

Royal Western Australian Historical Society's
Annual Pioneers Memorial Service
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Commemorating McCann family

Citation by John James

Premier, Canon Sheehan, Professor Appleyard, Other Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Writing in 2000 about the Irish in Western Australia, Anne Partlon observed that "Today at least 20 per cent of Australians can claim Irish ancestry. These figures identify the Irish as the largest ethnic group in Australia after the English."ⁱ Descendants of John and Mary McCann are certainly able to make that claim, with John having been born in Lancashire of Irish parents and Mary a native of Terryglass, County Tipperary.

The story of how they arrived, met, married and produced 10 children in the Victoria District (which we now know as Northampton and Geraldton) of nineteenth century WA is like many Irish stories - part fact, part myth and part fairy story. The challenge is to differentiate them. Like all good stories, it has its fair share of drama and heartache and is set against a harsh, unfamiliar landscape.

That, after many hardships, John and Mary are buried in this colonial cemetery with a fenced headstone speaks largely to the fortitude and determination of Mary. After 18 years of marriage, John died of pneumonia in Geraldton on 13 November 1880 (two days after Ned Kelly, a far more notorious Irishman, was hanged) leaving Mary to raise their seven surviving children.

Records of John and Mary's births have not been found, but the 1841 Census of England for Manchester has a family consisting of Francis and Ann McCann and their two sons, Samuel (10) and John (5). We know that ages were rounded to the nearest 5 years in the 1841 Census, so 1836 is only an approximate year of birth for John. Unfortunately, searches of later census' failed to find any further trace of the family.

What makes us think that we may have the right John McCann here is that his father is named as Francis on his marriage certificate; Ann was the name of his eldest daughter and Samuel his eldest son. Further, John's year of birth tallies closely with that calculated at the time of his trial in Manchester and subsequent transportation.

Mary, whose maiden name was Keane, always gave Borrisokane, County Tipperary as her place of origin. A 1985 search of the baptismal records by the then parish priest at Borrisokane yielded no matching baptism. However, a more recent search of the Irish Family History Foundation records produced a Mary Keane, daughter of Patrick and Ellen, baptised on 12 October 1834 in the parish of Terryglass, slightly northwest of Borrisokane and just below where the Shannon flows into Lough Derg.

Evidence for this being the Mary of interest to us comes from a marriage two years later in Terryglass of Patrick Keane to Bridget Walsh. We know from stories handed down from Mary that her mother died and that her father married a Biddy, Biddy being a contraction of Bridget. More support for this view comes from Mary naming her second daughter Ellen, her mother's name.

(Mary's view of her stepmother is best summed up by the frequently repeated quote: "If ever there's a soul in Hell, it's Biddy!").

While John's arrival in WA is a matter of public record, Mary's has not been established to date. What we do know is that she was accompanied by her brother William, an Enrolled Pensioner Guard whose job it was to guard the likes of John. Little wonder then that William was opposed to the relationship and eventual marriage of his younger sister. We know this from some notes written in the 1980s by Nina Parkinson, based on stories told to her by her mother Eliza Dye.

Those who are embarrassed by having a convict forebear may take some comfort from Professor Patrick O'Farrell's (1986) description of the Irish convicts as "...a better type of convict, less criminally inclined, more likely to completely reform, less inclined to return to crime in Australia...(and)...their criminal impulses those of the destitute and desperate."ⁱⁱ

How well did this description fit John McCann? His crime, according to the trial records of 15 June 1857 of the Manchester Quarter Sessions, was to steal one shirt, one sheet, one handkerchief, one pair of boots and one pair of shoes. For this he received a sentence of six years transportation to WA.

As for reoffending, "The West Australian" of 23 November 1880, as part of an obituary, reported that "...His Excellency the Governor has been pleased to remit the fine which was recently imposed upon Mr Walker (the alias under which John was convicted) by the bench here for selling by auction without a license, some old newspapers, the property of the Working Men's Society" The article concludes "...the remitting of the fine has met with the universal approval of the public."ⁱⁱⁱ

To show how complete was John's rehabilitation, we have only to read the obituaries in the Geraldton newspapers, one of which concluded by describing him thus: "...a straightforward Good Templar (he was a member of a temperance lodge), a kind husband, and an affectionate father." Earlier in the same obituary, he was described as "a hardworking and industrious man, was at all times ready and willing to assist in matters of public interest."^{iv} He was a member of three committees within the town of Geraldton, including one formed to celebrate on 6 June 1879 the Jubilee of the founding of the Swan River Colony.

