

## Helen Ennis review of Anne-Louise Willoughby, *Nora Heysen: A Portrait*

(Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Press, 2019), 384 pp., PB \$34.99, ISBN 9781925815207

Among the first decisions a biographer must face is where to start the narrative of their subject's life and how to deal with chronology. Anne-Louise Willoughby chose to begin her biography of Australian artist Nora Heysen with a discussion of *Transport driver*, one of Heysen's most celebrated paintings produced during Heysen's stint as a war artist. Willoughby's decision was sensible. It enabled her to stress from the outset that art was at the centre of Heysen's life, and to signal some of her fundamental concerns. The aircraftwoman Heysen depicted is 'a professional ... strong, authoritative', all of which applies to the artist herself. Willoughby's biography celebrates Heysen's considerable achievements, but it was also conceived as part of a larger project of restitution that redresses 'the historical biases that have shadowed women's contributions, in particular to Australian art'. The book adds to a slowly growing corpus of biographies of women artists; Jo Oliver's *Jessie Traill: A Biography*, published in February 2020, is the most recent. In addition, it relates to institutional initiatives such as the National Gallery of Australia's Know My Name exhibition (2020–21), which showcased the work of Australian women artists.

Nora Heysen emerges from the biography as a formidable person in many ways. She was spirited, blunt, loyal, a precociously talented draughtsperson, and a very knowledgeable, committed artist. There is no question that she knew her own mind from an early age and imagined a life devoted to her art. However, in common with so many creative women in the twentieth century, her career did not follow a smooth or linear trajectory. Heysen had to deal with countless frustrations, disappointments and disruptions along the way. While some of these were specific to her own circumstances, they did of course intersect with broader societal and cultural conditions, which were hugely influential in determining what was actually possible for her to accomplish. Chief among them were gender and sexual politics. Willoughby reminds us of Heysen's ground-breaking achievements as the first woman to win the Archibald Prize (1938) and the first official Australian woman war artist (1943–45), but Heysen always stressed she was not a feminist, an intriguing point that I will return to.

Heysen's art career followed an unfortunate and far too familiar trajectory: a promising start with impressive public recognition, a long period of obscurity (she did not exhibit her work for 6 decades), and rediscovery in the 1980s, which brought welcome institutional and public attention but was not accompanied by the

production of exceptional new work. By the time the art world became interested in her again she was well into her 70s and her practice—mainly flower painting in a realist style—was out of synch with contemporary concerns. It was only her earlier work, especially from the 1930s and 1940s, that came to be widely appreciated.

Willoughby pointedly titled her first chapter ‘In the Name of the Father’ because, as she rightly states, in any consideration of Nora’s work ‘her father is never far from the discussion’. German-born Hans Heysen is an eminent Australian artist, known above all for his landscapes. He was his daughter’s first mentor and provided her with financial, professional and emotional support throughout his life. The two were close and mutually respectful, though Hans made it clear that he would have preferred one of his sons to have become the artist in the family. Nora explained in an interview in 2001 that her father believed women were not suited to artistic careers because ‘biologically they were conditioned to bearing children and running a home and that was what women did’. A major consequence of Hans and Nora’s shared devotion to art was their agreement that he would paint landscape (the most prized genre in the hierarchy of Australian art) and she would confine herself to portraiture and flower paintings. The complex, interdependent relationship between the two artists has recently received further attention: the publication of *Heysen to Heysen: Selected Letters of Hans Heysen and Nora Heysen*, edited by Catherine Speck, and the exhibition *Hans and Nora Heysen: Two Generations of Australian Art* mounted by the National Gallery of Victoria, both in 2019.

The account of Nora’s early life forms one of the strongest sections of the book, probably because Willoughby is more at ease with description than analysis. The detail is lively and revealing. The fourth of Hans and Selma’s 8 children, Nora grew up in the idyllic setting of The Cedars at Hahndorf in the Adelaide Hills (the house is now open to the public). The children had the run of the 36-acre property, revelling in nature and their freedom, and enjoying an informal, osmotic education, surrounded by art and books. The family also had an impressive social life at The Cedars, largely due to Selma’s efforts. An extraordinarily adept promoter of her husband’s work and a supreme hostess, she organised innumerable tennis parties and soirées for members of Adelaide’s elite society and potential clients. There was also a seemingly endless flow of illustrious Australian and international visitors, including artist Lionel Lindsay, opera singer Dame Nellie Melba (she gave Nora her first palette), ballerina Anna Pavlova, actors Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, and politician (later prime minister) Robert Menzies. Tellingly, however, gender roles were in full force during these visits. Willoughby notes that Nora was invariably summoned from her studio if guests arrived; her role was to make the scones.

Willoughby's assiduous research has brought forth new material, including the circumstances behind a previously suppressed family tragedy involving Nora's older sister Josephine. She became pregnant to a man her parents disapproved of, was hastily married, lived in poverty and died after the birth of her first child due to inadequate medical care. Selma's determination to avoid a public scandal that could damage Hans's reputation were evidently factors in removing Josephine from Adelaide; all the family had to live with the dire consequences of her banishment.

