

**LAUNCH SUSANNA HOE'S *TASMANIA: WOMEN,
HISTORY, BOOKS AND PLACES***

BY MRS FRANCES UNDERWOOD

**WIFE OF HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
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Decorating the hall, leading from the side entrance to Government House, are photos of past governors. Walking past those photos on my first day as "wife of the Governor of Tasmania" I remember thinking, "where are all the women, why are they excluded?" – for my husband and I have always supported each other in our work and I know for a fact that most of these governors had a great deal of support from their spouses. Why are they invisible?

Being the wife of the Governor is a curious role. You are not employed by anyone. There is no job description. But at the same time there are protocols and official duties that you are expected to perform. There are also varied and diverse, unarticulated community expectations, and care must always be taken to ensure that appropriate community involvement does not create a perception of arrogant intrusion into the Governor's role. Those expectations make you more than a volunteer but at the same time you do not have the benefit of the usual workplace environment so you only get to be noticed, or know how people think you are performing, if you "muck

up”, by which time of course, it’s too late. These were my thoughts as I started out in this role on 2 April 2008.

So, I am very grateful to Susanna Hoe for writing *Tasmania: Women, History, Books and Places*. Not only has she breathed life into the, at times, poignant stories of the spirited, resilient resourceful women who contributed significantly to the establishment of Tasmania, and who deserve to be recognised, including the wives of governors, but she has also allayed my fears that, *even if I do “muck up”*, anything I could possibly achieve, would pale into insignificance beside the wife of Lieutenant Governor Murray, who held office between 1810 and 1812.

It appears that Mrs Murray took a lover and was caught by her husband “in flagrante delictu” with the Inspector of Public Works. A duel was fought, no one was injured and the Murrays separated. Mrs Murray then went off to live with a judge whom her husband had once imprisoned and who was described by Governor Macquarie as “much addicted to drunkenness and low company, totally ignorant of the law and a very troublesome and ill tempered man”.

Mrs Murray eventually returned to her husband only to be dispatched again after Macquarie complained to the Lieutenant Governor about “the very unjustifiable step you have adopted of taking back ... your wife ... after being yourself the publisher to the world of her shameful and abandoned conduct.” Mrs Murray then

took up with a Mr Kent. Susanna Hoe comments, "All Mrs Murray seems to have contributed to the development of Hobart is a little light relief." Governor's wives at that time, says Susanna, *had yet to create a role for themselves!*

Lieutenant Governor Murray does not appear on the wall in the hall – and no, it wasn't me who removed him!

Then there was Margaret Davey whose husband Lieutenant Governor Davey, tried to leave her behind when he sailed for Tasmania. However, she managed to jump on the boat at the last minute. He had more success on the return trip to England, leaving his wife and daughter in Tasmania and unprovided for. Fortunately, his daughter, Lucy, married well and she and her husband built Boa Vista, the gatehouse of which, was the kindergarten room, at the Friends School, when I was Head of Junior School there, until 2004.

Following Davey there was Governor Sorell, who left his own wife in England with seven children, and brought a Mrs Kent (no relation to Mrs Murray's Mr Kent) to Hobart with him instead, and I quote "to the confusion and shame of all married women and the evil example of the rising generation", so that respectable women felt obliged to stay away from Government House.

All of these things had happened by page 55 in Susanna's book and I was beginning to feel a trifle dull as a Governor's wife, and

rather letting the side down until on page 66 I read that Eliza Arthur was very well behaved and created a pattern for the Governors' wives who came after her. But no wonder! With 13 children how could she possibly find time between pregnancies and looking after children to do anything, let alone "muck up"?

Governors' wives and /or mistresses are not the only women to have been invisible in Tasmanian history. In referring to the Runnymede homestead in New Town, Susanna notes that researcher, and Churchill Fellow, Gemma Webberly, was inspired to work there because, quote, "the histories of the house tend to refer to the inhabitants as the Lawyer, the Bishop and the Whaler - the women excluded." [p. 260]

Further, some would argue that the Aborigines, both men and women have all too frequently been invisible in Tasmanian history. They would be right for Susanna writes at pages 112 - 113 (quote):

"In 1828 Walyer escaped from the sealers who had abducted her in her younger days. Returning to the north coast, she gathered around her a group of women and men from the Lairmairrener people of Emu Bay to fight the invaders. She taught them the use of firearms - the skill she had learned from the sealers - and ordered them to strike the *luta tawin* (whiteman) when they were at their most vulnerable, between the times that their guns were

discharged and before they were able to reload ... As [historian] Lyndall Ryan puts it: 'Walyer was known to stand on a hill and give orders to her men to attack the whites, taunting them to come out of their huts to be speared.'"

Today, Walyer would be rightly seen as a resistance fighter.