The ship which brought John McCann and 279 other convicts to the Colony was the "Edwin Fox" which arrived at Fremantle in November 1858. Remarkably, the teak hull of the ship can be seen today by visitors to Picton, New Zealand where it has been preserved and is on display. Before being used as a convict ship, she was a troop carrier in the Crimean War and then transported immigrants to New Zealand. She ended her days as a coal hulk. In 1965, she was bought by the Edwin Fox Restoration Society.

Little is known of John and Mary's lives after their initial arrival. John received his Ticket of Leave on 11 June 1860, the couple married in the Catholic Church, Fremantle on 4 March 1862 and John had his Certificate of Freedom by 22 Aug 1863. Their first child, Ann was born in January of that year.

It is the birth certificates of the McCann children which give us the clues as to where the family lived and how John was employed. The first two children, Ann and Samuel were both born at the Wheal Fortune Mine, Samuel succumbing to convulsions in July 1864 aged only one month.

Research reported in 2002 by Dr Martin Gibbs^v, an archaeologist now at the University of Sydney, suggests that both the Wheal Fortune Mine and the nearby Gwalla Mine, referred to below, were developed by the merchant capitalist, George Shenton. The Wheal Fortune Mine, just off the Port Gregory road near Northampton, formed part of WA's first mining operations which later came to be known as the Northampton Complex. This consisted of more than 100 deposits of lead, silver and copper which were worked between 1850 and 1973. According to Ethan Minerals^{vi}, the current lessee, the overall historical production is conservatively estimated at 77,000 tonnes lead, 4,268 tonnes copper and 212.3 kg silver.

Ellen, the third child of John and Mary, was born at the Yanganooka Mine in 1865 and John, the next born, at the Gwalla Mine, just south of Northampton, in 1867. While Wheal Fortune was a lead mine, both Yanganooka and Gwalla were copper mines. In 2009, the National Trust included the Gwalla Mining Precinct on its list of Heritage at Risk for that year, noting that the church and cemetery had been included on the state's Register of Heritage Places in 2002, but not the rest of the village.

According to later research by Gibbs (2010), Gwalla had been known originally as "Gwalla Estate" and was owned and managed by Joseph Horrocks who was himself an ex-convict. Described as a philanthropist, Horrocks attempted to establish his own village at Gwalla and donated to the community the non-denominational church he had built in 1861. Gibbs comments that "the fact that accommodation was made for all of the different denominations is of great interest, as it speaks of a concern for the broader community, beyond the usual sectarian approach seen in the colonies."^{vii}

Religion, or rather the particular brand of it, became a major issue for the McCann family after the births in Geraldton of Mary (1871), William (1873), Eliza(beth) (1874) and Francis (1876) and, more especially, after the death of their father in 1880. The only account we have of the events leading to Mary leaving the Catholic Church and embracing Methodism comes to us from Kath James, daughter of Mary McCann, the younger who married Patrick Brennan. Kath recorded a series of oral history interviews in 1992, four years before her death.^{viii}

As the story goes, because John died before the priest could give him the last rites and hear his confession, the priest refused to bury him in consecrated ground. Mary is supposed to have said that there was no way he would be buried in unconsecrated ground and she would have the Methodist minister bury him. Going further, she took the children away from the convent school and brought them all up Methodists.

In an attempt to make up for what he had done, the priest offered to educate Ann and Ellen at what is now Mercedes College at his expense. Legend has it that Mary led him to a pile of empty bottles at the rear of her little house on the beach and said: "See those bottles, Father? I would rather carry them around on my back and sell them from door to door than let you spend one penny on my children after what you did; because my husband is today lying in a Methodist grave because of you."

When Mary, the younger brought Patrick Brennan to meet her mother, Mary is quoted as saying that she had two things against him – he was an Irishman and a Catholic. So strong were Mary's views that she did not attend the wedding in St Mary's Cathedral, nor any of the other Catholic weddings of her children.

Mary made a deathbed return to Catholicism in 1915. Her daughter, Mary is said to have sought and obtained permission from Bishop Gibney for her to be buried as a Catholic, but in the Methodist portion of the cemetery. This was to allow her to be buried with John who had been reinterred at East Perth after the family moved to Perth. It is likely that they are the only Irish Catholic couple buried in this portion of the cemetery.

The other occupants of the grave are their son, John who died in 1905, ten years before his mother and Maria Mary Waldock, the seven year old daughter of Ann and her husband, William Waldock who died in 1897. William was a police inspector, the irony of which would not have been lost on John McCann, had he lived to see his daughter marry.

The oldest living Waldock descendant is also William, a 92 year old career Air Force officer who retired with the rank of Group Captain. Bill's health does not allow him to be here today and the family is represented by his younger sister, Dorothy, former private secretary to successive Commissioners for Railways. Their late brother, Len was the official timekeeper for the Perth Football Club for 63 years, a position his father had held from 1909 to 1947.

