

Elizabeth Martin of Madras and Walter Medhurst, Missionary

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I am an Australian working on a biography of my 2x great grandfather, the English missionary, Dr Walter Henry Medhurst. My research required me to make a visit to India last year to gain some background about how Walter Medhurst met and married his wife while delayed in Madras (Chennai), waiting for a ship to take him on to Malacca. I was particularly interested in his wife, Elizabeth and her early years growing up in South India, because she was to become an important partner in the missionary life of the Medhursts.

Elizabeth Martin was born in Tanjore (Thanjavur) in 1794, the daughter of George Martin, a Lieutenant in the 2nd Battalion of Native Infantry.¹ Although family tradition records her mother as George's wife, Elizabeth Taylor of Stapleton, Gloucestershire, Elizabeth's baptism in the India Office Records lists her mother as unknown and her as illegitimate, indicating perhaps an Indian mother.² During the course of her early life the family would move to various garrisons throughout the Madras Presidency. In 1796, George Martin was promoted to Captain and on 12 October 1798 he was given his first command of a battalion, the 2nd Extra Battalion, raised at Vellore.³ Captain Martin, with the aid of one British Lieutenant, would command a native force of 660 privates and 118 NCOs. The family and all their servants moved with the new commander to Vellore, which is located approximately 140km west of Madras. Shortly after the move, a sister for Elizabeth was born and named Sophia. In April of 1803, Captain Martin was placed in command of the 1st Extra battalion at Trichinopoly⁴ and by March of 1805 he had been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel⁵ and the family had moved up to Chitaldrug (Chitradurga).

In 1807, the newly appointed Governor, Sir George Barlow, sparked a crisis in Madras when he decided, against previous practice, that General Hay Macdowall, the Commander in Chief of the Army, would no longer have a seat on the Governor's Council.⁶ Macdowall took this as a personal affront. The Governor also made a number of other changes to allowances for senior officers which he believed were being abused. At the Government's request, a report was drawn up by Lt-Colonel Munro, which drew attention to these abuses and when the report became public knowledge, this initiated an atmosphere of revolt within the Madras Army. Senior officers, pronouncing that their honour had been impugned, drew up a petition accusing Munro of 'cruel and wanton

¹ George Martin baptised 2 Jan 1761, Trowbridge, Wiltshire

² IOR N/2/11/99-100; N/2/C3/35; N/2/C5/1252 – born 23 Oct 1794, bapt. 12 Oct 1795

³ Lieutenant Colonel W.J. Wilson, *History of the Madras Army*, Volume 2, (1882) p350

⁴ *Ibid.* p100

⁵ Dodwell and Miles, *Alphabetical list of the Officers of the Madras Army 1760-1834*, p112-113

⁶ The events of this crisis are described more fully in *Power and Conquest* by Stephen Taylor and *The White Mutiny* by Sir Alexander Cardew.

insult' and demanded that he be court-martialled. It was signed by 28 officers in command of regiments and sent to Macdowall under cover of a letter dated 25 September 1808, signed by three officers including Lt-Colonel George Martin. The letter, which Martin had helped to draft, was a highly seditious document since it effectively demanded the removal of the Governor and implied a threat of mutiny if the demands were rejected. Court martial proceedings against Munro were initiated, with Lt-Colonel Martin being appointed to conduct the prosecution. The matter dragged on for some months and came to a head when General Macdowall declined a request to release Munro, following which Governor Barlow overruled the Commander-in-Chief and ordered Munro's release. General Macdowall's response was to return to England, sailing from Madras in the *Lady Jane Dundas* on January 30th, 1809, sending his resignation to the Governor some days later from a port down the coast. The *Lady Jane Dundas* was one of seven ships that were lost in hurricanes which swept the Indian Ocean that year and Macdowall went down with the ship.

