

Elyne gained lifelong inspiration from the Snowy Mountains.
Photo: Matthew Higgins



Elyne Mitchell with husband Tom.
Copy of Mitchell family photo.

ELYNE MITCHELL

writer of the high country

On a hill overlooking the upper Murray River between Khancoban and Corryong stands an impressive two-storey Federation-style homestead. With windows facing east toward the magnificent Snowy Mountains, there is a ground-floor room in which were written some of the most popular novels in Australian children's fiction. That room was the study of Elyne Mitchell.

The National Museum of Australia has just acquired Elyne's early typewriter, used by the author in that room from the late 1930s to around 1960. It was on this machine that she typed *The Silver Brumby*, a novel that won the hearts of countless children and young adults in Australia and overseas. First published in 1958, it is still in print. The brumby series of novels that it launched was published in over 40 countries. Elyne, arguably just as much as A. B. 'Banjo' Paterson, popularised the wild horses of the Kosciuszko high country.

Born in 1913, Elyne was the daughter of (later General Sir) Harry Chauvel, who commanded the Desert Mounted Corps in the First World War and was instrumental in the famous charge at Beersheba. She grew up in a family where horses were part of the culture, and when she married lawyer and grazier Tom Mitchell of Towong Hill in the upper Murray in 1935, it was not long before she was riding the paddocks and local hills.

Then came the Second World War. Tom enlisted, was captured at the fall of Singapore and saw out the next three years as a prisoner of the Japanese. Back at Towong Hill, Elyne had to do much of the running of the cattle, sheep and horse property herself, spending long days on horseback as she learned from manager Mr Herbert. These were tough and terribly lonely years for her.

Elyne had learned to ski with Tom in the late 1930s, and they'd done many trips both overseas and in the Snowy Mountains. Elyne was the first woman to ski some of the incredibly steep Western Faces of the Snowy Mountains' Main Range. Her first book, *Australia's Alps* (1942) – now regarded as a high-country classic – brought these adventures to the public. Amazingly, Elyne kept skiing until she was 77 years of age.

She rapidly developed an intense love of the upper Murray and the Snowies. Her deep sense of place, commitment to the rural life, and close observation of nature saw her write *Speak to the Earth* (1945). Elyne's relationship with the Australian environment evolved over the years, and her concern for nature deepened. Whereas, for example, wedgetail eagles cast 'sinister shadows' over lambing paddocks in the 1940s, by the time she wrote *Towong Hill: fifty years on an upper Murray cattle station* in 1989, Elyne viewed eagles with wonder.

One theme running through many of her books is a search for meaning. There is a mysticism expressed in her writing (especially the earlier non-fiction work) as she asks questions of the enfolding landscape around her. A more pragmatic concern in some of her books was soil and its conservation. Elyne early observed the importance of tree cover in retaining soil.

Tom's return from captivity and the birth of their children saw Elyne venture into fiction, first with *Flow river, blow wind* in 1953. Then came children's fiction. As daughter Indi (christened after the local name for the upper Murray River above its junction with the Swampy Plains River) was growing up, and there was little suitable reading material available at isolated Towong Hill, Elyne decided to write her own. She based her new project on the wild horses she had seen in the Snowies. Mitchell later told interviewer Jeff Prentice that Indi, aged 10, was 'crazy about ponies'. The book started off as a short story but soon Indi was 'waiting at the typewriter for the next instalment'. *The Silver Brumby* was born, and the rest is history.

As well as going through multiple editions and spawning a series of novels, *The Silver Brumby* inspired a feature film in 1993, starring Russell Crowe and Caroline Goodall. Meanwhile, brumby numbers in Kosciuszko National Park have today become a major land management issue. Many people feel strongly either for or against the horses' presence in the park. Mitchell's books have no doubt contributed to popular views of horses in the high country.

Elyne's adventurous spirit was reflected not just in her skiing and long horse rides in the mountains. In 1948 with husband Tom and two companions she drove a jeep across the Snowies – the first vehicle crossing of the mountains. The

jeep, cutely named Iris, is today housed at the local Corryong Museum. This trip was made before the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme and there were then no roads like today's Alpine Way. In fact many of Elyne's early ski trips began on horseback, rather than car, from Towong Hill.

Further fiction and non-fiction works followed through the 1970s, 80s and 90s, making a total of nearly 40 books. Children's novels were interspersed with historical works on the Snowies and the Light Horse, as well as the autobiographical *Towong Hill*. Elyne also wrote poetry. She illustrated many of her books with her own photographs.

Recognition came not just from readers. Mitchell was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for services to literature in 1988. Charles Sturt University conferred on her an Honorary Doctorate of Letters in 1993. She won Children's Book Council awards. Corryong Library was renamed in her honour in 2001 (a year before her death) and a rural women's literary award has also been named after her.

The typewriter acquired by the Museum is a Corona, manufactured in 1936. It still has a ribbon and even an attached typewriter-rubber. Made in the United States, Coronas were a very popular brand. Numbers of famous authors and poets have used Coronas or Smith-Coronas, from Ernest Hemingway to T. S. Eliot and Kurt Vonnegut. Elyne, and her trusty typewriter, were in very good international company.

Now, thanks to donor John Mitchell (Elyne's son) the typewriter is in the good hands of the National Museum, enabling Elyne's contribution to Australia's cultural life to continue to be told.

Matthew Higgins
Senior Curator



Elyne's Corona typewriter, with the latest edition of *The Silver Brumby*.
Photo: Matthew Higgins

