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'Expect the Unexpected: My Dear Father & Mother'

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Mary Ann Sarsfield, or Murphy, was tried in Limerick, Ireland, in 1850. She was sentenced to transportation for 15 years for stealing a cow. Recorded as a laundress and house servant when she arrived in Van Diemen's Land, she was 22, single, Roman Catholic, 5' 1½, with a dark complexion, black hair, low forehead, hazel eyes and a long cocked nose. She was from Cork City.[\[1\]](#)

According to her indent, Mary Ann's family comprised her father Michael, mother Julia, brother Timothy and sister Ellen, all of whom were living at her Native Place, Cork City.[\[2\]](#)

In October 1851, a year after she arrived on the *Duke of Cornwall*, Mary Ann wrote to her parents from Hobart Town. Her letter is full of unexpected information although it begins in a standard way:

VDL Hobartown Octr 20 1851

My Dear Father & Mother

It is with great pleasure that I now take up my pen to write these few lines trusting to the great God it will find you My Dear Sister and Brother in good health as I am happy to say it leaves me at present ...

It seems that Mary Ann's parents may not have been aware that she had been transported as she goes on to say:

most likely you have been made acquainted with my misfortune before this but as I left your tender care against your wish I did not like to send to you from the Prison but if I had don [done] so no doubt you would have saved me from receiving the alfo [awful] Sentence which I did I now take the liberty of writing to you to you inform you that I have arived safe to this Contry and I trust that you will be kind enough to answer this Letter by return of Post telling me how you all are &c as I can asure you My Dear Parents I long to hear from you ...

Elsewhere she stated:

I was tried on the 10 Day of Jan 1850 in Lymrick [Limerick] in the name of Mary Ann Sarsfield but I was first taken on the first day of Nov^r 1849. I sailed in the Ship Duke of Cornwall in July 1850 and arrived [here] the same year.[\[3\]](#)

Mary Ann explained to her parents the circumstances of her arrest and trial:

I was never in trouble before and I do before you and my God declare that I was innocent of what I was transported for as it was my misfortune to meete the other three girls in Lymrick as they was driving the Cow and only spoke a few words before the Constable took them and

me and for that only I was tried and sentenced to be transported for 15 Years and I declare to you and my God that I did not know anything about it any more then I was speaking to them in the Street when they was taken for I only had been in Lymrick 14 days ...

Mary Ann continued:

I am Happy to inform you that I have got married since I have been here and most likely by the time you receive this Letter I shall be come a Mother if God spairs me ...

Earlier that year, in May, Mary Ann and fellow-convict Charles Jones, who arrived on the *Pestongee Bomangee*, successfully applied for permission to marry.^[4] They married in June 1851 at St George's Church of England, Battery Point. Charles was a servant who signed his name; Mary Ann made her mark [x].^[5] There is no evidence that Mary Ann was literate and the question of who wrote her letter for her remains unanswered.

Charles Jones, alias Henry Jenkins, was tried in 1845 in Southampton, Portsmouth Borough Quarter Sessions, for stealing a pair of pistols and a dressing case. He was sentenced to transportation for ten years. A 26-year-old shoemaker from Hereford, his behaviour on board the convict ship was described as 'most exemplary' Charles was literate and I suspect he may have helped Mary Anne with her letter.^[6]

My Husband at present is very kind to me but he wishes to go to Sidney ...^[7]

This may explain the urgent tone to the letter: Charles was recommended for a conditional pardon in June 1851 but Mary Ann, who had a 15 year sentence, was not yet free to leave Van Diemen's Land and sought her parents support to get her a conditional pardon. She was pregnant when she wrote the letter and no doubt did not want to be left behind in Van Diemen's Land with a child and no husband. She wrote:

Dear Parents do get Mr Dowden to do all he can to get my Conditional Parden sent out or I shall not be able to leave this Island yet this Eight years and if My Husband should go with out me I shall be returned in to Government and what then my Dear Parents I should have to go thru you know nothing about I [refrain] from telling you what I have already suffered as it would only greave you and do me no good and as I have brought it all on Myself I must put up with it but for Godsake get Rev^d Dowden Esq^r eather to get my sentence off to 7 years or my Conditional Pardon or any one that as got friends at Home can do it by applying to the Queen ...^[8]

Mary Ann concluded her letter with a heart-felt plea to her parents:

Dear Parents do try to do all you can for me and loose no time in answering and let me know [page torn] My Dear Sister is doing.

I must now conclude wishen you Dear father Mother Sister and Brother all the Health and Happyness this world can afford and belive me I remain your Loving Daughter

Mary Ann Jones

Mary Ann's release was hampered by her long sentence. She did not receive her ticket-of-leave until June 1855. She was recommended for a conditional pardon in January 1856. This was approved in November 1856.

By this time, Mary Ann's wish for a family, expressed in her letter home, had been fulfilled. Her daughter, Mary Amelia Jones, was born in Fingal in March 1852.[\[9\]](#) In all, Mary Ann had five children between 1852 and 1862.

