

# Irish Exiles to Van Diemens Land

## The arrival

On the 7th April 1850 the convict ship Neptune glided up the River Derwent heading for the port of Hobart Town, Van Diemen's Land (VDL). On board was an Irish exile, John Mitchel, classed as a "political prisoner". This was the third vessel to bring such exiles to the penal island. With Mitchel's arrival, the total number was now seven.

Nine months earlier, on the 20th July 1849 four exiles had arrived, William Smith O'Brien, Thomas Francis Meagher, Terrence Bellew McManus and Patrick O'Donohoe. Four days later the vessel Emma did likewise, bringing with it, Kevin O'Doherty and John Martin.

The colony of Van Diemen's Land was still very much a penal one, even though there was a strong Anti-Transportation League operating.

Since its settlement by the British in 1803 by Lt. John Bowen, Royal Navy, Van Diemen's Land up to this stage had received nearly 65,000 convicts\*. An autocratic, but able administrator, William Denison, governed the colony. Denison opposed cessation of convict transportation on the grounds that it would produce a substantial labour shortage; besides the colony had lost many men seeking their fortunes on the Victorian goldfields. Denison did not sympathise with any Irish Movement nor did he welcome their coming

The seven Irish exiles were not convicts. They were political prisoners and it would have to be said that in comparison to the common convict they travelled in style. Indeed, as O'Donohoe, who kept a diary during the voyage, wrote, "The voyage passed most cheerfully." Each prisoner had been given a cabin and was not obliged to wear convict garb. To pass the time they played backgammon and read from the classics. Overall, their meals were good, and they were allowed two glasses of sherry every day. O'Donohoe reported that they "got through a variety of other agreeable pursuits."

John Mitchel travelled not so grand. By his arrival to the colony he was unwell. The Neptune had come from Bermuda, then to Cape Town, but that colony refused to allow the prisoners to land or to supply food to the ship. To compensate this unfair treatment, Lord Grey gave each convict upon landing in VDL a pardon, all except "prisoner Mitchel".



## John Mitchel

After arrival, each exile was to be separated and be allocated to a portion of territory, on the proviso that they would give their word of honour not to escape. O'Doherty was sent to the township of

Oatlands. Both John Martin and John Mitchel would be sent to the Bothwell area, Thomas Meagher initially to Campbell Town and later to Ross. O'Donohoe was permitted to live in Hobart Town where he commenced a paper called *The Irish Exile*. Initially, MacManus refused to give his word, but soon relented and went firstly to Launceston and later to near New Norfolk. Smith O'Brien also refused and held out. As a result he was sent to the penal island of Maria. After harsh treatment, he eventually too relented and moved around the colony quite a bit, after spending a brief spell at Port Arthur.



### **John Martin**

#### **Nature of their crime**

The Ireland of the 1840s was a wretched hole. The potato crop had failed and famine stalked the land. Many common folk, unable to pay their rent, were brutally forced off their plot. It was ripe for revolution. To lead the fight against oppression and for Catholic rights rose Daniel O'Connell, a young barrister, who was inspired by the French Revolution. Even so, violence was not his way and he agitated for the Cause through peaceful means and through parliamentary legislation. The Cause had attracted many of the more active and impatient young men, which included the seven exiles to VDL. They accused O'Connell of being too slow in forcing change and even stated that he was playing into British hands. Their method was to be violent and major clashes with the police became the norm. In 1847, suffering from bad health because of his activities, O'Donnell died and the leadership of the revolution was passed on to the likes of Mitchel, Smith O' Brien and Meagher.

The year 1848 was the time of socialist revolution throughout much of Europe. In Ireland it was quickly and ruthlessly crushed without much opposition. The general population had other things on their mind to be able to offer support and that was to survive. The rising was a complete failure. The novelist, William Makepeace Thackeray sarcastically referred to Meagher as "Meagher of the sword" and Smith O'Brien as "Shmith O'Brine'.

It should be said that while the freedom of Ireland and Catholic emancipation was at stake, three of the exiles to VDL were Protestant, they being Mitchel, Martin and O'Brien.

The British authorities struck. Mitchel was arrested for treason and was sentenced to transportation for fourteen years. Bolstered by its success, the government then issued warrants for the leaders, arresting first Smith O'Brien and then in swift succession, the others. The offence was High Treason.

