

## IN THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR

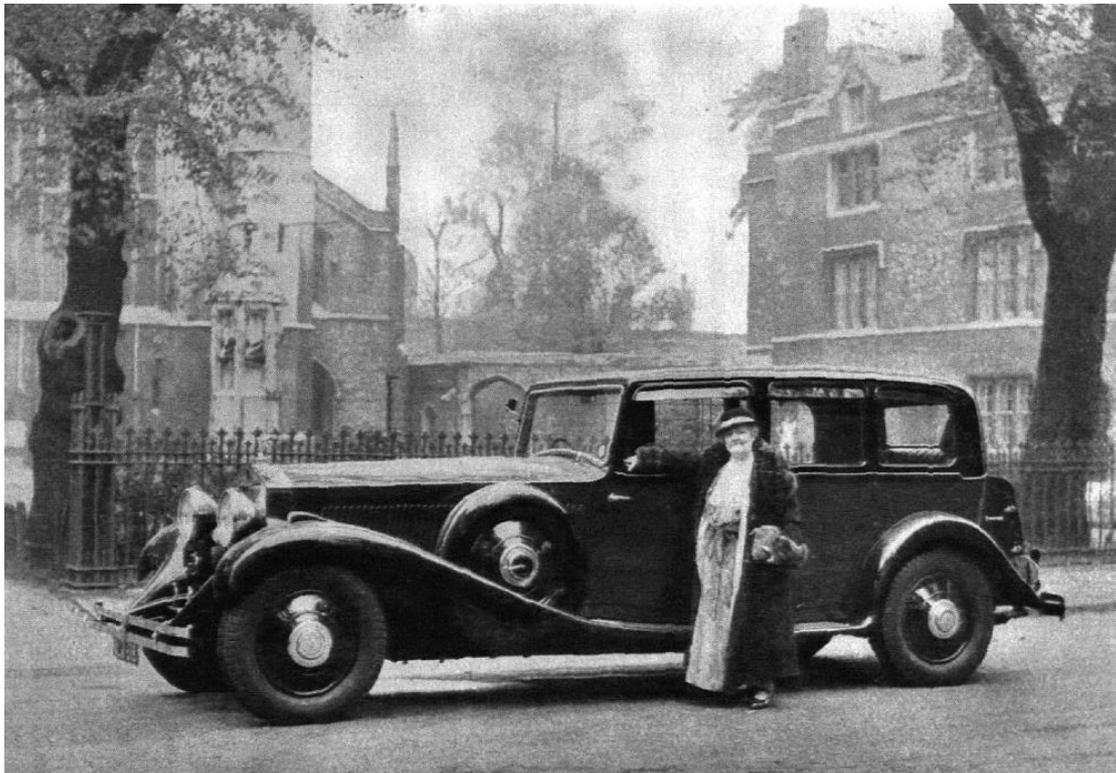
Miss May Brookes  
Under the North Star and the Southern Cross

May Brookes was a motoring adventuress. Her vehicles included a Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost, two Rolls-Royce Phantom IIs, a Bugatti 8-cylinder for sporting occasions and a Studebaker serving the sick and wounded in Egypt in World War I.



Portrait of May Brookes by Jack Cato, photographer, who ran a portrait-studio in Melbourne from the late 1920s. From *Who's Who in the World of Women*, Reference Press Association, vol. 2, 1934.

1933 Phantom II, 93MW, in London with Miss Brookes from *Wild Flowers and Wanderings*.



Motoring, however, was just one of an astonishing array of pursuits: water-colourist, china painter, champion golfer, first grade tennis player, soprano, troop entertainer and art collector.

Born into a wealthy Melbourne family in 1874, the younger daughter of William Brookes (1834-1910) of Warwickshire, England, and Catherine Margaret nee Robinson (1839-1913), of Portadown, Northern Ireland. William and Margaret married in 1865.

Miss Brookes was destined to be absorbed into a leisured upper-class society as her father had apparently intended for his family. William Brookes had arrived in Victoria in 1852 and became rich from gold mining in the Bendigo area, notably the Golden Fleece claim and other endeavours. Their city home, 'Brookwood' in Queens Road, was a rendezvous for Melbourne society and their mountain home, 'Penola', at Mount Macedon hosted weekend parties. Both had tennis courts. William Brookes left an estate of £172,000 (\$24M in 2020).

