow the regiment from there, but to follow John himself it would be necessary to check the muster rolls at The National Archives UK. He directed me to John Trevett’s attestation papers on the National Archives’ catalogue, *Discovery.* They show he was born at Bishopsgate Middlesex in 1802. He was a shoe maker, was attested in September 1825, and went to India January 1828[[14]](#endnote-14). His baptismal record is scanned on *Ancestry.*[[15]](#endnote-15)

Susan Wylie from the Warrington list drew my attention to an article from the Manchester paper[[16]](#endnote-16) which explained that Emma Wright, a midwife of Eldon Street, had falsely claimed a child was stillborn when it had lived briefly and been baptised. The child was consequently buried in unconsecrated ground, thereby avoiding any fees, it was said. As she was a longstanding midwife in the area and nothing else was known against her, she escaped prison with just a fine.

I then heard from a descendant of John Wright’s daughter, Sheila Barton, who sent me a copy of Emma and John Wright’s marriage certificate and a photograph of her grave. She said she believed she had located the right Emma Thompson on the 1851 and 1861 censuses. Finding her in 1851[[17]](#endnote-17) relied on her name, age, place of birth and a network of her mother’s family. Emma Thomson (sic), widow, born in NSW was a reeler in a Glasgow factory in 1851. She was a visitor with a son, Thomas, 6, and a daughter, Mary, 1 month, to the home of Janet Gold (nee McKechnie), who was the sister of Emma’s mother, Mary Thompson (nee McKechnie) according to the Scottish birth records, available via *Scotland’s People.[[18]](#endnote-18)* Who was the father of these children? What had happened to John Trevett? In the 1861 census,[[19]](#endnote-19) based on details of age, place of birth and her son’s surname, it seemed Emma (Amity?) was now Emma McFadyen, an iron draper’s wife living in Glasgow with Matthew McFadyen and Thomas Thompson, listed as his step-son.

Do these 1851 and 1861 census entries refer to Amity Moreton Thompson? In 1862, Amity Moreton Thompson wrote to the Immigration Commissioner in Glasgow regarding the steps she should take to obtain possession of a land grant she believed was made to her by Sir Thomas Brisbane in 1824. The Commissioner sent her request, now scanned on the Queensland State Archives website, to the Colonial Secretary, Queensland.[[20]](#endnote-20) There was no address for Amity Thompson but this does seem to place her in Glasgow, consistent with the census address.

**Have we traced Amity Moreton Thompson’s footsteps in time?**

In tracing Amity Moreton Thompson through these records, I found consistent personal details in relation to her date and place of birth. Although she changed her name to Emma, she retained the link to her birth name in correspondence. From 1871 as Emma Thompson she regularly identified as a nurse and it would appear that the Emma Thompson found on the 1871 census married John Wright and died in Warrington, Lancashire, but was this Amity Moreton Thompson? The 1851 and 1861 census entries are not strong links to earlier and later records of Amity Moreton Thompson and Emma Wright.

When there is wealth in the form of 500 acres there is always the possibility that someone, a family member or someone familiar with the claimant, could assume that identity. Moving from one country to another makes that possibility even more achievable. The path of Amity Thompson from India to Britain is unclear and the fate of her first husband at this point, unexplored. Her children’s father is unknown and they have not been located beyond names on a census.

**Has the search been done before?**

In 1975 John Oxley Library found the 1889 letter and contacted the Warrington newspaper in search of more information about the life of Amity Thompson. There was no response. The file, relating to the library’s efforts in this regard, has been missing for some time.

A check of the Redcliffe Historical Society’s findings on Amity Moreton Thompson revealed that the society had not only located her birth and baptism in Sydney but also that they had engaged an overseas researcher to find out more about her. Using the 1889 letter with Amity Moreton Wright’s address, the researcher found the 1881 English census record.[[21]](#endnote-21) As Amity married and died as Emma, the researcher did not find her marriage to John Wright, her death, or census records earlier than 1881, although it was known she was using the name, Emma. Her 1838 marriage to John Trevett as Amity Thompson in Bombay was also missed.

