

The Story of Mary Mack and her Daughter Elizabeth Mary Mack

By

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Among the actors who played minor roles in the drama of Tasmanian history during the early years of the little Settlement on the banks of the Derwent were two women, whose names are worthy of remembrance, not merely for their own sakes but because of their association with a man who played a leading part, the Rev. Robert Knopwood first Chaplain of the infant Colony. They were Mary Mack and her daughter, Elizabeth Mary, sometimes called 'Betty' or 'Betsey' Mack.

Of Mary Mack little is known, except that she was a young woman in her early twenties when she first came on to the scene. She probably came out in 1803 on board the 'Calcutta' with Lt. Col. David Collins to Port Phillip, and thence in 1804 to Hobart Town. But her name does not appear in any of the lists available in the Mitchell Library, or elsewhere, to which I have had access.

Collins brought with him a detachment of Royal Marines, who, if of good conduct, were allowed to quit the service on their return to England, or to be discharged at the expiration of three years after landing in Australia, if they desired to remain and become settlers. Between Mary Mack and one of these Marines an acquaintance began which ripened into a romance, with a not unusual, but tragic sequel. The young man returned to England, leaving her behind with an infant daughter of eight months old. The poor girl was destitute, and Bobby Knopwood, in the kindness of his heart and out of compassion for her distress, took her and her baby under his roof at Cottage Green, where she remained until her death a few months later, at the age of 27. She was buried in St. David's Cemetery, and over her grave was erected a simple monument, a slab of Tasmanian Blue-Gum, on which were inscribed the following words:—

IN MEMORY OF
MARY MACK WHO
DEPARTED THIS LIFE

October 16th 1808

Aged 27 YEARS.

This monument has had an unusual history. As the years went by, the old St. David's Cemetery fell upon evil times, and became the haunt of thieves and larrikins and other undesirables, who defaced the headstones and their inscriptions. One of Mary Mack's descendants noticed that her tablet had been damaged, and rescued it and presented it to the Tasmanian Museum. Years afterwards it was sent to England, to be exhibited there as a sample of the durability of Tasmanian timber. Upon its return it was again housed in the Museum, where it has been ever since. The wood is still in perfect preservation, 140 years after it was first cut, although it bears obvious signs of desecration by sacrilegious hands. It is the second oldest existing memorial of those in St. David's Cemetery, and one of the very few tangible links still left with those far-off days of Tasmanian history.

Mary Mack's infant child was born on 30th August, 1806, and in due course was baptised with the name of 'Elizabeth Mary'.

Apart from family tradition our only source of information about her is the diary of Robert Knopwood. Unfortunately he was a bad diarist, with little literary ability, and very rarely indulging in any personal opinions or comments, most of the entries being bare laconic statements of fact. And so, in perusing his diary, we must be prepared to read between the lines in order to discover the motives and background behind the incidents recorded.

The first entry about the child is dated 14th August, 1807, when he wrote 'This afternoon little Mary, a child of one year old, came to my house, and Mrs. McCauley [Knopwood's housekeeper] took her, her mother being a poor distressed woman'. Mrs. McCauley kept house for Knopwood until she went to live with her husband on his farm at Muddy Plains, as Sandford was then called. Knopwood was very often hazy about dates and ages. He was never quite certain even of his own age, and in the case of little Betsey Mack he contradicted himself, and gave her different ages at different times. But he always insisted that 30th August was the date of her birthday. The mother Mary Mack, died fourteen months after they took refuge at Cottage Green, and the poor orphan child was then formally adopted by Knopwood and brought up as his own. The volumes of the diary for the next six years, 1808 to 1814, are unhappily missing, and we do not hear anything more of her until September, 1814, when he recorded, 'Little Betty and self walked to Newtown to dine with the Whiteheads'. The Whiteheads were great friends of Knopwood and had a farm near Cornelian Bay, and as she was then only eight years old she must have been a sturdy child to walk so far.

On 30th August, 1815, there was an entry 'My little orphan's birthday, seven years this day' (she was actually nine) and thereafter there were frequent entries of subsequent birthdays, which were always occasions for special celebrations.

On 28th March, 1816, Mrs. Hayes, the wife of one of Governor Collins' free settlers, gave a ball for her grand-daughters, the two Miss Bowens, to which Betsy was taken, her first dance and 'stays all night'.

On her tenth birthday, 30th August, 1816, she was given some handsome presents, a cow from Lt. Governor Davey, another from Edward Lord, and a third from Knopwood himself. They were rather odd gifts for a child of her tender age but probably they were taken care of at the McCauley farm, and brought her in some pocket money.

On 24th March, 1818, he took her for a water picnic to Crayfish Point, accompanied by three men and four native girls. The latter dived for the fish and caught a 'great many'. The following month they had another outing to the same spot, with two native girls to do the fishing. There were other excursions, to Knopwood's farm at the Cove, and to the McCauley farm at Muddy Plains. Those early years must have been bright and happy years for the little girl, as well as for her adoring foster-father.

