



‘A Short Time Before Her Death’

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ABSTRACT

This Creative Matters piece is inspired by five objects in the archives of the colonial artist, Adelaide Ironside (1831–1867), which relate to her dying and death. In addition to two letters, one of which was the last Adelaide wrote before she died; the other by her mother shortly afterwards, I have drawn inspiration from the trunk the Ironsides took with them to Europe and which returned to Australia after their deaths and remains in the possession of her descendants. I have also referred to an obituary that was published in the *Athenaeum* and a lost artwork by Ironside entitled ‘The Pilgrim of Art’, which depicts mother and daughter. The central focus of this work is, however, the only confirmed photograph we have of Adelaide Ironside, which was taken, a note in her archive suggests, ‘a short time before her death’. In this creative piece, I experiment with how such archival objects can be used to speculate and evoke the final moments of a biographical subject’s life in historical narrative.

Keywords: Adelaide Ironside, archival traces, speculation, historical narrative

Let’s start with the only remaining photograph. The 6 cm × 10 cm image was taken in Rome, ‘a short time before her death’. It may have been March 1867. Adelaide would have been about six months or so from her thirty-sixth birthday. It is an oval-shaped *carte de visite*—a sort of pictorial calling-card and one of the Victorian era’s more imaginative responses to the new technology of photography. ‘Small card likenesses... very beautiful and varying in price’ and most likely taken in the studio of Signori Marig, 8 Piazza di Spagna, who placed the drying portrait on the thick cream rectangle card before giving it to Adelaide’s mother Martha,

