



# TACITLY

# MAB

Miegunyah Student Project Award 2021

Arabella Frahn-Starkie

Mabel Grimwade captured by Russel Grimwade 1915. Image courtesy of  
The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab  
Grimwade Bequest 1973.

I acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation as the traditional owners of the land on which the Ian Potter Museum stands, and I live, work and dance. I recognise that sovereignty was never ceded and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.





Portrait of Mabel Grimwade in London, England 1921 taken by Russel Grimwade. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

“Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.” - Susan Sontag





Mabel Grimwade captured by Russel Grimwade. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

In approaching the Russel and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Collection I chose to home in on Mabel Grimwade's distinct absence from the collection, despite her being one half of the archive's namesake.

Mabel 'Mab' Louise Grimwade, nee Kelly, was born in 1887, daughter of George Colman Kelly and Agnes Dalziel Wilson. To introduce Mab and centre her in her own narrative; she had a penchant for Scottish Terriers and was known to be a very good dancer.<sup>1</sup> She enjoyed an active lifestyle, loved to busy herself in the garden and was passionate about theatre.

Any piece of writing about her would establish she came from substantial wealth; her father having invested early in the mining company now known as BHP.<sup>2</sup> She married Wildfred Russel Grimwade in 1909 and was happily married to him until his passing in 1955. Whilst travelling extensively throughout her life, her main residence was at Miegunyah House in Toorak which was purchased by Russel at the time of their marriage. She lived there until she passed in 1973 and bequeathed the property, and most of its contents, to the University of Melbourne.



Mabel Grimwade captured by Russel Grimwade in 1913. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

## A TACIT SENSE OF MABEL GRIMWADE

As a dancer with an interest in documenting and archiving performance, I chose to approach the Grimwade archive as repertoire to generate a live performance with. My intention to draw together the photographic and inscribed traces of Mab into a temporal, spatial and tactile performance experience, has been to understand what tacit or kinaesthetic senses of Mab could be drawn out in the process. Could we know more about Mab by experiencing her trace elements in this way?

My strategy has been to scour the archive for any trace of Mab. Russel was quite the prolific hobbyist photographer so thankfully, there were many photos. Through the University of Melbourne archive listings, I could see records of letters, receipts, Mab's will, scant biographical information, newspaper clippings, and a list of books purchased by her. Once I gathered a sense of what traces of Mab and her surrounding lifestyle were left within the archive, I began to focus on the photographs.



Mabel Grimwade liked to wear hats.  
There are few photos in the archive  
without her wearing one.

Mabel Grimwade, Venice, 1927. Captured by Russel Grimwade. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.





Mabel Grimwade returned to study after Russel's passing, attending art lectures at Melbourne University.

Mabel Grimwade and her numerous Scottish terriers at Miegunyah. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.





Mabel Grimwade captained a women's cricket team in 1908.

Mabel Grimwade on her way to church, 1916. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.



Mabel Grimwad and her bridal party on her wedding day in 1909. Photograph from the Kelly family biography, 'The Daddy of the Field' by Katrina Wheatherly, 2008.

Mabel Grimwade had second thoughts about her marriage and called it off, returning the ring.



Mabel Grimwade enjoyed rural life  
and liked the smell of woolsheds.

Mab sitting at the end of a train- Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1912. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

While photography has evidentiary qualities and can provide us with an access point into the reality of the past, like any record, photography carries its own layers of distortion. On a physical level, photographs are an object, they are an illusionary window into a moment past. They commonly miniaturise and package the subject's image into a tactile souvenir of the past. On a depictive level, a three-dimensional world is flattened into a monocular plane, time is stopped, and the framing and focus is entirely subjective to the photographer. On a mental level, the composition of an image, focuses, even if very subconsciously, our attention to the intentions, decisions, and viewpoint of the photographer.<sup>3</sup>

We can analyse the content and the subject of the image, but the photograph also shows us the subjective viewpoint of the photographer themselves. This is where I feel a great deficiency of Mab's presence in the archive. Whilst there are many photographs of Mab, in these instances, she is the subject.

She is a subject, a reportedly very loved and respected subject, framed within Russel's photographic analysis of the world. Within this archive I can see evidence of the visual grammar of the images reflecting Russel's frame of mind and perceptions of the world. You can see this reflected in the nature of the photographs over Russel's lifetime. In the early days of his youth, he was very playful and experimental with the photographs he was taking which gradually became more refined with age as he became more steadfast and focused on his worldly pursuits.

