

1984-2017 A thirty-three-year search for the owner of a silver watch and a convict without a Christian name. The Australian family of Michael J S Egan MacAodhagáin.

Elaine Egan June 2017

1984 the Clan in Australia had been running for three years. In that time Michael JS and I had been collecting anything with “Egan” written on it. Our letters were flying across the oceans that our ancestors had crossed in sailing ships. Now thirty plus years later our “letters” are zooming through space.

Michael JS had also undertaken the search in Ireland for our Egan family (he found them) as well as my McCudden and Donaldson). In one of his letters (neither of us had emails or computers back then) he asked me if I would look for his convict relative in Van Diemen’s Land, with the Surname of Shrahan or maybe Shrathan or Srahan (or as I have since discovered over twenty other various recorded spellings for this name).

The family was from Co. Offaly/ Kings Co. and Michael JS had been given a “family treasure” in the form of a silver watch which belonged to his ----Shrahan ancestor. In the back of the watch were three very small pieces of paper with the words: see photo:

Top: “1838 Shrahan watch died in Van Diemens Land”

Middle: “Preserve this in memory of Shrahan who was sent to Van Diemens Land for serving his country”

Bottom: “This watch was left to James Egan father by his Uncle ...Shrahan”
Dated May 8th 1936 R.I.P



In the 1980’s the Library here in Gosford NSW had only a few books and micro films for Genealogy research, then the BDM microfiche arrived. I had three exercise books, one for my own family, one for Egan and one for Shrahan. I wrote and wrote and filled many exercise books except for Shrahan. All I could find in Tasmanian documents was the town of Strachan/Strahan and Governor Strachan

who had many records. No convict Shrahan.

I kept my Shrahan book with me and kept looking, but how can you find a convict from Co. Offaly with no Christian name and a surname with many spellings.

1986 I was beginning to think that the name didn't exist outside Ireland, and then one day at the Library going through these wonderful new BDM microfiche I found not one but two Shrahan birth registrations for children born to a Mary Ann Shrahan (James in 1871) and an Arabella Shrahan (Arthur (1886). There were no fathers listed. I was unsure if these were unmarried women or maybe widows, so I took a chance and got the certificates.

When they arrived, there was very little information on the certificates, both mothers were residents of Sydney and both single and they came from Galway not Offaly. I sent the certificates to Michael and we both put them aside.

Over the next twenty years I found hundreds of Strachan mainly from Scotland, a few Strahan mostly English, and I had also come across Mary Ann and Arabella Shrahan again. This time it was the listing for the ship "Columbia" arriving 1854 with parents James and Lucy Shrahan and three daughters, all from Galway. Another piece of info to add to the exercise book (now books).

No matter where I searched I could not find Co. Offaly Shrahan in Australia. I went through the convict list over and over, with no luck. In the meantime, I was adding variations of the name to my exercise book and details of Strachan and variant convicts.

2015 and Michael JS had a long conversation on the subject of the watch with his elderly Aunt Alice (R.I.P.). There was still no inkling of a Christian name, however she told him his convict relative was involved in an uprising and tried in Co. Galway. Michael sent me this information and I was back searching for a Shrahan or variant tried in Galway and sent to Van Diemen's Land. I went to the Tasmanian Archive site again and drew a blank trying to find a Shrahan that fitted the info we had. By this time, I had so many variants of the name, Straughan, Strain, Streahan, Straan etc. I decided to go to "S" in the Tasmanian Convict Behavior book lists and search them, one by one. There are over eight hundred and I read them all and couldn't find an Offaly/Galway Shrahan or a variant that would fit the time frame we had, although there were several Scottish Strachan and English Strahan.

Now it was back to NSW to the Archives and Bingo I found Michael Strahane (another spelling) tried for a firearms offence in Co. Galway in 1833 and arrived "Parmelia" 1834. Then I found John Strahane also arriving on "Parmelia" 1834, tried the same day as Michael for the same offence. Now I have two convicts from Galway, but in NSW not Van Diemen's Land. I did lots more checking on these two and discovered from John's Ticket of leave that he had a brother Michael also a convict in NSW, which confirmed their relationship. I emailed Michael JS to tell him that "I think I have found your convict". But hang on the watch has been dated as 1835, these two aged 24 and 23 arrived a year before this, and as farm labourers would they even own a silver watch?

At this time Michael JS was positive these had to be his family; me, I still had doubts so went back to record searching.

2016 I did all the convict records for Michael and John (per "Parmelia") and picked up all the certs., freedom etc, traced all their BDMs and children down through the indexes and then I found land title applications stating Michael and John bought and leased land in Moruya district in NSW and their application has them as "of" Shannon Harbour. Wow! This info goes to Michael JS as fast as I can write it and Michael says "yes Shannon Harbour is just over the bridge from my Offaly Shrahan family area. Fantastic, this is my chap".

