

## YATES Elizabeth (nee Oman)

contributed by Judith Devaliant, author of *'Elizabeth Yates: the First Lady Mayor in the British Empire'*

**Elizabeth Yates** was born in 1840, the daughter of **George Oman**, a Scottish soldier, and **Eleanor** his Irish wife. Elizabeth had a younger sister **Eleanor**. They spent an itinerant childhood moving around army towns in the United Kingdom. When George retired from the army he enlisted as a Fencible soldier and took his family to New Zealand, where he was assigned to the military village of Onehunga. Elizabeth watched the town grow and develop as she grew up.

In 1875 she married Michael Yates and lived with him in a cottage on the corner of Selwyn and Arthur Streets. When her mother died she invested the money that she inherited in property in Onehunga. As a property-owner and ratepayer she was entitled to vote and stand in local body elections at a time when women did not have the vote in parliamentary elections.

Her interest in local affairs was stimulated when Michael was elected to the Onehunga Borough Council. She took a keen interest in his work when he became Mayor, and joined in discussions with his friends earning their respect for her opinions. When poor health forced Michael to retire from politics his friends encouraged her to stand for Mayor. She did so, she insisted, in the interests of Onehunga, and not from any desire for notoriety or to advance the cause of women.

Her election as Mayor of Onehunga on 29 November 1893 (in the year in which women were granted their suffrage and voted in their first parliamentary election) caused great excitement. It was seen as a further sign of women's advancement. While some saw it as a red-letter day for New Zealand, others queried the ability of a woman to do the job of Mayor and spoke of it as an experiment. Elizabeth became a celebrity in New Zealand, and as the first woman Mayor in the British Empire attracted interest in newspapers overseas.

Reporters flocked to Onehunga for her installation as Mayor in the week before Christmas, and reports were published in newspapers throughout the country, the general agreement being that Elizabeth had shown arrogance and a lack of tact in her first speech to the Council. This was an indication of things to come. Onehunga Borough Council meetings were widely reported, with Elizabeth's every action watched. No male mayor was ever subjected to such scrutiny. Faced with a group of councillors affronted at having to serve under a woman Mayor, Elizabeth was taunted and ridiculed at meetings, and was accused of being dictatorial when she sought to impose order. Cartoonists had a field day portraying the Lady Mayor trying to control her unruly councillors. She was portrayed as unattractive and bossy.

Sensational reports in newspapers brought people by train from Auckland, eager to witness the fun at Council meetings. The Council Chamber was packed with noisy spectators adding to Elizabeth's difficulties, with people, in the street outside unable to get in, booing and jeering. The police had to be called to impose order. At one particularly lively meeting in May 1894 Elizabeth had to clear the Council Chamber before the meeting could begin, watched by Councillors none of whom offered to help.

A few of the more responsible members of the press began to point out that Elizabeth was not given a fair chance to show what she could do, and deserved to be shown some respect. The second half of her mayoralty was calmer than the first half, although Council meetings continued to be reported in detail.

Elizabeth showed great courage and determination in dealing with all this. She was an intelligent, quick-witted woman and spoke confidently at meetings. She modelled herself on Michael and like him sought to



keep the Council debt down. Her economics irritated Councillors, and brought her into conflict with a group which wanted to embark on expensive drainage schemes, but she stuck to her principles and at the end of the year regarded her greatest achievement to be the reduction of the Council's debt. Elizabeth was a capable administrator. The upgrading of streets and footpaths progressed during her mayoralty. She made a good impression on politics when she went to Wellington to lobby for the reopening of the Waikaraka Cemetery. She met the Prime Minister, Richard Seddon, and attended a session of Parliament.

Elizabeth stood for re-election as Mayor in November 1894 and was soundly beaten. It was generally agreed that she had not done too bad a job but there was relief that the experiment was over. Elizabeth left the Onehunga Borough Council in a strong financial position. She continued to take an interest in local affairs and spoke up at public meetings. In 1899 she served a term as a borough councillor but talk of her standing for Mayor again came to nothing. Michael's death in 1902 left her lonely and dispirited. She missed the stimulation of discussing politics with him and ended her days as a patient in the Auckland Mental Asylum in Avondale, where she died on 6 September 1918. She was buried in **Saint Peter's Cemetery** beside Michael after a short service in the church.

Elizabeth was remembered in obituaries as a capable administrator who served a year as Mayor of Onehunga. She was so far ahead of her time that it was 64 years before another woman mayor was elected in New Zealand. Her courage and determination in standing up to the ridicule and mockery she was subjected to earned her a place in history. During her year as Mayor, Onehunga, previously little known, came to prominence as the town that had a Lady Mayor.