

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1507

For the Love of Family

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She sat bolt upright in the spa. She had consumed a few wines but there was definitely a man standing on the deck in front of her. He was a ghostly figure, about 40 wearing old fashioned clothes.

My immigrant's story has revealed many interesting characters along the way. Men and women of great courage and strength have been discovered in every generation. They have seen tough times and survived many hardships. They have lived and loved hard. My immigrant Patrick was formidable against the many setbacks he encountered and was driven by the love of family.

Patrick was born around 1840 near Kilfenora, County Clare, Ireland.¹ He was the 5th of 7 known children of Patrick Senior and Honora Hearn. Patrick lived with his large family in a small cottage. They worked a tenement farm paying rent to the land owner. They lived a hard life in Ireland being close to the bottom rung of society.² Patrick was only a young child when the potato famine struck and would have remembered most of his childhood as a time of hunger, poverty and siblings leaving home.

The Great Potato Famine began in 1845 when Patrick was 5 years old. For the family, like half the Irish population, potato was the main food source. The potato crop failed again and again for the next five years as a result of a disease known as blight which destroyed the whole potato plant leaving it to rot in the ground. The Irish people were left vulnerable to famine and destitution. There was mass starvation and disease as a result. Many were left without a source of income unable to pay their rents and were evicted from their homes. Around one million people died and at least two million left the country.³

During the time of the famine and the slow recovery period afterwards Patrick Senior and Honora saw six of their seven children leave home to start a new life in Australia. They did not have funds for the whole family to go so struggled to find the fare for the older girls Mary and Margaret to emigrate in 1847. The others relied on these young women to get settled in Australia and send home money for their passage. Brothers Michael and Martin followed their sisters in 1855.⁴ The final two, Patrick and Susan left 10 years after the first two girls.

Patrick's opportunity for a better life finally came when he applied for passage to Australia on 12th May 1857. His fare cost £4 and he had a reference from the Parish Priest in Kilfenora.⁵ Like their older brothers and sisters Patrick and his sister Susan said a very sad goodbye to their parents and younger brother and began the long walk south to the port of Queenstown in Cork. The walk took them through Ennis and Limerick and many other smaller villages. It could easily have taken them a week or more to walk nearly 200kms. They survived on rations they bought with them and when they could not find shelter slept out in the open.

Patrick and Susan sailed from Queenstown, Cork, Ireland to Liverpool in England to wait for passage to Sydney. Their passage was booked on the 1292 ton ship *Herald of the Morning*. The ship left Liverpool on the 10th March 1858. On board were 441 registered passengers - 65 married males, 65 married females, 113 single males over 14, 118 single females over 14 and 80 children under 14. There were many more unregistered as well as the ship's crew. 22 of the registered passengers were from County Clare.⁶ After a long and harsh three months

the ship arrived in Sydney on 23rd June 1858. Patrick's age was recorded on arrival as 18 and his sister's as 17. The Sydney Morning Herald reported the arrival of the ship listing the registered passengers and announcing to friends and family that passengers would be ready to meet at 4pm on Friday 25th June 1858.⁷

During the next two years Patrick made his way to Maitland in the Hunter Valley where he settled on a piece of land in Rosebrook on the Hunter River about 15km north of Maitland. He married Mary Long on 16th October 1860 in Rosebrook⁸ and over the next 15 years Patrick and Mary's family grew rapidly. Mary gave birth to three daughters and six sons. Sadly two of the boys died as infants.

