

JOHN BATMAN

(C)

by

Reg. A. Watson



John Batman.
1800 ~ 1839

Supposedly John Batman, co-founder of Melbourne, who arrived from Van Diemen's Land (VDL) from Parramatta NSW, died of syphilis at the age of 38 years.

This claim was made some years ago with a discovery of a letter by Melbourne historian, Mrs Marjorie Tipping in which it refers to John Batman, as an *"assigned servant"* to John Hart. Some historians have been impressed with the evidence. Indeed a Dr Bernard Barrett, once Victoria's State historian, said, *"In fact Batman spent much time boozing and whoring."*

To attempt to validate those claims, (or to disprove them) let's look at Batman's life during his time in VDL and his documented settlement of Melbourne with John Fawkner.

We have four main claims that have been posed against Batman; they being:

- 1) Batman was not a freeman when he came to VDL and he arrived as a convict – *"who got kicked out of Sydney"*
- 2) He was a whorer.

- 3) a boozier
- 4) and died of syphilis.

The first claim appear to rest on the information contained in just one letter, unearthed at Sydney's Mitchell Library in 1988 and written in 1822. The letter is from John Hart to A.W.Humphrey, a magistrate.

We must begin our story at Batman's birth. He was born January 21, 1801 at Parramatta, NSW second son to William and Mary Bat(e)man, from Middlesex. He was christened June 10th 1810. His parents arrived in Sydney 2 June 1797. Father William from Yorkshire was transported for receiving stolen saltpetre (a substance which makes gunpowder), while his mother paid her fare and that of her children, Maria and Robert. William, after obtaining his ticket-of-leave, started a timber yard at Parramatta. The Batmans were a hard working family with William stern with his children.

It would appear that father William changed the name Bateman to Batman in 1810 probably to rid the family of the convict taint. He and family lived in Macquarie Street, Parramatta. William lived his life as a model citizen and had their children christened at the nearby St John's Church. He became quite successful and besides having his house in Macquarie Street acquired several other blocks in the town and at one time held the licence for the Duke of Wellington in Church Street. He is buried with his wife (who died in April 1840) in St John's Cemetery. William's tombstone still exists and reads:

Sacred

To the Memory of

WILLIAM BATMAN

Who Died 12th December 1834

Aged 29 years



William Batman's grave, St. Johns Cemetery, Parramatta.

John was named simply John (no middle name). He was then, a strongly-built colonial boy and grew to be well over six foot. He was a strong handsome youth and no doubt took advantage of the bush and the free environment. His family were strong Methodists and this may have influenced him later.

During those early days John had a restless spirit and at the age of 15 years he was sent as an apprentice blacksmith to Sydney. His stay as an apprentice in the big town of 30,000 inhabitants was short-lived for his master, John Flavell, blacksmith, was arrested for burglary and was executed.

John with young brother and third son Henry stayed in Sydney and Batman states, without any further details in his own Journal, *"About 1820 a love of adventure led me to leaving home."*

John and Henry (Australian Encyclopaedia 1958 states wrongly 'William'), decided to go to Van Diemen's Land (VDL). Before doing so, it was law to place an appropriate notice in the Sydney Gazette. It appeared November 17, 1821 and read:

