

ANNE MARSDEN

Elizabeth McArthur, early Melbourne school proprietor

Elizabeth McArthur walked a fine line in the early European Melbourne community, achieving financial success few considered possible or acceptable for a woman while being careful not to ruffle the feathers of society (see opposite). Although her surname was often spelt Macarthur or MacArthur, she should not be confused with Elizabeth Macarthur the New South Wales pastoralist. Melbourne's Elizabeth McArthur ran profitable schools for nearly four decades at a time when many school proprietors, both men and women, failed to prosper. She also appears to have been a much-loved figure in Melbourne's English-speaking community.

State Library Victoria holds the family papers of the Reverend Joseph Docker, an Anglican clergyman and later farmer who in the early 19th century settled first in New South Wales and then in north-eastern Victoria, and who sent his daughters to board at Elizabeth's school in Melbourne. Within the Docker papers are a small number of letters written between the family members and Elizabeth. Joseph Docker wrote to Elizabeth on 21 October 1850:

Mrs Docker and myself must ever entertain a feeling of gratitude towards you for your unvarying kindness and attention to Mary and Josephine,

Batchelder & O'Neill[?] (photographer), *Elizabeth McArthur*, studio portrait, c. 1857 – c. 1865[?], private collection of Matthew Betham Docker





Left: Donald Gordon McArthur. TF Chuck, *D. Gordon McArthur*, photograph: albumen silver, originally carte-de-visite format, 1872, H5056/362, in TF Chuck, *The explorers and early colonists of Victoria*, photograph of portraits mosaic, 1872, H5056

Right: David Charteris McArthur. TF Chuck, *David C. McArthur*, photograph: albumen silver, originally carte-de-visite format, 1872, H5056/136, in TF Chuck, *The explorers and early colonists of Victoria*, photograph of portraits mosaic, 1872, H5056

whose progress in their studies exceeded our expectations. I have only three daughters left and regret that I have not fifty, that I might have the pleasure of placing them also, in succession, under your care.¹

And an obituary to Elizabeth, in *The Australasian* in 1878, a substantial piece titled 'A good and useful woman', claimed, 'Mothers of up-grown families now look back to that period when ... they were little children in Mrs. Macarthur's schoolroom, and they gratefully think of her kind, quaint, pleasant manner ... whose effects are seen, in their own gentle habits and their well-regulated households'.²



Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on 16 November 1803, Elizabeth Kirby was the daughter of physician and president of the Royal Medical Society Jeremiah Kirby and his wife Jane.³ Early in 1835, Elizabeth, aged 31, married Donald Gordon McArthur, aged 24, son of Captain Donald McArthur and his wife

Elizabeth. Three weeks later, the couple embarked on the *Canton* for Australia, along with Donald's brother David and his wife – also of just three weeks – Caroline (née Wright) and other members of the McArthur and Kirby families.⁴ David and Donald (see page 62), aware of the dearth of marriageable women in Australia, had clearly made hurried marriages before embarkation. Elizabeth was recorded as 26 on arrival in Australia,⁵ but having been born in 1803, she was nearly 32 when she married Donald, who was eight years her junior. If she deliberately concealed her true age, she may have viewed Donald, and inclusion in the McArthur clan, as a means of escape from the restricted life looming for her as an unmarried woman.

The ship reached Sydney in September 1835.⁶ The family carried letters of recommendation to Governor Richard Bourke, resulting in the appointments of David as a clerk in the Bank of Australasia in Sydney and Donald as a clerk in the survey department.

