



Mrs Philip Gidley King, (Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)

# The Women of the First Government House 1788-1846

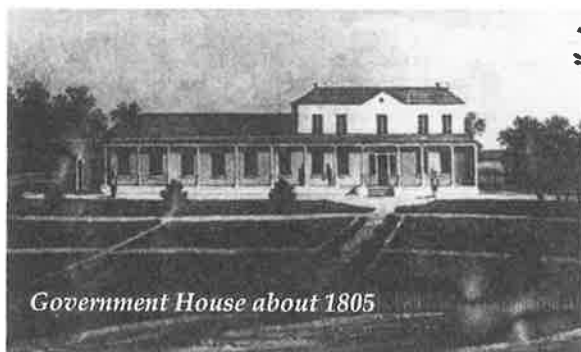
This article is abbreviated from a talk given by President Ruth Frappell on 15 May this year to Friends of the First Government House site Inc. on the 212th anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone. It is published here with the kind permission of the Friends of the First Government House Site.



Mrs Elizabeth Macquarie (miniature by unknown artist)

The foundation stone of the first Government House was laid on 15 May 1788; the house was demolished in 1846. During that half century, with various enlargements and extensions, it became home to successive governors and their wives. It did duty in a number of roles: as an official residence, as the governor's office, as a private, family home.

Until very recent times, when a revolution in communications and computing facilities permits many professional people to work from home, most of us have preserved a clear distinction between work and home. For the governors who resided at the first Government House, however, working from home was part of the job. It was taken for granted in one sense, though in another it was a totally new experience for all these men, individually. They were career naval and army officers. A few came from amongst the gentry and had ancestral homes in Scotland or in Ireland, not in England itself. Most were self-made men, dependent on their half-pay (because they were retired from active service) and their gubernatorial allowance. They had nowhere to call home, except briefly Sydney's first Government House. In their previous lives, home had been a ship or a regiment. They were therefore unused to running a household, and in that respect were dependent upon their wives or daughters, or if they were unmarried, a housekeeper. It is worth noting that the governors whose terms were the shortest, were either not married or not accompanied by their wives: Arthur Phillip, John Hunter, William Bligh. Those who stayed the longest, beginning with Philip Gidley King and Lachlan Macquarie and ending with Sir George Gipps, were those ably and faithfully supported by their wives. When they returned home from the colonies, they had either to rent, in London or Bath or some seaside resort in the south of England, and live as best they could on half pay. Most predeceased their wives, and much of the surviving correspondence relating to these women, concerns the widow's attempts to maintain her circle of patrons, secure her pension and bring up her children in genteel poverty. Only one widow, Anna Josepha King, returned to the colony.



Government House about 1805

Most of us are well aware of the naval and military backgrounds of colonial governors. These men had all spent their youth - literally - on active service abroad, either in the colonies or in the long running wars against France which ended in 1815. They had not been either settled enough or financially secure enough to contemplate matrimony till they were older men, in their thirties or even their forties.

They married always within their own class, the daughters of fellow officers or their own relatives, sometimes even their cousins. Their marriage patterns were those we know from the novels of Jane Austen, *Persuasion* in particular. Because one of their intentions in marrying at all, was to produce a son and heir, they chose women of child-bearing years, young enough in many cases to be their daughters. These women had therefore to juggle their differing roles

just as dexterously as many women have learned to do today. They had to be dutiful wives, to very much older husbands in positions of authority; they were simultaneously nursing mothers and official hostesses, and if they chose an active and public role for themselves, they undertook philanthropic duties.

And with all this, they had to control a household very much in the public gaze.

Arthur Phillip, builder of the first Government House, never had a wife in Sydney. He had been at sea since he was

15. Retired on half-pay at 25, at the end of the Seven Years' War, he married a widow almost immediately and settled down to work his farms in Hampshire. But the marriage ended in separation after less than six years, and Phillip went to sea again. He was almost fifty when he landed in Port Jackson as the founding governor of New South Wales. He built the first Government House as both a residence and an office, but not as a home. As his housekeeper, he employed a convict woman, Jane Dundas, who was retained in the service of successive governors till she died, 15 years later. Phillip returned to England in December 1792, in ill health. But he recovered sufficiently to marry for a second time in May 1794, at the age of 55. He lived in retirement in Bath and died in 1814, aged 75, an admiral of the Blue.

The second naval governor, John Hunter, never married.

The first governor to make Government House into a family home was Philip Gidley King, and it was for his growing family that the first extensions to Phillip's house were constructed. On his return to England after his first tour of duty on Norfolk Island, King, who came of humble Cornish stock, married his cousin, a Devon lass, Anna Josepha Combe. She was affectionate, lively, remarkably tolerant but in no way 'high fallutin'. She brought nothing to the marriage but her good sense, yet she died a very wealthy woman. She was 26, he 33, when they married at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, in March 1791. Four days later husband and wife set sail for Norfolk Island, where he was to resume duty as commandant. It cannot have been a blissful honeymoon. When she arrived in Sydney, Anna took charge of the elder of her husband's two natural sons, Norfolk, a baby of two years, and brought him to Norfolk Island to be with his father. Six weeks later, she herself gave

birth to King's legitimate son and heir, Phillip Parker King.

