



THE RUNAWAY SETTLERS by ELSIE LOCKE

A Collins Modern New Zealand Classic

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The Runaway Settlers, written by renowned author and social activist Elsie Locke, was first published in 1965. Set in an authentic historical setting, the story begins in 1859, not quite 20 years after British settlers began to arrive in New Zealand. The book chronicles the hard but inspiring life of a real family. While the story begins in New South Wales, Australia, the majority of their amazing life is played out in Governors Bay, Lyttelton Harbour, New Zealand. This much-loved and timeless children's story now returns to print as part of the Collins Modern New Zealand Classics series. Elsie was a gifted and prolific writer who died aged 88 in 2001, leaving behind the priceless gift of 17 books with historical and social themes. As well as inspiring and entertaining, *The Runaway Settlers* will provide young readers with a vivid window into New Zealand's colonial past.

Story synopsis

The Small family consists of parents Mary Elizabeth and Stephen Small, a grown-up daughter Mary Ann, and children Bill (15), Jack (12), Archie (9), Jim (7), and Emma (2). They farm near Berrima, a small town inland from Sydney.

Family life is quite intolerable, as Stephen Small is prone to violent, often drunken, rages and inflicts severe injuries on his wife and the older boys. When he is away droving, Mary Elizabeth and the family run away to hide in Sydney, change the family name to Phipps for protection, and wait until they can find a ship to take them — anywhere!

An Indian judge en route by ship to Lyttelton offers the two eldest boys labouring jobs on his Cashmere farm, and Mrs Phipps is offered domestic work. Farm work is backbreaking for the older boys, and the wages so low that Mrs Phipps fears it will take over five years to save for their own home. She convinces the judge to let her live in a small run-down cob cottage, over the hill in Governors Bay, in return for creating a garden and restoring the cottage. They are welcomed by neighbours — the Dyers and the Parsons. Bill and Jack return to complete the farm contract, and Mrs Phipps, with her 'green fingers' and tireless work, soon makes her new home spotless and habitable. When Mrs Phipps visits her boys at Cashmere, she finds them malnourished, exhausted and dirty, so breaks the contract and takes them home. She convinces the judge that it is still worth his while to allow her to continue to improve the cottage at Governors Bay.

They extend the cottage, plant trees, fruit and vegetables, and run chickens and cattle. School lessons are conducted at the neighbours'. The garden flourishes and soon the family are selling excess produce in Lyttelton. Life is hard but satisfying, and they are reunited with Mary Ann. A small boat purchased to transport the increasing produce is sadly burnt by 'ruffians' causing them to fear that they have been located by Mr Small. Bill, fuelled with gold fever, unsuccessfully seeks his fortune at Gabriel's Gully and returns home considerably wiser. When gold is discovered on the West Coast, Mrs Phipps displays her courage and entrepreneurial skills. Her own cattle are stolen, so to get her money back she purchases a herd of bullocks, and with only her now 12-year-old son Archie and a dog, drives them through rivers, swamps, and foul weather to sell them at a good profit at the goldfields. This remarkable feat earns much respect amongst the gold prospectors and her Maori friends who ensure she is protected from harm. When she returns to Governors Bay, both Mrs Phipps and Archie are regarded as heroes. Eight years after fleeing Australia, the family is settled, successful and very happy. Bill marries and the family puts the past behind them to become the Smalls of Governors Bay.

Pre-reading activities

- Prior to reading, have students use atlas skills to become familiar with important locations in the story, **eg** Berrima, Sydney, Lyttelton, Governors Bay, Christchurch, Gabriel's Gully, Taramakau River.
- Tell students that Mary Elizabeth Small was a 'real' person who came to New Zealand with her family in 1859. Have students type: Mary Elizabeth Small into the *Find a biography* section of: www.dnzb.govt.nz and read her brief history.

During and post-reading activities

- Do the students think that the decision to run away was a drastic step? Do the students think there was any alternative? What other steps did Mary take to help protect her family?
- When reading the story, have students focus on and note down the differences in life in the 1850s-60s compared with modern day life, **eg** responsibilities and jobs children were expected to carry out, leisure pursuits, household appliances we regard as essential that did not exist. . .
- Construct a wall chart to highlight these differences. What ways of life then would the students want to adopt today? Why? Discuss.
- Have groups conduct web research on cob cottages (www.cobcottage.com/questions) to find out how they are constructed, the materials used, and why this was a popular building style in early New Zealand. From the description in the story, have students construct a floor plan of the cottage.
- Discuss and identify the many problems that Mary Elizabeth Small had to confront and overcome to make a good life for her family. Have students make a list of words and phrases that describe the characteristics this remarkable woman displayed, **eg** optimistic, strong-willed, determined, sensitive, brave, loyal, courageous . . . Find sections of the book that best illustrate these characteristics.
- Little is said about Bill's ill-fated attempt to get rich on the goldfields. From the information given, have students speculate on what they think life would have been like on the Otago Goldfields during this time. Have groups conduct research on early gold mining at: www.teara.govt.nz > select Earth and Sky > select Mineral Resources > select Gold and mining, and write a week of diary entries that illustrates the harsh conditions.
- In groups, have students select, script and act out an exciting or important incident from the story.
- Conduct research into the life and further books of Elsie Locke at: <http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Kids/FamousNewZealanders/Elsie.asp>

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