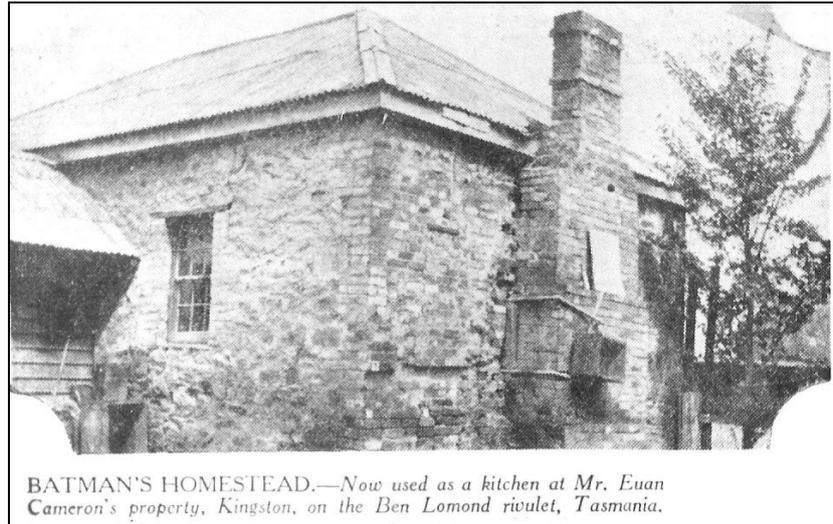
"Mr John Batman, leaving the colony by an early opportunity, requests claims to be presented. Mr Henry Batman, leaving the colony by an early opportunity, requests claims to be presented."

From the above notice it would certainly seem that John was not being sent to VDL as a convict; and as for being *"kicked out of Sydney"* well, perhaps John did make a quick exit because of his 'love of adventure', but there are too few details to speculate that he was driven out.

In December 1821, John and Henry arrived in Launceston aboard the *Haweis*. At Launceston they parted. Henry remained and became a wheelwright while John took to the bush and grazing for the next two years. It is possible that John had a child in the same year to Elizabeth Richardson.

In 1823, however, he is recorded as having tendered successfully to supply the government stores at George Town with meat.

The following year he qualified for a land grant of 500 acres (Australian Biography says 600) which he selected at Deddington on the timbered slopes of Ben Lomond. He named his farm, "Kingston". Eventually Kingston would cover 7000 acres.



By 1824 Batman had a house and six assigned servants (convicts).

Batman's life was to be full of adventure. He actually captured Matthew Brady in the Western Tiers, notorious bushranger for which Batman received further acreage. Batman came across the wounded bushranger and enticed him successfully to surrender. According to the book, "History of Australian Bushranging" (by Charles White) the following took place:

When Brady saw Batman he called out, "*Are you a soldier officer?*" To which Batman replied, "*I'm no soldier, Brady. I'm John Batman; surrender, there is no chance for you.*"

Brady replied, "*You are right Batman; my time is come; I will yield to you because you a brave man.*"

Brady was subsequently hanged.

Batman also took part in the Black Line of 1830 (which was an attempt to round up the Tasmanian Aborigines). In Campbell Town in the colony's midlands, Batman met with aboriginal conciliator George Augustus Robinson. Batman brought with him nine Sydney blacks with six being named, John Sawyer, John Peter, John Pigeon, John Croak, John Waterman and John Radley. These lived with him on the Ben Lomond property and there must have been great confusion when called for.

The Tasmanian aborigines generally regarded Batman well as he treated them with kindness and understanding. Although that was not always the case. In a report he made to Thomas Anstey, Oatlands Police Magistrate, (7 Aug 1829) when on a 'roving' party to hunt down the Blacks, they fled into the bush upon which, "*I ordered the men to fire upon them, which was done and a rush by the party immediately followed...*" A number of the natives were wounded; he then went on to say, "*On Friday morning we left the place for my Farm with the two men, woman and child (natives) but found it quite impossible that the Two former*

could walk and after trying them by every means in my power, for some time, found I could not get them on. I was obliged therefore to shoot them."

However, later (19 October 1830) he gave refuge to twelve natives who sought sanctuary from him after a voracious inter-tribal fight.

In 1825, Batman was visited by an absconder; (who he would eventually marry at St John's Launceston in 1828) named Eliza Callaghan.

Eliza an Irish girl, when only 17 years of age was sentenced to death for forgery. This was commuted to fourteen years transportation and she arrived at Hobart Town, December 20, 1821. She was assigned to John Petchy. While in his service, Eliza had three offences recorded against her; drunk and disorderly and absconding twice.

