

MARY GODWIN

(*Sea Queen*, 1846)

by

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Mary Godwin arrived in Van Diemens Land (VDL) as a convict per *Sea Queen* on 29 August 1846.¹ Two years earlier, she had been convicted of stealing a hen and some chickens in Monmouthshire, Wales, and sentenced to transportation for seven years. Although there is contradictory evidence in her convict documents about her age upon arrival, it is believed that she was somewhat older than the majority of the 13,500 (approx.) females who were transported to VDL for their crimes between 1812 and 1853. There is also a discrepancy in her convict documents about her marital status. Upon arrival at Hobart, she told the authorities that she was married and that she had left her four children with her husband, Thomas Godwin, in England – but when she married again in VDL two years later, she stated that she was a widow. In the colony, her behavior was exemplary – she was not charged with any new offences as a prisoner. However, soon after she had served her time, she and her new husband, John Blagg, were involved in a scandalous Supreme Court case which involved their refusal to return to its natural mother a young child for whom they were caring. Although the Blaggs had not been charged with the abduction of the child, they emerged from the trial with their reputations tarnished. Thereafter, nothing more was heard of Mary (Godwin) Blagg until she passed away at Bothwell, Tasmania, on 27 July 1868. Her death certificate shows that she was sixty-five years old.

This is her story:

Very little is known about Mary's life before her transportation to VDL in 1846. Her indent documents reveal that her husband's name was Thomas Godwin and that she had left their four children with him in England. She had two brothers, Thomas and Richard, but her maiden name and the names of her parents are not known.²

There is considerable uncertainty about Mary's age. Her indent documents state that she was fifty-seven years old when she arrived in VDL but that is improbable. From other evidence, it seems more likely that she was only thirty-seven, which means that she was born about 1809. She gave her native place as Hereford, Herefordshire, England.

¹ Conduct record: CON41-1-10, image 59; Description List: CON19/1/5, image 182; Indent: CON15/1/3, images 324/325; Police No: 415; FCRC ID: 10943.

² Indent: CON15/1/3, images 324/325.

After their marriage, John and Mary Godwin appear to have lived in Monmouthshire, Wales, because it was at the Monmouth Assizes, on 10 August 1844, that Mary was convicted of stealing a hen and chickens and sentenced to transportation for seven years.³

After her trial, Mary spent almost two years in gaol awaiting a ship that was to take her to VDL. As well as noting that she was married and the mother of only *three* children, her gaol report stated that she had had a previous conviction; earlier, she had been found guilty of the theft of coal and had spent three months in prison for that crime.⁴

Eventually, Mary was put aboard *Sea Queen* which, with 170 female prisoners, departed from Woolwich on 12 May 1846 and reached Hobart on 29 August that year.⁵ In the medical journal he kept during the voyage, the ship's surgeon, Dr. T. W. Jewell, described Mary's health as 'indifferent', adding that she was 'shy' and 'needs looking after'.⁶

At Hobart, Mary was described as being five feet and a quarter of an inch (about 153 cms) tall, of a dark complexion and with a small head, large nose, wide mouth and small, sharp chin. She had dark brown hair and light blue eyes. She stated that she could both read and write 'a little', that she was a Protestant and a farm servant by trade.⁷

After disembarkation, Mary was sent to the *Anson*, the hulk of a former naval vessel that had been moored in the Derwent River near Risdon in 1844 to be used to house female convicts in order to alleviate the overcrowding at the Cascades Female Factory. She was to be kept there for a probation period of six months before becoming eligible to be hired into service by settlers.⁸

Records show that by April 1848, Mary was in service in the Bothwell district. There, a former convict by the name of John Blagg (or Blag), now free by servitude, applied for permission to marry her.⁹ With approval granted, they were wed under the Rites and Covenants of the United Church of England and Ireland, by banns, at the Parish Church at Bothwell on 5 August 1848. The marriage entry shows Mary's surname as 'Goodwin'. John was described as a thirty-four year old 'labourer' and Mary as a forty year-old 'widow'. Both signed the register with their marks.¹⁰

John Blagg had been in the colony since his arrival per the convict vessel *Somersetshire* in May 1842.¹¹ A boatman by trade, he had been convicted at the Stafford Quarter Sessions in January 1841 of the theft of some clothing and sentenced to transportation for seven years. He had had

³ CON41-1-10, image 59.

⁴ Goal report: CON41-1-10, image 59.

