

Marie Byles

A Spirited Life



Mitchell Library, SLNSW

Marie Byles and Marjorie Edgar Jones on Crystal Peak, New Zealand, 1935

Marie Beuzeville Byles (1900–1979) was a woman of energy and vision. Throughout her life Marie became known as a committed conservationist, the first practicing female solicitor in New South Wales, mountaineer, explorer and avid bushwalker, feminist, author and an original member of the Buddhist Society in NSW. Her property *Ahimsa* was bequeathed to the National Trust in 1970.

This exhibition was produced by The National Trust of Australia (NSW) to tell the story of Marie's extraordinary life through the extensive archive of photographic images that she bequeathed to the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW and additional material from Trust archives.



Portrait of Marie at Presbyterian Ladies College, Pymble, 1917

National Trust of Australia (NSW), archives

‘True to ourselves’

Marie Beuzeville Byles’ liberal upbringing

Born in 1900 in Cheshire, to English progressive-minded parents who valued individuality along with arduous tramps in the countryside, Marie developed a respect for self discipline and the environment. Marie’s mother Ida was a suffragette, vegetarian, tee-totaller and artist who encouraged Marie to be economically independent and to develop her mind. Her father, Cyril, was an ardent campaigner against fenced land in England which prevented public access for recreational walks. He involved his children in these protests.

In 1911 the Byles family arrived in Australia where her father took up a position as railway signal engineer. They found a block of land situated near bush land at Beecroft to build their large house, *Chilworth*. Two years later, Marie chose to be educated at Presbyterian Ladies’ College at Croydon from 1914–1915. As part of the select senior girls she was chosen for the newly established Presbyterian Ladies College at Pymble, which she attended in 1916, and as a boarder in 1917. She excelled, and became Prefect and dux in 1916 and Head Prefect and dux in the following year.

‘We cannot be true to ourselves unless we are indifferent to what others think and say about us.’

MARIE BYLES, QUOTING HER MOTHER IN HER UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY ‘MANY LIVES IN ONE’



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Chilworth with tennis court under construction, Beecroft, 1912

The house was named after Ida Byles’ childhood home in England.



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Seawards at Sunrise Hill, Palm Beach

In 1914 the Byles family purchased *Seawards*, which was designed with 12-foot verandahs on which the family slept. Marie remembered that the house ‘gathered around it the atmosphere of happiness, the laughter and joy, not only of children and later of young men and women but also the older people who came.’

MARIE BYLES UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY ‘MANY LIVES IN ONE’



Mitchell Library, S/NSW

‘Cliss and I swatting’. Marie with school friend Clissa Wilson

Having been ‘struck’ with Miss Mackness, a second mistress at PLC Croydon and the first Headmistress of PLC Pymble, Marie continued the friendship into adulthood.

‘When I returned from a trip around the world and hung out my sign as a young solicitor, with no clients, Miss Mackness encouraged me to write “By Cargo Boat and Mountain” so as to occupy my time until the clients began to come.’

‘A NOTE BY THE DONOR’ AS PART OF A GIFT OF A BOOK ‘MISS PICKLE’, WRITTEN BY CONSTANCE MACKNESS, DONATED TO THE LIBRARY OF PLC CROYDON. 22ND JULY 1964



**Marie at graduation,
University of Sydney**

Marie described her time at Law School as a 'lone female very much afraid of men and without sex attraction in the midst of an uproarious class of over one hundred young men.'

MARIE BYLES, UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY, 'MANY LIVES IN ONE'
National Trust of Australia (NSW) Archives

'I was fated for the law ... pioneering in law was the most important, and all other happenings, as it were, hung on this.'

MARIE BYLES, UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY, 'MANY LIVES IN ONE'

'Pioneering in law'

The female solicitor

Marie was one of the growing number of women to attend the University of Sydney. In 1921 she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts and in 1924 a Bachelor of Laws. She was the first woman to be admitted as a solicitor in NSW in 1924, and was the first woman to establish a legal practice in 1929. Marie operated two successful law practices — one in Eastwood and the other in the city — until she retired in 1970. During this time she gave young women opportunities to participate in the legal profession.

'The business in Eastwood built up because she had the reputation of getting things done so quickly and that was almost unknown in a legal office, she was notorious.' (Employee, Ruth Milton, interview with Gillian Coote 1983)

In 1932 she joined The Women's Club, which was created in 1901 to provide a place where women interested in public, professional, scientific and artistic work could meet.

