

4 : A Clarence Man

The River

The Clarence River rises in a watershed on the Great Dividing Range, just below the Queensland border. Like the Nile, it falls into two distinct tracts, the Upper and the Lower Clarence. The Upper Clarence is a place of white rapids, gorges and waterfalls. The Lower Clarence winds coastwards among choice grazing plains and through broad stretches of placid blue-grey water to flow into the sea between the heads at Yamba and Iluka. The river's name honours the Duke of Clarence, and the Duke of Richmond is likewise saluted by the Clarence's companion stream to the north. The Aboriginal name is Ulgundahi. The area is in the lands of the Gumbainggir and Bundjalung peoples, who often showed great kindness to European travellers or wanderers lost in the Clarence River bush, but did not welcome settlers.

Locals claim that there are ninety-nine islands in the Clarence. At last count there were one hundred and two. Some, like Woodford Island, are large enough to accommodate several villages, and others are mere clots of riverine trash washed down over millennia. The waters are brackish and tidal for a long reach, and the fishing is splendid, but the placid Clarence can flood 'angry, swift and vexed' when heavy



inland rains fall. It carries all before it, drowns its islands, swamps its settlements, sweeps away homes and stock and the lives of some of its people. Cook and Flinders saw the river mouth, and John Oxley named it, but Richard Craig, escaped Moreton Bay convict, was the first to examine some of the splendour of what he called 'The Big River'. The description Craig brought to Sydney helped to win him his freedom. The news brought sawyers north in quest of cedar and other softwood trees.

Cattlemen followed the timber-getters. Early settlers on the Lower Clarence experimented with wool and

wheat growing, but neither thrived. The land was best suited for fattening stock, and for crops of maize, which was in high demand for feed in an era when horses were the main motive power. Sugar cane did well, so well that the Clarence became known as a 'sugar river'.

The northern districts of New South Wales took some time to populate. Travel between the rivers and Sydney was by sea alone, until explorers found a suitable overland route. The cost of shipping farm produce to Sydney was considerable, and the shortage of free labour that followed the end of the convict era also hampered development. 'These evils will, however, in some measure be gradually, if not rapidly, removed, so soon as emigration shall commence to flow to our northern shores', wrote a hopeful Port Macquarie correspondent in 1841. In the early 1860s, the flow of selectors increased. A local newspaper commented sardonically:

Free selection appears to be the only topic of interest now-a-days, the river contiguous to and below Woodford Island is literally covered with boats, passing up and down. In one boat you will see the fortunate selector with his bag of rations, pots, kettle, and pan piled up in the stern, while the bow contains his tent or future house, his dog who is to be his only companion for a time, and his American axe, with which he intends to deal destruction to the gigantic trees in the scrub around him. In another you may observe a party on the look-out for a farm : how carefully they examine the different lots still open for selection. The quality of the land, the probability of escape in time of flood, the chances of obtaining fresh water, are some of the chief points to be settled, but we fear these points have been overlooked by some of our 'free selectors' who have situated themselves in unpleasant, if not dangerous positions.

John and Michael Rush were part of this flow, and the Robertson Selection Acts helped to make the Rush boys proprietors, not mere labourers. John Rush selected land on Chatsworth Island, 59 acres of fine alluvial soil albeit at risk of disappearing now and then under flood waters. It was a holding twice the size of the Rush family's tenant farm in Dooish.

Stockman, Butcher, Oarsman

Among the first of the Clarence squatters was Mr John Small (shown **right**). Mr Small came from Sydney to the Clarence circa 1838 in the sloop *Susan*. He was in search of the cedar trees reported by the convict Craig. Small and others of his family bought land and took up residence on Woodford Island near Brushgrove. The *Susan* brought a small herd of horned cattle, and Mr Small commenced operations as a grazier and butcher. Small may at first have been supplied with 'assigned servants', meaning convict labour, but emigrant labour at high wages soon took their place.



A description of a nearby property offered for sale in 1846 gives us some idea of the kind of farm where Michael went to work, and aspired to own.

