

# The enigmatic relationship between Sir Samuel Way and Susannah Gooding

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These notes were compiled by Don Gordon.

These notes should be read in conjunction with 'A Tale of Two Women' which is item 001 in the Stories on the left of the home page.

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What can we understand of about this complex relationship?

For more than two decades, Samuel had maintained a clandestine relationship with his mistress and children in Tasmania and then in Melbourne. She was from a disreputable family whereas Samuel's prominence in Adelaide society continued to rise. He was one of the colony's most eligible bachelors, the epitome of integrity, the public face of propriety, the foremost law officer, with key roles in the government, church, Freemasons, hospitals, universities and most aspects of civic life. Somehow, Samuel managed to keep these two personas, these two worlds, separate.

What sort of person was Susannah? What did she make of it all?

- We know a great deal about Samuel – much has been documented about what he achieved, what he said, and even what he thought. But from Susannah there is silence. We can only guess at how she managed this secret relationship with such a public person for so long.
- She must have been a remarkable woman, a strong woman.
- She was in a powerful position because at, any stage, if ill feeling had developed between them, she could have exposed Samuel. This would have been at great cost to herself but even greater cost to Samuel. We do not know whether or not this was ever a factor in their relationship.
- She attracted one of Adelaide's most eligible bachelors so we can guess that she had many charming qualities in the early years of their romance and other endearing qualities as their relationship continued over the decades.
- It must have been much more than a sexual relationship. There must have been deep fulfilment for both Samuel and Susannah because they retained the relationship through the years, even though it would have been so difficult for both of them in different ways.
- She must have had strong feelings when she heard of Samuel's prominence in Adelaide while she was cut out and ignored publicly.
- Maybe Samuel was looking for other qualities in a wife. If Susannah had been Samuel's wife, could she have complemented his standing in the community as capably as Kitty was able to do?

Why didn't Samuel marry Susannah? Why did he keep the relationship a secret?

- Emerson (p28) suggests the ostracism by respected society of the time if someone married below their class or had a mistress.
- The difference in social standing would have been accentuated by the convict background of her parents and grandparents. South Australian had resisted the idea of having convicts and undoubtedly the upper echelons of Adelaide society would have been particularly negative towards convict backgrounds.
- Emerson suggested that, after the extreme poverty of his childhood: "... he wanted to put himself as far as possible from having to endure that misery again, and to him that seems to have meant conforming to established practices rather than challenging them. If it was not done thing to marry a servant if one aspired to high public office, then he would keep that side of life to himself. The division of private and public life is no exception in Victoria society." (ref: Emerson, p 28) Does this imply that it was common for high society to turn a blind eye to having a mistress of a lower class? There can be some doubt that this was common because it would have been difficult to keep this secret and avoid public scandal.

How did he keep it a secret? Who knew? How did he avoid public scandal?

- As such a public figure, many people would have wondered why Samuel was not married – he was a highly eligible bachelor.
- Fellow students and staff at Geelong Grammar would have asked the boys “Who is your father?” Paternity and lineage was pivotal, requiring a credible answer - particularly at that school, and particularly at that time. They would have been curious about who was paying the high fees. They would have noticed which parents attended official occasions like graduations and speech nights. Maybe John White, whoever he was, covered at least some of these questions.
- Emerson suggested that it was known by just a few intimate friends. (ref: Emerson, p 29). But many people must have known – the people around Samuel and the people around Susannah. It was a ‘secret’ many were aware of, but they did not spread the word. Why did they help perpetuate this secret? Maybe Samuel’s standing was so high, and the ‘outing’ would have been so explosive, that no one dared speak out.
- His youngest sister, Florence must have known. She was his confidante and might have destroyed his personal diaries (p 26). Also, her husband, Dr Allan Campbell must have known because he attended Susannah, at Samuel’s request, in her dying days.
- Did Kitty know? Susannah died 10 years before Samuel and Kitty were married, but Kitty knew Samuel very well before and also it seems that all the close family knew – so Kitty must have known quite a lot about the relationship and the boys, even if Samuel was not completely frank about every detail. We do not know her attitude or reaction.
- People (who?) would have asked why he was going to Tasmania (and then Melbourne) so often and where he stayed. It would have been a major journey in those days, and he was a busy man.
- Sir Rowden’s Knighthood documentation of lineage – compare with Samuel’s entry in Burkesxxxx
- James White, grandson, knew.
- In his own dying days, Samuel sought the medical opinion of both his sons.
- Summary:-
  - At the time, maybe it was the worst kept secret amongst a wide circle going well beyond the immediate family and some professional circles.
  - There was an unstated conspiracy of silence by all who knew at the time, and by historians over the years (they must have known) – maybe out of respect for this great man.
  - It did not come fully public until Parkinson’s article in 1995 [research; Check this.]. This was about 130 years after the commencement of their relationship, 107 years after Susannah had died and 80 years after Samuel’s death. Although many biographies of Samuel were written over these intervening years, none declared, let alone hinted, at this important aspect of his life.
  - It has now found its way onto internet genealogies. Who was first to put it on? Did they know the full significance of this information?

