

Hookum Chan and family

19TH-CENTURY FURNITURE MAKERS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA



DOROTHY ERICKSON

An unusual family of furniture makers in Western Australia in the 19th century was that of Hookum Chan (c.1800–1903) and his sons. We do not even know his real name, as he was recorded as Hookim Chan when he arrived with J. L. Morley from India on his ship *Cumberland* in 1829, the year of settlement.

Hookim/Hakim is actually a title akin to master, ruler or judge awarded to Hindu Brahmins on graduation. According to one of Hookum's granddaughters Alice Tchan Hahn, with whom he lived at the very end of his life, his given name began with a "J".¹

He was born into a high caste Hindu family probably in the area now known as Uttarakhand, in the foothills of the Himalayas, northern India, on the border of Nepal and Tibet. Before coming to the Swan River Colony, he was possibly employed in the irregular Bengal Army controlled by the East India Company.² He may have been what was called a

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Julia Chan (1858-1942) with her husband the jeweller Alfred Jackson, his sister, her brother Mathew Chand, and their children. Photograph courtesy Linley Stopford



1

Alfred Tchan (1853-98), c 1880 Photograph courtesy Linley Stopford

2

Matthew Chand (1866-1926), c 1900. Photograph courtesy Linley Stopford



political (intelligence) agent, and was assisted in coming to Western Australia by the wealthy and influential Prinsep family in Bengal, for whom he had worked. His granddaughter Alice Hahn is recorded as saying he was a ship's carpenter and he may have worked in this capacity for the East India Company, as among his effects were two uniforms, one apparently for the East India Company.³

Charles C. Prinsep, whom he knew, was a wealthy man with numerous properties in the Far East who lived in Calcutta (now Kolkata). He was Standing Counsel to the East India Company and occasional Advocate General in Bengal 1846–49 and 1852–55.

In a letter to his biographer A. C. Staples in 1957, Charles Prinsep's granddaughter Virginia wrote her recollections of Hookum Chan including that he was a carpenter who worked for her grandfather at *Belvedere*, his home in Calcutta, and how, when he came to WA, he had worked at the Prinsep Estate's properties which included *Belvedere* at Australind, *Paradise* and *Prinsep Park* at Dardanup until these were sold in 1874 by his son Henry Prinsep. She also wrote that he was a tiny little man of whom her family were all very fond. In later years

every year as regularly as clockwork he used to come to our house to salaam to the picture of my grandfather [C. R. Prinsep] as he had such a reverence for him. ... He always used to bring my father a walking stick that he had made.⁴

Like other immigrants, Hookum soon after arrival was gainfully employed. He worked from 1829–30 on government buildings and public works. There is also a record of his repairing a ship damaged on the *Stragglers* for a Captain Back in 1830 at the request of Governor Stirling.⁵ The same reference mentions repairing ships for Thomas Peel and restoring a boat for the Shiplovers Society.

Like many other skilled workers he was soon working for himself, but at



what is speculation. Granddaughter Alice Hahn claimed he had run a ferry service along the river from Pineapple Landing to Perth and on to Fremantle in the 1830s. People were mostly transported by water at this time because there were few roads across the sandy soil and it was more convenient, so it is a distinct possibility, but so far his name has not been found as a ferryman. In 1842 he lived in Henry Street, Fremantle but moved in the 1850s to Perth.

In 1834 the Morleys, with whom he had arrived, sailed to Madras in India, returning in 1835 with twelve Indian craftsmen and builders.⁶ In an 1892 court case, Chan said he arrived in 1835 so possibly he went with the Morleys for a trip to India. This may be when Hookum's marriage to Hannah Solomon/Suli was arranged and may even have taken place with her as a child bride who remained behind with her family until old enough to come to a country where there was no extended family to care for her.

He apparently sailed again to India and returned in 1841, possibly to collect her though the family believe they were married in 1845, when she would have been about 18. It is possible he may have taken additional lessons in inlay or other specialist cabinetmaking skills at either of these times.

