

‘I’ll take the two youngest’. Mothers on the East London Convict Ship 1843

By Colleen Arulappu

The mothers sentenced to transportation

&

those who became mothers.

‘I’ll take the two youngest and allow him to take the other two’, Alice Fitzsimons said to the judge in the Bailieborough Court, 1842, when she made an appeal for her children to be allowed to accompany her and her husband to Van Diemen’s Land. The ‘worthy and humane’ judge said he did not have the power to accede to the request but Mr Gallogly, Governor of Cavan Gaol, stepped forward and said he could give her liberty to take any children with her provide it was under the age of seven. He was present in court so perhaps a deal was worked out before the trial- (guilty plea – passage for the children). Ellinor Duffy made a very feeling and affecting appeal for mercy because of her six children and a vociferous lament on hearing her sentence. She left all her children in Ireland. The cries of pregnant Margaret Cowan, at her sentencing, were described as appalling.

Across the counties, as mothers faced their sentences of transportation, moves must have been made to gain permission to bring their children. The feelings of those in charge of justice can be seen in the remarks of Magistrate Henry Baldwin in 1842 who said he felt it was difficult separating a mother from her children but was assured by other magistrates that it was, ‘the only chance they saw of rescuing the children from a life of depravity into which their mother was leading them’. In reality most of the mothers aboard the *East London* had their youngest children with them. The chairman of the Guardians of Wexford Union offered to pay the coach fare to Dublin for ten year-old Hannah Wickham after she was granted free passage. But Catherine Riordan’s youngest children, described as emaciated and in rags, did not have the means to reach Dublin and were left behind. Her older daughters had walked one hundred and eight miles to Dublin Castle to personally deliver a petition for a commutation of their mother’s sentence.

Two women had children who sailed with their fathers on the *Navarino*. But for older children it was goodbye and God bless you; they were not allowed to accompany their mothers.

How did the mothers and children fare? It was common for young children to accompany their mothers to prison and most seemed to have arrived at Grange Gorman with their mothers. That meant that some children on the *East London* spent months in Grange Gorman while others just weeks or days. The prison records noted only three who arrived just before sailing. Rebecca Sharon Lawler’s Thesis on Crime in Nineteenth Century Ireland noted that in 1839 there were nine cells at Grange Gorman allocated to children which implied they were separated from their mothers – although it might not have been so in the depot. Eight children died there in 1843; one, probably Bridget Carey’s child as she had three when convicted but only two sailed with her. Alice Fitzsimmons gave birth in Grange Gorman, six others gave birth in county prisons while several more had young infants at the time they were tried and sentenced. The Grange Gorman nursing room was described as ‘malodorous’ but it was reported that what could to be ‘expected from inmates like that’.

Thirty-five women aboard the *East London* had children with them or born during the voyage. Seven of that group also left children in Ireland and at least fourteen other women left all their children behind. A few older women left grown up children, one woman said she left her three children with her husband, another left her three children with her aunt and one, a servant woman, left her child with its father, a lawyer in Dublin. It is hard to imagine their grief at parting. Gaol Reports regarding conduct were forwarded from the Irish prisons. While the majority of the women were well behaved there were twenty-four who were described as 'bad' or 'very bad', and fifteen of that twenty-four were mothers. Catherine Cahill had her three year-old child with her and left her husband and three other children in Ireland. The magistrate in County Cavan said she was an 'abandoned woman' but her husband was a 'respectable man and better off without her'. Despair at separation must have manifested itself in angry response. Not a word was written in the press of the anguish and sorrow in the early hours as the *East London* left Kingstown Harbour.

There were fifty children aboard the ship and twenty-one of them were less than two years old. Three children were born on board. How were they cared for as mothers faced seasickness, salt provisions and severe weather and coped with the hygiene needs of such young children? Little was written of the children in the medical journal. William Lyons broke his arm when he fell down the ladder of the main hatchway. Due to his mother's carelessness according to the surgeon. Twelve infants died at sea and up to eleven deaths soon after arrival. Not one of the children under two years of age survived. Did they deserve that fate?

In the archives in Hobart are the death certificates for the twelve children who died at sea and the words on them condemn the convict mothers – they were indolent, careless and neglectful with words such as 'gross neglect', 'wilful neglect' and 'bad nursing', listed among the causes of death. But it was not the truth. There were many factors which led to the deaths with wilful neglect by the mothers the least of the causes although very ill and dying women probably did fail in the care of their children. Six of the children who died outlived their mothers; three died not long before their mothers and one new born lived only three days. Surgeon Edward Caldwell's journal gave a different insight into the behaviour of the mothers. He wrote of one woman who, 'without my knowledge attempted to put the child to breast again', one woman had her child 'constantly at the breast' while having no milk support and another as having deceived him by 'continuing to suckle her baby'. In the early part of the voyage Anne Read consulted the surgeon daily for her children and as her health failed she was very reluctant to give up her younger child to the hospital- it was a place of death. Anne herself was very ill and the surgeon was affronted when she wished her child dead and later she said she was happy the child had died. Anne died of scurvy. Ann Gannon consulted the doctor repeatedly for her child who had a chest problem. Her child died and Ann died of scurvy. Despite the surgeon's condemnation the women had proven track records of being able to care for their children. Alice Fitzsimons had five children alive when she embarked. She and her youngest child died on the voyage and her two year old died in the days after arrival.

