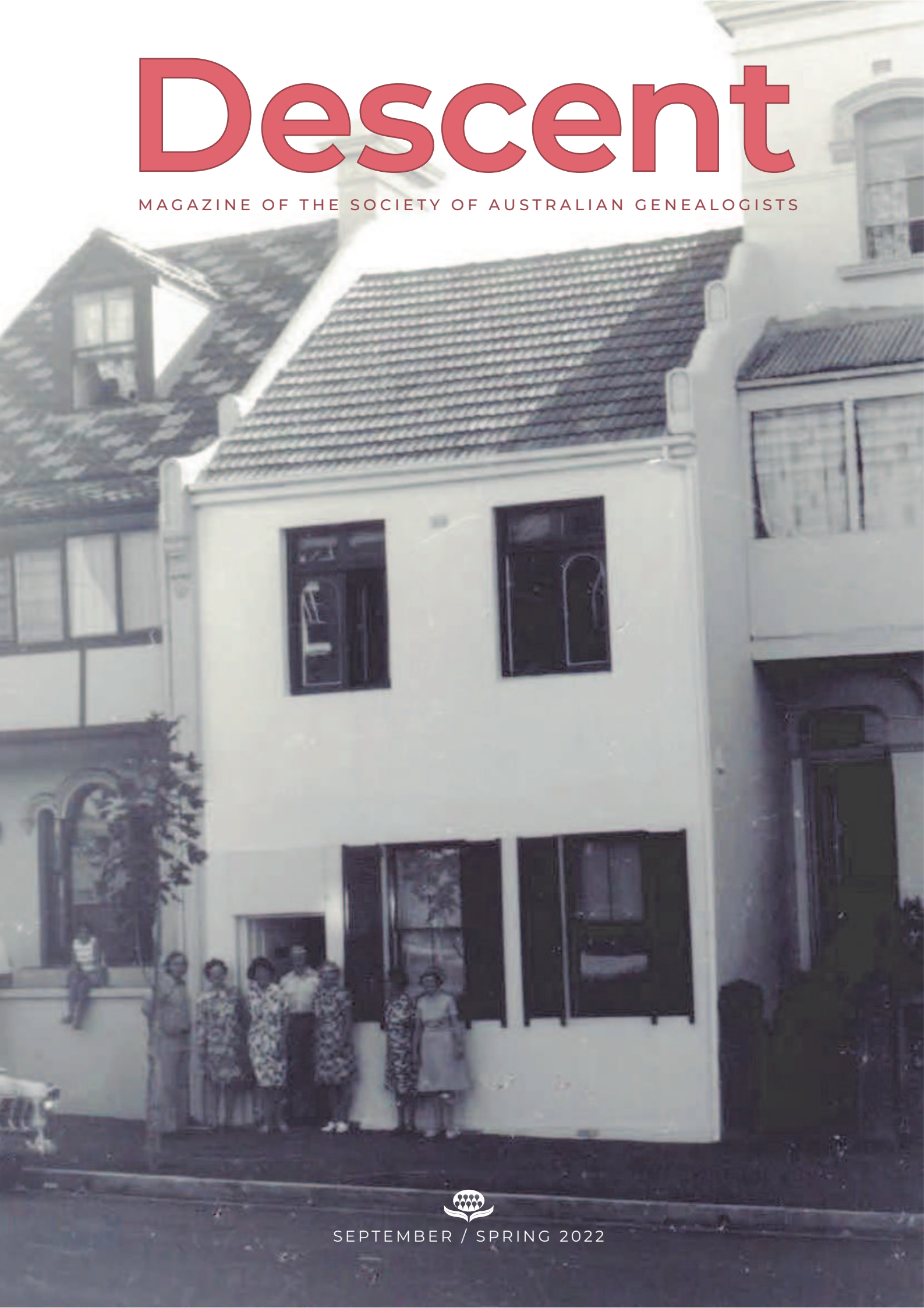


Descent

MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIAN GENEALOGISTS



SEPTEMBER / SPRING 2022

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The theme for this issue of *Descent* is an exploration of the impact of former European empires on the social and family histories of both the people who were colonised as well as those who arrived as colonisers. Our members have provided articles which illustrate the impact on families of the Colonial empires of the Early Modern period, with a particular focus on British India, South Africa, Hong Kong, Indonesia, New Zealand, Fiji and other Pacific Island nations.

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Cover Image

Heritage House, 413 Riley Street, Surry Hills. SAG occupied this building from 1971 to 1978, before moving to Richmond Villa. SAG Images.

Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge the First Nations peoples and we pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging. The Society acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which Richmond Villa stands.

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Many letters follow as Glyn's father scrabbles to find out more about his son's death. He makes contact with Nurse Hopwood at Panitola Hospital. She had been Matron at the Mawchi Mines hospital and it was a great salve to the family to know that "there was at least one at Panitola who knew him."²⁷ She was with him when he died²⁸ and described his funeral: "he was buried here in Panitola on the Sunday and had a military funeral. We were able to get some very nice flowers for him from a friends garden"²⁹

Temporarily buried in a grave with others in Panitola, his final resting place is the Gauwhati War Cemetery in Assam, India. Dad visited his father's grave in the 1990s where the generous Indian caretaker showed them around and described how he kept the cemetery and its dead well-cared for. He gave my Dad and Mum tea and, welcoming them into his office, showed them magic tricks.

- 1 Stennett, Ceri, *In Proud and Honoured Memory 2 (Fallen Heroes of World War II): Remembering the valiant sons and daughters of Whitchurch, Llandaff North, Birchgrove, Rhiwbina & TongTongwynlais*, Candy Jar Books, Cardiff, 2021, p67
- 2 <https://angloburmeselibrary.com/trek-casualty-list.html>, published 2009; accessed: 2 Oct 2021
- 3 Glyn to family, 26 June 1937
- 4 Obid.
- 5 Obid.
- 6 .Wikipedia – 'Mawchi Mine'
- 7 <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/mawchi-tungsten-mine-karenni-state-myanmar>; accessed: 12 Jul 2022
- 8 Glyn to family, 1 Oct 1937

- 9 Obid.
- 10 Obid.
- 11 Glyn to family, 31 Oct 1937
- 12 Glyn to family, 10 Nov 1937
- 13 Glyn to family, 1 Oct 1937
- 14 Glyn to family, 10 Nov 1937
- 15 Glyn to family, 26 May 1938
- 16 Glyn to family, 31 Oct 1937
- 17 Glyn to family, 1 Oct 1937
- 18 Glyn to family, 31 Oct 1937
- 19 Family to Glyn, 10 Jan 1942
- 20 Family to Nurse Hopwood, no date, June 1942
- 21 <https://angloburmeselibrary.com/trek-casualty-list.html>, published 2009; accessed: 2 Oct 2021

- 22 <http://ww2talk.com/index.php>; accessed 24 Aug 2021
- 23 Stennett, Ceri, *In Proud and Honoured Memory 2 (Fallen Heroes of World War II): Remembering the valiant sons and daughters of Whitchurch, Llandaff North, Birchgrove, Rhiwbina & TongTongwynlais*, Candy Jar Books, Cardiff, 2021
- 24 Family to Glyn, 6 July 1942
- 25 Mawchi Mines Company to family, 7 July 1942
- 26 Family to Mawchi Mines Company, 10 July 1942
- 27 Family to Nurse Hopwood, 13 July 1942
- 28 Family to Nurse Hopwood, 5 Sept 1942
- 29 Letter written 6 July 1942 by Nurse Hopwood, quoted in letter, Family to 26 Oct 1944

IN SEARCH OF...THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN COLONISATION ECHOES FROM A FADED EMPIRE: A PUNJABI-AUSTRALIAN JOURNEY

RACHEL CROUCHER

In this article, professional genealogist Rachel Croucher explores the impact of the British Empire on the Punjabi Sikh branch of her family tree. Her great-grandfather, Natha Singh, was a Sikh Hawker from Punjab who is believed to have arrived in Australia in 1902. Natha's eldest daughter from his brief marriage to Australian-born Emily Edith Bellingham, Florence Melba, was Rachel's paternal grandmother. Rachel's article takes a raw look at how colonial racial thinking influenced the way her ancestors were treated by society and the judiciary during the White Australia Policy era. She also discusses how the partition of India as well as cultural and language barriers have affected her research journey. Rachel concludes by sharing some exciting developments in relation to Punjabi family history research during British rule and beyond.

Trigger warning: This article mentions physical violence and sexual assault

Since I was a child, I've always known there was an Indian in my family tree. I didn't know where or understand the broader implications of empire or being non-white in colonial and early postcolonial Australia, I just thought it was cool. Better yet, the Indian in my tree was a hawker. "Like a department store on horse and cart!" I would brag to friends in the schoolyard, but that's where my knowledge ended, the finer details forgotten in time. My paternal grandmother, Florence Croucher (née Singh), passed away when I was a baby, so I never had the chance to pepper



Florence Melba in the backyard of her Bairnsdale home (circa 1975) – Private Family Collection

her with questions as curious grandchildren often do. Instead, for the better part of 20 years, I have used a blend of oral history and archival and academic research to go in search of the heritage of my dad's mum.