John Petchy left for England and about June 1824, Eliza was re-assigned to P.A. Mulgrave, Superintendent of Police at Launceston.

Eliza (month unknown), absconded early 1825 and headed for the bush. Eliza was only a small girl, 5ft 2 1/2 inches with brown hair and brown eyes, but obviously was full of defiance and a strong sense of survival. Eliza was no ravishing beauty as the only eye-witness account of her we have mentions that her face was rather marked, possibly caused by a childhood disease, which was common in those days. Eliza made her way to John Batman's house; this would have been either February or March 1825, and the following year Eliza had a child to John, who they called Maria. Officially her birthday is recorded as September 5, 1826, but Lucy the second girl was born December 11, 1826.

In the year 1828, Batman had a confrontation with the aborigines. This was his first known interaction with aborigines which occurred on 3rd April 1828, after his shepherd was chased off by a local tribe.

The next day he discovered their campfires. The *Hobart Town Courier* reported the incident as follows:

"Mr. Batman hastened, creeping on his hands and feet within 20 yards of the place, before the blacks discovered him. He then endeavoured to make them stop, but to no purpose; one of them was in the act of throwing a spear at him, when he fired at him in his own defence. The man fell, but got up again and ran off. Mr. Batman then pursued them, and at last overtook a boy about 16 years of age, whom he took prisoner... [but] during the night the boy made his escape, by groping his way up the chimney. "

More than a year later, the newspaper Colonial Times reported (28th August 1829 P.3) *"There have been a number of spearings around Ben Lomond and a stonemason named Tom Tucker speared to death. Mr Batman has taken a party including two aboriginals to track the perpetrator5s and capture them. The Governor has promised a reward for those captured unharmed. It is horrid to hear of the excesses committed by this barbarous and useless tribe."*

A months later (7th September 1829) the newspaper Launceston Advertiser reported: *“A man at Campbell Town had his head crushed in by natives. Mr Batman’s group encountered a party of at least 70 blacks near Ben Lomond and were compelled to fire upon the, killing 15 or 16 of them and about 20 dogs. They recovered 30-40 15ft spears and a quantity of stolen goods. They captured one women and one male child.”*

It is evident that problems continued not only with the aborigines, but also bushranger and that John Batman was called upon to deal with them. The Launceston Advertiser (14th September 1829 P.1) reported that Mr Batman was is in pursuit of a band of bushrangers and a party of blacks seen near Ross. *“If ever he gets on the track of Blacks or Whites, there is little fear but he will give a good account of the. We wish success to his arduous labou4rs because they are of essential importance to the whole community.”*

One of John’s assigned servants was Hugh Gollocher (sometimes referred to as Gallacher) who held a grudge against Batman who he considered was holding back clothing. Taking an opportunity, Gollocher passed information on to Thomas Simpson JP that the Elizabeth Callaghan (sic) *“a run away convict on my master’s house”*.

As a result the very next day Constable James Burton with help was despatched to Kingston farm. Upon arrival, they informed Batman of their intention in apprehending Eliza. Batman (or Bateman as he was constantly referred to in police records) was at first unco-operative, but eventually Burton (an ex convict) and his helper, Joseph Abrahams (who still was a convict) got inside the house and while they found no Eliza, they did find women’s clothing.

Batman, however, refused to admit that the clothes belonged to Eliza who he said, was not living there. Without sufficient evidence and no person to apprehend, the constables left.

The following month, November, assigned servants of John, Edward Russell and George Paton, both testified that the woman they knew as Elizabeth Callaghan (also known as Elizabeth Thompson) was living with John Batman. Even though the evidence was pretty strong there was no record of ever a charge against Batman being made. Batman, it would appear in retaliation, entered a charge of felony against Russell. Apparently Russell was not prosecuted.

As the years passed, interest in the apprehension of Eliza also passed and with John’s capture of bushranger Brady still in their minds, his esteem with the authorities was high.

