

**THE
MAP OF
WILLIAM**

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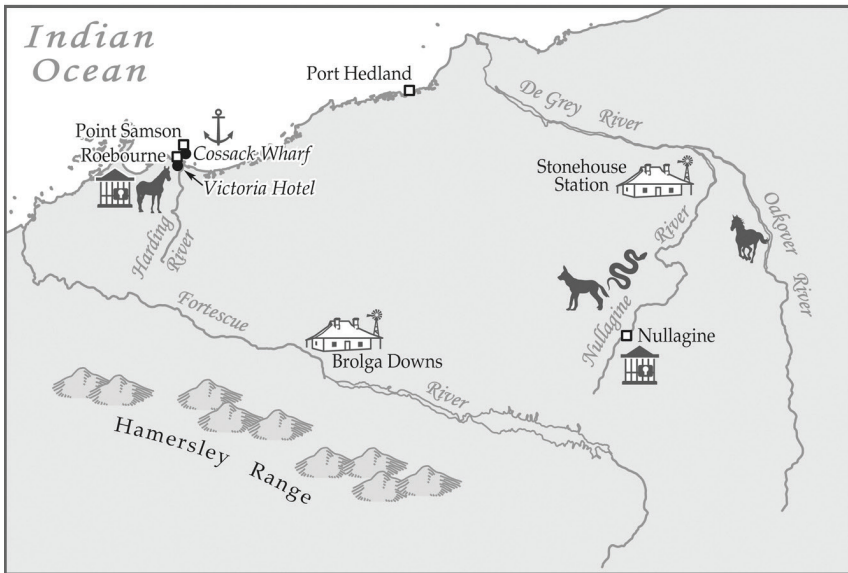


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To my family, past, present and still to come

*The author respectfully acknowledges the Noongar, Yamatji
and Martu peoples who are custodians of the lands on which
William walked.*

Although *The Map of William* is a work of fiction, the story is grounded in a time and place and aligned to historical events as they are known and recorded. The characters in the book are also bound to the era in which they lived, and what they do and say should be seen within that narrow context. Actions, words and attitudes that would be considered misguided today were often widely accepted at the beginning of the twentieth century. To omit them for the sake of propriety would be an impermissible diversion from the truth, regardless of any offence their inclusion may cause.



THE JOURNEY OF WILLIAM WATSON, 1909

CHAPTER ONE

My mother is a woman prone to tears. My father dries them gently and is slow to anger. I love them both in equal measure and find comfort in their devotion to one another. My father is my father, a man set apart from any other. My mother is my mother, first to rise and last to dream. She moves like a silent wind about the house and her fragrance lingers in every room long after she has left it.

He is a quiet man, my father, but there are treasured moments when I hear his voice. The deep resonance of his tone mingles with the soft mirth of my mother. I can hear them through the wall in the stillness of morning and smile when I catch a thread of conversation. My interest piques when they revert to Welsh, their language of choice when resolving any disagreement.

From time to time my name is mentioned through the lilt and hum of muffled voices, more often these days it seemed. A lull for a sip of tea is signal of a truce. The scraping of a chair on timber floorboards followed by a slamming door is confirmation that my mother has the upper hand. The tinkle of a spoon on an enamel mug seals a rare victory for my father. I know the signs. There is a rhythm to it all.

I share a bed with my two brothers. Our Thomas is five and suffers the curse of a weak bladder. Additional padding in his cotton britches absorbs the flow but does little to quell our discontent. He

is sorry to be the cause of our torment and has promised to stop drinking if that would help. Our Robert is eleven. He snores loudly and farts quietly but is otherwise fine company.

My sister Meg has married and is expecting a child of her own. Motherhood at seventeen seems a strange turn of events for my kind and feisty sister, but she is content with her lot. Her husband is a jovial fellow who speaks with a broad north English accent. He closely guards his nefarious past and, when pressed on the nature of his offences, James Martin delivers a practised answer.

‘I pissed on the guvnor’s flowers, young William, and they withered and died. The guvnor was none too pleased so here I am in Old Fremantle, married to your sister.’

