



Ira Daniel Aldridge

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The Lost Life of Ira Daniel Aldridge
(Part 2)¹

ABSTRACT

The sons of famous men sometimes fail to succeed in life, particularly if they suffer parental neglect in their childhood and youth. Ira Daniel Aldridge is a case in point—a promising lad who in his formative years lacked sustained contact with his father, a celebrated touring black actor whose peripatetic career in the British Isles and later on the European continent kept him away from home for long periods. When the boy rebelled as a teenager, his father sent him abroad, forcing him to make his own way in the world. Ira Daniel settled in Australia, married, and had children, but he found it difficult to support a family. Eventually he turned to crime and wound up spending many years in prison. The son of an absent father, he too became an absent father to his own sons, who also suffered as a consequence.

Ira Daniel's story is not just a case study of a failed father-son relationship. It also presents us with an example of the hardships faced by migrants who move from one society to another in which they must struggle to fit in and survive. This is especially difficult for migrants who look different from most of those in the community they are entering, so this is a tale about strained race relations too. And it takes place in a penal colony where punishments were severe, even for those who committed petty offences. Ira Daniel tried at first to make an honest living, but finally, in desperation, he broke the law and ended up incarcerated in brutal conditions. He was a victim of his environment but also of his own inability to cope with the pressures of settling in a foreign land. Displacement drove him to fail.

ABSTRACT

¹ Part 1 appeared in the previous volume of *Text Matters*. The abstract covers both parts.

WARRNAMBOOL

Within two months Ira Daniel and Ellen had moved and were living in Warrnambool, a port (population ca. 3,000) 170 miles west of Melbourne. Though small, Warrnambool was not a dull town. There were frequent lectures, readings, exhibitions, concerts, dances, banquets, and other social and sporting events that residents could enjoy. They had a Bowling Club, a Musical Union Committee, a Volunteer Ball Committee, a Ladies Benevolent Society, a Dramatic Club, and a Committee on Popular Entertainments, all of which provided opportunities for public participation. Ira Daniel was quick to join some of these groups, particularly those devoted to staging literary and dramatic performances. Despite his disastrous debut in Melbourne, he still hankered to prove himself on stage.²

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His first chance to do so appears to have occurred on 29 March 1869—Easter Monday—when a group of amateur performers from Warrnambool, accompanied by members of the town’s band, put on a concert, interspersed with readings from an assortment of literary works, for the benefit of the Common School at Mepunga, a neighbouring community. The *Warrnambool Examiner* reported that “In the first part Mr. Ira Aldridge gave as a recitation, ‘Othello’s Apology,’ with considerable dramatic effect, and in the second part he recited ‘The Well of St. Keyne’ in a very creditable manner” (2 Apr. 1869: 2). The first selection would have been an imitation of his father’s rendering of Othello’s last words, but the second, a mildly amusing ballad by Robert Southey, would have had to have been delivered in a very different style. That both were well-received suggests that Ira Daniel managed to display some versatility as a performer.

Encouraged by the favourable response from an audience of two hundred townspeople, he began to get bigger ideas. Five weeks later he was ready to attempt something more ambitious. On May 7th the *Warrnambool Examiner* announced that

This (Friday) evening, a dramatic performance will be given in the Royal Exchange Hall, by Mr. Ira Aldridge, assisted by members of the Club. We

² I wish to thank Helen Doxford Harris, co-author of *Cops and Robbers: A Guide to Researching 19th Century Police and Criminal Records in Victoria, Australia* (Nunawading: Harriland Press, 1990), for carrying out preliminary research on Ira Daniel Aldridge in Victorian archives and for guiding my own research in Public Record Offices in Victoria and New South Wales. I also want to express my appreciation to Elizabeth O’Callaghan of the Warrnambool and District Historical Society for sending me a list of helpful references to relevant articles in the *Warrnambool Examiner*. And I remain extremely grateful to the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra for awarding me a four-month fellowship that gave me the opportunity to conduct my research in ideal conditions.

have seen Mr. John [*sic*] Lambert's testimonial respecting Mr. Aldridge, who is spoken of by the veteran actor in high terms. He is a son of the late Chevalier Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius. The programme embraces selections from Shakspeare [*sic*], and other tragic authors, and includes songs, recitations, &c., by local talent. The entertainment will conclude with a series of Nigger Melodies, in character, by members of the Warrnambool Dramatic Club.³

237 An accompanying advertisement stated that the entertainment, "Consisting of Songs, Glees, Recitations, &c." would include Ira Daniel's recitation of "Othello's Apology" and Erasmus Darwin's melancholy "Death of Eliza at the Battle of Minden," plus, assisted by members of the Dramatic Club, selections from the fifth act of *Hamlet*. All this could be enjoyed in a front seat for one shilling sixpence and in a back seat for one shilling. A subsequent review of the show in the same paper recorded that "There was a fair attendance, and . . . [Mr. Aldridge] sustained the interest of the audience throughout, and was loudly applauded" (11 May 1869: 2). Here was another success and one that had earned the aspiring actor a little money.

