

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (July 2002)

By Rob Upson

MARY McCARTHY AGED 114

It was a sad coincidence that saw, within a few days of each other, the recent passing of Australia's oldest woman, Christina Cock and our oldest man, Jack Lockett. The former was 114 years of age and the latter 111. Longevity is not a recent phenomenon as there was a woman named Mary McCarthy (nee O'Brien) who died in Bendigo on the 1st Feb.1875, aged 114 and is buried in the White Hills Cemetery. The day after she died the Bendigo Advertiser carried an obituary that read as follows. (The footnotes are my own)

ONE HUNDRED AND FOURTEEN

To use the verbiage of the Spiritualists, a woman worn with years and weary of the battle, has passed peacefully to that other land where "the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest." And of a verity, the soul which has had its daily contact with the world, its petty cares, and sordid meannesses, for a hundred and fourteen years can well be content to leave the frame it has tenanted for so long a period, and seek its rest whether in the celestial plains of Turner¹, or the silence of the philosopher, matters little.

In 1761, when yet the fires that convulsed Europe in the latter part of the century were smouldering, when the vast resources of the great American continent were comparatively unknown; when locomotion by means of steam was unheard of, and when the Pilgrim fathers were battling in the rich country of the now great Northern States of America with the primitive possessors of the soil – the Delawares and the Sioux – there was born in the little village of Kiloran,² in the county of Galway, in the country of Ireland, a child whose fate it has been to see one nation spring into a great and vigorous life, and to witness what Henry Kingsley³ in Geoffrey Hamlyn calls the "foundation of a great and mighty empire."

In the new world of the south, and the greater new world of the north, the simple Irish maiden, Mary O'Brien, whose early dreams could not have soared beyond the thatched cottage of her birth, has played her part, played it well, and at last played it out. To think of only what this woman must have seen and known gives pause. Married before the great year of Ireland's greatest struggle, the year of which the unrivalled pen of Lever⁴ has told us so much in the O'Donoghue, she was a mother in '98. In all she had eight children, and to these she seems to have clung with that almost preter-human energy and devotion which characterizes the Irish race.

Emigrating to America in 1799, and taking her children with her, she resided there till she was 99 years of age, and there had the honor of seeing four generations around her. Had she remained there till her death it is believed she would have been able to have seen the descent of her family at least to the fifth, if not to the sixth, generation. However, at 99 years this really extraordinary woman left America for Ireland, to join her son, Mr. W. McCarthy, of Back Creek. He, by the way, is her youngest child, and is 64 years of age. Landing on her native shore, she walked 16 Irish miles⁵ from the nearest railway station to her native village.

Fifteen years ago she came to this colony, and has resided in Bendigo since that time. Of late years, her memory of events of the past has been very vivid. Forgetful from day to day of passing events, she yet could chat with freedom of those stirring times when it was penal for a Roman Catholic to be found within ten miles of the city of Dublin; and when, if a priest rode a horse worth £100, he was obliged to sell it to the first Protestant who demanded it for £5. To the end her faculties were perfect. Her last request, made some four or five days since, was that she might be buried in Kiloran,² her native place.

Three or four years since, her sight failed her, but she never wore spectacles, and, about two years ago, it returned as with the renewal of a last youth. She was then able to thread a needle at a common tallow candle; and, up to almost the latest moment, she was capable of hearing even the whispered communications of her son, in whose house she died. For a man of 64 to be able to attend the funeral obsequies at the remains of his mother is given to few; but such a sight may be seen to-day at Mrs. McCarthy's funeral, which will take place at the White Hills Cemetery. The deceased, it should be stated, is the grandmother of Mrs. Ready, the wife of Mr. Ready of the Rainbow Hotel, Hargreaves street.

On Mary McCarthy's headstone in the White Hills Cemetery is also recorded her son, Patrick McCarthy died 13th April 1877, aged 67 and Margaret Ready, died 2nd August 1882, aged 40.

¹ This is probably a reference to Joseph Turner, the English landscape painter.

² I couldn't find the village of Kilroran or Kiloran on a map, but there is a place called Killroran in County Galway.

³ Henry Kingsley (1830-1876) was an English novelist. After leaving Oxford University he set out for the Australian goldfields. Five unsuccessful years later he returned to England to write 'The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn' in 1859, a novel of Australian life. He was the brother of Charles Kingsley, author of 'The Water Babies' as well as other works.

⁴ Charles James Lever was an Irish novelist. His novel 'The O'Donoghue' (1845) portrayed the decay of the English gentry in Ireland.

⁵ Can anyone tell me what is an Irish mile? And don't tell me its 1760 yards in the land of the leprechauns.
