

Janet McTavish, Tasmanian Immigrant, Midwife and Prominent Citizen

Lesley Potter¹

Childbirth as a universal human phenomenon has received little research attention in colonial historiography of Australia, despite the critical need to stimulate economic growth and prosperity by increasing the Australian colonial population in the early nineteenth century. It was only with the New South Wales *Report on the Decline of the Birth-Rate* in 1904 that any official recognition was given to the importance of childbirth.² The under-emphasis on human reproduction until this time was due in some measure to the universality of giving birth: its everydayness masking its importance. At the same time, the historical documentation of the role and significance of colonial midwifery, because it is so closely aligned with childbirth, has been unacknowledged, unexamined and under-evaluated.³

The perception of colonial midwives as ignorant, unskilled and caricaturing the Dickensian image of Sairey Gamp persisted due to the prominence given to a few midwives whose practice was fraudulent, unethical or dangerous.⁴ Contrary to the common perception about midwives and the bad press they often received, it is the contention of this article that the majority of colonial midwives made significant contributions to the society in which they lived as businesswomen and providers of maternity health care.⁵ Focussing only on the professional aspects of midwives while excluding their participation in significant personal relationships, such as family and their community, is a theme denounced by North American nurse historian Patricia D'Antonio, who writes:

1 I wish to acknowledge Michelle Berry for alerting me to the existence of Janet McTavish as a midwife and Eric Pinkard (Mt Stuart Residents Inc.) for his assistance. I also appreciate and would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments and helpful suggestions to improve this article.

2 *Report on the Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate and on the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales, Vols 1-2, Sydney, 1904.*

3 Lesley Potter, *Mistress of Her Profession: Colonial Midwives of Sydney 1788-1901*, Sydney, 2017, p 132.

4 Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*, Oxford, 2009; Madonna Grehan, "From the sphere of Sarah Gampism": The Professionalization of Nursing and Midwifery in the Colony of Victoria', *Nursing Inquiry*, Vol 11, No 3, 2004, 192-201.

5 L E Potter, 'Weaving the Threads: A Tapestry of Sydney's Colonial Midwives, 1788-1901', PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2016; Madonna Grehan, 'Heroes or Villains? Midwives, Nurses, and Maternity Care in Mid-nineteenth Century Australia', *Traffic*, Vol 11, 2009, pp 55-72.

Women's culture and experiences can never be completely recounted solely in terms of their relationship with paid labor; that is, situations outside the workplace—women's places within the social fabric of their communities, their neighbourhoods, and their families—have emerged as equally powerful determinants of their consciousness, their roles, and their sense of agency. As a result, we have discovered the almost seamless interconnectedness of women's working and private lives.⁶

This article elucidates how the life and work of one woman and midwife challenges the common perception of midwives in the early nineteenth century colony of Australia and how her life as a distinguished citizen challenges the agency of women in early colonial times. What was it like to be a midwife in early colonial times? How did midwives practice their craft and assist women in childbirth? The life and professional status of Janet McTavish, working in Hobart Town in the early 1800s, before there was any professional registration or organisation of midwives, reveals some remarkable facts about midwifery in this early period and will help to answer these questions.⁷ The multifaceted web of associations surrounding Janet McTavish, both within her family and in Hobartian society, will identify her unique historical reality. Positioning midwifery, and in particular this midwife, in the milieu of colonial Hobart Town, in the local economy and in the domestic sphere, will lead to a better understanding of the important contribution the colonial midwife made to maternity and infant care.

When Janet McTavish arrived in September 1824, Hobart was a small town nestling at the foot of its sentinel, Mount Wellington. McTavish was to discover that Hobart Town was a small bustling port with water dependent industries, such as breweries, distilleries, shipbuilding, mills and storehouses, established along the waterfront. Tall masted sailing ships—convict transports, traders, sealers and whalers—jostled for docking positions around Sullivan's Cove. The town was also the administrative centre of government for the island, the most southerly outpost of British colonial rule.

6 Patricia D'Antonio, 'Revisiting and Rethinking the Rewriting of Nursing History', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Vol 17, No 2, 1999, p 272.

7 Alison Alexander, 'Midwifery', *The Companion to Tasmanian History*, 2005, http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/M/Midwifery.htm. accessed 12 June 2018.

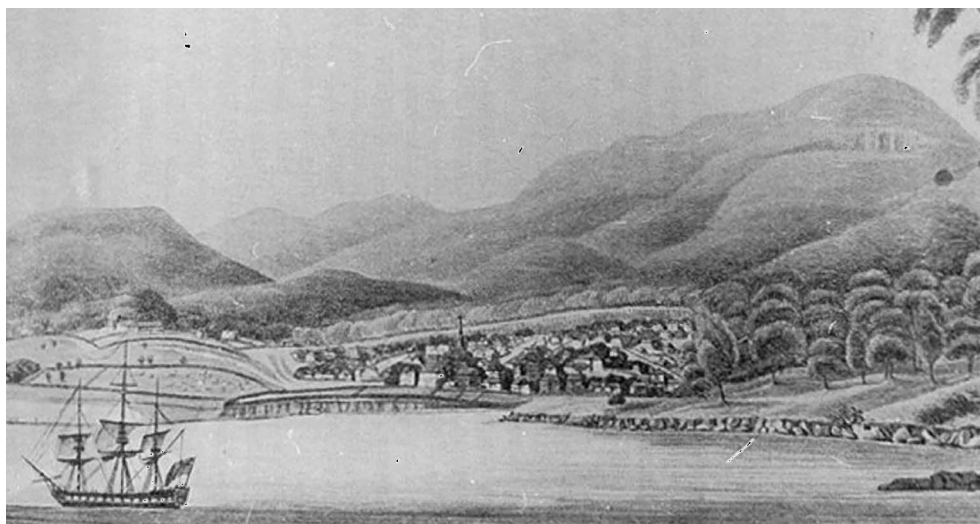


Figure 1: Hobart 1821, Joseph Lycett

Source: PH30/1/598, TAHO

In a similar fashion to the inchoate history of other Australian colonies, Van Diemen's Land was experiencing rapid change. Momentous events were happening around the time of Janet McTavish's arrival. In May 1824 the new Lieutenant-Governor, George Arthur, arrived to take up office. In the year following, on 3 December 1825, independence was proclaimed from New South Wales. Despite the continuing penal nature of Van Diemen's Land, politics, law, commerce and medicine were assuming greater prominence. In the early nineteenth century, the colony of Van Diemen's Land was shaped by two factors. First, the transportation of convicts, compelled by the British penal system, and, second, by the immigration of free settlers, dependent on land grants and the patronage of the British Government and colonial authorities.⁸

