





Border Crossings

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BORDER CROSSINGS (IRELAND/AUSTRALIA)

Dr Mary Knights

Border Crossings brings together Australian and Irish curators and artists to explore cross-cultural issues surrounding ethnic conflict, the legacy of colonialism and the challenges of reconciliation that are relevant to both countries. Six artists – Michelle Browne, Julie Gough, Sandra Johnston, Sue Kneebone, Yhonnie Scarce and Dominic Thorpe – have been invited to create new site-specific artworks and performances. Drawing on family stories, social histories, field and archival research, they have interrogated the curatorial premise from a wide range of perspectives and presented work that is at once challenging, powerful, poetic and whimsical.

The histories of Ireland and Australia are entangled and complex. It is likely that the first Irish to set foot on Australian soil were Joshua Childs from Dublin and Timothy Readon of Cork, both sailors on Captain James Cook's HMS Endeavour that sailed into Kamay, renamed Botany Bay, on 29 April 1770.¹ Eighteen years later Irish people were among those who sailed with the First Fleet and disembarked on country belonging to the Gadigal clan of the Eora people. One of the convicts was Hannah Mullens – a young Irish woman who had been found guilty of forgery at the Old Bailey in London and given a death sentence that was later commuted to transportation – along with her infant daughter Mary. Also from Ireland was the Chief Surgeon of the fleet and penal colony John White, who had been born in Mullaghduin in County Fermanagh and had joined the British Navy when he was twenty-two years old. White kept a journal and his observations reflect Britain's imperial aspirations, attitudes to race, assumptions about ownership of land and entitlement to resources. For instance on 23 January 1788 he wrote when Indigenous people claimed fish netted in their bay: *'...[n]o sooner were the fish out of the water that they began to lay hold of them, as if they had a right to them, or that they were their own; upon which the officer of the boat, I think very properly, restrained them, giving however, to each of them a part.'*²

White's entries also reveal the harsh conditions endured by the convicts. On 27 February 1788 White saw the first public execution at the penal colony and noted that

Thomas Barrett, an engraver, was hung for *'feloniously and fraudulently taking away from the public store beef and pease, the property of the crown'*.³ Only a few weeks earlier White had commissioned Barrett to make a silver medal to commemorate the day they had sailed into Botany Bay.⁴

Between 1788 and 1866 when deportation ceased, 24% of the approximately 164,000 convicts transported to Australia were Irish. Around 26,500 of these set sail from Irish ports after being convicted of crimes that ranged from petty theft to murder.⁵ Of the 'felons and vagabonds' it has been estimated that between 325 and 800 were political prisoners convicted of crimes such as treason and sedition.⁶

The Irish people refused to be easily subjugated. Ireland had been under English rule since the Normans invaded in the twelfth century and had been colonised from the sixteenth century through Plantations in which confiscated land was granted to English and Scottish Protestant colonists. Successive governments introduced increasingly oppressive laws that discriminated against Irish Catholics. Civil rights were violated, properties seized, Gaelic language and Catholicism were repressed. Land, wealth and power was amassed by the Ascendancy, Anglo-Irish who belonged to the Anglican Church of Ireland, dominated politics and the upper echelons of society. By the end of the eighteenth century, having been dispossessed for generations, much of the Irish Catholic population were impoverished cottiers increasingly dependent on the potato as a staple food.

Political and social turmoil in Ireland had consequences in the British colonies. After the rebellion at Vinegar Hill in 1798 many Irish affiliated with the United Irishmen were transported to New South Wales. Inspired by the French revolution a group of liberal-minded men belonging to the Protestant Ascendancy called for an Irish parliament, Catholic emancipation, and independence from British rule. The movement gained momentum amongst Catholics and Protestants. Threatened by the nationalist and republican sentiment British authorities arrested the leaders. Outraged, thousands gathered at Vinegar Hill and clashed with the British Army. The insurrection was quickly routed and followed with brutal reprisals to which United Irishman responded by adopting guerrilla tactics.

