

MARTHA'S QUILT



Jennifer Brett Roxborough

Martha's Quilt

The history of a Broderie Perse quilt made in Armagh, Ireland in 1795 and the people who have been its guardians.

Part One The Family

In 1881, a young woman of 27 boarded a ship in Belfast and set sail for New Zealand to marry her fiancé George Hill Willson Mackisack. In her trousseau she had a broderie perse quilt made for her grandmother at her marriage in 1795. Both grandmother and granddaughter were named Martha Alicia Brett. The Martha Alicia Brett who migrated to New Zealand was my great grandmother.

Martha's grandmother, Martha (or Matilda) Alicia Black, was born into an Armagh Church of Ireland merchant family in 1765 and in December 1795 she married Charles Brett of Belfast. The Black family were well established and although Martha's father's first name is not known, her mother's name was Ann. Martha had two sisters, Maria and Elizabeth and there may have been another sister, Catherine.¹

In 1795, Charles Brett (b. 1752) descended from a family of possibly Anglo-Norman settlers who had been in Ireland from at least the 16th century, was also Church of Ireland. He was a successful merchant and had recently built a comfortable house named Charleville in Castlereagh on the outskirts of Belfast². In November 1795, his mother, Molly, died but three weeks later he was celebrating his marriage to Martha Black. Charles was 43 and Martha 30.³

An established businessman, Charles had been taking care of his widowed mother since his father died in 1788. He had interests in many fields, the wine trade, distilling, glass making, insurance, farming flax and processing it and later merchant adventuring with a fleet of ships around the British Isles. He had turned down one offer of marriage to a Catholic girl around 1790 and probably met Martha Black through business contacts.⁴

The Black girls were from a privileged family and as such had time for genteel pursuits including needlework. Martha's marriage must have been planned well in advance and her sisters Elizabeth now Mrs Corne, and Maria (and perhaps Catherine, now Catherine Noble) produced a beautiful broderie perse quilt for the occasion. The quilt and its place in the textiles of the time is described in Part Two.

As her marriage quilt reflects the fashions and style of life at the end of the 18th century for a comfortably off middle class woman, so does Martha's life. She had a happy marriage and bore 7 children, 3 of whom died in infancy. The surviving children were, Matilda Mary Ann, the eldest, Wills Hill, Annabella Elizabeth, (the survivor of twins), and Mary Catherine Sandys. All the family were musical: Charles played the guitar and violin, Matilda sang and Mary and Martha junior played the

¹ Brett family tree. Catherine Noble appears as an aunt of Martha Alicia Black (ie her father's sister) but this is crossed out and her name has been handwritten in beside Elizabeth and Maria as a sister of Martha. The reason for them appearing on the family tree at all appears to be because of the quilt.

² A house built in 1890 now stands where the original Charleville stood. Address: 39 Manse Rd Castlereagh

³ P55 Long Shadows Cast Before.(LSCB)

⁴ P 55 LSCB

piano. Books, gardening, furnishing and decoration were other family interests. The family were active members of the Church of Ireland and were concerned about the less fortunate, even inviting the poor to Sunday lunch at Charleville. The elder girls were educated at home, Wills was sent to Trinity College Dublin in 1813 and Mary was sent to boarding school in Lancashire. Martha did not keep good health and died in October 1815 at the early age of 49. Charles continued to be concerned for the education of his children and providing for his family in the best way possible for a man of moderate means.

Charles Brett died on 23 June 1829 at the age of 77. He left a detailed will, leaving some money and a long list of valued possessions to each of his daughters and Wills as the executor and residuary legatee. Along with items such as piano's and other musical instruments, the two unmarried daughters were each left their own beds and bedding including the counterpanes. However the boderie perse quilt was unlikely to have been used as bedding and is not mentioned as being left to any of the girls⁵. The document listing the residual estate unfortunately no longer exists.

Wills did well at Trinity and by the time of his mother's death he had decided on a career in the church. Wills was ordained a deacon in 1821 and in 1822, priest. His sympathies lay with the evangelical, low church part of the Church of Ireland. Grey Abbey on the Ards peninsula was his parish for 21 years until he moved to the nearby parish of Kircubbin in 1843. Wills married Mattie (Martha) Garrett, the daughter of a Belfast solicitor in 1835. He was 37 and she 26. Up until the time of his father's death in 1829, Wills seemed to have lodgings in the village in the weekends and spend most of the rest of his time at Charleville.



