

ELLEN SWEENEY 1874-1940

Ellen (Nelly) Sweeney, daughter of John Francis Sweeney and Ellen Kenney and granddaughter of pioneers Thomas and Margaret Sweeney, was born at 'Culla Hill', Eltham, on 27th October 1874. She attended Eltham State School (209), and on the 8th of October 1891 was appointed a probationary teacher at that school. On the 16th of November 1891, the Inspector (Gamble) wrote, 'Very favorably impressed with her capacity today.' In April 1892 he wrote, 'Of considerable promise. Amiable towards children.' Ellen was a teacher Third class from 1st April 1892, and from January 1894, a teacher Second class. A year later she became a teacher First class and Gamble wrote, 'Steadily improving in skill in teaching.' For six weeks from 16th July 1898, she was Temporary Head Teacher at the Upper Diamond Creek State School (2059).

She resumed her position at Eltham State until the end of September 1898 when she became Temporary HT at Norong Central in the Rutherglen area. She was back at Eltham by the 18th of December 1898. She went back to Norong Central in January 1899 and worked there until the 18th of May. From Eltham she was posted to Millbrook as Temporary HT from 23rd June to 18th July. She then had five months back at Eltham State School and in January 1900, began two and a half months at Yarrambat. She returned to Eltham in April, and on the 23rd of August 1900, was appointed as Head Teacher at Wombelano in Far Western Victoria. On the 20th of November Inspector Cross wrote, 'Has been in charge not quite 3 months, but I judge her to be a first class teacher. 83 very good.' Six months later he wrote that she was a very good teacher and manager and an excellent disciplinarian. On the 12th of June 1902 he wrote, 'Continues to conduct the school with diligence and much success. School in beautiful order. 83 very good.' In spite of her excellent record, the Education Department wouldn't agree to a request she made in a letter dated 5th March 1902. Ellen wanted to have leave so that she could travel home to Eltham to see her parents for Easter. She writes to, 'The Secretary Education Office Melbourne'. 'Sir, I have the honour to apply for leave of absence on Wednesday the 26th and Thursday the 27th of March to enable me to reach my home, which is situated 15 miles east of Melbourne, by Easter Monday. A coach passes near my school on Wednesdays and Saturdays. If I cannot leave on the Wednesday preceding the "Easter Vacation" I shall not be able to reach my home until Easter Tuesday. Will you therefore be good enough to grant me leave on the dates mentioned above. I have the honour to be, Sir, Your obedient servant Ellen Sweeney H.T.' Her sister Agatha came to keep house for her and assist at the school. Agatha officially commenced duties as temporary sewing mistress on the 3rd of December 1906.

In May 1906 Ellen was commended for, 'exceptional interest and care taken in beautifying and improving school buildings and grounds.' Her teaching marks rose steadily until in October 1908, she reached 94. A commendatory letter dated 21st of October, 'expresses the Director's appreciation of the good work she has done at the school & the success that has attended her zealous & well directed efforts.' In November 1908, Agatha Sweeney (5665) applied for a transfer to Panton Hill, 'on account of the serious illness of her father, who resides at Eltham, to help provide means to nurse him and her mother, whose health is delicate.' While Agatha was seen as a very good sewing teacher and assistant in the infant classes, she lost her job in April 1909 due to a decline in pupil numbers. Ellen had received a compassionate

transfer back to Melbourne and worked at various schools in both the city and nearby countryside. Her father died on the 24th of May 1909 while she was posted to Kensington (2374). She spent the last three months of 1909 as a Temporary Assistant at Brunswick South (2743). She then went on to Abbotsford, Kangaroo Ground, St Andrews, Coburg, Doncaster East and Panton Hill. Finally on 11th April 1915, she was back at her old School in Eltham and would be there for eight years. She took a great interest in 'Culla Hill', the old family home. Her father had appointed her executrix of his will because he knew how capable she was. John Francis Sweeney left 'Culla Hill' to Ann Foley, Agatha Sweeney, Ellen Sweeney, Mary Sweeney, Thomas Sweeney, Frank Sweeney and Kathleen Sweeney. It seems that Frank Sweeney went to Western Australia about 1904. His brother Thomas continued farming at 'Culla Hill' until about 1915. Kathleen Sweeney married Frank Carrucan on 8th December 1915, but tragically died on 14th October 1916, four weeks after the birth of her son Francis Kenny (Ken) Carrucan. On 12th December 1917, Agatha Margaret Sweeney died, 'at her sister's residence, "Culla Hill," Eltham.' This indicates that Ellen had used her savings to buy her brothers out. Jack Carrucan said that Agatha left her share to Ellen, and his mother, Mary (Sweeney), gave her share to her to help save the beloved family home.