On November 1, 1827 the third Batman child was born, a girl they named Eliza. John seriously thought of marrying Eliza so he petitioned the Lt-Governor, George Arthur, for permission to do so. Eliza is referred to in the petition as *“Eliza Thompson, known by the name of Callaghan”*. Perhaps Eliza was previously married, her convict records do not state, although her court records show that she had a lover named John Newman while in London.

Governor Arthur approved and the marriage took place at St Johns Church Launceston March 29, 1828. Eliza was pardoned in 1833 and eventually another four daughters were born beside a son, John Charles.

By 1835, Kingston had grown to 7000 acres, but the property was very rugged and of poor productivity. John with his friends, John Fawkner and John Helder. Wedge ¹⁽¹⁾ long discussed plans to make discoveries on the mainland and were backed by John Tice Gellibrand. ²⁽²⁾ brilliant lawyer and a Hobart banker Charles Swanston.

Batman met John Pascoe Fawkner who ran the Cornwall Arms Hotel in Launceston, where Batman enjoyed a drink or two. After his first visit to Port Phillip he struck up a relationship with Fawkner.

Unlike John, Fawkner was not a colonial man. He was born in London 20 October 1792, leaving England when only ten years of age with his mother, Hannah, and sister Elizabeth to follow his father, John, who had been sent to the convict settlement at Port Philip in 1803, having been convicted for stealing stolen goods and transported for fourteen years. The ill-fated settlement was removed to Sullivan's Cove, later Hobart Town, which was under the command of Lt. David Collins.

In 1811 a grant of fifty acres was made to Fawkner Junior which adjoined his father's grant also of fifty acres (granted 1806) about seven miles north of Hobart. Later John Junior moved to Launceston and not only operated a hotel (although originally considered by the authorities "*not a proper person to keep a hotel*") he printed a newspaper the *Launceston Advertiser*, which appeared on the 9th February 1829.

The Port Philip Association was born. Batman visited the Port Philip site, returning to VDL, and then going back in May 1835 on the small vessel of fifteen tons, "Rebecca" captained by a man named Howard who was accompanied by his wife. The "Rebecca" was built at Rosevears north of Launceston by George Plummer. The trip was slow and difficult because of winds, rain and currents. They were forced to put into Port Sorell with Fawkner being terribly sea-sick. There was a fortnight delay with Batman writing, "*When shall we get away from this? I am almost mad, but must wait with patience; I do not know what to do or how to act.*"

¹⁽¹⁾ John Helder Wedge (1793-1872), surveyor and explorer, migrated to VDL in 1824 and had obtained an appointment in the colony as assistant surveyor. He assisted Batman in his apprehension of Matthew Brady. Batman named Mt Wedge after him (P17 of Batsman's Journal)

²⁽²⁾ Gellibrand – attorney-general of Hobart Town and Batman named a "fine little bay" after him: "Gellibrand's Harbour".



Monument to *Rebecca* at Rosevears

They made another attempt, but had to retreat. On another attempt they reached Port Phillip Heads, 29th May 1835 after nineteen days after sailing from Launceston. Batman claimed the Bellarine Peninsular. He already had noted a place suitable for a village. He wrote in his Journal, *“Upon landing from the Rebecca they caught sight of first of seven large gunyahs or huts. “* Batman who was accompanied by a number of Sydney natives introduced themselves to the local aborigines who seemed to *“perfectly understand each other.”* On arrival with his family and farm servants, Batman organised a church service where the readings was given by Mr Orton on Batman’s Hill (now lower end of Collins Street). His children’s governess was Miss Caroline Newcome. Batman and his fifteen partners then secured 600,000 acres from the aborigines entering into a treaty with them 6 June. He thus acquired a huge land empire. The deeds for the land were signed by Batman and eight chiefs, *“giving me full possession of the tracts of land I had purchased.”* (Journal P.20)³⁽³⁾ He wrote of the native children, that they were *“good looking and of healthy appearance.”* Later he met some other aborigines, whose chief stood 6’4” and his proportions *“gigantic”* (P21 – Journal)

