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# OLGA MARIE MONRAD – DANISH PIONEER, MOTHER AND WIFE



LISE TOENNER

A solitary marble cross stands in the Lutheran section of the Terrace End Cemetery. Over the years, its white colour has darkened in places and the writing on the marble has become more difficult to read. Here, most graves carry names of Scandinavian descent. ‘Olga Marie Monrad’ the inscription on the cross says.

It was Olga’s husband of nineteen years, Viggo Monrad, who rode his horse to Wellington to pick up the marble cross after her death in 1884. He placed it on her grave within weeks, after Olga had left behind her a family in despair.



*Olga’s cross at the Terrace End Cemetery.*

*Photo: Lise Toenner.*

“We are all very lonely now, especially father. We are all like sheep without a shepherd, and as good a shepherd we will we never get again. I can feel that. And I have never really appreciated it until now when it is too late,” Olga’s oldest son, eighteen-year-old Ditlev, wrote to his aunt, two months after his mother’s death.

Olga Marie Berg was born on 18 October 1843 into a tumultuous time of European history. Denmark saw its first democratic constitution come into effect in 1849, when Olga was five years old. The constitution was drafted by her future father-in-law, Bishop Monrad, who was Prime Minister at the time. She grew up in Svaerdborg, south of Copenhagen, where her father was a minister. Although she had a happy childhood, Olga experienced death and disease at close hand from early on in her life. Her mother died of

cholera when she was nine and her father died five years later when Olga was fourteen. Her sister Thekla, who was three years older, took on even greater importance in Olga's life after that, letting her move in with her and her husband, Captain Hansen.

The young Olga was often sad. In a letter to her close friend Emilie Rørdam in Copenhagen in 1863, she wrote: "I am most happy when I am by myself, you know it takes very little to make me sad. ... I do not believe [there will be] happiness in my life. But I do not fear the future. I am used to taking sorrows from God's hand and feel that I know and trust Him."

Later in the spring of 1863 she spent a week with the Monrad family at their estate Hummeltofte near Copenhagen. Olga wrote to her friend, Baroness Stampe, in June 1863, "I was at Hummeltofte for a week. You can't imagine what a wonderful time I had there. They are fantastic people and their estate is so beautiful".

The nineteen-year-old Olga, dark-haired, slender and well-educated, left a special impression on Viggo Monrad, the Bishop's eldest son. In May and June of that year, he wrote three love poems dedicated to Olga. One verse reads:

I am your lover, warm and tender.  
Even if you say 'no'.  
Life is a beautiful dream,  
I only dream of you.

Smitten with love, Viggo wrote in his third poem to Olga of her being a 'dark red rose' and himself as 'a weed that dies hard' in his love for her. Shortly after these poems were written in 1863, the two aspiring lovers faced a year-long separation, while Olga, her sister Thekla and her husband Captain Hansen undertook a journey round Europe. Concerned about the looming war, Olga wrote to her friend the Baroness that travel might take her mind off it. Everything was

organized by her brother-in-law, whom Olga seemed to respect a great deal. She kept a diary during the first months of the journey that took the three of them through Germany, France and Italy. She wrote about people she met, was often appalled by their behaviour and at times quite critical of her surroundings.



*Olga in Paris, 1863.*

*Ian Matheson Archives, PNCC Library.*

In Paris she had her portrait taken. It shows a beautiful young woman dressed in a dark-coloured silk skirt, a matching short cape-like jacket with a velvet border and underneath that a white shirt adorned with delicate lace. Her shiny black hair is pulled to the back in the elegant classical style of the time. On her face is a slight almost enigmatic smile as she looks away from the camera.

Although Olga did not directly mention Viggo in the letters sent home to Denmark during her travels, she expressed a longing to

be there and a concern for what changes the war may bring to her country. "Is Denmark going to be part of Germany, like Poland? ... Where will the help come from now that Dannevirke has been lost? The Germans will take the whole of Jylland. It is dreadful not to be in Denmark now," she wrote from Spain to her good friend Emilie Rørdam in February 1864, shortly after the war between Germany and Denmark had broken out.

