



Zora Cross, 1919,
photographer unknown
State Library of NSW,
PXA 690 / 3

Zora Cross

1890-1964

A short history

'I only know you, brother of my blood,
Have gone; and many a friend,
Trampled and broken in the Flanders mud,
Found Youth's most bitter end.
God! You are not yet one with the kind dust
Before new war-horns blow
And sleek-limbed statesmen in their halls break trust
To tell of other woe.

These profound words were written by Zora Cross, resident of Glenbrook in 1921. They are contained in her poem 'Elegy On An Australian Schoolboy' Verse 6. <https://allpoetry.com/Elegy-On-An-Australian-Schoolboy>.

The 2019 March meeting of the Glenbrook & District Historical Society brought the pleasant surprise of a donation for the Museum from foundation member Tim Miers. It was an early edition of the trailblazing poetry book *Songs of Love and Life* (1917) by Zora Cross who resided in Glenbrook from 1919 until her death in 1964. Joan Peard introduced the book to the meeting and explained that it had been owned by Tim's mother who had received it as a gift from her friend Zora! The ownership of this book by the historical society is a significant addition to the resources of the museum. A short commentary on this book is provided at the end of this article. This small pamphlet hopes to provide some background and understanding of Glenbrook's famous resident Zora Cross.

Who was Zora Bernice May Cross?

Born: 18th October 1890 at Eagle Farm, Queensland.

Parents Ernest William Cross (auctioneer originally from Sydney) and Mary Louisa Eliza Ann, nee Skyring, whose family was pioneer farming family in Queensland. It is claimed that Zora's great grandfather, Dan Skyring, introduced the pineapple to agriculture in Queensland. Sydney Morning Herald Thursday 9 October 1952, page 7, nla.news-article18285225.3



Early Life:

The family's fortunes failed during the 1890's Depression and 1893 bank crash. Life was renewed by moving to the Skyring family's dairy farm near Gympie, in Central Queensland. Zora was encouraged by her parents to write and her talent was fostered. Starting around the age of twelve, Zora was able to have many letters and stories published in the 'Children's Corner' of *Town & Country Journal*. She wrote about her life as a child, the farm and the bush environment; related settler stories about their relationships with the local Aboriginal communities; and recorded her experiences during the Federation celebrations and also the fate of soldiers returning from the Boer War. By a remarkable fate, it was Ethel Turner, of *Seven Little Australians* fame (<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/turner-ethel-mary-8885>), who was the editor of the journal and who recognized Zora's talent. In later life, both women became friends. A recent excellent study of Zora's life and work by Cathy Perkins, estimates that Zora had achieved over 30000 words of published work as a child. Perkins states: 'I could find no other child who contributed as many words to the newspaper during this period or who shared as much detail about their life'. (Cathy Perkins 2016, *Zora Cross* MA thesis, pps 18 & 26)

https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/15882/1/perkins_c_thesis.pdf

Education and Career:

Over her life, Zora was a schoolteacher, actor (stage), columnist, journalist, novelist, poet, children's author, speech teacher, theatre critic and more <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cross-zora-bernice-may-5828>

Zora's secondary education was at Ipswich Girls' Grammar School. Zora then moved to Sydney to live with an aunt, initially working at Burwood Superior Public School and Sydney Girls' High School.

She achieve professional teaching status after studies at Sydney Teachers' College from 1909 to 1910 and taught for three years during which she married an actor, Stuart Smith and experienced the tragic event of her baby daughter's death. She left Smith and continued to write journalism and poetry, while working as an actress and vaudeville performer. Among other publications and over the decades, Zora wrote poems, articles and serials in the *Bulletin*, *The Australian Women's Mirror*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *the Mercury (Hobart)*, *Sydney Mail*, *The Sun (Sydney)*, and the *Brisbane Courier*. Dorothy Green describes Zora as having 'immense courage and enterprise' in the manner in which she found ways to support herself (<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cross-zora-bernice-may-5828>)

In the 1920's Zora was engaged at her alma mater Sydney Teachers' College to lecture about Australian Literature. She produced once of the earliest books about literature of Australia, *An*

Introduction to Australian Literature (Sydney: Teachers' College Press, 1922).

