Tracing the Origins of Grandpa James: A Journey of Discovery

Thomas Shadrach James, 1859-1946
Background of Research Project:

This research project was conducted in Mauritius and India in May and September, 2012 and in Sri Lanka in 2016. It is a project of family history focusing on the connections of our great Grandfather Thomas Shadrach James, alias ‘Grandpa James’, with his birthplace of Mauritius in 1859 and his family connections with his forebears in India and relatives in Sri Lanka. Tracing Granpa’s connections with the birthplace of his parents in India in the 1830s, and his cousins on his mother Yoster (Esther) Thomas’s side in Sri Lanka, has been a long and rewarding journey.

The story of Granpa James remains a work in progress. It is aimed at providing a Family Tree history of the connections between Granpa James and the Yorta Yorta community whom he married into in 1885. The project leaves open the opportunity for the inclusion of more relevant data in the near future. It is not set in stone or a definitive and final reference point on the history of Granpa’s origins and family connections. Rather, it is a unique story that invites a listening audience and one that will continue to develop as more stories unfold in the future.

The research materials are correlated with the Family Tree created on ‘Ancestry.com’ which is now being circulated for family consultation. The story follows the relationship between those places his family group lived before he embarked upon an outstanding career as teacher, doctor, dentist, medical adviser and community leader at Maloga Mission and Cummeragunja Reserve (1881-1942). Using a variety of themes and resources to describe the broader context of the project it has a similar ring to the popular TV family history series: ‘Who Do You Think You Are’.

Granpa James takes us on a journey of discovery into the archival records and to the places where we locate the storylines in time and place. It follows the storylines through to the people who are related to us on Granpa’s side, and traces the footsteps of Grandpa, back to his ancestral connections. Indeed it is an amazing journey of discovery that draws on a range of themes, imagery, and storylines to articulate Granpas story.
Like the water of the river *Dungula that flows gently past the old Maloga Mission, where Granpa married Granny Ada Cooper of the Yorta Yorta, the story will continue to flow through our proud heritage to future generations.

*Dungula=Yorta Yorta name for Murray River

The Sri Lankan connection, which was visited in 2016, is essentially the last leg of the journey. Other family history research was conducted in Mauritius in May, 2012 and in Chennai (formerly Madras) in September, 2012, including research into the East India Administrative records repatriated to the British Library and National Archives in London after Indian Independence in 1947.

Research Approach

The best way of describing the methodology for the project, is to see it as a process that has evolved over time guided by a lifetime’s experience. It has evolved from what I and certainly many other of the extensive family network have learned about the nature and extent of our cultural and kinship connections. Our sense of being and spirituality of place handed down over time are other key elements of the story. It is something that is ultimately grounded in the Indigenous world view of land and identity and the importance of that relationship.

The methodology used for the project and applicable to other similar family histories is what I call the ‘storyline approach’ which is used to ground the stories in time and place. It is a more tangible form of learning that comes from the timeline of Indigenous occupation, use and enjoyment of the ancestral lands-a timeline that transcends more recent colonial history (60,000 Before Present).

I have developed this scope of knowledge in my teaching of Indigenous Studies and in the course I teach in Yorta Yorta country, called Oncountry Learning 2003-2017. It is a research model that stands firm in its own right and one that is steeped in oral tradition and more recent innovations in Family History research and documentation. The storyline approach is a teaching pedagogy that produces some outstanding positive outcomes in student learning. Students enjoy the tangible nature of this experience and the end results are transformative. The effect of this learning experience stays with them for a lifetime,
never to be forgotten, lingering uppermost in their memory. Visiting the sites and places and listening to the story lines told by Indigenous people has a profound effect on the learning curve.

Being Oncountry and able to hear the stories of Indigenous history in antiquity and to locate them in the land is a big plus for Indigenous Studies in Australia. It is the essence of what has shaped and driven the way this family history project has developed over many years. With that framework in mind we can now return to the footsteps of Granpa James using the story line approach http://waynera.wordpress.com/

Grounding the Storyline in time and place

The Yorta Yorta story is one that grounds the footsteps of Granpa James in Yorta Yorta country and the relationship with the people and the ancestral lands. This history of becoming one and of the people, and the legacy of the ‘Scholars Hut’ where he mentored and taught the first generation of outstanding leaders at Maloga and Cummeragunja, is the focal point of this journey.

Searching Granpa’s history in the National Archives, Republic Of Mauritius, Coromandel, 2012
With the process of history raising new questions and answers to be uncovered along the way, these are some of the challenges that face future generations as stories continue to emerge and be told. The project will continue to evolve as a Family History and educational resource. Materials will be made available to family members and others online and through the medium of Ancestry.com which is used to draw the data, images and documentary materials together in the narrative style. This will leave the final document open for feedback and other questions to be dealt with in a constructive way. The project endeavours to tell the story in its own unique style of story, imagery and oral tradition rather than from a theoretical and purely academic viewpoint.

Research materials for the project have been collected from a range of public institutions openly available for individual and family research, and from relatives of Grandpa in Australia, Mauritius, India and Sri Lanka, all of whom contributed generously to the project. No information collected was under any restrictions or embargoes imposed by public or private institutions. All materials are accessible for research and publication purposes under the normal requirements of International Cultural Property Rights and Copyright laws.

I will now discuss the genealogical findings and the background history of the project. This will provide a broader context for following the footsteps of Granpa from his journey to Australia and his dedication to the Yorta Yorta struggle for educational equality and self determination.

Genealogical Research Findings

According to his birth certificate, Grandpa James was born in L’Amitie, (Moka) Mauritius on 1 September, 1859. His father is recorded in the official registry records as James Peersahib and was also known in the family as Samson Peersahib. Through further examination of the documentary materials this has now been corrected to James Peersahib. The genealogical records of Mauritius indicate that Peersahib entered Mauritius as Peersaib No 132719 from Madras, India in 1854. His death certificate tells us that he died in Mauritius in 1905 at the age of 72, which puts his birthdate at 1833. His religion as recorded in his death certificate was Church of England. We don’t have evidence of what
his forebears’ religion may have been before that but we do know that Madras was a diverse Tamil linguistic region of mixed Muslim, Hindu, Sikhism, Buddhism and later Christian religion. There is evidence that it could well have been Muslim on his father’s side, and later converted to Christianity. His death certificate and other documentary evidence do suggest this conversion to be prevalent at the time (Certified Extract of Death Entry, Mauritius 1 June, 2012; Nelson, G&R, 2014:260,263).)

Grandpa’s mother was believed to be Miriam Thomas. Further substantive evidence has challenged this view and has shown that her name is Esther (sometimes referred to as Yoster) a younger sister of Miriam on the Thomas maternal ancestral line -see Genealogy on Ancestery.com. Whether the duplication of Miriam whose middle name is Esther and Esther caused some ambiguity is unclear. We do know however that Esther died in 1877, which is around the time that James Peersahib remarried and had a daughter Ruth alias Jahangeerbee to his second wife (Lokheea No 159681) who was also from India (Patna Rumpar, Uttar Pradesh: see Lokheea No 159681 on the Death Certificate of Peersaib). Ruth, the only child of James to his second wife, Lokheea, married David Ramchurn and had a daughter Flora who married Noel Purahoo in Mauritius. Purahoo is a common family name in Mauritius and we were able to meet some of the living members of the family on our visit in 2012. Ruth’s death certificate is available and she is also buried in St Thomas church with other members of the Purahoo family (Images recorded from St Thomas Church, St Thomas Church, Beau-bassin, Mauritius, May, 2012). The Purahoo family are related to us on the patrilineal line of James Peersaib and his second marriage.
Granpa changed his name from Thomas Shadrach Peersahib to Thomas Shadrach James after his father’s first name. Thomas is the matrilineal line through which we trace our blood line connections back to Esther and her brothers and sisters. The Thomas matrilineal line locates the storylines in Mauritius, India and Sri Lanka. Many of the Thomas family first names, like Miriam, Priscilla, Esther and Shadrach, are perpetuated through Granpa and Ada’s children. This seems to reflect the cultural tradition of naming children after their forebears which is a common cultural practice in Indigenous kinship systems in Australia. It is a custom that helps to maintain the close relationship of blood line connection—see Ancestry.com for clarification. Indeed many of our family carry first and middle names of our ancestors. My middle name comes from my Grandfather Puppa Henry Roderick Atkinson on the Atkinson kinship line and my older brother Clive carries his father’s first name and Henry as his middle name. My daughter Gabrielle carries my mother’s first name Iris as her middle name and so on.
The name Shadrach is interesting. It could be influenced by the biblical figure in the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who are like holy people recorded in the book of Daniel, Chapters 1-3 for their exclusive devotion to God. Granpa’s strong religious beliefs and his own personal teachings and writings certainly confirm his exclusive devotion to God, fulfilling Shadrach as his middle name; he then named his youngest son Shadrach Livingstone James, 1897-1956. The name was then passed down to Uncle Shadrach James’ son and finds common usage in the Yorta Yorta and general community today as Shady James. Some even say Shady-like characters that carry with them a charm for jovial spirit and personality along the way. Uncle Shadrach’s son, Shady was a talented sporting figure in the community playing football for Fitzroy, 1940-41, in the Victorian Football League, VFL. This was before the formation of the Australian Football League, AFL in the early 1980s. Many descendants of Granpa James and Granny Ada continue to be high achievers in sport, community and academic work.
James Peersahib in Mauritius