Of the digitised collection there is one image for which I know Mab took. It is a duet of images; Mab and Russel are sharing a boat ride on a lake in England in 1921. For my purposes, this is one of the most important photographs in the archive. This discreet image briefly connects me to her as an author of her own story. In these images I am able to reconstruct a moment shared by Russel and Mab from the two sides of the encounter.





Russel and Mab Grimwade canoeing on a lake in England, 1921. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.



Mab in a newly purchased car, 1923. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

Looking at the images side by side, you can see two separate photographic styles. Russell, the more experienced photographer has more consciously composed the image with Mab's face in focus and near the centre of the frame. Whereas Mab, sat lower in the boat and perhaps less familiar with a camera in hand, cuts the top of Russell's hat off and focuses on his knees.

For this project I have been developing a practice of performing with the images of Mab by arranging and projecting them using an overhead projector. I have been looking at the photos of her, her home, and her close family and friends intently. I have been looking at them in isolation and then in relationship to each other and testing displaying varying combinations of images to see if in combination, my reading of the images alters.

The effect of projecting the photo transparencies, is that there is an additional temporality layed atop the image.<sup>4</sup> The images are implicated in live choreography and are brought back again into the heat of the moment in some regard. Not back into the heat of the moment whence they came of course, but in the present moment of live performance.



By being implicated in a photographic re-enactment of sorts, the images are placed side by side with other images from the collection and are dislocated from their original context.

This collaging of images conjures associative meanings through juxtaposition with different combinations of images. This is to be the format of the live experience and creative outcome of this project. A collection of photographs and inscribed texts shared live in a curated duration and order at the Grainger Museum.



In this process I was inspired by American visual artist Leslie Hewitt's<sup>5</sup> approach to working with images. She is interested in the haptic and optical processes that structure our memories and uses images in her work as charged memory objects. She questions, if the image is the surrogate for a person's presence, what aura can an image hold?

Looking at these photos, I ask myself, what is held in these photographs of Mab beyond composition? What do I wish I could know?

Top image: Mab Grimwade winning a deck quoits competition aboard the ship R.M.S. Niagara, 1923. Image below: Mab Grimwade with dog 1914. Images courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.



Mab Grimwade at Marlow, England, 1921. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

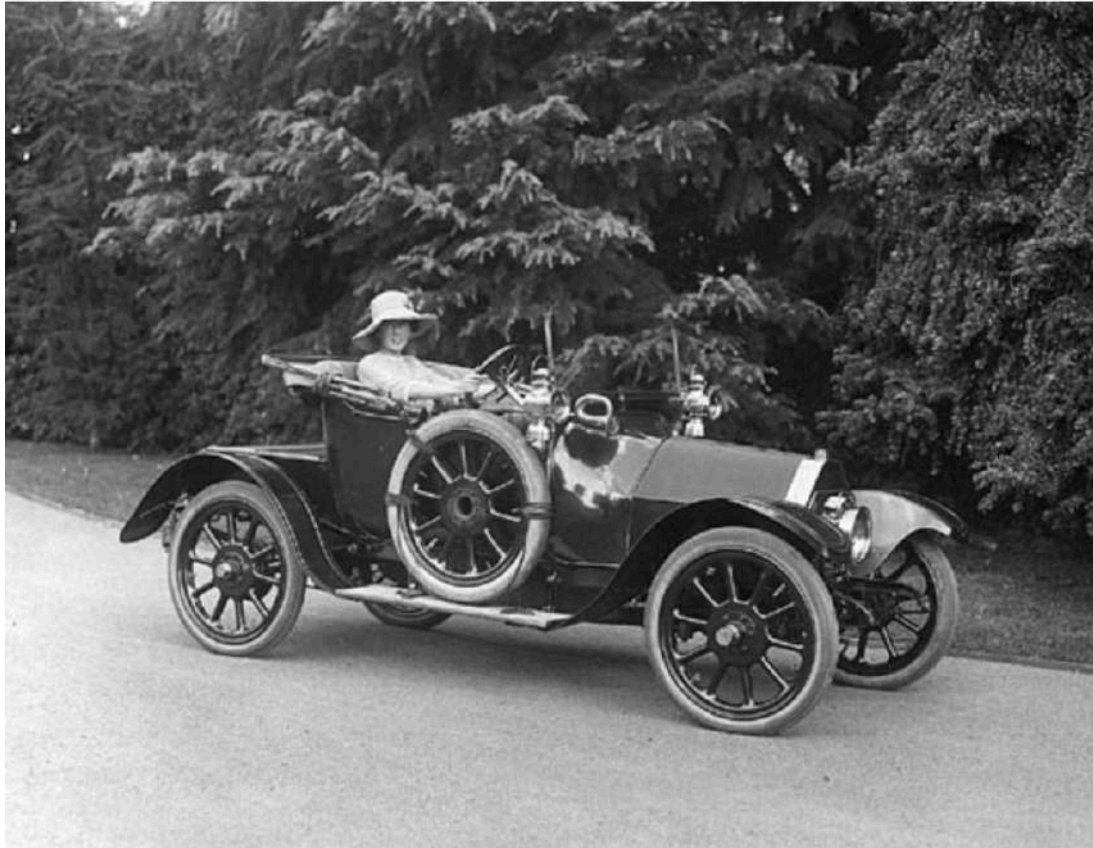
What amuses you?





