

# William Henry Perrin, Convict 5691

by Adam O'Neill

(extracted from: "Time in Exile: The Western Australian lives of two convicts", paper presented at the FamilyHistoryWA Convict SIG's excursion to Goomalling on 9 October 2022)

A prominent and better remembered expiree within the Goomalling community, William Henry Perrin (1832-1903), was born on the 29<sup>th</sup> January 1832 in his maternal grandfather's house at Bowbridge near Stroud in Gloucestershire, England. His parents were William and Mary Perrin, nee Haycraft.<sup>1</sup> William Henry followed in his father's footsteps in entering the cloth manufacturing industry – probably as his father's assistant – but later changed professions and became a grocer. In September 1855, he married Elizabeth Allway at Bristol. The couple settled in Charfield and in 1856 their son, William, was born. The small family's prospects looked promising. However, their future was utterly crushed and re-written when, in October 1858, William Henry was charged with the rape of his young sister-in-law in his own house. The incident occurred just one month before his wife gave birth to their daughter Mary.

He was found guilty of the charge at the Gloucester Assizes on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1858 and was sentenced to fifteen years penal servitude. Elizabeth lived the rest of her days overshadowed by loneliness, as a toy shopkeeper, perhaps accepting occasional charity from her family and neighbours.

William was transported aboard the *Palmerston* to the Colony of Western Australia, where he arrived on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1861. He was allocated Convict No. 5691. His convict record describes him as 5 foot 8 inches in height, middling stout, with dark brown hair, blue eyes and a thick face with dark complexion.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to William Perrin, who was a very intelligent and well-read man. Among his possessions which were received and recorded by the Convict Establishment in Western Australia upon his arrival were: the indispensable Bible and prayer book, twelve numbers of *Chambers's Journal*, ten issues of *The Farmers' Magazine*, and a further twenty-nine books. In addition, he had one dressing and one writing case, twelve postage stamps, two photographs (perhaps of his wife and child at home in England), and a silver watch.<sup>3</sup>

Perrin received his Ticket of Leave on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1862, and two days later was transferred from Perth to the Toodyay Convict Depot. From June of the following year, he was

engaged as a labourer to the Dempsters of 'Buckland' near Northam, where he became a respected employee. It is believed that he was a member of the first contingent of workmen who ventured with the Dempsters to an isolated corner of Western Australia, Esperance Bay, to establish a pastoral station in early 1864. By June, he was back working at 'Buckland' in the Avon Valley. It is possible that he may have made other overland journeys to Esperance for the Dempsters.<sup>4</sup>

In February 1863, he applied for a freehold location of forty acres on the western fringe of 'Buckland' estate, where a small community of Dempster employees was forming. By June 1865, Perrin was farming on his own account and by 1867 he had cleared thirty acres of his block and erected a house thereon.<sup>5</sup> That same year, he was granted his Conditional Pardon, which was effective from April 1868.

In 1863, Perrin reportedly established a private school in his residence, where the workman of 'Buckland' and surrounds sent their children for a rudimentary education. It is believed that Mrs James Maclean Dempster and her son, Charles Edward, assisted in the school's establishment.<sup>6</sup>

The Buckland School eventually became Government-supported after a petition was sent to the General Board of Education in 1868 by the settlers. Approximately 29 children would officially be on the roll of the school.<sup>7</sup> In 1869, the Governor approved a salary of £25 per annum for Perrin.<sup>8</sup>

William Henry Perrin became a cornerstone of the Wongamine community. He drafted local petitions, supported activities for social advancement, and assisted the illiterate when the need for a scribe arose.

Perrin's quasi-bachelor life, a world away from his wife and child in England, changed in July 1871 when he married the fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Woolhouse (1855-1908) in the Northam Anglican Parish Church. The daughter of the late Jeremiah Woolhouse, an Enrolled Pensioner Guard, and his wife Margaret (nee O'Mara), Elizabeth had spent her tender years in Newcastle before being employed at 'Buckland' by the Dempsters as a domestic servant.<sup>9</sup> William and Elizabeth were to rear a family of eleven children, one daughter of whom died in infancy and one boy being stillborn. It is unlikely that his children knew of his dark past; if some of them did, they surely knew nothing of his former wife and children back in the Home Country. His youngest daughter later claimed that he came from a rather high-class family who had a stately house, but that he had no claim to the family wealth.<sup>10</sup>

In 1875 the settlers were successful in having a school reserve set aside, situated closer to Wongamine, and a proper schoolhouse was erected thereon. The new building was of

mudbrick construction with a dirt floor of crushed anthill which made it difficult for the children to be kept clean. Being the first public building in the region, it was often used for social and church related events. The year that the new school was erected, Perrin's fixed salary was £12.10.0 per annum, which he received in addition to the school's earnings of £47.<sup>11</sup>

William Perrin became a devoted supporter of the temperance movement in Northam which first garnered support in the 1870s. Perrin's quick wit and his enthusiasm for the cause was manifested in his orations at meetings in the Northam Temperance Hall and Bushmen's Home, in which he denounced the curse of liquor which had generated many social ills.<sup>12</sup> When the Women's Christian Temperance Movement established a branch in Northam in the 1890s, his wife became a member.

