

# The Australian Women's Register

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**Entry type:** Person

**Entry ID:** IMP0014

## Brookes, Mabel Balcombe

(1890 - 1975)

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**Born** 15 June, 1890, Raveloe, South Yarra Victoria Australia

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**Died** 30 April, 1975, South Yarra Victoria Australia

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**Occupation** Author, Community worker, Political candidate

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### Summary

Mabel Balcombe Brookes, who worked for many charitable organisations, was acknowledged as a talented organiser and effective committee member. Her greatest contribution was as president of the Queen Victoria Hospital from 1923-1970. She was appointed as a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1933 and as a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire on 9 June 1955 for charitable and social welfare services.

## Details

Daughter of Harry Emmerton, a solicitor who emigrated from England, and Alice Mabel Maude (née Balcombe), Mabel Balcombe Brookes was born in Victoria. She was educated mainly at home by her father and a series of governesses, after her mother withdrew her from kindergarten, worried that she was developing a bad accent. She spent a year at the family property, The Briars at Mt Martha, recovering from ill-health and while there developed an interest in Australian history and in Napoleon when he was exiled on St Helena. It was Mabel's maternal great-grandfather, William Balcombe, who had worked for the East India Company on the island of St. Helena and hosted Napoleon in his guest pavilion for two and a half months in 1815. In the later years of her life, Mabel would build on the family collection of Napoleonic memorabilia, eventually bequeathing the collection – comprising over 380 items – to the National Gallery of Victoria.

Mabel became engaged to Norman Brookes, a tennis player, who was the first Australian to win Wimbledon, at the age of eighteen, and married him in St Paul's Anglican Cathedral, Melbourne, on 19 April 1911. In 1914, with a baby daughter, she accompanied Brookes on his tennis trips to Europe and the United States of America. During World War I, in 1915, she joined her husband in Cairo where he was working as commissioner for the Australian Branch of the British Red Cross. She assisted in the establishment of a rest home for nurses. On her husband's posting to Mesopotamia, she returned to Melbourne in 1917. At this point she wrote three novels and continued to write on a variety of topics during her life.

In 1918 she served on the committee of the Royal Children's Hospital, then became president of the Children's Frankston Orthopaedic Hospital, the Anglican Babies' Home and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. She was also an original member and a divisional officer of the Girl Guides' Association executive committee, foundation president of the Institute of Almoners and of the Animal Welfare League. She was a member of the Australian Red Cross Society's federal executive and president of the Ladies' Swimming Association.

Mabel Brookes's major contribution was as president of the Queen Victoria Hospital from 1923-1970, where she presided over the addition of three new wings within ten years.

During World War II the Brookes's home became a Red Cross convalescent home. The Brookes family lived in Elm Tree House and entertained Australian and American officers, including Lyndon Baines Johnson, later to become president of the USA. In a more practical contribution to the war effort, Mabel Brookes was commandant of the Australian Women's Air Training Corps and worked at the Maribyrnong munitions factory. She also attempted a political career by standing twice for parliament but was unsuccessful. She stood for the federal seat of Flinders in 1943 as a Woman for Canberra candidate and in 1952 for the state seat of Toorak for the Electoral Reform League.

She was appointed CBE in 1933 and DBE in 1955 for services to hospitals and charity. The French Government appointed her as Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur in 1960 in acknowledgement of her gift to the French nation of the pavilion which Napoleon had occupied on her great-grandfather's estate on St Helena. Monash University conferred on her an honorary LLD in 1967. A travelling scholarship for opera singers was established in her name. Both Sir William Dargie and Clifton Pugh painted her portrait.

Mabel Brookes published her *Memoirs* in 1974. She died at South Yarra on 30 April 1975, survived by her two daughters.

## Published resources

### Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

### Book

Memoirs, Brookes, Mabel Balcombe (1890-1975), 1974

Crowded galleries; with chapters on tennis by Sir Norman Brookes, Brookes, Mabel Balcombe (1890-1975), 1956

Sale catalogue of Australiana from the library of Dame Mabel Brookes., Hince, Kenneth, 1968

St Helena story, Brookes, Mabel Balcombe, 1960

Riders of time, Brookes, Mabel Balcombe, 1967

On the knees of the gods, Brookes, Mabel Balcombe, 1918

Old Desires, Brookes, Mabel Balcombe, 1922

Broken Idols, Brookes, Mabel Balcombe, 1917

### Resource Section

Brookes, Dame Mabel Balcombe (1890-1975), Poynter, J R, 2006,  
<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A130301b.htm>

Dame Mabel Brookes Napoleonic collection, The Briars Historic Park, 2002,  
<http://www.nepeanet.org.au/briars/mabel~1.html>

Lady Mabel Balcombe Brookes, Commonwealth of Australia, department of Prime Minister, 2002,  
[http://www.itsanhonour.gov.au/honours\\_list/resultDetail.cfm?awardsID=872706](http://www.itsanhonour.gov.au/honours_list/resultDetail.cfm?awardsID=872706)

### Edited Book

Who's Who in Australia 1950, Alexander, Joseph A, 1950

### Thesis

An Examination and Assessment of the Dame Mabel Brookes Family Records of Napoleon, Krautschneider, Astrid Britt, 2004

In Her Gift: Activism and Altruism in Australian Women's Philanthropy, 1880-2005, Lemon, Barbara, 2008

### Site Exhibition

Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,  
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html>

In Her Gift: Women Philanthropists in Australian History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2009,  
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/wiph/home.html>

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,  
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

## Archival resources

**National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection**  
Papers of Sir Norman Brookes, 1900-1914 [manuscript]

**State Library of Victoria**  
Letter, 1924 May 31. [manuscript].

**National Archives of Australia, National Office, Canberra**  
Brookes, Dame Mabel

AUTHOR Mabel B Brookes : ADDRESS Melbourne : TITLE OF WORK Old Desires : TYPE OF WORK Literary Work :  
APPLICANT Mabel B Brookes : DATE OF APPLICATION 5 Oct 1922 : DATE COPYRIGHT REGISTERED 30 Oct 1922 :  
WORK ENCLOSED? Yes [ exhibit only ]

Decorations & Awards - Dame Mabel Balcombe Brookes

Functions and Visits - Their Excellencies Sir Paul and Lady Hasluck in Victoria - Dinner in honour of Dame Mabel  
Brookes

AUTHOR Mabel B Brookes : ADDRESS Melbourne : TITLE OF WORK Old Desires

Official Residences - House Guests - Dame Mabel BROOKES, July 1971

**National Archives of Australia, Melbourne Office**  
Brookes, Mabel (Mrs) - correspondence regarding service with Red Cross

### Author Details

Rosemary Francis

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