What is your most cherished  
memory?

Mabel Grimwade captured by Russel Grimwade, 1910. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.



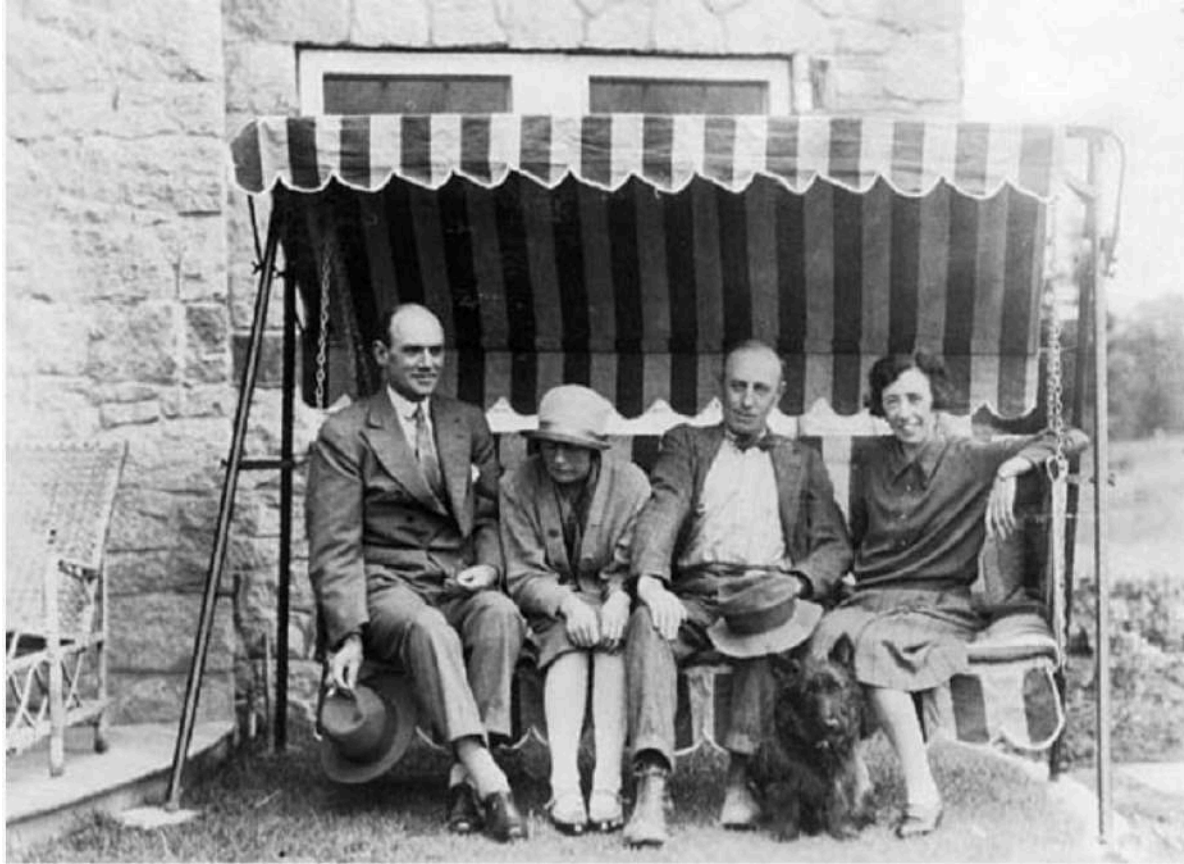
What are your dreams and ambitions?

