

# The Marvellous Media Mélange of Annie B

By Geoff Mentzer

Thomas emigrated from England to New Zealand with his wife and children in 1875<sup>1</sup> and settled in Christchurch, where first his youngest son, then his wife, each died from illness. After a while he left New Zealand and after another while returned, and he landed in Christchurch again at the end of 1889. Then less than four months later, he became the fourth husband of Annie Burt, an artistic, inventive, colourful, local fruitloop. So let me tell you about Annie Burt.

**A**nn Gravel Bentley was baptised on 7 July 1832 in Newark-upon-Trent, Nottingham, England; her parents Charles, a linen weaver, and Ann.<sup>2</sup> By the 1841 UK census, the family was living on Spittal Row in Newark, doubtless in one of the brick tenement houses built to accommodate weavers from the nearby linen manufactory. "House" then was a cellar that may have held a weaving loom and was otherwise used for storage; a single groundfloor room that was kitchen/laundry/bathroom /dining- and sitting-room; and two bedrooms upstairs. Ann was one of nine siblings who ranged from one year old to 20, but it's likely the youngest several slept with their parents. Ann in the 1851 census may well have been relieved to be one of three servants in the household of William and Martha Pate, a farming family in Newark; a room of her own perhaps, or sharing with only two others.

On 28 January 1856, in the Newark parish church and under the name Ann Greville Bentley, she married Samuel Burtt, a boiler-maker, son of Henry Burtt, a ship carpenter.<sup>3</sup> Both were of Newark, and 'of age', ie over 21. Ann's illiterate hand scratched a mark on the marriage register, and Samuel was never directly heard of again. In fact, he's also never been definitively heard of before, so his age, nationality, etc and fate remain unknown.

Annie next appears as Anne G Hollingworth, 26, wife of George Hollingworth, 28, saddler of Derby, England. That was 4 December 1859, when as Assisted Emigrants on the ship *Regina*, they arrived in Lyttelton, New Zealand.<sup>4</sup> No marriage record has been found for George and Anne, so presumably they were de facto. But their relationship became apparent on 26 March 1864, courtesy of the *Press* newspaper, Christchurch:

#### NOTICE

I will not be responsible for any debts that Anne Burt may contract after this date, as she disowns the name of Hollingworth. GEORGE HOLLINGWORTH, Saddler &c, Christchurch

By the *Press* of 4 June 1864, Annie seems to have renounced some or all participation in George's domestic scene:

NOTICE – WANTED – A general Servant. Apply to Mr. Hollingworth, saddler, Ferry Road, Christchurch.

The situation becomes more curious when, on 14 January 1865, the *Press* announces that upon a decision by the Supreme Court in the case of the Bank Of New South Wales versus Hollingsworth [sic], the Sheriff of Canterbury has instructed a local auctioneer to sell on this day by public auction:

A quantity of superior sitting and bed-room furniture, bedding, carpets, etc

Framed engravings, earthenware

Glass shades, flowers, and stuffed birds

Boxes sardines, tins coffee

Silver coffee pot and cream jug

And other effects

Sale at 1 o'clock. Terms cash on the fall of the hammer.

Enlightenment (and entanglement) commenced on 16 March 1865, courtesy of the *Lyttelton Times*:

#### SUPREME COURT.–CIVIL SITTINGS

Wednesday, March 15. Before his Honor Mr. Justice Gresson and a special jury. The Court reassembled at 10 a.m. Mr. C. R. Blakiston was foreman of the jury. The first case called on was that of Burt v. Black and others. Dr Foster, instructed by Mr. Wynn Williams, appeared for the plaintiff, and Mr. Garrick for the defendants.

This was an action brought by plaintiff to recover the value of some goods wrongfully seized by the Sheriff of Christchurch and his assistants. It appears that an action for debt had been brought against a man named George Hollingworth, and the goods of the plaintiff, who passed as his wife, were seized by the Sheriff and his men in satisfaction of the action.

