A Grace Seccombe Collection

Today Grace Seccombe is well known as an accomplished ceramic artist, best recognised for her highly glazed, slip cast earthenware figures of birds and animals. From a family with a long history in the potteries in Staffordshire, England, Grace emigrated to embrace Australia as her home and succeeded despite the odds.

The Grace Seccombe collection consists of:

1. A glazed earthenware slip cast kookaburra pepper shaker
2. A leather bound autograph book purchased from Dymocks Book Arcade that once belonged to Alfred Capper (Junior), that contains a painting of a steam ship and on the opposite page an autograph from Grace Seccombe with an inscription dated 1904:

“O Let us not be wrecked  
Here on this sea,  
But may our ship be brought  
To Thee O Lord  
Many happy returns Grace”

1. A glazed tile that features the Capper family before they emigrated from England. It is likely this was the last time the whole family was together. The tile was made by Arthur Capper who sold similar tiles featuring photographs that were particularly popular with the Italian community in Sydney for decorating cemetery monuments.

In *Significance 2.0* we read that “Australian Collections are the memory bank of the nation and a key to its future. They embody the people, history, cultures, science and environment of Australia and they show the creativity of Australians in all dimensions. Collections give a sense of our place in the world, and explain how the land and nation have evolved” (Russell & Winkworth, 2009, p. 2).

In this way Grace Seccombe’s story is a reflection of life in Sydney from 1903 until mid-1950. A story of emigration, the effects of World War 1, the Great Depression, World War 2 and even the stolen generation.

Before Grace’s arrival in Australia, her childhood was spent growing up in Burslem, Staffordshire – the heart of potteries in England. She was born in 1880, one of eleven children, of which nine survived through childhood. Alfred Capper, Grace’s father was a potter, as was his father Benjamin Capper. Hannah Povey, Grace’s mother, was also from a family of potters. There is little doubt that both Hannah and Alfred would have been of the same social standing and religion. The family are known to have been devout Methodists.

Burslem – Staffordshire, England is also the birth place of Josiah Wedgwood, founder of the famous Wedgewood Potteries and widely known as the father of potteries in England. Though Grace Seccombe’s success is not to the same extent as that of Josiah Wedgwood, parallels between their lives can be drawn. Josiah Wedgwood’s father, as with Grace’s father, was not successful as a potter though both were born into the potteries. Both Grace and Josiah ultimately found success through decorative pottery. There is little doubt that Josiah’s success greatly improved and influenced the lives of the residents of Burslem that went after him.

In 1739, Josiah Wedgwood had received only three years of formal education when at the age of nine his father died and he went to work in the family potteries. “At this time potting was still more or less a peasant craft” (Wedgwood Baralaston, Stoke on Trent, 1951, p. 5). In 1750 Burslem was still an isolated town with only five shops and the mail was delivered on Sundays only. It is said that Josiah changed life in Burslem beyond all recognition.

In 1762, Wedgwood changed the face of the pottery produced in Staffordshire when he became well known for cream coloured earthen table wear. In that same year Wedgwood and others petitioned to improve the transport in and out of Burslem. The petition provides a description of Burslem at that time – “in Burslem and its neighbourhoods are near five-hundred separate potteries for making various kinds of stone and earthen ware, which find constant support for near 7,000 people”.

In 1764, Josiah married his cousin Sarah Wedgwood who helped in the family business by providing feedback on any new designs. This marriage illustrates further the British social order of the time and would also have been seen as a marriage that benefitted the family business. Interestingly, their daughter Susan was later to become the wife of Charles Darwin, author of *On the Origin of Species*.

In 1769, Wedgwood entered into a partnership with Thomas Bentley that was to be instrumental to his Success. Bentley was well educated and it is believed that it was he who introduced Wedgwood to classical and renaissance art. Exposure to this art inspired Wedgwood to produce the decorative pottery called Black Basalt and later Jasperware. Wedgwood’s further development of Jasperware was to eventually result in a perfect copy of the Portland vase which Josiah produced from a cast made from the original Portland vase.

