

# **Croker Prize for Biography**

**Entry 1401**

**Old Brine: Terror of the Richmond  
River (Brian O'Neil)**

The sawyers on the Richmond River in the north of New South Wales in the 1840s and 1850s were a strange, wild lot. Hard working, hard living, hard drinking and hard swearing, they were a desperate set of ruffians comprising ex-convicts, runaways, thieves and vagabonds.<sup>1</sup> The wildest of them all was my ancestor Brian O'Neil, known as 'Old Brine', the terror of the Richmond, and the blackest sheep in my family's flock.

Brian was born into a farming family<sup>2</sup> in Ballyneale<sup>3</sup> in County Kilkenny,<sup>4</sup> Ireland in 1789.<sup>5</sup> Although nothing is known of his early life, he would have grown up in conditions of crushing poverty. When he was nine years old, the 1798 rebellion exploded across Ireland. A lot of the heaviest fighting took place in neighbouring counties,<sup>6</sup> and it would have had an enormous impact on Brian, fuelling a hatred of English authority and firing a spirit of rebellion within him.

Brian had no education and was illiterate, and when he reached adulthood he worked as an agricultural labourer, or 'croppie'.<sup>7</sup> In 1818 he rebelled<sup>8</sup> and acquired a firearm "during the troublous times of that country. And do you know",<sup>9</sup> he later said, "they had to run me into a soft bog before they could catch me!"<sup>10</sup> But catch him they did, and he was tried and sentenced to transportation to New South Wales for seven years.<sup>11</sup> He arrived in Sydney aboard the 'Minerva' on 18 December 1819,<sup>12</sup> where he was assigned to a farmer as a convict labourer.<sup>13</sup> He was now 30 years old.

By 1824 Brian had gained his Ticket of Leave, but in March of that year it was cancelled for harbouring runaway convicts, and he was gaoled.<sup>14</sup> Brian had already developed a strong sympathy with his fellow convicts and a defiant attitude towards the colonial authorities. He was convicted on 7 April and sentenced to serve out his original sentence.<sup>15</sup> Three weeks later he was transported to Port Macquarie.<sup>16</sup> He was soon sent back to face a charge of "being implicated in a daring robbery committed at the South Creek."<sup>17</sup> He was then convicted of this offence and sentenced "to be forwarded to Port Macquarie from whence he came".<sup>18</sup>

At Port Macquarie Brian and the other convicts were forced to labour in gangs at the task of cutting down the huge cedar trees, which grew along the banks of the Hastings River.<sup>19</sup> Cedar cutting would become one of his two main occupations in life, the other being rum drinking, to which he was also introduced at Port Macquarie. There was plenty of rum to be had there, cooked up by the convicts in illicit stills,<sup>20</sup> and Brian developed quite a taste for it. He had no taste however, for the harsh discipline imposed on him, and, true to his rebellious Irish nature, he escaped.<sup>21</sup>

Brian was quickly recaptured, and on 15 December 1824 he was sent to Newcastle with eleven other runaways, with instructions from the Colonial Secretary that they were "to be lodged in Gaol during their hours of relaxation, to be kept constantly in double irons, and to be employed for the present upon any hard work to which they can be set."<sup>22</sup> In March 1825 Brian was sentenced to 50 lashes as punishment for his escape, and these were duly administered to him.<sup>23</sup> No doubt this treatment hardened his resentment against authority and reinforced his sympathy with other convicts and runaways.