One of the many United Irishmen charged with sedition was Phillip Cunningham from Clonmel, Tipperary. Unrepentant, Cunningham incited mutiny on a convict ship while being transported, and in 1804 on hearing about the execution of Robert Emmet led a mob of Irish convicts in the failed Rebellion of Castle Hill.

Another influential convict was William Smith O'Brien from Limerick, one of seven Young Irelanders transported to Van Diemen's Land. Smith O'Brien had been radicalised by the suffering caused by the Irish Famine while a Member of Parliament. Between 1845-1851 the famine led to the death of over a million Irish through starvation and disease, and the emigration of another million. Misery was exacerbated by inadequate aid, evictions and the export of grain crops from the estates. Thousands of Irish trudged mournfully to quaysides in Dublin and Cork to embark onto crowded ships bound for Australia and America or the notorious 'coffin ships' destined for Canada. Appalled by the laissez faire attitude of landlords and the government Smith O'Brien called for the Irish to rule the Irish and for British control of Ireland to be overthrown. After the Battle of Widow McCormack's Cabbage Patch, Smith O'Brien was convicted of high treason and sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered and after petitioning by English and Irish supporters his sentence was commuted to transportation. In Van Diemen's Land in 1849, he rejected an offer of a ticket of leave, declaring that it was his duty to escape. After a failed attempt to board an American ship and escape from Maria Island he was incarcerated in a cottage at Port Arthur. The brutality of the prison disgusted him and communicating by writing letters he became a powerful advocate for the anti-transportation movement.

A loved one leaving Ireland was considered to be a tragedy until the famine, when emigration became a way that one might avoid hunger and death. From the early nineteenth century successive waves of Irish left the country. Landed gentry keen to clear their estates could compel cottiers to go by providing assisted passage and empty promises. During the famine the British Government urged poor Irish of working-age to emigrate in order to stock the colonies with labourers and unmarried women. Over 4000 impoverished girls from workhouses were shipped to through Earl Grey's Orphan Emigration

Scheme. As well as grinding poverty and other deprivations, on their arrival the girls faced prejudice against Irish Catholics. William Kerr, a Melbourne alderman, wrote to the editor of the Argus: *'It is only those who are blind to all other considerations, save the prospect which the introduction of so many Roman Catholic females gives of a goodly brood of young Papists, that will venture to say a word in favour of such an outrageous prostitution of the Immigration fund.'*⁷

Racist views about the Irish had been widely held since the earliest days of the colony. Reverend Samuel Marsden, nick-named the 'flogging parson', wrote *'of Irish convicts that they were 'of the lowest class of the Irish nation; who are a wild, ignorant and savage Race that were ever favoured with the light of Civilisation...'*⁸

Anti-Irish sentiment was exacerbated by the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. The Irish Proclamation of Independence on the steps of the Dublin GPO and the brutal execution of the leaders by the British that followed the uprising polarised political debate and caused divisions along sectarian lines in Australia. That same year Prime Minister "Billy" Hughes called for compulsory conscription to support the British war effort on the battlefields in France during WWI. Many Irish Catholics were opposed to aiding the British cause. One of the loudest and most influential agitators against conscription was the Irish Archbishop of Melbourne Daniel Mannix who Hughes inferred was a traitor and *'a man to whom every German in the country looks...if you range yourself under the banner of the deadly enemies of Australia.'*⁹

All of the curators and artists in Border Crossings are Irish or have Irish ancestry and have woven historical narratives through their work. Why was it that so many Irish – so aware of the tyranny of colonisation; who had resisted British rule for centuries, and were involved in political and social activism – colluded or were silent about the dispossession of the Indigenous people of their land, language and culture?

