A Pioneer Australian Missionary in China
from the Boxer Rebellion to the
Communist Insurgency

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The Massacres in China

The Sydney Morning Herald
Wednesday 7 August 1895

THE MASSACRES IN CHINA

REVOLTING CRUELITIES
LADIES HACKED TO DEATH
CHILDREN IMPALED ON SPEARS

Particulars received today concerning the massacre of Christian missionaries at Kucheng in China show that the originators of the atrocities were members of a newly formed Vegetarian Society, and comprised the rabble of the town. They subjected the female victims to revolting cruelties.

All twelve victims were connected with the Church Missionary Society ... Miss Harriet Eleanor Saunders and Miss Elizabeth Maud Saunders ... left Melbourne in 1893.

The ladies who were massacred at Kucheng begged piteously for their lives, offering to surrender all their valuables. The leader of the atrocities shouted 'Kill Nellie Saunders' whereupon the mob fell upon the lady missionaries and butchered them without mercy.

They burned the house of the Rev. Dr Stewart.

Miss Cissie Newcombe, one of the victims, was speared to death, and her body, bleeding and hacked about, was thrown over a precipice.

Miss Elsie Marshall had her throat cut.

Miss Gordon, who belonged to Australia, as well as Miss 'Topsy' Saunders, was speared in the head.

The four children of the Rev. Dr Stewart were impaled on the spears of the murderers.

In addition to the missionaries who were put to death several other persons belonging to the mission were attacked by the mob, but they managed to make good their escape, although severely wounded.
News of this shocking incident spread like wildfire within a few days of its occurrence in a remote part of China, powerfully demonstrating the speed of the recently installed international cable system. From the moment it broke, it stirred up strong reactions among ordinary Australians everywhere and quickly became a topic of conversation in homes and workplaces, shops and schools, even among total strangers.

Within a few days, local churches and missionary societies organised meetings to help people express their concern and pray for the safety of other foreigners at risk elsewhere in China. The news had the strongest personal impact upon those who supported Christian work in China, especially those who were considering serving there as missionaries. Sophie Sackville Newton was one of these, and for her this news was to be of life-changing significance.
The Challenge of an Adventurous Heritage
(1867–1891)

In early winter 1958, ninety-one-year-old Sophie glanced casually one morning at the back of the new cereal box on the table before her. Something caught her eye. The makers had begun an educational series on Famous Australian Explorers and on the box she noticed a familiar face. Surprised, she picked up a pen and scrawled shakily alongside the face: ‘Our Great Uncle, relative of my grandmother Dight, of Stafford, Singleton.’ It was a picture of the first Australian-born explorer Hamilton Hume.

Sophie was interested to check what the box said about him. It mentioned his expeditions south of Sydney in the Illawarra District while still in his late teens. Then his recruitment by two government-appointed explorers: first John Oxley, to survey the Western Plains, and later Charles Sturt, to survey the Darling River near the South Australian border. Most of the space
described his major discovery of the overland route to Melbourne in 1824 with William Hovell. In accomplishing this, they also found vast tracts of land suitable for settlement and farming. The expedition brought fame to Hume in the small colony. Hamilton and his wife Elizabeth (née Howe), through whom he was related to Sophie, did not have any children and finally settled at ‘Cooma Cottage’ in Yass, 322 kilometres south-west of Sydney, becoming major benefactors of the town and church there.

What the article on the box failed to mention was how much Hume’s success came from his good relationship with the Aborigines, who taught him how to find the best routes and where to locate food and water. He believed that they should be treated with respect and, despite their more primitive ways, as equals in the eyes of God. Hume was taught this by his mother, Eliza Hume, who had in turn learned it from regular meetings of William Wilberforce’s anti-slavery movement in her father’s rectory in England. She was a singular person in her own right, a teacher and cultured woman with a strong religious commitment. Just three years after her arrival in the colony, she was the first woman to be given the official position as matron of its first orphanage at Parramatta. Later, she also became one of the first women to receive a land grant in her own right, rather than jointly with her husband.

