

# **Eirene Mort: Artist, Artisan and New Woman**



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## **Declaration**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of the author's knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

Pamela Lane

August 2017.



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## **Abstract**

### **Eirene Mort: Artist, Artisan and New Woman**

Eirene Mort (1879 – 1977) was an Arts and Crafts practitioner and teacher whose work reflected transitions in twentieth century Australian art and culture, and in the opportunities available to women artists in changing patterns of taste, art markets and education. This thesis examines the factors that shaped Mort's career and contribution as a – for a time – prominent artist and artisan who was emblematic of independent womanhood. I assess the ways in which her struggles and achievements extend our understanding of the significance of gender in the art world of twentieth century Australia. Analysing Mort's wide-ranging body of art, together with her memoirs, family histories, financial documents, teaching records, social networks and contemporary reports of her life and work, I draw out the patterns that emerged in her life and work. Mort's significance as an historical figure is twofold. Firstly, the course of her long career illustrates the interdependency of art with a range of social and political influences, including gendered identities, patronage, education, class-based networks and aesthetic movements. Secondly, the relative neglect of Mort's work highlights the importance of restoring these dimensions to studies of artists in their context, and of dissolving an often-artificial distinction between 'art' and a range of craft-based practices in their social contexts. My biographical approach is informed by methodologies using qualitative and quantitative data – often fragmentary, but revealing even in that state – to reconstruct the social and personal contexts of her art practice, and to relate her work to changes in taste, patronage and education, and placing Mort in the wider cultural social, and economic patterns of her times.



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## List of Abbreviations

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AGNSW	Art Gallery of New South Wales
A & C Society	Arts and Crafts Society of New South Wales
CBD	Central Business District
E.M.	Eirene Mort
HMS	His Majesty's Ship
LHS	Left Hand Side
MFP	Mort Family Papers
ML	Mitchell Library
NGA	National Gallery of Australia
NLA	National Library of Australia
N.K.W.	Nora Kate Weston
NSW	New South Wales
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RHS	Right Hand Side
SCEGGS	Sydney Church of England Girls Grammar School
TAS	Tasmania





## Preface

In 1987, I guiltily dismembered two copies of Eirene Mort's *Australian Animal Alphabet*, mentally apologising to the artist (of whom I had never heard) as I did so. I was a Teacher/Librarian in a NSW primary school, and I needed the bold alphabet letters with their attractive animal drawings to mount on colourful cardboard so that I could place them above the fiction shelves in my library.

Ten years later, my good friend and former history tutor at the University of Newcastle, Margaret Henry, took me to a modest Adamstown house to meet Margaret Mort, as she was sure I would be interested to see some of the primary source material that Margaret Mort had inherited from her aunt Eirene. My friend was right – it was fascinating material, and I would have loved to have been able to spend time perusing it and discovering some of its hidden treasures. But the time was not right; I was working full time and had family commitments.

Now, twenty years later, in 2017, I am about to submit my thesis on 'Eirene Mort – Artist, Artisan and New Woman'. When Margaret Henry again prompted me in 2012 to undertake this research, it was just the kind of project I then needed. I have been fortunate to have been able to undertake this research while living in Canberra, as it has allowed me to access not only many resources located in Canberra's academic institutions, but also the superb direction of my Australian National University supervisor and panel members, together with help from other ANU staff and many student friends.

The project has proved an absorbing experience, full of challenge and discovery, and it has given me great satisfaction to help to bring this enigmatic woman out from the shadows some forty years after she died. I hope I have atoned for cutting up Mort's alphabet books all those years ago.

Pam Lane

Canberra, August 2017.



## Introduction

*Miss Mort is a pioneer in this class of work.*<sup>1</sup>

– A. G. Stephens

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### Historiography by default – the neglect of Mort

Figure 1



Eirene Mort c. 1905

Eirene Mort (1879 – 1977) was an Australian artist and artisan who has been largely overlooked by biographers and art historians alike (Fig. 1). In her heyday, she was widely known as a pioneer in applied arts who had ‘five hundred or more comrades or followers’.<sup>2</sup> Today, however, Mort’s name is virtually uncited. I hold that she deserves a place in the historical record of women who made a contribution to Australian art and culture and in an understanding of the social contexts supporting such work.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A.G. Stephens, ‘Black and Whiter’, *The Bookfellow* in *The Daily Herald*, September 10, 1910, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780 – 1950*. (Middlesex: Penguin, 1963), Preface, xviii. I am using Raymond Williams’ definition of the word ‘culture’ as ‘a whole way of Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780 – 1950*. (Middlesex: Penguin, 1963), Preface

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My first aim is to recognise Mort's important contribution to Australian art in the early twentieth century. In order to do so, it is necessary to define the terms 'applied' and 'fine' arts. The term 'applied arts' (sometimes known as 'Arts and Crafts') usually refers to art that is employed in the design or decoration of useful objects, as distinct from 'fine arts', the chief function of which is purely aesthetic.<sup>4</sup> I contend that Mort helped to break down the barriers between 'fine' and 'applied' art at a time when both areas of practice were playing a distinct role in articulating new domains for women's expression and recognition. Although Mort's contribution to Australian art is usually regarded as having been mainly in the field of applied rather than fine art, Mort made no such distinction. For her, 'the foundation of all artwork is good design'.<sup>5</sup> This synthesising of fine and applied art is a view that still holds true for some twenty-first century modern artists and designers, such as Chilean Sebastian Errazuriz, who 'gets lost in the crossover between art and design' because he 'enjoys working in the murky waters of both'.<sup>6</sup> Errazuriz's declaration that 'if a piece is created to solve a function, it is design; if it is created to express who we are, it is art: I need both', could equally apply to Mort.<sup>7</sup>

My second aim is to consider the social contexts supporting Mort's work and to which she, in turn, contributed. Mort contributed to Australian culture through both her artisanship and her art, as well as by way of her role as an entrepreneurial 'New Woman' in early twentieth century Sydney.<sup>8</sup> By generating her own income as a professional artisan and artist, she was not only able to be free from financial dependence on her family, but she was also able to pass on her

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<sup>4</sup> See Ralph Mayer, *Dictionary of Art Terms and Technique* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1981), 108; see also Harold Osborne, *The Oxford Companion to Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 406.

<sup>5</sup> Eirene Mort, 'Practical Stencilling', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 May, 1908.

<sup>6</sup> Sebastian Errazuiz quoted in Ross Bleckner, 'Art: Sebastian Errazuiz', 28 April 2009. <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/sebastian-errazuriz/#page2>.

<sup>7</sup> Sebastian Errazuriz interview 'In the Studio', 29 April 2017. [BBChttp://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04vfd0](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04vfd0).

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Grand, 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question', *The North American Review* 158, no. 448 (March 1894): 271. Sarah Grand used the term 'New Woman' in 1894 to refer to women whose acquiescence to stereotypical roles of womanhood was over.

knowledge and skills to girls and young women in schools and in private lessons and mentor many middle-class women in collegial organisations.

Underpinning these two major strands of her contribution to Australian art and culture are two other important aspects of Mort's life: her conventionalism and her socio-sexual way of life. Her personality displayed such divergent traits as cautiousness and entrepreneurialism, which led to inherent complexities. None of these intricacies was more involved than her status as an unmarried woman, living in a long-term partnership with another artisan, Nora Weston. Much of Mort's significance as an historical figure lies in this artistic and social synthesis, elements of which are not unique, but which are striking in the fusion of identity, role and influence she represents in her time. This thesis explores Mort's rewarding and productive career in relation to these contexts, and to the ways in which she related to the world she inhabited.

There has been little written on Mort's life and work. The fact that Mort is included in recent collections at all is an indication that she has had some standing in narrative accounts of Australian Art, appearing – for example – as an indicative or facilitating figure in Sacha Grishin's *Australian Art: A History*.<sup>9</sup> Otherwise, references to her work are scant. They range from Kerr and McPhee's article in *Heritage: the National Women's Art Book*, which allots Mort ten paragraphs and two illustrations, to Christopher Menz's *Australian Decorative Arts* that allocates her half a sentence.<sup>10</sup> Only three journal articles on Mort seem to exist. Although the two articles written by art curator John McPhee (1988 and 1989) are both scholarly and accurate, they do not address, as this thesis will do, such wider contextual issues as the effect of her London-based training on the Arts and Crafts style of work she adopted or the changing role of women in early

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<sup>9</sup> Sasha Grishin, *Australian Art: A History* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2013) 141–191.

<sup>10</sup> See Joan Kerr and John McPhee, 'First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work' in *Heritage: the National Women's Art Book: 500 works by 500 Australian women artists from colonial times* (Roseville East: G+B Arts International, 1995) 13 and Christopher Menz, *Australian Decorative Arts 1820s – 1990s* (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia Press, 1996), 64. The other half of the sentence in Menz's book goes to Brisbane artisan L. J. Harvey.

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twentieth century society.<sup>11</sup> The third journal article on Mort by Carol Mills largely focuses on Mort's work for children.<sup>12</sup>

Two Honours' year theses were restricted in the depth of analysis into which they could go. Because Brenda Starr's 'Wielding the Waratah' (1978) was written just one year after Mort's death, Starr was unable to access the many primary sources, such as the 'Mort Family Papers' and *Trove*, the National Library of Australia's electronic database of Australian newspapers, to which I have had access.<sup>13</sup> J. Elizabeth Little's 'Bedrooms and Bookplates' (2005) contains a useful overall exploration of Mort's life, but the fact that she largely concentrates on just one aspect of Mort's work – her bookplates – means that the breadth of Mort's contribution to applied arts and to teaching is not covered. My thesis will not only investigate the considerable contribution of Mort, and to producing and educating others in applied arts, but also the role she exemplified as an early twentieth century 'New Woman'. Although Jane Hunt's PhD thesis 'Cultivating the Arts' (2001) has perceptive insights into Mort and Weston's contribution to applied arts, they are only a contributory aspect of the main focus of Hunt's chapter on the role of women culturalists in the Arts and Crafts movement in Sydney from 1899 to 1914.<sup>14</sup>

The only paper on Mort presented at a conference, 'Eirene Mort and the Development of an Australian School of Design', was given by Margaret Henry at the 'Women and Labour Conference' held at the University of Queensland in July 1984.<sup>15</sup> After outlining Mort's achievements, Henry ended her paper with a plea

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<sup>11</sup> See John McPhee, 'The Eirene Mort Collection' in *Australian National Gallery Association News* November – December 1988. See also McPhee 'Eirene Mort & A National School of Design' in *Australian Antique Collector* 38<sup>th</sup> Edition July – December, 1989: 48–51.

<sup>12</sup> Carol Mills 'Eirene Mort (1879 – 1977)' in *The Lu Reeves Archive Collection* (Canberra: College of Advanced Education, 1989) 21–24.

<sup>13</sup> Penelope Starr, 'Wielding the Waratah', (Honours Thesis, University of Sydney, 1978). In addition, the NGA did not acquire its collection of 349 examples of Mort's work until the early 1980s.

<sup>14</sup> Jane E. Hunt, 'Cultivating the Arts' (PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Henry was then a tutor in History at the University of Newcastle.

for further research to be carried out on Mort's contribution to Australian art and culture – a plea to which I am finally responding.

This thesis is in response to the paucity of work on Mort. It considers the whole corpus of her artistic work, analysing not only her work for children and adults, but also the extent of her commitment to the Arts and Crafts movement that led her to a thirty-year career as a teacher and producer of fine and applied art. It takes a biographical approach to examine the social contexts of art and the opportunities and barriers that Mort faced, such as her age, race, gender and class in the various locations in which she lived her life. In addition, this thesis examines the importance of Mort's partnership with Weston, an aspect of her life that no other study has explored.

I seek to position Mort as a distinct kind of personality and artist in a specific historical context. Although historians such as Helen Topliss and Angela Woollacott have included some aspects of the lives of now lesser-known women in their accounts of women's lives of the early twentieth century, there is still more to be said about the ways in which such figures are both 'representative' and 'transitional' agents.<sup>16</sup> Anne Rees describes this category of women as being 'remarkable enough to deviate from the conventional trajectories of their generation but who ... have largely vanished from historical record'.<sup>17</sup> My analysis of Mort's life will help to fill that gap, place Mort's achievements on the record, and redress the current excessive historiographical preoccupation with the work of Modernist women artists – often defined by 'time away' – that leaves largely understudied the local contexts from which they emerged.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Helen Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists 1900–1940* (Roseville: Craftsman House, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Anne Rees, 'Travelling to Tomorrow: Australian Women in the United States, 1910 – 1960' (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2016), 37. Rees was referring to Australian women who moved to America, but the gap exists equally in the historiography of Australian women who remained in Australia.

<sup>18</sup> Young Australian middle-class women often spent 'time away' overseas to broaden their general education or obtain particular skills in such avenues of the arts as fine or applied arts or music. I examine this practice in more detail in Chapter 2.

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Mort's life story contributes to the historiographical debate over the changing role of women in late Victorian and early twentieth society, with particular Australian inflections. This was a period when many middle-class Australian women began to step out of the confines of domesticity and into the professional sphere, and – equally – to find the new connections between these spheres. Much historical research to date has concentrated on women who established themselves as successful novelists, musicians or artists, with these domains defined as relatively pure pursuits, and in terms of enduring contributions.<sup>19</sup> The great value of Mort as an historical figure is the extent to which her devotion to the 'applied' requires us to attend to social contexts in which art practice was a shared pursuit. It was not only an engagement with the prospects of collective change but also a measure of professional autonomy and vocational commitment. Perhaps as a consequence, her influence needs to be measured and valued not so much in transcending her times as in expressing the conditions and acceptance of her time and place – unlike some of her near, more famous contemporaries who were in the vanguard of Modernism, the movement 'characterised by a deliberate rejection of the styles of the past'.<sup>20</sup>

Mort's personality needs to be teased out. Taking up Virginia Woolf's dilemma, Barbara Caine holds that it is only by combining the 'hard granite of factual truth with the light of personality' that we can best inform our understanding of a biographical subject.<sup>21</sup> One cannot describe Mort as conservative, and yet she was religious and middle class. Her life's companion was Nora Weston, yet she was not a radical feminist, actively promoting sexual and political freedoms.

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<sup>19</sup> See Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London*, 2001 and Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism*, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Tate Modern, <http://www.tate.org.uk>

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 40. Caine may have been influenced by Virginia Woolf's words from her essay 'The Art of Biography' that a biographer 'can give us the creative fact, the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders'.



Mort's perception of herself is revealing. During her life, Mort gave herself various labels such as 'art teacher' and 'woman of independent means'.<sup>22</sup> Each of these terms validated her commitment to an independent lifestyle.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, in her role as an artisan, she saw herself as a pioneer and an innovator – even a trailblazer – especially in her use of original design. In the frontispiece of a catalogue for a retrospective exhibition of her own and Weston's work, Mort described the innovative nature of their applied and graphic art. She saw her work as 'wholly original in design, it broke new ground in traditional techniques; old fashioned now, but in its day *avant-garde*'.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps Mort's most ingenuous description of herself is the statement she made on the Art Gallery of NSW's 'Biography of Artist' form. When required to fill in the section marked 'career', she wrote: 'too busy for a career'.<sup>25</sup> It is a paradoxical description that seems to encompass both positive and negative nuances: the positive aspects of being productively and fully occupied with her work are counterbalanced by the negative implication that her work was not readily accepted by society as being worthy of the label 'career'.

The opinion of Mort's peers is also revealing. Examples of the opinions of colleagues or relatives give us insights into the multifaceted nature of her personality. Literary critic and editor of *The Bulletin*, A.G. Stephens wrote to Mort on many occasions, not only praising her work, but also wishing to acknowledge the light she sporadically brought into his life.<sup>26</sup> Others noted her paradoxical qualities. Mort's niece, Barbara Thelander, remembers Mort as being both 'adventurous' in her art and 'strict' in her expectations of suitable behaviour for

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<sup>22</sup> See Eirene Mort, 'Biography of Artist', (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1969). See also 'Memorandum of Association of the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW', 6. December, 1926. ML MSS 3645 Box 1, Folder 1, (Sydney: Mitchell Library). For legal documents, Mort accepted the commonly used but pejorative term 'spinster'.

<sup>23</sup> E.M., 'Certificate of Registration of a Design' (Canberra: National Archives of Australia, Item 2374, 6 March 1917).

<sup>24</sup> E.M. 'Catalogue for Memorial Exhibition of the work of Nora Kate Weston' held at Bowral, June 1966, (Mort Family Papers, Box 1).

<sup>25</sup> E.M., 'Biography of Artist'.

<sup>26</sup> A.G. Stephens to Eirene Mort, 9 March 1917, Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

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children.<sup>27</sup> Weston's great-niece, Helen Rees, recalls that although Mort was 'a bit cold and stand-offish' where children were concerned, she was also capable of 'great kindness'.<sup>28</sup> An analysis of the records of the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW reveal Mort to have displayed contradictory aspects of her character. Sometimes, the society's record keeper thanks Mort fulsomely for her generous support of the society's activities; at other times Mort's pernickety attention to detail in checking the society's finances is noted with brevity.<sup>29</sup> In short, the perception of others reveals differing aspects of Mort's complex personality.

As a biographical subject, Mort is not usually counted amongst the major contributors to Australian women's art in the early twentieth century and her contribution to the genre known as applied art has been acknowledged only minimally. She did not embrace Modernism. Nor is Mort generally recognised as an avowed advocate for women's rights in Australian feminist history writing. An understanding of the paradoxical nature of Mort's personality sheds light on her tendency for the adventurous, almost radical side to predominate in her early years, while in her later years, cautiousness and nostalgia came to the fore.

## **Two leitmotifs and two aspects of Mort's life**

I consider two leitmotifs in the social context of Mort's life. The first leitmotif that I analyse in some detail is the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement on her work as an artist, applied arts practitioner and educator. Traces of Mort's debt to the Gothic Revival, the Aesthetic Movement and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement (all of which in turn influenced the Arts and Crafts Movement) can be seen in most of Mort's fine arts work. Her applied arts work was especially influenced by the work of William Morris. His injunction to 'have nothing in your

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<sup>27</sup> Barbara Thelander, Interview by author, December 2016 in Toowoomba, transcript with author.

<sup>28</sup> Helen Rees, Interview by author, 18 November 2016 in Sydney, transcript with author.

<sup>29</sup> See Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW 'General Meeting Minutes Book, 'Committee Meeting Minutes Book 8.10.06 – 15.6.14, and 'General Meeting Minutes Book 13.8.06 – 19.7.15', ML MSS 3645 Box 6 and Box 7 (Sydney: Mitchell Library).

house except that which you know to be useful and believe to be beautiful' became the guiding mantra of Mort's own philosophy and output of work.<sup>30</sup> In addition to adopting Morris's 'useful and beautiful' mantra, Mort also accepted the emphases advocated by many of the Movement's other founders – men such as John Ruskin, Augustus Pugin and Walter Crane. Their emphases on such principles as the need for good design, the superiority of handcrafted items over machine-made ones, the suitability of natural forms as a source of inspiration and the value of co-operative networking resulted in Mort also promoting these values. Closely allied to co-operative networking was Mort's advocacy of the principles of the Arts and Crafts Movement with her private students and secondary school pupils.

The beliefs of another of the Movement's founders, Henry Cole, that Britain should have its own distinctively recognisable design style also resonated strongly with Mort. As an Australian, her proclivity was, of course, towards the use of indigenous Australian motifs. She promoted the use of, in her own words, 'a distinctly Australian character' into virtually all of the work done by herself and her followers.<sup>31</sup> I contend that Mort's use of identifiably Australian motifs places her amongst those whose distinctiveness in and commitment to the use of such motifs helped to define Australian identity. I argue, in addition, that Mort lived and breathed this fixation on the use of Australian motifs to such an extent that it became interwoven into the fabric of her own identity. Just as modern day celebrities become (for a while) the 'face' of a product, so Mort became (for a short period of time and for her contemporary colleagues and clients) symbolic of Australian design. During the decade of Mort's 'golden years' from 1904 to 1914, when one thought of work that displayed a distinctly Australian character, one thought of Eirene Mort.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> William Morris quoted in Ian Bradley, *William Morris and his World* (London: Thames and Hudson 1978), 112.

<sup>31</sup> Mort quoted in J. McPhee, 'Eirene Mort & A National School of Design', 49.

<sup>32</sup> One also thought of Ethel Stephens, but it is not within the scope of this thesis to examine her contribution to fine and applied art.

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The second leitmotif I explore concerning the social context of Mort's life is the fact that she was a 'New Woman', exemplifying a group of middle-class women whom Irish writer Edith Somerville described as living 'by their brains'.<sup>33</sup> These women, who lived independent lives by generating their own income, were free from the restricting ties of family (or male) dominance. They often flourished within networks of social or cultural groups of like-minded women. Andrew Montana sees them as being caught up in a 'volatile transition' period when they 'stepped out of the domestic interior and into the wider world'.<sup>34</sup>

Mort remained relatively independent of familial/domestic responsibility. It is a particularly important aspect of her life. Drusilla Modjeska has traced the difficulties of artist Stella Bowen (1893 – 1947) whose career floundered, mainly because of a range of domestic responsibilities.<sup>35</sup> Unlike Bowen and others who took on the responsibility of cherishing husband and children, Mort was free to concentrate on creating a life outside the parameters of domesticity.

For a woman to choose the single over the married state usually carried negative social consequences which Mort may or may not have experienced. Janine Burke holds that, for Australian women of this period, 'to be unmarried was to have failed in one's socially desired role'.<sup>36</sup> Mort's decision not to marry may therefore be seen as evidence of the 'radical' side of her nature. But Mort's choice not to marry begs the question, for she was not actually single. In reality, she was in a partnership with Weston. Weston family mythology has it that, although Nora was strong-minded and adventurous, she was also prepared to

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<sup>33</sup> Edith Somerville in Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Company 1981), 205. Somerville was not quite Mort's contemporary, being two decades older than Mort.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Montana, *The Art Movement in Australia: Design, Taste and Society 1875 – 1900*. (Melbourne: Miegunyah, Melbourne University Press, 2000), 60.

<sup>35</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinsky's Lunch* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1999), 44-102.

<sup>36</sup> Janine Burke, *One Hundred Women Artists 1840 – 1940* (Collingwood: Greenhouse Publications 1981), 39.

‘play second fiddle’ to Mort’s more virtuoso-like performance.<sup>37</sup> The couple were ‘joined at the hip’.<sup>38</sup>

Historians such as Susan Pedersen, Susan Ware, Lillian Faderman and Kirstin Downey have examined the relationships between women who lived together in early twentieth century and have found variety in the nature of those partnerships and diversity in the way in which the partnerships worked. Regardless of the uncertainty about the existence of a sexual element in their relationship, Mort and Weston’s partnership was an intensely close one. Their partnership, which flourished within wider social artistic networks of the time, was mutually sustaining and professionally productive.

The two leitmotifs of Mort’s career as an artist, artisan and educator, and her emblematic role as a New Woman underpin the various aspects of her life that come to the fore in each chapter. My analysis of the significant periods of Mort’s working life is embedded in these leitmotifs, as they remained constant throughout her career.

### **The contribution of recent historical awareness**

Earlier historians emphasised the work of important of male artists without making any serious attempt to acknowledge the contribution made to Australian art by many fine women artists. More recently, historians have concentrated, quite properly, on important women artists; they have helped to redress the gender imbalance that existed for many years. I offer this research project as a new and positive contribution to the historiography of women artists in Australian art and culture, but my biographical study is different from each of the studies already undertaken.

Where earlier historians have written biographies of important female artists such as Margaret Preston, Thea Proctor and Grace Cossington Smith, few

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Callan, Interview by author, 28 August 2016 in Canberra, transcript with author.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

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have examined the lives of lesser-known artists whose contributions also deserve historical recognition. Nor has anyone made an in-depth biographical study of a woman who was not only an artist, but also primarily an artisan. Mort's significance lies not just in the fact that she brought beauty into the average home, but also because she was, for a period, remarkably successful in doing so. She not only forged a career out of helping to dissolve the distinction between 'art' and a range of craft-based practices, but she also flew in the face of previously acceptable modes of female behaviour, using entrepreneurial ventures into a plethora of decorative arts to do so. Mort was indeed, in her niece's words, a 'Jack (or Jill) of all trades' who made a unique contribution to the artistic and cultural life of her times.<sup>39</sup>

Historians such as Caine and Brian Roberts have convincingly demonstrated the ways in which biography can enlighten our understandings of the past. Caine holds that a biographer can 'seek to show, through an individual life, the workings of a larger society'.<sup>40</sup> My analysis of Mort's life will not only show the ways in which Mort related to the world she inhabited, but also the way in which her life reflected the changes that were taking place in the role of women in Australian society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Roberts adds to Caine's insight with his reminder that, where the subject of any biography is concerned, their relationships with others 'will depend on issues of class, age, race and gender'.<sup>41</sup> These four aspects of class, age, race and gender were particularly relevant to Mort's life story. Taking each in turn, we can see that Mort's upper middle-class upbringing gave her an assured place in Sydney society. The second aspect – her age – also worked in her favour, for her

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<sup>39</sup> Eirene's niece, Margaret Mort, believed that, though her aunt was 'Jack of all trades', she was also 'master of none', a fact which she felt might explain her aunt's relative artistic oblivion.

<sup>40</sup> Caine, *Biography and History* 24.

<sup>41</sup> Brian Roberts, 'Biographical Research: Past, present and Future' in *Advances in Biographical Methods: Creative Applications* eds. Maggie O'Neill, et al, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 90.

youthful exposure to the Arts and Crafts movement gave her the skills and knowledge that formed the basis of her later career. Where race is concerned, the tacit advantages of her dominant British heritage gave her confidence. The fourth aspect, her struggle to overcome gender conditioning and stereotypes, when combined with the increasingly conventional aspects of her personality in her later years, had a mostly negative impact. I argue that, although Mort exemplified the newly liberated woman who was emerging from the Victorian confines of domesticity, she did so only partially. She certainly emerged from the home and into the studio, but her ultimate loss of relevance in changing tastes of the art market was mainly due not to her gender, but to her conventionalism and stubbornness. Mort's continued loyalty to the painting style of *en plein air* and to the Art Nouveau fashion that was associated with the Arts and Crafts movement ran counter to the newly emerging 1920s and 1930s artistic trends of Modernism and Art Deco.<sup>42</sup> When art trends moved on, Mort remained behind, largely slipping from artistic and historical consciousness.

Recent ventures into microhistory by historians such as Jill Lepore emphasise that the value in examining a single person's life lies 'not in its uniqueness but in its exemplariness, in how that individual's life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole'.<sup>43</sup> The exemplariness of Mort's life represents several conflicting areas of life for many middle-class young women in Australia at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.<sup>44</sup> On the one hand, they now had benefits brought about by

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<sup>42</sup> Mayer, *Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques*, 21. I am using 'sur le motif' or 'en plein air' to convey a sense of immediacy in the execution of an outdoors drawing or painting, rather than a labored representation of an outdoor scene produced over many hours of work. When using the term Art Nouveau, I am referring to images that are characterized by 'cursive expressive lines with flowing reverse curves or interlaced patterns'.

<sup>43</sup> Jill Lepore, 'Historians who Love Too Much: reflections on Microhistory and Biography', *The Journal of American History* 88, no 1 (June, 2001), 133.

<sup>44</sup> Geoffrey Sherington and Craig Campbell, 'Middle Class Formations and the Emergence of National Schooling' in *Transformations in Schooling: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* ed. Kim Tolley (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 18. I am accepting Sherington and Campbell's definition that the middle class may be seen as 'a projected

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enhanced educational curriculum, and by expanding opportunities to earn their own living. In addition, they could now choose between marriage and a career, depending on their own preference.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, many of these middle-class young women were likely to have been brought up in patriarchal families that adhered to gendered roles within the family, to have been required to conform to societal notions of female gentility and respectability, and possibly also to have been exposed to conservative religious ideas that advocated subservient roles for women.

Educational researcher Rubby Dhunpath and historian Hans Renders alert the intending biographer to the need for presenting their subject within the context of their times. Dhunpath reminds the researcher that ‘context that refers to the physical, institutional environment as well as the social, cultural and interpersonal environment includes significant others such as parents, mentors, colleagues and peers’.<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, my study of Mort will include an analysis of the influence of such significant others in Mort’s life as her lifetime companion Nora Weston, her family, her formal networks of colleagues (such as those in the Sydney Arts and Crafts movement), and her informal network of contacts in Sydney’s intelligentsia.

The female artists who were Mort’s contemporaries are also part of the context of her times. Historians such as Deborah Edwards, Andrew Sayers and Deborah Hart have written detailed biographies on Mort’s fine arts contemporaries Preston, Proctor and Cossington Smith respectively. Their obvious similarities lay in their commonality of overseas training and their experiences as white, middle-class, female artists trying to generate an income for

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moral community whose members are identified by their possession of particular moral qualities, political values and social skills.’

<sup>45</sup> Anne Rees, ‘Travelling to Tomorrow’, 46. Although some women, such as Margaret Preston, managed to have both a marriage and a career, most had to choose between the two. Anne Rees holds that, even in the 1930s, working wives were mostly ‘absent from the social landscape’ in Australia.

<sup>46</sup> Rubby Dunpath, ‘Life history methodology: “narradigm” regained’, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13:5, 546. DOI:10.1080/09518390050156459 (accessed on June 17, 2016).



themselves in a male-dominated art world. Less obvious, but still applicable, is the benefit Mort may have bestowed on her now better-known contemporaries. Their focus on the importance of interior spaces, and their belief that indigenous Australian flora contained inherent elements of beauty have been well documented. While it is true that both Preston and Proctor did not favour the Arts and Crafts approach to depicting Australia's indigenous flora and fauna, it is also tenable that Mort, who shared an appreciation of these particular aspects of beauty, widely promoted them in Sydney's middle-class artistic circles, an advocacy that broke new ground and benefited her peers. It is also even possible that Mort's influence on Cossington Smith may have been a direct one, as Mort commenced teaching art at Abbotsleigh girls' school during Cossington Smith's last year there as a pupil.

The careers of two of Mort's male contemporaries, Lewis Harvey and James Linton, provide a marked contrast to Mort's career. Glenn Cooke and Deborah Edwards have documented the steady flow of Harvey's contribution to pottery and sculpture from the safety of his full-time teaching position at Brisbane Technical College.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, former Art Gallery of NSW director Hal Missingham and art dealer Arthur Spartalis have each noted that Linton's prolific output in arts and crafts was underpinned by his full-time teaching position at the Perth Technical School.<sup>48</sup> The discrepancy between their careers and Mort's reinforces my hypothesis that it was their gender rather than their talent that ensured that these men experienced the luxury of permanent employment, a luxury denied to Mort and other similar female contemporary art teachers.

The historiography of the changing nature of women's place in late nineteenth and early twentieth century society has added an important transnational dimension to historical analysis. Historians such as Wendy Kaplan,

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<sup>47</sup> Glenn Cooke and Deborah Edwards, *L.J. Harvey & His School* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery Press, 1983), 25-41.

<sup>48</sup> See Hal Missingham, *James W R Linton 1869 – 1947* (Perth: The Western Australian Art Gallery, 1977), n.d. and Arthur Spartalis, *Linton, Father and Son* (Perth : Spartalis Fine Art, 1995), 4-5.

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Robert Judson Clark and Hannah Sigur have explored the transnational elements of the Art and Crafts movement in Europe, North America and Japan. Although each country embodied its own national expression of the movement, the underlying principles of the value of utilitarianism and aesthetic appeal gave coherence to the movement's spread. In England, where the movement began, Gillian Naylor, Rosalind Blakesley, Ian Bradley, Mary Greensted and Ian Hamerton are among the many historians who have demonstrated that its origins were social, moral and aesthetic. They have also traced the extent of its influence and the reasons for its ultimate decline.

The role of gender in history and in historical writing has also illuminated the changing nature of women's place in late nineteenth and early twentieth century society. Numerous historians, such as Joan Wallach Scott, Martha Vicinus and Coral Chambers have explored the way in which male power had been exerted in almost all aspects of life during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The core of Scott's definition of gender 'rests on two propositions: gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is primarily a way of signifying relationships of power'.<sup>49</sup> Vicinus traces the transformation of the Victorian 'Perfect Lady' who did not work and whose social and intellectual growth was confined to the family and close friends, to the 'New Woman' whose 'sphere of action became greatly enlarged through a variety of economic and social changes'.<sup>50</sup> Chambers contends that 'feminism did not seek dominance for women – but a simple justice in the institutions of society, and full expression for females as half of humanity'.<sup>51</sup> In particular, it meant that women should have the right to work. Joan Eveline adds that 'freedom for Anglo-Australian

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<sup>49</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 42.

<sup>50</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 1x. It is worth noting that, although Mort represents many of the qualities of the 'New Woman', she did not espouse all of them.

<sup>51</sup> Coral Chambers, *Lessons for ladies: a social history of girls' education in Australasia, 1870-1900* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger 1986), 34.

professionals meant ... the ability to choose work that was both economically rewarding and satisfying, and the right to remain single.’<sup>52</sup> Mort would claim both rights.

The exploration of the gender divide in the fields of fine or applied arts has also been well documented by historians such as Anthea Callen and Caroline Ambrus. Callen holds that Victorian society saw the notion of an artistic career as being ‘one of the few occupations considered suitable for middle-class women’ especially if certain aspects of it were labelled as ‘crafts’.<sup>53</sup> In the Australian context, Montana, Angela Philp, Woollacott, Topliss and Hunt have examined the emergence of women into the Australian artistic workforce. Montana sees the years 1875 to 1900 as being a prelude to the new century when ‘many affluent middle-class women stepped out of the domestic interior’.<sup>54</sup> Philp also contends that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, women were functioning as artists at a transitional time in Australia’s artistic and cultural development, holding that ‘their experience was that of a group caught in the middle of a period of great change, aspiring to the new order but tied very much to the past’.<sup>55</sup> Woollacott’s belief that the cultural phenomenon of young Australian women’s venturing forth to London between 1870 and 1940 ‘was clearly related to modernity’ reflects the willingness of young women such as Mort to both free themselves from the shackles of potential domesticity and equip themselves with skills that would enable them to lead independent lives.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Joan Eveline, ‘Feminism, racism and citizenship in twentieth-century Australia’ in *Women as Australian Citizens*, eds. Patricia Crawford and Philippa Maddern (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 165 and 177.

<sup>53</sup> The reason for this acceptance was that, provided that this work remained indoors and out of sight, it could be a ‘form of employment (that) would not disrupt the patriarchal status quo’. Anthea Callen, ‘Sexual Division of Labour in the Arts and Crafts Movement’ in *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design* eds. Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (London: The Women’s Press, 1989) 153–154.

<sup>54</sup> Montana, *The Art Movement in Australia*, 60.

<sup>55</sup> Angela Philp, ‘From Wallflower to Tall Poppies? The Sydney Society of Women Painters, 1910–1934’ in *Wallflowers and Witches* ed. Maryanne Deaver (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>56</sup> Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London*, 7.

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Topliss and Philp both highlight the fact that women of this period were perceived mostly as amateurs rather than professionals. Philp views them as being a ‘tangible symbol of changing twentieth century attitudes’ as they struggled to win a place for themselves in an unsympathetic environment.<sup>57</sup> For women who belonged to the Society of Women Painters, the society’s conformity to the norms of the established art world condemned both the society and its members ‘to the second rank’.<sup>58</sup> Hunt concurs with this assessment of women’s amateur status, but adds the insight that, for women involved in the Arts and Crafts movement,

the search for artistic and professional recognition of women’s work may have represented something of a defiant gesture. It was, however, a gesture made possible through the force of intelligence, artistic skill and confidence that those women vested in both themselves and the ideals of the arts and crafts movement.<sup>59</sup>

For Mort, a professional approach to her work was essential. In her own words, she liked to ‘get on with the job’.<sup>60</sup>

## **Methodology and resources**

This is a thesis grounded in the minutiae of one woman’s life as it intersected with the lives of those around her. This was a woman who sought opportunities to bring a coherent philosophy of artistic practice into many areas of her life; from school teaching to private tuition; from supplying specific commissioned work to applying for patents for future possible production; from lobbying on committees to writing for newspapers and journals; from solitary worker to working in partnership with others. It was therefore necessary to adopt a methodology of piecing together a jigsaw of Mort’s life through careful examination of primary and secondary sources.

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<sup>57</sup> Philp, ‘From Wallflower to Tall Poppies?’, 8.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. Philp sees the success of artists such as Grace Crowley and Margaret Preston as being ‘the exception rather than the rule’.

<sup>59</sup> Hunt, ‘Cultivating the Arts’, 83.

<sup>60</sup> E.M., ‘An ABC of St Catherine’s in the Victorian Era’ (Waverley: 1956, St Catherine’s Archives. Box 3), Letter A: Apology.

Examples of her work are spread over a wide variety of locations, with her output, during her thirty-three productive Sydney years, being both qualitatively rigorous and quantitatively vast. The National Gallery of Australia holds 349 items of Mort's original work; the Art Gallery of NSW holds just eleven artefacts. The National Gallery of Australia also holds, in its research library, exhibition catalogues and newspaper cuttings that report on her contributions to Arts and Crafts activities. Many of her artefacts remain with private collectors or with family members. The artefacts and designs in these collections range over a wide variety of artistic media, including watercolours, pen and ink drawings, etchings, woodblocks, linocuts, embroidery, leatherwork, pottery, calendars and tapestries. While these artefacts demonstrate the wide range of Mort's abilities as an artist and artisan, they are also important as a representative collection of the Arts and Crafts period of Australian art history.

Figure 2

Small  
sketch  
books

Figure 3

Bookplates  
and  
memorabilia

Eight boxes of memorabilia held by the Mort family and designated as the 'Mort Family Papers' contain many tantalising glimpses of her life story through letters, postcards, photos, an accounts book and 26 sketchbooks (Figs. 2-3).<sup>61</sup>

Although Mort had concentrated on 'applied' rather than 'fine' art throughout the course of her long career, an analysis of the drawing techniques on the pages of Mort's sketchbooks raised the question why she had never become part of the Modernist art movement. The thematic and stylistic diversity

<sup>61</sup> After the death of Mort's niece, Margaret, the extended Mort family members have documented the whereabouts of these items on a Mort Family Database. See 'Note' at beginning of Bibliography for further information.

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of these sketchbooks provided a challenge, since, in them, Mort experimented with pen and ink, pencil, pastel and watercolour. She also fluctuated between portraits and landscapes, and shifted between realism and fantasy. She moved from Art Nouveau to Art Deco and back again.<sup>62</sup> Her experimentations with these differing genres led me to form the hypothesis that her reluctance to embrace Modernism in ‘fine’ art during the latter years of her career was the result of a combination of two main aspects of her life: her own particular personality traits of loyalty and conventionalism, combined with her awareness of the difficult reception that her contemporaries who had embraced Modernist art were receiving.<sup>63</sup>

Another challenging but particularly rich source of information in the Mort Family Papers was the decoding and analysis of the detailed financial records in an ‘Accounts Book’ that Mort kept between 1924 and 1935.<sup>64</sup> Two results of this analysis were particularly surprising. The first was the almost obsessive detail into which Mort went to record every single penny of income and expenditure. The second and even more surprising outcome of the data analysis was the fact that, during this decade of record keeping, the major source of her income was from teaching rather than from applied arts. It was a result that required a reinterpretation of the relative parts played by each component of her career and a decision to give greater emphasis to her role as a teacher.

Libraries and archives have also helped me to piece together the jigsaw of Mort’s life. While Abbotsleigh, Kambala, Frensham and the Sydney Church of England Girls’ Grammar School Darlinghurst all yielded some information on Mort’s teaching career, by far the richest educational primary source was the

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<sup>62</sup> Many of the sketchbooks are undated, making the determination of the timing of Mort’s differing styles of art problematic.

<sup>63</sup> To a lesser extent, Mort’s childhood memory of being part of a minority ecclesiastical faction within the Sydney Anglican Church may also have affected her willingness to become part of a minority group.

<sup>64</sup> The transferral of this 1924-1935 data (excluding part of 1926-7 when Mort travelled overseas) into an Excel spread-sheet allowed me to discern patterns of income or expenditure that were inaccessible in the book’s original form.

memoir of her student days of St Catherine's Waverley.<sup>65</sup> The Mitchell Library holds a wide range of Mort's original applied arts work, as well as a number of manuscripts containing family histories.<sup>66</sup> Mort's manuscript history of the Weston family is, in the words of one Weston family member, 'a labour of love' that embodies the close relationship between the two women.<sup>67</sup>

*Trove* has been another valuable source of contemporary reports of Mort's contribution to the artistic and cultural life of Sydney, as has the large 'Eirene Mort Collection' in the manuscript section at the National Library of Australia.<sup>68</sup> The NLA collection ranges from Mort's hand-written family histories 'My People' and 'Letter Book' to the manuscript volumes of her travels around New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania and the area that was to become the Australian Capital Territory. The three main volumes of these travels, entitled 'Tracks', form concrete evidence of Mort's visual awareness, her love of Australian landscapes, and her nostalgia for recording fragments of the past. The NLA's microfiche records of newspapers, electoral rolls and Sydney telephone books also contain mundane but helpful information on Mort's entries into competitions and exhibitions, and the changes of her studio and domestic addresses. Although the National Archives of Australia holds only a few patents for Mort's work, their existence gives an added dimension to her attempts to patent her designs for children's toys.

The records of two Sydney societies hold further additional information. The Royal Art Society provides relevant information about Mort's brief venture into fine art, mainly through the medium of etching. The voluminous records of

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<sup>65</sup> E.M., 'An ABC of St Catherine's in the Victorian Era'.

<sup>66</sup> Fascinating though Mort's family histories are, they are unfortunately outside the timeframe and thematic scope of this thesis. Their content is mainly focused on the early history of the Weston family and the business arrangements between the various branches of the Mort family in England and Australia.

<sup>67</sup> Callan, Interview.

<sup>68</sup> Linda Newborn, 'The Lists Project: making collection lists searchable through Trove', <http://www.nsla.org.au/publication/project-report> (accessed on 5 July 2016). Despite Linda Newborn's analysis of *Trove* that includes the difficulty that 'navigation is limited and the reader may not be able to see the context of the item within a collection', *Trove's* multiplicity of primary source materials has proved an invaluable resource.

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the Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales yield much more information, mostly relating to Mort's contributions to the society's activities and her position of leadership within it.<sup>69</sup> Hunt has traced the fluctuating fortunes of the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW. She sees Mort as being one of the four leaders who saved the society from the doldrums into which it had fallen in 1911 by their return to the leadership later in the decade.<sup>70</sup>

Oral history records have played a minor part in my research into Mort's life. Two of the women who actually knew Mort, and whom I interviewed, are now in their nineties. Each was drawing upon recollections that went back into their childhood years. Although they were able to recall some details of their childhood interactions with Mort, other recollections were vague.

Mort's memoir of her childhood also raises the issue of the reliability of memory. Although historians differ on the ways in which they see memoirs as being able to enlighten biographical research, they seem to agree that, provided due caution is exercised by the researcher, autobiographical narrative can enlighten biographical writing. While Kerwin Lee Klein's paper posits that memory 'figures as a therapeutic alternative to historical discourse', he also alerts us to the dangers of using memory for historical purposes.<sup>71</sup> Jonathan Boyarin and Charles Tilley see memory as 'a potential for creative collaboration between present consciousness and the experience or expression of the past'.<sup>72</sup> Renders similarly reminds us that 'individuals' attempts at self-representation vary

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<sup>69</sup> These records are held in seventeen boxes in the manuscript section of the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

<sup>70</sup> Hunt, 'Cultivating the Arts', 112. The other leaders referred to by Hunt were Ethel Stephens, Elizabeth Soderberg and Muriel Danvers Power.

<sup>71</sup> Klein, 'On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse', *Representations* 69. The Regents of the University of California (2000), 45.

<sup>72</sup> See Carolyn Steedman, *Past tenses: essays on Writing, Autobiography and History* (London: Rivers Ora Press, 1992) and Jonathan Boyarin and Charles Tilly, *Remapping Memory: The Politics of Time Space*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 22. ProQuest ebrary. (accessed 6 September, 2016).



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depending on their culture, historical period and social group memberships,'<sup>73</sup> and Roberts points out that 'memories are refined, remade, reviewed and rehearsed'.<sup>74</sup> Despite any refining or remaking of her childhood memories that Mort may have made, her memoir functions at two levels in this chapter: it reveals the development of personality traits that either helped or hindered her in later life and it gives insights into educational trends during her period at St Catherine's school.

### Chapter outline

This is not an Art History thesis; nor is it a complete biography.<sup>75</sup> Rather, it is an historical approach to Mort's work and the most significant years of her life (1879–1930). In Mort's life story, I explore five main chronological segments that help to form the context in which the peaks and troughs of her career took place. My thesis engages with the discrepancy between her short-lived period of success from 1904 to 1914, her subsequent loss of influence in Sydney art circles in the 1920s and early 1930s and her near oblivion since then.

The trajectory of Mort's career illustrates the interdependency of her art with a range of social and political influences, including gendered identities, patronage, class-based networks, education, religion and contemporary aesthetic movements. The relative neglect of Mort's work highlights the importance of restoring these dimensions to studies of artists in their context. As such, it will help to dissolve the distinction between 'art' and a range of craft-based practices in their social contexts.

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<sup>73</sup> Hans Renders, 'Biography in Academia and the Critical Frontier in Life Writing' in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography* eds. Hans Renders and Binn de Haan, (Ceredigion: Edward Mellen Press, 2013) 262.

<sup>74</sup> Brian Roberts, *Biographical Research* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), 149.

<sup>75</sup> Mort's long life span of 98 years precludes my being able to give any attention to the last 47 years of her life, most of which was spent in retirement, firstly on a secluded property on the outskirts of Mittagong, and then in the township of Bowral.

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My thesis has five chapters, plus an Introduction and a Conclusion. Each chapter deals with the two major leitmotifs of Mort's life – her career as an artist, applied arts practitioner and teacher, and her emblematic status as an independent New Woman. The chapters also explore the underlying aspects of Mort's complex personality and her partnership with Nora Weston.

In **Chapter 1** (1879–1899) I trace the significance of Mort's family background and religious upbringing during her early years. Two features stand out: the fact that she was part of a well-known Sydney middle-class family, and the fact that her father was an Anglican priest. Her mother's influence can be seen in Mort's awareness of women's right to work and her love of creativity. Her father's predilection for an Anglo-Catholic form of worship gave her two important but different experiences. It not only aroused in her a love of beauty that predisposed her to eventually become an artist and artisan, but it also exposed her to being part of a minority group within a larger cohort – an experience on which she may have later drawn when she chose not to follow the path of Modernism in art. I contend that her father's modelling of entrepreneurialism may also have influenced her later entrepreneurial ventures. In addition, Mort's comparatively progressive education at St Catherine's girls' school enabled the adventurous side of her nature to outweigh the more cautious side of her personality. Mort's school days provided her with three things: an awakening of her love of nature and of art, a nurturing of her creative, aspirational personality and models of independent New Women in the form of several capable and encouraging teachers.

**Chapter 2** (1899–1903) traces Mort's time in London, where she met and formed a close relationship with fellow Sydney artisan, Weston. I argue that, although it has not been possible to determine the exact nature of that eventually long-term relationship, it is clear that their partnership was supportive and enabling. Mort's contact with the blossoming English Arts and Crafts Movement, whose origins I examine, converted her into becoming an evangelist for applied arts. By mastering a wide range of artistic and handcraft media, Mort not only

equipped herself to become a future applied arts practitioner, but she also stepped outside the accepted norms of Victorian female respectability.

The years 1904 to 1913, explored in **Chapter 3**, span Mort's most successful period. As well as exploring the two major leitmotifs of Mort's teaching / applied arts career and her symbolism as an independent woman, I focus on three other main strands of her life: her promotion of the Arts and Crafts cause, her networks of taste and culture, and her European sabbatical. Each of these strands reveal different but significant insights into the way in which Mort interacted with the world around her. Despite the difficulty of dealing with the male-centred hegemony of Sydney's cultural circles, and the barriers between 'fine' and 'applied' arts, Mort became part of a group of women involved in 'female cultural activism' within the context of a newly federated nation.<sup>76</sup> In so doing, she and her partner Weston ensured that they were able to be free from financial dependence on their families. By placing Mort's successes as an applied arts practitioner and teacher within the wider context of the census figures for 1911, I demonstrate that Mort's ability to generate an income made her part of the minority cohort of professional 'New Women'.<sup>77</sup>

**Chapter 4** (1914–1920) examines the way in which Mort responded to wartime and post war difficulties through her activities at the national, community and family level. She expressed her patriotism by the production of nationalistic artefacts and by her philanthropic contributions to the fund-raising activities of the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW and the Artists' War Fund. Of even more long-term significance than fund raising was the way in which she, Weston and other members of the Arts and Crafts Society used their applied arts skills with returned soldiers, setting in place the beginnings of a practice that would eventually be known as Occupational Therapy, a contribution that has

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<sup>76</sup> Hunt, 'Cultivating the Arts', 99.

<sup>77</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Census data for 3 April, 1911. 1283.

[http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/672F01666C9728B9CA2578390013E61F/\\$File/1911%20Census%20-%20Volume%20III%20-%20Part%20XII%20Occupations.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/672F01666C9728B9CA2578390013E61F/$File/1911%20Census%20-%20Volume%20III%20-%20Part%20XII%20Occupations.pdf) (accessed on 10 September 2016).

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largely been ignored to date. Her appointment in 1920 as principal of the School of Fine and Applied Arts, a position she held for almost three years, marked the zenith of her career. At the family level, Mort's loyalty was tested by a Mort family tragedy – the murder of a prominent General Practitioner by Mort's sister in law, Dorothy. I argue that this incident not only demonstrates her desire for family privacy but also illustrates the way in which changes were beginning to intrude into her comfortable, middle-class life.

In **Chapter 5** (1921–1930) I once again explore the leitmotif of Mort's career in teaching and applied arts. Although teaching formed the bulk of her income during these years, it was then that Mort seriously embraced the role of 'Jobbing Artist', taking on a number of extensive projects.<sup>78</sup> Mort's continued involvement with women's networks, her ventures into the male-dominated Art Society of NSW and her role as the only woman committee member of the Painters and Etchers' Society all consolidated her position as a respected and competent practitioner of applied arts. During this decade, Mort's art became increasingly nostalgic. She and Weston travelled the countryside, with Mort documenting in drawings and words the changing natural and built environments. The 1920s were also, however, the decade when a changing pattern of taste began to emerge in art markets. While Mort's contemporaries such as Preston, Proctor and Cossington Smith were experiencing early signs of success, Mort's star waned. Modernism had begun to make its presence felt, and its arrival heralded the beginning of the end for Mort's innovative role as an artist and artisan. Despite the beginning of this slow decline, Mort's role in both promoting an awareness of promoting aesthetically pleasing, affordable artefacts for middle-class homes, and her popularising of iconic Australian motifs, prepared the way for her now more famous colleagues. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the range of influences that eventually forced Mort into Sydney's artistic sidelines. Although

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<sup>78</sup> I have taken the phrase 'jobbing artist' to mean 'someone who would turn her hand to anything, as long as it generated an income'.

Mort had not passed her 'expiry date,' her *modus operandi* had passed its 'best before date', as had she.

I conclude my thesis by providing an overview of the most productive years of Mort's life, evaluating her professionalism, her networking skills and the important contribution she made to Australian applied art, especially in helping to dissolve the distinction between the latter and 'fine' art. The fact that the field of applied arts was often deemed suitable for female occupation does not lessen the achievement of women such as Mort who raised its standing to that of a profession. I highlight the fact that two particular contributions of Mort's – her role a precursor to the professions of interior designer and occupational therapist – have been largely overlooked. Moreover, I contend that Mort's focus on interior spaces and her use of indigenous Australian motifs may well have prepared the way for her Modernist colleagues to focus on these same aspects of art. I hold that Mort and Weston's eventual retirement to Mittagong may be seen not as a retreat, but rather as a reflection of their having achieved their goals.

Mort's star may have burned brightly for only a brief period, but she provided an exemplary model of an entrepreneurial, productive and independent artist, artisan and New Woman. It is my hope that the research and insights of this thesis will add to the aggregation of knowledge about women's history in Australia, and perhaps point to future fruitful areas of research in the same field.



## Chapter 1

### The Formative Years

(1879–1898)

*In the first three or four years of life ... ways of reacting to the outside world are established which can never be deprived of their importance by later experiences.*

- Sigmund Freud <sup>1</sup>

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Figure 1



Eirene Mort c. 1890

Freud's assertion that the experiences in the early years of life are of immense importance certainly rings true for one particular twentieth century Australian artist and artisan – Eirene Mort (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> For her, there were three main aspects of her childhood and adolescence that shaped her emergence into adulthood as a confident, capable young woman. Mort's middle-class family background, her Anglican rectory upbringing,

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* translated by Alan Tyson (Middlesex: Penguin, 1963), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Although Freud asserted that it was the first three or four years of life which are most critical to an individual's later development contemporary psychiatrists such as Stefano Bolognini and Bernard Reith hold that the critical years of personal development need not be restricted to the first four years.

and her education at a progressive girls' school all influenced aspects of her life that make her a biographical subject, a figure representative of significant dynamics in her historical period. These three important aspects of her youth predisposed her to becoming a devotee of the Arts and Crafts movement, one of the aesthetic currents that characterised the late nineteenth and early twentieth century cultural adaptations to modernity. They also foreshadowed her development as an exemplar of the twentieth century's New Woman, mapping out new pathways for women's identity, role and choice in those same currents of social change. And they offer a perspective on a life that she, often self-consciously, imagined in an ambivalent relationship to the centre and the margins of the society in which she moved.

Much of our knowledge of Mort's early life comes from the manuscripts she wrote throughout her lifetime, reflecting her desire to see the patterns of inheritance and autobiography that in themselves suggested her own sense of distinctiveness, and perhaps also of a need for continuity.<sup>3</sup> The most revealing manuscript of her personal life that Mort compiled is the memoir she wrote in 1956 for the centenary of St Catherine's School at Waverley. Entitled 'An ABC of St Catherine's in the Victorian Era', the memoir recounts Mort's experiences as a boarder in a private Anglican church school at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> In documenting the early days of St Catherine's, Mort also inadvertently affords the reader glimpses into the development of her own personality and insights into her preoccupations. In this memoir, and in her family histories, she made it clear that her recollections and her family histories were for the general public to read. She even added explanations (often in red ink) where she thought they were required.

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<sup>3</sup> In 1939 Mort completed a family history entitled 'My People'. This was followed by two more family histories, 'Letter Book' and 'A Tale of Three Cities'.

<sup>4</sup> Although the 'Church of England in Australia' did not officially become the 'Anglican Church of Australia' until 24 August 1981, I have used the later terminology unless the context specifically requires the older version.



### Mort's middle-class family background and rectory upbringing

A tension existed between the nurturing middle-class family atmosphere that the Reverend (Henry) Wallace Mort and his wife Katie provided for their children and the fact that the family lived in the challenging scenario of a rectory 'goldfish-bowl'.<sup>5</sup> Eirene was the middle child in this Woollahra rectory family of five siblings: Selwyn, Harold, Eirene, Eunice and Stanley.<sup>6</sup> It was a close family unit, with the children being in the habit of referring to each other, not by name but by their positions in the family (with Eirene being 'III'). The family was conscious of its well-known surname and its extended family unit, as Eirene's differing representations of her family tree demonstrate. (Figs. 2-3)

Figure 2

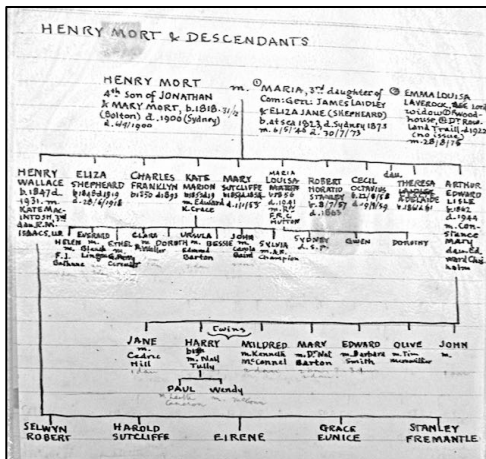
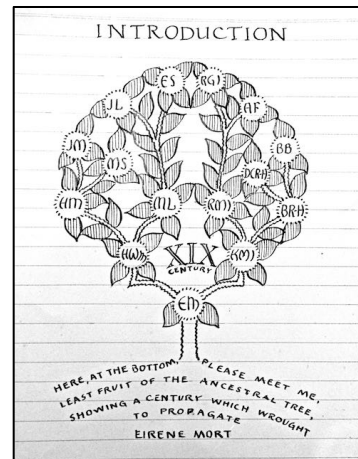


Figure 3



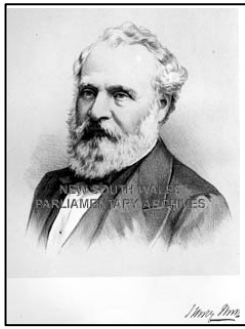
Mort's two versions of her family tree

Much of the extended family's original wealth came from a rural property in Franklyn Vale on the Darling Downs, Queensland. Henry Mort (Wallace's father and Eirene's grandfather) combined wealth with a certain social and political prominence (Fig. 4). He represented West Moreton and West Macquarie in the NSW Legislative Assembly in 1859-1860, and became a lifetime member of

<sup>5</sup> 'Goldfish bowl' is the colloquial expression that can be applied to people who live in the public eye.

<sup>6</sup> In order to avoid confusion, I will use Christian names to refer to different family members in this section of the chapter.

Figure 4



Henry Mort, MLA

the NSW Legislative Council in 1882. After moving to Sydney in 1855, Henry prospered financially for some years.<sup>7</sup> In 1874, he contributed £3,550 to the original total cost of £4,176 of All Saints, Woollahra.<sup>8</sup> Under the ‘Conditions of Agreement’ between Henry and the then Bishop of Sydney, Frederic Barker, Henry ‘bought the living’ for his son Wallace. The agreement, which was kept until 1914 (the year of Wallace’s retirement), had a

significant impact on the family, for it meant that Wallace had tenure as rector of the parish, and therefore that the children grew up as members of a secure rectory family.<sup>9</sup> It perhaps also meant that Wallace’s ‘living’ was understood as a particular act of patronage. It certainly gave him a measure of independence in his conduct of the affairs of the parish.

Additional family support came from Henry’s wealthy industrialist brother Thomas Sutcliffe Mort, usually known as T.S. Mort (Fig. 5). Among the most prominent of New South Wales’ entrepreneurs, T.S. Mort’s extensive interests in commerce, together with several areas of agricultural, wool and brokerage insurance, ensured that the family name of Mort became synonymous with wealth. His standing as ‘one of the most prominent Anglican laymen in Sydney’ with a strong High Church connection resulted in his contributing generously to

<sup>7</sup> Henry Mort became involved in insurance companies, banks, and his brother’s meat refrigeration company. In later years, Henry’s wealth diminished when the Goldsborough firm merged with his brother’s company.

<sup>8</sup> Eirene Mort, ‘Letter Book’, manuscript in ‘Eirene Mort Papers’, 06/017 Box 2 Item 1, n.d. (Canberra: National Library of Australia), 892. Four other unnamed family members contributed the remaining £1,176.

<sup>9</sup> See E.M., ‘My People’, Manuscript 06/017 Box 2 Item 3, (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1939), n.p; See also Walter Phillips, *Defending “A Christian Country”: Churchmen and Society in New South Wales in the 1880s and After* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1981), 39. New churches were being built at a rapid rate during this period, with the peak boom occurring in the 1880s, when no less than 170 new Anglican churches were erected in New South Wales.

Figure 5

St Andrew's Cathedral and St Paul's College at the University of Sydney.<sup>10</sup> It also prompted him to contribute to the cost of the new church of All Saints Woollahra. In addition, he offered his nephew Wallace 'fifty pounds a year for five years' when he became rector of the newly created parish in 1876.<sup>11</sup> Because T.S. Mort died in 1878, that source of additional family income did not continue.



Statue of T. S. Mort  
In Macquarie Place,  
Sydney CBD.

The Woollahra branch of the family clearly had a significant connection with considerable wealth, influence and reputation: to be a Mort was to have status in itself. In her careful construction of family genealogy, Eirene kept these associations alive. The addition of Wallace Mort's clerical role complemented this status. Church historian Brian Dickey points out that 'the Church of England, along with Queen Victoria, served as a 'comforting symbol of identity' in Australian colonial society.<sup>12</sup> As a rectory family, the Mort's were woven into the fabric of that reassuring symbol of identity. This family was, however, an atypical rectory family in at least two respects: it had access to money – Mort money – and it was associated with the Anglo-Catholic minority within the Diocese of Sydney. Both of these aspects were to be of significance to the young Eirene.

In this rectory family, Eirene's mother, Katie, was an important influence in her life. Katie was the daughter of Robert Isaacs, Attorney-General in Sir James Martin's NSW ministry. As a talented linguist, she was 'very much in demand

<sup>10</sup> Alan Barnard, 'Mort, Thomas Sutcliffe (1816–1878)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mort-thomas-sutcliffe-4258/text6777>, published first in hardcopy 1974 (accessed online 5 June 2017). T.S. Mort also funded the establishment of the Anglican church at Bodalla.

<sup>11</sup> E.M., 'Letter Book', 434. T.S. Mort's estate was valued at £600,000 at the time of his death in 1878.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Dickey, 'Secular Advance and Diocesan Response' in *Anglicanism in Australia: A History*, ed. Bruce Kaye (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 53.

when foreigners visited Sydney, for French, German, Italian, Spanish and Russian were in her repertoire'.<sup>13</sup> An accomplished musician who had studied piano in Stuttgart, Katie Mort's ability to create a stimulating cultural environment for her family was notable. In the role of rector's wife, she was actively involved in parish life, training the junior boys' choir and personally collecting money to pay off the debt incurred by the installation of an English pipe organ in the church in her husband's parish,<sup>14</sup> as well as taking 'a lively interest in current affairs, both ecclesiastical and civil'.<sup>15</sup>

Katie's interest in education as a project for improvement was extensive. Among her music scores, for example, were several operettas, composed for use in schools, the contents of which displayed an awareness of social issues prominent in late Victorian England. One particularly didactic work in the collection was entitled *Women at Work*, with music composed by A.J. Foxwell and the libretto by T.M. Pattison.<sup>16</sup> It centred on the message of women's fitness for and right to employment, a message proclaimed in the libretto by the character Mrs Gaurdem, in these terms:

How much better is it for a nation that its women should be clever, useful and capable, making the world nobler by their lives, rather than (be) idle and frivolous butterflies seeking only for pleasure! ... If we prove our fitness for any kind of work, why should we not do it? We are capable of more than we have yet accomplished.<sup>17</sup>

This operetta expressed an emerging feminist consciousness, a platform that, in Martha Vicinus's words, gave women 'a whole new way of structuring their lives'

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<sup>13</sup> E.M., 'Letter Book', 408.

<sup>14</sup> E.M., 'My People', n.p.

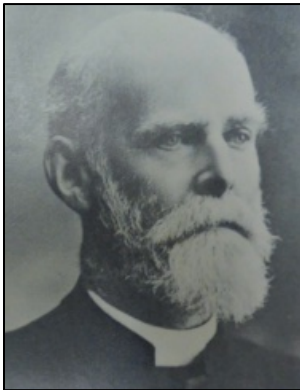
<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Hemphill, *1876 - 1976 All Saints Woollahra* (Sydney: Hogbin Poole Printers, 1976), n.p.

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Hill, 'The 1886 School operetta "Women at Work": a new acquisition for Rare Music'. Other school operettas owned by Katie included *Britannia*, *Queen of Ocean*, *White Garland*, *The Errand of the Flowers* and *No Work, No Bread*.

<sup>17</sup> A.J. Foxwell and T.M. Pattison, *Women at Work* (London: J. Curwen and Sons, 1886), 69. Libretto in Eunice Graham Papers, ML MSS 2589 Folder 4, (Sydney: Mitchell Library).

through work.<sup>18</sup> As the elder daughter, Eirene presumably was more than aware of her mother's interest in such matters.

Figure 6



The Reverend  
(Henry) Wallace Mort

Yet perhaps the most important influence in Eirene's early life was her father, (Henry) Wallace, a man dedicated to his calling as an Anglican priest, and one who made All Saints the kind of parish in which his wife's message was well-supported (Fig. 6).

<sup>19</sup> Membership of the Anglican Church in late nineteenth century Australia was, in Brian Fletcher's words, to be 'part of the faith of some 40% of the population, a figure that greatly exceeded that of any other denomination'.<sup>20</sup> Brian Fletcher notes that 'Anglicanism was above all the faith of the dominant elements in society which gave it considerable strength.'<sup>21</sup> For Eirene, belonging to that dominant element in society may well have contributed to a sense of confidence about her place within Sydney society.

Within this pre-eminent Australian Anglican church, however, there existed, in Tom Frame's words, 'sub-communities' that created tensions at the diocesan and parish level.<sup>22</sup> Fletcher sums up the diverse nature of Anglicanism:

Anglicanism is a by-word for religious diversity. Each of its differing forms of belief, 'low and lazy, broad and hazy, high and crazy', were represented in Australia, stretching as Bishop Burgmann put it, from 'left of Geneva to right of Rome'.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850 – 1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1985), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Hemphill, *1876–1976 All Saints Woollahra*, n.p.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Fletcher, *The Place of Anglicanism in Australia: Church, Society and Nation* (Sydney: Broughton Publishing 2008), 33.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Tom Frame, *A House Divided: the Quest for Unity within Anglicanism* (Brunswick East: Acorn Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>23</sup> Brian Fletcher, 'Australian Anglicanism and Australian History: the need for a Synthesis', lecture delivered for the Australian College of Theology at St James' Church, Sydney on 10 September 2004, 4.

In Australia, differing brands of churchmanship became embedded in the structure of the national church.

Reflecting accretions of succeeding layers of ideas and practices arriving from England, the ethos of many dioceses became quite diverse. Dioceses not only developed their separate identities; they were forced to contend with competing emphases within them.<sup>24</sup>

Sydney Diocese exemplified those competing emphases, with a minority 'Broad-to-High Church' minority struggling to implement their particular brand of churchmanship amidst a dominant 'Low Church' majority. The early years of Wallace Mort's incumbency at All Saints coincided with the short episcopacy of Alfred Barry (1884-1889). Muriel Porter notes that the many clergy and laity feared that Barry was trying to introduce Anglo-Catholic principles into the diocese.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, his successor William Saumarez Smith's extreme evangelical position and dislike of ceremony strengthened the position of the 'Low Church' majority.

It is helpful to pause and examine these terms, particularly as they would have been understood in late nineteenth century Australia and especially in relation to the Arts and Crafts movement's focus on beauty, a centrality that Eirene would later adopt as her own. Peter Nookles holds that, as an Anglo Catholic, 'a High Churchman in the Church of England tended to uphold in some form the apostolic succession as a manifestation of his strong attachment to the church's catholicity'.<sup>26</sup> Anglo Catholicism usually referred to a type of worship, the outward form of which could be recognised by its use of incense and bells and the wearing of vestments by the priest during the eucharistic service. Altars

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<sup>24</sup> Dickey, 'Secular Advance and Diocesan Response', 59. The first and only Bishop of Australia, William Broughton, established the broadly evangelical nature of the Diocese of Sydney, even though he was sometimes suspected of having Tractarian sympathies.

<sup>25</sup> Muriel Porter, *Sydney Anglicanism and the Threat to World Anglicanism: the Sydney Experiment* (Ashgate: Surrey 2011), 35.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Nookles, *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship 1760 – 1857*, 26.

[https://books.google.com.au/books?hl=en&lr=&id=jM8Fk\\_iF1YMC&oi=fnd&pg=PR11&dq=Evangelical+Anglicanism&ots=LfOliCpQB6&sig=qLZNlwoR\\_LJeAT4p7rIVhDYFYRo#v=onepage&q=Evangelical%20Anglicanism&f=false](https://books.google.com.au/books?hl=en&lr=&id=jM8Fk_iF1YMC&oi=fnd&pg=PR11&dq=Evangelical+Anglicanism&ots=LfOliCpQB6&sig=qLZNlwoR_LJeAT4p7rIVhDYFYRo#v=onepage&q=Evangelical%20Anglicanism&f=false)

were often ‘adorned with crosses, candles and frontals’.<sup>27</sup> Peter Williams sees the late nineteenth century shift to a movement sometimes called the ‘Gospel of Art’ as one that ‘placed a premium on physical beauty, particularly as exemplified in artistic creation ... and beautiful *objects*’.<sup>28</sup> This Gospel of Art’s characteristics were often a focus on the ‘liturgical, musical, artistic, pastoral, and spiritual dimensions of church life’.<sup>29</sup> John Orens agrees, holding that artistic forms of beauty and ritual are essential to worship.

This is why the beauty the ritualists restored to Anglican worship is no luxury ... We offer our art to the artist supreme, so that in God’s loveliness we may perceive the loveliness of our common humanity.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast, ‘Low Church’ Anglicans who followed an evangelical tradition focused on ‘the exhilaration of the vision of eternity, and the fulfilling satisfaction of joys which they believed to be lasting, in contrast with the provisions of earth that were essentially vacuous’.<sup>31</sup> They therefore used no beautiful aids to worship in their services, and needed no architects or artisans to beautify the exterior or interior of their buildings.

For Wallace Mort, this tension between the ‘High’ and ‘Low’ sub-communities was personal. Of particular significance was the fact that he had read theology and mathematics at Queen’s College Oxford from 1866 to 1870, only thirty years after John Newman, Edward Keble and Edward Pusey’s dramatic intervention into church life, an intervention that became known as the Oxford Movement.<sup>32</sup> Incorporating all the characteristics of Anglo Catholicism, the movement sought to restore to Church of England worship some of the aesthetic qualities that had been lost during the Protestant reforms of previous centuries.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Williams, ‘The Gospel of Wealth and the Gospel of Art: Episcopalians and Cultural Philanthropy from the Gilded Age to the Depression’, June, 2006, 75, 2. *Anglican and Episcopal History*, ProQuest Central, 173.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> John Orens, ‘The Anglo Catholic Vision’, [http://www.duq.edu/Documents/philosophy/\\_pdf/The%20Anglo-Catholic%20Vision.pdf](http://www.duq.edu/Documents/philosophy/_pdf/The%20Anglo-Catholic%20Vision.pdf). 9.

<sup>31</sup> Doreen Rosman, *Evangelicals and Culture: Second Edition* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 42.

<sup>32</sup> Wallace Mort was awarded Third Class Honours in Mathematics in 1870.