Hookum and Hannah had at least nine children, seven of whom survived to



4

Hookum Chan (c. 1800-1903), *workbox*, in carved and stained pine inlaid with another timber, h 35 w 25 d 11 cm. Family collection, photograph courtesy Maxine Klein

5

Rose Petersen née Jackson c. 1897, the second owner of the box



6

Hookum Chan (c. 1800-1903),
jewellery box featuring inlay work,
c. 1897. Family collection

7

Hookum Chan (c. 1800-1903),
turned tobacco jar, h 15 diam 6.5 cm.
Family collection, photograph courtesy
Linley Stopford



adulthood. They were Thackeray 1850-68; Alfred 1853-98 (**plate 1**); George 1854-84; William 1857-1943; Roseanna Julia 1858-1942 (**plate 3**); Dhano Annie 1863-1938; Nathan Luke born 1865, died (?); Matthew Luke 1866-1926 (**plate 2**) and John 1869-1917. Hannah was known for her charitable works. She died aged 45 in October 1872. Her eldest son Thackeray predeceased her. They were buried in a family grave in the Anglican section of the East Perth Cemetery.

Chan had furniture works in Perth and possibly at Champion Bay (Geraldton). One known workshop from c.1850-67 was behind what was later the Shamrock Hotel in Hay Street. He employed 29 ticket-of-leave men between 1852 and 1874. Some were cutting timber but others would have worked on the furniture and other endeavours. Trained ticket-of-leave cabinet-makers whom he could have employed included William Clifford, Henry Cutting, Thomas Davis, George Frazer, Joseph Glassel, William Hall, Edwin Truscott Gill or George Keane.

In the 1880s and 1890s the premises had a Murray Street address though they were probably still on the same site. His sons were also trained in the field. John became a wood turner, Alfred a wood carver and upholsterer and William a carpenter, wood carver, turner and upholsterer. Together they had quite a business but separated later. Thackeray had died young.

The *Perth Gazette* and *West Australian Times* on 16 September 1870 profiling the first “exhibition of works of Art and Industry” reported “two small specimens (nos. 421 & 423) the production of Hookham [sic] Chan; the former is a work-box, the top of which is inlaid in a geometrical design exhibiting a greater amount of good art than any other cabinet work exhibited.” So it would appear that he was particularly proficient in inlay work. A box owned by a descendant is intricately carved with a little inlay. It has a central female figure in an oval cartouche, inlaid circles of another timber and some stained sections (**plate 4**). It is thought to have been a wedding present for his daughter Julia when she married Alfred Jackson. It passed to Julia’s daughter Rose (**plate 5**) and down through the family.

A smaller jewellery box featuring inlay work is thought to have been made as a wedding present for Rose Jackson when she married in 1897 (**plate 6**).

Hookum Chan was also adept at turning. However we have only a small turned tobacco jar known to be by his hand (**plate 7**). He was apparently also a maker of fine tops, probably as a hobby in his retirement. It was reported in reminiscences in the newspapers by B. S. Ranford that

... I knew him well. As a woodworker, few in his time excelled him. He worked for my grandfather, Isaac Summerland, and was always respected by all who knew him. I quite agree with you his raspberry jam tops for us boys had a fine finish about them that no turner in Perth could imitate. When Hookum died, Perth was the loser in many ways, although some of his sons have worthily filled his place, especially William.⁷

All we know about Isaac Summerland is that he was the son of a carpenter, and arrived in the colony in 1830 when three years old.

The Western Australian Museum has recently acquired a chair donated by Linley Stopford. This is thought to

have been made for Alfred Jackson as a wedding present from Hookum in 1876. This was the same chair in which Jackson died and was also passed down through the family.

Some pieces in the Wordsworth Collection that had belonged to Henry Prinsep and his wife Josephine Bussell of *Prinsep Park* and *Belvidere* are probably by Chan and his workmen. Topographical draughtsman, painter, set designer, art teacher, photographer and civil servant Harry Prinsep was born in Calcutta. His mother died when he was seven and his father had a stroke when he was eleven so he was educated with his cousin Valentine by his uncle Sir Thoby Prinsep (1792–1878) at his home *Holland House*, in Kensington (London), where the art tutor was George Frederick Watts RA and the actress Ellen Terry was a frequent guest. He had some training in art in Dresden and Heidelberg and reputedly studied law at Oxford.

In 1866 he came to Western Australia to assess the family properties. He met Charlotte Josephine Bussell and in 1868 they married and lived at *Australind* where he was manager for his father's trustees. Here he bred horses and supplied railway sleepers for the Indian market. Shipwreck and other problems made his financial position difficult and saw him take a position in the Lands and Surveys Department in 1874. They moved to Perth and lived in *The Studio*, Hay Street near where the Mint is today. He became head of the new Mines Department in 1894 and in 1898 Protector of Aborigines.