Olga returned to Denmark from her travels towards the end of 1864 and it appears from her subsequent letters that she kept in close contact with the Monrad family. Viggo Monrad was mentioned in letters to Emilie Rørdam, as Olga indirectly told of her growing feelings for him. "There is nothing like love is there?" she asked in a letter written in January 1865. Then in the middle of that year her letters took on a more serious tone as she informed Emilie of her engagement. She wrote, "I am sure that you my faithful friend will be pleased when I tell you that I have become engaged to Viggo Monrad," and went on to say how sad she was that her friend did not know him yet. She told Emilie that the Monrads were treating her as if she were their own daughter, inviting her to spend the summer with them at Elsinore, north of Copenhagen. "I love them all so much," Olga wrote.

Olga may have imagined a comfortable life in Copenhagen with her husband and family, but the consequences of the war between Denmark and Germany changed that dramatically. The decision for the Monrad family to emigrate to New Zealand was taken by Olga's father-in-law Bishop Monrad, then Prime Minister of Denmark. It was a time of crisis in Denmark. With the loss of many young men's lives and almost 40% of Denmark's land area in the war against Germany in 1864, Monrad, as Prime Minister, became the scapegoat. He had been against a military solution in the disputes about the border with Germany, but Monrad felt that he had to get far away from Denmark.

Viggo Monrad, who was learning farming at the time, had hoped to go to the United States, where many other Scandinavians had already gone, but the Bishop's mind was set on New Zealand. It has been speculated that he chose New Zealand to get as far away as possible from Denmark.

Although Olga's initial reaction to the move is not known, on 27 November 1865 she married Viggo Monrad at a private ceremony conducted by the Reverend Rørdam, the father of Emilie. Emilie was at the ceremony, judging from a letter sent to her by Olga when the Monrad family was in London preparing for the ship's voyage to New Zealand. "Thanks for letting us stay with you in Hammer. Both Viggo and I enjoyed it. Only a pity it was such a short stay, our first day as a married couple and our last day in Denmark". They left the following day.

It is not clear whether Olga's sister Thekla was there to see her sister get married. Certainly, she and her husband Capt Hansen had been opposed to Olga marrying so soon. However, Thekla and Captain Hansen joined Olga as the Monrad family travelled from Lübeck in Northern Germany to Hamburg, before continuing to London. It was the last time Olga saw her sister in person. Thekla stayed behind, unable to continue fending for her younger sister as she had done since their parents died, and Olga set off on a sea journey that would see her arrive in an unknown country three and a half months later.

In London the Monrad travel party, including three of their five children, Olga and five young men that were friends of the family prepared for the long voyage. "I am a bit worried about the long time on the ship to New Zealand. We have looked at the ship. It is nice and new," Olga wrote to her friend Emilie.

On 14 December 1865, the *Victory* was towed down the Thames and out towards

the open sea. The long journey to the other side of the world had begun, and for Olga and the Monrad family, daily life took on a new direction. They celebrated Christmas at sea, they read and wrote during the day and tutored Viggo's younger siblings. The ladies sewed and read on deck as they sailed into warmer climates. The sea journey took a hard toll on some passengers and it would have made an impression on Olga to see young children and adults die on board. Olga and Viggo, enjoying their new life as a married couple, would have had plenty of time to walk round arm in arm on the ship deck, reading to each other, writing letters and spending the evenings with the rest of the Monrad family. It was during the first month at sea on board the *Victory* that their first child was conceived.

On March 25 the *Victory* arrived in Lyttelton after sailing along the "desolate and scarcely inhabited" coast of the South Island. A couple of days later, the Monrads boarded a small steamer that took them north to Wellington and then to Nelson, where they waited for their goods to arrive. They hoped to buy land in the Nelson area but this intention failed and Viggo and a family friend Heie headed north to explore the lower North Island. They brought back good news and it was decided that the family would be among the first settlers to purchase land in the lower Manawatu area. They spent about four months in Nelson, "a pleasant town", where Olga made friends with several families. There were plenty of visitors to their household and invitations to balls and dinners; for Olga it may have seemed a life not so different from the one she had led in Denmark. Viggo was often away looking for suitable land, so Olga spent much of her time preparing for the arrival of their first-born in September of that year. On 16 August 1866, a month before the birth, she wrote to her friend Emilie, "I have been busy knitting and sewing small things for the baby. Don't you find it strange to think that I am going to have a baby? God willing! It is not that long

ago we were children ourselves".