On the 9th June the “Rebecca” arrived back at Launceston, passing on news of Batman’s success. The newspaper the Cornwall Chronicle of Launceston spread the news stating in part, *“The peaceable disposition shown on the part of the holders of the new country enabled Mr. Batman to execute the object of his visit effectually and speedily. A fine athletic fellow – the chief of the tribe – after being made acquainted with Mr Batman’ wish to purchased land and his means to pay for it, proceed with him and his party, accompanied by his tribe, too measure it off. The payment of land in part consisted of 100 blankets, tomahawks, knives, flour ,etc and it was mutually agreed that a certainly quantity of clothing and arms were to be paid each year, the amount of 200 pounds sterling”.* (June 13th 1835).

³⁽³⁾ For purchase he gave blankets, knives, looking-glasses, tomahawks, beads, scissors, and flour. to the natives. “I also further agreed to pay them a tribute or rent yearly.”

Unfortunately for the new settlers, New South Wales Governor General Burke did not approve the settlement, but the Tasmanian Association (interestingly it was named 'Tasmanian' and not Van Diemen's Land) had the backing of VDL Lt-Governor, George Arthur.

Seventeen partners undertook to open up the new territory ⁽⁴⁾ including Joseph Solomon business man who had established himself in Launceston and Evandale. He was the tenth on the list. Joseph and his brother Judah Solomon provided capital to the Association. Joseph's interest in Port Phillip arose most probably through his son-in-law, Anthony Cottrell a former District Chief Constable at Launceston and an associate of John Batman.

Batman was also to meet William Buckley a large man of near 6'6" who had lived with the aborigines for more than 32 years, after escaping from Collins's original settlement at Port Philip in 1803. Buckley rejoined his fellow whites after Batman arrived. Buckley was pardoned and went to live in Tasmania where he died 1856 following an accident. Batman wrote of Buckley to Governor Arthur that "*Buckley explained to the several chiefs our motives and intentions in settling amongst them and the consequences which might arise from any aggression on their part. He also explained that any ill-treatment on the part of white men towards them, if reported to the heads of the establishment, would meet with its proper punishment. With this understand they were perfectly well pleased and promised to act in conformity it.*" This letter to Arthur was drafted by Gellibrand and Wedge.

The Association collapsed however and Batman returned to Launceston, promoting his land that was "*well supplied with running steam and fresh water.*" Back to his land, where he settled on Batman's Hill in April 1836 on which he established a store. Here he lived with his wife and seven daughters. Daughter Ellen died young, unmarried. The eldest girl, Maria, married John McKinney, a tide-waiter. John died, so she remarried Robert Fennel. Third daughter Eliza married William Collyer, a squatter. William's brother John, married Adelaide Batman, the sixth daughter. Lucy the second daughter lived in Geelong for some years. She married a Craigieburn settler, Joseph Lomax. Batman's youngest daughter, Pelonamana, became the second wife of Daniel Bruce, botanist and explorer who was with Ludwig Leichhardt in 1846 on his second attempt to cross Australia from east to west. There were no children.

His son, John Charles was born there in November. There were continual negotiations with the natives with whom he had a good relationship. So the second claim a "whorer" cannot be substantiated. He was clearly a 'one-lady' man and was extremely occupied in getting his settlement formed on a solid foundation. To highlight this, he gave office space to William Longsdale, the first police magistrate. By now he had sold Kingston for ten thousand pounds and brought all who lived on the property to the Yarra.

As for being a boozier, I cannot find any official offence for being drunk and disorderly, adding no doubt he enjoyed a drink or two, but so did most of the colonists. Batman had a

few brushes with the law, one in September 1829; he had to appear before magistrates in Launceston for having an “absconder” by the name of Thomas Smith and was fined ten pounds and one pound for 62 days.

