

Matthew Renaghan – Escaped Oatlands Gaol 13th February 1834

By Rubee Dano

Matthew Renaghan was born in 1777, and was convicted and sentenced to 7 years transportation in March 1815 in Galway, on Ireland's west coast. He travelled to Australia upon the *Chapman* (1), and from Sydney to Van Diemen's Land upon the *Jupiter*, arriving in 1817. Renaghan, a 40 year old butcher when he arrived in VDL, was described as having a crippled right arm¹. He originated from King's County, now named County Offaly, in central Ireland. While his original crime is not recorded, Renaghan was a prolific sheep stealer once he arrived in the colony.

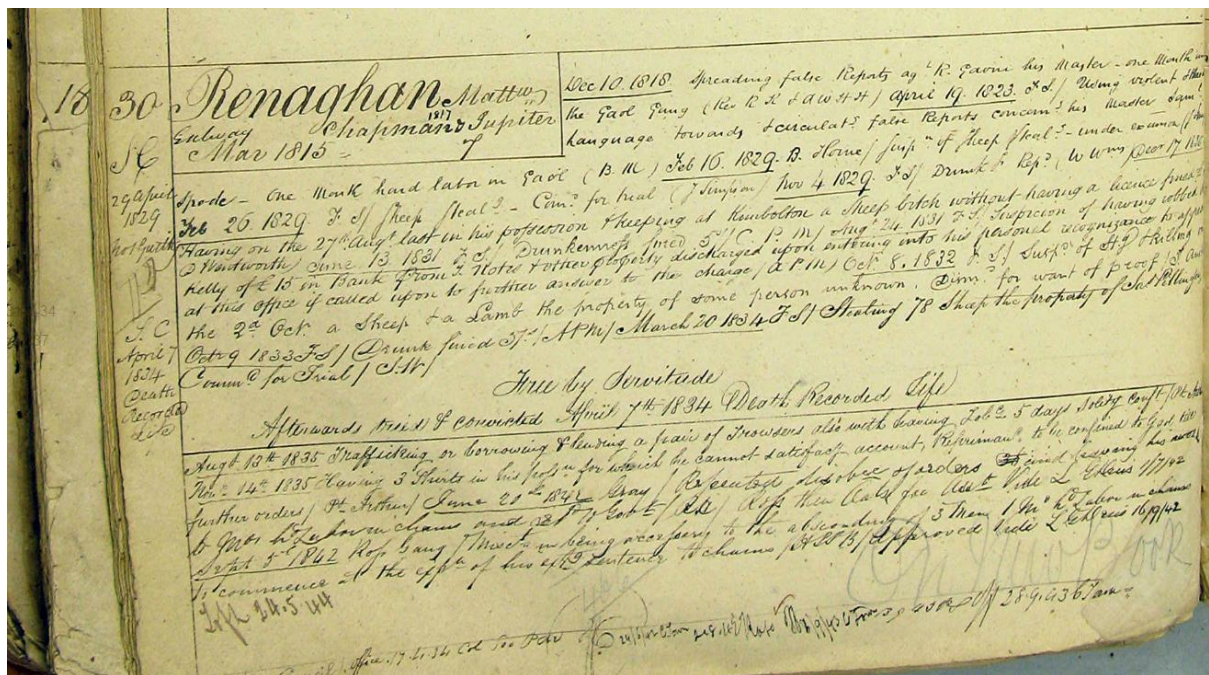


Image 1: Matthew Renaghan's original conduct record (1815-1844)²

It is likely Renaghan's sheep stealing career begun in his home-country of Ireland, given his profession as a butcher. Unfortunately, tracing Renaghan's early life is somewhat of a dead end – due both to the lack of availability of digitised records in Ireland, and the many spelling variations present for 'Renaghan', a common issue for convicts with unique names. Throughout various records, Matthew Renaghan's name appears as 'Mathew', 'Matthew', 'Reneghan', 'Renegan', 'Benegan' (an error in transcription from a court record with a particularly flowery R), 'Regan', and the list goes on. Often, the spelling of a convict's name in transportation records was assumed by the British officer writing it down, particularly with Scottish and Irish names, or cases where a convict may not have been able to spell their own name. Given the Gallic language's influence on both Scottish and Irish names, new spellings that were far from the original were common due to the variation in phonetics between

