

Crocker Prize for Biography

Entry 1519

My Grandparents Migrated
in the
20th Century

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Both my parents were the children of 20th Century Immigrants but both sides came from vastly different backgrounds. My mother's father came with his middle class working family from Bradford in West Yorkshire England in 1911¹ and my father's parents came from the slums of the East End of London in 1924². One side a life of relative comfort, the other a story of survival.

I believe it was my very enterprising Great Grandmother's decision to migrate to Australia. Born in Bradford, West Yorkshire in 1884³ she, like her sisters worked in the woollen mills in Bradford. Lizzie Webster married William England, a Pattern Maker in 1905⁴ in Bradford Cathedral. William England was born in 1883⁵ at Worthington Street Bradford the son of a Shuttle Maker. At the time of the birth of my Grandfather, Harry England in 1905⁶ the father's occupation was listed as a Pattern Maker. By the time of the birth of their second child, Marjorie in 1908⁷, William was listed as Fish Fryer. It soon became Lizzie's job with William joining other businessmen in a club instead of working in the shop. The tale of his purchase of a Fish Shop was a strange choice for a highly-qualified "wood spoiler" as his only brother described him but it was the catalyst for their journey to Australia.

Enterprising Lizzie, "determined to get him back on the straight and narrow" booked them on the Shaw Savill steamship bound for Australia along with her trusty sewing machine, piano and Harmsworth Encyclopaedia.⁸ Although Lizzie had selected Australia she was sure it would be a backward settlement given its origins and distance from Britain even though two of her married sisters had already settled here. The family tells the story of a rough trip with only young Harry making it to the dining room at all times for each meal while the others stayed in their sick beds.

They arrived in Sydney out of London and via Cape Town on 10 June 1911. They found accommodation in Marrickville which offered cheap rents, within an English community, and close to possible work. William went back to his Pattern Making trade working for NSW Railways at Eveleigh workshops from 1914 until his death 23 March 1967⁹. Lizzie found work making vacuum cleaner bags for Grace Bros. and dressing her boys in trousers made from Navy serge Bell Bottoms from the local military disposals store. They moved to Campsie for a while before purchasing property in Stanmore in 1940.¹⁰ The description of their prosperity was described by the phrase about the table groaning with the weight of food.

Their son Harry, after his apprenticeship with Bradford Kendall as a Pattern Maker joined his father at Eveleigh workshops. He married a daughter of another immigrant family, Kitty Pomroy, at Enmore in 1926¹¹. My Grandfather, Harry, predeceased his parents by more than 20 years while undergoing operations for cancer in the Lidcombe State Hospital in 1945¹². His specialised tools at Eveleigh were auctioned and the proceeds handed to his widow.

In stark and complete contrast to the England family, my father's parents, the Wall's, waxed and waned between prosperity and pecuniary following their origins in the slums of the East End of London.

Wilhelmina Althoff was the daughter of an emigrant family from Lubeck and Bunde in Hanover who settled near the Lutheran Church, St George in the East in the 1850s and a Chelsea Pensioner. Min was born 1901¹³ in Canning Town while James (Pop) although of a longstanding East End family, was born in Liverpool, Lancs. They both attended Ferguson Road School. Min was far more conscientious than Pop and attended school until she took on
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employment as a domestic at Harrow School. Pop meanwhile took on the role of street urchin, always up to mischief and only one step ahead of the police and earning money from an early age as a bare knuckle fighter¹⁴. His own father had died and his mother had remarried but Pop felt it his duty to support his mother the best way he could. When he was considered old enough he found work on coal ships up and down the coast of England. The love of the sea and associated adventure stayed with him for the rest of his life. Many an exotic tale was told to his grandchildren and even if only half of them were true it was a wild life in the merchant navy.

James and Min married 1922¹⁵ and two daughters were born in quick succession. We have no idea of the reason for the migration decision but James worked his passage and Min with daughters Nina and Eileen arrived on the “Baradine” in 1924.¹⁶ Accommodation was found in Guildford where Min and the two girls are believed to have survived on stale bread, dripping and tomato sauce while Pop continued sailing the seas. He eventually escorted Min’s sister Marion to Australia and Marion stayed with Min and helped with the children until of course she herself married and had her own family. By this time both mothers had moved to Marrickville into the area with other English emigrants. Min had a further five children while living at Marrickville including my father in 1928¹⁷ and had to rely on the resources of the NSW Benevolent Society’s Scarba House to look after her children when the next one was due or born.

Pop did settle for a while, obtaining a stall at the Sydney markets and this is where he worked when their incomes fluctuated so much. Both had been used to hard times and I don’t think they knew how to handle the good times as they came and went. They eventually purchased a house in Lakemba near Canterbury Road where Min grew her chrysanthemums and raised Fox Terrier pups and Greyhounds. Pop eventually obtained a settled position in NSW Rail¹⁸ as a labourer where he stayed until his retirement. Min died in a Nursing home in Petersham in 1971 and Pop eventually succumbed in 1979.¹⁹ My father also worked for NSW Rail as well as local council and died in 2011.

As far as I know the two families although living in similar areas and finding work with NSW Rail do not appear to have crossed paths

¹ National Archives Australia. Passenger List of Shaw Savill Steamship “Mamari” ex London.

² National Archives Australia. Passenger List of P&O Steamship “Baradine” ex London.

³ GRO. Birth Certificate 12 November 1884 Bradford WRY

⁴ GRO. Marriage Certificate 25 January 1915. Bradford Cathedral, WRY

⁵ GRO. Birth Certificate 13 September 1883 Bradford WRY.

⁶ GRO. Birth Certificate 24 July 1905 Bradford WRY.

⁷ GRO. Birth Certificate 6 October 1908, Bradford WRY

⁸ Professionally repaired some years ago they still exist.

⁹ NSW Railways employment card. BDM. Death Certificate

¹⁰ Land & Property Information. Certificate of Title. Vol. 5181/Fol. 63

¹¹ BDM. Marriage Certificate 27 November 1926

¹² BDM. Death Certificate 24 November 1945. NSW Railways employment card.

¹³ GRO. Birth Certificate 12 June 1901 Canning Town

¹⁴ Pops memories scrawled on large sheets of butcher paper.

¹⁵ GRO. Marriage Certificate 8 April 1922

¹⁶ National Archives Australia. K269/4.

¹⁷ BDM. Birth Certificate. 4 April 1928

¹⁸ NSW Rail. Employment record.

¹⁹ BDM. Death Certificate.