

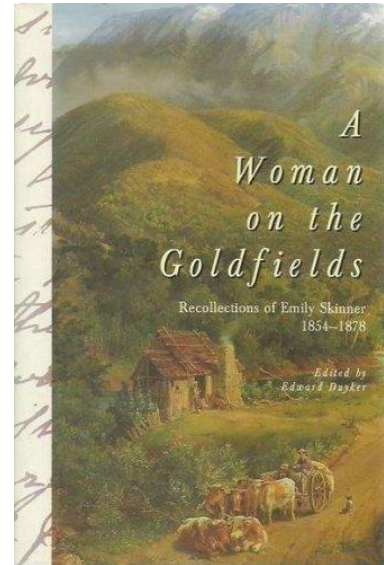
Biography



Emily (Fillan) Skinner (c1832 -1890) Migrant, goldfield pioneer, writer

23 year old Emily Fillan left her middle class London family in 1854 and courageously sailed, unchaperoned, as an unassisted immigrant, half way round the world to Melbourne, to be reunited with and marry her finance, William Elloitt Skinner, with whom she had previously worked in service. She showed her resourcefulness by quickly befriending a married female cabin companion, to protect her Middle Class respectability.

When Emily arrived in Melbourne, William had already been moderately successful at the Forest Creek (or Castlemaine) gold field but was then working in the retail trade. However, 4 months after their marriage, he decided to try his luck again, this time on the Ovens gold fields, leaving Emily in Melbourne. In May 1855, despite her awareness of stories of murderers, bushrangers and lawlessness in the bush, Emily showed great pluck and determination by traveling alone to Beechworth (or Spring Creek) to join her husband. She was 5 months pregnant and took the 8 day trip with 11 other passengers, over rough jolting roads, in a light American wagon.



The Skinners made several subsequent moves around the Ovens goldfields where they lived for 12 years. In early 1856, they were on the Woolshed. They returned to Spring Creek in 1857. They spent 8 years in the Buckland Valley from 1859 and then moved back to Beechworth in very late 1867. These frequent moves were not exceptional for goldminers' families. The fact that Emily had 9 children from 1855 until 1880 and 3 did not survive to adulthood was also unremarkable. Her variety of homes on the diggings - a bark hut at Spring Creek, green baize lined tent at the Woolshed and wooden houses at Spring Creek, Beechworth and the Buckland Valley as well as the frequent establishment of a garden, were also quite usual. Many women on the goldfield like Emily supplemented the family's variable mining income by washing, ironing, sewing clothes or cooking meals for unpartnered gold diggers.



What was remarkable about Emily is that she used her literary skills to write a journal during her sea voyage to Australia and later wrote a manuscript

about life on the Ovens Goldfields. These were not published but kept, copied and passed down to her descendants for over 100 years



Dr Edward Duyker, an academic, researched Emily's life and in 1995 edited and published her handwritten manuscript. In her shipboard journal, Emily identified fellow passengers by name. Duyker used this to discover the identity of the pseudonyms used for her goldfields manuscript characters. By disguising the identity of her characters, using pseudonyms, Emily could be absolutely frank, accepting, warm and compassionate in her writings, which are matter of fact, like those of working class women and non judgmental, as well as empathetic, unlike the critical writings of superior Middle Class authoresses. Her writings are devoid of ethnic or religious prejudice. Her story is free of the verbal contortions designed to maintain the writer's respectability "as a lady". She sometimes does not mention events, likely to compromise respectability and so avoids perpetuating the double sexual moral standard of the time. So she omitted any mention of her marriage to William 3 weeks after her arrival in



Melbourne, when they both lived in the new suburb of Collingwood. She also ignored the possibility of the girls, working in goldfields hotels and restaurants who attended the balls as miners' companions, being prostitutes. But Emily felt safe in revealing that whilst on route to Spring Creek in 1856, in one small fully booked hotel where she was forced to share a room with 2 fellow female passengers, she had screamed with fright when she woke to find a strange man undressing in her room.

In 1998, Joy Hooton included a part of Emily Skinner's memoirs in her collection of Australian autobiographical writings titled *Australian Lives*. Emily's story of her and William simultaneously contracting a fever at the Woolshed diggings and Emily hovering close to death for weeks, whilst their first born baby son died and was buried in an unmarked grave by strangers, is judged to be "one of the *most graphic and reflective of goldfields narratives*".

Emily claimed that her experiences on the goldfields were those of hundreds of miner's wives. However, women and their experiences were virtually invisible on the masculine goldfields, the predominant male view being that it was not an appropriate place for respectable women. Emily's presence and actions and those of other women on the goldfields, challenged this.

After William's retirement, the Skinner's gypsy life continued when in 1888 they went to Melbourne to live on William's government pension, first sharing a house in Brunswick West and then in Sydney Road where 58 year old Emily died in March 1890 as a result of a paralysing stroke. Her death certificate describes her as a "housewife". However, she was much more than that- she was a spirited, intelligent, determined, hard working woman who endured illness, poverty, loneliness, great personal loss and sorrow as well as hard domestic labour. She also left an engaging, authentic first hand, participant account of 12 years of life for a woman on the Ovens goldfields from the 1850s until the 1860s. In 1995, it suddenly became apparent, what a remarkable woman Emily Fillan –Skinner really was.

<http://www.egold.net.au/biogs/EG00115b.htm>

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For other women, life amidst the isolated, male-dominated gold societies proved a lonely, alienating experience. Elizabeth Skinner, who suffered as a result of her husband's unsuccessful pursuit of gold, recalled being lonely and sick and fainting while attending to her children, and wrote: 'How one longed for mothers and sisters at such times and envied the poorest women at home who in sickness generally have some relative near.'



<http://pioneersall.bounce.com.au/#/women-on-the-goldfields/4533061180>

".. in those first days of digging-life, when womanless crowds wrestled with the earth and the forest amid much weariness and solitude of heart, the arrival of a woman was the signal for a cry and a gathering. The shout 'there's a woman' emptied many a tent of bespoiled and hardy diggers, for the strange sight evoked instant memories of far-away homes; of mothers, wives and sweethearts, and all the sweet affections and courtesies they represented, and never with such eloquent emphasis as then."

<https://www.mup.com.au/books/9780522846522-a-woman-on-the-goldfields>

<http://www.egold.net.au/biogs/EG00059b.htm>

<http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/digging-up-gold-20130604-2nn7v.html>