

**‘Women Pioneers of Australia’,
Anniversary of the first Christian Service on Australian Soil,
3 February 2019**

Good afternoon. My name is **Margaret Middleton** (nee Gambier). My forbears were French Huguenots who fled to Britain at the end of the eighteenth century. In the Evangelical Revival of the 1740s, through the powerful preaching of the Rev George Whitefield, I was converted to a vital faith in Jesus as my Saviour and Lord and I dedicated my life to his service. So, when I met the handsome Charles Middleton I would not consider marrying him until he too came into a personal experience of faith. After we were married, we lived in my family home, Barham Court in Teston, Kent. In the colonies you pronounce that TESTON, but we say TEASON. Anyway, it is a grand home and we use it to promote grand schemes for the expansion of Christ’s kingdom. It helps that we are related to the great men of the realm, Henry Dundas, William Grenville, and William Pitt, the Younger. To be candid, my Charles, is a bit stiff (he’s a Scot, after all), but, to be even more candid, I must tell you, in all humility, that I’m able to put people at their ease, and the great and powerful like to visit us at Barham Court. Among them, Samuel Johnson, the essayist, and Joshua Reynolds, the painter. I assure you that I do have female friends, especially Hannah More, who is also blessed with vital faith. She is a playwright and author of religious tracts and herself a pioneer in female education. Her good friend, the delightful William Wilberforce, also seems to enjoy protracted stays at Barham Court.

Our local minister, the vicar of Teston, is the Rev James Ramsay. Now, he is a pioneer for you. He is known as the ‘pioneer abolitionist’, as he is leading the campaign for the abolition of slavery, and my dear husband and Mr Wilberforce are also increasingly interested in this campaign. However, before we got very far with that, an exciting proposal came to our attention. It was decided that a British penal settlement should be established on the other side of the world at Botany Bay. It is interesting that, if dear Hannah More is known as a ‘blue stocking’ because of her literary interests, my Charles is known as a ‘blue light’, that is an Evangelical in the Royal Navy. They were named after the blue light given off by flares used for signalling in the navy. Of course, it was a derisive nickname for those keen Christians who shone more brightly in their witness to the Lord than other Christians. But Charles gloried in the mockery, after all did not our Lord say, ‘Let your blue light so shine before men that they might see your good works and glorify your father in heaven’.

Indeed, my Charles was the leading ‘blue light’ because he was comptroller of the navy and when the news came of the great maritime adventure to the southern world, he was determined that this would be nothing like the slave trade in its callous disregard for human life. My Charles himself chose the 11 ships of the first fleet to ensure that they were seaworthy – none of them was older than 5 years – and he ensured that they would be so well provisioned that no-one would starve on the first fleet. When it was pointed out that the convicts on the first fleet would eat better than sailors in the Navy, my Charles, said, ‘what I have

provisioned, I have provisioned'. In truth, dear Charles had a great head for detail. Mr Pitt, the Prime Minister, in one of his visits to Barham Court confided in me that he considered Charles 'the best man of business' he knew. Mr Pitt did not entirely share our religious convictions, but he did endorse my Charles's belief that 'Without religion there can be no public principle'.

Charles and I also took an interest in the appointment of the Rev Richard Johnson as chaplain with the first fleet. The Rev John Newton was very excited that he had found one who had the faith and calling of a missionary to go on this remarkable voyage, from which he would have every expectation of never returning. Mr Wilberforce's friend, Mr Thornton, the banker, promised to cover his expenses. Then, one day, not long after Mr Johnson's appointment, we received an anxious letter from Mr Newton. Richard Johnson wanted to take a wife with him and so had set about finding one and had succeeded. Mr Newton seemed to think this was an issue because it would involve more expense. But we thought this was a great development and did not hesitate to help with the expenses. But I should let Mrs Johnson tell her story.

