

The Streets of York

Janet Millett Lane



In honour of Janet Millett's 200th birthday and with thanks to William Duperouzel for his book "Sunset over Mt Dourakine" and his Wikipedia article on the life of Janet Millett.

Janet Millett (1821-1904) is best known for her book "An Australian Parsonage or, the Settler and the Savage in Western Australia", her diary of life as a rector's wife in the York of the 1860s. Born Janet Webster on July 17, 1821 in Sutton Coldfield near Birmingham, England, she was the fourth of nine children of Joseph Webster and Maria Mary Payne.

The Websters were a Presbyterian family who operated a blade mill in Perry Barr, Birmingham, from the 1740s and developed a wire drawing business specialising in exporting piano wire to Continental Europe.

In 1853 at the age of 32 Janet married a Church of England clergyman, the 29 year old Reverend Edward Millett, son of George Millett and Elizabeth Amelia Agnew. He graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge with a B.A. in 1847, following in his father's footsteps as a Church of England minister.

Janet and Edward may have been influenced to come to Australia by having attended the International Exhibition of 1862 where Australia was one of 36 countries represented, but the main impetus was probably due to Edward's medical condition called tic douloureux. This was a terribly painful neurological disorder which caused convulsive face-twitching for which he took morphine to relieve the pain. It was hoped the warmer climate would help improve Edward's health so, in 1863, Edward accepted the position as colonial chaplain of the Holy Trinity Church, York, Western Australia.

Janet and Edward left England on board the ship "Tartar" on 26 August 1863 arriving in Fremantle 110 days later. In her book, Janet describes her sensation of pleasure at seeing Rottneest Island off the coast of Fremantle for the first time. Her pleasure tinged with sadness, as she later reflects with compassion on the death of an emigrant's child who died of illness and a sailor who drowned during the voyage.

Janet gave a vivid description of Fremantle and its churches. Travelling to Perth by steamboat up the Swan River she found the journey much to her liking and described her first impressions of Perth, Mount Eliza, Perth Town Hall, Melville Water, Bishop's House, the Barracks of the Pensioner Force and Government House. She also described the fauna and flora which she clearly enjoyed. Within a few weeks of their arrival Edward had preached at St George's Cathedral, Perth.

Having accustomed themselves to life in the new Swan River Colony in Fremantle and Perth the couple travelled to York to their new residence. Edward set out from Perth before Janet, who followed afterwards with one horse and a maidservant in a hired dogcart, a light horse-drawn vehicle, driven by a convict. During the sixty-mile journey through some inhospitable countryside she had friendly encounters with convicts and hounds. She also observed a large variety of wild flowers, red-gum trees, eucalyptus trees and shrubs, stopping at Cut Hill where she had her first view of the ridge of Mount Brown, beneath which was the parsonage.

Janet settled into her new life in York, which she called Barladong, and became very well known throughout the district. In her book she describes the determination of free settlers and convicts to do well for themselves relating a fascinating story about a French convict who later bought land and "did very well". She was captivated by the Noongar people and describes how they reacted to the new arrivals from Europe, telling stories that reflect her compassionate nature. On one occasion she was summoned to see a sick Aboriginal friend, Kitty, who was gravely ill. Kitty, with much difficulty pronounced the words, "Will you take my little girl?". "Take Binnahan - make good". Within a few days Kitty passed away and Binnahan came to live with Janet and Edward. The couple were also welcoming to the Aboriginal man Khourabene who became a loyal friend, evident by Janet's frequent warm references to him in her book. She was keen to learn the Aboriginal vocabulary and discovered from Khourabene that the word 'me-ul' signified 'an eye'.

Janet and Edward also enjoyed the companionship of some pet animals, amongst them a kangaroo named 'Jacky'; and a possum, or koomal as Noongar people called them, called Possie. Janet recalls the occasion when her husband's strange pet 'Timothy', a Mountain Devil, went missing. Much to the delight of Edward, young 'Timothy' was found by a boy and returned.

Edward visited convict hiring depots and ticket-of-leave men as part of his role as pastor and participated in local community events as evident by a lecture he gave after a tea-meeting in the Mechanics' Hall.

Janet was deeply troubled after years of hostility and innuendoes towards her husband from Walkinshaw Cowan, Resident Magistrate of York and Beverley, whose vilification started soon after the couple's arrival in York. The medication her husband was taking for his neuralgia sometimes resulted in unsteadiness and Cowan deduced from their first meeting that he was a heavy drinker, withholding stipends due to Edward for his visits to the York Convict Depot, convict road parties and ticket-of-leave men to tend to their welfare needs. He conducted a campaign against Edward with the intention of driving him from York, accusing him of "drunkenness, laziness, general moral delinquency and a diminished sense of responsibility".

Edward eventually wrote to the Colonial Secretary to request an official inquiry to clear his name. This followed in York in October 1866, comprising Bishop Hale, the Principal Medical Officer in Perth and Magistrate Edward Wilson Landor, who found in Edward's favour. Most parishioners supported and respected their minister and no evidence of neglect was found.

Edward's health did not improve and he resigned as colonial chaplain in July 1868 to return to England.

Janet and Edward boarded "Bridgetown" at Fremantle bound for England on 11 January 1869. One special memory for Janet to treasure was her favourite spot, which she called Mount Douraking, where she enjoyed taking a party of children into the bush to gather the wild flowers called everlastings.

After their return to Britain Janet used her journals, diaries and notes of her time in York to write her book, advance copies of which were available in selected bookshops as early as December 1871. Glowing book reviews were printed in newspapers and magazines throughout the United Kingdom and Australia during 1872. Reviews were consistent in their praise for Janet's vivid description of her life experiences in York.

Janet also wrote two articles at the invitation of the editor of a London missionary magazine called "The Net Cast in Many Waters; Sketches from The Life of Missionaries." Both articles ended with an appeal to readers to send assistance to the editor, to help support the new Aboriginal Institute in Perth.

Janet's first article "West Australian Natives", describes the relationship Janet and Edward had with the local Noongar people and her impressions of their way of life. This article concludes with reference to the work of the recently established Mission School for Aboriginal children within the Bishop's See, Perth. Her friend, Miss Shepherd, the late mistress of the Girls' School in York was entrusted with the role of matron and superintendent of this new Mission School.

In Janet's second article, "School Life in West Australia", printed in The Net in October 1873, She writes on behalf of Miss Shepherd about everyday life at the Mission School.

"An Australian Parsonage" is of cultural and historical importance for researching the early history of Western Australia. In England, it was of particular value as a guide to those seeking to emigrate to Western Australia as Janet describes a vast range of topics from settlers and convicts to animals and plants. The book is of special importance to the community of York as she reminisced about the people of the town and her everyday experiences in the 1860s.

Janet Millett died on 6 October 1904, aged 83, and was buried in the churchyard of Church of St Andrew, Biggleswade. Her legacy is held in high esteem and in recognition of her contribution the Shire of York named a road after her, Janet Millett Lane, which runs between the Holy Trinity Church and the Croquet Club.

Birthday Celebrations

In honour of Janet Millett's 200th birthday The York Society recently presented a series of readings from her book "An Australian Parsonage" to a group of fifty guests at the Holy Trinity Church where her husband Edward had preached. Costumed readers shared passages relating to her arrival by ship off Gages Roads, her journey via dog cart along the old York Road, her first views of Holy Trinity, associations with Noongar friends and convicts and her husband Edward's trials and tribulations due to his medical condition. After the readings guests walked, as Janet would have, to the Rectory where afternoon tea was enjoyed on the verandah.



