

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1518

**The Tribulations
of Mary Hughes**

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Genealogists strive to read between the lines of official ancestral documents such as those for births, deaths and probates, fleshed out with the occasional newspaper article. Rarely do these reveal the emotions that ebbed and flowed within our ancestors. Unless there are oral stories, often corrupted like Chinese whispers, perhaps we are left to empathise with our ancestors to sense their emotions. Our immigrant ancestors deliver us a further question to ponder; as they inhaled their final breaths, were they glad they came to Australia?

Lying on her deathbed early in 1863 in Darlinghurst with phthisis (tuberculosis) destroying her lungs¹, my immigrant ancestor had ample opportunity to reflect on her decision to migrate to New South Wales. Like many impoverished Irish people of that time, a youthful farm servant Mary Hughes and two sisters, Margaret and Ann, left their home town of Clones in Ireland in 1841 bound for Plymouth, England. Here the three Roman Catholic girls joined over two hundred other Bounty Scheme immigrants on board the *Lady Kennaway*², an Indian-built barque.

By the time the three sisters disembarked in Sydney in October 1841,³ Mary must surely already have questioned her decision to migrate. After a slow trip to the Equator, the “Indian Lady”, as she was nicknamed, was hit by a series of severe storms. One washed away deck structures releasing the bull that “*rushed about the deck, scrambling and tumbling*” as the crew desperately tried to regain control of the ship.⁴ Another violent storm tore away a quarter gallery⁵ leaving the ship on the brink of sinking. It was only the swift action of the crew, by stuffing and securing various forms of bedding into the large opening, that the ship was saved from foundering.⁶

Within 19 months of arrival the sisters had married and gone their separate ways. Margaret and Ann had married convicts and lived in Wollombi and Morpeth respectively.⁷ However, Mary had stayed in Sydney and on 7 November 1842⁸ she married an English migrant named William Cheesman.⁹ After having their first child, William, in Sydney in 1843¹⁰ the family moved north to the Hunter River port town of Morpeth, perhaps to be closer to Ann. Here they ran a small shop and William played cricket with the fledgling Maitland Cricket Club.¹¹ At this stage it is likely that Mary was content with her migration decision although William’s penchant for betting on his own cricket matches may have strained, or hopefully enhanced, the weekly budget.¹²

In the rural setting of Morpeth, Mary had her second child, Walter, in January 1845¹³ but one day less than six months later Mary’s resolve would be sorely tested. Three year old William was missing and a frantic search began. After much anguish their worst fears were realised; William was found drowned in the foul and stinking contents of the tanning pit of Mr Sanderson.¹⁴

Around one year later in June 1846, Mary gave birth to their first daughter, Margaret.¹⁵ Sometime later the Cheesman family relocated to Botany, south of Sydney, where they commenced market gardening in the fertile soil around the swamps and ponds. Perhaps the memories of Morpeth weighed heavily on their shoulders.

By all accounts normality returned to their lives and two more children soon graced the home; Arthur in April 1848 and Ann in late 1849.¹⁶ In the autumn of 1851 Mary again found herself expecting and in the evening of Wednesday 1 October 1851 she gave birth to another

daughter, Mary. After an apparently uneventful birth William took the midwife, Mrs Dickin, back to her home in Chippendale, several kilometres distant. On his return along Botany Rd it was determined that William fell from his cart and that the wheel passed over his head. He was found lying unconscious on the ground just near Waterloo Dam¹⁷ shortly before 9pm by Joseph Saxby, an acquaintance and fellow market gardener. He was taken to Sydney Infirmary¹⁸ where Mary rushed the following day when it was said “*her agony of mind, and delicate condition, is described as heartrending in the extreme*”.¹⁹ William passed away some 36 hours after the accident and, in the absence of witnesses, the Coroner found death by injuries accidentally received.²⁰ William was said to be an extremely temperate man and was perfectly sober²¹ at the time but one belief is that he may have suffered an epileptic fit.²² Perhaps he was just rushing to return to his wife and newborn.

Left with five children under seven years of age, no doubt Mary struggled and perhaps she was overburdened with grief and responsibility as just ten weeks later poor infant Mary died from an unrecorded cause.²³ But Mary soon had more trials to face in her adopted country.

It is assumed that Mary continued market gardening and on 1 April 1852, just six months after her husband’s death, she was returning home alone along Botany Road when, in almost the same location as William’s fatal accident, Mary was thrown from her cart and the wheel ran over her head. She was found insensible by a neighbour who took her to Dr Jenkins of Chippendale where, although severely cut and injured, she recovered.²⁴

After her husband’s death Mary had begun keeping company with a fellow market gardener, Irish migrant John McEntee, more than ten years her junior. Mary and John planned their marriage for 5 July 1852 at the former St Mary’s Cathedral. On the cold winter’s evening of Thursday 1 July, just four days before the wedding, Mary went outside to cut some vegetables briefly leaving her children inside. Hearing a commotion, she saw a blaze inside the house and on rushing in she found six year old Margaret enveloped in flames. She frantically extinguished the flames and sent for Dr Jenkins but the injuries were horrific and the poor girl died a day later in great agony.²⁵

Mary married John McEntee on 5 July 1852²⁶ just two days after burying a third young child, at least two of whom passed in tragic circumstances. In August 1854, Mary and John borrowed £200 from Patrick Deery to buy four acres of market garden in Botany from George Lord, son of the wealthy businessman Simeon Lord.²⁷ This is the last known record of Mary until her death on 23 January 1863 in Darlinghurst aged around 47 years after contracting phthisis. Mary’s will, dated 17 November 1862, was witnessed by Roman Catholic Dean John Felix Sheridan who also officiated at her burial and medically she was attended to by Dr Frederick Milford. Both of these men were strongly linked to the original St Vincent’s Hospital at Potts Point so it is likely she was admitted and died here or in one of Dean Sheridan’s nearby associated facilities.

