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2317 The Secrets of James Whirisky

by Linda Waters

The secrets of James Whirisky

I never met my great-grandfather, James Whirisky. He died before I was born in 1955¹. All I heard were stories from my mum and aunties and they were few when I was young. When I was older, the stories were of a distant, cranky, nasty man who resorted to alcohol. There were no happy memories or cheerful stories of trips to the pictures or days at the beach. Was the myth of this man fact or just the recollections of his teenage grandchildren?

James Whirisky was born in Dumbarton, Scotland on 9 February 1880² to John and Jane Whirisky, nee Haggerty. John Whirisky is an Ironstone miner of Irish descent. They have a daughter Jane in 1881 and then no further children. James and Jane's mother, Jane, dies in 1884³ when James is four years old, and it is unknown who looks after James and Jane after her death. In 1901 John Whirisky is a labourer and boarder, his children no longer with him.⁴

By 1907 James Whirisky emigrates to Australia to live in Sydney, his sister Jane follows with her husband and two children a few years later. On 25 September 1907, James Whirisky is appointed as a probationary constable with the New South Wales police force,⁵ a career he will stay with his entire working life. A year after his appointment, on 21 October 1908, James marries Annie Hanson, daughter of a Norwegian waterman and Irish mother who are both deceased. Annie is living in Paddington and James at Central Police Barracks.⁶ She is 24 and James is 28. During her life she has experienced poverty and hardship on the streets of Sydney living amongst the Irish Catholic population.

Soon after his marriage to Annie, James receives a black eye whilst on duty. Richard Long is drunk and disorderly and fighting another man in Liverpool Road Ashfield. A crowd of over 50 have gathered to witness the brawl and James moves in to arrest him and march him towards the police

¹ NSW Government. Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. James Whirisky, Death. Registration number: 28787/1955, District: Newtown. <https://familyhistory.bdm.nsw.gov.au/lifelink/familyhistory/search/deaths>.

² Births. Scotland. Dunbartonshire. 9 February 1880. Whirisky, James. 495/22. <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk>

³ Deaths. Scotland. Dunbartonshire. 9 June 1884. Whirisky, Jane. 495/36. <http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk>.

⁴ Ancestry.com, 1901 *Scotland Census*, Parish Kilsyth; ED: 6; Page 8; Line 23; Roll CSSCT1901_160

⁵ Ancestry.com.au, *New South Wales, Australia, Police Gazettes, 1854-1930*

⁶ New South Wales, marriage certificate (certified copy) for James Whirisky and Annie Hanson, married 21 October 1908; registration number 9621/1908; NSW Registry of Births Deaths & Marriages, Chippendale.

station. The crowd follows and incites Long to resist arrest. Long fights back and the result is a punch to James' left eye.⁷

In 1922, now a Constable first class, James is assigned to the historic town of Windsor. The family has grown to five. Phyllis is 13, Hilton 11 and Edna ten. Windsor is not the quiet country life for James. In his first two months on the job, he attends a robbery of railway tickets at Mulgrave Station⁸ and a suicide in the river.⁹ James pulls out the body of a stranger to the town. Despite an inquest and witnesses seeing him alive days before, the man's identity remains unknown. In February 1924, the river again claims a victim, James assists to recover the body of 13-year-old Madge Farrell¹⁰ who loses her life during a day swimming with friends.

Ten months later¹¹ the family move back to Sydney, living in a house in Carlingford. James is posted to Darlinghurst Station. His visits to see friends in Windsor are reported in the local newspaper. An article in 1931¹², talks of his 'kind and gentle disposition' and his popularity amongst the locals. The same article also mentions his daughter Edna is to be married the following week.

On 11 July 1931, Edna Whirisky marries Thomas Nolan at St Georges Church, Hurstville¹³. She is 19, he is a 21-year-old police officer. Their marriage is tumultuous, marred with violence and abuse. By 1936, Edna is living with her parents at their home in Daisy Avenue Hurstville. She finds work as a typist.

On 16 December 1935¹⁴ James is the victim of an accident not related to his work. James is knocked down by a push bike as he walks on his way home from work. He is taken to hospital, suffering from a fracture of the skull, a broken right forearm, and cuts to the face.

During the early years of World War II, Edna tells her family she is leaving to work in Victoria. When she returns to Sydney in 1943, her mental health declines to the point she is hospitalised. James, now retired, and Annie take her to Sawtell in the hope the sea air and simple life improves her

⁷ "A policeman's black eye", *Evening News* (Sydney, NSW) 13 November 1908, 5.

⁸ "Robbery at Mulgrave", *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* (Windsor, NSW) 31 March 1922, 2.

⁹ "Man drowned", *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* (Windsor, NSW) 28 April 1922, 1.

¹⁰ "The Toll of the River", *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* (Windsor, NSW) 22 February 1924, 3.

¹¹ "Week to Week" *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* (Windsor, NSW) 12 December 1924, 4.

¹² "Personal", *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* (Windsor, NSW) 3 July 1931, 3.

¹³ NSW Government. Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. Thomas Henry Nolan & Edna May Whirisky, Marriage. Registration number: 9431/1931, District: Hurstville.

¹⁴ "Constable Injured." *The Propeller* (Hurstville, NSW) 14 March 1935, 4.

health. In December 1947, Edna returns to Sydney, booking a room at the People's Palace in Pitt Street. When she is not seen for several days, the door is forced open. She is found dead on the bed, beside her is a glass containing the remains of a powder and a handwritten note.¹⁵ She is 36. Fifty years later a woman contacts Phyllis, Edna's sister, and tells her she is the daughter of Edna Whirisky.

In her later years, James' wife, Annie lives with her daughter Phyllis in a Sydney unit. She spends her days in a chair by the lounge window, dressed in a housecoat, holding a small transistor radio. Close by is the form guide. I don't remember her saying a word to me or my sister when we visited, but we had to approach her and kiss her cold, sagging cheek. She dies, aged 97, in 1981¹⁶, taking her family's secrets with her.

I bundle up the printed newspaper articles, placing them in an envelope to post to my aunty. A few weeks later she thanks me and says, 'I didn't realise my grandfather went through all this. He dealt with a lot. I see him differently now.' The research uncovered, that perhaps, he was a product of his life experience rather than the product of his nature.

¹⁵ "Woman dead in People's Palace", *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney, NSW) 16 December 1947, 4.

¹⁶ NSW BDM NSW Government. Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. Ann Whirisky, Death. Registration number: 20619/1981, District: 001.