**MOST CELEBTATED BUSHRANGER IN AUSTRALIA**

**WAS FROM DUBLIN**

**by**

**LIAM NOLAN**

The last lines of an old Australian folk song are these:

*And as he closed his mournful eyes, he bid the world adieu,*

 *“Convicts all, pray for the soul of Bold Jack Donahue*

So who was Jack Donahue? And what is a bushranger?

Let’s take the “who” question first.

Jack Donahue, when he died, was a 5ft 4inch, freckle-faced, flaxen-haired, 24-year-old Dubliner who was orphaned as a child. The authorities recorded the facts that he had blue eyes and had a scar under his left nostril.

In Dublin he’d been convicted of “intent to commit a felony”, and they sentenced him to transportation for life. Transportation for life meant being sent in a convict ship to Australia, there to remain for as long as he lived. In his case, that’s the way it worked out. Not that he lived all that long.

Jack Donahue early in life had turned to pick-pocketing to get enough food to stay alive. After the sentence was passed on him in 1823, they eventually put him and 200 other convicts aboard the India-built *Ann and Amelia,* a 600-ton sailing ship.

The voyage down to the Antipodes via the gale-lashed Roaring Forties started from Cork Harbour on 8 September 1824, and ended in Sydney Cove on the second day of January1825. From the moment he stepped ashore, the clock was running down on Jack Donahoe’s short and violent life.

At Carter’s Barracks in Sydney, the place of his initial Australian incarceration, he was soon introduced to the brutal punishments meted out to prisoners who were deemed to have committed a breach of the jail’s rules. He was twice given, and received, 50 lashes. It focused his mind on the subject of escape. And escape he did.

At muster one evening the jailers discovered that Donahue and two other convicts were missing. A report of the escape described how, “at the risk of suffocation he [Donahue] passed from a closet into a sewer, and thence found an exit.” The two other convicts, Smith and Kilroy, joined him, and later formed the nucleus of a gang with Donahue as the leader.

Donahue broke into a house at Brickfields Hill and, by use of threats, got hold of a gun, gunpowder, cartridges, food, and a suit of clothes. He was on his way as a bushranger. But what is a bushranger?

A bushranger is, by definition, a person who lives by robbing travellers and isolated homesteads in the bush.

One of the first travellers Donahoe robbed was a mounted, armed and uniformed officer, who claimed to be the Governor’ s aide-de-camp. Donahue took this worthy’s horse, his diamond ring, his watch, and a purse containing a substantial sum of money. Donahue (who was to become known as “Bold Jack Donahoe”) christened the horse “Deliverer”.

A short time later the gang ambushed three men driving drays that were being used for the delivery of provisions to up-country stations. The men not only capitulated, they joined Donahue’s gang, now known as The Strippers. In time its numbers swelled to17.

The authorities decided that the time had come to hunt down the band of bushrangers in an all-out campaign to crush the popular Jack Donahue. Police and soldiers were mobilised to carry out the manhunt.

Donahue and two of his gang (Kilroy and Smith) were captured, tried, and sentenced to death. Smith and Kilroy duly swung from the gallows — Donahue didn’t. Once again he escaped.

A reward of £20 was offered for his capture. Result — zilch.

But the pressure mounted relentlessly, and finally Donahue and his gang were cornered by a large group of soldiers and police. They engaged in a bloody shoot-out, during which Donahue repeatedly shouted insults and foul epithets at his massed attackers. A bullet to the head killed him. Trooper John Muckleston was the shooter.

The soldiers and police, far outnumbering the gang, killed most of them. The ones who survived were executed.

That wasn’t the end of the Jack Donahue story. Balladeers and songwriters, conscious that many people admired Donahue’s courage and his actions in stripping the powerful and the rich of their worldly goods, got down to commemorating his life and death.

One newspaper, describing his death, said, “And thus ended the career of as bold and popular a bushranger as ever was monarch of the highway.”

And he has been immortalised in the best-known Australian folksong “The Wild Colonial Boy” with its fictional hero called, variously, Jack Dubbin/John Dowling/Jim Doolin *et al*, each preserving John Donahoe’s initials.

**(ends)**