

IT WAS THE TATIES THAT DRUV US TO THIS COUNTRY

The Story of Mary and Julia McCarthy

by **Elizabeth Friederich**

Distress and want, and hunger and poverty – nothing else – druv us to this counthry. It was the will of God – glory be to his holy and blessed name! – to fail the taties. To be sure I couldn't dig one out of the ground not fit to ate.

This quote from an Irish woman describes the desperation of the potato famine, familiar to twenty year old Mary McCarthy and her eighteen year old sister, Julia. In 1848 they were sentenced to transportation from County Cork, Ireland to Van Diemen's Land for setting fire to a house with two others. They committed this crime for the purpose of being transported and both stated so. Mary, probably the instigator of the incident, received a life sentence, the others seven years. These daring young women, who chose transportation as a means of escape from poverty and starvation in Ireland, were not alone. Records show that between 1841 and 1853, 248 Irish women were transported for arson and at least 79 committed the offence in order to be transported. How did this bold act turn out for Mary and Julia?

Convict records state that Mary was a housemaid, Roman Catholic, 4'11" tall, had brown hair, grey eyes and spoke through her nose. Julia was a farm servant and child's maid, 4'9" tall, had freckles, black hair, black eyes and a small cocked nose. Neither could read or write. A sister, Ellen, was in America, but no mention was made of other family members. They departed from the Port of Kingston near Dublin, on 5 April 1849 on the convict transport *Maria* (2). Even though they chose this course, their feelings would have been mixed as they sailed away from their homeland and to an uncertain fate in a penal colony on the other side of the world.

On arrival in Van Diemen's Land the sisters spent some months probation on board the ship *HMS Anson*. Here they were taught to sew, spin and make garments, the basics of reading and writing, and a good dose of religion. At the end of the probation period, when the women became eligible for private service, the 1849 muster records Mary in the Brickfields Depot, awaiting hire. Julia was in the employ of J. Boon, Hobart.

Both Mary and Julia had exemplary convict records, with no further convictions or mention of any misbehaviour – after all they had achieved what they wanted – a new start in a new country, with food, employment and a roof over their heads.

Mary was married in August, 1851 at St George's Church, Hobart, to John Rogers, also a convict. John had been granted permission to marry Mary, after having been denied two previous requests to marry someone else. Mary was 23 and almost seven months pregnant. John was 36. He had been convicted along with his father Richard and brother Joseph for stealing a sheep. They were tried at Wells in England, sentenced for ten years each and transported to Hobart in 1845 on the *Equestrian* (2). Richard left behind a wife and five children, the youngest born the year he left. John left behind a wife and two children aged one and two and Joseph left behind a wife and baby. Three families devastated for one sheep! The three Rogers men were coal miners by trade so were immediately sent to the Coal Mines Probation Station near Port Arthur for fifteen months, before being individually assigned in Hobart.

Because Mary was pregnant and still in servitude, she entered the Cascades Female Factory for the birth of her baby. This was the one and only time that we know of her being behind those intimidating walls. Her daughter, Mary Ann, was born on 19 October, 1851. The informant was the Superintendent of the Female Factory. Another daughter, Catherine, was born in 1853 and a son, Thomas in 1855. Mary registered Catherine's birth and John was the informant for Thomas' birth. John's first daughter and son born in Van Diemen's Land bore the same names as the daughter and son he'd left behind in England.

John and Mary lived a mostly law abiding life. John became a milkman and their home, with stable and garden, was in Cascade Road, Hobart. In January 1855 John was fined five pounds for furiously driving a horse in Macquarie Street on Christmas Day. One year later he was fined two pounds for the same offence on 8 December. Constable McGuire informed the bench that John Rogers was *the terror of Hobart Town and was constantly driving in a furious manner about the streets*.