Julie Gough's art practice involves *'uncovering and re-presenting historical stories as part of an ongoing project that questions and re-evaluates the impact of the past on our present lives.'*¹⁰ In order to create her artwork Banished Gough searched for the names of the

Tasmanian Aboriginal people that were dispossessed of their Country and exiled to Wybalenna on Flinders Island. In the wake of escalating conflict and the infamous Black Line, in 1830 George Augustus Robinson was charged by Governor Arthur with the task of leading a 'Conciliatory Mission' to remove the remaining Indigenous people from Van Diemen's Land. From 1834 to 1847 when Wybalenna operated around two hundred people including Mannalargenna and Woretemoeteyenner were sent there with the promise that one-day they would go home. Devastated by illness and despair, most died there and were buried in unmarked graves. Using a photographic technique, Gough has stenciled each of the names that she found onto strips of calico cut from a single cloth and exposed them to sunlight. Many of the names are lost and missing.

Gough also scoured the colonial records and compiled data about 3775 Irish convicts transported to Van Diemen's Land. The brief notes hint at the fractured lives of the men and women exiled from Ireland forever. For example, the entry for James Hevy reveals that the 22 year old seaman from Dublin was sentenced to transportation for life in 1833 and had a number of tattoos including the name 'Isabella' on one arm, and on the other, the wistful words: *'the ocean may between us roll and distant though we be dearest should we never meet more I'll still remember thee'*.¹¹

Sue Kneebone's Irish family shattered in a single generation when two brothers Bartholomew "Batty" and Tom Higgins emigrated in 1863 – one to Australia and the other to America. They did not meet again for 40 years. Having survived childhood during the great famine on a small farm near Boyle, the brothers crossed social and geographical borders, shifting from being oppressed to oppressors depending on the circumstances that they found themselves Kneebone's great, great grandfather, Batty Higgins, enlisted with the Irish Constabulary before emigrating to Sydney where he joined the NSW police and was posted to The Rocks, then a slum terrorised by The Push. To improve his lot he rented the Old Watch House, a one-room hovel, and lived there with his wife and ten children while they built a row of houses named Erin Terrace. Two of Higgins's daughters married two Irish brothers that attended the same parish church, St Patricks. Their father Tim James Sullivan was a cooper

from Limerick who had been deeply involved with the Young Irelanders. He emigrated in 1854, and before moving to Sydney, lived in Van Diemen's Land in the same year that the Young Irelanders were pardoned. Meanwhile in America, Tom Higgins, after struggling for thirty years to make ends meet, at the toss of a coin, decided to try his luck prospecting in Arizona. On the frontier marked by violence he pushed deep into Apache territory. He found a rich seam of copper, established a mine and made a fortune. With no family of his own, he finally reconnected with his still impoverished Irish siblings.

Yhonnie Scarce was born at Woomera in South Australia and belongs to the Kokatha and Nukunu people. Stories passed down the generations from mothers to daughters included the occasional oblique aside about a Patrick Coleman from Tipperary, the father of Dinah's son William "Willie" Coleman, a pale skinned baby born around 1890 at Fowlers Bay. Sifting through the SA Museum's photographic collection Scarce found a photograph of Dinah, her great, great, grandmother. The faded sepia photograph depicts a desert woman with a powerful gaze. In *Border Crossings* Scarce speculates about the nature of the relationship between her Granny Dinah and Patrick which has resulted in a large Indigenous family – many of whom have inherited Patrick's fair Irish colour and some still bear his name. Patrick and his twin brother Daniel Coleman were surveyors in the country between Ceduna and the West Australian border in the late nineteenth century. As a young girl Scarce assumed that there had been a fleeting romance on the wrong side of the blanket. More recently she has wondered at the nature of the encounter and if Patrick met his son and knowingly gave his name, or walked away and never knew.