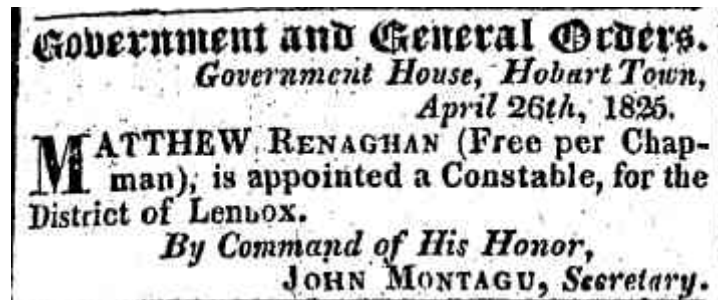
¹ Convict Description List entry for Matthew Reneghan, State Archives of Tasmania, CON23-1-3, p.27 (<https://libraries.tas.gov.au/Digital/CON23-1-3/CON23-1-3-P027> accessed 14/11/2024)

² Conduct Record (1) for Matthew Renaghan, State Archives of Tasmania, CON31-1-34, p.238 (<https://libraries.tas.gov.au/Digital/CON31-1-34/CON31-1-34P238> accessed 14/11/2024)

languages. It's possible Reneghan is actually a misrendering of Rohan, Regan, or Ronan, or even something more unusual such as Rattigan.

We can see from his conduct record³ that by 1823, Reneghan was free by servitude, and remained free until 1834 – this is denoted by each entry beginning with “Date FS/” meaning that the interaction was recorded whilst he was a free man. This would track with his sentence of 7 years from 1815, he would have been free again by approximately 1822.

Reneghan was appointed a constable in 1825⁴ in the District of Lennox. It was not unusual for current convicts to be appointed constables or javelin men, and Reneghan was free by servitude at this time.



(Image: newspaper clipping)

While there was no District of Lennox, the Parish of Lennox includes the area surrounding Tunbridge and Saltpan Plains.



(Image: an early survey map of Lennox⁵, modern day Tunbridge is located roughly in the centre of this image)

³ Conduct Record (1) for Matthew Reneghan, State Archives of Tasmania, CON31-1-34, p.238 (<https://libraries.tas.gov.au/Digital/CON31-1-34/CON31-1-34P238> accessed 14/11/2024)

⁴ "Classified Advertising" *Hobart Town Gazette and Van Diemen's Land Advertiser (Tas. : 1821 - 1825)* 29 April 1825: 1. Web. 6 Feb 2025 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article1090723>>.

⁵ Map – Somerset 56 – parishes of Lennox and Methven, Salt Pan Plains and Grimes Sugarloaf, Archives of Tasmania, AF396/1/1001, <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/Record/Archives/AF396-1-1001>

In April 1829, Reneghan was tried for stealing 22 sheep, the property of Benjamin Horne⁶. While this trial would have occurred in Hobart's Supreme Court, the names listed as witnesses including Norah Corbett, and Captain D'Arcy Wentworth, are names that pop up again in Oatlands' colonial history, so the crime likely occurred somewhere in the Southern Midlands region or there about.

