

Letter to the Editor

8 March 2009

During the preparation of his 2008 article for *Script & Print*, “The Writings of Theresa Tasmania” (32:2, 95–105), Ian Morrison, Senior State Librarian to its Heritage Collections, spoke to me about the Harrington Street Strict and Particular Baptist chapel, Hobart Town, since Theresa Tasmania, whoever she was, attended its Sabbath school. I had written a small book on the life of the chapel, *Baptists in Van Diemen’s Land: The Story of Tasmania’s First Baptist Church, the Hobart Town Particular Baptist Chapel, Harrington Street 1835–1886* (1985). I made the suggestion that the poetess Theresa Tasmania might be Lucy Edgar as I was familiar with Lucy’s work, “Among the Black Boys: Being the History of an Attempt at Civilising some Young Aborigines of Australia.” Born in Hobart in 1838, Lucy Anna Edgar was the daughter of Francis Smither Edgar and his wife, Harriett Elizabeth. Francis was a trustee and most influential member of the Hobart Particular Baptist Chapel in Harrington Street.

Interested that it could be Lucy Edgar, I searched the *Tasmanian Messenger* in hope that I could identify Theresa Tasmania and I did so. In the November 1865 edition, page 373, Theresa Tasmania’s piece titled, “Our Grandmamma’s Stories,” is introduced with the note that she is the author of “Among the Black Boys.” It was under this pseudonym, Teresa Tasmania, that Lucy wrote her first work, a baptism poem of December 1860. The last of Theresa Tasmania’s recorded poems appeared on 25 November 1875. Her poems and short fictional stories have been located in the *Tasmanian Messenger*, a religious journal for the family, the Sabbath school and the church 1859–1868; in the Tasmanian Congregational *Christian Witness* and in the Melbourne *Australian Journal*. In respect to Lucy’s use of the pseudonym “Theresa Tasmania,” at the conclusion of his article, Ian Morrison correctly wrote, “Perhaps as a Sunday school teacher, Teresa Tasmania felt unable to publish poems of doubt and stories of love and loss in her home town under her own name, and having established an authorial presence it was easier to keep using the pseudonym.” Because of this finding, Tasmanian Baptists can now claim as one of their own a religious poetess of some note, one whom Ian Morrison considers to have “a fine ear for language and a capacity to develop and control complex thoughts.”

The poems themselves support this identification of Lucy as Teresa Tasmania. The poem, “The Lord has Need of Me,” as found in the *Tasmanian Messenger* of November 1866 is Calvinist. Some of the lines read:

... me, so low and sinful!
Me, so fallen and begraded,
Wand’ring, staying, lost, unaided,

Sinner wretched and notorious
 Chief among a throng inglorious!

Calvinists hold to the ‘total depravity’ of man, that all men are miserable sinners or worms kept from dropping into the fires of hell only by the whim of an inscrutable God. The sinner is seen to be completely helpless: he cannot be exhorted as this would imply creature faith. So far as salvation is concerned, he can only be told to sit and wait for the Spirit of God to convict of sin and then give some token in this experience that he is indeed an elect soul. While acknowledging that Calvinists at the time could be found in many denominations, the constitution of the Harrington Street Baptist chapel was Calvinistic and the chapel was known as The Harrington Street Strict and Particular Baptist Church. Particular refers to the doctrine of election. At the chapel Lucy Edgar managed the Sabbath school with her father, Francis Smither Edgar (*Tasmanian Messenger*, January 1866, 5).

Lucy’s poem of 1864, “Complete in Him” displays further Calvinist traits:

I had a leprosy, but now am cleansed;
 Once was I blind, but now I clearly see;
 Once did I halt, but now I run and leap,
 Regenerate thro’ the atoning BLOOD,
 Saved from all consequences of the fall....

(*Tasmanian Messenger*, November 1864, 352)

This poem is Lucy’s account of her conversion. God is making her aware that she is one of the elect. She is going through the process of salvation as the Calvinists understood and preached it. Faith is the gift of God and the unbeliever “cannot believe till it be given him to believe.” For Calvinists, believers are encouraged to attend the means of grace, in the hope that the Lord will speak to them. So zealous were higher-Calvinists to maintain the sovereignty of God that they denied that preachers had the right “to offer Christ” to unregenerate sinners. It was only legitimate to pray for the well-being of believers and not the conversion of sinners. There is nothing one can do to be saved. Only God saves, only God gives faith, only God calls.

In her poem of 1866, “The Wreck of the ‘London’” (*Tasmanian Messenger*, April 1866, 115), Lucy appears to have known some who perished. One of those lost was George Rolwegan (p. 117), a Superintendent of the Hobart Town Battery Point Congregational Sabbath School, which was affiliated with the main Hobart Town Congregational Church in Elizabeth Street. While it is probably fair to say a regular contributor to the *Tasmanian Messenger* would have known of George Rolwegan, Lucy’s parents had attended the Elizabeth Street Congregational Church under the Rev. Frederick Miller before the establishment of the Baptist Chapel in Harrington Street, and thus probably knew him personally.

Edgar was the son of Baptist parents of the Crewkerne Baptist Church, Somerset. He arrived in the colony on 30 November 1832. He met and married Harriett Elizabeth Mitchell at Miller's church. Rolwegan arrived in the colony in 1834, two years after the Edgars. The Edgars resigned from the Congregational church in 1835 when the Baptist church was formed.

In December 1860 Lucy was in attendance at the Harrington Street Chapel when James Ingram, evangelist from Beechworth, baptised Agnes White, a young teacher in the Sabbath School and James Hurst aged eighty-four years. She wrote the baptism poem as published in the *Hobart Town Advertiser*, 12 December 1860, and subsequently reprinted in the *British Millennial Harbinger* in March 1861. Since Lucy and her father were in charge of the Sabbath school that year, they would have known Agnes White. Another of Ian Morrison's comments is so fitting: he wrote, "Barring accident or injury Lucy would surely have attended the ceremony."

Yours,
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