

Mary Cunningham, Mistress of Tuggeranong

The Cunningham papers in the National Library are a record of a 26 year correspondence between Mary Cunningham of Tuggeranong Homestead and Lanyon, and her family and friends. They give us an insight into one of the chief pastoral families of early Canberra, and portray life in the early years of Federation and throughout the war, from the viewpoint of an intelligent and perceptive woman.

Mary, the eldest of seven children, came from a distinguished Goulburn family. Her father Edward Twynam became acting Chief Surveyor of NSW in 1887, and throughout his long and active life he maintained a great interest in local and world affairs, and the progress of his widely travelled children. He was Mary's chief correspondent. Mary's mother Emily Rose, died in 1910; but she had established a name for herself as an accomplished woodcarver and wonderful botanical illustrator; her work was represented in the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

Mary was educated at home, at Riversdale in Goulburn. When she was only twenty she married a 38 year-old grazier James Cunningham, from "Tuggranong". (This, the original spelling, was changed to "Tuggeranong" with the coming of the railway in 1887.) James had inherited this property from his Scottish father Andrew Cunningham, one of the most successful and respected pastoralists in the Queanbeyan district. James's brother Andrew Jackson, owned the adjoining property of Lanyon., and the two brothers worked in partnership.

For the first thirteen years of her marriage, Mary's energies were taken up with her growing family. She had eight children in quick succession. Her position at Tuggeranong was always a comfortable one, with a number of live-in domestics and a nurse for the children. Mrs Mabel

Pike, nursemaid and housekeeper during the 1890's, refers to Mary and her little girl Peggy: "*my darling mistress, the dearest mistress in the world*", and her work as "*darling little Peggie's loving nurse*". A young parlour maid, Martha Harman, who worked at Tuggeranong from 1904, remembered Mary with great fondness, almost as a second mother. When Martha left in 1909 to get married, Mary cried and kissed her goodbye. On her way out to a social occasion, resplendent in evening dress, Mary visited Martha on the night her first baby was born and stayed to comfort her during the delivery.

The records we have of Mary suggest a woman of sensitivity and warmth, with a great capacity for friendship, but who often suffered great spells of loneliness and intellectual isolation during the years of child-rearing. Page after page of large notebooks are filled, in Mary's graceful handwriting, with copies of Victorian poetry carefully written out, verse by verse. Mary's correspondence with her father shows a deep bond between them, not just of affection but of literary interests in common, that would have been absent from the little farming community at Tuggeranong.

"I hope you will come soon again and read us Kipling on the lawn. The more I read of Kipling the more I admire his writing, his national pieces are so beautiful, and his flippant pieces so very flippant, which shows what an artist he is.."

In the years before the war, when her eldest children were young adults and the younger ones were away at boarding school, Mary embarked on an earnest program of self-education, to widen her acquaintance with books and to master the elements of English grammar and poetry. She wrote to her father, about her poetry writing:

“The work delights me; words are always so interesting. I feel like a child, who has been given a box of beads for the first time, with so many beautiful colours to arrange, and when I know more of the rules for arrangement, writing will become easier for me.”

The Reverend Pierce Galliard Smith of St Johns church at Reid, made a monthly visit to the homestead, travelling out on his horse as he had done faithfully throughout his long ministry, to visit his scattered flock. He baptised seven of Mary’s eight children at Tuggeranong; he also lent her books from the sizeable library he had established for parishioners, and brought her cuttings for her orchard and garden. Gardening was one of Mary’s passions, offering both aesthetic and practical satisfactions. When Captain Charles Bean came to live at Tuggeranong in 1919 to write the Official War History, he admired the gardens she had established, and did his best to preserve “Mrs Cunningham’s garden” as she had created it. Some of the trees she planted are still standing.

The decision in 1908, to build the new Federal capital in the Yass/Canberra region, was welcomed by most local people, but landowners soon realised that it would mean the end of their tenure. Sooner or later their land was to be resumed by the Commonwealth and they would have to start a new life elsewhere. Mary wrote to her father in May 1914, about the large property Gungahleen: *“The Craces have received notice of resumption by the Federal Government. I shall be very sorry to lose our neighbours. Mrs Crace was my greatest friend in the district.”*

James joined a group called the “Federal Capital Vigilance Committee” which was pressing for better compensation from the Government for forcible resumption of land. As it was, the Commonwealth did not need to acquire Tuggeranong until 1917; they had decided on the property as the ideal site on which to build a major arsenal (a plan abandoned with the ending of the war). The family, anticipating resumption of the land, had moved to the adjoining property of

Lanyon in 1914, after Andrew Jackson's death, though they still visited Tuggeranong throughout the war.