In the middle of this crisis, during which time George Martin had been in Madras, family information records that word came that his wife Elizabeth was gravely ill with a fever back in Chitaldrug and he should return home as fast as possible. Unfortunately by the time he arrived, she had already passed away. He had lost the love of his life and he had not been with her when she finally needed him. Adding to the utter despair he felt was the sense of desertion created by his Commander-in-Chief who had resigned and sailed back to England, leaving him and his fellow officers to sort out matters with the government. How was he going to support his daughters, especially if the army crisis turned against him and he was brought before a court martial and imprisoned or even executed? He knew that the risk was real and who would look after his daughters if they were left as orphans? Distraught from the loss and under the threat of a court martial from the potential revolt, George Martin arranged for young Elizabeth, now just 14 years old, to marry a fellow army officer, 27 year old Lieutenant George Henry Braune. The couple were married at Chitaldrug on 14th October 1808.⁷ George Martin entrusted Elizabeth's younger sister Sophia to their care and he returned to Madras for further orders regarding the developing crisis. The Army decided that someone should be sent back to London to explain to the Directors of the East India Company the Army's side of the dispute and who better to send than the Prosecutor in the Munro case, Lt-Colonel George Martin. He sailed on the *Sir Stephen Lushington* on 2 March 1809 and since Governor Barlow's representative, George Buchan was also on board the *Lushington*, the ship was nicknamed Pandora's Box.

Back in Madras the antagonism between the Army and the Governor intensified and developed into the rebellion which became known as the White Mutiny. George Martin was spared any further involvement in the mutiny and was able to lay low in England until the crisis ultimately died down. He married Mary Thring in Warminster on 9 January

⁷ IOR N/2/3/482

1813 and returned to India on the *Metcalfe* as Lt-Colonel with the 13th Madras Native Infantry.⁸

Meanwhile Elizabeth and Sophia had returned to life with the army, this time with Elizabeth as an officer's wife. By the time that George Martin returned to India, George Braune had been promoted to Captain and they had moved 300 miles north of Madras to Masulipatam so Elizabeth was unable to meet with her father when he returned through Madras. This was not a happy time for Elizabeth, but her stoic nature gave her the strength to make the most of it. She devoted herself to being a wife and she took on the role of mother to her young sister, Sophia. Elizabeth dutifully bore her husband two sons. George Martin Braune was born on 10 May, 1810⁹ and Henry Pullman Braune was born in 1813.¹⁰ Tragedy struck again in 1815 when young Henry died on the day that Elizabeth was to celebrate her 21st birthday.¹¹ As if that was not bad enough, her husband was away at the time on a campaign at Kurnool. Whether Captain George Braune died of wounds sustained during the action or from some other cause was not



Elizabeth Medhurst, née Martin, from a photograph taken in her old age.

recorded. We do know that he died on 26 November at nearby Gooty. Elizabeth would not learn of the death of her husband¹² until several weeks later, meaning she would likely receive that news as a dreadful Christmas present. By this time her father had returned to India and word came that he had also died, at Bellary in June of that year.¹³

So in the year that Elizabeth turned 21 she became an orphan and a widow, plus she lost one of her children. All of this in a land where she now had no family other than her son and her younger sister. She moved to Madras, placed her sister in an orphanage and went to live with missionaries at what is now the

⁸ Madras Almanac 1814 (FIBIS database)

⁹ N/2/4/50, Madras Fort St George

¹⁰ N/2/23/151, Cannanore

¹¹ *East India Register* 1817 – 23 Oct 1815, 'The infant son of Capt. Braune.'

¹² *East India Register* 1816-2

¹³ *Gentleman's Magazine* 1815 Suppl. Part II p634, 15 Jun 1815 (FIBIS database)

William Charles Memorial Church in Georgetown. There she taught and looked after the children, receiving board for herself and her son for her services. Then known as the Missionary Chapel, it was founded in 1806, by William Charles Loveless of the London Missionary Society and was the first church to be built outside Fort St George. Elizabeth's young son George was able to attend the school which the missionaries operated just next door to the church.

William Loveless had been sent out by the London Missionary Society in 1804, travelling on an American ship, the *Alleghany*, due to the reluctance of the East India Company to carry missionaries. On board that ship was Miss Sarah Farquhar, an American lady travelling to Calcutta and during the voyage an attachment was formed between her and William Loveless, resulting in their marriage in 1806. As a result, Sarah Loveless became the first American to be engaged in foreign missions.¹⁴ Initially William Loveless took over the running of the Madras Orphan Asylum, since the EIC opposed his setting up a mission in Madras, but by 1806 he had overcome this problem and he established the LMS Mission Chapel in Davidson Street, Georgetown. William and Sarah Loveless continued to run the LMS mission in Madras until 1824 when they returned to England to retire in Canterbury. The chapel continues today as the William Charles Memorial Church in Chennai.

