

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020**

**2032 The Elusive Mr Jones**

**by Holly Fitzgerald**

## The Elusive Mr Jones

“Gertie’s father died on a ferry in the harbour” was about all my mother could tell me about her Great Grandfather, William Jones. We understood he was a merchant in Athlone, Ireland, so the unproven folklore about him drowning in Sydney Harbour sounded odd. While there are always two sides to every story, we knew he had left his family home. He was rarely discussed.<sup>1</sup>

Gertrude Jones was my lively Irish Great Grandmother with strong opinions and a head full of knowledge that placed her ahead of her time. Whether it was by design or because no-one asked, Gertie provided few leads about her family.

With the everyday garden variety name of ‘William Jones’ on Gertie’s death certificate, no knowledge of her siblings with the exception of two brothers – ‘Louis’ and ‘James’, and no known descendants, it was never going to be an easy task to identify ‘our’ William in the days before online genealogical resources. The Australian National Maritime Museum<sup>2</sup> provided three shipping disaster leads.<sup>3</sup> Researching shipping fatalities was a grim task undertaken at the State Library of NSW.

William’s name materialised on a 1927 list of the *Greycliffe* victims.<sup>4 5</sup> A death certificate purchased in 2000<sup>6</sup> confirmed it was him.

With the publication of *Greycliffe: Stolen Lives* in 2003, emerged the countries in which William’s adult children lived in 1928.<sup>7</sup> My research expanded to Mexico, England, India and the USA, and the elusive William and his family (very) slowly took shape.

New connections through word of mouth, an Ancestry tree and later, DNA connections, suggested not much was known about what happened to William.

Gulielmus (William) Jones was born on 22 July 1855 in Dublin to Jacobi (James) Jones and Elizabeth Todd.<sup>8 9</sup> Based on information passed down, there is a belief among some family members that William was related to the Jones family business once located in St Stephen’s Green, Dublin.<sup>10</sup> No documentation has yet been identified.

Baptised Church of Ireland on 9 August 1855<sup>11</sup>, information from family suggests William was a man of faith and studied at Trinity College, Dublin, with an interest in becoming a vicar.<sup>12</sup> Advice from the College was there had been ‘a William’ around the right age who had attended but had left the College before qualifying.<sup>13</sup>

Aged 19, William arrived in Connaught Street, Athlone in 1874 and a drapery, fancy warehouse store and egg exporting business established.<sup>14 15</sup>

On his wedding day (10 June 1879) aged 24 years<sup>16</sup>, William was baptised<sup>16</sup> in the Roman Catholic Chapel, Ballymurry, when he married a farmer’s daughter, Anne Geraghty, or ‘Nannie’.<sup>17</sup> Together William and Nannie had 12 children.<sup>18</sup>

While dual baptisms were not unique, William’s response to the 1901 and 1911 Census of Ireland seem in contrast to his initial vocational plan. When asked to confirm his religion in 1901, he refused to provide details.<sup>19</sup> In 1911 he is recorded with the Walshe family in Dublin on census day and like them, notes his religion as a ‘Freethinker’.<sup>20</sup>

The Jones entrepreneurial flair was evident in the store's quirky newspaper advertisements and the farthing token discount enlisted to attract repeat customers at W. Jones and Co.<sup>21</sup>

Nannie was running the store by 1903 which perhaps flagged that things with William were moving in a different direction. In 1909 William and Nannie's son John Jones<sup>22 23</sup>, 3 weeks shy of his 24th birthday, was murdered<sup>24 25</sup> in Butte, Montana, USA. *The Anaconda Standard* reported excerpts of a letter found with John written by his mother. It mentioned how "his leaving broke her heart" and "...the hard time the family has had to get along since he left and speaks of the father's sprained ankle."<sup>26</sup>

William left the family fold around 1912-1915 to explore life in Australia.<sup>27 28</sup> He did not return to live in Athlone.