The movement's influence would have still been strong during Wallace Mort's time at Oxford University; it is even possible that he may have attended theology lectures given by Pusey who was then still professor of Hebrew. Although Hemphill asserted that 'Canon Mort's position was 'neither 'High' nor 'Low' but somewhere in between', his perceived Anglo Catholic churchmanship marked him out as being part of a small minority within the Diocese of Sydney – a stance that affected not only him but also his family.<sup>33</sup>

Eirene recorded a number of unpleasant incidents that occurred in reaction to her father's perceived Anglo Catholic churchmanship. Rather than intimidate the young Eirene, these experiences strengthened her propensity to follow her father's 'High Church' form of worship which embraced aesthetically enriching aids to worship, the beauty of which was designed to reflect 'God's loveliness'. This appreciation of beauty, which had been nurtured in her during her formative years, would become a natural stepping-stone to the emphasis on beauty she would later find in the Arts and Crafts movement.<sup>34</sup>

To illustrate the kind of harassment to which her father was exposed during his early years as rector of the parish, Eirene graphically recounted an incident in which her father seems to have been the subject of a parodic hoax. The incident involved the church bell being rung out for 20 minutes at 10 o'clock at night one New Year's Day, causing:

folk to wonder what the funny little parson was 'performing' at that late hour ... The priest and his household ran towards the bell; some neighbours and the valiant sergeant of police all reached the bell, but, horror of horrors! ... there was no man, woman, boy or girl near it, but still it rang out its monotonous tone ... it was at last arranged that a charge should be made at the bell, resulting in the discovery that a line was attached from a nearby paddock, but who the person or persons pulling it

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<sup>33</sup> Hemphill, 1876 – 1976, *All Saints Woollahra*.

<sup>34</sup> Sydney's 'low church' brand of Anglicanism still felt under threat as recently as 2002, when the then Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen stated: 'I think part of Sydney's psyche is that we're under threat. ... Our own self-history is that (the diocese of) Bathurst was evangelical: it was lost. Bendigo was evangelical: it was lost. Melbourne was even more evangelical and it was lost.' Peter Jensen in *The Chosen Ones: The politics of salvation in the Anglican Church*, ed. Chris McGillion, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 172.



was, was never discovered.<sup>35</sup>

Eirene also documented how narrow-minded was the criticism of her father and his brand of churchmanship by other clergy, including the then bishop, Saumarez Smith. As she recalled:

Much jealousy and criticism were rife in church circles in those early days of ALL SAINTS. It was a time when evangelism, narrow mindedness & bigotry were prevalent – not least in His Lordship & those nearest him – whilst the neighbouring rector to the west scorned no means of impeding & belittling the work of the new parish & its incumbent.<sup>36</sup>

The local press was another vehicle of attack on Wallace, a fact deplored by his daughter who noted:

Following are a few press cuttings of the day; they merely amused where they were designed to hurt. Not only were flowers in the church anathema to these gloomy Christians, musical festivals roused their ire, while a harmless Garden Fete was deemed too worldly for sponsoring by the Church.<sup>37</sup>

Of all the press cuttings at the time, the most outlandish was an anonymous letter in a weekly Sydney newspaper, the *Protestant Standard*, asking its readers if they were aware ‘of the advancing state of Ritualism alias Popery in our midst’.<sup>38</sup> The climax of these attacks was the defamatory announcement in the same paper that ‘Rev. Wallace Mort, rector of the Anglican church at Woollahra, Sydney, has renounced the Church of England, and has been received into the Roman Catholic Church.’<sup>39</sup> Eirene could not resist adding an exclamation mark in red to this last journalistic effort. Of course, Wallace Mort had done no such thing, but the fact that such letters and reports were published in the local religious press indicates the strength of feeling that sectarian issues

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<sup>35</sup> E.M., ‘Letter Book’, 399.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 399. The anonymous writer went on to complain about the ‘bunches of flowers being carried thither for the decoration of the altar on the Sabbath’ and ‘the sound of the monotonous bells every morning.’

<sup>39</sup> ‘Letter Book’, 399.

then evoked. Eirene's verbatim recording of the newspaper's attacks on her father suggests that, despite her protestations of amusement, the press coverage caused a significant degree of hurt to both her father and the family.

During the later years of his incumbency, perhaps simply by endurance, Wallace Mort's good standing with his bishop and much of his clerical community is reflected by the fact that he was appointed to a number of administrative and pastoral positions. He was made rural dean of East Sydney in 1902, rural dean of Randwick in 1910, and made Canon of Sydney's St Andrew's Cathedral in 1914, just after his retirement.<sup>40</sup> There lingered, however, an element of disapproval of his ministry in certain sections of the parish, even after Wallace's retirement.

Eirene recorded one troubling incident that eventually turned her into an avid amateur historian. Documents relating to Wallace's 38 years as rector of All Saints were housed in the church vestry. After his resignation, one of his successors, the Reverend A.G. Conolly, destroyed any records referring to Wallace's incumbency. Eirene's indignation is clear to see:

The new rector had them [the early parish records] all destroyed when he came to the parish... A member of the family took an interested overseas visitor to see ALL SAINTS. They found the verger, who had taken pride in the collection, almost in tears, & heard from him the story of this twentieth century Savonarola's holocaust.<sup>41</sup>

Eirene went on to conclude this particular section of her 'Letter Book' with an affirmation of the importance of record keeping, and the words 'all of which goes to show that *this* volume of records may not have been made in vain.'<sup>42</sup>

Eirene's experiences of Anglo-Catholicism had one particularly important effect on her – an exposure to a 'love of the beautiful' both within the church and

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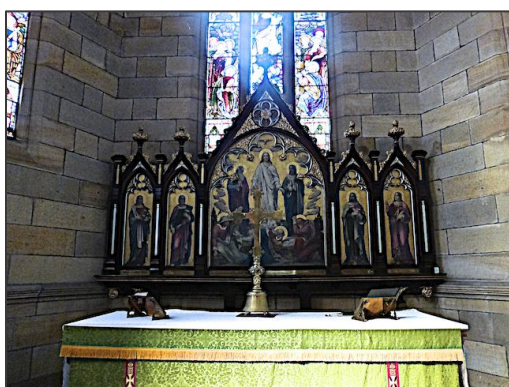
<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 482.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

beyond its ambit.<sup>43</sup> Among other things, Wallace Mort, influenced by his exposure to the Oxford Movement, and being, in Hemphill's words, 'devoted to the Fine Arts', created for his daughter an atmosphere of appreciation of well-designed church buildings and the artefacts within them, with a particular sense of their function of glorifying God.<sup>44</sup> It was an awakening that predisposed her to later find a natural home within the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Figure 7



The altar, reredos and stained glass windows of All Saints, Woollahra.

For Eirene, the form and fabric of a church building itself was important. Her later meticulous description of the All Saints building and interior (Fig. 7) reflects her knowledge of its gothic style and her appreciation of what was, in her opinion, its tasteful interior. The following passage records her particular attention to explaining the specificity of some elements by highlighting them in

red in the original text: she was insistent on exact terminology:

The ground plan is cruciform and the chancel is semi-octagonal. The reredos and altar-cloth are of plum (maroon) colour ornamented with gold, the design being particularly chaste and appropriate. ... There are no gaudy or meretricious [sic] ornaments about the edifice but the design all through is suitable and in good taste. The main body of the building is completed with the exception of some stone carvings on the finials (corbels) and the capitals of the gothic pillars.<sup>45</sup>

Dickey holds that Australian church buildings epitomised the prevailing trend of reproducing an English church in the antipodes.

<sup>43</sup> I am indebted to Andrew Montana for his coining of this particular phrase. Andrew Montana, *The Art Movement in Australia: Design, Taste and Society 1875 – 1900* (Melbourne: Miegunyah, Melbourne University Press, 2000), 159.

<sup>44</sup> Hemphill, 1876 – 1976, *All Saints Woollahra*. Hemphill also notes that Wallace Mort saw Fine Arts as being 'a great aid, in a very practical way, to the improving of men's minds and well-being'.

<sup>45</sup> E.M., 'Letter Book', 396. The text in red here is also red in Eirene's original manuscript.

Once completed, church buildings gradually acquired additional resources such as an organ, embroidered cloths, hangings and covers. Many added memorial tablets and then installed stained-glass windows, combining family pride with Pugin's dim religious light. These were all satisfying transmissions of the heritage of the English colonial setting. ... The satisfaction of achievement and the knowledge of conformity to English practice was vital. This was colonial Anglicanism.<sup>46</sup>

The Blakett-designed church of All Saints Woollahra certainly met the criteria of transmitting an English heritage within a colonial setting. The stained-glass windows, the elaborate cross on the altar, and the reredos behind it all may be said to evoke the continuities to which Dickey refers, and underscore the importance such links were ascribed.<sup>47</sup> Wallace Mort, whose theological training at Oxford did not preclude him from being aware of the earlier ecclesiology movement at Cambridge, planned the thematic approach of the stained-glass windows 'from the outset' and may well have been considered knowledgeable enough about church architecture to be consulted about other design elements in the All Saints building.<sup>48</sup> While Eirene, who had lived in a parish in England for two years from the ages of five to seven, was better placed to recognise the Englishness of All Saints than most Australian children her age, the building may also have had the emotional appeal of being the church of her youth.<sup>49</sup> Her fondness for All Saints is attested to by the fact that she later remembered it in her will, along with a minor bequest to the Anglican church at Bodalla, which had been established by her great uncle, T.S. Mort.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Dickey, 'Secular Advance and Diocesan Response', 63.

<sup>47</sup> All these features memorialise the survival from a shipwreck of Wallace Mort's mother, Maria, and are recorded as important realia in local parish records.

<sup>48</sup> E.M., 'My People'. Although the Cambridge Movement's focus on the 'science of church architecture' was largely over by the time Wallace attended Oxford, its influential magazine *The Ecclesiologist* was available until 1879 – seven years after Wallace's ordination. James White, *The Cambridge Movement: the Ecclesiologists and the Gothic Revival* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 49.

<sup>49</sup> E.M., 'My People'. Wallace Mort undertook a locum in England from 1884 to 1886.

<sup>50</sup> E.M., 'Will and Testament', 20 June 1966, Mort Family Papers, Box 7. Eirene's will sets aside an initial bequest of \$5,000 for All Saints for 'repair or restoration of the church building'. If her niece Margaret and friend Edelle Lindsay should predecease her, Eirene's entire estate was to go to All Saints, Woollahra, rather than to the remainder of her

Eirene's grounding in an appreciation of beauty extended to the aural as well as the visual aspects of worship. She recorded an excerpt from a local paper that praised the music at All Saints:

The organ – a very beautifully toned instrument with its front pipes painted in blue, chocolate and gold – stands in the northern aisle, & the choir, consisting of surpliced [sic] men and boys, occupy seats on both sides of the chancel & their singing of the chants, which were not of the easiest, was musically excellent and religiously devotional.<sup>51</sup>

We can see the religious and aesthetic frame of reference from which Eirene was drawing when we examine the text of a play entitled 'Golden Bells', written by her when her attitude to religion had matured.<sup>52</sup> In the dialogue during which the Pope speaks to Marco Polo before he sets out on his voyage to China, Eirene emphasises the necessity of beauty in the world.

First, let wisdom speak ... Religion is not a matter for argument. It is a wisdom that surpasses wisdom. It drifts into men's souls as the foggy dew comes unbidden to the trees. It is borne before our souls as the horned moon is borne before our eyes. You might say 'What is the use of sending me to China if you know I cannot bring those millions to the faith? My son, a great and noble thought must not die. GOD has put wisdom into my head and beauty into yours. Wisdom is needed for the government of this world, but beauty is needed for its existence.'<sup>53</sup>

There was yet another significant way in which Wallace Mort influenced his daughter: he modelled a spirit of entrepreneurialism for her. While the type of venture that each one undertook may have been very different, their willingness to launch into the unknown was the same. Where Eirene eventually set up her own business as an artist and applied arts practitioner, Wallace launched into real estate. During his incumbency at Woollahra, he purchased

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family. In addition, her funeral was to be held at All Saints, rather than at her local parish church at Bowral.

<sup>51</sup> E.M., 'Letter Book', 405. Mort also records that 'Diogenes' observed, in the same article, that 'this church is more comfortably pewed [sic] than many others so that Christians have not so much jostling to do in obtaining seats'.

<sup>52</sup> The play was written for and performed by the Eastern Suburbs Division of the Girl Guides in 1935.

<sup>53</sup> E.M., 'Golden Bells' Act II Scene I, 06/017 Box I Item 2, (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1935).

two properties in Ocean St, close to the church (one of which the family used as a rectory)<sup>54</sup> and a row of eight investment properties in the same street, plus an additional house in the Blue Mountains.<sup>55</sup> The additional income from these investment properties ensured the family's comfort. This comfortable lifestyle included the cost of private school fees for all five Mort children, and eventually, the cost of study at the University of Sydney (for the boys) and London colleges (for the girls). By the time Wallace died in 1932, his estate was valued at £19,954.<sup>56</sup> He was, in fact, the equivalent of a millionaire in today's terms, his estate being worth \$4,263,400, when the amount is calculated on 'minimum wage' criteria for 2015.<sup>57</sup>

Eirene reminisced in some detail about her family life, religious background and childhood education in her numerous manuscripts, often recalling the discoveries she and her siblings made as they explored the nearby Sydney harbour environment. Her recollections paint a picture of a sparsely-populated eastern suburbs that has long since disappeared:

Double Bay was drained by two tidal creeks – very unsavoury at low tide with scrub between them and extensive market gardens south of the New South Head Road. Bellevue Hill was covered with a wealth of native flora; Rose Bay with swamps and sand hills ... Vaucluse boasted but half a dozen houses; Watson's Bay was a hamlet of sea-faring folk – fishermen, watermen, signalmen, pilots, lifeboatsmen ... Centennial Park was still a waste of scrub and sand hills. After the milk-boy was seen replenishing his supply [of milk] with seepage from the dripping rocks in Edgecliff Road,

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<sup>54</sup> E.M., 'Letter Book' 06/017 Box 2 Item 1, n.d. (Canberra: National Library of Australia), 486. Wallace Mort's two properties in Ocean St, Woollahra were known as 'Trevlyn' and 'Hilton' in Wallace's time. Eirene records that her father offered the two houses to the parish on his retirement, but the parish declined the offer.

<sup>55</sup> See 'Letter Book', 482. The properties, called 'Lancaster Villas', were at 97-111 Ocean St, Woollahra. As well as his Sydney properties, Wallace Mort also owned a cottage at Wentworth Falls in the Blue Mountains and numerous stock market shares: See also Deceased Estate Files, Probate Packet Series 1 3660 Items, Series 4-183660, State Records of NSW. Mort's will stipulated that his estate was to be divided equally among his five children, and that Eunice was to be executor.

<sup>56</sup> 'Probate of Wills', *SMH* September 24, 1932.

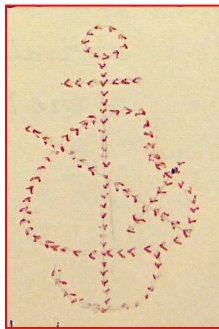
<sup>57</sup> 2015 is the latest year available for comparison of the 'minimum wage' with previous years: <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/how-we-will-help/templates-and-guides/fact-sheets/minimum-workplace-entitlements/minimum-wages>

HWM [Eirene's father] felt his family's health would be safer with a cow of his own, which he kept in a paddock adjoining the church.<sup>58</sup>

In another recollection, Eirene described an enigmatic symbol (Fig. 8) found on a rock face at Woollahra Point during one of their family outings, recounting that:

As children in the Woollahra area we knew some of these sculptured enigmas & liked to think of our early visitors as friendly Portuguese rather than as Armada-minded aggressors [sic]. We knew, too, many native carvings about the harbour foreshores, notched trees for sighting shoals of fish, & deep deposits of oyster shells marking the sites of orgies.<sup>59</sup>

Figure 8



Mort's drawing of the 'Heart-Anchor-Sword' symbol

The young Eirene was certainly aware of the controversial theory put forward in 1909 by Lawrence Hargrave, well-known Sydney aeronautical pioneer, inventor and progressive thinker who held Darwinist beliefs.<sup>60</sup> The fact that he was considered an 'erudite and valued friend' of the family speaks also to the Mort family's acceptance of innovative thinkers who held controversial beliefs.<sup>61</sup> Hargrave believed that Aboriginal people could not have done a number of rock drawings

that could then be found on the shores of Sydney Harbour.<sup>62</sup> One of these rock drawings – an interwoven Sword, Heart & Anchor – was an image that Mort understood was associated with Spain (Figs. 9-10).<sup>63</sup> Despite expressing a

<sup>58</sup> E.M., 'Letter Book', 06/017 Box 2, Item 3, 397. (Canberra: NLA).

<sup>59</sup> E.M., 'Tracks Part I: Sydney and the South Coast', 06/017 Box 2 Record 1586046, (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1970), f-g.

<sup>60</sup> A. Dunbavin Butcher, 'Le Souef, William Henry (1856–1923)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/le-souef-william-henry-7176/text12401>, published first in hardcopy 1986, (accessed online 6 June 2017).

<sup>61</sup> E.M., 'Tracks Part I', g.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Lawrence Hargrave in G. Nesta Griffiths, *Point Piper Past and Present* (Sydney: 1947), 48. Hargrave believed that Spanish vessels sailed to Sydney in 1595 on a quest to discover the great southern continent. He held that the Spaniards stayed in Port Jackson for five years, leaving a record of their stay in stone. The sword represents a warship, the

Figure 9

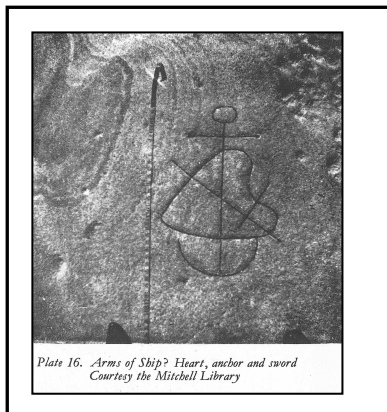


Photo of rock carving  
at Woollahra Point

Figure 10



Contemporary  
tattoo design

personal preference for the symbols to have a Portuguese rather than a Spanish origin, Eirene nevertheless conceded that ‘not all of his [Hargrave’s] interpretations are tenable’.<sup>64</sup> Her mind was, it seems, one that entertained both imaginative speculation but also an underpinning desire for historical accuracy.

Another childhood reminiscence recounts a scene in which Eirene and her school friends witnessed the arrival at St Catherine’s of the school councillors for a meeting (and of their wives for afternoon tea). Eirene paints a vivid word picture, describing them arriving ‘in their cabs and carriages and all the panoply of rustling, frilly parasols, top hats and frock coats.’<sup>65</sup> Her recollection of the scene not only reflects her enjoyment of the occasion, but it also gives us a glimpse into the middle-class world that she saw as a part of her family context. Her enjoyment may also well have been enhanced by the fact that her father, as a

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anchor is for strength, while the heart is an emblem of kindness and charity. It is still used in current tattooing circles to depict a Spanish connection. The image of ‘Heart-Anchor-Sword, Spain’ is available at [www.tattooforaweek.com/en/temporary](http://www.tattooforaweek.com/en/temporary).

<sup>64</sup> E.M., ‘Tracks Part I’, g.

<sup>65</sup> E.M., ‘An ABC of St Catherine’s in the Victorian Era’, (Waverley: St Catherine’s Archives. Box 3, 1956), Letter C: Council.



member of the school council for many years, was one of the men in ‘top hats and frock coats’.<sup>66</sup>

### **Education in an age of reform and Mort’s expanding horizons**<sup>67</sup>

Mort’s nine formal years of education (1888 – 1897) sit squarely within a time of fierce and long-standing debate about two closely related issues – women’s place in society and the nature of the curriculum for girls. It was a debate that was not only often heated, it was, in Shelley Richardson’s words ‘embedded in discussions of gender and class’.<sup>68</sup> In Chambers’ view, it was the expanding education of girls in Britain, USA, Canada and elsewhere that ‘questioned sexual stereotypes pertaining to educated women ... and the pervasive belief in women’s intellectual inferiority.’<sup>69</sup>

The emerging trend of equality for women, which began in England then spread to Australia, was never smooth sailing, especially in the field of education. Jane Martin has traced how, in England, the slow and tortuous way in which women members of the London School Board wrestled with strategies to implement the Education Act of 1870 in such a way that young women were not disadvantaged.<sup>70</sup> Board members struggled with decisions concerning the type of subjects that should be taught to girls, and the amount of time that should be devoted to each subject.<sup>71</sup> When board member Mrs Davies argued that girls would benefit from the inclusion of drawing in the curriculum, board member

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<sup>66</sup> Wallace Mort was also a member of The King’s School council for forty years.

<sup>67</sup> In this section, I am returning to the usual convention of referring to Eirene as ‘Mort’.

<sup>68</sup> Shelley Richardson, *Family Experiments: Professional, Middle-class Families in Australia and New Zealand c.1880-1920* (PhD thesis Australian National University 2013), 322.

<sup>69</sup> Chambers, *Lessons for Ladies: a social history of girls’ education in Australasia, 1870-1900*, 30.

<sup>70</sup> Jane Martin, ‘Fighting down the idea that the only place for women was home? Gender and policy in elementary education 1870 – 1904’, *History of Education* (1995) 24, no. 4, 279. Martin also holds that the very fact that women members sat on the Board at all was significant, as that was not usually the case.

<sup>71</sup> Although the Board’s main focus was on working-class girls, the issues they debated applied to middle-class girls as well.

Mr Green counteracted her viewpoint with the statement that ‘the only drawing girls would be required to know would be the ‘drawing’ of geese and other things for the table. (Laughter).’<sup>72</sup> The very nature of the curriculum for girls was under threat by such chauvinistic views. Despite the ridicule heaped upon drawing and art, these subjects were eventually accepted into the curriculum, a decision that was to have implications for the establishment of training institutions for teachers of art and design, one of which was Mort’s eventual *alma mater*, the National Art Training School of South Kensington.<sup>73</sup>

On the other side of the world, similar battles about the education of girls were also being fought. The first battle was on the question of whether girls should be educated at home or at school. Richardson’s analysis of the education experiment in Australasia circa 1880 to 1920 demonstrates that complex factors were involved in the decision-making about daughters’ education.<sup>74</sup> These factors included the parents’ attitudes to educational expectations, the availability of suitable schools and the financial situations of each family. Anita Selzer gives insight into the reason that many parents chose to educate their daughters at home rather than in a school.

Schools were regarded as unfit for daughters of leading families and upper echelons of society. It was thought that schools would not reflect class and family values and that upper-class girls could be contaminated by the lower classes in schools.<sup>75</sup>

In many upper and middle-class families, it therefore often became the task of mothers, female relatives or friends to educate the children. If family finances permitted, a governess might be employed.

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<sup>72</sup> Diana St John, ‘Educate or Domesticate?: early twentieth century pressures on older girls in elementary school’, *Women’s History Review* 3, no. 2, (1994), 284-285. St John records surnames only in her account of the meetings of the London School Board.

<sup>73</sup> Although the National Art Training School was renamed The Royal College of Art three years before Mort commenced studying there, the new name took some time to be accepted. Mort always referred to it as the ‘South Kensington School of Art’.

<sup>74</sup> Richardson, ‘Family Experiments’, 259-284.

<sup>75</sup> Anita Selzer, *Education and Women in Australia from the Convict Era to the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 105.

Where parents chose the school option, there was still the decision of state or private schooling to be made. A number of historians have examined the characteristics of private girls' schools in the nineteenth century. Beverly Kingston points out that, for girls, education was generally believed to 'make the difference between a useful woman and a cultured lady.'<sup>76</sup> Chambers has shown that there was considerable gender differentiation in education in Australasia, where 'quite prosperous parents did not see the same urgency about a daughter's education and training' as they did for the education of their sons.<sup>77</sup>

Parents who chose private schools for their daughters then faced the dilemma of deciding whether the school should be traditional or progressive. In traditional schools, because there was an emphasis on girls acquiring ladylike qualities, the curriculum was conventional and restricted. Melanie Nolan has examined the way in which the late nineteenth century 'push for a gender-differentiated curriculum' in New Zealand echoed the Australian experience of attempts to restrict educational opportunities for girls.<sup>78</sup> She notes that 'girls tended to sew samplers while boys marched around the playground'.<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, even while the founders of progressive schools sought to expand learning opportunities, in many cases, parents who sent their daughters to progressive schools still conformed to the conventional vision of their daughters' becoming 'the wives of the next generation of professional, political and business leaders'.<sup>80</sup> Full time teachers implemented a core curriculum of the basics, while part time teachers offered non-core subjects such as art and music as extra curriculum subjects. It was a practice that later defined Mort's teaching pattern of part time work in a variety of private girls' schools.

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<sup>76</sup> Beverley Kingston, 'Nationalism and Class' in *Australian Women: New Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Norma Grieve et al (Melbourne: Oxford University Press 1986) 34.

<sup>77</sup> Chambers, *Lessons for Ladies: a Social History of Girls' Education in Australia 1870 – 1900* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1986), 49.

<sup>78</sup> Melanie Nolan, 'Putting the State in its Place: the Domestic Education Debate in New Zealand' *History of Education* 30, no. 1 (2001), 20.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>80</sup> Kingston, 'Nationalism and Class', 34.

It was against this background of gender discrimination in girls' education and a somewhat limited range of educational choices available to them that Wallace and Katie Mort embraced the idea of an all-round, progressive education for all of their offspring.<sup>81</sup> The boys were sent to The King's School at Parramatta, Eirene to St Catherine's at Waverley, and her younger sister Eunice to The Shirley School at Edgecliffe.<sup>82</sup> St Catherine's was the most progressive of the four private girls' schools available in Sydney's eastern suburbs when Eirene commenced schooling in 1888, the other three being The Shirley School, Claremont College that catered only for primary school students and Kambala which was renowned for its 'gracious milieu, in which academic study was often secondary to the acquisition of charm and etiquette'.<sup>83</sup>

Figure 11



All Saints, Alford, Somerset

handed or in company of young friends'.<sup>84</sup> Some of these 'scholastic adventures'

Mort's education began, however, not at school but at home, with her parents opting for the use of a governess. Mort notes that, prior to beginning school, she had 'a mixed bag of scholastic adventures with various governesses, taken on single-

<sup>81</sup> Although there were a number of public schools in the eastern suburbs area, the only four private girls' schools operating during Mort's childhood years were Claremont College at Randwick, Kambala at Rose Bay, The Shirley School at Edgeworth and St Catherine's at Waverley. While Sydney Grammar School offered a secular education for boys, The King's School was the only Church of England boys' school available when Mort's brothers started school, 'Shore' not being established until 1889.

<sup>82</sup> For the reputation of The King's School, see Lloyd Waddy *The King's School 1831-1981* (Darlinghurst: David Ell Press 1981), 86-114. Because three headmasters during Wallace Mort's time at the school are regarded as having been innovative and dynamic, the school had a reputation for being progressive. The fact that Wallace Mort was himself a student there for two years also undoubtedly helped in the choosing of a school for his sons.

<sup>83</sup> Chambers, *Lessons for Ladies*, 145.

<sup>84</sup> E.M., 'An ABC of St Catherine's', Preface.

also included the ‘two impressionable years to the day’ Mort spent in England when her father undertook a locum in the parish of Alford, Somerset from 1884 to 1886 (Fig. 11).<sup>85</sup>

By the time Mort started at St Catherine’s at the age of nine, she could speak French and knew her nursery rhymes in Italian and German.<sup>86</sup> She also records that her accomplishments during those early years were ‘varied if not useful’.<sup>87</sup> She could ‘handle a horse or a boat, play cricket and do all that boys of her age did’.<sup>88</sup> Some of these skills were probably acquired during the six months Mort spent ‘with a family of boy cousins on the Queensland border and an equal period with a family of girl cousins in the new Federal Territory soon after the family’s return from England in 1887’.<sup>89</sup> The fact that the young Eirene was allowed to acquire these athletic and usually male-oriented skills suggests that the Mort parents did not indulge in a gender divide when it came to sport. It also suggests that, in her formative early years, Mort developed an adventurous spirit, a quality she would later need when she set out on entrepreneurial business ventures in Sydney.

Against the background of this debate on the nature of a curriculum for girls, in 1888 Wallace and Katie Mort sent their elder daughter, as a boarder, to the only Anglican girls’ private school then available in Sydney’s eastern

#### Figure 12

<sup>85</sup> E.M., ‘My People’ and ‘Letter Book’. In her family histories ‘My People’ and ‘Letter Book’, Mort mentions that her brothers went to a preparatory school at nearby Cheltenham. The fact that no schooling is mentioned for herself suggests that she was tutored at home by either a governess or her mother.

<sup>86</sup> E.M., ‘An ABC of St Catherine’s’, Preface. No doubt Eirene’s mother was instrumental in the acquiring of such linguistic adroitness.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. Although Eirene says she spent six months with girl cousins ‘in the new federal territory’ in the 1880s, the new territory of the ACT was not declared as such until 1911. Mort’s girl cousins were members of the Crace family of Gunghalin. It was later to prove a particularly productive period in her life, for she developed a love of the Canberra landscapes which eventually led to the production of her book *Old Canberra: a sketchbook of the 1920s* by Eirene Mort by the National Library of Australia.



Section of original stone building  
of St Catherine's Waverley

suburbs – St Catherine's School for Clergy Daughters at Waverley (Fig. 12).<sup>90</sup>

In making this choice, the Mort parents were following the time-honoured English tradition of sending young children away to boarding school. J. R. de Honey believes it was a practice that was aimed at 'dignifying a process of upward mobility'.<sup>91</sup> The family

backgrounds of pupils at schools such as St Catherine's were likely to be 'academics, Protestant ministers and state teachers' (Fig. 13).<sup>92</sup> Chambers holds that the sending of the children of these parental occupations was 'not so much a bourgeois tradition as a milieu for merit where specific talent was recognised and given hope to flourish, and then directed into appropriate avenues'.<sup>93</sup> Such an atmosphere undoubtedly helped to foster confidence in the coming breed of 'New Women'.

Figure 13

Mort



St Catherine's  
c. 1897

<sup>90</sup> Of the four private girls' schools in Sydney's eastern suburbs – Claremont College, Kambala, Shirley and St Catherine's. Of these, St Catherine's was the oldest, the closest to the rectory and the only one established specifically for the daughters of Anglican clergy.

<sup>91</sup> J. R. de Honey, *Tom Brown's Universe: the development of the public school in the nineteenth century*, (London: Millington, 1977), 124.

<sup>92</sup> Chambers, *Lessons for Ladies*, 49.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

The school that Mort attended changed its name, in her time, from ‘St Catherine’s School for Clergy Daughters’ to ‘St Catherine’s School’.<sup>94</sup> Its pupils called it ‘St. Cat’s’.<sup>95</sup> In her school memoir, Mort tellingly ruminates on the name change, confiding that her cohort ‘was sensitive about the name, feeling that it smacked of charity and we preferred using our patron saint’s name to disguise our parental status’.<sup>96</sup> Local historian Barbara Croft notes that the fee for the daughters of the laity was ‘considerably higher than that for clergy daughters.’<sup>97</sup>

Mort’s experiences at St Catherine’s reflected the transitional nature of educational reform in the late Victorian era, with students experiencing both the traditional approach to accepted societal values and the progressive approach to an expanded curriculum. The curriculum at St Catherine’s had initially focused on producing ‘a ladylike refinement’ in its pupils.<sup>98</sup> Queen Victoria was held up to the students as the archetypal figure of virtuous womanhood, and Mort fully realised the extent of her idealisation, wryly observing:

She (the Queen) was the symbol of Majesty, of Womanhood, of Modesty. Her influence was all pervading. Widows owed their cumbrous weeds to her example, mothers their countless families, ladies their fashion of distorting their apparel ... and we our stilted education. Like Caesar’s wife, she was above reproach, and like the Queen of Spain, she had no legs.<sup>99</sup>

The fact that Mort points out that the period of her schooling lay ‘wholly within the Victorian era’ suggests that she saw herself as a product of, but also perhaps distancing herself from, the Victorian era and its values.<sup>100</sup> Christina de Bellaigue argues that, for girls, Victorian era boarding schools were places in which ‘gendered notions of domesticity were a powerful influence on women’s

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<sup>94</sup> The old name seems to have remained in usage for some time. The *SMH* referred to the school as the ‘Clergy Daughters’ School’ in December 1895, and the school is listed as ‘Clergy Daughters School’ in the 1897 University of Sydney ‘Senior’ exam results.

<sup>95</sup> Bishop Barker and his wife Jane had founded the ‘St Catherine’s School for Clergy Daughters’ in 1856, specifically to meet the needs of providing an education for the colony’s clergy, many of whom were in bush parishes.

<sup>96</sup> E.M., ‘An ABC of St Catherine’s’, Letter N: Name.

<sup>97</sup> Barbara Croft, *St Catherine’s School 1856 – 1996* (Sydney: Bookpress, 1996), 17.

<sup>98</sup> Ainslie Baker, ‘Founded in 1856’ *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 12 January, 1956, 12.

<sup>99</sup> E.M., ‘An ABC of St Catherine’s’, Letter Q: Queen Victoria

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, Preface.

lives ... in both positive and restrictive ways. The shape and character of girls' boarding schools exemplified the pull and push of this influence.'<sup>101</sup>

Figure 14



Headmistress of  
St Catherine's

Mort's years at St Catherine's coincided mainly with the leadership of Miss Helen Phillips, the school's innovative second headmistress (Fig. 14).<sup>102</sup> By the time Mort attended St. Catherine's, Phillips, the embodiment of a New Woman, had broadened the school's curriculum to incorporate a wide range of subjects.

As well as the usual core subjects of 'the Three Rs – Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic' – the girls at St Catherine's studied Botany, Latin, Physical Education and Religion.<sup>103</sup> In addition, visiting staff taught the 'accomplishments' of French, German, Music, Dance, Drawing and Needlework.<sup>104</sup> Wollaston Thomas was the Drawing Master who gave drawing lessons in the morning and painting lessons in the afternoons. Mort loved both. She records that, when "Tommy" took his pupils out sketching, as he occasionally did, it was for her a 'Red Letter Day'.<sup>105</sup> This early fostering of her love of outdoor sketching was sound preparation for the emphasis on nature and organic forms that she later encountered in the Arts and Crafts movement.

Religion was a core curriculum subject at St Catherine's. In her school memoir, Mort recounts her reaction to a teacher's decree that she *must* recite the Catechism:

My rebellious spirit refused an answer, even to "What is your name?" On

<sup>101</sup> Christina de Bellaigue, *Educating Women* (London: Oxford University Press 2007), 16.

<sup>102</sup> Croft, *St Catherine's School 1856 – 1996*, 18. Helen Phillips arrived at St Catherine's in 1884. The 14 pupils who attended the school when Phillips arrived had grown in number to 42 by the time Phillips left at the end of 1889. Mort arrived at the school at the beginning of 1888.

<sup>103</sup> E.M., 'An ABC of St Catherine's', Letter E: Education.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., Letter V: Visiting Staff.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.



the mat, I said ‘I know the catechism, and you know that I know it, and I have said it for the last time.’ I had to write the whole of it every Saturday morning for the remainder of the term – a punishment well merited, but not so easy to bear with indifference, for it meant no swimming. But I never said that catechism again.<sup>106</sup>

This anecdote helps us comprehend Mort’s temperament as much as it enlightens our understanding of her attitude to religion. It shows one of her coping mechanisms – a sense of conviction bordering on stubbornness. She would refuse to comply with unnecessary requests, even if that refusal came at a cost. Although Mort rejected the rote recitation of the catechism on that particular day, she did not reject the catechism itself or the Church of England’s middle-class, English values. She remained an Anglican all her life, later observing (of her local parish church in Bowral) that ‘we are fortunate to have an organ grinder of quality and an efficient choir’.<sup>107</sup> Commenting to her niece on the music and ecclesiastical ritual in a service broadcast from St John’s Anglican Cathedral in Brisbane, she remarked: ‘I quite enjoyed it, the music was AI & the service itself nice and Highish [sic] for these days.’<sup>108</sup>

Marjorie Theobald notes that, despite their diversity of origins, female schools of this period ‘offered a strikingly uniform curriculum which they usually advertised as “an English education with the usual accomplishments.”’<sup>109</sup> Phillips stepped outside this uniform approach and daringly appointed Matilda Meares to the visiting staff as a biology teacher. According to Mort, the appointment was a controversial one, for ‘in those days, biological fact, even in the lowest forms of life, was a topic taboo. Shocked parents withdrew their daughters from the classes.’<sup>110</sup> The fact that Wallace and Katie Mort allowed their daughter to

<sup>106</sup> E.M., ‘An ABC of St Catherine’s’, Letter R: Religious Observance.

<sup>107</sup> E.M., to Margaret Mort, 23 November 1970, 06/017 Box 1 Folder 3, NLA. ‘Organ grinder’ was a colloquial term for a church organist.

<sup>108</sup> E.M., to Margaret Mort 9 August 1967, 6/017 Box 1 Folder 3, NLA.

<sup>109</sup> Marjorie Theobald, ‘Boundaries, Bridges, and the History of Education: An Australian Response to Maxine Schwartz Seller’, *History of Education Quarterly* 33, no. 4, (1993), 502.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

participate in Meares' 'enthraling biology lectures', reinforces my hypothesis that the Mort parents were progressive in their educational philosophy.<sup>111</sup>

Phillips continued to startle her school community by encouraging her students to sit for external exams such as the Civil Service exam and the exams then known as the Junior and Senior University exams. This was another decision that 'shocked the community'.<sup>112</sup> Certainly Phillips was, in Mort's words 'for those remote days, very enterprising, up to date when she was not before her time, and always energetic'.<sup>113</sup> It is an assessment with which Croft agrees, observing that:

Miss Phillips seems to have been a most enterprising and progressive woman. A graduate of Bedford College, and formerly Senior Assistant Mistress at Sheffield High School for Girls in England, she brought to the school not just her scholastic achievements but also her love of learning.<sup>114</sup>

Not only did Phillips raise academic standards, but she also fostered the development in the school of a public-spirited ethos. The school's aim was to improve life, on a daily basis, for the community as a whole. Dickey claims that, at the end of the 19th century, private church schools 'achieved significant social cachet ... All (schools) aimed to influence the children of the colonial elite to become responsible, public-spirited Anglicans'.<sup>115</sup> This grounding in the concept of improvement for all in everyday life undoubtedly helped to provide a firm foundation for Mort's later commitment to the Arts and Crafts movement's aim of beautifying everyday homes.

But school life was not always an uplifting experience. Although the curriculum at St Catherine's may have been progressive for its time, the pedagogy employed by many of the teachers at the school was not. Mort's trenchant criticism of the prevailing teaching methods reveals that few teachers at the school attempted to inspire a love of learning in their students.

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<sup>111</sup> E.M., 'An ABC of St Catherine's', Letter V: Visiting Staff

<sup>112</sup> Chambers, *Lessons for Ladies*, 159.

<sup>113</sup> E.M., 'An ABC of St Catherine's', Letter P: Principals

<sup>114</sup> Croft, *St Catherine's School 1856-1996*, 16.

<sup>115</sup> Dickey, 'Secular Advance and Diocesan Response', 68.

We learnt the history of English Literature, but no real love of its richness. Macbeth [was] spoilt forever by the type of study involved ... We learnt to use brushes and colours, but knew nothing of the masters, their craft and their work; sculpture was rather shameful in its nudity; music was a matter of striking the right note ... Nothing [in Mathematics] was explained. A sum or the solution to a problem was right or wrong, and that was that.<sup>116</sup>

Teaching methods obviously left a lot to be desired. It is testament to Mort's resilience that she was able to rise above the shortcomings of her formal schooling and develop a thirst for knowledge that motivated her continually to master new skills in later life. Mort's responses to the educational experiences she received at St Catherine's reveal as much about the development of her personality as they do about the educational trends of the day.

Two aspects of these experiences are particularly relevant, for they suggest that Mort's leadership qualities were noted and encouraged. The first aspect was the school's emphasis on 'Calisthenics, Deportment and Drilling, the names under which we practiced Physical Culture.'<sup>117</sup> Mort's mastery of calisthenics was reflected in the fact that the school's Physical Education teacher, Miss Elphinstone-Dick, trained her to teach P.E. routines. Mort took the school for their 'daily dozen' every school day for two years. It was a role that inadvertently displayed Mort's leadership qualities as well as her athletic ability. Elphinstone-Dick's influence on Mort was so strong that, in Mort's words, 'Miss Dick inspired me with ambition to follow her profession, and this I very nearly did – but not quite.'<sup>118</sup> Mort may have rejected the physical education aspect of Miss Dick's role modelling, but she did not reject either its teaching component, or her embodiment of the ideal of a New Woman, or the combination of physical dexterity with a sense of self-expression which would take several forms in her life, from enthusiasm for the acquisition of skills to early wartime initiatives in physical rehabilitation.

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<sup>116</sup> E.M., 'An ABC of St Catherine's', Letter E: Education.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., Letter C: Calisthenics, Deportment & Drilling.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

The second aspect of her educational experiences at St Catherine's was the formal recognition of her leadership qualities. Mort was made head girl in her final year of school.<sup>119</sup> Although she characterised herself as having an 'inherent lawlessness' as a student, her 'lawlessness' cannot have been too outrageous.<sup>120</sup> Leadership was a quality she would again display when she returned from London, in her mid-twenties, in order to spread the Arts and Crafts message to her Sydney contemporaries.

Another personality trait – that of a strong sense of justice – is revealed through an anecdote on the subject Mort referred to as 'Sewing', one of the 'practical subjects' in the NSW school curriculum.<sup>121</sup> In her first year at St Catherine's, she struggled to make a calico pillowcase and was surprised to find that, at the end of the year, her efforts had been rewarded. Mort puts a sting into the tail of her recollection of the reward for the pillowcase:

My pillowcase had been given a prize. It was a handsome fitted sewing-box with my name engraved on a silver plate. When I turned the key and open-sesame'd [sic] my casket, all my pleasure in it dissolved in a flash. A slip of paper lay on the treasures within, and on it was written, "Little Eirene must practice her buttonholes". I was hurt, affronted and very offended and said publicly that, if they didn't like my buttonholes, I didn't want their prize.<sup>122</sup>

This short anecdote seems to indicate in Mort a dislike of not having her work appreciated for what she perceived was its intrinsic value.

A further personality trait that becomes evident through a close reading of Mort's memoir is the fact that she had an aspirational personality, one that foreshadowed her later desire to become not an amateur, but a professional artist and artisan. Her desire to excel was, however, selective. It pertained only to subjects such as French, art, poetry, scripture, sport, spelling and maths –

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., Letter A: Autobiography.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Chambers, *Lessons for Ladies*, 146.

<sup>122</sup> E.M., 'An ABC of St Catherine's', Letter S: Sewing.

subjects that she liked. In all these, she excelled.<sup>123</sup> If, on the other hand, Mort took a dislike to a subject or a literary genre, she circumvented it. This tendency to strongly reject subjects she did not like was to reappear later in life in the form of an extreme dislike of Modernist art.

Figure 15



Eirene's 1897 University of Sydney 'Senior' exam medal for 'Design'

Mort's aspirational personality is again revealed in the fact that she won a Knox Scholarship while at the school<sup>124</sup> and in the taking of her final exam. Not content with being able to sit for an external exam, she made a 'complete pest' of herself by cramming the last two years of her schooling into one calendar year, and taking the 'Senior' (the final exam) a year earlier than was usual.<sup>125</sup> Mort was the only

student from St Catherine's who was permitted to sit for the public 'Senior' exam in her final year at the school.<sup>126</sup> This she did in November 1897, being one of forty female students in total to take the exam, and one of 31 to pass it.<sup>127</sup> She gained a First Class Honours and a university medal in Design (Fig. 5) and Second Class Honours in English, French, Physiology and Botany. She sat for the examination in the Great Hall at the University of Sydney, where, in words that showed her predisposition to appreciate the Gothic Movement, 'stained glass Kings and Queens looked down on us in all their scintillating colour and carved

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., Letter L: Library. Mort was awarded no fewer than twenty books as prizes during her time at St Catherine's. They are now classified as 'rare books' and held in the school's archives. Mort disliked fiction books, history and Latin, spent little time on them and received no prizes for these subjects

<sup>124</sup> Margaret Mort, 'Eulogy for the late Eirene Mort' given at All Saints Woollahra, Monday 5 December, 1977. Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

<sup>125</sup> 'An ABC of St Catherine's', Letter E: Examinations.

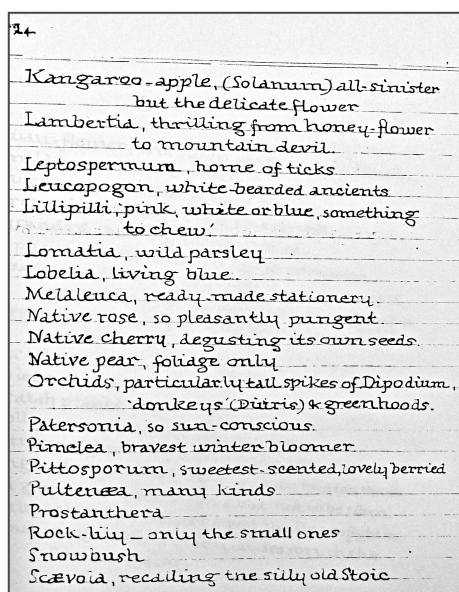
<sup>126</sup> *Manual of Public Examinations held by the University of Sydney for the year 1897*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1898), 53–63.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. The students who sat for the 'Senior' in 1897 numbered 119 in total, coming from 52 state schools and 149 private schools. Of the 119 students who sat the exam, 101 students passed; 31 (26%) of these successful candidates were female.

and painted angels of the hammer-beam roof balanced their heraldic shields above our heads'.<sup>128</sup> Eirene enjoyed the ambience, recalling that she had the good fortune to be drafted into the Nicholson Museum for one of her subjects and, between inspirations, had the companionship of alligators and mummies.

If much of the school's curriculum or pedagogy did not appeal to Mort, St Catherine's had, in her eyes, two redeeming physical features, each of which not only helped to prepare her for later studies in decorative arts but also revealed further insights into the development of her personality. These redeeming features were the school's rich environmental surroundings and 'The Studio'.

Figure 16



Extract from Mort's list of  
botanical specimens in her  
'Alphabet' memoir

The school's first saving grace proved to be its geographical location. St Catherine's was set close to bushland, a locale that gave Mort an extensive grounding in botanical specimens – a body of knowledge on which she drew many times in later years. Students were often permitted to take investigative walks through local bushland. In her memoir, Mort listed and commented on no fewer than 86 species of indigenous flora that could be seen in and around the school.<sup>129</sup> (Fig. 16)

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> 'An ABC of St Catherine's', Letter B: Botanical and B: Bishops court. Mort recounted how she was among the 'favoured few' allowed to walk to the old Bishops court to gather greenery for Christmas break-up decorations. The girls would return from Bishops court, 'like a southern edition of Birnam Wood, garlanded with smilax and armfuls of wild cherry and lillipilli'. The reference to Birnam Wood reveals how well Mort knew her Shakespeare – especially Macbeth.

Moreover, the school grounds contained many large, enticing trees, one of which was a particular favourite of Mort's (Fig. 17). She described it as being big enough to climb and use as a pretend castle, later recalling that:

Out of doors, we small fry had our "houses" in trees ... mine inspired [sic] to the status of a castle, with a valuable library. In it I wrote no less than 20 books – novels, plays, poetry, selections etc. in small black penny notebooks.<sup>130</sup>

The school's *laissez faire* attitude to tree-climbing fed Mort's budding creativity and her attention to the natural world.<sup>131</sup>

Figure 17



'Eirene's Tree'

Figure 18



St Catherine's 'Studio', now used as the school's museum

There was another physical advantage to be gained from St Catherine's. It was 'The Studio' – a haven for creative pupils like Mort (Fig. 18). Phillips had donated the building to the school soon after her arrival in 1884, and Mort and her friends found refuge there. Mort's description of the uses to which The

Studio was put reveals the creativity and ingenuity of the privileged few who were allowed the use of it.

In the studio, the drawing and painting lessons were given. Only those attending were privileged to enter. After she [Miss Phillips] had left us and I had become a legitimate inmate, a few of us asked to be allowed the

<sup>130</sup> E.M., 'An ABC of St Catherine's', Letter G: Games.

<sup>131</sup> Mort's favourite tree, now known as 'Eirene's Tree', is so valued by the school that, in the 2000s, the school community raised approximately \$40,000 to relocate it to a new location, as its original location was required for further building extensions.

use of it between lessons. We were given the key after dinner and it gave us about  $\frac{3}{4}$  hour a day... We painted, designed, drew, wrote, ran magazine, made scenery and properties for our plays and perpetrated misdeeds, but we thoroughly appreciated our privilege.<sup>132</sup>

Mort's escape to The Studio became one of her mechanisms for coping with the restrictions that school life imposed upon her. It had one important outcome. The Studio 'tipped the balance in my choice of career, and gave us a measure of both freedom in captivity and an outlet for self-expression'.<sup>133</sup> The very fact that Mort felt she had a *choice* where careers were concerned is significant. It indicates her awareness of the fact that she was not necessarily restricted, in the future, to a role of dutiful family service, but that a fulfilling and creative career path was open to her.

At St Catherine's, the names of girls who had succeeded in public exams were written up 'on the precursor of an honour roll – an ugly old blackboard over the fireplace in the dining room'.<sup>134</sup> If the fabric of the blackboard was shabby, its symbolism was not; it reflected the somewhat novel and dangerous idea that young women might aspire to take their place in a world outside the home. Richardson aptly describes the paradox of young women such as Mort who were among 'those educated and cultured middle-class young women of the late nineteenth century who were at one and the same time constrained by circumstances and liberated by the childhoods that had shaped them'.<sup>135</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that some of Mort's educational experiences were negative, her more positive experiences at school modified the effect of poor pedagogy on the part of some staff and her occasional oppositional reactions to what she saw as unjustified demands. At St Catherine's, Mort benefited from an extended and largely progressive curriculum, from access to surroundings rich in native plants, from permission to access 'The Studio' and 'Eirene's Tree', and from

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<sup>132</sup> E.M., 'An ABC of St Catherine's', Letter S: The Studio.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., Letter E: Examinations.

<sup>135</sup> Richardson, 'Family Experiments', 341.



evaluating opportunities modelled by a number of independent New Women on the school staff.

Although the Mort parents' commitment to gender equality might have been implemented in primary and secondary school, it did not extend fully to the tertiary level.<sup>136</sup> Wallace and Katie Mort ensured that their three sons were given the opportunity of attending the University of Sydney. The eldest Mort son, Selwyn, became a metallurgist; the middle son, Harold, was an engineer for the Railway Department of N.S.W; and the youngest son, Stanley, studied engineering at Sydney University, then won a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford.

The decision not to send Mort to university reflects the common perception (held by most middle-class parents of that period in Australia) that women who attended university carried, in Theobald's words 'a double burden: on the one hand to prove that they could succeed in the male intellectual domain; and on the other hand to convince even their mentors that they could remain 'true women'.<sup>137</sup> In Elizabeth Windschuttle's examination of the history of private girls' schools in late nineteenth century Australia, she notes that, of the many types of employment for women, 'light, genteel occupations' were at a premium. In Windschuttle's view, 'at the top of the hierarchy was teaching'.<sup>138</sup> Art was another field of employment that was deemed suitable for women. Anthea Callen contends that, in the Victorian period:

artwork was one of the few occupations that was considered suitable for middle class women. Here was a field of employment that appeared to be merely an extension of traditional feminine accomplishments ... It

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<sup>136</sup> Eirene's younger sister Eunice was afforded an opportunity similar to Eirene's in 1907 when she too went to London to further her musical training as a pianist and violinist. Eunice became a close and long-term friend of Thea Proctor during her first solo trip to England.

<sup>137</sup> Marjorie Theobald, *Knowing Women: Origins of Women's Education in Nineteenth Century Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 71.

<sup>138</sup> Elizabeth Windschuttle, *Women, Class and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia 1788 – 1978* (Melbourne: Fontana Books 1980), 126.

represented only the slightest adjustment to her accepted social position.<sup>139</sup>

In the light of such attitudes to the acceptability of both art and teaching, it is not therefore surprising that Mort's tertiary education should include training in both occupations. There is no evidence as to whether Eirene or her parents made the decision that the almost nineteen-year-old Eirene was to attend the National Art Training School in South Kensington, London. It stipulated, in its policy, that 'the special object of the school is the training of Art teachers of both sexes, of designers, and of Art workmen'.<sup>140</sup>

Figure 19



Signor Antonio Salvatore  
Dattilo Rubbo

Before Mort began formal training, however, the next step in her education was the private tuition she received in Sydney from the Italian artist and teacher, Antonio Dattilo Rubbo (Fig. 19). Wallace Mort had befriended the young Italian artist on his arrival in Sydney, even offering him accommodation on his first nights in the colony. Mort became his first pupil in 1898, in exchange for English lessons and 'bed and lodgings'.<sup>141</sup> Rubbo's artistic style was, in Oakley's view, 'eclectic, selecting both stylistic and thematic elements from the work of the nineteenth-century Realists, Naturalists and Impressionists'.<sup>142</sup>

It is interesting to note the difference in influence that Rubbo had on two of his pupils in particular. Where his artistic influence on Mort resulted in her

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<sup>139</sup> Anthea Callen, 'Sexual Division of Labour in the Arts and Crafts Movement' in *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design*, eds. Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham, (London: The Women's Press, 1989), 153.

<sup>140</sup> 'National Art Training Schools'

[http://sculpture.gla.ac.uk/view/organization.php?id=msib4\\_1222355292](http://sculpture.gla.ac.uk/view/organization.php?id=msib4_1222355292)

<sup>141</sup> Mort cannot have studied with Rubbo for much more than a year, for she completed school at the end of 1897 and had left for London by 1899.

<sup>142</sup> Carmel Oakley, 'Rubbo, Antonio Salvatore Dattilo (1870–1955)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/rubbo-antonio-salvatore-dattilo-> (accessed on 30 January 2016).

adoption of an *en plein air* or naturalistic style of painting, another of his other students, Grace Cossington Smith, responded quite differently. She attributed her interest in colour to Rubbo's influence, recalling that 'Signor Rubbo was the only one who knew anything about the Impressionists at that time [the early twentieth century] ... He had books that had colour reproductions in them ... he was very keen on colour'.<sup>143</sup> When Cossington Smith's art moved into Modernism, she recalled Rubbo's teachings and tried to ensure that the colour in her paintings was 'not flat ... it has to shine'.<sup>144</sup> Mort's artistic style took on no similar influence, and she remained firmly in the realism camp, with a personal preference for working in black and white.

## Conclusion

Mort's childhood experiences not only prepared her for becoming a decorative arts teacher and practitioner but they also helped prepare her to become a 'New Woman', capable of having a fulfilling career and earning her own living. The fact that the field of applied arts was often deemed suitable for female occupation does not lessen the achievement of women such as Mort who raised its standing to that of a profession.

The issues that Mort experienced during this period of her life reflect many of the larger issues of life for girls and young women in the late nineteenth century. Three aspects of her life were of particular importance for Mort – her family background, her religious upbringing and her educational experiences. The first of these aspects, the extent to which family background can influence the development of a young woman's personality, often impinges on the direction that her future career might take. In Mort's case, her parents provided a creative and supportive atmosphere that nurtured a love of aesthetically pleasing items in the church and the home. In addition, her mother modelled a

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<sup>143</sup> Grace Cossington Smith, Interview by Hazel de Berg, 16 August 1965 in Sydney NSW, audio recording, National Library of Australia.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

lively interest in current affairs and an active role in her husband's parish while her father modelled entrepreneurialism. The creative and adventurous aspects of Mort's aspirational personality largely counterbalanced any conventionalism that may have been engendered by her Victorian era rectory upbringing and the social mores of the time. The second aspect – the impact of religion on a young girl's life – reveals that not only did Mort's experience in a 'broad church' Anglican background predispose her towards a life in the creative arts, but also that being part of a minority cohort in the Sydney Diocese may have resulted in her developing coping mechanisms that were helpful in later life. The third major aspect, the nature of girls' education in the latter part of the nineteenth century, demonstrates that the extent to which a school's curriculum was traditional or progressive could have a significant impact on the shaping of a young woman's personality and career choice. Despite certain deficits in Mort's education, she benefited from its progressive curriculum, the nurturing of her talent and the role modelling it provided in the form of professional, inspiring New Women.

These experiences in Mort's formative years prepared her well for the next chapter in her life. She set sail for London as a confident, capable young woman. If the world was her oyster, she would prise it open in London, and hopefully find within it a pearl of great artistic price.

## Chapter 2

### London Calling

(1899–1903)

*Just embarking for London was often construed  
as a sign of success and ambition.<sup>1</sup>*

*- Angela Woollacott*

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Figure 1



'Myself when young',  
1902.

Eirene Mort's artistic abilities and academic successes, recognised by her family and her peers, were a sound platform from which to launch the next phase of her life. By embarking for London in 1899 – alone, and at the age of nineteen – Mort placed herself amongst the cohort of young women whose sphere of action was becoming greatly enlarged, through a variety of economic and social changes, and for whom 'new opportunities for independence

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<sup>1</sup> Angela Woollacott *To Try Her Fortune in London* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

and personal fulfilment' were opening up (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> Her niece, Margaret Mort, later observed that her aunt's 'years in England were very significant to her and she talked about that period a good deal later in life'.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I explore the leitmotif of the impact that the Arts and Crafts movement had on Mort's life. I will examine the attraction of London, the origins of the Arts and Crafts movement and her training in and early applying of its principles and practices. I argue that each of these aspects of her life in London helped to transform Mort into a capable artist and artisan, emblematic of the second leitmotif in her life – the early twentieth century 'New Woman'.

The impact of London was not peculiar to Mort. The city exerted a distinct attraction to young colonial women and, for Mort, the shipboard journey itself acted as a phase of transition in which her sense of identity and place in the world expanded with new experiences. On her arrival in London, this expansion was accompanied by the beginning of Mort's 65-year partnership with Nora Weston – a relationship that was fundamental to much that she achieved as an independent woman. Again, such a partnership was not peculiar to Mort and Weston: three other well-known and similar relationships will be examined in this chapter to draw out something of the significance of such bonds.

These transformations in elements of Mort's personal identity were coupled, and in some way affirmed, by the profound influence on her artistic practice of which three major art movements – the Gothic, The Pre-Raphaelite and the Aesthetic – which synthesised in the Arts and Crafts movement, and, in turn, in Mort's own style of fine and applied art. To appreciate the power of this influence, it is important to establish the origins and features of the Arts and Craft movement in England as well as in Europe, America and Japan. The work of Augustus Pugin, Walter Crane, Henry Cole, John Ruskin and William Morris in

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<sup>2</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850 – 1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 39.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Mort, interview by Bruce Semier, 14 February 1985 in Bowral, NSW, transcript with National Library of Australia. File 181/14/10/.

particular influenced Mort's emerging taste, and so did the more personalised apprenticeship in applied arts she undertook at the Royal College of Art, as well as the additional training she received at no less than four other art institutions. In London, she proved herself determined to broaden her skills in many media as well as her exposure to a particular aesthetic, and here, too, it was evident that the pursuit of the applied, the professional and the educational dimension of art practice would define her career. This breadth of engagement reflected and consolidated Mort's complex personality, with its combination of progressivism and conventionalism. Although these dimensions were evident in, and confirmed through, her London years, it was the adventurous side of her nature that predominated at this time.

### **The attraction of London**

Unusually for her age group, Mort travelled to London on her own.<sup>4</sup> Woollacott holds that, by travelling to London, Mort was following the 'recognised cultural ritual' that many young Australian women embarked upon from the 1870s onwards.<sup>5</sup> The flow of Australians and New Zealanders going to England numbered ten thousand per year at the turn of the century, and over twenty thousand per year a decade later. More than half of these adventurers were women. Going to London was 'a way for an Australian woman to express and act on her ambition: to advance her education or her skills, to absorb the latest styles, genres, research, or techniques, (or) to study under the most renowned practitioners'.<sup>6</sup> The perception of success that the journey represented would certainly have bolstered the aspirational aspect of Mort's personality.

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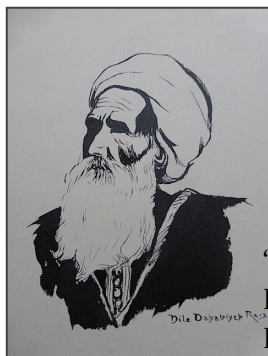
<sup>4</sup> Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London*, 52. Woollacott has noted that women were more likely to travel on their own if they were in their late twenties or older. The fact that Mort had lived in England as a child and had close relatives in London may have meant that the venture was less daunting than usual.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

The journey from Sydney to London on a steamship was of at least eight weeks' duration. It offered new experiences to Mort. The sketchbooks for these first (and second) journeys to London as an adult not only visually demonstrate Mort's curiosity about and interest in the new people and places she was encountering, they also reveal the adventurous side of her personality.<sup>7</sup> Her drawings of 'Nile Dababayeb Res' and 'Dom Basilio' reveal her sensitivity to the cultural differences between herself and the subjects of her drawings. 'Nile Dababayeb Res' (Fig. 1) hints at the authority and wisdom of a successful, learned man while 'Dom Basilio' (Fig. 2) shows a more humorous touch, with the pointing of the umbrella suggesting a sense of urgency and determination about the figure – a man who would not be turned aside from his purpose. They also show Mort sampling different styles: the studied portrait and the caricature, each marking out a sense of distance between herself as an artist and the new exotic she experienced.

Figure 2



'Nile  
Dababayeb  
Res'

Figure 3



'Dom Basilio'

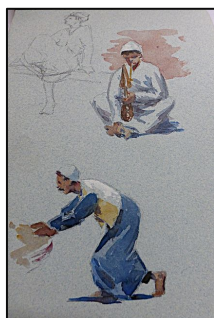
In the 'Three figures' watercolour sketch (Fig. 4), Mort's love of capturing different aspects of movement is revealed in her portrayal of three men – the stillness of the hookah figure, the partial movement of someone seated on a bench and the fluid movement of the man shaking out a piece of material. In 'The Boatman' (Fig. 5), the viewer's attention is caught by the man's thrusting motion with his pole, while his backward looking glance tells us that he is worried about

<sup>7</sup> Though Mort had lived in England for two years as a child, she may not have spent much time in London itself.



the safety of his load. Each sketch reveals not only Mort's receptiveness to the new experience, but also her interest in ordinary people, and the inherent dignity of the way in which they were involved in daily tasks.

Figure 4



Three figures

Figure 5



The Boatman

Mort's arrival in London coincided with momentous events in both Australia and Britain. Against a backdrop of the celebration of the formation of the Commonwealth of Australia on 1 January 1901, and the mourning for the death of Queen Victoria (whom she had been brought up to revere) on 22 January 1901, occurred another tragedy, closer to home for Mort. The family firm of Goldsborough Mort and Company Limited had been having financial difficulties since 1894. These difficulties came to a head in January 1901 when, as was reported in detail in the London paper the *British-Australasian*, the company wrote down £887,736/7/5 from its share and debenture capital.<sup>8</sup> The *British-Australasian* kept its readers, of whom Mort probably was one, well informed of the continued problems of the company.

Mort even recorded its effect on her family sixty-three years later, so strongly did the downturn affect her.<sup>9</sup> On 14 February 1901, Mort's father, Wallace Mort, accepted responsibility for the loss of £2,000 incurred by his late father, Henry Mort, when the share price was written down. In rescuing his mother and sisters, Wallace Mort alleviated 'the unfortunate position' that they were left in, instructing his solicitors 'not to inform' them where the money came

<sup>8</sup> 'Goldsborough Mort and Co. Ltd.' *The British Australasian*, January 10, 1901. 87.

<sup>9</sup> E.M. 'A Tale of Three Cities' ML MSS 1462/2 Item 1. (Sydney: Mitchell Library, 1964) 840-896.

from.<sup>10</sup> Eirene Mort later concluded her record of the financial debacle with the lament:

So parted the Family and the Firm. The name only remained. ... This record has been made as a labour of duty, in honour of, and in justice to, one small group of our country's men of business, by the grand daughter of one of them.<sup>11</sup>

When Mort arrived in London in 1899 however, the wider financial scenario had not yet played out. Initially, she boarded at a select residence for young women – Alexandra House in South Kensington. Conveniently situated just a stone's throw from the Royal College of Art and the Royal Albert Hall, Alexandra House 'drew the most accolades' as a residential facility available to women students.<sup>12</sup> It was full of other young women, all setting out on the exciting path of studying art, drama, ballet or music.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the building, the Doulton ceramic tiles and columns, together with the foyer's delicate wrought iron and wooden staircase, give an impression of Victorian respectability and gentility, and perhaps also a certain didacticism: the education that such women must have in finding their place in the world (Figs. 6-7).

Figure 6



Part of exterior of  
Alexandra House

Figure 7



Example of ceramic  
decorations in dining room

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 890.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 896.

<sup>12</sup> Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London*, 85.

<sup>13</sup> Now known as 'Queen Alexandra's House', the residence has been home to such notable British figures as ballerina Beryl Grey and actor Dame Judi Dench. [www.queenalex.cok/testimonials](http://www.queenalex.cok/testimonials).

Mort responded, as did many other young Australians, to the ‘modernity, colonialism and culture’ of London, developing a wide circle of friends drawn from contacts with other Australian expatriates, her extended family, her fellow art students and other young women in the ‘institution that drew most accolades’, the residential college, Alexandra House.<sup>14</sup> Many of these friendships lasted all her life. She was also in close contact with her maternal relations, especially the well-connected Fremantle family. They involved her in many of their social arrangements, one of which was a garden party at Buckingham Palace.<sup>15</sup> Her connections with the Australian expatriate community enabled her to be counted among the 600 members of the ‘notabilities’ who attended, in July 1900, the annual ‘Conversazione’ held by the Royal Colonial Institute at the Natural History Museum in South Kensington.<sup>16</sup> Mort’s art student friends included Gwen and Dorothy Hutton, the Chaplin sisters, Dorothy Freeman and E.H. (‘Kip’) Shepard.<sup>17</sup> Of this group, only Florence Chaplin and Shepard are known to have had artistic careers of any standing, with Chaplin exhibiting seven times at the Royal Academy in London between 1901 and 1926, and Shepard becoming the illustrator of A.A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh* and Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* books. It was from the Alexandra House friendship group that Mort formed the most important friendship of all. She met, and may have shared a room with, Nora Weston (commonly known as ‘Chips’).<sup>18</sup> Mort and Weston remained at Alexandra House for two years, after which they asserted their independence by moving to a flat elsewhere in London.

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<sup>14</sup> Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London*, 55 and 85.

<sup>15</sup> Mort’s aunt, Barbarina, had married Admiral Sir Edward Fremantle. In order to attend the 1903 garden party, Mort had a cream satin dress specially made. Many years later, during the early years of WWII, she gave the dress to Weston’s niece, Helen, to use as a wedding dress, luxury fabrics then being in short supply.

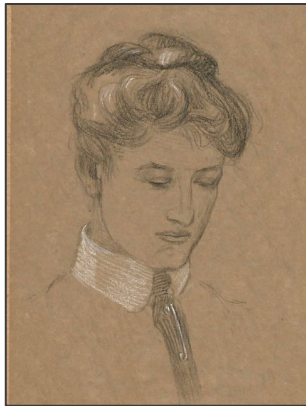
<sup>16</sup> ‘Royal Colonial Institute’ *The British Australasian*, July 5, 1900, 967. ‘Notabilities’ listed as attending in 1903 included ‘Indian princes, colonial premiers, Oriental potentates, colonial officers, members of Parliament, bishops and clergymen.’ *The British Australasian*, June 26, 1902, 1105.

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Mort in *Eirene Mort: Old Canberra Old Canberra: a Sketchbook of the 1920s* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1987), 9.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Chips’ was a colloquial reference to Weston’s woodworking competence – a ‘Chippie’.

## Partnership with ‘Chips’

Figure 8



Nora Weston c. 1903

Mort and Weston (Fig 8) lived and worked together as a couple from the early 1900s until 1965, the year of Weston’s death. On the few occasions they were apart, Mort would write to ‘Chips’, signing herself as ‘Fatima’.<sup>19</sup> Weston was to become the ‘significant other’ in Mort’s life. They were, in enduring ways, a partnership in life, and often in art practice.

These two young women had much in common. They both had a long English genealogy, with Mort being able to trace her English roots back to 1540, naming Adam Mort of Bolton, Lancashire, as her earliest known ancestor, and Weston being able to trace her ancestry back to 1749 when Henry Weston lived in Horsley, Surrey.<sup>20</sup> In addition, they shared a respected colonial history, with both the financial successes of the Mort family and the military prominence of Weston’s Johnston ancestors being well known in Sydney society.<sup>21</sup> The couple were known by their extended families as The Aunts’ and readily accepted into both family circles.

Figure 9

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<sup>19</sup> E. M. Postcard to Weston, ‘Oldest Watch in the World’, Canterbury. n.d., Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

<sup>20</sup> See E. M. ‘My People’ 06/017 (Canberra: National Library of Australia), 5. and E. M. ‘Acres and Ancestors’, PIC Volume 1003 (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1968), 3.

<sup>21</sup> See: E.M ‘The Westons of Horsley’ ML MSS 1462 (Sydney: Mitchell Library, 1943), 60; see also E.M. ‘A Bundle of Sticks’ ML MSS 1462 (Sydney: Mitchell Library, 1961; see also E.M. ‘A Tale of Three Cities ML’ MSS 1462 (Sydney: Mitchell Library, n.d.). Mort recounted her family’s early successes in ‘A Bundle of Sticks’ which narrated the history of extensive family landholdings in Queensland, and ‘A Tale of Three Cities’ that chronicled the rise and fall of the business ventures of the Mort family in Manchester, Liverpool and Sydney. In ‘Acres and Ancestors’, Mort recounted how Weston’s great grandfather, Lieutenant George Johnston, was the first man to step ashore on Sydney Cove in 1788, and later, as Major Johnston, featured prominently in the arrest of Governor Bligh in 1808.



Weston on  
Johnston cairn

Family legend holds that Weston, pictured here standing on the cairn of her ancestor Major George Johnston, was a 'very forthright person' who was known to 'speak her mind'.<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 9) The cairn on which Weston is standing marks the furthest point of her ancestor Johnston's December 1789 attempt to cross the Blue Mountains.<sup>23</sup> The photograph also demonstrates that, in later life, Weston, dressed in 'mannish' clothes and usually wore a three-quarter length skirt in a brown shade, with a jacket and a shirt that was buttoned to the neck (Fig. 9).<sup>24</sup> Mort was also known to be a person who held and expressed strong opinions.<sup>25</sup>

Simon Schama's description of progressive young art students studying at the Slade School depicts an evocative image of assertive young women, eager to embrace the exciting and creative possibilities ahead.

The New Women ride bicycles ... they have latch keys in their bags. ... Many have, with a sigh of relief, ditched the tyrant corset ... Men will have to take them as they are or not at all. Nor will they hold their tongues as their grandmothers were told to do if they wish to catch a husband. When they are beset with opinionated men who say nothing particularly interesting but say it loudly, they will argue back, with confidence and clarity. And now these girls make art.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Michael Callan, Interview by author, 28 August 2016 in Canberra, transcript with author.

