

Into the Darkness:
The Story of Minnie and William Eason



Karen J. Collins

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By Karen J. Collins
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Front cover image: Minnie and William Eason's Wedding Day, 23 December 1902

In memory of my great-grandmother, Minnie Eleanor Eason

30.6.1882 - 6.1.1929

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The Memorial Gates

I first learned of the William Eason Memorial Gates that stood by the entrance of the Koo Wee Rup State School in South Gippsland, when growing up in the suburbs of Melbourne. My father, Don Eason, told me with great pride that these monuments were erected in commemoration of his grandfather, William Eason, for his outstanding services to teaching.

William Lewis Eason was the Head Teacher of that school from 1914 to 1936 and his highly acclaimed teaching methods provided many Koo Wee Rup students with the academic foundation to earn scholarships for further education. This was especially significant at the time because a student's formal education generally ended at the age of 14 after gaining the Merit Certificate.

The memorial gates were erected by an appreciative Koo Wee Rup community in 1936, seven months after William died suddenly at age 59 from a cerebral haemorrhage, while still employed as Head Teacher. Among the family albums are various photos of family members proudly standing next to these impressive monuments that guard the entrance to the old school site, which is now the Koo Wee Rup Secondary College.



The William Eason Memorial Gates

The left pillar of these memorial gates is inscribed:

ERECTED BY THE RESIDENTS OF KOO WEE RUP AND DISTRICT

The right pillar is inscribed:

**TO THE MEMORY OF WILLIAM EASON HEAD TEACHER OF THIS SCHOOL
1914 - 1936**



Left: Arnold Lewis Eason (my grandfather and son of William Lewis Eason) at the William Eason Memorial Gates with his grandson, Campbell Eason, 1964.

Below left: Donald Lewis Eason (my father and son of Arnold Eason) standing beside the William Eason Memorial Gates, 1970s.

Below right: Some of William Eason's great-great-grandchildren, Trevor, Lauren and Maddie Eason, standing next to a pillar, 1993.



However, unfortunately, hiding behind this source of great family pride lies a dark secret of shame and grief. In stark contrast to William's advancing status as an acclaimed teacher and committed community stalwart, his wife (my great-grandmother), Minnie Eason (nee Watts), appears to have led a tormented life after the tragic death of their third child, Norma. Norma was fatally burned in the family home in 1912 at only seventeen months of age. William and Minnie had four children: Arnold, Elma, Norma, and Gwenda.

Sadly, in 1917, while the Eason family lived in Koo Wee Rup, Minnie was admitted into a psychiatric hospital. She was only 35 years old and remained in various psychiatric hospitals until her death eleven years later in 1929, aged 46. Dad shared with me some sketchy details about Minnie's life. His father, Arnold Eason, told him that a Catholic priest blamed Minnie for baby Norma's death because she married outside her Catholic faith.

According to Dad, Norma's death and the priest's accusation affected Minnie's mental health resulting in her committal to an asylum. Arnold rarely spoke of the death of his baby sister, nor did he care to discuss his mother's admittance to an asylum. Out of respect for my grandfather, I did not ask him any questions about these matters.

The focus of any discussion about William and Minnie Eason always turned to the impressive pair of stone monuments, reminding all of us that William had achieved greatness in his community. Yet, there can be no doubt that the overwhelming grief of baby Norma's death and the Catholic priest's condemnation would have left Minnie in a heartbroken, dispirited state.

In 2011, I discovered that the historical Victorian mental health records were open to the public 75 years after a patient's death. I mustered the courage to access Minnie's records from the Public Records Office Victoria (PROV) and began to learn about my great-grandmother's immeasurable torment, which had been shrouded in mystery for so long. Nothing could prepare me for my first glimpse of Minnie's image. Her photo was taken upon admission to psychiatric care in 1917 and attached to her clinical notes. There before me was a desperately sad, young, dishevelled woman with strong facial features that bore a remarkable resemblance to her only son, my grandfather, Arnold Eason.

Minnie's mental health records were disturbing and shocking to read. My heart ached for her chronic suffering and chilling powerlessness, endured in an era when little was known about mental health or effective treatment for mental illness. I was so overwhelmed that I set aside the thought of researching Minnie's life for several years.

Eventually, I finally had the opportunity and the strength of mind to address my nagging desire to fully understand Minnie's tormented life. This came about in 2014 after a chance visit to the Rosedale Cemetery, which was Minnie's burial site according to her death certificate. I began searching for her grave and found a large Watts headstone with inscriptions for Minnie's mother, brother and sister but disappointingly, there was no headstone or inscription for Minnie.

I contacted the local Rosedale historian, Don McCreddie, secretary of the Rosedale Cemetery, whose records revealed that Minnie had been buried in the same plot as her mother and siblings. Heartbreakingly, neither her presence nor her life had been acknowledged on the family headstone or individually at her grave, despite having ten siblings and three children who had survived her.

My mind turned to William with his memorial gates and the irony of his wife being buried without a headstone. This huge disparity ignited a quest to not only uncover more of Minnie's life story but right a wrong by giving Minnie a headstone at her gravesite that deservedly acknowledged her life.



Don McCreadie and Karen Collins at the Watts burial plot, Rosedale Cemetery, 2014.

Minnie's burial site lies under the dead rose on the left. The Watts headstone is behind us and marks the graves of Minnie's mother, brother and sister.

My research into William and Minnie's life has been from a range of archival sources, including:

- PROV for Mental Health; Education; Inquests into Deaths; Divorce Files; Wills and Probates; School Correspondence;
- National Library of Australia (trove.nla.gov.au) for access to many old newspaper articles;
- The Rosedale Historical Society, Foster Historical Society, Koo Wee Rup Swamp Historical Society and the Diocesan Archives at Sale;
- Sale Library for access to the Rosedale Courier on microfilm;
- Ancestry.com, particularly the invaluable research of Minnie's parents generously provided on this website by Teresa O'Keefe, a descendant of Minnie's brother, Alfred Watts;
- The State Library of Victoria (slv.vic.gov.au);
- Many births, deaths and marriage certificates; and
- Historical Services Unit, Department of Victoria Police.

I also sought a professional perspective on Minnie's mental health records and consulted academic historian Dr Alison Watts (no relation to Minnie). Dr Watts undertook her doctorate on *Maternal Insanity in Victoria, Australia: 1920-1973*, where she examined the histories of 31 women committed to Victorian mental institutions at a time when it was thought child-birth was connected to a host of women's diseases affecting their brain. Her study was based on the women's patient files, which made her expertise ideal for shedding light on the documents related to Minnie's committal to the asylum.

In this book, I have included some historical family background regarding the parents of Minnie and William to understand the context of Minnie and William's upbringing. Three of the four parents bravely emigrated on their own from England or Ireland during the early European settlement of the Victorian colony, with the fourth parent born near the Ballarat goldfields.

By writing this book, I hope to shine a light on Minnie's untold story and the intolerable and unimaginable suffering she endured for so many years. While the memorial gates at Koo Wee Rup provide a lasting monument to William's teaching career, I trust that this publication will be a lasting legacy to honour Minnie and ensure her life will not be forgotten. In addition, it is my intention to give Minnie a place in our family history and for her to receive the appropriate acknowledgement and respect that she rightly deserves with the erection of a headstone.

Karen Collins

1

Minnie Watts' Childhood

Minnie Eleanor Watts was born on 30 June 1882 to parents, 43-year-old Eliza Watts (nee Murtagh) and 51-year-old William Alfred Watts. She was the thirteenth child of fourteen children and grew up on a farm, 'Oakvale', about four kilometres south of Rosedale in Gippsland. Her parents were early colonists who met in Victoria after being courageous teenagers, emigrating alone without family. Eliza was desperate for a better life than her impoverished Irish one and William sought opportunities and fortune that didn't exist for him in England.



The eighth child of this large family, William (Jnr.), died from croup six years before Minnie was born when he was aged three. Therefore, Minnie (*left*) had eleven brothers and sisters to welcome her into the family:

- Elizabeth, aged 19
- George Henry, aged 17
- twins Alice and Essington, aged 16
- Ellen Catherine, aged 14
- Marcella Cecilia, aged 12
- Jane Gertrude, aged 11
- Alfred James, aged 7
- William Edward, aged 5
- Emma Maude, aged 3
- Ernest David aged 1

Eliza Watts' Catholic faith played a significant part in shaping Minnie's faith identity. Minnie was baptised at the local Catholic Church, St. Rose of Lima, Rosedale, on 24 September 1882. Her godparents were an uncle, William Schafer, and a local Irish friend of Eliza's, Catherine Regan. Minnie would have attended regular Masses at this church during her childhood and it was here that her two eldest children were baptised many years later.

In 1883, the year after Minnie was born, her eldest sister and the firstborn of the Watts family, Elizabeth, married a local labourer, Thomas Richardson. Thomas and 20-year-old Elizabeth continued living in the Rosedale district and by the time Minnie was eleven years old, the Richardson family included five children. Minnie was particularly fond of her niece, Ellen

(Nellie) Richardson, born in 1886; Nellie was a bridesmaid at Minnie's wedding and a godparent of Minnie's eldest child, Arnold Eason.



Above: 'Oakvale' in the early 1950s.

The Watts family built this house in approximately 1880 and sold it in 1945. The child in the photo is believed to be Noel Anderson, a son of Ernest and Ellen Anderson; Ernest and Ellen Anderson bought 'Oakvale' in 1952. Noel and his wife are the current owners of the house and property. (Photo provided by Noel Anderson)

Below: 'Oakvale' 2021



Minnie's youngest sibling, Arthur Henry Watts, was born three years after her on 12 October 1885. Unfortunately, he had Down Syndrome, a genetic disorder causing lifelong intellectual disability and developmental delays, thus presenting Eliza and William with additional challenges to their lives. Arthur grew up on the farm with limited vocabulary and was permanently admitted to Kew Asylum in 1910, at the age of 25.

Being the closest in age to Arthur, Minnie may have been charged with her younger brother's care during her childhood.

By the time Arthur was born, 46-year-old Eliza Watts had coped with an enormous amount of adversity. She had:

- survived malnourishment as a child during the Great Famine in Ireland;
- left her own family and emigrated on a long, dangerous sea voyage at 19 years;

- assisted her husband in establishing a home and farm from a bush block in the 1860s;
- endured thirteen pregnancies;
- given birth to fourteen children over 23 years, including twins; and
- experienced the death of a young child.

Eliza faced the challenges of raising an intellectually disabled son while ten other children remained in her care. Yet, like so many other pioneer women, Eliza seemed to manage adversity with courage, perseverance and resilience. Life would continue to test Eliza's fortitude.

Nearly four years after Arthur's birth, the Watts family was dealt a cruel blow with the sudden death of William Watts. He died, aged 57, on 27 January 1888 at Sale from 'stones in the bladder', having suffered from this ailment for many years. Widowed at 48 years, Eliza became the sole parent of her large family, ranging from 2 to 24 years. Young Minnie was five years old.

William Watts was buried in the Sale Cemetery. There is no headstone on his grave.

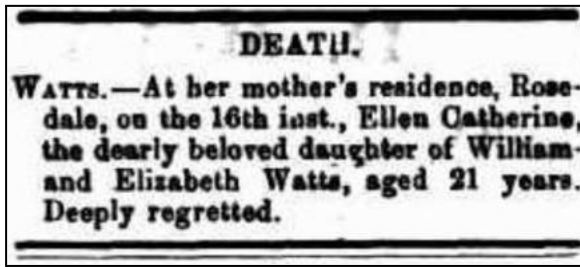
In William's will, he entrusted Eliza to continue the business of grazier and farmer and she was left all his property, including 879 acres of farming land, 100 head of cattle, a house and cash. William's assets amounted to £3,454, which was quite a sizable estate for this period. At a time when there was no government assistance for widows, Eliza was fortunate to have been supported by her family in maintaining the farm. According to Eliza's great-grandson, Fr. Eric Hodgens, Eliza was a strong person who managed the farm with particular help from her second eldest son, Essington, aged 21, who became the male mainstay of 'Oakvale'. The eldest son, George Watts, aged 22, had been farming his own 100 acres of land near 'Oakvale' for three years when his father died.



As the Watts family adjusted to their new life without a husband and father, it's likely all the Watts children who were living at home had plenty of domestic and farm chores to keep the family farming business going. Also, the older girls, Alice, Ellen, Marcella and Jane, would have had their share of responsibility looking after the younger children, as Eliza managed the farm and household.

Two years after William died, the death of a loved one again confronted the Watts family. Ellen Watts (*left*), aged 21, died suddenly from severe hepatitis on 16 January 1890 and her loss would have been felt acutely by her mother and her siblings. Ellen was likely to have mothered her younger siblings, including seven-year-old Minnie. I wonder how the loss of two significant family members in a short

space of time affected young Minnie. Ellen was buried in the nearby Rosedale cemetery alongside her younger brother, William.



The Gippsland Farmers' Journal
and *Traralgon, Heyfield and Rosedale*
News, 21 January 1890

The Watts children were educated at the Rosedale State School, located about four kilometres from their home. Rosedale State School records listed in Don Macreadie's book, *The History of Rosedale, Volume 1*, state that in December 1891, 43 students from Grades 3 to 6 were given an examination a week before an academic award presentation. The examination results determined a class ranking of all children in the upper primary school within their gender and awards were presented to students in the Rosedale Mechanics' Institute Hall. Minnie received third prize for the Grade 3 girls, from a total of seven girls. The significance of the presentation was enhanced by the presence of the Anglican Archdeacon of Gippsland as well as local councillors and the Rosedale Brass Band.

In November 1893, Minnie competed in the combined Willung/ Gormandale/ Hiamdale State Schools Sports Picnic hosted at Gormandale, as reported in *The Gippsland Farmers' Journal*. (Gormandale was 24 kilometres south of Rosedale.) Perhaps local children like Minnie were permitted to participate in these sporting activities, despite not attending any of the three rural schools competing. Minnie came second in a girl's running race, earning a skipping rope for her efforts. An evening concert was held in the Gormandale Mechanics' Institute Hall following the sports activities and picnic. Various adults and children sang or recited, including Minnie who recited, 'What Dolly has and what Dolly has not'. Minnie's love of performance and music continued into adulthood. She regularly played the organ at the Rosedale Catholic Church services and trained children in singing for school concerts after she married.

In December 1893, the *Rosedale Courier* reported that the Rosedale State School held an award presentation. Although the academic prize recipients were not recorded in the newspaper, 11-year-old Minnie was listed as one of the nine students who gave a recital for entertainment during the evening.

In May 1897, the *Gippsland Farmers' Journal* reported that 14-year-old Minnie played a significant part in a school performance held in the Rosedale Mechanics' Hall. (*next page*)

ROSEDALE

A very interesting, amusing and instructive entertainment was presented in the Rosedale Mechanics' Institute on Friday evening last by the scholars of the local State School and was witnessed by a large and appreciative audience. The children have been practising most assiduously for a considerable time past and the manner in which they acquitted themselves was a credit to all concerned and Mr and Mrs David and Mr McCubbin, under whose supervision the entertainment was arranged, must feel elated by the success achieved.

The first part of the program consisted of the performance of a cantata entitled, 'The White Garland', and we feel sure that the audience did not expect the great treat that was in store for them. The part of 'The Queen' was charmingly filled by Miss Minnie Watts, a young lady of 14, who had quite a queenly appearance, as she sat in a leafy bower, surrounded by masses of ferns and flowers and holding a sceptre in her right hand. She was attended by Miss Emily Barrett, who handed the wreaths of flowers to those who, in the opinion of the Queen, best deserved them. Miss Sophia Westwood took the very agreeable part of 'Punctuality' and did it very prettily and as a reward, was adorned with a wreath of flowers by the Queen. 'Perseverance' was the part sustained by Miss Charlotte Playfoot, which she performed with much taste, as did Miss Annie Robinson in her role of 'The Generous Scholar'. The boys did their parts splendidly and were the cause of much merriment. Master Norman David, as 'The Tardy Scholar', was exceedingly good, the droll manner in which he spoke being productive of much merriment. He appeared with his boots unlaced, face unwashed, etc., and was jeered at by all assembled on the stage and, when asked to join at play, exclaimed, "No, let us go and have a quiet sleep." Master George Stagg was the 'Quarrelsome Scholar' and bore traces of just having completed a fight. Master H. Westwood was the 'Greedy Scholar' and was reported to have eaten six other apples one after the other. Under the Queen's scathing remarks, however, he soon became penitent and handed his two bad companions half of his marbles. The singing of the children was delightful and their voices blended splendidly.

The second part consisted of four three-part rounds and were all well executed.

The hall had been prettily decorated for the occasion and we believe about £7 was cleared.

Minnie would have completed her education after earning the Merit Certificate in 1897. After completing her education, she was likely to have worked at 'Oakvale', undertaking farming and household chores; before marrying in 1902, Minnie was employed in domestic duties at home.

Minnie was 17 years old when a handsome 22-year-old school teacher arrived in the Rosedale district in August 1899. William Lewis Eason was appointed the headteacher of the small rural schools, Holey Plain and Coolungoolum, south-east of Rosedale and quickly became an active community member. During William's first few years living in the region, he competed in Rosedale's local football, cricket, golf, and Easter athletic competitions. By 1901 he had the

honour of captaining the Rosedale football team and was also elected to the Rosedale Mechanics' Institute committee. All eligible Rosedale women would have had their eye on this newcomer.

William must have been quite taken by Minnie, an attractive young woman from a respectable farming family. At some point, after he arrived in the Rosedale district, he began courting Minnie.



Left and Right: Minnie Watts c.1892

The photo (right) was produced by applying the My Heritage Deep Nostalgia application to the picture of Minnie on the left.

2

Minnie Watts' Family History **Minnie's Father: William Alfred Watts**

William Watts was born on 9 March 1831 in Chew Stoke, Somerset, England. He emigrated to Australia at 18 years and became one of the 1300 migrants who arrived in the Port Phillip District between 1848 and 1850. The colonial government subsidised his voyage to Australia under the Colonial Land Emigration Commissioner scheme to help manage the rural labour shortage in the developing colony; William was a literate agricultural labourer. He departed Plymouth, England, on board the *Tasman* on 17 June 1848, bravely emigrating without family.

Surprisingly, I found on Ancestry.com, courtesy of Teresa O'Keefe, an account of William's voyage in Florence Chuk's book, *The Somerset Years: Government-assisted Emigrants from Somerset and Bristol who arrived in Port Phillip Vic. 1839-1854*.¹ The following extract provides insight into the perils of William Watts' journey across the seas.

On leaving Plymouth, *Tasman* met with unfavourable light winds, causing an unusually lengthy passage. On 14 July, off the Guinea Coast, an approaching vessel caused some alarm to both crew and passengers. Seen more closely, it had such a threatening and 'piratical' appearance that the Master armed his men and issued the male passengers with muskets and cutlasses. Observing this well-organised preparation for resistance, the vessel bore off to the enormous relief of all.

The willingness of the men on the *Tasman* to take part in the defence of their ship was typical of the mood of the 221 emigrants. Cleanly and orderly, they cooperated with each other and the officers to make the voyage as pleasant as possible. The young men were encouraged by the surgeon to give the sailors a hand when necessity arose, as good exercise. He was also in the habit of lining them up on deck and giving each a healthy dose of brimstone and treacle.

After the pirate scare and the festive Crossing of the Line, the weather became much colder, so much so that it became difficult to persuade the passengers to go up on deck for exercise. Possibly this reluctance stemmed from a lack of suitable warm clothing. This lack of exercise was to result in illnesses towards the end of the voyage. Scurvy broke out, even affecting one of the 31 crew members. Ten deaths occurred during the passage: three adults and seven children. Seven babies were born on board.

After 117 days at sea, William arrived in Melbourne on 18 October 1848, when Melbourne was still a part of NSW. He had pre-arranged employment with pastoralist William Roadknight, a 56-year-old landholder of approximately 100,000 acres in Geelong, Colac, Cape Otway, Winchelsea and Deans Marsh. William Watts' shipping records reveal that he was tenured for three 'terms' (months) with a wage of £20 per annum, plus food.

So why did William Watts emigrate? William was raised in rural England by parents Samuel Watts (1805-1883) and Elizabeth Watts (nee Collins, 1806-1877). He was the second eldest of ten children, four of whom died in childhood, including the eldest. Samuel Watts farmed land and leased a mill at Chew Magna from 1832 to 1848 for most of William's childhood. The mill, known as Portbridge Mill, ground grain provided by the local farmers into flour and would have provided the Watts family with a reasonable income supported by the British Corn Laws. These laws were introduced in 1815 and placed tariffs on imported grain, keeping local grain prices high. Unfortunately for Samuel, the tariffs were repealed in 1846, resulting in English farmers receiving lower grain prices because of the cheaper imports. As a result, farming became unviable for Samuel, so he terminated his lease on the mill in 1848. Around this time, William, aged 18, emigrated to Australia.

Less than a year after William emigrated, his family emigrated to Sterling, County Cayuga, in the state of New York, U.S.A., arriving on 30 June 1849: Elizabeth aged 43, Samuel aged 44, and children Elizabeth aged 13, Mary aged eight, Alfred aged five and Charles aged two.

Samuel and Elizabeth Watts weren't the only family members to migrate to Sterling. Samuel's cousin, James Watts, emigrated over ten years before, in 1837 and Samuel's older brother, George Watts, emigrated in 1846. In addition, Samuel's sister, Hannah and her husband emigrated in 1849. The Sterling district was attractive to these Somerset families as the climate and crops grown there were similar to what they had known in England.

William Watts' family settled in rural County Cayuga and remained in the USA for the rest of their lives. Consequently, there are many descendants of the Watts family living in County Cayuga today.

It is unknown why 18-year-old William chose to emigrate before the rest of his family or why he chose Australia when some of his father's relatives were already living in the USA. However, one theory is that William had a falling out with his father; William did not name any of his seven sons 'Samuel'. During this period, a popular English naming tradition was naming the firstborn son after the father's father and the firstborn daughter after the mother's mother. Interestingly, William's first son was named 'George', the same name as William's uncle, and the name 'Samuel' wasn't given to any of his other six sons as a Christian or middle name. Yet Eliza and William's eldest daughter was named 'Elizabeth' after Eliza's mother.

I have been unable to determine where William lived and worked after serving his tenure of employment with William Roadknight. However, William appears in records from March 1855 in a plan of the township of Rosedale. The District Surveyor, William Dawson, completed a survey for the Lands Department and published his findings in *A Plan of the Township of Rosedale at Blind Joe's Creek, La Trobe River, Gipp's Land*.² Dawson's Survey consisted of a list of landowners at Rosedale, one of whom was William Watts. William was one of twenty adult residents living in Rosedale before 1858. According to Charles Ignatz Du Vu in his book, *Olden Rosedale*, written in 1910, William was a well-respected judge of a good horse, buying them locally and selling them to the Melbourne market.³ William met his wife-to-be, Eliza Murtagh, in Rosedale and they were married in Sale in November 1861.

* *Minnie's Father's Family Tree* is at the end of Chapter 1, page 18.

Minnie's Mother: Eliza Murtagh

Eliza Watts (nee Murtagh) was born in County Kildare, Ireland, in 1839 into a typically poor, rural, Irish Catholic family. Her parents, William Murtagh (1818-) and Elizabeth Walsh (1820-) had at least two older children, Bridget (1835-) and Elin (1838-), before the birth of Eliza. The Murtagh home was in Carbury, County Kildare and parish records reveal that Eliza and her siblings were baptised seven kilometres away in Kilshanroe.



When Eliza (*left*) was born, Irish Catholics had been persecuted by the British for centuries. They were dispossessed of their ancestral land, denied the right to speak their native language, made to pay tithes (taxes) to the Anglican Church of Ireland and denied the right to vote. Oliver Cromwell and his army of British soldiers conquered Ireland in 1649 and under their new system of land occupancy, the Irish were made to lease land from the English landlords and could be quickly evicted by the landlord or his agent without appeal. Years of struggle for the Irish followed British occupation with famines, the bubonic plague, rebellions and the native Irish generally oppressed by their minority English rulers. Ironically, many years later, Minnie Watts would marry a descendant of one of Cromwell's soldiers.

At the time of Eliza's birth, the Protestant English and Anglo-Irish families owned most of the land in Ireland. Most Irish Catholics were relegated to work as tenant farmers and forced to pay rent to the landowners. Tenants had no incentive to improve their land or house because the English owner would have then raised their rent and if they could not pay or fell into arrears, the family would be evicted without any compensation for their work.

Michael Winstanley, *Ireland and the Land Question, 1800-1922*, wrote the following about this period:

The majority of the Irish population in Ireland pre-1845 had little or no access to land, living in appalling conditions. 40% of Irish houses in 1841 were one-room mud cabins with natural earth floors with no windows or chimneys. Furniture and cooking facilities in those hovels were primitive. Their diet was monotonous (potatoes) and inadequate. Landless labourers occupied the lowest rung on the social ladder, apart from beggars and paupers.⁴

Eliza's father, William Murtagh, was one of these poverty-stricken, rural 'landless labourers'. The Griffiths Valuation of County Kildare in 1851 recorded William Murtagh paying an annual rent of 10 shillings to Irishman James Fox for the lease of a house only, set on 13 acres of land at Carbury, County Kildare. James Fox was a middleman who leased the property from a wealthy English landowner, George Magrath. According to Fiona Fitzsimmons, a director of Eneclann (a provider of Irish genealogy and history research), a rented house without any accompanying land and taxed at 10 shillings annually would represent the poorest of living conditions in Ireland: a mud cabin with a turf or thatch roof and one or two rooms (*below*).



Marion McGarry of the Galway Mayo Institute of Technology wrote of the typical Irish mud cabin in which the Murtagh family would have resided:

A one-roomed hovel in the heart of the Irish countryside. Walls constructed of clay and ramshackle roof gave an earthy smell that added to the smell of dampness. The kitchen, bedroom and dining all took place around a communal fire, not necessarily with ventilation: no electricity, central heating, windows, furniture or plumbing. A cesspit containing household waste was located outside the entrance door.⁵

Without any land to lease, William Murtagh would have been a farm labourer in the district, most likely farming the 13 acres surrounding the Murtagh house for his landlord. During this period, a large part of the Irish population depended on potato farming, as potatoes were almost an exclusive part of their diet. However, in 1845 when Eliza was just six years old, widespread potato blight was first discovered in the potato crops across Ireland. The infestation of this fungus-like organism ruined most crops during the next seven years and without Britain's support to provide food relief, the crop failures had a catastrophic impact on the Irish population. The Great Famine of 1845-1850 ensued and approximately one million Irish died and another million desperate souls departed on immigrant ships as refugees to Australia and North America.

More Murtagh children were born just before and during the Great Famine: Ellen (1842-1931), Catherine (1843-), Jane (1846-1913) and Marcella (1848-1876). The total number of Murtagh children who were born or survived is unclear. Still, we know that William and Elizabeth Murtagh would have had enormous difficulty providing food for their young family of at least four known surviving children: Eliza, Ellen, Jane and Marcella. All four of these girls would eventually emigrate to Australia independently.

The spectre of eviction for the Murtagh family would have always loomed. During the famine, many Irish farmers and their families were evicted by their English landlords for not paying their rent. It is estimated that 250,000 Irish farmers were forcefully removed between 1849 and 1854. Evicted tenants would either die from starvation or disease with no shelter or submit to living in an overcrowded, local workhouse where disease was rife and the mortality rate high.⁶ The workhouses were a place of last resort for the most destitute and poverty-stricken Irish. Life inside was brutal and ensured that only the neediest sought refuge there. The occupants had inadequate diets, worked long hours, endured harsh punishments and were segregated from their families. The Great Famine caused an unprecedented demand on the workhouses.

William Murtagh and his family evaded the local workhouse during and immediately after the Great Famine. The Lands Valuation, Dunferth, Kilmurry records confirm that William was still living in the same mud cabin in 1859 as that recorded on Griffith's Valuation in 1851. A descendant of William Murtagh, Teresa O'Keefe, employed the Hibernian Research Company in Dublin to undertake Murtagh family research. Records revealed that by 1866 the Murtagh house in Kilmurry no longer existed, nor did William Murtagh live in the area. It is possible the house was burnt down, or the Murtagh family was evicted. With no recorded deaths for William Murtagh in the Carbury Death Register 1861-1879, William had possibly entered the local workhouse, left the region or died sometime between 1859 and 1861. However, in Arthur Watts' Kew Asylum medical records dated 1916, it was noted that William Murtagh died at the age of 80 and Elizabeth Murtagh 'died young'; presumably, one of Arthur's siblings provided this information.

In keeping with their impoverished background, Eliza and three of her sisters, Ellen, Jane and Marcella, became domestic servants until they emigrated. The Murtagh sisters were typical of many young, single Irish women hoping to escape a life of grinding poverty. On 23 February 1859, a young Eliza Murtagh, aged only 19, began the chain migration for her sisters and courageously emigrated to Australia on board the *Herald*, departing from Plymouth, England. Her sisters later emigrated during the following years: Ellen in 1863, Marcella in 1865 and Jane in 1870.

Eliza undertook the long and dangerous voyage to Melbourne in 140 days with 383 other adults, 33 children and eight infants. The passengers were from England, Ireland and Scotland and many were young, single women like Eliza. Passenger records show that Eliza could read but not write and her occupation was listed as a 'house and domestic servant', typical of the Irish female passengers on board. She was assigned to Mr Patrick McGrath of Tarraville, six kilometres from Port Albert, Gippsland, for three 'terms' (months) of employment.

Eliza arrived in Melbourne on 1 June 1859 and boarded a boat to Port Albert sometime before 9 June 1859, when she started her new job. Travelling from Melbourne to Gippsland by boat was the only method of transport available as a road from Melbourne to Sale was not constructed until 1865. Eliza worked as a domestic servant for the McGrath family, helping Patrick McGrath, his pregnant wife, Mary, and their son, Thomas, aged four. Patrick and Mary McGrath were from County Galway and had emigrated to Australia in 1855, four years before Eliza; perhaps Eliza had a connection with this Irish couple before emigrating.

After serving her three months of employment, Eliza stayed with friends at Rosedale, eighty kilometres from Tarraville. These friends also took in boarders, one of whom was William Watts. By the time Eliza met William, he had been living and working in Victoria for more than ten years.

*Minnie's Mother's Family Tree is at the end of Chapter 1, page 19.

William and Eliza Watts: Married Life at Rosedale

On 23 November 1861, nearly two years after arriving in Australia, Eliza, aged 21, married William Watts, aged 29, at the Presbyterian Manse in Sale. Their marriage certificate states that William was a horse dealer and a member of the Protestant Church. Being Catholic, Eliza was permitted to marry in a Protestant Church during this period as the Canon law, which eventually prevented Catholics from marrying in Protestant churches, was introduced many years later in 1908. Eliza signed her surname using the phonetic spelling of Murtagh, 'Murtha', likely due to her poor literacy skills; the minister spelled her surname as 'Murtagh' when completing the marriage certificate (*below*).

Horse dealer _____ _____	29 21	Rosedale Rosedale	Rosedale Rosedale	Samuel Watts Elizabeth Collins William Murtagh Eliza Kelly	Miller Farmer
This Marriage was solemnised between us		W. J. Watts E. J. Kelly		In the presence of us Alfred Kent Edward James	
According to the form of the Presbyterian Church.		By (or before) me J. S. Logan		Officiating Minister, or Deputy Registrar	

After their marriage, Eliza and William remained living in Rosedale.

Charles Ignatz du Ve (1836 -1915), a Rosedale resident, wrote a historical account of Rosedale in his book *Olden Rosedale* in 1910. He reflected:

In the early days, there were two great stock-dealers in these parts, Billy Morris and Mr William Watts. As Mr Morris dealt in cattle, so did Mr Watts in horses. Mr Watts

was reckoned the best judge of a horse for many miles around and he always had a good mount to lend to a friend. On the day he abjured bachelorhood, his bride, one of the prettiest of Rosedale girls, rode his pet mount 'Blackie', the like of which for beauty and spirit is not to be found in present-day horse flesh.⁷

Long after William died and upon the death of Eliza, *The Rosedale Courier* reported on 14 November 1912 the following information about William Watts:

He was reckoned the best judge of a horse in the district and making local purchases, he supplied the Melbourne markets with the pick of Gippsland horses. Also in the early days, he sent fat cattle to the butchers in Donnelly's Creek and The Jordan before Walhalla was opened.

Gold was discovered at Donnelly's Creek and along the Jordan River near Jericho in 1862, creating opportunities for enterprising William. These goldfields were situated in the wilderness of the Great Dividing Range in such remote and rugged terrain that only packhorses could deliver supplies to the miners. William, aged 31, became involved with this packhorse trade, taking cattle from Rosedale to butchers in these remote mining settlements and returning with the hides and skins for treatment at Cansick's tannery in Rosedale. However, managing packhorse trains and cattle along narrow tracks over successive steep spurs and ridges would have been gruelling, dangerous work.



Packhorses at Walhalla in similar country to Donnelly's Creek and Jericho.

(Photo courtesy of Vic. State Library)

The route used for taking supplies from Gippsland to the gold diggings at Donnelly's Creek and along the Jordan River at Jericho was a track about one metre wide over steep ridges, through rivers, snow and dense bush. William Watts and his packhorse team drove cattle from Rosedale to Jericho, approximately 140 kilometres. Family lore passed down from Minnie's brother, William Edward Watts, tells of William preventing his cash from being stolen by tying

his takings to his leg, wrapping a bandage over it and then dribbling animal blood over the dressing before proceeding to walk with a limp.

The following article from *The Gippsland Guardian*, 29 August 1862, gives an account of William Watts at Donnelly's Creek. (All newspaper articles included in this book have the same coloured background as the article below.)

ROSEDALE

Mr Constable Feeley returned from the new rush, Donnelly's Creek, Mount Useful and says the diggers appeared to be in first-rate spirits and were grateful to the Rosedale men for the supply of beef and flour just arriving in time to save them from actual starvation. The cheer of the diggers on the arrival of the first mob of cattle in the yards, erected by Messrs. Kent and Watts, frightened one bullock so much that he jumped the fence; off he went - diggers after him on foot - they managed to down him, and in a very few minutes his steak was frying.

On 4 March 1863, William and Eliza Watts welcomed the arrival of the first of their fourteen children, Elizabeth Watts. She was also the first of the eldest five Watts children to be baptised in the Tarraville Catholic Church, the closest Catholic church to Rosedale at the time, eighty kilometres away.

On 25 June 1863, Eliza's younger sister, Ellen Murtagh, aged 21, arrived in Melbourne after emigrating from Dublin, Ireland, on board the *Maori*. Ellen sailed from Plymouth, England as an assisted passenger on 31 March 1863 and was one of 254 adult passengers, mostly young, single women undertaking the three-month voyage in the hope of a better life. The ship's records state that Ellen was Catholic, a general servant, could read but not write and came from Dublin. She was assigned to 'Mrs Matthy' at Port Fairy for three 'terms' beginning 3 July 1863.

Ellen remained in the Port Fairy district after marrying an English migrant, James Egan, in 1864 and raising a large family of ten children on a farm at Crossley, 15 kilometres from Port



Fairy. However, it would seem unlikely that the two Murtagh sisters often met, given the long distance of nearly 450 kilometres between Crossley and Rosedale and their family commitments raising many children. The remains of the humble stone Egan house (*left*), built in the 1860s, still exist and the building is currently used as a barn by the property owners.

In 1865, another younger sister of Eliza's, Marcella Murtagh, aged 17, arrived from Ireland. Marcella eventually married William Schafer in 1869 at Sale, where they settled and William worked as a baker. I imagine Eliza was very excited to at last have a sister living nearby, even if 28 kilometres away.

According to the 1866 Gippsland General Directory, the Watts family lived in Lyons Street, Rosedale, in 1865. It is likely that William and Eliza Watts' second child, George Henry Watts, was born in this Lyons Street home in 1865.

The Watts Family Grows.... and Grows

Twins arrived on 7 July 1866, with the birth of Alice and Essington Watts.

The Victorian Land Act of 1862 and the Amending Act of 1865 authorised the breakup of large runs of land into small acreage for selectors. These two pieces of legislation enabled William and Eliza Watts to acquire the first of their land selections in 1867, comprising 196 acres south of the Rosedale township. William spent the following years working hard felling trees, splitting wood, fencing (post and rail) and burning stumps until he had cleared enough land for cultivation and grazing. By 1888, the Watts' successful farming enterprise had enabled them to acquire 879 acres.

William and Eliza's fifth child, Ellen Catherine Watts, was born on 5 February 1868. According to Eliza's great-grandson, Fr. Eric Hodgens, the Watts family settled on their selection of land by 1869, so Ellen may have been the first Watts child to be born at the farm.

Not long after giving birth to Ellen, Eliza had to deal with a young son being bitten by a snake. The *Gippsland Guardian* reported the details of the incident on 3 March 1868:

Yesterday afternoon, a little boy about four years old, a son of Mr Watts, of Rosedale, was bitten on the top of his foot by a carpet snake, which was just outside the door. The mother immediately brought her boy to the township to have medical assistance; meeting a neighbour, Mr G. Rintoul, who at once cut deeply around the part punctured by the poisonous fangs and extracted the blood from the wound, which was described to us as being 'black as ink', then freely applied liquid ammonia to the part affected, the poison having been first well sucked out. Brandy was also administered to the child. Dr E. L. Simmons attended as soon as possible after hearing of the accident and approved of the prompt measures taken. He, however, remained in the neighbourhood for some hours for fear of any unfavourable symptoms setting in towards night. The snake, a large one of five feet in length, was killed. Up to a late hour last night, the child was doing well; strong coffee was being given to prevent drowsiness.

William and Eliza's sixth child, Marcella Cecilia, was born on 16 August 1869.

In 1870 another sister of Eliza's, Jane Murtagh, emigrated from Ireland and arrived in Melbourne on board the *Marpesia* on 9 August 1870. The *Marpesia* was a cargo ship and Jane,

aged 24, was one of the 31 'steerage passengers' on board, the lowest cost and class of travel on a ship. Steerage passengers lived below the main deck and their quarters were converted cargo space. The living conditions would have been dark, crowded and close to the waterline. Occupants had limited privacy and security, inadequate sanitary conditions and poor food and ventilation. Without government assistance, this degrading means of transport would have most likely been Jane's only option to travel to Australia.