In 1817 a young Walter Medhurst arrived in Madras from London on the *General Graham*,¹⁵ en route to Malacca where he was to set up a printing works for the London Missionary Society. Due to the reluctance of the East India Company to take missionaries on their ships,¹⁶ Walter was delayed for three months in Madras and during this time he lodged with Mr and Mrs Loveless, the missionaries in Georgetown. He wrote back to London that he had procured a Chinese grammar and began to teach himself Chinese. Of greater interest to Walter however, was the fact that he met Elizabeth, fell in love with her and convinced her to marry him and join him on his journey to Malacca. They married in the Missionary Chapel on 19 May 1817 and sailed next day with young



William Charles Loveless by Richard Woodman stipple engraving, 1824 or after NPG D37458 © National Portrait Gallery

¹⁴ Richard Knill, *The Missionary's Wife or, A brief account of Mrs. Loveless, of Madras, the first American missionary to foreign lands* (1839)

¹⁵ *Madras Almanac* 1818

¹⁶ The Company had long been opposed to attempts to Christianise the Indian population. Dr Robert Morrison, the LMS's first missionary to China, travelled to Canton via New York due to the EIC policies.

George on the *Fair Trail* for Malacca. Walter wrote back to London to inform them of his changed circumstances:

Yesterday I entered into the Holy State of Matrimony with Mrs Elizabeth Braune, widow of the late Captain Braune of the 15th Madras Native Infantry, who has resided in the house of our brother Loveless for these nine months. She speaks Tamil fluently and can also talk in Telugu. Born in India and having travelled over the greater parts of the peninsula living in tents under a scorching sun, she is more likely to endure the terrors of an eastern climate than one of our English ladies.¹⁷

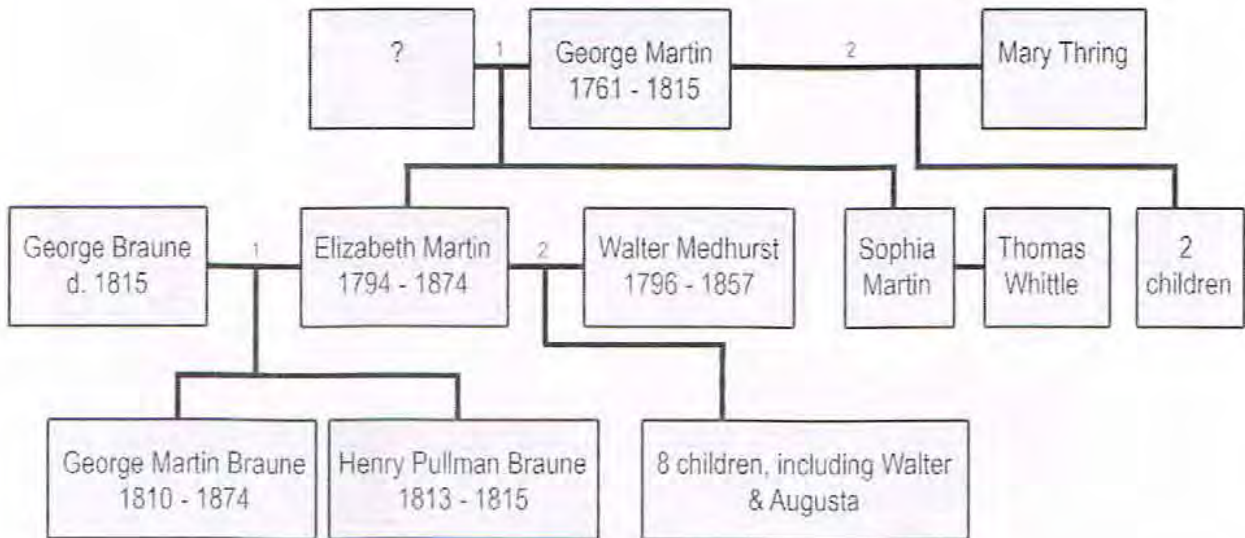
Thus commenced a partnership which embraced missionary work in Malacca, Penang, Indonesia and China and involved the establishment of churches, schools, orphanages and hospitals, some of which are still operating today. Young George Braune remained with his parents until the age of eleven when he was sent to school in England, gaining a BA at Cambridge and ordination in the Church of England. He died in Brussels in 1874, whilst Vicar of Wistow, Yorkshire. Sophia Martin joined the Medhursts in Batavia and became involved in the mission, showing herself to be a gifted linguist, learning Chinese and assisting in the Chinese schools. In 1829, Sophia left Batavia for Singapore due to ill health and there she married Thomas Whittle, a surveyor and she established one of the first schools for girls in Singapore.

