



## TERRA NOVA

**Exhibition Opening Speech by**

**Bernadette Mansfield**, Editor Ceramics Art + Perception

**Sunday 28 May 2023**

*I unreservedly acknowledge that we are meeting on the land of traditional custodians, the people of the First Nation.*

*I unreservedly acknowledge the care they gave this land for thousands of years, prior to 1770.*

*I unreservedly acknowledge their continuing and rightful custodianship of the lands on which we gather.*

*I pay my respects to the elders of the Gundungurra people, and their leader's past, present, and emerging.*

*And to indigenous people from other communities who are here on Gundungurra land, today.*

Frensham, in Surrey England – right next to the A237 – is where, with my family, I spent many weekends swimming and playing. In the spring, the water iris would bloom and circle the two ponds. Local clay was extracted from around Frensham for Farnham Pottery, where the pottery industry dates to Roman times. The West family moved to Farnham (close to Frensham) in 1891, the year that Winifred West turned 10, and her father died.

But it was Frensham where she was born, on December 21st, 1881 – the second of six children to a schoolmaster, Charles West and his wife, Fanny whose maiden name was Sturt. In 1894, at 13 years of age, this bright young girl was awarded a scholarship to board at Queen Anne's School in Berkshire, the same year the school was founded. For six years, she was immersed in the philosophy on which Queen Annes was built, with its motto 'Kind Hearts. Fierce Minds. Strong Spirit'

Winifred West went up to Cambridge to read medieval and modern languages at Newnham College and after being awarded an arts degree, headed to the island of Guernsey to teach at their Ladies College, with their motto: 'Do what's right, come what may'. It is also where she fell in love with an Australian and followed him to New South Wales in 1907, although on the journey down here fell in love with someone else and broke off her prior engagement. Only to have her new love head of a British Expedition to Antarctica.

It didn't mean the intrepid West changed her plans but stayed in Sydney and worked as an illustrator at the Australian Museum; was a private tutor; studied painting at Julian Ashtons – and also met her life-long companion Phyllis Clubbe. Together, they returned to England and West taught at Harrogate Ladies College for two years, known for its pioneering approach to girls' education since 1893. Its Latin motto is loosely translated to mean: 'Hard Working. Trusting and Loyal. Dutiful, Decent, Compassionate, Gentle and Conscientious'.

Back in Sydney by 1912, and at 33 years of age, and a growing critic of contemporary education, Winifred West, with Phyllis Clubbe and a staff of five and three pupils, established Frensham School. The motto she chose is: "*In love, serve one another*". Taken from Chapter 12 of St Paul's letter to the Corinthians which includes a pertinent description of community as being 'all part of one body'. The school's emblem? The iris, because of its ability to flourish in all conditions.

Winifred West's charisma has often been noted – most especially in the writings of her niece, Penelope Nelson; she was a clear, strong, and compelling orator. Her ordinary everyday clothing is described as 'no nonsense' but her formal wear leaned to the bohemian. Everything about her was energetic – her walk, her intelligent intensity, her sense of purpose. She was equally renowned for her dominating demeanour, as well as her ability to inspire. Her expectation was things should be done 'her way'.



A recurring theme in her public speeches is community, service to others, making the most of one's gifts and the utmost of one's life:

*"Now, there is a great difference between pleasure and happiness. We are meant to be happy, but pleasure seekers are normally unhappy. Discontented and unsatisfied. And the reason is that life is too big and too beautiful a thing to be frittered away. We are here to work in the world, and unless we work out our destiny, we too shall be restless and unsatisfied. Each sorrow we endure, and each temptation we overcome, strengthens our character and makes us more fit to help others, which, of course, is what we are here for."*

So, this is the woman who persuaded Ivan McMeekin to come to Sturt Pottery, and it is perhaps it is slightly easier to understand how she was able to do this. West had absorbed the progressive ideas in girls' education she had been exposed to in England, evolving them in Australia. In turn, she successfully encouraged McMeekin to do the same with his English experience gained at the Wenford Bridge Pottery in Cornwall.

The words that Owen Rye uses to describe his teacher and friend, Ivan McMeekin could so easily have been written to describe Winifred West:

He writes:

*"McMeekin was a strong-minded, even stubborn holder of principles that did not allow compromise, often causing rifts with colleagues. At the same time, these characteristics allowed him to persevere with his search for high standards in his art, and to become recognised as an Australian authority on the materials and technology of Oriental-style stoneware."*

Little wonder that his original five-year contract was not renewed by West, as these two highly intelligent leaders, capable of speaking with bruising candour, recognised their working relationship was untenable. It was a reward for us all that Les Blakebrough's relationship with West was less antagonistic.

