

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022**

**2228 North and South**

**by Gordon Hughes**

## North and South

I opened my mother's birth certificate expecting to see my grandmother's name, Mary Whyte Hay, and my grandfather's name, Frederick Firth. What I saw was her mother named as Mary Smith and a birthplace not in Edinburgh on the 11<sup>th</sup> October, 1919, but at Bournemouth, on the south coast of England.<sup>i</sup>

It was 1968, I was 17 and had just returned from my first trip to Orkney, where my mum's family originated. I had become obsessed with her family tree and was rifling through the family bureau that housed certificates and documents. I asked my mum about it. After so many years she was still embarrassed by her origins and after she told me her story, she asked that I not tell anyone until she died. At that time, I thought it would be impossible to trace her birth mother.

My mother died at the home of my sister Sheila in South Africa in 2007. She had been the person that built a home and cared for her three children through some turbulent times. In 2016 Sheila visited me and brought packets of family documents and photos to contribute to the family archive. One of these was a birth certificate that mum had obtained in 1996 in connection with her British pension. There was no Mary Smith listed as mother, but Irene Alice Firth, formerly Clark<sup>ii</sup>.

I have always been proud of my Orcadian and Scottish heritage. The Firth family in Orkney can be traced back to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>iii</sup>. The Hays were latterly from Kirkcaldy, Fife, on the north bank of the Firth of Forth, but formerly they were seafaring folk from Peterhead,<sup>iv</sup> on the north coast of Aberdeenshire, and had married into a prominent whaling family<sup>v</sup>, the Ogstons<sup>vi</sup>. Mary Whyte Hay's grandfather, Alexander, had been a sea captain<sup>vii</sup>.

Who was Irene Alice Clark and how did Fred Firth meet her? The search was to reveal many typically English family stories.

Fred was a seafarer and when war broke out in 1914, he joined the RNVR and served on coastal motor boats, ending the war engaged in shore duties in Portsmouth, 50 miles along the coast from Bournemouth<sup>viii</sup>, where Irene's parents ran a boarding house where she and Fred lived<sup>ix</sup>. He had married Mary Hay in 1903<sup>x</sup> and there is no evidence that he and Irene married, but it seems to have been a long-term relationship. My mother thought that Irene intended to migrate with her to Canada, presumably as Fred was returning to his wife. At this point the remarkable Mary Hay, Fred's wife, comes into focus: 'If she is your daughter then she belongs in this family.'<sup>xv</sup> By 1921 Irene was living with her parents without Fred or her 20-month-old baby<sup>xii</sup>

So, my mother was brought up in Fred's marital home with an older sister, Freda, with whom she had a close and enduring relationship. Her adoptive mother, Mary Hay, loved Betty as her own until she died in 1952.<sup>xiii</sup>

Irene's father was Francis Clark, born 1853<sup>xiv</sup> who, like his father James, was a baker.<sup>xv</sup> In later life he became a gardener<sup>xvi</sup> and his wife Elizabeth Atterbury ran guesthouses in Bournemouth; St Heliers, by 1891<sup>xvii</sup>, and Everley by 1911.<sup>xviii</sup>

James Clark, born in 1819<sup>ix</sup>, was working for baker John Shirvell in 1841 and lived with his household in Christchurch.<sup>xx</sup> By 1861 he was a baker, and a farmer of 90 acres employing two labourers and one boy<sup>xxi</sup>. In the 1867 Swanage Trade Directory James is also listed as being a bathing machine proprietor<sup>xxii</sup>. His address in 1861 is at the Royal Oak Inn at Swanage, Dorset,<sup>xxiii</sup> but he wasn't the innkeeper. The 18<sup>th</sup> century inn has evolved from a row of cottages<sup>xxiv</sup> and in 1861 Royal Oak was used to describe a number of premises occupied as residences and businesses, as well as the inn.<sup>xxv</sup>

James married Jane Webber in Swanage in 1847,<sup>xxvi</sup> the daughter of Henry Webber and Mary Briggs<sup>xxvii</sup>, Both Jane's brother Henry and her father were quarriers<sup>xxviii</sup> and this echoes my own Orcadian ancestors who also worked with stone.

Irene's mother, Elizabeth Atterbury, born about 1861, emerged from a cluster of Atterbury families who dwelt in Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire.<sup>xxix</sup> Elizabeth's father, George, born in 1826<sup>xxx</sup> left his home parish of Bow Brickhill as a young man and moved up to a coal-mining area in Staffordshire. The Union Canal ran close by his home and perhaps he enjoyed a yarn with the bargees about job opportunities further north and worked his passage on a barge up to Tipton, which was also on the canal, to work in the mines.

George settled in Tipton and acquired both a job in the mines and a wife, Sarah Fisher, in 1847.<sup>xxxi</sup> George's brother-in-law, James Fisher, was a bricklayer and by 1861 George Atterbury was a both a miner and a furnace maker.

