

Colonial Women and the Challenges they Faced

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The barque Ballarat rocks gently by the side of the wharf. There are only a few more hours until it will set sail to the newly formed colony of New Zealand. A woman pushes her way through the crowd, her eyes fixed on the boat. She stops at the gangplank, hesitant and unsure. At that moment, the sounds of a child's tantrum rise from below the decks. It is the child that she has been employed to nurse. The 18-year-old girl squares her shoulders, slowly steps onto the gangplank and makes her way onto the deck. She turns and looks back over the crowd, taking everything in. This is the last time she will ever see her homeland, or her family for that matter. With one final glance she makes her way below deck, to fulfil her duties as nursemaid.

This woman was Bridget Halpin, one of my ancestors. The boat trip to New Zealand, in 1866, took 104 days¹. 104 days on a small boat in the middle of the ocean. The living conditions on these boats were tough and these trips could be dangerous, especially if diseases such as typhoid or measles got on board.² Once the journey was made most people couldn't go back. Bridget left her family in Ireland to take her chances with a new life.

From the moment emigrants, like Bridget, stepped onto their boats, they had to face many challenges and learn to draw on strength that was a combination of courage, compassion, and sacrifice. The boat journey was just the beginning. Young colonial women, like Bridget, encountered a variety of challenges throughout their lives. To survive, they had to constantly demonstrate bravery and kindness in a number of different forms including determination, commitment, care and hope.

¹ <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers>: Daily Southern Cross Newspaper 6th of January 1866: Port of Auckland

² White Wings Volume 1: Fifty years of sail in the New Zealand Trade 1850-1900 by Henry Brett.

“The people of Motueka, in losing the services of Miss Halpin, lost perhaps the most efficient and successful teacher of a junior division that I have yet met within our Provincial schools”

(School Inspector Board of Education 1871)³.

When Bridget arrived in New Zealand, she quickly settled to a career of school teaching. A career in which she excelled. In 1871, Bridget married William Jackson, my great-great-great-grandfather. Like many pioneer brides, I imagine that Bridget must have missed her family tremendously on her wedding day.

Becoming a wife required Bridget to give up her teaching career. In the new colony, this was still expected of women when they married. Women’s role as homemakers and looking after their family was considered essential in colonial New Zealand for the development of a better society. Women’s role in the colonial project was considered just as important as men’s. In fact men were advised to bring a wife if they were migrating to New Zealand or to find a wife as quickly as possible once they’d arrived. In New Zealand, some colonial women found they had a great degree of independence and satisfaction over household chores and duties as their contribution to the Colonial Project.⁴

I imagine Bridget to be a strong woman, so I wonder whether or not she was happy to give up her career. I know for a fact that Bridget continued her focus on educating her own children, as they all were very successful. Bridget's only daughter Alda, my great-great-grandmother, became a successful music teacher by the age of 17. Alda also took over the management and running of a large farm in the early 1920s and was considered ahead of her time.

³ <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers>: Colonist p.3. 11th of August 1871 ⁴The Colonial Helpmeet: Women’s Role and the Vote in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand by Raewyn Dalziel in the NZ Journal of History, 1977. http://www.nzjh.auckland.ac.nz/docs/1977/NZJH_11_2_02.pdf

The work of women as early settlers was tough. They had to face huge challenges on the home front, both physical and emotional, and draw on bravery and strength daily.

“This [petition] is a great record of all those grandmothers, great grandmothers, great aunts and great-greats who had the foresight, the strength, and the opportunity to add their name.”

(Bronwyn Elsmore - author, 2017)⁵

I was excited to find out that Bridget’s signature was on one of the early suffragette petitions. When the women's suffrage petition was being signed most women did not want to take on the roles of men.⁶ Many women instead wanted the vote to make a better, more well behaved, society through things like the prohibition of alcohol.

Polly Plum was a feminist writer and activist for women’s rights in the 1860s and 1870s who wrote:

“I shouldn’t feel at all compensated for such a change by being allowed to be myself a lawyer, a doctor, or even a member of parliament. I don’t want to be any one of those things and don’t believe any true woman does.”⁷

Women’s compassion and commitment to their husbands and families was considered by many, at this time, as essential to the success of the entire colonial project as “home makers and guardians of moral health and welfare”.⁸ However, I wonder about those women out there who had greater aspirations.