⁵<http://members.iinet.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipsTAS.html>

⁶ See medical journal at www.femaleconvicts.org

⁷ Indent: CON15/1/3, images 324/325.

⁸ CON41-1-10, image 59; <https://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/convict-institutions/probation-stations/anson>

⁹ Permission to marry: CON52/1/2, page 335.

¹⁰ Marriage: RGD37-1-7/1415/1848, Bothwell.

¹¹ Blagg's conduct record: CON33-1-2, image 24.

several previous convictions. The gaol report that had accompanied him to VDL stated that he was single, 'of very bad habits and character' and of 'a sullen disposition'. Nevertheless, apart from a couple of relatively minor indiscretions, his behavior in VDL had been good. By 1846, he had been granted a ticket of leave, and by the time of his marriage to Mary in August 1848, he was free by servitude.¹²

The marriage of John and Mary did not produce children but it appears that they lived happily enough together for the first three years of their marriage without either coming to the attention of the law. Shortly after the marriage, Mary had been granted her ticket of leave and, on 31 March 1855, she had been issued with a Certificate of Freedom.¹³

At some time during the early years of their marriage, John and Mary had gone into business together as 'lodging house' keepers at Bothwell. Whether it was just a lodging house or something more than that is unclear but, in any case, it was certainly not the best time for the couple to be engaged in that line of business. Although there were some respectable lodging houses throughout the colony, many of the large number that had sprung up were, in reality, sly-grog joints or brothels, or both. In their reporting of crime, newspapers of the day were scathing of that kind of lodging house.

For instance, in 1846, *The Cornwall Chronicle* reported that a woman by the name of Mrs. McClutchy – who was 'of lodging house notoriety' – and her 'reputed' husband, Thompson, had been charged with 'harbouring a female transported offender, illegally at large', in their lodging house at Morven (now Evandale). Thompson was sent to gaol. Mrs. McClutchy immediately packed up and left the district.¹⁴ In 1848, six ticket-of-leave men were charged with misconduct in residing at 'a disorderly lodging house' in Goulburn Street, Hobart, kept by a Patrick Cosgrove. The apprehending constable stated that 'the place bore the worst of character' and that he had found from twelve to fourteen men sleeping in the same room. In admonishing Cosgrove, the magistrate warned him against allowing any prisoners of the Crown to reside in his lodging house.¹⁵ In 1855, Mary Kelly and Jane Gibson, ticket-of-leave women, were charged with being in a common brothel and making it their place of residence. In their defence, they pleaded that they were quite unaware of the character of the place. The magistrate did not believe them and sentenced them to fourteen days in solitary confinement. Reporting the case, *The Tasmanian Daily News* commented:

Beware of Low Houses ... It may not be altogether out of place to state that strangers, arriving here from the parent country, are exposed to considerable danger from such houses, inasmuch as most of them exhibit a bill in their

¹² CON33-1-2, image 24.

¹³ CON41-1-10, image 59; Certificate of Freedom: *Hobart Town Gazette*, 3 April 1855.

¹⁴ *The Cornwall Chronicle*, 19 December 1846, p.980.

¹⁵ *The Britannia and Trades' Advocate* (Hobart), 10 October 1848, p.2.

*windows – ‘Lodgings to Let’ or ‘Ready Furnished Apartments’ - and unsuspecting young persons, especially females, anxious to find shelter, engage lodgings, without having any idea that their reputation and their liberty are jeopardized by being found in these sinks of infamy, of the character of which they may be entirely ignorant.*¹⁶

And, in 1858, as the Municipal Council at Hobart considered a Report of the Police Committee which concerned criminal events that had occurred at a lodging house in Watchorn Street and deliberated the way in which a ‘common lodging house’ should be defined, *The Tasmanian Telegraph* editorialised: ‘Every man of common sense must agree ... that it is rather strange that a house such as the one alluded to ... which was known, not only in the immediate neighbourhood but all over the town, as a brothel of the very lowest and worst description could be called ‘a common lodging house’.¹⁷

It was in their capacity as operators of a lodging house at Bothwell in 1861 that John and Mary Blagg came into contact with the law again.