A few days afterward Ira Daniel left for Belfast (now Port Fairy), a town eleven miles away that was about the same size as Warrnambool. There he hoped to give a series of entertainments, starting with a repeat of the show he had just mounted with the assistance of friends and fellow members of the Warrnambool Dramatic Club. For this purpose he rented the Odd Fellows' Hall in Belfast with an opening performance set for May 17th. The price for admission was now two shillings for a front seat but still one shilling for a seat in the back, and children could be admitted for half-price. Announcements placed in the *Belfast Gazette* and the *Banner of Belfast* emphasized the success of this entertainment when staged in Warrnambool.

The reaction of the "pretty fair audience" that assembled to see the show in Belfast was not what Ira Daniel had anticipated or wished. The *Belfast Gazette* wrote that

Mr. Aldridge was assisted in his entertainment by the Volunteer Band and Mr. James Dorney, of Warrnambool. With the exception of the performance by the band, the entertainment was a complete "sell." The songs of Dorney were execrable, both in their selection and in their execution; but the audience maintained a good humour throughout the infliction, amusing themselves with rallying the singer, and with ironical applause.

³ The error in Lambert's first name suggests that the testimonial was not written by him. Perhaps Ira Daniel had composed it himself.

The wretched burlesque of the grave digging scene of Hamlet, however, was too much for many persons in the audience. Some left the building, others went to the doorkeeper and demanded their money back, others, seeing they were sold, went in for fun, baiting the unhappy performers. Mr. Aldridge left Belfast the same night. (*Belfast Gazette and Portland and Warrnambool Advertiser* 20 May 1869: 2)

After this debacle Ira Daniel decided to give up show business and concentrate on finding other means of earning an income.

Early in June he opened a day and evening school for boys that offered instruction in “English in all its branches, Arithmetic, Euclid, Algebra, also French, German, Latin, and Pianoforte” (*Warrnambool Examiner* 1 June 1869: 3). In announcing the opening of the school Ira Daniel claimed that he was “an ‘Associate of Arts’ in connexion with Oxford University, and has during the past four years been engaged in private tuition” (28 May 1869: 2). The first claim was false and the second exaggerated, for he had had less than two years experience tutoring in Lilydale, Melbourne and possibly Warrnambool. There is no evidence that he had worked as a tutor in London.

The *Warrnambool Examiner* applauded his initiative, saying, “The want of an evening school for boys engaged at work during the day has long been felt in Warrnambool, and the rate charged, 1s 6d per week, is very reasonable” (1 June 1869: 2). Actually, the fee for evening classes was two shillings per week. Day students paid the lower rate.

Ira Daniel ran the school at his own residence, but there were occasional problems. On 23 July 1869 he had a boy summoned before the Warrnambool Police Court “for using insulting language”:

It appears that defendant and some other youths were passing complainant’s house, on the night of the 17th, whilst he was engaged teaching in school, and the defendant called out “Sambo,” an expression which he had frequently indulged in. Mr. Aldridge stated that he had cautioned him, and as it was very annoying he begged the protection of the court. Defendant was fined 5s, and 5s costs. (*Warrnambool Examiner* 27 July 1869: 2)

Warrnambool does not appear to have been a racially intolerant community at this time. Ira Daniel’s mother had been white and his father “the colour of a new half-penny, barring the brightness” (*The Times* [London] 11 Oct. 1825: 2), so he himself was a light-skinned negro, but his curly hair, thick lips, and broad facial features may have made whites conscious of his racial heritage. Nonetheless, the local paper reveals he was not denied participation in community activities. He continued to give recitations and

readings at monthly public events organized by the Committee on Popular Entertainments,⁴ he applied without success for a position as Tramway Clerk (17 Sept. 1869: 2) but was later appointed Collector for the Warrnambool Mechanics's Institute (21 Jan. 1870: 2), and he plugged on as a school-teacher, still running his night school in his home but in November 1869 opening a new day school for boys and girls in a larger building, the Volunteer Orderly Room, where he was assisted by James Martin in Commercial and English subjects and by Mrs. Martin as sewing mistress (23 Nov. 1869: 2). On 12 March 1870 his son Ira Frederick was born, and a few days later Ira Daniel purchased a piano and offered to give instruction in playing it three times a week for a fee of £1 1s per quarter in advance (25 Mar. 1870: 4). It looked as if he was prospering and things were going his way.