Sophie clipped out the cereal cover and placed it in her memory chest, which also contained two fading letters by another of her forebears, an even earlier explorer, John Howe. Howe arrived in Sydney as a free settler in 1802, and after the death of his first wife, Frances Ward, he settled into the town of Windsor, one of the earliest settlements outside Sydney on the Hawkesbury River. The letters had been written several years later to his second wife, Jane Kennedy. In one, Howe expressed his heartfelt love for Jane, Sophie’s great grandmother, as well as a genuine faith in God. In the other, he looked forward to a visit from the Governor, Lachlan Macquarie, who he hoped would appoint him to an official position in the town. Howe had already distinguished himself by helping to build the first Presbyterian Church in the new colony at nearby Ebenezer. After his marriage to Jane, which produced nine children, he had built the first toll bridge into Windsor, which was named after him. He was to become, in turn, Windsor’s official auctioneer, chief constable and coroner. His major achievement, however, was leading a group of five fellow settlers and two Aborigines, who discovered the first accessible overland route north to the Hunter Valley, west of Newcastle, in 1819 and 1820. These expeditions opened up large tracts of fertile land for future settlement. As a young woman, Sophie had travelled along the road
following that route. Many signs of her great grandfather’s legacy lay along this route in the form of place names: Howe’s Mountain, Lagoon, Swamp, Valley and finally Park in Singleton, the first town in the district. As a reward for his explorations, Howe received two large grazing grants in the vicinity, where he and Jane ultimately settled.

Also in Sophie’s chest was a box containing the surgical instruments owned by her father, John Lawrence Newton, which had been passed on to her for safe-keeping after he died. When she opened the box, memories came flooding back. She could hear the sound of his north-country English voice talking fondly about Ormskirk, the little market town in West Lancashire where he was born and grew up with three siblings. He admired his father, also named John, a Methodist lay preacher and then clergyman, and he loved his mother, Hannah. Sophie’s father would often talk about the many places he had lived in while he was growing up, as his father had to move every few years into a new placement. Instead of the ministry, which one of his brothers chose, he decided on medicine as his profession, qualifying at just 24 as a Licentiate Apothecary, and Member of the Royal College of Surgeons in London. In the surgical box were letters of commendation from his professors, stating that he would make a caring doctor or an excellent teacher. Newton surprised them all by resolving to go to a new country at the other end of the world, where there were few doctors, and to seek work there in country areas where the needs were greatest. He was committed to educating ordinary people about matters relating to health, as well as practising his craft as both a physician and a surgeon. How many people, she wondered, had been healed by the instruments she held in her hands, and by the care and compassion which accompanied their use? She missed him, even after all these years, and there were tears in her eyes as she placed the instruments back in their box, closed the lid and laid it carefully in the chest.

So far we have seen something of the background to Sophie’s life story through her own eyes. Now we can begin to tell the story itself.

After he reached London, Sophie’s father John found a ship heading to New South Wales, and to pay his way he joined the crew as its doctor. Soon after his arrival, he was offered a position as assistant to a Dr Glenroy in Singleton, 193 kilometres north of Sydney. Within a year he met and fell in love with 19-year-old Emma Dight, who had grown up on her family’s station, ‘Stafford’, about 32 kilometres away. Her father George Dight,
who had died in early middle age, was one of the original members of the first Parliament in the colony. Two of her brothers, George and John, were pioneer graziers who had followed the route north to the Queensland border opened up by the explorer Alan Cunningham. On advice from Hamilton Hume, other members of the family had travelled as far south as the Yarra River near Melbourne and settled there. Several members of Emma’s family, including her mother Elizabeth, possessed a vital and loving Christian faith that placed a strong emphasis on service and philanthropy. Emma and some of her siblings warmly embraced her faith.

After a reasonably short courtship, John and Emma Newton were married on 27 January 1864 at All Saints Church of England in Singleton. Shortly afterwards, Newton decided to open up his own practice in Mudgee, a smaller town 145 kilometres inland. This placed him in a better position to support a wife and start a family. As in other towns where he had worked, Newton
soon became well known in Mudgee, working for its welfare in a range of ways. As was often the custom at that time, when their first daughter Hannah was due, Emma moved back to her family home for the baby's delivery and her subsequent recuperation. This also happened when their second child George was born two years later.

In 1867, the young family made a temporary move back to England so that Newton could further his medical qualifications. The trip also enabled Emma to meet Newton's parents, his elder brother William and wife Catherine, and his two younger siblings Susannah and Edward. They settled in the little village of Isleham, not far from Cambridge, where Newton continued to practice medicine and prepare for exams to become a member of the prestigious Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh. It was in Isleham on 11 September 1867 that Sophia Sackville Newton came into the world. Her middle name was a derivation of her grandmother's maiden name, Shackfield, and her first name came from one of her mother's sisters, although everyone knew her as Sophie. She was baptised in the Anglican Church in the village.

