

# WOMEN AT PORT ARTHUR

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## WOMEN

It is not known when the first women arrived at Port Arthur. Certainly Elizabeth Brownell was amongst the first, if not the first, when she arrived with her husband, Dr T.C. Brownell, from Maria Island in October 1832. Significantly, the Brownells left the settlement in April the following year, and years later T.C. Brownell gave amongst his reasons his wife's ill-health and the inability to procure the various necessities and comforts of life. The invalid servant the Brownells shared with their neighbour would not have been a female servant (Brownell Letterbook p 11, CO 280 P 341 p 528). By at least March 1833, soldiers' wives and children were at Port Arthur (Friendly Mission p 707). On 1 November 1833, Booth recorded that out of a total Peninsula population of 582 there were 14 women and 32 children receiving rations, and a further 14 women and children not in receipt of rations. Unfortunately Booth does not distinguish between the two for the final 14, but he did note that 10 women and 22 children were there on the strength of the regiment, with a further 5 women and 3 children present with permission. Of the lives of soldiers' families at Port Arthur, little is known. Given the state of the settlement, they could have only lived very confined communal lives in the military barracks, and little is recorded concerning communication between the civilian population and the military. The first reference to a female assigned servant is in July 1833, when the Port Arthur returns list one in Mr Cart's employment, and by May 1834 three female assigned servants appear in the returns (CS01/511/11180). Certainly from 1833 women became permanent residents at Port Arthur, and remained so until the close of the settlement.

To date only one account of Port Arthur life by a woman is known. These are the recollections of Jemima Irvine, nee Burn, the wife of Charles James Irvine, an assistant superintendent from 1847 until c. 1850. Jemima Irvine reviewed her Port Arthur days favourably, and her recollections could have applied equally validly to anywhere else in the colony. Her references to well-behaved and efficient convict servants, and her own habit of dropping tobacco near prisoners at work presents an impression of camaraderie not

found in other accounts. Her recollections, however, are necessarily lacking the immediacy of contemporary accounts which although not primarily presented from a woman's point of view, reflect the role of women at Port Arthur.

Of principal importance in this regard is the diary of T.J. Lempriere, chronicling as it does his own daily life and that of his much-loved wife and family. His wife Charlotte does not seem to have been unduly affected by being isolated at a penal station (to which she must have become accustomed) as opposed to merely being isolated, and the affects of her isolation (which Lempriere recognised) were alleviated by visits to Hobart. Apart from the isolation, she might have been living in any other rural community. She took part in activities which were exclusively female, e.g. her vigil with Mrs Simpson, their neighbour, when confined for the birth of a son on 19 Jan 1837, keeping Mrs Cart company when her child was seriously ill, suckling a soldier's baby following its mother's death, roles which she instinctively performed. Lempriere notes her state of health - one might consider, from the number of references to her being poorly, that she was a sickly woman, but the evidence would dispute this. Her own longevity and the fact that only her twelfth and last child died in infancy are telling enough, but the risks she endured and the pain she suffered, especially at the difficult birth of Lucy in March 1838, cannot be underestimated. Although she may have been of a timorous nature, e.g. being a "little afraid" when the water was rough (12 Feb 1837), not being able to manage her makeshift saddle "at all" (18 Jul 1838) she was obviously quite competent in her handling of normal domestic matters. Musically gifted, she was a much admired member of Port Arthur society, and she was the cherished companion of her husband, who sought her opinion, strove to please her and spent as much time as possible with her.

It could not be claimed that either Lempriere was typical of the people who found themselves at Port Arthur, but Lempriere's diary entries nevertheless provide clues as to the nature of the

typical at the settlement. Charlotte's activities, walking with her husband and the children to visit their garden, taking tea with neighbours and joining in social activities are all indicative of the life lived by the women in her social group. Of Charlotte specifically, it is known that she played the piano and sang, that she also played chess and backgammon, and spoke French. As was quite common for women of the era, she collected ferns and seaweed, and a collection of the latter was presented to Booth in June 1834, although he makes no mention of it. Mrs Champ also collected seaweed, and she sent to the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1855 a collection made during her Port Arthur sojourn, when it was noted that no department of natural history was richer in fine forms and tints to charm the eye, nor was there a "more delightful or more healthful occupation or more abundant reward" to be found in any other leisure activity.

The references to Charlotte Lempriere's cooking occur only when there is a celebration, Lempriere's 41st birthday on 11 Feb. 1837 when she "passed the day cooking", and Christmas Day 1837 when she was "busy at mince pies etc". Such references, by their infrequency may imply that cooking was not part of her normal routine, and it was a task she undertook when the presumably basic skills of her servants were not adequate for the occasion. In any event, in both houses she occupied at Port Arthur, the kitchen was detached, and the supervision of both house and children and kitchen would have been impracticable.

By way of contrast, there are references to other women whose lot was apparently quite different. In April 1834 Lempriere referred to the burial of Ogden, and in passing, to his "wife here who lately has been stark staring made, he died insane" and again on 2 September 1835 he noted that Burns, a soldier in the 21st Regiment who had been buried the previous day, had left a wife and two children.

