

MISS MARGARET HARRIS (1844-1926)

By her great-great nephew John Harris

23 July 2017

Margaret Harris was the younger daughter of Surgeon Harris's nephew John and his wife Nancy Ann (nee McKee). In 1838 John inherited a half-share of the Surgeon's 232-acre estate at Ultimo/Pymont, and left County Derry in the North of Ireland in 1843 with his wife and family of five small children to take up his Sydney inheritance.

John's half-share included the Surgeon's house - Ultimo House - which had been built in 1803-4, but as it was let to tenants for some years after the family arrived, they lived during those years at Ultimo Cottage, nearby in Crown Street. Only in 1855 did they move into Ultimo House.

Margaret had an older sister Mary Ann who died in 1857 at the age of 17 (she is remembered today in Mary Ann Street), so when the family eventually effected a subdivision of their lands in 1859 (joining with John's cousin who had inherited the other half-share), Margaret and her four brothers shared up their land in five approximately equal shares of about 20 acres each.

Ultimo and the Harris family's part of Pymont underwent rapid development from the 1860s on (as distinct from the Macarthurs' part of Pymont which was first developed thirty years earlier), so through their landholdings Margaret and her four brothers became very rich citizens of Sydney and built their own residences on their respective lands.

Margaret built Littlebridge (shown below) as her home in William Henry Street and she lived there all her life.



Littlebridge was named after the main street of the town of Moneymore in County Derry where they came from. I remember my father taking me and my brother to see Littlebridge in Ultimo in the mid 1950s, many years after Margaret's death, and me imagining "Auntie Maggie" still in residence and looking out from an upstairs window. The house was later demolished to build the Ultimo Community Centre on the site and the main hall of the Centre is called the Littlebridge Hall.

Margaret never married and devoted her life to many Sydney charities and also to being a loving aunt to her brothers' children, encouraging and following them in their school and sporting activities (which included two Rugby Waratahs). For example, she sent a postcard photo of Bulwara, her brother John's house in Jones Street, to my grandfather Reg, John's son, and handwritten on the back she sent her Christmas greetings and congratulations (probably sporting rather than scholastic!).



*"I suppose you will know that photo - it is taken by James and Hilda Thompson.*

*Wishing you the compliments of the Season and congratulations.*

*Auntie Maggie"*

*"This is BULWARA which faced Jones Street and ran down to Wattle Street."*

The message on the card is rather simple but that's what Margaret was, a no-nonsense, down-to-earth woman of Scots-Irish background and a keen supporter of Presbyterianism in Sydney. She and my great-grandfather funded the construction of the Presbyterian Manse in Quarry Street (now the Harris Centre) and the marble plaque in the front wall of the Manse commemorates her contribution.



The Sunday Times of 28 June 1908 (page 10), in a series called Prominent Women of Today, said that Margaret Harris "is noted for her philanthropy, for no-one in Sydney has taken more interest in charitable work, and there are few institutions that have not benefitted by her kindness. ...Miss Harris is extremely popular in Sydney, where her affable and gracious manner endears her to a large circle of friends."

PROMINENT WOMEN OF TO-DAY



MISS MARGARET HARRIS

Among her many charities were Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (where she gave £1,000 in 1900 for a new ward), the Home for Incurables (now called Royal Rehabilitation Centre at Ryde), Burnside Homes (where she gave a new wing), the Fresh Air League (which provided country holidays for poor city children and coastal holidays for country children), the National Council of Women, and the Mission to Seamen (where she was on the committee with Dame Eadith Walker and Dame Nellie Melba).

She was also involved in many important social events of the period, including the Royal Concert for the Duke and Duchess of York at the Town Hall in May 1901 (her invitation is in the Federation Ephemera at the Mitchell Library), and the Annual Ball at the Town Hall for the Fresh Air League (SMH 27 June 1901 p.6). She was a Vice-President of the Elsie Hall Benefit Concert in 1900 in aid of the Indian Famine Relief Fund (I have a copy of the Programme), and she organised a Young People's Ball in 1908 at Paddington Town Hall in aid of the Consumptives' Home, Thirlmere (Sunday Times 28 June 1908).

