

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022**

## **2211 A Miner's Ancestry**

**by Claire Williams**

## A Miners Ancestry: Henry Robert James (1869 – 1902)

Commonly known as Harry, Henry Robert James was born to unwed parents David James and Isabella Rixon in 1869 at Mount Kembla, NSW. Harry was most likely raised by his paternal grandparents as his birth was quite the scandal of the Mount Kembla mining village. Harry's mother, Isabella Rixon, was the daughter of the famed Benjamin (Ben) Rixon who married Margaret Phinnamore (Finnamore) in 1829 in Campbelltown. After Harry's birth she went on to marry William Simpson in 1874 in Wollongong, NSW. Ben was the son of James Rixon and Amelia Burrows from the Hawkesbury, NSW. Ben Rixon was a famed bush mailman confidentially navigating the track over Mount Keira to Campbelltown. Ben was also known as the "best white tracker in Australia". His father James Rixon was born in 1770 in England and tried in Derby as 'James Hickson' before being sent to Australia aboard the Barwell in 1798. Similarly, Ben's mother Amelia Goodwin was born in England, tried in Kent and sent to Australia arriving in 1800 aboard the ship Speedy. Together, James and Amelia had 6 children, including the first non-Indigenous triplets to be born in Australia which included Ben. Today, there are over 15,000 descendants of James and Amelia.

Harry's father is unknown. In the 1800's there were three James' families living in Mount Kembla. We know that Henry is directly descended from Robert James, a Scottish convict. Robert was born in 1782 to David James and Janet Cumming. David and Janet had six children together. Robert married Catherine Flanagan in 1801 in Ireland before being tried in Scotland and transported to Australia in 1824 aboard the Countess of Harcourt. A decade later, Janet and the children set sail aboard the George Hibbert as free passengers to join Robert in Australia.

Harry's fathers true identify is currently unknown as there are 3 David James' directly descended from Robert James and Catherine Flannagan. These are Robert and Catherine's son David James (1816-1876), and two grandsons, one born to David James (1816-1876) who married Catherine Munro, and the second grandson born to their son William Charles James who married Isabella Rose Munro. Grandson David James (1846-1920) married Margaret Amelia Payne whilst grandson David James (1847-1915) married Anna Maria Sales.

Oral family history tells us that Harry was either raised by his paternal grandparents and passed off as their youngest son. Given Robert James and Catherine Flannagan passed away

before Harry's birth, it is not possible that they raised him. Thus, Harry must be the son of either David James (1846-1920) or David James (1847-1915), both of whom were the grandsons of Robert James and Catherine Flanagan. This would mean that he was raised by his paternal grandparents David James (1816-1876) and Catherine Flannagan or William Charles James and Isabella Rose Munro respectively. This would make respectively Harry 21 or 13 years younger than his paternal grandparent's youngest child.

Whatever the case, Harry attended Mount Kembla Public School as a child. He married Elizabeth Peace in Wollongong, NSW in 1892. Elizabeth, one of the 12 children of Jonathon Peace and Jane Foster who married in England in 1860 and arrived in Australia aboard the HMMS Himalaya. Harry and Elizabeth lived at miner's cottage 118 in Mount Kembla with their children - Ester Jane (1893-1976), Henry Robert (1895-1964), Percival Robert (1900-1968) and David William (1903-1973). Harry was employed as an engine man, driving haulage engines to haul tubs of coal from the coal face out of Mount Kembla Colliery pit.

Harry and eight of his in-laws were working in the Mount Kembla Colliery on 31 July 1902 when a mixture of gas and coal dust caused an explosion. Harry died on 16 November 1902 succumbing to afterdamp following his heroic efforts to help save others trapped in the mine, never having had the chance to meet his youngest son David, having died months before he was born. Harry is buried in the Wesleyan / Presbyterian section of the Wollongong General Cemetery being the 96<sup>th</sup> and final victim of the disaster. Harry's headstone was vandalised in 2009.

Harry's widow moved with the children to Corrimal, NSW. She met and married James (Jim) Jones in 1906, who was later killed at the Newnes Shale Mine in 1921. Elizabeth and Jim had four children— William John (1909-1982), Ellis (1912-1964), Gwendoline (1915-unknown) and Dorothy (1917-unknown). Elizabeth lived at 35 Wilga Street, Corrimal for the rest of her life caring for her brother Isaac (Bob) who was injured during the Mount Kembla Mine Explosion. Her son William was charged with failing to support his first wife and their child in 1930. Ellis was a local bus driver, living at 38 Wilga Street with his wife and children for many years.

Of Harry's children, Esther never married and lived with her mother throughout her life. Henry and Percy were miners like their father. They were fined 45 pounds in 1945 for taking street bets. Henry married Annie Elizabeth Padget in 1917 and had four children, living at 14 Wilga Street for much of their lives. Their son David James worked in mines rescues most of

his career. Percy married Mary Ellen Carmichael and had 3 children. David married Eileen Muriel Whymss. Harry's widow Elizabeth died on 3 May 1950 in her Wilga Street home. She is buried in the Presbyterian Cemetery in Wollongong.

Henry did not die in vain. The 1902 Mount Kembla Explosion resulted in a Royal Commission, which declared safety lamps should immediately replace naked flames to prevent further disasters. This made mining safer for thousands of Australian miners working over the next century, with their use continuing today.

Henry's life is commemorated on the Mount Kembla memorial amongst the names of his fallen mates. His memory lives on in the hearts of his descendants who continue to live in the Illawarra today.