James Peersahib came to Mauritius from Madras in 1854 which brings us to the period of domination and control of India by the infamous British East India Company. This was the oppressive colonising force operating in India, up until Queen Victoria took over the reins as Empress of India in 1858, before the rise of Ghandi’s leadership.

Several significant changes were underway in Mauritius at the time. To understand the background to the Peersahibs’ story we need to go back to the beginning of the 19th century and look especially at the reasons for the huge Indian immigration to Mauritius which reached its peak in 1868-69. This was the time when James Peersahib was first employed as an interpreter in the Magistrates Court in Mauritius in 1859 and when his son Shadrach (Granpa) was born. A number of forces can be seen to have impacted on the emigration of Tamils from Madras to Mauritius as indentured labourers at that time, and we can speculate that these same causative factors are part of the Peersahib story. In examining these important factors, it is highly likely that James Peersahib first came to Mauritius as an indentured labourer before he was employed as an interpreter in the Justice system. The number 132719 in his death certificate entry is a relevant reference point for the indentured labour system under the British Raj.

We must remember that this was a significant turning point in history that many of us thought was the end of the brutal and exploitive era of slavery, only to find however that the replacement of slaves with indentured labourers was used to supplement the loss of income to the vested colonial interests of the day. The trail leads us deep into the divisive British colonial policy and practice both in India and in the sugar colonies, and the way the same formula was applied in other British colonies including Australia in the 18th Century.

The English had taken over the colony of Mauritius from the French in 1810, after winning the final land and naval battle in a long lasting competition between these two colonial powers. The battle was about the control of the sea root through the Indian Ocean to India. Mauritius was at the time an important strategic and stopping off point for ships trading between Europe and the East. However the British invasion made little difference to the
life of the island due to the generous capitulation terms offered to the French. French Mauritians continued to dominate the economic life of the island. Most of the cultivated land was owned by French settlers and worked by slave labour (Shima, 2010: 101-106; Addison& Hazareesh, 1968:55-56).

The sugar industry was dramatically expanding as a result of a British government’s decision in 1825 to allow the import of Mauritian sugar on the same terms as West Indian sugar. Within 2 or 3 years sugar had become overwhelmingly the most important crop grown on the island.

It was the sugar industry that brought thousands of Indian indentured labourers to Mauritius in the mid 1800s.

Before looking at this mass exodus from India, we will fill in some basic colonial history before the British took control.

**European Colonisation of Mauritius**

**Dutch settlement**

According to the history of occupation of Mauritius, it is said that there were no Indigenous people on the Island when it was first occupied by Dutch people in 1638. Unlike Australia it seemed to fit the notion of terra nullius, as an unoccupied Island in the Indian Ocean west of Africa and Madagascar. Before the Dutch however there is evidence that the Island was known by Arab and Swahili traders who made markings of the Island on their medieval Arab maps. The Portuguese were also one of the main colonising powers of the 15-16th Century and the Island was sighted by the Portuguese in 1507. But it was the Dutch East India Company that decided to send an expedition in 1638 to make the first settlement on Mauritius, fearing that the English or French would beat them to what was an important strategic and economic base in the Indian Ocean. At that stage it was basically a port of call. The Dutch finally abandoned the struggle to make a success of their Mauritius settlement and withdrew in 1710. Unfortunately they had denuded the island of ebony, and destroyed the buildings and stores as they left. There is also evidence to suggest that they were largely responsible for wiping out the traditional bird, the Dodo, during their stay (Shima, 2010: 105; Moonindra Nath Varma, 2008: 12-15).
French Settlement

Next came the French Compagnie des Indes in 1721. The company’s rule ended in 1767 when the Royal Administration under the French Crown took over. Under the French the shipping trade increased, the harbour at Port Louis was developed, sugar cane was cultivated and milled, and food crops expanded. These results depended on the labour of slaves. In 1788, for example, of a population of 43,000, 7,000 were free men and 36,000 slaves. At first most of the slaves were brought from Madagascar, later from West Africa. Smaller numbers came from Asia, mainly India and Malaya. Indian slaves were given preference in domestic work but most worked in agriculture (Shima, 2010: 105-106; Addison & Hayareesingh, 1984: 48-50).

Under Napoleon (1803-1810) law and education were improved. The island’s legal system was an adapted form of the Napoleonic Codes, and this system has remained as the basis of the Mauritian legal system to the present. Only one school was opened and this was expected to turn out prospective officers for the army as well as Citizens (French) with a sound general knowledge. Only whites attended this school (Moonindra Nath Varma, 2008:12-15).

The Making of Mauritius

The fate of Mauritius was bound up in the trade competition between the English and French for control of India and the Indian Ocean. The ability to control access to India depended on naval power. The French had developed Port Louis in Mauritius as a ship building port, and as the nearest French base to India it had strategic importance. Good enough reasons to cause the British concern but that was not all. Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt in 1798 was meant to be the first step in a great plan leading to the French invasion of India, but was cut short by Nelson’s destruction of the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile. After this, French naval effort turned to engaging privateers, operating out of Port Louis, to undertake commercial raiding. These “corsairs” were so successful that they plundered about £2.5 million in 5 years. It is not surprising the British decided they must capture Mauritius (Moonindra Nath Varma, 2008:11-12).
In 1810 a British force of 12,000 landed on the north coast of Mauritius. The 4000 French troops were easily swept aside and the French capitulated and ceded sovereignty to the British on honourable and generous terms. The property, laws, customs and religion of the French settlers would all be respected and were eventually integrated with the imported English common law (Shima, 2010:104-106).

**The ending of slavery**

Although the French law abolishing slavery was in force from 1794 as an outcome of the French Revolution, the French authorities on Mauritius defied both the law and the government representatives sent to enforce its observance. The settlers continued to import slaves (Addison & Hayareesingh, 1984: 55-56).

The first serious threat that British rule posed to French interests arose when in 1807 the British Parliament passed an Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. This should have led to the end of the slave trade but in practice this did not happen. It is estimated that over 20,000 slaves were brought into the island after it became a British possession. To ensure a smooth transition to British rule the Governor turned a blind eye to this illegal trade. But in 1822 the Commission of Eastern Enquiry was set up by the Colonial Office to make recommendations about the future development of recently acquired territories including Mauritius. They expressed concern about the continuation of the slave trade (Moonindra Nath Varma, 2008: 13-15; Addison & Hayareesingh, 1984: 48-50).

It was not until 1835 that the 1833 Act for the Abolition of Slavery came into effect in Mauritius, but through successful political pressure the Mauritian planters succeeded in getting a generous share of the compensation money to slave owners that was set aside by the Act. They also gained a bridging four years of paid labour from the emancipated slaves. In 1839 at the end of four years, almost all the ex-slaves left the sugar estates and sought other forms of work (Shima, 2010:101-102).

There was a lot of racism against the emancipated slaves and the emerging ‘coloured’ populations of mixed race. They were not provided with schooling and lived under very poor conditions. Most of them became smallholders, unskilled labourers or fisherman. Two mission priests were the first to challenge this situation and fight for their rights and social
improvements. Not until 1829 was Royal College opened to coloured children, and the priests also opened several independent schools for this group.

Indian immigration

The sugar planters were not too concerned about the loss of their slave labourers. They had foreseen and planned for this outcome. In 1829 representatives of the planters had made enquiries from the governments of Madras and Singapore about obtaining Indian labourers on contract. By 1835 immigration began on a regular basis. This source of labour would soon provide all the labour that was needed. Planters persistently strove to ensure that the supply of indentured labourers was always large enough to keep the cost of labour down (Shima, 2010:105-106).

