

ELIZA DAVIES

Eliza Davies was never meant to sail to Sydney in 1838 and traipse the wild Flat Rock Creek, but an early taste of the Sydney colony and hearing Alexander Campbell preaching in her native Scotland formed Eliza's devotion to Churches of Christ and pioneering work establishing schools for poor children. One of the early pioneers of our movement, Eliza Davies firmly established the preaching of the Gospel with a response to community need.

Raised in Paisley, west of Glasgow, Eliza was part of the Scottish Baptist Church before discovering a deeper purpose in Christ through being evangelised by Wesleyans in 1831, where informed by her own 'sad and lonely' childhoodⁱ, she began a ministry to poor Glaswegian slum children.ⁱⁱ A fiercely principled advocate, after having a blazing argument with her mother over the prospect of an arranged marriage, Eliza left Scotland at just 17, sailing to Sydney on the barque *Portland* as the only 'Dissenter'ⁱⁱⁱ among 253 Protestants^{iv} – a fact hinting at her religious independence as dissenters were outcasts of the established Church of England.

"I had become religious, and I was turned out of my mother's house, and I had no home among my own people, nor anyone to care for me, and I was going to trust God and leave my country; and seek a home among strangers, perhaps they would be kind to me."^v

Arriving in Port Jackson in December 1838, Eliza stayed at the home of Mr George Cooper, NSW Comptroller of Customs^{vi} at his 10-acre property, Waterview Villa in Waterview Bay (now Mort Bay, Balmain). The Sydney colony was a challenging place. Eliza observed a community deeply divided over the hanging of seven men for killing 28 Aborigines in the Myall Creek Massacre;^{vii} and described Sydney as '*degenerate*' and hot, waterless, and inhabited by drunks and convicts. Due to the appalling conditions of the colony, Eliza was admitted to Sydney Hospital with a serious fever,^{viii} staying for a time before being discharged back to Waterview Villa to recuperate. The Sydney colony elite was small and mainly connected through empire, trade and marriage connections, and key to the colony's future success was that it become a safe place for women to live and meet like-minded people to socialise with, marry and raise families. Thus, when Cooper's friend Captain Charles Sturt and his wife Charlotte visited Waterview Villa,^{ix} Eliza was invited to join them and South Australian Governor George Gawler and his wife on expedition into South Australia^x and was among the first settler group to navigate the Murray River^{xi}. After five weeks of various challenges, Eliza was involved in a serious horse and carriage accident. Injured, she walked several miles back to the South Australian Governor's

residence for help, assisted on the way by master tinsmith William Davies. Eliza reluctantly married William on 17 April 1840 at the insistence of Charlotte Sturt. It was a short union characterised by great violence^{xii}, and with the support of a local Baptist church, “... *She escaped her violent, alcoholic husband and returned to NSW in 1842.*”^{xiii}

In early 1847, Eliza returned to Paisley, Scotland, for a fresh start. She fortuitously heard Alexander Campbell (who had formed the Disciples of Christ with Barton Stone in 1832) preaching at her local church on 1 Corinthians 13:13. Inspired by Campbell’s words “... *Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity,*” Eliza accepted Alexander’s offer to live with his family in West Virginia, USA, in November 1847, becoming closely involved with the family and their social circle. Nicknamed ‘the Dove’ by Alexander Campbell because of her generous, unstinting care for Thomas Campbell in his old age;^{xiv} Eliza gained influence and respect as associate principal and matron at Kentucky Female Orphan School;^{xv} refining her teaching and networking skills over the next decade.