2017 Well now we have Galway Shrahan and not Offaly as first thought. Michael JS did another check on the Census in Ireland for his Shrahan and discovered one of his young relatives was missing on the night of the Census. He then checked the Galway Shrahan household and finds his missing young relative across the bridge in Galway in this household and is listed as a nephew.

This verifies that the Offaly and Galway Shrahan are relatives and the convicts John and Michael are related to Michael JS but it still does not give us an owner for the watch.

By this time, I had the name of the convicts' parents as Kieran Shrahan and Mary Coughlin.

I decided to start from scratch for another search for Shrahan and all the variants I had listed, as well as the very common form of Strachan.

I started with BDM indexes for all States.

While searching Victoria, Patrick Strachan showed up as being in the same age group and with the same parents as the convicts Michael and John Strahane. I found all I could from indexes and Trove etc. and he is definitely a third brother.

Now I knew for sure this family came from Galway not Offaly so it was back to have another look at the family I had recorded in my tattered exercise book thirty years previously in 1986, James and Lucy and their five daughters.

The family is listed on the immigration index as coming from Galway and James is listed as a Farm Labourer. I recently found that one of the daughters was baptized in Offaly and that three days after arrival into Sydney James made an application to the Education Board in Parramatta for a position as a School Teacher. This application also states he was trained in Offaly. On the death cert. of one of his daughters he is listed as a School Master.

I decided to apply for a few certificates to get proof of the family connection. Michael JS meanwhile was talking to old residents in Galway. He was given the information that one of the Shrahan married a girl with the surname of Eyre.

The certificates I applied for were in the names of Lucy Strachan died 1890, Lucy Shrahan died 1873 and Fanny Strahan died 1888.

These were the wife and two daughters of James, all deaths are registered with different spellings (doesn't make research easy).

Lucy Sr's. showed her maiden name was Eyre. So, having had James and family in

my exercise book since 1986 I am now able to give James three brothers all living in Australia in the latter part of the 1800's.

But who owns the watch? and who went to Van Diemen's Land?

The 1895 death certificate for Patrick Strachan stated that he was in Victoria for 40yrs so arrived in Vic c1855. So far, his immigration records elude me. Was he a convict in Van Diemen's Land before coming to Victoria or was the reference to Van Diemen's Land a reference to the Australian Mainland? I am still working on this.

Then there is James, School Master; he certainly had the position to own a silver watch and came to Australia long after the age of the watch has been identified. Having arrived as an Assisted Immigrant and not a convict makes it unlikely he was referred to as "sent to Van Diemen's Land for serving his country". His shipping states he had brothers John and Michael in the Colony, (Patrick is not listed) so Patrick's arrival was probably as his death certificate stated c1855, the year after James and his family.

The little notes in the back of the watch could be interpreted different ways: was he "sent" as a convict? or did he die in VDL in 1838 maybe serving his Country as a Military Man? is there still another Shrahan hiding in the records? or was the watch left behind in Ireland as a memento for the Shrahan who immigrated.

The watch and its notes are over one hundred and eighty years old. Many Shrahan and Egan relatives have pondered on its owner the unnamed Shrahan. For Michael and me it has been a journey with

more questions than answers but finding the four brothers has been fantastic. We still have a way to go. The two major items to find at this time are Patrick's arrival into Victoria - he has to be in the records somewhere - and James' death. There are several James deaths in NSW without parents and several different spellings of the name. I have found a James Sherif who has no parents listed but his age is exact, I will check out the indexes to see if he is listed anywhere as being married or having children. If I can't find him anywhere else, then I will take a punt it is another spelling variation of some other name and get his death certificate.

But wait there is more

Michael JS had told me several years ago of his relative Thomas Shrahan (father Kieran) who married Honora Egan. Thomas went to America but family information was that he had a son who died in Australia possibly Queensland. I found immigration records in Queensland for Michael Strahan who arrived per Stirlingshire in 1878 age 20 and his brother Kieran who arrived 1880 per "Scottish Hero" age 18.

Michael died in Queensland in 1892 age 35 and is buried in Rockhampton; his parents are listed as Thomas Strahan and Honora Egan. His birthplace is listed as Shannonbridge, Kings Co. Ireland, his brother Kieran was a witness at Michael's burial.

Kieran's name shows up in electoral rolls as living in a tent with other railway workers in the 1890s working on building the Western NSW rail line. I have not found his death in Aus. Indexes.