But why would an Indian man leave his country for such a precarious opportunity so far away?

The reality at that time is there was a disintegration of Indian rural life brought about by the new property laws introduced by the British. For example in South Bihar the British administration system was so harsh that the Bhumij Rebellion of 1832-33 erupted. It was then brutally suppressed, with great loss of life and property. This caused the displaced agricultural labourers to seek to immigrate to places where they could make a living without harassment. In the Bengal Presidency in the first half of the nineteenth century, the importation of foreign cotton from the mills of the British Industrial Revolution, led to the destruction of the old handicraft industry based on hand spinning. As a result a large number of weavers, spinners, dyers, bleachers, and needle workers lost their occupations. These created a massive supply of unskilled labour. In addition, the establishment of new land relations based on private property, with contract replacing custom led to a large number of the agricultural population losing their land rights. The consequent poverty made them particularly receptive to ideas of migration (Shima, 2010:105-106).

The densely populated Tamil districts of Madras with their large numbers of landless labourers were extremely vulnerable to emigration. Recruiters were sent from Mauritius to entice workers. They were offered 5 year contracts with wages fixed at five rupees a
month besides free board and clothing. The payment of 3 months wages in advance was a good incentive (Shima, 2010:101-102).

Was James Peersahib one of these indentured labourers from Madras? Certainly his work in the courts was to assist them to understand the message of the Magistrate and the nature of their wrongdoing.

Indian immigration to Mauritius reached its peak in 1858 and 1859 when Grandpa was born. This was a time when the demand for Mauritian sugar approached a maximum. They were recruited from Calcutta, Madras and Bombay (Lee, 1999:106).

The conditions on the sugar plantations were not much different from slavery. The work was heavy, relentless and unpleasant. Workers could be fined for a long list of offences. Wages were lower than in most other sugar colonies and almost exactly half those in the Caribbean. Wages were often paid months in arrears. Given these conditions it was not surprising that Indians who had served out their period of indenture were reluctant to renew their contracts. Some returned to India, others left the estates and the camps and sought a freer, better life either in a village or a town. Was James Peersahib one of these ‘free’ Indians? (Shima, 2010:109).

The Peersahib story

What can we surmise about the life of James Peersahib and his family?

Peersahib the interpreter

Firstly we know from family, including the Mauritian relatives we met, that he was an interpreter. But who employed him and what was his role? It was likely, we thought, that he was employed by the government, which at the time was the colonial government represented in Mauritius by a British Governor.

We were thrilled to discover that there were detailed records in the Mauritian Archives at Coromandel including hand written letters of our great Grandfather. We were guided to the Blue Books, the official record of the Civil Servants in each year - what office they held the date they were appointed and their annual salary. We went back to 1840 and combed the lists of office bearers in each department, and found that the Courts employed an
interpreter. This narrowed the search. We then opened the Blue Book from 1859 when Grandpa was born, and to our great excitement found James Peersahib, Interpreter, in the District and Stipendiary Magistrate’s Court.

What was his role and what languages did he speak? We searched in the Government dispatches for the letter of appointment for James Peersahib without success. But we did find extensive correspondence in 1858 between the District Magistrates and the Judiciary Department concerning the role of interpreters. It had been the custom to employ Indian messengers who doubled as interpreters. One of the District Magistrates pointed out that the educational level of the persons so employed was not sufficient to ensure accurate interpreting. He urged the separation of the roles, and payment of interpreters at a higher level. This was achieved, with the messengers employed at £24 per year and interpreters at £72 per year. The higher level is what Peersahib was paid from his first appointment in 1859.

There was also discussion of what linguistic skills were required. One of the magistrates declared that it is not satisfactory to expect one man to cover all the Indian languages. He proposed that two interpreters be employed. However this was not achieved and throughout Peersahib’s employment from 1859 to 1897 only one interpreter per court was employed. They needed to speak both Hindustani and Tamil. There was also discussion of the different requirements as between the Stipendiary Magistrate and the District Magistrate courts, the latter requiring a sound grasp of the legal proceedings and the English language used by the Magistrate. Given that Mauritius was strongly influenced by the French language that also developed into the local language (Creole), it is clear that French would have been another important language to have up the sleeve. An understanding and use of the diversity of languages spoken including French and English were therefore an essential part of Interpreter’s workplace skills.

The Stipendiary Magistrates heard minor cases of indentured labourers only. The District Magistrate heard a wider range of cases.

From these Blue Books we know that James Peersahib was a court interpreter from 1859 to his retirement in 1897. When Grandpa – Shadrach James Peersahib - was born in 1859. James was at the Plaines Wilhelm’s Stipendiary Magistrates court in the central and more
populous district of Mauritius. He moved his family to Savanne district when he was appointed to the court there in 1868 when grandpa was 9, but returned to Plaines Wilhems in 1873 on the plea of an unhealthy climate. Souillac where he had been living is in the South East of the island and much more isolated than Plaines Wilhems, which is the most highly populated area and includes Rose Hill where James died. The new appointment to Plaines Wilhems in 1873 was to the District Magistrate’s Court, a more senior position. Peersahib was employed until his retirement due to old age at 64 and he received a government pension from 1897 until his death in 1905--see letter from James Peersahib seeking assistance for transfer to Plaines Wilhelm’s written in 1873.

The Peersahib family

Headstone, Samson Peersahib, (younger brother of Grandpa)

1873-1875, St Thomas Church, Beau-bassin.

What siblings did grandpa have? We visited the grave of Samson Peersahib who was buried at St Thomas Church. Initially we thought from the inscription on his grave that he
lived between 1873 and 1875—see grave headstone in Ancestry.com. His birth certificate however challenges this, and puts his birthdate at 1861 which would make him 13 when he died. His birth certificate puts his place of birth at Cascavell which is located near Flic-en-Flac a small seaside town on the western part of Mauritius.

The tangible evidence we saw on his headstone is illuminating. At the bottom of the headstone is engraved the words ‘HE THAT IS DEAD IS FREE FROM SIN’, which is a biblical passage from Romans chapter 6 Verse 7. This scripture seems to be saying that at Samson’s baptism he is sinless. His parents then could be sure that at his early death, he was without sin and would go to live with Christ. The headstone also has engraved words: ‘SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF THE LATE SAMSON PEERSAIB, BORN, 11 JUNE, 1873: DIED 3 OF JANUARY, 1875’. There are probably different interpretations of the faded engraving on the headstone which is hard to read. After careful analysis of the engraving using imagery technology to further illuminate the writing that’s as far as we got on this occasion and have left his birth date open for further discussion and interpretation. The Birth certificate does provide conclusive evidence.

With no evidence of Samson’s cause of death except for oral accounts of him dying of a fever, it is relevant to look at the types of diseases impacting on society of the time. We know that there were epidemics of cholera and malaria that hit Mauritius in magnitude proportions. The epidemics of the 1860s and 70s are estimated to have killed thousands of people ‘creating much panic and despair’ in the community (The Making of Mauritius, 2008:31). If we correlate Samson’s death date of 1875 with Thomas Shadrach Peersahib’s birth, 1859), this would put Granpa at 16 just three years older than Samson. That is assumed to be not long before the time that Granpa is said to have left Mauritius for Australia at the age of 17. This would have been around 1876 or thereabouts. The revised date of death suggests that Granpa and his younger brother would have been very close growing up as brothers with the compassion that was instilled in them from their Christian upbringing. With that in mind one can imagine the emotional impact it would have had on Granpa after losing his only brother at such a young age. This provides further insight into the questions surrounding Granpa’s decision to leave the Island.
To follow up on the scripture from Romans 6:7, some research was done on the translation of the passage of the bible which demonstrates the dedication to the faith that the family had chosen to follow. This is commemorated at their place of worship in St Thomas Church Beau-bassin where many of Granpa’s people are buried. These include relatives of his father’s second marriage on the Purahoo line, and his cousin Priscilla and Ronald from his first marriage to Esther Thomas.

The other reference we found of Samson’s relatives in the church was a plaque dedicated to his cousin, Gamalial Thomas (Gami) who was ordained as a priest. He has a plaque in the church with the inscription: ‘In memory of the Reverend Captain Gamaliel Thomas, an Army Chaplain in Two World Wars. Died, 21st November, 1974, Aged, 86’. (See plaque in Ancestry.com. Image taken from the wall of the St Thomas Church, 2012-ICCPR.

