

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022

2223 If You're Lucky Enough

by Andrew Redfern

If You're Lucky Enough...

When Robert Redfern stepped ashore in Sydney Cove from the Phoenix in 1825¹ with his son, he looked forward to a future of prosperity and good fortune. He hoped to leave behind his chequered past that included arrest, imprisonment, destitution, and press gangs. As a free settler, he carried a letter of authorisation² for a land grant which would allow him to establish himself and build a respectable life. But where had Robert come from, and could he escape his past? Or would his own experiences and indeed his ancient ancestral roots continue to follow him?

Little is known of Robert's early life and in fact his five siblings are also a mystery in terms of their birth dates and locations. Their English surname³ gives a clue with the name Redfern originating around Rochdale, Lancashire with a village named in honour of the "red ferns" that grew in the vicinity. However no direct link to Lancashire has been found for Robert's line. Previous researchers have suggested links to Trowbridge through a brother, Thomas, who was practicing medicine there, but again, no documentary evidence has been found to substantiate this as the foundation point of this particular Redfern branch. In fact, his English surname proved to be somewhat of a red herring and Robert's true ancestral roots were only revealed through DNA analysis, particularly Y-DNA and investigation of the paternal line. It turns out, Robert and his forebears, have distinctive Irish roots with connections to the O'Neill clan back into the 15th Century.⁴

One of the first records found regarding Robert is a May 1797 article in The Belfast Newsletter⁵, reporting him as one of eleven prisoners being sent to Dublin on a charge of high treason. Certainly not an auspicious beginning. During his time in Kilmainham Gaol his letters of petition⁶ tell a story that becomes more desperate as his four-year internment drags on. His wife and three young children are destitute, and his own business fails. He desperately tries to find a way to care for his family, even requesting materials in prison to continue his work. Named in the Banishment Act of 1798⁷ which prevented him from returning to His Majesty's Dominions or passing into any country at war with His Majesty," Robert suffered greatly for his involvement with the United Irishmen as a divisional military committee member in Belfast.

¹ The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser, Thu 3 Mar 1825, Page 2, Shipping Intelligence. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/2183783>

² New South Wales Government. Main series of letters received, 1788-1825. Series 897, Reels 6041-6064, 6071-6072. State Records Authority of New South Wales. Kingswood, New South Wales, Australia. Number 807, Page: 287-90

³ The Internet Surname Database. <https://www.surnamedb.com/Surname/Redfern>

⁴ O'Neill Project. Family Tree DNA. <https://www.familytreedna.com/public/oneill?iframe=yresults>

⁵ The Belfast Newsletter, Monday May 1, 1797, Page 3. Accessed via <http://newspapers.com>

⁶ Robert Redfern State Prisoner Petitions (SPP), 1797-1799, Kilmainham Prison Ireland Transportation Database. State Prison Petitions. Numbers 39, 261, 379 & 795. <http://findingaids.nationalarchives.ie/>

⁷ Irish Legislature "Banishment Act" 38 George III c.78 March 24, 1798. Accessed Online. <http://redfern.s3-website-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/banishment-act.pdf>

Although his prison record states he was transported⁸ following his release in 1801, it seems that this did not happen, and we next learn of Robert in Portugal. Baptismal registers at the British Factory in Porto, record Sarah Redfern, born to Robert and Margaret in 1803⁹ although tragically she died as an infant. A second Sarah Redfern, born to the same parents arrived in 1805¹⁰. Redfern continued to fall under the watchful eye of authorities. His past involvement with rebellion was difficult to escape. He wrote a letter, telling of his plight, stating he was torn from his wife and family and press ganged as a common soldier into the Portuguese Army with the connivance of the British authorities. This letter was brought to the attention of Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1812 who set about publicising Redfern's situation and outlined plans for a campaign to free him, including sending copies to prominent individuals, such as Sir Francis Burdett in the House of Commons in London.¹¹

We don't know exactly what steps were taken to free Robert but his name first appears in the Philadelphia Directory¹² in 1817, listing him as a saddler which corroborates with his prison register of Ireland. In fact his work as a saddler led him to receive his first contract in 1819¹³ to manufacture military caps for the US Army. Over the following four years he created 7000 Infantry Shakos, two of which are still in existence with his name written on a yellow label pasted in the crown. His saddler business on High Street, continued to be listed annually in the Philadelphia directory up until 1824. In the 1820 US Census¹⁴ Robert is recorded as the head of a household of nine with no slaves. From poor beginnings, it appears that Robert's life had begun to change fortunes and perhaps he had finally escaped his defiant past.