<sup>23</sup> E.M. 'The Weston's of Horsley', (Mittagong: December 1943), 59. Johnston later quelled a convict rising at Vinegar Hill in 1804 and placed Governor Bligh under arrest in 1808.

<sup>24</sup> Bronwyn Vost Interview by author, 22 September 2016 in Sydney, NSW, transcript with author. The cairn on which Weston is standing marks the furthest point of Johnston's attempt. He later quelled a convict rising at Vinegar Hill in 1804 and placed Governor Bligh under arrest in 1808.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Thelander, Interview by author, 2 December 2016 in Toowoomba, transcript with author.

<sup>26</sup> Simon Schama *The Face of Britain: the Nation through its Portraits* (London: Viking, 2015), 397.

The same spirit of ‘confidence and clarity’ can certainly be traced in these two ‘South Kensington girls’ who were emblematic of the New Woman. In 1895, Marion Leslie asserted the importance of women’s right to work:

Steady and sure is the advance of the women who work, and their success and recognition brings with it a sense of dignity which was absent in the “good old times” when no woman worked for money unless she was obliged to.<sup>27</sup>

Juliet Gardiner sees the progress made by women during this period as challenging and ground-breaking, but ultimately rewarding. She too stresses the importance of work, stating that, for each woman, ‘hard work rather than glittering and decorative opportunities, lies before her’.<sup>28</sup>

Rebecca Jennings adds a note of caution to the use of the term ‘New Woman’ by reminding us that the concept is ‘highly contested’, varying from ‘an independent and pioneering woman who fought for and embodied ... new opportunities for expanding educational, employment and political rights’ to ‘women who offered a range of possibilities for the expression of desire between women’.<sup>29</sup> Most exemplified part, though not all, of this description.

As Susan Pedersen found in her account of the relationship between English parliamentarian Eleanor Rathbone and Scottish social worker Elizabeth Macadam, the dearth of personal diaries or revealing letters between two women who lived and worked together for many years means that ‘there is much we can no longer discover about their friendship’.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the lack of diaries or personal correspondence between Mort and Weston has meant that some aspects of their lives remain unclear. What is clear is that, with their ‘new opportunities

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<sup>27</sup> Marion Leslie, ‘Women Who Work’, in *The New Woman: Women’s Voices 1880-1918* ed. Juliet Gardiner (London: Collins and Brown, 1993), 128.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

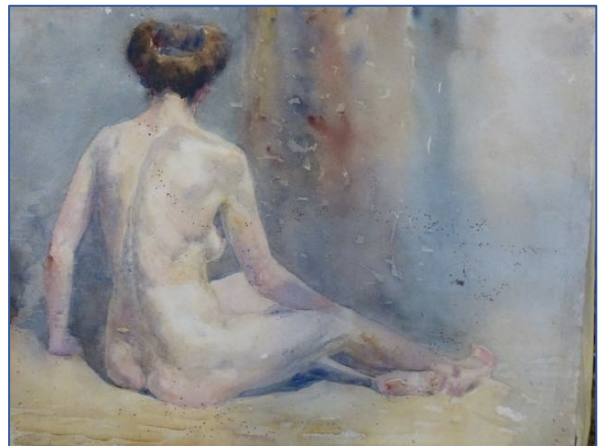
<sup>29</sup> Rebecca Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Women Since 1500* Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007, 57–58.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 96.

for education, work and mobility', women such as Mort and Weston 'saw that they had alternatives to marriage'.<sup>31</sup>

The question of whether or not there was a sexual element to Mort and Weston's partnership is an intriguing one, for which I have not found a definitive answer. Mort's drawings of a nude model, whom members of the Weston family believe to be Nora, hint at a sexual awareness (and perhaps even sexual attraction) on Mort's part (Figs. 10-11).<sup>32</sup> It is, however, also possible to argue that the drawings were done merely as part of a requirement of the art course Mort attended in London. If there was a sexual element to the close relationship that existed between Mort and Weston, neither acknowledged it publicly.

Figure 10



Nude figure,  
watercolour

Figure 11



Nude figure, pencil

<sup>31</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* London: Viking, 1990, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Weston family member Bronwyn Vost believes that the nude drawings are of Nora Weston. Mort did not label these drawings, hence there is an element of doubt.

Several factors mitigate against this hypothesis of there being a sexual element to the couple's relationship.<sup>33</sup> None is conclusive. The first factor is a family recollection that, although the partners shared a bedroom, they slept in separate beds in their Vacluse and Mittagong homes.<sup>34</sup> By the time they moved to Bowral in April 1960, they had separate bedrooms.<sup>35</sup>

The second factor is the possibility of heterosexual relationships in Mort's life. Mort family legend holds that the 'love of her life' was E.H. (Kip) Shepard, the illustrator of A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* and Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* books, with whom she fell deeply in love.<sup>36</sup> Family legend holds that it was his alleged rejection of her that set the young Eirene on the path to spinsterhood.<sup>37</sup> Instead of reciprocating Mort's feelings, Shepard married one of her good friends, former art student Florence Chaplin. Mort and Shepard remained good friends and corresponded regularly for the next 70 years, with Shepard sometimes writing to her about his latest difficult dealings with publishers or sending her printed Christmas cards of his own design (Fig. 12).

Figure 12



Margaret Henry recorded that Mort had promised to show Shepard around Sydney, but by the time he managed to visit it, they were both in their nineties. Neither party was up to the grand tour of the world's premier city, so Mort took Shepard

Christmas card sent  
to Mort by Shepard

<sup>33</sup> See Introduction, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Helen Rees, Interview by author, 21 November 2016 in Sydney, NSW, transcript with author.

<sup>35</sup> E.M. Plan of Bowral house, Mort Family Papers, Box 7 and E.M. Letter to Selwyn Mort, 19 May 1960. N.L.A. 06/017, Box 1.

<sup>36</sup> Milne approved Shepard's *Winnie-the-Pooh* 1920s illustrations as the only ones suitable for his *Pooh* books and *Now We Are Six* poems. Grahame's *Wind in the Willows* was originally published in 1908 with only one illustration – a frontispiece by Graham Robertson; Shepard illustrated the 1931 version.

<sup>37</sup> Margaret Henry, Interview by author, 20 June 2015 in Newcastle, NSW, transcript with author.



to the revolving Summit Restaurant in Centrepoint Tower, and ‘showed him around Sydney’ for the rest of the day.<sup>38</sup>

Another somewhat ambiguous clue to the possibility of heterosexual relationships in Mort’s life can be found in a poem that was sent to her by a rejected admirer, just before her departure for Australia in late 1903.

Now where will she be at fifty, should Nature keep her alive,  
 If she’s got such a wonderful knowledge-box, before she is twenty-five?  
 I pray some Noble Savage may capture her long ‘ere that,  
 And carry her off to his spacious hut (or his big expensive flat)  
 And hit her a whack on her knowledge-box, and, should Nature let him  
survive,  
 Persuade her thus to the Paradise where Love and Babies thrive.  
 (But I don’t really wish anything of the sort! T.T.)<sup>39</sup>

It is arguable that ‘T.T.’ would not have expressed a wish for Mort to be carried off to a place where ‘Love and Babies thrive’ if Mort had openly rejected him on the grounds of her sexual preference for women.

The fourth factor is the recollection of ‘The Aunts’ by Mort’s niece, Barbara Thelander, that ‘they were not affectionate. They didn’t call each other darling or anything like that. They were good friends.’<sup>40</sup> The exact nature of their friendship is, however, difficult to ascertain.

Jennings’s examination of the ‘Romantic friendship’ of Lady Eleanor Butler and the Honourable Miss Sarah Ponsonby has flagged the difficulties of establishing the nature of female relationships at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when issues of class, financial dependency and religious upbringing all played a part in enabling or inhibiting the way in which women could live together in partnership.<sup>41</sup> Sharon Marcus’s exploration on the

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<sup>38</sup> Margaret Henry in Alan Kennedy, ‘A Summit Achieved by Two Old Friends’, *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 8 Septemeber, 1994. Mort Family Papers, Box 7.

<sup>39</sup> T.T. ‘To E.M.’, Mort Family Papers, Box 5. Although there can be no certainty as to the gender of ‘T.T.’, its general tenor does seem to suggest that the admirer was male.

<sup>40</sup> Barbara Thelander, Interview by author, 2 Decemeber, 2016 in Toowoomba, transcript with author.

<sup>41</sup> See Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain*, 44-73.

nature of the term 'friendship' when referring to the relationship between women notes that:

For Victorians, a friend was first and foremost an emotional intimate who was not a relative or sexual partner ... Only through discreet but marked rhetoric did Victorians qualify that some "friends" were not friends, but special friends, life friends, and particular companions who in private communication could as easily be called wife or husband.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps the words of English novelist and poet Dinah Mulock Craik, written fifty years before Mort and Weston came to London, may be said to describe the kind of relationship that existed between the two women.

To see two women, whom Providence has denied nearer ties, by a wise substitution making the best of fate, loving, sustaining, and comforting one another, with a tenderness often closer than that of sisters, because it has all the novelty of election which belongs to the conjugal tie itself – this is, I say, an honourable and lovely sight.<sup>43</sup>

One final point about Mort and Weston's partnership needs to be made. Any lack of clarity about the intimate details of their relationship in no way diminishes either their contribution to Australian art and culture or their roles as 'New Women'.

Because the relationship between Mort and Weston was so important to both of them, it is worth pausing to consider the nature of other partnerships similar to theirs. In her study of female relationships at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, Martha Vicinus states that 'friendships between girls and young women were strongly encouraged by advisors ... who saw them as excellent training in sincerity, devotion and service'.<sup>44</sup> Vicinus points out that the mid-Victorian attitude to the status of a woman who chose to remain single was that 'she should remain at home throughout her adulthood and fulfill her duties as a daughter and sister'.<sup>45</sup> Kay Whitehead argues that the single state only became problematic when a young

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<sup>42</sup> Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 26.

<sup>43</sup> Dinah M. Craik quoted in Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women*, 35.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

woman chose to remain single, rather than marry.<sup>46</sup> Whitehead sees single women as being ‘an anomalous minority, resented by men whose control they had escaped.’<sup>47</sup> Young professional women were able to benefit from the growing acceptance of professionalism, and make a choice that led, not to marriage, but to a different kind of partnership.

Historians such as Kirstin Downey, Lillian Faderman and Susan Ware have sought to explore the nature of the lifelong partnerships between single women in the early twentieth century. Downey holds that, for many professional women, whereas marriage usually restricted a woman’s sphere of influence to the home, ‘finding a compatible female partner seemed a prelude to success and contribution (to society)’.<sup>48</sup> Faderman’s examination of the relationship between Irish writer Edith Somerville and her cousin Violet Martin highlights the importance placed on the spiritual, rather than the sexual, element of women brought up in the Victorian era. Martin holds that, for Edith and Violet, ‘the spiritual aspect of their union was of vital importance, and what interfered with it in their view would have been eliminated’.<sup>49</sup> Ware’s study of the relationship between Americans Molly Dewson and Polly Porter suggests that ‘what is important is not what they did in bed, but that they chose each other, loved each other, and expressed that love through a lifetime of shared partnership’.<sup>50</sup> Pedersen points out that even to ask whether or not such long-term relationships were actively sexual is ‘to question the depth of emotional attachments

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<sup>46</sup> Kay Whitehead, ‘The spinster teacher in Australia from the 1870s to the 1960s’ *History of Education Review* 36 no. 1 (2007), 1-17.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>48</sup> Kirstin Downey, *The Woman behind the New Deal: The Life of Frances Perkins, FDR’s Secretary of Labour and His Moral Conscience* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 2009), 168.

<sup>49</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1981), 208.

<sup>50</sup> Susan Ware, *Partner and I: Molly Dewson, Feminism and New Deal Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 59.

unaccompanied by physical desire' and is perhaps a signal of our post-Freudian culture.<sup>51</sup>

David Hull's warning about the dangers of 'two-eyed' presentism reinforces Pedersen's caution. Historians cannot avoid presentism, but he advises both the writer and the reader against 'allowing our knowledge of the present from distorting our knowledge of the past', an admonition that applies particularly well where the nature of female partnerships, such as that of Mort and Weston, is concerned.<sup>52</sup>

Whatever the nature of their relationship was, it was fortuitous that the applied art skills acquired by Mort and Weston blended together so well, for it meant that they could eventually establish a business together and earn the income they needed in order to be able to live the independent lives to which they aspired. Their areas of expertise complemented one another beautifully. Mort was skilled in painting with watercolour and drawing with pen, pencil and charcoal. She was also expert in the 'soft' crafts of embroidery, bookplates, ceramics, linocuts, pyrography and the 'hard' craft of etching. As well as being skilled in bookbinding, Weston produced artefacts in the 'hard' crafts of brass-work, copper-work, silverwork and woodwork. Leatherwork was the one area of craft in which they overlapped. Mort's ability to produce original designs for both of them meant that they were never short of inspiration.<sup>53</sup>

When Mort and Weston eventually returned to Australia in late 1903, the breadth of art education that they had acquired in London made the two women amongst the most highly qualified artists and artisans of their time. This does not mean, however, that their path was a smooth one. They needed both enthusiasm and determination to generate a living as artisans. They needed each other as well.

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<sup>51</sup> Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience*, 96.

<sup>52</sup> David Hull, 'In Defense of Presentism' *History and Theory*, 18, no. 1 (Feb., 1979), 15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2504668>

<sup>53</sup> Belinda Mort, Eirene's great-niece, has in her private collection over a thousand tracing paper designs from which Mort and Weston worked.

## Origins and features of the Arts and Crafts movement

As has been made clear, the movement that influenced Mort most during her life was the Arts and Crafts movement. This leitmotif began during her time in London. It is necessary to pause here and note the origins and features of the movement, for Mort adopted so many of its principles and practices that her oeuvre cannot be evaluated unless it is viewed in the light of that legacy.

It was not until 1887 that Thomas Cobden-Sanderson coined the actual phrase ‘the Arts and Crafts movement’.<sup>54</sup> He allowed that the name ‘Arts and Crafts’ could be defined in more than one way. ‘It may be associated with the movement of ideas ... or it may be associated with the revival, by a few artists, of hand-craft as opposed to machine-craft ... or again it may be defined both the one and the other, and to have a wider scope than either.’<sup>55</sup> Rosalind Blakesley contends that the movement was ‘protean and multifaceted’.<sup>56</sup> It had no ‘uniform visual code’ and there was ‘little visual coherence’ in the work of Arts and Crafts practitioners, with items ranging in size from jewellery to furniture, and in design from simple to intricate. Mort’s oeuvre certainly followed this ‘protean and multifaceted’ pattern of Arts and Crafts production, with her work eventually ranging over forty different kinds of artistic media.<sup>57</sup> In fact, Mort’s niece, Margaret, believed that her aunt’s determination to become proficient in a plethora of artistic media may well have contributed to her becoming a ‘Jack of all trades but master of none’.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas Sanderson established his credentials with the Suffragette movement by prefixing his fiancé’s name ‘Cobden’ to his own name when they married and adopting the hyphenated surname ‘Cobden–Sanderson’ for them both.

<sup>55</sup> Cobden-Sanderson in *An Anthology of the Arts and Crafts Movement: Writings by Lethaby, Gimson and their Contemporaries*, Mary Greensted ed. (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2005), 62.

<sup>56</sup> Rosalind Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd. 2006), 8.

<sup>57</sup> These different types of media will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>58</sup> Henry, Interview.

The Arts and Crafts movement was inspired by, in Gillian Naylor's words, 'a crisis of conscience'.<sup>59</sup> 'Its motivations were social and moral,' she argues, and 'its aesthetic values derived from the conviction that society produces the art and architecture it deserves.'<sup>60</sup> Many artists and philosophers of nineteenth century England rebelled against the 'dark Satanic mills' in which men, women and children laboured.<sup>61</sup> They believed that 'somehow the Industrial Revolution was using people as machines, dividing head from hand (and) undermining the ordinary ways in which they related to the physical world.'<sup>62</sup>

This crisis of conscience was expressed by a number of influential thinkers, men such as Augustus Pugin, Walter Crane, Henry Cole, John Ruskin and William Morris.<sup>63</sup> Their ideas were to shape the movement's growing concern not only with the quality of the products Britain was producing but also with the dignity of the lives of the workers producing them. These philosopher-artists held that industrial England's art had little merit or soul, springing as it did from a populace deprived of self-respect and out of touch with nature. In time, their ideas raised public awareness of the need to improve working conditions for factory workers and artisans.

Not everyone was motivated by a 'crisis of conscience'. Mort's interest in character, movement and people as evident in her sketchbooks shows her as being predisposed to challenge the practices of the Victorian era for other reasons. She had a vision of society in which the individual worker could take

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<sup>59</sup> It is ironic that the 21<sup>st</sup> century artistic phenomenon of *Steampunk*, a Victorian-themed subculture, can be seen as 'a rejection of our modern industrial values and our modern industrial processes'. Cliff Overton in *Future Tense* ABC Radio National. 1 September, 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Gillian Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement: a study of its sources, ideals and influences on design theory* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1971), 7.

<sup>61</sup> William Blake, 'Jerusalem' in preface to *Milton* (London: William Blake Trust, 1967). There is academic discussion as to whether Blake was really referring to industrial mills or establishment churches in his poem.

<sup>62</sup> Alan Crawford, quoted in *W.A.S Benson: Arts and Crafts Luminary and Pioneer of Modern Design* ed. Ian Hamerton, (Woodbridge: Antique Collector's Club Suffolk 2005), 14.

<sup>63</sup> Other such as John Sedding and Charles Ashbee were also influential in the Movement, but are not particularly relevant to Mort.

pride in his or her work, rather than be the agent of mass-produced items. This view was compatible with the motivation of many Arts and Crafts practitioners who were reacting to workers' brutalisation by factory working conditions. Mort's sketches contain no political undercurrents; rather, they reveal her empathetic interest in ordinary people going about their work, shaking out a piece of material, punting a boat or driving a wagon over a bridge.

The Arts and Crafts movement that Mort experienced in London was part of a transnational movement that had been spreading across Europe, America and Japan since the late 1870s. It reached its peak during the time of Mort's London sojourn – the early 1900s. Blakesley emphasises the element of regional and national expressions of the movement:

it produced works of extraordinary vibrancy and intellectual rigour. It opposed vulgarity, pretension and shoddy workmanship. It championed the maker and the process of making, as much as the object made. And it created a new understanding of the need for local and national expression in art and design.<sup>64</sup>

Although its characteristics varied from country to country, underlying principles, such as a deep belief in 'the spiritual benefits of work done by hand', formed an invisible bond that yoked the disparate parts of the movement together.<sup>65</sup> Even so, an element of national distinctiveness was central to the adoption of Arts and Crafts principles. Amy Ogata reinforces the centrality of national expressions of the movement:

Instead of focusing on formal appearance, recent scholarship has emphasised the underlying values – including the significance of regional and national identity – that so many of the international applied arts movements shared.<sup>66</sup>

The range of differences in the movement between various countries was large. In Germany, the movement split into two camps, with one camp focusing

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<sup>64</sup> Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Wendy Kaplan, *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe & America 1880 – 1920: Design for the Modern World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 13.

<sup>66</sup> Amy Ogata, 'Belgium and France: Arts, Crafts and Decorative Arts', in Kaplan, *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe & America 1880–1920*, 245.

on producing luxury goods while the other camp supported functionalism and industrial design. Belgium's acceptance of the Arts and Crafts movement eventually culminated in the distinctive Art Nouveau style of decorative arts, with Victor Horta's use of 'interlaced patterns and whiplashed curves' embodying the principle of creative individual craftsmanship.<sup>67</sup> France mainly focused its production on luxury items, with Renee Lalique's glassware and jewellery also reflecting Art Nouveau's stylistic traits. In the United States, 'tastes for things British and oriental were ... decisive influences' and were expressed in a democratic approach to design and variety in regional expression.<sup>68</sup>

The Japanese blurring of the distinction between 'fine art' and 'decorative art' had a resounding impact not only on its own art but Western art as well. Moreover, Hannah Sigur points out that, during this period,

a bridge linked those who created the "fine art" regarded as the highest form of human expression, to an equally idealized and all-important realm: the home, and those who presided over it – women.<sup>69</sup>

Even though Mort utilised the Japanese style of Arts and Crafts designs only rarely, the Japanese movement's elevation of the status of women would have reinforced her own convictions on the importance of women's contribution to applied arts. In addition, the Japanese aesthetic principles of asymmetry and stylisation combined with the use of humble as well as costly materials 'to infuse Western design with new vigour of arrangement'.<sup>70</sup> Mort's use of both inexpensive and expensive materials reflected these emphases.

Mort absorbed many of the transnational features of the Arts and Crafts movement, incorporating into her work its emphases on functionalism, regional

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<sup>67</sup> Ralph Mayer, *Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1981), 21. The academic debate over the links between Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau, (with art historians such as Nikolaus Pevsner emphasizing points of difference and Jean Lahor emphasizing each movement's similarities) seems to be ongoing.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Judson Clark, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876-1916*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), xiii.

<sup>69</sup> Hannah Sigur, *The Influence of Japanese Art on Design* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2008), 101.

<sup>70</sup> Kaplan, *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe & America 1880-1920*, 101.



and national expression, the production of items by hand, the appeal of the Art Nouveau style, the asymmetry of Japanese motifs and the use of a wide variety of both humble and costly materials. She needed to incorporate these aspects of the movement into her own work if she was to generate an income from it in the future. Her focus, as a professional artist, would be on the domestic realm of function and ornament, and, as a teacher, on equipping her future students with the same skills that she had acquired in London. By actively promoting the principles and practice of applied arts and by fostering collegial networking, Mort became a participator in Sydney's emerging 'female cultural activism'.<sup>71</sup>

Important though these transnational influences were, it was British Arts and Crafts philosophers and practitioners who influenced Mort most. Although Pugin, Crane, Cole, Ruskin and Morris were all key figures in the Arts and Crafts movement, the sub-trinity of Pugin, Crane and Morris affected Mort most. Within that sub-group of three, Morris, known for his proficiency in textile design, artefact production, poetry and social activism, stood head and shoulders above the rest. His legacy in the areas of design and artefact production was keenly felt by Mort. While living in London, she acquired several of his books, brought them back to Australia and kept them for the rest of her life.<sup>72</sup> Morris's work became a very practical source of inspiration for Mort's own work.

Two important goals – those of utility and beauty – guided Morris's work and teaching above all other objectives. Bradley attributes these qualities to the paring down of nineteenth century artistic excesses. 'Morris's stress on simplicity and his dictum "have nothing in your house except what you know to be useful or believe to be beautiful" did more than anything else to remove from Victorian drawing rooms the clutter of tasteless bric-a-brac'.<sup>73</sup> Pamela Todd holds that

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<sup>71</sup> Jane Hunt, 'Cultivating the Arts' PhD Thesis, Macquarie University, 99.

<sup>72</sup> Titles included *Summer Dawn*, *In Praise of My Lady*, *Two Red Roses Across the Moon* and *The Gillyflower of Gold*.

<sup>73</sup> Ian Bradley, *William Morris and his World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 112.

Morris's 'useful and beautiful' maxim had 'a huge, reverberating impact'.<sup>74</sup> Mort certainly felt that force.

In addition to Morris, one has to include the Victorian architect Pugin among the other notable thinkers who influenced Mort's attitude to design. His belief that a design and the material in which it was to be worked should complement one another struck a chord of sympathy in Mort. For Pugin, there were to be no more 'staircases for inkstands, monumental crosses for light-shades ... and a cluster of pillars to support a French lamp'.<sup>75</sup> Instead, Pugin wanted:

artist smiths in silver and iron, artist chasers in metals, artist glass painters, artist engravers ... artists for the manufacture of stuffs ... well grounded in the fundamental principle of adapting the style and working of its ornament, not only to the purpose, but in the material in which it is to be produced.<sup>76</sup>

The contemporary architect John Sedding claimed that there would have been 'no Morris, ... no Webb, no Rossetti, no Burne-Jones, no Crane, but for Pugin'.<sup>77</sup> Gillian Naylor and Peter Rose agree that Pugin's influence was seminal. Naylor holds that the Arts and Crafts generation recognised Pugin as 'a pioneer in their cause'.<sup>78</sup> Rose notes that Pugin's statement on the nexus between design and the material to be used was 'a clarion call to all future generations of artist designers'.<sup>79</sup> Mort was one of many who responded to that call.

Mort was also indebted to Crane, designer and illustrator of children's books, for his views on the value of handcrafted items and the need for a worker to have self-respect. In his 1888 presidential address to the newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Art and its Application to Industry, Crane gave the following example to illustrate his point.

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<sup>74</sup> Pamela Todd, *William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Home* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 46.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

<sup>76</sup> Pugin quoted in Hamerton, *W.A.S. Benson*, 18.

<sup>77</sup> Sedding quoted in Naylor *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 15.

<sup>79</sup> Rose in Hamerton *W.A.S. Benson*, 18.

We may perhaps see some wonderful piece of ingenuity and mechanism – a carpet loom, for instance, such as I saw at the American Exhibition in London. The machine itself appeared to be a marvel of adaptation; but ... when one came to the product itself – the carpet in the loom – the result as an artistic matter, a matter of design and colour, was simply deplorable. ... We have lost sight of the end in search of mechanical perfection of the means.<sup>80</sup>

For Crane, a worker who was made responsible for his work would find that ‘his self-respect at once increases, and he is stimulated to do his best.’ Crane held that there should be a close relationship between craftsmen and artists, asserting that ‘we must turn our artists into craftsmen, and our craftsmen into artists.’<sup>81</sup>

Mort embodied Crane’s ideal, being both artist and craftswoman. Not only were her artefacts of the highest quality, but also she and her followers gained dignity and self-respect by the very act of producing them. Kaplan argues that, with the exception of Ruskin, most of the British designers believed that the principles of good design would not necessarily be violated by the use of machine techniques, provided that the element of pleasure in the creative process was retained.

While Arts and Crafts leaders did not oppose the use of machinery, they were convinced that what mattered most was the process of making. Without joy in labour, production would have neither merit nor value.<sup>82</sup>

Although it is not possible to know just how much of Mort’s work embodied the principle of ‘joy in labour’, her considerable body of work was overwhelmingly hand-produced. Whether this characteristic of her work was due to deliberate choice or lack of support for ventures into mass-produced methods of production is a moot point. What is irrefutable is that 99% of the 500 or so artefacts of Mort’s currently held in Australian galleries, libraries, museums and private collections are hand-made. It is a distinguishing characteristic of her work. The fact that Mort also produced designs for wallpaper speaks to her willingness to design for machine-made items, but the firm of Liberty for which

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<sup>80</sup>Walter Crane in Greensted, *An Anthology of the Arts and Crafts Movement*, 18.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>82</sup>Kaplan, *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe & America*, 12.

she worked (and with which Morris was also closely associated) was known for distributing only well-designed and well-made wallpaper that could easily meet the criteria of being both beautiful and useful.<sup>83</sup> It could therefore justifiably be incorporated into an artisan's portfolio, as both Morris and Mort had done.

Whilst Morris, Pugin and Crane were major influences on Mort's developing Arts and Crafts consciousness, we can also see the influence of others in the pantheon. Mort was indebted to Ruskin, art patron and social philosopher, for her conviction that good design must be based on nature.<sup>84</sup> He produced 'superbly detailed drawings of plants, mountains and the contours of rock formations and then abstracted, from these, simple diagrams to demonstrate how decoration could be derived from natural forms.'<sup>85</sup> It was a principle that Mort adopted wholeheartedly.<sup>86</sup> Ruskin's influence on Mort can also be detected in their shared conviction that it was important to expose children, at an early age, to good quality works of art and artisanship. Ruskin had set up the 'Ruskin Museum' in 1875. Containing many examples of hand-produced items, it was aimed at exposing schoolchildren and labourers to paintings and artefacts of intrinsic merit.<sup>87</sup> Mort's thirty-year career teaching art and design in girls' schools is testament to the degree to which she supported this philosophy.

Ruskin had also established a guild of craftsmen in Yorkshire. Though it ultimately failed, its strengthening of the idea that hand-made artefacts were improved by communal participation in their production played an important part in Mort's later Sydney life. It was also at the heart of a professional practice

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<sup>83</sup> By Victorian times, wallpaper was a product that was overwhelmingly mass-produced, with very little of it being hand made. In later years, along with William Dobell and Margaret Preston, Mort also created designs with Australian motifs for the Manchester and textile company, Sheriden.

<sup>84</sup> E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, eds. *The Works of John Ruskin* Volume 8, (London: George Allen, 1903), 141.

<sup>85</sup> Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 22.

<sup>86</sup> At the time of writing, Mort's family holds 26 sketch books that are not yet archived. They date from 1901 to 1936, with most containing works drawn after her return to Australia. Almost three quarters of the drawings contained in them are drawings based on nature.

<sup>87</sup> Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 93.

that was oriented towards artisanship. Although Mort accepted the notion that societies could lift the standards of artistic craftsmanship through collegial practice, Mort chose her inspiration selectively. Where Ruskin and Morris had strongly advocated communal living experiences, Mort adapted their view to a more moderate stance. She was content to liaise in a collegial relationship with others who wished to produce artefacts that embodied the ‘useful and beautiful’ principle. Mort had no hesitation, however, in accepting the view of another key figure in the movement’s development, Cole, that a nation’s design style should be manifestly recognisable. For Mort that style was to be distinctly Australian, and this was a conviction with which she became completely identified.

In short, Mort’s time in London exposed her to the pervasive influence of figures such as Pugin, Crane, Cole, Ruskin and Morris, and to the influence of the wider movement that they inspired. Like them, she was always mindful of the ideal that the artefacts she and her colleagues were producing should be both functional and aesthetically pleasing. Their production should be complemented by social outcomes such as the promotion of dignity, self-respect and mutual support. Like others in the movement, she was aware of the paradox that lay at the heart of the Arts and Crafts movement – the fact that only a relatively well-off few in society could afford to buy items that had been lovingly hand made by skilled craftsmen. There was also an ultimate goal to aim for – that the artefacts thus produced should have commercial viability. Bradley contends that Morris was conscious of the inconsistency between what he practised and what he preached.<sup>88</sup> In his first public lecture in 1877, Morris’s famous *cri de coeur* ‘I do not want art for a few’ tied him to the figurative masthead of ‘Art for All’.<sup>89</sup> It was a dilemma that was to face the ensuing generations of designer artisans, of whom Mort was one.

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<sup>88</sup> Bradley, *William Morris and his World*, 82.

<sup>89</sup> William Morris in Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 9. As Morris’s work became more established and his name better known, he moved further away from designing and producing artefacts for the middle class, and frequently catered for the nobility, furnishing such select abodes as Castle Howard.

These significant men were not the only influences on Mort. Like them, she was stimulated by those who went before. As well as being heavily influenced by social conditions in the nineteenth century, the roots of the Arts and Crafts movement were also heavily embedded in three major art movements – the Gothic revival, the Pre-Raphaelite movement and the Aesthetic movement. Each of these movements arose as a reaction against the mass-produced items of the industrial revolution; each of them helped to influence not only the direction that was taken by the Arts and Crafts movement but also the shape and content of Mort's work.

A reverence for medieval or Gothic forms of art inspired the Gothic revival. Gothic revivalists believed that old skills needed to be resurrected so that artisans could recapture the appeal of the Middle Ages. In Todd's words, 'There was a feeling that art had been better appreciated then, and that individual ways of working had been encouraged, with devout artists pouring their souls into rich, colourful illumination and good, solid craftsmanship.'<sup>90</sup> In the original Gothic Revival 'important developments were achieved in the fields of architecture, sculpture and manuscript illumination, as well as literature, theology and philosophy'.<sup>91</sup> The Gothic Revival that occurred during the nineteenth century drew on the legacy of those developments, especially in the fields of medieval imagery and design. Mort's description of the furnishing of a medieval hall reveals her interest in and knowledge of the period. She wistfully recounted a time:

when arms and armour clattered against its walls ... and the minstrel sang of brave knights and ladies fair. No craftsmanship was too good for its adornment – rafters were carved, walls painted with pictures of the great deeds of the house and hung with commemorative tapestries.<sup>92</sup>

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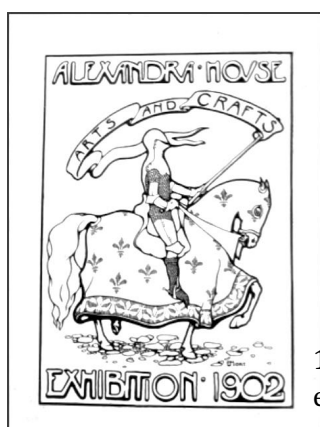
<sup>90</sup> Pamela Todd, *William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Home*, 14.

<sup>91</sup> Megan Aldrich, *Gothic Revival* (London: Phaidon Press, 1994), 13.

<sup>92</sup> Eirene Mort, 'Women's Homes and Their Work No 2 House Decorations–The Hall', *The Sydney Mail*, May 29, 1907.

The romanticism embedded in this description reveals Mort's idealisation of and nostalgia for the past, a fondness that was later to surface in her documenting the historical features of Australia's colonial past before they disappeared from view. Mort's oeuvre contains numerous examples of her comprehensive knowledge of the medieval period. A poster for the Alexandra House Exhibition for 1902 exemplifies her interest in the power of medieval imagery (Fig. 13), while detailed sketches of medieval costumes demonstrate her extensive knowledge of clothing in the Middle Ages (Fig. 14). These drawings reveal the conventional side of Mort's personality that resonated with traditional images and old-fashioned values. The Gothic Revival influence was short-lived in Mort's oeuvre, as it was soon overtaken by her commitment to the use of Australian motifs.<sup>93</sup>

Figure 13



1902 poster for exhibition

Figure 14



Medieval costumes

The

Pre-Raphaelite movement encompassed a belief that nature should be the source of inspiration for art. It was a belief that one of its main proponents, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, insisted on adhering to, even at the end of his life when he asked for plants to be brought into his studio so that he could 'paint them from nature.'<sup>94</sup> This belief in the importance of nature had considerable influence on Mort and was incorporated into many of her sketches. Her great love of nature is exemplified in many of her pen and watercolour sketches such as 'Three Birds' (Fig. 15) and her ceramics such as 'Gum Leaf Vase' (Fig. 16).

<sup>93</sup> Mort did, however, continue to use heraldic emblems in some bookplates for a number of years.

<sup>94</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 154.

Figure 15

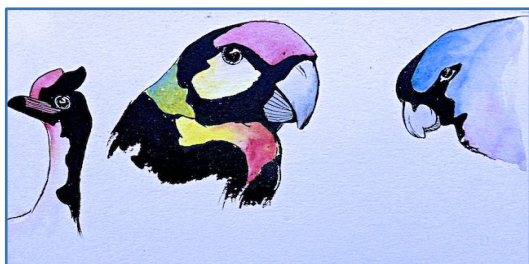
Three  
Birds

Figure 16

Gum Leaf  
vase

Whether she was creating a work of fine art such as an etching, or an artefact such as vase, Mort continually demonstrated the Pre-Raphaelite principle that nature should be the basis for art. The vast majority of Mort's designs were, like those of the Pre-Raphaelites, based on natural forms. She later taught the students in her art class at Kambala school that 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, Holman Hunt, John Mullais, Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burns Jones and George Watts formed a strong group brotherhood [that] left paintings noted for their simplicity of style'.<sup>95</sup> Mort not only recognised that simplicity was the essence of good design, but she sought to incorporate a Pre-Raphaelite style of simplicity into her own work.

The Aesthetic Movement was the third movement that was to have some influence over Mort's work. This movement idealised artistic forms of Eastern art, particularly Japanese and Chinese art. Art historian Isabelle Anscombe holds that the Aesthetic Movement was 'essentially a decorative fashion' that allowed its adherents the opportunity to display 'an overt demonstration of good taste.'<sup>96</sup> The tasteful predilection for 'all things Japanese' spread from Europe to Australia. Artists and artisans who appreciated the way Japanese art embodied the principle of simplicity in design were able to model their own work on that same principle and achieve results that pleased many clients. Although Mort did not adopt a Japanese style of decoration for most of her work, she did appreciate their use of asymmetry. The Japanese influence can be seen in occasional examples of her

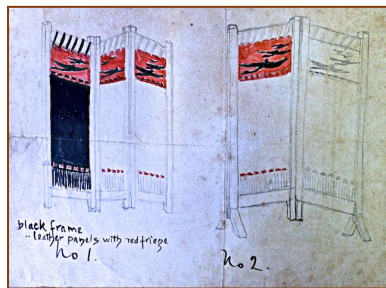
<sup>95</sup> Jean Boulton, 'Art Lesson Notebook: Kambala Church of England Foundation School for Girls', Mort Family Papers, Box 6. n.d.

<sup>96</sup> Isabel Anscombe, *A Woman's Touch* (London Virago 1984), 27.



drawings or designs (Fig. 17). Mort held that Chinese forms of art were ‘inclined to carry conventionalisation [sic] into forms too abstract to retain our interest’ (Fig. 18). She preferred the approach of the Japanese who ‘have interpreted much of the simple treatment of the ancients, with, however, an additional touch of realism’.<sup>97</sup>

Figure 17



Design for a screen

Figure 18



Design for a plate

The three major art movements described above helped to shape the way art was taught at the (then-named) National Art Training School in South Kensington, later to be known as the Royal College of Art.<sup>98</sup> Since it was Mort’s primary place of learning, it is worth examining its history and connection to the Arts and Crafts movement.

Mort did not apply to any recognised institution that trained its students to become masters of the fine arts. Instead, she applied to the prestigious Royal College of Art, an institution that specialised in producing art teachers rather than fine arts painters. The aim of the school was ‘not to train artists who would hang pictures on walls, but to train designers.’<sup>99</sup> Its policy stated that:

<sup>97</sup> E.M. ‘Notes on Design’, Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

<sup>98</sup> The National Art Training School of South Kensington officially became the Royal College of Art in 1896 when Queen Victoria graciously consented to a change of title and the institution was renamed the Royal College of Art. Usage of that name did not become common until early in the next century. Mort preferred to refer to it as the ‘South Kensington Art School’.

<sup>99</sup> Royal College of Art (including National Art Training School), Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851-1951, University of Glasgow, History of Art and HATII, online database 2011 [http://sculpture.gla.ac.uk/view/organization.php?id=msib4\\_1222355292](http://sculpture.gla.ac.uk/view/organization.php?id=msib4_1222355292), (accessed on 4 August, 2016).

the special object of the school is the training of Art teachers of both sexes, of designers, and of Art workmen ... The Royal College of Art is not intended to train painters of easel pictures. It was originally intended to train designers for fabrics ... and craftsmen rather than artists.<sup>100</sup>

The existence of the Royal College of Art was itself the result of a prolonged study of the quality of English design. As a result of lobbying by men such as Peel and Irish reformer Thomas Wyse, an 1835 parliamentary inquiry by a Select Committee on Art and Manufactures led to a report that had a 'far reaching impact'.<sup>101</sup> The establishment of Schools of Design, including the Royal College of Art at South Kensington, was intended both to foster designer artists and to train practical operatives.

Fortuitously for Mort, by the time she arrived at the Royal College of Art in 1899, the philosophy and practices of the Arts and Crafts movement were fully embedded in its curriculum. In the 1880s, director of the then South Kensington Museum, Thomas Armstrong, was 'very active in instilling an Arts and Crafts sensibility in the college and appointed many members of the Art Workers' Guild as lecturers to teach techniques to the students.'<sup>102</sup> By 1898, Crane had become its principal and the institution had consolidated its position as an important centre for the promotion of Arts and Crafts.<sup>103</sup> In 1899, the Council of Advice on Art recommended that the school should have four faculties: Architecture, Painting, Sculpture and Design. Stuart Macdonald contends that the fact the Design School was prioritised at the school was due to Crane, asserting that 'the scheme of reorganisation was mainly his'.<sup>104</sup> Crane fostered the conditions in

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Sir Robert Peel quoted in Paul A.C Sproll 'Matters of Taste and Matters of Design: British Government Intervention in Art Education 1835' *Studies in Art Education: a Journal of Issues and Research* 35, no.2 (1994), 110.

<sup>102</sup> Neil Parkinson, E-mail to Pam Lane, 16 April, 2013. The Art Workers' Guild was formed by a group of British architects in 1884. It denied the distinction between fine and applied art, and promoted William Morris's approach to decorative arts.

<sup>103</sup> It is unlikely that Mort, a first year student, would have studied under Walter Crane, as their respective attendances only coincided for the year of 1899.

<sup>104</sup> Stuart Macdonald, *The History and Philosophy of Art Education* (London: University of London Press 1970), 297.

which the ethos of the Arts and Crafts movement could permeate the classrooms. Enthusiastic students, such as Mort, would have breathed in the heady decorative arts air and been swept up in the enthusiasm for producing items that were both beautiful and functional. Photos of the Royal College of Art, taken in 1906, demonstrate the students' absorption in their lesson (Fig. 19).

Figure 19

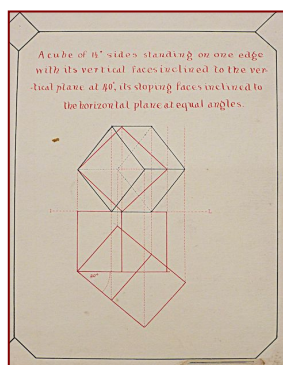


Art class in the Royal College of Art at South Kensington

Mort would have been aware of the commitment to the Arts and Crafts movement displayed by her teachers at the Royal College of Art, and the mentoring role they assumed by passing their skills on to others. The Arts and Crafts movement needed its disciples as much as any other contemporary art movement. The movement's growth depended not only on converting art students and art practitioners to its principles of the need for 'applied' rather than 'fine' arts, but also on the importance of educating them in the techniques and skills they would need to produce applied arts items. Moreover, there was an imperative to operate in the wide social space of the upper and middle classes and 'permeate public consciousness' in order to develop and influence prospective clients.<sup>105</sup> Small wonder then that Mort absorbed this desire to spread the Arts and Crafts word with an almost evangelical zeal, and began to induct others into its ethos almost as soon as she returned to Sydney.

<sup>105</sup> Steven Adams, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (North Dighton: J.G. Press, 1996) 70.

Figure 20



Excerpt from the  
Geometrical Drawing  
submission

As well as taking lessons in Model Drawing at the Royal College of Art, Mort also took lessons in Geometrical Drawing (Fig 20). She sat for exams in September 1901 in both subjects for the Board of Education of the Administrative County of London, and gained passes (second class) in each exam. Mort's three-year course at the Royal College of Art gave her the qualification to become an art teacher in 1903. It undoubtedly helped to make Mort a competent,

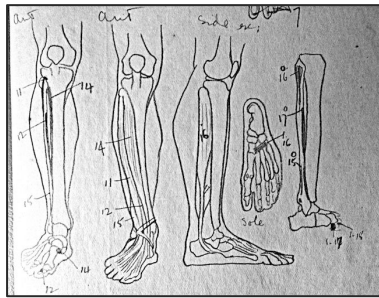
though not a brilliant, artist and eventually led her towards becoming a first-rate artisan rather than a first-rate artist. Much of her artwork also demonstrates her love of the *en plein air* style of painting, a style that suited her preference for portraying the image or scene in front of her as realistically as she could.<sup>106</sup> Her marriage of nature-and-arts (and nature-and-crafts) is reflected throughout the sketches and artefacts she produced, not only during her London years, but also throughout the rest of her life.

Although Mort liked to draw landscapes, she also knew that she needed an understanding of anatomy if she was to draw people and animals well. Her anatomical studies included drawings of the anatomy of the human torso (Fig.21), horses (Fig. 22) and birds (Fig. 23). By drawing subjects such as these, Mort sought to represent skeletal and muscular body parts by concentrating on technical skills such as accuracy of form and precision of proportion.

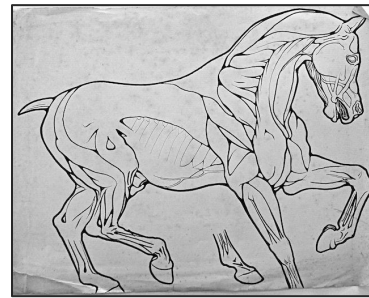
Figure 21

Figure 22

<sup>106</sup> Ralph Mayer, *A Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960), 299. The expressions 'en plein air' and 'sur-le-motif' were used from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards to describe painting done outdoors. Mayer states that, prior to that time, almost all landscape painting was done wholly within the studio.

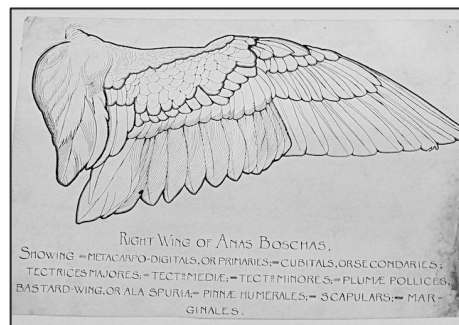


Study of human leg



Study of horse

Figure 23



Right Wing of Anas Boschas

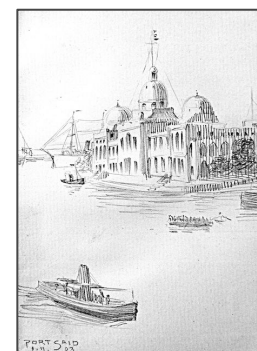
As well as drawing landscapes and animals during her time in Britain, Mort also practised drawing a variety of subjects, ranging from historic buildings and street scenes to portraits (Fig. 24), and foreign cities (Fig. 25). The diversity in her subject matter reflects both the comprehensiveness of her training and her skill as an artist.

Figure 24



Portrait of man with cap and scarf

Figure 25

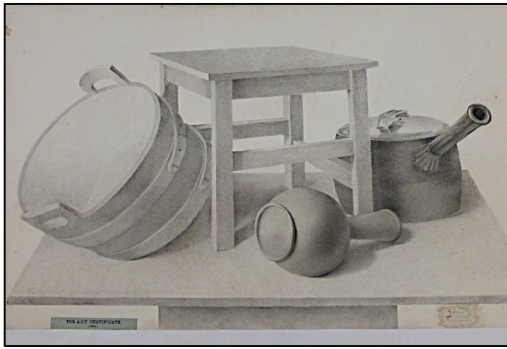


Foreign city of Port Said

In addition to attending the Royal College of Art, Mort attended no less than four other prestigious institutions: the Grosvenor Life School, the Royal Drawing Society, London University and the Royal School of Art Needlework. At

the Grosvenor Life School, Mort enrolled in a three-year course in Art under William Donne, where she practised using a variety of artistic media including pencil (Fig. 26), pen and ink (Fig 27), charcoal (Fig. 28) and watercolour<sup>107</sup> (Fig. 29).

Figure 26



Still Life - pen and ink

Figure 27

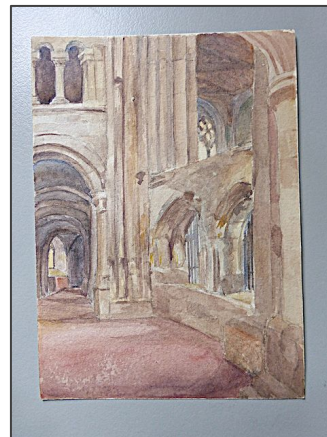


Figure 28



Bulldog - charcoal

Figure 29

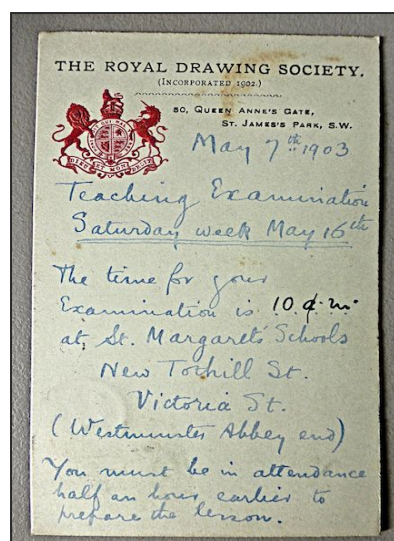


St Bartholomew's Church -  
watercolour

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<sup>107</sup> Mort later transferred many of her drawing skills to etching, a skill she did not acquire until her second trip to London in 1912.

Figure 30



Mort's invitation to attend the Royal Drawing Society exam

Mort furthered her mastery of drawing by attending lessons at the Royal Drawing Society during the first term of 1903 and sat for an exam at the end of the term (Fig. 30). The quality of Mort's illustrative work, together with her exam results, led to her being offered a position there as a teacher/artist at the society. Mort was beginning to reap the rewards from the hard work she had put into the acquisition of skills during the preceding three years. Employment as a teacher in London was a good omen for a young woman hoping to be able to continue to teach art on her return to Sydney.<sup>108</sup>

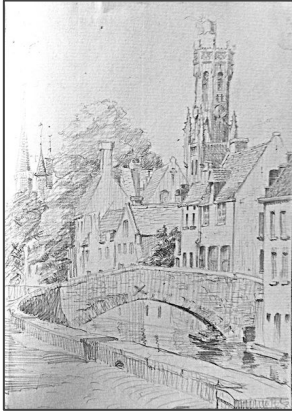
Mort also attended London University where she studied medieval art under Kaines Smith, a recognised authority on English and European art of the period.<sup>109</sup> She studied 'Illustration' under 'various masters' there.<sup>110</sup> Evidence of Mort's enduring fondness for English and European gothic and medieval art and buildings, together with her love of heraldic symbols, noted above, can be found throughout her sketchbooks, bookplates and posters (Figs. 31–32).

<sup>108</sup> Mort stated that her original intention, on her return from London, was to be an art teacher. Article by A.G. Stephens in *The Bookfellow* (Adelaide: 10 Septmeber, 1910) 4.

<sup>109</sup> E.M. 'Biography of Artist' (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1969), 1.

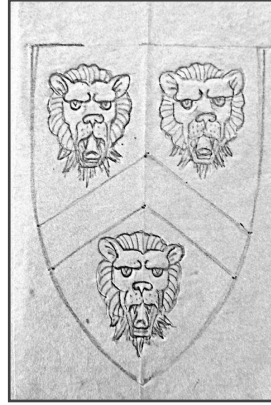
<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

Figure 31



Quai Verte, Bruges

Figure 32



Heraldic crest

But Mort was not only studying art; she was also learning the skills of applied arts. At the newly established Royal College of Art Needlework, Mort enrolled in a three-year course, completing it by the end of 1902.<sup>111</sup> Embroidery was one of the few professions that was regarded, throughout the nineteenth century, as being ‘a traditionally feminine craft’ that did not pose a direct threat to men.<sup>112</sup> The College’s name was, however, something of a misnomer. It did not restrict itself merely to needlework. John McPhee has outlined the wide range of skills covered in this design course. They involved ‘the study of interior design, including furniture, textiles, carpets, wallpaper, tapestries, wall hangings, and various painted and embroidered accessories, and also included specific design

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<sup>111</sup> The Royal School of Needlework, ‘History’, [www.royal-needlework.org.uk](http://www.royal-needlework.org.uk). The college’s premises initially were ‘in a small room above a bonnet shop in Sloane St, London. Although the College moved in 1903 to a new, purpose-built centre in Exhibition Road, near the Victoria and Albert Museum, it seems unlikely that Mort would have studied in this new facility. The college is now known as the Royal School of Needlework and is based at Hampton Court Palace.

<sup>112</sup> Anthea Callen in *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design* eds. Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham, (London: The Women’s Press, 1989), 156 -157.



studies and lessons in embroidery, appliqué, stencilling and pyrography.’<sup>113</sup> Mort’s later body of work attests to the fact that she mastered many of these skills.<sup>114</sup> In also attending the Royal School of Art Needlework’s Higher Art School, Mort joined other ‘promising artists, craftsmen, designers and architects [who] lectured and gave advice to working students attending evening classes.’<sup>115</sup> Gaining a Design Diploma there, Mort went on to become an expert in needlework and tapestry.

Mort’s attendance at no less than five prestigious art institutions demonstrates not only her adventurous spirit and aspirational personality, but also her commitment to gaining maximum knowledge of, and experience in, as many arts and crafts media as possible. The simple fact that such training was available in formal teaching, and that Mort gained certificates and accreditation from all these institutions indicates the role her skills played in a society looking for valorisation of such crafts amid the pace of industrialisation – and also something of the wider context in which the Arts and Crafts movement had its prominence. But such pursuits also marked some differences between Mort and other young Australian women who were her contemporaries (or near contemporaries), who also had the opportunity to study art abroad, but who focused increasingly on the ‘easel arts’.

Only Thea Proctor came close to Mort around that time in accessing multiple forms of artistic media. Proctor not only painted watercolours, she also did lithographs and produced flower arrangements and delicate artworks on silk fans. Margaret Preston reserved her skills and time for painting and pottery, while Stella Bowen restricted herself to painting and Gladys Reynell confined herself mainly to pottery. In gaining a multitude of skills from her time in London, Mort stepped outside the earlier conventional limits of female

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<sup>113</sup> John McPhee, ‘Eirene Mort & A National School of Design’ *Australian Antique Collector*, 38<sup>th</sup> Edition, (July–December 1989), 48–49.

<sup>114</sup> Although Mort’s ‘Biography of Artist’ lodged with the AGNSW includes the names of all the courses she undertook while in London, it does not include details of which courses were full time or part time.

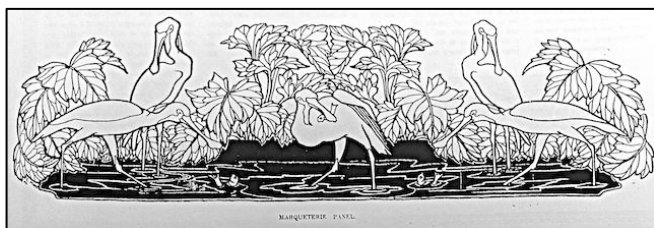
<sup>115</sup> McPhee, ‘Eirene Mort & A National School of Design’, 49.

professions. Her willingness to turn her hand to almost any media made her well equipped to begin to earn a living as an applied arts practitioner when she returned to Sydney. Such capacities set her up to become an emblem of the twentieth century's independent New Woman, while, at the same time, marking a distinction between the breadth of her interests and the more focused 'modernity' pursued by many others.

### Applying London training

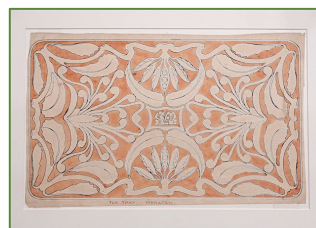
During her London years, Mort began to experiment with designing and producing artefacts for commercial sale. Design was the key element that underpinned the making of any artefact. For Mort, beauty could be created by simple repetition, while practicality could be achieved by ensuring that the items for which beautiful designs were being produced had a utilitarian quality. Many of her designs, such as the 'Spoonbills' design for a marquetry panel (Fig. 33) and the 'Desert Pea' motif for the design for a tray (Fig. 34) show how well she mastered simple repetition, and the importance she placed on the aesthetic appeal of a design based on natural forms.

Figure 33



Spoonbills

Figure 34



Desert Pea

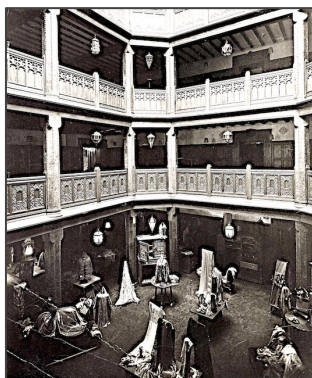
Mort's interest in aesthetic appeal and repetition carried over into her designs for wallpapers. A journalist for the *All About Australia* magazine, noted her efforts in this area, reporting that:

Miss Irene [sic] Mort, daughter of the Rev. H Wallace Mort of Woollahra, has been in England some time studying at the Kensington Art School drawings, black and white prints ... and the designing of wallpapers (a most paying game and quite a new idea with English people).<sup>116</sup>

<sup>116</sup> 'Social Column' *All About Australia* (Sydney: Yewen Publishing Co., March 1, 1902), 215.

Wallpapers were among the applied arts items often sold through such high fashion emporiums as Liberty & Co of Regent Street – the ‘Laura Ashley’ of

Figure 35

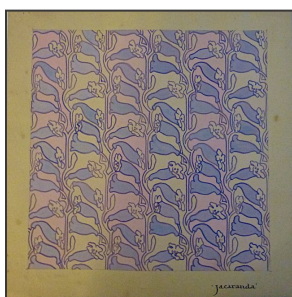


Liberty & Co. c. 1902

Victorian times (Fig. 35). Although the firm of Liberty & Co no longer has any records of Mort’s employment there, Margaret Mort later recalled that, at some point, her aunt ‘did a lot of children’s designs for Liberty’s’. Some of these designs may well have been for wallpapers.<sup>117</sup> In addition, at least two historians attest to the fact that Mort worked for the London firm.<sup>118</sup> Similarities in style can be seen between Morris’s and Mort’s wallpaper designs,

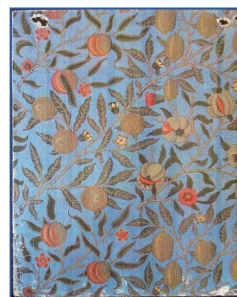
with Mort’s Jacaranda wallpaper (Fig. 36) and Morris’s Pomegranate wallpaper (Fig. 37) both exemplifying simplicity of design, close repetition of motifs and appropriate harmony of colour.

Figure 36



Mort’s Jacaranda

Figure 37



Morris’s Pomegranate

Another indication of Mort’s interest in simplicity of design (and her link

<sup>117</sup> Margaret Henry, Interview by author 20 June 2015 in Newcastle, NSW, transcript with author.

<sup>118</sup> Jennifer Isaacs notes in her 1987 book *The Gentle Arts: 200 years of Australian’s Women’s Domestic and Decorative Arts* that Mort ‘worked for four years for Liberty, designing fabrics with Australian flora and fauna motifs’ (p. 168) while Michael Bogle is another historian who notes, in his book *A National Spirit 1880–1970*, (p. 51) that Mort designed fabrics for the firm of Liberty.

to Liberty's) can be seen in the small book published by the firm that she kept.<sup>119</sup> Mort's copy of this book, entitled *Nursery Wall-Papers*, shows signs of wear, tear and repair, as though she perused it many times. The concept of simplicity is clearly demonstrated in the book's illustrations, one of which is included below (Fig. 38). The preface of the book also highlights simplicity:

The object is to train the eye from infancy to discriminate and enjoy artistic work ... (that) consists of bold and simple outline pictures illustrating Nursery Rhymes; Domestic, Farm-yard and other Animals.<sup>120</sup>

Figure 38

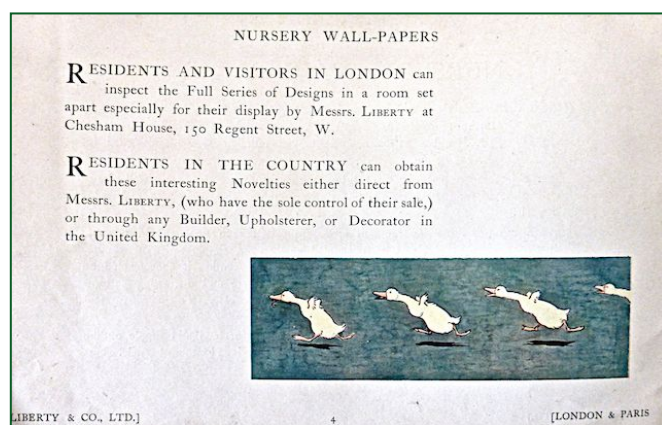
Nursery  
wall-papers

Figure 39

Mort's first  
personal bookplate

One of the first items that Mort produced while living in London was the bookplate. In 1902, she made one for her cousin, Barbara Fremantle, and another for herself. Her own bookplate featured an image of a mouse in a circular frame placed above her initials (Fig. 39).<sup>121</sup> Mort later designed three more personal bookplates. Unlike her first offering, each later bookplate used an Australian motif to convey her strong personal identification with her native land. (Figs. 40–

<sup>119</sup> Cecil Aldin and John Hassall, *Nursery Wall-Papers* (London and Paris. Liberty & Co., nd.) 7.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

<sup>121</sup> Eirene Mort. *A Checklist of the Bookplates of Eirene Mort* (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1943), 3.

41) The final personal bookplate, with the gum tree rooted firmly in Australian *terra firma*, expresses the symbiotic relationship between Mort, the Australian continent and its iconic gum tree (Fig. 42).

Figure 40



Figure 41

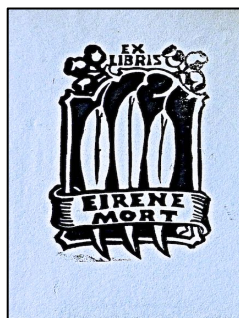


Figure 42



#### Mort's later personal bookplates

An ideal and financially rewarding way to implement the Arts and Crafts ethos, the bookplate was an artefact that was in demand by discerning middle-class clients during her lifetime. It was individually designed and produced, its illustration symbolising the person whose name it bore, as 'a personalised limited- edition miniature artistic print'.<sup>122</sup> During her time in London, Mort produced only five bookplates, including her own 'mouse' one.<sup>123</sup> The other four were for family members and for friends. It is not likely that she received payment for them; her commercial production of bookplates is more likely to have begun after she returned to Sydney.

In 1903, Mort began another venture that was eventually to become commercially rewarding. Putting into practice the drawing skills she had learned during her time in London, Mort designed a children's alphabet. Notes from this time show that Mort was initially considering using such generalised images as

<sup>122</sup> , J. Elizabeth Little, *Bedrooms and Bookplates: the Designs of Eirene Mort* (Bachelor of Art Theory Honours thesis, University of NSW College of Fine Arts 2005), 56.

<sup>123</sup> E.M. 'List of Bookplates', 06/017. Box 2, Item 2. (Canberra: National Library of Australia).



McPhee holds a similar view on Mort's drawing of wombats, observing that 'the animals Eirene Mort has drawn do not look very much like real wombats' (Fig. 45).<sup>126</sup> Despite these criticisms,

#### Letter 'W' for Wombat

McPhee gives Mort credit for realising that, for Australian children, E for Emu is more relevant than E for Elephant. McPhee assigns to Mort's alphabet the place of being one of the earliest of her works to feature Australian animals and birds. The alphabet testifies to her lifelong interest in creating and promoting specifically Australian decoration, despite the rather awkward example of the inclusion amongst her choices of animals, of Australian Aborigine for the letter 'A'.<sup>127</sup> Mort's decision to use only Australian animals in the alphabet was a sound commercial one that capitalised on the uniqueness of her product. It confirmed her commitment to promoting the use of Australian images in her work, and strengthened her determination to be identified as a 'distinctly Australian character' in her own right.

In this same year of 1903, Mort also began another experiment that had some potential to become commercially successful. It was the venture of providing book illustrations. Art historian Joan Kerr and art curator McPhee cite Mort as having gained, through the patronage of Princess Alexandra, a commission to illustrate Sarah Bibbie's book *From Cape to Cairo* published in London in 1903.<sup>128</sup> Diligent searching has unfortunately failed to reveal that a copy of this book exists in any Australian or British libraries.<sup>129</sup> Mort certainly

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., Preface iii.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Joan Kerr and John McPhee 'Eirene Mort' *Design and Art Australia Online* database <https://www.daao.org.au/bio/eirene-mort/biography/> (accessed 9 September 2015).

<sup>129</sup> The Rare Books librarian at the British Library has checked not only the British Library's catalogue, but also the UK and Ireland's academic and specialist library union catalogue, COPAC, and other library meta-catalogues such as OCLC Worldcat and the KVC Catalogue and the antiquarian book dealers online marketplace, Libri – all to no avail.

knew Bibbie, and may have visited her at her home in Mayfair.<sup>130</sup> Mort later tried her hand at book illustrating several times, although it was an artistic avenue that did not prove commercially successful for her in the long run.

## Conclusion

There is no evidence to suggest that Mort's time in London was meant to equip her to become a 'fine arts' practitioner. Instead, the courses she undertook and the skills she developed all suggest that Mort wanted only to learn how to produce aesthetically pleasing artefacts for everyday use in people's homes, and to share her knowledge and skills with others. Her adventurous and aspirational personality prompted her to absorb, and later promote, the main principles of the movement – beauty, usefulness, national expression of good design, the well-being of the designer and the social interaction generated by networking. By learning from skilled London practitioners of the movement, Mort was able to master many craft-based techniques in a variety of artistic media, thus breaking the bounds of traditional female occupations.

The timing of Mort's London sojourn was serendipitous. To have arrived there just as the Arts and Crafts movement reached its apogee meant that she was able to benefit from its philosophies and practices without falling prey to its excesses. She absorbed the ideas of men such as Pugin, Crane, Cole, Ruskin and Morris along with the legacies of the Gothic revival, the Pre-Raphaelite movement and the Aesthetic movement.

When Mort left London, she took with her an appreciation of the value of handcrafted items, an awareness of the need for simplicity in design, a conviction that she must promote identifiably Australian motifs and an understanding of the importance of social networking. In helping to transplant British Arts and Crafts philosophies and practices into Australian soil, Mort found her life's work. In fact,

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<sup>130</sup> 'Address Instructions', Mort Family Papers, Box 7. Bibbie lived at 31 Charles St, Mayfair, and gave Mort directions to take the tube to the now abandoned Down St tube station to get to her place.



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in her aunt's words, she 'gave herself to it as a vocation'.<sup>131</sup> She became an evangelist for spreading the good news of the Arts and Crafts gospel to others. Ultimately, however, the movement's hold was a two-edged one. It engendered in Mort such a loyalty to its principles and practises that she seemed unable to relinquish them and move on to new and challenging forms of art.

Perhaps, however, the most poignant aspect of Mort's London years may best be seen at the personal level. It is not possible to know if Shepard's alleged rejection of Mort set her on the path to spinsterhood. What is certain is that the relationship between Mort and Weston that began in London was to last for the next six decades. They lived and worked together in a mutually supportive partnership, with each one complementing the other in personal and professional ways. It is difficult to contemplate the significance of Mort's place in Australian cultural and artistic history without factoring in the unconditional support given her by Weston.

Mort's days in London had been transformational. She had prised open the oyster of London and found inside it the pearl of the Arts and Crafts movement. Now Mort and Weston were ready to begin their lives together as 'New Women', earning their own living and sharing their love of applied arts with others. It was time to go home.

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<sup>131</sup> Margaret Mort, 'Eulogy for the late Eirene Mort', December 1977, Mort Family Papers, Box 5.



## Chapter 3

### The Golden Years

(1904–1913)

*We do not hesitate to predict for the artist a brilliant and successful career*

- 'Genette'<sup>1</sup>

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Figure 1



Eirene Mort and  
Nora Weston c. 1904

When Mort and Weston (Fig. 1) returned to Sydney in December 1903, they were unproven as artists or artisans. They were, however, well placed to tap into the growing popularity of the Arts and Crafts movement. The *Sydney Mail's* prediction of a 'brilliant and successful career' for Mort seemed possible and perhaps even probable.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Genette', 'Social Gossip' *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, May 9, 1906.

These were the most productive years of Mort's life, a period when several factors combined to make this decade her 'golden years'. Three aspects of her career stand out at this point in time. Firstly, although Mort's initial aim was to teach art and design, her focus gradually changed during the decade from being a *teacher* (to middle-class girls studying art as a subject in private schools) to being a *mentor* (to women who aspired to be artists and artisans in Sydney's middle-class society). Secondly, she established a business model that led her into a variety of entrepreneurial ventures through which she managed to attain financial independence. Thirdly, Mort's networking practices facilitated her role as a cultural agent for applied arts. Each of these aspects shaped the trajectory of her career, contributing to her emblematic standing as a professional, independent, income-earning 'New Woman'.

## Mort as educator

Initially, Mort set out to earn her living as a teacher of art and design, a profession for which her London 'South Kensington' training had amply prepared her. She outlined her philosophy of teaching art in a 500-word flyer advertising the private group lessons that she gave in her studio.

By encouraging a child to express himself pictorially under sympathetic supervision, his eyes can be trained to detect, his mind to accept, his hand to depict truth, beauty, idealism etc., and an individuality of thought, expression and technique will be found to be compatible with a system of class teaching. The simple crafts, and above all, elements of design, taken in conjunction with drawing, will provide a field for ingenuity and manual training ... which so many boys and girls sadly lack.<sup>2</sup>

In this, Mort exemplified the South Kensington approach to teaching art in paying little attention to colour but 'concentrating heavily on design,

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<sup>2</sup> Eirene Mort, 'Drawing Lessons Flyer' 06/017. Box 2, Item 2. (Canberra: National Library of Australia). n.d. Mort's use of the masculine pronoun 'his' is probably generic, as there is no evidence that any of the children she taught during this period, either in schools or privately, were male.

n.

emphasising skills of drawing in symmetry and proportion' as an almost moral imperative.<sup>3</sup>

Mort's private lessons to adults and children were conducted in her city studio.<sup>4</sup> Adults were taught individually; the lessons for children were offered in her studio to groups rather than to individuals, a practice designed to encourage social interaction.<sup>5</sup> All lessons given in her studio were based on the Royal Drawing Society's syllabus, as were the lessons in exclusive Sydney private girls' schools. Rebecca Kummerfeld holds that for artists, teaching (either in private lessons or in schools) 'offered essential support for those working within the volatile Sydney art market ... and helped to fund their artistic endeavours'.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond providing financial support, these classes expressed wider dynamics of the time, particularly in the education of girls. The concept that girls were entitled to the same kind of broad education that had characterised boys' education was gaining ground in both England and Australia. During Mort's own years of primary and secondary education, there had been only four private girls' schools in the eastern suburbs of Sydney.<sup>7</sup> Mort had attended the most progressive of the four – St Catherine's at Waverley. It is therefore not surprising that, in the early years of the twentieth century, Mort was drawn to teach at the similarly progressive Shirley school, at Edgecliff (Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Rebecca Kummerfeld, 'Ethel A. Stephens' "at home": art education for girls and women', *History of Education Review*, Bundoora 44.2 (2015), 213.

<sup>4</sup> Private lessons for individuals may have cost more than group lessons. The only evidence for fee structures relates to a later period in Mort's life. If fees in these early years were based on the same principles as the fees recorded in Mort's Accounts Book of 1924–1935, then these lessons formed between five and ten per cent of her total income.

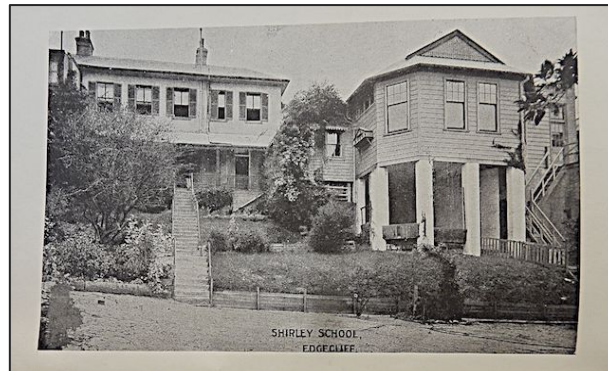
<sup>5</sup> E.M. 'Drawing Lessons Flyer'.

