

## Lady Douglas, of Glenbervie, New Zealand

From attractive wrought iron gates on the flat below, a long drive swept round in a wide graceful curve up to the front door of 'Glenbervie' which was built on a slightly elevated site for Lady Douglas in 1887 in the district now known as Glenbervie in the Whangarei County.

Born in 1845 in Exmouth in the County of Devon, England, Eleanor Louisa Liffiton came to New Zealand with her parents, Thomas and Caroline Liffiton, and her two sisters and one brother in 1856 on the Hastings. The Liffitons settled in Wanganui where Eleanor grew up to be a lovely-looking girl, and it was not surprising that she married at a young age. Her husband was Frederick Smith, but theirs was a brief marriage for within a very short time she became a widow.



Lady Douglas

It was about this time that Eleanor met Sir Robert Douglas, the handsome young captain of the 57th Regiment, which was then stationed in the Wanganui district. Although only in his mid twenties, he already had had a notable military career. After serving in India at the storming of Sebastopol(1), the capture of Kinburn, and later at Aden during the Indian Mutiny, he came to New Zealand with his regiment in 1861 to take part in the Maori Wars.

Some time after Eleanor and Sir Robert met, they fell in love and were married in St. Peter's Church in Wellington in 1866. A year later, when his regiment was recalled to England, he sold his commission and bought a tract of land extending from the Whangarei Falls to "Huanui", now the 'Hutchinson' orchards, which are five or six miles from Whangarei City,

Their first home was a modest bungalow where they lived for some 17 years. From the early 1880s, they began planning a much larger house, and the timber for it was heart kauri, felled and pitsawn on their own property. Unfortunately Sir Robert died before it was completed, but Lady Douglas continued with the project, including the supervision of the beautiful gardens, the fine orchard and exotic shrubs. She had a great love of trees, and among those she chose were oaks, sycamores and a tulip tree. The elevated site for her new home was ideal for the artistic, laying out of her grounds, and she took full advantage of it.

Soon after Sir Robert and Lady Douglas had settled in the Whangarei district, he was taking a leading part in public affairs. He became a member for Whangarei of the Auckland Provincial Council in 1873 until its abolition in 1876, and Member of Parliament for Marsden from 1875-1879. Nearer home where he was a Justice of the Peace and sat on the Bench in the Magistrate's Court, amusing incidents often occurred in the course of his duty.

One of these was particularly enjoyed by Lady Douglas. It concerned a rope-walker, Isaac Laurie, who plied his trade of twisting rope as he walked along his rope-walk, a path from the river to Mill Road. He had an enemy who used to tease Isaac as he rode by. Eventually, Isaac decided to take his revenge on his tormentor, so one evening when it was almost dark and he saw a man riding by on a black horse, he said to himself, "Ha! This is the man."

Without looking at the man's face, he leapt out of his hiding-place, grabbed his supposed enemy by the beard and hauled him to the ground, giving his victim a black eye in the process. Too late he saw his mistake!

A few days later, Isaac was required to appear in Court on a charge of assault and he was horrified to see that it was Sir Robert Douglas who was sitting in judgement on him. "Yes," said Sir Robert, hiding a smile, "I am the man you attacked the other night and I have a bruised face and a black eye to prove it!"

In 1884, Sir Robert, who was suffering from that dreaded disease, cancer, that was never directly mentioned in those days, went to Wanganui to seek medical aid from his old Army doctor. Unfortunately, it was too late, and he died there at the early age of 47 and was buried in the local cemetery.

Though devastated by her husband's death, Lady Douglas showed great strength of purpose by deciding to carry on the running of the estate.

After her husband's death, she did little entertaining but took a great interest in the farm and the upkeep of her large garden and grounds. Their only son, Robert, worked in Customs in Auckland, and when his father died he returned home to manage the farm where his father had established, among other things, a fine herd of dairy cattle.

Living on and beyond the boundaries of the Glenberrie Estate were at least 700 Maoris, and Lady Douglas showed a real concern for their welfare. One year an epidemic of measles swept through the district and many children and some adults, having no resistance to this Pakeha disease, fell victim to it in scores. Not knowing how to cope with this strange sickness, the Tohunga(2) decided that the fever was causing the trouble and must be brought down. So he took some of the children to a creek and dipped them up and down in the cool water — with disastrous results!

Very concerned about these children, Lady Douglas had to show great tact and understanding before she could convince the parents that "Pakeha diseases needed Pakeha treatment." However, she must have had some success, because the Maoris gave her a piece of land at Pacific Beach at Tutukaka to show their appreciation.

Some years later, Lady Douglas employed Mary Ellen Shore as her maid. It is not clear how the two women met, but as the years went by they became good friends. The mistress and the maid had completely different backgrounds, but time proved that both were women of character.

Photos show that Mary Ellen was a beautiful young woman, and evidently Lady Douglas' bachelor son, Robert, thought so too. In 1895, when she was 20, he married her. and they took up residence in the original Douglas home on the property.

Lady Douglas came from a family who, back in England, had had servants to wait on them, but the Shore family lived in the most primitive conditions in the small settlement of Lepperton, or Manutahi, as the Maoris called it, six miles from New Plymouth.



Mary Ellen Douglas

Their home was a Maori *whare* in a bush clearing, where they lived a more or less hand to mouth existence. They planted potatoes, kumaras, wheat and maize in order to live. It was just too bad if any crop failed! Like that of many other early pioneers, their flour didn't come in bags, but they had to grind their own grain in a handmill. Mary Ellen's mother cooked most meals in a camp oven, and the food included dampers, bread, [missing line] father, George Shore, acted as a Maori interpreter, but tragically for the family, he drowned in the Mokau River when only 25. This put the Shore family in a desperate situation, and as soon as the children were old enough, they had to "go to work".

After only ten years, their marriage came to an abrupt end in 1905 when he had a serious accident on the estate. He was topping trees when he slipped and fell and suffered a severe blow on the head. The tragic result was that he died of cerebral haemorrhage, leaving the two women alone. By this time, Mary Ellen had eight children, including an eight-months-old baby -- a grim and frightening situation for a young mother with no means of support.

It was then that Lady Douglas showed her caring nature for she helped her daughter-in-law in every way she could, and together they brought up that family of eight young children.

After her son's death, Lady Douglas employed a farm manager for some years, but when she was 69, she decided it was time to retire from running her large estate, so she bought a property in Auckland and set about winding up her affairs.

Her home where she had lived since 1887 had been called "Glenhervie", after the Douglas castle and property in Kincardineshire, Scotland, Although Sir Robert was born in Middlesex, England, the Douglas family seat was in Scotland. In 1914, in order to perpetuate the name, she gave five acres of land to the Education Board for a school on condition it was called "Glenbervie". At that time the existing school was along the present Harris Road and was called 'Huanui School ', the Maori name for the area.

Unfortunately, before she had had time to enjoy her retirement, she had a heart attack and died in December of that year and was buried beside her husband in Wanganui. After her death, her wish that the name, "Glenbervie" be perpetuated was more than granted for before long not only was the new school but the whole district that had been known as "Pehiaweri" and "Huanui" took on the name "Glenbervie",

#### Notes:

1. Sebastopol is of course in the Crimea, not India, as is Kinburn. Aden is in what is now known as South Yemen.
2. In the culture of the Māori of New Zealand, a *tohunga* (tōhuka in Southern Māori dialect) is an expert practitioner of any skill or art, either religious or otherwise. Tohunga include expert priests, healers, navigators, carvers, builders, teachers and advisors.