Miss Brookes was educated at Shipley House, South Yarra. Run by Mrs Webster from about 1880 to 1895 it was one of the most popular schools for girls in Melbourne.

Miss Brookes published her memoirs, *Wild Flowers and Wanderings – under the North Star and the Southern Cross*, in 1934 and this plus contemporary newspaper reports give a picture of her lifestyle in this echelon of Australian society. It encompassed tennis at Wimbledon in the 1900s, Cairo in World War I and Rolls-Royces in England, on the Continent and in Australia in the 1920s and 1930s.



The cover of *Wild Flowers and Wanderings* with Sturt's Desert Pea and passion fruit flower growing under the Southern Cross. Annotated in the collection of the State Library of Victoria and available on-line.

Miss Brookes took delivery of her Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost, chassis 115EM, an Arthur Mulliner limousine, on 3 April 1924. It was fitted with front wheel brakes soon after new. The car was noted in Australia in the 9 December 1926 edition of the society weekly newspaper *Table Talk*, published in Melbourne from 1885 to 1939: "The racing Bugatti which she brought back with her (along with the Rolls Royce) was in the hill climb at Belgrave on Saturday." The hill-climbing contest at Terry's Hill, Belgrave, in the Dandenong Ranges was organized by the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria and considered the most difficult up to that time.

**B CLASS.**

A. W. Bernadou, Bugatti, A. W. Bernadou	1,496	9.97
A. J. Terdich, Bugatti, A. J. Terdich	1,496	9.97
J. Barber, Lancia, J. Barber	2,121	14.14
Miss C. A. Barber, Lancia, Miss Barber	2,121	14.14
D. Barnett, Bugatti, D. Barnett	1,496	9.97
May Brookes, Bugatti, Mrs. Lane		
C. S. Buckley, Metallurgique, J. Cleaver	1,970	13.13
H. Cooper, Ballott, H. Cooper		
J. C. Chalmers, Rhode, J. C. Chalmers	1,232	8.21
A. Gardini, Darracq, A. Gardini		
J. E. Goodall, Aston-Martin, J. Goodall	1,466	9.91
John Hollway, Darracq, J. Hollway	2,121	14.14
B. Hutton, Alvis, B. Hutton	1,496	9.97
L. G. Jackson, Bugatti, L. G. Jackson	1,496	9.97
W. H. Lewis, Fiat, Mrs. Lewis	1,400	9.78
W. N. Lowe, Metallurgique, G. A. Whyatt	1,970	13.13

May Brookes' Bugatti was entered in the 4 December 1926 RACV Hill Climb. Driven by Mrs Lane. [The Age 27 November 1926]

The atmosphere of the 1926 hill climb at Terry's Hill, Belgrave, is captured here with A. Gardini at the wheel of a Talbot-Darracq. [Car identified by Tom Clarke. Photo State Library of Victoria]





After the excitement of the 1926 RACV hill climb the town returned to normal as shown in this view of Terry's Hill looking into Belgrave.  
[Museums Victoria.]

The 17 February 1927 edition of *Table Talk* added: "The stately Rolls Royce appears to be discernible in increasing numbers upon our streets. Miss May Brookes, of "Ardoch", Dandenong road, East St. Kilda, is numbered amongst Rolls Royce owners."

A report of her motoring adventures also comes from *Table Talk* on 9 June 1927: "At present touring on the Continent is a well-known Melbourne sportswoman, Miss May Brookes, whom members of her old club, the Royal Melbourne Golf Club, will remember. Miss Brookes, accompanied by Mrs. C. J. Thomsen, has been touring Italy and Switzerland, and the latest news of her is that after touring Holland and Germany she will proceed to Scotland, where she can indulge in her favourite sport, golf. Motor racing is also one of Miss Brookes' pastimes, and last February she broke the record at the Belgrave hill climb in her straight eight Bugatti. She has deserted the Bugatti for a Rolls-Royce while abroad." It is likely that Miss Brookes took her Silver Ghost 115EM back to Europe for this tour, as it is not subsequently known in Australia.