They knew what their fate was to be and consoled each other. By Irish law they had to be tried before a jury, but it was an easy affair to have the jury stacked to the government's favour. A brilliant address given by Thomas Meagher who said among other things, "I am here to speak the truth, whatever it may cost. I am here to regret nothing that I have ever done – to retract nothing that I have ever said. Far from it. No! I do not despair of my poor old country, her peace, her liberty,

her glory. For that country I can now do no more than bid her hope.” In short they were sentenced to death, but this was later changed to being exiled for life. In the meantime they were incarcerated in Richmond Gaol, Dublin.

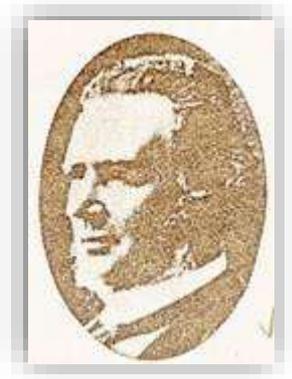
The place of exile was to be that far off penal colony of Van Diemen’s Land, the reputation of which was notorious.

### **Their activities after arrival**

Meagher spent only a little time in Campbell Town. Arriving tired, he was not impressed with the village, which consisted mainly of one street. His arrival was very much noticed and for one who liked his privacy he found the attention disturbing. He asked permission to live in the small village of Ross, just five miles south. There he moved into a little cottage in which lived a strict Methodist couple, Mr and Mrs Anderson. The arrival of a Catholic perturbed them greatly.

For the time being, comrade Smith O’Brien, because he refused to give his world of honour not to escape, was shut up in a small cottage on Maria Island. He wrote: “No person, not even a child, is allowed to approach me, except the officer who brings me my meal.”

Kevin O’Doherty went to Oatlands, a village south of Ross. There he was held in such esteem by the locals that they dubbed him “Saint Kevin”. O’Donohoe started his paper in Hobart Town, something that even John Mitchel marvelled at, questioning why the authorities allowed him to conduct a paper. O’Donohoe asked Mitchel to join him in the enterprise, but he refused.



### **Kevin O’Doherty**

Mitchel was a paradox; there was no doubt that he felt himself superior to the others, including O’Donohoe. After his eleven months cruising to VDL he was sent to Bothwell, where as Mitchel states in his Jail Journal, “John Martin vegetates.”

He writes further in his Journal, “...(Bothwell) contains sixty or seventy houses; has a church where clergymen of the Church of England and of Scotland perform service, one in the morning and the other in the evening of Sunday; has four large public-houses or hotels, establishments which are much better supported on the voluntary system and have much larger congregations, than the church; has a post-office and several carpenters and blacksmiths, shops for the accommodation of the settlers who live in the district, and a police-office and police barrack with the police magistrate of the district predominating there.”

MacManus first went to Launceston, then to live in a pleasant house, which still stands, on the banks of the beautiful River Derwent. Despite being not allowed to meet up with each other, local

authorities turned a blind eye to the practice and the exiles often met at places, such as Lake Sorell. On one occasion MacManus and Mitchel met in a “wayside inn” where the latter was informed of the treatment of O’Brien.



### **Terence MacManus**

Soon there developed an organised support group, led by the dynamic clergyman of strong pro-Irish persuasions, Father William Dunne of Richmond. Another major player was Dr James MacNamara of Campbell Town.

### **Escapes.**

While life could have been tranquil for the exiles, they were men of action and the thought of neglecting the Cause and enduring the endless boredom proved too much. In the meantime, the New York Directory took an interest and an agent, Pat Symth, was despatched to look at the possibility of organising escapes.

William Smith O’Brien, however, had already tried, but sadly for him, unsuccessfully. Unable to endure any more suffering and with the help of Dr McNamara, the plan was that when he took his daily walk to the foreshore, he would eventually see a waiting ship, the Victoria, which would take him on board and to freedom. Father Dunne was to be the go-between, i.e. the captain of the vessel and O’Brien.

William visited the chosen spot often, but was disappointed. Little known to him his plot had been told to the authorities. Eventually, O’Brien did see the waiting vessel and a longboat coming towards him. Instantly he plunged himself into the waters, only to have a guard cock his musket, fire it and order him to stop. Those aboard the small vessel, to O’Brien’s surprise, gave him up to the guard.

For punishment, the few privileges he had were curtailed. It was believed that the ship’s captain, Ellis, informed the government of the attempt. O’Brien was later moved to Port Arthur and broken in body and spirit he complied with the government’s wishes. As a result he was allotted to the Derwent Valley region.

