

## JOHN SHEEN - OR WAS IT TIMOTHY MURPHY?

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My husband's grandfather, William Sheen, was one of those old fellows who was often just outside the law, he seemed to enjoy the challenge of outwitting anyone in authority. He was a professional fisherman in the Murray District and one of his many minor sins was fishing where he shouldn't. He also enjoyed a drink - quite a few in fact - and after numerous charges of driving under the influence, the frustrated policeman at Pinjarra won the battle, if not the war, by removing the steering wheel of William's car. Can you imagine the outcry from the Civil Libertarians these days.

About a hundred years ago, I attended a librarian's talk-fest at Curtin University, and one of the speakers mentioned that he had a set of microfiche listing all the convicts who had been transported to Western Australia. Microfiche at that time were the last word in advanced technology, and during the following tea break, we were invited to view this wondrous resource. As I knew the background of my side of the family in Victoria, I wondered about my husband's relatives. Who more likely to have a convict ancestor than the aforesaid grandfather. I checked under the surname Sheen and sure enough there was a John Sheen. I had a bit of a giggle about this co-incidence and thought no more about it.

As the years rolled by, the time eventually came when I decided to trace the history of our families and sure enough John Sheen was my husband's great great grandfather, and William the re-incarnation.

John Sheen was born at Rath Luirc, Co. Cork, Ireland, c1828. In one of the convict records his father is listed as John Sheen, in another as Dennis/Diarmid Murphy. The convict John also used the name Timothy Murphy, and had a tattoo "T.M." on his arm, so we will never know exactly who he was and as you read on you will find he had a habit of being careless with the truth.

In October 1846, aged eighteen, John joined the British Army and was stationed at Brompton Barracks, Chatham. He was a private in the Reserve Battalion, 56th Regiment. It didn't take him long to get into strife. Army life was evidently not to his liking as he deserted in early December, and sold his uniform and equipment. He was brought before the (army) court in January 1847 and sentenced to three months hard labour. He must have kept to the straight and narrow for a year or so, but was back in court in March 1848, this time for giving the drill sergeant 'a mouthful' - I imagine anyone who has ever been in the army has had the same urge. This brought a sentence of 50 lashes and 84 days imprisonment with hard labour, however the punishment actually inflicted was 124 days imprisonment.

At some point his regiment transferred to the garrison at Gibraltar. It was here that his misbehaviour resulted in his conviction and eventual transportation to the Swan River Colony.

The event is described in the transcript of his court martial which I obtained from London. He had stolen a silver pin (tie-pin perhaps?), a small knife and two silk handkerchiefs from Captain Hague. The batman came into the room to find John with one leg either side of the window sill and the goods in his pocket. However, when confronted, John cheekily affected a surprised "Who? Me?" response. This went down like a lead balloon, and in view of his previous conviction, he was summarily court-martialled on 30th September, 1848.

He was transferred to Millbank Prison, on the banks of the Thames, on the 24th October 1848. John remained there for more than six months, almost certainly in 'separate confinement', as was the practice of the day. It is noted in the records that during this time he was visited by his parents and sister, so they must have been living in London.

On the 3rd May 1849 he was moved to Pentonville Prison, also in London, and stayed there for ten months. His next 'residence' was Portland Prison in Dorset where he arrived on 4th March 1850 and stayed until July when he sailed for the Swan River Colony, aboard the *Hashemy*.

He eventually married Jane Adams, the daughter of a pioneering family and they had seven children. The demon drink seemed to be his downfall and he continued to be in and out of minor trouble for many years to come. At one stage when he was 'doing time', Jane pleaded with the authorities for him to be released, claiming hardship in bringing up their children by herself. This

request was granted but then a couple of months later she requested that he be returned to prison as he was 'drinking and being indolent'. He died at the Mt Eliza Depot in December 1895, aged 67.

John and Jane Sheen's son, also named John, married Ellen Nettle, the daughter of convict Michael Nettle who was convicted of receiving stolen goods and transported to Fremantle on the *Phoebe Dunbar*. Michael married Anne Furlong, an Irish servant girl who arrived on the *Emma Eugenie* - but that's another chapter.

The moral of the story is - do your family tree before you get married! However in the interests of giving equal time to the pros and cons, I must add that my mother-in-law who was the downstream progeny of these two Irish scallywags was one beautiful lady - good on ya, Mum.