From the outset of European colonial settlement in Van Diemen's Land, the notion of class, evident in the life of Janet McTavish, was a central factor influencing social relationships, political and economic structures. Two distinct classes—the free immigrant citizen and the transported convict—were recognisable throughout the island both in the urban and rural areas. In Van Diemen's Land, colonists with capital were granted large land freeholds by the government, which led to the formation of an early colonial aristocracy or gentry.⁹ Land grants in Hobart and surrounding areas, such as that granted to McTavish, also validated the bourgeois status of those granted smaller holdings, enabling them to garner respect and 'play an important role in the economic and political life of the colony'.¹⁰

8 James Jupp, *The English in Australia*, Cambridge, 2004, p 52.

9 Shayne Breen, 'Class', *The Companion to Tasmanian History* http://www.utas.edu.au/tasmanian-companion/browse_r_concepts.htm accessed 22 January 2018; Ian Pearce and Clara Cowling, *Guide to the public records of Tasmania*, section 4, Archives Office of Tasmania, 1975, p 5.

10 Henry Reynolds, "'Men of Substance and Deservedly Good Repute': The Tasmanian Gentry 1856-1875", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol 15, No 3, 1969, p 61.

Convicts formed an underclass in Tasmanian society with close to 74,000 male and female convicts transported to Van Diemen's Land between 1803 and 1853.¹¹ This meant it was impossible for the free immigrant and transported convict of Hobartian society not to be conscious of each other. Indeed, there existed an atmosphere of suspicion between the two orders as free settlers feared immoral contamination from the convict class.¹² Convicts, however, were essential as free labour on the estates of the landed gentry and in the small businesses and households of middle class citizens in towns such as Hobart.

As well as class, gender always mattered in the Australian colonies in both the economic and social environment of human relationships.¹³ The common perception that an Australian egalitarianism has been present from inchoate colonial settlement days is a misleading myth. As historian Penny Russell asserts, it persists in the popular imagination as an Australian tradition.¹⁴ Gender is perhaps at the centre of class-consciousness for there has been an unmistakable male bias in much of early Australian historiography. Feminist historians of the 1970s and 1980s have successfully challenged and commented on this bias in the gendered nature of colonial society.¹⁵

This article is written in part to redress the failure to identify in Australian historiography individual women and their contribution to the social, economic and cultural fabric of the society in which they lived. It seeks to show at a micro level how one woman, Janet McTavish, challenged the gendered role a woman was duty bound to play in society. This article documents her progress and success, for her sense of feeling at home depended on how quickly as a new immigrant in Hobart Town, she could adjust, acclimatise and gain a new sense of purpose in her life and daily living. Chronicling the life and times of McTavish is therefore an attempt to document this midwife's place in history and by extension to rectify the place of women in colonial history. This article also seeks to identify the issue of class distinctions in early Van Diemen's Land colonial society and the relationship between the convict and free immigrant class as it is explored in the experience of McTavish. As an early immigrant to the colony, she lived side by side in the same society as convicts, albeit maintaining her distance in the context of her social standing and class distinction.

11 P R Eldershaw, *Guide to the Public Records of Tasmania*, section 3, Archives Office of Tasmania, 2003, Appendix 4, pp 60-1.

12 See Peter Bolger, *Hobart Town*, Canberra, 1973.

13 Penny Russell, 'Gender and Colonial Society', in Alison Bashford and Stuart MacIntyre (eds), *The Cambridge History of Australia*, Vol 1, Cambridge, 2013, p 471.

14 Penny Russell, 'Cultures of Distinction', in Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White (eds), *Cultural History in Australia*, Sydney, 2003, p 159.

15 Katrina Alford, *Production and Reproduction? An Economic History of Women in Australia, 1788-1850*, Melbourne, 1984, pp 2-3; Ann Summers, *Damn Whores and God's Police*, Sydney, 2016; Beverley Kingston, *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann*, West Melbourne, 1975; Miriam Dixon, *The Real Matilda*, Ringwood, Victoria, 1976; Joy Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia*, Melbourne, 1997.

This is not an easy task as there is minimal documentation of the early free female settler, the respectable middle class immigrant, and her contribution to European settlement and development of Tasmania. The Van Diemen's Land convict system and the lives of female convicts have been well researched and documented.¹⁶ The extant records of the colonial government demonstrate the extraordinary level of supervision and control the authorities had over convicts while they remained in the penal system. They provide detailed reports of age, place of birth, criminal offences, trial dates and sentences together with descriptions of physical features. Information can also be obtained of their assignments, their crimes and punishments in Van Diemen's Land. Once convicts had served their sentence or obtained a free pardon, and if they had no further contact with the law, they generally disappeared from the historical record. This hiatus in the historical documents is amplified when researching the lives of free citizens, making it a more difficult undertaking than researching convicts while they remained in the penal system. Documenting the life of a free immigrant woman like McTavish in Van Diemen's Land in the early 1800s bears witness to the difficulty encountered in working with scattered and limited evidence in an effort to reconstruct the historical context. Nevertheless, documenting her life from the traces that remain reveals an insight into the society in which she lived and her contribution as a midwife, landowner and citizen.