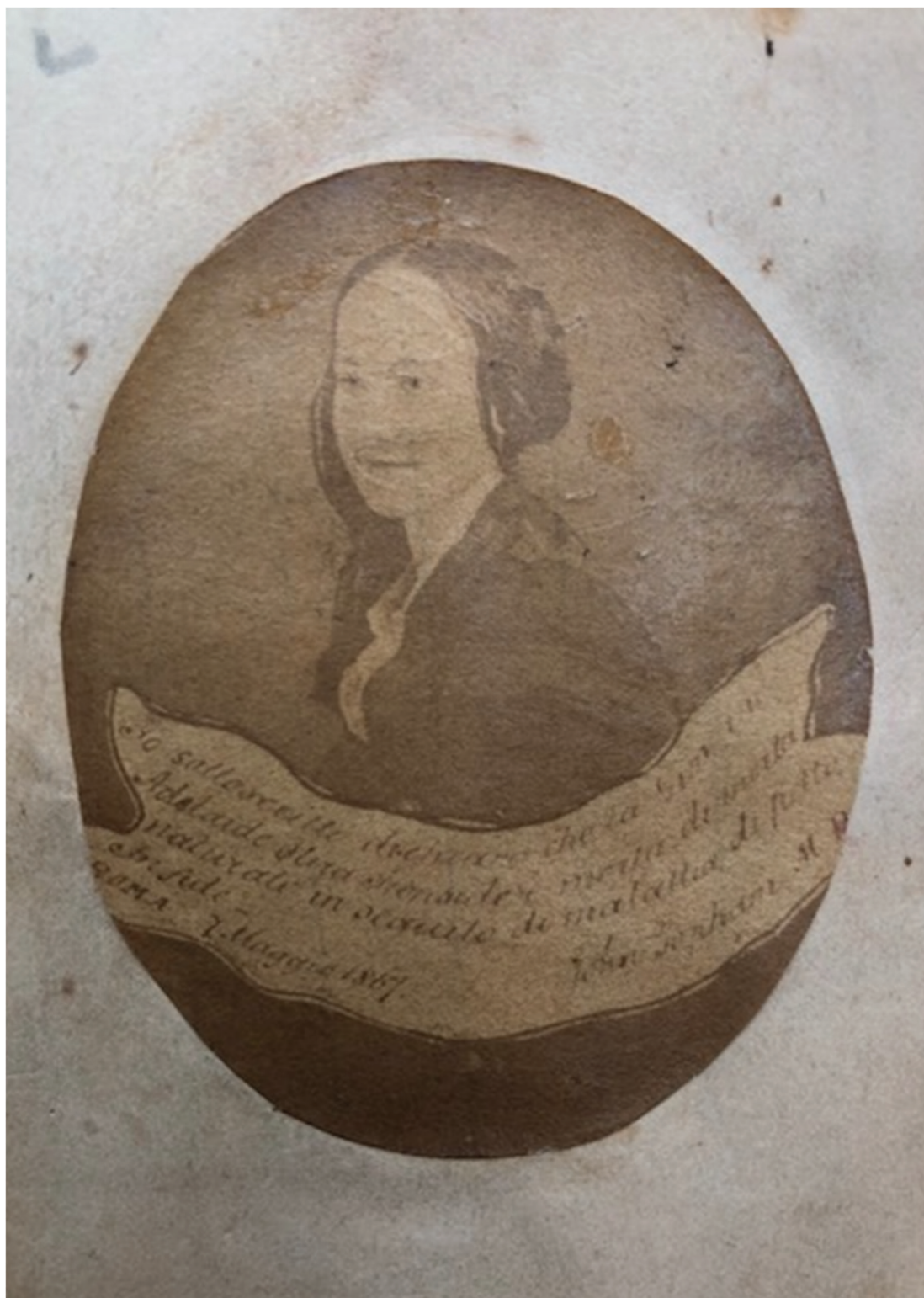


Figure 1: ‘Addie Ironsides [sic] taken a short time before her death, 1867’, SLNSW Mitchell Ironside Family Papers, MSS 272/1/357, 15–19.

who wanted it taken and Adelaide obliged, because they both knew.¹ Adelaide would have struggled from her bed for this occasion, but the two women would have persisted, determined that she be remembered.² Dressing her with a sense of posterity, they would have made decisions about her shoes, shawl and hair, before slowly making their way out of their apartment, down the stairs and onto the busy thoroughfare of Via Quattro Fontane.³

See the two women pushing forward. In the past, year, they have lost four loved ones and both now wear some sort of mourning garb. Their heavy garments seem to drag, even clutch at their mortality. They are weak with winter but too poor for a coach.⁴ So they walk. Slowly. Up the hill, past the dust-covered statues of the four river gods and along Palazzo Barberini, with its great wrought gates. It is a route they have taken for years, sometimes to see Gibson for breakfast or to take supper with a sister sculptor.⁵ After a heavy winter stuck inside, both are blinking a little at the outside world.

At the top of the hill mother and daughter pick their way over the uneven volcanic cobblestones of Via Gregoriana, before proceeding cautiously down the first portion of *Salinata*, the Spanish Steps.⁶ It is late morning, but the air is still crisp and Adelaide can feel it cutting at her chest. Halfway down, the pair stop as she struggles to steady her sharp rasps. Martha waits, looking out on the palazzo. Only a few horses and carts lounging about this morning, she thinks. And a coach that is probably waiting for some rich Americans.⁷ After a time, Martha senses her daughter is settled and gestures with an arm through which Adelaide slips her swollen hand. One step, then another, and another. Finally the women are on steady ground.

As they cross the square, the two women hardly attract a glance. Cart men are smart. They can see the younger one already has one foot in the grave—that their clothes are not as good as they should be. These *straniera* should leave their sick at home, one thinks to himself, as he spits, not bring them here to die.⁸ Oblivious perhaps, the two women press on, past the buckets of cut blooms and towards Marig's studio, which is probably somewhere on the left. Almost certainly up another flight of stairs.

Il Fiore d'Australia, Flower of Australia, as she sometimes styled herself, is seated on an angle, looking to the left.⁹ She is a small slim thing, even for a nineteenth-century woman.¹⁰ Indeed, several friends described her as child-like, not only for her slight frame and intense enthusiasms, but also, what might appear on first impression, naivety.¹¹ And yet, in this image, I sense vigour, vision and ambition. Her face is much fuller than I imagined, particularly given what the letters indicate about her health at

this stage. Even so, I think I can detect the flushed cheeks and glittering eyes of that 'flattering malady'.¹²

She has a large white forehead and long black hair that is parted, rather severely, in the centre. It has been swept over one shoulder, away from the camera, and drops down over the other. Light has caught her crown and given it a sheen. I cannot tell if this is because her hair is glossy with careful grooming or lank from sickness. I suspect it may be wet with sweat from the effort of the recent walk. She wears her hair down in a fashion that recalls the medieval style she gave several women in her paintings.¹³ But there is more to it, I now know, for the hair of consumptives was thought to grow so unruly it could not be made to conform with fashion.¹⁴ Perhaps mother and daughter spent an hour or so this morning trying to reign it to their will, then saw the time and decided to let it have its way.