Zora wrote a number of novels over her life but none achieved the literary success of *Songs of Love and Life* (1917). She also wrote a number of poetry books including *A Song of Mother Love* (1916), *The Lilt of Life* (1918) and *The City of Riddle-Me-Ree* (1918). Zora made many, many contributions of poetry, short stories and serials to newspapers and magazines. Perkins describes Zora as a 'working machine' (Cathy Perkins 2016, *Zora Cross* MA thesis, p. 85) https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/15882/1/perkins_c_thesis.pdf

In later life Zora worked on a Roman theme with *The Victor* being published in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1934. Zora's ambition was to write a trilogy and she continued to work on the project until her death.

Family:

After an earlier relationship and then a marriage to Stuart Smith in 1911, Zora partnered with writer, poet, and former NZ Congregationalist preacher David McKee Wright (born 6 August 1869) and twenty-one years her senior. Zora had met David during his time as literary editor of the *Bulletin* magazine. They resided in Glenbrook in a cottage in what is now called Wright Street. Unfortunately, David died of a heart attack on 5 February 1928 aged 58 years. Michael Sharkey has commented that Wright was 'A gifted speaker ... and was remembered for his truthfulness and outstanding generosity to fellow writers'. <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wright-david-mckee-9200>



Photo credit: <https://www.poemhunter.com/david-mckee-wright/>
<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2w33/wright-david-mckee>

For further information on Wright please refer to the above links as a starting point.

Over her life, Zora had 3 children, Ted, Davidina and April, and another who died at birth. Zora became a widow when she was 37 years old.

Dorothy Green has commented elsewhere that 'Wright's sudden death in 1928 left Zora in great financial difficulties. Her struggle to support her three children, mainly by freelance journalism, makes a painful story, though she remained cheerful, free of self-pity and simply got on with her work. Her younger daughter remembers her as 'a delightful and amusing parent, who never for one moment lost sight of her priority as a writer and a poetess'. <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cross-zora-bernice-may-5828>

To assist in supplementing income, Zora received a Commonwealth Literary Fund pension of £2 a fortnight from 1930. Despite this financial support 'the family were often short of the bare necessities.' <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cross-zora-bernice-may-5828> (As a comparison, the adult male basic wage in 1930 was set at approximately £2 a week <https://guides.slv.vic.gov.au/whatitcost/basicwage>)

These few facts underscore Zora's tenacity to live her life in spite of deep pain and challenges.

What is Zora's historical importance?

In many ways Zora was a woman before her time.

Zora was a strong and talented woman who believed in her rights to self-determination. One can recognise in Zora some elements of the feminist movement of the 1960s and its development towards the contemporary feminist expression of the 'Me Too' Movement. Thus, she has been given the title of 'proto-feminist' by the *Old Queensland Poetry website* <http://www.oldqldpoetry.com/index.php/zora-cross>.

Zora contributed to the world through her literary and journalistic skills for children and adults. She also contributed to the fledgling notion of rights of women and to many other social issues.

Over five years from the late 1920s Zora recognised the contributions of thirty-eight women poets, novelists and short story writers. to Australian literature by writing a feature article on each person. They were published monthly in the *Australian Woman's Mirror* under the pseudonym Bernice May, these being her middle names. (Cathy Perkins, *Zora Cross*, MA thesis, 2016. page 80, see also 97) https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/15882/1/perkins_c_thesis.pdf. These contributions are still recognised as important accounts of those women writers.

Zora's childhood and later accounts of her family's relationships with local tribal Aboriginal people are still valued.

Zora's book *Daughters of the Seven Mile* (1924) showed 'a then unusual interest in Queensland settings and some awareness of developing social and economic stresses in Australia' (D. Green <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cross-zora-bernice-may-5828>).

Writing was at the core of her being.

As such, she became part of the bohemian culture of the arts community and counted prominent literary figures Ethel Turner, Mary Gilmore and Eleanor Dark as friends. Her work appeared beside that of Henry Lawson, Mary Gilmore, Vance Palmer. Christopher Brennan admired her ability to write sonnets. Zora knew the famous Lindsay's including Norman Lindsay who did not think that, as a woman, she could be capable of writing about adult relationships. She proved him wrong. Vickery and Dever in their introduction to Australian Women Writers 1900-1950 Exhibition at Monash University 2007 explain that 'Many women writers attempted to sidestep the presumptions of gender through the use of pseudonyms. For women writers who kept their gendered signature, the two realms were often collapsed, especially if they wrote openly about sexuality and intimacy.... (Zora Cross' writing) was read as confirmation of their sexual exploits... their writing became circumscribed by the gossip of their lives.... Cross struggled against it for the rest of her life.' (Page 4 *The Glasshouse catalogue07 zora cross*. https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/158242/catalogue07)

Cross broke new ground for female writers in Australia because she dared to express intimate feelings of females across all their experiences. The writer of Zora's profile on the *Old Queensland Poetry website* <http://www.oldqldpoetry.com/index.php/zora-cross> states that 'this might sound exciting, but in fact the poems in this (*Songs of Love and Life*) and subsequent books when read today are difficult to immediately understand; they are full of classical allusion, and mix religious language and expressions of self-love with archaisms.' Zora's contributions to other topics in poem form, such as the 'Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy' have better stood the test of time and changing cultural understanding.