But she was now twelve years old, and it was time to think of more serious things than crayfishing and bush walks, she must be educated and brought up as a young lady should be. So in September, 1819, Knopwood took her in his boat across the river to Clarence Plains, to inspect the Seminary for Young Ladies at Rokeby, kept by Mrs. Speed. We know nothing about this establishment, but apparently the inspection was satisfactory, at any rate on the surface, and

Betsey was duly placed under the care of its proprietress and remained there for about three years. She was visited from time to time by her guardian, and on at least one occasion, on 23rd October, 1822, by the Governor's Lady (politely referred to by Knopwood as 'Mrs. Sorell') who he says, 'was very much delighted by Mrs. Speed's manner and the neatness of the beds and rooms'. But, alas, we suspect that this delightful manner and neatness were only window-dressing, and concealed methods and practices that would have done credit to Mr. Squeers of Dotheboys Hall. For in January, 1823, there was this entry—'From her ill-treatment I determined to take my orphan child from school'. From this bald statement we are left to imagine what poor little Betsey's trials and experiences must have been. How thankful she must have been to get back to the gentle loving atmosphere of Cottage Green!

But it was not to be for long. She was now sixteen and growing up, and Romance was waiting around the corner. Cinderella had found her Prince. He was a young man named Henry Morrisby, who lived with his father at Clarence Plains. He had probably met her at the Rokeby School, or at Muddy Plains. They fell in love with one another and became engaged. Knopwood at first seemed very happy about the matter, although reluctant to part with his beloved companion, and readily gave his consent to the match. He described Henry Morrisby as 'a young man of excellent character' and busied himself with elaborate preparations for the marriage. He officiated at the wedding, which took place at the old St. David's Church on 20th October, 1824, and entertained the guests at breakfast at Cottage Green, and then took the happy pair in his boat across the Derwent to spend their honeymoon at the McCauley's farm. He gave them wedding presents of cattle and sheep, and persuaded Lt. Governor Sorell to grant them a farm of their own at Muddy Plains. But after it was all over the old man went back sadly to his empty house, overwhelmed by the realization of his loneliness and with gloomy forebodings for the future. 'Very unwell' he confided to his diary 'at the departure of my only comfort, my dear adopted daughter, E. Mack'.

In October the following year (1825) Cottage Green was to witness another interesting event, the birth of Betsey's first child. It was a son, who was christened 'Robert Henry' on 14th November. Knopwood gave a grand dinner party to celebrate the occasion, bringing up from his cellar, wine which, 'had been in the house from 12 to 14 years'. For the next year or two things apparently went well with the young couple. Robert and his mother often came to Hobart Town to visit the old man, the boy was vaccinated with 'Cow Pox' and his first birthday is recorded in the diary. But in 1829 there was a hint of trouble at Muddy Plains. In an entry of 10th May of that year Knopwood wrote 'At Clarence Plains. In the afternoon returned to Mrs. Morrisby. He behaved "malum" to her'. (Throughout his diary he dropped into Latin when he had anything particularly unpleasant to record.) This was followed, a few days later, by another remark, 'At Mrs. Morrisby's. He was returned and behaved very ill to my poor dear girl. I took her part. His conduct is very bad'. And again, on 2nd June, 'My poor dear girl, Mrs. Morrisby—E. Mack that was—and her little boy were obliged to return home. Mr. Morrisby would not allow her to remain. His treatment of her is shameful'. This must have been a particularly bitter blow for Knopwood, as June 2nd was his birthday, and Betsey and the boy had gone over to celebrate it with him. However the breach was healed a few months later, when he says that Mr. Morrisby had come over to tea at Cottage Green, and 'we made it up'. Knopwood seldom bore resentment

against anyone for long, except for Colonel Arthur, whose treatment of him he never forgave or forgot. The last day of that year was spent with his beloved Betsey and her friends Mrs. and Miss Chase, who sat up with him until midnight to see the Old Year out and the New Year in, and to wish him a Happy New Year.

But their good wishes were not fulfilled, for the new year was to see the close of what was probably the saddest chapter of Bobby Knopwood's long life. He was approaching his 70th year, and had for some time been in serious financial difficulties. His creditors had seized and sold most of the valuable land granted to him on his arrival in the Colony. He had been compelled to resign his post as Chaplain, to make room for Rev. William Bedford, and to take up temporary duty at New Norfolk. He had expected to be appointed permanently to that Parish, but his hopes were dashed by the arrival from England of the Rev. Hugh Robinson, armed with the appointment, and he himself was relegated to Clarence Plains. He was still occupying Cottage Green, but in 1829 that, too, was sold to one Henry Jennings, who soon after disposed of it to Lt. Governor Arthur. Jennings had assured him that he could stay on there as long as he liked, but this did not suit Arthur's plans, and in 1830 the poor old man was forced to leave his beloved home and to take up residence in his New Parish, in a tiny uncomfortable cottage not far from Kangaroo Point, on the road to Howrah. By April of that year he had packed up all of his possessions and moved into his new abode. He was most unhappy, and from time to time would walk up to the Bluff and gaze wistfully across the water, dreaming of the days that were no more.

