

Mrs Meredith preferred 'Anson girls'.
Alice Meredith Hodgson
April 2019

Mrs Meredith, formerly Louisa Anne Twamley, came to Van Diemen's Land in 1840 as the wife of Charles Meredith, second son of English settler George Meredith of Cambria at Swansea¹. George Meredith also happened to be Louisa's maternal uncle and her earlier refusal to come to Tasmania as governess to the children of his second marriage had rather soured their relationship. Charles and Louisa had become reacquainted when he returned to England as a young man to pursue his right to a land grant. Louisa's mother was opposed to a marriage between cousins but nonetheless they married in 1839 in Birmingham². The couple arrived in New South Wales where they intended to settle for a colonial stay of perhaps a decade before returning to live in England. The first of Louisa's four sons was born at Homebush on the Parramatta River. They travelled to Tasmania to better their fortune. Later they would be left virtually destitute after a collapse in the agricultural sector destroyed Charles' New South Wales ventures in grazing. It was fortunate that Louisa had not experienced wealth in childhood or as a young adult for it was to elude her. Nonetheless she was a lady and there were standards and expectations to meet.

Louisa was an accomplished artist and poet and some in her literary circle had criticised her decision to marry and come to faraway Australia for it meant relinquishing her acknowledged place in Birmingham society as a scholar and a published writer. As it turned out her role as wife and mother did not preclude intellectual pursuits. Louisa and Charles were avid readers and she was relieved of the boredom of the limited conversation of her colonial peers which, for the ladies, emphasised 'dress, domestic events and troubles, and for the gentlemen, wools, fleeces, flocks and stock³,' by her love of books. Bad servants were, in her view, the staple dining-table topic. She read and reread her small library of classics and favourites when other material was unavailable.

As a respectable household, the Meredith's required servants: they were physically important to assist with the work and they were a social necessity. There was generally a cook, a nursemaid, a groom and a general domestic servant about the house and farm specialists and labourers on the property. Initially, in New South Wales, Louisa had the benefit of immigrant labour for the wives and daughters of farm managers filled the essential roles. Louisa felt they spared her much annoyance. An emancipist nursemaid coloured her early experience of

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convict servants and taught her to be vigilant with locks. This woman, who was with them only five days, stole valuable items on her way through.

The landscape and fauna of her new home captivated Louisa and she used her artistic skills to translate the revelations into works of art and literature, for children and adults. She was also a social commentator and her taut observations present an inkling of her views on convicts, servants, and daily life in colonial society. Some of her observations were not popular with her family or wider circle of acquaintances but this did not deter her⁴.

A true royalist from the 'home' country, she dedicated her *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales* to her English friends for their amusement and *My Home in Tasmania* to her most gracious and beloved Queen, Victoria. Both volumes make light of the difficult physical and economic circumstances. The Meredith family moved many times in search of better times. Louisa followed Charles north and south in Tasmania before establishing the family, more or less, on the east coast first at Swansea, then near Buckland and finally in Orford. Tasmania was to remain their home. Limited finances meant the dreamt-of family return to England never eventuated although Louisa did return once in her dotage to oversee the publication of a book.

Louisa wrote *My Home in Tasmania* from Riversdale near Swansea. This was an early one of the many homes, or as she referred to it '[her] vagrant household'⁵ in the colony. It was here that she had her first real taste of selecting and managing convict servants in the period before Mrs Bowden's 'admirable reformatory work'⁶, as Louisa termed it, had begun. The servants were selected by the Meredith's agent in Hobart, presumably from free or emancipist women looking for work and prepared to go to the country; and from the lists of convict women available for assignment due to their arrival in Hobart, because another colonist had returned the servant to the government, or they had finished a term in the female factory. This was a common arrangement. Letters in the Leake Papers to and fro between John Leake and his town agent show a similar agreement at Rosedale, an extensive farming enterprise near Campbell Town that had a large house to be tended⁷.

Louisa had what she would recall as her worst servant experience with a woman sent from the female house of correction. She was:

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'dirty – beyond all imagining, she drank rum, smoked tobacco, swore awfully, and was in all respects the lowest specimen of womankind I ever had the sorrow to behold. Before I had time to procure another, she drank herself into violent fits, so that four men could not hold her from knocking herself against the wall and floor, then went to the hospital, and, finally, got married⁸!'

