

VIVIEN LEIGH'S ARMENIAN ROOTS

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✘ **Liz Chater**, London UK, 12 August 2015

Liz Chater specialises in Armenian family history in South Asia and Southeast Asia. She is the author of "[Armenian Graves, Inscriptions and Memorials in India--DACCA 1722-1977](#)". In this extract from her genealogical research "Armenian: Something Vivien Leigh and her cousin Xan Fielding a British spy had in common" she answers the question: "Did Vivien Leigh have Armenian blood?" Leigh wasn't the only actor in the family. Her two cousins were also Hollywood actors. Among her relatives there were a writer, a colorful spy, and a celebrated US public speaker. References from the original study by Liz Chater have been removed for ease of reading. For the complete article and references list please visit her [blog](#).- Ed.

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Vivien Leigh's life has been examined in detail over the years. There are several well -written books that cover her life and a number of biographies have been written about the famous actress and the classic movies ("Gone With The Wind", "Lady Hamilton", Caesar and Cleopatra", "A Streetcar Named Desire", "Ship of Fools", etc.) she made during her brief life. Born in 1913 in India, she died of tuberculosis in 1967. My intention here is to prove her family connection to an Armenian heritage and in particular to the Armenian Catholic Yackjee family.

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Numerous comments and opinions about Leigh's background and family history abound, both in print and on the Web. Some say she was Irish Anglo-Indian, some suggest she had a Parsi heritage while others say she was from a Bengali background, and some suggest she might have been Armenian. But until now no one has been able to put their finger on anything definite.

I first became aware of the queries regarding Leigh's heritage in 2012. Fellow family history researchers asked me: *"Do you think Vivien Leigh is Armenian? Her mother's name was Yackjee"*. I gave the topic a cursory glance, and replied that I did not think that Yackjee was an Armenian name. It certainly did not have the usual Armenian name formation. I also thought it might be Parsi. I gave no further consideration to the question until a few months ago when I was researching an unconnected Armenian name—Eyoob-- in India. I have written in my blog about the Eyoob name, [you can find that entry here](#). I happened to be reviewing one of the many estate accounts for Jacob Eyoob dated 1852, (which was incorrectly indexed under the name of Eyoole,) and a small 4-line statement in those estate accounts caught my eye.

"27 March 1848. To Mr. J.G. Yackjee acct of a draft drawn by the Bombay Agents on acct of the annuity nephew of the deceased who departed this life on the 7 Ultimo from the 1st Decr 1846 until the 6 Ultimo being 14 months and 6 days @ 7/8 per month..."

There was again the name Yakjee. (also spelt Yackjee, Yakchee, Yakjie, Yachee). I decided that because the Yackjee name had come up in my research on the Eyoob family, I would follow it up.

Here are my findings.

Why was J.G. Yackjee mentioned in the accounts of Jacob Eyoob? Jacob Eyoob (1770-1842) was a successful Catholic Armenian merchant with links in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta as well as North Africa and the Middle East. He built an import/export business over a number of years regularly purchasing goods from the Middle East and shipping them to India. He also shipped Indian goods back to the Middle East. His trading network was large and complex, and because he was using several Indian ports to ship and receive his goods, it was quite common for these types of merchants to have agents in each port. Marcus Joseph was his main agent based in Bombay but Eyoob would also have other traders he would rely on. One of those traders was J.G. Yakjee aka Johannes Gabriel Yackjee, who, just like Jacob Eyoob, was a Catholic Armenian.

Johannes Yackjee can be found on a passenger list of the ship 'Ann' sailing from Bushire in Persia (present-day Iran) to Calcutta in October 1843. Other Armenians making their way to India were Mrs. Aratoon, Rev. Mr. Carapiet, Rev. Peter Antonee, and Rev. Jacob Gregory.

The Armenian Church register in Calcutta for 1843 provides evidence that Rev. Peter Anton and Rev.

Carapiet had travelled to Calcutta to take their places as the incumbent Armenian clergymen to the city community. My own comprehensive list of Armenian clergy who have served in the Armenian Church in Calcutta since 1793 [can be found on my main website](#).

With regard to J.G. Yackjee, there is proof that he was Armenian and this can be seen in a newspaper notice in 1847 in which he and other Armenians offer, on behalf of the Armenian community of Calcutta, a small donation to the building of a memorial. The notice was signed by J.G. Yackjee *as an Armenian*.

Records with English translations for Armenians in Bushire do not exist for this period at the moment, but it is quite likely that Johannes Yackjee (aka Yackjee) was born and married there. So far, tracing his wife Elizabeth and her family has proved impossible. However, what I do know is the Armenian community was a closely-knit unit and it is more than likely they were known to each other, perhaps they were even cousins (marrying cousins was common). Were their children born in Bushire or Calcutta? That is anyone's guess. However, I have searched the Armenian Church baptism register in Calcutta and they certainly do not appear in the register entries.

So why was J.G. Yackjee mentioned in the will of Jacob Eyoob of 5th April 1842? It states: "*.....To my poor nephew John Joseph Eyoob, I request that my agent at Bombay Mr. Marcus Joseph will continue paying what he is in the receipt of, until such time as he will be able to look round and be enabled to earn a livelihood for himself after which, it may be stopped this will I hope be a stimulus to him, that he may not continue to be a long burden upon the estate of his uncle and exert himself.....*"

The estate accounts of 1852 clearly indicate that John Joseph Eyoob continued to rely on the bequest made in the will of his uncle Jacob Eyoob for his day-to-day living expenses, and the burden of responsibility for paying such a regular legacy was passed to J.G. Yackjee in Calcutta. He issued the funds and claimed it back from the Bombay agent Joseph Marcus. However, it can be seen that the accounts also record the death of John Joseph Eyoob ("*nephew of the deceased who departed this life on the 7 Ultimo*") and no further payments were made after the Feb. 6, 1848. J.G. Yackjee's role in the business of the estate was complete.

