



## FAMOUS IRWINISH WOMEN



### ISABELLA WALDECK

1859-1905

*Dr Nan Broad*

Women are unsung heroes in history, invisible inside a dwelling only known to care for a husband or parent, produce children and keep house. We know what they lived in, from tents and bough sheds to houses, how they cooked and what they cooked, on open fires or black wood burning stoves in dark kitchens, meat and flour turned into bread, cakes and puddings with few vegetables and little fruit.

Women in colonial times still forfeited their property and possessions to their husbands, could not write cheques nor could they vote. Despite these strict social practices, women very often took over the business of their family amid enormous odds, both physical and psychological. Some surely would have 'gone under' but the few we do know of succeeded, for history always remembers the victors.

On such amazing woman we know little about beyond her statistics and where she lived. Isabella Brand was born in Stirlingshire, Scotland and emigrated in 1859 with her mother and three brothers. Her Scottish father arrived at Fremantle in 1855, convict no 3354, on the 'Stag', and obtained his ticket of leave one year later. After his family joined him, it increased with two more children, all living on a small tillage lease at Greenough called *Ironbarks*.

The Waldecks also arrived at Greenough in 1859. Frederick and Fredericka (née Kniest) had come originally from Germany to London. From there they sailed to Perth by 1836 as catechists to the W.A. Missionary Society whose aims were to give spiritual guidance to the colonists and to convert the Aborigines. After a short period when the whole project foundered, these two young people married and lived in Perth where Frederick ran a tailoring business.

At this time the Waldecks converted to Methodism under the guidance of friends who saw a better method of expressing their religious beliefs through the teachings of John Wesley: believing in the Bible, free will and a



methodical belief in a moral form of social justice. This was a personal religion, with meetings held in the open or in public halls and led by local preachers.

People have always needed to revere an ideal or mythological figure (I suspect today it is money) and the displaced colonists in the Swan River and beyond desperately needed spiritual guidance. The Anglican hierarchy often did not meet the ordinary people. After all the Bishop and his See resided in India and dictated orders from that distant land. Frederick Waldeck became a Methodist lay preacher and spent the remainder of his life ministering to his fellow colonists, in religious practices, in neighbourly actions and by taking the role of medical practitioner in the district.

Settling at Greenough as farmers 23 years after their arrival on the other side of the known world, Fredericka had by then given birth to 11 children. How did she manage to carry a child every second year while maintaining the home and bringing up the family? They loaded furniture and household goods and children onto one of the coastal cutters and sailed to Champion Bay from where they would have had to hire a wagon or dray to convey the cargo to the Greenough Flats.

Once there the whole family would have worked at clearing the land, ploughing with a single furrow implement and sowing grain by hand. Harvest was also done by hand and the seed heads loaded into bags for sale. No doubt Fredericka and her girls were working alongside the men at this time while living roughly until their house was built. They called the property *Mt Pleasant*.

Isabella Brand and her mother would have been involved in similar activities besides the normal household chores. Wheat was taken to the mill and flour, bran and pollard brought back to sustain the family, the fowls and the pigs. Orchards were planted and the fruit preserved, vegetable gardens established, cows kept for milk, butter and cheese, soap handmade and tobacco grown for men's smoking and to cure scab in sheep. Both sheep and cattle were slaughtered regularly so that a household was virtually self-contained.

Isabella apparently had strong ideals and her Methodist views abhorred alcohol. She is credited with opening the taps of several hogsheads of whiskey in the house of a wealthy

settler and locking herself in her room until the uproar subsided. Obviously undaunted by the male attitude, while a passenger in a boat she discovered several bottles of whiskey which she quietly dropped over the side. On the loss being discovered the men dived to retrieve the bottles and Isabella described this as one of her 'most trying times of bravery'.



*Isabella Brand and Henry Fletcher Waldeck at Ironbarks for their wedding reception in 1867.*  
IRME2262

Henry Fletcher Waldeck and Isabella Brand were married in the Mechanics Institute at Greenough in 1867 with a reception at her parents' home. Both were strictly teetotal and practicing Methodists like their parents. They lived on and ran *Bonniefield*, a property just north of Dongara where Fletcher, as he was known, after farming duties engaged with most of the public offices in the district. He belonged to the Irwin Road Board, the school board, the Mechanics Institute, the Society of Good Templers and became a Church Steward in the newly formed Methodist Church. He also ran the pound (held frequently to auction off all unmarked stock which had strayed).

All these institutions were well known and well documented as always with public affairs. What was Isabella, the strong-minded wife engaged with at this time? Household duties of course and giving birth to eight children, one of whom died aged three. Nothing is written or known

of her activities or her attitude to all around her or her ability to cope with deaths and droughts and personal disasters during those 16 years.