Sport was an important pursuit for Miss Brookes and her siblings. She recounted in *Wild Flowers and Wanderings*, "It was in Scotland ... that I was first filled with an ardent enthusiasm for golf; at North Berwick, a beautiful spot overlooking the sea, I played my first round on its famous golf-links." By 1914 Miss Brookes was twice Lady Golf Champion of the Royal Melbourne Golf Club.

Miss Brookes was also a first grade tennis player and wrote, "All were literally 'tennis mad', and went from one tournament to another, with Wimbledon, as now, the Mecca of the champions .... After the Wimbledon matches we would go across to the Continent, often to the well-known sporting centre of Dinard, where we were always entertained royally." Her brother, Norman Everard Brookes (1877-1968), won the Gentlemen's Singles Championship at Wimbledon in 1907 and again in 1914. Norman Brookes was knighted in 1939 and the trophy for the men's singles at the Australian Open, the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup, is named in his honour.

This is Miss Brookes' account of her involvement in World War I: "In the midst of all our excitement and ambitions in the golf and tennis world, there came upon us the dreadful news of the start of the Great World War. I dropped my golf clubs, and Norman his tennis racquet, and we both commenced to think of how we could be of service to the wonderful men who joined up so readily to do their bit for our Empire. My brother Harold also went to England and joined up at once for active service. Strangely enough, though one might imagine it from his exploits as a tennis champion, Norman was not accepted for active service [he suffered from stomach ulcers], so turned his efforts towards immediate service with the Red Cross. After his departure for Egypt, I felt the war atmosphere so strongly that sport and social events faded completely from my existence and something in my being, urged me to go as near as possible to the centre of activities – to do something, no matter what, to help."

Soon after the outbreak of war, fundraising activities began to help with the suffering in Belgium. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported on 17 August 1914 that a fund, which became known as the 'Belgian Fund' had been arranged in Sydney, under the direction of the Consul for Belgium, Mr Watteeuw. It was supported right across Australia with an enormous number and variety of fund raising functions over the next few years. The Melbourne newspaper, *The Argus*, reported on 4 August 1916 the fund had raised £190,000 nationally [\$20M in 2020]. A similar 'Belgian Relief Fund' operated in London.

Miss Brookes wrote, "My mind turned towards Art, and it seemed to me that my voice had been given to me for some special purpose in life; my long studies of many roles in opera – my Schubert Lieder and my study to acquire something of the Art of bel canto – hitherto a personal pleasure solely because of artistic striving – seemed to point the way to a special mission, and I thought to utilize this gift for the benefit of our boys. I decided to start at home, by organizing a concert in aid of the Belgians, for whom great sympathy had been aroused by their gallant stand against overwhelming armies; this concert was held at my flat in Fairleigh House, South Yarra, and I had sent out invitations which resulted in such a demand for seats that a substantial sum was handed to the Consul for Belgium, who attended along with most Notables of Melbourne."

"Full of zeal, and inspired by the success of our efforts, I spread my wings for the first time – "sans famille" – and set off with my faithful maid Lucy, and my accompanist Mrs. Billings - Egypt as the depot for Australia's army – being

our objective.” Miss Nellie Billings was a well known Australian pianist, who returned to Australia in early 1916.

Miss Brookes and her party travelled on the ‘Osterley’, which during World War I was used as a troopship by the Australian Imperial Force as ‘HMAS Osterley’ and during the voyage entertaining the troops commenced, “a favourite was “Softly awakes my Heart” from “Samson and Delilah”. Indeed, I came in time to be known as “Delilah May”, for this aria was always in demand on my programmes, with almost fatalistic regularity.”

“These concerts by night were a truly wonderful sight, and I felt a strange inspiration and awe singing to the crowded mass of upturned faces. The atmosphere of mystery as we went on into the unknown was felt intensely by all, the ship with throbbing pulses gliding over the dark ocean, and the Southern Cross shining above us like a symbol of our Crusade.”

“My first vision of my brother Norman was at Shepheards that famous hotel which became my headquarters for the next four years. All visitors to Cairo are familiar with this celebrated rendez-vous, like a Persian temple in its beauty .... Having once started on my mission, demands for my services took on the dimensions of a fast rolling snowball, and I soon found myself engaged in hospital work during the daytime, and in the evening driving long distances to give perhaps three concerts a night.”

Shepherd’s Hotel was the leading hotel in Cairo and one of the most celebrated hotels in the world from the middle of the 19th century until it was burned down in 1952. During World War I it served as British Headquarters in the Near East.



