

MISS CONSTANCE MACKNESS M.B.E.

OUR FIRST HISTORIAN



By Ken Gray



This Sketch is about Miss Constance Mackness MBE and her family at Narragon Beach.

Constance was the first historian of our town and wrote *Clump Point and District, An Historical Record of Tam O'Shanter, South Mission Beach, Bingil Bay, Garner's Beach and Kurrimine*, G. K. Bolton, Cairns, 1959.

Her book was based on many interviews with long-term residents such as Les Alexander who arrived at *Bicton* in Bingil Bay with his family in 1913 and left in 1958. Much valuable information would have been lost to us had Constance not completed that fine history.

Her father, James Mackness (1838-1926) was born in Buckinghamshire, England, and at age 14 he left home and sailed to Australia as a cabin boy.¹ His ship was wrecked near Melbourne. He went onto the Ballarat goldfields and then to the Tuena goldfield near Bathurst, NSW. There he married Alice Mary Brown (1858 – 1940) who was born in Tuena, and they raised a family comprising Violet (1875-1958), Constance (1882-1973), Wilfred George (1880-1956), Lucy Bertha (1884-1887), Leonard Owen (1886-1974), Raymond Alfred (1888-1939), William (1892-1960) and twin, Egerton Matthew (1892-1960). Violet was born when Alice had just turned 17 years of age; the couple married four years later.

There is an alternative history of James Mackness that is well documented on *Ancestry.com.au*.² If we believe this version, and there is little reason not to, considering how specific the information is, then Constance came from humble beginnings and achieved much in life despite it. James Mackness was convicted of 'simple robbery' in 1857 and sentenced to 10 years of transportation to Australia in 1857. He sailed to Fremantle in 1862 and was given leave from the Fremantle prison soon after and received a conditional pardon in 1865. The records state that the father of the amazing Sydney University scholar, Constance Mackness, was illiterate. In 1894, when in NSW, James was appointed to a community position as Secretary of the Commoners of Tuena, so no doubt he had soon learned to read and write.

The family lived on a small holding in Tuena and James eked out an existence by gold prospecting, growing small crops and rabbit shooting. Constance taught herself to read before she could write. She boarded at the NSW State model school in inner Sydney (Fort Street, founded in 1848). She excelled there, winning one of only three university scholarships available to girls in NSW. At age 16, she attended Sydney University and graduated BA with First-Class Honours in French, English, and History at 20 years of age in 1902. She won a prize in geography and was runner-up in the university prize for history as well.

Constance joined the prestigious, inner city private school, Sydney PLC (Presbyterian Ladies' College) as a teacher soon after. She taught her pupils in strictly religious terms so had been profoundly influenced at the tiny Presbyterian Church in Tuena. In 1916, at age 34, she became Head Mistress at the new Presbyterian Ladies' College in Pymble. In 1918, she was appointed as the first Principal of the new Warwick Presbyterian Girls' College. She led the school successfully before retiring after 32 years of service. Students affectionately called her *Macko* among themselves, and while she was ultra-strict and conservative, she quite liked her supposedly secret nickname.

During her time in Warwick, Miss Mackness started writing novels. In all, she wrote ten novels for and about young people. Her most popular book was *Glad School* (1927). None were best sellers, yet she had

¹ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 10, Melbourne University Press, 1986 accessed June 2022 at: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mackness-constance-7402>

² *Ancestry.com.au*, James Mackness accessed June 2022 at: <https://www.ancestry.com.au/family-tree/person/tree/53288615/person/26658948592/story>

strong a following. Her most enduring publication was her history of *Clump Point and District* (1959) which has been reprinted twice. Only one of her novels was based on life at Mission Beach; *The Young Beachcomber*. Miss Mackness visited the Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement and began to write and speak of Aboriginal culture and injustices late in her career.

During her time in education, Constance supported her struggling family. Her parents, James and Alice, left Tuena after living there for more than 60 years. In 1922, they retired to a 160-acre fruit farm at Narragon Beach which had been abandoned by the original selector, Jack Unsworth in 1917. He was unable to transport his produce to markets because the shipping was seconded for WWI. The farm was named by Unsworth after an Aboriginal hero, Narragon, so the Mackness family retained that name. Jack Unsworth was well known and liked by the Djiru people; he walked far and wide to obtain paid work until his farm was productive, so they named him *Jacky Walkabout*.