In Hobart the surviving children were admitted into the Orphan School and fifteen had mothers still alive. Records show that eleven of them were collected by mothers or relatives as soon as possible – sometimes within days or weeks of marriage or obtaining their ticket of leave. Mary Quinn fetched her daughter the day she received her ticket of leave and Nancy Egan claimed her daughter the day after her marriage. Three older girls were sent into service before their mothers received tickets of leave. One was Margaret Rowe and her mother was charged with being absent without leave in the days after Margaret was discharged from the Orphan School. Later mother and daughter, both married, sailed together to Port Phillip. The other reason children were not collected by their mothers was because their mothers died or were in the New Norfolk Asylum. It is clear that they strived to reunite with their children. Three women on board were convicted with their sons. Catherine Sheridan's family had her teenage son assigned to them from Point Puer. Two others were crime matriarchs, fully involved in their families and in their crimes and there are some clues that suggest they reunited with husbands and sons.

In the years that followed two of the women who left children in Ireland applied for free passages for them but were refused. Catherine Hoare, whose husband, Michael, was also transported, left eight children in Ireland. They wanted to be together as a family and at least six of the children did make it to Tasmania – an amazing tale of family loyalty. Dolly Douragan, who brought her youngest child with her but left six in Ireland, was refused permission for a free passage for them. The authorities were worried about increasing the number of orphans and introducing an inferior class of people to the colony. Beside which her two little boys were running around without shoes. Mary Wickham said her son was in the 11th Regiment. That regiment was in Tasmania in 1847 and certainly Patrick Wickham was in Sydney with his regiment in 1850. His name was on a list of departures from Tasmania in 1853 four weeks after his mother was admitted to New Norfolk Hospital.

Most of the women married or partnered as soon as allowed. The desire to form relationships was stronger than religious affiliation. Sectarian Ireland was forgotten and thirty-eight Catholic women married outside their faith. With only a couple of exceptions the husbands were men who were transported. Some had suffered harsh treatment- the most severe was lashed three hundred times; a couple of the men had been at Macquarie Island, several on Norfolk Island and Port Arthur. The partnerships which followed the harsh experience of transportation had some successes and lasted while others failed in misery and violence or desertion. However, children were born, although, to only about half of the women. There were at least twelve women who gave birth to five or more children, several as many as ten or more children. Four women died in childbirth

The women clung to their children throughout the years after freedom even women who had problems in their lives and were perhaps not the best of mothers. Newspaper reports showed glimpses of their lives with their children. Widowed Bridget Henigan fell on her knees and begged for pity for the sake of her children when caught stealing. Lucy Magaughran was in tears and asked for mercy because of her six children when sentenced to another term of imprisonment. Other records showed occasions where the women lived near

their adult children, moved with them to other states, faced charges with their children, provided for them in a will or were buried beside them.

Despite her life being very troubled Mary Calnan was lovingly remembered by her son, William Donnelly. Ten years after her death her put a notice in an Adelaide paper. It was a poem of remembrance and the most poignant line was, 'Anchored safe where storms are o'er'.

Reported in New Zealand papers were the last words of Catherine Shaw, as she lay dying. They were for her daughters, her eldest child and her youngest.

'Goodbye my faithful Lizzie; may God bless you my child. Mind my Katie'

Catherine Shaw, Dunedin, NZ, 1864

The children Catherine mentioned were her daughters. An insight from my own family also placed an emphasis on female children. My grandmother and her mother, a daughter of one of the children on the *East London*, greatly valued the birth of a daughter. Sons were pampered princes but girls were considered essential. Was this a legacy of women exiled from their homeland, broken hearted, incarcerated in female prisons, transported on female convict ships and who formed families far away from their communities? Did the trauma of their experience lead them to value female support for survival and well being?

The women from the *East London* who became mothers have descendants and the brick trail in Campbell Town shows many of them remembered by these descendants. They had grandchildren and great grandchildren who served in the armed forces and even gave their lives for our country. They have descendants who have contributed in many fields across many states.

Archives of Ireland, Prisons 1/9/4 Richmond (Grange Gorman) female penitentiary register of female convicts 11th July 1840-22 December 1853

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Irish Transportation Records Catherine Riordan CRF 1842 R12

Drogheda Conservative Journal 16 July 1842 (Trial of Alice Fitzsimons)

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Lawler, Rebecca Sharon: Crime in Nineteenth Century Ireland Grange Gorman female penitentiary and Richmond male penitentiary, with reference to juveniles and women, 1836- 1860 Chapter 11

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TAHO Conduct Records for women on East London 1843

Purtscher, Joyce: Children in Queen's Orphanage Hobart Town 1828- 1863

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Hawkes Bay Herald, Volume 8, Issue 687, 30 September 1865 (Catherine Shaw)