Andrew Baker

Requiem for Mignon

The mystery of Mrs Nelson and Elgar’s secret daughter.
The original "Mignon" is a mysterious character in Goethe's novel "Wilhelm Meister." Mignon is a young acrobat and dancer, first introduced to the hero, who is travelling as an actor through eighteenth century Germany, as a "riddle" or "an enigma". Wilhelm rescues her from an abusive master and takes her on his journey. Mignon is a figure of mystery. Who is she? Where does she come from? She sings a song about her longing for Italy "Do you know the land where the lemons grow?" which inspired many composers including Beethoven and Schubert. She suffers an unrequited love for the hero, Wilhelm. She is androgynous, often wearing boy's clothing. When she dies the members of a secret society sing her elegy, the words of which were set to music by Robert Schumann as "Requiem for Mignon."

The haunting character of Mignon has influenced writers, artists and composers for two hundred years, as the classic image of someone searching for their origins and trying to understand an unknown past.
1 – Mrs Nelson

 Shortly after Michael Kennedy published his biography of Sir Edward Elgar, "Portrait of Elgar", in 1968, the composer Sir William Walton suggested that he should contact Sir Kenneth Clark, later Lord Clark, to pursue an extraordinary story. Walton had been a friend of Clark's in the 1940s when Clark had been Director of the National Gallery. Walton told Kennedy that it was known to Clark's family and friends that the family's cook, Mrs Nelson, had been Elgar's mistress and that her daughter was Elgar's daughter.

![Sir Edward Elgar c1911](image)

Michael Kennedy had heard rumours that Elgar had had an illegitimate daughter. Jerrold Northrop Moore mentions these rumours in his "Elgar, A Creative Life", published in 1984, long before Kenneth Clark’s story had appeared in print. Moore was very sceptical about the stories but he does say that they always involved a daughter.

The sources of these rumours are impossible to pin down but when Michael Kennedy heard the story from Walton he felt it was worth taking seriously. Elgar enjoyed surrounding himself with mysteries. He was a complex and emotional man, very different from his public image.

The idea that he might have had a relationship with another woman seemed credible to the biographer. He was highly strung and moody but also very fit and active. Around the time of his fiftieth birthday he set off to cycle from Hereford to London. His wife, Alice, was nearly ten years older and showing her age.

There were some periods in the composer's life when a serious personal drama might account for creative or emotional crises. Most dramatic was the time in 1906 and 1907 when Elgar suffered a kind of breakdown. He was under immense stress while trying to complete his oratorio "The Kingdom" and his mind was moving away from epic sacred works to far more personal abstract music, particularly the first and
second symphonies and the violin concerto. This is the most extreme of a series of periods of self-doubt which came with what were probably psychosomatic illnesses. What is understood of Elgar’s character has changed considerably in recent years with the rediscovery of Elgar’s intense relationship with the very much younger Vera Hockman in his seventies. Considering his character it is possible to imagine him having a secret life. Against this is the fact that his day to day existence is recorded in detail in Lady Elgar’s diaries and in an enormous number of surviving letters. At first glance it appears to be possible to know what he was doing on almost any day. This might seem to make the possibilities of an affair and a love-child going undetected very slim indeed, and yet there are always gaps in the record, and days and nights when Alice Elgar did not know what he was doing.

It is important to consider that Elgar’s reputation was at a low ebb in the 1940s and his romantic and emotional personality would not have been understood by many people at that time. He would have been an unlikely subject for such a story if it were an invention. Why would someone, inventing a story of a famous father, choose his name, of all the possible celebrities who were no longer around to answer for themselves? Kenneth Clark was not a musician, though the National Gallery became a famous venue for concerts during the war. Elgar’s would not be a name which someone might draw out of the air to impress him.

Soon after Walton had passed on the story to him Michael Kennedy wrote to Lady Clark (who, in the usual way of running a household, would actually have been the cook’s employer) asking for any information about the mysterious Mrs Nelson. It was Sir Kenneth himself who replied, on September 13th 1968, confirming Walton’s story and giving what proved to be a mixture of puzzling details, some still doubtful and some verifiable.

In the traditional style of cooks the supposed mistress of Elgar was only referred to as “Mrs Nelson” in Kenneth Clark’s letter and Michael Kennedy put the mystery aside, as the lack of a full name meant he was unable to identify the cook or her daughter. After nearly twenty five years Kennedy decided that it was worth making the story known in the hope that someone would be able to shed light on it. Mrs Nelson’s daughter might still be alive. He published a short article about the puzzle, “The mysterious Mrs Nelson”, in the Sunday Times on September 15th 1992. This gave the basic evidence from Clark’s letter and some speculation on Elgar’s various muses and his love of cryptic dedications.

