

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1417

**Edward Daniel McIlree (1854-??):
the Elusive Deserter**

An elusive deserter, unknown to McIllree family researchers until recently, may be the ‘blackest sheep’ in the author’s mother’s line.¹ Edward Daniel McIllree (1854–??) was a soldier and clerk, who became a British Army deserter in 1881, serving a long sentence in London’s Millbank Prison. Edward’s father, Dr John Drope McIllree (1811–1894), was a prominent Irish surgeon in the British Army. Edward’s older brother, John Henry McIllree (1849–1925), became an Assistant Commissioner in the Canadian North-West Mounted Police.² They, and other family members, were well connected in Ireland and England. After his arrest, Edward’s relatives apparently abandoned him, excising him from McIllree family history. While records for other McIllrees have been comparatively easy to locate, those for Edward are frustratingly sparse. What happened to him, in particular between between June 1874 and February 1881 and after 1901, remains a mystery.

Edward Daniel McIllree was the second son of Dr John Drope McIllree and his wife, Anne McIllree née Wilson (c. 1829–1875). Dr McIllree, born in Ireland in 1811, became a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons, London, in 1832. He was a surgeon with British Army regiments in England, Jamaica, Turkey, the Crimea, Canada, Ireland and elsewhere from 1835 to 1876, rising to the rank of Surgeon-General of Ireland in 1867.³ Dr McIllree died at Bray, County Wicklow in 1894.⁴

No-one among current McIllree generations had ever heard of Edward Daniel McIllree until an English researcher from Leicestershire alerted the author to his existence in 2011.⁵ Edward Daniel is not mentioned anywhere in the author’s family papers, although there is reference to his parents having ‘two’ sons.⁶ By contrast there is a considerable amount of information available for Edward’s older brother, John Henry McIllree.⁷

Edward Daniel McIllree was the seventh of John and Anne McIllree’s 12 children—two boys and 10 girls. Edward was born in 1854 at Claybrook, a picturesque village near Lutterworth, Leicestershire, England, where Dr John McIllree’s brother, Dr Edward Quigly McIllree and his wife Elizabeth McIllree née McCreight, had relocated from Ireland. Edward Daniel was baptised at Claybrook on 14 October 1854.⁸ Little is known about much of Edward’s life, including where he went to school, if he ever married, had children and where he died. Edward did not see much of his father in his early life, as Dr McIllree was posted to Scutari, Turkey as a surgeon with the 16th (the Bedfordshire) Regiment of Foot only weeks after Edward’s Christening. The family would not have accompanied Dr McIllree to Turkey if it were considered a campaign post, so most likely remained in England until his return. Dr McIllree served in General Hospitals at Scutari at the same time as Florence Nightingale.⁹ Owing to the high regard in which he was held, in February 1856 he was sent to the Crimea to assist General Williams who had fallen ill.¹⁰ Dr McIllree left ‘the East’ in July 1856. Anne, Edward’s closest younger sibling, was born in 18 June 1857 when the family was visiting the Channel Islands.¹¹ Florence McIllree was born at Halifax, Nova Scotia on 19 August 1859¹², indicating that Dr

McIllree had been posted to Canada when Edward was four or five.¹³ Lucy, Laura and Violet, the youngest of the McIllree daughters, were all born in Halifax—Violet on 10 February 1865, when Edward was 10.

A descendant of Dr McIllree recently discovered online photographs of McIllree children, taken by William Notman (1826–1891) in Montreal, Quebec, Canada in 1870.¹⁴ The photograph of ‘ED McIllree’, attached, is believed to be of Edward Daniel, aged about 16. Lovell’s *Province of Quebec Directory*, 1871 lists an Edward McIllree, clerk, at Montreal.¹⁵ He would have been about 17, a little older than when the photograph was taken.

Edward joined the British Army probably about August or September 1871, possibly when the family was in England.¹⁶ He served as a Private in the Second Battalion, Scots Fusilier Regiment of Guards¹⁷ for about eighteen and a half months from the latter half of 1871. The regiment applied for Edward's discharge, along with that of many other soldiers, on 6 February 1873, referring to his character as 'Indiff't' [Indifferent], providing no reason for his departure.¹⁸

He received a payment of £20 for 1 year and 246 days' service and was discharged on 10 March 1873¹⁹ at the age of 19. Another record indicates that 'Edward D McIlree' later joined the 67th Infantry Brigade Depot,²⁰ from about May 1873. National Archives records for the 67th Brigade Depot had a life from 1873 to c. 1881. In 1873 the 100th and 109th regiments merged.