Throughout his career Josiah experimented with both clay and glazes. In 1774, Wedgwood sold a full dinner set to Catherine the second of Russia. Industrial espionage was alive and well in Wedgwood’s time and his work was copied prolifically. In a letter to Bentley, Wedgwood writes “we should glory in it, throw out all the hints we can and if possible have all the artists in Europe working after our models” (Wedgwood Baralaston, Stoke on Trent, 1951, p. 35). Further evidence of Josiah’s generous nature, “in 1760, when still a comparatively poor man we find him giving ten pounds towards the establishment of a second free school in Burslem” (Wedgwood Baralaston, Stoke on Trent, 1951, p. 35).

When Josiah Wedgwood died in 1795 he left a substantial fortune to his wife and children. A monument in his memory in the church yard in Stoke reads, “he converted a rude and inconsiderable manufactory into an elegant art and an important part of the National Commerce” (Wedgwood Baralaston, Stoke on Trent, 1951, p. 36).

It was Josiah’s youngest son Josiah who inherited the family business. By rights it should have been John, his eldest brother. All of the Wedgwood children were well educated and though Josiah, like his brother, believed himself too good for the family business, he did try to carry on as best he could. By 1811, business for Wedgwood was once again flagging as the following quote from Josiah illustrates, “the business is not worth carrying on, and if I could withdraw my capital from it I would” (Wedgwood Baralaston, Stoke on Trent, 1951, p. 39).

It has not been possible to pinpoint a pottery run by Cappers in the last half of the 19th century however it is possible to make some educated guesses about the lives of the Cappers before leaving England. According to birth records, Grace’s father Alfred Capper was born in 1852 and her mother Hannah Povey in 1854.

We can see from newspaper reports after the family’s arrival in Sydney that Alfred was an educated man, and from this we can assume that Benjamin Capper, Alfred’s father, was either a Master Potter or owned one of the more than five hundred potteries in the Burslem area. This theory is further strengthened by evidence found in the Scriven Report into child labour of the 1840’s. From this report we learnt that life for the working class in Burslem was harsh and for most there was probably little chance that their lot in life would change.

The following are statements recorded during interviews with children in the potteries while Scriven was compiling his report. The full report can be found online at:

<http://www.thepotteries.org/history/scriven.htm>

*Jos Wilkinson, aged 11:*

“I run moulds and wedge clay for Wm. Bentley; have been at work five years; I am sure I was but six years old when I began; cannot read or write; never went to day school; go to Sunday school and learn a bab. Have got a father; he’s a collier, but has had no work this good while; my mother is a baller (supplies the thrower with balls of clay); she is out of work; have three sisters and four brothers; one brother drives donkeys, another works in pit, another has got nothing to do; one sister turns wheel, t’other two canna work, them is little ‘uns. I get 3s 3d. a week; come at half-past six to work, go home at nine; work Mondays and every day.

“Wm. Bentley licks me sometimes with his fist; he has knocked me the other side the pot-stove for being so long at breakfast; half an hour is allowed, but he makes me work before the half hour is up. I go home to dinner, but only stop half an hour, he won’t let me bide an hour; I live a quarter of a mile away, and have to run home and back out of it, and get my dinner to;

“I never get a bit of play, am very tired when I get home at night, get my supper, and am glad to go to bed. I get milk-meat for breakfast, and taters and salt for dinner, sometimes a bit of bacon; would rather work ten hours a-day than fifteen; should not care then if I had less wages a good sight. I should go to school then, and have a bit of time for play. I don’t wear shoes and stockings while I am at work; have got a pair at home and better clothes than this, what they gave me at school: my father is very good to me; he is a totaller.”

