

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2021**

**2123 Mary's Ordeal**

**By Jacqueline White**

## Mary's Ordeal

Annie Elizabeth Dyer was born sometime between 1833 and 1838, possibly at Parramatta. This is all I could guess about her early life.

She married James Henry Dixon in Maitland in 1853 and they had at least nine children. Widowed in 1869, she married John Adams in 1878 and bore another child before being widowed again in 1879. Many of her children predeceased Annie, but it appeared that her life was well-documented, if a bit obscure as to some details – e.g. her exact age and place of birth. With the registration of the birth or death of each child, there were inconsistencies and in the pre-digital age when I began family history research, I pursued the most accessible records. So I left Annie there. After all, there were another 63 great-great grandparents to research. Years later I met some distant cousins and looked at their chart – they said her name was Moore. I had relied on information from the marriage certificate of her daughter Henrietta in 1884 and there was no mention of that name. One of my sisters is very skilled at historical research, and together we concluded that the name Dyer probably referred to William Calvin Dyer of Maitland. The convict records showed that Mary Ryan was granted a Ticket of Leave in 1837 and permission to marry William Dyer in 1838. Mary had been transported to NSW on the *Surrey* in 1833. There were two women named Mary Ryan on that voyage. One from Tipperary accompanied by her son. The other, younger, Mary Ryan from County Clare, was accompanied by her baby daughter, Ann. That must be her! The prison records my sister discovered referred to Ann's father as "Maule".

Having trouble with the computer in the SAG's reading room in Kent Street, I began looking at The Hunter Valley Register, bound volumes of typed summaries of family notices and found an entry for Mary Dyer's death on 3 August 1895. The Maitland Mercury noted that "Mary was relict of late William Calvin Dyer, formerly of Raworth Farm near Morpeth. Daughter was A.E. Dixon". I couldn't wait to tell my sister - and she couldn't wait to tell me that she had found Annie's parents in a transcript of the birth registration of Annie and James Dixon's daughter, Clara. The informant was William Calvin Dyer, grandfather. Mary Dyer was a witness. To have found these records independently on the same day was a breakthrough and we regarded the date, March 17, as an omen. It was St Patrick's Day!

Now we were sure that Annie had been born in Ireland. There are gaps in the convict records of the 1830s but I found a reference to Mary on a microfiche index at the State Library. The records themselves are at the Kingswood State Archives Office. When the folder containing the document was delivered I sat down and with gloved hands unfolded yellowing and brittle pages which seemed to have been untouched since 1833. As I was trying to flatten the pages I saw the words "Court House, Goulburn Plains 20<sup>th</sup> June 1833 - Proceedings of an enquiry into the cause of the death of a female child which took place at this Township last night-".

This document was a record of the terrible ordeal of Mary Ryan and her infant daughter Annie. Lachlan McAlister, JP, conducted the hearing. He had taken depositions from Mary as well as traveller Catherine Lawless, settler William Merritt and Trooper Martin Doyle of the Mounted Police. Mary said that yesterday week she was assigned out of the Factory at Parramatta. From the time she left Malachi Ryans between Liverpool and Parramatta her master did not supply either herself or her baby with any food and she was obliged to beg for charity. One night she

had to sleep with her baby in the open air. She said that on Monday Wells had left her at Joseph Peters' public house about twenty miles away. Catherine Lawless said she had met Mary at Peters Inn and found her "in great distress" with the baby appearing to be "in a dying state". Miss Lawless gave her a bed alone with her own servant woman, got her supper and then brought her to Goulburn Township. She said "nothing could be more decorous and proper" about Mary's behaviour. About four hours after they arrived at Goulburn, the baby died.

William Merritt and Martin Doyle both had a low opinion of Wells and his wife. The record of these proceedings was enclosed with a letter to the Colonial Secretary requesting information as to how Wells was able to obtain a servant and advising that Mary would stay with a decent household until her future was decided by the Governor. A reply from the Female Factory enclosed the original typed application form with which Wells applied for a Dairy Maid. George Bunce, JP noted "the Applicant is a very decent man and his wife just about to be confined". William Wells was later placed on the register of convicts banned from obtaining female servants. There was no note of where or when the baby was buried.

In August 1895 The Maitland Mercury reported that the late severely cold weather has proved very trying on aged and infirm people of the district and during the last few days more than the ordinary number have succumbed. One was Mary Dyer, who had lived in Morpeth Road before it was even formed. She had become bent with age, though up to a comparatively short time before her death she had been seen about town. She leaves numerous descendants residing in East Maitland. The funeral procession left the residence of her daughter, Mrs Dixon. How much did Mrs Dixon know about her mother's life? Did her mother tell Annie about Ireland or what happened at Goulburn? Or her father?

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#### References:

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