

Link with the Irish Republican Movement

By Robert Atkins

30/12/2022

This article was published in the FamilyHistoryWA journal the Western Ancestor in September 2022. Since then, the following paragraph has been added by way of substantiating a link between William Smith O'Brien and Stephen Hastings Atkins. It would seem that he also had republican leanings and sympathy for the plight of tenants.

On 16th September 1834 a local Irish newspaper reports the formation of the Limerick Agricultural Society and a committee to draw up rules and regulations. The 21 committee members included Stephen Hastings Atkins and William Smith O'Brien¹. A year later, on 17 September 1835 he was removed from the Tipperary magistracy for alleged acting in a manner inconsistent with his magisterial functions and derogatory to his duty in abetting and encouraging breaches of the peace. He later resigned his positions of magistrate for Limerick and Clare, having failed to have his case reviewed. Three months later the Leinster Express newspaper commented "The circumstances if the Conservative efforts of Mr Atkins having been opposed to the nominees of the Whigs and O'Connell, in the late Tipperary election, afforded sufficient motive for this extraordinary dismissal, made without conceding that enquiry which public justice demanded and which Mr Atkins had loudly but in vain reclaimed."¹

When I read the article *Another Side of the Catalpa Story* in the July 2022 edition of the Western Ancestor it reminded me of a transcription project I had not completed. My father's family history collection included several letters and parts of letters that have been or appear to have been written by various ancestors. One wet day a couple of years ago I set up my camera and photographed two pages, that had attracted my curiosity, so I could view them as high-resolution images on the computer and transcribe them to see what they were all about.

These two pages turned out to be parts of two letters written in August and September 1850, which mention two people: Smith O'Brien and O'Donohue [sic]. Who were these people? Unfortunately, the writer or the recipients' names are not on either page. Step one was to transcribe the pages which, given the handwriting was not easy. With some help from Edwina Shooter, I have most of the text. The next step was to find out about the people mentioned in these pages, who was the writer and who were the recipients.

Searching these names, Tasmania and 1850 on Google revealed the following information. The Irish political prisoners William Smith O'Brien and Patrick O'Donoghue were transported to Tasmania in 1849. William Smith O'Brien was the son of Sir Edward O'Brien, baronet County Clare Ireland. On arrival in Hobart, Smith O'Brien refused to give his parole² in return for a ticket-of-leave and nine months later was sent to Maria Island, off Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania). He made an unsuccessful escape bid, to the United States in an American Whaler,

¹ Leinster Express 24/12/1835, Irish Newspapers Archives, SLWA.

on 12 August 1850 and on re-capture sent to Port Arthur on 21 August 1850, where he was allowed to live in his own cottage. He was subsequently persuaded to give his parole and was granted a Ticket of Leave in November 1850.³⁴

It is clear from the pages that the writer was a supporter of these revolutionaries. I am going to take a leap of faith and suggest that the letter dated September 1850 was written to Rev. Theyry who is mentioned in the first letter, dated August. There is one possibility that Rev. Theyry was John Joseph Therry⁵ The other two people mentioned in the August letter were Mr. Moore⁶ and Mr. Regan⁷ both sympathisers to the Irish cause. The writer of the August 1850 letter did not seem to have a very high opinion of O'Donoghue. However, the context of this letter is unknown and requires further research to understand the basis for the letter. It can be assumed the purpose of the September 1850 letter was to convey news of Smith O'Brien's attempted escape from Maria Island. Much has been published on these events and is readily available to those wishing to learn more of these escapades.

This really aroused my interest in establishing the link to my family! Two clues suggest the writer could be my two times great grandfather Stephen Hastings Atkins. Firstly, these pages appear to have been handed down through the family. While this is not strong evidence, why else would such letters be in the family's possession? Secondly, the pages were addressed from Sydney in August and September 1850. Stephen Hastings Atkins was Irish, a landed gentry, so the same class as O'Brien, and was a magistrate in County Clare, the same county as O'Brien's birth.

Stephen Hastings Atkins was born in County Cork Ireland in 1793. He brought his family out to Tasmania in 1847 and lived there until about 1857. While he was based in the north and northeast of Tasmania shipping records indicate he traveled between New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. I also have a copy of a letter addressed Sydney 1851 signed by S.H. Atkins consistent with him staying in Sydney for periods in the 1850s. To my untrained eye the hand writing in the signed letter is similar to that in the unsigned pages. So, it is reasonable to assume that the two pages mentioned above were written by Stephen Hastings Atkins from Sydney in 1850.

