

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020

2021 May Day

by John Callaghan

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This is my grandmother, Edna Dorney, clutching my father, Jack. By the time Jack was 8 years old he was a resident at the St Joseph's Home for Boys, an orphanage at Kincumber on the central coast of New South Wales. I grew up knowing nothing about my grandmother beyond her name, and that she was from Redfern or Waterloo in Sydney.

In 1997, my family gathered around my father's bed to say farewell. I listened intently as his younger brother told stories about growing up in the Boys' Home. They were heartbreaking and distressing stories. Edna abandoned her boys at the home, only ever visiting them once. Their father visited them and took them on outings – but neither took them home.

It was a revelation. Until that day I thought my dad was an orphan and clearly, he wasn't. What followed was more than 20 years of obsessively seeking the truth about Edna and her ancestry, wanting to know if we share genetic traits.

A search for Edna's birth record yielded nothing. Edna Dorney was not born anywhere in Australia in the period of time twenty years before or ten years after her estimated birth year - 1910.

In her marriage record I found clues to Edna's birth.¹ Her name was recorded as Edna May Willcock, *known as* Edna May Dorney. Edna's mother was recorded as May Willcock, deceased. It was back to the birth register, where patiently waiting was Edna May *Willock*, mother May Willock, born 31 August 1909 at Crown Street hospital.² In the hospital admission record I learned that May Willock was admitted to Crown Street Hospital on 28 August 1909, aged 23, her occupation was waitress and her address was the Fitzroy Hotel in Cooper Street Waterloo.³

The Fitzroy Hotel was on a corner and for that reason, its address was sometimes described as number 3 Cooper Street and sometimes as Byrne's Lane.⁴ The proprietor of the Fitzroy Hotel in 1909 was Mrs Lucy McFarlane, who happened to be the mother of Mrs Lucy Dorney - who happened to be Edna's adoptive mother.⁵

When May Willock registered Edna's birth in September 1909, she gave her age as 22; a year younger than when she had arrived at the hospital a few weeks earlier. She gave her address as 'Burnses' Lane in Waterloo and her birth place as Wellington NSW.⁶

May Willock then vanished into a mysterious, elusive, puff of smoke. There was no Australian birth, marriage or death record for a person named May Willock at the right time or in the right place. Was May Willock a real name, or a fictitious name invented by an unmarried mother?

My desire to solve the May Willock mystery led me to take an ancestry DNA test. Through careful scrutiny of DNA matches I quickly learned that I was indeed connected by DNA to people named Willock.

I constructed a family tree for every Willock family living near Wellington in the 1800s, working out how they connected to each other. Then I studied every Willock lady who would have been about the right age at about the right time to be May Willock.

I narrowed it down to two Willock sisters. Mabel and Miriam Willock.

In 1910 in Lismore in northern New South Wales, Mabel Willock gave birth to an illegitimate baby boy named Henry.⁷ In 1912 Mabel then gave birth to an illegitimate baby boy in Sydney, named Frank.⁸ In 1914, Mabel gave birth to an illegitimate baby girl in Lithgow, named

¹ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage record 008466/1931.

² NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth record 21828/1909.

³ Royal Hospital for Women, Admission record, May Willock, Crown Street Women's Hospital, 28 August 1909.

⁴ Sands Directories: Sydney and New South Wales, Australia, 1858-1933. W. & F. Pascoe Pty, Ltd. Balgowlah, Australia.

⁵ 1907 'Family Notices', The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW: 1842 - 1954), 17 April, p. 8.; Ancestry.com. Sydney and New South Wales, Australia, Sands Street Index, 1861-1930, 1910 Waterloo.

⁶ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth record 21828/1909.

⁷ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth record 16191/1910.

⁸ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth record 24731/1912.

Phyllis.⁹ Sydney newspapers tell me that Mabel lived a hard life on the edge of Sydney's criminal underworld in the 1920s.¹⁰

Could Mabel Willock have been May Willock? She was about the right age at about the right time. She had a number of illegitimate babies. Edna could have been the first of them. Except that Edna was born on *31 August 1909* and Mabel's son Henry was born on *11 April 1910*, just over 7 months later - which means she can't have been Edna's mother.

What about Miriam Willock?

On 16 September 1911, Miriam Willock gave birth to an illegitimate baby boy named Albert in Katoomba New South Wales.¹¹ Albert's birth record says Miriam was 23, a spinster, from Wellington in New South Wales.

Then on 13 November 1913, Miriam Willock gave birth to another illegitimate baby boy. His name was Jack Willock and he was born at the Crown Street Women's Hospital in Sydney... the same place that Edna was born.¹²

On 27 June 1915 a baby named John Willock was baptized in the Parish of St Stephen in Newtown, Sydney, by his foster parents.¹³ The baptism record shows that baby John was born in November 1913, and his mother was May Willock.

Between 1910 and 1915 there wasn't a John *and* a Jack Willock born in New South Wales. There was only Jack Willock, born to Miriam Willock in 1913. Is baby John Willock actually baby Jack Willock and is it possible that Miriam Willock and May Willock are one and the same?

In March 1914, Miriam Willock got married in Queensland, where she lived until her death in 1929. Looking for answers, I accessed Miriam's Queensland records. And that's when I struck genealogical gold. The marriage record says her name was Miriam May Willock, aged 25, born in Wellington New South Wales.¹⁴ She signed it... May Willock.

And the icing on the genealogical cake?

May Willock's death record says there were four babies from the Queensland marriage, and my ancestry DNA results say I share substantial DNA with one of those children.¹⁵

It took 23 years to solve the Edna mystery and then find the elusive May Willock. I learned that the abandonment of children was common to both women, overcome by one but not the other. Thankfully that trait stopped with Edna. Without an ancestry DNA test, the truth would never have been known. My next task? Find Edna's elusive father!

⁹ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth record 19201/1914.

¹⁰ National Library of Australia, TROVE, 1922 "'IN THE TOILS" .', Truth (Sydney, NSW: 1894 - 1954), 28 May, p. 9.; 1922 'CONCERNING CHEQUES', Truth (Sydney, NSW: 1894 - 1954), 3 December, p. 5.

¹¹ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth record 41233/1911.

¹² NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth record 39978/1913.

¹³ Sydney, Australia, Anglican Parish Registers, 1818-2011.

¹⁴ QLD Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage Record 14737/1914.

¹⁵ QLD Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death Record 9379/1929.