

Visits to the dentist – 1873 style

Extracts from the diary of Nelly Shire

Introductory Note

The family

Nelly (Elina) was the youngest child of Lyster Henry (1800–1866) and Elizabeth Maillot (1809–1876) who arrived in Natal in mid-1846 from Mauritius via the Cape, with their first child, Joseph who had been born at sea. In 1896 Joseph provided information for Christopher Bird's project on the history of the early settlers. He related that his father was an Irishman of German extraction who had joined the British Army in his youth, and had landed up in Mauritius with his regiment. He bought his discharge after 14 years' service, married, and for seven years ran an 'academy for girls' on the island. It did not prosper, so towards the end of 1845 he gave it up and sailed for the Cape, and ultimately Natal. Elizabeth, born on the island of Bourbon, is said to have had pirate ancestry.

They settled on the Little Umhlanga river on the farm *Melkhout Kraal* (later *Milkwood Kraal*) where Henry was the first in the colony to cultivate sweet potatoes, and by 1850 was also growing cotton. Sugar became his main crop in later years. Joseph maintained that their home was the first substantial house to be built in Victoria County. Family information also has it that the flamboyant tree near the house was the first in Natal, grown from seed brought from Mauritius.

It appears that Nelly's mother was the one with the money, and *Melkhout Kraal* (4 280 acres) was originally registered in her name, viz. Marie Elizabeth Chéerie Maillot and that of co-buyer, William Wilson (c.1813–1868).

In 1854 something happened which changed their circumstances completely. The first inkling comes in a letter to

Henry from the Colonial Secretary dated 15 June, recording that the Lt.-Governor had no objection to Lyster Henry assuming his own name, Henry Shire. There is no incoming correspondence in the Colonial Secretary's papers, but there is a letter from Lyster Henry dated 14 June, superscribed 'Crown Hotel, Pietermaritzburg', about the title deeds for Elizabeth's farm *Mount Elias* in the Noodsberg. From the Surveyor-General's papers one sees that also on the 14th, in Pietermaritzburg, Henry received and signed for the titles to *Mount Elias*. From the fact that he was in the capital at this time, it is probable that he had a personal interview with the Lt.-Governor explaining his reasons for wanting to drop his alias.

Just over a week later an advertisement appeared in the press giving notice that he had resumed the name Henry Shire. On 8 July he and Elizabeth made an ante-nuptial contract. This particularly excluded community of property in regard to any possessions in Mauritius to which Elizabeth was entitled, or to which she might in the future become entitled. They were married at 'the Umhlanga' on about 31st July.

An explanation could be that his wife Catherine Barrett had died in Mauritius, leaving him free to marry Elizabeth.

A Mauritius resident, M. Bourbon, came to Natal in the late 1840s, where he remained two years, afterwards writing *Deux ans à Natal: souvenirs d'un voyageur*¹ which appeared in Mauritius in 1850. Some of his statements are far-fetched or incorrect. However, it seems as though he is referring to Henry Shire when he writes:

Ten miles from Port Natal I met a man well known in Mauritius, who, under a charge of bigamy, married for a third time (so they say) to escape from the severity of English law which, as everyone knows,

does not punish trigamy at all, although bigamy is a capital offence. This man, whom I will not name, arrived in Natal with the first immigrants and, in return for 6 000 shillings, became the owner of 6 000 acres of more or less arable land. Today (that is to say four or five years later) this same property, not yet cleared, but enhanced by a fine house, extensive outbuildings and huge cattle paddocks, is valued at 20 000 *piasters*², not including the numerous herds which are fattening at no cost in the pastures, and which represent a considerable asset. It is generally reckoned that cattle sent to Port Natal in the condition required for export are worth a minimum of 15 *piasters*² a head...

In March 1859 Henry Shire's sister Mary Ann Doyle (c.1804–1871), the widow of Anthony Holmes Doyle, and a teacher at the Littleton Parochial School in Thurles, County Tipperary, Ireland, arrived in Natal with her family, Anna Maria (c.1839–1867), Anthony Gideon (born c.1841) and Caroline (born c.1843). Shire had stood surety for the repayment of the fares. Mrs Doyle taught for a time, but was the pound-mistress at the Umhlanga when she died. Anna Maria in 1860 married Thomas Duff (1825–1905)³.

Shire was much loved by his family as is revealed in Nelly's diary, and was a prominent member of his community. In 1854, although at this time it was only through his wife that he could aspire to be a landowner, he was elected a member of the Victoria County Council, while a neighbour, William Lister, even went as far as to describe him as the 'squire' of the district. Although his obituary described him as 'a true Christian' – his Indian indentured labourers (some of whom might also have been Christian), saw another side of him. The Verulam Resident Magistrate's letter books record that a commission was appointed by the Lt.-Governor to enquire

into complaints against Shire by his Indian labourers, the first sitting being set for 19 March 1862. Then in November the magistrate, Dr Benjamin Blaine, informed the Indian Immigration Agent that the Indians refused to return to their master ‘in any case’, alleging as the reason ‘their dislike to his service’. On hearing Blaine’s decision re their complaint they said they could not trust their master to carry it out. When Blaine promised that at the next branch court in their area he would have them and Shire before him, and see that justice was done, they still refused. He then sent them off to Shire in the care of two policemen, but they all absconded *en route*⁴.

