

# From Skibbereen to Ballarat: Mary Donovan (1831–1860)

By Maura Cahalane

On Wednesday, October 13th, 1852, a marriage was solemnised in the primitive St. Francis Xavier Chapel at Heidelberg (now Warringal) near Melbourne, Australia. The chapel is described thus; "a long hut made of planks, barely planed, or not planed at all, and surmounted by a wooden cross".\* The French priest who conducted the Sacrament was Fr. Viventius Bourgeois,"a man of about forty with a respectable corpulency".\* In the chapel a rather unlikely couple and some witnesses had gathered. The groom was a literate thirty-one year old Dubliner; much travelled; former British Royal Navy man; entrepreneur and master mariner. The bride was an illiterate twenty-one-year old Irish Famine orphan girl from Skibbereen Workhouse, employed as a domestic servant. Michael James Cummins and Mary Donovan stood at "the most modest altar that you would be able to find among the most modest of our Corpus Christi Chapels; a sort of big square packing case covered with a white cloth, a box-wood crucifix, an image, flowers and two copper candlesticks fitted out with their candles"\* In the presence of the witnesses, Patrick O'Brien, the teacher at the Parish School and John Petrie, a New Zealander, they pledged their loyalty to each other.

The couple had already sworn that they were members of, or held communion with, the Roman Catholic Church. After the service the groom signed the marriage certificate with his full name and the bride signed with an X, to which Fr. Bourgeois added "her mark". Thus began a marriage which would take them together to the goldfields of Ballarat where her husband was a prominent entrepreneurial businessman, Municipal Councillor and advocate of political reform. Mary had several children, some of whom died in infancy and she devoted her spare time to charitable work for destitute women and orphans. She died, tragically young, in 1860. Her husband, although her senior by ten years, married three more times. Each wife was his junior by many years, but life on the

goldfields and the hazards of childbirth cut the female lifespan short.

In many ways Mary Donovan was one of the lucky ones. Fate decreed that she met a husband who was literate and able to make the most of the opportunities that came their way.

Mary was one of twenty five female orphans from Skibbereen Workhouse who made the voyage on the *Eliza Caroline*, leaving Plymouth on December 31st, 1849. On March 31st, 1850 they arrived at Port Phillip, South Australia. They were then accommodated in Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney, until suitable positions were found for them as domestics in the developing Colony. Mary was truly blessed to have lived a life of comparative affluence in those far off days.

\* The information on Mary Donovan is taken from *Letters from the Goldfields* by Antoine Faucher. Faucher was a French journalist and photographer who was a prolific writer. He was in Ballarat during the goldrush era and wrote of his experiences on his return to France. His work was subsequently translated into English, and to this we owe our information on a Skibbereen Famine Workhouse orphan.