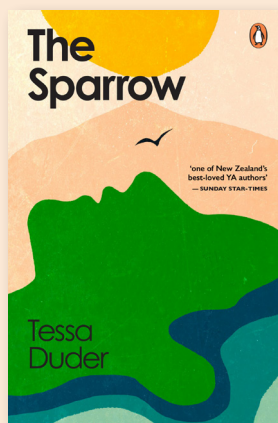


# The Sparrow

Tessa Duder



**Some background for teachers, students, librarians and readers to the novel's research, themes and writing.**

## Family narratives provide impetus for storytelling

Readers sometimes ask: how does a novelist decide on a theme, a time, a setting, a voice, their characters – and how can they then be sure their choices are compelling enough to commit to several years of research and writing?

Quite often, authors reveal that they've drawn on some echo from their family's past. In Aotearoa New Zealand, it's likely to be from their Māori ancestry or a European immigrant narrative. For *The Sparrow*, I wove in elements from two of my own family stories.

One came from my mother's side. *The Sparrow's* young protagonist, Harriet, is the daughter of a Sussex saddle-maker based on what I know of Charles Wycherley, a gentle, well-educated man who emigrated to New Zealand in 1885 with his wife and 10 children. The youngest of their children was Ernest, a baby of one year: my grandfather. I have Charles' very full account of their gruelling 12,000-mile journey by sailing ship to the other side of the world; in Wellington he quickly established a successful saddlery business.

Secondly, my family name itself rings another distant bell. My ex-husband John N. Duder is the great-grandson of Able Seaman Thomas Duder, whose ship HMS *Buffalo* was wrecked in Whitianga harbour (hence Buffalo Beach) in July 1840. Deciding to remain in Auckland, Thomas served as the Signalman on Devonport's Mt Victoria until 1875. This was a role of some significance: the flags and signals he hoisted daily on the summit's flagstaff informed the township of shipping movements and the weather.

## So, to Auckland's September 1840 founding story – why it's important and how it provides the framework for *The Sparrow*

About twenty-five years ago, reading the biographies of John Logan Campbell by Auckland historian Russell Stone, I became intrigued by the account of the founding on 18 September 1840 of a capital for the new British colony of New Zealand. It's a remarkable, even unique founding story, but today hardly known, even to Aucklanders.

We know what happened on that day principally through the journals of a 35-year-old Londoner, Sarah Mathew, wife of Felton Mathew, the colony's first Surveyor-General. In March 1840, she had arrived in the Bay of Islands, and during the winter of that year she accompanied Felton

on a perilous two-month journey in a small sailing vessel. He had been tasked by Governor Hobson to explore harbours to the south that might be suitable for a capital. On their return to Kororareka, Governor Hobson declared his preference for the Waitematā.

## Auckland is named New Zealand's capital

In September, two ships arrived in the harbour: the *Anna Watson*, carrying Hobson's newly appointed officials; and the *Platina*, transporting a 'government house' timber kitset sent from London.

Sarah was present at the ceremony on a prominent headland (Point Britomart) where the sale of 3000 acres was finalised with local Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. Her diary, written in a firm, legible hand, tells us the British flag was hoisted and Her Majesty the Queen was toasted with three cheers. In the afternoon, the officials organised longboat and waka races for an impromptu regatta and, on the *Anna Watson* after sundown, had themselves a party.

We are indebted to the further writings of Sarah Mathew and the Scotsman John Logan Campbell for lively accounts of what happened next. Felton started field work on the first surveys of the Tāmaki Makaurau isthmus so land could be formally sold by the Crown to settlers. From the start, the three adjoining bays on the Waitematā's southern coastline were used to establish the new settlement's class distinctions.

Sarah and Felton came ashore to live in tents with other Crown representatives in Official Bay.

Logan Campbell and his partner William Brown moved from the island of Motukorea (Brown's Island) to Commercial Bay to begin selling blankets, nails and tobacco to Māori and real-estate and general goods to incoming settlers.