At some point, Jane Murtagh came to the Rosedale district and met a local farmer, Joseph Garrett. They married in the Sale Presbyterian Church in 1872 and farmed at Cowwarr, about 25 kilometres north of Rosedale, raising a large family of ten children.

On 12 April 1871, Watts' seventh child, Jane Gertrude, was born and named after Eliza's recently arrived sister. By coincidence, the eighth child, William, was born exactly two years after Jane, on 12 April 1873. Thus, when the ninth child, Alfred James, was born on 15 November 1875, the Watts family had grown to nine children in twelve years.

Tragedy struck the Watts family twice in 1876. Firstly, three-year-old William Watts (Jnr.) died suddenly from croup on 6 August. His death certificate states that he suffered from croup for only 24 hours before his death, but it was severe enough to trigger a pulmonary collapse. Little William was buried in the Rosedale Cemetery not far from the family residence. Having shared his birthday with Jane, perhaps she was forever reminded of her deceased younger brother.

The second tragedy was the death of Eliza's 28-year-old sister, Marcella. She died on 29 December 1876 in Rosedale after suffering from dysentery and pneumonia for ten days. Her husband, William, was left to raise three young children: Henry, aged six, Elizabeth, aged five and George, aged three. Five months later, young George Schafer died of croup at Rosedale on 19 May 1877. Little George was buried next to his mother at the Sale Cemetery.

Eliza and William's tenth child, William Edward, was born on 1 September 1876, between the deaths of young William Watts and Marcella Schafer. He was named after his father and recently deceased brother.

The eleventh Watts child, Emma Maude, was born on 20 September 1878, followed by Ernest David on 15 July 1880.

A permanent double red brick homestead was constructed in approximately 1880. Noel Anderson, the current owner of 'Oakvale', believes that the red bricks were transported to the district by rail after the opening of the Rosedale railway station in 1877. The homestead had three bedrooms, a living room and a detached kitchen to house the large Watts family.

Minnie Eleanor Watts, the thirteenth child of the Watts family, arrived two years later on 30 June 1882. Perhaps she was the first Watts child to be born in this new home.



The Watts' brick homestead, Willung Road, Rosedale. 2021

¹ Florence Chuk, *The Somerset Years: Government-Assisted Emigrants from Somerset and Bristol who Arrived in Port Phillip/Vic., 1839-1854*, Pennard Hill Publications, Ballarat, 1987, page 99

² Gwen Hardy, *Rosedale, 150 Years Pictorial History*, The LV Printers Pty Ltd, Traralgon, 1989, page 10

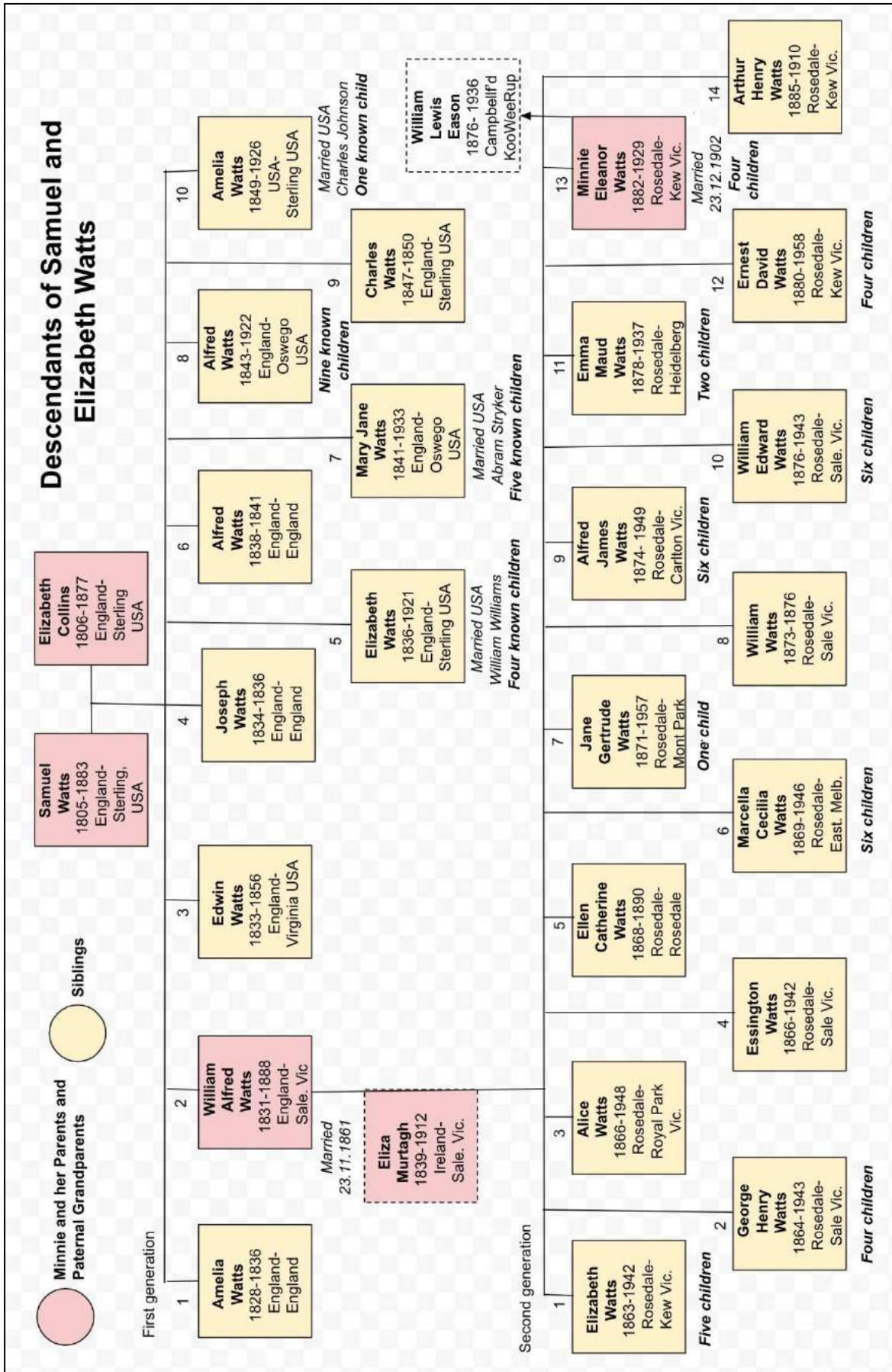
³ *The Morwell Historical Society News*, Volume 8, 1969, page 7

⁴ Michael J. Winstanley, *Ireland and the Land Question 1800-1922*, Lancaster Pamphlets, Routledge, Great Britain, 1984

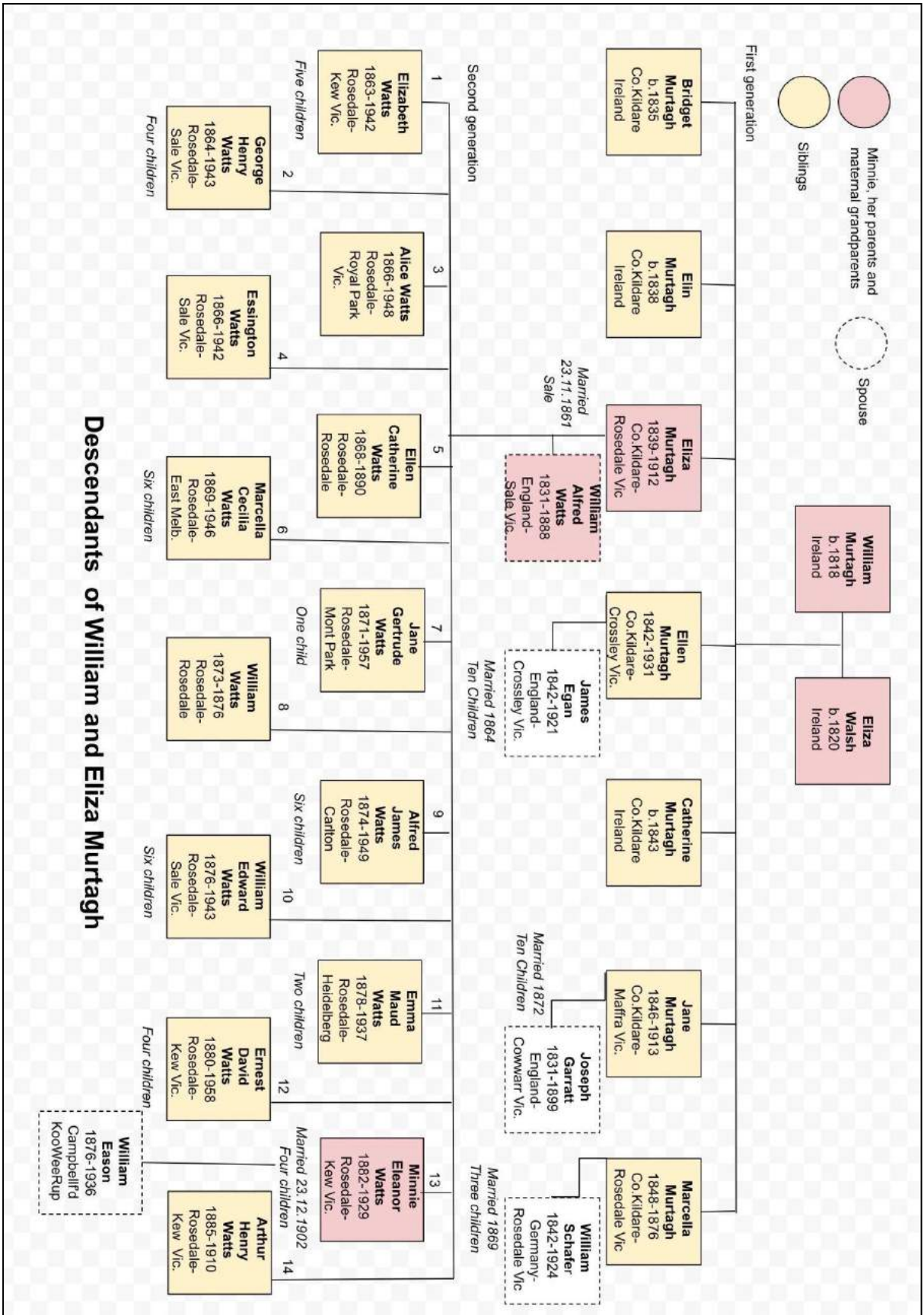
⁵ Marion McGarry, Galway Mayo Institute of Technology, 'Room to Improve: the homes of Ireland's 19th century rural poor', 8 Jan. 2019

⁶ Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1995

⁷ *The Morwell Historical Society News*, Volume 8, 1969, page 7



Minnie's Father's Family Tree

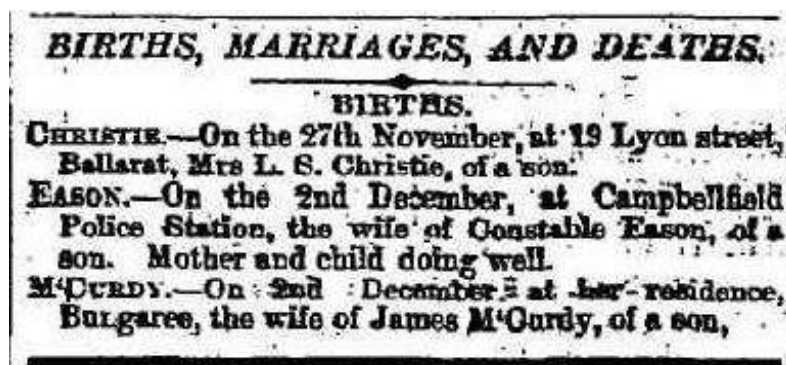


Minnie's Mother's Family Tree

3

William Eason's Childhood

William Lewis Eason was the son of a policeman in the Victorian colony. Subsequently, he spent the first twelve years of his childhood living in various Victorian rural towns, as his father was either transferred or promoted. He was born on 2 December 1876 at the residence attached to the Campbellfield Police Station, 16 kilometres north of Melbourne and was the second child of Margaret Wilson Eason, aged 18, and Samuel Eason, aged 27. Constable Samuel Eason was in charge of the Campbellfield Police Station.



The Ballarat Courier,
4 December 1876

William's birth may have assisted his parents' grief from the death of their eldest child, Samuel (Jnr.). At six months, baby Samuel died from scarlet fever, only seven months before William was born. Consequently, William was raised as the eldest child of six more children born during the following 21 years.

On 15 September 1878, Margaret and Samuel's third child, Samuel Eason (Jnr.), was also born at the Campbellfield Police Station. A month after his birth, Ned Kelly and his gang murdered three police officers near Mansfield. Many troopers, including Constable Samuel Eason, were sent to northeast Victoria to assist in the Kelly gang's capture. Samuel was transferred to Bright, relocating with his young family. The locals particularly felt his absence from the Campbellfield Police Station, as reported in *The Age* 15 September 1879:

On Saturday, the police station at Campbellfield was dismantled all Government materials and possession given up. Mounted Constable Eason, formerly in charge of the district, was removed to take part in the pursuit after the Kelly gang, since which time the district has been left unprotected. A short time ago a deputation waited on the Chief Secretary with a petition praying that a constable might be stationed in the district, as petty robberies and assaults had been of frequent occurrence since the removal of the police. The conduct of a number of youths and young men in the district on the Sabbath is represented as scandalous, as they congregate in places on the main thoroughfare playing pitch-and-toss, using insulting language in the presence of females and otherwise misconducting themselves with impunity. As the harvesting season approaches this

district is always resorted to by swagmen and other undesirable members of the community and the property-holders consider a great injustice is being done to them by the withdrawal of the police constable.

The Eason family remained in Bright until December 1879, when Samuel took command of the Broadford Police Station. While stationed there, he and another trooper captured 'the wildman of the Tallarook Ranges', arresting him near Broadford and taking him to the Kilmore gaol. The offender lived in a small cave in the ranges and stole items from locals to survive. The arrest was of great interest to the public and was reported in *The Argus* on 6 August 1880.

Margaret and Samuel's fourth son, Leonard, was born at Broadford on 5 August 1881.

Samuel was promoted to the rank of Senior Constable when transferred upon his request to Myrniong in January 1882. Perhaps Margaret and William wanted to be closer to Margaret's parents and family at Pootilla; Broadford to Pootilla was a distance of 148 kilometres compared to the 40 kilometres between Myrniong and Pootilla. While living at Myrniong, eight-year-old William Eason attended the Myrniong Agricultural Show in 1885 and was awarded second place for his marigold display. William's interest in horticulture continued into his adult life as he was often commended by the District Inspector for the pride taken in his school grounds.

Margaret and Samuel's eldest daughter, Ada Mary, was born on 11 August 1883 at Myrniong. The photo of the Eason family below was taken during this period. Handwriting on the reverse of the photograph states it was taken outside the Sandridge Police Station (now Port Melbourne).



Left: Cyril (boys wore dresses during this period until they were toilet trained), Margaret holding baby Ada, Constable Samuel Eason, William and Samuel

A brief transfer to Heidelberg in September 1885 occurred before Samuel was promoted to Blackwood on 28 January 1886. Blackwood is located on the Lerderderg River, 90 kilometres northwest of Melbourne, within the Wombat State Forest. When the Easons arrived there, Samuel became the newly appointed Clerk of the Court of Mines and Petty Sessions, as the main occupation of the Blackwood residents was mining.

An article in *The Bacchus Marsh Express* on 24 November 1888 revealed that despite Samuel receiving a much higher income from work opportunities while living at Blackwood, compared to local residents, he chose to be promoted to the rank, senior-constable, in the City Watch House rather than remain in Blackwood. While living in Blackwood, Samuel earned his police wage as well as £7 annually for being the Inspector of Nuisances for the Ballan Shire Council. Also, Margaret and Samuel housed police billets to Blackwood, generating another £50 annual income and pregnant Margaret cleaned the Blackwood Courthouse for £8 a year.

However, Margaret's workload must have been particularly burdensome when Cyril Lewis Eason was born in Blackwood on 23 June 1886. Margaret juggled catering for boarders, cleaning the Blackwood Courthouse, nursing a baby, raising four young children and completing the daily domestic duties during an era of no electricity. William Eason was aged between nine and eleven years when he lived at Blackwood. He likely had many chores with such busy parents, including looking after his younger siblings; perhaps these early responsibilities fostered William's later community leadership skills.

Samuel was promoted to the City Watch House in Russell Street, Melbourne, in September 1888. The Eason family settled in the suburb of Clifton Hill, close enough for Samuel to commute to work by train or tram. The Easons had to quickly adapt from living a rural life to living in a bustling city of 445,000 people.

For William, aged eleven, and his four siblings, living in Melbourne meant new experiences and better educational opportunities. In 1890, at the age of 13, he had the privilege of attending Scotch College, then located in East Melbourne. (The school was later relocated in 1915 to its present 27-acre site in Hawthorn.) William seemed bright enough to not be disadvantaged educationally from attending multiple rural primary schools.



Remarkably, William (*left*) completed the Melbourne University Matriculation Examinations at Scotch College at the tender age of 15 in November 1892. He also was listed in the Scotch College Honour List for his year level of 56 students as one of the four students who managed to pass eight subjects: Latin, Algebra, Geometry, English, History, French, Arithmetic and Geography.

During William's final year at Scotch College, he was confirmed at his local Anglican church, St. Andrew's, Clifton Hill, on 17 June 1892. He remained closely

involved with the Anglican church for the rest of his life.

After graduating from Scotch College, William began teacher training at Clifton Hill State School in Gold Street, not far from his parent's home. During the next six years, he was based at this school while undertaking teaching experience in various small, rural Victorian schools, including Coliban, Poowong East, Lang Lang and Carapunga East. Two more siblings were born during William's teacher training period: Ernest Valentine Eason in 1893 and Margaret Dorothy Eason in 1897.

While William was teaching in the Swan Hill district at Carapunga East in 1899, he was transferred in August 1899 to the Rosedale district in Gippsland to teach at two small schools: Coolungoolun and Holey Plains. This transfer set the course for William's eventual marriage and children, including the birth of my grandfather.



Samuel and Margaret Eason's 50th Wedding Anniversary Oct. 1924

Back row: Cyril, Ernie, William, Leonard, Samuel (Jnr.)

Front row: Samuel, Ada, Maggie, Margaret

4

William Eason's Family History

William's Father: Samuel Eason

Samuel Eason was born in Athlone, County Westmeath, Ireland, on 18 August 1849, when Ireland was still suffering from the Great Famine. He was the youngest of at least eight known children born to parents Sergeant Alexander James Eason (1788-1851) and Anne Payne (1807-1877). Samuel's siblings were: Jane (1828-1903), Alexander Jnr. (1832-1896), Joseph (1835-1860), Mary Anne (1837-), Susan (1839-1876), Catherine (1841-1900) and Elizabeth (1847-).

Samuel grew up in Athlone, a garrison town for the British army where Athlone Castle and the Athlone Barracks were a central part of local life. The castle had been part of the defences of Athlone for over six hundred years and the Barracks had been operational since 1691; the Barracks were built to accommodate 12,000 British troops after the English conquest of Ireland in 1649. Raised in a Protestant family in Athlone, Samuel may have fostered a deep respect for regimentation, law enforcement and resentment towards those of the Catholic faith.



Margaret and Samuel Eason

Samuel joined the Royal Irish Constabulary at 16 years and served with the Irish Police for four years before emigrating to Australia and arriving in Melbourne in May 1870. His decision to emigrate was likely influenced by his five siblings who had already arrived in Australia: Alexander, Joseph, Jane, Susan and Catherine. It was also likely Samuel's brothers, Alexander and Joseph, influenced his decision to join the Victoria Police as they were both employed as Victorian detectives.

Samuel joined the Victoria Police on 8 January 1872: Constable Eason (2451). His first appointment was the Inspector of Slaughter-houses for the Shire of Ballan, based at Ballan Police Station, 41 kilometres east of Ballarat. While stationed there, he met an attractive young teenager, Margaret Wilson Lewis, who lived on her family's farm at Pootilla about 12 kilometres northeast of Ballarat. Samuel must have begun courting Margaret when she was quite young as she married him at the age of 16 years whilst Samuel was aged 24.

They married at the Lewis family church, St. Luke's Anglican Church, Pootilla, on 26 October 1874.

Samuel's father, Sergeant Alexander Eason, was born in Dublin and joined the British Army at the age of 16 in 1803. He served with the 6th Company, 1st Battalion 95th Regiment of Foot (known as 'The Rifle Brigade') and during his 21-year military career, he remarkably fought and survived 13 battles during the Peninsular War, 1807 to 1814. The Peninsular War was a military conflict fought in Spain and Portugal whereby the British Army assisted the Spanish and Portuguese in fighting against the invading forces of France, led by Napoleon Bonaparte.

Alexander Eason was promoted to the rank of Sergeant on 12 October 1810, at the age of 22 years and served throughout the Peninsular Campaign, fighting in the following Battles: Vimiera, Corunna, Busaco, Fuentes D'Onor, Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajoz, Salamanca, Vittoria, Pyrenees, Nivelle, Nive, Orthes and Toulouse. Significantly, he witnessed the downfall of Napoleon Bonaparte at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

Alexander was awarded the British Military General Service Medal 1793-1814 (MGSM) in 1848, with thirteen clasps on the attached ribbon; each clasp represented a specific battle fought during this period. The MGSM was issued in 1848 to all surviving soldiers who had served in the British Army and were present in at least one specified battle from 1793 to 1814. Of the 25,650 British Army soldiers who received this medal, 695 were awarded to the three battalions of the 95th Regiment in which Sergeant Alexander Eason enlisted. Of these 695 medals, the most clasps issued on a medal was fourteen, awarded to only two soldiers. Only three of these 695 medals had thirteen clasps.⁸



Left: Sergeant Alexander Eason's MGSM medal

Above: The rim of this medal

After reading about some of the Peninsular Battles Sergeant Alexander Eason fought in, it would seem that his prestigious medal of thirteen clasps provides great insight into his character. He had the capacity and good fortune to survive a horrific environment of killing and maiming for years on end.

Alexander's medal is now displayed at the Royal Green Jackets (Rifles) Museum at Peninsula Barracks in Winchester, England. After contacting the Curator of The Royal Green Jackets (Rifles) Museum, I discovered that his medal had been brought to Australia, presumably by one of his sons. It was

then sold to a gentleman in Toorak during the Great Depression in 1934 and subsequently to Mr Carey, an English collector of The Rifle Brigade medals. The Carey family presented their rare collection of medals to the museum in 1972, including Alexander Eason's.

Alexander's great-grandson and my grandfather, Arnold Eason, wrote in 1981, aged 76:

When I was a boy, I saw a military campaign medal inscribed on the edge with the name Sergeant Alexander James Eason; the medal ribbon carrying numerous bars bearing the names of famous places where important battles were fought during the Peninsular War 1808-1814 against Napoleon.

Also, family lore has it that another soldier named Alexander Eason went from Stirling, Scotland, to Ireland and was one of Oliver Cromwell's men (Roundheads). He received a medal from Cromwell in the early 17th century.

I found Sergeant Alexander's military records on Ancestry.com in the *UK, Royal Hospital, Chelsea: Regimental Registers of Pensioners, 1713 - 1882 for the Rifle Brigade and Miscellaneous Corps, 1806 - 1838*. The records stated that 37-year-old Alexander was:

- admitted to hospital in August 1824,
- 'worn out' after fighting and surviving thirteen battles and
- given a pension after 21 ½ years of service.

After viewing graphic pictures of these battles, I wondered if 'worn out' Alexander had post-traumatic stress disorder when admitted to the Royal Hospital, Chelsea.

Two years after receiving the pension, Alexander, aged 39, married Ann Payne, aged 19, in 1826. They had at least eight children over the next 23 years. When the youngest child, Samuel Eason, was 20 months old, 63-year-old Alexander died on 18 April 1851, leaving Anne to raise a large family. Anne Eason was 44 when she became a widow and the Eason children were aged: Jane 23 years; Alexander (Jnr.) 17 years; Joseph 16 years; Mary Anne 14 years; Susan 12 years; Catherine 6 years; Elizabeth 4 years and young Samuel 1 year.

Anne Eason remarried in 1856 to William Smith in Athlone when Samuel was aged about seven.

Samuel Eason's Siblings

Samuel Eason's siblings emigrated to Australia in the following order:

1. Alexander Eason (Jnr.)

Alexander Eason briefly joined the Royal Irish Constabulary as a teenager before being discharged and becoming the first Eason sibling to emigrate to Australia. He arrived in Sydney, aged 18, on 15 March 1851, a month before his father died in Athlone. Samuel Eason was one year old when his eldest brother migrated.

Shipping records state that Alexander could read and write, was a farm labourer from Athlone and arrived in the colony without family. He joined the Victoria Police in 1852 and became a detective based at the Ballarat goldfields, rising through the ranks to eventually become a well-known Sergeant of Detective Police. Alexander died in 1896, aged 62, at his home in South Yarra after suffering from 'amnesia syncope' for five weeks. Although he had married twice, he did not have any children. His obituary was published in *The Age* on 19 February 1896:

DEATH OF EX-SERGEANT DETECTIVE EASON

Mr Alexander Eason, who was for many years a prominent member of the detective force, died at his residence, Fitzgerald Street, South Yarra yesterday. Mr Eason joined the Victorian detective service in 1852 and the ability he displayed won for him rapid promotion. In 1869 he was made a first-class sergeant and up to the time of his retirement on a pension in December 1885, was associated with others in investigating some of the most celebrated criminal cases here. Old colonists will remember the good work done by him in running to earth the perpetrators of the Break o' Day murder. While driving in his buggy, and having a large quantity of gold in his possession, Mr Alick Burke, a bank manager at Break o' Day, near Rokewood was set upon and foully murdered, his assailant making off with the gold. Detective Eason was told to make enquiries with the result that he arrested two men, Searle and Ballan, who were convicted of the crime and hanged.

Another mystery which he, in company with the late Detective Hyland, succeeded in unravelling early in the sixties was the murder of a man at Bullarook Forest. The detectives had little to work on, for the murderer burned the body and all that remained as a clue were a button and portion of a pair of trousers. Eventually, however, they arrested a man named Murphy, a former mate of the deceased who was convicted and prior to his execution confirmed his guilt. Many other instances of the detective's astuteness might be mentioned. The deceased's brother, Sergeant Eason, of the uniform police, is now orderly at the City Court.

2. Jane Eason

Jane Eason, aged 20, married William Short, aged 24, on 17 January 1849 in Athlone, the same year her youngest brother, Samuel, was born. Two years later, she became the second Eason sibling to emigrate to Australia when she and her husband and their young child, William (Jnr.), arrived in Sydney on 6 June 1851, several months after Alexander. Alexander was still living in Sydney when Jane and her family arrived and it was his name she provided in her passenger records in the column 'Relative in the Colony'.

Jane and William Short relocated from Sydney to Melbourne, where four more children were born: Alexander in 1852, Angelina in 1854, Thomas in 1856 and Jane (Jnr.) in 1858. William Short joined the Victoria Police on 11 April 1859 and was appointed to the Talbot Police Station in the goldfield region. The remainder of the Short family were born in the Amherst/Talbot district: Susan 1860, Elizabeth 1862, Alfred 1865 and Kathleen Marie 1868.

Jane died in Talbot, Victoria in 1903, aged 74 years, having suffered for nine months with 'malignant disease of the stomach and exhaustion'. Five of her nine children predeceased her.

3. Joseph Eason

Samuel Eason was only four years old when his older brother, Joseph, emigrated in 1853, aged 18. Joseph Eason joined the Victoria Police, serving as a detective from 1854. However, he had a poor conduct record with the Victoria Police and was dismissed on 13 February 1860. Joseph died six months later, on 30 August 1860, in West Melbourne from tuberculosis at the young age of 25 years. Alexander was the informant on his brother's death certificate.

4. Susan Eason

Susan Eason, aged 17 years, married William Kingsley, a bootmaker, in Athlone in 1856 and emigrated to Melbourne with their three-year-old son, Alexander, in 1861. Samuel Eason was aged eleven when his fourth sibling emigrated.

Five weeks after arriving, Susan and William Kingsley's second child, Hannah Kingsley, was born on 18 January 1862. Four more Kingsley children were born during the next nine years: Jane 1863, Alexander 1866, Thomas 1868 and Elizabeth 1871.

Hard times fell on the Kingsley family when Susan, aged 33, a mother of six children and a servant, was convicted on 22 April 1872 of stealing £31 from a gentleman who had visited her home. After her trial in the Melbourne Supreme Court, she was sentenced to twelve months' hard labour in the Old Melbourne Jail. Susan falsely claimed to police that she had been given the money by her brother, Detective Alexander Eason, but he denied this in Court; family tensions must have been at an all-time high with reputations at stake. When Susan was incarcerated, her children were aged one, four, six, nine, ten and thirteen.

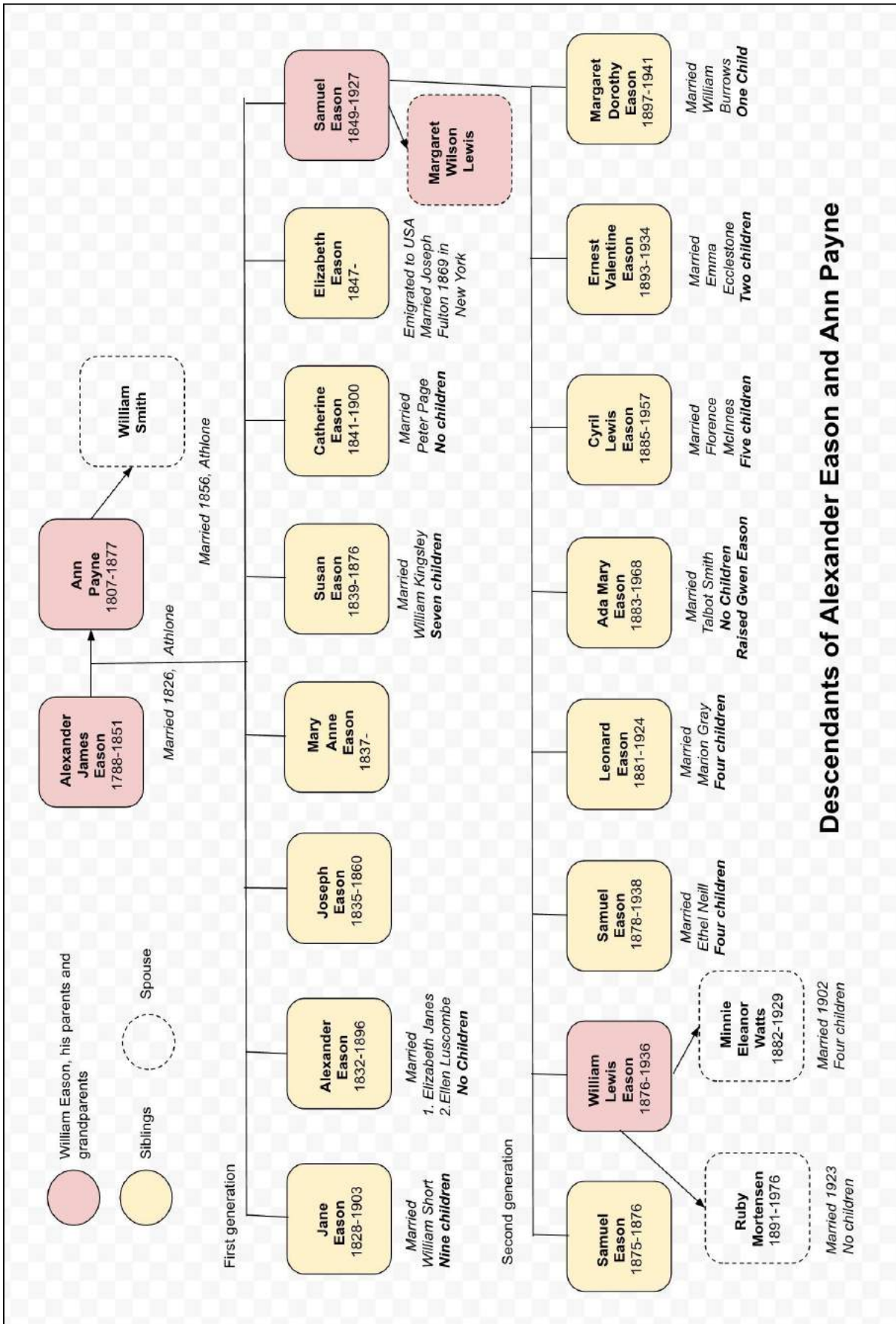
Samuel Eason joined Victoria Police three months before his sister Susan was convicted.

Susan was released from jail on 21 December 1872, only eight months after being sentenced. Not long after returning home, she became pregnant and her seventh and youngest child, Isabella Kingsley, was born on 26 December 1873. Unfortunately, Susan became seriously ill at about the same time Isabella was born and remained unwell for the next 22 months. Sadly, little Isabella died aged six weeks after experiencing diarrhoea for twelve days. With a sick wife, the death of a child and the family's reputation in tatters, William Kingsley faced bankruptcy in 1875.

On 25 October 1876, Susan, aged 38, died from 'Morbus Cordis Dropsy' (heart disease). William did not remarry and died in 1900 when run over by a motor car in Brunswick, aged 66.

5. Catherine Eason

Sometime before 1863, Catherine Eason also emigrated. At the age of 22, she married Peter Page, aged 28, in the Manse of the Scots Church, Melbourne, on 6 July 1863. Their marriage certificate states that Catherine's profession was a 'servant' and Peter was a 'baker'. Catherine and Peter were married for 37 years before Catherine died suddenly from a cerebral hemorrhage in 1900, aged about 59 years. The Pages had no children.



Descendants of Alexander Eason and Ann Payne

William Eason's Father's Family Tree

William Eason's Mother: Margaret Wilson Lewis



Margaret Eason (nee Lewis) (*left*) was probably born in a tent at Gong Gong, on the fringe of Ballarat, on 22 March 1858, as was her younger brother, William (Jnr.). She was the fifth child of ten children born to William Lewis, a labourer (1823-1910), and Mary Lewis (nee Maxwell, 1823-1904). (*see photos of Mary and William Lewis below*)

Margaret's parents were born in Ireland but married on 1 January 1851 at Rothesay, the Isle of Bute, Scotland. Several years later, they emigrated to Australia with their two young children in the hope of a better life, lured by the Ballarat gold rush. So it was from this small island off the west coast of Scotland that the Lewis family began the long journey of migration to Adelaide, South Australia. As they left the shores of Liverpool, England, on 3 April 1854, Mary and William would have been aware of the high death rate of young children on long sea voyages. Their children were: Anna, aged two and Elizabeth, aged one. When measles spread amongst passengers during the early part of the voyage, I imagine a heavily pregnant Mary would have felt alarmed for herself and her family. Two-year-old Anna succumbed to the disease, died on 22 May 1854 and was buried at sea. Thirteen other passengers also died on this voyage.

After ninety days at sea, enduring cramped and unhealthy living conditions, the Lewis family arrived in Port Adelaide on 3 July 1854. A week later, Mary gave birth to their third child, Mary Jane Lewis. It is difficult to imagine how Mary coped nursing a baby, perhaps still grieving the loss of a child and facing an uncertain future in a new country. Nevertheless, the Lewis family eventually made their way to the Ballarat goldfields, likely by horse and dray.



When Mary and William's fourth child, Anne, was born in Ballarat in 1856, William worked as a labourer in the Ballarat district. By the time my great-great-grandmother, Margaret Wilson Lewis, was born two years later on 22 March 1858, William's occupation was a miner. Presumably, he had little success at mining as he was later employed with the Ballarat Gas Company. However, six years after arriving in the colony, William purchased 72 acres of forest at Pootilla, near Bungaree, in about 1860.



Pootilla pre -1900

The sixth Lewis child, William (Jnr.), was born 8 November 1860 in Gong Gong, about three kilometres from the Lewis farm at Pootilla. William was working as a 'dairyman' at the time, perhaps on his own farm.

The seventh child, Amelia Johanna, was born on 28 January 1862, followed by Thomas Maxwell, born on 18 June 1863. The ninth child of the family, Emma Lewis, was born in 1866.

Margaret Lewis is likely to have attended the Bullarook State School, about three kilometres from her home, which opened sometime in the 1860s. The local community would have had to raise a portion of the building costs to get this school established, as free, secular and compulsory education was not introduced until the Education Act of 1872. With few opportunities for further education or training, Margaret would have left school to help on the family farm at a young age.

William Lewis worked hard to clear the forest and cultivate his land to grow hay and potatoes. Like many farming families at the time, he was assisted by his children, who undertook adult tasks. On 18 March 1867, 12-year-old Mary Jane was helping her father in the paddock operate a threshing machine that removed oat seeds from the stalks of hay. Horrifically, a hook on Mary Jane's petticoat was caught in the machine's spindle, dragging her into it, spinning her by the hair and crushing her spinal cord. She did not regain consciousness after the machine was stopped and died shortly after. The next day, an inquest for Mary Jane's death was held on

the family farm, and William provided a statement on oath. This tragedy would have devastated the Lewis family, including eight-year-old Margaret, who turned nine only four days later.

During the same year that Mary Jane was killed, William and Mary's tenth and youngest child, James Henry, was born in August 1867. Young James Henry died of gastroenteritis seventeen months later.