However, within six weeks he was in serious financial difficulty. On April 29th and 30th he was sued in court by three individuals and two firms for unpaid bills, unpaid wages and unpaid loans amounting to more than £14 (6 May 1870: 4). He did not have the means to discharge these debts, so police seized his crockery, glass, cutlery and family clothing, auctioning them off on May 5th (3 May 1870: 2). The amount realized at the outset of the sale satisfied all the claims for which verdicts had been obtained, so some of the items—mainly women's and children's clothing—were returned to Mrs. Aldridge (6 May 1870: 2).

But this was only the beginning of Ira Daniel's financial woes. On May 10th three more people—one a teacher at his school—came forward with claims on him amounting to more than £10 (13 May 1870: 3). Two others later joined the suit with additional claims of more than £8 (8 July 1870: 4). By the time the first of these new charges reached the court, Ira Daniel had absconded, and police who had been alerted in Warrnambool, Melbourne and Ballarat could not find him in order to serve a summons on him (13 May 1870).

PRISON

Where Ira Daniel went and what he did to support his young family after leaving Warrnambool is unknown, but it looks as if he headed toward the gold mining region of the country. The next mention of him in print appeared almost a year later in the *Victoria Police Gazette*. He had been picked up by the Avoca police and remanded to Castlemaine, seventy-eight miles northwest of Melbourne, for having committed a crime under a pseudonym:

⁴ See the accounts of these entertainments in the *Warrnambool Examiner*, 18 June 1869: 2; 13 Aug. 1869: 2–3; 22 Oct. 1869: 2; 5 Nov. 1869: 2; 12 Nov. 1869: 3; 19 Nov. 1869: 2.

Charles Corfield, *alias* Ira Aldridge, is charged, on warrant, with uttering a valueless cheque for £1, to John L. Sangster, Castlemaine, on the 22nd ultimo. He is a half-caste of african descent, a pianoforte tuner, aged about 25 years, about 5 feet high, medium build, very dark copper-colored complexion, black curly hair, clean-shaved; wore dark coat, dirty white waistcoat, and wideawake hat. He has a fresh scar on forefinger of one hand.—1st April 1871.⁵

He apparently was now following in the footsteps of his father-in-law.

Two weeks later he was charged with having obtained board and lodging as well as 7s 6d from another individual by uttering a valueless cheque under the name of William Hill (*Victoria Police Gazette* 18 Apr. 1871: 96). When these cases reached court, he pleaded guilty and “said that he had a wife and family dependent on him, and but that he was pressed he would not have done what he did. The Bench sentenced him to gaol for three months” (*Castlemaine Representative* 18 Apr. 1871: 2). The sentence included hard labour.

While Ira Daniel served his time, Ellen and Ira Frederick probably moved back to Melbourne where her mother and some of her siblings lived. Her father, Francis Huxley, and her younger brother John, who had been convicted of burglary and stealing, were both incarcerated outside Melbourne at Pentridge Prison, which had small single cells measuring 9’6”x6’4” (Kerr 153) but better facilities and amenities than the country jails. At Castlemaine and other prisons some distance from Melbourne, “the single cells, unlike the cells at the Pentridge Panopticon, were unsewered, nor did they have running water or artificial light” (Lynn and Armstrong 76). A thief who had served time at several prisons in Victoria was quoted as saying, “Melbourne [Gaol] is a Hotel, Pentridge is a boarding-house, but Castlemaine is Hell” (Lynn and Armstrong 84).

Upon completing his sentence in such a place, Ira Daniel may never have wanted to spend another day in any sort of prison, but nine months after being released, he was back at his old tricks again, passing bogus cheques for small amounts to shopkeepers, landlords and other gullible strangers in Melbourne. He was arrested at the end of April 1872 and prosecuted at the Melbourne Criminal Court on May 15th. A record of the proceedings appeared in a *Supplement to the Argus* the following day:

Ira Aldridge, a young man who was at one time advertised as a theatrical star, was charged with forgery and uttering. On the 17th April the

⁵ *Victoria Police Gazette* 4 Apr. 1871: 85, and reprinted in the *Warrnambool Examiner* 14 Apr. 1871: 2. According to the *Warrnambool District Historical Society Newsletter* Mar. 2005: 4, a wideawake hat was a soft felt hat with a broad brim and a low crown.

prisoner went to the shop of Mr. Joseph Benjamin, in Elizabeth-street, and purchased a pair of earrings for 6s. He paid for them by a cheque for £1 17s., purporting to be drawn on the Commercial Bank by Thomas Howard, the difference between the price of the goods and the amount of the cheque being handed to the prisoner. No such person as Thomas Howard had an account in the bank. The cheque was proved by one Charles Partridge to be in the prisoner's writing.

