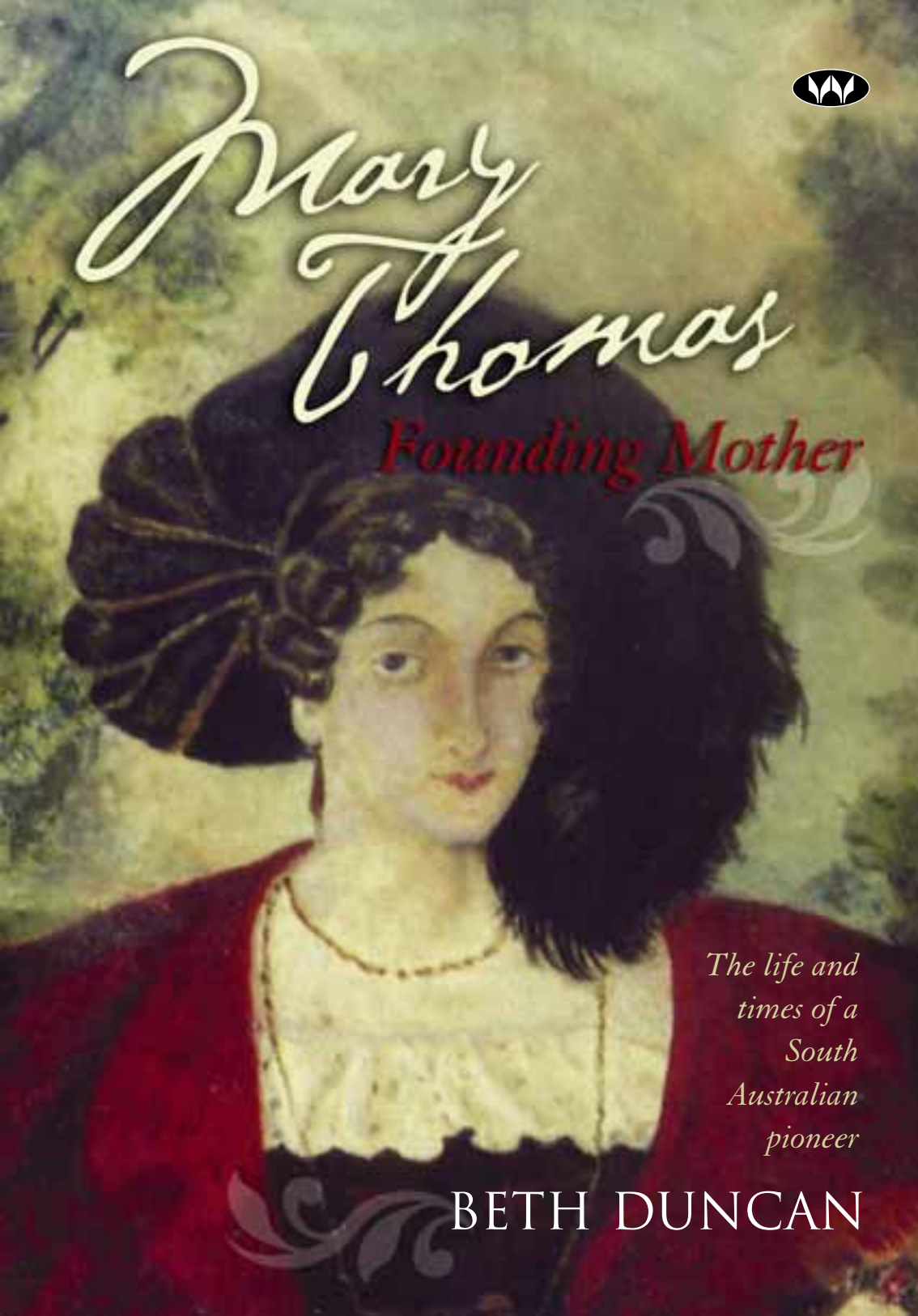




# Mary Thomas

*Founding Mother*



*The life and  
times of a  
South  
Australian  
pioneer*

BETH DUNCAN

Wakefield Press

## *Mary Thomas: Founding Mother*

Elizabeth (Beth) Duncan was born at Glenelg, South Australia, a descendant of emigrants who reached the colony in 1839. After completing her schooling in South Australia she worked on a Northern Territory cattle station as a governess for two years, before undertaking nursing training at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. Following the completion of a Diploma in Social Studies at the University of Adelaide she worked as a social worker in Adelaide, Darwin and Brisbane, later gaining her Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Queensland.

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BETH DUNCAN



Wakefield  
Press

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*To my husband, George Duncan,  
who helped me stay the course.*



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# Equivalent monetary values

An approximate rate for the conversion of 19th-century prices, expressed in pounds sterling, has been based on the House of Commons Library Research Paper 99/20, *Inflation: The Value of the Pound 1750–1998*.

The further conversion to Australian dollars has been derived from the list of historical exchange rates published by the Reserve Bank of Australia.

From the House of Commons Research Paper the variation between 1838 and 1878 is within 10 per cent, which justifies the adoption of a single conversion rate throughout this period.

One pound sterling during Mary's years in South Australia approximates to AU\$200 in 2007. Changes in the prices of goods and services have not been uniform, however. Some items, very expensive in Mary's time, have now become cheap everyday commodities, particularly those which were handmade and are now mass-produced, for example most footwear and clothing.

A pound was divided into 20 shillings, and a shilling was divided into 12 pennies. One guinea was equal to 21 shillings or £1 and 1 shilling. A sovereign was a gold coin valued at £1.

# Preface

The pivotal point, and coincidentally virtually the mid point, of Mary Thomas's long life of 87 years (1787–1875) was the decision taken with her husband, Robert, to be among the first emigrants to make the long, arduous journey, in 1836, to the new colony of South Australia.

Apart from this decision Mary's life before emigration was unremarkable. Neither in Southampton as the daughter of a moderately prosperous merchant and innkeeper, nor as the wife of a successful London Fleet Street law stationer and publisher and the mother of six children, was she markedly different from others of her gender and position. Even the loss of her sixth and youngest child as an infant was not unusual for the times.

