

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2021

2115 Nun on the Run

by Michelle Goldsmith

Nun on the run

Coming from a long line of, shall we say, religious sceptics, it was most unexpected to discover not only a Catholic nun in the family tree but one who served with Australia's only Saint, Mother Mary Mackillop.

My maternal Irish Catholic ancestor, John Hiney, arrived in Sydney, New South Wales with the 17th Regiment of Foot (Leicestershire) in 1830.¹ I am still to confirm if wife Ellen Mooney and children Patrick and Catherine travelled on the same ship although I do know the children were born in Ireland.² Elizabeth and Ellenor (Ellen) were born soon after in Sydney as the family followed John and the Regiment around the colony.³ After leaving the nomadic Regimental lifestyle in July 1835, the family continued moving, eventually settling on Norfolk Island when John became Chief Constable in 1837.⁴ Despite the relocations the family grew to include Hester, John Joseph, Sarah Agnes, James, Alice and Mary.⁵

Searching the historic digitised newspapers via Trove, I discovered an erratum in the Freeman's Journal, a publication dedicated to Catholic news. It corrected a misspelling of a surname from the previous edition; 'Hiney' had been incorrectly written as 'Heeny'.⁶ Following the trail, I discovered that Ellen, John and Ellen's fourth child, had taken the white veil of the Sisters of Mercy in St Patrick's Catholic Church in 1869.⁷ As I couldn't locate a marriage or death notice for Ellen here was a possibility I hadn't even considered!

The family had continued to move around after John was pensioned from his position on Norfolk Island in 1849, returning to New South Wales and living in Sydney, Lansdowne and finally to Campbelltown by about 1866.⁸ It made sense that the St Patricks mentioned in the newspaper was the Church at Parramatta as it was the closest to them. Unfortunately, to date, attempts to obtain information from the Sisters of Mercy about their early Sisters has been unsuccessful.

A now archived database called 'Women of Vision: An Index and History of Nuns and Sisters of the Catholic Church in Australia 1838-1918' provided answers.⁹ Expecting to find information about Ellen being a Sister of Mercy, it showed she had joined the Josephites in Penola, South Australia, on 27 May 1872.¹⁰ Her religious name had been Paulina and she died in 1917.¹¹ Ellen's mother's maiden name, Mooney, was also listed, providing vital confirmation.¹² Purchasing the death certificate for Sister Paulina Hiney confirmed she died on 27 May 1917 in Kensington, South Australia.¹³

Whilst I admit that my entire knowledge of nuns and the Catholic Church comes from watching the 1991 ABC series 'Brides of Christ', I harboured a suspicion that information about individual Sisters may have been difficult to obtain. However, discovering Sister Paulina's personal story has proven harder than I anticipated. Newspaper articles about the Order's schools or activities rarely identify the nuns individually. They are simply referred to as 'the Sisters'. No such censure occurs with the priests who are always named in full! Additionally, inter library loan arrangements have not yet resumed, thanks to COVID, rendering potentially useful items listed on Trove unavailable.

I discovered that many records concerning religious orders are held in private Church or University archives and are inaccessible to the general public. Thankfully, Roslyn Kennedy, Congregational Archivist, Sisters of St Josephs, was very helpful. Whilst I am unable to view these private records, Ms Kennedy confirmed (via email) that Sister Paulina had entered the Congregation in Adelaide and then taught at the Order's South Australian schools in Manoora (1879-1885), Burnside (1885) and Laura (1886).¹⁴ Ms Kennedy also advised that private letters in their archives prove Sister Paulina corresponded with Mother Mary Mackillop on school matters.¹⁵

Ms Kennedy provided an obituary from the newsletter 'The Garland of St Joseph', dated 16 June 1917.¹⁶

On the 16th of June a very old member of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart was called to her reward. Sister M. Paulina spent many years of her religious life in the schools, and she bore the trials and hardships of the early days with a sweetness and patience which won her the love and esteem of all her companions. She worked well and faithfully till her advancing years deprived her of the ability of carrying out what her still unflagging zeal prompted her to undertake, and at length a severe illness warned her Sisters that the end was approaching, and it came quietly on the day following the Feast of the Sacred Heart. A solemn Requiem Mass and Office were celebrated for the repose of her soul at the Convent, Kensington, where she had breathed her last. The interment took place at the Mitcham Cemetery, where rest many of Sister's early companions.—R.I.P.