The historical details and background of Janet McTavish's family life and education as a midwife contextualise her place in the community and form important facts for supporting the argument that she made a valuable contribution to Hobart Town society. Janet (Jean or Jennet) Anderson was born about 1774 in Scotland. It appears her first marriage was to Robert Campbell, writer (lawyer) to the Society of the Signet, Stirling Scotland.¹⁷ The Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet is an ancient branch of Scotland's legal profession: 'the members of the society hold office under commission from the keeper of the signet, an officer of the crown, who is head of the society'.¹⁸ Although there are two Robert Campbells listed as members of the Signet Society in this period, neither were married to a Janet/Jean Anderson. However, if a Robert Campbell, husband of Janet Anderson, was a member of the Society, then Janet as his widow would have had access to the Society's Widow Fund for financial support.¹⁹ No extant record has been located, to date, regarding this marriage or of the death of Robert Campbell.²⁰

16 Alison Alexander, *Tasmania's Convicts: How Felons Built a Free Society*, Sydney, 2014; Lyndall Ryan, 'The Governed: Convict Women in Tasmania 1803–1853', *Bulletin of the Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies*, Vol 3, No 1, 1990-1, pp 37-51; Lucy Frost, *Abandoned Women*, Sydney, 2012.

17 Pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/150017/20170123/www.cocker.id.au/murray/young_family.html accessed 16 January 2018.

18 *A History of the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet*, Edinburgh, 1890, p ix.
<http://www.archive.org/details/historyofsociety00socirich> accessed 11 March 2018.

19 *A History of the Society of Writers*, pp xcvi-c.

20 Leah Leneman and Rosalind Mitchison, 'Clandestine Marriage in the Scottish cities 1660-1780', *Journal of Social History*, Vol 26, No 4, 1993, pp 845ff.

Due to this lack of documented evidence, these facts must remain uncertain. However, the daughter of Janet McTavish was Janet Campbell, which provides the only hard evidence, that the Campbell/Anderson marriage or de facto relationship took place.²¹

Janet Anderson did marry Tavish McTavish, a dealer in spirits, in St. Andrew's Church, Edinburgh presumably, after Robert Campbell's death. The reference to this marriage stated that she was the daughter of John Anderson (deceased) from the Parish of Kippen.²² Janet McTavish was widowed a second time after Tavish McTavish died from injuries gained after falling from a gig near New Inn, Fife and was buried on 17 August 1814.²³ Janet McTavish did not enter a third relationship and immigrated to Tasmania as a 50-year-old widow on the *Portland*.

The *Portland*, a ship of the Australian Company, commanded by Captain William Snell RN, left Leith, the port for Edinburgh, on 1 April 1824 and arrived at Hobart via Rio de Janeiro on 10 September 1824, a voyage of just over five months.²⁴ On board were eighty-seven passengers and a valuable cargo of merchandise for the colony.²⁵ Included on the list of *Portland* passengers were Janet McTavish with her son-in-law, Thomas Young and his wife (also named Janet) and their two children, Thomas and Elizabeth. Janet Campbell and Thomas Young were married on 6 June 1822 in St Cuthbert's Church, Edinburgh.²⁶

As an extended family group, the Youngs, with McTavish, voyaged to Van Diemen's Land as unassisted immigrants, to commence new lives in the colony. Thomas Young, the first child of Thomas and Janet and grandson of Janet McTavish, had been born in 1820.²⁷ This suggests he was born either out of wedlock or during the betrothal of Janet Campbell and Thomas Young. He nevertheless would be considered their legitimate firstborn as illegitimacy had a complex history in the nineteenth century and marriage laws in Scotland were quite different from those in England.²⁸ Elizabeth, the second child of the Youngs and granddaughter of McTavish, was born just a year before the family left Scotland. It is tantalising to think that grandmother McTavish was the midwife for her daughter's confinements. Janet Young must have been relieved that her mother was accompanying them as her assistance and advice concerning the children during the voyage would have been invaluable. The Youngs were to have seven more children in Hobart and again we can assume that grandmother McTavish was the midwife at these confinements.

21 Garry Wilson, *Biographical report for Janet Campbell*, Tasmanian Database in Biographical Database of Australia, person ID T#20052274403.

22 *Scotland's People* : Church of Scotland - Old Parish Registers, Record/8766689, Edinburgh, Parish No 685/1, reference 530 282.

23 *Scotland's People*, No 685, reference 990 208.

24 Scottish Post Office Directories, p.72.
digital.nls.uk/directories/browse/article/83560649?mode=transcription. accessed 22 February 2018.

25 *Hobart Town Gazette and Van Diemen's Land Advertiser*, 10 September 1824, p 2.

26 *Scotland's People*, FR 497, reference 400 487.

27 Wilson, *Biographical report for Janet Campbell*.

28 Alan Macfarlane, 'Illegitimacy and Illegitimates in English History', in Peter Laslett, Karla Oosterveen and Richard M Smith (eds), *Bastardy and its Comparative History*, Cambridge, 1980, pp 71-5; *Marriage*, The University of Glasgow <http://www.gla.ac.uk/scottishway/marriage> accessed 23 January 2018

Janet McTavish had been a qualified and practising midwife in Edinburgh prior to immigrating to Van Diemen's Land in 1824. She was educated as a midwife, as were two other immigrant midwives in Hobart—Mesdames Barfoot and Miller—under the tutelage of Dr John Thatcher MD FRCS, Clinical Lecturer at the Royal College of Edinburgh.²⁹ Thatcher was a well-known medical man in Edinburgh holding positions of Senior Physician at the General Dispensary and Lying-in Institution and Physician at the Edinburgh Lying-in Institution. This institution was notable for delivering poor married women in their own homes.³⁰ Thatcher gave McTavish a glowing testimonial: 'She is most thoroughly qualified from experience, to continue her Practice, as a Midwife, and from her general good conduct whilst with me, as well as from her mild and unassuming manners, she has my warmest wishes for her success...'³¹