I have always suspected that he was a highwayman.

My mother has given birth to nine children and is not yet thirty-five. Six are now living. My sisters Rebecca and Annie complete our household. At sixteen, our Rebecca has caught the eye of a widower twice her age. My mother likes him. My father has reservations and so do I. Our Annie is ten and scorns the prospect of a life in servitude to another.

‘I will run away and you will never see me again!’ she would threaten.

I tease her endlessly and she bristles when I recommend an entirely unsuitable prospect for marriage.

‘He has a grey beard, William Watson. And he walks like a duck. I would rather die!’

The ebb and flow of life always promised change. I felt it coming and contemplated its arrival with a mix of excitement and trepidation.

The news came that I had been indentured to Mr Hobbs, a prominent architect in Perth. It was a position that I would assume on my fifteenth birthday, still some months away. My good fortune was due in part to a glowing reference from Mr Forrest who had recruited my father during his tenure as Surveyor General. I had shaken his hand on more than one occasion and he seemed to like my father well enough. Their paths crossed from time to time but Hywel Watson made little fuss of his connection to important men and Mr Forrest was now in parliament.

The summer of 1909 brought a welcome reprieve from the slicing cane wielded by Mr Llewellyn, my schoolmaster. I took my many punishments with as much fortitude as I could muster and endured his invectives with stone-faced defiance.

‘Every day is a reward, William. When you lay your head to sleep, reflect on what you have done and learn from your mistakes. God knows you make enough of them to be the wisest boy on earth! Hold out your hand if you please!’

On my final day under his drudgery I heaped more than a modicum of horse shit on his favoured chair. I had gathered it fresh that morning from a dray on Mouat Street and thought it an apt parting gift. I do not regret its doing but the act was clandestine and lacked courage, on reflection. His parting words were kind and I mumbled my thanks.

‘You are a clever lad, William. Never shun what God has given and work hard to prove yourself worthy of His gift.’

Mr Llewellyn is not a good man but he is not a bad one either. Some weeks later, a chance encounter altered my opinion of him.

‘Thank you for the horse manure, William. It now serves its rightful purpose in Mrs Llewellyn’s cabbage patch.’

A glance of censure from my mother was all it took to seal my fate.

‘William has always enjoyed your classes, Mr Llewellyn. He speaks of you with great fondness, so thank you for your patience with him. I know he can be a trial and he is often a recalcitrant and wilful boy,’ said my mother, her singsong voice laced with irony.

The swelter of summer drew us to the river at Point Walter. Robert and I clambered up the limestone cliff and leapt into cool oblivion. Beneath the surface I flailed in silent desperation and drew welcome breath as my head re-emerged. Robert took great delight in being the more accomplished swimmer and flickered a cheeky grin when I expelled a mouthful of acrid water.

The race was on to ascend the cliff face and Robert, lighter in frame, scampered ahead. I had long dismissed the notion that I would be a lithe and supple athlete and congratulated Robert on his victory after arriving at the jump point some time after him.

‘The truth is, Will, I could not bear to look at your hairy arse from below. It is not a pleasant sight,’ he quipped.

We heeded our mother’s warning and took shelter from the midday sun. Robert was strangely subdued as we shared a soft apple. To while away the time, I sketched the vista below and boggled at the skill of the boatmen as they navigated a path between treacherous sandbars.

It was not long before Robert revealed the root of his consternation. My honest brother wore his heart on his sleeve and possessed no guile or streak of meanness. My mother spent long hours working on his letters but they were a blur to him and the cause of great frustration and anguish.

‘I am not like you, Will. You are good at everything you do.’

‘Not everything, Rob. Your farts could destroy an army and any fish would love to swim so well.’

My reserve of witticisms had reached their limit so I spoke my father's words.

'Our Robert will make a fine craftsman one day, mark my words. He has a talent for fashioning something from nothing and the patience to see it through.'

'Who said that?' Robert asked.

