

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2021

2104 A Shattered Life

by Bob Wright

A SHATTERED LIFE

My blood ran cold as I scrolled down the page containing my grandmother's baptism entry, and I stared at my computer screen in disbelief. Having obtained a copy of her birth certificate many years earlier, I had never before gone looking for her baptism record. Now that I had found it, I had also stumbled across my most unexpected research finding.

Born Phyllis Bowden in the north London suburb of Enfield Lock in 1909,¹ my maternal grandmother had a difficult and tragic early life. Her father, Frederick Bowden, died in 1912 when she was very young,² and a few years later her mother Celia remarried.³ But her mother was very bad tempered and tyrannical, and over time became more and more difficult to live with.⁴

At age 21 Phyllis escaped from this trying situation, marrying Freddie Pratt in 1931.⁵ During the 1930s Phyllis and Freddie had three children.⁶ But Freddie was frequently out of work due to the Great Depression, and Phyllis was forced to go out to work herself in her trade as a milliner, to make ends meet. As time went on she discovered that her husband was selfish, lazy, and abusive.⁷

In 1937, when Phyllis was pregnant with their third child, Freddie began an affair with a woman they shared their flat with. Phyllis could hear them having sex in the next room, but she was very ill at this time, and could do nothing about it.⁸ After her child was born and she was sufficiently recovered, Phyllis confronted Freddie about his behaviour, and he reacted by losing his temper and trying to strangle her. Fortunately the neighbours heard her screaming and called the police, who arrived in time to prevent murder.⁹

Freddie was taken away, and then he disappeared completely with his lover. Phyllis never saw or heard from either of them again. She was left with no husband, no money, no job, and no support for her three children, at a time when there were no jobs for single mothers with young children (even in millinery), and no social security.¹⁰ The next few years were a terrible struggle for survival. Phyllis had to move from place to place, because she could not afford the rent, and was sometimes homeless. She ended up having to give up all her children (she eventually recovered her daughter, but her two sons were gone for good).¹¹

Her fortunes improved when she met my grandfather, Ernie Edwards, in 1940 and formed a new relationship with him, from which my mother was born.¹² Phyllis and Ernie eventually married, but not for some years, as Phyllis could not find Freddie to serve divorce papers on him.¹³ Phyllis's marriage to Ernie was a happier one, but she suffered from a chronic nervous condition as a result of her experiences in the earlier part of her life.

In time to come my mother migrated to Australia,¹⁴ and Phyllis and Ernie followed her out.¹⁵ Ernie died in 1967,¹⁶ and Phyllis in 1989.¹⁷ As a widow, Phyllis lived with us throughout my childhood, and I came to know something of her tragic past, though she was reticent about it and did not go into great detail. It was only in more recent years that I became curious to learn a little more about the circumstances and began researching Phyllis's early life.

The electoral rolls for Enfield told me that the woman living with Phyllis and Freddie in 1937 was one Helen Portlock.¹⁸ The previous year, Helen and her husband James Portlock had been living just around the corner from Phyllis and Freddie, in the next street.¹⁹ In 1937 James Portlock was living with his parents.²⁰ Clearly then, Helen and her husband had separated, and Helen had moved in with Phyllis and Freddie. I next found that Helen had married James Portlock in 1934 and that her maiden name was Dunklin.²¹

I'm not sure exactly why I went looking for my grandmother's baptism entry at this time, but when I found it I saw that the entry immediately above it was the baptism entry for – of all people – Helen Dunklin. They had been baptised in the same church (St. James Anglican Church in Enfield Highway) on the same day, 21 January 1910.²² Shocked, I investigated further and found that Helen's father, Harry Dunklin, worked at the Royal Small Arms Factory – the same place as Phyllis's father Frederick Bowden.²³ Clearly the two families knew each other.

I then discovered that the man who was to become Phyllis's step-father, Joe Edmondson, rented a room from Helen's grandmother, Ellen Dunklin, before he married Phyllis's mother Celia in 1916.²⁴ Further research revealed that the two families – the Edmondson/Bowdens and the Dunklins – lived in close proximity to each other for some years when Phyllis and Helen were young, and may have even have shared a flat at one time.²⁵ Phyllis and Helen undoubtedly also went to the same local school – St James Church of England Primary School.

The awful truth now crashed in on me with full force. The woman who had so grievously betrayed Phyllis by stealing her husband and shattering her life had been her friend since childhood, perhaps even her closest friend. I hadn't expected this. My grandmother had never mentioned this part of her tragic history, and I can well understand why. The wound must have cut too deep. I could not even begin to imagine her pain. My discovery filled me with sadness. Perhaps, after all, there are some things it is better not to find out.



