

Elizabeth Guise – A Canberra Pioneer

Snowy Haiblen, Dickson College 2006

In the quiet, peaceful cemetery of the church of St John the Baptist in Reid, ACT, lays the grave of Elizabeth Guise, who died in 1853. She was 91 years of age when she died. Behind the simple inscription on her gravestone is a fascinating story.

Destined to end her days in the Canberra region, Elizabeth was born in England in 1762. She was already eight years old when Cook sailed into Botany Bay, a teenager when rebel American colonies won independence from King George III, and a young woman of twenty-six when the first fleet departed from England to found a convict settlement in NSW. She was living in England when the revolution erupted in France. While little is known of her childhood, the first major turning point in the long life of Elizabeth Guise came with the French Revolution of 1789.

Her future husband, Richard Guise, was born in 1757 in Lorraine, France. A relation of the French Royal Family, he fled to England to escape the guillotine when the Bastille was stormed on 1789. On 14th October of that year he joined the Royal Grenadier Horse Guards as a private, hoping that maybe the King and Queen of England would attempt to save the King and Queen of France. It would have been some time after 1789 that Richard met Elizabeth (nee Armstrong) who was described as an “English young lady of good character”.

It seems that the two fell in love, for Elizabeth’s parents were said to have strongly opposed the idea of her marriage to Richard Guise. In 1791 Richard transferred to the New South Wales Corps (the 102nd regiment of foot) and Elizabeth decided to elope with him to the other side of the world. Having left all of her family and friends behind forever, this was clearly another turning point in her life.

The NSW Corps was raised specifically for service in the colony of New South Wales. The arrival of the first contingent of the Corps in Sydney in June 1790 was described by Watkin Tench, RM (Clark, 1950, p60). “Before the end of the month, three more transports, having on board two companies of the NSW Corps, arrived to add to our society. These ships also brought out a large body of convicts.” John Macarthur, one of the most well known personalities of the early colony and later destined to be a near neighbour of Richard and Elizabeth Guise, was one of the lieutenants in this first contingent. A letter from Sir George Yonge to the commanding officer of the NSW Corps, Major Francis Grose, dated 8th June 1789 said: “The Corps is to consist of four companies, and each company of one captain, one lieutenant, one ensign, three sergeants, two corporals, two drummers, with sixty-seven private men.” The instructions stipulated that “no recruit be enlisted under five feet four inches and a half height, nor under sixteen nor above thirty years of age.” (Clark, 1950, p49) Richard Guise enlisted into the Corps first as a corporal, then a sergeant. (Blackmore) Thus he was one of the twelve senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) in the Corps.

It is likely that Richard and Elizabeth arrived in the colony in 1792, in a later contingent of the NSW Corps that included Lieutenant-governor Francis Grose. If so, it is probable that they embarked on the *Atlantic*, reaching the colony on 29th June of that year. According to a guidebook published some years later, *The Emigrant’s Friend 1848*, the passage would have lasted some four months. The *Friend* would have advised Elizabeth to furnish herself with

“one warm cloak, (with cape), 2 bonnets, one small shawl, one stuff dress, two print dresses, six shifts, two flannel petticoats, one stuff petticoat, one pair of stays, four pocket handkerchiefs for neck, three caps, four night caps, four sleeping jackets, two black worsted hose, four cotton hose, two pairs shoes, six towels.”

The arrival of Elizabeth and Richard to the colony of New South Wales coincided with the departure of Governor Phillip who left for the old country aboard the *Atlantic* on 10th December 1792. Collins (Clark, p.71) described Phillip’s departure: “His excellency, at embarking on board the *Atlantic*, was received near the wharf... by Major Grose, as the head of the NSW Corps, who paid him, as he passed, the honours due to his rank and situation in the colony.” Presumably Sergeant Richard Guise took part in the ceremony. Perhaps Elizabeth was standing among the crowd of onlookers. On 12th December Lieutenant-governor Francis Grose assumed command of the colony until the arrival of the next governor.

