

The Remarkable Mrs Kennion

Mrs Kennion began life as Lady Henrietta Duncan Fergusson, daughter of baronet Sir Charles Dalrymple Fergusson in Ayrshire. In Harrogate George Wyndham Kennion was the son of a middle-class trainee physician. George became a Vicar in Bradford until 1882. Henrietta grew up in Scotland with servants and tutors and moved into society. As late as March 1881 she was living with a sister and four servants in a London house, describing her *occupation* as 'baronet's daughter'!¹

In 1882 George was chosen as the Anglican Bishop of Adelaide and within four hectic weeks received an honorary D.D from Glasgow University, consecrated in Westminster Abbey and on 5th December 1882² married Henrietta in Kensington in a simple ceremony without family. He left his new wife to arrange to follow on alone as he embarked on the 10,000- mile voyage to be enthroned bishop of Adelaide.

We hope Henrietta travelled 1st Class as she bravely faced the voyage. Ships were similar to the S.S. Great Britain but



even the sturdiest of ships fell prey to rough seas, as this diary comment from **1955** describes:

"Passengers vomited everywhere, the corridors stank. The best cure-fresh air - was hard to come by as waves crashed over the decks in spectacular fashion".³



A tiny 1st class cabin was hardly luxury, but eight weeks of communal living in steerage would be very hard to bear. She set off in January 1883 through North Atlantic seas, and arrived in Adelaide on 23rd March 1883 in the Australian autumn. For the first time the 37-year-old bachelor and 43-year-old spinster were living together, and in a strange country they knew very little about.

Adelaide was a town governed by men. Without a local gold rush or convict ships it avoided the violence and degradation of east Australia. But there was poverty and deprivation among the indigenous people, hard work in countryside communities but fine houses for some. Wealthy men played a dominant part in public life, supporting charitable and cultural organisations and enjoying sporting clubs and high social life. The role of women was secondary.



Henrietta had a great deal to learn about the climate, seasons, culture, food, dangers from vegetation, insects and animals. With no experience as a vicar's wife - let alone a bishop's - she had a house and home to set up and a personal position to establish. If she had hoped their marriage would result in children she was to be sadly disappointed. Now so far from family, friends and all that was familiar, the years ahead loomed ominously. But Henrietta quickly put her energy and influence at the disposal of the 'Churchwomen of Adelaide' and their activities, and she learned fast and well. During the next twelve years the Kennions only travelled home twice for holidays and for George to attend the Lambeth Conference of Bishops. Eventually in 1894 George was recalled to England to become Bishop of Bath and Wells.⁴

If Henrietta had been concerned about the success of her role in Adelaide, the emotional tone of the farewell letter written by the 'Churchwomen of Adelaide' must have deeply moved her;
"Dear Mrs Kennion; It is with the profoundest regret that we realise you are leaving us....you have been so identified with every good and kindly work...your hand open to all in need....your warm sympathy extended to every deserving cause... the loving heart which is the guide of your life has made it felt....your influence

¹ This information is probably from the 1881 Census records

² Adelaide University, Adelaide Connect. <https://connect.adelaide.edu.au/nodes/view/25562>

³ Immigration Museum, Journeys to Australia, (Adapted from quote), <https://museums.victoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/resources/journeys-to-australia/>

⁴ Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 5, (MUP), 1974

*will have a wider scope where you are going but you can never be more highly esteemed than you are to your friends in South Australia."*⁵ A moving tribute to accompany her to her next home in Somerset.

On May 10th in the late of autumn of 1894 the Bishop and Henrietta left Adelaide on the RAS Valitta bound for London. They travelled on 1st Class tickets paid for by Adelaide friends.

