

## EDITOR'S NOTE

A truly incredible and strangely littleknown story: How Elizabeth Macarthur's long-lost secret memoirs were discovered

Some time ago, during the renovation of a historic house in Sydney, a tin box, sealed with wax and wrapped in oiled canvas, was found wedged under a beam in the roof cavity. The house was Elizabeth Farm, where Elizabeth Macarthur, wife of the notorious early settler John Macarthur, lived until her death in 1850. The box jammed with hard-to-read old papers, cross-written to save space—was somehow, unbelievably, mislaid until recently, when through a chain of events so unlikely as to seem invented it came into my hands. The contents turned out to be her long-hidden memoirs.

In these private papers, written near the end of her life, she steps out from behind the bland documents that were her public face. They're a series of hot outpourings, pellets of memory lit by passionate feeling. With sometimes shocking frankness, they invite us to see right into her heart.

Australian history, like most histories, is mainly about men. Only a few women emerge from the obscurity that was their usual destiny, and Elizabeth Macarthur is one of them. Still, she's remained an enigma until now. What she did was extraordinary, but who she was—what quirks of temperament drove her—has always been a frustrating blank. She was born Elizabeth Veale in 1766, a farmer's daughter from the tiny village of Bridgerule in Devon. As a young girl she was taken into the local clergyman's family, where she grew up in a world like that of her near-contemporary, Jane Austen. In 1788 she married a soldier, and a year later the two of them, with their infant son, sailed to the newly established penal colony of New South Wales. The genteel young woman from the Bridgerule parsonage was dropped, like a rosebud into a cesspit, into a violent and brutal society on the remotest spot on the globe.

The first mystery is what possessed her to marry Ensign John Macarthur. He was no charmer. She herself describes him as 'too proud and haughty for our humble fortune or expectations'. He was no oil painting, either, having been badly scarred by childhood smallpox. And he wasn't rich or distinguished: he was the son of a Plymouth draper, with no resources other than his half-pay. In the world of Jane Austen such a marriage would have been pretty much impossible.

But John Macarthur had one thing going for him: a ruthless single-mindedness in pursuit of his own advancement. By a relentless mix of bullying, flattery and fibs, within ten years of arriving in New South Wales he was the wealthiest and most powerful man there.

An admiring historian calls Macarthur a 'firebrand', and I suppose that's one way to describe someone who shot his commanding officer in a duel and orchestrated the gunpoint deposing of a governor. For each of these events Macarthur was sent to London to face trial. He was there for four years the first time and eight years the second, leaving his wife in Australia to manage their affairs.

Australians of my generation had it dinned into them that 'our nation rides on the sheep's back'—meaning that wool was the basis of our economy—and that John Macarthur was 'the father of the wool industry'. Streets and swimming pools and parks all over Australia are named after him in gratitude.

But here's the thing: the Australian merino—the sheep we rode on the back of—was mostly developed during the years that John Macarthur was in England. It looks very much as though the Father of the Wool Industry must actually have been the Mother of the Wool Industry: his wife.

So who was Elizabeth Macarthur? How did she survive marriage to perhaps one of the most difficult men on the planet? How did she know how to run a gigantic farming enterprise, or breed fine-woolled sheep, or manage a workforce of brutalised convicts? The pluckiest Austen heroine might have been daunted.

Now we come to the problem. Her husband left a mountain of paper to tell us who he was, but when we go looking for Elizabeth there's almost nothing: a few unrevealing letters home to family and friends, a half-finished account of her voyage to New South Wales, and a lot of dull correspondence with her adult children. The dozens of letters she wrote to her husband while he was away for those two extended absences are where we might expect to find a trace of the person she was. Somehow or other, though, not a single one of those letters has ever come to light.

Circumstances plunged Elizabeth Macarthur into a life inconceivable to a woman of her class and time, and something in her personality let her seize those circumstances and make them her own. She's fascinated generations of searchers. How maddening, then, to have nothing that would let us know what sort of person she was—until now.

I've done nothing more than transcribe the papers in the box. Of course, I had to use my imagination where the faded old ink was impossible to read, and I spent considerable time arranging the fragments in what I judged to be the best order, but beyond that I've let Elizabeth Macarthur tell her own story. It's been a pleasure and a privilege to be the first to read her words and bring them to the world.