Dr. Foster opened the case, detailing the facts of it. He stated that the plaintiff had been married in England some years ago to a person named Burt, and had been deserted by him. Since then she had been cohabiting with Hollingworth. The case was a very complicated one, the pleas being so contradictory. He should have great difficulty in dealing with it.

His Honor: If you were embarrassed with the pleas, you should have applied to have them amended.

Foster believed that an application to that effect had been made.

His Honor: I do not think that one was made with reference to this particular subject, but I can foresee that we shall have a very fair crop of discussion upon the question whether the plaintiff is or is not a married woman, and whether the goods in question were justifiably seized under the writ of *fi. fa.*

A witness then testified that she knew the plaintiff as Mrs Burt, who had rented a house from her and she recognised the January auction goods as having been sold by her to Mrs Burt. The Sheriff later chipped in, "I retained some of the pictures from the sale, because they were too indecent to be sold."

Other witnesses knew Annie variously as Burt or Hollingworth or both, and related that she'd purchased furniture of them and paid for those herself and had them delivered to her own house and asked that Hollingworth not be told. And to further witnesses, Mr Burt was sometimes alive and sometimes dead and according to one, Annie "varied her statements in order to suit her convenience."

Then Annie took the stand. "I am a milliner, dressmaker, and upholsteress. On January 13th, the sheriff's officers entered my house. The furniture belonged to me; every bit of it. It was seized by the bailiffs.... There was in the house some crockery, which is not mentioned in the inventory. The house contained six rooms; there was more in it than would furnish it.... I paid for the things. I cannot exactly state their value, but I should say about £140. There were some articles made by myself—waxwork and embroidery.

"I kept the house; Hollingworth gave me funds for keeping the house. It was his house.... I rented the shop from him; I paid him £3 per week. Not one article in the list was purchased by him. I carried on a distinct business from him. I bought the stuffed birds out of my own funds. Hollingworth made no allowance beyond the house-keeping expenses."

And Hollingworth countered, "I am living with Anne Burt, the last witness; she keeps a confectioner's shop and a coffee shop. I have supplied her the funds for carrying on the business. I have paid bills for her; some are not yet paid. As a matter of course, I paid the money so long as she was living with me."

The Judge then summed up and "the jury, after retiring for half-an-hour, returned a verdict for the plaintiff, damages £90 14s. The case occupied the whole day, and was not concluded until 5 p.m."

It's not known what Annie did during the following four years, but clearly she was multi-skilled, viz. *The Star* newspaper of Christchurch, 14 June 1869:

#### HOKITIKA RESTAURANT

MRS BURT begs to inform her numerous friends and the public generally that she has now OPENED the above Restaurant, situate at the corner of Tuam Street West and the Windmill Road. Private Rooms for Families. Mrs B. also wishes to intimate that she will have Cock-a-leeky on Wednesday and Saturday, from 7 to 11 pm. Also a good supply of fresh Oysters.

The enterprise apparently fared well, viz. *The Star* of 26 October 1869:

Wanted, a good General Servant. Apply to Mrs Burt, Hokitika Restaurant, Tuam Street.

Or did it? *The Press* on 4 January 1870 advised an auction at the Hokitika Restaurant on Tuam Street of Mrs Burt's superior household furniture, glass show cases, confectionery, fancy articles of wood and bead, marble statues and oil paintings and engravings. Thus the Hokitika joint departed and silence reigned, until *The Star* of 4 July 1877:

I, MRS ANNIE BURT, of Armagh street east, request all Bills to be sent in at once for immediate payment.

....with intrigue ramped up in *The Star* of 16 October that year:

I, ANNIE BURT, of Armagh street East, wish to deny the report that is circulated in Christchurch, that I am Married to THOMAS POPE DE BEER. I am not; neither do I intend to be. Dunedin and Wellington papers please copy.