Mary and John's married life had its ups and downs and a major family tragedy. On 8 July 1856, their three year old daughter, Catherine was burnt to death in an accident in their home. The detailed statements of witnesses at the inquest into her death give us more insight into the lives and personalities of John and Mary, than any other documentation. Neighbours described them as being *very noisy in their way of talking, shouting and bawling to one another*. They went down the town twice a day selling milk, leaving the children with a servant woman. On the day of the tragedy, the servant was not there and John and Mary had had a row, with much yelling and Mary throwing stones at the windows. She left the house to collect some milk tins and later John went to the end of the road to check on a delivery of grain. The two younger children were left in the care of five year old Mary Ann. She left Catherine alone, to take the baby down the street to her father. Shortly after, Catherine ran out of the house with her hair and clothes ablaze. Many neighbours appeared, rolled her in the dirt, stripped her and put oil on her. One fetched the father. John ran into the yard and on seeing the child said, "*Oh Bobby,*" (*the name he always called her*) "*my dear child*". *The child said "Daddy" as best she could*. Both parents were greatly distressed, with the father *so much affected by fright as to be unable to do anything*, and when Mary returned some 15 minutes later she was *fitting and crying and fainting away*. Two doctors arrived after half an hour, but the child was not expected to survive and died a couple of hours later.

Newspaper articles give more information about Mary's character, reporting her defending herself two months later in a violent assault by her brother-in-law Joseph Rogers. Mary prosecuted him in the courts and won. Joseph defended his behaviour by telling the court *a long "rigmarole" about the complainant's misunderstandings with her husband, and the provocation she gave him by spitting in his face*. Mary was reported in one of the articles about the case as being *an interesting young woman*.

Having received their pardons, Mary and John made the very good decision to move to New South Wales, leaving behind the harsh Van Diemen's Land convict system with its social dysfunctionality. John auctioned his milk business of four cows, milk cans, dishes and sundries, in November 1858, and they left for Southern New South Wales. Their son, John was born at Cathcart in 1863. In 1864 John senior is recorded as a digger, and in 1867 as a butcher, at the Nelbothery gold fields which were between Bombala and Delegate, NSW. Two more children were born at Nelbothery –

Henry in 1865 and another Catherine in 1867. The Rogers family eventually settled in Bombala where John owned a butcher shop. Mary died in Bombala in 1878 aged 46, of congestion of the liver. John died seven years later aged 70. John's obituary in the Bega Gazette in 1885 indicates that they had been respectable members of the community. They had been able to move past their convict history, which remained hidden from their many descendants for generations.

Mary's sister, Julia also married a convict, William Oliver. It is likely they met working for the same master, James Boon of Liverpool Street, Hobart. They were married in March 1853 at St George's Church in Hobart, where Julia's sister, Mary was married nineteen months earlier. William had been sentenced at Chelmsford in Essex, at the age of eighteen. He received ten years transportation for stealing five caps, even though he was, at worst, only an accessory to the crime. He arrived in Hobart on the *Equestrian (1)* in May 1844. He had a number of additional offences shortly after his arrival, such as absconding, robbery and being absent for a week. He was sentenced to a further 24 years imprisonment and spent over five years at Port Arthur. Even there his offences included disorderly conduct, insolence, having a pipe and tobacco, idleness and neglect of duty, resulting in time in hard labour, in chains and in solitary confinement. However, William eventually emerged from Port Arthur in 1850, married Julia in March 1853, and settled down. He obtained his conditional pardon in 1855, two years after his marriage and two years after Julia had received hers. They remained in Tasmania where the convict stigma appears to have been much more difficult to overcome.

Julia and William's son James (possibly their only child) was born at Constitution Hill in 1863, some four or five years after Julia's sister Mary had left for a better life on the mainland. William was a sheep farmer at Green Ponds and later at Bashan Plains. In 1873 Julia died in childbirth at the remote Bashan Rivulet at the age of 43 and was buried at Bothwell. This was a year before the death of her sister in Bombala.

In 1880, William was convicted of sheep stealing and received six years imprisonment. His new wife Sarah and seventeen year old son James were sentenced to two years for the same offence. The *Launceston Examiner* reported that the case *elicited a great deal of interest as the Oliver family had been carrying on wholesale sheep stealing for a long time.*

Transportation certainly did give Mary and Julia a new start away from the desperation of their homeland, avoiding poverty and possibly starvation. They made a daring decision when faced with adversity and both had the sense and personal strength to stay out of trouble in the convict system, when many others floundered. They probably both had a significant influence on their husbands also staying out of trouble. When those young sisters ignited the fire that changed the direction of their lives, they would have had hopes and expectations. Whether these were fulfilled by their roles as wives and mothers in a new land, we can only speculate.

Mary was a feisty lady, with a loud voice and stone throwing temper, but perhaps this feistiness helped her to stick up for herself in the violent male dominated environment of colonial Van Diemen's Land, and the brutal system she found herself in. She was able to survive, marry, raise a family and leave many descendants. She was my great-great-grandmother.

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