

A Short  
**ACCOUNT**  
 Of the LIFE of  
*John \*\*\*\*\**  
 Alias  
*Owen Syllavan,*

Alias *John Living sten,* alias *John Brown,* by which Names he stood indicted by the Grand Jury, and was found Guilty by the Supreme Sessions for the City and County of NEW-YORK, for Counterfeiting and passing the current Bills of that Colony emitted in the Year 1737: And was Executed on Monday the 10th Day of *May* 1756. Shewing what Manner of Life he led from his Infancy. Taken from his own Mouth.

To which is added, HIS  
**Dying Speech**  
 At the Place of Execution.

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*A Short Account of the Life of John \*\*\*\*\**  
*Alias Owen Syllavan*

[ 1756 ]

I was bred and born in the County of *Waxford* in *Ireland,* of English Parents near the Town of *Fedard,* and from my youth I was always in all kind of Mischief; so that I never minded Father nor Mother, Sister nor Brother; but went on in all Manner of Vice, till I came to the Age of eleven Years, or there-about; I was confined by my Parents in a Room, and fed upon Bread and Water for a considerable Time, and then I seemed to humble myself; till I again obtained my Liberty, and after that I was ten Times, worse than I was before; so that my Parents was obliged to send me to another Place, some Distance from home to a School-Master, who my Parents gave strict charge to keep me from Vice, and keep to my Learning.

And the first Night that I lodged there, I was called by an evil Spirit by my Christian Name; *John, John, John, John,* and that for several Minutes together, to the Surprise of myself, and all the Family: and so continued for three or four Nights together, before there was any Notice taken of it; but the fourth Night my Master set up, and Read by me till Eleven o'Clock; and then the Spirit began to call again, *John, John, John,* and that every Minute, for sixty Times together by my Master's Watch; and that lasted so for three Months together. The Ministers from sundry Parishes came to set with me; as also sundry Persons, who always pray'd by me, and giving me all good Advice in their Power, begging and praying of me, to Repent. Then I began to fear GOD; and finding so many Hundreds of People that came to see me from far and near, who took pity upon me. At last some of them concluded to take me to one of their Houses, which they did; as soon as it was eleven o'Clock, the Spirit began to call again, *why John! why John! why John!* it called so loud that the Windows shook, and every one in the House trembled for Fear, except myself. I was taken Sick about five or six Days,

before the Spirit had done calling, and during my Sickness it called louder then before; and as I laid in Bed, there was something that seem'd to press me between my Shoulders with a Hand, but saw nothing.

So this continued till I was Removed to my Parents, who then took Compassion upon me; and to the best of my Knowledge I lay Sick, for about the same Time as the Spirit had called to me before, but not troubled with any more of that evil Spirit. So it pleased GOD to restore me to my former Health, and I went to School again; but fell from Good to Evil, by provoking my Parents and giving ill Advice to others, such as my Play-mates, &c. And when my Parents chastised me for my Faults, I look'd upon it as Tyranny, and told them several Times to exercise their Tyranny upon me. And when I was about thirteen Years of Age I deserted from my Parents, and stroll'd away to a Place called *Bellaback*, near the Passage of *Waterford*, so coming down to the Water Side, there was a small Boat ready to push off, and I desired of them to take me aboard, which they refused and told me they was not going over the Ferry; but told me they was going to *Waterford*, I asked of them to give me a Passage there, for I wanted to see my Aunt; so they asked my Name, and I told my Name was *Owen Syllavan* which was a Lye, for it was there I changed my Name, and so they gave me my Passage to *Waterford*, and I stol'd from Place to Place, till I came to the County of *Limerick*. There was a Gentleman Riding along, asked me whose Son I was, I made answer I was born in *Dublin* and of poor Parentage, and that they were Dead, and I told him I was going to *Cork*, expecting to find some Relations, and told him my Name was *Owen Syllavan*.