Tom P De B elicited some sympathy around New Zealand at Annie's rigorous rebuff, but he was persistent if nothing else, for on 26 April 1878, Annie Burt, 40, widow, wed Thomas Pope Beer, 44, bootmaker, at the Registrar's office, Christchurch.<sup>5</sup> Each declared in the Intention to Marry register to having been in the district three years, which was possibly true in Beer's case, since he was in Melbourne, Australia at least until January 1873. Annie, however, had mislaid fifteen years residence in Christchurch, and six years of age.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, though, she'd learnt to write at least her own name; a rough but readily recognisable signature.

All did not remain bliss in the Beer abode; while Tom was listed in Wise's 1878-79 New Zealand Directory as a bootmaker at High St, Christchurch, in the *Press* of 8 May 1879, he's recorded as having ceased to occupy his household, thus he was no longer entitled to have his name retained in the List of Voters for 1879-80. Then in the Victoria (Australia) *Government Gazette* of 16 March 1880: Thomas Pope Beer, bootmaker, Carlton; meeting of creditors in Court of Insolvency, Melbourne, AUS

The following, while not proved beyond doubt to be our peripatetic Annie, certainly is in keeping with her attributes and the style of possessions to which she was accustomed; from the *Press* of 30 August 1879 we learnt of yet another sale of valuable household furnishings and effects, fancy items, shop fittings etc, on account of Mrs Burt - now of Manchester Street - who was leaving for England. The *Press* of 5 September 1879 advised a mopping-up sale but there was, however, no suitable Bentley/Burt/Hollingworth/Beer departing New Zealand via Lyttelton between 1 September 1879 and 1 September 1880.

Nothing more is heard of Annie, until her reticence was reduced in *The Star* of 10 April 1884: FOR SALE, 4 Large Pictures, made by me and considered very handsome, fit for a drawing-room. Also some Splendid Flowers and Shades. Lessons given. Apply, Mrs Annie Burt, or Mrs Beare, 237, Montreal street North.

'Mrs Beare' was presumably her take on her latest married name, after which her use of it and any modesty were discarded, according to *The Star* of 6 February 1886:

FOR SALE, a Lot of Beautiful Work, which has taken me one year to make. It is on view in the Double Shop in Market place, near the new Salvation Army Barracks. Ladies will do well to pay a visit to my Shop and see the work before it is sold, as I shall not again have such a Stock; and I intend to give lessons on all the Work I make.

MRS ANNIE BURTT  
Market place, Victoria street.

Ten days later, a little desperation has set in; *The Star* of 16 February announced the sale of Mrs Annie Burt's unique collection of "Beautiful and artistic needlework", "Genius And Patient Industry" and "Unrivalled Collection of Fancy Work", on the premises adjoining Bligh's Temperance Hotel, Victoria Street.

But she rebounded, in *The Star* of 10 December 1887:

BY the English papers I see the ladies can't get feathers nor flowers to match their ball or party dresses. Now, if there is any lady requires anything of the kind, if they will send me a piece of their dress I will make some very pretty flowers to match them; also, a pretty wreath for widowweed cap of the same material. I have made a few as a sample, and a few other articles. Mrs Anne Burt, opposite Robinson's, the Red House Bakery. Victoria street, next shop to the West Confectionery

This is about the point where one would expect Annie to have lost her procreation facilities, thus an appropriate time to look back. It's not possible to obtain a definitive result from English records without a large expense of buying birth printouts for every Burt/Burt/Hollingworth for the period 1856-59. So we cannot state definitively that Annie was never a mother in England. New Zealand however is easy to search, and unless she gave birth in a closet or under the covers so to speak, we can say that she was never a mother here.

What ensued in the *Press* of 20 February 1888 is well worth reproducing in its entirety:

