

## 6. Australia – Fred Molteno and ‘the young Paganini’

In the third generation of Moltenos in England a new surge in migration began in search of better opportunities. John and Caroline Molteno’s family were particularly affected. The departure from London of four of their five children laid the foundations for branches of the family in Southern Africa and Hawaii, as well as the first attempt among Anthony Molteno’s descendants to make their home in Australia. These next chapters recount what happened.

### Fred and Alicia – the youngest children

Fred<sup>1</sup> was the youngest of the three boys, four years old, when his father died in 1827. His older brothers, John Charles and Frank, both emigrated when he was still only a child in the 1830s. He grew up in Peckham through the years of greatest hardship for the family which consisted only of his mother, his sisters Nancy and Alicia, and himself. Caroline made sure he was schooled, but much or all of it may well have been at home. He certainly never obtained a professional qualification.

At what age and how Fred began to earn a living is not known. He was still living at home at the age of 18 in 1841.<sup>2</sup> But even at this young age, he seems to have had bad luck. The following year, John Charles wrote to Caroline that he was sorry to hear that Fred ‘has *again* [my italics] been so unfortunate’, the implication being in some enterprise or in keeping a job. John Charles was surprised because, only a short while before, things had seemed to be going so well for Fred. She had said nothing in her letter as to the ‘reason for his leaving’ – whether Fred, therefore, was just leaving home or moving further away, we simply don’t know.<sup>3</sup>

Alicia, the youngest of the children and closest to Fred in age, had been a baby when their father died. Twenty years later when John Charles made his first and wholly unexpected visit to London in 1851, the question came up whether Alicia might return with him to the Cape. She was already 26 and, unlike Nancy, not yet married. But nothing came of the idea. Aunt Rose Molteno commented in a letter to her brother Charles Dominic Molteno, that she had ‘almost expected his visit would turn out as it appears to have done, perhaps widening the feelings between the relatives, instead of strengthening them.’<sup>4</sup> Quite what this tension in the family may have been is unclear.

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<sup>1</sup> There has been some confusion about Fred’s middle names. His son, Albert Frank Molteno, put down incorrectly on his marriage certificate that his father’s middle name was John. Various sources also gave different dates for Fred’s year of birth ranging from 1823 to 1826. This led to the erroneous idea there were two brothers, Frederick John Molteno and Frederick James Molteno. It is now clear this was not the case.

<sup>2</sup> 1841 census.

<sup>3</sup> John Charles Molteno to Caroline Molteno, 9 Oct. 1842.

<sup>4</sup> Rose Molteno to Charles Dominic Molteno, 13 Sept. 1851.

## Fred sails for the Australian colonies

Fred,<sup>5</sup> who was about to turn 28 at the time of John Charles' visit and galvanised perhaps by his example, now decided also to emigrate. He sailed on board the *Prince Alfred* along with his friend Arthur Hartley and arrived in Melbourne, the chief town in the colony of Victoria, around March 1852.<sup>6</sup> The main period of convict settlement that had begun in 1788 was coming to an end, and most settlers were now coming voluntarily, attracted by the economic opportunities of the Australian colonies. The famous gold rush in New South Wales and Victoria had started only a year before Fred and Arthur's arrival.<sup>7</sup>

Fred clearly hoped to link up with his brother Frank because he placed a notice in the local paper announcing his arrival and wishing to find his brother 'Captain' Frank Molteno.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Frank had been in Hawaii for several years by this date. Fred's advertisement indicates that Frank had probably not originally intended to land up in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, nor made the dangerous passage around Cape Horn. Instead, he had headed for Britain's quite recently acquired territories in Australia, and had then taken ship for Hawaii from there. Clearly, the number of letters from Frank that had successfully made their way back to his family in Peckham was very small and Fred, as a result, was seriously out of date as to his brother's whereabouts.

Fred moved up-country to a little place called Bendigo about 100 miles north of Melbourne where 'the incredibly rich Ballarat and Bendigo fields were in production'<sup>9</sup> and tried to earn a living there by opening a small store. He now sought to track down another relative, this time on Caroline's side of the family. *The Argus* in Melbourne carried a notice (dated 23 March 1853): 'If Mr Alfred Bower or Mr Hervett of New Peckham should see this, perhaps they will write a line to F J Molteno who has a library and store at Bendigo.... [He] will be glad to hear of other friends.'

