

History in a bottle

A journey of remembrance

Agnes Gibson left Scotland in 1912 to join her fiancé in Australia. One hundred years later, her granddaughter, Anne Field, undertook her own journey, one of commemoration.

MY GRANDMOTHER, Agnes Nicol Gibson, was born in 1878 in Lanark, Scotland, one of six daughters to Agnes Nicol and Robert Gibson. She emigrated to Australia in 1912 to reunite in Sydney with her fiancé, Robert Cochrane, who had arrived on a ship from Liverpool, England, three years earlier.

From Glasgow, a train had taken Agnes to London, where she boarded the steamship *Pakeha* as a third-class passenger. A ship belonging to Shaw Saville and Albion Ltd, *Pakeha* was carrying 1,150 immigrants, including 200 agricultural labourers, 25 Cornish miners and 60 bricklayers and carpenters. After leaving London on 12 March 1912, the ship stopped at Cape Town on 3 and 4 April, then made a direct passage to Sydney, arriving on 23 April. Agnes and Robert married at The Manse in Balmain, Sydney, the very next day.

Agnes and Robert set up home at Holmesville, near West Wallsend in Newcastle. They had three daughters: Agnes, my mother Elizabeth, and Margaret. Grannie died in 1961, aged 83. I still have her original ticket and her log from her journey, as well as my grandfather Robert's Baltic pine trunk from 1909.

To honour my grandmother and acknowledge the risky voyage that she had undertaken, I decided on an unusual method: to put a bottle into the sea with her story in it. Agnes was an excellent record keeper, and in her voyage log she had noted each day's weather conditions, latitude, longitude and distance travelled. Grannie's record-keeping made my task much easier.

I planned to put my bottle in the sea from Albany, Western Australia. When asked for assistance, the Albany Tourism Bureau referred me to Mark McRae of Southern Ocean Sailing in Albany, who had also committed a bottle to the ocean when he and his crew were rounding Cape Horn in 2009.

By 19 April 1912, Grannie had sailed to 44 degrees 27 minutes south, 123 degrees 2 minutes east, in the Roaring Forties. Exactly 100 years later, with my empty wine bottle, Mark, a friend and I headed out of Albany to send my bottle on its way.

Mark prepared my wine bottle as he had prepared his bottle at Cape Horn. Grannie's history was rolled around a pencil and put into an airtight sandwich bag, which was then sealed, rolled and put into the bottle. Tartan ribbon was placed in the top of the bottle, which was screwed tight and then wrapped in waterproof tape. My bottle was ready for its journey in the Southern Ocean.

At 10 am on 19 April 2012, I read the second verse of Robert Burns' poem, where he says 'My love is like a red, red, rose'. In a four-metre swell, and with some difficulty, I then threw the bottle overboard 60 nautical miles south of West Cape Howe at 36 degrees 1 minute south, 118 degrees 22 minutes east, wishing it 'God speed'. It was a surreal experience being out in the Southern Ocean. The albatrosses were flying overhead, the waves were very high energy, and one certainly needed a firm grip to hold on. It was not an experience for the faint-hearted.

Back in Sydney, my story soon took an unexpected turn. I was contacted by Russell and Raelene, from Perth, who had found my bottle on the beach at Bremer Bay during a fishing holiday. It had been in the Southern Ocean for about 32 days. They asked what I wanted them to do with the bottle and I suggested they take it back to Perth, as I needed to go there soon. Raelene was able to meet me in July 2012 for a handover and lunch. Raelene and Russell later sent me photos of Bremer Bay, and I was able to visit there later, in 2017. I am pleased that my bottle washed up in such a stunning location.



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I still have Grannie's original ticket and her log from her journey, as well as my grandfather's Baltic pine trunk from 1909

01
Anne Field off the coast of Albany, Western Australia, with the bottle containing her grandmother's story.

02
Anne and skipper Mark McRae prepare to throw the bottle into the Southern Ocean.

All images Anne Field

02



History in a Bottle

A journey of discovery, adventure and challenge, the voyage of the *Connemara* was a truly remarkable feat of seamanship and endurance.

In her voyage log, my grandmother Agnes had noted each day's weather conditions, latitude, longitude and distance travelled

01
Anne and deckhand Paul with *Connemara* in Eden, New South Wales.

02
Richard and Anne prepare to throw the bottle (helpfully labelled) into the water off Eden, New South Wales.

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Back in 2012, I wrapped the bottle in a towel once more for its journey in my hand luggage back across the continent to Sydney, thinking what a shame it could not earn frequent flyer points, given the kilometres it was racking up!

Dr David Griffin, a physical oceanographer and atmospheric researcher at the CSIRO in Hobart, explained to me that my bottle had washed back in because the Leeuwin current, off Western Australia, is always trying to reattach to the coast. The East Australian current, however, moves away from the coast. He recommended Eden, on the New South Wales far south coast, as a good place to recommit Grannie's bottle.

It took some time to locate an Eden operator who went far enough out to sea, but eventually Richard Buckingham, who operated the *Connemara* for fishing trips, was able to assist. Early on 30 September 2012, we made it out to the Continental Shelf, 16 nautical miles offshore. In the distance, we could see the spray from humpback whales on their journey south to Antarctica. Once again, albatrosses were flying overhead, as were Siberian mutton birds.

At 8 am, at 37 degrees 3 minutes south, 150 degrees 17 minutes east, Grannie's bottle was recommitted to the ocean, after I had again read the second verse of Burns' poem. Richard could not resist writing 'Message in Bottle' in black felt pen on the bottle.

Ten minutes later, and at 37 degrees 3 minutes south, 150 degrees 14 minutes east, I committed a second bottle to the sea. This, my 'Yorkshire bottle', commemorated my great-grandfather William Field, who was born in Wakefield, Yorkshire, in 1831. He emigrated to Melbourne on the *Antelope* in 1853 and was a gold miner and later a tailor in Maryborough, Victoria.

More than two years later, on 30 March 2015, Jason Ovey and his niece, Tiah Crowther, found my Yorkshire bottle on Farnborough Beach, Queensland – a long way from where it had entered the sea. Jason emailed to tell me of his find, and he also notified the *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*. They published an article on 8 April 2015 with a photograph of Jason holding the bottle. Jason and Tiah are now part of my story.

When I contacted him, Dr Griffin told me it was amazing that the bottle was found, but not completely surprising that it ended up in Queensland. Two and a half years would be long enough for it to go close to New Zealand with the prevailing wind and current, but instead it veered left at some point and headed back to northern Australia under the influence of the south-east trade winds.

In late March 2017, I returned to Albany to mark five years since I had begun my adventure. I caught up with Mark McRae and visited Bremer Bay, where Grannie's bottle had washed in. In late October 2022, I travelled to Eden to acknowledge the ten years that Grannie's bottle had been at sea for the second time.

My journey is a tribute to Agnes Gibson, Robert Cochrane and all our early immigrants, who braved hazardous conditions to begin a new life in Australia. It is a story of adventure, the power and beauty of the ocean, family history, ocean currents, immigrant ships and their shipping routes, as well as the economic and social conditions of the time, which resulted in the immigration waves to Australia.

I do sometimes wonder where Grannie's bottle might be, and I am hopeful that it will turn up again in my lifetime. It is a pity that I could not put a tracker on it!

Anne Field is a retired social science teacher and former local government councillor at Rockdale Council (1991–1999) and Kogarah Council (1999–2008). She self-published *The History of Moorefield Racecourse, Kogarah, Sydney, Australia (1888–1951)* in October 2016. She presents guest talks to community groups on Moorefield Racecourse and the story of her message in a bottle.