

## Gertrude Scarlett 1886 – 1970

Gertrude Alice Scarlett nee Peir [variant St Pierre] was born in Sydney on 29 November 1886, the daughter of Henrietta Letitia Elizabeth Peir and Herbert Henry Lee, a son of Thomas and Fanny Lee of Kelso, NSW. They may have met at an art class when Lee was a student at Sydney University. Et and her family lived close by. Neither of her parents ever married - although her father kept in contact with her until his death in 1951. She grew up from the age of 6 in Sutherland in the Sydney area with her grandparents Henry and Emma Peir nee Wood. The Peirs were a large and creative family and their home was one where music, art and literature, humour and a love of the natural world were all important parts of everyday life. She attended Miranda primary school, an unknown secondary school and later studied art at Sydney Technical College, Ultimo – her teachers including the Sydney artists Alfred Coffey and Syd Long.

About the time of her marriage to Robert Dalley Scarlett, musician and composer (known as Dalley) she gave up her studies. They had first met at the Sutherland Choral Society and were married on 8 September 1909 at Christ Church St Laurence, Sydney. Her family's long association with this church had begun in 1840 with her great grandparents, Thomas and Ann Wood whose lives are commemorated there in stained glass. A few years later, they moved to Grafton where Robert Dalley Scarlett was appointed organist and choirmaster to Grafton Anglican Cathedral. Their marriage faltered in 1917 after the return of her husband with neurasthenia from the First World War. 'Love' letters in Latin between a schoolteacher and Robert Dalley Scarlett, later quoted in well-publicised maintenance proceedings, were the catalyst for the end of the marriage. Gertrude was unwilling to agree to his requests that she move to Brisbane where he had taken up a position in 1919 and was judged a deserted wife by the courts. She returned to Sydney in 1925 and lived in Greenwich with her sons, Grahame Yorke Dalley, (born Sydney 1910) and Hubert St Pierre Bach (born Grafton 1914). After a long legal separation, Gertrude granted Dalley a divorce in 1930 to enable him to remarry.

Her straitened circumstances following the separation demanded action and she began to contribute paragraphs to a range of publications including The Sydney Morning Herald, Smiths Weekly, The Bulletin and the Woman's Mirror. She also wrote plays for stage and radio and radio comedy sketches, and supplied ideas for the comic strips drawn amongst others by Stan Cross. Signatures to paragraphs known as pars included 'Greenie,' 'G Major' (a play on her favourite Beethoven Concerto and her own first initial) and simply her initials GDS (Gertrude Dalley Scarlett). Very little of her prodigious output survives. However arguably her letters hint at her real potential rather than her surviving published work.

Another creative and social outlet was the Sydney Short Club formed in 1938. The Club, which met weekly, drew on a wide cross section of Sydney people - its annual, anniversary meeting attracting up to 130 members and their friends. Here in 1941, she met poet and author Nancy Keesing and they formed a lifelong friendship, described by Keesing in her autobiography *Riding the Elephant*. As well as reading from her own work at club meetings and adjudicating others, she addressed members on paragraph writing and comic captioning and was one of the members whose work was published in a compilation *10 Minute Stories* in 1941. Her association with the Club ended during 1943 but in the period before this, when her two sons were abroad with the AIF, the Club became an important part of her life and a distraction from the uncertainties of war.

Her continuing love was classical music (She was an early if not foundation ticket holder of the ABC's Symphony concerts) and her surviving correspondence and papers include concert programs and autographs of performers and comments on concerts she attended. She had no hesitation in expressing her opinion in writing to an artist. In response to one such instance pianist Arthur Rubenstein replied with a warm message.

Throughout her life, she read widely and with the same discernment, enjoyment and critical faculties she applied to music. Nancy Keesing noted that it was Gertrude Scarlett who introduced her to Patrick White and whose criticism she valued most. She was always in demand by family and friends to read teacups which she did with flair, showing in yet another way her perceptiveness and ability to judge character.

Domestic duties and cooking did not interest her but knitting, crocheting and creating rugs from unwanted material and clothing gave her satisfaction and an artistic outlet – just as painting and sketching had done when she was a young woman. During the war years and post war when materials and toys were scarce she sewed and illustrated cloth books and made dolls for her grandchildren. Her great and sustaining strength was her capacity to appreciate the world around her – the vagaries of human nature and the beauty to be found in nature everywhere. Her major passion was astronomy. She loved the stars and planets, knew the movements of the night sky intimately and wrote feelingly about them in private correspondence.

Another avenue for her literary skills was letter writing. Her grandfather Henry Peir had emigrated from London in 1855 to join the NSW Police Force and told her he had been a member of the Gold Escort. She corresponded with his family in England and America and with members of her immediate family and wrote too, in the 50s and 60s to a family in Shropshire. She met the latter by letter through her readership of the BBC publication *The Listener*. Unfortunately very little of this has survived. Her habit was to burn most of her own personal papers including letters and she asked at least some of those she wrote to, to do the same. Nancy Keesing in later life lamented burning hundreds of her letters. About twenty letters written to her son Grahame between 1940 –1941 survive. Although these are only a fragment of a much more extensive correspondence (conducted over six years), they are still representative of her writing and the subjects which moved her. A small number of letters to a grandchild and a significant copy of a letter to her husband also survive.

Throughout a life, which included emotional and physical hardship, she maintained a sense of humour and delight in life and in her family and friends. Her illegitimacy undoubtedly created difficulties in her own Peir family. It is unknown whether her sons knew that her friend, the elderly man who moved to live near her in c.1949, was their grandfather.

#### RELATED COLLECTIONS

Dalley Scarlett Collection, Private library of Robert Dalley Scarlett (1887-1959) Fisher Library, University of Sydney Papers of Nancy Keesing National Library of Australia. MS 5378 Nancy Keesing - further papers, 1939-1977. Letters received from Gertrude Scarlett State Library of New South Wales. MLMSS 2828 Papers of Grahame Scarlett. Australian War Memorial.

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Excerpts from John St Pierre *My St Pierre Forefathers* (privately published Kipparing Queensland c 1990) These extracts give context to and identify relationships of people named in Series 1, 2, 3, 7 8,9.