

Who Do I Think I Am?

(Supplementary Family History Material for *Beyond Misbehaving: Changing Universities, Pluralism, and the Evolution of a Heterodox Behavioural Economist*)

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For much of my life, I knew little of my family history but, as is evident in chapter 1 of *Beyond Misbehaving*, the little that I knew did have an impact. I came to know much more after I met my current partner, Annabelle Taylor, in 2005. In addition to being unambiguously ‘The One’ for me, Annabelle is a very capable and meticulous genealogist. She was thus keen to construct my family tree. What she uncovered is on a par with the sort of material that provides the basis for episodes of the TV franchise *Who Do You Think You Are?* For me, it was a reminder of just how path-dependent everything is and of the importance of science and education for bringing people out of poverty and dramatically increasing their life expectancy in only a few generations.

Like my maternal grandfather, my father Eric’s parents had died before I was born. Eric told me that his father, Fred Earl, had become a carpenter after service as a professional soldier, some of which was in India. However, he said nothing about the extent of Fred’s military service during World War I. Annabelle’s research revealed not merely that Fred served in the 2nd Battalion, The Rifle Brigade, with the 1911 British Census listing him as being at Fort William, Kolkata; it also revealed that Fred’s battalion had fought in many battles during World War I, including at the Somme and Passchendaele. Given this, Fred was truly lucky to survive and be demobbed, but it is hard to believe that he was not left with what would nowadays be recognized as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

For much of my life, I believed that Eric was the third of four children born to Fred and my maternal grandmother Lottie (née Hennem). Eric and his younger brother, Sid, had spent time in a children’s home in London while Lottie was terminally ill with breast cancer. The two small boys ran away from the home to try to get back to see her and were subsequently put into foster care in Margate, Kent. However, Annabelle’s research revealed that, after Sid was born, Lottie had three further children, all of whom died very young. The family lived in poverty in a damp basement flat not far from St Pancras station and seemed to have had a diet little better than that

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set out in the documentary TV series *Victorian Slum* (Frank, 2016). The evening meal could often consist of bread and jam, and Eric and Sid would sometimes be sent out with a half-penny to buy a bag of broken biscuits. Yet although the family had barely enough money to support themselves, it appeared that somehow there was money for Fred to spend on beer and tobacco and that Fred was prone to ‘tell the boss where to shove his job’ and then head for the pub if he got into a bad mood. On hearing about this when I was a child, I had viewed it simply as irresponsible behaviour due to Fred having a lack of self-control. However, given what I now know about his military service, I realize that I had probably been judging too harshly a man who had most likely seen terrible things and was suffering from PTSD.

The Earl family’s living conditions improved dramatically when they were rehoused into a nearby council flat in Levita House in the early 1930s, in the brand-new Ossulston Estate, close to the British Library. This estate was a remarkable social housing project of the time, and Levita House is now a listed building (with Ossulston Estate having its own [Wikipedia entry](#)). A decade later, they were lucky not to have been casualties of a German bomb that caused major damage to the Earl flat. Sad to say, the flats in Levita House were eventually privatized and became completely beyond the reach of working-class households (with leasehold values for two-bedroom flats reaching £542,000 by 2021).



Figure 1: Levita House Following the October 1940 Bombing



Figure 2: Levita House in 2013

The socioeconomic story on my maternal side was slightly better, with a more satisfactory real estate outcome: the privately rented terraced house in Andover Road, Islington in which my mother grew up has been demolished in recent decades to make way for a social housing project. However, my mother was the ninth of the eleven children that her mother, Julia (née Bone Groom), had in two marriages. Julia Bone Groom's first husband, George Reid, was the father of her first three children, but he was killed in World War I and two of these children died very young. Her second husband, my maternal grandfather, Henry Rowley, had been badly gassed during the war and worked as a dustman despite his weak health. From what my mother told me, it appears that Henry was a quiet man, whereas her mother liked to smoke and 'go down the pub', even as Henry battled tuberculosis at home. My mother viewed her mother's behaviour as unforgivable.

The elder Julia's fondness for the local pub might not seem surprising, given that her own mother, Elizabeth Bone, was not what one would call 'classy' even though she had lived in Waddeston, Buckinghamshire, the manorial village of the estate owned by Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild: according to the 1881 Census, Elizabeth Bone worked in the bar at Waddeston's 'Five Arrows' pub. She was clearly very 'popular', as she had three children out of wedlock before marrying bricklayer George Groom, the father of the third, and moving to London. However, it may be a mistake to view my maternal grandmother as someone who had pub life 'in her

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blood': as with the case of Fred Earl, we should not forget how traumatic her earlier life had been with the loss of her first husband and two young children. Given the limited social welfare support available in Britain in the interwar years, she might have counted herself lucky to be able to remarry despite the impact of the war on the gender balance in her generation. But even if she did, we may be unwise to apply the compensatory principles of conventional economic theory here and presume that her longer second marriage and further children would have numbed her sense of loss.

My mother (whom everyone in the family called 'Queenie', presumably to avoid confusion with her mother) was fervently opposed to drinking and smoking. This was always a source of friction with my Earl relatives on the rare occasions that we saw them, and with my father. After decades of terrorising my mother, my sister, and me with his smoking habit, my father finally quit smoking on the day that he retired but, eighteen years later, at age 81, it was lung cancer that claimed him. My mother was somewhat more successful at keeping my father from going to pubs, which in later life she did by a rather paradoxical ruse: she took up winemaking via commercial winemaking kits, thereby providing a controlled supply of alcohol for consumption at home. This area of life provided me with a formative set of lessons about poverty, addictive consumption, and non-price-based absolute aversions to some forms of consumption.

