

The Underfed Children of Bridget Norton

Bridget Norton, Ephraim Doe the Younger and Mary Ann. Orphan School

By Jennifer Jacobs, October 2018.

A British newspaper headline described Bridget as a “bare faced swindler” and “shabby, but genteel.”¹ At Lower Jerusalem in 1859, she probably felt that neither of these descriptions matched. The shabby was still there but the indicators of gentility would have been hard to maintain when slumped over the bar with a mind befuddled by drink. Besides that, Bridget herself had just been swindled.²

As Bridget Norton, she had left Athlone in Ireland and landed in Liverpool where after several offences for stealing clothes, she had had a package of shoes delivered and then scarpered without paying for them. Four months later, in April 1848 she found herself aboard the *Tory 2* bound for Van Diemen’s land.³ Materials for knitting and sewing had been provided and it was proudly written in the Surgeon’s journal upon arrival that 500 shirts had been manufactured during the trip.⁴ As Bridget’s conduct record described her as very industrious, it can be assumed that she performed her duties well.

After six months aboard the *Anson*, with no demeanours listed on her record, she was released into the community and at St Luke’s church at Richmond, in August 1850, she married Ephraim Doe.⁵ She had been in the colony for two years with not a mark against her name. Her fortune was not to last. In November, only three months after the wedding, her husband took his employers Mary and Edward Williams to court, the wife for stealing his hat and suspenders and the husband for not paying his wages.⁶ The case against Mary was dismissed but Edward was found guilty and forced to pay Ephraim 15/- for three weeks wages, five shillings of which he was forced to pay back to court after celebrating his windfall and getting drunk. I mention this because his wage also included 14 lb of flour, 7 lbs of pork, 2 lb of sugar and ¼ lb of tea per week, which he said he required as he had a wife to support. Their diet must have been interesting.

Bridget and Ephraim were then twice caught out in the town of Sorell without a pass.⁷ Admonished on the first charge they each spent six months incarcerated for the second.⁸ This was the first of Bridget’s three trips to the female factory. In 1853, she spent another six months there, after being found guilty of harbouring Edward Hunt, a prisoner of the crown, and habitual drunkard for the “purpose of tippling.”⁹ It was a warm homecoming for her. Ephraim the Younger was born exactly nine months later, followed by Mary Ann in 1856.¹⁰

¹ ‘A Bare Faced Swindler’ *Liverpool Mercury* (Liverpool, England), Friday, December 24, 1847

² ‘Supreme Court.’, *The Hobart Town Daily Mercury* 24 December 1859, p. 2.

³ TAHO, CON41/1/6 p. 180 Conduct Registers of Female Prisoners arriving in period of the probation system Bridget Norton *Tory 2* 1847.

⁴ TAHO, ADM101/42 Surgeons journal *Tory 2*

⁵ TAHO, RGD37/1/9 Marriage Richmond 1850/865 Ephraim Doe Bridget Norton

⁶ TAHO LC484-1-2 p 50 Sorell Lower Court, 15 March 1851

⁷ TAHO LC484-1-2 p Sorell Lower Court, 7 June 1851

⁸ Bridget Norton, Conduct Registers.

⁹ TAHO, CON41/1/ 6 p. 26827 Male Prisoners arriving in period of the probation system Edward Hunt *Equestrian* 3 1852.

¹⁰ TAHO, RGD33/1/32 Richmond 1854/1117 Ephraim Doe, RGD33/1/34 Birth 1856/1426 Mary Ann Doe

Having children, settled the couple. At Lower Jerusalem, seven kilometres north of Campania they rented space on two farms where they grew grain crops and ran a few cattle.¹¹ Ephraim also dealt in buying and selling horses. On the surface all looked well for nearly three years. There was however, a problem in the district in that despite rigorous attempts at branding their stock, farmers were regularly losing sheep.¹² Early in 1859, meat was found hidden, hanging in the bush on Ephraim's farm and he was unable to give a plausible explanation. He received a fine of £50 or alternately 3 months imprisonment.¹³ He left for Launceston to raise the finance.¹⁴

Bridget began clearing the farm of furniture and equipment and news that it was being vacated reached the property owner William Brown, who left his home in Green Ponds to collect arrears in rent. He found Bridget drinking at the Halfway House and asked her for the money. She offered him £20 for the six months owed but he wanted more. He expected her to also pay for an extra six months even though the next instalment was not due for another three months. The following day, he employed a bailiff and with him went to serve a distraint for unpaid rent. Accompanied by the bailiff he arrived at the property where Bridget was nowhere to be seen. However, a dray full of farm tools outside the Half Way house alerted them to her presence inside. At a later court hearing, they described her as being not sober and not drunk, just about half and half. Before even approaching her, the bailiff took two of her mares and a filly. They were sold at auction the same day earning more than the debt which was owed. The bailiff pocketed the balance. One wonders where the children were while this was taking place.

