

*Jane Bardsley's
Outback Letterbook*
**ACROSS
THE YEARS**
1896 - 1936



Pioneer life in Australia's tropic north

EDITED BY JOHN ATHERTON YOUNG

I do not know yet whether I like Atherton as much as Bardsley, all is so different out here.

I shall have to make something for my gins to wear apart from the men's shirts. It is really too embarrassing as we get such heavy winds that at times I am afraid I might find them shirtless.

This afternoon I put on my very best undies and one of my pretty muslin dresses which I have not seen for three weeks. I sent my luggage out beforehand by the carriers for fear of thunderstorms coming and preventing the waggons getting through. If I had not

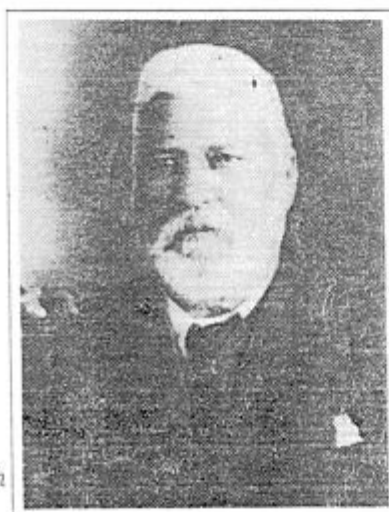
Esther Atherton, née Ainscough. Esther was born in Lancashire in 1804 and married Edmund Atherton I in 1829 or early 1830. They came to Australia in 1844, settling first in Maitland, then in the Armidale district and finally at Mount Hedlow (originally spelled Hedloo) near Rockhampton in Queensland in 1860. She died there in 1889.



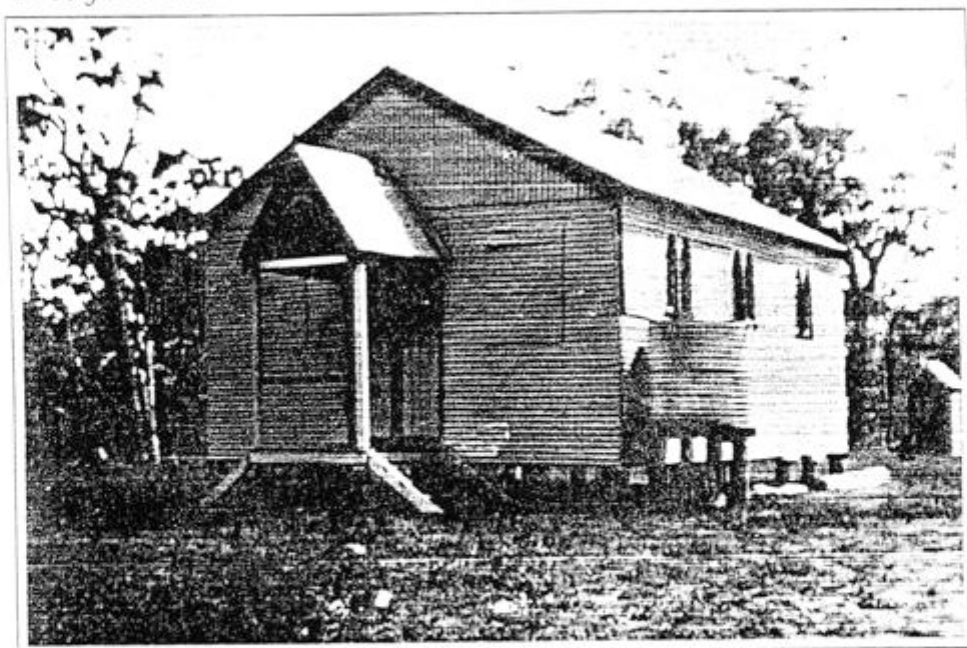
done this I would have had to wait five months — until the wet season was over — or run about in a man's shirt. We keep a stock in the storeroom.

When my lubras saw me they simply stared saying "budgereee", which means good. After they had walked round and round me several times, feeling the texture of my dress, to my amazement Kitty dropped on her knees and touched my pretty shoes. She traced the pattern of my black openwork stockings with her finger, and lifted the hem of my skirt and felt and admired my beautiful heavily starched petticoat with its frills and laces. She then came to another garment of which she made a thorough inspection. She called to

Henry Bell, husband of Alice Atherton (1834-1892). Henry Bell founded Plane Creek Station near Mackay in 1866.



