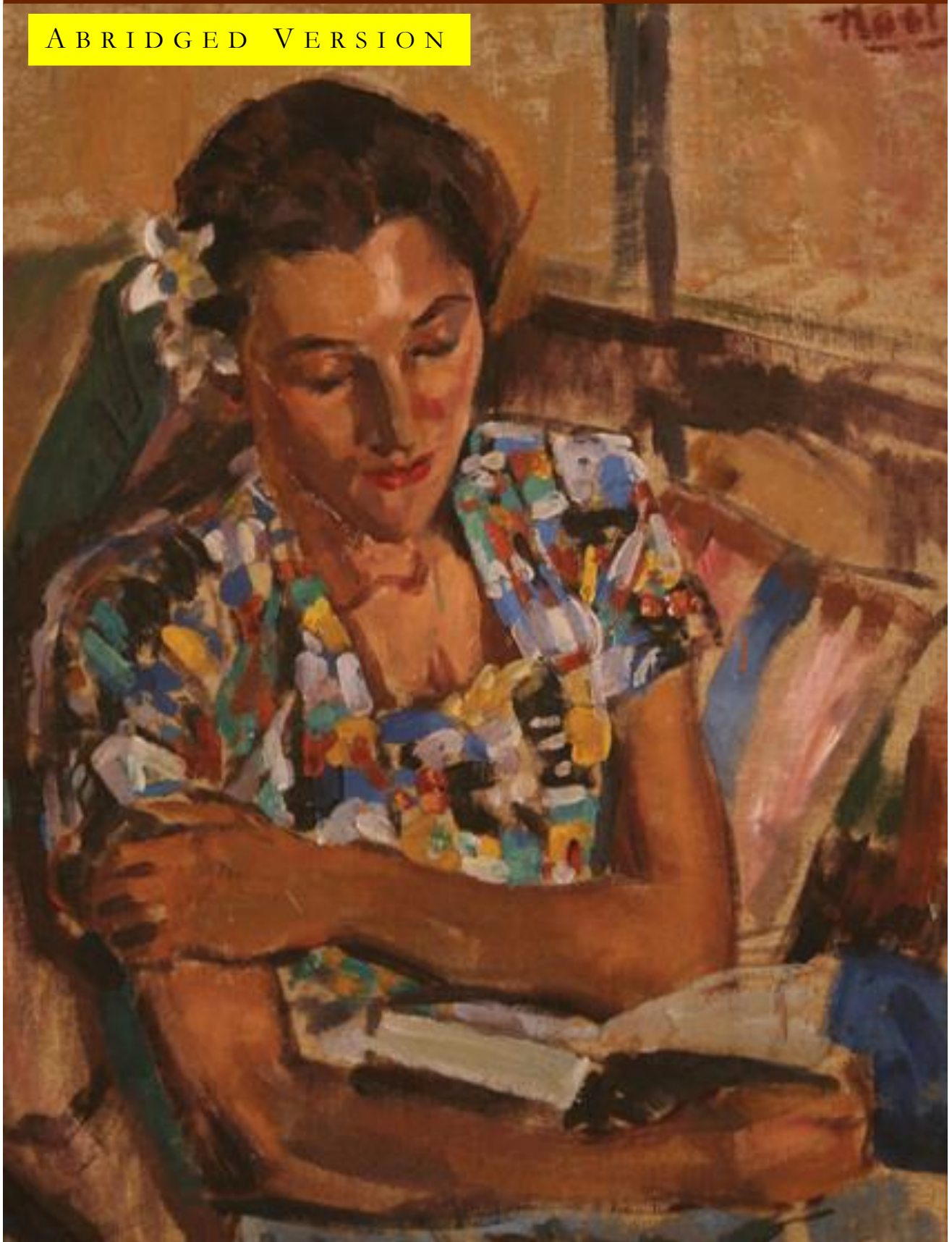


ARTISTS of the ISLANDS

ABRIDGED VERSION



VOLUME 1: NOEL WOOD by KEN GRAY

Published by

Mission Beach Historical Society Inc.

Document AB19.1 Version 1.

Website: www.mbhs.com.au



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First published in 2023.

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This is the abridged version of the full story.

