



HISTORY OF MEDICINE

A SIGNIFICANT TOMBSTONE IN AN UNEXPECTED LITTLE PLACE

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My first visit to the little hamlet of Nieu Bethesda was in 1996. I visited the Owl House and afterwards had tea at the nearby Village Inn. The owner, who had just moved to Nieu Bethesda, told me about the grave of a doctor in the local cemetery. This intrigued me, and at my next visit to the hamlet I searched the cemetery with the help of my wife and found the grave.

The tombstone read:

Dr Arthur William Strickland
MRCS (Eng) LRCP (Edinb) LSA
Born: Kensington, London, June 15th 1852
Died at New Bethesda, Cape Colony, Jan 12th 1892



Headstone of Arthur William Strickland in the cemetery at Nieu Bethesda.

What could we find out about this man? Why did a highly qualified person, winner of a senior surgical prize, choose to come to the Cape Colony and live and work in such an insignificant place?

EARLY LIFE

Arthur William Strickland was born in Kensington, London, on 15 June 1852 to Margaret Jones and Frank Strickland.

During research for this study, I was given a photograph of a tombstone in Boynton Chapel, Bridlington, UK, of Sir William Strickland, Baronet, who died in 1834. Also mentioned is Arthur Strickland, third son of the Baronet, who died in 1863. It states that Arthur's life 'was spent in the active study of the wonderful works of God'.

Considering the names of the Baronet (William) and his third son (Arthur), it is quite possible that our man, Arthur William, was a grandson of this Arthur. Arthur must have had a son, Frank, who was Arthur William's father. The above assumption may be incorrect, but Arthur William's two names are strong grounds for believing that he was a grandson of the Baronet buried at Bridlington.

When and where did Arthur William qualify as a doctor? The first entry of Arthur William Strickland in the *British Medical Register* appears in the volume of 1875. His address is given as Snitterfield, Stratford-on-Avon. In the next volume (1876) his address is given as Warwick, near Birmingham, not far from Stratford-on-Avon. He stayed here until 1880 when he moved to Kids Grove. He appears under this address in the *Register* every subsequent year until his final entry in the 1893 volume.

The 1893 *British Medical Register* indicates under the heading 'Districts' that Dr Arthur William Strickland was assistant House Surgeon at the Queen's Hospital in Birmingham in 1873. He is also mentioned as having received the Senior Surgical Prize at this hospital in the same year.

Research at the Royal College of Surgeons in England revealed that Arthur was examined by this body in London on 23 July 1873 for diploma membership (MRCS), paying £5 and 5 shillings (five guineas) in fees. He was approved in medicine, but referred. He re-presented himself to the Court of Examiners on 22 January 1874 and duly passed. He now had to pay 10 guineas in fees. His address was recorded as being Stratford. He did not go on to become a Fellow of the College

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(FRCS), and therefore no information regarding his personal life and career was reported, as is the case with Fellows.

Nearly a year later on 2 December 1874, when Arthur William was 22, his name was written into the register of the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh, under the heading 'Licentiate'. His place of birth is given as Stratford-on-Avon. The examiner's signature is probably that of Dr Rob Paluso.

Arthur continued to equip himself for his career. He was examined for his Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries of London on 22 April 1875, his address being recorded in a list of those who had passed as St George's, Wellington.

FAR AWAY

Nine thousand kilometres south of where all this was happening lies an area of the Karoo known as the Koup (which means omental fat). Here, 30 kilometres north of Graaff-Reinet, on the N9 towards Middelburg, one finds the turn-off to the picturesque hamlet of Nieu Bethesda, 27 km further along on a dirt road.

In 1875 the Reverend Charles Murray of the Dutch Reformed Church in Graaff-Reinet was looking for a suitable location for a new church for the local farmers and a mission station. Having seen this beautiful valley he was satisfied that his search was over.