My own involvement with the story began in 2011 when I found a cutting of Michael Kennedy’s article in my father’s copy of a book of Elgar letters. I was immediately hooked.
One of my most powerful experiences in my teens, in 1971, was hearing Sir Adrian Boult conducting Elgar’s Second Symphony in the Bedford Corn Exchange. Since then I have been immersed in Elgar’s world of passions, ghosts and the search for the “Spirit of Delight”, the underlying theme of the symphony. I could easily imagine that the composer had a secret life, perhaps entirely imaginary, but which might have involved a human incarnation of the Spirit of Delight. Elements of this idea have been woven through my own work ever since that 1971 concert. From the moment I read the press cutting I became personally emotionally involved – as many people are with Elgar’s very intense music.

In my work as a librarian I had become very well used to ancestry research using all the resources that had become available on-line. I felt I might be able to trace Mrs Nelson in ways that would have been impossible even as recently as 1992.

As the investigation went on the sense of being tied to the story myself became deeper. There were extraordinary pieces of luck, as well as complicated detective work, and before long I was in contact with people who had known the characters in the story. As I discovered more about these people I felt a growing sense of responsibility to “Mrs Nelson” and her family. I became aware of the underlying question of the morality of potentially exposing something that had been carefully hidden. Parts of the story were tragic and painful, other aspects surprising and dramatic. The Elgar rumour was a gateway into a world that is fascinating in itself, whatever the truth of that tantalising letter.

Right at the start I discovered that, a few months before my discovery of the newspaper cutting, Ismene Brown, the Sunday Telegraph’s deputy arts editor who had worked with Michael Kennedy on his article, had published an update on the
story on www.theartsdesk.com, “Elgar’s Enigma was a Lovechild named Pearl.”

This told what had happened after the 1992 Sunday Times story had appeared. A Rupert Nelson had contacted the paper and suggested that Mrs Nelson was his mother, Dora Adeline Nelson. Rupert had a sister, born twenty years earlier than himself, in 1907, whom he rarely saw. His mother was fascinated by the theatre and kept her “shorn Titian tresses” in a box. She would not speak of the past.

I contacted Ismene Brown and we began sharing information about Dora and her family. In the next few weeks we found birth and death and census records, and electoral rolls from the 1920s and 30s which gave an outline of Dora’s life and career.

Dora’s daughter had been born in a “Girl’s Home” in Wimbledon, and we tried to understand the options available to unmarried mothers in the Edwardian era. In fact this home was, it seems, successful and caring and Dora’s daughter, also called Dora, was able to have a reasonably good life.

The details of Dora’s career, and the people she worked for, gradually filled out, but we could not see how she could have jumped from the very modest households she served in the 1930s to being the kind of high class cook who might have worked in the places where we knew Mrs Nelson had worked the 1930s and 1940s. There are very few electoral roll records available outside London so it was difficult to trace her from the mid-thirties on. The clues we had from her son did suggest that she had worked in Guildford during the war, so it became more and more difficult to connect her with Kenneth Clark.

After a great deal of time-consuming research I discovered that Dora’s son, sadly, had been wrong. Kenneth Clark’s “Mrs Nelson” was not Dora. She and her daughter proved to be red herrings.

There was a clue in Clark’s letter which led very directly to the identification of the real “Mrs Nelson.”

Michael Kennedy’s 1992 article had not given Clark’s letter in full. When I read the complete text on Ismene Brown’s website I was surprised and intrigued that Clark had written that “Mrs Nelson” had previously worked for Lord Berners. By chance I have been fascinated by Lord Berners longer than I have been with Elgar. Berners was a composer, novelist and artists and, behind the scenes, a supporter of other artists. He was also well known as a practical joker. Once his involvement with the case of “Mrs Nelson” was recognised there was a slight suspicion that this might derive from one of his jokes. Berners was, though, a serious person under the surface, and very deeply committed to music – and good food.
Lord Berners

Bizarrely, at the age of five or six, I had 78s of Berners’ ballet “The Triumph of Neptune” amongst a pole of discs handed down by my father, with an acoustic gramophone. Even at that age I recognised the unique quirky world of Berners. He was almost forgotten at the time and in the early 70s, as a sixth former, I wrote to many of his surviving friends to find out more. This coincided with a concert in the Purcell Room, introduced by John Betjeman. Several of us went and mingled with recognisable faces from the 1930s ballet world, including Frederick Ashton and Margot Fonteyn.

In 1983 my father helped organise a Berners centenary exhibition and I found myself standing next to Diana Mosley at the Royal Festival Hall reception. Lady Diana, I now know, was not only a friend of Adolf Hitler but also a confidante of “Mrs Nelson”, and the cook makes a dramatic appearance in Lady Mosley’s autobiography.

The Berners connection was another reason why this mystery became personal and an increasing obsession of the next few years. My lifelong interest in Berners also meant that I knew the contacts who could provide more information. It was the simple fact that “Mrs Nelson” had worked for Berners which led to a definite identification of the cook, or, perhaps that should be, “what seemed to be” a definite identification – and what seemed to be a definite identification of the daughter. As time went on the matter of names and “who is really who” became far more entangled than I could have imagined.

Electoral rolls, which had helped trace Dora’s career, revealed that Lord Berners’ cook, at his London House, 3 Halkin St, was not Dora but a “Lilian Nelson”, living there from 1937 to 1939 with a William Nelson. They were, it eventually proved, a cook/housekeeper and butler partnership.