On the introduction of the system of localisation of the forces, the 100th and 109th Regiments were, by General Orders 18 and 32 of 1873, ordered to be formed into a brigade for purposes of enlistment and service, and to be allotted to the 67th Sub-District, consisting of the counties of Meath, Westmeath, Longford, King's County and Queen's County, and having its headquarters and brigade depot at Birr [County Offaly, Ireland].²¹

On 27 February 1874 Private 'Edward D McIlree' of 'Good' character applied for discharge from the 100th Battalion. On 6 June 1874 he was discharged in Ireland with pay of £20 for 264 days' service²² indicating that he had been in the battalion for about nine months. What happened to Edward McIlree between June 1874 and February 1881 is still being researched, however he rejoined the Army at some stage. There is a tantalizing reference on the National Archives' website to an 'Edward Darrah McIlree' who was a member of the Household Cavalry, 2nd Life Guards,²³ possibly after the assignment in Ireland.

On 8 February 1881, 'ED McIlree', aged 26½, absented himself from the 50th Regiment of Foot then stationed at Glencorse, Scotland. He was described in *The Police Gazette* of 7 March 1881 as 5' 11½" tall with brown hair, blue eyes and a fresh face. His place of birth, although erroneous, was recorded as 'Montreal, Canada',²⁴ but confirming a connection there. Less than a month later, on 3 April 1881, 'Edward Daniel McIlree' is listed in the England Census as a 26 year-old 'military prisoner' in London's Millbank Prison with the occupation of soldier and clerk.²⁵ The reason for Edward McIlree's incarceration, but most likely for the severely punishable crime of desertion, when he was gaoled, and for how long, have not been located.²⁶

The Tate Britain Art Gallery now stands on the former site of the infamous Millbank, which took its name from the mill belonging to Westminster Abbey. The prison was originally called the 'Penitentiary Pimlico, London' and was built between 1813 and 1816 through the efforts of prison 'reformers'. It was at Millbank, which opened in 1816, that civilian prisoners were held before being transported to the colonies or where others served out their sentences.

The intention was that by well-regulated hard labour and religious instruction the criminal inmates should be reformed. The system was a complete failure and in 1843 ordinary prison methods were adopted. In 1870 it was made a military prison and finally condemned as unsanitary, was demolished in 1891 and the prisoners transferred to the newly built Wormwood Scrubs prison.²⁷

Edward McIlree possibly ended up in the Scrubs before joining a Scottish labour colony. In

1897 the Charity Organisation Society of Glasgow leased nearly 500 acres in the Ruthwell Parish, Dumfriesshire as a labour farm—known as Mid-Locharwoods Labour Colony—providing work for the destitute unemployed and for reclaiming Lochar Moss.²⁸ By 1901 Edward Daniel McIlree, aged 46, was located at Mid-Locharwoods Labour Colony, where he worked as a clerk.²⁹ After 1901 McIlree's trail goes completely cold. In 1904 'certain Lands and Buildings' at the labour colony were 'certified as an Inebriate Reformatory for the accommodation of ten males.'³⁰ Whether McIlree was included among the ten is unknown. The colony lasted 18 years³¹, closing about 1914, around the eve of World War I.

A Scottish researcher, who lives in the Mid-Locharwoods area, has informed the author that people living at the colony may have been encouraged to emigrate after the farm's closure and that some of the 'inmates' were granted small blocks of land to farm.³² At 60, McIlree would have been too old to join forces going to World War I. So if he did not die at the colony, after the farm's closure, he may have acquired a farming block, left the area, or Scotland itself, perhaps for Canada or America.³³ A gruesome outcome, according to the Scottish researcher, could have been that Edward McIlree, disowned by his successful, well-to-do family, took to the road after the colony closed and died, alone and forgotten, in the harsh Scottish elements.



ED McIlree, Montreal, QC, 1870, William Notman (1826–1891). Silver salts on paper mounted on paper—Albumen process 13.7 x 10 cm © McCord Museum, Montreal, Quebec, Canada (Believed to be a photograph of Edward Daniel McIlree aged about 16.)³⁴

¹ Edward Daniel McIlree was a cousin of one of the author's great-grandfathers on her mother's side.

² The North West Mounted Police (NWMP) force was established in 1873 and became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 1904. John McIlree served with the NWMP/RCMP from 1873 until 1911.

³ Among Dr McIlree's surviving brothers were a banker, another doctor, a clergyman and one of the author's grandfathers, who, after a life at sea, became a successful horse breeder and grazier in Victoria's Upper Murray. Dr McIlree's surviving sisters married well—one to an engineer and one to the son of an Irish baronet from County Galway.