Running the business had become too much for Nannie by 1919.<sup>29</sup> Son James and daughter Rebecca travelled from the USA<sup>30 31</sup> to attend sister Annie's wedding<sup>32</sup> to Edwin John Robinson, and to discuss the future of the family business with other siblings.<sup>33</sup>

William's trail goes decidedly cold until 1920 when, having never visited America, he makes the trek from Sydney to San Francisco for a 6-month visit with daughter Rebecca and her husband Lewis Oliver, in Santa Monica.<sup>34</sup>

In 1924 Gertie moved from England to Australia with her family, due to her husband's employment.<sup>35</sup> They moved to Rose Bay and its surrounds in Sydney, a stone's throw from where William lived. However, it was not a close father-daughter relationship.<sup>36</sup>

In the late 1920s, William was employed as a gardener in one of the most picturesque areas of Sydney at 39 Coolong Road, Vaucluse near Watson's Bay.<sup>37 38</sup> William's employer, Oscar Hall O'Brien<sup>39 40</sup>, was a wealthy philanthropist<sup>41 42</sup>, merchant and owner of O.H.O'Brien Electrical. Oscar had purchased the land following the resubdivision of "The Huts Property" owned by Fitzwilliam Wentworth.<sup>43</sup>

With stunning ocean views and dappled sunlight on the rocks at the water's edge, the property is nestled next to Nielsen Park and only steps away from Shark Beach.<sup>44</sup> William lived onsite at the property with fellow Irishman and long-term Caretaker employee of Oscar's, Alfred Meeke.<sup>45 46 47</sup>

The end of William's life was brutal and unexpected. On a ferry trip from Circular Quay to Watson's Bay, his life was taken by force to the bottom of the ocean when the 'SS Tahiti' and the 'Greycliffe' collided on 3 November 1927.<sup>48</sup> William's body remained underwater for eight days.<sup>49</sup> Alfred, like so many other locals who waited for news after the accident, soon found himself trying to identify William's body.<sup>50</sup> Gertie's husband, William Withers, apparently undertook a similar task but later could not talk about the experience.<sup>51</sup>

William's ashes were scattered at Rookwood Cemetery on 11 November 1927 with no headstone.<sup>52</sup> Nannie died in Ireland on 19 September 1947.<sup>53</sup>

The full story of William's life, for now, remains elusive with some answers likely to have been taken to the ocean's depths with him. Somehow, I doubt this is the end of the story.