Servants were an indicator of gentility and eased the load of running an industrious household where cleaning, cooking, keeping the stove and fires burning, watching the baby and the interminable washing were constant priorities. Louisa supervised the housework and did much herself. Men were employed as cooks for the work of cutting wood and maintaining the stove was heavy but the lady of the house needed to be able to prepare and cook the dinner as Elizabeth Fenton of Fenton Forest and Elizabeth Leake of Rosedale both attest.⁹ Specialised and high value tasks, like supervising the dairy and butter making were rarely trusted to the servants. Louisa sewed; all the clothing for herself and her children, and the house linen, an enormous amount of which was required in the dining room and bedrooms. She tended the children, managed the chickens and ducks, dispensed the rations, and took on household chores. In between time she packed and unpacked her household goods, walked, sketched, read and wrote. Outwardly a stoic woman, Louisa lamented the loss of precious china and furniture when moving, again, caused breakages and visible damage to things from 'home', and then their replacements. She was often alone, but for the servants and the children, and keenly felt the lack of mature conversation when Charles was working away from the property.

Convict servants could be trial for the mistress. There was one instance when, with two convict women servants assigned to the house, a nursemaid and a maid, Louisa was obliged to dismiss the nursemaid who she had believed was:

'... really good, virtuous and honest, and truly repentant of her former misdeeds: she was a kind nurse to our little boy, and a cheerful obliging servant...¹⁰,

But the nursemaid had to go for she had gained access to the wine and spirit cellar and with able assistance from the groom, drank her way to oblivion. The groom was also dispatched. This was doubly unfortunate for the maid was at the time doing time for striking her fellow

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servant. This left Louisa with little assistance for the period it took the maid to return from her stint of solitary.

After all this Louisa viewed the first of her *Anson* maids as an experiment. Her experience of 'prisoner women', as she termed them, had been passable and a nurserymaid secured through Mrs Bowden had remained for eighteen months. Nearly three months of this time was spent at Government House in Hobart where Louisa, her children, the nurserymaid and several other families and their retinues were accommodated. Charles Meredith stayed as his schedule allowed. The sojourn turned the maid's head. Louisa wrote:

[She] 'was all I could desire in a servant, irreproachable in her conduct, clean, cheerful, and industrious until the visit to town, and the greater opportunities for showing her pretty face, caused neglect of her duty, and an alarming exhibition of pink silk stockings, thin muslin dresses, and other town vanities.'¹¹

The maid would not go back to the isolation of the east coast. Mrs Meredith turned again to Mrs Bowden on the *Anson*.

I digress now to Caroline Leakey's description¹², supposedly fictitious in its day but now recognised as colonial convict social history¹³, of going aboard the *Anson* probation station to select a new servant. Diplomatically there is no description of Mrs Bowden – she was in England for the fictitious period.

An eligible *Anson* prisoner was brought forward for inspection and was described:

'She had on the usual brown serge skirt (so short as to show a masculine pair of half-boots), a jacket of brown and yellow gingham, a dark blue cotton kerchief; and a prim white calico cap...'¹⁴

All was of coarse material; the final touch was rough knitted blue stockings.

The conversation between the colonist and the *Anson* official displayed the differing opinions of the merits of the probation system of punishment for women. The *Anson* attendant was, understandably, a staunch supporter to the potential for reformation while the new master was of the view that imprisonment for probation only deferred the process of reform, if not

making it more difficult. The offer of a tour was accepted and the visitors were shepherded through the cabins below decks and observed rows of women industriously cobbling, bonnet making and employing other trades, and in other spaces being schooled in reading and writing. They also witnessed the noise of a refractory woman in a solitary cell – kicking the walls and door and shouting for her release and noted the behaviour was likely only to result in a continuation of the punishment¹⁵. The visitors departed the hulk as they had come, by row boat to the New Town wharf. The newly-contracted prisoner disembarked before them so she could be kept in full view.

Caroline, Lady Denison, recorded her view of the *Anson* in her journal after a visit with her husband, Sir William Denison, to the hulk as part of his vice-regal duties. Sir William was not a fan¹⁶. Lady Denison found Phillippa Bowden 'despotic', and many of the prisoner women 'quiet and respectful'¹⁷. She also expressed sympathy for the many women aboard who had children, particularly those with youngsters who had been sent to the Orphan School and had no contact with their mothers which she thought resulted in 'the misery of both at this parting.'¹⁸ Unfortunately Lady Denison did not comment to her journal on the performance of her *Anson* servants, of whom there would have been a number.

Louisa spoke only for herself in her commentary about convict women servants.

'Simply judging from the superior usefulness, willingness, and orderly, decent, sober demeanour of the women I have taken from the "Anson", over all others of their unfortunate class I have known I must believe the system pursued there by Mrs Bowden to be an excellent and effective one, and rendering the greatest possible benefit to the colony generally'¹⁹.