Clark’s letter to Michael Kennedy is the only direct evidence for the Elgar story, though he had certainly passed on the idea that the cook, “Mrs Nelson”, had been Elgar’s mistress to his family and close friends, including Walton, at the time.
Kenneth Clark wrote on September 13th 1968, from B5 Albany, Piccadilly W1:

Dear Mr Kennedy, I am afraid I have been travelling about the country for some time and so have not been able to answer your letter to Lady Clark.

During the war we had a cook called Mrs Nelson. She had been cook to Lord Berners and was an extremely good one. She had dyed red hair and the remains of considerable beauty, and in her youth had been on the stage in Paris. She claimed to have been a great friend of Jeanne d’Avril. She had a daughter, whose age appeared then to be about forty, who was also on the stage but without her mother’s advantages. The daughter was acting with ENSA, required a passport, and I had to sign the necessary form. She said, and her mother confirmed, that she was a daughter of Elgar, and indeed her name appeared as Elgar on the passport. I only saw Elgar once or twice, but to judge by earlier photographs she certainly had a strong physical resemblance to him. I used to pretend that Mrs Nelson must have been one of the unknown characters in the Enigma Variations, but of course the dates are wrong, as the Miss Elgar whose passport I signed cannot have been born much before 1905.

Yours sincerely, (signed) Kenneth Clark.

The application for a passport is a serious legal business and is not something people can take flippantly. Passports require signatures of a guarantor. Sir Kenneth Clark, would have been asked to sign the form, and the photograph, to confirm the identity of the applicant. At the time there was no requirement to provide proof of birth or parentage for a passport application. This implies, of course, that he knew the daughter well enough to do this.

No passport records survive for this period so it cannot be proved that the daughter actually used the name Elgar. Perhaps Clark misremembered this detail. It is very probable, though, that the daughter had not used the name he would have expected, Nelson, and it is easy to understand how this might have led to some curiosity on his part.

Perhaps a key phrase in this letter is “she said, and her mother confirmed, that she was a daughter of Elgar.” In other words it was the daughter who first told him who her father was. As the characters in this mystery emerge from the shadows this precise wording may seem more and more significant. Clark does not write that Mrs Nelson told him that she was Elgar’s mistress but that the daughter said that she was a “daughter of Elgar.” Clark made the obvious assumption that this meant that Mrs Nelson had been Elgar’s mistress, just as we, years later, made that assumption when we started investigating the mystery.

There is no doubt that this event happened. There is a letter from Mrs Nelson about this very passport application, and ENSA, in the Kenneth Clark archives in the Tate Gallery. The letter makes it clear that it originally enclosed the forms and photograph for Clark to sign. The letter is undated but almost certainly dates from 1941 or 1942, which is how it is indexed in the Clark Archive in the Tate Gallery.

How old was the daughter?
She appeared to be “about forty” he says, and yet he says she “cannot have been born much before 1905”. He was clearly unable to judge her age. He was, it appears, trying to stretch her birth date backwards to bring it closer to the date of Elgar’s “Enigma Variations”, composed in 1899. Each of these variations is a musical picture of one of the composer’s friends, the last being an energetic self-portrait. The penultimate variation is a strangely atmospheric piece marked only with three asterisks. Clark wondered if “Mrs Nelson” have been the subject of this thirteenth variation, a secret lover, and that this relationship with an unknown woman might have resulted in the birth of a love-child. Could Mrs Nelson’s daughter have been born about that time? Though Clark’s words are confusing it does seem as if he was grappling with the fact that the daughter was clearly not old enough to have been born in 1899, which would have made her a few years over 40 when this incident happened.

In fact the woman for whom Clark signed the passport application was not much over 30 at the time.

Clark’s comments about Mrs Nelson’s early life are also puzzling.

"In her youth (she) had been on the stage in Paris. She claimed to have been a great friend of Jeanne d’Avril." This is an extraordinary claim. "Jane Avril" (she used the English form of the name) was a star of the Moulin Rouge in the 1890s. Avril was a dancer of a wild and original kind, particularly associated with the Can Can. She is most famous from the series of posters and portraits of her by Toulouse Lautrec.

If there is any truth in this it would link the 1940s cook to a world which seems a very long way from wartime London. Was it possible that Mrs Nelson could have been a "great friend" of Jane Avril, whose career had been at its height over forty years before?

Jane Avril was closely associated with England. In the late 1890s she was a sensation at the Palace Theatre. When she returned to France in 1899 she took with her a troupe of English dancers. Her closest friends throughout her life were English. After touring France in 1901 she worked in New York and then returned to Europe, appearing again at the Moulin Rouge and the Bal Tabarin. She toured as one of a quartet of dancers, her Quadrille. Jane Avril died during 1943. She was still alive when the passport incident happened.

