

The Story *of* Mary MacKillop

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The MacKillop Family



FAMILY LIFE

The story of Mary MacKillop begins in colonial Melbourne with the meeting of her parents, Alexander MacKillop and Flora MacDonald, both Scottish migrants from Inverness.

Their arrival in Australia was not in itself unusual. Between 1788 - the date of white occupation - and the 1850s, when the gold rush boom was encouraging thousands of adventurers to seek their fortunes in Australia, 187,000 free settlers crossed the seas. Alexander and Flora, like all those others, were seeking a new life in this land.

Alexander MacKillop was 26 years old when he arrived in Port Jackson (NSW) on the 2 January 1838, a passenger on the ship, *Brilliant*, which was skippered by Master Gilkinson, and was reported as arriving from the Island of Mull (Scotland). Work was plentiful and Alexander soon found employment as a clerk with the busy import-export company, Campbell and Sons.

Later the following year he was transferred by his employers to Melbourne in the recently proclaimed colony of Port Phillip, a district with a population of approximately





Alexander MacKillop
1812 - 1868

Mary MacKillop ArchiveCentre,
North Sydney, NSW

3,500 at the time. Melbourne, the next important settlement after Williamstown, was still a mere village. Roads, such as they were, were dusty ruts in summer and muddy ditches in winter. Properties were unfenced, with animals roaming everywhere at will.

Yet the first signs of prosperity were beginning to appear. Horses and carts pulled wool and wool products to busy wharves, ready for selling and shipping back to England. Double-storey, sometimes even triple-storey, solid stone and brick buildings were being constructed. Such wealth and solidity indicated that colonial Melbourne was intended as more than a temporary outpost of the British Empire. Cultural activities, too, were further evidence of this. Soon Alexander, himself, was involved in organising lectures and in the establishment of a library.

Twenty-two year old Flora MacDonald, with her mother Catherine and brother Donald, arrived in Port Phillip on 11 April 1840 on the ship, *Glen Huntly*. Typhoid broke out not long after the ship left Scotland and when only ten days from Melbourne, their eldest brother, Alastair, caught the fever. It is claimed that 'he went overboard in a fit of delirium.'

Neither family had known each other in Scotland, but within three months of meeting (July 1840), Alexander and Flora were married by Fr Patrick Bonaventure Geoghegan OFM in the small wooden chapel near the site of what is now St Francis Church in Lonsdale Street, Melbourne.

Alexander was an educated man. He'd studied as a seminarian for seven years, first in Rome and later in Scotland, so he knew philosophy and theology. As a leading Catholic layman he was appointed a member of the Board of

Trustees and Treasurer of the Roman Catholic Church.

After three years in Australia, Alexander was well established, not only socially in Catholic circles, but also in business. He was a member of a coal mining company, an employer of assisted migrants and he owned land between the Merri and Darebin Creeks.

In April 1841, Alexander purchased a house in Fitzroy (then known as Newtown) for himself and his wife. Fitzroy, Richmond and Collingwood were original suburbs of Melbourne. The house, known as *Marino Cottage*, situated at Lot 11 in Brunswick Street, was the place where the MacKillop's first child Mary, baptised Maria Ellen, was born. A granite slab set into the footpath now marks the MacKillop site. The inscription reads:

'On this site MARY MacKILLOP
Foundress of The Sisters of St Joseph
was born on 15th January 1842'.

The house no longer stands.

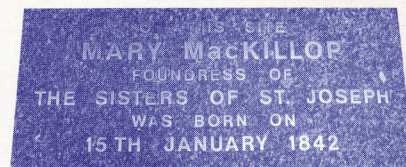
Mary was only three months old when business failure forced her father to sell the family home. Alexander was among a group of businessmen who formed a syndicate to assist a local trader. The syndicate was made responsible for the sum of ten thousand pounds. Forced by the bank to sell to pay their debts, Alexander lost everything.

The MacKillops shifted to Glenroy, the first of the moves that were to become a regular occurrence throughout Mary's childhood. Never again would Alexander be as successful in business as he had been, and he would now have to battle to provide for his growing family. Never completely destitute,



Flora MacDonald
1816 - 1886

Mary MacKillop Archive Centre,
North Sydney, NSW



Granite slab set into
the footpath outside
Lot 11 Brunswick Street,
Fitzroy, where Mary
MacKillop was born.

Bob Ingram 1995

Early Melbourne Street
Scene

Mary MacKillop Archive
Centre, North Sydney, NSW

*It was in hardships,
poverty and even want
that you had to rear
your children, but in
the bitterest trials and
greatest need your
confidence in Divine
Providence never
failed.*

17 November 1866, Penola



Peter and Flora MacKillop, mid-1860s

Mary MacKillop Archive Centre, North Sydney, NSW

the family would be always poor and dependent on the generosity of relatives.

Mary, as the eldest of the eight children: Maggie, John, Alick [died at 11 months of age], Annie, Lexie, Donald and Peter, came to be relied upon heavily. Only 11 years old when Donald was born, Mary sacked the nurse employed by her mother, after finding the nurse in a drunken state.

Three years later, the family followed Alexander MacKillop to Sydney in a fruitless search for work. He returned ahead of them. Upon their return to Melbourne, Flora, pregnant with Peter, and along with the other MacKillop children was stranded at Sandridge (Port Melbourne). Mary and John had to walk 25 kilometres to the Somerton relatives for help. In 1866 Mary would write to Flora recalling the years of struggle and Flora's unswerving faith:

'It was in hardships, poverty and even want that you had to rear your children, but in the bitterest trials and greatest need your confidence in Divine Providence never failed.'

17 November 1866, Penola

Mary had a private education for a while, but the frequent moves while her father sought work meant that her formal education was often disrupted. Alexander's training for the priesthood,

however, meant that he was able to give Mary much assistance. Her many letters and her writings in later life demonstrate not only grammatical skills and perfect spelling, but a sound understanding of her Catholic religion and an ability to articulate her learning and her thoughts.

During these years Alexander was heavily involved in religious and political debate. His outspoken opinions against the Reverend John Dunmore Lang who preached sectarianism cost him his job with Campbells. Likewise, his criticism of Minister O'Shannasy's land policy cost him his position as a clerk on the Ballarat goldfields.

Her father's actions and the consequences that followed for the family, taught Mary at an early age about the price for holding firmly to beliefs. This was of course to be her own experience and she, too, would stand firm.

'My life as a child was one of sorrow, my home when I had it, a most unhappy one.'

Mary to Monsignor Kirby, Rome, 22 May 1873.

*My life as a
child was one
of sorrow, my home
when I had it, a
most unhappy one.*

Mary to Monsignor Kirby,
Rome, 22 May 1873.

Artist Mary Brady OP



Mary MacKillop