

SEVENTY SIX COUSINS, THE STORY OF AN IRISH MIGRANT FAMILY IN EARLY VICTORIA & QUEENSLAND

A Proposal for a TV Programme about the Holian Family

by
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1914 photo of Patrick Holian's work team and their stack of 15,000 bags of wheat at St James, North Eastern Victoria. Patrick, in the front row wearing a tie, is the author's grandfather.

76 Cousins, The Story of a Pioneering Irish Family in Eastern Australia

On June 7, 1841, the sailing ship *Frankfield* dropped anchor at Port Melbourne ending a four-month journey from Liverpool. It was only six years after the settlement of Melbourne and amongst the 300 passengers was an Irish family named Holian. The Holian story is ordinary, but also remarkable. It is a story of immigrants coming to Australia and going about their lives and forging a new nation. The post-WWII migrations to Australia are well documented, but little is known about these early Victorian pioneers. This is a story of the first four generations of Holians in Australia. A part of their story is the story of the Kelly Gang and these connections are explored at appropriate points below. The story is based on the book *The Holians, A Galway Family in Australia* by Des Regan and the website www.softdawn.net/ls6/ls6.html.

Michael and Catherine Holian with their four children Brigid (19 years old), Patrick (18), Margaret (16) and John (13) came from County Galway. Aged 55, Michael and Catherine weren't young emigrants. Economic factors in Ireland were the major cause for migrating. Ireland's population expanded significantly in the early 18th Century and the amount of land available for cultivation was constrained. Most of the land was owned by landlords (around one third being absentee) who extracted the highest rents possible from a multitude of tenant

farmers who eked out a living on tiny plots. Farm workers, or small farmers in Ireland, they came to Australia for the promise of owning their own land and for a better life for the children. The Holians were a devout Catholic family which carried down through the generations.

THE TRACK TO MELBOURNE

On their first day in Port Phillip District a tragedy befell the family. On the 4 km trek to Melbourne with other ship passengers, the youngest, John, became separated. With many of the ships passengers taking the narrow sandy track through tea-tree bush, over boggy ground and avoiding the swamps along the way it would have been simple to become separated and at the end go in separate ways. No matter how hard they looked the 13 year-old couldn't be found. It is likely John was taken-in by a family he was friendly with on the boat. Nothing is known about his life as he grew up. Happily, John and his family were eventually re-united, but it wasn't until nearly a decade had passed. It is expected they heard of the where-abouts of each other through the networks between Irish communities in the various centres who would've passed on such a moving story.

EARLY DAYS

Initially the Holians worked as farm hands, but in 1847 they became tenant farmers renting a 100 acre farm in the Barrabool Hills west of Geelong. In February 1851, devastating bushfires occurred. On the sixth an inferno swept the Barrabool Hills and the Holians lost their crop, houses and a barn. In a report in the *Geelong Advertiser* the next day it said *Mr Michael Holian had everything destroyed except one small hut*. This must have been devastating for someone only ten years out of green Ireland. Michael and his sons built up the farm again and used their bullock drays to haul provisions to the nearby goldfields. They resisted the temptation to try their luck at the diggings.

In April 1849 the oldest son Patrick married Bridget (nee Costello) in St Mary's Church, Geelong. Bridget had arrived from Ireland only five months earlier.

Around 1857 Michael and Patrick and their families left their Barrabool Hills farm and went to work for the wealthy squatting family, the Armytages. They moved to the south Winchelsea area and spent 17 years in the employ of the Armytages who built their now heritage-listed Melbourne residence *Como* on Toorak Hill overlooking the Yarra River flats and billabongs. Because of gold fever farm workers were in short supply and reliable hands were valued. Michael and his sons would have earned good wages. Over such a long period of employment, being of frugal Irish stock, they would have put away savings and there would have been the opportunity to work on their own behalf. In 1862 Patrick selected 115 acres which was fully paid-off over time at the price of £1 per acre. He also purchased 120 acres near Geelong.

All her life, the mother Catherine loved to dance. One evening in 1866, aged 80 but still sprightly, Catherine told her family *I don't think I'll be dancing anymore* and by morning she was gone. She is buried in Geelong Cemetery.

Patrick had always wanted to own his own farm, but by the 1870s there was little suitable land available in the area so he looked further afield. In mid-1874 they decided to become *selectors* and select land in North East Victoria on the border of St James and Devenish parishes.