Although George was still resident in West Bromwich in 1871<sup>xxxii</sup> he was in Bow Brickhill in the May of both 1868 and 1869 when he was involved in a celebrated campaign of civil disobedience protesting about encroaching private ownership of the Heath, which was historically public land. In 1869 he, and his son John, 16, were fined for the deliberate destruction of a crop of potatoes planted on the Heath by Benjamin Holton, who paid rent for the land to Mr. Pettit, who claimed ownership of this once common land<sup>xxxiii</sup>.

Where did I come from? From birth granny Irene Clark and her very English heritage, with hints of Thomas Hardy? Or from adoptive granny Mary Hay, with her Scottish seafaring roots? Nature or nurture? I think I'll go for the fusion of the two that combined in my mother, Mary Elizabeth Firth. She loved her home and the stability that she built there with my father, but a wild streak of longing for the ocean and the unknown was never far below the surface.

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<sup>i</sup> This certificate is now lost.

<sup>ii</sup> GRO Birth Certificate no. BXBZ 954799 for Christchurch, Bournemouth issued 16 April 1996.

<sup>iii</sup> Clouston, J. S. Records of the Earldom of Orkney, 1914, page 280.

<sup>iv</sup> 1841 Scotland Census. Aberdeenshire, Peterhead, schedule 32. Charles Hay.

<sup>v</sup> The Peterhead Almanac for 1853 contains details of many whaling voyages over the previous 30 years. Captains J. Ogston and A. Ogston made over 25 voyages between them.

<sup>vi</sup> Charles Hay, Sailor, married Margaret Ogston, 20 August 1818, in Peterhead. Scottish Old Parish Registers.

<sup>vii</sup> 1871 Scotland census. Fife, Kirkcaldy. District 19 schedule 89. Alexander Hay, Ship Master

<sup>viii</sup> Photo of service record in family collection.

<sup>ix</sup> GRO Birth Certificate number BXBZ 954799 for Christchurch, Bournemouth, issued 16 April 1996.

<sup>x</sup> Scotland Statutory Marriages, 685.6 281 1903

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- <sup>xi</sup> Conversation, 1999, between Mary Elizabeth Hughes, ms Firth, and daughter Sheila Hughes.
- <sup>xii</sup> 1921 Census of England and Wales. RD 95 RS 2 ED 1. NA series RG15, piece Number 05477, schedule 291/E
- <sup>xiii</sup> Groni Belfast 9 pre-1973 Q4, urban 4. D/1952/50/1007/259/430
- <sup>xiv</sup> 1871 Census of England and Wales. Dorset, Wareham, Swanage, RG10, piece number 1991, folio 47, page 37.
- <sup>xv</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>xvi</sup> 1911 Census of England and Wales. Christchurch, Reg district 95, Bournemouth 2/1, RG14, piece number 5832, schedule 137. Folio 47 page 37. Rg 14pn 5832 RG78PN267 RD95 SD2 ED1 SN137
- <sup>xvii</sup> 1891 Census of England and Wales. Christchurch, West Cliff, RG12, piece number 901, folio 21, page 36 schedule 194.
- <sup>xviii</sup> 1911 Census of England and Wales. Christchurch, Reg district 95, Bournemouth 2/1 RG14, piece number 5832, schedule 137, folio 47 page 37. Rg 14pn5832 RG78PN267 RD95 SD2 ED1 SN137
- <sup>xix</sup> 1871 Census of England and Wales. Dorset, Wareham, Swanage, RG10, piece number 1991, folio 47 page 37.
- <sup>xx</sup> 1841 Census of England and Wales. Christchurch, Hampshire & Dorset, ref. HO107, piece number 397, book 5, page 7.
- <sup>xxi</sup> 1861 Census of England and Wales. Dorset, reg. district Wareham, RG09 piece number 1343, folio 29, page 51.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Swanage Trade Directories 1793-1939 indexed by John Patrick, 2008. Accessed at [http://members.iinet.net.au/~suegar/Swanage%20PO\\_1867.htm](http://members.iinet.net.au/~suegar/Swanage%20PO_1867.htm)
- <sup>xxiii</sup> 1861 Census of England and Wales. Dorset, reg. district Wareham, RG09, piece number 1343, folio 29, page 51.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Totally Haunted. Website <http://totallyhaunted.co.uk/the-royal-oak.php> Accessed 29/05/2022
- <sup>xxv</sup> 1861 Census of England and Wales, Dorset, Reg. district Wareham, RG09, piece number 1343, folio 29, page 51.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> England Marriages 1538-1973, Swanage, Dorset, Parish Marriages. Accessed via Find My Past
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Dorset Parish Baptisms transcribed by Dorset Family History Society. Accessed via Find My Past.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> 1851 Census of England and Wales, Dorset. Reg. district Wareham, district 2B, ref. HO107 RG09, piece number 1856, folio 57, page 6, schedule 22.
- <sup>xxix</sup> 1841 Census of England and Wales. See entries for Atterbury in Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire
- <sup>xxx</sup> England births and baptisms 1538-1975. Parish Baptisms via Find My Past.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> England & Wales Marriages 1837-2005, Dudley, Staffordshire. Vol. 18, page 364. Accessed via Find My Past.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> 1871 Census of England and Wales. West Bromwich. RG10, piece number 2978, folio 28, page 10.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Leighton Buzzard Observer, Tuesday June 8th, 1869.