

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020

2022 Elusive Annie – Who was Annie Taylor?

by Colin Kilduff

Who Was Annie Taylor?

I have gone through a phase, almost an obsession, of desiring to know who my ancestors were. I started off with my father's side, and was suitably rewarded by finding tracking them back to their country and county of origin. By the end of my research I had the satisfaction of knowing that on my father's side I had a claim to Australian "royalty." Six of my ancestors were convicts.

Of my father's ancestors who came of their own will, all were of Irish ancestry, which was almost as bad, or good. All of these were Catholic, which in the nineteenth century was a by-word for disreputable, dirty and uncouth.

For my mother's side of the family line, perhaps I thought, "how hard can it be?" I knew my grandmother Gladys, although I was not quite thirteen when she died. I knew her maiden name, because it is my sister's middle name. She was born in Sydney. The Registry record of my grandmother's birth¹ tells me that her father was William Jay, born in England (Warminster, Wiltshire). The certificate tells me that her mother was Annie Taylor, born about 1865 in Grafton (NSW). The information came from William, who would be expected to know, at least in so far as Annie knew.

Going back a step further, William and Annie had married at the lovely old St Barnabas's Church on Broadway, then more prosaically named George Street. The Registry record of the marriage certificate gives Annie's birth place only as New South Wales and does not give the age of the couple, but these details were on their daughter's birth record, as mentioned. According to the marriage record, Annie's parents were William Taylor and Emma. Annie apparently did not know her mother's maiden name.²

This is where my search hit a brick wall. In order to find Annie's birth, the simple approach was unsuccessful. Various permutations of wild cards were tried, in case of a particularly illiterate registry officer or later transcriber. I also tried variants on Emma as her mother's name.

Not only was there no birth record for Annie Taylor in Grafton or anywhere else in NSW, nor in Queensland, but there was no plausible marriage for William and Emma in either colony.³ Thinking even more broadly, how about for example England? No help at all. In the records accessible through freebmd.org⁴ there are multiple marriages in most quarters across England of William Taylor to an Emma, and freebmd.org does not include Scotland or Ireland.

This opens up many possibilities for speculation. Had Annie been born in NSW but for some reason the birth remained unregistered? For the period, it seemed unlikely, although in earlier times a few parish baptisms seemed to slip out of the indexes. Had Annie or her mother invented a father for the child? This was not unknown.

At the other end of my great-grandmother's life, she died in 1930. The death record was not greatly helpful.⁵ She was by then a widow, and although she had lived with her daughter in western Victoria for a period, she had returned to NSW, where she died, in hospital. The informant for the death record was that daughter, Gladys, who knew only what she had been told. Whether Gladys had returned to Sydney temporarily around the time of her mother's last illness is unclear. It was a very long journey for a woman who was about five months pregnant with her second child. Annie's parents were not named on the certificate.

In addition to my grandmother, Annie and William had another, younger daughter, who became disabled following an accident in childhood. Although she lived independently at one stage of her life,

she had been an inmate of the Stockton hospital, with epilepsy. She survived her mother by only a few weeks, which is probably coincidence rather than cause and effect.⁶

One point of interest for me was that William Jay, Annie and Mabel are, and although the two women are unnamed on the headstone that all three were buried in the same grave has been confirmed.⁷

Further progress seemed unlikely, but DNA was thought to be a possibility. Annie's granddaughter Lynette⁸ was interested in genealogy, and wanted to get a DNA test. She also wanted her son tested, because he may have had Aboriginal ancestry on his father's side.⁹ Because mitochondrial DNA is transmitted exclusively through the mother's line, I thought that it would be a guide. However, Lyn was not interested in this angle, probably due to the influence of ancestry.com advertising. Her sister, my mother, died years ago but I realised that although I am male, I carry her mitochondrial DNA. Family Tree DNA suggested that my matriarchal line was associated with Ireland, but I have had no close matches.

So, the question remains. Who was Annie Taylor?

¹ Birth Certificate Gladys Jay, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages reference 1895/32542

² Marriage Certificate William Walter Jay and Annie Taylor, RBDM reference 1894/0203

³ Queensland records at <https://www.familyhistory.bdm.qld.gov.au/>.

⁴ At <https://www.freebmd.org.uk/search>. The index covers only England and Wales.

⁵ Death Certificate for Annie Jay, RBDM reference 1930/6947, transcribed by Marilyn Rowan

⁶ Death Certificate for Mabel Jay, RBDM reference 1930/8037 (Marilyn Rowan)

⁷ The cemetery is now administered through Macquarie Park Cemetery; verbal advice from the Anglican office on site

⁸ Lynette died in 2018, about a year after her DNA test

⁹ At the time Ancestry's database was too small to specify Aboriginal. The term Melanesian was used, not quite accurately