The Gentleman told me if I would go and live with him, he would be my Friend and Relation too, with that I consented and went with him to his Country-Seat, his Lady looking out of the Window, he with a smiling Countenance said, I have brought you a pretty Boy to wait upon you, the Lady seemed to like me very well, and I gave them an Indenture to serve for seven Years, and so become my Lady's running Foot-Page. And was train'd up to running, and served them almost six Years, which pleased me better than Schooling; and in the sixth Year of my Servitude, I seemed to be home sick; and set a Resolution if I should be sent of an Errand that way, I would make the best of my Way Home, which was about 100 Miles: And soon after my Master wanted me to carry a Letter to a Gentleman, about twenty Miles distance. I embrac'd that Opportunity, delivered my Letter, but did not wait for any Answer; but went direct for *Waterford*, where I arrived the same Day, about four o'Clock in the Afternoon, which was seventy Miles. When I came to *Waterford*, I drank a Tumbler full of Wine, and being very Hot, I was taken with a Pluratick Pain, and lay Sick there for some Time; although I was then about thirty Miles from my Father's House, I would not let myself be known; but told the People, that my Errand was as far as

*Waxford* Town. After I got well I went down to the Wharf, where I saw several Passengers going on Board of a Vessel bound for *Boston*, in *New-England*; so I goes up to the Captain, and agrees with him for my Passage; and Bound my self for four Years, and in a few Days set Sail for *Boston*; where we arrived in about nine Weeks: but having many Souls on Board, we was very Scant of Provision. I agreed with the Captain to serve him three Years more, for as many Biscuit as I could Eat, during the running of three Glasses, which caused the Captain to burst into a Laughter, and so consented to it: but I was to have no Water during the Time. After our Arrival at *Boston*, I told the Captain I had as soon be Sold for seven Years, as for a Day; since I must be Sold, and to get for me as much as he could. And he Sold me to one Captain *Gillmore*, living about twenty-four Hours Sail to the Eastward of *Boston*, to a Place called *St. George's-River*. I served that Gentleman two Years and an half, in chopping of Wood and clearing of Land; and hearing of a *French* War, my Master and all the Family Removed to *Boston*, except my self; my Master Sold the Remainder of my Time to Captain *Bradbery*, who I served two Years, as a Soldier, and proved faithful to my King and Country.

And after that, contrary to my Master's Will, I listed under Captain *Waldo*, in General *Shirley's* Regiment of Foot, for *Cape-Breton*, and after that, I was Drafted into Captain *Gordon's* Company of Grenadiers, and took great Delight in the Discipline, which pleased my Officers exceedingly, and they was pleased to put me chief Armourer of the Regiment; and some Time after, they thought proper that I should Number and Engrave the Arms of the Regiment belonging to Governor *Shirley*, as also Sir *William Pepperrell's* Regiment's Arms, and so continued as Armourer for two Years; then I unhappily Married a Wife, which proved a Torment to me, and made my Life uncomfortable; and she was given to take a Cup too much, and I for my Part took to the same; and through her aggravating Tongue, neglecting my Business, I was turned out, and was obliged to do private duty again as a common Soldier. And after I was off Duty, I took and set myself up as a Silversmith, and followed Engraving and Seal-Cutting; and as I was Moulding, I cast a *Spanish* Dollar amongst the rest of my Work and laid it down on the Work-Bench, so that I did not care who saw it; and by an ill-minded Man who made it his Business to inform against me, I was taken up for the same and Try'd by a General Court-Marshal; I pleaded Guilty, and by the Dollar's being good Silver was acquitted, and some Time after, I quarrel'd with a brother Soldier, and he complain'd to his Officer about it, and for that Crime I receiv'd Fifty Stripes; and in a short Time after the Regiment was broke, I came to *Boston*, and sat up to Engraving; and in that Time there came two Men who perswaded me to Engrave them a Plate for *New-Hampshire* Money,