Dancers started very young. Even star dancers in the London theatres could be in their early teens. Even if Mrs Nelson had been a dancer at the time that Jane Avril returned to Paris from a very successful period in England she might still only have been in her fifties when Clark knew her. She might have been some years younger than this and known Jane Avril at a time when the famous dancer was making one of her “comebacks”. The story is surprising but not impossible.

But who was the daughter?

Living with them are a Phyllis Nelson and a Mignon Nelson. In other years this Mignon also appears as “Mignon Harman Nelson” and “Mignon Harman.”

When I first found this document on-line this unusual name stood out. Surely this must be Lilian Nelson’s daughter. But why did she have a different surname, and why was she so uncertain which name to use? Could it be that Mignon was the daughter of an earlier marriage? Was Mignon unsure about taking on a step-father’s name?

Here was a person who did, at least sometimes, use a different surname to her supposed mother. Was there a connection between this and Clark’s puzzlement at what he remembered as “Miss Elgar”? If the daughter was Mignon did she actually apply for a passport as “Mignon Harman” and was it this that sparked Kenneth Clark’s curiosity and led to a conversation about her name - and who her father might have been?

My guess that this Mignon was the dancer, hoping to join ENSA, was quickly confirmed, or so it seemed.

A Google search found two references to Mignon. One, mis-spelled “Mignon Harmon, was in the cast list for a 1928 Jack Buchanan show. The other, tantalisingly and very bizarrely, was in a quotation given as an example of the use of the word “vivacious” on a Russian English language website. There was no source given.

“One of Phyl’s Plaza chums, Mignon Harman had an unhappy life at this time; she had been adopted by a doctor and on the surface was a vivacious person spending her time playing cards and laughing with the rest of them.”

This frustratingly untraceable quotation, which must, surely, have been about the same Mignon, seemed to suggest that something tragic was about to follow. The tragic theme was confirmed by the only other trace of Mignon in the whole of the ancestry.co.uk resources – her death certificate from 1946. She had committed suicide.

Mignon was, indeed, a dancer and her life had ended with a gas oven. This must surely be “Miss Elgar”.

But who was the “Phyllis Nelson” who was living with William, Lilian and Mignon? A sister of William Nelson? Just like Kenneth Clark I had made some immediate assumptions. If Mignon’s name was Harman was this Lilian’s maiden name or her name from a previous marriage? Had she married William Nelson around 1930 and Mignon had not been happy to take on the new family name?

There were no traces of any marriages that matched Lilian in either name.

Following the first revelation that “Mrs Nelson” was Lilian and not Dora more information quickly appeared. Lilian Nelson, the cook, began to emerge as an individual remembered vividly by everyone who knew her. She was something more than one of the many domestic servants working over steaming pans in basements. She was a very successful professional working for very demanding employers. Wilhelmina Harrod, in an unpublished interview with Gavin Bryars, who was researching for a proposed book about Lord Berners, called her a “frightfully grand cook”.

10
Mignon emerged even more startlingly. She was also vividly remembered. There are personal accounts of her. I was able to speak to a friend of hers who spoke as if the 1940s were only yesterday.

Ismene Brown published an article on the story so far in The Spectator Online on January 8th 2015, which included a link to my account on my own website www.heardmusic.co.uk. Sadly Michael Kennedy had died at the end of 2014. He had kept up with our research and had written to Ismene:

‘Gosh! What a magnificent piece of research by Andrew and you. Please tell him I am overwhelmed with admiration. I feel this must be the truth… I read it through at a sitting and was enthralled. I would be honoured to write a foreword.’

But the investigation seemed to have come to an impassable void. Who were these people? There was no sign at all of any Lilian Harman or Nelson who could be the cook in the ancestry records, apart from the few electoral rolls in the 1930s. There was a death certificate for Mignon but no sign of her birth. What was her real name?

My colleagues working in libraries have enormous experience of ancestry research and we have never come across such a complete blank. Something was wrong. There was a deeper mystery.

On November 2nd 2015 the “1939 register” was published. This is a census of the British people at the outbreak of war, used to produce identity cards, plan evacuations and rationing. This instantly proved a revelation. There, in 1939, are Mignon Nelson and Phyllis Nelson, listed as “dancers travelling” in a boarding house in Sunderland. Unlike the older censuses the return gives the actual dates of birth, not just an age. The register is more than just a snapshot of the moment. Alternative names were been added to the document over a long period after 1939. Mignon’s name has been changed by the authorities to Harman. Phyllis Nelson, who I had not been able to identify, appears, at first sight to be Mignon’s older sister but she has also had her name corrected. Her real name, as far as the authorities were concerned, was Phyllis O’Callaghan.

After three years of research this was a bombshell.

If Phyllis was not Nelson but O’Callaghan the same was almost certainly true for William and Lilian.

In a few minutes I had found William N P and Lilian J O’Callaghan – certainly the couple we had searched for as Mr and Mrs Nelson. Even more oddly Lilian’s name had been altered three times, from Lilian to Gillian, back to Lilian and finally to Elizabeth Mary O’Callaghan.

This, then, was her “real” name.

