

Hillard, Kerr, Mathewson & Alison

... and their origins in Fermanagh (Northern Ireland) and Scotland

McAlister, Ballantyne, Davis & Barry

... and their origins in Antrim, Clare, Kerry (Ireland), Scotland and Essex (England)

Part of the history of early Victoria



Melbourne in 1858 - Looking west down Bourke St from Spring St

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John Hillard

18 Buckland St, Tawonga South, Victoria, Australia

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Preface

As a teenager in the early 1970s, my mother, sister and I lived with my elderly aunt - Linda May Hillard (1898-1974) - at 334 Kooyong Rd, South Caulfield. This was the house that my grandfather John Beattie Hillard (1854-1918) had bought about 1898 and had been inherited by my aunt on the death of her mother Hannah Jane Margaret Mathewson (1860-1928). At that time, all I knew about my family were the names of my various aunts and uncles. I recall talking to "Aunty Lin" about her family and having her give me the names of her father and mother both of whom were familiar to me only from old pictures in her living room. She then told me in some detail about her memories of living in South Caulfield at the turn of the 20th century. She had very distinct memories of her father being very proud of his horses. They were stabled in a separate building at the rear of the house that was at that time used as garages. The large bins built into the central room of that building were feed bins and she pointed out the marks on the wall where the partitions had been for the individual stalls. She said that the horses had been grazed on open land to the south of the house.

When I then asked about her grandparents, her responses were vague. She knew little about her paternal grandfather other than that he "died by water". I don't recall whether she had any memory of her paternal grandmother but she might have as Mary Kerr (1827-1906) lived nearby at that time and died when Linda was 8 years old. Again, I don't recall whether she had any knowledge of her maternal grandparents - Alexander Mathewson (1827-91) and Margaret Alison (1828-74) - but it is unlikely as they died well before she was born.

I did not do anything further to investigate my family history until 1980. I had left Australia in 1973 to go to University in Dunedin in New Zealand and only returned to Australia in early 1980. Despite having a degree, I'd not been able to get a suitable job and had done various short-term jobs such as labouring in the Central Australian gas fields and working as a barman. So, it might well have been the need to do something a bit more "intellectual" that prompted me to do some further research on my family tree. At that time, such research involved visits to the Registrar of Births, Marriages & Deaths, to the Land Registry Office for land records and the Public Record Office of Victoria (PROV) for immigration and other records. Such research was very time consuming as there was usually a time delay between searching indexes, ordering certificates and obtaining results. But, right from the start, I got hooked on trying to expand on what I knew.

From the start, I was amazed at how easy it was to step back through the generations using the information in the various records. What I only discovered later was that Victoria had one of the earliest (and arguably the best) systems in the world for compulsory registration of life events. We all have good reason to thank William Henry Archer (1825-1909) – an English gentleman and statistician – who was appointed as the acting Registrar-General when statutory registration was first introduced in 1853. Unlike his counterparts in other places, Archer thought through what information should be captured on birth, marriage and death certificates that would enable subsequent generations to link this particular individual to their forebears. For example, a Victorian birth certificate from this period lists not just when and where a person was born but also lists the names, occupation, ages and places of birth and marriage of the parents and the details of the informant and any witnesses. It is a testament

to his design of the system that the information collected today is essentially the same as it was then.

In mid-1980, I got a permanent job with BP Australia working as part of the project team that were responsible for developing Australia's first Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project – the NorthWest Shelf Project. Later that year, I was offered the opportunity to work in London and I moved there in mid-1981. After my first year of family history research in Victoria, I knew the names of my ancestors back to my great-grandparents, when they arrived and where they had come from. It was also clear that my ancestors from the previous three generations were from Northern Ireland, Scotland, England or Ireland so my being in London gave me the ideal opportunity to investigate further back.