This provides evidence of McTavish's character and some indication of her experience as a midwife. Her training seems to have been in the form of attending lectures and practical experience, largely domiciliary, under the supervision of a medical man such as Thatcher. Her education, nevertheless, gave her confidence to advertise her services, particularly the postnatal care of confined women, immediately on her arrival in Hobart. Historian Barbara Mortimer has researched the careers of midwives in mid-nineteenth century Edinburgh, concluding that the dominant influences on their careers was the impact of commerce and a growing professionalism.³²

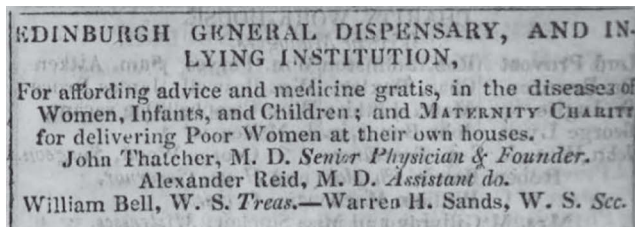


Figure 2: The Edinburgh Almanac, 1828, p 350

Education for Scottish midwives was well in advance of other countries in the early eighteenth century with the appointment in Edinburgh of the first professor of midwifery in the United Kingdom in 1726. Historian Alison Nuttall traces the educational opportunities for midwives in Edinburgh and at the Edinburgh Royal Maternity Hospital. She argues for the continuance of midwifery training, both in attendance at lectures and in gaining practical experience throughout the eighteenth

29 *Hobart Town Courier*, 14 October 1836, p 3; 11 November 1836, p 3.

30 *Edinburgh Almanac or the Universal Scots and Imperial Register*, 1828, pp 349-50 <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008691662> accessed 18 January 2018; Alison Nuttall, 'Maternity Charities, The Edinburgh Maternity Scheme and the Medicalisation of Childbirth, 1900-1925', *Social History of Medicine*, Vol 24, No 2, 2011, pp 370-88.

31 *Hobart Town Gazette*, 17 September 1824, p 3.

32 Barbara E Mortimer, 'The Nurse in Edinburgh c.1760-1860: The Impact of Commerce and Professionalisation,' PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2002.

and nineteenth centuries in this hospital.³³ It is therefore not surprising to learn of McTavish's qualifications as a midwife and of her reference from Thatcher. At a later date, a similar testimony from Dr G W Wannan was provided for Margaret Robertson, who trained in 1848 at the Edinburgh Royal Maternity Hospital and who emigrated to New Zealand in 1863.³⁴

A comparative study of the midwives of Edinburgh and Sydney in the mid-nineteenth century concluded that midwives in both cities worked independently. However, although both groups had created a niche for themselves in the commercial world, there was a difference. The Edinburgh midwives were mainly dependent for work upon medical practitioners, while the Sydney midwives were independent practitioners who organised and managed their own small enterprises.³⁵ Janet McTavish's style of midwifery work was more akin to the Sydney model, as there is no evidence that she worked in partnership with a medical man, while the domiciliary postnatal midwifery she proposed to undertake was akin to the Edinburgh model.³⁶

There was limited competition for competent independent midwives in early Hobart Town, although there must have been many women, with no official midwifery training, engaged in delivering babies. Midwifery in Van Diemen's Land rural districts in this early period has not been adequately researched. The isolated nature of rural midwives work and the conditions they would endure travelling long distances over rough terrain in all types of weather, often on horseback, to reach a woman in need of maternity services would have been arduous. Modern conditions remain difficult in rural Tasmania for both midwife and women with maternity needs as is evidenced by recent research.³⁷ McTavish was part of the small contingent of respectable and trained midwives, who immigrated to Van Diemen's Land in the 1820s. Their numbers remained small until 1850s.³⁸

33 Alison Nuttall, 'A Preliminary Survey of Midwifery Training in Edinburgh, 1844 to 1870,' *International History of Nursing Journal*, Vol 4, No 2, 1999, pp 4-6.

34 Nuttall, 'A Preliminary Survey', pp 9-10; Alison Nuttall, 'Midwifery, 1800-1920: The Journey to Registration', in Annie Borsay and Billie Hunter (eds), *Nursing and Midwifery in Britain Since 1700*, Hampshire, 2012, p 131.

35 Lesley Potter, 'Independent Women: Midwives of Two Cities, Sydney and Edinburgh in Mid-19th- century', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol 101, part 1, 2015, pp 79-92; Barbara Mortimer, 'Independent Women: Domiciliary Nurses in Mid-nineteenth-century Edinburgh', in Ann Marie Rafferty, Jane Robinson and Ruth Egan (eds), *Nursing History and the Politics of Welfare*, London and New York, 1997, pp 134-49.

36 *Hobart Town Gazette*, 17 September 1824, p 3.

37 Marita E Bardenhagen, 'Professional Isolation and Independence of Bush Nurses in Tasmania, 1910-1957', PhD thesis, University of Tasmania, 2003; Thi Hai Ha Hoang, 'Maternity Care and Services in Rural Tasmania: The Perspective of Rural Women and Health Professionals', PhD thesis, University of Tasmania, 2012.

38 Alison Alexander, 'Perceptions of Women's Role in Tasmania, 1803-1914', *Bulletin of the Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies*, Vol 3, No 2, 1991, p 86.