During the 1910s to at least the 1930s Zora was she was one of Australia's best-known authors. She

had celebrity status.

- An introduction to a serial written by Zora for the Sydney Mail (Wednesday 12 August 1925, page 16) states that Zora is 'probably one the busiest woman writer in Australia. Her work is done in Glenbrook, on the Blue Mountains, where she is an ardent grower of flowers and fruit, and where she absorbs much of the colour that makes her a vivid writer'. (nla.news-article160083924.3)
- Such celebrity status lead to magazine profiles, akin to those that appear today in magazines. One such article 'Zora Cross by F.C. Brown' appeared in *The Australian Woman's Mirror* March 20, 1928.



The photograph above appeared with the profile. Intriguingly, this article was published about six weeks after her partner David Wright had died. It was written by an 'FC Brown' who reports that he is a friend. The article did not refer to Wright nor to Cross' feeling or situation since.

The article concludes with: 'Zora has no wish to travel, no love for expensive hats, frocks or shoes, would like to conduct a girls' newspaper and, except for purely "literary" work has no method in her writing ... She has never attended a race meeting, nor heard Madame Melba sing, nor Mr. Hughes speak, and she doesn't want a Ford car. She loves dictionaries, and her favourite possession is the Oxford, which occupies a corner of her study.' (F. C. Brown, 'Zora Cross', *Australian Woman's Mirror*, 20 March 1928, p. 10. nla.obj-398813274)

- A third example of Zora's celebrity status in the 1920s is an article in the Sun newspaper which presents Zora's advice for making a decent cup of tea! (Sun, Thursday 23 August 1923, page 13 nla.news-article224098814.3) *Readers are advised to comprehend some of Zora's statements in the cultural context of the era especially in the reference to 'negroes'. There is also some 'tongue in cheek' language and a plea for Australian agriculture.*

'MY FAVORITE RECIPE

The Australian woman has long had a reputation for versatility, and Zora Cross, at her Glenbrook home, can turn a pancake as neatly as she can turn a sonnet. This is her favorite recipe — a method of making what she calls "Australian Nectar".

ZORA CROSS

Set a suitable quantity of fresh rain water to boil in a well-seasoned copper kettle. Thoroughly cleanse, and warm to about 190 degrees a silver vessel (silver-plate is an excellent substitute). In the vessel place, at the rate of one teaspoonful for each consumer, and one additional as an offering to the gods, the noblest trade product of the British Orient (which ought to be grown in Queensland in sufficient quantity to meet our vast national needs). Add the boiling water and sprinkle over the infusion about two grains (troy) of finely granulated sugar. Leave the mixture exactly 95 seconds. In a suitable number of porcelain cups (Royal Doulton will do if genuine Chinese are not available) put the sugar and fresh milk (not cream) to taste. Pour out the infusion at 11.15 a.m.

This dish— known to the elect as morning tea — is, in my opinion, the best which comes from the kitchen, and marks the height of our civilisation. It is still unknown to the majority of Americans, to the provincial British and the negroes.'

Zora's poetry about war played a significant part in helping others to understand and express the human condition and suffering of war.

The poems 'Australia in England' (1917) and 'An Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy' (1921) are two fine examples. The critically acclaimed elegy was written in memory of her brother Jack who died in the First World War. Perkins relates that 'as a result of that elegy, Cross has been counted among Australia's significant poets of the First World War. (Cathy Perkins 2016, *Zora Cross* MA thesis, p.8) https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/15882/1/perkins_c_thesis.pdf

Zora's support for the Red Cross remained undiminished all her life. During WW1 she moved back to Queensland, funding herself by running an elocution studio in Brisbane, and then touring the state's north with a theatrical group raising funds for the war effort. She used the proceeds of her book of poetry *Motherlove* to aid the Red Cross. During her decades in Glenbrook Zora spent many hours supporting and speaking at events organised by the local Red Cross group. This even included her writing a script and music for a fundraising pageant on the Red Cross Story. (Nepean Times Thursday 3 December 1942, page 3 nla.news-article117891613).