Mrs Meredith was obviously a fan and also held quite firm views on social class, and suitability. In this context the woman she selected from the *Anson* to replace one of her household had been shaped into 'a willing, orderly and thankful creature...²⁰' who, though of limited skill, came with the disposition to learn and became a successful addition to the household. Louisa generally found *Anson* servants orderly, decent and of sober demeanour and credited this to the practices employed on the probation hulk²¹.

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Louisa remarked on the respect the prisoners showed Mrs Bowden and her staff. It surprised her that convict servants commented well on their time on the hulk and of the relationships between people ²². She may have been lucky in her choices and not secured a woman with propensities to kick down doors.

Louisa paid her *Anson* girls²³, as she termed them, eight or nine pounds a year raising the amount on performance. Free women expected a much higher wage and were reluctant for country service. Louisa found them less willing and less under her control. A bother with all domestic servants, prisoner or free, was they constantly left to get married ²⁴. She complained to her readers:

'All are certain of marrying, if you please; proposals are plentiful, inconveniently so. Indeed, sometimes, to masters and mistresses, when tidy handmaidens are wooed, won, and married in such quick succession that new servants have constantly to be sought... But [she added] a suitable marriage is so probable and legitimate a means of reformation, that we never place obstacles in the way of such good intentions. Those prisoner-women who settle in the country, with few exceptions, behave well and industriously. ²⁵

Louisa was a firm proponent of developing self-respect in the prisoner population. Drink was clearly a great evil for women, particularly for prisoners. Louisa saw it reduce capable and conscientious women to careless wrecks. She continued to run a home in Tasmania until financial circumstances led her to move to rooms just months prior to her death in 1895. Convict and free servants, her sons, daughters-in-law, and granddaughters supported her in running her household over the many decades of her Tasmanian life. Income from Louisa's writing had helped keep these households afloat.

Louisa Meredith spoke of her own experience. As with her views of Mrs Bowden and the *Anson*, she was committed to social commentary.

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Endnotes:

¹ This following summary biography is drawn from: Sally O'Neill, 'Meredith, Louisa Ann (1812–1895)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/meredith-louisa-ann-4435/text6731>, published first in hardcopy 1974, accessed online 2 November 2018, and Maureen Martin Ferris, "Louisa Anne Meredith", *Former Times*, Issue 12, April, 2017.

² Rae-Ellis, Vivienne. *Louisa Anne Meredith: A Tigress in Exile*. [TIE] Hobart: St David's Park Publishing, 1990, p. 65.

³ Meredith, Louisa Anne (Mrs Charles), *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales*, [NSNSW] London: John Murray, 1844 [facsimile edition Ringwood: Penguin, 1973], p 161.

⁴ TIE p. 73.

⁵ Meredith, Louisa Anne. *My Home in Tasmania During a Residence of Nine Years*, [MHIT] 2 Volumes. London: John Murray [facsimile published by Glamorgan Spring Bay Historical Society, Swansea, TAS in 2003], 1852. Vol 1 p. 152.

⁶ MHIT Vol 1 p. 152.

⁷ Leake Papers, Index, Archives of the University of Tasmania, L1.

⁸ MHIT Vol 1 p. 154.

⁹ Fenton, Elizabeth *Mrs Fenton's Tasmanian Journal 1829-1830*, Adelaide, Sullivan's cove, 1986, p 75, and Elizabeth Leake to Mrs Taylor, Leake Papers, 8 June 1833, Archives of the University of Tasmania, L1/B524.

¹⁰ MHIT Vol 1 p. 155.

¹¹ MHIT Vol 2 p. 207.

¹² Leakey, Caroline Woolmer, *The Broad Arrow: being the story of Maida Gwynnham a 'Lifer' in Van Diemen's Land* [BA] London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1887. Leakey used the pen name Oliné Keese for this novel.

¹³ Deborah Adelaide, ed. *A Bright and Fiery Troop: Australian Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* Ringwood: Penguin, 1988 p. 3; and, Miranda Morris, *Placing Women: a methodology for the identification, interpretation and promotion of the heritage of women in Tasmania*, Hobart: Government of Tasmania, 1997, p 76.

¹⁴ BA p. 116.

¹⁵ BA p.118.

¹⁶ Davis, Richard, and Stefan Petrow, eds. *Varieties of Vice-Regal Life (Van Diemen's Land Section) by Sir William and Lady Denison*. [VVRL] Hobart: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 2004, footnote, p. 40.

¹⁷ VVRL p. 41.

¹⁸ VVRL p. 42.

¹⁹ MHIT Vol 2 p. 208.

²⁰ MHIT Vol 2 p. 208.

²¹ MHIT Vol 2 p. 208.

²² MHIN Vol 2 p. 209.

²³ MHIT Vol 2 p. 209.

²⁴ MHIT Vol 2 p.191.

²⁵ MHIT Vol 2 pp.209-210.