<sup>6</sup> Kummerfeld, 'Ethel A. Stephens' "at home" ', 210.

<sup>7</sup> While there were four private girls' schools (Claremont College, Kambala, The Shirley School and St Catherine's) in the late nineteenth century, in the early twenty-first century there are nine private schools (excluding Roman Catholic, Jewish and Greek Orthodox schools) that cater for girls in the CBD and eastern suburbs of Sydney.

<sup>8</sup> Rosamund Docker quoted in May Munro, *Shirley, the Story of a School in Sydney* (Killara: Shirley School Old Girls Union, 1967), 4. Former pupil Docker recalled that 'harmonious self-development came from self-activity in as many ways as possible. The emphasis therefore was on learning, not on teaching. The teachers taught persons and not subjects. ... The key-note was co-operation, not competition.'

Figure 2



The Shirley School,  
Edgecliff

In Mort's time, Harriet Newcomb and Margaret Hodge were joint directors of this demonstration school, offering a broad curriculum that promised not only a 'high moral tone' but was also 'among the first girls' schools with a regular cricket team'.<sup>9</sup> There is no record of the length of time Mort worked there, but school records show that she was teaching at The Shirley School in 1907, providing a class in 'Design for Australian Living'.<sup>10</sup>

The very title of this class reveals that, from the start of her teaching career, Mort intended her lessons to focus on two priorities – design and Australian content. For Mort, good design was essential. She believed that 'without design, work cannot bear the scrutiny of time'.<sup>11</sup> Of equal importance was the principle that Australian designs should reflect Australian motifs.

Let us have the best that the nations, past and present, can offer us, but let us have something of our own too, and the day will come when one will be able to point confidently and surely to a specimen of Australian work, as now one can single out a Greek sculpture, Indian metal work or a Japanese woodcut.<sup>12</sup>

At the Shirley school, not only did Mort give art and design lessons but she also produced, in 1908, a folio of thirty-one drawings that were suitable for a

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<sup>9</sup> Margaret Bettison, 'Hodge, Margaret Emily (1858–1938)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hodge-margaret-emily>, (accessed on 23 January 2017).

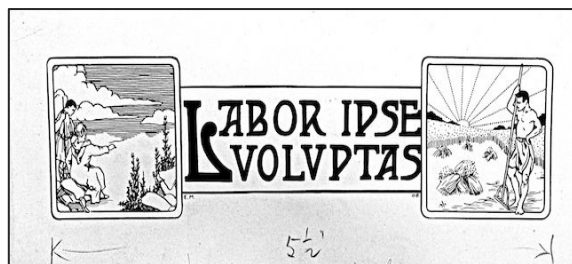
<sup>10</sup> May Munro, *Shirley: the Story of a School in Sydney* (Killara: Shirley Old Girls' Union, 1966), 28. Mort's 'Accounts Book 1924-1935' records income from The Shirley School as late as 1930.

<sup>11</sup> E.M., 'Arts and Crafts and Australian Design', *Art and Architecture*, iv, no. 2, (1907): 63.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

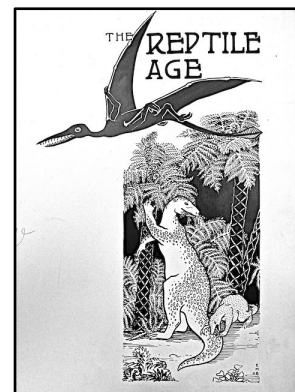
songbook, entitled 'In the Australian Bush and Other Songs', the words of which had been written by Hodge.<sup>13</sup> Mort's drawings addressed the wide variety of the songs' subjects, ranging from the reptile age to the school motto in Latin (Figs. 3-4).<sup>14</sup>

Figure 3



Illustrations from 'In the Australian Bush and Other Songs'

Figure 4



Mort's employment opportunities were not always so well aligned to her skills as they were at The Shirley School. Fifi Hawthorn, headmistress of Kambala, recalled in her memoir that, when Mort returned from studying abroad as a fully qualified art teacher, Miss Gurney (the then headmistress) offered her 'a position teaching dress designing and corsetry, which she very naturally declined.'<sup>15</sup>

Women such as Winifred West and Edith Badham, newly arrived from England, were establishing private girls' schools in and around Sydney during this period.<sup>16</sup> The visionary nature of entrepreneurial ventures such as these, combined with uncertain economic times, meant that the duration of many of these private girls' schools was short-lived.<sup>17</sup> Their impermanence was a major factor in Mort's peripatetic teaching footprint in various Sydney suburbs. At least

<sup>13</sup> E.M., Illustrations for 'In the Australian Bush and Other Songs', ML MSS 2589, 6. Mitchell Library, Sydney. The songbook was reproduced by a Cyclostyle machine and was used at school assemblies.

<sup>14</sup> The school motto 'Labor Ipse Voluptas' is Latin for 'Work itself is pleasure'.

<sup>15</sup> Fifi Hawthorne, *Kambala* (Sydney: The Wentworth Press, 1972), 9. Mort taught at Kambalah in the 1930s.

<sup>16</sup> Badham founded the Sydney Church of England Girls Grammar School (SCEGGS) at Darlinghurst in 1895. West founded Frensham at Bowral in 1913.

<sup>17</sup> Margeurite Gillezau, email to Pam Lane, 16 April 2013.

she was able to use a progressive 'old girls' network to help her obtain employment in another school when the one in which she was working ceased to exist. Her positions appear to have come by word-of-mouth, that being the usual *modus operandi* at the time.<sup>18</sup>

During her thirty-year teaching career, Mort taught at no less than ten girls' schools.<sup>19</sup> Eight of these teaching appointments occurred in the first decade after her return to Sydney.<sup>20</sup> They were:

- Abbotsleigh, Wahroonga
- Cambridge School, Hunters Hill
- Holmer School, Parramatta.
- Kambala School, Edgecliffe
- Kelvin Girls College, Neutral Bay
- Kelvin Girls College, Watson's Bay
- The Shirley School, Edgecliff
- SCEGGS Chatswood

Mort's longest teaching position was the 25 years she spent at Abbotsleigh, where she began teaching in 1912.<sup>21</sup> (Figs. 5-6) To Nancye Kent Perry, former Abbotsleigh pupil with whom Mort later corresponded for many years, Mort was the 'well-loved and respected art teacher' (Fig. 5) who taught her well and gave great encouragement, and whose attention was highly personalised.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, students' reports were also individualised, often written on Mort's own personal notepaper, rather than school stationery (Fig.6).<sup>23</sup> She was a teacher in a school, rather than a school teacher.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. It is also likely that Mort's teaching appointments were part-time, as it was usual at the time for schools to employ part-time teachers in subjects such as art and music.

<sup>19</sup> E.M. 'Biography of Artist', (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1964).

<sup>20</sup> Mort also taught at the Sydney Kindergarten Training Colleges at Darlinghurst and Waverley.

<sup>21</sup> It is possible to deduce the date Mort began teaching at Abbotsleigh by subtracting 25 years from the date of her official retirement (Dec. 1936), we know that she would have begun teaching at Abbotsleigh circa the beginning of 1912.

<sup>22</sup> Nancye. K. Perry to Anne Bateson, 5 February 1978, 03/ 127, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>23</sup> E.M., 'Report for Term ending 12 December 1919', T/M/2, Abbotsleigh Archives, Wahroonga.



Figure 5

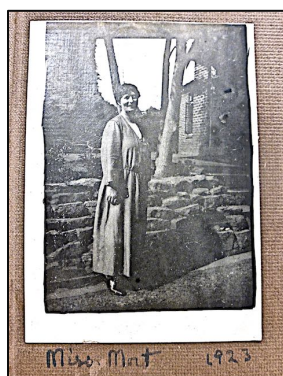
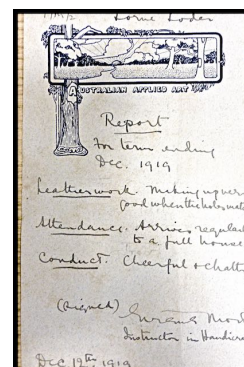
Mort at  
Abbotsleigh

Figure 6

School report for  
Lorne Lodes

Yet, despite this emphasis on the quality of her teaching, Mort also managed to achieve quantity as well. In these schools and throughout her career, Mort instructed over 5,000 students in art and design.<sup>24</sup> She kept a book listing all her pupils' names, and some details of their achievements, including their student identification numbers at public exams.<sup>25</sup> This detailed record keeping not only indicates a personal interest in individual pupils, but also signals a teacher who cared deeply about her students and their achievements. As Kummerfeld argues:

Art historians and biographers tend to dismiss this teaching work as a means to an end. Yet their teaching had an impact and influence on the next generation, and shaped their understanding and relationship with the arts'.<sup>26</sup>

The fact that many of Mort's pupils, such as Perry and Lodes, also took private classes or corresponded with her after they had left school is evidence of the enduring relationships she built in this work.<sup>27</sup>

### Mort as artist

While Mort's teaching connected with progressive ideas of girls' education throughout this decade, Mort's artwork – when not dealing with applied

<sup>24</sup> E.M. to Nancye Kent Perry, 12 August 1968, 03/ 127 Folder 1, NLA, Canberra.

<sup>25</sup> E.M. to Mrs Kent, 21 October 1936, 03/ 127 Folder 1, NLA, Canberra.

<sup>26</sup> Kummerfeld, 'Ethel A. Stephens' "at home" ', 210.

<sup>27</sup> E.M. to Nancye Kent Perry, 03/ 127 Folder 1, NLA, Canberra and letters to E.M. Mort Family Papers, Box 5; see also 'Accounts Book' Mort Family Papers, Box 7,

purposes or commissions – concentrated on nostalgic depictions of landscapes (Fig. 7), animal studies (Fig. 8), old buildings (Fig. 9) and quaint people (Fig. 10).

Figure 7



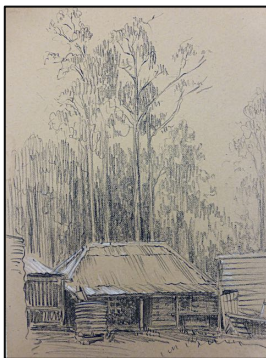
Bush Pond - landscape

Figure 8



Pelican – animal study

Figure 9



Glenmark Slab Hut,  
Tasmania – old building

Figure 10



Old Man and Dog – quaint figure

Occasionally departing from realistic subjects to draw fantasy creatures such as mermaids, seahorses, hungry frogs or dragon ships, Mort subscribed to a vogue for what Robert Holden sees as ‘an alternative existence far removed from daily realities; an other-world landscape peopled by elves and fairies ... mermaids and magic puddings (Figs. 11-13).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Holden, *The Golden Age of Australian Fantasy* Sydney: National Trust Centre, 1985.

Figure 11



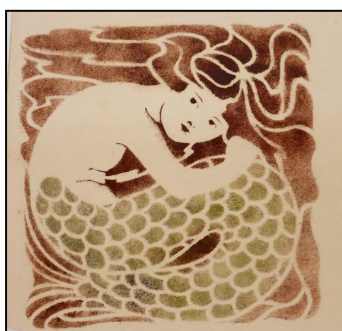
Dragon Ship

Figure 12



Tarasque & the Rhone Maid

Figure 13



Mermaid

Even within this style, Mort was still experimental in some ways, a watercolour entitled ‘a female figure and six dancing satyrs’ showing her to be, in art curator Robert Bell’s opinion ‘at the top of her game in terms of design, subject matter, composition and the execution of watercolour’<sup>29</sup>

(Fig. 14).

Figure 14

Female figure and six dancing satyrs



Around the same time, a Japanese-styled design in her illustration of a coral tree for a piano back showed similar versatility in adapting one design to

<sup>29</sup> Robert Bell, Interview by Pam Lane, 20 October 2016 in Canberra, ACT, transcript with author.

different uses (Figs. 15-16).<sup>30</sup> Mort's attraction to Japanese style was reflected in a feature article on interior design she wrote for the *Sydney Mail* in 1907:

The Japanese, who are such masters of decorative art, adorn their rooms with one ornament at a time – probably some exquisite vase – in which is arranged with perfect taste a single flower or natural spray. To us, this arrangement would seem very bare; ... but if we would look more to simplicity in our decorations, we would be able to take more pleasure in our ornaments. Overcrowded, they cannot look well.<sup>31</sup>

Figure 15



Piano back design

Figure 16



'Coral Tree' stencil print

As Alison Broinowski contends, such an attraction was part of a wider exploration of a changing nation's image of itself as much as it was a challenge to 'fear, ignorance and bigotry'.<sup>32</sup>

What predominated was a devotion to the decorative purpose of such styles. This impetus saw Mort exploring Post-Impressionism, using it in her watercolour 'Butterfly' (Fig. 17) and in a pen and ink drawing 'A Walk in the Woods' (Fig. 18), each of which show a heavier use of outline than was usual for her. She also ventured into the Art Deco style with her later linocut of the Macquarie Lighthouse where the angular rays of the setting sun accentuate the curved outline of the Harbour Bridge, (Fig 19) while the influence of Cubism may be clearly seen in her watercolour 'The Sweeper' (Fig 20).<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Montana, *The Art Movement in Australia: Design, Taste and Society 1875-1900* (Melbourne: Miegunyah, Melbourne University Press, 2000), 26. Montana notes that, in the interests of casual artistic interior decoration, it was not uncommon in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries to have a piano placed diagonally in a corner or to have its back facing the room.

<sup>31</sup> E.M., 'House Decoration: No 3 - The Drawing Room', *The Sydney Mail*, June 12, 1907.

<sup>32</sup> Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

Figure 17



Butterfly: Post Impressionism

Figure 18



A Walk in the Woods

Figure 19



Macquarie Lighthouse: Art Deco

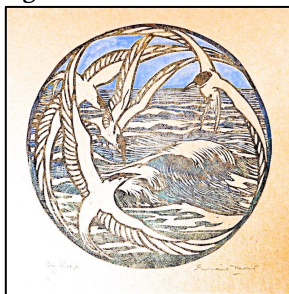
Figure 20



The Sweeper: Cubism

Mort used linocuts to produce a number of images in one or two colours, mostly favouring the strong primary colours of blue and red to offset the images' black outlines, and varying her shapes from circular to rectangular (Figs. 21-23). Her subject matter again ranged from the mundane to the fantastical.

Figure 21



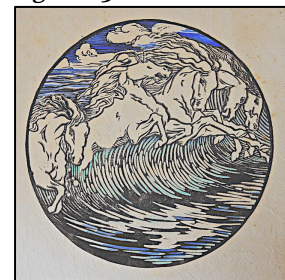
'Sea breeze'

Figure 22



Woman with Pan

Figure 23



Seahorses

<sup>33</sup> 'Art Deco' was not a style term used in the 1920s, but rather a 1960s invention that developed with the revival of interest in the period. There were various terms in the 1920s - 1940s such as 'Moderne' and 'Modern Style'.

Figure 24



Our Artist at Home'

In the long run, however, Mort could not bring herself to forgo either the nature-inspired Arts and Crafts approach or the curves and scrolls of Art Nouveau to accommodate the more angular aspects of 'Moderne' designs. She seems to have felt more at home

with a realistic approach to art, particularly in the medium of black and white drawings, and especially if it could be done *en plein air*, as Figure 24 illustrates.

Mort's expertise in design, and her skill in black and white work, became well known during this decade. A.G. Stephens, editor of *The Bookfellow*, expressed his admiration for Mort's work in 1907:

Miss Mort is a decorative designer. She makes black-and-white drawings which exhibit happy originality of conception, dexterity of execution, and an acceptable sense of balance and proportion.'<sup>34</sup>

Three years later, Stephens reiterated his assessment of Mort's expertise as a 'black and white' artist, reflecting his understanding of the challenging situation Mort and her colleagues were experiencing, as they struggled to make a living from their craft:

Miss Mort prefers the pen to the brush, and illustration to designing. But there is no sufficient market for illustrations; and her talent is one of those that cannot develop to perfection while she is earning a living in Australia ... Her higher qualities are her characteristic independence, her original vision, her painstaking accuracy, and her individual humour – often adequately translated in her drawing.<sup>35</sup>

Stephens' accurate assessment that Mort was unable to make a living from her black and white illustrations helps to explain her reasons for venturing into a number of different avenues of applied art, each one with commercial potential.

<sup>34</sup> A.G. Stephens, *The Bookfellow*, January 3, 1907. Alfred George Stephens was a literary critic, publisher and editor of a number of newspapers and magazines, including *The Bulletin* and *The Bookfellow*, the latter often an insert into other publications.

<sup>35</sup> A.G. Stephens, 'Black and Whiter', *The Daily Herald*, September 10, 1910.

She needed to have available as wide a professional selection of products as possible so that she could meet the needs of discerning Sydney clients.

### **Mort as applied arts practitioner and mentor**

Although Mort's original intention had been to earn an income through teaching in schools, her vision broadened considerably once she realised that another avenue was open to her – that of becoming a mentor. She explained this decision to Stephens:

Teaching seemed to me to be the only thing, but I soon found an unexploited field in designing for amateur workers in the crafts, and gradually I drifted into that class of work ... A more absorbing and interesting (field) it would be hard to find. It involves research into the decorative arts of all periods and peoples, besides an acquaintance with many processes, each one alluring in itself.<sup>36</sup>

In true entrepreneurial spirit, she explored many new avenues to produce everyday objects that were both 'beautiful and useful' and to mentor others in the same Morris-inspired pursuit. For Mort, 'useful' was framed by the place of crafted objects in defining the domain of a domestic sphere characterised by the relative autonomy of women in creating a home, and expressing a personality appropriate to its comforts; the term 'beautiful' was in part defined by an aesthetic increasingly attuned to ideas of a distinctive Australian identity. Both terms were, of course, specific to their times.

If Sydney was especially suited for this venture into applied arts, so too was Mort. The press had already proclaimed that the applied arts might be 'the basis ... of Sydney's love of the beautiful'.<sup>37</sup> In Sydney, Mort found a niche market which she exploited gainfully and ably, not least in capitalising on her recently

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<sup>36</sup> Stephens, 'Black and Whiter's'.

<sup>37</sup> Montana, *The Art Movement in Australia: Design, Taste and Society 1875-1900*, 176. Montana devotes a whole chapter in his book to 'Sydney and the Love of the Beautiful'.

received overseas training which, as Helen Topliss argues, conferred at least in this domain, 'equal status to male artists'.<sup>38</sup>

Mort was determined to be, and be seen to be, a successful professional artist and artisan. Part of this quest was a desire to mentor others who wanted to become skilled in arts and crafts. Accordingly, she developed a business model aimed at securing her credibility among her peers and establishing her reputation with the public at large. One of her first priorities was to find a base from which she could work.

Figure 25



Mort mentoring a client

Between 1909 and 1914, Mort and Weston set up four successive studios in Sydney's CBD – in Angel Place, Pitt Street, George Street and Hunter Street – changing venues when circumstances such as either end of a lease or the need for expansion forced them to do so (Fig. 25).<sup>39</sup> Their studio was an important symbol of their metamorphosis from amateurs to professionals. As Topliss suggests of this period, 'there had always been female art students, and the statistics in Australia bear this out,

but the real issue as to whether women saw themselves as professional artists is only revealed by the record of having artists' studios in the cities, and this only took place from the early 1900s up until World War II'.<sup>40</sup>

Mort was well aware of the power of a studio. She treasured an obituary from *The Shirley* for artist Maria Grey in which the writer and early feminist, Kathleen Ussher, recalled the effect of Grey's Melbourne studio on its visitors: 'Your soul was stirred when you went into that little studio, that tiny kingdom of

<sup>38</sup> Helen Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists 1900–1940* (Roseville: Craftsman House, 1996), 174.

<sup>39</sup> *Sydney Telephone Directory*, February 1904–August 1914, microfiche.

<sup>40</sup> Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism*, 48.



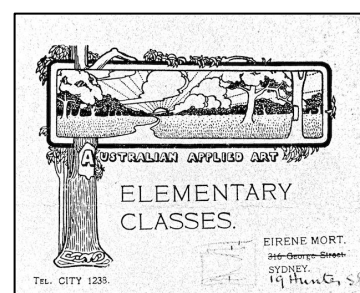
Australian Art'.<sup>41</sup> Ussher exhorted others to emulate Grey's example, declaring, 'That studio is a small world, waiting for its rulers.'<sup>42</sup>

The studio was the professional base from which Mort and Weston conducted their business. From this 'small world', they sold most of their artefacts and mentored their students (Fig. 24).<sup>43</sup> Their premises was also the site for social interaction as when, in 1913, the studio was used by a group of thirteen young women who, calling themselves the 'Thirteen Club', met in Mort's studio at 19 Hunter Street on the thirteenth of each month so that they could dispel the superstitious notion that thirteen is an unlucky number.<sup>44</sup>

Figure 26

Mort and Weston's  
joint business card

Figure 27

Business card for Mort  
as a solo operator

The location of the studio in the CBD made good business sense. A *Sunday Times* journalist who visited Mort's studio noted that 'Miss Eirene Mort has not much to exhibit, as she recently held an exhibition and *sold nearly everything*'<sup>45</sup> [my italics]. Elegant business cards proclaimed its purpose and whereabouts. The business cards attest to the fact that, initially, Mort and Weston saw their venture

<sup>41</sup> K. Ussher, 'Mrs William Grey', *The Shirley*, January 7, 1907.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. It is unlikely that Mort and Weston lived at the studio. The envelopes of letters addressed to Mort show that, after her return from London, she lived in one of her father's investment properties in Ocean St Woollahra.

<sup>43</sup> Mort and Weston also sometimes sold their wares through the premises used by the Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales (then in Rowe St, Sydney).

<sup>44</sup> 'The World and His Wife-Home and Society', *The Sunday Times*, 7 September, 1913.

<sup>45</sup> 'The Society of Arts and Crafts', *The Sunday Times*, December 14, 1913.

as a joint one (Fig. 26).<sup>46</sup> Eventually, however, all their advertising was done solely in Mort's name, suggesting that her professional eminence was established early in their careers (Fig 27).

Figure 28



Cabinet with fauns

The couple did, however collaborate on projects such as a wooden cabinet, for which Mort designed a faun-like creature that Weston executed on its front panel. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* description of the cabinet notes that the two women had made 'a little cupboard in native wood had a panel, on which disported three Australian fawns, [sic] distinguishable from the old-world genus by the fact that kangaroo paws took the place of goat hooves'.<sup>47</sup> (Fig 28)

Just three months after her return from London, Mort embarked on a series of entrepreneurial ventures confirming that adventurous aspect of her personality. Most attempts to extend her business activities were successful, ranging from entering competitions to designing and producing in a wide variety of media (Table 1). This diversity could be interpreted as either a search for a market or an underlying 'Jack and Jill of all trades' ethos – interpretations that have perhaps contributed to Mort being sidelined in Art History. Alternatively, her diversity of media could be seen as a deep embrace of the Arts and Crafts insistence on the nexus between usefulness and beauty, and reveals another facet of Mort's determination to be, and be seen to be, a professional artist and artisan.

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<sup>46</sup> E.M., Designs for business card, Envelope 3, Box 3, Research Library, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. It has not been possible to determine the degree to which Weston contributed to their joint income as, unlike Mort, she kept no record of her finances.

<sup>47</sup> 'Puck's Girdle', *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 31, 1909. 5. The journalist strangely failed to mention the fact that the creatures also sported huge kangaroo tails. Until 2016, all trace of this work had been lost. I tracked it down in the private collection of one of Weston's distant relatives, Michael Fox.

Table 1

Artistic Media used by Mort			
Advertisements	Alphabet blocks	Blotters	Book binding
Book illustrations	Bookplates	Book repairs	Calendars
Children's books	Children's toys	Christmas cards	Curtains
Cushion covers	Dadoes	Decorative panels	D'oyleys
Ecclesiastical designs	Etchings	Gift cards	Hall lights
Illuminated addresses	Inlaid wood designs	Leatherwork	Linocuts
Magazine covers	Mirror frames	Panels	Play boxes
Pottery	Postcards	Posters	Prayer book covers
Pyrography	Repoussé work	Sketches	Stenciled borders
Tablecloths	Tapestries	Wallets	Wallpaper designs
Watercolours	Woodcarving designs	Woodcuts	Woodprints

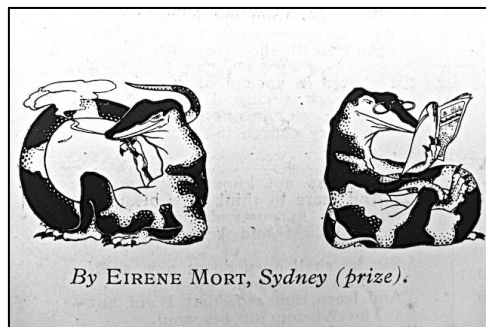
Mort's first successful venture was to enter competitions that mainly promoted Australian flora or fauna. Richard White has contended that, 'the fetish for distinctively Australian motifs in popular art, literature, architecture and décor gained strength during the years following federation',<sup>48</sup> and Mort was part of this trend. Between February 1904 and June 1907, she entered several competitions, the requirements of which specified the use of well-known Australian images. Mort won prizes for her entries in the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW's headpiece competition (Fig. 29), the Post-Master General's postcard competition (Fig. 30), the Institute of Architects of NSW's competition for a portiere,<sup>49</sup> and *The Bookfellow's* competition for headpieces or tailpieces.<sup>50</sup> The winning of these competitions not only showcased Mort's talent as a woman whose subject matter ranged from serious to humorous, and whose technique encompassed such different styles of art as Art Nouveau and Celtic, but it also raised her public profile. This coupling of romantic nationalism to artisan practice became a marked feature of much of Mort's oeuvre.

<sup>48</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 114.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Scott to Eirene Mort, 16 June 1904, 06/017, Box 2, NLA, Canberra; 'The Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales' *Australia*, 9 May, 1907.

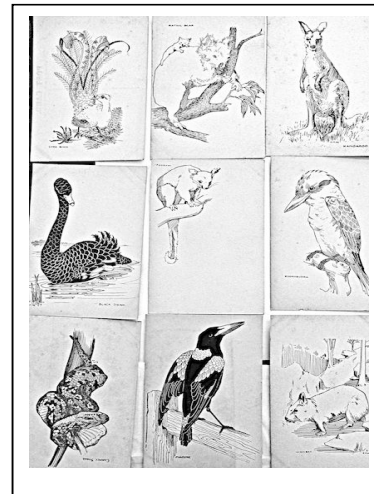
<sup>50</sup> A.G. Stephens, 'Decorative Drawing Competition: Headpieces and Tailpieces' *The Bookfellow*, Vol. 1 No 16, (8 April 1907), 'The Eirene Mort Collection', Folder 2, National Gallery of Australia Research Library, Canberra. See glossary for 'headpiece'.

Figure 29



Part of Mort's humorous entry for the headpiece competition.

Figure 30



Postcard competition.

In a 1907 article for *Art and Architecture* – the journal of the NSW institute of architects – she made a heartfelt plea to a broad company of designers whom, she hoped, were shaping an Australian aesthetic:

Let us have no more sprays of meaningless blue daisies that are being painted on plates, cups and jugs of proportions and shape preposterous enough to break one's heart.<sup>51</sup>

This article itself indicates the prominence Mort sought and had in this campaign. It certainly informed her own practice. The interweaving pattern of kangaroos on 'Kangaroo and Snail Plate' (Fig. 31), her skilful representation of Doryanthes leaves on a leather book cover (Fig. 32) and the balance of her tapestry design of banksias (Fig. 33) are examples of the way Mort used innovative, nationalistic designs in several different media.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> E.M., 'Arts and Crafts and Australian Design', *Art and Architecture* iv, no.2. 1907. n.p.

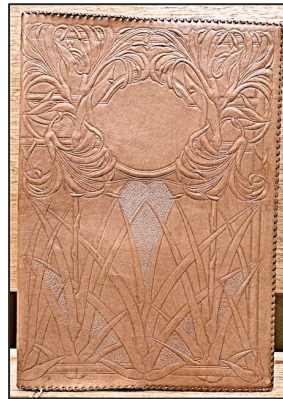
<sup>52</sup> The Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW holds the plate under lock and key in a historic artefacts cabinet in its Sydney showroom. The plate has the Roman numerals VIII on its verso, signalling that it was an early Mort artefact. There is no record of where she had her pottery fired, but the fact that Mort later did an etching of 'The Pottery Kiln – Longueville' suggests that she may have taken her pottery there to be fired. The NGA has collaborated with the firm 'Fine-Craft Design' to reproduce Mort's 1907 tapestry 'Honeyeaters and Banksia' (bought on E-Bay for \$40 in 2015).

Figure 31



Kangaroo  
and snail plate

Figure 32



Leather  
book cover

Figure 33



Banksia  
tapestry

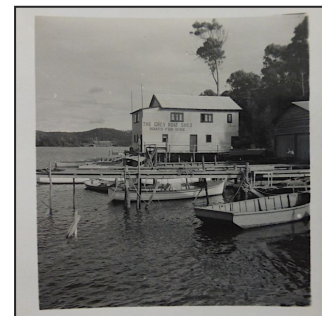
A subtler Australian motif is adopted in a business card for Grey's Boat Shed (Figs. 34–35), the commission in itself indicating the reach of her work.

Figure 34



Mort's design for a business card for  
'Grey's Boat Shed: Boats for Hire'

Figure 35



Original photo of  
'Grey's Boat Shed'

Mort's activism for the cause was particularly evident when, in September 1906, she issued a circular proposing the formation of an Australian Guild of Handicraft, the objectives of which were:

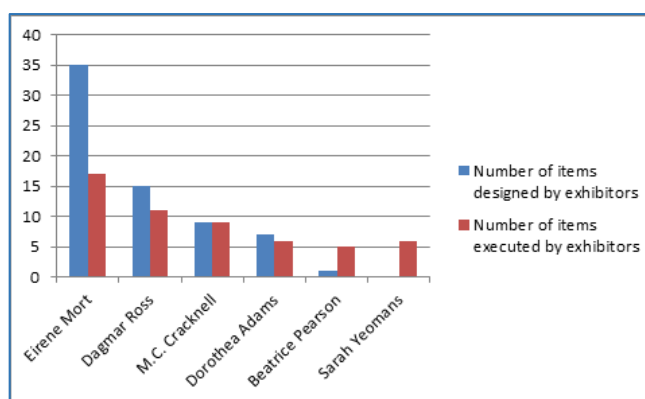
to produce articles of household use and decoration, of a distinctly Australian character, the designs to be based on natural forms and the subjects typically Australian and the materials used to be, wherever possible, of Australian production and manufacture.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> E.M., quoted in John McPhee, 'Eirene Mort & A National School of Design' *The Australian Antique Collector* 38th Edition (July – Dec 1989), 49.

In order to promote the viability of the guild, Mort organised an 'Exhibition of Applied Arts' at Vickery's Chambers in Pitt St, Sydney. It was held during the first fortnight of December 1906, with the express intention of demonstrating the talent that already existed in Sydney. Mort and five other young women contributed 68 items, most of which were for sale.<sup>54</sup> Mort was by far the most prolific contributor, designing 35 items, 15 of which she also executed<sup>55</sup> (Fig. 36). The range of her artefacts included cushion covers, nursery curtains, toys, stencilled borders, a play box and a hall light.<sup>56</sup>

Figure 36

Contributors to Applied Arts' Exhibition, Dec. 1906



The applied nature of the designs was recognised by the *Sydney Morning Herald* which reported that:

Miss Mort's Australian alphabet is cleverly designed and will be procurable as blocks for children later on, and so are her toys, representing Australian animals and birds ... and some of her pen and ink sketches are most interesting.<sup>57</sup>

The exhibition was a resounding success, with over 500 people visiting and buying artefacts (or placing follow-up orders for them) from places as far apart as

<sup>54</sup> 'Social Column', *SMH* 8 December 1906.

The other young artisans were Dagmar Ross, M. Cleone Cracknell, Beatrice Pearson, Dorothea Adams and Sarah Yeomans.

<sup>55</sup> The term 'executed' was the technical term used by Mort in her catalogues to describe work that she had produced.

<sup>56</sup> Prices ranged from 2/6 for a cushion cover to £5/5/- for the mirror frame. The basic male wage, introduced in 1907, was £2/2/-. The mirror frame would therefore have been the equivalent of almost three weeks' work.

<sup>57</sup> 'Social Column', *SMH*, December 8, 1906, 11.

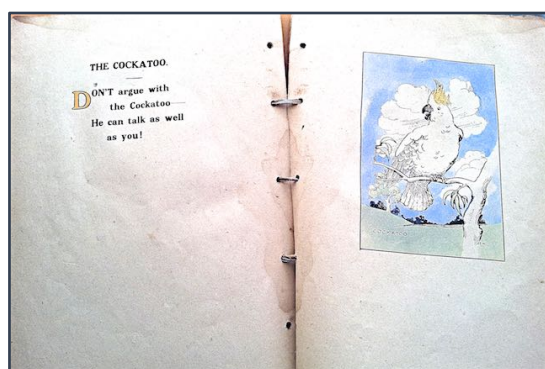
Rockhampton and Melbourne.<sup>58</sup> Mort later recalled, in an interview with Stephens, that:

The first little exhibition of Arts and Crafts, Australian in character throughout, was held in my studio four years ago. Most of the designs were mine, and the work of carrying them out was shared among six of us.<sup>59</sup>

Unfortunately for Mort's leadership aspirations, however, the Guild of Applied Arts was a short-lived experiment, probably because the timing of its launch was inopportune. The formation of the Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales just four months earlier in August meant that the vacuum Mort had perceived was already being filled, and perhaps in a more inclusive way than her own scheme allowed. I will return to Mort's role within this new society later in the chapter.

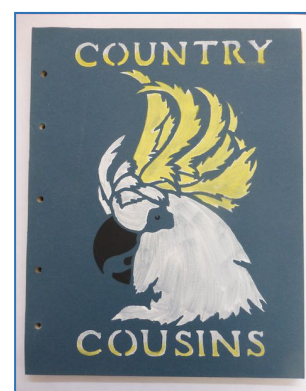
Her activism was matched to intense activity in her own work. Earlier in the decade, Mort had begun another new venture featuring Australian images – that of self-publishing. Choosing a children's poetry book to launch this foray, Mort both composed the poems and drew the illustrations. The illustrations had the potential to be hand-coloured by illustrator or owners, if desired (Fig. 37).<sup>60</sup>

Figure 37



Double page from  
*Country Cousins*

Figure 38



Cover of  
*Country Cousins*

<sup>58</sup> E.M., 'Visitors Book', Mort Family Papers, Box 1.

<sup>59</sup> Stephens, 'Black and Whiter'.

<sup>59</sup> Isabelle Anscombe, *A Woman's Touch* (London: Virago, 1984), 33.

<sup>60</sup> Mort demonstrated this facility when she hand-coloured the book for her partner Weston's five-year-old niece, Helen, as shown above.

Mort paid special attention to the book's cover, designing three different front covers, each one of which also could be hand-painted (Fig. 38).<sup>61</sup> The book exhibits many of the qualities so dearly loved by the doyens of the Arts and Crafts movement, being original in concept and design and assembled by hand.

National Library of Australia librarian, Bruce Semier, commented that:

E.M. was much influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites, both as to the design and the craft concept exemplified in the Morris workshops outside Oxford. The book *Country Cousins* is an example of E.M.'s style, side sewn with tape, the grey paper folded the better so as to take watercolour one side over the printed outlines.<sup>62</sup>

Mort, who was obviously proud of her book, would no doubt be surprised and pleased to know that Sydney bookseller, Berkelouw Books, sold one copy of the 1904 book for \$450 in 1998 (Fig. 39).<sup>63</sup>

Figure 39



Proud author  
relaxing with  
a copy of  
*Country Cousins*

Mort's desire to promote distinctively Australian images included her use of Indigenous people in her oeuvre in ways that catch the ambivalent attitudes to

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<sup>61</sup> Margaret Mort, Interview by Margaret Henry, July 1980 in Newcastle, NSW, transcript with Keith Parsons in Newcastle. Mort's niece, Margaret, noted that Mort and Weston printed *Country Cousins* together.

<sup>62</sup> Margaret Mort, interview by Bruce Semier, 14 February 1985 in Bowral, NSW, File 181/14/10/. Transcript in Canberra: National Library of Australia.

<sup>63</sup> Email from Charlotte Cooper of Berkelouw Books to Pam Lane, 15 September 2016. Specialist book auction firms have recently listed the book at an indicative price of over A\$2,000 on the rare occasions it becomes available.



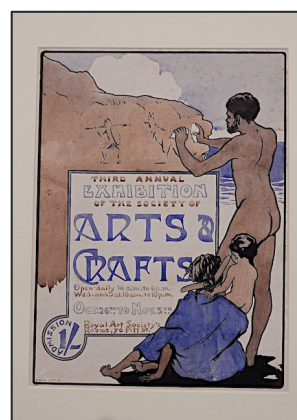
Aboriginal people and cultures of her time, both reflecting national distinctiveness but also remaining curiosities almost subsumed with ‘nature’. She repeated the image of an Indigenous man that she had used for the letter ‘A’ in her Australian Alphabet Book – which had primarily featured animals as illustrations – in one of her advertisements, and used an Aboriginal family in her poster for the 1910 annual exhibition for the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW (Figs. 40-41).<sup>64</sup>

Figure 40



Newspaper advertisement for Mort's studio

Figure 41



Poster for 1910 exhibition

In addition, Mort's illustrations of 'Beereun the Mirage Maker' (Fig. 42) and 'Goomble Gubbon and Dinewan' (Fig. 43) indicate a familiarity with at least some Dreamtime stories, as they were transcribed by early amateur and then increasingly professional ethnographers, among them Catherine Stow.<sup>65</sup> The use of this material went beyond souveniring, but was still framed by the conventions of primitivism then prevalent.

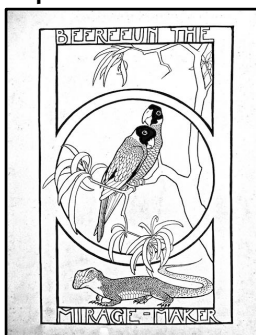
<sup>64</sup> 'The Society of Arts and Crafts', *The Sunday Times*, December 14, 1913. This image is one of only two known depictions of Indigenous people that Mort is known to have used in her work.

<sup>65</sup> In 1897, Catherine Stow writing as K. Langloh Parker transcribed the oral stories of 'Dinewan the Emu and Goomblegubbon the Bustard' together with 'Beereun the Prickly Lizard' into written form in *Australian Legendary Tales*.

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/aus/alt/> (accessed on 8 February 2017) and

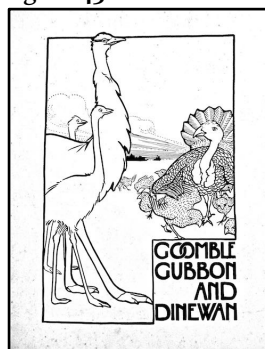
[http://enargea.org/tales/Australian/Beereun\\_Mirage\\_Maker.html](http://enargea.org/tales/Australian/Beereun_Mirage_Maker.html) (accessed on 8 February 2017)

Figure 42



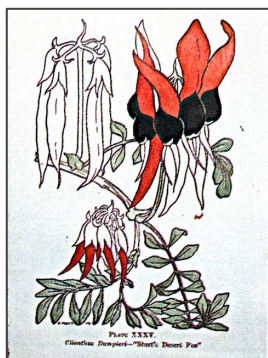
Covers for books  
retelling  
indigenous myths

Figure 43



Angela Woollacott sees the Australian women of Mort's generation and cohort as both participating in and shaped by 'an imperial culture that was hierarchical, racist and gendered'.<sup>66</sup> Mort's sampling of Aboriginality needs to be seen within this context. Indigenous people in her artwork were idealised, 'beautiful and useful' but still cast in an essential imperial model of racial progression and paternalism.

Figure 44



Eleven year old Marion Carment's illustration of Sturt's Desert Pea from the children's version of wildflowers' book

Mort's detailed and accurate knowledge of the indigenous flora of New South Wales came to the fore in 1912 when she collaborated with well-known Sydney personality and fellow member of the Arts and Crafts Society, Florence Sulman.<sup>67</sup> Sulman, daughter of Sydney architect Sir John Sulman, was known for her energetic patronage of organisations including the Kindergarten Union and the Australian Red Cross, each expressing their own version of benevolent care, and with which Mort

would have some association.<sup>68</sup> Together, they produced a two-volume work (and a children's version) entitled *A Popular Guide to the Wildflowers of New*

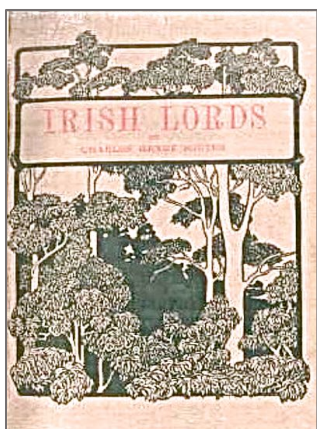
<sup>66</sup> Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17.

<sup>67</sup> Other women, such as Ellis Rowan, were also skilled illustrators of Australian native flora, but it was only Sulman and Mort who combined to produce a book of such high standard.

<sup>68</sup> Margaret Henry, 'Sulman, Florence (1876–1965)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*,

*South Wales*, with Sulman providing the text, and Mort supplying 43 of the book's 50 illustrations (Fig 44).<sup>69</sup> The book quickly became a standard reference book, not superseded until 1967 by A.M Blombery's *A Guide to Native Australian Plants*.<sup>70</sup> Even then, Mort was still regarded as an expert botanical illustrator, with Blombery using 75 of Mort's illustrations in his monograph (32 more illustrations than Sulman had used 55 years earlier).

*Stock and Station* journalist 'Gossip' endorsed Mort's skill by observing that not only was the book 'beautifully illustrated' but also that its pictures were 'not meant for ornamentation, but for the purpose of enabling the reader to recognise the plants'.<sup>71</sup> This attention to botanical detail was one element of her practice which would mark her distance from the later, more purely decorative, stylised treatment of indigenous flora by artists such as Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor as they embraced the tenets of Modernism.



Frontispiece of *Irish Lords and Other Verses*

Figure 45 Mort's skill in capturing native flora was widely appreciated, and served distinct purposes at the time. Despite its Irish sounding title, C.H. Souter's book *Irish Lords and Other Verses* celebrated the diversity of flora and fauna to be found in the Australian countryside (Fig. 45).<sup>72</sup> Souter, who wrote frequently for *The Bulletin*, his verse depicting 'the daily life of small farmers of the Mallee

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National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/sulman-florence-8713/text15251>, published first in hardcopy 1990, (accessed on 20 January 2016).

<sup>69</sup> Florence Sulman and Eirene Mort, *A Popular Guide to the Wildflowers of New South Wales* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, Vol. I, 1912). Volume II was published in 1913.

<sup>70</sup> Alec Blombery's 1967 *A Guide to Native Australian Plants* was the first of ten books the author wrote on Australian flora. Mort's copy of the book contains a handwritten acknowledgement by Blombery of his debt to her.

<sup>71</sup> 'Gossip' *Stock and Station Journal*, January 10, 1913.

<sup>72</sup> C.H. Souter, 'Irish Lords and Other Verses', *The Bookfellow* (1912): 55.

district of South Australia',<sup>73</sup> thanked Mort for her work by generously ranking her skill at illustrating the gum tree as being highly instructive to nature lovers:

I thought I knew the gum tree by heart, but I have only really seen it since I have looked at your drawing of it. Strange how the artist can tell the nature lover what to see! The design was used as a copy from the "Bookfellow" & is certainly reproduced in the "index" number of the latter, in full size. Every branch & leaf is a study, & I have been finding pictures in gum trees that I have never seen before since I got the advance copy of my rhymes.

Again many thanks, C.H. Souter.

P.S. Mrs Mary Gilmore said she felt inclined to "go down on her knees & say her prayers for it" (not my rhymes, but the book cover!) C.H.S.<sup>74</sup>

Jane E. Hunt, who places Mort in the category of teachers and artisans trying to promote the use of Australian idioms, holds that 'none of these early leaders in the search for Australian design principles took on the socialist imperatives of Morris's teachings, but stylistically they understood his preference for the native local and applied it in their use of Australian images'.<sup>75</sup> Ann Stephen extends the significance of this concept even further, contending that for botanist Richard Baker and artist Lucien Henry, who had promoted the use of Australian motifs some twenty years earlier, an Australian national style was 'not simply locally relevant, it was to be of international significance and vital to the future identity of the country'.<sup>76</sup> Mort may not have been the first to use Australian images in her work, but she certainly popularised the practice to a far greater extent than had been done before.

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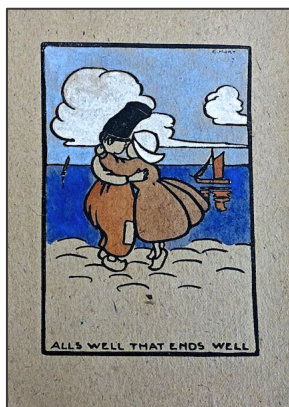
<sup>73</sup> Vivian Smith, 'Souter, Charles Henry (1864–1944)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/souter-charles-henry-> (accessed on 18 July 2017).

<sup>74</sup> C.H. Souter to Eirene Mort, 6 February 1913, Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

<sup>75</sup> Jane E. Hunt, 'Cultivating the Arts', (PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 2001), 84–85. Hunt has examined the way in which the concept of promoting native Australian flora and fauna into decorative arts works was promulgated through the short-lived magazine *Arts and Crafts* (1895–1898) and the influence of technical college teacher Lucien Henry and museum curator Richard T. Baker.

<sup>76</sup> Ann Stephen, *Visions of a Republic: the Work of Lucien Henry* (Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing, 2001), 122.

Figure 46

Shakespearean  
postcard

Not all of Mort's work was focused on promoting Australian motifs. Heartened by her success with the 'Australian Birds and Animals' postcards, Mort branched out into more postcards in a new subject area – six of Shakespeare's plays, using simple black outlines to depict the main theme of each play by placing childlike figures of stereotypical Dutch appearance against sparse backgrounds (Fig. 46).<sup>77</sup> In true Arts and Crafts fashion, the postcards could be hand-coloured.

Another innovative approach to generating income was Mort's production of bookplates through use of linocuts, woodcuts or etchings. Each medium produced bookplates of differing artistic appeal. The catalogue of an exhibition Mort held in 1906 states that she would be willing to create (for one guinea each) personalised bookplates, each one of which would symbolise a characteristic or quality of its owner.<sup>78</sup> In a 1944 list, she documented that she had produced over 100 bespoke bookplates. In her thesis 'Bedrooms and Bookplates: the Designs of Eirene Mort', J. Elizabeth Little argues that Mort's bookplates 'can be read as a list of her personal and ongoing relationships with friends, relatives and other patrons'.<sup>79</sup>

The bookplates Mort designed for Rose Scott and Florence Sulman not only demonstrate her knowledge of their personalities and priorities, but also indicate that she numbered influential Sydney women among her clients (Fig. 47). The inclusion of the words 'courage for freedom and for fate' in Mort's bookplate for Scott, a prominent feminist, denotes at least her awareness of, and probably her acquaintance with, an activist who, as Judith Allen summarises, 'worked

<sup>77</sup> The plays depicted on the postcards were: *All's Well that Ends Well*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest* and *A Winter's Tale*.

<sup>78</sup> Basic Wage Analysis, <http://guides.slv.vic.gov.au/whatitcost/basicwage> The male basic wage in 1906 was £2/2/- per week.

<sup>79</sup> J. Elizabeth Little, 'Bedrooms and Bookplates: the Designs of Eirene Mort' (Bachelor of Art Theory Honours Thesis, University of New South Wales, 2005), 61.

Figure 47

[throughout her life] for measures to reduce men's power over women and to expand women's material options beyond marriage or prostitution.'<sup>80</sup> Scott, Mort and Weston were among the cohort of women who were visible proof that 'material options beyond marriage' were possible. The care taken by Mort in designing and producing the bookplate indicates some of the links they shared.



Rose Scott's bookplate

Sydney Ure Smith noted that, in her bookplates, Mort was 'one of the first to practice the art of the woodcut ... most of which were cut and printed in two colours.'<sup>81</sup> Many middle-class patrons commissioned her to create for them a bookplate that would capture their interests and identities. Individualised bookplates were the perfect vehicle for embodying Arts and Crafts principles. They were hand-made, useful, beautiful, and individually designed to suit each client (Figs. 48-50).

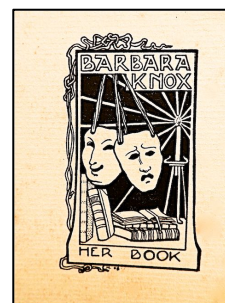
Figure 48



Figure 49



Figure 50

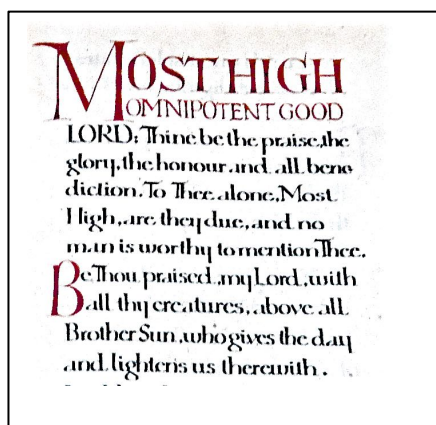


Mort's differing styles of bookplate art representing clients' individual personalities.

<sup>80</sup> Judith Allen, 'Scott, Rose (1847-1925)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/scott-rose>, (accessed online 22 January 2017). The inclusion of the word 'EYPHKA' is also of interest, for together with the triangular arrangement of the flowers on the crest, it denotes Mort's awareness of Gauss's Eureka Theorem of triangular numbers.

<sup>81</sup> Sydney Ure Smith, 'The Revival of the Woodcut', *Art in Australia*, 3, no. 4, (March, 1923): n.p.

Figure 51

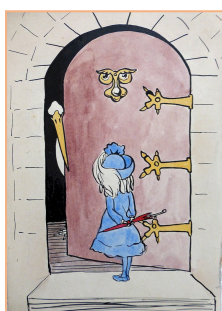


Prayer of St Francis of Assisi:  
'Song of Brother Sun'

Mort's use of two colours, together with her expertise with calligraphy, is once again demonstrated in her 'Song of Brother Sun', an abbreviated version of the prayer of St Francis of Assisi (Fig. 51). Contained in a small, handmade book, the prayer may well have been a gift for her clerical father.<sup>82</sup>

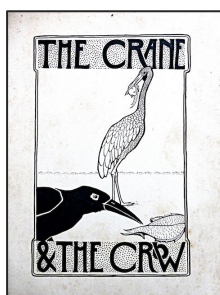
Unlike her contemporaries May Gibbs and Ida Rentoul Outhwaite, Mort's efforts to produce commercially viable drawings for children found little marketable outlet. Although she produced many sketches that were clearly aimed at children, they remained just that – sketches (Figs. 52–54).

Figure 52



Anybody Home?

Figure 53



The Crane &amp; the Crow

Figure 54



A Daytime Nap

Figure 55



Christmas Pudding

Mort's sketch of a pudding-like creature certainly had commercial potential, as her contemporary, Norman Lindsay, was later to prove (Fig. 55). His belief that children liked to

<sup>82</sup> E.M., 'Song of Brother Sun', section of page, Acc. No. 2324, AGNSW, Sydney.

read about food rather than fairies seems to have proved valid.<sup>83</sup> Unlike Lindsay, Mort did not pursue this particular concept.

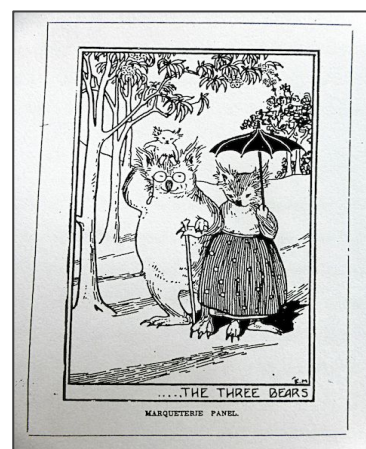
Some of Mort's humorous children's drawings did, however, occasionally appear in newspaper articles that were written for children. Her 1911 illustration 'The Bush Orchestra' (Fig. 56) and her Australian version of 'The Three Bears' (Fig. 57) reflect not only an awareness of the specialised children's market, but also her continuing desire to promote Australian motifs wherever possible.<sup>84</sup>

Figure 56



The Bush Orchestra

Figure 57



The Three Bears

At a time when Australian children's literature was beginning to blossom through the writing of authors such as Ethel Turner and Jeannie Gunn, Mort sought to include fictional writing in her range of work.<sup>85</sup> In 1909, she submitted a short story, 'The Porpoise', to the *Sydney Mail*, evoking the beauty of a Sydney beach as a young boy enjoys his morning surf:

The breakers were chasing each other up and down the hard white beach, each straining to leave his shell-fringed mark just a few inches higher than the last. Teddy had been playing in them and with them, as only a coast-

<sup>83</sup> The Magic Pudding' Norman Lindsay Gallery and Museum <http://www.normanlindsay.com.au/normanlindsay/themagicpudding.php> (accessed on 22 November, 2015).

<sup>84</sup> 'The Bush Orchestra' *The Comic Australian*, November 25, 1911; 'The Three Bears', *The Sydney Mail*, August 7, 1907.

<sup>85</sup> Ethel Turner had published *Seven Little Australians* in 1894 and Jeannie Gun followed with *We of the Never Never* in 1909, but May Gibbs did not write *Gumnut Babies* until 1917, and Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding* was not written until 1918.



bred boy knows how, and, laughing and breathless, he had thrown himself just beyond their reach in the light morning sunshine.<sup>86</sup>

The power of such imagery perhaps reveals more of her strengths as an artist than as a writer, but the sense of pleasure in an immersion with the local seaside is evident. If fiction writing was not ultimately a successful initiative for her, Mort remained determined to expand her 'market'. In this pursuit, her artefacts for children, frequently received favourable comments in the press, as exemplified by 'Fanella', who praised both Mort's work and her studio (Fig.58).

Figure 58



Her sets of toys and blocks for children are unique ... Miss Mort's studio is a veritable treasure trove of beautiful things ... (that are) remarkable for unique design and bold treatment.<sup>87</sup>

Section of Mort's 'treasure trove' of a studio

In December of 1909, the journalist 'Puck' enthused:

Visitors to Miss Eirene Mort's annual exhibition of Christmas gifts always look for at least one novelty item amongst her productions, and are never disappointed. This year ... (there was) a child's play bag made of plain strong sacking, with rope handles, and an attractive picture of an emu, kangaroo or magpie stencilled on either side. These little bags should delight the heart of any child.<sup>88</sup>

Ever practical, as well as utilising 'plain strong sacking' for her child's play bag, Mort ensured that her mother-and-baby cardboard cut-out doll would stand upright (Figs. 59-60).

<sup>86</sup> E.M., 'The Porpoise School', *The Sydney Mail*, February 3, 1909.

<sup>87</sup> 'Fanella', 'Art Designing', *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, July 1, 1909.

<sup>88</sup> 'Puck's Girdle', *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 8, 1909.

Figure 59



Figure 60



Cut out dolls

In addition, Mort developed a connection with a number of organisations that commissioned work involving the use of their crest or motto (Table 2)<sup>89</sup> and (Figs.61-63). Almost all of the organisations were for women and girls, underpinning Mort's quiet feminist sympathies. Many of these institutions would have paid her; some may not have done so. In either case, Mort's willingness to work for such entities demonstrates that her social conscience was in good working order.

Table 2

Corporate Clients: Organisation / Institution	Year
Abbotsleigh Girls' School	1912 - 1937
Antiques Loan Exhibition, 21 June - 8 July	
ANZAC Festival Committee	1938
Australian Board of Missions	1910
Branksome School, Leura. NSW	
Diocese of Sydney, N.S.W.	1910
Kindergarten Union of N.S.W.	
Girls' Realm Guild of Service and Good Fellowship	
Kambala Girls' School	1932 - 1934
Methodist Ladies College, Burwood, N.S.W.	
Shirley School, The	1907 - c. 1912
Surrey Hills Free Kindergarten	
Sydney Wild Flower Show	1914
University of Queensland	1926 - 1927

<sup>89</sup> It has not been possible to determine which organisations paid Mort for her work, or for which ones she worked *pro bono*; nor has it been possible to determine the exact dates of the work Mort did with these organisations.

Figure 61



Figure 62

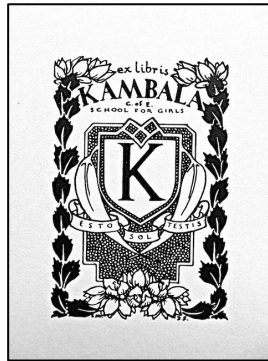
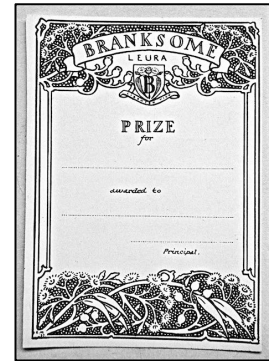


Figure 63



Examples of school crests

Throughout these years, Mort's industriousness is striking: if driven by a desire to earn a living, and establish a reputation, her work was both steady in its underpinning philosophy while being often experimental in new media. The aesthetics she advocated had – as we have seen – a few major manifestos in leading journals, but also a more constant stream of advice as well as artefacts for her chosen audience. In this advice, Mort focused on an ideal of the average small householder. Perhaps, as Andrew Montana observes, this choice of reader was because works for middle-class Sydney society could appeal to an identity that was 'driven by money rather than a British type of class system'.<sup>90</sup> That class were avid consumers of items 'in a mercurial but snobbish society [which] produced a competitive culture of aspiration in which the ideal of art in the home and its application to everyday objects held value and cachet'.<sup>91</sup> But Mort's milieu was more specifically that of middle-class women who had sufficient disposable income to acquire skills on applied art from lectures or classes, and to purchase the hand-made work of experts.

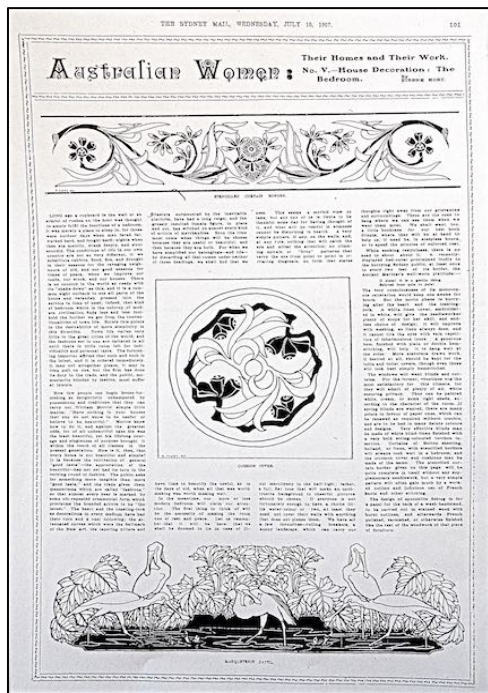
Although Mort's eclectic approach to art and craft varied according to the purpose and medium in which she was working, her commitment to Morris's principles of good design were paramount, as she advised readers in 1907:

<sup>90</sup> Montana, *The Art Movement in Australia: Design, Taste and Society 1875–1900*, 19.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

How few people can begin house-furnishing so delightfully unhampered by possessions and traditions that they can carry out William Morris' simple little maxim: 'Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful'. Morris knew how to do it, and against the greatest odds, for of all unbeautiful ages, his was the least beautiful, yet his lifelong courage and singleness of purpose brought it within the reach of all classes in the present generation.<sup>92</sup>

Figure 64



Sample page of a full-page article by Mort in *The Sydney Mail*

The Morris quote was part of a series of seven full-page articles, entitled 'Australian Women: Their Homes and Their Work', published fortnightly in 1907 in the *Sydney Mail* (Fig. 64). After the introductory article covering the general principles of 'House Decoration', each article focused on a different room in the house, with Mort enumerating the key considerations to be taken into account that would reflect Morris's 'useful and beautiful' maxim.<sup>93</sup>

Nicholas Brown's analysis of the nature of the changing role played by individual rooms in an early twentieth century house shows that Mort was at the forefront of current trends in her emphasis on each room revealing the personality or individuality of its creator, rather than adhering to Victorian convention that rooms should reflect traditional defined domestic purposes. A significant shift occurred between the 1880s and the 1920s, when 'the rooms of

<sup>92</sup> E.M., 'Australian Women: Their Homes and Their Work. No. V - The Bedroom', *The Sydney Mail*, July 10, 1907.

<sup>93</sup> E.M., 'Australian Women: Their Homes and Their Work. No 1 - House Decoration', *The Sydney Mail*, May 15, 1907.

entitlement, solace and display became the rooms of personality'.<sup>94</sup> This was a belief that Mort also held, asserting (of the Drawing Room) that 'the more we use it, the more individual it will become. It will express our tastes, our occupations, and even our character.'<sup>95</sup>

The 'Smoking Room', another room to which Mort turned her attention, reflects a focus that was emerging at this time: that of the comfort of men. Brown points out that 'although the home was often marked out as women's space, it was the comfort of men which emerged as central to the meaning of the home by the end of the nineteenth century.'<sup>96</sup> The irony of Mort, as a single woman, expending considerable effort on teaching other women how to make their menfolk (and other male guests) comfortable in their homes was not lost on her, as she explained in her article on the 'Smoking Room'.

It is true that this is a man's place of retirement, but it is due to housewives to know how to make their husbands and their guests comfortable – hence this article in a woman's column.<sup>97</sup>

Nor was Mort averse to a little gentle ridicule when she advised her women readers to ensure that it would be a good idea for bookshelves in the Smoking Room to be all the same height, as this would mean that 'their tops will make a pleasing support for trophies and 'objets d'art' *dear to the masculine mind* [my italics].<sup>98</sup> Brown notes that, for the unattached woman, 'the house itself emphasised the basic incongruity of living outside the family' – another irony that would not have been lost on Mort.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Nicholas Brown, 'Making Oneself Comfortable: or More Rooms than Persons' in *A History of European Housing in Australia*, ed. Patrick Troy (Oakleigh: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 20.

<sup>95</sup> E.M., 'Australian Women: Their Homes and Their Work. No III – The Drawing Room' *The Sydney Mail*, June 12, 1907. Each article consisted of an entire broadsheet page of some 1,500 words plus illustrations.

<sup>96</sup> Brown, 'Making Oneself Comfortable: or More Rooms than Persons', in Troy, 113.

<sup>97</sup> E.M., 'Australian Women: Their Homes and Their Work. No. VI-The Smoking Room' *The Sydney Mail*, July 24, 1907.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Brown 'Making Oneself Comfortable: or More Rooms than Persons', in Troy, 118.

Mort's ideas on design were the basis of her approach to applied arts.

Writing in 1908 for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, she held that:

The foundation of all artwork is good design. Without it, the cleverest craftsmanship is labour lost. It helps the work of the unskilled as it enhances that of the skilled. And if design is the keynote of work in the crafts, suitability is the keynote of design, for design has no existence apart from the medium in which it is executed ... It would be ludicrous, for anyone to try to transfer a design for stained glass into dress fabric, and just as absurd for a design intended for a carpet to be attempted in woodcarving.<sup>100</sup>

Mort did not confine herself to the realm of the philosophical; she also ventured into the practical. In a 1908 article entitled 'Practical Stencilling', Mort instructed her readers in the minutiae of steps that should be taken in the execution of a simple design:

Pick a rose leaf or any other graceful leaf or spray in the garden, and draw it carefully. Then redraw it very simply, leaving out everything that you can dispense with without losing grace or form. Rule a few six-inch squares and try different arrangements of your leaf in them, sometimes free, sometimes conventional or symmetrical, but always filling in your space well.<sup>101</sup>

Mort's writings always emphasised quality of production, but it was not always an easy idea to sell. Her difficulties in promoting the use of good design and generating an income from her applied arts work was recognised and deplored by Stephens in his *Bookfellow* article on the plight of Sydney artists, who observed that:

Sydney is not yet educated to household art, and there is a dearth of patrons who are prepared to pay more for a really good design than for a really bad one ... What is clear so far is that Miss Mort and her associates deserve credit and support in their honest effort to make it better.<sup>102</sup>

This journalistic venture into educating Sydney into household art places Mort among the cohort of women who began to foreshadow the not-yet-invented role of interior designer. Isabelle Anscombe points out that:

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<sup>100</sup> E.M. 'Practical Stencilling', *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 27, 1908.

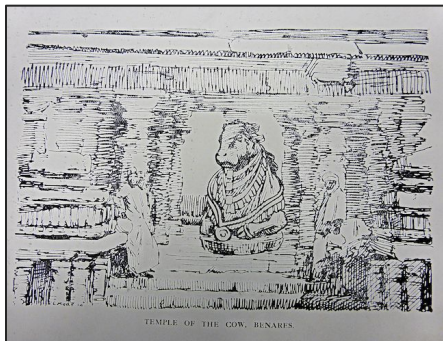
<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>102</sup> A.G. Stephens, 'Black and Whiter', *The Daily Herald*, September 10, 1910.

The Arts and Crafts Movement had begun by incorporating women as the passive subjects of its ideology, but by the end of the nineteenth century it had created a new sphere of professional activity for women designers ... Women designers were now poised to take a radical shift of emphasis out of the hands of orators and dreamers like Ruskin and Morris and into a more practical world, revolutionising the middle-class home to meet the changing needs of the middle-class woman.<sup>103</sup>

It was the changing needs of the middle-class woman that prompted Mort to seek to reach a wider audience. In so doing, she joined the ranks of women for whom it was common practice to be 'dedicated to teaching and disseminating the specific artistic modes they had learnt in Europe'.<sup>104</sup> Mort was, in fact, a forerunner of later Australian interior designers, such as Marion Hall Best, Thea Proctor and Hera Roberts who 'moved between roles as fine artists, commercial artists, decorators, furniture designers and illustrators'.<sup>105</sup> Mort's innovative practice in this field has been almost entirely overlooked.

Figure 65



Hindu temple in Benares, India

The professionalism of Mort's practice resulted in a high standard of artefacts produced – an excellence of quality that helped to break down the often-artificial distinction between 'fine' and 'applied' arts. In one entrepreneurial venture, however, Mort's usual high standard failed her. In 1914, Helen Phillips, former headmistress at St Catherine's, invited Mort

to illustrate part of a book she had written about her journey to India (Fig. 65).<sup>106</sup> The combination of Mort's drawing having been copied from a photograph and

<sup>103</sup> Anscombe, *A Woman's Touch*. (London: Virago, 1984), 33.

<sup>104</sup> Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism*, 174.

<sup>105</sup> Little, 'Bedrooms and Bookplates: the Designs of Eirene Mort', 30.

<sup>106</sup> Helen Phillips, *Sydney to Delhi with Cook's Coupon: Breaking the Journey for a Fortnight in Ceylon* (Dodanduwa: Ceylon 1914), 64.

the poor quality of the book's reproduction resulted in the illustration lacking her usual deft touch.<sup>107</sup>

Another unsuccessful area of endeavour for Mort was her brief flirtation with magazine covers. Her designs for the covers of *Australia Today for the Immigrant and Tourist* (Fig. 66) and *The Lone Hand* (Fig. 67) were never published.

Figure 66

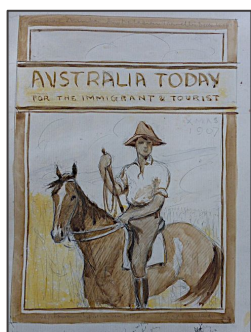
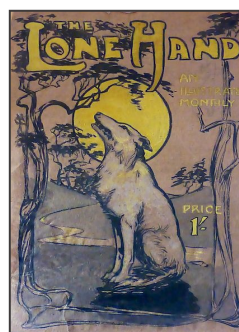


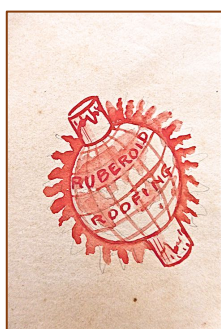
Figure 67



Designs for  
magazine covers

A venture into advertising was similarly short-lived. Although the difference between her initial draft designs for a postcard for the firm Ruberoid (Figs. 68-69) and her final product (Fig. 70) demonstrate her flexibility of approach, this was another avenue of revenue Mort chose not to pursue.<sup>108</sup> Perhaps the final choice of design was too plain for her taste.

Figure 68



Draft designs for  
Ruberoid postcard

Figure 69

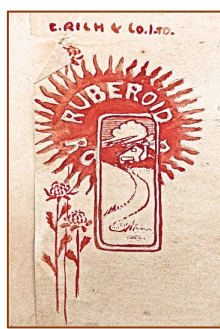
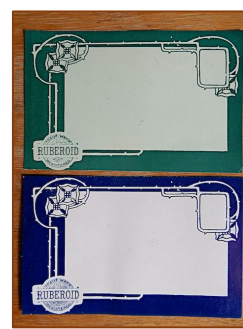


Figure 70



Final design for  
Ruberoid postcard

<sup>107</sup> The deduction that the drawing was done from a photograph is based on the fact that Mort never went to northern India. Benares is now known as Varanasi.

<sup>108</sup> Ruberoid is a bitumen roofing membrane. The verso of Mort's postcard features a 1906 photograph of the factory roof of the British-Australasian Tobacco Company in Sydney.



### Mort's networks of taste and culture

During this period of Mort's life, she frequently worked within a network of other middle-class female decorative artists, a *modus operandi* that illustrates the collegial nature of her work. The sense of a 'culture in common' that can 'provide a particular tending' to nurture individuals within a group is a feature of networking that has been explored by Raymond Williams in his monograph *Culture and Society 1780–1950*.<sup>109</sup> Williams argues that the precise form of such a culture in common is always specific to historical periods and interests.<sup>110</sup> Rebecca Jennings has also noted that, for some women, their membership of a more fluid network 'sustained them and gave them identity and purpose, focused on their work ... and (focused on) resistance to marriage and family'.<sup>111</sup>

In an Australian context, the first decade of the twentieth century was a period of change on social, political and economic fronts, especially for women. Women were obtaining the vote, emerging from the home into the studio and starting to threaten male dominance in the art world. One of the most visible symbols of this changing ethos was an exhibition of women's work held in Melbourne in 1907. It was one of a series of exhibitions, held both abroad and in Australia, that 'were not simply collections of cultural artefacts; they were themselves a quintessential expression of the culture of the age'.<sup>112</sup>

The First Exhibition of Women's Work was a 'massive undertaking' that demonstrated Australia's importance as an artistic colony.<sup>113</sup> Held in Melbourne during October and November of 1907, it differed from previous exhibitions in two important respects. Firstly, it utilised 'a network of committees' of hundreds

<sup>109</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1963), 337.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Rebecca Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Women Since 1500* (Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), 64.