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- <sup>1</sup> Personal interviews by author with family members 2000-2020. Notes held by author.
- <sup>2</sup> Australian National Maritime Museum, 2000, [Unpublished] Letter received from G Simpson, Librarian. Letter held by author. An estimated window of time was provided to the ANMM by the author with a request for advice/assistance.
- <sup>3</sup> Graeme Andrews, *Ferries of Sydney*, (Sydney, Oxford University Press, Sydney, 1994) 154-163.
- <sup>4</sup> James Jervis, *The History of Woollahra*, (Sydney, The Municipal Council of Woollahra, C1960-1965), 19.
- <sup>5</sup> "Harbour Disaster - Reported Missing", Sydney Morning Herald, 5 November 1927, 17.
- <sup>6</sup> New South Wales Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate of William Jones (1927:17494).
- <sup>7</sup> Steve Brew, *Greycliffe: Stolen Lives*, 2003 (ACT, Navarine Publishing), 102-103.
- <sup>8</sup> Ireland, Superintendent Registrars District of Roscommon, Certified copies of entries of marriages. No.80/1879 Marriage Certificate of William Jones and Nannie Geraghty, 10 June 1879, Kilmain.
- <sup>9</sup> Ancestry.com. *Ireland, Catholic Parish Registers, 1655-1915* [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2016. Original data: Catholic Parish Registers, National Library of Ireland, Ireland. Record of Baptism of William Jones, 10 June 1879.
- <sup>10</sup> There are directory listings and other information on Jones family groups associated with St Stephen's Green, Dublin. A historical reference image also exists of the Jones store. Other researchers have undertaken research on other family tree groups. While it is possible that William is related, to date no clear link as to how William might be connected has been identified by the author.
- <sup>11</sup> Irish Genealogy.IE Church Records, Baptism record for William Jones 9 August 1855.
- <sup>12</sup> Email correspondence received by author from a UK family member, 6 November 2012. Stored by author.
- <sup>13</sup> Email correspondence received by author from a UK family member, 6 November 2012. Stored by author.
- <sup>14</sup> Oisin, '*Athlone Miscellany: Connaught Street in Fact and Fiction*' – Part VI, 6 September 2002 – publication name and organisation unknown. Article supplied to author. James Green reported his finding of an old Athlone farthing while renovating in the late 1990s. The token was marked W. Jones and Co. and was designed to attract repeat business by way of a discount for return customers.
- <sup>15</sup> Email to author from a Jones family member, 22 November 2012. Memories of his mother pointing out the Jones building in St Stephen's Green in connection to William.
- <sup>16</sup> Ancestry.com *Ireland, Catholic Parish Registers, 1655-1915* [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2016. Original data: Catholic Parish Registers, National Library of Ireland, Ireland. Record of Baptism of William Jones, 10 June 1879.
- <sup>17</sup> Ireland, Superintendent Registrars District of Roscommon, Certified Copies of Entries of Marriages. No.80/1879 Marriage Certificate of William Jones and Nannie Geraghty, 10 June 1879, Kilmain.
- <sup>18</sup> New South Wales Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate of William Jones (1927:17494). Two children did not reach adulthood. That is William and Nannie's first child, Maria Josephine Jones who died in 1896 aged 16 years' of Bright's Disease. Their youngest, Bernard Jones, died from bronchitis in 1900 at 6-months of age. HSE Civil Registration Services Death Certificates held on file by the author.
- <sup>19</sup> The National Archives of Ireland, Census of Ireland 1901, Entry for William Jones, resident of 15 Connaught Street, Athlone.
- <sup>20</sup> The National Archives of Ireland, Census of Ireland 1911, Entry for William Jones, former egg exporter and visitor at 18 Terenure Road Upper, Dublin.
- <sup>21</sup> Oisin, '*Athlone Miscellany: Connaught Street in fact and fiction*' – Part VI, 6 September 2002 – publication name and organisation unknown. Article copy supplied to the author.
- <sup>22</sup> State of Montana Bureau of Vital Statistics, Standard Certificate of Death, Registered 532, John Jones, 3 July 1909. Various articles provided by the Butte, Montana Historical Society.
- <sup>23</sup> "Deep Mystery Surrounds the Man of Many Aliases", The Butte Daily Post (Butte, Montana), 6 July 1909, 1.
- <sup>24</sup> "Manner in Which Jones Met Death More Apparent As Inquest Proceeds", The Butte Miner (Butte Montana), 11 July 1909, 8.
- <sup>25</sup> Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives. Multiple articles supplied to the author, 19 November 2012.
- <sup>26</sup> "Gruesome Find of Boys at Play", The Anaconda Standard, (Anaconda, Montana), 6 July 1909, 2.
- <sup>27</sup> Email correspondence received by author from UK family member, 6 November 2012. Stored by author. Estimated date.
- <sup>28</sup> New South Wales Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate of William Jones (1927:17494). William's death certificate suggests he was in Australia for 12 years.

