

## **A Road to Australia**

The story of Pioneer James Davoren's settlement in Australia from Ballylaghnaun

### Background.

There are 85 million Irish, mostly descendants of those who migrated between 1840 and 1880. In 1974 my wife and I with our five children were some of the many who wended their way back to Ireland to discover their roots. We had a few things in our favour, the unusual surname "Davoren", events were still fresh in the older minds and we were then something of a novelty. I suspect that by 2007 the novelty has worn off and current day explorers will find the going more difficult.

We found the farm, my Grandfather's home until 1877, between the Ogonolloe Parish Church and the Piper's Arms Hotel. We found a living relative, much of the family's history and the family graves. The farmhouse is substantial and probably built by my family as they were recognised builders in Clare.<sup>1</sup> The house still stands, having been recently renovated, testimony to the skills of the builders and the deep pockets of the new owners.

Through my involvement with the Irish Association of Tasmania, I find that there are many Irish people interested in stories of their relatives who survived the ordeals of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and carved out a niche in Australia's tough terrain. This is the story of one such family.

### The Ballylaghnaun Davorens

William Davoren, born around 1790 who farmed at Ballyheefy, was my first confirmed ancestor He was married to Anne Cooney. John, his eldest, born 1818, married Bridget Farrell. They had six sons William, Michael, Patrick, Mary, James, (my grandfather), John and Edmond and one daughter, Mary. John had at least two sisters, Mary who married Andrew Brann and Margaret, who married Denis McNamara and a brother, William. John subsequently moved to a 31 acre farm in Ballylaghnaun after the birth of his third child.

The next generation: William, the eldest son of John, inherited the farm and married Mary Casey. John married Mary Costelloe who subsequently inherited her father's farm in Ballylaghnaun. Mary married James Ward. Michael migrated to Australia, as did my grandfather James. The other sons never married. The remnants of William's family moved to Wexford, after selling the farm in 1929 to Michael Boland.

### James' Story.

James Davoren arrived in Australia in 1877 after 90 days at sea on the Nivenah. Why did he decide to leave his homeland and family forever and cross the world to a remote colony of the British Empire? To stay in Ireland without land was a bleak prospect as he would be unlikely to marry. But why Yea, some 90 miles from Melbourne? Few of the Irish that migrated during the famine years went to Australia. During the 1860's gold rush period, Australia received a higher proportion of Irish but

---

<sup>1</sup> Fr Fitzgerald: Ogonolloe Parish Records.

my grandfather migrated to Victoria well after the gold rush when migration to Australia had slowed.<sup>2</sup>

My meeting with Gerard Madden, Editor of Sliabh Aughty in 2006, provided the key to why my Grandfather settled in Yea. Gerard had written about Australian, Joan Quinlan, with ancestors from Ballylaghnaun. The Quinlans were friends of my father and I suspected the family connection had its source in Ireland. Returning to Australia, I located one of the Quinlans who provided me with the necessary information to resolve my dilemma as follows:

Two other members of my family migrated to Australia before James. They settled in the Kilmore/Yea area. The first was William Davern, Grandfather James' uncle, who in 1858, married Bridget Quinlan, John Quinlan's widow. Michael, the first of the Quinlans in Yea, was a cousin of William. Michael's mother was Mary Cooney, a sister to William's mother, Ann Cooney.

I was unaware that James' brother Michael had migrated to Australia in October 1875. Michael married Anne Quinlan, on the 15th September 1880 at Kilmore. She owned 29 acres adjoining her father Michael's property.

By the time my grandfather arrived in 1879, the farming community was prospering and new roads were needed. Michael Quinlan's son John became the first Mayor of Yea, a position he held on a number of occasions. James Davoren was a road and bridge construction contractor, so having a relative as Mayor, may have been good for business.

