

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY

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John Gilligan – Searching for a Better Life

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John Gilligan hoisted his swag, walked out of the bark humpy he had called home and headed off into the bush. It must have been with great trepidation that he said goodbye to his wife and son, leaving them behind in the disaster that the Byrnestown Commune had become. John's expulsion left him and his family in dire straits. The committee was withholding their rations and the family was almost destituteⁱ. A tough two-day walk to Childers lay ahead, but John didn't have many options. He needed some way to support his family.

Life in the Queensland Colony had not been kind to Irish immigrant John Gilligan. Born in 1858 in Ennis, County Clareⁱⁱ, John was the second of Michael and Anne Gilligan's eleven children. In February 1881 John married local girl Norah Quinnⁱⁱⁱ and later that year the couple were blessed with a Christmas baby, Michael, born on 27 December^{iv}. Another boy, Patrick, was born on 16 July 1884^v.

A year later the family of four were in the Rockhampton Immigration Depot^{vi}, ten thousand miles from home. Norah's widowed mother and two younger brothers had already emigrated to Queensland in 1883^{vii}. With John seeking a better life for his young family and likely full of hope, the Gilligan family sailed on 5 May 1885 as remittance passengers on the *RMS Quetta*^{viii}. They arrived in Rockhampton on 27 June 1885.