Early motoring enthusiast, Harleston, 1908. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.



What advice would you give to your younger self?

Mab Grimwade with puppies at Miegunyah, Toorak. 1929. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.



Do you have any regrets?

Daryl and Joan Lindsay and others visiting Westerfield at Baxter, 1925. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.





Mab Grimwade and dog at Miegunyah, Victoria, 1934. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

Who do you miss?

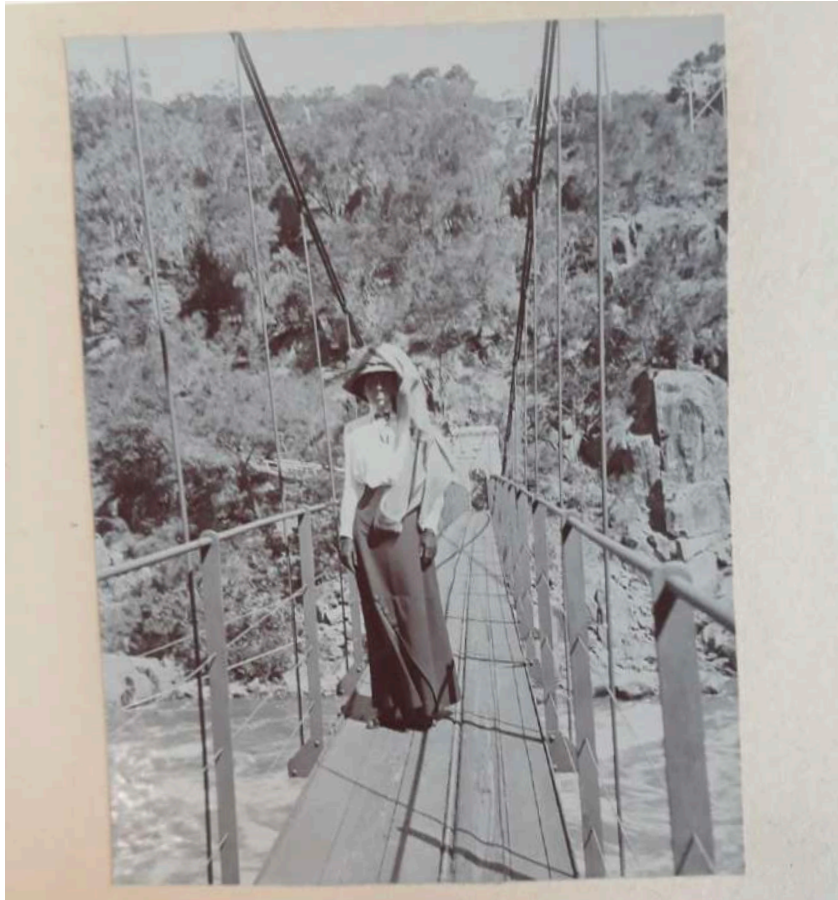
## WHAT CAN ABSENCE TELL US?

A theme that struck me in this project has been absence, and the structural value we can draw from it. In the introduction to *Pride of Place*, the latest publication exploring the Grimwade Collection, editor Alisa Bunbury notes that ‘women are largely absent from this presentation of Australia’s history,’<sup>6</sup> and this is true of the Miegunyah Collection. In researching Mab, despite her name being attached to the collections’ title, there is very scant information about her. She is often written about in association with the male figures in her life, her father, her brother, her uncles, her husband. I couldn’t gain access to any writing that she herself authored. There are records of a few correspondences and journals within the archive, however due to covid-19, I was unable to access these, and so embarked on a process of getting to know Mab based on photographs and collateral written accounts of her.

