

INDEPENDENT EXPERT REPORT

VICKERY EXTENSION PROJECT

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SUMMARY OF REPORT

This Report will discuss the significance of the Australian poet, Dorothea Mackellar, to Australian literature and culture. As a consequence, it will also discuss the relationship of the writer and her poetry to the rural property formerly held by her family, called “Kurrumbede”, about 25 kilometres north of Gunnedah, N.S.W.

This Report is not exhaustive: it is by necessity brief and contains limited information, due to the restraints of time and space. The Reference listing is incomplete for the same reason, but the author is happy to provide further referential evidence if required.

Dorothea Mackellar wrote one of Australia’s best-known and loved Australian poems — “My Country”. First published in 1908, it has proven to be an integral part of Australian culture, being anthologised, recited and quoted widely to the present day (Moore in Jose).

Kurrumbede was bought for the Mackellar family by Dr. Charles (later Sir Charles) Mackellar in 1905. Eric and Malcolm Mackellar, Dorothea’s brothers, lived and worked on Kurrumbede. The original purchase was as a large 3,650 hectare grazing property with “The Rampadells” purchased nearby as a 150 hectare “out paddock”.

Dorothea was a frequent visitor to Kurrumbede and often referred to visiting the property and being involved in farm activities in her diaries (Brunsdon, 67, 74, 75,163). She also based a number of poems on her experiences of the environment and pastoral practices there (see below).

The importance of Kurrumbede as a domicile of Dorothea Mackellar, premier Australian poet, cannot be overstated. This was a place she loved, lived in, worked and wrote about as a place which was special: a peaceful retreat and a place of unique and natural beauty. Its existence is essential to the Australian literary and historical record and cannot be ignored. Its preservation, which includes maintaining the integrity of homestead, farm buildings, garden and environs is essential. It is my opinion that the expansion of coal-mining in the immediate vicinity will severely impact the visual, aesthetic and cultural importance of this property, closely associated as it is with the Dorothea Mackellar’s life and creative work.

Dorothea Mackellar's close connection to Kurrumbede is shown through her poetry and further evidenced in her diary entries. Relevant poetry is listed with dates published appearing in parenthesis to their titles as they appeared in collections.

This Report will summarise Dorothea Mackellar's relationship to Kurrumbede and the Mackellar family's involvement with the property and district.

My opinions are based on original research as part of my PhD studies with Charles Sturt University. This has been conducted over the past 5 years, firstly as part of my Honours year in Australian Literature (Deakin University, 2014) and includes several extended visits to the Mitchell Library, Sydney (2012, 2016, 2017) to view original material – manuscripts, letters, personal artefacts and letters held there. I have also read and taken notes from Dorothea Mackellar's diary kept from 1908 until the end of 1918. These were times during which she was creatively active and visited Kurrumbede often. The diaries were not consistently maintained thereafter.

For convenience and brevity's sake, I have used excerpts from Dorothea Mackellar's diaries, as quoted in Brunson (1990). Quotations from Dorothea's poems have been taken from the 1971 Rigby edition (*The Poems of Dorothea Mackellar*), as the four original collections published in 1911, 1914, 1923 and 1926 are not easily procured.

In September 2017 I visited Gunnedah for the annual Dorothea Mackellar Memorial Society Poetry Awards. During my time spent in the town I spoke extensively with members of the Society and to the President of The Gunnedah Water Tower Museum, Gunnedah. I was able to view a number of artefacts at the Memorial Society's rooms and at the Museum, including photographs of Dorothea Mackellar, her brothers Eric and Malcolm, friends and relatives as well as their property, Kurrumbede. Many of these artefacts and photographs are notable as being unique and rare— I have not seen them elsewhere and some have been locally sourced. These include a number of photos of Kurrumbede taken in its prime when the Mackellar family were in residence, complete with extensive gardens, trees and a variety of farm buildings, well maintained and tended.