But, as became the story of Fred's life, he never stuck to anything for very long, nor indeed was successful in financial terms. So a year or two later he braved the long voyage home and returned to London where he got married a couple of years later.

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<sup>5</sup> A photograph of Fred Molteno exists from around this date. It came into the possession of Sir Robert Bristow, a great grandson of Mary Bristow (nee Molteno) (see Chapter 3). Sir Robert told Percy Molteno about it (letter dated 26 Aug. 1934) and was certain it was Fred, brother of Sir John Molteno, and taken by Byrne & Co., Richmond.

<sup>6</sup> Jenny Molteno has done the most research on the Australian Moltenos; and this chapter relies heavily on what she has shared with me most generously. She has tracked down these passenger records, Fiche Ref. B019 005 and B019 004.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Lee, *Our National Stories*, Ch. 1, 'Linking a Nation: Australia's Transport and Communications 1788 – 1970', Australian Heritage Commission, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Research by Jenny Molteno.

<sup>9</sup> New South Wales Government, Board of Studies, 'The Gold Rush 1823 – 1896'.

As for his sister Alicia, the upshot not going out to the Cape Colony with John Charles was that three years later she went off on her own, to Australia rather than the Cape. She arrived in 1855, by which time Fred was back in England. But she made contact with Fred's friend, Arthur Hartley, who had remained in Australia and the two of them got married.

Arthur was setting busy himself up as an architect. Many of the buildings he designed in Victoria, including a particularly fine one in Melbourne, are still standing. But tragedy soon struck. His and Alicia's first-born, also called Arthur, was born in 1856 but died the same year.

Only a couple of months later, Alicia was travelling by coach in Sandhurst where they were living and the horses took fright. She was thrown clear but the shock mutated into 'typhoid fever', and she died after four weeks of suffering on 23 April 1857, aged only 32.<sup>10</sup> Her mother in Peckham, who by this time had lost four of her five children to emigration, now had the terrible news of her youngest daughter's death. As for Arthur, he remarried, had a somewhat chequered career, became an alcoholic and when he died was buried in a pauper's grave.<sup>11</sup>

### **Fred Molteno marries in London and moves again to Australia**

In March 1856 Fred married a local girl, Laura Antoinette Sheridan.<sup>12</sup> She was only 17, and had to be recorded as a minor on the marriage certificate. He was already 33, so nearly twice her age. As for occupation, he put himself down simply as 'Gentleman'. Laura's father, John Joseph Charles Sheridan, was a 'practical chemist' living on Commercial Road in London's East End.<sup>13</sup> The ceremony took place in an Anglican church in Camberwell by licence, Fred having been brought up in the Church of England by his mother. As one would expect given his age, he seems to have been no longer living with Caroline. Neither of the witnesses present was a Molteno or a Sheridan. Whether this indicated disapproval by the families, we cannot know.

Shortly after their marriage Fred left for the Australian colonies again, now accompanied by Laura. The next year, 1857, their first child, Alice Edith Molteno, was born in Melbourne. In fact, all six of their children were born in Australia during the 13 years the family spent there.

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<sup>10</sup> As told by Eliza Bingle to Betty Molteno. Alicia was buried the day after her death in Lower Bendigo (now called White Hill Cemetery).

<sup>11</sup> Information from Jenny Molteno, 16 November 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Laura had been born in 1838 in Lewisham, Surrey, which was next door to Peckham, and was still living in that part of London, in the (civil) parish of Lambeth, in 1851. Source: 1851 census.

<sup>13</sup> Molly Molteno, Fred's granddaughter, always asserted that her grandmother on her mother's side was a relative of Richard Sheridan, the great 18<sup>th</sup> century Irish playwright and politician in London, but no one has firmly established this connection.

