

The emigration of the Sullivans and Buckleys to Australia in 1844

The transportation of convicts to Australia reached a peak in the 1820s and 1830s and began to decline thereafter. There was growing agitation by free settlers to end the convict system. This was based not so much on humanitarian concerns as on a belief that this would reduce the incidence of crime in the colonies and eventually remove the legacy of the “convict stain”¹. Transportation to New South Wales was suspended in 1840 and finally abolished ten years later. Convicts continued to be sent to the other Australian colonies for some time, with the last arriving in Western Australia in 1868.

Towards the end of the 1830s, the economy of New South Wales was booming under the stimulus of pastoral expansion. Colonists clamoured for a new labour supply, but one of free settlers rather than convicts². In 1840 the *Geelong Advertiser* in the Port Phillip District, then part of New South Wales, editorialised that “The demand for labourers of every description becomes more and more urgent every day”³.

From 1837 to 1840 various bodies – Australian colonial governments as well as emigration societies in Britain – developed schemes to promote the arrival of free settlers⁴. These bodies offered various forms of assistance to emigrants, including in some cases free or assisted passage. In 1840 a coordinating body, the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission, was created to supervise the selection of emigrants, to improve the conditions of transportation, and to monitor the payment of the bounty to emigration contractors on the safe arrival of suitable settlers. It was established in part to make the emigration programs more effective and cost efficient, and also to address the high mortality rate among passengers on the emigrant ships.

One of the major emigration contractors was the London firm of Messrs Carter & Bonus. They had been involved in sending emigrants to Canada, but in 1840 switched their attention to NSW to take advantage of the bounty scheme. They appointed John Besnard Jnr. in Cork as their agent for Ireland, and he in turn had a web of at least 39 sub-agents located in virtually every part of the country⁵.

¹ Babette Smith, *Australia's Birthstain: the startling legacy of the convict era*, Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2009.

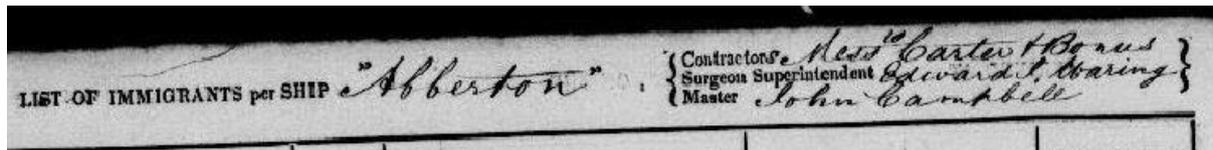
² John McDonald and Eric Richards, “The Great Emigration of 1841: Recruitment for New South Wales in British emigration fields”, *Population Studies*, 51 (1997), 337.

³ *Geelong Advertiser*, 19 December 1840, page 2.

⁴ Robin F. Haines, *Emigration and the Labouring Poor: Australian recruitment in Britain and Ireland, 1831-60*, London: Macmillan Press, 1997, page 272.

⁵ McDonald and Richards, *op cit.*, page 351.

A large number of emigration contracts were issued in 1840 to meet the demand for free settlers. However, boom soon turned to bust in the colonial economies and by 1841 NSW was in a severe depression. The migration tap could not be turned off instantly, and settlers continued to arrive even though many new arrivals were unable to find work⁶. The bounty program continued in fits and starts for a few more years until 1843 when the final contracts for this period were issued. The bounty system would be revived, but not until 1848.



The last of the ships carrying bounty emigrants in this period was the *Abberton* engaged by Carter & Bonus. It sailed from London on 16 May 1844 with emigrants recruited in the Midland counties of England⁷. Before heading for its ultimate destination – the Port Phillip District of New South Wales – the *Abberton* proceeded to Cork to collect a group of Irish emigrants. This group included Matthew and Margaret Sullivan and eight of their children and step-children⁸. The ship departed the port of Cobh near Cork city on 1 June 1844 on a voyage that would take almost 4 months.

	Eliza	72	✓		
+	36 Sullivan Matthew	43	✓	Cork	✓
+	Margaret	35	✓	do	✓
+	+ Buckley Thomas	12	✓	do	✓
+	Buckley Catherine	10	✓	do	✓
+	Margaret	12	✓	do	✓
+	Fanny	9	✓	do	✓
+	Bridget	3	✓	do	✓

The *Abberton* arrived in Australia on 22 September 1844 and the bounty list prepared soon thereafter shows the names and ages of Matthew, Margaret and five

⁶ *Ibid*, page 338.

⁷ Letter from John Patterson, Immigration Agent, to Charles Joseph La Trobe, Superintendent of the Port Phillip District of NSW, 12 October 1844, page 1.