Shepherd’s Hotel in the 1920s. By Photographer of American Colony Photo Department or its successor, the Matson Photo Service via Wikimedia Commons.

Miss Brookes now came within the orbit of the upper echelons of the military: "At this time I met many military celebrities: notable among Australians in Egypt were the late Sir John Monash, Lieut.-General Sir H. C. Chauvel, Brigadier-General Granville Rynie ... General Sir W. R. Birdwood, one of the best loved of the Australian soldiers, such was his camaraderie that he was always ready with the fullest admiration for the daring exploits of his men – "I cannot say how far the Anzacs will go", he said on one occasion, "but I know they will go as far as I ask them, if it is within the bounds of human possibility".

Miss Brookes wrote of another military character, "Frequently in Cairo was 'Colonel Lawrence' [T.E. Lawrence, 'Lawrence of Arabia'], in those days referred to as the uncrowned king of the Arabs. He would disappear as mysteriously as any Arab for long periods, and reappear just as silently and unobtrusively. To have the respect of the Arab chiefs, a man must have quality, and there is undoubtedly that "something" in this romantic personality which has gained him so many respectful tributes from a race which temperamentally is considered "difficult" by Europeans."

"Ross Smith, the Australian pioneer airman, was among my friends in Cairo at that time. He was a very popular officer, and intrepid airman, and all who knew him were saddened when his career was so tragically cut short by death." Sir Ross Macpherson Smith (1892-1922) enlisted in 1914 in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Light Horse Regiment, landing at Gallipoli 13 May 1915. In 1917 he volunteered for the Australian Flying Corps. He was later twice awarded the Military Cross and the Distinguished Flying Cross three times. Smith was pilot for T.E. Lawrence and fought in aerial combat missions in the Middle East. He is mentioned several times in Lawrence's book, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

Miss Brookes continued, "The atmosphere of this period was one of extraordinary intensity – one never knew what was going to happen next; the terrible sufferings of the wounded, rushed in from the debacle of Gallipoli, shocked and startled everyone in Cairo at that moment, and many Egyptian palaces, and everything available, were converted into hospital space....

My Studebaker car was devoted to the service of the sick and wounded, and it was part of my daily routine to drive a batch of convalescents to Shepherd's for tea, or out to Cairo's one green spot – the Barrage, about thirty miles distant."

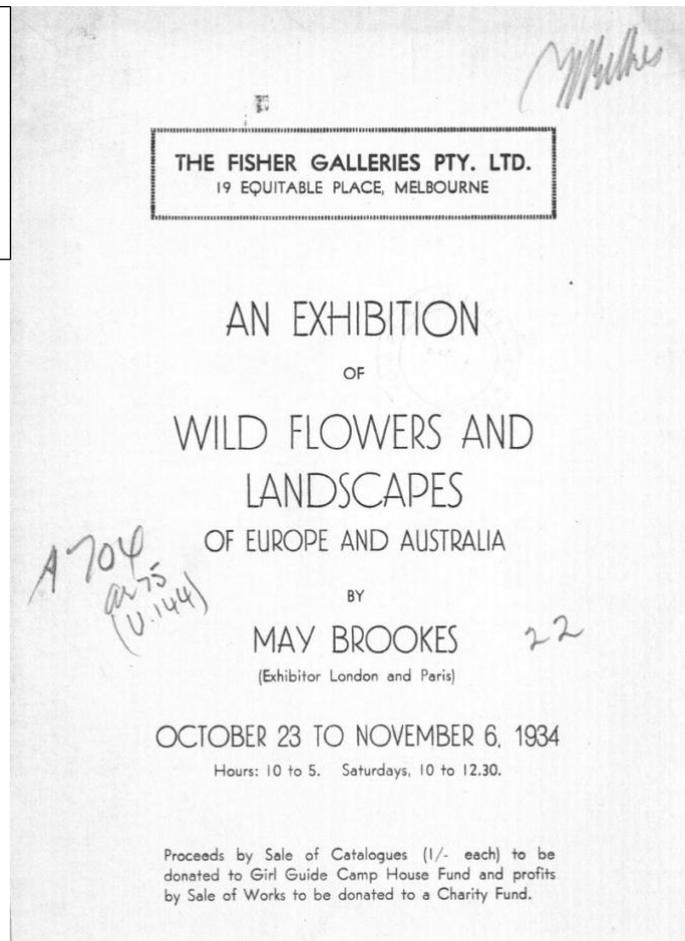
Finally, "The signing of the Armistice let loose all the pent-up emotions of the war, and all English speaking residents in Cairo literally "went mad" with the joyous prospect of peace." The revelry was riotous, "As a climax to the festivities a donkey was commandeered, and ridden up the classic stairs of Shepherd's .... and around the ballroom by anyone specially favoured by its guides."