<sup>112</sup> Graeme Davison, 'Festivals of Nationhood: The International Exhibitions' in *Australian Cultural History*, eds. S.L. Goldberg, and F.B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 158.

<sup>113</sup> Kirtsen McKay, *Portrait of an Exhibition: Centenary Celebrations for the First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work 1907* (Castlemaine: Castlemaine Art Gallery and Historical Museum, 2007), 9. During the three weeks of the exhibition, over 250,000 people viewed more than 16,000 exhibits.

of women and men across the new nation, and stimulated thousands of women to send in entries that ranged over dozens of artistic media.<sup>114</sup> Secondly, it aimed at celebrating ‘the advancement of women’ and nurturing opportunities for female employment.<sup>115</sup> In her official notice initiating the exhibition, Lady Northcote stated:

Everyone ... must have noticed the opening up of new avenues of employment to women ... Every opportunity should be afforded to them to determine for themselves the occupations ... by the pursuit of which they may reasonably hope to secure an adequate position of independence.<sup>116</sup>

Historians have interpreted the significance of the 1907 exhibition in differing ways. Topliss sees it as ‘a significant signpost for women’s liberation in the arts’.<sup>117</sup> She also contends that, by choosing to call their exhibition an ‘Exhibition of Women’s Work’, rather than an ‘Arts and Crafts Exhibition’, women were subverting the traditional male division of arts and crafts.<sup>118</sup> Robert and Ingrid Holden also hold that the exhibition highlighted ‘the way in which women defined themselves in relation to the powerful male image of Australia’s budding nationalism’.<sup>119</sup> Hunt, however, has argued that, despite this attempt of women’s asserting a new role for themselves, the concentration on traditional categories in the exhibition demonstrated ‘the presence of conservative values in the emergence of female cultural activism’.<sup>120</sup>

Mort’s Art Nouveau–styled poster, promoting the forthcoming exhibition, features an archetypal appealing young woman in three-quarter face profile who beguilingly invites the public to visit the exhibition (Fig. 71). The fact that the woman is holding a waratah aloft indicates that, in the fierce debate that was

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>115</sup> ‘Women’s Work in Australia’, *The Lone Hand* Vol. 1 No. 7, November 1907, 32.

<sup>116</sup> McKay, *Portrait of an Exhibition*, 18.

<sup>117</sup> Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism*, 48.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>119</sup> Robert and Ingrid Holden, ‘Women’s Art and Craft Exhibitions in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Australia’, *Hecate* 6, no. 2 (1980), 121.

<sup>120</sup> Hunt, ‘Cultivating the Arts’, 94 and 99.

raging at the time over whether the wattle or the waratah was the preferred national icon, Mort came down firmly on the side of the waratah.<sup>121</sup>

Figure 71

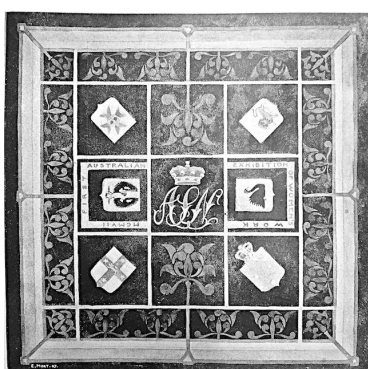


Mort's poster for the 1907 exhibition

Her contribution to the preparations for the exhibition received favourable press coverage, with the *Sydney Mail* noting her role as the leader of four young women who shared a studio and were producing items for the Melbourne exhibition:

Miss Mort originated the bright idea of making a special cult of applied Australian art, and as a talented designer, she directs the efforts of the other craftswomen.<sup>122</sup>

Figure 72



Mort's design for the carpet

One of the most widely publicised contributions that Mort made for this exhibition was her symbolic design for a special carpet on which Lady Northcote, wife of the governor general, would stand as she opened the exhibition (Fig. 72).<sup>123</sup> The carpet was so large that it had to be made in sections; Mort again assumed a leadership role in the making of one of its sections.<sup>124</sup> One journalist

<sup>121</sup> K.R. Cramp's 1909 leaflet *Wattle Day and Its Significance* made a strong case for the adoption of wattle as the national floral emblem of Australia, claiming that the waratah had 'a stiff propriety that does not represent the freedom and joyful spontaneity of the average Australian person'. K.R Cramp *Wattle Day and Its Significance* (Sydney: The Australian Wattle League, 1909), 2.

<sup>122</sup> 'M.S.', 'Australian Women: Prominent Exhibition Workers in the Applied Arts', *The Sydney Mail*, Wednesday 31 July, 1907.

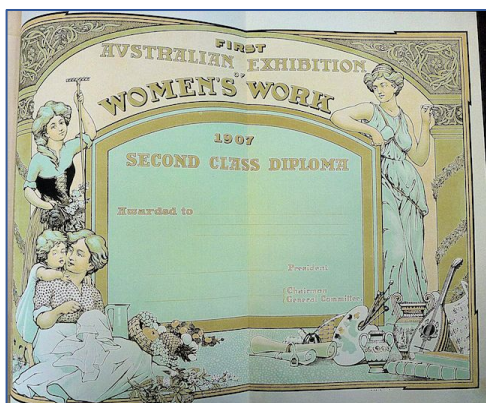
<sup>123</sup> 'The Exhibition Carpet', *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, 11 Oct. 1907, 2 and *The Sydney Mail*, September 11, 1907, 682. The carpet was colourful, symmetrical and full of symbolism as well as being 'wonderfully rich, thick and handsome'. It was made with 'a great deal of enthusiasm' and with 'bands of ladies daily cutting up wool in the room hired for the purpose'.

<sup>124</sup> Descriptions of the carpet's dimension varied from '16 ft. each way' to '12ft. 6 in. square'.

noted Mort's use of a combination of traditional heraldic symbols with the then innovative use of the waratah:

The groundwork is dark blue, the centre design being the coronet and monogram of Lady Northcote, surrounded by the six heraldic shields of the different states of the Commonwealth. The border is a very handsome one of crimson waratahs.<sup>125</sup>

Figure 73



Mort's design for award given to second place winner in the 'First Exhibition of Women's Work

Mort's seven entries in five traditional categories won two prizes: a first prize for designing the award certificate given to exhibitors who gained a second place in any section of the exhibition (Fig. 73) and a second prize for a bookplate. The quality of Mort's entries for the exhibition was also praised. A *Sydney Mail* commented on Mort's use of Australian motifs and her originality of design:

Miss Eirene Mort (NSW) remembered the children in her clever exhibit "Australian Animal Alphabet," also in the stencilled nursery curtains "Cocks and Hens" and "Kangaroos" – a most versatile contribution to the Women's Exhibition. Miss Mort has sent in many beautiful specimens of her artistic skill in many sections. In each instance, there is an originality of design which gives this exhibitor's work a mark of distinction.<sup>126</sup>

After the 1907 exhibition, Mort's prominence increased in the press. 'Fanella' of the *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* singled her out as someone who had successfully adopted 'art designing' as a profession.

Amongst careers for women, art designing is one that ranks first in popularity. Sydney possesses several clever girls who have adopted this profession as a means of making a livelihood, and are doing excellently well at it. Miss Eirene Mort, who is an artist as well as a designer, has been

<sup>125</sup> 'The Exhibition Carpet', *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, 2.

<sup>126</sup> 'Vandorian', *The Sydney Mail*, November 13, 1907.

giving the public of Sydney some proof lately of her efforts, which are both useful and artistic.<sup>127</sup>

This coupling of romantic nationalism to artisan practice became a marked feature of much of Mort's oeuvre and was noted by numerous journalists. In 1908, *The Bulletin* noted that her 'hand-made toys and original designs for curtains, cushions and friezes were among the magnets of the show',<sup>128</sup> while the *Sydney Morning Herald* also commented on Mort's originality:

Miss Mort can always be relied upon for something original in the shape of Christmas gifts, and this year she has not disappointed us. A most ingenious device is the travelling cushion cover, made in stout linen, with strong handles and pockets at one side to carry one's book and work when one is going on deck; in a corner of the cover is a spray of gum leaves, just a reminder of where you've come from.<sup>129</sup>

Mort's involvement in informal networks such as those created by the 1907 exhibition extended into other more formal areas of her life. Membership of the Royal Art Society of New South Wales gave her entrée into a network that featured prominently in Sydney's cultural circles during this decade. Although Mort had joined this society on her return to Sydney in 1904, she did not really begin to utilise its networking aspects until 1913.<sup>130</sup> A review of that year's society exhibition praises both her technique and her choice of subject matter, stating that Mort 's work reveals:

uncommonly finely etched studies, delightful old-world atmosphere, so delicate and yet so strong with vista effects that take you inside and far, far away. They grow by distance and yet you can sit beside them and see every line and every minute tracery.<sup>131</sup>

It is now time to return to Mort's membership of the organisation that she joined after her abortive attempt to establish an Australian Guild of Handicraft –

<sup>127</sup> 'Fanella', *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, July 1, 1909.

<sup>128</sup> *The Bulletin*, May 7, 1908, 22.

<sup>129</sup> 'Puck's Girdle' *SMH*, December 2, 1908.

<sup>130</sup> *Royal Art Society* 'Records for Eirene Mort' Entries 1 and 2 (out of 22 entries).

By September 1904 Mort had sold a black and white drawing ('The Wave', priced £3/3/-). She sold another black and white drawing in 1905.

<sup>131</sup> *The Newsletter*, December 27, 1913.

the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW. If Mort's membership of the Royal Art Society was at best spasmodic, the opposite was true of her membership of this newly formed society, whose open door Mort walked through just six months after its formation in March 1907. She was the eighth member to do so. Weston joined later that same year, as its sixteenth member. By July of 1907, Mort was voted onto the Selection Committee in a tightly fought battle, in which seventeen members contested the right to be on this prestigious inner circle of members.<sup>132</sup> The Selection Committee was a body of particular importance, for it was the task of this committee to choose individual items 'of sufficient merit to be exhibited' for the society's annual exhibitions.<sup>133</sup> The power of selection/rejection was jealously guarded and frequently exercised. Soon afterwards, in March 1908, Mort was elected to the Executive Committee of the society, a position she held for most of the next 24 years, with Weston joining her in December 1910 – a sign of confidence in both women's abilities.<sup>134</sup>,

Mort's commitment to promoting the Arts and Crafts cause included her keeping an eye on the financial health of the society. On many occasions, she suggested ways that money could be saved, either by economies of scale or by judicious planning of events – a contribution that may have seemed pernicky to her peers. Right from the start of monthly meetings, the inaugural members set a fine of sixpence if members missed more than two meetings in a row, a substantial amount in light of the fact that the annual subscription was one shilling per annum.<sup>135</sup> Mort later moved a motion that members who had not paid their annual subscriptions should be contacted and asked to pay overdue

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<sup>132</sup> Meeting held on 16 July 1907, by Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'General Meeting Minutes Book 8.10.06 – 15.6.14', ML MSS 3645, Box 6 (Sydney: Mitchell Library) 17. The members elected, in order of voting preference, were: the Misses Stephens, Gether, Mort, Wilson, Newman, Creed, and Mesdames Soderberg and Hume.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. Meeting held on 11 July 1907.

<sup>134</sup> Mort took leave of absence from her committee duties on her sabbaticals to Europe in 1912–13 and again in 1926.

<sup>135</sup> Meeting held on 09.08.1906 by Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Committee Meeting Minutes 9.8.06 – 17.8.07', ML MSS 3645, Box 4 (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 2.

fees. She recommended that failure to do so within seven days would lead to their names being 'crossed off the books'.<sup>136</sup>

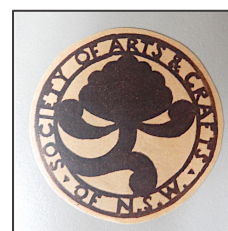
Mort experimented with possible logos for the society (Fig. 74), her waratah design becoming the official logo of the society (Fig. 75), an influence still visible at the time of writing in 2017 outside the Arts and Crafts Society's shopfront in Sydney's historic 'The Rocks' area.

Figure 74



Mort's draft designs for logos  
for Arts and Crafts Society

Figure 75



Final logo

Figure 76



Award certificate for the  
Society of Arts and Crafts

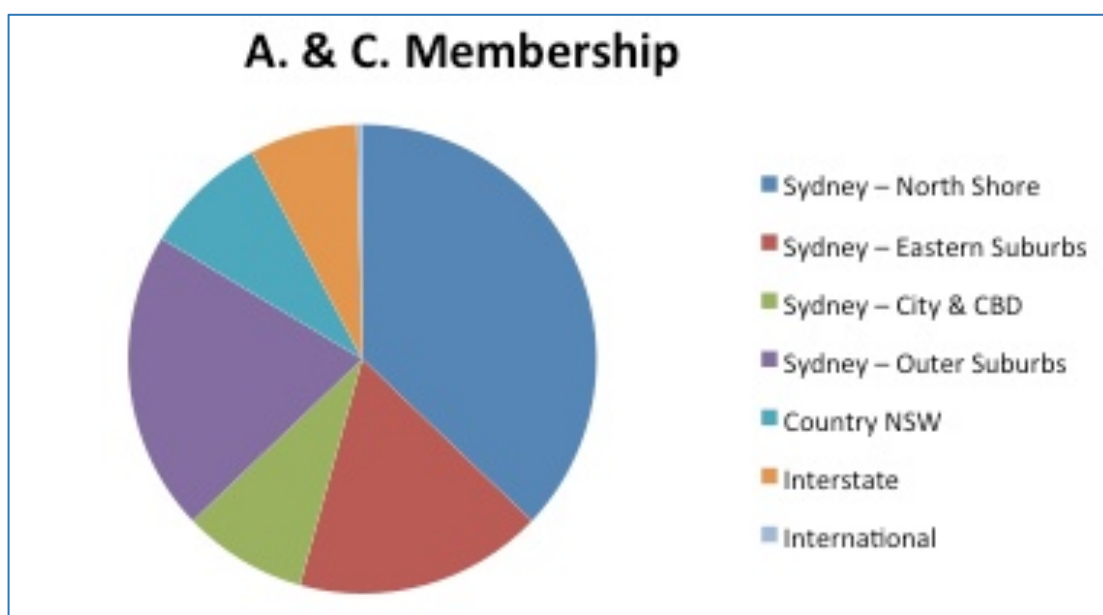
Mort achieved considerable success within the ranks of the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, winning no less than 26 award certificates. Fittingly, they featured Mort's own distinctive waratah design as the logo on the award. (Fig. 76) These awards demonstrate the variety of media in which she was proficient, including categories as diverse as Needlework, Book Decoration, Tiled Panels and Mural Decoration. Mort also won cash prizes in the competitions of several other organisations such as those held by the Thirlmere Home and Fresh Air League and the Girls Realm Guild of Service and Good Fellowship.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>136</sup> Meeting held on 13.05.1911 by Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Committee Meeting Minutes 16.8.07 - 12.12.09', ML MSS 3645, Box 4 (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 87. It should, however, also be noted that Mort proposed that a member who had inadvertently paid the year's subscription fees twice be informed that she need not pay them the following year. Pernickety she may have been at times, but she was also scrupulously fair.

<sup>137</sup> Award letters / certificates, Mort Family Papers, Box 2.

The Society grew rapidly, attracting ‘the elite of fashionable Sydney Society into its heart’.<sup>138</sup> Records show that monthly meetings regularly had an attendance of about thirty people.<sup>139</sup> From time to time, a ‘Bring-A-Friend’ meeting was organized when attendance would swell to 70 – 80 people.<sup>140</sup> The bulk of its membership (63.7 per cent) came from the affluent areas of the North Shore and the Eastern Suburbs (Fig. 77).<sup>141</sup>

Figure 77



Society membership distribution 1906-1934

Mort participated in a number of strategies used by the Society to encourage and promote various crafts.<sup>142</sup> From the first monthly meeting in October 1906, members were asked to bring a sample of their own craftwork to every meeting so that they could share information on resources and techniques.

<sup>138</sup> Hunt, ‘Cultivating the Arts’, 104.

<sup>139</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W., ‘Press Cutting Album’, ML MSS 3645, Box 7 (Sydney: Mitchell Library). n.d. The membership rose to 175 members at one point.

<sup>140</sup> Meeting held on 19 March 1907 by Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W., ‘General Meeting Minutes Book 13.8.06 – 19.7.15’, ML MSS 3645, Box 6 (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 12.

<sup>141</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, ‘Membership Book’, ML MSS 3645 Box 6 (Sydney: Mitchell Library). The society’s membership book, which dates from 1906–1934, shows a total membership of 254 members (of whom 15 were men) during those years.

<sup>142</sup> Mort only occasionally took on the role of an office bearer, filling in as Acting Secretary on 11 January 1909 and Acting President on 31 March 1911 when those office bearers were absent. She does not seem to have acted as Acting Treasurer at any time.



Mort's first item for sharing was the *Australian Animal Alphabet* in its paper format (Figs. 78-79).<sup>143</sup>

Figure 78

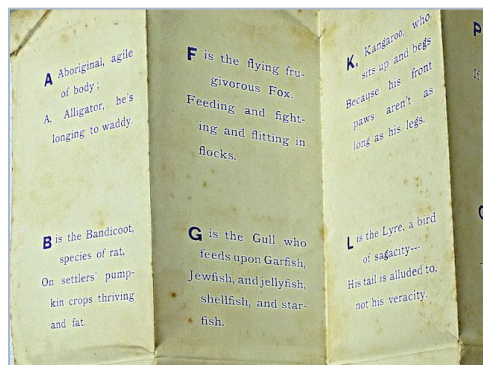


Figure 79



*Australian  
Animal  
Alphabet*

The Society had several different objectives, including the continued education of its members. The first lecture given in March 1908 was 'a paper read by Miss Mort on 'Japanese Art', a form of art on which she wrote in her newspaper columns'<sup>144</sup>, later followed by lectures on 'Lettering', 'Design', 'Embroidery', 'Stencilling', 'Birds in Decoration' and 'Modern Craft Work'.<sup>145</sup> This was diverse, earnest instruction.

The Society's focus on educating its members was extended in 1913 by the formation of subgroups called 'Circles', one of which was the Design Circle.<sup>146</sup> Members were asked to submit their work for 'friendly criticism' on their designs.<sup>147</sup> Perhaps the criticism was not as friendly as it should have been, for by August 1914, the Design Circle, which had started with twelve members, had lost most of them. Mort and three others were appointed to a sub-committee to examine

<sup>143</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, ML MSS 2859, Box 6, (Sydney: Mitchell Library).

<sup>144</sup> G.P. Allen. *Historical Sketch of the Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W*: compiled from the Minute Books 1906-1931'. (Sydney, Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W 1931), 3.

<sup>145</sup> Other guest lecturers spoke on topics as diverse as art in advertising, Chinese ceramics, wooden carving, mosaics and architecture.

<sup>146</sup> The Design Circle, of which Mort was a member, met to study aspects of colour coordination or the use of repetitive motifs.

<sup>147</sup> Meeting held on 19 March 1907 by Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W., 'General Meeting Minutes Book 13.8.06 - 19.7.15' ML MSS 3645 Box 6. (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 156.

ways of reinvigorating the group.<sup>148</sup> No way of resuscitating the Design Circle was found, and it was allowed to lapse in September 1914. Perhaps the outbreak of war diverted attention, or perhaps such didacticism had worn a little thin.<sup>149</sup>

The Arts and Crafts Society had always had male members. In fact, three out of the eight people at the inaugural 1906 meeting had been men.<sup>150</sup> By 1909, however, the proportion of males had shrunk dramatically, with only six of the 75 members being men.<sup>151</sup> The social implications of the society's overwhelmingly (though not exclusively) female composition are important, for they illustrate the way women drew strength and comfort from each other's presence, and were able to function more effectively as part of a group than as solo practitioners of applied arts. And perhaps also was evident a widening division between women's domain of 'craft' and men's sphere of 'art'.

Mort contributed to the Society's success in many practical ways. One way was to submit entries in the yearly exhibition, with examples of Mort's solo work, as well as her joint work with Weston, being listed for sale (Fig. 80).<sup>152</sup>

Figure 80

Eirene Mort and Nora Weston		
253.	Screen, own design . . . . .	8 8 0
254.	Travelling Cushion . . . . .	1 5 0
255.	Work Box . . . . .	1 1 0
256.	String Box . . . . .	9 6

1910 catalogue  
for the Annual  
Exhibition of the  
Society of Arts  
and Crafts-NSW

<sup>148</sup> Meeting held on 21 September 1914 by Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W. 'Committee Meeting Minutes Book 8.10.06 – 15.6.14' ML MSS 3645 Box 6 (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 8 and 36.

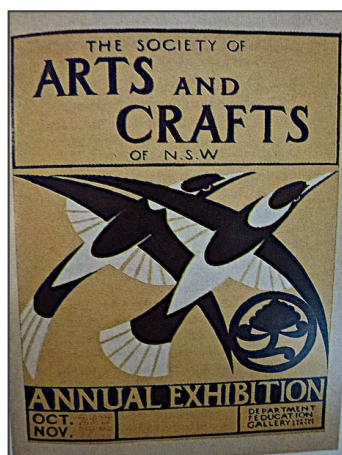
<sup>149</sup> As Opposition leader, Fisher had already pledged Australia that Australia would stand behind the mother country 'to the last man and the last shilling'. When he became Prime Minister in August 1914, he did not need formal ratification by parliament to commit Australian troops to going to war.

<sup>150</sup> Meeting held on 13 August 1906 by Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W., 'General Meeting Minutes Book 13.8.06 – 19.7.15', ML MSS 3645, Box 6, (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 2. The men who were present at the inaugural meeting did not take out formal membership. One man, Dr. Alsop, was appointed as treasurer.

<sup>151</sup> By 1915, men featured more in the society's records more as guest speakers than as members.

<sup>152</sup> *Third Annual Exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW catalogue*, ML MSS 3654, Box 3, (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 1910.

Figure 81



Arts and Crafts  
Exhibition Poster 1912

Another practical way of supporting the Society was to design posters for the society's annual exhibitions. Mort's 1912 poster (Fig. 81) is another example of her flirtation with the bold geometric forms of Art Deco. Art curator Bell views the poster as being one in which Mort utilises both Art Deco and a Japanese style of design by 'combining the streamlined shape of the birds with a Mon-like use of the Society's logo'.<sup>153</sup>

The minute books of the Executive Committee meetings and general monthly meetings are littered with votes of thanks proposed to Mort for 'the unselfish way in which she has worked for the Society and furthered its interests in every way'.<sup>154</sup> Sometimes, Mort helped in finding staff for the Society's depot, as when 'Miss Mort and Miss Stephens were appointed as a subcommittee to engage a custodian'.<sup>155</sup> On another occasion, confusion reigned about the closing date for the acceptance of items for an exhibition. It was Mort who offered a solution, proposing an extension of time, as the date had inadvertently been set for a public holiday.<sup>156</sup>

At other times, the society's difficulties were more interpersonal than logistical. An anonymous member of the society complained to the committee about interviews that had been given to the *Australian Star* by Mort and Stephens, as she thought that the interviews did not represent the society accurately. Some of Mort's comments seem innocuous enough, reflecting the view that members should avail themselves of the opportunity to study and 'fit themselves for a

<sup>153</sup> Bell, Interview.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., Meeting held on 22 March, 1909, 41.

<sup>155</sup> Meeting on 9 April 1908 by Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W. 'Monthly and General Meeting Minutes '13.8.06 - 19.7.15' ML MSS 3645, Box 6, (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 20.

<sup>156</sup> Meeting held on 21 August 1911 by the Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W. 'Monthly and General Meeting Minutes '13.8.06 - 19.7.15' ML MSS 3645, Box 6, (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 98.

wholesome and remunerative career.<sup>157</sup> Perhaps the implied criticism of Sydney offended the anonymous complainant, for Mort contended that Melbourne, Tasmania and New Zealand offered better opportunities for study than did Sydney at that time, and posited that:

they have imported competent teachers for the different arts and crafts, with the result that there is no 'running home' to learn what, in many instances, can be as well – if not better – taught here.<sup>158</sup>

Or perhaps the anonymous complainant took personally Mort's hope that:

this society will teach women that there are other things in life than painting. Many ... have not the remotest talent that way – so few have the Divine gift – yet they will not be persuaded.<sup>159</sup>

It may, however, have been the alleged remarks of Ethel Stephens ('It takes a lot of skill to learn a craft. You can't pick it up promiscuously') that were found to be even less acceptable.<sup>160</sup> Committee members commiserated with Mort and Stephens, feeling that the press had misrepresented the two women's opinions, but the determination that art might form the core of 'wholesome and remunerative careers' seems recognisably Mort's view.<sup>161</sup>

Of even more significance was the crisis of leadership that occurred in 1911 when the effectiveness of the chairperson was called into question. Hunt holds that the crisis was only resolved by the return of Stephens, Mort, Elizabeth Soderberg and Muriel Danvers Power to the executive.<sup>162</sup> Although the contributions made by these and others such as Sulman and Fairfax should not be ignored, Topliss' assertion that the Arts and Crafts movement in Sydney was 'a body that was given shape by Eirene Mort and Ethel Stephens', recognises the

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<sup>157</sup> 'Arts and Crafts', *The Australian Star*, Saturday April 11, 1908, 4.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> 'A Sydney Woman's Society', *The Australian Star*, Wednesday April 8 1908, 1.

<sup>161</sup> Meeting held on 21 April 1908 by Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W. 'Committee Meeting Minutes Book 8.10.06 – 15.6.14' ML MSS 3645 Box 6, (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 22.

<sup>162</sup> Hunt, 'Cultivating the Arts', 112. Mort returned to the executive committee, not to a senior office bearer role.

primacy of Mort's (and Stephen's) place in helping to shape Sydney's artistic development during the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>163</sup>

The Arts and Crafts Society was an undoubted success. An undated newspaper article summarized its victories thus:

"Small beginnings sometimes lead to big endings" is an old adage which may find its proof in the birth, establishment and development of the Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W. The little friendly centre of self-help, founded twelve years ago, had become a State, if not a national institution. The women of the Society of Arts and Crafts have founded what may be termed a National School of Handicraft.<sup>164</sup>

In 1910, the journalist 'Eblana' noted the society's success, commenting that the exhibits for an annual exhibition were 'all the work of the gentler sex, and go forcibly to prove what a woman can do in arts and crafts if she but perseveres'.<sup>165</sup> The patronizing tone of the comment ill accords with the professional standard of work that was being produced by such members as Rhoda Wager, Florence Sulman, Ethel Stephens and, of course, Eirene Mort.

Hunt argues that there is a pattern in the female patronage of the Arts and Crafts movements in Sydney during the first decade of the twentieth century:

Women in Sydney certainly assumed more active roles as cultural agents. These patrons came from wealthy or influential families with strong imperial ties. Most had been exposed directly to European culture ... Their new cultural activism maybe seen as a manifestation of new womanhood, although the patrons did not always directly and actively propound emancipist views.<sup>166</sup>

Mort's role within the Society of Arts and Crafts undoubtedly was that of a 'cultural activist'. It strengthened her professional status, and contributed to the

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<sup>163</sup> Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism*, 11. It has not been within the scope of this thesis to examine the contribution made by Stephens to the Arts and Crafts movement. Stephens and Mort were close collaborators during their years in the Arts and Crafts Society; in the 1920s they acquired homes near each other in Vacluse.

<sup>164</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Newspaper Cuttings Album', ML MSS 3645, Box 7, (Sydney: Mitchell Library).

<sup>165</sup> 'Eblana', 'Social News and Gossip', *The Catholic Press*, November 3, 1910, 12. Being Anglican, perhaps the persevering Mort and Weston were spared knowledge of this patronizing comment.

<sup>166</sup> Hunt, 'Cultivating the Arts', 117.

perception of her as being emblematic of the 'New Woman'. Though their ride as networkers was bumpy at times, the benefits for Mort and Weston far outweighed any disadvantages. The society was their refuge and their power base – a mutually beneficial place where they could be supported, give support and be recognised for their expertise.

### **Mort as a 'New Woman'**

The New Woman of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and in the Australian context, has been cast as a woman who 'worked, sought education and fought for legal and political rights'.<sup>167</sup> Montana holds that the involvement of many affluent middle-class women in the Art movement was 'a threat to social order'.<sup>168</sup> When considering this second leitmotif in Mort's life, it must be conceded that, although she certainly worked and sought education, Mort was no radical political activist. Nor does she completely fit the prototype 1920s version of the modernist New Woman – a fashionable consumer in paid employment who favoured Modernist art. In significant ways, she was anomalous, deviating from the stereotypical New Woman. Stereotypes, however, often belie a range of experiences. Although Mort wrote no words that would place her firmly in the political feminist camp, her actions proclaim her support for women's right to work. She perhaps fell into the category of women whose careers were:

proof that the newly gained independence of women in the professions was directly owing to the achievement of women's suffrage and their professional training abroad. Not all of them expressed their views openly about emancipation.<sup>169</sup>

Mort's feminine consciousness, though largely unobtrusive, was nevertheless deeply rooted. It is true that, while she struggled with the woman-centred versus heterosexual ideals of women's role in society, she nevertheless embodied the

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<sup>167</sup> Martha Vicinus, 'Introduction: The perfect Victorian Lady' in *Suffer and Be Still, Women in the Victorian Age*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1972), ix

<sup>168</sup> Montana, *The Art Movement in Australia*, 8.

<sup>169</sup> Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism*, 173.

spirit of independence and confidence that characterised the New Woman of the era.

Much of Mort's status in this regard can be attributed to her relationship with Weston. It was not only personal; it was also professional. During this period, their partnership, so beautifully captured in the photo below, helped to enable them to fulfil their goal of living independent and productive lives as 'New Women' (Fig. 82).

Figure 82



Weston  
and Mort  
c. 1905

Although Weston practised as a woodcarver and metalworker, their successful partnership was based more on Mort's career than on Weston's. In similar fashion to Bertha Viver's supportive role to Victorian era novelist Marie Corelli, Weston was content to 'play second fiddle' to her partner.<sup>170</sup> Weston was, in fact, Mort's 'enabler' – the 'behind-the-scenes' figure who dealt with the minutiae of daily life and facilitated Mort's prominence in Sydney's artistic and cultural milieu. Jennings points out that, when women such as Viver and Corelli attended functions as a couple, the nature of their relationship changed from private to public, signifying a significant step in community acceptance.<sup>171</sup> The same can be claimed for Mort and Weston.

<sup>170</sup> Michael Callan, Interview.

<sup>171</sup> Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain*, 66-67.

In launching her career on her return to Sydney, Mort had first to achieve credibility as an artist and artisan. The first platform of her artistic credibility rested on the excellence of the training in which she had participated during her four years in London. Overseas experience was considered 'an essential component of an Australian artist's training'.<sup>172</sup> It was deemed necessary whether the artist concerned pursued career as an independent artist or took up teaching as a career. The second platform of Mort's credibility, her level of skill as an artist and artisan, needed to be continually demonstrated to her colleagues and her clients. The successful combination of these two platforms (through her utilisation of a studio, the promotion of her abilities through competitions and advertising, her networking skills, her mastery of a wide variety of media, and, above all, her innovative promotion of iconic Australian images) meant that Mort was able to function as an independent woman, capable of generating her own income.

It is important to place Mort's artistic achievements in the context of her times. She was able to capitalise on the current fashions in artistic taste and style by riding with the tide of popularity that the Arts and Crafts movement was then experiencing in Sydney. Her promulgation of the Arts and Crafts cause and the message that art need not be hung on walls but could be found in the beauty of everyday objects helped to break down the often artificial distinction between 'fine' and 'applied' art, and the fact that she was able to do this at a time when the male-centred hegemony of Sydney's cultural circles still largely held sway is to her credit. Moreover, her plea that artefacts should have a 'distinctly Australian character' does not just lend itself to the play on words that Mort was a 'distinctly Australian character' herself; it also symbolises Mort's close identification with the iconic images she so passionately championed.

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<sup>172</sup> Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism*, 11 and 13. Although Topliss' statement was referring to the work of artists such as Margret, Grace Crowley and Gladys Reynell, it can be argued that her view on the value of overseas training may equally apply to artists-cum-artisans such as Mort, for Topliss also believes that the important issues, such as the professionalism of women artists, crossed stylistic and media boundaries.



Figure 83



Bookplate for Dr  
John Wright, Anglican  
Archbishop of Sydney

As well as the support networks of art and education available to Mort during these early Sydney years, her personal and social connections extended to a number of other areas. Her links to the Anglican Church were strong and brought her occasional commissions of work, including a bookplate for the then Archbishop of Sydney, Dr John Wright (Fig. 83).<sup>173</sup> She mixed with many influential upper middle-class families, being in constant contact with such important Sydney figures as Mary Fairfax (president of the society for many years) and Sir John Sulman (father of another long-term president, Florence Sulman), and activists such as Rose Scott and Dr Mary Booth. Each of these contacts and networks helped Mort to become well known as an independent operator in Sydney's artistic circles. In addition, even though she chose not to be financially dependent on the family, she undoubtedly had the emotional support of her parents, siblings, nieces and nephews.<sup>174</sup> They patronised her exhibitions and attended her art classes.

Stephens expressed the extent of Mort's influence during this decade in his *Bookfellow* article of 1910 when he asserted that she was 'a local pioneer' in the applied arts, and estimated that there were 'probably *five hundred or more women* [my italics] in Sydney who may be associated with her [Mort] as comrades or followers, some of them in earnest'.<sup>175</sup> Stephens' use of the words 'comrades or followers' is significant, with the former implying that a spirit of camaraderie existed within the group, while the latter acknowledged her leadership role as a change agent for the Arts and Crafts movement. The peak year in this decade for

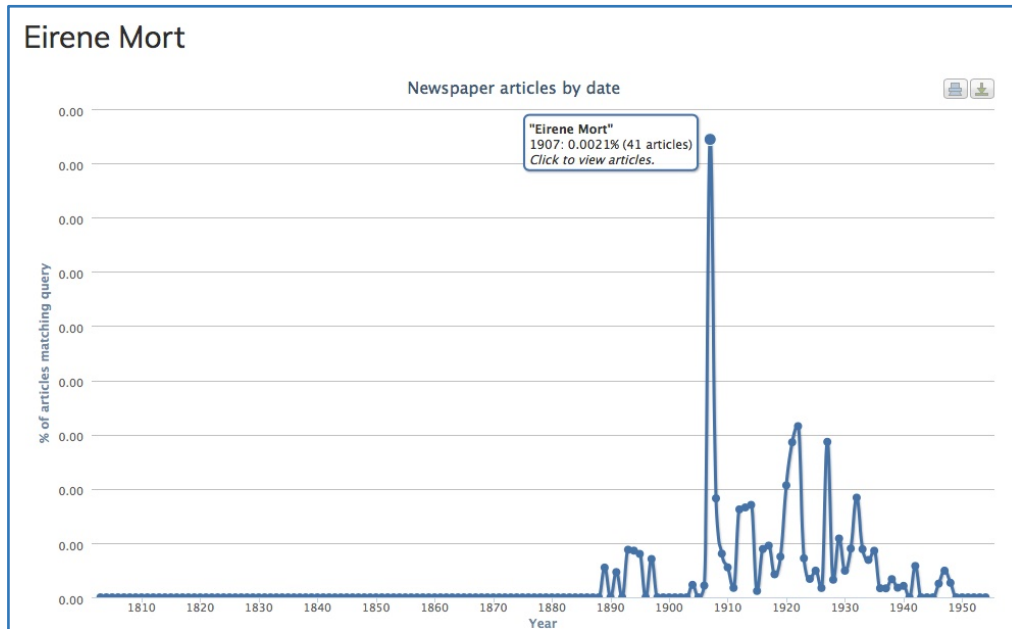
<sup>173</sup> The family home that had belonged to Eirene's great uncle, Thomas Sutcliffe Mort, had been sold to the Diocese of Sydney as a residence for the Archbishop. Mort and her mother occasionally attended garden parties there.

<sup>174</sup> No letters from this early period of Mort's life remain in the various collections of her work, although later letters show that the bond between the siblings remained strong. When they wrote to each other, they almost always referred to themselves and each other in code, using a Roman numeral representing their position in the family. NLA 06/017 and Mort Family Papers

<sup>175</sup> Stephens, 'Black and Whiter's'.

public recognition of Mort and her work was 1907, the year of the Exhibition of Women's Work, when 41 newspaper articles made mention of Mort's work and success (Fig. 84).<sup>176</sup>

Figure 84



<sup>176</sup> With the exception of one letter to the editor, all mentions of Mort in the press that year were favourable.

Mort's degree of success can be more comprehensively understood by placing her work in the economic context of her times. Data for the early twentieth century shows that, in Australia, relatively few women could class themselves as being financially independent. The census figures for 1911 show that only 18.4 per cent of women classified themselves as being a 'breadwinner' at that time; of those female breadwinners, only 13.4 per cent classed themselves as being 'independent' wage earners<sup>177</sup> Whether Mort classed herself as a 'breadwinner' or an 'independent' wage earner, she was unusual for her times, a fact that her niece Margaret later commented upon:

Unlike some of the woman artists of the day who were aided by well-off husbands or families, my aunt fully supported herself by her art ... She was unusual in the social group to which she naturally belonged.<sup>178</sup>

Mort could adapt to change at the micro level. If new premises for a studio needed to be found, they were. If a new artistic technique, such as etching, needed to be mastered, she did so. 'It is useless to design [for] a craft without some knowledge of its limitations and possibilities, and the best, if not the only way, is to try yourself' [my italics].<sup>179</sup> It is therefore all the more poignant that Mort could not adapt to changing practices at the macro level and move into new forms of artistic expression.

The careers of Mort's male contemporaries, L.J. Harvey (in Brisbane) and James Linton (in Perth), sit in stark contrast to Mort's career. Glenn Cooke and Deborah Edwards have documented the steady flow of Harvey's contribution to pottery from the safety of his full time teaching position at Brisbane Technical

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<sup>177</sup> Commonwealth of Australia: Census Data for 3 April 1911, 1283.

[http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/o/672F01666C9728B9CA2578390013E61F/\\$File/1911%20Census%20-%20Volume%20III%20-%20Part%20XII%20Occupations.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/o/672F01666C9728B9CA2578390013E61F/$File/1911%20Census%20-%20Volume%20III%20-%20Part%20XII%20Occupations.pdf) (accessed on 10 September 2016).

<sup>178</sup> Margaret Mort, interview in Newcastle by Bruce Semier, 14 February 1985, transcript in NLA file 181/14/10.

<sup>179</sup> Stephens, 'Black and Whiter's'.

College.<sup>180</sup> Similarly, former Art Gallery of NSW director Hal Missingham and art dealer Arthur Spartalis have each noted that Linton's prolific output in arts and crafts was underpinned by his full-time teaching position at the Perth Technical School.<sup>181</sup> The discrepancy between their careers and that of Mort's reinforces the hypothesis that it was mainly their gender rather than their talent that ensured that their careers were full-time and permanent. In Harvey's case, the gender factor is particularly noticeable, in light of the fact that in 1902, a full-time female employee at the Brisbane Technical College was dismissed so that he could take up the position she had already occupied.<sup>182</sup>

### European sabbatical (1912 – 1913)

In keeping with Mort's spirit of professionalism, both she and Weston updated their proficiency in applied arts on a sabbatical to London, becoming two of the many Australian women who 'went back and forth (to London) over the years'.<sup>183</sup> Her departure on 11 April 1912 on the S. S. Gneisenau (Fig. 85) was reported in the social columns of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in terms reflecting her standing:

Amongst the passengers who left Sydney by the German mail steamer Gneisenau on Wednesday last was Miss Eirene Mort, well known in artistic circles for her clever designing, illustrations, and for her leatherwork. Miss Mort intends to pursue her studies in London (having been formerly a pupil at the Royal School of Design, South Kensington) and will probably also travel on the continent before returning to Australia.<sup>184</sup>

Figure 85

Figure 86

<sup>180</sup> Glenn Cooke and Deborah Edwards, *L. J. Harvey & His School* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery Press, 1983). Harvey was a sculptor as well as a potter.

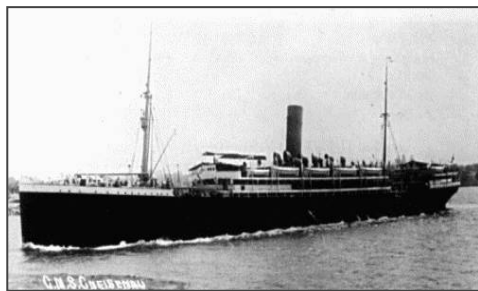
<sup>181</sup> Hal Missingham, *James W R Linton 1869 – 1947* (Perth: The Western Australian Art Gallery, 1977).

Arthur Spartalis, *Linton, Father and Son* (Perth: Spartalis Fine Art, 1995).

<sup>182</sup> Cooke and Edwards *L.J. Harvey & His School*, 51. The employee was named as Miss Elwood.

<sup>183</sup> Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London*, 54.

<sup>184</sup> *SMH*, April 20, 1912.

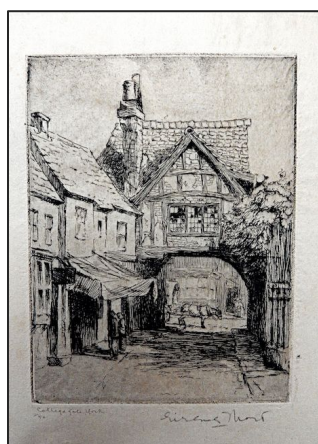


S. S. Gneisenau

19 Coram St  
Bloomsbury

During this visit, Mort and Weston rented an apartment in a Georgian mansion in the fashionable suburb of Bloomsbury.<sup>185</sup> (Fig. 86) Mort spent several months at the London County Council Central School of Arts and Crafts in Southampton Row, attending courses on illuminating under Grailey Hewitt, a noted English calligrapher and illuminator. She also studied etching with Luke Taylor and became adept at producing etchings of buildings of historical interest such as College Gate in York (Fig. 87). After her return to Sydney in early 1913, Mort turned to Australian subjects, producing etchings of farm animals, boats, rural properties and unusual buildings such as ‘The Pottery Kiln’ (Fig. 88).<sup>186</sup>

Figure 87



College Gate, York

Figure 88



The Pottery Kiln, Longueville

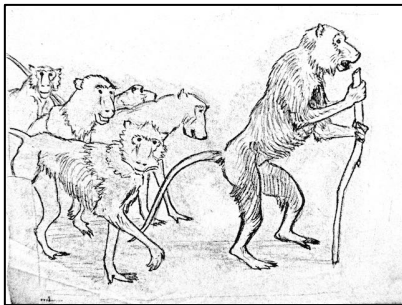
At the London County Council Hammersmith School of Arts and Crafts at Shepherd’s Bush, Mort studied painting and sculpture, focusing particularly on

<sup>185</sup> Frances Johnson, email message to author, 5 June 2015. The building was razed to the ground during the London blitz.

<sup>186</sup> E.M. ‘List of Colour Prints and Etchings,’ Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

the study of animal anatomy. This attention underpinned her ability to draw animals with accuracy and empathy, while allowing her steadfastly to stick to realism. She obtained a season ticket to the London Zoo so that she could practise her sketching of animals *en plein air* (Figs. 89-90).

Figure 89



Primate troop

Figure 90



Tiger

Although she disliked Modernist art, in 1913 Mort visited the display of Post-Impressionist art that was housed in the Belgian Pavilion at the 'Ghent Exhibition of International Art' (Fig. 106).<sup>187</sup> Her comments on the exhibition reveal the extent of her dislike of Modernism.

I am afraid I am very old fashioned, for this ultra modern movement strikes no chord of sympathy in me. I cannot believe it to be genuine and honest, and it seems even worse as applied to things we use ... It is less barbaric than vulgar, and is studied only in grossness and ugliness.<sup>188</sup>

By the time Mort and Weston completed their visit to Britain in 1913, the decline of Arts and Crafts had already begun, with the fashionable and the regenerative sides of the movement probably collapsing most between the years 1905 and 1907. The sudden dearth of several Arts and Crafts periodicals in the

<sup>187</sup> 1913 Ghent Universal & Industrial Exhibition

<http://www.aps.org.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Ghent-1913.pdf>

It seems likely that some of the works on display at the 1913 exhibition were by Wyndham Lewis, Aexej von Jawlensky and Matisse. There may also have been a Picasso.

<sup>188</sup> Margaret Henry, Research notes for 'Eirene Mort and the Development of an Australian School of Design', Women and Labour Conference, University of Queensland, July 1984. Mort was not the only one to be unimpressed by the works on display at the 1913 Exhibition. Some of the art works in the Fine Art pavilion were considered so scandalous that Cardinal Mercier, Belgium's Primate, forbade priests, school principals and parents to visit them.

same years would seem to support this view. Not all Arts and Crafts activities declined so precipitously, and the end of the movement as a whole was anything but clear-cut.<sup>189</sup>

Despite this nebulous British collapse, the two women were energised by their eight months' sabbatical in England and France. They returned to Sydney, still committed to the Arts and Crafts philosophy and practice and planning to lead, once again, the comfortable, independent lives they had fashioned for themselves during the previous decade.

### **Conclusion**

During the first decade of Mort and Weston's time back in Sydney, a number of factors combined to make the period their 'golden years'. Her intense creative and entrepreneurial activities during this decade both promoted the Arts and Crafts cause and sustained her income-earning ability. Mort's teaching career in private girls' schools gave her an important income base, and her articles in Sydney newspapers and magazines were helping to educate middle-class women in the principles and practices of the applied arts. Although Mort's success as an artist was limited, as an artisan Mort achieved much greater success, both in producing artefacts that were both 'useful and beautiful' and in mentoring others to do the same.

These were also the years when the adventurous side of Mort's personality seemed to be winning out over her cautious side. There was, however, a paradox in both her life as an artisan and her personality. On the one hand, her approach to 'applied' art was innovative and all-embracing of an unusually wide variety of media; on the other hand, her approach to 'fine' art remained fixed in the traditional *en plein air* style. In similar fashion, Mort's lifestyle represented the new breed of aspirational, independent, New Women who were changing the role of women in society, while at the same time, many of her political, social and

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<sup>189</sup> S.K. Tillyard, *The Impact of Modernism: Early Modernism and the Arts and Crafts Movement in Edwardian England* (London: Routledge, 1988), 36.

religious values were conventional. Mort certainly had a feminist consciousness, but she was not an outspoken advocate for women's rights. At most, she was a 'quiet feminist'. Although she pushed at the gender boundaries of her time, she did not militantly campaign against them.

By the beginning of 1914, the war clouds that were hovering on the horizon undoubtedly cast a dark shadow over Britain and her empire. Mort and many others were to find the direction of their lives interrupted by the coming catastrophe. The next chapter will explore the effects of war on Mort and Weston as they moved into the next stage of their lives together and tried to adjust to the changing priorities in wartime life and the changing face of art. They had delighted in their 'golden years'. The next stage of their future would be darker.



## Chapter 4

### Consolidation and the Beginnings of Change

(1914–1920)

*The crimson thread of kinship runs through us all.*

- Henry Parkes<sup>1</sup>

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War years are sometimes described as being years of ‘peak experiences’ for those who live through them.<sup>2</sup> For Mort, the years between 1914 and 1920 were not so much a peak experience as both a phase of consolidation and – if more in retrospect – the point at which social and cultural change began to move in directions that proved less supportive of her prominence as an artist. That consolidation came with opportunities to be involved in networks that supported community-based war efforts, particularly those that forged a connection between a surge of patriotism and the application of a voluntaristic ethos of design, craft and social purpose. Citizens and their resources were mobilised for war. In these networks, Mort found roles that reflected distinctive aspects of her

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Parkes, ‘The Banquet’, *The Age*, 7 February 1890.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Smart in *The Great War: Gains and Losses—ANZAC and Empire* ed. Craig Wilcox, (Canberra: ANU 1995), 27.

work and skills, including in that identity of the 'New Woman' as it related to her personality. But as those years also provided a stimulus to aspects of Modernism in the arts, they also began the drift away from popular support for the aesthetics which defined Mort's practice. This paradox is central to this chapter.

### **The war years**

Although historians such as Carmel Shute have argued that, in general, the years of World War I saw the social gains made by women in the preceding decades being eroded, this argument does not apply to Mort.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Shute's assertion that 'the nature of womanhood was stripped of any remaining pretence of emancipation and reduced to its quintessential biological function, that of maternity' does not reflect the experience of Mort and Weston. Despite the difficulties the war years brought, they not only continued to live in ways that marked their independence from societal pressures concerning marriage and maternity (and the limitations associated with them), but also managed to live independent lives.<sup>4</sup> Nor does Shute's summary capture the distinctive ways in which women's patriotism became a marked feature of the times. Catherine Speck holds that 'womanly patriotism was a mainstream value', an active agent in wider cultural and political currents.<sup>5</sup> Joan Beaumont agrees, singling out middle-class women as predominantly and unreservedly promoting patriotism in the war years.<sup>6</sup> These women 'spoke the language of imperial loyalty' and supported official endeavours at the home front to boost commitment to the war

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<sup>3</sup> Carmel Shute, 'Heroines and Heroes: Sexual Mythology in Australia 1914-1918' in *Making Australian History: Perspectives on the Past Since 1788* eds. Deborah Gare and David Ritter (Melbourne: Thomson, 2008), 323.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Speck, *Painting Ghosts: Australian Women Artists in Wartime* (Melbourne: Craftsman House, 2004), 50.

<sup>6</sup> Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2013). Beaumont also holds that later generations of their middle class cohort would espouse different values from their counterparts of World War 1.

effort 'with growing passion'.<sup>7</sup> Beaumont maintains that many modern day Australians struggle to understand this erstwhile attachment to Britain:

No one born after the decline of British global power can begin to comprehend the ideological fervour and passionate sense of loyalty to empire that sustained many Australians through the terrible years of war'.<sup>8</sup>

Mort offers one perspective on how such sentiments were shaped in those first decades of Australian nationhood.

For Mort, the home front was no passive space. It was a place of purposeful activity in which she could contribute to the war effort in ways that suited her best and advanced her ideals. Speck cautions us, however, that the term 'home front' has several layers of meaning that need to be balanced against usual associations with it as a 'lesser place' of inaction when compared with the active war front.<sup>9</sup> The boundaries between these entities, she argues, were 'often blurred'.<sup>10</sup>

Mort represents many aspects of the experience of the middle-class women for whom voluntary patriotic work and imperial allegiance had origins prior to the outbreak of World War I. Her upbringing, both at home and at school, had conditioned her to be a loyal subject of the British sovereign, and therefore a loyal member of the British Empire. In Mort's words, at school, 'the influence of "Our Sovereign Lady Queen Victoria" was all pervading'.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, by the outbreak of war, not only had Mort already visited Britain three times, but she still had close relatives living in London, a connection that would have strengthened her attachment to Britain and her patriotic response to support the effort.

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<sup>7</sup> Beaumont, *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, xx in Preface.

<sup>9</sup> Speck, *Painting Ghosts: Australian Women Artists in Wartime*, 47.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> E.M. 'An ABC of St Catherine's in the Victorian Era', (Waverley: St Catherine's Archives, 1956), Box 3. Letter 'Q'.

Despite this emotional pull towards Britain, Mort was also one of many whose loyalty was equally to Australia within that imperial world-view. As we have seen, a desire to use indigenous motifs that would fashion a distinctively Australian style had long been central to her work. The question of national loyalty was a complex one, springing from the close historical ties between Australia and Britain. Mort typifies Peter Stanley's view that, in the early twentieth century, many Australians thought of themselves as (in Alfred Deakin's term) 'Australasian Britons' who felt both 'intensely British and absolutely Australian'.<sup>12</sup> Michael McKernan believes that 'possibly for the first time, Empire loyalty fused with Australian patriotism, to create a particular type of dual loyalty to which all classes in Australia could give their allegiance, in varying proportions, Australian or imperial'.<sup>13</sup> Mort, to that extent, was part of the dominant culture of the new nation, a nation that could claim to be 'ninety-eight per cent British ... some said more British than Britain itself'.<sup>14</sup> World War I provided an opportunity to more tightly fuse these loyalties.

As the war penetrated into many aspects of social mobilisation, and into many tests and demonstrations of allegiance, Mort participated fully in the cause. Like many private individuals, she wrote letters and sent parcels to anyone she knew who was overseas.<sup>15</sup> She donated much of her jewellery to be sold as part of fundraising activities, keeping back only a few treasured items such as a pearl ring and a lapis long chain.<sup>16</sup> As Mort had visited Belgium in 1912, it may well have been the appeals for 'cash or kind' made by associations such as the Belgian

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Stanley, 'Australia in World War One', [www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/australia\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/australia_01.shtml) (accessed on 10 March, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Michael McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1980), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 112. White gives the 1901 census figures as: 77 per cent Australian born: 10% born in England and Wales, 3 per cent in Scotland and 5 per cent in Ireland.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Mort, interview by Bruce Semier in 1985 in Newcastle, NSW, transcript in Canberra: National Library of Australia, file 181/14/10/.

<sup>16</sup> The pearl ring had belonged to her grandmother, Maria; Weston had made the lapis long chain. 'Inventory' NLA, 06/017 Box 1, folder 4.

Fund that struck a particular chord with her.<sup>17</sup> But in addition to these personal gestures, Mort was quick to offer her artistic skills to community and wartime organisations. As Mort's niece, Margaret, later recalled, during the war years, her aunt 'did all sorts of things to earn money for the soldiers'.<sup>18</sup> These altruistic commitments reflected the congruence between Mort's work and wider cultural currents of the time, as well as the networks of which she was a part.

Although some of her wartime work was done on commission, much was voluntary. Stephen Garton and Stanley have noted that volunteer societies were comprised primarily of the 'middle and upper strata [who] contributed their time and effort to the numerous charitable and philanthropic societies that sprung up to support the war effort'.<sup>19</sup> McKernan agrees, maintaining that, for middle-class women, 'the social status of the work appealed to them'.<sup>20</sup> These campaigns drew precisely on ideals Mort identified as being increasingly important in her work: that task of imparting skills and opportunities in amateur work she found 'absorbing'.<sup>21</sup>

Most of Mort's voluntary work was done through the Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales, which proved whole-hearted in its support for the war effort. Rather than compete with other fund-raising organisations (such as the Australia Day Fund or the Community War Chest), the Arts and Crafts Society decided to throw its support behind the efforts of one of the community organisations that were already focused on fund-raising – the Australian Red Cross. Mort, who had been a continuous executive committee member of the Arts and Crafts society since 1907, re-nominated Weston as an executive

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<sup>17</sup> 'Repatriation Fund' *SMH*, May 8, 1916. 8. Other similar funds were the Russian Fund, the Polish Fund and the Repatriation Fund.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Mort, interview by Bruce Semier, 1985.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Garton and Peter Stanley, 'The Great War and its Aftermath' in *The Cambridge History of Australia* eds. Alison Ashfield and Stuart Macintyre (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press 2013), 51.

<sup>20</sup> McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> E.M., in Stephens, 'Black and Whiter's'.

committee member in August 1916.<sup>22</sup> Both women were now part of an executive committee that zealously promoted support for the war effort, and presumably reflected their shared ideals and influence.

Committee meeting notes show that, from September 1914 until November 1918, all committee members, including Mort and Weston, worked tirelessly.<sup>23</sup> Chaired by the prominent Sydney philanthropist and women's leader, Mary Fairfax of the *Sydney Morning Herald* family dynasty, the committee increased from seven to nine members during the war, reflecting its increased levels of activity.<sup>24</sup> The majority of its members were single, middle-class women who dealt with a diverse number of practical concerns, ranging from the weighty decisions of determining fund-raising methods for the war effort to such mundane matters as the installation, in their rented Hunter St building, of a telephone and an electric light (the running cost of the latter being £1 per year).<sup>25</sup> In the view of Bruce Scates and Raelene Frances, such fund-raising activities 'eased an overwhelming sense of powerlessness' for many women.<sup>26</sup> Equally, given the profile of the committee, they reflected the capacities of these women to exert influence at least in the domain of such campaigns. Mort's purposeful activities throughout the war certainly suggest that she felt no sense of powerlessness.

The Arts and Crafts Society's executive committee proposed to hold a 'patriotic auction sale' within a month of Australia's commitment to the war.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Committee Meeting Minutes 15.6.14-1.5.22', ML MSS 3645, Box 4 (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 74. Weston had been a committee member in 1910, but had not stayed on in the intervening years. .

<sup>23</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Committee Meeting Minutes 15.6.14-1.5.22'.

<sup>24</sup> The regular members between 1914 and 1918 were Mrs Soderberg and the Misses Allen, Atkinson, Bell-Brown, Elliott, King, London, Mort and Sulman.

<sup>25</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Committee Meeting Minutes 15.6.14-1.5.22', ML MSS 3645, Box 4 (Sydney: Mitchell Library). See meetings on 17 April 1914 for electric light; 15 November 1918 for telephone.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Scates and Raelene Frances, *Women and the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 53.

<sup>27</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Committee Meeting Minutes 15.6.14-1.5.22' ML MSS 3645, Box 4 (Sydney: Mitchell Library) 31 Aug. 1914.

All members were asked to contribute one or more pieces of work for sale. The Society even decided to accept for sale ‘work from friends outside the society’, a departure from their usual practice of allowing only members’ work (which would naturally be of the highest standard) to be exhibited and put forward for sale.<sup>28</sup> By February 1915, members had raised £79/17/6, an amount which they agreed to increase to £80. This was then donated to the Red Cross towards the cost of ‘purchasing a motor lorry’.<sup>29</sup>

Figure 1



Girls' Patriotic Fund Poster

Along with this committee work, Mort also supported the war effort through her production of applied arts items. Both the New South Wales Girls' Patriotic Fund and the Red Cross requested posters to promote their causes. Mort's 1914 design for the Girls' Patriotic Fund, which was particularly active in soliciting donations from schools, featured a young woman carrying the Union Jack and conveying the message that every penny donated to the Fund would relieve the 'distress' arising from war (Fig. 1).

Other posters, such as the one produced for the Red Cross Industries Exhibition, reflect Mort's ability to respond to specific graphic requirements of a brief for a more basic design, targeting a distinct audience (Fig. 2). Mort's versatility is evident in these contrasting styles.

Red Cross Industries Exhibition poster

Figure 2



<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Monthly and General Meeting Minutes 13.8.06–19.7.15' (Sydney: Mitchell Library ML MSS 3645, Box 6. 21 June, 1915), 163. The fact that the annual weekly wage for females in 1915 in NSW was £1/6/10 demonstrates the relative value of these fund-raising efforts.

Figure 3



The Lady Helen shield

Figure 4



Top LHS corner of shield's centre panel

Unusually for Mort, the Lady Helen shield (Fig. 3), also commissioned by the Red Cross, exemplifies not her own design but rather her execution of a design by Professor Leslie Wilkinson, inaugural Dean for the faculty of Architecture at the University of Sydney.<sup>30</sup> Weston's intricate carvings in each of the corners of the shield's centre panel, including the Caduceus medical symbol – highlighted in gold leaf by Mort (Fig. 4) – symbolically reinforce the message of service by Red Cross members and again exemplify the collaborative partnership between Mort and Weston.<sup>31</sup>

Mort's wartime networking was extensive. The Australian Artists' War Fund was a charitable organisation to assist wounded soldiers founded under Fairfax patronage by a group of Sydney artists under the auspices of the Royal Art Society. In January 1915, it met to discuss fund raising options.<sup>32</sup> The dominant figures represented at its prestigious first exhibition held at Vickery's Chambers in Pitt St in March 1915 were male Impressionist painters of an older generation, but the presentation of the exhibition owed much to established female artists

<sup>30</sup> The Lady Helen Munro-Fergusson Shield was commissioned in 1920. Lady Helen had been national president of the Australian Red Cross from 1914-1920. The fact that the shield contains only one inscription – the 'Western Suburbs Detachment N258' – suggests that it was awarded only once, in 1920.

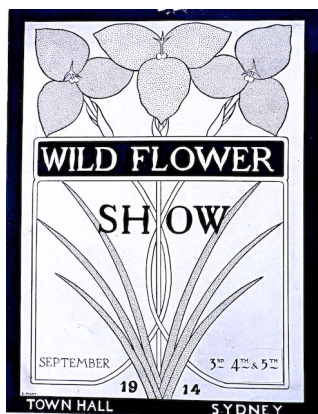
<sup>31</sup> The Caduceus symbol of two snakes and a winged staff was only adopted in the nineteenth century as the symbol of rejuvenation and healing; prior to that, the symbol of Asclepius was a more common medical symbol.

<sup>32</sup> 'Artists War Fund' *SMH* 29 January, 1915. 6.



such as Ethel Stephens and Ethel Carrick Fox. Included in the catalogue were two items designed by Mort.<sup>33</sup> One was an inlaid tray executed by Mr Johnstone (priced at £3/3/-). The other, an etching of Bruges (also priced at £3/3/-), was both designed and executed by her. Participation in such initiatives made Mort part of the process in which, as art historian Helen Topliss contends, women artists saw art ‘as a social instrument’ where ‘the important issues, such as the professionalism of women artists, crossed stylistic and media boundaries’.<sup>34</sup> Adaptability and innovation were part of the currency of such networks, as Mort showed, for example, in designing toys for the Red Cross. It would have been in the same spirit that Mort supported her colleague Ethel Stephens by attending the opening of exhibition of Stephens’ paintings in July 1915 at the Anthony Hordern Art Gallery.<sup>35</sup>

Figure 5



Poster for Wild Flower Show

Although most of Mort’s work during these years was focused on patriotic themes, she also continued to produce applied arts items of a different nature, such as her 1914 poster for a Wild Flower Show (Fig 5). Striking in its clarity, it reflects Mort’s understanding of the effectiveness of simplicity of design and her continued interest in Australian indigenous plants.

In late 1915 or early 1916, esteemed Australian poet and socialist Mary Gilmore commissioned Mort to illustrate her new children’s poetry book *The Tale of Tiddlywinks* (Figs. 6-7).<sup>36</sup> The illustrations

<sup>33</sup> ‘Artists War Fund’, *SMH*, March 9, 1915. 9. Present at the exhibition were the governor of NSW, Sir Gerald Strickland, who opened the exhibition and Sir James Reading Fairfax, member of the *SMH* family, who was president of the ‘charitable art movement’.

<sup>34</sup> Helen Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists 1900-1940* (Roseville: Craftsman House, 1996), 11.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Society Doings in Sydney’, *SMH*, July 17, 1915. 48.

<sup>36</sup> A.G. Stephens to Eirene Mort, 23 March 1916, Mort Family Papers, Box 5. Although the published book has no date imprint, Stephens wrote to Mort in March 1916, advising her that publication of the book would be held over until December 1916 or January 1917.

Figure 6

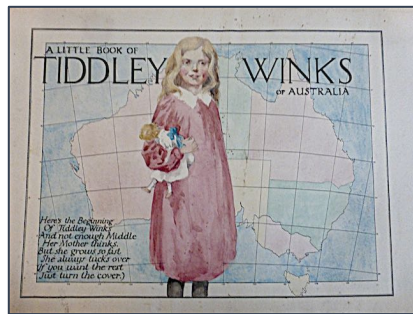
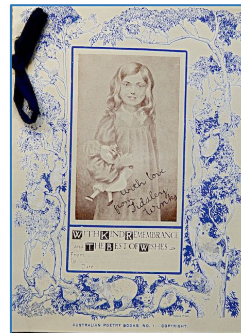
Design for *Tiddley Winks* cover

Figure 7



Cover for published book

throughout the small book feature a young Australian girl and the gum trees for which Mort was now becoming well known.<sup>37</sup> Her work was awaited with high expectations, the writer of the 'Personalia' column in *The Austral-Briton* reporting that:

Miss Eirene Mort, whose gum leaves in pen-line are the most beautiful and characteristic expression of the Australian national tree yet executed in that particular medium, is busy on illustrations of an extended book of Mary Gilmore's verses for "Tiddley Winks".<sup>38</sup>

Figure 8



Wyabra', Lane Cove

Amid such collaborations, in April 1915, Mort and Weston purchased and moved into a house in Longueville Rd Lane Cove on Sydney's lower north shore (Fig. 8).<sup>39</sup> During the war years, their 'Wyabra' home became their studio. Just as William Morris had filled his family home 'Red House' at Bexleyheath with many examples of artistic merit and

<sup>37</sup> Helen Rees, Interview by Pam Lane, 21 November 2016 in Sydney, transcript with author. Helen Rees, niece of Nora Weston, believes the drawing of the young girl strongly resembles Mort's niece, Sheila Graham.

<sup>38</sup> 'Personalia' *The Austral Briton*, February 19, 1916. 15.

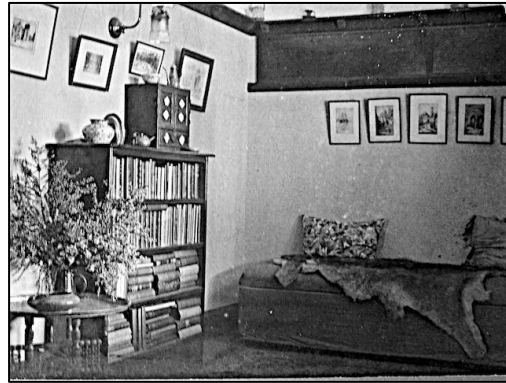
<sup>39</sup> *Sydney Telephone Directory* April 1915. When Australia's involvement in World War I began on 4 August 1914, the Sydney telephone directory listed Mort's address as being her studio at 19 Hunter St, Sydney. Prior to their move to Lane Cove, it is likely that Mort and Weston lived in one of Wallace Mort's investment properties in Ocean St, Woollahra.

excellent craftsmanship, so too did Mort and Weston decorate their home with fine examples of Arts and Crafts work (Figs. 9-10).

Figure 9



Figure 10



Interior of Mort and Weston's home,  
Longueville Rd, Lane Cove c. 1915

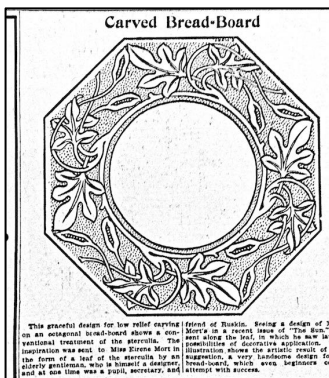
The homes of women artists in this period could provide an adjunct to their search for support: Stephens, for example, used her own home to hold exhibitions of her work and so gain control over her guest list while providing discreet opportunities for the sale of her art. Mort does not seem to have sought – or perhaps needed – to similarly negotiate ‘the division between her public life as an artist and the comfort offered by the private sphere’.<sup>40</sup> But her home with Weston certainly conveyed a thorough application of Arts and Crafts principles to daily life.

While Mort and Weston had a place as practitioners in war-time fund raising, the most long-lasting contribution that they (and their fellow artisans of the Arts and Crafts Society) made during the war years reflected a further refinement of their educational mission and the impact of their commitment to furthering the Arts and Crafts cause. At a meeting on 15 December 1915, Fairfax, as president, proposed physical rehabilitation programs as a new field of endeavour through which members could contribute to the well-being of ‘returned wounded soldiers who [were] unfit for hard work’ and, at the same time,

<sup>40</sup> Rebecca Kummerfeld, ‘Ethel A. Stephens’ “at home”: art education for girls and women’, *History of Education Review*, Bundoora 44.2 (2015), 208.

continue to advance the essential Arts and Crafts philosophy.<sup>41</sup> Her proposal was ‘enthusiastically taken up’ by the meeting.<sup>42</sup> Groups of women were selected to teach skills such as carpet making, leatherwork, basketwork, modelling in clay, fretwork, wood carving and pokerwork. The aim was twofold – to ‘quieten the nerves and help pass the time’ for the soldiers, and to promote the Arts and Crafts Society so that it ‘would become better known and its work more and more appreciated’.<sup>43</sup>

Figure 11



Design for bread board

Mort was one of five women and one man appointed to supply designs for the work to be undertaken.<sup>44</sup> Of necessity, the designs on which the returned soldiers were to work would have needed to be simple. An elderly gentleman, ‘himself a designer and at one time a pupil and a friend of Ruskin’, sent Mort a leaf of the *sterculia*, suggesting that it would be a design that ‘even beginners could achieve with success’.<sup>45</sup> Mort’s resulting octagonal ‘Carved Bread

Board’ was reproduced in a 1917 newspaper article (Fig. 11), along with an explanation of the reason for Mort’s choosing the *sterculia* as the simple motif, appropriate to the task both technically and aesthetically.<sup>46</sup>

Mort and her fellow artisans volunteered at the Randwick Military Hospital (now known as the Prince of Wales Hospital), initially working in five wards (Fig. 12). These wartime applied arts practitioners developed a curriculum and a pedagogy that would not only enable a returned soldier to produce useful items but would also be tailored to the psycho-social needs of his recovery. Each soldier’s disability was to be addressed in tasks appropriate to his

<sup>41</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, ‘Monthly and General Meeting Minutes’ 18.8.15 – 26.7.22’, ML MSS 3645, Box 6 (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 7-8.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>44</sup> The other women were the Misses Madeline King, V. Allen, Cornish and Mildred Creed. The solitary man was Mr Nielsen.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Carved Bread Board’, *The Sun* February 25, 1917.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

appropriate physical and cognitive capacity. It was a potentially challenging activity that required interaction between middle class women and traumatised men, many of whom would have been scarred physically or emotionally by war (Fig. 13).

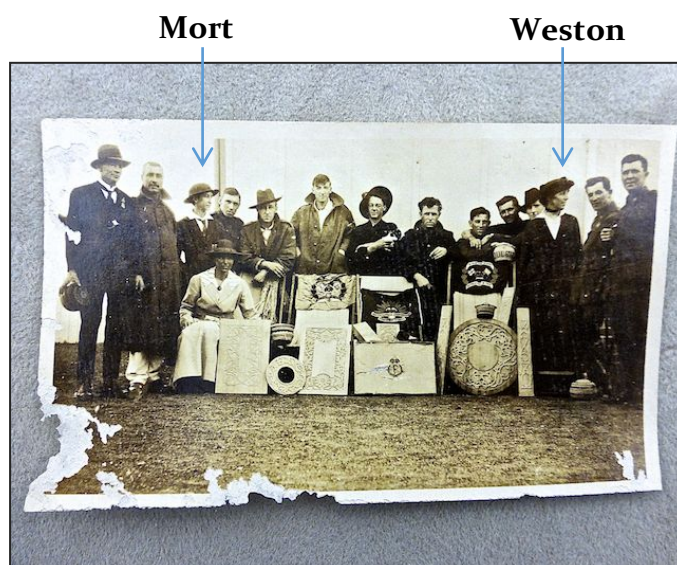
Figure 12



Randwick Military Hospital, c. 1915.