We now have five brothers Thomas, James, John, Michael and Patrick as well as two nephews of the four brothers living in Australia, but still no owner for the watch. I still have a feeling that there is an Offaly Shrahan hiding in the indexes, who once owned a silver watch, so the search continues. The family didn't help by not using one form of surname spelling and they certainly walked back and forth across the Shannon many times having births in Galway, baptisms in Offaly and sleepovers at uncle's houses across the Shannon bridge.

After thirty years I feel I know this family as well as my own. Through all the Archival records I have discovered that the three brothers who took the opportunity to buy, lease and farm this wonderful country Australia, prospered and thrived to become Australian pioneers. They have made their names part of the history of the communities where they lived, Moruya in NSW and St Arnaud in Victoria.

The fourth brother James, wife Lucy and their five daughters stayed in the city of Sydney. His profession as a school teacher probably decided this. In the 1850s Sydney was a harsh place to survive. They had a much harder life than the three farming brothers. Their lives were full of sickness and tragedy. Their only son, a child born on the voyage to Australia, died; two daughters Mary Ann and Arabella, had children while working as servants (both children died as infants). Another daughter Fanny died after a long illness. A fourth daughter Lucy was tragically burnt from a coal falling from a stove while she was cooking and setting her clothes on fire; she died the following day. Florinda married

and had two sons who died, one aged 4yrs the other 8yrs.

From the records, I have found, I am fairly sure there are no existing descendants for James and his wife Lucy.

Like all family history the story is never complete; there are still records to search and stories to find. It has been a challenge. Every now and then we discover that little tiny insignificant piece of information, jot it down, tuck it away and then, as in this case, find the link thirty years later.

I have "met" many wonderful and helpful people during the search, one being Michelle, who works for the Grampians Shire Council in Victoria. I phoned the council seeking information on St Arnaud Cemetery, they passed me through to Michelle, who listened while I told her the Shrahan story. Michelle sent me a list of all the Strachan buried in St Arnaud. Then to my great surprise she went out to the cemetery after work and took photos of all the Strachan headstones and emailed them to me that night.

Another was Tricia Mack of balmaincemetery.org.au. Tricia is a lady on a mission: her aim is to find all the burials (thousands) that took place in Balmain before 1949 when the cemetery was demolished to be made into what is now known as Pioneer Park. Tricia has been extracting Church records, undertakers' records etc to find details of the burials that took place. Four members of James Shrahan's family were buried here and she was able to give me the burial of James' grandson which I did not have. Her site is free and has many hundred burial details listed.

My thanks also to Sue and Greg, who on a trip to Canberra, called into Moruya and took photos of the Strahan graves in Moruya Cemetery.

For now the silver watch still remains without a named Shrahan as its owner, but the search has given Michael JS many Shrahan relatives in Australia. He once emailed me that there were very few Shrahan still in the Shannonbridge area; well we now know why, they are here in Australia.

I still have a Margaret Strahan in Victoria who married an Egan. She is also on my list for further investigation.

I will let you all know when this very special watch has a “named” Shrahan as its owner. The search is not yet over.

MacAodhagáin I hope in some small way this research is a thank you for all the research you have done for our family and the World-wide Egan Clan.

With warm regards to all

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Notes from MacAodhagáin

- We know that the first name we have in Esker, Co. Galway was Kieran - from the Griffiths Valuation (GV 1858) perhaps. We know that his wife was Mary Coughlan.
- This man was the father of Michael and John who were sent to “Van Dieman’s Land”. They were born around 1807 – which means that Kieran was born in the 1700s. Therefore, this Kieran was very likely NOT the Kieran in the Griffiths Valuation.
- This brings me to conclude that the GV Kieran was a brother of Michael

and John. James was also a brother of Kieran, Michael and John and in 1854 James’s mother Mary(Coughlan) was still alive and living in Clonfert parish (ie Esker).

- We know the GV Kieran was married and his wife was Bridget – she was still alive in 1896 when Kieran died (he could have died in 1895.) I should check for his death cert.
- By 1901 Census we know who was in the house in Esker. Bridget (a widow) was head of the household and 60 years of age.
- Van Diemen’s Land and Australia would have been synonymous in Ireland at the time of Michael and John being sent abroad. To either destination meant that they would never be seen again! So, don’t read too much into the destination!
- Esker is just across the river from Banagher and people in present day Esker go to mass in Banagher.
- Lucy Shrahan was the daughter of Richard Eyre and Mary Ann (no maiden name at present). These Eyres should be traceable in Clonfert, Galway.

If I was a betting man I would bet that the first Kieran was born in Clonever, Co. Offaly. That is how he had the name Kieran who is the saint of Clonmacnoise.