

Bridget Hopkins c1833-1915: A Galway girl goes to Bathurst and Bourke

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Bridget Hopkins, aged 16, arrived in Sydney in 1849 on the emigrant ship *Digby*. She was one of 229 female Irish orphans on board, drawn from some eight different workhouses in the northern counties of Ireland, and one of more than 4,000 orphan girls who came from over 115 different Irish workhouses to Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide under the Earl Grey Famine Orphan Scheme 1848-1850. She was my maternal great-great-grandmother.

Through the efforts of past and present descendants, the broad arc of her long life has been known for at least two decades. My own far more recent efforts have added a diagram here, a detail there, joined some dots and placed a fuller record of her life in the public domain.

My research has triggered many unresolved questions. Not only about what she did but also more uncomfortable questions about what kind of person she was. How did the furnace of the Great Famine, the workhouse, emigration and at least one and perhaps two unsatisfactory marriages temper her nature? Was she Bridget the brave? Bridget the survivor? Is it best to think of her as a business woman who made her own living for more than forty years, striving to achieve some degree of financial and legal independence from her husband/s? Was she close to her children or was she ambivalent about motherhood? Was she like Brecht's *Mother Courage*, carrying her surviving children through the desolation of her own widowhood, separation and abandonment, only to lose five more of them in the prime of their lives? In all likelihood we shall never know but here is the story that has prompted them.

Bridget was born in County Galway, Ireland around 1833. Her mother was Bridget (Biddy) Moore and her father was Thomas Hopkins, a butcher. Both were reported as dead by 1848. We know she was born near Dunmore in the north of Galway, but exactly where is not proven. After a lot of searching and a convoluted process of deduction, I have come to the view that Bridget most likely came from the townland of Glen (var. Glan, Glann, Glean, Gleann) in the Parish of Kilkerrin some 18 km south east of Dunmore in north Galway.

In 1841, when Bridget was eight years old, almost 70% of the total population of Kilkerrin Parish was illiterate, and only 9.2% could both read and write. Bridget could neither read nor write when she arrived and we do not know if she spoke English; some 75% of those admitted to workhouses in the province of Connaught spoke only Gaelic. She was still signing with her mark in 1893.

Glen townland was a little under 168 acres, given over to tillage and pasture, with a small village at its heart, and was decimated within a decade. In 1841 the townland had a population of 110 people living in 22 houses but by 1851 its population had dropped to 17 and there were only four houses remaining. Glen is but one tiny example of the extreme depopulation of Ireland during and after the Great Famine.

It is highly likely, but not proven, that Bridget was admitted to the Castlerea Workhouse just across the border in County Roscommon; Glenamaddy workhouse was not opened until 1853. Accounts of the state of Castlerea workhouse and other workhouses in the west of Ireland during the Great Famine are devastating.

A few weeks after Bridget had arrived in Sydney, Mr Auchmuty, the Temporary Poor Law Inspector for the Castlereagh Poor Law Union, wrote to the Poor Law Commissioners:

The means of the poor are exhausted; they are in a most deplorable condition, some of the persons lately admitted are actually in a state of starvation; all employment, I may say, has ceased, the able-bodied are going to England in great numbers to look for employment, and leaving their families in the greatest destitution; there is fresh difficulty in discharging paupers from the workhouse who have been in the house for any length of time; they have no homes to go to, the moment they come in, their cabins are levelled by the landlords. There has been a great many evictions in this Union lately. ... it is astonishing, everywhere I go through the Union, to see how fast the cabins are disappearing.

No matter how hard Bridget's life was to be in NSW, it is likely to have been even harder, and probably a good deal shorter, had she stayed in Ireland.

Bridget departed Plymouth on 16 December 1848 on board the *Digby*. The voyage was not all plain sailing. There were six cases of typhus fever, and two orphans died from it. One orphan attempted to throw herself off the side of the ship. Some were punished for misdemeanours with bread and water diets or hard labour with holistones and one was punished by cropping her hair very short. Three were presented with a prayer book each and the clothes of one of the dead orphans as a reward for good conduct during the time they were hospital assistants and for great kindness to the sick. Bridget kept her head down; she is not mentioned in any of the known Digby documents.

