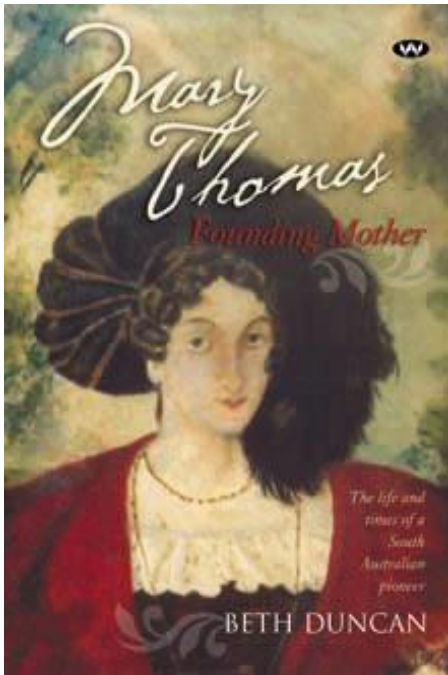


Mary Thomas: Founding Mother. The life and times of a South Australian Pioneer by Beth Duncan. Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 2007, pp. viii + 215, AUD \$34.95 Paperback ISBN: 978 1862547834.



In 1836 Mary Thomas, 49, her husband Robert, 53, and four of five surviving children aged between 10 and 17 (a sixth had died in infancy) sailed aboard *Africaine* for the new colony of South Australia. Their eldest son, 16-year-old Robert George, an apprentice surveyor, sailed on the *Cygnets*. Mary left modest prosperity in London to improve her boys' prospects at a time when it was becoming difficult for the 'sons of the lower middle classes ... without influential connections' (p.14) to obtain employment in Britain and in the hope that, after a few years, she and her husband and three daughters could return.

Robert Thomas, a London law stationer and publisher, came with the colonial government printing contract. He and his partner George Stevenson, a former journalist emigrating as secretary to Governor John Hindmarsh, had published one issue of the *South Australian Gazette*

and *General Register* in London before the family embarked.

For some time things went well in South Australia. Besides his newspaper, Robert ran a general store, stationery and bookshop, and the Thomases achieved a degree of affluence. However, Stevenson's editorials were critical of the colonial government, making them enemies in high places, and in 1840 the government contract was withdrawn. Economic recession compounded the loss and in 1842 the business was declared bankrupt. The Thomases retained their home and some property in trust to Mary, but 'in effect ... the financial rewards of their life's work had been swallowed up in the black hole of South Australia's economic crisis.' (p.149) A year earlier Mary had written: '[I] shall never think of myself at home until I get back to [my] own dear native land' (p. 123). Though the Thomases recovered to an extent, Mary would die in Adelaide at the age of 87 without seeing England again.

Mary's 'levels of intelligence and education ... were considerable' (p. 1). Before emigrating, she had published poetry, and 'her diary of the voyage out and letters describing the first years of settlement were published posthumously and became very well known' (p. 4). She was also a practical and capable woman who did not shrink from hard work or primitive living conditions. She took 'so active and useful a part in the journalistic department [of the *Register*] that she might well have been classed as one of the firm' (p. 250), she virtually raised several grandchildren, and she was for a time the family's sole breadwinner.

In such a small society almost every development impinged directly on the lives of each citizen. The times are inextricably bound up with the life and Beth Duncan gives a good account of both, from the planning of the colony, financed by the sale of land in

advance, through its infancy as a tent city of a few hundred souls, to its transformation over four decades into a growing agricultural, industrial and urban society. She deals with the deteriorating relationship between the colonists and the Aboriginal population as the European practice of settled farming clashed with the complex tribal boundaries and journeying of the Aborigines. By 1874 '[t]he alienation of Aborigines from their lands was complete – Aborigines were placed in the care of missionaries, and out of sight was out of mind.' (p. 248)

At the time the colonists were more concerned with their own welfare. On the voyage out in 1836 Mary nursed three children with severe scarlet fever; in the early 1860s, when Adelaide was commonly known as the 'city of stench', two of her grandchildren died in infancy. Indeed, '[i]nfant mortality in the colony reached its peak in 1868 with 180 deaths in children under the age of 12 months, for every 1000 live births ... the worst in Australia' (p. 226). Her daughter Frances died of TB in her 37th year; Mary junior, who married her widowed brother-in-law, suffered terrible throat infections and regular miscarriages; both required constant help from their indefatigable mother.

Nevertheless, as she had hoped, Mary's children did benefit from the emigration. Robert George became a successful architect, William ultimately a proprietor of the *Register*, the newspaper his father and Stevenson had begun. When she died, Mary had four living children, 26 grandchildren and 'an estimated 25 great-grandchildren' (p. 255); her daughter Helen died in 1921 aged 95.

This admirable and scholarly work is thoroughly referenced and includes a comprehensive index, an extensive bibliography, appendices, and black-and-white illustrations including portraits. Unfortunately, however, the illustrations are of varying quality and disappointingly small. I noticed one pagination error in the index, and the omission of original publication dates in citing works published over a century earlier than the edition used is irritating; but these are minor criticisms. This is a fascinating insight into the life of a remarkable woman and the first 39 years of the colony of South Australia.

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