Accompanying the Sunday Times article was this photo of Margaret looking very grand in dark velvet and long white gloves, hair up (her favourite style), and wearing jewels and a diamond tiara. An elderly relative Florence Morehead told me in the 1970s that Margaret loved to have young people (including Flo) come to Littlebridge on Saturday afternoons for tennis parties and to stay for dinner. After dinner she would sometimes say to the girls "let's go up and see the tiara", and she would lead them upstairs, close the bedroom curtains and get the tiara out of a drawer. Flo told me Margaret had

bought the tiara to wear to the Ball the night her brother John as Mayor opened the Sydney Town Hall in 1889. It was sold by her executors after her death.



In 1914, one year before he died, the prominent artist Emanuel Phillips Fox painted a portrait of Margaret, who was by then 70, which she donated to the Art Gallery of NSW in 1916. The rather Calvinist lace collar and fichu and dark dress were a favourite attire of hers. This painting was loaned to the National Gallery of Victoria for their Phillips Fox exhibition in 1995 and was on display at the Art Gallery of NSW between 2005 and 2010. I am hoping it can be displayed again periodically. However it can be viewed online.

The Phillips Fox expert Ruth Zubans in 1995 told me that official portraiture of Australian women as early as 1914 is rare. In her Catalogue for the 1995 exhibition she described this painting as follows:

“This portrait of Margaret Harris presents an imposing image, perhaps the most forceful Fox ever painted of a woman. The portrayal has none of the Edwardian

elegance often present in Fox’s depiction of women; rather it focuses on the character of a strong individual. Colours are subdued and in its structure the work demonstrates how much Fox had gained from his study of Velasquez so many years before.”

In 1912 Margaret paid for the construction of a tennis court, pavilion, and fencing in Wentworth Park for the newly formed Bulwara Lawn Tennis Club for the people of Ultimo/Pymont and she became its patron (SMH Monday 15 April 1912). Sir Allen Taylor (Lord Mayor), a close friend of the

Harris family, opened the court and she gave an engraved sterling silver cigar box for presentation to him. By chance, it came up for sale on eBay in 2016 and I now have it.





In addition to her support for charities, church, social events and young people, she found time to sew tapestry and carve wood. A large tapestry hunting scene was some years ago in the collection of the Ryde District Historical Society and I have a fine floral wood-carving bearing her initials.



Two personal anecdotes about her illustrate her matter-of-fact style:

- (1) The late Charlie Hackett, Labor MLC and Ultimo resident all his life, told me in 1971 (when he was 82) that she was much liked by her neighbours. "She came out on her balcony every day. She minded her own business. Ned Ryan had a pub opposite and traded out of hours but he always used to say there was no need to worry about Miss Harris objecting. She wouldn't interfere."
- (2) The late Captain Fred Aarons, Gallipoli veteran and nephew of Lady Harris (Margaret's sister-in-law), told me in 1980 (when he was 93) that "she was noted for her charity work. She had the best coach and pair in Sydney. During the Boer War I was walking up Pitt Street and the carriage was outside some building near the AMP Society and I recognised the coachman sitting up with his top hat on. Then I met Miss Harris coming towards me. She said 'where are you going Frederick? (she always called me Frederick). I said 'I'm going

home.' She said 'You were going to pass me without paying me the compliment of saying good-day to me'. She told me to get in and she drove me to the cable car in King Street."

I often compare Margaret with Dame Eadith Walker, who was the other prominent unmarried lady in Sydney whose philanthropy derived from her personal inheritance. I ask myself why Margaret was not made a dame or an OBE in recognition of her contribution to her fellow citizens.

Margaret died in 1926 and was interred in the family vault at Rookwood Presbyterian Cemetery with her mother and father and sister Mary Ann. On the day of the funeral, which was a Saturday, my father John then 18 years old (who became a Waratah like his father) was in a car in the procession to Rookwood and passed the football ground (I think Concord Oval) where his team was playing as they passed. Of course he had had to miss the match for that day and he told me he could hardly restrain himself from jumping out and joining them. I think Auntie Maggie would have understood if he had.

Margaret left £76,000. Because she felt that the girls in the family had been disproportionately overlooked in her brothers' wills in favour of their sons, she left most of her money to nieces. She would have known the value of a woman having her own money, thanks to her fairer father. I suppose she was an early feminist. I am very proud of her.