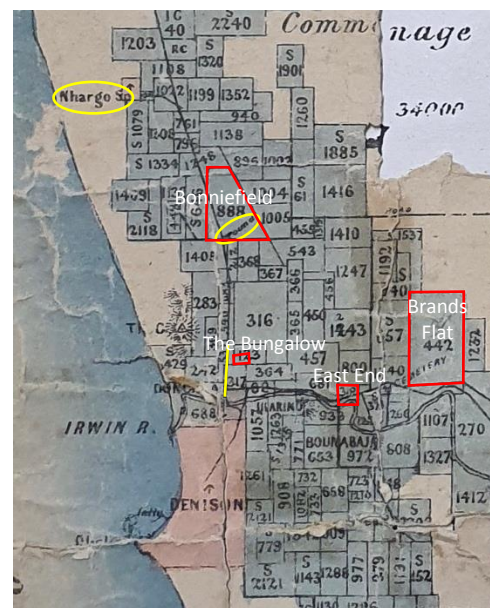
However, she was thrown into the forefront of history the day before her last child was born for, in 1883, Isabella's husband died prematurely. One can only imagine the trauma of the death bed and the drama of the premature birth to follow. The only thing to do was continue with life, taking solace from the Methodist deity and Methodist followers who rallied to assist her. Isabella survived, as did the newborn child, and now she had to run the household and the farm.

This sounds very possible in the present era but go back in time and face the times of the 1880s. Male dominance was supreme and in colonial Australia this dominance was heightened. Men sometimes refused to take orders from their male superior and would certainly not take orders nor listen with any respect to a female boss. How did this young woman understand the intricacies of farming; the animals, particularly the workforce of horses, the implements to be used, the carts and drays to be serviced, the plants to be grown at what time?

How did she manage the finance, not having authority to exchange cash in the ordinary manner of business, or pay the men their salary? How did she fit all this into her already overloaded twelve hours of daylight or even fix the candles for dim evening activities? Certainly, she may have had house help and the older children were always expected to carry out tasks suitable to their age and strength. The burden of responsibility could have broken Isabella so readily, but it did not.

In 1884 she had to face the loss of her son, Clarke Laurance and, as expected of this stalwart woman, she soldiered on. Apart from her father in law, Frederick, the Elders of the Wesley Church helped where they could while two eminent businessmen of the Irwin district became her closest advisors. Francis Pearse prevailed on her to buy *Nhargo*, an adjoining property to the north of *Bonniefield* while he and Edward Clarkson proceeded to follow the progress of the railway line being constructed from Champion Bay to meet the Midland Railway Company line coming up from Guildford.

The northern line was to pass down through *Bonniefield* and Pearse and Clarkson suggested that Isabella plant acres of crop for hay and tender to the railway to supply fodder for the working horses. This she did, winning the tender and then buying Lot 442 on Brands Flat (opposite Obawarra) for more land, reorganising all properties to maximise the crops. The detail of this is mindboggling as grain, further men, horses and machinery must be purchased and organised, harvest completed and the hay sheaved and stoked followed by the detail of supplying it to the railway gangs.



*Places associated with Isabella Waldeck, shown on map dated c1880. IDHS Maps*

Don't forget the household and the growing family to feed and care for. As if this were not enough Isabella sent her older sons to *Nhargo* and provided accommodation at *Bonniefield* for the Supervisor and Foreman while she trellised in the side veranda into a dining room and supplied meals for the workers – 60 men three times a day. As the line progressed further south, she still sent hay and food down on the train while the two boarders travelled back and forth, obviously preferring their comfortable bed and board to roughing it down the line.

A daughter later wrote of the action:  
*The kitchen rafters hung with hams and bacon and there were barrels of pickled pork. Bonniefield had everything needed and she engaged a cook and a waiter from Criddle's hotel. After many weeks she was able to buy her binder and a two-horsepower chaff cutter. The railways bought all her chaff at £12 per ton and she supplied the railways all the way to Mingenew, the train*



*picking up at the farm all their needs. In 1896 she was able to send me three girls to Methodist Ladies College and my brother Harry to Prince Alfred College in Adelaide.*

All this frenzied activity stretched over months as the lines joined near Arrino in 1894. Isabella had made a financial 'killing' and now was able to build a substantial house (still standing but not occupied at the present time). Five years later she lost her third son, Edwin, aged 27. History does not record the circumstances of his death. Practicing Methodism all her life, she gifted a block of land to the Dongara church in 1900 to build a manse to house the Reverend. A special key was made for Isabella to open the finished building, which the Waldeck family still holds.



*View from Methodist Manse along Waldeck Street, c1930. IRME0216*



*Waldeck women on the verandah at Bonniefield, 1904. IRME1765*

We presume Isabella continued to farm the properties in a normal manner with the help of her sons and daughters who, no doubt, were married by this time. In 1904 the girls were given cash, and Fred and George took over *Bonniefield*. Isabelle purchased Cohen's Store at the East End for her son Henry. Mother and daughter Fletcherina moved to live at Francis Pearse's *The Bungalow* and the following year, while visiting her daughter in Fremantle,

Isabella contracted influenza. She passed away at the home of her daughter Elizabeth (Lizzie) Uren in Barnett Street Fremantle on 15 July 1905. Isabella was interred in the Dongara Cemetery beside her beloved Henry Fletcher, at a service attended by over 200 mourners, who sang her favourite hymn "The Sweet Bye and Bye" at the church and at the graveside.

So much is not known of Isabella's private ways and thoughts and actions but her record of achievement stands out clearly with hard facts to support the story of a strong, indomitable woman prospering in a man's world. She is known to be supportive of her neighbours and the community in the manner of her faith and of her parental upbringing. For the girl who bravely destroyed someone's whiskey, she progressed a long way while keeping her convictions and her energy intact. Isabella, we should all salute you.

The Waldeck name endures in Waldeck's Nursery and street names in Dongara, Geraldton, Caversham and Mosman Park.

Written with many thanks to Shirley Scotter who provided so much information for this article.