

# The Women of Fibre

■ Lynne Johnson

*Who are these Women of Fibre and where do they come from?*

We have few diaries or letters, few first hand accounts. We have no formally documented ways of knowing the circumstances, the situations, the choices behind the marriages, the journeys and travels of these women in my family. No ways of knowing whether they saw themselves as exiles or emigrants when they set out variously from England and Scotland to Australia. Likewise we know little about why their sons and daughters and grandchildren set out later for places far from home, some to New Zealand, some to Papua New Guinea.

But we have stories, lots of stories passed down and across generations—stories that have captured my imagination and demand to be retold. Stories that I hope do justice to and honour those whose experience they portray. Stories that I hope will interest these and future generations.





The stories came to me mostly from my mother, my grandmother and from Aunty Nell, usually as part of cooking a meal or washing up, or while knitting and sewing. I assume it was thus in previous generations. I can't actually know. What I do know is that as a child and young woman the best place to be was in the kitchen to hear the gossip and chat. Again I assume it was thus in previous generations.

As well as the stories we have formal pieces of paper—birth certificates, death certificates, census and shipping records, reports from coronial inquests and newspaper records. These formal records legitimise much in the stories and correct or redirect those parts that may have strayed from the truth.

My mother Esmé Johnson's role in all of this was huge. She collected and retold so many of the stories (this was the easy part). She then set about digging wherever and whenever to put the more formal structures round the stories. There were dates, places and written records—genealogical gems that might provide today's answers but more likely pose many more questions for tomorrow's digging (the harder part).

For ages I asked her when she was going to stop digging and write it all up. Her answer always was that she'd do so when the work was finished. Quite so. I decided I could keep asking and waiting. Or I could offer to write some of it for her. She accepted.

It's been good to find so much from the family stories borne out and

supported by the documents Mum found. It has been intriguing too to uncover from other documents some of the stories the family didn't tell us. The writing of these stories (those told and those discovered) have been filtered through several lenses, the main ones encapsulated in the title *Women of Fibre*.

There were three main family dramas that were coming through Mum's research: the Amy Bock fake marriage story had only recently come to our attention; Aunty Nell's death in 1977 brought the tragedy of her son Alan's death into focus; and then there was Ellen Daniel giving birth to Aunty Lou under a dray in George St, Brisbane (which had me wondering "which part of George St" and "did the dray have curtains"). Add to these the rape and murder of my father's sister Margaret just six or so weeks after her mother had died.

An out of the ordinary marriage, tragic and violent deaths, an out of the ordinary birth, all had me wondering and wanting to find out more about the women involved. Wanting to know how the events had come about, what the women's lives were like and how they had managed before, during and after these momentous events.

At this time too feminism was helping many of us reshape our views of gender and roles. We collectively realised that history as written and taught was shaped so powerfully by men at the centre and women somewhere else, if indeed they were visible at all.

I wondered where to fit Amy Bock, Nell Munro, Ellen Daniel and Margaret Marion Johnson into these frameworks. I decided that they were extraordinary women whose truths needed to be explored and told. I called them *Women of Fibre*. It expressed what I felt but couldn't easily explain.

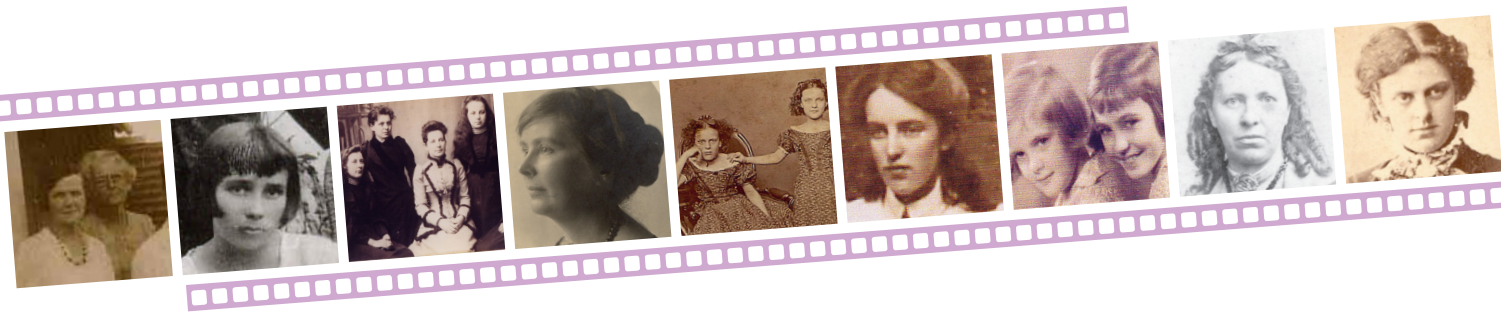
During the 1980's and 1990's I became more involved with Mum's research as I pondered the events and lives of these *Women of Fibre*. Perhaps it isn't surprising that I found many more of them. The life events of these other women weren't as dramatic as the originals but their stories were just as compelling and I had no doubt too that they indeed qualified as *Women of Fibre*.

During the 1980's and 1990's I was also becoming more involved with textiles and the textile arts. Knitting and sewing clothes for the family was changing to stitching and knitting art pieces for exhibitions.

I asked Mum about textile connections in the family stories as I made a quilt with many of the fabrics she had collected over the years. And again it presumably isn't surprising that there are many such connections, in fact the most we know about some of our forebears was that they were a "sock knitter" or a "silk throwster" or "draper's assistant". This information is from the census documents of the day.