Elizabeth set up a school in Sydney, an occupation deemed acceptable for an educated woman, if space for a schoolroom could be set aside during the day in the family home. Scotland's Presbyterian emphasis on education at that time meant that Elizabeth had likely received a sound schooling, and she may have been a governess prior to her marriage, as was her half-sister Jane.⁷ Elizabeth gave birth to her first daughter, Elizabeth (Bessie), on 20 August 1836 and to her second, Helen Wemyss, on 16 October 1838. Both the McArthur brothers had by the later date moved to Melbourne, David to open a branch of the Bank of Australasia, and Donald to the office of the surveyor in charge at Port Phillip. By late 1838 or early 1839, Elizabeth was also settled in Melbourne; Helen was baptised there in February 1839.⁸

At that time, the population of the settlements of Melbourne and Williamstown totalled 1066, including only 369 women and girls.⁹ In spite of the small numbers, Elizabeth wasted no time in opening her first school in Melbourne; the family was financially stressed, so it was to its benefit to establish another income stream. Her schoolroom was in a 'plain one-story building' on the corner of Russell Street and Flinders Lane.¹⁰

Marjorie R Theobald, a historian who wrote about the evolution of girls' schools in Victoria, said that Melbourne's early girls' schools

reproduced a vital component of ruling class culture. Speech, manners, social ritual and the right connections were vital in an era of family-based capitalist enterprise. The gatekeepers of power and privilege looked to women of their own class to educate their daughters in the ways of gentility. For nearly forty years Elizabeth Macarthur conducted her school within the proprieties of class and gender.¹¹

Elizabeth’s school prospered, and by 1847 the numbers of girls enrolling were, according to Theobald, greater than those of students at Melbourne’s top two boys’ schools.¹² The previous year, 1846, had seen the first of Joseph Docker’s daughters leave the family’s Bontharambo estate in Port Phillip to attend Elizabeth’s school.

In 1851, Elizabeth, ‘in consequence of the present unhealthy state of Melbourne’, moved the school to Robe Street, St Kilda, not far from the beach, where she built Belle Vue House. And in 1867, as Robe Street became increasingly congested, the school was on the move again, to St Kilda’s Alma Road.¹³

State Library Victoria’s collection of Docker family correspondence contains some letters relating to the daughters’ time at the school dated between March and May 1856. A letter home on 1 March 1856 from Charlotte Docker gives a glimpse into the life of a ‘parlour boarder’:

It is more like [?home] having tea and breakfast with Mrs MacArthur. I am very happy here ... Mrs Forsyth teaches music, she plays beautifully and ... I am a favourite pupil. My dear Mamma ... I wish to know if Mrs McA may get me in the Easter holidays, a new bonnet and pair of gloves, and two pairs of shoes, one of them for dancing.

Charlotte’s fees for the term ending 31 March 1856 were as follows:

Board and education	£20
French	£2 2s (shillings)
Drawing	£2 2s
Singing lessons	£2 2s
Washing	£2
Music (pieces)	4s 6d (pence)
Exercise and copy books	3s
Dancing shoes	7s 6d
Gloves	2s 6d

In the letter of 1 March 1856, Charlotte remarked, ‘I almost forgot to tell you that Mrs McArthur took us to hear a lecture on chemistry given by Dr Macadam last Tuesday which was very interesting’.¹⁴

Charlotte’s letters describe what Theobald called ‘the circumscribed domestic routine of the ladies’ school’. Apart from lessons, they engaged in private study and music practice. Girls mended their clothing, played games and took part in physical activities in the form of walking, dancing and summer sea bathing. They also went to church.¹⁵ In the early days, Elizabeth

would have taught most of the basic curriculum herself; later, when specialist teachers appeared on the scene, she could hand over subject areas to them.

Elizabeth's husband, Donald, displayed a compassionate spirit. In Little Collins Street in October 1839, a butcher appeared to encourage a dog to attack two Aboriginal women, and Donald and his companion kept the dog from biting them. Donald wrote to George Augustus Robinson, protector of Aboriginals (discussed and pictured in John Gregory's article in this issue, on page 41), requesting he take action 'to show such men as the unfeeling butcher that the blacks are not without friends'.¹⁶