Art was a passion and Miss Brookes was an accomplished artist. In December 1932 she exhibited in Paris and M. Estrangin, art critic of the *Continental Daily Mail* reported, "A charming and very popular exhibition by an Australian artist, Miss May Brookes, is now open at the Georges Petit Gallery

in the Rue de Sèze, under the title of “Australian Wild Flowers”.... Being an intrepid traveller, sports-woman and motorist, she has gone all over the world constantly enriching her vision and ideas.... I pick out for special mention the screen in which, like a modern Van Spaendonck she has made a harmonious arrangement of Australian flowers. Miss Brookes has painted some very attractive landscapes – views of the Riviera, picturesque visions of Norway and charming expressions of Dutch tulip fields. She also exhibits a glass case full of china, exquisitely decorated with birds and flowers. Such a varied artistic talent deserves to be known.” She was in good company because in 1932 the Galerie Georges Petit hosted an important retrospective of the works of Pablo Picasso – what would now be called a blockbuster as it included 225 of his paintings. And just in time as the gallery closed in 1933. Miss Brookes also exhibited in the ‘Whistler Room’ in Walker’s, London in 1933.

Miss Brookes was also an art collector and started her, “collection of pictures by buying a “Streeton”.... I bought his “Salute”, a gorgeous impression of early morning breaking over this famous old Italian church [Santa Maria Della Salute], with the waters of the canal sweeping its feet. Many times in Venice I have felt the charm of this beautiful spot.” Australian artist, Arthur Streeton (1867-1943) painted a number of versions of this Venetian scene in 1908. Coincidentally, it was Arthur Streeton who previewed her exhibition of wild flowers and landscapes of Europe and Australia at The Fisher Galleries, 19 Equitable Place, Melbourne in October 1934.

Catalogue of Exhibition  
Fisher Galleries. Annotated  
in the collection of the  
State Library of Victoria  
and available on-line.



When in England after World War I she noted that a “painter who has expressed the spirit of southern English beauty is John Shapeland [1865-1929], an artist whose studies of the moors aroused my admiration. By a strange coincidence, while wandering on the moors near Exeter, I chanced to see an exquisite little spot I thought most paintable; not long afterwards, I learned that I had been anticipated in my artistic choice, for I saw the self-same spot depicted from the exact angle by this artist. I promptly bought this most delicate, and beautiful example of his Art. Purple heather on the rocks is marvellously blended with the golden brown hills which intermingle with the creamy gold of the sky and the little rocky stream threads like a silver line among the moors and disappears into the distance of the hills on the horizon.”

