

Meagher of the Sword

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Meeger. Marger, Meheheher. These are a few of the names I've been called amongst others. I was even called Mr Nietzsche the other week by a sales assistant at David Jones. It's Meagher – M E A G H E R a gaelic Irish name. Occasionally it's useful, such as when telemarketers ring up

"Please may I speak to Mr Meeger"

" I'm afraid there's no one here by that name"

But most of the time its just a pain in the arse trying to correct people. It's not very common in Australia, and even less common where I come from in New Zealand, so when I see my name inscribed somewhere, I'm always curious. Such as about 10 years ago when I was trailing my wife – ex-wife – through the January sales at Peter's of Kensington (sigh) and I ended up next to the Waterford Crystal display.

"Aah, what's that?"

It was a Meagher Whiskey decanter.

"Hmm, I wonder who they named that after?"

Grandad Jim? My grandfather owned a pub in New Zealand during WW2 and because of war shortages was forced to import whisky from Australia so cloudy he had to strain it through fish bladders before he sold it.

"No probably not."

It was a \$1000.00 so I put it back quite carefully.

It wasn't til I read a book many years later – by one of the peninsula's residents Tom Keneally – on 19th century Ireland, that I discovered I had a namesake, perhaps a distant relative after whom the whiskey decanter was named. His name was Thomas Francis Meagher and what an extraordinary life he led. He was born into a wealthy family in Waterford in 1823, his father in fact was the mayor, and educated by the Jesuits and then in England. He was described as elegant, a wonderful orator and a favourite with the ladies. When he was 25, he brought the green white and orange flag back from France and flew it on Irish soil for the first

time, and that same year attempted to raise a rebellion against the English with the other leaders of the Young Irelanders. The year was 1848 and Ireland was being stalked by Phytophthora Infestans,

“ The Potato Blight – given to us by God – but it was Queen Victoria who gave us the famine that took a million men women and children to the grave”

In the grand tradition of Irish rebellion it was terribly organized – they rode around South West Ireland to enthusiastic crowds declaring

“We’ll be rising up but it won’t be today, we’re thinking about a week or two”

Inevitably, the English got wind of it and captured the rebels. Meagher in fact turned himself in after having his honour questioned, and not for the last time, by a newspaper article suggesting he was afraid of being a martyr. At his trial in Dublin he declared to the assembled judges

“My Lord, this is our first offence but not our last. If you go easy with us this once, we promise on our word as gentlemen to try better next time”

Not surprisingly, he was convicted and sentenced to hanging and quartering, the drawing having presumably been removed from the sentence by that stage on humanitarian grounds. Fortunately for him and the other leaders there was a huge public outcry and the sentence was promptly commuted to transportation to Van Dieman’s Land.

Now because he was wealthy and educated, he and the other rebels were treated very differently from the common criminals. While they were waiting for their convict ship at Richmond Gaol , he dined with the prison Governor and furnished his cell with possessions carted up from Waterford including French wall hangings, a library of books and numerous keepsakes sent by adoring women. On their arrival in Hobart, instead of being sent to Port Arthur, these violent treasonous Empire threatening revolutionaries were detained there by making them promise not to escape. A method that had some rather obvious flaws.

Meagher was given a ticket of leave up the Macquarie River, out of a place called Campbell Town, where he was able to hunt and fish and ride. He had his own cottage with a servant and free range of the local ladies, one of whom he married and who bore him two children, neither of which, incidentally, he ever saw.

When his supporters in Ireland arranged a ship for him to escape, he released his bonds by writing a formal letter to the local authority.

" To the Police Magistrate, Lake Sorrell, District of Campbelltown, Saturday January 3rd 1852. Sir, circumstances of a recent occurrence urge upon me the necessity of resigning my ticket of leave and consequently withdrawing my parole. I write this letter respectfully to apprise you that after..."

" Twelve o'clock tomorrow noon, I shall no longer consider myself bound by the obligations... Strike me pink. Nothing but trouble since he arrived and now the Irish bastard's escaping. Why in the Devil's name do they send them up here to me. They belong in Port Arthur. You.. you... get up there and arrest him."

Now this is where the accounts of the escape diverge and his honour was again called into question. According to the police constables:

"Sir Magistrate sir, we wish to report that we could not find him sir. When we approached the dwelling, he was not there or thereabouts, so we dismounted our horses and entered the cottage sir. Waited in the kitchen for some hours, and as he did not appear, we returned to Campbell Town as instructed sir."

"Well, did you think of having a look for him? Oh never mind, he obviously broke his parole and left straight away... Bloody bogtrotters"

But according to Meagher's own account published in the New York Herald

"I remained in my cottage at Lake Sorrell until seven o'clock that evening. A few minutes after that hour, four of my friends arrived on horseback and communicated to me the intelligence that the police were coming to arrest me. I went out into the bush and remained there about 300 yards from the cottage, until my servant brought the news that the police had arrived and were sitting in the kitchen. We mounted our horses immediately and rode down to the cottage until I came close to the stables which were within pistol shot of the kitchen door. I drew up there and desired him to go in and tell the police I was waiting for them. The moment they appeared, I rose up in my stirrups, called out to them that I was the prisoner they came to arrest, and defied them to do so. The challenge was echoed by my friends with three loud hearty cheers, in the midst of which, I struck spurs to my horse and dashed into the woods in the direction of the coast."

After a few more adventures , he was duly picked up by his ship and conveyed to America where he was given a rapturous welcome by the expatriate Irish community, however the question of whether he dishonoured Ireland by breaking his parole followed him across the Pacific and was eventually published in "The Freeman's Journal" Outraged he stormed off to the newspaper office to demand a retraction, but finding the editor not there, he lay in wait outside his residence and according to contemporary accounts attacked him severely and repeatedly with a horse whip, receiving a graze to the face with a pistol ball in return.

He finally settled the matter by agreeing to a trial organized by his friends at which he naturally represented himself, and was roundly acquitted of all charges.

When the American Civil War broke out in 1860, he used his powers of oratory to raise a regiment of Irish volunteers for the Union Army and ended the war with the rank of Brigadier General. It's fair to say that while his courage as a soldier was never questioned, his sobriety often was. According to whichever account you choose to believe, he lost his horses in battle either by having them shot out from under him or falling off them drunk.

After the war , he was appointed the inaugural Governor of the new state of Montana, and in 1867 at the age of 44 he ended up at the bottom of the Missouri river after having one too many whiskies and falling off the back of a paddle steamer.

"They said I was too fond of the bottle. Well what Irishman doesn't have a drop of whiskey in his veins? They said I was too much of a favourite with the ladies, well what of it? I'm not called Meagher of the sword for nothing. But to question my honour... I regret nothing I have ever done, retract nothing I have ever said, and I crave with no lying lips the life I consecrate to the liberty of my country."