The prisoner was found "Guilty."

He was then arraigned on another charge of forging the name of George Coppin to a cheque. On the 26th April prisoner went into the Greyhound publichouse at Richmond and presented a cheque for £1 3s. 6d. of Mr. George Coppin's. The landlord cashed the cheque, but on presentation it turned out to be a forgery.

Verdict—"Guilty."

The same prisoner was arraigned on another charge. On the 18th April prisoner went to the Niagara Hotel and asked the landlord to cash a cheque for £1 4s. 6d. on the National Bank, Bourke-street, and purporting to be drawn by George Halliday. The landlord had no change, but a bystander named Joseph Gulliver cashed the cheque. It turned out that no person of the name of George Halliday had an account at the bank.

Verdict—"Guilty."

There were two other charges against the prisoner but they were not proceeded with.

Prisoner was remanded for sentence. (16 May 1872: 2)⁶

Actually, the official record of the trial shows that there were seventeen additional complaints registered against Aldridge for similar offences,⁷ and there might have been many more if greater sums had been involved, but "in each case the cheque was drawn for a small amount, the largest being £2 7s" (*Argus* 7 May 1872: 7). By now Ira Daniel was a serial fraudster specializing in financial transactions so petty that he may have thought no one would bother to pursue him, but since he was known in court to have been a repeat offender with a record of imprisonment at Castlemaine, the penalty he received was three years at hard labour, to be served this time at Pentridge, where two of his in-laws occupied cells.

On July 27th that year Ellen gave birth to a second son, James Ira, at the Lying-In Hospital in Melbourne, so she had been in her last trimester of pregnancy when her husband was arrested, tried and sentenced. What

⁶ George Coppin, a well-known British theatre manager in Melbourne, had in his younger year performed with Ira Daniel's father in Newcastle and Wolverhampton in 1846. For information on his career in Australia, see Bagot.

⁷ Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 23/P/O, Unit 15, Melbourne Criminal Sittings, 15 May 1872: 21.

could the poor woman do in such circumstances? One assumes that she sought refuge with her relatives, but all we know for sure is that when James Ira died a year later on the 7th of May after two days of convulsions, she was living at Nott Street in Sandridge, Melbourne's seaport. During the next two years she may have lived with another man or turned to prostitution, for on 24 July 1875, a little over a month before her husband was discharged from prison on August 30th, she gave birth to another boy, John Edward, who could not have been Ira Daniel's son.

Ira Daniel seems to have taken this surprise in stride, for when the birth was registered a week later, he signed on as the father, describing himself as a teacher of languages living with his wife and five-and-a-half year old son at 91 Cambridge Street in Collingwood, a northern suburb of Melbourne. However, in an application for assistance from the Victorian Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society, he described his situation as follows:

Destitution and that alone was the cause of my fall. I had tried hard to obtain a living for my family but failed. My wife was in ill health at the time as well. I do not want pecuniary assistance but employment is the thing I want. I have one child of my own and about six weeks since my wife's sister died leaving an infant to our care. I have some idea of starting hawking tobacco, round the shipping and suburbs. But I ask the Society to obtain me employment, on a station as book-keeper, store-keeper, or any employment that I am capable of doing.⁸

The Victorian Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society had been formed in 1872 at a meeting called by the Society for the Promotion of Morality. Its purpose was to help discharged prisoners make the transition to normal society so that they would have a chance to lead virtuous, honest and productive lives. However, at first they helped only "deserving cases" (Lynn and Armstrong 96). Members of this Society may have been responding to a report made a year earlier by the Inspector-General of Penal Establishments who had pointed out that

No system can be considered complete which does not make provision for saving the discharged prisoner, on his first restoration to liberty, from the promptings of his own evil heart, and from his old associates in crime. Two causes combine to throw him back upon his old habits—employers often object to give him work with the knowledge that he is a discharged prisoner—*employes* [*sic*] refuse to work with him for the same reason. (*Age* 18 May 1872: 7)

⁸ State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, MS 10663, Bag 27, Application Register No. 4, p. 34.