### Fred Molteno and Laura Sheridan's Children<sup>14</sup>

Birth <sup>15</sup>	Christian Names	Marriage	Spouse	Death
1857	'Alice' Edith	1891	William Wallis	1935
1859	Frederick John			1866
1861	Laura 'Ada' <sup>16</sup>	1889	Arthur Isaac Durrant	1927
1863	Agnes Emma			1864
1865	Frank Albert <sup>17</sup>	1889	Sarah Emma Mills	1921
1868	'Agnes' Maud	1893	Frank George Land	1947

### Teaching in Geelong – Fred's temper on a short fuse

The excitement of the gold rush up-country was now over, and Fred and Laura headed instead a short distance southeast of Melbourne to the little town of Geelong where he got a job in January 1858 at Geelong National Grammar School. He was teaching the youngest children in Years 1 and 2<sup>18</sup> at a salary of £125 a year. But things did not go smoothly. Before the year was out, Fred had been dismissed after the school found out that he had no formal teaching qualifications. In addition he was up for assault in the case, *Brown versus Molteno*!<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Sources: Australian newspapers; British Army World War 1 Service Records, 1914-20; English Births, Marriages and Deaths (BMD) records (Vol 1d, p. 1258); All Saints St Kilda, Victoria, Australia christening record; my deductions from British census records for 1881, 1891, 1901,1911; Australian birth certificates; English marriage certificates. Quote marks indicate the first names by which each child was known.

<sup>15</sup> All the children were born in the State of Victoria, Australia, except for the youngest who was born in Launceston, Tasmania, the dates of birth confirmed from State of Victoria records by Jenny Molteno, 16 May 2009. Other sources make mistakes; for example, Genes Reunited records Laura Ada Molteno's birth as 1865; this was contradicted by Laura Ada herself who, in the 1911 British Census, said she was 50 years old.

<sup>16</sup> There is some confusion as to what name she used. In the 1881 census, when she was 20, she was called Laura.

<sup>17</sup> There is also confusion as to what first name he used; in the 1881 census he is listed as Frank, whereas in 1891 he calls himself Albert and was now grown up.

<sup>18</sup> Most of what we know about Fred and Laura in Australia is the result of Jenny Molteno's assiduous researches on the Internet.

<sup>19</sup> *The Argus*, Melbourne, 30 Nov. 1858.

The headmaster, Mr Brown, had asked Fred to return the books the school had issued to him because they were needed by the teacher who had replaced him. Fred did not return them and wrote to the local paper saying that his students had been happy with his teaching even if he didn't have any qualifications and that many of them were willing to enrol in a new school he was setting up himself. Mr Brown then happened to see Fred in the street. He asked him again about returning the books, but Fred was 'very abusive and called the witness [Mr Brown] a reptile – and such abusive terms'. Fred told him that 'if he asked him again for the books, he would kick him; and the defendant [namely, Fred] then commenced kicking him.'

Fred conducted his own defence, probably not having the money to employ a lawyer. He cross-examined Mr Brown and denied that he had done anything to abuse or insult him. Anyway, Fred argued, the books belonged to the Victoria National Board of Education and it wasn't they who had dismissed him; there was no breach between him and the Board! He further alleged that in fact it had been Mr Brown who had abused him in the street 'stating that he had lost his character, and that it was well known', and Mr Brown had 'become very impertinent'. Fred pushed him away. Mr Brown allegedly shook his fist in Fred's face. Only then did Fred 'kick him, and regretted that the provocation he received induced him to do so.' The Mayor who was hearing the case lost patience with this line of defence and fined Fred £2 plus costs.

This put paid for the time being to Fred supporting his young family by teaching. At one point a few years later, Laura, who was constantly pregnant, started trying to earn the family living by running a school herself.<sup>20</sup> Fred, having moved the family to Tasmania, was employed in a Church of England grammar school there during the family's last year or two in Australia.

### **'The Infant Paganini' – Frederick John Molteno**

All Fred and Laura's children turned out to be extremely musical. The eldest boy, Frederick John Molteno, for a year or two became a celebrated infant prodigy in Australia, so much so one of the newspapers dubbed him 'the infant Paganini'! John, as he was called by his family in memory of his grandfather, had been born in Melbourne in 1859 and from a very early age was taught the violin. All three of his sisters turned out also to be very musical and when they grew up became professional musicians. They were the first Molteno women to support themselves independently in a field other than teaching. Alice became a harpist and pianist, Ada a violinist, and Agnes an opera singer. In the next generation their brother Albert's daughter, Beatrice Lilian Molteno, who came to be known to a later generation as Great Aunt Molly, also became a music professional.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jenny Molteno from the local newspapers now digitised.

