

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4788

Cunningham, Mary Emily

(1869 - 1930)

Born	30 September, 1869, Goulburn New South Wales
Died	15 November, 1930, Fairvale' Canberra Australian Capital Territory
Occupation	Activist, Pastoralist wife, Poet, Red Cross Worker, War Worker

Summary

Born to English parents, and daughter of the Surveyor General, Mary Emily Twynam married wealthy pastoralist James 'Jim' Cunningham and became an important and formative figure in the developing pastoralist community in the Tuggeranong district. She was a compassionate, sensitive and intellectually curious woman whose capacity for friendship and kindness turned her homestead 'Tuggranong' into the social focal point of the community. Her early married years were taken up with raising eight children and battling with the bouts of serious depression that would shadow her for her entire life. As her children grew she found time to indulge in her love of gardening as well as pursue her passion for poetry and the written word. Cunningham was also an outspoken advocate for conscription during the two referenda in 1916 and was dedicated to fundraising for soldiers in the Great War.

Details

Mary Emily Twynam was born and grew up in the New South Wales township of Goulburn. Her family home 'Riversdale' was a place she always remembered fondly. Her father, Edward Twynam came to the colony in 1855 from England and prospered as a surveyor. He would eventually go on to become the Surveyor General. His wife Emily Rose was an accomplished artist who left behind many beautiful woodcarvings and etchings. She took a keen interest in the natural world and Mary Emily seems to have inherited a love of gardening and nature from her. From the archival material that exists Emily Rose appears to have been a loving and kind mother to her children. Mary Emily however, developed a close bond with her father that would be one of the cornerstones of her whole life. They shared an interest in literary pursuits and both possessed keen and inquiring intellects. As an adult Mary would often run drafts of her poems and ideas by her father. Like other young women of her class, Mary was educated at home by Governess Miss Nora Martyr. 'Riversdale' was to occupy a special place in Mary's heart for her whole life indicating that she had a warm loving and happy childhood in the place she would call 'Home' until her death.

On 24 April 1889 a 19 year old Mary Emily was married to successful pastoralist James 'Jim' Cunningham, who at 39 was 20 years her senior. It was a marriage partly borne of duty, but one which would become, if not passionate, stable and affectionate. After a honeymoon abroad in Europe the couple returned to Australia to settle at 'Tuggranong' (spelled this way to distinguish it from the surrounding Tuggeranong district). 'Tuggranong' was one of a number of properties owned by Jim Cunningham and his brother Andrew Jackson Cunningham. 'Tuggranong' like the brothers' nearby property 'Lanyon' was a large sheep station on the eastern banks of the Murrumbidgee river; up to 50 000 sheep were shorn at the 'Tuggranong' sheds. The brothers also had properties on the western side of the river as well as holdings in the Cooma and Forbes districts. Both 'Lanyon' and 'Tuggranong' would come to occupy an important part of Mary's heart and life with both providing her a deep sense of place and belonging. She also left her mark on both properties with her skilful and committed gardening.

Mary Emily was already pregnant with the couple's first child by the time they settled at 'Tuggranong' and on 2 June 1890 Jane Cynthia Cunningham was born. Seven more children would follow in the next 12 years. During this period Mary's first documented battle with what we would now call depression or postnatal depression occurred. Mary herself never referred to these battles in her letters or notebooks, but references to her breakdown in 1902, after the birth of her son Alexander 'Pax', are found in her family's letters. In October 1903 Mary's sister, Edith wrote from 'Riversdale' to her friend Stella Miles Franklin and expressed relief and gratitude at Mary's restoration 'from the dead'.

Despite her personal struggles with such darkness Mary remained a much loved, and loving, member of her community. She

took to her role as a successful pastoralist's wife with gusto attending balls, getting involved in fundraising activities for the parish church as well as other causes like raising funds for a local hospital. The homestead itself became the social hub of the district and Mary and Jim hosted many fine gatherings there. When the new military academy at Duntroon was opened in June 1911 Mary warmly welcomed the cadets. Many of them would call on 'Tuggranong' whenever possible, probably in part due to her teenaged daughters, and a few would keep up correspondence with Mary when they were serving overseas in the Great War a few years later. Her involvement in the community and her loyal and giving friendship were all the more admirable as in these years she lost both her eldest daughter Jane Cynthia to appendicitis and her beloved mother just a few short weeks later.

