

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020**

**2006 A Twist in the Tale**

**by Coral Wynter**

## A Twist in the Tale

It was the early 1960s. My mother used to say to me, "I'm sure your father has convict blood." This was after she had endured a bitter divorce, and I was 13 years old at the time. It was still the era when it wasn't cool to have a convict ancestor, the mark of Cain. So after I finished university, I began to research my Dad's family. I couldn't ask anyone as my mother had cut off all relations with his family.

I quickly found my great, great grandfather, William George Chennell, born in Surrey, England, in 1814.<sup>1</sup> He had married Sarah Hitchcock in 1844<sup>2</sup> in Byfleet, Surrey. She was the daughter of Solomon Hitchcock,<sup>3</sup> born in 1794 in West Horsley, Surrey. Solomon Hitchcock had 8 children with Mary Tanner from Abinger, Surrey.<sup>4</sup>

Lo and behold I had found my convict. Solomon had been convicted twice at Surrey Assizes for stealing food for his large family. He was acquitted in 1819,<sup>5</sup> but the second time, he was sentenced to life and transportation for stealing a side of lamb. He sailed on the Portland, arriving in Sydney in 1832.<sup>6</sup> My mother was vindicated.

Spurred on by my success, I started on my grandmother Doris Adams. I found her mother, Frances Victoria Conneff, born 1864,<sup>7</sup> and her mother Mary Eliza Conneff, born 1841<sup>8</sup> to Irish Catholic immigrants in Sydney. The Conneff family had arrived on the ship Heber in 1839.<sup>9</sup> The father, James Conneff, was a tailor and had a shop in Sussex Street East, Haymarket. Frances' birth certificate had no father listed, but a clue was the middle name of Lions.<sup>7</sup>

Then began the great mystery. My great grandmother Frances was illegitimate. Who was my great, great grandfather? I searched all the Sands Sydney Directories, ship arrivals, the census and electoral data for a Lions, but drew a blank. There was no record of any Lions in the colony, but I always thought there was some exotic blood in our veins, besides convict. My grandmother Doris had beautiful red hair in tight, tiny curls, always cut short. I gave up the search for my mysterious Lions for 35 years.

In 2015, I attended a talk by the City of Sydney library on family research. I mentioned my problem and it was suggested that I should look at the original baptism certificate as the priest, on his own volition, often listed in the margins the real name of the father of the illegitimate child.

So I tracked down the microfiche of the original baptism certificate kept at SAG. It was a challenge to operate the microfiche viewer. I want to thank the volunteers at SAG for always being on hand, offering practical help and lots of advice. I found the entry, although the baptism date was 4 months later than the birth date. There it was, as clear as day. The name of the father had been wrongly transcribed. And it was actually Henry Zions, not Lions.<sup>10</sup>

He was a Polish, Jewish tailor, who had owned a tailor's shop at 415 George Street, close to my great, great, great grandfather, James Conneff.<sup>11</sup> When I told my brother the solution to the mystery, he commented that Dad had told him there was a Polish Jew in the family! Thanks Bro!

Henry Zions was born in Plock, Masovia, Poland in 1839.<sup>12</sup> He emigrated first to New Zealand by an unknown route, and afterwards arrived in Sydney on the ship, the Breadalbane, in 1860.<sup>13</sup> He gave no support to his illegitimate daughter Frances, but was forced to pay 10 shillings a week for 12 months after Mary Eliza summoned him to the Water Police Court in October 1864.<sup>14</sup>

Henry Zions travelled to London and married a young Jewish woman Clara Cohen in 1874.<sup>15</sup> He went on to become one of the wealthiest Jewish men in Sydney, a leading light of the Jewish community.<sup>16</sup> Henry Zions had 11 children to Clara,<sup>17</sup> lived in Oxford Street, Paddington, and died in 1920.<sup>18</sup> My great, great, grandmother Mary Eliza married in 1883,<sup>19</sup> did not have any more children and died in Newington Asylum, Lidcombe, in 1915.<sup>20</sup>

However, life is serendipitous. In March 2020, I was reading the history of Jessie Street, one of Australia's earliest feminists, who fought a valiant fight for women's rights and equal wages. I was part of a team organising a feminist, historical walking tour of Sydney and a friend dropped off Street's autobiography which had recently been reprinted.