And the immigrant families aboard both ships, maybe a hundred all told, camped on the foreshore of Mechanics Bay and coped as best they could with Auckland's changeable weather and the harbour's low muddy tides. The men looked for manual work in Commercial Bay as carpenters, sawyers and stonemasons to feed their wives and children.

(Auckland's Anniversary should theoretically be September 18, but in 1842 it was agreed to move the celebration to late January, thus properly marking Governor Hobson's arrival in his capital. High summer was also deemed more suitable for regattas.)

## The founding of Capital Auckland through Harriet's eyes

My novel *The Sparrow* opens on Auckland's founding day, as seen through the eyes of a spirited 13-year-old English girl, Harriet. Sarah Mathew describes the gun salutes fired from the two ships during the ceremony – surely, terrifying explosions to the children aboard.

How, I asked myself, would a girl of only 13, travelling alone, survive the first months among the settlers camping in Mechanics Bay; they had only the limited supplies of food, clothing and camping gear brought on the ships. Wouldn't Harriet, unjustly transported to Australia and on the run from Hobart's infamous women's prison, dream only of how she could get back to England, to her family in Sussex?

Her adventures over the next six months were largely determined by events of the historic record as described by Sarah Mathew (there's more about early Auckland in her 1872 *Autobiography*); also by Logan Campbell's own books and his recently published *Reminiscences of a long life*, and by the work of

scholars like James Rutherford, Russell Stone and Paul Moon.

Yes, that 'government house' kitset was laboriously brought ashore and erected up on Point Britomart. In October, a fire made its way down the hillside above Commercial Bay to destroy the hut known as the Government Store along with all the precious gear held there. As 1840 drew to a close, there was indeed a threat of invasion by northern Māori. At the end of January, Governor Hobson and his wife Eliza led a ragtag procession up Shortland Street to his barely finished Government House.

And the first land sales held mid-April 1841 were attended by hundreds of cocky land speculators from Australia, confident of quick and profitable re-sale; never mind the genuine settlers with limited resources wanting land for their homes, shops and small farms. Hobson was elated by the funds now available for public works, but the colonial bosses in London were horrified at the prices paid; Auckland's reputation, to this day – you could say its DNA for expensive real estate, prized by foreigners – was well and truly established.

Around these known historical facts, I wove Harriet's story, beginning in 1836 when her comfortable rural life in a Sussex village is abruptly shattered by her trumped-up conviction for theft. After six months in London's notorious Newgate Prison, she travels on a ship to the equally grim Cascades Female Factory in Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania). Three years later, various misadventures bring her to the Waitemata.

Here she encounters some of Auckland's earliest identities: Sarah Mathew and John Logan Campbell, of course, but also the ailing Governor Hobson and his young wife Eliza and the official interpreter Edward Williams from the Bay of Islands mission family. But her interest in the local Māori, who are soon providing the settlers with food, firewood and raupo huts, puts her seriously offside with the settler families.

### **Fiction bringing history alive**

Because of the novel's close adherence to recorded events in our biggest city – September 1840 to April 1841 – I'm hoping that *The Sparrow* will find favour with history teachers inspired by the new emphasis on introducing students to their country's heritage; equally, it may appeal to English teachers helping students to enjoy fiction that illuminates the past as well as providing an entertaining read.

My purpose in creating Harriet's narrative from England to New Zealand, however, was not primarily didactic; rather it stemmed from a life-long interest in nineteenth-century immigrants: why they chose to leave, what horrors they endured to get here, and their often epic struggles to build new lives for themselves and their families.

Of my own great-grandparents, besides the English saddle-maker, there was another couple who came from Livorno, Italy; others who came from eastern France, Ireland and Yorkshire. The lives they made in Hokitika, Wellington and Palmerston North would be typical of nineteenth-century immigration. (I wrote about my Tuscan forebears in *In Search of Elisa Marchetti: a writer's search for her Italian family*, published by Penguin in 2002.)

Harriet's story aims to re-create the immigrant experience of a girl forced by ill-fortune and her own indomitable nature to travel and survive alone.

I am currently working on a sequel that will follow Harriet's experiences as a teacher at William Fairburn's mission station at Maraetai on the Coromandel coast; later, how her life is affected by the

arrival of her saddler father . . .