The Executive Committee of the Society considered Ira Daniel's application on the day he was discharged, and noting that his conduct in prison had been good and that he "now appeared sincerely desirous to . . . strive to regain his character . . . [and] to obtain some kind of employment through which he could support [his family]," they agreed to help him find suitable work.⁹ In the meantime he began hawking tobacco, using the sum he had earned in prison (£5 6s. 2d.) plus a loan from the Society to start his business. Entries in the reports of George Wilmot, agent and collector for the Society, reveal that for a time Ira Daniel did make some progress:

September 10, 1875—Aldridge has called several times through the week. He says he is doing a little and would do much better if he had a larger stock of goods. He wishes for the loan of £2.

September 13—Alldrige [*sic*] called today, to say that he had been out to see Mr. Bridges, overseer of the Shoemakers at Pentridge, who advised him to get a sewing-machine, and he would endeavour to obtain him plenty of work in making uppers. Alldrige finds he can get a machine for £9.9.0 on time payment but wants a guarantee, this he asks the Society to be. To have a loan of 20/- towards increasing stock to be expended by agent.

September 14—Aldridge was given tobacco to the value of £1.

September 27—Called today to say he was making a living.

October 11—Ira Aldridge is steadily pursuing his employment—hawking tobacco—he makes a living.

November 8—Ira Aldridge is still hawking tobacco and is making a living.

January 10, 1876—Ira Aldridge is still doing pretty well, he would have repaid the loan, but his wife has been sick. He promises to call this week.

February 14—Ira Aldridge is still persevering in the right direction.¹⁰

Ironically, this last report was written a week after Ira Daniel had started forging and uttering worthless cheques again, first in Melbourne and then much farther afield in Horsham and Echuca, where under another pseudonym he had represented himself as a travelling salesman for a music company in Melbourne (*Victoria Police Gazette* 29 Feb. 1876: 61). In most cases the amounts fraudulently obtained continued to be small, not exceeding £3, but in one instance he obtained from an outfitter in Melbourne the sum of £18 17s. 6d. by asking him to cash six of these cheques. After

⁹ State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, MS 10663, Box 103, Minute Book No. 2.

¹⁰ State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, MS 10663, Bag 27 and Box 51, Agent and Collector's Report.

this, the police were looking for him, but he had already fled to Sydney, where it was said “he continued his dishonest career” until he was arrested by Sydney detectives in November 1877 and remanded to Melbourne where he faced trial for two of his old crimes. The press reported that “he pleaded guilty, and asked the bench to deal with the cases. In order to give him an opportunity of reforming, his application was granted, and the lenient sentence of twelve months’ imprisonment for the two offences was inflicted upon him” (*Age* 21 Nov. 1877: 3). The reporter failed to mention that this lenient sentence required that he spend the year at hard labour in Melbourne Gaol.

In April or May 1878, halfway through his new period of incarceration, Ellen had another baby, a boy she named Arthur Henry without registering his birth. In this case too it is not certain that Ira Daniel was the father, for he presumably would have been continuing his criminal career in New South Wales at the time the child was conceived. Ultimately it didn’t matter, for Arthur Henry died four months later, so Ira Daniel never had any contact with him. On the death certificate Ellen recorded her husband as the father, listing his occupation now as bootmaker, a trade he may have learned during one of his spells in prison.

Upon his release from prison in mid-October 1878, Ira Daniel made another appeal to the Victorian Discharged Prisoners’ Aid Society for assistance, but this time, after examining his record of recidivism, the General Committee declined his application.¹¹ The following month he started passing bad cheques again.

It would appear that Ira Daniel never learned his lesson. He kept on forging and uttering deceptive cheques even though he must have known that the police would eventually catch him and send him back to prison. Perhaps it was simply the easiest of crimes to commit. A historian of criminal activity during this period states that

A shortage of coin and bank notes in country districts, and a consequent reliance on orders, greatly widened the scope for forgery. . . . New South Wales’ convict character . . . made it unsafe to carry or keep cash. . . . it was distance which principally led to the widespread use of orders. The ease with which such orders could be drawn or altered was believed to be a major incentive to forgeries. (Sturma 112)¹²

The same historian adds that

¹¹ State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, MS 10663, Box 30, Application Register.

¹² Forgery and uttering were common in Victoria as well. Between 1868 and 1876 the *Victoria Police Gazette* recorded an average of nearly 110 cases per year.

it was assumed that most offenders were either intoxicated when they perpetrated crimes, or that they committed offences in order to satisfy their appetite for liquor. . . . Burglaries were inspired by spirits, while forgeries were committed by “habitual drunkards of the more educated class.” (Sturma 150)

Ira Daniel certainly would have been classified among “the more educated class,” but given the long years he spent in prison, it appears unlikely that he would have had an opportunity to develop the habit of excessive drinking.