<sup>21</sup> See later chapters.

Where did all this musicality come from? The children's Great Uncle Charles Dominic Molteno had played an instrument for enjoyment at one stage and came back to it towards the end of his life.<sup>22</sup> And their Aunt Nancy played the piano. In fact, she lamented when her stepdaughter, Eliza, was away in Greece in 1874 learning Greek and there was no one to play duets with. But undoubtedly it was the children's mother, Laura, who was the musical one. She played with the children. And she and Fred recognised early on that their children had this potential and made sure it was cultivated.

John's first public performance took place when he was six. The *Sydney Empire*<sup>23</sup> headlined the story 'The Infant Musician' and reported: 'The first public exhibition by Master Frederick John Molteno took place last night at the School of Arts.... The little fellow, who is but six years of age, was dressed in costume appropriate to his age,<sup>24</sup> is a very intelligent and interesting-looking child, with fair cheeks ... and eyes that betoken more than an ordinary amount of thought in a child so young.... Master Molteno manages his little violin with great grace and bows with wonderful accuracy and strength, succeeding in getting much tone and melody, combined with precision and delicacy of light and shade.' The event had received the patronage of His Excellency the Governor-in-chief and Lady Young. John's performance 'was received with rapturous applause, and he will have few audiences who can refrain from a similar display of feeling.'

A year later, the little boy, who was 'not higher than a table', gave a private performance at Government House with the Governor's wife herself accompanying him on the piano. Another paper reported: 'He does not play mechanically or automatically, as he might be supposed to do were his performances the result of laborious and incessant practice, but with an intelligent perception of time and accent, light and shade, and expression which proves that his capacity works from within outward, and is not the result of incessant drilling operating on him from without.'<sup>25</sup>

For well over a year in 1865-66 Fred and Laura took him around New South Wales and Victoria giving numerous performances. Reviews in the local papers almost make it possible to track the little boy's concert schedule. One Sydney paper told its readers that the boy's 'father brings with him credentials and testimonials of the highest public and private character' – not perhaps something the Geelong National Grammar School would have agreed with!<sup>26</sup> John became so well-known that the Australian National Portrait Gallery has a portrait of him.

As for the purpose of organising all these concerts, one paper said it was 'to provide means to send him to Europe for the purpose of receiving a first-class musical education'.<sup>27</sup> But it is also possible

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<sup>22</sup> A letter of Charles Dominic Molteno in 1869.

<sup>23</sup> *Sydney Empire*, 2 Feb. 1865.

<sup>24</sup> In velvet and lace, a bit like *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, as the photograph of him shows!

<sup>25</sup> *Bell's Life in Victoria*, 28 Oct. 1866.

<sup>26</sup> *Sydney Empire*, 22 Jan. 1866.

<sup>27</sup> *Caxton Sydney Advertiser*, 17 Jan. 1866.

that John's musical prowess made a useful contribution to the family's rather pressed financial circumstances.

In the middle of 1866, a well-known Australian group of musicians, the Lancashire Bell Ringers, visited Geelong and had John appear with them in a number of performances. This led the *Geelong Advertiser* (5 July) to write about this 'favoured child of Nature': 'Geelong has made many efforts to produce marble, coal and gold, but has apparently at last succeeded in bringing to light an infant Paganini who is said to be a native of this town; every person must, therefore, go see the wonder...' Such was the stir caused by his performances that the Ringers advertised their 'Grand Fashionable Night' at the Mechanics Institute with a star billing for 'Master F. J. Molteno – The Infant Paganini'.

Realizing that the little boy was a big draw-card, the Ringers reached an agreement with John's parents that he should join their tour of South Australia, with Fred accompanying him.<sup>28</sup> When they reached Adelaide, however, the little boy felt unwell. A doctor suggested the country air would do him good, so he and his father continued with the Ringers on their tour. But he got worse and in what proved to be his last concert had to give up playing half-way through. By the time they reached Kapunda, he was so ill Fred took him back to Adelaide where they stayed with Fred's close friend, Mr Joseph Elliot, and where, after a week in bed, John died on 2 September 1866 of a 'low fever'.<sup>29</sup> He was only seven years and five months old. The notice in the *South Australian Advertiser* the next day spoke of him as the 'most beloved son of Mr F J Molteno' and his death 'most deeply deplored by his disconsolate parents and by all who knew him.' He had been, as another paper said, 'an amiable, docile child ... [who] took a delight in the study of music. So far from his talents being forced, he displayed a real love of the art, and a readiness to perform the parts allotted to him.'<sup>30</sup> The Rev. D. J. Robertson officiated at the funeral and he was buried on Wednesday afternoon, 5 September, in the Elliots' family vault in West Terrace Cemetery.<sup>31</sup>