⁸ The structure of the blended family is as follows: Thomas and Catherine Buckley were the children of Margaret's first marriage (to Patrick Buckley); Ellen, Mary, Margaret and Fanny Sullivan from Matthew's first marriage (to Mary Jeffords); and Bridget Sullivan and infant Joanna from Matthew's marriage to Margaret. Matthew Sullivan and Mary Jeffords' eldest daughter, Anne Sullivan, arrived in Port Phillip earlier that year on the *Royal Consort*

of their children. Two others, Mary and Ellen Sullivan – recorded incorrectly as being from county Clare -- were listed separately in the section for Unmarried Females.

X 20	Spillsey	Anne	21	Clare	Roman Catholic	do
X 21	Sullivan	Mary	14	do	do	✓ reads
X 22	"	Ellen	16	do	do	✓ do

The baby Joanna/Johanna who had been baptised in Carrigaline in the previous September, does not appear on the bounty list as she died on the voyage, aged 10 months.

Nominal list of Deaths on b^d

Name	Disease	Date	
		1846	
Tho ^s . Foot	16 th Erysipelas	May 22 ^d	
Maria Annally	9 th Atrophy	July 8	1.
John Annally	10 th do	" 16	2.
Benjamin Holbrook	24 th Diarrhoea	" 19	3.
Mary Wheeler	35 th 1 st water in chest	Aug 10.	14
M. W. Wheeler	4 th days	" 14	

Three members of the family were in occupational categories the bounty scheme sought -- Matthew as an agricultural labourer, and the adult daughters Ellen and Mary (aged 16 years and 14 years respectively) as domestic servants. Accordingly, Carter & Bonus received the full bounty of £18 and 14 shillings for each of them and for Margaret, and half of that amount for the children under 14 years.

There were some issues about the suitability of the family as bounty immigrants and a number of financial hurdles they had to overcome.

The colonial authorities had made it clear they were not keen to assist families with a large number of young, dependent children. However, in those days children could start work at a very early age. Catherine Buckley at the tender age of 10 years was able to be employed immediately on arrival. She went to work for a Mr Brodie, probably Richard Brodie, on a sheep station at the headwaters of Moonie Pond Creek, north of what is now Melbourne. She was engaged on a 6-month contract at an annual rate of £6 plus rations, and presumably undertook domestic duties.

Then there was a special problem with the only boy in the family group, Thomas Buckley. On the list of bounty passengers prepared at Port Philip he is described as "idiotic", and Carter & Bonus therefore was denied the bonus payment for him. The CLEC required that intending emigrants be assessed by a surgeon and passed medically fit. In practice it seems the assessment of suitability, on medical as well as other grounds, was sometimes performed by the emigration agent. In this case the "medical assessment" must have been made by Besnard and he waved Thomas through.

Labourer	18	14	..				
Wife	18	14	..				
Stepson	"	"	"				
Step daughter	9	7	"				
daughter	9	7	"				
do	9	7	"				
do	9	7	"				
						74	16

This man brought to the Colony two daughters - adults. + Thomas Buckley is idiotic and consequently ineligible for the Bounty

The next issue is Matthew Sullivan's age. It was a CLEC requirement that married couples be less than 40 years of age. Matthew admitted to being 43 on the bounty list, though I was later to discover that he was born in 1797⁹ and thus was 47 in the year of departure.

Then there were other practical challenges for the Sullivans to overcome. Intending immigrants were required to pay a deposit of £1 per adult and 10 shillings for each child to ensure they met their commitment to emigrate¹⁰. This money was used to purchase bedding and mess utensils for the voyage. These items were given to the immigrants on arrival in the colony¹¹. In the short term, however, the Sullivan family had to come up with £6 in cash. That would not have been easy. The combined income of an Irish agricultural labourer and his wife in 1844 has been estimated at

⁹ Prison record at the Pentridge Stockade.

¹⁰ McDonald and Richards, *op cit.*, page 340.

¹¹ Haines, *op cit.*, page 102.

£12 per year¹². The estimate is based on the assumption they could both find work for 300 days a year, which might have been difficult given the seasonal nature of farm employment.

They also faced the expense of suitable clothing for the voyage as required by the CLEC. Judging by the description of the Irish emigrants boarding the *Abberton* at Cobh, many of them struggled to meet these requirements. A young English passenger on that voyage, Henry Mundy, recalled this scene at Cobh when writing his reminiscences many years later:

*A batch of about eighty strange looking individuals – men, women and children – arrived on board, accompanied by their friends and relatives to bid them a last farewell. It was a motley crowd and a picturesque gathering. The men clad in knee breeches, long stockings and nondescript hats. The children and women were mostly barefooted*¹³.

The shipping agent, John Besnard, Jnr., was a descendant of a prominent Huguenot family from France. He held a number of public positions in Cork but his main business commitment was as an emigration agent. The business required a great deal of time and expense which he said resulted in little or no profit. He had to travel widely throughout Ireland publicising the bounty scheme, vetting applicants and signing them up if they appeared to be suitable candidates. He placed advertisements in local newspapers, had handbills printed for wide distribution, and paid a fee or commission to his sub-agents. All these costs came out of the 15 shillings he received from Carter & Bonus for each emigrant who qualified for the bounty on arrival in Australia.

