

Unintended journeys: the life and crimes of Mary O'Neil

The online dictionary I consulted when I began to think about this paper gave the following definition of a journey: 'the act of travelling from one place to another; a trip'. To me, the word 'journey' suggests a definite starting point and a destination; a moving from and a moving to, in a linear path for the most part, with stopping off points and detours, perhaps, but always with a sense of purpose. There might be some meandering, but I don't think of journeys as serendipitous events. In my mind, the word implies that those who have been on a journey have learned something, that as journeyers our lives have been changed by the process we have undertaken and it seems to me that the implication is that those changes are for the better.

Thirty years ago I began an intended journey – I set out to explore my family history. I didn't know what I would find, but I knew it would be an adventure. I just didn't think that thirty years on I would still be stumbling on details of lives lived hundreds of years ago and that I would still be making new connections with relatives I had not know of before.

The journey into my family's past actually began ten years before I officially began my research. In the summer of 1972/73, my sister, who was 17 and suffering from a serious illness from which she died in the following year, spent a few weeks visiting our grandmother in Launceston. Usually Granny held on to the secrets of the past, but these were unusual circumstances and so she talked to my sister about her girlhood and her family. My sister, a keen writer, made many notes and it was from her notes that I discovered a number of romantic family stories, such as the story of Great-grandmother Mary McBride, who came to Tasmania as a maid at Government House, married a dashing NSW Corpsman who tragically died while crossing the Derwent on his horse. As it transpired, Mary McBride was actually Kitty Fitzgerald and she came to Tasmania courtesy of the Government all right – as a convict. She did marry a man who drowned crossing the river – the Macquarie River – but he was also a convict. After his death Kitty married my ancestor William Hunter, also a convict and they lived in the Carrick/Hagley area for the rest of their lives. From what I have discovered, they were decent parents who raised a large family in extreme rural poverty and made a decent fist of their new 'unintended' lives.

My grandmother would never tell us anything about our grandfather's family, however. 'What do you want to know about them for. They were a bad lot.', she would say. The code of silence was very firmly in place.

But it is about my grandfather's family that I want to talk to you today. My grandfather's maternal grandparents, Joseph Storey and Mary O'Neil, struggled, proving themselves to be inadequate parents and inadequate citizens, a pattern that was continued in the following

generation. My grandfather's siblings, their grandchildren, especially the girls, lived wild lives, clearly not well supervised – wild and undisciplined, if the number of illegitimate children they bore is anything to go by. My grandfather, a wonderful man, lived a life that was 'micromanaged' by his wife. A raconteur extraordinaire, with a beautiful, if untrained, tenor voice, Grandpa could keep all the neighbourhood children riveted with his stories of the days when he rode with Wyatt Earp. (Who were we to know any better?) But never once did he tell us stories of his childhood or of his family. It was as though they had never existed.

I began my journey as a family historian thirteen years after grandpa's death and perhaps that is just as well. Although I have uncovered what to me were interesting details of the family's past, I doubt that my grandparents would have seen it that way and I approach my research remembering always that these were real people living real lives. I've delved into my own family's past extensively and the history of the families of many others in the course of completing a Masters and PhD in the history of education. I'm now involved in local history as well as the Female Convicts Research Group and the Founders and Survivors Project and so I'm looking into the lives of strangers and discovering things that even their families have never known. Part of my journey as a researcher is to keep reminding myself that they have no say in the fact that I can find out so much about them and that it is never my intention to trample all over their lives.

I began my family history research at a time when there was no Internet, few indexes were available and there was no easy access to the records. I wrote many letters to the Archives of Tasmania, hoping against hope that I could find out when the first of my ancestors arrived, often with very little information to offer. I would come over to Tassie, make a brief visit to my aunt in Launceston, then hotfoot it to the Archives in Hobart, consulting the microfilmed births, deaths and marriages indexes, heading out to Bellerive to the GST rooms then heading north again and following the same sort of routine in Launceston. My mother worked her way around all the elderly relatives, discovering what she could, then relaying the information to me.

Gradually material became available in libraries. With the advent of the Internet email was possible. Then the world wide web made so many records available online. Now it's hard to know where to start. No more waiting for ages to see whether the Archives have anything of help. I've got my CDs of indexes to births, deaths and marriages at home. I can head off to the Tasmania's Memory website. My subscription to Ancestry and Findmypast offer so many more possibilities.