Ellen lived at 'Culla Hill' for a few more years, but by the time of her marriage to Will Hooley on the 21st of April 1923, it was rented to John and Margaret Davies.¹ Ellen must have met Will while she was teaching at Wombelano. In the 1911 Post Office Directory, he is listed as a Stock Dealer of Tarrayoukyan, which is around 40 Kilometres south of Wombelano. Will was born on the family farm at Tarrayoukyan in 1874, the son of Daniel and Bridget Hooley from County Cork, Ireland. There exists an invitation to 'Miss Sweeney' to attend a Bachelors Ball at Casterton, so perhaps that is how they first met.² After their marriage in 1923, Ellen and Will lived at Jackson Street, Casterton. In the 1924 Electoral Roll, Will is a mail contractor at Casterton. In the 1931 Electoral Roll they are at 'Culla Hill', Eltham, and Will is a labourer. He is still at that address in 1936, though Ellen is in the Electoral Roll as a 'teacher' at 'Glenview', Yundool, near Tungamah in North-East Victoria. With the early years of the Great Depression, she was forced to put the old place on the market. Will Hooley is said to have lost Ellen's money in a failed business venture. Jack Carrucan noted that at one time the property was in the hands of six agents. Justus Jorgensen looked at it as a possible site for his proposed artists colony, but subsequently purchased another site for 'Montsalvat'.³ At Easter 1938, when Sweeney descendant Frank Ryan took his daughters to stay at 'Culla Hill', the house was empty and some of the furniture was stored in the loft. The terrible 1939 bushfires burnt 'Rutters' over the road, but miraculously spared the house and outbuildings at 'Culla Hill'. Some people said it was sacred ground due to the Sunday masses held there in the pioneering era. Will Hooley was living in a caretaker's cottage at 'Rutters' at the time of the fire. A number of Walter Withers paintings were lost at 'Rutters', along with other valuable items.

¹ Memories of Vivian Lethbridge Davies as told to his daughter Rosemary in 1984.

² Printed invitation in the collection of Tim Erickson (From Mary Carrucan, Ellen's sister).

³ Justus Jorgensen related this to the author in the 1960s.

It seems that Will Hooley had a reputation for being lazy. Pat Sweeney in Perth recalls visiting 'Culla Hill' as a child and noting that Will had a red truck parked in the old barn. One of the Sweeney kids commented, 'Our Dad's got a truck like that – but it goes out.' Will's half brother, Edward Timothy Hooley (1842-1903) was famed for his explorations in Western Australia and was a Member of Parliament there. Apparently Will would proudly talk about his three sisters who were nuns in New South Wales.⁴ Ellen Hooley died on the 25th of April 1940, about a year after 'Culla Hill' had been sold to the Gibson family, and only a few months after it was featured in *The Australian Home Beautiful*. Her obituary reads: 'Mrs. W. Hooley (nee Miss E. Sweeney), who was born in the historic home, Culla Hill, one of the first settlements on the Yarra, has died. She was widely known as a state school teacher in the Western District and at Eltham, where the funeral took place after a Requiem Mass at St. Mary's Church. The pallbearers were mostly girlhood friends. Deceased leaves a husband, two brothers (Mr. Tom Sweeney, Kew, and Frank, West Australia) and two sisters (Mrs. Carringham [Carrucan], Eltham, and Mrs Lane, West Australia). Will Hooley died at Katoomba in the Blue Mountains in 1942.

While 'Culla Hill' looks well cared for in the photographs in the February 1940 *Home Beautiful*, when Vic and Vi Burston purchased it in 1951, the original paling hut was falling down and the 1840s 'long-house', which had become the kitchen, was in a very bad state. While these buildings were subsequently demolished, much of the main house from the 1850s survives, as does the original barn built of stone and brick.

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⁴ Recollections of Catherine Cuffley, cousin of Ellen Sweeney.