THE MOVE TO NORTH EAST VICTORIA

At the beginning of November 1874, Old Michael, Patrick, his wife Bridget and their family of now twelve children (oldest 24 and the youngest less than one) loaded up their bullock drays and began the long, slow trek to the North East

taking four weeks to cover the 330 km. The slow moving procession of a large family, animals and equipment must have been quite a sight. There weren't made roads or bridges.

When the family reached their destination they set about laying claim to land. The 1869 Land Act encouraged opening-up of unsettled regions. An individual aged 18 or more, whether male or female, could select up to 320 acres (129.5 hectares) with the expectation of owning the land in ten years or so, if not impossible conditions were met.

The father, Old Michael selected land on both sides of the border of St James and Devenish, selecting 120 acres in St James and 200 acres in Devenish. This border is now South Boundary Road which is the boundary of Moira Shire and Benalla Rural City. However, it's unlikely the 88 year old Michael intended to farm his selection. He was a *dummy* for his son, to allow Patrick to get around the maximum acreage restriction.

Because Patrick retained previously selected land in the Winchelsea area, he could apply for only 200 acres. His selection was on Old Michael's northern boundary. Patrick's eldest son selected 280 acres on Patrick's eastern side. Old Michael died less than a year after they'd arrived and Patrick took over his father's selection.

Having selected their land, the Holians went about fulfilling the conditions of their licences – fencing the selections, building a house, clearing the land and starting to farm it. There was an annual rent to pay and the rent payments would pay-off a property when they eventually equalled the price of the land – £1 per acre. The family was a tight-knit unit and would have helped each other out. They were tough times. Settling amongst uncleared native vegetation some distance from the nearest town and supplies, the basics of life had to be created by the selectors themselves from local materials. As a result the conditions of life were primitive.

According to a local history of St James, the original inhabitants and traditional owners were the Kwat Kwat tribe. It says *The early selectors did not have much contact with the local aborigine .. It would seem to indicate that the presence of squatters caused the aborigine to abandon his habitat of many centuries and move on.* Another explanation could be that the aboriginal people succumbed to white mans diseases such as smallpox, or were resettled on aboriginal reserves or mission stations.

The three adjacent properties formed a family enclave which was extended in 1878 when another son turned 18 and selected 140 acres on his father's western boundary. Around 1880 a daughter selected the 90 acre block on the western side of the Devenish selection. She was a dummy for her father and her land had passed into his name by 1888.

Around 1878 a handsome 22 year old appeared on the scene. He was Thomas Walker (1856-1935), a butcher from Steiglitz in the Brisbane Ranges. There is a romantic belief amongst the Holians that Thomas and young Bridget Holian (1862-1950) knew each other before the family moved and Thomas followed her to their new home. In February 1882 Thomas and Bridget married, however a lot happened in the interval before their marriage. By 1879 Thomas had taken over a 100 acre block adjoining Patrick's holdings and was working the land.

It was only a few years before the Siege of Glenrowan in June 1880. It was the time of the Kelly Outbreak when the Kelly Gang was on the run after the shoot-out at Stringybark Creek where three policemen were killed. For two years the Gang easily evaded the police, roaming the northeast living off the land with the support of sympathetic locals and two bank robberies.

THE HOLIANS & THE KELLYS

The Holian farms were not far from Glenrowan and only a little further from Greta where the Kelly home was located. Amongst Holian descendants there is a strong underlying belief the Holians knew and assisted the Kelly brothers, Ned and Dan who were still young, aged around 20 and 14. According to written records, young Bridget, her parents and her husband to be, knew the Kellys and held them in high regard. It is said that Ned, Jim and Dan would ride over and the boys would go shooting for rabbits. Once on the run after Stringybark Creek the outlaws often camped on Patrick's property at a waterhole. Patrick and his wife Bridget would give them food even though police came regularly to the house looking for the Kellys. There is the family memory of Mother Bridget hanging out a white tablecloth on her clothesline whenever the police were around as a warning to the Kellys.

Thomas' land adjoined Patrick's and on one occasion Thomas was riding over to the Holians and saw a campfire near a waterhole. He went to see what it was and found the Kellys. There was a policeman at the house talking to Patrick. So Dan Kelly went with Thomas to near the house and Thomas went in to get food from Mother Bridget and brought it out to Dan.