Since statutory registration only began in the 1850-60 period, the main sources of information would be parish records, census information and land records. When I began work on the different lines, it became very clear that the completeness and the quality of the records was very different between each country. Many of the Scottish records extended back into the 18th century, gave reasonable amounts of detail and were readily available through the records offices despite the usual delays due to corresponding by mail. The Northern Irish records are patchy due to some of the original parish and census records being destroyed in 1921 during the Irish War of Independence. But, in many of the parishes relevant to our Fermanagh ancestors (Aghalurcher and Aghavea) the original registers had survived and were held by local vicars. The English records were perhaps the most difficult due to the indexes being difficult to work with and the fact that the name of my great grandfather - Frederick Davis of Essex - would, I thought, be very common. So, my priorities at that time mostly driven by the lines that I thought would be easiest to research.

In general, the information available from these early records was much less detailed than what I'd been used to from the Victorian records. Many birth records gave only the fathers' name except for the Scottish records which usually gave the mother's maiden name as well. Burial records were generally much less informative than the death records from Victoria that I was familiar with. English, Scots and Irish records generally say little more than "Buried James Bloggs today" although sometimes with a note about where he lived.

One feature of the Irish records that is very important is the concept of "townlands". There are more than 60,000 of these ancient land divisions in Ireland that average about 300 acres but with the smallest being less than an acre. People seem to have habitually referred to the townland they lived, and it is a really important clue about where people thought was "home". When trying to read a written record, it pays to think about who it was that created the record given that many people were illiterate or only partially literate. If it was a local Vicar, then the record of names and locations will generally be consistent. But, if it was an English clerk recording details for a ship manifest, then what he thought he heard from someone with a broad Irish or Scots accent might be very different from what the speaker meant.

I lived in London for a total of six years in early and-mid 1980s. I visited Northern Ireland twice and visited locations in Fermanagh associated with our Hillard, Kerr and Somerville ancestors as well as Belfast and Dublin to visit the record offices.

Some of these places were easier to visit than others. This was the period of the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland and there was a low-intensity war going on between the British army, the RUC and the IRA. I’d hired a car in Dublin and driven up to Fermanagh. My introduction to the province was driving around a corner to find a soldier waving me down. He was friendly but asked to see my papers and then waved me on as soon as I’d explained who I was. All the while there was a soldier pointing a heavy machine gun at the car from the embankment above the road. There were often military helicopters overhead and, while in a small village one day, it suddenly filled with soldiers in full combat gear who then disappeared again a little later. I was there to visit vicars some of whom lived in isolated houses so it was quite normal to have the door open only slightly so that they could confirm who you were before being let in.

The tension between the Protestant and Catholic communities was evident even in rural areas like Fermanagh. The attitude of the Protestant minority was very “in your face” with “Northern Ireland is British” banners hung from walls in small towns. Despite it being a very beautiful area, there was virtually no tourists from the rest of Britain. The only tourists appeared to be French and German fishermen who took advantage of the superb boating and fishing in Lough Erne and the rivers.

Even to this day, there was little intermarriage between the communities, so it was strange to realise that my surname meant that people instantly recognised that I was descended from the Anglo-Irish Protestant community. I’d realised from my previous work that all my Fermanagh ancestors (Hillard, Kerr, Somerville and Beatty) were Protestants so I knew that the relevant records would be with the local Church of Ireland. I almost felt that I wanted to explain to the family the ran the B&B where I stayed that I was Catholic on my mothers’ side.

Once they knew who you were, the Vicars were very helpful and usually just sat me at a table in their house with a cup of tea and left me to work my way through the registers. The registers that they had were original with most dating from about 1790 to 1820 onward. I simply scanned through each page looking for Hillard, Kerr, Somerville or Beatty entries and then noting the details for each relevant birth, marriage or burial. Some of the registers were in good condition, but others were not, with loose pages and damage from moisture or rodents. In some cases, the handwriting was easy to read but in others it was terrible with illegible scrawls. In such cases, it was a very slow process to identify relevant entries and then to decipher what they said.

