

## She Lived in Tumultuous Times

Williamina de Castilla (nee Couper) 1838 – 1893

By Robert Atkins [Member: 10908]

WILLIAMINA WAS BORN in Aberdeen, Scotland, the daughter of William Couper and Margaret Stephens. Her father was involved in building a dock and ship building at Whampoa in China in the 1840s and 1850s with his son John Cardno Couper. The family lived on a 'chop' [a house boat] moored in the river off Whampoa. During the second Opium War, newspapers of the day reported that in December 1856 Mr Couper [snr] was kidnapped by a party of Chinese while walking on the deck of the chop with his wife. He was taken up river by sampan and apparently never seen or heard of again.

Captain Henry Castilla, was born with the impressive name Henry Mariano Ramos de Castilla in 1821 in Norfolk, England, to Mariano Jose Ramos de Castilla and Rebecca Cooke and was a steamer Master Mariner operating mainly on the Pearl River between Canton, Macao and Hong Kong during the 1850s; and, as far as I can work out, also between the UK and in and around China in the 1860s. His father was Argentinean, of Spanish descent, who was an emissary and informant to the British Government seeking the liberation of South America from Spanish rule. He lived much of his life in England. The de Castillas often dropped the 'de' which I speculate was in deference to living within English society. This practice continued variously down the generations.

Henry Castilla married Williamina Couper in November 1857 in Hong Kong. Earlier that year Captain Henry Castilla, master of the steamer *Fei-ma*, was one of the last commercial steamers to ply the Pearl River during the Opium War, having been chased by 53 Chinese war junks, the *Fei-Ma* took several shots to its hull. Williamina certainly lived in tumultuous times; as there is some suggestion she was on the chop when her father was kidnapped and she married a steamer master who was involved in skirmishes with Chinese war junks and whose vessel was also under constant threat of pirates



*A studio photograph of Williamina Castilla [nee Couper] as a young woman. Courtesy of Robert Atkins.*

sneaking aboard. Henry and Williamina returned to England in September 1859, and their first daughter Margaret Rebecca was born six months later.

They appeared to stay in the UK until 1862 when Henry commanded the steamer *Express* to Hong Kong. There they had mixed fortunes. Their first son Henry Couper was born in Shanghai in July, and in October their second daughter Williamina Mary died and was buried in the Hong Kong Cemetery. We next pick up the Castillas in Glasgow in Scotland with the birth of their fourth child, John Stephen, in 1866. Williamina was never to return to China again. Henry was to once more command a new steamer *Lamont* to Hong Kong in 1867 and died in Ceylon in January 1868 on his return trip to the UK leaving Williamina with three children under eight years to support. A very eventful eleven years for Williamina.

Williamina and her family migrated to Western Australia in the 1880s, however I am still to determine dates and if the boys travelled at the same time as Williamina and her daughter. I do not know much about her life in Perth for those six to eight years. Her last residential address was Limbo Street (now Museum Street) Perth. Williamina Castilla died in Perth, Western Australia, on the 15<sup>th</sup> March 1893, aged 55 years, and is buried in the East Perth Cemetery where her final resting place

is marked by a simple granite slab. The lettering on the slab has been damaged and is currently undergoing restoration.

Williamina was survived by her daughter Margaret Rebecca, who having never married died in West Perth in 1934; and her two sons. John Stephen Ramos de Castilla lived in Claremont, until February 1900 when as part of the second contingent West Australian Mounted Infantry went to South Africa to fight in the Boer War. He remained in South Africa serving in the German East Africa Campaign in the Imperial Service Contingent rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in September 1918. He married, Canadian born, Maude Lilian Bremner in 1904 and subsequently became a Resident Magistrate. John Stephen died in Cape Town in 1938 without issue.

Henry Couper Castilla, the ancestor of our Western Australian Castillas, had an interesting career holding several engineering positions in the Public Works Department and an intervening period as City Surveyor with the City of Perth in the mid 1890s. Henry Couper Castilla married Violet May Bussell daughter of Alfred Pickmore Bussell and Ellen Heppingstone on 13 June 1894. Thus completing the linkages that started in Argentina went through the UK, China and finishing in Western Australia. Although Henry and Violet Castilla have almost 100 descendants, the Castilla name has not survived.

### Which Service?

One Sunday morning, the pastor noticed little Johnny was standing and staring up at the large plaque that hung in the foyer of the church. The young man of seven had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the pastor walked up and stood beside him. Gazing up at the plaque, too, he said quietly, "Good morning son." "Good morning pastor" replied the young man, not taking his eyes off the plaque. "Sir, what is this?" Johnny asked. "Well son, these are all the people who have died in the service," replied the pastor. Soberly, they stood together staring up at the large plaque. Little Johnny's voice barely broke the silence when he asked quietly, "Which one sir, the 8:30 or the 10:30 service?"