Throughout the biography Willoughby effectively uses quotes from Nora's letters and interviews to convey a sense of her character and straightforward, no-nonsense attitude. One of the most memorable concerns Donald Friend whose studio was next to Nora's at the war artists' studios in Melbourne. She found him irritating, as she explained to her parents in 1945:

He giggles incessantly and entertains. I don't mind the racket of the trains and trams, but that giggling is an irritant. He wears heavy gold rings on his fingers, long hair and the work I've seen up to date repulses me. I'm convinced he is a fake, no doubt a very amusing and witty one with pretty camouflage, but my back bristles.

However, when discussing Nora Heysen's art rather than her life Willoughby is far less convincing, mostly offering generalisations not insights. Heysen began to establish herself as an artist in her 20s, and benefited from 3 years spent in England and Europe, from 1934 to 1937, which gave her firsthand contact with major works of Western art, invariably a revelatory experience for Australians whose art education was so reliant on reproductions. It was in this period that Heysen's complex engagement with modernism became apparent. Picasso, for example, she regarded as a charlatan and she was very wary of abstraction. The work of the old masters, including Vermeer, was of enduring interest. On her return to Australia, Heysen continued to produce outstanding works, especially portraits and self-portraits, but her artistic development was interrupted by the outbreak of war, and by her relationship and eventual marriage in 1953 to Robert Black, a specialist in malaria research whom she met in New Guinea when on war service. Black was apparently indifferent to his wife's art but she persevered nonetheless. On one occasion, when travelling with him, she shut herself 'in the small stifling hot bedroom we shared and painted a flower piece'. This is a revealing admission because it speaks both of her compromised situation and her determination to overcome it. She later described her 19-year marriage as a 'great disruption'.

Willoughby attempts to bolster the human interest angle with which she is more comfortable by incorporating extensive art historical research. She is, however, over reliant on secondary sources—there are too many quotes from art historians, they're often too long and are not well integrated into the text. Her treatment of the different phases of Heysen's practice is also uneven. The Sydney decades are particularly sketchy, with regard to Heysen's artwork as well as the dynamics of her

life with Black. (Did they socialise or were they an insular couple, did she mix with artists, how was she affected by her travels to Pacific Islands with her husband?) There is no doubt that Heysen's life choices and unchosen decades-long invisibility defy standard biographical approaches, but it is precisely because of this situation that other ways of examining her activities and providing contextualisation are called for. The task in cases such as Heysen's is to ensure that complex private realities are not elided or nullified by the lack of a public presence and existence of conventional documents. I would, for instance, like to know much more about Heysen's garden at her home The Chalet in Hunters Hill; it was clearly a site for significant creative effort and relates to the practices of numerous other artists (including contemporary Australian painter Elizabeth Kruger).

It is in the later chapters of *Nora Heysen: A Portrait* that structural issues with Willoughby's biography become most apparent. Important points are often not well articulated or are buried in an excess of detail. The discussion of Jeffrey Smart is one such example: the information Willoughby offers may be of general interest but it is not put to work to advance the main narrative.

While the decision about where to start a biography is crucial, so is the decision about where and how to end it. In her final chapter, Willoughby identifies possible reasons behind Heysen's long period of obscurity but does not marshal them into a substantial, critically informed discussion. The facts given include her unfashionable choice of subject matter (flower paintings had a marginal status), an approach to art that was not progressive (more could have been said about dominant art styles of the period), and her refusal to promote her own work (she did not have a commercial dealer). This brings me back to feminism, the consideration of which is not well developed either in relation to Heysen's perspective or Willoughby's own. Nora Heysen experienced sex discrimination and hostility firsthand, at home and as a professional in the art world. One of the most shocking public outbursts came from artist Max Meldrum who railed against her winning the Archibald Prize. He declared that: 'Women are more closely attached to the physical things of life. They are not to blame. They cannot help it, and to expect them to do some things equally as well as men is sheer lunacy'. Heysen's response to this endemic misogyny was not to become a feminist, as one might have expected of a well-educated, well-informed, strong woman. She saw herself first and foremost as an artist and did not want to be judged either as a woman artist or according to feminist criteria. This position was not unusual among women of her time but did it mean that Heysen paid too high a price for her views? Willoughby quotes art theorist Frances Borzello who argues that: 'Women coped with the prejudice against them by denying it existed—as was officially the case—or by getting on with their work regardless'.

Towards the end of her biography, Willoughby refers to the ‘genteel poverty’ of Heysen’s domestic situation in the years before her death: she lived with her beloved cats (numbering 32 at the peak) in a once lovely but decaying home overrun with possums and rats, and chose not to replace broken windows or repaint the walls (she said she liked the patterns formed by the peeling paint). Were her reclusiveness and eccentricity some of the inevitable outcomes of subjugation and seemingly endless compromise? Were they positive, defiant responses?

Willoughby’s enthusiasm for Heysen and her work is genuine and unflagging. However, *Nora Heysen: A Portrait* does not sufficiently address the big questions affecting Heysen and many other creative women of her generation, especially those relating to the high stakes endeavour of pursuing an art practice—regardless.

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