A report in *The Melbourne Courier* of 16 June 1845 implied that Donald had been absent from Melbourne, reporting that he had 'returned to the province' with the appointment of principal locker in the Melbourne customs. In an 1847 Melbourne directory he was listed as a clerk in Flinders Lane. Sadly, by the 1860s, Donald was in financial stress. His brother David maintained payments on Donald's life insurance, ensuring a level of security for Elizabeth and her daughters in the event of Donald's death. In 1861, David arranged an allowance of £8, later increased to £16. Donald died in 1871.¹⁷

Before that, however, Elizabeth and her brother-in-law David McArthur had become 'the mainstays of the family economy', according to Theobald.¹⁸ Through his influence in the early Australian banking scene, David held the purse strings of many prominent members of society. Historian Geoffrey Blainey noted that 'he kept the government account and won so much private business that in three years his branch was nearly the size of the office in Sydney'.¹⁹ In 1839, David had purchased 34 hectares at Heidelberg, to the north of Melbourne. As he rose through the social ranks, he developed his magnificent estate, Charterisville, where he entertained lavishly. The property was later an important location for the Heidelberg School of artists. David was elected to membership of the exclusive Melbourne Club in 1851. In 1853, he became one of the initial five trustees of the Public Library, now State Library Victoria. His crest, together with those of Library president Redmond Barry and of fellow-trustees, can be seen high up on the inside of the portico entrance to the Library. David was valued for his financial skills. He was a pallbearer at the funeral of Redmond Barry and succeeded him as president of the Library. The McArthur Gallery, opened in 1875, serves as a testament to David McArthur's importance in the Library's early history (see pages 67–8). In 1872, David became president of the Melbourne Cricket Club, enjoying the privilege of accompanying legendary English cricketer WG Grace and his wife around the cricket grounds of Melbourne. David died in 1887.²⁰





Samuel Calvert (engraver), *Opening of the new Fine Arts [McArthur] Gallery, Public Library*, print: wood engraving, Melbourne: Ebenezer & David Syme, 14 June 1875, IAN14/06/75/89

Elizabeth's daughters, Bessie and Helen, were involved in the running of Elizabeth's schools. Bessie, assisted by her mother, set up a school at Moonee Ponds, a suburb of Melbourne. This is likely to have been at Rothmaise, the house at which Elizabeth eventually died.²¹

Elizabeth carefully paved the way for her daughters' marriages. They grew up with the example of a resourceful, determined mother who pursued a profitable business. They would have observed their contemporaries, young women, married in their teens and early twenties, often weighed down with a large family. Mamie, the wife of James Graham, a prominent merchant close to the McArthur family, was just 17 when she married, having the first of her 26 known living births nine months later. Her childbearing years spanned nearly three decades.²² It is telling then that Elizabeth's daughters married widowers, Bessie when in her forties, and Helen in her mid-thirties. Widower Jonathan Binns Were, in his early seventies in 1882, when he married Bessie, was a wealthy stockbroker and the first chairman of Melbourne's stock exchange. He was 30 years Bessie's senior and died three years after the marriage.²³ Helen's husband, Joseph Docker's nephew Matthew Betham Docker, was 9 years Helen's senior. They had a daughter and two sons, Elizabeth's only grandchildren.²⁴

In 1875, the year after Helen married from Belle Vue House, Elizabeth sold the property. She died in 1878, in her seventies. On 21 November 1878, her funeral cortege left her residence Rothmaise and passed over Princes Bridge on its way to St Kilda Cemetery, where this most impressive early European Melbourne identity was laid to rest.²⁵ Elizabeth's obituary expressed the highest praise: 'It is not too much to say that to her intelligence we are indebted for much of that leaven of better domestic life which distinguishes the class representing what we may call the historic residents in Victoria' (see opposite).²⁶

Elizabeth's achievements were significant in the light of the great hardships endured by the early inhabitants of Melbourne. Not only did she persevere with determination to educate the settlement's young girls, but she forged ties with prominent families and in cooperation with her brother-in-law David McArthur set the extended McArthur family on a successful path in their new land. This article is the result of the good fortune of the author to discover the extensive manuscript collection of the Docker papers preserved at State Library Victoria, which throws light on generations of this most interesting family.