In 1800-1806, Anna Josepha pioneered the role of governor's wife. She was the first woman (so far as we know) to give birth at Government House, Sydney, in February 1805, to a daughter Mary. She entertained there: hence the long verandahed extension and kitchens and storerooms added at the back. Her concern for her own children, shown in her diaries and her care for her husband's natural sons, extended to all waifs and strays in Sydney Town, of whom there were hundreds. She founded the first philanthropic institution - and the first committee of management - in the colony, an institution popularly known as 'Mrs King's Orphanage'. It housed about 100 girls, and Anna Josepha attended almost daily, when she could, to oversee their upbringing. The school was, after all, only a short walk down what is now Bridge Street from Government House.

Philip Gidley King died in England in 1808, not long after his return home and for twenty-four years, Anna lived quietly in what were initially straitened

circumstances. But in 1832 she returned to the colony to live with her children who had settled there. In 1812 her eldest daughter, Anna Maria, born on Norfolk in 1793, had married Hannibal Macarthur, who thereafter managed his mother-in-law's farms and stock at South Creek. In 1826 Mary, the daughter born at Government House, Sydney, married a Cornishman, Robert Copland Lethbridge and they too settled in the colony. Her son, by 1832 a captain in the Royal Navy, an outstanding hydrographer and fellow of the Royal Society, was about to retire from active service and join the New South Wales Legislative Council. Anna was 67 when she returned to New South Wales to live with Anna Maria at The Vineyard, Parramatta. She died aged 79, a much respected and beloved member of her extended family.

William Bligh, the fourth and last naval governor, left his wife at home in 1806. Son of a customs officer in Plymouth, he had married at the relatively tender age of 26, the daughter of a customs officer on the Isle of Man and niece of the commandant of the convict hulks in the Thames. Bligh's temper was notorious, and perhaps his marriage survived because of the length of time he spent at sea. Both his sons predeceased him; he was survived by six daughters, the eldest of whom he brought with him to Sydney. He was then 52. Mary acted as his hostess, and her naval husband, Captain John Putland, as his aide-de-camp. Her entertainments were lavish. In August 1807, for example, she had Government House illuminated for the first time, to celebrate the birthday of the Prince of Wales. But Bligh's term of office was cut short by what is now called the Rum Rebellion. We are all familiar with the cartoon of Bligh caught under a bed in the steward's room in the extensions to the house. He and his daughter spent many months under house arrest there. Putland died unexpectedly, and when her father returned home in 1810,

Mary determined to stay on. She contracted a marriage with the recently arrived commandant of the 73rd Regiment, which the new governor, Lachlan Macquarie, had brought with him. The marriage of Mary Putland and Maurice O'Connell was the first celebrated at Government House, with invitations issued by Macquarie and his wife. It must have been sweet revenge for the months of confinement the bride had spent there.

The second governor's wife to make Government House a real home was Elizabeth Macquarie. At the age of 31, Macquarie had married his first wife, Jane Jarvis, for love while on active service in India; his good luck was that she left him her considerable fortune, but she did not leave him a son and heir. At the deathbed of his distant cousin and her brother-in-law, Macquarie met Elizabeth Campbell. He described her in his diary as a practical woman, who would make 'an admirable soldier's wife'. He proposed, on condition she wait until he returned from his next tour of duty in India. And she did. They eventually married, in 1807; she was 29, he 46. His initial assessment proved correct.



*The King Family in 1799  
(artist Robert Dighton, in private collection)*

She was the most loyal of all his supporters in the colony, interested in the welfare of women convicts and Aborigines, in gardening, landscaping and architecture. The road through the government Domain, still known as Mrs Macquarie's Road and the twin towers of St John's church, Parramatta, are surviving monuments to her interests. And she gave Macquarie a son, Lachlan. Despite the bitter clashes of personality which marred Macquarie's administration, he stayed twelve years, almost double the length of previous terms. Elizabeth and her son were largely responsible for that.

Macquarie's successor came of a more distinguished Scots family. Sir Thomas Brisbane, knighted in 1814 for his services in the Peninsular War, enjoyed a passion for astronomy. He had sought the office to pursue his astronomical observations in the southern hemisphere. In 1818, at the age of 45, Brisbane had married an heiress and in 1826 added her name to his by deed poll. She was described as 'an unassuming, plain woman', who preferred to live 'in great retirement' devoting herself to her husband and children. Three babies were born in the four years of her husband's administration. Brisbane built an observatory near Government House, Parramatta, and he and his wife resided there for most of his term. She took very little part in colonial life.