The Medhursts spent 21 years in Batavia, leaving behind a legacy which survives today in the form of the oldest English speaking institution in Indonesia, All Saints Jakarta and the Parapattan Orphanage, still going strong after 182 year. , In 1843, when the Treaty of Nanking resulted in the opening up of the trading ports in China, the Medhursts set up the LMS Mission in Shanghai, where together they reached some of their greatest achievements. In 1856, when Walter's ill-health forced a return to England, they arrived back to London on January 22nd, 1857 where Walter died two days later. He is buried in Abney Park Cemetery, London. His wife Elizabeth retired to Newton Abbot in Devon where she lived to the grand old age of 79.

Walter and Elizabeth Medhurst had eight children together, four of which lived into adulthood. Their son, also named Walter Henry Medhurst went on to become the British Consul in Shanghai and was knighted by Queen Victoria. I am descended from their youngest daughter Augusta.

Medhurst published numerous reference works and he played a key role in translating the bible into Chinese. He was awarded a Doctor of Divinity by New York University in 1843.

¹⁷ CWM/LMS/South India.Tamil/Incoming correspondence/Box 1 - Letter held at SOAS, University College London, in the CWM collection (Records, 1764-1977, of Council for World Mission predecessor bodies, including records of the London Missionary Society, 1764-1966)



In visiting Chennai, I wanted to find out if the Church in which Walter and Elizabeth met and married still existed and after a few internet searches I was delighted to find out that the William Charles Memorial Church was very much alive and well and I was invited to attend a service while I was in Chennai. The invitation turned out to mean a lot more than just to attend a service. The welcome I received and the hospitality shown by the Presbyter and her congregation was astonishing. They were so appreciative of having someone visit who was connected with their history and I could assure them that I shared those same feelings. After all, I was standing in the rooms where Elizabeth and young George lived during that time of tragedy and opportunity. It was really gratifying to see that this Church is as vibrant today as it must have been in 1817.



John Holliday with Mr & Mrs Selvaraj and family, taken inside the Vicarage of William Charles Memorial Church.

During my visit I became aware that the Church did not have a picture of their founder to display among the other historical information about the Church. As a result of some previous research I was aware that the National Portrait Gallery in London had a picture of William Charles Loveless on display and I thought I might be able to source a copy from them. I am happy to report that I was able to obtain a copy of the portrait and give it to the



William Charles Memorial Church, Madras, established 1806 - the church interior today.

Church as a small token of my appreciation. Hopefully this will add to the history which is portrayed so well on the walls of this wonderfully restored Church.

Postscript

George and Mary Martin had a son, Francis Pitney Martin, who was born in Bellary on 10 April 1814, a year before George Martin's death. Mary must have been pregnant at the time of George's death, for she returned to Madras and gave birth to a daughter, Georgina Mary Elizabeth Martin on 28 February of 1816.¹⁸ With the European community being so small at that time, this would mean that Elizabeth would have met her step-mother and her step siblings at that time. It is not known exactly when the family returned to England but both Francis and Georgina lived long and successful lives.

Other sources:

- Records of the London Missionary Society at SOAS in the CWM collection, 1764-1977, (Records of Council for World Mission predecessor bodies) including numerous letters and papers.
- *Memoir of the late Rev Medhurst*, a reprint of articles in the *Evangelical Magazine*

¹⁸ IOR N/2/23/30. Baptised as Mary Elizabeth, St George's Church Madras.