Within the next two weeks the Monrads moved to Wanganui, where the women and children were to stay while the men felled trees, prepared land for farming and started building a farmhouse at Karere on the banks of the Manawatu River. Olga seemed happy during their time in Wanganui. Here too, there were plenty of social commitments to attend to and when Olga and Viggo's son Ditlev was born on 20 September, there was the new role of mother for the twenty-two year-old woman.

With the first years in Nelson and Wanganui being quite civilised for a well-educated young woman, one can only imagine what thoughts must have gone through her mind on hearing Viggo tell about his experiences in the bush, encountering Māori, losing his close friend Heie to a drowning in the Manawatu River and working long days in the swampy areas of the Manawatu, felling bush while fending off mosquitoes.

Olga was in good health, enjoying her time with the Monrad family who spent their evenings reading literature from their vast library to each other, playing their grand piano and discussing politics, much in the way they had done in Denmark. In February, Viggo's sister who had recently arrived in New Zealand described the family atmosphere to her oldest sister in Denmark, "Mother [Emilie Monrad] is sitting beside me writing. Johannes and Karen [Viggo's siblings] are playing dominos on the floor, Viggo reading – his pipe beside him; Olga is nursing the baby". In a photo from July 1867, Olga sits with Ditlev on her lap, looking happy and content as a mother, and with no sign of sadness in her face.

However, in April 1867 the Bishop and his wife Emilia Monrad moved to the newly-built farm house at Karere, to join the rest of the family there. Viggo and Olga stayed



*Olga and Ditlev in Wanganui, 1867.*

*Ian Matheson Archives, PNCC Library.*

behind in Wanganui, as Viggo had taken up a job as land surveyor. Olga was sad about the move, as noted by the Bishop's wife in a letter to her daughter Ada in Denmark, "Olga has been well the last days. Cried when we left but [I] think the young couple will feel freer. I'll miss them". Emilie appreciated her daughter-in-law, and wrote to Viggo: "Olga's letter was very enjoyable to us. Such a clear and vivid picture of how you are".

In the following months the Bishop prepared himself to return to Denmark. He wanted Viggo to take over the farm at Karere; Johannes, Viggo's younger brother had gone to Patea, in Taranaki, to farm land there. The Bishop's wife was pleased about their achievements at Karere. She wrote to her daughter Ada on September 6, 1867, "It has now been decided that Viggo shall take over

Karere. The worst work is over. Monrad has shown such persistence and energy. I myself am glad. The bishop and I have managed most of the work for Olga".

However, it was almost two years before the Bishop and his wife left for Denmark. As the land at Patea had to be farmed and inhabited for at least twenty months, and the Monrad sons had to be prepared to join the militia before they could claim ownership, Viggo and Johannes travelled there in October 1867, while Olga and young Ditlev joined the rest of the Monrads at the farm at Karere. The Bishop and his wife were pleased to have their daughter-in-law and grandson closer by again. "We sit here by a big round table. Olga is sewing clothes for Ditlev. I am knitting socks for Monrad who is reading aloud. At 9 pm the men will call us for supper; milk, bread and butter. Then we talk till 10 pm," Emilie wrote to their daughter Ada in Denmark.

It was a life characterized by contrasts: hard work during the day, surviving in the swampy, mosquito-ridden area and at night listening to Shakespeare, read aloud by the Bishop or listening to piano concerts played by Viggo's sister and Olga. What is known about Olga during that time comes from letters written by her parents-in-law to relatives in Denmark. "The house is getting more cosy. But the mosquitoes are a worry; I feel sorry for those who have lived here longer," Emilie wrote to Ada in November 1867.

New settlers often had to be inventive. In the battle against mosquitoes no dress was too precious: "Little Ditlev sleeps in a tent of rose-red silk from one of his mother's [Olga's] ball gowns. It serves the little one well," Emilie wrote to Ada.

Although Olga later came to suffer ill health, in the first couple of years at Karere she appeared to be well, even when she was heavily pregnant with her second child.



*The Monrad family farmhouse, Karere, near Longburn. To the right of the house can be seen a clay and thatch whare which may have been the hut occupied by the Monrads prior to the construction of the house.*

*Ian Matheson Archives, PNCC Library.*

"Everyone is well, especially Olga who is her usual wonderful self ... Olga is radiant. No headaches. She is expecting the baby soon," Emilie wrote in March 1868.