'Father said it, you numbskull. To our mother. He spoke in Welsh. And you know what that means.'

'What did mother say?'

'*Mae'n fachgen coeth. Mae mam yn gwybod.*' He's a fine boy. A mother knows.

Most of what I said was true and Robert's mood lifted, despite my poor command of Welsh. When we finally made it home, Mother kissed him on the cheek and I smiled at the gesture.

'You reek, our Robert! William, prepare a bath and scrub behind your brother's ears! I will not have you smelling at the table!'

My father is a merry drunk and an amorous one it seemed to me. We waited at the kitchen table for his imminent return, all scrubbed and smelling of velvet soap. Our stomachs groaned at the lateness of the hour but Father always took the first bite and nothing good would come of complaining.

Time moves slowest for those who watch its passing and so, to stay the pangs of hunger, I recounted Robert's exploits on the River Swan. I crafted a tale of such daring that any knight of old would proudly lay claim to the gallantry of my brother Robert. He basked in the moment and I watched his face glow as the story unfolded.

The latch clicked open and my father's head appeared. I could gauge the state of his intoxication by the degree of whimsy in his tone. I smiled broadly as he made his grand entrance and surmised

that he had consumed more than a few. As he circumnavigated the table, none was spared from his canoodling. Mother bore the brunt of it and was chased around the kitchen.

‘Thank you for waiting. Before we start, I will need to use the privy. It will be a short visit so be thankful for small mercies. Talk amongst yourselves while I take my leave.’

It was a sign for my mother to serve the food, and generous dollops of mutton stew were spooned from pot to plate. My father made a great show of taking the first bite and, after several false alarms, plunged the dripping fork into his mouth. It was a tradition peculiar to our family and a source of great affinity and connection. There was no silence at our table, even in times of sadness.

Ale can make a man maudlin but not so my father. As the candle dripped low we were ushered to our beds. Wax was precious and oil for our lamps in short supply, so darkness preceded sleep and that was that. My status in the house had risen with the news of my indentureship and my father asked me to remain behind while Mother attended to the younger children.

Hywel Watson is a man of wit and talent and, for the most part, I am proud of him. He would be absent from home for months on end surveying remote parts of a vast land and assessing its potential for human habitation and industry. He often grumbled that solitude was an unnatural state for any man and relished the easement of his family. I treasured these moments alone in his company and breathed a sigh of contentment as he commenced his ruminations.

‘Wales is a small place. It is a green and pleasant land. This country, Terra Australis, seeks out the weak and burns them to a crisp. I have seen birds fall from the sky, stone dead before they hit the ground. It is a wild and empty land. How the native folk have

tamed its unruliness and thrived in parts where human habitation does not seem possible is beyond my understanding. I am but a poor Welshman, William. A stranger in a foreign land.'

The candle flame shuddered as a gentle draft exhaled across the room. My father had ceased his musings and looked me squarely in the eye. He held my gaze and compelled me to return it with equal sobriety.

'A man is nothing without his family, Boyo. I cannot describe the longing I feel when absent from you all. It pains me to leave but leave I must. It puts food on the table and there are too few men trained in my profession in this far-flung corner of the world. In my many absences your mother has endured the loss of three children without a husband at her side to offer comfort and consolation. I too feel these losses, William. Each one is a stake to my heart. Sons I will never know. A daughter I will never hold.'

My mother removed her apron and joined us at the table. Over recent weeks I had observed a softening in her manner towards me and assumed that tiredness from long days in the service of her family was the reason. Whispered conversations, all in rapid Welsh, would often end in tears for my mother and a bout of quietness for my father. This I concluded was an anomaly and would soon right itself when the sea breeze returned.

'Your mother and I have reached an agreement, William. It has not been an easy task to find common ground where you are concerned.'

Louisa Watson shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Whatever my father's decision I knew that she had opposed it and only relented in deference to his position in the household.