In the mid-nineteenth century, midwives in both England and Australia were commonly elderly and more often than not widowed.³⁹ Janet McTavish fits this categorisation. Between 1824 and the 1850s when McTavish was practising, only eight women (McTavish, Barfoot, Miller, McKenna, Morrow, Scott, Murphy and Maher) advertised their services as midwives in Hobart.⁴⁰ The first advertisements by eight Sydney midwives occurred in 1858 with the first edition of the Sands and Kenny Directory.⁴¹ Mrs Morrow was the only Hobartian midwife to advertise her fee, 15s to £1, for attending an accouchement.⁴² Advertising their services as midwives suggests that, in a similar fashion to the midwives of the English midlands, they were engaged in a sustained midwifery practice with a midwifery related income.⁴³

Whether or not all these women were trained midwives, by advertising their services they formed a unique cohort practising long before there was any training for midwifery in Tasmania.⁴⁴ It is unfortunate that to date no midwife's casebook in Van Diemen's Land in the early nineteenth century has been unearthed. Such a casebook might provide some statistics and shed light on midwifery practices. In all probability, McTavish kept a casebook as this was a common practice of midwives in Edinburgh.⁴⁵ Tantalising evidence that some colonial Australian midwives did keep a record of the deliveries they attended is the "Baby Book" of Margaret Crowley, an elderly midwife resident in New South Wales, who documented the 720 births she had attended over a thirteen-year period.⁴⁶

The role of Tasmanian midwives and their colleagues on the mainland accorded with the nineteenth-century Victorian ideal of the place of women in society. This ideal involved the fundamental belief that the dominant role for women was in the domestic private sphere of the home, caring for her children and husband.⁴⁷ Indeed, one writer, in a letter to the editor of the *Tasmanian Daily News* in 1857, convinced of a woman's rightful position and influence in the family, disparaged women speaking publicly because it would not only harm the peace and comfort of the family circle but

39 Nuttall, 'Midwifery, 1800-1920', pp 130-31; Potter, 'Weaving the Threads'.

40 *Hobart Town Gazette*, 1 October 1824, p 4; *Hobart Town Courier*, 14 October 1836, p.3; 11 November 1836, p 3; *The Courier*, 29 January 1841, p 1; 17 October 1846, p 1; *Colonial Times*, 5 October 1849, p 1; *Hobartian Guardian*, 17 April 1850, p 2.

41 Trade Section, 'Midwives' of Sands and Kenny's, *Commercial and General Directory*, Sydney, 1858.

42 *The Tasmanian*, 6 April 1838, p 3.

43 Frances Jane Badger, 'Delivering Maternity Care: Midwives and Midwifery in Birmingham and its Environs, 1794-1881', PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2014, p 17.

44 Training commenced at Queen Victoria Hospital, Launceston in 1897 and in 1908 at the Queen Alexandria Hospital, Hobart. Examination and registration of midwives was not achieved until the Midwifery Nurse Act, 1901.

45 A M Nuttall, 'The Edinburgh Royal Maternity Hospital and the Medicalisation of Childbirth in Edinburgh 1844-1914: A Casebook Centred Perspective', PhD thesis, Edinburgh University, 2003.

46 *Maitland Daily Mercury*, 5 May 1897, p 5; *Singleton Argus*, 8 May 1897, p 3.

47 Alexander, 'Perceptions of women's role', pp 81-97; Kingston, *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann*, p 5.

also destroy the whole fabric of society!⁴⁸ In assessing women's work in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Frances Badger attributes the identification of appropriate women's behaviour with the domestic sphere to expectations of middle class men and their attitudes to the place of women in society.⁴⁹ Nineteenth-century midwifery was closely associated with domesticity and considered an acceptable occupation for women: its milieu was the home. Midwifery considered as private women's business was also closely linked to female reproductive functions.⁵⁰

The Victorian paradigm of the ideal woman implied that respectable women were not expected to work for a living. Janet McTavish was perhaps economically constrained into this situation of supporting herself due to her status as a widow. As historian Alison Alexander commented, women in this period only worked for a living if they had to support themselves or their families.⁵¹ In a study of midwifery in Sheffield England in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historian Tania McIntosh alludes to the family structure of a midwife greatly influencing the way she worked and how many women only needed to work once they were widowed. Midwifery linked with domesticity was an acceptable occupation, especially for many widows.⁵²

The rules and etiquettes surrounding childbirth in England did not necessarily apply in the colonies. In the colonial environment, the social bulwarks of family, suitable friends and the social niceties that would surround women during childbirth were generally lacking. In the early colonial period, women were grateful for assistance from a midwife, even a convict woman with some experience and knowledge of childbirth. Margaret Catchpole, a New South Wales convict with midwifery experience, wrote that the women she attended in the Hawkesbury region could not do without her.⁵³ Therefore, it was a great boon to women in childbirth if the services of a trained and experienced midwife could be secured.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, there remained residues in the colony of long-practiced English childbirth traditions, such as the customs associated with preparing the sacred space of the lying-in room for the birth.⁵⁵

48 *Tasmanian Daily News*, 11 November 1857, p 3.

49 Badger, 'Delivering Maternity Care', p 15.

50 Potter, *Mistress of her Profession*, p 29.

51 Alexander, 'Perceptions of Women's Role', p 83.

52 Tania McIntosh, 'Profession, Skill, or Domestic Duty? Midwifery in Sheffield, 1881–1936', *The Society for the Social History of Medicine*, Vol 11, No 3, 1998, pp 407–411, 413.

53 Margaret Catchpole Papers, 2 September 1811, p 15, Mitchell Library MSS 6241.

54 Glenda Strachan, 'Present at the Birth: Midwives, "Handywomen" and Neighbours in Rural New South Wales, 1850–1900', *Labour History*, No 81, 2001, pp 13–28; Lesley Potter, *An Analysis of Those Present at Birth in the Sydney Suburb of Glebe in the Year 1890*, forthcoming.

55 Adrian Wilson, 'Childbirth in Seventeenth-and-eighteenth-century England', PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 1982, p 131.

