

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020

2016 Who Were You and Where Did You Go?

by Diana Pecar

Who Were You and Where Did You Go?

My mother-in-law always growled that her grandfather was a ‘real bastard’ because he had abandoned his young family and disappeared when he realised that he was not going to inherit anything from his father-in-law, George Kirby¹. Of course, this piqued my interest so I asked the obvious question, “What do you actually know about him?”

“He was Arthur McArthur, my grandfather [you can imagine my reaction to this wonderful, easy-to-find name!]. He up and left his family when he found out that he wouldn’t be getting anything from grandma’s father. Dad always said ‘my father walked the halls of Guys Hospital’ ”.²

That’s all she knew. So I got to work. But it wasn’t easy and there were still so many unanswered questions. So I wrote the following letter to Arthur.

A letter written – never to be sent, never to be read ...

Dear Arthur

I’ve been looking for you for about 9 years! Please help as I’m tired and frustrated from searching everywhere, all the databases in England and Australia, but I can’t find answers. Seriously though. I know a lot about you but I don’t actually know you. So really, it’s quite simple!

Who were you and where did you go? What happened?

Were you born Arthur McArthur in 1840 at 28 Robert Street, St Andrew, Holborn (above the Bars) in London and baptised on 18 May at St Andrew Western, Holborn?² This is the only reference I can find for an Arthur McArthur who was born in London between 1835 and 1855. If this is you, then your parents were Sechibald McArthur and Martha Morris?³⁴ Sechibald was a tailor and you all lived Above the Bars in Holborn, a Civil Parish in London⁵. Did he make suits and clothes for doctors at Guys Hospital because a family story says that ‘Arthur walked the halls of Guys Hospital’⁵. Were you delivering your father’s goods?

If all this is wrong, then, *Who were your parents?*

When did you come to Australia and why?

¹ Last Will and Testament of George Kirby, Probate declared 17th May 1894 (copy held by the family)

² Oral family histories.

³ General Register Office for England and Wales, Birth for Arthur McArthur, Holborn Vol. II Page 128;

⁴England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837-1915, Birth for Arthur McArthur, June 1840, Holborn Vol II Page 128; London, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1917, Baptism for Archibald [sic] McArthur Camden Gray’s Inn Road Holy Trinity, Parish Register, baptized 8th October 1840 (born 18 May 1840) to Archibald (Tailor) & Martha McArthur of 28 Robert Street, Holborn, Middlesex.

⁵ England Census, Middlesex, St Andrew Holborn (above the Bars), St Andrew Western District 13 – 28 Robert Street; FamilySearch Wiki for Holborn, Middlesex Genealogy.

I can't find a shipping record of when you arrived in Australia, or none that I'm absolutely certain is you.⁷

But I do know that you were on the Electoral Rolls for The Bogan 1877-78 to 1882-83, residing in Forbes⁷ You married Esther Kirby on 18th August 1877 at Esther's residence in Forbes although your Marriage Certificate gives no other clues as to who you are⁸

You and Esther had three children:

- Florence, born 1 December 1877 in Stokes Hill, Forbes.⁹
- George Kirby, born 28 January 1880 in Forbes.¹⁰
- Victoria Sylvia, born 3 March 1886 in O'Connell Street, Parramatta.¹¹

When Florence was born, you were 39 years old and born in London which would give you a birth year of 1838. But when Victoria Sylvia was born 9 years later, you said you were 35!! For a bookkeeper, your figures leave a lot to be desired.

There is also a family story that you abandoned your family after your father-in-law's Will was read in mid 1894 as he left quite a bit of real estate to his daughter Esther, his son and his grandsons for their sole use¹². Is this true? Did you leave your family because you were specifically mentioned that you were not to receive anything? You disappeared off the face of this Earth!

Where did you go and what did you do? What were the circumstances of you leaving the family?

Your living family would really like to get answers to all these questions. So please, come and sit on my shoulder and let's have a chat! It'll be quick, just a few questions, I promise. Maybe 4 to 5 hours!! That's not much time to ask for.

Thanks.

The letter – answered!!

Surprisingly, I did get a reply - from the other side. Yes, I know, it's a bit unreal isn't it?

I had the opportunity to see a clairvoyant and out of the blue, Arthur barged his way into my session indicating that I was looking at the family tree. So, with great hesitation, I asked him some questions

⁶ Unassisted Immigrant Passenger Lists 1826-1922 both on Ancestry.com.au as well as NSW State Archives & Records; National Library of Australia, Trove online newspaper collections www.trove.nla.gov.au .

⁷ Electoral Rolls (NSW), The Bogan, Forbes 1877-78 and 1882-83, State Library of New South Wales.

⁸ New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage Certificate for Arthur McArthur and Esther Kirby (1877/002832).

⁹ New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth for Florence McArthur (1878/012234).

¹⁰ New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth for George Kirby McArthur (1880/13841).

¹¹ New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth transcription for Victoria Sylvia McArthur (1886/18878).

¹² Last Will and Testament of George Kirby. "I Give and Devise unto my daughter Esther McArthur wife of Arthur McArthur all my allotment of lands situate at Hornsby in the colony aforesaid (not far from the Railway terminus)

(through the clairvoyant of course) and here is the basis of what transpired and some of my thoughts on his answers.

“What happened to you?” Arthur answered, “Madagascar and Madeline”.

Although these names were said as a sort of word game and the letters could be jumbled, I have since established that a ship *Madagascar* did sail from London to Melbourne in mid 1853. Arthur would have been 13 years of age. As many 'children' worked on ships in those days it is not unrealistic to think that Arthur may have been on this ship. There is also a conundrum in that his parents cannot be found in the 1851 England Census although there was a cholera outbreak in London in the late 1840's when over 10,000 Londoners died.¹³ He could have been an orphan. It is certainly possible that he may have sought work on the ships. This would mean that Arthur walked the halls of Guys Hospital as a 10-12 year old. Possible, but will we ever find out?

Arthur then indicated a date of 1898.

Well, it was around 1900 that I 'lost' Arthur, around the time of the death of his father-in-law who's Will stated categorically that Arthur was not to receive anything from his Estate.

“Why did you leave?” Arthur answered, “To escape the tyranny of injustice”. He also said he feels remorse about leaving.

“Can you give me some names?” Thinking that he would say Esther, his wife, he actually rattled off, “Adelaide. Josephine Montgomery, Bethany, Ann, Joseph. Unrequited love.”

All this really didn't help, it just created more questions. But it was quite exciting to be 'talking' to Arthur.

Arthur McArthur still remains the mysterious and elusive ancestor and more work is needed.

¹³ 1851 England and Wales Census; Wikipedia 1846-1860 cholera pandemic www.en.wikipedia.org .