

# EDITH DICKENSON

## An Australian Emily Hobhouse?

### By A Hocking

Anthony Hocking grew up in Cornwall and has lived in South Africa for half a century. He is the author of more than 35 books. Since 2007 he has owned and operated the Royal Hotel in Bethulie, established in 1873. He also owns the old Bethulie railway station which served the deadliest of the concentration camps. On request he accompanies tours of war-related sites in Central South Africa, ranging from Stormberg in the south to Paardeberg in the north. In 2016 he was honoured with the FAK's '*Prestige-Toekenning vir Besondere Kultuurprestasies*,' highly unusual as he is an English-speaking *uitlander*.

### Abstract

Edith Dickenson was Australia's first-ever female war correspondent, representing the *Adelaide Advertiser* of South Australia. As such she wrote stinging reports on a number of the so-called 'refugee' camps of the South African War. Much of her more controversial material was suppressed by military censors, but copies of the outtakes reached Emily Hobhouse who featured them in her book *The Brunt of the War and Where It Fell*. Emily repeatedly described Edith as 'the Australian Mrs Dickenson,' which suggests they never met. Had they done so Emily would have realised that like herself, Edith was from a privileged and well-connected English background. Edith was born into a distinguished military family but lost her father when she was seven. Following her mother's remarriage she became stepdaughter of the 2nd Earl of Stradbroke and grew up in a stately home in Suffolk. At 19 she married a local clergyman many years her senior. Fifteen years and five children later she ran off to Australia to join a married doctor, Augustus Newton Dickenson. Her journalistic career started in 1898 when she visited a son in the Indian army and wrote a series of highly entertaining articles on India, Burma, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. Arriving back in Australia she heard that two of her sons were besieged in Ladysmith. She determined to join them and the owner of the *Advertiser* appointed her 'special correspondent' to cover the war 'from a woman's standpoint.' The articles she wrote are full of charm and she told her stories with wry good humour. She was also a photographer of note. Sadly, early in 1902 she was diagnosed with cancer and at the same time lost Gus. Eventually unable to bear the pain, she ended her life by taking an overdose of morphine. She was 52.

### Paper / notes

I'm from a small town called Bethulie that's located about 180 km south of here. I've lived in Bethulie since 1983. Twelve years ago I bought the old hotel across the street from my house. It was one of those places routinely called 'historic' even though nobody could tell you why. One thing people did say was that the hotel was haunted. A doctor from Bethulie concentration camp had died in room No 4, probably by his own hand. His name? Augustus Newton Dickenson. I soon began a long search for

whatever I could dig up on the hotel's history. I was richly rewarded, but won't go into that now. And then came a discovery that had me falling off my chair. It was all thanks to Google. A random search for the hotel had led me to a lengthy article written by a journalist working for the *Adelaide Advertiser* of South Australia. Her name was Edith Dickenson.

At the end of 1901 Edith Dickenson had spent three weeks in Bethulie, during which time she'd stayed at the hotel. Among other things her article detailed every aspect of its operations. She described the rooms, the décor, the monotonous diet and the high prices. She portrayed the owners, the staff, her fellow guests. TripAdvisor would have loved her. Edith also described the impact the war was having on the community. The shops had no stock. Every building was protected with sandbags. It was rumoured that the Boers were all around. I couldn't help thinking that Edith's name rang a bell, indeed a couple of bells. First of all it was an odd coincidence that Edith shared a surname with the hotel's ghost. But second, I'd just been reading Emily Hobhouse's book *The Brunt of the War*. When I went back to it I found repeated references to 'Mrs Dickenson, the Australian.'

Forbidden to revisit South Africa herself, Emily had got hold of Edith's articles. These described the atmosphere of the so-called 'Refuge Camps' in blistering disapproval. Emily used Edith's findings to confirm and amplify her own observations of a year earlier. She also used extra material provided by Edith that had never been published because of censorship. Edith's article on Bethulie had surfaced through 'Trove,' a wonderful service provided by the National Library of Australia in Canberra. (I wish we had something of the same in South Africa.) 'Trove' was scanning and digitising every Australian newspaper it could lay its hands on. Fully searchable stories and articles were being made available on the internet, completely free of charge. Month by month 'Trove' was bringing more of Edith's writings to light. In time there was a substantial body of material. And meanwhile Google had led me to Edith's descendants.

By this time I'd realised that Edith's personal story was way out of the ordinary. But before going any further, let me pose my question. Was Edith Dickenson an Australian Emily Hobhouse? Answer, by no means. In their different ways both Emily and Edith were unique, ultra-capable ladies with an extraordinary lust for life. And in any case,

Edith wasn't really Australian. Instead she was an upper middle class Englishwoman, just as Emily was. Born Edith Bonham, on her mother's side she was descended from one of the most distinguished families in England. Her father, a soldier, died in 1856 when Edith was five. Her mother promptly remarried an elderly bachelor who happened to be the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Stradbroke and lived in an enormous stately pile in Suffolk. There Edith lived the kind of privileged existence made familiar by *Downton Abbey*. Her mother was having more children, a son and six daughters. Each of Edith's half-sisters was known as 'the Hon.'