These engaging vignettes of the personal circumstances of individual women, representatives of their era in Tasmanian history, are typical of many in Susanna's book, as she explores the elements of the subtitle, *Women, History, Books and Places*, stitching together a colorful patch work of Tasmanian history. The stories begin with Louise Girardin, the first white woman, who in 1792, travelled to Tasmania disguised as a sailor, then Ouray-Ouray, the first aboriginal woman to be named in exploration literature, the result of the Baudin scientific expedition in 1802, followed by Martha Hayes, the daughter of a convict and teenage mistress to Bowen, who stepped ashore in 1803, pregnant, and they continue to Enid Lyons, 1947. Thereafter a chronological listing of representative women, to the present day, provides fertile ground for perhaps Volume 2 of *Tasmania: Women, History Books and Places*.

The book is cleverly structured into two parts: a chronological telling, followed by a geographical "itinerary", in which the reader becomes in effect an armchair traveler. Many women and incidents involving women are featured in both parts, which together form a "jigsaw of Tasmanian history", a phrase Susanna Hoe uses herself in

reference to Julia Sorell but it also happens to be an apt description of this book!

Susanna's itinerary of Tasmanian places in Part 2 of her book is often enlivened by riveting extracts, from women's writing.

Here is an example from the author Tasma's short story, "What an Artist Discovered in Tasmania", written in 1878:

"On a knoll girt in by native trees, interspersed with alien elms and willows, stood a building that would have given a Turk the horrors. From its clean, bare corridor and windows, the oldest of old women, in every stage of decrepit, pathetic, grotesque old age, look forth. They appear to mouth at a world that is perpetually renewed, while they cannot make good the loss of a tooth, or a failing sense. Such as have any sensation left are snappish. The oldest of all are the merriest, mumbling with idiotic satisfaction, when they warm themselves like vegetables in the sunshine." [p. 307]

With respect to Susanna's authors it might be said that she has created – as suggested in its subtitle –an honourable roll call of Tasmanian women authors. To name a few of considerable influence: Caroline Leakey, Louisa Anne Meredith and Nan Chauncy, and in contemporary times, Margaret Scott, Carmel Bird, Alison Alexander, and Lyndall Ryan.

It is clear that Susanna thinks, that author Caroline Leakey, was unfairly treated by the critics at that time, who favoured Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life*, published in 1874 over her book *The Broad Arrow* published in 1859. Both Leakey and Clarke were writing about the convict system. In writing *The Broad Arrow*, Caroline Leakey had the benefit of 5 years experience living in Tasmania with access to many aspects of the convict system. Marcus Clarke had the benefit of wide reading, including reading Caroline Leakey's book, but only 6 weeks journalistic assignment in Tasmania. Interestingly, Caroline Leakey was censured for knowing too much about a subject so unseemly. Marcus Clarke was praised for his expose of the horrors of the convict system. Indeed, Susanna Hoe makes the point, as the symbolic centrepiece of her book's theme, that Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* received all the accolades that should have gone to *The Broad Arrow*.

Well, Susanna's book describes other injustices that women suffered and fought against such as the absence of universal suffrage, a struggle that we know was met with considerable hostility. The hardships borne by Tasmanian women in the past are apparent from this description of the Tasmanian branch of the National Council of Women, the NCW, formed in 1904 about which Susanna wrote:

"The NCW flourished, becoming an umbrella for women's organisations in Tasmania. Caroline Morton (nee Mills) ...

encapsulated its purpose [when she wrote]: ‘Wherever there is a little child neglected, a home comfortless, a girl astray, a man inebriated, a city insanitary, a mind left uncultivated, a willing hand left idle for the want of hiring, there is a need for the National Council of Women.’”

Admirable aims, all of them. But here is how they were received:

“The Labor press criticised [the NCW] for its ‘ignorant and harmful twaddle ... [its] vapid and malicious foolishness’.”

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Not that such words cowed the pioneer suffragettes. In subsequent years some Tasmanian women took a strong stand against World War One compulsory conscription. Tasmanian-born Cecelia John was not only a co-founder of the National Women’s Peace Organization, but she also put her fine contralto voice to good effect by singing the peace army’s signature anthem. The words are particularly poignant to me:

“I didn’t raise my son to be a soldier, I raised him up to be my pride and joy, Why should he put a musket to his shoulder, To kill another mother’s darling boy.”

Obviously the fruit of prodigious research, *Tasmania: Women, History, Books and Places* is both intellectually and emotionally

engaging. A vibrant and fascinating history of women in Tasmania, it invites the reader to critically examine and reflect on the considerable contribution to our State, often unacknowledged, of individual women. Susanna Hoe's book brings each one into existence, makes each one visible, and frees the spirit of each to travel down through the years, in the same way that Carmel Bird writes of Thomas Bock's painting of Mathinna, tragic though it is, bringing her spirit into existence.

I invite both women and men to read this informative and entertaining, gem of a book, to follow Susanna Hoe's itineraries around the Island with those spirits, and to explore a different perspective on Tasmanian history. You won't be disappointed! After all the stories, warts and all, of many Tasmanian families are represented and indeed, some of you here today are probably related to those who provided the gossip that Susanna passes on with such finesse. It gives me great pleasure to launch; Susanna Hoe's "Tasmania: Women, History, Books and Places.

Thank you

Frances Underwood, 21 November 2010