Late one night, I was reading in her book, where Jessie Street described her meeting in 1930 with Nancy Astor, the first woman elected to the House of Commons. While in London, Street also attended a meeting on birth control, where a Doctor Norman Haire introduced himself as a fellow student at Sydney University. Street described him as a rotund, middle-aged man, very well off, with a large house in Harley Street and a birth control clinic.<sup>21</sup>

The clinic entrance was inside the house with an inscription above it in great gold letters: "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe, she had so many children, she didn't know what to do." Jessie Street couldn't remember a Haire, but he said his name, as a student, had been Zions.

I nearly fell out of bed, as there could not be many families of Zions in Sydney. I quickly checked my ancestry file and one of Henry and Clara's sons was Norman Zions, born in 1892 in Paddington.<sup>22</sup>

I'm very proud of Norman Haire/Zions as he tried to improve the lives of women, by helping them limit the number of children, when it was still considered a taboo subject. He must have thought of his own mother. So I am really glad I tracked down my most elusive ancestor, Henry Zions.

1. General Register Office, England, Birth Certificate of William George Chennell, Chertsey, Sept, 1847, Vol 4, page 87
2. General Register Office, England, Marriage Certificate of William Chennell and Sarah Hitchcock, Chertsey March 1844, Vol 4, page 31
3. Findmypast Solomon Hitchcock, born 1794, British Home Office: Convict Hulks, Convict Prisons and Criminal Lunatic Asylums: Quarterly Returns Of Prisoners, Series HO 8. Assessed 15 April, 2020.
4. Findmypast Baptism of Mary Tanner, 1797, Abinger, Surrey, Assessed 16 April, 2020.
5. Findmypast Solomon Hitchcock, Surrey Assizes 1819, Home Office: Convict Hulks, Convict Prisons And Criminal Lunatic Asylums: Quarterly Returns Of Prisoners, Series HO27 Assessed 16 April 2020.
6. Tickets of Leave 1824-1867, Solomon Hitchcock, arrived on the Portland, 1832, NSW, Australia.
7. NSW Registry of BDM, Birth Certificate of Fanny Lions Conneff, 26 August 1864, Balmain, Sydney, No 2619, Vol 1555
8. NSW Registry of BDM, Baptism of Mary Eliza Conneff, 15 January 1841 St Mary's Cathedral., Sydney No 1427, Vol 133
9. List of passengers, Arrival of James Conniff on the ship Heber, 28 Feb, 1839, Vol 19
10. Baptisms of Frances Conneff, 18 December 1864 in Balmain, St Augustine, Roman Catholic Church, Microfiche SAG
11. NSW Police Gazette, 17 October, 1866, Stolen on the 12th instant, from the shop-door of Henry Zions, tailor No 415 George Street.
12. NSW State Archives, Naturalisation of Henry Zions from The New Zealand Gazette, 20 June 1860 Reel 130, page 87, Register 35 68/2090.
13. List of Passengers, Arrival of Henry Zions on the ship Breadalbane, from Auckland in 1860 states he was born in Poland, age 29 years, record number, 2090.
14. Sydney Morning Herald 22 October 1864, page 4 Water Police Court, Henry Zions appeared on summons to answer to informant Mary Eliza Connell, Trove.
15. Marriage Certificate of Henry Zions and Clara Cohen Nov 1874, Mile End, General Register Office, England, Middlesex. MXH 682785
16. The Daily Telegraph, A City Wedding Zions-Lazarus, 29 January 1915, page 3, Trove
17. NSW Registry of BDM, Death Certificate of Clara Zions 1929, 3665/1929
18. NSW Registry of BDM, Death Certificate of Henry Zions 1920, 3399/1920
19. NSW Registry of BDM, Marriage Certificate of Mary Eliza Connell and John Wharton 1883, Bathurst 1883/3720
20. NSW Registry of BDM, Death Certificate of Mary Wharton, 12 September 1915, Newington Asylum, Lidcombe 1915/11762
21. Jessie Street, A revised autobiography, Edited by Lenore Coltheart, Published by Federation Press, 2004, page 75. ISBN 1 86287 502 2
22. NSW Registry of BDM, Birth certificate of Norman Zions, 1892, Sydney 1892/27866