

# Obituary

FLORA MARJORIE BASSETT



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Although Flora Marjorie ('Marnie') Bassett, a Foundation Fellow of the Academy, received from two Universities the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, she never studied in a University nor even went to school, but was educated in a home rich in the culture of Scotland, the birthplace of her parents. Her father, Sir David Orme Masson, was a distinguished professor of the University of Melbourne, her grandfather, David Masson, was an eminent man of letters and the author of a classic biography of Milton, and two of her aunts were writers of merit. Marnie Bassett never had to struggle to learn the art of writing: pure, flexible, unaffected English was the family tongue and she knew no other. When, in old age, she prepared for publication home letters dashed off during her visit to New Guinea nearly half a century before, she changed only one word.

As a young woman Marnie became interested in Australian history and published some learned papers before her marriage. Her duties as wife and mother did not permit her to resume serious scholarly work until she was over fifty, but meanwhile she kept her interest in it alive by extensive reading and the preparation of many historical papers for the Catalysts, a society of professional women of which she was an active member for sixty years. She did not regard the long postponement as a sacrifice because family life was a joy to her. Marnie was all of a piece throughout: the woman and the historian were not in conflict but supported and enriched each other, aspects of a single personality whose ruling passion was love of life, of experiencing, observing and recording it.

In history, as in life, Marnie Bassett respected the uniqueness of all the people she encountered, wished to learn about their lives and families and friends, and to enter into their joys and sorrows, their problems and predicaments. So fine a sensibility might have degenerated into sentimentality but did not, because Marnie was both intelligent and truthful and had a strong, self-disciplined character, firm values, humour and a sense of proportion. Her masterpiece, *The Hentys*, is both a sympathetic portrait of a family and a major contribution to the pastoral history of Australia, based on historical research as thorough and precise as if she had been a chemist, like her father and younger son.

Marnie Bassett's books are *The Governor's Lady, Mrs Philip Gidley King* (1940); *The Hentys, An Australian Colonial Tapestry* (1954); *Realms and Islands, The World Voyage of Rose de Freycinet in the Corvette Uranie, 1817-1820* (1962); *Behind the Picture, H.M.S. Rattlesnake's Australia-New Guinea Cruise, 1846-1850* (1966) and *Letters from New Guinea, 1921* (1969).

The last years of Marnie's long life, during which her much loved husband,

Sir Walter Bassett, died and she suffered several strokes, were lived with courage, dignity, consideration for others and, when it was possible, with gaiety. On 3 February 1980, in her ninety-second year, she died in her own home, according to her devoted physician, as beautifully as she had lived.

*Kathleen Fitzpatrick*