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- <sup>29</sup> National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington D.C.; Roll #: 906; Volume #: *Roll 0906 - Certificates: 115250-115499, 11 Sep 1919-11 Sep 1919*. Ancestry.com. *U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925* [database on-line]. Application for James William Jones. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2007. Original data: *Selected Passports*. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Supporting document suggests the reason for travel is related to his mother who is unable to manage the business due to advancing years’.
- <sup>30</sup> National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington D.C.; Roll #: 906; Volume #: *Roll 0906 - Certificates: 115250-115499, 11 Sep 1919-11 Sep 1919*. Ancestry.com. *U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925* [database on-line]. Application for James William Jones in 1919. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2007. Original data: *Selected Passports*. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
- <sup>31</sup> Ancestry.com. *UK and Ireland, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878-1960* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2008. Original data: *Board of Trade: Commercial and Statistical Department and successors: Inwards Passenger Lists*. Kew, Surrey, England: The National Archives of the UK (TNA). Series BT26, 1,472 pieces. Rebecca and Lewis Oliver travelling from the USA to visit Connaught Street Athlone in 1919.
- <sup>32</sup> HSE Civil Registration Service, Ireland, Marriage Certificate of Anne Jones and Edwin John Robinson (16 October 1919, Vol 2, Page number 715). General Register Office, Republic of Ireland. "Quarterly Returns of Marriages in Ireland with Index to Marriages."
- <sup>33</sup> Sons William, Richard Aloysius and daughter Annie had taken on at various times more responsibilities which enabled the business to continue. With Annie’s marriage in 1919 came her departure to Canada. William (Jnr) would also leave the business in 1928 for the USA. The business was taken on by Richard Aloysius who oversaw the relocation of the Jones store from Connaught Street to Mardyke Street around 1935, and the closure of the business in the later 1930s.
- <sup>34</sup> Ancestry.com. *California, Passenger and Crew Lists, 1882-1959* [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2008. Original data: *Selected Passenger and Crew Lists and Manifests*. National Archives, Washington, D.C. View all sources. The National Archives at Washington, D.C.; Washington, D.C.; *Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at San Francisco, California*; NAI Number: 4498993; Record Group Title: *Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787-2004*; Record Group Number: 85. William Jones passenger record travelling on board “Sonoma”.
- <sup>35</sup> National Archives of Australia, Incoming Passenger List to Fremantle, “Moldavia”, 4 September 1924, K269, 12279667. Gertrude Withers (nee Jones) travelling with family to Australia.
- <sup>36</sup> Conversations with relative of Gertrude Jones, varied dates.
- <sup>37</sup> Woollahra Library, Local History Librarian, [Unpublished] letter sent to author 10 January 2001. Held by author.
- <sup>38</sup> Steve Brew, *Greycliffe: Stolen Lives*, 2003 (ACT, Navarine Publishing, 2003) 102.
- <sup>39</sup> "Oscar Hall O'Brien" *Smith's Weekly (Sydney, NSW: 1919-1950)* 25 September 1948: 11.
- <sup>40</sup> "Big Estate to Aid Charity" *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate (NSW : 1876 - 1954)* 22 January 1954: 10.
- <sup>41</sup> "Charities Benefit From Big Estate" *Daily Examiner (Grafton, NSW: 1915-1954)* 22 January 1954: 3.
- <sup>42</sup> "Sydney Merchant Leaves £511,949" *The Newcastle Sun (NSW: 1918-1954)* 21 January 1954, 2.
- <sup>43</sup> Woollahra Library, Local History Librarian, [Unpublished] letter sent to author 10 January 2001. Held by author.
- <sup>44</sup> Site visit by the author to the area in 2012.
- <sup>45</sup> "Family Notices" - death of Alfred Meeke, *The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW: 1842-1954)* 7 May 1941,12.
- <sup>46</sup> "New Style On Old Frontage" *The Daily Telegraph (Sydney, NSW : 1931-1954)* 9 March 1937: 8.
- <sup>47</sup> Ancestry.com. Ancestry Family Trees. Meeke Family Tree, Owner Kyra Meeke. Q.v. Alfred Wray Meeke (1864-1941).
- <sup>48</sup> National Library of Australia. Trove. Multiple digitised newspaper articles including “A Shocking Disaster” (1927, November 6). *Sunday Times (Perth, WA: 1902 - 1954)*, 1.
- <sup>49</sup> “Greycliffe: More Bodies Recovered” *The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW: 1842-1954)* 12 November 1927,17.
- <sup>50</sup> Steve Brew, *Greycliffe: Stolen Lives*, 2003 (ACT, Navarine Publishing, 2003),103.
- <sup>51</sup> Interview with author’s mother, [Unpublished], Sydney, 21 May 2020. Notes stored by author.
- <sup>52</sup> New South Wales Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate of William Jones (1927:17494).
- <sup>53</sup> HSE Civil Registration Service, Ireland, Death Certificate of Anne Jones (1947/204).