FOR SALE, a Station on the Clarence River, situate at Woodford Island, about twenty miles from the Heads, well watered in the driest seasons, consisting of about two hundred head, more or less; a mixed herd, with about forty well-bred milking cows, all broken in to bail : a well bred bull; three brood mares, broken into saddle; two fillies, three colts, and a capital stock horse. There is a cleared paddock of about thirty acres, enclosed with a good fence, together with all useful and necessary agricultural Implements, and six working bullocks, with bows, yokes, and chains; a comfortable dwelling house is on the station, containing four rooms, men's hut, dairy, barn, piggery, with about thirty pigs, fowl house, stock-yards, calf-pens, milking yard, and bails. The advantages of this station to a small beginner consists in the cheap and convenient communication with Sydney by water carriage, by means of the steamer, which makes her trips regularly once a fortnight, besides coasting vessels which pass the island, thus avoiding the tedious, expensive communication by land. Also, a new boat, with oars, &c.

Several members of John Small's family farmed in the area. Which of these Michael Rush worked for is not clear, though it was probably John F. Small (Jnr.), who had a butchery. Michael's stock-handling background and fellmongering skills learned from his Uncle Michael would have stood him in good stead. The connection between Mr Small and Mr McGrath may have been a friendship, or at any rate a business relationship, made through the butchery trade. Like the family of Mary McGrath née Fitzpatrick, the Small family were of convict origin. Family folklore says that it was in this place and at this time that Michael Rush learned to row, delivering meat and other produce, perhaps milk and butter, to selectors. Later in his life, Michael described his first rowing lesson:

He had previously not the slightest idea of handling an oar. His first essays were of the rudest description. At that time, the only means of conveyance or communication on the Clarence was by boats. In those days there were neither bridges, punts, nor steamboats; the rich islands were a mass of logs and scrub. It was a novelty to see a steamer, and a sugar-mill was not dreamt of. In the same locality to-day, scores of steamboats and sugar-mills are at work daily. Rush became a rower by necessity, and his first instructor, who might be said to have chipped off the rough edges and licked him into shape, Mr G. Martin, still lives on the Clarence. Shortly after Rush's arrival Mr Martin undertook to row him down to his (Rush's) brother's farm, some few miles further down the river, and I might give Rush's own description of his first lesson in rowing. 'I said, "That looks very easy; let me row awhile." Mr Martin replied that he wanted to get down with the tide and preferred rowing himself. I felt snubbed, for it seemed so simple that I thought I could row as fast as he was doing. With some additional persuasion he let me have the oars. I

tried hard, but found it was not so easy as it looked, and though my friend did all he could to instruct me I had to give it up. He consoled me by saying I would soon learn, but my own impression was that I never could.' His next lessons were at the hands of Mr O. Colnan in a 3 ton boat with oars 20 feet long. His tutor at first delighted in occasionally showing his superiority by rowing the boat into a bush or mudbank, till at last both were on pretty equal terms, when many a hard and good natured struggle was indulged in, the mudbank deciding the day.

The boats Michael and others rowed were sturdy gigs known to the locals as 'settler boats' or 'farmer work boats'; also 'baker' or 'butcher boats'. The latter names are maritime terms describing a rowing vessel that delivers fresh produce to a ship moored in a port or harbour. In modern terms, butcher boats were the utilities or light trucks of early Clarence settlers. They were not built for racing, but nineteen-year old Michael and other local lads seemed to have enjoyed impromptu rowing contests, just as some lads today like to race their over-powered farm 'utes'. Racing butcher-boats was so prevalent a pastime on the Clarence that it soon became a characteristic event at the regattas on the northern rivers, and remained so for many years afterwards.



Figure 1 : Clarence River butcher-boat crew, 1935.
These heavy boats were often rowed by just one oarsman.

Michael did not stay long with Mr Small. At Grafton, on 8 June, 1864, he acquired by free selection 84 acres of Lower Clarence River land. He chose lots F and G, Portions Nos. 30 and 31, in the Parish of Ashby. At the age of 20, Michael Rush was at last his own man. It is like Michael's impulsive character to have taken on a much larger portion of land than his brother. There was a more urgent reason for Michael to have set himself up with some place to live and the means to support himself: he was about to be married.

