

## **Darling Downs South East Qld.**

My ancestors on both sides came from the United Kingdom, and when I lived and studied in England I desperately wanted to feel a deep connection with my ancestral land, but it was not to be. England felt like a foreign country, with strange (albeit very picturesque) scenery, and curious customs. One Mothering Sunday I visited Staverton in Northamptonshire, where my great-great-great-great-grandmother is buried - and possibly her mother and grandmother before her - hoping that the earth, the village and the countryside would reveal some long dormant familial memory. I felt nothing; I sat self-consciously in the church, wandered the graveyard wistfully, and gazed at the cottages like a tourist. It is a very pretty village, and I have since returned a number of times, but it did not touch me as I had hoped it would.

However, a recent visit to the Darling Downs in south-east Queensland was a deeply moving experience, as I retraced the paths followed by my family in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was a journey into an imagined history, the story of my mother, my grandmother, great-grandmother, and so on - of five generations of women I refer to as my Motherline: Josephine, Florence, Edith, Rebecca and Lydia.

The Darling Downs, those vast tablelands west of Brisbane where so many European pioneers settled, bear very little resemblance to the gentle green downs of England for which they were named. They are undulating plains interspersed with scattered gums and low rocky outcrops, stretching to the far distant hills. Before European settlement Aboriginal people roamed this area, hunting kangaroos and emus. The first Europeans were attracted to the grassy plains, and established large sheep properties. Today the land has been cleared, and fields of grain have replaced the sheep.

My family connection with the Darling Downs began in 1855 when Lydia, her husband Thomas and six children left Staverton to join the ship *John Davies*. Their journey brought them to Australia, to employment and a new life at Eton Vale Station in what is now the Cambooya Shire. At the time Lydia was in her forties and her fourth daughter Rebecca (my great-great-grandmother) was eighteen. Their descendants, Edith, Florence and Josephine were all born on the Downs; I was the first to break with tradition, and was born in Brisbane.

So I returned to the Downs and to the places which hold the memories of my Motherline. Eton Vale Station is no more; only an old brick chimney marks the spot where the homestead stood, on the edge of a (now dry) creek at the base of a small hill, facing west across the plains to the serried rows of blue hills in the distance. Where the stations hands, shepherds and servants lived - where Lydia made a home for her family, cooking, cleaning and carrying water, and perhaps helping in the homestead or in the garden - was not marked.

I drove a short distance into Cambooya for a cool drink, and walked down to where the creek flows (metaphorically speaking) through the township. It was awe-inspiring: deep, dry and filled with dramatic rock formations, like the ruins of old stone buildings. I walked and rock-hopped for a long time, absorbing the atmosphere. The last puddles had evaporated long ago in the drought, leaving a dry, dusty, tessellated pavement where once water would have gushed and flooded in the summer storms, and

slowed to a more sedate pace in the winter. There were small shells in the creek bed, sad reminders of a lost ecosystem. Grasses with furry cream seed heads grew between the rocks, in optimistic imitation of a foaming stream. Pepperinas - my mother's favourite trees - with clusters of small red berries lined the eastern bank. To the west, the plains stretched for miles in unbroken sameness.

It would have been within an hour's journey of the Eton Vale Station homestead by horse or dray. Did my grandmothers and their families swim and picnic there? Perhaps. Perhaps not. I seemed to hear the echoes of children's laughter in the creek. Aboriginal children? White children? I am reminded of the feminist advice re our lost herstory: "Remember, make an effort to remember or, failing that, invent." And I choose to believe that, on that day, I walked where they had walked, the women who gave me life; I sat where they had sat; I dreamed where they had dreamed.

My great-great-great-grandmother Lydia was buried in the Toowoomba cemetery in 1871, and her daughter Rebecca in 1891. Did they ever yearn for the land they had left behind; did they still feel the "love of field and coppice, Of green and shaded lanes, Of ordered woods and gardens", or did they, like Dorothea McKellar, grow to "love a sunburnt country, A land of sweeping plains, Of ragged mountain ranges, Of drought and flooding rains"? I hope that their lives on the Downs fulfilled their dreams but, just in case, I located their graves and placed on them some photos of Staverton I took on a recent visit to England. I also offered them objects from my own place: seeds and flowers, pebbles, a feather, some rain water I had caught.

Over the years, as Rebecca's daughters and granddaughters married and followed their husbands in search of work, a series of moves across the Darling Downs occurred. Today only weed-infested gardens mark the site of Edith's home in Oakey; the building is long gone, a casualty of the population drift to the city. A pile of broken bricks, one of many clustered around the abandoned mine head, is all that remains of Florence's marital home at Mount Colliery. Further west, in the tiny township of Cement Mills, all that survives of the past is the one room building where Josephine started school, and the outline of the workers' cottages straggling untidily up the hill.

Almost nothing remains. "The roofs are ruined, the towers toppled, frost in the mortar has broken the gate, torn and worn and shorn by the storm, eaten through with age." Like the inhabitants of the ruined city in this Old English poem, the lives of my grandmothers are crumbled to dust, blown away on the wind. And yet the land holds the memory of their presence; the trees whisper stories of their spirit; bricks and stones bear witness to their passage; their bones feed the land in an eternal cycle.