The church at Grey Abbey

The second Martha Brett was a woman of literary and musical tastes, also interested in botany and Greek and Hebrew. Fortunately Wills' inheritance meant servants could take care of the children and domestic arrangements. Like her husband, Mattie was very musical, being both an accomplished singer and pianist. Charleville was sold

⁵ Will of Charles Brett, the original at LÉstrange and Brett, Solicitors, Belfast. Transcript in the public Records of Northern Ireland.

shortly after the marriage and they rented a house in Grey Abbey which had no parsonage. 13 children were born, 10 of whom survived, Elizabeth Corne Brett (named after Will's aunt who had helped make the quilt), Charles Henry Brett, Thomas Brett, George William Montgomery Brett, Anne Catherine Brett, Annabella Matilda Brett, James Robert Brett, Mary Brett, William Jasper Brett, and the youngest Martha Alicia Brett, my great grandmother, born in 1854 when Wills was 56 and Mattie 45. In 1843 Wills, Mattie and the children moved to brand new parsonage associated with a newly build church at Kircubbin about 5 miles from Grey Abbey, endowed by Robert Ward of Bangor, a distant relative. Wills remained in this parish until his death aged 64 in June 1862.⁶



The church (above) and parsonage (below) at Kircubbin



Wills left an estate of between £4,000 and £5000 and divided so that the youngest received the most. Charles the eldest son, received only £20 and now became the breadwinner of the family. They needed to move from the parsonage at Kircubbin and moved to a house at 6 Carlisle Circus, Belfast and later to a house at 3 The Crescent, Holywood after Charles was married. Here Martha lived with her daughters until her death in 1886. The four who never married, remained there for many years.

⁶ P 74-77 LSCB.

3 The Crescent Holywood



In 1881 Martha, the youngest, became engaged to George Hill Wilson Mackisack and emigrated to New Zealand. Mattie probably decided to give Martha the quilt because she was the daughter getting married, as well as being her grandmother's name sake. Her older sisters were all between 30 and 40 by this stage and did not seem to have marriage prospects. Martha had in all probability met George through her older brother George William Montgomery Brett, who married Mabel Mackisack (her fiance's older sister) in 1874 and emigrated to Otago New Zealand in the ship Nelson in 1878. George Brett trained as an accountant in Belfast and settled in Gore in 1880 and eventually became a bank manager.⁷ Martha's other brothers, Thomas, Robert and Jasper all entered the law and practiced as barristers or solicitors. Charles Brett later reported that of his brothers, only George helped him in supporting his mother and sisters.

George Mackisack may have emigrated earlier than Martha as at the time of their marriage which took place in the Holy Trinity Anglican church in Gore on 13 July 1881, his address is described as being usually of Dunedin, but lately of Gore.⁸ Their names do not appear in the patchy shipping lists which exist in New Zealand, but this may be because they did not have an assisted passage. However Martha must have been a passenger on either the Benvenue which arrived in Dunedin on 29 April 1881 or the Waitangi which arrived on 13 June as a bound copy of favourite music which she took to New Zealand is inscribed Martha A Brett March 4 1881, Holywood⁹

The third Martha Brett, now Martha Alicia Mackisack settled in Dunedin with her new husband, George. In 1882 Martha continued the family tradition of twins which were unfortunately still born. In the same year a house was bought in Edward Street St Clair, Dunedin. Over the years Charles Brett lent them considerable sums of money so could have helped finance this house. From 1883 to 1891, seven children were born at regular intervals, Hill Willson, Martha Brett, (1884) Eleanor Willson, Jasper Wills, Charles Brett, Henry Lawrence and Kathleen Elizabeth.

⁷ P 103 Michael J Rombouts, Irish Settlers and Southland to Otago

⁸ Transcripts of Marriage Registers in Anglican Churches in Otago and Southland.