Florence Melba Singh was born on 17 July 1911 to Emily Edith Bellingham and Natha Singh.¹ Emily Edith was a domestic servant born on 24 September 1886 to English-born parents, Lucy Webb Heath and Albert Nathaniel Bellingham, in the working-class Melbourne suburb of Richmond.² In stark contrast, Natha was a soldier, labourer and hawker who came from a region of the Indian subcontinent called Punjab, a Persian word meaning *the land of five rivers*.³ There is no known documentation of Natha's arrival in Australia. Still, multiple oral histories indicate he left Punjab – then ruled by Great Britain but now divided between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan – in



Inder and Natha Singh
(date unknown)
Private Family Collection

1894.⁴ I have been unable to locate local records relating to the brothers' lives in Punjab and their migration journey due to linguistic, cultural, and geographic barriers, but they are said to have been members of the British Indian Army who lived for several years in South Africa before purportedly being smuggled to Australia at the end of the Boer War by a group of Australian soldiers. My first cousin once removed, Alan Singh, was 16 when his grandfather

Inder died in 1951.⁵ Alan told the following story to those present at the 2006 AGM of the Australian Field Battery Association:

Over the past 50 years, many of my friends made fun of my name. For all those years, I harboured a secret from the many jokers and larrikins of the Battery. My grandfather [Inder] and his brother [Natha] did their military service in the Indian Artillery, after which they moved to South Africa. My grandfather [Inder] opened a teashop, his brother was a tailor. They were in situ at the outbreak of the Boer War. Both reported their expertise to the Battery Commander, who commented, 'As you are not British, we cannot employ you as Gunners, but you are welcome to set up your trades within Battery lines.' Joy of all joys—a tailor shop and teashop in the Battery! The bottom line is, my grandfather [Inder] became 'A' Field Battery's first Cha Walla. Both Indians were subsequently smuggled by boat to Australia by some of the boys from the Battery. My grandfather [Inder] is buried in the Bairnsdale Cemetery, his brother [Natha] is buried in a small private plot at Corryong, Victoria.⁶



Natha Singh and Pollah Singh (date unknown)
Australian Indian Historical Society

Natha and Emily Edith's marriage was short-lived and tumultuous and saw them frequently move in the few years they shared as a couple. They welcomed a child named Florence in 1908 in the working-class Melbourne suburb of Carlton.⁷

Tragically, however, their firstborn passed away only six months later in Brisbane, Queensland, of "gastroenteritis and bronchitis" on 3 February 1909.⁸ Natha and Emily Edith married seven months later on 7 September 1909, at the ages of 35 and 23 respectively.⁹ After their 1909 marriage, the couple welcomed their second child, my grandmother Florence Melba, on 17 July 1911, in the Melbourne suburb of Preston.¹⁰ Their third child, a daughter named Beatrice Maud, was born on 28 November 1913 in Bairnsdale – a regional town nearly 300 km east of Melbourne with a small but visible Sikh community.¹¹ Natha and Emily Edith's marriage broke down approximately two months before the birth of Beatrice Maud. According to an article published in *Every Week* on 11 February 1915. Emily Edith told the Bairnsdale Police Court that "her husband [Natha] had left Bairnsdale about 18 months ago, and left his two children totally unprovided for." Shortly after Natha's disappearance, Emily Edith commenced a de facto partnership with Inder Singh—her husband's brother. Emily Edith and Inder never married, but they had five children, one of whom died in infancy, and raised their blended family in Bairnsdale, my hometown.¹²

I was born in the multicultural 1980s and accordingly saw my Punjabi heritage as something unique and cool, even inventing my own henna designs to paint my pasty-white freckled hands

with in permanent marker as a child. I therefore struggled (and still struggle) to reconcile the positive self-image I had built of my heritage with several examples of how colonial racial thought negatively impacted how my ancestors were treated by society and the judiciary in early to mid-20th century Australia.