⁵ Bronwyn Elsmore, 2017: www.flaxroots.com/flaxflower/thanks-to-all-the-grandmothers ⁶ The Colonial Helpmeet: Women’s Role and the Vote in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand by Raewyn Dalziel in the NZ Journal of History, 1977.

http://www.nzjh.auckland.ac.nz/docs/1977/NZJH_11_2_02.pdf
⁷ The Colonial Helpmeet: Women’s Role and the Vote in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand by Raewyn Dalziel in the NZ Journal of History, 1977. Quote on page 121.
http://www.nzjh.auckland.ac.nz/docs/1977/NZJH_11_2_02.pdf

⁸ The Colonial Helpmeet: Women’s Role and the Vote in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand by Raewyn Dalziel in the NZ Journal of History, 1977. Quote on page 113.
http://www.nzjh.auckland.ac.nz/docs/1977/NZJH_11_2_02.pdf

The cart's wheels rattle on the dirt road. The children are already asleep. Bridget looks out over the view. There are hills and trees stretching out as far as she can see. Bridget's gaze drifts to her husband, who is steering the horses. She silently urges the horses to go faster. The sooner they reach Hawera the better. It is a thriving new town and, they believe, their best hope for a better future and their growing family.

I imagine the colonial settlers as being robust, strong minded, and over all ambitious. The settlers had to make the most of what they had, as there was no going back for many. I imagine Bridget arriving in Hawera with three young children on her heels, full of hope and determination for this move to work out for her family and their fellow community of settlers.

The decades that followed Bridget settling in Hawera were full of opportunities, but many came with risks. Setting up a brand new society meant the men had to do a lot of dangerous work. Accidents could happen at any time, from falling off a horse to felling trees.⁹ Many men from Bridget's new community and extended family died from accidents like these. The new settlement also suffered several devastating fires, caused by candle lamps¹⁰.

To add to the challenges of settlement, two global catastrophic events happened near the end of Bridget's life. In 1914 she had to watch her son march off to war, wondering if she would ever see him again. Then in 1918 the influenza pandemic struck, killing many people. In two months, New Zealand lost half as many people to influenza as they had to World War One. New Zealand had never lost so many people in such a short amount of time.¹¹ The early 1900's was a time of sacrifice and resilience.

⁹ <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers>: 'Shocking Fatal Accident: A Young Man Killed Whilst Bushfelling' Feilding Star 27 May 1896 – another ancestor. Bridget Halpin's daughter's first husband died in a horse riding accident.

¹⁰ <https://teara.govt.nz/en/taranaki-places/page-6>

¹¹ <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/influenza-pandemic-1918>

“The disappearance of the race is scarcely subject for much regret. They are dying out in a quick, easy way and are being supplanted by a superior race”

(Alfred Newman- doctor and scientist, 1881)¹².

Alfred Newman, a popular scientist in 1881, said this about Māori. This comment reflects ideas of ‘Social Darwinism’ that many settlers were using to justify the Colonial Project. This thinking took the concept of ‘survival of the fittest’ and created racial hierarchies that suggested settlers were more evolved than indigenous peoples.¹³ This makes me think that bravery and kindness is always limited by the frameworks of understanding that we live within.

I know now that behind the colonial story was a lot of social injustice. Colonial settlers were taking over indigenous Māori land. The 1860s were the time of the Māori land wars. Parihaka was a peaceful land occupation, where many Māori had gathered to try and protect their land. The year Bridget moved to Hawera, 1881, was also the year the government violently invaded and destroyed the protest at Parihaka only 70km away.¹⁴ Hawera itself grew around a military blockhouse.

I wonder how much Bridget knew and how she felt about this attitude towards Māori. Did Bridget ever question her right to settle on the new land?

¹² <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3n4/newman-alfred-kingcome>

¹³

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2017/09/06/lifting-the-veil-of-kindness-friendship-and-settler-colonialism-in-argentinawelsh-patagonia/> and <https://teara.govt.nz/en/european-ideas-about-maori/page-4>

¹⁴ <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/occupation-pacifist-settlement-at-parihaka>

Learning about Bridget and other colonial women has certainly inspired me - knowing that my ancestors stood strong in the face of so many difficulties. My generation will have to face many challenges too. These include climate change, adapting to artificial intelligence, and the coronavirus pandemic we are facing right now. Our future might mean living in dangerous and uncertain times. It might mean taking political stands. It could mean sacrificing things for the greater good of society.

We have learned a lot since Bridget's time, especially concerning the social injustice of colonisation and the capabilities of women. Modern society is starting to learn about indigenous values and the potential of men at home. The knowledge is there should we choose to listen and work in partnership.

Right now we have two female leaders running for prime minister at the coming election. Our current prime minister even had a child during her term in leadership, while her husband stayed at home to look after the baby. While Polly Plum would be turning in her grave, I like to imagine that Bridget Halpin would be impressed. Impressed by women standing strong in adversity, taking greater leadership, and working outside the home.

I hope that if our generation can face the challenges in front of us with resilience, hope and sacrifice, we will be able to live in a better, thriving society; better than colonial women ever imagined. I can only hope that I have inherited some of Bridget's strength, compassion, and bravery to see me through.