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Elizabeth's Remarkable Pioneering Resilience

A Tough Life: **Elizabeth's Remarkable Pioneering Resilience**

Elizabeth Clark (nee Harris) typifies Australia's pioneering women: surviving enormous challenges to contribute so much to Australia's development. Picture Elizabeth in the early days of the colony: a poor 16 year-old originally from Sussex but now living in a lonely slab bark hut surrounded by the unknown terrors of the Victorian wilderness, newly married and having just given birth to her first child, her father a recidivist convict and her mother dead 4 years earlier in a tragic accident. Put yourself in her shoes (did she even have shoes?) and consider the strength and resourcefulness she would have needed to survive her hardships and become a highly successful pioneer.

Elizabeth was born c. 1823/24 in Mayfield, Sussex,¹ the second child of Jonathan Harris and Elizabeth Baker. Whilst an infant her father committed burglary: "*Charged ... with buglariously breaking and entering the dwelling house of the said Thomas Cobram at Uckfield feloniously stealing there from six linen shifts, one mahogany desk & other articles value 40/-*". He was sentenced to be hanged,² but this was subsequently commuted to transportation for life. Jonathan arrived in NSW on 3-Jan-1826 aboard the Marquis of Hastings³ and was assigned to ex-convict Charles Thompson.⁴

Imagine the harshness of Elizabeth's fatherless life for the next 5 years, living in poverty and relying on the charity of relatives and friends – at least until Jonathon obtained permission to have his family rejoin him. In 1831 Elizabeth, now 7, and her mother and two siblings survived the 35-week trip to Sydney aboard the Kains⁵ - a female convict transport described by the ship's doctor as "*a Hell afloat*". The reunited family settled on a property owned by Charles Thompson in the Goulburn area.⁶ We can hope that Elizabeth managed to have at least a few happy childhood years.

Unfortunately any happiness was to last only five years. When Elizabeth was 12 and with three more young siblings⁷ Elizabeth's childhood was abruptly shattered a final time. On 30-Mar-1836 Elizabeth's mother, travelling from Bong Bong to Campbelltown, was killed when her cart (driven by her oldest son, and with her 7 month-old baby in her arms) overturned. Newspapers reported the circumstances but seemed more interested in debating the state of the road.⁸

The next years must have been "a hard life" indeed. Elizabeth would have become mother to her younger siblings (aged 1, 3, 4, and 11) and then just a year after her Mother's death, her father was back in gaol charged with robbery (again!).⁹ He was acquitted this time, though he eventually did end up convicted (with his oldest son) and was transported to Van Diemen's land in 1842 for, unsurprisingly, robbery! Amazingly, Jonathan lived to be 91 and married twice more. Elizabeth ended with 5 full siblings and 10 half siblings.

Then, barely three years after her mother's death, on 22-July-1839, a young 15 year-old Elizabeth married 29 year-old William Clark in Bowning.¹⁰ William was keen to find a wife as part of a plan hatched with two of his brothers. They knew about the inland route south (identified 15 years earlier by Hume and Hovell) and with Melbourne settled just 4 years earlier they believed the route would see increasing traffic. Later in 1839 they headed south to settle on the river crossings: William and Elizabeth at the Ovens River, Richard at Broken

River, and John at Goulburn River. Each established an Inn and a punt in the wilderness and their homes eventually evolved into Wangaratta, Benalla, and Violet Town.¹¹

In 1840, shortly after settling on the Oven's River Elizabeth, at the tender age of just 16, gave birth to her first child! Over the following years Elizabeth had another 11 children, with 10 of her children surviving to adulthood. As Wangaratta grew William became a significant public figure, making a small fortune during the "Ovens gold rush" and using this to become a major land-holder and council member. "Old Bill" eventually became known as "*the Father of Wangaratta*"¹² – though Elizabeth undoubtedly deserved much of the credit.

William died in 1871¹³ and Elizabeth lived another 17 years, dying on 29-Sep-1888, aged 64. That could almost have been the disappointing end of her story, with Elizabeth drifting into obscurity and leaving us wondering if her harsh upbringing had left her broken and embittered. Fortunately, a few weeks after she died, a trooper wrote to the local paper, surprised at how little had been said about Elizabeth's passing. His story paints a wonderful picture of how well this strong, brave woman had survived her harsh life:¹⁴

"Mrs Clarke, ... arrived in Wangaratta with her husband as far back as 1839, she being then little more than 15 years of age. One solitary hut then represented the present township. ... there was not another woman in any direction within twenty miles; but she used to travel that distance on horseback on occasions, to comfort the sick or to help to bring little native Australians into the world. ... there are very many still living who stand to her almost in the light of foster-children, owing to her kind and charitable attention to their mothers in their need. I can speak personally of Mrs Clarke's friendly and pleasant ways when her family was growing more and more numerous, and I know that she made us fellows feel not only comfortable, but as if we were at home again. I write this because Mrs Clarke's many good qualities and great services — when such services were invaluable, and indeed, but for her, unprocurable — seem to be either unknown or forgotten."

Elizabeth deserves much more than a broken headstone¹⁵ and a dusty plaque in the Wangaratta Anglican cathedral¹⁶ (for which William and Elizabeth donated the land in 1849). She must have been a true pioneer, brave and generous in the harshest of circumstances, and resilient despite tragedy after calamity after misfortune. My great-great-grandmother, like all our pioneers, deserve our respect and gratitude for the foundations they built for our nation!