She differed in only two significant ways from the majority of her contemporaries who came from a similar social background: her age when she married – at 30 she was older than the average – and her publication of a book of poems (*Serious Poems*, 1831). Mary's poems demonstrate not so much her skill as a poet, but her levels of education and intelligence. Both were considerable.

Her poems also indicate that Mary had liberal views regarding individual rights and freedoms. The founding of South Australia, based upon E.G. Wakefield's theories of emigration, was surrounded by a reformist aura and involved both Dissenters and republicans. The Thomas family's emigration, however, was

motivated not only by their desire for an improved society but, as much, by the opportunity emigration offered for economic advancement, especially for their two sons.

Mary in particular emigrated in the belief that she would spend some years in the colony and ‘obtain a competence’ sufficient to make retirement in England possible for herself, her husband and their three daughters; perhaps in an idyllic village on the outskirts of her native Southampton. This was not a unique view of emigration to the new colony and many of the first settlers had similar ambitions. For Mary, this dream remained unfulfilled. She became, almost against her will, something else – an esteemed South Australian pioneer. Following the economic crises that beset the colony in 1842 with tragic consequences, not only for Mary and her family but for many others, she became her family’s strength and mainstay, the support that enabled them to prevail.

In June 1836, just prior to his emigration, Robert Thomas, in partnership with George Stevenson as R. Thomas and Co., published in London the inaugural issue of what was to become the colony’s first newspaper, the *South Australian Gazette and Colonial Register*. It marked the beginning of a free press in South Australia, a crucial element in the liberal reformist society promoted through Wakefield’s theories of emigration. With almost continuous shortages of skilled staff, Mary became involved in the paper’s production during its first years and thus a family engagement with the *Register* newspaper was begun. It was taken up later by Mary’s second son, William, then by his sons and continued for almost 100 years. Subsequently, the Thomas’s involvement with newspapers was maintained in two further generations through an association with Melbourne’s *Herald and Weekly Times* and the Adelaide *Advertiser*.