J.G. Yackjee's life was not easy. An insolvency notice had been served to him in Calcutta in December 1848 at which time he found himself with no option but to apply for relief as an insolvent debtor throwing himself on the mercy of the Calcutta court. With a wife and at least two young children to support, it was a desperate time. The two children were called Michael John Yackjee born circa 1843 and Pascal John Yackjee born circa 1848.

Michael was the first of the brothers to marry (Nov.13, 1872) at St. Thomas's Roman Catholic Church, Calcutta. He was 28 when married to Mary Theresa Robinson (second daughter of James Wilston Robinson) who was 15 at the time. Michael listed his occupation as station master with the I.E.

Railway. His father's name was John Gabriel Yackjee.

Two weeks later at the same church, Pascal John Yackjee also married. He was 23 and his bride was 23-year-old Constance Rosamond Randolph. Like his brother, Pascal also worked for the East India Railway as an assistant goods clerk. Pascal and Constance went on to have at least five children. It can therefore be seen that Vivien Leigh's grandfather Michael John Yackjee was an Armenian railway worker in Calcutta.

From *Street's Indian and Colonial Mercantile Directory of 1869* J.G. (Johannes Gabriel) Yackjee appears to have turned around his misfortune and is now listed as a merchant in indigo.

Following the earlier insolvency, Vivien's great grandfather John/Johannes Yackjee went on to become an indigo merchant. He was in good company. Stephannos Mnatsakan Vardan and his father Manatsakan Sumpat Vardan both originally from Julfa but settlers in Saidabad (approx.. 230 kilometers north of Calcutta) built an impressive indigo business. The Yackjee's and the Vardan's would certainly have known each other.

It is my belief that there were other siblings of Michael and Pascal. Gabriel Johannes Yackjee is listed in the *Annual Returns for Patients Treated in Asylum for Europeans*. He was admitted into the Asylum on August 24, 1867 suffering from "mania chronic, cause unknown" and was discharged on the June 3, 1868. His age was given as 30 and he was a clerk with the E.I. Revenue. Parentage was noted as East Indian and his birth place simply as Asia. Joseph Peter Yackjee was another sibling who worked for the Board of Revenue in Calcutta.

The Yackjee Family Tree

Vivien's mother, Gertrude Mary *née* Yackjee was born in Darjeeling in 1888. Gertrude's father, Michael John Yackjee, formerly a station master but at the time of his death a landed proprietor, died when she was only 5. Agnes Mary, the next surviving sister was 15 and likely to have still been at  school at the time of their father's death and therefore less of a worry to their widowed mother Mary Teresa Yackjee.

Gertrude and Agnes's eldest sister Mary Patricia was 14 years older. She married in 1894 to Percy Feilmann. It was quite common within Armenian families in India to take care of a recently bereaved parent, particularly if there were young children to be cared for; India was a harsh place to live if you didn't have a family support network. It is quite likely that the newly-married Mary Patricia Feilmann played a big part in comforting and supporting her recently-widowed mother and the young girls. Percy Feilmann had a growing successful business, one that would fund a very lavish lifestyle as the years went on. They were in a position to help and support financially the widowed Mary Yackjee and her young family. I'm in no doubt the Feilmann's would have played an important role in the

survival of the Yackjee family and the young sisters, Agnes and Gertrude. Gertrude had met Ernest Hartley in Calcutta. They married in Kensington, London on April 9, 1912.

According to Hugo Vickers biography 'Vivien Leigh' Gertrude and Ernest Hartley held "astonishing parties" and Gertrude "*had a fair peach-like skin which encourage many in the belief she was Irish*".

Indeed, Gertrude's mother Mary Teresa Yackjee, *née* Robinson was Irish, but there was also Armenian blood in Gertrude's veins.

The couple returned to India after the wedding. Vivian Mary Hartley (later to be known as Vivien Leigh) was born on Nov. 5, 1913 in Darjeeling. Gertrude went on to have twin baby girls in April 1917 but their premature birth meant they survived only a day. They were buried together on April 24, 1917 at St. Mary's Church in Ootacamund. Consumed with grief, Gertrude was then faced with the death of her mother only two weeks later. Mary Teresa Yackjee (*née* Robinson) died in Ootacamund on May 5, 1917 from heart failure and was buried at the same church in Ootacamund as the babies. The inscription on her tombstone reads:

"In loving and undying memory of our darling mother Mary Teresa, widow of the late Michael John Yackjee, who died suddenly of heart failure at Ootacamund, 5 May 1917, born 13 October 1854, aged 58 years 6 months 22 days"

Vivien's grandfather Michael John Yackjee had died on June 13, 1893. He was buried at the Roman Catholic Cemetery in Darjeeling. He had made his will just two weeks prior, leaving everything to his wife Mary with legacies to his children.

Vivien Leigh's life has been scrutinized and written about by a great many people. It is not my intention to write her biography here, but try and show to the world she had Armenian ancestry and a heritage from Iran.

Vivien's mother, Gertrude Hartley *née* Yackjee, died in London on August 9, 1972. Her estate valued at £54,611 and probate was granted on the Feb. 28, 1973. Gertrude had out-lived her daughter Vivien who had died in 1967.