William Lewis (Jnr.), Margaret Eason's brother, farming at Pootilla

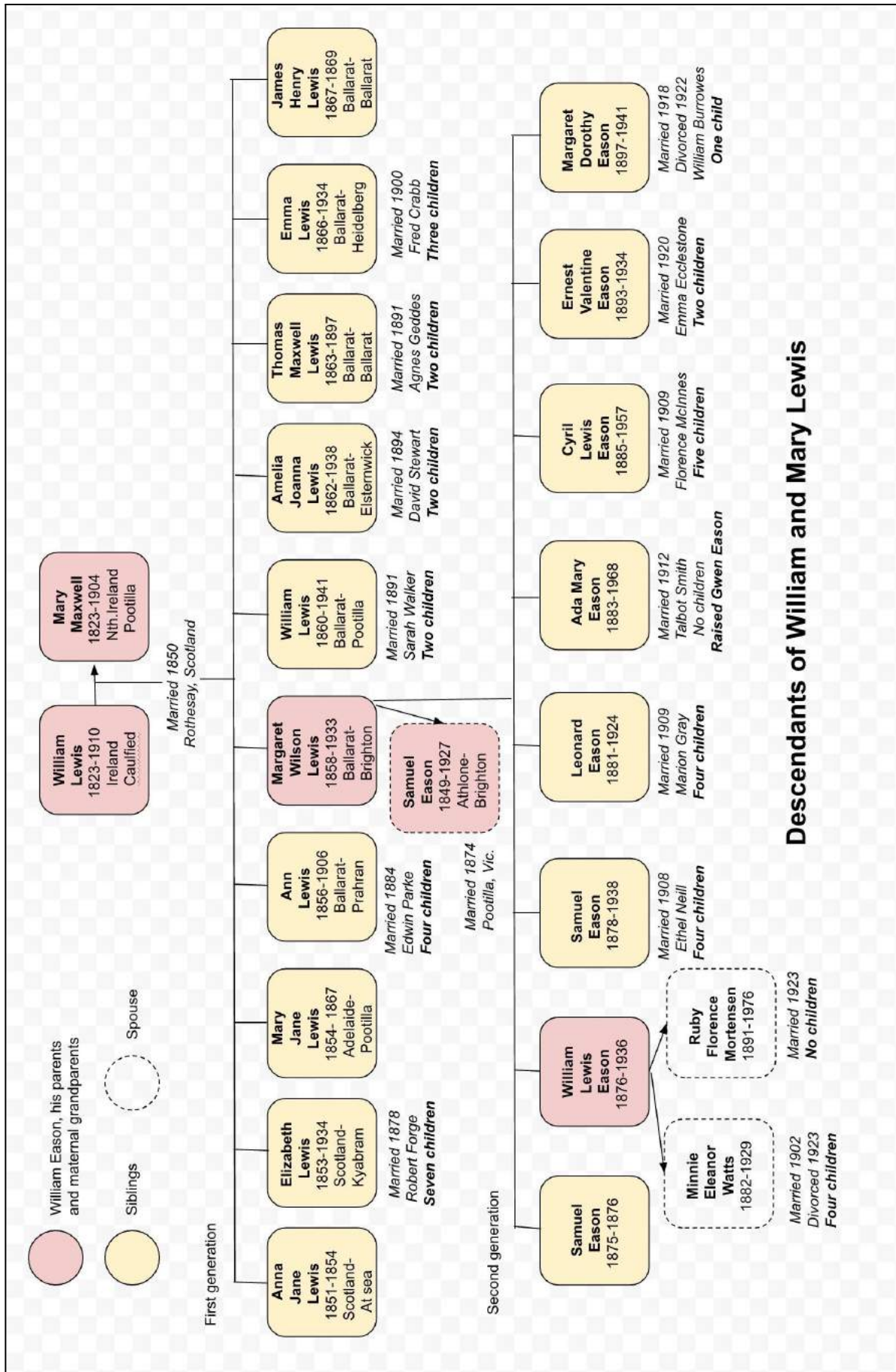
At the time of Margaret and Samuel Eason's wedding in October 1874, Margaret's surviving siblings were: Elizabeth aged 21, Anne aged 18, William aged 14, Amelia aged 12, Thomas aged 11 and Emma aged 8. Her parents, Mary and William Lewis, were both aged about 51.

Descendants of Margaret Eason's brother, William Lewis (b.1860), still live on the Lewis farm today, at Lewis Lane, Pootilla.



Lewis siblings, c.1920

Left: Emma Crabb, William Lewis (Jnr.), Amelia Stewart, Margaret Eason



Descendants of William and Mary Lewis

William Eason's Mother's Family Tree

Reflections on William and Minnie's Childhoods

It would seem that the childhoods of William and Minnie and their family backgrounds were different in many significant ways. For example,

- Minnie was mainly raised without a father, whereas two parents raised William. Discipline may have featured more in William's childhood than Minnie's as William's father had a law enforcement, regimental background.
- Minnie was raised in the Catholic faith, whereas William was raised in the Anglican faith.
- Minnie had little educational opportunity, whereas William was given a privileged, paid secondary education at a private school with many sporting and academic opportunities.
- William was the oldest of seven children, whereas Minnie was the second youngest of thirteen surviving children.
- Minnie experienced the loss of a parent and sibling in early childhood. William did not experience the death of a parent or sibling until he was an adult.
- Minnie's childhood was centred around one community, whereas William shifted houses and communities regularly during his early years.
- William descended from the Protestant British. Minnie descended from the Catholic Irish and Protestant British; the early death of Minnie's father meant her Catholic, Irish mother significantly influenced her religion.

⁸ 'The Royal Green Jackets Museum Digital Book', digitalbooks.theonlinebookcompany.com

5

Minnie and William's Wedding and Married Life at Rosedale

Two days before Christmas in 1902, the marriage of 20-year-old Minnie Watts and 26-year-old William Eason took place at St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church in Rosedale. The following day the *Rosedale Courier*, the local weekly newspaper, briefly reported the event with the promise of a full report to be published in the next edition for their readers.

A very popular wedding was celebrated at St. Rose of Lima Church, Rosedale, on Tuesday last, when Mr William Eason, eldest son of Sergeant Eason of Melbourne, was married to Miss Minnie Watts, youngest daughter of Mrs Watts of 'Oakvale', Rosedale. In order to furnish our readers with full particulars, we have decided to hold our report over until the next issue.



On 8 January 1903, the *Rosedale Courier* published a comprehensive account of Minnie and William's wedding; the article took up an entire column on page three.

The article reported that charming Minnie had four bridesmaids attending her: her sister Emma Watts, a friend Ruby Kreyenborg, and two young nieces, Nellie Stevenson, aged eight and Nellie Richardson, aged sixteen. William's best man, Frederic Rumpff, was a local teaching colleague of William's who taught at the nearby Cowwarr State School.

In the absence of Minnie's late father, her older brother, William, aged 26, walked Minnie down the aisle and her mother, Eliza Watts, signed her consent to the marriage on the marriage certificate.



The newspaper article revealed that after the ceremony, Eliza Watts generously hosted a sumptuous wedding breakfast at 'Oakvale' for the bridal party and the many guests, followed by a night of partying, including music and lively dancing into the early hours of the following day. Another fun part of the evening was the guests accompanying William and Minnie to the nearby Rosedale railway station, where the newlyweds were showered in rose petals, rice and warm wishes on their departure to Adelaide for a honeymoon. The ebullient guests then returned to 'Oakvale' to continue the celebrations.

William Watts (Jnr.)



St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church, Rosedale, 2021.

This church was a special place for Minnie. It was here she was baptised in 1882, married in 1902, played the organ for church services and witnessed her two eldest children's baptisms.

The complete account of William and Minnie's wedding published in the *Rosedale Courier* is provided below:

**ORANGE BLOSSOMS
EASON -- WATTS**

As briefly stated in our last issue, on the 23rd December 1902, a wedding in which a great deal of local interest was centred was solemnised at the R.C. Church, Rosedale, by the Rev. Father Roche, between Mr William Eason, eldest son of Sergeant Eason, of the City Court, Melbourne, and Miss Minnie Watts, youngest daughter of Mrs E. Watts, of 'Oakvale', Rosedale. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the wedding march was ably rendered by Mrs Nolan. The pretty bride was given away by her brother, Mr William Watts and wore a gown of Ivory silk, trimmed with Brussel's applique lace and insertion with accordion-pleated frills. A pretty wreath and veil completed a charming toilette. A shower bouquet of choice flowers was also carried.

The bridesmaids, four in number, were Miss Emma Watts (sister of the bride), Miss Ruby Kreyenborg of Bairnsdale, Miss Nellie Richardson and Miss Nellie Stevenson (nieces of the bride). The former two were tastefully gowned in blue voile, tucked with

insertions of cream guipure chiffon sashes. Their hats were of Tuscan straw, trimmed with maize mousseline ribbon, finished with black velvet ribbon and sprays of for-get-me-nots. Misses Richardson and Stevenson wore cream Japanese silk, trimmed with deep cream insertions and cream hats to match. Mr F.S. Rumpff capably officiated as Best Man.

After the ceremony, the wedding party drove to 'Oakvale', where a sumptuous breakfast was provided, and the usual toasts were duly honored. Special degree of interest was attached to the wedding cake, the make and artistic ornaments being the work of the bride's uncle, Mr William Schafer.

Mr and Mrs Eason left by the evening train for Melbourne, en route to Adelaide, for their honeymoon and a large circle of friends accompanied them to the train and showered them with rose leaves, rice and good wishes. The bride travelled in a dress of Veux-rose crepoline, trimmed with paris net and insertion and frills edged with black satin ribbon, finished with rosettes of the same. She wore a hat to harmonise, made of Paris straw.

In the evening a 'Musical Evening' was given at the house, where a large number of friends gathered and a thoroughly enjoyable evening was spent, dancing and other amusements being indulged in until the early hours of the morning.

The presents were numerous, useful and valuable gifts and included the following:--

- Bridegroom to Bride, a gold necklet and pendant
- Bride to Bridegroom, a dressing case
- Mrs Watts, cheque and house linen
- Mr Ernest Watts, chair
- Miss Jane Watts, tray cloths and d'oyleys
- Miss Emma Watts, set of jugs
- Miss Alice Watts, linen
- Mr and Mrs H. N. Stevenson (Korumburra), silver-mounted oak biscuit barrel and silver-mounted dinner cruet
- Mr and Mrs Slatter (Melbourne), pair of handsome vases
- Mr E. Crossley, china teapot
- Mr G. McKay (Melbourne), tea set
- Dr and Mrs Nolan, hand-painted table centre
- Mr Chalk, silver-mounted breakfast cruet
- Mr and Mrs J. R. Williams, bedroom lamp
- Miss Kingsley, silver-backed hairbrush and comb
- Mr C. Beck, silver-mounted butter dish
- Mrs Kelly, silver bread fork
- Mr A. Milligan (Traralgon), silver butter dish
- Mrs Gresson, water jugs and glasses
- Mr J. G. David, cheque
- Mr J. Payne (Traralgon), Shakespeare's Works
- Misses A. and A. R. Raffale, hand-painted vases
- Mr Wolfe (Maffra), silver jam spoon and butter knife
- Mr and Mrs F. H. Ingle, handsome afternoon tea cosy

Misses G. and M. and Master G. Yeats, cut-glass bowl
 Mr J. Ditterich (Korumburra) silver-mounted cut-glass salad bowl
 Miss I. Ingle, scone d'oyley
 Mr. F. S. Rumpff, silver butter cooler
 Mrs T. H. Waite (Traralgon), Hampton Lace side-board cloth
 Mr H. Schafer, silver dinner cruet
 Mr and Mrs Feely, silver-mounted pickle jar
 Mr H. S. Davy, silver teapot
 Mr T. Lawless, glass cheese dish
 Mr J. G. Scott, silver sugar scuttle
 Mr and Mrs Fitzgerald, silver teapot
 Mrs Yeats, silver-mounted breakfast cruet
 Mr W. Schafer, wedding cake
 Miss R. Kreyenborg, pair silver salt cellars
 Miss Richardson, ruby butter dish
 Miss N. Stevenson, ashtrays
 Mr E. Bell, cake dish
 Mr W. Watts, set of carvers
 Mr and Mrs J. Teeling, glass cake stands
 Miss A. Teeling, tea-cosy
 Mr T. Rowley, silver-mounted butter dish
 Mr and Mrs Robotham, handsome cake dish
 Mr and Mrs Ayres, inkstand
 Mr and Mrs E. Wilson, Japanese afternoon tea-set
 Mr A. Watts, purse
 Mrs Richardson, cake dish
 Mr and Mrs T. P. Grace, handsome lamp
 Miss M. Grace, set of jugs
 Miss D. Grace, pair of silver serviette rings
 Misses C. and N. Rowley, vases
 Miss M. Birkery, handsome ornaments
 Mr and Mrs Pearce, vases and window curtains
 Mr A. Rowley, inkstand
 Miss M. Portch, tea-cosy
 Mrs N. Portch, vases

Interestingly, the *Rosedale Courier's* detailed report of William and Minnie's wedding exposed the absence of William's parents and six siblings. Perhaps the Protestant Eason family's absence at their son's Catholic wedding demonstrated the sectarian tensions felt during this period. In 1902, when William and Minnie married, a strong mistrust still existed between Protestants and Catholics in Australian society due to colonial rivalries and historical baggage between the English and Irish. Given that William's father, Sergeant Samuel Eason, was raised as a Protestant in Ireland and was also the son of a soldier in the British Army, Samuel was

likely to have staunchly disapproved of his son's marriage to the Catholic daughter of an Irish Catholic, in a Catholic church.

At this time, the Catholic Church condemned Catholics marrying non-Catholics and although not forbidden, the Catholic Church did not like to perform these weddings. In 1902, the Catholic Church considered these 'mixed marriages' as unholy alliances since any children resulting from these marriages were seen to lose their Catholic faith if ever they had received one.⁹ From the Protestant perspective, marrying a Catholic partner meant compulsorily marrying in a Catholic church and also compulsorily signing an agreement with their partner to raise any future children in the Catholic faith.

Seven years before William and Minnie married, in 1895, the Council of the Roman Catholic Church issued a decree against mixed marriages and ordained that this decree should be read in all places of Catholic worship on the second Sunday 'after Epiphany' in each year thereafter. As a result, this decree had been read to congregations in all Catholic churches in Australia, including St. Rose of Lima, Rosedale, at least seven times by the time Minnie and William married. On 20 January 1902, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported Father Fitzpatrick reading this decree to his congregation during the Mass held at St. Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, on 19 January. Below are some passages of this decree read by Father Fitzpatrick:

In regard to mixed marriages, that is of Catholics with non-Catholics, it is well known that they are strictly forbidden by the ancient law of the Church, which the Popes have always inculcated, as the sanctity of marriage requires that both parties be qualified by faith and other dispositions of the mind to receive the grace of the Sacrament and as many disadvantages and great evils frequently arise from marriages of this kind, namely, domestic broils, the perversion of the Catholic party, and of the offspring, or what frequently happens in this country, the infection of the children with indifferentism.

Hence we feel bound to admonish all priests firmly to adhere to this doctrine and that they do not cease to set forth the evils arising from marriages of this kind. The Church has always opposed marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics on account as well of the criminal participation in divine things, as of a serious danger of perversion of the Catholic party, or the bad training of the offspring. Hence it happens that when there is a question of a mixed marriage, the Church never dispenses without a grave cause and unless a promise be made of taking those precautions by which the danger for the Catholic party and the offspring is removed. These precautions are:

- (1) That there be no danger of the perversion of the Catholic by the non-Catholic party.
- (2) That the Catholic party has an obligation as far as possible to withdraw the non-Catholic party from error and
- (3) That all children born of these mixed marriages must be brought up in the Catholic religion.

I found many newspaper articles regarding the Catholic Church condemning mixed marriages from this era, similar to the article below and on the previous page. On 24 January 1902, the *Southern Cross*, a Catholic South Australian newspaper, reported the following:

THE CURSE OF MIXED MARRIAGES

The Decrees regarding mixed marriages have aroused more than ordinary interest this year. The 'Daily Telegraph' discovered the document on Saturday and published it as a fresh and startling piece of news. The controversy in the 'Ecclesiastical Record' has sharpened the interest of the priests and in every Catholic Church on Sunday, mixed marriages were strongly condemned. It would be good if the decrees were read at least four times a year, and even printed in the reading books of our schools and colleges for the practice is one of the greatest curses which we suffer from.

Comparatively, the Church of England opposed Anglicans marrying Catholics yet did not condemn mixed marriages quite as strongly as the Catholic Church. The article below provides some insight into the Anglican attitude. It was published 1 January 1900, in *The Church of England Messenger for Victoria and Ecclesiastical Gazette for the Diocese of Melbourne*:

The question of mixed marriages is ever with us, and the recent dispute in Gippsland, and a still more recent one in Sydney, brings the question prominently before us once more. Mixed marriages are one of the thousand evils that we reap from the seeds of controversy and division sown during the last few centuries. Love, they say, levels all ranks, and buries all distinctions of creed; but, like many a popular assertion, this is only superficially true. For a time, perhaps, religious difference may slumber, but if either parent be thoroughly convinced of the truth of their own creed, it must sooner or later crop up again. What remedy can we suggest? Of course the most obvious one is "DON'T!" But if it has to be, could not some definite understanding be always insisted upon as to the religion the children are to be taught? We believe the Church of Rome always tries to exact a promise that the children of such unions shall be brought up as Roman Catholics; and surely we of the English Church ought not to be one bit behind in insisting that the children of such marriages shall, when one of the contracting parties is an Anglican, be brought up in our own form of faith. How frequently one sees the children of these marriages utterly indifferent and careless! Sometimes a compromise is attempted - but it is a most lamentable error. Let the children be united, even though their parents cannot be, on this great subject of religion. Most emphatically, we protest against any mixed marriage as an evil; but yet, if they are entered upon, for the sake of the children let some agreement be made that they may be trained as one family in all that concerns their spiritual life.

With strong opposition to mixed marriages at the time of William and Minnie's marriage, the newlyweds and William's family would have been acutely aware of the challenges that lay

ahead. William's pledge to raise his future children in the Catholic faith would be of particular concern to his family.

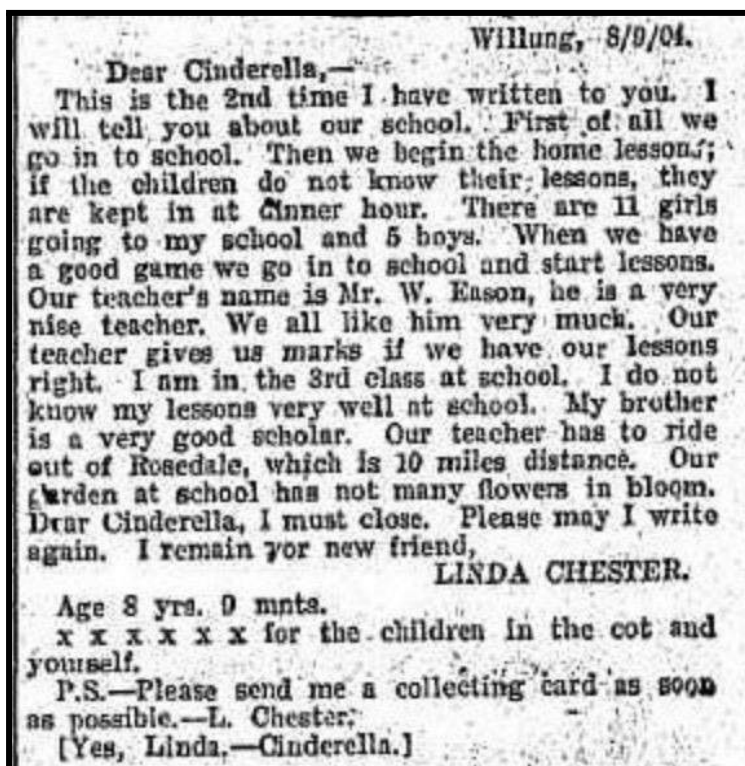
After William and Minnie returned from their honeymoon, they settled in the Rosedale township. William continued teaching at the two small, rural schools, Holey Plains and Coolungoolun, spending half his working week at each school; Holey Plains was approximately 18 kilometres southeast of Rosedale and Coolungoolun was about 25 kilometres east of Rosedale. William rode to these schools on his horse.

In May 1903, William began teaching half-time at Holey Plains State School and Willung State School. Willung State School was approximately 16 kilometres south of Rosedale and William would have ridden his horse past Minnie's family farm, 'Oakvale', during his teaching days. On 23 June 1903, he wrote to the Education Department complaining he had nowhere to confine his horse during the day while he taught at the Holey Plain school:

As I work part-time with Holey Plains 2597, I keep a horse for travel purposes but I am put to great inconvenience at this school through not having a small paddock for my horse. As there is plenty of suitable timber at hand, a post and wire fence of three wires could be put up at a small cost.¹⁰

The Education Department replied to William's request: 'No funds available.'

An eight-year-old student of William's at Willung State School, Linda Chester, entered a writing competition in September 1904 and her letter was published in a weekly Melbourne newspaper, *The Leader*, on 15 October 1904 (*below*). It provides valuable insight into William's teaching and school life during this period.



In January 1904, William was elected President of the Mechanics' Institute. As a result, he oversaw the construction of a supper-room, a classroom and improvements to the main building. He also supervised the organisation of a 'Grand Fete' held in April 1904, with the Honourable E.J. Croke M.L.C opening it. The fete provided an array of attractions for the locals: shooting gallery, hat trimming competition by men, nail driving by women, guessing competitions, art and china, fruits and flowers, produce stalls, refreshments and cake stalls.

In March 1905, William accepted the appointment of First Master of the Rosedale Masonic Lodge, the highest rank within the Rosedale Masonic Lodge. This appointment was for a year and would have required a significant time commitment for William outside his working hours. As First Master, he chaired all of the business at the regular meetings, presided over the rituals and ceremonies which took place within the Lodge, scheduled all functions, oversaw all financial issues and represented the Rosedale Lodge at Grand Lodge. Once William took office, he was addressed as 'Worshipful Master' by his brethren. One of the leading newspapers in Australia, *The Argus*, announced William's appointment to First Master on 29 March 1905:

ROSEDALE:- On Friday evening, at the lodge-room, Brother William Eason was installed as Worshipful Master of the Rosedale Masonic Lodge.

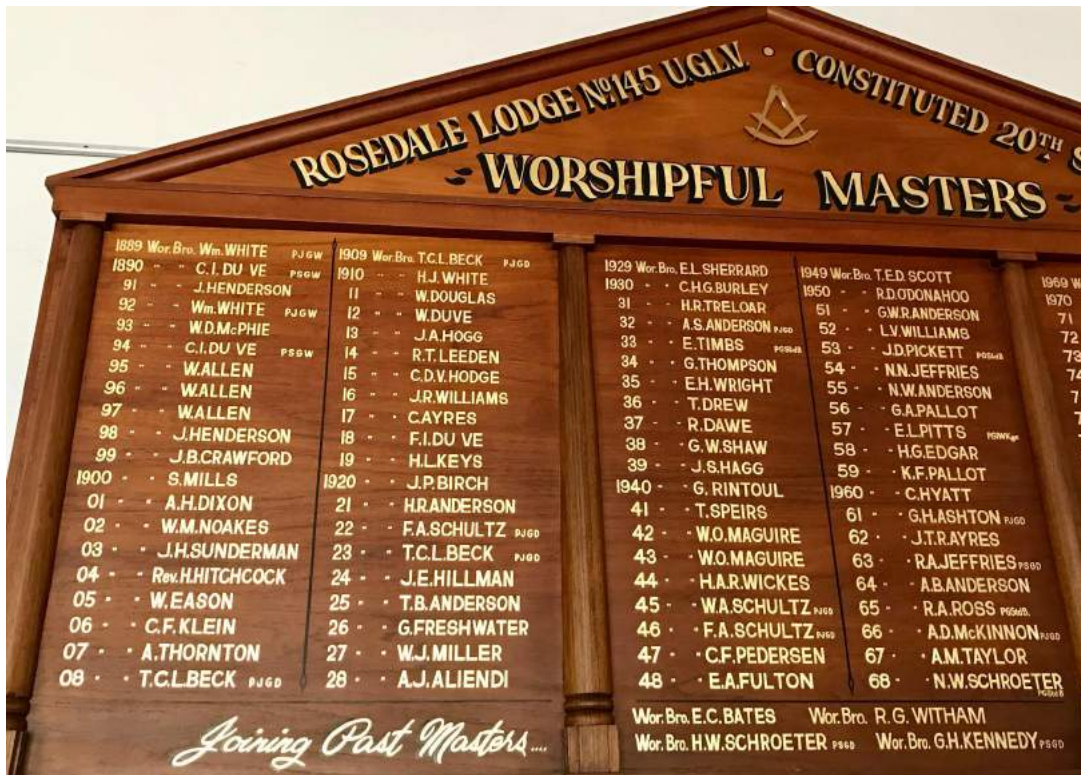
The first Grand Lodge, an association of lodges, was founded in England in 1717, bound together by secret rites of initiation and ritual and notably excluded women. According to the Freemasons' website, masterymason.com, the purpose of Freemasonry is:

to make better men out of good men, better fathers, better husbands, better brothers and better sons, strengthening a man's character, improving his moral and spiritual outlook and broadening his mental horizons.

From the inception of the Freemasonry organisation, the Catholic Church opposed Freemasonry, believing that the Masonic principles and rituals were irreconcilable with Catholic doctrines. Consequently, from 1738 the Catholic Church prohibited Catholics from membership in the Masonic organisation and after 1917, a Catholic who joined a Masonic organisation faced automatic ex-communication.¹¹ Interestingly, William may have already been a Freemason at the time of his marriage to Minnie, as there was a unique pathway to follow in order to attain the highest rank of First Master: a minor Masonic position, 'Junior Warden', then 'Senior Warden' with each Masonic office held for a year.

Many questions will remain unanswered concerning the impact of William's prominence in the Masonic Lodge on his wife, a devout Catholic, and on their relationship:

- How did Minnie feel about William's commitment to the Masonic Lodge?
- Did she find it disrespectful to her faith?
- Could she accompany her husband to the annual Masonic Ball if the Catholic Church condemned Freemasonry?
- Did William's involvement drive a large wedge between them as a couple?



Rosedale Worshipful Masters Roll of Honour, Rosedale Historical Society building. William Eason's name is listed for 1905: first column, fourth from the bottom.

Minnie and William Begin a Family

Minnie and William Eason's first child, my grandfather, Arnold Lewis Eason, was born on 23 November 1905, in the Traralgon Private Hospital, 24 kilometres from Rosedale. Six weeks later, he was baptised on 7 January 1906 at St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church, Rosedale. Minnie's niece, Nellie Stevenson, aged 11, was Arnold's godparent, per proxy for another niece, 19-year-old Nellie Richardson; both of these nieces were bridesmaids at Minnie and William's wedding. I wonder how the officiating priest felt about baptising the son of the local First Master of the Masonic Lodge.

In the years following Arnold's birth, William took on various activities, in addition to his school and Lodge commitments. Education Department correspondence, dated 22 February 1907, revealed William tutored a local 15-year-old boy, Albert Mitchell, twice a week in the evenings. Albert was a telegraph messenger who required coaching for his Departmental Examinations. Since William was employed full-time by the Education Department, he had to seek permission to tutor Albert.

In early 1907, William was elected secretary for the committee organising the annual carnival of the Rosedale Easter Sports Club. This carnival was a huge event for the district and would have required many volunteer hours to organise. While William was working full time as head teacher of two schools, tutoring two evenings a week, a member of the Rosedale Masonic

Lodge and involved in the organisation of the Rosedale Easter Carnival, Minnie had the responsibility of parenting young Arnold and completing onerous domestic chores.

In 1908, several significant events impacted the Eason family. Firstly, William and Minnie's second child, Elma Moira, was born on 22 February in Rosedale. She was baptised three weeks later, on 16 March 1908, at the St. Rose of Lima Church; the local policeman was appointed her godparent. The photo of Arnold below was likely taken on the occasion of Elma's christening.



The second significant event that impacted the Eason family was a controversial one and took place during the Easter of 1908. A decree, known as *Ne Temere*, was issued by the Pope concerning the validity of all marriages involving Catholics, focusing particularly on mixed marriages. The decree stated that the only valid marriage recognised by the Catholic Church was one officiated in a Catholic Church by a priest and that the couple also had to agree to all children from the marriage being raised Catholic.

Prior to 1908, the Catholic Church had only condemned Catholics marrying a non-Catholic, but now this new Canon law made a mixed marriage invalid if the conditions to it were not met. *Ne Temere* understandably caused huge resentment towards the Catholic Church by Protestants, driving communities apart. Young

non-Catholics were educated apart and socialised separately, based on parental fear that they could 'lose' their child to the Catholic faith if they socialised with a Catholic child and wanted to marry eventually.

The *Ne Temere* decree remained in place until 1970, when a new Code of Canon Law was proclaimed in an attempt to search for unity between divided Christians. However, the 1908 decree could possibly have added tension to Minnie and William's relationship regarding their religious differences. And would this decree add strain to William's relationship with his parents and siblings, given they presumably did not attend his wedding for religious reasons?

The third notable event in 1908 occurred on 18 November, when non-Indigenous women over the age of 21 were granted the right to vote in Victorian elections; the right to vote in federal elections was granted in 1902. Incredibly, Indigenous women would have to wait until 1962 for their right to vote in federal and Victorian elections. After European settlement, Australia was very much a patriarchal society; men held primary power and predominated in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. However, despite non-indigenous women achieving equal voting rights, there was still a vast difference in social and economic equality between genders.

Minnie's life was very typical for women of this era: a woman was expected to marry young, look after the children and accept being financially dependent on her husband while he worked and pursued his own interests.



Minnie and Elma, 1908

The fourth significant event occurred on 15 October 1908 when Arnold Eason, aged 2, was involved in a serious accident and severely burnt. *The Argus* briefly reported the accident on 17 October and a week later, on 22 October, the *Rosedale Courier* provided a more comprehensive report.

Rosedale Courier, 22 October 1908:

BURNING ACCIDENT PLAYING WITH MATCHES

The infant son of Mr W. Eason had a most lucky escape on Thursday last from being burned to death, and as it was he received painful burns about the body and limbs. The little fellow secured a box of matches and after lighting several, his clothing became ignited and in a few seconds he was enveloped in the flames. Fortunately, he ran to his

mother who at once wrapped her skirt about the burning clothing and thus extinguished the flames. The outer clothing of the lad was burnt to shreds and his life was undoubtedly saved by a jagged singlet which he wore and which had resisted the flames, only a small hole being burnt near the arm. Painful burns, however, were inflicted on the lower portion of the body, arms and legs and he was also scorched in many places. Dr Clarke skilfully dressed the wounds and greatly alleviated the pain but the little patient suffered much from shock and it was not until Saturday that he became easier and allayed the anxiety of his parents and friends, and he is now rapidly recovering from his injuries. While extinguishing the burning clothing Mrs Eason also sustained painful burns on the arms and hand.

Presumably, Minnie was responsible for Arnold's care at the time of this accident as he was close enough to run to her and therefore save his life. As Arnold and Minnie recovered from their injuries, I wonder how Minnie coped with the associated guilt she would have felt regarding Arnold's burns. This accident may have laid the foundation for Minnie to blame herself in a later tragedy involving her third child, Norma.

William played in a two-day golf tournament at Traralgon the weekend prior to Arnold's accident. Coincidentally, the *Weekly Times* reported his golf scores on the same day *The Argus* reported Arnold's accident. Managing the constant demands of domestic life on her own for long periods while her husband was absent, either working, playing sport or taking a leading role in a range of community activities, provides a possible explanation for why Minnie was not always able to be attentive to a two-year-old.

In January 1909, William's father, Samuel, aged 59, resigned from Victoria Police after steadily working his way through the policing ranks over the previous 35 years: Constable, Senior Constable, Leading Senior Constable, Sergeant, Senior Sergeant, Sub-Inspector and Inspector. He was promoted to Sub-Inspector in 1904 and transferred from the City Court, Russell Street, to the Bairnsdale Police Station. Consequently, Samuel, his wife, Margaret and their two youngest children, Ernie, aged eleven and Maggie, aged seven, relocated from Clifton Hill to Bairnsdale in 1904. Samuel was again promoted in 1907 to Inspector of Police, based in Bairnsdale, while policing the districts of Avon, Bairnsdale, Dargo, Omeo, Orbost and Tambo.

After Samuel retired, he returned to Melbourne with his wife and two teenage children to live in Elsternwick, a suburb of Melbourne, where Margaret cared for her widowed father, William Lewis, in their home. William Lewis lived with the Eason family until he died on 14 January 1910.

Meanwhile, William Eason continued his voluntary and sporting pursuits throughout 1909. In January, he was elected treasurer for the Rosedale Racing Club, which entailed a commitment to all meetings and race days. During the same month, he was elected to the Board of St. Mark's Anglican Church, Rosedale; William attended the weekly Anglican service while Minnie attended Mass at the Catholic Church with Arnold and Elma.

William, a keen golfer, also participated in regular competitions, winning the Rosedale Golf Club monthly medal in July 1909.

William's teaching assessment records can be viewed from this period, as the Victorian Board of Education assigned record books to all teachers employed in State Schools. These records were created to summarise the working history of each teacher in government service in Victoria from 1863 to 1959. District Inspectors assessed teachers approximately every six months throughout their teaching career with a comment noted in the teacher's record book alongside a score out of 100. On 30 June 1909, District Inspector Robb visited Willung State School and wrote the following comment about William's teaching:

Is a sound and intelligent teacher, painstaking and thorough. His management is tactful and effective. His school has a very good tone and is making very good progress. 88 V.G.

Not long after district Inspector Robb wrote this teacher assessment, the following article was published in the *Rosedale Courier* on 22 July 1909, highlighting William's professional, civic, sporting and religious pursuits:

We are pleased to note that two of our local school teachers -- Mr H. White, head teacher of the Rosedale school, and Mr W. Eason, Willung school -- have been put on the promotion list and are eligible to apply for higher positions than they at present occupy. While congratulating both gentlemen on their promotion we can not help regretting that it will mean their removal from Rosedale. During Mr Eason's residence of over ten years in Rosedale he has been associated with every institution in the town and he will be missed particularly by the sporting clubs and parents will regret to lose two such capable tutors to their children. It is not certain when either gentlemen will be transferred but there will probably be changes in the local schools' staff during the next few months.

William was promoted to the Welshpool State School (No. 3011), 90 kilometres from Rosedale. He finished teaching at the Willung school on 27 August 1909 and began his new employment in Welshpool ten days later, on 6 September. For Minnie, the move would mean separation from her large family and community for the first time.

The Rosedale community gave the Eason family a special farewell before leaving the district. Minnie had a 27-year, lifetime connection with Rosedale and William had given nearly ten years of teaching, sporting and voluntary service. The following article (*next page*), published in the *Rosedale Courier* on 22 August 1908, provides a summary of William's pursuit of his personal interests in the Rosedale community and is a telling example of patriarchal privilege during this era.

GOING AWAY

MR. W. EASON

Within the next few days Rosedale will lose one of its most energetic and popular citizens in the person of Mr W. Eason, who has received notice of his promotion to the charge of the Welshpool State School. While heartily congratulating Mr Eason on his well-merited promotion we cannot help regretting that it means his severance with the district, and every institution in the town will be much the poorer by his removal. During the ten years Mr Eason has been a resident of Rosedale he has taken an active part in all matters of interest to the district and the many clubs in the town. He has not only had his name on the members' roll, but he was also a prominent playing member. During the past couple of years he has held the secretaryship of the local Sports Club and the Oddfellows Lodge. The latter has about trebled its membership and the sports club has made splendid progress, thus testifying to Mr Eason's ability and zeal. It is hard to imagine how his place will be filled. His qualifications as teacher are by no means the least of his accomplishments, for while in charge of the Holey Plains, Coolungoolun and Willung schools, Mr Eason was recognised as a first class instructor and the parents of his pupils will be sorry at his departure. Mrs Eason will also be much missed, especially by the Catholic Church in which she took a keen interest and for some time past has officiated as the organist. Mr and Mrs Eason will leave for their new home on Tuesday next and we wish them every prosperity in the future.

From this account, it is clear that William devoted an extraordinary amount of time, outside of his work, to his interests which did not include Minnie and his young family. The implications of William not prioritising his wife and young family could understandably have created insecurities, self-doubt and resentment on the part of Minnie. Although the above article acknowledges that Minnie took an active role in the Catholic parish at Rosedale, it is quite possible that she may have felt insignificant and unimportant to her husband, given his huge involvement in voluntary work, club memberships and participation in sporting teams. I imagine William felt highly gratified by the local paper's glowing report highlighting his high social standing in the community.

⁹ Mixed Marriages and their Results, W.A. Record (Perth, W.A.; 1888-1922) 10 1908 22 Feb. 1908 Perth

¹⁰ PROV, VPRS 796, Unit 473, 1880-1928

¹¹ Phillip Jenkins, Two Centuries of Tension Between Masons, Catholics, May 30 2014, goodfaithmedia.org

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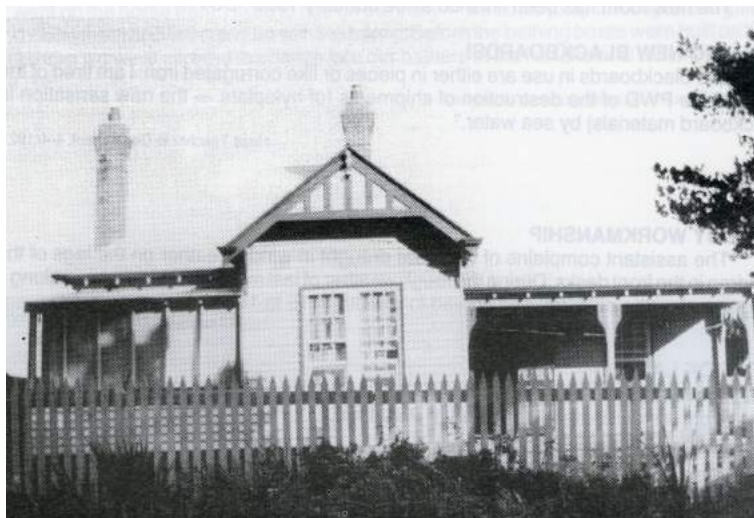
Minnie and William's Life in Welshpool

When the Eason family arrived at Welshpool in September 1909, the town boasted a hotel, a butcher, a bakery, a post office, two banks, a blacksmith, a saddler's shop, a boot maker's shop and a store. Local transport was still limited to horse and buggy as the first motorcar owned by a Welshpool resident didn't occur until 1913. In 1904, a public telephone was installed in the post office and a railway line connected from Melbourne to Welshpool.

George Gunton wrote a history of the Welshpool Primary School for the school centenary celebrated in 1990: *Welshpool Primary School No. 3011, 1890-1990*. It contained an account of William Eason's predecessor, Mr Jeremiah Hayes, arriving at Welshpool on 2 November 1904, which provides an insight into the conditions possibly confronted by the Eason family on their arrival:

There is nowhere to reside except a hotel. I retired with my wife and family to a much ventilated hut with a slab and mud chimney four miles from the school. From there, I was obliged to ride backwards and forwards over the almost impassable country, the grade in one part being one in four for a mile.¹²

It is unknown where William, Minnie and their young family initially settled in Welshpool in August 1909, but on 23 June 1911, they moved into a newly constructed schoolhouse adjacent to the Welshpool State School. They were likely to have been very excited about moving into their new house yet unaware of the shocking tragedy that would occur in this home the following year and change their lives forever. The Eason family remained in this house until December 1913, when William was promoted and transferred to Koo Wee Rup.



