

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2023

2324 The Enigma of Black Kate Sullivan

by Robyn Black

The Enigma of Black Kate Sullivan

Catherine Caroline Sullivan has no birth certificate. From research I surmise she was born anywhere between 1854 and 1866. In later years she is listed as being born in Deniliquin however it is entirely possible she was born on the Victorian goldfields, anywhere from Back Creek to Bendigo, or in Echuca and onwards to Deniliquin. My mysterious great-great grandmother.

According to her marriage and death certificates, Catherine's parents were John Sullivan (occupation tailor) and Mary Ann Sullivan née Dewar (variously spelled Deward/Durward), both allegedly from Ireland. None of her children nor her husband are listed on her death certificate; the informant is an 'authorised agent'. This is strange as her husband, Robert Cooling, and her surviving daughter Anna Mary Cooling/Bentley were still living at the time of her death.

The certification trail I have uncovered first shows a Catherine Sullivan giving birth to baby Arthur Kenrick Sullivan in 1885 Deniliquin. She was listed as being 27 years of age. Arthur died 10 weeks later of 'inanition' – exhaustion from lack of nourishment – 'suffered since birth'. If Mary Ann was Catherine's mother, then she was already deceased and unable to assist her daughter, who was illiterate and marked all her children's birth and death certificates with an 'X'. It is doubtful Catherine had the ability to adequately care for herself, let alone a baby. It is also interesting she gave the child the middle name 'Kenrick'. At the time, the Deniliquin area had not long been colonially settled by William Adam Brodribb who had a son, and a brother, named Kenric. Maybe she had heard the name. Maybe there was more to it. In the end it did not matter, the poor little mite only lasted 10 weeks.

There are no census or muster records for Catherine Sullivan in New South Wales or Victoria and the next certificate is for another son's birth, this time in Echuca. Frank Roberts (yes, 'Roberts') Sullivan is born in October 1887 and Catherine is again listed as being 27 years of age. Frank dies 12 weeks later of 'marasmus'.

Next is daughter Jessie, born December 1889 in Bendigo, with Catherine – now listed as aged 29 - insisting she was married to a Scottish Engineer named Alexander Law, yet neither he nor any certificates can be found. At Jessie's marriage, the church certificate states her father as William Booth however this was scrubbed by the time it was officially recorded at BDM VIC.

Catherine gave birth to Louisa Margaret Sullivan, my great-grandmother, in 1893 and again no father is listed. Sadly, Louisa died of septicaemia in May 1911, just after turning eighteen, and two months after giving birth to my grandmother Ellen. Ellen's father was also unknown. Robert Cooling is listed as Louisa's father - which he was not - on her death certificate and Catherine is listed as married woman Cooling.

In fact, Catherine called herself Mrs Cooling for many years before she was actually married, evident in census records and inquest statements, including the inquest into the murders/suicide of Robert Cooling's brother Frank who killed three of his six children, his wife and then himself one awful night in 1911 Kyabram.

Three children, Robert, Ada Catherine, and Anna Mary Cooling were all born next with baby Robert dying at eight months. Father Robert was in gaol for stealing a sheep and Catherine was in hospital with a prolonged bout of gastro. Baby Robert had been farmed out to a community member however not long after Catherine returned home, he too died, for 'want of proper food'.

It was a hard-scrabble existence and Catherine lived on her wits. She was variously known and Catherine, Katie, Katherine, Kathleen, and Black Kate. The latter soubriquet was announced by the burglar Mr Reardan when in the dock answering charges to stealing whiskey, which he admitted to, stating he took back to 'Black Kate's place' to drink it. Earlier reports had Kate's house listed as 'frequented by convicted thieves' and 'a brothel' and that 'Cooling was loafing off the woman'. She was also listed as a 'washerwoman'.

Catherine and Robert finally married on December 8, 1930, and Catherine is listed as being seventy-six. She passed away five years later, with a newspaper obituary stating she was 'farewelled by a large number of friends'.