As I read "The Ruin" I experience the same sense of loss, and of presence, that I had felt on the Darling Downs. In a reflective process that parallels my excursion into the imagined history of my Motherline, the Anglo-Saxon poet wanders among the fallen stones, collapsed towers and broken tiles of a once-magnificent city, and reflects on the ruins, their builders, and the people who dwelt there. It was clearly a very impressive city, with hot springs, luxurious bath houses and splendid courts and halls; a place of beauty and wealth.

Scholars are divided about the precise location of this ruined city. It was, in all probability, originally designed and built by the Romans; the poem also refers to "re-builders", but it is not clear who these may have been, or when the reconstruction

occurred. I accept the most commonly agreed identification, and choose to believe that the city was Aquae Sulis - now modern day Bath - in England.

Ironically, the manuscript of "The Ruin", like the buildings it describes, is badly damaged, with parts of the text unreadable. Even more ironically, the religious traditions that were centred in the temple buildings over the hot springs at Bath were also, at the time the poem was written, in ruins, "the sanctuaries become empty wasteland ... their shrines collapsed" and are, today, fragmented and largely forgotten.

I read this poem with great sadness. Despite its clear and somewhat detached tone, it is a deeply moving work. The language is rich and resonant, and the extensive use of alliteration creates a reflective repetitive effect, almost like a mantra. The descriptions of the shattered walls and buildings are clear and succinct: "Bright were the buildings, with many bath houses, high noble gables and a great noise of armies, many a mead hall filled with men's joys", but they still manage to convey a sense of abrupt demise, when "mighty fate made an end to all that", and of regret for what is no more. With the poet, I mourn the loss of the glorious architecture, the beautiful buildings, the many pools and gushing streams, and the vibrant community. The "courts are empty", their residents gone: once "gold-bright, bedecked in splendour", now "rotten, forgotten", in "the hard grip of the ground".

I grieve, as well, for the destruction of the ancient nature traditions that honoured streams and springs, that recognised the centrality of water for all life. Today the circular pools at Bath have been reconstructed from the ruins, but in place of hot streams gushing over great stones, there is now only one place where water spills from an overflow, out of reach of all but the most agile visitor. Instead of devotees paying homage there are crowds of tourists. Candlelight has been replaced by camera flash bulbs. Votive offerings have given way to entrance fees and tacky souvenirs.

This poem becomes my own lament for long-forgotten earth-centred traditions, and an elegy for the lost stories of my Motherline. I want to reconstruct both: to remember the ancient traditions of the earth, and my own female ancestors, from dismembered fragments of myth, story and physical evidence. My sources include parish records, shipping lists, cemetery records, family reminiscences, and ancestral places like Staverton and the Darling Downs. They also include medieval manuscripts that record prayers, spells and other evidence of earth-centred beliefs and practices, and sites of ancient rituals, such as Aquae Sulis.

I have vivid memories of my last visit to Bath. I went, not as a tourist, but as a pilgrim. While I shared with other visitors a desire to learn more about the site, its builders and its history, I was also hoping to hear/sense/feel in the stones and the waters some echo or essence of the chants, processions and other devotions that were held on this site so long ago, and to which it still bears witness.

Some evidence was unmistakable. I recall the larger-than-life gilt bronze head of Minerva, (*sans* helmet), probably from a statue which stood in her temple beside the sacred spring, looking across the courtyard to the great altar. I also remember the carvings of the four seasons, surmounted by a decorated pediment containing an image of the moon goddess Luna, which faced a carving of the sun god Sol on the opposite wall. Autumn, winter, spring, summer, moon and sun; the seasons and the solar symbols; all are represented, but it is the element of water which dominates this site. Water: still and

moving, contained and free-flowing, from its first emergence in the sacred spring, through the spring overflow and the bathing pools, to its onward passage in the River Avon.

I leaned over the guard rail at the overflow, and stretched my hand out to where the water falls into an open brick drain. A sign warned visitors of the dangers posed by the hot water. In a moment of levity, I wondered if those long ago worshippers at this site were similarly advised, and if the temple staff in those days were concerned about health and safety procedures and public liability insurance.

Elsewhere imagination and creativity were needed to visualise the temple complex at Bath as it had been, before fate, time and nature intervened and its buildings, like those at Eton Vale, Oakey, Mount Colliery and Cement Mills were "tumbled ... felled by the weather". But, despite their ruined state, each of these places holds the memory of stories that are significant for me: of Lydia, Rebecca, Edith, Florence and Josephine; of an ancient presence in the earth, the seasons, the planets and the elements.

"The Ruin" tells us that "the earth's grasp ... holds the builders ... until a hundred generations of men are gone". We are approaching this time, and I am filled with optimism. The last lines of the poem, with their vivid descriptions of the spring at its most majestic, reinforce the possibility of regeneration. They speak to me of a time when humans will, once again, celebrate the wonder of the natural world, in the hot springs and gushing streams of Britain, and in the rocky gullies and dry creek beds of Australia.

- Patricia Rose -  
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