Cover:

Noel WOOD, *Portrait of Yvonne, Timana Island, Nth Queensland, 1945*, oil on canvas on board, 59 x 45 cm, Cairns Art Gallery Collection. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by the artist and Valerie Albiston, 1999, image accessed July 2022 at:

<https://www.cairnsartgallery.com.au/collections/portrait-of-yvonne-timara-island-nth-queensland>

Peggy MacIntyre¹ in 1939, neatly described the dilemma faced by an artist who relies on selling their art to make a living, as Noel Wood always did:

Perhaps it is an unenviable position for so young a painter to have enjoyed such an extraordinarily wide success. If he goes no farther than he has gone (though this seems unlikely) he will experience the tragedy of portraying picture-postcard problems of the tropics to the complete satisfaction of the tourist, without meaning to do so. On the other hand, if he advances he will lose the support of the larger public in favour of a smaller, more advanced group. At the moment, he stands in the extraordinary position of pleasing nearly everybody.

Noel Herbert Wood (1912 – 2001) lived to almost 90 years of age and spent his first 24 years in South Australia. For 60 years, he was based at Bedarra Island, before living in North Queensland in several places on the mainland for his last few years.

Noel was born in 1912 in Strathalbyn, South Australia and was educated at the South Australian School of Art in Adelaide with his older brother, Rex (1906 - 1970), where he was tutored by Marie Tuck and Leslie Wilkie who regarded Noel as an accomplished portrait painter. However, Noel usually preferred to paint landscapes. At art school in 1933, he met and married Eleanor Weld Skipper when 21 years old and they had two children, Virginia, and Ann.

He was successful early in his career, so his paintings were soon in high demand and sold quickly, and after his first three solo exhibitions in South Australia, he was able to buy a used Model T Ford. Noel and Eleanor travelled north in search of their own island in their *Tin Lizzie* in 1936, eventually finding and buying 15 acres of land on Bedarra Island. At the start of 1940, Eleanor, Virginia, and Ann evacuated the island to be safe from the war and settled at Woodend in Victoria. They did not return until Ann started visiting Noel regularly from 1964 on.

Noel's island life was often featured in newspaper articles in romantic tones implying that life was easy, yet he worked long hours doing gardening and maintenance and painting pictures. Journalists sometimes referred to him as, *The Robinson Crusoe Artist* and said that he was a recluse, yet while he enjoyed the solace of island life and the peace it provided to focus on his art, he encouraged visitors to his refuge and, from 1940, shared the island with several others.

Search engine *Trove* provides more than 150 newspaper articles referring to Noel Wood and his art. He was constantly in the news. Many reviews by art critics among these articles indicate a high level of interest in his works and life and a great respect for the quality of his art.

When he presented 52 of his Bedarra paintings at *David Jones Gallery* in Sydney in 1939, the reviews were particularly gushing and unanimously encouraging. He won the admiration of the Sydney art world in a heartbeat and his reputation was made.

Within a few days, Noel Wood had sold eight paintings for a sum of \$4,500 in 2022 currency equivalence. The publicity Noel received from this exhibition was incredible with widespread coverage in most major cities across the nation and many regional newspapers also publishing the stories.

¹ Peggy MacIntyre, *Noel Wood and the Barrier Reef, Art in Australia*, 15 May 1939, accessed on *Trove* September 2022 at: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-351472393/view?sectionId=nla.obj-354698582&searchTerm=Noel+Wood&partId=nla.obj-351536826#page/n44/mode/1up>

In 1941, one of Noel's paintings held in the Queensland Art Gallery collection was chosen by an expert panel, to be exhibited in a series of events to highlight Australian Art in Canada and the USA.²

In 1947, Noel spent three years in Europe, staying with his brother, Rex, in Portugal and with his friend, Hugo Brassey, in Ireland. While in London, he painted commissioned portraits to make a living. American film director, Byron Haskin, met Noel in London and again on Bedarra Island and invited him to work and exhibit in Hollywood. Noel chose not to exhibit yet did a year as an assistant art director in 1955-6.

