

# James Keating (1839-1884) and Jane Slater (1840-1899)

Apparently well matched, the marriage of James Keating and Jane Slater proved to be a disaster that tore their family apart.

James Keating and Jane Slater married at St Nicholas Church in Plumstead on 25 August 1862. Aged 22, James Keating was the oldest of seven children - though at the time of his wedding his mother Mary was pregnant with an eighth. Jane Slater, who had just turned 21, had three older sisters and three younger siblings. The church that day must have been full of family and friends there to wish them well; as things turned out, they should perhaps have wished a little harder.

The couple had much in common. James worked as a tailor, Jane as a dressmaker and seamstress. And the two had similar if unusual childhoods as the children of Royal Artillery gunners, largely based in Woolwich where both were born, but with interruptions of months or years at a time when their fathers' units were posted elsewhere, taking the entire family with them.



St Nicholas Church, Plumstead, around 1880

James was born on 4 August 1839 at Wellers Building, part of Woolwich Barracks, and baptised James Eyles Keating at St Mary Magdelene Church. He was the son of John and Mary Keating (born Bradford). John, like his own father, Roger, was a career soldier who had been born at Fort George in Inverness where his father's artillery unit had been garrisoned. Mary had been born in Woolwich, so it is possible that she too came from an artillery family; she was just 18 when they married, and 20 when James was born.

Growing up, although James was born in Woolwich the family moved within a year to Weedon in Northamptonshire. By 1842 they were back in Woolwich, by 1845 at Elizabeth Castle on Jersey, and from 1847 to 1851 they were on Malta. There was one final posting away from Woolwich in 1854 that took them to Portsea Island. By

the time John Keating was granted a pension on grounds of ill health and left the artillery in 1856, James's childhood had come to an end.

Jane was born in Woolwich in 1840, and was the daughter of Thomas and Ann Slater. Thomas had been born in Ireland, and served many years in the Royal Artillery, but died in 1851 when Jane was still young. Ann, too, had been born in Ireland. The couple were both just 20 when their eldest child was born. After Thomas's death the family must have relied heavily on the older girls to get by: the 1851 census shows Eliza (24), Isabella (19) and Sarah (15) as dressmakers and all still living at what was then the family home in Market Street, Woolwich.

Jane's father, Thomas, had already served for five years in Bermuda before she was born. Isabella and Sarah were both born there. But as she, her younger sister and two younger brothers were all born in Woolwich there is, unfortunately, no evidence of further postings.

After their marriage, James and Jane settled down near to family and friends. Their daughters Isabella Mary (born 1863), Eliza Edith (13 July 1864) and Jessie Jane (10 April 1867) were all born in Woolwich. They must have moved soon after this, however, as their fourth and final daughter, Minnie Ada (11 June 1869) was born in Rochester, some 20 miles further east into Kent. The 1871 census places them at 179 High Street, Rochester.

At this point, James Eyles Keating disappears from the record – in the UK at least.

179 High St	1	James Keating	Male	Head	31		New Woolwich
		Jane	Female	Wife	34		do
		Isabella	Female	Daughter	8	Schooler	do do
		Eliza	Female	do	5	do	do do
		Jessie	Female	do	3	do	do do
		Minnie	Female	do	1	do	do Rochester

The 1871 census, above, is the only document to capture the whole family in one place.

### James – a new life

In 1873, however, he reappears – on the jury lists compiled by the colonial authorities in Hong Kong. At this time the population of Hong Kong was around 125,000, of whom just 2,000 were European – and only white Europeans were permitted to serve on juries; the jury lists were compiled annually and name almost every adult white European man in the colony. James Eyles Keating's name appears on the list that year and every year until 1884. His occupation throughout is given as "assistant" at the firm of Driscoll & Co in Queen's Road Central – then as now a busy main road in the commercial centre of the city. The jury list also includes the names of John James Driscoll and Thomas Nathaniel Driscoll, both clothiers who give their business address as 47 Queen's Road.



Queens Road, Hong Kong, around 1880.

James's decision to leave his young family, and his choice of Hong Kong as a destination will likely remain, a complete mystery. Perhaps that was the point. However, he appears to have had little difficulty finding work or settling in to the local community. By 1876, his name appears regularly in local newspaper reports of Freemasonry lodge meetings; on 6 December 1879, the *China Mail* (p.2) reports that, "At the last meeting of the Lodge St John No. 618, the brethren presented Bro. J. Keating with a handsome jewel in recognition of his services to the lodge." The following year, James succeeded his friend and employer "Bro. T. N. Driscoll" as master of the lodge.

Early in 1877, James also appears in a report in the *Hong Kong Daily Press* (15 January, p.2) as president of the United Club, "formed about twelve months ago to supply a want which had long been felt by working men and others; to whom the hotels and public-houses were almost the only places open for recreation". This, James noted in his address to the Club's first annual dinner, "was not only expensive, but did not afford the same comfort as was enjoyed by other people at their clubs".