The normal choice of venue by nineteenth century women for childbirth was the home and the home therefore was the acknowledged place for the practise of midwifery in both Australia and the United Kingdom.⁵⁶ Therefore, it is remarkable that as early as 1839, Janet McTavish, as a sixty-five-year-old qualified midwife, established and managed a simple lying-in home, *Rosebank* in New Town. *Rosebank*, located in what is now McTavish Avenue in suburb of North Hobart, seemed to incorporate the residence of McTavish and rooms accommodating women for their confinement.⁵⁷ The role of nineteenth century midwives as businesswomen has been neglected in historiography of women's work largely because midwifery had been conducted in the domestic realm, secluded from the male gaze. Australian historian Catherine Bishop concludes from her research concerning the small businesswomen of Sydney that midwives as other colonial entrepreneurial business women were 'hidden in plain view'.⁵⁸ English historian Barbara Mortimer's work suggests that the Edinburgh midwives she studied were engaged in commercial enterprises.⁵⁹ Frances Badger agrees that the midwives of the English midlands she researched had an entrepreneurial approach to their work and 'should be integrated into the historiography of businesswomen'.⁶⁰

While it was unusual for colonial midwives to establish and manage their own lying-in facility, there is evidence that a few enterprising colonial midwives managed lying-in maternity homes as a business enterprise. To illustrate this, I will take two examples from my research of colonial midwives in Sydney. Madame De St Remy was a Parisian-educated midwife who came to Sydney in 1855 and settled in the eastern suburb of Woolloomooloo. She quickly advertised her services as a midwife.⁶¹ She established a modest midwifery business, which quickly expanded into a commercial concern and attracted pregnant women from both urban and rural areas due to the positive reputation of her midwifery knowledge and skills.⁶² Another entrepreneurial midwife was Annie Lever, a trained midwife from Somerset, who established a lying-in maternity business in the Georgian mansion *Lyndhurst*, Glebe between 1884 and 1886. Glebe at this time was an outer suburb of Sydney, but within walking distance of the town. Annie Lever was a 43-year-old widow when she immigrated to Sydney in 1878. Although her lying-in business appeared to flourish, it ran into financial difficulties and Annie Lever resorted to conducting abortions for monetary gain. This practice led to two court trials and her prompt departure to Western Australia.⁶³

56 Mortimer, 'The Nurse in Edinburgh'.

57 D H Metcalfe, *A History of Mount Stuart*, North Hobart, 2001, p 40.

58 Catherine Bishop, *Minding Her Own Business: Colonial Businesswomen in Sydney*, Sydney, 2015; Catherine Bishop, 'Women of Pitt Street 1858', *Dictionary of Sydney*, 2011.
<http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/women_of_pitt_street_1858> accessed 28 August 2013.

59 Mortimer, 'Independent women', pp 133-49.

60 Badger, 'Delivering Maternity Care', Abstract.

61 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 June 1855, p 6.

62 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 October 1859, p 1.

63 Potter, *Mistress of her Profession*, pp 89-92.

Although Janet McTavish's lying-in enterprise may have started as a small venture, allocating rooms in her residence for confining women, the fact that she employed a number of people together with convicts suggests her maternity enterprise expanded and she had something of a thriving business establishment at *Rosebank*. Midwifery work enabled her to combine the role of householder and businesswoman. There was thus an obvious benefit to the practice of midwifery for a woman as she could function as a midwife in and from her own premises.

In the early 1820s, convicts and emancipated convicts still formed the major portion of the working class population. Once transportation ended in 1853, there was an urgent need for intakes of free immigrants as labourers if Van Diemen's Land was to increase its productivity. The depletion of the population to the Victorian gold fields between 1851 and 1858—the peak of the Victorian Gold Rush—intensified this need.⁶⁴ This determined push for immigration of free immigrants to Van Diemen's Land did not begin until the conclusion of transportation. As an early immigrant in 1824, McTavish had arrived long before this period, when Van Diemen's Land was still primarily a penal colony. What was it like, then, for a free, educated, middle-class woman to live side by side with convicts in a penal settlement in the early nineteenth century? Snippets from the life of McTavish in Hobart provide a limited insight into such a milieu.

In a similar fashion to most free immigrants who could afford to support a convict workforce, by providing accommodation and food, McTavish had a number of convicts, male and female, assigned to her. This is remarkable for two reasons. First, it was unusual, although not unknown, for a woman to have convicts assigned to her as most convicts were assigned to the master of a household. Second, as a midwife she was unique in having assigned convicts. My research to date, of midwifery in nineteenth century New South Wales, has not revealed another midwife who had convicts assigned to her. McTavish, however, was considered in the 1837 Census, as the head of her household. In this census, it is recorded that one female and two male convicts were assigned to her. As well, she had two free immigrants, John Moses and Jane McCarty (or McCarthy) in her employ.⁶⁵ In 1838, McTavish also received convicts from the Prison Barracks, Hobart.⁶⁶ I have not been able to discover how many convicts there were nor who these convicts might be. A year later in 1839, transported convict Ann Gough (*Majestic*), whose designated occupation was domestic servant, was assigned to Janet McTavish, New Town Road.⁶⁷

64 Kevin Green, 'Immigration as an Alternative to Transportation: Van Diemen's Land 1852- 1855', *Bulletin of the Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies*, Vol 3, No 1, 1990-1, pp 150-65.

65 Census 1837, Census District Newtown POL 363/1/1, Record ID 479851, p 115.

66 *Hobart Town Courier*, 18 May 1838, p 4.

67 CON19-1-14, HO 10/51, p 256, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office.

POTTER: JANET MCTAVISH, TASMANIAN IMMIGRANT,
MIDWIFE AND PROMINENT CITIZEN

As a prospering middle-class citizen of Hobart, McTavish was not spared the larceny that was rife in the colony. On 24 November 1833, her premises on New Town Road were broken into and all movable items stolen. Convict Samuel Dyke stole from her cellar a quantity of ale, porter, ham and soap. Samuel Dyke, an absconder from the road gang, was apprehended and McTavish brought charges against him. Dyke was tried on 21 January 1834 and received the death penalty.⁶⁸



**Figure 3: Janet McTavish, portrait by Thomas Bock.
C1848 crayon and opaque white on paper, Private collection.**

Source: Diane Dunbar, *Thomas Bock, Convict Engraver, Society Portraitist*, Launceston, 1991, p 57

⁶⁸ *Hobart Town Courier*, 19 July 1833, p 2, 24 January 1834, p 3; *Trumpeter General*, 9 January 1834, p 3; *Colonial Times*, 14 January 1834, p 7.

