Entry type: Person
Entry ID: PR00471

McConnel, Ursula Hope

(1888 - 1957)

Born	18881027, Cressbrook, near Toogoolawah Queensland Australia
Died	19571106, Queensland Australia
Occupation	Anthropologist, Photographer

Summary

Ursula McConnel is recognised as an influential anthropologist of the Cape York Peninsula and a talented amateur photographer. McConnel used her photographs to illustrate publications of her research in magazines and ethnographic journals such as *Oceania* and *Walkabout*. She was also a collector of Indigenous artefacts.

Content added for original entry by Lee Butterworth, last modified 11 June 2009

As one of the first students of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown's Australian tenureship, Ursula McConnel conducted ethnographic fieldwork as a participant-observer in western Cape York Peninsula between 1927 and 1934. She worked chiefly among the Wik peoples, particularly the Wik Mungkan based at Aurukun Mission. As part of her anthropological study McConnel amassed a substantial material culture collection of over five hundred artefacts. Together with Donald Thomson's collection from the same area, it forms a unique record of Wik Mungkan material culture from that period. In 2006 a large collection of professional papers belonging to Ursula was discovered and donated to the South Australian Museum.

Details

Ursula McConnel was an academic and a talented amateur photographer who used her photographs to illustrate her articles, which were published in magazines and ethnographic journals such as *Walkabout*.

Ursula Hope McConnel was born at Cressbrook, Queensland on 27 October 1888. The eighth child of ten, her parents were James Henry McConnel and Mary Elizabeth (née Kent). They were farmers and graziers. She attended the Brisbane High School for Girls and went on to the New England Girls School in Armidale, NSW. A gifted student, she obtained first class honours in Philosophy at the University of Queensland. In 1905 she went to London where she took classes in history, literature and music at King's College. Two years later in 1897 she returned to Australia and enrolled at the University of Queensland, where she completed a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in 1918 and an MA with first class honours in 1921. Following this, in 1923 McConnel began a PhD in anthropology at University College in London, under the supervision of (Sir) Grafton Elliot Smith and William Perry. However, she did not complete her doctorate due to ill health and loneliness, and in 1926 returned to Australia. This was to prove a fateful decision, since it prevented her from ever attaining an academic position. She subsequently studied at the University of Sydney under the anthropologist Alfred Radcliff-Browne, who trained her in the techniques of fieldwork.

Working under Radcliffe-Brown, the focus of her academic endeavour was an ethnographic study of the Aboriginal people of the people of the Cape York Peninsula and their culture. Beginning in 1927 she undertook five field trips to the Cape York Peninsula and conducted research into the Wik Mungkan. As part of her research project she took numerous photographs documenting the people and their artefacts. Joan Kerr in *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book* has suggested that these photographs differ little from those taken by other male academics. She adds that there was little interest in women's issues within the scholarly world at the time (Kerr 106). One such photograph is *Food is carried in Dilly Bags Suspended from the Forehead'* (1936). Used to illustrate her article 'Cape York Peninsula: Development and Control,' it made no mention of women's work, its only focus being the artefacts. She used the same photograph for her article 'Inspiration and Design in Aboriginal Art.'

McConnel's more 'private, informal photographs,' however, told a very different story to the official photographs. From these it is clear that she did indeed develop a particular interest in women's artefacts and women's business. The same

photographs also show a more personal response to her sitters, their relaxed faces and postures reflecting the connection that had formed between her and the Indigenous people she met.

McConnel published *Myths of the Munkan* (Melbourne, 1957) as well as numerous articles, many of which were published in *Oceania* and *Walkabout*. She was also a collector of Indigenous artefacts; these are held by a number of museums in Australia. While still working in Cape York, McConnel was awarded a Rockefeller fellowship to study under Edward Sapir at Yale University. Sapir was the pioneer of anthropological linguistics and this was consequently to become an important component of her fieldwork alongside photographic documentation and the collection and description of artefacts.

McConnel never married, despite her striking good looks. At a time when most women were dependent financially on husbands, she made enough money to support herself through her investment in wool bonds and was able to retire in the mid-1930s. For the next 20 years she lived in Creswell. She died suddenly of a brain haemorrhage aged 69 in Brisbane on 6 November 1957.

Sadly, academic recognition of and respect for her achievements only came after her death. Today, along with the work of Donald Thomson, her publications form the foundations of present-day anthropological research on Western Cape York Peninsula.

Collections

McConnel Collection, South Australian Museum

Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

South Australia Museum Archives

Ursula McConnel Collection, National Museum Australia

Content added for original entry by Lee Butterworth, last modified 11 June 2009

Ursula Hope McConnel was born on the family property, Cressbrook, at Toogolawah, Queensland, to James Henry McConnel and Mary Elizabeth, née Kent. Her aunt, Mary Bundock, later Mrs Murray-Prior, was a significant early collector of Aboriginal artefacts from the Richmond River district of New South Wales and may have encouraged Ursula in developing a professional interest in the Aboriginal people of Queensland.

