

# THE COURAGE OF DOLLY DALRYMPLE

by

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**Dolly was a half-caste Tasmanian aborigine. Having a white husband she made her life among the settlers. For her courage as outlined below, Governor Arthur gave her a grant of land. Dolly was certainly a pioneer for her people adjusting successfully to life in a new world.**

Dolly was born about 1807/1808 exact date unknown. It is said she was very beautiful with light coloured skin and large eyes tinged with blue. James Bowick states that she was as “fair as a lilly”. No doubt many a young man would have fallen in love with her, but being a half-caste in those days was not acceptable to ‘polite’ society. It is said that she was the first half-caste born in the northern part of the island.

Her father it is believed to have been a sailor and sealer in Bass Strait, named John Briggs from Berkshire, England. Her mother was a Tasmanian Aboriginal, named Bong, (full name Woretermoeteyenner) or her English name, Margaret. She belonged to the Dalrymple tribe hence Dolly’s name. The tribe lived near Port Dalrymple, at the entrance of the River Tamar, leading to Launceston. It was to Port Dalrymple that Lord Hobart ordered Governor King to remove part of the establishment at Norfolk Island. Both Briggs and Bong accompanied James Kelly on his adventurous voyage around Tasmania in a whaleboat. They sailed south from Hobart, rounded the southwest cape and discovered Port Davey. They then continued northwards, discovering Macquarie Harbour. On January 8 1816 they reached George Town on the east side of the Tamar River.

A few days later there was an altercation with some natives at Ringarooma Point, the tip of the east point of Tasmania. There, Kelly and his group were surrounded, but fortunately the chief, Mannalarena, recognised Briggs and asked for their assistance to help him fight his brother, Tolobunganah with whom he was at war. Kelly refused to get involved and moved on, later meeting Tolobunganah who also recognised Briggs. There they traded seal skins for kangaroo skins. They then safely sailed into Hobart Town, 30<sup>th</sup> January 1816.

Dolly’s surname was Briggs and when she was about twelve years of age Dr. Jacob Mountgarret, the colonial surgeon from county Armagh Ireland, took her in charge. He and his wife became very fond of Dolly, so much so that Mrs Mountgarret taught her to read, write, sew and attend to domestic duties. Dolly was baptised 18<sup>th</sup> March 1814 in Launceston with no age given. The 1819 muster for Port Dalrymple lists, “Dalrymple Briggs, aged 7, off stores” (Mitchell Library – T. Mutch indexes). After leaving the Mounagarrets about 1825, Dolly met Thomas Johnson, an ex-convict and drover. They married at Longford 29<sup>th</sup> October 1831 and had a number of children (see at end of article). Thomas had been transported for burglary on the *Asia* in 1824 and had been born at Isleham, Cambridgeshire in June 1805.



Thomas Johnson

However, a mystery arises regarding Dolly's real birth. In some instances Dolly's full name is listed as Dolly Mountgarret Briggs. In the "Briggs Genealogy" by Bill Mollison and Coral Everett (December 1978) it is stated that Dolly was possibly the daughter of Dr Mountgarret. This was revealed to Dolly by her brother-in-law. I am not fully convinced of this.

Dolly and her family moved to the Mersey area to the property of a Mr. Stoker. As a convict, Johnson was not allowed to come and go as he would have liked. He and Dolly had a lonely existence, their living quarter being nothing more than a small slab hut with a bark roof, coated with a thick blanket of mud and lime to keep out the weather; yet it proved to be a lifesaver later for Dolly and her children. G.A. Robinson visited their hut in September 1830 describing it in his diary, "This stock keeper lives with a half-caste female, a stout well made person with whom he has had two children. They are exceedingly fine children as are all the half-caste children that I have yet seen. This woman's father is a white man, a sailor on board Griffith's schooner and her mother a black woman named Punga who is now at the establishment. The children are very fair and their hair is white."

Both girls had their mother's beauty; Jane had white hair when she was young, but as she grew older, it turned black. Caroline Creek at Sherwood was named after another daughter, Caroline.

On the morning of 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1831, Dolly and her family rose early as usual. She gave Thomas his breakfast and soon after he left to do his chores. Dolly began to do hers and on hearing a noise outside, sent her elder daughter, Jane, to see what it was. Dolly heard a scream and picking up a musket, went outside to investigate. She was horrified to see Jane on the ground, with a spear in her thigh. Dolly tried to carry Jane to the safety of the hut, but had some difficulty because of the spear catching the doorpost. However, she finally got Jane inside and hurriedly barricaded the door and windows.

She fired at the attacking aborigines, but with little effect, having nothing but buck shot, although she said later that she wounded one. She scanned the surrounding hills desperately hoping to see Thomas although she knew he would not return for several hours.

Then as suddenly as they appeared, the marauding aborigines fled – or so she thought. Soon, however, they returned, this time with saplings and faggots, which they kept lighting and throwing on to the roof, trying to burn Dolly and her children out. They underestimated the fighting spirit of this remarkable woman. She drove them off time and time again and for six hours the battle was fought and not until Johnson came back did the natives flee.

During the melee, word had reached Captain William Moriarty, who immediately sent a detachment of troops, stationed at Dunorlan, to the scene and his later report on the incident did a great deal in bringing fame to Dolly and to her family. As a side note, Moriarty, who came from Ireland, became port officer first for Launceston and later for Hobart Town.