Within days a mass of new information had been fund on ancestry.co.uk, all locking together perfectly, and I was in contact with Lilian’s great niece, great nephew and three grand-children. “Mrs Nelson”, it now appeared, was just one facet of a very complicated life, a life that was surprisingly well documented and yet which has new and unexpected mysteries within it. Whether or not the story has anything to do with
Elgar it is clear that Lilian and her husband kept professional tight lips. It appears that Lilian never spoke about her past. Only one of her present day family had heard the name Mignon, as Phyllis’s friend until her suicide. Though there are stories about her later life hardly anyone knew about Lilian’s career before the end of the Second World War but the facts that did emerge revealed an extraordinary story with new mysteries.

Mignon, it seems, was not “Mrs Nelson’s” natural daughter but a girl who lived with them, unofficially adopted perhaps, and who sometimes called herself “Mignon Nelson.” Her origins are still untraceable and may remain so, unless the publication of the 1921 census reveals more information.

It’s a haunting story and the more we discover about the O’Callaghan family the less surprising a connection with Elgar becomes.
2 – William and Lilian

The records available on ancestry.co.uk give a clear framework for the story of Lilian and William O’Callaghan for at least their first thirty years. There are documents of many kinds, giving precise details, all of which interconnect to confirm that this is a continuous story of one unusual family. In 1925 the clear thread becomes tangled and there are inexplicable mysteries - though there are strange things about this family from the beginning. Both Lilian and William had a penchant for experimenting with alternative names. Lilian was not born Lilian, but Elizabeth or Lizzie.

It's best to put everything in strict chronological order, though this does mean that there are a great many dates and facts before the story becomes more three dimensional.

Lizzie Connelly (Elizabeth Mary Connelly) was born into a Roman Catholic family on August 15th 1883 at Clondalkin, County Dublin, Ireland. (Her birth record has not been traced, but this, and all the facts in this chapter, are confirmed and double checked by other documents.) Her father was William (born in County Kildare in 1851) and her mother was Mary, born 1856. William Connelly was a railway labourer. In 1901 the family lived at 8 Bluebell, Clondalkin, close to Inchicore, still today the main engineering workshops of Irish railways. Inchicore also had a tram depot with quick links to Dublin City Centre.

Neither William nor his wife were literate. The children were all able to read and write.

Lizzie (as she appears on the 1901 census) had three brothers, William John and Owen, all at school in 1901, and three sisters, MaryAnne, (a seamstress) and Julia and Maggie, like Lizzie recorded as Domestic Servants in 1901.

On May 7th 1903 Julia, Margaret and Elizabeth sailed on the Mayflower from Liverpool to Boston, Mass., arriving on May 16th. They were originally listed as having no occupation but this has been corrected to "servant." They were travelling to stay with their aunt, Mrs Jos.Tempest, who lived at 30 Hecla St, Dorchester, Mass, a few miles south from the centre of Boston.

This aunt was Catherine A Tempest. She was listed as the widow of Joseph P Tempest in the 1912 directory of Springfield where she later lived. Catherine was born in Ireland in 1851. Her husband, Joseph, was a stonecutter. Her maiden name was Riley. Though US censuses state that her husband was born in Mass, Joseph was actually from Yorkshire, a quarryman. She died 1918.

There is no trace of Lizzie's return home, but her sisters stayed in the USA. On April 3rd 1904 Julia married Patrick Joseph Donovan, a motorman on the Boston Electric Railway who had been born, like her father, in County Kildare. Julia's address at the time of her marriage was Aunt Catherine’s at 30 Hecla St, Dorchester. Her husband lived at 20a Cypress St, Somerville, northwest of the Boston City Centre. Margaret also seems to have stayed in Massachusetts.
Lizzie may have stayed in the USA for two over two years. In a later document, a 1917 border crossing from Canada to the USA, Lilian, as she had become, stated that she had previously been in the country between 1904 and 1906. I suspect she has simply misremembered the date that she originally left Ireland and underestimated how long this first time in America had lasted.

By 1907 she was, presumably, in England and had met and married her partner for over 50 years, William O'Callaghan.

By the 1911 census, three sisters, Lizzie, Julia and Maggie and the oldest son, William, had left home and Lizzie’s parents had moved to Phoenix St, New Kilmainham, Dublin.

William O'Callaghan was born in Southampton on the 22nd March 1882. His father Charles, born in Southampton in 1854, was a railway clerk. His mother was Emily, also born in Southampton. He had four brothers, Patrick, Walter, Charles and Hugh (a sailor) and five (or more) sisters, Emily, Ellen and Edith, Kathleen and Nora, the last of whom was born in Twickenham in c1885. Charles worked for the London and South Western Railway, which operated main lines to Southampton, Portsmouth and Exeter from Waterloo, as well as south west London suburban services through Twickenham. The O'Callaghans, including Lilian and William, kept close links with Twickenham area for the rest of their lives.