In early 1869, after the family moved into Cambridge, Sophie's sister Amelia Frances Howe was born. This was a happy time, until the sudden death of her older brother George from croup the following year. This severely affected the young family, and it was doubly hard to bear given John's medical expertise. In 1871 they moved into 29 Regent Street in the heart of Cambridge. Here they lived in a comfortable two-storey corner house overlooking a large park, close to several university colleges and the city hospital. Family life was just beginning to get back to normal when Emma fell pregnant again. Due to a difficult pregnancy, Emma feared she might die in childbirth and she persuaded Newton to return to Australia so that she could be with her
family. This decision was made easier by hearing that Newton’s elder brother William and his wife had accepted an offer to serve in the Anglican church at Macleay River in northern New South Wales. Sophie’s family transferred to London where, while waiting for a post on a ship, another son, John Kennedy Howe, was born. Eventually Newton found employment as the ships’ doctor on the SS *Parramatta*, and during this voyage Emma gave birth to another son, Herbert Swanston, who was named after the ship’s captain.

For five-year-old Sophie, the trip was a marvellous adventure. Little did she know that this long journey was only the first of many overseas voyages she would make. Despite leaving England, she always maintained a strong link with the land of her birth, particularly the village of Isleham. Like so many Australians of that era, this connection was regularly strengthened through the flow of letters between relatives still living in England and their family in Australia.
After his family arrived in Sydney in late 1872, Newton found a position in the town of Queanbeyan, 290 kilometres south-west of Sydney. He quickly established himself there, again becoming an active member of the community. Some of Sophie’s earliest recorded memories come from this time. She remembered playing in the hollow of a large tree in the garden, suffering a severe burn from a red-hot iron, and the anxiety she caused her mother when she accidentally swallowed a thimble. Above all, she remembered the birth of another sister, Emmeline Grace, to whom she became very close. On the wider family front, it is interesting to speculate whether she ever went with her family over to ‘Cooma Cottage’ near Yass, only 64 kilometres away, to meet her great-uncle Hamilton Hume – who was to die later that year.

In 1874 the family moved back to Mudgee, close to Newton’s brother William, Rector of Gulgong, the next town to the north. Newton soon resumed his former position in the town, often appearing in court as a forensic expert and ultimately becoming the coroner for the district. Sophie, now seven, established a special link with William’s daughter Eleanor, who was similar in age.

While this move was a welcome one for John and Emma, a very practical problem soon arose. There was simply not enough room in the house for all six children. In consultation with Emma’s family, they decided that Sophie, Hannah and Amy would go to live with their Uncle Samuel, Aunt Mary and their grandmother Elizabeth at ‘Stafford’, near Singleton, where there was both space and household help.
The placing of children in the care of relatives was not unusual at this time, as families thought of themselves in extended, rather than just nuclear terms. Since ‘Stafford’ was where Sophie’s mother had grown up, it was a place where the girls felt at home and could easily be visited by their parents. The house was a fine example of a two-storey, verandah-enclosed dwelling, with several add-on utility buildings. The property’s income was derived mainly from dairy, fruit and wheat. It was here that Sophie learned domestic duties such as cooking and gardening (and developed a lifelong love for roses, which she grew in the conservatory), and also learned to play the piano. She watched calves being birthed and helped out when crops were harvested. It was here too that she learned to ride a horse and swim in the local creek. For Sophie, her aunt and grandmother modelled strong, active and sometimes independent responsibility, not only on the property but in the town.

Sophie and her sisters went to the public school and attended St Lawrence’s Church of England in the small village of Warkworth, only a few kilometres away. This was part of the sprawling parish of Jerry’s Plain, and many parishioners met in homestead churches. Apart from these activities, there were occasional trips in horse and cart with the family to Singleton, the closest major centre, on business, for shopping and to attend social events. Less often, Sophie made the longer trip in the other direction to Mudgee to spend time with her family, especially for birthdays and Christmas. Although she had grown up in a Christian family, Sophie’s experience of family devotions with her grandma, aunt and sisters at ‘Stafford’ left a lasting impression. They sang and read regularly from a small book of *Hymns for Little Children*, which also contained the Ten Commandments as well as morning and evening prayers. As these times were simply part of their daily life.
routine, she learned that you did not need to go to a special building or have a special service to experience God with other people.

In April 1876, the girls received a letter from their parents and brothers in Mudgee to say that she had a new little sister, Florence Geraldine. Life went on without incident for the next few years until three weeks before Christmas 1880, when Sophie’s older sister Hannah died suddenly of rheumatic fever. Hannah’s unexpected death broke her parent’s hearts, as a deeply grieving letter from her father Newton to his mother-in-law Elizabeth demonstrates. Recalling their loss of son George ten years earlier, he took comfort from the fact that ‘our eldest girl and boy are in heaven’. He and Emma had now lost two children, and again Sophie had to face the death of someone very close to her. Coupled with this, she now felt the pressure and responsibility of being the eldest child.