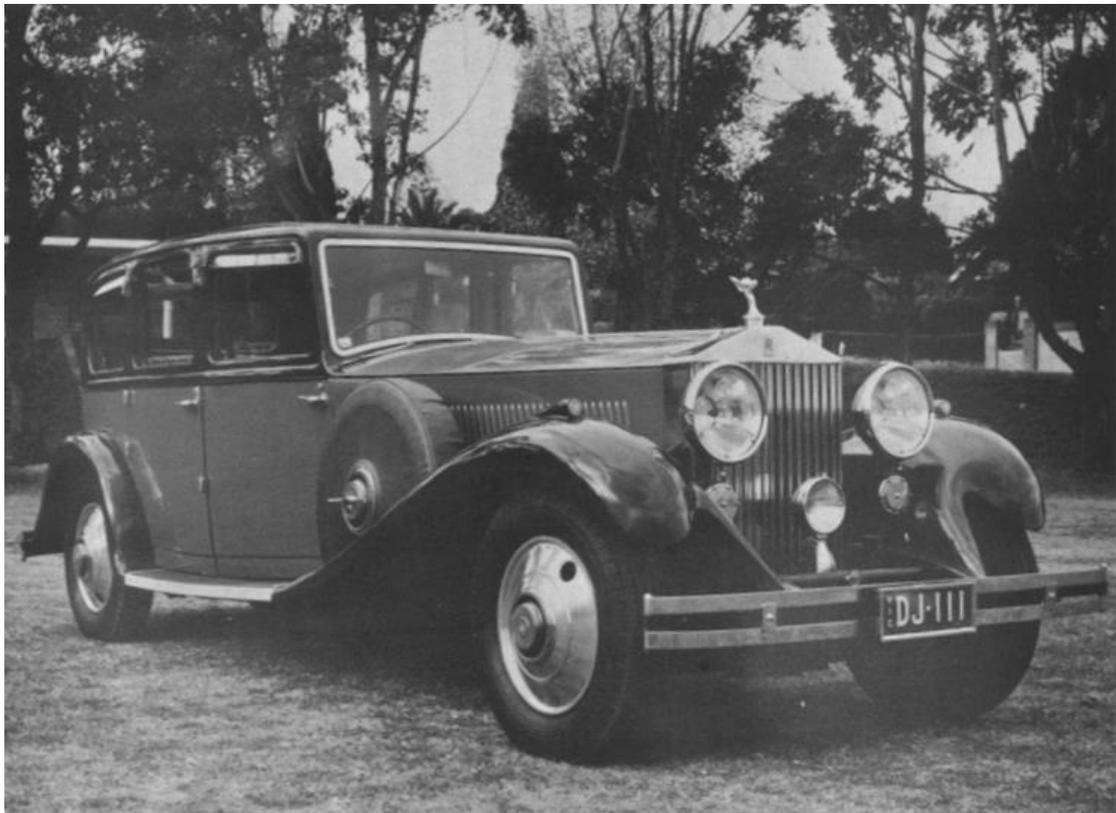
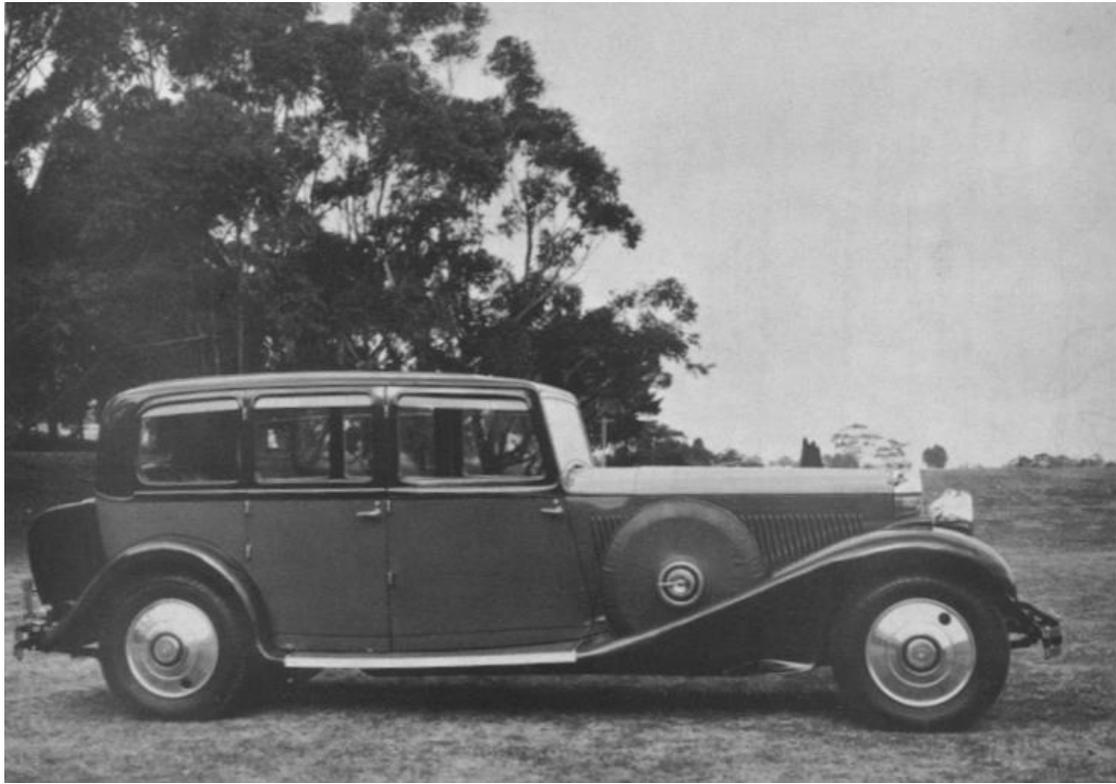
Miss Brookes had two Rolls-Royce Phantom IIs in close succession. The first was chassis 148MS, which was purchased 7 October 1932 and off test on 11 November 1932. It was dispatched to Arthur Mulliner on 3 December 1932 and a limousine body was fitted, the same coachbuilder as with her earlier Silver Ghost. It was the short wheel base chassis, unusual for a limousine body. Her residence at this time was Southsea, England. The car was completed on 11 February 1933 and three months elapsed before the guarantee, No.8310, applied from 15 May 1933 for Miss Brookes, but for her ownership from 15 August 1933. Guarantee No.8361 was also applicable from 15 May 1933, for C. W. Batten, an Arthur Mulliner director, but for his ownership from 9 October 1933. Guarantee No. 8445 again applicable from 15 May 1933, for J. Pierce, but for his ownership from 20 January 1934. So, Miss Brookes only had the car for just under two months.