In the two years they were on the run, there were no sightings of the bushrangers by their police pursuers. They travelled freely around the northeast winning over supporters to their cause. It was not until late June 1880 the outlaws emerged into public view at Glenrowan. Their plan was to derail a police train on an elevated bend and by wrecking the train and killing or capturing the passengers, the Kelly Gang hoped to rouse disgruntled small farmers, farmworkers and labourers to rise in revolt. The old class distinctions had been brought from England and the administration of justice was applied in the same unequal way. These ordinary folk (many of Irish background and/or ex-goldminers) had come to the northeast hoping to select land or obtain work. They were angered by low living standards and status, police persecution, police manipulation of their land-selection applications and by squatters' privileges and land-use abuses aided by the authorities.

Unfortunately for the Gang, the police train was forewarned and pulled in at Glenrowan short of the ambush site, intent of making use of the opportunity to capture the Gang. In readiness for the ambush the four Kelly Gang members had rounded-up the people at Glenrowan and held them hostage in the Glenrowan Inn. Hearing the Gang was at the Inn the police moved quickly and formed a cordon in front. The Siege of Glenrowan lasted 12 hours and ended with the capture of a seriously wounded Ned Kelly, the death of Joe Byrne by a police bullet and the setting alight of the Glenrowan Inn in which Dan and Steve Hart were believed to have been incinerated. In later years, the true fate of Dan and Steve became an issue for Bridget and Thomas after they moved their family to Queensland.

Although only 35 km away, it's unlikely the Holians were aware of the dramatic happenings at Glenrowan. Radio hadn't been invented and travel was by horse and cart. Nevertheless, news of the Siege spread like wildfire through the district. News of the aftermath and Ned's trial was followed in close detail.

THE NEW RAILWAY & NEW TOWNS, DEVENISH & ST JAMES

Life gradually returned to normal and settled down to the annual rhythm of farming. In 1883-85 a government built railway from Benalla to Yarrawonga passed a short distance from the Holians' farms. New towns sprang up along the line and the new towns of Devenish and St James quickly became established with a wide range of shops, a broader social life for previously outback farms and reliable transport for travel, goods and crops.

The Holian children who had made the trek to the northeast were growing up and having families of their own. Married in February 1882, Bridget had her first child, a girl, in January 1883. Over the next 22 years she went on to give birth to another 10, only one of whom didn't live to a good age. Devenish rate records show that in 1902 and 3, Bridget was paying the rates on a farm a little south of Old Michael's Devenish selection. Bridget delivered the mail around the district until 1908, so it's likely they lived on the farm until then when the family moved to Queensland.

By the early 1890s Thomas had given up being a farmer and became a harvesting and haulage contractor and acquired equipment and work animals to harvest, bag and cart wheat crops. It's likely he wouldn't have worked only for local farmers, but could have started the season north in NSW and worked the harvest back down to northeast Victoria.

Postal records show that Bridget Walker had contracts from 1892 carrying the mails up to six days a week to and from the post office at St James railway station to six other centres in a radius of 15 km. This was an important and demanding job. Each day she drove her horse and gig (a light 2-wheeled one-horse carriage) and would have been on the road most of the day. She was a well-known and respected figure. The dirt roads were rough and dusty in summer and muddy in winter.

Despite living in difficult conditions women in the northeast often had large healthy families. Mothers were still having babies when their daughters began to give birth. Overall, ten of Patrick and Bridget's children married and had children. And they were a bountiful lot producing a total of 76 offspring. In other words, in the first Holian generation at St James/Devenish there were 76 cousins, hence the name of this story.

After 25 years living in the district, a large party was held in April 1899 to celebrate Patrick and Bridget's (aged 75 and 65) Golden Wedding Anniversary. Some 200 family, friends and neighbours came together in recognition of the now well-established Holians who had arrived in Australia 58 years earlier. Patrick died in 1902 and Bridget in 1913. Both are buried in Devenish cemetery.

