

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020

2020 Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary

by Vanessa Bland

Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary

Mary Sheehan: my great-great grandmother, my white whale, my most elusive ancestor. Born in Co. Galway, Ireland in 1861, Mary was the first of 11 children. Her parents Martin and Bridget emigrated to Massachusetts, USA in the 1880s along with all of Mary's siblings. Mary however, travelled to South Australia, arriving alone in Port Adelaide in 1880 aboard the ship 'Devon'. She settled in Steelton a small rural town where she lived and worked on the property of William Murphy. My research into Mary's early life led me to relatives in the US. The Sheehan descendants shared a family story that Mary had been sent to Australia to help an older relative with their farm. I delved deeper into the Murphy family and found that William Murphy's wife's maiden name was Mary Sheehan! Unfortunately, this trail soon went cold as I could not connect the two Mary Sheehan's, though it seems strongly likely that they were related in some way.

There may have been another relative in the Australian colony though, as I then discovered in a tiny newspaper advertisement:

"Any tidings of Martin Stack, last heard of in Mr J. Poonan's employment, Gulnare South, November 1877. Any information respecting his whereabouts will be thankfully received by his Cousin, Miss Mary Sheehan, care of Mrs Murphy, Steelton."¹

This lead proved to be yet another frustrating dead end for my research as I could not find any link between Martin Stack and the Sheehan family. I did learn that 22-year-old Martin Stack died in Adelaide Hospital in October 1880 of Phthisis².

In 1883, Mary married my great-great grandfather Thomas Doyle at 'Star of the Sea' church in Port Adelaide. Thomas who was born in Dublin, Ireland, worked as a mariner and waterside worker on the Adelaide ports. The couple had three children: my great grandfather Michael (1884), as well as Thomas (1886), and William (1888) who died as an infant. Then Mary disappeared from the records. In 1908, Thomas married his second wife Mary Butler, with the marriage certificate listing him as a widow. Also in 1908, my great-grandfather Michael got married in Sydney, NSW and his marriage certificate listed his mother as deceased. Yet no matter how much I looked for a death record, an obituary, or burial information I came up with nothing. I assumed her death to be between 1888 and 1908, but I was uneasy with the lack of evidence.

It was over a year before I found my next clue, an 1892 admission to the Destitute Asylum in Adelaide. Mary was 29 and pregnant. Her admission record states that "she is a widow, her late husband Thomas Doyle having died five years ago". She gave birth in the asylum in April 1892 to Frederick William Doyle. There was a note on the record that the "Putative Father" was "Frederick Koop, a farm labourer from Horsham, Victoria"³. More notes in her file describe her situation

"Has not seen him [Koop] for five months she states he knows her Condition and promised marriage she has not the slightest proof against him, she gave Koop ten pounds toward making a home for her, she received a letter from him four weeks ago, (which she stated) in which he stated that it was no good for her to depend upon him, as he was out of work and had no money."⁴

¹ South Australian Weekly Chronicle, Saturday 18 June 1881

² "Mortuary Return" The South Australian Advertiser, Fri 4 Feb 1881. P273. It is unclear whether Mary ever learned of her cousin's death.

³ Register of Admissions to the Destitute Asylum

⁴ ibid

Poor Mary! What a dire situation she had found herself in. She left the asylum in late 1892⁵, narrowing the window for her death to sometime between 1892 and 1908, yet I could still find nothing. I also couldn't trace the child Frederick and supposed that he may have been adopted and had his name changed. Mary's sons, Michael and Thomas moved to Sydney, NSW once they were old enough, believing their mother to be dead. I widened my search for Mary Doyle to other states, but still no luck. I was once again left with no evidence, just a window.

I decided to revisit Frederick Koop, the man who had deserted Mary while she was pregnant. I couldn't believe that I hadn't considered him earlier, I'd taken Mary's words at face value, assuming him to be unreliable and absent. It turned out however that he came back into Mary's life. In 1895, Mary married Friedrich⁶ Koop at The Lutheran Parsonage, Horsham, Victoria. Why hadn't I found her remarriage before now? Mary had concealed her past. Her 1895 marriage describes her as Mary Sheehan, Spinster. Mary Doyle had indeed disappeared, as she had started her life over as Mary Sheehan. It is doubtful that Friedrich even knew of her former family. The couple raised their son as Fred Koop, which explained the child Frederick Doyle's disappearance from the records. They had four more children: Bernard 1894, Darcy 1900, Berly 1902 and Percival 1906.

Mary established herself in Horsham, remaining there until her death in 1939. Her obituary reveals some of the inconsistencies in her life story: "a native of County Galway, Ireland, the deceased was 76 years old, came to Australia with her parents and arrived in South Australia where the family lived for five years". Mary did not arrive with her parents, nor reside with them for five years in South Australia, but apparently the informant did not know that.

Although many of the questions surrounding Mary's life have now been answered, she remains my most elusive ancestor. Why did she move to Australia while the rest of her family went to the United States? Did she choose Australia for another reason? Did she want to follow Martin Stack? And what happened with her first marriage? Was Thomas a bad husband? And if so, why didn't she take the children with her? Or return for them later? Was she 'flighty' by nature? And why did she never tell her second family about her former life? Will I ever have the answers to these questions? Probably not, but I'll continue to search...

⁵ The last note on her record, dated 9 Nov 1892, said "mother and child to Mrs Murphy Commercial Hotel Jamestown. Child to Mrs [?] Cromwell Street." Don't get excited now reader, I could find no connection between the Mrs Murphy who ran the Commercial Hotel and the Murphy relatives that Mary had lived with in Steelton. In any case, it is likely that Mary worked at the hotel as a domestic servant to support herself.

⁶ Friedrich Koop was of German ancestry, his name in the records is sometimes 'Frederick', an anglicised version of his name.