An industrious and hardworking individual, Perrin was acutely aware of the need to augment his meagre teacher's salary which had up until then been supplemented by his farm earnings. In 1885 he applied for an eighteen acre block adjoining the Wongamine School with the object of establishing a mulberry plantation thereon for silk production. Evidently, his scheme never amounted to much as he sold the block by 1895.<sup>13</sup>

Perrin established a reputation as a dedicated teacher, whose breadth of knowledge was widely respected. His sharp wit brought light humour to the classroom. On one occasion, he awarded an end of year prize to his nephew, Alex Glass (who had to walk four or five miles to school), for the *worst* attendance – only one day for the year!<sup>14</sup> Generally, however, his pupils were engaged and eager. A correspondent of the *Inquirer* wrote that by 1886, there had been a remarkable shift in the area of peoples' attitudes to literature: where in the 1860s barely five per cent of Wongamine were educated, now settlers were interested in classical literature, historical works, encyclopedias and social journals. This was attributed solely to Perrin's school. The correspondent concluded, 'The fact that the present generation can peruse and appreciate such works is proof that the good work we do sometimes lives after us, and it is not always buried with our bones.'<sup>15</sup> This was certainly true of Perrin and his immense influence on the education of successive generations of families.

Perrin's teaching was generally noted with satisfaction by Education Department inspectors. In March 1895 his wife Elizabeth Perrin was appointed as the sewing mistress for the Wongamine School.<sup>16</sup>

By the late 1890s, Education Department inspectors' reports noted that although Perrin was a conscientious educator, he was of the old stock of teachers and was often stuck in his ways, finding it difficult to adapt to the new curriculum. However, he continued to man his post with pride, declaring to one inspector in 1901 that he had only been absent from the school

one week during his official thirty years' service. Perrin eventually retired in April 1901 on a pension of £55 per year.<sup>17</sup>

During his nearly four decades as an educator, Perrin had been responsible for educating nearly all children of Wongamine, including all of his own children, his nephews and nieces, and even some of his grandchildren. The high esteem in which he came to be held together with his intelligence and diplomacy skills meant that he was a natural choice for the position of Secretary when the Goomalling Road Board was established in 1895.<sup>18</sup> Perrin died on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1903, in his seventy-second year, and was buried in an unmarked grave in the Church of England portion of the Northam Cemetery. Although none of his descendants still reside in the Goomalling region, his memory lives on in the history of the district as one of its dedicated and hardworking pioneers.

**Researched and written by Adam O'Neill, 2022. Revised, 2025.**

*Acknowledgements: I would like to gratefully thank Margaret O'Neill, whose research on W.H. Perrin has contributed much towards this article.*

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## References

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- <sup>1</sup> The National Archives, UK, RG 5/133, Certificate 4533; research by Margaret O'Neill.
- <sup>2</sup> SROWA, list of passengers aboard the Palmerston, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1861, Cons 128/23; SROWA, Character Book, Cons 1156/R19, Convict 5691.
- <sup>3</sup> SROWA Cons 1156/V14, Convict 5691.
- <sup>4</sup> Rica Erickson (ed.), *The Brand on His Coat: Biographies of Some Western Australian Convicts*, (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1983), p.299; Convict records, SROWA, Cons 1156/21B and 1156/R4. See also Rica Erickson, *The Dempsters*, (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1978), p.82-83.
- <sup>5</sup> SROWA L&S Red 31/1, Avon Location 205; SROWA SDUR/P3/288, 18.11.1863.
- <sup>6</sup> John Ridders, comp., *Western Australian Schools 1830-1980*, Pt 1 (1984), p.26; *Inquirer*, 29.9.1886.
- <sup>7</sup> SROWA Acc. 127/2, Toodyay RM Letterbook, no. 947.
- <sup>8</sup> SROWA Cons 526/2, General Board of Education correspondence.
- <sup>9</sup> Western Australia Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage Reg. 3292/1871.
- <sup>10</sup> Patrick O'Neill to Gervase (Vessie) O'Neill, 12.6.1954 (copy of letter in author's possession).
- <sup>11</sup> *Rural & Isolated Schools in the Goomalling District* (Goomalling Historical Society, 1980).
- <sup>12</sup> *Inquirer*, 12.9.1877.
- <sup>13</sup> SROWA Cons 541 file 1885/1754; SROWA L&S Red 669, Avon Loc 1477; SROWA Cons 527 file 1895/2959.
- <sup>14</sup> Cora Morgan, "Memories" (1975-1979), photocopy in the author's possession.
- <sup>15</sup> *Inquirer*, 29.9.1886.
- <sup>16</sup> SROWA Cons 1036/2 fol.357 (Elizabeth Perrin's service record).
- <sup>17</sup> SROWA Cons 1036/1 ff.215-216 (Perrin's service record); SROWA Cons 794/14, fol. 366.
- <sup>18</sup> Barbara Sewell, *Goomalling, a backward glance: a history of the district* (Goomalling: Goomalling Shire Council, 1998), p.418

### Acronyms

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| Cons    | Consignment   |
| Loc     | Location  |
| L&S Red | Lands & Surveys Red Nos., Consignment 5000, State Records Office of Western Australia |
| SROWA   | State Records Office of Western Australia   |
| RM      | Resident Magistrate   |