Welshpool Schoolhouse, 1913



The former Welshpool schoolhouse, 2019.

This house was relocated to nearby Agnes and restored by its owner.

Education Department correspondence records reveal some of William's challenges in teaching at a small, rural school. Initially, he was the only teacher for the 54 children enrolled, but five months later, the school was entitled to a junior teacher after eight more children registered. As a result, the Education Department allocated another teacher. However, this teacher never arrived at Welshpool and William was eventually permitted to appoint a Welshpool student who was younger than 15 years and had earned the Merit Certificate.

Around this time, Minnie's youngest brother, Arthur, was admitted to the Kew Asylum on 2 November 1910 at the age of 25. He had lived on the family farm at Rosedale with his mother and family members all his life and perhaps he had become too difficult for 71-year-old Eliza to manage. The doctors wrote a grim account of poor Arthur on his admission record:

Inane, expressionless, talks incoherently, cannot answer questions re age etc., does not know his name, speaks only a few words, is mischievous and at home drowns fowls pushing them into the water.

Arthur's Patient Clinical Notes are disturbing to read. Phrases such as 'congenital idiot', 'idiot of Mongol type', 'very stupid', 'is insane' and 'very dull' appear frequently in his records. The terms used to describe Arthur reflected society's attitudes at the time and would not represent current-day understandings.

Arthur's sister, Alice Watts, signed Arthur's admission forms indicating that she had accompanied him to the asylum. The family contact listed on these forms was Jane Johnson, another sister living in Rosedale.



Left: Arthur Watts upon admission to Kew Hospital for the Insane

On 10 April 1911, Minnie, aged 28 and William, aged 34, became parents for the third time, with the arrival of their daughter, Norma Alvina, at a private hospital in Traralgon. Arnold was aged five and Elma was aged three.

Around this time, William was also excelling with his teaching and management of the Welshpool State School. On 15 June 1911, District Inspector Betheras wrote:

He has worked hard to improve the surroundings of the school. The scholars make a very good effort. All his classes have reached a very good work standard of proficiency. His scholars learn very well; they reason only fairly well. He is a very good teacher. 88 Very Good.

A photo sourced by George Gunton for his book, *Welshpool Primary School No. 3011, 1890-1990*, depicts Arbor Day at the Welshpool school and includes William, Minnie, Arnold, Elma and baby Norma Eason (*photo next page*). The significance of the occasion is evidenced by the dress code of the parents, teachers, and students, all proudly standing in the tidy school grounds. Also, given that Minnie is holding baby Norma, the photo was taken in 1911, not 1913, as suggested by George Gunton.

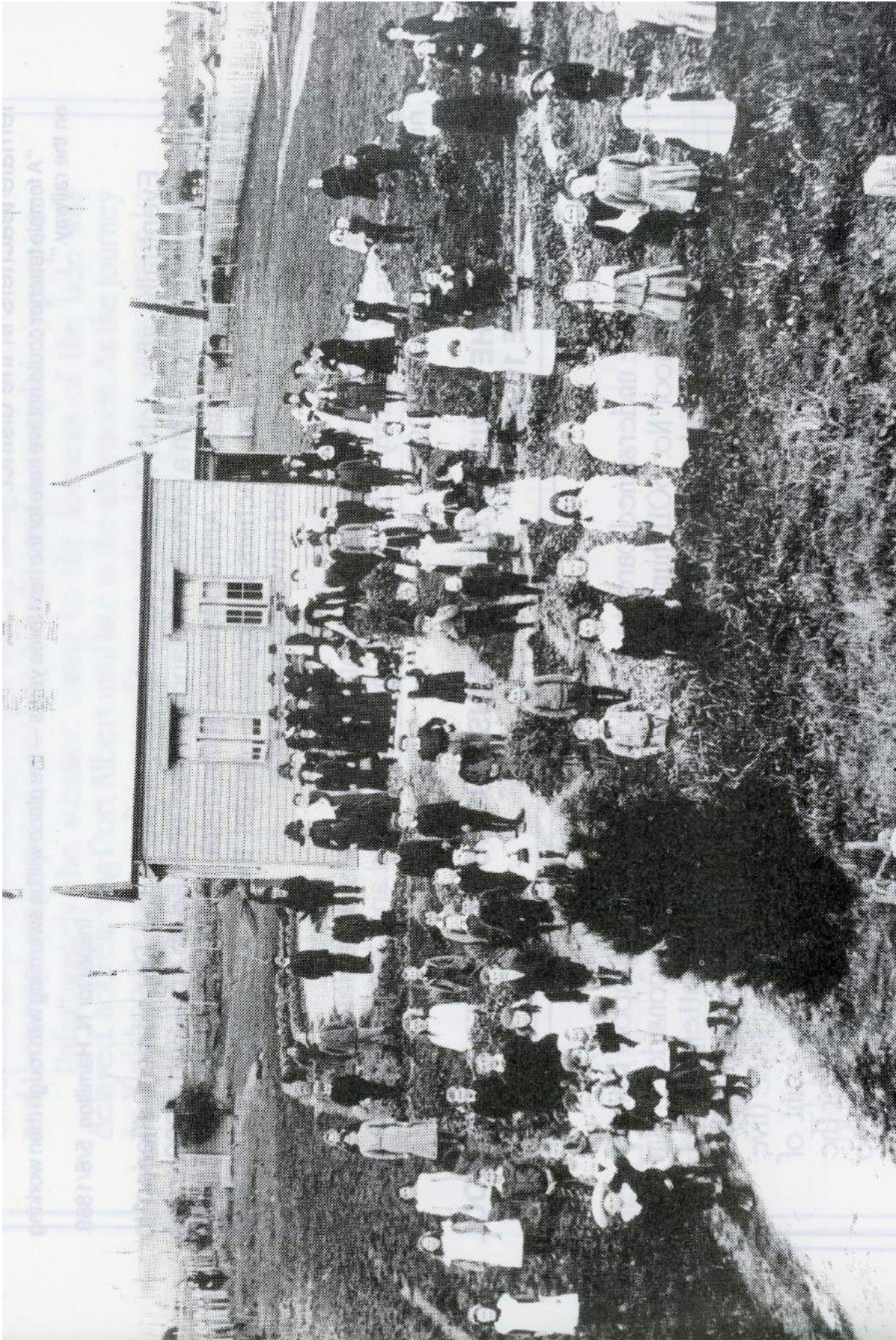
The accompanying label of the Arbor Day photo in George Gunton's book is below. Not all adults and children have been identified by George Gunton and his committee.

AT SCHOOL ARBOR DAY, c. 1913

In the photograph are: Students: Eileen Flanagan, Ferguson, Florence Rendell, Frank Parry, Dick Pauline, Florence Medley, Lois Daff, Jack Taylor, Nellie Hackwill, Alan Hackwill, Keith Growse, Daisy Hackwill, B. P. (Dut) Kerr, Jack Pauline, Arthur Pauline, Jessie Gregory, Alice Kerr, Beatrice Pauline, Ida Simmons, May Webb, Norman Daff, Colin Daff, Charlotte Shand, Stuart Christensen, Norman Growse, Jenny Merritt, Nellie Flanagan, Iva Ferguson, Frances Newson, Marjorie Growse, Victoria Gregory, Bessie Vening, Eunice Christensen, Lala Rendell, Lizzy Flanagan.

Parents and friends: Mrs. George Paragreen, Mr. and Mrs. Eason (H.T.) and baby, Mr. and Mrs. A. Pauline, Mrs. Florence Daff, Mrs. Frank Daff.

In the Arbor Day photo, William is the second person from the right in the back row, standing between the two windows of the school building with his arms behind his back. Minnie is standing directly in front of William holding baby Norma. Although difficult to see, Arnold, aged five, is standing in front of Minnie while Elma, aged three, is standing in front of Arnold.



Arbor Day, Welshpool State School, c.1911

Just prior to Easter in 1912, Minnie's precious jewellery was stolen from her Welshpool home. I wonder if this theft developed a sense of mistrust of the Welshpool community for Minnie and William. The police published the theft in the Victorian Police Gazette, 12 July 1912:

MINNIE ELEANOR EASON, Welshpool, reports stolen from her dwelling, between the 28th March and 4th April last, a gold ring set with five diamonds in a claw setting and a small gold bar brooch with the name 'Arnold' inscribed on it. Value £7 —0.5024. 12 July 1912.

The Death of Norma Eason

Six months after this theft, suddenly and tragically, life changed forever for the Eason family. On 10 October 1912, a horrific accident occurred in their Welshpool schoolhouse with little Norma Alvina Eason, aged 17 months, receiving extensive fatal burns to her body. Her death and the circumstances around it became a defining moment for Minnie particularly and caused the unravelling of their family life. At the time, Minnie was 30, William 35, Arnold 6 and Elma was 4.

Rosedale Courier 16 October 1912:

SAD FATALITY AT WELSHPOOL

FORMER RESIDENTS OF ROSEDALE CONCERNED

Death entered the household of Mr and Mrs Eason, of Welshpool, on Thursday last, in particularly sad circumstances. A number of the scholars at the school of which Mr Eason is head teacher were practising for a school concert and in the afternoon were to meet at the residence. Mrs Eason left the younger child, a little girl 17 months old, amusing herself at the piano, and crossed the playground to inform her husband she was ready to receive the scholars. The boys first arriving, saw the little toddler in flames, and at once raised an alarm. By the time Mr Eason came on the scene every stitch of the child's clothing was consumed and the body was more than burnt- it was roasted. The child lingered for two hours and then died. How it came in touch with fire is not definitely known. It is assumed that she held a piece of paper in the small fire in the stove, and ignited her clothing. The little coffin, covered in flowers, was conveyed to Foster by the early train on Saturday morning, and on the Welshpool railway station assembled a number of sorrowing school children, to whom the intelligent little child had become endeared.

Bendigo Advertiser and *Mount Alexander Mail*, 14 October 1912:

CHILD FATALLY BURNT

TOORA. Monday. On Thursday afternoon, Norma Alvina, infant daughter of Mr William Eason, teacher, of Welshpool, was so severely burnt by fire that she succumbed to her injuries within two hours. Dr Macdonogh arrived too late to be of

any assistance. The mother had temporarily left the child alone in the house, and she wandered into the kitchen. It is thought that she was throwing papers into the oven when her clothes became ignited. Mr Growse held a magisterial inquiry and the verdict was accidental death by burning.

Norma's death notice was reported in *The Argus* and *The Age*, 16 October 1912:

DEATHS

EASON- On the 10th October, at Welshpool, Norma Alvina, the beloved younger daughter of William and Minnie Eason.

One more angel in Heaven

A magisterial inquiry was held the following day after Norma's death, on 11 October 1912. Upon oath, William stated:

The deceased child, Moira Norma Eason, was my child. She was seventeen months old on 20th September last. I last saw her alive at about 1.15 pm yesterday. At 3.50 pm yesterday from something I was told I ran over to the house from the schoolhouse, a distance of about 50 yards. I saw the deceased child. All her clothing had been burnt off her. She was conscious and very badly burnt about the upper part of the body and face. I applied oil to her and sent for the doctor. The doctor subsequently arrived and gave no hope of the child recovering. The child died at about 6.30 pm in the evening. I am of the opinion that she caught fire from the stove where a small fire was burning. I found a piece of paper near the front of the stove partly burned. It would appear that the child had tried to put the paper in the stove and that the flames had set fire to the upper portion of her clothing.

William Eason, schoolteacher, Welshpool

William was possibly in shock when giving his statement to the police. He stated Norma's full name was 'Moira Norma Eason', which was also the name the local policeman provided on her death certificate. However, Norma's correct name was inscribed on her gravestone at the Foster Cemetery and printed in the family death notices in newspapers: Norma Alvina Eason. 'Moira' was Elma Eason's middle name.

It is also evident from William's testimony that he applied oil to Norma's burned skin, an old home remedy. Today, we know that this type of first aid would have increased the damage to Norma's skin as well as her excruciating pain level.

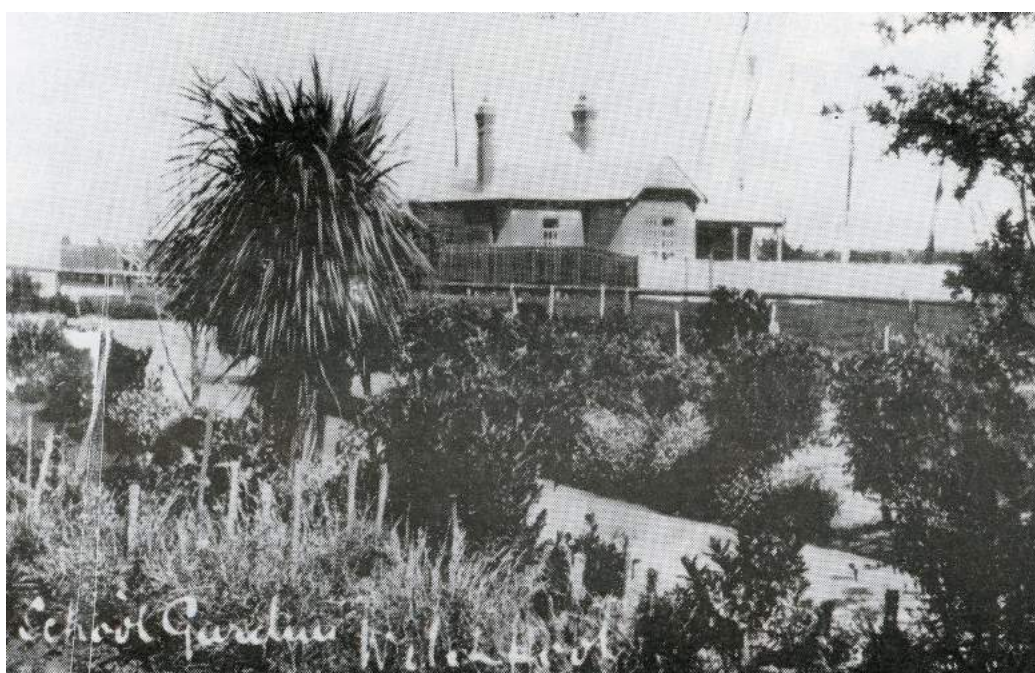
The local policeman who attended the scene, Constable William Thomas, stated upon oath:

On the 11th of October, I attended Mr Eason's home at Welshpool in consequence of a message received that his infant daughter had met her death by burning. I viewed the body and found the face very much disfigured from the results of burns. I made inquiries as to the cause of the death and from information received I was of the

opinion that the child's clothing caught fire by accident. I could find no suspicious circumstances in connection with the death.

Alexander Parry was a Welshpool school student and eleven years old. His statement at the inquest read:

I remember on the 10th of October at about 4 pm. On that day, I attended Mr Eason's private house to attend a singing lesson. I came to the house by the back door and saw the deceased child on fire near the door of the dining room. I tried to put the flames out as well as I could. There was another boy named Maxwell with me. He ran over to the school and told Mr and Mrs Eason, who came at once and immediately attended to the child.



Welshpool School gardens looking across to the schoolhouse, 1913.

The young Welshpool student, Maxwell, desperately ran the 50 yards from the schoolhouse to the school to raise the alarm.

Alexander had attempted to extinguish the flames on critically-injured Norma while his friend ran for help. Nearly eighty years later, in 1990, he reflected on his school life in the Welshpool Primary School Centenary publication and notably omitted any reference to Norma's death. However, blocking out memories can be a way of coping with trauma and I wondered what toll this shocking event had on poor Alexander. He simply recalled a humorous incident with Mr Jeremiah Hayes, who was the principal preceding William Eason:

I just remember, shortly after I started school, he often went up for his paper while he kept some pupils in after school. On one occasion he went for his paper and met a friend and then went for a game of billiards, forgetting about his pupils. When the children didn't come home and it was getting late, parents were looking for them. One boy, Ralph Gregory, sneaked out the window. The teacher moved on shortly after that.¹³

I contacted the Foster and District Historical Society to inquire about potential records relating to Norma's tragic death. The volunteer staff were exceptionally friendly and helpful, which prompted me to organise a visit to this small coastal town, six hours drive from my home. A time was arranged to meet local historian Nola Taylor at the Foster Cemetery and my husband, Brendon, and I set off on our road trip.

As we entered the Foster Cemetery, we were greeted by an elderly lady with a warm smile, holding a large bouquet of freshly picked native flowers to place on toddler Norma's grave. She also held a photo of all the Welshpool students, staff and parents, taken in 1911 on Arbor Day (page 54). I felt incredulous that Minnie Eason and baby Norma featured in this old photo. It was a spine-tingling moment, made even more so when Nola advised that the Welshpool schoolhouse still existed and she handed me the address. The house had been relocated to the nearby town, Agnes, and renovated to its original state with an additional front room.



Nola Taylor and Karen Collins, standing next to Norma Eason's grave, 2019.



Norma Eason's epitaph reads:

**In Loving Memory of
NORMA ALVINA EASON
DIED 10th OCTOBER 1912
AGED 17 MONTHS**

OUR BUD IN HEAVEN

Standing at little Norma's grave, I wondered how a mother would cope with the crushing burden of guilt for temporarily leaving her toddler unattended, resulting in such a hideous death. I imagined she felt traumatised, extraordinarily vulnerable and grief-stricken. Added to this would have been Minnie's memory of Arnold's severe burns from playing with matches unattended when he was also presumably in her care. I also wondered how William coped with witnessing the gruesome death of his child and, more importantly, did he blame Minnie?

There was yet another alleged layer of guilt and distress for Minnie in this tragic event. Arnold told my father that a priest cruelly blamed Minnie for Norma's death because she had married a Protestant. It is unknown if Arnold was told of this by his mother, father or someone else or even if he had been present when the priest made this accusation. However, the family understanding was that the priest's callous response had a brutal impact on an already struggling Minnie. How would young Arnold and Elma cope bearing witness to their mother's unimaginable grief? It would seem that Arnold learned with a steely resolve to 'never marry outside your own faith'. He certainly ensured that his son, Don (my father), understood this lesson.

After researching the views of the Catholic Church towards both 'mixed marriages' and Freemasonry during this period, it became evident that there was credibility to Arnold's information that a priest blamed Minnie for Norma's death. The following newspaper article demonstrates the Catholic doctrine of Catholics marrying a Freemason in 1912. It was published in *The Catholic Advocate*, a weekly Catholic newspaper, on 17 August 1912:

CATHOLIC INFORMATION

(Question) "I am a Catholic and wish to marry a non-Catholic who is a Freemason. Can we be married by a priest? Please state whether the non-Catholic must take any instructions and for what length of time before the ceremony?"

(Answer) Not without a dispensation; and Bishops wisely require that the non-Catholic party in such cases take a course of instruction before the dispensation is granted. Why do you not consult your pastor about it? If you are a good Catholic you will respect the laws of the Church which forbid mixed marriages and put away the thought of marrying a non-Catholic. You cannot be supposed to be solicitous about either your own salvation or the salvation of your children if you are willing to marry a Freemason. Bear in mind, you cannot be validly married except by your pastor or other priest authorised by him or the bishop of the diocese in which you live. You should seek instruction from your pastor, and whatever course you take you may act in conformity with the laws of the Church, or if you obtain a dispensation, with due reverence for authority.

The priest's proclamation, 'you cannot be solicitous about either your own salvation or the salvation of your children if you marry a Freemason', supports Arnold's allegation. Wikipedia

defines salvation in Christianity as, 'the saving of human beings from sin and its consequences, which include death and separation from God.' Therefore, in the eyes of the Catholic Church, Catholic Minnie married to Worshipful Brother William would have to expect the consequences of her sin, including death and in her case, the death of her toddler.

The disdain felt by Catholic clergy towards mixed marriages and Freemasonry around the period of Norma's death is evident in the following article, which was published in *The Freemason's Journal* on 3 July 1913. This newspaper reported the sermon given by the Archbishop of Sydney, Michael Kelly, the previous Sunday at Mass at St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney.

WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING THE ARCHBISHOP ON INTERNATIONAL MASONS Wedded Happiness Impossible

His Grace the Archbishop, preaching at the 11 o'clock Mass in the Cathedral on Sunday, in the presence of a large congregation, referred to the evils of mixed marriages, and the aims of International Freemasons.

"Yesterday, the day before and during the early days of the week," his Grace said, "I received one letter or more daily putting forward various pleas on behalf of young couples contemplating matrimony, one of whom is a Catholic and the other a non-Catholic. Strong and long-standing intimacy compendiates all these pleas. There is the sheep's clothing. The hidden wolf reveals itself in domestic life. Husband and wife do not pray together, they do not assist at religious worship together, nor do they sympathise with each other's faith. To them, wedded happiness is unintelligible and impossible."

"For their children the fruits are worse; they, indeed, are the prey of the wolf. Their parents set before them an example of contradictory religion and of utter indifference to religion, and the fruit of this parental example is simply scandal to the children of the worst kind. Marriage is the sheep's clothing, and in the mixed marriage you have the wolf, who preys on the happiness of the married pair, and upon the welfare of generations, perhaps for centuries, perhaps forever."

"Looking at society abroad, we find a veritable wolf in sheep's clothing in the International Masonic sect. Let simpletons fancy Masonry has nothing to do even with politics, let alone religion. The secret oath and mysterious assemblages constitute an evil tree that cannot bear good fruit. The policy of Freemasonry everywhere is to strike root in popular sentiment, to grasp social and political power, and to direct legislation even against Christianity. And Masonry in working for the attainment of its ends carries out its policy with a subtlety and malignity worthy of Lucifer, their master and the enemy of Christ."

"Masonry now triumphs in France and Portugal; it is seeking for the upperhand in Italy, Germany, Belgium and the United States of America. In these places its leaders are outspoken on their policy. People at home may plead that Masonry has no such aspect in our midst, but the fact remains that it is an international society wherever it exists, it is bound by a secret oath and it holds its meetings in the dark. Thank God our Catholic

people so far have not fallen prey to the wolf in sheep's clothing which destroys the fold and especially attacks religious Orders and people consecrated to God in other countries - namely, secret societies and particularly International Freemasonry."

It is understandable and possible that the burden of Minnie feeling responsible for the death of Norma, not only through her absence of supervision at the time but also for disobeying the Catholic Church, would have seriously affected her mental health. Minnie could well have believed that she was paying for her sins, firstly by her eldest child being seriously burned yet saved, and secondly by her toddler being horrifically burnt to death. How could Minnie have optimism in the future, knowing that she would continue to pay for her sins as long as she remained married to a Protestant and Freemason?

It is not known if the priest who allegedly blamed Minnie for Norma's death was from the Welshpool or the Rosedale community. If the priest was from the Rosedale district, he may have been aware of William's past active role in the Rosedale Masonic Lodge, including his leadership position of First Master. It is unknown if William had the opportunity to attend the Foster Masonic Lodge, 22 kilometres from Welshpool.

I wondered if Minnie was harshly judged or shown compassion by the Welshpool community. Did she have good social support in this small community after living there for nearly three years? Newspaper articles certainly made it clear that Norma's accident happened in Minnie's absence. The following article was published in *The Ballarat Star*, 14 October 1912:

FATALLY BURNT

A CHILD SUCCUMBS

WELSHPOOL, Saturday. A child, 18 months old, the daughter of Mr W. Eason, State school teacher, sustained burning injuries on Thursday, and these have had a fatal termination. The accident occurred during the temporary absence of Mrs Eason from the house, she having left the place for a few minutes to visit the School.

Also, the reporting of Norma's accident in newspapers during this period is an example of how women were not considered equal to men, as only Norma's father was acknowledged as the parent in many newspaper accounts of Norma's death.

After reading the coroner's inquest records of Norma's traumatic death, I began to think Minnie might have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. Eleanor Hayley, a psychologist specialising in grief, states:

When someone experiences a traumatic death, their challenges become two-fold. One, they must cope with the trauma and two, they must cope with their grief. (*Minnie had a third challenge: feelings of guilt and self-blame*). The experiences of trauma and grief are two different things unto themselves, yet after a traumatic death, they get thrown into

one big emotional blender. Understandably, it is not uncommon for people who've experienced a traumatic death to experience intensified and prolonged grief/trauma reactions. As well, concerns about one's reactions following a death add to existing emotion by causing additional anxiety, depression, anger or shame. Post-traumatic stress disorder can develop which prevents the mourner from finding meaningful ways to continue their bond with their loved one.¹⁴

It would seem the stresses involved with Norma's death would have seriously impacted family relationships and created challenges for all of them. However, William was fortunate to have his teaching as a distraction. Eleven days after Norma's death, his teaching was assessed by the district inspector. William achieved the highest teaching assessment score he had ever achieved. Perhaps he was determined to be promoted to another school to leave behind the horrendous memories in their home and school community. Or perhaps he was just not capable of letting his daughter's death affect his teaching.

Inspector Burgess wrote:

Impressed me very favourably as an earnest, capable man with ideas and ideals. These school premises are very admirably kept. He is a very good teacher and the tone of his school is very good indeed. He has a very good presence and teaching style is of good average and is a very good disciplinarian. 94.

I found some helpful perspectives on the impact of losing a child in the article *What the Loss of a Child Does to Parents, Psychologically and Biologically*, written by Joshua A. Krisch, a health scientist.¹⁵ In this article, various professionals in psychiatry commented on areas particularly pertinent to Minnie and William's situation:

Dr Gail Saltz, a psychiatrist at the New York Presbyterian Hospital Weill-Cornell School of Medicine: It seems that gender plays a part in how well parents adjust in the aftermath of losing a child. Historically, mothers have been the primary caretakers and are more likely to have their identities wrapped up in being mothers. This may result in stronger responses among women who lose their children.

Mothers and fathers who lose a child often must contend with surviving siblings. Figuring out how to parent after losing a child is a unique challenge and here, too, experts agree that the outcomes for both surviving children and parents largely depend on the state of the relationship before the trauma. Death can bring a family together or tear it apart.

Deborah Carr, Chair of the Sociology Department at Boston University: The death of a child generally makes a troubled marriage worse and a stronger marriage better. If one spouse blames the other, or feels the other did something to hasten the death, that's almost something that cannot be recovered.

Joshua A Krisch: Unfortunately, research suggests that psychological damage done by a child's death often does not heal over time. One 2008 study found that even 18 years after losing a child, bereaved parents reported more depressive symptoms, poor

well-being, and more health problems and were more likely to have experienced a depressive episode and marital disruption. While some parents did improve, recovery from grief was unrelated to the amount of time since death.

Minnie and William's situation regarding the loss of a child had more layers of complexity than what was discussed in Krische's article; not only did Minnie and William lose a child, but their child died while under the care of Minnie. Also, both parents helplessly witnessed their child's hideous death.

The Death of Eliza Watts

Tragically, only a month after little Norma died, Minnie's 73-year-old mother, Eliza Watts, died unexpectedly in Rosedale from a brain hemorrhage resulting from a stroke. Eliza was a woman of strength and resilience who had faced and overcome extraordinary challenges, starting with her humble beginnings in famine-ravished Ireland. Notably, she had been Minnie's sole parent for most of Minnie's life and Eliza's unexpected death was likely to have induced a heightened state of mourning in Minnie.

Eliza Watt's death was reported in *The Argus*, 12 November 1912:

WATTS.- On the 10 November, at Rosedale, Eliza Watts, relict of the late William Watts and mother of George, Essington, Alfred, William, Ernest and Mrs H. Waldron, Mrs H. U. Stevenson, Mrs J. Johnson, Mrs J. Ditterich, Mrs Wm Eason and Alice, aged 73 years.
Deeply regretted

On 14 November 1912, *The Rosedale Courier* reported Eliza's death:

OLD GIPPSLANDER PASSES AWAY

It is with deep regret that we record the death, on Sunday last, of Mrs Eliza Watts, relict of the late William Watts, an old and highly respected resident of Rosedale. The deceased lady, who was 73 years of age, had up till the day previous to her demise, enjoyed fairly good health, and little did her family and many friends think her end was so near. On Friday she came into the town with her daughter and did some shopping, and all those who met her could not help but remark how well she looked, little thinking that in two days she would be beyond the pale. As was her usual custom, she retired early to rest on Friday evening and passed a peaceful night. She arose with the lark in the morning and attended to some light duties about the house. At about 10 a.m. she was unexpectedly attacked with an apoplexy stroke and did not regain consciousness. She passed away peacefully at 10 am on Sunday morning to the loss and distress of her family. Mrs Watts has resided over 50 years in Rosedale and leaves a family of 12 living out of 14, a daughter named Ellen and a son, William, having died some years ago. Deceased, who was left a widow in 1888, leaves two younger sisters, Mrs Garrett, residing at Cowwarr, and Mrs Egan at Warrnambool, to mourn their loss.

The late Mrs Watts was a Miss Murtagh and came from Ireland late in the fifties. She resided at Rosedale for some time at a friend's house. Here she made the acquaintance of her future husband, Mr William Watts, who resided at the same place and was a very well-to-do dealer in horses and cattle. He was reckoned the best judge of a horse in the district and making local purchases he supplied the Melbourne markets with the pick of Gippsland horses. Also in the early digging days, he sent fat cattle to the butchers in Donnelly's Creek and the Jordan before Walhalla was opened. Miss Murtagh was one of the prettiest of the pretty Rosedale girls in those days, and Mr Watts speedily succumbed to her charm.

Accompanied by two gentlemen friends as escorts, they were married in Sale by the Rev. Mr Logan, and the union was a long and happy one, early closed by the solitary death of Mr Watts. The many friends of the family deeply sympathise with them in the great sadness that has been bestowed on them and a large number followed the cortege to the Rosedale Cemetery.

Minnie most likely attended her mother's funeral in Rosedale and it is possible that the priest who officiated Eliza Watts' funeral service was the same priest who allegedly blamed Minnie for Norma's death. At this time, it had been only three years since William and Minnie left Rosedale to live in Welshpool.

Life for Minnie and William after Norma's Death: 1913

According to Minnie's Victorian Mental Hospitals' Record, she had her first 'attack' at 31 years of age. Minnie turned 31 on 30 June 1913, so this 'attack' occurred between eight and twenty months after Norma's death. Unfortunately, the symptoms and duration were not recorded.

Confirmation of Minnie's mental health struggles after Norma's death was revealed in Arthur Watts' mental health records from the Kew Hospital for the Insane. Four years after Norma's death, a medical entry dated 11 May 1916 was recorded for the Watts family. A doctor drew the Watts family tree to demonstrate possible family links to mental illness: presumably, the information was given by a family member and is accurate. Both Minnie and Arthur shared the same purple shading inside the circles denoting their family position on the tree, while other family members had uncoloured circles. In addition, next to Minnie's name, a doctor had written:

Married with three children. Her manner was dreary a few years ago but has recovered.

The doctor's comments regarding Minnie being 'dreary a few years ago' undoubtedly would have related to the period after Norma's death. However, his reference to Minnie's recovery is of particular interest.

After Norma died, William had the advantage of working full-time, the freedom as the family's breadwinner and being a male to pursue his own interests. In January 1913, he was elected

secretary of the newly formed South Gippsland and Alberton Shires Rifle Association. He was also a member of the Welshpool Rifle Club and regularly competed in the local competitions at the Welshpool rifle range.



Welshpool Rifle Club. William Eason: front row second on the left, c.1913
(Vic. State Library)

William's full-time job, meetings and competitions would also mean more time away from his vulnerable wife and young children. Moreover, these long absences may have compounded Minnie's 'dreariness', as described by the doctor in Arthur Watts's mental health records.

Seven months after Norma's death, William was still excelling in his teaching and also actively involved with his school community. District Inspector Gill wrote on 1 May 1913:

Is a most enthusiastic and earnest teacher. His school is the centre of much local interest and the close connection of his school with the agricultural pursuits of his district is commendable. He is a fine organiser and teaches according to very good methods. A very good teacher. 92

Ex-pupils of William Eason were interviewed for the 1990 Welshpool Primary School centenary publication and their comments were recorded in George Gunton's centenary book:

Agnes Turner (nee Morris):

He was very strict. Children would receive the strap for not knowing how to spell. He had a strap like a 'cat of nine tails', short strips on the end.

Beatrice Daff (nee Pauline):

If left-handed, you had to put your right hand on your head. If you were right-handed you had to put your left hand on your head (when writing).

Lala and Colin Rendell:

We had to draw a map of Europe with maps and cities from memory, never being allowed to trace. We took our school supplies except for ink. This was made by boys from powder. They filled stone ink wells.

On 4 September 1913, William received another excellent teacher assessment. Inspector Gill wrote:

Has given much labor to make his school a centre of interest in this district. His work in agriculture is very credible. The written work shows that the subjects are taught in a thorough manner. Formal subjects are well taught but oral work does not show to the same advantage. Exercises keen supervision over his staff. A very good teacher. 91

On 22 September 1913, William was commended by Inspector Gill for 'exceptional care in beautifying the school buildings and grounds' and, on the same date, given a promotion to Koo Wee Rup State School as Head Teacher of about 70 students. This news of relocating towns was likely a huge relief for William and Minnie, leaving behind their horrific memories associated with the schoolhouse.

William was scheduled to take up his new appointment in Koo Wee Rup on 1 January 1914. However, before the Eason family departed Welshpool, residents gathered at a special function to farewell them. The *Rosedale Courier* announced this community farewell on 1 January 1914:

LOCAL AND GENERAL NEWS

Mr W. Eason of Welshpool, formerly in charge of Willung and Holey Plain State Schools, has been transferred to Koo Wee Rup. The residents of Welshpool are tendering a social farewell to Mr and Mrs Eason prior to them leaving that town.

¹² George Gunton, *Welshpool Primary School No. 3011 1890-1990*, South Gippsland Publishing Co. Foster 1990, page 19

¹³ George Gunton, page 99

¹⁴ whatsyourgrief.com: Understanding Grief: Grief After Traumatic Loss, 19 January 2016

¹⁵ fatherly.com: What the Loss of a Child Does to Parents, Psychologically and Biologically, Joshua A. Krisch. 7 June, 2021

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Minnie and William's Life in Koo Wee Rup

Koo Wee Rup is located 65 kilometres southeast of Melbourne and 139 kilometres from Rosedale. The surrounding area was originally a large freshwater swamp of 40,000 hectares, abundant in food resources for the Aboriginal inhabitants for over 40 millennia. However, the Victorian Department of Lands began draining the swamp in the 1870s to provide land for agriculture and as a result, the settlement of Koo Wee Rup began about 1893. The town's name, Koo Wee Rup, was an Aboriginal word meaning plenty of blackfish, a reference to the fish which lived in the swamplands.

Despite a drainage system in place, Koo Wee Rup was still prone to serious flooding and the township of 700 residents was just recovering from a major flood when the Eason family arrived in December 1913. At this time, William, Minnie, Arnold and Elma were aged 35, 31, 8 and 5 years, respectively.

On 4 February 1914, the *Lang Lang Guardian* reported William's arrival, although notably, there was no mention of his wife and children.

KOO WEE RUP

Mr Eason has taken charge of the Koo Wee Rup School and should be an acquisition both to the school and the sphere of sport, being a first-class cricketer.

One of Arnold's Koo Wee Rup school peers, David Mickle, published a book in 1983 called *Mickle Memories of Koo Wee Rup*. In this book, he recalled his memories of William Eason:

We must have had a bad reputation with the Education Department because early in 1914, a strong man who knew how to handle wild boys arrived, and in no time, he had us learning and not fooling. Our percentage of passes at the exams came close to the highest in the state in a few years after Bill Eason arrived. He and Mrs Eason had two children, Arnold and Elma, and another baby that died. Arnold and Elma quickly became friends with us and 'one of us', as the saying goes. Arnold and Elma were under the same discipline as we were.¹⁶

Interestingly, David Mickle referred to Norma's death even though she had died before the arrival of the Eason family in Koo Wee Rup.

I wondered how Minnie settled into this new community and how much she was still grieving her loss of Norma. William was occupied with school life, playing in the local cricket team and studying at the Koo Wee Rup Mechanics' Institute to improve his educational qualifications.

On 4 August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany and consequently, Australia pledged its support to the British Empire. Patriotism thrived within Victorian communities and issues of *The School Paper* were filled with letters from soldiers, patriotic poems, stories and reports on battles. *The School Paper* was a monthly publication of the Victorian Education Department, introduced into Victorian schools in 1896 and provided additional reading material for the students.

Frank Tate, the Victorian Director of Education, established a War Relief Fund commonly known as the Schools' Patriotic Fund. Head teachers, including William, devoted much time and energy to raising money for the Patriotic Fund by creating student fundraising events. The Fund supported soldiers, nurses, hospitals, war widows and orphans.



Arnold and Elma Eason, c.1914

An example of the fundraising effort is described in the following article from the *South Bourke and Mornington Journal*, 5 November 1914:

DISTRICT NEWS

The school children gave a patriotic concert in the hall on Friday night. The overture was played by Miss Harris, Miss Binder and Mr Watkins. Great praise is due to Mr and Mrs Eason and Mrs Morrison, who worked so hard with the children in drilling and instructing them in the different parts they had to play, and I must say, the children in

every case (by the way they carried out their part) did credit to their instructors. Miss Bessie Colvin sang, 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary'. Miss L. Mickle, Miss M. Dunlop, Miss Elma Eason, Miss M. McNamara and the boys that gave a display of physical drill did their parts well. In an interval, Miss Alice McNamara, Miss A. Hudson and Miss Elma Eason sold badges, the gift of Mrs D. McNamara. Afterwards, there was a flag drill. Then the children sang the National Anthem. England, Ireland and Scotland were represented by the Rose, Thistle and Shamrock. After the concert, a ball was held. Messrs Woods played the music and kindly gave their services free. The ladies of the district provided refreshments and dancing was kept up till a late hour in the morning. The attendance at the concert and ball was a record one.

In November 1914, William's brother, Samuel Eason, was appointed head teacher at Lang Lang State School, 11 kilometres from Koo Wee Rup. Samuel and his wife, Ethel and their family remained living in Lang Lang until 1924. Their children were Samuel Leslie (1908-1980), Victor John (1910-1995), Ivan Henry (1912-1987) and Norman Lewis (1922-2009).

