

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FACT FILE

ELIZA FORLONGE

(1784 – 1859)

Pastoral Pioneer and Importer of Saxon Sheep

- 1784 Born 21 October in Glasgow, Scotland; daughter of Jean and Alexander Jack, a teacher
- 1804 26 November married John Forlonge, a Glasgow wine merchant
- 1827-1829 Walked through Saxony, Germany, buying flocks of the finest Merino sheep
- 1829 Son William sailed to Van Dieman's Land with 100 sheep
- 1830 28 August, Eliza, John and son Andrew sailed from Scotland with more sheep
- 1831 14 January, they arrived in Launceston, Tasmania
- 1834 Family returned to England; during this trip John died
- 1839-1851 The great plains of Victoria were opening up and William and Andrew left Tasmania, buying various properties before settling at *Seven Creeks* near Euroa in 1851
- 1840 Eliza returned to England and arranged passage for 200-300 emigrants to alleviate labour shortages
- 1844 Eliza moved to Victoria, joining William at Merri Creek near Bendigo
- 1851 *Seven Creeks* property was purchased and Eliza helped William run it
- 1859 5 August, Eliza died at *Seven Creeks* and was buried at Euroa

Eliza Forlonge had lost four of her six children to tuberculosis and in 1826, when 14 year old William showed early signs of the disease, the family decided to emigrate to Australia for its dry, sunny climate. *At that time, wool growing appeared to be the only thing Australia was good for, so Eliza decided that she would go into the business of growing wool!*

Having learnt of the availability of land grants in New South Wales, and recognising that Saxon merino wool was consistently selling at higher prices than wool from NSW, Eliza and John, decided to collect sheep from Saxony to take with them to NSW. Their enterprise was financed by John's sister, Janet Templeton, and her husband Andrew, a successful Glasgow banker, and supported by Sir Thomas Brisbane, recently returned Governor of NSW.

With introductions to leading woolgrowers and woolbrokers, Eliza and her two sons spent the next three summers in Leipzig, the centre of the European wool industry, learning the language, and every aspect of *the business of growing wool*. John joined his family in the summer of 1828 when he lived with shepherds in order to learn the necessary husbandry. William was employed for three years in a leading sorting house to learn wool classing. Andrew attended school, and accompanied his mother while Eliza visited studs, inspected flocks, and learned to select the finest sheep, bargaining hard for her prizes. She paid for the sheep with gold sovereigns, which she carried in a bag under her skirts. She paid up to £30 for each sheep and, to avoid substitution, she padlocked a special brass collar around their necks once she had

purchased them. To succeed, Eliza had to overcome the hostility of the Saxons, who were loath to part with either their knowledge or their sheep.

Saxony at that time was a rough, mountainous land of isolated villages and medieval walled towns, with roads so bad that many of the farms were accessible only on foot and villagers highly suspicious of foreigners, which made it impossible to hire shepherds. To collect her sheep from around the country, Eliza and the boys, disguised as peasants (which aroused more suspicions than they allayed!) travelled some 500 miles on foot until they reached Hamburg, from where the flock was shipped to Hull in England. They then walked the sheep across to Liverpool to ship the flock to Greenock in Scotland.

During the three journeys she made around Germany and one into France buying up the finest sheep she could find, Eliza walked some 1500 miles on foot, sometimes with her son, often on her own, staying in squalid inns and dealing with suspicious and obstructive officials. It was an incredible feat performed by a remarkable woman.

The first flock of 100 Merinos was purchased by the Australian Agricultural Company. More sheep now had to be collected for William to take to NSW, so Eliza returned to Saxony where she was able to buy even better quality sheep now that the legend of the eccentric Scotswoman who roamed the country paying gold for stud sheep had spread.

William left on the *Clansman* in 1829 with his flock. However, when the ship called in at Hobart Town, Governor Arthur, recognising the value of his sheep, offered William a maximum grant of land to remain in Van Diemens Land. The sheep were immediately in high demand and William was soon writing home glowing letters of the prospects in the Colony, urging his parents and Andrew to join him.

Meanwhile, Andrew Templeton had died in Glasgow and his widow, Janet, decided to settle in NSW for her sons' future. In 1831, she chartered a ship, the *Czar*, to take her family and the Forlonges with their servants, household goods and a third flock of Saxon sheep, collected by Eliza, to Australia. While Janet went on to NSW and was given a grant of land near Goulburn, the Forlonges joined William in Van Dieman's Land where John was given a maximum land grant next to his son's, which was known as *Kenilworth*. Eliza managed *Kenilworth*, while John was involved in various business ventures. Until his death in 1834. However, with no access to permanent water, farming was often difficult and, in 1839, when the fertile plains of Port Phillip were opening up, William and Andrew decided to leave, while Eliza continued to manage their affairs in Tasmania.

In 1840 Eliza made a trip to the United Kingdom to arrange passage for 200-300 bounty emigrants to help alleviate the shortage of labour caused by the cessation of transportation to the Colony.

In 1844 she severed her ties with Tasmania and joined William and his family in Victoria at *Woodstock*, Merri Creek near Bendigo. They survived the Great Wool Depression of the 1840s and, in 1851, she moved to *Seven Creeks*, which she managed for William who was frequently away on business or in England where his family was being educated. Here, Eliza continued to build up the superfine wool industry so that, when she died in 1859, she was one of the best known women in the colony.

In the era when history recorded the deeds of men rather than women, Eliza Forlonge was one of the unsung heroes of the Australian Wool Industry. Much has been written about Elizabeth Macarthur, but her contribution to the industry is easily rivalled by that of Eliza Forlonge. Without Eliza's vision, courage and grit, it is doubtful that Australia would have become the world's leading producer of high-quality apparel wool.

In 1934 the Country Women's Association (CWA) of Victoria erected a granite monument, the exact size and shape of a bale of wool, over her grave at Euroa. In 1940 the CWA of Tasmania erected a sundial in memory of Eliza at *Kenilworth*. There was also a large mural at the School of Rural Studies (now TAFE) in Sydney, depicting her paying gold sovereigns for the sheep. (see image on our website) In recognition of Eliza's vision in pioneering superfine wool merinos in Australia, *The Wool Foundation Eliza Forlonge Medal* was established in 1991. The medal is awarded in recognition of outstanding individual contribution to the Australian Wool Industry.

Sources

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The Wool Foundation Eliza Forlonge Medal Citation

*United Associations of Women Newsletter April-May 1973 (Archives)

*Held in JSNWL

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