Although Marie's law practice was general in nature, she wrote articles against women changing their name on marriage so as to protect their financial assets, and also worked to ensure just divorce settlements for female clients.



Mitchell Library, S.N.S.W.

June Ayres, office employee, 1947



Mitchell Library, S.N.S.W.

**Ruth Milton, book keeper,
sitting on her car, 1949**

Marie described her female staff as 'a marvelous group, always helping each other and the office ... without such wonderful women to depend upon the practice would not have been possible. One of my teacher friends said that women never work together without quarrelling. There were usually about ten on our staff and they proved her completely wrong.'

MARIE BYLES, UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY, 'MANY LIVES IN ONE'

'I worked for conservation'

The campaign for Bouddi National Park



Hammering the rules for Bouddi Natural Park, 1935

Mitchell Library, SLNSW

From her family's holiday retreat on Sunrise Hill at Palm Beach, Marie would look out through her telescope across Broken Bay at the imposing coast and bushland around Maitland Bay, then known as Boat Harbour, on the Central Coast. With her girlfriends, Marie found ways through the bush where they set up camps on the beautiful shores of Maitland Bay.

By 1929, there was an increasing focus on organised recreation for the growing city and suburban population. Marie joined the two-year-old Sydney Bushwalkers Club, which was one of the few walking clubs to admit women.

In 1930 a new name for Boat Harbour was proposed by the Club. Bushwalker Dorothy Lawry suggested Maitland Bay after the shipwrecked steamer rusting at the northern end of the beach. Over the next five years, with the support of the Federation of Sydney Bushwalkers Clubs, Marie successfully campaigned in the press for the area to be placed under public ownership. The creation of Bouddi National Park in 1935 was a landmark achievement for early conservationists.

'The Federation of Bushwalking Clubs had been formed and I managed to make the historic Maitland Bay the first major worthy cause it espoused.'

MARIE BYLES, UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY, 'MANY LIVES IN ONE'



Mitchell Library, SLNSW

Maitland Bay

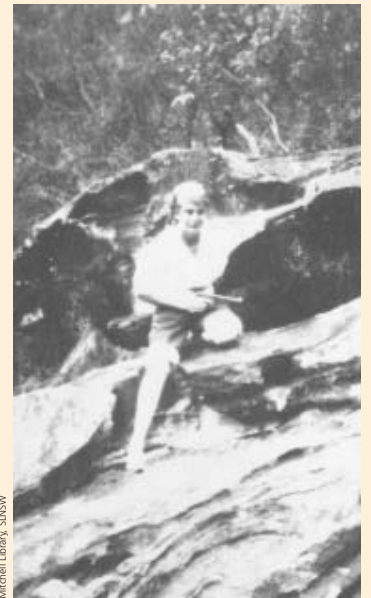
In 1934, Marie, Dorothy Lawry and Richard Croker took Mr Barry, the district surveyor from the Department of Lands, through the bush to view Maitland Bay.



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Clearing tracks for Maitland Bay, May 1940

Over the years Marie organized 'working bees' to maintain the tracks. Volunteers included Paddy Pallin (pictured right), who established the first business in Australia to make lightweight camping gear. Together he and Marie founded The Bush Club in 1941, which allowed more people, including war refugees, to participate in less arduous walks.



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'The Brigand' (Esther Waite), 1918

'Esther Waite with a ferocious looking Coult's automatic pistol at her belt and a pair of business-like military breeches on her person. Those were the days! I can't remember that the Coult's automatic was ever used but it looked good and it symbolised the daring of our early camps when all nice girls stayed safely at home.'

AN EARLY ADVENTURE IN BOUDDI,
SYDNEY BUSHWALKER NO 69 SEPTEMBER 1940



'The summit of my ambition'

Travelling the world in search of mountains

In 1927 Marie had saved enough money from working as a law clerk to take off on a Norwegian cargo boat to begin her journey around the world. This included climbing mountains in Britain, Norway and Canada. From this journey she authored her popular book, 'By Cargo Boat and Mountain', in 1931.

Later, Marie led expeditions to Mt Cook in New Zealand in 1935 and to the 20,000-ft peak, Mt Sansato, in Western China near the Tibetan border, in 1938. At times her party in China traveled with 15 mules, porters, an interpreter, cook, two servants, three riding ponies and occasionally military escorts to protect them from bandits. Due to the poor weather, the expedition failed to reach the summit and Marie was bitterly disappointed.