The search for birth and death records without precise details and particularly dates is the challenging part of family research. It can be both rewarding and very frustrating at times and drives the quest to find answers to questions even stronger. While we had some success in retrieving data from the Archives and Libraries in Mauritius and elsewhere, we were less successful on our visit to Chennai India. The Tamil Nadu Archives in Egmore have a more complicated process. To gain access to primary source data one has to make formal application to the Commissioner of the Tamil Nadu Archives before access is given. We made an application in September, 2012 with no success to this point and have continued our journey of discovery through other sources-see letter to Commissioner in index.

Further light has now been shined on the subject matter in the recent family history publication of George and Robynne Nelson, their splendid book, ‘Dharmalan Dana,’ published by Australian National University Press, 2014. Due acknowledgement is made to source materials in this publication, now available in print and online at http://press.anu.edu.au

Given the complicated nature of information retrieval systems and the impediments that crop up along the way, our research was complemented by the diversity of community based resources made readily available. We were delighted to make contact with the grandchildren of Ruth Ramchurn, and her grandchildren Laurent and Arlette Purahoo in
Mauritius. We also made contact with their cousin Yvette Caspresse (Thomas) on the Thomas line in Negombo Sri Lanka - all related to Samson through James Peersaib, and his marriage to Esther and Lockheed.

The other valuable resource that emerged in November 2015 is the Family History project of Carlos de Sousa who has put together an elaborate Genealogy of the same family tree. He traces the Thomas line through his wife Marcella who is a descendant of Granpa’s Uncle Emanuel Thomas and his Aunty Mercy Vinden on the Esther Thomas line -see Geni.com https://www.Geni.com/family-tree/index/6000000039102442652

Carlos has attempted to draw together the extensive kinship system in a similar program to Ancestry.com called Geni.com and has been most helpful with consultations and shared resources. There is much data on this Family Tree that correlates with the one we created on Ancestry.com.

The other family member who has come to the frontline of our research is Alwin Thomas, a great grandson of Emanuel’s son Abishegam Thomas, (first cousin of Granpa on the Thomas line). Alwin Thomas’s father is Ronald Thomas, eldest son of Abishegam and Sophie Thomas which connects us on the Thomas matrilineal blood line. Alwin has been most helpful in providing information on family connections on his side. He now lives in Sydney with his family and keeps in touch with Peersaib-Thomas family members.

Having discussed some of the issues surrounding the acquisition of original data and other developments that have illuminated the journey of discovery, we can now continue with looking at Granpa’s kinship connections in Mauritius and Sri Lanka.

There is no evidence that James Peersahib had any siblings in Mauritius. His first wife Esther Thomas, however had three brothers, Jogabeth (Josapet), Eyravile (Israel) and Murravale (Emanuel), who are Granpa’s first Uncles on his mother’s side - MB’s in kinship terms. Of the three brothers, Emanuel married Esther Vinden and had seven children: Mercy, Gamaliel (Gami), Abishegam (Abi), Cyrus, who could have died young, Ebenezer (Ebi), William (Neesam), and Quisana. Quisana was questioned by Aunty Yvette in Sri Lanka which requires further clarification. We have since found however that the birth certificates for the seven Thomas family members are located in the birth records of
Mauritius (Nelson, G&R, 2014:269). This data would confirm the existence of the seven family members.

The four Thomas brothers who left Mauritius for Sri Lanka are Granpa’s and (Samson’s) first cousins. They are Gamaliel (Gami), Abishegam (Abi), Ebeneezer (Eby), and William (Neesam). They are said to have immigrated to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) sometime after Granpa left the Island for Australia in 1878 (per comm. Yvette Caspersz, Negombo, May, 2016). Abishegam married Sophie (Simon) and they had a daughter Priscilla Thomas who is said to have lived with the Thomas family in Sri Lanka and later chose to return to Mauritius at the age of 18.

Priscilla died in 2011 and is buried with her relatives in the St Thomas Church. Like many of the seekers of knowledge to this unfolding story, we learned that Priscilla played her part and was actively engaged in bridging the gap between the family connections. I recall that Priscilla and her cousin Yvette at different times visited Melbourne, to meet Granpa James relatives at the hospitality of George Nelson and family members in the 1980s and thereafter. Some of the letters of communication that transpired between George and Priscilla provide important insights into Granpa’s life in Mauritius before he left for Australia (Nelson, G&R, 2014 :).

By the time we got to Mauritius in 2012, Priscilla had already passed but the memory of her life and presence amongst the families of Mauritius and Sri Lanka is still strong. We were able to record a photo of her from her cousin Yvette in Sri Lanka. We now follow the storyline to Sri Lanka to discuss the Sri Lankan connection-the last leg of our journey but certainly not the end of the storyline to this point.

We were keen to find out more about the close relationship that continued through the correspondence between Granpa and Thomas family members. We were lucky to meet an important Thomas family member in Negombo who generously provided us with a significant piece of the jigsaw puzzle.

The Sri Lankan Connection

Picking up the storylines from where we left off in Mauritius and India in 2012 and locating them Sri Lanka, 2016 proved to be most productive. We were fortunate to meet
an important blood relative of Granpa’s on the Thomas kinship line in the town of Negombo.

We can now discuss Aunty Yvette’s knowledge of the Thomas brothers and particularly her father William. This comes from the meeting and lunch we had with Yvette in Negombo on the 9th August, 2017.

Aunty Yvette Caspersz is the daughter of Rev William P Thomas, whose father was Ebenezer Thomas, brother of Esther Thomas, Granpa’s mother. William was known as Nesam after his middle name Pernesam and with his three brothers and the other members of the family he was born in Mauritius—see dates in Ancestry.com. Aunty Yvette told us that Nesam migrated to Sri Lanka with his wife seeking new opportunities away from Mauritius ‘which was not a fully developed and independent country’.

He got married in the Holy Trinity Church Mauritius. She told us that he asked the bishop for work and got a job. He was ordained in Colombo. He was priest at St Stephen’s Negombo for 13 years, 1921-34. William Nesam Thomas invited his 3 brothers, (Gami) (Abi) and (Ebi) to join him in Sri Lanka (pers comm. Yvette, 9 August, 2016).

As previously mentioned, William Nesam is Granpa James first cousin on his mother Esther’s side. The question of the timing of the brothers’ departure from the Island becomes clearer when we examine their birthdates in relation to Granpa’s departure estimated to be May, 1878 (Nelson, G&R, 2014:279). We know he was appointed as the ‘head teacher, at Maloga in 1881’ (Mr. Maloga, 1976: 134). If we correlate those dates with the birthdates of William, recorded in the Diocese Records, Colombo, 3 April, 1880, and Gami in 1888, it seems likely that all the brothers were born after Granpa’s departure. This would be sufficient to conclude that their departure for Sri Lanka was obviously much later.

In 1881 we know that Granpa would have been 22 and ready to step into his role as teacher and educator at Maloga. In the final analysis it seems likely that his brother’s untimely death, the early remarriage of his father after Esther’s passing in 1877, coupled with the state of the economy and race relations in Mauritius, are key determining
factors. We do know however that Granpa continued to keep in touch with his cousins William, Gami, Abi and Ebi when he was in Australia.

Given that the pen was the only form of communication in those days and Granpa was an avid writer, there would have been many letters exchanging hands. In Priscilla’s letter to George Nelson she talks of lengthy letters written between Granpa and her Uncles in Ceylon and between his ‘half sister Ruth’ Peersaib in Mauritius. Priscilla’s cousin Joyce Danforth of Sri Lanka who we located in the Diocese records in Colombo, talks of Uncle James writing to her father, William Thomas, in her letter to George Nelson (letter from Joyce Danforth, Sri Lanka to George Nelson nd).

It would have been a wonderful reward to locate these letters and to see what information was being exchanged at that time. Unfortunately we could not find any of the letters written by Granpa to William or his other relatives in Mauritius and Sri Lanka except for the one that William wrote to Granpa and Ada’s daughter Rebecca in which he expressed a desire to come and visit his relatives in Australia, expressing a special interest in doing some preaching and sharing news of his missionary work in Mauritius and Ceylon - see letters of correspondence in file (Letter to George Nelson, 1 April, 1993).

