

Preface

The starting point of this book is my father Bill Skyvington, shown here when I last saw him, in May 1978, in Paris:



King Skyvington [1917-1978], nicknamed “Bill”.

Five months after that photo, my father died, suddenly and prematurely, on 12 October 1978... which happened to be the 37th birthday of his second son, Don Skyvington [1941-2009].

As indicated in the above image caption, “Bill” was merely a nickname. My father’s birth certificate (the upper section of which appears on the next page) indicates that he was born on 16 October 1917 at the Hillcrest Hospital in Rockhampton, which still exists today (in new buildings) just to the south of the Fitzroy River. When his mother Kathleen Pickering registered her baby, on 19 October 1917, he was given a single unusual name: King.

BIRTH		C	5213
BIRTH in the District of		ROCKHAMPTON	
in the State of Queensland,		District Registrar	
1 917	Registered by	Arthur Henry O'Kelly	
Marginal notes (if any)	Column	14814	947
	1 Number		
	CHILD	16th October 1917	
	2 When and where born	Hillcrest Hospital	
	3 Name	King	
	4 Sex	Male	

Top of my father's birth certificate.

The given name “King” was a homage to Kathleen’s young brother Francis Henry Pickering [1897-1945], who had received this nickname through his athletics exploits at his school in outback NSW. In chapter 5 of this book, I speak at length about “King” Pickering, who had returned home from World War I as a military hero. And, since Francis Pickering would be turning 20 a week after the birth of Kathleen’s son, my father received his uncle’s nickname as his unique given name. Well, it appears that the Hillcrest nurses were amused at the idea that a baby might have such a regal name, and they made an association with a celebrated Aboriginal elder known as King Billy. Consequently, they started to refer affectionately to my father as “little King Billy”. And, from that moment on, my father’s official given name, King, slid into the background, and everybody started to refer to him as “Bill”... which was the nickname that stuck to him throughout his life.

A couple of months later, back home at Mount Larcom (50km south-east of Rockhampton in the direction of Gladstone), my grandparents decided to have their baby baptized. In his baptismal certificate (shown on the next page), my father received a second curious given name. The handwriting of the parish secretary (who, incidentally, did not know how to spell the name of Captain Larcom, after whom the great explorer Matthew Flinders named this coastal mountain) gave the impression that this newly-appended name was Mephan. The correct spelling should have been Mephram: the surname of the baby’s paternal grandmother, Eliza Jane Mephram [1865-1899], whose family is described in chapter 2 of this book. But the naming damage had been done, and it would irk my father throughout his entire life. Whenever my mother wished to annoy her husband (a situation that arose constantly), she would refer to him as “King Meefan”, as if he were the make-believe monarch of an archaic pantomime domain.

With hindsight, I realize that it would be good if this misspelt baptismal certificate were to have been destroyed, as soon as it was created, to prevent it from poisoning the daily life of my father “Bill” Skyvington.



My father's baptismal certificate.

Besides, my father never had any time for religion. He told me once, when I asked him why he never felt like attending services at Christ Church Cathedral in Grafton: *"Billy, you must understand that my personal cathedral is my bush property out at Nymboida."* It took me half a century to discover my haven of Gamone in south-east France, from where I am writing today, and to understand the profound sense of my father's reply.



This book presents the genealogical origins of my grandfather Ernest Skyrington [1891-1985] and of his wife Kathleen Pickering [1889-1964]. The two subjects are handled separately: first, the genealogy of my grandfather (chapters 1 to 4), then that of my grandmother (chapters 5 to 7).

In the case of my grandfather, I have been concerned by individuals

named Skyvington, Skivington, Skevington or Skeffington, which appear to be equivalent spellings of my surname. The existence of this uncommon name has enabled me to investigate genealogical and historical avenues in a quite systematic fashion. Our own Skyvington line can only be traced back precisely over a few generations before we run into a brick wall around the start of the 18th century. I have then attempted—resorting to speculation at times—to place my description of these recent generations within a much vaster context: that of families who spread out from the Norman settlement of Skeffington in Leicestershire.

I might have tried to investigate my grandmother's Pickering background in a similar fashion to that of the Skyvingtons. After all, there is a Norman castle in the Yorkshire town of Pickering, and there have been numerous distinguished individuals of that name. But I refrained from using the same approach, because the two contexts are by no means symmetrical. Unlike the Skeffington story, I never found traces of an ancient patriarchal family named Pickering. So, in the case of my grandmother, I have simply worked backwards, describing ancestors about whom I happened to have unearthed a few facts. If I found information about an ancestor of my grandmother, this was because that particular individual happened to be relatively interesting for one reason or another. The presentation of my grandmother's genealogy gives the impression that all her ancestors were exceptional people! This is an illusion brought about by the obvious fact that her more ordinary ancestors did not always leave sufficient traces (even in the form of parish records) enabling me to evoke them. This is the case concerning her ancestors named Pickering, who disappear from the archives as soon as we move back to the middle of the 18th century.