Mary’s eldest son, Robert George, emigrated in 1836 as the 16-year-old apprentice of the deputy surveyor-general, George Kingston; and, as Colonel Light’s assistant, he drafted Light’s City of Adelaide plan. Ten years later he left the colony for England to qualify as an architect. He eventually returned to Adelaide and

after a period in private practice was appointed architect-in-chief for the colony. A number of his buildings still survive and are now listed on South Australia's heritage register.

Both of Mary's sons were significant figures in the colony: through the *Register* in the ideas, values and attitudes the paper espoused; and through architecture in the forging of Adelaide's enduring physical form.

Mary's family, both as individuals and as a group, feature strongly in her narrative – the domestic sphere was the focus of her life. Although she utilised the resources of Adelaide town acre 56 in Hindley Street to make a living and was for a time her family's sole breadwinner, she did not have a public life or a public profile. Most women of her era and social class did not engage in paid employment and, as a rule, those few who did, except for teachers, did not do so away from home. Neither did they join societies nor organisations, as in most instances, they would not have been entitled to membership, even had they sought it. Organisations for women, the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Women's Suffrage League, did not emerge until the 1880s.

Virginia Woolf's biographer, Hermione Lee, quotes Virginia: 'My memoirs ... are always private' and Lee comments:

*so were most women's ... she [Virginia] is acutely aware that the sort of life-writing that might be appropriate for a public figure cannot 'fit' her ... Virginia Woolf's curriculum vitae is in public terms full of gaps. She did not go to school. She did not work in an office. She did not belong to any institution. With rare exceptions she did not give public lectures or join committees or give interviews.*

This lack of a public profile has militated against the writing of biographies of 'private' women. As far as I have been able to discover, the present biography of Mary is one of only two full biographies of a 'private' South Australian woman of this pioneering era. The other, of Mrs Agnes Hay by Anthony Laube, narrates the interaction with the public sphere of a society hostess. And there are only two biographies of others of the same period

who might be considered 'public' women: that of Catherine Helen Spence, novelist, journalist and social reformer, by Susan Magarey; and of Matilda Evans, novelist and teacher, by Barbara Wall.

In coinciding with the first four decades of the colony, Mary's story is inextricably linked to the development of South Australia and Adelaide in particular. Mary spent all of her years in the colony in Adelaide, which during this span evolved from a clearing in the bush to a city whose liberal press supported legislative change in promoting the rights of women, and whose public buildings enhanced its planned streets and squares. This development is so closely intertwined with Mary's narrative that the village, then town, then city almost becomes a character in its own right.

Many other pioneer women who shared these early years were less articulate and less heard than Mary, whose diary of the voyage out and whose letters describing the first years of settlement were published posthumously and became very well known. With these women Mary braved the arduous living conditions and privations of the first settlement; worked alongside her husband at the printing press as they did alongside the plough; nursed family members through severe illnesses; and endured. With them she transcended economic disaster and somehow managed to hold her family together. And throughout it all, like many pioneer women, Mary experienced the acute pain of extreme homesickness.

This is not only Mary's story; she shares much of it with all women who reached South Australia during the first years of settlement.