It's been quite a journey and a wonderful one at that, but I'll tell you something, I still secretly miss the days of heading off to the letterbox, hoping against hope that there will be a letter there giving me my next clue to unravelling the family history.

Throughout all those years, Mary O'Neil has remained a shadowy figure. My journey into her past has been frustrating and I have made many unintended journeys, only to discover that I was not on the right track at all. Her convict record, which I read on microfilm originally, revealed that she was born in County Tyrone in about 1834. By the time of her trial in April 1852, her mother was dead, she and her sister Anna were living in Glasgow while her father and brothers remained in Tyrone. She was convicted of housebreaking in April 1852 but had been convicted previously of theft (five times), shoplifting and housebreaking. This time she was sentenced to transportation and she journeyed south to Millbank Prison, then to Woolwich to join the ship the 'Duchess of Northumberland'.

The arrival of the 'Duchess of Northumberland' in Van Diemen's Land on 21 April 1853 represented something of a journey too for the colony of Van Diemen's Land, an intersection between two eras. It was the last female convict ship to arrive. Soon afterwards the name Van Diemen's Land was changed to Tasmania and the colony began its long journey from convict destination to tourist destination.

There was nothing spectacular about Mary O'Neil's life as a convict. She refused to work, absconded, was out after hours, got drunk and used obscene language, just as many others did. She was sent to the House of Corrections often and in May 1857 gave birth to an illegitimate son at Milford, a property near Campbell Town. The father of her son, Joseph Storey, who was named on the birth certificate, married her in April 1858, despite having two previous wives, who as far as I can tell, did not die before the next marriage, and an illegitimate son by another convict, two years previously and also at Milford!

Shortly after their marriage the Storeys sailed for Invercargill, in the Otago region of the south island of New Zealand. It is not possible to know why they left Tasmania, but perhaps they were tempted by the lure of gold, for between 1861 and 1863 there was greater immigration to the region on account of a gold rush. Whatever their reason for heading across the Tasman, it seems that they did not seek gold but set up in the town, Joseph at least nominally plying his trade of shoemaker. Five more children were born in Invercargill, the first of them my great-grandmother Mary, who later married John Beckett, another child of convicts.

If one went by the information on the children's birth certificates, it would seem that Joseph Storey and his wife Mary O'Neil now settled into some sort of respectable life, but this was not so. Not too long ago, I discovered that someone in New Zealand had begun indexing the Otago Police Gazettes and had put the indexes up online and I was absolutely astonished to find reference to Joseph and Mary Storey, brothel keepers, of Invercargill. There were six references, all between October 1871 and October 1872. Both Mary and Joseph had been arrested. She was sentenced to six weeks labour for obscene language in October 1871 and of assault on police in December of that year. In October 1872 she served time for disorderly

conduct and being drunk and disorderly. Joseph was charged with brothel keeping. And at home? Well, my guess is that eleven year old Mary, my great-grandmother, was left in charge of the younger children.

There are long gaps in the story and the next mention of Joseph is in 1879 when their daughter Mary married my great-grandfather John Beckett. The records are silent again until November 1891 when Joseph Storey died as an 82 year old invalid pauper at the Launceston Benevolent Asylum. Shortly before his death, in September 1891, Mary Storey made her last appearance on the convict records when she was sentenced to 14 days for larceny at Campbelltown. She then disappeared from the official records, so there is no way of knowing when or where she died.

Hers was a life of poverty and extreme hardship, a life defined by crime. Her eldest daughter, Mary Beckett, lived a hard life, too, almost all of it spent in the Cressy/Longford area. She bore ten children, the eighth of whom was my grandfather, Albert Charles.

His daughter, my mother Grace, belonged to the generation who made the longest and most significant journey and of the four children in her family she was the one who travelled the furthest, in every sense of the word. In many ways her journey WAS intended. She wanted more from life than to simply know her place. Too poor even to train as a pupil teacher and bored to death with her job in a Launceston dress shop, she became one of the first dental nurses when the Tasmanian Education Department set up its travelling dentist scheme in the 1930s. Here she found freedom and responsibility and a sense of achievement. And here, by chance, she met my father, a Methodist clergyman from Victoria. By marrying him her world expanded in ways that were unimaginable to her family.

It may have taken three generations and over eighty years, but the true significance of Mary O'Neil's unintended journey to Tasmania can be seen in the life her great-daughter, Grace Griffin.

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