*Sampson Beard, aged 12:*

“I run moulds I cannot read, I cannot write; I never went to day school; I go to Sunday school ‘top of the hill chapel; father is dead; mother does nothing, her stays at home; I have two sisters, one a painter, the other a cutter of paper; I get 3s. 6d. a-week; I and my sisters all carry our wages home to support mother; she is too old to work, she used to make triangles and spurs.

“I first came to work when I was five years old; I am sure I was not more than five; I am twelve now; I have been to work seven years; father died before I came. I don’t go home to breakfast because I take it here in the paint room with one of my sisters; I get my dinner with her, I get it in half an hour and work the other a half; I come at six in the morning and go home at six and eight o’clock, sometimes at one time, sometimes at the other, all depends; we work six days in the week. I am always tired when I go home.”

This evidence was collected only ten years before Alfred Capper was born. In England, the Capper family was living in a two storey Victorian Terrace. The photo of the Capper family on the tile is likely to have been taken before the family left England as all nine children are present in the photo. Though Eleanor may have visited her family in Australia, she stayed behind in England where she worked as a nurse. It is possible that this photo was taken the last time the whole family was together.

It appears that all of the children had received a good education. We know Alfred Capper junior was a steam engineer, Victor Capper a chemist, and Arthur Capper a Draftsman. Further to this at a time when a good education was still a privilege Grace had also received some secondary education while still in England. In an article called, *The rise and rise of amazing Grace*, for *Antiques and Arts in New South Wales* Graham Dodds quotes a Marjorie Graham article, “Grace studied drawing, underglaze and overglaze painting at the Wedgwood Institute in Burslem” (Dodd, p. 66).

Once again it is pure speculation, but it is possible that through offering his children an education Alfred was securing his chance of a successful pottery business in Australia. A chemist could after all formulate Glazes while a steam engineer would be useful in relation to running a kiln and of course Grace could glaze and decorate any pottery produced.

It is unclear why the Capper family left England. Benjamin Capper LTD traded in England until around 2001. It was a company that produced decals for Royal Doulton in its last incarnation. Ben Capper LTD produced the decals for Royal Doulton, including “Country Roses” – one of Royal Doulton’s biggest sellers; but went out of business because the decals are now produced in China. Alfred may have had no claim on any family business and so decided to strike out on his own.

Although Josiah Wedgwood made a number of improvements in Burslem, including cutting a canal that ensured fresh water to the town. Burslem also benefitted from an elevated position which meant that the pollution from the potteries was more likely to blow away. Despite this, it is likely that Burslem by the 1900’s was still a heavily polluted area with so many coal fired Kilns. It is rumoured within the family that many family members suffered from asthma.

Benjamin Capper died in 1889, and Elsie Capper died at age five in 1893. It could be that their deaths prompted Alfred Capper to look for a new life for his family. In the 1890’s, he made at least two visits to Australia and also to New Zealand. It is likely Alfred was trying to decide where best to set up his pottery business.

In *The Examiner,* Launceston, Australia, Saturday 12 March 1904, page 4 we read, “the visit to Australia of Mr A Capper (Messrs Capper and Wood, Burslem) and Mr T. W Bennett (Messrs Dunn, Bennett and Co, Royal Victoria Pottery), Burslem is likely (says the Pottery Gazette) to lead to important developments of the potting industry in the federated states. It is understood the two gentleman referred to are passengers by the P&O *Maldavia* and have set out with the main purpose of prospecting for clay and to make enquiries with reference to coal supply”.

The rest of the Capper Family departed Liverpool on the White Liner *Persic* on 27 April 1904 and arrived in Sydney on 27 May 1904. We cannot tell from the passenger arrival lists the class the Cappers travelled but judging from Alfred Cappers recognition as a passenger on the *Maldavia* it is unlikely that they came to Australia in steerage, perhaps cabin class.

