

Women and Religious Change: a case study in the colonialmigrantexperience.¹

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Foreword

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, currents of religious change long perceptible in the west became far more pronounced. Long established religions lost adherents to agnosticism on the one hand and, on the other, to newer, more individualistic religions which were less institutionally and liturgically oriented. From as early as the mid-eighteenth century, women had bulked increasingly large in the church congregations of the west as men tended to stand aside from religion and dedicate themselves to a more and more secularised public world of work and politics. This trend too became more pronounced in the late nineteenth century, but a new feature now came to the fore: women rose to striking public visibility in organised religious activity, assuming organisational and leadership roles on a scale surpassing even that of the radical religious turmoil associated with mid-seventeenth century Protestantism.

Against this European background I want to take up the story of Margaret Dixon in Australia. Her shift from Anglicanism, via numerology, astrology and commitment to the world ideals implicit in Esperanto, to the teachings of Bahá'í, on the one hand reflects the widespread change occurring in western Protestant religion we have noted. But beyond that it also traces out a far from uncommon pattern the historian is able to discern among Australian religious women of her time.

My grandmother Margaret Dixon was born Margaret Bertha Shann on Wednesday, 11 July 1877 at 12.50 pm (her horoscope, 1926) and died at the age of sixty two in Melbourne, 1939. My grandmother's life, and that of my father, was deeply shaped by the circumstances of my great-grandfather's story, above all by the breakup of his marriage somewhere in the 1880s.

My great-grandfather Frank Shann, Margaret's father, was the twelfth

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or thirteenth son of a Yorkshire clothier family, the Shanns. Strips of land belonging to Shanns can be seen in maps of the villages outside Leeds from the 16th century onwards. During the expansive eighteenth century, Margaret Dixson's branch of the Shanns moved into Leeds, set up as textile manufacturers, and became citizens of substance. They played a part in church and civic life: Shann daughters, for example, taught the children of barge-dwellers, the 'bargees', and a notable Shann male was prominent in the affairs of the Leeds library. Margaret Dixson's passion for things of the mind took one of its points of departure from the traditions of her English and Australian Shann bourgeois family. But, as we shall see, it was her destiny to be and feel estranged from them and much of the nourishment they might have given her.

Various Shanns migrated to America and New Zealand, but since Margaret Shann Dixson's immediate family is our quarry here, I'll confine myself now to the Australian branch. The Australian Shanns, like the English, number some well-known citizens: Edward Owen Giblin Shann, Australia's first prominent economic historian and professor of economic history at the University of Western Australia; Frank Shann, a former headmaster of Trinity Grammar, Kew, Victoria. Frank's son, Edward, has been head of the Economic Division in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet; an Australian representative at the International Monetary Fund in Washington; Chief Economist with Shell Australia, and Director of Policy and Research with the Business Council of Australia. After many years as a paediatrician in the New Guinea Highlands, his brother Athol spent some of his time setting up international programs and lecturing on third world infantile disease for the World Health Organisation. He was also the Director of Intensive Care at the Royal Children's Hospital and Senior Lecturer in Paediatrics at the University of Melbourne.

Margaret Shann's father Frank was born in 1836, and married Elizabeth Anne Barry in 1858. She died giving birth to their second child, and next year (1864), we find the young widower following his elder brother Richard to Australia. Richard found his way to Queensland and there established a family. Frank, who divided his time between Victoria and Tasmania, married Frances Wood, whose name was given to my father: John Francis Dixson.

Frances Wood's parents were John Wood and Anne Davenport, both Irish Protestants. John was the son of John Wood and Annie Knox, of the same religious persuasion, and they lived in Fermanagh county. Frances's mother, Anne Davenport, was the Tipperary-born daughter of an army captain. Frances's father John was at various points in his career an overseer, a tollgate keeper, and finally a farmer. John and Ann Wood married at St. Andrew's church, Dublin, on 23 June 1837. Arriving in Australia about 1845, they stayed for some thirteen years in New South Wales and many more in Victoria. John died in Victoria at the age of eighty-five in December 1890.

Several of John and Ann's eleven children had been born in Ireland, before

they migrated, but Margaret Dixson's mother, Frances, was born in New South Wales, possibly in Monaro, on 24 April 1851 and subsequently christened in the Church of England on 5 June that year.

Frances, as we've said, married Frank Shann, and the couple had four children. Then - a most unusual thing in that day and age, particularly among what in the phrase of that time would have been called 'respectable' citizens, they divorced.

Margaret Bertha Dixson had one sister, Elizabeth (called Leischen, with the nickname 'Fuss'), and two brothers, Edward and Frank: the girls' names, like those of the boys, were typical Shann names.

