



WHITFIELD FAMILY



WHITFIELD

Irwin Munro

Service No: 1065



Photo Courtesy Greenough
Museum and Gardens

Basic Information

Name: Irwin Munro Whitfield

Service Number: 1065

Date of Enlistment: 1/4/1915

Age at Enlistment: 20 years 3 months

Medals, Honours, Awards:
British War Medal, Victory Medal, 11914/15 Star

Height: 5 Ft. 8 ½ inches

Weight: 163 Lbs.

Chest Measurement: 35cm

Complexion: Medium

Eye Colour: Brown

Hair Colour: Black

Father: Edward Goldsmith Whitfield

Mother: Amy Goldsmith Maley

Siblings: Claudia Kniest, Mary Guerin (Polly)

Married: No



TROOPER IRWIN WHITFIELD.

Killed in action somewhere in Egypt after three years' service. Son of Mr and Mrs. G. Whitfield, Greenhills.

Courtesy National Archives of Australia

Life Story

Irwin was a great-grandchild of one of the earliest settlers in the Avon Valley, Captain Francis Whitfield (1777-1857) who arrived in W.A. in 1830 with his wife Charlotte Maria Meares (1789-1847).

Charlotte was a relative of Richard Goldsmith Meares, York's second Resident Magistrate. Francis and Charlotte's son, Thomas, settled a pastoral property, "Yanadooka," on the Irwin River in the Mid-West. His son, Edward Goldsmith (1871- 1935), worked the property with him.

In 1894, Edward married Amy Goldsmith Maley (1869-1943) whose family owned a mill at Greenough. Edward and Amy moved to "Wonobbing," a farm at Greenhills in the York district.

Irwin was born on the 14th January 1895 and educated at Scotch College, Perth. Typical of so many Western Australian farmer's sons, he enlisted in the 10th Light Horse Regiment in May 1915, one of many recruits who had answered the call for reinforcements after the Anzac landings on the Gallipoli Peninsula on the 25th April.

Irwin's Regiment, the 10th Light Horse, was part of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade which had been sent to Egypt, initially to defend the strategically important Suez Canal. This is an extract from a letter he wrote:

*Heliopolis camp Sunday 25th July [1915]
"We have arrived in camp. And my word this is a place. Cairo is absolutely one of the dirtiest holes on God's earth I reckon...."*

Irwin wrote regularly to his family, especially to his mother Amy.



Card sent by Irwin to Claudia
Courtesy M. Bennett & Dr G.M.
Galvin.



Card sent by Irwin to his Mother
Courtesy M. Bennett & Dr G.M. Galvin.

Irwin survived service at Gallipoli and, on the 29th December 1915, he arrived back in Alexandria following the evacuation of the Peninsula.

The 10th Light Horse Regiment evacuated on the nights of the 18th and 19th December 1915.

Irwin wrote, on the 2nd January 1916, from Heliopolis camp, Cairo:

"We are back in Cairo, and we are not very sorry either, but still the coming away from the Dardanelles and thinking that we had left all those good men who had fallen before us was really hard but still we are back with our horses"

Over the next thirty months. Irwin was engaged in the actions as the Australian Mounted Division slowly pushed the Turkish Army back towards Damascus.

Irwin died on the 3rd May 1918. He was killed at the Battle for Es Salt, in Palestine, by a gunshot wound to the head. All witnesses reported that death was instantaneous.

The Record of Service, Egyptian Expeditionary Force records:

May 2/3 1918.

10th Australian Light Horse was attacked 4 times during the night, but succeeded in beating off the enemy with heavy losses.

Irwin was buried the same day near where he fell.

After the War, the Graves Registration Unit moved his remains to the Damascus Commonwealth War Cemetery (Grave Reference D70).

His memorial tablet has been engraved with the words:

The only son of Ned and Amy Whitfield of Greenhills, York, WA.



Photograph of Irwin's first grave:
Courtesy M. Bennett & Dr GM Galvin.

WHITFIELD Claudia Kniest



Life Story

Claudia Kniest Whitfield, born in 1900, was the eldest daughter of Edward Whitfield and Amy Maley who lived at Wonobbing Farm at Greenhills, near York. She had a brother, Irwin Munro, born in 1895, and a sister, Mary Guerin (known as Polly), followed in 1902.

