

# DOROTHEA MACKELLAR OBE 1885 - 1968

Isobel Marion Dorothea Mackellar was born on 1 July 1885, at her family's home that stands on Point Piper, overlooking Rose Bay on Sydney Harbour. The third of four children, Dorothea was the only daughter born to renowned physician and Parliamentarian, Sir Charles Kinnaird Mackellar and his wife, Marion (nee Buckland). The young Dorothea received private tutoring in painting, fencing and languages and later attended lectures at the Sydney University though she never formally enrolled as a student. She spoke French, German, Italian and Spanish fluently. When the family travelled overseas, Dorothea acted as an interpreter for her father.

Dorothea had a lively personality with a keen sense of humour, which is reflected in her diary entries of the early 1900's. Hers was a privileged life that was divided between the busy sophistication of the city and the simplicity of the country.

The Mackellar family owned several properties in the Gunnedah area, including "Kurrumbede" and "The Rampadells" on the Blue Vale Road near Gunnedah. The late Mrs Maude Broun lived on the adjoining property, "Coulston", with her husband, the son of Sir Charles Broun. In a taped interview after Dorothea's death, Mrs Broun recalled the Mackellar's regular visits with Dorothea, Eric and Malcolm (her two remaining brothers, Keith having been killed in the Boer War at age 19), to their Gunnedah country residences.

Sir Charles handed these properties over to his sons whom many still remember as well respected and generous members of our local community. Over the years Dorothea often visited the area, staying with her brothers and maintaining her skills as an ardent horsewoman. Dorothea was very proud of the fact that she could ride side-saddle so well, even in the bush.

The first draft of what was to become Australia's most quoted and best loved poem, "My Country", was written in England at a time when Dorothea was feeling homesick. Never quite content with the verses, she wrote and re-wrote the poem several times after returning to Australia and living in the apartments above her father's consulting rooms in Buckland Chambers, Liverpool Street, Sydney, opposite the ANZAC Memorial. It is fitting that Dorothea's Memorial should now grace ANZAC Park in Gunnedah, depicting her as the young woman who wrote "My Country", and gazing in the direction of her beloved "Kurrumbede".

Dorothea never married though, at 28 years of age, whilst living in London, she fell in love with an English poet named Patrick Chalmers. When she returned to Australia just before the start of World War I, she wrote to Patrick to let him know her parents approved of their decision to wed. Unfortunately, the letter was lost and Patrick married someone else. Dorothea was heartbroken, her poetry after this experience becoming more serious with sometimes tragic undertones. ("Sorrow")

Dorothea continued to write and travel during the Twenties and early Thirties, her work appearing in journals of high repute such as the London "Spectator", American "Harper's Magazine" and the Sydney "Bulletin" among others. During these years, four volumes of verse were published, "The Closed Door", "The Witchmaid", "Dreamharbour" and "Fancy Dress".

The Australian countryside continued to be a source of inspiration to Dorothea. Two poems that particularly reflect her special relationship with our district are; "Dawn" (At the dawning of the day; On the road to Gunnedah...), and "Burning Off" (They're burning off at the Rampadells; The tawny flames uprising...).

Later in life Dorothea suffered increasing ill health and ceased to write. In the 1968 New Year Honours list her contribution to Australian literature was formally recognised and she was made an Officer of the British Empire. Sadly, only two weeks later on the 14 January, Dorothea Mackellar died in her sleep in the Scottish Hospital, Paddington. The funeral service was held in St Mark's Church at Darling Point where reportedly Dorothea's favourite poem, "Colour" was read. She was once recorded saying about the poem, "You know, I think that was as close as I ever came to writing poetry." She was laid to rest in the family vault at Waverley Cemetery in Sydney.

Dorothea's brothers predeceased her, leaving no heirs, therefore Dorothea was the last of that branch of the Mackellars.



## The Red Kangaroo Memorial

Cumbo Gunnerah was the legendary warrior and wise leader of the Gunn-e-darr people of the Kamilaroi tribe. He was buried, it is thought, in the late 1700's in a manner befitting an Aboriginal man of great importance ie. in a sitting position, backed by a tree carved with totemic designs in his honour. The stories of his unsurpassed bravery, achievements and adventures were handed down from generation to generation and his burial place was treated with great respect.

Some two centuries later, white settlers dug up the remains of Cumbo Gunnerah and sent them, along with a slab of what was locally known as "The Blackfellow's Tree", to the Australian Museum.

As custom demanded his silence, King Bungaree, the last full blood Aboriginal of the Gunn-e-darr tribe, was unwilling to talk about his great leader. It was only just before he died that he decided to confide in his friend, Stan Ewing, the local Police Sergeant. Stan Ewing recorded this information and passed it on to other historians. Cumbo Gunnerah soon became recognised as the greatest of all Aboriginal leaders, his story appearing in The Sydney Mail in 1891. His name is also mentioned in the Department of Mines' publication of 1918, "The Dendroglyphs (or carved trees) of NSW", written by the Director and Curator of the Australian Museum, R. Etheridge Jnr.

The information was ultimately passed on to author, Ion Idriess, who turned "The Red Chief", first published in 1953, into a best seller.

In the 1960's, the Gunnedah Historical Society erected a sign to mark the burial site of "The Red Chief". This sign still stands on the footpath near the corner of Abbott & Little Conadilly Streets.

Dennis Adams (the sculptor of the Dorothea Mackellar Memorial) was asked to design a memorial of the Red Kangaroo suitable for erection on the footpath. Not long after the sculptor's design was received, the National Parks & Wildlife Service approached Gunnedah Shire Council with a request to assist in erecting a Cairn on the Abbott Street footpath to mark the burial site. In consultation with the Aboriginal community through the Min Min Club and the other parties concerned, Dennis Adams' design was adopted and the bronze relief commissioned. Financed by the National Parks & Wildlife, Land Council grants and supplemented by Shire Council and community donations, the large sandstone on which the bronze relief had been mounted, was erected. Not on the footpath as originally intended, but at the entrance of the State Office block which is adjacent to the burial site.

On National Aborigines' Day, 14th September 1984, the memorial was officially dedicated by one of the oldest members of the local Aboriginal community, John Lalor. Before retiring, Mr Lalor worked for the Gunnedah Municipal Council for a number of years. A Corroboree was held to commemorate the ceremony.

It is believed The Red Kangaroo Memorial is the first memorial erected in honour of an Aboriginal historic figure. The bronze relief text reads:

Yilambu giwihir gayir Kambu Gunirah gir ginyi.  
Nghimgu mari ngihma gayir Gaweh Canuhr.  
Nghirma binal wuraya, wahrunggul yiliyan  
maringu Gunidahngu ginyi.  
Yirahla ganu wunda dawandah nahbu gayir  
gaweh Gawinbara Wuraya.

In times past there was an Aboriginal man  
called Cumbo Gunnerah  
His people called him The Red Kangaroo.  
He was a clever chief and a mighty fighter  
(this man from Gunnedah)  
Later, the white people of this place  
called him The Red Chief.

Dr Margaret Sharpe, Lecturer in Aboriginal Languages, wrote the Kamilaroi text.

