

Our Unending Heritage

A critical biography based on the life of

Ella Osborn Fry CBE

(née Robinson)

1916 – 1997



by

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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PREFACE

The title of the thesis, *Our Unending Heritage*, is taken from the poem *Nightfall* by Gwen Harwood¹, which was written in memory of Vera Cottew². Gwen Harwood was, like Ella Fry, an alumna of Brisbane Girls Grammar School where Vera Cottew taught art and where I am now the Principal; Cottew was a friend to both Harwood and Fry. The format of my writing is somewhat unconventional as I have endeavoured to structure the research questions more creatively; a “top down” approach to prose has been replaced by section headings phrased as introductory questions, playing on words, but fulfilling the role of guiding the reader as to the key concepts at the outset.

I have used the heading ‘Part’ instead of ‘Chapter’ throughout the thesis to reinforce my purposeful selection of language to suit the subject and to reflect a postmodern play on words. The word ‘part’ has many definitions depending upon the context or ‘reading’, but here it is specifically chosen to delineate chapters, not only because of its literary use to define divisions, but because of its musical application.

Each Part commences and concludes with quotations, either by Fry, or by other women. In particular, I have selected a number of quotations from two of Margaret Atwood’s novels, *The Robber Bride* and *The Penelopiad*, and I feel this is worth a brief explanation. I enjoy Atwood’s novels generally (*Alias Grace*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, etc.), and relate particularly to her clever way of weaving historical content with feminist issues, often using a postmodernist approach. While not wishing to labour the point, her insights seemed most relevant to my own style and writing on Fry; I believe the selected quotations add to the richness and poignancy of how and why I am undertaking this research.

¹ Gwen Harwood (1920-1995) was born in Brisbane. Educated at Brisbane Girls Grammar School, she took piano lessons, hoping to become a musician; Harwood subsequently became a music teacher. She learned German and read German poetry and philosophy widely, especially the philosophical writings of Wittgenstein. She married William Harwood in 1945 and moved to Tasmania, where she raised four children. She used the pseudonyms Walter Lehmann and Miriam Stone when she first began to publish poetry. Her first book was *Poems* (1963), after which she published six more books of verse. She was awarded the Robert Frost award (1977) and the Patrick White (1978). Her fourth book *Bone Scan* (1989) won the Victorian Premier’s Literary Prize for poetry.

² Vera Cottew is discussed in more depth in Part II.

In relation to formal quotations used throughout the thesis, I have indented some either for emphasis, or because of their complexity or length, and others I have left embedded within the text to ensure an uninterrupted reading and flow of ideas.

References to artists and their works play an important role throughout, so I have endeavoured to provide brief biographical details for those mentioned and include examples of their paintings where appropriate for comparison and explanation - in this context the adage “a picture paints a thousand words” is most apt! I have used the method of footnotes to facilitate immediate access for the reader, in preference to endnotes. This occurs when I am elucidating points, explaining personal connections, providing additional information not easily included as part of the text, to cross-reference, or to cite a minor reference. A complete bibliography is included at the end of the thesis, along with a chronology and a list of Fry’s works I have referred to in the body of the research.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a critical biography researching the life of Ella Osborn Fry, focusing on her work as a musician and artist, her philanthropy, her contributions to education and public life, and her accomplishments and recognition as a woman. It is written from my position as a woman, an educator and an art historian. My research includes a consideration of biography as genre, feminism and feminist issues in Australian art and education. It also notes the similarities, intersections and coincidences that underpin both our lives, and uses a postmodern approach to create the architecture of the thesis. Fry's own words and artworks provide invaluable source material upon which the research explores the various milestones in her life. The conclusion places her in an Australian context of women in art, governance and public life.