It is fortunate for the Cappers that by 1904 the trip from England to Australia had been reduced to just one month due to advancements in steam travel. In *Sailing to Australia*, Andrew Hassan studies the diaries of emigrants travelling to Australia from England in the mid to late 1800’s despite just a month on board ship it was likely to have been a relief to arrive in Sydney. Steerage was engaged during their time on board for preparing their own meals, cleaning their cabins, and washing their clothes. Cabin class passengers with less to do filled their days with needlework, fishing, reading, playing board and card games and wandering the deck. There were also social events such as balls, though despite this it seems life on board was as monotonous as the view.

I wonder if, for the Cappers during the long journey, there was a sense of excitement and hope for a new life. Or, as many emigrants experienced, was there sorrow for the life they had left behind.

Alfred Capper and Mr Bennett’s first job in Australia was the management of Australian Potteries. It is clear that Alfred was keen to further the pottery industry in Australia. In the *Sydney Morning Herald* Thursday, 1 June 1905 we read, “The Potters Art was the subject of an interesting and instructive lecture given at the Chatswood Methodist hall last night by Mr Alfred Capper who is the manager of Australian Potteries at Longueville”. The article goes on to say that over a number of hours Alfred entertained and captivated his audience with the history of potteries from early Egyptian, Chinese, Babylonian, Greek Roman, Anglo Saxon, French and Italian regions. Alfred exhibited examples of pottery that he had produced at Australian Potteries including examples of reproductions of Egyptian Black work.

Later in the lecture Alfred talked about his search for suitable clay in New South Wales, and the importance of good coal supplies. Further to this he spoke about the opportunities that would afford to artists, designers and workmen with the growth of a pottery industry in Australia. This article recognises briefly an attitude in Australia that I believe was Alfred Capper’s ultimate undoing, “there appears to be an unfortunate prejudice against local manufacturers of all kinds, and that prejudice extends to pottery”. Alfred believed this attitude had developed through uncertain supplies and the inferior quality of the products previously made in Australia.

The prejudice that Alfred outlined may have been harder to shake than expected. In Pate’s *Post War Australian Pottery*, a telling quote from Enid Pate, wife of John Pate who established Pates Potteries in 1946. Of pates Pottery Enid says, “I wouldn’t have it in the house. I preferred European Pottery, you know, the well-known companies such as Wedgwood” (Davenport, 1998, p. 11). If this was the feeling even in 1950 when pates was established it can be no surprise that early attempts to establish potteries in Sydney were less than successful.

In February 1906 we read in an Article in *The Advertiser* in Adelaide, a report that Alfred Capper, after two weeks on Kangaroo Island had declared that the “quality of the China Stone, China Clay and feldspar from the Kangaroo Island mine is quite equal to that of the clay found in England and on the continent”. Further Alfred is quoted as saying “the discovery of this huge deposit will open up a new and profitable industry which will largely benefit not only South Australia, but the whole of the Commonwealth”.

The Kangaroo Island China Stone and Clay Mines operated from 1905 until 1911 when the company went into liquidation.

In *The Sydney Morning Herald* on Wednesday 26 June 1912 is a prospectus for The Glazed Brick and Pottery Company. The prospectus states that a share of the 500 shares sold for this company will go to Mr Capper for his sole Australasian Glaze company. Under the heading of management the prospectus states “The company secures Mr Cappers exclusive services for a period of five years from the date of the registration of the company. Mr Capper is an English expert from Staffordshire pottery and has been associated with the glazed brick and pottery manufacture for upwards of twenty years. The bricks and other ware which the company intends to manufacture require very special knowledge and experience not only in the construction works, but also in the process of manufacture. Mr Capper possesses this knowledge and expertise”. By 1913 this company was in liquidation.

Alfred Capper died in January 1914, and with his death the dream of a family pottery business also appears to have ended forever. It is difficult to gage the effect of this on the Capper family who came to Australia with hopes of a better life. For emigrants to Australia who had little in their country of origin it may have been the land of milk and honey. Perhaps life in England had not been as easy as it had been when the family left but there is little doubt that they had social standing and a comfortable life. Life in Australia was probably not that easy.

