

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6008

Mackay, Helen

(1903 - 1999)

Born	1 January, 1903, Scotland
Died	31 December, 1999, Western Australia Australia
Occupation	Professional photographer

Summary

Helen Mackay worked at a photography studio in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, where she specialised in portraiture.

Details

Helen Mackay (known as Ella) was born in 1903. Her father was T.F. Mackay, a professional photographer who had trained in Glasgow at the Studios of T. & R. Annan. The family left Scotland and arrived in Perth, Western Australia in 1916. The following year T.F. Mackay took over J.J. Dwyer's photography studio in Kalgoorlie, c.1917, and operated a very successful studio of his own.

Ella had shown an interest in drawing from an early age. Clearly talented in this area, she was awarded three certificates by the Royal Drawing Society in June 1924.

Mackay was also fascinated by photography. From the age of 12 she began visiting her father when he was at work at his studio. Mackay began working at this studio after she left school at the age of 15. Her father trained her in all aspects of photography, from retouching and mounting techniques to film processing. Her father put Mackay in charge of the amateur film processing section of the studio and eventually made her an assistant studio operator.

Her work was studio based and encompassed the photography of babies and weddings, as well as portraiture. The compositions possessed a formal quality and used 'subtle lighting and dramatic tinting' (Hall 31).

Mackay chose not to marry, focusing on photography instead. She once remarked that '[a]lthough many women were entering professions, if I had married I would probably have retired, not because of conventions, but because I don't think one can succeed in two jobs. One has to choose and concentrate on the most important work: photography was my main love' (Hall 31). Mackay died in 1999, at the age of 96.

Collections

Burtenshaw Collection of Photography, State Library of Western Australia

Mackay, T.F. (Thomas Faulkner) & Dwyer, J.J. (John Joseph), 1869-1928 (1920). T.F. Mackay collection of photographs of Kalgoorlie

Published resources

Book

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

Archival resources

State Library of Western Australia

Papers. [manuscript]

Author Details

Anne Maxwell (with Morfia Grondas and Lucy Van)

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