A quick search online reveals 15 solo exhibitions in major cities and many more in regional galleries plus 18 group exhibitions, including one at the *Museum of Modern Art* in New York in 1941, a series of *Queensland Art Gallery* exhibitions held in the USA during 1950 and the *Queensland Artists of Fame & Promise* exhibition held in Brisbane in 1953.

His works are owned by at least nine important Australian galleries including the *National Art Gallery* in Canberra and the *Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA)* in Brisbane. Galleries in Brisbane, Melbourne, Adelaide, Armidale, Cairns, Townsville and Bundaberg have one or more of his works in their collections.



Painting 1: Noel WOOD/Australia 1912-2001/ *The pathway to Banfield's old home (Dunk Island)* c. 1940/ Oil on canvas on composition board/ 46 x 59.8cm/ Purchased 1940/ Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art/ © QAGOMA/ Photograph Natasha Harth, QAGOMA.

Painting 2: Noel WOOD/Australia 1912-2001/ *Two boats* 1946/ Oil on canvas/ 45.7 x 56.5cm/ Purchased 1946/ Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art/ © QAGOMA/ Photograph Natasha Harth, QAGOMA.

Because almost all of Noel's paintings were sold at his exhibitions, they are largely held in private collections and do not come up for sale often. In 2019, Ross Searle stated that only 12 of Noel Wood's works had come up for sale since 2007 and the prices were \$3,000 - \$4,000.

It is impossible to separate the man from the artist. They are intertwined. Noel Wood's philosophy of life was simple and clear from early in his life. He adopted a form of Zen Buddhist philosophy and was not at all religious. Awe of Nature was probably the closest thing to religion Noel had. No gods seemed to have invaded his thoughts.

His philosophy impacted his art, for he had no concern whatsoever for what others on the planet thought of him or his work. He loved to paint and set his own agenda and if his style changed over the years, the evolution was driven by Noel alone. He was not focused on what critics said at all. His

² *The Telegraph* Brisbane, 22 March 1941, accessed on *Trove*, September 2022 at: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/186603090?searchTerm=Noel%20Wood>

philosophy was to live in the present and he openly declared that he did not wish to be remembered. He was not influenced by what the world would say about his art when he was dead.

The research revealed in this small publication (full story) will give readers interested in relativity sufficient access to information to form their own view of Noel Wood's position in the art world. But, if Noel is watching, he will not be at all concerned about what we conclude! He will probably just giggle inwardly at our seriousness and think to himself that we might *try to be a little kinder*.

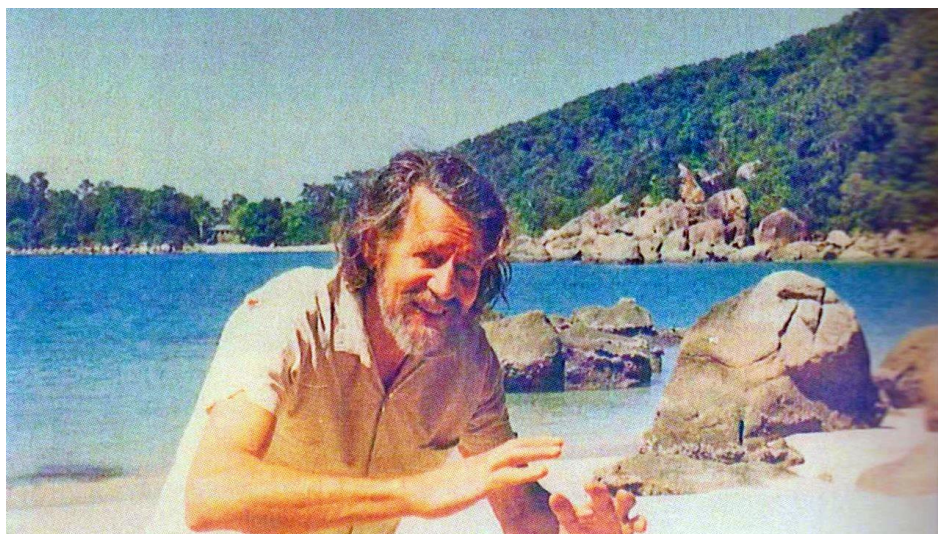
Noel Wood loved fun and the company of others and made friends easily, yet he also craved privacy and valued time alone to paint, muse and enjoy his own company. He built an art studio for himself well away from his house, near the spring. He also built a small conventional guest house on the opposite side of the island, to reduce the adverse impacts of visitors.