'In eight months you will leave our home and live under another man's roof. Mr Hobbs will provide board and lodgings with his

family in Perth and you will be free to visit when time permits. It is what occurs in the meantime that is of concern and the cause of some rancour between your mother and myself. The Chief Surveyor has sanctioned an expedition to the northern hinterland and for that task I require an assistant. You will be that assistant, William. It has been decided. We journey north in thirty days.'

CHAPTER TWO

Robert took the news of my impending departure with grace. I knew that he would suffer through my absence but his blessing was genuine and heartfelt all the same. My mother sensed his quietness and, after completing the daily duties on the list she had drawn, gave us leave to spend time in each other's company.

She was with child again and lacked the fortitude to empty our burgeoning privy, so in our youthful ignorance we volunteered to assume that thankless task. Robert showed commendable resilience and chortled away as I emptied the contents of my stomach.

'This is our shit, Will. I hate to think what you would do if it was someone else's.'

If the sheets on our bed remained dry we allowed Thomas to accompany us on our jaunts. He was under strict instruction to remain silent or we would abandon him at the lunatic asylum, just a dog's bark from Holland Street. Our threats fell on deaf ears and he drove us to despair with an inexhaustible barrage of questions.

'What is a lunatic, Will? If you leave me there, how will Mother know where to find me?'

On and on he went, asking the same questions more than once and trying our patience to breaking point.

'A lunatic is a boy who pisses his britches while he sleeps, Tommy.'

Mother could visit every second week with fresh linen, and stale bread for your supper,' Robert answered.

The mulberry tree we sought overlooked the high wall of the asylum courtyard on Finnerty Street. We climbed its branches and found safe purchase within reach of a cluster of ripened fruit. I sketched the scene below while Thomas and Robert gorged on the purple bounty. The asylum could be seen from our house on Holland Street and we had passed by it a thousand times. I had made detailed drawings from every angle of the building, but never from a mulberry tree. Finials decorated the limestone façade and high windows framed the harbour and ocean beyond. From my vantage point perched above the shaded cloisters, I thought the life of a lunatic to be a rather blissful one.

'What are the lunatics doing, Will?' flicked Tommy's blackened tongue.

'Playing cricket and reading books, I think. One is chopping wood and three are sleeping under a tree. I thought I saw a boy but their heads are shaved so I could not tell for sure.'

My father is a font of local knowledge and after supper he recounted his only visit to the asylum.

'It was in a professional capacity, let me make that clear, William. Resist the temptation to use me in one of your stories, if you please. Contrary to what your mother says in my absence, I am not a lunatic. From my casual observation most inmates are normal souls with little to distinguish them from those we meet on the promenade. Some are women of ill repute who fall foul of the law. Others are slaves to drink and lack the strength of mind to overcome its temptation. Many are shadowed by sadness and spend their days in a state of melancholia. There are degrees of insanity, William, as

you will no doubt learn. It is my view that they are fortunate to have such care and, as you have seen for yourself, they roam the grounds as you and your brothers roam the streets.'

'And yet many are prisoners still, not having committed any crime. How can that be?'

My mother smiled and continued with her embroidery.

Charles Yelverton O'Connor, the engineer, was a man revered by my father. They had met on several occasions and shared a common dislike of English snobbery and entitlement. The new harbour he had constructed was a place of wonder and, as a small boy I had spent long hours watching it take form. Silt and rock were dredged at the river's mouth and heaped on long barges for removal out to sea. It was a sight to behold and we marvelled at the ingenuity of Mr O'Connor's plan.

'Without Mr O'Connor this colony would be a poorer place. The English hate a clever Irishman, William. And they despise a clever Welshman, so be warned. They drove him to an early grave with their spite and callousness. Lesser men all of them and I am saddened by what has transpired.'

In his familiar state my father is a circumspect and diligent man. I had learned to never repeat what ale had spilled and decided that I would press him further on the matter when he was sober. Meg's husband, James, was English and I liked him well enough.

It was a still morning on Mr O'Connor's harbour. Gulls bickered overhead as Robert and I sidled down the length of Victoria Quay. The blue-green water rested between tides and appeared as glass in the early light. Across the harbour tiny wavelets lapped against the hull of a steamer anchored in quiet repose after her journey.