⁹ This music is now in the possession of Richard Jones (great great great grandson of Martha)



Martha Alicia Mackisack

George is described as a salesman and worked for Neill and Company, Wine and Spirit Merchants. He was clearly well regarded by his employer and after his untimely death in 1892 an obituary was placed in the Otago Daily Times. How did he die? Family lore has it that he committed suicide after getting the maid pregnant, but this information was not shared with my grandmother for example, until she was well into middle age.¹⁰ Charles Brett, back in Belfast regarded George as a scoundrel¹¹— may be because of this or maybe because of the succession of loans he made to them. In addition to loans, George also raised 5 or 6 mortgages on the St Clair house until it was sold in 1888. They had several other properties in Dunedin. In 1888 they leased a property off Serpentine Avenue, then from 1888 to 1890 lived in Maitland Street. In 1892 the address is Royal Crescent, St Kilda. Other properties were also bought and leased but it is not clear where George made or lost money from these transactions.¹²

What is clear is that Martha was left a widow with 7 small children. She was known as a refined lady who held musical soirees in her house in Neidpath Road, Mornington, Dunedin, (probably 89) where she lived from 1895-1904. Music continued to be important to the family. All the children eventually married apart from Eleanor (Dolly) who became a teacher. From 1905 to 1910 Martha lived at 185 High Street Roslyn, Dunedin, and then when all her children were grown, at 2 Preston Crescent, Mornington. At the time of her death on 26 July 1927, she was living with her daughter, Eleanor, at 22 Blacks Road North East Valley, Dunedin. It is not known when she gave the quilt to her eldest daughter the fourth Martha Brett (Mackisack) but by this time the makers of the quilt (the Black sisters) had been included on a copy of the Brett family tree and identified as the quilt makers. The tradition of passing the quilt on to the eldest daughter was established.

Martha Brett Mackisack (my grandmother) married Thomas Bolton Arlidge on 18 11 1908 in Dunedin. He was a young accountant born in Dunedin of English and Scottish ancestry. Martha (Matsie) and Tom moved to Palmerston North early in their

¹⁰ Conversation with my cousin, Margaret Marshall, reporting a conversation with her mother or grandmother.

¹¹ p.77. Charles E B Brett, *Long Shadows Cast before, Nine Lives in Ulster, 1625-1977* (London: John Bartholomew & Sons, 1978). Adam Brett in Belfast in November 2006 also confirmed that he had heard that George's death was suicide.

¹² This information is from the Otago electoral rolls, Stones Directories and the Land Transfer Records at the National Archives in Dunedin.

marriage and five children were born all while they lived at first Park Road and then 38 Bryant Street. Several carried on the tradition of Brett family names: Thomas Hill born 1910, Mary Alicia born 27 July 1911, Kathleen Eleanor, 1914, John Brett, 1916 and Allan Stephen 1921. Martha continued with the interests of her forebears. She was very well read, an accomplished pianist, a keen gardener and rose grower and heavily involved in the Anglican Church.



Martha Brett Arlidge

She taught Sunday school and even had services in her house at one point. She was interested in needlework and in her later years liked tatting and decorating towels and bags with her handiwork. In later years Mattie and Tom moved to 68 Beresford Street. As a widow Mattsie lived in a flat in Park Street and in her very old age in a rest home in Greenmeadows, Napier until her death in 1975.

Martha gave the quilt to her daughter Mary Alicia Jones (my mother) in 1970 and it was at 44 Pohutukawa Ave Orewa that the first existing photo of the quilt was taken.¹³ On Mary's death in 1994 the quilt passed to her eldest daughter, (my sister) Lynette Mary Brook of Dunedin. In 2006 it was lent for a period to the Otago Museum to form part of a quilt display, as far as I know the first time it had actually been on public display.



Mary Alicia Jones

¹³ Taken by Pamela Fitz Gerald, quilt historian, approximately 1980

Part Two

The Broderie Perse Quilt

The Fabrics

Martha's quilt is made from chintz motifs appliquéd onto a plain background. The first chintz or painted cotton fabric was imported from the Coromandel coast of India as early as 1600 by the British and Dutch East India companies to meet the need of the rising middle classes for domestic textiles especially for bed covers and curtains. The original prints were those favoured in India at the time but as these were not always appealing to British tastes Indian chintz makers began to incorporate floral and other popular English themes. When oriental designs such as the tree of life became popular these appeared as well.¹⁴ However to protect the declining British wool and silk industry bans were placed on imported fabrics. These prohibitions were sometimes ignored but as imported fabrics the chintzes were expensive and hard to come by until restrictions were lifted in 1774. Imported cottons were then heavily taxed.

