20. Death of William Petrie, N.S.W. Deaths, 1837, 1829 vol. 102 and 89 vol. 103.
22. The renaming of North Pine as Petrie was a contentious issue locally; see Railway Department file 1929/5112, A/12611, Queensland State Archives.

'A Distant Past': Researching the First Petrie Generation

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Researching the Scottish origins of the Petries was the first stage of a two-pronged investigation into the family's eventful history. Complementing this lengthy task was the need to interrogate early colonial sources in an attempt to reconstruct the original immigrants, Andrew and Mary, as complex historical actors. While it was not our intention to undertake a psychobiography, it was necessary to negotiate the private family sphere, firstly as a means of elucidating the achievements of a very public Brisbane family and secondly, as a subject possessing its own intrinsic interest. In this regard, researching the first immigrant generation proved to be as challenging as investigating the Scottish connection. In the case of the Petries, it was not till the early twentieth century that Constance Petrie, a granddaughter of the original immigrants on Tom's side, recorded the celebrated Reminiscences of Early Queensland,¹ while Andrew Lang Petrie, a grandson on John's side; wrote a series of short sketches for the Daily Mail at the end of his parliamentary career.² Valuable as these family sources were for the colonial period, there were significant gaps in the record, especially concerning the original immigrants.

Andrew Petrie, the master builder and business founder, remained elusive, shrouded in the reticence of a pioneer who was more concerned with practical achievement than with social reputation. Andrew appeared to have left few written records. Rather, his energy
was expended in ‘writing on the landscape’. The buildings and furniture which he constructed and supervised, along with the paths which he cut around the forests of what became south-east Queensland, constituted his most enduring monuments. Andrew was never a prolific writer to the newspapers and, in the manner of most colonial officials, chose only to go into print when his reputation was directly challenged. Such was the case in Sydney during a dispute over convict discipline, and at Moreton Bay during occasional polemics over river navigation and the siting of alternative port facilities. Andrew was far more likely to confront his critics in person. Differences with the Moreton Bay military and the famous argument with Governor Gipps over the width of Brisbane streets are two examples of his directness. In town politics, Andrew was inclined to reticence, a policy which was partly forced upon him by his blindness in later years. We do know however that he enjoyed real influence when his son, John, served as Brisbane Lord Mayor. Yet, in spite of his well-earned title as patriarch of the city, local government eulogies do not elucidate in any detail the character traits which contributed to Andrew’s achievement.

An important prelude for the Petries at Moreton Bay was the Sydney period (1831-37) when Andrew worked for John Dunmore Lang on the Australian College buildings and for Major Laidley in government service. If Andrew’s career could be traced back prior to Moreton Bay, it might be possible to uncover motives for the migration from Scotland and the subsequent decision to leave Sydney at a time when his youthful family was becoming established. While family research has uncovered child mortality as a possible ‘push’ factor, one should not however underestimate Andrew’s own restlessness and sense of adventure. In this respect he was conspicuous among the Stirling Castle immigrants, most of whom were content to establish themselves in the tightly-knit Sydney Presbyterian community. Nor was Andrew as politically-minded as many of his fellow immigrants. Although he signed several petitions relating to immigrant grievances, Andrew was reluctant to stand as a candidate for the Town Liberals or Squatters, and was never an active Langite in the Fortitude Valley tradition.

In the family sources mentioned above, there is no reference to these Sydney experiences. By contrast, the Reminiscences devote several interesting chapters to the Moreton Bay years when Andrew and Mary established themselves above the Brisbane River at Petrie Bight. Although Tom’s Reminiscences, recorded by Constance, exhibit two much independence to be classified as family history, they do evoke the decade 1838-48 when Andrew and Mary were both still healthy and active. After this time, the Petrie story enters a new phase, with
Andrew's semi-retirement and Mary's death in 1855. When using Tom's recollections as an historical source, it should be remembered that he was only six years old when the family arrived in 1837 and twelve years when Andrew undertook his celebrated exploration of Wide Bay and Fraser Island. Consequently, Tom was not able to accompany his father on such occasions and relied himself on the oral testimony of family members and of local Aborigines.