At this time the Afrikaner people spoke Afrikaans in everyday conversation, and Dutch at official gatherings. It therefore happened that at the meeting of the Graaff-Reinet Church Council Reverend Murray told the members of the proposed location of the new mission station. When asked about the name of the new settlement-to-be, he said '*Laten wij deze plaats nu Bethesda noemen*' ('Let's now call this place Bethesda', the name of the pool in John 5:2). The council members understood him to say 'New Bethesda', and the place was named accordingly. Much later this misunderstanding was confirmed when the name was officially spelled the correct Dutch way, namely Nieu(w) Bethesda.

The town was founded in 1878 when part of the farm 'Uitkyk' was bought for £4 000 from Barend Jacobus Pienaar. One of the conditions of sale was that no liquor was to be sold in the village. This condition was only revoked in the late 1980s when the first liquor store 'Malgenoeg' opened. Nieu Bethesda remained a Dutch Reformed church town (kerkdorp) up to 1936, when its administration was handed over to the Cape Province. It is known today for being the birthplace of writer Athol Fugard, as well as for the Owl House of Helen Martin. (While I was writing this article, a thesis in fine art on Helen Martin was published — see Ross, *This is My World*.)

With information from England regarding Arthur Strickland now exhausted, I turned to South African sources. There were two medical Stricklands in South Africa at that time, our man Arthur W, and a Frank Strickland, who practised as a dentist in Port Elizabeth. He had qualified in 1876 (about the same time

Arthur William finished his academic studies), so it is unlikely that he was Arthur's father, although he could have been a brother or cousin. The two Stricklands came to South Africa at about the same time — the dentist was already in South Africa in 1882, and the doctor arrived in 1884.

Government Notice No. 32 in the *Government Gazette* of 17 January 1890 lists all the licensed medical practitioners in the Cape Colony up to 31 December 1889. Arthur William, with his full qualifications, is listed as residing in Victoria West. It states that he acquired his licence to practise in the Colony in November 1884. This would imply that he had entered South Africa at that time, aged 32 years. His letter of application to register supports this date. His application for a licence to practise, addressed to the Colonial Secretary of the Cape of Good Hope, was written on a letterhead of the Royal Hotel of Cape Town and dated 17 November 1884. He was in a hurry because, as he states in the letter, 'I am going to act for Dr Bogle in Victoria West, might I ask for my papers to be forwarded there as I am leaving Cape Town tomorrow.'

A letter from the Office of the Colonial Medical Committee dated 21 November 1884 states that the Medical Board advised that Dr Arthur William Strickland be licensed to practise medicine and surgery in the Colony. It states his qualifications and is signed by the Secretary, Dr Johann Philip Landsbergh.

Searching through the letters that the Colonial Secretary received from the Residing Magistrate and Civil Commissioner of Victoria West for the periods 1884 - 1888 (when he received his licence) and again from 1889 to 1890 (when he left), nothing about him could be found.

Dr Bogle asked the Civil Commissioner permission to visit England for family matters from May until August 1888 and proposed Dr Hart as acting district surgeon in his place. At another time during 1889 Dr Bogle was absent and the German-Jewish Dr August Hanau, acted as locum. This would indicate that Arthur Strickland had already moved to Nieu Bethesda by May 1888.

MARRIAGE AND MOURNING

It is not clear when Arthur William married, probably after his stay at Victoria West and certainly before June 1889. His wife, Frances Elizabeth Martin, was from a well-known family in the town of Nieu Bethesda. Helen Martin of Owl House fame is a descendant of this family. Arthur probably must have met Frances after moving there. His death notice, signed by her, states that he had no (living) children. Yet next to his grave lies the grave of a child, Arthur Llewellyn Strickland, 5 months old, who died on 28 June 1889. This child was therefore born in January 1889, so one can assume that the couple married before April 1888.