Wrote letters to Granpa and Aunty Becky
Aunty Yvette Caspersz in Negombo

Our visit to Aunty Yvette was most enlightening. She is a lively and warm hearted soul who lives by herself in a small house in Negombo Town ‘with an Iron Gate and bush fence with flowers’ as she directed us over the phone. On arrival we were greeted with nice sweet cakes and Ceylon tea - thanks Aunt. She is strongly attached to Negombo which she often praises as the ‘best place to be’.

We were fortunate to make contact with Aunty Yvette through visiting the church and the priest at St Stephens Church on the hill. This is where she worships and the place where her father had served as priest, 1921-34. Reverend William Thomas’s service to the church congregation is proudly displayed in the Vicars list on the front entrance to the church - a timely reminder of his presence. Aunty Yvette invited us to accompany her to the Sunday service which we quickly accepted as an important protocol, and attend we did with Aunty Yvette up front. In the church she introduced us to the congregation as visiting family members and gracefully pointed us to the Vicars list on the board showing her father’s name.

After church Aunty Yvette took us to the cemetery to show us the graves of the Thomas family and identified those family members buried there including her husband, father and Uncles. There are four graves:

1. Yvette’s husband, Andrew Caspersz
4. Abi’s daughter Esther (died of TB at 17)

Aunty Yvette is still very sharp and attentive to detail and wears her proud Sri Lankan identity with the utmost esteem. She tells us that she was born in 1935 and still teaches English as a second language, and continues to teach some students in her house snuggled in a laneway off a busy and progressive part of the Negombo city. She likes teaching
children and their parents who want to improve their English and she is also bilingual speaking Sinhala and English fluently. She is very well read and knowledgeable in worldly events and Sri Lankan political history.

Now in her early 80s, Yvette has some health problems although her mind is very lively and she enjoys sharing her knowledge of family connections. The conversation is fluent and the influence and love for her father is very present. She has some heart problems that require medication, but she told us that she decided not to have a by-pass as there is no one at home to help with post-op rehabilitation.

Yvette’s knowledge of Granpa James was what she had learned from family connections and visits to her father’s birthplace in Mauritius. She also kept diaries of her travels and notes of family connections. Her recollections of Granpa James were interesting. She thought that he had landed in Australia at 14 or 16 and had an orchard and got rich! We know that Granpa’s life in the region he lived was certainly in the heart of the fruit industry which was one of the main employment avenues for our people, but getting rich and having an orchard was not on the money to say the least. Aunty Yvette kept an open mind on these matters and was appreciative for being enlightened with more substantive information from the family history project.

Yvette shared with us the extent of her family history which she described as one ‘big mixed pickle’. Her husband Andrew Caspersz was a Burgher of mixed Dutch and Sinhalese background. She has a daughter Coralie who married a man of Malaysian and Sinhalese descent - they now live in Perth. She has made regular visits to Perth and has made visits to Melbourne to meet family members of Granpa James. I remember meeting her on one of these visits organized by Cousin George Nelson who has done much ground breaking research and bridge building work on the subject matter. I think this was in the early 80s at a one of the family gatherings held at the Aborigines Advancement League, Melbourne to welcome her. We were both delighted to recall these family get togethers and the enthusiasm that was shared in meeting our distant relatives across the sea in Mauritius and Sri Lanka. She loves visiting Australia and expressed a desire to make one more journey to visit her daughter in Perth, ‘god willing’ in her words.
Yvette told us that Gamaliel Thomas (Gami) came to SL and was ordained as a priest. He served as Chaplain to the East India Co Army in Bangalore, India. Uncle Gami was teaching French at Bishop’s Cotton College Bangalore. The day Nesam died, Gami heard a knock at his door and saw Nesam.

Ebenezer Thomas (Ebi): Uncle Ebi Stayed in Bangalore with Gami. He was a businessman. He had diabetes and had a leg amputated. His children were all born in Sri Lanka.

Yvette’s mother was Rachel Thomas nee Wahed and she taught French in Sri Lanka.

Yvette’s grandfather was Wahed, a Muslim man from Alahabad, North India. He was a linguist and scholar and spoke 7 languages. He converted to Christianity and this put him in danger, so he came with missionaries to Mauritius. When he died the Muslims wanted to take his body and bury it within 24 hours, but the Christians won. He had 3 sisters. All their grandchildren are in Sydney or Melbourne.

We learned that after Priscilla came back to Mauritius she was very active in public life. She worked in the Ministry of Youth and Sport and was in charge of the Girl Guides for which she is said to have been instrumental in setting up and was appointed the Commissioner of the organisation (Notes from Yvette, Negombo, 9 August, 2016).
Story about Aunty Yvette


Yvette has a cleaning lady Sami. One day Sami fell at her feet and begged her to buy her a house. She was living in a hovel with her children at the time. Yvette told her:
‘Only God can help you. He is ready to hear you, but your voice gets lost when you have your head full of all the other gods.’
So she taught her to pray to the one God, Jesus.
The woman had a small block of land with a shack, a lean to that leaked with the rain, and Sami had to climb on the roof to cover it with plastic to keep her girls dry.
Yvette paid $1000 to put down a concrete slab, and then she wrote to her friends and family and raised the money to help put up a two room house with veranda.
Pray and ye shall receive!
Yvette showed us pictures of the house and we met Sami who was helping in the house that day and brought us tea. Yvette had also bought some special cakes for the occasion and accompanied us to where we were staying with lots of information including images and diaries she kept of her travels to Mauritius and some notes on family genealogies.
Having discussed the family connections that culminated in the Sri Lanka journey following the matrilineal line of the Thomas family, we can now return to the story of Granpa and his educational background before he left Mauritius. This will provide a good foundation to follow his journey from Mauritius to Australia and from Melbourne University to the Yorta Yorta world.

What can we learn about Grandpa’s schooling?

Was there a school for him in Savanne? We have no information about that. By the time the family returned to Plaines Wilhems district in 1873 grandpa was 14, and it was five years later that he decided to leave Mauritius for greener pastures. A rather daunting reality as one can imagine but one that he takes on with obvious feelings of melancholy for his people and his home that would remain far away but always close in kindred spirit.

We know from family information and letters of communication that Granpa had a high aptitude for learning and he saw education as an important empowerment pathway for bigger and better things to be achieved. Family information tells us that he was ‘highly intelligent’ and attended a “private school in Port Louis” Mauritius’- see letter from Priscilla to George Nelson, 1 April, 1993. One can assume that his quality of education was enabled by his father James who was on a comparatively good income from his employment as a civil servant in the Justice System, 1859-1897.

Priscilla’s letter is informative. She says that Granpa ‘lived with his parents in Port Louis’ and she makes an important reference to him ‘leaving the Island at the age of 17 in search of pastures new-as did my four Uncles including my Dad’, who all ‘left later for Ceylon, where I grew up’. She then gives an intriguing insight into some of the issues surrounding Granpa’s life at the time, with a sense of sorrow for ‘Poor Shadrach’ who she says ‘must have had a tough time, being a coloured Muslim lad in a strange land’. Will come back to this point shortly.

His primary schooling could have taken place in one of the private schools that had been set up in Pt Louis. We know from research that by 1866 there were about 25 such private schools attended by about 1000 boys. These included London Missionary Society schools
and, as we shall see later, Indian vernacular schools. There was also the Royal College School which had developed from the first government funded school in the colony, set up in 1823, as well as a number of other government schools.

Indian education had its own story. There were no provisions for the education of children of the indentured labourers, just as there had been none for the children of the slaves before them. But by 1851 large numbers of Indians were settling in Pt Louis after the expiry of their indentured labour contracts. In 1855 Muslim merchants founded a school in Pt Louis for children of their religion. Indian vernacular schools were attempted – two schools were opened, one in Tamil and one in Hindi. In these schools English was added to the curriculum and by 1882 replaced Indian languages as the language of instruction – the Indian vernacular schools were not seen as a success. Some Indian parents paid for education in private or in afternoon schools, preferring to maintain their own socio-religious teaching over a Western education, but these schools in time became complimentary to the government schools.

Grandpa may have attended primary school at a Church school or a government school, but because he was from a Christian family probably not at an Indian school.