Selector at Ashby

Ashby lies on the western bank of the North Arm of the Clarence River, just below Chatsworth and Harwood Islands. It probably took its name from Ashby-de-la-Zouche. One of its earlier squatters was Mr Clark Irving, who owned and operated the coasting steamer Agnes Irving named in honour of his daughter. Mr Irving had for some years operated a meat preserving business on Ashby Island, and it is probable Michael sold carcasses to these works. Michael's first purchased land lay opposite the tip of Ashby Island. He was later to take up more and more land, for example, Portion 25 at Ashby in 1871. For example, he has two listings in the Post Office Directory of 1867, at Brushgrove, and at Rocky Mouth, though in 1872, he is still listed at Ashby. The 'residence' qualification for free selectors was not enforced until 1875 when Inspectors were appointed, but it was still flouted. By that time, Michael was living elsewhere. Perhaps that is the reason he sold in that year his Portion 25 at Ashby to Hugh McInnes of Grafton. It was one of many such disposals of Michael's property. He seemed never to

hold on to any possessions for very long. Michael keenly enjoyed acquiring, but was not much interested in owning.

FOR SALE,

A FARM, containing 127 acres, situated in the parish of **ASHBY**, adjoining Mr. A. M'Auley's Butchering Establishment. The **IMPROVEMENTS** consist of a large and substantially built **SLAUGHTER HOUSE, STOCKYARDS**. Nearly the whole of the land is fenced in, and about 12 acres cleared. First-rate ~~agricultural~~ land. A four roomed **HOUSE** and other improvements. A first-class opening for a butcher or meat preserving establishment, having deep water frontage. To be **SOLD CHEAP**.

For terms and particulars, apply to the undersigned, on the premises

MICHAEL RUSH.

Figure 2 : Less than ten years in the Colony, and already prosperous.
This advert appeared in August, 1870, when Michael Rush moved to Rocky Mouth.

Michael Rush lived on his Ashby selection for at least some of his early Clarence River life; one of his children gave Ashby as her birthplace. Of Michael's manner of living there, he has left us no story. On the other hand, there are several descriptions of early days on the Clarence written by pioneers, or by their descendants. One of these accounts is by Michael's eldest son, John Thomas 'Jack' Rush. Jack Rush wrote about Clarence settlers, but between the lines we can read his recollection of an enjoyable country boyhood.