Brian was granted his Certificate of Freedom on 13 June 1825, his original sentence of seven years having expired, and he was allowed to return to Sydney.<sup>24</sup> He

was now 36 years old, and he took up the trade of a sawyer, putting the skills he had learnt at Port Macquarie to good use. By 1827 he was in trouble with the law again, and an item appearing in the newspaper under the title of “Dreadful effects of tea-drinking” tells the story:

Bryan O’Neal, free, was charged with assaulting Judith Ward. The accused is a sawyer. On Wednesday evening he went uninvited into the defendant’s house, in Kent-street, and observing the table had been just set out for tea, desired the lady of the mansion to favor him with a cup. The affrighted lady whose doors the stranger had never darkened before complaisantly complied with his request, not without a hope of getting rid of him in peace and with decorum. In this particular, however, she had made a wrong reckoning; for no sooner had he revelled to his heart’s content on the refreshing beverage, than he commenced a warfare upon the unoffending crockery and tea-equipage. Tables were floored, and a horrible clattering of other furniture was a brewing, when some constables put a stop to the war by laying violent hands upon the infuriated man, and conveying him away to the watch-house. He had no defence to offer before the magistrates, and was accordingly committed for trial at the Sessions.<sup>25</sup>

It emerged that Brian was very drunk when he entered Judith Ward’s house, and he assaulted her quite viciously.<sup>26</sup> It is not known what his punishment was on this occasion, but the incident demonstrates that he was capable of unprovoked violence when under the influence of strong liquor.

On 17 August 1833 Brian married Catherine Mann, an English convict, at St. Mary’s Cathedral in Sydney.<sup>27</sup> Brian was now 43, and Catherine was 17.<sup>28</sup> She was also seven months pregnant.<sup>29</sup> Brian and Catherine would have a total of ten children over the years.<sup>30</sup> In the late 1830s they moved north to join the cedar cutters on the Macleay River.<sup>31</sup> When the cedar ran out in the 1840s,<sup>32</sup> they moved north again, following the trail of the cedar cutters to the Richmond River.<sup>33</sup>

On his advent to the Richmond, Brian, now nearly sixty years of age, became known as ‘Old Brine’, and he earned a fearsome reputation with his hard drinking and wild nature.<sup>34</sup> He was “the owner of a brass mounted carbine which was likely a relic of Minden or Waterloo, being converted from a flint to percussion, and was highly prized by its owner who always had it at hand as a bosom friend, greatly to the terror and dislike of his fellow sawyers who gave Brine and his carbine as wide a berth as possible while drinking”.<sup>35</sup>

On one occasion Brine, suspecting a newcomer to the Richmond, known as ‘Ruggy Ned’, to be a policeman on the lookout for some fugitive from the law, chased him down the river in a boat. Brine fired at Ned’s boat with his carbine, putting a bullet into it, in order to get it to bring to. After satisfying himself that Ned was no policeman, Brine produced a bottle of rum, and insisted all hands drink with him, eventually becoming drunk and falling asleep.<sup>36</sup> On another occasion:

after cutting a contract of cedar for Billy Wright and paying the store bill and laying in a stock of necessaries, among which was the very

necessary ten gallons of rum, on Brine's arrival at camp the password flew around that there was ten gallons to be drunk at Brine's. So a jovial crew met there determined that there would be ten gallons of rum less in the country ere long, and all enjoyed themselves without a hitch or quarrel which was an unusual and I may say – an unprecedented occurrence, with the host in particular, who had apparently become passive and lifeless by heavy potations. But, as all things must have an end, so it was with the liquor and great was the surprise of the majority at the want of endurance and stability exhibited by the keg refusing duty. Now during the commotion caused by the keg's failure to respond to time, Brine roused up and on learning what was the matter, took the keg, gave it a shake to convince himself of the void within, and sorrowfully remarked 'What – ten gallons of rum dhrunk and not a blow sthruck – t'will ne'er do.' Paddy Mace who was roused up by the commotion caught Brine's eye and before Pat had quite straightened up Brine hurled the keg at Pat's head striking him on the forehead with the bilge part, and over went Pat with a bump on his hard head as large as a small keg.<sup>37</sup>

At this point two of Brine's other drinking companions intervened to try and calm him down. Brine went berserk and attacked them both with an adze, forcing them to flee for their lives.<sup>38</sup>

The sawyers and settlers of the Richmond River must have breathed a little easier when Brian O'Neil finally died at the age of 69 on 20 March 1859, of "general debility".<sup>39</sup> Presumably his years of hard drinking and rough living had taken their toll. Old Brine was gone, but his wild doings live on in local folklore and family legend. The voice of our blackest sheep still echoes down to us: "What – ten gallons of rum dhrunk and not a blow sthruck – t'will ne'er do..."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jervis, James, 'Cedar and the Cedar Getters', *Royal Australian Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, Vol. 25, Part 2, 1939, pp. 154-155.

