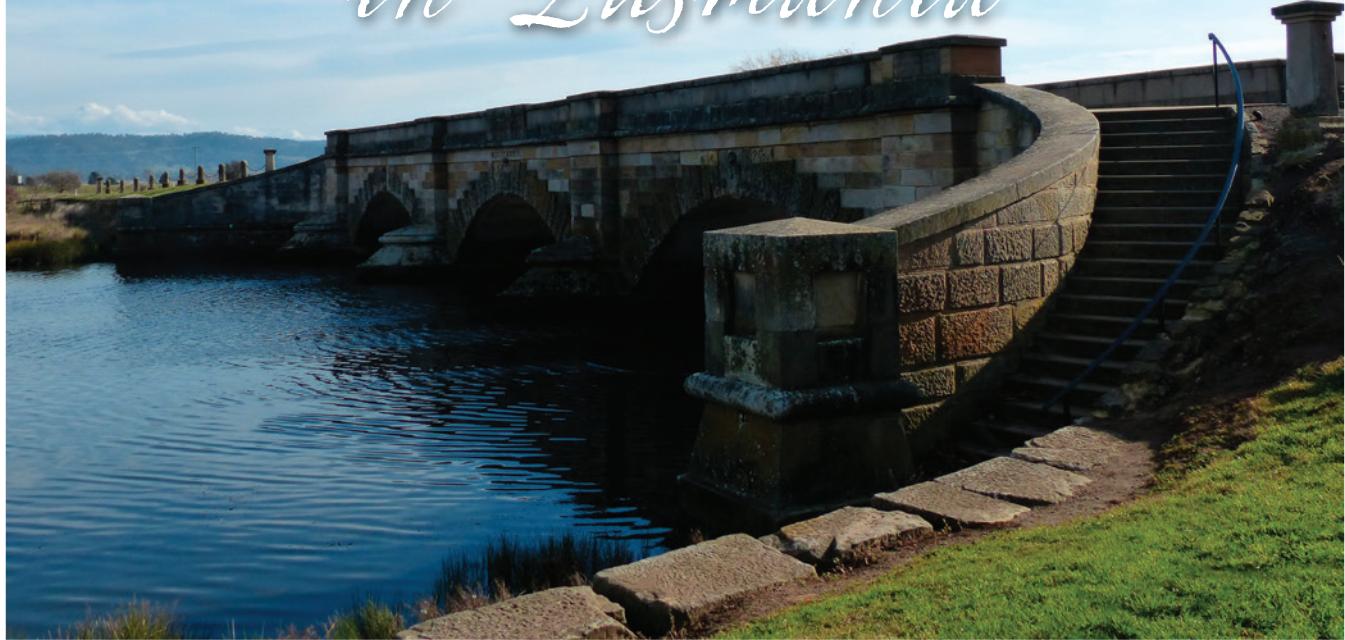


Ross Bridge, Tasmania. Image courtesy of Sandy Guy

Young Irelanders in Tasmania



By Sandy Guy

In the centre of Waterford, Ireland's oldest city, is a statue of Thomas Francis Meagher (1823–1867) astride a prancing steed. Waterford's most famous son went on to have a fascinating, albeit short, life, part of which was spent as a convict in Van Diemen's Land.

Throughout 1848, long before the tricolour became Ireland's official flag, before it was waved over Dublin's GPO during the 1916 rising, Meagher flew the tricolour from 33 The Mall in Waterford City, near where his statue stands today.

The son of Waterford's first Catholic mayor, as a young man Meagher became a passionate supporter of the Young Ireland movement, which grew out of Daniel O'Connell 'The Liberator's' campaign to repeal the 1800 Irish Act of Union with Great Britain.

An equally imposing statue of William Smith O'Brien stands in O'Connell Street, Dublin. O'Brien (1803–1864), a Protestant member of parliament from one of Ireland's noblest families (a descendent of King Brian Boru), was born at Dromoland Castle, County Clare, and educated in England at the prestigious Harrow School and Trinity College, Cambridge.

O'Brien entered parliament in 1826 and spent 17 years fighting for Irish interests in the British House of Commons. He believed Ireland's best interests lay in self rule.

Ireland's Great Famine of 1847–51 was devastating; 1.5 million people starved to death while millions of pounds worth of food was exported under the protection of British troops, because landlords would not sell below the market price. Ireland's population fell from eight million to three million through death and emigration.

Appalled by the attitude of the government, O'Brien called for British control of Ireland to be overthrown and for the Irish to rule the Irish.

The Paris revolution of February 1848 raised the expectations of such an outcome, and in May, O'Brien and Meagher led a delegation to Paris to congratulate the leaders of the new French Republic. They believed Young Irelanders could attain similar results in Ireland in protest of British rule.

In response, in July 1848, the government announced the suspension of *habeas corpus* – meaning they could imprison Young Irelanders without trial. Facing flight or armed resistance, Young Irelander leader O'Brien chose resistance, and attempted to initiate what became a futile rebellion in Ballingarry, County Tipperary, on 29 July 1848.

