

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022**

## **2225 Finding Anne Jane, Finding Myself**

**by Rosalie O'Neale**

## Finding Anne Jane, finding myself

'You're one of us, you know.' The tiny, very elderly woman fixed me in her view, coming up right close to deliver that blunt opinion. There was no question in it, just a statement of fact based on an assessment made within minutes of our meeting.

It was October 2016, and I'd travelled to Northern Ireland for the first time, to learn more about the places and the people who had shaped my family, and to find the source of the extraordinarily strong sense of connection that had bound my father's family together, parent to child, sibling to sibling over continents and generations, extending out to the furthest twig on the furthest branch of the family tree. And on this day, I'd called in to Annie Eileen's on spec as I passed through Lack on my way back to Belfast, to say hello and pay my respects.

My journey began years before, with a family tree<sup>1</sup>, drawn up for a 1987 reunion of descendants of an uncle and nephew (both named David Weir) who left Glasmullagh, Fermanagh in Ireland and settled on the South Coast of NSW, before migrating up to the Richmond River region. According to this drawing together of family lore, the people at the top of the tree were my 3x great grandparents: Robin (or Robert) Weir and his wife 'Miss Phillips'. 'Interesting,' I thought.

When my chance finally came to delve further into my family story, not only did I want to learn more of the where and when of the Weir family in Ireland, I was determined to find out more about the mysterious Miss Phillips.

Except...I could find no evidence that she ever existed.

After endless – and fruitless - searches through available records online, I changed tack and checked the marriage<sup>2</sup> and death certificates<sup>3</sup> of David Weir senior, my 2xgreat grandfather. No Miss Phillips there - his mother was named as Anne Jane Funston. Final proof was found in the death certificate of Robert and Anne Jane's daughter, Jane<sup>4</sup>. And with that, things clicked into place. Of course her name was 'Anne Jane'! Just look at the family's very strong adherence to Irish/Scottish naming conventions and the fact that this name, and permutations (Anne Jane, Jane/Janie, Anne/Annie, Anna and so on), have been such a strong thread down the generations!

Available Irish parish records are patchy. To date I haven't been able to locate Anne Jane's baptism records, or anything confirming her marriage to Robert. However, in transcribed baptism records for Fermanagh<sup>5</sup>, I found records for four children with parents Robert and Ann: Jane (1825), William (1832), John (1837) and Robert (1840) showing that they were born in townlands (Mweelbane and Tirmacspird) within a mile or two of Glasmullagh<sup>6</sup>.

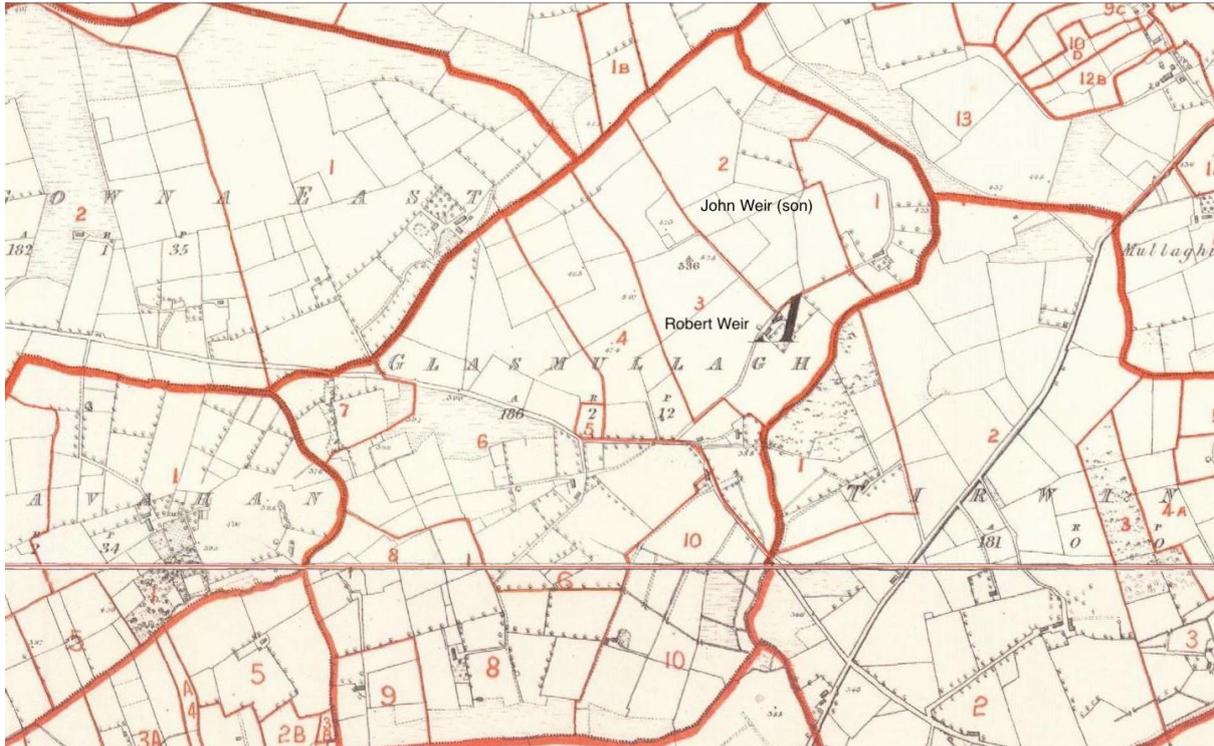


Image 1: The townland of Glasmullagh in Fermanagh, Ireland, showing the portions farmed by the Weir family. (Griffith's Valuation.)