The consequences of secrets.

- To his credit, Samuel did not take the easier path of completely abandoning and ignoring Susannah and the boys. Quite the opposite. He might have attended their christenings, they were named in ways which indicated that he was the father. He provided support in housing and education. He maintained visits. Every step he took was increasing the likelihood of exposure.
- It would have been difficult to keep the secret and the public consequences of the secret eventually coming out would have played on his mind and the minds of people close to him. Secrets come at a cost. It would have been distressing to not be able to publicly acknowledge your own family – at times of honour (eg graduating from Geelong Grammar) and grief (at the funerals). Parkinson called it “The Regret of Samuel Way”
- He publicly upheld the moral standards of the day through his roles in the courts, church, Freemasons and family. He, of all people in the community, epitomized certain standards. He could have exposed himself to being seen as an enormous hypocrite.
- As time went on, and his public profile increased, the consequences of exposure would have become greater and greater. The whole intrigue could have been easily become public. The risks were huge.
- The enormity of all this is indicated by the fact that at least six researchers investigated it. Firstly Alex Castles, Anne Rand, Margaret Glover, Shirley Eldershaw and Sue Edgar. This research included Castles’s examination of some Tasmanian shipping records of Samuel’s his visits to Tasmania. By the time Emerson made it public, possibly for the first time, it did not matter (ref: Emerson,p 26).

There were many potential points of controversy:-

- Class – the servant and the socialite
- Conformity – the relationship out of wedlock

- Secrecy – always difficult to sustain
- The law – convict background of her grandparent and father (stealing and ‘murder’) Vs the chief law officer
- Hypocrisy – the disconnect between private actions and public standing
- Scandal – what can really be wrong with loving a woman and caring for their children

What affect did it have on his professional life as judge and public figure?

- Samuel’s experiences with Susannah and the boys must have influenced (for the better, we hope) his professional life – a better understanding of the circumstances of others :-
- When chairing a Royal Commission into welfare services in 1883, *“he was shocked at the ‘Lying-in home’ on North Terrace. Unmarried mothers were imprisoned for six months and forced to wash clothes six days a week”* (ref : Emerson, p 35) He must have thought of Susannah while considering the plight of those lying-in.
- *“In many of the cases he presided over involving women and children his judgements are compassionate and sometimes even progressive.”* (ref : Parkinson, p 252)

## Conclusions

- Potentially there were tremendous consequences of ‘exposure’ - much of what Samuel had achieved could have been overshadowed. He took a great risk but he evaded all public consequences even if there was a personal toll on many close to him.
- It is difficult to gain a balanced perspective on what, if anything, Samuel did wrong. And what public and private reactions (150 years ago and now) can be expected.
- One view could be that :
  - He loved a good woman and cared for their children as best he could – what is so wrong with that?
- On the other hand :
  - He treated Susannah badly (secrecy and shame) – in stark contrast to how he treated Kitty (pubic pride)
  - If he had publicly acknowledged his relationship with Susannah and paternity of the boys, he would have faced a scandal, but we can only guess how his career would have been hampered.

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