> Kate Grenville, transcriber & editor

## THE MEMOIRS OF ELIZABETH MACARTHUR

## PART ONE

MY DEAR SON James has given me a task for my last years, or months, or whatever time I have left beyond the many years I have lived so far. It is to compile an account called *The History of the Macarthurs of Elizabeth Farm*. Meaning myself and my late husband, John Macarthur.

He was barely cold in his grave when they began lauding him as a hero, even the ones who loathed him in life. Surely it must be one of the choicest revenges of outliving an enemy: to look pious at his name, turn up your eyes, put your hands together like a parson, and mouth all the false words.

The History of the Macarthurs of Elizabeth Farm. It sends a chill through my marrow. Even *the*, that least regarded word in the language, strikes me as absurd. How can there be *the* history? Beyond one *the*, watertight and trim, lies another, just as watertight, just as trim.

But James has made the task hard to escape. He has trawled through all the desks and drawers and come out with every remnant of the past he could find, to jog my fading memory. I look at them with a feeling like disgust. At some time in the unimaginable future, a reader will pore over all these items, looking for the past to show itself. To that person, and to you, the reader of these words, I can only say: *Do not believe too quickly*! What are they, these proofs of the past?

Firstly, from my husband to myself, thirty-nine letters.

I feel a clutch of apprehension, even now, with him twelve years laid in earth, when I see that all-too-familiar handwriting. I knew in an instant the mood of the letter, from the way he addressed me. *My dear Elizabeth. My dearest Elizabeth. My dearest dearest Elizabeth. My beloved Elizabeth. My dearest best beloved Elizabeth.* It was a dependable equation: the more elaborate the endearment, the more unpleasant the letter.

Secondly, from Elizabeth Macarthur to her husband, one letter, of a dozen lines, dashed off hastily not long before he died, containing nothing more revealing than cheerful news of family doings.

Thirdly, twelve letters to England to my friends and family the copies, of course, which careful Mr Macarthur insisted I always make. They are blameless documents, pious reassuring lies from beginning to end, with a little boasting thrown in.

Fourthly, my account of the first part of our voyage from England to New South Wales in the year 1790. Written with publication in view, it reveals little of myself.

Fifthly, two miniatures on ivory of John Macarthur and Elizabeth Macarthur. A gentleman and his lady wife had to have their portraits done on ivory, and the entire lack of ivory in New South Wales, or anyone with the skills to paint on it, did not deter Mr Macarthur. His idea was for sketches to be made here by Mr Bullen and sent to someone Mr Macarthur had heard of in Mayfair, who would translate them into ivory. The portraits are therefore at best approximate, but the point was not to record a likeness. It was to have a pair of costly portraits to hang in the parlour, even if some visitors were not quite sure exactly who was depicted.

Mr Macarthur sat sideways to be drawn, everything about him

always slant, guarded, sly, evasive. There is his arrogant thrust-out chin, his pugnacious lower lip, the haughty set of his head. He would have thought of that as *aristocratic bearing*, never guessing that the portrait revealed all the worst aspects of his nature.

For myself, I was happy to look Mr Bullen in the eye and was content with what he drew. But Mr Macarthur found fault. I was too plain, my expression too forthright. The chin too square, the eyes a little skewiff, the mouth smiling too much, or in the next sketch not smiling enough. Poor Mr Bullen scratched and rubbed, and tried again, and then again, until the paper was worn into holes and he had to take another sheet. By the time Mr Macarthur was satisfied that the sketch was what he wished his wife to look like, I was pretty sure no one would recognise me in this dainty person, all curls and dimples.

Yet these are the Macarthurs who will travel into the future. People will say, how resolute and commanding he was! And oh, what a charming and lovely wife he had—look, you can see it in the picture!

My first impulse was to burn the lot. But now I have a better idea than a bonfire. I will create one more document, one that will show all these others to be the heroic work of fiction that they are. What I am writing here are the pungent true words I was never able to write.

Late on this spring afternoon, the sweet time of long shadows that I love best, I feel an excitement, a breathlessness, at the scandalous pleasure of what I am embarking on. Thank God I outlived him. I think of that with a skip of the heart. How shocked people would be, or make out to be, if they knew. But I walk out into the sweet dusk and tell myself: not dead yet. Not dead, and free, at last, to speak.



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