The church at Mt Hedlow, near Rockhampton, circa 1870. The Atherton family settled at Mt Hedlow in 1860. From this church, Edmund Atherton I would have been buried following his death on 17 June 1863.



Annie, who had moved away a few paces. "By Chri! Missus got trousers on, you come look!"

I am sure I am going to like my new name and enjoy station life.

Love from,

JANE ATHERTON

My Dear,

It is a long time since your letter came but I have been trying to get my house in order, which I do not seem able to do. I am such a fool. One of the first things I did was to get a bundle of unbleached calico, with turkey twill for trimmings, and a simple pattern, to make dresses and underclothing suitable for my poor lubras.

Really I am sorry I ever started the dressmaking as I cannot get away from them and cannot get them to do any work for me as they are interested in every stitch I do. As it is all done by hand you can understand it is quite a business. Tom says that we shall buy a sewing machine when the times improve.

Since starting to sew I have already finished two dresses in princess style, trimmed with bands of turkey red — they love red — and two pairs of drawers, trimmed in the same way. The lubras are especially proud of these latter garments.

I had to bribe them to get their work done early by telling them they would get their dresses after dinner — one o'clock. So, won't there be plenty of excitement? I am longing to see them clothed in something other than men's shirts.

Later I gave them their dresses and as soon as I did so they raced off for their lives to the bathing hole to get clean before putting on their frocks. My dear, I can hardly write for laughing. These girls are screams. After their bogey they put on their clothes and came back to show me how they looked. They had forgotten to dry themselves and looked as though they had been through a heavy storm. You can imagine how funny they looked.

I have explained to them how to wash their drawers and to hang them on a barbed-wire fence, for we have no clothes pegs, and that they must not let white men see them on the line. You know dear, how our mothers would faint if we mentioned drawers in company, let alone see them flying high on a barbed-wire fence.

Every day brings some fresh amusement.

Love from,

JANE ATHERTON





Edmund Atherton II (1839–1899). Born in Lancashire, Edmund II came to Australia with his parents in 1844 and trekked overland from Armidale in New South Wales to Mount Hedlow near Rockhampton in Queensland in 1860. In 1865, he travelled further north with his brother Richard and his brother-in-law Henry Bell to the Mackay district, and, in 1866, founded Cliftonville Station just north of Mount Chelona. He died on 8 February 1899.



Richard Atherton (1847–1927). Richard, the youngest son of Edmund Atherton I and Esther Ainscough, was the father of Althea Cook, whose Christian name seems to have been taken by Jane for her fictitious correspondent. When Edmund Atherton II continued on to found Cliftonville Station, Richard remained behind to found Woonon Station which was long known as Atherton's Camp. It was this property that Tom and Jane Atherton bought in 1901; they lived there from October 1901 until 1917 when they moved to Pretty Bend near Bowen.



My Dear,

Some weeks have passed and I am still on the subject of hanging out the lubras' underclothing, for now they have each a chemise added to their wardrobe.

Kitty was not pleased with the place I had shown her to hang her drawers as she prefers to hang them where the wind has full play in filling out both legs. Judging by the number of times these articles are washed, I should say she likes seeing them on the line better than feeling them on her legs.

There is nothing left to do but eat, sleep and talk. The wet season has set in, so we shall not see town or a neighbouring station until the middle of April.

Tom is as good as any book with yarns of his grandfather and father, and his own pioneering days, and as there is nothing special just at present I shall write you something of their lives.

His grandfather was a Lancashire farmer and landowner and came out from England in 1844 with his wife and seven children, with the intention of settling in the then little-known continent Australia.¹³

The colony of New South Wales attracted his attention. They went first to Maitland where two other children were born: Ester, who afterwards became Mrs Haylock, and whose husband owned Sanomi in the Bowen district, and Richard.¹⁴

Wishing to acquire a larger run for their sheep and cattle, the grandparents and family moved into the New England district and took up land at Mount Pleasant, near Armidale. Later they acquired Bald Blair station further out.

In the mid-fifties James Atherton, the eldest son, came to Queensland and founded a sheep station called Rosewood on the Fitzroy River, in the Rockhampton district.

