

Mary Donovan 1819 - 1891

By Erica Orsolio

Dear Mary, (aka. Mother of Eliza, Grandmother of William, Great Grandmother of William, Great Great Grandmother of Tasman, Great Great Great Grandmother of Lyn and Great Great Great Great Grandmother of me, Erica)

It has been 126 years since your passing. This year on May 21st I will light a candle to let you know that on this anniversary of your death, you will be remembered and honoured for the life that you lived. We never met. The years between us, far too great a distance but just knowing you existed and learning your story has been such an incredible comfort to me, and given me roots firmly planted in the history of this amazing country of ours. Roots I never knew I had.

You were born in late 1819 in Fermoy, County Cork, Ireland. I've seen pictures of it on the internet. Lush green hills and fields. I read that it was a British Army barracks¹. One of the largest in all of Ireland at the time.

At age 20, for reasons unknown, you had travelled to London living "on the street" as they politely put it when you were arrested for larceny alongside Matilda Everdon. Was she your friend, Grandmother? Perhaps a roommate? Or just an acquaintance? I wonder what you were thinking when you pawned the stolen jacket of David May, upon Matilda's request. Did you have any idea that one small action would have changed the course of your life forever? While you were drinking with your ill-gotten funds, at the back of the pub on that Thursday in March 1841, did you ever imagine you would be sent across the sea to the other side of the world to serve out your 7 year sentence and never return?²

Your ship, the *Rajah*, departed merry old England at Woolwich on April 5th, 1841, a few short weeks after your conviction, arriving in Hobart, van Dieman's Land, 15 weeks later.³ While on board, the women partook in creating a quilt for "the ladies of the convict ship committee" to express their gratitude for their efforts working with the women.⁴ While I know we will never have the answer to the question, I would love to know if you were one of supposed 20 women who worked on the quilt during the journey. How incredible it was to discover that something which may have touched your very hands still existed today! While the quilt currently resides in the National Gallery in Canberra, one day I will make the journey to see it and marvel at its beauty and wonder if maybe, just maybe if your mark is somewhere within it, Grandmother Mary.⁵

I wonder what your thoughts were as your *Rajah* docked in Hobart. I can only imagine how you felt arriving here at just 21, having had a birthday while at sea. At 21, I was finding myself, experiencing life and having fun, but you were a convict, living in awful conditions in Cascades Female Factory. Then onto service with Mr Archer, and then Mr Herbert in Launceston. You gave birth to your first child, Eliza, in March of 1843 at the Launceston

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fermoy>

² *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, 07 July 2017), March 1841, trial of MARY DONOVAN MATILDA EVERDON (t18410301-911).

³ http://rootsweb.ancestry.com/~austashs/convicts/conships_r.htm

⁴ <https://nga.gov.au/RajahQuilt/>

⁵ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/stitches-in-time/news-story/090aaab6ea086748be80366fbc5764c2>

Female Factory. An illegitimate child, with father listed as unknown. While, the records don't list a name, whoever he was, Great Grandmother, I hope he treated you with kindness, however fleeting your union. You at least deserved that.

When she was just 2, Eliza was put into the Queens Asylum Orphanage as was the practice for children of female convicts. I cannot imagine what it must have been like to have them take your daughter from you. I don't know what sort of relationship you had with her, but with a daughter of my own, I just can't fathom not being able to watch her childish antics and mischief. I wonder if your heart broke saying goodbye as mine did reading about it. She stayed there for the next 9 years, finally being released in July 1854.⁶

You were arrested a number of times during your time as a Tasmanian convict. Drunkenness, bad language and sharing your bed seemed to be the most prominent offences you were found guilty of, but on the 1st of March 1848, you finally received your Certificate of Freedom, and married William Borthwick, a convict in 1852. William fathered your son, William who was born in February of 1853 but sadly passed away from influenza just 7 weeks later. It was quite common back in those days, so I understand, but it doesn't make it any less of a tragedy. I wonder if the loss of your son, caused the downward spiral that followed? Several court appearances and more time at Cascades Female Factory followed that year for larceny of 12 fence palings owned by the Crown until the verdict of not-guilty was found on the 20th October 1853.⁷

Your husband William was finally free on 14th July 1854 after serving his time, and Eliza was released into your care just a day later. Your family was together at last! Happier times ahead, and little Thomas was born in May 1855 at your home in Macquarie Street, Hobart.

On 21 May, 1891 you passed away from senile debility aged 72.⁸

Well Grandmother Mary, I may never find your final resting place to pay my respects properly as I'd like to, but please know that wherever you are, I have remembered you, and I will tell your story to my children and hopefully one day to my grandchildren. They will learn the story of their ancestor, Mary Donovan, an Irish woman who came to Australia as a convict and died as a free woman, who made her contribution to society, became the Mother of Eliza, Grandmother of William, Great Grandmother of William, Great Great Grandmother of Tasman, Great Great Great Grandmother of Lyn and Great Great Great Great Grandmother of me.

Rest In Peace, Mary Donovan.

I won't forget to remember you.

Your great great great great granddaughter, Erica.

⁶ http://www.researchtasmania.com.au/documents/biographies/DONOVAN_Mary1st.pdf

⁷ http://wordpress.researchtasmania.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/DONOVAN_Mary1st.pdf