Zora's letter in 1921 to George Robertson of publishers *Angus & Robertson* demonstrates Zora's attitude to writing about war: 'Really you never know a nation until you find out what its pens have been doing,' she writes in 1921. 'The swords don't matter a spoonful of blood. Ink outlasts all the gore that was unnecessarily spilt.' (cited in Cathy Perkins 2016 *Zora Cross*, MA thesis, page 68). https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/15882/1/perkins_c_thesis.pdf

Zora was a woman who worked to support her children.

Upon the sudden death of David McKee in February 1928, Zora and her family were plunged into sadness and poverty. She wrote to George Robertson 'I have been in great grief and worry and distress' and she tells Mary Gilmore 'she has had 'a bit of a break-down' (Cathy Perkins, *Zora Cross*, MA thesis, 2016. Pages 45 & 76) https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/15882/1/perkins_c_thesis.pdf.

She showed concern about the environment especially native flora: 'Visitors coming to Australia want to be reminded of our own glorious bush when they arrive, and not Mexico.' (SMH Wednesday 22 June 1932, page 11 nla.news-article28032303).

She argued for better inclusion of study of Australian literature for schools: 'Surely it is time a section of the English paper refer directly to Australian literature in the interests of young Australians (SMH Monday 4 December 1939, page 5 nla.news-article17637221).

She advocated about the adequacy of funding for the arts:

'Meanwhile the maximum literary pension is £4 a week, which no writer can live on and produce work as well to-day that is, work of any consequence. As regards this maximum I quote the secretary of the fund: "The question of a general increase in the rate of pensions is under consideration, but a decision is not likely in the immediate future." '

(SMH Saturday 27 September 1952, page 2 nla.news-article18283818).

During the period of preparations for celebrating the 150th Anniversary of Captain Phillip's landing Zora advocated for the establishment of a National Theatre as one of the ways to mark the

anniversary:

'It must surely give us pause to realise that, whereas in 1789, the inhabitants of Australia were capable of amusing themselves theatrically, today in 1937 in our thousands of theatres in every part of the country, despite our highly developed schools and universities, and the fact that Australian-born men and women, all of them partly and many of them wholly trained by theatrical teachers, dancers and elocutionists at home are appearing with success and honour on the most important stages of the world, we ourselves are content to be amused by people of other lands.' (SMH, Wednesday 15 December 1937, page 6).

Zora's comments on the preservation of Australian history may be appreciated by the reader:

'TO THE EDITOR OF THE HERALD: HENRY LAWSON'S HOME.

Sir, -While it seems fitting and proper that an obelisk should be erected to Henry Lawson's memory near his boyhood home, I fail to see why the home itself cannot be preserved. It is not as if the dwelling-place of our greatest poet were just any haphazard building erected casually. It was built by the poet's father. Motorists have all too few places of interest to visit in Australia that any such as this should be allowed to disappear. A hundred times during my residence here I have been asked by motorists for particulars of the century-old Blaxland Inn, which, like the Lawson home, might well be bringing in revenue as a place of historic interest. Australians, as well as visitors, are keenly interested in Australia historically, and Lawson's home, wherein the young dreamer found his soul, is a romantic relic of the now vanished Australia the poet sang. Can we not preserve it for all time as symbolic of Lawson's era? I am, etc,

Glenbrook, Feb 12. ZORA CROSS'
(SMH, Wednesday 14 February 1940, page 6)



Death:

Zora died at Glenbrook of a heart attack on 23rd January 1964 aged 83 years. She was buried with Anglican rites at Emu Plains cemetery. She was survived by her son Ted, and her younger daughter April McKee (Wright) Hersey and her family in Glenbrook.

Songs of Love and Life (1917)

A copy of this poetry book was donated in March 2019 to Glenbrook & District Historical Society Museum by Mr Tim Miers, whose mother originally had been gifted with the book by her friend in Glenbrook, Zora Cross.

