

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2023

2327 James Denard, the Man, the Myth, Definitely Not a Legend

by Karen Penn

James Denard, the man, the myth, definitely not a legend.

My great-grandmother, Alice Elizabeth Jolley, or 'Old Nan' as she was known to me, was a tiny, quiet and very respectable woman. We would make the trek from South Australia to Canberra to visit her every year, and without fail, she would blush and giggle when my father offered to make her a 'shandy', a combination of beer and lemonade, agreeing provided everyone present agreed not to tell Uncle John, the oldest of her seven children, who was quite religious in nature. I was privileged to live with her for a year as a child when we moved to Canberra permanently.

It shocked me, long after Old Nan's death, to learn that she had quite a sad childhood. Although brought up by loving people, the Gordons were not her parents. She had been told that her father, James Denard, had left her in their care when she was six weeks old after her mother, Nellie Guernsey had died, to return to his native Scotland to find employment and establish a home, at which point he would send for her. However he never did, and Alice spent a lifetime wondering why. The family consensus was that he must have travelled to Scotland and either died on the journey or shortly after arriving, although my grandmother had personally scoured the records in England and Scotland and had not been able to find any trace of the man.

Now there is nothing I love more than solving a mystery, and while Old Nan was no longer around to provide the answers to, five of her seven children were still alive, including Uncle John, who had carefully traced the family tree in previous years, having only gone back through his father's side due to the lack of information on his mother's. Even with the benefit of the Internet, however, James Denard did not make it an easy task.

Like any other logical person trying to trace someone who had sailed from Australia to Scotland around 1902, I began with shipping lists, but after finding nothing began to think that the illusive Mr Denard may have been just a figment of the family imagination. Did anyone have a copy of Old Nan's birth certificate? No. Apparently not even Old Nan herself had ever seen it. The time had come to order it and see who her parents actually were before chasing any more ghosts! My first surprise came not in the fact that James Denard and Nellie Guernsey were indeed Old Nan's parents as believed, but in her birth name - Alice Elizabeth Maria Denard¹. She herself had not even known her full name.

Having been unable to find James leaving Australia, I concentrated on finding his arrival record, locating him arriving in the colony of New South Wales on a ship called the *Star of Germany* on 1 February 1883². My second surprise? He arrived not as a convict or a free settler (as such), but as a stowaway³. I was full of hope that my great-great grandfather would turn out to be an interesting character, and I would have at least something interesting to tell his grandchildren... little did I know!

Having had little luck in Scotland, I concentrated my search in Australia and found that James was indeed an interesting character. I located a photograph of the man himself on a

¹ Birth certificate of Alice Elizabeth Maria Denard, born 26 August 1902, NSW19141/1902

² Passenger Index, *Star of Germany*, London to Sydney, 1 February 1883, *Mariners and Ships in Australian Waters*; <https://www.marinersandships.com.au/1883/02/002sta.htm> accessed 25/05/2023

³ Ibid.

Prisoner's Photo Index from Darlinghurst Gaol in 1891, and we finally learned who my brother resembles! Unfortunately, we also learned that James had been previously convicted of child desertion in 1888, some 14 years before Alice's birth - and on this occasion had been sentenced to five years imprisonment for burglary and larceny⁴. A contemporary news article notes that he had 'burglariously' broken and entered a dwelling, and stolen a quantity of electro-plate and several articles of clothing belonging to two actors⁵.

Although impossible to find on departure lists from Australia, James Denard is all too easy to find in the New South Wales Police Gazettes. In 1904, he was arrested on a warrant for child desertion⁶. In 1905, another warrant was issued on the same grounds. The Gazette gives a clear description of James and states that he was 'recently employed as a cook on the SS Woolhara'⁷ - it is clear he did not leave Australia for Scotland in 1902 as per the family myth, but remained in Australia and out of his daughter's life. In 1906, a warrant was issued for a woman named Mary Smith, who was wanted for burglary and said to be in the company of James, wanted on a warrant for child desertion and believed to be headed for Newcastle or Mount Kembla⁸.

James Denard died in 1920 without ever seeing his native Scotland again. His death certificate⁹ indicates there was a son with whom he may have had contact, although my research into Alice's mother suggests that this may actually have been one of her sons from a previous relationship who remained with James after Nellie's death and adopted the Denard surname despite the fact the couple had never married.

The historical record does not show James Denard in a favourable light. In busting the myth that he returned to Scotland in an attempt to create a stable life for Alice, I shed light on a criminal who left at least two deserted children in his wake. However, there is still a place on my wall for James, as the historical record also left hints that he loved both Alice and Nellie. Although he could not in life, in death he gave Nellie his surname and the title of 'wife'¹⁰. Government records¹¹ show that Alice was not admitted into State care and the care of the Gordons, until April 1903, some seven months after Nellie's death. I like to think that perhaps he at least did his best in a world with no childcare, no safety net for the unemployed and no family to support him. Perhaps he simply figured she would fare better without him.

⁴ Gaol Inmates /Prisoners Photos Index 1870 -1930. Item no [3/6053] | Digital ID: IE162282 | Series: NRS2138 | Page No: 171 | Photo No: 5150

⁵ A Brace of Crib Crackers, *The Australian Star*, 4 July 1891, Page 6;

⁶ NSW Police Gazette and weekly record of crime (Sydney) Wed 25 May 1904 [Issue No 21] Page 220, Apprehensions &c.

⁷NSW Police Gazette and weekly record of crime (Sydney) Wed 5 July 1905 [Issue No 27] Page 245, Deserting Wives and Families, Service &c.

⁸ NSW Police Gazette and weekly record of crime (Sydney) Wed 14 Feb 1906 [Issue No 7] Page 57, Burglaries &c.

⁹ Death certificate of James Denard NSW11147/1920

¹⁰ Funeral Notice for Nellie Denard, Family Notices, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 September 1902

¹¹ Dependant Child Register, DENARD, Alice Elizabeth Maria, NRS-13358- 11/22104, page 7643