*Crane Rd, Twickenham. William’s family lived in no. 14, for many years.*

At the age of 19, in 1900 William was briefly employed as a shunter for the London Brighton and South Coast Railway, at New Cross. He was dismissed as “useless”. In 1901 he was a railway shunter for the LSWR at Twickenham. This was a tough and dangerous job and William may not have kept at it for long even if he had been less useless working for the rival company.
William used his various names flexibly but in 1905-6 he seems to be calling himself William Walter O’Callaghan. Walter was the name of one of his brothers. The date and place of birth, 22nd March 1882 and Southampton, certainly suggest that it was William who was employed, for less than a year, in the Royal Navy, as an officer’s servant. This would be good experience for someone whose temperament and vocation was more suited to the work of a butler than the dangers of the railway yard.

William joined the Encounter on 16th December 1905. At the same time as Lilian was in the USA William sailed to Sydney, Australia. This would be the first of three occasions on which he would be listed on a ship bound for Australia. His service was very short-lived. The record card gives dates of service on the Pembroke as 15th March 1906 to 7th June 1906 and yet, confusingly, notes “to be sent home on Oruba, leaving Sydney 7/4/06. This was not a naval ship, but a ship of the Orient Lines, on the Australia service, transferring to the Royal Mail Steam Packet Co, in 1906. I do not understand the note of this record card “man informed that his SC has been impounded” or how, in spite of this speedy end of a short naval career, his conduct is marked “VG.”

The documents imply that William and Lilian were married in 1907. They are recorded to have been married four years in the 1911 census. I have not been able to trace a marriage certificate, though there may be explanations for this. Lilian was last been heard of in Boston in 1906, William returning from Australia in the same year.

Wherever they met and married they were certainly a couple by 1910, and in the Twickenham area, close to William’s family.

There is a family tradition that the O’Callaghaens had a first child, Joseph, who died young. I have not been able to confirm this, though there are several possible births in the years before the birth of their daughter, Phyllis Edith Lilian O’Callaghan. She was born at 19 Royal Rd Teddington on 15th December 1910.

The father is named as William O’Callaghan and, for the first known time, Elizabeth or Lizzie gives her name as Lilian O’Callaghan, maiden name Connelly. Lilian is the informant and gives her address as 7 Beechcroft Avenue, Golders Green, Hampstead.
An extraordinary number of addresses appear on the various documents throughout this story, many in the Twickenham and Teddington area. It appears that Lilian and William rented rooms or houses for short periods, implying that their work was elsewhere.

Phyllis’s birth certificate shows two addresses. The registrar was informed of the birth three months after the birth took place. This seems a long time but births were usually reported by the mother and she may have been unwell, or working away, as this implies she was.

19 Royal Road was owned by a William Stanley Watkins, according to electoral rolls, who owned other property in the area. This is likely to have been one of the many temporary addresses Lilian and William used. On the birth certificate William appears as “Butler”. He would have been employed at a larger house somewhere within reach. Royal Road is a modest suburban street where families may have employed maids, but not butlers. A butler is a position of responsibility, quite separate from the rest of the servants. It was better paid and a very respectable profession.

In spite of his unsuccessful navy experience William had become a butler only four years later.

It is reasonable to deduce that William was employed in a larger establishment in the Twickenham area, but Lilian gives her own address as 7 Beechcroft Avenue, Golders Green, some miles away in North London.

This may be where she was employed in March 1911. Had she been working there before the birth of Phyllis, or was this a very brief employment? She was not at that address only two weeks later when the 1911 census was taken. It is possible, then, that this was where Lilian had been working before Phyllis’s birth.
7 Beechcroft Avenue (according to the 1911 census) was the home of John Theodore Goddard.

Goddard (born 1879) was the founder of the law firm of Theodore Goddard & Co in 1902. This became a major business and Goddard’s later clients included Wallace Simpson for her divorce case.

In the 1911 census, which was taken on April 2nd, less than three weeks after Lilian had given the address on the birth certificate, the residents of 7 Beechcroft Avenue were

John Theodore Goddard, aged 32 and single.
May Emily Saul, 58, a visitor from Leominster, Herefirdshire.
Ellen Buckingham Reeves, 59, a visitor, and a popular novelist of the day, under maiden name Ellen Mathers. She had published her last two novels Gay Lawless and Love the Thief in 1908 and 1909.
There were two servants, Kate Ann Wild, 39 and Ada Eden, the cook, 30.
The neighbouring houses have only one or two servants, so one of these may have replaced Lilian.

Only two weeks after Phyllis’s birth had been registered William and Lilian appear on the 1911 census, (April 1911.)
William and Lilian on the 1911 census.

In the 1911 census William O’Callaghan and Lizzie, now calling herself Lilian, were both employed as domestic servants at a house called River Deep, Cross Deep, Twickenham. This was part of what had been Baroness Howe’s villa, partially demolished in 1840. They are recorded as having been married for four years.

William and Lilian’s employers are John George Chancellor, a private tutor, and his wife Fanny. Also in the house are an Italian student and an American travelling manager with his wife and daughter.

The census notes that William and Lilian have one child living but she does not appear on the census. Phyllis, would have been five months old. She may well have been looked after by the William’s father and mother who are now living nearby at 14 Crane Rd Twickenham, with his sisters Edith and Kathleen (laundry machinists), Nora (home help) and brother Hugh, a sailor.

