
Leslie John Dwyer (1892–1962): ‘Man about town’

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Many people are aware of the unique record of Canberra’s early development recorded by the government photographer Jack Mildenhall.¹ But few know of the National Library of Australia (NLA) collection of nearly 2,500 images of Canberra life from the 1920s to the 1960s by commercial photographer Leslie John Dwyer.² Many more of his photographs are held in other collections, including by the Canberra & District Historical Society (CDHS) and the ACT Heritage Library, by his family and by the many families, clubs and organisations (including parliament and diplomatic missions) for which he took photographs. During the 1930s Les was one of several commercial photographers in Canberra. These included the talented Richard Strangman, active in Canberra for about 30 years from 1927,³ Alex Collingridge, Fred Bareham and Maxwell Ahearne. None matched Dwyer for his work ethic and cultivation of useful connections.

Dwyer came to Canberra as a carpenter and quickly immersed himself in civic life. The Depression forced him to make a living from his hobby, photography, and he did not look back. By the time he died in 1962 he was one of the best-known men about town, as he appeared at numerous functions, took countless photographs and contributed to the community in many other ways. His contribution to the community is recognised by the naming of a street in his honour in the suburb of Forde.⁴

1 Mildenhall Photographic collection, National Archives of Australia (NAA), A3560.

2 See Les and Daryl Dwyer collection, 1942–65, Trove, trove.nla.gov.au/version/183197170.

3 See ‘R C Strangman’, photo-web, www.photo-web.com.au/strangman/default.htm.

4 Much of the information in this article derives from the Dwyer family, especially Ian Heffernan (Les’s grandson) and his mother, the late Roma Heffernan (Les’s daughter). Much of Roma’s information was contributed by Marie Sexton, who dedicated many years to documenting the NLA’s Dwyer collection of photographs of the city. Both she and Roma worked at the NLA.



Figure 1: Les Dwyer in his studio at the shop, Manuka Shops.

Source: National Library of Australia, nla.pic-vn5981561.

Dwyer was born to Frederick James Dwyer and Emily Olive Dwyer (née Long) in 1892 at Granville, near Parramatta, Sydney, the fourth of seven siblings. At the time of his birth, Granville was an emerging industrial area, benefiting from being at the end of the Sydney–Parramatta railway line. But like most of the country, it was also suffering the effects of a serious economic downturn. In 1917 Les married Eileen Louie Campbell Hughes at what is now the inner-city suburb of Ashfield.⁵ At this time World War I was still underway, military conscription had been voted against for the second time, and a general strike had just ended in New South Wales. By the year of his marriage, this once highly desirable residential area was on the decline and many of its higher income residents had moved to the North Shore of Sydney Harbour. The newly married Dwyers were also on the move, the most likely reason being to seek work. Their first child Nola Olive was born at Barraba (near Narrabri) in 1918, Roma Mary at Melbourne in 1920 and Daryl Leslie at Narrabri in 1922.

The family arrived in Canberra in 1924, Dwyer as a member of the building force of the Department of Works and Railways.⁶ There was much work to be done to prepare for the move of public servants to the new city and the opening of the provisional parliament house. Family sources suggest the Dwyers moved straight into the Westlake workers' settlement, which was located at the place now known as Stirling Park, at Yarralumla. By late 1926 Westlake, also known as the Gap, consisted of 62 rudimentary weatherboard cottages.⁷ Dwyer's brother, Harry, a bus driver, took up residence there on 9 August 1926, so it is likely he moved in with his brother's family.⁸ Westlake was an area of the fledgling national capital set aside from the 1920s to 1950s for labourers involved in building the new city and their families. In its earliest days accommodation was basic, consisting of tents and humpies, but during 1921 an upgrade came in the form of buildings from the former Molonglo Internment Camp at the place later known as Fyshwick. In 1924 the standard of housing further improved after H. M. Rolland, director of works and chief architect, designed portable wooden cottages to accommodate married men and their families. These cottages remained in use until after World War II.⁹

Roma Heffernan recalled that, from his earliest days in Canberra, her father was always active in his business and very involved in community activities. Prime Minister R. G. Menzies, who knew Dwyer well, called him 'The Mayor of Manuka' and said that Les was busier than he was.¹⁰ He was actively involved in many organisations,

5 NSW Births, Deaths and Marriages.

6 Information about Dwyer joining the building force in 1924 comes from the ACT place names search facility on ACTmap (Leslie Dwyer Street, Forde). Biographical information was supplied by Les Dwyer's daughter, Mrs Rona Heffernan.

7 Ann Gugler, *The Builders of Canberra 1909–1929. Part 1, Temporary Camps and Settlements* (Canberra: C.P.N. Publications, 1994), 211.