He may have simply given up all hope of finding a decent job. As an ex-prisoner he certainly couldn’t go back to school teaching or to acting on stage, and he never had sufficient means to set himself up in business, so what options of productive employment did he have? John Buckley Castieau, the Governor of Melbourne Gaol in the 1870s, recorded in his diary that

I am convinced both men & women frequently leave the Gaol impressed with the folly of leading dissolute lives. They can-not however battle with the world without assistance. Reputable people turn the cold shoulder upon them & their applications for employment & at last in desperation they seek the kind word & shelter where it is to be got, among their old companions or those they have made in Gaol. Return to prison is then certain & merely a time of days or weeks. Their having been in Gaol before & the company they are keeping is sufficient to make them fair game for the Police. (194)

Ira Daniel seems to have been a case in point. By the middle of December 1878, barely two months after being released from Melbourne Gaol, he was again apprehended, charged and convicted in two police courts on several counts of obtaining money by false pretences, and sentenced to another year at hard labour, most of which he spent in Geelong Gaol, forty miles southwest of Melbourne (*Victoria Police Gazette* 11 and 18 Dec. 1878: 345, 355).

Upon release the following November he almost immediately resumed his old practices under various pseudonyms, but now he did so some distance from Melbourne—in Ballarat, Hay, Narrandera, and fashionable sections of Sydney (*Victoria Police Gazette* 4 Feb. and 3 Mar. 1880: 29, 61; *New South Wales Police Gazette* 25 Feb. 1880: 72). One of the warrants for his arrest stated that “He frequents public-houses,” so perhaps it is true that he, like other educated forgers, had developed a strong appetite for liquor (*Victoria Police Gazette* 4 Feb. 1880: 29). It took until August for police to find him, and after being tried under the assumed name of

George Crawford in a Wagga Wagga court, he wound up in Berrima Gaol, where he was described as follows:

1880: 193. George Crawford
 Condition: Free
 Ship: Great Britain
 Year of arrival: 1867
 Where born: England
 Religion: Church of England
 Trade: Cook
 Age: 28
 Height: 5'5"
 Make: Stout
 Complexion: Black
 Hair: Black, Curly
 Eyes: Black
 Education: Read & Write
 Remarks: Thick lips, Thick short nose¹³

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A few of these details (the name of the ship he arrived on and his age) were incorrect, and his trade was new, but the rest of the description conformed to what had been said about him in previous prison registers.

Berrima Gaol, constructed in 1839 with 92 cells, was described in a pamphlet a century later as “a blot on the history of British Justice in this country, [being] as useless as it was despairing, and it is doubtful if any moral benefit accrued to any who spent a period of exile within its walls” (*Berrima Gaol* 1). All the worst offenders were sent to Berrima, and they were treated harshly. After 1860, prisoners serving five years or more had to spend their first nine months in silence and solitary confinement in a small cell (6'x4') for twenty-three hours each day, only one hour being allowed for exercise in a narrow fan-shaped yard (Jervis 34 and McColgan). “What with the continual loneliness and silence, they succumbed to a condition of melancholy” (*Berrima Gaol* 4).

It is in this state that we must leave Ira Daniel, for no further records have been found that tell the rest of his story. He was sentenced to five years at hard labour on the roads at Berrima, but we don't know what happened to him afterwards. Perhaps he was arrested yet again and detained elsewhere under other pseudonyms. Or perhaps he died an early, unrecorded death. The only thing that seems certain is that after his stint at Berrima, and possibly even earlier, he never returned to Ellen

¹³ State Records New South Wales, Wagga Wagga Description Book (1880), ref. CGS 2570, 6/5513.

and her children, for we do have further fragments of information about them.

FAMILY

Ellen had been having her own problems with the law while her husband was in and out of prison. She had been arrested and locked up for a week in November 1879, for a month in January 1880, and for forty-eight hours in April 1880. These sentences were for minor offences, probably drunkenness or some other form of disorderly behaviour,¹⁴ but in February 1881 she was sent to Melbourne Gaol for twelve months at hard labour for keeping a house “frequented by thieves and women of ill-fame” (*Age*, 11 Feb. 1881: 3). She may have been imprisoned earlier under the name of Ellen Jackson or another pseudonym for such crimes as stealing, vagrancy, indecency, prostitution, and using threatening, insulting or obscene language.¹⁵ By April 1894, when she was given another twelve-month sentence for being “idle and disorderly,” she had a record of nineteen previous convictions (*Victoria Police Gazette* 23 Feb. 1895: 70a). Clearly she had gone steadily downhill after the break up of her home life.

