

A SOLDIER'S WIFE

Martin Terry considers the life of William Bligh's daughter, Mary

Two hundred years ago, in the early evening of 26 January 1808, the 20th Anniversary day of the colony's founding, officers and men of the New South Wales Corps marched 'with fixed bayonets' up Bridge Street, Sydney, intending to toss out Governor William Bligh.

One person resisted this. At the gates they were met by Bligh's daughter, Mary Putland: 'parasol in hand', wrote Miss Blaxland, and widowed just three weeks earlier. Bligh's wife Betsy had declined to accompany him to Sydney, so Mary, born 1783, and married to Lieutenant John Putland, was acting as her father's hostess. George Jubb, Bligh's steward, reported how Mary, on seeing the troops marching up, 'hastened to the gates, & gallantly opposed their entrance ... exclaiming "you traitors, you rebels, you have just walked over my husband's grave & now come to murder my father"! She continued similarly until 'forcibly dragged away—but again escaped nor would she be opposed'.

Bligh himself apparently behaved poorly. Whether in fact he was actually dragged from beneath a bed (as suggested in a notorious caricature), or was intent on destroying his papers, he appears to have left his daughter downstairs to deal with a party of armed soldiers.

William Bligh (1754–1817) seems a man fated to be much rebelled against. Years after the celebrated mutiny on the *Bounty*,



he was in dispute with Captain Short on the voyage out to New South Wales—resulting in Lieutenant Putland being ordered to fire a shot across his father-in-law's ship. Arrived in the colony, his daughter Mary projected her own assertive personal style (writing to her sister for example, describing a gown which she considered 'altogether different and superior to anything of the kind which has been seen in this country').

Following the tumultuous events of Anniversary day, the Blighs continued to occupy Government House. After another year however, William Paterson, commanding officer of the New South Wales Corps, had had enough and on 30 January 1809 Bligh, who had formerly (as alleged by Surgeon Harris) moved around like 'a great planet'—in a festooned

above:
William Nicholas (1807–1854)
Portrait of Lady O'Connell c.1847
oil on canvas; 76.0 x 56.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an14305023

below left:
Unknown artist
Arrest of Governor Bligh,
January 26, 1808
(Sydney: Government Printing
Office, 1890s)
photolithograph of watercolour
27.0 x 44.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7655522





above:
Alexander Huey (active
1809–1818)
*Portrait of Rear-Admiral William
Bligh* 1814
watercolour on ivory
11.5 x 8.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an11230917

below:
G.E. Peacock (b.1806)
*View from Sir Maurice
O'Connell's Residence,
Woolloomooloo, Sydney, NSW*
1845
oil on canvas; 23.0 x 30.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an2272203

coach with liveried out-riders—was carted away to the barracks in a 'one-horse chaise'. Mary's sense of the dramatic hadn't deserted her, and under 'a Vertical Sun', without a parasol presumably, had run after her father in support. They entered the barracks together, whereupon she fainted on a sofa. They then spent a month in small, adjoining rooms before Paterson, on being given Bligh's promise to return home to England, permitted them to board HMS *Porpoise*. Bligh broke his word however, and

spent a year cruising between Sydney and Hobart Town. He was unwanted in both townships, and the *Porpoise's* officers and crew must have loathed this pointless display of bravado, which came to an end only when Lachlan Macquarie arrived in Sydney at the end of the year. At that point, Bligh returned to Sydney and gathered evidence for the trials ahead.

There was a surprise in store for him, however. Mary had borne Bligh's privations as her own, but now Colonel Maurice O'Connell of the 73rd Regiment called on Bligh, asking permission to marry his

daughter. O'Connell (1768–1848) had arrived in Sydney with Macquarie, so the wooing must have been rapid. That Bligh had failed to notice a courtship between his daughter and the second-ranking officer in the colony is a measure of his self-absorption, but perhaps also evidences Mary's subterfuge and determination. The couple married on 8 May 1810 at Government House, and Bligh sailed for England four days later. Writing to his wife Betsy from Rio, he relates how O'Connell 'had unknown to me won her affections'. Bligh had actually refused his suit, but Mary had been adamant, leaving Bligh 'overwhelmed with a loss I could not retrieve'.

Macquarie had seen Bligh off—but what about the daughter? In correspondence with the Colonial Secretary, Earl Bathurst, Macquarie wrote in August 1813 that 'a good deal of Party Spirit [factionalism] still exists in this Colony, principally arising from the circumstance of Lieut. Colonel O'Connell's having married the Daughter of Governor Bligh'. Macquarie was convinced that this 'Faction will [only] be Completely annihilated on the removal of Lieut. Colonel and Mrs O'Connell'. To achieve it, he urged the extreme measure of transferring the entire 73rd Regiment, his own, overseas (though in fairness, there were other factors as well). This was agreed to, and the O'Connells left Sydney on the *General Hewitt*, for Ceylon in March 1814.



The Ceylon posting was notable for two successful British campaigns: against the King of Kandy in 1815, and an uprising of the Kandians in 1817. During this period, Mary would have been living at Colombo, and then Trincomalee, before the regiment was recalled to Ireland in 1821.

