

18. Retracing His Footsteps

Back to Mauritius

On Robynne's next trip to Mauritius in October 2010 some things had changed a great deal, with Cousin Sydney's memory now failing and Auntie Priscilla Thomas now in a nursing home, frail and unable to remember anything at all.

This time we were relying heavily on family recalling something new, Govinden's support to access St Thomas Church records, and new friends and connections to provide some direction and support where possible. Robynne would also be attending a conference in the city of Port Louis to talk about Grampa in the hope of generating some interest and support from key historians and researchers in Mauritius and England. As it would turn out this new search would take us deeper into the world of archives and research, with some of our longstanding information now being put into doubt.

Robynne: I arrived in Mauritius alone and was greeted by the taxi company who were transferring me to the hotel at Flic en Flac. But once I got in the taxi sadness swept over me. Firstly, I hated leaving Mum and Dad at home because I worry about them endlessly. Secondly, I was remembering that last time I was here, Dad was beside me and it was a journey we were taking together. It didn't feel right to be here this time without him. Sadly he wasn't well enough to return to Mauritius again. So I quickly rang Mum and Dad from in the taxi, just to hear their voices and let them know I was okay, because, where do you think I get the 'worrying' from!

Robynne went back to spend more time with my cousins Arlette and Sydney Purahoo, Sydney's wife Joceyline, and their daughter Lorna. She wanted to see if they could share any further information relating to Grampa and his parents. Although struggling to remember specific points now due to ailing health, and failing memory, Sydney happily explained to Robynne:

What I am telling you I heard from my Grandmother Ruth ... she told me that Grandfather Samson Peersahib (Grampa and Ruth's Father) had a second wife after Miriam and she was my great-grandmother. She had come from India and converted from Hindu to Christianity and she is Gooran.

Sydney was unable to tell Robynne what Gooran means, or what his great-grandmother's name was, but this was a start. He also believed that at the time our Grampa went away to Australia he was 17 years old and his sister Ruth (Sydney's grandmother) was three years old.

Sydney referred to Grampa's mother as Miriam, then Esther, and then Miriam again. When Robynne questioned him about this he seemed very clear it was Esther. Was this another clue?

A Man or a Boy

After spending the day with Sydney, Arlette and Lorna, Robynne headed over to meet with Mr Govinden Vishwanaden at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI) at Moka. It was nice to finally meet in person, although she soon learnt that what he had to share with her that day would throw a spanner into all the works.

In his search for the death records for Grandfather Samson Peersahib, dated 31 January 1875 (the date on the headstone at St Thomas Church), he came across the birth and death records of a Samson Peersahib who was born on 9 July 1861 and died 31 January 1875 – yes, a 13-year-old boy. These were the exact dates we thought we saw on the headstone at St Thomas Church two years earlier.

The birth and death records for this boy named his parents as James Peersahib, Interpreter, and Esther Peersahib, both of Plaines Wilhem District in Mauritius. The name of the witness on the birth certificate was 'Teeroochelvan Arlapah Samoonaden'. Remember this name as it will prove to be useful later on as we put the jigsaw pieces of this story together.

Now we had a young boy with the same name as Grandfather Samson, buried in the grave that the family had always believed was Grandfather Samson Peersahib's grave. No one in the family in Mauritius had ever heard of a boy named Samson Peersahib, or that Grandfather Samson and Grandmother Miriam had another son.

More Aliases

By the end of that day, some interesting points were standing out for Robynne as she sat in her motel room putting the pieces together. She phoned Brenda and me to talk about them. This new find raised a number of questions for us:

- Did Grampa's mother go by the name Esther or Miriam, hence the reason for Sydney's confusion in recalling her name?
- Did Grandfather Samson go by the name James Peersahib?
- Was this boy Samson, Grampa's brother?

For now we will continue to call Grampa's parents Samson and Miriam until we have further evidence to confirm our suspicions and to save too much confusion.

As Robynne explained the evidence collected so far, I suddenly remembered that in one of her many letters to me over the past 20 years, Aunty Priscilla had actually referred to Grampa's mother as Miriam Esther Thomas. It is also important to note, as mentioned earlier in this book, that Grampa's first child was named Miriam Esther. Interesting!