8 A. Gugler, personal communication, 20 June 2016.

9 Gugler, *Builders of Canberra*, 16–17.

10 M. Sexton, internal NLA email, 15 November 2011.

often as a foundation committee member. These included the Canberra Chamber of Commerce, the Manuka Traders' Association, the Royal Canberra Golf Club, the Federal Golf Club, the Canberra Bowling Club, the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows and the Parents and Citizens committee of Telopea Park School in 1927. The family first worshipped at St John the Baptist in Reid, and later, when they moved to Griffith, at St Paul's, Manuka.

Dwyer became an invaluable member of the Westlake Social Service Association, established in 1925.¹¹ Such associations were important in the early days of Canberra, especially during its construction phase, as they aimed to improve social amenities in the city. They were individually initiated in April 1925 by John Butters, the Federal Capital Commission (FCC) chair, and united under the Social Services Association in February 1926. The FCC supplied a permanent secretary, J. H. Honeysett, the commission's social service officer.¹² The associations were one of the few ways ordinary residents of Canberra could represent their needs to government.

Under the 'energetic guidance' of Dwyer, who filled the role of honorary secretary, the Westlake Social Service Association was very active and promoted improvements to local services and amenities. Its 1926/7 annual report described Westlake as 'one of the more lively' in promoting the social welfare of the locality's residents. A children's playground and tennis courts, both of which became a focus for community activities, were testament to Dwyer's energy, as well as the 'zeal' of the Chairman Mr S. Champ.¹³ The tennis courts became the venue for competitions between the various settlements and suburbs.

The formation of a Canberra lodge of the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows (MUIOOF), a fraternal organisation to promote personal and social development, was reported in May 1926, with Dwyer, the Noble Grand Master, the contact for inquiries.¹⁴ The order arranged a Christmas party at Eastlake (now Causeway) Hall that year, and Dwyer 'was the old man himself, and handed cheer to the children from off the tree'.¹⁵ While he continued his involvement with this charitable organisation for some years, he also joined similar ones, and often assumed senior and organisational roles. Thus when in 1943 a Friendly Societies Council was formed in Canberra, he became president at the first annual meeting.¹⁶

11 Gugler, *Builders of Canberra*, 220.

12 Jim Gibbney, *Canberra 1913–1953* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1988), 99–101.

13 Canberra Social Service Association, 'Second Annual Report 1926–27', NAA A6266, G1927/2731.

14 *Canberra Community News*, 11 May 1926, 7.

15 *Canberra Times*, 22 December 1926, 9.

16 *Canberra Times*, 6 February 1943, 4.

The Dwyers left Westlake in March 1928 when they moved to Ainslie. At this time the Federal Capital Commission was seeking to replace the temporary camps with permanent housing.¹⁷ Yet accommodation remained segregated and Ainslie was a workers' suburb with a minimum building cost set at £700.¹⁸ From 1928 to 1932 the family had a house at 11 Corroboree Park, and remained there throughout the Depression. The electoral roll prepared for the 1928 Liquor referendum showed Dwyer's occupation as a carpenter. The difficult times appear to have been recognised by a 20 per cent reduction in rent.¹⁹ The house was typical of the suburb—a FCC type 19 with two bedrooms and a veranda. This was a tight squeeze for a family of five; it eased somewhat when the veranda was enclosed in 1930, a common occurrence in Canberra.

The Depression put a temporary end to construction in Canberra, and government employment was severely curtailed.²⁰ A workers' compensation claim lodged by Dwyer for a back injury sustained on 30 May 1932 described him as a 'casual relief worker' by the parks and garden section of the newly formed Department of the Interior. This was probably 'sustenance' work that was allocated sparingly to help the unemployed get by. His claim was successful and he was recommended for light duties. Five months later the family had left its house at Ainslie.²¹ The combination of casual work and back injury could have made it difficult for the family to remain there, and where they lived after leaving Ainslie is unclear. There seems little doubt though that Dwyer saw this as the moment to try to make his hobby of photography profitable. He had been taking pictures of the new capital from the time he arrived—the earliest image in the NLA collection is from 1924, and there are a number from the following year—and it is possible that he used photography as a means of supplementing his wages.

The family may have moved to Manuka (the name of the shopping centre in the suburb of Griffith) where Dwyer had established a photographic stall in 1929, the first business to provide a complete photographic service to the ACT. Small shops, which had no residential component, were available on the east side of what is now known as The Lawns after 1927. By 1935 the electoral roll places the Dwyers at an unspecified Manuka location, so it is possible, even likely, that they rented one of the nearby cottages attached to shops fronting the main streets of the shopping centre. Indeed, it was largely because of Dwyer's advocacy that The Lawns at Manuka came to be such a vital part of the aesthetics and ambience of the shopping arcade.