Grace attended the Sydney technical college to study black and white drawing. Then in 1908, aged 28, Grace married Clarence P. Seccombe in Rockdale Sydney. Clarence was born in Melbourne, the son of a Methodist Minister. Advertising in Australian papers indicate that between 1910 and 1930 Clarence worked actively in and around the Sydney area as an architect and builder. Some time during World War 1 Clarence was posted overseas and in May 1918 *The Sydney Morning Herald* includes Clarence in a list of wounded. Later in life Clarence became a lay Minister.

According to Graham Dodds, Grace stated on her marriage certificate that her occupation was Pottery Artist. In an article originally written for the *Christian Science Monitor,* Grace says that she had not thought of pottery until she returned to England with her husband. It seems Grace spent the first twelve years of her marriage working for the Methodist church in Eastwood and teaching in some of Sydney’s girls’ schools. It is likely that she was teaching arts and crafts or drawing.

When Grace returned to England for a visit in 1920, she was forty years old. In the Christian Science article Grace recounts a moment that changed the course of the rest of her life, “it happened that they were on the railway station at Stoke on Trent she saw a showcase containing some English birds in pottery – a bullfinch, a yellow hammer and a little spotted woodpecker. She fell in love with them and persuaded her husband to buy them. In the ship returning to Australia they were both admiring the birds when she said, ‘you know, I could make birds in pottery like that, only I would do Australian birds’… ”.

We could say that this period of Graces life was almost literally and practically the equivalent of a modern day sea change – on arriving back in Sydney she bought five pounds of clay and a tiny gas furnace. Though Grace had received training in glazes and underglazes and had watched her father modelling clay she had no personal experience and undoubtedly produced her first pieces through trial and error. Having spoken to a number of family members Grace continued to experiment throughout her career as some family members still have examples of this work, including vases, buttons, and garden ornaments.

Most of Graces pieces were highly glazed, hand finished slip cast earthenware. Grace is best known for the modelling of Australian animals and birds. In the Christian Science article grace related that she had watched birds in her garden and at the zoo, and did research at the Australian Museum, where she was lent the skins of various birds and also a platypus. One of Graces nieces related to me that her treasured piece of Grace Seccombe was a platypus, no doubt modelled on a platypus that continues to reside at the Australian Museum. Despite some effort I was not able to locate records of these loans.

Additional evidence of Grace’s love of observing nature can be found in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on Thursday 12 January 1933 in a letter to the editor entitled “The Bul-bul”. Here Grace defends the honour of a bird called the Bul-bul who was brought into doubt through a previous letter to the editor.

“The Bul-bul have made their home here for several years and this season a pair have four little nestlings in a plum tree about twenty yards from the house. A few plums have been attacked as much by sparrows and starlings as by the Bul-buls but never until the fruit is too ripe for packing. The important fact though is that the Bul-buls are continuously around the garden looking for insects. I have seen them searching the Virginia creeper and dashing them on the fence. This year we have been watching the cleverness of the birds in taking the moths which fly on calm evenings”.

At the end of the *Christian Science* article there is a detailed and precious description of how Grace produced some of her work, “Mrs Seccombe loves the feel of clay, and describes it as clean dirt”. It is interesting to note here that Josiah Wedgwood’s eldest son decided that the pottery business was inherently dirty and beneath him. This is a stark contrast to Grace’s approach where she appears to have a real affinity with both the environment and clay. “She is most happy doing freehand modelling in clay, although she loves underglazes and overglaze painting. The clay is fired, then the animals and birds are painted with underglaze colours that are ground in water and mixed with a little gum which keeps the glaze from moving when being glazed.

“Over the underglaze painting she puts a clear glaze which looks like thick white Kalsomine before firing. When fused in firing it covers the painting and so protects it from injury. Two firings are given which makes the colours richer. Overglaze painting requires a third firing”.