References:

¹ No definitive record has been found for Elizabeth's birth or baptism, but her father Jonathan was baptised in Mayfield in 1800 (though various records indicated he came from Uckfield, Sussex – possibly because this was where he was when caught for Burglary) and was married in Mayfield in 1821. Jonathan's petition to have his wife and children join him in Australia lists them living at Mayfield, and Elizabeth's older brother was baptised in Mayfield in 1822. The Bishops Transcripts for Mayfield do not however include a baptism record for Elizabeth or her younger brother Henry. The year of Elizabeth's birth is estimated from her age on various records, including being 5 years old on the petition in 1828 and her age on marriage and death certificates.

² Home Office: Criminal Registers, Middlesex and Home Office: Class: HO 27; Piece: 30; Page: 203. The National Archives of the UK (TNA), Kew, Surrey, England.

³ Home Office: Convict Prison Hulks: Registers and Letter Books 1802-1849; Class: HO9; Piece: 9. The National Archives, Kew, England. See <http://search.ancestry.com.au/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=1989&h=209600> .

For Jonathan's transport see <http://www.convictrecords.com.au/convicts/harris/jonathan/111662>, and for information on the Marquis of Hastings see http://www.jenwilletts.com/convict_ship_marquis_of_hastings_1826.htm.

⁴ 1828 New South Wales, Australia Census. See <http://search.ancestry.com.au/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=1186&h=218390> and <http://search.ancestry.com.au/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&db=1828NSWcensus&h=5941>.

⁵ Records for the Kains provide a list of the convicts aboard (coincidentally including an Eliza Harris!) but not the free immigrants. There are various source of information (such as surgeons records but these do not mention the family). Jonathan's Ticket of Exemption from Govt Labour however mentions his wife, "*free per Kains*". Various later records for Elizabeth's brother, Jonathan jnr (when he was convicted and sent to Tasmania) indicated he arrived aboard the Kains. And a diary by one of the seamen on the ship (Charles Picknell) mentions a free woman called Harris.

⁶ See Jonathon's ticket for Exemption from Govt Labour, 1831 (which shows him in Windsor) and then 1832 (which shows him in Argyle). http://indexes.records.nsw.gov.au/searchhits_nocopy.aspx?table=Convict%20Index&id=65&frm=1&query=Surname:Harris;Vessel:Hastings

⁷ All three children were baptised in Paramatta:
Sophia – b. 15/1/1832, bap. 26/2/1832, Parramatta (by Chas. Dickinson - from Field of Mars!)
Thomas – b. 13/7/1833, bap. 28/12/1833, Parramatta (by Rev. Robert Forrest)
George – b. 19/8/1835, bap. 9/12/1835, Parramatta (by H.H.Bobart)

⁸ Sydney Herald (NSW : 1831 - 1842), Thursday 21 April 1836, page 2. See Trove <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article12854186>.
The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (NSW : 1803 - 1842) Sat 2 Apr 1836 Page 2. See Trove <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/2203559>

⁹ New South Wales, Australia, Gaol Description and Entrance Books, 1818-1930. State Archives NSW; Roll: 853. Date of admission: 7 Jul 1837. See <http://search.ancestry.com.au/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=1783&h=84450>.

¹⁰ Australia, Marriage Index, 1788-1950. See <http://search.ancestry.com.au/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=1780&h=1599273>

¹¹ See <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/vufind/Record/78364>. Page 9 of <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/papers/govpub/VPARL1853-54NoC4.pdf> lists William with Ovens Crossing Place = 30,000 acres, 8 horses, 400 cattle (30,000 acres = 121 sq km!) - and maybe Whitefield = 59,520 acres, 4 horses, 1500 cattle. His brother Richard (?) with Junction Station (Broken River --> Benalla), 8,640 acres, 35 horses, 20 cattle. His brother John (?) with (Goulburn River --> Mitchellstown).

See p13 of <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/papers/govpub/VPARL1855-56NoC36.pdf>. His Ovens Crossing run is down to 16,000 acres, though on p29 his combined run is still 12 horses 1900 cattle.

¹² Information on William and Elizabeth's life in Wangaratta can be found at:
<http://wangeratta.com/en/wangeratta-history>
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/list?id=11966>
<http://www.thesydneyhotel.com.au/#!/history/cy96>

<https://conversationswithgrandma.wordpress.com/2014/04/10/sepia-saturday-a-quartet-of-hotels/>
<http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/AUS-VIC-NE/2003-06/1056756876>
<http://worldconnect.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=wermore&id=127667>

¹³ Ovens and Murray Advertiser (Beechworth, Vic. : 1855 -1918), Thursday 27 April 1871, page 2. See Trove <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article196417184>

¹⁴ Ovens and Murray Advertiser (Beechworth, Vic. : 1855 - 1918), Saturday 13 October 1888, page 6. See Trove <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article198927577>

¹⁵ See <https://www.ancestry.com.au/family-tree/tree/996297/photo/19ebe960-a277-4513-ba7a-ffb6de8689>

¹⁶ See <http://conversationswithgrandma.com.au/2014/03/16/sepia-saturday-219-arches-and-significant-buildings/>