Turning to secondary education, Royal College was the sole channel to higher education, but how elitist was it? Was it possible for an Indian student to attend? Royal College constitution established that it was open to youths of all religious persuasions. In 1829 the Equality of Educational Opportunity Act opened the college to all Mauritians irrespective of colour, class or creed. In practice the college was closed to all but the white elite until in 1832 when boys of the ‘free coloured’ population were admitted. Did they admit Indian students? (Ramdoyal, 1976:25)

In 1840 the British government, in an effort to make Mauritius English and Protestant rather than French and Catholic, gave Royal College an English rector and English language superseded French. The influx of Indian immigrants had dramatically changed the demographic and linguistic configuration of the island. English also ousted French as the language of the courts, a factor in James Peersahib’s success in getting an interpreter’s job. The Peersahib family were in practice Anglican as we know from their close connection with St Thomas Anglican Church Beau Bassin, and James necessarily spoke
English as an interpreter. In church they would be mixing with the English hierarchy to some extent although at the time Indians generally were regarded as inferior and alien, and only in Mauritius as an economic necessity- a similar ring to British colonial policy in Australia. So as an Anglican scholar, Grandpa would not have been too out of place in Royal College (Ramdoyal, 1976:27-29).

In the 1870’s the teaching of Hindustani and Tamil was introduced at Royal College, indicating that by then Indian students were there in significant numbers. All these factors make it possible that Grandpa went to Royal College. A visit to the College, however, to follow up this likely scenario was unable to confirm his attendance. The old records were not available and it was difficult to pursue any further.

We do know however that another Indian born in 1859, the same year as grandpa, graduated from Royal College Curapipe and went on to complete a medical education and become a doctor. This is recorded in “The History of Muslims in Mauritius”. He was the second Muslim to graduate from medical school and was “one of the rare Indo-Mauritian students to make it to the state college at a time when the very mention of one’s name was enough to be denied admission” (Ramdoyal, 1976:21-23)

To sum up, grandpa may well have boarded in Pt Louis while his family was in Savanne, and probably attended Royal College for his secondary education. He is also said to have helped his father in a teaching role in the Indian Christian School established by his father in Mauritius (Nelson, G&R, 2014:271). How else can one explain his high level of education, worldly knowledge, academic skills and theological teachings when he arrived at Maloga in 1881?

Why did Grandpa leave Mauritius in 1878?

The family tells us that Grandpa was 17 when he sailed from Mauritius and travelled to Australia around 1878. Did it have anything to do with the death of Samson in 1875? Then his mother died in 1877 after Samson’s death and his father remarried in 1878. This second marriage produced Grandpa’s step sister Ruth in 1880. Was it because of the difficulties he faced being a young coloured lad of Muslim background in Mauritius under British colonial rule. Or was it to do with his father marrying too quickly after Granpa’s mother
Esther died which is said to have affected him emotionally. Could it have been the culmination of these causative factors that determined Granpa’s decision to ‘leave the Island in search of pastures new’ or were there other causative factors that need to be considered?

Other causative factors of the time are the cholera and malaria epidemics that wreaked havoc in Mauritius during the 1850s up until the late 1860s ‘leaving people in a state of utter helplessness and despair’. These epidemics are said to have killed over 20,000 people creating panic and despair and leaving people with no guarantee that diseases like these would not return. Whether these were factors that contributed to Samson’s early death and the reasons for emigration from Mauritius at the time to escape epidemics of this scale and whether these may have impacted on Grandpa’s health generally are other factors to consider.

In 1859 the P&O and other shipping companies opened the England – Australia route via Mauritius, Sydney and Hobart. This would have provided opportunities for Mauritian seamen and maybe Grandpa got a job on one of these voyages by ‘befriending one the captains of the shipping companies to find his way to Tasmania’ (Nelson, G&R, 2014:281).

The fact that his father was well settled in a permanent and prestigious position and that Grandpa himself was an intelligent and well-educated young man, leaves open the question as to why he did not stay in Mauritius. Like many a young man he may have been looking for adventure and better opportunities than were available in a Mauritius where there was still considerable discrimination against Indians and black people.

One aspect of this discrimination was in the political sphere. Despite a change to the constitution in 1885 that increased the number of members in the Council of Government from 14 to 27, the franchise was so restricted that it was almost impossible for any but a white to be elected. In the 1886 election no Indian was elected. When Mahatma Gandhi visited Mauritius in 1901 he was shocked by the lack of rights for Indians. It was not until 1907 when an Indian barrister, largely at the suggestion of Mahatma Gandhi, came to Mauritius to practice law that the position of Indians was challenged.
It was against this background that Grandpa left Mauritius, and it was this political experience that he brought with him to Australia. His father James Peersahib had been working in the courts assisting Indians who were disadvantaged by illiteracy and lack of English and whom the political system left out in the cold. Granpa would have surely seen some of this reality and his arrival in an Australian world that was comparable to this experience is a powerful factor. Ironically, those human rights abuses and racial ideologies exposed in India and Mauritius would soon come home to visit Granpa in Australia. Whether by fate or good fortune particularly for the Yorta Yorta Nation, it was like the young messiah coming to the call when it was most needed. And the storyline takes another major turn in time and place.

While there are many stories to be told of Grandpa’s life, Thomas Shadrach James is the name that he lives by in Australia, and for which he is known at Maloga, Cummeragunja and in the general community up until his death in 1942. In respect of the admirable legacy he leaves however, he is still revered as Granpa James.

There is a lot more to tell about Grandpa’s life in Australia and his work at the Maloga and Cummeragunja schools where he educated the first generation of Aboriginal activists who are now household names in Australian Indigenous history. People like William Cooper, Theresa Clements, Bill Onus Doug Nichols and Marj Tucker were educated by Grandpa in the Scholars Hut at Maloga and in the School at Cummeragunja. This was during the time when the education level allowed to be taught in New South Wales was to the third grade - equal to that of a nine year old European child. This story is continued in other writings of Maloga and Cummeragunja history in a chapter written by myself in The First Australians, edited by Rachel Perkins in 2008. Having written this chapter there is a mistake in Granpa’s origins that needs to be corrected. While he has some connections with Sri Lanka his origins are Mauritius and India. My apologies for this oversight that will be corrected.

Meanwhile back in Australia further questions arise: Grandpa’s Death Certificate

On return to Australia we were able to access Grandpa’s Death Certificate from the Registry in Melbourne. The certificate raises some other equally intriguing questions that add further challenges to the story.
The Death Certificate confirms his father and mother’s names as James Shadrach Peersahib and Miriam Esther Thomas which contradicts the genealogical data noting James first wife as Esther- Miriam’s older sister. This has been further confirmed in the Marriage and Death Certificate entries researched by the Nelson family and documented in their publication (Nelson, G&R, 2014: 266-271).

Other interesting material raised in the Certificate is ‘place born and how long in the Australian States’. The answer to this question is: ‘Mauritius no date followed by 24 years in Victoria, 40 years in New South Wales, and 3 years in Tasmania’. While the Victorian and New South Wales connection is clear, the Tasmanian story is another question. We know that his third eldest daughter Rebekah does mention this in the Oral History interviews collected by Wayne Atkinson in the late 70s and recorded in his manuscript, A Picture from the Other Side, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, 1981, p.80. In her recollections of Grandpa, Rebecca mentions Tasmania as ‘the first place he landed’ where he ‘studied to be a schoolteacher’ before he ‘came across to Melbourne’ where he is believed to have studied medicine at the University of Melbourne. Rebecca also talks fondly about his disciplined studies of medicine - how he committed himself to the long hours of study by candlelight in the evening, allowing himself one day off for church and spiritual worship in the Christian faith that he ardently practiced.

The University of Melbourne again crops up when we look at the path chosen by Granpa’s son Shadrach who is believed to have followed in his father’s footsteps and studied law. We know that he was ‘Lecturing on the Aborigines’, now called Indigenous Studies at Melbourne University when he was in his early 40s (Tindale Collection of Genealogical Data, Cummeragunja, 25, May 1938). Like his father Shadrach saw the power of the pen as a means of articulating your views and wrote many letters including a book that he said he wrote on the life of his father and his work amongst the Aborigines. Would have been an amazing insight into the world as it was back then but unfortunately there is no trace of the book which is said to have been lost in a fire presumably at Uncle Shady’s home in Mooroopna (Uncle Shadrach’s letters personal writings and collection).
During my teaching at the University of Melbourne, I have made enquiries into the student records of Granpa and Uncle Shady’s academic studies, but have been unsuccessful to this point. Nonetheless we do know that they were both exceptional scholars in their relative fields of medicine, education and law, and Uncle Shady became a very strong advocate for his people in justice matters.