THE WALKERS MOVE TO QUEENSLAND

As time went by, the 76 cousins grew up and began having their own children. People naturally went their own ways. Some settled nearby and others moved elsewhere. Around 1907, Thomas and Bridget decided to relocate their family and select land near Dalby in southern Queensland. They were about to repeat what Bridget's parents did 33 years earlier. The reasons are uncertain. Obviously the attraction of free land was important for a family with seven sons. Most of the land around the area had been taken up and the economic slump of the 1890s made times difficult for farmers. The parents weren't young - Thomas aged 50 and Bridget 44. All of the eleven children were to go, but the eldest Mary remained behind having found a job at Beechworth Lunatic Asylum where she met, and married, John Regan, the Asylum's tailor whose team sewed the inmates uniforms and restraint garments.

In 1907 transportation hadn't moved into the modern era of cars, semitrailers and airlines. In 1907, Thomas and his three eldest sons set off with their livestock and bullock drays and walked up the *long paddock* along established stock routes through NSW, into Queensland and onto Bell, just north of Dalby. A distance of 1150 km as the crow flies. It took them six months to do the trip which must have been physically and economically demanding! Each selected an allocation of land and together built a house. The following year the second half of the family was to make the move. Thomas returned to Devenish to travel back with Bridget and the younger children. They caught the train from Benalla to

Sydney where they boarded a boat to Brisbane. Then they took trains through Toowoomba to Dalby. There was a problem when Bridget saw the house her men had built. She didn't like it, so they built another in front of the first.

Soon after Bridget had settled in Bell, Thomas brought his 75 year old mother from Steiglitz to be close to them. She died within the year and was the second person buried in Bell Cemetery.

The Walkers prospered in Bell and remained a close family. Their first selection was named St James. The next was called Devenish. Bridget was a strong force in keeping the family in contact, writing letters and sending birthday cards. From time to time she made trips to a son in NSW and onto her family at St James. A grandson later recalled *Grandma was in full charge of her family. A little Cock Sparrow about 5 feet high.*

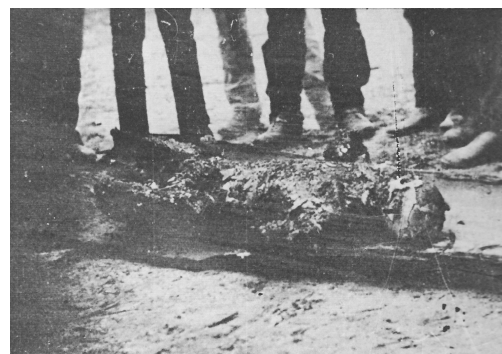
At the turn of the 20th Century there was a demand from the *Mother Country* for butter and cheese. Southern Queensland had good soils and high rainfall and was well positioned to supply dairy product. There developed a movement of farmers' co-operatives which built factories for processing milk from members' farms. As farmers, the Walkers benefited from the good prices for dairy products due to export demand and cooperative production. They milked their cows and grew crops.

DAN KELLY & STEVE HART

About 1910 Thomas returned home from a horse sale at Dalby. He smiled at his family and said mysteriously *Well .. well, you never know who you are going to run into do you?* To persistent questioning all he would say was *It was some one from the old days at Glenrowan. I'll tell you all one day.* Over the years Thomas did let the information slip. Bridget and the children learnt that the man at the livestock sale was actually Dan Kelly. Thomas had identified Dan Kelly *in a sea of faces* going under the name of James Ryan. Thomas approached James, who denied he was Dan, but they spoke for a long time.

Some years later Thomas also came across Steve Hart visiting the area. When he spoke to him, he first denied being Hart, but later agreed he was. Said he was married and had a family a credit to any man. He did not want his sons to know who he was.

Dan and Steve were members of the Kelly Gang who officially had been found to have died in the firing of the Glenrowan Inn during the Siege in 1880.



The two charred bodies pulled from the ashes of the Glenrowan Inn.

The idea that Dan Kelly and Steve Hart didn't die in the inferno is not generally accepted. After the fire, two extremely charred bodies were identified as those of Dan and Steve and this has been the official view since. However, there is an opposing view that the bodies were never conclusively identified. The bodies were so charred, identifying each corpse could only be done by body size.

Moreover, on the afternoon of the Siege, to defuse an angry situation, the police handed the corpses over to the families for burial without an autopsy.