Figure 13

Mort and Weston with returned soldiers from the Australian Commonwealth Military Forces



Arts and Crafts Society members co-ordinated their plans for obtaining supplies, drew up rosters and gave frequent reports back to the general meetings of the Society on the progress of the soldiers' work. As well as promoting the work of their protégés at the Society's own exhibitions, they also arranged, for several years running, for the soldiers' work to be included for sale in the annual exhibition of the Red Cross Toy Industry.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Committee Meeting Minutes 15.6.14 - 1.5.22', (Sydney: Mitchell Library ML MSS 3645, Box 4), 106 and 130.

The women's early efforts in teaching applied arts skills to returned Australian Commonwealth Military Forces' soldiers were the precursors of a new profession – that of occupational therapy.<sup>48</sup> These women became the forerunners of a career that was still being called 'an infant profession' in 1945.<sup>49</sup> Occupational therapy lecturer Ruth Ellen Levine has recognised this debt to the Arts and Crafts movement. In her paper 'The Influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement on the Professional Status of Occupational Therapists', Levine traces the origins of the movement from Ruskin and Morris to its uptake by American physicians of note such as Herbert Hall, Adolf Meyer and William Dunton. Levine holds that, as a result of the work of these physicians between 1912 and 1930:

Only a thin line divided the arts and crafts philosophy from occupational therapy. Arts and Crafts persons were diversionists using activity to achieve a cure; yet to them the product was as valued as the process. Therapists differed slightly, they focused more on the concept of function and were less concerned with the product, but they still used crafts.<sup>50</sup>

A thin line (not a 'crimson thread') it may have been, but its existence meant that Mort welcomed the opportunity to assist in the soldiers' production of artefacts as an expression of her commitment to education by teaching the skills of such practice rather than simply presenting them as a 'diversion'.<sup>51</sup> The

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<sup>48</sup> Sam Rigney, 'Pioneer who focused on the "can-do"', *Newcastle Morning Herald*, September 3, 2012. 54. Eirene's niece, Margaret Mort, was instrumental in the formation of the Occupational Therapists Club in 1944. It became the Australian Association of Occupational Therapists in 1945 and remained that until 1994, when it became Occupational Therapy Australia.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Lyons, 'Powerful Practices: The Legacy of Margaret Mort' *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal* No. 51 (2004) 44. The article by Lyons (School of Health Sciences in the University of Newcastle) on Margaret Mort's contribution to Occupational Therapy covers her initial art training at East Sydney Technical College but omits any reference to the early art training she received from her aunt Eirene.

<sup>50</sup> Ruth Ellen Levine, 'The Influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement on the Professional Status of Occupational Therapists' *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*. 41, no. 4, (April 1987) 250–251.

<sup>51</sup> Margaret Mort, Interview by Margaret Henry at Newcastle, 12 November, 1984, tape 2 side 1. It is a priority that has since been reversed, with a greater focus on meeting the emerging needs of the patient replacing the earlier focus on the production of artefacts.

challenge of working with wounded and possibly traumatised men was a project that once again brought out the adventurous side of her nature.

Mort's contribution to occupational therapy had an enduring influence within her own family. Recognising that her aunt had provided a model of rehabilitation, her niece, Margaret (who as a child had been part of Eirene's Saturday art classes at her home in Vaucluse and had been influenced by her aunt's approach to art and craft) took her aunt's work much further.<sup>52</sup> Margaret Mort became heavily involved in rehabilitating soldiers during World War II, being seconded into the Army for the very purpose of developing rehabilitation programs, and using her training in Arts and Crafts to implement them. Margaret Mort eventually became a recognised authority for her work on post trauma rehabilitation and was awarded an MBE in 1977 and an honorary Doctor of Health from the University of Newcastle in 2010.

As the war years rolled on, Mort was given further opportunities to use her applied art skills in other areas of patriotic effort. One of these was in support of an ally of the British Empire – France. Many Australians felt an attachment to France. Not only did prominent Australians such as the editor of *The Bulletin*, J. F. Archibald, 'Frenchify' their names, but the elite of Sydney and Melbourne also patronised cafes and restaurants that specialised in French food.<sup>53</sup> 'France's Day' was 'one of a number of special days' held throughout the war to give support to particular causes and to lend a sense of urgency to a particular campaign.<sup>54</sup>

In 1917, Mort designed the front cover of a souvenir program for 'France's Day', held on 13–14 July (Fig. 14). Her program cover, featuring the intertwining leaves of the *luaus nobles* and the *eucalyptus*, portrays an affinity with French

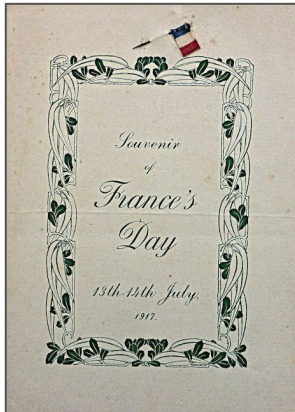
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<sup>52</sup> Barbara Thelander, Interview by author, 2 December 2016 in Toowoomba, Queensland. Transcript with author.

<sup>53</sup> John Feltham Archibald had changed his name to *Jules Francois Archibald* by 1878.

<sup>54</sup> Scates and Raelene, *Women and the Great War*, 52.

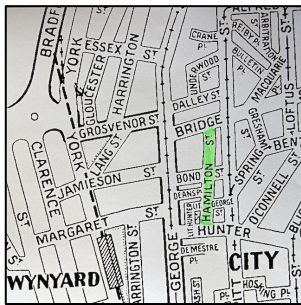
Figure 14



culture and symbolises the close relationship between the two countries.<sup>55</sup>

France's Day' program  
1917

Figure 15

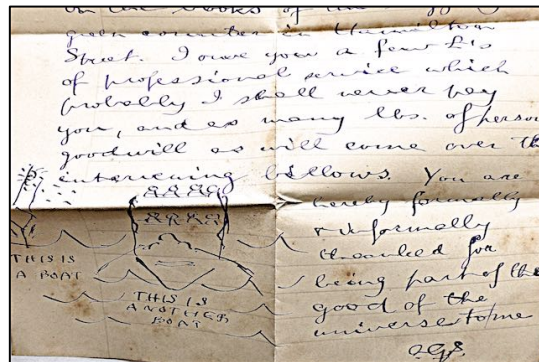


Sydney CBD in the 1920s  
showing Hamilton St

*Bookfellow* editor A.G. Stephens later called upon Mort's expertise for another work in a similar vein. Before examining this request, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider the links between Mort and Stephens. They had known of each other since 1910, when Stephens first began commenting on Mort's work in his magazine. A 1917 letter, written from a boat in the early hours of the morning of 9

March, not only reveals Stephens' admiration for Mort as both a person and an artisan, but it also offers a glimpse into the character of this woman whose occasional visits to a bookshop in Hamilton Street in the city endeared her to such a prominent man (Fig. 16).<sup>56</sup>

Figure 16



Excerpt of letter  
from Stephens  
to Mort

<sup>55</sup> Attached to the top of the cover page with a rusty pin is a small French tricoloured flag.

<sup>56</sup> A.G. Stephens to Eirene Mort, 9 March 1917, Mort Family Papers, Box 7.



Reflecting at 2.15 a.m. on life and death and the vicissitudes of things and persons, I wish gratefully to acknowledge the boon of your steady little intermittently shining and obscured light on my hurried piece of life – ever since, with shy persistency, you used to shed small spring smiles on the books of the sagging green counter in Hamilton Street. I owe you a few £'s of professional service which probably I shall never pay you, and as many lbs. of personal goodwill as will come over the intervening billows. You are hereby formally and informally thanked for being part of the good of the universe to me.

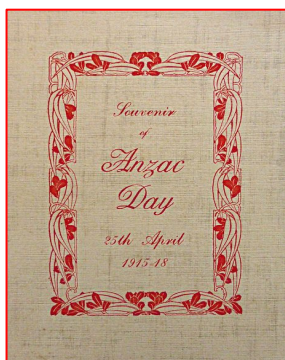
A.G.S.<sup>57</sup>

Stephens's use of pseudo-formal language and the inclusion of sketchy drawings of two boats suggest that, by this time, a spirit of camaraderie existed between the two correspondents.

In early 1918 Stephens again wrote to Mort commissioning a design for a border for the coming ANZAC commemoration service. Writing on the letterhead of The Returned Servicemen's Association of New South Wales, Stephens briefed Mort on the kind of design he required, recommending that she name her own fee for the work. The informality of the letter again implies a pre-existing friendship and deference to Mort's professionalism in the task.

Will you draw a border of laurel leaves and gum leaves conjoined for a special edition of our memorial, with or without laurel berries and gum blossoms? ... I wish for a distinctive Australian design. Can you? Can you in a week? King George is waiting ...<sup>58</sup>

Figure 17



ANZAC Day  
Service cover  
1918

The border on the front cover that Mort supplied to Stephens shows an economy of effort and a delicacy of taste on her part. Re-using the design for the France's Day program, Mort provided a cover with the same border (but reproduced in red rather than green) (Fig. 17). It also complied with Stephens's request that the design should not only conjoin laurel leaves and gum leaves, thus reflecting the prevailing

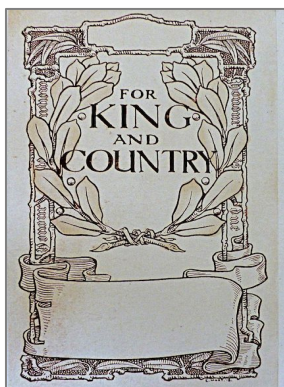
<sup>57</sup> Hamilton St ran between Bridge St and Hunter St in the CBD, where Australia Square now stands.

<sup>58</sup> Stephens to Eirene Mort, n.d., Mort Family Papers, Box 7.

awareness of the intertwining of the fates of both nations, but be a ‘distinctive Australian design’.

The close connection between Australia and Britain, symbolised by Mort’s program cover, was continued in the words of the patriotic poem, ‘The Toast’. Written by South Australian journalist and medical practitioner C.H. Souter, his poem compared the ‘steadfast courage’ and ‘deeds of deering-do’ of the ANZACs with the courage of the soldiers in England’s ‘Light Brigade’. It was a comparison that would have depended on the public’s familiarity with the Light Brigade’s heroic exploits, a familiarity ensured by Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poem ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’.<sup>59</sup>

Figure 18



‘For King and Country’  
active service card

The bravery of soldiers was very much a live issue in 1918, when feelings on the nature of patriotism were running high because of the rejections of national conscription through the 1916 and 1917 plebiscites. It was therefore in keeping with this focus on active service that, in March 1918, Florence Sulman’s proposal that the society should sell ‘For King and Country’ active service cards at the coming Red Cross Day found immediate favour with members (Fig. 18).<sup>60</sup> The Mort-designed certificates, to be displayed by businesses or private houses, featured a

space in which could be written the name of a person currently on active service.<sup>61</sup> This recognition of service indicated how far the demands of patriotism had moved from a private to a public space, and also the implicit politics patriotism was acquiring in the later war years.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Tennyson, Alfred *The Poetical Works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson* (London: Ward, Lock & Co, n.d.), 277, verse 3.

<sup>60</sup> Florence Sulman was the then president of the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW.

<sup>61</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, ‘Committee Meeting Minutes 15.6.14 – 1.5.22’, ML MSS 3645, Box 4 (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 117. Meeting on 8 March, 1918.

<sup>62</sup> E.M., Illustration to ‘For King and Country Award Certificate’, (Canberra: Mort Family Papers, Box 4).

The artwork on the active service cards contained several symbolic representations that expressed Mort's own beliefs about the strong links between Britain and Australia. While the English laurel leaves are prominently shaped as a wreath or crown that a British or European hero might wear, the supporting graphics were strongly Australian, with gnarled branches of gum trees defining and surrounding the space for the wording. The design seems to be trying to embed, within the reassuring iconography of the Australian bush, the prevailing sense of indebtedness that Mort felt the Australian nation owed those young men and women who had served their 'King and Country' in foreign lands.

Because the active service cards were only delivered on the morning of Red Cross Day – too late for framing – Sydney stationer William Penfold - 'kindly donated one thousand envelopes to fit the cards so that they could be distributed' by mail or by hand delivery.<sup>63</sup> On Red Cross Day, members of the Arts and Crafts Society followed their usual practice of participating in the sale of goods and donating their profits to the Red Cross. The total amount raised on the day was £59/9/5, an amount that later swelled to £89/4/6 with post-Red Cross day sales. David Jones, another major Sydney retailer with whom the Arts and Crafts Society liaised, sold a further £24/8/3 worth of the society's goods at its store, a sum which was again passed on to the Red Cross.<sup>64</sup>

One final quirky aspect needs to be included in any exploration of Mort's contribution to the wartime effort. It is the fact that, for someone so competent in many aspects of applied arts, Mort did not comply with the usual womanly activity of sock knitter, acknowledging that 'even two world wars haven't made a knitter of me'.<sup>65</sup> Sock knitting was one of many activities undertaken by

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<sup>63</sup> Meeting on May 20, 1918. Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Committee Meeting Minutes 15.6.14-1.5.22', (Sydney: Mitchell Library, ML MSS 3645, Box 4), 117.

<sup>64</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Committee Meeting Minutes 15.6.14- 1.5.22' (Sydney: Mitchell Library ML MSS 3645, Box 4), 122, and Balance Sheet, 20 May, 1918. A further £24/8/3 worth of goods was sent to David Jones to be sold for the Red Cross, and a further small donation of £5/16/10 was made to the Red Cross later that month, the money probably coming from late sales of items.

<sup>65</sup> E.M., 'An ABC of St Catherine's in the Victorian Era' (Waverley: St. Catherine's Archives, 1956), Box 3, Letter 'S'.

volunteers in the Red Cross and the Comforts Fund, both of which provided 'comfort items' for the use of Australian soldiers abroad.<sup>66</sup> Even though Mort was not a knitter, the symbolism of Cossington Smith's 'The Sock Knitter' provides an opportunity for perceptive interpretations by historians such as Jeanette Hoorn and Speck. Jeanette Hoorn sees Cossington Smith's painting of 'The Sock Knitter' as being 'a political painting ... about the experience of middle class women. ... Her painting constructs woman as an active subject who refuses the gaze of the spectator'.<sup>67</sup> Speck holds that the painting 'can be seen as an understated image of women *only* being able to knit socks at home as their major contribution'.<sup>68</sup> Both interpretations underline the fact that the 'private moments' and perceived lesser contributions to war by women need to be placed within the 'wider tapestry of civil society touching people's lives in wartime'.<sup>69</sup> Mort's varied wartime activities need to be viewed within this wider tapestry of civil society, her work being of a more active, public character.

When war ended in November 1918, the readjustment to peacetime conditions posed challenges to both individuals and organisations that had been attuned to the mobilisation for war. The administration of the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW was no exception. In May 1919, for reasons not explained in either the minutes or the correspondence of the executive committee of the Society, a 'misunderstanding' occurred between the executive and the Misses Mort and Weston.<sup>70</sup> It has not been possible to track down the nature of the 'misunderstanding', but it was serious enough to lead to Mort's resignation from the committee in June, followed by Weston's resignation two months later. The fact that both women resigned is confirmation of the strength of the bond

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<sup>66</sup> McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, 74. The Comforts Fund won particular praise for sending 1, 354, 328 pairs of hand-knitted socks to the troops during the war years. Other items sent to the troops included soap and sheepskin vests.

<sup>67</sup> Jenette Hoorn, *Strange Women: Essays in Art and Gender*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 14.

<sup>68</sup> Catherine Speck, *Beyond the Battlefields: Women Artists of the Two World Wars*. (London, Reaktion Books, 2014), 50.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>70</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Committee Meeting Minutes 15.6.14 - 1.5.22', ML MSS 3645, Box 4 (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 146.

between them. The issue in question seems to have related to only those two women, as there were no other resignations at the time.

Committee members directed the secretary to write to both women, expressing their 'deep regret' (for Weston) and their 'very deep regret' (for Mort) about the resignations.<sup>71</sup> Mort was asked to reconsider, but she replied that she 'could not see her way clear to reconsidering her decision at present'.<sup>72</sup> Although Mort continued to attend the society's general meetings and enter its annual exhibitions in subsequent years, she did not accept nomination for the committee for another nine years, until April of 1928.<sup>73</sup> Her decision to step aside from membership of the executive committee created an unfortunate tension for all parties concerned.

### **Patriotism and teaching in the war years**

During this period, Mort taught part time at several private girls' schools, one of which was The Shirley School at Edgeworth. As a staff member, Mort reinforced patriotic sentiments with tools already at hand. In her early years at the school, Mort had produced illustrations for a songbook written by Margaret Hodge, a co-director of The Shirley School and a talented English teacher.

Many of the songs in the booklet were patriotic in nature. They included such titles as:

'Across the Mighty Ocean'	'When George Ruled our Land'
'The Federation Song'	'Let a New-born Nation' and
'The Empire Song' <sup>74</sup> (Fig 19).	

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>73</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Committee Meeting Minutes Book 16.8.27- 2.12.39' ML MSS 3645 Box 6 (Sydney: Mitchell Library), 39.

<sup>74</sup> E.M., 'Portfolio of illustrations for Songbook' *In the Australian Bush and Other Songs* ML MSS 2589, Box 6 (Sydney: Mitchell Library) n.d.

Figure 19

'The Empire Song'  
illustration



The Empire Song's words, 'Far and wide where spreads the Empire, on whose bounds the sun ne'er sets', were designed to remind Australian students not only of the empire's reach, but also that it was from this same empire that 'Britain draws her willing legions, bound for her to do or die'.<sup>75</sup> Used at school assemblies, the book left enduring impressions on former Shirley School pupil Hinda Lion who recalled with pleasure, 'songs that stand out in my memory are 'Far and Wide spreads the Empire' and 'Upwards, Onwards.'... I well recall how much I enjoyed all the singing and the music'.<sup>76</sup>

Throughout these war years, Mort continued to demonstrate both her patriotism and her commitment to the Arts and Crafts cause through her position as a visiting part time teacher of art and design at Abbotsleigh School at Wahroonga, Kelvin School at Watson's Bay, and Kelvin Girls' College at Neutral Bay. Jean Thomson, headmistress of Kelvin Girls' College, reflected on the four and a half years that Mort had been teaching at the school, assessing her as being:

a most efficient and conscientious teacher with a very special gift of developing the originality of her pupils and of drawing out their best efforts. ... Under her training, her pupils have a marked development of their powers of memory, observation and technique [which] is based upon the soundest principles of art training.<sup>77</sup>

In 1917, Mort joined the staff of Sydney Church of England Girls Grammar School (SCEGGS) Darlinghurst. Headmistress Edith Badham's address in the annual school report for that year contains the information that:

<sup>75</sup> Margaret Hodge, 'The Empire Song' in Shirley School folder, ML MSS 2859.1 (6) (Sydney: Mitchell Library, n.d.).

<sup>76</sup> May Munro Shirley: *The Story of a School in Sydney* (Killara: Shirley Old Girls Union, 1966), 10.

<sup>77</sup> Jean Thomson quoted in Margaret Henry, 'Eirene Mort and the Development of an Australian School of Design' (Women and Labour Conference, University of Queensland, July 1984).

Mr Collins, some time ago, gave up his design class here, but recommended us to secure the services of Miss Eirene Mort in his stead. This we were fortunate enough to do. Specimens of this year's work in this and other branches of decorative art can be seen in the Girls' Sitting Room. I sincerely hope that this class will increase very much next year. It is most useful to any girl with artistic taste to know the laws of harmony in form and colour.<sup>78</sup>

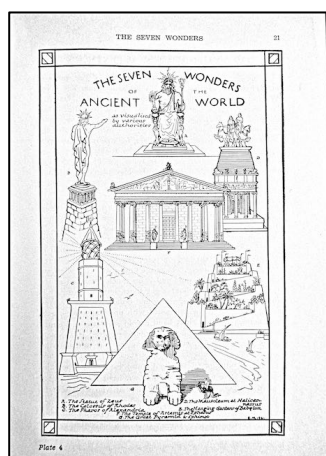
Apparently, the headmistress' hope was not met, for in the 1918 school report, Badham lamented:

I wish that more pupils would join the Design Class. It means a great deal more than just learning to make stencil patterns; it is a real education in colour and form.<sup>79</sup>

Mort remained at this school for several years, continuing her mission to engender a love of the 'beautiful and useful' and to reinforce patriotic loyalty through her teaching of art and design.

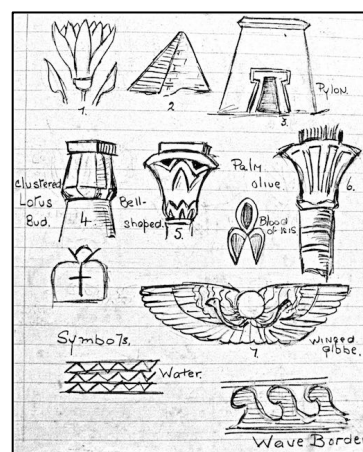
Mort's teaching notes from this time show the broad scope of the subjects she taught in her art classes, with topics ranging from classical Egyptian, Graeco-Roman, Byzantine and Medieval architecture (Figs. 20-21) to Impressionism and Futurism in art. The NSW Department of Education later recognised her expertise in architecture, commissioning her to write a book for

Figure 20



Page from  
*The Story of Architecture*

Figure 21



Notes for teaching  
Egyptian architecture

<sup>78</sup> E. A. Badham, *Lux*, XV, no 3, October 1917, 16.

<sup>79</sup> Badham, *Lux*, XVI, no 3, October 1918, 9.

students at the Intermediate Certificate level of secondary schooling.<sup>80</sup> The resulting *The Story of Architecture* demonstrates her impressive breadth of Mort's knowledge of art, sculpture and architecture, as do her teaching notes.

These notes give insight into the views she expressed to her pupils on differing forms and periods of art. In Australian art, Mort praised George Lambert, Rupert Bunney and Julian Ashton for their portraiture, while she held that Arthur Streeton's landscapes were 'vigorous in colour, delicate in atmosphere and broad in technique'.<sup>81</sup> She was dismissive of modern trends in architecture and sculpture, believing that the sculptures of Jacob Epstein were 'a very primitive and savage form of art' whose 'abstract forms ... have been introduced, much to the confusion of a leaderless public, because of ignorance.'<sup>82</sup> Such advice to students showed that, while Mort also kept up to date with trends in Modern art, most received similar condemnation. She was especially critical of the vogue for Futurism, particularly disapproving of the work of Giacomo Balla, whose 'painting of a dog with several heads and legs in the belief of suggesting movement' was 'an extremist form of art (that was) not likely to last long.'<sup>83</sup>

Mort's teaching always included a focus on the principles of design, believing, as she did that:

the foundation-stone of all artwork is good design ... If design is the keynote of work in the crafts, suitability is the keynote in design, for design has no existence apart from the medium in which it is to be executed.<sup>84</sup>

It is significant that the end of year exam Mort set for one unspecified grade required her students to produce, not a landscape or portrait, but a design for an applied arts item, giving them the option of choosing from one of the following three options:<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Students sat for the Intermediate Certificate at the end of their third year at high school. Mort's *The Story of Architecture* was a standard art text for the Intermediate Certificate until the late 1950s.

<sup>81</sup> E.M. 'Teaching Notebook', Mort Family Papers, Box 4. n.d.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> E.M. 'Practical Stencilling', *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 27, 1908.



The cover of a school magazine in black and white  
OR  
A birthday greeting card in five colours and with good lettering  
OR  
An all-over pattern for a tablecloth.

Mort would have required her pupils to demonstrate, in their answers, both the principles of good design and an awareness of the suitability of their design for the medium chosen.

By increasing her participation in the work force, Mort was not only consolidating her position as both an artisan and a respected teacher of art and design, she was actually going against the national trend for female employment. Beaumont references the work of Joy Damousi, Marilyn Lake and Cora Baldock to assert that ‘the percentage of women in paid employment in Australia actually declined between 1911 and 1921, from 28.5 per cent to 26.7per cent’.<sup>86</sup> Viewed in the light of this trend, Mort’s record of active and versatile paid employment may be viewed as evidence of any one or all of three things: a simple decision to put food on the table, a commitment to continue to promote the Arts and Crafts philosophy and practices, or, the most likely of all, a determination to maintain the free and independent lifestyle to which she and Weston had by now become accustomed.

### **The post war years**

The post war years were, for Mort as for many other Australians, years of change. Her awareness of these transitions is captured in one small sketch of Sydney Harbour and its accompanying text. The sketch and text are a significant departure from Mort’s usual portrayal of the harbour as a place of sunshine and relaxation. The title of the text accompanying the sketch, ‘H.R.H & H.M.S ... A

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<sup>85</sup> E.M. ‘Teaching Notebook’.

<sup>86</sup> Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War*, 99.

study in Change'<sup>87</sup> depicts the 'pride of the Royal Navy', the battle-cruiser 'H.M.S Renown' bringing His Royal Highness (H.R.H.) Prince Edward to Sydney in June 1920 (Figs. 22-23). The drawing and accompanying text underscore Mort's enduring sense of imperial connections – the currency of which was highlighted by her careful inclusion of the biplanes that were 'the pride of the RAAF' as welcoming the ship's arrival.<sup>88</sup>

Figure 22

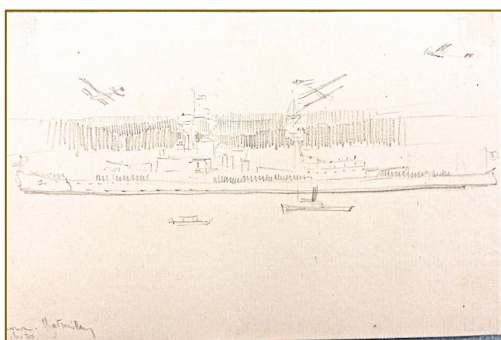


Figure 23

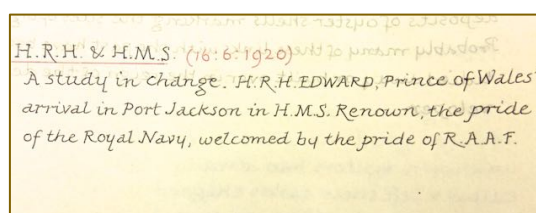


Illustration and text of 'H.R.H &amp; H.M.S (16.6.1920) A Study in Change'

One of Mort's post war commitments was to lend her support to activities promoting peace. In September 1919, she designed, for the Kindergarten Union's annual fund raising day, a button symbolic of peace – a white dove on an enamel background.<sup>89</sup> Her colleague Sulman, who was president of the Kindergarten Union at the time, undoubtedly elicited Mort's applied art skills in this (and other later fund raising ventures).<sup>90</sup> This activity again reflects not only the networking aspect of groups in which Mort was involved, but also her continued interest in the education of children and the women who taught them.

Mort's engagement in other women's groups was far more involved than were her peace-promoting activities. As a member of the Society of Women Painters, she worked with one of its core objectives of addressing the 'discontent

<sup>87</sup> Mort was incorrect in labeling the biplanes as being part of the RAAF. This branch of the Defence Forces did not come into being until 1921. In June 1920, the date of Mort's drawing, the biplanes were a component of The Australian Flying Corps.

<sup>88</sup> E.M., 'Tracks: Part I', 06/017 Box 2 Record 1586046. Canberra: NLA

<sup>89</sup> 'Through the Eyes of a Woman', *The Mirror*, August 31, 1919.

<sup>90</sup> Mort had earlier collaborated with Sulman to produce *A Popular Guide to the Wildflowers of NSW*.

of certain [women] exhibitors in having a percentage of their work excluded from the Royal Arts Society's and the Society of Artists' exhibitions'.<sup>91</sup> The aim of this Society, formed in 1910, was 'to promote the advancement of Australian women's work'.<sup>92</sup> The Society's main objectives were the encouragement of a spirit of camaraderie among women artists and the maintenance of a studio / club room for the use of members.<sup>93</sup> The Society also provided education for its members by inviting guest speakers.<sup>94</sup> Invited to address the Society in 1919, influential journalist, craftsman and technology enthusiast George Taylor noted the powerful effect that World War I had had on the position of women in society:

With the Great War over, woman stands in a position of power. ... She has tasted remuneration of great value, and she is not going back to her former state of dependence. ... The world must recognize woman's new place in things.<sup>95</sup>

Taylor continued his address with a declaration about the way in which Australian women's new status might be helped by art:

We note the average girl of today is not the humble individual living from her father's stipends until marriage transferred that responsibility to a husband. And the financial independence accentuated by the Great War ... gives her the right to have and to hold; gives her the right to create and to invent; gives her a right that in Art will win mighty opportunity.<sup>96</sup>

In keeping with Taylor's optimistic vision, the Society of Women Painters decided it required better premises than the ones it occupied in 1919. By June 1920, it had found the accommodation it needed – a long studio on the top floor

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> 'Society of Women Painters' *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, July, 1910.

<sup>93</sup> Society of Women Painters, *Rules of the Society of Women Painters*, Acc. No. 2644501, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

<sup>94</sup> 'Society of Women Painters' *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, July, 1910.

<sup>95</sup> George A. Taylor *Art and the Woman: A Plea for Better Recognition* (Sydney: Society of Women Painters of NSW, 1919). Taylor's address was delivered not only orally but also in written form, complete with coloured illustrations that exemplified women's skill in painting.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 6.

of the Queen Victoria Building in Sydney's CBD.<sup>97</sup> Deciding to establish a 'School of Fine and Applied Arts', the society invited Mort to be the principal of this newly formed school. Whatever her status amid a rising generation of artists, this appointment was a public recognition of her continuing standing. In retrospect, it perhaps represented the zenith of her career.

The new School of Fine and Applied Arts opened with considerable flourish in on 30 June 1920. Some 196 members were present at the launch.<sup>98</sup> In his opening address, Sir John Sulman, influential Sydney architect and the then president of the National Art Gallery, congratulated the society on its choice of 'three very competent persons' as teaching staff – Mrs Hedley Parsons, Miss Eirene Mort and Miss Florence Fuller. Julian Ashton also spoke at the opening, encouraging the women there to continue the battle for equality, and reminding them that:

there were many evidences that women were proving equal to men in various departments of life. In thus entering the fight with men, they must make up their minds to take hard knocks unflinchingly, stand up to criticism, and determine to do their work well.<sup>99</sup>

Through providing a series of classes for art students, the School of Fine and Applied Arts hoped to nurture the development of art students' skills and promote the sale of their work. The School placed advertisements in the *Sydney Morning Herald* naming Mort as Principal, and offering classes in 'Etching, Drawing, Design, and Commercial Arts and Crafts'.<sup>100</sup> A *Sunday News* article entitled 'Three Clever Women Artists' gave details of the new school and photos of its main instructors (Fig. 24).<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Well-known Sydney artist Julian Ashton described the room as having beautiful lighting and being tastefully furnished. Senga, 'Society Doings in Sydney', *The Australasian*, July 10, 1920.

<sup>98</sup> 'Society Doings in Sydney', *The Australasian*, July 10, 1920. The article states that the Society of Women Painters had a membership roll of almost 100 artists and 720 associates.

<sup>99</sup> 'Women Painters Open an Art School', *SMH*, July 1, 1920.

<sup>100</sup> 'Advertisements', *SMH* September 11, 1920.

<sup>101</sup> 'Three Clever Women' *Sunday News*, 20 June 1920. (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, Eirene Mort File, Box 3, Envelope 7).

Figure 24



(L to R) Mrs Hedley Parsons,  
Miss Florence Fuller &  
Miss Eirene Mort'

In the article, Mort was described as 'instructing in designing, applied arts, china painting and jewellery'.<sup>102</sup> The article also notes that, as well as teaching these skills, Mort was 'entrusted with the organizing and business management of the new venture'.<sup>103</sup> It further praised her for the quality of her work, and attributed to her the innovation of use of Australian motifs:

Miss Mort's etchings are a recognized feature of art exhibitions in Sydney, and have also won her the approval of the purchasers for the National Gallery where she is represented by specimens of her applied art. *She was the first in Sydney to start the vogue for Australian designs* [my italics] ... Her studio in the city was eagerly sought after, but now she prefers to work at home between her hours of daily instruction at several of the principal schools.<sup>104</sup>

In such quarters at least, Mort's name had become synonymous with distinctly Australian motifs in her applied arts work. Distinctively Australian connotations also featured in the work Mort undertook for two organisations that aimed at keeping the spirit of ANZAC alive in public consciousness – especially where the legacy of the sacrifices made by ANZAC soldiers affected the welfare of women.

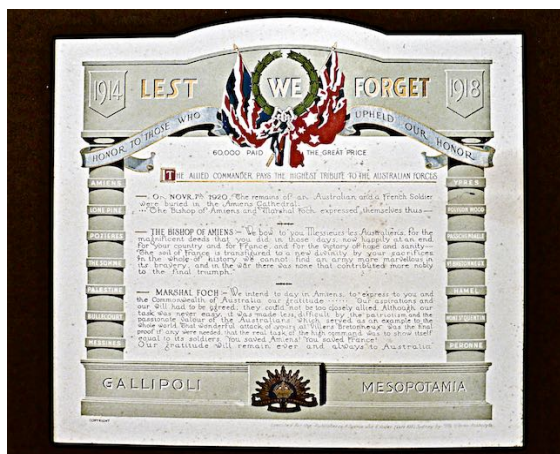
In November 1920, Mort provided designs to support the ceremony surrounding the burial of the bodies of two unknown French and Australian

<sup>102</sup> John McPhee, Interview by author on 16 September, 2014 in Canberra, transcript with author. Although no record has so far been found of Mort producing china painting, John McPhee holds that students wishing to do china painting would have come to Mort for lessons in design.

<sup>103</sup> 'Three Clever Women Artists', *Sunday News*.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. The 'National Gallery' eventually became the Art Gallery of NSW. The attribution to Mort as being the first to start the vogue for Australian designs errs on the side of generosity. Credit for being the initial promoters of the concept must go to Lucien Henry and Richard Baker.

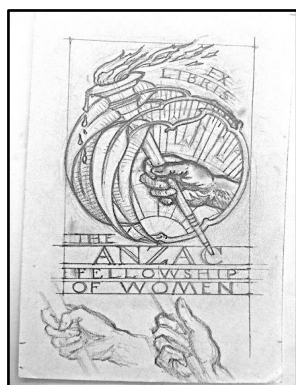
Figure 25



ANZAC commemorative plaque

soldiers in Amiens Cathedral (Fig. 25). Mort's artwork and calligraphy that explained to Australians the significance of the commemoration, highlighting the nature of the sacrifice that ANZAC soldiers had made in France in the words of the Bishop of Amiens – words that thanked '*Messieurs les Australiens* for the magnificent deeds' that they did.<sup>105</sup>

Figure 26



ANZAC Fellowship of Women bookplate

The same war-inspired patriotism led Mort to women whose lives had been changed by war. She designed a bookplate for an organisation founded by prominent women's activist Dr Mary Booth – the ANZAC Fellowship of Women. This organisation aimed at fostering, through the Arts, the commemorative character of ANZAC Day as an inspiration to future generations (Fig 26).<sup>106</sup> The Prime Minister, William Hughes, granted the Women's Fellowship the right to use the word

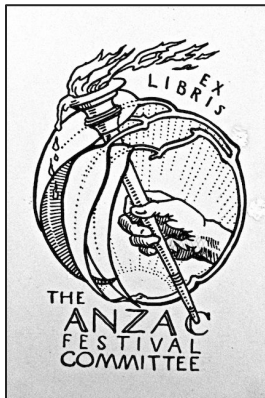
ANZAC in its title – a singular concession, since at the time the fine for using the name ANZAC without permission was £100 or six months imprisonment. Although the poster's design remains in draft form, it reflected the shared commitments of Booth and Mort, which probably arose through a shared interest in soldier rehabilitation through Mort's work at Randwick Military Hospital.

<sup>105</sup> E.M., Commemorative plaque, 'Lest We Forget', 74350.84.681.53 NGA, Canberra.

<sup>106</sup> 'The ANZAC fellowship of Women' *The Australian Women's Register*.

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE1108b.htm> (accessed 5 January, 2015).

Figure 27

ANZAC Festival  
Committee bookplate

After the war, Booth became chairperson of the ANZAC Festival Committee an organisation that grew out of the ANZAC Fellowship for Women.<sup>107</sup> Once again, Mort designed a bookplate with a patriotic theme. This time it was for the ANZAC Festival Committee (Fig. 27). The symbolism in both designs of a hand holding high a torch to be passed on to future generations expressed Mort's commitment to the rising spirit of promoting the ANZAC legend. Historian Ken Inglis highlights the way in which the sacrifices of the soldiers were honoured, with the Sydney Morning Herald declaring that the soldiers had *made* the country and 'lifted Australia from comparative obscurity', and the returned men being encouraged to think of themselves as an aristocracy.<sup>108</sup> Inglis notes that women were excluded from active participation in early ANZAC ceremonies,<sup>109</sup> agreeing with Carmel Shute that women's attachment to ANZAC commemoration effectively 'retarded the struggle for women's liberation for another fifty years'.<sup>110</sup> But Mort was far from alone in this role: figures as diverse – and more openly feminist – as Jessie Street and Mary Gilmore, equally promoted the cause of ANZAC.

For Mort, the war years provided no watershed. With associations such as these, she reinforced her position within Sydney's middle-class culture and society through her agency as an independent artist and artisan, and her already considerable networking skills. An analysis of her press cuttings from 1914 to 1920 shows that, although her public profile declined from its 1907 peak, it was still

<sup>107</sup> Jill Roe, 'Booth, Mary (1869–1956)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/booth-mary-5291/text8927>, published first in hardcopy 1979, (accessed on 7 January 2017).

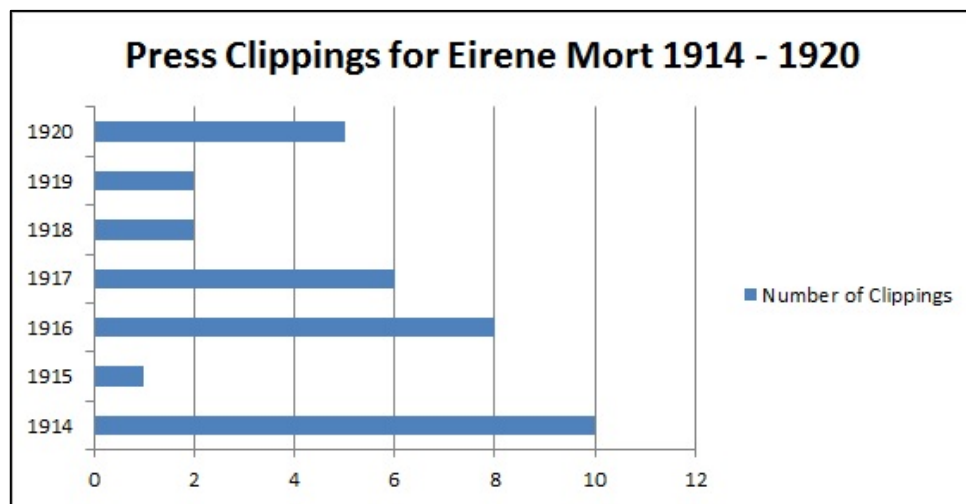
<sup>108</sup> Ken Inglis, 'Men, Women and War Memorials' in *Memories and Dreams: Reflections on Twentieth century Australia, Pastiche II*, eds. Richard White and Penny Russell (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1997), 54.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

relatively healthy during these years (Fig. 28).<sup>111</sup> By continuing to generate her own income, Mort became part of the one-in-four women in Australia who was self-supporting during these difficult years.<sup>112</sup>

Figure 28



But changes were afoot. The artistic context in which women artists, and women more generally, were now working was beginning to alter, creating a shift in emphasis and style. Modernism began to emerge as an unorthodox and challenging form of art. Modernist artist Roland Wakelin held that, although critics initially viewed Modernism as ‘elaborate and pretentious bosh’, its emphasis on vibrant colour and new ideas in composition created a ‘spirit of adventure’ that was ‘a means to express something much more vital than what we saw in paintings around us.’<sup>113</sup> To Wakelin, who used the metaphor of the body to convey the need for a fresh approach to art (‘it is at least better to have a crude living thing than a well-dressed corpse’), it was essential for an artist to give ‘movement to his lines’ and ‘vitality to his colour’.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>111</sup> In 1914, nine of the ten newspaper articles were dated after war began, and were related to fund-raising activities of the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW.

<sup>112</sup> McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, 99.

<sup>113</sup> Roland Wakelin, ‘The Modern Art Movement in Australia’ in *Art in Australia*, third series, no.26, December 1928, n.p.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*



For women such as Mort, who favoured a realistic approach to art, the new vogue for Modernism held no attraction. She was content to stay within the boundaries of an *en plein air* approach to art and a traditional approach to design, and to give her support to conventional organisations such as the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW and the Painters-Etchers' Society.<sup>15</sup>

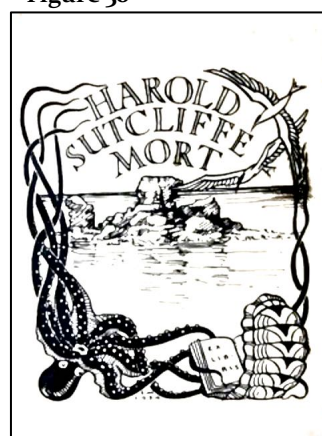
Mort's support for the war effort was, in short, all embracing, encompassing effort on her part at the national, community and personal level. Whatever security Mort was able to gather in the consolidation of those years, however, it still existed within the framework of those changes in the status of women. A particularly personal aspect of those changes would test the security Mort derived from her family background, and her own sense of dignity and privacy.

### A Family Crisis

Figure 29



Figure 30



Bookplates for  
Harold Mort

The Mort siblings had always been close. The bookplates Eirene designed for her brother Harold (Figs. 29–30) reflect her knowledge of his character and interests, with the smaller one of 1914 showing an armorial crest featuring a phoenix girded with the family motto 'Fidèle à la Mort (Faithful unto Death) against a floral

<sup>15</sup> Despite the peaks and troughs of organisational existence, The Arts and Crafts Society of NSW has continued to flourish, with a shop-front in Sydney's prestigious 'The Rocks' area, and an enthusiastic membership of 83 exhibiting members and 15 non-exhibiting members at the time of publication.

background, and the larger one, dated 1934, depicting a seaside scene that symbolised Harold's interest in marine biology.<sup>116</sup>

That sibling closeness was tested in 1920 when, just before Christmas, Dorothy, the wife of Eirene's brother Harold, murdered the well-known Sydney doctor Claud Tozer, a general practitioner who was treating her for depression and anxiety.<sup>117</sup> Dorothy Mort's trial, which was widely reported in the press, portrayed the highly unusual circumstance of a middle-class family caught up in a scandalous situation.<sup>118</sup> The details of this strange tale of unrequited love are important, for Mort's reaction to the tragedy reveal both the extent of her family loyalty and the degree to which she later protected her privacy.

Dorothy had been married to Eirene's elder brother, Harold, a surveyor for ten years at the time of the murder. She had, as historian Suzanne Falkiner judges, been suffering from 'some nameless mental malaise which would probably today have been diagnosed as depression'.<sup>119</sup> Harold Mort had turned to Dr Tozer for help in treating his wife, and Tozer accordingly treated Dorothy for her 'aberrations' for six months, during which time Dorothy fell in love with Tozer. Falkiner contends that there is evidence that Tozer initially encouraged her attentions, but subsequently tried to distance himself from her. On 21 December 1920, Dorothy Mort shot and killed Tozer. She immediately tried to shoot and then poison herself, but survived. Dorothy Mort was tried and found 'guilty whilst of unsound mind'. She went to prison for nine years (Fig 31).<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Mort also designed several bookplates for her sister Eunice and her brothers Selwyn and Stanley, each of which reflected their appropriate personality traits or interests.

<sup>117</sup> Suzanne Falkiner, *Mrs Mort's Madness: A true story of a Sydney Scandal* (Sydney: XOUM Publishing, 2014). The tragedy has been well documented in this blend of biography and investigative non-fiction.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 251. Falkiner notes that, of the several hundred women who were in Long Bay Gaol in 1921, only three were incarcerated for murder. The bulk of the remainder was mostly working class and impoverished. The women had been sent to prison for such crimes as burglary, being drunk and disorderly, or creating a public nuisance.

<sup>119</sup> Falkiner, *Mrs Mort's Madness*, 27–31, 92–98.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 191. Dorothy Mort eventually returned to live again with Harold and her two children, Poppy and Patrick. Initially they lived in suburban Sydney, but subsequently moved to the central coast of N.S.W.

Tozer had a high profile in Sydney. He had been a World War I, medical corps war hero, and it was rumoured that he would be selected to play cricket for Australia against the British in the coming test matches. The press coverage of the scandal was detailed and graphic, with *The Sun* allocating full-page articles to the trial.<sup>121</sup> The articles blazoned headlines such as ‘The Tozer Tragedy’ and ‘Strange and Startling Statements’ atop their pages, and portrayed Dorothy Mort in an unfavourable light. Artist’s sketches included one showing Dorothy facing the court in a defiant manner (Fig. 32).

Figure 31



Dorothy Mort on entry into Long Bay Gaol on 18 April, 1921



Figure 32

Artist's impression of Dorothy Mort, drawn during the trial

For the previous two decades, the family member who had generated the highest public profile was their talented daughter and sister, Eirene. Now, the distasteful publicity of the trial maligned the Mort family name. During Dorothy's incarceration, the whole Mort family (including ‘The Aunts’) remained supportive of Harold, inviting him, his children and his mother-in-law to family occasions such as their Christmas lunch. The ‘crimson thread of kinship’ that had activated Mort's public wartime service now surfaced strongly in her family setting. Falkiner holds that Mort ‘never wavered’ in her support for her brother Harold.

<sup>121</sup> ‘The Tozer Tragedy’, *The Sun*, March 20, 1921.

Figure 33

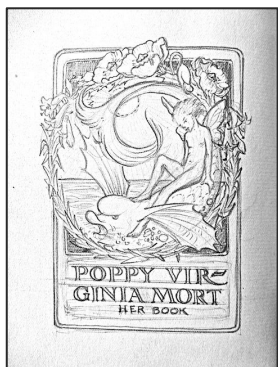


Bookplate for  
Harold Mort, 1928

Mort produced a second bookplate for Harold while his wife was in prison (Fig. 33).<sup>122</sup> Describing the imagery in the bookplate as being ‘a surveyor’s theodolite on a broken tripod made of gum twigs knotted together with string and weighted with an empty wine bottle’, Falkiner interprets this image as possibly representing ‘a broken life repaired by a retreat to the bush.’<sup>123</sup>

Although Falkiner ultimately decides that this is not a valid conclusion, she may be closer to the truth than she thinks. There is no doubt that Mort always tried to represent her client’s lives with images that matched their characters and/or their professions. It is not inconceivable that this later bookplate of Mort’s may well have tried to represent this difficult period in her brother’s life with just such emotive imagery as a broken tripod held together with bush detritus.

Figure 34



Bookplate for  
Poppy Mort, 1921

In 1921, the year that Dorothy went to prison, Mort produced a bookplate for Harold and Dorothy’s nine-year-old daughter, Poppy (Fig. 34). After Dorothy was released from prison, Mort continued to be in contact with her brother and his wife, forming a close relationship with Poppy. The fact that Poppy subsequently corresponded with Mort for many years, visiting her at her homes in Mittagong and Bowral, affirms the strength of the bond between them.

Mort’s reaction to the tragedy and the ensuing murder trial reveals the extent of her family loyalty. It also signifies another way in which her world was changing. The unwelcome glare of adverse publicity during the murder trial

<sup>122</sup> Falkiner, *Mrs Mort’s Madness*, 283.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

accorded to Dorothy – and by association, the extended family – would have been an intrusion into her hitherto comfortable, middle-class world. Although, in retirement, Mort compiled a number of family histories, they contain not one word of this infamous episode. Her total silence on the matter suggests that the whole episode was a very private hurt.<sup>124</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Although the gamut of Mort's artistic and cultural operations during the war and immediate post war years was defined by conventional parameters, within those parameters Mort was able to function much as she always had. She operated within a variety of networks, consolidating her position as an Arts and Crafts practitioner and a respected teacher of art and design in girls' schools. Within her own close circle of applied arts practitioners, she continued to mentor fellow artisans in Arts and Crafts techniques, to set an example in industrious productivity of her wares, and to generate an income from the sale of her applied arts work and from her teaching.

The war galvanised Mort's nationalism, turning her into a patriot. She demonstrated 'loyalty to king and country' in its Australian manifestation by personal donations of jewellery and money to fund raising efforts, and by supporting the fund-raising activities of the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW and the Australian Artists' War Fund. Perhaps the most important contribution Mort (and her fellow artisans) made to the war effort was not their fund raising, helpful though that had been. Rather, it is the fact that she helped to develop and pass on to others some of the skills required to underpin the newly evolving field of occupational therapy. It is a legacy that has, to date, been overlooked.

In wider circles, by using her contacts within the network of Sydney intelligentsia, Mort was able to produce applied artworks that not only

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<sup>124</sup> Mort wrote five volumes of family history, totaling over 1,000 pages, in beautiful copperplate handwriting. They cover genealogical history, business history and reproductions of over 500 letters. After Mort had reproduced the letters, she burnt the originals.

emphasised the links between Australia and Britain but also helped to promote patriotic causes. Her wider circles also included those organisations that promoted the legacy of ANZAC and supported women's issues. Her concern for women included support for members of her own family. The way in which she responded to the family crisis caused by Dr Tozer's murder illustrates the strength of her family bonds, especially where a sister-in-law and niece were concerned.

If Mort hoped that, once the war ended, she could return to her former positions of considerable influence in Sydney's decorative arts circles, she was to be denied that particular solace. Her influence as an artist and artisan began to wane in the post war period as her style of art lost its trend-setting and popular status. The next chapter will explore the way Mort lived and worked as 'jobbing artist' in peacetime, the effect that the arrival of Modernism in art had on her work as an artist and artisan, and her unintended easing of the way for her Modernist colleagues being accepted into the artistic canon of the times.

## Chapter 5

### A Jobbing Artist

(1921–1931)

*'No time for a career'.<sup>1</sup>*

- *Eirene Mort*

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Figure 1



Bookplate depicting Eirene Mort and Nora Weston

The decade of the 1920s saw Mort take on the role and identity of a 'jobbing artist' with great determination.<sup>2</sup> During those years, she gravitated further towards the status of a commissioned and vocationally driven artisan more than that of an artist, and did so with an element of pride as much as pragmatism. She became so busy opting for each and every job opportunity that

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<sup>1</sup> Eirene Mort, 'Biography of Artist'. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines a 'jobbing' artist as one who does 'piecemeal' work.

came along that she stated she had ‘no time for a career’.<sup>3</sup> An undated bookplate, designed by Mort’s colleague Margaret Oppen, has adroitly captured not only the determination with which Mort and Weston generated their income – graphically conveyed in the physical effort of turning a press – but also the nature of their mutually beneficial partnership (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup>

This chapter focuses on Mort’s life as a teacher and an applied arts practitioner. As a teacher, the relationships she developed with particular schools and with individuals within her school networks became increasingly important to her. In her applied arts work, Mort’s judicious combination of a number of major and minor projects, together with her place within five artistic societies, not only gave her income but also sustained her status. In her partnership with Weston and this mix of roles, Mort secured independence and retained her standing in like-minded circles.

Despite these positive aspects to her life, it was nevertheless during this decade that Mort’s star began to wane in the larger compass of Australian art. Modernism began to creep into artistic acceptance, defining new tastes, markets and reputations. Yet, despite the fact that many of Mort’s contemporaries eclipsed her in the annals of Australia’s art history, they nevertheless owe her a debt of gratitude for the way in which she paved the way for them in two areas – the beautifying of interior spaces and the inherent beauty of indigenous flora and fauna – both of which Mort had promoted all her working life. What Mort experienced, and to some extent rejected as a rising cultural tide, nonetheless owed much to the paths she had contributed to preparing.

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<sup>3</sup> E.M., ‘Biography of Artist’.

<sup>4</sup> In exchange for this bookplate, Mort did a reciprocal one for Oppen. Neither bookplate is dated. The fact that the printing press was bought for £25 in July 1929, and that the undated bookplate is in the Art Deco style have led me to place the bookplate in this chapter.



## Mort as educator

It has been difficult to evaluate the influence Mort may have had on her pupils but it is undeniable that teaching was central to her sense of purpose. In passing on to her pupils her Arts and Crafts knowledge and skills, she continued to educate the next generation of young women in the principles of good design and, at the same time, to promote the movement's 'useful and beautiful' philosophy. Working in progressive girls' schools that had a strong Christian ethos provided elements of continuity in her work and identity, and enabled her to exercise a personal influence. School records offer glimpses of Mort's ability to empathise with students experiencing difficulties. The headmistress of Kambala school, Fifi Hawthorn, recounted that:

Miss Eirene Mort, daughter of Rev'd Canon H. Wallace Mort, rector of All Saints' Church of England, Woollahra, who knew the Gaden girls ... says that they came from a remote Queensland station. They were utterly lost and miserable. Other than their family, they had seen no white woman before.<sup>5</sup>

Such relationships could endure. In Mort's 'Account Book 1924-1925', student surnames, such as those of Kent, Gaden and Lodes later became entries as private clients.<sup>6</sup> The surnames of adult learners Vickery, Dawson, Foster, Bennet and Stephens (together with the initials such 'S.G.' 'M.I.' and 'M.S.') also occur repeatedly over several years.<sup>7</sup> The personal dimension to such teaching consolidated the networks (including extended family members) that supported Mort, and in which she presumably had some standing as a respected practitioner.<sup>8</sup>

Yet it remained the case that, in girls' schools, 'accomplishments' such as drawing were usually taught by part-time visiting teachers: these job opportunities required an element of independence, if only in moving between

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<sup>5</sup> Fifi Hawthorne, *Kambala* (Sydney: The Wentworth Press, 1972), 2

<sup>6</sup> It is likely that there were several former school students who later became private clients, but the 'Gaden' surname is the only one for which I can find evidence.

<sup>7</sup> E.M. 'Accounts Book 1924-1935', 4-16. Mort Family Papers, Box 7.

<sup>8</sup> 'Graham' was the married surname of Eirene's sister, Eunice. The student was probably one of her daughters.

them.<sup>9</sup> Before examining the schools at which she taught during this decade, it is necessary to pause for a moment to gain an overview of Mort's financial situation, as it places in context the degree to which her teaching, either in private classes or in exclusive girls' schools, formed the major part of her income.

The income Mort made from private lessons was regular but not large. The lessons in drawing, painting or handicraft skills, for which private students paid £ 6/6/- per term, took place either individually or in small group settings in her Vacluse home. In her 'Accounts Book', Mort identified her private clients either by their initials or their surnames (Fig. 2).<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 2**

1927 July - Dec		1927 July - Dec	
Aug. W.V. Booth	31 10 0	July Spence & Co. (Bank)	4 5 0
- wife	2 10 0	Payroll	4 7
July Canberra H.S. (Buckley of York)	9 9 0	Sept Payroll	7 4
L. Wood & Canberra Creek	2 2 0		
Aug W.V. Garden, Canberra Creek	1 6 0		
Aug II Term Abbotdale	74 0 0		
II - Chats	12 12 0		
II - Private (D.P.)	7 3 0		
Mr. Philipp & Co. (Bank)	7 17 6	Nov. Parker	2 3 5
Mr. Philipp & Co. (Bank)	1 0 0		
Mrs. Mortimer, Colton Camp	3 3 0		
" " " "	3 13 6		
" " " "	1 1 6	Dec. sleepers & H.	6 3
Mr. Helle, Oake, Palerford	1 11 6	" " "	1 9
Mr. & Mrs. Oake, Team	1 11 6	page	11
Mr. Philipp & Co. (Bank)	1 11 6		
Mr. & Mrs. Oake, Team	15 0 0		
Dec. II Term Abbotdale	74 0 0		
" " Chatswood	13 13 0		
" " Private	6 6 0		

Accounts Book 1927, with 'Income' on L.H.S. and 'Expenditure' on R.H.S.

The bulk of Mort's income during this decade came, however, not from private lessons or classes, but from her teaching of art and design in girls' schools, with the remainder of her income coming from the sale of her applied arts work. This dependence on teaching in private girls' schools is nowhere highlighted more clearly than in 1924, the first year of Mort's 'Accounts Book', when she did no teaching for the first quarter of the year. For those three months, her expenditure far exceeded her income (Table 1).

<sup>9</sup> Coral Chambers, *Lessons for ladies: a social history of girls' education in Australasia, 1870-1900* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1986), 159.

<sup>10</sup> E.M., 'Accounts Book 1924-1935', Mort Family Papers, Box 7.

Table 1

Mort's Income and Expenditure for 1924				
	Jan. – Mar.	Apr. – Jun.	July – Sept.	Oct. – Dec.
<b>Income</b>	£ 6/10/2	£ 149/0/8	£ 105/8/9	£ 141 /11/3
<b>Expenditure</b>	£ 40/13/4	£ 45/5/4	£ 20/10/2	£ 23/11/9
Net <b>Loss</b> /Profit	£ – 34/3/2	£ 104/14/4	£ 96/18/7	£ 117/19/6

That position was reversed in the rest of the year, when the income she received from four schools, together with fees from private lessons and the sale of work, ensured that she made a living that was treble or, by the end of that year, quadruple the average basic female wage.<sup>11</sup> Mort's income peaked in the years 1929 – 1930 (Table 2).<sup>12</sup> Her total income of £186/3/- in 1930 was well above the average female wage of £110/8/- for that year.<sup>13</sup>

Table 2

Financial Record of Mort's Net Profit 1924–1930		
Year	Jan.– June	July – Dec.
<b>1924</b>	£ 87 / 5 / 3	
<b>1925-1926</b>	No records for these years – Mort and Weston travel in Europe.	
<b>1927</b>	£ 63	£ 74
<b>1928</b>	£ 71 / 8 / -	£ 81 / 18 / -
<b>1929</b>	£ 88 / 0 /10	£ 95 / 16 / 3
<b>1930</b>	£ 99	£ 87 / 3 /-

The 'Accounts Book' also reveals, however, that her applied arts expenses were ongoing. Wools, canvas, glass, copper, brushes, linen, pencils, paper, nitric

<sup>11</sup>The basic female wage at 31.12.1923 was £2/1/6 per week. This would equate to an amount of £24/17/- per quarter (allowing for one week's unpaid holiday leave each quarter).

[http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/o/6CCF154BDC39163ECA257AFC000FD AFF/\\$File/13001NSWYrBook1922.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/o/6CCF154BDC39163ECA257AFC000FD AFF/$File/13001NSWYrBook1922.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> There is no record of how many hours per week Mort worked, but one thing is clear – her pay was reduced from 1932 onwards. Either the number of hours she was teaching at the school was reduced, or she worked the same number of hours for less pay. Mort was, of course, not alone in this. The Depression was biting hard. In March 1933, the average female wage had dropped from £2/14/2 per week in 1929 to £2/6/5 in 1932. 'Wages Drop', *Launceston Examiner*, March 10, 1933.

<sup>13</sup> Government of Australia, 'Employment Statistics', [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/o/3FAEDD1895C1B77ACA2574A6001955 C6/\\$File/61010\\_1930\\_CHAPTER2\\_WAGES.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/o/3FAEDD1895C1B77ACA2574A6001955 C6/$File/61010_1930_CHAPTER2_WAGES.pdf)

acid, frames, envelopes, linoleum, cellophane, paint-remover, silver wire, blotting paper, French polish and lacquer-thinner – these purchases supported the diversity of her practice.<sup>14</sup> She even occasionally bought luxury items, paying 12/8 for three ounces of silver in October 1925 and 2/- for some gold in late 1927, an amount that would have bought her a little less than half an ounce.<sup>15</sup> The price of being an independent artist was evident when, in January 1928, she made her largest equipment purchase – £20 for an etching press – which appropriately appears in Oppen's bookplate.

Continuous though the entries for cost of equipment and materials were, they were not the major expenses Mort listed. Her two greatest outlays were the telephone and transport. Of these two items, by far the greater expense was the cost of travelling.<sup>16</sup> Mort criss-crossed Sydney by public transport, teaching in schools in the prosperous Eastern suburbs and the increasingly affluent North Shore. She bought both daily and season railway tickets. In 1924, a season ticket for the railway cost Mort £25/19/4 for the January – March quarter. The fact that Mort and Weston purchased a car in 1928 may well account for a seeming decrease in her transport costs to £5/-/8 per quarter.<sup>17</sup> Again, if that purchase was evidence of her relative affluence, it was also a reflection of her circumstances.

While teaching made up the bulk of her income, and the sale of artefacts the minor part, Mort also had an additional revenue stream from a small share portfolio.<sup>18</sup> Even allowing for the occasional contribution from shares or

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<sup>14</sup> Mort paid £4/17/6 to the stationery firm 'Penfolds' in February 1928 for material for The Shirley School. There is no record in the 'Accounts Book' of reimbursement for these items, so it seems likely that she absorbed the cost herself.

<sup>15</sup> *The Brisbane Courier*, January 27, 1928. The price of gold in Jan. 1928 was £4/11/2 per ounce. Mort was probably buying gold foil for the lettering on the 'Book of Student Benefactors'.

<sup>16</sup> Regular telephone payments, ranging from £3/8/4 in 1924 to £4/4/2 in 1932, appear in each half-yearly record.

<sup>17</sup> As Mort did not document the cost of running a car in her 'Accounts Book', it is difficult to be sure.

<sup>18</sup> Mort Family Papers Box 7 and *SMH*, March 6, 1935. Mort paid £250 for the 31 shares in the Bank of New South Wales on 7 April, 1933. In that same year, she received a yearly

from family members, the income Mort generated from her work for the years 1924–1935 was usually considerably above that of the average female income.<sup>19</sup>

In February 1924, Winifred West, who, with Phyllis Clubbe had founded Frensham girls' school at Mittagong ten years earlier, stated that she was 'awfully glad' to be able to offer Mort a position at the school at '£25 per term, plus reimbursement for travelling expenses', and suggested that 'afterwards, when the classes have increased in size, we could arrange (your employment) on a percentage basis.'<sup>20</sup> West's attitude to education was innovative. Frensham had become known as 'an unusual school: with non-denominational religion, few rules, and no competitions, marks or prizes, it emphasized music, art and drama as well as academic subjects and sport.'<sup>21</sup> West held that:

If we use our good moments well, if we learn to truly love beauty, goodness and truth, we shall need no other worthy motives in our lives ... We may only have one talent, but that must be used, not buried in the ground.<sup>22</sup>

Mort's 25 years at Abbotsleigh, the school at which she taught the longest, spanned the leadership of the headmistresses Margaret Murray, Dorothea Poole and Gladys Everett. As well as introducing specialist Art and Music teachers<sup>23</sup> Murray also raised teachers' salaries, an improvement that would have benefited Mort.<sup>24</sup> Murray was pleased that Mort's art classes, initially small after World War I, had begun to increase in size by 1921. She also praised the quality of the work being produced in those classes.

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dividend of £8/17/11 from the Bank of NSW (a dividend of 5/3 per share), and 15/7 from the Commercial Banking Co of Sydney (a dividend of 5 1/2 d per share) She also had 81 shares in the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (dividends not known). Mort's dividends for the year would have totalled £9/13/6, the equivalent of approximately one month's wages. Mort still held shares in those same three companies in 1954.

<sup>19</sup> Mort omitted to document income and expenses in her 'Accounts Book' for the years 1925–1926 when she and Weston were in England.

<sup>20</sup> Winifred West to E.M. 5 February 1924, Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

<sup>21</sup> Priscilla Kennedy, 'West, Winifred Mary (1881–1971)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/west-winifred-mary>, (accessed on 22 November 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Winifred West, 'Miss West's Speech', *Frensham Chronicle*, I, no. 17, (January–June, 1928), 19.

<sup>23</sup> 'Miss Murray: 1913–1924', *The Weaver* school magazine, 1924, 67.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Emilsen, *The Lily and the Lion* (Wahroonga: Richard Smart Publishing, 2000), 68.

Miss Eirene Mort's classes in Handicrafts have been unusually well attended this year and both in this department and in Design her girls have done really good work.<sup>25</sup>

The fact that Mort continued to teach at Abbotsleigh until her official retirement in 1937 suggests that both parties were satisfied with the way in which she was fulfilling her yearly contracts.

The tenure of any given teaching position was not always predictable. Along with her break with Frensham, Mort's 'Accounts Book' records that Kelvin Girls' College also made only one payment of £21 to Mort in 1924. Her employment prospects during the early 1920s seem to have been precarious, and were to become even more so when the Depression took hold, with the closure of several of the schools at which she was teaching.<sup>26</sup> While a significant part of her income and of her role, teaching was far from secure for Mort.

### **Mort as artisan and networker**

Along with the precariousness of teaching art in schools, the general profile of the arts in New South Wales was reported to be at a low ebb during these years. In July 1920, the journalist 'Senga' used a literary analogy to reflect on the status of art and artists, declaring that:

Art in New South Wales is the Cinderella of the muses, and is always left at home to sift the cinders left by a step-mother government, while her proud sisters Literature, Architecture and Music attend the court balls.<sup>27</sup>

And this status had a particular impact on Mort, with the Art Gallery of NSW, for example, purchasing only ten of Mort's works during her long career. At that gallery, while a number of oil paintings, ceramics and sculptures had been added to its collection in the early 1920s, its watercolour collection expanded by only five additional works – and this saw a reduction in government funding for the

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<sup>25</sup> Margaret Murray, 'Extracts from the Principal's Report' *The Weaver*, 1921, 6.

<sup>26</sup> SCEGGS Chatswood closed in the 1930s; The Shirley School merged with Kambala in 1936.

<sup>27</sup> Senga, *The Australasian*, July 10, 1920,

Gallery, and a decline in visitors.<sup>28</sup> As if in response, art societies redoubled their roles of promotion and support. In these societies, however, gendered divisions were marked.

Of the five societies with which Mort was associated, one (the Society of Women Painters) was solely for females and one (the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW) was predominantly for women. Male members dominated the other three (the *Ex Libris* Society, the Painter-Etchers' Society and the Royal Art Society) to differing degrees. Although the networking was strong in the Society of Women Painters, Angela Philp argues that they 'were perceived as neither committed nor serious' by men.<sup>29</sup> Lloyd Rees reflected that they were strangled by their very title'.<sup>30</sup> In the predominantly female Arts and Crafts Society of NSW, collegiality flourished, but the concentration on applied arts by most of its members eroded its status as a professional body. Examining Mort's participation in the activities of each of the societies in turn suggests the ways in which her career was marked by distinctions in taste, gender and media – ways that were becoming firmer and perhaps harsher in this post war decade.

The Society of Women Painters had invited Mort to be principal of its new School of Fine and Applied Arts in June 1920. In the roles of principal of one organisation and executive member of the other, she sought, in April 1921, to

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<sup>28</sup> See *Year Book Australia 1919-1920*, 471 and 543.

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/1301.01920?OpenDocument>  
and

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/ProductsbyReleaseDate/009EAA00D4E0BF9ACA257758001322ED?OpenDocument> The Art Gallery of NSW had received 0.0005 per cent of annual state expenditure in 1919, but its allocation had dropped to 0.00043 per cent by 1925. Weekday visitor numbers dropped from 503 in 1920 to 450 in 1925. During weekends, the average total attendance remained steady at 1,500 persons. The number of weekday visitors dropped by 10.6 per cent.

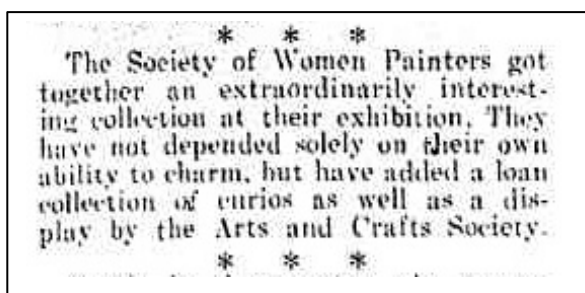
<sup>29</sup> Angela Philp, 'From Wallflower to Tall Poppies? The Sydney Society of Women Painters, 1910-1934', in *Wallflowers and Witches* ed. Maryanne Deaver (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>30</sup> Lloyd Rees in Philp, 'From Wallflower to Tall Poppies?', 4.

maximise the link between these organisations by arranging for an Arts and Crafts Society display at a Society of Women Painters' exhibition (Fig 3).<sup>31</sup>

Figure 3

Social Column article  
about joint display



Such a collaboration attracted wide attention, even the *Sydney Stock and Station* applauding the joint venture and praising Mort's 'fine etching and good poster design'.<sup>32</sup> The *Sydney Morning Herald* also noted that:

Miss Mort is one of our best-known women artists. Her etchings are greatly admired and she is considered an authority on the various processes in this form of art.<sup>33</sup>

At the close of this exhibition, the society held a musical program, a 'Conversazione', in the gallery of the Education Department in Bridge Street Sydney, an occasion that also saw Mort given particular journalistic attention.<sup>34</sup>

The high hopes with which the new School of Fine and Applied Arts began did not, for Mort, last long. She resigned from her position as principal sometime in 1923. No reason is recorded, but – again – this volatility in her relationships around this time suggests significant issues of direction, purpose or philosophy were under debate. The Society for Women Painters eventually disbanded in 1934, with several of the younger members opting to form a 'more commercially oriented' society.<sup>35</sup> Although the society was only in existence for some 14 years, Maryanne Deaver holds that, in the Society, women were challenging men's 'explicit agenda of containment and limitation' and bringing

<sup>31</sup> 'Women's Column', *SMH*, April 6, 1921.

<sup>32</sup> 'Eve's Moving Finger', *Sydney Stock and Station*, April 26, 1921.

<sup>33</sup> 'Near and Far', *SMH*, May 5, 1921.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Philp, 'From Wallflower to Tall Poppies', 1.



their work from the private into the public sphere, an act that undermined ‘the status quo of entrenched male dominance in the art world.’<sup>36</sup>

At this time, Mort was giving most of her attention to the largely female Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, which also provided a venue for the sale of her work. Always keen to involve herself in issues of management, Mort was one of the nine members responsible for the incorporation of the society as a limited company and the by-laws associated with that act,<sup>37</sup> and was also involved in protracted negotiations about the move of the Arts and Crafts shop from Rowe St to new premises in the Hotel Australia.<sup>38</sup>

Mort also frequently endorsed the names of people to be considered as members or for office, knowing that an increase in membership numbers not only boosted the financial health of the society, but also afforded an opportunity for social enhancement – providing the new members were of desirable social cachet. In this role, she can be seen to be bridging styles, as when she seconded Sulman’s nomination of Margaret Preston as a new member of the society in 1928,<sup>39</sup> (Fig. 6) She also proposed that Dorothea Mackellar be invited to be a Vice President.<sup>40</sup>

For Mort, the educational aspect of the society was important. She continued to give guest lectures on topics ranging from embroidery to stencilling, and, in 1928, conducted a series of ten design classes, open to members of the

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<sup>36</sup> Maryanne Deaver, *Wallflowers and Witches* ed., (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press 1994), xiv.