Their trouble started on 9 August 1861, when Mr. Adams, a solicitor, applied for a writ of *habeas corpus* in the Supreme Court, Hobart, on behalf of his client Jessie Easton, a young unmarried mother of Bothwell. The writ, directed to a Launceston surgeon by the name of William Campbell and to John and Mary Blagg, called for ‘the production of the body of William Easton Campbell, the illegitimate son of William Campbell and Jessie Easton’.¹⁸

Reading from an affidavit sworn to by Easton, Adams told the Court that Campbell had been engaged to Easton, who was then living at Oatlands, but that when she gave birth to a son on 24 January 1859, he had not only called off the marriage but had refused to provide her and the baby with any financial support. Easton had then applied to the Justices of the Peace at Oatlands who had ordered Campbell to allow her thirty shillings per fortnight as maintenance. He had done that for five months but had then discontinued the payments - probably because he had married another woman soon after Easton had given birth.

However, Campbell and his new wife were not happy together and had separated some months later. At that time, Campbell had again made contact with Easton, who was now living at Bothwell, begging her to come with their son to live with him at Launceston but Easton had refused to do so. Campbell had then gone to Bothwell where he resided temporarily at the Castle Inn. From there, he had contacted Easton again, asking her if she would bring the child to him so that he could ‘nurse’ it – and she agreed to do so.

¹⁶ *The Tasmanian Daily News* (Hobart), 11 June 1855.

¹⁷ *The Tasmanian Telegraph*, 16 October 1858, p.8.

¹⁸ *Mercury* (Hobart), 10 August 1861, p.2.

On the following morning, Easton had taken the child to Campbell at the Castle Inn and had left it in his care but when she returned the next day to collect it he had told her that the child was not there. He said that he had put it into the care of John and Mary Blagg at their lodging house at Bothwell. Easton had gone to the Blaggs immediately but they had refused to hand the child over.

In her affidavit, Easton said that that she had been informed that the Blaggs's residence was not only 'a common lodging house' but also 'a brothel'. She had also been told that her child was being 'utterly neglected' by the Blaggs and was 'frequently beaten and otherwise ill-used'. On a recent occasion, the child 'was covered with vermin.' Easton claimed that she had been 'denied access to the child' repeatedly and that she truly believed 'that the life of the child will be endangered if it continues in the custody of John and Mary Blagg'.

In refuting the facts of Easton's affidavit, Campbell maintained that Easton was not a fit and proper mother to her son. He claimed and that when she brought the child to him at the Castle Inn, she was virtually abandoning it. Therefore, he argued, she had no right to claim custody of it now.

At this point in the hearing, the Court rose to await the return of the *habeas corpus* writ.

When, on 23 August 1861, the Court met again in the Easton case, the Chief Justice remarked that it had been an unquestionably difficult one on which to come to a decision. In regard to Campbell's claim that Easton had abandoned the child, he agreed that Easton's conduct had been strange but was prepared to think that her apparent 'abandonment' of the child might have been done it 'in a moment of pique'. He also noted that Easton had taken an unduly long time to take action that was available to her through the courts in an attempt to recover the child.

In regard to the Blaggs, the Chief Justice said that Easton's claim that their Bothwell lodging house was actually a 'brothel' had not been substantiated. Nevertheless, he continued, the Court would never allow a child to live amid 'scenes of contamination and vice' nor was it prepared to leave the child in a country lodging house 'where improper scenes were not infrequently enacted' and where 'persons in a state of intoxication would not infrequently reside'.

In conclusion, the Chief Justice said that he was of the opinion that 'the natural rights of the mother should in this instance be recognized' and ordered that the child should be 'delivered up to the custody of its mother'. The child was delivered up accordingly.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Mercury* (Hobart), 24 August 1861, p.3; *Launceston Examiner*, 27 August 1861, p.5.

But how did Mary feel about having to give up the child? Was she devastated? Had she come to love the boy in the time he had been in her care? Why had she taken the boy in the first place? Was it her way of compensating for the sad loss of the children she had had to leave behind in England in 1848? Was it because she and John Blagg had not been able to have children of their own? Or was it simply a matter of a financial arrangement between Campbell and the Blaggs? Had Mary really treated the child as badly as Easton had claimed in court? Had he been ‘utterly neglected’, ‘frequently beaten and otherwise ill-used’ and ‘covered with vermin’ – or was that purely prevarication on Easton’s part in an attempt to sway the court? There are no satisfactory answers to these questions yet.

While it is clear that John and Mary Blagg continued to live together at Bothwell for some years, nothing more was heard of their lodging house.

Mary passed away at Bothwell seven years after the Easton case. Her death, on 22 July 1868, was registered by her husband. The cause of death is shown as ‘cancer of the womb’. The death certificate shows her surname as ‘Blag’.²⁰

²⁰ Death: RGD35/5/1868, Bothwell.