Finally, as part of my visit to Gunnedah, I visited Kurrumbede. I walked around the homestead, viewed the gardens, many of the farm buildings and absorbed the atmosphere of an old country property and formed an opinion of its condition, the views afforded by the

siting, especially to the north and south. Most importantly, I was able to re-imagine the Mackellars going about their everyday pastoral pursuits: backed up by the photographs I had seen and the descriptions I had read, particularly in Mackellar's diaries. I stood under the front verandah, my feet on the cool flagstones and looked out across the plains, to the Namoi River now out of sight, I heard the wind sighing through remnant native vegetation and the cries of numberless birds. Kurrumbede maintains, despite the changes wrought by over 150 years of European occupation, an atmosphere of peace and beauty.

Dorothea Mackellar's Literary Legacy and importance

It is my opinion that the cultural importance of the poetry written by Dorothea Mackellar is of great importance to the State of New South Wales, to the nation and most recently, to the international cultural community.

Dorothea Mackellar's unique response to the Australian landscape was nurtured by Kurrumbede. It is the rural property which has the most long-standing association by far, with her name. It was here that she nurtured a creative response to her environment driven by a sensitivity to its singular appeal. Mackellar's awareness of the colours inherent in the Australian environment, together with her appreciation for the land as her 'country', were stimulated and enabled by her extended visits to Kurrumbede and her participation in station life.

After a long car and train journey from Sydney in 1911 she wrote, "...we arrived....and it was all heavenly — and the garden a dream. Never have I seen such grass in the paddocks..." and on the following day "drove down to the river to see the bullocks taking timber across. 28 of them. A good sight..." (March 10/11). A week later "...after church went riding with Eric and took a stubborn lot of sheep from Redbank to Culgai ...and saw black duck and swans and got back in time for tea." And on the next day, "...gathered armfuls of roses, for the rain in the night had brought them out ...Afterwards went out mustering with Eric to Emu and Vicky Castle. Came home after sunset. None in the west, but the eastern sky all pink clouds, the rest pink and gold swirls on a bright blue background..." (Brunsdon, 75)

It is also my opinion that while there are several extant properties associated with Mackellar – “Dunara”, Sydney, “Torryburn”, Gresford and “Tarrangau”, Lovett Bay, Pittwater. These properties are now privately owned as places of residence and not directly associated with many of the works held to be representative of the poetry the Australian public have held dear for over a century.

I believe that an open-cut coal mine, associated with expansion of infrastructure, including a rail line, will irrevocably impact on the rural nature of the property, Kurrumbede, regardless of the siting of the house, or the improvement of the garden surrounds, currently in a neglected state.

In my opinion, Kurrumbede should belong to both the State of NSW and the nation as it is the only home most closely associated for a long period of time with the iconic poet Dorothea Mackellar and her family. As such, it should be preserved and restored as witness to Australia’s literary and pastoral history, for future generations.

Having seen Kurrumbede recently, I hold that the mine, plus any expansion and associated infrastructure, will severely impact the visual amenity of the property in every direction. The remaining farm buildings are limited in size, scale and many are in an advanced state of disrepair. The depleted garden, including what is left of hedges, stressed trees and shrubs, cannot possibly protect the overall integrity of the house and property, in the face of large, modern, industrial development, such as that which is proposed. This includes (but is not limited to) the period of development and construction, when various pollutants including noise, dust, movement and vibration, would be expected to diminish and ultimately destroy any perception of untrammelled space — the “wide brown land”, or view — the “far horizons”, or the beauty of the “ragged mountain ranges” (“My Country”[1908, 1911] 1971, 4).

A Brief Biography of Dorothea Mackellar and Literary History

Mackellar’s success

Australian poet and writer Dorothea Mackellar, was the author of one of Australia’s best-known poems – “My Country”. First published in the *London Spectator* in September 1908

as “Core of My Heart”, the poem subsequently appeared in the Australian press later that year in *The Call* (7) and in the *Sydney Mail* (1056). Revised and re-titled, it has appeared regularly in collections, surveys, literary and historical analyses and anthologies as well as the popular press for over a century — a rare distinction for poetry of the period, shared mainly by nationalists such as A. B. (‘Banjo’) Paterson and Henry Lawson.

