

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020

2013 A Ninety Year Mystery Solved

by Patricia Braden

A Ninety Year Mystery Solved

It was only after **John Louis Edwards'** death in 1929 that his wife Dorothy, upon opening a locked box, was shocked, confused and distraught to discover that her late husband was not whom he had claimed to be.

Although within this Pandora's Box she was able to ascertain that his real surname was **Price**, it was virtually of no use. Despite writing to England and hiring private detectives during the 1930's in order to find his family and ascertain the reason for his many lies - it was to no avail.ⁱ

Seventy years later, having heard the oral story passed down from older family members, I became obsessed with the idea of finishing the task my Great Grandmother had failed to achieve all those years ago. I felt I needed to do it "for her".

John had told one of his sons that he was educated at "Harrow" but didn't like wearing the hat, so when he was 12 years old he solved the problem by running away; stowing away; joining the Navy; and jumping ship. Hmmm ... not a very feasible story, but somewhere for me to begin.

My enquiries revealed that John Edward PRICE was born in Southwark, London on 2nd November, 1844.ⁱⁱ However there is no record of his attendance at Harrow school.ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet, he had certainly "joined the Navy" (albeit the Merchant Navy) as an Apprentice in 1859 and sailed the world on the *Alchemist*.^{iv} Upon their return to England a couple of years later, John decided not to report for duty, was arrested and put into Bodmin Gaol, Cornwall on 26th August, 1861.^v Forced back into service when released, he was attached to the *Montmorency* which sailed into Morton Bay (Brisbane) on 8th April, 1862.^{vi}

Now his story becomes a little bit of supposition, because although he told his son he had jumped ship, no definitive proof can be found. It transpires that although he re-boarded the *Montmorency* when it sailed from Brisbane, he was not on board when it docked in London a few months later!^{vii}

Apparently after his last attempt, 16 year old John had learned how to escape his still-to-be-served apprenticeship and this time he waited until the ship was away from a major port where his crime could not be reported. His tales of exploring Northern Queensland with Landsborough may not be quite true, but it seems he waited till the *Montmorency* called into Maryborough for supplies – and he was next heard of 10 years later under his now assumed name of John Louis Edwards. He had obviously dropped his surname and retained his middle name as his last. But where on earth did he get the new middle name of "Louis"? And, where did he actually go and what did he do during those ten years?

Yet we find him marrying a young Prussian lass by the name of Wilhelmina Millar on 2nd August, 1873 in Maryborough.^{viii}

The following year 'Mina gave birth to a baby daughter, but when the baby died twelve months later, our dear Great Grandfather disappeared again.

John Louis Edwards miraculously turns up in Berry, in the Shoalhaven area of NSW (far from the prying eyes of Queensland Jurisdiction). Here he marries his true love, Emily Walker, on 15th October, 1875.^{ix} But what about ‘Mina? She hadn’t died. He hadn’t divorced her! His marriage to Emily is BIGAMOUS !!

However that doesn’t deter John. He and Emily moved to Balmain where they went on to have four beautiful children over the next ten years, as well as rearing and giving a home to Emily’s own younger siblings. He confided to Emily about his family and she convinced him to write to his parents in London. Found in his locked box were a number of heart-rending letters back and forth between himself, his parents and his siblings.^x

But life now struck him a terrible blow. Having lost one of their children a few years earlier John was distraught when his beloved Emily now died after the birth of their last baby.^{xi} What was he to do? How could he cope? Whatever he did, it wasn’t enough, as baby Ernest followed his mother to the grave just a few months later.^{xii}

In desperation he turned to Emily’s old friend Dorothy Maguire for support, and as he needed a mother for his remaining two boys, he asked her to marry him. A marriage of convenience! (Although again a bigamous one!)



Thus my Great Grandparents John Louis Edwards and Dorothy Maguire made their marriage vows at St. James Church Sydney on 31st March, 1886.^{xiii}

Despite the initial reasons for their marriage, John and Dorothy settled down to what appears to be a good life, and another six children were born to this union. John had furniture importing businesses in Balmain and Leichhardt, and he also became a real estate entrepreneur whereby he purchased and sold a number of blocks of land.^{xiv} I guess his gift of the gab and his many lies over the years made him a good salesman. But although he didn’t own a single piece of freehold at the end of his life, I believe he had given land to each of his children upon their respective marriages.

When John died in 1929 and Dorothy opened his “Pandora’s Box” she found, along with his letters, a Medallion for Gallantry for saving lives off the wreck of the *Admella* in 1859 in South Australia. The medallion was awarded to William Booth. Who was WB and why did John treasure it? This is just another of the mysteries still to be solved about my Great Grandfather.

Yet, for all John Price-Edwards’ (*then unknown*) faults and foibles, my mother dearly loved her grandfather and he became my own “backseat driver” as I delved into his history and (with DNA proof) I have finally found what Dorothy couldn’t achieve - his siblings’ descendants now living in Canada.

Sources and References:

Image: John Louis Edwards – c.1920

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- ⁱ Original letter from Day & Co, London (dated 17th June 1931) in the possession of John Edward's Granddaughter (2005). (Scanned copy in my possession).
 - ⁱⁱ Copy of Original Birth Certificate No. COL784352 – Register General's Office, London - John Edward Price born 2nd November, 1844 – in my possession.
 - ⁱⁱⁱ Letter from "Harrow" School, Middlesex, (dated 30th March, 2004) – indicating no record of John Price, but noting there had been a fire which had destroyed many of their records – letter in my possession.
 - ^{iv} UK Apprentices Indentured in Merchant Navy, 1824-1910 for J E Price - Accessed 6/6/2018 via Ancestry.com Original data: Registry of Shipping and Seamen: Index of Apprentices. BT 150/1-53. The National Archives of the UK, Kew, Surrey, England. Accessed by myself on 20/4/2018.
 - ^v Gaol Register 1861 – John Edward Price – Copy received from Bodmin Gaol 30/3/2018 – in my possession).
 - ^{vi} Voyages to Queensland - booklet by Genealogy Society of Queensland - Montmorency – 1862 – Accessed at the NSW State Library 8/5/2018 – photocopy of relevant page in my possession.
 - ^{vii} Voyages to Queensland - booklet by Genealogy Society of Queensland - Montmorency – 1862 – Accessed at the NSW State Library 8/5/2018 – photocopy of relevant page in my possession.
 - ^{viii} Queensland Marriage Register - Maryborough – John Louis Edwards - 2nd August, 1873 – Via Ancestry.com - Australia, Marriage Index, 1788-1950 – accessed 6/6/2018 - copy in my possession.- which thankfully shows the correct names of his parents in England.
 - ^{ix} NSW Marriage Certificate No.1875/004063 – John Louis Edwards – 15th October, 1875 – Copy purchased 2004 and currently in my possession – which again gives his parents' correct names.
 - ^x Copy of some of these letters in my possession – proving his parents' names, one of which is quite unique.
 - ^{xi} NSW Death Certificate No. 1885/5853 – Emily Rhoda Edwards – 23rd July 1885 – Copy purchased in 1993 and currently in my possession.
 - ^{xii} NSW Death Certificate - Transcript – Ernest John Edwards – 6th December, 1885 – Copy dated 25/1/2006 in my possession.
 - ^{xiii} NSW Marriage Certificate No. 1886/00518 – John Louis Edwards & Dorothy Maguire – 31st March, 1886 – copy in my possession.
 - ^{xiv} Trove – Various newspaper articles advertising the businesses, along with Lands Department records of the purchase of freehold allotments.