Queensland appealed to the grandfather and the other members of the family and so, in 1860, they left Armidale with all their possessions. They had three bullock waggons and one horse team.

¹³ Edmund Atherton I, born 4 February 1804 at Blackrod near Wigan, Lancashire, married Esther Ainscough, who was born in the same village on 21 November 1806. They emigrated to New South Wales in the *Great Britain*, arriving in Sydney on 27 June 1844. He died at Mount Hedlow in Queensland on 17 June 1863.

¹⁴ Richard Atherton (1847–1927), the youngest son of Edmund Atherton I and Esther Ainscough, was the father of Vida Althoea Atherton (known as Althea Atherton, later as Althea Cook, 1875–1955), perhaps the model used by Jane for her imaginary correspondent. Clearly, however, this passage was not written with Althea Atherton in mind since, in that case, it would surely have referred to Richard Atherton as "your father". In any case, the real Althea was married, whereas Jane's correspondent was a spinster.



The riders were in charge of two thousand head of shorthorn cattle.

A lovely big brolga strutted behind the waggons. He was too fond of grandma to stay with his own mates in New South Wales.

The journey through a country, practically without roads, and with all the disadvantages of the times, was a tremendous undertaking. It was, however, successfully accomplished in four months. They arrived at their destination and took up country in the Rockhampton district which they named Mount Hedlow, from the aboriginal word meaning mountain. The grandfather only lived two years after settling at Mount Hedlow, and then the whole family branched out.

John Atherton¹⁵ took up Bomoyia and sold and delivered a mob of bullocks at the Palmer gold-diggings in 1870. So pleased was he with the north that he took up Cashmere and later Emerald End station, on which the town of Mareeba now stands.

Tom's father and Henry Bell — who married Tom's aunt, Alice — took up West Hill station in 1866, in the Mackay district. Here they were joined by Richard Atherton, who had been left at a boarding school in New South Wales.¹⁶ Dissatisfied with the country around West Hill, they continued to blaze the trail along the coast towards the newly discovered Pioneer River, and the few tents and huts which comprised the new township of Mackay. As they rode along, the grass was so tall and thick they had to call out at times to keep trace of one another.

There were no other animals but the kangaroos and wallabies to keep the grass in check. Incidentally, I might mention that this was a wonderful covering for the wild blacks. Reaching a good creek with a nice open plain on the other side, the party decided to go to the nearest ridge to camp. Here they formed a station and shortly after arranged for each to take a run, as open untouched country was called in those days.

Henry Bell remained on at Plane Creek — as they named it. Edmund, Tom's father, went a few miles further north to the rocky Mount Chelona, and called his property Cliftonville.

Richard crossed the creek and took country between it and the sea, which through general usage became known as the Atherton Camp, then the Camp, and finally changed to Woonon.

¹⁵ John Atherton (1837–1913), who was the second son of Edmund Atherton I and Esther Ainscough, gave his name to the Atherton Tablelands.

¹⁶ Tom's father was Edmund Atherton II (1839–1899), the third son of Edmund Atherton I and Esther Ainscough. Alice Atherton (1837–1892) was his elder sister, and Richard Atherton (1847–1927) was his youngest brother.





Plane Creek Station, circa 1876. Founded in 1866 by Henry Bell.

I nearly forgot the pretty pieces about the forming of their places in the New England district. They brought from England a small pink monthly rose in a pot, and so far every Atherton in the family has a bush in his garden. The grandparents brought the weeping willows to Armidale and their sons planted slips in the creeks on the run, which, at the present time, make Armidale the picturesque town of New South Wales.

When Tom¹⁷ left Brisbane Boys' Grammar School he accom-

¹⁷ Thomas Arthur Atherton I, was born at Mount Hedlow in Queensland on 8 February 1866. He left school at seventeen and joined his father at Cliftonville in 1883.





Thomas Arthur Atherton I, circa 1901. Tom was born on 8 February 1866, at Mt Hedlow, near Rockhampton, while his father, Edmund Atherton II, was away in the Mackay district, setting up Cliftonville Station, on which the family was to settle. He lived most of his life in North Queensland and this photograph was probably taken in Sydney in 1901. In later life he lived at Taronga, near Bli Bli in the Maroochy district, where he died on 10 February 1935.

they were not allowed to break the *Aboriginals' Protection Act*. I was allowed to take Pigeon as the Government looked upon me as her foster-mother.

