

ELIZA HASSALL

Dr Win Ward has generously supplied a copy of her address to the Society, delivered at our Annual Dinner on April 8, 1999.

A GLIMPSE INTO THE RELATIVELY GENTEEL LIFE OF
THE NEW SOUTH WALES CLERGY DURING THE MID
1800s THROUGH THE LIFE OF ELIZA HASSALL,
DAUGHTER OF THE REV. THOMAS HASSALL, "THE
GALLOPING PARSON" AND GRANDDAUGHTER OF THE
REV. SAMUEL MARSDEN, THE "FLOGGING PARSON".

I was asked to give a title to my talk tonight. It is a long title, and before I proceed with the talk I want to stress the use of the word "relatively", because compared with the elite society of "Mother England" from which so many came, their genteel status was often very relative.

Their relative status is, I believe, well summed up in a comment made in an incident recorded in one of the Hassall family biographies. James and Anna Rootes and their three children arrived in New South Wales in 1837 as free settlers, hoping to find employment in the convict colony. They were engaged to work for Mr James Hassall, Eliza Hassall's uncle. As they were being driven in a bullock dray to meet their new employer Anna Rootes asked: "What is this Mr Hassall like? Is he gentry or from the nobility at home?"

"Nobility? Not him" answered the bullock driver, "though for New South Wales I suppose he counts as gentry. They say that his father arrived in New South Wales with barely a penny to his name - a weaver turned missionary. About the only thing he had in his favour was that he was not a convict and that he was honest and hard-working. That was about forty years ago. But men in those days were being given grants of good land, and his father got a lot. Specially down this way in the Cowpastures - lovely country, rich, on the Nepean River. They say the old man left his property to his children" continued the bullock driver, "four sons and four daughters. The oldest of the Hassall sons lives in

these parts, too: he's the Rev. Thomas Hassall, landowner and Church of England rector". And Rev. Thomas Hassall was Eliza's father.

So it was that with their land grants, or their positions in the church, or in official employment, there developed a stratum of society which, as the bullock driver described, "Nobility? No! Though for New South Wales I suppose it counts as gentry". Soon after the Rootes arrived at Matavai House, the home of Eliza's aunt and uncle, Mr & Mrs James Hassall, Anne Rootes watched guests arrive for a party. The women, dressed in their rich, elegant gowns were ushered into the home, brilliantly lit with lamps and candles. Included among the guests were Eliza's parents. Other guests included James and William Macarthur and their ladies from Camden Park, the Oxleys of "Kirkham", relatives of the Surveyor General, and the Charles Cowpers of "Wiverhoe".

Into this environment Eliza Hassall was born on the second day of November 1834, the fourth daughter and seventh of eight children born to Rev. Thomas and Mrs Anne Hassall. Anne, Eliza's mother, was Samuel Marsden's daughter. Eliza's father, the Rev. Thomas Hassall, became known as "The Galloping Parson" and her grandfather, the Rev. Samuel Marsden, was known as "The Flogging Parson".

As members of the Historical Society, you would be well aware of the unfortunate situation which developed in the early days of convict settlement when many of the clergy acted in the dual role of magistrate as well as chaplain. This practice resulted in considerable antagonism against religion by many in the early settlement. Parson magistrates were responsible for ordering hundreds of floggings and sentences to chain gangs. Despite Rev. Samuel Marsden's reputation as a caring missionary, his practice of handing down savage penalties from the bench made him one of, if not the most, hated clergymen of the convict era. It has been claimed that of 248 people successively sent before him, only 7 were released. Altogether the bench distributed 11,321 lashes.

By contrast, Eliza's father, the Rev. Thomas Hassall, had quite a different reputation. He was described as a man with a strong face who looked at his congregation with warmth and love and was certainly regarded with great affection by the people to whom he ministered. His parents, Rowland and Elizabeth Hassall, were Tahitian missionaries and the young Thomas became a protege of Samuel Marsden, and was the first resident

Australian to take Holy Orders, a qualification which in those early days of settlement required study overseas.

His developing interest in real estate was evidenced when he sold 4 acres of land bounded by George, York and Market Streets for 200 pounds in order to buy land at Bathurst for five shillings per acre. He received a considerable grant of land at O'Connell Plains in the Bathurst district. He also owned a farm on the banks of the Hawkesbury River in addition to a cattle station at Crookwell. Following an appointment at Bathurst he was appointed in 1827 as the first rector to Cobbity and the Camden district and was first offered a home at Razorback. This was not suitable, so he purchased "Denbigh", an Indian-style dwelling situated on about 1,100 acres at Cobbity, on the opposite side of the Cowpasture River from Camden. Thomas once described his area as "All of Australia beyond Liverpool".

At the time of Eliza's birth the family had settled into their home at "Denbigh". It would seem to her father that his area of parish responsibility would be almost "the rest of Australia", because he held divine services at Cobbity, Narellan, Camden, Cabramatta (then known as Rossmore), Mulgoa, South Creek, Inverary, Wollongong, Sutton Forest, Goulburn Plains, Picton and The Oaks.