Charles Jones, aged 40, died of *phthisis* in April 1863 in Oatlands, leaving Mary Ann destitute with five young children.[\[10\]](#)

In 1863, three of Mary Ann's children – Mary Amelia, aged 11; Henry William, aged 10; James Michael, aged 7 – were admitted to the Queen's Asylum for Destitute Children (formerly known as the Orphan Schools).[\[11\]](#) George, aged 12, was admitted in 1870.[\[12\]](#)

The application for admission to the Asylum for Mary Amelia, submitted in 1863, stated:

The father of this child is dead, the mother has another infant to provide for aged 19 months, and should the application be met with approval her intention is to enter service and maintain her youngest child ... The mother appears to be a very delicate woman and as she has been placed in her present miserable condition by the visitation of God and not through any misconduct and it is moreover certain that the girl can never be expected to become a moral and subsequently useful member of society by being left to grow up in such a place as one of the poor lodging houses of the City, we beg to recommend that she be admitted into the Queen's Asylum for Orphans.[\[13\]](#)

In November 1863, George Hunter, Catholic Chaplain, wrote a letter of support for the admission of Mary Amelia, stating that Mary Ann, a widow with five young, was destitute. Three of her sons were already in the Queen's Asylum:

This woman appears to be in a very destitute condition, without home or means of protecting or instructing this little girl.[\[14\]](#)

Mary Ann moved to Victoria about 1886. Aged 56, she died of *pleuro pneumonia* at the residence of her son, James, in Collingwood, Victoria, in 1888, and was buried in the General Cemetery Melbourne. She was survived by her five children.[\[15\]](#)

It is not known whether Mary Ann's parents received her letter. She included her return address on her letter but it was very vague:

Direct for Mrs Mary Ann Jones to be left at the Post Office till call^d for Hobart Town
Vandiemens Land.[\[16\]](#)

Mary Ann addressed the letter to Rev. Dowden, Sunday's Well, Cork, Ireland 'or elsewhere' with a note:

Sir

I trust you will pardon me but I shall be ever bound to pray &c if you will be so kind as to let this letter be given to My father or any of My family) Mickle Murphy and by so doing you will Sir ever oblige your Humble and most Obedt Servant Mary Ann Murphy.[\[17\]](#)

Rev. Dowden sent a memorial to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, enclosing the letter.[\[18\]](#)
Rev. Dowden's memorial gave some background for Mary Ann's letter:

[she is] a woman who is under sentence of transportation for fifteen years for cowstealing and is now undergoing sentence abroad. The convict was, when with her father and mother Michael and Julia Murphy, of a peculiar and sensitive temper, and when threatened by them to be punished for some neglect from them, went to Limerick, and fell into the company of robbers, with whom she was implicated in the crime for which she was transported; although it appears probable, to those who knew her character, that she was not more than an ignorant associate with the criminals when taken.

Rev. Dowden continued:

The convict when arrested and charged with crime assumed a false name to prevent her father and mother learning of her involvement ... she appears in the Calendar of the Limerick Jail, under the name of Mary Ann Sarsfield.

To support his case for favourable treatment for Mary Ann, and remission of her fifteen year sentence, he sought statements of her character from the Governor and chaplain of the Limerick County Gaol.[\[19\]](#) He concluded:

The convict is now married, and bears the name Mary Ann Jones; her location is Hobart Town, and the Letter to her Father and Mother tells her history with much seeming simplicity and truth, concluding with a request that memorialist will try to get her liberty, so that her honest husbands children should not be a convict woman's offspring ...[\[20\]](#)

The application was not successful and the documents, including Mary Ann's letter, sit in a long-forgotten file in the National Archives of Ireland.[\[21\]](#)

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[\[1\]](#) TAHO, CON41/1/28 Mary A Sarsfield or Murphy *Duke of Cornwall* 1850 No.955; TAHO, CON19/12/9 [5'1, Cork, laundress and house servant]; TAHO, CON15/1/6 pp.276-277 Mary A Sarsfield, proper name Murphy [laundress]

[\[2\]](#) TAHO, CON15/1/6 pp.276-277 Mary A Sarsfield or Murphy *Duke of Cornwall* 1850 No.955.

[\[3\]](#) NAI, CRF 1852 S31 Mary Ann Sarsfield.

[\[4\]](#) TAHO, CON52/1/3 p.241; CON 52/1/4.

[\[5\]](#) TAHO, RGD37/1/10 District of Hobart 1851/228 Mary Ann Sarsfield [Sarsfield on *Tasmanian names Index*] and Charles Jones.

- [6] TAHO, CON33/1/74 Charles Jones alias Henry Jenkins No.17322.
- [7] NAI, CRF 1852 S31 Mary Anne Sarsfield.
- [8] NAI, CRF 1852 S31 Mary Anne Sarsfield.
- [9] TAHO, RGD33/1/30 District of Fingal 1852/166 Mary Amelia Jones. Father, constable. Mother 'Sarsfield [*Tasmanian Names Index*: Tarsfield] Informant, by letter, Avoca.
- [10] TAHO, RGD35/1/32 District of Oatlands 1863/382 Charles Henry Jones; TAHO, SWD26/1/6 Jones. He was free by servitude.
- [11] TAHO, RGD33/1/32 District of Fingal 1854/227 Henry William Jones. Father, constable. By note, Avoca. [*Tasmanian Names Index* mother 'Tarsfield'], TAHO, SWD26/1/6 Jones. Additional information from descendant Carolyn Nulty.
- [12] TAHO, SWD27/1/1, HAP1871/63.
- [13] TAHO, SWD26/1/6 Jones.
- [14] TAHO, SWD26/1/6 Jones. Mary Ann 'Sourcefield'.
- [15] *The Age* (Melbourne) 4 August 1888 p.5.
- [16] NAI, CRF 1852 S 31 Mary Ann Sarsfield.
- [17] NAI, CRF 1852 S 31 Mary Ann Sarsfield.
- [18] NAI, CRF 1852 S 31 Mary Ann Sarsfield p.7
- [19] NAI, CRF 1852 S 31 Mary Ann Sarsfield [8].
- [20] NAI, CRF 1852 S 31 Mary Ann Sarsfield [8].
- [21] NAI, CRF 1852 S 31 Mary Ann Sarsfield p.2.