With the departure of long-established families, other people arrived on the scene, providing a new range of interests for the local community. The local paper reported in detail on the military training camp, usually held at Liverpool, but in 1913 held at the new capital in March, when blizzards and heavy rain provided realistic testing grounds for the 1st and 3rd Light Horse Brigade. The issue of rum "for medicinal purposes" was much appreciated by the shivering soldiers, in what was a "dry territory". Another camp was held in March 1914 at Tirranna, a big sheep station near Goulburn, and the local Goulburn papers were much taken by the visit of Sir Ian Hamilton, Commander in Chief, to inspect the troops. Mary's sister Joan, gave her own view of the occasion, having talked to some of the local soldiers, and recorded their very down to earth view of the British military establishment: "*Sir Ian Hamilton is just what you imagine a hero to be like. They couldn't bear his aide-de-camp. Ned told him to go to Hell, and Major Holman told him to 'take that blasted piece of glass out of his eye!'*"

The Royal Military College was established in 1911 on the old Campbell property of Duntroon. Mary and her family became good friends with the staff, and were frequent visitors at the games and other events associated with the college. In April 1914 she wrote "*On Monday Jim, Andrew and I went to Duntroon to see Sir Ian Hamilton present the prizes to cadets*".

Tuggeranong became well known for its warm hospitality to both officers and cadets. The latter would often ride their bike or borrow a horse and ride out on a visit, during their brief Sunday leave. Some spent the Christmas of 1913 at the property. One of the main attractions of the visit was the presence of Mary's lively teenage daughters, three of whom married Duntroon officers

during or after the war. Mary wrote to her father in 1918, pleading that her brother Ned be spared for the weekend to help Mary's son Twynam play host:

"I have eight girls coming to me for the Dance the staff are giving the cadets at Duntroon. Please ask Ned if he is coming to assist me entertain them. Twynam threatens to take refuge at Woden if he is left unsupported, which must not be thought of for a moment!"

A number of officers continued to write to Mary while on active service. The memory of that quiet rural homestead and its friendly inhabitants would have been treasured by them as a contrast to life in the trenches. Of approximately 130 men who left Duntroon to serve as officers with the Australian Imperial Force, 37 were killed or died of wounds. Their average age was 21 ½ years.

In a letter to her sister Joan, serving as a nurse in France, Mary expressed her sense of frustration at not being able to offer more active help to the cause of the war. During the Gallipoli campaign, in which her own son was wounded, she wrote to her father:

" Captain Davies spent last weekend with us, and we took him by motor for a picnic to see the wattle at Naas. It is looking so beautiful here now, it makes it difficult to realise that this titanic war is in progress, and that our best and bravest are offering their great sacrifice. We must reinforce them with all the courage we have."

With the start of the campaign for the referendum to introduce conscription, in 1916, Mary found a voice, and a passion, that led her to public speaking engagements in the local area, and to write letters to the Sydney Morning Herald in support of conscription. Part of her local speech of October 1916 went thus:

"We appeal for the interest and co-operation of all women, they should feel with us. We have sent our sons to fight. We expect them to send theirs."

Mary also became involved with Red Cross fund-raising in the district, and assumed the management of the War Chest Flower Shop in Sydney, which she visited often during the war because of her husband's ill-health. Perhaps her most meaningful aid to others, took the form of letters and poems which she wrote to many of her friends in the local district, so many of them having lost sons in the drawn out campaigns of trench warfare. We don't have copies of Mary's letters, but the responses are eloquent. Her friend Jean Rutledge wrote from Bungendore in late 1917:

"You understand what it is to me to lose my priceless boy. He was so merry and full of life..it is hard to realise he is dead. He wrote long but cheerful letters, but I think the iron had entered his soul..he dreaded the bitter winters, my dear sun-warmed boy. I can't write much dear Mary but want you to know how your love and kindness help me..."

Like most of her class and generation, Mary was a staunch supporter of the British Empire and of Australia's contribution to the distant war. In September 1915 she wrote to her father:

"It was Andrew's birthday last Sunday; it seems such a little time ago that he was a small boy, playing at soldiers and drilling his sisters and brother, and now he is a real soldier, twice wounded in the service of the Empire. You may imagine how proud of him I am, as I know you are too."

After the war, her son Andrew returned to take over the management of the family property of Lanyon. But the restless adventurous years of the war had taken their toll, and Andrew was never able to settle back to the routines of farming life. Under his careless management Lanyon lost its position as one of the premier properties of the region, and was sold at auction in 1926. Mary made a last visit to the property in April 1926, and wrote to her daughter-in-law Helen:

“The country here is looking quite beautiful. I don’t think I have ever seen it so green before. It is rather sad saying goodbye to the old places, especially when they are looking so very pretty, but I suppose it will be for the best for everyone, especially for... (my) son’s prospects. I have been collecting roots and bulbs for Riversdale, and it looks as if I had enough to plant all Goulburn”.

Visitors to Lanyon today can look past the grazing cattle, to the left of the entry drive, and they will see a small cemetery surrounded by a white fence and protected by a circle of old pine trees. Mary Cunningham was buried here in 1930, returning at last to her beloved “old places”, with views to the river and the quiet hills beyond.