And then, six months later, came the final, shattering blow. On October 19th, 1830, Mrs. Morrisby, who was expecting her second baby, invited him to dine with her next day—the anniversary of her wedding—but he was unwell and had to decline the invitation. The following morning, at nine o'clock, he was horrified to receive the news that she had died shortly after giving birth to a baby daughter. She, whom he loved more than anything in the world, had gone, at the age of 22 and left him to face the future alone!

For the next few weeks his diary was full of laments over this untimely and unexpected loss. On 22nd October he wrote—'At home all day in a most melancholy state. Many friends both came and sent to know how I was, including Rev. Bedford to settle about the funeral'. On 23rd October—'Preparing for the funeral of my dear and ever-regretted Elizabeth Mary Mack . . . in fact my only comfort'. There is no account of the funeral in the diary, but on the 26th he says, 'This morn early I visited the grave of my dear and ever-regretted late E. Morrisby', and on 5th November, 'Rode to Clarence Plains. Called upon Mrs. Maum, and gave her two gown pieces for her attendance upon my dear and ever-regretted late E. Morrisby. Afterwards I visited the Tomb'.

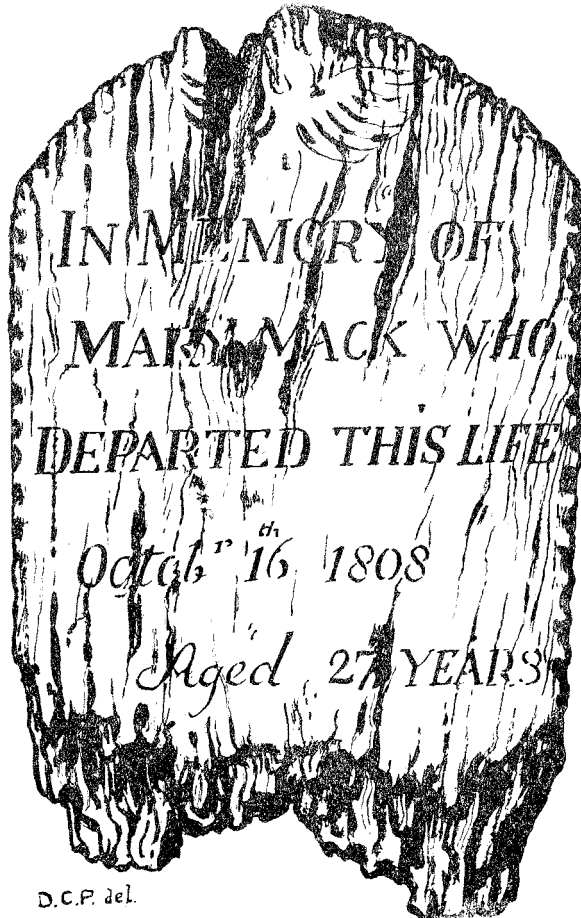
The following Sunday, 7th November, he rode to Clarence Plains and preached a funeral sermon on the death of his 'dear lamented girl'. 'Everybody' he added 'greatly affected by the Sermon'. On 10th November he baptised the new baby, giving her the name of 'Elizabeth Sarah Morrisby'. His many friends rallied round him and endeavoured to comfort him, but the old man never really recovered from his grievous loss, and from time to time we find entries which show his inability to forget. Thus, on 2nd June, 1831, he wrote 'This day I entered into my 69th year [it was really his 70th] and never to my recollection spent a more unhappy day. The death of my dear and ever-regretted girl, late E. Morrisby, was always in my thoughts, recollecting the many happy days she was with me, and her friends, to commemorate it. I expected the Rev. Mr. Connelly and another. They did not come'.

On 30th August, the anniversary of Betsey's birthday he said 'I always, when in Hobart Town, had a large party to dine with me, and how very happy we always were on this day. But now she is keeping her birthday in a happier place, by the side of that God whom she always put her trust in'.

Mr. Morrisby married again, much to the old man's disgust, but later he became reconciled to the new couple, and they were very good to him, and looked after him when he went to live at Rokeby. He became greatly attached to the two children, and often had Robert to stay with him. He sent him to the Orphan School at Newtown to be educated, and took him to Reviews on the Domain and to other entertainments.

By his Will, made in 1836 Robert Knopwood left everything he had to the two children. He died on 18th September, 1838, at Kangaroo Point, at the age of 77.

And so, when we look at this old slab of Tasmanian hardwood, with its rudely carved lettering, let us remember the story behind it, and keep it as an enduring memorial of a youthful romance, and of the charity and kindness of a man, whose frailties are too often remembered, while his virtues and good deeds are apt to be forgotten.



Mary Mack's Headstone, formerly in St. David's Cemetery, now in the Tasmanian Museum.