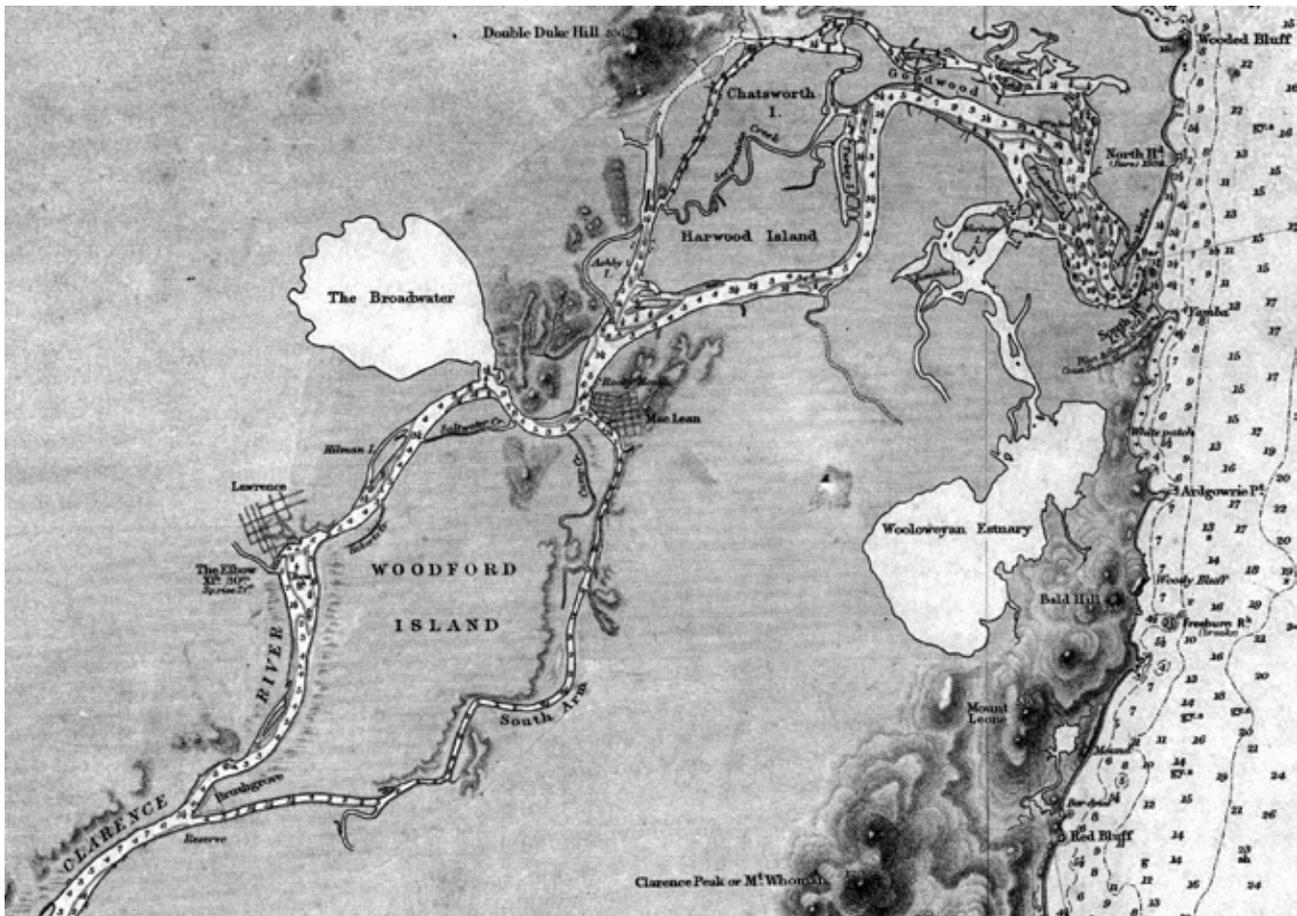


Figure 3 : The area of the Lower Clarence where Michael and John Rush settled.



4: A CLARENCE MAN

SOME HISTORY OF THE EARLY CLARENCE RIVER AND UP TO 40 YEARS AGO

J. T. Rush

I do not remember the great influx of farmers who came to the Clarence to take up farm land under Sir John Robertson's free selection scheme, but knew hundreds of them some years later. They were only allowed to occupy 40 acres, but there was nothing better in the State. The price was £1 per acre with very easy terms to pay. I do not think anything was paid until a crop was harvested.

These pioneers came mostly without money and the local storekeeper supplied their needs and it took several years to get out of debt. When a certain number of blocks were taken up a surveyor was sent to put in their boundary pegs. These men cleared the dense jungle and burnt off what they could, but many large logs remained and for the first year they had to walk between the logs carrying the seed maize, which was planted with a hoe.

MAIZE AT 1s 8d

While the maize was growing they had to contend with wallabies and paddy melons [*pademelons Thylogale thetis*] and bandicoots - the latter often ate the seed. When the maize was cobbing the white Cockatoos, King and other Parrots devoured it. When the crop matured, it was pulled [harvested] and carried in sacks to the barn to be husked, threshed and bagged. At that time, maize was 1/8 to 1/9 [one shilling and ninepence] per bushel in the Sydney market, but freight had to be paid and sacks purchased and one bag of four bushels only realised 5/- to 6/- [six shillings], and this was the only crop at that time. Potatoes and sugar cane came later. These sturdy settlers thought nothing of hardships and plodded for years until their properties were free of debt and many a wealthy farmer to-day owes his success not only to his own efforts, but also to the foresight of Sir John Robertson, who was then Premier.

The selectors assisted each other. They felled the timber in the forests nearby, and split posts and rails for fences, also for huts and barns and erected them. Mostly earth floors, but the women were also game in those days and waited for flooring boards.