#### A NEW BRIGHTON MYSTERY. A DREAM AND ITS CONSEQUENCE.

A peculiar affair has occurred within the last few days at New Brighton, and the excitement caused among the population of the little seaside resort will long be remembered. The details of the affair given below read somewhat like a chapter from the popular story of "Herr Paulus," now being published in the Weekly Press and Telegraph. The circumstances as detailed to us are as follows:— A Mrs Burt, who keeps an artificial flower and fancy goods shop in Victoria street, went down on Monday last to New Brighton for a change, as she was not very well, and she there rented a small house. She asked a neighbor, Mrs Parker, to go down and stay with her. Mrs Parker consented, and accompanied Mrs Burt, also taking her two children, an infant, and a little boy named Willie, aged two and a half years, with her. Mr Parker, who is in the employ of Mr Watt, provision merchant, Victoria street, remained at home. On Thursday night Mrs Burt had a dream. She dreamt that the little boy, Willie Parker, was lost on the Sandhills, and that he was covered up in the sand with a lot of white paper about him. The dream was of great length. She woke up and fell asleep again, when the dream recurred. She then also dreamt that a butcher rode up to the door with the child on the saddle in front of him. She told Mrs Parker in the night about the dream. Next morning, after getting up, Mrs Burt had occasion to go outside, and she called to Mrs Parker, and said, "There is the man passing now there is the butcher," and pointing to a man who was riding by, added, that is the man who brought the child back to the house." They spoke several times during the day about the dream, and Mrs Burt told Mrs Parker to watch the child, as she was suspicious that something was going to happen to it. On Saturday morning Mrs Burt returned by the eight o'clock tram to Christchurch, intending to let Mr Parker go down to New Brighton and stay with his wife till Monday, as the house was too small to hold all of them. Before leaving Mrs Burt again warned Mrs Parker to be careful about the child. Nothing eventful happened till about two o'clock in the afternoon, when the boy, who had been playing on the sandhills, suddenly disappeared. He was last seen playing near a place called the Look-out, not far from the house where his mother was staying. An alarm was at once given and search parties were organized to hunt for the missing child. In a

chivalrous and commendable manner the whole male population of New Brighton together with a considerable part of the female portion turned out to lend assistance in the search. The sandhills and surrounding country were explored, but in vain. A telephone message was then sent to the Police Station, Christchurch, and men were dispatched by the last tram to New Brighton, and they assisted in the search. But still no trace could be got of the little wanderer. There was not the slightest clue. Then it was suggested it might have got into the river. Men were accordingly sent down from Christchurch yesterday (Sunday) with drags, and assisted by a number of people, the river was dragged but with fruitless results. Inspector Pender also proceeded to New Brighton by tram and search parties were again organised and despatched in various directions but, as before, without success. And now comes the most remarkable part of the affair. About halfpast one in the afternoon a man named Patrick, who keeps a butcher's shop in Victoria street, and who is staying at New Brighton with his family, found the child on the sandhills, about three miles northward from the house from which it was lost. He was on horseback, and rode up to the door of the house. Mrs Burt, who had gone back to New Brighton, after hearing of the loss of the child, at once recognised Mr Patrick as the man she had seen in her dream. The only difference she noticed was that the man she saw had on a pair of breeches, while Mr Patrick was wearing a pair of trousers. There are some curious circumstances connected with the finding of the child. The impression on some people's mind is that the child had been taken away by some one. After its recovery a number of persons went to see the spot where it was picked up by Mr Patrick. A peculiar coincidence is that the child had not suffered in any way, nor did it even appear to be hungry; though it was missing for twenty-four hours. Mrs Burt, who by the way, belongs to the Salvation Army, claims to be in communication with the "spirits." She frequently expressed the opinion that the child was "over there," pointing in the direction in which it was afterwards found. It may also be mentioned that subsequent to the child's disappearance and before its recovery, Mrs Burt frequently repeated her dream to different persons, among whom were the police. The whole matter is at present a mystery, and one can only conjecture at the probable solution.

*The Star* of 21 February took a more cynical angle:

..... This two-year-old child, if the story is to be credited, was out on the bleak sandhills for nearly twenty-four hours, clad only in the ordinary way, and without food. Moreover, in the early morning of Sunday, at about two o'clock, there was a drenching downpour of rain. Yet when this little toddler was brought back, it displayed phenomenal conditions. Twenty-four hours without food, it wanted nothing; it was in no way disconcerted; and its clothing, even to the undervest, was *perfectly dry*. The story is, to use a vulgarism, but an expressive phrase nevertheless, too thin. It seems most likely that some stupidly conceived conspiracy was carried out. Whether there was some ulterior purpose, whether, for instance, there was a desire to play upon the mother's imagination, can only be determined by stringent enquiry. As it seems to us, the circumstances demand keen investigation, and for obvious reasons.