From what I can tell from the archive, Mab was a person that enjoyed keeping busy and dedicated much of her time to philanthropic work and maintained a very social presence in Melbourne. Perhaps Mab evaded historicization because

she didn’t care too much to be made a fuss of. From my time with the archive, I believe this could be a possibility. It is telling and somehow unsurprising that she largely evaded historicization even in her own archive and despite being the partner of an individual who clearly made a point of collecting and had a keen interest in history. The fact that she is so underrepresented in this archive says more about the dominant narratives and cultures of the time and who was encouraged in the areas of record keeping activity, and the kinds of records that were deemed valuable and appropriate to preserve for the future.

In her journal article, *Performance Remains*, Rebecca Schneider talks of the limits of privileging siteable remains and the habits of housing memory in strictly material, quantifiable and domicilable remains.<sup>7</sup> Therein lies a connectoin between Mab, her absence within the archive, my desire to connect and facilitate a tacit sense of her presence through her traces, and the problem posed by archiving ephemera. In *Performance Remains*, Schneider is looking through a dance studies lens whereby, through the lens of dance academia, performance is a form of ephemera that tussles with the process of archivization, for it is deemed an unstable and unhousable artform. By extension,



Mabel Grimwade captured by Russel Grimwade. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

practices such as oral storytelling, live recitation, and ritual enactment are not the kinds of practices that have been historically privileged in the writing and remembering of history.

What histories remain untold and unsurfaced, that weren't fastidiously photographed or documented in written language? If Mab is not recorded decently in her own archive and personal collection, who else's perspectives are missing from the dominant narratives of the time?

This research project summary and reenactment to follow at the Grainger Museum are by no means answers, but I hope this cross-disciplinary thinking within archival collections can contribute to an ongoing endeavour to unearth untold stories and to developing strategies to situate ephemera within archives.

## Endnotes

1 Camilla Kelly – married to Mab’s nephew Jim Kelly, recalling memories of Mab Grimwade and interview transcribed, 2019.

2 Jim Kelly, *An introduction into Alister Clark’s Rose namesakes 1915-1952: The Women behind the Roses*, ed. Tilly and Andrew Govenstone (Australia: Rosenberg Publishing Pty Ltd, 2010), 167-171.

3 For more information on Stephen Shore’s concepts on photographic composition and theory: Stephen Shore, *The Nature of Photographs* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998)

4 Peggy Phelan talks about the “photographic effect” involving the multiple temporalities existing in the experience of viewing photographic images: P. Phelan, “Haunted Stages: Performance and the Photographic Effect,” in *Haunted*, eds. Jennifer Blessing and Nat Trotman (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2010), 50-62.

5 Guggenheim Museum, “Off the Record: An Unclassified Dossier,” a collated series of conversations featuring the voices of artists represented in the exhibition, 18/09/2021, *Public/Private Accounts: Leslie Hewitt and Lisa Oppenheim*, moderated by Efe Igor, Assistant Director, Academic Engagement, 54:25-1:37, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OK-F7AIdtUs&ab\\_channel=GuggenheimMuseum](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OK-F7AIdtUs&ab_channel=GuggenheimMuseum).

Leslie Hewitt and Julia Wolkoff, “In the Studio,” *Art in America*, September 2018, 108-115, [https://7acd0b6e-e2d7-4c8e-9074-17088633d917.filesusr.com/ugd/d3f9dc\\_92488fad57f3401191d18147b5d994ed.pdf](https://7acd0b6e-e2d7-4c8e-9074-17088633d917.filesusr.com/ugd/d3f9dc_92488fad57f3401191d18147b5d994ed.pdf).

Toni Hafkensheid and Leslie Hewitt, “Memory Objects: Leslie Hewitt trains her lens on photography’s charged history,” *Modern Painters*, May 2016, 76-81, [https://7acd0b6e-e2d7-4c8e-9074-17088633d917.filesusr.com/ugd/d3f9dc\\_9c794ba6066e4b0e878fc31a27dc2126.pdf](https://7acd0b6e-e2d7-4c8e-9074-17088633d917.filesusr.com/ugd/d3f9dc_9c794ba6066e4b0e878fc31a27dc2126.pdf).

6 Alisa Bunbury, *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*, ed. Alisa Bunbury (Carlton, Victoria: The Miegunyah Press, 2020), xiii-3.

7 Rebecca Schneider, “Performance Remains,” *Performance Research* 6, 2 (2014): 100-108, DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2001.10871792.



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Mabel Grimwade captured by Russel Grimwade. Image courtesy of The University of Melbourne Art Collection.  
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