<sup>2</sup> NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Brienard O'Neal, 20 March 1859, No. 50, issued on 31 July 1993. Brian's death certificate states that his parents were John O'Neil, a farmer, and Mary Delane.

<sup>3</sup> 'Principal Superintendent's Office, Sydney, March 24, 1824', *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 25 March 1824, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Brienard O'Neal, 20 March 1859, No. 50, issued on 31 July 1993. Brian's death certificate states that he was born in County Kilkenny.

<sup>5</sup> Ancestry.com, *New South Wales Australia, Convict Indents 1788-1842*, (database on-line). According to his convict indent, Brian was 30 years old when he arrived in the colony in 1819.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Bartlett, 'The 1798 Irish Rebellion', *BBC History*, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire\\_seapower/irish\\_reb\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire_seapower/irish_reb_01.shtml) accessed on 12 April 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Ancestry.com, *New South Wales Australia, Convict Indents 1788-1842*, (database on-line). According to his convict indent, Brian could neither read nor write, and his occupation was 'labourer'. Agricultural labour would have been the only occupation he knew.

<sup>8</sup> State Records NSW, NRS 939, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1825, [4/3864], p. 127, Reel 6019. Brian was tried at the Summer Assizes at Clonmell in County Tipperary.

<sup>9</sup> Jarrett, Charles, 'Tales of the Richmond: Old Identities', *The Reminiscences of Charles Jarrett of Ballina*, Richmond River Historical Society Inc., provided to the author on 3 March 1996, p. 5.

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- 10 *Ibid*, p. 5.
- 11 State Records NSW, NRS 939, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1825, [4/3864], p. 127, Reel 6019.
- 12 Ancestry.com, *New South Wales Australia, Convict Indents 1788-1842*, (database on-line). The 'Minerva' sailed from Cork with 172 convicts and made the passage to Port Jackson in 113 days. On arrival Brian was described as 5 foot 7¼ inches tall with a fair, mid complexion, brown hair and blue eyes.
- 13 Jarrett, Charles, 'Tales of the Richmond: Old Identities', *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- 14 State Records NSW, NRS 898, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1825, [4/6671], p. 68, Reel 6023. Brian was sent to the Government Agricultural Establishment at Emu Plains.
- 15 State Records NSW, NRS 939, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1825, [4/3864], p. 127, Reel 6019.
- 16 State Records NSW, NRS 939, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1825, [4/3864], p. 127, Reel 6019. Brian was transported on the cutter 'Sally' with 32 other prisoners.
- 17 State Records NSW, NRS 897, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1825, [4/1816], pp. 207-209, Reel 6069. There was some confusion on the part of the authorities, who initially sent the wrong man, who, coincidentally, was also named Bryan O'Neill, and who had also been transported to Port Macquarie.
- 18 State Records NSW, NRS 898, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1825, [4/6671], p. 46, Reel 6023. Brian was re-transported to Port Macquarie on the cutter 'Sally' on 17 September 1824, arriving back after an absence of four months.
- 19 Jervis, James, 'Cedar and the Cedar Getters', *op. cit.*, p. 142.
- 20 Hughes, Robert, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868*, Collins Harvill, London, 1987, p. 439.
- 21 State Records NSW, NRS 937, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1825, [4/3513], pp. 96-97, Reel 6014.
- 22 State Records NSW, NRS 937, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1825, [4/3513], pp. 96-97, Reel 6014.
- 23 State Records NSW, NRS 898, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1825, [4/1718], p. 201, Reel 6023.
- 24 State Records NSW, Brian Neill, Minerva, 1819, No 048/3891, 13 June 1825, Certificate of Freedom, [4/4423], Reel 601.
- 25 'Offences: Dreadful effects of tea-drinking', *The Australian*, 7 November 1827, p. 3.
- 26 State Records NSW, Sydney Quarter Sessions January 1828, No. 32, [4/8448].
- 27 NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Marriage Certificate, Brian O'Neil & Catherine Mann, 17 August 1833, No. 68, issued on 15 September 1992.
- 28 Ancestry.com, *New South Wales Australia, Convict Indents 1788-1842*, (database on-line). Catherine was a nursemaid from Manchester, but she was born in Ireland. She was convicted of stealing gingham (a plain-woven cotton cloth) in 1832 and was sentenced to transportation to New South Wales for 14 years. She arrived on the 'Fanny' in February 1833, and was described on arrival as 4 foot 11½ inches tall with sandy hair, grey eyes, and a fair complexion with freckles.
- 29 NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Baptism Certificate, Margaret O'Neil, 12 May 1834, No. 338, issued on 8 May 1996. Catherine must have become pregnant to Brian very soon after her arrival in the colony. Their first child, Margaret, was born in October 1833.
- 30 NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Catherine O'Neil, 15 July 1877, No. 612, issued on 2 October 1992. Catherine's death certificate shows that they had a total of ten children. These were Margaret, born 1833, Bridget, born 1835, John, born 1838, Timothy Brian, born 1839, Elizabeth, born 1849, Catherine, born 1853, Patrick, born 1857 and died the same year, and three other sons who also died in infancy.
- 31 NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Baptism Certificate, Timothy Brian O'Neil, 28 August 1839, No. B1839/2665-133, issued on 30 July 1993. Timothy Brian's baptism certificate shows that he was born at the Macleay River.
- 32 Jervis, James, 'Cedar and the Cedar Getters', *op. cit.*, p. 143. The cedar trade started on the Macleay River in the 1830s. By 1841 there were over two hundred sawyers on the river. The numbers fell sharply during 1842 as the cedar started to run out, and by September of that year there were only about a dozen sawyers left on the river.
- 33 NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Elizabeth Powditch, 17 January 1934, No. 100, issued on 11 August 1998. It is not known exactly when Brian and

