

# The Australian Women's Register

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**Entry type:** Person  
**Entry ID:** AWE5987

## Chinnery, Sarah

(1887 - 1970)

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**Born** 1 January, 1887, Belfast Northern Ireland United Kingdom

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**Died** 31 December, 1970, Melbourne Victoria Australia

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**Occupation** Photographer

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### Summary

Sarah Chinnery was an amateur photographer known for her unique ethnographic photography of the Indigenous peoples of New Guinea, where she lived between 1921-1937. Despite the challenges she faced developing film in the tropics, Chinnery had many of her photographs published in the press, including the *New York Times*. Later in Australia the focus of Chinnery's photography shifted to portraits of artists and floral studies.

### Details

Sarah Chinnery was known for her ethnographic photographs of the Indigenous peoples of New Guinea as well as portraits of artists, flower studies and people living in Melbourne.

She was born in 1887 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. One of a large family of ten children, her mother died when she was around six years old and her father remarried. At the age of thirteen, she went to live in Aylesbury, England, where she kept house for her three brothers, all of whom were dentists. One of her brothers gave her a 'Little Nipper' camera as a gift when she was fourteen years old and so began her interest in photography.

She owned a motorbike – the 'second woman in England to have one' (Australian Gallery Directors' Council 11) – which she rode in the search of subjects to photograph. These encompassed landscapes, architecture, character portraits and photographs of working people. Chinnery joined three postal camera clubs (members mailed their photographs to each other as well as entered competitions) and won a number of prizes. When she was in her twenties she considered becoming a professional photographer but instead chose to study dentistry, following in her brothers' footsteps. She took over the management of one of her brothers' dental surgeries after he enlisted to fight in WW1.

In April 1919 Sarah married E. W. Pearson Chinnery (nickname 'Chin'), an Australian anthropology student. They lived in England while he completed his dissertation under the eminent anthropologist A.C. Haddon at Cambridge University. During the period 1919-1920, she studied town planning at Cambridge, where she also joined the Cambridge Camera Club and attended lectures on anthropology. The couple moved to Australia in 1921, and Sarah took lessons in watercolour tinting from Mrs Barlow as well as instruction in oil painting from Bernaldo. Later in the same year they moved to New Guinea, remaining there until 1937. Her husband had been hoping to secure the position of Government Anthropologist, having previously served there in 1909 as a clerk and then a patrol officer. He was eventually appointed to a government anthropological position after initially serving with a mining company.

During the 16 years spent in New Guinea, Sarah gave birth to four daughters. She also did much travelling locally, unaccompanied by her husband, including voyages to Port Moresby, Salamaua, Madang, the Wau goldfields, and the Ramu and Sepik Rivers, where she would photograph the landscape and the Indigenous people within their own environment. Unlike many ethnographic photographs of the period, her photographs were not staged; rather, they 'displayed respect, sympathy and excitement for her subjects' (Hall 138). They were 'strong and clearly made photographs, full of atmosphere, taken to her own standards and liking. They were also photographs of "natives," more than individual people going about their day's work' (Australian Gallery Directors' Council 12). It was while the family was living in Port Moresby in 1921 that Sarah began keeping a diary, and she continued the practice intermittently until the family left Rabaul at the end of 1937.

Chinnery never exhibited her work but many of her photographs were published in numerous newspapers, some accompanying articles that she had written describing her life in New Guinea. These included *The New York Times* weekend

supplement in 1935; in Melbourne *The Herald* and *The Star*; in Sydney, *The Sun*; in Brisbane *The Courier-Mail* and *The Sunday Mail*. Weather conditions in New Guinea made it difficult for Chinnery to develop her negatives and print her photographs. 'At ten in the morning, it was too hot and the film melted in places; at night, the water is so warm you could take a bath in it' (Australian Gallery Directors' Council 12).

In 1939, her husband was seconded from New Guinea to head up a new department of native affairs in the Northern Territory, so the family moved back to Australia. He retired from this position in 1946 and took up the role of Australian adviser at the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations. In 1947, he retired from this role and he and Sarah moved to Melbourne. Once settled in Melbourne, Sarah Chinnery's work shifted to photographing artists, flower studies and people she saw in the street. She was friendly with many artists and craftspeople: Ellis Rowan (watercolour painter), Hans Heyson, Justus Jorgenson, Matcham Skipper, Esther Patterson, Violet McInnes, Mirka Mora, David Boyd, Gertrude Johnstone (founder of the National Theatre) and the photographer Julian Smith.

Sarah Chinnery died in 1970.

Her husband's photographs related to his work as an anthropologist and government official and were made in the Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown tradition, but Sarah Chinnery's photographs are far more diverse in subject matter and style, with some even being fine examples of Pictorialism. The National Gallery of Australia holds 329 photographs and 1489 negatives by her. The photographs that date from before WW1 record English scenes and country people. The Papua New Guinea photographs feature airfields, villages, houses, house posts, canoes, outriggers, markets, dances, trees, flowers, Rabaul Harbour, visits to Wau (1933), Salamaua (1933) and the Sepik (1935), the volcanic eruption at Rabaul (1937) and many villagers, servants and other Indigenous peoples. The collection includes portraits of notable anthropologists, such as Gregory Bateson, Raymond Firth, A.C. Haddon, A.R. Radcliffe Brown, W.H.R. Rivers, Margaret Mead, G. Elliott Smith and F.E. Williams. There are also portraits of the Chinnery children, and artists and writers who lived at Montsalvat, Melbourne streetscapes, landscapes, and flowers and other still life photographs.

### Technical

In New Guinea she used an early roll-camera, a Rolleicord, in the mid-thirties, and a Sinclair Una plate camera (3 and a quarter x 4 and a quarter), which she used to photograph the first session of the New Guinea Legislative Council.

### Collections

Sarah Chinnery Photographic Collection of New Guinea, England and Australia, 1900, National Library of Australia

## Events

### 1981 - 1981

Sarah Chinnery's work featured in *Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950*

### 1901 - 1950

## Published resources

### Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Sarah Chinnery Photographic Collection of New Guinea, England and Australia, Chinnery, Sarah Johnston, 1900, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-vn3802543>

### Manuscript

Diaries of Sarah Chinnery, 1920-1937, Chinnery, Sarah Johnston and Waters, Sheila, 1920

### Book

Malaguna Road: the Papua and New Guinea Diaries of Sarah Chinnery, Chinnery, Sarah, 1998

Australian Women Photographers 1840 - 1960, Hall, Barbara and Mather, Jenni, 1986

### Exhibition Catalogue

Australian Women Photographers 1840-1950, 1981

### Magazine article

A First For Women Photographers in Australia: Quick Thinking and Ladders Got the Top Shots, Bowen, Jill, 1981, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article55457051>

## Archival resources

### National Library of Australia, Pictures Collection

[Scrapbook of newspaper clippings relating to New Guinea and the Chinnery family \[picture\] / Sarah Chinnery](#)

### Author Details

Anne Maxwell (with Morfia Grondas and Lucy Van)

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