

ELIZA McDEVITT

[*Phoebe*, 1845]

by

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Convict Eliza McDevitt arrived in Van Diemens Land (VDL) at the age of thirty-two in 1845.¹ She was a married woman, apparently childless, who had left behind in Ireland – without regret - a husband who had treated her badly. Although little is known about her life, either before her conviction and transportation or afterwards, one thing is very obvious: she was a strong-willed woman who seemed to know what she wanted in life and might have achieved it eventually. While still a prisoner in VDL, she married again but that marriage, like her first, was not a success and so, after serving her sentence, she fled from it, too. There are no further sightings of her in VDL. Where did she go? Did she leave the colony? There is some (slight) evidence that her husband tried to find her in the neighbouring colony of Victoria but without success. It is frustrating to find that – as with many females sent to VDL as convicts between 1812 and 1853 - she simply vanished from the pages of history soon after serving her time.

This is her story:

Eliza was born at Glasgow, Lanarkshire, Scotland, around 1812, one of six children of her parents, a father who is not named on her convict documents and her mother Agnes (maiden name unknown). Had her father died before her conviction? Her sisters were Tammy, Mary, Jane and Martha. Her brother was William.² The family might have not been well-off financially. In VDL after her transportation, Eliza stated that she could read but not write, probably indicating that she had received little, if any, education.³

At some time in the 1820s or 1830s, Eliza had met and married James McDevitt, a soldier in the 4th Royal Irish Dragoon Guards, a regiment of the British Army with a proud history dating back to 1699. Although it had served previously in a number of overseas conflicts, the regiment was on garrison duties in England, Scotland and Ireland at the time of the marriage.

Afterwards, Eliza had gone to live with McDevitt at Longford, about seventy-five miles (120 kms) north west of Dublin, Ireland. Although it is likely that James was paid well enough for the

¹ Conduct record: CON41-1-5, Image 91; Description List: CON19-1-4, Image 197; Indent: CON15/1/3, Images 124, 125. Police Number 229; FCRC ID: 10127.

² CON41-1-5 Image 91.

³ CON41-1-5, Image 91; CON19-1-4, Image 197; CON15/1/3, Images 124, 125.

couple to live in relative comfort, Eliza was not happy there. It was at Longford, Ireland, that she was tried for the crime for which she was transported.⁴

On 28 February 1844, she was charged with the theft of a shawl. Found guilty, she was sentenced to transportation for seven years.⁵ After the trial, she was kept in gaol in Ireland until was put aboard the ship *Phoebe* which, with 129 female prisoners, departed Dublin on 25 September 1844 and reached Hobart on 2 January 1845.⁶

The gaol report that accompanied Eliza to VDL stated that she had had no prior convictions and that she had been a ‘most exemplary’ prisoner. In similar vein, the surgeon aboard *Phoebe*, Dr. Alex Macleroy, had made a special mention of Eliza in his medical report, commending her to the authorities for her ‘good conduct during the voyage’.⁷

At Hobart, Eliza was described as being four feet eleven and a half inches (about 151 cms) tall with a fresh complexion, black hair and hazel eyes. She had a tattoo of an anchor on her left arm. She said that she was of the Church of England faith and a ‘laundress, housemaid and milliner’ by trade.⁸

More interestingly, perhaps, she stated that she had committed her crime in Ireland on purpose to get transported because her husband was a ‘drunkard’.⁹

In the colony, however, Eliza’s behaviour was not quite as good as her Irish gaol report and the commendation from the ship’s surgeon might have led the authorities to believe. Obviously, it took a little time for her to adjust to her new circumstances. On 1 November 1845, while assigned to the Wilson household, she was taken before a magistrate and charged with being drunk. For this offence, she was ordered to serve three months with hard labour at the Cascades Female Factory. On 30 March 1846, very soon after her release, she absconded from her service and, when apprehended, was sent back to the Cascades for another three months of hard labour. And, then, on 9 September 1846, she absconded again. This time she was sentenced to six months with hard labour at the Cascades. While there, she was charged with ‘misconduct’ and forced to spend ten days in solitary confinement. Those offences however, were the only ones recorded against Eliza during her term of servitude.¹⁰

⁴ 4th Royal Irish Dragoon Guards: <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/4th-royal-irish-dragon-guard>; <http://www.from-ireland.net/stations=british-army-oct-1845/>; the marriage certificate of James and Eliza McDevitt has not yet been located.

⁵ Details of the trial at Longford have not been located.

⁶ <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipsTAS.html>

⁷ CON41-1-5, Image 91; see FCRC website www.femaleconvicts.org for gaol report and surgeon Macleroy’s journal.

⁸ CON41-1-5, Image 91; CON19-1-4, Image 197; CON15/1/3, Images 124, 125.

⁹ CON41-1-5, Image 91.

