Elizabeth Sharkey is my grandmother’s grandmother, through an all-female line. I like to imagine this line as a fine gold thread coming from my heart and connecting me from mother to mother, spanning the oceans and the centuries back to a bleak workhouse in the town of Omagh in County Tyrone, Ireland.

In September 1849, 17 year old Elizabeth Sharkey sat gazing at the pile of clothes on her cot, more clothes than she had ever had in her life. She couldn’t believe they were actually given to her by the union. On the cot next to Elizabeth’s sat her best friend Biddy McQuaid, a year younger than Elizabeth, their friendship forged by the shared trauma of losing parents to starvation and fever during the horrors of the potato famine of the last few years. Although the workhouse had kept them alive with food and shelter, it had not provided them with any comfort or kindness, and their friendship was the only real security they had in their young lives. Thank goodness they were both chosen to emigrate to Australia.

They had no idea where Australia was, of course, except that it was a long, long journey by ship. They had known other families who had taken the voyage to North America or Australia but now to be going themselves was another matter altogether. They were equally excited and scared. But the girls were not sorry to be leaving the workhouse. The drudgery of laundry work, the scarcity of food and the harsh words and treatment dished out by the matron would definitely not be missed.

 Eliza checked off the list of clothes as the girls carefully laid them in their trunk. Six shifts. Two flannel petticoats. Six pairs of stockings. Two pairs of shoes. Two gowns. Biddy fingered the lettering on her trunk and asked Eliza yet again to read it to her.

 Soon enough the day came when nineteen excited and nervous girls from Omagh Workhouse, dressed in tartan capes and straw bonnets, pushed and shoved their way onto the cart to take them to Dublin and then by steamer on to Plymouth. There they boarded the barque *Diadem*, which would take them on a three month journey to their new life.

A newspaper article at the time describes their departure and hints at the animosity and vitriol which was to dog the girls for months and years to come.



Having survived the 88 day voyage to Port Phillip the *Diadem* anchored at Hobson’s Bay (Williamstown) on 10 January 1850 and the girls were taken ashore on Saturday and Monday. Williamstown was then a fishing village located six miles by walking track from Melbourne and it’s possible the girls had to walk the distance into the city. It would have been hot and through a very different countryside to what they were used to.

Eliza and her shipmates stayed at the Immigration Depot in Melbourne waiting to be chosen by a prospective employer who arrived to inspect the girls and choose one as a domestic servant or shop assistant. Eliza and Biddy must have felt very nervous and unsure. They stuck together and to their huge relief were both chosen for employment by John English. The contract was struck for a six months term at £10 per annum with board and lodging and they left the depot on 18 January.

John English had a store at 92 Little Bourke Street on the corner of Queen Street right in the heart of Melbourne. He had a wooden house with one room in 1850 and in 1851 was operating as a butcher, and by 1854 as a grocer. Whether he and the girls all lived together is not known but there was only one room for them all to share.

The Argus newspaper voiced its condemnation of the orphan girls time and time again: “the majority of the female orphans …. were degraded beings ….and were responsible for the melancholy increase to the vice and lewdness that is now to be seen rampant in every part of our town”.

300-400 people attended a meeting on Irish orphan immigration at nearby St Patrick’s Hall shortly after Eliza and Biddy settled into their new employment. A news article reveals a positive outcome from the meeting for the girls as ‘highly useful to this province, as supplying a description of labour urgently required, and contrary to other assertions made, “had been found to render much satisfaction to their employers by their honesty, good conduct, and a desire to improve their condition in society.’” Submissions by several police officers attested that a maximum of four girls only had found their way into prostitution – a far cry from the number being bandied about.

I don’t know how long Eliza stayed with John English but she was still in Melbourne one year later when she married John Charles Middleton on 6 May 1851 at St James Church of England Cathedral in William Street, Melbourne, by Banns. Witnesses were David Leedham and Bridget Leedham. This was Eliza’s best friend Biddy who married a year earlier, barely two months after arriving in the colony. Biddy had the consent of her guardian which wasn’t altogether unusual. The authorities were keen to marry off the girls to help right the colony’s gender imbalance. David Leedon and John Middleton were part of the group known as “exiles or Pentonvillians”, pardoned prisoners from several gaols in England who were granted their freedom on arrival in the colony. Many of the orphan girls went on to marry one of this group. John Middleton alias John Bibby arrived on the *Anna Maria* in June 1848 in Geelong.

And then came the gold rush. The discovery of gold deposits at Ballarat in 1851 changed everything, not just for Eliza but for Melbourne. In a short space of time, Melbourne was inundated with a massive surge of fortune hunters and hundreds of large ships were anchored in Port Phillip Bay. There was a shortage of accommodation and tent cities sprang up to house the thousands of immigrants before they trekked off to the gold fields. The local men deserted their jobs and their wives to seek their fortune on the gold fields. Women moved in together, not only for financial reasons but for security. At one stage there were only two policeman in the entire city - they too had gone to the goldfields.