which I did, and they Rewarded me well for it. I thought it was an easy Way of getting Money, so I Counterfeited the *Boston* Bills of Credit; but never made none above *Forty Shillings*. Soon after, my Wife and I having differed together, she cry'd out Hey, you Forty Thousand Money-Maker, which was heard by some of the Neighbours, who made a complaint against me; for which I was Apprehended, and stood Tryal, and was acquitted, by Reason they had no Law for that Money: The Attorney-General desired that I should be continued in Custody till next Court, or give Bail for my Appearance; the next Sessions they found a Bill against me for Forgery, and was found Guilty, for which I stood two Hours in the Pillory and received Twenty Lashes at the public Whipping-Post; during my Confinement, I engraved three sorts of Plates, two of *New-Hampshire* Money, and one for *Boston* Currency, and for want of a Rolling Press, struck it off by Hand, sign'd it in Goal and gave it out by Quantities to my Accomplices, and some Time afterwards, being in low Circumstances, two Gentlemen came and paid my Bill of Costs, and took me out of Goal; soon after I came out of Confinement, the *New-Hampshire* Money was found out to be false, (that is the first Money that I Engraved for the Gentlemen,) one of them turned King's Evidence and swore against me for engraving the Plate, and against his Confederate; but both got clear by Swearing it upon me; for my Part I made my Escape and got into *Rhode-Island* Government, where I met with a Man who I had known in *Cape-Breton*, where I laid concealed for some Time; he and sundry more came to me, and desired of me, and intreated of me to cut them a Plate, which I did and struck off *Twelve Thousand Pounds*, and divided the Money amongst them, as I thought proper; and in one Day I changed and past about *Sixteen Hundred Pounds*, and got good Money for it; and coming through the Town of *Providence* one of my Accomplices Wives was taken up for Counterfeiting Money. I told her before she should Swear, that she might say she had the Money from me; and she would never have been taken up, if she had not taken a Bill clandestinely and Sign'd it herself.

My Partner *Nicholas Stephens* and I, rid about three Miles out of Town, and divided the good Money we had by us, and then parted; he Rid in Town and there gave himself up as an Evidence, in behalf of King and Country, and they confin'd him to Goal; and he brought in seven or eight more, who all pleaded not Guilty and swore they had the Money of me, and received it for good Money in Trading; and in about a Week after, I was taken and confin'd to Goal: I was brought to Examination and pleaded Guilty, and said that those People that was in Goal I had Cheated in Trading. I had hid about *Four Thousand Pounds*, which the Authority demanded of me; I told them that I would not deliver the Money till they would deliver, and Discharge the Innocent now Confin'd; and after they

were Discharged, I was brought out under a Guard and delivered up the Money; soon after that, I was brought to Tryal and found Guilty; and was Branded in both Cheeks with the Letter R. and Cropt in both my Ears, so I was returned to Custody again. I broke out of Goal and saw *Nicholas Stephens* Cropt and Branded, the High Sheriff of *Providence* came to me, and desired of me to return to Prison, for he said he should loose his Place; with that I went very quietly, and soon after, on a Monday I broke out of Goal and went to a Husking Frolick about three Miles out of Town, and differ'd with the Company, and got almost Kill'd, and the next Morning returned to my old Prison again, then I was put in strong Irons and confined very close; but I soon found Means to break out again; although they pursu'd me very close, sent Post haste after me, and did all they could to Apprehend me; but all in vain, till I came to *Dutchess* County, in the Province of *New-York*; and going from House to House, there was a Person that knew me, and asked if my Name was not *Syllavan*? No, said I, you are mistaken in the Person my Friend; and so I went off for fear he would betray me; which he did, by describing my Visage and Apparel, and said, he was sure it was *Syllavan* the Money-Maker.

Then I provided my self with a secret retreating Place, at the Side of a Swamp; in a large unfrequented Wood: but hearing that some of my Accomplices were taken, and expecting they would betray me, or discover my Habitation. I therefore abandoned it, and fled to the Mountains, where I concealed my self seven Days; till being compel'd by Hunger, I ventured to a House of my Acquaintance, hoping they would favour my Concealment; and having cut a Plank in the Floor of the House, I dig'd a Cavity under the Hearth, and had a Fire-place, the Smoke of which issu'd by a Vent into the Chimney above; I had not been long conceal'd there, before the House was surrounded by several Men: so I suffer'd myself to be taken, and surrender'd to them. First I was carried to *New-Haven* Goal, and afterwards removed to *New-York*.

