

# The Australian Women's Register

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**Entry type:** Person  
**Entry ID:** AWE6031

## McLeod, Mona Catherine

(1897 - 1964)

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**Born** 18970101, Sea Lake Victoria Australia

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**Died** 19641012, Bairnsdale Victoria Australia

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**Occupation** Photographer

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### Summary

Mona McLeod was a professional photographer working in Bairnsdale, Victoria, where she ran her own studio. Many of her photographs of local events, including the Black Friday bushfire (1939) were published in local newspapers.

## Details

Mona McLeod was born in Gippsland near Bemm River, Victoria in 1897 and lived there for most of her life. Her parents had emigrated from Scotland and she was the fifth of seven children. The family lived on a farm in an isolated and mountainous part of the country. The farm was largely run by her mother and the children, as her father was away fossicking for gold in South America, California, as well as East Gippsland for much of the time.

McLeod received her first camera at the age of 11 and soon after decided on a career as a photographer. Her determination saw her setting up a fruit and vegetable stall so that she could make enough money to leave Bemm River. McLeod managed to move to Bairnsdale when she turned 14, working at the Royle's Coffee Palace as a waitress in return for being able to lodge there 'under the protection of the owner' (Australian Gallery Directors Council 20) .

She eventually found work as a studio apprentice with the only photographer in the area, Howard Bumer, and by her twenties was able to set up her own studio at the back of a toy shop. By 1927 McLeod had rented a shop which she converted into a 'shopfront studio.' McLeod was able to support her family through her hard work, purchasing a house for them in Marlow, close to Bemm River.

Although McLeod had set up a darkroom at home, she mainly worked from her Main Street studio until her semi-retirement in 1959. She was the only photographer in the district, known to have 'seldom refused a job and would go almost anywhere, loading her old fashioned plate camera into the back of her big, vintage Dodge convertible' (Australian Gallery Directors Council 20).

McLeod's photography captured all manner of social and community events. She was known to be able to relax her sitters with her warmth and 'vivacious humour.' Her studio work, in contrast, was considered stiff and lacking in imagination – the same three backcloths were used throughout her career. McLeod was more creative and adventurous with her outdoor photography, to the extent that 'she didn't mind climbing a lamppost' with little concern about revealing her 'large, modest bloomers' (Australian Gallery Directors Council 20).

McLeod's news photography, depicting events including floods, car accidents and the Black Friday bushfire (1939) was published in *The Weekly Times*, *The Herald* and possibly *The Argus*. She was also commissioned by *The Australian* to photograph oilfields.

McLeod took on three female assistants during the war years to support her with an ever-increasing work load. Increased demand for photography materialised because the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) had a large air base close to Bairnsdale. McLeod photographed many social events of the time and also produced some propaganda photography. One of her assistants, Elsie Sievwright, pursued a career in photography, setting up her own studio after Mona died.

Although McLeod had a close relationship with Clarrie Royle, the son of Mrs Royle, the owner of the Royle's Coffee Palace, the couple never married. After McLeod died as a result of high blood pressure in 1964, she was cremated. Her ashes were taken to Lakes Entrance by her close friends, who scattered them near a bush bungalow where this group of female friends had regularly holidayed.

## Technical

McLeod owned a Bellows plate camera.

## Collections

Bairnsdale Museum (collection includes McLeod's large Bellows plate camera)

East Gippsland Historical Society

George Paton Gallery Archive, University of Melbourne Archives

State Library of Victoria

## Events

### 1981 - 1981

Mona McLeod's work featured in *Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950*

### 2010 - 2010

Mona McLeod's work featured in *Bairnsdale Historical Museum exhibition*.

## Published resources

### **Exhibition Catalogue**

Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950, 1981

### **Book**

Australian Women Photographers 1840 - 1960, Hall, Barbara and Mather, Jenni, 1986

### **Newspaper Article**

Homage to Local Hero, O'Sullivan, Kerrin,

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/archive/travel-old/homage-to-a-local-hero/story-fn3025t0-1225910234401>

### **Author Details**

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