PHYLLIS BOWDEN

Submitted by Bob Wright

Croker Prize for Biography 2021 - Society of Australian Genealogists

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- ¹ General Register Office, England, Birth Certificate, Phyllis Bowden, 15 November 1909, No. 444, District of Edmonton, County of Middlesex, issued on 3 August 2000.
 - ² General Register Office, England, Death Certificate, Frederick Bowden, 4 May 1912, No. 221, District of Andover, County of Southampton, issued on 29 August 2001.
 - ³ General Register Office, England, Marriage Certificate, James Allen Edmondson & Celia Ann Bowden, 7 February 1916, No. 398, District of Edmonton, County of Middlesex, issued on 15 May 2001.
 - ⁴ Oral history from the author's grandmother, Mrs Phyllis Edwards (nee Bowden).
 - ⁵ General Register Office, England, Marriage Certificate, Frederick William Pratt & Phyllis Bowden, 16 May 1931, No. 26, District of Edmonton, County of Middlesex, issued on 15 February 2001.
 - ⁶ General Register Office, England, Birth Certificate, Patricia Mary Pratt, 6 July 1932, No. 100, District of Edmonton, County of Middlesex, issued on 15 February 2001;
General Register Office, England, Birth Certificate, David John Pratt, 11 September 1934, No. 410, District of Edmonton, County of Middlesex, issued on 14 February 2001;
General Register Office, England, Birth Certificate, Peter Pratt, 10 December 1937, No. 160, District of Edmonton, County of Middlesex, issued on 15 February 2001.
 - ⁷ Oral history from the author's grandmother, Mrs Phyllis Edwards (nee Bowden).
 - ⁸ Oral history from the author's aunt, Mrs Pat Dean (nee Pratt).
 - ⁹ Oral history from the author's aunt, Mrs Pat Dean (nee Pratt).
 - ¹⁰ Oral history from the author's grandmother, Mrs Phyllis Edwards (nee Bowden).
 - ¹¹ Oral history from the author's aunt, Mrs Pat Dean (nee Pratt);
General Register Office, England, Adoption Certificate, David John Pratt, 26 September 1939, No. 58968, issued on 2 February 2017;
General Register Office, England, Adoption Certificate, Peter Pratt, 15 February 1945, No. 12748, issued on 15 December 2016.
 - ¹² General Register Office, England, Birth Certificate, Beryl Ann Edwards, 16 October 1941, No. 325, District of Edmonton, County of Middlesex, issued on 3 August 2000.
 - ¹³ General Register Office, England, Marriage Certificate, Ernest Hayward Edwards & Phyllis Pratt, 12 February 1962, No. 235, District of Edmonton, County of Middlesex, issued on 14 November 2000.
 - ¹⁴ Findmypast.com, *Passenger Lists Leaving UK 1890-1960*, (database on-line).
 - ¹⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Immigration, Document of Identity issued in lieu of a Passport to Ernest Hayward Edwards & Phyllis Edwards, 28 November 1962, No. 217828.
 - ¹⁶ Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Office, South Australia, Death Certificate, Ernest Hayward Edwards, 29 September 1967, No. 332, District of Adelaide, issued on 2 August 1996.
 - ¹⁷ Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, New South Wales, Death Certificate, Phyllis Edwards, 6 May 1989, No. 10988, issued on 8 November 1993.
 - ¹⁸ Ancestry.com, *London, England, Electoral Registers, 1832-1965, Frederick William Pratt, 1937*, (database on-line).
 - ¹⁹ Ancestry.com, *London, England, Electoral Registers, 1832-1965, Frederick William Pratt; Helen Portlock, 1936*, (database on-line).
 - ²⁰ Ancestry.com, *London, England, Electoral Registers, 1832-1965, James Portlock, 1936*, (database on-line).
 - ²¹ Ancestry.com, *England & Wales, Free BDM Marriage Index, 1916-2005, 1934 Q4 Sep-Dec*, (database on-line).
 - ²² Ancestry.com, *London, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1917, Phyllis Bowden, 1910*, (database on-line).
 - ²³ Ancestry.com, *1911 England Census*, (database on-line);
General Register Office, England, Birth Certificate, Phyllis Bowden, 15 November 1909, No. 444, District of Edmonton, County of Middlesex, issued on 3 August 2000.
 - ²⁴ General Register Office, England, Marriage Certificate, James Allen Edmondson & Celia Ann Bowden, 7 February 1916, No. 398, District of Edmonton, County of Middlesex, issued on 15 May 2001;
Ancestry.com, *1911 England Census*, (database on-line).
 - ²⁵ Ancestry.com, *London, England, Electoral Registers, 1832-1965, James Allen Edmondson & Celia Ann Edmondson, 1918-1923; Harry Dunklin, 1915-1919*, (database on-line).