Elizabeth Macarthur has been referred to as “Australia’s first and greatest lady”. Upon her death in 1850, her grand-daughter wrote of her: “Through all the difficulties and trials that beset her path, her Christian spirit shines forth, and in all her letters to her children, with whom she corresponded regularly until her death, there is found no complaining or ill-natured word”.

Elizabeth Macarthur, the wife of John Macarthur, army officer, pastoralist and public figure, was a courageous woman. Born in 1766 in Devon, England, Elizabeth was the daughter of R. Veale, a farmer who died when she was six. She received private tutoring at the Kingston vicarage at Bridgerule, and in 1788 she married John Macarthur. As it was difficult to support a family on his lieutenant’s half-pay, Macarthur volunteered for the New South Wales Corps, and 14 months later the couple and their infant son Edward, sailed for Sydney on the Second Fleet, arriving there in June 1790.

Mrs Macarthur was the first educated white woman to arrive in Australia. She also possessed a natural charm and beauty, with a touch of aristocracy, that brought the elegance and gentility that was lacking in the harsh male-dominated convict settlement.

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