

#52 Ancestors #Week 27 Independent

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I went searching in the family tree for an independent woman and it became increasingly obvious as I searched that until the last fifty years, there were none to be found. The contrast between the lives of our female forebears, and our lives – those of us born in the years since WW11 – is startling.

Two women in particular stand out.

My great aunt Charlotte Whitten, known as Lottie, looks at first glance to have been independent. In 1906, when she was 27, she was single and living away from home, in the city. At first I thought she must have had some kind of career, but perhaps she was being supported by her parents – I have no evidence. What I now know is that she had been prevented from marrying the man she loved because he was her first cousin, and had gone – or been sent – to Sydney to remove her from proximity to him. She was clearly deeply unhappy, because she was found dead, having hanged herself by a rope from her bedpost.

It is unthinkable that any 27 year-old women of mine or my children's generations would be so dictated to by their parents. By 27 we were considered to be adult enough to make our own decisions because we were no longer financially dependent and not living under our parents' roofs. Education and social mobility were the main agents of this change.

The other sad story of failed independence is that of my great grandmother, Mary Jane Black. She married for the first time at the age of 18, in 1880 to my great grandfather George Morgan. In the next 6 years she had four children. When she fled (or was abandoned) she took only the baby. A woman with no money and no education had only the option of a man in order to survive. Between 1886 and 1895, she had six more pregnancies. Five of these babies survived, but their father George Ellis, died in 1896 so she was once again in need of a protector. When Mary Jane married Edward Sarchfield in 1899, they already had three children and she was committing bigamy as George Morgan was still alive, although she was almost certainly unaware of this. There were five more children – two died in infancy – before Edward died at the age of 50 in 1905.



Charlotte ("Lottie") Whitten

Mary Jane was finally able to have a small degree of independence only when she stopped having children – she had spent 25 years being pregnant or as a nursing mother. When Edward died, she had a house to live in, and some of her adult children lived nearby. One hopes that when she died in 1933, aged 72, she had had some happy years to compensate for her early struggles.

The world has changed for women like me – white, middle class, living in a first world country. There are still millions of women for whom independence is constrained by the very things that hampered my ancestors in the 19th century - poor education, limited mobility and lack of fertility control.