Robynne: This confusion in names may be why Mr Govinden had been unable to find any information about Samson and Miriam and their life in Mauritius. Maybe we should have been looking for James and Esther Peersahib!

And now, it could be that Grampa fled Mauritius after the deaths of both his brother AND mother, and his father's sudden remarriage.

We had mentioned earlier that when we visited Grandfather Samson Peersahib's grave we found that someone had attempted to change the dates on the headstone. It is now possible that Grandfather Samson was buried with his son Samson, and so the name didn't have to be changed on the headstone, but someone had tried to alter the dates to reflect the passing of the Elder of the family, Grandfather Samson.

This information raised the possibility that Grampa's father was James Peersahib; if so, it meant that when Grampa came to Australia and changed his name to Thomas Shadrach James, he maintained his mother's maiden name Thomas and his father's Christian name James.

But we can hypothesise all we like. What we needed to do was find birth certificates for both Grampa and his sister Ruth Peersahib and then cross check these against the birth and death certificates of this boy named Samson to see if they shared one or more of the same parents, Esther and James Peersahib.

The Nursing Home

Arlette, Lorna and Robynne headed off to visit Aunty Priscilla Thomas in her nursing home at Point Aux Sables on the coast near Port Louis. They were all excited to be going; Robynne drove the little hire car while the girls gave her directions. It was Sunday so the traffic wasn't as bad as on a week-day.

Robynne: Aunty was sitting up in bed and gave me a big smile of recognition. But as I came closer to her, I realised she didn't know me at all. Then I asked if she knew George Nelson in an attempt to help her sort out who I was. Her face lit up and she smiled and jumped excitedly to say: 'George? Yesss how is hee?'

I then explained that I was his daughter and she was excited to see me and then I was quickly forgotten again. The three of us left Aunty that day feeling very sad. As it turned out, none of us would ever see her again. Aunty died a few months later in 2011.

The Conference

Now it was time for Robynne to attend her conference (International Conference – Isle de France, Mauritius: 1810, The Great Turning Point). While there she gave a presentation about Grampa and our search for his life and ancestry. Attendees were historians and researchers who had great expertise in Mauritian/Indian history and they were very keen to hear about the Mauritian Indian man who had achieved great things in Australia.

Some attendees offered their insight on the day and some, such as Marie France Chelin-Goblet, offered to provide support to our ongoing research. A Mr Cader Kalla provided his learned insight into the name Peersahib, suggesting that it was very unlikely that the name stemmed from Kashmir, as we had been previously advised.

He also suggested that the name Peersahib is related to someone of special status such as a High Priest, or someone from whom people would seek counsel. This account was very similar to that of Cousin Arlette who suggested it meant ‘Noble Man’.

A Mr Burrun who was present at the conference suggested that the book *Diocese of Mauritius* could be very helpful to our research. He had a photocopy of the book waiting at the airport for Robynne when she was leaving Mauritius. Other attendees related their knowledge of the St Thomas Church in India, suggesting that the family Thomas may have had some connection to southern India and the roots of the St Thomas Church there. Robynne later attended a formal lunch at the home of the Australian High Commissioner in Mauritius – Catherine Johnstone.

The Church Records

Following the conference, Arlette and Mr Govinden made a special trip with Robynne back to St Thomas Church to seek access to death, marriage, baptism and christening records. They met with the Lisette, the woman responsible for maintaining the church records and she was very unwell at the time, so she asked them to leave the request with her and she would get back to Mr Govinden sometime. But while they all chatted in language, Robynne stepped inside the church.



Govinden Vishwanaden of Mahatma Gandhi Institute and Robynne outside the St Thomas Church at Beau Bassin in Mauritius, 2010.

Source: GBRN Collection.

Robynne: I walked around inside wondering 'is this where Grandfather Samson and Grandmother Miriam were married?' I spent some time reading the plaque inside the door and then sat quietly alone. It is a beautiful old style church with stained glass windows and a feeling of enormous peace swept over me while there. I sat near the back of the church talking to Grandpa Samson, Grandma Miriam Esther and Grampa, asking for their guidance and direction in how to find evidence of their lives in Mauritius. I felt sure they were there with me. I had an image of Grampa as a baby, being held in the arms of his proud Mum and Dad as they stood at the front of the church before the Bishop for his Christening.