Mary passed away less than a week before her eldest child, Walter, turned 18 and Arthur and Ann were approximately 14 and 12 years of age. John and Mary had no children together and there are indications that he was not a good stepfather possibly deserting the family before Mary’s death. John McEntee died on 9 January 1893 at the George Street Asylum in Parramatta.²⁸

It seems her children lost their home as in April 1864 Patrick Deery sold the Botany four acres, presumably as the children were unable to keep up the mortgage payments.²⁹ No

doubt this left the children in a very difficult situation. Given Mary's association with Dean Sheridan it is possible that he took the children under his wing as he was known for his devotion to youth welfare. In support of the possibility of the Dean's benevolence to the children, both Arthur and Ann lived out the rest of their married lives in Surry Hills, the parish adopted by Dean Sheridan shortly after Mary's death.³⁰

Where did Mary's thoughts drift as she lay on her bed knowing her life was ending? She had lost her first child by drowning less than four years after stepping ashore in Sydney. Then seven years later, in the space of just nine months, her husband had a fatal accident just hours after she gave birth to a daughter who died only 10 weeks later; Mary herself was almost killed; her 6 year old daughter was horrifically burnt to death; and Mary remarried into what seems to have been an unfortunate union. Her early death jeopardised her children's destiny. However, no doubt there were many happy and delightful periods in Mary's life and she left a legacy as all three surviving children lived honest and fruitful lives.

So as Mary drew her last laboured breath, was she glad she had left the difficult conditions of her native Ireland? We can only speculate.

¹ NSW Death Reg. No. 111/1863. Recorded erroneously under Mary McIntyre.

² Shipping Records: State Records Reels 1331 and 2134 and online Family Search Bounty Scheme Index.

³ State Records Reel 2134 and various newspaper reports.

⁴ John Hood's book "Australia and the East" mentions many animals on board e.g. geese, chickens, ducks, dogs, cows, horses.

⁵ A quarter gallery is a cabin that juts out at the edge of the stern of the ship.

⁶ The account of the voyage is from "Australia and the East" by John Hood, a paying passenger.

⁷ Margaret married Charles McDonald in Wollombi on 8 September 1842 (NSW Marriage Reg. No. V 1842 2257 93) and Ann married Thomas Tapp in Morpeth on 19 May 1843 (NSW Marriage Reg. No. V 1843 529 27C).

⁸ NSW Marriage Reg. No. V 1842 85 26C (William Cheesman and Mary Hews).

⁹ No definitive arrival or pre-NSW details of William Cheesman have been found. But as the name is rather rare in NSW, it is considered that he is the Mr Cheesman who arrived in Sydney on board the *Duckenfield* in July 1831 (The Sydney Herald 18 July 1831 Page 4). This is supported by a letter dated 2 February 1831 from a W Cheesman of Luddesdown, Kent who says he is "embarking for New South Wales" and was enquiring about land (from Deane Index). The *Duckenfield* sailed for Hobart and Sydney a few days later.

¹⁰ NSW Birth Reg. No. V 1843 482 134.

¹¹ The Maitland Cricket Club was formed in late January 1845 (The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser 25 January 1845 Page 2). William played in one of their early matches on 19 May 1845 (The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser 24 May 1845 Page 2).

¹² The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser 21 June 1845 Page 2.

¹³ NSW Birth Reg. No. V 1845 1604 62.

¹⁴ The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser 12 July 1845 Page 2.

¹⁵ NSW Birth Reg. No. V 1846 1001 63.

¹⁶ Arthur NSW Birth Reg. No. V 1848 237 65 and Ann NSW Birth Reg. No. V 1849 626 67.

¹⁷ Near the intersection with Bourke St, Zetland.

¹⁸ Formerly known as the Rum Hospital and now Sydney Hospital.

¹⁹ Empire (newspaper) Mon 6 October 1851 Page 3.

²⁰ The Sydney Morning Herald 6 October 1851 Page 2.

²¹ The Sydney Morning Herald 6 October 1851 Page 2.

²² Empire (newspaper) Mon 6 October 1851 Page 3.

²³ NSW Death Reg. No. V 1851 581 118. There is no record of infant Mary's birth, probably because of the tragic circumstances of the mother. The burial record refers to her being 10 weeks old.

²⁴ The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser 7 April 1852 Page 4.

²⁵ The Sydney Morning Herald 5 July 1852 Page 2.

²⁶ NSW Marriage Reg. No. V 1852 130 98.

²⁷ Lands Office record 33-526.

²⁸ NSW Death Reg. No. 11672/1893 recorded as John McAntee.

²⁹ Lands Office record 87-536.

³⁰ C. J. Duffy, “Sheridan, John Felix (1825–1897)”, Australian Dictionary of Biography.