The *Lang Lang Guardian* reported Samuel Eason's appointment on 4 November 1914. This article also demonstrated that William had quickly earned public respect as a teacher in his new hometown:

Mr Eason, of Broadford, has been appointed teacher of the Lang Lang State School and will take up his duties after the Xmas holidays, relieving Mr Burleigh, who is temporarily in charge of the school. Mr Eason, we understand, is a married man (being a brother of the worthy teacher at Koo Wee Rup) and has an excellent record in the department.

William was elected Secretary of the Koo Wee Rup Mechanics' Institute in March 1915, which had a library and offered lectures, discussions and classes.

In June 1915, William's brother, Ernie Eason, aged 22 years, enlisted with the 59th Battalion A.I.F. in Melbourne and was the only brother of William's to enlist. Ernie served in France, was wounded in action, and then later rejoined his unit and achieved the rank of lieutenant during his four years of overseas service.

On 21 July 1915, Minnie was elected to the committee of the newly formed Koo Wee Rup Red Cross Society which helped create fundraising activities for the war effort. Perhaps this voluntary work affirmed Minnie's settlement into Koo Wee Rup life.

Fatal Burning Accident in Koo Wee Rup

On 4 July 1915, William was involved in another tragic, fire-related accident, which resulted in the death of a 64-year-old labourer. The *Lang Lang Guardian* reported the fatality on 5 July 1915:

BURNING ACCIDENT

At Koo Wee Rup

John Brown, aged 64, a labourer, of Koo Wee Rup, was the victim of a fatal burning accident early on Sunday morning. At about 3 am, Mr W. Eason, State Schoolmaster, heard screams and groans of a man in agony. He got up and upon investigating found the charred remnants of a camp. A canvas tent had been burnt away, four pieces of a stick that had been placed in the ground in an upright position, were smouldering at their ends, and lying between the posts was Brown. His hair was burnt off, his moustache was singed close up to his face, and the bedding, which had been suspended on bagging from the four upright posts, had disappeared. Mr Eason, after dragging Brown from the burning debris, communicated with Constable Cole and Dr Harkness of Lang Lang. The victim was temporarily relieved and bandaged and was taken to Pakenham, whence he was dispatched to Melbourne by the first train leaving that place. A St John Ambulance met the train, and Brown was conveyed to the Melbourne Hospital. He was admitted by Dr Kerr, suffering from severe burns about the head and body and expired shortly after admission. It is presumed that Brown had been reading in bed and had fallen asleep. The candle, which was stuck on one of the posts, evidently set fire to the bed clothing and he was suffocated.

William gave the following evidence at the coronial inquest on 29 July 1915:

I did not know the deceased. I reported this case to the police on the morning of 4 July. I heard groans coming from the northwest of my place and I got up and went to the door and on opening the door I heard the groans. I then dressed and went across to the paddock to where the groans appeared to be coming from and then a man named Nelson came in the scene also. I struck a match and in a clearing I saw there had been a fire in the tea-tree and amongst the embers of a tent, I saw the body of the man John Brown. I wrapped him up in my coat and took him to a shed in the recreation reserve and then sent for Constable Cole and Dr Harkness and they came shortly after. While we were waiting, I asked the deceased how this happened. He said that he went to bed at 10 pm and that he had been to town and had several drinks and that all he remembered was drinking some whisky which he had brought in a flask and he was reading the paper by a lighted candle. That was the last he remembered. He had woken up and felt very cold and, feeling around, was surprised to find himself naked.

The *Weekly Times* published the Coroner's Inquest findings on 31 July 1915. (*next page*)

CORONER'S INQUEST

DEATH FOLLOWS INJURIES

Man Burnt in Tent

"I woke up feeling very cold and tried to draw the bedclothes around me. I was surprised to find that I had burned." Found moaning in the tea-tree scrub at Koo Wee Rup, in the ashes of his tent, John Brown told his rescuer this remarkable story. He died in the Melbourne Hospital from his injuries. Hearing groans coming from a paddock behind his house at a quarter to three on the morning of July 4, William Eason, school teacher, searched in the tea-tree scrub and found Brown, who was suffering intense pain from burns on the body and legs. Brown told him that he had been drinking in the township on the night before and had brought whisky back with him. He went to bed at about 10 o'clock and read the paper by candlelight. He recollected nothing else until he woke up. Having heard this and other evidence at the Morgue, Dr R. H. Cole, The Coroner, returned a finding that Brown died in the Melbourne Hospital on July 4 from burns accidentally incurred on the same day.

I wondered if this accident triggered strong emotional and physical reactions for Minnie and William and how William might have coped with seeing another seriously disfigured burnt body.

On 23 July 1915, William and Minnie attended a popular Red Cross fundraiser event at the Koo Wee Rup Mechanics' Hall. This fancy dress ball was held about two weeks after William found John Brown's horrifically burned body and about a week before William attended the coroner's inquest. Over 220 dancers and spectators were present at the local hall and the *Lang Lang Guardian* reported the evening as 'one of the most successful balls ever held'. Minnie must have looked the part in her costume dressed as 'Peace', as she was awarded 'Best Lady', one of only five prizes on the night. This light-hearted, fun night was likely a welcome distraction to the events in Minnie and William's lives at this time.

In spite of the John Brown incident, it would seem that William's teaching and management of his school were not affected. On 9 September 1915, District Inspector Saxton wrote:

Continues to do fine, strong, purposeful work. He is attuned to progressive methods and to his own improvements. His school is in a very efficient condition. 96

William Joins the Lang Lang Masonic Lodge

William again became heavily involved with Freemasonry in October 1915. The newly formed Lang Lang Masonic Lodge was consecrated on 27 October 1915 and William was appointed First Master of the Lodge. I wondered how Minnie felt about her husband's continued involvement with an organisation that the Catholic Church strongly condemned. Many

questions sprang to mind as I pondered over William's appointment to the highest-ranking officer in the Lang Lang Masonic Lodge:

- Might Minnie have felt the value of her Catholic faith cast aside as William attended the Masonic Lodge?
- Was she expected to give practical support to her husband in his prestigious and demanding role as First Master?
- Was Minnie anxious that another one of her children could be killed, given the alleged story that a priest had blamed Minnie for Norma's death due to Minnie marrying a Protestant and Freemason?

As the Masonic Lodge's leader, William would have had many duties and responsibilities during his elected year, including scheduling all functions, overseeing all financial issues, performing ceremonies, representing his lodge at Grand Lodge events, providing ongoing education to the Brethren and delegating duties to officers and the lodge committee.

On 3 November 1915, the *Lang Lang Guardian* reported the Consecration ceremony:

MASONIC LODGE

Consecration Ceremony

The consecration of the Lang Lang Freemasons' Lodge and the installation of Worshipful Brother W. Eason as First Master took place in the Mechanics' Hall, Lang Lang, on Wednesday, October 27th, the ceremonies being very ably performed by the Most Worshipful Grand Master, Worshipful Brother G. Emery assisted by his team of 13 Grand Lodge Officers, among whom were the Grand Chaplain, Grand Treasurer and Grand Secretary.

The consecration ceremony being finished there followed the installation of the Master and the Investiture of Officers which comprise the following:

- Wor. Bro. W. Eason- W. M. (*Worshipful Master*)
- Bro. W. Cole- S. W. (*Senior Warden*)
- Bro. E. Harkness - J. W. (*Junior Warden*)
- Bro. H. Lawrence - Treasurer
- Wor. Bro. S. Eason - P. M.- Secretary (*William's brother*)
- Bro. E.N. Wiseman -S. D. (*Senior Deacon*)
- Bro. N. Jabour - J. D. (*Junior Deacon*)
- Bro. G. Howlett - I. G.
- Bro. S. Christie - Steward
- Bro. W. H. Gardiner - Steward
- Bro. F. Hammond - Steward
- Bro. H. Rogers- Tyler

After the ceremonies were over the Brethren sat down to a banquet, which was laid out by Mrs Stevenson in her best style and which was thoroughly enjoyed by all. During the banquet, several musical items were rendered by the Brethren. The Brethren from the surrounding Lodges - Loch, Wonthaggi, Korumburra, Dandenong and Yarrum attended in large numbers, there being 81 present.

William continued his association with the Freemasons for the remainder of his life and eventually joined the Koo Wee Rup Masonic Lodge when it was established in 1923. Noticeably, William's brother, Samuel, was also invested at the Lang Lang Masonic Lodge at the same time as William was invested as First Master in 1915. Samuel was Secretary and held the title of Worshipful Brother, which indicated that he had previously been a First Master of another lodge. Interestingly, I found an article in *The Broadford Courier and Reedy Creek Times*, dated 3 May 1907, revealing that Samuel Eason was installed as First Master in the Broadford Masonic Lodge. Another brother, Leonard Eason, was First Master at the Warrnambool Masonic Lodge in 1923. Therefore, it is highly likely that these Eason brothers were well known throughout the Freemasonry movement in Victoria.

When William was elevated to First Master in October 1915, he was also Secretary of the Koo Wee Rup Mechanics' Institute, a committee member for the annual Koo Wee Rup Races and a member of the Koo Wee Rup cricket team. I began to think all these voluntary pursuits and additional principal duties during the war perhaps left a pregnant Minnie feeling neglected.

Minnie and William's Youngest Child is Born

On 3 March 1916, Minnie and William's youngest child, Gwenda Eason, was born in Warragul, approximately 50 kilometres from Koo Wee Rup. Arnold was aged ten and Elma was aged eight. Gwenda became known as 'Gwen' to her family and friends.

When Gwen was born, William had seven months remaining as First Master of the Lang Lang Lodge. Nevertheless, Gwen's arrival did not stop his extracurricular activities nor his volunteering for more management positions in the community. Presumably, Minnie was sleep-deprived with a newborn and juggled the demands of a young family and burdensome domestic duties during this time. Nearly three weeks after Gwen was born, William and his fellow committee members hosted the Koo Wee Rup Races and its grand ball. These two events were held on 20 March 1916 and reported in the *Dandenong Advertiser and Cranbourne, Berwick and Oakleigh Advocate* on 23 March 1916.

William's later divorce petition records stated that his marriage was unsatisfactory from approximately June 1916 onwards. In June 1916, Minnie was responsible for a three-month-old, an eight-year-old, and a ten-year-old, as well as domestic chores while her husband was frequently absent.

In July and August 1916, William competed in a local tennis competition representing Koo Wee Rup and the results were published in the *Lang Lang Guardian*.

By 25 October 1916, William had completed his term of office as First Master of the Lang Lang Lodge yet remained actively involved the following year and invested as 'Worshipful Brother W. Eason, I.P.M' (Immediate Past Master). William's brother, Samuel Eason, continued as Secretary. On 25 October 1916, the *Lang Lang Guardian* reported that representatives from surrounding lodges were present and the banquet was well attended at the ceremony.



Koo Wee Rup State School, grades 6, 7, 8. c.1916

William Eason: back row, far right. Arnold Eason: front row, fourth from the left
(Vic. State Library)

On 18 November 1916, eight-month-old Gwen was baptised at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Iona, about 20 kilometres from Koo Wee Rup. Baptism records state that Fr. Gallagher conducted the baptism and Gwen's godparent was Mrs McNamara. Mrs McNamara was the wife of the Koo Wee Rup Hotel publican and a friend of Minnie's from the Koo Wee Rup Red Cross committee. William faced an interesting conflict given that he was the First Master of the Lang Lang Masonic Lodge, attending his child's baptism in St. Joseph's Catholic Church. Similarly, William was confronted with the same situation in 1906, when Arnold was baptised at the St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church and Willam was the First Master of the Rosedale Masonic Lodge.

In December 1916, eleven-year-old Arnold Eason was awarded the Merit Certificate at the Koo Wee Rup school and given a prize for being one of the two 'Best Scholars' presented by his father and head teacher, William. His achievement would have reflected well on William and was reported in the *Lang Lang Guardian* on 20 December 1916. The Merit Certificate was

awarded for completing a Grade 8 education when a student was approximately 14 years of age. Arnold was an exceptionally bright student considering his age-group peers were in Year 6.

William excelled in helping his students earn their Merit Certificate and gain scholarships to further education as reported in the *Lang Lang Guardian* on 22 December 1916:

KOO WEE RUP

The teaching staff of the local school should be congratulated on the excellent results which they secured at the Qualifying and Merit Certificates. Four pupils sat for the Merit and 10 for the Qualifying Certificates. and everyone met with success. On Tuesday and Wednesday, four scholars presented themselves for the scholarship examinations. The headmaster (Mr Eason) has had 27 pupils go up for the Merit Certificate in the last four years without a failure being recorded. The achievement is an eloquent testimony as to the method Mr Eason employs in bringing out the latent powers of the children.

Young Elma had studied music from a young age and it is likely Minnie's love of music influenced her daughter; Minnie would have been Elma's first music teacher. At the age of eight, Elma capably passed the elementary grade of the London College of Music examinations at Koo Wee Rup. Her results were published in the *Lang Lang Guardian* on 7 February 1917. Students participating in the musical training offered by the London College of Music progressed through the Primary, Elementary, Intermediate, Senior, Advanced Senior and Diploma A.L.C.M. (Associate of the London College of Music) levels.

Significantly, in early 1917, William took on more voluntary positions in the Koo Wee Rup community and made himself available to be elected to:

- The Board of Guardians for the St. George's Anglican Church in February;
- The Committee of Management for the annual Koo Wee Rup Sports meeting, in March; and
- The position of Secretary of the Koo Wee Rup Mechanics' Institute in April.

Minnie's Mental Health

Throughout William and Minnie's marriage, I have only included the documented commitments for William, so it is possible that he had other undocumented voluntary commitments in the community. After the birth of Gwen, William's extensive voluntary work must have seriously compromised his family life, leaving Minnie to cope alone. Minnie's Patient Clinical Notes dated 17 August 1917 reveal that she suffered a second 'attack' from approximately mid-April 1917 to 17 August 1917. The symptoms of this 'attack' are unknown, but these records also state that Minnie was diagnosed with Dementia Praecox, a psychiatric diagnosis not used today. According to Wikipedia, Dementia Praecox was characterised by

rapid cognitive disintegration and seen as 'a disruption in cognitive or mental functioning in attention, memory and goal-directed behaviour'.

During the four months Minnie suffered from this second 'attack', her brother, 31-year-old Arthur, died of pneumonia on 22 July 1917 in the Kew Hospital for the Insane. This news may have been another source of distress for Minnie, given that she was the closest sibling to him in age.

Arthur's inquest records stated that he arrived at Kew Hospital for the Insane in 'fair health' in 1910, suffered from scabies repeatedly despite treatment and that his health deteriorated eighteen months before he died; he had tuberculosis in 1915. Sadly Arthur's last visitor was ten months before he died, by an unknown sister, in September 1916.

While Minnie struggled with her mental health, William's teaching assessment on 2 May 1917 revealed that he was not only a capable, competent teacher but also very engaged with his school community. District Inspector Lone wrote:

He has a very good teaching style and possesses a thorough knowledge of requirements, is very intelligent, employs approved methods of teaching his pupils who are very successful in obtaining certificates. He has been thoroughly interested in his community in the school. The discipline and tone of the school are excellent. He is a very good teacher. 97

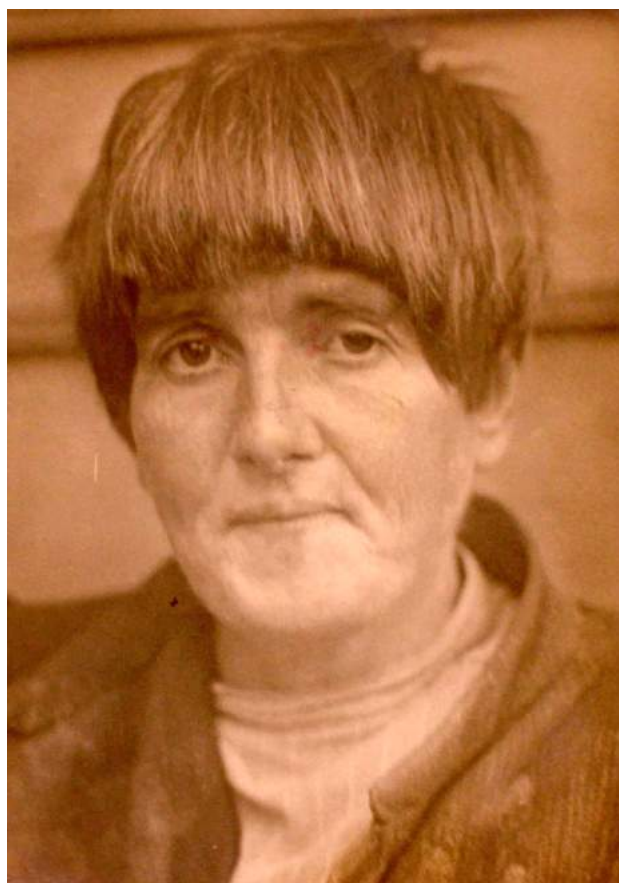
So, whilst William's professional and community life progressed very well in the months leading up to August 1917, he had begun a process that would ultimately result in Minnie's forced removal from home, an end to her marriage and the permanent separation from her children.

¹⁶David J. Mickle, *Mickle Memories of Koo Wee Rup And More Mickle Memories of Koo Wee Rup*, Koo Wee Rup Swamp Historical Society, Koo Wee Rup, 1913

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Minnie Admitted to Royal Park Receiving House

In 1917, a person was admitted to a psychiatric hospital in one of three ways: voluntarily, ordered by a court, or privately requested by a relative or friend. Minnie's Patient Clinical Notes provide much detail and harrowing insight into the circumstances of her committal. They reveal that William played a pivotal role in having 35-year-old Minnie committed, with his private request for his wife to be admitted to the Royal Park Receiving House in Parkville. Consequently, Minnie was committed at 2 pm on 17 August 1917. The Royal Park Receiving house was simply known as the Receiving House and accommodated persons who required short-term diagnosis and treatment for up to two months. After two months, patients like Minnie were either discharged or declared insane and admitted to further psychiatric care.



Minnie, on admission to the Royal Park Receiving House, 17 August 1917

If a relative or friend requested an individual's admission to a hospital for the insane, the request had to be supported by two medical practitioners who provided medical certificates. Minnie was admitted to the Receiving House pursuant to William's private request with the accompanying medical certificates from two male doctors, 37-year-old Dr Sidney Sewell and 31-year-old Dr Norman Lennox Spiers.

Minnie's patient records disclosed William's reasons for seeking his wife's committal, as well as the reasons why Dr Sewell and Dr Spiers supported him. The following statement was given as William's reasons:

Mr Eason states that his wife makes constant accusations of infidelity against him. Is violent and wilfully destroys furniture. Can (illegible) if crossed in any way.

A sample copy of the form William was required to complete in order to make his request for Minnie to be admitted to the Royal Park Receiving House is on the following page. I imagine William's listed occupation as head teacher was of some influence to his plea.

REQUEST FOR RECEPTION OF PATIENT INTO RECEIVING HOUSE.

I the undersigned hereby request you to receive R.S. as a patient into the receiving house of which you are the Superintendent for a period of one calendar month subject to the provisions of the *Lunacy Act* 1903. Subjoined is a statement regarding the said patient.

Person signing the request

Occupation of that person

Abode of that person

Degree of relationship or other connexion of that person with the patient

Dated this day of One thousand nine hundred and
at in the State of Victoria.

To K.L. Superintendent of the receiving house at

(Signed)

Form used for the request of a patient into the Receiving House.

William completed a document like this to request Minnie's committal.

FORM OF MEDICAL CERTIFICATE TO ACCOMPANY ORDER OR REQUEST FOR RECEPTION OF A PERSON AS A PATIENT INTO A RECEIVING HOUSE OR WARD.

I the undersigned being a medical practitioner hereby certify that I on the day of One thousand nine hundred and at [*here insert the particulars of the place of examination as the street number of the house or other particulars*] in the State of Victoria separately from any other medical practitioner personally examined R.S. of [*insert residence and profession or occupation if any*] and that the said R.S. is apparently insane but as the symptoms of insanity are not sufficiently marked to enable me to certify that the said R.S. is insane the said R.S. is in my opinion a proper person to be received into a [receiving house or receiving ward]. And I further certify that I have formed my opinions on the following grounds, viz. :—

1. Facts observed by myself [*here state the facts*].

2. Other facts (if any) communicated to me by others [*here state the information and from whom*].

(Signed)

Qualification

Place of abode

Dated this day of One thousand nine hundred and at
in the State of Victoria.

A sample copy of the medical certificate completed by Dr Sewell and Dr Spiers to commit Minnie.

Disturbingly, Minnie's clinical notes reveal that Dr Sewell and Dr Spiers wrote the following reasons as their observed 'facts' on their committal certificates in their support of William.

The patient is suspicious and erratic in her behaviour. Inclined to accuse nurses and others of sexual irregularities without provocation. Refuses reasonable attempts at treatment and says her husband goes as he pleases and suspects her husband has intercourse with other women.

William's reasons for requesting his wife's committal, as detailed in her Patient Clinical Notes, were included as 'other facts' on these medical certificates.

In addition to Minnie's clinical notes, the Register of Patients book for the Royal Park Receiving House exposed William's crucial role in his wife's committal. William Eason was clearly noted as the authority who sent Minnie to the Receiving House. Also, in this book, Minnie's cause of insanity was given as 'jealousy', presumably, of the other women Minnie believed William had been unfaithful with.

REGISTER OF											
Date of Reception.	Christian and Surname (at length).	Sex.		Age.	Condition as to Marriage.			Condition of Life, and previous Occupation.	Previous Place of Abode.	By whose Authority sent.	Dates of Medical Certificates, and by whom signed.
		M.	F.		Married.	Single.	Widowed.				
1917 17 th Aug	Eason Minnie Eason	1		35	1			Housewife Dublin	Royal Park	W Eason	Dr Sewell 15.5.17 Dr Spiers 17.8.17

PATIENTS.													
Supposed Causes of Insanity.	Bodily Condition, and Name of Disease (if any).	Epilepsies.	Congenital Idiots.	Duration of Existing Attack.			Number of previous Attacks.	Age on first Attack.	Date of Discharge, Removal, or Death.	Discharged or Removed.			Died.
				Years.	Months.	Weeks.				Recovered.	Relieved.	Not Improved.	
Jealousy					1	2			19 th Oct 1917				1 Royal Park

Register of Patients Book, Royal Park Receiving House

In retrospect, given what is now known about mental illness, it seems incomprehensible and appalling that Dr Sewell and Dr Spiers could commit Minnie into an institution based on the reasons William provided. Their medical observations of Minnie were supportive of William's request and ensured Minnie's committal. These medical reasons are summarised as follows::

- Minnie believed her husband went wherever he liked.
- Minnie was suspicious of William being unfaithful.

- Minnie resisted attempts at medical treatment.
- Minnie was 'inclined' to accuse 'nurses and others' of 'sexual irregularities'.

Minnie's accusations that William 'goes as he pleases' seems reasonable given his apparent long absences from home for voluntary work and sport. No doubt Minnie was justifiably suspicious, resulting in her feelings of resentment and loneliness. I have been unable to substantiate Minnie's accusations of William's infidelity. However, given that he stated in his divorce petition in 1922 that their marriage had broken down twelve months before Minnie's committal in 1917, her concerns may well have been valid.

Another factor which suggests that Minnie's suspicions about William's behaviour were well-founded relates to Ruby Mortenson, who married William only two weeks after his divorce was granted in 1923. Ruby was aged 32 and William was aged 45 at the time. According to the Victorian Electoral Rolls, Ruby lived in Koo Wee Rup between 1914 and 1918; Ruby was aged 23 in 1914 and a dressmaker. Koo Wee Rup was only a small town with 500 residents in 1920 and William and Ruby likely knew each other well before Minnie was admitted to the asylum. I found a newspaper article dated 28 July 1915 in the *Lang Lang Guardian* reporting a fancy dress ball that both Minnie and Ruby attended. There were 29 women who wore fancy dress costumes, with Ruby dressed as a nurse and Minnie dressed as 'Peace'. Minnie was awarded the 'Best Lady' prize. Presumably William accompanied his wife to this well-attended ball.

Regarding Minnie accusing 'nurses and others' of 'sexual irregularities', I have wondered if these nurses were from Dr Sewell's or Dr Spiers's medical rooms and in what context Minnie made these accusations. And could 'others' have referred to women in the Koo Wee Rup district with whom Minnie suspected William might have been involved?

In relation to Drs Sewell and Spiers alleging Minnie resisted medical treatment, doctors in 1917 did not know how to effectively treat a patient with depression or mental illness. In early twentieth-century psychiatry, the common belief was that insanity was a physical disease and the patient was treated with physical means to cure the mind. The type of medical treatment Dr Sewell offered Minnie is not known, but it is possible that Minnie's refusal was justified, particularly if she was fearful of how it was going to be administered and its potential side effects.

In 1917, doctors had no training in mental health as it is known today. In regard to the two doctors who committed Minnie, one trained in gynecology (the study of the female reproductive system) and the other trained in neurology (the study of the nervous system).

Dr Sidney Sewell was a neurologist and began a private medical practice in Collins St, Melbourne, in 1910. By 1945, his distinguished medical career in tuberculosis's early diagnosis and management earned him a knighthood.

Dr Norman Lennox Spiers was a gynaecologist at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne, having been appointed an honorary staff member in 1916 at 30 years of age, the youngest doctor to receive this type of appointment. Dr Spiers enlisted with the Australian Medical

Corps six weeks after committing Minnie to Royal Park and left to serve in France, rising to the rank of Major and then later, Colonel in WW2.

One lingering and most disturbing question that arises from Minnie's committal is: could William, a man held in high esteem, both professionally and throughout the wider community, have used his considerable influence to legitimately remove his wife from their home? This notion that spouses could play a significant role in the process of committal is discussed by Dr Alison Watts in her thesis *Maternal Insanity in Victoria, Australia*. It was not uncommon for the opinions of a husband to be a deciding factor in his wife's committal during the early twentieth century.

The testimony of husbands was highly prominent in committal certificates, as they had been in nineteenth-century women's cases. There were no new diagnostic tools in the early twentieth century for psychiatrists to assess their patients for insanity. They relied on their observations of patient behaviour and the testimony of others close to the patient. Husbands were often the first to notice their wives' behaviour, and their testimony was pronounced in the patient clinical notes. Husbands remained central in the decision to commit their wives. It is worth noting that the husband's role in committal started before the institution's psychiatric assessment, often featuring in the two G.P. committal certificates, completed and submitted before the psychiatrist's first notes and assessment. Nancy Tomes argued that it was relatives that determined insanity rather than doctors.¹⁷

Nancy Tomes, referred to in Dr Watts' thesis, is an American historian, author and university professor in New York and served as the President of the American Association for the History of Medicine from 2012 to 2014.

The following article, published in *The Daily Standard* on 1 May 1930, supports Dr Watts' research:

"DUMPING GROUND"

UNWANTED HUSBANDS AND WIVES

MELBOURNE, Thursday. Serious allegations were made by a deputation representing the Society for the Welfare of the Mentally Afflicted, which waited upon the Chief Secretary (Mr Tunnecliffe) today.

The deputation quoted instances of patients who had been treated with cruelty, badly fed and detained against their will. One member of the deputation, who was formerly an inmate of Kew Asylum, described that institution as a "dumping ground for unwanted husbands and wives". The deputation asked that a Royal Commission should be appointed to inquire into the treatment of patients at all Victorian mental institutions.

Mr Tunnecliffe said that, before deciding whether a Royal Commission should be established, he would have each case cited by the deputation, examined and reported upon.

In 1922, William stated in his divorce records:

On the 17th day of August 1917, she (Minnie) was removed into and detained in the Receiving House, Royal Park.

'Removed into and detained' would suggest Minnie was taken against her will, admitted and involuntarily confined at the Receiving House in Parkville. Dr Sewell wrote his medical certificate for Minnie's committal on 15 August 1917, while Dr Spiers wrote his certificate on 17 August 1917, the same day that Minnie was committed. In William's later divorce petition, he stated that he and Minnie lived together up until 17 August 1917, so it is possible that Minnie was forcibly removed from Dr Spier's medical rooms in Clifton Hill on 17 August 1917. These medical rooms were located at 59 Queens Parade and only four kilometres from the Receiving House. If Minnie was 'removed' from Dr Spier's medical rooms, she would likely have been escorted by police to the Receiving House, as was customary for this period.

Once 'removed and detained', I imagine that Minnie would have felt terrified, anxious and powerless, compounded by her likely symptoms of depression and separation from her children: Arnold was eleven, Elma was nine, and Gwen was 17 months.



Royal Park Receiving House and Hospital for the Insane.

(Photo courtesy of PROV)

Minnie's admission notes in her Victorian Mental Hospitals' Record can be viewed at the end of this chapter on pages 89 and 90. Important information in these records included:

- Minnie was diagnosed with Dementia Praecox.
- The cause of this diagnosis was given as: 'baby burnt to death' and 'jealousy'.
- Minnie suffered an 'attack' for four months before her committal.
- Minnie was aged 31 when she first suffered a similar 'attack (this would have been some time after Norma's death)
- Minnie was described as dangerous and destructive.

Dr Stoddart, a British doctor and author of *Mind and its Disorders* (1927), described the understanding of Dementia Praecox at this time:

Since the pathology of this disease is still somewhat obscure, the treatment of this disease must be merely symptomatic. When the patient comes under our observation, he is almost invariably found to be suffering from malnutrition and insomnia. Accordingly, our first efforts are directed to increasing his weight and procuring sleep.¹⁸

From what is now known about depression, people suffering from this illness often have physical symptoms such as loss of appetite, weight loss and insomnia. Simply treating these symptoms and not the cause of the depression was not likely to be an effective treatment for patients like Minnie, who was diagnosed with Dementia Praecox.

Several degrading and humiliating procedures occurred after Minnie's admittance to the Receiving House. Firstly, her hair was cut to manage a potential lice infestation, followed by a portrait photo taken for identification purposes. Also, she would have been forced to exchange her civilian clothes for plain, institutional clothing. By doing so, the institutional clothing assisted the authorities in identifying Minnie if she escaped, eliminated the need for the family to supply clothes, and minimised patient conflict if clothes were stolen or swapped. For a woman who so clearly prided herself on her appearance, as evidenced in earlier professional photos, it must have been a devastating and crushing blow to be treated in this manner.

Minnie's Patient Clinical Notes reveal that a doctor examined her three days after being admitted to the Receiving House. His medical notes stated that Minnie was 'bright' and thought her 'suspicious ideas may clear up in a short time'. However, Minnie was likely to have had an overwhelming sense of powerlessness as a forced inmate of the Receiving House. Given that she was admitted on the grounds of suspecting her husband was unfaithful, it is understandable that she may have desperately hoped to secure a quick release by reassuring the doctor she could rid herself of such suspicions.

Meanwhile, on 30 August 1917, the *Rosedale Courier* reported Minnie's health to its readers:

The many friends of Mrs Eason, who has been suffering from a nervous breakdown, will be glad to know that she is now progressing favourably under Dr Sewell's treatment, nerve specialist, Collins St. Melbourne.

Minnie's next medical assessment was on 15 September 1917. The doctor recorded in her patient clinical records:

Mentally apparently quite clear, still a little shaky after a course of thyroid

The use of organ and gland extracts, such as thyroid, was an experimental episode in the history of psychiatry and outmoded by the 1930s. Hormone extracts used as psychiatric treatments included thyroid, pituitary, ovary, testis, pancreas (insulin), spleen and adrenalin. A

course of thyroid injections was thought by doctors to be effective for people with a mental health condition, despite the lack of scientific proof.¹⁹

A month later, on 11 October, another medical assessment of Minnie was recorded in her clinical files:

Physically, very well, mentally somewhat excitable and (illegible). Sometimes peculiar.

On 19 October 1917, after two months of being detained at the Receiving House, Minnie was declared insane by the Medical Superintendent, Dr Clarence Godfrey. Consequently, he organised for her to be transferred to the nearby Royal Park Hospital for the Insane and to receive treatment; it is unknown precisely what treatment Minnie was destined to receive. The Register of Patient's book for the Receiving House reveals that Minnie suffered from an 'attack' for six weeks before her discharge. Therefore, Minnie's mental health began deteriorating only a few weeks after she was committed on 17 August 1917. A copy of the Medical Superintendent's declaration of Minnie's insanity is at the end of this chapter on page 91.

The Register of Patients' book for the Royal Park Hospital for the Insane reveals that 35-year-old Minnie arrived from the Receiving House on 19 October 1917. Again, the cause of her insanity was given as jealousy.

The Royal Park Hospital for the Insane had been known as an asylum prior to 1903. After 1903, the Lunacy Act changed all 'asylum' references to 'Hospitals for the Insane'. When Minnie was committed, patients were referred to as lunatics; poor Minnie would be known as a 'lunatic' for the rest of her life. It wasn't until 1934 when the Mental Hygiene Act was introduced, that the language changed from 'lunatic patients' to 'mental patients'. Perhaps this name change demonstrated a shift in thinking towards the treatment of people with mental illness.

It is highly likely that Minnie's family would have felt great shame regarding her mental condition. In 1931, the Honorable William Higgs, a campaigner for the plight of the mentally ill, wrote:

A widespread opinion prevails amongst all classes that to be related to any person who is suffering from mental derangement involves a stigma, a brand of shame or disgrace, a mark or sign of moral blemish upon the family name. This deplorable wrong view is also one of the causes of the neglect of the inmates detained in the hospitals for the insane.

If ever a mental patient is discussed by relatives and friends, the conversation is not louder than a whisper and is soon terminated. If a person is discharged as sane, nearly everybody thinks it is only a question of time when he will break down again. As for visiting the asylums, that is, for most people, an impossible and heart-breaking task.²⁰

In 1917, when Minnie was committed, doctors clinically diagnosed the behaviour of those

committed involuntarily, with little attention paid to the factors that may have brought on the behaviour. In Minnie's case, even though the death of her child was noted in her files, it was overlooked as a potentially significant event that most likely contributed to her mental state. Also, little was known about trauma and its effects on mental health at this time. A better understanding of trauma evolved after the institutionalisation of shell-shocked soldiers returning from WW1.

Thirty-five years after Minnie was committed, the diagnosis of mental health conditions substantially improved with the publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) by the American Psychiatric Association. Based on extensive research, this manual classified mental disorders using common language and standard criteria and, as a result, facilitated a better diagnosis of mental disorders and greater availability of treatments.

Casualties of the Vietnam War provided further understanding of mental illness, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These returning soldiers suffered terrible symptoms of combat fatigue resulting in the official diagnosis of PTSD being added to the DSM-III in 1980. Ongoing revisions to the DSM have identified more types of mental disorders and provided modified diagnostic criteria. Notably, many previous classifications of mental illness, such as homosexuality, were withdrawn from the DSM.

Today, the impact of Minnie's trauma from witnessing her child burn to death would be considered very relevant in the treatment of her mental health.

Significant changes to the admission rules for mental hospitals did not occur until 42 years after William requested Minnie to be committed. Back in 1917, a person could be admitted in one of four ways:

- A private request by a friend or relative supported by two medical certificates;
- Two justices ordering a person who they deemed wandering at large or without adequate care;
- A prisoner suspected of being a 'lunatic'; and
- Voluntary admission.

The introduction of the Mental Health Act 1959 ensured that a friend or relative could no longer make a private request for an individual to be admitted. Instead, a doctor had to examine an individual first and then recommend their admission to a mental hospital. Once the individual arrived at the hospital, they were promptly examined by the superintendent and either approved or rejected for admission.

On 19 March 1930, Thomas Hose, a dairy farmer and grazier, shire councillor and an ex-patient at a Melbourne Hospital for the Insane, made a chilling statement on oath and before the Commissioner for Affidavits, Mr J. R. Mathers, at Kew. He stated:

You do not know the day, nor the hour, nor the minute, even when you or your friends may fall ill and have your case wrongly diagnosed by doctors lacking in the practical experience of mental maladies, and perhaps acting on the advice of still more

inexperienced relatives and be certified as insane.²¹

Academic Analysis of Minnie's Committal

I decided to seek a professional perspective on Minnie's mental health records and consulted academic historian Dr Alison Watts (no relation to Minnie). Dr Watts undertook her doctorate on *Maternal Insanity in Victoria, Australia: 1920-1973*, where she examined the histories of 31 women committed to Victorian mental institutions with puerperal insanity and childbirth-related ailments in the early twentieth century.²² Her study was based on the women's patient files which made her expertise ideal to shed light on the documents related to Minnie's committal to the asylum. Dr Watts also provided specific research for the TV program *Who Do You Think You Are?*, which delved into the past of Australian actress Susie Porter's great-grandmother, who had died in the Ballarat Mental Hospital 31 years after she was admitted.

I gave Dr Watts copies of my research material on Minnie, including her patient files from 1917 to 1929, William's divorce petition, evidence from the coronial inquest into Norma's death, and background information on William's volunteer work which I had sourced from the National Library website, Trove. After examining these documents, Dr Watts provided me with her analysis of Minnie's circumstances:

Minnie is likely to have suffered post-traumatic stress disorder after Norma died, recorded as her first 'attack' in about 1913 on her admission warrant files. Minnie could have experienced 'traumatic distress symptoms' including purposelessness about the future; numbness, detachment or absence of emotional responsiveness; difficulty believing or acknowledging Norma's death; shattered worldview; excessive irritability and bitterness or anger related to Norma's death. Any four of these are categorised as 'complicated grief' (Field & Behrman, 2003). Minnie's symptoms may also have been triggered whenever her children went near the wood-burning stove.

The family's relocation to Koo Wee Rup in 1914 may have compounded Minnie's 'complicated grief' and depression. She would have been expected to set up a new household and forge new friendships while caring for a young family. Without electricity, housework was physically demanding work for housewives during this era. Housework included chopping and fetching wood to maintain the kitchen wood stove, which was necessary for cooking and heating water; hot water was also required for use in the kitchen, laundry and personal hygiene. Such labour-intensive housework may have been extremely difficult for Minnie to undertake if she suffered from 'complicated grief,' depression and PTSD.

With the likelihood of Minnie suffering 'complicated grief', depression and PTSD, the family's relocation and giving birth to a fourth child may have caused Minnie to experience postnatal depression or postnatal psychosis. Some of the symptoms of postnatal depression she may have experienced include fatigue, mood swings, feelings of anger, withdrawal, risk-taking behaviour and thoughts of harming her children or herself. Mr Eason may have been at a loss in understanding Minnie's difficult

behaviours and, therefore, unaware of how to support his wife at this time. It is possible that during this period, he may have been unfaithful.

