



SACRED
(TO)

THE MEMORY OF
PRISCILLA HITCHINS,
NATIVE OF TRURO
CORNWALL ENGLAND,
WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE
IN CHILDBIRTH, JAN. 5TH 1874,
AGED 38 YEARS.

COME GENTLE STRANGER, TURN ASIDE,
LEAVE WHERE THOU ART INTRUSIVE PRIDE;
ON ME THIS FAVOUR PRAY BESTOW,
APPROACH AND READ THESE LINES BELOW.
YOU'RE BORN IN SIN, ESTRANGED FROM GOD,
AND MUST BE WASHED IN JESUS' BLOOD;
MUST KNOW ON EARTH YOUR SINS FORGIVEN,
IF YOU EXPECT TO ENTER HEAVEN.
TO THIS BRIEF LECTURE PRAY ATTEND,
THAT'S ALL PASS ON, OBEDIENT FRIEND.

Priscilla Hitchins (nee Hawkey) was one of the thousands of women who lost their lives in childbirth in colonial New Zealand. Complications of childbirth were the second most common cause of death for young women in the late-nineteenth century, surpassed only by the “great white plague”: tuberculosis.

Priscilla Hawkey was born in Truro, Cornwall in 1836. When she was 25 years old she embarked on the long voyage to the colonies, arriving in Victoria, Australia, aboard the *Lord Raglan* in February 1862. Travelling with her was 20-year-old Martin Hitchins, who was probably her future brother-in-law; the Hitchins family also hailed from Cornwall. Two months later Thomas Hitchins arrived from New Zealand to meet her; he had probably, like many others in this period, moved on from the gold fields of Victoria to those of Otago. Priscilla Hawkey and Thomas Hitchins were married in Bendigo in April 1862. Shortly afterwards the newlyweds set off for Dunedin aboard the *Sea Breeze*.

Their activities and movements after reaching Otago are unclear, but a Thomas Hitchens or Hitchings was living in Blue Spur from 1868 to 1871, and a Thomas Hitchins manned the tollbar at Hillside, Caversham from 1871 to the mid-1870s. Priscilla gave birth to at least three children: their son Thomas was born in 1864, William was born at Gabriels Gully in 1866, and George in 1871.

On 5 January 1874 Priscilla Hitchins, who was 38 years old, died in childbirth at Dunedin Hospital. A number of factors made childbirth risky in this period. About a third of maternal deaths were caused by infection. Until the emergence of antibiotics in the 1930s, there was no effective treatment for ‘childbed’ or ‘puerperal’ fever, which could be introduced by birth attendants who did not clean their hands or instruments effectively. Haemorrhage caused problems for some. Unless they had a skilled midwife or doctor present, and many birthing women did not, death could come quickly from bleeding. Transfusion was not a safe option until blood groups were identified, and was seldom used before the 1930s. Some women died of eclampsia, the most serious stage of toxæmia. This rarely arises today because of careful screening and treatment of pregnant women. As there was effectively no antenatal care in the 1800s, women often did not realise anything was wrong until they had a seizure, and by then treatment was often too late to save either mother or baby.

Many women also died due to what the statistics of the day categorised as “other accidents of childbirth.” If a woman could not deliver her baby naturally,

perhaps due to a small or deformed pelvis, or because the baby was lying crossways in the womb, the options were grim. If no intervention was taken, she would usually die of shock or a ruptured uterus. Caesarean section was highly risky and usually only performed to save the unborn baby of a dead or dying mother. The first ‘successful’ Caesarean in New Zealand – that is, one where both mother and baby survived – took place in 1890, and it did not become common until several decades later. Doctors and midwives sometimes managed to turn a baby in the womb, or deliver it with ‘high’ forceps. If these options failed, they might carry out the operation known as ‘craniotomy’ or ‘embryotomy’. This involved crushing the baby’s head so it could be fitted through the pelvis – it killed the baby, but might save the life of the mother.

The fact that Priscilla Hitchins died in the hospital suggests the family had fallen on hard times, because hospital admission was only allowed to the poor in this period. It was, presumably, Priscilla’s death which prompted the Hitchins family to leave Dunedin for Victoria, where some of their extended family had probably remained. In March 1874 a party of six Hitchins boys, ranging in age from ten to sixteen years, arrived in Victoria aboard the *Alhambra*. The youngest boys in the group may have been Priscilla’s sons, and the older ones were perhaps Thomas’s sons from an earlier marriage, or his nephews, whom Priscilla had been helping to raise. Whatever their relationship, the loss of a mother figure clearly had a devastating impact on this family. Thomas and any remaining younger children soon made their way to Bendigo, too; Thomas died there in 1885.

Priscilla Hitchins’s beautiful headstone at Dunedin’s Northern Cemetery is more extravagant than we might expect from a family of slender means; they must have wanted to ensure the woman they were leaving buried in foreign soil would not be forgotten.

The verse engraved is so poignant:

Come, gentle stranger, turn aside,
Leave where thou art intrusive pride;
On me this favour pray bestow,
Approach and read these lines below.

You’re born in sin, estranged from God,
And must be washed in Jesus’ blood;

Must know on earth your sins forgiven,
If you expect to enter heaven.

To this brief lecture pray attend,
That's all, pass on obedient friend.

Prepared for the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand
(www.cemeteries.org.nz) by Dr Alison Clarke, Historian of Macandrew Bay, Dunedin