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Catherine arrived on the Richmond, but it must have been by 1849, when their daughter Elizabeth was born there. On the Richmond Brian moved around where the cedar trade took him, working first at Gundurimba, then at the camp at Tintenbar, then at Duck Creek, and finally at Bald Hill, later known as Bexhill. Cedar was discovered on the Richmond River in 1842, and cedar getters commenced operations there later that year. The Richmond continued to produce cedar for many years. The area around the river was full of giant cedar trees and was known as the 'Big Scrub'. Today, courtesy of Brian and his fellow sawyers, the 'Big Scrub' has entirely disappeared and all the cedar is gone.

34 Daley, Louise Tiffany, *Men and a River: A History of the Richmond River District 1828-1895*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1968, p. 33.

35 Jarrett, Charles, 'Tales of the Richmond: Old Identities', *op. cit.*, p. 6. Charles Jarrett was also a sawyer on the Richmond River, who later became known as the 'cedar king'. He left a diary with fascinating vignettes of some of the colourful characters amongst the early sawyers on the river.

36 *Ibid*, pp. 6-7.

37 *Ibid*, pp. 7-8.

38 *Ibid*, pp. 8-9.

39 NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Death Certificate, Brienard O'Neal, 20 March 1859, No. 50, issued on 31 July 1993. Catherine survived Brian by 20 years, dying at the age of 61 at Lagoon Grass, near Lismore, on 15 July 1877.

40 Jarrett, Charles, 'Tales of the Richmond: Old Identities', *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8. Old Brine's son Timothy Brian O'Neil was my grandmother's grandfather. Like his father, Timothy was a sawyer and a somewhat eccentric character, and my grandmother remembered that it was his habit to wear a thick overcoat on very hot days. His explanation: "What keeps out the cold will keep out the heat!" In the 1880s Timothy carved a large table top out of a solid piece of cedar. This table top is still in the possession of my family today.