

From the archive: Emily Harris Letters and Diary Excerpts 1860-63

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Introduction and acknowledgements

As a consequence of some research for a poetry sequence and then an essay, I found myself looking through the papers of writer and artist Emily Cumming Harris at Puke Ariki Museum in New Plymouth. ‘The Fascicles,’ my poetry sequence, had drawn me into the maelstrom of 1860s Taranaki. Finding the work of soldier poet Matthew Fitzpatrick published in newspapers contemporary with the military action they describe drew me further into the complexities of the Taranaki conflict 1860-61. And now here in front of me were handbound booklets (fascicles) into which Emily Harris had written her experience of the same conflict. From behind the lines in New Plymouth came a lively young female voice writing diary entries and letters to her family in Nelson. And there among the letters and diary excerpts were two poems and evidence to show that Emily Harris (1837-1925) was writing poetry and sending it to her family and friends on a regular basis. Later she would become well-known for her paintings and drawings of New Zealand flora, and for the diaries that show how difficult it was for a woman artist to earn a living in the 1880s and 1890s. But her early writing of time and place, and the desire to render both in poetry, constitute a rare and crucial record of female experience in wartime Taranaki.

We present here a full transcript of the letters and diary excerpts 1860-63, with some images of the handwritten fascicles from Puke Ariki and a photograph of Emily Harris taken in a Hobart studio in the 1860s. Contextual notes follow, bringing as much quotation as possible from contemporary sources to put alongside Emily Harris’s accounts of New Plymouth and Hobart.

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Makyla Curtis and Tim Page provided help with visual materials. Permission to use images of manuscripts from Puke Ariki has been given by the museum. Permission to reproduce the portrait of Emily Harris in Hobart has been given by Roseanne Cranstone, present owner of the Harris family album in which the photograph appears.