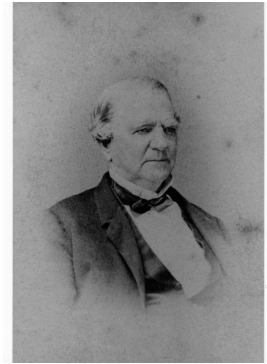


## THE MYSTERY OF GEORGE DAVENPORT: *CONVICT, SERVANT, & SETTLER*

George Davenport was a man who had an association with the explorer, Captain Charles Sturt, and his family that started in 1831, and endured until his death in Adelaide on 6 May 1871. He remains an enigmatic figure because the reasons for his transportation to the penal colony at Norfolk Island do not seem to accord with the military history of the time, which, coupled with the confusion in the spelling of his name, suggests that something is missing. Notwithstanding these mysteries, there is no doubt that George Davenport was a constant and resilient man who survived the harshness of the convict system, endured the dangers of Sturt's 1844-1846 Central Australian Expedition, and at age 69, died a prosperous and respected resident of the City of Adelaide. This is his story.



On or about 6 August 1830, following his return from the Murray expedition, Captain Sturt was dispatched on duty to the penal colony on Norfolk Island, a place that was a veritable hell on earth for those incarcerated there. It had been re-established by Governor Brisbane in 1824 as a receptacle for the worst of offenders, "from which they were to be excluded from all hope of return". Governor Darling, in his turn, was to decree that "it was to be a place of the extremist punishment short of death", in consequence of which it was to evolve into a place of unspeakable cruelty. In her biography the *Life of Charles Sturt* (c1899), Mrs. N.G. Sturt writes that George Davenport was transported to Norfolk Island for the crime of "Cowardice on the Battlefield", and this raises the first of many questions.



According to Mrs. N.G. Sturt, Davenport was subject to fits, and "feeling the dreaded symptoms when carrying the colours at the Battle of Waterloo, he took down the colours, put them for safety in his pocket, and lost consciousness". After the battle he was found in the rear, dazed but unwounded, with the missing colours in his pocket. "This added a suspicious circumstance, and his 'ugly face' confirming his guilt, a Board of Officers promptly condemned him to transportation for life". If this was the case, it indicates that Davenport was an officer in the British Army, because the regimental colours were always carried by an officer of the rank of Ensign, whose duty it was to defend them to the death.

Any student of military history will confirm that a regiment's colours are revered icons upon which are emblazoned its battle honours, and until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it carried them into battle. They were the regiment's rallying point in battle and the focal point where messages or orders had to be conveyed to the officer in charge. It is therefore difficult to accept that at the Battle of Waterloo, where communications being essential to his victory, Wellington was constantly on the move assessing the battle and sending messages to the various regiments, that it could have been possible for the Ensign and colours of any regiment to simply go missing. It also raises the question as to what regiment did Davenport belong, because although a large number of men of all nationalities did run away from the battle on that day, there is no record of the loss or absence of any regimental colour at Waterloo. The only regimental flag officially recorded as missing during this time was that of the King's colour of the 69<sup>th</sup> regiment, which was taken by French cavalry, two days before Waterloo, at the Battle of Quatre Bras, on 16 June 1815.

A further question that remains unresolved is that of the conflict of the dates. The Battle of Waterloo occurred on 18 June 1815, following which George Davenport allegedly faced court martial and was transported for life, but he could not have been sent to Norfolk Island because that location was not reopened until 1824. Prior to this date convicts were transported to Van Dieman's Land, or New South Wales. However, the 1828 census of New South Wales confirms that there was nobody of that name in the colony in that year. There was a convict named J. Devenport, for whom no details are provided because he was in a hospital at Newcastle and therein may be a clue.

Later records show that he variously spelled his name as both George Davenport and George Devenport, whilst the record of his second marriage in 1859 shows that his father's name was "John". These are puzzles that beg to be solved and further inquiries will be made to the Mitchell Library.

To return to Mrs. N.G. Sturt's biography, she writes that George Davenport was a convict on Norfolk Island in 1831, became Sturt's cook and participated in the incident in her book, which she inexplicably refers to as the "Wreck of the Queen Charlotte", which is a misnomer. The incident to which she refers did not involve a shipwreck, but rather a capsizing of one of the ship's boats.

The 'Queen Charlotte' was a "Brig" that at noon on 27 May 1831, arrived off the harbour bar at Norfolk Island flying a signal of distress. At this time a gale was rising fast, and the rough seas combined with the tremendous surf created a dangerous situation. Sturt decided to launch a boat to render assistance, called for a volunteer crew, and promised freedom to any convict who saved life. Having nothing to lose, a number of convicts, amongst whom was George Davenport, launched a boat and set out. However, before they could reach the Brig one of its boats, having on board the prostrate figure of a man, was launched and seen making for the shore. This figure later proved to be the ship's captain, Captain Rennoldson, who had been wounded that morning by the accidental discharge of a musket. As the ship's boat neared land it capsized. Davenport dived into the boiling surf and succeeded in rescuing the ship's captain, whilst the others rescued those in the water. Eleven days later Captain Rennoldson succumbed to his wound, and nothing more is heard of George Davenport until 1835 when Sturt and his wife Charlotte (née Green) returned from England and settled on land at Bargo Brush at Mittagong, New South Wales. Mrs N.G. Sturt writes that, at this time, "foremost of his trusty retainers was George Davenport, who had been Sturt's cook on Norfolk Island, and had won his freedom by his gallant conduct at a shipwreck there".