THE BIOGRAPHER.

A GOOD AND USEFUL WOMAN.

There pass away from us, every now and then, early colonists who, although their names have never been conspicuously before the public, have exercised notable influence of a social kind. They have reared no monument to attract the eyes of casual wayfarers, but they have done good work in the clearing and foundation process. Their work is below ground, or at least beneath the feet, but it is good work, and upon its strength much of the superstructure has depended. It is thus we may speak of those who undertook the business of education in the first days of Victoria; for to their efforts many of those who now compose the most stable class in the community are indebted for whatever education they ever received.

It might not probably have attracted the attention of one in a hundred the other day when the obituary notices contained the announcement that Elizabeth Macarthur, widow of the late Donald Gordon Macarthur, and sister-in-law of Mr. D. C. Macarthur, long known as the manager of the Bank of Australasia in this city, was dead, at the age of 75. But to that one in a hundred it called forth many recollections. For nearly 40 years Mrs. Macarthur had been a schoolmistress in this colony, and for many years after her arrival, in 1839, hers was the only school where the young ladies of that period could obtain any education at all. She had the training of the wives of many of our leading colonists, and it is not too much to say that to her intelligence, and her motherly-affectionate discipline, we are indebted for much of that leaven of better domestic life which distinguishes the class representing what we may call the historic residents in Victoria.

Mrs. Macarthur was the daughter of Dr. Kirkby, a leading physician in Edinburgh, in the early part of this century, and was born in 1803. Some time after her marriage she came out to New South Wales, and opened a school in Sydney, where she remained five years. In 1839 she came to Melbourne, then a mere village in extent and importance, and first in the city, and afterwards at St. Kilda, she led, as we have said, for nearly 40 years the uneventful life of a schoolmistress. She died on the 19th of last month at Moonee Ponds, where, for a brief period, she had resided on first coming to Victoria, then the Port Phillip district of New South Wales.

At this day, and with a knowledge of the resources procurable by the conductors of private schools, there does not seem anything remarkable in the circumstance of an educated lady undertaking the work of tuition. But it is to be remembered that in those early times there were no masters of various subjects to be had as now there are, by means of whom the principal of a lady's academy is relieved of nearly all the work except that of general supervision. Mrs. Macarthur, though a highly educated woman, was a schoolmistress of the good old-fashioned kind, and in this way her pupils were brought into a more direct association with her than is the case by the subdivision-of-labour method, now the rule. Latterly, both by reason of her advancing age and in that the aid of masters was easily procurable, Mrs. Macarthur availed herself of this co-operation; but it is of the old time we speak, a time which represents an epoch very dear to old colonists, who, when they were very few, and when this colony was almost unknown to the outer world, regarded themselves rather as a family circle than an organised community. Mothers of up-grown families now look back to that period when, in a plain one-story building, at the corner of Flinders-lane and Russell-street, where now the Detective-office stands, they were little children in Mrs. Macarthur's schoolroom, and they gratefully think of her kind, quaint, pleasant manner, now only a memory indeed; but a golden memory, whose effects are seen in their own gentle habits and their well-regulated households.

As an evidence of the respect felt for Mrs. Macarthur by her old pupils, it became known some months before her death that her school had not, for a few years, been so flourishing as once it was, and that her age and infirmities rendered her less capable than formerly of doing her work. It was at once determined to raise a sum which, for the few remaining years of her life, should place her beyond the necessity of further labour. A large amount was at once subscribed, and at the time of her death contributions were still coming in. All this was done without the least publicity, a few ladies having formed themselves into a committee, for the purpose of collecting subscriptions.

Those only who knew Mrs. Macarthur can speak of her genuine private worth. She was a woman excellent in all womanly virtues, and the future time alone can show how her influence with the many hundreds of her own sex, who owed their educational training to her direction and example, has beneficially operated.