

The fate of Caroline Broun; wife of Peter Nicholas Broun, the first Colonial Secretary of the Swan River Colony

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On 9 September 1848 “Mrs. P. Broun” was aboard the *Hindoo* bound for London from Fremantle. Caroline Broun was the only woman on board and she wrote the following (probably to her son James), reported in the *Inquirer* 18 July 1849¹:

‘Jan. 8, 1849; on board the William Fisher, Capt. Twiss, R. N., bound from Bahia to Liverpool. — We have all been wrecked! On the morning of Friday, the 29th Dec, at six o'clock, I was called and informed that the ship had sprung a leak. I dressed quickly, went on deck, and found all hands busy at the pumps. I assumed the task of providing refreshments and supplying the wants of the toiling crew, and that post I never left until 9 o'clock the next morning, when the ship was discovered to be on fire. Judge of our horror! She would not answer to her helm, and we felt her settling fast. For the first time since our catastrophe, I lost my courage, but in five minutes rallied, and went on the poop with the mate to help him to untackle the pinnace, while all the rest were busy emptying the longboat. This done, and some biscuit, water, and meat, being put into the boats, I was slung, with a rope around my waist, over the stern of the ship into the boat, which, from the fearful rolling of the vessel, could not come alongside. The captain was the last to get in; poor fellow, he had been on a sick bed for three days previous. We all got off in good order, and remained a few miles from the ill-fated wreck to see the last of her. She went down at about 2 o'clock, with all her treasures on board; the chronometer, a few necessary nautical things, and eight letters that chanced to be at hand, were the only things saved: we could not save the mail — the hold being on fire, we dared not open it. A month after we left Fremantle, we had to throw three bales of wool overboard, that had ignited, which was attributed to the wet manner in which they were shipped. The ship was too heavily laden with copper-ore. We were 4 days and 3 nights in the open boats, suffering from heat, rain, and squalls, placed upon an allowance of half a biscuit, half a pint of water, and two ounces of pork each a day. We were picked up by the William Fisher, after a frightful squall, and treated with every kindness by the captain. I was quite insensible when first taken on board. The kindness of Captain Burgoyne throughout the whole affair was above anything I ever experienced’

Who was this woman, prepared to roll up her sleeves and do whatever was necessary to hopefully avert disaster? Here then is what we know of the story of this adventurous woman, one who had followed her husband into the unknown – embarking on a journey which helped to establish a fledgling colony and the State we now call home. Let's start back "at the beginning."

Caroline was born in London in 1804, the daughter of James Simpson and Hannah Chantry² and she and Peter Brown (his name was changed back to Broun in about 1844) married in Edinburgh in 1825³. We have no idea of her early life or how she came to be in Scotland. The Brouns were a Scottish family, although Peter and his mother were born in Guernsey.

From the age of about 22 years Caroline produced babies every year or so from 1826 until 1844, bearing 12 in all, 8 of whom survived to adulthood. Caroline gave birth to their first son, McBryde Anderson Brown, in Scotland, born at Newmains House, Lochmaben, Dumfriesshire, in 1826.

In 1828 Peter and Caroline were living in Rockingham Row, Newington, London, which is where their first daughter, Anne Maingy Brown, was born that year. Six months later, Peter Broun was appointed “Secretary to the Government” at the yet to be established Swan River Colony. On daughter Anne’s birth record, Peter described himself as a “glass merchant” which is perhaps a strange qualification for a future senior public servant. As with most women of the day, Caroline’s life was to a large extent an adjunct to her husband’s career, and she supported Peter Broun in his

work as secretary to the Government and in particular, James Stirling. Peter's story has been told in abbreviated form and in footnotes to the wider history of the beginnings of Western Australia, but here we must pay tribute to his wife whose own story has been overlooked by the history books.

Caroline Broun arrived at the Swan River Colony with her husband Peter Nicholas Broun the Colonial Secretary and their two children McBryde Anderson Broun (2 years) and Anne Maingy Broun (1 year) in June 1829 aboard the *Parmelia*. One can only imagine what it must have been like for a young woman with a son not yet three and a infant in arms - not to mention being four months pregnant – boarding the *Parmelia* and sailing off into the unknown. Their third child was born on 31 October 1829, four months after their arrival and before they had a permanent home. The baby was named Ellen Stirling Broun after James Stirling's wife Ellen.