With the coming of civil registration, Anne Jane crossed that great divide into the state records system. And so, I found absolute proof of her life via the record of her death: Anne Weir, farmer's wife of Glasmullagh, died aged 77 in 1873, of senile debility<sup>7</sup>. Husband Robert was present at the end.

A name, a lifespan. A series of key events. Stepping out of the shadows and taking form. But only visible in relief -- there are no photos or paintings, no letters that mention her, no captured, contemporaneous memories. Anne Jane remains elusive, leaving only the very faintest footprints in time.

Anne Jane was not a person with a high profile, not an adventurer or pioneer, nor someone close to heart of power. But between the span of her years, 1796 to 1873, the Irish endured poverty, attempted revolution, great wind, killing winters and cruel famine<sup>8</sup>, so she was someone who lived an ordinary life through extraordinary times. Someone - like so many of her sex and of the age - who faded quickly from sight and became lost in time, but who lived her life - was born, married and became a mother, who worked and died - with the same clamour as every other person no matter where they are in place or time.

She was someone who lived as generations before her had done, as a tenant farmer's wife, with horizons reaching not much further than the family church. But she was someone who nurtured the generation that spilled out across the world, across the Irish Sea to Scotland, and across the oceans to America and Australia, and who helped lay the foundations of the world of her children, grandchildren and beyond.

The search is not over, not yet. But what I have discovered so far about Anne Jane has revealed a strong truth about the unbreakable bonds of family, and a continuing link to that small area of Ireland, connecting us down – and across – the generations, between cousins, second, third and fourth, all over the world. It has given me a clearer picture of my own identity, of where I came from.

Fast forward to 2016, and finally an opportunity for me to travel to Northern Ireland. Time to wander the narrow roads and laneways, to visit the Colaghty church<sup>9</sup> - epicentre of the family's religious life for more than 180 years. The place where so many Weirs (and others who joined the clan over the years: the Bartons, Coopers, Johnstons, Irvines, Martins...) were baptised, married and where they found their final resting place.

Including Anne Jane. Standing there, amongst the graves in the Colaghty churchyard, I found a sense of the circle closing.



*Image 2: Colaghty Church in 2016. A Weir family grave is towards the back, near the church entrance. (Photo: author)*

On, then, to that day in Lack, when I met and spoke with my second cousin (once removed), Annie Eileen, 2x great granddaughter of Anne Jane and Elder of the branch of the family that remained in Ireland. She remembered my own grandmother from a visit made in the 1950s, and noted that I look very like her. And in that knowing, beyond-argument way, she claimed me with ‘you are one of us, you know.’

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> Various authors. (1987). 'Weir family history 1774 to 1986' – recollections from descendants of David Weir and Elizabeth Clarke, and his nephew David Weir and (1) Anne Jane Weir and (2) Isabella Clarke. Unpublished, NSW, Australia.
- <sup>2</sup> Marriage certificate 3257/1859 David Weir and Elizabeth Clarke, District Wollongong, NSW Registry of Births, Death and Marriages
- <sup>3</sup> Death certificate 17386/1914 David Weir, District Kiama; NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages,
- <sup>4</sup> Cooper, Jane (Statutory registers Deaths 573/1 227) Scotland, 1865 Deaths in the parish of High church in the Burgh of Paisley.
- <sup>5</sup> Ireland Genealogy Project (IGP) Archives: Births recorded in Tubrid Church Kesh, Co Fermanagh, Ireland. Accessed through <https://www.igp-web.com/IGPArchives/ire/fermanagh/churches/tubrid-births.htm>
- <sup>6</sup> Griffith's Valuation, conducted 1847-1864. Accessed from <https://www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation/>
- <sup>7</sup> Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) Death registration Anne Weir Registration no D/1873/120/1014/2/372, Registration district Irvinestown (pre-1973 Q4), Registration sub-district Ederney.
- <sup>8</sup> Irwin, Margaret. (2020). 'Fermanagh: from Plantation to Peace Process'. Eastwood Books, Dublin, Ireland.
- <sup>9</sup> Keys, David. (2005) 'Church of Ireland Lack or Colaghty Parish History 1835-2002'. Enniskillen: Erne Heritage Tour Guides.