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2301 An Academic Question

by Roz Gatwood

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It's not entirely surprising that my great-grandfather William Hamilton Bailey became the subject of one very persistent family myth: that he had been a don at Cambridge University.

William had been born into a prosperous Melbourne family in 1862ⁱ, the second child of English merchant William Bailey and his Irish wife Charlotte Lowry. His comfortable boyhood had been largely spent at the family's grand Toorak residence, "Tintern"ⁱⁱ, from where he had attended Hawthorn Grammar School, distinguishing himself in athletic pursuits, if nothing else, as a couple of ornate engraved trophies passed down through the family would later attest.

Immediately after his school days, in 1882, he did indeed go to Cambridge University. The captions in an album of photographs from his time at university make it clear that he had attended Gonville and Caius College (often referred to simply as Caius), participating in various nattily attired sporting teams, including the Caius second rowing eight in May 1883. But it's the dashing photo of him in academic dress, I believe, that sowed the seed of the myth of his career as a don.



William Hamilton Bailey in academic dress.

Everyone believed it. His two daughters – my great-aunt Dorothy and my grandmother Molly – had implicit faith in it, and Molly passed her belief down to the next generation, namely my father and his three siblings. They in turn handed it down intact to my own generation.

But, in fact, the myth is very readily unpicked. According to the published records of the college, William Hamilton Bailey was admitted as an undergraduate in October 1882 and left after just one year, without sitting for a degree.ⁱⁱⁱ The famous photograph of him in academics shows not a don – that is, a fellow of the college – but a student in formal garb.

The fact that in September 1885 William, then aged only 22, was back in Melbourne getting married to a young woman called Emilia Margaret Katherine “Kitty” Campbell is further proof, if any were needed, that he never had been (and never would be) a Cambridge don.^{iv} At the time of his marriage, he described himself as a “merchant”, a description he also used when he registered the birth of his first child in 1886.^v

But well over 100 years later, family members of my father’s generation would still state proudly that their grandfather had been a don at Cambridge. Why did the myth persist for so long? Obviously, it is the kind of thing that one might wish were true of one’s antecedents. And in a colonial family with no actual experience of Oxbridge or indeed of any university, the claim presumably aroused no scepticism. But I believe that its longevity came mainly from the fact that there was no-one around who could set the story straight. William and Kitty Bailey, the two people who could most easily have done so, both died tragically young.

Her daughters Dorothy and Molly were aged only 10 and eight respectively when their pretty, curly-haired, 38-year-old mother died when peritonitis set in after surgery for uterine disease in 1896.^{vi} All of the little girls’ grandparents, at least two of whom certainly knew the details of William’s earlier life and should have been able to shed some light on his Cambridge career, had predeceased Kitty.^{vii}

William, presumably reeling from the loss of his wife, was also struggling financially. The substantial wealth left by his father at his death in 1890^{viii} had apparently disappeared, no doubt at least partly because of the severe economic depression, exacerbated by a widespread drought, that beset the colony of Victoria in the 1890s. Leaving the girls in Melbourne in the care of their mother’s childless younger sister, Maud, and her dentist husband, Alfred Pincott, William seems to have set off to try to regain his fortune, first in New South Wales and Queensland, then further afield in Fiji, where in 1904-05 he was managing a timber plantation and mill on the island of Kiou.^{ix}

If the teenaged Dolly and Molly had already got hold of the idea that their father had been a don at Cambridge, there was now no time or opportunity for Pups, as they called him, to disabuse them of the notion. By 1906, William was sub-manager of an estate on Fanning Island (now called Tabuaeran), a tiny atoll much further away from Melbourne even than Fiji, and it was there, on Sunday, 1 April 1906, at the age of only 43, that he committed suicide by cutting his throat with a razor.^x

It was a sad and terrible end to a life which had started with so much promise. The only tiny shred of comfort to be drawn from the circumstances of William's death is that it took place on Fanning Island, rather than on some other minuscule speck in the Pacific. From 1902 until the early 1960s, Fanning Island was a link in the trans-Pacific telegraph cable that ran from Canada to Queensland.^{xi} Because of the manned cable station, his death was discovered swiftly and news of it flashed almost instantly back to civilisation.

After his death, William's daughters continued to live in Melbourne with their Aunt Maud and Uncle Alfred. Their father had left them nothing in the way of money, but there were a couple of handsome school athletics trophies, a rather nice painting of a house called "Tintern", some fond letters from faraway Fiji, and quite a few photographs. Some are of their lovely mother and some of their moustachioed father, including one in which he is a slim young man wearing a mortar board and an academic gown and looking for all the world as if he is a don at Cambridge.

ⁱ Victorian birth registration, no. 1862/19896.

ⁱⁱ *Sands & McDougall's Melbourne and Suburban Directory, 1872-1881.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Biographical History of Gonville and Caius College*, Vol. II, ed. J. Venn, Cambridge, 1898.

^{iv} Victorian marriage registration, no. 1885/3796.

^v Victorian birth registrations, nos. 1886/12999 and 1888/14547.

^{vi} Victorian death registration, no. 1896/2407.

^{vii} Victorian death registrations, nos. 1890/4729; 1890/4898; 1890/4946; 1895/13782.

^{viii} Victorian Public Records Office, probate file 42.446.

^{ix} Series of three letters from William Hamilton Bailey to his daughter Molly, September 1904 to February 1905.

^x *The Fiji Times*, Saturday, 7 April 1906.

^{xi} Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tabuaeran.