*The Star* in the following days had a series of letters to the Editor. The first was a disclaimer from Patrick the butcher, who stated that Mrs Burt and the boy's parents were unknown to him; he had never spoken to them in his life; and that "a thorough investigation should have been made before putting the matter in print."

The second was from the boy's father, who stated that he was the first to tend the child, who he found very hungry, sleepy, perfectly dry and with the appearance of having slept in the sand all night. Finally, there were letters from two anonymous people who were involved in the affair "from start to finish" as searchers, and who examined the facts and were justifiably sceptical of the dream. As one said, 'some foolish trick has been played on the poor mother.'

So was Annie feeling a lack of attention, seeking a little publicity – she had now gone fully nationwide – or was she starting to jangle the threads? It seems the Brighton Mystery remained unresolved and the footloose Annie quiet, until *The Star* of 16 February 1889 advised that Mrs Annie Burt, artificial flower maker, was to sell by auction the whole of her "Very Compact, Useful, Well kept Household Furniture & Effects", on account of her departing hence for the Old Country.

Presumably the auction proceeded, but it seems that Annie was simply spinning another web; there is no suitable Bentley/Burt/etc/etc recorded in the press as a passenger out of Lyttelton in 1889, although if she had travelled, she could have gone steerage, thus unrecorded. Which is all irrelevant, since on 16 April the following year, she married Thomas Curties, in Christchurch.<sup>7</sup>

Both stated that they were living on Durham St, Christchurch; it's unknown if they were neighbours, or in the same boarding house, where the service was conducted by a Methodist minister. In the Intention to Marry Register, Thomas correctly stated he'd been in the Christchurch registrar's district three months, whereas Annie – a widow as usual – as usual adjusted the maths and said, Two years. On top of knocking a decade off her age.<sup>8</sup> Yet she did remember her father's name and occupation – albeit elevated from linen weaver to manufacturer – and her mother's maiden name along with – and was this creative, or some wicked sense of humour? – the date she was widowed: April 1<sup>st</sup> 1876.

No record has been found of her ever being widowed, or divorced.

Logic suggests that Thomas did not know Annie before 1890, so why the whirlwind affair and marriage? Was it his want of companionship? Attraction to her flair and flamboyance? Or did he take pity on her? Whatever it was, was hardly forever.

By *The Star* of 10 June 1890, they were apparently still an item:  
TEACHING. Copying Flowers and almost all kinds of Fancy Work. Samples on hand, Also, Sewing. Also, To Let Sitting and Bedroom, with use of kitchen, to respectable Married Couple without children. Mrs T Curtis, 191, Durham street North

However, Wise's Directory for Christchurch of 1890-91 lists a Mrs Burt, wax flower maker, 11 Aldred St, and in Wise's of 1892-93, there is: Mrs Annie Bert, and La Blanche, dressmaker, at 191 Durham St. La Blanche remains unidentified; perhaps only ever a figment of imagination. By February 1892, Thomas was living on Barbadoes St, Christchurch,<sup>9</sup> and 31 March 1893 is the last time that he's found recorded in New Zealand.<sup>10</sup>

We now have to dip into tentative waters. The several Annie Burts in that region and era are all accounted for, but from 1894, there is a Mrs Annie Curtis who fits our Annie. Even the age discrepancy more or less suits her; viz. Sunnyside Hospital, Christchurch, admissions:  
*31 December 1894 Mrs Annie Curtis admitted to Wellington Asylum*  
*21 May 1895 No 2227 - Mrs Annie Curtis, 53, housewife; previous abode – Wellington Asylum; admitted to Sunnyside Lunatic Asylum, Canterbury; Observations – Wesleyan; English; Relatives unknown.*<sup>11</sup>

Although she was admitted to Sunnyside, it's unclear if she was retained there indefinitely, or released for a while. If the latter, we have:

*18 May 1899 Mrs Annie Curtis, 57, English; of Maunsell St, Woolston; C of E; admitted to Ward 4, Christchurch Hospital, with debility.*<sup>12</sup>

Wise's Directories of 1896 to 1900 don't have our Annie anywhere, let alone at Maunsell St, but those of 1901 to 1904 have Mrs Annie Curtis, 16 Crescent Rd, St Albans, Christchurch. She is not found in any Christchurch Electoral Roll in that period; in fact, our Annie has never been found in any Electoral Roll.