⁴ Dr John Drope McIlree's career is still being researched. Unfortunately summaries of his service so far located do not include details of his overseas postings. In the early to mid-1870s the McIlrees lived in Dublin, Ireland where Dr McIlree and his wife, Anne, who died in 1875, were contemporaries of surgeon and ophthalmologist, Sir William Wilde, father of author Oscar Wilde. They are all buried at Mt Jerome Cemetery, Harold's Cross, Dublin, among other members of Dublin 'society'. In his retirement, from about 1879, Dr McIlree and his unmarried daughters lived in a house at Bray, built by Sir William. Dr McIlree's older brother, Robert, a banker died at the house in July 1886.

⁵ Email to the author dated 9 June 2011. The author visited the Lutterworth Museum and Historical Society in 2011. A gentleman at the museum passed on a request for any information about the McIlree family to other members of the society. A member answered the query with information about Edward McIlree in the 1881 England Census. It was from this information that Edward McIlree's story began.

⁶ A deceased family researcher of the McIlree family refers, in papers that the author holds, to Dr John Drope McIlree and his wife, Anne, as having 'two' sons but does not mention the second son by name.

⁷ John Henry McIlree was born at Kingston, Jamaica on 28 February 1849 while his father was stationed in Jamaica. John Henry was educated at Windsor Academy, Nova Scotia, Canada; Southampton College, the Royal Military College, Kingston, and Sandhurst Military College, England. He married Caroline Elizabeth (Lily) Humphreys, the daughter of John William Humphrys of Ballyhaise House, Ballyhaise, County Cavan, Ireland. The McIlrees had property in County Cavan and other locations in Ireland. John Henry McIlree was one of the first men to join the Canadian North-West Mounted Police in 1873. His exploits are recounted online and in books such as RG Macbeth's *Policing the Plains: Being the real life record of the famous Royal North-West Mounted Police*.

⁸ Email to the author dated 24 June 2011. A birth/baptism record for him, held by the Leicestershire Records office, records his names as 'Edward Darah'—the second name obviously a mistranscription of 'Daniel'.

⁹ Florence Nightingale arrived at Selimiye Barracks, Scutari, Turkey in early November 1854. See for example, the Wikipedia entry on 'Florence Nightingale' at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florence_Nightingale, accessed on 7 April 2014

¹⁰ Dr McIlree was prevented from entering Russian lines and General Williams recovered before McIlree could see him: 'Official Despatches, War Department, April 22, 1856', *Morning Chronicle* (London, England), Wednesday 23 April 1856.

¹¹ Anne McIlree was born in St Helier Parish, Jersey, Channel Islands. Birth record for Anne (Annie) McIlree from the Jersey Heritage Trust (<http://www.jerseyheritagetrust.jeron.je/word/GC03A216.pdf>), accessed on 1 August 2011

¹² Armed Forces Births 1761–2005, accessed from findmypast.co.uk on 22 December 2011 and 8 January 2012

¹³ Florence died there at the age of about seven and a half months on 8 April 1860 and is buried in the Fort Massey Cemetery, Halifax. (Veterans Affairs Canada, Fort Massey Cemetery: Halifax, Nova Scotia, at http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canada/fortmassey/fm_plot/172). A search of the 1861 Canada Census located an 'Edward McElree' aged nine, however, no-one else in the family could be located for that year.

¹⁴ The author is indebted to another McIlree family historian who discovered photographs of the McIlree children: ED McIlree, JH McIlree and the 'Misses McIlree' on the McCord Museum's website in January 2014. The photographs are believed to be of the children of Dr John and Anne

McIllree, including of Edward, as the photograph of 'JH McIllree' has been compared and likened to others of him available online.

¹⁵ Listed in the *Canadian Genealogy Index 1600s–1900s*, accessed from Ancestry.com on 11 January 2012

¹⁶ At the end of 1871 Dr McIllree and family were staying at Havelock House, Havelock Park, Elm Grove, Hampshire, England as they are mentioned in 'The Southsea Visitors' List' published in the *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* on Saturday, 16 December 1871. Havelock Park was a 'Victorian villa estate developed gradually in Southsea [an area or suburb of Portsmouth] after 1857.' (Alan King, *The Portsmouth Encyclopaedia*, online edition, Portsmouth City Libraries, 2006. p. 5 accessed from http://www.portsmouth.gov.uk/media/Penc_Upload.pdf on 4 July 2012).

¹⁷ The Second Battalion was sent from England to Canada in 1861, where it remained for most of its three-year visit on garrison duty in Montreal, as part of a force to reinforce the frontier during the American Civil War. In 1864, while the American Civil War was still raging, the battalion returned to England. In 1877 Queen Victoria restored the name of the regiment to the 'Scots Guards' as it is known today.

