

of Irish Descent

☘ A M^cNAMARA FAMILY HISTORY ☘

Karren Strahan



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1879, p. 120.)

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Back cover – The wedding of John Joseph
McNamara and Florence Lillian Poole, 24
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Acknowledgments

I began researching the family history about twenty years ago. Cousin Tony McNamara and his wife Madeleine had already embarked on the journey and generously shared their findings with me. I have also been in constant touch with cousin John Dillon and his wife Joy. John has written a memoir of his Dillon family which he shared with me. Tony, John and I have a keen interest in our DNA as family anecdotes have it that there is some Aboriginal blood in our veins. We have not been able to confirm or deny this possibility. Certainly, my DNA test indicated that I have 3% Nigerian so there is a definite link with an ancestor of colour. I have a couple of theories but nothing firm. It remains a mystery to unravel.

I used My Heritage and Ancestry websites to further my research and I found that with the multitude of data and likely matches with other users my tree grew beyond expectations. It then became a matter of sharpening my focus. This book looks at my father's line only – the McNamara's, going back four generations to my great-great-grandparents, most of whom arrived in Australia as assisted immigrants between 1835 and 1850. Both websites allowed me to contact a variety of cousins, some of whom I met in 2012 when husband Robert and I, with granddaughter Charlotte in tow, embarked on a road trip through NSW.

I am especially grateful to Linda Combe in Sydney, her sister Irene Combe who



My grandfather, Thomas Michael McNamara on his wedding day to Martha Walsh, 25 Nov, 1904.

lives in Cairns, Lorraine Berton in Sydney, Mary and Alda McNamara in Bathurst, Dianne Barnes in Bathurst and Margaret Buckley in Orange.

Warwick McNamara generously shared his research on the McNamara family and I have drawn extensively on his work. I have also found Trove (NLA) a great resource and I have found an amazing array of newspaper articles and *Gazette* notices in which my ancestors appeared.

Many thanks to my niece, Shelley McNamara, for publishing this family history. Shelley accompanied me throughout the last three years to bring this manuscript to life. Her support, knowledge and patience are greatly appreciated.

Of Irish Descent

 A M^cNAMARA FAMILY HISTORY 

Introduction

In writing a family history it is impossible to do justice to the lives of individuals. I feel this most strongly as I draw on available facts that give a hazy outline to the times in which my ancestors lived. While I begin with the 'begats' – family births of my ancestors mostly in a direct line, it is the stories that I favour. Those oral tales that have been passed down, sometimes with glaring errors, and the stories pieced together from newspaper articles. The family folklore is almost always relayed with humour and highlights the sense of fun that is inherent in my family. The more sordid tales are withheld but hinted at – 'there are too many skeletons in the cupboard' my Auntie Stace used to say. Their apparent lightheartedness also reflects an acceptance of things as they are/were and a faith in God that all will be well. They embrace the struggles and look to the future.

The newspaper stories are sometimes blandly told but generally reflect the moral attitudes of their time. The attitudes reflected may jar with current thinking. The quaint language of the day is also reflected in these articles and is the reason I have included many full articles rather than a precis.

While researching my ancestors lives over the last 20 years, I came across many sad, disturbing stories that reflected both the times and conditions people lived in as well as their fortitude and endurance. I have structured the book loosely in generations, starting with my ancestors who were first to arrive in Australia. As most of them came from Ireland, there are many gaps in the accessible data. Consequently, I do not have much information on the lives of families who lived in Ireland before 1835–1850.

I have not included the history of my mother's family – that is another story to write.

I have used tables to outline births, deaths and marriages of individual families before launching into their 'stories'. Family trees have also been included, where appropriate, at the beginning of chapters. Noticeably, on the male line the names of fathers, uncles, and cousins are often the same. This can be very confusing. To make it easier to follow the family tree, consistent and repetitive signposts have been added, such as first born, second born and so on.

Book Structure

The book is divided into parts and contains various chapters about each family. These include:

Part I: First Arrivals

Traces my great-great grandparents and the story of Harriet Short and Mary Williams.