'The summit of my ambition'

During her trip around the world Marie climbed Dyrhaugstind in Norway. According to Marie, Australia had no real mountains, and she spent two years exploring world peaks.

Mitchell Library, SLNSW

'The last bale of wool had been shipped, the gangway drawn up, and I was alone on a Norwegian freighter with the dream of years coming true.'

MARIE BYLES, UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY, 'MANY LIVES IN ONE'



Mitchell Library, SLNSW

Ex Libris bookplate



Mitchell Library, SLNSW

'Taken the day I went on 'The Ice', I and another girl are very perky'

During her early climbing years, Marie refused to be constricted by long dresses, hats and petticoats. Her knickerbockers, jacket and bonnet became her climbing trademarks.



Private Collection

Marie's expedition party travelling through western China on their way to Mt Sansato, 1938



**'New bag'.
Marie in Burma, 1957**

Mitchell Library, SLNSW

'Paths to inner calm'

Marie's spiritual journey

During her travels through Burma, China and Vietnam in 1938, Marie often chose to stay in temples instead of simple inns, and traveled through remote villages. These experiences brought her into direct contact with non-European cultures and religions. On her return, Marie renewed her interest in the teachings of Gandhi, and began exploring Buddhism. No longer able to walk far or to climb her beloved mountains due to a collapsed foot arch, she became more interested in spirituality and meditation as a way of dealing with her pain.

During the 1940s Marie also became interested in Quakerism — and was friends with local Quakers who lived nearby and who had meetings at her house. Unfortunately, she was refused membership due to her ongoing interest in Buddhism. Over the following years she made spiritual journeys through India and Asia. She spent a year in India, including the Himalayas, and made three trips to Burma and two trips to Japan. From these experiences she completed four books on Buddhism and was significant in introducing and promoting Buddhism in NSW.

'Its logic appeals to a lawyer. Then there is the example of the life of Gautama the Buddha. He was always at peace with the world as well as himself.'

MARIE BYLES, UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY, 'MANY LIVES IN ONE'



Mitchell Library, SLNSW

'The Buddhist Meditation Group' at Ahimsa, 1957

The Buddhist Society of NSW was founded by Sister Dhammadina, a Buddhist nun who stayed with Marie at Ahimsa in 1952. On her return from Burma, Marie gave many talks to the Theosophical Society in Sydney as well as broadcasting on their regular Sunday night programme on Radio Station 2GB.



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Pagoda Hill, Mandalay



Mitchell Library, SLNSW

Jizo statues, Japan, 1966

Marie described these statues, photographed at a Jizo wayside shrine, as the most popular symbol of worship in Zen and Mahayana Buddhism.



Photograph of *Ahimsa* today

National Trust of Australia (NSW) Archives

'My dream cottage'

Ahimsa and the Hut of Happy Omen

By 1938 Marie left her family home *Chilworth* at Beecroft and built her own house on Crown Land in nearby Cheltenham.

The large verandah is primarily where Marie slept and lived in preference to the interior rooms. The four room pre-fabricated fibro and sandstone home was called *Ahimsa* after the term used by Ghandi meaning harmlessness.

In addition to the house, Marie wanted to have a place on her land for groups to meet for discussions and meditation. By 1949, the *Hut of Happy Omen*, which was designed as an open sleepout with bunks and a large sandstone stone fireplace, was complete.

In 1970 Marie bequeathed her property to The National Trust of Australia (NSW), which she had helped in 1946 when she was the consulting solicitor who drafted the organisation's Constitution.

Her decision to give her home to The National Trust was based on her faith in the Trust to help preserve the native bushland around her home and to help protect the surrounding reserves. Marie died at *Ahimsa* in 1979. Today, the Trust honours her wishes by providing a sympathetic tenant to care for *Ahimsa*, and also leaving the *Hut of Happy Omen* and grounds open to visitors.

'It was over 10 minutes walk from the station so that there would always be a walk, right in the midst of bush clad hills which were reserve and out of sight of other houses. For many years I had been compiling the requisite of my dream cottage ... it was imperative that it have a 12 foot verandah facing north.'

MARIE BYLES, UNPUBLISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY, 'MANY LIVES IN ONE'



Mitchell Library, SANSW

Marie's lounge room with her cat and typewriter

Marie typed her many manuscripts while sitting crossed legged on the floor in her lounge room.



National Trust of Australia (NSW) Archives

Marie's wake at *Ahimsa*, November 1979

Dot Butler and fellow mourners, including members of the Bush Club, scatter Marie's ashes in the vegetable garden.