

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022

2204 From the Ashes of Lost Chastity

by Nereda Shute

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From the ashes of lost chastity, children and respectability - secrets, skeletons, scandals

I never really knew where I came from on my father's side of the family. He was from Sydney whilst I was raised in Melbourne where my mother's family were so I grew up learning very little about the Sydney side.

My paternal grandfather had died in 1929 and was never mentioned. My grandmother however loomed large although she had died when I was only three years' old. She was referenced in snippets of family stories, not always in a positive light, and I grew up thinking of her as quite formidable.



*Elizabeth Ann Jane Shute (née Power)
c.1930*

Perhaps that intimidating image came from being a descendant of First Fleet convict Jane Langley and soldier Thomas Chipp¹ (which I only learned much later). Or perhaps because she was always referred to by all three of her christian names "Elizabeth Ann Jane", not just her first name as if it was one, hyphenated word, the way your mother enunciates all your names when you are in trouble.

Despite this, I had assumed she was just like my maternal grandmother and other women of that era – respectable, conservative, unassuming.

The family story was that Grandma had been married twice. The first to George Chapman, with whom she had two children and the second to my grandfather, George Shute, with whom she had four children.

Only when I recently started researching Grandma's first marriage and descendants did I unearth her various surprises. By then, my father and his siblings were deceased, and I had no connection with any living descendants.

I could find no marriage records for Grandma except the one to my grandfather, and interestingly, that listed her maiden name, Power². Her death certificate listed only one marriage and its children, not the two "Chapman" children³.

I found birth records for the two known children of the supposed earlier "Chapman marriage" – with no father specified, given Elizabeth's maiden name. So, both illegitimate!

But I then also discovered two other, previously unknown, children - also with no father's name on their birth records.

One illegitimate child c.1900 was scandalous, let alone four! Elizabeth had been a housemaid - had the master been the impregnator? Was that George Chapman? But how could she look after four children whilst working? And what happened to the two children no-one had known even existed?

Additional digging revealed a death certificate for one child but no further records for the second "missing" child. It seemed I had hit a dead-end.

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Then, fortuitously, in the midst of COVID, I was united through Wikitree with a half-cousin. She informed me of another half-cousin ... a son of the "missing" child, Freida.

It was only upon the death of his mother in 1979 that this half-cousin found Freida's birth certificate listing her mother as Elizabeth Power and realised Freida had been adopted. He then connected with several biological cousins.

We three half-cousins got together, pooling information from our different family recollections and own research. Using electoral rolls, newspapers, police gazettes and other records, I dug further and was able to piece together a coherent story.

Elizabeth Ann Jane Power would have been only 16⁴ and unmarried when she first became pregnant. Rieta was born in 1893 in Ermington⁵ and a second illegitimate child, Mervyn, born in Newtown (both Sydney suburbs) four years later⁶.

In the years between it is believed that Elizabeth worked as a house-maid in Forster, about 300km north of Sydney. George Chapman lived in a neighbouring area with his wife, Caroline Croker, and family^{7,8} (a Croker connection!).

Elizabeth's next illegitimate child, Freida, was born in that area in 1899⁹.

Then in 1900 ... a terrible tragedy! Rieta was killed in a fire in Ermington. Inquest reports^{10,11,12,13} revealed Rieta, and her two younger siblings, were living with Elizabeth's parents in Ermington whilst Elizabeth lived and worked elsewhere.

Not long after this, Mervyn (aged about 3), was sent to George Chapman to be raised and took on Chapman's name^{14,15,16}. At the same time the baby, Freida, was "given" to a family friend - a childless widow - and Freida took on her surname^{9,17}.

Not long after, in 1902, back living with her parents, Elizabeth had her fourth illegitimate child, Alma^{18,19}. Elizabeth married my grandfather three years later².

Alma was raised with the later Shute children, and no-one knew of Mervyn's existence until he came to find his mother when he was 21 (c.1918) and established a relationship with his half-siblings. But none of the siblings knew of Freida's existence. And thus the mystery remained.

So, having uncovered all these skeletons, for me the question remained ... was George Chapman the father of all four illegitimate children?

Well, geography seemed to discount Rieta being his. Mervyn was likely his son, as why would he take in a random 3 year-old boy when he already had a large family? But Chapman did not take Freida.

Then I discovered Elizabeth had taken James Massingham to court for child support just after Freida was born²⁰. She lost the case. But recent DNA testing has confirmed a connection²¹.

Police Reports were also uncovered of Elizabeth filing for child desertion in 1902 a few months after Alma's birth²². The alleged father, Alfred Wicks, skipped town to New Zealand²³. Alfred Wicks has no descendants but DNA has revealed Alma and Freida did not have the same father²⁴.

It appears all four illegitimate children had different fathers!

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So ... I come from a woman who held many secrets, led what would have been considered a very scandalous life for that time, and went to her grave with no-one knowing those secrets until now, over one hundred years later. She obviously had a strength of character to bear the many shames and hardships which would have befallen her.

So much for a conservative and respectable grandmother! But nevertheless her legacy lives on through her children, both illegitimate and legitimate.

So I know where I came from now – like it or not!

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