Chapter 1: Mary O'Brien and Henry Williams

Chapter 2: The Trial of Harriet Short and Mary Williams

Chapter 3: Mathew Walsh and Mary Brady

Chapter 4: Bridget Cannon and Thomas Jones

Chapter 5: Michael McNamara and Winifred O'Donnell

Part II: First Generation Born in the Colony

Covers my great-great-grandparents' children born in the colony of NSW. As they had generally large families, there is a lot of information in these two chapters. I diverged here to include stories of some grandchildren – cousins who are not in my direct line. I have not given every detail but concentrated on stories of interest including in-laws' stories, for example Bridget Skelly.

Chapter 6: Mathew Walsh and Catherine Williams

Chapter 7: Michael James McNamara and Mary Ann Jones

Part III: Second Generation Born in Australia

Covers the McNamara family (my grandfather and his five brothers).

Chapter 8: Francis McNamara and Ann Walsh

Chapter 9: Thomas McNamara and Martha Walsh

Part IV: Third Generation Born in Australia

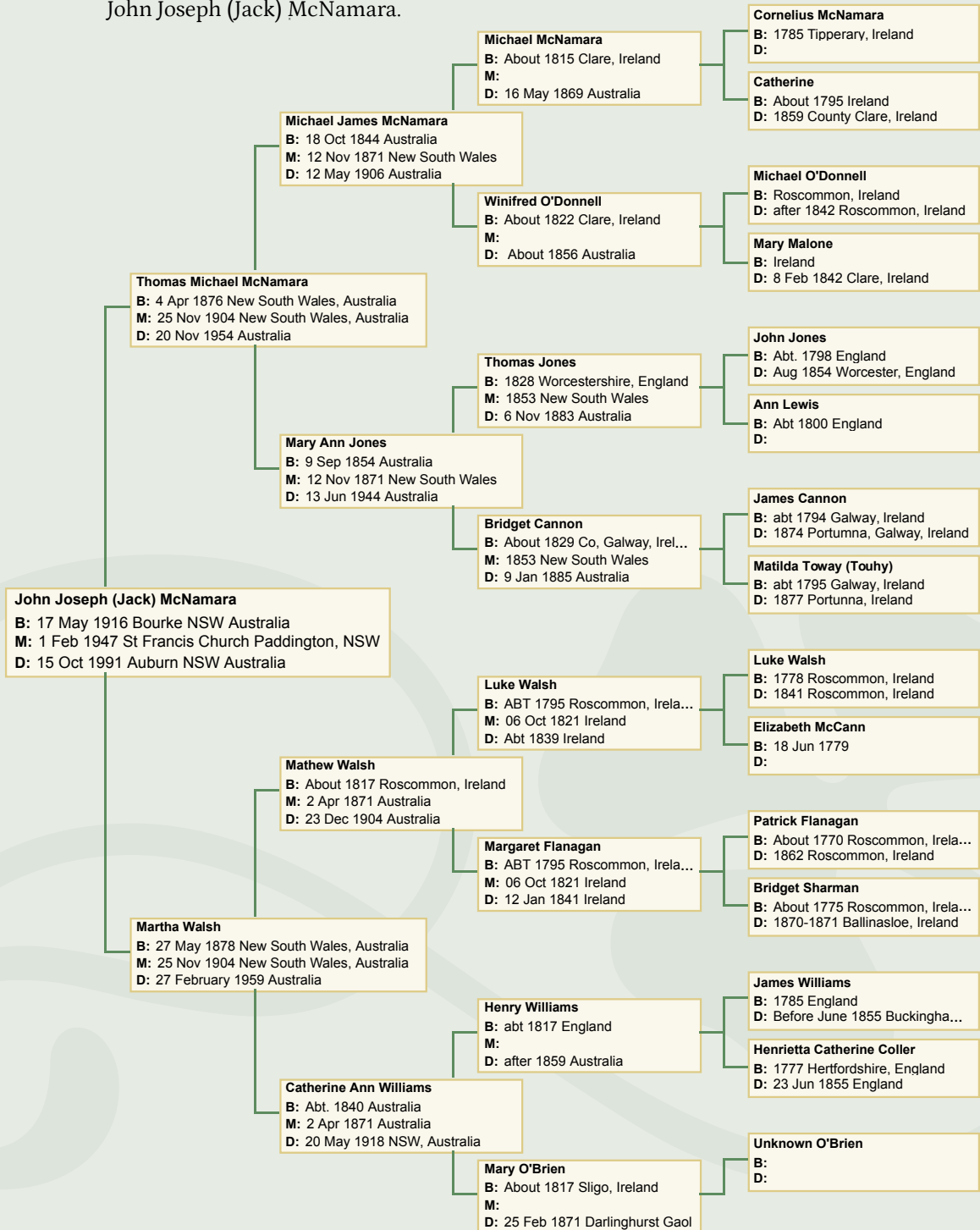
Dedicated to my father's immediate family and family memories.

