

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1501

**Bridget Bryan:
An Immigrant's Story**

This is the story of my paternal great-grandmother Bridget Bryan (c1867-1950), who migrated from Ireland to Queensland in 1876. Her father John Burke (c1827-1908) grew up in County Galway during the terrible starvation and disease of the Great Famine in the 1840s. During this time the potato crops were devastated by blight and large numbers of Irish perished or emigrated. A modest economic recovery in the 1860s may have encouraged him to stay in Ireland, but the downturn in the 1870s that became the Long Depression¹ persuaded him to look overseas for a better life for his family. Bridget sailed as a nine year-old girl with her parents John (age 40) and Mary (age 38) and three brothers Michael (age 18), Patrick (age 16) and William Joseph (age 12) in the *City of Agra* from Gravesend and arrived at the Queensland port of Maryborough in July 1876².

Queensland was declared a separate colony in 1859 and its population expanded steadily with assisted migration programs from Britain and Ireland. The Darling Downs area was particularly attractive due to its rich black agricultural soils. By the time Bridget's family arrived, the government was extending the road³, rail⁴ and telegraph⁵ networks throughout the district. The family moved to Highfields, a village near Toowoomba, where John Burke was listed as a Freeholder in the electoral rolls from 1877 to 1885⁶. Then from 1886, he was working for the railways and living at Cocks's Camp, a railway camp established in about 1883 near Highfields station. Mary died in 1894⁷ and John lived in the camp until it was disbanded in about 1900, when he moved to Leyburn⁸, a small town about 70 km south-west of Toowoomba.



Figure 1 Highfields Railway Station - late 1870s

Henry Bryan, an immigrant from Bath in England, started work with Queensland Railways in 1893 as a lengthsman⁹ (someone who was responsible for the maintenance of a length of railway track). He also lived at Cocks's Camp¹⁰, and must have met Bridget while working with John Burke. He later became a railway bridge carpenter¹¹ and then a bridge inspector. Henry and Bridget were married in Toowoomba Catholic Church (now the Toowoomba Cathedral) in 1896¹². They had seven children over the next sixteen years. The first, Nellie Mary (1897-1978) trained as a nurse and worked for a time at the Willowburn Mental Asylum (1867-1953)¹³ in North Toowoomba. Bridget's father John died in 1908 and is buried with Mary in Cabarlah Cemetery¹⁴ near Highfields.

Bridget's eldest son William (1899 – 1961) followed his father and grandfather into the railways in 1917¹⁵, starting in the Locomotive branch of the Southern Division. By 1926 he was a fireman¹⁶, and then an engine driver. His job took his family around the State to Quilpie (west of Charleville), then to Southport, before he finally settled in Coorparoo in South Brisbane.

Bridget did more than her fair share of child-raising, because she also brought up two of her grandchildren who were born out of wedlock. Nellie gave birth to Daniel (1918-1982), and her 15-year old sister Bridget (1904-1949) gave birth to John (1920-c2001). However, there was a limit to how many of her children's offspring Bridget would raise for them, and when the still-unmarried Nellie gave birth to Jack (1922-), she must have put her foot down, because she was not the baptismal godmother as she had been for Daniel and John¹⁷. Not long afterwards, Nellie left her nursing career and took Jack to the Charleville area to work as a cattle station cook, later moving to Brisbane.

Nellie was keen for Jack to follow in the family tradition of a railway career. In 1938 when he was fifteen he sat for the entrance exams for both Queensland Railways and the Post Master General's Department (PMG). An acceptance letter duly arrived from the PMG, and Jack took the position, starting work as a telegram boy. A couple of weeks later an acceptance letter arrived from the Railways, but it came too late, much to his mother's disappointment. In the end, Jack had a successful career with the PMG, retiring in 1988 as the State Broadcasting Manager for South Australia and being honoured with an Order of Australia for services to the media as a radio broadcasting engineer the following year¹⁸.

Bridget's household made a worthy contribution to the war effort during World War II, although not all of them made it home. Daniel served as a clerk in the 25th Infantry Battalion from 1940 to 1945¹⁹. His unit saw service in the Egypt and Libya from 1941 to 1942, and then returned to reinforce the battered Australian units on the Kokoda Trail, finishing the war battling strong Japanese resistance at Balikpapan in Borneo²⁰. John saw service in New Guinea as an artillery gun layer in the 2nd Field Regiment from 1942 to 1946²¹, following the unit's return from the desert campaign. Jack joined the RAAF in 1941 and became a radar mechanic in the 43rd Squadron, flying operational patrols in Catalinas to New Guinea and beyond²².

Bridget's third son Tom (1907-1945) enlisted in the Army in 1941 and was posted to the 31st Infantry Battalion in Syria, arriving a month after the armistice was declared. Like other units, his battalion returned home in 1942 to reinforce the Australian forces on the Kokoda Trail²³. The 31st was the first to re-enter Kokoda and to help break up the Japanese defensive position at Gorari. But the final operation of the war proved to be the most difficult for the 31st, as they suffered the heaviest casualties of any unit after the landing at Balikpapan in July 1945²⁴. Tragically, Tom was killed on his birthday on the day after the landing. His death was mentioned in the Battalion's memoir, *Forever Forward*, because as the battalion advanced that day, he remarked to a comrade "I'm going into action on my thirty-eighth birthday, and wouldn't it be a bugger if I was ironed out on the anniversary of the day I came into the world"²⁵.

Bridget's third daughter Eileen (1907-2003), in contrast to her older sisters, spent her whole life in the family home, had no children and was a devout Christian. Despite this quiet and sober life, she gained some notoriety in 1984 when the Toowoomba Council announced it was planning to move the Mothers' Memorial from the main street to a

nearby park²⁶. This memorial contained the names of all Toowoomba residents who died in the World Wars, including her brother Tom. Eileen was outraged by this and threatened to have his name removed if the memorial was moved, saying that when it was installed in the early 1920s, the Council solemnly pledged that it would never be moved. The upshot was that the memorial was relocated to the park and Tom's name is still there, so she didn't carry out her threat.

Eileen outlived her parents and all of her siblings, inheriting the family cottage. When she died she left it to the Catholic Church (much to the dismay of her nieces and nephews, who thought that Henry and Bridget wanted them to have it!).

Bridget and Henry moved into a cottage in Toowoomba in about 1922²⁷, probably after Henry retired from his job at the railway. Jack remembers that when he visited the house in the 1930s, the gateposts were fashioned from a very solid timber pylon that came from a railway bridge that Henry had repaired. Henry died in 1948, and Bridget died two years later at the grand age of 80²⁸.

After migrating to Australia in 1876, Bridget Bryan's life included the long period that saw Australia develop from a British colony to a prosperous independent nation. She lived through two severe economic depressions and two world wars. Her life in Australia began as an assisted migrant during a period of colonial expansion, and ended during another era of assisted migration as the country welcomed the displaced peoples of Europe to create the modern Australia of today. In the twilight of her life, she would be entitled to reflect that her family had contributed well, both to the nation's prosperity by helping develop the railway network that was essential to its development, and also to its freedom by service in the armed forces when it was most needed.

References

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Figure 1: Queensland Rail, History Timeline, 1870s.