In newspaper interviews, Noel often said how much he disliked the way the world was. He was largely apolitical yet railed at the way most humans lived their lives. He could escape that best when he lived remotely and, while he said he was not an *escape artist*, that seems to an observer to be exactly what he was. He often described the world as being *mad* and his island was his refuge from that. He said, for example, in *The Courier-Mail*, in 1940, *I am not an escapist. I have worked out satisfactorily how I can live happily in this mad world without worrying anyone.*³

James Porter, in his excellent account of the life of Noel Wood in his book, *A Family of Islands*, explains how much his garden meant and how immaculately he maintained his home, paths and gardens. By the 1950s, the home was still open to the forest in many parts, yet it was well-built and decorated for gracious living. Noel kept a large library of books that he shared enthusiastically with his visitors who found he had a near photographic memory and remembered large swathes of text easily.

He did not read newspapers yet subscribed to a couple of magazines like *The New Yorker*. He had no radio until late in life and spoke of not knowing of King Edward VIII's abdication in December 1936.

Eventually, the noise and presence of residents building nearby became too much and Noel sold Bedarra and settled on the mainland on the Atherton Tablelands in 1996. He was then 84 years old, and his health was deteriorating.



³ *Art in the Tropics*, *The Courier Mail*, 07 September 1940 accessed on Trove, September 2022 at: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/40919426?searchTerm=Art%20in%20the%20Tropics>

Peggy MacIntyre was a fan of the man and the artist and said:⁴ *One of the nicest things about him is that he is a human being, with a sense of humour; and a whole-hearted admiration for the works of other artists.*

Steve Kenyon and his wife Jenny lived on Bedarra for two years and knew Noel well. Steve wrote a small collection of Noel's thoughts and sayings in his book, *Heaven is within you: Reflections from a beachcomber's mind*.⁵ Steve says in his notes on the author that he travelled extensively, always seeking unique characters. *However the most priceless person lived right here in Australia ... Noel Wood.*

We learn from Steve that Noel was always, *immersed in nature* and that his thinking was based on Eastern philosophies such as Zen Buddhism. Steve's quotes indicate that Noel lived in the moment without regard for the past or the future: *This is what counts, the here and now.* He lived by the Buddhist ideal to live simply and not acquire things and to sustain yourself by growing your own food. As he said repeatedly to the press, *The hermit is not lonely, but he is alone.* He saw all as *ephemeral* and *The only permanence is change.*

Many people in this world talk much of their personal philosophies of life and tend to chide others for not living that way. Noel Wood, from all that is written of him, appears to have had a clear and articulated philosophy and to have lived it throughout his years on Earth. He was true to his life ethics and did not plead with others to follow his lead.

Noel had many girls stay and share his island life and loved good food and expensive imported wines and brandies when he could afford them. On love he cited, *Love is where you are, Love what you are doing, Love whom is with you.* He also liked Aldus Huxley's view ... *try to be a little kinder.*



Noel and daughter Ann Grocott at a friend's home in Mission Beach, 1996.

The full story of Noel Wood includes stories of many friends and visitors to the island, speaks of daughter Ann Grocott's art and shares her recollections of his life and his art. On Bedarra, Noel was a magnet to so many famous artists and all manner of people from around the globe. The evidence revealed in his story confirms that Noel Wood is an icon of the Mission Beach district and is undoubtedly the most recognized and accomplished of all artists in our history.

He wasn't an ordinary person, Noel. He was very kind to people, very sweet. But he never really loved a person, or an animal. What he really loved was his island and his painting.

Eulogy, Ann Grocott.

⁴ Peggy MacIntyre, *Noel Wood and the Barrier Reef, Art in Australia*, May 15 1939, accessed on *Trove Magazines* July 2022 at: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-351472393/view?sectionId=nla.obj-354698582&searchTerm=Noel+Wood&partId=nla.obj-351536826#page/n44/mode/1up>

⁵ Steve Kenyon, *Heaven is within you, Reflections from a beachcomber's mind*, Aurora House, 2018.