

# A HUNDRED YEAR JOURNEY HOME: WHEN FAMILY HISTORY BECOMES HISTORIC ARTEFACT

by REBECCA HART, Midwife and Historian

Every family has 'that' person. That person who collects the things. That person who holds the stories. That person who keeps the memories. That person that connects us to our family history. Somehow, in my family, I have become that person. The collector, the holder, the keeper, the story teller. One story has woven its way into and through my life to an unprecedented degree. It has become my academic focus and my personal passion. My great-great grandmother reaches across time and space, whispering to me, urging me to find her and share her story.

Perhaps you have met my great-great grandmother Hannah Jane 'Grannie' Watts? She is the old lady standing outside her home and hospital, smiling shyly, who invited you to join the webinar to launch the Australian Midwifery History Project in December 2021. Perhaps you have seen that photo again on the website, read her profile there, or read something I have published around her. If you know me, you'll have certainly heard me speak of her, almost as if she was right here and you just missed her! I confess I've done much time travelling with Grannie as my guide. She captivates me, fascinates me, enthrals me, intrigues me, astounds me, humbles me, perplexes me, bewitches me, and inspires me. I am in awe of this little dynamo of a woman.

How does an illiterate, Irish immigrant woman, a twice widowed mother of six, come to be an esteemed member of her community? Hannah is remembered still, a hundred years after her death, and commemorated by the Melton community in Hannah Watts Park and the local electoral ward of Watts named for her. And most recently, she is commemorated in the exhibition '*Hannah Watts: midwife, mother, matriarch*' now on display in the City of Melton library. Yes – an exhibition about a midwife!

I always knew I had a Grannie who was a midwife in Melton, but I did not know her story. Like most children hearing old family stories, I glazed over and did not really listen when my father would talk. It did not influence my decision to become a midwife at all. I think that was just in my bones as my mother will tell you that I had decided on midwifery by the age of five. I had been a midwife for a few years when I randomly asked my dad one day 'who was that midwife up in Melton? What was that story?' and he began to tell me what he knew.

Hannah learnt her midwifery skills en-route from Ireland to Australia in 1854. The family eventually settled in the Melton area, which was then rural Victoria, where she farmed and worked as a midwife. She would walk across

the district attending births whenever the call went out "send for Grannie!" Her first home was the place my grandfather was born, and where my father roamed as a boy. She attended her last birth just a few months before her death in 1921, just short of her 90th birthday. I immediately thought how different her professional life must have been as a colonial grannie midwife to mine, a graduate of the first Bachelor of Midwifery cohort in Victoria, which started some 80 years after her career ended.

I had to know more! Like Alice, I tumbled down the rabbit hole, free falling into the weird and wonderful world of genealogy and family history. I learnt so much more about Hannah and her world. Two marriages. Six children. Dairy farming. Colonial life. I learnt about the world she was born into in Northern Ireland, and what it must have been like for her to survive the Great Hunger ('the famine'), something we can all perhaps better relate to now with our experience of a pandemic. Although Hannah was a farmer's daughter, she worked in an industrial market town, where she was a supervisor in a linen mill. As a young bride, she set sail for the other side of the world in hope of a better future, and birthed our first little Australian in Geelong, a mere 5 weeks after arriving here. I learnt about bravery and stoicism, stamina and strength, duty and service, and many other characteristics I recognise in the family descended from her.

And I learnt about midwifery history. Hannah progressed from helpful neighbour to grannie to registered midwife, and when she opened her home for care it became the first registered private hospital in the district. At a time when a doctor might be hours away, the local midwife was often the only form of aid and called to the role of the gatekeeper: bringing them in (birth) and laying them out (death). Falling even further down the proverbial rabbit hole, Grannie led me into the academic world of history with a Graduate Diploma in Local, Family and Applied history (GDLFAH) where I wrote a minor thesis, and even to PhD study. Hannah kept a book of births she attended, and in unpacking that to write my thesis '*Send for Grannie: Midwifery in rural Victoria 1886-1920*' I learnt about the size and scope of her practice. I came to understand what a sinister slur 'Sairy Gamp' really is, the genesis of professional tension both in and around midwifery, and how midwifery was (and in many ways still is) caught in a perfect storm of class, gender, education, professional turf wars, and social change. Ultimately, it led me to the development of the concept for the Australian Midwifery



Rebecca Hart with the Grannie Watts display at Melton Library.

History Project and the desire to share that history – our professional history.

Aside from her record book, perhaps there is nothing particularly unique in Hannah's story. In many ways she represents a whole class of women of her time. But through depth and breadth of study I came to understand how the local midwife came to be the still remembered, still loved local hero. It is all about relationships. Sheila Kitzinger tells us that "In all cultures, the midwife's place is on the threshold of life, where intense human emotions, fear, hope, longing, triumph, and incredible physical power enable a new human being to emerge. Her vocation is unique."<sup>1</sup> Those intense human emotions create intense human bonds, still felt across generations. It is a source of pride in Melton to have ancestors that were 'Grannie born' and even more so to be her descendant. Melton still recognises, embraces, and celebrates her contribution and connection to the community, and her immigrant history connects to the changing and developing migrant population of today.

I have been fortunate to be invited to speak on Grannie at Melton a few times now, and a casual conversation between myself and librarian Nicole Hilder about the 100th anniversary of Hannah's death resulted in the idea 'we should put an exhibition together!' And so, the idea of the midwife as an exhibition was born: a celebration of a woman significant to the local community. Over the years, Hannah's few remaining personal objects have been handed down through the generations of women in the family. In her will, Hannah left all her personal effects to her granddaughter Lizzie, who was a diligent custodian. In time, Lizzie passed the objects and stories onto her

daughter Mary. Mary was a fierce guardian of Hannah's legacy and did much to keep her story alive in local history. Her daughter Kathleen then inherited the objects and has entrusted them to my care. Various other family members have held objects which they have also added to the collection, including some incredible textiles from Lizzie's daughter-in-law Valda. In Hannah Watts: midwife, mother, matriarch, we bring Hannah back home to Melton.

Working with the Library staff and Melton City Council, we have curated a small exhibit of personal objects relating to Hannah's home, faith, and midwifery; a digital version of her famous book – the first time it has been on display; an animated photo; and other resources from the family history collection held in the Library. Hannah's personal artefacts and book have never been on display in this way. Covid lockdowns meant Hannah's 100th anniversary (2021) came and went without acknowledgement, but we were finally able to launch the exhibit as part of Melton's Heritage Festival in April 2022. In July, Melton's artist in residence Christian Hansen, also opened his art exhibit '*Elements of Hannah Watts*'. For a short time, the two exhibits will share a space in the library, offering different perspectives and layers of interpretation of Hannah's story. It is a strange experience when your personal family history becomes an academic research question – and stranger still when it becomes historic artefact – but it is also an honour and privilege to have my ancestor, my Grannie, and our profession of midwifery recognised in this way.

You can explore some of Grannie Watts' personal and midwifery artefacts online and read her profile on ACM's Australian Midwifery History website [www.australianmidwiferyhistory.org.au](http://www.australianmidwiferyhistory.org.au).

## References

1. Kitzinger, S. (2000). Rediscovering Birth. Boston: Little Brown, p.164