In February 1851, it was MacManus’s time to escape. Beforehand, fellow exile Thomas Meagher, had met a beautiful Tasmanian girl, Catherine Bennett at Ross and he decided to marry her. The first Catholic Bishop of Hobart, Dr Willson, officiated at the ceremony. During the service a strange uninvited guest appeared. It was not long before Bishop Willson became aware of his identity; it was MacManus in disguise. Although he was escaping, he took the time to be at his friend’s wedding. Preparing to go, he was approached by the Bishop.

“You are to leave us my friend?” he said to MacManus.

Everyone held his or her breath. Was the Bishop planning to reveal his identity?

“One moment,” he said, “One moment. You must not go until I give you my blessing.”

MacManus did eventually go and finally made it to the USA

Thomas Francis Meagher was next. With the help of local sympathisers he left his cottage home and took to the bush moving his way up to the West Tamar area. His wife, Catherine, was left behind with plans for her to join him after he arrived in America. As a free citizen she could readily do this. Catherine, however, was to have Thomas’s child, when he left. From the Tamar River he was taken to Waterhouse Island, a barren small place off the shore of the eastern coast of Tasmania in Bass Strait. There he endured miserable conditions, hoping every day, like O’Brien did before him, that a ship would appear to take him to freedom. Happily for Meagher, it did and this time there were no setbacks. Leaving his penal island behind, his wife and son-to-be, he found freedom, also in the USA. Tragically, his son three months from his birth died of influenza. He was buried in the ground of St Johns Catholic Church, Richmond. In the 1950s his remains were moved to near the entrance of the church where all visitors and parishioners can see the small grave.



### **Thomas Francis Meagher**

John Mitchel was critical of Meagher in that he did not inform the authorities that he was to break his word of honour and escape. Mitchel in planning his attempt promised that he would, as a matter of honour, inform his attention to the government.

With the help of Pat Smyth, it was planned for Mitchel to surrender his parole with the magistrate at Bothwell and then speedily move to Hobart Town where a vessel would be waiting for him to take him to, again, the USA.

On the morning of June 9, 1853 Mitchel and Symth entered Bothwell, but only after receiving the bad news that the waiting vessel had sailed. Mitchel, not willing to stay in VDL any longer, continued with the plan, depending later on his supporters to arrange another vessel.

Entering the courthouse, he passed to the startled magistrate the following note:

“Sir. I hereby resign the ‘ticket-of-leave’ and withdraw my parole. I shall forthwith present myself before the police magistrate of Bothwell at his office, show him a copy of this note and offer myself to be taken into custody. – Your obedient servant, John Mitchel.”

Without waiting for an answer from the stunned man, Mitchel mounted his horse and rode swiftly out of the town, much to the delight of villagers. Despite hardships and set backs and a jolly good adventure, Mitchel did escape to the USA, accompanied by his family.

Following Meagher, O’Donhoe escaped from VDL also to America.

## Exiles post life

John Mitchel went on to be a firm supporter of the southern States during the American Civil War. He lost two sons to its Cause. He died as a contented grandfather. Colleague Meagher also served in the Civil War, as a Brigadier General for the North. His Tasmanian wife died and he remarried. His death in 1867, acting as Governor of Montana, is still shrouded in mystery. Officially he drowned while falling from a riverboat into the Missouri River.



### Statue of Meagher at Helena, Montana. USA

William Smith O'Brien received an unconditional pardon in 1856. He returned to Ireland and took no further part in public affairs.

Kevin O'Doherty also received an unconditional pardon in 1856 and ended up as Minister for Health in the Queensland Government. He did at one time return to Ireland where he was given the keys to Dublin. He is buried in Brisbane.

Patrick O'Donohoe, as noted, escaped to America. He was different to the others, in that he was poor and their superior attitude towards him showed. Even after his death amongst humble surroundings, his landlady Mrs. Henry called his once-colleagues a "money making pack" as they had forgotten him even at that time.

Terrence MacManus died in hospital in San Francisco, aged but 37 years. His body was taken to Ireland and is buried in a Dublin cemetery.

Sturdy John Martin, companion of John Mitchel, also received an unconditional pardon in 1856. He actually married John Mitchel's sister.

Each exile has his own story to tell.

***\*By the end of transportation in 1853, the colony received near 70,000 prisoners.***