About one month into the voyage, the girls were often hungry. I was told by a descendent of another Digby girl that some would slip down to the cook's galley to steal the plums out of the pudding. The Surgeon Superintendent began to observe symptoms of scurvy for which he could not account. After investigation, he found that the ship's captain was defrauding the emigrants of a large portion of their rations and providing poor quality rations contrary to the Government Regulations. After much on-board disputation between the Captain and Surgeon Superintendent, the rations were improved and the journey proceeded with passable equanimity. The Immigration Board investigation in Sydney, which followed complaints by the Surgeon Superintendent, recommended the ship's captain and officers should not receive their gratuity and that the captain should never be employed on an emigrant ship again. Not much consolation for Bridget and the other workhouse emigrants.

After 110 days at sea, the *Digby* arrived in Sydney on 4 April 1849 and the girls would have walked up to their temporary lodgings at the Immigration Depot at Hyde Park Barracks. By mid-May, Bridget had been indentured to Mr John Connor who seems to have run a boarding house in Castlereagh Street, Sydney and who had applied for a general servant from among the *Digby* girls. We know little about him, or of Bridget's time in his service, other than the fact that from her wages she spent 4/6d to buy herself a new pair of shoes from Joseph Vickery at Adelaide House in George Street. But just a year after her arrival, on 12 April 1850, her indentures with Connor were cancelled for absconding from service and the Magistrate ordered that she be ... sent up the country; to be kept separate from the other girls whilst in Sydney; balance of wages to be appropriated to pay expenses of removal to the interior.

Cancelled indentures were common among the Earl Grey girls, and Trevor McClaughlin in his book *Barefoot and Pregnant? Irish Famine Orphans in Australia* reminds us that it is best not to jump to any firm conclusions about what the cancellation said about Bridget herself. However, the inclusion of the phrase ... *and kept separate from other girls whilst in Sydney* ... is unusual in the official records. Of the 254 girls listed in a submission to the NSW Parliamentary Enquiry in 1858, Bridget was the only one to have this particular phrase included in the Magistrate's Decision and Recommendation for Disposal. Around the time that her indentures were cancelled, Bridget became pregnant.

Perhaps 18-year-old Bridget was wearing her nice new shoes when she married William Carroll in Bathurst in November 1850, both signing the marriage certificate with their mark. William, a carpenter by trade, was from Haggardstown, County Louth, Ireland and more than 20 years her senior. Bridget and William settled in Kelso and her daughter Catherine was born in February 1851. Between 1851 and 1861, Bridget and William had five more children, one dying in infancy and another, Thomas, dying aged two years.

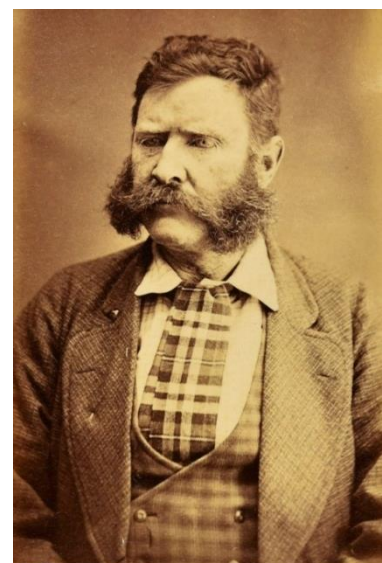
In 1857, William was granted a publican's licence for the Gold Finder's Arms in Kelso which he and Bridget ran for the next four years, changing the sign to the Gold Miner's Inn in 1861. Running a pub was really hard work. At that time, pubs were required to provide public accommodation and have a least two sitting rooms and two bedrooms for public use. They were allowed to open six days a week until 10 pm, with all day Sunday closing. Opening hours became even more generous after 1862. The very high turnover of publicans suggests that the costs and benefits did not always align.

Early in 1861, William became ill. While he renewed the licence for the Gold Miner's Inn in April, in May he auctioned all his household furniture, presumably to provide some income for his family, pay down debts or both. Later in the year, he became too ill to work and was confined to bed. He died of apoplexy on 12 November 1861 at the Grey Horse Inn in Bathurst, aged 50.

