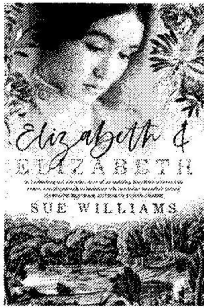


Intrepid pair of pioneers



ELIZABETH & ELIZABETH

By Sue Williams
Allen & Unwin, 336pp,
\$29.99

Meg Keneally

Macquarie and Macarthur are two of the most recognisable names from the colonial side of Australia's history.

Yet while those who admire the view from Mrs Macquarie's Chair or visit Elizabeth Farm may know a fair bit about Lachlan Macquarie and John Macarthur, it's less likely they know as much about the women after whom these landmarks are named.

Both women have made appearances in fiction, from Kate Grenville's recent *A Room Made of Leaves* to Luke Slattery's *Mrs M*.

These novels have a speculative aspect to them.

Slattery, who has called his book "an imagined history", writes about Elizabeth Macquarie's fictional relationship with a character known only as the Architect. Grenville based her novel on Elizabeth Macarthur's fictional memoir.

Now Sue Williams has tied the two together in *Elizabeth & Elizabeth*, a novel that is

almost as much about the forces that shape their relationship as it is about the women themselves.

It's no surprise that this novel hews more closely to the historical record than its predecessors; Sydney-based Williams has written several works of nonfiction and biography.

In this, her first foray into fiction, she has struck a successful balance between transmitting the information readers need to understand the story and providing an intelligent, entertaining and pacy narrative.

Elizabeth Macquarie, known as Betsey in Williams's telling, arrives in Sydney with well-meaning but somewhat naive thoughts of working alongside her husband in the business of building a society.

As a young girl in England, she met and was awed by the glamorous Elizabeth Macarthur, and has since heard of her skilled management of the Macarthur flocks in her husband's long absences.

Betsey fantasises about forging a strong bond with a similarly minded woman.

The reality is a little different. When Betsey and her husband the governor arrive unannounced in Parramatta,

Elizabeth, fresh from the fields in work clothes and fretting about her severely ill daughter, bristles at the intrusion. She finds Betsey's complaints about the sorry state of Sydney brattish, and rebukes her for seeking to meddle in the affairs of government.

Still, Elizabeth is not in a position to be too choosy. Her husband has gone to England to support Major George Johnston as he deals with charges arising from the Rum Rebellion, in which then-governor William Bligh was deposed.

Bligh and John Macarthur have long had a bitter enmity. A friendship with the new governor's wife could have its advantages. The former governor Macarthur has been touring Tasmania, and arrives back in Sydney expecting to be feted by his replacement.

Betsey and Elizabeth unite in their shared loathing of the bombastic Bligh, and in Williams's retelling they are instrumental in facilitating the marriage between his daughter, Mary Putnam, and Lieutenant Governor Maurice O'Connell — a union Bligh learns of only as he's about to sail for England.

The early relationship be-

tween the pair is not entirely smooth, with Elizabeth unable to let go of her initial impression of Betsey as entitled and blind to her own privilege, but when Betsey miscarries, Elizabeth is the one to comfort her as the two share their grief over lost children.

Politics is woven through many of their interactions. Elizabeth, for example, disapproves of the Macquarie building program, including Betsey's efforts to set up an orphan school, and doesn't share Betsey's concern for the rights of convicts.

We witness through Betsey and Elizabeth the defining elements of this era, including the horrors of the Appin massacre, the battles between emancipists and exclusives and the discontent and white-anting that ultimately led to the Bigge report into the government of the colony.

John Macarthur's depression is lightly touched on but ever-present.

He resents Lachlan Macquarie for not giving him land grants, and pressures his wife to try to discredit Betsey and her husband, a pressure Elizabeth resists.

Later, when he returns to NSW, his continued schemes

to undermine the governor put Elizabeth in a precarious position.

Betsey, meanwhile, is dealing with the increasing number of antagonists trying to undermine her and Macquarie, and with the arrival of her friend's husband is feeling increasingly besieged.

While the historical events surrounding the two women are an important aspect of the novel, the story is, first, a personal one, and Williams skilfully shows how both Elizabeths are moulded, pulled apart and pushed together by the times they live through.

Both characters are well-rendered with distinct voices, and Williams takes the opportunity to explore how the same events were viewed radically differently by those on opposite sides of the political lines.

Just as importantly, the novel provides a record of the too-often overlooked impact Elizabeth Macarthur and Elizabeth Macquarie had on the early development of the colony — a record that, until now, has been largely dominated by their husbands.

Meg Keneally's latest novel is *Wreck*.