

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022

2226 Silent Partner: The Life of Mrs E. R. Symes

by Eleanor Snibson

Silent Partner: The Life of Mrs. E. R. Symes

My great-grandmother Mrs. Elizabeth Rogers Symes was a woman who lived in a small town seemingly near nowhere, where she raised eight children.

She did not sign the 1891 Women's Suffrage Petition. She did not write a book, or a brochure. She never went to university or was awarded any qualifications that I could find. She never waited for her husband, brothers, or sons to come home from a war. She seemed so distant from me.

Is this where I come from? Where did I come from?

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Alfred Symes was oiling the engine on his chaff cutter in the Autumn of 1910, when his sleeve was caught in a spindle. Suddenly, all his clothes were torn from his body, and he was badly knocked about.

He returned home to his wife and family, but developed a cold, then pneumonia and bronchitis. He wrote a new will, leaving everything to his wife Elizabeth. Six days later Alfred was dead, aged 45.

Elizabeth had eight children: two sons under four years-old, and the rest daughters aged under sixteen. Elizabeth was under pressure to sell – who could now run a sheep farm and dairy? Without Alfred, it was now up to Elizabeth alone what she would do.

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On 16 May 1869, Elizabeth was born to Mary and James Mitchell at Purnim, near Warrnambool, in the Colony of Victoria.

In 1875, when Elizabeth was aged about six, her parents uprooted the family, travelled over 200 kilometres north, and selected land at “Werrigar” in the newly opened Wimmera district. A reporter wrote at that time that the country was “desolate and famine-like in the extreme [...] a poor prospect both for the selector and squatter.”¹

However, after the land had been cleared of mallee, the district proved suitable for wheat. The country's proneness to drought was lessened by an expanding irrigation system.

A community settled on the banks of the Yarriambiack Creek. “Warracknabeal” was proclaimed there in 1884, home to 200 people. Two years later, a new rail line allowed wheat to be easily transported to Melbourne for exportation.

On 30 March 1892, Elizabeth, aged 22, became the first of nine siblings to marry. Alfred Symes, a 26-year-old farmer, was Anglican, but Elizabeth was Presbyterian. In a curious compromise, the pair married in a Methodist ceremony. The new couple became devoted adherents of the Methodist Church.

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Elizabeth settled into married life eight kilometres east of Warracknabeal at *Woodlands*, clearing it of mallee aided by stump jump ploughs. The 640-acre farm was held by Alfred under the *Mallee Act*. The lease ended in 1903, after which Alfred purchased the property.

This is where Elizabeth gave birth to eight children: Gladys Evelyn (born 1893); Roselyn May (born 1894); Doris Winifred (born 1897); Lillace Mary (born 1899); Effie Victoria

¹ ‘Farm and Garden Miscellany’ *Leader* (Melbourne, 20 February 1875) 9.

(born 1901); Edith Eileen (born 1903); Francis Thomas James (born 1906); and Arthur Laurence (born 1907). Apparently, they all preferred to be known by monosyllables: Glad, May, Dot, Lil, Eff, Ede, Frank and Art.

In 1904, Alfred purchased 281 acres at nearby Challambra to keep sheep.

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In July 1908, Alfred purchased *Woodbine* (539 acres) for £5120 10s, a record sale price for the district. *Woodlands* was sold to make the payment.

Woodbine was used as a dairy. The family moved into a six-bedroom homestead, the grandest home Elizabeth had ever lived in. It had a large garden with Morton Bay figs, palm and mulberry trees, and an olive grove. A gardener was employed to manage the vegetable garden.

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Alfred's death less than 18-months after purchasing *Woodbine* was undoubtedly a shock.

On 21 May 1910, Elizabeth had woken up as a wife and mother, with only a few personal items to claim as hers alone. But at 8am that day, Elizabeth was a widow with a total estate worth £7154, which included 820 acres of land, over 300 sheep, 20 cows, and 14 horses. She was the sole operator of one of two dairies in Warracknabeal.

Alfred J. Symes is replaced with Elizabeth R. Symes in public documentation. Where he was recorded as "farmer," she is "widow".

Elizabeth worked and managed the farm throughout the 1910s. She dealt with all the droughts, floods, and other problems which beset Warracknabeal farmers. But as the years went by, she continued to brand her stock "A. S."

Her children were not excused from being financial contributors to the family. Each morning before school, Elizabeth's sons rode out to attend the sheep at Challambra, aged only nine or ten. Her daughters Dot, Lil and Eff become teachers at the Warracknabeal State School when they are fifteen or sixteen years old.

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In 1919, the family moved to *Riverview* on the bank of the Yarriambiack Creek. Elizabeth gradually retired. She saw all her daughters and one son marry, and found time to assist with her grandchildren.

On 20 July 1935, Elizabeth died at *Riverview*, aged 66, from myocarditis complicated by cardiac failure. She was buried with her husband at the Warracknabeal Cemetery two days later. It was written that "she was greatly respected and esteemed for her kindly nature and the successful fight she had made against great difficulties, which she had so courageously overcome".²

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In 1994 (two years before I was born), the Australian Law Reform Commission acknowledged that farming women were still being treated as non-productive silent partners. The convention held that farmers were men, and women did home duties.

Elizabeth fell into this misused silent category. She was never recorded as a farmer or manager. She was recorded as Mrs. E. R. Symes. Widow.

² Obituary.: Mrs. E. R. Symes.' *The Warracknabeal Herald* (23 July 1935).

Elizabeth's life could easily be forgotten by her community and descendants. Her actions alone may be unheroic – unless they are viewed strung together.

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Some years ago, my grandfather Graeme Symes Bell sent an old spice jar containing the Wimmera dirt where my mother played as a child. The bottle was proudly emblazoned:

WARRACKNABEAL.

Never forget where you came from.



The spice jar in question

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