Although we have little information about Sophie’s life as a teenager, at some point she most likely went with the folk from ‘Stafford’ to Sydney’s Royal Easter Show. They were able to stay with those members of their extended family who lived in Sydney, which was only half a day’s train journey from Singleton. This agricultural show was a significant event for many country families, providing them with the opportunity to display their animals and products, compete for various prizes, meet with relatives from other properties, do some major shopping and see something of the harbour and the ocean.

Sophie’s personal faith developed during these teenage years. Around the age of 17, she began the practice of reading a widely used devotional booklet *Daily Light*, a practice she continued all her life. Although she had always regarded herself as a Christian, a year later on 23 July 1885 she used her confirmation in the Church of England in Singleton to publicly and wholeheartedly give her life to Christ.

In 1887, and at an age when many young women were becoming engaged or married, Sophie took up employment as a governess. She had responsibility for seven younger cousins at ‘Boonal’, a cattle and sheep station near Warialda in the New England district of NSW, owned by her uncle George and aunt Isabella. Its stone- and wood-built homestead was expansive, and many rooms had fireplaces to keep the cold Northern Slopes winters at bay. Much of the property lay along lush river flats, making it excellent shorthorn cattle country, later diversifying to sheep and wool.
Although Sophie had lived the previous 12 years of her life on a station, ‘Boonal’ was very much larger and more remote, the whole district then having only a few hundred people. Although nearby Warialda had a post office, court house, school of arts and church, it was far smaller than the more established town of Singleton. To get there, Sophie would have travelled many hours by train to Tamworth, followed by a 193 kilometre bone-jarring journey by horse and buggy. This isolation from immediate family and friends, as well as looking after and educating primary-aged children as an untrained teacher, must have posed a big challenge. Since there was a public school in Warialda, her responsibility was chiefly to broaden and improve the children’s reading, writing and musical skills, certainly testing her capacity to develop a creative syllabus for a diverse age group. This first experience of earning a living also taught Sophie how to be thrifty and use her money wisely, lessons that were to prove valuable at various times in her life.

Sophie’s days at ‘Boonal’ were very full. In addition to lessons with each of the children, she was inescapably involved with the many aspects of life on a large, remote property and its ever-changing seasons. Help at shearing and cropping times were whole family activities and provided plenty of ‘extra-curricular’ activities for her seven lively charges. While it would have been difficult to have days off, she enjoyed riding to and occasionally staying at another uncle’s property, ‘Yetman’; family outings to a well-known picnic spot, Cranky Rock; and regular trips to Warialda for shopping, social events and attending church.

During her two-year stay at ‘Boonal’, Sophie received letters from her much-loved sisters, now joined by Florence, in Singleton. The correspondence between the sisters contains strong indications of their mutual faith in God and prayers for one another. It also reveals Sophie’s growing spiritual maturity, demonstrated by an anonymous poem titled The Master’s Message that she copied out:

‘My Child! the Cross lies here
Come and raise my drooping head
And look at Me – no burden
Would I give thee
But one to suit they feeble frame,
With just a weight sufficient
To draw thee from thyself
To ask of Me
That strength that thou
Dost not possess,
But which in all thy weakness shall be perfect made
If only thou wilt find thy
Source in Me! …'
'Yes. Lord!', I cried with one great yearning cry.
'So place the burden that I may leave
With all my weight on Thee,
Nor keep the load myself and I will walk
Close by Thy side nor fear the journey if Thou shalt lead me.'

In August 1888 Sophie’s now settled life was uprooted again when her aunt Isabella’s declining health required her husband to move with her to the larger town of Armidale for better medical care. As this ultimately led to her aunt and uncle deciding to sell the farm, Sohpie’s position came to an end. Unclear what was next in store for her, she moved back to her parent’s home in Mudgee. Sometime after her return, she was pursued by an eligible young man in the district, whose father was a well-known wealthy grazier and businessman. As no personal records have survived from this period, unfortunately we know very little about him. According to family sources his name was James. It is not clear how long they ‘kept company’, but the relationship was close enough for him to propose marriage and for her to accept.

Most women of her age were now married and beginning a family. Employment opportunities, particularly in the country, were few. She did not want to further burden her parents in their already overcrowded home. However, not long after their engagement, Sophie began to have second thoughts and painfully ended the relationship. It is not fully clear what motivated her to do this. Was her fiancé heading in the same direction as her desires expressed in *The Master’s Message*? Was there some perceived problem with the life they would have together because of his family’s business and its demands? Whatever the reason, the fact that it was her decision would have raised eyebrows in those days. For Sophie, however, it opened up the way for a different set of life choices that lay just around the corner.