Chapter 10: John Joseph McNamara and Florence Lillian Poole

Chapter 11: My Children, Nieces and Nephews

McNamara Family Tree

Below is a complete family tree up until my father, John Joseph (Jack) McNamara.





'Our Voyage to Australia. A brief sketch by W. S. M.' Diary October-December 1853.
Source: State Library of NSW.

PART I:

First Arrivals

FAMILIES

Mary O'Brien and Henry Williams

Mathew Walsh and Mary Brady

Bridget Cannon and Thomas Jones

Michael McNamara and Winifred O'Donnell

This section outlines the beginning of the McNamara story in Australia. We will get to know the families that took enormous risks to migrate to Australia, leaving their families, friends and lives as they knew it behind. In the process, they became part of Australia's colonial history.

Context

Assisted migration

Between 1788 and 1868 (80 years) 165,000 convicts were transported to the colony of NSW. Free settlers came from as early as 1793 on the *Bellona* but the majority were to begin arriving from the 1830s. From 1831, the British and Australian colonial governments assisted migration by subsidising or paying for thousands of migrants to move to Australia. Two thirds of immigrants arriving between 1830 and 1850 used assisted migration.

From 1810 to 1840, convict labour played a significant role in building the public infrastructure of Australia. Most male convicts had skills that were put to use in Australia. They built roads, bridges, hospitals and courthouses; they cleared and farmed the land. Many worked for private employers and their conditions varied greatly. Those who worked out their sentences not only gained their freedom but also found opportunities in a new land. The going was always tough!

According to Elizabeth Rushen from *Colonial Duchesses: The migration of Irish women to New South Wales before the Great Famine* (2014), in 1830s Ireland there was a growing population that were landless and in great poverty. The land was worked by tenant farmers or labourers. She elaborates:

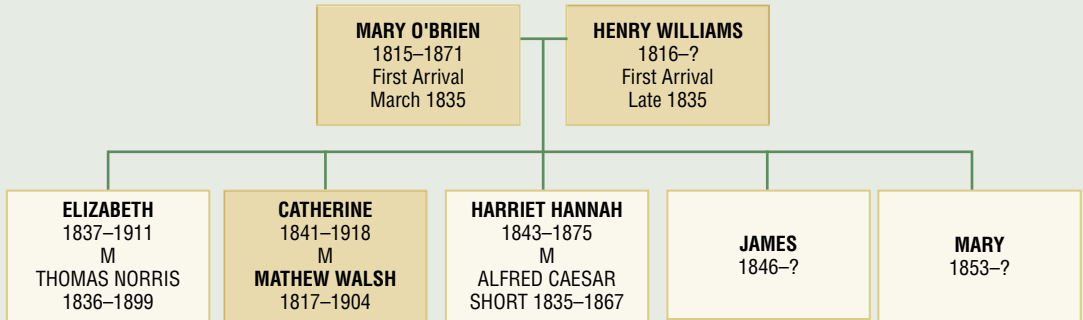
the problems for pre-Famine rural families were made more difficult because most of the land was held in the hands of wealthy Protestant absentee landlords.

