Mrs Macquarie's Earrings

Were Mrs Macquarie's earrings made from the first gold found in New South Wales? Patricia Clarke investigates an Australian mystery.

One of the more unusual treasures in the National Library is a pair of gold pendant earrings. Very occasionally these exquisite earrings are put on display in an exhibition, such as the recent *The World Upside Down: Australia 1788-1830*. At other times they are kept in a strongroom. But how did the Library come to get these earrings and what is the story behind them?

When I first heard about 'Mrs Macquarie's earrings', the information that accompanied them interested—in fact, startled—me. A note stated that the earrings were believed to have been made from the first gold found in New South Wales. This raised some questions. Gold was first discovered in New South Wales in 1851 (or that's the usual story); Mrs Macquarie arrived in New South Wales in 1810, with her husband Governor Lachlan Macquarie, and left in 1822 after his term ended. Not only that, she died in 1835, nearly 20 years before the first gold discovery. An intriguing story? A conundrum?

The Library's involvement with the earrings began in 1968 when a New York resident, Edward Manley Hopkins of Park View Avenue, Bronxville, approached the Australian Consul-General in New York, Sir Reginald Sholl. He wanted to present to Australia 'Mrs Macquarie's earrings' and four Macquarie family letters, including one written by Mrs Macquarie to her niece, Mary Maclaine of Lochbuy, Scotland. Edward Manley Hopkins, incidentally, was not only a distant kinsman of Elizabeth Macquarie; he was also related to the distinguished English poet and Jesuit priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The Australian Prime Minister, John Gorton, accepted the earrings and the letters. On 13 November 1968 he wrote to Mr Hopkins thanking him for his gift and 'the interest in our country which inspired it'. He said the earrings and letters would be placed, at Mr Hopkins' wish, in the National Library of Australia. The note that accompanied the earrings to Australia read:

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Earrings made of the first gold mined in New South Wales, Mrs Macquarie sent the gold home to her niece,
Mrs Gregorson of Ardtornish, who had the earrings made.

This is the evidence for the story of the earrings being made of Australian gold.

Is it possible? Even as early as 1788, the first year of European settlement, a convict, James Daley, claimed to have found a gold nugget. But he later withdrew his claim after enduring 150 lashes for refusing to say where he had found the gold. There's a report of gold being found at Prospect during Governor King's term in the early years of the nineteenth century. Then, in 1814, there were rumours of the discovery of small pieces of gold by convicts building the road over the Blue Mountains. In 1820, a Russian naturalist with the Bellingshausen expedition, F. Stein, claimed to have sighted gold-bearing ore while he was on a 12-day trip to the Blue Mountains. But many people, including the botanist Allan Cunningham, were sceptical of his claim.

The first verified discovery was by surveyor James McBrien, who found gold at the Fish River near Bathurst in 1823—but by then Mrs Macquarie had left Sydney. Later still there were reports of discoveries by Count Strzelecki in 1838 and the geologist, Reverend W.B. Clarke, in 1841.

Governor Macquarie's papers make no mention of the discovery of gold. There also appears to be no mention in Mrs Macquarie's surviving correspondence of her sending gold to her niece, Mary Maclaine. So why did Mrs Macquarie's family believe the gold came from New South Wales?

There is one possible explanation. There is every reason to believe that the authorities were frightened of the discovery of gold, or even rumours of its discovery. It would have been difficult to maintain discipline over convicts with little to lose and excited by the thought of great riches. It would have undermined law and order. With hindsight, of course, we could say it might have kick-started the economy!

The possibility of a gold find being kept secret is canvassed in a letter from the then National Librarian, H.L. White (later Sir Harold), in reply to an inquiry about the origin of the earrings. On 31 January 1969, he wrote:

> the well-known fear of officials concerning the consequences of any discovery of gold has prevented most historians from stating without qualification that no gold was found before 1823.

He concluded that there were no grounds on which 'to deny or even to dispute Mr Hopkins' claim regarding the authenticity of the earrings'.

In a letter to the Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, Harold White also stated this view. He had found nothing, he wrote, to 'confirm or positively deny that the earrings had been made from the first gold discovered in New South Wales'. His conclusion: it was possible that the gold used in the making of these earrings could have been first brought to the notice of the governor.

The discovery would not of course have been made public at the time for reasons that are now a matter of common knowledge.

During the National Library's research on this subject in the late 1960s, Mr Hopkins was asked if he could discover any further documentary evidence. After making inquiries in the Macquarie, Maclaine...
and Gregorson families, he reported that the information about the earrings was an oral tradition passed down in the family.