My research into my two times great grandfather Stephen Hastings Atkins had revealed him as a most interesting person. However, he has become even more interesting with the discovery of the contents of these two pieces of paper.

So, did he in fact write these letters and to whom? Some further research in Tasmania might find the answers in the future. S.H. Atkins sold all his holdings in Tasmania and left Australia in the mid to late 1850s, never to return, leaving his wife, daughters and one son, my great grandfather William Atkins behind. He took three other sons with him, leaving one in Hawaii, one in Vancouver Canada and the third a seafarer eventually returned to Australia to live out his remaining years as a fisherman at Queenscliff Victoria. S.H. Atkins eventually returned to Ireland and died there in 1870.

LETTER TRANSCRIPTIONS:

78 King St Sydney augt

13 -

Dear Sir

I am in receipt of your extraordinary and unexpected communication respecting Mr O Donohue no doubt that gentleman should feel grateful for your communicated acts of kindness to him, but it is so repulsive to human an honourable mind to have friendships forced upon him, to fill his belly and afterwards turn turnd and cry beggar at him, that Mr O Do may face all your warm hearted Irish hospitality cancelled by blazing it forth to the world, it requires not the ready pen or strong reasoning of Mr Moore – to convince me of the faults and foibles of Mr O Do, he would not be an Irish man wanting there, but I hope they belong to the head not to the heart if he is all you say of him he is such a monster of sanguinity, that his presence would pollute the atmosphere of port Arthur, I can hardly believe that Gentleman like the Revd Mr Theiry Mr Regan and yourself would associate with a man of such depraved habits, or if you have not Known the mans real character till after his release from Port Arthur, it does not speak much for your knowledge of human nature

78 King St Sydney

Sept 2nd 1850

Revd and Dear Sir,

*I beg to acknowledge the receipt of yours of the 30th July and I am glad I did not write sooner, as I have to convey news to you that I am sure you will be rejoice to hear the escape of Smith O Brien from Maria Island. I Recd a letter this day with in the morning from O Donohue conveying this intelligence, and in less time than I am in writing this I had Sydney in a blase, but our joy was short lived in the evening I Recd another, from him a day later stating that the poor fellow had been retaken which I hope in god is not true, for if he has made an effort to escape and failed it will frustrate all the plans of their friends to get them all off which I hope at no distant date I will be able to communicate to you, I am sorry to hear of the irregular way in which you receive the **ile but I can assure your Reverence the fault does not rest with me but with the first officer*

18 King's St. Hobart
Sept 2^d 1850

Dear and Dear Sir

I beg to acknowledge the receipt
of yours of the 30th July and I am glad I could
not write sooner, as I have the contrary news to you
that I am since you wish to be obliged to hear, the
escape of Smith O'Brien from Maria's Island. I had
I thought this day well in the morning from I had
conveying the intelligence, and too late to send
in the office I have been in all places, but our joy was
short lived in the evening I had another from him & they
later stating that the poor fellow had been taken when
I hope in free is not true, for if he has made an effort to escape
and failed it will frustrate all the plans of their friends to get them
out of schools & hope at no distant date I will be able to
communicate to you, I am sorry to hear of the irregular way in
which you receive the cables but I can assure you I am
the fault does not rest with me but with the post office

36 - 12 - 6
18 - 15 - 6
17 - 11 - 11

The letter dated 2 September 1850

¹ Dublin Evening Packet and Correspondent (British Newspapers FMP)

² A condition that he would not attempt escape was unacceptable to him.

³ Biography of William Smith O'Brien, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/obrien-william-smith-2516>

⁴ William Smith O'Brien in Van Dieman's Land, History Ireland, <https://www.historyireland.com/18th-19th-century-history/william-smith-obrien-in-van-die>

⁵ Known sympathiser, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/233329751/25158249>, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Joseph_Therry

⁶ Probably John Moore, Editor Hobart Guardian newspaper

⁷ John Regan, owner of a range of properties in the centre of Hobart, Catholic, a supporter of O'Brien (*Tasmania – Home for Ireland's Forgotten Rebels of 1848 Who Became Settlers*) Peter MacFie, Historian © 1986 & 2007, <https://petermacfiehistorian.net.au/wp-content/uploads/Forgotten-Rebels-2017-04-03.pdf>