

MARY BARRY

Mary Barry was born in September 1886 on the Normanby goldfield in far North Queensland. Her parents, Sarah and James Nolan, were immigrants from Ireland. Mary was educated at the primary school at Limestone on the Palmer River goldfield. Mary's mother cultivated her love of reading. Mary's books and thirst for knowledge sustained her all her life. A firm believer that everyone should learn something new every day, Mary kept an encyclopaedia beside her bed.

The Nolan family was the last to leave the little settlement of Limestone. When she was still a teenager, Mary married Bill Barry, who had arrived in Australia many years earlier as a child immigrant from Ireland. Mary's mother lived with the family when Mary's elder children were young, and taught the children from a large book containing a primary education syllabus which she had brought from Ireland.

Mary went to Mungana with her prospector husband. From there, they went to the coal mining town of Mt Mulligan in 1915. The trek from Mungana to Mt Mulligan was arduous. Mary already had a herd of goats, and a flock of hens which accompanied the family to Mt Mulligan. Her babies travelled in wooden kerosene cases strapped to either side of the horse.

Although Mt Mulligan was close to the Hodgkinson River goldfield, most of the gold had been worked out, and the pickings for a gold prospector were slim. Mary's husband acquired the contract to supply sleepers for the Mt Mulligan coal mine, and Mary supplied townspeople with milk and meat from her goats and eggs from her fowls. The family's vegetables were supplied from Mary's garden. She also grew mustard and cress to impart flavour to the goat mutton and maintained a healthy granadilla vine to supply fruit for delicious pies.

There was no butcher in Mt Mulligan for many of the years the family lived there. Mary slaughtered her goats and chickens herself. Mary's goat business thrived, and at one time owned 240 goats divided into two herds.

Mary was determined that all of her eleven children, eight girls and three boys, would be educated as well as possible. Although she had been born an Anglican, Mary ensured that her children were taught the faith of their Roman Catholic father. Her goat skins were used as mats where her children knelt to say the prayers Mary taught them. There was no priest in Mt Mulligan in the early days, and Mary had six children before any were baptized. Mary had been married in a Registry Office because there was no available priest. Mary and her husband had their Church wedding at the same time as her children were baptized.

Mary Barry also provided many services to the community at Mt Mulligan. Although pregnant at the time, she volunteered to help at the time of the Mt Mulligan mine disaster in 1921 when more than seventy miners died. For many years, she acted as town midwife, helped by knowledge from the medical books she read avidly.

The bustling mining town supported a school of some 300 pupils in the 1920s under the headship of the greatly-admired Tommy Hull, who managed to help his students achieve considerable successes in the State Scholarship examination, despite having been gassed during the First World War. Mary's eldest son, Jack, was the first to pass the State Scholarship from the Mt Mulligan school. He completed the Junior public examination at Mt Carmel College, Charters Towers, and entered the State teaching service. His brother, Harry, followed him.

Mary's husband died in 1934 and she moved the family to Mareeba on the Atherton Tableland. The girls in the family, assisted by the proceeds of Mary's goat business, studied for their Junior Public examination at the Cairns High School. Two, Elsie and Iris, also became teachers. Betty became a nurse, a profession which later attracted Elsie who became a triple certificated nurse in addition to her teaching qualifications. Edith had achieved the perfect 8A score in the Junior examination and began her career as a clerk-typist in the government chemical laboratories. She became a librarian after years of part-time study. Joy supervised the cash desk at the large Tritton's furniture store in Brisbane.

Mary left Mareeba in 1960 to live with her youngest child, Iris, in Ipswich. She had been concerned that, because her parents had not lived into old age, that her children would not enjoy long lives. With the determination which marked her achievement in building sound lives for her children, Mary wanted to live until she was eighty. Mary Barry died in Ipswich in November 1966, two months after her eightieth birthday¹.

¹ Oral history interview with Mary Barry's daughters, Joy O'Connor, Iris Creedy, Edith Kizmann and Elsie Hillas, Brisbane, 20 February 2002.