Shire died in 1866, ‘after a long trial of bitter afflictions’⁵, according to his gravestone, and Elizabeth died ten years later, both at *Milkwood Kraal*. Their only son Joseph Elias carried on with sugar cultivation after his mother’s death, but by 1877, while still farming, had a contract from the Durban Corporation for road works. As late as August 1881 he described himself as a planter and contractor, but by September 1882 he was contracting only. In this year he constructed pumps and wells for the Corporation. He also worked in the OFS and Transvaal. Shire Construction (although no longer in the family) is a reminder of his influence on the construction industry.

The diary

This forms part of the Natal Society collection, housed in the Alan Paton Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg. It can really only be described as scraps of a diary, on paper which over the years has become torn in places. Two of the three fragments are dated and run from 18 February–16 March 1873, and 4–21 April 1873 and end abruptly as Nelly was travelling to

Pretoria. The third was written in October (possibly also in 1873) and is very short. It is all that has survived of her description of a wagon journey back to Natal.

The patient

Elina, commonly known as Nelly, the fourth daughter and youngest child, was born in about 1854, and was 19 when she wrote the diary. In July 1874, at St Paul’s, Durban, she married a mining engineer, George Edward Fewcus, a native of Northumberland. Possibly she had met him during her sojourn in the Transvaal the previous year. She died in Durban on 12 September 1876.

The dentist

Little has come to light about George William Baylis. He married Josephine Ruth Hill in 1886, part of their marriage settlement being a piece of land in Scott Street, Addington, with Baylis’ relation, Leighton Baylis, being the trustee. The marriage was dissolved on 17 June 1890. On 20 June, being about to leave for England and because Leighton refused to accept the trust, Josephine gave her power of attorney to Dr H.A. Dumat to recover monies due to her under the court judgment and to apply for the appointment of a trustee to receive transfer of the Scott Street property.

George was still practising in Durban in 1895.

More is known of Leighton Baylis (c.1850, Gloucestershire – 20 Apr. 1904, Pietermaritzburg), also a dentist and probably his brother. His parents were George Lawrence Woodroffe Baylis and Anne Baylis. The evidence points to Leighton Street, between Loop (now Jabu Ndlovu) and Burger Streets, being named after him. His wife was Louisa Martha, the daughter of a land surveyor, Robert Anderson (c.1818–1878) who lived at Park View

on Erf 14 Burger Street⁶ (today's 146 Jabu Ndlovu Street). Louisa inherited the property from her widowed mother, and in 1899 she and the owner of Erf 13 Burger

Street, John Mortimer of Bale & Mortimer, land and house agents, each donated land to create the street.

SHELAGH SPENCER



Wednesday 19 [February]

We have to go to Durban today... [from *Milkwood Kraal*]

Friday 21

... I went to the dentist yesterday and both Henrietta⁷ & Jeannette⁸... assure me I was exceedingly 'impudent'? to him – He extracted a tooth for me & I wanted him to put in a false one in its place – but he said he did not know how it was to be managed & he would a great deal rather not do it – I then insisted upon having it all my own way – & he replied 'very well then, but I won't be responsible for its coming down; I can only do my best' – After that he came into the next room and gave us such a scolding – He knew that people used to call him independent and disobliging – but he also knew he consulted his patients' good & not his own – '& she' pointing to me and speaking to Henrietta 'came here fully expecting that I would not do anything for her – & that she would ask me to do it.' He said a great more in the same strain which I can in no way remember – At any rate his lecture had a beneficial effect upon me for today when I went to him I had given up the false teeth – greatly to his relief – He was exceedingly agreeable to me today he stopped 3 teeth for me and bade me return next Tuesday – I must not forget to say that he hurt my mouth at the side a good bit & it has been smarting very considerably ever since – When Mr Baylis had nearly done all he intended to he told me I had a great deal of pluck – a great many people had they been undergoing what I was would have told him he was choking them – All I gave for answer to

that speech was that I thought I would make a very good martyr.

Saturday 22

Oh! I have passed a miserable night I had tooth ache last night worse than I have ever had it – I dare say I did sleep – but it seems to me like as if I had not slept a wink – I was so glad when daylight made its appearance for I then wrote a note to Mr Raw⁹ for some Antimonial wine & when it came I emptied the bottle in teaspoonfuls every five minutes but I am afraid the wine was not strong enough as it had hardly no effect upon me at all – at any rate – the very acute pain went away & I had a small nap – but ever since I have been feeling miserable – I still feel a pain in my tooth but not half so bad as it was last night – But anyway in case I may be wakeful again tonight I shall provide myself with candle, matches & a book...

Sunday 23

...My valentine is an ugly little thing costing about 6d with forget me not in front & such terribly love sick lines in original (?) poetry – all about 'thy beauty' ... – what nonsense ... Henrietta...decides... it must be Mr Baylis – what an imagining – to go and accuse a poor unfortunate man who does not so much as know my name of sending me a valentine – this is even worse that the romances mother used to invent....

