

15. The Man Of Mystery

The Alias

Despite all that I had learnt about Grampa over the years, through the family and community stories and the vast collection of letters and documents I had uncovered, I realised that I knew nothing of Grampa's life prior to him coming to Maloga. He still remained a mystery.

His name was Thomas Shadrach James, or at least that's the name by which we always knew him. It wasn't until the 1990's, after much research, that I came to realise that this was a name he chose for himself as he fled his country of birth.

Searching for Answers

When Brenda and I married, moved to Echuca and bought a car, one of our favourite pastimes was to visit family such as her father Ron, Nanny Pris and Pop Mackray, my Aunties and Uncles and other Elders in our family and community.

Asking Nanny Pris

When I asked Nanny where Grampa came from she would say: 'He come from over there ... from Ceylon or somewhere!' I kept asking her over many years, in the hope of getting a more definite answer, but it was always the same.

Asking the Aunties and Uncles

When I asked the Aunties and Uncles where Grampa come from, they all seemed to have stories that were in some ways similar to each other, but in other ways very different. Some would say Grampa came from India, some Ceylon and others from Mauritius. Some would say that his family were tea merchants in Ceylon. Dad's sister, Auntie Iris Atkinson, had told me during the 1960s that Grampa had arrived in Melbourne and was studying at college where he befriended G.J. Coles. So, during the 1970s, I headed off to make contact with the family of G.J. Coles and managed to contact his daughter who held her father's personal records and diaries. Sadly she came back to me to advise there was no mention of anyone that resembled Grampa anywhere in his journals. Of course, that doesn't mean they weren't friends.

Another relative suggested that Grampa studied teaching in Sydney, taking the name James from a family he lived with there, before moving south to teach at

Maloga. Another said he arrived in Sydney and studied medicine there. Someone else said he befriended some people named James on the boat on his way to Australia, and took their name. During the 1990s I contacted the universities of Tasmania, Sydney and Melbourne but none had any record of Grampa studying medicine (the University of Tasmania wasn't founded until 1890, which was too late for Grampa, considering he arrived at Maloga in 1881).

Asking the Cousins

My cousins Murray Moulton (grandson to Grampa's daughter Becky) and Carey James Jnr (Grampa's grandson) had been told similar stories.



Me with my cousin Carey James Jnr.

Source: Courtesy Carey James Jnr.

One family member recently told me she had learnt that:

Grampa landed in Tasmania and started studying to be a doctor straight away there. Then he got sick and couldn't continue because his hands used to shake. He wanted to be a surgeon. Then he moved from there to NSW to study the bible and get formal qualifications in the ministry at Singleton Bible College. He then came to Maloga as teacher's assistant to Mr Matthews. Then a couple of years later he became the teacher in charge. He studied to become a qualified teacher after that.



Cousin Murray Moulton.

Source: Courtesy Kimberley Moulton.

All the people I asked about Grampa's history between 1946 and 2006 told me that Grampa was studying to be a doctor. Many told me that Grampa was a Brahman or Tamil Indian, and that he spoke many languages, but no one ever seemed to know for certain his place of birth: was it Mauritius, Ceylon or India? The one story that seemed most common amongst everyone was that Grampa was studying medicine at Melbourne University, contracted typhoid fever, got the shakes, was not able to become a surgeon, so he had to give up his studies. With all those different stories, one thing was certain – there was a real sense of mystery surrounding Grampa's life. This only spurred me on!

Oddly, Grampa's children seemed to share the opinion that the past is in the past, so 'why do you want to know that?' My cousin Rhonda Dean confirmed to me that her father Uncle Carey (Grampa's youngest child) felt the same: 'When we were kids and used to ask questions about Grampa, Dad would say that Grampa's life in Mauritius was in the past. They weren't interested in talking about the past, it's in the past!' And I know from first hand that Nanny Pris was the same. This seems to be the reason why the mystery and confusion around Grampa's life has built up over the past 100 years.

Rhonda Dean also went on to say that:

I remember as a little girl when we first moved out of Anzac Avenue to Cameron Avenue, Shepparton. I was ten and these people came from Mauritius. They were down the back in the shed and Dad was with them and the people were speaking their language. I don't know who they were, but I reckon they were from over there. This was around 1960. When I asked who they were ... they were black and Indian looking, Dad said, "you don't need to know about who they are".

But Dad was in there with them – They were talking the language, yet Dad didn't know the language – It was really strange – But I remember asking Mum, can Dad talk their language? But Mum would say: 'no your father can't talk that language'. But he was there listening, taken it all in ... big trunks would come from Mauritius all the time for Grampa, with silk and Indian saris ... coming all the time.

Dad spoke about when his father went back to Mauritius for the first time. Grandma Ada wouldn't go. He was gone for about 6 months. Dad always kept close to them because he was the change of life baby – Dad called his father Dada.

I remember that Nanny Pris also called her father Dada.

Rhonda recalls that one of the men who travelled to Australia to spend time with family here was named Ebenezer. Remember this name as it may be helpful later in this story.