

The identification of her illness was delayed by her doctor's insistence that all she had was a bilious attack, even after she had come out in spots, even though an epidemic was raging. Sixteen-year old Frank called on the doctor and convinced him that he was wrong. The children were sent to lodgings. Barred from school because of possible infection, they continued their studies. Al and Fan taught French and arithmetic to the younger ones and gave them dictation. Frank spend his days running messages between the doctors, the chemist and the house where his mother was dying.⁹ Mr Bennett was telegraphed for and took the children back to Sydney except for Frank, whom he left in London to prepare for a medical course.

The long visit to England was over. Had the children gained great advantages in their careers from their stay in England? Mrs Bennett wrote (24 September 1879), I presume not really meaning it, that she would die rather than fail. I am inclined to say that she died and she failed and that her death and its consequences contributed to her failure. There are, of course, great difficulties involved in making judgments of this sort.

Mrs Bennett's death, a result of the the visit to England (it is highly unlikely that she would have died of smallpox in Neutral Bay) can be counted as the major misfortune which ensued from it, since it involved considerable emotional trauma for the family. It led also to a curtailment of their stay by about six months, with a change of plans for some of the children. It brought, nineteen months after Mrs Bennett's death, a very unwelcome stepmother. The death of the first Mrs Bennett, and then the arrival of the second, damaged the children's relations with their father.

In itself the curtailment of their stay probably had little effect on most of the children, but because of it Al could not sit for the senior Cambridge examination for which she had been working. Perhaps that was of no great moment. Wal may have been more seriously affected. If he had sat the examination in November 1881 and had come out top of the five boys, he would have had a naval career, a different kind of life and possibly a happier one.

Frank was affected, not so much by the shortening of the stay as by Mrs Bennett's death. She had wanted Frank to return with her and I think she could have prevailed over her husband. She was in many ways the firmer of the two.

Almost the only source for what happened to the children back in Sydney is Mr Bennett's letters to Frank but the run of these is very incomplete.¹⁰ Al and Fan had, I think, no more schooling. They taught Agnes and Harry for some time and Al mothered all the younger ones. Alf and Wal went to school, possibly Sydney Grammar. Agnes eventually went to a school called Abbotsleigh and later attended Sydney Girls High School. After some years Harry went to a boarding school