## Researching Auckland's 'First Lady' Sarah Mathew

My 2015 publication *Sarah Mathew; Explorer, Journalist and Auckland's 'First Lady'* was the first biography of this Englishwoman who deserves far more recognition of her role in Auckland's – and New Zealand's – history. Only recently has it been acknowledged that traditional 'history' has been largely by, about and for men; the voices of the many women who shaped modern New Zealand are barely heard, if at all.

Sarah Mathew lived in Auckland from September 1840 to 1847 (with a two-year gap when the couple returned to England to secure Felton's position in New Zealand with the Colonial Office, unsuccessfully, as it turned out). In 1858, by then a widow, she returned to New Zealand for three years, needing to sell the land bought by her late husband in Auckland and Thames.

In standard histories of early Auckland, I found a common pattern: despite her lively diary always being quoted, Sarah herself was usually dismissed by these authors (all male) as priggish, acerbic, snobbish, or, though a prominent Auckland 'identity', ignored entirely. Clearly, she did not suffer fools. The excellence of her writing was – absurdly – often put down to the fact that, during her childhood in London, her older brother George was a close friend of Romantic poet John Keats.

There was one book that took her somewhat more seriously. In 1938, James Rutherford, history professor at Auckland University College, had travelled in England and persuaded Mathew family descendants to donate extant writings by both Sarah and Felton to New Zealand archives. Sarah's *Journal for 1840 and extracts from her 1875 Autobiography* formed a major part of his centennial publication, *The Founding of New Zealand: the Journals of Felton Mathew, first Surveyor-General of New Zealand and his Wife 1840-1847* [sic].

The remarkable story of how the Mathews' papers were kept safe by the family and eventually donated back to New Zealand is told in the prologue of my biography. Now held by the Auckland Central Library, these are documents of incalculable worth to the city. When I read Rutherford's book, my interest in Sarah was aroused. What was her upbringing in London, how did she come to travel on her own, first to New South Wales and then New Zealand? Why did the couple so abruptly leave Auckland, and what about her later life?

### A stroke of online luck

By some extraordinary luck while scouring the internet, I came across some Mathew family trees and email addresses for relatives in the UK. These led me to Sue Gemmell, a well-known local genealogist, descended from one of Sarah's sisters, who had been quietly researching Sarah Mathew's life for two decades. Sadly, I found Sue had died not long before my investigations began, but her husband generously handed over a precious box of research material.

From these and my own further research, I found that Sarah was born into a London merchant family. She was – from the evidence of her adult writings – well read and well educated. Leaving home at 17, she worked for nearly ten years as a governess for military families. At 27, she travelled to New South Wales to marry her first cousin Felton – nineteenth-century marriages were often within families – and lived there for nearly ten years until 1839, when Felton, now Sydney's Town Surveyor, was appointed first Surveyor-General for the brand-new colony of New Zealand.

From Sarah's writings, it's clear they were a devoted couple; in both Australia and New Zealand Sarah accompanied Felton on his surveying field trips. She made fair copies of his lengthy official reports and played hostess to official visitors, ship's captains and missionaries. I learned that she played the piano, spoke some French and was an accomplished rider and gardener. (They shared the sorrow of having no children, instead burying two stillborn babies in their Sydney garden.)

The couple would happily have settled in New Zealand, but their time in Auckland ended in great disappointment. Early in 1847, Felton, just returned from the UK visit, was brutally ousted from his position as Police Magistrate by the autocratic new governor, George Grey. Greatly disillusioned, the couple set off back to the UK by way of Peru and the Panama isthmus, but in Lima Felton finally succumbed to tuberculosis, probably contracted during his ten years' tramping around Sydney's hinterland. Devastated, Sarah travelled on to England alone. Apart from those later years back in Auckland, she lived out the rest of her life in southern England, dying in 1890, aged 85.

Her association with New Zealand had entailed not the usual one outward passage from England but in fact six non-stop voyages, three around Cape Horn, and every one of them requiring four to six gruelling months at sea.

## Books for further reading

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