With all the work and no doubt stress, Batman become ill and Quaker Missionary James Backhouse noted that he had been “*an invalid*” since he removed himself to Victoria. He also suffered financial stress from borrowing too much and lending without security.

In February 1837 his colleague, Gellibrand disappeared from the settlement possibly in the Otway Ranges, because of Batman’s physical deterioration prevented him from searching for his friend.

And dying of syphilis? It is believed he died of accumulated effects of dissipation, perhaps from those of exposure, on the 6th May 1839, after his health began seriously to take a turn for the worse in 1835. He was buried in the first Melbourne cemetery, which adjoined the original Queen Victoria Market. There was no headstone on his grave and as time progressed the exact site of it became uncertain. In 1870, however, was relocated and a handsome blue monolith was erected over the grave and unveiled 3 June 1882. Later Batman’s remains were reinterred in the Fawkner General Cemetery and the memorial was shifted to its present site in Batman Avenue (pictured).



His estates were left to his daughters. The evidence about J.B's "syphilis" is that his nose seemed to be rotting away and he wore a handkerchief over it to cover the mess - or at least people said so. It could, however, have been cancer of the nose or face.

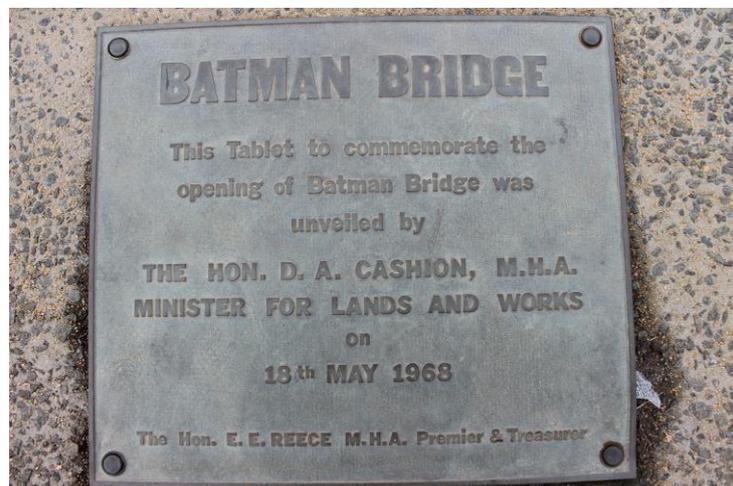
Wife Eliza remarried in 1841 to William Willoughby (Batman’s former manager and a good man) and commenced a legal challenge to the Will. She and Batman had fallen out and she sailed for England and returned after his death. Her husband Willoughby was murdered in 1852. Eliza had left husband William after the terrible drowning of their adored son, John Charles in the Yarra River in 1845, when he was only eight years old. It is believed her

husband was murdered by John Trigg, Eliza Wilson and “another named George whose surname is unknown.”

The prisoners were eventually discharged. What had apparently taken place was a lot of hard drinking at the home of (then) Mrs Willoughby in Geelong. This was followed by quarrelling and the subsequent murder.

The inquest papers were endorsed, “no prosecution” and were never printed. She remarried to William Weire (July 1853) town clerk of Geelong

The case then against John, would appear to be on shaky ground. Certainly as John Bonwick, early historian and author said of him, that he was no hero, full of warts and all. Indeed he was human, but too, not excessive in his behaviour as charged. He was a man, however, who rose from humble beginnings and obtained prominent heights in our history books. It can be said that he grasped a chance and made the most of it.



Reg Watson photo

A bridge spanning the Tamar River in the north (Batman Bridge) of the State is named after him. See plaque above. The name recognizes his role in the founding of Melbourne. It was noted at the time of the bridge’s construction and opening that he was from Launceston and that his ship *Rebecca* was built at Rosevears.



Batman Bridge spanning the River Tamar



Melbourne Coat of Arms

- Thanks to the Parramatta Historical Society.