The plaque said that the St Thomas Church was established in 1850 so it was probably only newly established when Grandfather Samson and Grandma Miriam Esther arrived in Mauritius.

Mr Govinden made attempts to gain access to the church records, but it was taking a long time to uncover the information, so he decided to persist with his connections at the Civil Status Office (Births, Deaths and Marriages) (CSO) instead. Cousin Sydney provided written approval so that Mr Govinden could seek family records with the CSO; this seemed like the best way forward at the time.



Inside St Thomas Church.

Source: GBRN Collection.w

Govinden and Robynne decided it would be best to start the search for Sydney's records at the CSO and then work backwards from there following the paper trail to his mother, and hers, and hers, in the hope of arriving at Samson or James. It sounded like a good plan; an easy plan; but it all took a great deal of time.

Home again

So Robynne returned home leaving Mr Govinden to continue the search on our behalf. She came home with more questions than when she left. It was clear that this was going to continue to be a very long process. We now had to wait patiently giving our friend in Mauritius the time to search.

When Robynne arrived home, we made writing all our findings down in the form of this book our first priority, in the hope that sometime before we finished, the missing bits and pieces might be uncovered. So that's what we started to do. And that's why you have been taking this journey with us, through the twists and turns as we locate more information and head off on new paths.

As it turned out, this would be a long drawn out wait. Two years later, there was still no success with our quest.

Shortly after Robynne returned from Mauritius, my cousin Murray Moulton gave us a letter that had been in his Grandmother Becky's (Grampa's daughter's) possession. It was a letter from Uncle Nesam Thomas in Ceylon, dated 12 February 1948, addressed to Auntie Becky Murray (nee James). The letter was hard to read, and we found it difficult to understand the context, so we will not share it with you until later in the story (see Chapter 19).

Honouring Brenda

Robynne: Exactly one week after I arrived home from Mauritius, I was ready to get into writing up the findings and experiences from that trip. I called in to visit Mum and Dad in their home on my property, as I did every morning, to see if they were alright. Mum was her usual bright and bubbly self. I spent some time that day sitting with her on her little love seat on their verandah holding hands, swinging happily, whilst nattering away, like best friends do and listening in on a conversation Dad was having with a male visitor. Then I headed back into my office to work.

Only a couple of hours later, Dad called me to come and check on Mum because he couldn't wake her. I immediately ran inside to find her on the couch. It seemed like she was gone; as though she had passed away in an instant. I was horrified and terrified and had Dad ring the ambulance, who directed us through CPR. My head was reeling. As I lay Mum on the floor and started doing CPR, all I could see were my tears pouring all over my darling Mum's chest. I just couldn't stop crying.

There were so many random thoughts going through my head. How did this happen? This wasn't meant to happen. Not like this. Not in an instant. It wasn't right. It wasn't real. I looked to Dad on the phone and he seemed so calm, but I knew he was in a state of shock, with his heart breaking inside his chest. But he didn't show it; he remained calm, while I was falling apart. But I continued on doing CPR for one hour until the ambulance arrived. It wasn't long before they declared that my beautiful Mum had passed away. No! No! This can't be real!!

In the days and weeks that followed, I struggled with the enormous guilt that I had spent so much time focusing on our Ancestors who had passed on, through this research and travelling. I felt like I had neglected my Mum in the last two weeks of her life. How could I? I just didn't want to come back to this research at all. It was over for me.

I watched as Dad struggled with the huge shock and grief at Mum passing away so suddenly, with no time for goodbyes. Such overwhelming grief took over our lives and so this story was put aside for six months while we tried to heal from our loss. Then one day Dad came out of the darkness and said he really wanted to finish this book. And so, here we are, slowly and steadily, moving forward to finish the story that we started. To finish the story that Mum encouraged us to tell.

We have continued on with this project, visiting people and searching in various archives, while I also keep trying to earn a living. It hasn't been easy for us the past couple of years.

Then it was suddenly two years later – 2012, and time to return to Mauritius to see how far we had come with the searches that started six years earlier. It was time to complete our search so that we could finish telling our story.



Brenda, me and Robynne at Rumbalara Football Netball Club Launch.

Source: GBRN Collection.