THEY WERE SUPERMEN

There were few horses and carts, but they got the timber in somehow. They were supermen. We shall not see them again. They cleared tracks to the river, which, fortunately, was deep in most places, and dragged the maize on home-made slides, where it was loaded into punts and towed by rowing boat to the nearest wharf for shipment to Sydney, largely by small schooners. If the ship was lost, so was the crop. They raised poultry under difficulties. Native cats and carpet snakes devoured them by night, hawks took the chicks by day, goannas ate the eggs. If the ducklings went to the creek, the eels ate them. The selectors grew potatoes and pumpkins for their own use, but green vegetables were out of the question as they were eaten as they appeared above ground and often bandicoots ate the seed. Some planted peach trees and bananas, but the flying foxes ate most of the peaches. When the scrub was felled and burnt off, cape gooseberries came up everywhere and were a real asset as they could be eaten as a fruit or made into jam or pies. This was the case all over the river where scrub was cleared. Passionfruit also grew in the scrub and climbed to the tops of the trees.

BUTTER AND MILK UNKNOWN

Butter and milk were unknown for some years. Rats and mice ate the sacks and fattened on the maize. Carpet snakes were often allowed to live in barns because they ate the rats and mice, but they in their turn ate the young fowls that could not get on the roost, and a hen on eggs had no chance unless well protected. Ants swarmed everywhere and food was slung under scrub trees in flour bags from ants, blowflies and goannas, but there were redeeming features. The river teemed with fish, there was an abundance of game and plenty of honey if you knew where and how to get it, but the aborigines were experts at finding honey, made by the small sting-less Australian bee. Bananas were largely grown in later years, but there were few plantations when I left the river. I cut thousands of bunches when I was a youngster. My father shipped about 500 bunches each week from Maclean purchased from farmers. There was no packing. The stalks of the bunches were branded with a steel brand and they were thrown into a general heap on the steamer for Sydney. The settlers were mostly English, Irish, Scotch and German.

It is contrary to our notions of Michael Rush that he would spend his life clearing scrub, ringbarking trees, ploughing and planting, chipping weeds and fighting off snakes and bandicoots. There were are no snakes in

Ireland, and certainly no bandicoots. The *Agricultural Class Book* does not mention cockatoos or pademelons; it does not mention vermin at all. It is not like Michael, for example, to sit for hours husking and stripping corn cobs. It must not be said that Michael Rush was lazy. Rather, he sought always a quick return for effort. Not for him the plodding life, the back-breaking labour to reap a modest crop; Michael Rush had a grander vision. Or else it was mere short-sightedness. It must be added that by the time Michael arrived in the Clarence, the choicest selections had long ago been snapped up. The remaining land would have to be worked hard to make it pay.

Michael must have had doubts about the arduous and risky life of a selector, if ever he really intended to be one. He will have seen the impact of the pleuro-pneumonia bacterium on Clarence River herds. This would have given Michael pause had he considered spending his life as a raiser of cattle. On the other hand, Michael surely loved life on the Clarence. He felt that mysterious and primitive that compels us towards flowing water, the exhilaration it brings. He sought a way to enjoy the best of this life while avoiding the and on 9 May, 1871 we find him announcing his proprietorship new store at Rocky Mouth. How much more like Mick Rush is To stand behind his own counter all day, dispensing geniality to bustle of customers, along with BOOTS and SHOES and IRON BEDSTEADS, and perhaps dispensing more credit than is good fledgling business. For there are worse risks than snakes and bandicoots for a storekeeper to face. Selectors were notoriously up for cash, and many of them ran up enormous debts, mortgaged to next season's crop which might succumb to fire, flood or disease, never mind pademelons. Storekeepers had been bankrupted before due to their customers' defaulting.