It was not long before Richard and Elizabeth started a family. Richard junior was born in 1794 closely followed by William (b. 1796). A daughter Elizabeth was born in 1799. Unfortunately there is some confusion between sources. Blackmore’s genealogy chart gives the children’s names as William, b.1792, Hannah, died at birth 1793, Richard jnr, b. 1795 and Elizabeth, b. 1799. The children’s births were not only a turning point in the lives of Elizabeth and Richard, but also within the greater colony where they must have been among the first Europeans born on Australian soil. They were probably referred to as “native stock” or “currency lads and lasses” as such children were termed at the time.

Richard was therefore a soldier in the NSW Corps during the governorships of Hunter, King and Bligh. Richard may have been one of the soldiers who, on 5th March 1804, quelled the Castle Hill convict revolt. This is the same period during which officers of the NSW Corps were said to have created a rum monopoly in the colony. Richard was possibly one of those who arrested Governor Bligh at government house on 26th January 1808, the twentieth anniversary of the colony, on the orders of Major Johnston, commanding officer of the Corps. This so-called “Rum Rebellion” was a turning point in colonial history. It is interesting to speculate on what Elizabeth and Richard thought of these events.

Bligh returned to England during 1808 and was replaced by Governor Macquarie. Sergeant Guise may have paraded at the wharf to greet the new governor. This was probably one of the last times the NSW Corps did so. Macquarie came to the colony accompanied by the 73rd Highlanders, who replaced the NSW Corps. The officers of the Corps were recalled to England.

Even without knowing details it is clear that Richard and Elizabeth Guise lived through this major turning point in the country’s colonial history. Property records in Sydney show that Richard Guise held a wine and spirits licence at premises in Kent Street called the “Jolly Sailor” from 1809 until 1911. It is therefore clear that he left the NSW Corps in or soon before 1809, presumably due to its disbandment and became a publican. According to Blackmore, Richard Guise was assigned a convict assistant, George McCurr, in 1809. The records indicate that McCurr absconded.

Perhaps Richard's hotel was similar to the one described by this eyewitness in 1830. "Almost everyone was drinking rum in drams... every man seemed to consider himself just on a level with all the rest, and so quite content... I think there was not an individual in the room, but one female, who did not smoke (a pipe)... Their dresses were of all sorts: The blue jacket and trousers of the English lagger, the short blue cotton smock-frock and trousers... some wore neck handkerchiefs; some none. Some wore straw hats, some beavers, some caps of untanned kangaroo-skin. And not a shin in the room... had on either stocking or sock." (Clark, p.428)

In 1811, the Guise family reached another turning point. Richard sold his licence and purchased land at Bankstown, then later at Minto, where he built a homestead. The children were then probably aged nineteen, sixteen and eleven, Elizabeth herself now forty-nine. The property at Minto, named "Casula", adjoined another property belonging to Charles Throsby. Charles Throsby was the first white man to explore the Canberra region, in 1820. Richard Guise ran his Minto property for the rest of his life.

Perhaps the next turning point in Elizabeth's life was the birth of her first grandson, Richard, to son William and his wife Catherine Allan in 1816. In 1821, six years after the defeat of Napoleon in Europe, Richard Guise died of liver complaint. Elizabeth, now fifty-nine years of age, was both a widow and a grandmother.

In 1820 Charles Throsby discovered the Canberra region. According to Gillespie (1991), Throsby had arrived in the colony in 1802 as surgeon-in-charge on the convict transport *Coromandel*. He received a grant of five hundred acres at Glenfield in 1809, and used his new residence as a base for exploration into country further south. By October 1820 his explorations had reached Lake George which was "covered in innumerable flocks of black swans, ducks and seagulls."