One of the most remarkable features of Lilian’s story is that Phyllis stayed with her throughout her life. Over the following years Phyllis went everywhere Lilian and William went. When Lilian died sixty three years later Phyllis was living a few miles away. In contrast, Lilian also had four sons who had lives separated from their parents to different degrees, though this can be explained by their parents’ constant movements and changes of employment. It must have been difficult for anyone in service, at any level, to bring up children.

There is no definite evidence that Lilian worked as a cook until the 1920s at the earliest. On most of the documents, even as late as 1928, she gives her occupation as housewife, and only on one occasion each as “housekeeper” or “domestic”. It is possible, though, that in the early part of their careers, William and Lilian worked in partnership as a butler/valet and housekeeper/cook as they did later for Lord Berners. It is hard to imagine how they could bring up Phyllis unless they had a regular employment which would provide a regular home. Though the evidence is flimsy I suspect this was the way they lived and worked until about 1923/5 as will be shown later.

Though Phyllis was not with them in the 1911 census she would stay with them for the next twenty years, wherever their adventures took them.

Between the registration of Phyllis’s birth on 15th March 1911 and the census on April 2nd 1911 William and Lilian had found a position where they could both work together, with Phyllis, presumably, nearby. At this point William and Lilian are listed as...
domestic servants so it is understandable that William would want to find a more suitable position, and one with a better income.

Patrick William Nelson O’Callaghan was born at Hampton Court Palace on 22\textsuperscript{nd} November 1912. This is also given as Lilian’s address. Lilian gives her name as “Lilian Josephine”, a combination of names that she used often over the next thirty years.

Patrick became an electrical engineer. He died in 1982.

\[\text{Lilian’s sister Mary Anne with Patrick c1935}\]
Hampton Court Palace is as large as a small village. Within the palace are more than fifty apartments. These were traditionally “grace and favour” homes granted to aristocratic widows. As recently as 2009 Patrick’s Christine widow mentioned in a conversation with her sister-in-law Jane (second wife of Lilian’s third son) that her husband had been born at Apartment no. 9. This was the home of the Dowager Lady Napier of Magdala.

The O’Callaghan family remember the name “Lord and Lady Napier” in connection with Hampton Court and also with Lilian’s mysterious fourth son who seems to have vanished without trace, perhaps taken away and adopted by wealthy people. Christine may have remembered the name and found the details of Lady Napier’s apartment in a book “Grace and Favour” published in 2005 and now available online, but the name Napier has been carried down through the family and it is reasonable to accept that it was at Lady Napier’s apartment that Patrick was born.

In the 1911 census, taken just eighteen months earlier, the Dowager Lady Napier of Magdala, widow of Field Marshall Robert Napier was living in this fourteen room apartment on the top floor of Fountains Court with her younger son, Albert, a footman, cook and two domestic servants.

The 1911 census for no. 9 Hampton Court Palace.

Lady Napier of Magdala was her husband’s second wife. His two sons by his first wife became successively the second, third Lord Napier, without children. Mary, Lady Napier, had three sons herself and her eldest son Edward Herbert Scott Napier became the fourth Lord Napier. Albert Napier, who was living with his mother at Hampton Court, and probably still was when William and Lilian worked there, was a barrister. He had no success in his own practice but, in 1915, he became private secretary to the Lord Chancellor and had very long and significant career as a civil servant, dying in 1973.

The 2005 publication which lists all the inhabitants of the apartments gives an impression of Lady Napier’s establishment:

In May 1892 Lady Napier wrote a long list of requests for work to be done to her apartment, including a new kitchen. This request was eventually granted and it was the last apartment to gain a third-floor kitchen. Lady Napier also asked for a bathroom, but changed her mind when she discovered that it would be at her own expense. In c1905 the apartment comprised bedrooms, storeroom (amended to bathroom), servants’ room, lobby, lavatory, stores and servants’ lavatory, library, kitchen, servants’ room, pantry, drawing room, dining room, nursery (amended to
smoking room) and a further lobby. By the 1920s Lady Napier was very frail and she
had a hand-powered lift installed at her own expense. It was not, however, a great
success as it required immense strength to raise the cage and it was removed at the
end of her tenancy. In 1914, one of her servants was called Miss James. Lady
Napier died in the palace in 1930.

(Grace & Favour © Historic Royal Palaces, 2005 ISBN 1 873993 50 1)

Lady Napier lived on the highest floor of the east side of Fountains Court.

According to the birth certificate William has now become a butler, a servant with a
high status, usually working very closely with the master, or mistress, of the house.
There is no butler listed in Lady Napier’s establishment in 1911, so perhaps William
had filled a vacancy soon after Phyllis had been born. The butler in this kind of
household, would be expected to live in, and, having their own room, it would be
possible for Lilian to remain there, as another member of the staff, until giving birth. It
would not be so easy to keep children with them.