**Amity Moreton Thompson’s land claim**

In her 1889 letter, Amity Moreton Wright referred to Commandant Miller’s son, Charles Moreton Miller’s being given a similar land grant. There is some discussion about the correctness of various details she mentions in relation to these grants. More significantly however, the Miller family continued to live in Australia and would have been well-positioned to take advantage of such a generous land offer. There is no evidence of Amity Thompson’s claim but more importantly, there is no evidence that Charles Miller had a land claim much less availed himself of it.

**The status of the search for Amity Moreton (Emma) Thompson**

Much more information is now at our fingertips via databases such as *Ancestry, Findmypast* and *Familysearch* covering Australian and international material such as censuses, records of shipping, military personnel and births, deaths and marriages across time. Australia has also additional digitised original historical birth, death and marriage records which provide valuable steps to records both within Australia and overseas. Digitised Australian newspapers are available free on *Trove* and, with overseas newspaper databases, bring alive the details of people’s lives whether it is in the letters they write or about the incidents in which they are involved. Mailing lists and email allow pooling and sorting of information. A search such as this, however, shows that in some cases we need more corroboration, especially when the links are tenuous, names have been changed and there are reasons to suspect the authenticity of an identity. We need established links for Amity Moreton Thompson across the places she lived and the names she lived by. The 1851 and 1861 Scottish censuses indicate she had children but they have not been traced. More information about her entry into nursing, early husbands and children would provide a clearer idea of her. We have the path of her life from birth in Moreton Bay in 1824 to her marriage in India in 1838. But there is no strong link from Amity in India to Emma in Scotland and in England despite the consistency of several personal details. Was Amity Moreton Thompson, first white-born child in Moreton Bay, Emma McFadyen the iron draper’s wife in Scotland and the nurse, Emma Thompson/Wright in Lancashire? We have found more steps but we are still seeking a firm track.

1. *Brisbane Courier* 28 April 1923 p19. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article20617350> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Telegraph* 20 June1889 p5. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article174771079> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Sunday Mail* 2 June 1996 p 67 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Courier Mail* 2 October 1999 Weekend 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Register of baptisms, burials and marriages 1787-1856 [microform] / [NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and
 Marriages]*. Salt Lake City, Utah : Genealogical Society of Salt Lake City (1985)
 SR reel 5002 V1824 901/903 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages: Family History Search* <http://www.bdm.nsw.gov.au/Pages/family-history/family-history.aspx> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Tasmanian Archives and Heritage* <https://www.linc.tas.gov.au/archive-heritage/> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Familysearch India deaths and burials 1719-1948* <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1584968> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *Findmypast British India Office marriages* [http://search.findmypast.co.uk/search-world-records/british-india-
 office-marriages](http://search.findmypast.co.uk/search-world-records/british-india-%20%20%20office-marriages) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Findmypast British Army Worldwide Index 1841* [http://search.findmypast.com/search-world-records/british-army-worldwide-index-1841](http://search.findmypast.com/search-world-records/british-%20%20%20army-worldwide-index-1841) WO12 /2048 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Ancestrylibrary.com 1891 UK census collection* <http://search.ancestry.com.au/search/group/1891uk> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Findmypast* *1891 England Wales & Scotland census* [http://search.findmypast.com.au/search-world-
 records/1891-england-wales-and-scotland-census](http://search.findmypast.com.au/search-world-%20%20%20%20records/1891-england-wales-and-scotland-census) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *FreeBMD* <http://www.freebmd.org.uk/> [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *The National Archives UK Discovery* h[ttp://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C4397068](http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C4397068) WO25/321 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *Ancestrylibrary.com London, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538-1812* <http://search.ancestrylibrary.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1624> [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser* 24 September 1895 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Scotland’s People: censuses 1851* <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/> [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Scotland’s People*: *statutory registers, births and baptisms* <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/> [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *Scotland’s People: censuses 1861* <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/> [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Letter from the Immigration Commissioner in Glasgow to the Colonial Secretary of Queensland regarding
 what steps Amity Moreton Thomson would have to undertake to obtain possession of a land grant made to
 her by Sir Thomas Brisbane in 1824* Qld State Archives
 <http://www.archivessearch.qld.gov.au/Image/DigitalImageDetails.aspx?ImageId=2768> [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Moreton Bay detachment 1824-25 : the soldiers who served at the Redcliffe convict settlement* / by John
 St. Pierre for the Redcliffe Historical Society (2nd ed) 2006 p 47 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)