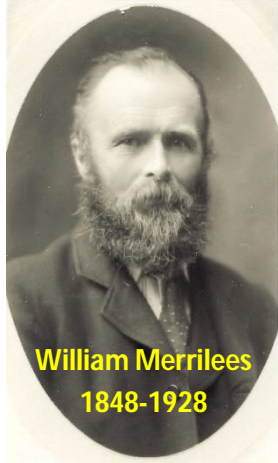


DNA to the Rescue – Tree 11

Researched by Don Munro, husband of Christine Elizabeth (Bet) Merrilees, in Perth Western Australia

Tree 11 is the only Aberdeen-shire tree in the Merrilees Family Association and starts with Esther Chalmers who had an illegitimate son she named William Merrilees. Tracing the tree back to Esther was relatively easy but what happens next? Would it be possible to find William's father – where



would we look? First clue of course, is that Esther gave her son the surname Merrilees; did she pluck the name, quite an unusual one, out of the air? Quite possible I suppose but back in those days the church was the guardian of their parishioner's morals and in a small village you could be sure that the Elders would know of an illegitimate birth. So, was Esther brought before the Kirk Session to confess her sin and name the father and did a Merrilees admit to being the father. From Scotlandspeople, we find *"In the case of an illegitimate birth, the father's name might be recorded along with the penance committed by both parents, for example, having to make a public confession and profess their repentance before the congregation, being forbidden to take communion for a set period of time, having to pay a fine to Poor Relief. In cases where the father was unknown, the mother was often put under considerable moral pressure to name him and sometimes an alleged father would dispute the mother's*

allegations. The drama would be played out through the Kirk Session minutes. Sometimes the mother would resist all attempts to discover the father's name and the child would be recorded under the mother's name" The father's name would be used if he acknowledged paternity. Again from Scotlandspeople we find *"If the parents were not married when the child was born, the father's name could still be entered in the register provided he admitted paternity; that is, he went with the mother to register the child and they signed the register together. The child's birth would then be indexed under both the father's and the mother's surnames. However, in practice, some were registered only under the father's surname, and known by that name"*. As I asked before, did this mean that William's father had admitted paternity? Where I could possibly find the answer would be in the Kirk Session minutes for the Longside Parish – but these are kept in Edinburgh, a long way from Perth, Western Australia and they are not on line. I commissioned a researcher to check the minutes to see if any record could be found; unfortunately he found nothing. Nor could we find William's birth certificate.

This seemed like a dead end but we did not give up and the next step was to find any record where William stated that his name was Merrilees and where his father's name was shown. In the certificate for his marriage to Margaret Will, his father is shown as William Merrilees, draper, deceased. When Margaret died, after bearing thirteen children, William married Margaret's sister, Jemima, and in this certificate, his father was again shown as William Merrilees, draper, deceased. His death certificate showed his father as Merrilees, draper and of course, he was William Merrilees in all of the Census records during his lifetime. From all of that we can see that William at least, was quite convinced that his father was a William Merrilees.

The way forward was to find if there were any William Merrilees in Aberdeen at that time who could have been the father - and we did find one. William Mirrielees, a merchant and his twin brother James and their families lived there. In the 1837 Pigot's Directory William is shown as a Draper in 72 Union Street, Aberdeen and his brother James is also there as a general merchant in 9 Adelphi Court. No other William Merrilees could be found, so this William Mirrielees had become the central focus. He is also found with his family in the 1841 census under the name Morilees. Caroline Merrylees was now interested in this tree, our research agreed and she was convinced that William Mirrielees was the father. As far as I was concerned, what our research proved was not that he was the father but that he was the most likely father and using traditional research methods this was as far as we could go.

By the way, the William Mirrielees we are looking at is in tree 33 and the book Muir & Mirrielees, shows him at that time as a partner in the firm Cattenach & Mirrielees, clothiers & tailors, 126 Union Street Aberdeen. Is it a coincidence that the 1851 census shows Esther Chalmers and her sister as seamstresses?

Enter our Chief at that time Mike Mirrielees who, in his wisdom decided that the Merrilees Clan needed to find a common ancestor and the only way to do that was by DNA testing. Thank you for that Mike! Fifteen trees were tested to twelve markers by Family Tree DNA and it was found that fourteen of the trees matched exactly in all twelve markers with the other tree matching eleven markers. What this proved was that all of these trees had a common ancestor about 400 years back. Bet's Tree 11 is one of the trees that matched exactly, proving least that her original Merrilees name was correct but of course not yet proving who the father of our first William was. Next, Mike decided that the way forward was to test to 37 markers and asked for volunteers to contribute to the cost of doing this. Both Trees 11 and 33 were tested and Tree 11 was found to be only one marker different from Tree 33 – a very close match, in fact this is what Family Tree DNA says about such a match.

*“For example, if you and your match have both tested at the Y-DNA37 level and are a 36/37 match this is a genetic distance of one. You are then considered tightly related. **Few people** achieve this close level of a match.”*

Traditional research showed that we had a very possible match and I believe that this, combined with DNA testing proves that William Mirrielees from Tree 33 was the father of our first William and that Tree 11 can now be combined with Tree 33.

Footnote: I said above that William Merrilees is mentioned in the book Muir & Mirrielees. What an interesting family that is for, along with Andrew Muir, Archibald Mirrielees founded the first high class department store in Moscow. Nationalised during the Russian revolution the store still exists as TsUM just opposite the Bolshoi Ballet building. It is a very interesting book and well worth reading for anyone interested in Merrilees history