Even within their own group, Lempriere observes signs of distress: Mrs Simpson's hysterics (17 Feb 1837), his suspicion that her sudden illness had been caused by drink (1 Aug 1837); the peculiar behaviour of Mrs Weatherstone, (whose husband succeeded Simpson as Wesleyan

missionary), although it must be noted that Lempriere had considered her odd even before her arrival there, and there was the ever-present evidence of Miss Wood's drunkenness before his eyes. At the Montgomerys at Point Puer there were "strong symptoms of a matrimonial fight, bruised face etc" (8 Apr 1834).

Lempriere's remarks about women are usually made without references to the context of their being at Port Arthur - Mrs Hoy "seems a homely old lady" (2 Feb 1838) Mrs Weatherstone "a complete ghost" 20 Nov 1837 and "such an ugly woman" (4 Dec 1837), Mrs Law who "makes a pretty picture" (14 Apr 1837), and Miss Spottiswood, "a bouncing girl & seemingly very agreeable" (3 Apr 1834). His remarks about Mrs Durham, wife of the Church of England chaplain, are revealing. An examination of Durham's stay at Port Arthur provides a good insight into his character, while his wife remains a shadowy figure, probably suffering intensely as a result of her husband's treatment of her - Courtenay, refers to the insolence of convict servants to Mrs Durham, and to her husband's "conduct towards his family" (MM62/26 12337). Lempriere on 17 Aug 1847 observed that "His (Durham's) Wife's slanderous tongue was the greatest cause of Mrs Graham's illness".

It is clear from Lempriere's diary that Charlotte could never have suffered from loneliness - she could, in fact, have suffered from a surfeit of company, surrounded as she was in mid-1838 with a family of nine children ranging in age from 14 to three months, a female servant resident somewhere within the Lempriere house, and a daily male convict servant. As well, there were visitors who stayed overnight in the house, and a continual stream of visitors to dine or take tea, and there were frequent social gatherings in the evening at their own house or at the homes of neighbours. As well as Charlotte Lempriere, women known to have sung or played these occasions were Mrs Manton and Miss Cully, the latter playing and singing in "a powerful voice and all solo" (27 June 1834), and Mrs Simpson (15 Feb 1837). It seems poor ugly Mrs Weatherstone lacked even this accomplishment. Most of the company at these gatherings was drawn from those people who lived in the immediate vicinity, the Commandant, the doctor, the missionary, sometimes the superintendent, and frequently, visitors to the settlement. The wives of the shipwrights, Watson and Hoy, appear only very rarely; they may have been excluded by

their comparative isolation at the shipyards, but equally they may have belonged to a social group which was unlikely to share the interests of the Lempriere set. Apart from a reference to Charlotte and Mrs Burrows, the wife of the overseer of shoemakers, both suckling an orphaned baby (20 June 1838) there are no references to any contact between the women who lived in the vicinity of the Lemprieres and the wives of the overseers, who in fact lived physically quite close to them, but who were probably quite removed socially. One may surmise that the overseers' women were sustained by one another's company in much the same way that Charlotte Lempriere and her companions sustained each other. Unlike the Lempriere group, however, several overseers families were related - Hurst/Burrows, the Meyers, Clarke/Hoy, Clark/Inglis.

In the earlier years, there was no difference in the standard of accommodation offered to superior officers and overseers. The Lemprieres in fact endured considerable discomfort for all but a few months of their 15 year sojourn at Port Arthur, and it was only after considerable protest that Lempriere was eventually able to have built and occupy a house of a standard superior to the rough wooden houses built in the settlement's infancy. His home for over fourteen years, although commodious by Port Arthur standards, did not have "a single window or door wind or water tight; already has the roof on one end of the buildings been propped up by pillasters... the plates supporting the uprights are decayed from damp and age which has caused the walls to sink; the whole having been built of green wood every door and window has shrunk, in fact the quarter is quite unfit for the residence of any officer of the Department" (MM62/21 7566., CS05/174/4142). James Sly, overseer of shoemakers, referred to his accommodation when he resigned in October 1833 - he and his wife had to live and work in a hut 13 ft x 9 ft: "The place we lay in was only 4½ ft long and 3 ft wide" (CS01/654/14672).

For some of the other women who spent time at Port Arthur there are only passing references, and few of them in the first person. One which is, in only an incidental form, is Catherine Augusta Mitchell's sketch of Dead Island, on which she records that her "two poor darlings" were buried there (Allport Library). There are glimpses of women as different as Mrs Agnes Susan Baker, Schoolmistress, who with her assistant schoolmaster husband Francis, was dismissed in August 1866

for supplying a constable with liquor (MM62/35 24201), and Miss Jessie Todd, sister of the schoolmaster William Todd and daughter of Thomas Todd, the Provision Storekeeper, who although competent, was too nervous to undergo any formal examinations to qualify (CSD7/59/1421).

From an earlier period, there was Mrs Sarah Newman, wife of the chief constable Richard Newman, who had accompanied her husband throughout a great portion of the Peninsula War, sharing all the dangers and discomforts experienced by the troops in the course of which she buried two children (Murray's Review 21 Jul 1843). For her, life at Port Arthur was probably quite uneventful.