James also fulfilled his duties as a juror. For the most part this involved giving verdicts on endless cases of petty theft, although on 26 September 1874 the *China Mail* (p.7) names him as one of seven jurors to

**At the last meeting of the Lodge St. John No. 618, S. C., the brethren presented Bro. J. Keating with a handsome jewel in recognition of his services to the Lodge. The jewel bears the following inscription,— "Presented to Bro. J. Keating by the members of St. John." The jewel was provided by Messrs Falconer & Co. The ribbon is of the Royal Stuart tartan, matching the facings of the official aprons and sashes of the Lodge. This young but enterprising Lodge has emerged from the troubles of its earlier existence and now enjoys general recognition as a properly constituted body. The Acting Grand Master, E. C., will install Bro. Driscoll, who was lately elected master of St. John's. There are now 70 members on the roll.**

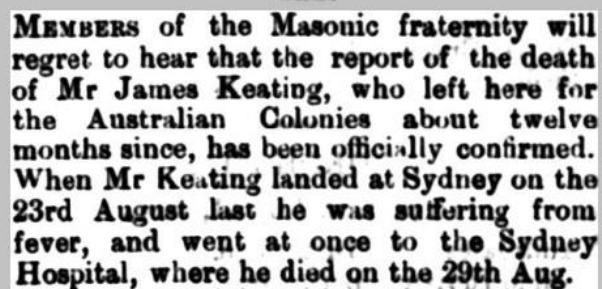
Freemasonry: *China Mail*, 6 December 1879

hear a case of piracy and wounding against two men accused of attacking a fishing junk at Cap d'Aguilar.

And then, in 1884 James moved on again. Passenger lists for New South Wales reveal that he travelled from Hong Kong to Sydney, Australia, on board the steamship *Naples*, operated by the Australasian, China and Japan, and Straits Steamship Company, arriving at his destination on 15 August 1884. But there was to be no new life in Australia. James was suffering from a fever when he landed, and went straight to the local hospital. He was dead by the end of the month, and today lies buried in at Rockwood General Cemetery, Grave 221, Section N, Zone B, 1 Hawthorne Avenue, Rockwood, New South Wales.

Intriguingly, there is a postscript to James's life story. News of his death made its way back to Hong Kong the following summer. The *China Mail* reported (21 July 1885):

"MEMBERS of the Masonic fraternity will regret to hear that the death of Mr James Keating, who left here for the Australian Colonies about twelve months since, has been officially confirmed. When Mr Keating landed at Sydney on the 23rd August last he was suffering from fever, and went at once to the Sydney Hospital, where he died on the 29th Aug."



**MEMBERS of the Masonic fraternity will regret to hear that the report of the death of Mr James Keating, who left here for the Australian Colonies about twelve months since, has been officially confirmed. When Mr Keating landed at Sydney on the 23rd August last he was suffering from fever, and went at once to the Sydney Hospital, where he died on the 29th Aug.**

But his fate remained a mystery to his British family. Towards the end of the following year, the *Victoria Police Gazette* (23 December 1885, p361) carried a short announcement:

"MISSING FRIENDS.

"INQUIRY is requested for James Iles Keating, who is supposed to have left Hong Kong about twelve months ago for Melbourne. It is said he died in either Melbourne or Sydney twelve months ago. He was 45 years of age, and a past master of the Masonic Order. Inquiry is requested at the instance of Eliza Edith Bush, daughter of the man sought for, who writes from 6 Angleseaplace, Woolwich, Kent, England. - O.7531. 22nd December 1885."

A similar announcement appeared in the *New South Wales Police Gazette* the following week (30 December 1885, p387).

That October, back in Woolwich, James's second daughter, Eliza Keating, had married Charles Alfred Bush. Had she hoped to tell her father her good news, or did she simply want to tie up loose ends?



## Jane and her daughters

There were to be no such international adventures for Jane Keating and her four young daughters. They returned to Woolwich, living at 28 Chapel Street, where on 1 March 1875 Jessie Jane Keating died aged eight years old of “congestion of the brain” – a term no longer used, but applied then to all manner of strokes or fits. Her mother, who had been present at the death, reported it a few days later, giving Jessie’s father’s occupation as “tailor’s cutter”.

By 1881, and possibly earlier, the family had fragmented. That year’s census found Isabella (18) and Minnie (11) living with their grandmother, Mary Keating in Henry Street, Woolwich. Eliza Edith (16) had made her own way in the world and was working as a servant at a school on Sudbury Hill in Harrow, to the north-west of London. The school had a master, three assistant masters, a female housekeeper, 16 borders, and 11 servants of various descriptions including a gardener and pageboy.



*Woolwich Workhouse exterior.*

And Jane was in the workhouse. There is no record of when she was first admitted to Woolwich Workhouse, but creed registers compiled by the Woolwich Board of Guardians from 1885 that survive in London Metropolitan Archives show that she was admitted and discharged usually after a period of four or five months no fewer than 17 times between October 1885 and April 1899. Where recorded, these discharges were without exception to the infirmary.

One final entry records that on 24 December 1899 Jane died, aged 60, of phthisis, or as we now know it tuberculosis. Whether her repeated workhouse and infirmary admissions were the result of TB or had been triggered by the traumas of the 1877 will always be unknown.



Christmas Day in Woolwich Workhouse, 1905 - just six years after Jane Keating died there.

#### Further reading and sources

I have relied heavily on parish and civil records of births, marriages and deaths, and the census for 1851, 1861, 1871 and 1881. Along with copies of James and Jane's marriage banns, these are taken from the Ancestry website.

Newspaper reports are referenced in the text. The *China Mail* is included in the [British Newspaper Archive](#). The *Hong Kong Daily Press* is online in the [Hong Kong Public Libraries multimedia information system](#).

An extraordinarily useful entry for James Eyles Keating can be found on the [Old Hong Kong website](#).

New South Wales Government. Inward passenger lists. Series 13278, Reels 399-560, 2001-2122, 2751. State Records Authority of New South Wales. Kingswood, New South Wales, Australia.

New South Wales Government. Reports of vessels arrived (or Shipping reports). Series 1291, Reels 1263-1285, 2851. State Records Authority of New South Wales. Kingswood, New South Wales, Australia.

[James Keating burial](#) is listed on the Rockwood General Cemetery website.

Jane Keating workhouse records. Creed Registers, Woolwich Board of Guardians Workhouse, X020/393, 394, 395, London Metropolitan Archives