In fact there is evidence that Ned Kelly knew the two hadn't died at Glenrowan. At his trial, after the verdict of guilty had been pronounced, there was a unusual lengthy exchange between the judge Raymond Barry and the prisoner about to be sentenced (recorded in the authoritative book *Ned Kelly [a short life]* by Ian Jones). At one point the judge said *Your unfortunate and miserable associates have met with deaths you might envy, but you are not afforded the opportunity.* Ned's reply was simple *I don't think there is much proof that they did die that death.*

Steve Hart was the fourth and youngest member of the Kelly Gang. He and Dan Kelly were close friends. The Kelly Gang were all recognised as good horsemen, but Steve was considered to be an outstanding horseman. The family memory doesn't include the alias used by Steve Hart, but it recalls he lived at Wallumbilla (50 km short of Roma) and was visited from time to time by James Ryan.

In 1933, James Ryan walked into the Brisbane offices of the *Sunday Truth* believing, after 50 years, a statute of limitations would protect him from prosecution. His claim to be Dan Kelly was published by the newspaper running over four weekly editions. James died in 1948 in a train accident and is buried in Ipswich General Cemetery where a memorial has been erected by Ipswich City Council in the believed likelihood of James Ryan's true identity.

In 1940 Bridget Walker visited a relative from the Army in Ipswich Hospital. He pointed out an old patient and said *See that old man in the corner, he says he is Dan Kelly.* She questioned the old man at length about things only a regular visitor to the St James/Devenish area in her youth could know. Said there was no doubt he was Dan Kelly. He knew places and people around the district and could tell her where the outlaws camped and who helped them. He knew too much not to be a Kelly.

In earlier times James travelled from Ipswich, stopping at Toowoomba and then went out west to see Steve Hart. As the Walkers became established some moved into Toowoomba. They would hear about James Ryan's movements and where he stayed.

STEVE HART

Later, as a grown man, one of the Walker sons recalled meeting a Wallumbilla farmer who told him he was a neighbour of Steve Hart going under the name of Thompson. Said he told them in the later years he was Steve Hart, but people doubted it, but later two of his sons started a Garage in Roma as Hart Bros. Said he was a good neighbour, good stockman, wonderful rider. We now know that Thompson's first name was Harry because in May 2014 the town of Wallumbilla acknowledged its collective memory of Harry Thompson being Steve Hart when the Council officially named a new local walkway *Harry Thompson Walk*.

Harry lived on a property, Devil's Pulpit, north of Wallumbilla and died in 1943. The author Norman Timms in his book, *Across The Years*, tells how he knew and worked with Harry Thompson and describes him as an enigma. It was widely believed in the district the bearded bushman was actually Steve Hart. He always kept his rifles and revolvers fully loaded, kept to himself and used the Kelly brand, NK2, for his cattle. Timms noticed his upper legs were covered in burn scars, as might have happened when the hotel at Glenrowan was set on fire. Harry lived alone and eventually perished in a house fire – if he was Steve Hart, he died aged 84.

Our family's story of Dan and Steve's survival after Glenrowan is unlikely ever

to be proven true. There are other claims about Dan and Steve surviving the Siege and living in Queensland, but the Walker story seems the most complete. There was no vested interest in telling their story. Thomas Walker encountered and recognised Dan Kelly around 1910 well before James Ryan went public in 1933. Walker family memories about Steve Hart are supported by the collective memory of the Wallumbilla community which adds substance and fresh information to the story.

CONCLUSION

As the years went by and new generations were born and people lost contact with their roots, some began to wonder about their family origins. A Holian family reunion was held at Devenish in 1980. Over 300 attended from many parts of Australia. A small, dedicated group had collaborated and pieced together the Holian story in Australia which is told in Des Regan's book.

Then in 2011 another highly successful Holian reunion was held in northeast Victoria. In the lead-up to the celebration a big effort was made to produce up-to-date descendant charts descending from each of the four children who came to Port Phillip District in 1841. At the conclusion of this work (documented in the second edition of the Holian book), the researchers said *We have been able to trace and/or research 3640 of the descendants of 'Michael' and Catherine Holian in Australia.*

These numerous descendants of the original Holian family have good reason to take pride in their family heritage. To paraphrase J. J. Rouse we could say *We are standing on the shoulders of the ones who went before us, ... we are lifted by their longing for a fair and brighter future; we are grateful for their vision, for toiling on this earth.*

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