

ROSANNAH CAVANAGH

(*Abercrombie*, 1841)

by

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A small number – probably fewer than 120 - of the 13,500 (approx.) females who were transported to Van Diemens Land (VDL) between 1812 and 1853 were convicted in one of the other Australian colonies. Rosannah CAVANAGH was one such. She was convicted in New South Wales (NSW) and arrived in VDL per *Abercrombie* on 16 April 1841. She was twenty-three years old¹

Cavanagh (seen also as Rosanna CAVANAGH, Rosannah CAVENAH, Rosanna CAVANNAH and similar variants) was born at Liverpool, about sixteen miles (26 kms) west of Sydney in 1818. There, she lived with her Irish-born mother, Mary Ann ATTWOOD and her step-father, James ATTWOOD, a farmer. Both were former convicts. Mary Ann Attwood had been eighteen when she arrived in NSW (as Mary Ann PRENDERGAST) aboard *Experiment II* to serve a seven year sentence in 1809. English-born James Attwood had been sentenced to transportation for life and had arrived on *Lady Castlereagh* in 1818.²

Rosannah had five brothers – all younger than she: Andrew, James, Joseph, John and Charles. While the boys grew up with the Attwood surname, Rosannah was variously known as Cavanagh and Attwood. The NSW census of 1828 lists Rosannah, then ten, by the first name of ‘Rose’.³

There is some evidence that Rosannah might have been troublesome from an early age. The ‘Gaul Description and Entrance Books, 1818-1930’ reveal that a ‘Rosannah Cavanagh’, born in the colony, *fourteen* years old, was admitted to gaol in Sydney in 1832. No details of the offence or of the period of incarceration, if any, are given.⁴

In April 1838, twenty year-old Rosannah (as ‘Rosanna Attwood’) and a twenty-nine year-old convict by the name of Richard COX (*Marquis of Hastings*), who was serving a life sentence, applied for permission to marry. Their request was declined, the supervisor declaring Cox was of ‘an intolerable character’ and not only was the application ‘perfectly ridiculous’ but that the

¹ <https://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/>

² Mary Ann Prendergast is thought to have been married twice before her transportation – to a Farrell and then Cavanagh. (Public Family Trees via ‘Ancestry.com’.)

³ CON40-1-2, p.128; Indent 16-1-1, Image 162. See also ‘Ancestry.com’ Family Trees and NSW Census 1824 and 1828.

⁴ State Archives NSW, *Gaul Description and Entrance Books, 1818-1930*, Roll 855, via Ancestry.com.

marriage if allowed would have been ‘contrary to the Govt. regulations’.⁵ Nevertheless, some family history researchers believe that Rosannah gave birth to a daughter by Cox and that the daughter died at the age of three in 1839. As no record of the birth or death has been located, this is yet to be verified.⁶

What is certain, however, is that in early 1839, Rosannah (as ‘Rosanna Cavanagh’) was indicted for ‘wilful and corrupt perjury’ after appearing as a witness in a case brought against a woman by the name of Ellen RYAN at Campbelltown, NSW, a few months earlier. In early November 1838, Ryan had been charged with the theft of two hundred pounds (about ninety kilograms) of potatoes from a Mr. CONNOR and had called upon Cavanagh to confirm that. Cavanagh had sworn that she had been present when Ryan had purchased the potatoes from a Mr. HOLLOWAY. When later evidence proved conclusively that Ryan had indeed stolen the potatoes from Connor, Cavanagh had been charged with lying to the court. However, inexplicably, when brought to court to answer the charge some months later, she had been acquitted.⁷

Cavanagh was not to be so fortunate when next she appeared in court! At the Parramatta Quarter Sessions on 15 February 1841, she stood trial for the theft of money from her employer. The *Sydney Herald* reported the case in this way:

*Rosannah Cavenah (sic), free servant to Mrs. Loveridge, of the Steam Packet Inn, was indicted for stealing, on the 15th of January last, £13 in one pound notes, with £1 6s. in silver; guilty; to be transported to Van Diemen's Land, for the period of seven years.*⁸

Ironically, Mrs. LOVERIDGE was herself a former convict. As Clara Johanna KIMPTON (*Sovereign*, 1829), she had been convicted at the Old Bailey, London, in 1829 of the theft of a quantity of clothing and other linen to the value of £5 (approx.) and sentenced to transportation to New South Wales for seven years. There, in 1830, she had married another former convict, John LOVERIDGE (*Mangles*, 1824). In the early 1840s, they had acquired the Steam Packet Inn at Parramatta.⁹

After a short term in gaol, Cavanagh was put aboard *Abercrombie* which, with nine other prisoners, all male, sailed from Sydney in early April 1841.¹⁰

⁵ Convicts Applications to Marry 1825-1851: NRS 12212 [4/4510 p.019]; COD 13; Reel 713; Fiche 786-788 | Place: Liverpool. See also ‘NSW, Australia, Convict Applications for Publication of Banns, 1828-1830, 1838-1839’ for Rosanna Attwood, 1838; the date of Richard Cox’s arrival in NSW has not been verified.

⁶ ‘Rosannah Cavanagh’ in Public Member Trees via ‘Ancestry.com’, accessed October 2019.

⁷ *The Colonist* (Sydney), 6 February 1839, p.2.

⁸ *The Sydney Herald*, 19 February 1841, p.2.

