

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020

2010 James Connolly: A Self-Made Man

by Barbara Reen

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James Connolly
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James Connolly, my great grandfather was, according to his death certificate, born in Newcastle-on-Tyne, England c. 1855-1857, to parents Martin Connolly and Mary Canavan.¹ A record of his birth and information on the backgrounds of his parents remain elusive. Presumably Martin and Mary were both born in Ireland, but records of their arrival in England and of their marriage, also remain elusive.

We first encounter James in the English Census of 1871. James, his mother, Mary, and a younger brother, Martin, were living at 9 Lumb, in the Parish of Tottington Higher End, Ecclesiastical District of Edenfield, Lancashire, England. Mary, the Head of the family, age given as 40, married, and born in Ireland, was a 'rag sorter at paper mill'. Her son Martin, age given as 14, born in Newcastle, was a paper catcher. Her son James, age given as 15, born in Newcastle, was a labourer for a blacksmith.² By the English Census of 1881, only Mary, a widow, age given as 52, and Martin, a joiner, age given as 23, were recorded. Mary was still a rag sorter at the paper mill. Their address was now 110 Lumb in the Civil Parish of Tottington Higher End, Rural Sanitary District of Haslington, Ecclesiastical District of Edenfield.³ Martin later emigrated to America, where his marriage to Mary Donnelly was registered in 1897.⁴ After she died in 1910, Martin joined his brother James in Australia.⁵

When next we hear of James, he was living in Sydney, Australia. An obituary in the *Sydney Morning Herald* at the time of his death in 1927, reported that he had spent three years in New Zealand before moving to Australia, and that he had been here for forty-six years.⁶ So, possibly he arrived in Australia in 1881. How and when James travelled firstly to New Zealand and thence to Australia remains elusive.

In Australia, James's life was well documented in the State Records of New South Wales. He married Mary Feeley in St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, in 1883.⁷ They lived first at 25 Wilson Street and subsequently at 5 (later 9) Bourke Street in the Woolloomooloo area.⁸ They had

¹ Death Certificate of James Connolly, died 27 September 1927, Registrar of Birth, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 13112/1927; Anon., James Connolly, photograph, screenshot from Ancestry Connolly Family Tree, original held by John Connolly, Jerabomberra, NSW.

² 1871 England Census, RG10/4139, p. 80, <http://search.ancestry.com.au/search/db>, accessed 26 August 2015.

³ 1881 England Census, RG11/4136, p. 20, <http://search.ancestry.com.au/search/db>, accessed 26 August 2015.

⁴ Marriage Register of marriage between Martin Connolly and Mary C. Donnelly, 17 May 1897, 1966, p.110, <https://familysearch.org>, accessed 30 August 2015.

⁵ Death Certificate of Mary C Connelly, died 5 June 1910, Massachusetts Deaths, 1841-1915, 5335, p275, <https://familysearch.org>, accessed 30 August 2015.

⁶ Anon., Obituary - Mr J. Connolly, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 October 1927, p. 13.

⁷ Marriage Certificate of James Connolly and Mary Feeley, Married 19 April 1883, Registrar of Birth, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 717/1883.

⁸ Sands Sydney and Suburban Directory for 1886, Part 2, p.123, <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/search-our-collections/sands-directory/1880-1889>, accessed 31 August 2015; Sands Sydney and Suburban Directory for 1889, Part 1', p. 12, <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/search-our-collections/sands-directory/1880-1889>, accessed 31 August 2015.

eight children, five boys and three girls, of whom six, three boys and three girls, survived infancy. The first-born was James in 1884, followed by twins, Thomas Martin and Mary Ellen who were born in 1886. Thomas Martin died in 1887. Next born was Frances Barbara in 1888, followed by Leslie Joseph Valentine born in 1890. John Oscar (my grandfather) was born in 1891 and Margaretta Florence in 1893. Their last child, Edmund Jerome, was born in 1895 and died in 1896.⁹ Mary died of a brain tumour in 1895, and in 1904, James married Margaret Hunter (nee Coles), a widow with two daughters who became James's step-daughters.¹⁰ Their daughter, Margaret Eileen, was born in 1904 but died in 1905.¹¹

In 1884 James set up a blacksmithing business, the Fitzroy Iron Works, at 60-62 Nicholson Street, Woolloomooloo.¹² The business prospered and he was soon tendering for government contracts. Notable works undertaken included the gates outside the Sydney Town Hall (now to be found at St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill), stairs and shelving at the Mitchell Library and at Fisher Library at the University of Sydney and the wrought iron railings surrounding Circular Quay. After James's death, the business became a limited liability company, J. Connolly Ltd, and moved to Mountain Street, Broadway. Here the company specialised in the manufacture of metal window frames.¹³

The family moved up in the world, first to a large residence, *Guylin* at 128 Victoria Street, Darlinghurst, and then to 5 Allen Street, Glebe.¹⁴ The Electoral Roll for 1922 shows James living at this address, along with his wife Margaret, his brother Martin, his three daughters and two step-daughters.¹⁵ James retained ownership of the house at 9 Bourke Street, and of the blacksmithing works premises in Nicholson Street. The former was rented out to a succession of tenants, while the latter was rented to Mosher Bros, motor mechanics, until the mid-1920s.¹⁶ By the time he died in 1927, aged 70, James had moved to 14 Toxteth Street,