Caroline gave birth to nine children at the Colony from 31 October 1829, beginning with Ellen Stirling Broun, through to Jessie Souper Broun born in 1842. She left the Colony on 14 January 1844 per the *Napoleon* with her family for two years six months, presumably to visit family, returning on 8 June 1846 per the *John Bagshaw*. While she was away she gave birth to a son Edward Richard Broun on 18 June 1844 at St Andrews, Guernsey⁴.

By January 1830 the Brouns at last had a "home" - on the corner of Irwin Street and St. Georges Terrace, Perth. At least, it probably did not feel much like a home as Peter conducted all his official business in this building⁵, with all the comings and goings of visitors and settlers and officials. In fact Caroline's fourth child James was born in this house - during a dinner party for some official guests!

Peter had extensive land grants allotted to him based on the value of the goods he had brought with him. Caroline too, was granted land in the Plantagenet region, quite near where the town of Mount Barker now stands. The Broun's homestead property was to be called Bassendean (after a property of that name which had been in the family in Scotland, now a Perth suburb) and the family were able to move here away from the centre of government business. A bark-thatched house was apparently built on this property (much of what is now Ashfield) and it would have been here that Caroline had a stillborn child in 1833. By any English standard, life was primitive in the colony. The weather in summer was oppressive, mosquitoes were a problem and there was little market for the crops that were produced - the colony struggled.

Peter Nicholas Broun died on 5 November 1846 at his brother Richard McBryde Broun's Fremantle residence and was buried at the East Perth Cemetery. The public record and what is revealed for the first time in this diary is that Peter Broun left little to support his family after his death⁶. There was debate in the Legislative Council⁷ as to whether his widow was destitute and whether the government should award her a pension to enable her to support her family.

Ultimately, the Governor was authorised to expend a sum of £70 to “*enable the widow....to proceed to England, with the view of obtaining assistance to maintain her family*”⁸. More on how she fared in this regard later.

Thus we come to the voyage of the ill-fated *Hindoo* in 1848. Surely she gave thanks her children were not with her! Gone with the ship were all Peter Broun's notes and personal journals which Caroline had planned to publish when back in England. The glimmer of hope provided by those journals and papers - snuffed out. How much more of our early history went to the bottom of the Atlantic? These were the notes of a person at the very heart of the development of the colony in those early days. This incident (the loss of the papers) usually merits just a line or so in our official histories, but what a blow to Caroline who might have been financially rewarded by such publication.

The children remained in Western Australia when Caroline returned to England. This is easy to say, but imagine how any mother would feel leaving all her children behind, the youngest of whom was just six (Jessie). Several of her children she never saw again, and she probably did not attend any of

the eight marriages. Family news was only by way of letter, months late. She was miserable, poor, bitter and alone. Presumably in London she records in her diary:

“Listen to this, Those who do injury to others.....are not only accountable for the actual evil they inflict but also for the perversion of feeling which they give to in their victims. If this be true what have you got to answer for the many wicked acts you have done to me, separating a Mother from her children....I mean this for Richard Broun - CB“

This appears to refer to her brother-in-law Richard McBryde Broun, one of the three executors of Peter Broun’s Will. Although Richard McBryde was well respected in the colony, Caroline obviously had personal reasons for making such a diary entry.

Little appears to be known of Caroline after she left the Colony, where she lived, who she associated with and how she supported herself. Her diary records some journeys between Jersey, Edinburgh and London in 1864.

It is clear from her diary and official records that her attempts to gain a pension from the government were unsuccessful, that the disposal of her husband’s lands in the Colony yielded little after debts were settled and that she lived a meagre existence on the generosity of her family. The executors of Peter Broun’s Will appeared to be unable to provide any relief for Caroline’s financial situation. One of these, Richard McBryde Broun, with whom she had a troubled relationship, died in November 1858. Her problems were compounded by the fact that the winding up of Peter Broun’s estate was a protracted affair of at least 30 years after his death.⁹ The next part of this story reveals the hardship this caused.

Caroline writes: *“What brilliant hopes were held out to us if we would consent to go to West Australia to make a fortune in ten years. What a disappointing end, left a widow with eight children and not one penny to live on a sad denouement I was sent home for a pension under the faith of money being sent to me by Richard”*.