Ephraim returned from Launceston, was arrested and sent to the penitentiary for three months. Bridget managed on her own for only two weeks. On the 24th March she, and an accomplice were charged with the theft of an iron pot, a brass candlestick and a grass broom from James McGowan, a local skin and hide dealer.¹⁵ Bridget was again, on her way to the Female Factory for six months. A letter of application was written from the factory, for the reception of Ephraim (the younger) and Mary-Ann into the Queens Infant School.¹⁶ They arrived on April the first, Ephraim being chargeable to Imperial funds and Mary-Ann to Colonial, presumably a consequence of his being born before Bridget received her ticket of leave, and Mary Ann afterwards.

Imagine the distress of waking up to your third birthday and finding that it is your first day in the Queen's Orphanage. There would have been no cake, candles or presents for Mary Ann. In fact, only the previous year, a large-scale enquiry had been held over the matron's use of the children's rations for herself and of her returning stale milk to the cans.¹⁷ It was said, her soup alone required 2-4 lbs of beef per day. Children were supposed to receive beef and lamb alternately along with bread and milk but rations had been meagre and the children were observed to be underweight and listless. For them a typical daily ration was one small chop, one potato, ¼ pint of milk and a pound and a quarter of bread with pinches of rice, tea and sugar, no matter what their age.¹⁸ The government was very slow to react to the inquiry and in August, and it was only as a result of public pressure, that the milk quota for the children's age group was quadrupled.¹⁹ Requisitions had been put out for 100 skipping ropes for them but one wonders whether they had the energy to play.²⁰ Physical

¹¹ TAHO Valuation Rolls Richmond 1859

¹² 'Classified Advertising', *The Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 21 February 1859, p. 3.

¹³ 'Country Districts. Spring Hill', *The Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 2 March, p. 2.

¹⁴ 'Supreme Court.', *The Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 24 December 1859, p. 2.

¹⁵ TAHO LC 445-1-2 P 879 Richmond Lower Courts

¹⁶ TAHO SWD26-1-3-493, SWD26-1-3-494, SWD26-1-3-495, SWD26-1-3-496 1859 Applications for Queen's Infant school

¹⁷ 'Patriotic by Proxy,' *The Courier*, 19 April 1858, p. 2.

¹⁸ 'Original Correspondence', *The Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 22 December 1859, p. 2.

¹⁹ 'The Queens Orphan School', *The Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 16 August 1859 p. 2.

²⁰ 'Classified Advertising', *The Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 25 January 1858 p. 4.

violence was perpetrated upon the children by the matron Mrs Smyth. Though there was denial that it was excessive, witnesses described beatings often on the head, neck and shoulders with whips, a cane and slate frame. Bedwetting was a crime for which punishment was guaranteed. Some children died after beatings. Mrs Smyth's dog would jump on children and knock them to the ground and no one was sure whether it bit them or not. For her transgressions, Mrs Smyth was admonished.

Ephraim the Elder had been released from prison somewhat earlier than Bridget, yet the children stayed at the orphanage, an example of the thinking of the time that the children belonged to the mother rather than the father. Finally, on the 5th of September, Bridget was able to collect them and re-join her husband. They stayed around Richmond until December, long enough for Ephraim to go to court to reclaim the money which the bailiff had withheld after the sale of his horses.

In the new year, Ephraim, Bridget and the children went north, possibly on someone else's horse. (slide) Bishopsbourne was their objective, an area familiar to Ephraim from his convict days. Here within the next few years he purchased property in a place, still remote today called Stringy Bark Forest, right underneath the Western Tiers, where he attempted to clear the land and create a farm from the native bush.²¹ Unfortunately he had not learned his lesson and continued to help himself to sheep from other people's farms, on one occasion tossing a sheep's head to his dogs to destroy evidence when the police arrived unexpectedly.²² Disaster was ahead.