Tom's impatience to visit the Bunya country north of Brisbane was compounded by the active role which his elder brother, John, played in his father's exploration parties. Several long letters detailing these trips appeared in the Brisbane press during the 1860's at a time when John was Lord Mayor. Their publication was designed in part to enhance the family's reputation in the eyes of new town immigrants, most of whom knew little or nothing about Andrew or his family's pre-Separation activities. The bond between Andrew and John was strengthened by the dangers which their small party experienced during journeys through the Glasshouses and Maroochy district. On one occasion, dated March 1839, Andrew and his companions were surrounded by a large body of blacks as they were about to enter the forest in search of Bunya plants. Later, as the party crossed to the south bank, John was separated from the party and in danger of being taken hostage or killed. What was significant about Andrew's accounts was his perception of John as physically robust and courageous in the face of danger. By contrast, Andrew resorted to intimidation to keep his convict companions from panicking when surrounded by the blacks and stated that he had threatened members of his own party who showed "the least symptoms of cowardice."

Andrew's official reports, though dated differently from the letters, bore striking similarities to the newspaper accounts and provided further information on these northern trips. They state that, in 1840, John accompanied his father to the Caboolture River where the famous 'Petrie Pine' was cut from a massive Bunya growing on the river bank. On this occasion, John again distinguished himself by manning the oars during a very rough return passage to Brisbane as most of the party were incapacitated by sea sickness. When Andrew decided to prolong the journey in the company of a black guide, John was given responsibility for keeping the main party together until his father's return. In spite of sporadic ankle and leg injuries, Andrew was constantly on the move during these excursions and insisted on carrying his Kater's compass and stand to take bearings along the coast. His reports suggest that he was usually engaged in several tasks simultaneously, be it locating shipwrecked timber, trying to contact runaway convicts, collecting pine specimens or searching for stone and building materials. He survived many dangers in the bush and
ensured the safety of his parties by a combination of forcefulness and respect for the Aborigines whom he encountered. On the occasion of the Maroochy visit, Andrew took a headman hostage. He subsequently exchanged names with his adversary and invited the tribe to visit the Moreton Bay settlement, an invitation which was duly accepted to the consternation of the local residents.

At the settlement, Andrew enjoyed a reputation for hospitality and local knowledge. Tom’s childhood reminiscences depict his father as a stern figure who frowned on his pipe-smoking and truancy. According to this view, Andrew exercised his managerial authority in family matters and upheld Presbyterian values of teetotalism and industry in a settlement which was predominantly emancipist and inebriate. This austere patriarchal image is modified elsewhere in the Reminiscences and in other primary sources. Why, for example, was Tom allowed at age 15 to accompany Turrbal blacks to a Bunya feast in the Blackall Range? And why did Andrew host squatters from the Darling Downs when they arrived in town for business and pleasure? Andrew differed from his patron, John Dunmore Lang, on social questions, just as he differed from the military and his penal predecessors on questions of convict punishment and reform. Squatters like Henry Stuart Russell who accompanied Andrew on his Wide Bay expedition considered him to be a good-hearted companion, who tolerated their drinking sprees and enjoyed a joke at the expense of ‘new chums’ up the country. Nevertheless, it is probably true to say that temperance ended with the first Petrie generation and that Andrew’s sons were more relaxed in this respect than their parents could afford to be.