In going back further into my family history, Annabelle found typical signs of London life in past centuries: one of my paternal great-great grandfathers, Charles Hennem, a gilder, died of smallpox in 1871, with his posthumous son Arthur (Lottie's father) then being born in St Pancras workhouse; a great-great-great grandfather, John Strew, who lived in the very poor Shoreditch area, was one of 14,000 Londoners to die of cholera in the 1849 epidemic, and another ancestor, whose surname was Jacquard, probably had been a Huguenot refugee. But two strands of my family tree deserve more detail here even though they played no formative role in how my thinking evolved.

One is the Mainstone line on my paternal side, where the story is fit for turning into a stage musical. My great-great aunt, Grace Mainstone, was one of the music-hall stars of her day. Indeed, she was so successful that she even toured the USA. She had one daughter before dying of tuberculosis at the age of 28. Grace's daughter trained in ballet and was married to a carter, but her own daughter became another star, under the stage name Sally Gray, and married a lord. Sally Gray was one of the most glamorous and successful British actresses of the 1930s and 1940s. One of her most notable roles gave her top billing (above Trevor Howard) in the wartime movie *Dangerous Moonlight*. This film, coincidentally, appeared

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to be my father's favourite, though he showed no sign of being aware of his family connection to its leading lady, and it was because of this that I got to know of the composition that has a central role in the film, namely Richard Addinsell's 'Warsaw Concerto'. Long before I knew about the family connection to its star, I purchased the sheet music for this piece, with a view to making a 'prog rock' arrangement of it in the style of the band Emerson, Lake and Palmer, who had overlooked the opportunity that it presents. (I belatedly began the task – though for a guitar, bass and drums 'power trio' – using Guitar Pro notation software, just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit and diverted my leisure time to more pressing matters such as pre-recording my remaining lectures. I resumed work on it in 2023, with a view to making a screen capture video of the score play-thought for YouTube.) After Sally Gray retired from stage and screen, she went on to marry an Irish peer, the fourth Baron Oranmore and Brown. She thereby became the stepmother of Tara Brown, a close friend of The Beatles: his death in a car accident in 1966 inspired The Beatles' song 'A Day in the Life'.

Even more fascinating was Annabelle's discovery that my mother's great-great grandfather, Robert Rowley, was born in San Domingo and christened in Spanish Town, Jamaica around 1784. Robert's military records reveal his extraordinary career as an army trumpeter in the 20th Light Dragoons (who had been deployed to Jamaica in 1795), with whom he enlisted in 1798 at the age of 14 and stayed with until they were disbanded in Dublin in 1818. He travelled the world during the Napoleonic wars, where he served at the 1807 Battle of Montevideo and the 1807 Alexandria Expedition, as well as in the Battle of Vimeiro in the Peninsula War in 1808. He would have been in the thick of these battles, sounding out coded commands. But his military records also reveal that his hair, eyes, and skin were black. This discovery helped with making sense of my Ancestry.com DNA analysis, which had shown me to have a couple of percent from the Benin/Togo area of West Africa. The obvious implication was that Robert had slavery in his background. Indeed, with slave numbers rising rapidly in Jamaica in the late 1700s, the puzzle is why he was able to enlist in the army rather than having a life of enslavement there. What is clear, via the work of military historian [John D. Ellis](#), is that Robert was one of several hundred men of colour to serve in the British army during the Napoleonic Wars, many of whom served as musicians (who also had the unenviable task of administering floggings).

Robert Rowley ended up living in London, where he married a widow, Sarah Wernham, at the very late age of 58, fathering a single boy who went on to have eleven children. After Robert's death in 1855, his widow Sarah

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eventually died in 1881 in the same workhouse in which my great grandfather, Arthur Hennem, had been born a decade earlier.

Robert had thus been a very early West Indian immigrant to Britain, more than a century before the ‘Windrush generation’ that helped ease post-World War II labour shortages in the UK. This discovery raised another question, for it led Annabelle to discover a photograph of one of Robert’s grandsons, who evidently had a dark skin and had died as recently as 1953. One of the brothers of the man in the photograph was my mother’s grandfather, who had died in 1920, only seven years before my mother was born. Given this, it seems most unlikely that her father knew nothing of the man in the photograph, who was his uncle and who outlived him by several years, or about his own black background. Yet my mother showed no signs of knowing anything about her Jamaican connection. Perhaps the knowledge had been deliberately withheld from her and her siblings.

It was all very ironic, as my mother had strong anti-immigrant sentiments that seemed to result from her anxieties about people from different cultures: not only did she declare how glad she was to move to Cornwall when my father retired, since ‘Stevenage has been ruined by all the immigrants that moved there’; she would even wash unpeeled fruit, such as bananas, ‘that might have been handled by coloured people’. Alas, my mother died in 2009, a few years before Annabelle made these discoveries, so we never got the chance to see how she reacted to learning that she had black ancestors. I expect there would have been rather a lot of denial, even if we had shown her the relevant documents. She was as adept at denial as she was full of needless anxieties.

REFERENCE

Frank, E. (Director) (2016). *Victorian Slum*. UK, Dazzler Media (DVD)/Amazon Instant View.