

The Footes

By Jane Smith

If the purpose of assisted immigration was to develop the colony by attracting hard-working, resourceful and honest citizens to its shores, then the Foote family was an example of the scheme's outstanding success.

Elizabeth Foote, the matriarch, five of her grown children and her daughter-in-law had set off from Plymouth to follow her two other sons, Alfred and Joseph junior, to the colonies. Alfred had been farming in Launceston and Joseph in Victoria. Before long, Alfred would move north to join his family in Moreton Bay. Joseph, however, had other plans. He had emigrated in the hope of reuniting with his father in Van Diemen's Land but his father's unexpected death had thrown him off-course. In 1851, he set off for the goldfields in California. After a time, he returned to Australia and turned his interest to mining in Victoria. Eventually Joseph moved up to Queensland to join the rest of his family.

John Clarke Foote was the eldest son of the Foote family, and the only one to have brought a spouse with him on his passage to Australia. On landing in Moreton Bay, John initially took work on Cressbrook Station in Brisbane Valley, before becoming a teacher at the 'German settlement' (now Nundah) in 1851. The following year, he began a lifelong association with Benjamin Cribb that was both professional and personal.

Benjamin Cribb was a merchant who had emigrated from England with his brother Robert in 1849. The brothers established a shop in Brisbane but before long Benjamin had moved to Ipswich, where he set up his 'London Stores' and sold drapery, ready-to-wear clothing, tea, liquor and shoes.

John Clarke Foote joined Cribb's firm, working as a manager for a few years until he entered into a partnership. From 1855, the firm was known as 'Cribb & Foote'. It would become one of Ipswich's most successful and enduring department stores, being family-owned until 1937. The company would eventually open franchised stores in Brisbane, Rockhampton, Warwick, and Gatton.

At the quarantine ground, John Clarke Foote had worked as principal hospital assistant and earned great praise from Dr Ballou for his conscientiousness and competence. The promise that John showed in those early days was fulfilled; he went on to achieve success as a businessman, a family man, and a citizen. In his youth, he showed a strong interest in politics, and in 1877, he was elected to the Legislative Council. 'Although he was not a prominent public man,' read his obituary, 'he exercised a practical sympathy with all public philanthropic institutions and he was ever ready with a kindly word and a helping hand to those in need. Moreover he was always to the fore with assistance to any movement having for its object the advancement of the interests of the town and district.'¹ John remained a Member of the Legislative Council until his death in 1895.

John was a trustee of Ipswich Boys Grammar School and Vice-President of the Queensland Agricultural and Pastoral Society. His devotion to his religion never waned; during his early days in Ipswich he acted as Precentor at the local Presbyterian Church, and when the Wesleyan Church was established in Ipswich he 'worked energetically in its interests as long as he was able to get about, occasionally occupying the pulpit.' For 35 years, he superintended the Wesleyan Sunday School, and well into his old age he conducted a Bible Class for young men. The wisdom of his counsel was much admired, and 'his tact in dealing with individuals outside his class was inimitable.'²

In August 1895, John had a stroke. He had been suffering mildly from a 'brain disease' for nine months, and had taken to his bed six weeks previously when his condition had worsened. He died on 18 August 1895 at the age of 73. As a mark of respect, the Council flew the municipal flag at their

chambers at half-mast, and all the businesses in town partially shut their windows. Many of the businesses in Ipswich closed during the afternoon of his funeral. The event was well-attended by family, former employees, Councillors, and a great many citizens. John left behind several children, some of whom, like John himself, were highly successful in business and public life.

John's widow, Mary Ann, had been a young bride when the couple emigrated. She would live an active and wholesome life until falling victim to influenza in 1904. Mary Ann had been as devoted to the church as her husband, conducting meetings every Monday afternoon. For a time she was President of Ipswich Benevolent Society, which provided relief to the poor. Mrs Foote was known to provide charity in an 'unostentatious manner' from her own resources to 'distressed' families.³

For several years, the firm of Cribb and Foote employed two of John's brothers: Joseph and James. But the Foote family's involvement with Benjamin Cribb extended beyond their business alliances. In 1853, at the age of 27, John's sister, Clarissa Foote, married the widower Benjamin Cribb. Cribb and his second wife Clarissa settled in Ipswich and had nine children. When Cribb died in 1874, Clarissa became the senior member of the firm with her brother John Clarke Foote. Both retired in 1891 to make way in the business for younger members of their families. Clarissa was known for her 'exceedingly benevolent disposition,' and her extensive charities that were 'practised in an unassuming and kindly manner that made her beloved in many humble homes.'⁴

John's younger brother, James, who had emigrated with him, also became an eminent citizen of Ipswich. He was employed for a while by Cribb and Foote, and later became a grocer and an ironmonger. In 1863, he married Catherine Keith (nee Cramb) in Brisbane, and the pair settled in Ipswich. Like John Clarke, James was active in public life. He was a Member of the Queensland Legislative Assembly for three separate periods between 1873 and 1893. He served as Alderman of Ipswich City Council, and was Mayor of Ipswich in 1870.

James Foote established a woollen factory and the first flour mill in the West Moreton district. He was also a director of the Phoenix Engineering Company. 'As a politician, Mr. Foote was a man of influence, and was deservedly esteemed,' stated his obituary. 'The public always had confidence in his ability and his strict integrity'.⁵ A supporter of both the Congregational and Baptist churches in Ipswich, James' religious interests were profound and ecumenical; for 'other Churches had his warmest sympathy, and, as occasion required, his practical help was always forthcoming'.

In the late 1880s, James contracted typhoid fever. Although he recovered, the illness left him with weakened bones in his leg, and as he was getting into his buggy one day, his femur broke. Complications, from which he never fully recovered, set in. In September 1895, only a month after his brother John's fatal stroke, James also suffered a stroke. He had been ailing since Easter. His general debility, the stroke, and congestion of his lungs led to James' death on 4 September 1895. His wife had predeceased him and he had no children.

James' younger sister Lucy Foote was 17 when she sailed with her family to Moreton Bay. In 1859, Lucy married another member of the Cribb family: John George Cribb, the son of Benjamin's brother, Robert. The couple settled in the Brisbane suburb of Milton and raised a family. As a woman, Lucy did not have the business or political opportunities that were open to her brothers, but as a citizen, she was no less admired. A committed Christian like the rest of her family, Lucy founded Milton Congregational Church's Sunday school. 'A most active and unobtrusive Christian worker,' Lucy's 'care for the orphans, the sick, and the sorrowing [was] untiring.'⁶ Lucy died in 1895 – the same year as two of her brothers, John and James.

Harriet was the youngest of the Foote family, being only 13 when they emigrated. Harriet married Thomas Bennett in 1871 and settled in Ipswich, where she raised four children. Harriet was

active in church and benevolent work and was a regular visitor in the wards of Ipswich General Hospital. She was the last surviving member of her immediate family. Harriet passed away peacefully in her Ipswich home in 1922.

¹ (1895, Aug 20). *Queensland Times, Ipswich Herald and General Advertiser*, p.5

² *ibid*

³ (1904, July 5). *Queensland Times, Ipswich Herald and General Advertiser*, p.7

⁴ (1899, Dec 16). *Queensland Times, Ipswich Herald and General Advertiser*, p.9

⁵ (1895, Sept 5). *Queensland Times, Ipswich Herald and General Advertiser*, p.5

⁶ (1895, May 24). *The Week*, p.13