Let's fast forward to 1870 when Edith was 19. Against family advice she married a local clergyman named Belcher, 17 years older than she was. All anyone could say of him was that he was 'good.' Edith did her duty and bore Mr Belcher a daughter and three sons, including twins. They lived in a succession of lonely vicarages and rectories spread through rural Suffolk. Detail is sparse, but it appears that after 15 years Edith met a newly arrived doctor named Gus Dickenson. Gus had abandoned his wife and family in Dublin and was evidently on the run from creditors. Edith enrolled for courses in first aid offered by Gus, and soon the two began an affair. Edith left her clergyman husband, and she and Gus decided that their best hope of happiness lay in Australia. Gus went out first in 1885, working his passage as ship's doctor on a four-masted clipper and not touching land in nearly three months. Four months later Edith followed in style on a brand new steamship. Thanks to 'Trove' we can follow the couple's progress around Australia. Within a few months they settled in Deloraine in rural Tasmania – that's Deloraine, not De la Rey!

By now Edith was calling herself 'Mrs Dickenson' though both she and Gus remained married to other partners. Gus's wife eventually divorced him, but Edith found herself stuck. A daughter was born – but all too soon, the Dickensons were on the run again. This time Gus and Edith moved to the desert interior of South Australia. It was here that Edith took up photography. Let's fast forward again, this time to late 1898. One of Edith's twin sons had joined the army in India and she decided to visit him. She offered to write about the trip for the *Adelaide Advertiser*. As things turned out Edith was away for a year. In addition to touring India she went through Burma, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. And along the way she was writing hugely entertaining travelogues. By the time Edith returned to Australia the South African War had broken out. Both her

twins were in the army besieged in Ladysmith. Edith told the *Advertiser's* editor that she'd like to go and see them.

The editor appointed her as the *Advertiser's* special correspondent, charged with telling the story of the war 'from a woman's standpoint.' As a first step she travelled to South Africa on a troopship. In bidding her godspeed, a note in another local paper described Edith as 'a remarkable woman in many respects. She can ride, shoot, walk like a man, and would make an ideal leader of Amazons.' The description continued: 'Tall, robust, masculine, she quickly impresses one as a woman quite out of the common.' I wonder how many of today's women would like to be described as 'masculine.' Edith arrived in Durban with her camera and a gun. She carried the gun not to protect herself but to shoot animals and birds. Both she and Gus were passionate natural historians. So began a remarkable five months. Australia's first-ever female war correspondent more than justified her editor's faith. Her reports were even-handed, well informed and often very witty.

Though a fully-accredited correspondent, I suppose it's unsurprising that Edith was never allowed close to actual fighting. She more than made up for that by describing the carnage in grisly detail. For example, in a Boer trench she came upon 'a head almost fleshless, but with the long black hair streaming over the jacket behind, and the coarsely made skirt showing plainly the sex of the dead. 'It was a woman's body. Near it lay a broken umbrella and a portion of a straw hat.' Clear evidence, I think, that Boer women did indeed take part in the fighting, right next to their husbands in the trenches.

With her strong military connections, Edith was often able to wangle concessions that were denied to other correspondents. Not least she did indeed reach Ladysmith and reported in detail on what she found.



Following the taking of Pretoria many considered the war was over. Most of the journalists departed. Edith travelled to England and France before eventually returning to Australia. She had with her the photographs she had taken in South Africa. Some sound rather revolting – for instance, images of dead Boers and khakis with their faces pecked to pieces by birds. Edith had her photographs converted into magic lantern slides and used them to illustrate talks she gave in Adelaide and surrounding communities. ‘Trove’ reveals that these were well received.

It was now that Edith first heard of Emily Hobhouse’s scathing report on conditions in the ‘Refuge Camps.’ With the *Advertiser’s* backing, she offered to return to South Africa for a second tour. This time Edith was accompanied by Gus, who had taken to the bottle. Though initially accepted into the Army Medical Corps in Maritzburg, he was fired after two weeks as an incorrigible alcoholic. So it was that Gus applied for a position in a concentration camp. He was sent to Bethulie, where the head doctor was also from Australia. Ten years earlier he’d achieved fame as an Australian test cricketer. Bethulie was already notorious for having a death rate way higher than anywhere else. This had been blamed on the camp superintendent, a clueless civilian<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Major

who'd just been replaced by an ex-army officer. In briefly accompanying Gus to Bethulie Edith wrote about the camp's problems in detail but her efforts were censored. Fortunately for us, they were given an airing in Emily's famous book.