The textile lens is a powerful one in this story. It highlights the second element of the *Women of Fibre* tradition





for me. The women Mum researched dealt with fibres, yarns, threads and fabrics as I do. They used tools and machines similar to the ones I use. The patterns and designs I use and play with, extend and improvise upon are ones that were known to them. They too made garments and items for everyday domestic use and wear, then other items for special occasions and decorative display. In several stories sewing machines were special gifts for special events such as coming of age, engagement and marriages in particular. In another story the only gift ever from a grandmother was the presentation of a fine woven woollen

shawl to mark the birth of the first child in each family.

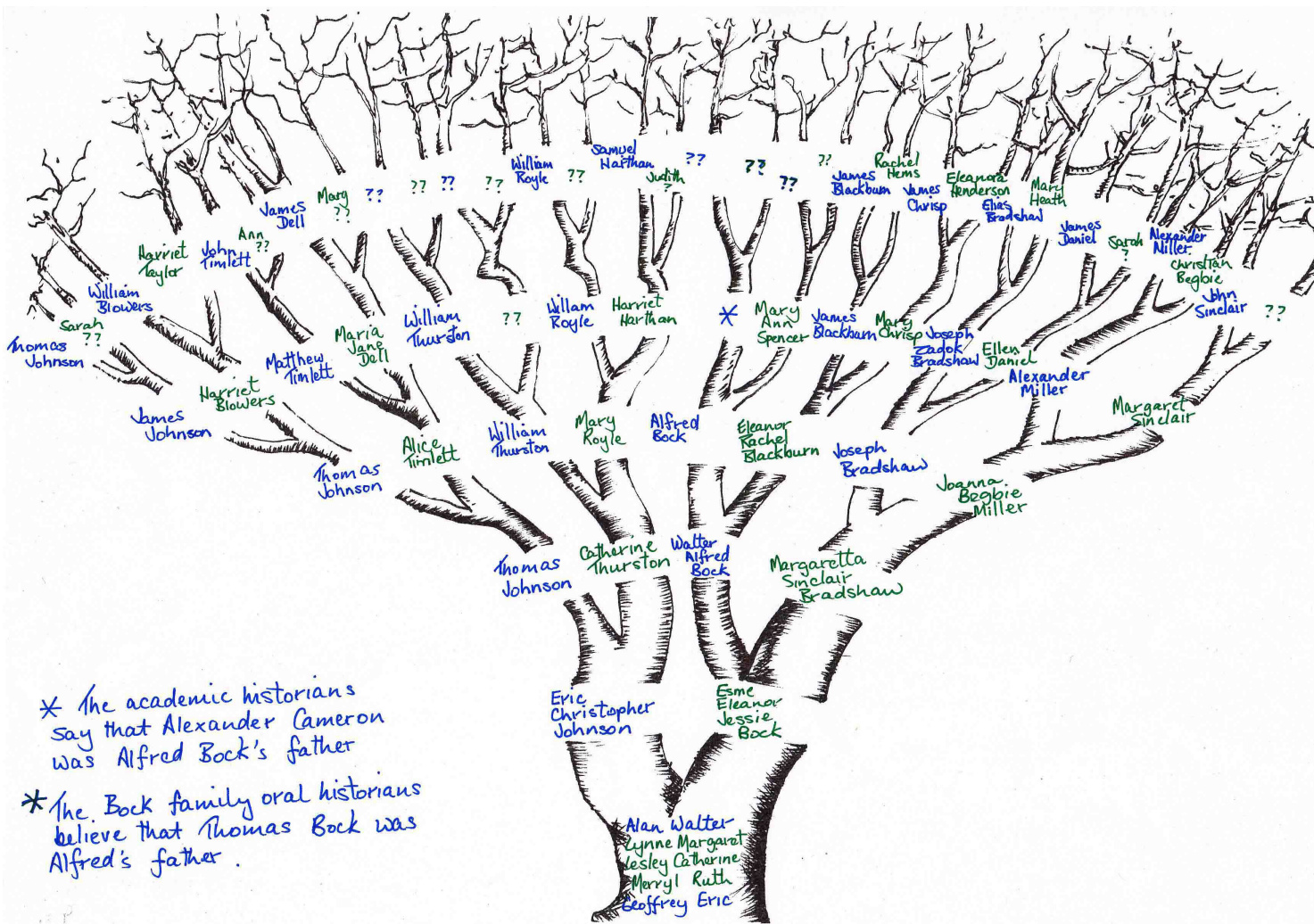
It's been satisfying to trace and describe the connections with the women in my family in terms of the textile arts. It's fun to surmise that they too experienced phases of high interest, excitement even, boring patches, frustrating episodes, then pride in their sewing and knitting activities. Mum and I decided to bring our passions together and to document our work for others to enjoy and share. It's a work in progress. She was still organising her diggings up to the later years of her life. I'm

now sorting, archiving and further researching her work and still playing with new textile techniques and ideas to see what happens.

There are three main family groups of women featured: The Bradshaws and the Millers, The Bocks and the Blackburns, The Johnsons, the Timletts and the Thurstons. The first series of stories come from the Bradshaw and the Miller families, from England and Scotland to Brisbane in Queensland, to Cairns in Far North Queensland, to Papua and New Guinea.....

To find out more about the Women of Fibre story so far visit [www.womenoffibre.com](http://www.womenoffibre.com) or email [lynnejohnson@grapevine.com.au](mailto:lynnejohnson@grapevine.com.au)

The Bradshaw and Miller women are here on the right hand branches of the Family Tree



\* The academic historians say that Alexander Cameron was Alfred Bock's father  
 \* The Bock family oral historians believe that Thomas Bock was Alfred's father.