After researching many historical subjects, I have a great respect for stories based on family tradition, as this one is. There's usually a basis of fact somewhere in the story.

A possible explanation, it seems to me, is that a small piece of gold was found during the making of the road over the Blue Mountains. This was brought to the attention of Governor Macquarie, possibly while he and his wife were travelling over the mountains to the site of Bathurst in 1815. The find was kept secret. Subsequently, Mrs Macquarie sent the gold home to her niece. An intriguing story! These days it would raise all sorts of questions.

The earrings themselves are approximately 5.7 cm in length, with citrine stones set in the attachment at the top. According to Marion Fletcher in *Costumes in Australia*, gold drop earrings of this style appear frequently in Australian portraits in the 1820s to 1840s.

Elizabeth Macquarie was the second wife of Governor Lachlan Macquarie. At the time of their marriage in 1807, she was 29 and he 46. Formerly Elizabeth Campbell of Airds, Scotland, she was Governor Macquarie's distant relative. In September 1808 their first child, a daughter, was born, but she died a few months later. Subsequently, over a period of three-and-a-half years, Elizabeth Macquarie had five miscarriages. One occurred in 1809 shortly before she boarded the *Dromedary* to sail to New South Wales, where Lachlan Macquarie had been appointed governor. He was taking over during the crisis that followed the rebellion against Governor William Bligh.

In New South Wales, Elizabeth Macquarie made a unique contribution to some aspects of public affairs not usually regarded as the domain of women in that era. She had a great interest in architecture and gardening, and she left her mark in these fields. She planned the road running round the inside of the Government Domain in Sydney to the point on the harbour named after her. At the point is the rock seat that is known as Mrs Macquarie's Chair. When the road, measuring over five kilometres, was completed on 13 June 1816, Governor Macquarie recorded in his journal that it had been carried out exactly to the plan laid down by Mrs Macquarie.
She is also credited by Dr Frederick Watson in his *The History of Sydney Hospital from 1811 to 1911* with contributing to the planning of Sydney's first hospital. 'Architecture was a great hobby of Mrs Macquarie's,' he wrote. He believed she had sketched some of the plans and influenced the governor in the choice of site.

Elizabeth Macquarie also performed the more usual roles of a governor's wife, particularly in continuing vice-regal interest in the care of orphans. In 1800, Anna Josepha King, the first governor's wife to live in New South Wales, and her friend, Elizabeth Paterson, the wife of the Lieutenant-Governor, had established the Orphan Institution in George Street, Sydney. This was the first public social welfare activity undertaken by women in New South Wales.

From the time she arrived, Elizabeth Macquarie was concerned by the situation of the Orphan Institution, next to a guardhouse and a lumberyard. She believed this could lead to the prostitution of the girls at the institution. Soon her husband decided that a new Female Orphan School should be built at Parramatta. Elizabeth Macquarie became mistress of this school, making it her principal public activity. She visited it frequently and, apart from the school, took a personal interest in ensuring that the farm and market garden attached to it were run efficiently.

Elizabeth Macquarie carried out her public activities despite suffering frequent bouts of illness. She was a shy woman, happiest when among her family and close friends, but there were very few women of similar interests and background in Sydney. Nevertheless duty demanded that she entertain regularly at Government House where the company often stayed until late in the morning.

The most momentous private event in the Macquaries' lives during their stay in Sydney was the birth of their only surviving child, Lachlan, in 1814. After their experience of losing an infant child and Elizabeth's series of miscarriages, it is not surprising that both doted on their son.

One of the letters given to the National Library by Edward Manley Hopkins reflects the central position that Lachlan filled in the Macquaries' lives. Writing to her niece, Mary Maclaine, Elizabeth recalled how she had cared for her as a baby when her life was despaired of. Now, she was pleased Mary took such an interest in her son: it strengthened the tie between them. She wrote:

> As you do me the favour to ask for a lock of Lachlan's hair, I have great pleasure in sending it and also a little sketch of his face which though by no means well done serves to give an idea of him ... Little Lachlan has this moment come from school and delighted me more than you can think by pointing out a great many of his letters.

The Macquaries left New South Wales in February 1822 to live at their estate on the Scottish island of Mull. Macquarie survived for only a couple of years. Elizabeth died in 1835. Perhaps before she died she was able to admire—even to wear—the earrings her niece had made from the gold Elizabeth had sent to Scotland.

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Richard Read Sr

*Mrs Macquarie 1819*

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