

First Lady

From its founding in 1839 until 1919 when Miss Cooper was appointed 'lady assistant', the Melbourne Mechanics Institution appears to have been an entirely masculine organisation: its patrons, committee members, trustees and staff were all men. Men continued to predominate in the organisation's management until 1976, when Mrs. E. McInnes and Mrs E Handfield were elected to the Committee to Management.

However, among subscribers, women had a much longer history, gradually increasing in number until, in the latest surviving list (for 1946) they formed the majority. The first of these many women deserves recognition as a pioneer. She was recorded among the list of subscribers for 1848 in the patriarchal manner of the day as Mrs Col. Anderson. There is no special mention in any of the Institution's surviving records of her becoming a member: the organisation seems to have been as properly blind to gender as to religious affiliation. In any case, her status as the colonel's wife together with her long experience of colonial service life would ensure that she would fit comfortably into the organisation.

All we know of her life (and it is the bare bones) comes from the press, and most of it referring to her husband or children: news; shipping intelligence; the colonel's obituary; family notices and advertisements. Indeed, it is only from her death notice (*Argus* 19.8.1870) that we learn for the first time that her name was Mary. Until then she appears in the records only as the colonel's wife. Being also the daughter as well as the mother of colonels, she would have taken that for granted: her father was Col. Campbell and her son W.A.D. Anderson went on to become Lt Colonel of the Victorian Volunteer Artillery Regiment.

We don't know how old Mary was when she joined the Mechanics' Institution, but she would have been middle aged with her family growing up. One of her four daughters had already married in Sydney while her only son and the other three daughters all married in Melbourne during the 1850s. The double wedding on 31 December 1856 at St Paul's Church of her second and third daughters to 'gentlemen of old standing in the colony' must have been a social occasion of some note. The youngest daughter, Juliet Vivian also married a man from the country, Charles Hugh Lyon.

Although appearing in the records only as the colonel's wife, Mary was an independent woman. In February 1851, while her husband briefly entered public life as an appointed member of the Legislative Council, she went to Sydney, perhaps to see her married daughter there, even to say goodbye if her husband had received another posting. She and her three unmarried daughters were back in Port Phillip in July.

As a young man Anderson had served, *inter alia* in the Peninsular campaign one degree of separation between Napoleon and Melbourne in the 1840s! We don't know

when he and Mary married, but she must have shared many years of her husband's extensive colonial service, including the time when he was in charge of the convicts on Norfolk Island. The family returned to Australia from India in 1845, Col. Anderson having obtained leave of absence for two years on a medical certificate. They appear to have settled for a time in Parramatta, as it was there, the following year, that their eldest daughter was married in the Anglican Church to Alfred Rush of the 58th regiment on July 11th. Not long afterwards, in August, Col. Anderson left Sydney for Calcutta presumably to settle his affairs there while Mary, evidently a woman with cultural interests, imported a piano from London. It looks as if they had decided that Australia was to be their future home.

But it wasn't to be Sydney. In November 1846 there was a sale of some surplus furniture, a couple of horses and milch cows from their home at Newlands, Parramatta, preparatory to making a move to the greener pastures of Port Phillip. It's not clear when they arrived there to settle, but there is a report of their return to Sydney in February 1846 on the *Shamrock* from Port Phillip, probably a trip to set things up for their move. According to the colonel's obituary, he 'engaged in squatting pursuits on the Goulburn River', but by this time, Mary may well have had enough of pioneering. Whatever the reason, it was not long before the Andersons moved to South Yarra where they built Fairlie House beside the Botanic Gardens, (now the site of Anderson Street and Fairlie Court) and it was there that they spent the rest of their lives.

Settled in her new permanent home, with her children growing up, Mary would have had more time for her own interests. In 1848 she joined the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution which at that time had a collection of some 3228 volumes as well as copies of the latest local and English newspapers and magazines. She was again a member in 1850, 1851, and 1852 – and then there are no more subscriber lists in the annual reports to search through until 1866. Was she something of a Victorian bluestocking, enjoying uplifting books, or did she share a delight in fiction with her daughters? During the 1850s, did she call in to change her books on her way to 'doing the block' to see and be seen or did she prefer a quiet read at home?

Although we know so little of her personal tastes, her appearance, her values, her friends, her family or her daily life, it is clear that she must have had strength and courage to have lived the life of an army wife of the time.

We do know, however, that like the many women subscribers who succeeded her, she had a love of books.

Note. Volunteers in the archives of the Melbourne Athenaeum are researching the changing roles of women in the organisation since its inception. Mrs Col. Anderson is one of our discoveries. Where were the other women members of Mechanics' Institutes in Victoria?