Further research on the Tasmania connections is revealing. George Nelson confirms Rebecca’s story by locating Granpa in Tasmania as his first port of call. This is taken from records of his arrival in Tasmania around 1878 and his application for a teaching job with the education Department in 1879. Having some teaching experience up his sleeve from Mauritius, with his father, he was keen to find work in Tasmania but as George Nelson explains there is no evidence to this date that he worked as a teacher in Tasmania (Nelson, G&R, 2014: 279-282).

From Tasmania the next stop was Melbourne which is where he is believed to have studied medicine at Melbourne University around 1879-1881. Keep in mind that 1881 is the year that another significant turning point in Granpa’s footsteps takes place. This is the time
that he meets Daniel Mathews at Brighton Bay beach and his life from there takes an irretrievable change. We reconnect with this storyline shortly.

**Further Research on Grandpa**

While following the footsteps of Grandpa in Mauritius and his father in India, we studied other archival sources in London that may be relevant to Granpa’s connections with India and Mauritius. These are the British Library Oriental and India Office Collections which house a lot of material from the period of the East India Company in India before it was handed over to the British Crown in 1857 under the Crown administration of Queen Victoria. This would certainly be in the period of James life in Madras before he immigrated to Mauritius around 1853.

With no results forthcoming from the Tamil Nadu Archives in Chennai, we thought London may have been the next stop in Grandpas Who Do You Think You Are journey— not to mention Tasmania as his first port of call.

We were able to access records of the East India Company administration repatriated to the British Library in Euston, London, after British rule in India. We looked for information in these records in the British Library India Collections, including the baptism records of the Church of England registries, assuming that if James religion of Church of England as recorded in his Death Certificate, 1905, he may have been baptized in Madras. Further to this leg work was more research in the National Archives in Kew Gardens, Richmond, to see if we could find more information. Looking back it must have been the longest bow to draw in the journey of discovery and one that produced no positive outcomes. The next and final stop in the storyline was the visit to Sri Lanka, 2016.

**Esther Thomas’s Story**

An issued that we're sure readers will pick up is, what about our great grandmother Esther Thomas from whom Grandpa takes his first name, and how the name Esther flows to their eldest daughter Miriam as her middle name and onwards.

We tried to get details of (Yoster) Esther Thomas in Mauritius through the births deaths marriages registry and are still waiting on formal applications we made to the registry in
Mauritius and in Chennai. We also visited the St Thomas Church in Mauritius to find out more and that’s as far as we have been able to go on except to say that the Thomas name is significant. St Thomas, as one of Jesus’ disciples, is reputed to have travelled to India and founded the early Christian church of South India. St Thomas churches are all over South India and are most common in Kerala in the West. In Sri Lanka there is a ‘tradition that St Thomas the Apostle visited Ceylon and preached to the people’ from the hill ‘overlooking the harbor on which the present St Thomas church stands’ (Medris, 1995:15).

Fortunately more valuable information on Esther has been made available in the Nelson book which gives us more substantive evidence on Esther and other family members. Birth and Marriage Certificates from Mauritius confirm that James first wife is Esther and mother of Thomas and Samson. The marriage between James and Esther took place at Plaines Wilhemes, Sri Lanka, 23, October, 1858 (Nelson, G&R, 2014: 265-268).

**Following Granpa’s footsteps from Mauritius to Australia.**

We follow Granpa’s footsteps from Mauritius to Melbourne and to that famous walk along Brighton Beach where it is said that he heard the word and the calling of the Yorta Yorta people. It was in a tent set up at Brighton beach by Daniel Mathews to appeal to the public for support for his missionary endeavor that Grandpa’s soul was irretrievably moved. Whether it was intuition or fate that flowed from this meeting and that metaphoric stroll along the beach front, it is a story that remains etched in our minds as the definitive point of Granpa’s life commitment to our people. It was at this meeting that Granpa offered his services voluntarily and the rest of the story unfolds from there. ‘A colored man from a European dominated Island who was particularly well suited to understand the problems of his new pupils’ is how Granpa’s coming is welcomed in the book of Mr. Maloga, 1976:134.

Granpa’s Yorta Yorta story begins at the old Maloga Mission. Here he taught and mentored Aboriginal people in what has been immortalised as the ‘Scholars Hut’- a place of outstanding quality of education achievement. It is set against the racial barriers that denied Aboriginal people equality of opportunity in education, sovereignty and land justice. (In Australia and at Maloga Mission and Cummeragunja Reserve, 1874-Present).
Daniel Matthews was the missionary who sought intervention into the deplorable human rights abuses that he encountered in the Murray Region in the 1870s. Mathews saw the importance of education and attempted to provide a better level of education for the people under his care at Maloga. The level of education allowed to be taught to Aboriginal people in New South Wales at the time was only to the third grade, which was equal to that of an eight-year-old white child. This was to change dramatically and forever with the arrival of a remarkably intelligent and worldly thinker of the calibre of Thomas Shadrach James.

It was on the visit to Melbourne to drum up support for his privately funded mission, that Matthews first met Thomas Shadrach James. Granpa was a distinguished scholar of Indian and Mauritian background, who came to Australia in the 1878 and studied at the University of Tasmania and Melbourne. He was an exceptional scholar in medicine, history, politics and linguistics and became a qualified teacher in education. He was also knowledgeable in traditional healing plants and dispensing medicines, and was often called upon to administer medical and dental treatment. Grandpa brought these skills with him to Maloga (1881) and to Cummeragunja, (1888-1922) where he became an admired leader, mentor and headmaster of the school up until his retirement in 1922 (Nancy Cato, 1976:240-41).

During his lifelong connection with Maloga and Cummera he became increasingly immersed in local Yorta Yorta history and culture. He gained a deep insight into Yorta Yorta culture, language, spirituality, tribal groups, and land relations which he recorded in his writings (Atkinson, 2001: 220). He wrote much about Yorta Yorta cultural traditions and land relations and a lot of his writings have survived and are held in the Archival records of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra.

Daniel Mathew’s admiration for the quality of Granpa’s teaching is reflected in his diaries, 1881-1889. Pupils under Granpa at Maloga, including the ‘white kids he taught’ were ‘better educated than the majority of state schools’; the school ‘flourishes under Mr James’ careful direction and children are in robust health’ (Nancy Cato, 1976:215, 225). Reports from visitors to Maloga were equally glowing, claiming that they ‘never saw children more
advanced’ in their learning and how they could ‘read, speak and recite in public with assurance’. These were the hallmarks of Granpa’s teaching pedagogy (Nancy Cato, 1976:193, 228).

Grandpa James encouraged students to be confident in their own abilities. He taught them to be proud of their Yorta Yorta identity and to recognise the empowerment that comes from being able to articulate their grievances through the power of the voice and the spear of the pen. Strongly influenced by the passion for human dignity and racial equality, Grandpa was a strong believer in the political strategy of passive resistance and non violence. It was a process nurtured by other humanitarians of the time that required patience, leadership and collective people power. Grandpa James’s teaching ability and the desire to gain justice for the Yorta Yorta people, combined to lay the foundations of what became the genesis of Yorta Yorta political leadership and visionary thinking to this day. The tradition of protest, and calls for freedom and equality against oppression and exclusion, grew from Maloga and continued through Cummera to the present.

The Scholars Hut

With this background it is worth reflecting on the concept of the ‘Scholars Hut’, the place where Granpa held his ‘scholars classes in the evenings’ (Cato, 1976: 185). We try to imagine the quality of education that Grandpa’s pupils were receiving, including the instructive nature of his teaching. We get a glimpse of this through the eyes of some of the non-Indigenous students whom Grandpa took under his wing at Maloga and Cummeragunja. Mathews, eldest son John, who went on to enjoy a privileged education in Australia, London, and Canada, returns to pay homage to Granpa, whom he said ‘laid the truest and finest foundation of his education’ and was a ‘teacher unsurpassed anywhere’. Given the restrictions placed on Aboriginal education at the time, Maloga’s success story in the eyes of John Mathew’s was attributed to ‘the character and ability of Mr James’ (Riverine Herald, 16 August, 1946). Maloga was punching well above its weight in education alone, and was making its contribution to deconstructing the racial superiority that drove Government policy of the time.
It must be said that the learning attributes of the bright young scholars of Maloga were producing outstanding results. William Cooper in particular, showed his aptitude for learning by ‘acquiring knowledge of the Alphabet, capital and small letters, in three days and then taught Bobby (his brother) capitals in –only one day’. Hunger for learning, and an opportunity to learn in an environment that was nurtured by someone who believed in the natural capabilities of his pupils, was an essential ingredient of Maloga education. It was the power of education and care that saw the rise of many outstanding leaders like William Cooper who carried the resistance flag high for Yorta Yorta justice and racial equality into the 20th Century (Nancy Cato, 1976:69).