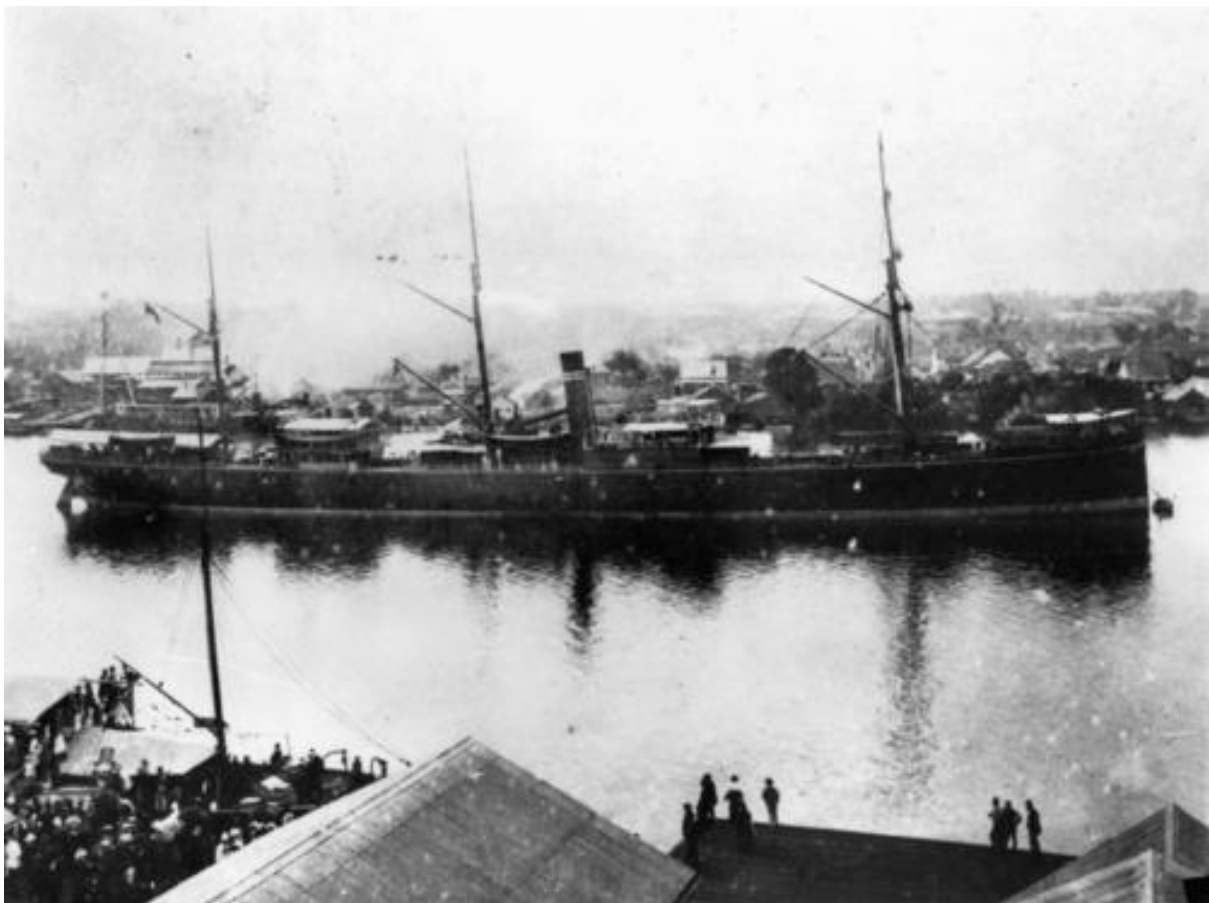


Figure 1: The *RMS Quetta* circa 1884. Source: John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland Neg: 4300

The family didn't stay long in Rockhampton however. In 1886 they were living in the appropriately named Hope Street, South Brisbane, when their third child John Joseph was born on 9 December^{ix}. As the family continued to grow they moved again. Their fourth child James was born on 13 April 1889 in East Brisbane^x, but he wasn't thriving. Norah also wasn't well following James' birth.

Tragically Norah died on 9 June 1889, leaving behind eight-week-old James. She was just 28 years old and a post-mortem revealed heart disease as the cause of death^{xi}. Unable to afford a headstone, Norah was buried in an unmarked grave in South Brisbane Cemetery^{xii}. John was left to mourn his wife while still trying to raise their four young boys on his own.

Just two weeks after Norah passed away, James contracted bronchitis. The awful, helpless sound of the baby coughing and struggling would have filled the house. Already weak and malnourished, on 5 July 1889, James also died, not even three months old^{xiii}. James was buried in the same grave as his mother^{xiv}.

John desperately needed to find a new wife to raise and care for his children. He soon married Mary Long, a 23-year-old Irish girl living in South Brisbane. We can't know if love blossomed in the toughest of times, or if it started as a marriage of convenience, but either way John and Mary were married on 5 October 1889 in St Stephen's Cathedral Brisbane^{xv}.

The 1890's depression squeezed Queensland hard. John worked as a sawmill salesman for a couple of years^{xvi} before he was forced to look further afield. In 1892 the family moved again, this time out to Warwick where John found labouring work on the railways. It wasn't long though before misfortune struck again.

In April 1892, Patrick and Michael were with another boy exploring the nearby Condamine River. Eight-year-old Patrick was wading near the water's edge when he went to cross a small waterfall. He fell, slipping into deep water. Michael and their friend watched helplessly, presumably not able to swim, as Patrick failed to resurface. His body wasn't found until the next day^{xvii} and he was then buried in Warwick Cemetery^{xviii}. John must have been devastated watching another small coffin with one of his young sons being lowered into the Queensland dirt.

John's work in Warwick finished and he headed back to Brisbane, unemployed and scarred again by tragedy. John learnt of a new opportunity for the unemployed where groups of men and their families could receive land and funding to form a commune and become self-sufficient. Maybe John saw this as a chance to put his past behind him and start afresh. He signed up to be a member of the Byrnestown group^{xix}, which selected land near Gayndah. The commune started well enough in March 1894, but soon became dogged by controversy with allegations of corruption, strikes and harsh treatment of the communards by management^{xx}.

John's hope for a better life was falling apart. The group became bitterly divided by factional in-fighting. John found himself ultimately on the wrong side of those factions, leading to his expulsion around July 1895^{xxi}. He left and found work at the Childers Mill^{xxii}, with his family finally leaving Byrnestown later that year and joining him there.