Adelaide Eliza Scott Ironside. Daughter of a single mother who was abandoned by a Scotts businessman who preferred another woman and his drink. Aesi or Aei to her closest friends. Ruskin's 'sweetest child'. Most kind Lady Adelaide: Most Skilled in the art of painting to the Italian monks. Addie to her family.¹⁵

There is a glow to her face that has temporarily rendered her incandescent. Her skin is without blemish. Her nose soft rather than angular. The mouth supple and slightly lifted at the corners, as if Signori Marig has caught her just before she is about to smile. But, in fact, Adelaide would have held this expression for one, two, perhaps even five minutes as he carefully aligned the various alchemies of his trade with the temporal forces. She wears tartan over her shoulders, a shawl that is similar to one she depicted in several ink and charcoal works.¹⁶ The cream lace under her dark dress serves to lighten her, although the shade so closely matches her skin that it seems to dissolve where it touches her, particularly about her throat.

Only a few weeks ago Adelaide wrote what was probably her very last letter, confiding to her old pastor, Dr John Dumore Lang that, 'after all her years of striving after glory' for 'her sex and her country', she has finally learnt 'in calm submission to "kiss the rod" and be content that it is not worse'.¹⁷ But it will get worse. Within weeks. And in a few months from now, Martha will write her own letter to their pastor—this one, bordered in black, describing the 'death of my beloved artist'.¹⁸ How her daughter's 'dear, delicate body' suffered intensely from 'the first consumptive'. Martha will promise to tell him more—in person—when she is back in Sydney. For, after weeks of equivocation, she has decided not to leave her daughter to rot in Rome among the other expatriate corpses in the non-Catholic Cemetery. Instead, Martha informs Dr Lang, she will bring Adelaide home to rest in her 'beloved native land', surrounded by the wildflowers that first brought her fame.¹⁹



Figure 2: Adelaide Ironside, 'Ars Longa, Vita Brevis: The Pilgrim of Art Crowned by the Genius of Art' (1859).

Look about their apartment now, in the few days before Martha leaves. In the next room, she has begun packing their trunk. It stands open, half full of sketchbooks, poetry and papers.²⁰ Much of Adelaide's art is already packed, or at least covered in cloth. Indeed, the only work Martha

now keeps within sight is the small ‘picture poesy’, depicting mother and daughter in their devoted pilgrimage of art.²¹

Martha’s penmanship lacks the flourish of Adelaide’s confident hand and is occasionally illegible. The letter itself is also torn at a corner, and when I found it in Dr Lang’s voluminous archive, it seemed as stranded as she must have been the day she wrote it.²² I imagine those first days and weeks swallowed Martha in grief. Adelaide was her only surviving child and always, she confessed, her ‘early idol’.²³ No wonder, then, that some time during that first period of grieving Martha took the advice of a local acquaintance who urged her to take ‘a small, very small dose’ of ‘the famous Chloridine’ for her shattered nerves.²⁴

While she had first welcomed those chemical waves of calm now, Martha knows, she must be firm. A decision has been made. She packs away the bottle and sits down to put pen to paper. She is ‘a poor correspondent at any time’, she tells her old pastor, but the ‘suffering’ of this present moment has rendered her ‘almost hopeless’.²⁵ She cannot seem to stop the shaking in her hands, she explains, after ink blotches onto the page. But she wants the doctor to know how keen she is to come home and hear him preach. First, however, she must ensure her



Figure 3: *The Ironside’s wooden travelling trunk 1855–1869 (partial labels on either side Rom and bagali).* Wooden trunk made from dark wood features hinged lid, metal handles, keyhole and partial labels 33 × 78.5 × 46.5 cm, Slade Private Collection.

daughter's legacy.²⁶ She pauses to consider the various tasks she must accomplish: she must tend to the packing, see to the coach, organize the dreadful details of that lead-lined coffin. There are also letters to get from the Consul and official papers from a local doctor which will ease their passage across the various borders. As she is putting these in order, Martha looks up and catches her reflection in the glass across the desk. A thin, pale, aging woman looks back at her, and, in that moment, the grieving mother sees how ill-equipped she is for all that lies ahead. But then, as if flicking an errant spark from her dress, Martha gets up—quite suddenly—and goes to the trunk. Fossicking about, she finds the two large pages of the *Athenaeum* obituary. Folding these into four, she inserts them into the envelope before adding a quick postscript that asks the doctor to ensure the enclosed is published across all the colonial press. It is the first of many tasks she must complete. Martha seals the envelope.

