

SUNDAY ARTICLE

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Elizabeth Macarthur 1766-1850

Australian Christian History Research Institute

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.

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 can be classed among the great pioneer women on her own merits. As a devoted wife, mother and home-maker, as well as a pastoralist and a sheep breeder, and a gracious "first lady" in the society of her day, she was a role model of Christian character for those who came after her.

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.

The officers flocked to the Macarthurs' small cottage. Food was rationed and whenever there was a party at Government House, the guests had to take their own bread with them, except Elizabeth. Governor Phillip said: "There will always be a roll for Mrs Macarthur".

Notwithstanding her husband's constant fights and disagreements with anybody of any substance or authority, including all the governors (except Governor Phillip), no one ever spoke ill of Elizabeth. She was above reproach, liked and respected by everybody; and she stayed sweet and cheerful through it all.

In 1793, John Macarthur received a grant of 100 acres at Parramatta, which he named Elizabeth Farm in honour of his wife. They built a house, "a very excellent brick building", in which Mrs Macarthur lived for more than forty years and where she raised her five sons (one of whom died in infancy) and three daughters.

Elizabeth's greatest achievement was her ability to build and maintain a strong and harmonious family life, even through the long absences of her husband overseas and the innumerable demands of farm life.

Elizabeth Farm was one of the few homes in which the dignity and gentilities of family life were maintained in the face of the surrounding harsh realities.

Elizabeth carefully supervised the education of the children, in both secular and religious subjects. (The boys were later sent to school in England.) She brought

to the home an order and peacefulness that contrasted sharply with the chaos and violence of her husband's public life.

Elizabeth's industriousness was also evident in their extensive productive gardens with fruit and vegetables. It was obvious also that she delighted in

the beauty of nature. She commented: "The beautiful variegated landscape; almonds, apricots, pear and apple trees are in full bloom; the native shrubs are also in flower, and the whole country gives a grateful perfume".

The unique beauty of Mrs Macarthur's home and her carefully reared children escaped any criticism which was directed at her husband. Elizabeth was a devoted wife, a warm and caring mother, a charming and hospitable hostess, an intelligent and witty entertainer, and an able administrator.

During the forced absences of her husband from the colony, from 1801 to 1805 and from 1809 to 1817, Mrs Macarthur managed Elizabeth Farm, Seven Hills Farm,

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and the Camden Park estates. By 1820, the Macarthurs owned 9600 acres, which together ran over 4000 head of sheep as well as cattle and pigs.

Her responsibilities were considerable. "The management of our concerns gets troublesome to me in the extreme, and I am perpetually annoyed by some vexation or other", she wrote to Captain Piper in 1804. "God grant me Health and Patience, for indeed my good friend, I have need of both to keep my mind in tolerable frame." In addition to the care of the home and livestock, Mrs Macarthur supervised the work of up to ninety convicts.

Not only did she need good health and patience; she also needed courage. She was often at risk from Aborigines, who had murdered several shepherds (including some of her stockmen), women and children. Yet Elizabeth regularly rode on horseback to Camden Park, fearlessly staying overnight in a "miserable (slab) hut", so she could make inspections or supervise the culling of sheep and cattle. In 1804, when the Irish convicts ("Croppies") arose, she and her children had to flee from Parramatta. They stayed with Elizabeth's friends, Rev and Mrs Samuel Marsden.

Elizabeth's husband appreciated his wife's work. In 1810, he wrote:

I am perfectly aware, my beloved wife, of the difficulties you have to contend with, and fully convinced that not one woman in a thousand, would have resolution and perseverance to contend with them all, much more to surmount them in the manner that you have so happily done...I am grateful and delighted with your conduct.

In 1816, Governor Macquarie made a grant of 600 acres to the farm at Parramatta in recognition of Mrs Macarthur's contribution to the agricultural improvement of the country. In a letter to Lord Bathurst, John Macarthur commended her able management of the flocks that had resulted in an improved breed of sheep and in increased wool production. In 1816 she sold 15,000 pounds of wool.

Elizabeth's practical wisdom and flock management was critical because it was the time when the foundation of the Australian wool industry was being laid. While Elizabeth supervised the farm and crucial breeding decisions and day-to-day management of the flocks, her husband John, in London, researched the wool market and was able to solicit government support for his vision.

The husband-wife team kept in close touch with each other. Elizabeth sent John detailed reports of the farm

operation, and carefully followed John's directions. However, because of the many months between letters, Elizabeth often had to act on her own initiative. It was largely the result of her work that John Macarthur was awarded a gold medal for the greatest quality of fine wool imported from New South Wales in 1821, and a second for the finest sample of wool from the colony, by the Royal Society of Arts in London.

In spite of the long absences, John and Elizabeth were devoted to each other. Elizabeth, in a letter to Bridget Kingdon, on 1 September 1798, wrote:

How bountifully Providence has dealt with us. At this time I can truly say no two people on earth can be happier than we are. In Mr Macarthur's society I experience the tenderest affections of a husband, who is instructive and cheerful as a companion. He is an indulgent Father, beloved as a Master, and universally respected for the integrity of his character.

Not everyone would have agreed with Elizabeth's assessment of her husband, but she could see beneath John's rough exterior. Their devotion was mutual. In a letter to Elizabeth, John wrote: "My dearest Elizabeth, my beloved wife...Believe me...the period of separation from you has been almost

indescribable wretchedness...Dearest beloved, how great are my obligations to you".

While John gratefully expressed his admiration for her "excellent and prudent management", Elizabeth was always loyal to her husband. Later in life, when he was losing his mind and accusing her of unfaithfulness, she bore it with "becoming fortitude" and cheerfulness fitting for a Christian, and was devoted to him until his death. Even when her husband's illness threatened to destroy the home, she managed to keep the family together.

Mrs Macarthur died in 1850 and was buried at Camden Park with her husband. Her precepts and example had much importance in forming the character of her sons, Edward, John, James and William, all of whom played an important part in the family business, and in the life of the colony.

*The **Christian History Research** website contains a large collection of information and resources to help you understand more about Australia's Christian heritage.*

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Elizabeth Macarthur's husband, John, on the old \$2 note.