Tuesday 25

... I went to Mr Baylis today according to arrangement & was agreeably surprised to find that for once he condescended to know my surname but of course I don't

suppose for one moment that he knows me – I dare say he thinks I am Jemima¹⁰, Rosie¹¹ & myself in one – It was in this wise I discovered that he knew my name – Henrietta who was in the next room happened to have fixed her attention upon a book of Vignette for gentlemen & Mr Baylis rather objected to such a proceeding but at any rate that little circumstance set him talking about the books on his table & he says – ‘I put a Bible on my table but I have never seen a patient reading it yet.’ His fingers were in my mouth & so I could not say anything so presently he proceeded with ‘Oh yes! Once I saw your mother reading it – you see I notice what people do’ my mouth was brimful of table napkin instruments & gold so perforce I was dumb.

He stopped one of my side front teeth with gold, this is the first time – although scarcely a tooth in my head is without stopping – that gold had been put in my teeth & consequently I consider myself tremendously ill-used – it hurt me very much indeed to have that tooth stopped with gold but it hurt me a great deal more when Mr Baylis made an enormous hole in one of my back teeth and touched the nerve – this is a tooth which up till now I have thought only a little decayed & about a year ago when I went to Mr Baylis to have my other teeth attended to he said that one was not sufficiently decayed for him to meddle with & now he thinks it would be more advisable to pull it out than do anything else – but out (I believe) of compassion for my empty mouth he has decided that the nerve shall be killed & then put a dressing so as to make the poor old tooth last a little longer I had expected to pay Mr Baylis today & so I begged William¹² to lend me £3 10s on the strength of what Joe¹³ is going to give me on the first of next month – but Nose OO¹⁴ said ‘no’ he had not got any money [but] my lady¹⁵ put me

up to the trick of asking him again down at the store – & so I did with good kind my lady’s assistance & after a few ‘nos’ asked for money was in my purse & I was saying ‘I am so, so, so very much obliged’ – but all this need never have been said perhaps for the dentist says I must go back again twice more he thinks...

Wednesday 26th

...I went again to Mr Baylis & he took the nerve out of my tooth & stopped it – Amongst the other things he said to me was this – ‘I would so much like to have a pupil I would take so much pains to teach him’ a long pause ‘If I liked him’ another long pause – ‘I refused two boys because I did not like their appearance’ all this time I was longing to say something only his fingers...[paper torn]

NOTES

- 1 Reprinted in *Natalia*, vols. 18 and 19.
- 2 By Bourbon’s reckoning a *piaster* was then worth 4/-, i.e. five to the £.
- 3 Author of *First impressions of Natal by a Perthshire Ploughman* which was reprinted in *Natalia* 7, 1977. The Duff property was a subdivision of *Milkwood Kraal*, named *Woodlands*, but became more familiarly known as Duff’s Road, a name perpetuated as a station name when the railway was built. It is now part of KwaMashu.
- 4 Shire was not the only one who maltreated his indentured labour.
- 5 His obituary records his labour shortage, his losses from fire and a stroke which left him partly paralysed.
- 6 The erf-naming pattern is that the erfs on the Town Hill side of the street take their name from the street, while those on the Msunduzi side take the name from the street behind them, e.g. the Anglican Cathedral is on Erf 17 Longmarket (now Langalibalele) Street, while the erf opposite it in Church Street is Erf 17 Church Street.
- 7 Her sister Henrietta (born 1847) who in 1865 had married William Arbuckle (1839–1915), at this time a Durban storekeeper. He later became Mayor of Durban four times during the period 1877–1882, then a member of the Legislative Council 1897–1902. He was knighted in 1902.
- 8 Her sister Jeannette (1849–1887), otherwise known as Jemima.

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- 9 Robert Raw (1810–1876) of Durban – an ‘apothecary and chemist’ according to the 1853 *Directory of D’Urban and Pietermaritzburg*.
- 10 Jeannette above – referred to in the diary interchangeably as Jemima or Jeannette.
- 11 Her sister Rosette (1852–1911) who married William Wilson (1849–1934) in 1877. They farmed at *Sterling* in the Underberg district. William was the son of the William Wilson who was part-owner of *Milkwood Kraal*.
- 12 Her Arbuckle brother-in-law.
- 13 Her brother Joseph Elias (1846–1919).
- 14 Nose OO, her diary name for Arbuckle.
- 15 Henrietta.

A modern dental surgeon comments:

In the process of making some deductions from Nelly’s diary entries concerning her visit to the dentist, it seems very apparent that the basic principles of excavation, repair and replacement have not changed much. Indeed, these would not be far removed from those practised by at least the Etruscans in c.800 BC. What has improved since the industrial revolution is the advanced means of rotary excavation.

I am sure that Dr Baylis would have used standard amalgam mixed with a pestle and mortar apart from the gold filling mentioned.

Research is still trying very hard to find a material to match amalgam as a good functional tooth filling material.

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