Well, thank you, Lady Margaret, for introducing me. A great honour, I'm sure, to be so introduced. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is **Mary Johnson**. I was baptised Mary Burton. You will gather from my cockney accent that I am a Londoner. I lived in the parish of St Mildred Poultry in Cheapside, that is the market place centre of London. Richard and I were married on 4 December 1786 in the church of the parish where he resided, St John's Clerkenwell. This was just two months after Richard, following sleepless nights and days when he could not eat, agreed to accept the appointment as chaplain. He shared with me his fears so that he could be sure that he had found a helpmeet who shared his calling and his burden for those 'poor and abandoned people'. Mr Newton was not entirely pleased to find out three days after the event that we had been married. Apparently, I would be the only wife of an officer in the entire fleet, and he thought I'd be an expensive addition to the plan and wrote to Sir Charles Middleton for a solution. Wot a bover I was. So we were relieved to learn afterwards that our marriage was warmly approved by Mr Newton's friends, one of whom said it was a wonderful thing that Mr Johnson was going to Botany Bay and even more wonderful he 'had prevailed upon a person to accompany him in character of a wife'. I was a little ambivalent about another such message to Mr Newton, 'So at last you have given the good Bishop of Botany Bay a wife to take with him – a very good thing.' I found his next words unnecessary, 'If she be a good wife. I pity, and rejoice, pray for and congratulate them both'. A bit rude, innit? I regret that the word 'sexist' has still to be coined. Actually, the one who said that was a Baptist - just like me really. Yes, my Richard believes I'm half Methodist and half Baptist, and that adds up to more than two members of the Church of England.

Anyway we found out much later that our hurried marriage was all the norm among those who became missionaries. The men would study hard with no thought for marriage, then, on appointment, they would have enough money to support a wife, so that they had to find one in quick time. Ministers became

experts in helping potential missionaries to find a bride, offering advice such as the following:

My advice to you is, be quietly on the look-out; and if, in God's providence, you make the acquaintance of one of the daughters of Zion, traversing like yourself, the wilderness of this world, her face set thitherward, get into friendly converse with her. If you find that in mind, in heart, in temper and disposition, you congenialize, and if God puts it into her heart to be willing to forsake father and mother and cast in her lot with you, regard it as a token from the God of providence that you should use the proper means to secure her Christian society.

Well, it seems Richard found my face set thitherward, and we did congenialize. I noticed as the years passed and he wrote home from New South Wales, that his letters used the pronoun 'I' less frequently and the pronoun 'we' more frequently, and I did like it when he referred to me in these letters as 'my dear Mary'.

Our 16,000 miles voyage to Botany Bay on the store ship *Golden Grove* was surprisingly unterrifying. Admittedly, at first Richard found the ship's company too profane for his liking, but the heinous swearing was reduced in our hearing after Richard preached on its wickedness, and the captain allowed Richard to have prayers every evening in the 'great Cabbin' and to preach the entire ship's company every Lord's day. We left Portsmouth on the 13 May in the year of our Lord 1787 and arrived in Botany Bay on 18 January the next day. 252 days at sea, 16,000 miles at the speed of a man walking. The Lord had carried us through the dangers of the deep with scarcely any loss of life, and the entire company of marines and convicts arrived healthier than when they had left home. My Richard had words for it at the first service of worship: Psalm 116, verse 12: 'What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?' Richard arranged for it to be held under a 'great tree', beginning at 10 o'clock on 3 February. At home this would have been in the depths of winter, but in New Holland it was a hot midsummer's day. The more than 250 convict women who came with us on the First Fleet were not permitted to alight until 3 days after the first service. So, it felt to me as if I was the only woman present in a congregation of 800 men.

At first we slept mainly on board ship in Sydney cove or in tents which were very uncomfortable. The *Golden Grove*, which had been our home, sailed out of Sydney Harbour in October 1788, and by November, after much labour and no small cost, we got into our little Cabbage tree cottage. It was a hut measuring about 9 feet by 12 feet. It had a central door with a little window on either side which are covered with wooden lattice shutters. The walls are made of the trunks of cabbage trees, lined on the inside with mud. The thatched roof was made from cabbage-tree fronds. We were not unhappy since it in some measure answered our purpose, although in excessive rains we were all of a swim within doors.

Waiting for our little cottage was not the biggest problem in our first year. I don't know what my birthday was, but I think I was about 34 when I married Richard,

and I did not conceive until two years after that. My first babe was a man child, but just before we moved into our hut, he was still born, and for some time after the delivery I was in the utmost danger. Through God's mercy, however, I recovered – slowly.