Soon afterwards, the man who was to become one of Ireland's foremost nationalist heroes was arrested, and in October 1848 sentenced to death for high treason. This was later commuted to transportation for life.

Meanwhile, in March 1848, Meagher had been arrested and charged with seditious libel, which was eventually dismissed. He was arrested again in September that year on a boat about to depart for New York, this time found guilty of sedition and treasonous activity, and also sentenced to death. This was later commuted to banishment for life, and Meagher was transported to Tasmania on the same ship as O'Brien, the *Swift*, which left Dublin on 9 July 1849.

Between 1849 and 1850, 15 Young Irelanders were exiled to Tasmania on various charges, including John Mitchel, John Martin, Patrick O'Donohue, Kevin Izod O'Doherty and Terence Bellew MacManus.

After arriving in Hobart on 27 October 1849, 45-year-old O'Brien rejected an offer of a ticket of leave, which were granted on an undertaking not to attempt to escape, declaring it was his duty to do so. The refusal meant he was sent to the notorious Maria Island convict settlement, eight kilometres off Tasmania's south-east coast.

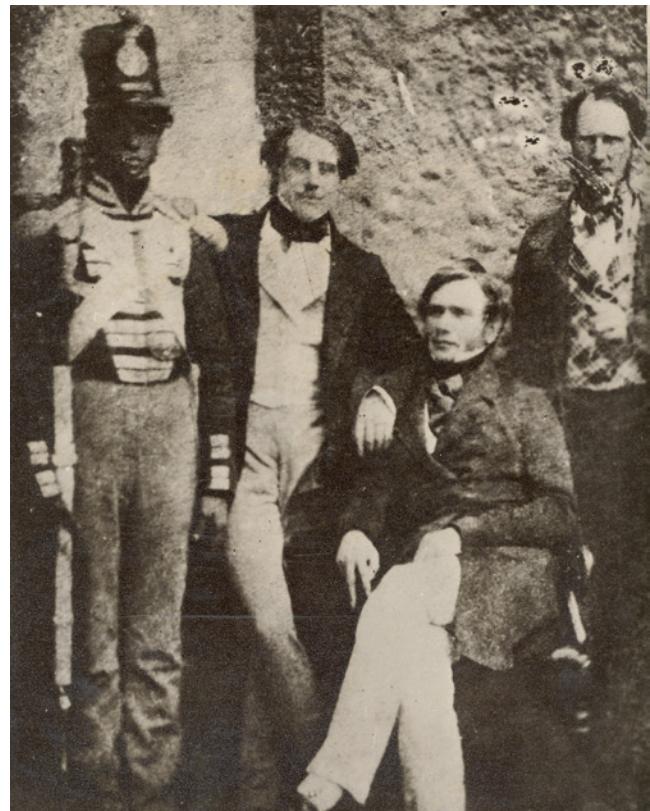
In August 1850, O'Brien was involved in a dramatic escape bid from the island. The plan was arranged for some time and O'Brien paced a stretch of beach for several days in anticipation of rescue. When the escape vessel, the cutter *Victoria*, came close to shore, a dinghy was lowered and O'Brien readied to make a dash for it.

The escape bid was foiled. It transpired that authorities had become aware of the plot – it's said they were warned by Captain Ellis, master of the *Victoria* – and as the rescue party was about to land, O'Brien, a corrupt guard in on the plot, and three rescuers from the ship, were arrested by an armed constable.

O'Brien was confined to his quarters and, on 21 August 1850, moved to the equally infamous Port Arthur, where you can still see his cottage today; as an aristocrat and a former member of the British Parliament, he was spared the worst horrors of convict life.

In November 1850, after undertaking not to attempt to escape for six-months, O'Brien obtained a ticket of leave and moved to Elwin's Hotel in New Norfolk, a property that still stands today.

Meagher, on the other hand, accepted a ticket of leave 'for a limited period – say, for three to six months'. After disembarking from the *Swift* he was first sent to Campbell Town 132 kilometres north of Hobart, which he described



Under arrest in 1848, Thomas Francis Meagher (standing next to guard) and William Smith O'Brien (seated) with the governor of Kilmainham Gaol Dublin (right).
Image courtesy of Kilmainham Gaol Museum

as having 'too much of the vulgar upstart village in it: it contains too much glare, dust and gossip'.

A few days later, he moved to Ross, 12 kilometres south of Campbell Town, which he called 'a little apology of a town,' although he described it to O'Brien as 'Elysian'.

Situated around halfway between Hobart and Launceston, Ross was established in 1812, when a garrison of soldiers was stationed on a ford of the Macquarie River. In 1836, the splendid sandstone bridge you see today was constructed, and the town became the site of one of Tasmania's four convict 'Female Factories', operating from 1848 to 1855.

Today, Ross boasts more than 40 historic buildings, including Meagher's one-time home, a humble cottage in Bond Street.