My maternal genealogy book, *A Little Bit of Irish* (Gamone Press, 2014), evoked individuals who abandoned their impoverished homeland in the middle of the 19th century, seeking a place to survive. On my paternal side, the situation was rather different. My recent ancestors came to Australia in an adventurous pioneering spirit, seeking greener pastures and prosperity.

In referring to the El Dorado of my paternal ancestors (a little unjustly) as *“the last of lands”*, I have borrowed an expression invented by the Australian poet A D Hope, whom I have admired ever since my university days.

The first part of my book, chapters 1 to 4, deals with my grandfather's genealogy. He was born and brought up in London, but the history of the paternal family, who first wrote their surname as Skivington, was located essentially in Dorset. This aspect of my family history is presented in great

detail, and should interest various Dorset Skivington descendants who are scattered throughout the world today.

Further back in time, one can imagine speculative trails that would surely lead back to the Norman settlement of Skeffington in Leicestershire. There are strong reasons to believe that the relevant trails, as far as my personal ancestors are concerned, would have passed through Bedfordshire, where members of the family often wrote their surname as Skevington. In this book, I merely describe these speculations and summarize the research paths that might throw light upon such questions. For a broader treatment of these questions, interested readers are invited to consult my forthcoming in-depth genealogical monograph entitled *Skeffington One-Name Study*.

The second part of the book, chapters 5 to 7, presents my grandmother's genealogy. I mention families named Pickering, Harris, Latton and Wadham. Finally, I reveal the existence of a line back to King John [1167-1087] and William the Conqueror [1024-1087].



When I started my family-history investigations, in 1981, researchers in genealogy communicated by letters sent through the post, and they would exchange photocopies of registry certificates and church records. When the Internet became a daily reality—two decades ago, at the time I settled down here at Gamone—genealogy underwent a revolution. From that moment on, we could sit at home in front of a computer screen and consult a gigantic planetary database of genealogical data of all kinds. An Internet resource that has helped me immensely is the IGI [*International Genealogical Index*] created by the Mormons. Then there are all the online services for registry certificates (including the excellent *FreeBMD* website in the UK), census data and old church records. The Internet has totally revitalized genealogy.

A great benefit that family historians can derive from the Internet is the possibility that unknown relatives might discover their ongoing research and supply them with unexpected information. During the writing of the present book, whose chapters were constantly made available to the general public through the Internet, I was contacted several times by strangers who turned out to be relatives, indeed *close* relatives.

- In 2010, Mary-Jane Howard (New Zealand) provided me with data and photographs concerning our Harris ancestors, and this information was incorporated into chapters 6 and 7.
- In 2012, Richard Frost (South Africa) sent me a copy of a fine portrait of our ancestor, the vicar of Woodhorn, presented in chapter 7.

- In that same year, Judd Skevington (Australia) sent me spontaneously, through the post, a huge pile of photocopies of Skeffington documents that he had collected with the aid of professional historians.
- In that same year, Chris Lamble (England) sent me a portrait of his ancestor Atwell Skivington, and identified his father.
- In that same year, Roger Latton (England) told me that his grandfather John Latton was in fact the same individual whom I had introduced under his rightful name, John Pickering. Together, Roger and I then set out to unfold the known elements of an amazing tale of bigamy, of a kind that one might expect to encounter solely in a movie.
- In January 2014, Terry Stabler (England) told me about his Skyvington grandfather who had been a gunner in World War I, and written an unpublished account of his grim experiences on the Western Front.
- Finally, in March 2014, at a moment when I imagined that this book was ready to be published, Nicola Courtenay (England) informed me that she was the granddaughter of a man who had disappeared from our family archives in mysterious circumstances: my great-grandfather William Skyvington. An ensuing period of intense Internet discussions with Nicola gave rise to a last-minute revision of chapter 2 of my book.

At the start of my genealogical research, I would have been incapable of asking any of the above-mentioned individuals to assist me, for the simple reason that I was unaware of their existence. Since then, thanks in part to the Internet, these kind people have become both collaborators and friends. As such, they have entered—unwittingly, as it were—the small circle of family members who have accompanied me constantly throughout the research and writing operations that have given rise to this book: my sisters Anne and Susan, our cousin Glenn Tarrant and her mother Yvonne, and the Pickerings of Gunnedah.

I acknowledge too the contributions of various family members who are no longer with us, whose names appear explicitly throughout my book. If I were to dedicate *They Sought the Last of Lands* to the memory of one such person, it would be the New Zealander Selby Spence [see page XXX], who was the first relative to evoke our links to the founder of Wadham College at the University of Oxford.

Gamone, Choranche
1 May 2014