# Part I



## Chapter I

# Early years, marriage and London

*Adieu, fair Southampton! I quit thee forever,  
Take leave of thy prospects, this beautiful shore;  
Ah, yes! My heart tells me that this time I sever  
From my dearly loved birthplace to see it no more.*<sup>1</sup>

Mary Thomas wrote her farewell to her childhood home when she was there in July 1831 to attend her father's funeral. This visit to Southampton was to be her last before she and her husband, with their children, embarked for South Australia. Her verse is prescient – seemingly emigration had always been in the back of her mind. And even at the age of 46, the prospect of emigration did not seem unrealistic or daunting. In about 1833, 14-year-old Frances, Mary's eldest daughter, painted a portrait of her mother, which Mary considered a 'fair likeness'.<sup>2</sup> Frances depicted Mary as youthful-looking and in vibrant good health.

Mary was born in Southampton in 1787, only a few months after the First Fleet left Portsmouth bound for Botany Bay. She was a contemporary of the novelist, Jane Austen (1775–1817); both were born and raised in Hampshire, and when the Austens made their home in Southampton between 1805 and 1808 it was in the same neighbourhood as Mary's, in the vicinity of the Dolphin Hotel.<sup>3</sup> Jane Austen attended balls at the Dolphin and patronised Southampton's theatres<sup>4</sup> – as Mary almost certainly did – and Mary



shared many aspects of the social and domestic life that Austen described in her novels.

Mary's parents, George Harris and Mary Batchelor, were in their mid thirties when they married in November 1786.<sup>5</sup> At about the same time George became the proprietor of the Royal George<sup>6</sup>, a High Street inn located near the wharves.<sup>7</sup> Mary was born 10 months later, on the 30th August, and was baptised in Southampton's Anglican Holy Rood Church. Her three siblings, Sarah, who lived for only a day or so, Ann, born in 1789, and George, in 1790, were also baptised there.<sup>8</sup> Their mother died<sup>9</sup> a few weeks before Mary's 12th birthday, and in September 1801 her father married Elizabeth Davies, a widow with no children.<sup>10</sup> By year's end George had given up the inn and moved his young family away from the wharves to other High Street premises alongside Holy Rood Church and not far from the Dolphin Hotel, the town's premier inn.<sup>11</sup> From there he sold glassware and the new porcelain tableware,<sup>12</sup> probably to wealthy newcomers who were building fine Georgian houses during an upsurge in Southampton's popularity as a seaside resort town.

During summer the town was crowded and gay. Its role as a strategic port in the wars with France – with the frequent movement of troops throughout the town – imbued a sense of feverish urgency. The High Street overflowed with stagecoaches and carriages carrying ladies dressed in the height of fashion and gentlemen resplendent in regimental uniforms. Visitors and residents graced race meetings, took the air of an evening along the beach promenades, and enhanced the elegance of balls and soirees held at the Assembly Rooms and in the long room of the Dolphin. Theatres, circulating libraries and coffee houses competed for custom, while the wharves offered daily excursion services to the Isle of Wight and other destinations along the coast.<sup>13</sup> The town was in an almost constant state of restless activity, providing an exciting and colourful environment for Mary and her siblings to grow up in.

In selecting a school for his daughters, George Harris had no shortage of choice among the many operating in Southampton.

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries the works of Southampton-born and educated female novelists were popular locally. This may have stimulated a particular interest in writing in Southampton girls' schools. Writing, especially poetry, became Mary's recreation and one of her greatest pleasures.<sup>14</sup>

When Mary was about 21 her father retired from his business but retained an interest in the High Street premises<sup>15</sup> through a lease and a mortgage.<sup>16</sup> He moved his family to a new home, Ashfield Lodge, near the small town of Romsey, in the Test Valley, about 13 kilometres from Southampton.<sup>17</sup> The surrounding countryside was arcadian. Mary and her family took walks and drives in the fine parks of the landed gentry to enjoy the serene vistas of the valley – meadows dotted with grazing cattle and sheep and in summer reapers bringing in the corn. The New Forest with its great trees, its deer and ponies, was only a short trip by carriage from Mary's home.<sup>18</sup>