¹⁰ CON41-1-5, Image 91.

Upon her release from the Cascades, Eliza was assigned to a settler in the Longford district of VDL.¹¹ (Did she smile at the irony of being at 'Longford' again?)

On 13 July 1847, now thirty-five, Eliza re-married. Her new husband was George Mills, a farmer on the big 'Adelphi' estate near Westbury. The wedding was conducted by the Rev. John Bishton in the Church of England at Westbury. The marriage entry shows Mills's rank as 'Settler' and Eliza's as 'A.S.', or assigned servant. It is not clear whether Eliza was assigned to Mills or to some other person in the district.¹²

Nothing is known of Mills apart from the fact that, in 1851, he was the occupier of a leased farm of 113 acres (approx. thirty-six hectares) for which he was paying £35 per annum rent to the very wealthy owner of 'Adelphi', Charles Prinsep.¹³ Did Mills arrive in the convict as a free settler or was he an emancipated convict?¹⁴ Further research is warranted.

All seemed to go well for two or three years after the marriage. Although there was no house or stables on the farm, Mills was made an allowance by Prinsep of five shillings an acre for clearing and, like the other 'Adelphi' tenants, seemed to be having success. In September 1851, John Peyton Jones, the local police magistrate, reported to Lieutenant-Governor Dennison that:

*As a general thing, I should say that all tenants are doing well and from all the information I can obtain have prospered beyond their expectations this year, owing no doubt to the high prices of all kinds of farm produce.*¹⁵

For her part, Eliza was also having success. Although she was refused a ticket of leave when she first applied in October 1848, it was granted on her second application in May 1849.¹⁶ And then, on 28 February 1851, she was free by servitude. She had served her sentence and was a free woman again. Four months later, she had reason to celebrate once more when her certificate of freedom was issued.¹⁷

However, it is evident that all was not as happy in the Mills household as it should have been. On 20 March 1852, this advertisement appeared in *The Cornwall Chronicle*:

¹¹ 'New South Wales and Tasmania, Australia, Convict Musters, 1806-1849', via 'Ancestry.com'.

¹² Mills/McDevitt marriage: RGD37/1344/1847, Westbury; application for permission to marry has not been located.

¹³ 'Return of Tenant Farmers in the Westbury Police District, 1851' via Heazlewood, I. (2002). *They Sowed, We Reap*. Whitmore: Whitmore Historical Group.

¹⁴ It is tempting to think that Mills might have been a former convict because Prinsep is known to have leased a number of his 'Adelphi' farms to former convicts - see Heazlewood (2002), *op. cit.* However, there were a number of men named 'George Mills', free settlers and convicts, in VDL at this time; see 'Tasmanian Names Index' at https://linctas.ent.sirsidynix.net.au/client/en_AU/names/.

¹⁵ Heazlewood (2002), *op. cit.*, p.20.

¹⁶ ToL refused CON41-1-5, Image 91; ToL granted *Hobart Town Gazette*, 15 May 1849.

¹⁷ CON41-1-5, Image 91.

*NOTICE — This is to give notice that my wife Eliza Mills left her home without any provocation — I shall therefore not be accountable for any debts she may contract after this date. George Mills. Adelphi, Westbury, March 12.*¹⁸

Shipping records in Tasmania show that, on 20 August 1852, just a few months after Eliza had fled, a man by the name of ‘George Mills’ departed from Launceston on the vessel *Yarra Yarra* bound for Melbourne. And, on 9 September 1852, a ‘George Mills’ – but apparently a different man – left Launceston for Melbourne aboard the vessel *Tamar*.¹⁹ Was either of these men Eliza’s husband? Was he going to Melbourne to find her and bring her back? That, alas, cannot be verified.

There is no evidence that Eliza ever returned to Mills and records of the ‘Adelphi’ estate show that he had left the area soon after this time.

Unfortunately, there is no satisfying ending to Eliza’s story. What happened to her after 1852? Did she leave the colony? Did she marry again? When and where did she die? There are no answers to these questions yet.

Sadly, Eliza’s ‘disappearance’ from the pages of history is not unusual. The stories of quite a big number of female convicts end in the same way. But, as Snowden (2010) observed of convict women who had served their time in VDL: ‘Many successfully merged into colonial society creating new families and, through good conduct and hard work, forged new lives.’²⁰ It is hoped that Eliza was one of them and that, wherever she was, she had found the peace and happiness that had eluded her for so long.

¹⁸ *The Cornwall Chronicle* (Launceston), 20 March 1852, p.184.

¹⁹ ‘George Mills, Departures’ in Tasmanian Names Index at https://linctas.ent.sirsidynix.net.au/client/en_AU/names/

²⁰ https://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/F/Female%20convicts.htm; see also *The Examiner Extra*, 16 November 2010, p.A23.