

DRAKE-BROCKMAN Deborah Vernon

Grace Bussell's daughter made a huge fortune through shrewd development of rare metals such as tantalum, wolfram and beryllium and then investing her profits in grazing and commercial enterprises from one end of Australia to the other.

She was born Deborah Drake-Brockman, but through her amazing career as businesswoman, social hostess, cook, traveller and charity worker was better known by three other names.

Adventurous

Married and widowed three times she was known in her native State of West Australia as Lady Hackett, in South Australia as Lady Moulden and finally in Victoria as Dr Buller-Murphy. She was called Queen of the Spinifex and Australia's Tantalum Queen and was a non-stop dynamo who for more than half a century was a legendary figure in Australian life.

As well as having a national heroine for a mother, Deborah Drake-Brockman (who was borne in Perth on July 16, 1888) had famous WA pioneers on both sides of her family. Grace Bussell married Frederick Drake-Brockman, West Australia's Surveyor-General. Their daughter, Deborah, inherited her mother's adventurous spirit and her father's passionate interest in rare and beautiful stones.

At 15 Deborah Drake-Brockman was more interested in solitary exploring trips in the bush than in schooling. Indeed, on one of these treks she is credited with discovering the beautiful Lake Cave near Margaret River in WA. Unaided she lowered herself into the mouth of this cave by a rope which she had slung from a tree above the rim of the giant cavity which fronted the entrance.

At 17 Deborah Drake-Brockman took the even more adventurous step of marrying the 57 year-old newspaper magnate Sir Winthrop Hackett. At 26 she was widowed with four young daughters and a son. Of her late husband she said: "He was a truly great man. As a girl I had a wonderful guide and philosopher in Sir Winthrop."

Although Sir Winthrop Hackett left his young widow adequately provided for, the great bulk of his wealth (\$1.5 Million) was left to give WA the first free university in the British Commonwealth.

Charity Work

During her brief widowhood Lady Hackett busied herself writing and publishing a 1000-page "household guide" advertised as an Australian rival of Mrs Beeton's Cookery Book. In 1916 she moved to Adelaide and married the barrister Frank Moulden. But because she disliked the idea of dropping her title she began calling herself Lady Hackett Moulden or simply Lady Hackett.

Adelaide accepted this, but once when she visited Melbourne a mischievous social reporter announced that Lady Hackett and Mr Frank Moulden were sharing a room at Menzies Hotel. However, before long Moulden became Lord Mayor of Adelaide and was himself knighted. So his wife dropped her Hackett title and happily became Lady Moulden.

With buzz-saw energy the new lady mayoress raised more than \$200,000 for charity in two years, while her Adelaide mansion, Lordello, became the centre of a dazzling social whirl. During the 1920 Australian visit of the Prince of Wales (now the Duke of Windsor) Lady Moulden cheerfully accommodated half the royal suite in her own home. In 1923 she became interested in the mining of rare metals in WA and daringly invested most of her Hackett inheritance in what the experts said was a wild goose chase. But Lady Moulden thought differently.

Her father had taught her much about minerals and she decided there was a fortune to be made mining tantalum (used in high quality steel alloys) at Wodgina, about 80 miles from Port Hedland

in WA. The gamble paid off. Her Wodgina mine became the richest source of tantalum in the world. In 1925 Lady catching perch with a bent pin and a piece of string. In 1931 Lady Moulden's mineral interests were transferred to a company of which she became chairman of directors. Finding that did not leave her enough to do she acquired the 700,000-acre Minilya station 100 miles north of Carnarvon in WA.

In 1934 Lady Moulden wanted to get to London in a hurry on business. So she hired the Dutch airmen, Parmentier and Moll, who were returning home after competing in the Centenary Air Race, to take her with them. And thus Lady Deborah Moulden became the first commercial passenger to fly from Australia to England.

Back home again Lady Moulden received an Honorary Doctorate of Laws from the University of West Australia in recognition of her first husband's benefaction. She also found time to write a book on the language, customs and legends of the Dordenup tribe of Aboriginals who lived near her girlhood home in WA.

In 1936, following the death of Sir Frank, Lady Moulden married the Melbourne barrister, and later judge, BG Buller-Murphy. This necessitated a move from Adelaide to a Toorak mansion and to transport her furniture, 12 huge pantechnicons made the trip. It was said to be the largest cargo of household goods ever moved in Australia. She was now plain Mrs Buller-Murphy and as she had borne the title of "lady" from her teens she felt something was lacking. Then she remembered her honorary doctorate and for the rest of her life she cheerfully called herself Dr Buller-Murphy.

Nightmare

She became one of Melbourne's most opulent society hostesses and once had 800 pigeons sent from Adelaide to be cooked in wine for a Scots ball. Dr Buller-Murphy's dinners were famous for roast venison. "There are plenty of deer in Australia," she said. "But you've got to find somebody to hunt them for you."

Her husband described her life as "a well organised nightmare" as she continued to dash about the continent on business. She invested in a chain of cinemas in Perth and was constantly experimenting with new ventures such as recovering copper from scrap and getting gold with a new dry-blowing process at Mt Browne in NSW.

During World War II Dr Buller-Murphy's mines were taken over for the duration by the Australian Government. Tantalum in particular was vitally important to the Allied war effort and was flown directly from Wodgina to the US. Because one of its uses was in radar Dr Buller-Murphy said proudly after the war: "My metal was used in radar and radar saved Britain".

But that did not stop her in 1949 bringing action against the Commonwealth for \$2 Million compensation for its wartime use of her mines. When the matter was ultimately settled out of court for an undisclosed sum Dr Buller-Murphy stated her life-long business creed: "I always say what I mean and I always mean what I say."

But this same no-nonsense businesswoman spent much of her time during World War II running a cafe for charity in Melbourne and personally making more than 5000lb of jam and chutney for sale in the establishment.

After the war Dr Buller-Murphy left her Toorak home for a simple orchard property at Kilsyth in the Dandenong's. "It doesn't matter where you live," she once said. "It's the way you make your home." At Kilsyth she toiled from daybreak daily in her prize garden and when inside busied herself weaving dress lengths, suit lengths, scarves, towels and tartans on a hand loom.

The property abounded in pets - dingoes, magpies, seagulls, wallabies, crows, tortoises, mountain devils and many more. "Do you like animals?" was the first and most important question Dr Buller-Murphy asked when interviewing prospective servants.

She staged comic opera in Melbourne, ingeniously rebuilt her dining room to look like the interior of an 18th-century London tavern and ran a home for orphans. When the Olympic Games were staged in Melbourne in 1956 Dr Buller-Murphy was called on by the organisers to serve a truly Australian epicurean meal to 200 visiting VIP's.

The result was an alfresco luncheon, prepared entirely by the then 68 year-old hostess. At the luncheon she served barramundi from Darwin, oysters from Onslow, crayfish from Geraldton, wild turkey from Carnarvon and venison from deer hunted in the Victorian Alps. But because her barramundi arrived with the heads and tails removed this threatened to destroy the decorative effect of the prepared fish in Dr Buller-Murphy's cold buffet. Undeterred she scoured the Melbourne fish markets for equivalent sized snapper heads and tails. These she fitted to the barramundi, added trills to hide the joins and nobody was any the wiser.

Courageous, enterprising and probably Australia's most successful self-made business woman, thrice-widowed Dr Buller-Murphy died at Kilsyth on April 16 1965. Despite the niche she has already won in her nation's hall of fame it is probable that historians, mindful of her early mining ventures in WA, may yet credit her with sparking Australia's current mineral boom.¹

¹Brisbane Sunday Truth, April 13, 1969