

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4789

McKeahnie, Elizabeth Julia

(1844 - 1919)

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Born | 18440101, Boboyan', near Queanbeyan New South Wales |
| Died | 19191102, Blythburn' near Tharwa Australian Capital Territory |
| Occupation | Pastoralist, Poet |

Summary

Elizabeth McKeahnie was a successful, independent pastoralist between 1882 and 1911, at a time when women generally did not run their own properties. She owned and operated Blythburn, an 810ha dairy and cattle property next to her parents' property, Booroomba, near Tharwa. She usually worked the property singlehanded, when necessary employing only women to assist her. McKeahnie was also a poet, publishing poems in the local newspaper, particularly after the deaths of friends and relatives.

Details

The daughter of Charles and Elizabeth McKeahnie, who emigrated to New South Wales in 1838, Elizabeth McKeahnie was born and grew up in country New South Wales (in what is now the ACT). Over six-foot tall in adulthood, McKeahnie was an imposing figure. She apparently rode astride and carried an ivory-handled revolver. She was known as a skilled rider and horsebreaker, regularly travelling long distances on horseback to visit family and friends. As well as caring for her aging parents (her mother died in 1899 and her father four years later), she also ran her own dairy and cattle property independently. Among the women who worked for her, according to Canberra resident, Una West, who was interviewed in 1983, were Ruth and Grace Kirchner and Mary Ann Warner. One family story suggests that when she was too ill to do the milking, those men who volunteered to assist had to wear women's clothing while completing the task.

McKeahnie seems to have been regarded as somewhat eccentric but her obituary also emphasized her 'feminine' qualities. She was remembered as a 'gracious and warm-hearted lady.'

Always impeccably dressed...her conversational gifts were above the average, and, taken altogether, she was a woman as much higher in womanly qualities as she was in stature above the ordinary.

McKeahnie's homestead at Blythburn still stands and is on the ACT National Trust List of Classified Places. (Latitude: 42.224420° N, Longitude: 94.195630° W) The main structure, which consists of three rooms opening onto a verandah without interconnecting doors, still survives, along with a kitchen building. There is also evidence of further outbuildings. The building was lived in for several years during the 1940s, when one room was converted to a kitchen, but is otherwise reminiscent of McKeahnie's occupation between 1882 and 1919. McKeahnie received Blythburn from her father in 1882 and after his death she bought adjoining land in 1905 and 1908. Her brother Charles assumed active management of the entire property in 1911, but McKeahnie lived in the house until her death.

Like the rest of her family McKeahnie was active in the Presbyterian Church. Her family had a long association with St Stephen's in Queanbeyan, where she is buried in the family plot. Her mother laid the foundation stones of both the church in 1872 and the manse eleven years later and her brother donated the McKeahnie Font, in memory of his parents and two daughters. A memorial tablet commemorating Elizabeth McKeahnie was unveiled inside the church in 1921.

McKeahnie also wrote poetry, primarily in times of grief and distress. 'My Darling Niece' was written after the death in 1877 of her niece, Jane Elizabeth McKeahnie, and 'In Memorial' in 1907 for Charles, the son of her brother, Archibald. Several of her poems were published in the *Queanbeyan Age*. Other poems included 'Effect of the Drought' and 'Gone', neither particularly cheerful. 'Gone' was written in 1892, a few months after the death of Kenneth Cameron, who was also memorialized in 'In Memory of Kenneth Cameron'. (1891) Cameron was a close friend who had proposed marriage to her. McKeahnie's father refused to give his permission, although it is not clear why. Both were members of the same church and

Cameron had no financial problems. He was twenty-one years older than McKeahnie. Neither Cameron nor McKeahnie ever married and legend has it that McKeahnie wore a black -banded wedding ring engraved with Cameron's initials after his death. There has been a suggestion that Charles McKeahnie gave his daughter the Blythburn property as some sort of compensation for refusing to allow her to marry.

A contributor to the *Queanbeyan Age* and *Observer*, writing about McKeahnie several months after her death, concluded 'Nature seemed to point her for something else, but it was the old, old story of a wasted life and 'what might have been.' There is certainly a sense of disappointment in McKeahnie's life, particularly in relation to her thwarted relationship with Kenneth Cameron, and some sadness is reflected in her poetry. Nevertheless, she seems to have been a well-respected and admired member of the local community. She had financial independence. She found enjoyment in her garden and her poetry and undoubtedly took pride in her ability to run a successful cattle and dairy farm. She remains remarkable as one of few rural women of her era to run a successful independent business on the land.

Poetry (collected in Lyall Gillespie's, *Early verse of the Canberra region*):

Dear Land of My Ancestors (1876)
Only A Dream (1876)
Awa' Cald Winter (1876)
My Darling Niece (1877)
What I Love (1878)
In Memory of Mr Kenneth Cameron (1891)
In Memory of Mr Kenneth Cameron: Fate (1891)
Alone (date unknown)
A Memoir (1895)
In Memoriam (1906)

Poetry (collected in Brian Moore, *Cotter Country*):

Effect of the Drought (date unknown)
Gone (1892)
In Memoriam (1907)

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Classified Places: ACT National Trust List of Classified (C) or Recorded (R) Places, National Trust of Australia (ACT), 2008,

<http://www.nationaltrustact.org.au/?pageid=21>

Book

Early Verse of the Canberra Region: A Collection of Poetry, Verse and Doggerel from Newspapers, Other Publications and Private Sources, Gillespie, Lyall, 1994

Cotter Country, Moore, Bruce, 1999

Report

ACT Heritage Register (Decision about Registration for Booroomba Station - Incorporating Blythburn, and Braeside and Adjacent Plouhlands), ACT Heritage Council, 2011,

http://www.environment.act.gov.au/heritage/heritage_register/register_by_suburb

Blythburn Conservation Plan - Stage 1: The Buildings. Report Prepared for Anna and John Hyles, ACT, Martin, Eric and Associates, 2000

Strine Design for Australian Department of Housing and Construction A.C.T. Region 'Blythburn Cottage conservation plan', Canberra Department of Housing and Construction, 1938

Resource Section

Blythburn/2000/01, 2000,

http://picasaweb.google.com/lh/photo/SrIGjEPF183KcxkvMs_9-Q

Elizabeth Julia McKeahnie, 2004,

<http://www.triviumpublishing.com/womenshistorymonth/featuredwomen/elizabethmckeahnie.html>

Journal Article

Enterprising Gaels Become Pioneer Pastoralists, Corp, Tony, 1982

Site Exhibition

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg>

Author Details

Catherine Bishop

Created 22 June 2012

Last modified 20 November 2018

Digital resources



Title: Elizabeth Julia McKeahnie

Type: Image

Date: 3 May, 2023