

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2021**

**2109 Oh Brother**

**by Jo Callaghan**

## OH BROTHER!

On Thursday 13 November 1913, at the Women's Hospital in Crown Street in Sydney, my great grandmother Miriam Willock gave birth to an illegitimate baby boy.<sup>1</sup> She named him Jack Willock. Miriam obviously expected Jack's arrival, but he was a surprising addition to my family tree. Most unexpectedly, his records may have solved a mystery about my grandmother.

Jack Willock's records proved quite difficult to find. A handful of men named Jack Willock lived in New South Wales in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and for one reason or another, none of them could have been Miriam's son. A fireman named Jack Willock lived near Newcastle but he married in 1929, when Miriam's son was just 16. Another man named Jack Willock was arrested near Kempsey in 1921 but that man was born in 1901. One Jack Willock lived in Mallanganee and another one lived in Wellington; they were Miriam's brother and cousin, whose names were really John Willock but they were commonly called Jack.

Examining other Willock records of the era, I learned that on Christmas Eve 1913 in Darlinghurst, six weeks after Jack's birth, a warrant was issued for the arrest of a man named David Donald for child desertion. The complainant's name was May Willock.<sup>2</sup> The case came before the courts in February 1914 and was heard 'ex parte', meaning without the parties present. David was ordered to pay for the maintenance of his child but whether David paid any money to May Willock is unknown.<sup>3</sup>

Then, on 27 June 1915 in the Parish of St Stephen in Newtown, a couple named Duncan and Euphemia McLaurin baptized a child. They said they were his foster parents, his name was John Willock, he was born in November 1913, and his mother's name was May Willock.<sup>4</sup>

Were baby Jack Willock and little John Willock the same child?

The Ryerson Index revealed that in May 1971, a man named John Willock died in Sydney.<sup>5</sup> He was aged 58 and was therefore born about 1913. His death record revealed a few details such as the date and cause of his death, his age, his occupation, and his address, but curiously not his parents' names. Those fields were marked 'Not known'.<sup>6</sup>

John Willock's marriage record provided a few clues. On 18 December 1947, John Willock married Doreen Johnston at the Congregational Church in Perry Street, Marrickville. Once again John's parents' names were not recorded, suggesting that John didn't know or wouldn't say the names of his parents. Helpfully, the witnesses to the marriage were both named

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<sup>1</sup> New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Births, 1913/39978.

<sup>2</sup> New South Wales, Australia, Police Gazettes, 1854-1930, 24 December 1913.

<sup>3</sup> 1914 'Apprehensions.', New South Wales Police Gazette and Weekly Record of Crime (Sydney: 1860 - 1930), 25 February, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> Sydney, Australia, Anglican Parish Registers, 1818-2011, St Stephen Newtown, 27 June 1915.

<sup>5</sup> Website, The Ryerson Index to death notices and obituaries in Australian newspapers, <http://ryersonindex.org>

<sup>6</sup> New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Deaths, 1971/51987.

McLaurin. I had most likely found the child that was baptized in 1915 but I couldn't say he was the same person as Miriam's son Jack Willock.<sup>7</sup>

John Willock's probate records revealed that lawyers made numerous searches of Registers in New South Wales seeking to find any person, other than his widow, who might have had a legitimate claim on John's estate. Lawyers eventually located two people who had important information.<sup>8</sup>

The first was Miriam's brother Albert, who explained what he knew.

In about 1914 I was told by my mother that my sister had a child in Sydney and that she was unmarried. I believe that the child's name was Jack and that he was born in Sydney in late 1913.<sup>9</sup>

The second was John's 'brother' Major Murdoch McLaurin, who quite unexpectedly told the entire story of John's life and confirmed that John and Jack Willock were the same person.

My mother was Euphemia McLaurin, and my father was Duncan McLaurin...

Late in 1913 my mother read an advertisement in a local newspaper... placed by a young woman asking for someone to take care of a male child while she worked. My mother and my sister... collected a little baby boy who was at that time about six weeks old. This story was often spoken of and it was common knowledge in my family.

... the little baby boy became known to my family as Johnnie.

Johnnie's mother was Miriam Willock, and she visited our home on many occasions in late 1913 and early 1914. Mother and father loved Johnnie and wanted to adopt him. Johnnie's mother seemed to agree to this, and my parents signed adoption papers, but Johnnie's mother disappeared and was never heard of again by my family.

Late in 1914 my parents were contacted by a man who claimed to be Johnnie's father, wanting information about him. He said that he was going away to the war and that he would contact her again as soon as he returned. He was never heard of again by my family. This is another story that was often spoken of in my family.

Johnnie continued to live in our home and quickly became a member of the family, yet my parents were always under a cloud that someday his mother or father might return to claim him. He was always known as John or Jack McLaurin.

... He knew his name at birth had been Jack Willock, but it was never clear to us whether he had been adopted. He obtained a copy of his birth certificate, confirming that his surname was Willock and from that time on he called himself Jack Willock but everyone who knew him called him John McLaurin and I always regarded him as my brother.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> New South Wales Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriages, 1947/25152.

<sup>8</sup> New South Wales State Archives and Records, Probate Packets, NRS-13660-66-41-Series 4\_745493.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. From the hand of Albert Joseph Willock.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. From the hand of Major Murdoch McLaurin.

In March 1914, just a few weeks after disappearing from the McLaurin home, my great grandmother married in Brisbane and never returned to her life in Sydney. Her marriage record revealed that her middle name was May.<sup>11</sup> Miriam May Willock died in Queensland in 1929.<sup>12</sup>

My grandmother Edna and her brother Jack were raised by two different families, each probably never knowing of the existence of the other. Jack Willock's probate record unexpectedly helped me to understand why my grandmother wasn't raised by her parents and perhaps explained how that might have come about.

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<sup>11</sup> Queensland Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriages, 1914/B/14737.

<sup>12</sup> Queensland Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Deaths, 1929/C/3613.