Bridget was left to raise their four surviving children, all under 10 years including nine months old William Bernard. As William's widow, the licence for the Gold Miner's Inn automatically passed to her and she may have continued to manage the Kelso inn until the licensing year ended on 30 June 1862, or, as I suspect, she took over the licence of the Grey Horse Inn in Bathurst.

In Bathurst in March 1862, four months after William's death, Bridget a 26-year-old widow, publican and mother of four married Charles Adolphus Bell, a 23-year-old cattle and horse dealer living at Limestone Flat. Charles was born in Queen Charlotte Vale (now Perthville) NSW, the fourth of 20 (yes, 20) children born to William Bell and Sarah Drake. He was a renowned athlete and sportsman in his younger days, and an expert horseman. [Charles Adolphus Bell is pictured here, aged 40, State Records NSW, NRS 2138].

We do not know precisely how the relationship between Bridget and Charles played out over the next decade, but from this distance it was most certainly not a marriage made in heaven.



Bridget and Charles had three daughters together, so there were now seven children to be cared for. Between 1862 and 1875 both Bridget and Charles were publicans. They held multiple publican's licences in Bathurst under their individual names and changed hotel locations and signs many times but it is not always clear whether they were running the pubs together or apart. At the Grey Horse Inn, Charles looked after the two beer engines while Bridget ran the bar. The bar cannot have been a big operation, just 18 tumblers, one glass jug, two lamps, a counter and some shelves.

Two themes came into focus as my research progressed. The first was that Bridget lived most of her life as a small business woman, largely throwing off the shackles of a domestic servant in the employ of others. Perhaps her search for independence came from her indenture with John Connell on arrival in the colony where she may also have learned the rudiments of running a lodging house. The other theme is the minimal financial or legal protections afforded to married women like Bridget which caused so many to stay in unhappy relationships.

On each of her marriages, Bridget's property and legal identity was merged with that of her husband. Charles Bell had been refused a licence for the Grey Horse Inn two years before their marriage, probably on the grounds of his prior conviction for gambling. As a widow, Bridget briefly held a licence for the Grey Horse Inn in her own right, but on her marriage, it automatically transferred to Charles who then held the same privileges, rights, duties and obligations as if the licence had been originally granted to him.

In March 1866, Charles was declared insolvent. From reading his insolvency papers and newspaper reports I have formed the impression that my great-great-grandfather was a larger than life, hail fellow well met type, quick to provide board, lodging and even loans to his mates, slow to call in their debts and slow to pay his own debts. Rents for the hotel were high and income limited. He may or may not have had a drinking or gambling problem, but he seems to have been fond of horse racing and a pretty poor manager of money.

Just six weeks after his bankruptcy, on 25 April 1866, Bridget and Charles signed Articles of Separation, Bridget signing with her mark.

Whereas divers unhappy differences having arisen between the said Charles Bell and the said Bridget Bell, his wife, they have mutually agreed henceforth to live separate and apart from each other during the remainder of their joint lives ...

Charles and Bridget agreed that they would not live together, that Bridget was free to go about her own business free from any interference from Charles, that Charles was not responsible for Bridget's debts and that their children would live with and be maintained by Bridget so long as she did not live in adultery or otherwise misconduct herself.

Because a married woman had no legal status separate from her husband, the agreement was actually between Charles Bell and William Jones, a road contractor of Bathurst who agreed to serve as a Trustee for Bridget. To be crystal clear, Bridget could not enter into a legal separation agreement with Charles, but Charles could enter into a legal agreement with a third (male) party, Jones, who agreed to receive maintenance of 10/0d per week from Charles and then transfer it to Bridget if the terms and conditions of the agreement were met.

Initially I thought this separation agreement was just a legal fiction, something cooked up between Bridget and Charles to protect some of Charles's assets from creditors. As an

insolvent, Charles was unable to hold a publican's licence, but the licence could have passed to Bridget. Rather conveniently, very soon after the separation, Charles 'went down the Macquarie River' and while he was away, Bridget sold their furniture valued at £17/-, providing her with some funds to look after her family and thus denying redress to Charles' creditors. She then departed the Grey Horse Inn and, as a now judicially separated woman, became the licensee of the Tradesman's Arms, holding the sign name for three years in her own right while relocating her premises. Theoretically she could not have held the licence as a married woman, so I came to believe the separation was real.