WORKS CITED

ART

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- SLNSW. *Adelaide Eliza Scott Ironside Family Papers, 1854–1868*, MSS 272/1/.
- SLNSW. *Australian Wildflowers painted by the late Miss Adelaide E. Ironside of Sydney, 1868*. ML 759.994/373.

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

- 'Obituary: Adelaide Ironside.' *The Athenaeum*, 11 May 1867, 624–625.

REALIA

A wooden travelling trunk 1855–1869 (partial labels on either side *Rom and bagali*). Wooden trunk made from dark wood features hinged lid, metal handles, keyhole and partial labels 33 × 78.5 × 46.5 cm, Slade Private Collection.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kiera Lindsey is a Senior Research Fellow conducting an Australian Research Council grant on speculative biography and historical craft at the University of Technology Sydney. Her first speculative biography, *The Convict's Daughter* (Allen & Unwin) was published in 2016; she is currently working on a second, about the colonial artist Adelaide Ironside (Allen & Unwin), and a co-edited collection on Speculative Biography (Routledge, forthcoming 2021). Lindsey has presented masterclasses nationally and internationally, been a regular guest on ABC Radio National and served as an on-camera historian with Foxtel and ABC. She is an executive member of the History Council of New South Wales. E-mail: Kiera.lindsey@uts.edu.au.

NOTES

- 1 Murray, John, 1858, xxii.
- 2 Laura Wentworth to Timmie Fisher, SLNSW *Wentworth Family Papers*, MLA868, c. 1866.
- 3 Adelaide Ironside to J.D. Lang, SLNSW *Wentworth Family Papers*, MLA868. From 1859 to 1867 her letters from Rome use this address.
- 4 There are numerous references to the Ironside's limited financial condition in their archive, including gifts of clothes from friends. See SLNSW, *Adelaide Eliza Scott Ironside Family Papers, 1854–1868*, MSS 272/1/ from Countess Virginia Somers.

- 5 The Ironsides lived on the margins of the region in Rome where most expatriate artists lived, which was the area immediately surrounding Piazza di Spagna. They lived near their closest associate, the Welsh Sculptor, John Gibson, who resided at Via Gregoriana while his partner, Penry Williams, lived nearby at Piazza Mignanelli. Many artists, including Gibson were in the habit of having their breakfast at Café Greco before starting in their studios. Correspondence indicates that the American sculptor Harriet Godhue Hosmer was often in their company. SLNSW, *Adelaide Eliza Scott Ironside Family Papers, 1854–1868*, MSS 272/1.
- 6 Roe, Nicholas, 2013, page 388.
- 7 The American Academy in Rome's photographic archive includes a small collection of images taken during the period the Ironsides lived in Rome. From 17 April to 22 September 2019 the Museum of Rome held a 'Fotografi a Roma' exhibition which included numerous particularly evocative images of Roman street life from the same period. These descriptions are taken from these collections and my own time in Rome, retracing the steps of these two women. See American Academy in Rome. *About The Photo Archive*, <https://www.aarome.org/research/photo-archive/about> and see Museo di Roma. *Fotografi a Roma*, <http://www.museodiroma.it/en/node/1004543>, 2019.
- 8 Research concerned with Keats's death in Rome detail the hostile treatment consumptive invalids could expect from authorities and locals who correctly suspected the illness was contagious. Hoolihan, Christopher, 1989 notes how the number of invalid expatriates in Rome increased exponentially during the 1850s and that by the time the Ironsides were residing in Rome a veritable industry of health tourism visited each winter.
- 9 (Trans.,) 'The flower from Australia'. Adelaide signs her name thus on her twenty-fifth birthday, 17 November 1856. See Ironside, Adelaide, *Common Day book*, Private Collection.
- 10 There are numerous references to Ironside's physical frailty, particularly letters from Laura Wentworth. For example, 5 June 1866: 'Miss Ironsides and Mam who is staying here—the poor girl is very delicate', and (n.d.): 'The Ironsides are staying with us now—the poor little thing has still a most dreadful cough and she is so thin when undressed that it is wonderful how she can'. SLNSW *Wentworth Family Papers*, ML A868.
- 11 In the SLNSW, *Adelaide Eliza Scott Ironside Family Papers, 1854–1868*, MSS 272/1: Ruskin frequently begins his letters to Ironside, 'My dear child'. Eminent colonist Charles Nicholson was also critical of her 'irrational' behaviour. Browning's description of her 'wild enthusiastic ways' is cited in the associated article as is the *Athenaeum* 'Obituary: Adelaide Ironside', which also refers to an episode recalled by Gibson, 'I was angry at her one day but by George! I could not scold her when I saw her sweet smile and heard her sweet voice'.
- 12 In Chapter 7, 'Dying to Be Beautiful', Day attributes the term 'flattering malady' to John Leake who said consumption 'seizes the young and most beautiful of the Female Sex; for such from their natural delicacy of frame re more particularly subject to its malignant power'. In the same chapter she also cites Charlotte Bronte using the same term, see Day, Carolyn, 2017, pages 86 and 95.
- 13 See *The Marriage at Cana of Galilee*, 1861, at the Art Gallery of NSW.
- 14 Day, Carolyn, 2017, pages 87 & 98.
- 15 See SLNSW, *Adelaide Eliza Scott Ironside Family Papers, 1854–1868*, MSS 272/1; SAG *Manuscript Collection* 4/12973 *Ironside*.
- 16 See, for example, 'Woman with Sheaf of Wheat', Art Gallery of New South Wales. Attributed to Adelaide Ironside. First accessed 2 November 2016: <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/63.2008>.