Songs of Love and Life catapulted Zora Cross to fame in Australia and overseas, so much so, that Michael Sharkey (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/michael-sharkey>) noted that her name "was fashionably given to children born in subsequent years, and even bestowed upon a race horse" (cited in Vickery and Dever page 20 *The Glasshouse catalogue07 zora cross*.
https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/158242/catalogue07)

Popularity and financial success:

Perkins reports that the poetry book consisted of '60 sonnets, 36 other poems and a portrait of the author ...(and during the war it was reprinted three times and sold approximately 4000 copies) ... a decent number in a population of five million. (cited in Cathy Perkins 2016 *Zora Cross*, MA thesis, page 1).
https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/15882/1/perkins_c_thesis.pdf

The first edition, financed by Zora's mother Mary Cross, sold out in two days! This encouraged Angus and Robertson to finance further printings and to begin a long professional relationship between Zora and the company.

Literary and Social Impacts:

Vickery and Dever explain that 'The collection contains two quite different sets of poems, a series of girlhood poems and the love sonnets. In the former, girlhood is a state separate from the realities of the modern world. They echo the poetry of Mabel Forrest and Dorothea Mackellar in being filled with witchery, spells, faerys, and fayness. In contrast to the girl-poems, the volume's central group of poems, the sixty "Love Sonnets" do away with concealment (of sexual feelings and desire)In bringing both kinds of poems together in the one collection, Zora draws an inevitable comparison between the freedom of affection that girlhood allows and the bohemian desires more associated with the New Woman. Their difference is revealed to be of discursive degree: girlish sexual desire is described as "gladness" rather than "bliss," a girl merely "cuddles" rather than in a clinging embrace.' (Page 20 *The Glasshouse catalogue07 zora cross*.
https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/158242/catalogue07)

Love Sonnet Number Xxix is one poem from Songs of Love and Life.

Dearest, there is no part of us, but air
And earth are counterparts. Your fragrant eyes
Touching my own, some essence of the skies
Instil therein, and all your warm, brown hair
Smells of the sun's slow passion, fine and fair.
I cannot touch your hands but I surprise
Some element of summer; and the sighs
Of stars from your red lips I seem to share.

O Love...Love...Love...Dearer than God to me.
Earth of the earth are we and light of light.
God-born, God-breathing, all our scented souls

In Death will glow, gladdening eternity.
So give me love...all love...this perfect night
As round our naked limbs its full fire rolls.

Initial verses of two examples of the 'girl poems' are:

Memory

Late, late last night, when the whole world slept,
Along to the garden of dreams I crept.
And I pulled the bell of an old, old house
Where the moon dipped down like a little white mouse.
I tapped the door and I tossed my head:
"Are you in, little girl? Are you in?" I said.
And while I waited and shook with cold
Through the door tripped me---just eight years old.....

Books

Oh, bury me in books when I am dead,
Fair quarto leaves of ivory and gold,
And silk octavos, bound in brown and red,
That tales of love and chivalry unfold.

Heap me in volumes of fine vellum wrought,
Creamed with the close content of silent speech;
Wrap me in silent tapestries of thought
From some old epic out of common reach.....

These poems and a number of others were reprinted in various anthologies that made their way into schools over the decades for student study. One anthology that readers may recall is *The Wide Brown Land* by Mackaness and Mackaness.

Vickery and Dever also note the favourable comments by early twentieth century Australian poet Christopher Brennan that 'he felt that he had before him "the real stuff of poetry". Zora's sonnets sometimes reminded him "without any copying, without any reminiscence-of the best sonnet-writers, from Rossetti back to Shakespeare". (Page 22 *The Glasshouse catalogue07 zora cross*.

https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/158242/catalogue07

Dorothy Green comments that 'The sixty love-sonnets in the book were the first sustained expression in Australian poetry of erotic experience from a woman's point of view, a fusion of sensuousness and religiosity, rather than sensuality; they attracted favourable if somewhat startled reviews.' Green's opinion is that Zora's sonnets in *Songs of Love and Life* were expressions of her love for David McKee Wright rather than an uninhibited attitude to multiple relationships and that her best work is to be found beyond the poems in *Songs of Love and Life*: 'Zora Cross had a true lyric gift, revealed best perhaps in some of her children's verse: for example, the charming *The City of Riddle-mee-ree* (1918), and in more sombre tones in the fine *Elegy on an Australian Schoolboy* (1921),

<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cross-zora-bernice-may-5828>

It is hoped that the above information gives readers a sense of the Zora's work displayed in *Songs of Love and Life*.

Recommended Further Reading: *The Shelf Life of Zora Cross*: Cathy Perkins 2016, Zora Cross MA thesis https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/15882/1/perkins_c_thesis.pdf