In Claudia's day, the old English class system still prevailed and, although they didn't have lots of money to spare, her family was at the highest end of Western Australia's social spectrum. Claudia was educated at Methodist Ladies' College in Perth.



Claudia, aged 13, is dressed as a nurse at this children's Fancy Dress Ball held at Greenhills Hall in 1913. Which child is she? Your guess is as good as ours – but possibly standing next to the boy and man on right hand side of picture.

Courtesy York Residency Museum P04.22

Little is known of Claudia's early life but, after her brother, Irwin, enlisted in April 1915, she began to correspond regularly, passing on news of family and friends from home and writing about day-to-day events on the farm. The first written record of Claudia is her last letter to Irwin which was returned to her after he was killed in action in 1918:

*"Wonobbing"
Greenhills
1.5.18*

*"My dear old Irwin,
Dad and Courcey have gone to the Beverley races today, so mum and I are on our pats*".*

"Aunt Grace was up here for a few days.....on Monday she got a wire and she had to start work on Wednesday at Wooroloo..."

"Courcey....is going to stay until after the ninth, that is the day when we are having our entertainment for the Red Cross.... we are hoping that it will be a great success financially. York made about four hundred pounds on their day".

"The seeding is going on well. Dad had to get another boy to scarify in front of the drill, as the weeds were so bad. We are hoping that it will rain, as the grass is beginning to curl up for need of a drop".

*"Toby sent Polly a photo of himself the other day, it was a good one, but he has grown a moe, and he looks just like a blooming pommy officer.
This is all the news, so heaps of love from your loving old sister, Claud" xxxxx*

*[*derived from Cockney rhyming slang: Patsy Malone = alone]*

The 'Aunt Grace' mentioned in the letter was Grace Maley, sister of Claudia's mother Amy. She was a nurse by profession, so it is likely she was working at the Wooraloo Sanatorium which had been established in 1914 to deal with infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid and diphtheria. These diseases were widely prevalent in the aftermath of the mass migration that came as a result of the gold rushes in Western Australia in the early part of the twentieth century.

After Irwin's death on the 3rd May 1918, Claudia left school, declaring that she would come home and help her father run the farm. In her own words, she intended to be 'the son my father has lost'.

At that time a woman's place was considered very firmly to be in the home. Although the Commonwealth Parliament had passed an Act which gave the vote to adult women in 1902 (women in Western Australia had had the vote since 1899) women were not allowed to actively participate in War work, as they could in the U.K. during the First World War. In Australia, their role was seen as that of supporting men through activities such as fundraising with the Red Cross and C.W.A. (Country Women's Association).

Claudia was determined to take an active role in the management of the farm, and a series of farm diaries from 1921 to 1949 offer a glimpse into how she did this. Although her father was suffering from ill health, it was he who wrote the journals listing the everyday activities on the farm, the notes about crops grown, sheep sold and all the other minutiae of rural life right up until his last illness in 1935.

However, in 1922 Claudia began to make entries in the diaries:

*'Gordon not working' '
Moore started today' '
Men returned home. Too hard to follow'*

It is possible that Claudia took responsibility for paying the staff wages, especially during periods of her father's absence, such as September 7th to the 16th when he went into hospital for an operation.



The Whitfield Diaries
Courtesy Mr. Malcolm Bennett &
The York Society Archives and Research Centre

By 1923, Claudia was handling more of the farm finances, and her diary entries increased as her father's health declined. Edward Whitfield made his last entry in the farm diary in 1935:

4 May. *"Ill in bed"*.

5 May. *"Harold came out and took me back to hospital"*.

By the 6th May 1935, Claudia had taken responsibility for the practical running of the farm at a very difficult time.

11 May. *"Sheep seem to count out about right"*.

15 May. *"Went into York. Dad not so well."*

16 May. *"Operation. All in York. At Toby's."*

23 May.



Mary [Polly] and Claudia Whitfield, early 1920's.
Courtesy Greenough Museum & Gardens

Nothing was entered for the 23rd May 1935, the date of her father's death. The date is simply crossed out.

