

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE0562

Gunn, Jeannie (Mrs Aeneas)

(1870 - 1961)

Born 5 June, 1870, Carlton Victoria Australia

Died 9 June, 1961, Hawthorn Victoria Australia

Occupation Author

Summary

Mrs Aeneas Gunn was the author of *The Black Princess*, published in 1905, and *We of the Never Never*, published in 1908. During and after World War I she worked tirelessly to support the servicemen of Monbulk, Victoria who she referred to as "my boys." She was awarded an OBE in 1939, "in recognition of her services to Australian Literature and to the disabled soldiers and their dependents." In 1948 she began to work on a book recording all the details of the volunteers from Monbulk who had served in the Boer War, the Boxer Rebellion and World War I. Gunn presented her completed manuscript to the Monbulk RSL in 1953 and the book, *My Boys – A Book of Remembrance*, was published for the first time in 2000.

Details

Mrs Aeneas Gunn was born Jeannie Taylor on 5 June 1870 in Melbourne, Victoria, the second youngest of six children. She was educated privately by her mother and at seventeen matriculated at the University of Melbourne.

In 1888, Gunn opened a private school in their home in Hawthorn with her sisters. Named Rolyat, Taylor backwards, the school was regularly attended by 50 – 60 pupils until it closed in 1896 when one of her sister's married. Gunn then became a visiting teacher and her subjects included gymnastics and elocution.

She married Aeneas James Gunn in 1901. Just before their marriage he had become a partner in Elsey, a cattle station on the Roper River, 483 km south of Darwin, so the newlyweds soon set sail for Port Darwin. While her husband worked as the station manager, Gunn impressed those who said a woman would be out of place on station with her sense of humour and fine horsemanship. She took an interest in the lives of the Aboriginals who lived and drifted through the station, displaying a true sympathy and affection for their way of life.

Unfortunately, outback life lasted only 13 months, Gunn returned to Melbourne after her husband died of malarial dysentery in 1903. Back in Melbourne, she longed for the quiet bush life and found solace travelling with her father to Monbulk, a settlement in Victoria's Dandenong Ranges. Encouraged by friends who had read her letters and heard her tell stories to their children, Gunn wrote *The Little Black Princess*, which was published in Australia and England in 1905, and was about Bett-Bett, an Aboriginal child she had befriended at Elsey. In 1908, her second book *We of the Never Never*, was published. Although it was entitled a novel, it was a recreation of actual events. The book went on to become an Australian classic, it was used in schools and translated into German.

During World War I and after, Gunn became active in welfare work for soldiers and their families, especially in Monbulk. She virtually adopted all the men who enlisted to serve in the war from Monbulk, referring to them as "my boys." She sent parcels and letters to them while they were overseas, knitted socks and kept a photo of every single one of her boys on her mantelpiece.

After the war, Gunn worked tirelessly for the welfare of the returned servicemen, becoming an unofficial liaison between them and the Repatriation Department. In 1925 she became patron for the Monbulk diggers T B Sailors and Soldiers Assistance Relief Fund and she did not miss a function in the next 21 years. Gunn helped to organise a clubroom and library for the Monbulk sub branch of the Returned Sailors Soldiers and Airmen's Imperial League of Australia. She received an OBE in 1939, "in recognition of her services to Australian Literature and to disabled soldiers and their dependents."

In 1948, Gunn embarked on a project to record the efforts and sacrifices of Monbulk during World War I. It was her intention to record the service details of every volunteer from Monbulk who served their country in the Boer War, the Boxer Rebellion and World War I. She said of the book that it was "not an honour roll – it is definitely a record of each man's service to his country." Gunn presented her completed manuscript to the Monbulk RSL in 1953 and the book, *My Boys – A Book of Remembrance*, was published for the first time in 2000.

Mrs Aeneas Gunn passed away on 9 June 1961, four days after celebrating her 91st birthday. 200 mourners packed Scots Church in Collins St, Melbourne for her funeral.

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition

Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html>

Edited Book

Who's Who in Australia 1950, Alexander, Joseph A, 1950

Book

Victoria, the first century : an historical survey, compiled by the Historical Sub-committee of the Centenary Celebrations Council, 1934

A History of the Lyceum Club Melbourne, Gillison, Joan M, 1975

My boys : a book of remembrance, Gunn, Aeneas, Mrs, 2000

The little black princess : a true tale of life in the Never-Never land, Gunn, Aeneas, Mrs, 1906

We of the Never-Never, Gunn, Aeneas, Mrs, 1907

Flynn's Outback Angels: Casting the Mantle - 1901 to World War II, Rudolph, Ivan, 2001

Resource Section

Gunn, Jeannie (1870 - 1961), O'Neill, Sally, 2006,
<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A090134b.htm>

Archival resources

The University of Melbourne Archives

[Derham, Dorothy Lush](#)

State Library of South Australia

[Notes and letter on the characters in 'We of the Never Never'](#)

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[Papers of the Gunn family, 1841-1912 \[manuscript\]](#)

[Papers of Norman McCance, 1894-1972 \[manuscript\]](#)

[Papers of Mrs Aeneas Gunn, 1955 \[manuscript\]](#)

[Manuscripts and correspondence of Mrs Aeneas Gunn, 1905-1937 \[manuscript\]](#)

[Correspondence, 1937 \[manuscript\]](#)

[Manuscripts and correspondence, \[19--\] \[manuscript\]](#)

Author Details

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