Mr Eason's divorce petition stated that Minnie was under medical advice before committal and that when her symptoms worsened, he feared she may harm the children. While Mr Eason stated in his divorce petition that Minnie experienced hallucinations, there is no mention of this problem in her mental health records. Minnie's mental health records noted that she suffered from jealousy, suspicious ideas and made constant accusations of infidelity against him. While Mr Eason may have denied the alleged infidelity, Minnie's suspicions (cast as hallucinations in Mr Eason's divorce petition) and her alleged dangerous and destructive behaviour were used to demonstrate her insanity and reason for committal.

Infidelity is hard to verify and it is difficult to judge whether Minnie's accusations are true or false. Yet, it could be highly likely that Mr Eason sought other female company as Minnie's postnatal symptoms increased in severity. On the other hand, Minnie's jealousy of her husband seeing other women may have been grounded in facts (for example, he was rarely home, or perhaps he lied to Minnie about his whereabouts, was evasive, arrived home late or became unreliable etc.). Considering William's power and social status as an educated and professional man, it would have been far too easy to disregard Minnie's suspicions as trivial as she was seen merely as a 'jealous' housewife.

It is worth noting Mr Eason stated in his divorce petition that Minnie was under the medical care of Dr Sewell during the 12 months before her committal. Given that Dr Sewell's private medical practice was located in Collins St. Melbourne, much time, planning and financial resources would have been required to take Minnie to her appointments from Koo Wee Rup. Also, it is interesting to note in the divorce petition that Mr Eason mentioned Minnie's 'sullen and morose' behaviour yet entirely omitted the death of Norma and the birth of Gwen in 1916 as possible reasons explaining Minnie's behaviour.

In some married couples, the male breadwinner would hand over the whole wage to his wife to handle the weekly budget of food, rent and other expenses. For other couples, the husband controlled the finances and gave his wife a housekeeping allowance. Even if Minnie had considered separating from Mr Eason, it is quite likely that Minnie had little access to money. Therefore it would have been extremely difficult for her to secure a future for herself and her children. During this period, wives were the dependents of their husbands. As a result, many husbands like Mr Eason held much power in the relationship. Mr Eason also held power in his community as a schoolmaster, as a leader of the local Masonic Lodge and in key roles in many community organisations. All these positions brought him respect in the community and connections to other men who held high-status occupations. Mr Eason had the education, professional networks and financial resources to free himself of his unwell wife and start afresh.

Analysing Minnie's life from current perspectives through psychosocial terms, divorce

or separation was difficult to do in this era. If Minnie divorced her husband, she would need an income to support herself, either office or factory work, in which the wages were so low it would be difficult to live on. There were few or no alternatives in Minnie's time for women other than being married. Her grief, depression, failed marriage, and the realisation that she had no financial and social support may have caused Minnie to act out with violent and destructive behaviour. The fight or flight response in stressful times can help survival, especially in dangerous moments. However, long-term stress over an extended period, such as in Minnie's case, is often linked to mental disorders. Once a person became a danger to themselves and/or others, then committal may have been the only course of action. Yet one must wonder how much Minnie's husband contributed to her stress and lashing out, knowing she had nowhere else to go.

Dr Watts' independent and comprehensive analysis of Minnie's patient files, divorce records and facts relating to William's extensive voluntary pursuits shed light on the possibilities surrounding Minnie's committal. It would seem Minnie's tragic circumstances were enabled during an era when:

- Admission rules to a Hospital for the Insane allowed a husband the power to commit a vulnerable wife.
- A patriarchal society existed, whereby the role of the male as the primary authority figure was central to social organisation and where males held authority over women, children and property.
- There was little medical understanding of trauma, depression and an effective method of treatment.
- A mental health system was defined by a custodial framework of detention and imprisonment of the mentally ill.
- There was no access to the effective medication that is available today.

It would also seem possible that William contributed to Minnie's demise by:

- not prioritising her needs but instead devoting significant time to the community on various management committees and pursuing his own sporting interests; and
- utilising the defective rules of admission to an asylum and, in doing so, instigating his wife's admission to an institution that stripped her of all civil liberties, dignity and hope, while at the same terminating access to her children.

VICTORIAN MENTAL HOSPITALS' RECORD.

Name—*Minnie Eleanor Eason* Date of reception—*2 pm 11. 8. 17* Folio—

Name and address of nearest friends— *Mr. William Eason
Kot Wee Riep.*

Essentials—Medical Certificates— *Voluntary*
*D^r. Sewell reports that her patient is suspicious & erratic
in her behavior. Inclined to accuse nurses & others of sexual
irregularities with at provocation. Refuses reasonable attempt
at treatment. Says her own hair goes to pieces & suspect husband
frequent use with other women.*
Diagnosis—*Dem. Paranoia* Prognosis on leaving—
Payment— Date of discharge, transfer, &c.—
Aetiological and previous history (insane relatives, &c.)—

Voluntary, court, or private request— *Vol. mental* Cause of attack— *Baby brought to death
(fever)*
Religion— *R.C.* Whether epileptic— *no*
First or other attacks— *no* Whether suicidal— *no*
Age on reception— *35* Whether dangerous— *Yes*
Age on first attack— *31* Whether destructive— *Yes*
Duration present attack— *4 wks & Sewell.* Habits of life— *Temperate*
Married, single, widowed— *no* Whether in other hospitals—
Number of children— *3* Age youngest— *17 months* Whether in receiving house or ward—
Birthplace— *Rosedale* Weight— *9st. 11 lbs* Temperature— *98*
Occupation— *Wom. Duties* Previous abode— *Kot Wee Riep*
Hght. 5ft. 7in. Pulse 74 Resp 20

General physical condition on reception (health, marks, cleanliness)—
Old burn mark on R. arm. Old scar on buttock
On returning from O.T. — Head dizzy.
Condition of urine— *Normal. No albumen.*
History or evidence of syphilis—

PHOTOGRAPH.



Specimen of handwriting.

General mental condition on reception and report of relatives—
*Mr. Eason states that his wife
makes constant accusations
of infidelity against him.
He is violent & wilfully destroys
furniture. He does it crossed
in any way.*

Any special physical condition or lesions, including hernia, pregnancy, &c.—

Since Minnie's admission records contain handwriting that is small and difficult to read, I have re-written some of the information below.

N.B: I have added my comments in italics.

Diagnosis: Dementia Praecox	Age on reception: 35
Voluntary, court or private request: Private	Birthplace: Rosedale
Cause of attack: Baby burnt to death, Jealousy	Religion: Roman Catholic
Age on first attack: 31	Whether epileptic: No
Duration present attack: 4 months Dr Sewell	Whether suicidal: No
Married, single or widowed: Married	Whether dangerous: Yes
Whether destructive: Yes	
Number of children: 3	
Age of youngest child: 17 months	
Occupation: Domestic Duties	
Habits of Life: Temperate	
Weight: 9 stone, 11 pounds	
Previous abode: Koo Wee Rup	
Pulse: 74	
Height: 5 ft. 7 ins	
Temperature: 98	
General physical condition on reception (health, marks, cleanliness): Old burn mark on right arm (<i>likely saving Arnold from being burned to death in 1908.</i>) Old scar on buttock.	

Declaration of Minnie's Insanity by the Royal Park Superintendent of the
Hospital for the Insane, 19 October 1917

1503

Minnie Eleanor Mason
19/10/17

Receiving House, Royal Park. [13]

LUNACY ACT No. ~~1877~~ ²⁶⁸⁷

SECTION 45 SUB-SECTION 5.

WHEREAS Minnie Eleanor Mason
has been examined by me at the Receiving House at Royal Park and I am of the
opinion that the said Minnie Eleanor Mason is insane, and requires
treatment.

Now I hereby order that the said Minnie Eleanor Mason be trans-
ferred to the Hospital for the Insane at Royal Park, of which
you are the Superintendent.

Attached are the ~~copies of the request and of the statement, and of the~~ medical certifi-
cates upon which Minnie Eleanor Mason was received into
the Receiving House.

Given under my hand this 19th day of
October one thousand nine hundred and fifteen.

C. D. Woodpeck
Superintendent.

To Dr. J. H. Godfrey
Superintendent of the Hospital for the Insane,
at Royal Park

¹⁷ Dr Alison Watts, *Maternal Insanity in Victoria, Australia: 1920 - 1973*, Southern Cross University, 2015 p.231; Nancy Tomes, 'The Anglo-American Asylum in Historical Perspective', in *Location and Emerging Themes in the study of Mental Health and Mental Illness*, ed. By Christopher Smith and Stigma: John Goggs (Boston, Unwin Hyman, 1988), page14

¹⁸ Dr William H.B. Stoddart, *Mind and its Disorders: A Text-Book for Students and Practitioners of Medicine Nature*, Forgotten Books, 1927

¹⁹ Dr Alison Watts, *Maternal Insanity in Victoria, Australia: 1920 - 1973*

²⁰ Hon. William Higgs, *A Plea for the Better Treatment of the Mentally Afflicted: What can happen to a Man*, Ruskin Press, Melbourne, 1931

²¹ Hon. William Higgs, *A Plea for the Better Treatment of the Mentally Afflicted: What can happen to a Man*, Rusken Press, Melbourne, 1931

²² Dr Alison Watts, *Maternal Insanity in Victoria, Australia: 1920 - 1973*

9

Life Inside Hospitals for the Insane

The book, *A Plea for Better Treatment of the Mentally Afflicted* was written by William Higgs, a former Federal Treasurer and a campaigner for the plight of the mentally ill during the 1930s. Higgs provided reliable yet disturbing insight into a patient's life like Minnie during her time in the Royal Park Receiving House and subsequent confinements in Hospitals for the Insane.²³ Higgs' book reveals chilling evidence in the form of affidavits from ex-patients and medical staff of Victorian asylums during the 1920s.

Higgs published his book in 1931, intending to bring about reform in asylum administration and the Lunacy Act 1928. He effectively achieved reform regarding the terms used to describe the mentally ill, arguing that by sending a person to a hospital for the insane was branding them insane, harming them psychologically and suggesting their illness was incurable. In 1934, with the introduction of the Mental Hygiene Act, all titles for officers and institutions associated with treating people with mental illness removed the words 'insane' and 'lunacy'. New titles included: Director of Mental Hygiene, Department of Mental Hygiene, Mental Hospitals, mental patients.

Higgs made many suggestions for reform, including mandatory 'mental hygiene' training for doctors. Doctors in this era received their medical degrees without any mental health education and he proposed that 'no medical student be granted a certificate entitling him to describe himself as a medical practitioner unless he passed an adequate test in mental hygiene.' The two doctors who committed Minnie, Dr Sewell and Dr Spiers, had completed their medical degrees when 'mental hygiene' was not studied; Dr Sewell obtained his Bachelor of Medicine in 1905 and Dr Spiers graduated in medicine in 1909.

Another significant recommendation by Higgs related to certifying patients. He advocated that the medical certificate form be amended to provide more facts indicating mental disorder and reasons for certification. The Lunacy Act 1915 required a medical practitioner to make entries on a medical certificate that were the doctor's observed facts as well as any facts communicated by others.

Given that a patient could be certified based only on the observations of a patient's behaviour, without attention to the reasons for that behaviour, Higgs provides a chilling and disturbing account of the reality for patients, like Minnie, admitted into an asylum:

If a patient becomes excited when he discovers that he is in an asylum for the insane and speaks loudly or excitedly in protest, this is taken as additional evidence of insanity. If he goes further, and in his anger or terror strikes anyone or damages any of the furniture in the ward, this is sure to be used against him and he will be reported as violent and destructive. It will then be impossible for him to obtain freedom

immediately, however sane he may be. Unless and until he realises this and becomes quite calm, he may never get out of the asylum, especially if he becomes depressed or melancholy as a result of his continued detention and the refusal of the authorities to let him out, excepting under the guarantee of persons who decline to give a guarantee for his proper care and safekeeping.²⁴

Higgs proposed that a medical certificate used to certify a patient should also include details of how long the doctor had known the patient, how many times they had examined the patient and the dates and duration of those examinations. Higgs argued that no two doctors should take the extreme step of depriving a person of their liberty unless the doctors examined them more than once and on different days. According to William's divorce petition, Minnie had seen Dr Sewell before her committal, but we do not know if she had seen Dr Spiers on other occasions prior to the day he committed her.

Life in a Victorian Hospital for the Insane followed a structured and hierarchical routine. Higgs described the following range of factors that contributed to the horrific and appalling conditions that patients like Minnie were subjected to:

- **Overcrowding:** There was chronic overcrowding in all Victorian hospitals for the insane during the 1920s when Minnie was a patient. At the Kew Hospital for the Insane, some female patients slept on floor beds in day rooms for years and beds were permanently made up in corridors. In all hospitals, wards were so overcrowded that gentle, inoffensive patients were placed in the same wards as violent, aggressive and homicidal patients and attendants could not always prevent the violent patients from injuring the inoffensive inmates. For example, at the Sunbury Asylum, a man tore a picket from an airing-court fence and killed another patient by striking him on the head.

Overcrowding prevented the categorisation of inmates, which was necessary to treat patients properly. Without this classification, some patients became seriously injured, killed, or permanently insane. Also, chronic overcrowding led to the dehumanising practice of herding patients like cattle in some asylums.

- **A Free Home for Alcoholics:** Alcoholics with no mental illness were provided with a free home in the Receiving House to the discomfort and detriment of other patients.
- **Cruel Treatment:** Inmates were cruelly treated by some attendants. One ex-patient stated that nurses commonly used their knees to knock patients in their stomachs when they refused their medicine. Another ex-patient reported witnessing a woman who tried to escape, being dragged along the ground by the hair of her head. In a 1924 Sunbury Hospital report written by the medical superintendent, six patients were recorded with limb fractures from 'accidental falls'. In 1927, the Kew Hospital for the Insane reported injuries from 'accidental falls' that included fractures in thigh bones, jawbone, forearm, pelvis, rib and tibia.

- **Forced Medicine:** The Lunacy Department made it a law that all patients had to take strong laxative medication in the belief it would help cure the insane. This was forced upon patients, regardless of their reluctance or feeling unwell afterwards. At Sunbury Hospital for the Insane, patients were dosed weekly, usually with a mixture of Epsom salts, magnesia and water. If a patient refused it, four nurses would typically restrain the patient and hold the patient's nose closed to cause the mouth to open and enable medicine to be poured down the patient's throat. The medicine had a dual purpose: if a patient was troublesome, it was also given as a punishment. Sedative and laxative medicines were both used as a means of restraint.
- **Inadequate Diet:** Breakfast typically comprised two slices of dry, often stale bread with a small serving of butter and a cup of poor-quality tea with very little sugar. The same food was provided at tea-time at 5 pm. Lunch consisted of low-quality meat and a few vegetables. Patients who had engaged in manual labour would get extra food, such as a saucer of rice. Porridge was served three mornings a week. Any food objection resulted in a trip to the refractory ward, where the dangerous patients were housed. A refractory ward was used as punishment to isolate 'difficult' patients or those that broke the rules.
- **Untrained Male Attendants:** Untrained male attendants were employed who had no previous experience or education in the proper care or treatment of patients with mental illness. They were not required to attend any regular course of training and some attendants looked upon patients as criminals and treated them accordingly.

In considering the issue of untrained staff, it is interesting to note the enormous impact that WW1 had on mental health nursing. During that period, many trained male attendants had left the employment of the asylum to enlist, leaving a depleted workforce. Many years before, in 1906, the Victorian Government mandated that 'lunatic attendants' were required to sit for compulsory examinations at the end of the first year of service in order to progress to the next level of employment. Two years after completing that exam, they were eligible to sit another examination to attain a certificate as a Mental Nurse. However, when these trained attendants enlisted, staffing shortages meant that untrained staff were employed to the detriment of patients.

During the 1920s, staff resignations in the Victorian Hospitals for the Insane were abnormally high due to the lack of employee incentives, below-average wages and poor working conditions. The substandard conditions afforded to mental health nursing by the Public Service Board reflected the lack of value associated with caring for people with mental illness.²⁵

- **Work Without Wages:** Unlike prisoners in jails, patients were not required to work, but to do so meant better meals. Comparatively, prisoners in jail were paid for their work while patients in mental hospitals were not. Minnie would have been offered sewing, scrubbing, cleaning, kitchen and laundry work like other female patients. Men were offered gardening and painting work.

- **Sane Persons Held:** Sane persons were held in bondage until a person volunteered to provide them with proper care and safekeeping. Those without relatives or friends to secure their release remained imprisoned for life.
- **Insanitary Conditions:** Most hospitals had inadequate sewerage, bathing and toileting facilities.

All patients in Victorian Hospitals for the Insane were expected to rise at 7 am, whether sick or not, and be in bed at 7 pm. Bedrooms were cleaned out and the doors locked. Patients could take on jobs within the asylum or otherwise stand, sit, walk about or lie down in the airing yards, verandahs or corridors. The asylum provided no entertainment. Patients were confined to the airing courts or yards regardless of the weather. The prison-like discipline of the asylum prescribed the same routine for all. As one ex-patient, Robert G. McLachlan, stated:

This routine destroys self-respect and gives a sense of being branded. Life in a Hospital for the Insane under the present conditions is often definitely bad for inmates, tending to make them worse rather than better. I have seen people broken for life, not by their insanity, but their hospital experiences, which left a sense of life-long degradation.²⁵

Higgs claimed that the rate of mental health recoveries for patients in hospitals for the insane in Victoria was the lowest in Australia. His reasons for the low recovery rates in Victoria are given below:

Is it any wonder that, as a result of the overcrowding, the lack of classification, the herding of the patients, the employment of untrained male attendants, the absence of any attempt to cure the mental maladies, the insanitary conditions of most of the hospitals for the insane, that the percentage of recoveries on admissions of patients sent to the asylums has gone down during the 26 years until it is the lowest of all the States of the Commonwealth?²⁷

In 1928, thirty per cent of Victorian Hospitals for the Insane deaths were caused by pneumonia, bronchitis, pleurisy and tuberculosis. Higgs believed all these serious illnesses were attributed to poor diet and living conditions. Both Minnie and Arthur Watts were diagnosed with tuberculosis in the Kew Hospital for the Insane: Minnie in 1924 and Arthur in 1915. Arthur died of pneumonia as a patient in 1917.

At the time of Minnie's committal, the Lunacy Act 1915:

- contained no provision making it an offence for a person to trick another into entering a hospital for the insane;
- permitted carelessness on the part of medical practitioners and others dealing with the insane; and
- permitted the suppression of letters addressed by patients to persons outside the hospitals for the insane, eg. a patient writing to an authority pleading for help.

Higgs' comprehensive account of the dehumanising and appalling conditions that patients endured in Victorian asylums during the 1920s provides confronting insight into the unimaginable suffering that Minnie would have experienced. A vivid picture emerges of Minnie's torment, misery and desperate situation:

- Upon admission, Minnie was likely to be depressed, believed her husband was unfaithful and knew that he requested her committal.
- Detained against her will, Minnie lost everything that gave meaning to her life: all contact with her children, family and friends, access to music, a sense of purpose, dignity, hope, freedom, the opportunity to attend church and life as she had known it in rural Victoria.
- Minnie was disempowered, at the mercy of doctors, staff and other patients, living in the most degrading, overcrowded, insanitary conditions, vulnerable to violence and cruelty with no opportunity of leaving except by escaping, which she courageously attempted twice.

²³ Hon. William Higgs, *A Plea for the Better Treatment of the Mentally Afflicted: What can Happen to a Man*, Ruskin Press, Melbourne, 1931

²⁴ Hon. William Higgs, *A Plea for the Better Treatment of the Mentally Afflicted: What can Happen to a Man*, page 50

²⁵ Sands, Natasha Marina (2009) 'Round the Bend: A Brief History of Mental Health Nursing in Victoria, Australia 1848 to 1950s', *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 30; 6, 364 - 371

²⁶ Hon. William Higgs, *A Plea for the Better Treatment of the Mentally Afflicted: What can Happen to a Man*, page 70

²⁷ Hon. William Higgs, *A Plea for the Better Treatment of the Mentally Afflicted: What can Happen to a Man*, page 47

10

Life for Minnie and her Family Post-Committal: 1917 - 1921

Throughout the years Minnie was detained in various Victorian asylums, medical notes on her state of health were briefly recorded, generally on an annual or semi-annual basis. In this chapter, I have included these medical notes and information relating to them in bold text to contrast Minnie's life with her family's during the same period.

After Minnie was committed, it is not known how her children coped with their loss; they were aged 11, 9 and 17 months. Elma and Arnold continued living in Koo Wee Rup and attended school with their father. However, William would have had great difficulty managing home life on his own, given his work, civic, church and sporting commitments. Around this time, William's 34-year-old sister, Ada and her husband Talbot (Tal) Smith, aged 30, took little Gwen into their permanent care at Gardenvale, a suburb of Melbourne. Gwen became Ada and Tal's much loved and only child and despite never being formally adopted, she became known as 'Gwenda Smith'.



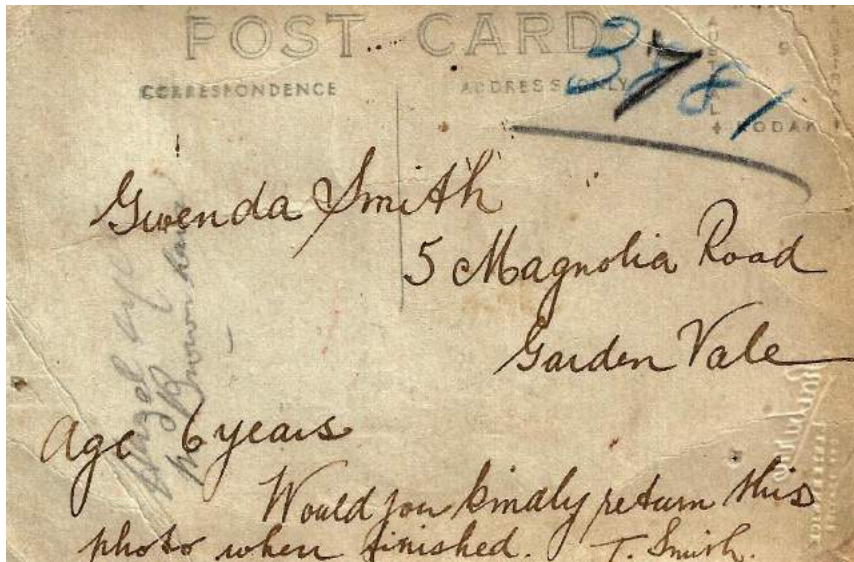
Ada, Tal and Gwen



Gwen Smith (Eason)

According to Gwen's son, Brian Perkins-Stafford (b.1939), she grew up in Gardenvale believing that her mother had died when she was a baby. As a result, Gwen came to refer to Ada as 'Mum' but always referred to Talbot as 'Tal' because it was made very clear to Gwen that William Eason was her father.

It seems that in order to protect Gwen, the circumstances surrounding her mother's absence were not made clear. When I spoke with 81-year-old Brian in 2020, he was unaware that Minnie, his grandmother, was committed to an asylum when Gwen was a toddler and also that Minnie had actually died when Gwen was 12 years old. Given the stigma and shame around mental illness and asylums during this period, it is understandable that the Eason family protected Minnie's children. However, it is also possible that Arnold and Elma were told their mother had died when she disappeared from their lives in August 1917.



The other side of Gwen's photo, as shown on the previous page, denoting Gwen's surname.

Brian recalled his mother saying that William Eason occasionally visited the Smith household in Gardenvale to primarily 'check up on her schooling progress'.

It is unknown how William's parents, 59-year-old Margaret and 68-year-old Samuel, coped with their son's family crisis nor how much support they provided to him and their grandchildren. However, their concern and likely feelings of shame regarding Minnie being committed were possibly compounded by the socially unacceptable situation unfolding for their daughter at this time; Maggie, aged 21, was unmarried and pregnant. A wedding had to be hastily arranged before the birth of their grandchild and as a result, Maggie married William Wilfred Burrows on 7 January 1918, ahead of the birth of Norman Lewis Burrows on 6 March 1918.

The divorce records of Maggie and William Burrows disclose that after the wedding, a heavily pregnant Maggie returned by herself to live with her parents in Male Street, Brighton. Maggie remained living with her parents after Norman's birth. According to Arnold Eason, the two cousins, Norman and Gwen, grew up together as the Smiths lived less than three kilometres from Samuel and Margaret Eason. Furthermore, Arnold never mentioned Maggie was a single mother.

In October 1917, William was faced with challenging staffing issues at his school after a Junior Teacher was transferred to Richmond State School and not replaced. Fearful of a partial school closure, William sought permission from the Education Department to employ young Arnold Eason as a temporary Junior Teacher, given that he had earned his Merit Certificate. However, in William's letter to the Education Department, he did not disclose the age of

Arnold or his relationship with William. Subsequently, 11-year-old Arnold became a temporary Junior Teacher on 8 October 1917 until the position expired on 31 December 1917. Arnold turned 12-years-old on 23 November 1917.

While temporarily employed as a teacher, Arnold excelled in a drawing and essay writing competition held at a local horticultural show. The show took place on the 6th and 7th of December 1917, with large attendances and many exhibits. The divisions for prizes included 'Best Map of Australia Drawing in Black and White' and 'Best Essay on the War'. Arnold was awarded first prize in the Under 16 section for both these divisions and his achievements were published in the *Lang Lang Guardian*, 15 December 1917.

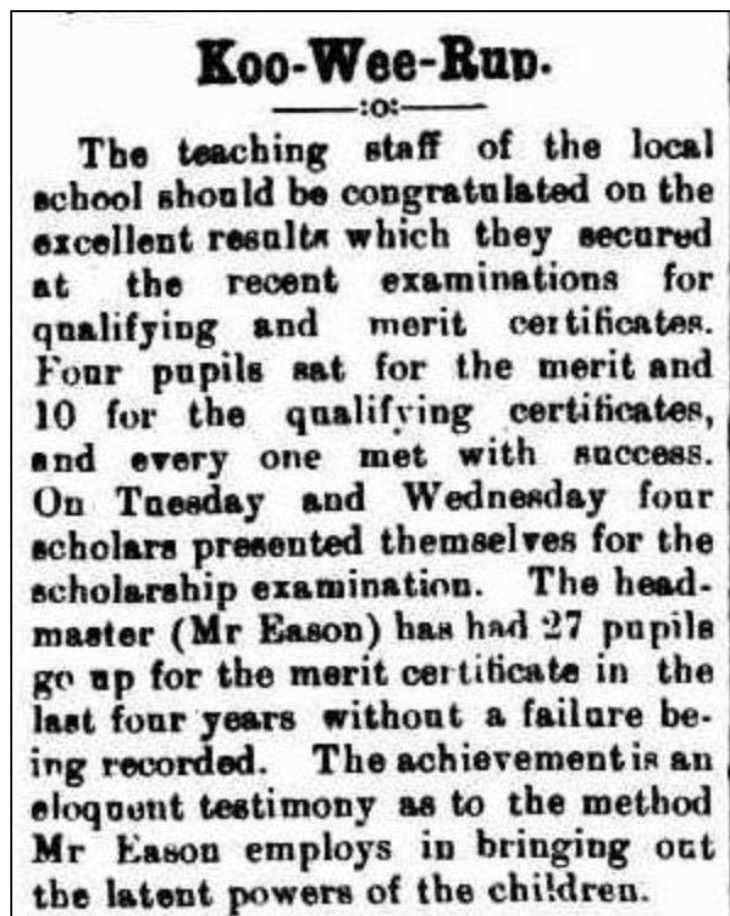
On 12 December 1917, Minnie's medical report stated:

Still very peculiar - tearing up all her clothes. On thyroids.

Minnie's resentment of wearing plain, drab, asylum clothing is understandable. Despite these clothes being her only possession, they were representative of her imprisonment and all the losses associated with the denial of her freedom. Patients like Minnie, who destroyed asylum property, were put in some type of constraint.

In December 1917, William's students achieved excellent results in their examinations and as a result, he received affirming public recognition in the *Lang Lang Guardian* on 22 December 1917 (*right*). William took enormous pride in his students' academic successes and their accomplishments undoubtedly reflected very well on him.

Also, in December, nine-year-old Elma earned her Qualifying Certificate, a significant accomplishment for such a young student. The qualifying examinations were designed to mark the completion of the Year Six state school syllabus when students were generally aged twelve. Both Elma and Arnold had proven to be academically advanced; it is most likely that their tuition extended well beyond the classroom into their home.



Lang Lang Guardian, 22 December 1917

1918: Trial Leave

On 18 January 1918, Minnie was assessed by a doctor. He wrote:

Better since the course of thyroids but still has suspicious ideas.

Minnie had been detained for five months by this stage. Perhaps the doctor was disappointed the mandatory thyroid medication had not cleared up Minnie's suspicions, presumably relating to William's infidelity.

William's divorce petition, filed in 1922, revealed that he did not visit Minnie after she was committed. He stated:

From time to time, since the 17th day of August 1917, I have been furnished with reports as to her (*Minnie*) mental and bodily condition.

As a result of William not visiting Minnie, she became depressed and attempted to escape. Her medical records for 4 February 1918 state:

Tried to escape. Depressed because her husband won't come to see her.

On the day of this last medical assessment, Minnie was granted Trial Leave for nearly five months; the Patient's Leave of Absence book for Royal Park Hospital for the Insane recorded Minnie's trial leave period from 4 February 1918 to 30 June 1918. Trial Leave allowed patients to be released into another person's custody for a specified period to test whether the patient should be discharged. Significantly, patients were often discharged whilst on Trial Leave, so this was Minnie's opportunity for permanent freedom.

Despite the doctor describing Minnie feeling depressed due to William not visiting her, William was not her appointed guardian. Clearly, William did not want to accept the responsibility of his wife's care. So instead, Minnie's widowed sister, Jane Johnson, was appointed guardian with the approval of William. (For those patients being released into the care of someone who was not paying the patient's weekly hospital fees, written consent was required from the person who paid the account.)

The only clues to the state of Minnie's mental health upon her release for Trial Leave are the limited medical comments recorded for February in her clinical notes, stating that she was depressed. Yet, I presume Minnie had recovered enough to earn her release into her sister's care.

Minnie was fortunate to have Jane secure her leave as William Higgs (Chapter Nine) stated there were sane patients permanently housed in Victorian asylums as a result of no relatives or friends willing to accept their responsibility, which was a condition for Trial Leave and discharge.



Left: Jane and Ellie Johnson

Jane was a widow living with her only child, Ellie, in Albert Street Rosedale and occasionally took in boarders for additional income. She had become a widow when her husband, John, died suddenly in 1906 from a stroke, only sixteen days after the birth of their first child, Ellen (Ellie). When Minnie arrived in Rosedale to live with her sister and niece, Ellie was aged twelve, the same age as Arnold.

In later divorce records, William stated:

I am informed and believe that on the 4th day of February 1918, she (*Minnie*) was pursuant to certain provisions under the Lunacy Acts, allowed to be absent from the said hospital upon Trial Leave in the custody of her sister Mrs Jane Johnson but that notwithstanding such absence she was still a patient under the control or supervision of the said hospital. Her condition became worse and she was taken to a private hospital at 12 Malvern Grove, Malvern in the state of Victoria where she was examined by Dr A. M. Hill, who ordered her immediate return to the said Receiving House Royal Park Melbourne to which institution she returned to on the 18th day March 1918.

Something must have gone terribly wrong for Jane to return Minnie into psychiatric care much earlier than agreed. Jane took Minnie to a private hospital in Malvern on 18 March 1918, where she was examined by a doctor who promptly organised her admission to the Royal Park Receiving House. The following are some possible explanations for Minnie's fragile mind deteriorating during her six-week stay in Rosedale:

- Minnie was not granted access to her children during this period.
- She no longer had a role as a mother in a community where she had once nurtured Arnold and Elma.
- She experienced the stigma of mental health and received discrimination from locals in her small hometown (the Rosedale Courier had previously announced her nervous breakdown in its 30 August 1917 edition).
- She was separated from Elma and Gwen when they had their birthdays: 22 February and 3 March.
- Living with 12-year-old Ellie was a daily reminder of her own children's absence in her life.

It is possible that by Minnie returning to her familiar hometown, she had overwhelming feelings of loss, resentment and powerlessness with the continued deprivation of the family life she had once known.

1918: Minnie Moved to Sunbury Hospital for the Insane

Not surprisingly, Minnie's condition worsened upon readmittance to the Receiving House. On 20 March 1918, two days after being readmitted, the Medical Superintendent, Dr Clarence Godfrey, completed the paperwork to transfer her to the Sunbury Hospital for the Insane. This institution housed female criminally insane and general psychiatric patients.

On 23 March, a doctor at the Receiving House examined Minnie and noted:

Has been on leave with her sister at Rosedale. She returned two weeks ago and is now thin, emaciated and very confused. Has a peculiar inhibition of effort to speak something to one, where she can seem insane.

In this medical assessment, the doctor incorrectly stated that Minnie returned to the Receiving House two weeks before this examination when it was only five days. If Minnie presented as emaciated, it would seem she had not thrived during the six weeks in her sister's care. Also, during this medical examination, it is possible that Minnie was reticent in talking to the doctor, fearful that she could say something that could exacerbate her situation or be misunderstood, jeopardising her chances of release.

The Victorian Inspector-General of the Insane, Dr W. Ernest Jones, approved Minnie's transfer on 25 March 1918, and she was promptly transported to the Sunbury hospital. Subsequently, Minnie became one of the 975 residents (511 female and 464 male) living in this overcrowded hospital in 1918 and she would remain detained there for over six years, until 8 September 1924.

Minnie's medical assessment upon arrival at Sunbury revealed that she had extensive bruising all over her body. Poor Minnie had obviously encountered violence sometime between 23 March and 25 March. The doctor noted:

Condition fair, bruises on both legs and arms and both hips, old mark on buttock, vermin in head, scratches on body and shins. Height 5 ft. 4 ins. Weight 8 stone 10 pounds.

Minnie's wretched condition would have been aggravated with head lice, the likely cause of her scratching. Her deterioration was also evident with a one-stone weight loss since being committed seven months earlier.



Sunbury Hospital for the Insane, 2019



Sunbury Hospital for the Insane complex.

It was surrounded by a huge, red brick wall.

The Register of Patients book for the Royal Park Hospital for the Insane revealed that prior to Minnie's removal from the Receiving House on 25 March 1918 and transfer to Sunbury, she had suffered from an 'existing attack' for three months. Therefore this 'attack' must have begun about 25 December 1917. It is very possible that Minnie's mental health suffered from being incarcerated at Christmas, locked away from loved ones and her family's Christmas traditions.

1918: Elma Eason

The first records I could find relating to Elma after her mother's committal were newspaper articles dated 28 February 1918. Both the *Dandenong Advertiser* and *Cranbourne, Berwick and Oakleigh Advocate* reported that Elma, aged ten, passed the Intermediate Level of the London College of Music examinations held at Koo Wee Rup. She had been studying music with a private tutor, Mrs Kitty Townson, perhaps as a result of Minnie no longer being able to teach her. Elma's success in her music examinations would have been a great source of pride for Minnie had she known. However, it is also possible that if Minnie had indeed known about Elma's excellent musical performance in these examinations, which occurred during Minnie's Trial Leave period in Rosedale, it may have caused her some stress, accentuating the loss of contact with her children.

According to the Rosedale Register of Pupil's records, Elma finished her education at the Koo Wee Rup State School at the Easter break on 28 March 1918 and was enrolled as a student at the Rosedale State School from 8 April to 19 November 1918. The *Rosedale Courier* reported a Sports Day at Rosedale on 1 April, Easter Monday, in which Arnold participated and came first in the Siamese Race, second in the Boot Race and third in the Backward Race. It would seem that Arnold and Elma stayed with their Watts' relatives during the Easter holidays and Arnold returned to Koo Wee Rup without his sister. Elma, aged ten, lived with her aunt, Jane Johnson and cousin Ellie, aged 12, in Rosedale for the remainder of the year and the two cousins attended the Rosedale State School together.



Watts' relatives at 'Oakvale'

Children on the horse: Arnold is second from the right, Elma is second from left and Ellie Johnson is fourth from left. c.1913

While Elma and Arnold stayed in Rosedale, many Watts' cousins, aunts and uncles lived in the district and may have helped fill the void of their mother's absence. Minnie's twin unmarried brother and sister, Essington and Alice Watts, lived on the original Watts' farm, 'Oakvale' and three other brothers, William, George and Alfred Watts, all lived and farmed in the Rosedale district with their wives and children.

In 1918:

- George Watts' children were aged: Phyllis 14, Myrtle (adopted) 6, Clarence 6 and John 5;
- William Watts' children were aged: Irene 9, Maurice 7, Drucilla 5 and William 3; and
- Alfred Watts' children were aged: Gordon 8, Eileen, 6, Alfred 4 and Elma 2.



Arnold, aged 14 and Keith Stevenson, aged 11, Rosedale, c.1919

During the 1970s, Ellie Johnson's son, Fr. Eric Hodgens (b.1935), researched the Watts' family history and wrote a small document, *The Watts Story*, which included anecdotal material. According to Fr. Hodgens, Minnie's sister, Marcella Stevenson, was particularly close to Jane and regularly visited the Johnson home with her family. Marcella and her husband, Nelson and their children lived at Warragul, about 80 kilometres from Rosedale and an easy commute by train. In 1918, the Stevenson 'children' were aged: Ellen 24, Eric 21, Howard 19, Pearl 17 and Keith 10 years. I recall Arnold telling me that he and his cousin, Keith Stevenson, had a lifelong friendship.

Fr. Hodgens believed that his grandmother, Jane Johnson, was gregarious, kind and welcoming, which explained the caring she provided to her desperate sister

and a motherless niece and nephew. Fr. Eric Hodgens' mother, Ellie Johnson, told him that Jane 'mothered' young Elma and Arnold 'for a time after their mother died.' However, when Minnie died, Arnold and Elma were young adults and would not have required mothering. It is more likely that after Minnie's failed Trial Leave, a young Ellie was told Minnie had died. Given that Gwen was told Minnie had died rather than reveal Minnie was committed to an asylum, perhaps young Arnold and Elma were told the same.