By 1901 John was almost back to where his Queensland odyssey started. A new meatworks had been established in Gladstone in 1896 and John gained employment there^{xxiii}. Around 1912 John and Mary moved to Lakes Creek in North Rockhampton^{xxiv}, the site of another meatworks. They stayed in North Rockhampton for the next nineteen years, perhaps finding stability for the first time.

John and Mary were married for forty two years, which included some very tough times. Mary died from cancer in Rockhampton on 3 June 1931, aged sixty-six^{xxv}. John moved back to Gladstone after Mary's death where he resided until he died from influenza on 26 November 1936, aged seventy-eight^{xxvi}. John was buried in Gladstone Cemetery in an unmarked grave.

John Gilligan spent much of his life having to overcome adversity while constantly searching for a better life for himself and his family. Whether he ever felt that he found that "better life" is unsure, but he certainly kept on trying. John's tribulations make me appreciate my own life and family that much more. I will be sure to spend a moment more tucking my children (John's great-great-grandchildren) into their beds and hugging them that little bit tighter.

References

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- ⁱⁱ Ancestry.com.Ireland, Catholic Parish Registers, 1655-1915[database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2016. Baptism record John Gilligan 16 April 1858.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ireland Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Registrar District of Ennis, marriage certificate 44/1881 John Gilligan and Honoria Quinn.
- ^{iv} Ireland Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Registrar District of Ennis, birth certificate 399/1882 Michael Gilligan.
- ^v Ireland Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Registrar District of Ennis, birth certificate 419/1884 Patrick Gilligan.
- ^{vi} Queensland State Archives, Digital Image ID39207, Register of Immigrants: Quetta, 1885-1888.
- ^{vii} Queensland State Archives, Assisted Immigration 1848-1912 Index, Passenger list of Nowshera 1883 p300, <http://www.archivessearch.qld.gov.au/Search/ItemDetails.aspx?ItemId=18480>
- ^{viii} Queensland State Archives, Assisted Immigration 1848-1912 Index, Passenger list of Quetta 1885 p200, <http://www.archivessearch.qld.gov.au/Search/ItemDetails.aspx?ItemId=18482>
- ^{ix} Queensland birth certificate, 1887 / B37818, John Joseph Gilligan.
- ^x Queensland birth certificate, 1889 / C8100, James Gilligan.
- ^{xi} Queensland death certificate, 1889 / C3564, Norah Gilligan.
- ^{xii} Ibid.
- ^{xiii} Queensland death certificate, 1889 / C3580, James Gilligan.
- ^{xiv} Brisbane City Council, South Brisbane Cemetery, <https://graves.brisbane.qld.gov.au/> Norah Gilligan and James Gilligan.
- ^{xv} Queensland marriage certificate, 1889 / B13571, John Gilligan and Mary Long.
- ^{xvi} Queensland Post Office Directory 1890 (Hollander), p344 and Queensland Post Office Directory 1891 (Hollander), p211.
- ^{xvii} 1892 'HEAVY RAIN & FLOODS', *Warwick Argus (Qld. : 1879 - 1901)*, 5 April, p. 2. , viewed 15 May 2017, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article76639622>
- ^{xviii} Queensland death certificate, 1892 / C4108, Patrick Gilligan.
- ^{xix} Metcalf, *The Gayndah communes*, 41.
- ^{xx} Ibid., 41-69.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 62.

^{xxii} Queensland Electoral Roll, Electoral District Burrum, 1896. John Gilligan.

^{xxiii} Queensland Electoral Roll, Electoral District Port Cutis, Gladstone Division, 1901. John Gilligan.

^{xxiv} Commonwealth Electoral Roll, Electoral District Capricornia, North Rockhampton Division, 1913. John Gilligan.

^{xxv} Queensland death certificate, 1931 / C1849, Mary Gilligan.

^{xxvi} Queensland death certificate, 1936 / C4044, John Gilligan.