And to the goldfields was probably the destination of John Middleton, Eliza’s (now departed) husband. I have found evidence of a John Bibby (Middleton’s alias) who lived around Bendigo with a wife and family some years later. Maybe he reverted to that name and just started a new life? He certainly never returned to live with Eliza again.

 By February the following year Eliza was in another relationship with James Martin Watts, a sea captain from Geelong. On 27 November 1852 my great grandmother Ann Elizabeth Watts was born in Geelong and baptized a few weeks later in the Roman Catholic church. In December a Mrs Watts was a passenger on the brig *Gertrude* (George Stuart, master) from Geelong to Hobart. Tasmanian coastal shipping records state that James Martin Watts was the captain of the *Gertrude* a 118 ton brig which plied the cargo trade between Geelong, Melbourne and Hobart. Watts was captain of this vessel until 1855.

 Now based in Tasmania, Elizabeth and James were married on 22 September 1853 when little Ann was almost one year old. They were married at the residence of Reverend W Day in Campbell Street, Hobart. Elizabeth stated she was a spinster, so a bigamous marriage for her!

Barely five months later, there is another marriage. This time James Martin Watts (bachelor!) married Margaret Reid Walsh at Circular Head in Tasmania by special licence. That same year their first daughter was born, with more children to follow. James was the bigamous party this time.

Eliza and little Ann must have returned to Geelong, because shipping records show them travelling once again from Geelong to Hobart on her former husband’s vessel the *Gertrude.*

Captain James Watts left both wives and children to return to England to his home county of Staffordshire where he married in 1858 to Emma Worsley. They both returned to Victoria where a son was born.

And what became of my great great grandfather, the master mariner James Martin Watts? He died in Sydney in December 1867 under the name James Martin, separated from three wives and still a relatively young man of 38. His death notice states he left four orphan children. No mention of his three wives who were all still living!

As a reader of this biography can imagine, this story has taken me a long time to unravel, with all the bigamous and trigamous marriages involved. But wait …. There’s more!

 My great great grandmother Elizabeth Sharkey/Middleton/Watts married yet again, as a spinster, to a soldier William Garment in the home of Reverend William Nicholson of Hobart. William made his mark and the literate Eliza signed her name, albeit trigamously, on yet another marriage certificate in June 1855.

William Garment was an Englishman from Middlesex. In 1850 he had enrolled in the 99th Regiment of Foot in England and travelled to Van Diemens Land in 1851. This regiment was ordered back to England in 1855 and many members transferred to the 12th Regiment which allowed them to remain in Hobart. William was attached to Headquarters in Hobart as servant (batman) to the Brigade Major.

It’s hard to comprehend that Eliza was still only 23 years old, but no longer the naïve young Irish girl who arrived on the “Diadem”. Her first brush with the law came the following November when she was charged by Mrs Fanny Whelan with using abusive and threatening language when Eliza threatened to “wring the neck off” the woman. The case occupied the bench for some time and the news article notes that “although the ladies were young and well dressed, they could call naughty names, and take lunars at, and use bad language towards, each other. From the testimony of Mr and Mrs Hughes, which was partially contradicted by that of Mr John Graham, the chief police magistrate thought there was enough elicited to make it necessary to bind the defendant [Eliza] over to keep the peace for three months, herself in the sum of £5 and two sureties in £2 10s. each.”

In 1858 William Garment was on detachment and the 12th Regiment was preparing to depart to Sydney, New South Wales. After burying her one year old son George Henry in Hobart, Eliza and her three daughters Ann (nee Watts), Sarah and Mary, moved with William and his regiment to NSW. William resigned from army life and the family moved to rural Bathurst in the central west of the state where William took up farming and five more children were born.

Ten years of farming didn’t bring William and Eliza the successful life they had planned and William was declared insolvent in July 1868. They struggled on, William working as a carrier across the Blue Mountains. William took to drink and the following article in 1890 describes their circumstances:

*[Bathurst Police Court] Friday, 28th February 1890. (Before the Police Magistrate.) GARMENT V. GARMENT.*

*This was a case of wife desertion, and the plaintiff sued to obtain support. Elizabeth Garment deposed that her husband had deserted her about the end of January and had not been near her nor sent her any money since ; they had been married 34 years, and she never proceeded against him before; he frequently took her rent money and drank and gambled it away, and was away, sometimes, all night; her husband works at Halliday's tanning yard and earns 25s per week, out of which he used to pay her £1 ; witness admitted that she drank a little, but was not an habitual drunkard and did not ever lock him out ; once he went to a drawer where she kept the money and took it all and she followed him down to the tannery where he pushed her into the pit ; she had sold the furniture to pay the rent. Defendant then deposed that his wife was a drunkard and that she had often shut him out of the house: he paid her £1 a week out of his wages and did not steal her rent money or push her into the pit at the tanning yard; he had sent her money since he left her. The P.M. dismissed the case, remarking that it was a sad affair.*

The situation didn’t improve for Eliza or William and they were still at odds with each other and obviously he was still drinking to excess. Back in Bathurst Police Court exactly one year later, this time it was a neighbour who took William to court.