<sup>37</sup> Arts and Crafts Society of NSW, Memorandum of Association, 6 December 1929, ML MSS 3645, Box 1. (Mitchell Library, Sydney). This position would have undoubtedly heightened her awareness of her financial responsibilities to the society.

<sup>38</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, ‘Minutes of Committee Meetings’ (6.1.1930 – 7.9.1931) ML MSS 3645 Box 4, 89-90, (Mitchell Library, Sydney). The negotiations culminated in the society’s leaving the Hotel Australia shop and moving to premises in George St in 1931.

<sup>39</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, ‘Committee Meeting Minutes Book, 16.8.27–2.12.39’, ML MSS 3645, Box 4; (Sydney: Mitchell Library).

<sup>40</sup> See: Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W. ‘Minutes of Committee Meetings’ (16.8.1927 – 2.12.1929) ML MSS 3645, Box 4, 90. (Sydney: Mitchell Library) and ‘Minutes of Committee Meetings (1931 – 1938) ML MSS 3645, Box 5, 97. (Sydney: Mitchell Library)

Arts and Crafts Society and the public.<sup>41</sup> Each class focused on a different aspect of design, and participants were asked to complete very specific exercises each week. The notes were both detailed and practical, and sometimes included helpful hints, such as the instructions and rhyme below (Figs. 4-5).<sup>42</sup>

Figure 4

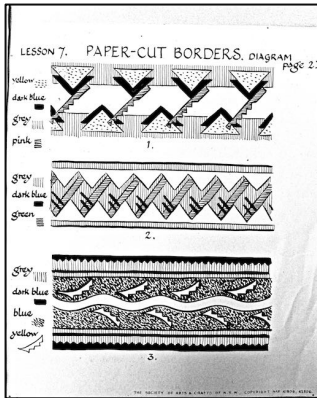
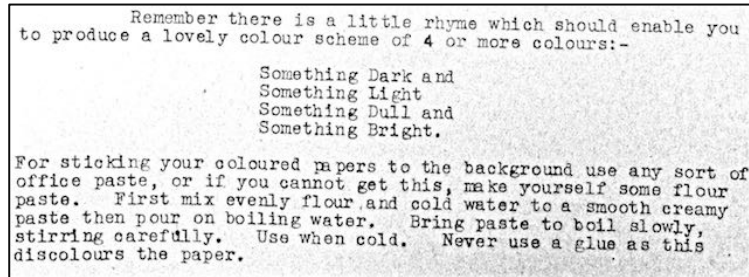


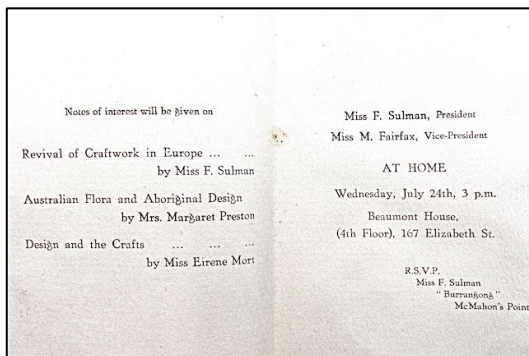
Figure 5



Examples of handouts for Lesson 7 in Design classes.

The contrast between the quaint practicality of such advice and the emerging advocacy of domestic modernity is perhaps indicative of brooding strains in such circles.

Figure 6



Brochure for 'At Home'

In July 1929, the Society again utilised Mort's expertise in design by including her as one of three presenters at an 'At Home' held at Beaumont House in the city, (Fig 6) speaking with Florence Sulman and Margaret Preston who was developing her advocacy of Aboriginal themes.

<sup>41</sup> Arts and Crafts Society of NSW, 'Design Class Folder', ML MSS 3645 Box 1, (Sydney: Mitchell Library).

<sup>42</sup> It is indicative of Mort's generosity that she assigned the copyright of the detailed notes and illustrations to the Arts and Crafts Society rather than to herself. In the nine boxes of the Society's records in the Mitchell Library, there is no other collection of training notes with copyright assigned to the society rather than the author.

Mort was central to an established pattern of sociability in the Society, being chair of the committee responsible for the decorations of a July 1930 ball at which five debutantes were presented to the Governor of NSW, Sir Philip Game, and his wife, Lady Game.<sup>43</sup> Preparations began some time beforehand, with fundraising card parties and novelty-making afternoons hosted in people's homes (Figs. 7-8).<sup>44</sup> Mort's role in particular was described as 'a labour of love, if ever there was one.'<sup>45</sup>

Figure 7



Newspaper photos of A &amp; C ball preparations

Figure 8

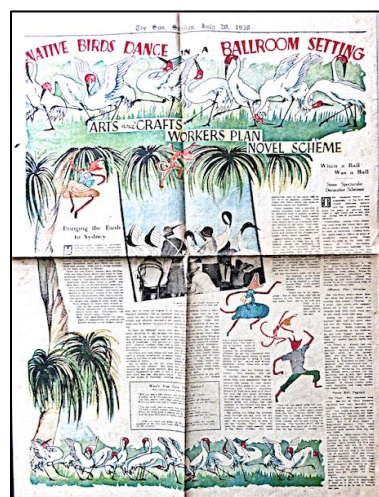
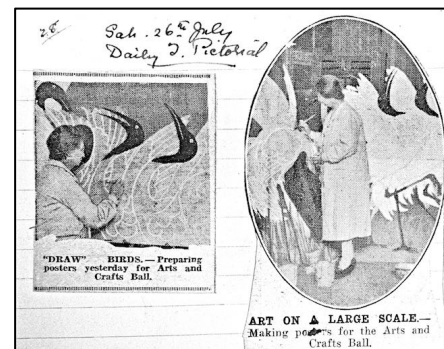


Figure 9

In keeping with the society's aim of 'furthering Australian art', Mort and her helpers decorated the ballroom with 36 life-sized brologas and covered Mountain Devil twigs with lacquer for prizes (Fig. 9).<sup>46</sup> Such motifs were, however, a marked contrast to the bold engagement with Indigenous art that was inspiring Preston.

Newspaper feature article about the Arts &amp; Crafts Ball

<sup>43</sup> The debutantes were the Misses Rosaleen Ashton, Stella Hemphill, Gwen Pierce, Dorothy Wager and Flora Ingram. 'Debutantes Ball' *The Sun*, August 2, 1930.

<sup>44</sup> 'Making novelties' *The Pictorial*, July 3, 1930.

<sup>45</sup> 'Native Birds Dance in Ballroom Settings', *The Sun*, July 20, 1930.

<sup>46</sup> 'Arts and Crafts Society's First Ball', *SMH*, August 2, 1930. The brologas were painted on brown paper and mounted on cut-out plywood. These were set around the ballroom among real grass-trees, gigantic crimson lilies and a profusion of native scrub, foliage and wildflowers. *The Sun*: double page insert, 28 July 1930.

Despite (or maybe because of) the fact that the Depression was just beginning to bite, the ball was a glittering success. The full-page double spread coverage by *The Sun* noted not only that Mort was one of the ‘welcoming committee’ for the ball, but also that she was attired in ‘parma violet georgette beautifully embossed with chenille’.<sup>47</sup> It was surely a sign of the difficulties associated with early Depression times that Mort’s fellow committee members took care that she should not be out of pocket for her expenses and moved a motion that she be reimbursed immediately, rather than wait the usual month for reimbursement.<sup>48</sup>

In 1920, Mort accepted the responsibility of becoming one of the founding members of the Australian Painter–Etchers’ Society, established ‘to protect and further the interests of members’.<sup>49</sup> Her election to its first committee, and its only woman member until 1927, was seen by journalist and art critic William Moore as proof that ‘prejudice against women’s work’ was not universal.<sup>50</sup> It also perhaps suggested an element of tokenistic, ‘moral licensing’,<sup>51</sup> as Mort posed no threat to the members of the first committee that included Lionel Lindsay, Gayfield Shaw, A.H. Fullwood and Sydney Ure Smith, each of whom employed a traditionalist approach to art, and frowned on Modernism.<sup>52</sup> The Society provided a congenial vehicle for the exhibition of her work over many years, beginning with its first annual event in June 1920 when a

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<sup>47</sup> ‘Graceful Frocks: Decorations – Arts and Crafts Ball’ *The Sun*, August 2, 1930.

There are minor sartorial discrepancies in the reports about Mort, with *The Pictorial* describing her gown as being of ‘dahlia georgette with applique flowers’ and the *Sydney Morning Herald* noting that her gown was ‘violet chiffon with silver motifs’.

<sup>48</sup> Arts and Crafts Society of NSW, ‘Minutes of Committee Meetings’, Minutes for August 2, 1930, ML MSS. 3645 Box 4, (Sydney: Mitchell Library).

<sup>49</sup> ‘Australian Painter–Etchers’ Society’, *SMH*, May 21, 1921.

<sup>50</sup> William Moore, ‘Art and Artists’, *The Brisbane Courier* May 21, 1927.

<sup>51</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, <http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/01-the-lady-vanishes>

The term ‘moral licensing’ refers to the practice of initiating one morally benevolent practice, only to postpone for quite some time further examples of the practice. It took another seven years before a second woman was nominated to the Painter–Etchers’ Society committee.

<sup>52</sup> Lionel Lindsay was elected president. The committee also included John Shirlow, John Godson and Bruce Robertson.

total of almost 600 etchings was on display, 34 of which Mort contributed.<sup>53</sup> The Society sent its exhibitions further afield – to Melbourne (in Nov 1921), Brisbane (in Dec 1921) and Adelaide (in March 1922). The *American Magazine of Art* also ‘referred favourably to the etchings of Miss Eirene Mort which were shown at a recent exhibition held by the Printmakers of California’.<sup>54</sup>

The Australian Painter-Etchers’ Society provided one of many contexts in which Mort exhibited during the twenties and thirties; others included many of Sydney’s city galleries such as the Education Department Gallery in Loftus Street, Tyrrell’s Art Gallery in Castlereagh Street, Gayfield Shaw’s Gallery in Elizabeth Street, Farmer & Company in George Street, as well as at Kambala School in Rose Bay.<sup>55</sup> The purchase of an etching press saw this medium become more central to her work, as she routinely printed (and sold) 50 copies of each plate (Figs. 10-11).<sup>56</sup> The sale of etchings became one of Mort’s most profitable commercial ventures, bringing in a regular income each year.<sup>57</sup>

Figure 10

Title.	Edition limited to.	Date.
The Sentinel . . . . .	50	1917
The Armoury, Port Arthur . . . . .	50	1917
The Forge, Cobbitty . . . . .	50	1920
Elizabeth Farm House, Parramatta . . . . .	50	1920
Court House and Cells, Hartley . . . . .	50	1920
The Pottery . . . . .	50	1920
Camden . . . . .	50	1920
The Stables, Vaucluse . . . . .	50	1921
The Hospital, Port Arthur . . . . .	50	1921
Eaglehawk Neck . . . . .	50	1921
Jubbergate, York . . . . .	50	1921
Heart of the Bruce . . . . .	50	1921
Vaucluse House . . . . .	50	1921
The Team . . . . .	50	1921
Palm Court, Vaucluse . . . . .	50	1922
Peter, Jock and John . . . . .	50	1922
War Memorial, Double Bay . . . . .	50	1922
Macquarie Light . . . . .	50	1922
The Lotus Flower . . . . .	50	1922
The Yard . . . . .	50	1922
The Trough, Berrima . . . . .	50	1923
Careening . . . . .	50	1923
The Magpie . . . . .	50	1923
A Hartley Barn . . . . .	50	1923
Macquarie’s Bathhouse . . . . .	50	1923
The King’s School . . . . .	50	1924
Officers’ Mess, Duntroon . . . . .	50	1924
Black Mountain, Canberra . . . . .	50	1924

Figure 11

EIRENE MORT		
Pont de Sucre, Bruges . . . . .	50	1912
Quai Vert, Bruges . . . . .	50	1912
Cul de Sac, Brussels . . . . .	50	1913
Abbaye de S. Bavon, Ghent . . . . .	50	1913
The Timber Scow . . . . .	50	1913
St. Mary’s Abbey, York . . . . .	50	1913
College-gate, York . . . . .	50	1913
Adjutants. (Aquatint) . . . . .	50	1913
A Bush Home . . . . .	50	1914
The Mill, Dudzele . . . . .	50	1914
Uplands . . . . .	50	1915
A Mountain Path . . . . .	50	1915
The Three Sisters . . . . .	50	1915
The Stockade, Vaucluse . . . . .	50	1915
St. John the Baptist, Canberra . . . . .	50	1916
The Duckpond . . . . .	50	1916
Coledale Pier . . . . .	50	1916
The Bridge . . . . .	50	1916
Govt. House, Windsor . . . . .	50	1916
Bookplate, N. K. Weston . . . . .	50	1916
Bookplate, E. B. MacLeod . . . . .	50	1916
St. Paul’s, Cobbitty . . . . .	50	1916
The Sawmill . . . . .	50	1916
The Sliprails . . . . .	50	1916
Pasture . . . . .	50	1917

\* Out of print

List of Mort’s etchings 1912-1924

<sup>53</sup> ‘Etchers’ Society—A Great Exhibition’, *SMH*, June 6, 1921.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Notes’, Unidentified newspaper, 1922.

<sup>55</sup> Hawthorne, *Kambala*, 120.

<sup>56</sup> E.M., ‘Accounts Book 1924-1935’, Year 1928 income, Mort Family Papers, Box 7.

<sup>57</sup> Even so, by comparison with the income that her male contemporaries such as Norman Lindsay or A.H. Fullwood could generate from their etchings, Mort’s income from etchings was modest.

Yet this productivity was also marked by new emphases in Mort's work and a changing of critical reception of it. As several artists gravitated towards a more dramatic Modernist engagement with Australian motifs, she began to shift her attention to subjects that reflected a more sentimentalised engagement with heritage. Reviews of her work, in this transition, were mixed.<sup>58</sup> David Angeloro has noted a decline in 'Mort's interest in using Australian flora and fauna as design motifs', the subject of most of her work becoming either bush landscapes or historic buildings in various shades of repair or disrepair.<sup>59</sup> An *Art in Australia* review of the second annual exhibition of the Australian Painter-Etchers' Society in 1922 damned Mort with faint praise: 'Miss Eirene Mort, within her narrow gamut, continues her steady output of sincere though not exciting work'.<sup>60</sup> Other reviewers were kinder, praising her 'nice feeling',<sup>61</sup> her 'very neat in execution'<sup>62</sup> and admiring the individuality of her work:

Eirene Mort shows works that only Eirene Mort can accomplish. They are almost all gems of careful industry lightened by an imaginative mind.<sup>63</sup>

It was one thing to be identified as a familiar and reliable contributor in a medium which, as an *Australasian* journalist noted, had emerged as 'an avenue of expression [that] has come slowly into favour with Australian artists'.<sup>64</sup> It was another to be catching the tide of innovation.

Etching, by this point in her career, suited Mort's temperament – it could facilitate collegiality, particularly in forms and groups that proved

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<sup>58</sup> Paradoxically, the very fact that Mort produced etchings in batches of 50 would have militated against her being considered as a producer of 'fine art', the output of which was almost always a singular item.

<sup>59</sup> David Angeloro, 'Come Up and See Her Etchings', *The Australian Antique Collector*, 52<sup>nd</sup> edition (November 1996–April 1997): 212. A kookaburra is the only indigenous Australian animal portrayed in Mort's etchings.

<sup>60</sup> 'J.F.B.' 'The Second Annual Exhibition of the Australian Painter-Etchers' Society', *Art in Australia*, 3, no. 1, August, 1922. 'J.F.B.' was probably art critic J.F. Bruce.

<sup>61</sup> 'Painter-Etchers: A Fine Exhibition', *The Register*, March 8, 1922.

<sup>62</sup> Bertram Stevens, 'Etching in Australia', *Art in Australia*, no 9, 1921.

<sup>63</sup> 'I.G.' 'Two Art Shows', *The Sunday Times*, June 4, 1922.

<sup>64</sup> 'The Studio: Australian Painter-Etchers', *The Australasian*, November 12, 1921.

congenial among women.<sup>65</sup> Mort also saw etching as a medium in which her role as an educator in technique was unsurpassed, using it in working with women, although sometimes – as when she took pity on her colleague, Sydney Ure Smith – with men. Mort taught Ure Smith the technique of etching when his colleagues, Norman and Lionel Lindsay, refused his request to share their knowledge of etching with him.<sup>66</sup> Etching was a domain which could still mark a divide between the kind of sustained labour associated with artistic practice for men and media which, as Roger Butler notes, ‘were perceived as women’s work’ that ‘could be worked on intermittently at home’.<sup>67</sup> Again, Mort’s etching press had an element of defiance in claiming a determination to succeed in a physically demanding medium and in the face of masculine disapproval.

The fourth society with which Mort was associated was the *Ex Libris* Society, an association promoting the production of bookplates, and which was noted for its ‘growing popularity among women’.<sup>68</sup> In July 1923, Mort attended the first meeting of the society and became its honorary treasurer.<sup>69</sup> She actively pursued the society’s goal of promoting the design element in bookplates. Her own designs were notable for their creative borders and the variety of methods she used – methods that ranged from linocuts and woodcuts to etchings. She also encouraged communication between artists,<sup>70</sup> exchanging bookplates and ideas on how to improve them with members such as Theo Broekstra, George Perrottet, Hilda Wiseman, Tama Te Kapua, Neville Barnett and Ella Dwyer over many years.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Angeloro, ‘Come Up and See Her Etchings’, 209.

<sup>66</sup> E.M. to Daniel Thomas, 18 February 1969, ‘Letter Folder’, Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW.. Mort mentions in her letter to Thomas that she taught Ure Smith in her studio at Longueville Rd Lane Cove, a residence she and Weston moved into in 1915, so her instruction of Ure Smith must have occurred after this date.

<sup>67</sup> Roger Butler quoted in Sasha Grishin, *Australian Art: A History* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2013), 195.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Ex Libris’, *The Sun*, August 2, 1923. By 1927, 28 per cent of its members were women.

<sup>69</sup> Mort had stepped down from the position of Honorary Treasurer by 1926.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Ex Libris’ *The Sunday Times*, December 14, 1924.

<sup>71</sup> ‘Ex Libris’ Correspondents, 06/017, Box 2, Item 2, Canberra: NLA.

In contrast to bonds formed in the very specific craft of bookplate production, the fifth and most male-dominated art society with which Mort was involved was the Royal Art Society. It had been established in 1880 to ‘encourage sound art training for students and to encourage the development of an Australian style (which) incorporated the traditional *en plein air* style of painting which was popular in both England and Australia at the time’.<sup>72</sup> Significantly, Mort’s involvement with this society was minimal, and consisted mainly in offering her etchings for exhibition and sale. (Table 3).<sup>73</sup> Yet this was an achievement in itself, given the Society’s record of not giving women much place in its hangings.

Table 3

ROYAL ART SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES				
Artist		Title of Work	Medium	Date
MORT	Eirene	The Wave	Black & White	1904
MORT	Eirene	The Pied Piper	Black & White	1905
MORT	Eirene	Quai Vert, Bruges	Etching	1914
MORT	Eirene	Pont di Suere, Bruges	Etching	1914
MORT	Eirene	Bruges	Black & White	1915
MORT	Eirene	The Mill	Etching	1915
MORT	Eirene	Uplands	Black & White	1915
MORT	Eirene	The Duck Pond	Black & White	1916
MORT	Eirene	Monotype	Black & White	1916
MORT	Eirene	Government House, Windsor	Black & White	1916
MORT	Eirene	Coledale Pier	Etching	1916
MORT	Eirene	The Bridge	Etching	1916
MORT	Eirene	The Sentinel	Etching	1917
MORT	Eirene	The Armoury, Port Arthur, Tas.	Etching	1917
MORT	Eirene	Black Swans	Monotype	1917
MORT	Eirene	Pasture	Etching	1917
MORT	Eirene	Courthouse and Cells, Hartley	Etching	1920
MORT	Eirene	Elizabeth Farm House, Parramatta	Etching	1920
MORT	Eirene	The Forge, Cobbity	Etching	1920
MORT	Eirene	Heart of the Bruce	Etching	1921
MORT	Eirene	Jubbergate, York	Etching	1921
MORT	Eirene	The Lotus Flower	Etching	1922

Record of Mort’s items placed for sale through the Royal Art Society

The pattern across Mort’s associations in the post war decades was to seek connections. She found, however, that the available avenues were either adopting styles that were diverging from her established Arts and Crafts practice, or – where there was more congruence in taste – avenues in which the dominance of men was more entrenched. Because Mort chose to focus on applied rather than fine art, her struggle in navigating between these paths was less severe than that

<sup>72</sup> ‘History’, The Royal Art Society of New South Wales, [www.royalart.com.au](http://www.royalart.com.au) (accessed on April 6 2014).

<sup>73</sup> The RAS has no records of the number of sales made or the prices for sales.



of some of her contemporaries, and her involvement in these different societies sustained many of her networks. But these divergences were nonetheless evident, and marked the new tensions she experienced and represented in attempting to raise the status of women artists and artisans in Sydney's social and cultural life.

### Major projects

Four separate projects undertaken during this decade give insights into Mort's ability to give priority to one particular aspect of her work without neglecting the many other areas of arts and crafts in which she was involved. The first was another lengthy trip to Europe in 1926, taken partly as a sabbatical and partly as a guide to some of her former students.<sup>74</sup> The second was an eighteen-month project of the compilation of a special book, initiated by a professor at the University of Queensland. The third was a series of sketches made in response to the changes that were occurring as a result of the opening of Parliament House in the new national capital, Canberra. The fourth was the continuation of Mort's determination to become a travelling artist so that she could record the changing nature of the countryside and the built environment.

Figure 12



1926 passport photo of Eirene Mort, aged 47

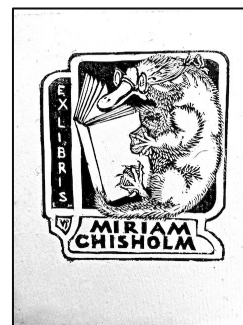
Mort's and Weston's 1926 trip to Europe was a combination of a sabbatical and a mentoring holiday. (Fig. 12) Its dual purpose enabled the couple to enjoy a vacation in the company of some of Mort's former students and, at the same time, update their applied art skills. The couple escorted three former Frensham students, two of whom (Helen and Frena Crace) were Mort's relatives, and one (Miriam Chisholm) who was the daughter of an established and prosperous Goulburn pastoral family.

Here is an indication of the social milieu in which Mort and Weston operated: they were accorded the responsibility of mentoring, in foreign lands,

<sup>74</sup> Mort's prior trips to Europe had been in 1884-6, 1899-1903 and 1912-1913.

three young women from wealthy families. Chisholm, whom Mort depicted symbolically as a studious platypus (Fig. 13), developed a lifelong friendship with Mort, in due course joining both the Arts and Crafts and the *Ex Libris* societies under Mort's aegis.<sup>75</sup> A letter, written to Mort by Miriam Chisholm's mother, Edith, prior to the group's departure, gave Mort full control over Miriam's budget of £1,340.<sup>76</sup> Edith confided that the girls were 'keen as ever, and that Helen has been heard to say that 'you were the only person she wanted to go with and be controlled by'.<sup>77</sup>

Figure 13

Bookplate for  
Miriam Chisholm

With this trust, in January 1926, the 'Frensham Fellowship' set out in style on the S.S. *Wooltan*, dining at the captain's table and being taken up onto the bridge for a personal tour.<sup>78</sup> In an endearing insight into both Mort's creativity and her rapport with children, Chisholm describes how, at a fancy dress ball:

Miss Mort went as a zoo. She spent ages cutting out animals and chalking them in colours and sewing them on her black evening dress with Taronga Park on her collar, and this notice

<p>NOTICE: THE ANIMALS WILL BE FED AT 10 PM</p>
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on the back.

<sup>75</sup> Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 'Committee Meeting Minutes Book 16.8.27–2.12.39', ML MSS 3645, Box 4, 66, (Sydney: Mitchell Library). Their friendship was probably strengthened by the fact that it was Mort who nominated Chisholm to be a member of the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW two years later.

<sup>76</sup> Edith Chisholm to E.M., December 1925, Mort Family Papers, Box 2. As the average male weekly wage at Dec 31, 1925 was £4/16/9, the budget for Miriam Chisholm represented the equivalent of just over five years' annual average male weekly wages.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, text written in post script at side of letter

<sup>78</sup> Miriam Chisholm to Edith Chisholm from on board S.S. *Wooltan*, January 24 1926, MS 2607 Box 1 Series 1, Folder 3, NLA, Canberra. 'Frensham Fellowship' is the name given to the school's alumni.

Also, all the technical names were on labels under each animal. Cameleopardarlis Longinecus was on the Giraffe's label – my spelling is meant to be zoological too! I don't think people realized that it was all done on board. She had a flock of children following her in almost ½ a minute. I was very sorry I didn't have some peanuts!<sup>79</sup>

Arriving in the 'terribly noisy and rather dirty' city of Marseilles in March 1926, and continuing their journey in the south of France, Mort's artist eye was caught by the 'picturesque blue gowns and huge white coifs' of some nuns attending 'a service of full pomp' in St Saviour's Cathedral in Aix-en Provence.<sup>80</sup> Chisholm wrote perceptively to her father from France:

We are loving it all. Miss Mort is a great manager, without you actually being aware of it. She just seems to sail into things & we all sail with her. I don't know how much she twists me round her little finger, but it's wonderful to hear her doing it to the two girls. She creates the right atmosphere and they simply make the suggestions she happens to want. In fact, they think they are thinking of all the good ideas and Helena always says "Don't you think that is a good idea of mine, Eirene?" when really she has thought of it & we've discussed it a day ago! I never saw such tact. I nearly burst trying to keep a straight face sometimes.<sup>81</sup>

Figure 14



Mort's ticket for the class at the 'École D'Art Animalie'

Although most of Mort and Weston's travels were focused on introducing their charges to the artistic and cultural experiences that Europe had to offer, they still found time to update their applied arts skills, with Mort attending the 'École D'Art Animalier' in Paris (Fig. 14) and Weston improving her woodwork and

<sup>79</sup> Miriam Chisholm to Anne Chisholm, 1 February 1926, MS 2607 Box 1 Series 1, Folder 3, NLA, Canberra.

<sup>80</sup> E.M., to Wallace Mort, 5 March 1926. Mort Family Papers, Box 5. The travellers visited Nice, Aix-en Provence, Arles, Avignon, Nimes, St Raphael and Paris.

<sup>81</sup> Miriam Chisholm to Frank Chisholm, written from Marseilles, 26 February 1926, 2607 Box 1 Series 1, Folder 3, 13, NLA, Canberra.

bookbinding by taking classes in London.<sup>82</sup> The group also travelled widely in Italy, finishing up in Rome,<sup>83</sup> where Mort revealed her predilection for royalty by writing to her father that the ‘King and Queen and Mussolini’ were expected to attend the ‘great affair in the Coliseum to celebrate the birthday of Facism’ and that she also hoped to attend (Figs. 15-16).<sup>84</sup>

Figure 15

Mort’s sketch  
of the River  
Tiber in Rome

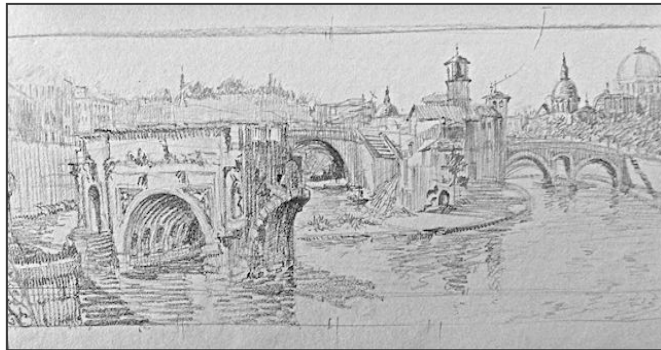


Figure 16

1926 Photograph  
taken in Italy by  
Miriam Chisholm

After exploring the Netherlands and Germany, the group headed to London where Mort and Weston took their duties as tour guides and educators seriously, escorting ‘their girls’ to city’s tourist sites and art galleries.<sup>85</sup> Mort

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<sup>82</sup> The date of Mort’s attendance at the École D’Art Animalier fits with the dates of the 1926 General Strike in Britain (3 - 12 May). With transport workers and dockers on strike, it is probable that the group would not have been able to travel to a U.K. port.

<sup>83</sup> The group visited Monte Carlo, Genoa, Pisa, and Florence.

<sup>84</sup> E.M., to Wallace Mort, 25 March 1926. Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

<sup>85</sup> Rotterdam, Cologne, Stuttgart, Frankfurt-am-Main and Potsdam are other towns visited.

wrote to her father that she had ‘all the girls with me (in London) just now ... but next week I shall be freer, and Chips and I will be able to be a little more independent.’<sup>86</sup>

The two women certainly made the most of their freedom, travelling extensively around the South of England.<sup>87</sup> They made a point of locating two potteries in Surrey in which Mort was particularly interested – the Farnham Pottery in Farnham and the Watts Gallery and Pottery in Compton. (Figs. 17-18) Mort was pleased to discover that Mary Watts, a well-known Art Nouveau potter and textile artist, still lived at the latter (Figs. 19-20).<sup>88</sup>

Figure 17



Figure 18



Farnham Pottery: present and past.

Figure 19



Figure 20



Watts Gallery, Compton – past and present

<sup>86</sup> E.M., to Wallace Mort, 1 June 1926, Mort Family Papers, Box 5. It is likely that the group later met up again to travel home together.

<sup>87</sup> The two women visited Hampton Court, Kew, St Albans, Reading, Basingstoke, Frensham, Hindhead, the Meon Valley, Aldershot, Keswick, Romsey, Salisbury, Bath and Stonehenge.

<sup>88</sup> E.M. to Wallace Mort, 1 June 1926. Mary Watts would have been 72 at the time of Mort’s visit. Mort does not mention having met her.

While in London, Mort renewed the close family connection with her London relations. She was especially fond of her uncle by marriage, Admiral Sir Edmund Fremantle (Fig. 21), taking pleasure in reporting on his court activities to her father: ‘I see he was in attendance on the King at the levée yesterday’.<sup>89</sup>

Figure 21



Sir Edmund Fremantle

Her ‘Uncle Eddy’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday dinner’ in London was a memorable occasion. Mort recounted the ‘brilliant time’ she had in mixing with not only a great many of her relations at dinner but also with a number of contemporary society luminaries who attended (Fig. 22).<sup>90</sup> The dinner would have been a fitting climax for Mort to a successful European sabbatical cum working holiday. It captured the world in which, to a large extent, she still felt most comfortable.

Figure 22

15/6/26

**TABLE PLAN.**

Lt. Col. F. E. Fremantle	Mrs. Denyon	Mrs. Edward Parry	Mrs. George Thesiger	Miss Frances Whitehead	Mr. Walter Fremantle
Mrs. Dalrymple Hamilton	Mr. Alan Fremantle	Mr. St. John Whitehead	Mr. Ronald Fremantle	Mr. Martin Hall	Mrs. F. E. Fremantle
Mr. Cecil Fremantle	Mrs. Mackwood	Miss Jerrard	Mrs. Guy Boas	Mrs. Eskine	Mr. W. Ramsay
Mrs. Ronald Fremantle	Col. Arthur Brodrick	Sir Selwyn Fremantle	Mr. John Fremantle	Mr. Christopher Fremantle	Mrs. Hadcock
Mrs. Raymond Massey	Mrs. Yate Lee	Lady Dent	Mrs. Greville Peel	Miss Oonah Thesiger	Mrs. Claris
Mr. Guy Boas	Miss Joan Fremantle	Mrs. Martin Hall	Miss Elrene Mort	Miss Rosamund Fremantle	Sir Francis Dent
Mrs. Alan Fremantle	Mr. F. David Fremantle	Mr. M. A. Fremantle	Mr. Yate Lee	Mr. David R. Fremantle	Lady Parry
Sir Wilfrid Peek	Lady Elizabeth Fremantle	Lady Fremantle (VRS)	Mrs. Slater Harrison	Mrs. Charles Fremantle	Miss Kathleen Peek
Miss Susan Fremantle	Mr. Mackwood	Lt. Comm. J. Claris	Mr. Benyon	Mr. Guy Cameron	Mr. Gerald Thesiger
	Miss Beatrice Cartwright	Mrs. Guy Cameron	Mrs. Reginald Fremantle	Mrs. W. Ramsay	Miss Priscilla Fremantle

Table Plan, 18 June 1926. (E.M. is seated in 4th column from left; 6th row from top.)

Chisholm’s penultimate letter to her mother about the whole experience indicates that the trip seems to have been a success. When offered

<sup>89</sup> E.M. to Wallace Mort, 1 June 1926, Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. The seating plan of the dinner shows that, as well as the guests of honour, Sir Edmund and Lady Barbarina Fremantle, other guests included the Earl of Middleton, Lord and Lady Cottesloe, Sir Edward and Lady Cameron, Sir Wilfred and Lady Peek, Lady Elizabeth Fremantle, Sir Chauncy Cartwright and Col. Arthur Brodrick.

the chance to go to Scotland with other friends, Chisholm declined, telling her mother that:

We'd had such a ripping tour with the Bean<sup>91</sup> ... & Miss Weston said she'd put me in the way of bookbinding, [so] I didn't feel like risking it, especially as I wanted to see as much of Miss Mort & Miss Weston as I could, & couldn't bear the idea of saying goodbye to them at such short notice!<sup>92</sup>

On her return from Europe in November 1926, Mort commenced the second important project of the decade, which equally reflected her world at its best.<sup>93</sup> It eventually resulted, in 1927, in the 'Book of Student Benefactors', which was listed the University of Queensland's current and future student benefactors.<sup>94</sup> The book's significance lies in the illustration it provides of Mort's ability to meet a challenging design brief for a micro-managing client, while indicating other aspects of her networks. Dr Frederick Robinson, lecturer in English and German at the University of Queensland, who had known Mort through his connections with the Anglican Church in Canberra, contacted her in December 1925, asking for advice about the compilation of such a book.<sup>95</sup> He judged there was 'no one else' except Mort to whom he could turn, and indicated that he was prepared to wait a year for Mort to begin the work.<sup>96</sup> He did so.

In December 1926, Robinson began a spate of detailed letters outlining the kind of book that he wanted (Figs. 23-24).<sup>97</sup> He advised Mort that the

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<sup>91</sup> 'Bean' was a brand of car made in England between 1919 and 1929. It outsold Austin and Morris in the early 1920s.

<sup>92</sup> Chisholm to Edith Chisholm, written from S.S. Otranto, 19 October 1926, MS 2607, Box 1, Series 1, Folder 4. 13. NLA, Canberra.

<sup>93</sup> Early in their correspondence, Robinson refers to one of their previous meetings at a church function, a connection that may well have been strengthened through contact at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, for Robinson was assistant professor of modern languages there from 1913 to 1915, while Mort visited the Campbell homestead, situated within Duntroon, many times.

<sup>94</sup> The project of the benefactors' book was to be largely funded by the Students' Union, with some financial assistance from the University Senate.

<sup>95</sup> Frederick Robinson to Eirene Mort, December 23, 1926, Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

<sup>96</sup> Robinson to E.M., 6 December 1926, Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

<sup>97</sup> Correspondence about the project began in December 1925 and continued for 18 months; it ceased in June 1927, after the book had been delivered to the university.





though handsome, was scarcely a full accounting of their labour.<sup>100</sup> The finished book was displayed at Sydney's Mitchell Library in March 1927 before being sent on to its ultimate Brisbane destination, the Fryer Library of the University of Queensland. Robinson was delighted with the final product. 'Book splendid all delighted congratulate you both' he telegraphed.<sup>101</sup>

The book achieved widespread coverage in the press, the *Sydney Morning Herald* exhorting its readers to catch a glimpse of a 'folio of the best standard of the Middle Ages',<sup>102</sup> and waxing lyrical on the technical details of the book. It was 'sewn in sections of four on the best Italian hemp naval cord in ligature silk' and that the book 'written with the quill – on the title page in Types founded on an Italian 15<sup>th</sup> Century revival of Sixth Century script ... Pure beaten gold was used in the illumination,' and:

when the last benefactor signs his name, he will look back on the first inscription with something of the incredulous wonder that we bestow on the Piltown skull and other prehistoric things.<sup>103</sup>

The 'Book of Student Benefactors' was an active record for forty-eight years, listing, during that time, 5,562 names of benefactors. Its prominent display on ceremonial occasions or significant anniversaries, such as annual student graduations, remains one of the most enduring contributions Mort made through her work. The studied archaism of the project played directly to Mort's Arts and Crafts expertise. It was not, however, a model for sustained work.

The third important project that Mort undertook in 1927 was her mission to record Canberra's heritage. She had developed a fondness for the region when, as a child, she visited her Campbell relations at Duntroon and her Crace relations at Gungahlin – both established large-landholding families. Knowing that the Canberra region was about to change because of its coming status as the national capital, Mort visited Canberra several times in the 1920s, compiling a portfolio of

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<sup>100</sup> The average female wage in 1927 was £2/10/8 per week. *Year Book Australia 1928* 'Labour, Wages and Prices', 543. [www.ausstats.abs.gov.au](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au) (accessed on 13 October 2016)

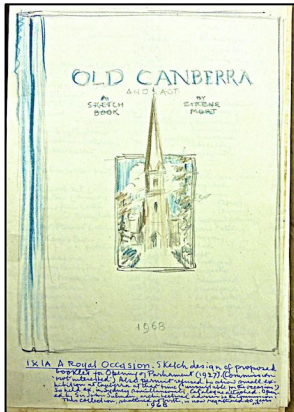
<sup>101</sup> Robinson, Telegram to E.M., 12 April 1927, Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

<sup>102</sup> *SMH*, 27 March, 1927.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

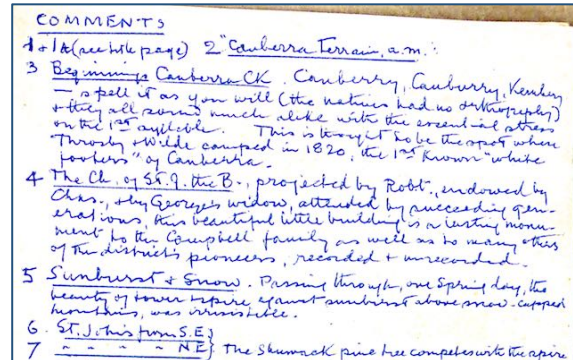
77 drawings (Fig. 25) of 'Old Canberra', together with historical comments (Fig. 26).<sup>104</sup>

Figure 25



'Old Canberra' booklet

Figure 26



Comments for 'Old Canberra' booklet

Local historian Pat Wardle recounts how Mort:

had a handsome portfolio ready for the exhibition she hoped to hold at the opening of Parliament in 1927. The Federal Capital Commission, its eyes on the future, brushed her unceremoniously aside; it was 'unsuitable for the occasion'.<sup>105</sup>

Undeterred by this rebuff, Mort held a one-woman exhibition of her Canberra portfolio in Sydney. It was opened by Sir John Sulman who had been chair of the Federal Capital Advisory Commission and set his own distinctive stamp on the capital project by taking the bold vision of the Griffins into a more modest 'garden city' approach.<sup>106</sup> In his opening address, Sir John predicted that Mort's work would have 'great historical value ... as, in ten years' time, the quaint old buildings would all have been demolished to make room for a growing city'.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Although, during these trips to Canberra, Mort painted some watercolours and did some etchings, most of her illustrations were done as pencil sketches.

<sup>105</sup> Pat Wardle, 'Introduction, *Old Canberra: a Sketchbook of the 1920s by Eirene Mort* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1987), 4. The Commission also refused Mort permission to hold an exhibition of her Canberra portfolio in Canberra.

<sup>106</sup> Ironically, Sulman was no preserver of the past, recommending the demolition of such Sydney landmarks as Hyde Parks Barracks, St James Church, Victoria Barracks and Sydney Hospital. Richard E. Apperly and Peter Reynolds, 'Sulman, Sir John (1849-1934)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/sulman-sir-john-8714/text15255>, published first in hardcopy 1990 (accessed online 16 September 2016).

<sup>107</sup> 'Art Exhibition Opened', *SMH* April 28, 1927.

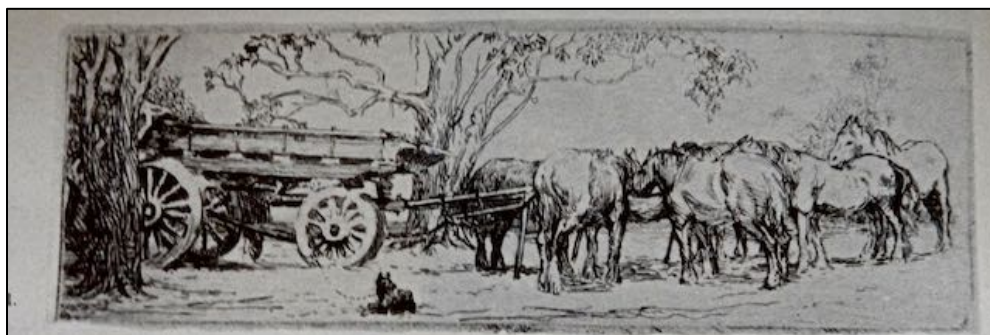
The pencil notations beside the catalogue numbers indicate that the exhibition was successful, with over half of the 31 pencil drawings and every one of the nine etchings being sold.<sup>108</sup> The exhibition was well reviewed in the press. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* reviewer praised both the exhibits and the exhibitor:

Miss Mort has roamed among these scenes as one who has loved to transfer them to her sketch-book, and she has done so with fidelity as well as imaginative power. Both etching and drawings show authoritative command of line, and an artist's true sense of the points which tell in the composition of a vivid and well balanced picture.<sup>109</sup>

Similarly, the *Evening News* commented favourably that:

Miss Mort's sensitive line and pictorial sense are revealed in her etching of the old sheep-yard, and also in an animated scene, showing a waggoner and his team camped by the roadside (Fig. 27).<sup>110</sup>

Figure 27



Gungahleen – The Team

Mort's etchings caught the eye of Kenneth Binns, the librarian of the Commonwealth of Australia Library, who explained to Mort:

I was so impressed with the historical value of these (etchings) that I was anxious to secure a complete set for inclusion in the Canberra section of our National Library, because photographs somehow do not seem to convey the same feeling.<sup>111</sup>

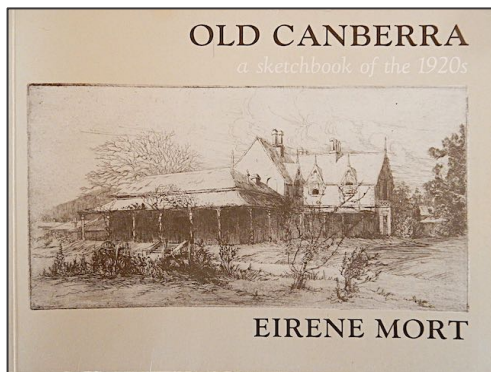
<sup>108</sup> 'Ephemera: Art and Artist Files', Research Library, National Gallery of Australia. Some of the etchings, such as 'Canberra Creek', were ordered up to seven times.

<sup>109</sup> 'Canberra Scenes: Miss Eirene Mort's Exhibition', *SMH*, April 27, 1927.

<sup>110</sup> 'Rustic Beauty', *The Evening News*, April 26, 1927.

<sup>111</sup> Kenneth Binns to Eirene Mort, 1 December 1933, Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

Figure 28



Old Canberra: A Sketchbook of the 1920s' by Eirene Mort

The National Library of Australia eventually published a collection of Mort's Canberra drawings and etchings as a monograph ten years after her death (Fig. 28).<sup>112</sup> In capturing (in both images and words) a rural landscape that was about to change so dramatically, Mort made an important contribution to Australia's cultural heritage. It is a claim that not all 'jobbing artists' can make.

The fourth major project that Mort undertook during the 1920s was the lengthiest project of all. It was the documentation, throughout the decade, of the natural and built environment.<sup>113</sup> Some of her drawings were pen and ink, while others were watercolours or etchings. As with the Canberra sketches, her motive in compiling her many years of sketching into several portfolios entitled 'Tracks', (each of which concentrated on a particular geographical region) was the desire to express her sadness at the loss of place and the cost of 'progress'. Her preface to 'Tracks Part III' expresses her sentiments:

The sketches in this scrapbook have been collected from old holiday sketchbooks. Many of the subjects have since been swept away or altered in character, in the name of progress.<sup>114</sup>

Tom Griffiths contends that the transition from colonial and early twentieth century attachment to landscape painting began when Australians

<sup>112</sup> *Old Canberra: a Sketchbook of the 1920s by Eirene Mort* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1987).

<sup>113</sup> The geographical areas of the 'Tracks' manuscripts were Sydney and the northern, western and southern regional areas of NSW; Mort was working on Volumes iv and v when she died in 1977.

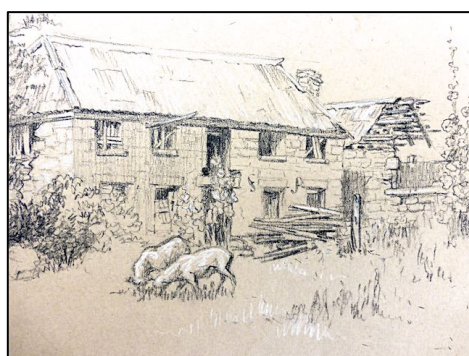
<sup>114</sup> E.M., 'Tracks Part III: Sydney to Parramatta and the West', PIC Volume 1003, Record #463632, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

started to develop ‘an awakened respect for the fabric of old buildings’.<sup>115</sup> Richard White also holds that many Australians began to value their built environment. He sees Mort as one of the early twentieth century artists whose work

helped to train Australians to see the past around them as quaint and charming. They inspired tourists to appreciate old stately homes, historic towns and vernacular farm buildings, their rustic decrepitude adding an overlay of nostalgia.<sup>116</sup>

Mort’s drawing of, and insightful comments about, the old barn at the Tasmanian town of Ross are a perfect example of White’s claim, highlighting her sensitivity to the passing of time. (Figs. 29-30)

Figure 29



‘Ross barn’ Tasmania

Figure 30

A typical old barn of its period. The barn was often much more imposing than the homestead. In its heyday it would house the crops, conserve the feed, shelter the stock & fill innumerable useful purposes. Now in its quiet old age hens might lay and hatch among the junk of ages and here and there an interesting relic might be found – an obsolete tool, a side saddle or a mouldy book.

Mort depicted many more scenes in just such a nostalgic mood. The location of the etching of ‘Elizabeth Bay’ (Fig. 31), for example, shows a sparsely populated harbour foreshore, while ‘The Guardhouse, La Perouse’ (Fig. 32) portrays a building that is a relic from the convict era in nearby Botany Bay.

<sup>115</sup> Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996). 237.

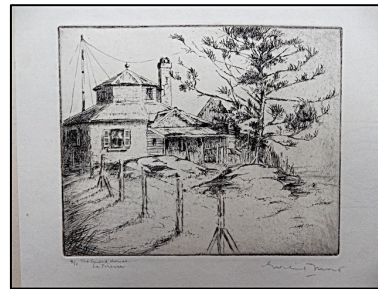
<sup>116</sup> Richard White, excerpt from wall text of ‘Touring the Past: Tourism and History in Australia’ exhibition, Macleay Museum, University of Sydney, December 2013.

Figure 31



Elizabeth Bay,  
Potts Point

Figure 32



Guardhouse,  
La Perouse

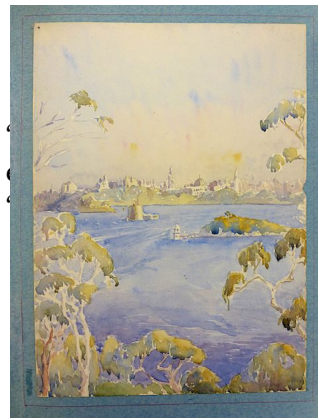
Two watercolours of Sydney Harbour, dated 1920, create a more uplifting mood by offering a glimpse of the harbour's charm on a bright summer's day (Figs. 33–34).<sup>117</sup>

Figure 33



Figure 34

'Sydney in the  
early Twenties:  
The Heads'



'Sydney in the  
early Twenties:  
'The City Skyline'

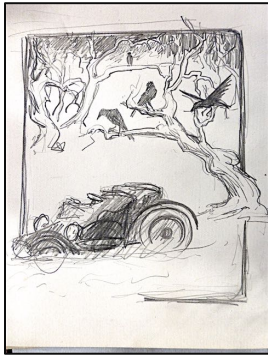
Once Mort and Weston had acquired their car – probably a Rover, a four-seater detachable head coupé, costing £235 – she could travel further afield in documenting such landscapes (Fig. 35).<sup>118</sup> Margaret Mort later reminisced:

It was understood that Eirene did not have to do the chores; she could sketch very quickly and did the drawings that we (now) have, often when the car stopped for a few minutes.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>117</sup> E.M., 'Tracks Part I', Manuscript 06/017 Box 2, Record 1586046, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>118</sup> E.M., Mort Family Papers, Box 3, Large Sketch Book 5. Email from Peter Duffell, Rover Car Club, to author, 16 June, 2017. The car was sold in 1962 with Mort writing that 'Chips is seldom now in appropriate nick for driving'. E.M. to Margaret Mort, 2 September, 1962. 06/017 Box 1, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

Figure 35

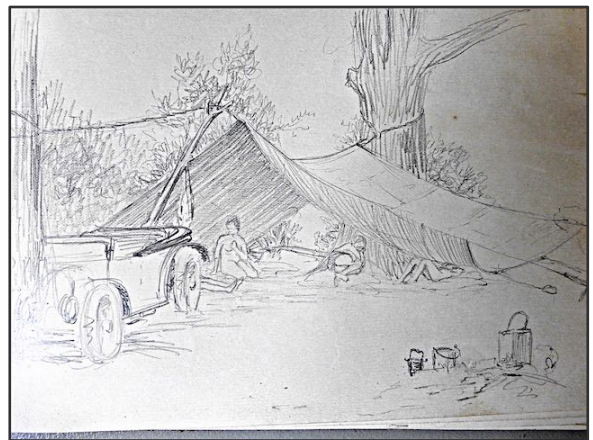


The Mort-Weston car

It is only as one looks into the drawing that one realises that the figures are nude, a form of art not usually associated with Mort's conventional background. Perhaps those middle-class conventions were being relaxed in at least one area of her life.

The car appears again in the foreground of 'Bush Picnic'. The pencil sketch conveys a scene of relaxation, with the billycan in the foreground suggesting that a 'hot cuppa' had already been enjoyed (Fig. 36).<sup>120</sup>

Figure 36



Bush Picnic

Figure 37



Berrima Court House

Drawings that eventually made it into Mort's 'Tracks' manuscripts often include comments that demonstrate her awareness of the historical or architectural uniqueness of a scene or a building. Her text describing the old Berrima

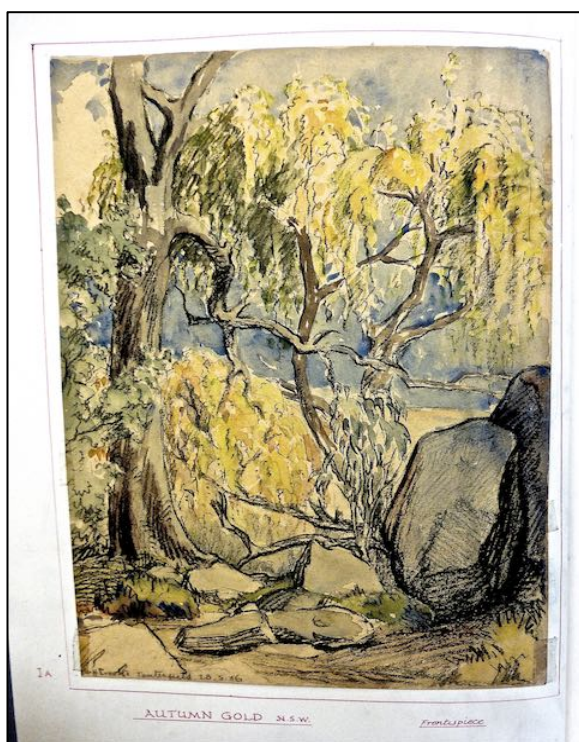
<sup>119</sup> Margaret Mort, Interview by Bruce Semier, 14 February 1985 in Newcastle, NSW, file 181/14/10, transcript in Canberra: National Library of Australia.

<sup>120</sup> E.M., 'The Mort-Weston Car', Mort Family Papers, Box 1, Medium Sketch Book 8.

Courthouse building exemplifies this special talent (Fig. 37). Comparing the courthouse with the heavy structure of the jail across the road, Mort observed:

The little “Doric” portico of the Courthouse is a pleasant surprise. Inside, it is interestingly lit from above, leaving the walls unbroken. In its day it has played many parts besides administering the Law. It has been the social, cultural and political centre of the town and surrounding district, School of Arts, dance-hall, library, lock-up, skating rink, art gallery and probably many more scenes of past activity.<sup>121</sup>

Figure 38



‘Autumn Gold’

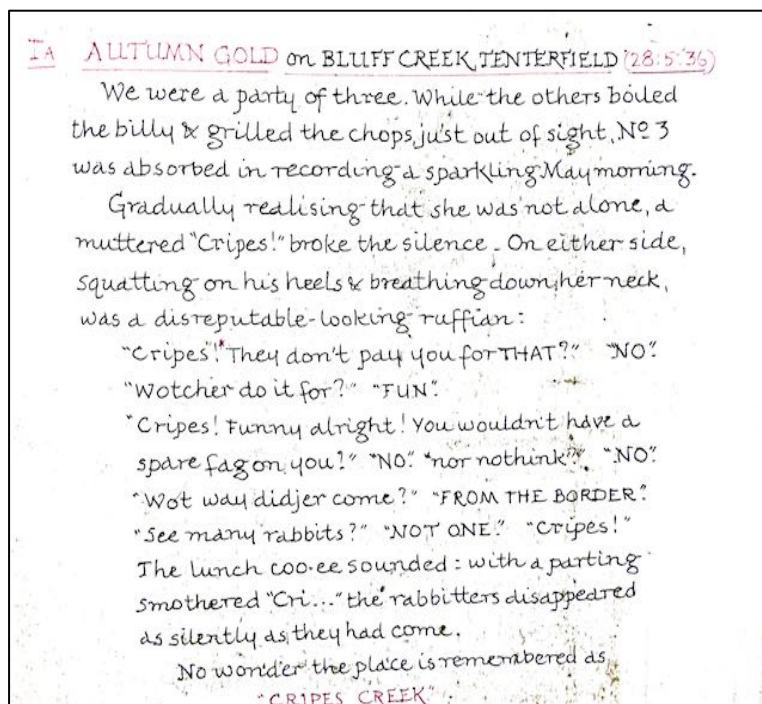
Mort’s dry sense of humour is evident in many segments of the ‘Tracks’ manuscripts. In the text accompanying the watercolour ‘Autumn Gold on Bluff’s Creek, Tenterfield’ (Fig. 38), she recounts an exchange of views with a ‘disreputable looking ruffian’.<sup>122</sup> (Fig. 39) In these observations Mort is both an artist and a social commentator, aiming to build a visual and verbal picture of her changing times.

<sup>121</sup> E.M., ‘Tracks: Part iv’, Mort Family Papers, Box 8.

<sup>122</sup> E.M., ‘Tracks: Part ii’, Preface, 06/017 Box 2 Record 3045012, Canberra: National Library of Australia.



Figure 39

Text for  
'Autumn Gold',  
Bluff Creek,  
Tenterfield

Although the fragile condition of the 'Tracks' manuscripts means that it is unlikely that they could ever have been published, the fact that Mort donated the first two 'Tracks' volumes to the National Library of Australia in 1970 and Volume III in 1973 suggests that she knew their value and wanted these sketches and commentaries preserved for posterity.

### Minor projects

A number of minor projects further illustrate other important aspects of Mort's applied arts work – the fact that she could work collaboratively with other artisans and that she could follow specific design briefs. Of these minor projects, three stand out. The first involved preparation for a visit to Sydney by the Duke and Duchess of York on which Mort collaborated with fellow artisan, Ethel Stephens. The second was a fire screen, a joint Mort-Weston item of furniture

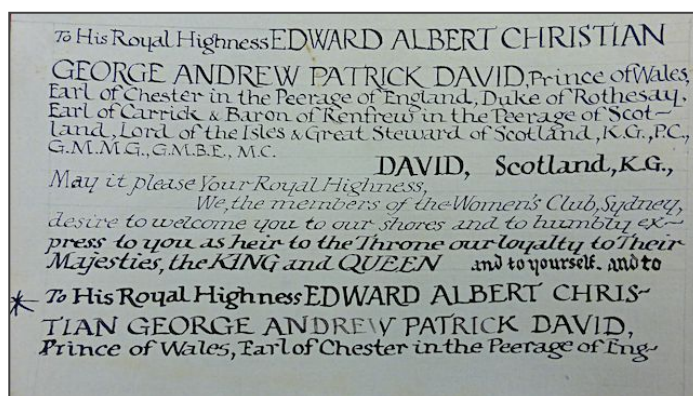
that they made for themselves, while the third was a design brief for two commissioned tapestry works that had very different specifications.<sup>123</sup>

Many Sydney monarchists eagerly anticipated the visit by the Duke and Duchess of York in early 1927. Although the primary purpose of the royal visit was to open the new Commonwealth Parliament building in Canberra, the royal couple participated in many other official functions, one of which was a reception in the University of Sydney's Union Hall on 29 March.<sup>124</sup> The National Council of Women, which was organising the event, commissioned an address that would be presented to the Duke and Duchess:

The address is being prepared by Miss Ethel Stephens, who is responsible for the decoration and illumination, and Miss Eirene Mort, who has undertaken the lettering. The design, which forms a border to the address, shows examples of Australian fauna and flora, which it is proposed to accompany with a key giving the name of each specimen in the design.<sup>125</sup>

Figure 40

Mort's practice attempts for the Loyal Address to the Duke of York



Mort and Stephens had worked together earlier that year to produce an autograph book that was presented to the Bishop of London on his visit to

<sup>123</sup> It is not possible to know the exact number of items Mort and Weston produced together, as most of them were sold to clients. Two items that remain in the Mort family and illustrate their collaborative work are a footstool and a fire screen.

<sup>124</sup> A report of the occasion records that the first part of the reception was formal, with an inspection by the Duke of a guard of honour. The Duke's later informal conversation reportedly consisted of the single word 'Good-oh'.

<sup>125</sup> 'National Council of Women', *SMH*, February 17, 1927.

Sydney.<sup>126</sup> The National Council of Women paid her £6/6/- (an amount that equalled more than two weeks' wages) for the Loyal Address (Fig. 40).<sup>127</sup> By then, Mort and Stephens, who had been executive committee members of the Arts and Crafts Society for many years, were near neighbours as well as collaborators.

Figure 41



Mort and Weston had returned from living in Lane Cove to Vaucluse in 1923, moving first to a rented house in Village Lower Road, then, in October 1925, into their own house at 29 Wentworth Ave (Fig. 41).<sup>128</sup>

29 Wentworth Ave, Vaucluse

The proximity of fellow artists and the prosperity it reflected were signal achievements for those seeking to approximate the communal life-style envisaged by Arts and Crafts founders such as Ruskin, Morris and Ashbee. One Melbourne journalist noted that the suburb:

bids fair to become an artist colony, as ... just lately three of the fraternity – Ethel Stephens, Alice Norton and Eirene Mort – have all built themselves charming bungalows with studios attached, and any day in the week you may see easels dotted over the wooded dell where Wentworth was wont to practise his orations.<sup>129</sup>

Mort and Weston once again furnished their home with examples of their work, such as the 'Lyre Bird' fire screen, with Mort supplying the design and embroidery and Weston fashioning the wooden frame (Fig. 42). During their

<sup>126</sup> 'The Bishop's Autograph Book', *Sunday Mail*, February 15, 1927. The book contained the signatures of subscribers to the Havilah Church of England homes. Mort's records show that she was not paid for this work.

<sup>127</sup> E.M., Income 1927, 'Accounts Book 1924-1935', Box 7, Mort Family Papers, Canberra. The basic wage for women in NSW in December 1926 in 1927 was £2/10/8 per week. Labour, Wages and Prices', *Year Book Australia*, 1927, 526. [www.ausstats.abs.gov.au](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au) (accessed on 15 October 2016).

<sup>128</sup> *Sydney Telephone Directory*, October 1925, and email to author from Jane Britten, Woollahra Council, 1 June 2017.

<sup>129</sup> 'Where Sailors Rest and Artists Work', *Table Talk*, April 16, 1925.

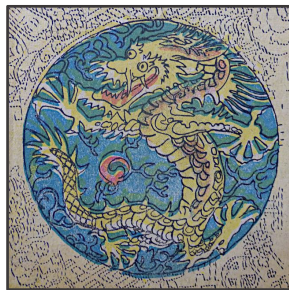
Figure 42



'Lyre Bird' fire screen

1926 overseas trip, while Mort was refreshing her skills in the 'softer' decorative arts such as painting, embroidery, leatherwork and calligraphy, Weston also attended classes that updated her skills in woodcarving and bookbinding. It was therefore appropriate that the furnishing of their new home with items such as the fire screen should involve both artisans.

Figure 43



Chair seat cover

The third minor project that Mort undertook during this decade was the acceptance of briefs to design two tapestry works. The resulting designs were featured in a full-page article on 'Ancient Tapestry' in the *Sydney Sun*. The first commission, for a seat-cover, required Mort not only to design the tapestry but also to make the

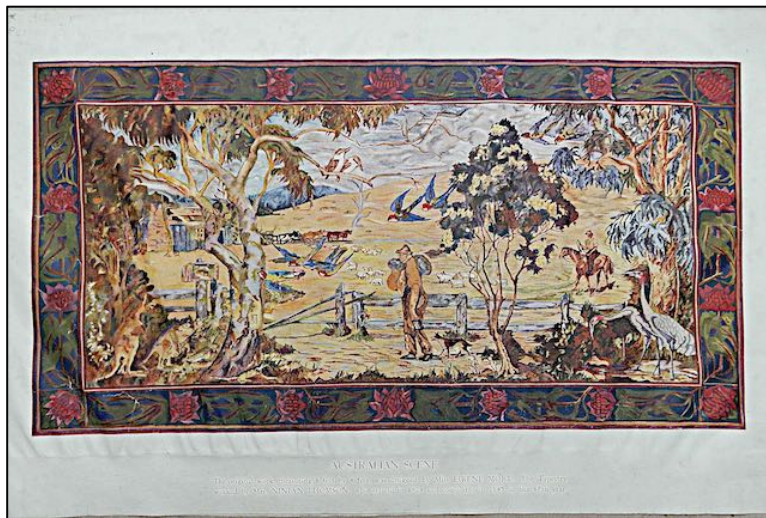
tapestry (Fig. 43). Mr Ernest Mitchell, brother of Dame Nellie Melba, requested that the design on the chair seat cover should match a Chinese rug that he owned.<sup>130</sup> The resulting design features a lively golden dragon writhing on a blue background. Although traces of the influence of Asian art can be found in some of Mort's other works, the design for Mitchell's chair seat cover is one of the few examples of her work where she ventured into a distinctly Asian motif.

In contrast to the dragon design for a chair seat cover, the second commissioned work was quintessentially Australian, depicting a typical rural scene. In May 1930, Mrs Ninian Thomson paid Mort £15 to 'design for her a canvas which must be gay and have somewhere in it a swagman.'<sup>131</sup>

<sup>130</sup> 'Ancient Tapestry', *The Sun*, November 2, 1930.

<sup>131</sup> Vink, Interview.

Figure 44

Mort's design for  
'Australian Scene'  
tapestry

The task of executing this design fell to Mrs Thomson, who took 17 years to make it, finishing it in 1945 at the age of 87. At the time of writing, it hangs proudly (and in shade) in the Common Room of the boarding house at Frensham School in Mittagong (Fig. 44). *The Sun's* report of the commission, which gives details of the lengths to which Mort was prepared to go in order to be able to fulfil the commission, exemplifies her professionalism.

Miss Mort evolved the interesting design reproduced on this page, and which spreads itself over a canvas nine feet by six. So unusually large was the size required that Miss Moors [sic] had to have it (the canvas) made specially in Paris. It took her a day to select the wools, about 400 skeins of which will be used in the making.<sup>132</sup>

### The Modernists' debt to Mort

It is easy to contrast the sentimental and archaic dimensions of Mort's work in these years with the rising of Modernism, and Mort herself was aware of the contrast.<sup>133</sup> But it is equally important to note connections and continuities in arts practice from those years. Mort's focus on the need for beautifying interior

<sup>132</sup> 'Ancient Tapestry', *The Sun*.

<sup>133</sup> I have used capitalisation for art styles such as Modernism and realism, except where the terms occur within quotes; in those instances, I have left the original size of lettering intact.

spaces, together with her early promotion of the suitability of Australian flora as design motifs, can also be seen as paving the way for her now more revered female contemporaries, the Modernists, to succeed in these areas of art in the 1920s and 1930s. Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara and Philip Goad's assertion that 'there is no simple formula to explain the transmission of modernism' and their rebuking of 'the time-lag explanation because it is ... too straight forward and too one-dimensional' accommodates my hypothesis that Mort helped to prepare the way for Modernist art.<sup>134</sup>

During the 1920s, Realism in art began to give way to Modernism, and Art Nouveau to Art Deco. If World War I did not actually cause these new movements to spring up, it gave impetus to their eventual emergence into artistic and public acceptance. That acceptance did not come easily, often being seen as 'cultural vandalism' and 'largely excluded from state art museums' until the late 1960s'.<sup>135</sup> Stephen, McNamara and Goad hold that 'it implicitly challenged an evaluation of art resting upon nationalism, identity and the pastoral landscape tradition'.<sup>136</sup>

Artists such as Roland Wakelin believed that Modernist art offered the 'vitality' that Realism had lost:

Modern painting aims at setting down the essentials in the clearest and most direct manner possible ... The [modern] painter believes it is better to have a crude living thing than a well-dressed corpse'.<sup>137</sup>

Adventurous women artists, such as Grace Cossington Smith, Grace Crowley, Thea Proctor and Margaret Preston employed the new Modernist approach to art. To Grace Crowley, there was a vast difference between the 'Representational Vision' of realistic art and the 'Interpretive Vision' of modern art that allowed her

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<sup>134</sup> Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara and Philip Goad, *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967* (Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2006), 12.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* 13 and 5.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>137</sup> Roland Wakelin, 'The Modern Art Movement in Australia', 1928, in *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967*, eds. Ann Stephen et al., Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2006, 75.

‘a way of seeing things I had never thought of’.<sup>138</sup> Preston, recalling her time spent in Munich in 1906 and in Paris in 1912-13, commented in 1923 that:

There were two very strong elements in Munich at the time, the dead realists and the lively moderns. ... I suffered all the discomforts of doubt and indecision ... (but) there, realism had its first rebuff.<sup>139</sup>

By 1926, Proctor had also become convinced that Modernism was the way forward in art:

I believe that a larger portion of Modern art will survive than that of many other periods, because it is sound in construction, simple in treatment and decorative. When painting has become too realistic, it has become decadent.<sup>140</sup>

Contemporary critics such as Radcliffe-Brown might have observed that ‘the more recent work of Margaret Preston has been viewed in some quarters with disfavour as being infected with the vices of Modernism’,<sup>141</sup> but Roger Butler contends that, by 1923, ‘Preston’s work had generated a great deal of interest and her career began to flourish’ and that, by 1929, her Grosvenor Galleries exhibition in Sydney was ‘a great success’.<sup>142</sup>

Modernism slowly began to make inroads into the male dominated sphere of fine arts. Mort, however, could not or would not join these colleagues and move away from Realism. She had never been a fan of trends, and regarded Modernism as the latest ‘fashion’ in art – and she was not enamoured of ‘fashions’:

The public asks for something more tangible than mere “good taste”, and the trade gives them mannerisms which are called “fashions” ... the

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<sup>138</sup> Grace Crowley, ‘The Essentials to be Considered in Picture Building’ in *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917 – 1967*, eds. Ann Stephen et al., (Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2006), 123-125.

<sup>139</sup> Margaret Preston, ‘Why I Became a Convert to Modern Art’ in *Art and Australia by Margaret Preston: Selected Writings 1920-1950*, ed. Elizabeth Butel (North Sydney: Richmond, 2003), 20.

<sup>140</sup> Thea Proctor, ‘Design: Miss Thea Proctor’s Talk to the Students’, *Undergrowth* (September-October 1926).

<sup>141</sup> Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, ‘Margaret Preston and Transition’, *Art in Australia*, Series 3, No. 22, December 1927.

<sup>142</sup> Roger Butler, *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1987) 13 - 15.

tapering pilasters surrounded by the inevitable platform have had a long reign; and the grossly insulted female figure, in place and out, has writhed on almost every kind of article of merchandise.<sup>143</sup>

There was a strong difference of opinion between Mort and Preston (and several of her other Modernist female contemporaries) on three particular aspects of art – the intrinsic value of Indigenous art, the style that should be used to portray native Australian wildflowers, and the way to beautify household interiors. Preston could foresee, as Mort could not, the potential for Indigenous Australian art, telling her audience at an ‘at home’ meeting of the Arts and Crafts Society in 1929 that ‘as Australia is a young and primitive country, it is fitting that its art should be satisfied with the primitive ideas used by the aborigines in their designs’.<sup>144</sup> Mort disagreed, telling that same audience that ‘the art of the Aboriginal is so remote and primitive that the sophisticated would find that it had its limitations’.<sup>145</sup>

Preston and Mort also disagreed about the way to draw Australian wildflowers. While Mort preferred to depict native flowers as botanical specimens, Preston’s approach to painting indigenous flora was, in Proctor’s view, one that rescued Australian art from the doldrums into which it had fallen.

Australia should be grateful to Mrs. Preston for having lifted the native flowers of the country from the rut of disgrace into which they had fallen by their mistreatment in art and craftwork and of the many very bad paintings that had been done of them.<sup>146</sup>

Colour was another area of difference between Mort and the Modernists. Mort preferred to work in black and white, while the Modernists revelled in their use of colour. Crowley held that artists ‘must understand the value of one colour

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<sup>143</sup> E.M., ‘Australian Women: Their Homes and their Work’, Article V – The Bedroom, *The Sydney Mail*, 10 July 1907, 100.

<sup>144</sup> ‘Society of Arts and Crafts At Home at Beaumont’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 July 1929, 5.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> Thea Proctor, ‘An Artist’s Appreciation of Margaret Preston’ in *Art in Australia* 3<sup>rd</sup> series, No. 21 (December 1927). n.p.



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with another' in order to 'arrive at a vital colour organisation'.<sup>147</sup> Preston's 'aesthetic combinations of colour' resulted in her producing a colour chart as a guide for her fellow artists.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, even though Preston was a member of the Arts and Crafts Society, her opinion of the artistic style of art of many of its members was not high.