143 Wednesday 29th April 1829.

Matthew Reneghan Sheepstealing Norah Corbett
 # 22 3rd March 1829 J Simpson

Him	Jury
Daniel Cooke.	Captain D'Arcy Wentworth
David Dunkley	Lieut Francis Aubin
James Beebie	" Nathaniel Lowe
Norah Corbett	" Ernest Augustus Stedman
Benjamin Horne	Robt Surgeon Patrick Pollock
	" John Davidson
	Quartermaster Isaac Stiles

Benedict
 Matthew Reneghan. Not Guilty

(Image: Supreme Court record for Matthew Reneghan's April 1829 trial)

Luckily, Reneghan was found not guilty of stealing Benjamin Horne's sheep, and continued to remain free by servitude in the Southern Midlands it seems, from his conduct record we can see he illegally kept a "sheep bitch" at Kimbolton, which sat between the township of Hamilton and Lawrenny Estate on the River Ouse⁷. One would be forgiven for thinking a "sheep bitch" is a ewe to a constable unfamiliar with livestock, which given the transient nature of employment in early Tasmania, would make sense. However, a second conduct record for Reneghan provides clarity.⁸ When copied over, the information provided on his original conduct record for this event reads instead: "keeping a dog without license", telling us that Reneghan was not in fact keeping a ewe but a sheepdog, who happened to be female. Given his propensity for sheep-stealing, his possessing a sheepdog is particularly enlightening.

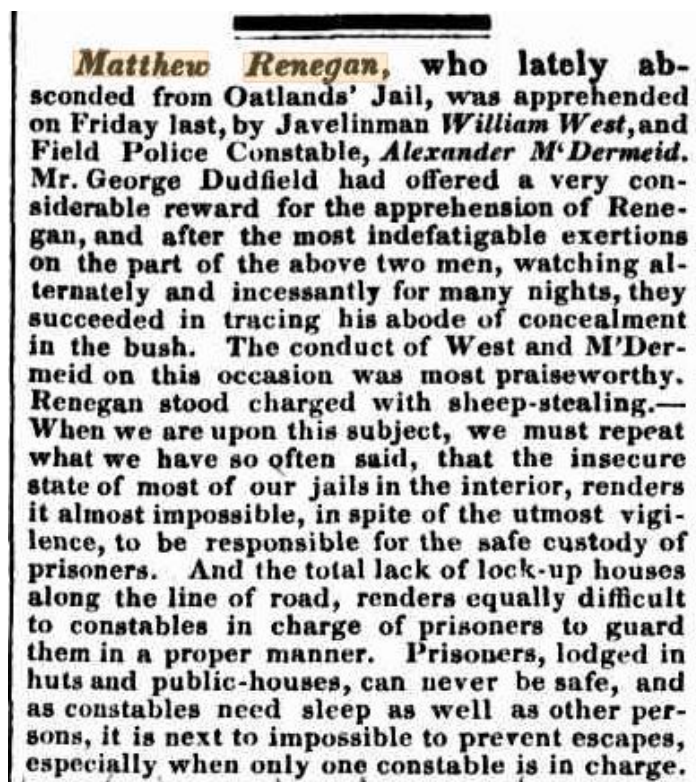
⁶ Supreme Court Records 1829, Archives of Tasmania, SC32/1/1 image 370, <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/Record/NamesIndex/1522977>

⁷ Plan – Estates of Lawrenny & Kimbolton – Cumberland – D10 (93860 and 93861) 1848, Archives of Tasmania, AF766/1/133, <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/Record/Archives/AF766-1-133>

⁸ Conduct Record for Matthew Reneghan (2), Archives of Tasmania, CON35/1/1 image 470, <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/Digital/CON35-1-1/CON35-1-1P470>

Reneghan was suspected of a few crimes between attaining his freedom and his eventual re-conviction, but prior to 1834 when he stole 78 sheep and was sentenced to life⁹. While awaiting trial, Reneghan was kept in the Oatlands Gaol, from which he would later escape. According to a letter from George Dudfield dated 17 February 1834, Reneghan had promised to disclose the names and locations of his sheep-stealing confederates in the area, and sought a private discussion with Dudfield in a less secure area of the Gaol.¹⁰ Due to only two javelin men being on duty at the time, and one being called away to search for bushrangers (likely the same gang Reneghan was part of), Reneghan, who appeared "most enfeebled and not enjoying a good state of health", according to Dudfield, made his escape.