When Arnold and Elma arrived at Rosedale for Easter in 1918, only eleven days had passed since their aunt Jane had returned Minnie to psychiatric care. Many unanswered questions remain:

- Would Elma and Arnold know that their mother had been staying at Jane's house?

- What information would Ellie share with her cousins about their mother's presumably severe, mentally distressed state?
- How did Ellie cope with seeing her aunt in such a troubled condition?
- Would Elma have to cope with Rosedale schoolyard gossip or teasing regarding her mother?

In May 1918, the Rosedale School participated in the Patriotic Queen Carnival, along with other local schools: Nambrok, Kilmany, Flynn and The Pines. This fundraising event was held in support of the Victorian State Schools' Patriotic Fund and each school selected a Queen, two maids of honour and two pages to represent them. After two months of fundraising by each Queen's community, the Queen who had raised the most money was crowned at a gala event in the Rosedale Mechanics' Hall on 19 July 1918.

Ellie Johnson was selected as the Rosedale State School Queen and Elma Eason was chosen as one of her maids of honour. The *Rosedale Courier* reported the Rosedale and Willung communities working tirelessly to support Ellie in hosting many major fundraising events, including a concert and dance at Willung, a mammoth Jumble Fair held over two days of well-attended dances in Rosedale. Elma Eason would have been kept busy supporting her aunt, cousin and new school with these fundraising activities.

A large, enthusiastic crowd attended the coronation of the Queen, preceded by a concert given by the children from the participating schools. Each stylishly dressed Queen walked on to the stage to await the winner's announcement. An extract from the main article of the Queen Coronation, as reported in the *Rosedale Courier*, 25 July 1918, is below:

The Queen of Rosedale (Miss Ellie Johnson) appeared next with a very loud ovation. She looked very winsome, her attire consisting of white satin, with pearl trimmings with an old gold and black train. Her crown was shown conspicuously and a brooch set with jewels was also worn. The Queen's bouquet consisted of wattle blossoms and asparagus. She also carried a kewpie (*a type of doll*). Miss Elma Eason and Winnie Murren acted as maids of honour and presented a graceful appearance in their dresses of white satin, trimmed with pearls. Their posies were made of jonquils, daffodils and fern and their gold crowns studded with jewels. Little Gladys Birch and Myrtle Watts were the pages, and as in the other cases, they completed the group to perfection wearing gold satin tunics tied with black French knots and also Napoleon hats of a golden colour trimmed with white ostrich feathers.

The Queen from The Pines School won the competition, having raised the most money, £529. Ellie was awarded second place for raising £351. In all, the five district Queens and their communities raised a massive £1,243 for the Victorian State Schools' Patriotic Fund and the competition was described in local papers as a 'splendid success'.

A photo of 'Queen' Ellie Johnson with her maids of honour and pages was presented to the Rosedale State School, as reported in the *Rosedale Courier* on 19 December 1918. Unfortunately, the Rosedale Historical Society cannot locate the photo.

ROSEDALE SCHOOL

A beautifully mounted photo has been presented to the local school by Miss Morrison of the Exchange Hotel. It consists of Miss Ellie Johnson, as Queen of Rosedale, her maids of honour (Miss Winnie Murren and Elma Eason), and her two pages (Gladys Birch and Myrtle Watts). It is encouraging to all concerned to know we have citizens like Miss Morrison to take such an active interest in the welfare of the school children.



The Rosedale Historical Society provided a photo of the Flynn school participants in the Queen Carnival, taken in the Rosedale Hall (left). The Queen of Flynn was dressed similarly to Ellie Johnson and the maids of honour were also dressed in similar attire to Elma.

On 12 December 1918, the Rosedale school examination results were published in the *Rosedale Courier*. Six students, including 10-year-old Elma, gained their Merit Certificate on 19 November. Elma's extraordinary academic achievement was highlighted by the ages of the other five students listed in the newspaper; they were all aged 14. Therefore, Elma completed Year 8 when her age-group peers completed Year 4. Also, despite being two years older than Elma, Ellie completed Year 6 during 1918 and a later *Rosedale Courier*

article reported Ellie gaining her Merit Certificate in December 1920. Elma was obviously gifted scholastically like her brother.

When Elma left the Rosedale State School on 19 November 1918 to return to Koo Wee Rup, it is not known how long she remained living with William or if she was able to further her education elsewhere. Unfortunately, I could not find any other records about Elma until 1931, when she appeared on the Victorian Electoral Roll. Elma, aged 23, was working as a bookkeeper and living with Ada and Tal Smith in Gardenvale.

1918: Arnold and William Eason

By April 1918, 12-year-old Arnold's home life had changed dramatically compared to eight months prior. The permanent removal of his mother and youngest sister, Gwen, as well as

Elma's relocation to Rosedale in April 1918, meant his family life was shattered. Despite these enormous losses and adjustments for young Arnold, his father continued his community leadership and committee duties. It is likely that Arnold unwittingly began his journey of independence at this time.

In early 1918, William was elected the secretary for the committee organising fundraising events for the St. George Church of England, Koo Wee Rup. One of the events organised by this committee was the church's successful annual flower show, held during several evenings in April 1918, with flowers judged, musical items performed and lectures given. The flower show was reported in the *South Bourke and Mornington Journal* on 2 May 1918, including the acknowledgement of William's secretarial duties for the event.

A public holiday for the King's Birthday occurred on 3 June 1918 and Koo Wee Rup held a Patriotic Carnival for the district, a fundraising extravaganza for the war effort. It included a fancy dress procession through the town, sports events and a military band performance, followed by a fancy dress ball in the evening. William was the president and treasurer of the organising committee and received much credit from the community for the carnival's success, with around 1,500 people in attendance and over £250 raised. Arnold was in the carnival procession, dressed in the character of 'The Waybacks', a famous Australian silent, rural comedy film. A detailed report was published in the *Lang Lang Guardian* newspaper, dated 7 June 1918. An extract of this article is below:

KOO WEE RUP CARNIVAL A GREAT SUCCESS

President: W. Eason; secretaries, H. Bourke and F. Ellis; treasurers, F. Ellis, W. Eason and W. Dyer; marshal for the procession, M. Bourke; starter J. O'Brien; clerk course, N. Webster; horse events- Judges, Cus. Powell, P. Temple, D. J. Bourke and Mr Smale; Sheffield Handicap, Messrs. Woodman, Whelan, Powell, Temple and Bourke; pony measurer, D. J. Bourke; gate; Messrs C. Moody, J. Longmore, Bethune, Hudson, McDonald; cashier, J. Shelton The Koo Wee Rup Patriotic Carnival was held on Monday, June 3, King's Birthday, in ideal weather. It was an unqualified success, and over £250 will be realised when final figures are reached. The gate takings were £51 and fully 1500 persons were present. Great preparations were made by the local folk to make it a record, and the whole affair was an undoubted credit to the promoters and the town and district. A large number of returned soldiers were present, amongst whom we noticed:- M. Johnson, H. Cole, T. Williams, Wm. Selby, R. H. Taylor, W. McGree, R. H. Ellett, J. Morden, V. Blythe, Willis, Corp. Gilchrist, L. Cochrane, T. Jenkins, Fowler and Swords.

The procession, which started from the market yards at about 11.30 am, was a fine spectacle. The Malvern Tramways Band of 15 players led the way to the recreation reserve. The decorated motor cars came first. Mr Downward, M.L.A. and several returned soldiers were occupants of the first car. The decorated lorries and groups were splendid. Miss Fergie's 'Children of the Empire' won first prize and was represented by a host of school children in various costumes.

William's prominent role in the Koo Wee Rup community is demonstrated in the *Lang Lang Guardian* article on 14 June 1918. He delivered a speech on behalf of the Koo Wee Rup citizens to recognise the efforts of a local soldier returning from the war.

KOO WEE RUP WELCOME HOME PRIVATE TOM JENKINS

Koo Wee Rup always welcome their soldiers home enthusiastically and the welcome extended to Private Tom Jenkins on Wednesday night was no exception to the rule. There was a large crowd at the hall to do him honour and when he entered the hall the returned warrior was greeted with cheers, while Mr Eason extended the glad hand on behalf of the Citizens. He said that Private Jenkins enlisted early in 1915 and had been through the Gallipoli campaign and was entitled to bear that most honoured word, 'Anzac'. (Cheers). After the evacuation, he proceeded to France, where he had been twice wounded and invalided home. Private Jenkins was on the ill-fated Southland when torpedoed by the Germans. Altogether he has been wounded three times and has seen nearly 3 ½ years of service, so that he has indeed earned a rest. He is in fairly good health, save a partial disablement of his arm.

Cr. J. O'Brien, in presenting the soldier with a ring containing the Battalion colours, said it was only a very small thing they asked him to accept compared with what he had done for them. He asked Private Jenkins to treasure it, however, not for its intrinsic value, but as a memento of esteem from the dear friends at home who he had fought for. He had helped to bring the name of Australia before the world and he had pleasure in handing him this small token of respect. (Cheers).

Private Jenkins having thanked them, 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' was sung lustily and more cheers were given. A program of music and dancing afterwards occupied attention and a splendid supper was prepared.

In April 1918, a Bush Nursing committee was formed in Koo Wee Rup to establish a local Bush Nursing Centre and William was elected president. The Bush Nursing movement began in 1910, supplying skilled nurses to country areas once communities had raised the necessary funds to pay for the nurse's salary. On 18 July 1918, the *Lang Lang Guardian* reported the young nurse's arrival at Koo Wee Rup.

WELCOME TO NURSE HOMEWOOD

At Koo Wee Rup on Tuesday evening, a cordial welcome was extended by the residents to Nurse Homewood, who arrived on Monday from Ouyen to fill the position of Bush Nurse in the new nursing centre, embracing Koo Wee Rup, a portion of Yallock and South Pakenham. There was a large attendance. Mr W. Eason is the president and Mr G. Burhop secretary and it is expected that there will be close to 100 members of the association. In his remarks, the president stated that the bush nursing idea originated eight years ago by

Lady Dudley and since then 34 centres had been established, the first being at Gunbower. Bush nurses filled a great want in districts where the services of a medical man were unobtainable. They had a great many trials and difficulties to contend with and it was their duty to alleviate suffering and save life. It was to their interest to join heartily in the movement and make it a great success. He welcomed Nurse Homewood to Koo Wee Rup. (Applause). Nurse Homewood, who is quite a young-looking girl, made an appropriate response, and hoped they would all work well together. A musical program was rendered with refreshments in abundance and choice. A dance was held afterwards, the company separating at 1 am.

A hospital, the first of its kind erected voluntarily in Victoria, was eventually constructed next to the Bush Nursing Centre. William and his committee raised the required £1,800 to build the hospital, which was opened in 1923. The 'Fallen Soldiers Memorial Hospital' had four beds but could treat up to ten patients in an emergency. William's first grandchild, my father, Donald Lewis Eason, was born in this hospital in 1930.



William Eason, front left, with the construction team, c.1922

In July 1918, 12-year-old Arnold Eason won the Grade 8 division for a writing competition organised by the Victorian Farmers Union in Koo Wee Rup. Essays were written by local school children on the topic, 'The Farmers' Union Exhibit at the Carnival' and the prize winners for Grade 8, Grade 7 and Grade 6 students were published in the *Koo Wee Rup Sun* on 31 July 1918.

While Arnold and William Eason were actively involved in the Koo Wee Rup community, albeit with a reduced family unit, Minnie remained imprisoned within the walls of the Sunbury Hospital for the Insane. After enduring five months of incarceration at this institution, she desperately tried to escape by climbing over a verandah. Unfortunately, her

bid for freedom was short-lived and she was 'recaptured' at a creek below the hospital. It is unknown what consequences Minnie faced after being recaptured.

On 5 August 1918, Minnie's medical records state:

Escaped this morning by climbing over the veranda in the airing court in F6 (*female ward*). Recaptured again down by the creek at Benson's Farm.



The wall surrounding the Sunbury Hospital for the Insane, 2019.

A trench on the inside made it impossible to scale from within, while from the outside, the wall looked low enough so as not to suggest imprisonment.

On 5 October 1918, Minnie's medical records state:

Poor health

It would be another year before Minnie was medically examined.

When World War 1 ended on 11 November 1918, William and Arnold were involved in the celebrations at Koo Wee Rup. The *Lang Lang Guardian* and *Koo Wee Rup Sun* reported this momentous occasion on 13 November 1918:

AT KOO WEE RUP

The news was received here on Monday night. It was accepted with reserve by many, who remembered the former fiascos, and waited for official intelligence. Fog detonators were exploded on the line, and there was some cheering, but many people resolved to wait till the morning before getting unduly excited. Then when morning papers came through

it was seen that the long war was over at last, and the Huns' fangs had been drawn. A little after ten o'clock the hall doors were thrown open and the school children, marshalled by Mr Eason, headteacher, marched into the building, where a program of patriotic airs was rendered with songs by Miss Mickle, Mr E.J. Lupson and Sergeant Flick. Messrs Eason and Hopkins made suitable speeches. Mrs Townson presided at the piano. The National Anthem was sung with great fervour. 'The Marseillaise' and 'Rule Britannia', 'Anzacs Everyone', 'Soldiers of the King' etc. Cheers were given lustily and a collection was taken up to give the school children a picnic during the afternoon, Mrs J. A. Mickle kindly offering the use of a paddock.

A couple of returned soldiers were present and they got an ovation. The afternoon was spent pleasantly with a really capital sports program, about 3 pounds being collected.

In the evening a dance was given by Mr and Mrs McNamara in honour of the victory at which there was a very large attendance. The utmost happiness was on everybody's faces and all enjoyed themselves thoroughly. Excellent music was furnished by a band from Tooradin. Cr. E. Simpson Hill made a speech in which he referred to the doings of our boys at the front and gave instances of their heroism which was loudly applauded. An excellent supper was provided. Considering the social was not arranged until midday and that it was a postal holiday, the goods having to be ordered from Melbourne, it seemed an impossible performance to get these sent on the 1.15 pm train, to arrive for the evening's festivities. Yet it was done, reflecting great credit on the Melbourne caterer, Dance's, and Mrs McNamara.

During the summer of 1918/1919, William played cricket for the Koo Wee Rup team and was also secretary of the Koo Wee Rup Cricket Club. It was reported in the *Koo Wee Rup Sun* on 11 December 1918 that 42-year-old William had chosen the side, helped to significantly beat the opposing team and excelled enough to be selected as the best batsman on the day.

Summarising William's known commitments during 1918, with Arnold under his direct care, he held the positions of:

- Head Teacher at the local school;
- Secretary of the fundraising committee for the St. George's Anglican Church;
- President and treasurer of the Patriotic Carnival committee organising a day of events for 1,500 people and a gala ball in the evening;
- President of the Bush Nursing committee involving fundraising for the construction of a hospital and the provision of a nurse's wages;
- A member of the Lang Lang Lodge; and
- Secretary of the Koo Wee Rup Cricket Club and a player in the local cricket competition.

William's lack of prioritising his family is also summarised:

- His extensive volunteering and pursuing his own interests throughout his marriage meant his wife and children were less significant in his priorities.

- He committed his wife to an asylum and then never visited her.
- He did not allow his wife to return to the family unit on her Trial Leave.
- After Minnie was committed, he gave away his toddler daughter to be raised by relatives and sanctioned his ten-year-daughter to live with relatives for at least eight months.

1919

The year began with the Spanish Influenza pandemic interrupting daily life for Australians. The deadly virus arrived in Victoria in December 1918, resulting in emergency regulations issued by the Victorian health minister on 30 January 1919. Meetings of more than 20 people were prohibited, travel in long-distance trains was restricted, people were encouraged to wear masks, public buildings were closed, NSW closed the border with Victoria and strict maritime quarantine took place to help pause the spread of this infection. By the end of 1919, at least 12,500 Australians had died from this flu and up to 40 per cent of the population fell ill. The influenza outbreak eventually killed around 50 million people globally - more than the First World War.²⁸

An outbreak of the Spanish flu occurred in the Sunbury asylum and also at Koo Wee Rup with the death of Elma Eason's piano teacher, Mrs Kitty Townson, in June 1919. A wing of the Koo Wee Rup Memorial Hospital was named in Kitty Townson's honour.

Amid the gloom of the pandemic, it was announced in the *Koo Wee Rup Sun* on 12 February 1919 that Arnold Eason had won a government scholarship to Wesley College in Prahran. The article also mentioned Arnold was 'the son of Mr W. Eason, Head Teacher of the Koo Wee Rup School'. William would have been incredibly proud of his son's achievement and no doubt delighted in his great teachings. Perhaps without a home life in 1918, copious amounts of homework had filled the void in Arnold's life.

Arnold boarded with a family in a suburb near Wesley College and began his private school education on 12 February 1919, aged 13 years and three months. He was admitted into the Year 10 level, where he was at least two years younger than his classmates and placed in a class called 'The Twenty', made up of the brightest students of his year level. In 1920, Arnold was again placed in a class with the brightest students: Fifth A. However, in 1921 he was placed in the Year 12 'Sixth B' class, failing inclusion into 'Honour Sixth' or 'Sixth A'. Maybe Arnold struggled to maintain academic success without the same maturity as his peers.

By February 1919, Minnie, William, Gwen, Arnold and likely Elma were all living apart. Therefore, William would have had limited family responsibilities until Arnold returned to Koo Wee Rup in December 1921.

In April 1919, William was elected President of the Koo Wee Rup Football Club after the club reformed following WW1. Whilst he was president, the Koo Wee Rup football team became the 1919 and 1920 league premiers of the Korumburra Football Association.

In April 1919, William was elected the Secretary of the Koo Wee Rup Mechanics' Institute.

Minnie continued to struggle with her health in the Sunbury Hospital for the Insane. On 9 October 1919, Minnie's medical records state:

Poor health. Troublesome. Laundry

(Despite her poor health, it seems Minnie may have been working in the asylum laundry.)

On 25 August 1919, *The Age* reported a list of grievances by nurses at the Sunbury Hospital for the Insane. The list of complaints included:

- a shortage of staff and irregular leave since November 1918;
- an outbreak of influenza in the hospital with no extra nurses to cope with it;
- insanitary conditions in the cottage accommodation for night nurses; the cottage had been condemned for ten years and was next to a piggery and sanitary depot; and
- male staff with similar duties to female staff enjoyed much better conditions with fully staffed male wards, constant regular leave and a salary twice that of female staff.

Minnie's miserable living conditions in the Sunbury hospital would have been exacerbated by the shortage of nurses in her ward. Unfortunately, the influenza outbreak placed more demands on these overworked, dissatisfied female staff and impacted the quality of care available to all female patients.

1920

Five months after Minnie's previous medical assessment, a doctor noted on 28 March 1920:

Never sleeps without draught. Still troublesome.

(A 'draught' referred to a drink or drug intended to induce sleep.)

On 2 October 1920, the doctor's medical assessment of Minnie was very brief:

Troubled lady

It would be two more years before Minnie was medically examined again.

1921

William continued his involvement with the Masonic Lodge. It was reported in *The Argus* on 19 October 1921 that Worshipful Brother W. Eason, P.J.G.D (Prince of Jerusalem, Grand Deacon), performed the Lang Lang Masonic installation ceremony, including his brother, Samuel Eason, as 'Choirmaster.'

Meanwhile, Arnold's education at Wesley College finished in February 1922. He passed Leaving Certificate English and Chemistry but failed Physics and History in 1921 and, as a result, sat the supplementary exams for the failed subjects in February 1922.

William organised employment for Arnold in a Koo Wee Rup bank, the English Scottish and Australian Bank (E.S.& A.) and so began his successful banking career on 10 December 1921. He worked as a junior ledgekeeper, teller and agency officer, travelling in all weather by horse and jinker around the district to perform his agency officer duties. Arnold remained at the Koo Wee Rup branch for the next eleven years, studying accountancy by correspondence during the evenings.



William and Arnold Eason c.1921

²⁸Debbie Cuthbertson, What we can learn from Victoria's Spanish flu outbreak of 1919. Published in The Age, March 22, 2020

11

William Files for Divorce

The Divorce (Insanity) Act of 1919 enabled a husband or wife to be granted a divorce if it was proven:

- their partner was a 'lunatic' or a person of unsound mind and not likely to recover; and
- the partner had spent five out of six years in a hospital for the insane before a petition was filed.

William filed for divorce in September 1922, five years after Minnie was committed.

William's divorce petition states that his marriage had been unsatisfactory from about June 1916 (not long after the birth of Gwen) until the time Minnie was removed to a hospital for the insane on 17 August 1917. If William wanted to separate and divorce Minnie during this period, there were limited reasons a couple could divorce and none of these applied to their marriage. From 1890, the Marriage Act permitted the following reasons to be considered grounds for divorce in Victoria:

- desertion for three years by a husband or wife;
- habitual drunkenness, with cruelty and neglect, by a husband or wife;
- frequent convictions for crime, or a conviction of murder on the part of a husband only;
- proven adultery by either party; and
- proven repeated assaults by either party.

When William committed Minnie, he would not have known that a Bill to amend the Marriage Act would be passed by the Victorian Government in July 1919, allowing him to divorce Minnie. This Bill enabled a partner's insanity for five years as grounds for divorce.

In 1922, the Victorian Master-in-Lunacy oversaw the property and legal affairs of those who were imprisoned in asylums and as a result, he was appointed Minnie's guardian during the divorce and was known as the Guardian of the Respondent. However, a Crown Solicitor for the State of Victoria represented the Master-In-Lunacy in the Supreme Court; Minnie may not even have been aware of any of the divorce procedures or that William had filed for divorce.

An extract of William's affidavit, dated 29 September 1922, is below:

THAT for some 12 months prior to the said 17th day of August 1917 the said Minnie Eleanor Eason had behaved in a peculiar manner. She was sullen and morose and suffered from hallucinations to such an extent that I was afraid she might do herself or the children bodily harm. During this period she was under medical advice and when her symptoms appeared to be getting worse I accepted the advice of Dr Sewell who was then attending her

with the result that on the 17th day of August 1917, she was removed into and detained in the Receiving House Royal Park Melbourne aforesaid. I am informed and believe that on the 4th day of February 1918 she was, pursuant to certain provisions under the Lunacy Acts, allowed to be absent from the said hospital upon trial leave in the custody of her sister, Mrs Jane Johnson, but that notwithstanding such absence she was still a patient under the control or supervision of the said hospital. Her condition became worse and she was taken to a private hospital at 12 Malvern Grove, Malvern in the State of Victoria where she was examined by Dr A. M. Hill who ordered her immediate return to the said Receiving House Royal Park Melbourne aforesaid to which institution she returned to on the 18th day of March 1918 and on the 25th day of March 1918 she was removed from there to Sunbury Asylum where she is now an inmate and has been ever since.

THAT from time to time since the said 17th day of August 1917 I have been furnished with reports as to her mental and bodily condition. On the 11th day of February 1922 I am informed and believed that her mental condition was not improving in any way and that at times she was dangerous and was mentally deteriorating generally. On the 28th day of June 1922 I received a further report that there was no change in her mental condition.

THAT the said Minnie Eleanor Eason has since the celebration of the said marriage become a lunatic or person of unsound mind and has been received into and detained in two or more hospitals for the insane for period or periods not less in the aggregate than five years within six years immediately preceding the filing of my Petition herein and I am informed and believe as stated in the preceding paragraph of this my affidavit that she is unlikely to recover from her lunacy or unsoundness of mind.

William's divorce petition contained many conflicting statements and omissions which reflect poorly on his integrity:

- Significantly, he omitted Norma's traumatic death and Gwen's birth in 1916 as possible reasons explaining Minnie's 'sullen and morose' behaviour in the twelve months before her committal.
- William failed to state that he requested and was responsible for committing his wife. He avoided this important admission by claiming that he '*accepted the advice of Dr Sewell, who was then attending her with the result that on the 17th day of August 1917, she was removed into and detained in the Royal Park Receiving House.*' The Receiving House Register of Patients' book clearly revealed that William was the authority who sent his wife to this institution, not Dr Sewell. In addition, Minnie's Patient Clinical Notes stated William and not Dr Sewell made a private request to commit Minnie.
- William stated that Minnie had suffered from hallucinations for the twelve months before her committal. However, upon admission to the Receiving House, her medical records did not mention Minnie suffering from hallucinations. Also, in William's report to the Receiving House (detailed in Minnie's Patient Clinical Notes), William did not say that Minnie suffered from hallucinations.

- William stated that he feared Minnie might harm herself or their children during the twelve months before her committal. Yet William's well-documented extracurricular activities seem to be at odds with such concern for his family.

If William could exaggerate Minnie's depressed state and omit critical information about her behaviour in his divorce petition, I wonder how much credibility there was to his allegations against Minnie, which resulted in her committal.

We also know that William did not ever visit Minnie after her committal. Therefore, he would have had no idea of Minnie's condition from 28 June 1922 (when he received his last report from the Kew asylum) to 29 September 1922, when he submitted his divorce petition.

Divorce Court proceedings were reported in much detail in newspapers during this period, with no privacy taken into account for the concerned parties. One party had to prove the other party was 'at fault', so the hearings made interesting stories and sold newspapers. In William's petition, sworn under oath, he claimed his address was that of Ada and Talbot Smith's address, presumably to avoid scrutiny from his local community when his case appeared in a newspaper. William's divorce application was reported in *The Argus* on 1 December 1922, including an inaccurate reporting of the number of children from the marriage:

DIVORCE COURT

William Eason, Magnolia Road, Garden Vale, school teacher, obtained a decree against Minnie Eleanor Eason on the ground of the respondent's lunacy for five years and upwards. The parties were married at Rosedale, Gippsland, in 1902, and there are two children of the union. The unfortunate respondent is an inmate of a mental home.

Meanwhile, Minnie's medical record of 31 October 1922 stated that she was well-oriented to time and was aware of her situation in the Sunbury asylum.

At times violent. Laughs irrationally when spoken to. Knows where she is and how long she has been here.

Understandably, Minnie's sense of powerlessness in knowing that any conversation with a doctor was futile could have triggered her alleged violent behaviour. Unfortunately for Minnie, any violent behaviour resulted in a patient's seclusion from others in a locked room of isolation and information relating to the punishment was recorded in Seclusion Books: the name of the patient, the type and cause of seclusion or restraint (including drugs and straitjackets) and the number of hours per day the patient was treated in this manner. These records are held at PROV, but after 99 years, they are still not open to public viewing. Not long after this medical examination, Minnie developed peritonitis. Symptoms of peritonitis include severe abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, fever, excessive thirst, diarrhoea or constipation. Her medical record on 14 November 1922 stated:

She is reported to have jaundice and pain in the right hypochondrium with rigidity of the rectus - in the opinion of the medical officer, she is developing peritonitis. Is to be transferred to the Melbourne Hospital this afternoon at 3 pm.

Minnie was granted leave from the Sunbury Hospital for the Insane from 14 November 1922 until 31 March 1923 and transferred to the Royal Melbourne Hospital in Parkville for medical treatment. After a few weeks, she recovered enough to be returned to the Sunbury Hospital for the Insane on 2 December 1922.

Minnie and William were officially divorced on 16 June 1923 when a Decree Absolute was granted based on Minnie's insanity. Once divorced, William was no longer required to pay Minnie's weekly allowance of 10 shillings and was also free to remarry. However, unless this allowance was paid by another family member, Minnie would have then been relegated to the 'pauper' section in the female ward with fewer privileges. I wonder if Minnie even knew that she had been divorced.

Two weeks after the divorce, 45-year-old William married 32-year-old Ruby Florence Mortensen, a dressmaker, on 30 June 1923. Incredibly, William married his second wife on Minnie's 41st birthday.

William signed his name on his marriage certificate, agreeing that all the details on the certificate he had provided were true. However, he had knowingly provided two incorrect details. William claimed that he had no children who had died and that his usual residence was Ada and Tal Smith's address in Gardenvale.

Reverend Ernest Panelli performed the marriage ceremony at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond and their two witnesses were Ruby's sister, Elvine Mortensen and her fiance, Cyril Loveday. At the time of William's second marriage, his children were aged: Arnold 17, Elma 15, and Gwen 7.

William and Ruby Eason remained living in Koo Wee Rup.

Not long after William re-married, Minnie's only medical assessment in 1923 occurred on 17 July:

Becoming very thin - no improvement mentally.

12

Minnie, William and Arnold: 1924 - 1928

In this chapter, I have continued including Minnie's medical records and information relating to her in bold text, to contrast her life in an asylum with the lives of William and Arnold during the same period.

By 20 May 1924, Minnie's physical health was deteriorating. Her medical records state:

Talks disconnectedly and cannot sustain any conversation. Chest examined: moist sounds at the left apex.

On 1 June 1924, Minnie was diagnosed with the infectious disease tuberculosis. There was no reliable treatment of this disease at the time and an effective cure was not discovered until the late 1940s with the antibiotic streptomycin. Minnie must have been treated at the Sunbury hospital as there is no record in the asylum's *Register of Discharges, Removals and Deaths* of her being discharged to another hospital.

Minnie's medical records, 24 August 1924, state:

Restless and inclined to be mildly excited. Put on Ol. Morr.

Minnie's medical records, 30 August 1924, state:

Picking at her forearms and hands, causing them to become septic.

Dr Alison Watts thought Minnie might have had scabies. Scabies is a highly contagious and intensely itchy skin condition caused by a tiny burrowing mite spread by close physical contact among people; scabies amongst asylum patients was common.

Minnie Moved to Kew Hospital for the Insane

The *Register of Discharges, Removals and Deaths* for the Sunbury hospital notes that 42-year-old Minnie was transferred to the Kew Hospital for the Insane on 8 September 1924. She was diagnosed with senile dementia and became one of the 897 patients residing in this overcrowded hospital: 494 males and 403 females. Coroner's Inquest records reveal that Minnie arrived at this hospital in poor health and physical condition and that she never improved after admittance. Minnie would remain at this asylum until she died in 1929.

The Inspector-General of the Insane, Dr W. Ernest Jones, presented his 1924 report on the Victorian Hospitals for the Insane to the Victorian Parliament in 1925. In this report, Jones gave damning evidence against the Kew asylum:

Wards on the male and female sides are always uncomfortably and unhygienically crowded. A large proportion of the new receptions at Kew are rendered mentally and physically helpless by old age. The Homes for Aged and Infirm appear to pass on to Kew Mental Hospital all those cases in which advanced senile changes render technically insane.²⁹

Dr W. Ernest Jones' report also included information regarding the Kew Hospital for the Insane admissions, discharges and deaths for 1924:

- 1,014 patients remained on the books at the end of 1924;
- 167 people were admitted during the year, including Minnie;
- 22 recovered;
- 25 were relieved;
- 108 died, with the heaviest mortality attributed to pneumonia, bronchitis and pleurisy;
- The average number of residents for the year was 891;
- 12.12% of the average number of residents in 1924 died; and
- 13.17% of the average number of residents in 1924 recovered;



Aerial view of the Kew Hospital for the Insane.

This photo was taken after the hospital was closed in 1988. The buildings were then developed into residential apartments and landscaped grounds, opening in 1993.

Minnie's admittance to the Kew Hospital for the Insane was also recorded in *The Head Nurse's Daily Report Book*. Entries in this book were completed daily by the head nurse of the female department, providing readers with a snapshot of the depressing daily life of the women held in these wards. On the day Minnie was admitted, Monday, 8 September 1924, the following information was recorded :

- Minnie was admitted to 'E' Ward with 46 other patients;
- 403 female patients were in eight wards;
- Minnie was one of 17 patients from 403 who remained in bed during the day;
- Ward 8 held 29 patients in 'tents' (*These were huts known as fever tents and built in 1907 during a typhoid outbreak.*);
- 184 patients were employed in the kitchen, laundry, sewing-room or doing housework in the wards;
- 219 patients were unemployed;
- 160 patients had time in the Airing Courts;
- Two patients were destructive;
- Four patients had epileptic fits;
- 22 patients were suicidal;
- none had died;
- none had escaped;
- 11 patients slept in 'canvas rugs' (*restraints*);
- 11 beds were reported wet from the night before;
- 140 patients required special supervision; and
- 42 patients were under medical treatment.

Two days after arriving at the Kew Hospital for the Insane, Minnie was assessed by a doctor:

Filthy in her habits. Restless and resistive. Has sores on hands and legs.

Perhaps Minnie was 'filthy' because bathing with these sores was too painful.

Minnie's medical records, 17 September 1924, state:

Very dirty in her habits

Meanwhile, William attended his parents' 50th wedding celebration in October 1924. The photo of William (*next page*) was cut from the family portrait taken for the occasion, seen on page 24. This photo shows an impeccably groomed man with a confident, upright stance. William looks like someone who does not want for anything, a man who is in control and very satisfied with his life. In stark contrast, Minnie's life was spiralling downward in degrading and overcrowded conditions, vulnerable to violence and cruelty, as her physical and mental states deteriorated rapidly.



Minnie's medical records, 23 October 1924, state:

Dirty, destructive, incoherent, demented. In fair condition.

Minnie's medical records, 29 November 1924, state:

No change.

It would be 14 more months before Minnie was medically examined again.

On 19 March 1925, it was recorded in *The Head Nurse's Daily Report Book* that Minnie had been destructive, tearing her chemise (a clothing garment); on the same day, two other patients ripped a mattress and another tore blankets. The head nurse was not required to record patient punishments in her daily report, but Minnie was likely forced to wear some type of restraint to control her behaviour. Other information from this daily report book for Thursday, 19 March 1925, included:

- 390 female patients were in eight wards;
- 184 patients were employed in the kitchen, laundry, sewing-room or doing housework in the wards;
- 206 patients were unemployed;
- Six patients slept in 'canvas rugs';
- Ten patients were noisy;
- One patient was 'dirty';
- Sixteen patients were 'wet';
- One patient died;
- Forty-two patients were under medical treatment;
- Seventy patients attended a dance; and
- Nineteen patients were suicidal.

Minnie's medical records, 20 January 1926, state:

General health better - demented, dirty in her habits.

While Minnie was surviving involuntary confinement in brutal conditions, William continued to excel as head teacher of the Koo Wee Rup School. School correspondence from the Education Department in January 1926 attributed the rising enrolments of 132 children directly to William's popularity as head teacher.

Minnie's medical records, 30 July 1926, state:

No change - habits dirty

It would be another year before Minnie was medically examined again.

On 12 August 1926, it was reported in *The Age* that William had been elected to manage the Koo Wee Rup recreation reserve.

On 26 August 1926, *The Head Nurse's Daily Report Book* recorded Minnie destroying her cotton chemise again. Minnie was first recorded ripping up her institution clothing two months after being committed in 1917. Nine years later, she was still protesting her incarceration despite the inevitable consequence of punishment.

In September 1926, Arnold played in the Koo Wee Rup football premiership side, defeating Leongatha at Korumburra. In 1927, Arnold and William were both involved in the Koo Wee Rup Football Club: Arnold was a club player and auditor, and William was a committee member and delegate to the South Gippsland Football Association.



Koo Wee Rup Football Team 1926

Back row, second from right: Arnold Eason, aged 20

Minnie's medical records, 13 July 1927, state:

Terminal dementia - habits faulty. Health fair.

Minnie's medical records, 23 June 1928, state:

Very dirty. Demented. Health fair.

Minnie's medical records, 4 October 1928, state:

Transferred to hospital - has diarrhoea, emaciated.

Minnie's medical records, 5 December 1928, state:

In a very low state.

Minnie's medical records give a particularly appalling account of her health and condition; she was close to death.

²⁹ Hospitals For The Insane. Report of the Inspector-General of the Insane for the Year Ended 31 December, 1924. Presented to both Houses of Parliament pursuant to Act 6 Geo.V., No. 2687, Section 19, H.J. Green, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1925

13

Minnie's Death

Minnie, aged 46, died at the Kew Hospital for the Insane on 6 January 1929. According to her death certificate, she died from 'acute pulmonary oedema (fluid on the lungs) and disease of the heart'. The informant on the certificate was a policeman, Constable Gilbert Henry Toakley, aged 25, who was also present at the coroner's inquest. When Constable Toakley completed Minnie's death certificate, he did not know if she had children, where she was born, her ex-husband's name or her correct age.

When asylum patients died, it was mandatory for a post-mortem and a coronial inquest to occur. After the post-mortem, Minnie's coronial inquest was held at the Melbourne Morgue on 15 January. These records are grim reading right from the beginning, with Minnie referred to as 'Body No. 61'. They provide further shocking insight into Minnie's continued isolation from loved ones at the time leading up to and including her death.

The nurse who attended Minnie at her death provided the following statement at the inquest:

5.

CORONER'S INQUEST.

This Deponent * *Francis Ellen Armstrong*
on oath saith, I am a *nurse*
residing at *Hospital for Insane Kew
The Bleasdale*

Minnie Eleanor Mason
was admitted to Hospital Ward
from I Ward 20th November 1928
and was put to bed. She
died at 2.45 A.M. 6th January
1929 nurse Lobb was at
death. She was not visited
by friends or relations. She
was seen by Official Visitors
12th November 1928

F. E. Armstrong

A medical officer from the Kew Hospital for the Insane, Henry Rogerson, stated on oath at the inquest:

The records show that the deceased, Minnie Eleanor Eason, was received into the Hospital for the Insane Kew on 8 September 1924 on the warrant now produced. Her age, on reception, was stated to be 42 years. Her mental condition: terminal dementia. She was in poor health and physical condition on reception. Her condition did not improve – at intervals she suffered from diarrhoea. In November last, she was transferred to the hospital ward in an increasing amount of weakness. Her condition became gradually worse and she died, I have been informed, at 5.45 am on January 6th, 1929.

During Minnie's eleven years of incarceration, her life had tragically become one of abandonment, insignificance, isolation and unimaginable suffering until the very end. Without a friend or relative in her final hour, it was as though she never existed. This disregard for her life and dignity continued with the mandatory autopsy on her body the day after she died, followed by her burial in an unmarked grave at the Rosedale Cemetery on 8 January 1929.

A funeral service for Minnie may have occurred in the St. Rose of Lima Church, yet more likely, a formal burial ceremony was held at the Rosedale Cemetery. Whilst there is no record of the attendees at Minnie's burial, we do know that Reverend Father O'Donnell officiated and she was buried in the Watts' family plot, beside the marked graves of her mother Eliza, sister Ellen and brother William. When Minnie died, her children were aged: Arnold 23, Elma 20 and Gwen 13. Gwen would have no memory of her mother at all.