It is rather extraordinary to learn that only a month later, Fred arranged for the eldest child, Alice, to perform with the Lancashire Bell Ringers at a Grand Miscellaneous Concert in Adelaide on 1 October where she was billed as 'the Australian juvenile harpist, nine years of age, sister of the late lamented Frederick John Molteno whose early death has caused so general a feeling of regret.' The local paper, *The Register*, was uncompromisingly critical of her father's action. 'It is a great mistake to bring her before the public so early. If her life should be spared, she will probably become an accomplished musician, but at present there is nothing in her performance – except that it is done by a child of

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<sup>28</sup> All this fascinating detail comes from Gwyn Gillard's fascinating article, 'Triumph and Tragedy: the Lancashire Ringers WOW Geelong' at [www.handbells.org.au/04\\_lancashire.htm](http://www.handbells.org.au/04_lancashire.htm)

<sup>29</sup> *The Mercury*, Hobart, Tasmania, 20 Sept. 1866, reporting the 'Death of Master Molteno'. The article opened by saying 'Many of our readers will be grieved to learn that Master Molteno, the infant musician whose exquisite performances on the violin have so delighted audiences in this and the neighbouring colonies, died on Sunday morning.' The article provides a full account of the little boy's last weeks.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Jenny Molteno got someone to visit the grave, Road 3, East side of Path 13, Grave 1. The gravestone had been damaged, but the remains of fencing posts still surrounded the grave.

tender years – to justify her appearance in public. It is really pitiable to see an interesting child, who ought to be in bed at an early hour, set up to exhibit her musical acquirements before an audience, and a grave responsibility rests upon those who put her forward.’<sup>32</sup>

In fact both girls, Alice and Ada, turned out to be almost as precocious as their brother. Another year on, in July 1868, they appeared together in a concert, this time in Sydney – Alice by then was eleven and still playing the harp while Ada was only seven). They were well received. The concert was reported<sup>33</sup> ‘a complete success, the talents of the two children being well displayed.... the beautiful aria ‘Il Baleu’ from *Il Trovatore* was exquisitely played by Alice Molteno .... ‘di Pescatore’ from *Lucrezia Borgia*, arranged as a duet for harp and violin, was beautifully rendered by the two little children.’ In fact, ‘the little girls, both of whom are so young that the task of appearing before an audience at all, must be an arduous one, were well received.’ And subsequent reviews in Tasmania in 1869 were equally positive.<sup>34</sup>

### **The family moves to Tasmania**

The family decided to up sticks and move from mainland Australia a few months after John’s tragic death. Fred got a job as a Classical and Mathematics master at the Church Grammar School in Launceston, Tasmania. Even then bad luck seemed to dog them. The ship they were on was involved in some kind of accident and they lost all their effects, including a piano, harp, lute, furniture, linen and clothes. All these items had to be replaced, including what was described as Mr Molteno’s ‘choice classical library’. Fred’s immediate reaction was to organise yet another fundraising concert by the children, this time with his wife, Laura, taking part as well. It was a huge success. The *Launceston Examiner* (17 August 1869) reported: ‘The harp and violin solo by the Misses Molteno astounded everyone. In the one case, the child’s arms appeared to be too short ‘to sweep o’er the chords’, and in the other too tiny to manage the bow and hold the violin. These wonderful young ladies were greeted with thunders of applause and showers of bouquets.’ About 700 people crowded into the hall and the large sum of £50 to £60 was taken at the door, the equivalent of half a year of Fred’s salary as a teacher.

### **Return to London and tragedy strikes again**

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<sup>32</sup> Reproduced in [www.graemeskinner.id.au/biographicalregisterM-N.htm](http://www.graemeskinner.id.au/biographicalregisterM-N.htm)

<sup>33</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July 1868.