Her children would have been quite young—Ira Frederick almost eleven, John Edward only five—when she went off to Melbourne Gaol for a year. Someone must have stepped in to care for them in the interim, but it appears likely that their lives were considerably disrupted by the loss of both parents. In June 1891, when John Edward was fifteen and apprehended along with two other youths for playing pitch and toss at a late hour in Melbourne (*Age* 30 June 1891: 5; *Argus* 30 June 1891: 9), the police reported him as a neglected child whose “parents are reputed to be very disorderly and dishonest, and also the whole family bears a very bad character.”¹⁶ He was sent to a reformatory for two years, but after serving a portion of his sentence by working on a farm in Warring, he absconded in November 1892 and went to live with his mother in Carlton. However, he too soon turned to petty crime and subsequently was booked for offences major and minor—larceny, vagrancy, getting into a railway carriage while in motion.¹⁷ By 1899, when he was arrested and imprisoned for six

¹⁴ The offences are not mentioned in her prison record held at the Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 516, Unit 8, No. 4709: 211.

¹⁵ In a court deposition now held at the Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 30/P, Unit 935, File 341/1893: [24], Ellen stated that “I have been called Ellen Jackson.”

¹⁶ Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 4527, No. 18083: 108, available on fiche no. 100. Ellen’s father Francis had a long prison record, and her brothers John and Edward had been in and out of jail several times by the 1890s.

¹⁷ Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 515, Unit 51, No. 27970: 213.

months as a “suspected person,” he had a record of six previous convictions (*Victoria Police Gazette* 4 Apr. 1900: 128b).

Back in April 1893, when John Edward was still living with his mother, Ellen brought a charge of assault with attempt to rape against John Wooten, a young man who along with three companions had entered her house in the middle of the night demanding beer. The *Argus* reported that

The case for the prosecution was that Ellen Aldridge, a married woman, living apart from her husband in High-street, Carlton, was aroused about 1 o'clock on the morning of the 9th ult. by a disturbance in the kitchen. She went down, and found four young men assaulting her son. She interfered, and her son ran off for a policeman. The accused then knocked her down and attempted to assault her, but she screamed for assistance, and the men decamped. The accused was afterwards arrested and identified by Mrs. Aldridge, but her son was not able to do so. The defence was that Mrs. Aldridge was mistaken, and that the accused was not one of the men who were in the house. The jury acquitted the accused, and he was discharged. (19 May 1893: 7)

Wooten may have escaped punishment because the jury did not find the testimony of a woman with a long criminal record credible. A month later he was tried for perjury with testimony given by several police constables who supported Ellen's version of events, but Wooten was again acquitted.¹⁸

One interesting fact that emerged at these trials is that on the night of the alleged assault “a child three years of age was the only other person in the house.”¹⁹ There was no indication of whose child this was. Ellen, at age forty-seven, was probably too old to be its mother; John Edward, now eighteen, may have been too young to be its father; and Ira Daniel, having disappeared for thirteen or more years, almost certainly had nothing to do with it.

This leaves Ira Frederick, age twenty-three, as the likeliest suspect. Unfortunately, we know nothing about his youth and young adulthood except that he somehow managed to stay out of trouble while his father, mother and brother were repeatedly breaking the law. He never was sent to a reformatory or to prison, so his name does not turn up in the *Victoria Police Gazette* or other criminal records. The only surviving documents through which we can trace him during this period pertain to his death, which took place the following year, on 20 May 1894. There were several reports of this “strange death” in the press:

¹⁸ The depositions for both cases can be found at the Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 30/P, Unit 932, File 287/1893, and Unit 935, File 341/1893.

¹⁹ Public Record Office Victoria, VPRS 30/P, Unit 932, File 287/1893: 3.

About 1 o'clock yesterday morning Constable E. Hedger, of North Melbourne, was informed by a man named William Dunlop that the body of a respectably-dressed young man was lying in Courtney-place, off Courtney-street. The constable went to the spot, and found that though the body was covered with blood there was still some life in it. He therefore removed it to the Melbourne Hospital. On admission there, however, life was pronounced to be extinct. Returning to North Melbourne Constable Hedger learned that the deceased was one Frederick Aldridge, a married man with a wife and one child, who lived in Mary-street, North Melbourne. Mrs. Aldridge states that her husband was seized with an attack of severe illness on Friday, during which he vomited blood plentifully. On Saturday night he was much better, though at 8 o'clock, when she went out, he was in bed, and intended to remain there. During her absence he had apparently been seized with the illness again, for the bed was covered with blood, and the doorstep and verandah were stained with it. From there to the spot where Aldridge was found there was an almost continuous track of blood, and it is surmised that when his illness returned, being alone and unable to send for medical assistance, he had got out of bed and dressed himself hurriedly so that he might go himself to the doctor's residence. Exhaustion, consequent upon his loss of blood, overcame him in Courtney-place, and he fell and died on the paving-stones within a hundred yards of his own door. (*Argus* 21 May 1894: 6)

His death certificate identified the cause of death as ulceration of the right bronchus and pulmonary hemorrhage, but given the circumstances of the case, the city coroner did not consider an inquest necessary (*Argus* 22 May 1894: 3). It is odd that the death certificate did not name his wife, saying only "Married Particulars not known." The names of his parents were also not known.