Mauritius, 2012

A Targeted Approach

Thanks to a funding grant from the Community Justice Panels Executive Committee in Victoria in April 2012 Robynne was able to return to Mauritius a third time hoping to draw this search to an end. Yes, we could have rushed and finished this story a year ago, but if we had told the story as we had it a year ago, it wouldn't have done Grampa justice at all. In fact, a great deal of the story would have been completely wrong, as it turns out. In hindsight, our slow and steady approach has been the best way to go, and you will soon see why.

We had some specific questions and information that we were seeking this time around and tried a different approach.

First of all we would focus on James and Esther Peersahib, rather than Samson and Miriam, and see where that might lead us. And we would consider every possible way of spelling Peersahib; including Peershahib, Peersaib and the list goes on.

Robynne: It is therefore important to note that from this point forward, any mention of the name Peersahib, will be very deliberately spelt precisely as that specific record or person has suggested. I hope this explains the constant changes in the spelling of this name.

Robynne also teed up Marie France Chelin-Goblet and Mr Abdool Cader Kalla, whom she had met at the conference in Mauritius two years earlier, to assist her during this trip. Both were very experienced historians and authors in their own right in Mauritius. And both had kindly agreed to meet with Robynne to see what they could find together. She also hoped to catch up with Mr Govinden from the Mahatma Gandhi Institute again, if he was available.

Prior to heading to Mauritius, Robynne had put together a list of all that we knew from our family, and the information we needed to find; and then worked with Marie-France and Cader Kalla to plan her time there.

The Diocese of Mauritius

Thankfully dear Marie-France started her search several weeks before Robynne's arrival; as it turned out, this approach paid off! She uncovered a reference to a 'Peersaib' in the book *Diocese of Mauritius* by Reverend E.E. Curtis (1975), which is about the establishment of the Anglican Church in Mauritius and the work of the Anglican Bishops there. The information she uncovered was an

excerpt taken from the journals of the very first Anglican Bishop of Mauritius, Bishop Vincent Ryan, from his eight years residence in both Mauritius and Madagascar.

Robynne: Would you believe when I spoke at the Conference in Mauritius in 2010, a Mr Burrin had provided me with a copy of this book? He had it waiting at the airport for me. Silly me! I had only ever skimmed through it, thinking it didn't have any relevance to our search. What a mistake!!

The reference in this book was headed:

The Christian Indian Association:

In 1856, Bishop Ryan encouraged the Indian Christians to organise themselves on nearly the same pattern as the Mauritius Church Association, so that the evangelistic and Missionary work might be independently undertaken by them. It did not have a spectacular beginning, but as the years went by, it produced leaders among the Indian Christian Community who left their mark in that early part of the history of the diocese – Anandapen, *Peersaib*, Kooshalee. In the opinion of Archdeacon Buswell, Kooshalee was the Apostle by excellence to the Indian Immigrants.

This was a great find! We didn't have a Christian name, but we did know that the Thomas men (Grandmother Miriam's brother Manuel Thomas and his sons) were all deacons of the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) and Anglican Church. This excerpt connected *this* Peersaib with the CMS and therefore with the Thomas family. This may have been how Miriam and Samson (or Esther and James) met – through the church.

Robynne: At this point we must now find a Christian name for this Peersaib mentioned in the Diocese of Mauritius book to confirm whether he is part of Grampa's family.

The Blue Book

Suddenly we received another email from Marie-France with another exciting find; she had found mention of a James Peersaib online in the Government Blue Book and *Mauritius Almanac and Civil Service Register online*, which highlighted James' work history as an Interpreter for the Magistrate at Plaines Wilhem, a region of Mauritius. What is also interesting from this is that a person named 'Teeroochelvan Arlapah Samoonaden' is also noted in the blue book as a work colleague of James.

Remember, he was also the witness on young Samson Peersahib's birth certificate? This linked James Peersaib the Interpreter and government employee to James Peersahib the father of the boy Samson, who lies in the grave at St Thomas Church Beau Bassin – the grave that our Mauritian family have always believed to be that of our Grandfather Samson Peersahib. Given that we have always known that Grampa's father was an Interpreter for the government, this now increased the possibility that James was Grampa's father, also known in our family as Samson. This information was very exciting and would now support our renewed searches in Mauritius.