She took delivery of her second Phantom II in London. It was 93MW, off test on 21 July 1933, also fitted with an Arthur Mulliner limousine body. The guarantee No.8363 (two guarantee forms later than Batten with 8361) was applicable from 26 August 1933, but for her ownership from 4 October 1933. It is not clear why Miss Brookes exchanged 148MS for 93MW, though the latter did have the long wheel base chassis and was fitted with the more powerful Continental engine. This was the car that Miss Brookes brought back to Australia in 1934. Miss Brookes described the car in an Australian press interview as saxe blue outside and inside upholstered in very fine blue and grey mottled leather with chromium and blue enamel fittings.

Miss Brookes returned to Australia in 1927 and 1931, though her preferred domicile around this time was Paris where she had a flat. After another three years absence, Miss Brookes returned to Australia in March 1934, and in her cabin, she had a cage with two cardinal birds. As song birds they were highly prized as pets.

The Phantom II languished from the late 1930s to the mid 1950s in Sir Norman Brookes' garage at Mt Eliza, Victoria. It passed through a few owners until in March 1961 Victoria Branch member, David Jones, RROCA HLM, acquired it. The car was badly in need of restoration and this was the first of a number of prize-winning restorations that David Jones has carried out.

Indeed, 1933 Phantom II, 93MW won the Victoria Branch Concours d'Elegance in 1962 and the Post-Vintage award at the Federal Rally Concours d'Elegance in 1964.



Two views of 1933 Phantom II, 93MW, after it was restored by David Jones in 1961. From the Rolls-Royce Owners' Club of Australia *Quartley Magazine*, Autumn 1962.

Miss Brookes brought back to Australia in 1934 advance copies of *Wild Flowers and Wanderings*, which had been published in France by Imprimerie Francaise de l'Edition, Paris. The newspaper reviews were favourable with comments such as “good reading”, “universal appeal” and a “joyous book”. It gives us some insight into the life of a wealthy Melbourne family, World War I and the talented and gregarious nature of its author.

May Brookes died in London on 17 May 1938. The two words that come most readily to mind about her are ‘world’ and ‘oyster’ and just as surely two words that don’t fit are ‘shrinking’ and ‘violet’.

Acknowledgements: I am indebted to Tom Clarke (UK) and André Blaize (France) for unravelling the histories of Miss Brookes’ Rolls-Royces.

Author: David Neely is an Honorary Life Member of the RROCA, George Sevenoaks Medal (NSW), SHRF Historical Consultant, co-author with Tom Clarke of ‘Rolls-Royce and Bentley in the Sunburnt Country’, author of ‘In the Rear-View Mirror – a History of the Rolls-Royce Owners’ Club, former editor of PRÆCLARVM and regular contributor of articles. He has owned a 1926 Phantom I, 1929 Phantom II, 1957 Bentley S1, 1963 Silver Cloud III and currently has a 1985 Silver Spirit [2020].