⁹ Birth Certificate of James Connolly, Born 12 January 1884 (Registrar of Birth, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 543/1884; Birth Certificate of Thomas Martin Connolly, Born 27 February 1886, Registrar of Birth, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 1073/1886; Birth Certificate of Mary Ellen Connolly, Born 27 February 1886, Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 1074/1886; Death Certificate of Thomas Martin Connolly, Died 25 January 1887, Registrar of Birth, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 158/1887; Birth Certificate of Leslie Joseph Connolly, Born 15 May 1890, Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 1628/1890; Birth Certificate of John Oscar Connolly, Born 19 August 1891, Registrar of Birth, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 2622/1891; Birth Certificate of Margaretta Florence Connolly, Born 01 September 1893, Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 2640/1893; Birth Certificate of Edmund Jerome Connolly, Born 09 July 1895, Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 19418/1895; Death Certificate of Mary Feeley, Died 12 November 1895, Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 11041/1895; Death Certificate of Edmund Jerome Connolly, Died 20 May 1896, Registrar of Birth, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 5101/1896.

¹⁰ Marriage Certificate of James Connolly and Margaret Hunter (nee Coles), Married 06 January 1904, Registrar of Birth, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 93/1904.

¹¹ Birth Certificate of Margaret Eileen Connolly, Born 22 October 1904, Registrar of Birth, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 29359/1904; Death Certificate of Margaret Ellen Connolly, Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages NSW, 29 November 1905, 11566/19 05.

¹² Anon., 'Modern Specialist Company Founded by Blacksmith', *Daily Telegraph*, Building Today, Sydney, 23 November 1959, p. 25.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 'Sands Sydney, Suburban and Country Commercial Directory for 1913, Part 2', p. 160, <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/search-our-collections/sands-directory/1910-1919>, accessed 31 August 2015.

¹⁵ 'NSW Electoral Rolls', West Sydney, Toxteth, <http://www.ancestry.com.au/cs/us/au-electoral-records>, accessed 31 August 2015.

¹⁶ 'City of Sydney Assessment Books 1845-1948', <http://photosau.com.au/CosRates/scripts/home.asp>, accessed 26 August 2015.

Glebe, having rented out the Allen Street property.

James left an estate valued at £29,770.4.6, with assets of £30,762.10.0, minus liabilities of £992.5.6. This was established by the executor of his will, the Perpetual Trustee Company (Limited), for the purposes of the Stamp Duties Act, 1920-1924. The estate consisted mainly of his property portfolio and shares in the family business.¹⁷ The family business had supported not only James's large, blended family but it went on to support the families of his three sons, and four of his grandsons.

So, from obscure and elusive beginnings, James Connolly, blacksmith, became a self-made man who:

*Under peculiar difficulties and without the ordinary helps of favoring circumstances, have attained knowledge, usefulness, power and position ...*¹⁸

Unlike his own father, James established and supported a large family. He must have gained his independence, his drive and his ambition by observing the harsh and unrewarding conditions experienced by unskilled labourers and factory workers like his parents.¹⁹ He transformed himself from a blacksmith into a structural engineer who developed a large, and successful engineering company. His contribution to the fabric of Sydney is significant both aesthetically and historically, and it is there for all to see.²⁰

His legacy may be tangible, but his elusive origins remain as a continuing challenge for a family historian. After searching in vain for information about the deaths of James's parents in the records of the United Kingdom, I have just discovered that Mary, James's mother, travelled with his brother Martin to Boston, Massachusetts, in the United States of America in 1888.²¹ Here she died of pneumonia in 1890. Her parents were recorded as Lawrence and Margaret Kanavan.²² Each new piece of information opens up new lines of enquiry in the continuing pursuit of the elusive elements of family history.

¹⁷ Will of James Connolly, Died 27 September 1927; Affidavit under the Stamp Act, Deceased Estate File 4-31383 James Connolly, Stamp Duties Office, State Records NSW, 20/5107.

¹⁸ Frederick Douglass, 'Self-Made Men', [Http://Monadnock.Net/Douglass/Self-Made-Men.Html](http://Monadnock.Net/Douglass/Self-Made-Men.Html), 1872, accessed 01 April 2020.

¹⁹ *Note.* Martin Connolly is recorded as a labourer on both of James Connolly's marriage certificates; he was not found recorded in the 1871 England Census but his wife Mary was recorded as the Head of the family in that Census.

²⁰ Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority, Cast Iron Railings, Palisade Fence and Gate Posts Statement of Significance, http://www.shfa.nsw.gov.au/sydney-About_us-Heritage_role-Heritage_and_Conservation_Register, accessed 02 April 2020.

²¹ National Archives and Records Administration National Archives and Records Administration, Massachusetts Index to Boston Passenger Lists, 1848-1891, Ship Bothina, Mary Connolly, *Massachusetts Index to Passenger Lists, 1848-1891*, 1888, <https://www.familysearch.org>, accessed 14 April 2020; Massachusetts Index to Boston Passenger Lists, 1848-1891, Ship Bothina, Martin Connolly, *Massachusetts Index to Passenger Lists, 1848-1891*, 1888, <https://www.familysearch.org>, accessed 14 April 2020 .

²² State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts Deaths, 1841-1915, 'Death Notice of Mary Kanavan Connelly', *Massachusetts Deaths, 1841-1915*, 2019 <<https://www.familysearch.org>, accessed 14 April 2020.

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