NEW STORE.
ROCKY MOUTH.
THE UNDERSIGNED begs to state that he has
OPENED A GENERAL STORE.
AT ROCKY MOUTH,
WHERE EVERY ARTICLE WILL BE
Sold at the Lowest Possible Price for Cash.
A splendid assortment of Men's and children's
BOOTS and SHOES on hand, also, a lot of first-
class IRON BEDSTEADS, to be
SOLD VERY CHEAP.
MICHAEL RUSH,
GENERAL STOREKEEPER.

force
He
worst,
of a
this!
a
for a
hard

Michael Rush found the money to become a storekeeper by selling his Ashby butchering business. And by this time, he had discovered an even readier source of quick cash than the sale of land. All this will be explained in our next chapter, but it is useful to observe how, at this early stage in his life and career, Michael Rush rapidly abandoned one venture and hurried on to another. We can see at work here the two halves of his nature. On one side is the prudence of Uncle Michael, which prompted Mick Rush to open a store and earn a steady income. On the other we detect the brashness of his Uncle Thomas, who could win a glittering cascade of sovereigns in less than half an hour. Mick Rush almost certainly financed his store with winnings from two sculling matches held in 1870, no less than seven hundred pounds. The risks and outlays involved in racing were far more dangerous than those of commerce, but at this stage, Mick Rush must have felt himself almost invincible, cocooned by success, and by love. For, helping him behind the counter of their brand new Rocky Mouth store was Mrs Michael Rush, *née* Annie Fitzpatrick.

The Fitzpatricks of Emu Plains

The Fitzpatricks were of Irish Catholic and convict origin. Thomas Fitzpatrick, born 1801, hailed from Queen's County, where he had been employed as a butler and groom. In 1825 he was charged with horse-stealing, and sentenced to seven years' transportation. Thomas arrived in Sydney aboard the *Henry Porcher* in December of 1825, and was assigned as a labourer to the household of the Reverend Matthew Devenish-Meares who was Assistant Chaplain of a parish which comprised Wilberforce, Sackville and Pitt Town. It was here that Thomas Fitzpatrick met Mary Walsh, who in 1828 had been transported for 14 years (crime unknown) from Queen's County. They married in October 1829, and eventually had eleven children, of whom three come into our story: Mary, Thomas Montrose, and Anne Aby, known as Annie Theresa.

Around 1842, upon both receiving their discharge and freedom, Thomas and Mary Fitzpatrick became farmers, probably tenants, on the rich riverine soils of Emu Plains which were suited to raising wheat, maize and cattle. Emu Plains was the location of cattle saleyards, to which drovers brought stock from the inland grazing lands, and where Sydney butchers purchased beasts for slaughter. It was here that Michael McGrath may have met and done business with the Fitzpatrick family. In 1853, he married Mary Fitzpatrick, and in the early 1860s, the Fitzpatrick family came to live in Camperdown. It is there that Annie Fitzpatrick probably met the Rush boys, and took a fancy to Michael.

The Fitzpatricks later moved to Rylstone NSW, where Thomas Fitzpatrick (Senior) died in August 1868. Mary Fitzpatrick *née* Walsh died in 1882, in George Street Camperdown, where she was living with her daughter,

Mary McGrath. On the death certificate of Mary (Senior), Michael McGrath is described as her son-in-law, so the connection between the Fitzpatrick, McGrath and Rush families is made clear: Mary (Jnr.) and Annie were sisters. Mary McGrath was Michael Rush's aunt by marriage, and then became his sister-in-law. Michael McGrath was Michael Rush's uncle, and became his brother-in-law as well. These strong family ties drew Michael and Annie Rush back to Sydney often.

Family Matters

The simple marriage notice in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 25 September 1865 tells us a number of interesting things about Michael Rush, and when considered alongside a copy of the couple's Marriage Certificate, we learn even more. It was one of only six marriage notices in that day's issue. The population of Sydney at that time was around 65,000 people, and there were surely many more marriages taking place, but the Rush vows were