In England....1894

Feathers were ruffled among senior bishops when the young 'colonial bishop' was appointed to prestigious Bath and Wells. But George was too busy to notice as he rode his bicycle to visit Somerset parishes - and was recorded as the first bishop to do so! He raised £30,000 to return Glastonbury Abbey to the care of the Church of England⁶ and in 1897 Henrietta opened her home to accommodate international bishops who visited the Abbey. One wrote " *bishops Canterbury, York, London, and others stayed at the Bishop's Palace where bedrooms were inscribed with our names... mine had Tasmania over the door.*"⁷

In 1901 the Kennions gave a home to Henrietta's seven-year-old orphaned cousin – George Boyle - affectionately known in the Palace as 'Master George' and adopted him as their own.

The bishop's work-load increased over the next ten years with two royal funerals, Edward VII Coronation, the marriage and double Coronations of George V and Queen Mary, and regular attendance at the House of Lords. The bishop was spending more time in London leaving events at home in Henrietta's capable hands.

Meanwhile Henrietta was accepting countless invitations to open bazaars, sales-of-work, jumble sales, exhibitions and flower shows. She opened the Palace doors and gardens to many county women's groups and introduced illuminated promenade concerts and firework displays. She became Vice President of the Somerset Home Arts and Crafts Association, was elected Lady Patroness of the Wells Cottage Hospital, presided over the Wells Nursing Institute, and supported the Wells NSPCC Society. When they both supported the introduction of adult evening classes Henrietta signed up for all of them – including car mechanics - to encourage public participation.

On 22nd June 1909 the bishop and Henrietta hosted a lunch at the Palace for the Prince and Princess of Wales to celebrate the millenary of the founding of the Bath and Wells Diocese. They travelled on to Glastonbury Abbey where thousands saw the future King and Queen in a horse drawn carriage watching the Abbey deeds being presented to the Archbishop of Canterbury.⁸

War with Germany was declared on 4th August 1914 but it wasn't until 15th Jan 1915 that Wells learned troops were to be billeted in the city and lorries began arriving in the Cattle Market (*now the site of the Bus Station.*) The Kennions were both concerned for the safety of George Boyle who was then 20 years old and an Army Officer.

In 1917 bishop George was taken seriously ill and said it was only God and the surgeon's skill that saved his life. Considerably weakened he recovered slowly, but his workload and the war took its toll. On a November day in 1919 when, for the first time in 25 years, the Palace moat lay frozen over, the bishop was again confined to bed. Henrietta continued to complete as many local engagements on his behalf as she was able but in June 1921 the bishop reluctantly announced his resignation.

They left Wells by train in October 1921 and travelled to their new home in Scotland. Six months later, on 19th May 1922, George Kennion died age 77 at 11 Alloway Place, Ayr.

⁵ Page from digital copies of a book of illuminated addresses representing the many charitable organisations with which Mrs Kennion had been associated with and presented to her by 'the churchwomen of South Australia', <https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/2505#idx17434>

⁶ Palace Archives (document from Abbey House website – now no longer available on the website)

⁷ <https://anglicanhistory.org/england/hhmontgomery1933/11.html>

⁸ Central Somerset Gazette 25 June 1909, accessed via British Newspapers Archive

Wells Cathedral expected the bishop's body to be returned for burial with due honour but Henrietta was adamant that George wished to be buried in Scotland without fuss and ceremony and stood her ground. She was further saddened in 1929 when she learned that George Boyle had been killed in a flying accident leaving a wife and two small children.

Henrietta lived to be 99 and died on 12th December 1937.

Since then many warm words have been written about Kennion as a man, a bishop and a preacher. His wife of 39 years was remembered for..." *many unobtrusive acts of kindness which have constituted a quiet service of inestimable value..*"

To which I would add my comment:

"Henrietta was a remarkable woman of demonstrable courage, resilience, stamina and devotion. She deserves wider recognition for her contribution to serving England and its Church both at home and in the colony of South Australia."

Lynda Ogborne November 2021

General sources:

1. George Wyndham Kennion, Australian Dictionary of Biography. See: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kennion-george-wyndham-3946>