17 Nicholas Brown, *A History of Canberra* (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 76.

18 Peter Freeman, ed., *The Early Canberra House: Living in Canberra 1911–1933: An Anthology* (Fyshwick, ACT: Federal Capital Federal Press of Australia, 1997), 16.

19 FCT Property and Tenancy Register online at Archives ACT.

20 Gibbney, *Canberra 1913–1953*, 163.

21 L. J. Dwyer, Claim under Commonwealth Employees Compensation Act 1930, NAA A1, 1932/4805.

By 1933 Dwyer's reputation was boosted when the local architect Malcolm Moir used his images to illustrate an article in the prestigious journal the *Architectural Record*.²² He also possessed a personality suitable to his trade, his daughter Roma describing him as outgoing, friendly and energetic. Always out and about meeting people at Parliament House, embassies, functions and sporting events, these characteristics helped him maintain the high profile essential for his business.²³ 'Short, stout, loaded down with camera equipment and always wearing a trilby', Dwyer quickly became known as a 'man about town'.²⁴ As well as taking the photographs, in his small Manuka shop he processed, printed and tinted (in the days before affordable colour photography) both his own work and, in the age of the Box Brownie and other simple and cheap cameras, that of his customers. In his shop he had a velvet-curtained space for formal photographs, often of politicians, other VIPs and wedding groups. With his car, ACT 5, always at the ready, he was on constant alert to photograph events, disasters, people and activities of a place that was still a small community.

Dwyer's energy and ubiquity were essential for one in his profession, and there was stiff competition, even at times resentment, between Canberra's commercial photographers. Some felt that Jack Mildenhall had an unfair advantage as he was employed directly by the government and came to monopolise departmental photography and at least one competitor complained.²⁵ An inquiry resulted in Mildenhall's monopoly ceasing in 1935.²⁶

Business grew strongly and, by 1940–41, Dwyer was sufficiently financially secure to build a house and garage at Stuart Street, Griffith. The architects were the highly regarded husband and wife team of Malcolm Moir and Heather Sutherland, and the builder H. V. Hunt.²⁷ The same year he extended his Manuka studio and installed more modern equipment including improved lighting and new backgrounds. He also advertised that he had employed the services of one of Sydney's leading colourists and was offering members of the armed forces a special concession on the cost of portraits of men in uniform.²⁸ From around the late 1940s the *Canberra Times* began using more of his photographs. When snow fell in July 1949 the newspaper marketed prints of his photographs for two shillings and six pence. These included two light-hearted subjects: 'Snow Man arrested for loitering' and 'All snow dog sits on Tucker Box', both published on 20 July 1949.

22 *Canberra Times*, 23 August 1933, 2.

23 Marie Sexton, personal communication, 8 June 2018.

24 Nick Swain and Meryl Hunter, *Manuka History and People 1924–2014* (Canberra: The authors, 2015), 222–24.

25 *Herald* (Melbourne), 28 November 1933, 8.

26 NAA. Mildenhall photographic collection. Fact Sheet 222.

27 *Record of Building Applications and Permits Issued*. Archives ACT; Canberra House website, accessed 6 June 2019, www.canberrahouse.com.au/. The house was demolished in 2018.

28 *Canberra Times*, 27 September 1940, 5.

Dwyer took an active role with trade and professional organisations, and had been a member and then a councillor representing Manuka interests of the Canberra Chamber of Commerce since 1934.²⁹ He became inaugural president of the Manuka Traders Association when it was formed in 1949. Under his leadership the association immediately became active, pressing for improved postal and telephone facilities, bituminising laneways, enforcing traffic regulations and seeking to include Manuka on the route of special shopping buses between Civic and Kingston.³⁰ The now much appreciated Lawns at Manuka Shops were developed largely because of his advocacy and became a vital part of the aesthetics and ambience of the shopping arcade.³¹

Dwyer's energy extended to sporting organisations, including tennis and bowls, but particularly golf. The Acton temporary public golf course had been established in 1922 and the first 11 holes of a permanent course were opened in 1925 in the grounds of the now submerged old Acton Racecourse. The adjoining (Royal) Canberra Golf Club was formed in July 1926. The Acton public golf course languished during the Depression but was resurrected in 1933 when dairy farmer Alexander Stuart successfully requested Percy Gougard, secretary of the works and services branch of the Department of the Interior, to approve the necessary rehabilitation works.³² Dwyer later lodged an application to the Department of the Interior for permission to form a golf club.³³ The Acton Golf Club was established in May 1933 partly because for many enthusiasts the fee of one shilling charged by the Canberra Golf Club was high.³⁴ Dwyer became foundation club secretary in June 1933, and during his period of office committee meetings were held in his Manuka shop. Initially the new club struggled to compete with its rival, and also suffered from hardships imposed by the economic conditions and the slow development of Canberra. The club later adopted its current name—the Federal Golf Club—and moved in 1947 to its present location at Red Hill. Its first nine-hole course was opened in 1949, and a second nine holes was completed two years later.