Background and family

Dorothea Mackellar was the only daughter and third of four children of upper class, Australian parents. She was born at “Dunara”, overlooking Rose Bay at Piper’s Point, Sydney. Dorothea’s father was Sir Charles Mackellar, of Scottish descent, a doctor by profession, knighted for his work in public health. A State (NSW) Member of Parliament for forty years, he accumulated wealth, power and exerted considerable influence over State and mercantile affairs (Australian Dictionary of Biography).

Publishing history of “My Country”

At the age of 23, Dorothea Mackellar’s signature poem, “My Country”, was published in 1908. It was then reprinted many times and included in Mackellar’s first collection *The Closed Door and Other Verses* (1911), going through four editions that year — the first selling out in a month (Barnes 292). The poem’s singular success ensured it appeared regularly in the popular press throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. “My Country” has appeared regularly in popular newspapers and magazines; Australian anthologies, illustrated special editions, children’s anthologies and school publications – the latter as it disseminated cultural and national values through its ‘readers’ and ‘school papers’ (Bradford 2008, *The Victorian Readers Sixth Book*, 1-3).

Broader cultural influence of “My Country” and Mackellar’s poetry

“My Country” has been set to music many times over the last century – but most recently by Australian virtuoso composer Elena Katz Chernin, who was commissioned by the Vienna Boys Choir and performed by them at the Brisbane Festival in 2012 (Australian Music Centre, 2012).

The cross-disciplinary responses to Mackellar's life and poetry have included the visual arts as well as music and have included an opera, "Dorothea", commissioned for Australia's Bi-Centenary Celebration (Brunsdon, Holley, 1988). A series of paintings, drawings and photographs have accompanied a number of singular publications of "My Country", beginning with an illustrated version (1915), then included in *The Art of J.J. Hilder* (1918) and more recently *Dorothea Mackellar's "My Country": A Centenary Celebration 1908—2008*. Jean Isherwood's series of 32 paintings based on the poem are now housed within the Dorothea Mackellar Memorial Society's headquarters in Gunnedah, N.S.W., twenty-five kilometres from the Mackellar family's pastoral property, Kurrumbede. The town of Gunnedah boasts a life-size equestrian sculpture of Mackellar in the main street and the Society hosts annual, nation-wide poetry awards – a feature of the town and nation's cultural celebration of the importance of stimulating children's creativity over many years.

An important cultural feature of Mackellar's poetry

Influence on Australian vernacular

However, one of the most enduring cultural influences of "My Country" has been on the language itself. Phrases from the poem have passed into Australian vernacular speech and include 'sunburnt country', 'sweeping plains', 'droughts and flooding rains', 'far horizons', 'wide brown land' (Macquarie on line). This encompasses serious as well as popular writing and speech (Murray-Smith 199, *The Warrnambool Standard* 5). Celebrations of 'Australia Day' cannot pass without Mayors and Shire Presidents from town and country repeating a phrase or reciting the second verse of Mackellar's poem, the 'most often recited piece of poetry in Australia' (Moore in Jose 388). Its evocation of the 'beauty' and 'terror' of the Australian environment has become part of Australia's cultural, as well as literary heritage. In spite of massive environmental changes in the last century, her depiction of the landscape continues to be read as apt, as it is seen as familiar and her cultural importance remains strong (Lovell 5, *Herald-Sun* 20). The remainder of her poetry depicts a loved and special landscape and it is my opinion that much of this was informed by Dorothea's experiences at Kurrumbede.

"My Country" today – enriching our language

Writers in this century utilise the poem's heritage, incorporating the words and imagery of "My Country" in their own work as a positive reinforcement, as in the rural romance stories of *Love in a Sunburnt Country* (King). Similarly, in the historical romance *To Love a Sunburnt Country* (French), which features two lines from the poem ("...you who have not loved her/you will not understand") on the front cover. And when *Back Roads* (2017) ABC series presenter Heather Ewart declared the country town of Harrow (Vic.) had seen its share of "droughts and flooding rains", the visible connection was very clear.

Finally, recognition for the poem became international in February 2017, when "My Country" (cited by its original title, "Core of My Heart") became Australia's first literary work and Mackellar the first female writer recognised by UNESCO, with the manuscript copy added to the *Australian Memory of the World Register*.