On a trip in December of that year Throsby first set eyes upon the Limestone Plains. "A lovely clear plain called by the natives 'Candariro' (Gundaroo)" was reached on 7th December. The following day a "very high hill" was ascended near the Molonglo River, from which there was an extensive view of the surrounding region. Throsby reported that on "the banks of the river on both sides . . . is a most beautiful forest as far as we could see thinly wooded by gums and Bastard Box." It is generally accepted that the high hill was Black Mountain.

The General Muster of 1822 gives us some specific information on Guise family holdings. It lists both William and Richard junior as "residing at Liverpool on 100 acre grants" together owning a total of nine horses, over 200 head of cattle, 28 hogs and a considerable amount of both wheat and maize. As commissioner Bigge stated, successful farming in the colony was a forbidding prospect, so this was quite an achievement. "Industrious habits, some portion of agricultural knowledge . . . and the operation of a steady demand for produce." "More extensive grants [such as the Guise's], united with the profits derived from grazing" promised better results.

Throsby's explorations had opened up the Canberra region for grazing. The General Muster of 1822 also informs that the Guise brothers had been given a grant of 100 acres near Gundaroo as payment for carting wheat and provisions to the men working on new roads to

the interior. This may have been the road to the Goulburn plains, a project under the control of Charles Throsby. It is thought that the Guise family moved to this property on the Yass River just north of Sutton in 1826. This was Elizabeth's final major move. She was to spend the rest of her days in the Canberra region until her burial at St John the Baptist's Church in Reid.

In 1829 the Guise's established a permanent home at Bywong, Elizabeth now in her sixty-seventh year. Over the next few years the family holdings increased rapidly. In the 1834 census by Dr Lysky, the Guises are listed as owning over one thousand head of cattle at their property on the Monaro, "Buluko". In the mid 1830's the two brothers grazed their herds in the Khancoban district. According to Blackmore, a severe drought caused the Murrumbidgee "to cease running and Lake George to dry up." In 1845 the Guise family owned more than two hundred and eighty thousand acres in Bywong and Gundaroo alone. One could guess that Elizabeth, now eighty-three, remained at the Bywong homestead for the rest of her days.

A widow of twenty-three years, Elizabeth had to deal with the loss of many close relatives in her later years. Her son William died in 1850, most probably fifty-four years of age. His death closely followed that of his wife Catherine Guise (nee Allan), who died two years before him in 1848. Martha Guise (nee Lette), who married Richard junior in 1821, died in 1844 aged 30.

Elizabeth also lost two grandsons. Henry Guise, the younger son of William and Catherine, was killed in 1845 when he was only eighteen. His elder brother Richard whose grave is the oldest at St John the Baptist's church, was killed when bringing horses up from Victoria in 1844. He was only twenty-eight. His cousin George, son of Richard and Martha, also died young – he was only sixteen when he died in 1839. We can only guess the pain these early deaths must have caused elderly Elizabeth.

One of the more fascinating deaths was that of Mary Ann Guise, daughter of William and Catherine. In about 1851 Mary married a man named Brownlowe. "A man of lax morals", as he was described by Samuel Shumack, her marriage to Brownlowe was short lived. "One day when she was carving the dinner an argument developed over his association with another woman, and in the heat of the moment she stabbed him with the carving knife, inflicting a wound from which he died three days later." Mary was arrested, charged with murder and later tried and found guilty at the Goulburn jail and sentenced to hang. Much of the region was in turmoil over what was viewed as an "inhuman" sentence and petitions were presented to the Governor in Council who rejected them all. Remaining in prison until the birth of her child, Mary was hung, presumably also in 1851. (Shumack, 1967, p89)

Elizabeth Guise passed away peacefully two years later, in 1853, having reached the age of ninety-one. She lies at rest in Canberra's oldest cemetery to this day, where the story of her fascinating life lies hidden beneath her gravestone. Elizabeth's life contained a series of turning points, both in a personal sense and in a wider meaning. She lived through exciting times and her life was, in a real sense, a turning point in the heritage of modern Australia.

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