In truth our lot was hard and encouragements were not great. Captain Phillip was not eager to build a church and his successor was eager not to build a church. Our food supply almost ran out. We thought we were saved when a second fleet, as big as the first, arrived. But Sir Charles Middleton was not responsible for its provisioning; and it was run by a slave trader. Over a quarter of the more than 1000 convicts died and most were very ill. After the arrival of the fleet dear Richard buried over 100 more, and many were never fit for any employment. Never had we seen such misery, in every sense truly wretched, naked, filthy, dirty, lousy, & many of them utterly unable to stand, to creep or even to stir hand or foot. Mr Newton had warned my husband not to go into the hold of a disease-ridden ship, but he insisted on doing so. My Richard was a great deal amongst the sick, 'till he came home quite ill. He brought some of the sickest to our home and we nursed them back to health. In the process we caught the Scotch Fiddler, which at times made us dance & caper about the room more than we cd. wish. It took us some time to be cured of this filthy disorder. Yet it was my dear husband's finest hour. So many spoke highly of their chaplain after that. Indeed, his greatest satisfaction came in talking with his convict charges one on one. They did not much care for church going even after my Richard managed to get one built or rather built it himself practically with his bare hands. But we got on well with them. I spoke their language, well, not their vocabulary so much, but I shared their accent, and once they were comfortable with me, it was easier for them to be comfortable with their chaplain.

My dear husband is easily the best farmer in the colony and, although the soil is poor, our little garden supplied us daily with some vegetable or other. The greater the food shortage, the more my Richard was in demand to grow crops. The convicts, many of whom I got to know, were not from farming backgrounds. They were Londoners mostly, like me, quite incapable of growing anything. The soil is not the only problem. As early as our second year, we were in drought, and Richard had never witnessed conditions like that in rural England, and he had to do much experimenting. He frets over having to do so much agricultural work, not because he doesn't like it, but because he feels it is not the true work to which he has been called. Mr Newton in one of his letters to us told him that he should not feel that way, that the survival of the colony owed much to his farming expertise, and that the divide between the practical and the spiritual is much narrower than pious people think.

Our friends back home, astonished that we had agreed to this life of exile in the first place, were fully expecting us to return home as soon as possible. All the difficulties we faced did nothing to change this impression and we received letters fully accepting of what they understood to be our determination to leave. We had to let them know that while conditions here were worse than they could have imagined, we did not desire to leave. We believed that God had called us to

this ministry and that he would give us the grace to persevere. In the 12 years that we were there things did improve. A second more comfortable house, made of brick, was provided for us as early as 1791, and we were blessed with two more children. To our first we gave an Aboriginal name, Milbah Maria. We believe that she was the first white person ever to receive an Aboriginal name. My Richard declares that every day she grows more engaging, and Mr Newton has written to assure us that he is content to accept our word that she is the finest child in New Holland. Our second surviving child was a boy. We named him Henry Martin. Oh, I hear you say, so you named him after the best-known missionary of his day? No - different spelling and when our Henry was born, the great missionary was only 11!

In 1789 the year before Milbah was born, a smallpox epidemic ravaged the Aboriginal population. We took in to our hut one 15 year old girl, Boorong, sometimes called Abaroo, who contracted small pox but who survived. She began to speak a little English and we taught her to read and to say the Lord's prayer. She made herself useful to me around our little home, and she served as a mediator between us and the Eora people. One of her friends was Patyegarang who taught our friend Mr Dawes some of the Eora language. Patye would come to visit Boorong and us at our house and I helped her to learn how to wash her petticoat and she liked it when my Richard read the Bible to her. They were good fun, those lively girls, and we had great hopes for them, but after about 18 months Boorong returned to her people and observed the law keeping of her culture. We were disappointed that she did not seem to be converted to our faith. She became the third wife of Bennelong and she had a child by him called Dickey. But I am almost as tired as you must be by my story, and therefore I will allow another to tell you her story.