On March 31, 1868, Olga's second son, Arne David, was born. Although healthy at first, he fell seriously ill at around two weeks of age. When the doctor finally arrived, he diagnosed the baby with volvulus [bowel obstruction] for which nothing could be done. Arne David died the following day, on 14 April 1868.

"Olga cries when she is alone. Mother is very sad, in this short time her heart has become so attached to the little boy. It is good that Viggo is here now, " Bishop Monrad wrote in the days following his grandson's death. Viggo had returned from Patea for a couple of weeks to see his new son, but instead had to comfort his mourning wife.

A small area of the paddock was fenced off near the house and Olga's baby son was buried in a small coffin made by a family friend. In June 1868 she wrote to her sister Thekla in Denmark, describing Karere with much affection, writing on a series of photographs showing the house, the surrounding area near the lagoon and the son's grave. "This is where my little boy is buried. We have made it a bit smaller and the fence tighter to guard the grave against the sheep. And we have planted flowers there".

The life of a settler's wife made Olga grow as a person. Long gone was the insecure, slightly scared young woman who had arrived in New Zealand a couple of years earlier. "Olga is a wise, energetic and industrious person. It is a relief for us that she is so brave. We have had so many wonderful evenings with her," Emilie Monrad wrote to Ada in November 1868. It was a time for





*"The little enclosure where my boy is buried".*

*Ian Matheson Archives, PNCC Library.*

concern as the conflicts between settlers and Māori escalated. Olga had to let Viggo go back to Patea, where the conflicts were rife and some settlers had already lost their lives. "Olga is very upset and quiet. She says she wants to go to Patea," the Bishop wrote in his letters.

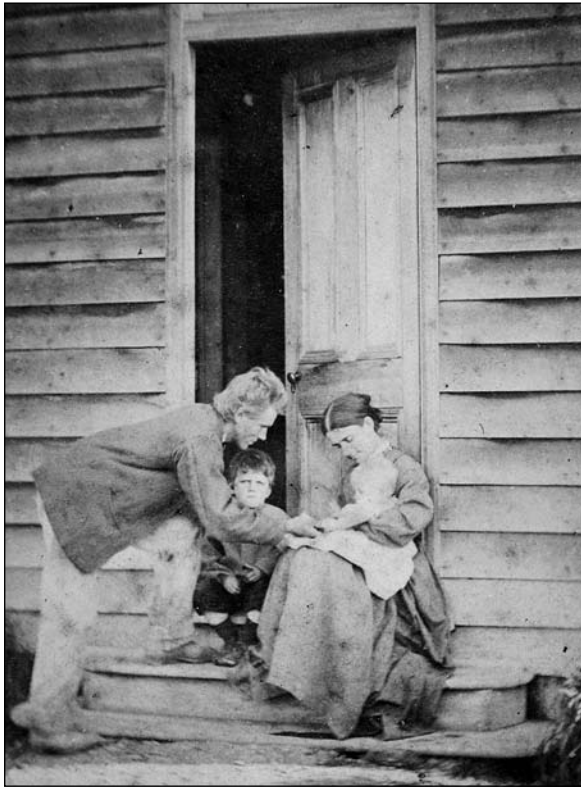
Bishop Monrad, his wife and their two daughters left New Zealand on 10 January 1869. Olga and Viggo were left in charge of the farm at Karere. Between 1869 and the beginning of 1871, Olga kept a household diary. Entries into this diary are erratic at times, usually consisting of short and factual entries describing household chores, children being sick, harvesting and preserving fruit and complaining about headaches and mosquitoes. But some entries show that above all, Olga was a family person, appreciating life with her husband and children. She told of going swimming with Ditlev in the Manawatu River, sewing clothes for the children, says how sweet the children were and how Viggo made a drawing of Johannes

one evening. Once, Viggo even had to jump into the river to save his son: "In the river Ditlev lost his footing and disappeared under the water, and Viggo jumped in after him, with all his clothes on," Olga wrote on 24 January 1871.

A photo taken in March 1870 by family friend and photographer Theodore Bloch, shows a picture of a hardworking but happy family. Olga sitting on the doorstep with baby Johannes on the lap. Viggo bending down towards Johannes with an affectionate gesture, five-year-old Ditlev standing in the doorway of the house.