During my stay in *Dutchess* County, I made large Sums of *Rhode-Island* Money, of six Assortments, and of the *New-Hampshire* Currency *ten* or *twelve Thousand Pounds*, and left the Plates with my Accomplices; of *Connecticut* Money, I made three Sorts, and printed off about *three Thousand Pounds*, and lef[t] the Plates with my Accomplices; of *New York* Currency four Sorts, and had four different Sett of Accomplices; and there was four Sorts Counterfeited by my Accomplices, which I had no Hand in at all; and all of the new Currency, with the following Signers Names to it, viz. *De Lancey*, *Depuyster*, and *Livingston*. All my Accomplices deserv'd the Gallows, as well as myself; but I will not betray them, or be guilty of shedding their Blood.

And then turning to the Spectators, said, well Gentlemen, *You may all*

take Warning by me, and look out for the King of Terrors; and told the Sheriff that he must needs confess, that he was not willing to die. Then looking about him, said, I see none of my Accomplices here; but I hope they will burn and destroy all the Money, Plates and Accoutrements, that they have by them, and that they may not die on a Tree as I do. Then call'd to the Executioner and said, don't pull the Rope so tight, it is hard for a Man to die in cold Blood: after which he cried out O good GOD! O good GOD! have Mercy on my Soul! then said the Lord's Prayer. Just as he was turn'd off the Cart, he cry'd, LORD have Mercy on my Soul.

*Finis.*

### Source Notes

According to information supplied on the title page, *A Short Account of the Life, of John \*\*\*\*\* Alias Owen Syllavan* originally was published in New York and then soon "re-printed and Sold by Green & Russell" in Boston during the latter half of 1756. Since the New York edition has not been located, the Boston edition text has been used for this anthology.

Owen Syllavan (also spelled Syllivan) was one of the most notorious and most productive of all early American counterfeiters. In his *Counterfeiting in Colonial America*, Kenneth Scott devoted an entire chapter to Syllavan ("Chapter Five"), which traces the counterfeiter's movements throughout Canada and New England. According to Scott, Syllavan, although "drunken, quarrelsome, and exacting," was an excellent self-taught engraver who cut plates for a variety of currencies and who employed an extensive network of accomplices to pass his spurious bills (122). According to several newspaper accounts, he went to his death as defiant as his narrative depicted him to be. Both *The Boston Gazette* (May 24, 1756) and *The Boston Weekly News-Letter* (May 27, 1756) reported:

*Owen Syllavan*, before he was turn'd off on Monday last, declared, That some Years ago he struck off near Twelve Thousand Pounds of Rhode-Island Money, and passed above sixteen Hundred of it in one Day:— That of New-Hampshire Currency he made Ten or Twelve Thousand Pounds:—Of Connecticut Cash he struck off about Three Thousand Pounds:—And of New-York Currency he printed large sums of 4 different Emissions; the last of which was the Bills signed Oliver DeLancey, John Livingston, and Isaac DePeyster, and dated so late as March 25, 1755; to do which he had four Setts of Accomplices, who, he said, printed and passed other large Sums at Times unknown to him: And that he left several different Plates and Stamps with his Confederates, all of whom he allowed deserved the Gallows as well as himself; but would not betray

them one of them, or be guilty (he term'd it) of shedding their Blood:— Soon after which he took a large Cud of Tobacco, and turning round to the People said, *I cannot help smiling, as 'tis the Nature of the Beast.* And being ask'd, for the Benefit of the Publick, of what Denomination the Bills were which he printed of the New-York Money, answered, *You must find out that by your Learning;* and so died obstinate.

The execution, however, did not take place without incident and delay. On May 20 *The Boston Weekly News-Letter* printed a curious report from New York: "Owen Syllavan, alias John Livingston, alias John Brown, the forty thousand Pound Money-Maker, who was to be executed on Friday last pursuant to his Sentence, for the Want of a Hangman was respited until Saturday; but the Gallows being cut down on Friday Night by Persons unknown, and Jack Ketch, Esq; being still wanting, his Time was farther prolong'd to this Day, when he is certainly to make his exit."