Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6211

Blackburn, Helen Carola

(1918 - 2005)

Born	19181022
Died	20050111, Orange New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Author, Aviator, Journalist, Pilot, Writer

Summary

Helen Blackburn developed a passion for aviation whilst living in America during the early 1940s. She gained her commercial licence in 1945 and later became the federal secretary of the Australian Women Pilots' Association.

Helen's other passion was shell collecting, which she undertook for a number of institutions. In 1984 she donated her extensive collection to the National Museum of Australia.

Details

Bryony Helen Dutton was born in 1918 and grew up on Anlaby Station, the oldest stud sheep station in South Australia, with her three siblings. Due to ongoing teasing by other children about her first name, Bryony, she decided to go by her middle name, Helen.

Helen married U.S. serviceman Captain William Curkeet in 1942 and the pair moved to America. Although their marriage was short-lived, it was her time in America that sparked her passion for aviation. She learned to fly when the United States Government sponsored the Civil Pilot Training Scheme. At the age of 26, she was trained in US Air Force single-primary trainers and gained her commercial license in c.1945. For a time, Helen served as federal secretary of the Australian Women Pilots' Association, as well as president of the Australian section of the Ninety-Nines Inc. In addition to being an ongoing member of both of these organisations, Helen was also a member of the British Women Pilots' Association.

Helen married Richard Blackburn in 1951 and together they moved to Adelaide and started a family. Here she joined the Royal Aero Cub of South Australia where she flew Tiger Moths. Both Helen and her husband were keen flyers and they spent numerous hours roaming Australia by air. For seventeen years they owned a Cessna 172, which they eventually sold in 1979.

Richard was appointed resident judge of the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory in 1966. With her family relocated to the Northern Territory, Helen pursued her passion for collecting shells; a passion which had developed during family holidays at Rocky Point when she was young. Helen often combined her love of aviation and shell collecting, flying to remote areas in her plane in search for shells. She regularly visited Queensland's Great Barrier Reef, and the Kimberley in northwest Australia during the late 1960s.

Due to her skills and reputation for shell collecting, Helen collected for several major institutions, including the Australian, Darwin, Tasmanian and Western Australian Museums, the CSIRO and the University of New South Wales. In fact, one of the shells she presented to the Australian Museum had never before been described, so it was named in her honour: *Cryptomya blackburnae*.

In 1971, the Blackburn's moved to Canberra, where Richard took up a position with the ACT Supreme Court. This allowed Helen to broaden her collection to include shells from the New South Wales south coast. In 1980 Helen published a book on shells, which was entitled *Marine shells of the Darwin area* and in 1984, Helen offered her seashell collection to the National Museum of Australia, which was gratefully accepted.

In addition to aviation and shell collecting, Helen Blackburn was passionate about pollution and enjoyed writing. Prior to having a family, she had worked as both a free-lance journalist and short story writer.

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
Papers of Richard Arthur Blackburn, 1922-1995 [manuscript]

Papers of Geoffrey Dutton, 1898-1998 (bulk 1961-1998) [manuscript]

Papers of Lady Helen Blackburn, 1944-1990 [manuscript]

National Library of Australia
[Biographical cuttings on Helen Blackburn, pilot, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals]

NULL
Helen Blackburn talking to Margaret Travers in Orange, NSW on 30 December 1995. sound recording

National Museum Australia
Lady Helen Blackburn collection

Author Details
Alannah Croom

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