In Australia, Frank Shann worked at various occupations. Between about 1889 and 1896, for example, we find him editing the *Nhill Mail* and publishing the first poems of John Shaw Neilson. His sons Frank and Edward went to school at Nhill state school, SS2411, as it was designated. Frank Shann also established a school in Hobart, Tasmania. Here he became friendly with L.F. Giblin, the economist later to play an important part in helping the Australian federal government to fashion its responses to the 1929 depression. As token of his affection for Giblin, Frank Shann called his second son by the name of 'Edward Owen Giblin'. Frank Shann's letters to Margaret Dixson reveal him as a deeply religious man, and in 1909, at the age of seventy one, we find him still active in local church affairs in Albert Park, a suburb of Melbourne, writing for the church newspaper. At that time Margaret, then a busy young mother and farmer's wife, wrote regretting that she "had so little time to read and study God's Word". In response Frank advised her to "ask for His Holy Spirit and 'He will teach you all things...'"

In the late nineteenth century when the parents split up, Frances, the mother, took the two girls, Margaret and 'Leischen', and Frank, the father, took the two boys, Edward and Frank. The stories of each side then diverge quite markedly: that of the boys is one of hard work, steady success and upward social mobility; that of the mother and girls one of hard work, lack of success and downward mobility. One could perhaps explain this entirely by recalling the tragically scarce paid work-options then available to the unskilled woman, especially one who'd been initially a mother and wife and then became a sole parent. Such options are very limited today, but at the time Margaret Dixson's mother had to rear her girls, there was not even a safety-net social welfare system. Family legend has the mother earning their income by selling jewellery from a horse-drawn buggy. Neither daughter seems to have received significant formal education.

Edward and Frank, the brothers, by contrast received a good education. Edward's postgraduate experience at the London School of Economics played no small part in shaping his later attitudes towards economics. As a postgraduate student, Edward described as 'particularly helpful' a letter of introduction

his father procured from the distinguished Australian politician Alfred Deakin. In later life, when as we noted, he was to become a leading economic historian, Edward corresponded actively with John Maynard Keynes whom one surmises he met during his years in London. His elder brother, Frank, at one point a teacher at Wesley College, Melbourne, as we saw became headmaster of the Anglican boys' school, Trinity Grammar, Kew.

My story of Margaret Shann's life now shifts to north-eastern Victoria, to farming country near Numurkah. At some time in the early twentieth century, Margaret Shann became governess in the home of one of the five brothers of Walter Dixson. It was no doubt through that position that she met the handsome, dark haired and blue-eyed Walter Dixson. At about nineteen she married him, at the time a moderately successful farmer. My photo of the marriage shows a reflective and quite strikingly attractive Margaret and a debonair, a dashing Walter, then thirty-seven. Walter's father was English. His mother was Anne Wilson, a Scottish woman whose own father was a sea captain. The Dixsons were early settlers in the Goulburn Valley, and though Walter had five brothers, there were no sisters. In sixteen-inch rainfall country well-suited to wheat, he raised wheat and some sheep. With his brother Harry, who lived about two miles away, he also worked an area of good wheat country on the banks of the Murray some miles from the home farm. The brothers further grazed cattle on another largish area in a horseshoe bend of the river for many years called Dixson's Bend. Walter Dixson's wheat won a prize at the Numurkah District Agricultural Society annual competition in 1904, and on occasion his horse, Silvermane, won competitions.

Margaret, dark-haired and dark-eyed, with her 'humorous sort of mouth', was an eternal optimist who could only see the good side of people. She bounced when she walked, she whistled, she loved to sing. Her daughter Molly described her as 'something of a dreamer', 'so spontaneous in her feelings'. She 'loved to laugh', and 'didn't care if people looked at her'. Some detail of Margaret's life with Walter on the farm outside Numurkah comes from her elder daughter, Dorothy Ann ('Doris'). Her first babies were twins and died. Then came Doris, John Francis ('Jack', my father), and Molly. Margaret seems to have been an excellent sewer, for pictures show the children in fine flowing babies' dresses - baby Jack is quite elegant - and sturdy Doris at about nine, long beribboned tresses and a frilled, fetching dress. Margaret seems to have been a good cook and housekeeper. She was an enthusiastic pianist, it seems, and Doris tells us she played her children to sleep. Later when fourteen year old Jack was learning the saxophone, she would sit by his side 'for hours' while he practised, beating time for him.

Farm life in the early twentieth century demanded a lot of women, even more than it does now. For example Doris recalled that her mother had to wind up water from a deep well to feed the draft horse, and carry buckets of

water into the house to boil water over the fire. As a careful housekeeper she had to bear it with equanimity when storms deposited layers of fine dust over her dinner table. An excerpt based on Doris's information about her from my book on Australian women, *The Real Matilda*, fills out the picture of Margaret's life on the farm a little more:

My own grandmother, Margaret Bertha... was a deeply intellectual woman. But because she married a farmer in north-east Victoria, the life of the mind was often denied to her, for example, by the need to cook for farm labour during harvest, by tasks such as carrying water to the kitchen (Grandfather was reluctant to 'waste' money for capital improvement by piping water to the kitchen) and hand sewing clothes for Dad and my aunts. Though Grandma died when I was nine, she had a crucial influence on my life...

