

BIOGRAPHICAL ENTRY – AUSTRALIAN DICTIONARY OF BIOGRAPHY ONLINE

SERLE, PERCIVAL (1871-1951), accountant and scholar, was born on 18 July 1871 at Elsternwick, Melbourne, eldest surviving son of Walter Henry Serle, later secretary-manager of James McEwan & Co., and his wife Kate, née Grocock, both English born. He grew up in East Melbourne and was educated at Cambridge Street, Collingwood, State School and Scotch College. In 1887 he joined a life assurance firm, the Australian Widows' Fund, eventually becoming chief bookkeeper on about £250 a year.

He learned to speak in public at the Holy Trinity, Kew, Debating Society, wrote a literary column for the local newspaper and occasionally contributed to the *Bulletin* and other journals. His favourite authors came to be Shakespeare, Marvell, Wordsworth and Browning, Jane Austen, Thackeray, Meredith and Arnold Bennett. Serle wrote for the *Sportsman* on amateur athletics; he had been a founder of the East Melbourne Harriers and the Amateur Sports Club and was a cross-country runner. He also played golf and tennis.

In 1901 he subscribed to the first issue of the *Connoisseur* (London). When he was 13 the family had visited Europe, which roused his interest in art. In 1906 he took six months unpaid leave which he spent largely in the British and European galleries. He came to know John Ford Paterson and Fred McCubbin, from whom he learned much, and most of the Victorian painters of his time. In 1911 he joined the council of the Victorian Artists' Society on which he remained for forty years. On 29 March 1910 he had married the artist Dora Beatrice Hake (1875-1968).

That year Serle was appointed to the administrative staff of the University of Melbourne, soon becoming chief clerk, accountant and occasionally acting registrar, eventually on about £400 a year. His friendly contacts with university staff developed his intellectual range and sophistication. In 1920, however, he resigned because of over-work but also because he now had a private income approaching £1000 a year, derived almost entirely from shrewd investment of small savings. He began work on a selection of Donne's poetry, then prepared an edition of Samuel Johnson's poems, which he eventually submitted unsuccessfully to the Clarendon Press. In 1923 he published himself, finely hand-set, Christopher Smart's *A Song to David and Other Poems*, then appealed in *The Times* for donations to Australia of early editions of English authors; several major libraries profited. Working towards an unachieved history of Australian and New Zealand poetry, he compiled *A Bibliography of Australasian Poetry and Verse*, published by Melbourne University Press in 1925; J. A. Ferguson described it as 'the first worth-while attempt at scientific Australian bibliography'. In 1927, assisted by his friends R. H. Croll and Frank Wilmot, he produced *An Australasian Anthology (Australian and New Zealand poems)*, judged much later by H. M. Green as 'easily the best of Australian historical anthologies'. In 1924 Serle founded a literary club which for nearly twenty years met monthly for discussion (with plenty of cake but no ale) at his home, attended by most of Melbourne's leading writers. He lobbied the Commonwealth Literary Fund for grants to writers in distress and in 1927 organized an unsuccessful deputation to Prime Minister Bruce to plead for trebling the fund's vote.

Bernard Hall had engaged Serle in 1924-26 to catalogue the Connell and Verdon collections at the National Gallery of Victoria. He also gave general guide lectures—eventually more than 150. By now he was a fluent lecturer and impromptu speaker. In 1928 he spent a year overseas, primarily in galleries and museums. For five years from 1931, however, his income having been halved, he conducted a second-hand bookshop in the Eastern Market. He was curator of the art museum at the National Gallery on a £2, one-day-a-week basis for nearly three years from December 1933. His reports on buying policy for pottery and porcelain, furniture, glass, etc, were influential and he formed a warm alliance with Sir Sydney Cockerell, English adviser to the Felton Bequest. His happiest experience at the gallery was his appointment for a month in 1940 to advise the newly appointed (Sir) Daryl Lindsay who was acting as director.

Serle's outstanding achievement was his *Dictionary of Australian Biography* (2 vols, 1949). He had systematically collected biographical information since 1929, but decided only in 1939, encouraged especially by Green, to attempt the dictionary himself. For five years, in old age, he averaged four lives in nearly 3000 highly compressed words a week. The work was well received and, despite the limitations of a one-man enterprise, lasted usefully as a reference work for some forty years.

He continued to work, editing an edition of Wilmot's poems (1944) and writing *A Primer of Collecting* (1951). He contributed to the *Australian Encyclopaedia* (1925-27, 1958) and to *The Oxford companion to art*. The Depression had radicalized him on economic and social issues. His only club was the walking-conversational Wallaby.

Frederick Macartney recalled Serle as 'rather less than middle height ... polite in manner, prepared to be merry at a joke, head on one side tolerantly listening to a disputable opinion, but emphatic enough when some example of injustice or incompetence required that'. His great strengths were breadth of knowledge and accuracy, rather than originality. Modest and lacking in self-confidence until middle age, he was too unassertive for his own good. Nettie Palmer remembered him as 'a liaison man of discrimination and spirit', 'an almost incredible figure in his place and period'. Vance Palmer summed him up as 'a self-made man, and the job was exceedingly well done'.

An agnostic, Serle died at home at Hawthorn on 16 December 1951, survived by his wife, daughter and two sons. His estate was sworn for probate at £27,774.

His wife Dora was born in South Melbourne on 2 September 1875. She studied at the National Gallery schools and with Phillips Fox, Jane Sutherland, Walter Withers, and Stanhope Forbes at Newlyn, Cornwall, England. In Paris in 1902 she revelled in the Impressionists, 'decided that was how I wanted to paint', and went on to grapple throughout her life with the interplay of colour and light. For several years before marriage she conducted an art school at Geelong. She was, for some seventy years, a member of the Victorian Artists' Society and from 1939 of the Independent Group of Artists; she was president of the Melbourne Society of Women Painters in 1933-34, represented them on the National Council of Women (Victoria), and was a member of the Lyceum Club. Her work is represented in the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria and provincial galleries. She died at Hawthorn on 10 September 1968. Her sister Elsie Barlow (1876-1948) was also an artist, primarily a water-colourist, and was a founder of the Castlemaine Art Gallery.

Of Percival Serle's brothers, Walter Henry (1873-1954), farmer and clerk, served as a sergeant in the 60th Battalion, Australian Imperial Force, was wounded four times, badly gassed and awarded the Military Medal. Edwin Hamilton, O.B.E. (1875-1945), solicitor and athlete, was a major in, and in 1919-20 director of, military intelligence, Army Headquarters.

Select Bibliography

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Print Publication Details: Geoffrey Serle, 'Serle, Percival (1871 - 1951)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 11, Melbourne University Press, 1988, pp 567-569.

<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A110580b.htm>

22nd Sep, 2006