A group of philanthropists that formed the Dublin Emigration Committee viewed immigration, particularly of single females, as a means of reducing the claims of the poor on the country and providing a rare opportunity for the girls to be independent and have better social and economic choices than they otherwise would have had. In 1833 the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Conditions of the Poorer Classes in Ireland saw emigration as a viable response allowing the women an escape from impoverishment. The prime targets were the Irish charitable institutions who were keen to sponsor women who were poor but not destitute, in good health, skilled in home activities and willing to emigrate. In the capital cities, many children had been orphaned due to the fever epidemics and widows were unable to find employment.

A series of famines (the Great Famine 1845–1851), epidemics (typhoid, cholera and dysentery) and political unrest followed. In that period, one million people died and a further one million emigrated, mostly to the US and Australia.

Mary O'Brien–Henry Williams

Family Tree 1815–1918



- William
1864–1868
- Margaret
1866–1868
- John
1868–1938
- Anne
1870–1875
- Rose
1872–1959
- David
1873–1873
- Ellen Catherine 1874–
1941
- Ann
1876–1979
- Martha**
1878–1959
- Phillip James 1881–
1941



Map of the City of Sydney c1843
By William Henry Wells From the collections of the State Library of New South Wales [a3998001 / Z/M2 811.17/1843/2].

Chapter One

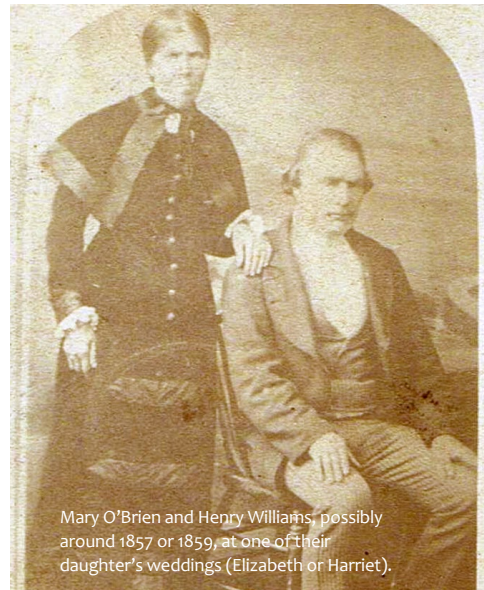
Mary O'Brien and Henry Williams

In this chapter we will delve into the lives of my great-great-grandparents, Mary O'Brien and Henry Williams. Their daughter Catherine Williams married Mathew Walsh (my great-grandparents). As they are direct descendants, the family of Catherine Williams and Mathew Walsh is more comprehensively addressed in Chapter 6.

The life of Mary O'Brien (1816–1871) and Henry Williams (1814–1867?)

Mary O'Brien migrated to the Colony of New South Wales as a free single woman seeking a better life. Henry Williams came to the colony in 1835 on the *Royal Sovereign* as a convict to serve a seven year sentence. Precisely where they met is uncertain but they had a relationship from about 1837, most likely in the Mudgee area. No marriage records have come to light but they were certainly life partners. They were my great-great-grandparents.

Mary O'Brien, one of the first female Irish immigrants arriving in Sydney on the bounty ship *Duchess of Northumberland* in 1835, was the first of my ancestors to arrive in Australia. Mary's age was put at 18, suggesting she was born in 1817. Mary was one of 226 Bounty women who migrated to the colony of NSW on the *Duchess of Northumberland*.



Mary O'Brien and Henry Williams, possibly around 1857 or 1859, at one of their daughter's weddings (Elizabeth or Harriet).

We don't know anything about Mary prior to this. She indicated on her forms that she came from Sligo originally.

Mary O'Brien - Duchess of Northumberland

The *Duchess of Northumberland* left Dublin on 2nd October 1834 with 105 women on board. Twelve women had left the ship before sailing – an indication of the anxiety these women were

experiencing embarking on such a risky venture. *The Duchess* sailed down to Cork in stormy weather where more women and families boarded. The women kept a few belongings with them in the cabin, but the chests were stored below decks. Every month they had a chance to change their garments.

Mary was No 49 on the ship's list. Three O'Brien women boarded the *Duchess* in Dublin. These included:

- Rose O'Brien, 17, from Ballynakill, Co Galway – a charter schoolgirl from the House of Refuge in Dublin
- Margaret O'Brien, 19, who was No 50 – she gave no place of origin so Margaret may have been related to Mary (Mary was a house servant, and Margaret a nursemaid).