Elizabeth Darling took the opposite path. An accomplished young woman of 19, she married Sir Ralph Darling when he was 42. Though she brought no fortune to the marriage, she did bring her family's influential connections. Her father, the late Colonel John Dumaresq, belonged to an illustrious Jersey family of ancient lineage. Her two brothers came with their brother-in-law to New South Wales, Henry as Sir Ralph's private secretary and

William as a civil engineer. Elizabeth cultivated a loving and close family circle, as a refuge for her husband from the unpleasantnesses of his public life. She was devoted to him but never overawed by him, despite the age gap of 23 years. As governor's wife, she gave birth to a new child almost every year; during his term of office, she reared six children ranging in age from 13 years to a few months. She was diligent in the running of her household, advising her sister-in-law that "It is a woman's duty, in every station, however wealthy or however exalted to look well to the ways of her household" and "see that her maidens eat not the bread of idleness". Withall, she undertook a heavy program of philanthropic work. Judge Roger Therry commended the hospitalities of Government House, which the Darlings dispensed 'with taste and liberality' and made particular comment on the governor's 'virtuous private life'.

Sir Richard Bourke came of a distinguished Anglo-Irish gentry family. He served with the Grenadier Guards in the Netherlands, South America and the Peninsula War. Having private means, he married at the age of 23. His wife, Elizabeth Jane Bourke, the daughter of John Bourke, receiver-general of the land tax for the county of Middlesex, suffered delicate health all her life, though she did bear her husband two sons and three daughters. When not on active service, Bourke managed his estates near Limerick. Eventually, in response to his wife's need for a warmer climate, he accepted administrative posts in colonies in temperate zones, Malta, the Cape Colony and in New South Wales. In 1832 when he was appointed to New South Wales, the prison reformer, Elizabeth Fry, wrote to the Revd Samuel Marsden, the senior chaplain, that Lady Bourke was held in high esteem, but that 'ill-health will probably prevent her doing much philanthropic work in the colony.' Mrs Fry was right. Five months after her arrival, Elizabeth Bourke died, aged 54, at Government House, Parramatta and was buried in the churchyard of St John's. She barely used Government House, Sydney, because of its dilapidated condition. But Elizabeth Bourke's family made a somewhat more significant contribution to the colony than she did. In 1833 her second daughter, Anne Maria, married the clerk of the Legislative Council, Edward Deas Thomson, afterwards the colonial secretary. Like the Lethbridge Kings, the Deas Thomson family was an extensive and influential one.

Bourke's successor, Sir George Gipps, was the last official occupant of the first Government House. Gipps was a career army officer, commissioned second lieutenant at the age of 17, who continued in the army after 1815, first at Chatham, then in the West Indies, then as a joint-commissioner in Canada. In 1830, when he was 39, he

married Elizabeth, daughter of Major-General George Ramsay of the Royal Artillery. In 1837 he was simultaneously knighted, promoted to major and appointed governor of New South Wales; he was by then 46. About that time some female acquaintance with a sharp tongue, described his wife as one of three sisters, 'beauty', 'wit' and 'fascination'. 'Beauty'

was said to be still unmarried and on the lookout; 'wit' was married to Gipps and 'fascination' was married to a country clergyman. Gipps served a relatively long term of eight years as governor, but during that period his health deteriorated markedly. Headaches, recurrent malaria and eventually a heart condition sapped his strength, so that he was unable to climb the stairs at Government House, Sydney, without making one or two stops on the way. His wife was his companion and nurse. Lady Franklin, the blue stocking wife of Sir John Franklin, governor of Van Diemen's Land, noted his high intelligence and his abiding devotion to his very much younger wife. He died of heart failure shortly after their return to England. Her surviving letters show her to have enjoyed a variety of cultural interests and to have been much distressed that her only child, a son, Reginald Ramsay Gipps, had to be sent home during his father's term, to complete his education. Reginald Gipps rose to the rank of general and was knighted.

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Being a governor's wife was a multi-faceted post. She had to manage a household, support her husband, look after her family and play official hostess, in a sprawling and dilapidated house, bereft of money even for maintenance. It fell down in 1846. The site, however, remains, though it is now sorely disfigured. But the tradition of good works and wifely devotion established there, set a much needed example in a colony where there was little 'genteel' society or any degree of consideration for others. That is a tradition which cannot be destroyed, though for many generations it has been overlooked. However Anna Josepha King and Eliza Darling have been included in the list of local worthies honoured in the calendar of the most recent Anglican prayer book for Australia.



*Mrs Elizabeth Darling  
(Rex Nan Kivell Collection,  
National Library of  
Australia)*

### **\$2.3 MILLION FEDERAL GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR NATIONAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Funds, over three years, have been allocated for a National History Project to encourage more students to study history at primary and high school.

A sum of \$200,000 has been set aside for two national seminars to be held in 2001 and 2002. The first will focus on Australian history, the second on global and regional history. A total of \$450,000 will be spent on a National Centre for History Education which will develop curricula. A further \$600,000 will go towards primary and secondary teaching and learning resources, \$700,000 for a locally based professional development consortium project, \$100,000 to the History Teachers Association to promote best practice in teaching, \$100,000 for a National Postgraduate Programme in History Education and \$100,000 to develop a text on teaching history in schools.