George Davenport was to prove in every way a devoted family servant. He was the first to hold their son Napier, for whom he was to have a life-long affection, and he accompanied them to their next property at Varroville, where he assisted Charlotte Sturt during Sturt's absence in 1838 when he overlanded cattle to the Colony of South Australia. In 1839, when the family moved to South Australia, George Davenport followed, but again there is no record of his arrival in the shipping list of passengers arriving at Port Adelaide between 1837 and 1845. Perhaps he came overland, but he was certainly here in 1840, when Charles Sturt "gave him" to his brother, Evelyn Sturt, who was finding his feet in a pastoral venture and needed an experienced bushman. George Davenport was to remain with Evelyn Sturt, who subsequently moved to Victoria and then Mount Gambier, until 1844 when he saw a newspaper report that Captain Charles Sturt was about to lead an expedition into central Australia and determined that he would offer his services.

He informed Evelyn Sturt that, whilst regretting the inconvenience caused by so sudden a departure, he must be off at once, declaring: "If that good man is going to risk his life, I must go and do what I can for him, and if he dies, die with him". He arrived in Adelaide just before the expedition departed and was hired as a servant "to wait upon the officers of the party". The expedition departed Adelaide on 10 August 1844 and it was to prove an eighteen-month journey of epic proportions that resulted in the death of James Poole from scurvy and exhaustion. After eighteen months, in January 1846, its gaunt and sun-blackened survivors, both men and animals, returned to Adelaide where the next stage of George Davenport's life was to begin. From this time on, whilst he was to continue an ardent admirer of Sturt, he became his own man.



According to documents held by his descendents, referred to as the Devenport papers, it is recorded that he invested his accumulated pay from the 1846 expedition in certain sections in Adelaide, acquiring a property in Hindley Street in 1846, one in Wright

Street in 1847, and the Talbot Inn in Gouger Street in 1850. However, this does not accord with the official records.

The Adelaide hotel register shows that in 1846 the Hotel Gothic in Morphett Street, Adelaide, Town Acre 461, was held by a T. Petch. In 1847 the licensee is recorded as being G. Devenport (Davenport ?), in 1848 the licensee was G. Devonport, and/or Michael McNamara, and in 1849 the licensee was G. Devenport. In 1850 the licensee is shown as ??, and from this time on the confusion of the spelling of his name becomes manifest. There is no doubt that the licensee of the Hotel Gothic is the person whom we know as George Davenport, because there is uncertainty about the year 1850, which is the year he acquired the Talbot Inn in Gouger Street. The Devenport papers place him there and the official record shows that from 1850 to 1852 the licensee of the Talbot Inn was G. Davenport (note spelling), and that it was held by another person in 1853, which was the year he went to the goldfields and struck gold. In 1854 G. Davenport is again the licensee and remains so until 1871 when he dies. From 1871 to 1872, the licensee was C. J. Davenport, who was his wife Catherine (née Harris). Of particular interest was that the Talbot Inn was held in the name of Davenport, not Devenport.

It is interesting to note that Mrs. N.G. Sturt's record of this appears to be the source of information in the Devenport papers, which are at variance with the official colonial records. She writes "Davenport, on his master's recommendation, invested the capital for the eighteen months in certain sections of Adelaide to such good purpose that for one such section acquired at two shillings and sixpence to five shillings, he was able later to refuse £3,000. She also writes that "Davenport's fortunes culminated in a lucky hit on the goldfields, where, after actually throwing up his rights in a digging, he picked up a nugget of 4lb. 3 oz. weight, which in the Adelaide mint assayed at £300. This enabled him to buy more land, and to open a good inn with successful results". It is evident that Mrs. N.G. Sturt's story simply does not accord with the fact. George Davenport may or may not have struck gold as described, but he certainly did not open a good inn on the proceeds. He already held the Talbot Inn, in the circumstances as described, and in the absence other sustainable evidence to the contrary, the version of the property holdings described by Mrs. N.G. Sturt, and the Devenport papers, must be discounted.

The last meeting between Captain Sturt and George Davenport is reported to have taken place at the Talbot Inn just prior to Sturt's return to England. There is a reference to this meeting in a letter in the possession of Davenport's descendents, written by a James Miller Loch, who was George Davenport's trusted friend and executor of his will and estate, and dated 30 January 1902. In that letter James Loch writes "The evening before he (Captain Sturt) left Adelaide he visited Devenport's and bade them goodbye. I was present at the time and, of course, saw Captain Sturt. He appeared to me almost blind. Devenport led him into the room at the back of the hotel and gave him a cage with a favourite parrot". The family also appear to hold a letter from Sturt, dated June 1853, which was written and sent to George Davenport from St. Helena, whilst en route to England. This letter contains a reference to the parrot given to him by Davenport, which is reported to be a great favourite that often cheers them up with a song. This corroborates the Loch letter dated 1902.