On this first crossing of the *Duchess of Northumberland*, forty women came from Dublin Charities, including fourteen from the Charter Schools, sixty from the Cork House of Industry and 100 from Cork Orphan Asylum. Some young women also travelled independently, often sponsored by philanthropic landowners like Lord Duncannon, 4th Viscount (John William Ponsonby), WW Curry or William Smith O'Brien. Lord Duncannon sponsored five girls from his estate in Kilkenny but we don't know whether Mary was an orphan or sponsored as an independent traveller.

Mary and her fellow travellers would have been both excited by the prospects and anxious about the journey and what awaited them on the other side of the world.

Leaving Cobh Harbour on 19th October under the command of Captain Jobling, the ship sailed non-stop to Sydney, taking 131 days for the journey. It took a few days for the travellers to find their sea legs and many of them were sick, but overall the weather was kind and they made good progress across the Southern Ocean.

The passengers spent their days mainly in quiet activities such as knitting or needlework, songs and games and for some, reading. Some of the girls taught others to read and write or at least to sign their name. A few things happened to break the monotony of shipboard life. On occasion they passed other ships and would wave frantically with their hats or hankies in acknowledgement. Sometimes crew from passing ships would come aboard with mail for Captain Jobling. On one rare occasion, a flying fish landed on the deck causing much merriment. When they crossed the Equator, the crew and male passengers engaged in the usual frivolities of initiation where males were stripped to their underwear, daubed with paint and their heads shaved. A frightening experience for the young women.

Matron Mary Marsden, also one of the emigrants, was very fair in her dealings with the women, becoming a dear friend to many. Matron saw to the women's many needs, interceding with Surgeon Eckford and Captain Jobling as necessary. There was strict segregation of the male crew and the bounty women and generally the women felt safe and not overly bothered by the crew. The ships officers were mostly polite. Although, there were a few

lasses a bit loose in their ways. Were they just flirting or promiscuous? Perhaps some felt their survival was dependent on male support and protection and to secure a husband was their best option. Rushen was able to confirm ninety-seven marriages for women of the first crossing of the *Duchess of Northumberland* – at least half of them to convicts.

Five months is a long time and as they neared their destination the constant confinement led to boredom and irritability with some of the lasses falling out occasionally. Passenger Thomas Trotter kept a journal of this 1835 voyage and indicated the women were all well behaved being:

*good and peaceable...
without the least reproach;
not a single instance of bad
conduct being known on
board by the Cork girls.*

However, on the subsequent voyage in 1836, Wren, the third mate recorded:

a great disturbance with some of the women. I never witnessed anything like it; could hardly think women could behave so.

There was very little sickness on board, testament to the fact that the women chosen were expected to be healthy. However, five people died on the journey: Margaret Bulger-Lyons – 20, John Harris – 2, Patrick Bulger – 6, Bridget Duffin – 18 and Frances Coin (Coyne) – 2.

Biddy Duffin had boarded with Mary in Dublin and died just short of their

destination. It was not uncommon for the Irish women to hold a wake over their departed companions. They would pour out their grief with loud keening, all compounded by their own fear of the future.

Arrival in Sydney

When Mary O'Brien arrived in March 1835, the Colony of NSW was forty-seven years young. The Governor of the day was Major General Sir Richard Bourke and the population in NSW was 71,304. The population in Sydney grew from 11,000 in 1828 to 40,000 in 1851.

The Sydney Gazette reported a prolonged drought in the Nepean – 'vegetation is everywhere parched up and in many places the cattle are suffering severely from want of water'. The journalist suggests the adoption of the process of irrigation.

Sydney Town was possibly not as grand or as promising as Mary expected when the ship docked in Sydney on 27th of February 1835. After an early breakfast on board, the women were met by the Ladies Committee and hustled down the gangplank straight to the Bazaar.

It was made clear that the women should accept what was on offer and not hold out for something better. They were expected to exhibit high moral conduct and put up with the demands of their employers (whether they be kind or not).