*Thursday, February 26th, 1891. (Before the Police Magistrate and Mr. W. H. Paul, J.P.)*

*Handover v. Garment*

*William Garment deposed I am a tanner residing in Seymour-street, Bathurst, the information read is true ; I know the defendant, last Sunday week went as usual to attend to the horses and afterwards went to my daughter's house; returned home about half-past eleven and went into my bedroom and went to sleep, when I got up at half-past two found there was no dinner ready. Went into my wife's room and pulled her off the bed for not getting the dinner; the wife called out and defendant rushed into the room and swore at me and dashed me on to the bricks and hit m ; my face and hand were hurt. To Mr. McPhillamy: I did not drag my wife into the yard; did not hit her over the head with a stick; defendant did not see me in the yard, but came into my bedroom; the cut on my face was not caused by a man whom I cheated at dominoes some days ago; defendant had no edge' against me; he lives half a block away; did not strike him as he was too quick; as soon as I could get up I went to my sister's; am sure defendant did not do this because of the assault on my wife.*

*For the defence — I William Handover, a carpenter, was called and deposed: I remember the Sunday in questio ; between the hours of three and four o'clock in the afternoon heard loud screaming of 'Murder!' and 'Somebody come and help me!'; rose from my bed and went to the top of the garden, half way between my house and plaintiff's; the cries were still continued so I got over the fence and went to the gate; saw Mr. Garment with a stick 3ft. long by 1in. in diamete; he was beating his wife over the back; the stick broke in three pieces and he then punched and kicked her; I went over to him and said ‘You cowardly man,' then put my arms round him and dragged him into his room, sat him on the couch and said 'For God's sake keep quiet as it is Sunday, you should not beat your wife.' His wife came to the door and the prosecutor jumped at her and struck her again; I jumped up to stop him and he swore at me and knocked me down, my head was cut in the fall. While I lay on the floor the man tried to hit me again but his wife hit him across the back with a paling; to avoid any more blows, I went out of the room and he followed me out into the yard and wanted to fight; as he could not get near me he rushed at his wife and beat her again; he then went to the front gate where there were a lot of men and challenged them to fight. The complainant's version of the affair is all untrue.*

*By Mr. Thompson: I live 100 yards from Garment's; did not see any one else about the house; saw some other people but they were frightened to go near the place. Will swear the man broke the stick into three pieces on his wife's back and she was completely disabled through this. Advised the woman to go away but she did not. Did not tell any one else about this as I did not wish to bring disgrace on to the family. Am not aware that the wife is a drunkard.*

*Elizabeth Garment — wife of complainant —I remembered the day in question ; my husband was beating me and I sang out murder; my husband was quite stupid with drink and was beating me with a green stick and I thought he would murder me; young Handover came up then and tried to quieten my husband, but my husband fought with him. Mr. Handover has only seen me once since the affair but had no conversation about this. To Mr. Thompson: This was on Friday when Handover came with the subpoena; the stick he beat me with was pretty thick, and he beat me with it until he broke it; when he wanted to fight Handover the latter said, 'You are too old a man to fight me ;’I have been living for 36 years with my husband; have not taken a glass of drink for a long time; proceeded against my husband for maintenance, but the case was dismissed. The P.M. dismissed the case with professional costs against the plaintiff, £1 1s, 5s for one witness, in default two weeks' imprisonment.*

Despite his chronic alcoholism, William Garment lived for nearly twenty more years. He died on a Sunday morning 10 April 1910 of senile heart and is buried in the Church of England Cemetery, Bathurst. A newspaper obituary referred to him as an “old and respected citizen of the district”. The obituary also stated William left a Widow and six children; 4 daughters and 2 sons left to mourn.

Eliza spent her last years in the bosom of her family, surrounded by children and grandchildren. Elizabeth Sharkey/Middelton/Watts/Garment died as Elizabeth Garment, aged 85 years on 5 September 1916 at Rocket Street, Bathurst. The only marriage shown on her death certificate was to William Garment. Eliza died of senile heart failure and fracture of the thigh, congestion of lungs. She had been ill for 3 weeks. Eliza is buried in the Bathurst Church of England Cemetery and, although I have searched labouriously, I could not find her grave or a headstone.

My great great grandmother married three times, bore 9 children and lived to see grandchildren in her old age. When I recently moved to Melbourne one of my first outings was to St Francis Church and also St James Church, in its new location near Flagstaff Gardens. I was amazed at the emotion I felt as I entered these churches and felt a tangible link to my ancestor. Having left her native land and her relatives, I’m glad she had children of her own to comfort her and bring her joy, something she did not always enjoy with her husbands. Did Elizabeth Sharkey have a happy life? Probably not. But she made the best of it and I believe she was strong and brave and resilient – traits handed down to her daughters and their daughters. And so the golden thread continues to pass from heart to heart ….