

“Lord Jesus, Receive my Soul”
The Life and Death of Margaret Coghlin
By Brian Rieusset

I was born Margaret Galvin in 1818 in the small town of Athlone located in the middle of Ireland on the banks of the river Shannon. Athlone was famous for its Norman Castle dating back to 1210, built to defend the bridge over the Shannon which provided safe travel from West to East Ireland.

Our Galvin families in Athlone were large, being good Roman Catholics. Being one of many children in a poor family was fine as a child, but it became quite disagreeable as I grew older. So as soon as I was able, I moved to Kildare to become more independent. I soon found work as a housemaid and plain cook to a large but reasonable family.

But times began to get tough in the early 1840's with what was called the Great Famine caused by the potato blight. We were almost entirely dependent on the potato for food. Near starvation was upon us all and I quickly lost my job with the family.

What was a girl to do? And here I have to be truly honest. I had no choice. Thrown out into the back streets of Kildare. To just survive, I began to sell my body to men who were readily able to pay for my services. Life was not all that bad for five years. I had money for food and more importantly alcohol, which caused me to be arrested several times for drunkenness.

But then began my downfall. I had a falling out with one Denis Fagin and to “fix him”, I accused him of shooting a man (which wasn't true of course) He was arrested and imprisoned. Before long I began to feel sorry for him. So I owned up and swore that he had not done it. For that I was arrested. Dragged before the Magistrate and charged with perjury. Ruling me guilty, he sentenced me to seven years transportation to Van Diemen's Land.

I arrived here in Hobart Town in February 1847 with 148 other females on the convict ship *Arabian* after a rather uneventful and boring three month voyage from Dublin. Fortunately, I was soon assigned as a house maid to William Kermode at his property Mona Vale not far from Ross.

Once I arrived there after some arduous travel, conditions were idyllic and I lived the good life with the Kermode family for two years. The work was easy and being isolated away from crowded towns removed me from the temptation of the drink. It was at Mona Vale that I first met John Coghlin. He was a free man.

When he visited the family, he'd seek me out and pay me a lot of attention. He was a bit quiet but I did enjoy the interest. John was 12 years older than me. Presently he asked me if I would marry him and as you can expect, I quickly agreed.

Upon hearing that our application to marry had been approved we naturally celebrated, whereupon I slipped away to spend some private time with John in Ross and of course we over-indulged in the demon drink. John later dropped me back at Mona Vale, where Mr. Kermode carted me back to Ross to appear before Mr. Willmot, the Magistrate.

I was charged with being absent without leave, as well as being drunk. I received one month hard labour for my crime, with half of it to be spent in separate apartments. For that I was sent back to the Factory at South Hobart, which for me turned out to be quite convenient, as John lived in Hobart Town.

We were married in St Joseph's Church by Vicar General Father William Hall in August 1849.

John ran a dairy on the corner of Goulbourn and Harrington Streets. The hours were long and hard, but we got on well together, as we both like to kick back and enjoy a good drinking session after the day's work was done. Early mornings, late evenings. Milking, cleaning, dealing with all sorts of customers. I did enjoy a good strong drink to settle down at night.

I tried hard to be a happy, sober and affectionate wife. We had no children. Though we did have a young girl, Isabella living with us for several years. But John's behaviour began to change. As the years went on he became mean and cranky and started knocking me about, especially when he had too much to drink, which was becoming more and more regular.

We'd been married about five years. Living with a drunkard who regularly beat me became more and more than I could bear. Late one Sunday morning, I could stand it no further. It had to end. I hurried down to the new wharf and in a fit of frenzy, without even stopping to think, I threw myself off the wharf into the murky waters below.

I tried not to struggle, but heard a splash as a man jumped in from a nearby barge. He grabbed my hair, so then I did struggle and we both started to sink. Then another man grabbed me and dragged me onto a boat. I can't remember much more, except that later doctor McCarthy was in the Police Office bending over me. I felt very ill. Then - I was charged with attempting to make away with myself. "Suicide by drowning". They said.

I could not deny it, but pleaded that it was all bad-occasioned by my husband, John. The Magistrate bound me over to be of good behaviour for three months, I was fined £50 and another £50 in sureties.

Drink. The curse that has been on me, strong drink has caused all my misery. Everything has been sacrificed for strong drink.

Two years later John even took me to the Police Office and prayed that I be bound over to keep the peace. He stated that when I was drunk I was very violent. Me ! He said that I took up a piece of marble weighing about 5lbs, and

threw it at his head, and I had threatened to cut his throat, "and my own". My only reply in defence was that, "I don't care about him." I was again bound over to keep the peace for six months in two sureties of £20 each.

Come Christmas Day, I was once more bound over from celebrating too much. The Police ordered me to keep the peace for 12 months on being a common brawler. Later I was again fined £1 as a peace disturber. Yes, I did create a row with those high and mighty Protestants from the congregation who were leaving Chalmers Church up on our next corner after the morning service. Me a good Catholic girl – drunk again.