Reading this description it is no surprise to me that Grace’s niece described the opening of the Kiln as tense. With only a cursory understanding of pottery one is aware that it only takes one pot to explode (which happens not infrequently) and everything in the kiln can be ruined. With up to three firings it may be a minor miracle that any of her work survived its making. At Pates in the 50’s we read, “problems occurred if a piece fell in the Kiln (pates used a large tunnel Kiln). At pates this problem was dealt with by shooting the offending piece out of the way using a.22 riffle.” (Davenport, 1998, p. 27) .

While the 1920’s and early 1930’s were likely a fruitful time for Seccombe Pottery the latter half of the 1930’s were undoubtedly less so, as many families struggled to merely survive. By 1936 it is well known that many families in Sydney were unable to keep their children adequately nourished. In some instances schools and other organizations set up the equivalent of soup kitchen’s to ensure that kids receive at least one meal a day. In a letter to the editor in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 October 1936, Clarence praises one such scheme.

“All honour to the boys of Crown Street; in giving to others they are building a finer manhood for themselves…”, Clarence also praises the many other organisations who are also feeding poor despite their own need. He continues, “…every day more than sufficient milk and fruit and vegetables to restore to these children their undeniable birth right of physical health…”. Finally Clarence writes, “It is our plain duty to see that no child in this Commonwealth is deprived of physical requirements for health which we produce in abundance. But private charity can never take the place of social justice. This ought ye have done and not left undone”.

In 1930 Grace Seccombe joined the Arts and Craft Society of New South Wales. Dorothy Johnston writes that the “Arts and Craft Society frowned on commercialism” (Johnston, 2008, p. 62), despite this Grace was a member of the society for more than twenty five years. I was keen to discover any reference I could which would help me to better understand Grace the person, with little luck. One person I spoke to about Grace was the current archivist for the Arts and Crafts Society who pointed out to me that although commercialism was frowned upon, for most artists it takes a great deal of discipline. It seems artists by their very nature are driven to produce original work and have it seen. Grace was using moulds to slip cast the same pieces over and over again in order to keep up with demand.

Perhaps it was Graces association with the society that kept her sane. The Arts and Craft Society was founded in 1906 by Dorothy Wilson and eight other crafts people. The society was established with a view to create a “nurturing environment to stimulate creativity and improve the quality of their work” (Braye, p. 1). By 1907 the membership for the group at grown to more than sixty with this growth came a diversification of objectives “which included encouraging the use of Australian materials and motifs, holding exhibitions of members work, establishing a specialized library, and promoting social intercourse and good fellowship” (Cochrane, 1992, p. 19).

In the 1930’s Grace Seccombe regularly had her work included in society exhibitions evidence of this can be found in numerous Newspaper articles:

*The Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuesday 16 June 1931

“Examples of brushwork and pottery form the basis of this month’s exhibition at the Society of Arts and Crafts in Rowe-street. The exhibitors in the China section are Miss Grace Seccombe (who has shown some beautiful pieces of pottery adorned with Australian flowers, native bears, and native birds)”.

*The Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday 6 November 1935

“Lovely examples of handicrafts are displayed at the society of Arts and Crafts annual exhibition… Mrs Grace Seccombe and Miss H G Hirst skilfully turned lumps of wet clay into butterflies, bowls, jars, and jugs ready for colouring and glazing”.

In 1938, A display of craftwork from the society including some of Grace’s work was exhibited at the 50th anniversary of the English Arts and Craft society at Burlington House in London.

The Society not only exhibited the work of its members but also shaped their work through classes and lectures. In 1912, Baldin Spencer is credited with having rediscovered aboriginal Bark Paintings. Spencer can also be credited with being one of the first people to advocate the relevance of Aboriginal design to contemporary art and craft. At a lecture given to the Victorian Arts and Craft Society, he expressed reservations about some uses of native flora, apparently regarding the wattle as an awkward basis….he favoured the waratah…Spencer also encouraged craft workers to visit the museum and copy some of the designs of the Australian aborigines or perhaps better still those of New Guinea or South Sea Islands.