Father always said that Mr O'Connor's harbour was like an

amphitheatre. Sound echoed across the water and conversations could be had between north and south if the wind played its part. So I tested his theory and waved at a lone sailor who had cast a line from under the north wharf bridge.

‘Ahoy there! How are the fish biting?’

‘My bucket is empty and my line is limp! Does that answer your question, boy?’

‘May I suggest a different place to cast your line?’

‘If it provides a change of fortune I promise to throw my first mackerel across the water! I trust that you can catch!’

That evening, Mother prepared a fish stew with all the trimmings. Father was delighted that we had invited the lone sailor to our table and was a gracious and gregarious host. In the blink of an eye, Donal Campbell became an honorary member of the Watson family. His easy manner and charm had cast a spell on both my sisters who fluttered and giggled in his presence. Our Tommy asked a thousand questions and Donal answered every one with grace and patience. He chopped wood with our Robert and told him that he had not seen his equal with an axe.

‘Are you an Englishman?’ my sister Annie inquired.

‘Do I sound English to you, Annie Watson?’

‘Father is always complaining about them.’

‘We have that in common, your father and I. It is a good question that you ask, Annie, so I will answer it with another. I was born not two miles from here, far removed from England. Am I then an Englishman?’

And so it was that Donal Campbell entered our lives. He was to play a great part.

The weeks melted away and preparations for our journey north were almost complete. Father was meticulous in his planning and while he reviewed his many lists, I sat with my mother in a quiet moment and watched her darn my undergarments. We never spoke of loss and pain but I knew that she ached with every stitch. I contemplated her lot in life and made a poor attempt to apply an assuasive balm.

‘I shall return in no time, Mother. Four short months before you scold me again and send me to our room.’

‘Please, William. This does not help a mother. In four months, my belly will be swollen and I will have another child to wrench at my heart.’

Father had cleared the dinner table and gathered his brood around him like a mother hen. He had prepared a rudimentary map outlining our journey north. Hywel Dawyd Watson was never one to allow a sense of occasion to pass him by. He had used his immaculate hand to give title to the map and drew on his pipe before unfurling it, just to heighten the drama.

“‘The Map of William.’ Oh, Father! It is a fine map. May we keep it?’ begged Annie, wide-eyed in wonderment.

‘I shall fasten the map to the wall if your mother will allow it. In that way you can all accompany our journey and do so without the privations that William and I will surely endure. Now, we have all swallowed a single fly and found it to be a most unpleasant experience. On one occasion I swallowed at least fifty of the little blighters and removed fifty more from my beard. The point I make is that our adventure is not simply a line on a map. Bear that in mind, children.’

Earlier that morning I had attended Father’s office in the bowels of the Commissariat building on Cliff Street. There were papers of commission to sign and other contractual documentation to

initial, the substance of which I knew little and understood even less. Father was at ease in his place of work and I followed him around as a puppy follows its master.

‘We board the SS *Doreen May* at Victoria Quay and steam past the Isle of Rats to Geraldton and Port Gregory. From there we alight at Carnarvon to take on cargo and continue our journey north to Cossack. You have memorised the rest, William. Of that I am sure.’

The future had now become the present and I was wary of the fissure it had opened. The unknown was a place of mystery and my heart contorted at the threat it posed. Father was my guide and that gave me strength. Mother would pray and that gave me comfort. Our Robert would weep when the boat blew its horn at Gage Roads. I would miss my kind-hearted brother and I am not ashamed to say it.

I hugged them all on Victoria Quay. Robert was stoic and held me longest.

‘Will you miss me, Will?’ Thomas sobbed. ‘I am sorry for being a lunatic.’

‘You are not a lunatic, Tommy. You are my little brother and every boy misses his little brother.’

As I walked across the gangway a hand reached out to steady my awkward gait. I looked up to thank the owner.

‘Welcome aboard, William Watson,’ said Donal Campbell. ‘I hope you have brought your sea legs.’