Taking on the farm was a challenge that some people would have never considered. The Great Depression of the early 1930s saw the value of Australia's wool and wheat exports halved. Many farms were abandoned and even respectable, hard-working people could be made destitute.

The effects of the Depression lasted until the beginning of World War Two.

At the time of Edward's death, a woman could not legally undertake some business transactions without a man acting as guarantor, so Edward may have appointed trustees to manage Wonobbing farm after his death.

Even with trustees looking over her shoulder, Claudia appeared to be excited about running the farm. Although she seems to have had some initial help from neighbours, she was soon thrown into the thick of it.

The farm workers, however, did not adjust well to being told what to do by a woman. The diary shows they were quarrelling and Claudia dismissed one, then another gave notice. According to her God-daughter, Anne Nicholson, Claudia was a strong woman, both mentally and physically. She was intolerant of weakness, including her own and, as the year went on, Claudia's confidence in her own decision-making abilities grew.

As well as making decisions about the running of the farm, Claudia was not afraid to take on practical farm work herself. Killing a sheep was something she did regularly. Mutton was the staple diet of many farmers and, every fortnight or so, a sheep would be killed to feed not only the family, but the workers too.

By 1910, there was a steady trade in frozen meat exported from Fremantle and, when a new freezer plant opened in Albany in 1936 to process lambs for export to the U.K., Claudia was quick to tap into this rapidly expanding market.

The following years were tough for those on the land. The Wheatbelt, like the rest of the State, was in drought between 1935 and 1940, and temperatures in 1938 were particularly high. There was a severe water shortage at "Wonobbing" and Claudia continued to have problems with workers. With little cash-flow, it is likely that the farm desperately needed maintenance. She was forced to sell land to raise capital.

The outbreak of war, in 1939, affected everyone on the farm. The staff changed again, and Claudia took on more practical farm work (as many women did during World War Two) including harvesting, binding, carting and even the worst jobs like attending to flyblown sheep. There was a fuel shortage during the War and nineteen horses were put to work, rather than use the tractor.

Claudia's sister, Polly, remained on the farm with Claudia and their mother, Amy. Polly had taken on the more conventional domestic role of an unmarried woman. She ran the household, doing the washing, mending, cooking and preserving of fruit and produce. Both Amy and Polly continued to attend social events whilst Claudia stayed at home. Claudia's God-daughter, however, remembers her as having a very strong sense of duty and hearing of her taking a leading role in fundraising activities during both World War One and World War Two.

The only recreation Claudia seemed to allow herself was golf, and she remained a keen member of York Golf Club throughout her life.



Amy Whitfield
Courtesy Dr. G. M. Galvin

Amy Whitfield died in 1943, leaving Claudia and Polly to continue running "Wonobbing" Farm. By 1944, there were only two men working on the property, both too old to be conscripted, and they were getting older. Other men now refused to work with horses, so it is likely that the onset of mechanisation, combined with lack of money and staff shortages, convinced Claudia to sell the farm.

With the sale of Wonobbing, Claudia and Polly bought a house at the corner of Harriet and McCartney Street. It was a spacious building with wide verandahs and a large garden. The garden, and any outside chores, were Claudia's domain, while Polly undertook most of the domestic work.



The house on corner of Harriet and McCarthy Street
Courtesy Cathy Clarke

They settled into their new routine and always rose early, doing chores in the morning before a midday meal and rest. The afternoons would often be spent visiting, especially anyone who was sick.

Claudia would don her best hat and gloves and could often be seen in one of the many tearooms, or the Ladies' lounge of the Castle Hotel, meeting friends after shopping.

She remained keen on golf and one of the very few photographs of her shows her presenting the Whitfield Trophy at York Golf Club Ladies' Day.



After Polly died, in 1968, Claudia had a small house built in Glebe Street, where she remained, wonderfully independent, for the remainder of her life, until a fall led to her hospitalisation and death in 1993.

Claudia never forgot her much-loved brother Irwin and her final request, carried out as she wished, was to have Irwin's medals buried with her.



The house in Glebe Street that Claudia built after Polly's death
Courtesy Cathy Clarke

In many ways Claudia was a woman ahead of her times, running the farm against immense odds in a man's world.

Neither Claudia or Polly ever married.

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