Phyllis may have been with William’s family in nearby Twickenham at this point, or
she may have been tolerated in the apartment. Patrick was given to the O’Callaghan
family to be looked after but William and Lilian did not stay at Hampton Court.

Less than a year after Patrick’s birth Lilian and William made a dramatic move. They
set sail for Australia, as if intending to emigrate to the country that William had briefly
visited in 1906. Though Patrick was left behind they did take Phyllis, who was now
two years and eight months old. They sailed from Liverpool on the Runic, bound for
Sydney, on 21st August 1913, only six months after Patrick’s birth. They give their
country of last permanent residence as Ireland. It seems likely that it had been
impossible to keep up the post at Hampton Court with the new baby and they had
decided to leave, probably visiting Lilian’s Irish family before deciding to emigrate.
William gives his profession as “Butler”, and he may have hoped to find employment in the same role in the new country. Lilian is listed as “housewife.” With Phyllis to look after Lilian may have hoped to have been supported by William rather than to have to go back into service herself.

The move to Australia was not a success.

Though they had travelled as passengers intending to make Australia their country of permanent residence the family returned to London less than six months later, sailing on the Moravia. They arrived back in London on the 5th February 1914. For the return journey William describes himself as a “Chemist”. Perhaps there had been no suitable employment for the 31 year old butler. Another reason for their decision to return may have been that Lilian was pregnant again.

Roy Desmond O’Callaghan was born on 14th July 1914 at Chesterton, St George’s Rd, Isleworth, which is also given as his father’s address. They were back home close to William’s father and his family in Twickenham.

This address was the home (in 1911 and in later electoral rolls) of Ernest Albert Lane, 45, assistant secretary of a railway institution and his wife and one servant. It was probably a convenient lodging within easy reach of the William’s father in Crane Rd, Twickenham.

Roy was placed in the care of Lilian’s sister MaryAnn who had married Joseph Redmond and was living in Inchicore.

During World War II Roy was an RAF air gunner flight sergeant and later returned to Dublin to work on the railways, as both his Irish and English grandfathers had done. In the 1940s he also, with William and Lilian, worked for Prince Aly Khan in Ireland.

On Roy’s birth certificate the father is simply named “William O’Callaghan” and is described as a “Secretary Public Company”. From this point until his death William
would describe himself as a Secretary as much as Butler, though more often as a “Private Secretary” which implies a post of confidentiality. Though his professions seem to change rather often it could be that there was more consistency and continuity in his life than is immediately apparent. In the next few years the O’Callaghans made two long trips to Canada and the United States and these seem to be more understandable as business trips than as family visits.

Just over two years later, on the 28th November 1916 William, Lilian and Phyllis arrived in Newfoundland. They sailed on the Cranley to the port of Botwood, and went on to Bishop’s Falls.

Ten months later, on the 1st September 1917, they sailed on the Kyle from Port au Basque, Newfoundland, to North Sydney, Nova Scotia, on their way to Boston.

Their border crossing into the USA on 4th September 1917, gives an enormous amount of information. William’s father’s address is given as 14 Crane Rd Twickenham, Lilian’s father’s as 35 Phoenix St, Inchicore, Ireland. From this form we know that Lilian was 5 foot six inches tall, with auburn hair and hazel eyes.

Lilian’s has slightly underestimated her age, giving 30 when she would have been 34 in August. Phyllis’s age is given as 5 when she was actually nearly seven.

William is described as a clerk, which may be consistent with his description as “Secretary Public Company” on Roy’s birth certificate three years before. He appears to have abandoned domestic service for the time being. From the border they were travelling south to see Lilian’s aunt, Mrs Joseph Tempest, in Springfield, who died the following year.

It appears that they stayed in Springfield eighteen months, until a year after Lilian’s aunt’s death. How could they afford to have such a long holiday? And what took
them to the remote Bishop’s Falls, with the six year old Phyllis, just in time for a long winter?

Bishop’s Falls “nestling in the heart of the Exploits Valley” must seem a desolate place in winter even today. The local website mentions its attractions as icebergs and whale watching. In 1917 it was only just beginning to be developed.

This gives an impression of what Bishop’s Falls was like in the early 20thc but it might actually be a nearby settlement.

The settlement was connected to the port of Botwood by a railway in 1900-1 with the construction of a long trestle bridge. Better access lead to the opening of a pulp mill, processing wood for the paper industry, in 1911. The mill was operated by an English company, A E Reed and Co, who began to export pulp through Botwood to Britain. The population rose from 20 in 1901 to 343 in 1911.

There is a complete census of the population of Bishop’s Falls in 1921 available online. There is no sign of anyone born in Ireland who could be a relation of Lilian’s, and only one or two people from England. The population was almost entirely born locally. The mill did have an English manager, A E Harris, who worked there until his retirement in 1929.

Bishop’s Falls today.

After eighteen months in the USA the family returned to Liverpool from Boston on the Prinses Julian on 10th March 1919.

On the passenger list William now describes himself as an “Investigator.” This may mean that he has had to take on a temporary role as a private detective to help support his wife and family, assuming that he would not be paid by his employer for