By now, Edith had visited seven camps – the same as Emily – and she wasn't pulling punches. Calling them Refuge Camps was a misnomer, she said. They were prisons, and of the worst kind. Like Emily before her, Edith had gone out of her way to talk to individual Boer women and hear their stories at first hand. Her conclusion? The camps were a disaster. Edith was greatly irritated when she heard people comment that the Boers were 'unclean.' It was a complaint echoed by the official 'Committee of Ladies' which was touring the camps at this time. Edith recalled that as a clergyman's wife back in England she had frequently visited the homes of the poor. In general she found the Boer women to be a great deal cleaner than their British counterparts!

So far, I've given you only the sketchiest idea of Edith's actual articles. Let me put that right by quoting from a couple of extended passages that will give you an insight into her approach. Here's a story from Edith's visit to Merebank camp in October 1901. 'Four boys, carrying a stretcher, passed and stopped at a tent. A woman, sobbing bitterly, stepped out and laid a little bundle wrapped in a railway rug on it. 'As the boys returned, I met them and saw that their burden was that of a young child, perhaps about 5 years old, who had just died; the second the poor mother had lost in a fortnight. 'There is no minister here, and no chance of any form of Christian burial. A small grave is dug and the tiny wasted body placed in it.'

And how about this from Maritzburg camp in the same month? 'A nice-looking young woman, in deep mourning, beckoned me to come into her tent. She was a widow, Mrs Venter. 'Her husband was commandeered early in the war, when they had only been married eleven months, and her baby was only just born. He was killed six months' ago, and the baby died of croup three months after, in this camp. 'However, she had a blind father-in-law, who took up much of her time. She was of English parentage, and spoke English fluently. The old man could speak no English, but was most anxious that I should come and talk to him, so Mrs Venter acted as interpreter. "The old man says," she began, "that he wishes you to know how he was taken. He was on a farm with his sister, who was also blind, and when the "khakies" arrived he begged them to leave him one cow and a pound of coffee, but they refused, and he was for a day and

a night without food, till some Boers passed and took him to another farm.” ‘A few weeks after, that farm was burnt, and then he was taken along with the convoy, and finally reached this camp, when his daughter-in-law joined him.’

And how about this, from the camp at Irene in November 1901? ‘Irene had been described to me as one of the worst of the camps so far as the mortality of the children was concerned,’ wrote Edith. ‘But as I had found that Miss Hobhouse’s suggestion as to allowing them tinned milk had been adopted at Merebank, Maritzburg, and Howick, I was astonished to find that at Irene the rations were on a much lower scale. ‘No condensed milk is allowed here as a regulation ration for a child unless it is ill, and then, instead of giving the mother a tin and allowing her to mix it, it is served out diluted, and, of course quickly becomes sour. ‘I saw some terrible instances of emaciation among children, which could only be matched by the famine-stricken people of India. In one photograph I took of a child of five years the skin hardly covers the bones. ‘It was not in hospital, and had no disease: it was simply wasting away from improper food.’

Sadly, early in 1902 Edith faced a serious setback herself. She was diagnosed with cancer. Her only hope of surviving was to go to England for an emergency operation. Frantically she wrote to Gus, his boss, his superintendent, the camp authorities. But for an extended time there was no reply. When an answer came Edith was told rather curtly that Gus was dead. (As an aside, we should mention that Gus had managed to get himself dismissed from Bethulie camp for excessive drinking. Quite an accomplishment! He’d moved to the hotel and it was there he had died.) Edith went to England for the cancer operation. It failed. She returned to South Africa for no other purpose than to put up a headstone for Gus. It can still be seen in Bethulie’s cemetery. The love of Edith’s life was gone, and her own time was running out. By now it was February 1903. Edith took lodgings in Simonstown where her youngest son was in the Navy and could look after her. As the cancer took hold Edith was taking morphine to stem the pain, so bad she could barely stand it. While her son was out of the room, accidentally or deliberately she took an overdose. Lights out.

Presumably Edith was buried in Simonstown, but nobody knows where. When one of the twins died in the Cape in 1962 he left instructions that his mother’s name should

be inscribed on his tombstone. Aside from that, and her descendants, and her writings, Edith's life left little trace – except for one thing. During their travels she and Gus had amassed an impressive collection of stuffed birds and animals. In one of her last acts Edith left 'the Dickenson Collection' to the Adelaide Museum, where it still holds an honoured place. Only problem – over the years the accompanying paperwork has been mislaid. Until very recently the Museum had no idea where the collection had come from. When I asked a friend of mine to visit the Museum to throw some light on the matter, she was greeted like a rock star.

Even though Edith made sure her natural history collection wasn't wasted, it seems she made no such plan for her photographs. I've done my best to trace them, but to date not a single one has turned up. If anyone has ideas on where Edith's photos might be found, do please let me know. Something tells me they'd be sensational.