Writing about this extensive area of responsibilities in later years his son, the Rev. James Hassall, said that his father "was a good rider and always rode a good horse". Records indicate that he rode many hundreds of miles caring for people in these widely settled areas and he organized the building of many churches, settling each into a different parish. With good reason he became known as "the Galloping Parson."

He was not only highly thought of by his Parish people, but also by the authorities. Records of the Narellan Parish refer to a report compiled in 1829 by Archdeacon Scott on land grants to chaplains which strongly criticised the custom as injurious but when he came to the name of Thomas Hassall, Archdeacon Scott said "the case of Mr Hassall is different....Mr Hassall is a very prudent man....he does his clerical duties with greatest decorum and punctuality throughout a very large district."

Eliza grew up in the gracious environment of "Denbigh". The extensive property sur-

rounding Denbigh was likened by Eliza's eldest brother, James, to a scattered village, and for some time it was known as Heber Village. Eliza's father built, at his own expense Heber Chapel, named after The Rt. Rev. Bishop Heber, the great hymn writer and missionary. He did later receive 300 pounds towards the cost of the chapel.

Within the Heber Village there were located the shoemaker, the brickmaker, the carpenter, the blacksmith, the gardeners, the dairyman, the schoolmaster and other artisans. The Hassall family and people from surrounding areas attended services in the Heber Chapel which was consecrated by the Rev. Samuel Marsden in 1828. One report tells of a new arrival to the area being very impressed to see carriage folk arriving with well dressed women being handed down from their carriage seats by gentlemen in tall hats. Parties of convicts arrived with their overseers and were led to seats at the back.

The size of the congregation soon outgrew the accommodation available and in 1837 it was proposed to enlarge Heber Chapel. Instead in 1840 it was decided to build a new church and the foundation stone was laid on the 25th April, 1840 for St Paul's Narellan (Cobbity). It was described as a fine Gothic stone structure of mixed styles. The church was consecrated by Bishop Broughton on Easter Day, 1842.

A wealth of information is available from existent original letters held in the Mitchell Library written by Eliza to her brother James while he was in England studying for the ministry. Eliza constantly wrote about the many activities on the property which included caring for an orangegrove, a vineyard and an apple orchard. Her father was keenly interested in horses, not only to ride, but also to breed and sell. Horses realized high prices and he seldom sold any under sixty to seventy pounds.

The boys in the family had some schooling at Kings School Parramatta where their fellow students included the Macarthurs, the Oxleys, the Wentworths and other boys of the colony's elite society. They also shared instruction given to Eliza and her sisters, first by a governess, who was acknowledged by James as being a splendid teacher. Later, the Hassall children were taught by an excellent tutor, Mr John McKenny. The girls were also taught the art of needlepoint. A narrow lace collar which they made as a birthday gift for their mother is now possessed by the Australian Historical Society.

In addition to school contacts, at Denbigh the Hassall family enjoyed social contacts with other pioneering families who included the Marsdens, Macarthurs, Blaxlands, Wentworths and Kings. In her many letters written to James, Eliza wrote of the frequent picnics and parties enjoyed with friends. Her father's keen interest in horses ensured that there were always ample numbers of horses to accommodate a picnic party of about twenty people. Horse-riding parties were commonplace to the beautiful areas of Bent Basin, Cowpasture River, Donohue's Cave, The Oaks and to Razorback mountain. In a letter to James, written in 1863, Eliza expressed thanks to God for so many true friends and she assured her brother that the older she became, the more pleasure she obtained from their company.

Her letters to James included comments about the sheep, the horses, the crops, the meals for the servants and the aborigines which she supervised, and one letter described the excellent crop of black grapes used to make wine and white grapes used to make sherry. Her affinity with her father's activities both in the property and in his ministry is suggested in a letter he wrote on the 6th December 1855 in which he commented: "Dear Eliza is a great assistance - she takes up things so earnestly."

There was plenty of activity at Denbigh to occupy Eliza. Her father employed on occasions from one to two hundred aborigines to assist in such work as burning off dead timber. They would begin work at 9.00am and work until 3.00pm. When they left off in the afternoon they had a good meal described as "hasty pudding hominy, soup and vegetables, with a sugar bag, described as empty sugar mats soaked in a bucket of water." On one occasion, while at Denbigh James had witnessed a corroboree in which over 400 aborigines participated.

For a number of years Eliza's father had from a dozen to twenty convict servants whom he had to clothe and ration. Rations consisted of tea, sugar, meat and flour or wheat which they used to grind for themselves in a small steel mill. Assigned servants at Denbigh were managed by a Scottish overseer and a considerable amount of farming was carried on. Wheat crops sold at 8 shillings a bushel and hay at 8 pounds per ton. A negro lived with the family for 50 years. He had been rescued by Rev. Samuel Marsden from a ship at Tasmania (then Van Diemen's Land) and he proved to be a faithful servant, described by Eliza and her family as a "true Uncle Tom."