- 17 Adelaide Ironside to Lang, 10 January 1867, SLNSW *John Dunmore Lang Papers*, vol. 9, ML A2229/249.
- 18 Idem, A2229/251.
- 19 'Beloved native land' is a term Ironside uses in several letters; Ironside to Lang, 25 September 1862; 12 February 1863; 13 July 1863; 10 January 1867, SLNSW *John Dunmore Lang Papers*, vol. 9, ML A2229. In late 1854 Ironside exhibited 43 watercolours of Australian wildflowers at the Australian Museum. These were then sent to the Paris Internationale in 1855 where they were awarded an honourable mention. In 1866 when Adelaide had become too sick to paint, a fellow colonist and botanic illustrator, Louisa Australia Blaxland, encouraged Ironside to have these early watercolour wildflowers published. An agreement was made with the London publisher, John D. Day that the Ironsides would secure the subscriptions required to make this profitable and Martha then circulated a pamphlet throughout England and Australia for this purpose. Numerous subscribers did invest, including the Prince of Wales. Sadly, the publishers became bankrupt before the subscriptions were secured and the book was never published. I have found several examples of watercolour botanic illustrations in various archives associated with the Ironsides, but it is not possible to determine if these are from the original watercolour collection. The pamphlet promoting these works remains the most compelling evidence of these works. SLNSW, *Australian wild flowers painted by the late Miss Adelaide E. Ironside of Sydney, 1868*, ML 759.994/373.
- 20 This trunk is part of the Ironside's realia collection. *A wooden travelling trunk 1855–1869 (partial labels on either side Rom and bagali)*. Wooden trunk made from dark wood features hinged lid, metal handles, keyhole and partial labels 33 × 78.5 × 46.5 cm, Slade Private Collection.
- 21 This is certainly how Ironside described it in her letters to Lang, 20 February 1863, SLNSW *John Dunmore Lang Papers*, vol. 9, ML A2229. Sadly, this work was left in 'a sort of three-sided shed' associated with the Art Gallery of NSW where it deteriorated beyond repair. A black and white photograph is now the only remaining image we have of this work which was published in Preston, Margaret, 'Pioneer Women Artists', in Flora Eldershaw, 1938, page 126.
- 22 Martha Ironside to Lang, 18 June 1867, SLNSW *John Dunmore Lang Papers*, vol. 9, ML A2229/251.
- 23 Laura Wentworth to Timmie Fisher, 25 March 1869, SLNSW *Wentworth Family Papers*, ML A868, describes how Martha acknowledged to her that Adelaide's death represented the end of all 'earthly joy' for her and that Martha also confessed her preoccupation with her daughter as 'an earthly idol' had distracted her from her faith.
- 24 Mark Minshull to Martha Ironside, 27 June 1867, SAG *Manuscript Collection* 4/12973 Ironside.
- 25 Martha Ironside to Lang, 19 June 1867, SAG *Manuscript Collection* 4/12973 Ironside.
- 26 Ibidem.