Writing from London in 1824¹⁵ to the Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies, Earl Bathurst, Robert requested a land grant in New South Wales, indicating he understood agricultural pursuits. Where and how he gained this knowledge is not known, given his previous occupation as a saddler. Nevertheless, the answer to Robert's request was

⁸ The National Archives of Ireland; Dublin, Ireland; Ireland Prisoner Registers. Ireland, Prison Registers, 1790-1924. Accessed via ancestry.com

⁹ "Portugal Batismos, 1570-1910", database, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:F2H7-CV5> : 9 February 2020), Sarah Redfern, 1803.

¹⁰ "Portugal Batismos, 1570-1910", database, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:F2H7-CVY> : 9 February 2020), Sarah Redfern, 1805.

¹¹ O'Brien, Paul. Shelley and Catherine Nugent: spirits of the age. Published in History Ireland. Issue 3 (May/June 2005), Vol 13. <https://www.historyireland.com/18th-19th-century-history/shelley-and-catherine-nugent-spirits-of-the-age/>

Ingpen, Roger. 1914. Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley. 1792-1822; Accessed online: <https://archive.org/details/letterscontainin01sheluoft/page/274/mode/2up>

¹² Philadelphia Directory. 1817. Page 360. Accessed online: <https://archive.org/details/philadelphiadire1817phil/page/360/mode/2up>

¹³ Howell, Edgar M. & Kloster, Donald E. 1969. United States Army Headgear to 1854. Smithsonian Institution Press. Washington. Pages 18 & 71

¹⁴ "United States Census, 1820," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHLN-87K> : accessed 31 May 2022), Robert Redfern, Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States; citing p. , NARA microfilm publication , (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll ; FHL microfilm .

¹⁵ mfm PRO 1-5950 (Various)-Records of the Colonial Office (as filmed by the AJCP)/Fonds CO/Series CO 201/Subseries Pieces: 1-629/File 160. AJCP Reel No: 139/Settlers. M-Z

positive¹⁶ and he received a grant of 2000 acres near Bathurst, which he set to cultivation assisted by several convicts assigned to him.¹⁷ It seemed Robert had indeed built a better life on the plains beyond the Blue Mountains.

However, this good fortune was somewhat short lived. In 1831¹⁸ he was declared insolvent to the value of 2000 pounds, stating that “his embarrassments arose out of the serious depreciation of the price of livestock during the last four years.” And then in 1836¹⁹, his son was arrested, charged with cattle stealing and transported to Van Diemen’s Land. Separated from his family he remarried in 1840²⁰ and with further land grants he died in September 1853²¹ with an estate approximately to the value of three hundred pounds.²²

One wonders how a man faced with so many setbacks could continually rebuild himself. From a chequered past, his tenacity and willingness to overcome hardship are in many ways inspirational. And while he lived and travelled throughout the world, his Irish origins remained strong, encapsulated in the old saying, “If you’re lucky enough to be Irish... you’re lucky enough!”

¹⁶ Series: NRS 899; Reel or Fiche Numbers: Fiche 3001-3162. Ancestry.com. New South Wales, Australia, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1856 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc, 2010.

¹⁷ Great Britain. Colonial Office - New South Wales Governors' Despatches, 1813-1879. Governor Darling Despatches. Microfilm. State Library of NSW. Reels CY539-545

¹⁸ The Sydney Monitor (NSW : 1828 - 1838), Wed 2 Feb 1831. Page 4. Domestic Intelligence. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/32074912>

¹⁹ The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (NSW : 1803 - 1842) Sat 10 Dec 1836, Page 4. FIFTY POUNDS REWARD; OR A CONDITIONAL PARDON. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/2208237>

²⁰ NSW Births, Deaths and Marriages. Register Number 284/1840 V1840284 130

²¹ NSW Births, Deaths and Marriages. Register Number 975/1853 V1853975 119

²² Records NSW. Probate Pack. Robert Redfern Date of death 3 September 1853, Granted on 5 October 1853. NRS-13660-1-[14/3258]-Series 1_2723