Another noteworthy convict association in this saga was the connection Janet McTavish had with the Hobart artist Thomas Bock. McTavish and Bock had arrived in Van Diemen's Land in 1824. Transported for fourteen years for administering herbs for the purpose of causing a miscarriage, Bock had arrived in Hobart on the *Asia* on 19 January 1824.⁶⁹ As a free immigrant, McTavish had arrived in Hobart on the *Portland* on 10 September 1824. In 1835, Thomas Bock was granted an absolute pardon and was therefore a free man. By the 1840s, Bock's reputation as an engraver and portraitist had grown, enhanced by vice regal patronage and his clients were members of the top echelon of Hobart's society—clientele 'who could afford his services'.⁷⁰ Robert and Janet Young together with McTavish all had their portraits drawn in crayon and coloured chalk circa 1848 by Bock, which suggests they were amongst Hobart's elite class. Indeed, Thomas Young had some standing in the community as, one month after his arrival in 1824 as a fledgling lawyer, he had been admitted to the Van Diemen's Land legal establishment. The Supreme Court in Hobart had only been constituted in May 1824.⁷¹ McTavish and the Young family had not been part of the Scottish aristocracy, but in Van Diemen's Land they were part of the professional upwardly mobile socially elite class.

Although related by marriage to a distinguished Hobart lawyer, McTavish was a prominent citizen in her own right. Around 1830 she received a grant of about five acres, one of the earliest land grants in the precinct of Mount Stuart.⁷² Theophilus Lightfoot's claim for a grant of land adjacent to that occupied by McTavish substantiates that she had indeed received this land grant.⁷³ Although it is not known why or how McTavish was granted this land, from the 1820s many respectable settlers brought with them letters from the Home Office authorities entitling them to land but this seems unlikely in her case.⁷⁴ By 1839, however, her residence *Rosebank* had been built.⁷⁵

69 Roger Butler, 'Thomas Bock, Engraver', in Diane Dunbar (ed), *Thomas Bock, Convict Engraver, Society Portraitist*, Launceston, 1991, p 7.

70 Diane Dunbar, 'Thomas Bock: Society Portraitist, the Oil Paintings', in Dunbar, *Thomas Bock*, p 46.

71 *Mercury*, 2 July 1913, p 6.

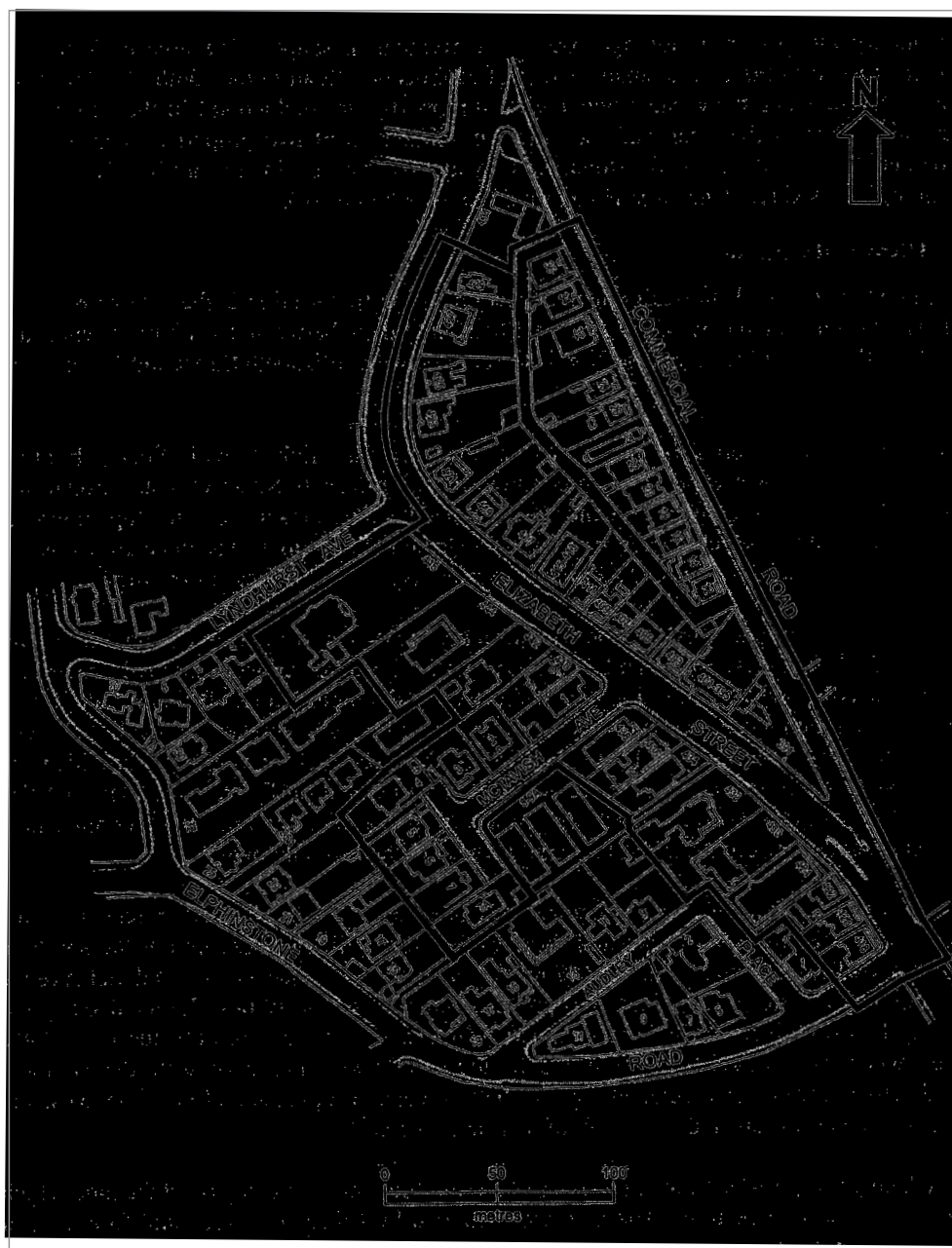
72 Robert Vincent, *North Hobart Heritage Study*, Hobart, 1999, p 58.