This is the story of ... stories. The gaps filled in by half-heard snippets and long-held beliefs with dubious foundations. Plain lies told to fill the gaps and silences and to explain the inexplicable or simply to try and save face or reputation. It is also possible that Catherine and others simply did not have the right information about the family or themselves. What BDM certificates exist are almost all incomplete and/or full of errors.

The oral history handed down in this, my birth father's family, is of Aboriginal heritage. From DNA ethnicities, Catherine seems to maybe have been partly of West African heritage. But she would not have known that. Was Sullivan her actual father?

There are no birth certificates for Catherine or her siblings, except for one female child who died as a baby. Trove has thrown up the odd mention of the family, with (alleged) father John Sullivan drowning in the Gulpa Creek on the Mathoura run; brother John junior maybe a shearer in the area; another sibling Hannah in court for fighting another young girl on the street and she and another sister, Mary Ann, doing gaol time for other offences. There is younger sister Susan who stayed in Deniliquin and had a brood of children, and a brother Peter who was born two years after the demise of John senior which strengthens the idea that Mary Ann had to resort to dubious means to survive. There is a distinct lack of documentation to track John and Mary Ann.

Catherine survived and prospered on her wits and personality. Unravelling the mystery of Catherine is like constructing a jigsaw puzzle with a whole lot of blue-sky pieces which all look the same. Yet different.

References

Arthur Kenrick certificate of birth, 26 November 1885, Deniliquin – registry BDM NSW 26767/1885
Arthur Kenrick certificate of death, 15 February, 1886 Deniliquin North – registry BDM NSW 11710/1886
Frank Roberts Sullivan certificate of birth, 10 October 1887 Echuca – registry BDM VIC 27965/1887
Frank Roberts Sullivan certificate of death, 15 January 1888 Echuca – registry BDM VIC 1355/1888
John Sullivan and Mary Ann Deward certificate of marriage, 10 February 1852 St Francis Church Melbourne 1249/1882
Mary Ann Sullivan certificate of death, 13 November 1879, Deniliquin – registry BDM NSW 5229/1879
Jessie Law certificate of birth, 26 December 1889, Bendigo – registry BDM VIC 7381/1890
Jessie Law certificate of marriage, 9 February 1905, Presbyterian Manse Echuca
Louisa Sullivan certificate of birth, 8 May 1893, Echuca – registry BDM VIC 12872/1893
Louisa Sullivan certificate of death, 24 May 1911, Echuca – registry BDM VIC 4770/1911
Robert Cooling and Catherine Sullivan certificate of marriage, December 8, 1930, certificate 11171/1930 – Methodist Manse 8.30 pm
Catherine Cooling certificate of death, 27 April 1935, Echuca – registry BDM VIC 14178/1935
Susan Sullivan certificate of death, 10 March 1950, Deniliquin – registry BDM NSW 6592/1950

Trove:

John Sullivan – Inquest - drowning; Herald (Melbourne, Vic. : 1861 - 1954), Friday 3 September 1869, page 3
Sullivan and Cooling: Newspaper report – Riverine Herald (Echuca, Vic. : Moama, NSW : 1869 -1954; 1998 - 2002), Wednesday 27 March 1895, page 2
Reardon trial – newspaper report - Riverine Herald (Echuca, Vic. : Moama, NSW : 1869 - 1954; 1998 - 2002), Wednesday 25 April 1900, page 3
Hannah Sullivan court appearance newspaper report: Pastoral Times (South Deniliquin, NSW _ 1866 - 1895,) Saturday 21 September 1867, page 2_files
Hannah Gaol (1866) – New South Wales, Australia, Gaol Description and Entrance Books 1818-1930
Catherine obituary: Riverine Herald (Echuca, Vic. :Moama, NSW : 1869 -1954; 1998 -2000), Monday 29 April, 1935, page 2

PROV :

<https://prov.vic.gov.au> Robert Cooling death inquest no. 604 23 April 1898
<https://prov.vic.gov.au> Cooling murders inquest no. 992 1/11 December 1911
<https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/brodribb-william-adams-3060>
<https://www.nsw.gov.au/births-deaths-marriages>
<https://www.bdm.vic.gov.au/>
<https://www.ancestry.com>