

Reynolds, Rachel Selina

by Dorothy Page

Biography

Rachel Selina Pinkerton was born in South Australia on 19 December 1838, the eldest of six children of Eleanor Smith and her husband, William Pinkerton. Her childhood, delightfully described in her memoir, *Pioneering in Australia and New Zealand* (1929), was full of adventure. Her parents emigrated to Australia as newly-weds in 1838, establishing a sheep run near Adelaide. Just 36 hours after Rachel was born their new house and most of its contents – including a piano, 10 years' supply of clothing brought from England and the baby's delicately hand-sewn layette – were destroyed in a fire.

It was a lonely and violent place. Rachel's father was away for weeks at a time, and her mother sometimes had to barricade the door and hide her children under the table while she confronted 15 or 20 spear-carrying aboriginal warriors. When Rachel was about 10 years old the family moved to a less isolated location, Port Lincoln. She made new friends and developed new skills, such as wielding a stockwhip from horseback to drive wild cattle. For William Pinkerton, however, the move, far from providing greater security, was a disaster: 'his life was a torture – no security of life and limb', Rachel wrote. 'He had many cases of robbery, despoliation and murder as well.' The gruesome murder of one of his shepherds determined him to leave. He bought a 200-ton brig on which, in 1855, he took his family and as much stock as he could carry to Otago, New Zealand: 'a long and trying passage, out of both food and water for our sheep and selves', as Rachel tersely described it. It marked the end of a phase in her life, which would henceforward be much more sedate.

While William Pinkerton took his sheep to Tapanui and set about clearing land and building a house, the family lived in Dunedin, walking long distances over unformed, muddy roads to join in the little town's social life. Since theirs was one of only two pianos in Dunedin it accompanied them to dances, on a horse-drawn sleigh.

On 7 October 1856, at Dunedin, 17-year-old Rachel Pinkerton married William Hunter Reynolds, a 34-year-old merchant. William Reynolds was by this time well established in business and launched on a career in local and national politics that would span 46 years. His background was as adventurous as that of his wife. He grew up in Portugal where he worked in his father's cork business; he bore scars from encounters with Spanish brigands. Shortly after the marriage Rachel accompanied her husband to England to recruit colonists. The stormy voyage was a nightmare for her, desperately seasick and pregnant; the first of her nine children (five daughters and four sons) was born in England.

Back in Dunedin the couple bought the fine hillside property of Montecillo, their home for nearly 40 years and the centre of Rachel Reynolds's life. She took pleasure in managing her large household. This busy, happy family period was disrupted when in 1868 her father's roving disposition caused him to leave his now flourishing West Otago estate for disastrous ventures in San Francisco and New Mexico.

While her family was still young Rachel Reynolds joined women's committees for the establishment of a girls' high school in Dunedin and for the admission of women to the University of Otago. Both of these objects were achieved in 1871. In 1879 she demonstrated her concern for disadvantaged children by taking part in an attempt to set up a crèche. Her charitable work stemmed from a religious faith nurtured by regular study of the Bible. She believed that 'no one can be living a truly

vegetables daily from Montecillo, and every Sunday walked to the Otago Benevolent Institution to read to the old people there.

Much of her work focused on nearby St Andrew's Church, which she and her husband helped found. Its dynamic minister, Rutherford Waddell, was a valued friend whose social conscience matched her own. Rachel Reynolds set up a Sixpenny Clothing Club, to which subscribers donated 6d. a month and material to make clothing for poor families. She held weekly mothers' meetings where she taught young mothers to sew for themselves and their children; each of her daughters was given responsibility for one of the families. She enjoyed the company of the women, to whom she paid the courtesy of always dressing in her best. She took part in the agitation of 1889 against sweated labour conditions in Dunedin. When money was being raised for a women's ward at Dunedin Hospital she was on the committee.

It was to the free kindergarten movement that Rachel Reynolds devoted her chief energies. The impetus came from two sources: concern about the waifs of the notorious Walker Street (Carroll Street) area, which was near Montecillo, and the belief that early training 'with tenderness, sympathy and pity' could develop the 'all round possibilities lurking in every child'. As president of the Dunedin Free Kindergarten Association she worked tirelessly with other enthusiasts to establish the Walker Street kindergarten, which opened with 14 children in the Walker Street mission hall in June 1889. She lived to see the establishment of eight kindergartens, one of them bearing her name, with partial government funding.

Her commitment to social justice led Rachel Reynolds to support the extension of the franchise to women. At a crowded public meeting in 1891 she proposed a vote of thanks to its advocates in parliament. Woman, she said, has 'a right to equality with man in the very nature of things'. Notwithstanding her own strong religious affiliation she favoured the establishment of a women's franchise league unconnected with 'any church, sect, or temperance movement', and accepted the vice presidency of the league which was formed in Dunedin in April 1892. She affirmed that women needed the vote not 'merely because man had it, but in order to help the world to higher and nobler things.'

Rachel Reynolds fulfilled with ease and charm the social obligations imposed by her husband's position. In February 1896, for example, when the Intercolonial Medical Congress of Australasia, held in Dunedin, coincided with a vice-regal visit, she was hostess to an elaborate garden party for 500 guests. She was a woman of great intelligence as well as wide humanity, and despite having had only one year's formal schooling had the confidence to publish poems, lectures and even her views on the evolution debate, where she took the bold line: "Tis Evolution holds the key / To that great fact, Divinity'.

After the death of William in 1899, Rachel Reynolds made three voyages to England. She handed over some of her charitable responsibilities, but maintained into old age her delight in helping others. She died at her daughter's home in Dunedin on 21 August 1928.

External links and sources

More suggestions and sources

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