In 1867, a local farmer offered to pay a reward to catch the sheep stealers, and a shepherd and his companion decided to set a trap to catch Ephraim Doe.²³ On a moonlit night in August, they set up an enclosure of sheep close to his property and upon seeing him arrive in the area, they hit him over the head with a waddy they had prepared earlier and knocked him down. The shepherd stayed to watch over Ephraim while his offsider went for help. When he returned Ephraim was gone. A three hour search revealed the shepherd lying dead on the ground, Ephraim's pipe nearby.

When a battered Ephraim returned home, Bridget immediately recognised the gravity of the situation. Preservation of her family was of utmost importance. First, she made sure that her children, now aged eleven and thirteen, and their boarder Thomas Blunsden all had their story straight; the shepherd had come to their fence line to lure Ephraim out to the area where the offence had taken place. The jury preferred the story offered by the prosecution, that he had been out stealing sheep of his own accord. He was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to fifteen years at Port Arthur.²⁴

From the inquest and the trial, something about the characters in the family can be seen. Bridget, the Irish girl from Liverpool, could "handle any dog," not a skill likely learned in her former life. This was important as dogs were used to herd sheep for theft. She bore a grudge against her neighbours, who were living rent free in a hut on her land. She accused them of several moral offences including that of not being married and of being found in the wrong place when the shepherd's hut was "shook".²⁵ Coincidentally, the neighbours legalised their relationship between the murder inquest and the trial.²⁶ Her colourful language included the accusation that the murdered man and the neighbour had "manplotted" against her husband and that "crosslifting" had taken place.²⁷

²¹ Land Bishopsbourne (find ref)

²² 'Country Intelligence.', *Launceston Examiner*, 26 September 1863, p. 3

²³ 'Criminal Sitings', *The Cornwall Chronicle*, 19 October 1867, p. 3.

²⁴ 'Law', *The Mercury* 21 October 1867, p. 2.

²⁵ 'The Murder of Harris At Mountain Vale', *The Cornwall Chronicle*, 28 August 1867, p. 2.

²⁶ TAHO RGD37/1/26 Longford 1867/479 Marriage John Thomas Daws Margaret Jane Barker.

²⁷ 'The Mountain Vale Murder', *Launceston Examiner*, 24 August 1867, p. 6.

Ephraim the Younger when asked to swear on the Bible stated that he did not know what a Bible was; he had never been to church, chapel or school and could not read. Bridget had had lessons during her six months aboard the *Anson*, but obviously did not pass on these skills. It is improbable that any book was to be seen in their house. Young Ephraim, like his father, became a farmer, operating farms at Paradise and later at Wilmot and despite his lack of earlier education, became a founding member of the Christian Brethren Church at Sheffield.²⁸ From the Bible he learned to read, though his spelling was sometimes creative with words not found in the "good book." When his wife died during her 13th pregnancy, he simply married another.²⁹

Mary Ann the daughter was herself was accused of a crime in 1874 but after a subscription was taken up to pay for a lawyer, she was found not guilty.³⁰ She married a sea captain and must have been comforted by the change from sail to steam and the resulting decrease in shipping disasters, of which there were many. Mary Ann sustained herself during his many absences by taking in washing, often from ships.³¹ Her mother must have taught her well, already a laundress before her transportation, she had had much experience at the tubs of the Female factory. Mary Ann nursed her children through illness and coped with the early deaths of two of them.³² In 1899, she coped with two other deaths on her property in two days, one a suicide.³³

Perhaps, most of all Bridget taught her children resilience.

²⁸ Post Office Directory Wilmot 1903, 'God was Their Rock' Alan Dyer

²⁹ RGD Marriage Mersey Ephraim Doe, Rose Arnold 1905/39 No 1049

³⁰ 'Torquay', *Launceston Examiner*, 29 June 1875, p. 3.

³¹ 'Municipalities', *The Tasmanian*, 15 October 1887, p. 2.

³² 'Family Notices', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 February 1887, p. 2, 1919 'CURRENT TOPICS', *Examiner*, 24 April, p. 4.

³³ 'Local and General', *Daily Telegraph*, 27 June 1913, p. 4, 'Case of Suicide', *Launceston Examiner*, 11 November 1899 p. 7.