Perhaps one of the most prolific, long standing and persuasive members of the Art and Craft Society of New South Wales was Artist Margaret Preston. Preston clearly believed that the flora and fauna of Australia were over represented in the decorative arts and crafts. Preston strongly believed that aboriginal and Pacific Islander themes should be used more. Preston’s views on how this work could be used are well documented. Today the use of aboriginal designs by white artists would be regarded poorly. Preston was of her time and felt free to use aboriginal designs in any way she saw fit without regard for the original artist or meaning. In *Possessions*, Nicholas Thomas quotes Margaret Preston as saying “when one speaks one does not insist on one’s knowledge of grammar. Speech is used naturally to convey an idea. Use your art in the same way” (Thomas, 1987, p. 119).

Grace Seccombe has been credited as one of the first ceramic artists to use aboriginal designs in proper context, preserving the intent of the original artist. In an article entitled “Sydney women’s success as creative artist”, we read,

“if proof were ever wanted of the compatibility of aestheticism and utility it was conveyed vividly in the thirtieth exhibition of the Society of Arts and Crafts? The Society of Arts and crafts is a body of creative artists whose endeavour it is to produce craftwork that breathes Australia, This impulse is responsible for the aboriginal motif in Mrs Grace Seccombe’s pottery rarely has the essential spirit of primitive Australian art been captured with instant charm. It almost seems as one admires Mrs Seccombe’s work that to her has been handed the torch of almost extinct native art.”

The Grace Seccombe entry in the database of Australian Artists written by Joan Kerr quotes a similar article also written in 1937,

“The essential sprit of the native design so completely that her pottery might be the work of native artists. Mrs Seccombe has reproduced the native designs with remarkable fidelity of line and colour; from paddles and other native implements in the Australian Museum…she has decided to use the various designs only in their proper associations, so that this graceful and lovely, though decidedly primitive, art will remain essentially aboriginal”.

Family members confirmed that at times Grace had employed young Aboriginal women as domestic help. These women would now be recognised as the Stolen Generation. Grace may have become involved with this program through the Methodist church. Grace’s niece confirmed that grace loved these girls and treated them well and remembered particularly fondly a girl called Gwenny. Perhaps it is from her involvement with these girls that grace learnt respect for Aboriginal culture.

Grace found a number of outlets for her work such a Prouds Jewellers, Grace Brothers and Taronga Zoo despite some efforts I was unable to locate any correspondence referring to these transactions.

Through my research I also discovered that Grace sold souvenir pieces on Manly wharf. The following quote from Daphne Friend illustrates how people fell in love with Grace Seccombe’s pottery and how often these simple pieces came to embody happy holiday memories. The piece to which Daphne is referring is one of a number of pieces known as the “Seven Little Australians” – seven small kookaburras on the edge of a bowl. Many Seccombe pieces have humorous titles or even inscriptions on the Piece.

“I bought it in Manly. I’m not sure when, but we used to go to Manly – which I loved, for holidays when I was a girl and then after I married I went with Cliff for holidays. I would have bought it after I was married (1948). I fell in love with it and I love kookaburras”.

Daphne Friend is still a lover of native birds – she feeds magpies, rainbow lorikeets and a butcher bird every day – in fact several times a day (she buys mince especially to feed the birds). She used to feed a kookaburra but he has not been around in recent times.

In the *Christian Science* article Grace credits herself with the invention of “Pie birds” which she says she patented all over the world. Evidence of this has not been located. Pie vents now often referred to as Pie Birds definitely existed much earlier than in 20th century England. In *More People’s Potteries Stories*, Dorothy Johnston claims that “with encouragement from her husband, she produced thousands of Pie Birds at his suggestion – a young one with its beak open to emit steam. It is said that she had 20,000 of these made in Japan to her specifications. She goes on to suggest that these birds were then hand painted in the Eastwood studio. (Johnston, 2008, p. 62). The pie birds were of course produced alongside many Koalas, Platypus, Kookaburras and a variety of other birds and animals.