By 1914 with the Great War well and truly looming large the family moved to 'Lanyon'. The move was precipitated by the death of Andrew Jackson as well the changes afoot with the planning for the new Federal Capital. There were uncertainties about how quickly 'Tuggranong' would be reclaimed as Commonwealth land and so a move to 'Lanyon' afforded the family some stability. At this time the couple offered 'Tuggranong' to the Commonwealth government as a convalescent hospital for the duration of the war, but this offer was not taken up. The war also caused other shifts in the Cunningham family and in the texture of Mary's everyday life. Always a staunch supporter of Empire, (her Empire Day bonfires for the Tuggeranong district were big affairs) Mary was unequivocally supportive of the war. Her eldest son, Andrew would go on to distinguished service with the First Light Horse Regiment, and her sister Joan served as nurse overseas for the duration of the war.

Mary herself became a passionate fundraiser and like many of her class a committed advocate of conscription during the campaigns in 1916. To the disapproval of some of the conservative people in her community she took a public role in joining a local pro-conscription committee. In the winter of 1915 she threw a ball at 'Lanyon' to raise funds for the Red Cross, and in 1917 she took the post of president of the newly created War Chest Flower Shop. The War Chest was established in 1914 as fundraising group that aimed to support all soldiers, not just the wounded ones like the Red Cross did. The position meant Mary had to travel between Sydney and 'Lanyon' of which she was now involved in managing as her husband had succumbed to chronic ill-health. The Flower shop, based on Elizabeth Street in Sydney, sold fresh produce, fresh flowers and over time Mary would come to sell some of her poems in the store too; a move she relied on her father to help her make with him often acting as critic and editor of her work. The Flower Shop was a successful venture and they eventually moved to larger premises on George Street. Despite the growing pressures and gloom of her ailing husband Mary, as always, formed supportive intellectually stimulating and loyal friendships, she struck a particularly affectionate relationship with the young artist Grace Cossington-Smith during these years.

After the war Mary's life changed. Her son Andrew returned from war in 1919 but had been broken by his service and eventually descended into alcoholism. He took over 'Lanyon' as Mary was now based in Bondi, Sydney with Jim whose health was too poor to be in the cold southern climate. Andrew proceeded to publicly disgrace the family and mismanage 'Lanyon' to the point that it was publicly auctioned off in 1926, much to Mary's dismay. 'Tuggranong' was also gone by this stage having been taken over by the Department of Defence in 1922; it became the Official Historian, Charles Bean's residence for the duration of the history's writing. Both of these losses came after a deeply felt loss of Jim, who died on 28 December 1921 after years of poorly healthy. For a woman so bound to community, place and family Mary was adrift in many ways. After Jim's death she went 'home' to reside at 'Riversdale', but the final hurt came with the death of her father in 1923 after just a brief illness. After this latest grief she split her time between 'Riversdale' and 'Fairwater', a property near Ulladulla that she acquired in 1927 after the sale of 'Lanyon'. Here Mary withdrew into her herself and unlike in 1902 her family was now grown and busy with their own lives and did not rally around to pull her out of her darkness. She died alone at 'Fairvale' (her daughter's home) at the age 61 on 15 November 1930. Her death certificate refers to her refusal to take drink or food and of her 'unsound mind'. Her son Andrew found her body and had her buried at the family cemetery at 'Lanyon' where her husband and four of her daughters also lay. With the end of her life so came the end of an era of her family's proud pastoral heritage and deep ties with the land and people of the Tuggeranong valley.

Read more about Mary Cunningham's activities during World War I at the exhibition [Canberra Women in World War 1: Community at Home, Nurses Abroad.](#)

Published resources

Site Exhibition

Canberra Women in World War I: Community at Home, Nurses Abroad, Clarke, Patricia and Francis, Niki, 2015,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cww1>

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg>

Newspaper Article

Funeral Notice. Mrs. M. Cunningham, 1930,
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16731622>

Marriage Notice, 1889,
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page1385549>

Silver Wedding, 1914,
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article31401528>

Resource Section

Cunningham, James (Jim) (1850-1921),
<http://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/cunningham-james-jim-278>

Cunningham, Mary Emily (1870 - 1930),
<http://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/cunningham-mary-emily-1639>

Lanyon Homestead,
<http://www.museumsandgalleries.act.gov.au/lanyon/>

Twynam, Edward (1832-1923),
<http://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/twynam-edward-1648/text1756>

Resource

Tuggeranong Homestead,
<http://www.tuggeranonghomestead.com.au/>

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Book

Mary Cunningham: An Australian Life, Horsfield, Jennifer, 2004

The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918: Australia during the war, Scott, Ernest, 1938

Journal Article

Beautiful Colours to Arrange: Mary Cunningham, Mistress of Tuggeranong, Horsfield, Jennifer, 2003

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[Letters, 1910-1960 \[manuscript\]](#)

[Letters, 1858-1931 \[manuscript\]](#)

[Papers of Cunningham family, 1834-1902 \[manuscript\]](#)

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