Meagher, in his 20s, described his Ross home:

'Just imagine a little lodge built from head to foot of bright red bricks, two flowerbeds and a neat railing in front... a clean, smooth flagway 18 inches across from the outer gate to the hall door, two stone steps to the latter. A window containing eight panes of glass and then four rooms inside each 14 feet by 12 feet and an oven in the kitchen. Just imagine all this and you will have a pretty correct picture of this establishment in which, with a domestic servant and a legion of flies, I now have the happiness to reside'.

He described his landlady, Mrs Anderson, as 'a devout Wesleyan, an amiable female of stupendous proportions and proportionate loquacity'.

Today Meagher's cottage is unmarked: washing flaps on a clothesline, chickens scratch around the yard. It's a far cry from the mansion where Meagher was born, situated on Meagher Quay in Waterford, and now the grand Granville Hotel.

It was at Ross, most of which Meagher would recognise today, that he met and married Catherine Bennett, the 19-year-old daughter of Irish emancipist Brian Bennett. Following their nuptials in Ross on 22 February 1851, the couple built a cottage on the shores of nearby Lake Sorell. Their boat, *Speranza*, built in Hobart and transported to the lake by a bullock team, was used by Meagher as he grew vegetables on a small island on the lake.

The Young Irelander prisoners were allotted separate districts to live, where they could have freedom of movement, but from where they couldn't roam, or have any contact with each other.

They ignored the latter, and secret trysts were held at sites across Tasmania, including Lake Sorrell. Both John Mitchel and John Martin frequently visited from Bothwell, an 80-kilometre horse ride; O'Doherty from Oatlands, 37 kilometres away; and O'Brien from New Norfolk, 90 kilometres south.

Meagher's district was Blackman's River between Ross and the lovely town of Oatlands, site of the Callington Mill, where O'Doherty, a doctor, lived at Elm Cottage. The cottage still stands today. The town's Catholic Church, St Paul's, was under construction when O'Doherty lived here, and he helped build it. It still stands and can be visited today. From Oatlands, O'Doherty rode to nearby Tunbridge to meet Meagher.

A sleepy village 16 kilometres south of Ross, Tunbridge was at the crossroads of two districts. Meagher and O'Doherty met at the town's handsome convict-built bridge, where it's said a table from a local hotel was set up mid bridge, with each prisoner sitting in their respective districts. Strolling across the historic bridge, I think about the long-ago meetings of the Irish rebels.

Past Oatlands I turn right towards Jericho, en route to New Norfolk, 80 kilometres south-west, via Bothwell, Hamilton and Gretna, driving gravel roads that give an idea of the countryside the Young Irelanders crossed on horseback to see each other. Set amid rolling green hills and rocky ridges, this is sheep-farming country, featuring large properties, some fine Georgian houses, lonely churches, abandoned cottages and one-lane bridges.

O'Brien took up residence at Elwin's Derwent Hotel in New Norfolk, situated on the banks of the Derwent River 34 kilometres north-west of Hobart, in November 1850.



Thomas Meagher's cottage today in Bond Street, Ross. Image courtesy of Sandy Guy

Tasmania's third-oldest settlement, New Norfolk was established by evacuees relocated from Norfolk Island after the evacuation of the island prison in 1807.

At Elwin's, the buildings date from 1808 and the first licensee was Oscar Davis in 1829, who arrived in Tasmania in 1815 as a convict sentenced to 14 years for forgery. In 1844, William Elwin became licensee of what became known as Elwin's Derwent Hotel.

At this lovely location, on the banks of a gurgling stream, O'Brien rented an upstairs bedroom and adjoining sitting-room for £6 per month. He was permitted to travel around the district, and set about getting to know the neighbours.

After many years as a private home with no access for history buffs, the property was purchased by Rob and Liz Virtue in 2016, and has been transformed into the Glen Derwent Heritage Retreat, a beautifully restored Georgian property with charming gardens. I cannot describe the thrill of not only seeing William Smith O'Brien's former bedroom – the Green Room on the first floor – but slumbering within its venerable walls. Across the hall is O'Brien's sitting room, now the master bedroom, with the same fireplace he no doubt sat before while penning letters to his wife, Lucy, and five children in Ireland.

Liz shows me a cupboard in this room where Meagher, clandestinely visiting O'Brien in December 1850 with a young Irishman named Keane, hid when betrayed by a local.

When police arrived at the hotel, Keane presented himself to police and, while Meagher huddled in the cupboard, was subsequently arrested. Soon afterwards, Meagher escaped, galloping back to Ross on a horse supplied by a more sympathetic neighbour.

But greater escapes were on the minds of the Young Irelanders... ◦

Read about the Young Irelanders' daring escapes from Van Diemen's Land, and their fascinating futures, in the next edition of Traces.

For further reading, Thomas Keneally's magnificent book of non-fiction The Great Shame (Random House, 1998) tells the stories of Irish political convicts in Australia over 80 years, and includes the Young Irelanders.