James Bonwick in his book, “The Lost Tasmanian Race” wrote of her courageous act:

*“For six hours she sustained a siege and nobly defended her position. Our heroine fought behind no granite wall, nor was she shielded by a bombproof roof. Her castle was a single slab hut, though the bark roof, fortunately for her, had been covered with a thick coating of mud and lime to keep out the weather.”*

*“So noble a defence called for the warmest expression of applause and the Governor was not the last to acknowledge her heroic act.”*

Her remarkable effort was taken up by William Dean of Launceston and Alexander Clark from Longford. Governor Arthur granted her 10 acres of land (other sources say 20 acres) at Perth and legitimised her husband, who was eventually given his freedom in August 1836. The whole account is carried in Captain William Moriarty’s report to the Colonial Secretary, dated August 25, 1831, Dunorlan.

Dolly and Thomas became celebrities and lived a happy life together. They had further children and become so respected that Thomas had a street named after him in Tarleton. However, Thomas was arrested in 1838 for stealing wheat and was sent to four years imprisonment. Dolly wrote to the governor (someone else would have written it) asking that Thomas be assigned to her, but her request was refused. It must have been very hard for Dolly to keep the family going. He was released in 1841

That was not the first occasion Dolly had a confrontation with the aborigines. Dolly once lived with a man called Cubitt (Cubid) who was a storekeeper at Lake River. Dolly saved him from being murdered by the natives by fighting them off with a double-barrelled shot gun. George Robinson in his Journal states that she assisted in killing the natives. It has been said she killed sixteen, but I cannot confirm this. Author James Bonwick also relates the story.

The 1842 census records that there was usually eleven people residing at the house, which included her mother and one assigned servant. It also included a male visitor.

In 1845 they moved to the Mersey, taking on the tenancy of Frogmore Estate from Henry Bonney. Johnson then purchased 500 acres near Frogmore where he built the family home, “Sherwood Hall”. Miss Lucinda, sister of Captain Moriarty described Frogmore and who lived there, as being, “One of the wildest and most inaccessible

places in the island at the time, with the river cutting off communication in the front and an unknown wilderness at the back.” Dolly petitioned to have her mother to leave Wyalebenna on Flinders Island to live with them. Her petition was granted.



The relocated and renovated Sherwood Hall, Latrobe. Relocated by the Devon Historical Society.

Dolly died in December 1 1864 at Sherwood Hall. The Examiner newspaper 8th December reported: “At Sherwood on December 1, Dalrymple Mountgarret Johnson, the beloved wife of Mr Thomas Johnson, aged 54. There was a large attendance at her funeral and the family with its offshoots to the third generation with their relations and numerous friends was a remarkable feature of the occasion.”

Thomas became quite comfortable, owning hotels at Sherwood and Ballahoo, the *Native Youth* and *The Dalrymple*, besides blocks of land in the township of Tarleton. He also had a coal mine called *Alfred Colliery* which shipped its coal from Ballaho Creek. In 1846 he had received a First Class Pardon.

Three years later after Dolly’s death, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1867 he died, aged 61 years. He and Dolly had twelve children (taking into account that Jane’s was theirs). After Dolly’s death he married again, to Marie Emma Bourne aged 21 years, but the marriage was short lived. They had one girl who married Gore-Brown the manager of the Don Company at Devonport, but there was no issue from that marriage. Johnson Street is named after Thomas. After Thomas died and it would appear the marriage was not a happy one, Marie married a man called Masterman.

As for Jane the wounded girl, she recovered and married a man named Hearps, who lived south of Latrobe. They married in the Church of England, Perth. Interestingly enough she used the surname Baker. She died in May 1898, aged 72.

Dolly’s adventure played perhaps little part in shaping the future of the colony, but the character she possessed, like so many of the pioneers, played a major part in building the nation.



Dolly's house as it was in 1975. This dates from the 1850s and not the house where the siege took place. Reg Watson photo.

Interestingly enough Dolly's brother was an ancestor of Australia's first aboriginal Governor, Sir Douglas Nicholls of South Australia.

Both Dolly and Thomas are buried together on the banks of the Mersey River, the location swept away many years ago by floodwater.

Sherwood Hall, as stated, was relocated in 1993 with the efforts of the Devon Historical Society. The Latrobe Council undertook much of the actual work with some input from the National Trust. There was a concern around further damage from flooding at the original site along with vandalism.

In 2020 I was taken to the exact location where Dolly and her daughter Jane endured their ordeal. It is located in what is known today as Diary Plains. The area is somewhat remote, but in Dolly's day it would have been **very** remote. Nothing remains of the house today except some rubble which may have been part of the foundation. Pictures following will show the exact location (first two) and the following two, the environment where it was situated.







List of children and when born:

Jane (1827 – it possible that her father was Thomas Baker), Sarah (1828-1837), death unknown), William (1833-1848 drowned in the Mersey River), Thomas (b.1835 married Elizabeth Atkinson), Caroline (b.1836 married Joseph Gwynne), John – *Jack* - George (b. 1837 married Isabella Thompson), Lewis James (b. 1841 married), Mary Ann (1843), Charlotte (b.1845 married James Henry Gower), William (b. 1849– born Frogmore and named after his late brother married Mary Elmer), Sarah (1851– born at Frogmore and named after Dolly’s sister married Samuel Wright) and Walter George (1854-1855) born at Ballahoo.

Interesting articles:

Tasmanian Mail, April 28, 1987. Author unknown.

The Advocate, May 8, 1976 regarding Dolly’s granddaughter...author unknown.

The Courage of Dolly Dalrymple, Parade Magazine November 1975 by Reg. A. Watson

The Ordeal of Dolly Dalrymple, Saturday Evening Mercury by Andrew Waythier (Reg. A. Watson). October 1969.

The book, “With the Pioneers” (1957) by Charles Ramsay has a chapter on Dolly.

In 2004 a small book was published by Diana Wyllie called, “Dolly Dalrymple”.

**NOTE:** A photo of Dolly does appear from time to time, but it is not Dolly, most probably that of Thomas’s second wife, Marie.