Clarence Seccombe died in 1945 as Australia experienced the end of World War 2. Clarence had assisted Grace with a lot of the heavy work associated with potting, such as moving clay and turning it into slip as well as loading and unloading the kiln. After Clarence died, Grace’s brother Arthur helped out, allowing her to continue potting. The tile included in this collection was produced by Arthur, who had a business producing photographic tiles which were particularly popular with the Italian community of Sydney for use on cemetery monuments. Arthur was a trained draftsman but was apparently “never the same” after World War 1 and had since made a living out of doing odd jobs.

Grace died in 1956 with her niece by her side. Eleanor remembered Grace as a woman before her time: kindly, gentle, alternative and into wholesome food before others were. Eleanor laughed when she recounted to me that when Grace was an old lady she felt that she should be able to knit then set about teaching herself. I like the photo of Grace in the Peoples Potteries by Dorothy Johnston, it is a picture of Grace sitting outside her studio in a wicker chair, perhaps cleaning greenware (a messy job) or painting a piece. In the same article Grace claima that this is where she always seemed to be. At the end of her life Grace was content and thought of her work as an achievement and of herself as an artist.

It appears that while Grace was alive despite her modest popularity she merely made enough money from her work to live modestly, though there is the possibility that any extra money could have been given to the Church.

Up until the 1980’s Grace Seccombe’s work was loosely regarded as Kitsch until a whole new audience of collectors discovered her work. Prices have steadily risen over the past two decades and now a piece such as the Regent Bowerbird held by the powerhouse Museum would be worth as much as $20,000 dollars. In talking to the archivist of the Arts and Crafts Society of New South Wales, I was interested to learn that it is difficult to purchase Seccombe pieces as they are hotly contested by a few serious collectors whenever they go to auction. Marvin Hurnall was recently profiled on the ABC television show *The Collectors* – he is the proud owner of more than one hundred Grace Seccombe pieces. His collection began in the late 1980s with the purchase of Grace Seccombe’s personal collection of twenty pieces. A number of the articles I read about Grace were written either by collectors or dealers I wonder at the motive of these pieces as they seem a device to drive up prices. I am not so sure that Grace would approve of the monopolisation of her work for personal gain.

I have long been intrigued by a quote from *Convict Love Tokens* by Timothy Millet and Michelle Field. When Michelle suggested that Tim had “something to say about convicts” and that he should consider a book and exhibition. Tim said that he “needed another one or two years to buy for his collection those tokens on the market while he knew the value and no one else did”.

The Grace Seccombe story reflects many important aspects impacting life in Sydney in the first Half of the 20th century, including immigration, World War 1, the Great Depression and World War 2. The provenance of this collection is impeccable as it has been passed down through the Capper family.

Although the glazed slip cast pottery Kookaburra is in good condition and representative of the work of Grace Seccombe, it is unsigned. Many better examples of Grace Seccombe’s work periodically become available at auction, a few pieces are also held by cultural institutions such as the Power House Museum and the National Gallery of Australia.

The Autograph book is a much rarer object as there appears to be few personal items that can be connected directly to Grace Seccombe. The small painting of a steam ship is particularly poignant to Graces journey to Australia. The only other example of this type of material relating to Grace is a scrap book held by the Power House Museum. The National Library of Australia has a number of original newspaper articles that could be considered to assist with telling Grace’s story.

The tile, printed with a photo of The Capper family made by Arthur Capper is poignant and also rare. The picture of the family was taken about the time that the Cappers migrated to Australia. The clothing gives an indication of social standing; it is probably the last photo of the family together before they are separated by the tyranny of distance.

The items included in this collection would form a solid basis for a Grace Seccombe collection that could be augmented over a period of time through the purchase of other pottery Australian birds and animals.