“This cruelty to the widow and children of a man who had served, and ruined his health, in that expensive Colony, and sunk all his property in it, which became valueless so therefore being perfectly helpless were all ruined. Then the Government sent me home for a shadow they called a pension this step was not a success, no pension so the widow was estranged from her dear helpless children, cared for as best they could be and she without money to return to them and herself sustained by dribblets of money from old time acquaintances”

She tried to find some solace in her faith:

*"My God my Father whilst I stray
Far from my home in life's rough way
Oh teach me from my heart to say
Thy will be done"*

and

“Ever since I have lived here, I have had misery, how I should like to get away cannot find a place so cheap, I get plenty of water here, and that’s a luxury”(sic)

As was often the case in those times, Caroline depended on her family to support her. Initially this fell to her sons McBryde Anderson, James William (Robert’s great grandfather) and Charles Frederick (Don’s 2 x great grandfather). However, they were struggling to make a living in the Colony.

McBryde was a registrar in the Convict Department while James and Charles were farming in the York-Beverley district. Things took a turn for the worse in December 1866 when McBryde died leaving a wife and daughter. This placed an even greater burden on James and Charles. A letter from James to his mother (December 14th 1865) confirms this and he writes “*I will have to provide for Mary Ann and Bessie¹⁰, so dear Mother you must try and live on your £60 as the farms will very soon become Shenton’s as we get no rent and he advanced your £60 on the strength of the farms*”.

Three of her sons in law; Robert McNeil, George J.D. Heath and James Lyall also seemed to have been involved in finalising Peter Broun’s estate and exploring options for attempting to secure a government pension for Caroline. They had married Caroline’s and Peter’s daughters: Anne Maingy, Mary Susan Lennard and Matilda (Tilly) Caroline Maude respectively. McNeil was a banker in Singapore; Heath was an officer of the Madras Infantry rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and Lyall an East India Company merchant. Caroline’s meagre allowance from estate and farm income in the Colony was patchy. Copies of letters recorded in her diary indicate that this seemingly unreliable income was being supplemented by at least two of her daughters Mary and Matilda.

Caroline Broun wrote on 5 October 1870 to Earl Granville (former Secretary of State for the Colonies) putting her case for some financial assistance from the government and requested her letter be forwarded to the new Secretary of State Earl of Kimberley.

*136 Kensington Park Road,
Notting Hill, W., Oct. 5, 1870.*

MY LORD,-I am sorry to write to you on the old subject, but my position for want of a small income (certain) to live on is very frightful. It is two years and three months since my income (very small) ceased from property that is now gone in Western Australia, and all those I had a claim on, and who would now be in civil service office, are dead, my husband, two brothers-in-law¹¹, and my eldest son¹². Those who have helped me willingly and cheerfully since my income ceased, cannot help me any longer ; their own circumstances have changed so largely for the worse, that they find it impossible almost to keep their very large families of young children and themselves. My son in Western Australia has a wife, eight young children, a sister depending on him and very delicate, and also the widow and child of my eldest son, who were both left penniless at his death, three years ago, he has to keep and support. I drew a bill for £15 on my son in Australia four months ago, and he has been compelled to return it not accepted for want of funds ; now I have no hope against the horrors of want and debt also to a small extent here. I write this, my lord, to ask you if you can allow me some small certain help from the civil list. I do not ask it as a claim, but as a matter of want. My husband was Colonial Secretary of that colony for eighteen years; his death caused all my troubles. Other official officers have lived to recover the losses of early days, and have better salaries now to provide for their widows and children. I would work rather than ask this boon of you and who would give it me? (sic) I hope, my Lord, you will consider my helpless condition, [...] with many apologies, my Lord,

I am, &c,

CAROLINE BROUN.

The Rt. Honble. Earl Granville, K.O.B.

Earl Granville passed her request onto Earl Kimberley, who responded 1 November 1870. His office responds:

*Downing Street,
1st November, 1870.*

MADAM,-[...] Lord Kimberley desires me to express his sympathy with you in your difficulties, but his Lordship regrets that he is unable to hold out to you any hope for assistance from the Civil List.

I am, &c,

R.W. Herbert

These letters were also sent to the WA government and tabled in Parliament 20 December 1870.¹³ A motion that *Mrs Peter Broun had no claim on this colony for assistance* was carried in the Legislative Council on 4 January 1871¹⁴. In the end, no government pension was forthcoming and there appeared to be little left over after the sale of the colony properties and the payment of debts. One of the final entries in her diary reads:

“What a ruin Western Australia has been to my over sanguine kind and generous husband, Peter Nicholas Broun. My life has been wasted, without the power of helping my children for want of a little money and help. Caroline Broun”

It can only be assumed that Caroline continued to depend on payments from those of her family that could from time to time afford to make a contribution towards her welfare. She notes in her diary; *“What would I have done in my sad trouble but for dear Robert McNeil and George Heath God bless them both, and may they for ever prosper.”*

Caroline never returned to the colony and probably moved between family members in London, Edinburgh and the Channel Islands. As attested by her diary entries: *“Ever since I have lived here, I have had misery, how I should like to get away cannot find a place so cheap.”* and *“Cheering hopes and depressing fears, glowing anticipation and withering disappointment have hitherto alternated during the monotony of my widowhood”*.