It seems the love between Olga and Viggo flourished in spite of their long working days. In her diary, Olga described with affection and a sense of humour how she and Viggo took a stroll one night, when the children were sleeping: "Walked with Viggo under the moon along the new track into the forest. How lovely it was. The mosquitoes nearly killed me. I had to flee!!! Ha ha!"





*Viggo, Olga, Ditlev and Johannes, Karere 1870.*

*Ian Matheson Archives, PNCC Library.*

Viggo gave Olga art prints as presents for Christmas. As well as appreciating art, Olga played the piano. She played for her family and also at meetings within the Lutheran church, which was of great importance to both her and Viggo. In 1883, a year before her death, Olga played the piano at a 400-year anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther celebrated by the Lutheran church in Palmerston North, a church that Viggo Monrad had helped erect some years earlier. Although a Lutheran Christian all her life, Olga kept an open mind to other congregations. Having attended a Salvation Army service in August 1884, she wrote in a letter that she thought that with their singing and clapping “they preached better than many a minister”.

From letters to her sister-in law Karen, it was clear that Olga’s sons were very different from each other. She told Karen how practical-minded Ditlev was and how academic-

minded Johannes was. She was sad, however, that without a maid in the house, she had little time to teach her younger children.

In 1881 the twelve-year-old Johannes was sent to stay with relatives in Denmark as he suffered badly from asthma. In a series of letters from Olga to Johannes, it becomes evident how much she missed him and her friends in Denmark. “It is so lovely to think that you can see the same flowers and enjoy the same pleasures I could as a child. ... Don’t you think that people in Denmark live so nice and pleasantly? Here [there are] hardly any people one would like one’s children to make friends with ... they are not quite like our friends at home,” Olga wrote in 1882. She told Johannes of daily life at Karere, a trip to Mt Stewart with the whole family, her impressions of the new road and the many farms in the area. Although New Zealand was her home, she never forgot Denmark. In 1883, she wrote to Johannes: “I wish they would invent a balloon and they were cheap to travel with, then I would fly quickly over seas and lake and back again and live both here and there”.

Olga Marie Monrad gave birth to eight children during her eighteen years in New Zealand. Perhaps it was the effect of the labour-intensive life as a settler, perhaps the more and more frequent headaches that forced her to spend days in bed or perhaps it was the increased longing for Denmark that started to tire her. In her last letter sent from New Zealand, she tells in great detail about all the children to her sister-in-law Karen, ending the letter with “from your old Olga”. She was forty-one when a week’s illness forced her to her bed. What seemed like an innocent flu turned serious and towards the end of that week Olga died, on 28 November 1884. On her death certificate, Dr Marriner wrote ‘inflammation and collapse of the lungs’ as the cause of death.

Olga’s sudden death left behind a family in shock.



*The Monrad family in front of the house at Karere. Olga is in the black dress with son Ditlev next to her. Viggo Monrad is in the background leaning against a window.*

*Ian Matheson Archives, PNCC Library.*

"We didn't know until the last minute that she was seriously ill. And when we did she did not know us. Father went in a little before us and she squeezed his little finger a little. I did not know five minutes before she died that she was going to die," wrote her 13-year-old son Oscar to his aunt a couple of weeks after Olga's death.

To his brother Johannes in the US, Viggo described Olga's death in detail.

"Death came so quickly that only by a faint movement of her lips could she return my kiss. She could not talk. I promised to be good to the children and she squeezed my finger. Ditlev came, laid his arm around her head, Mother! Oscar fell to the floor in despair, then we pulled ourselves together and sang "Christ stod op af døde". We

thought she heard it, when we finished she quietly drew her last breath. Oscar staggered out the room, I went after him and took him in my arms. 'She is in heaven now?' he asked. 'Yes, I believe that', and he was a bit calmer".

Many families came to express their sorrow to Viggo in the days following Olga's death. Olga had made a great impact on the community and was a well-known and respected person in the area. "I have been told it was the largest number of mourners there has ever been in the district. ... It makes me feel better after all," Viggo wrote to his brother.

A few months after Olga's death, Viggo returned to Denmark with his seven children. In 1886, Ditlev and Oscar returned to New Zealand to work the farm at Karere together.

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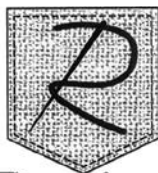
Death certificate for Olga Marie Monrad.

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