From the 1750s, chintz and dress fabrics were also printed in England and the earliest fabrics are dated from around 1750, often from orders of fabrics shipped to the United States. Fabric designers usually started as young apprentices but some were established artists. Many designers were anonymous but some achieved a certain fame, notably William Kilburn who was apprenticed to a calico printer in Ireland before moving to Walthingham in Surrey. Peter Casteels and John Baptist Jackson are two other designers whose work survives. . Early English chintzes favoured floral designs on white backgrounds, but by the 1760s coloured and dark grounds were used. . By the last quarter of the 18th century, the British cotton industry had undergone enormous expansion and the range of dyes and their colourfastness was increasing. Fabric designers needed to have a good understanding of the chemistry involved in the complex printing and dyeing process. In 1790 "Turkey Red," the first really colourfast red was produced in Britain and by the time the Black sisters were planning their quilt a wide range of bright woodblock printed cotton fabrics were available. The main motifs were from furnishing chintzes but border fabrics were also available or borders from dress cottons could be utilised.



Block printed furnishing chintz c1795 Victoria and Albert Museum collection

¹⁴ Judy Anne Johnson Brennan, , Chintz Appliquéd: the Art of Broderie Perse, www/womenfolk.com/quilting/history/broderieperse.htm accessed 27/12/06



English Furnishing Chintz by Peel and Co, Church, 1812 Victoria and Albert Museum Collection.¹⁵

The style known as “Chinoiserie” featured prominently in the designs of British cotton manufacturers at this time. This was a European vision of Chinese life. Typically this consisted of designs including oriental looking figures often holding sunshades, engaged in drinking tea or standing on bridges or near pagodas. Several of these designs feature on Martha’s quilt. Birds and flowers in urns, vases or baskets were also popular. These designs were similar to those on the British produced porcelain for example Delftware and porcelain produced by factories at Bow, Lowerstoft, Liverpool and Worcester which was in turn influenced by Indian flower designs from European porcelain, notably from Meissen and Sevres. The pattern of oriental imports, restrictions, and then local production of oriental influenced designs followed much the same pattern in the porcelain and textile industries.¹

Delft lidded vase 1750



Example of Indian flower design on Meissen vase



¹⁵ Wendy Hefford, Design for Printed Textiles 1750 to 1850

The Quilt

Broderie perse quilts had been made since the early 1700s. Broderie perse refers to appliquéd chintz motifs on to a background with a small, delicate blanket stitch using embroidery silk. It was a way of making expensive fabrics go further as they could be appliquéd onto locally produced or cheaper backgrounds. These quilts, usually about 8 feet square took the form of a central motif surrounded by pieced or appliquéd borders or border fabrics. Surrounding this inner square was often a further border of large appliquéd motifs arranged symmetrically or at least to provide balance and further narrow borders of border fabrics or pieced designs form the outside edges of the quilt.¹⁶ Martha's quilt follows this design and is very similar to others of the period. Clare Browne, the Textile Curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London thinks that the fabrics in Martha's quilt are British woodcut prints from around 1790.¹⁷ Martha's quilt is described in detail by Pamela Fitz Gerald.

“It measures 82 ½” x 77 ¾” and comprises a central 24” square of white linen appliquéd with a basket of flowers surrounded by four floral swags and floral motives in each corner. Buttonhole stitch in course silk has been used to appliqué this medallion and all the other pictorial motifs. The square is surrounded by a 5” tan border edged on each side with 2” narrow printed borders. The tan area is appliquéd with clamshell-shaped chintz prints using hidden stitches not buttonhole stitching. A 9 ½” linen border follows, with sixteen broderie perse appliqués spaced around the medallion. These depict an urn and two baskets of flowers; bouquets; and little scenes, some of them depicting Chinese pagodas and trees and two of them little figures, each standing under a tree holding a parasol. One lavish display of flowers also has an exotic pheasant perched on a branch. The buttonhole stitch in some places has been used to create stems and branches and in one area, a pair of flowers – which might indicate that the ladies ran out of chintz and used this method to balance the block. Straight stitching and French knots have also been used to embellish some flowers. The top is finished off with a further tan border with appliquéd clamshells and narrow strips of yet two more fancy prints. there is a linen backing and though there is no batting, the two layers are held together with quilting in a zigzag pattern which is also known as chevron or Van Dyke pattern”.¹⁸

¹⁶ Jeanne Walsh Transcripts of Marriage Registers in Anglican Churches in Otago and Southland. , Quilts in Broderie Perse at [www//suite101.com/article.cfm/quilts-and-quilting/63368](http://suite101.com/article.cfm/quilts-and-quilting/63368) accessed on 27/12/06

¹⁷ Email from Clare Browne, 28/10/06

¹⁸P 100, 101 Pamela Fitz Gerald, Warm Heritage: Old patchwork quilts and coverlets in New Zealand and the women who made them