Mary shared her father's home with her stepmother and her sister Ann. There is nothing to suggest that her relationship with her stepmother was other than amicable, but Mary and Ann did not get on – the sisters' relationship probably during these years, and certainly later, was acrimonious. Ann married Benjamin Self, a publican from Hursley, a hamlet near the Harris home, c. 1816, shortly before Mary's own marriage.<sup>19</sup>

On 8 January 1818, six months after her 30th birthday, Mary married Robert Thomas in Southampton's Holy Rood Church. Robert, six years Mary's senior, was a self-employed, modestly prosperous London law stationer and publisher. He was one of three sons and six daughters and grew up on his family's farm, Rhantregwynwyn, near the border of the then Welsh county of Montgomeryshire and England's Shropshire. Robert's forebears had owned land in the district for many generations and were probably successful yeoman farmers.<sup>20</sup>

As an aspiring younger son, by the age of 21 Robert was living in London,<sup>21</sup> where he would later establish his career and business at 203 Fleet Street, serving customers drawn from law firms in the

vicinity of the nearby courts.<sup>22</sup> Mary and Robert set up home above the business, only a short walk from Temple Bar and the Strand, in a building with a Georgian-style shopfront and an apartment of three upper floors plus an attic.<sup>23</sup>

In November 1818, 11 months after their marriage, their first child, Frances Amelia, was born. Frances was followed by Robert George in 1820, and then William Kyffin 18 months later. Mary had two more girls, Mary Jnr, who was born on her mother's birthday in 1823, and Helen in 1825. Alfred completed her family in 1827. All of Mary and Robert's children were baptised in the Anglican parish of St Dunstan's in the West.<sup>24</sup> This crumbling medieval church, located in Fleet Street, was demolished in 1830,<sup>25</sup> and Mary commemorated the consecration of the new St Dunstan's in 1833 with a hymn<sup>26</sup>—an indication that members of the Thomas family were regular worshippers there.

From the upper windows of her apartment Mary looked out on sights utterly unlike the tranquil beauty of the Test Valley—London's sheer size, noise and pollution had demanded many adjustments of her. Its population had doubled during the 18th century and had reached one million by 1800, making it the largest city in the world. The capital continued to swell during the new century, doubling its rate of growth again to reach two million by 1850.<sup>27</sup> Inevitably, services were overwhelmed by this ever-increasing demand as people, like the Thomases, left rural life and flocked to the city hoping to enhance their prospects.<sup>28</sup> By 1841 less than two thirds of its population had been born in London.<sup>29</sup> The rapidly expanding population caused serious problems—drinking water, described as 'offensive and destructive to health', was drawn from the Thames, which was virtually an open sewer.<sup>30</sup> Foetid, congested courts at the end of squalid, airless alleys to the back of Fleet Street, particularly around Fetter Lane, were only a short walk from Mary's home. Alfred, Mary's last born, succumbed to these unhealthy conditions at the age of 16 months; in some districts during these years one child in three died in their first year of life.<sup>31</sup> Mary attempted to assuage her grief in verse:

*Memory still unwilling  
 To relinquish holds thee fast, and oft  
 In fancy paints thy smiling image  
 With its little hands held forth for aid.*<sup>32</sup>

Despite London's serious detractors it could, nevertheless, engage and enthrall. By the late 1820s, inspired by the vision of King George IV, it was becoming a magnificent capital. All around her Mary watched the development of beautiful thoroughfares, like Regent Street, and the creation of splendid buildings to house great institutions, such as the British Museum and the National Gallery.<sup>33</sup> Across from her home and just beyond Fleet Street, in the relative peace of Middle Temple Gardens on the bank of the Thames, Mary could survey the river's sweep and the panorama of its traffic from the Houses of Parliament to the Tower. Directly beneath her windows was the hubbub of Fleet Street, and immediately opposite, in Dick's Coffee House, the arguing and debating of London's literati.<sup>34</sup>