Indeed the image of the Scholars Hut, a candle burning into the night, and the intellectual stimulus that Granpa was imparting to his students, is a powerful metaphor. It continues to have a profound effect on Yorta Yorta peoples desires to carry on from where Grandpa left off and to achieve in higher education.

Thomas Shadrach James married William Cooper’s sister Ada, at Maloga in 1885 and dedicated the rest of his life to Yorta Yorta education, culture, community health, and to their political struggle. His marriage into the people produced a blood line connection to nearly every family group within the broader Yorta Yorta Nation. He was one with and of the people and he remained headmaster until his retirement, giving over forty years of esteemed service. Indeed it was his knowledge and his style of teaching that inspired the next generation of Yorta Yorta political activists, including William Cooper, Sir Doug Nicholls, Jack Patten, Bill Onus, Theresa Clements, Shadrach James (his son by Ada), Marj Tucker, Geraldine Briggs, Eddy Atkinson and many others. Names of family group leaders like these have their origins in the achievements that were nurtured at Maloga and Cummeragunja. All were equally articulate, proud and talented leaders who used the knowledge and skills they learned to achieve better outcomes for their people (Nancy Cato, 1976: 192-193).

One also needs to recognise that while these leaders are iconic figures in Indigenous history, their achievements are inseparably linked to the support and solidarity of the community from where they came and for whom they represented. They were also
moulded by the unimaginable circumstances Indigenous people faced at that time in Australia under the Government’s atrocious segregation and control polices of the 19th and early 20th Century.

Reflecting on Grandpa James’ work and his retirement many years later, one of his pupils remarks: ‘He was the cog in the wheel, and when he left it left a big gap to fill because he set such a high standard to follow’. After his work at Maloga, and Cummera, Grandpa and his family moved to Melbourne for a while where he continued to mentor and advise his former students, who by this time had set up one of the first Aboriginal organisation in Australia, the Australian Aborigines League, in Melbourne in 1933. He later returned to Shepparton where he died in 1946 (4 years after William Cooper’s passing), and is buried with his wife Ada in the Cummeragunja cemetery (Atkinson, 1981: 79).

Many of his kinship group followed in his footsteps and have achieved in higher education including those at the University of Melbourne who have graduated and those who are now running and attending education programs in the ancestral lands where Maloga and Cummera were established. Many continue to play important leadership roles in community organisations, sport and government agencies, grounded in their proud identity and connections with the inspiration flowing from the days of Maloga and Cummera.

The concept of the Scholars Hut has turned a full circle and continues to be a key metaphor in the teaching of Oncountry Learning courses. Students doing field base Indigenous Studies courses are taken to the site of old Maloga and Cummeragunja to hear the story lines told by Granpa’s descendants, and to gain a better understanding of this important chapter of history.

The political strategies that were nurtured in the Scholars Hut - the Power of the Voice, Spear of the Pen and Collective organisation - have remained the key strategies used to achieve fair and just outcomes in the Yorta Yorta Struggle for Land Justice, National Parks, Equality of Education and Self Determination in 21st Century Australia. Like the old river Dungala that flowed past the old Maloga site, Granpa James story and vision will
continue to inspire future generations to see the value and importance of education as a means of individual and community empowerment.

We have included in the ‘References’ a list of the Library, Archival institutions and Oral history sources consulted for the project, 2012-2016.

Finally this is a project that has involved much work over a long period and has not been funded by any third party funding bodies. It has been done out of personal interest and commitment to tell Granpa’s story and to document for family interest and for publication in time. The information, including images and documentary sources collected and used in the working paper, needs to be observed in accordance with Intellectual Cultural Property ICPR and Copyright laws.

13,971 words.

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Mitchell Library, Sydney

Mortlock Library, Adelaide

State Library, Melbourne

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra.

International Research Institutions Consulted

1. National Archives, Republic of Mauritius, Coromandel.

2. Civil Status office Port Louis, Births, Deaths Registry.

3. Mahatma Ghandi Institute, Immigration Archives and Folk Museum, Moka.

4. National Library, Port Louis, Maturités.

5. Natural Museum, Port Louis, Mauritious.

6. Royal College, Port Louis, Mauritious.

7. St Thomas Anglican Church, Beau-bassin.

8. University of Mauritius, Department of History & Political Science, Moka.

9. Tamul Nadu Archives, Chennai, India.

11. National Archives, Kew Gardens, Surry


People Consulted:

- Lorna Puraeoo, Rose Hill - relative of T.S James - see genealogy.
- Laurent Paratoo, Quatra Borne - relative of T.S James - see genealogy.
- Rector of Royal College, Port Louis.
- Ms Jocelyn Chan Lam, University of Mauritius
- Mr Vishnu Govinden, Archivist, Immigration Archives, Ghandi Institute, Moka.
- Mr Dewanand Bagha, Senior Archivist, National Archives, Republic of Mauritius
- Commissioner, Tamil Nadu Archives, Egmore, Chennai
- Yvette Caspersz, Negombo, Sri Lanka.
- Alwin Thomas, Sydney Australia
- Carlos de Sousa, London
Lorna Purahoo, Grandpas GG Granddaughter Rose Hill, Mauritius
(Looks a bit like Aunty Lula)
Yvette Caspersz taken in front of St Stephens Church, Negombo where her father was Priest, 1920-1934
Medical Dispensary where Granpa worked at Cummeragunja

Picture of Granpa teaching at Maloga, after he was appointed head teacher, 1881 ICPR
Copy of letter written by James Peersaib, 20 May, 1873 when he was Interpreter in Justice System, Mauritius. Letter was a request for assistance when he was transferred from Savanne to Plains Williams with his signature at the bottom Peersahib. From: Archives, Mauritius-see p.16.
Plaque in St Thomas Church, Mauritius commemorating work of Gamaliel (Gami)
First cousin of Granpa James on the Thomas line

Nanny Priscilla, daughter of Granpa James
Ada Cooper-Yorta Yorta, 1887-1982
Shades of Heritage Connections Represented by place of Origin

Indigenous Australia-Yorta Yorta Dja Dja Wurrong

Republic of Mauritius

India

Sri Lanka
Formal Letter of Application to the Commissioner of Tamil Nadu Archives seeking information on GG Grandfather James Peersahib, 26 Sep, 2012.

To: The Commissioner, Tamil Nadu Archives, 51 Ghandhi-Irwin Road, Egmore, Chennai.

Re: Application for Birth certificate of ancestor Persaib alias James Peersahib, Madras, 1832.

From: Dr Wayne Atkinson, Senior Fellow, School of Social & Political Science, University of Melbourne, Great Great Grandson of James Peersahib.

Date: 26 Sep, 2012.

Dear Commissioner,

Following discussions with your administration of TNA, I have been advised that in order to gain access to records that may contain the birth certificate of my great great grandfather I need to make formal application to you as Commissioner of the TNA to determine whether or not there may be records of birth and or other relevant details of that nature in the TNA records. Please find attached a copy of his death certificate which I obtained from the Republic of Mauritius Registration Office from research that I conducted in March this year.

As this is a special family project that I have been working on for many years I would appreciate any information on this matter that may be possible through a search by your trained officers with whom I spoke yesterday while visiting the TNA as part of a visit to India on behalf of other family members in Australia many of whom have ancestral connections with the same ancestor.

It has been a personal journey for me in the hope that I can trace the footsteps of my great grandfather’s Indian and Madras ancestral connections through Mauritius to India and back to his many proud descendants back in Australia please see http://waynera.wordpress.com/family-history-connections/ for family history connections and other information on my profile at: http://waynera.wordpress.com/

Thank you kindly for your staff’s helpful assistance with this important matter and will look forward to hearing what results may arise from this application. The following contacts with assist in further discussions and communication on this matter.

Yours Sincerely

Dr Wayne Atkinson

Senior Fellow, School of Social & Political Science

University of Melbourne

waynera@unimelb.edu.au

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Granpa James & Granny Ada with eldest Daughter Miriam Esther
Husband, Stewart Morgan and son Theo or (Trevor), Shepparton, ICPR
Tracing our Heritage Connections through Granpa James
A Family History Project

Dr Wayne Atkinson, Yorta Yorta Dja Dja Wurrong
Catherine Guinness, Research Assistant
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