MARRIAGES.
On the 4th July, at Trinity Church, Paddington, by the Rev. James Leitch Moody, M.A., chaplain to the Forces, assisted by the Rev. D. L. Cousins, M.A., incumbent of Kingswood, the Rev. George Woodyatt, B.A., incumbent of Radstone, Northamptonshire, eldest son of the Rev. Edward Woodyatt, M.A., of Hastings, and grandson of the late Sir Nigel Bower Woodyatt, of Falden, county Derby, Bart., to Eliza, only daughter of the Rev. John Fendall, M.A., Glebe Point.
On the 10th instant, at St. Michael's Church, Berry Hills, by the Rev. T. O'Reilly, Anthony Reilly Adams, youngest son of the late Captain Thomas Adams, Cavan Light Infantry, to Eliza Anna, eldest daughter of the late Henry Augustus Moore, Esq., of Sydney College.
On the 11th instant, by special licence, at St. Mary's Cathedral, by the Rev. M. J. Dwyer, Mr. Michael Rush, of the Clarence River, native of the county Tyrone, Ireland, to Miss Anne Theresa Fitzpatrick, youngest daughter of Mr. Thomas Fitzpatrick, Camperdown, late of King Plains.
On the 11th instant, by special licence, at St. Ann's Church, Hyde, by the Rev. G. E. Turner, Robert Hervey Fouchier, son of the late Mr. James Fouchier, and nephew of Henry Hervey, Esq., of Parramatta, to Sarah Jane, eldest daughter of Mr. William Gould, of Hyde.
On the 12th instant, by special licence, at St. Stephen's Church, Newtown, by the Rev. Charles Kemp, Robert Andrew Russell, of Sydney, to Mary Jane, eldest daughter of Robert Morrow, 101 Lane, Concordtown.
On Saturday, the 13th instant, by special licence, at St. Matthew's Church, Paddington, by the Very Rev. the Dean of Sydney, assisted by the Rev. F. Spragg, M.A., Austin Thomas, eldest son of Austin Thomas Wilshire, Esq., Elford House, Gosmore Road, to Fanny Josephine, eldest daughter of Thomas Vaughan, Esq., J.P., Bradley, Greenwich Road.

announced in the company of Sydney's social elect: the Rev. George Woodyatt, grandson of Sir Nigel Bower Gresley, Bart. High Sheriff of Derbyshire; Anthony Reilly Adams, youngest son of Captain Adams, Cavan Light Infantry; Austin Thomas, the son of Austin Thomas Wilshire, Esq. proprietor of tanneries; a Camperdown publican's daughter, the nephew of a Parramatta gentleman, and Michael Rush. Michael and Mary McGrath were witnesses, and the wedding was conducted by the Rev. Michael J. Dwyer, O. S. B. who among other things was Roman Catholic Chaplain of Darlinghurst Gaol, grandson of the exiled Irish rebel Michael Dwyer, and Prefect of Studies and President of Lyndhurst College, Glebe. Annie being just 19 years of age, her father's consent was required for the marriage. Michael Rush gives his age as 21 years, which gives the lie to his being 20 years of age when he arrived four years ago. Michael gives his occupation as 'farmer', so he is no longer working for Mr Small and must be occupying his Ashby selection. Annie is shown as a 'housekeeper', and family

folklore says she was at the time living with an 'Aunt Jane'. Most interesting of all is the place of marriage given, St Mary's Cathedral. Interesting, because the premises had burned almost to the ground three months before.

With St Mary's in ruins, where did the ceremony take place? The temporary cathedral built of wood was not commenced until August 1865. It was not completed and consecrated until November. The Chapter House was built the following year. Perhaps Michael and Annie were married in the chapel of Archbishop Polding's residence? Or, since the bell tower and façade of the ruined cathedral were still standing, perhaps they were married on the steps, under a marquee.



Figure 4 : St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, was gutted by fire in June 1865. Where, then, did Michael and Annie wed?

The weather that morning had been overcast, with a shower or two of rain, but the rest of the day was fine and clear, and a pleasant 20°C. An excellent outlook for a long and happy marriage. On what date Michael arrived in Sydney to prepare for his wedding we do not know. We do know that Richard Green rowed against William Hickey on Saturday August 26, 1865, Hickey winning £200. It is not impossible that Michael came down from Ashby in plenty of time to watch these two champions in action, and see the stakes paid over at Punch and McGrath's Hotel.

