

Finding John Coten's family – Ned & Jim's perspective

Written by Ned & Jim Coten, outlining how the story unfolded from their perspective and what it meant to them.

When our father, John Coten, passed away in 1970, our mother Meg had no one to tell from his side of the family. He had lost contact with them long before, and despite Mum's efforts over the years, she was never able to trace them. Whenever she had asked him about them, he had changed the subject and, in her wisdom, let it be.

For us, growing up without any connection to Dad's past was always a quiet gap in our life - one that lingered in the background even as we built our own lives and families.

The story we were raised with was one of intrigue. Dad had told Mum that his father was in the British Army and that he was born in Quetta, a city in what is now Pakistan. He had supposedly been sent to England for schooling at Winchester College, had served in the army, and eventually made his way to New Zealand and then Australia. Along the way, he lost his identity documents - at least that's what he told Mum. When they married, he needed to be baptised just so he could get paperwork that would allow the marriage to go ahead.

We always knew there had to be a family somewhere. But whenever we tried to dig deeper - writing letters to distant Coten's we found in phone books or searching online databases (when the internet evolved in the 2000's), nothing ever came of it. From around the age of 20, we would revisit the search every few years, always hopeful but always hitting a dead end. We checked military records, school archives, and migration databases, but it was like trying to find a ghost. There was no apparent trace of who John Coten really was or where his family were.

Despite this, we knew a few things: that Dad had a sister named Helen, and that Mum believed his mother's name was Catherine Amelda Cody. Ned was named Edward John after Dad's father. But beyond that, the story was non-existent.

Everything changed in 2017. Ned was travelling to London on business and arranged to meet our cousin Richard Porter, the son of Mum's brother Dick, at his house in the best part of London, right near Oxford Circus. He and wife Tina arranged a beautiful morning tea, where Richard's daughter Natasha and her in-laws Hilary and Dick Tulloch, both enthusiastic family historians, all gathered. Hilary and Dick were immediately interested, and Ned told them the story of our Dad and the mystery of his past. What followed was an extraordinary journey of discovery.

Hilary and Dick took the story as a challenge, and with a mere handful of clues - names, places, and vague memories— - they began searching. Within a matter of weeks, they had uncovered a completely different version of events. Our dad had been born Maurice Joseph Graham in New Zealand, not Pakistan. He had changed his name and left his family behind in 1948, sailing to Australia at the age of 20, never to be heard from again - until now.

Each new fact that came to light was both a revelation and a shock. For the first time in our lives, we were discovering our father's origins. And most remarkably, we discovered that his sister, Helen, was still alive.

We felt we had to reach out. On a call to New Zealand, Jim rang the only “A.H. Mulgan” listed in the phone book. When a woman answered, he introduced himself with: “You don’t know me, but I believe your brother is my father.” It was her.

That phone call remains one of the most extraordinary moments of our lives. After over 40 years of wondering and nearly as many of researching, we had found our family. And in that moment, Helen found the brother she had lost six decades earlier.

Soon after, we arranged for Helen and her son Roderick to fly to Perth to meet our family. We gathered together - Meg, both of us and our families - and spent time together making up for lost years. It was the only time that Mum and Helen met, but it was unforgettable. Watching them together, seeing the bond form, was a moment of profound peace and connection.

Some people have asked how we feel about the fact that Dad – Maurice - had created a new identity and told a story that wasn’t true. Our answer is simple: people make the choices they need to make in life. Perhaps he felt he couldn’t go back. Perhaps he needed to leave something behind. But if he hadn’t made those choices, we wouldn’t be here. He wouldn’t have met Mum, and the life we were given would never have happened.

We’re deeply grateful to Hilary and Dick Tulloch, to Helen and her family, and to everyone who has supported us on this journey. We feel incredibly lucky to have found a wider family - people who have welcomed us so warmly and with such love.

It’s an extraordinary story. One that, like the best parts of life, is filled with mystery, emotion, and ultimately, connection. We’re proud to include it in this book, not only as part of Mum’s legacy but as part of Dad’s too.

We now refer to our father as Maurice, not just because that was his given name, but because it’s the name that connects him to the family we’ve come to know and love. It’s the name that links him to his past - and to our future.

With love and gratitude,
Ned and Jim Coten
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