

## JANET THOMAS (1824-1861)

On 15 June 1839, the day after her 15th birthday, Janet Grierson sailed from Scotland aboard the ship 'David Clarke', bound for Australia. As the ship left the shores of Greenock, one of the passengers, John Arthur (who later became the first curator of the Melbourne Botanic Gardens) picked up his bagpipes and played "Lochaber No More", a significant song to any Scot leaving his homeland. Janet was accompanied by her parents, John and Mary, brother John aged 20, and sisters Catherine 8 and Mary 12. There was a total of 229 passengers on board the 'David Clark', making the 5 month journey to the land of their future. This voyage was significant because it was the very first free emigrant ship direct to Port Phillip (Melbourne). Unlike many other voyages from this period, where disease saw many deaths on board, this one was different because of only one death in transit, that one being only five days out of Melbourne, which was a great testament to the ships surgeon, Mr Gilchrist. There was also one birth during this 5 month journey. Their travels from Scotland to Port Phillip took them via Rio de Janeiro, where they stopped for 10 days to replenish supplies.

Upon arrival at Port Phillip the passengers were landed in the ship's boats at the beach opposite Williamstown, and the women were carried ashore. The passengers then walked two miles to the banks of the Yarra Yarra, they crossed the Yarra at a place known as the Yarra Falls, now known as the Queens Bridge where tents were erected for their short term accommodation.

As described in the Launceston Advertiser, Nov 21, 1839, "In the evening the piper struck off with some of his wild national airs, and the greater part of the immigrants danced by moonlight on the grass, after some time passed in this way, the whole party headed by the man of wind and pipes, went off through the bush for about a mile to see a grand corroboree of the blacks; it was singular to hear the blending of our highland music with the deep monotonous chant and beat of the Austral aborigines. What must have been their ideas upon seeing those grounds which five years past were tenanted by themselves alone, teeming with hundreds of fresh and strange arrivals". At this early stage of Melbourne's life and including the 229 new arrivals Melbourne's total population was still less than one thousand.

By the age of 19, Janet had met and married another Scot, Moses Thomas. By October 1844, Janet gave birth to her first born son Walter, at Simpson's Rd (now Victoria St) Collingwood, shortly followed by another son John, and daughters Mary and Janet. Sadly baby Mary died just 2 weeks after birth.

Moses purchased 400 acres of land at Morang (now Mernda), and in 1851 he and his family relocated to a small wattle and daub structure, known as the Bridge Inn, on the banks of the Plenty River.

During the adult life of her eldest son Walter, who was a prolific writer and regular contributor to a number of local newspapers, he often recalled his memories of his childhood growing up in Collingwood and also Morang. In one of his writings he recalls the trip from Collingwood to Morang. He writes, " I can call to mind my father, mother and their family travelling up the Plenty Road on their way to Morang, but now named Mernda. We travelled in a spring cart, and we crossed the Merri Creek over a ford near where St George's Road bridge now stands, and we skirted the Northcote Hills coming onto the Plenty Road, about a mile south of where the Rose, Thistle and Shamrock Hotel now stands. The first place we called at was a Mr Lamond's, on the banks of the Plenty River, having on our way crossed the

Darebin Creek over a ford to the east of where the bridge now stands. We also called at the farm where Mr Mark Clements now resides. After a rest we travelled to the property my late father had purchased, and on which there was a wattle and daub house that was doing duty as The Bridge Inn, although there was no bridge near the place".

He also recalls his early attempts at fishing in the clear waters of the Plenty River without success, and bushfires were a constant threat.

In another story Walter also recalls the warmth and compassion of his mother Janet, towards an aboriginal woman, Mary, who had been attacked by her husband. He describes how his mother sent a cart to pick her up and have her removed to the newly erected family home, 'Mayfield'. He wrote, "One of the blacks named Tommy, who was the son of the Chief called Murray of the Yarra, speared his lubra in the thigh and cleared out and left her lying in the mia mia that they had. Mother had her removed to our home where she remained for several months. We were all very fond of her and under mother's guidance she soon recovered from her wound, the late loved Dr William Ronald being the medical attendant. Mary got to be very clever in the house and was a great help to my mother but after a time she got restless and one day she disappeared after some of the blacks belonging to her tribe had been about and we never saw her again but we all missed her".

In the years since moving to Morang, Janet also gave birth to three more children, May, Mary and Mosina.

Unexpectedly, Janet died 24 July 1861, aged 37 years. The cause of death as per her death certificate was Pthisis Pulmonalis (Tuberculosis), although family stories state that her cause of death was the result of being caught out in the rain and catching a chill, which led to her death.

Newspaper reports of the day describe Janet's funeral to be the largest ever seen in the district, with upwards of 500 persons attending the burial. Her funeral left from 'Mayfield' on Sunday 28 July at 10 am, passing through Northcote at 1 pm, to the place of internment at the Melbourne General Cemetery, alongside her parents.

For a girl that arrived on the shores of Port Phillip as a 15 year old, during the following 21 years she managed to find a husband, provide him with 7 children, make a home, mothering and nurturing her young family, whilst her husband pursued his various business interests with vigour, when Melbourne was at its infancy and merely surviving was difficult; she did more than survive, she flourished. I have nothing but admiration for women like Janet Grierson.

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