Hello, my name is **Elizabeth Shelley**. In one sense I took over where Mary Johnson left off. She carries on a bit doesn't she? The cockneys love yarning. I'll be briefer. I have too much to do to hang around monuments yarning. Anyway, after 12 years in the colony, the Johnsons returned to England, arriving there in 1801. That was the same year in which I, Elizabeth Bean, daughter of a free settler in NSW, married William Shelley, a missionary with the London Missionary Society who had arrived in the colony from Tonga the previous year. We built quite a nice house really on the corner of Macquarie and Church streets in Parramatta, and it was we who urged Governor Macquarie to establish in 1814 the so-called 'Native Institution' where the native children could be taught reading, writing, farming, sewing, knitting, and other such 'useful employments'. And we offered to allow the Native Institution to be held in outhouses behind our house.

Why, you ask, did we make this offer? The governor was at that time open to our proposal because the relationship between Aboriginal people and white settlers was then particularly bad following the brutal murder near Appin of Aboriginal people of the Gandangara clan and the payback from Aboriginal warriors which followed. A woman and two children who were killed during the atrocity were buried on a farm owned by another free settler, John Kennedy. He arranged for

them to be buried there even though they were not murdered on his farm. If you are still awake and paying attention you will be absolutely fascinated to learn that this farm was called Teston farm, named after the village in Kent where the Middletons had their home, Barham Court.

We had to do something to give Aboriginal children some hope for the future. Among the very first intake of students at our Institution was Maria, daughter of Yellomundy (Yarramundi). In 1819 Maria stunned the colony by taking the first prize in the public examinations, defeating almost 100 white children in the process. We missionaries were thrilled. Maria's achievement vindicated our strong Christian belief in the equality of all races and both sexes in intellect.

She also demonstrated belief in the validity of inter-racial marriage. My husband knew of the disappointment the Johnsons had suffered when Boorong left their care and rejoined her own people. We had to be realistic enough to accept that it would be difficult for even educated Aboriginal girls to find a similarly-educated white marriage partner, so we suggested that they might settle for an Aboriginal man or a convict, providing they had faith in Christ. Very paternalistic, you think, with your politically correct views of another age. But Maria ran with the suggestion – she was a bright one – she did not choose either of our suggestions – instead she settled for both!

Whatever do I mean? Well, in 1822 she married Boorong's son. Yes, you heard right. Dickey, son of Boorong and the famous Bennelong, was a baptised Christian, perhaps the first Aboriginal person to be baptised. So, you see Mary and Richard Johnson's labour with Boorong was not in vain. Dickey was baptised Thomas Walker Coke, named after John Wesley's successor as the leading missionary among the Methodists. But Dickey died early the next year, 1823. Then, on the 36th anniversary of the settlement of the colony (26 January 1824) in St John's Parramatta, I attended Maria's second wedding. This time she married Robert Lock, a convict carpenter working on the building of the new Native Institution, now relocated from Parramatta to Blacktown. As Robert Lock had not yet completed his sentence, he was assigned by the government to work for her.

Maria and Robert had ten children, nine of whom survived her (she died in 1878). She had generated quite a dynasty. She became, one historian tells us, 'the matriarch of a vast family, and her descendants now number in their thousands'. One of them always gives the welcome and recognition of country at every Macquarie University graduation.

Extraordinary!

It is fashionable today, of course, for you, my politically correct hearers, to condemn our efforts in the Native Institution for our attempts to 'civilise' and 'assimilate' the First Australians. But please constrain your indignation at our appalling insensitivity and cut us some slack. For my story reveals some remarkable departures from social conventions.

- A black married to a white
- A man assigned to a woman,
- A white man assigned to an indigenous woman
- A woman was allowed to acquire property in her own name
- An indigenous woman was allowed to acquire property in her own name

Such was the length we went to in the early history of your colony in support of marriage and stable family life. We understood then, what you no longer seem to understand today, that family stability is foundational to the stability of the nation.

In 1815, just a year after the opening of the Native Institution, my husband, William Shelley died, leaving me in sole care of the Aboriginal children. So, it was I who actually ran the Native Institution. I never remarried, and now at the age of 96 I have outlived my husband by 63 years. But before he died he had given me 4 sons and 3 daughters in quick succession, a solid foundation for a Christian family dynasty. Among my descendants are those active in Christian service in Sydney to this day.

As the Psalmist says of the Lord (119:90) 'Thy faithfulness is unto all Generations: thou hast established the earth and it abideth.'

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