But, notwithstanding the terms of the separation that they would not cohabit, there may have been a reconciliation for their third and last child Florence Charlotte Bell was born in late 1867. Charles's bankruptcy was discharged in late 1868. In 1869 he took over the licence of the Grey Horse Hotel for two years and then the Family Hotel in George Street, Bathurst before taking on the licence of the newly built and very grand Haymarket Hotel for a brief period. It is not clear whether Charles and Bridget were living together at this time.

Then, on 18 April 1871 at the Bathurst District Court, Bridget Bell was granted a Protection Order under the Deserted Wives and Children's Act 1858. The Act allowed a married woman who was deserted by her husband to apply to the Courts for an order to protect any personal property which she may acquire after such desertion against her husband or his creditors ... The order also allowed her to enter into contracts in her own right and be treated as a 'femme sole', a single woman. She could also sue her husband or his creditors if they tried to take her property. If she was judged not to be deserted without reasonable cause or if the couple again cohabited or resided together, the order ceased. While I have not located the details of the Protection Order, I think we can be confident that Bridget had been deserted by this time.

It was virtually impossible to obtain a divorce on any ground in New South Wales until 1873 with the passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act. Even after that, divorce was not an option for Bridget, probably because of her Catholicism, perhaps because of cost too.

While her eldest child Catherine Carroll had already been married for three years and had two children of her own, Bridget was still responsible for six children under 14 years. Charles may have paid some maintenance, but she still had to earn her own living. In 1871, immediately after the Protection Order, Bridget opened an accommodation house in William Street, Bathurst. It may not have been particularly profitable because Bridget later acquired a new publican's licence, for the Cricketer's Arms in Bathurst and held the licence in her own name 1874-75. Hotel-keeping was a competitive business; in 1875 there were some 61 licensed hotels in Bathurst, and many Bathurst publicans were Irish.

In October 1876, the Bathurst Licensing Bench heard an application to transfer the licence of the Busman's Inn to Bridget. She engaged a lawyer to argue her case, and he drew the attention of the court to the fact that she had held licences in Kelso and Bathurst and had never been refused; that no objection had been judged against her; that she was separated from her husband by a judicial order; that the business of a publican had been her sole means of enabling her to support her large family, and that she had gone to a great expense in making the house suitable. The Bench declined to grant a transfer, consistent with government efforts to reduce the number of licensed pubs, but informed Bridget that this would not prevent her from applying the full Bench. The cost of such an appeal would have been considerable and thus ended Bridget's career as a publican.

Yet Bridget still had young children to care for. Family lore has it that, denied a publican's licence and a known way of supporting her family, Bridget became a cook in the railway camps as the track was extended westward. This certainly fits with the history of the main western railway. It also fits with the individual histories of three of her children.

These railway camps were really a collection of tents erected on frames so they could be removed easily, mile by mile, as the line progressed. There would be butchers' and bakers' carts and other vendors moving in and out. A few camps had rudimentary schools for the children of the railway workers – surveyors, engineers, navvies and fettlees alike, all who had to be fed. Some even had a shebeen or sly grog shop. Cooking would have been done outdoors but it would have been hot hard work, with summer temperatures reaching well over 100°F in the shade and over 120°F in the sun.

Meanwhile, in September 1878, Charles Bell was indicted at the Bathurst Quarter Sessions for stealing cattle. He was found guilty of receiving and sentenced to three years' imprisonment with hard labour. He was admitted to gaol on 5 September 1878 and discharged on 4 March 1881. On 28 December 1881, nine months after Charles was discharged, his son Reginald Charles Frederick Bell was born in Bathurst. Reginald's mother was not his wife Bridget, but Annie Cattermole from Stepney, London who had come to Australia as a nurse in 1871, aged 21. Charles and Annie moved to Dubbo around 1883 and established themselves as the Bell family and lived there together until Charles died in 1918.

I have found no records for Bridget herself in the decade between 1876 and 1886 as she followed the railway line to Nyngan and then Bourke.