<sup>34</sup> Someone – presumably Fred Molteno himself – kept all these reviews, including ones of performances by the girls in London three years later and on the East Coast of the United States the year after (1873), and eventually had them printed up on several sheets with the heading ‘Opinions of the Press on the performances of Misses Alice Edith and Laura Ada Molteno, Harp, Violin and Piano Soloists etc’. A parallel sheet was typeset in commemoration of little Frederick John entitled ‘Opinions of the Victoria and Sydney Press on the Performances of the Australian Infant Musician’.



Somehow Fred and Laura had not really made a go of things in Australia. They had tried three different colonies – Victoria, New South Wales and Tasmania. Fred had done at least two, and probably more, spells as a school teacher – at the start and again towards the end of their 13 years there. Now they seem to have called it a day. The last performance by their daughters reported in the press was on 19 June 1869. A few months later, the family arrived back in London, having presumably travelled this time on one of the early steamships.

Almost unbelievably, tragedy struck again. During their years in Australia, Fred had lost his sister Alicia, his and Laura's extraordinarily talented little boy John, and their fourth baby, Agnes Emma. And while they had been away, Fred's mother, Caroline, had died in London. Now an even heavier blow fell within months of their return. The family was staying in Brixton at No. 4 Belinda Road, just off Coldharbour Lane, squashed between two railway lines. Laura was pregnant once more, and on 11 December, she died in childbirth.<sup>35</sup> For 24 hours, with Fred by her bedside, her life ebbed away until finally the end came.<sup>36</sup> Fred was so overcome it was four days before he managed to report her death to the authorities. Laura was only 31 at the time of her death.

Now in his forties, he found himself not just bereft of his wife, but on his own looking after four young children – the two girls, a little boy and a baby daughter. Being a single parent, no matter in what age or country, is terribly hard. Being a single *father* in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the father of daughters to boot, must have been unimaginably tough. Fred's only sibling in London, Nancy Bingle, was now living on the other side of the city in Richmond and, for whatever reason, was largely out of touch. Fred had not established any enduring way of earning his living; although he continued to describe himself as a schoolmaster, he still possessed no formal qualifications. He was without access to capital. Remarriage was unlikely; what woman would want to take on a husband in such circumstances? What's more, he had demonstrated a certain irascibility of temper and tendency to fall out with people that did not make things any easier for him.

What would the future hold for him and the children?

### **Rupture in the family**

There was one more source of sadness in Fred's life. At some point, perhaps quite early on, a rift developed between him and one of his brothers about which we know really nothing. Two people make this clear. Fred's granddaughter, 'Great Aunt Molly' Molteno, recalled that there had been some scandal.<sup>37</sup> She spoke of his having run off with a much younger woman, Laura Sheridan, (in fact, of course, Fred and Laura had got married before leaving for Australia). She also believed there had been a terrible quarrel between Fred and one of his brothers. The brother's name was almost

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<sup>35</sup> Nancy Bingle to Caroline Molteno, 29 Jan. 1870; she had just heard that 'Poor Uncle Fred's wife' had died in childbirth.

<sup>36</sup> The death certificate speaks of 'flooding from the placenta' over the previous 24 hours.

<sup>37</sup> Note, dated 24 November 1990, of a meeting Selina Cohen (nee Molteno) and I had with Great Aunt Molly's nephew, Jim Molteno-Mills, and his wife Zoe, in Banbury.

never mentioned by Fred and no contact was kept up between the two families.<sup>38</sup> The second source is almost equally Delphic. When in 1869, within a fortnight of Laura's death, the news from Hawaii filtered through to London, and then the Cape, that Fred and John Charles' brother, Frank, had died, John Charles wrote to their sister, Nancy Bingle, 'and now there are only the three of us, and one completely estranged from us'.<sup>39</sup> The rift continued. Four years after Laura's death, Uncle Charles Dominic Molteno wrote to Nancy on 22 July 1873: 'Do you ever hear of Frederick and his family? And what he is doing? I fear nothing that would be satisfactory to you, but such is life, trouble and care.'