¹⁸ In the 1870s soldiers were recruited for the British Army for much shorter periods than they are today, often being discharged when their services were no longer needed for a particular Army purpose.

¹⁹ Edward D McIllree, Transcription of discharge document from Chelsea Pensioners' discharge documents 1760–1887, British Army Service Records 1760–1915, WO 121, and GBM-WO121-00223-001-109.jpg, accessed from findmypast.com.au, March 2013

²⁰ British Army Service Records 1760–1915, Infantry Brigade Depot (67th), WO 121, accessed from findmypast.com.au on 26 March 2013

²¹ See the National Archives website at

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/Catalogue/topictermdetail.asp?fldAFGroup=4&fldAFTermID=12362&SearchType=5&BackURL=search.asp%3FSearchType%3D5%26fldAFListType%3D2%26fldAFListTermType%3D5%26fldAdvSearchNumber%3D%26fldAFListString%3D%26fldAFPartialListString%3D%26fldAFJump%3Dp%3A447%26fldPickTermRow%3D-1&j=1> accessed on 26 March 2013

²² Chelsea Pensioners' discharge documents 1760–1887, at

http://www.findmypast.com.au/record?id=gbm%2fwo121%2f0230%2f001_391&parentid=gbm%2fo121%2f121467311&highlights=%22mcilree%20edward%20%22 accessed from findmypast.com.au on 26 March 2013

²³ This record is not digitised, so will not be available before this entry is due. If the record is actually for Edward Daniel McIllree, then his service with the 2nd Life Guards must have taken place before he joined the 50th Regiment of Foot.

²⁴ War Office, Deserters and Absentees from Her Majesty's Service, *The Police Gazette*, p. 4. Entry for McIllree, ED: Office Number 283086 Reg No.: 310, Corps: 50th Foot, Where Born: Montreal, Canada, Age: 26 ½, 5' 11 ½" tall, Brown hair, blue eyes, fresh face. Dress: Coat & Trousers: regimental. Date of Absenting Himself: 8 February at Glencorse.

²⁵ Interestingly it was in 1881 that the 50th Regiment was amalgamated with the 97th (Earl of Ulster's) to form The Queen's Own (Royal West Kent) Regiment. Although his father, Surgeon-General John McIllree had retired from the Army in 1876, Dr McIllree had been a member of the 97th Regiment in its various forms for some years before his retirement.

²⁶ The records could be in the National Archives at Kew and/or in British regimental archives.

²⁷ *Probert Encyclopaedia* accessed from <http://www.probertencyclopaedia.com/cgi-bin/res.pl?keyword=Millbank+Prison&offset=0> on 24 November 2011. According to another source, Millbank became a military prison in 1870, closing in 1890. For more about Millbank see for example, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millbank_Prison, <http://www.45millbank.com/history-of-45-millbank.html>, www.victorianlondon.org/prisons/millbank.htm

²⁸ Cambridge County Geographies, *Dumfriesshire*, p. 78, accessed on 24 September 2011 from http://books.google.com/books?id=afM8AAAAIAAJ&pg=PA78&lpg=PA78&dq=Mid+Locharwood+s+Labour+colony&source=bl&ots=IOe0C58qmp&sig=kf20-bq6S58IO_RtcJFqh9BaFtE&hl=en&ei=9hh9TrXHJsa4iAeZ4LG2Dg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=10&ved=0CFUQ6AEwCQ#v=onepage&q=Mid%20Locharwoods%20Labour%20colony&f=false

²⁹ Scotland Census 1901

³⁰ *The Edinburgh Gazette*, Friday 8 January 1904, p. 29

³¹ Johnston R, “‘The charity that heals’: the Scottish Labour Colony Association and attitudes to the able-bodied unemployed in Glasgow 1890–1915,” *The Scottish Historical Review*, Vol. 77, No. 203, April 1988

³² For the story of Mid-Locharwoods, see Ian McClumpha 2011, *A Look at the Locharwoods*, available from Imchad Ancestry, 15 High Road, Hightae, Lockerbie, DG11 1JS, Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland

³³ No death record has been located for Edward McIllree (or related spellings) in records from Scotland, Canada or the United States. As far as is known he did not come to Australia.

³⁴ This photograph, held by the McCord Museum of Canadian History, is out of copyright, ‘is meant to be accessible to everyone’ and is being used for ‘educational purposes’ as set out in the Terms of Use on the museum’s website at <http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/conditions.html>, accessed on 29 May 2014