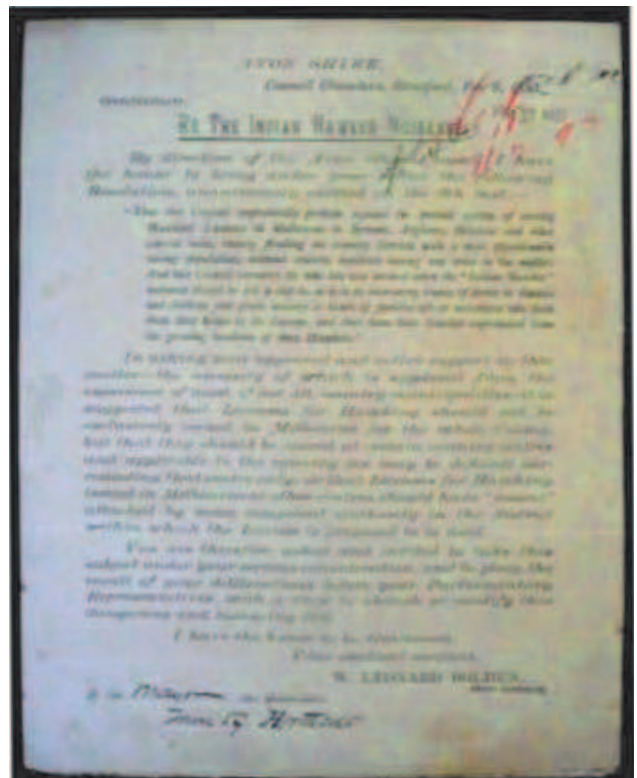
The framers of Australia's Constitution were motivated by notions of race stemming from Britain and the British Empire. At the 1890 Constitutional Convention, Sir John Hall described the type of Australia attendees envisaged in bluntly racist terms.

The foundation exists in that feeling of kinship among Australasians to which so much eloquent allusion has been made. That is the foundation upon which we are preparing to build-upon interests which are common, upon community of race, language, and history.¹³

Only months after the Constitution took effect on 1 January 1901, the new parliament passed the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* (Cth), otherwise known as the White Australia Policy, on 1 June 1901. This law aimed to limit non-white immigration to Australia to help keep the country 'British'.¹⁴ Although Natha and Inder were able to circumvent these racial restrictions by arriving as British subjects, their lives in the new nation would be dramatically shaped by the negative colonial attitudes towards race.

Colonial racial thought regularly denounced hawkers as a menace to society. In 1890, the Avon Shire Council Chambers in Stratford, Victoria, passed a motion in relation to the "Indian Hawker Nuisance" in the region (see inset below). Its members were unanimous

That this Council emphatically protests against the present system of issuing Hawkers' Licences in Melbourne to Syrians, Afghans, Hindoos and other colored races, thereby flooding the country districts with the most objectionable roving population...



Hawker Nuisance Notice – Avon Shire, 9 February 1893
Museums Victoria

Such openly brazen racism surprised me after first discovering this announcement on the National Library of Australia's Trove database several years ago, no less because the town of Stratford in Avon Shire is situated in my home region of East

Gippsland. Sadly, it occurred to me that this was quite literally the environment into which my great-grandfather Natha was welcomed because of the colour of his skin. I was nevertheless amused by the concern that hawkers were "An increasing source of terror to females and children." Not all females, I quietly chuckled to myself, thankful for Emily Edith's disregard for the social norms of her time.

In addition to negative social attitudes, my forebears endured multiple discriminatory applications of the law by the judiciary during the White Australia Policy era. These incidents reflected broader colonial attitudes toward non-whites and the women who "consorted" with them. However, before exploring related media reports, it is essential to note that transliterating names from a source language with their approximate phonetic or spelling equivalents in a second language is a complex process, especially when government administrators were almost exclusively British—and because I do not speak or read any of the Indian languages. These cultural and linguistic barriers have created inevitable research obstacles, such as locating records wherein Natha's name has been alternatively transliterated as "Nuttah," "Nutta," "Muttah," and once even "Nutter," admittedly my personal favourite. Moreover, ignorance of the diverse cultural and religious fabric of the Indian subcontinent saw Natha regularly mislabelled in media reports and government documentation as Muslim, Hindu, and Afghani, amongst others.¹⁵ I have adapted to these limitations by cross-referencing oral history and archival and academic research to distinguish between what is possible, what is likely, and what is true.

On 15 August 1903, the *Snowy River Mail and Tambo and Croajingolong Gazette* reported that "Mohammedan" Nutta Singh brought charges of unlawful assault against Herman Singh and Cartah Singh.¹⁶ After cross-referencing this article against other media reports and my personal research files, I determined it is likely that the "Nutta" referred to in the article was indeed my great-grandfather. Regardless, both as a law student and the descendant of a non-white migrant to Australia with the same name, I was disappointed by the court's approach to the evidence before them. A medical doctor who examined Nutta deposed that,

On examining the informant [Nutta], I found both sides of his face grossly swollen and discolored; the eyelids swollen; a cut over the bridge of the nose; a bruise about the size of a shilling on the right temple on which the skin was broken; also two or three red marks on the left side of his throat, each about half an inch in diameter.

