



Kimberley Society

Book Note

***Mother O'Neill : Widow of the Kimberley Goldfield* by Yvonne Coate. Hesperian Press, Carlisle (WA), 2012. Soft cover, 135 pages, full colour, illustrated, maps, ISBN 978-0-85905-518-5, RRP \$35.**

Here is a book that is full of surprises. Far from the slim volume I expected to see—given how little is known about Mother O'Neill—the book is packed with information about the Kimberley goldfield and the old Wyndham–Halls Creek road. A marvellous selection of photographs gives the reader glimpses of many of the places mentioned.

By packaging her story of Mother O'Neill in this way, Yvonne was able to build on earlier work that she and husband Kevin (both members of the Kimberley Society) have done on East Kimberley burials. Some of that material has been expanded, and many new entries are provided. It is great to have all the entries available in one convenient volume, grouped by the locations of the burials.

The expanded entries add a lot of personal information to the ones published in *Lonely Graves of Western Australia & Burials at Sea* (Hesperian Press, 1986) and in *More Lonely Graves of Western Australia* (Hesperian Press, 2000). That information provides insight into the harsh conditions that prevailed in the East Kimberley during the nineteenth century. Other entries, for burials that occurred up to 1979, tell of people who lived in and around Halls Creek in later decades. One very descriptive entry unfortunately uses pseudonyms as though they were real names, thereby creating people who did not exist. The man identified as Hurst (pages 85–6) is listed under his correct name in a separate entry on page 86; the nursing sister was E M (Lil) Rogasch. The confusion comes from using a book-length story in which Sister Rogasch gave pseudonyms to most of the people she wrote about.

The use of pseudonyms and nicknames in historical writing can be both entertaining and frustrating. It can also lead to the perpetuation of errors. This is especially so when the people concerned were the subject of gossip and oft-repeated yarns. Mother O'Neill fell squarely into that category, and, given that, I would like to have seen this book take a more critical view of the yarns told about her. But every author has to select his or her audience, and, in this case, Yvonne kept her text relatively free of analysis because she was writing primarily for visitors to the Kimberley. The result belies the extensive research that underpins the book but it also gives the impression that some of the more fanciful yarns have been verified. Less indulgence in poetic licence, and more citation of individual sources, might have reduced the likelihood of dubious material being seen as factual. Some future books, articles and websites will no doubt happily recycle it as though it is factual.

The task of sorting fact from fiction is difficult enough when researching any enigma but, in this instance, it is complicated by the variety of nicknames applied to Sarah O'Neill. Pages 61 to 64 deal with this issue under the heading 'Names that caused confusion'. But here, too, there is confusion. Yvonne suggests several possibilities for the origin of the name "Mother Sudden Death" but she classes it only as one of the names 'supposedly describing Sarah O'Neill'. Yet, tucked away in the diary of Trooper James Sweeny (a police farrier on the goldfield), is an entry stating that 'M^{rs} M^e Neill Known as old Mother Sudden Death' reached Elvire Gorge on 16 December 1886. The misspelt surname can be ignored because Sweeny also mentioned that she was the first white woman on the goldfield and had arrived with a loaded dray.

Sweeny's reference to the dray is important because it points to the weakness of one lot of reminiscences on which Yvonne relies. Written by Charles Edward Flinders, who met Mrs O'Neill in the 1890s and recalled her as "Mother Dead-finish", those reminiscences had her selling her dray at Fletcher Creek and continuing her journey to the goldfield with pack horses. Flinders presumably heard that yarn from someone else, just as he heard that Mrs O'Neill had landed at Wyndham from the barque *Onyx* in June 1886, after embarking at Normanton (Qld). The *Onyx*, however, reached Wyndham at the end of August, heavily laden with cargo and passengers from New Zealand. Did it put in to Normanton en route, taking on Sarah O'Neill, her five horses, dray, poultry, and all the goods she planned to sell?

Another question that exists is whether Mrs O'Neill was a widow when she reached Wyndham. Yvonne asserts that she was—her presumed husband Joe O'Neill having died in Queensland at an unspecified time. Barney Lamond, who met Mrs O'Neill in 1886, said otherwise. In 1935 he wrote: 'She and her old man had come across from Queensland with a dray and two horses and were camped a mile or so away from where we crossed the Denham, at a spring that was afterwards called Dillon's Spring.' Like Flinders, Lamond was far from accurate in his recall of events, but he was one of the few people who recorded seeing Mrs O'Neill on her way to the goldfield. And, like her, he stayed after the rush. As well as mentioning her surname, he recalled her as "Mother Dead Finish". Yvonne states that, although various writers applied that name to Mrs O'Neill, they 'were two different women'. She says the same about "Mother Dead Horse" who came by that name 'because her shanty was located on Dead Horse Creek'. Interestingly, Michael Patrick Durack recorded seeing Lamond at Dead Horse Creek on 26 October 1886, which was a day or two after Lamond met Mrs O'Neill. Could three women – Mrs O'Neill, "Mother Dead Horse" and "Mother Dead Finish" – all have been knocking about the countryside operating shanties at a time when European women were a rarity beyond Kimberley towns?

Another writer who mentioned a husband was the explorer David W Carnegie. He met Mrs O'Neill on the goldfield during the wet season of 1896/1897. Either then or shortly afterwards, he recorded that she was known as "Mother Deadfinish" and had come 'overland from Queensland, accompanying her husband ... in the early days of the rush'. Did that actually happen? With so much conflicting information in circulation it is unlikely that anyone will ever sift the facts from the fiction. One small consolation is that, as Yvonne notes, stories about "The Mountain Maid" do not apply to Mother O'Neill. "The Mountain Maid" was definitely a person in her own right.

When the nitpicking of historians is set aside, we are left with a larger than life character who did reach Halls Creek in late 1886 and then lived in that vicinity until her death in 1903. *Mother O'Neill : Widow of the Kimberley Goldfield* shows us where she travelled with her dray, where she operated shanties on the Wyndham–Halls Creek road, and where she lived and worked on the goldfield. By presenting the earliest of that information in the context of the rush, and adding deaths that occurred during and after the rush, Yvonne has produced a book that is both readable and informative. The combination of historical information, yarns and photographs should not only appeal to a wide range of people but will also enhance their knowledge of the East Kimberley.

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