Over the years changes took place and gradually the life-style became less affluent. As convict transportation to the mainland eastern states virtually ceased in 1840, convict labour became unavailable and free labour was very scarce. The Bank of Australia failed in the early 1840s and as a shareholder in the Bank Eliza's father lost a considerable amount of money. Tenant farmers on the large Denbigh property left to purchase their own holdings. Stock prices fell and a scarcity of money forced the land-owning cleric to sell several properties in order to meet calls on his finances. Eliza's father was gradually relieved of the more scattered districts of his parish, including Sutton Forest, Goulburn, The Oaks, Mulgoa, Narellan and Cabramatta. This reduced work load enabled him to live a more relaxed life and enjoy a period of rest as age increased, although this was somewhat tempered by the loss of his curate who accepted a higher position in another parish.

Eliza never married and remained with her parents, helping to nurse her father through gradually failing health as his age increased. True to his reputation as "The Galloping Parson", a fortnight before he died he conducted three services which involved riding 24 miles and the following day rode 28 miles through bush to Mulgoa, not arriving at his destination until 9.00pm. Next day he was so ill he had to take to his bed and he died within a fortnight on 29 March 1868, aged 73 years. About 600 people gathered in the churchyard at St Paul's Church at Cobbity to farewell the good man who had been so influential and beloved in the district, and throughout his ministry had ridden great distances to minister to his parishioners.

After her father's death Eliza moved to the Parramatta District with her mother to whom she gave loving care until her mother's death in 1885. Her mother was also buried in the Cobbity church grounds, midway between Heber Chapel and St. Paul's.

Eliza maintained her dedicated work for the church. On 18th July 1880 she commenced the New South Wales branch of the Young People's Scripture Union. Membership grew, with Eliza continuing an active role as secretary for this work.

The records of the Church Missionary Society refer to the valuable assistance given by Eliza to the work of the Society. Her most valuable contribution resulted from her

response to a Deputation, led by Mr Eugene Stock, sent to Australia from the London headquarters in 1892. The Deputation's object was to promote and foster support from the colonies for missionary work, especially in China, India and the South Sea Islands.

As a direct response to the Deputation's appeal Eliza offered her own home, 'Cluden', which was then located at Ashfield, to be used as a Training Home for women missionary candidates. Eliza also offered her services in a voluntary capacity as Superintendent of the Training Centre. The grateful Committee named the training centre "The Marsden Training Home" and for eleven years Eliza worked as the Training Home's superintendent. Lectures were given to the candidates by members of the clergy. Work under Eliza's supervision included studies in the Acts of the Apostles, the Book of Revelation, Bible readings and Mission geography. Eliza also participated in examining the students.

The first student admitted was Eliza's own niece, Amy Isabel Oxley, who was Samuel Marsden's great grand-daughter. Amy went to China in 1896 as an accredited missionary and established a Home to provide care for blind Chinese boys. Initially the intake of candidates at any one time to the Training Home was limited to five. Due to popular demand for the quality of the training and services offered by the Home, Eliza increased the accommodation capacity to seven by the addition, at her own expense, of two more rooms.

By 1903 advancing age prevented Eliza from carrying out her duties as Superintendent. The Marsden Training Home was closed and arrangements were made for women candidates to be trained at the Diocesan Deaconess Institute at Newtown.

Acknowledgement of the value of the training Home was made in the Church Missionary Society Annual Report for the Ninety-Seventh Year, which was published in 1896. Reference was made to Miss Hassall as a highly valued friend to whose goodness the Association was indebted for the great boon of the Marsden Training Home. For having rendered essential service to the Society Eliza was awarded the distinction of Honorary Membership for Life of the Church Missionary Society, London.

In addition to her service as Superintendent of the Training Home, Eliza's support for

the Missionary Society included active membership of the Ladies' Committee which was formed in 1893 to assist the newly constituted Association. As inaugural President of the Committee she helped arrange Sales of Work and work parties. The first city depot for the sale of needlework and gifts was opened in Sydney's Strand in June 1894. As the work in aid of the Association's funds prospered, larger premises were leased in 1898. Organization by the Sydney Committee during 1899 of the first Missionary Loan Exhibition was described as a conspicuous success.

At the age of 83 years Eliza Marsden Hassall died on 26th December 1917 and the next day was buried in the Cobbity churchyard between St Paul's Church and the Heber Chapel. The weathered gravestone still stands in the rural countryside where Eliza grew to womanhood and enjoyed the privileged life-style of the colonial elite. She is buried in the precincts of the Chapel and Church where she worshipped and where she was encouraged to foster in her own life the inheritance of practical activity in the missionary movement which was an inheritance received from both sets of grandparents, on the one side Rev. Rowland Hassall, and on the other the Rev. Samuel Marsden who, prior to his new South Wales appointment was the first missionary to New Zealand.

It is for her missionary activities she is most remembered. Due to her work for missions the History of Narellan Parish has recorded Eliza Marsden Hassall as 'the great Missionary Society worker.' Many tributes have been made and recorded in both the Parish and Church Missionary Society histories of her dedication and gracious kindness. She was indeed greatly loved and respected.

For ourselves, Eliza provides a glimpse into what may be described as aspects of the relatively elite section of Colonial Society.