The 'shippers', Carter & Bonus, were required to meet the cost of emigrants' accommodation while they waited for embarkation -- at the rate of one shilling per person per day¹⁴. In the early years of the bounty scheme, the lodgings available to emigrants in Cork, as in other ports of departure, were in "the lowest and filthiest houses" in the city¹⁵. In 1841 Besnard established an emigrants' depot in Cork at 15 Merchants Quay to address this problem. Three years later the accommodation was expanded and upgraded to accommodate 500 people. Besnard was very forward thinking in the way the depot was set up. It was organised to reflect, physically and organisationally, life aboard ship. People slept in bunks as they would on the ship. They were organised in messes of perhaps 10 or 12 people from which a "captain" was appointed to collect cooked food from the galley and distribute it among group members, and a daily routine was followed similar to shipboard life.

¹²http://www.aughty.org/pdf/edens_pleasure_grnd1844.pdf. Accessed 18 June 2014

¹³ Les Hughes, *Henry Mundy: A young Australian pioneer*, Bedfordshire, UK: Next Century Books, 2003.

¹⁴ Haines, *op cit.*, page 103.

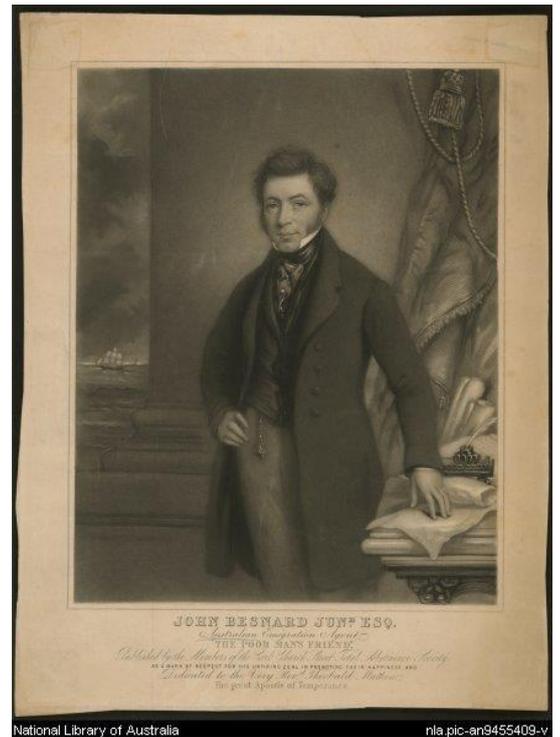
¹⁵ Oliver MacDonagh, *A pattern of government growth, 1800-1860: the Passenger Acts and their enforcement*, London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1993, page 42.

There were additional services at the depot they would not receive at sea – a library, needlework instruction, a school, and daily visits from a priest and clergyman. Obviously this was not a man seeking to extract the last penny of profit from his business.

In the National Library of Australia there is an image of John Besnard Jnr. at the bottom of which are a number of laudatory titles, but the most prominent of them is “The Poor Man’s Friend”. He clearly was a public spirited citizen.

And why did the family decide to emigrate? This would not have been an easy decision as they knew they would never see Ireland again. The uncertainty of land tenure in Ireland may have been a factor. Even though Matthew occupied a 29-acre farm in 1831, he could have lost that tenancy in the intervening 13 years. A more likely explanation lies in the size and composition of the family – eight daughters and a disabled son. In rural Ireland a ‘match’ had to be negotiated before a marriage took place and in most cases a ‘fortune’ or dowry had to be paid to the father of the husband-to-be if that family had land.¹⁶ With eight daughters and thus eight ‘fortunes’ to find, it would have been very difficult for them to make ‘good’ marriages.

As for the disabled son, Thomas Buckley, there is only one trace of him after the family’s arrival in Australia. In the application by a later son, Daniel Sullivan, for probate on their mother’s estate in 1882, “Thomas Buckley of New Zealand” is listed as one of the beneficiaries. Thomas would then have been 50 years of age. We know that Matthew and Margaret and some of their children went to New Zealand and lived there from 1855 to 1861, but I have been unable to find any trace there of Thomas. There is no record of his death that I have been able to find, nor any record in Archives NZ of him being cared for in a mental health institution. His half-sister Bridget Sullivan married Samuel Roe in New Zealand on 14 April 1857 and settled in that country, so Thomas may have spent his life with them. I have been in contact with Roe descendants but they have been unable to shed any light on this mystery.



National Library of Australia

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Philip Crowe, 18 June 2014

¹⁶ Arensberg, C. M. and S. T. Kimball (1968). *Family and community in Ireland*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press., pp 103-14;