

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FACT FILE

JESSIE CATHERINE COUVREUR (TASMA) (1848 – 1897)

Author, Lecturer, Journalist, First Overseas Correspondent

1848	Born 28 October in Highgate, London
1852	Family migrated to Hobart Town, Tasmania
1867	Married Charles Fraser
1873-75	Jessie and family lived in London, Brussels and Paris
1877	First article <i>A Hint to the Paris Commissioners</i> published in the <i>Australasian</i> in Melbourne
1878	Marriage broke down as Charles was declared insolvent. <i>Barren Love</i> , first short story, published
1879	Sailed for Europe to meet up with her mother and family
1880	Gave her first public lecture in Paris, an immediate success
1881-2	Lectured in France, Belgium, Venice to enthusiastic audiences
1883	Returned to Melbourne to comply with divorce requirements; divorce granted; returned to London and Europe
1885	Married Auguste Couvreur and lived in Brussels.
1888	Her first novel, <i>Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill</i> , published
1889	Translated into French <i>The Origins of the Republican Form of Government in the United States of America</i> for publication in 1890
1890	<i>A Sydney Sovereign and Other Tales</i> published; her reputation was at its height
1894	Auguste died from stomach cancer. Jessie persuaded the London <i>Times</i> to accept her as their correspondent in Brussels
1897	Died 23 October in Brussels

Jessie Catherine Couvreur was the second child and first daughter of eight children of Charlotte Sophia (Ogleby) and James Alfred Huybers, a Belgian wine merchant. Jessie was educated by her mother, an independent, intellectual woman with a great love of European, especially French literature, art and music. When Charlotte inherited a substantial legacy, the family migrated to Hobart Town, Tasmania where James established a successful warehousing and merchant's business. The opening sequence of *Not Counting the Cost* (1895) is evidently based on Jessie's childhood in and near Hobart.

On 8 June 1867, aged eighteen, Jessie married dashing Charles Fraser, member of a prominent Tasmanian family, whom she met while he was holidaying from his position as manager at a flour mill in Kyneton, Victoria. They had little in common; Charles was obsessed with horse racing and Jessie missed her cultured and stimulating family and spent long periods away from Charles. Between 1873 and 1875 she lived with some of her family in London, Brussels and Paris, becoming fluent in French and completely falling under the spell of European life and culture. On her return to Australia, using the pseudonym 'Tasma', Jessie began her successful writing career. She and Charles finally separated and Jessie returned to Europe in 1879 where she supported herself writing short stories, continued her articles for the *Australasian* as well as European papers and journals, and embarked on a highly

successful new career as a celebrity lecturer. Her talks on Australia, in fluent French, in Paris, Belgium and Holland were so popular that King Leopold of Belgium invited her for a private audience, and she was named an Officier d'Academie by the President of France. In 1883 she returned to Melbourne and was granted a divorce from Charles.

In 1885 Jessie married Auguste Couvreur, a journalist and distinguished Belgian politician, journalist and economist, and settled in Brussels where her home became a centre of intellectual, political and social life. Here she began to write her novels.

Her first and most outstanding novel, *Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill*, was published in 1888 to rave reviews in which Jessie was described by a London newspaper as 'the Australian Jane Austen' and compared with writers as diverse as Charles Dickens and Olive Schreiner! It is a gently ironic story of the aristocratic pretensions of a *nouveau riche* Melbourne family whose wealth has come from the goldfields. Jessie's later novels, mainly concerned with ill-matched marriages, were also very well received. As was the fashion of the day, her books were serialized in newspapers. She was probably the best known Australian woman novelist of her time as she became famous in England, America, Europe and Australia.

During a visit to Constantinople in 1889 Jessie came to an arrangement with the American Minister to Turkey to translate his *The Origins of the Republican Form of Government in the United States of America* into French. It was produced in Brussels in 1890.

In 1894, when Auguste died from stomach cancer, he was a member of that elite group, the London *Times* foreign correspondents. Jessie needed the income, and even though it was an unheard of role for a woman, she successfully replaced him as the Brussels correspondent. She also continued to write articles for the Melbourne newspapers *Argus* and *Australasian*, whose policies were to *keep readers informed of the latest developments in Europe*.

The demands of work and family problems caused Jessie to become seriously ill, and she died from coronary thrombosis in Brussels on 23 October 1897 just before her forty ninth birthday.

Tasma's achievements cannot be overestimated. As a woman and a writer, she made her mark. Her journalism, in a male dominated world, was impressive, especially considering the opposition to women's rights in England. While most of her novels have dated, perhaps unfairly seen as romantic fiction despite their underlying messages, Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill stands firm, contributing an invaluable commentary on the Australian situation at the time.

Published Works

*Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill (1888)

*In Her Earliest Youth (1890)

*A Sydney Sovereign and Other Tales (1890) – reprints of articles published in the *Australasian* in the 1880's.

The Penance of Portia James (1891)

A Knight of the White Feather (1892)

Not Counting the Cost (1895)

A Fiery Ordeal (1897)

Sources

- *Ackland, M (ed) *Tasma: A Sydney Sovereign* Angus & Robertson 1993
- Bradstock, M *The Pipers of Piper's Hill* Australian Scholarly Editions Centre, School of Language, Literature & Communication, University College, Canberra 2002
- *Clarke, P *Tasma: The Life of Jessie Couvreur* Allen & Unwin 1994
- *Clarke, P (ed) *Tasma's Diaries: The Diaries of Jessie Couvreur* Mulini Press, Canberra 1995
- Pike, D (ed) *Australian Dictionary of Biography Vol 3 1851-1890* Melbourne University Press 1969
- *Sage, L *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English* Cambridge University Press 1999
- *Tasma (Jessie Couvreur) *Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill* Pandora Press 1987
- Wilde, W, Hooton, J & Andrews, B *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* Oxford University Press 1991

*Held in JSNWL

© Jessie Street National Women's Library (July 2004)