Mary and Robert paid to have water connected to their home,<sup>35</sup> probably to the kitchen. It was a luxury, which suggests a modest prosperity, even though Mary managed with only one live-in servant.<sup>36</sup> In many homes meals were frequently brought in from nearby coffee houses or cookshops, particularly when visitors were expected, making home management easier.<sup>37</sup> The first floor of dwellings above business premises was generally used as a living room, combining dining room and parlour with bedrooms on the upper floors. In comfortable but relatively modest homes of the period, such as Mary's, it was usual to dine at a table which was afterward, especially when entertaining, put against a wall to free space for dancing or musical evenings.<sup>38</sup> Mary commemorated in verse a friend's musical skill:

*A harp his energies drew forth,  
 Upraised his soul and prov'd his talent's worth,  
 Gaine'd him applause, esteme and well earn'd fame.*<sup>39</sup>

In 1831 she published her writings as *Serious Poems*. They celebrated the simple pleasure and contentment to be found in the beauty of nature, and in singing and music-making in the company of friends. Her writing also expressed the right of all, regardless of race, to freedom from oppression. Other poems reflected Mary's deeply held Christian faith.

Mary visited Southampton in April 1831 and accompanied her father to his lawyer, Mr Clements, to make his will.<sup>40</sup> After Mary's marriage, and sometime before June 1821, George Harris Snr had moved to Hill<sup>41</sup>, where his second wife, Elizabeth, died in 1822.<sup>42</sup> Hill was a picturesque village on the outskirts of Southampton with thatched cottages and well-tended gardens. The village had expanded during Southampton's building boom to include larger dwellings<sup>43</sup> and George Snr had acquired two sizeable villas, with a garden and a small amount of land attached to each. Three months after making his will, Mary's father died at the age of 83.<sup>44</sup> His home in one of the villas, with its contents and his personal effects, he bequeathed to Benjamin Self, Ann's husband, and Robert Thomas inherited the other.<sup>45</sup>

Mary's father had also procured the lease of the Anchor Inn at Redbridge, near Millbrook on the outskirts of Southampton, and had then sublet it. Included as part of the inn were stables, a granary, outhouses, vaults, cellars, yards, watercourses and gardens. The right to operate it and its profits went to Ann, but from them she was required to pay her brother, George, an annuity of £25 per year. Mary's father had also retained the mortgage of £1000 on the business premises in High Street, Southampton, which he bequeathed to Mary along with the balance of its yearly interest after a further £5 annuity had been paid to George. Mary's inheritance amounted to about £50 a year, which at the time was a considerable sum. Ann was also left the residue of the estate after debts had been settled; it may have been that Ann was her father's favourite, or perhaps Mary had received the more generous marriage settlement. George's share was minimal and he was

constrained, on pain of disinheritance, from contesting their father's will, indicative of some family tensions.

Despite the strictures he placed upon George, the action of Mary's father in making specific provision for his daughters demonstrates, what was for the time, a liberal-minded concern to provide them with a measure of independence. Mary would come to rely upon his bequest during the testing years ahead. George Harris was buried beside his first wife in St Mary's churchyard, Southampton. Mary arranged and paid for the headstone on her mother's grave to be replaced by a double stone dedicated to the memory of both her parents.<sup>46</sup>

About 18 months after her father's death, two of Mary's friends died within a few weeks of each other. They were elderly brothers – Mary was very fond of both and she memorialised them in her unpublished manuscript book of poems.<sup>47</sup> In the same book during 1833 she also commemorated the loss of a close female friend<sup>48</sup> and earlier, in *Serious Poems*, she had recorded her grief at the deaths of two other female friends.<sup>49</sup> Between about 1830 and September 1833, in little more than three bleak years, Mary had endured the deaths of six people to whom she was deeply attached. Mary's grief may have made the notion of emigration more acceptable to her and the parting from England easier to contemplate and less daunting. It may also have seemed to her that one phase of her life had reached a conclusion and that her life should now expand in a new direction and take on new interests and new challenges.