Two of the Mackness sons, Raymond and Leonard, lived in the district, with Leonard cane farming at Liverpool Creek. Raymond built the family home because the one that the Unsworths had used was ruined in the 1918 cyclone. The mail for the Clump Point district south of Narragon came to the Mackness' home after Banfield of Dunk Island died in 1923. After 1932, it was delivered to Alec Dunlop's place at Wongaling Beach.

The Mackness family did much to help develop the district, and in 1924, they, with the Cuttens, Alexanders and Garners built the first access 'road' from Bingil Bay to Garners Beach and El Arish. It was a rough, muddy track so was impassable in the wet, but in dry weather, it was useable by truck. The Johnstone Shire Council only provided the bolts for the bridges at Maria Creek and Muff Creeks. Earlier, the Mackness brothers built half the road from Narragon Beach to Bingil Bay using explosives and a truck provided by Council. The Mackness boys built the first crossing over the northern creek at Narragon which is now named, Mackness Creek. The road from Bingil Bay to El Arish was not properly made until 1936.

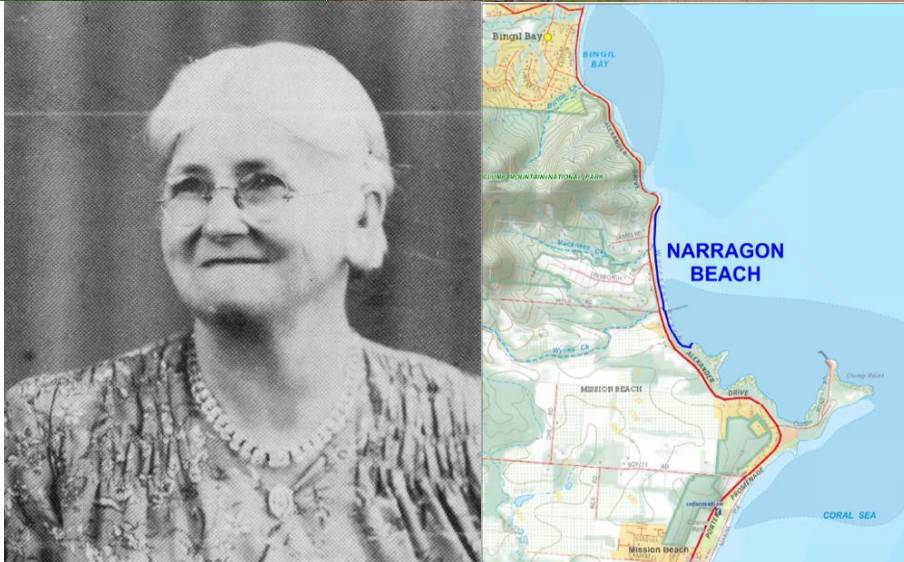
James Mackness died in 1928, but Alice was still in the district when the war broke out and died in 1940. She maintained a beautiful garden. Constance usually stayed at Narragon during school holidays. She retired in 1949, moving to Narragon to care for her ailing brother, Leonard. She was awarded an MBE for her services to education in 1959 and became heavily involved in the Progress Associations of the district as had her brother Raymond previously.

Constance was a strong advocate for the district. She asked the Council in 1953 to rename the beach nearby. At the time, it was informally named, *Mackness Beach*, and she made a case for it reverting to the Djiru name, *Narragon*. Council agreed but did not gazette it as they should have, and it became listed in error as *Warragon Beach* on the *Queensland Place Names*, website, and then on popular online mapping systems, like *Google Earth*. In late 2018, the author of this Sketch researched the history and entered negotiations with *Queensland Place Names* who agreed to correct it and gazetted it in November 2018.

Constance's parents were both buried on their Narragon Beach property on the hillside. Constance was not buried beside them. She died after living in a nursing home for a short while in Brisbane, Queensland and was cremated when she died there 17 June 1973.



Tuena Presbyterian Church; Graduation 1902 aged 20 years;



Images top to bottom, left to right: Sydney PLC; Warwick Presbyterian Girls' College; Constance late in life; Narragon Beach is gazetted 1918.

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Miss Constance Mackness from *Woman's Mirror* 14 December 1926.



Warwick Presbyterian Girls College, 1933.