Being a family historian, I still have many questions about Ellen. Why had she taken the veil? Did she feel it was her only choice, still single at 39 and from a large Catholic family? Some supposition – her younger brother, John Joseph, presumably there for the gold rush, had died in 1868 in Boatman's Creek, Inanghua, West Coast, New Zealand. A notice appeared in the Freeman's Journal in July 1868, announcing that John had died on 28 February of that year.¹⁷ Discovering a loved one's death five months after it occurred would be a blow for any family. Perhaps the grief of losing a brother moved Ellen to the religious life.

How did Ellen end up as a Josephite in South Australia in 1872 when it was reported she had taken the veil in New South Wales as a Sister of Mercy in 1869? Did she complete her Mercy novitiate training? Are nuns able to transfer between Orders? Did she prefer Mary Mackillop's philosophy or was it as simple as the Order sharing a name with her lost brother? Did she maintain contact with her family in New South Wales throughout the remainder of her life? I suspect answers to my questions will be hard if not impossible to come by - not that I will stop looking! What I do know is that literature detailing the early days of the Josephites reveals they were pioneers of social welfare, believing in free education for all as well as assisting women and children in distress.¹⁸ I like to believe these

ideals inspired Ellen to become part of a community devoted to helping those in need, whatever her personal circumstances may have been.

Ellen Hiney, a single woman and thus a category often forgotten in family history research, now has her own story- albeit with many unanswered questions. She spent a lot of time on the run, moving around New South Wales as a child with her family and then as Sister Paulina, in South Australia, serving as a Josephite with Mother Mary Mackillop- an icon of Australian history. As part of that long line of religious sceptics, even I admit this most unexpected research finding makes one interesting tale!

¹ Sydney Gazette 29 July 1830, p. 2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2195668>

² Patrick Hiney GRO Regimental birth indices Vol 1005 page 38 (1761-1924) [Accessed via Find my Past Sept 2019]; Catherine Hiney GRO Regimental birth indices Vol 1005 page 24 (1761-1924) [Accessed via Find my Past Sept 2020];

³ Birth of Elizabeth Hiney, GRO Regimental birth indices Vol 1005 page 36 (1761-1924) [Accessed via Find my Past Sept 2020]; Ellenor GRO Regimental birth indices Vol 1005 page 42 (1761-1924) [Accessed via Find my Past Sept 2020]; Biographical Database of Australia (B.D.A.) Source Description Pages : 17th regiment of Foot (Leicestershire) 1830-1837 www.bda-online.org.au/files/MR15_Military.pdf [Accessed online 15 April 2021].

⁴ Muster Books and Pay Lists General – April 1835-March 1836 17th Regiment of Foot (Leicestershire) PRO Records of the War Office (as filmed by the AJCP) 1770-1960 File no.: 3438 Reel no.: 3750 p. 37. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-1688110355>; Norfolk Island; Returns Colony Establishment, 1833-1844 Volume 4/7330. NSW State Archives and Records. [Accessed online via Ancestry.com April 2021].

⁵ John Hiney Death certificate, DOD 16 July 1881, Registrar of NSW Births Deaths and Marriages 5728/1881.

⁶ Freeman's Journal 28 August 1869 p. 10. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article115431855>

⁷ Freeman's Journal 21 August 1869 p. 2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article115433661>

⁸ 'Death of an Old Colonist' Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate 22 July 1881 p. 2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article136049732>

⁹ 'Women of Vision: An Index and History of Nuns and Sisters of the Catholic Church in Australia 1838-1918'. St Bedes Catholic College, p. 113. <https://sites.google.com/stbedes.catholic.edu.au/womenofvision/home> [Accessed May 2021]

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹³ South Australian District Death certificate transcript, Norwood District 1917 : Sister Mary Paulina Hiney. Provided by Genealogy SA.

¹⁴ Private email between author and Roslyn Kennedy, Congregational Archivist, Sisters of St Josephs, April 2021.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ 'The Garland of St Joseph', 16 June 1917, held in the Archives of Mary MacKillop and the Sisters of St Joseph, North Sydney, NSW.

¹⁷ Freeman's Journal 25 July 1868 p. 8. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article119441394>

¹⁸ M. T. Foale, 'The Sisters of St Joseph: Their Foundation and Early History 1866-1893'. A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of philosophy in the department of history at the University of Adelaide December 1986, p. 111. The University of Adelaide. <http://hdl.handle.net/2440/21566> [Accessed online 15 May 2021].

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