Ira Frederick was buried in the Church of England section of the Melbourne General Cemetery in the family plot (GG No. 39) of James and Rachel Fulljames. This fact suggests that Ira Frederick's wife may have been one of the Fulljames's daughters, possibly Laura, since their other daughters, Emma and Margaret, had married in 1892. However, Laura, born in 1876, would have been only eighteen years old in 1894. Would she have borne a child four years earlier who was being raised by her mother-in-law? The absence of birth and marriage records makes it impossible to answer such questions with any degree of assurance. It is known that Laura in 1913 married James Burr, and she may have married someone else before or after this date, for when she erected a monument on her parents' grave after 1903, she gave her name as Laura Hill-Trevor, but there is no official record of her marriage to anyone with this name. Rachel Fulljames, in a previous marriage to William Pemberton, had had three other

daughters—Esther Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary Ann—one of whom could perhaps have been Ira Frederick’s wife. An Esther Jane Pemberton married in 1888, and an Elizabeth Margaret Pemberton married in 1889. If these are Rachel’s daughters, this leaves Mary Ann as the only likely bride for Ira Frederick from this branch of the family, but there is no record of a Mary Ann Pemberton ever marrying.

In any case, the child born to Ira Frederick’s wife, whoever she was, and whether or not she left her child to be cared for by his mother in 1893, may be the last possible genetic link to Ira Frederick’s grandfather, Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius. It would be interesting to know if this descendant had any descendants, for if so, there is a possibility that the bloodline of Ira Aldridge may be carried in the veins of some Australians living today. Ira Aldridge’s Swedish wife had four children by him but they all died childless.

Ira Daniel, the illegitimate son who could not get along with his stepmother and was sent away to Australia half a year before his father died, had an unlucky life. His best years may have been those he spent at boarding school, where he had a secure base among friends and teachers who cared for him. His “Mamma” was also a reliable source of love and comfort when she stopped travelling with her husband and took up permanent residence in London. His father, though, was seldom home during his youth and adolescence, and Ira Daniel may have lost some respect for him upon discovering that he was a serial womanizer. Perhaps this knowledge also alienated him from his young stepmother whom he appears to have treated with scorn and hostility.

Australia was meant to reform him, to help him mature and learn to rely on his own resources. His father had left the United States at age seventeen and had struggled to make a career for himself on stage in England. How wonderful it would have been if Ira Daniel had been able to report to him his own success playing Mungo in Melbourne. But he did not have the theatrical talent of his father, so he started teaching to make a living. In this profession he also failed, and when he could find no other honest work by which to support his family, he turned to crime.

The Australian penal system, based on a notion of “reform through suffering” (Finnane 42–43), only made his life worse. Long spells of solitary confinement, enforced silence, and hard labour killed his spirit, and his prison record deprived him of opportunities for gainful employment afterwards. Following his three years at Pentridge he made a half-hearted effort to earn money independently by hawking tobacco, but he found it far easier to pass forged cheques. Between 1871 and 1885 he spent more than ten years in penitentiaries and another two or three years travelling and hiding from police. His wife turned to other men, and his sons hardly

ever saw him. He wasn't just an absent father; he was an unknown father, someone who had no presence, no place, in their lives. One of his sons turned bad, and the other died young. His wife gradually became an habitual criminal.

It's a sorry story, and one wonders if the inheritance his father left him would have enabled him to make a fresh start. However, Ira Daniel turned twenty-five just as he was entering Pentridge, and he may not have wanted Mr. King, Mr. Bone or his stepmother to know where he was or what had happened to him. Also, it is possible that he knew nothing about his father's will. Perhaps neither the executor nor any of his father's friends had been able to reach him in Lilydale, Melbourne or Warrnambool to inform him of the terms in his father's last testament. Lost, Ira Daniel may have been left to his own fate in a foreign land. This was a legacy of abandonment that, like a bad cheque, he passed on to his wife and sons, cheating them of a decent family life.

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