Some of the most difficult ones (e.g. the pre-1842 registers for the Parish of Aghalurcher) have not been deciphered and made available on the internet to this day. The surnames that I was interested in were much more common in some Parishes than others. I will discuss this in more detail later but in some Parishes, there were so many Somerville / Summerville and/or Beatty / Beattie entries that I gave up trying to record them all and so my records are incomplete in that respect.

When I mentioned the surnames that I was interested in, the vicar would often say that there were families of that name living nearby. I was reluctant to bother people that I didn’t know and it was only on subsequent trips that I met some of my Kerr cousins that still live in Fermanagh today. After spending many hours recording hundreds of births, marriages and

deaths from the 19th Century, and comparing it with how few people live there today, it became clear the extent to which successive waves of migration had de-populated this part of Ireland in the second half of the 19th Century.

I did a few trips to various areas where our Scots ancestors originated: the Cockpen / Lasswade area south of Edinburgh for the Mathewsons, the Innerwick area of East Lothian for the Porteous family, the Cupar / Monimail area of Fife for the Alison and McRabbie families and the Fodderty area south of Inverness for the Ballantynes. In these cases, I did not spend much time trying to obtain records from the churches as most of the original records were already held centrally and copies were searchable at the central record offices. In Cockpen / Lasswade and Cupar I did visit the local record offices and the librarians were very willing to help. There were very few people searching such records at that time, so they were much more willing to spend time helping than I suspect they would be now.

In recent years, I have visited southwest Ireland to see the places where our maternal great-grandmothers came from in Counties Clare and Kerry. I have also briefly visited the northwest coast of County Antrim where our McAlister and Murray ancestors originated.

As the only boy in my family, my parents did the traditional thing and gave me the names of both grandfathers so I was named after John Beattie Hillard (1854-1918) and Andrew Brendan McAlister (1878-1938). Until I started this work, I had no idea how far these names went back in my family. My paternal grandfather John Beattie Hillard was probably named after his mother's parents who were John Kerr (1786-1844) and Jane Beatty (c1791-1856) and his father may be a John Kerr of Killarbran who is listed in the 1788 Roll of Electors. My maternal grandfather Andrew McAlister was named after his maternal grandfather Andrew Ballantyne (c1826-1888). I suspect that both names run even further back in both lines and future research might cause me to modify this summary.

Of the direct ancestors that I have in my tree today, I think I had identified at least 75% of them before the year 2000. The internet has made it much easier to access family history material but it has not added much to the early source material. This makes sense when you consider that much of the early material (e.g. parish registers, census, cemetery inscriptions, etc) that is available on the internet now was already available back in the 1980s but, at that time, it was on microfilm and you had to visit the national register offices to search it. There is a huge amount of other material (e.g. estate records, company archives, etc) held by national and local record offices around the world but very little of it has been digitised and that will only happen slowly as it largely depends on voluntary effort.

While the popularity of family history research has skyrocketed, the vast majority of people signed up to Ancestry do not do any original research but simply recycle work that others have done. The exception is where descendants have photos, letters and other heirlooms that have been handed down within one branch of a family and, if they are shared online, they can add significantly to what is known about that family. For each family line, there are a few people that I've met over time that have particular local knowledge (usually due to their being descended from a line that remained within the original location) and/or that do careful and comprehensive research and I've will refer to them as write each section of this document.

The most significant change in family history research in recent times has been the advent of DNA testing. When I first received my list of autosomal DNA matches my reaction was “who are these people”? But, after working through and identifying nearer relatives, its’ value became very clear. Identifying those people that also match known relatives meant that it became possible to group many of these matches into family lines. In many cases, it has helped to identify ancestors of our matches that might be siblings due to their living at the same locations and at about the same time.

The main benefit of Ancestry to me has been its capacity to handle much greater amounts of data than was possible using manual systems. So, in recent years, I have massively broadened my family tree to include the family lines of more and more distant cousins. By linking my known ancestors to other trees via notional “common ancestors”, I’ve used Ancestry to “fish” for cousins in other lines. When looking at other family trees that might be connected to mine, I check for DNA links with others that pop up through the “Ancestry Member Trees” feature of Ancestry. When I identify such a cousin, I’ll often find a few more DNA links with other descendants of that line. By then tagging those individuals as a “DNA match” and their ancestors as “DNA connections” I can track back to potential common ancestors.