Henry played the violin, wrote poetry, designed and painted the sets for various dramatic productions in Perth and painted the interiors of the 1881 Perth International Exhibition halls. He moved in the highest social circles and taught art to the Government House set. He was involved in the founding of the Wilgie Club in 1889 and exhibited with them and the WA Society of Arts. He retired in 1907 and they visited London and then moved to Busselton where he built *Little Holland House*, designed *Beachgrove* for the Brockmans and served as mayor for several years. The furniture, which they owned



8

Attributed to Hookum Chan (c. 1800-1903), elegant Regency-style *sideboard* in jarrah c.1868, made for the Prinseps, h 90.6 w 198.2 d 54 cm. Wordsworth Collection, National Gallery of Australia

(that was sold by their grandson about 1985 and known as the Prinsep Collection) is uneven in craftsmanship and undoubtedly from several hands but some is from his old friend Hookum Chan (**plates 8-10**), at whose funeral he was a pallbearer.

No work by Alfred or John has been positively identified. However among pieces held by family members to which access has not been granted, there is believed to be a wardrobe carved with a Tudor rose motif.

William's carving is seen on the several organs built by Cecil Clifton for St John's Fremantle, St Andrew's Presbyterian Church Perth and others. That made for Clifton's own home is now in St Alban's, Highgate (**plate 11**).

Linley Stopford remembers

I remember going to see William at his home in Fitzgerald St in 1943, not long before he died and I was about 11. My grandmother Rose Peterson (his niece) [plate 5] had taken me there to buy one of the pedal organs he had made for me to play because I was anxious to learn to play the organ. He was a tiny



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Attributed to Hookum Chan (c. 1800-1903), elegant double-sided *music stand* with brass candleholders, jarrah and cedar, h 125 w 59 d 55 cm, which belonged to Henry and Josephine Prinsep. Prinsep was a violin player and apparently so were other members of his family, as this is designed for duets or to accompany a singer also reading music. Wordsworth Collection, National Gallery of Australia



10

Attributed to Hookum Chan (c. 1800-1903), *bureau desk* of jarrah made in George I style for Henry Prinsep 1866-8, h 88 w 120 d 41 cm. Private collection, photograph D. Erickson

little man too, probably no more than about 5 feet tall with snowy white hair and Nana resembled him a great deal.

We were taken into the front room of his house and I remember my surprise and delight to find it full of pedal organs, all so intricately carved and some of them player organs like player pianos. They chose one for me...

The carving on it was beautiful and I treasured it for that alone...

I often wonder what happened to all those organs I had seen there that day. Hopefully they were sold to collectors.

Reports of thefts in May 1882 from Hookum's premises indicate William was still working in his father's premises at this time.⁸ The objects stolen were a Lucas

plane, a twist bit branded H.C., one two-foot rule branded W.C., two two-foot rules, four-folding, branded F.C. and H.C. and one carpenter's square branded H.C. "F.C." has not been identified, but it may have been a misprint in the papers for TC for eldest son Thackeray, who was by this time dead.

For some reason in 1885 there was a cluster of court reports about men sleeping on Hookum's premises without his permission. The report of one of these court cases was racist in language. Attitudes were beginning to change apparently. In February 1885, he was referred to as 'this dusky individual' and further on as

The dark gentleman with an unpronounceable name, was put into the box, and in highly unintelligible language made a statement, which the police interpreted as a denial of having given the prisoner the alleged permission.⁹

Worse was to follow. On Christmas Eve, when he went to the Shamrock Hotel for a beer, he was punched in the eye. The assailant was later jailed for two months.¹⁰ It may have been privately amusing for him that these people who addressed him as Hookum were actually saying the equivalent of 'Honoured sir or master' while attempting to denigrate him.

About 1887, Hookum retired and moved to live in the old cottage on the A5 location he owned at the Pineapple Landing. By 1890 one of his children, probably Mathew who had returned from Champion Bay, was living there too. By this time the sons John, Alfred and William were running workshops. Hooper, Dalziel & Chan was listed in the 1894/5 Almanacs in Murray Street, Perth. This may have been John carrying on in his father's premises with partners. William is listed in the Almanacs in 1893/4 in St Georges Terrace but had altered the spelling of his surname to Tchan; Alfred had also altered his surname to Tchan by this time. This, the family said, was done because Chan sounded Chinese, which they were not.

By 1892 Hookum's life really began to take a turn for the worse. On 6 December a dispute over certain parcels of land, A4 and A5 along the Swan River at Pineapple Landing, that Hookum thought he owned and where he was living, was brought against him by the WA Norwood Estate Co. Somehow the Norwood Estate had obtained the title deeds to the land at Pineapple Landing in 1887 and by 1892 decided to sue Hookum, who lost the case.¹¹ A very aggrieved Hookum moved to live in a cottage in a sandy square next to where the Royal Hotel was later built in Wellington Street, Perth.