A member of both clubs, Dwyer was a handy golfer himself, competing regularly in the annual Easter Cup at the Royal Canberra.³⁵ In 1949 Dwyer offered a trophy, the Federal Canberra Bowl, for competition, between the Federal and Royal Canberra clubs. The first match was played in 1950 and they continued annually until 1962, the year Dwyer died. The competition continued irregularly until

29 *Canberra Times*, 28 November 1934, 2.

30 *Canberra Times*, 11 February 1949, 3.

31 Sexton, personal communication, 8 June 2018.

32 Don Selth, *More than a Game: Canberra's Sporting Heritage, 1854–1954*, (Port Adelaide: Ginninderra Press, 2010), 48.

33 Sexton, personal communication, 8 June 2018.

34 D. S. Clues, *The Federal Golf Club Story 1933–1983* (Canberra: Federal Golf Club, 1983), 4.

35 *Canberra Times*, 28 March 1959, 15. The Royal Canberra Golf Club confirmed in July 2018 that Les Dwyer scored a hole in one on the second in 1929.

1971, and then went into abeyance until the battered remains of the original were discovered and restored in 1991 and the annual competition resumed. Dwyer was also an enthusiastic lawn bowler. In 1948 he and a number of like-minded men met in the Manuka Hockey pavilion (now demolished and the site of Manuka Terrace in Flinders Way, Manuka) to discuss the formation of a new bowling club. He moved that a bowling club be formed in the Griffith area and thus the Canberra South Bowling Club was born—many of its members were Manuka traders.³⁶ Dwyer was an active member for many years and on 28 March 1960 he became the singles champion.

Dwyer and Eileen celebrated their Silver Wedding anniversary on 31 January 1942, hosting a party at Barton House, a privately operated hostel that had opened mid-1941. Their elder daughter Nola, who often helped out in the shop, married John Armstrong of Malvern, Victoria, in 1946. Son Daryl served in the AIF during World War II, and married Elaine Purcell at St John's Church, Canberra, on 25 February 1950. Roma married a Victorian, Roy Peter Heffernan, in February 1946.

After Dwyer's sudden death in 1962, his son Daryl took over and expanded the business until he too died in 1967, after which his widow closed the enterprise. In 1972 the NLA purchased from her 1,897 negatives (of which 446 are glass plates) and 528 black-and-white photographs. The NLA catalogue has entries for 115 of these images, of which 102 are digitised.³⁷ The earliest photograph in the collection is dated 2 March 1924 and is of the Hotel Canberra under construction.³⁸ The others demonstrate Dwyer's broad interests and versatility, and include Canberra buildings, state and royal visits, diplomatic staff and functions, parliamentary occasions, local events, weddings and other social functions.³⁹ There are large numbers of high-quality original portrait photographs in the collection, predominately members of federal parliament, senior public servants or members of the diplomatic community. As was usual for the time, almost all were men. Even so, the portraits have considerable political significance. A significant number of members of parliament used Dwyer's portraits for their biographical entries in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Handbook, a standard historical work, which has ensured that they have become standard images. He also took a considerable number of photographs of events and places, and thus recorded some of the city's memorable moments, including the opening of Federal Parliament (1927), the Canberra floods (1926, 1945, 1956), royal visits (1934, 1958), the 1940 Canberra air disaster and the funeral of John Curtin (1945).

36 Swain and Hunter, *Manuka: History and People*, 224.

37 See Les and Daryl Dwyer collection, 1942–65, NLA, nla.gov.au/nla.obj-142687712.

38 NLA PIC/14442, album 1251, item 194.

39 NLA catalogue entry for the Dwyer collection of photographs of Canberra.

Les Dwyer was a self-made man who through necessity made a living from his hobby of photography. He was enterprising, hard-working and made sure he was well-known and available. His life reflected Canberra's varying economic circumstances and uneven growth. The family experienced Canberra from the unstable employment of a labourer in a worker's settlement, progressing to more permanent public housing in Ainslie, the dislocation and hardship of the Depression, to a steady business and permanent accommodation at Griffith. Dwyer was both a participant and a recorder of Canberra's growth; his extraordinary contribution to sport and social services matched the endeavour he showed as an amateur turned professional photographer. Yet his importance as a documentary photographer is not as well appreciated as his significant body of work deserves. Extensive work is well under way at the National Library of Australia to fully document and assess his photographs and make them more readily accessible.

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