Patrick farmed the land and worked on building roads in the area to supplement his income and help feed and clothe his large family. He worked through the long hot hours of a Maitland summer and rose early on the cold crisp mornings of winter. The Hunter weather, the droughts and the floods would have been a stark contrast to the conditions in his Irish home. Disastrous floods in June 1867 severely affected the settlers in the Rosebrook area. For 48 hours they worked helping each other shift cattle, furniture and crops to safer places. Many farmers lost crops still in the ground with Patrick losing 250 bushels of corn and 500 dozen pumpkins.⁹

Two years later Patrick received news from home. His father, Patrick Senior, had passed away in May at the age of 70. Patrick Senior was still working as a herdsman until he was taken by a 'visitation of God'.¹⁰

1875 however would be the year of greatest tragedy for Patrick, Mary and their children. In March 1875 the current baby of the family, 19 month old Andrew, fell sick. It developed into acute croup and he died in Mary's arms 14 days later. He was buried with his brother Thomas who had died as a baby ten years before.¹¹ Mary fell pregnant with her ninth child a few months later.

Later in the year Patrick was employed on the roads at Hillsborough not far from his home. He rode to and from work on horseback. On the first Saturday in October he left work around 4pm in the evening and called at Mr Drinan's store across the river. He shared three or four large glasses of wine with a few local farmers and was under the influence when they all left around sundown. Mr Drinan put them in the boat to cross the river and watched as they crossed to the other side and ascended the bank to head home.¹² Patrick collected his horse and the farmers went their separate ways. He headed along the river bank towards his home but had only walked about 10 metres when he inadvertently walked too near the edge and was thrown into the river when the bank gave way under his feet.¹³

Mary grew increasingly worried when Patrick did not return home. Early the next morning she sent one of the older boys to alert her brother Thomas and they began searching for Patrick. His horse was found grazing by the river and his coat was found on the ground nearby. The searchers examined the river bank and found that a portion of the bank had fallen away.¹⁴ They frantically searched the river bank to no avail. The river was dragged and after a short time Patrick's body was found not far from where the bank had fallen in.¹⁵

Ironically our family only discovered my immigrant Patrick's story after we had purchased a property on the Hunter River. We made the startling discovery that Patrick had drowned only a few kilometres down the river from our much loved farm. Patrick and his beloved family

had settled across the river from our property. Whenever we or any of our extended family visits the property we feel a great sense of peace and of home.

Patrick was 35 when he drowned in the Hunter River.¹⁶ Mary buried her beloved husband a few days later before facing the reality of being left alone with six young children and another on the way. My immigrant's story shows a character of great strength and determination driven by the love of his family. It was the love of his parents and older siblings that enabled him to pursue a better life in Australia. It was for the love of his wife and children that he worked hard to support them against the odds. However it looks as though it is for the love of his descendants that Patrick's ghostly figure might still be here looking out for his family!

¹ Death Certificate of Patrick X died 2nd October 1875 Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages, NSW, 07435.

² *A Family History of The X Family of County Clare* compiled by the Clare Heritage Centre, Corofin, County Clare, Ireland, January 2014.

³ Encyclopaedia Britannica: Irish Potato Famine <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/294137/Irish-Potato-Famine>> accessed 13th February 2015

⁴ Martin and Michael X Immigration Record 27th November 1855, State Records of NSW.

⁵ *A Family History of The X Family of County Clare* compiled by the Clare Heritage Centre, Corofin, County Clare, Ireland, January 2014.

⁶ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Friday 25th June 1858

⁷ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Friday 25th June 1858.

⁸ Marriage Certificate of Patrick X and Mary Long married 16th October 1860 Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages, NSW, 02006.

⁹ *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, Thursday 27th June 1867

¹⁰ *A Family History of The X Family of County Clare* compiled by the Clare Heritage Centre, Corofin, County Clare, Ireland, January 2014.

¹¹ Death Certificate of Andrew Timothy X died 23rd March 1875 Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages, NSW, 07307.

¹² *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, Thursday 7th October 1875 Coroner's Report.

¹³ *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, Tuesday 5th October 1875.

¹⁴ *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, Tuesday 5th October 1875.

¹⁵ *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, Tuesday 5th October 1875.

¹⁶ Death Certificate of Patrick X died 2nd October 1875 Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages, NSW, 07435.

*To avoid revealing the name of the author the family name has been replaced by the letter X in the endnotes.