We don't know what the estrangement was about. But it must have bitter. There is no trace of John Charles seeing or communicating with Fred during his visit to London in 1871 or subsequently, this despite the fact that Fred and his children were now living in Peckham where he and his brothers and sisters had grown up.<sup>40</sup> The breach seems to have been so complete that John Charles's sons, when they started coming to university in England in the 1880s and 90s, did not seem even to realize that these cousins of theirs existed. On one occasion James Molteno, when a young law student at Cambridge, saw a poster for a performance by Agnes Molteno in 1886 (she was singing professionally in London), but had no idea that they were related, let alone were first cousins.

It is dispiriting that a judgement about a relative's behaviour becomes so unalterable that one makes no contact ever again, and this then carries over into the next generation. Of course, it is possible that Fred during his years in Australia did not write to his mother or sister Nancy, and that they did not even know that he was married or that he and his wife had had six children born there. But there must have been some contact between Fred and Nancy when he and Laura got back to London in late 1869. Certainly Eliza Bingle wrote to John Charles's daughter, Caroline, immediately on hearing the news of the death in childbirth of 'Poor Uncle Fred's wife'.<sup>41</sup> But it is possible, that Fred and Nancy chose to have little or nothing to do with one another over the next quarter of a century even though they were, once again, living in the same city.

### **The evening of life and healing at last**

Nancy and Fred in their old age got beyond at last the mysterious, decades-long rupture. It was nearly 20 years on, early October 1889. Nancy, who was now a widow but still living at 4 Friston

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<sup>38</sup> This is puzzling. Who could the brother have been? John Charles had left England when Fred was only eight years old and visited the country on only a handful of occasions during the years when Fred was living in London. As for the only other brother, Frank, Fred had actively tried to get in touch with him when he first went to New South Wales in the early 1850s.

<sup>39</sup> John Charles Molteno to Nancy Bingle, 4 December 1869.

<sup>40</sup> We know this from the 1871 and 1881 census records.

<sup>41</sup> Eliza Bingle to Caroline Molteno, 29 January 1870; Eliza and Caroline were much the same age. What's more, years later, Eliza was able to tell Betty Molteno the names of each of Fred and Laura's children, and the musical instruments they played.

Villas, a stone's throw from Richmond Station,<sup>42</sup> wrote to her niece, Betty Molteno, who had been staying with her during a trip to England, a touching account of what happened. She told how, in a lull following various visitors staying with her, she had suddenly decided to take:

The opportunity of asking my brother to spend a few days, which he did last week..... We had a very pleasant few days together. We were able to take some walks by the River, to the Terrace and Kew Gardens, the weather being tolerable although showery and one day we were obliged to remain indoors all day. We had so much to talk about of old times and people and things, also of events that had taken place during our separation, so that we were never at a loss – [and] as he wished it, we had some music in the evening. I playing accompaniments to his songs and he liking to hear songs and pieces he remembered my playing in days gone by.

I must tell you he has had two marriages in his family during the summer; first his only son who is only 21 and whose young lady was pointed out to me at the Concert. Then Ada, the second daughter and violinist; there were many notices in the papers about her, so I enclose them, as well as a copy of the speech made by Fred, as I know his style amuses you. Ellen [the servant] thought him very clever as she sometimes heard his jokes and puns.<sup>43</sup>

Nancy died a couple of years later in 1892, and Fred three years after that. He had gone swimming in the new Goose Green public baths on a hot summer's day (it was 12 August 1895), and was found drowned, presumably following a heart attack. The notice of his death described him as 'late of 46 Ady's Road, East Dulwich' (just round the corner from Arnott Road where he had been living before) and, rather optimistically, as a man of 'independent means'.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Nancy's husband, Mr Bingle, had died 13 June 1888, aged 73. He and Nancy had been married for 40 years. Source: 'Copy of Notes made by Betty Molteno ... concerning the Molteno family, the information supplied by Eliza Bingle who was adopted by her Uncle John Edward Hartwell Bingle'. UCT Archives.

<sup>43</sup> Nancy Bingle to Elizabeth 'Betty' Molteno, 10 October 1889. Fred lived a dozen miles away from Richmond in Peckham. I find myself relieved to read how the two of them at last put this old hurt behind them. And the glimpse of Fred's personality – his sharpness, slight zaniness and noisy sense of humour, all things one finds echoes of in Moltenos down the generations.

<sup>44</sup> The death certificate recorded his death as 'accidental drowning'.