Irish artists Michelle Browne, Dominic Thorpe and Sandra Johnston often engage with contentious aspects of history and refuse to be silenced. For *Border Crossings* they are responding to the curatorial premise through performance, an artform that in the Irish context Áine Phillips notes has developed over the past decades to be *'politically active and socially engaged'*¹² and *'operates beyond perimeters, breaks down borders, and expands into new territories of meaning and action, exchange and communication'* developed out of the Irish context.¹³ In her curatorial and performance practice Browne investigates *'how we co-exist together as a public of*

disparate individuals and how societies are organised socially, politically and spatially.¹⁴ In line with the 'White Australia Policy' and the call to 'populate or perish' post WWII immigration, saw many Irish people come to Australia. Irish Catholics were reclassified as 'white' British citizens and previously significant racial and sectarian distinctions brushed aside. Today, Australia's population is just over 24,000,000 of which approximately 10.4% claim Irish heritage and 3% of the population are Indigenous. With the collapse of the Celtic Tiger a new wave of young and well-educated Irish immigrants are coming to Australia. For Border Crossings Browne has considered the accounts of Irish people who took the desperate step in the past of committing crimes in order to be transported: *'I wish to look at the desire to leave Ireland and its relationship to current emigration in Ireland.'*¹⁵

Johnston was born in Belfast in 1968, the year that The Troubles began and grew up amid the violent sectarian upheavals that marked Northern Ireland throughout the seventies and eighties. Northern Ireland remains a part of the United Kingdom and was partitioned off from the rest of the Republic of Ireland in 1921. To interrogate trauma and conflict each of Johnston's ephemeral performances is *'developed from carefully observing the tensions that exist between the history of locations, set in dialogue with the vibrancy and insistence of the passing moment.'*¹⁶ To glean an understanding of the tensions and the ongoing impact of colonisation in Australia Johnston has undertaken a residency that has enabled her to work alongside artists in Adelaide and at Warlukurlangu Artists, Yuendumu.

In his practice Thorpe focuses on human rights abuses in Ireland – in the past and in the present. He is interested in the potential for art to *'highlight the proximity we have to each others lives. Proximity to the lives of victims and also proximity to the lives of perpetrators.'*¹⁷ Thorpe's charged physical responses to everyday spaces and ordinary materials challenge assumptions, expose uncomfortable truths and disrupt complacency. In preparing for *Border Crossings* Thorpe focused on the *'experiences of people who live outside their home country, often people forced to do so, and considered the sense of displacement that is communicated through time in Irish songs and stories of emigration.'*¹⁸

1. Richard Reid, 'Irish in Sydney from First Fleet to Federation', Dictionary of Sydney, 2012, www.dictionaryinsydney.org/entry/irish_in_sydney_from_first_fleet-to_federation, accessed 26/1/2016.
2. John White, '23rd January 1788', *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales*, www.gutenberg.net.au/plusfifty-n-z.html#white, accessed 20/1/2016.
3. John White, '27rd January 1788', *ibid.*
4. John White, *ibid.*
5. Rena Lohan, 'Sources in the National Archives for research into the transportation of Irish convicts to Australia (1791–1853)', www.nationalarchives.ie/topics/transportation/Ireland_Australia_transportation.pdf, p.1.
6. Irish Rebels to Australia 1800-1806, www.members.pcug.org.au/ppmay/rebels.htm, accessed 20/1/2016.
7. William Kerr, 'Female Orphan Immigration, To the Editor of the Argus', *The Argus* (Melbourne), Saturday 20 April 1850, p.2.
8. Samuel Marsden, 'A few Observations on the Toleration of the Catholic Religion in New South Wales', memorandum, quoted in Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, London: Collins Harvell, 1987, p. 188.
9. Brenda Niall, *Mannix*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2015, p. 89.
10. Julie Gough, artist statement, www.juliegough.net/artist-statement, accessed 3/1/2016
11. Julie Gough, excerpt from *Banished*, video still, 2016.
12. Áine Phillips, ed. *Performance Art in Ireland: A History*, Bristol: Intellect & Live Art Development Agency, 2015, p. 8.
13. Áine Phillips, ed. *Performance Art in Ireland: A History*, Bristol: Intellect & Live Art Development Agency, 2015, p. 8.
14. Michelle Browne, unpublished artist statement, 2016.
15. Michelle Browne, unpublished artist statement, 2016.
16. Sandra Johnston, unpublished artist statement, 2016.
17. Dominic Thorpe, unpublished artist statement, 2016.
18. Dominic Thorpe, unpublished artist statement, 2016.