My sisters and I are more likely to have stronger matches with other descendants on our father’s side than would be expected. The reason why is our very long “generation interval”. I was born in 1954, my father in 1904 and my grandfather in 1854 so the interval between generations is exactly 50 years. For most people, that interval is about 25 years – i.e. the average time between birth of a child and the birth of the parent.

Since a child inherits roughly half of their DNA from each parent, a child will inherit 25% from a particular grandparent, 12.5% from a particular great grandparent and 6.25% from a particular great-great-grandparent. Over a period of a hundred years, there would normally be four generations and, if two people had a link through a single great-great-grandparent then the only 6.25% of each person’s DNA would come from that ancestor. The actual amount of DNA that is common to the two descendants will usually be much less than this. With each generation, the child will receive only half of each parent’s DNA and the specific DNA chromosomes that a child in one line of descent receives from their common ancestor may be different from those that a child receives in a different line of descent from that same ancestor.

The notable exception to this steady dilution of autosomal DNA through generations is where there are first cousin marriages, and these were not uncommon. This can result in significantly stronger matches than would be expected since the descendant is likely to pick up some of the DNA of the common ancestor via both cousins.

People from families with longer generation intervals are much more likely to show stronger matches over a given period of time that are people with shorter generation intervals – i.e. if fewer generations occur over a given period, then there will be much less dilution of the DNA inherited from a common ancestor.

In the rest of this document, I will summarise what I know about each of my great grandparents and where they lived immediately prior to migration. It will cover what I know

of their personal history, how the events of the day might have influenced their decision to migrate and how they travelled to Australia. I'll look back at their known ancestors and speculate on where that branch of the family might have originated. I'll also use my DNA links with cousins to identify those branches of each family that stayed in Ireland and those that emigrated – typically to the USA, Canada, Australia and NZ.

For the benefit of readers that share just some of my ancestry, I'll structure the remainder of this paper as separate chapters for each great grandparent so that you can easily identify those that are relevant to you:

1. Thomas Hillard (1825-1886) of Tattnaheglis, Fermanagh, Northern Ireland
... and his parents Robert Hillard (c1804-1860) and Ann Somerville (c1807-1885)
2. Jane Kerr (1827-1906) of Tattnaheglis, Fermanagh, Northern Ireland
... and her parents John Kerr (c1786-1844) and Jane Beatty (c1791-1856)
3. Alexander Mathewson (1827-1891) of Cockpen, Midlothian, Scotland
... and his parents John Matheson (1787-1868) & Agnes Porteous (1789-1855)
4. Margaret Alison (1828-1874) of Collessie, Fife, Scotland
... and her parents Thomas Alison (c1800-1851) and Mary McRabbie (1807-1880)
5. Patrick McAlister (1847-1910) of Layde, Antrim, Northern Ireland
... and his parents Edmund McAlister (c1816-1872) and Catherine Murray
6. Mary Ellen Ballantyne (1857-1928) of Castlemaine, Victoria, Australia
... and her parents Andrew Ballantyne (c1827-1888) and Mary O'Dowd (c1822-1906)
7. Frederick Davis (1839-1919) of Ilford, Essex, England
... and his parents Samuel Davis (1793-1870) and Mary Ann Smith (1803-1842)
8. Catherine Barry (1835-1898) of Killarney, Co Kerry, Ireland
... and her parents Richard Barry (c1796-1856) and Catherine Real (c1794-1888)

At the start of each chapter is a tree that identifies the ancestors of the relevant grandparent. They are colour coded to show what kind of evidence supports the inclusion of each individual in the tree:

- a)  - DNA Links to other descendants and documentary evidence
- b)  - DNA links or documentary evidence
- c)  - Weaker documentary or circumstantial evidence