I believe Bridget arrived in Bourke in, or before, 1886. Between 1889 and 1907, Bridget ran various boarding houses in Bourke, as well as a (labour) Registry Office from 1891 and Servants' / Ladies' Home from 1898. She moved frequently between different premises in Richard Street, Hope Street and Mitchell Street, just as she had moved from pub to pub in Bathurst. She must have suffered damage in the big Bourke flood of 1890 for she received £1/10/- from the Catholic flood relief fund. Just as she had done in Bathurst, when she needed money, she sold her furniture. This she did in 1893, and then again in March 1907 when she auctioned the entire contents of her boarding house in Richard Street and retired aged 74.

Bridget died on 5 September 1915 at her residence at 5 Anson Street, Bourke, a home she shared with her daughter Martha McConnell (née Bell) and son-in-law John McConnell. The cause of death was recorded as senile decay and exhaustion and her age as around 82 years. The national old age pension had been introduced in 1908 and she was receiving the pension at her death.

She was buried in the Catholic section of the old part of the Bourke Cemetery. The exact location of her grave, like many others in the old part, is now unknown: time, drought and flooding rains, and headstone damage having all taken their toll. To acknowledge her, some of her descendants contributed to a memorial plaque which was placed on the Bourke Cemetery's Memorial Wall in February 2018. Thanks to the efforts of her Carroll and Willcox descendants, her name is also inscribed on the Australian Monument to the Great Irish Famine located at the Hyde Park Barracks on Macquarie Street, Sydney.



Catherine (née Carroll) and John Willcox and family, Hay, 1918, at their 50th Wedding Anniversary

Four months after Bridget's death, on 24 January 1916 at their residence in McLeay Street, Dubbo, her 77-year-old husband Charles Adolphus Bell, drover, quietly married Annie Cattermole, his common law wife of 35 years and the mother of their six children.

Children can provide some security in old age. But when Bridget died, only two of her nine children were still living – Catherine Carroll from her first marriage and Martha Bell from her second. No mother, not even one who had little mothering herself and who lived through the Great Famine, could easily bear the loss of so many adult children well before their time.

Bridget's descendants, drawn from all walks of life, have not forgotten her. My research builds on the efforts of many others who were researching the Hopkins-Carroll-Bell family history for years, well before I started: the late Pat Willcox; the late Roy Mitchell; Sister Marjorie Carroll O.S.U. who is Bridget's great-granddaughter; Marie Cribbin, Beth Atkinson, Karleen Reilly and Joanne Howlett who, like me, are Bridget's great-great-granddaughters. The generous sharing of what we each know of the family history comes, I believe, from a collective sense of responsibility to honour Bridget properly and truthfully, even though few of us have met in person. None of us own her history, yet all of us are writing it in our own way, and re-writing it as new evidence emerges, as it inevitably does.

A final proposition. If we travel back to the original intention of the Earl Grey Scheme, Bridget conformed early. She was a domestic servant, then a helpmeet to two husbands, producing nine children who in turn produced 39 grandchildren, three of whom served in World War 1, two never coming home. She ticked all the expected boxes, until she did not. She tried to make her marriages work and support her husbands, even if they may have been profligate or feckless. I do not think of her as a victim. I think she knew where to draw a line. She knew she could not depend on husbands or on the legal system or on government. She knew she had to make her own way in the world, and for more than 40 years she did just that, creating her own luck with not a single brush with the law or negative newspaper comment. Just as she had on the *Digby*, she avoided the limelight and got on with the business of raising her family while earning a

living to support them. She defied the usual expectations of an orphan girl from Galway and, to my mind, paid a high price for choosing independence.



Three generations: Bridget's daughter, grand-daughter and great-granddaughter

Bio Note

Kaye Schofield AO has very recently retired after a 55-year career in education, initially in schools and then tertiary education and later advising on Australia's international development programs in the Indo-Pacific. She holds a bachelor and a master degree and an honorary doctorate in education. Her DNA ethnicity estimate is 46% Irish. Her passion for family history is relatively new but her original training in history and geography has proved helpful. Her family is a little bemused by but grateful for her obsession.

Trevor McClaughlin is a member of the Tinteán Editorial Team