In Wise's of 1905, Mrs Annie Curtis is at 18 North Crescent Rd, St Albans, but whether that was a change of address or street numbering or a typo is not known.

None of the preceding Annie Curtises have been satisfactorily identified as anyone other than our own Annie B.

Meanwhile, back at Sunnyside:

CASEBOOK<sup>13</sup>

*No 2227 - Annie Curtis*

*7 September 1905 – Rambling, deluded & grandiose; says her name must be on every coin to make it legal; that she came out in her own ship; that she talks through the floors; states she has been here forty-two years. Health good*

*25 May 1906 – Was placed in bed on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, suffering from severe cough which developed into bronchitis*

*Pat(ient) died at 10 am on May 26<sup>th</sup>. Cause of Death Acute Bronchitis*

Annie was buried on Monday 28 May 1906 at Sydenham cemetery, Christchurch by the Methodist minister J A Lochore, and who apart from him and perhaps the undertaker and sexton stood in the bitter cold nor-easterly wind as she was laid to rest?<sup>14</sup>

Annie had done the religious rounds throughout her life: baptised and first-married C of E; Salvation Army in the Brighton affair; Methodist marriage to Thomas Curties; Wesleyan at her second lunatic spell; reversion to C of E when debilitated; and finally popped in the ground by a Methodist. We can only speculate as to what or indeed if she had been looking for in her life.

There is no irrefutable proof that Annie Burt born Bentley in 1832 is the same person throughout this narrative; but that said, the circumstantial evidence is rather convincing. Additionally, scans of both New Zealand marriage source documents, ie the registers actually signed by the parties, show that Annie's two signatures have a number of points in common. And the information supplied in her second marriage here certainly identifies her as the wife of Samuel Burtt.

And perhaps Annie has at last spoken through the floor that is this Earth.

REFS:

- 1) FamilySearch; ship *White Rose* passenger manifest; Page 4, Thomas CURTIES & family
- 2) FamilySearch; *England, Births and Christenings, 1538-1975*, Ann Gravel BENTLEY
- 3) GRO marriage register; Newark, 1856, Vol 7B, Page 347, Line No 14; BENTLEY, BURTT
- 4) FamilySearch; ship *Regina* passenger manifest; Page 5, Geo & Anne G. HOLLINGWORTH
- 5) Archives NZ, Christchurch; R20170318, source marriage register, 1876-1880; BURT, BEER

- 6) Archives NZ, Wellington; Intention to Marry register, Christchurch 1 April to 30 June 1878
- 7) Methodist Archives, Christchurch, NZ; source marriage register 1890; CURTIES, BURT
- 8) Archives NZ, Wellington; Intention to Marry register, Christchurch 1 April to 30 June 1890
- 9) NZSG Kiwi Index; School Records, APW, parent/guardian
- 10) Archives NZ, Wellington; AJHR 1893 I D14; T Curties, lessee of Railways land, Heathcote, Christchurch
- 11) Archives NZ, Christchurch; R20127952, Sunnyside Hospital register of admissions; CURTIS
- 12) Archives NZ, Christchurch; R20081611, Christchurch Hospital Admissions, Ward 4, No 189
- 13) Archives NZ, Christchurch; R20127931, Sunnyside Hospital Casebook
- 14) Registrar General NZ; death register; 1906/3379

All newspaper clippings are courtesy of Papers Past, National Library of New Zealand

No photographs are known to exist of any of the participants in the narrative.