In subsequent correspondence it is revealed that Reneghan was a prolific sheepstealer in the Oatlands area. Oatlands Police Magistrate John Whitefoord wrote "I have the honor to inform you that Reneghan was a person who has long been suspected of carrying on a system of sheepstealing in this District in conjunction with other and greater criminals than himself. The case of sheep stealing upon which he was remanded in custody was perfectly clear against him; which Reneghan being aware of, he made no denial of his guilt but spoke of implicating other parties and expressed his willingness to afford the Government a good deal of valuable information of the Felonies of a similar kind."¹¹ In the same letter, Whitefoord states a five pound reward was being offered for Reneghan's capture, a very substantial reward for the time.



Matthew Reneghan, who lately absconded from Oatlands' Jail, was apprehended on Friday last, by Javelinman *William West*, and Field Police Constable, *Alexander M'Dermid*. Mr. George Dudfield had offered a very considerable reward for the apprehension of Reneghan, and after the most indefatigable exertions on the part of the above two men, watching alternately and incessantly for many nights, they succeeded in tracing his abode of concealment in the bush. The conduct of West and M'Dermid on this occasion was most praiseworthy. Reneghan stood charged with sheep-stealing.— When we are upon this subject, we must repeat what we have so often said, that the insecure state of most of our jails in the interior, renders it almost impossible, in spite of the utmost vigilance, to be responsible for the safe custody of prisoners. And the total lack of lock-up houses along the line of road, renders equally difficult to constables in charge of prisoners to guard them in a proper manner. Prisoners, lodged in huts and public-houses, can never be safe, and as constables need sleep as well as other persons, it is next to impossible to prevent escapes, especially when only one constable is in charge.

(Image: news article detailing Reneghan's capture, Tuesday 25 March 1834¹²)

⁹ Supreme Court Records 1834 – Hobart Town, Archives of Tasmania, SC32/1/2 image 126, <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/Record/NamesIndex/1508139>

¹⁰ Colonial Secretary's Office, Archives of Tasmania, CSO 1/176/4296 p241.

¹¹ Ibid, p247.

¹² "No title" *The Colonist and Van Diemen's Land Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser* (Hobart Town, Tas. : 1832 - 1834) 25 March 1834: 2. Web. 6 Feb 2025 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article201159292>>.

Reneghan was recaptured over a month after his escape, and his captors “absolutely refused” the five pound reward offered by Dudfield, who commended their actions in correspondence following Reneghan’s capture.¹³

Following his recapture and conviction for the original sheep stealing charge, Reneghan was imprisoned at Port Arthur for some time before ending up in Ross in 1842¹⁴. In 1844 he received his ticket of leave¹⁵, however his ticket of leave was revoked three years later, according to later entries on his conduct record¹⁶. The last entry in Reneghan’s conduct record prior to his death reads: “Granted a pardon available everywhere save in the United Kingdom and the Island of VDLand, 27/10/54”. Just under a month later, he died in hospital in Ross at the age of 84¹⁷.

¹³ Colonial Secretary’s Office, Archives of Tasmania, CSO 1/176/4296 p253

¹⁴ Conduct Record for Matthew Reneghan (2), Archives of Tasmania, CON35/1/1 image 470, <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/Digital/CON35-1-1/CON35-1-1P470>

¹⁵ "THE GAZETTE." *Colonial Times (Hobart, Tas. : 1828 - 1857)* 28 May 1844: 4. Web. 6 Feb 2025 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article8754918>>.

¹⁶ Conduct Record for Matthew Reneghan (2), Archives of Tasmania, CON35/1/1 image 470, <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/Digital/CON35-1-1/CON35-1-1P470>

¹⁷ Convict Records, Archives of Tasmania, CON63/1/2 pR6, <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/Digital/CON63-1-2/1355351>

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