I remained a few days in Normanton while Tom handed over our racing stud. He was also eager to have a last ride on his favourite mare, Lobelia, so Mr Underwood, who purchased Midlothian, arranged a wild pig hunt. I forgot to tell you that Tom brought a prize white sow with six suckers to Midlothian in 1894. I hated the sight of them for they were allowed to run wild and consequently they stirred up all the waterholes in search of lily roots. This is especially annoying in the dry season when there is not much water. These pigs increased in great numbers.

A mob of pigs were seen feeding on the plain and Tom and his friend gave chase. Suddenly a huge boar ran across the path, got tangled up in the legs of Tom's horse, throwing him, his horse and the pig into a tangled heap on the ground.

Watching the road for his return I could not understand why a buckboard was coming instead of the usual mob of riders. It turned out to be Tom lying in the back of the buggy badly bruised and shaken, with a broken collarbone.

So we left the Gulf, the land of peril, on 13th August 1901.

Our boat remained anchored at Thursday Island for six hours so we explored the whole island, and had a look at the garrison from a distance. A number of soldiers were stationed there to look after our shores and to keep the New Guinea natives in order. The South Sea



Mustard Ship's Station camp, Jim Law met us there & took all their cattle home. We got 43 calves home about 12 noon & branded them by 12 o'clock. I took out some this morning. Ned Dohy after 20 Father's 44 per acre for 100 acres of that section of fields including the house & yard.

22 TUESDAY [81-284]

Arthur & George went to Sarangamba for the Bull I bought, but he proved to be a man for them, lost Charles to Frank Rawson to rock to town. I left at noon with 2 cows, 2 calves & went to theorpion to camp for the night.

23 WEDNESDAY [82-283]

Back again from the Dairy plain for a week. Night with the most quiet and rain, we were 11 1/2 hours long as usual as any four fellows could be, and a family got we had coming through Bogie's place with horses. Finally Jim & Law caught up to us at Jack's crossing. We got home about 12 noon & branded 117 calves.

Met Jim on theorpion & brought some two calves & a couple bullocks. The 22N and white stumpy Jim put his cattle on Mundaba, Law the Morgan & Cameron as we were coming from at Norton's. R. Ross & a lot of his people went past here after afternoon.

25 FRIDAY [84-281]

Ross at theorpion sent over to see if we could have some calves in for another. I went to see how to come over tomorrow. Arthur, Jack & I went up to some of our camp met Jim there & took our cattle home. The 22N & 22P came up to get 1/2 day of

26 SATURDAY [85-280]

My 100 jaws Emma got. Nucleus of his horse has this afternoon about 3 p.m. and died about 6-30 p.m.

27 Sunday - 6 in Lent [86-279]

God help him. My dove & Jack's station this Sunday has been one of the most miserable days ever spent

We left here for the Mount
with poor James Edmunds. And
funeral at 11 A.M. by Mr
Biggen in the presence of a
lot of friends

29 TUESDAY (88-277)

Very sorrowful day. It seems
like a week. Ethy Anne & I went
to Yppoon in the afternoon.
Mr R. Ross came up in the afternoon
and stayed with us about 2 1/2 hours

30 WEDNESDAY (89-278)

Annie & I went to Paolook and
brought 5 bunches of Banano
Mr Rawson came up from Yppoon
Mr. G. J. Richardson called on
his way from Mr. Wades
Sent Mr Rawson Buses

May God help my poor Mary
As she died this morning at
about 1-30 A.M. this Monday
Morning 19 of December 1887

Rest in Peace, My

Darling good old wife will
be dreadfully miss. The
Christmas at Adelaide Park
& Yppoon. Good by Darling
Jas. Sturton

2 SATURDAY (91-279)

Por
On Nov 11

ROCKHAMPTON FIRE CLAY
FIRE CLAY, of a quality verified by
analysis, as equal to the best English
fireclay, can be supplied in any quantity
short notice to any part of the colony at
prices below the cost of the imported
material.
The certified analysis of Mr. K. T. Stanger
be seen at this office.
FRED. DYERLEY.