Martha's Quilt





Martha's quilt-details (above)



A similar Broderie Perse quilt with applied motifs from a printed cotton on quilted ground, American, about 1800¹⁹

¹⁹ P138 The Illustrated History of Textiles



A broderie perse quilt in Charleston USA made 1845 -1853

There are not large numbers of pre 1800 Irish broderie perse quilts existing today apart from those unknown with private owners. There are a few in Ireland and the United States and other places where the Irish immigrated. although most of the quilts in museum collections with documented histories are of other embroidery styles which drew on the same design sources for their inspiration.²⁰ There are some other broderie perse quilts in New Zealand in both private and museum ownership which have been documented by quilt historian, Pamela Fitz Gerald.²¹

Around 1980, Pamela Fitzgerald, heard of the quilt and visited my mother Mary Jones at Orewa. She took photographs and details of the quilt which my mother and I had worked out largely from the family tree. This was really the first time that I and other members of the family were aware of the significance of the quilt as we had never seen it when visiting our grandmother over many years. In 2004, Pamela Fitz Gerald's book, *Warm Heritage: Old patchwork quilts and coverlets in NZ and the women who made them*, was published. This was the result of more than 27 years of research into quilting and patchwork.

After reading Charles E.B. Brett's *Long Shadows Cast before Nine lives in Ulster*,²² before a planned trip to Northern Ireland in 2006, I realized that some details of the quilt history I had written with my mothers help were not quite accurate. In part my interest in the quilt had its roots in trying to put the record straight while finding out more about my great grandmother and how she had come to bring the quilt to New Zealand.

Jenny Roxborough (Jennifer Brett Roxborough) December 2006

²⁰ P 75, Elizabeth McCrum, "The Wonder of Its Day, Irish Bedcovers of the 18th Century," *Irish Arts Review* (1998).

²¹ Pamela Fitz Gerald, *Warm Heritage*.

²² Brett, *Long Shadows Cast Before*.

Bibliography

- Brett, Charles E B. *Long Shadows Cast before, Nine Lives in Ulster, 1625-1977*.
London: John Bartholomew & Sons, 1978.
- Fitz Gerald, Pamela, *Warm Heritage: Old patchwork quilts and coverlets in New Zealand and the women who made them*, David Bateman, Albany, 2003
- Hefford, Wendy, *Design for Printed Textiles, 1750-1850*, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1992
- Johnson Brennan, Judy Anne, *Chintz Appliqué: the Art of Broderie Perse*,
[www//womenfolk.com/quilting history/broderie perse.htm](http://www.womenfolk.com/quilting/history/broderieperse.htm) accessed 27/12/06
- McCrum, Elizabeth. "The Wonder of Its Day, Irish Bedcovers of the 18th Century."
Irish Arts Review (1998): 75-83.
- The Illustrated History of Textiles*, Ginsburg, Marilyn (Ed), Studio Editions, London, 1991
- The History of Porcelain*, Atterbury, Paul, Gen Editor, Orbis UK and William Morrow & Company Inc, New York, 1982
- Rombouts, Michael J, *A Register of Irish Settlers to Otago and Southland*, M.J. Rombouts, Dunedin 2002
- Walsh Jeanne, *Quilts in Broderie Perse* at [www//suite101.com/article.cfm/quilts-and-quilting/63368](http://suite101.com/article.cfm/quilts-and-quilting/63368) accessed on 27/12/06

Transcripts of Marriage Registers in Anglican Churches in Otago and Southland.
Held in the Dunedin Public Library

Northern Cemetery Dunedin N.Z. Headstone Transcripts Entry 1511, held in Dunedin Public Library

Stones Directories, 1881-1927 Held in Dunedin Public Library

Land Transfer records, 1881-1927, National Archives, Dunedin

Public Records Office of Northern Ireland Entries D/3303/11/1 1887-1892 Papers relating to the Mackisack family who had settled in New Zealand. D 3303/11/1-6 documents relating to loans paid to George Mackisack in Dunedin. D3303/8/F/22 Martha Brett's will, 15/2/79

Acknowledgement

Much of my initial information about the Brett family comes from work done by my uncle Allan Arlidge of Wellington. He also introduced me to Charles Brett's *Long Shadows Cast Before*, and provided contact details for Adam Brett in Belfast who supplied me with addresses, Charles Brett's will (1829) and other useful information.