



Local Artist Profile

esme gollschewsky (1917 - 2001)

One of Australia's most respected short story writers was for many years thought to be a man – a mistake deliberately encouraged by the author. Like many well-known writers, Esme Gollschewsky used only her initials when she first submitted stories to publishers – and such was her grasp of life on the land and in rural Australia, many Editors believed only a male could write with such authority and insight.

As one of the youngest in a large family, Esme heard many stories of the early days in the Bundaberg district – the legends, people and way of life were told and retold by her parents and relatives until they were as familiar as bedtime stories. Maudsleigh, a large property between Rubyanna Creek and the Burnett River, was inherited by Esme's father William Madona Strathdee in 1915. In a short story titled 'Jibber', Esme describes her childhood home:

"Sunday afternoon at Maudsleigh, towards the end of summer. Sailing boats skidding over the silvery flatness of the Burnett River. Plop of a tennis ball and twang of racquet from the tennis court where the rotting wire of the high fenceguards was festooned with brilliant blue of morning glory, creamy, scented profusion of honeysuckle, and antignon, flaring coral pink amongst the passionfruit vines that grew wild."

Life at Maudsleigh in the 1920s was hectic – Esme was one of nine children, and her parents encouraged all their children to develop individual talents. Esme's mother was an enthusiastic horsewoman, and her children learned to ride at an early age, using the more placid horses to get to and from the nearest school each day. Esme remembered that the horses were kept in a fenced paddock during school hours, then after school the fun began, as the children had to stalk and capture their frisky mounts for the ride home. Bits of bread from lunch sandwiches came in very handy when enticing the reluctant horses, although apparently the ponies were a fair bit smarter, and carried out many successful grab and run missions on the offered food.

Esme began writing at a very early age, publishing stories and poems in the local newspaper by the time she was 10 years old. She sent her writing to the children's pages in major Queensland newspapers over the next few years, but did not seriously pursue her writing until many years later, after she was married and a parent.

In the early 1940s, she began writing again, and sent off stories to various women's magazines under the names Esme Strathdee and Esme Gollschewsky, while using the noncommittal E. A. Gollschewsky for stories she sent to the more masculine journals, such as *Overlander* and *The Bulletin*. By varying her names, Esme could submit two or three times as many stories to editors without their realising it was the same author. In 1941, her first story was published, followed by more success with other magazines such as *The Australian Women's Mirror*, and *The New Idea for Women*.

In 1943, Esme, her husband Harold, and their two children moved to Deepwater. They bought land and farmed bananas for several years while the children were young, and it is here that some of Esme's best short stories were written. Her son Ian remembers his mother snatching moments to write, in between household duties and looking after her young



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children. At nights, Harold would help out, transcribing her handwritten stories with his two-fingered typing.

By 1946, Esme was widely recognised in literary circles, and by editors and fellow writers as one of the best short story writers in Australia. The same year 'Coast to Coast', an annual publication comprised of 10 stories from Australia's best short story writers, selected Esme's short story 'Hans and the Bull' for publication. Her fishing story 'The Salmon', remains a favourite today, being listed on a US website as one of the best short stories ever written, although Esme's personal favourite was 'Proudly My Son', published in *Meanjin* magazine in 1959.

Part of Esme's success lay in the versatility of her writing - her stories ranged from romance to adventure and outback yarns, and in many cases were thinly disguised experiences from life in a regional area. One Editor of an outdoors magazine was surprised to discover E. A. Gollschewsky was female - his comment being that he was sure a woman couldn't write like that. In addition to short stories, Esme also submitted feature articles to many journals - the 12 April 1969 edition of *The Bulletin* contained a short article 'The Yesterdays and Today's of the Sugarcane Industry', while the 5 April issue included a column in the Tourism section on author Vance Palmer's connection to Bundaberg.

Esme continued writing short stories for almost 30 years, and even began a novel - *Seed Within Itself* - which still remains unpublished. Eventually she seemed to lose interest in writing - turning her energies instead to her numerous grandchildren. Esme never lost her love of words and literature though - remaining an avid Patrick White fan and reader of mystery novels, and lover of cryptic crosswords.



In the 1970s, many of Esme's short stories were published overseas in collections of Australian literature, with some being translated into other languages. In her later years, Esme received much enjoyment from the knowledge that her stories were still being reprinted and used in overseas University courses on Australian Literature. Royalty cheques rolled up to the front door on a regular basis even when she was in her seventies, many years after she had stopped writing.

Although many of Esme Gollschewsky's stories are now out of print and almost impossible to find, her talent as a short story writer is acknowledged widely on the Internet. The London Magazine of 1961, on the poetrymagazines.org.uk website describes her writing in 'The Salmon', as reminiscent of an early Hemingway, with her use of language and setting giving her writing a flavour which goes beyond any local appeal.

Many thanks to Ian and Annette Gollschewsky, for access to Esme's short stories, and photographs and information about her life and writing.

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REFERENCES

The Strathdee Family Maudsleigh 1879 - 1999
(Privately published).