Considering the United States her home, Eliza had no plans to leave.^{xvi} However, in 1857, her half-sister Barbara, a resident of the NSW colony with her husband, a master mariner, and their three children, begged Eliza to return to Sydney to care for the children on the expectation of her death^{xvii}. Arriving in Sydney eight months later in February 1858 to a sister who had recovered, Eliza refocused on her call to evangelism as the American Bible Union’s Sydney representative, seeking to spread Campbell’s philosophy^{xviii} and dispensing copies of the American translation of the Bible across Sydney. Through this role, Eliza was invited to Kiama where she saw a poor Irish girl in the streets, which “... *drew her back to her primary calling – the teaching and care of the poor.*”^{xix} Eliza settled in Mt Pleasant at a pastoral property, just south of Kiama, converting an old shed into a school for the pastoral workers’ children. After a three-day raging storm, which partly destroyed the school, Eliza renamed the site ‘Hurricane Hill’. She achieved similar success to that in Kentucky, the *Kiama Examiner* reporting in 1860, “*On leaving the school, and probably the country, she carried with her the affection of her pupils and the respect and esteem of the parents.*”

In 1862, Robert Dixson of the Bush Missionary Society challenged Eliza to visit a place north of Sydney so degenerate that “*No respectable person would work or stay there.*”^{xx} Eliza later recalled the crossing in heavy rain: “*We drove till we came to the great Flat Rock. This was just what its name indicated, honeycombed with great holes always full of water in dry weather. I could navigate them dry-shod, but it was always covered with water in the rainy season, and dangerous to cross, and over this my road lay; but now it was impassable, a*

river a quarter of a mile wide was rushing over it with mad fury, full of rapids, and concealing the holes with its muddy water.^{xxxi}

The next morning, Eliza saw many isolated huts populated by dirty ragged children and their mothers.^{xxii} Finding a dilapidated old hut, Eliza had it cleared and branches spread over the tin roof for heat protection^{xxiii} and in three months was running a day and night school, Friday prayer meetings, Lord's Day morning, Sunday school and hosting Bush Missionary Society speakers. As the school's primary champion, Eliza lobbied local merchants and businessmen for the funds to build the school. There were still no proper roads on the lower North Shore, so Eliza walked to meet various suppliers: brick maker, lime maker, timber merchant and workmen,^{xxiv} and independently sourced the shingles, hinges and doors.^{xxv} Eliza was a true missionary in the sense of putting the Gospel and the needs of her community before her own comforts, project-managing the construction of the school while maintaining her teaching load and living in five dishevelled rental properties throughout 1862.^{xxvi} The 'Bethany School' was officially opened on 30 July 1863, and the establishment of the school attracted settlers to the area. In 1866, Bethany School was legislated as the North Sydney National Public School, now known as Willoughby Public School by Sir Henry Parkes, creating funds for a teacher's position and books.^{xxvii} Eliza faced further challenges whilst running the school with "... *Flooding of Flat Rock Creek a regular hazard, and a continuing threat of bushfires, floods, snakes, wandering cows, violent men and local bushrangers.*"^{xxviii} In 1874, Eliza left Willoughby as "*a thriving village, three of her former night scholars had married and two had become teachers.*"^{xxix} With the US Civil War having ended in 1865, Eliza had planned to return to her American family; however, she was asked by the Magarey family and George Fife Angas to help establish the Hindmarsh School for poor children, in Robert Street, South Australia. She accepted this assignment, achieving similar success alongside evangelists Thomas Jefferson Gore and Mark Collis.^{xxx} Eliza finally returned to Kentucky in the late 1870s, publishing her autobiography *The Story of an Earnest Life* in 1881. She died on 27 March 1888 and is buried in Lexington, Kentucky.^{xxxi}

ⁱ **Harold E. Hayward.** *Dedicated to her pupils: An appraisal of the Life and Work of Eliza Davies.* Churches of Christ in New South Wales – Occasional Papers in History and Theology. Paper #14. 2016.

ⁱⁱ **Hayward.** 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ **F.L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone (eds).** *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (13 Mar 1997) 3rd Edition. USA. Oxford University Press, page 490: "Dissenter: A Protestant Christian who had separated from the Church of England during the 17th and 18th centuries."