Mrs Annie Rush

We must admire little Annie Rush for her courage in setting out with Michael to take up life as a selector's wife. We expect Michael had already constructed some sort of hut or humpy for them to occupy. He should have known something of the matter if, as most Irish tenant farmers did, his family had built their cabin with their own hands. If not, others may have helped him erect a slab hut in the Australian manner, there being no shortage of timber, and, Michael Rush being the amiable fellow he was, no shortage of friends. We admire Annie's grit, being left alone so often on the river bank while Michael was away, droving stock or delivering meat, or in other ways earning their keep. We hope that Annie made friends among the women-folk, for she was soon pregnant with the first of their fifteen children, the last infant being born on Australia Day, 1892. Twenty-six years of bearing and nursing - and sorrow, for Annie lost some of her babies.



Family folklore has it that Annie was often frightened when left alone, especially if Michael was away overnight. She was terrified of the Aborigines, plenty of whom still lived in the area, though there is no evidence that they did Annie or Michael any harm. Annie would lock herself inside the hut, but Michael would afterwards tease her saying, that's no good, they can smell you in there. It is also possible that, rather than building, Michael rented a house in the hamlet of Ashby, which lies just a mile or so down river from his selection on the slopes below Sandeman Hill, opposite Rocky Mouth. Annie may have been less lonely there. Equally possible is that Annie went to live at Rocky Mouth almost immediately. Adverts in the *Examiner* give Rocky Mouth as the address of Michael Rush as early as 1866.



Folk must have smiled to see Annie and Mick together. Convict records tell us that Thomas Fitzpatrick was just five feet four inches tall. His daughter Annie was a little bit of a thing, but Michael Rush in his prime was six foot high - he had to stoop to enter their cabin door. In other ways, they were perfectly matched. If Annie Rush had been a different sort of woman, peevish, discontented, fretful, nagging, resentful of the time and money her husband spent rowing, jealous of its hold over him, no-one outside his family might ever have heard of Michael Rush. On the contrary, Annie was Michael's sturdiest supporter. She does not appear much in our story, but without her, Michael's life might not have unfolded this

way at all. The many accounts of Michael's races as a rule do not mention Annie Rush, but we should picture her always standing at the sidelines and cheering as loud as anyone, perhaps with a babe in arms and a toddler clutching her skirt.

As good wives can and do, Annie fed the flowering of her young husband's spirit. Michael McGrath gave Michael a new start in Australia, and Annie gave him love and comfort and approval. He'd left his own home and mother far behind, but Annie gave him a new heart where he could warm himself. Annie Rush does not seem to have minded where they lived, and they were to move several times as Michael's restless spirit took them roaming. Annie made a home for Michael and their children and made the best of whatever circumstances she found.

They were a devoted couple, for Michael was a warm and affectionate fellow, and Annie must have found him endlessly entertaining and attentive – when he was home. She must also have possessed a fine sense of humour and sound common sense. Michael did not win every race and now and then was moody and downcast. Sometimes money was in short supply. Michael did not manage it well. Michael had the stamina and the swagger to meet and make challenge after challenge, but someone gave him the heart to go on, and her name was Annie Rush.

Neighbours

Among those neighbours who may have helped Michael to build himself a home was Prospero Coulon. Usually called 'Pros', his sir-name was almost always misspelt by the press as 'Colone' or 'Colour', or even 'Conlon'. Coulon was a Shoalhaven lad, son of Philadelphia-born sailor Adolphus Coulon, who may have been of Mauritian origin. Pros was a deck-hand, and it was a coasting ship that brought him to the Clarence River early in the 1860s. He took advantage of the Selection Act to take up land on North Arm, he married in 1866, and like many a Clarence farmer, he became an expert boatman. Coulon began his racing career at the Lower Clarence Regattas, beating all comers at Lawrence, Ulmarra and Grafton, until Michael Rush emerged as a force to be reckoned with, finally beating Prosper in 1868, and taking the Championship of the Clarence from him a year later. The two men then joined forces and cheekily decided to take on Sydney's champion rowers. Both had young families. Michael had two daughters and a son by 1869 – but off they went to Port Jackson, to row in the Anniversary Day Regatta of 26 January, 1870.

We will let Michael tell that story. It too will form part of the next chapter. Brimming with confidence and now with a happy home to warm and strengthen his heart, Michael Rush was poised to row himself into sporting history.