Further embarrassment was to come. In September 1898 Hookum was called to give evidence to the Immigration Restriction Committee. Gilbert Smith had alleged that there was a Chinese with leprosy living in Perth. The member for North East Coolgardie, Frederick Charles Vosper, who fought for causes such as republicanism, political separation for the goldfields and miners' safety, opposed Asian immigration and belonged to the Anti-Asiatic League,¹²

had alleged leprosy in his newspaper *The Sunday Times*. Vosper had apparently told the Parliament that if given a committee, he could produce the lepers. Subsequent police investigations had produced no lepers.

This did not satisfy Vosper's informant Smith who had Hookum Chan collected by the police to come before the committee. Hookum had developed a skin disease called Vitiligo, which can cause the body's skin to lose its pigmentation in patches. Smith thought it was leprosy. It was not – as three doctors testified. When the committee's report came before the Legislative Assembly, Hookum's friend and neighbour, the proprietor of the Shamrock Hotel and Member of Parliament Timothy Quinlan

protested against the mention which had been made in the committee's report about a respectable old resident of the colony, upon whom had been cast the suspicion of leprosy. The old gentleman was a friend of his, and came to his house every day.

Another member, Mr Monger, called the report a disgrace and the decision was made that sections of it not be printed.¹³ Smith got his comeuppance. He was arrested in Sydney a year later, charged with a malicious libel and refused bail.¹⁴

At some stage before his death in 1903 when he had become bedridden, Hookum was taken to live at 134 Fitzgerald Street, where William had built a substantial house. Here William's wife Annie took care of him until he died on 19 March 1903. Hookum's funeral two days later had many floral tributes. His pallbearers included some of Perth's most prominent men including H. C. Prinsep, W. D. Moore (a leading businessman and Member of the Legislative Assembly), A. Parker, J. Neeves, W. Golding and Taj Din. He was buried next to his wife Hannah and two of their sons in the family grave in the Church of England section of the East Perth Cemetery. An Anglican minister Rev. W. F. Marshall officiated.

There are mysteries about Hookum Chan which may never be solved, but this

small record of his life at least elucidates part of the life of a man who was an unusual pioneer in Western Australia.

Acknowledgements

Much of the information in this article has been researched and generously supplied by Mrs Linley Stopford, family historian of the Chan family, who considers the correct family name is most probably Chand. Another branch which came to eastern Australia spell their version as Shand, while the remaining Western Australian descendants use Tchan, one of the spellings used in early newspapers and adopted by Hookum's sons William and Alfred. This was considered appropriate at the time as it is apparently the Kashmiri word for carpenter. The pronunciation should be something in the region of 'Shon', which is the spelling on the birth certificate of one of his daughters.

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Notes

- 1 SLWA RN 396 Notes from Mrs S. Adams.
- 2 Charles Allen in *Soldier Sahibs* states: "One final point about the Bengal Army of this period [19th century], its Native Infantry regiments were very largely made up of recruits – nearly all high-born Hindus from the Brahmin or Rajput upper castes." These men were often referred to as 'orderlies', but according to Allen "the word 'orderly' also needs to be corrected, suggesting as it does that (they) were little more than servants. Many of the village and clan chiefs who in those early days joined irregular corps raised by British political officers were locally powerful men who brought their own retainers with them and led them as troop leaders." Carroll & Graf USA, 2001, preface p. 11.
- 3 SLWA RN 396 Notes from Mrs S. Adams.
- 4 SLWA RN 194 and Rica Erickson (ed.), *Bicentennial Dictionaries* vol 3 p 2537.
- 5 SLWA RN 396 Notes from Mrs S. Adams.
- 6 These would have been indentured and returned to India probably after five years as was apparently the custom.
- 7 *Western Mail* 3 Jan 1935, p 12.
- 8 *Police Gazette* 3 May 1882
- 9 *West Australian* 20 Feb 1885 p 3.
- 10 *West Australian* 30 Dec 1885, p 3.
- 11 *West Australian* various dates Dec. 1892.
- 12 <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/vosper-frederick-charles-burleigh-8933>
- 13 *West Australian* 20 Oct 1898, p 3.
- 14 *The Age* 24 June 1899, p 5.

11

William Tchan (1857-1943), carved woodwork for Robert Cecil Clifton's organ, built 1898-1908, now in St Alban's Anglican Church, Highgate WA. Photograph D. Erickson