Oh, those wretched kookaburras, gum leaves and wattle blossoms done on chairs in a Kensington (England) school-of-design manner. One aboriginal prayer let there be – may no one ever give me a suede cushion cover worked with a kookaburra ... such as one sees in nearly every shop in Sydney.<sup>149</sup>

Despite the differences, however, Mort (and her colleagues) unobtrusively broke new ground for Modernist women artists by popularising the use of indigenous flora as a means of beautification. The very ubiquity of the 'Kensington' school of art of which Preston complained reflects a wide acceptance of the use of Australian motifs in middle-class Australian homes, an acceptance that eased the way for the Modernists.

Only for Grace Cossington Smith is there any possible direct link to Mort. Mort's first year of teaching at Abbotsleigh School in 1912 overlapped with Cossington Smith's last year of attendance at the school. It is therefore conceivable that Mort may have taught art and design to the young girl for a year. If so, neither recorded the fact.

There is no similar potential close link to other well-known Modernists, though the women certainly all moved in the same circles and knew each other. Proctor's portrait of Mort's sister Eunice (later Mrs Gilbert Graham) with whom

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<sup>147</sup> Crowley, 'The essentials to be Considered in Picture Building', 124-125.

<sup>148</sup> Margaret Preston, 'The Moderns to the Year 1938', in Butel, *Art and Australia by Margaret Preston: Selected Writings 1920-1950*, 39, 51 and 105-109.

<sup>149</sup> Preston, 'Away with Poker-worked Kookaburras and Gum Leaves' in Butel, *Art and Australia*, 73.

Figure 45



Eunice Graham (nee Mort)  
by Thea Proctor

she became ‘very close friends’ reflects not only their friendship but also suggests the limited size of Sydney’s artistic circle at the time (Fig. 45).<sup>150</sup>

In 1932, publisher and artist Ure Smith commented on the way Modernism gave new importance to ‘the trend of modern interior decoration’ in which pictures now played ‘a very small part as wall decoration’, their place having been supplanted by ‘the use of charming textiles – carpets and floor coverings, curtains and chair seats – all (of which) proclaim the use of the artist’.<sup>151</sup> In itself, Mort’s high-profile career, her focus on beautifying interior spaces and the nature of the small artistic circle in which she and her generation of women artists moved meant that, albeit unwittingly, she prepared the way for her Modernist female colleagues, helping to smooth out their difficult path. Without Mort’s popularising of her own message, the Modernists may have had an even more troublesome time being accepted into Australian mainstream art. Unfortunately for Mort, the corollary to her stance meant that, while the Modernists’ stars waxed, hers waned.

## Conclusion

After the end of World War I, Mort was fortunate to be able to utilise her qualifications as an art teacher, and supplement her teaching income by

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<sup>150</sup> Sarah Engledow in *The World of Thea Proctor*, eds. Barry Humphries, Andrew Sayers and Sarah Engledow (Canberra: Craftsman House National Portrait Gallery, 2005), 19-46. Proctor regarded Eunice, in Sarah Engledow’s view, as ‘utterly dependable, and the person of whom she could ask things as of no one else.

<sup>151</sup> Sydney Ure Smith, ‘Editorial Notes’, *Art in Australia*, 15 August 1932, n.p.

becoming a 'jobbing artist'. Although the production of artefacts contributed only a minor part of Mort's income, it nevertheless formed the major part of her life and her persona. This conflation of careers meant that Mort could both produce beautiful artefacts for Sydney-siders to enjoy in their homes, and could teach others how to do so as well.

During this decade, Mort's involvement in a number of collegial networks not only consolidated her position as a well-known producer of work in the Arts and Crafts style but also helped to raise the status of women artists in Sydney. Steeped in Arts and Crafts philosophy, she did not join the Modernist movement and disappeared from public consciousness as a 'trail blazer'. The fact that she became, instead, a 'jobbing artist' speaks not only of her commitment to her cause but also to the conventionalist side of her personality having won out. For many years, she was able to produce high quality items of a 'distinctly Australian character', pass on her skills to countless others and live the productive and satisfying life of a 'New Woman' in rapidly changing circumstances.

In 1936, Mort and Weston were 'conquered' by a property on 'The Gib,' high on a hill just outside Mittagong (Fig. 46).<sup>152</sup> They moved there in 1937, enjoying their horses, dogs and 'an informal but beautiful garden' (Fig 47).<sup>153</sup>

Figure 46

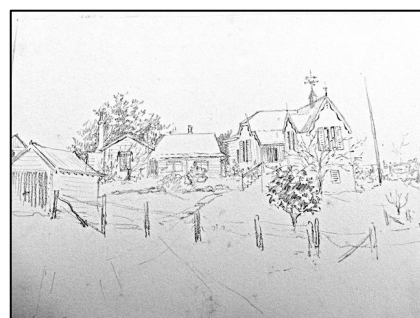
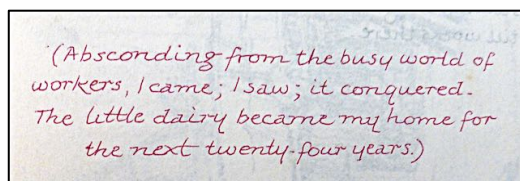


Figure 47

'Greenhayes', Mittagong

<sup>152</sup> Mort knew her Caesar.

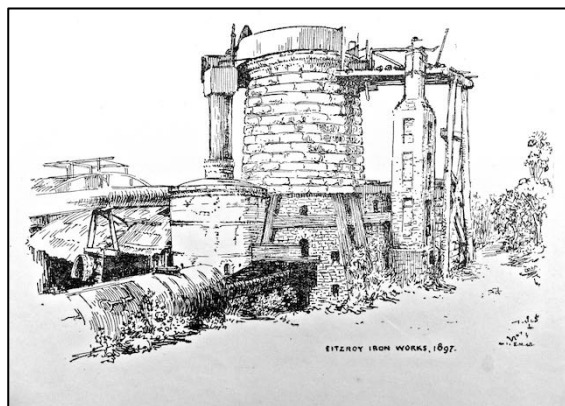
<sup>153</sup> Margaret Mort in *Old Canberra: a Sketchbook of the 1920s* by Eirene Mort. (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1987), 11.

They relocated to a home in Bowral in May 1960, closer to the medical assistance they both then required.

In retirement, Mort ventured back into her former arts and crafts world only occasionally. She kept up her contacts with the ANZAC Fellowship of Women until 1938. In 1942, she contributed artefacts to an Arts and Crafts exhibition opened by Colonel A.M. McIntosh and attended by 30 returned soldiers from the 113<sup>th</sup> Australian General Hospital, Concord.<sup>154</sup> The wide variety of their exhibits was a feature of the exhibition, as was the series of Mort's drawings from her book, *The Story of Architecture*.

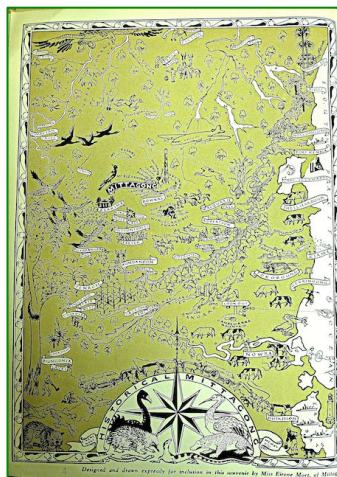
In 1948, Mort demonstrated her continuing interest in old buildings by contributing to the booklet that celebrated the centenary of the Southern Highlands – *Centenary of Australia's First Iron Smelting at Mittagong*.) Her sketch of the Fitzroy blast furnace (Fig. 48)<sup>155</sup> and stylised map of the local area (Fig. 49)<sup>156</sup> confirm that her artistic skills had not diminished with time.

Figure 48



Pen and ink drawing from photograph of Fitzroy iron works in 1897

Figure 49



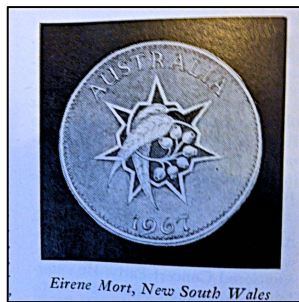
Map of Mittagong area produced for centenary celebrations of local iron industry

<sup>154</sup> 'Soldiers Craft Work', *SMH*, October 2, 1942.

<sup>155</sup> E.M., "Fitzroy Iron Works" o6/017 Box 2, National Library of Australia, Canberra;

<sup>156</sup> E.M., Map from *Centenary of Australia's First Iron Smelting at Mittagong, New South Wales 1848–1948*, Mittagong Iron Works Centenary Committee, 998.1/M. 1948. 5. (Sydney: Mitchell Library, 1948).

Figure 50

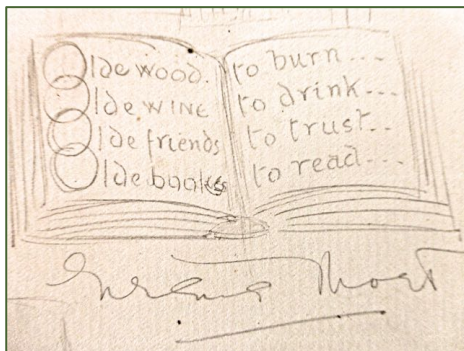


Entry for design for decimal currency

In retirement, Mort's commitment to the use of distinctively Australian images remained strong, prompting her, in 1965 at the age of 87, to submit an entry for the design of Australia's new decimal coinage (Fig. 50). Among fifty entries deemed worthy of selection for having 'outstanding merit' by the Australian Coin Society, her entry was one of the few to have its image reproduced in the Society's magazine.<sup>157</sup>

Mort's niece Margaret states that her aunt continued to teach until she retired – again – in 1949.<sup>158</sup> The fact that she was able to have a comfortable retirement suggests that the level of financial independence she achieved was fairly substantial. Mort and Weston's move to the Southern Highlands might be read as a retreat, but perhaps more as a reflection that they acquired the accoutrements of retirement to which they looked forward (Fig 51).<sup>159</sup> Mort had certainly earned them.

Figure 51



'Olde wood to burn ... Olde wine to drink ...  
Olde friends to trust ... Olde books to read ...'

<sup>157</sup> 'Entries with Outstanding Merit in Design', *Australian Coin Review*, August 1967, 6.

<sup>158</sup> Margaret Mort in *Old Canberra*, 11. As there is no record of Mort's teaching at Frensham during her retirement, it is likely that her lessons were to private students.

<sup>159</sup> E.M. Text of image, Mort Family Papers, Box 3, Large Sketch Book 5.



## Conclusion

*Eirene Mort ... deserves more attention  
than she receives today.*

*- Robert Holden<sup>1</sup>*

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If Robert Holden's quote about the lack of attention paid to Eirene Mort was germane in 1979, it is even more applicable today. For a brief period at the beginning of the twentieth century, Mort was influential in Sydney's artistic and cultural circles. As tastes in art trends and art markets changed, her leadership position within those circles altered, and, over time, she gradually declined into relative obscurity. This examination of the first 51 years of Mort's life outlines the substantial contribution she made to Australian art and culture – a contribution that has, to date, been overlooked.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Holden, 'More about Hand-coloured Woodcuts', *Biblionews and Australian Notes and Queries: A Journal for Book Collectors*, 4, no. 4, (1979): 94.

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Mort's formative years had set her up well to succeed in her chosen career as an artist and artisan. Her extended family background as part of a well-known middle-class Sydney family, her supportive parents and her education at a progressive private girls' school all prepared her to undertake training as a teacher of art and design. Mort's complex personality meant that, at times, the cautious side of her nature was dominant; at other times, her adventurousness won out. She herself saw her experiences in the early years of the twentieth century as 'a pioneering adventure' and her work as 'in its day, *avant garde*'.<sup>2</sup>

Mort's teaching qualifications, gained in no less than five art academies in London, provided her with both credibility among her peers and the opportunity to gain employment in exclusive private girls' schools in Sydney. She spent much of her energies teaching secondary schoolgirls, the impact of which is hard to calibrate. In addition, the positive relationships she developed with her pupils resulted in many of them later becoming private students in her studio or home-based classes, and a few participating in a European cultural tour in 1926.

While Mort's role as a teacher was the material basis of her professionalism, the dominant leitmotif in her life was her vocation as an artist and artisan. Her four-year training in London had, in fact, turned her into an evangelist for the Arts and Crafts cause. The artefacts she created and sold and the lessons she gave (initially in her city studios, and then later from her homes in Lane Cove and Vaucluse) represented a defence against the social as well as the aesthetic corrosion associated with industrialisation.

Mort's vanguard position in helping to establish the Arts and Crafts movement in Australia was facilitated by a juxtaposition of timing and talent. Fortuitously for her, the timing was right. In Sydney's increasingly sophisticated society at the beginning of the twentieth century, a 'love of the beautiful' was

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<sup>2</sup> Eirene Mort, 'Catalogue of the Memorial Exhibition of Nora Kate Weston', Mort Family Papers, Box 1. (Bowral: June, 1966), 1.



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becoming a feature of middle-class life.<sup>3</sup> But timing on its own was not enough; Mort needed talent as well, and this she had, as an artisan and – to a lesser extent – as an artist.

Mort took as her mantra William Morris's exhortation 'have nothing in your house except that which you know to be useful or believe to be beautiful'.<sup>4</sup> She demonstrated her mastery of this synthesis in a wide variety of artistic media and established an applied arts practice that gave her the opportunity to exploit the niche market of beautifying middle-class homes. Mort's artefacts had an innovative and distinguishing feature – the use of distinctively Australian motifs. Mort's popularising of such motifs among her colleagues and her discerning clientele helped to strengthen the sense of national identity that was emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This coupling of romantic nationalism to artisan practice became a marked feature of much of Mort's oeuvre.

Mort's business sense saw her venture into numerous entrepreneurial practices, most of which were successful. In finding this path, Mort expressed the conditions of her times. It may have been the need to generate an income that saw her produce an exceptionally diverse range of artistic media – a trait that drove her to express the nexus between utility and beauty in as many differing media as she could master, and in a context that supported such initiative.

A central component of Mort's art practice was her mentoring of a cohort of middle-class women, an involvement that reflected her place within collective change. In the social context of her times, art practice was – ideally for Mort – a shared pursuit. Much of her mentoring was done through a series of formal and informal networks, the most significant of which was the Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales. Her collegial activities facilitated her role as a cultural agent, revealing a powerful synthesis between her aesthetic, social and

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Montana, *The Art Movement in Australia: Design, Taste and Society 1875 – 1900*. (Melbourne: Miegunyah, Melbourne University Press, 2000), 159.

<sup>4</sup> William Morris in Ian Bradley *William Morris and his World* (London: Thames and Hudson 1978), 112.

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perhaps also political associations. Formal networks were not, however, Mort's only *modus operandi*. Her applied arts skills were also utilised by various members of the informal networks of the Sydney and Adelaide intelligentsia.

Integral to both her ability to implement the principles and practices of the Arts and Crafts movement and her skill as a consummate networker was Mort's professionalism. She was determined to be, and be seen to be, a professional. This insistence helped to break down the barriers between 'fine' and 'applied' art, and all that they represented at that time, not only in art practices but in gendered identities associated with them.

Her commitment to professionalism coincided with the beginning of the new century, a time of transition, particularly in terms of roles associated with women, leading to the second leitmotif in Mort's life – her emblematic role as a 'New Woman', able to generate her own income and function as an educated, professional, independent woman in Sydney's cultural milieu. Underpinning her role as a New Woman was Mort's relationship with fellow artisan Nora Weston, with whom she lived and worked for over 60 years. They were, in enduring ways, a partnership in life and often in art practice. Weston's support must also be seen as an integral part of Mort's significance, as an Arts and Crafts practitioner, and, relatedly, a historical figure.

World War I and its aftermath demarcate a change in Mort's standing in artistic circles of the day. Where prior to war, Mort had been in the vanguard of artistic taste through her promotion of Arts and Crafts philosophy and practice, after the war and the ensuing growth of the Modernist movement, Mort's star began to wane. In the latter part of her career, Mort functioned as a 'jobbing artist' whose position in Sydney's artistic circles was diminished by the gradual but stellar careers of some of her female colleagues such as Margaret Preston, Thea Proctor and Grace Cossington Smith. Although their achievements are thoroughly documented and well deserved, Mort should in some sense be seen as preparing the way for them in two main areas of their work – their focus on items of beauty in interior spaces and their belief that indigenous Australian flora

contained aesthetically pleasing elements that were worth capturing. The fact that, unlike her now better-known contemporaries, she could not bring herself to join the ranks of the Modernists should not detract from the very real contribution that she did make to Australian artistic practice in the context of her times.

Two aspects of Mort's life deserve particular recognition. Firstly, through her teaching, mentoring and writing about the many ways in which a home could be beautified, Mort was an unacknowledged forerunner of the profession of interior designer. Secondly, as noted, her innovative wartime rehabilitation programs for returned wounded soldiers led to her becoming a precursor of the profession of occupational therapy. Neither contribution has been suitably recognised to date, either by interior designers, occupational therapists or historians. Her major contributions to Australian artistic and cultural life, however, lie in her role as an artist and artisan as well as in her emblematic role as a New Woman, capable of generating her own income and leading a productive life.

On the spectrum of female activists, Mort may rank lower than many of her contemporaries. Nor would she qualify in the ranks of Modernist Australian women artists. Her star only burned brightly for a short period of time. I have, however, drawn out its brief luminescence and long-term legacy in terms of a life devoted to the crafts of art in Australia. In tracing the life that Mort negotiated, I have highlighted what she achieved, and what she represented, in a crucial phase of social and cultural transition in Australia.



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- For the duration of this research, the Mort Family Papers have been in the author's possession. On completion of this thesis, they will be on loan to the Canberra Museum and Gallery, after which they will be returned to the Mort family.
- Many images, especially those included from the Mort Family Papers, have *no dates*. Where dates are available, they have been supplied.
- All measurements of figures are in centimetres.

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4. Photo: Henry Mort M.L.A. Parliament of New South Wales, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150723083921/http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/members.nsf/1fb6ebed995667c2ca256ea100825164/90of3fc9ae6dfdd5ca256e4b0001b8d3?OpenDocument>
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13. E.M. 'Alexandra House Poster' for exhibition, 1902. 21.5 (H) x 14.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 3, Large Sketch Book 3.
14. E.M. Illustration: not titled [Medieval Costumes] 21.0 (H) x 18.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 3, Large Sketch Book 1.
15. E.M. Illustration: not titled [Three Birds] c. 1903. 13.0 (H) x 20.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 1, Medium Sketch Book 5.
16. E.M. Glazed earthenware: not titled [Gum leaf vase] 11.4 (H) x 13.6 (W) 74302 84.681.6. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
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18. E.M. Illustration: not titled [Design for a plate] 10.0 (H) x 16.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 7.
19. Photo: c. 1906. Art class in South Kensington National Art School, held in Archives of the Royal College of Art, emailed to Pam Lane by Neil Parkinson, 16 April, 2013.
20. Section of Mort's submission: 'Geometrical problems for Art Class Teachers' Certificate', 1901. Whole panel - 72.4 (H) X 51.2 (W) NGA Acc. No 74480 84.781.177.
21. E.M. Illustration: not titled [Anatomical study of human leg] 12.0 (H) x 18.0 (W) c. 1902, Mort Family Papers, Box 5.
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29. E.M. Illustration: St Bartholomew's Church, watercolour, 20 cm (H) x 13 cm (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 1, Medium Sketch Book 5.
30. Royal Drawing Society Examination card, Mort Family Papers, Box 2.
31. E.M. Illustration: 'Quai Verte - Bruges', 20.0 (H) x 13.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 1, Medium Sketch Book 3.
32. E.M. Illustration: not titled [Heraldic Crest] 20.0 (H) x 13.0 (W) Canberra: Mort Family Papers, Box 1, Medium Sketch Book 10.
33. E.M. not titled [Spoonbills] design for marquetry panel, 6.0 (H) x 24.0 (W). *Sydney Mail*, 10 July 1907.
34. E.M. not titled [Desert Pea motif] 20.4 (H) x 60.8 (W) 74496 84.681.193. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
35. Photo: Liberty & Co. interior, Liberty's of London Archives, c. 1902.

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36. E.M. Wallpaper design, not titled [Jacaranda] 30.0 (H) x 30.0 (W) Private collection.
  37. William Morris. Wallpaper design, 'Pomegranate' Victoria & Albert Museum, Acc. No. E447.1919.  
<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/search/?offset=60&limit=15&narrow=1&extrasearch=&q=William+Morris+Wallpaper&commit=>
  38. Sample page of *Nursery Wall-Papers*, 12.0 (H) 18.0 (W) Liberty & Co., Mort Family Papers, Box 2.
  39. E.M. not titled [Personal Bookplate 1] 2.5 (H) x 2.5 (W) Private collection Bronwyn Vost, Sydney.
  40. E.M. not titled [Personal Bookplate 2] 9.5 (H) x 7.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
  41. E.M. not titled [Personal Bookplate 3] 9.0 (H) x 7.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
  42. E.M. not titled [Personal Bookplate 4] 9.5 (H) x 6.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
  43. E.M. Illustration: not titled [Initial design for alphabet Letter 'T'] 13.0 (H) x 13.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
  44. E.M. Illustration: not titled [H for Hamster] 20.0 (H) x 13.0 (W). Mort Family Papers, Box 1, Medium Sketch Book 4.
  45. E.M. Illustration: 'Wombat', 15.5 (H) x 15.0 (W) *Eirene Mort's Australian Alphabet*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1986.

### Chapter 3: The Golden Years

1. Photo: Eirene Mort and Nora Weston c. 1904. 10.0 (H) x 6.0 (W), unknown photographer, Mort Family Papers, Box 2.
2. Photo: The Shirley School, Edgecliffe (unknown photographer) 9.0(H) x 12.0(W) Mort Papers, ML MSS 2859. Mitchell Library, Sydney.
3. E.M. Illustration: 'Labor Ipse Voluptas', 14.0 (H) x 32.5 (W). *In the Australian Bush and Other Songs* 1908. Mort Papers, ML MSS 2589.6. Mitchell Library, Sydney.
4. E.M. Illustration: 'The Reptile Age' 30.0 (H) x 19.0 (W) 1908, *In the Australian Bush and Other Songs*, Mort Papers, ML MSS 2589.6. Mitchell Library, Sydney.
5. Photo of Eirene Mort, 9.0 cm (H) x 6.3 cm (W) (unknown photographer) 1923. Abbotsleigh Archives, Wahroonga.
6. E.M. End of term report for Lorne Lodes, 18.0 cm (H) x 11.0 cm (W) December 1919. Abbotsleigh Archives, Wahroonga.
7. E.M. Illustration: Watercolour: not titled [Bush Pond] 18.0 (H) x 25.0 (W). Mort Family Papers, Box 1.
8. E.M. Illustration: Pen and ink, not titled [Pelican] 62.0 (H) x 74.0 (W) Private collection, Belinda Mort, Greenethorpe.
9. E.M. Illustration: 'Glenmark Slab Hut', "Tasmanian Lookabout", 27.0 (H) x 17.0 (W) 17 January 1933. PIC Volume 1002, R. 5229. National Library of Australia, Canberra.
10. E.M. Illustration: not titled [Old Man and Dog] 11.0 (H) x 11.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 1.
11. E.M. Illustration: not titled [Dragon Ship] 9.0 cm (H) x 13.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 1, Small Sketch Book 4.
12. E.M. Illustration: 'Tarasque and the Rhone Maid', 13.0 (H) x 20.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 1, Medium Sketch Book 10.

13. E.M. Linocut: not titled [Mermaid] (H) 18.0 x 18.0 (W) 74362 - 84.681.64 Canberra: National Gallery of Australia.
14. E.M. Watercolour illustration: not titled [Female figure and six dancing satyrs] 25.8 (H) 44.1 (W) 74394 84.681.96. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
15. E.M. Illustration: 'Design for Piano Back', 7.5 (H) x 10.0 (W) *The Sydney Mail* 12, June 1907.
16. E.M. Stencil print: 'Coral Tree', 53.7 (H) x 76.4 (W) 84.681.152. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
17. E.M. Drawing with black pencil with watercolour: not titled [Butterfly] 37.8 (H) x 56.0 (W) 84.681.138. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
18. E.M. Illustration: not titled [A walk in the woods] 22.0 (H) x 13.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
19. E.M. Linocut: [Macquarie Lighthouse and Sydney Harbour] 9.0 (H) x 15.3 (W) 06/017 Box 2, Folder 9. National Library of Australia, Canberra.
20. E.M. Illustration: not titled [The Sweeper] 25.5 (H) x 17.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 8.
21. E.M. Lincocut: not titled [Sea Breeze] 20.0 (Diameter) Mort Family Papers, Box 10.
22. E.M. Lincocut: not titled [Woman with Pan], 84.681.90 National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
23. E.M. Lincocut: not titled [Seahorses] 20.0 (Diameter), Mort Family Papers, Box 10.
24. E.M. Illustration: 'Our artist at Home', January 1912. 17.5 (H) x 22.0 (W) Private collection, Bronwyn Vost, Sydney.
25. Photo: Mort and client in her studio, (unknown photographer) 8.0 (H) x 6.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
26. E.M. 'Joint Business Card', 4.5 (H) x 7 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 2.
27. E.M. 'Individual Business Card', 4.5 (H) x 7 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 2.
28. E.M and Nora Weston, Panel of cabinet: not titled [Wooden cabinet with faun carvings] 41.0 (H) x 31.0 (W) x 23.00 (D). Private collection, Michael Fox.
29. Competition entry: 'Lizard', 4.0 (H) x 9.0 (W) *The Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales Journal*, 9 May 1907. 06/017, Box 2. National Library of Australia, Canberra.
30. E.M. Competition entry: Postcards, 'Australian Birds and Animals', 14.0 (H) x 9.0 (W) for each postcard. Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
31. E.M. Ceramic plate: not titled [Kangaroo and Snail Plate], 4.0 (H) x 16.0 (Diameter) Archives of the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, The Rocks, Sydney.
32. E.M. 'Doryanthes' leather book cover, 1934. 39.4 (H) x 30.7 (W) 84.681.311. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
33. E.M. Tapestry 'Banksia' 41.0 (H) x 41.0 (W) 74617 84.681.309. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
34. E.M. Business card: 'Grey's Boat Shed: Boats for Hire', 5.5 (H) x 5.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 3.
35. Photo: 'Grey's Boat Shed', 5.0 (H) x 7.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 3.
36. Graph: Contributors to Applied Art Exhibition December 1906.
37. E.M. Double page verse and illustration of 'Cockatoo' poem in *Country Cousins*, (25) H x 35.5 (Width of double page). Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
38. E.M. 'Cockatoo' cover of book *Country Cousins*, 25.0 (H) x 19.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
39. Photo of E.M. holding a copy of *Country Cousins*, (unknown photographer) 8.0 (H) x 11.5 (W). Mort Family Papers, Box 4.

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40. Newspaper advertisement for Mort's studio, 5.5 (H) x 9 (W) Research Library, Envelope 3, Box 3. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
  41. E.M. Poster for Third Annual Exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW, 38.8 (H) x 28.4 (W) NGA. 84.681.98, 1910.
  42. E.M. Illustration: K. Langloh Parker, 'Beereun the Mirage Maker', 29.0 (H) x 23.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 5.
  43. E.M. Illustration: K. Langloh Parker, 'Goomble Gubbon and Dinewan' 29.0 (H) x 23.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 5.
  44. E.M. Illustration: Sturt's Desert Pea' 15.0 (H) x 10.0 (W) in child's version of *Wildflowers of NSW* Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1932.
  45. E.M. Frontispiece of book: *Irish Lords and Other Verses*, 16.5 (H) x 12.0 (W) G. Adelaide: Hassell & Son, 1919.
  46. E.M. Postcard: 'All's Well that Ends Well', 9.5 (H) x 6.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
  47. E.M. Bookplate: Rose Scott, 1905. 8.5 (H) x 6.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
  48. E.M. Bookplate: Margaret Oppen, 6.5 (H) x 3.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
  49. E.M. Bookplate: G.E. Graham, 10.5 (H) x 7.5 (W) Ann Graham 11.0 (H) x 7.5 (W) and Barbara Mort 11.0 (H) x 7.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
  50. E.M. Bookplate: Barbara Knox, 8.5 (H) x 5.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
  51. E.M. 'Song of Brother Sun', section of one page 31.3 (H) x 21.3 (W) 2324, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney.
  52. E.M. Illustration: Pen and watercolour, not titled [Anybody Home?] Pen and watercolour, 25.0 (H) x 19.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 5.
  53. E.M. Illustration: Pen, not titled [The Crane & the Crow] 29.0 (H) x 22.9 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 5.
  54. E.M. Illustration: Pen and watercolour, not titled [A Daytime Nap] Pen and watercolour, 20.5 (H) x 15.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 3.
  55. E.M. Illustration: Pen and watercolour, not titled [Christmas Pudding] 7.0 cm (H) x 12 cm (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 3.
  56. E.M. Illustration: 'The Bush Orchestra' *The Comic Australian*, 9.5 (H) x 18.5 (W). Canberra: National Library of Australia, 25 November 1911.
  57. E.M. Illustration: 'The Three Bears', 8 (H) x 12 (W) *The Sydney Mail*, 7 August 1907.
  58. Photo: Photo: Mort's studio (unknown photographer) 7.5 (H) x 10.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
  59. E.M. Cardboard cut-out doll, 24.0 (H) x 18.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 7.
  60. E.M. Cardboard cut-out doll, 24.0 (H) x 18.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 7.
  61. Abbotleigh book donation plate, 8.0 (H) x 5.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
  62. Branksome prize giving award, 10.0 (H) x 7.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
  63. Kambala book donation plate, 8.0 (H) x 5.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
  64. E.M. 'Australian Women: Their Homes and Their Work - No. 5, The Bedroom', sample page of *Daily Mail* article, 10 July 1907.
  65. E.M. illustration: Hindu temple', 10.0 cm (H) x 13.5 (W) in *Sydney to Delhi with Cook's Coupon: Breaking the Journey for a Fortnight in Ceylon*, Dodanduwa Ceylon, 1914.
  66. E.M. 'Australia Today for the Immigrant and Tourist' magazine cover, 20.0 (H) x 15.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 3, Large Sketch Book 4.
  67. E.M. 'Lone Hand' magazine cover, 20.0 (H) x 15.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 2.
  68. E.M. Draft design for Ruberoid postcard, 14.0 (H) x 9.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 5.

69. E.M. Draft design for Ruberoid postcard, 14.0 (H) x 9.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 5.
70. Ruberoid Postcards, 8.5 (H) x 13.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 7.
71. E.M. Poster: 'Exhibition of Women's Work 1907' 42.0 (H) x 25.0 (W) *The Sydney Mail*, Mort Family Papers, Box 7.
72. Newspaper photo: Mort's design for 'The Waratah Carpet', 15 (H) x 15 (W) *The Sydney Mail*, 11 Sept. 1907.
73. E.M. Award certificate for second-place-getters: *First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work Catalogue*. 1907. 30.5 (H) x 38.5 (W) National Library of Australia, Canberra.
74. E.M. Possible logos for Arts and Crafts Society of NSW, various sizes, Mort Family Papers, Box 2.
75. E.M. Logo for Arts and Crafts Society of NSW, 8.0 (Diameter) Mort Family Papers, Box 7.
76. First Place Award Certificate of Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, 16.0 (H) x 12.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 5.
77. Pie Chart: Arts and Crafts membership Distribution 1906–1934.
78. E.M. Text from 'Australian Animal Alphabet', paper version. 32.0 (H) x 32.0 (W) Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, ML MSS 2859, Shirley School Folder, Box 1, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
79. E.M. Illustrations from paper version of 'Australian Animal Alphabet', each picture 4.5 (H) x 4.5 (W) Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, ML MSS 2859 Shirley School folder Box 1, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
80. Section of catalogue of Arts and Crafts Society's Annual Exhibition, 1910. ML MSS 3654 Box 3, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
81. E.M. Poster for Arts and Crafts Annual Exhibition 1912, 28.0 (H) x 38.1 (W) 74352 84.681.55, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
82. Photo: Eirene Mort and Nora Weston c. 1905 (unknown photographer) 8.0 (H) x 10.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
83. E.M. Bookplate for John Wright, Archbishop of Sydney, 9.0 (H) x 7.0 (W) 1913, Mort Family Papers, Box 3.
84. Trove graph: Mort's activities reported in the press.
85. Photo: *S.S Gneisenau* (unknown photographer) Last trip from Australia to Bremen was in 1914. [http://www.norwayheritage.com/p\\_ship.asp?sh=gnei](http://www.norwayheritage.com/p_ship.asp?sh=gnei)
86. Photo: 19 Coram St, Bloomsbury London, (unknown photographer) 23.0 (H) x 19.0 (W). Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre, Bloomsbury.
87. E.M. Etching on copper: 'College Gate, York', 1913. 13.8 (H) x 10.6 (W) AGNSW, Sydney.
88. E.M. Etching: 'The Pottery Kiln' 16.0 (H) X 12.5 (W), Mort Family Papers, Box 7.
89. E.M. Illustration: not titled [Primate troop] 20.0 (H) x 22.5 (W). Mort Family Papers, Box 3, Large Sketch Book 1.
90. E.M. Illustration: not titled [Tiger] pencil sketch, 22.5 (H) x 20.5 (W), Mort Family Papers, Box 1, Large Sketch Book 5.

#### Chapter 4: Consolidation and the Beginning of Change

1. E.M. Poster: 'Girls' Patriotic Fund' 25.5 (H) x 20.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 3, Large Sketch Book 5.

2. E.M. Poster: 'Red Cross Industries' 100 (H) x 76 (W). Belinda Mort, Private Collection, Greenethorpe.
3. E.M. Nora Weston and Leslie Wilkinson, Wooden artefact: 'Lady Helen Shield', 59.5 (H) x 41.5 (W). LR 110. Mitchell Library, Sydney.
4. E.M. Nora Weston and Leslie Wilkinson, Wooden artefact: 'Lady Helen Shield', Corner of LHS, 4.0 (H) x 4.0 (W). Acc. No. LR 110 Sydney: Mitchell Library.
5. E.M. Poster: 'Wild Flower Show' 24.0 (H) x 18.0 (W), Mort Family Papers, Box 3, Large Sketch Book 5.
6. E.M. Illustration: 'Tiddley Winks' cover, 20.5 (H) x 25.5 (W). Mort Family Papers, Box 1, Large Sketch Book 1.
7. Mary Gilmour, *Tiddley Winks*. Illustrated by Eirene Mort, 15.5 (H) x 11.5 (W). Sydney: William Brooks and Co, 1917. In NLA, Canberra.
8. Photo: Exterior of Mort and Weston's home, 'Wyabra' Longueville Rd, Lane Cove, 8.5 (H) x 14.0 (W) 06/017 Box 2, Folder 9. National Library of Australia, Canberra.
9. Photo: Interior of Mort and Weston's home 'Wyabra' Longueville Rd, Lane Cove. c. 1916 (unknown photographer) 14.0 (H) x 12.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
10. Photo: Interior of Mort and Weston's home 'Wyabra' Longueville Rd, Lane Cove. c. 1916 (unknown photographer) 8.0 (H) x 12.0 (W). Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
11. E.M. 'Carved Bread Board' design. 15.0 (H) x 13.0 (W) *The Sun* February 25, 1917. Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
12. Photo: Red Cross Recreational Hall at the Randwick Military Hospital. Photo ID: P03956.001. Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
13. Photo: Mort and Weston with returned soldiers from Australian Commonwealth Military Forces, 6.5 (H) x 11.0 (W), c. 1917, 06/017 Box 2, Folder 9. National Library of Australia, Canberra.
14. E.M. 'France's Day Commemoration Service' cover, 22.0 (H) x 15.5 (W), 1917. Mort Family Papers, Box 5.
15. Section of Gregory's map of Sydney. 20.0 (H) x 20.0 (W). 1934.  
<http://voommaps.com/historical-maps/1934-gregorys-sydney-street-directory/>
16. Excerpt from letter by A. G. Stephens to E.M. Mort Family Papers, Box 7. 9 March 1917.
17. E.M. 'ANZAC Day Commemoration Service' cover, 22.0 (H) x 15.5 (W), 1918. Mort Family Papers, Box 5.
18. E.M. 'King and Country' active service card, 20.5 (H) x 13.0 (W), c. 1917. Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
19. E.M. Illustration: 'Empire Song', 22.0 (H) 32.5 (W). *In the Australian Bush and Other Songs*, Mort Papers, ML MSS 2589, Box 6. Mitchell Library, Sydney.
20. E.M. *The Story of Architecture*, Sydney: Consolidated Press, 1942.
21. E.M. teaching notes for Egyptian architecture 23.0 (H) x 17.0 (W), c. 1935. Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
22. E.M. Illustration: "H.R.H & H.M.S (16.6.1920) A Study in Change", 17.0 (H) x 10.0 (W) Mort Papers, 'Tracks Part II', 1936. Pic. Vol. 1003, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
23. E.M. "H.R.H & H.M.S (16.6.1920) A Study in Change", 8.0 (H) x 10.0 (W) Mort Papers, 'TRACKS II', Pic. Vol. 1003, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
24. 'Three Clever Women Artists' 9.0 (H) x 11.0 (W) *Sunday News*, June 20, 1920.
25. E.M. Commemorative Plaque 'Lest We Forget', 33.0 (H) x 38.0 (W), 1923. 7435084.681.53. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
26. E.M. 'ANZAC Fellowship of Women' bookplate, 11.0 (H) x 7.5 (W), c. 1920. Mort Family Papers, Box 7.

27. E.M. Bookplate: 'ANZAC Festival Committee' bookplate, 11.0 (H) x 8.0 (W), c. 1922, Mort Family Papers, Box 6.
28. Trove graph showing number of newspaper articles per year that mention Mort.
29. E.M. Bookplate: 'Harold Mort' 11.0 (H) x 8.5 (W), 1914, Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
30. E.M. Bookplate: 'Harold Mort' 8.0 (H) x 11.0 (W), 1934, Mort Family Papers, Box 6.
31. Photo: Dorothy Mort 18 April 1921 State Records of N.S.W. Series Number NR S 3/6007 No. 518 Series title: Identification card, 1921.
32. Artist's courtroom sketch of Dorothy Mort, 10.0 (H) x 15.0 (W) *The Sun* 20 March 1921.
33. E.M. Bookplate for Harold Mort, 1928. 8.0 (H) x 5.0 (W), 1928. Mort Family Papers, Box 7.
34. E.M. Bookplate for Poppy Mort, 11.0 (H) x 7.5 (W), 1921. Mort Family Papers, Box 6.

### Chapter 5: A Jobbing Artist

1. Margaret Oppen, Bookplate for Eirene Mort 7.0 (H) x 5.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 7.
2. Eirene Mort, 'Accounts Book 1924-1935', Mort Family Papers, Box 7.
3. Article about the Society of Women Painters' Exhibition, *SMH* April 6, 1921.
4. E.M. Section of handout for Design Class, 'Design Class Folder,' Arts and Crafts Society of N.S.W., ML MSS 3645, Box 1, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
5. E.M. Section of handout for Design Class, 'Design Class Folder,' Arts and Crafts Society of NSW, ML MSS 3645, Box 1, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
6. Brochure for 'At Home' given by Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW in July 1929, MLMSS 3645 Box 2, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
7. Photo: Ball Preparations, *Daily Pictorial*, 3 July 1930.
8. Photo: Ball Decorations, *Daily Pictorial*, 2 July 1930.
9. First page of double page spread: 'Native Birds Dance in Ballroom Settings', *The Sun*, 20 July 1930.
10. List of Mort's etchings *Art In Australia*, Third Series, No. 13, 1925.
11. List of Mort's etchings *Art In Australia*, Third Series, No. 13, 1925.
12. Passport photo of Eirene Mort, December 1925. 7.0 (H) x 4.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
13. E.M. Bookplate for Miriam Chisholm, woodcut, 9.0 (H) x 7.5 (W) 1931. Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
14. Mort's ticket for class at the *École D'Art Animalie* Mort Family Papers, Box 7
15. E.M. Pencil sketch of Rome 20.0 (H) x 13.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 1, Medium Sketch Book 10.
16. Photo: 'Italy', taken by Miriam Chisholm. 8.5 (H) x 14.0 (W) Chisholm Papers, MS 6207 Series 7, Folders 61-65, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
17. Farnham Pottery, Farnham Surrey. Photo taken by Pam Lane in April 2016.
18. Farnham Pottery, Farnham Surrey, c 1900, 12.0 (H) x 20.0 (W) (unknown photographer)
19. Photo: The Watts Gallery in the early twentieth century, Photopress, Johnson's Court Fleet St.
20. Photo: The Watts Gallery, Compton, Surrey. Photo taken by Pam Lane, April 2016.
21. Photo: Sir Edmund Fremantle 13.5 (H) 8.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 4.
22. Table Plan for dinner, June 1926. 17.5 (H) x 23.0 (W), Mort Family Papers, Box 4.

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23. Sample Page of 'The Book of Student Benefactors', 1927. 30.0 (H) x 45.0 (W), UQA S190, University of Queensland, St Lucia.
  24. Front cover of 'The Book of Student Benefactors', 1927. 47.0 (H) x 32.0 (W), UQA S190, University of Queensland, St Lucia.
  25. E.M. 'Old Canberra' booklet, 20.0 (H) x 13.0 (W) 06/017, Box 2, Folder 9, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
  26. E.M Example page of comments for 'Old Canberra' Booklet, 06/017, Box 2, Folder 9, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
  27. E.M. Etching: 'Gungahleen - The Team', 7.0 (H) x 18.5 (W) *Old Canberra: A Sketchbook of the 1920s by Eirene Mort*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1987, 50.
  28. E.M. *Old Canberra: A Sketchbook of the 1920s by Eirene Mort*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1987.
  29. E.M. Illustration, 'Ross Barn', 20.0 (H) x 27.0 (W) 'Tasmanian Look about' R5204 PIC Vol. 1002, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
  30. E.M. Description of 'Ross barn', 'Tasmanian Look about'.
  31. E.M. Etching: 'Elizabeth Bay, Potts Point', 15.5 (H) x 25.0 (W) PXA. 64, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
  32. E.M. Etching: 'The Guardhouse, La Perouse', 16.0 (H) x 22.0 (W) PXA. 64, Mitchell Library, Sydney
  33. E.M. Watercolour: 'Sydney in the early Twenties: The Heads', 1920. 37.8 (H) x 27.5 (W), 'Tracks Part IV', Plate IV abn 85 - 143 874. National Library of Australia, Canberra.
  34. E.M. Watercolour: 'Sydney in the early Twenties: The City Skyline, 1920. 37.8 (H) x 27.5 (W) Plate III abn 85 - 143 625. 'Tracks: Part I', National Library of Australia, Canberra.
  35. E.M. Illustration: not titled [The Car] 20.5(H) x 25.5 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 3, Large Sketch Book 5.
  36. E.M. Illustration: not titled [Bush Picnic], 13.0 (H) x 20.0 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 1, Medium Sketch Book 8.
  37. E.M. 'Berrima Court House' pencil sketch, 1931. 18.0 (H) x 20.0 (W) 'Tracks: Part IV', 38. Mort Family Papers, Box 8.
  38. E.M. Illustration: watercolour 'Bluff Creek, Tenterfield', 1936. 25.0 (H) x 18.5 (W) 'Tracks: Part II', Pic. Vol. 1003, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
  39. E.M. 'Autumn Gold on Bluff Creek, Tenterfield'. Text accompanying watercolour, 20.0 (H) x 18.5 (W) 'Tracks II', Pic. Vol. 1003, 1936, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
  40. E.M. Practice for Address to Duke of York, 1927. 11.0 (H) x 17.5 (W) 06/017 Box 2, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
  41. Photo: 29 Wentworth Ave, Vaucluse, photo taken by Pam Lane in April 2015.
  42. E.M and N.K.W. 'Lyre Bird' fire screen, 71.2 (H) x 56.4 (W) Toowoomba: Private Collection, Barbara Thelander.
  43. Chair seat cover photo in 'Ancient Tapestry article, *The Sun*, November 2, 1930.
  44. E.M. Design for 'Australian Scene' tapestry, 35.0 (H) x 25.5 (W) SSV TAP I, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
  45. 'Mrs Gilbert Graham' by Thea Proctor. 24.4 (H) x 19.4 (W) Private collection, 1918.
  46. E.M. Description of 'Greenhayes, Mittagong. 'Tracks IV', Mort Family Papers, Box 8.
  47. E.M. Illustration: 'Greenhayes', Mittagong. 'Tracks IV', 25.2 (H) x 17.2 (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 8.
  48. E.M. Illustration: 'Fitzroy Iron Works 1897' 12.0 (H) x 18.0 (W), National Library of Australia, Canberra.



49. E.M. Map of Centenary of iron industry in Mittagong area. 22.5 (H) x 16.5 (W) Mitchell Library 998.1/M., 1948. Photo: (unknown photographer) 'Entries with Outstanding Merit in Design', *Australian Coin Review*, August 1967.
50. E.M. Design for Coin, 4.0 cm (H) x 4.0 cm (W) *Australian Coin Review* August 1967, Mort Family Papers, Box 7.
51. E.M 'Olde Wood' 14.0 cm (H) x 20 cm (W) Mort Family Papers, Box 2.



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**Note:** For the duration of this research, the Mort Family Papers, consisting of eight boxes of documents, sketchbooks and memorabilia, have been in the author's possession. On completion of this thesis, they will be on loan to the Canberra Museum and Gallery, after which they will be returned to the Mort family.

## **KEY**

### **1. PRIMARY SOURCES**

- **Archival Collections**
- **Newspapers and Magazines**
- **Journals**
- **Newspapers and Magazine Articles**
- **Monographs**

### **2. SECONDARY SOURCES**

- **Journals**
- **Monographs and Chapters in Edited Books**
- **Interviews**
- **Exhibitions**
- **Electronic Resources**
- **Unpublished Theses and Papers**



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## Glossary

Art Deco	style of art of the 1920s and 1930s; typified by angular shapes and elongated lettering.
Art Nouveau	decorative style of art of the 1900s and 1910s; typified by cursive expressive lines.
Dado	the lower few feet of a wall when faced with wood or coloured differently from the upper part.
en plein air	painting what the eye can see out in the open air.
etching	An engraving on a metal plate by means of a corrosive substance.
headpiece	A headpiece or tailpiece is the design that sits at the bottom of a page in a newspaper or book.
intaglio printing	an image is incised into a surface, and the incised image holds the ink.
mon	a Japanese circular emblem usually used to identify a family
portiere	a curtain hung over a doorway.
pyrography	the art of burning a design into wood using a hot poker.
relief printing	printing an image from an upraised surface.
repoussé	a hammered design, usually in metal.
Ruberoid	a commercial roofing product in the 1920s.



- **Appendix**

**Eirene Mort - Timeline**

Year	Event
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eirene Mort's father was the Reverend (Henry) Wallace Mort, member of the wealthy and well-known Mort family. Her grandfather, Henry, was a pastoralist and Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly.</li> <li>• Her mother was Katie (nee Isaacs), the daughter of Robert Isaacs, Attorney-General in NSW ministry. She was a talented musician and linguist.</li> </ul>
1870 - 1872	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wallace Mort, who had attended Oxford University for his undergraduate degree in Mathematics and Theology, was deaconed in England in 1870 and priested in 1872. He was curate at St Mary's, Litchfield 1871 – 2 (£50 p.a.).</li> </ul>
1873	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Returned to Sydney in 1873 and initially was curate at St John's Parramatta, then licensed as curate at St Peter's Watson's Bay.</li> </ul>
1876	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He was licensed as first rector of All Saints Woollahra, his father and uncle (T.S. Mort) having paid for the building of the Blckett church, on the proviso that Wallace could be rector there. He was rector of All Saints Woollahra for 38 years.</li> </ul>
1879	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eirene was born on 17 November at 'Cothaine', Point Piper Rd, Woollahra. Eirene was the third of five children. The two older siblings were Selwyn and Harold; the two younger children were Eunice and Stanley.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• E.M. spent her formative years living in a house that functioned as the rectory in Woollahra. Her recollections about the Eastern suburbs during her childhood ('Letter Book' and 'My People') paint an interesting picture of the Eastern suburbs in the 1880s – 1890s.</li> </ul>
1884-1886	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In May 1884, family (of five) sailed for England on the P &amp; O liner 'S.S. Rome'</li> <li>• Wallace Mort undertook a <i>locum tenens</i> in the parish of All Saints at Alford, Somerset. The boys went to Prep school at Cheltenham; no record of Eirene going to school there, but she would have been only five or six at the time.</li> </ul>
1887	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On return to Australia, E.M. stayed for six months in Queensland with a family of girl cousins and six months in Gunghalin, ACT, with a family of boy cousins.</li> </ul>
1888	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• E.M. commenced attendance at St Catherine's School (for</li> </ul>

	daughters of the Clergy), Waverley. Attended as boarding pupil until 1987. Was 'Head Girl' in final year.
1897	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• E.M. awarded Medal for Design in her final year of school –in the Senior Public Examinations hrl'd at Sydney University.</li> <li>• Was associated with a short-lived 'Black and White' sketch club with A.H. Fullwood</li> <li>• Canon Mort befriended a young Italian painter named D'Attilo-Rubbo. In return for board and lodging, the young man set up an art class in the Rectory. D'Attilo-Rubbo later became well established as an art teacher in Sydney.</li> <li>• E.M. became his first pupil.</li> </ul>
1899	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• E.M. set sail for London, probably arriving there in September, in time for the start of the new academic year.</li> <li>• Later passport records her as being 5'4" (162cm) tall, with grey eyes and brown hair</li> <li>• Took up residence at Alexandra House. (Later named Queen Alexandra House.) Was there for 2 years (census records show her being listed as an art student : 1900 – 1901)</li> <li>• Began studying to become a teacher of Art and Design at the Royal College of Art, (the known as the South Kensington Art Training School).</li> <li>• Met Nora Kate Weston at Alexandra House ('Chips'). Nora is described as being a 'tall, physically active woman who possessed a sense of humour and freely used slang and other Australianisms'.</li> <li>• Had enjoyable social life at A.H. based on friends made there and family connections in London (Fremantle family).</li> </ul>
1901	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Began studying art at the National Art Training School, South Kensington (soon to be renamed Royal College of Art). Amongst other things, studied Model Drawing and Geometrical Drawing</li> <li>• Enrolled at Grosvenor Life School – studied under William Donne. Befriended fellow student, A.H. (Kip) Shephard, while studying there. They corresponded for next 70 years.</li> <li>• Studied for Design Diploma – studied under Paulson-Townsend</li> <li>• Enrolled in the Royal School of Art Needlework. Through its employment services, gained a number of design jobs. The most important of these resulted in designs for Liberty &amp; Co of Regent St, London. Mort's designs for textiles featured Australian floral motifs.</li> </ul>
1902	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With help from a reference from Princess Alexandra, was commissioned to illustrate Sarah Bibbie's book <i>From Cape to Cairo</i>.</li> <li>• Designed <i>Australian Animal Alphabet</i>; notes and lists from this time show she was considering using animals such as the albatross, garfish and iguana in her alphabet. She eventually decided to use only Australian animals; had to draw some from memory as some</li> </ul>

animals were not present in the zoo. Designs were featured in the influential London magazine, *Artist*.

- Began designing and producing bookplates. Her first two bookplates were for herself and her cousin, Barbara Fremantle.
- The quality of her illustrative work resulted in her being offered a position as teacher – artist at the Royal Drawing Society, London
- Travelled to several places in England, including Hodge Hill (Cumbria) and Blae Crag (Warwickshire).

**1903**

- Took courses at:
  1. London University – studied Medieval Art under Kaines and Smith
  2. London Central School, studied under various masters: illustration, writing and illumination.
  3. The Hammersmith Polytechnic in London – studied anatomy, painting, sculpture and animal studies.

While at Hammersmith Polytechnic, focused on continued study of anatomy and animal studies.
- Returned home with Nora Weston to Sydney (Nov.–Dec. 1903), again drawing scenes and people en route. Probably shared one of her father's investment properties with Nora in Ocean St, Woollahra.

**1904 – 1906**

- Set up first of four successive studios in Sydney – one in Angel Place; the other studio was first in George St, then in Hunter St. A later studio was set up in Pitt St;
- Eirene Mort and Nora Weston shared their first studio with Beatrice Pearson and Dorothea Adams.
- Designed postcards of the Australian native flora and fauna; these seem to have been an entry in a competition run by the Post Office.
- Began teaching career at The Shirley School, a progressive girls' school in Edgecliffe.
- Children's book *Country Cousins* self-published at about this time (no date is given for printing of book by G.B. Philip and Son, 451 Pitt St, Sydney). Book was assembled by hand.

**December  
1–15, 1906**

- Organised and held 'Exhibition of Australian Applied Art'; exhibition was a success. Mort's exhibits included friezes, stencil borders, mirror frames, leather frames, bathroom curtains, bookplates as well as designs for silver trays, carved tables, hall lights and carved chairs.
- Issued a circular suggesting that a Guild of Handicrafts be established in Sydney; object was to produce articles and goods 'of a distinctly Australian character'. Circular sent to various artists known to her. The guild did not eventuate, probably because of the establishment of the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW just four months earlier.

- 1907**
- January: Designed a frontispiece for *The Bookfellow* (Editor: A.G. Stephens)
  - April: Was commended for Design for a headpiece for *The Bookfellow*
  - Design of a Kurrajong portiere in *Art and Architecture*
  - Became a member of the newly formed Arts and Crafts Society of New South Wales. In July 1907, Mort was elected to the Selection Committee; it had 'power to refuse any work not considered of sufficient merit'. Mort's area of responsibility listed as 'Bookplates'.
  - Wrote a series of articles on 'Australian Women: their Homes and their Work' for *The Sydney Mail*. Articles covered such topics as The Bedroom, The Hall, The Nursery, The Dining Room and The Smoking Room.
  - 23 Oct – 9 Nov: *First Exhibition of Women's Work* held in Melbourne.
  - Illustrated a newspaper article heralding the coming exhibition in *Sydney Mail* 11 Sept 1907
  - Submitted designs for a poster to advertise the exhibition; design accepted by *The Sydney Mail*.
  - Submitted seven entries in exhibition, winning a first and a second prize. Her entries included her Australian Alphabet and nursery curtains featuring kangaroos. It was the range of her entries, rather than her skill in any one entry, that Mort showed her strength.
  - Won first place in category of designing a certificate for exhibitors who won Second Class Diploma in any category.
  - Produced design for a large carpet featuring Australian motifs. Originally carpet was planned to be 25 yards square; it ended up being 12' 6" square.
- 1908-1909**
- Continued developing skills in portraiture and landscape.
  - Experimented with humour, fantasy, children's illustrations, children's toys, designs for furniture and designs for advertisements promoting garage equipment and roofing material
  - Continued designing and producing bookplates; became member of the *Ex Libris Society*. Mort corresponded frequently with other members of the society such as George Perrotet and Theo Broekstra. Continued making bookplates until 1947.
  - One woman exhibition of *Australian Applied Art* given at Bray's studio, Sydney. It was enthusiastically reviewed in *Art and Architecture*.
- 1911**
- Illustrated children's section, 'The Young Idea', of *The Comic Australian* magazine with drawing of headpiece and animals in a Bush Orchestra
  - Designed cover/poster for 'Girls Guild Realm' event held from 26 April to 6 May at Sydney Town Hall 'What to do with Our Girls'.

- 1912**
- Began producing illustrations for Florence Sulman's *A Popular Guide to the Wild Flowers of New South Wales*. Illustrations required detailed knowledge of and accuracy in portrayal of native flora. Volume 1 was published in 1913. Volume 11 followed in 1914. Mort's illustrations became recognized as being 'gold standard' for accuracy. Sulman – Mort book was used as the authoritative book on wildflowers for over 50 years.
  - In 1932, a children's version was published - *A Painting Book: Wildflowers of New South Wales*. Competition was held in which children were encouraged to colour in the illustrations and forward them in to G.P.O. address. There were to be three categories for age groups: 7–9 yrs, 9–11 yrs and 11–14. First prize was to be 10/- and second prize was 5/-. Judges were Miss Irene (sic) Mort and Miss Ethel Stevens. Prize-winning entries were to be displayed in Angus and Robertson's shopfront windows.
  - Won numerous prizes (8 x 1<sup>st</sup> Prizes; 7 x 2<sup>nd</sup> Prizes; 5 x 3<sup>rd</sup> Prizes) in Society of Arts and Crafts *Design Exhibition*; items entered include Art Needlework, Mural Decoration, Book Decoration, Study of Natural Form and Design for Tiled Panel.
  - Won second prize for an original watercolour in Thirlmere Home & Fresh Air League Fair.
  - Designed and drew cover for book by C.H. Souter *Irish Lords and Other Poems*.
  - 11 April 1912, departed for London on S. S. Griesenau, along with 2,160 other passengers.
  - Lived at 19 Coram St. W.C. Often visited Regent's Park Zoo 'for the purposes of making artistic studies from the Animals.' Not allowed to do so on Saturdays or Sundays.
  - Attended classes in Etching and Book Illustration at L.C.C. Central School of Arts and Crafts, Southampton Row.
  - Visited her brother Stanley while he was living in Oxford; also visited several other places; did drawings of Hampstead Heath (in London), Jubbergate (in York), and Clare Bridge (in Cambridge) as well as watercolours in several other unidentified places.
  - In the Netherlands, visited and drew Breskens. In Belgium, visited Brussels, Ghent and Bruges and did pencil sketches and etchings there.
- 1913**
- Attended classes in Animal Drawing and Modelling – Still Life at L.C.C. Central School of Arts and Crafts, Lime Grove, Shepherds Bush W. February 1913.
  - Returned to Australia in mid 1913.
  - Illustrated second volume of Sulman's *Wildflowers of New South Wales* (published in 1914).
- 1914**
- Won 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> prizes in Girls' Realm Guild Second Australian Wildflower Show
  - Produced posters for the Girls' Patriotic Fund and the Australian Red Cross.

<b>1915</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Commenced Occupational Therapy work with returned soldiers at Randwick Military Hospital.</li><li>• After experimenting with several designs, designed logo based on a waratah for A &amp; C Society.</li><li>• In April 1915, EM and Weston purchase a property and move to 'Wyabra', Longueville Rd, Lane Cove.</li><li>• Art Gallery of NSW purchased a selection of Mort's embroidery work; waratah tablecloth (Acc. No 2356), cushion cover with gum nut and leaf design (Acc. No 2355), and a tea tray with Sturt Desert Pea design (Acc. No 1296) are examples of work purchased; also etchings and prints.</li></ul>
<b>1916</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Illustrated Mary Gilmore's <i>The Tale of Tiddlywinks</i>.</li><li>• Continued Occupational Therapy work as war effort.</li><li>• Continued to experiment with illustrating children's artwork.</li></ul>
<b>1917</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Continued Occupational Therapy work as war effort.</li><li>• Donated gold jewellery to be melted down for the war effort.</li><li>• Designed cover of Bastille Day commemoration.</li><li>• Designed cover for Anzac Memorial Service</li><li>• Began teaching at SCEGGS, Darlinghurst towards the end of 1917.</li><li>• Visited Tasmania in the December-January holidays. Toured extensively, although was disappointed not to be able to visit West Coast – there was no road.</li><li>• Sold an etching entitled <i>The Armoury, Port Arthur</i> to the RAS for the AGNSW collection.</li></ul>
<b>1918</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exhibition with Weston of their students' work.</li><li>• Continued Occupational Therapy work as war effort.</li></ul>
<b>1919</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• EM and Weston resign from the Executive Committee of the Society of Arts and Crafts. No reason is given.</li></ul>
<b>1920</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Appointed Principal of the 'School of Fine and Applied Arts' sponsored by the Society of Women Painters.</li><li>• Introduced more craft orientated classes.</li><li>• In Aug. 1920, the 'Australian Painter – Etcher Society' founded in Sydney; Mort, a founding member, elected onto its first executive committee – the only woman to be on for the next seven years.</li><li>• Exhibited etchings at Shaw's Gallery, Elizabeth St, Sydney. 13-24 Dec.</li></ul>
<b>1921</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Continued her work with Women Painters' School.</li><li>• First exhibition of the Australian Painter – Etchers' Society; some of EM's etchings sold to the Royal Art Society.</li></ul>



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- Exhibited etchings at Shaw's Gallery, Elizabeth St, Sydney. 12-24 Dec '21.
- 1923**
- Exhibited with the first showing of Australian Relief Prints at Tyrrell's Art Gallery, Sydney.
  - In Oct. 1923, exhibited five items in second Australian Painter-Etchers' Society exhibition in Melbourne. Other exhibitors included Norman Lindsay, Lionel Lindsay, Sidney Ure Smith, A.H. Fullwood and Jessie Traill.
  - Resigned from *Society of Women Painters School*.
  - Returned to living in Vacluse, renting a house in Lower Village Rd while their own house was being built
- 1925**
- EM's work was listed in Sept. volume of *Art in Australia*. Volume focused on etching. Volume also gave a list of 53 of her etchings released up to that date.
- 1926**
- Travelled to Europe with a group of three former Frensham students, Frena and Helen Crace and Miriam Chisholm; arrived in Marseilles on 5 March, 1926. Toured France, Germany and Italy with 'Chips' and the three young women.
  - Places visited in France included Marseilles, Nice, Aix-en Provence, Arles, Avignon, Nimes, St Raphael and Paris.
  - In Paris, attended *Ecole D'Art Animalier* – directed by M. Navellie
  - In Italy, visited Monte Carlo, Genoa, Pisa, Florence and Rome.
  - In Germany, visited Cologne, Stuttgart, Frankfurt am Maine, Rotterdam and Potsdam.
  - Arrived in London at end of May. Led students on a tour of art galleries in London.
  - Visited Hampton Court, Kew, St Albans, Reading, Basingstoke, Frensham, Hindhead, the Meon Valley, Aldershot, Keswick, Romsey, Salisbury, Bath and Stonehenge.
  - Visited potteries in Surrey - the Watts Gallery in Compton and the Farnham Pottery in Farnham.
  - Resumed contact with Fremantle family; attended a society dinner on 15 June held in London in honour of Sir Edmund Fremantle's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Other guests included numerous members of the British aristocracy as well as at least 14 other Fremantle cousins. Good example of Mort's upper middle class status.
  - Visited brother Selwyn and his friend Alan who were 'living in the country.'
- 1927**
- In March, provided the calligraphy for a 'Loyal Address' to the Duke of York on behalf of The Women's Club, Sydney.
  - Completed commissioned work begun six months earlier, 'Book of Student Benefactors', for the University of Queensland.
  - April – May 1927: successful One-Woman Exhibition of sketches of 'Old Canberra' – forty works in all; strongly supported by Sir John

Sulman and his daughter, Florence.

- 3 December 1927, exhibited with the Painter-Etchers' Society

1928	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• June - Exhibited with the Painter-Etchers' Society</li> <li>• Nov. - Exhibited with the Painter-Etchers' Society</li> <li>• Late in 1928, the two women purchased a car, using it to travel around the countryside so that EM could document the changing natural and built environment. 'Chips' was the driver of the car.</li> </ul>
1929	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EM attended four performances of the ballet at the Theatre Royal Sydney. <i>Prima Ballerina</i> was Anna Pavlova; performances sponsored by J. C. Williamson. Performances were on 18 April, 16 May, 21 May and 22 May.</li> </ul>
1930	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For the first Arts and Crafts Society Ball, EM and others in the society produced 36 life-size brologas, painted on brown paper and mounted on cut-out 3-D plywood. These were set around the ballroom among real grass-trees, gigantic crimson lilies and a profusion of native scrub, foliage and wildflowers (Sun 20 July 1930).</li> </ul>
1931	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Published <i>Old Roads</i> – comprised of pencil sketches and etchings. Of early Sydney.</li> <li>• In her introduction, EM commented on the contribution of Sydney's pioneering forbears, especially Governor Macquarie, with Sydney's roads 'stretching out like fingers from Macquarie Place.'</li> <li>• Held one-woman exhibition on <i>Old Roads</i>. 3 December, 1931.</li> </ul>
1932	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participated in the Sydney Harbour Bridge opening celebrations – Australian Exhibition at the Macleod Gallery.</li> <li>• Designed two calendars for 1932; calendars had hand-produced look.</li> </ul>
1933	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designed poster / cover for large charity event – 'The Loan Exhibition of Antiques'. The event was held in the ballroom of Sydney Government House, from 28 November to 19 December 1932.</li> <li>• Produced a calendar with a design of wildflowers. It was initially sold on behalf of the Surrey Hills Free Kindergarten; its sale was subsequently widened to being sold on behalf of the Kindergarten Union.</li> <li>• A review of the calendar by Barbara Goode-Matthews in <i>Art and Architecture</i> 1940 noted that Miss Florence Sulman 'had the happy idea of donating 250 (calendars) to the Police Department. Now flower-pickers, when "arrested" with their bush booty, are taken to the police station and "convicted according to the calendar."'</li> </ul>
1934	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exhibited in Kambala Exhibition, Rose Bay. Dec. 13 – 22, 1934.</li> </ul>

1935	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wrote a four-act play for the Eastern Suburbs Division of the Girl Guides. Entitled <i>Golden Bells</i>, Mort adapted it from Donn Byrne's novel, <i>Messer Marco Polo</i>. The novel was about the journey of Marco Polo to Cathay in search of 'golden bells'. It was performed on 12 December, 1935 at the Savoy Theatre. The reviewer in the <i>SMH</i> noted that in the play 'Golden Bells', 'a number of excellent scenes were presented, notably one of the Cathedral at Acre, which was arranged with striking effect'. (<i>SMH</i> 13 Dec 1935 p 18). Possibility of Mort being involved in designing the backdrop?</li> </ul>
1937	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EM's official retirement date. Moved to old Whinstone Park Dairy on 'The Gib' at Mittagong; lived there until 1962.</li> </ul>
1938	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participated in Australia's Sesqui-centenary Anniversary Celebrations, 2 – 28 February, 1788–1938.</li> <li>• Nov. - Exhibited with the Painter-Etchers' Society; the society changed its name to the Painter-Etcher and Graphic Society of N.S.W. by this date.</li> <li>• Exhibited selected works in in Sydney Building, Canberra</li> </ul>
1942	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Published <i>The Story of Architecture</i> at the request of the NSW Department of Education. Book used by teachers as preparation for Intermediate Certificate.</li> <li>• Contributed to an Exhibition of Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW with designs for bookplates and a series of architectural drawings from her book <i>The Story of Architecture</i>.</li> </ul>
1943	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Checklist of Bookplates by Eirene Mort</i>: 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (150 copies) published by Australian Bookplate Club in Hawthorne, Melbourne. Date of first publication unsure. It contains 88 examples of her bookplates, done in pen drawings, woodcuts or etchings. EM's own bookplate 'of charming simplicity' (Preface) was voted the favourite of Bookplate Club members.</li> </ul>
1945	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suffered the one serious illness of her life - a gastric ulcer.</li> </ul>
1945 – 1947	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With Weston, visited returned soldiers in various hospitals teaching them crafts.</li> </ul>
1957	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contributed drawings and map to booklet celebrating Mittagong's Centenary of Iron Smelting. Unusually for Mort, she did a drawing from a photograph – that of the Fitzroy Iron Smelter as it was in 1897. She scrupulously noted that the drawing was from a photograph.</li> <li>• Illustrated her brother's book <i>Coins of the Hapsburg Empire</i>. The illustrations required specific heraldry knowledge and skill in drawing heraldic crests.</li> </ul>
1960	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EM and Weston moved to 4 Edward St, Bowral.</li> </ul>

- 1965**
- ‘Chips’ Weston died, after distressing battle with dementia.
  - After Weston’s death, EM, her niece Margaret and Weston’s niece, Edelle Lindsay, arranged an exhibition in Bowral of Weston’s and Mort’s works as a tribute to Weston’s life. It was well attended, and many items were sold.
  - Entered design competition for Australia’s new decimal currency. He entry was judged as one of the entries ‘with outstanding merit’ (*Australian Coin Review*. 4, no. 2). She was 87 at the time.
- 1967**
- EM’s wildflower illustrations used in another important wildflower book by Alec Blombery.
- 1968**
- Visit to Sydney by E.H. (‘Kip’) Shepard. Mort was too frail to show him around Sydney (they were both in their nineties) so compromised by taking him to lunch in the revolving restaurant at the top of Centrepoint Tower. (Article by Margaret Henry in *Newcastle Herald* 8 Sept 1994.
  - EM’s eyesight begins to deteriorate significantly.
- 1975**
- EM’s work included in Bloomfield Gallery’s exhibition *Through Women’s Eyes*.
  - EM’s work included in exhibition held at the Mitchell Library *Prints and Sketches 1830 – 1930s*.
- 1977**
- Died on 1 December, aged 98. She had chosen not to have the battery in her pacemaker replaced. She was alert and *compos mentos* the day before she died.
  - Funeral held at All Saints, Woollahra on 6 December 1977. Margaret Mort gave eulogy for her aunt who was ‘never bored and never boring’.

#### **Posthumous Events:**

- 1978**
- EM’s work included in NSW Society of Arts and Crafts: Project 24: 1906 - 1935 *Cicadas and Gumnuts*.
  - EM’s design work was included in an exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW,
- 1982**
- Large selection of EM’s etchings sold through the Jim Alexander Gallery in East Malvern, Victoria. With an average price of \$150 each, they would have fetched over \$5,500 if they were all sold. Alexander noted, in the program notes, that the etchings in his exhibition were ‘only examples of a portion of (Mort’s) output over many years which also included many black and white illustrations,

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colour linocuts, wood engravings, pottery and other crafts.’ He concludes ‘Hers was a prodigious, though unsung, achievement.’

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| <b>1984</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The National Gallery of Australia purchased a large collection of her work and work executed after her designs. Included were designs for all manner of craftwork, illustration and graphic design and examples of her ceramics, leatherwork, metalwork, needlework and woodwork. (AG NSW – Biography)</li><li>• EM’s designs used by Sheridan Textiles as a screenprint on polyester/cotton to produce sheets, pillowcase and doona set.</li></ul> |
| <b>1986</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• EM’s alphabet was first produced as children’s blocks; later (1986) as a book and as T-shirts by N.L.A. Each letter of the alphabet was available as an individual T-shirt.</li></ul>   |
| <b>2001</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The National Gallery of Australia hosted a ‘Centenary of Federation’ exhibition. A number of submissions based on EM’s designs were received from a gallery in Brookvale, NSW.</li></ul>  |
| <b>2013</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The National Gallery of Australia hosted a <i>Creating Words</i> exhibition for children. EM’s <i>Australian Animal Alphabet</i> blocks were on display inside a glass case as an example of the way words and visual art can blend.</li></ul>  |
| <b>2017 - 2018</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• At time of writing, the Canberra Museum and Gallery plans to hold an exhibition of Mort’s life and work entitled <i>Eirene Mort: A Livelihood</i>. It will run from September 29 2017 until February 25 2018.</li></ul>   |