Ellen married Thomas Mulligan, an Irishman from County Cork. Their oldest descendant is Thomas McMullen who, with his wife Veronica, has lived for 61 years in the West Leederville home built by his Mulligan grandparents in 1910. Apart from war service with the RAAF, Tom had a 40 year career with the Australian Taxation Office. We wish Tom well as he approaches his 90th birthday.

John remained single and died at the young age of 38 and, as mentioned above, is buried with his parents. Mines Department records show that, in 1894, he was the first listed leaseholder of a gold mine near Mt Magnet known as the White Rose Mine. His brother-in-law, Patrick Brennan is said to have worked on the mine with him for a period.

By the time Mary married Patrick Brennan, he had moved to Perth and begun to work in the tramways where he became foreman of construction. Ruri, one of their four sons, was politically inclined and campaigned for Philip Collier (1873-1948), Labor Premier for nine years up to 1936.

After war service in Papua and New Guinea where he was commissioned in the field, Ruri returned to work in the public service there and became President of the Public Service Association which he led from 1952-57. In his 1976 account of Australia's administration of the Territory, Sir Paul Hasluck described Ruri Brennan as a "remarkable public-spirited officer".^{ix}

Of Mary and Patrick's grandchildren, Fay Brennan would have been the one most likely for other McCann descendants to have encountered, perhaps unknowingly. As Sister M Anastasia, she nursed in midwifery at St John of God Hospital, Subiaco for 30 years until her premature death in 1968.

Like his older brother, William McCann never married. A teamster on enlistment in the First AIF in 1916, it was logical that he would join the 10th Light Horse Regiment which saw service in the Middle East for the remainder of World War I. It was William who was given the responsibility of supervising the disinterment of his father's remains from the Geraldton cemetery and subsequent reinterment at East Perth.

Elizabeth, or Eliza as she was better known, married Matthew Dye and they had four daughters, Mamie, Nina, Jean and Corrie. Depending on whether your interest is in politics or sport, Eliza could have laid claim to being the grandmother of two of the most distinguished of the McCann descendants.

Corrie and Jim Barnett's son, Colin has been our State's Premier since 2008. Any dispassionate observer of WA politics would say that the position is his to occupy for as long as he chooses. One wonders what John and Mary McCann would have made of their great-grandson preparing to host the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting later this year. As with the rest of us, there would have to be a measure of pride that a family member has achieved the highest elected office in the State.

By contrast with the Premier, his cousin, John Parkinson's football career is well behind him. However, John has the satisfaction of having tied with Bill Walker for the 1967 Sandover Medal and helping Claremont to win two WANFL Premierships. The only blot on John's illustrious career is that he lowered himself to play some games for Collingwood in 1971, before seeing the light and returning to finish his career at Claremont.

Francis was the youngest of the McCann children. He married Ellen Harris in 1905 and they had three children, Alice, John and Francis. Kevin, son of Francis and his son, Benjamin are the only two people still to carry the family name which gives them a special place at today's commemoration.

At this, the first gathering of the clan since 1980, we honour John and Mary McCann and give thanks for their lives. We also ask for mercy for the priest whose actions created generations of bitterness and division within the family. It is to be hoped that this commemoration will complete the healing of the breach.

A quotation from Edmund Burke, the 18th Century Anglo-Irish statesman and philosopher seems an appropriate note on which to end this citation:

"People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors."

Collated and presented by John James in consultation with Beverley Kiddey, granddaughter of Eliza Dye, nee McCann.

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ⁱ Partlon, A. (2000). *Singers Standing on the Outer Rim*. In Reece, B. (ed.), *The Irish in Western Australia*, University of Western Australia, Perth, WA

ⁱⁱ O'Farrell, P. (1986). *The Irish in Australia*, 3rd edn, UNSW Press, Sydney, NSW

ⁱⁱⁱ *The West Australian*, 23 November 1880

^{iv} *The Victorian Express*, 17 November 1880

^v Gibbs, M. (2002). *Archaeological Survey of the Wheal Fortune Mine, Northampton, Western Australia: Midwest Archaeological Survey 01/02*, Report to the Shire of Northampton, Northampton, Western Australia

vi www.ethanminerals.com.au

vii Gibbs, M. (2010). *Landscapes of Redemption: Tracing the Path of a Convict Miner in Western Australia*, Int J Histor Archaeol, Published online: 12 June 2010, Springer

viii Verbatim transcript of an interview with Kathleen James (1911- 1996) by Erica Harvey, Oral History Unit, J S Battye Library of West Australian History, Reference number OH 2540

ix Hasluck, P. (1976). *A Time For Building: Australian Administration in Papua New Guinea 1951-1963*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Victoria