Margaret Dixson might have thought herself starved for the life of the mind, but she was far from entirely cut off from it. Mrs Hilda Morrison of Numurkah tells us that 'Dickie', as Margaret was known around Numurkah in the early years of the century, studied numerology and astrology, attending lectures on these given by that great stalwart of early twentieth-century country town culture in Australia, the local school headmaster. Hilda Morrison can also remember conversations in Esperanto between her own mother and Dickie, and I remember Grandma teaching the language to me when she lived with my family in St. Kilda, a suburb of Melbourne, not long before her death. From her childhood, Doris recalls parcels of books on Milton and Shakespeare arriving at the farm homestead, and Molly tells of her mother's musical evenings there.

In 1916 or 1917 Walter Dixson's story ended tragically, and as a result, Margaret's life changed dramatically, taking her finally to Melbourne where she would encounter the young Bahá'í movement. On the home farm Walter and Margaret weathered the severe droughts of 1915-1916, and had a bumper crop ready to harvest. Facing severe wartime labour shortage, Walter tackled the crop only to collapse and die ten days later from cerebral haemorrhage. The bereaved family left the farm and finally found its way to Melbourne. Doris was old enough to work, and left home. Despite some help from Doris, Margaret found it extremely hard to earn enough money to raise Jack and Molly. At some point Margaret took her children to Echuca, Victoria, where she worked as housekeeper for her cousin, Ruby Dixson, a former singer and one-time protegee of Dame Nellie Melba. However Margaret Dixson pined for the city and the life of the mind, and found her way back as soon as she could. In the Melbourne suburb of South Yarra (Margaret was fond of South Yarra, and the family lived in rooms in several different locations here), she

found further work as housekeeper. But she took other kinds of work wherever she could find them. For example we know that at one stage, in a converted tram situated in the backyard of a home in Ormond, she taught Esperanto to a seventeen-year-old youth struck down with polio. She also set up a tiny nursery school at an Ormond girls' school, 'Kilvington', owned by her friend Miss Fish. Margaret charged twelve shillings a week for each child, and had five pupils.

Margaret's interest in numerology, astrology and Esperanto took her into the New Civilisation Centre, in Collins Street, Melbourne in the early twenties. The Centre was based on New Thought, a philosophical and mental therapeutics movement developed in North America. 'Individualistic and non-liturgical', it emphasised the power of constructive thinking, and to some extent recalls the Theosophical Movement which also had a branch in Melbourne at that point. At this time a newspaper advertises Margaret Dixson as teaching numerology classes at the New Civilisation Centre. It is reasonable to surmise she first encountered the infant Australian Bahá'í movement here, for we know the founders of the Australian movement, Clara and Hyde Dunn spoke at the Centre at this time. She became secretary to the Melbourne Bahá'í group. In the early 1920s, Margaret and her two children accompanied the Duns to Sydney, where they shared a house at Randwick. We find her mentioned as secretary to the Sydney group during her brief stay there.

Margaret Dixson, born into the Church of England, drew enormous satisfaction from her later commitment to the Bahá'í movement. Her son and daughter register her years as sole parent as a time of great material hardship, and considerable ill-health: according to her daughter Molly, she often seemed 'too weak ... just worn out.' But she was never downcast, and never complained. Margaret Dixson was a seeker. We can see signs of this in the discussion evenings she held at the farm near Numurkah; in her studies from much the same period in numerology, astrology and Esperanto; and finally in her involvement with the Bahá'ís. Graham Hassall describes her as 'an ardent worker for nearly twenty years' with the Bahá'í movement in Melbourne, and in that work he suggests she displayed qualities of 'genuine self-effacement, or humility...'

Finally, she had a love of the Australian country, and we end this tribute to her life with an excerpt from an article she wrote in 1928 which conveys something of the flavour of that love and of her sense of what it meant 'to be a pilgrim':

Leaving the beautiful agricultural districts behind us, we passed now into a barren and rocky belt of country called 'Stony Rises', where nothing was in evidence but the mineral kingdom, and the country seemed to be covered with strange-looking mounds, which as we came nearer turned out to be stone outcrops of all sorts of queer shapes. All the fences

hereabouts were built of stones carefully and laboriously built one upon another) standing monuments of the forming of the qualities of Patience and Perseverance in the souls who made them. So it appeared that whereas pilgrims may set out through what appears to be a pleasant and easy path, sooner or later the hard stones of the self will come to light. . . (But) we in this wonderful day of swiftly-moving events do not have to live a life-time among the stones, as did those old pioneers, but can move rapidly on to the Desired Land.

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