From this time on George Davenport maintained a correspondence with Captain Charles Sturt, and his son Napier, until Sturt's death in 1869. Thereafter he wrote to Napier, and on one occasion Mrs Charlotte Sturt added a passage to one of Napier's letters. Davenport later sent him a fine gold chain made from nuggets in his possession and this chain remains in the Sturt family. At one time George Davenport made Napier Sturt his heir, but later changed his will when he had sons of his own, and therein is another story and the great confusion of names becomes evident.

The register of marriages shows that on 14 February 1846, one month after the Central Australian Expedition returned to Adelaide, George Davenport (note the spelling), labourer, married a Mrs Anne Giles at Holy Trinity Church, Adelaide. The register of deaths records the death on 16 March 1859, at Gouger Street, of Ann, the beloved wife of Mr George Devenport, aged 40. She married G. Davenport, she died the wife of G. Devenport, but there is no burial recorded in that name. There is an Ann Davenport buried in the West Terrace cemetery.

It appears that George Davenport did not believe in extended periods of mourning. The register of marriages shows that on 19 October 1859, one George Davenport (again note name), whose father's name was "John" (shades of the 1828 census), married Catherine Jane Harris at St. Luke's Church, Adelaide. The register of births shows that on 9 September 1862, a son was born to Mrs. Devenport, at her residence, the Talbot Inn, in Gouger Street. This son, of whom no other record could be found, must have been one George Napier, who

was the father of a Mr. Victor Sturt Devenport, of Victoria, who was the holder of the Devenport papers, and family memorabilia, in 1945.

Their next child, Lionel Harris Devenport, was obviously born in 1864, because he is recorded as having died on 24 August, 1865, aged 1 year. He is buried Lionel Maris Devenport, in the West Terrace cemetery. The Maris is obviously a data entry error in the cemetery records, because he is buried in the family plot that contains Charlotte and George Davenport.

Charlotte Augustus Davenport was born on 10 February 1867 in Adelaide. She died on 16 January 1868 aged 11 months and was buried Charlotte Augustus Devenport in the West Terrace cemetery.

The last child, Sydney Augustus Devenport, was born on 3 March 1870 at Adelaide. He later married a Helen Matcher and they had a child, Sydney Davenport.

George Davenport died on 6 May 1871 aged 69 years. He was buried George Devenport, at West Terrace cemetery, and thus ends the story of this man. His wife Catherine held the licence of the Talbot Inn in 1871 and 1872, following which it passed to a Mr. R. Cock in 1873, and at this time Catherine Davenport or Devenport seems to disappear. The family descendants in Victoria, for some reason or other, seem to have taken great pains to erase the name Davenport from the record. This is particularly noticeable in the address given by V. Sturt Devenport in 1945, and published by the Victorian Historical Society in September 1949. In that paper, every reference to Davenport, in the sources quoted, has been changed to Devenport. The passages from Mrs N.G. Sturt's biography in which she specifically refers to George Davenport, or at times, the more condescending term of "Davenport", have certainly been deliberately changed to "Devenport". The references to George Davenport in Sturt's Journal of the central expedition, and his *Narrative*, have also been changed, and raises the question often posed by the late Professor Julius Sumner Miller, "Why is it so?"

Many years ago, when I noted this anomaly, I raised it with the late David Sturt-Bray, who was an acknowledged expert on Sturt and George Davenport, and his explanation was that the family changed their name to "Devenport", because of the stigma of their convict heritage. Whilst I accepted that version at face value at the time, I must confess that now I am not so sure, and perhaps there was something more in the story of George Davenport that remains to be told.

The romantic version as recounted by Mrs. N.G. Sturt, to Davenport's executor, Mr. James Loch on 2 May 1902, in which she writes "My earnest wish was to show, as forcibly as my poor powers working on very slight material could do, the high qualities of a mind of character which shone with brighter lustre because of the cruel wrongs and against which hardships of fate in his early life Mr. Davenport so nobly and successfully fought his way. More than one of the English reviews singled out this remarkable career as a wonderful instance of steadfastness under most various conditions of life and expressed indignation at the hideous miscarriage of justice which condemned so fine a character to such an utterly undeserved term of transportation". This is what Mrs. N.G. Sturt believed until her death in April 1944, but was it true, because on her own admission the story was based "on very slight material", and that understates the case.

Was George Davenport his real name, was it George Devenport, or was he the convict, J. Devenport, in the Newcastle hospital in 1828, who for some reason did not provide the details required for the census, other than that at some time prior to 1828 he arrived in the 'Ocean'.

Was he a soldier transported for cowardice? If so there must be records in the Public Record Office in England, and he must appear on the convict muster roll on Norfolk Island in 1831. This is the stuff of which mysteries are made, but it does not in any way detract from the fact he is an historical figure, and that he and people like him endured all things to make a new and better life for themselves in the new world. George Davenport, as we know him, succeeded, but like his idol Captain Charles Sturt, the enigma remains. As they used to say at the end of the old mystery plays of my youth, "will the real George Davenport please stand up"?