After school at The Brisbane High School for Girls (Somerville House), and the New England Girls Grammar School, Armidale (New South Wales), Ursula went to London. She took courses in history, politics, literature and music between 1905 and 1907 at the women’s department, King’s College. Ursula enrolled at the University of Queensland in 1913, graduating BA with first class honours in 1918. She was appointed honorary demonstrator in the Philosophy Department where her brother-in-law, Elton Mayo, was professor. In 1922 she returned to London and enrolled as a PhD student in cultural anthropology at University College, London.

In 1926 McConnel abandoned her thesis and returned to Australia to commence fieldwork among Aboriginal Australians in North Queensland with Professor Radcliffe-Brown of Sydney University. She stayed at the Presbyterian Mission at Aurukun as the guest of Reverend William and Geraldine (Gerry) Mackenzie, the friends and helpers of Frances Derham. McConnel, however, was publicly critical of the mission, and as a result she and other anthropologists were banned from it. In 1930 she received a grant from the Australian National Research Council and went to Cairns. From there, she and her friend Margaret Spence returned on horseback to Cape York, despite mission opposition. Although she published scholarly articles in *Oceania* and was awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship to study under Edward Sapir at Yale University, Connecticut, United States of Americia in 1931, she was excluded from academic employment (which she bitterly resented) and denied a PhD on the grounds of insufficient publications.

When research and fieldwork funding also dried up in the late 1930s, McConnel went into semi-retirement. She purchased a house at Eagle Heights, south of Brisbane in the late 1940s and continued to write up her field data on the Wik-Mungkana for publication, producing her book, *Myths of the Munkan* (1957), with help from her friend the poet Judith Wright, in the year of her death. The importance of McConnel’s scholarly contribution was recognized after her death. With those of Donald Thomson, her publications form the foundations of present-day anthropological research on Western Cape York Peninsula. She had devoted much of her life to this endeavour, driven by a sense of duty and justice towards the Aboriginals with whom she had worked.

Published resources

Book

Native arts and industries on the Archer, Kendall and Holroyd Rivers, Cape York Peninsula, North Queensland, McConnel, Ursula H, 1953

Myths of the Munkan, McConnel, Ursula H, 1957

Journeys to the Interior, Rothwell, Nicholas, 2010

Brilliant Careers - Women collectors and illustrators in Queensland, McKay, Judith, 1997

First in Their Field: Women and Australian Anthropology, Marcus, Julie; Lepervanche, Marie de; McBryde, Isabel; Prior, Mary Ellen Murray; White, Isobel; Morris, Miranda; O'Gorman, Anne; Marcus, Julie and Cheater, Christine, 1993

Unexpected Treasure: Surprise Discovery of Early Anthropological Papers by Ursula McConnel in Adelaide, Sutton, Peter, 2006

Book Section

The snake, the serpent and the rainbow : Ursula McConnel and Aboriginal Australians, O'Gorman, Anne, 1993

Ursula McConnel, Kerr, Joan, 1995

Only Sticks and Bark: Ursula McConnel - Her Collecting and Collection, O'Gorman Peruso, Anne, 2008

Resource Section

McConnel, Ursula Hope (1888 - 1957), O'Gorman Perusco Anne, 2006,
http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A150214b.htm

Surprise Discovery of Early Anthropological Papers in Adelaide, Sutton, P, 2006,
http://www.aas.asn.au/Newsletter/2006/103%20AAS%20Newsletter%20September%202006.pdf

Ursula McConnel, Kerr, Joan, 2011,
http://www.daao.org.au/bio/ursula-hope-mcconnel/biography/

Journal Article

Cape York Peninsula: Development and Control, McConnel, Ursula

Ursula McConnel : A Woman of Vision, O'Gorman, Anne

Ethnographic Artifacts and Value Transformations, Henry, Rosita, Otto, Ton and Wood, Michael,
http://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/29209/4/29209_Henry_et_al_2013.pdf

Australian Anthropologists and Political Action 1925-1960, Sutton, Peter

Ursula McConnel's Tin Trunk: A Remarkable Recovery, Sutton, P., 2010,
http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/tandf/trssa/2010/00000134/00000001/art00007

Thesis

Feminist Anthropology Thesis Topic: Re-reading Australian Women Ethnographers; a Feminist Appraisal of the Anthropological Work of Phyllis Kaberry, Olive Pink and Ursula McConnel in the 1930s, Leslie, Christina, 1995

Ursula McConnel: The Archaeology of an Anthropologist, O'Gorman, Anne, 1989

Perhaps if there had been more women in the north, the story would have been different: Gender and Race in North Queensland 1840-1930., Henningham, Nikki, 2000

Edited Book

Heritage : the national women's art book, 500 works by 500 Australian women artists from colonial times to 1955, Kerr, Joan, 1995

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition

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

Archival resources

The University of Adelaide, Barr Smith Library Rare Books & Special Collections
Sir John Burton Cleland (1878-1971) - Papers, principally relating to anthropology and medicine

South Australian Museum Archives
Letters from Ursula McConnel to Fry

Oceania vol. Xxl

McConnel, Ursula Hope (AA 191)

John Oxley Library, Manuscripts and Business Records Collection
Ursula McConnel

Author Details
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