Our doctor must have moved from Victoria West to Nieu Bethesda not later than April 1888. It is certain that he practised there, but considering the size of the town he must



The walled-in graves of Arthur William and his little son Arthur Llewellyn. The marble beam next to Arthur William's headstone is the base of his son's. Frances does not rest here — she probably remarried and is buried elsewhere.

have had time to spare, and we also know that he had some bad debts owing to him during this time.

Around the middle of 1890 the Special Justice of the Peace of the Town wrote to the Residing Magistrate of Graaff-Reinet to report that there was need for medical supervision at the local jail, and requested that Arthur William be appointed as its Medical Superintendent at £50 per year.

The Residing Magistrate then wrote to the Colonial Secretary on 1 July 1890 supporting this appointment. He mentioned that it would be very costly to send a doctor from Graaff-Reinet to Nieu Bethesda whenever someone got ill there. He also wrote 'in consequence of some accounts submitted by him [AW] having been disallowed he has now notified that he will in future decline to act in any way unless he is paid and that he is willing to undertake the duties of Medical Attendant at Bethesda for £50 per annum.'

Arthur William was duly appointed Assistant District Surgeon in the magisterial district of Graaff-Reinet. This appointment led to the Resident Magistrate of Graaff-Reinet writing to the Colonial Secretary on 22 November 1890 proposing that the doctor also be appointed a Justice of the Peace.

In his motivation for this appointment he stated that Arthur William Strickland was about 40 years of age, in possession of an apothecary licence and able to read and write English. Arthur accepted the appointment as Assistant District Surgeon on 31 July 1890. In his letter of acceptance he writes in a very neat handwriting, 'I accept the post of District Surgeon for New Bethesda according to agreement with the exception that confinements must not be included under sickness in the families of the Government Officials as then the salary would be inadequate. I commence my duties on August the 1st.' His letterhead bears the head of a stag, which emblem stems from the Strickland family crest. William the Conqueror had

conferred the right to display this to a Strickland for services rendered to the Royal Court. (The conferees were allowed to hunt game on the royal lands and forests. Deer was ranked as Royal Game and was reserved for hunting by the chosen few.)

The *Medical Directory* 1894, obituary section, lists Arthur William Strickland as having died on 12 January 1893, aged 39 years and 5 months. Yet his death notice issued on 16 January 1892, states that he died on 12 January 1892, the date that appears on his tombstone. He lies buried next to his little son.

No obituary could be found in the *British Medical Journal* or the *Lancet*. The *Graaff Reinet Advertiser* of 18 January 1892 has a short death notice, stating that he died at 3 am on the 12th in his house and that he was buried in the local Dutch Reformed cemetery. The notice gives no indication of the cause of death but quotes 'Onze Courant' as saying that the body would be embalmed and sent to his family in England. This clearly did not happen.

These are the facts as far as I could trace them. Still, they do not answer the question why this highly qualified man, a double specialist and apothecary, chose to come to South Africa to locum for a general practitioner in Victoria West for some years and then move on to the little hamlet of Nieu Bethesda, probably in private practice but also as assistant district surgeon. One possible answer is that he had tuberculosis and hoped to cure his disease in the hot, dry climate of the Karoo. In those days it was not uncommon for people to move to such climates for a cure. Many were indeed cured. Arthur William was perhaps one of the unlucky ones.

Next time you are rushing down to the Cape, visit Nieu Bethesda and spend a minute next to the grave of a tragic colleague who qualified himself more than adequately but was not granted the opportunity or the time to apply this knowledge to the benefit of mankind. May he continue to rest peacefully in one of the most beautiful little places in our country.

I wish to thank Mr J H Minnie of Camps Bay for research done in the SA Archives in Cape Town, Ms Glen F-Jones, Library Secretary of the Royal College of Surgeons of England in London, for her efforts and valuable information, Ms Margaret Pringle of the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh for her help, and Mr S Pienaar of Aasvoëlkrans, Nieu Bethesda, for taking the photos.

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