⁹ Old Bailey online at <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>; and

<https://convictrecords.com.au/convicts/loveridge/john/109869>

¹⁰ http://sites.rootsweb.com/~austashs/convicts/conships_a.htm

Upon arrival at Hobart, Cavanagh was described as being five feet nine and a quarter inches (about 177 cms) tall, and ‘stout’ – a big woman for her times. She had black hair, brown eyes and a fresh complexion. She had a scar in the centre of her forehead. In one of her convict documents her religion is shown as ‘Catholic’ but in another as ‘C of E’. She gave her occupation as ‘laundress and house servant’.¹¹

By the time of Cavanagh’s arrival, the *assignment* system which had been operating in VDL since the early days of settlement had been abandoned. That system had allowed the government to place convicts with free settlers who provided them with shelter, food and clothing in return for their unpaid labour. However, after almost four decades the authorities had become disillusioned with this system, believing that some convicts were being treated too leniently while others suffered horribly under masters and mistresses who were rapacious and cruel. They had also come to think that the assignment system did little, if anything, to rehabilitate the prisoners. So, instead, the authorities had instituted a graded *probation* system, in which newly-arrived convicts were all kept by the government at one or other of the eighty or so probation stations that had been set up for the purpose. There, they were employed on public works, progressing through various levels of probation until they had shown themselves worthy of being granted a ticket-of-leave or a conditional pardon and were able to find work for themselves.¹²

Cavanagh’s conduct record indicates that, upon her arrival, she was in kept Hobart under the control of the Comptroller-General. However, she must have been orderly because she was not in government service for long. The convict muster of 1841 shows her in the employ of a Mr. G. JOHNSON of Hobart.¹³

On 19 February 1842, Cavanagh applied for permission to marry Joseph MILKIN, a former convict (*Albion*, 1828), who, by this time, had received a free pardon.¹⁴ Given approval, the

¹¹ CON40-1-2, p.128; Indent 16-1-1, Image 162.

¹² Alexander, A. (ed.), *The Companion to Tasmanian History*:
https://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history

¹³ New South Wales and Tasmania, Australia, Convict Musters, 1806-1849, via Ancestry.com at
https://www.ancestry.com.au/interactive/1185/IMAUS1787_114246-00519?pid=351808&backurl=https://search.ancestry.com.au/cgi-bin/sse.dll?_phsrc%3DJBN97%26_phstart%3DsuccessSource%26usePUBJs%3Dtrue%26indiv%3D1%26dbid%3D1185%26gsfn%3DRosannah%26gsln%3DCavanagh%26cp%3D0%26msady%3D1841%26_F0005868%3DAbercrombie%26new%3D1%26rank%3D1%26uidh%3Dag5%26redir%3Dfalse%26mst%3D1%26gss%3Dangs-d%26pcat%3D36%26fh%3D1%26h%3D351808%26recoff%3D%26ml_rpos%3D2&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=JBN97&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true

¹⁴ Register of Permissions to Marry, CON52-1-2, p.061, 19 February 1842; State Archives. NSW:

<https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/archives/collections-and-research/guides-and-indexes/node/1621/browse>

couple married at Holy Trinity Church, Hobart on 28 March 1842. Milkin is described on the marriage entry as a thirty-eight year old bachelor and a blacksmith, Cavanagh as a twenty-three year-old spinster.¹⁵ No children of the marriage have been identified

There are some indications that the marriage was not a happy one. On 29 October 1842, only seven months after the wedding, Cavanagh was charged with being drunk in her service. Her punishment was to spend four days in solitary confinement – probably at the Cascades Female Factory, Hobart - and then to be returned to her husband. A month later, on 2 December 1842, she was charged again, this time for ‘misconduct’. On this occasion, her sentence was harsher: three months with hard labour in the separate working rooms of the gaol and again to be returned to her husband.¹⁶

Gladly, these were the only offences recorded against Cavanagh in the colony. Afterwards, she appears to have settled down and, on 28 June 1844, she was granted a ticket-of-leave.¹⁷ On 24 August 1846, her conditional pardon was approved, the condition being that she remain in VDL.¹⁸

Whether or not the condition of her pardon was waived later is unclear but Cavanagh did *not* remain in VDL. At some point in the 1850s, she returned to New South Wales, probably with her husband. On 17 December 1859, the following notice appeared in *The Sydney Morning Herald*:

*I HEREBY GIVE NOTICE that I will not be responsible for any DEBTS contracted by my Wife, ROSANNA MILKIN, better known as ROSA ATTWOOD, she having left her home without my consent. JOSEPH MILKIN. Cabramatta Creek, 15th December.*¹⁹

Again, it is not clear whether the couple were ever re-united but it seems probable that they were. An entry in the record of deaths in New South Wales shows that a William J(oseph?) MILKIN passed away at Liverpool in 1882.²⁰

In 1886, at the age of sixty-eight, Rosannah married again. Her new husband was James SHEATHER.²¹ But was that marriage a success? Perhaps not! Family sources assert that Sheather’s death certificate does not mention Rose/Rosa/Rosannah.²²

¹⁵ Marriage: RGD37/1403/1832, Hobart. Note that the authoritative Tasmanian Pioneers Index (‘Digger’) incorrectly shows Milkin’s name as WILKINS.

¹⁶ CON40-1-2, p.128.

¹⁷ *Hobart Town Gazette*, 28 June 1844.

¹⁸ *Hobart Town Gazette*, 25 August 1846 and 26 August 1846.

¹⁹ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 December 1859, p.4.

²⁰ Death: NSW 7812/1882, Liverpool.

²¹ Marriage: NSW 3040/1886, Newtown; Sheather’s death certificate has not been located.

²² ‘Rosannah Cavanagh’ in Public Member Trees via ‘Ancestry.com’, accessed October 2019.

Rosannah died - as Rose MILKIN - in New South Wales in 1899.²³ According to family sources again, she was buried in a pauper's grave at Rokewood Cemetery.²⁴

²³ Death: NSW 13266/1899, Granville.

²⁴ 'Rosannah Cavanagh' in Public Member Trees via 'Ancestry.com', accessed October 2019.