

SUSANNAH JOHNSTONE

Susannah Johnstone is the Susan mentioned in the diaries who worked for short periods with Anne Drysdale and Caroline Newcomb between June and December 1844. However, she is significant due to her connection with the Scott girls, especially Maryanne, whose story will be added later. This story is based on information supplied by Marion Taylor, Susannah Cloverdale in Marion's Ancestry family tree, and Anne Drysdale's Diaries.

Susannah was born in 1816 in Lockabie, Dumfriesshire, Scotland. Her parents were James Johnstone (1785 - 1855) and Euphemia McLaren. Her father died a pauper and Susannah worked as a servant. She emigrated on 11 July 1841 to Batavia due to poor health and lack of local connections.¹ She left Batavia for Australia on 19 August 1843 aged 27 as a passenger on the *Rebecca*, a 400 ton barque, captained by MacTaggart.² The *Rebecca* stopped at King Island in September 1843. John Scott, a sealer, took his family out to the ship in a long boat seeking ink and paper with which to educate his children. Scott resided on King Island with three indigenous women, Maria, Mary and Georgina known as 'The Ranger'. The family which visited the *Rebecca* consisted of Maria, probably his first indigenous wife, Mary, the mother of the children, son Tom, two girls Maryanne and Kitty, and an infant unnamed girl child. They were well received on the *Rebecca*. However, as they were returning to the Island, a violent squall blew up and upset their boat throwing them all into the water. John Scott and the infant child drowned. The women were able to get the other children and themselves ashore. The same squall dashed the *Rebecca* onto the rocks severely damaging it. The Captain, his brother, the female passenger Susannah/Susan and all but three of the crew got into their longboat and rowed ashore. There they were looked after by the women for three weeks.³



Fig. 1. General Scene from King Island (c) King Island Tourism Board

Captain MacTaggart, Bill (his brother?), Tom Scott, and Susannah then took the ship's long boat and crossed the Strait to Port Phillip and landed at the 'Heads' (Indented Head). There they were met by Mr. Fenwick, the Police Magistrate, who took charge of Tom, aged about 12, and hired Susannah to work for his sister. MacTaggart put out an advertisement asking for a female to take charge of the two girls. This was answered by Anne Drysdale and Caroline Newcomb and Maryanne, aged about 8, and Kitty, aged about 5, came to them on 16 November 1843.⁴ A party was dispatched from Melbourne to repair the *Rebecca* but the ship was blown off King Island and adrift in Bass Strait in April 1844 with these people on board without provisions or navigation aids.

¹ Letter from Hugh Fleming to William Gardner, Glasgow, 1 July 1841, Taylor Family Tree, Ancestry.com.au.

² Marion Taylor, letter from Mark Howard, 27 January, 2006; Anon., 'Wrecks On King's Island', Sydney Morning Herald, 23 February 1875, p. 3.

³ Taylor, letter, 2006.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Fortunately, they were found by the *Ganges*. After being provided with food and a compass, they were able to bring the *Rebecca* safely to Launceston.⁵

Susannah worked for the Fenwick's on their property which was adjacent on the east to Drysdale and Newcomb's Boronggoop. Susannah may have first come to Boronggoop when she arrived as Anne wrote in her diary '*Susan went to Miss Fenwick's and did not return*'. There was a mention of her visiting on 12 December 1843, '*Susan came*' and possibly also on the 6 December 1844, '*Susan went home*'. These visits may have been to see the Scott girls. Drysdale and Newcomb employed a young woman Biddy Trainer to assist Vair Armstrong with the washing. Her story will be added to the website. There are a few mentions in the Drysdale diaries of Susan working for them after Biddy Trainer left to get married.

- 22 June 1844: Susan here but also to be married.
- 24 June 1844: Susan stayed home as she was proclaimed in church.⁶



Fig. 2. Coverdale Memorial, Geelong East Cemetery, photo (c) Ron M 22 May 2016

Susannah Johnstone married Richard Coverdale on 11 July 1844. He was working at Lloyd's Stores in Geelong at that time. He later farmed at Cowie's Creek near Lara.⁷ They had six children all born in Geelong - John (9 Mar 1845 - 16 Mar 1845), Elizabeth known as Bessie, married John Bell (14 Aug 1846 - 1928), Mary Johnstone married James Smith (17 June 1848 - 3 December 1944), George Edward (28 Jan 1851 -), John (16 May 1852 - 8 Oct 1852), Thomas James (23 Oct 1854 - 1 November 1920).⁸ Richard Coverdale was born 2 February 1810 in Yorkshire, England and died 21 May 1897 in North Geelong. Susannah Coverdale died 13 June 1899 in Lara.⁹ Richard and Susannah are buried in the Geelong Eastern Cemetery. Mary Johnstone Smith, John Coverdale 1852, and Thomas James Coverdale are also mentioned on the memorial.¹⁰

Susannah maintained contact with Maryanne and Kitty Scott. A diary entry 27 Oct 1846: M. & K. [Scott] to see Susan.¹¹ A letter written to Susannah Coverdale by Maryanne dated 10 June 1852 verified that Susannah continued her connections with Maryanne and Kitty. It is believed she

⁵ Anon., 'Port Phillip', Shipping Gazette and Sydney General Trade List, 4 May 1844, p. 51.

⁶ Diary of Anne Drysdale, diary entries, Volume 11.

⁷ Marion Taylor, personal telephone conversation with Ann Hodgkinson, February 2023.

⁸ Taylor Family Tree, Ancestry.com.au.

⁹ Taylor Family Tree, Ancestry.com.au

¹⁰ Susannah Coverdale, Find A Grave Index, https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/162954423/susannah_coverdale, Ancestry.com.au, accessed 6 June 2023.

¹¹ Bev Roberts Ed., *Miss D and Miss N*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009, p. 215.

attended Kitty's wedding in 1856.¹² The following quote from Maryanne's letter demonstrates her close connection with the two Scott girls:

*I will never forget your kindness to me
I have you always in my mind thinking that I had
such a kind friend and could not behave myself. Mother
And Maria are in good health and fat like pigs. They many a time
talk about Susan the white lady of the Rebaker as they call you*

Maryanne Scott left Drysdale and Newcomb's residence during the period covered by the missing diary, although Kitty remained with them until the early 1850s. Maryanne worked for a period of time as a nanny with Susannah Coverdale.¹³ This was probably from around 1848 until Maryanne's pregnancy and the birth of her daughter, Janet Scott in 1849, as alluded to in the above letter, after which she returned to King Island.

(C) Ann Hodgkinson, Bellarine Historical Society, 2023.

¹² Taylor, telephone conversation, 2023.

¹³ Agati, Luke, *John Scott Sealer, Family Man & His King Island (1828 - 55)*, King Island Historical Society 2019, p. 14.