Her probate notice has her living at Ivy House Lewisham Kent prior to her death at Bayswater Middlesex¹⁵. Caroline Broun died in a boarding house in London (Paddington) on 2 March 1881. Her Will, left to her executor, son-in-law James Lyall (“Jem”), is a poignant document:

My Dear Jem

Any property I leave at my death please forward to my son Charles Frederic Broun living in Western Australia. He has a large young family and very little money to keep them with and everything is useful to them out there. My seal skin jacket I leave to Annie as promised. If practicable I should like to be buried at Woodcote in Huberts Churchyard it would not cost much to send me down by train in a very plain coffin. And if it is asked he will not refuse I am sure. Signed by me in the presence of Elizabeth Bacon and Louisa Bruce Feb 1st 1881. (Hubert George Nind was the vicar and husband of Caroline's granddaughter Emily Stuart Tyndall)

Afterword

Caroline's children and legacy.

Four of five daughters married into, and became part of, the grand British Empire - army officers, businessmen and plantation owners in Ceylon, India and the Straits Settlements.

McBryde Anderson Broun died in Perth 1866 leaving a widow and one daughter.

Annie Maingy Broun married Robert MacNeil, a banker. They lived in Madras, India and later England. Annie, a widow and all of their children returned to WA by the 1880s. Annie died there in 1912.

Ellen Stirling Broun married John Tyndall, a coffee and tea plantation pioneer in Ceylon. They had three daughters. Ellen died in London in 1875.

James William Broun married (1) Emily Lukin and (2) Ellen Pettit in WA. He was a pioneer farmer of the Beverley district and had at least thirteen children, ancestors of many West Australians. He died in Beverley in 1897.

Mary Susan Lennard Broun married Lieutenant George Heath in Singapore. They had five children. Mary lived close by Caroline when she (Caroline) died in 1881, in London's Paddington district. Mary died in Inverness in 1888.

Charles Frederic Broun was also a pioneer farmer in the Pingelly district. He married Amelia Smith and had eleven children. He died in 1927.

Matilda Caroline Broun married James Lyall, a businessman/ "East India Waterman", in Singapore. They had four daughters in England. She died in Kensington in 1931.

Jessie Souper Broun married, had one son and died in 1873 at York Western Australia. She married John Edward Sewell of Pingelly.

¹ Inquirer (Perth, WA: 1840-1855), 18 July 1849; TROVE web site, National Library of Australia

² International Genealogical Index; <http://www.familysearch.org>

³ Parish records of St. Andrews, Edinburgh; Scotland's People (<http://scotlandspeople.gov.uk/>)

⁴ Channel Islands, Selected Births and Baptisms, 1820-1907; database, FamilySearch web site. To date nothing further has been found for Edward Richard Broun

⁵ Bryan, Dr. C. & Bray, F (1935) Peter Nicholas Brown (1797-1846): First Colonial Secretary of Western Australia (1829-1846)' in Journal and Proceedings (Western Australian Historical Society), vol 2, part 18, pp 1-33

⁶ Peter's attempts to provide a banking facility for the colony (with no support from the Government) are well documented.

⁷ Inquirer (Perth, WA: 1840-1855), 5 April 1848; TROVE web site, National Library of Australia

⁸ The Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News (WA: 1848-1864) 29 July 1848; TROVE web site, National Library of Australia

⁹ Notice to Creditors, The Edinburgh Gazette, December 8, 1876

¹⁰ McBryde Anderson Broun's widow and daughter

¹¹ Peter Nicholas Broun's brothers: William James Broun (d 1867, Guernsey) and Richard McBryde Broun (d 1858, Fremantle, Western Australia)

¹² McBryde Anderson Broun (d 1866, Perth Western Australia)

¹³ Parliamentary Debates; The Perth Gazette and West Australian Times (WA: 1864 - 1874) Friday 30 December 1870 p 3 Article. TROVE web site, National Library of Australia

¹⁴ Inquirer and Commercial News (Perth, WA: 1855 - 1901), Wednesday 11 January 1871. TROVE web site, National Library of Australia

¹⁵ Scotland's People; <http://scotlandspeople.gov.uk>