However, I do quote from McMeekin's letter to the Sydney Morning Herald published on January 16th, 1961 to clarify it was not a transition without its problems:

McMeekin writes:

*"So, if one accepts Blakebrough to carry on Sturt Pottery, I feel one must also allow that he make use of the foundation that was laid during the first five years. In spite of its shortcomings, I feel it better than a completely fresh start. Blakebrough can be justly criticised – as in my opinion he has been by your critic – for the use he may make of this foundation, but not for the fact that he does use it."*

It is, undoubtedly, McMeekin who put Sturt on the map as one of this country's leading centres of ceramics excellence. Even though, as he acknowledged, Australian potters had to work without the nourishment of what Leach called "the tap-root of tradition", His name will forever be synonymous with this place. As is West's with Frensham School, and the studios and pottery she named in honour of her mother. The fact that we gather here on the anniversary of McMeekin's death, May 28, 1993, is fittingly poignant.

I have little doubt that, over the decades, Sturt Pottery has suffered somewhat because of the misunderstanding of its association with Frensham School, that somehow its patronage skews priorities towards commercial viability and popular appeal. One would like to think that the work of the artists at this exhibition would put to rest any doubt, but we are a fickle lot, the ceramics community, and for some reason slightly immune to success outside of a Sydney-centric parameter, especially if that success appears to come without struggle.



It is incumbent upon the keepers of our history, the tellers of our stories – indeed, an obligation – to recognise that historical accounts can be influenced by power dynamics, political and personal agendas, and cultural bias. By acknowledging the subjectivity of historical accounts, we foster a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of our shared past, at same time as challenging assumptions. Human experience is complex and diverse; multiple narratives, differing viewpoints, various perspectives, experiences, and interpretations, all contribute to our understanding of every situation or event. Winifred West would often upset her audiences when she promoted the ‘avoidance of passive, selfish acceptance... as a duty to the communities to which we belong’. I think it is a fine sentiment to aspire to.

70 years ago, in 1953, the world was still rebuilding itself from the ashes of war. Queen Elizabeth II was crowned; Menzies was Prime Minister; but it was still nine years away from all indigenous people being given the right to vote in Commonwealth elections; 14 years away from indigenous people being included in the national census; it was another 17 years before the ‘Aborigine Welfare Boards’ were abolished marking the end of a whole generation of the heartbreaking government-sanctioned stealing of children. For too long the traditional owners of this country, its first people, have been denied a voice, but in the referendum to be held after September this year, this can and should be, changed. I am particularly delighted that the artists of Ernabella (established in 1948) are represented in this exhibition, and two can join us today. Tidida.

One of McMeekin’s first apprentices here (at Sturt) was Gwyn Hansson Piggot – arguably Australia’s greatest internationally successful ceramic artist. A title, or description, she would loathe. Perhaps not as much as ‘ceramicist’, but not too far behind. For her whole working career, she corrected anyone who described her as anything other than a potter. I like to think this was the influence of Ivan McMeekin who she is on record as crediting for her success. I have often publicly described Ivan McMeekin as the ‘father of Australian ceramics, and I do so again today. Why? Because the legacy he spawned (from this place) through his teaching and understanding of Australian materials, is unparalleled. His book Notes for Potters in Australia should be read alongside our adopted bible The Potters Book by Bernard Leach, by anyone working with materials gathered from this land.

To the current stewards and custodians of the Sturt legacy, on behalf of us all, I offer our deepest appreciation for adding to the 70 years of unwavering dedication to the arts that Sturt has made. The next chapter of this magnificent and hallowed place promises, under your leadership, to be as transformative as the ones already written. This day is to celebrate the past, embrace the present, and support you in the eagerly anticipated future contributions Sturt will continue to make to the national and international field.

There is something imperceptibly, intangibly (yet profoundly) unique about Sturt; and the spirit that has guided it through seven decades to the benefit of us all, will doubtless continue.

I wish to end with the words of both Winifred West, who had the foresight to invite Ivan McMeekin to break ground here at Sturt, and the words of McMeekin, himself:

*“You were meant to be happy and joyful, and you ought to be able to impart some of your happiness to others. Face life, go out, and meet it with courage; there are great things before you. The world, life, death, things present and things to come; all are yours.”*

And from McMeekin, his fearless comments after judging the Royal Easter Show in 1957 as reported in the Sydney Morning Herald:

*“There are still some atrocities, and a lot of the exhibits are far too complicated and fiddly. But there is more originality this year”.*

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Celebrating 70 Years at Sturt Pottery 1953-2023



No wonder he was keen to establish The Potters Society of NSW in 1956 with members' applications needing to satisfy a peer review of their work, before acceptance (two years later, in 1958, the Craft Potters Society in the UK was founded on the same principles as The Potters Society of NSW. The CPA continues to adhere to these principles).

I am reminded of (the French impressionist) Degas' quote on painting, which I will upend to satisfy my purpose, but also to speak to McMeekin's approach to the training of a potter:

*"Ceramics is easy when you don't know how, but very difficult when you do."*

Congratulations to the artists who were selected to be part of this incredibly important exhibition. You are now woven into the legacy of Sturt Pottery; there are few accolades higher than this. Your thread, your stitch, is now woven into their rich tapestry – and deservedly so.

Happy 70th birthday.

**Bernadette Mansfield**

Sturt

May 28th 2023