In December 1896 Grandfather James married Mary Jordan from Strath Creek near Yea. She was the daughter of a shearer who "disappeared" leaving behind a wife and three daughters. (Cornelius) William Jordan, her father, was the son of James Jordan Jones, who arrived in Van Diemens Land on Her Majesty's prison ship "John Barry" on 4 April 1834. In 1843, James, a tailor in Westbury, married Margaret Sullivan in Launceston Tasmania.<sup>3</sup> Changing names, changing ages or anything else on official documents, seemed to be the norm. James Jones seized the opportunity to use his second name because the real "Jordans" were prominent in the Westbury/Longford area, all descendants of the real James Jordan and Mary Butler, infamous convicts resettled from Norfolk Island.<sup>4</sup>

My grandfather's family changed their name to Davern on arrival in Australia. "Davoren", was an Irish name, "Davern", was not. I believe that the universal change of name by the family was prompted by the spectre of the Colonial Authority persecuting an Irish family. My father retained the original spelling.

Mary was described as "tall slim and smart, wore her hair in a bun and was fun to be with". She once ran the Coffee Palace at Jeetho, whilst bearing seven children. Six survived. James was 40 years of age when he married in Melbourne's St Francis

---

<sup>2</sup> Patrick O'Farrell: The Irish in Australia

<sup>3</sup> Max Frost Westbury Historical Society

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.beswick.info/besfam.htm>

Church and Mary was 25. His marriage certificate has his age as 35 years, a lie that was no doubt necessary to help him woo his young bride.<sup>5</sup>

I will never know for certain why James moved to Jeetho in South Gippsland. Grandfather James' first child arrived 2 months after the wedding. Grandfather had jumped the gun. Public opinion in a small town in 1896 would have been harsh so probably the departure was necessary to preserve Mary's reputation, and ease James' embarrassment. Having the wedding ceremony in Melbourne, well away from both communities then moving to a new locality before the birth, is consistent with this hypothesis.

The South Gippsland area was being developed for farming. Roads were needed and land was readily available, albeit most of it heavily forested. James was ultimately responsible for much of the construction of the Grand Ridge road that was to link these settlements. This road runs along the top of the Strzelecki Ranges, a southerly outcrop of Australia's Great Dividing Range.

### Jeetho

Jeetho played an important part in the economy of South West Gippsland at one time. When the route for the Great Southern Railway had been finally approved, the township of "Jeetho Valley" was surveyed resulting in a township of 154 building allotments, completely serviced by streets linked to existing roads. The township allotments were sold in 1888. The auctioneer's sale brochure stated, "The vendors were erecting a large plant for carrying out an extensive saw milling business. This with the railway works would mean the employment of a large number of men." From 1891, the town was the local government centre for the Shire of Poowong and Jeetho and the town became a prosperous business centre. From nothing, the townspeople built stores; a baker's shop, a blacksmith's shop, a coffee palace, a church and all that a community of that period required.<sup>6</sup>

In the early 1900's, James Davern was prospering. He had purchased a store, bought three allotments, and erected a house on two of them. The family resided in and operated the Coffee Palace. James was also contracted to the Shire of Poowong and Jeetho. The following reflect some of his activities:

"Jeetho Riding, [Coverdale/ Loh] J Davern was appointed at 7/- per day; -- 10/- per day for man, horse, dray etc. Davern was a frequent contractor. [November 1902]

A Deputation [Cr. Loh] of Messrs. Tomasetti/ Morrison/ Davern/ Billing/ E Greening/ E J Wilson asked the Council to let the residents of Jeetho have the use of the Shire Hall at a nominal rental after the business of Council was removed to Korumburra. Subsequently in November, [Coverdale/ Loh] a lease was accepted. [October 1907]

---

<sup>5</sup> Joan Trimmell Joan's Story: [www.geocities.com/richard.davoren/trimnell.pdf](http://www.geocities.com/richard.davoren/trimnell.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Joseph White The History of the Shire of Korumburra

In July 1908, J Davern asked for an increased allowance for horse hire from 3/- per day to 5/-, which was allowed. "<sup>7</sup>

Following the opening of the Wonthaggi/Nyora railway and the transfer of the shire offices to Korumburra, Jeetho declined. By 1917 all the businesses had closed and most of the houses and business premises had either been removed to other nearby towns, or had been destroyed by fire.<sup>8</sup>

The family moved to the Melbourne suburbs in 1921. By then my Grandfather had retired. They were rural people and they had to make dramatic adjustments to their lifestyle. Melbourne in the 1920's had a population in excess of one million. It was an exciting city particularly for the young. Female emancipation had followed the Great War. It was the era of the "Flapper" a new breed of young women who wore short skirts, bobbed their hair, listened to jazz and flaunted their disdain for what was then considered "decent" behaviour.<sup>9</sup>

The family fortunes began to decline. The first event was Grandfather James died in 1923 leaving a young family that was highly dependant on him.