Despite the savagery of the beating and other corroborating evidence against both defendants, the court allowed their lawyer to raise the defence that "the affair was nothing but a drunken squabble between a lot of blackfellows, and that there was nothing for it but to dismiss both cases." Although Cartah Singh was fined, the case against his accomplice Herman Singh was dismissed.

The white women who consorted with non-white men during



In the Shade of the Old Lemon Tree – Truth Newspaper 28 August 1910

the White Australia Policy era were also treated harshly by the judiciary.¹⁷ On 28 August 1910, the tabloid newspaper *Truth* (see inset above) reported that Emily Edith was living with her new husband Natha in a tent on Frederick Farm in Tallebudgera, Queensland, where he worked as a labourer. It was there on 24 January 1910 that Emily Edith alleged she was raped by a man named King. The article explained Emily Edith had felt "off colour" and gone to a nearby farm to retrieve some lemons to make a drink. There, a farmer named King reportedly offered to show her the lemons himself, and despite her resisting his "overtures," he "effected his purpose." I was shocked by the comical tone adopted to describe this horrific encounter and bewildered that despite extensive physical evidence, witness testimony, and police statements, the court discharged King, with the article

concluding that advocates of "black labour" would see the "error of their ways and become straight-out White Australians."¹⁸ Justice was clearly not blind for victims of crime with the wrong skin colour and their families and loved ones.

Thankfully, assimilationist policies that once restricted non-European immigration and forced migrants to shed their cultures and languages to become indistinguishable from the white British ideal ended with the multiculturalism of the 1970s.¹⁹ I am grateful the Australia I live in allows me to celebrate exploring my Punjabi heritage equally to my Irish and English family lines without fear of social or judicial recriminations. In this regard, there have recently been some exciting developments in relation to Punjabi family history research during British rule and beyond.

The records of 320,000 troops from Punjab who fought in World War I were digitised and uploaded to a database launched by the United Kingdom Punjabi Heritage Association and the University of Greenwich on Armistice Day 2021.²⁰ Although neither Natha nor Inder fought in World War I, this database is a promising development in Punjabi family history research because most databases are designed for the British in India rather than Indians in India, whereas until the *Punjab and World War One* database was launched in 2021, no such facility existed for the families of Indian soldiers.²¹

On research closer to home, I was cleaning out my woefully neglected Facebook Messenger folders in late 2021 and went to delete a message in my 'Other' folder from someone whose name I didn't recognise with no mutual friends. Instead, I accidentally opened it to find a message from Australian-Indian visual artist Yask Desai who had seen my contributions to a thread about hawkers in the Gippsland History Facebook group.²² He politely asked if I was interested in taking part in a visually-based project he was working on about the descendants of hawkers from undivided India, describing his project *Telia* as,

*an attempt to reanimate and reexamine the experiences of the men who migrated from undivided India and worked as hawkers or travelling salesman within rural Australia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.*²³

Yask's work will involve the production of a photobook consisting of archival artefacts in combination with his own photography. I have eagerly assisted by sharing my own research and introducing him to as many of my Singh relatives as possible for him to photograph

and collect oral histories. There are no words to describe the relief and satisfaction I feel knowing the history of the elusive Indian in my family tree is being celebrated and preserved instead of lost in time as just another echo from a faded empire.

1 Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages, Event Registration Number 23100.
 2 For birth certificate of Emily Edith Bellingham see Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages Event Registration Number: 29040; for birth certificate of Lucy Webb Heath see Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages Event Registration Number: 29040; for birth certificate of Albert Nathaniel Bellingham see Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages Event Registration Number: 13558.
 3 Pippa Virdee, *From the Ashes of 1947: Reimagining Punjab*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018) 20.
 4 Encyclopaedia Britannica, Punjab <https://www.britannica.com/place/Punjab-state-India/History>.
 5 Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages. Event Registration Number: 16052.
 6 'Members Corner,' Australian Field Battery Association Newsletter, December 2006, 4.
 7 Queensland Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages. Event Registration Number: 810620.
 8 Queensland Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages. Event Registration Number: 810620.
 9 Queensland Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages. Event Registration Number: B8008.