Finally, late one night in January 1862, it all came unstuck.

Before breakfast on that fateful Sunday morning, John fetched home some rum and we had a glass a piece. When breakfast was over he brought in two pots of beer and between dinner getting ready, he went out twice and brought in a black bottle, with rum. I can't remember how much was in it, but I had a glass out of each bottle.

John had a pot of beer with his dinner. We ate by ourselves, but then a woman named Hall came in with her husband. They tossed for half a pint of rum and John won it. Mrs. Hall gave him a shilling and he went and got the rum which we all drank.

When Mrs. Hall went away she slipped a shilling into my hand which I showed John. He asked for it and because I would not give it to him, he rushed me out into the yard and struck me several times and knocked my head against the fence, cutting my eye. I gave him the shilling and he fetched another half pint of rum which we both drank.

After eight, John quarrelled with me again. He pushed me out of the gate and locked it. But before he pushed me out he struck me on the elbow with a piece of wood. Then he struck me left and right across the thighs and knees with the same piece of wood.

A constable out in the street, eventually got John to let me back in the gate and I went to bed. John must have gone out, as I woke up to find him in the kitchen, staggering and making motions with his hands. He had a little black bottle with him, from which he poured some liquor into a teacup and drank it.

I coaxed him into bed and went to bed myself. I was not long in bed before he dragged me out by the hair of my head. He got into bed again and I was looking for some matches when he called me a "bloody whore" and said: - "What brings you here again, making a noise?" I said that I was "making no noise".

But he took up an iron bar and he threw it at me. It didn't strike me - but struck against the door. I was the worse for drink. I turned back in passion. I took up the bar and struck him with it. I destroyed him. I struck him on the

head. I could see - he was dying so hard, and I felt so sorry, that I got his razor and I cut his throat!

After a while I went back outside and called to the Constable who was still patrolling our street. I said "Oh, Constable, my husband John has just come home and cut his throat." He didn't believe me - because of the battered state of John's face and head.

I was arrested and after being charged by the Police in the Mayor's Court I was taken and locked away back at Cascades for three weeks. The prison van then brought me to the big Court in Campbell Street. Standing there in the dock I was overcome with fear. I shook and trembled so much that Mr. Fleming, the Judge, allowed me to sit down.

During my trial, lots of evidence was brought forward about John and the way he treated me. Friends and neighbours told of John's drinking, his violent temper. They heard the blows - Him belting me and me crying "Don't strike me John". But old blind Tom from across the road told the court that he frequently heard me say "That I would murder him - John my husband."

My lawyer was no help. He told the court - that I was - an habitual drunkard. He said "Indeed it could be proved that the novelty was to see me sober, not to see me drunk. And thus any charge against me should be one of manslaughter, not that of murder."

Finally I could not bear listening to any more details. So I stood and confessed to what I had done, blaming the demon drink. The Judge told the jury - that from my confession there could be no doubt that the deceased, John, had died by the hands of me, his wife. A barbaric, evil act attributed to the curse of all curses, drink.

The jury found me guilty of wilful murder. The Judge then ordered that I be hanged by the neck until I was dead. And that my body, when dead, be given over to the Surgeons for dissection. They took me back to Cascades to anticipate my future.

A week later, just after finishing my midday meal I was taken to Mr Adkins office, where the Mr. Crouch, the Under-Sheriff read to me from a long page, a warrant, written by the Judge. It said that the sentence of death be accordingly made and done upon me on the 18th and my body be given to Doctor Turney at the Hospital.

Two more long weeks I awaited my destiny. The prison van came late on the Monday and brought me to the gaol in Campbell Street where Father Hunter, the Catholic priest, led me down a long passageway to that bleak cold condemned cell.

They gave me some tea. I did manage to get some rough sleep during the long night until about seven o'clock, when I rose and prepared myself for that inevitable conclusion.

Just before eight, Solomon Blay and Mr. Crouch arrived with Father Hunter. He was reading some prayers, which I tried to repeat as best I could, but my voice didn't seem to sound right. Solomon Blay, the executioner was kind and thoughtful. His deep blue eyes looked sad as he tied my hands and then bandaged my eyes.

I heard the nearby church bell chime. "It's time, Margaret" said Solomon, quietly near me. I felt his strong grip on my arm as he helped me walk over to the gallows.

As I felt the noose around my neck, I repeated how sorry I was to have killed John. I was starting to say a quick prayer.

"Lord Jesus, Receive my Soul" when.....

The trap door fell beneath my feet. With a dull thud - I went to meet my Maker.

Thus ends her wretched story, the last woman to be executed in Tasmania. The scrap remains of Margaret Coghlin's dissected body will no longer exist, where they were interred in the Prisoners Burial Ground, now the Campbell Street School play ground. But I am sure that Margaret, in spirit through her tragic story, will always try to linger nearby.