The next event that was to impact on their lives was the "Great Depression. Australia's cities were depopulated as thousands of unemployed took to the countryside in search of menial agricultural work. My father told many "stories" of his time roaming the bush in search of work. This was the era of the "swaggie", where itinerant workers carried their belongings on their backs from town to town and place to place. One such story relates to how he and his brothers survived the cold and slept in a tent with two blankets. Two would fall asleep under the blankets and the other would sit by the fire. Once one was asleep, the one by the fire would take his blanket and curl up. After a time, the one without the blanket would awaken and remove the blanket from the one still asleep. This routine would occur all night and thus all would have a good night's sleep and the fire would be maintained.

Rabbits formed a large part of the diets of Victorians during the depression. My father ferreted, shot and captured rabbits by the score. During my childhood he hunted rabbits and I would accompany him. Because we owned poultry, Saturday's menu was roast chicken and Sunday's was roast rabbit. If starving, I might turn cannibal, but I will never eat chicken or rabbit.

After the depression the sons married but life had barely settled back when war was declared in 1939. Being Irish, the family had no enthusiasm to fight a British war but that attitude changed once Australia was threatened in 1941. My cousin Maurice and Uncle Ned (Edmond) served in the South-West Pacific Zone. Ned suffered severe deprivation following service in New Guinea. I believed that Maurice, an airman, went missing in action and I would read any report of findings of DC3's, hoping that Maurice's body had been found. My Aunt believed this also, because the family hid

---

<sup>7</sup> Shire of Poowong and Jeetho Minutes.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph White: The History of the Shire of Korumburra

<sup>9</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flapper>

the terrible truth that her eldest child had been captured and beheaded by the Japanese. Her husband carried this dreadful secret to his grave.

The family never lost touch with Jeetho and the bush. My father loved animals and when people would own a dog or a cat, my father owned a menagerie in suburban Murrumbena. My Uncle Jim, (James) was an excellent artist, mostly painting in watercolours. His way of combating suburbia was to paint murals on his garage walls depicting the rolling hills of Jeetho. My Uncle Bill, (William) moved to a property with several acres. Uncle Ned (Edmund) would always tell stories of the bush. I believe several of his stories were the foundation of his son, James Davern's stories that emerged in some of his many TV productions with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.<sup>10</sup>

The Kennedy family with links to Ogonolloe, had a son, Cyril. Cyril became a de facto son of James. Cyril fathered Graham Kennedy, who was a famous talk show host and comedian on Australian television.<sup>11</sup>

Laurie, Aunt Lil's husband established a market garden in his back yard. His crop during wartime was tobacco, which he dried and cured. Free tobacco did not help his relatives reach ripe old age.

For James' epitaph I would write:

“James disliked British institutions and was opposed to any war that the British were involved with. He was a decent man, fundamentally Irish and never lost his love for his country. He worked hard and was a good provider for his family. Had he invested his capital in a more viable location or married younger, his fortunes would have been much improved. He lived long enough to see the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922, but not long enough to see his children married and enjoy his 19 grandchildren.

His greatest “success” was the Irish values that he passed on to his future generations through his sons and daughter.”

For the full story go to [www.davoren.net.au](http://www.davoren.net.au) or the link on the East Clare Heritage web site. <http://www.eastclareheritage.com/>

Richard Davoren  
48 Canopus Road  
Mount Rumney Tasmania

---

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0202670/>

<sup>11</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graham\\_Kennedy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graham_Kennedy)