10 Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages. Event Registration Number: 23100
 11 Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages. Event Registration Number: 27760 (birth)
 12 Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages Event Registration Number: 18139 (birth), 11390 (death).
 13 Parliament of Australia, 1890 Australasian Federation Conference I Proceedings No. 7 (14 February 1890) <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db=CONSTITUTION;id=constitution%2Fconventions%2F1890-1007;query=id%3Aconstitution%2Fconventions%2F1890-1005>
 14 National Archives of Australia, The Immigration Restriction Act 1901, <https://www.naa.gov.au/explore-collection/immigration-and-citizenship/immigration-restriction-act-1901>
 15 James B. Minahan, *Ethnic Groups of South Asia and the Pacific: An Encyclopedia*: An Encyclopedia (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012).
 16 Kamal Deep and Vishal Goyal, 'Development of a Punjabi to English Transliteration System,' *International Journal of Computer Science and Communication*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2011).
 17 On the treatment of white women who consorted with non-white men, see also Dr Kristy Love, *A Most Undesirable Woman: Writing about*

the Criminalisation of Poverty (YouTube, 24 June 2021) 32:07 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmrXCQX0qjl>
 18 Rachel Croucher 'I wasn't prepared for the emotional impact of tracing my ancestry,' SBS Online (2019) <https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/voices/family/article/2018/04/18/i-wasnt-prepared-emotional-impact-tracing-my-ancestry>
 19 Department of Home Affairs | Multicultural Affairs, Australia's Multicultural Policy History <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/multicultural-affairs/about-multicultural-affairs/our-policy-history>
 20 Punjab and World War One, <http://punjabww1.com/>
 21 Rajeev Syal, 'Records of 320,000 Punjab soldiers from first world war uncovered', *The Guardian* (2021) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/10/records-of-320000-punjab-soldiers-from-first-world-war-uncovered>
 22 Gippsland History Facebook Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1755971574632862/>
 23 Yask Desai, 'Telia,' Blak Dot Gallery, <https://blakdot.com.au/current-exhibitions/2021/6/17/telia-by-yask-desai>

**IN SEARCH OF...THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN COLONISATION
 WILLIAM GIBSON OF JESSORE
 SUE REID**



William Gibson died at the age of 33 years in Jessore, Bengal, far from his home and family in Ayr, Ayrshire, Scotland. William was the son of Peter Gibson, a writer (a Scottish solicitor¹), and had five brothers and one sister. The Gibsons were a peripatetic lot. Two of William's brothers served in the army in India. Another two brothers were surgeons: one in Lanark, Scotland, and the other in Jamaica. Only his youngest brother Thomas remained in Ayr. William was an indigo planter.

Indigo has been cultivated since 4000 BC in East Asia, India, and Egypt. A prized commodity on the ancient silk route, indigo produces a brilliant blue colour, treasured as it was one of the most colourfast natural dyes. In addition, artists value its opacity. The raw product comes from the leaves of the plant *Indigofera tinctoria*. As each leaf contained 2 to 4% of the dye, large crops were required to produce significant amounts of indigo. Once harvested, the indigo leaves were soaked in a series of large tanks or vats of water and eventually dried to form a thick paste.²



The dye was in high demand in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, and later Levi Strauss used it to colour denim jeans.³ During the industrial

revolution, a significant consumer was the flourishing textile industry in Manchester.

When growers in the Caribbean found coffee and sugar crops more profitable than indigo, British colonist revived their interest in indigo planting in Bengal. Bengal was in the northeast of what was then India, now part of Bangladesh. When the Nawabs of India came under the rule of the British East India Company, the cultivation of indigo became commercially profitable, and indigo became one of the earliest items of British trade in India. The planters established factories with associated buildings to process the indigo. They frequently advertised the factories for sale. For example, in 1814, a factory with eight pairs of vats, a drying godown (warehouse), pressing equipment, boiler, bungalow, and houses for sircars (domestic servants), standing on 40 biggahs (about 5.3 hectares) was for sale at 1400 sicca rupees.⁴ In 1810, the value of indigo exported to Britain from Bengal was worth £6,000,000; three-quarters of that came from Jessore.⁵

William, who was born in 1784, would have made his way to Jessore in the early years of the 19th century, a dark period in the history of English colonialism. In Bengal, the British planters gained land rights by taking leases on unoccupied land from the zamindars (landowners who leased their land to tenant farmers). They could also cultivate crops on the land of ryots (tenant farmers) who had died without an heir or had abandoned their land. However, the