^{iv} **Hayward.** 2016. **Adelaide [AZ]** Settlement. *Women. Eliza Davies joins the Charles Sturt 1839 expedition as an 18-year-old; first of three roles in early South Australia.* 2021.

^v **Eliza Davies.** *The Story of an Earnest Life: A Woman's Adventure in Australia,* Cincinnati, Central Book Crown, 1881. Page 47.

^{vi} **Hayward.** 2016.p3

^{vii} **Barbara Dawson.** In the Eye of the Beholder: What Six Nineteenth-century Women Tell Us About Indigenous Authority and Identity. *Chapter 3: Literary Excesses – Eliza Davies: Imagination and Fabrication (pp. 29-50)*. 2014. ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia. 2014.

^{viii} **Harold E. Hayward.** *Dedicated to her pupils: An appraisal of the Life and Work of Eliza Davies*. Churches of Christ in New South Wales – Occasional Papers in History and Theology. Paper #14. 2016.

^{ix} **Hayward.** 2016. p13

^x **Adelaide [AZ] Settlement.** Women. *Eliza Davies joins the Charles Sturt 1839 expedition as an 18-year-old; first of three roles in early South Australia*. 2021.

^{xi} **Sarah Ailwood.** (2011) *The Laws of God and Men: Eliza Davies' Story of an Earnest Life*. *Life Writing*, 8:4, 433-444, page 434.

^{xii} **Adelaide Register, SA (1901-1929).** *Eliza Davies and Infant Adelaide*. Wednesday, 28 January 1925. p13(2)).

^{xiii} **Sarah Ailwood.** (2011) page 434.

^{xiv} **Harold E. Hayward.** *Dedicated to her pupils: An appraisal of the Life and Work of Eliza Davies*. Churches of Christ in New South Wales – Occasional Papers in History and Theology. Paper #14 (2016) page 13.

^{xv} **Hayward.** 2016.

^{xvi} **Hayward.** 2016.

^{xvii} **Barbara Dawson.** In the Eye of the Beholder: What Six Nineteenth-century Women Tell Us About Indigenous Authority and Identity. *Chapter 3: Literary Excesses – Eliza Davies: Imagination and Fabrication (pp. 29-50)*. 2014. ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia. 2014.

^{xviii} **Sarah Ailwood.** (2011) page 434.

^{xix} **Harold E. Hayward.** *Dedicated to her pupils: An appraisal of the Life and Work of Eliza Davies*. Churches of Christ in New South Wales – Occasional Papers in History and Theology. Paper #14 (2016) page 18.

^{xx} **E. Leslie & J. Michaelides.** Bicentennial Community Committee: *Willoughby: The Suburb and its People*. Willoughby Municipal Council. Management Development Publishers Pty Ltd. Sydney NSW, Australia. 1988.

^{xxi} **Eliza Davies.** *The Story of an Earnest Life: A Woman's Adventure in Australia*, Cincinnati, Central Book Crown, 1881.

^{xxii} **Geoffrey Sherington.** *Willoughby Public School: From the Bush to the Suburbs*. Willoughby District Historical Society & Museum Inc. (Chatswood, Sydney Australia). 2021.

^{xxiii} **E. Leslie & J. Michaelides.** Bicentennial Community Committee: *Willoughby: The Suburb and its People*. Willoughby Municipal Council. Management Development Publishers Pty Ltd. Sydney NSW, Australia. 1988.

^{xxiv} **Hayward.** 2016, page 24.

^{xxv} **Hayward.** 2016, page 24.

^{xxvi} **Hayward.** 2016, page 24.

^{xxvii} **E. Leslie & J. Michaelides.** 1988

^{xxviii} **Hayward.** 2016.

^{xxix} **Hayward.** 2016.

^{xxx} **Harold E. Hayward.** *Dedicated to her pupils: An appraisal of the Life and Work of Eliza Davies.* Churches of Christ in New South Wales – Occasional Papers in History and Theology. Paper #14. 2016.

^{xxxi} **Hayward.** 2016.

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