The Andrew Petrie to emerge from a survey of primary sources is undoubtedly more complex than the ‘dour and enterprising Scot’ of most secondary accounts. An important source in this respect are the reports of his northern excursions, despatched to his immediate superior, Colonel Barney of the Royal Engineers. Promoted by Barney, Andrew was a civilian appointment and, as such, did not gain immediate acceptance in the Moreton Bay military circle. Moreover, during the penal years, he experienced a conflict of interest between the demands of his Sydney superior and those of the local Commandant Cotton, who used Petrie’s knowledge of the surrounding country whenever he could. A comparison between Andrew’s reports to Barney and his elaborate newspaper accounts suggests that Andrew’s journeys were motivated as much by a personal sense of adventure as by commercial and official demands. In the case of the Wide Bay expedition, he had been asked to explore the Maroochy forests but opted to proceed north after the party
experienced difficulty in crossing the river bar. In many respects, Tom was later to emulate his father's achievements by using Murrumba as a base to explore the Brisbane and Wide Bay coastline. In deciding to stay at Moreton Bay rather than return to government service in Sydney, Andrew, too, had pursued an independent existence. The more information we gathered about Andrew, the more it became evident that similarities between father and son override their differences in temperament and training.

An intimate family episode of Reminiscences, involving Tom and his father, was the dramatic account of Andrew's tragic blindness. Tom related to Constance how, at age 17, he had accompanied his father who was suffering a severe attack of sandy blight to the old Convict Hospital for medical treatment. Subsequently, Tom and the family blamed the 'bush surgery' of hospital staff for the deterioration of Andrew's vision. It is difficult to confirm Tom's opinion but, if such incompetence occurred, it would have made Andrew's condition much more difficult to accept. Tom's indignation and compassion for his father indicate a stronger filial affection than existed in the childhood recollections. It is clear that Tom believed his father to be deserving of greater recognition than his disability allowed. By contrast, John Petrie rarely received a mention in the Reminiscences, except in one or two boyhood incidents. Tom, who told his own story and, to a certain extent, that of his father, had less to say about his famous older brother or about his mother, Mary.

Researching the lives of colonial women like Mary posed special challenges. Once at Moreton Bay, Mary Petrie did not enjoy the same mobility as her menfolk nor did she leave a journal or written account of her daily activities. It was nevertheless possible, by using family and official records, to glean some understanding of Mary Petrie in her own right. Of the eight children to whom she is known to have given birth, two sons did not survive infancy and Walter drowned tragically aged 21. Information received about the infant deaths suggests that family misfortune may well have played a part in the Petries' decision to emigrate to Sydney and to Moreton Bay. The account of Walter's accident is the one episode of the Reminiscences which shifts the reader's attention from exploration and the Aborigines to Mary's grief. Her intuition and suffering are captured in one of the most vivid chapters of the book.

Like Andrew, Mary becomes a tragic figure after experiencing a series of family crises. But what of her early years at the settlement? The brief recollections of her only daughter, Isabella, suggest a life of labour and danger, especially when the menfolk were away for protracted periods — unexpected visitors from the country, sickness, children gone missing and the search for scarce labour to assist her
at home. For much of the time, Mary's lot was with Tom and the younger children. She relied heavily on Aboriginal women for domestic labour and her trust was not misplaced. She gained the respect of former convicts, some of whom supplied her from their gardens. Of Mary's pleasures, we know less; singing was a popular pastime at home, boating on the river and short trips beyond the settlement helped to relieve the routines of a large household and the tedium of the small settlement.

In reconstructing several generations of family life for the purposes of a book, it is tempting to assume success where there was often uncertainty, even hardship. Religion and the work ethic played a stabilising role for immigrants in times of uncertainty. The 1840's depression was scarcely a propitious moment for Andrew and his sons to branch out into private enterprise. The early Petrie story is one of relative obscurity and struggle, but also of endurance and humanity. Tom's childhood world at Petrie Bight was far removed from the gracious living of 'Beerwah' or the calm of 'Murrumba'. It was nevertheless the starting point for the saga of achievement which shaped colonial Brisbane.

ENDNOTES

3. See *Brisbane Courier* 6 December 1862 p.2.
4. *Brisbane Courier* 10 April 1863 p.3.