Some poems referred to which are directly reflective of Kurrumbede

Note: All poems listed are found in the 1971 Rigby collection *The Poems of Dorothea Mackellar*. Dates listed after the titles, refer to the original dates when published. This listing is not exhaustive.

Kurrumbede is referred to directly or named as being the location, in the poems "Dawn", "Flower of Youth" (1915) "The Magic Forest" (1923) "Psyche (Namoi River, 1914), "The Moving Mountain" (Northern Mail). It is indirectly referred to in the imagery and detail contained in "Spring On the Plains", "Culgai Paddock", "Blue and Silver", "Night on the Plains", "Up Country" (1911) "The Colours of Light" ('Silver green of the myall leaves'); "Australia" (1923) "Impression – Spring Weather" (1926). Kurrumbede's nearby "outpaddock" is named in "Burning Off" (1911) — an Australian farming practice still followed today. They all reflect a sharp awareness of the special qualities of life on the Liverpool Plains and its flora and fauna.

In "The Wings of a Dove" —

'I know a long lagoon on Northern Plains/where small white everlastings shine/...There come to drink: ibis and pelican,/Parrots in patchwork dresses,/Egrets like slender sad bewitched princesses;/I'll watch the hunting swallows and the teal/And pearl-grey broilgas tall/With a brother or a horse — /Or nobody at all./ '

From "Waiting, Australian Autumn", 37, (1926).

Visitors and workers

The Mackellar brothers — Malcom and Eric — were excellent riders and totally involved in all station activities and equestrian pursuits, including polo (Howley). Dorothea was also a skilled rider and involved in station activities (see her diary entries above, Brunsdon).

They were host to a variety of visitors due to their many links to family and friends of wealth and power (see Howley, Brunsdon). Their riding prowess, as well as their location, led to friendships and activities of a different kind. Popular visitors and also workers on Kurrumbede included 'Snowy' Baker and Andrew 'Boy' Charlton.

New Film Industry

Kurrumbede had links to the newly-emergent film industry that was being developed in Australia after World War 1. A highly-successful feature film, *The Lure of the Bush* (1918) was filmed largely at Kurrumbede with the participation of family members, including Dorothea Mackellar who rewrote the titles – the film being 'silent' (Brunsdon, 191). Its star was athlete and later film stunt-man, R.L. 'Snowy' Baker, friend of Malcolm Mackellar. Famous in his day, he was a middleweight boxer, diver, swimmer, footballer, horseman and wrestler. *The Lure of the Bush* was story of derring-do and romance on a 'cattle-station' where Baker rode buckjumpers, trounced the station bully and won the girl's heart. No copy of this exists, but there are stills taken from the film (Reade, Howley 136, Brunsdon 171, 191/2).

Kurrumbede also hosted for over eight years, famous Olympian, Andrew "Boy" Charlton who worked as a jackaroo there. Kurrumbede was a fine, well-managed pastoral property, noted for its Corriedale sheep (Brunsdon 25).

Conclusion

From the summarised evidence discussed above, my opinion is that the retention and preservation of the homestead and rural environs of “ Kurrumbede”, formerly the property of the Mackellar family, is extremely valuable in the context of the literary history of this nation. The continued viability of Dorothea Mackellar’s signature poem “My Country” is proof enough of the esteem in which the poet continues to be held and the cultural relevance of the sentiments expressed in the poem continue to be relevant and inspirational, especially in times of change. In my opinion it is essential Kurrumbede be preserved for future generations and given full Heritage protection. This should include permanent protection from the impacts of further developments, most immediately the Vickery Extension Project proposal, as this will severely impact the visual and aesthetic amenity of all buildings, including the homestead, garden and broader rural aspect. Kurrumbede and its environs were well known and loved by one of Australia’s most iconic poets: Dorothea Mackellar. It is imperative that the country house, property and landscape surrounding Kurrumbede, which she depicted so well in her poetry, are restored and preserved for future generations. The Vickery Extension Project is inimical to the sense of place Dorothea Mackellar created in her poetry, for all Australians, for all time.

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12th February, 2019.

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