Around the time of Minnie's death, there was much public concern regarding the treatment of patients like Minnie. Twelve days after she died, William Higgs formed the Society for the Promotion for the Welfare of the Mentally Afflicted in Victoria and became the Society's president. This society aimed to create public awareness of the conditions of inmates in the Hospitals for the Insane and advocate for change in their treatment. Eventually, the Society's efforts contributed to establishing Australia's first mental health association in 1930, the Victorian Mental Hygiene Council (VMHC), which evolved into the Mental Health Foundation Australia in 1981.

The formation of the Society and its subsequent meetings attracted the media's attention, the first meeting being reported in *The Argus* on 19 January 1929, thirteen days after Minnie's death.

WELFARE SOCIETY FORMED

'Shocking Administration'

With the object of forming a society for the promotion of the welfare of the mentally afflicted, a meeting of citizens was held in Collins House last night. The chair was occupied by Mr W. G. Higgs, a former Federal Treasurer.

In outlining the objects of the proposed society, Mr Higgs said that the reports of the Inspector-General of the Insane (Dr W. E. Jones) and the medical superintendents of the hospitals for the insane made painful reading, for they proved that the administration of the Lunacy Department in the last five years, and its consequent neglect of the best interests of the majority of the 6,500 mental patients in the hospitals for the insane, had been shocking. The inspector-general, the medical superintendents, the warders and the nurses were not to blame, for they had apparently done their best. The chief cause for complaint was overcrowding. For at least five years the medical superintendents had declared that there had not been sufficient room to accommodate all the mental patients. They had reported overcrowding at the Kew Asylum, where there were about 877 patients; Ballarat Asylum, where there were 686; the Ararat Asylum, where there were 619; the Royal Park Receiving House, where there were 116; and the Mont Park Asylum, where there were about 1,200 patients.

Many of the unfortunate persons, said Mr Higgs, had to sleep on the floor, in the passages and corridors, which were never intended to be used for such a purpose. It was not surprising, when so little had been done by previous Ministries to provide all mental patients with a proper bed and adequate accommodation, that little had been done by way of amusement to relieve the deadly monotony of the lives of many of the patients or to attend in a proper manner to their religious welfare. Nothing had been done in past years to erect a church and recreation hall, but there was a rumour abroad that something would be done in the matter during 1929. The first thing the society should do after its establishment was to raise funds for the purchase of wireless sets, loud speakers, headphones (for those patients well enough to use them), gramophones, records, pictures and for the provision of other forms of recreation and entertainment.

Mr Higgs said that the Chief Secretary (Dr Argyle) had rightly said that, "the responsibility for the care and maintenance of hospitals for the insane rests upon the State." Dr Argyle considered that it would be improper to appeal to the public for funds towards defraying the cost of the administration of the Lunacy Department, but he would offer no objection to the acceptance by the department, of donations voluntarily made by private persons with a view to providing for the greater comfort of patients. The proposed society, said Mr Higgs, could form committees, the members of which would, with the consent of the hospital authorities, from time to time visit patients. The society could also promote the study of comparative methods of treatment of mental cases and arrange for the delivery of public lectures and addresses on kindred subjects. Mr Higgs added that he felt sure that the public would respond to any effort to make brighter the lives of thousands of human beings.

He moved-

"That these persons present who approve, hereby form themselves into a society for the promotion of the welfare of the mentally afflicted."

The motion was agreed to and it was decided that the motto of the society should be Adam Lindsay Gordon's lines-

"Kindness in another's troubles,
Courage in your own."

The following officers were elected: President, Mr W. G. Higgs; secretary, Mr J. Bell; treasurer, Mr W.F. Geech. A committee was formed to draw up a constitution and make the necessary preliminary arrangements.

After this Society was formed, William Higgs wrote and published *A Plea for Better Treatment of the Mentally Afflicted* in 1931, as discussed in Chapter 9, with all profits of the sale of this book returned to the Society. In addition, he sent copies to prominent persons in government and petitioned the Victorian Government to reform 'Lunacy Law' and 'Lunacy Administration'.

At the time of Minnie's death, Higgs was campaigning for reform to the Lunacy Act in the following areas:

- male attendants and nurses to be trained and able to pass a strict exam before working with people with a mental health condition;
- that all cases of assaulting and ill-treating a patient be reported to the Department of Police by the medical superintendent. Failing to report should be punished by dismissal from the service;
- that the form of the medical certificate be amended to provide for more facts indicating mental disorder and reasons for certification;
- that all Christian Churches be invited to send representatives to the mental hygiene hospitals to hold church services and particularly to converse cheerfully with those inmates who choose to do so;
- payment for work done by patients; and
- significantly, Higgs demanded that doctors be trained in mental hygiene and pass an examination before being able to commit patients.

Minnie had endured eleven years of an inhumane mental health system, including two desperate escape attempts and the serious diseases tuberculosis and peritonitis. Surviving appalling conditions, physical illnesses and the denial of freedom for so long was a testament to Minnie's courage, determination, resilience and spirit.

14

The Eason Family's Life after Minnie's Death: 1929 - 1936

Minnie's children were likely unaffected by her death as she had been absent from their lives for so long. When Minnie was committed in 1917, her children were aged 11, 9 and 17 months and at the time of her death, they were aged 23, 20 and 13. Also, when Minnie died, William had been re-married for five years.

Arnold applied for and was appointed administrator of his mother's estate by the Registrar of Probate, as Minnie had died without a will. Despite Minnie not having any paid occupation during her life, her estate was worth £280-16-1. Some, if not all of these funds, were from a share of her parents' estate from which £1,579-18-7 had been equally divided amongst the twelve surviving Watts children in 1914, after Eliza Watts's death in 1912. Each of the adult Watts children received £131-13- 2. Whilst incarcerated, Minnie's loyal siblings, William Watts and Jane Johnson, held her funds in trust in a fixed bank deposit. William Watts had walked Minnie down the aisle on her wedding day and Jane Johnson was Minnie's guardian on Trial Leave in 1918.

Arnold's signature on the Letters of Administration documents was witnessed by his uncle, William Watts and aunt, Jane Johnson. Interestingly, Minnie's Net Asset statement disclosed a deduction of £41 for her funeral expenses and 'transshipment' to Rosedale Cemetery. Since there were no deductions for asylum fees, it would seem that her maintenance costs continued to be paid by an unknown source after William divorced Minnie. In contrast, £81 was deducted from Arthur Watts' estate for his maintenance fees and funeral costs after he died at the Kew asylum in 1917; these maintenance fees were paid to the Master in Lunacy.

Arnold distributed Minnie's estate equally between Elma, Gwen and himself. I wonder if Gwen was not told of her mother's death at this time and if Ada and Tal placed Gwen's share of her mother's estate in a trust for her.

Meanwhile, William Eason continued gaining success in his teaching career. State schools and teachers during this period were classified into divisions ranging from First Class to Seventh Class, with a higher ranking indicating a better school and teacher. In 1898, after four years of teacher training based at Clifton Hill State School, William had been classified in the Seventh Class. According to William's teaching records, he was promoted to the Fourth Class by March 1929 and in October 1929, he was promoted to the Third Class. On 27 June 1929, the *Dandenong Journal* reported one of William's promotions. (*next page*)

Mr W. Eason, the headmaster of the Koo Wee Rup State School, has been promoted to Fourth Class and the school itself has been raised a grade. Mr Eason has always been a keen worker for his school, and these promotions are very well deserved.

On 9 November 1929, Arnold married Mimie Fulton Campbell at the Malvern Presbyterian Church. He had met my grandmother in Koo Wee Rup after she moved from Melbourne in 1927.



Arnold and Mimie after they were Married, showered in confetti



Mimie with bridesmaid, Elma Eason

Mimie grew up in Melbourne, but according to the 1927 Victorian Electoral Roll, at the age of 22, she and her only sibling, Alister Campbell, aged 31, settled in Koo Wee Rup managing a draper's store in the main street, Rossiter Road. Presumably, Mimie and Alister moved to Koo Wee Rup from Malvern to be closer to their widowed, retired father, Donald Campbell, who had relocated from Malvern to a property at Budgeree East in 1927; Budgeree East was about 130 kilometres east of Koo Wee Rup. Alister Campbell continued working in this drapery business until he returned to Malvern in 1936, a year after his father died.

After their marriage, Arnold and Mimie lived in Koo Wee Rup, where Arnold remained employed by the E.S.& A Bank as a clerk. Perhaps Mimie continued working in the drapery store until their first child, Donald, was born.

Of interest, both Mimie and Arnold “lost” their mothers at the age of eleven; Mimie’s mother died from gall stones and Arnold’s mother was removed from his life. Also, as Mimie’s name was so similar in spelling to ‘Minnie’, it frequently and eerily appeared on the Victorian Electoral Roll next to Arnold's name spelled as 'Minnie Eason’.



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Arnold and Mimie's first child, my father, Donald Lewis Eason, was born at the Koo Wee Rup Memorial Hospital on the 4th of October 1930. His birth was announced in *The Argus*, 18 October 1930:

EASON (nee Mimie Campbell)-- On the 4th October at Memorial Hospital, Koo Wee Rup, to Mr and Mrs A. L. Eason-- a son (Donald Lewis)



Koo Wee Rup Sun, 14 April 1927

In 1931, 26-year-old Arnold proudly won the Commonwealth Institute of Accountants Student Society’s gold medal for securing the highest marks in his final examinations (*above*). This prestigious award was perhaps a sign of a rewarding career ahead, culminating in his appointment as Senior Deputy General Manager of the E.S. & A. Bank (the precursor to the ANZ bank) for Australia and England in 1964.

Victorian Electoral Roll records located on *Ancestry.com* from 1931 to 1937 reveal that Elma Eason lived in Magnolia Road, Gardenvale and worked as a bookkeeper from 1931 to 1934. Therefore, Elma lived with Ada and Tal Smith and her younger sister, Gwen, from at least the age of 23 years, yet perhaps from a much younger age. From 1935 to 1937, Elma lived with Arnold and Mimie in Camberwell, while 21-year-old Gwen lived with Ada and Tal. Gwen was working as a dressmaker in 1937.

In 1932, Arnold was transferred from Koo Wee Rup to Geelong after he and his family were given a large public farewell by the community in the Koo Wee Rup Mechanics' Institute Hall. This farewell was reported in the *Koo Wee Rup Sun* many years later, on 20 November 1968, in an article regarding Arnold's illustrious banking career and retirement.

While briefly living in Geelong, Arnold became a passionate Geelong football supporter, beginning a family tradition for many of his descendants. After 18 months, he was then transferred to the Chief Office of the E.S.& A. Bank in Melbourne and he and his young family relocated to the Melbourne suburb of Gardiner.

Arnold and Mimie's second child, Alan Campbell Eason, was born in Camberwell on 25 November 1934. During this time, four-year-old Don stayed with his grandfather William and step-grandmother Ruby Eason in Koo Wee Rup. While Don was living there, the most significant flood on record occurred in the district, creating an inland sea. Not only was William and Ruby's house affected, but approximately 1,000 residents in the surrounding area were temporarily homeless. Consequently, William wrote to the Education Department desperately seeking permission to remain in Koo Wee Rup to supervise the clean-up of the school and residence and assist with relief work.

Dear Sir,

I have the honour to report that a disastrous flood overwhelmed the district on Saturday 1st December. The school building was invaded by floodwaters to a depth of 30 inches. One chimney will need rebuilding as the foundation has given way. I would like to have this seen to at an early date. Our furniture was damaged but not to a great extent.

The water surrounded Departmental buildings to a depth of 5'3" but the wisdom of building well up off the ground level was shown. Mrs Eason and I did not therefore vacate our home.

The Health Officer has ordered the school to be closed. Gangs of men are cleaning up the streets, and I expect the school building to be cleaned up this week, the floor and walls being very slimy. When it is dry we will have it scrubbed and disinfected.

I beg to apply for permission to remain at Koo Wee Rup and supervise these arrangements for the school and residence. I have also taken charge of relief work for the pupils of the school and am assisting in general relief work, as hundreds of families are destitute.

I have the honour to be
your obedient servant
William Eason

During these floods, my father featured in a local newspaper, *The Star*, on 5 December 1934 and he kept this newspaper article amongst his treasured items for the rest of his life. A copy of this original article is on the following page.



The article reads:

SOME OF HIS FAVOURITE TOYS which have been rescued from the flood provide some consolation for this little chap, who is homeless because of the floods at Koo Wee Rup.

William Eason's Death

On 29 May 1936, William Eason, aged 59, died suddenly in Koo Wee Rup, which shocked the community as he was still employed as Head Teacher. William died from various ailments, including chronic nephritis (kidney inflammation), cerebral hemorrhage from the previous four days, arteriosclerosis (build-up of cholesterol in the artery walls) and cardiac failure.

William's death notice was published in *The Argus* on 30 May 1936.

DEATHS

EASON- On the 29th of May, at his residence, Rossiters Road, Koo Wee Rup, William, the dearly beloved husband of Ruby Eason and devoted father of Arnold, Elma and Gwen, loving grandad of Donald and Alan and loved brother of Samuel, Cyril, Ada (Mrs Smith), and Margaret, aged 59 years. (Headmaster, State School, Koo Wee Rup.)

The outpouring of grief and sense of loss felt by the Koo Wee Rup community was conveyed in an article published in the *Koo Wee Rup Sun* on 4 June 1936. (next page)

OBITUARY- William Eason

It is with deep regret that we have to chronicle the demise of a widely-known and much-respected citizen of Koo Wee Rup, in the person of Mr William Eason, headmaster of the local State School for the past 22 years. For twelve months the deceased had been gradually ailing, owing to a kidney complaint, and on Monday week was struck down by a stroke. Never regaining consciousness, barring several short periods, he passed away peacefully at 2.30 am Friday, aged 59 years. The rudeness of his illness and untimely death cast quite a gloom over the township, he being a man greatly respected by everyone. He was not only a teacher of the young of great repute but a counsellor of no mean order to his colleagues of the many public committees he was connected with, also to the many friends he possessed. In short, he had always acted up to his Christian principles and was a man among men. The record district following, which paid tribute to his memory at Saturday's funeral, will long be remembered, with over 60 motor cars following his remains to their last resting place - the Pakenham Cemetery. After a short service at his late home, conducted by the Rev. T. R. Vizard, the coffin was borne to St. George's Church of England, members of the Masonic Lodge marching in front of the hearse. After the Rev. Vizard had conducted an impressive service in the church, the cortege proceeded to the above-mentioned cemetery, it being over a mile in length. Present scholars, followed by numerous past pupils of the deceased, preceded the hearse down Station Street, falling out at the hospital. At the cemetery, the burial service was conducted by the Rev. Vizard, followed by a masonic service conducted by Wor. Bro. Dr A. B. Hewitt, present and past brethren of the Koo Wee Rup Lodge being present in large numbers.

The coffin-bearers were: Messrs E. Child, J. Preston, J. Mackin and H. K. Jeffery. The pall-bearers were: Dr A. B. Hewitt & Mr G. Lucas (Masonic Lodge), Mr F. Hodgson (Memorial Hall Committee), Mr C. S. McLeod (St. George's Church vestry). Mr J. L. O'Riordan (Recreation Reserve Committee), Mr J. H. Stanley (School Committee), Mr Chris Keighery (Waterworks Trust), Cr. L. J. Cochrane (RSSILA) and Messrs W. Jeffery Snr, S. H. Mills, W. Mortensen (*brother-in-law*) & C. Loveday (*brother-in-law*).

Mr. W. J. Garnar, Dandenong, carried out the funeral arrangements. The deceased was the husband of Mrs Ruby Eason, father of Arnold, Elma and Gwen and brother of Samuel, Cyril, Ada and Margaret. To the bereaved ones, we extend our deepest sympathy.

Noticeably, Arnold was not a coffin-bearer or pall-bearer at his father's funeral service, nor were Minnie or Norma's lives acknowledged.

Another newspaper, the *Dandenong Journal*, published William's obituary on 4 June 1936:

OBITUARY

W. EASON

Mr William Eason, a well-known and highly esteemed resident of Koo Wee Rup, passed away at his residence, Rossiter's Road, Koo Wee Rup, early on Friday morning, at the age of 59 years. Deceased had been the headmaster of the State School, Koo Wee Rup, for 22 ½ years, and from information received had obtained more scholarships at the school than any other individual master. He had also been headmaster at the Welshpool school for about four years, and for nine years on the teaching staff at Rosedale, also at other centres in the Mallee district. Altogether, he had been connected with the Education Department for 41 years. Deceased was a fine townsman, a Past Master of the Koo Wee Rup Lodge of Freemasons, Vicar's Warden of St. George's Church and was also on the committee of the Memorial Hall, Recreation Reserve, School Committee, Water Trust and Returned Soldiers.

The funeral, which took place on Saturday afternoon, was one of the largest seen in the district and left his late residence, preceded by the members of the Koo Wee Rup Lodge, to St. George's Church, where an impressive service was conducted by the Rev. Robert Vizard to a large congregation and many people could not gain admittance. At the conclusion, the cortege, which was over a mile in length, and headed by about 300 of the present and past scholars of the school, marched through the main street to the hospital and then formed a guard for the cortege to pass on its last journey to his last resting place in the Church of England portion of the Pakenham Cemetery, where the Rev. R. Vizard again officiated.

The Masonic service was given by Dr Hewitt, the immediate Past Master of the Lodge, and pall-bearers were: Dr Hewitt, A. Lucas, J. Hodson, C. S. Mcleod, L. O'Riordan, J. Stanley, C. Keighery, Cr. L. Cochrane, Mr Jeffrey Snr. and S. H. Mills. The coffin-bearers were E. Child, J. Preston, J. Macken and H. K. Jeffrey. The funeral arrangements were carried out by Mr W. J. Garnar, of Dandenong.

The *Gippsland Times* also reported William's death on 4 June 1936:

The death has occurred at Koo Wee Rup of Mr William Eason, 59 years. Deceased was well known in Rosedale, being Head Teacher of the state school there for many years. He married Miss Minnie Watts, youngest sister of the highly respected Watts family of Nambrok and Rosedale, Mrs J. Johnson being a sister. There are two children, Elma and Arnold.



William Eason's headstone, Pakenham Cemetery
Ruby Eason died 40 years later, aged 86. (Photo courtesy of Kerry Bulow)



The Eason Family, around the time of William's death, 1936
Left: Steve Perkins-Stafford 26 yrs. (Gwen's future husband), Elma 28 yrs.
Gwen 20 yrs. Don 6 yrs. Alan 2 yrs. Mimie 30 yrs. Arnold 30 yrs.

On 11 June 1936, the *Dandenong Journal* reported that the Cranbourne Council intended to send a letter of sympathy to Ruby Eason:

ABOUT PEOPLE

It was resolved, by the Cranbourne Council, on Friday that a letter be sent to Mrs W. Eason, of Koo Wee Rup, in sympathy for the sad bereavement of herself and family, caused by the death of Mr William Eason.

After William's death, a committee was established to organise a memorial fund to construct a Koo Wee Rup memorial wall tablet in honour of William. Don Jewell, in his book, *Schooling on the Swamp, A History of Primary School No. 2629, 1884 - 1984*, wrote that Dr Alan Hewitt, a local doctor, asked for the authority on behalf of the Koo Wee Rup residents to erect memorial gates instead of a memorial wall tablet. Dr Hewitt and William had been brethren of the Koo Wee Rup Masonic Lodge and Dr Hewitt was also William's doctor, as evident on his death certificate. These two men must have shared a special friendship as Dr Hewitt was a pall-bearer at William's funeral.

The Argus reported Dr Hewitt's request for memorial gates on 5 August 1936:

Koo Wee Rup - At a meeting of the W. Eason Memorial Fund at Koo Wee Rup, it was decided to rescind a resolution that a memorial wall tablet be erected in the local State School and in its place to erect gates at the school entrance.

By December 1936, two granite pillars anchoring wrought iron double gates were constructed in honour of a 'greatly esteemed and trusted citizen' who had an extraordinary ability and commitment to help students earn scholarships and a huge capacity to volunteer his time to public committees. Since the construction of these memorial gates, thousands of students, parents and teachers have walked through them.

The unveiling of these memorial gates was a significant event for the town and was reported in local and Melbourne newspapers.

The Age, 22 December 1936:

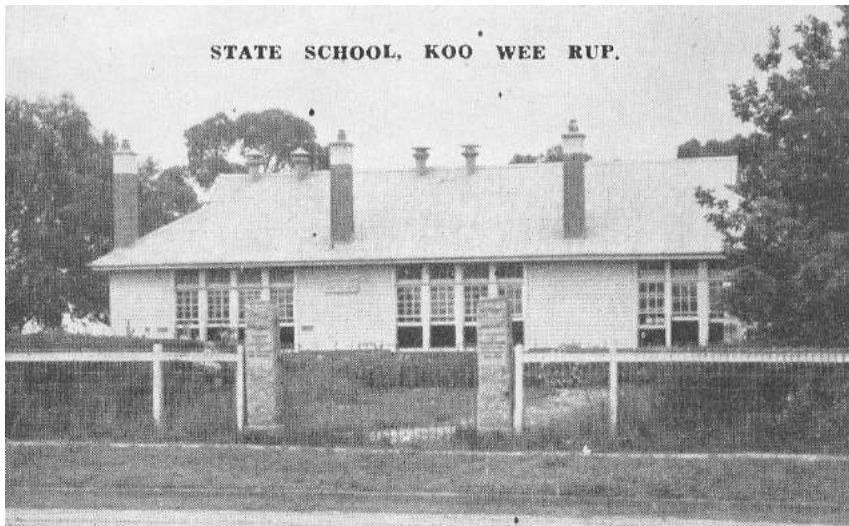
KOO WEE RUP - A large number of parents, former pupils and residents of the district assembled at the Koo Wee Rup State School on the occasion of the unveiling of the memorial gates erected in honour of the late Mr William Eason, headmaster of the Koo Wee Rup school for 22 years. The ceremony was performed by Mr. J. A. Seitz, Director of Education.

The *Koo Wee Rup Sun*, 24 December 1936:

There was a good number present at the Koo Wee Rup State School last Friday to witness the unveiling of the Memorial Gates erected by residents to the memory of the late Mr W. Eason, who had been Head Teacher of the school for twenty-two years and a greatly esteemed and trusted citizen. Mr. J. A. Seitz, Director of Education, on unveiling the tablets on the gate read aloud the following:

‘Erected by the residents of Koo Wee Rup and District to the memory of William Eason, Head Teacher of this school 1914 - 1936.’

Mr Seitz said that most favourable reports were recorded in the Department’s records since 1899 of Mr Eason’s ability as a teacher and organiser. During his twenty-two years at Koo Wee Rup, he had secured fifty scholarships for his pupils.



William Eason Memorial Gates outside the Koo Wee Rup State School in the 1940s. This school building was built in 1915 and burned down in 1950.

(Photo courtesy of the Koo Wee Rup Swamp Historical Society)



The William Eason Memorial Gates, 2020

Today, the memorial stone pillars remain to mark the entrance of the Koo Wee Rup Secondary School. The state school on this site, where William Eason had been head teacher for 22 years, burned down in 1950 and the replacement school opened as a Higher Elementary School in 1962. The primary school was eventually relocated, leaving the memorial gates marking the entrance to the Secondary College.

I can't help but feel that a dark shadow was forever cast over these glorious monuments from the unimaginable suffering and torment of a disempowered wife who was forcefully removed from her home, her children and the Koo Wee Rup community.

In summary, my research of William and Minnie has revealed the following:

- William and Minnie married at a time when both the Catholic Church and Church of England opposed marriages between Catholics and Anglicans; Minnie was Catholic and William was an Anglican.
- Minnie and William witnessed the gruesome death of their third child and toddler, Norma.
- Minnie had been responsible for Norma's care when Minnie momentarily left her and the little girl accidentally burnt to death.
- The Catholic Church vehemently condemned mixed marriages and Freemasonry at the time of Norma's death, giving credibility to Arnold Eason's comments regarding a priest blaming Minnie for the death of her child as a result of her marrying a Protestant. William was also a committed Anglican and Freemason.
- Minnie likely suffered from depression or post-traumatic stress disorder due to witnessing the traumatic death of her child.
- William was frequently absent from his family home throughout his marriage due to his occupation as a school principal and pursuing his own interests, including volunteering for many committee positions in the community.
- After the birth of their fourth child, Gwen, Minnie may have suffered from postnatal depression. Also, after Gwen's birth, William continued to volunteer for many committees, play sport and was an active member of the Lang Lang Masonic Lodge outside of his work commitments as Head Teacher of the Koo Wee Rup State School.
- William's frequent absences from home likely contributed to Minnie feeling resentful and distrustful of him; Minnie's hospital records reveal that she told her doctor she believed her husband was unfaithful and 'goes as he pleases'.
- William used the defective asylum admission rules of this era to remove his suffering wife from his life and have her detained in an institution similar to a jail.

- The reasons to certify Minnie, given by William and two doctors, were based on her alleged behaviour without considering William's contributing behaviour or the significant stress and trauma in her life.
- The immensely flawed and often barbaric mental health system of this era was defined by a custodial framework of imprisonment when there was no understanding of the treatment for trauma, grief and depression.
- William never visited Minnie once she was forcibly removed and detained in an asylum.
- William divorced Minnie as soon as he was legally permitted. William's divorce petition exposed his willingness to omit significant facts and distort the truth for his own benefit.
- William married Ruby Mortensen two weeks after his divorce from Minnie was granted. Ruby had lived at Koo Wee Rup during the years Minnie lived in the small town (December 1913 to August 1917).
- William married Ruby Mortensen on Minnie's 41st birthday.
- Minnie was imprisoned for eleven years in various asylums, deteriorating in body and mind until her final breath on 6 January 1929.
- Upon William's sudden death in 1936, the Koo Wee Rup community erected memorial gates at the local school to honour William's involvement with an extraordinary amount of public committees and organisations in the district. He was considered 'a fine townsman', and 'a greatly esteemed and trusted citizen'.

While William's memorial stone pillars provide a lasting tribute to his memory, it is now time to honour Minnie's memory with a headstone at her grave to give her the appropriate recognition, respect and dignity she so rightly deserved.

Reflections

From a young child, I grew up with the knowledge that my great-grandfather, William Eason, was a highly respected teacher committed to helping his students excel in examinations and earn scholarships to further education. The William Eason Memorial Gates at the Koo Wee Rup's school entrance, erected by an appreciative community following his death in 1936, were a great source of family pride. However, I knew very little of my great-grandmother, Minnie. Dad told me that William and Minnie's young daughter, Norma, had died in a fire; a priest had blamed Minnie for her death because she married a non-Catholic and Minnie ended up in an asylum where she eventually died. Consequently, in 2011 my interest was aroused when reading a newspaper article concerning a patient's mental health records being available 75 years after their death. I was curious to learn more about my great-grandmother's life and the circumstances surrounding her disappearance.

After accessing Minnie's Victorian Mental Hospitals' Records, I found them confronting and disturbing as I learned of her unimaginable suffering and torment, which she endured for over eleven years. Added to my anguish, I discovered that William had privately requested her committal. At this stage, despite feeling alarmed at the thought of a husband committing a wife, I remained open-minded regarding his actions. However, after absorbing the harrowing details of her asylum life, I didn't have the resolve or the courage to continue my research into the circumstances surrounding Minnie's committal.

It took a chance visit to the Rosedale Cemetery in 2014 to re-ignite my interest in Minnie and William's lives when I discovered that Minnie was buried in an unmarked grave. In stark contrast, William had a headstone in the Pakenham Cemetery and the Koo Wee Rup Memorial Gates as lasting legacies. I felt deeply troubled by such disparity.

The journey of researching Minnie and William's lives has been similar to solving a jigsaw puzzle without consulting the image on the box. During the following years, crucial facts emerged through official documents, newspaper articles and more hospital records. I started to piece together a framework of their married lives and the circumstances of Minnie's committal. As newspaper articles mounted regarding William's community, church and club leadership positions he volunteered for, I wondered how his frequent absences from home would have impacted his young wife and family, raising doubt in my mind as to William's level of commitment to Minnie. Furthermore, after reading the Coroner's Inquest records concerning Norma's tragic death, I wondered how a couple could ever have recovered from such a devastating event, especially with Minnie being responsible for leaving little Norma temporarily unsupervised.

It is highly likely that as a result of the circumstances surrounding Norma's death, Minnie suffered from severe shock, profound grief and lasting guilt, which all contributed to her demise. Her chances of ever returning to a fulfilling, settled life were further diminished by many other risk factors in her life, including: her husband's priorities seemed to lie outside of his home, the Catholic Church condemned mixed marriages and Freemasonry, and doctors

had little understanding of mental health and the brutal mental health system which existed at that time often incarcerated vulnerable people. I imagine Minnie's potentially fragile mental health eventually became a liability to her husband as he took on more prestigious roles in his community. Yet, just like a missing piece of jigsaw, we will never know with absolute certainty what led William to remove Minnie from her family home and children, leaving her to a life of abject misery and despair until her death.

I began to think less favourably of William after learning that his divorce petition omitted significant information and exaggerated Minnie's mental state. When I then discovered in the Receiving House Register of Patients book that William was the attested authority who committed Minnie based on her supposed jealousy, I felt a strong sense of injustice, particularly given that Minnie's allegations of infidelity against William were quite plausible with his extracurricular activities requiring frequent absences from home. Furthermore, my suspicion that William did not truly care for his wife was validated when I realised that he not only never visited Minnie once he committed her but chose to re-marry his second wife on Minnie's birthday.

As I discovered more critical information about Minnie's committal, the purpose of my investigations shifted to giving Minnie a voice. No one in her family or community would ever have read her Patient Clinical Notes or hospital records to understand how much she ultimately suffered from her husband's actions. No one in William's family or community would ever have read his divorce petition, let alone reconciled its claims with Minnie's hospital records. I felt a responsibility to reveal the intolerable suffering that she must have endured as a result of the death of her child, an unhappy marriage and, significantly, being an involuntary patient in three asylums for eleven years, in degrading, overcrowded conditions, vulnerable to violence and cruelty.



Arnold Eason at my wedding, 1986

In my quest to understand the circumstances of Minnie's committal, I have unwittingly unearthed the chronically unstable childhood that my grandfather, Arnold Eason, experienced. After tragically losing his younger sister when he was six years old, he then witnessed the deterioration of his mother's mental health, his parents' struggling marriage and his mother's permanent removal from his life, all within five years. Eighteen months after his family unit was torn apart, Arnold had another upheaval moving from a rural town to board with a family in Melbourne for three years whilst attending Wesley College. Such severe emotional turmoil and sudden disruptions to his young life gives me a greater appreciation and understanding of his character and the fine and successful man he became.

While there have been many times when my research has exposed shocking and upsetting facts, the actual process of locating information resulted in many treasured and sustained connections with both relatives and strangers. I shall remain forever grateful that so many kind people have generously shared their time and resources with such understanding.

I recently had an opportunity to visit St. Rose of Lima Church in Rosedale, Minnie's special place of worship for the first 27 years of her life. It was here that Minnie had been baptised as an infant, married, played the organ for services and also witnessed the baptisms of her two eldest children. I imagine this tiny church had been a source of peace, fellowship and joyful celebrations for Minnie and provided a sense of rhythm in her life based on the Catholic Church seasons.

After contacting a parishioner via a phone number posted on the locked church door, I explained my great-grandmother's links to this church and inquired about the possibility of looking inside. As a result, Geraldine Smith kindly offered to show Brendon and me inside the church the following morning. Geraldine lives on a farm with her husband on the outskirts of Rosedale and has had a long association with the Rosedale parish.

Geraldine greeted us with a big, warm smile and had notes on the church's history tucked under her arm. Brendon and I followed her into the church's vestibule and I braced myself, knowing that I was entering Minnie's sacred place of worship from a happier chapter of her life. Yet, I was still unprepared for the overwhelming sadness that gripped me as I took in the beauty, charm and powerful aura of calmness within these walls of worship. This aura was in such stark contrast to the living hell inside an early 20th-century asylum that Minnie had entered eight years after leaving this parish.



Inside St Rose of Lima, 2021

Sitting in the front pew, not far from where Minnie and William would have exchanged their wedding vows and where my grandfather was baptised at six weeks of age, I reflected on

Minnie's life; I may have even been sitting in the same space where Minnie had once sat over one hundred years ago. I imagined Minnie as a little girl, sitting beside her twelve siblings across several pews in this church. I could picture her as a radiant, stunning bride, gracefully walking down the aisle, holding onto the arm of her proud brother. I could also visualise an elegantly dressed Minnie as a new mother, lovingly cradling her infant, Arnold, at the baptismal font.

I thought too, of a grieving, tormented woman abandoned by her husband and discarded into a merciless mental health system, totally powerless to change her harrowing situation that was devoid of any familiarity and purpose. I pondered over the thought that if Minnie had lived during my lifetime, how differently her life could have played out; importantly, she would have received the appropriate mental health treatment after witnessing the traumatic death of her child.

Poignantly, Geraldine pointed out the corner at the back of the church where Minnie once would have played the organ, although the organ no longer exists today. I instantly envisaged Minnie as a young woman enthusiastically running nimble fingers over the keys, immersed in her music.

Geraldine kindly invited Brendon and me to her home for morning tea. This thoughtful new acquaintance knew only a little of Minnie's story and she had generously and respectfully given us her time and willingly shared the church's history.



**Geraldine Smith and Karen Collins
at St. Rose of Lima Church, 2021**

After meeting Geraldine's husband, Tony, I learned that his ancestors, Charles and Maria Smith, were married in Tarraville, Gippsland, about the same time Minnie's parents were married at Sale. Both couples selected land in the Rosedale district after the Victorian Land Act of 1865 was introduced, with their farms about five kilometres apart. Remarkably, both couples raised a family of fourteen children, including twins. The Smith twins, Amy and Catherine, were the youngest of the fourteen Smith children and were born the year before Minnie in 1881. It follows that these families would have been well-known to each other in this small community.

I wondered if five-year-old Minnie ever played with six-year-old Amy Smith before Amy died from extensive burns after her clothes caught fire when playing near a fire on the family farm in 1888. Furthermore, I wondered if 22-year-old Minnie and 23-year-old Catherine Smith had been friends in 1904 when Catherine died of liver disease at home in Blind Joe's Creek.

I have met many wonderful people like Geraldine and Tony during my family history quest. In 2011, long before I knew of Minnie's unmarked grave, I began researching William Eason's mother's (Margaret Eason, nee Lewis) side of the family and discovered that a living descendant of Margaret Eason's brother, William Lewis, was still living on the original Lewis farm at Lewis Lane, Pootilla. After making contact with 85-year-old Bill Lewis, I learned that he was the grandson of William Lewis. (Interestingly, Bill's father was also named William Lewis.) Bill was thrilled to learn that the Lewis name had remained in my family as a middle name for five successive generations (now six) and kindly invited Brendon and me, as well as my brother, Andrew Lewis Eason, and his wife, Maree, to lunch one Sunday.



Bill Lewis and his sister, Mary Davies

After driving 400 kilometres to meet our hosts, Brendon and I were warmly greeted by Bill, his sister and brother-in-law, Mary and Ron Davies, and Bill's daughter and son-in-law, Anne and Phil Ford. This lovely family not only welcomed four strangers into their home to share a delicious roast dinner but generously provided me with a comprehensive account of the Lewis family history and many copied photos of my ancestors. Included in this surprise package was the 1924 original photo of the Eason family, taken on the occasion of Margaret and Samuel Eason's golden wedding anniversary (*see page 24*).

Since my visit to Pootilla, it would seem that in whatever direction I have turned for assistance during the research of Minnie and William, there has always been a kind stranger who has willingly offered their support, including the staff at PROV and particularly the volunteers from the Rosedale, Foster and Koo Wee Rup historical societies. Also, the current owners of



the original Watts' homestead, Noel and Debbie Anderson (*left*), were exceptionally generous in welcoming Brendon and me into their home in March 2021, sharing their knowledge of the house and the Watts family and also allowing us to view the original rooms that Minnie and her family once occupied.

By writing this book, I hope that Minnie is now given the appropriate acknowledgement, respect, understanding, and compassion that she so rightly deserves in our family. However, a lovely surprise affirming Minnie's memory arrived in the Eason family on 12 January 2021 with the birth of Minnie Rose Doughton. Minnie Rose is Minnie Eason's great-great-granddaughter and the daughter of Minnie's great-great-granddaughter, Sophie Doughton (nee Eason). By naming their second child Minnie, Sophie and her husband, Allister Doughton, have honoured Minnie's rightful place in our family history. The name Minnie will now live on.



Karen Collins with great-niece Minnie Doughton

Minnie Doughton's life is full of hope and promise and we lovingly welcome her into the family. She has been born in a time when women in Australia have achieved much in their fight for equal rights, socially, economically and politically, compared to Minnie Eason's lifetime. She will have the opportunity to be educated and pursue any career she wishes. She won't be reliant on a man for her livelihood and will have freedom of choice in her relationships. Little Minnie will have options about raising a family and opportunities to work outside the home.

Also, Minnie Doughton has arrived during a time when mental health knowledge and treatment have undergone massive advancement since my great-grandmother first witnessed her toddler's death in 1912. The evolution of pharmacology and other treatments, such as psychological techniques, have enabled people to recover, improve or manage their mental illness symptoms. Importantly, the stigma attached to mental illness today has significantly decreased since Minnie Eason was a patient.

Minnie's life was finally acknowledged with the placement of a headstone on her unmarked grave at the Rosedale Cemetery on 2 July 2022. Various descendants of Minnie Eason and friends who shared this journey with me attended the unveiling of her headstone, to honour the memory of a life not forgotten.





Some Descendants of Minnie Eason

Back Row: Dan Collins (gr-gr-grandson), Stuart Eason (gr-grandson)
**Front Row: Karen Collins (gr-granddaughter), Margaret Porter (granddaughter),
Jill Eason (gr-granddaughter)**



Karen Collins, July 2022

MINNIE ELEANOR EASON

30.6.1882 - 6.1.1929

**Thirteenth child of Eliza and William Watts
Mother of Arnold, Elma, Norma and Gwenda
Resident of Rosedale, Welshpool and Koo Wee Rup
Involuntary patient of Victorian asylums: 1917 - 1929
Remembered by her many descendants
2022**

*" The arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice,"
Martin Luther King Jr.*