73 *Hobart Town Courier*, 9 May 1834, p 4.

74 Pearce and Cowling, *Guide to the Public Records of Tasmania*, section 4, Hobart, 1975, p 5.

75 Katheryn Bennett, *North Hobart Heritage AREAS, A DETAILED ASSESSMENT*, HOBART, 2005, P 67.

POTTER: JANET MCTAVISH, TASMANIAN IMMIGRANT,
MIDWIFE AND PROMINENT CITIZEN



**Figure 4: Proposed Heritage Area G –
McTavish Avenue and Surrounds.**
Source: Katheryn Bennett, *North Hobart Heritage
Areas, a Detailed Assessment*, Hobart, 2005, p 66

A curious incident revealed in a Hobart Town Police report occurred on 31 May 1838, when McTavish was fined ten shillings for ‘assaulting and beating’ her free hired servant Jane McCarthy.⁷⁶ Unequal power relationships existed between mistress/master and convict and to a different degree of inequality, between mistress and free servant. Despite Thatcher’s reference to McTavish’s mild and unassuming manners, she lost her temper presumably because of Jane McCarthy’s behaviour.⁷⁷ Whatever misdemeanour McCarthy had committed, she obviously considered such physical punishment beneath her dignity as a free woman and resorted to the law for justice. This event was even more remarkable because McTavish’s son-in-law, prominent lawyer Thomas Young would surely have been able to have the case quashed. Was McTavish being made an example of because of her mistreatment of her employee? This is a notable early example of a servant bringing a charge against an employer and a singular indication of the accessibility and impartiality of the British legal system for all citizens in the colony. McTavish died on 5 October 1858 at the age of 84 and is interred in the Thomas Young family vault, Cornelian Bay Cemetery.⁷⁸ In her last will and testament dated 1857, McTavish left her personal estate to her beloved daughter, Janet Young wife of Thomas Young solicitor.⁷⁹



Figure 5: The Young Family Vault, Cornelian Bay Cemetery, Scottish section, KK.

Source: Author photograph January 2018

76 *Hobart Town Courier*, 8 June 1838, p 4.

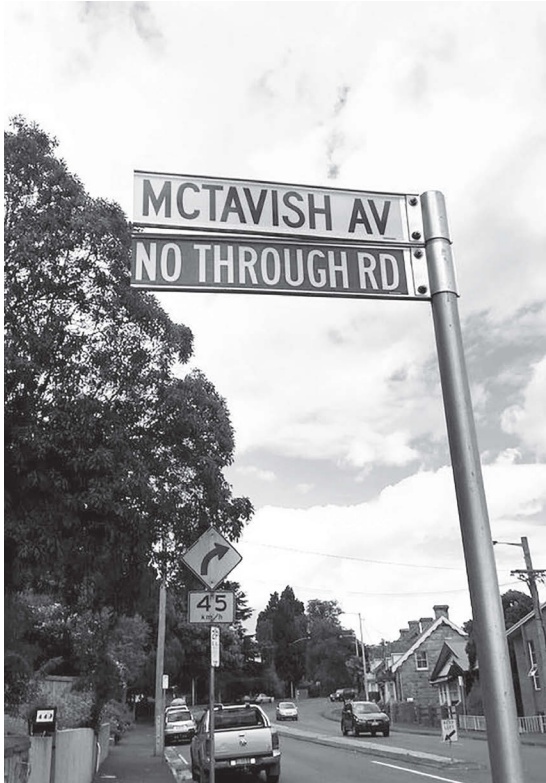
77 *Hobart Town Gazette*, 17 September 1824, p 3.

78 Tasmania Government, LINC. death registration, RGD35/1/5, no 1153.

79 Tasmania Government, LINC. Will no.752, p.278. AD 969/1/4.

Janet McTavish a Scottish immigrant to Van Diemen's Land in the early nineteenth century, although advanced in years, is an example of a woman adapting to her new environment. As a grandmother to her daughter's children, in many ways she went against the grain of the Victorian ideal of womanhood that a woman's place was only in the domestic sphere. McTavish embodied the presence of a woman engaged in midwifery work and, by establishing her midwifery enterprise, she became a small businesswoman in early Van Diemen's Land. Her education as a midwife in Edinburgh enabled her to engage with confidence in maternity care and in the process gain status within her local community.

McTavish's domestic arrangements also show the inequality and divisions existing within the early Van Diemen's Land society. On the one hand, for the elite there was privilege and prestige, and, on the other hand, for the underclass there was domestic service and manual labour with insignificant status and power. The seamless connections between her working and private life, her involvement with family, neighbourhood and community point to her sense of agency. McTavish's middle-class lifestyle, assisted by a grant of land, employing servants and having convicts assigned to her, all point to the fact that she was an accomplished small businesswoman and prominent citizen. McTavish Avenue in North Hobart is named after her and confirms her place as a prominent citizen of Hobart even to this day. There are few streets in Australia named after a colonial midwife.



**Figure 6: Signpost,
McTavish Avenue,
North Hobart.**

Source: Author Photograph
taken January 2018