Professional soldiers' lives are peripatetic, and years later O'Connell, now knighted and a general, was again sent out to New South Wales. What might Mary have been thinking as the *Fairlie* made its slow way up Sydney Harbour on 6 December 1838, and she spied Edward Blore's new Government House under construction? And what did Sydney think of Mary, as she alighted at Bennelong Point?—for there was about Mary O'Connell the aura of ancient trouble. Anyone who thought this petite and elegantly turned-out woman would be content to be a relic of a former era, was mistaken.

The O'Connells re-enter the colony's official records when, in a 'hurried despatch' of 7 August 1839, Governor George Gipps informed the Colonial Secretary that Sir Maurice, on behalf of the Bligh heirs, had claimed 'a considerable portion of the Town of Parramatta'. This audacious land-grab placed Gipps in an awkward position, and the matter wasn't settled until February 1841, A.G.L. Shaw observing that the settlement was 'so favourable to the grantees that whatever his temporary trials, Bligh's estate gained lasting benefit from his office'.

In Sydney town, the O'Connells lived at Tarmons, a two-storey villa built by John Verge (or his assistant, John Bibb), on the site of present-day St Vincents College in Victoria Street, Potts Point. Here they entertained in great style. Godfrey Mundy in his account of the colony, *Our Antipodes*, described a dinner of wallaby-tail soup, haunch of venison, and wonga-wonga pigeon, commenting that were it not for the local fare, 'the general appliance of the household, the dress of the guests and servants, were as entirely English as they could have been in London'.

Gipps left Sydney on 11 July 1846. Sir Maurice O'Connell administered the colony from 12 July until Charles FitzRoy took over on 3 August. Mary O'Connell, earlier evicted from Government House, must have revelled in hosting receptions in the new one during this brief three-week period.



In 1847, the first issue of *Heads of the People* was published in Sydney. Each issue was well-produced, with manic little vignettes, an episode of Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*, engravings by Thomas Rider, and a lithographic portrait by William Nicholas. The journal, wrote its publisher William Baker, 'decapitated the swells and oddities of the town'—but everyone seems to have agreed to be in it, from the official establishment to the postman, the undertaker, a horse-whisperer, and some New Hebrides natives who had turned up in town.

Maurice O'Connell's portrait appeared in the issue of 19 June 1847, looking the very image of affable authority. After being criticised as 'ungallant' for not considering that some good heads might be met with amongst 'individuals of the softer sex', Baker sought female subjects. One declined, afraid of being the first, claiming that 'she would rather wait til after Lady Mary had appeared'. It was a long wait: Mary was finally featured in 29 January 1848. Though she was sensible to be wary of this rather anarchic journal, in fact she was treated with cautious respect: made to look years younger, and flattered by being described as a typical soldier's wife. Which may have amused her—the daughter of an admiral, and the wife of a general.

The accompanying text is carefully vague: the 'soldier's wife' is praised for her

William Nicholas (1807–1854)
*Portrait of Lady O'Connell, the
Soldier's Wife*
(Sydney: W. Baker, 1848)
lithograph; 27.5 x 21.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an8152926



above left:
William Nicholas (1807–1854)
Sir Maurice O'Connell c.1847
oil on canvas; 76.0 x 56.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an13834976

above right:
William Nicholas (1807–1854)
*Portrait of Sir Maurice O'Connell,
the Soldier*
(Sydney: W. Baker, 1847)
lithograph; 27.5 x 21.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an8148569

constancy, and bravery in the face of battle. Often far from home, she must endure 'the frigidity of the north and the burning heat of torrid climes'. (Mary had certainly done this in Ceylon.) Only in conclusion, and probably unnecessarily, the writer reminded readers that 'Lady O'Connell is the daughter of Admiral Bligh ... whose life was marked by the most striking events.'

Just four months later, on 25 May, Sir Maurice was dead. Reporting on the funeral of 29 May, the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted that despite 'the inclemency of the weather, thousands on thousands attended the melancholy procession'. With guns firing from Fort Phillip at Bennelong Point, the cortege with 150 carriages wended its way from Tarmons to St James's church in the city. After the service, the general's final journey was to the Burial Ground in George Street.

Nicholas's lithographs then served as the foundation for imposing portraits of Maurice and Mary—probably commissioned by Mary



or her son (Maurice junior), and acquired by the National Library in 1998.

Mary's portrait remains largely faithful to Nicholas's print. The heavy-lidded eyes miss nothing; she's an image of icy control. Possibly standing on the verandah at Tarmons, she's elaborately jewelled—from the diamond cross at her throat, to the cameo-pendant pinned on her dress, to a locket and two-heavily encrusted bangles on her left wrist. She holds a glaring spaniel wearing a silver collar.

The portrait of her husband, however, has been radically altered from Nicholas's version. His relaxed pose has been changed to show him standing; the sword presented to him by the Lloyd's Patriotic Fund for services in the West Indies is prominent. The left-hand side of the composition is dominated, if not overwhelmed, by the egret plumes adorning his regimental shako. In the distance is a glimpse of the homestead at Riverston(e), the land near Windsor which he had been granted by Macquarie.

With her husband's death, Mary left the colony for the last time. Living in Gloucester with her daughter Elizabeth Somerset, she died on 10 December 1864, aged 81.

MARTIN TERRY is Exhibitions Curator at the National Library of Australia