Anne-Louise Willoughby is the author of Nora Heysen: A Portrait. She gave a lecture on Nora Heysen in Melbourne on Sunday 10 March as part of the NGV’s exhibition, Hans and Nora Heysen Two Generations of Australian Art.

In 1967 I was nine when I went on a school excursion to the WA Museum. We didn’t have a dedicated art gallery, and on the first landing of the museum’s impressive timber staircase hung Hans Heysen’s *Droving into the light*. The intense and magical effect that the work had on me, the way Heysen had rendered the light of the Australian bush, transported me, and changed how I responded to art from that moment.

It was not until the early 1990s that I saw a work by Nora Heysen and I was puzzled. The work had strong characteristics of a Hans Heysen but I knew it wasn’t his. When I learned it was by his daughter I was embarrassed that I hadn’t heard of Nora – after all she was the first woman to win the Archibald Prize and Australia’s first woman Official War Artist. But I discovered I wasn’t alone. In art circles Nora was known, but in the wider conversation she was out of view.

This is the first biography of Nora Heysen and I have been grateful for the Heysen family’s support over the last four years as I have researched and written this book.

This is my contribution to the ongoing conversation about women in art and their restitution to their rightful place, a conversation that started with the new wave of feminism in the 1970s and which has
progressed particularly in the last twenty years in a most meaningful way across the major art institutions in this country.

There are distinct chapters in Nora’s life from her childhood at The Cedars in the Adelaide Hills to her final days in Sydney and today I will share some of these with you by reading from my book.

Throughout all these stages there was one prevailing common denominator – Nora lived her life propelled by an all-consuming drive to draw or paint.

Of the eight Heysen children it was Nora who showed early signs of a natural artistic talent and her father was quick to foster it, and at times his eagerness to guide was not welcome. The teenage Nora working alongside her father in his studio was seen by her mother as a distraction for Hans, and she proceeded to move Nora out:

Sallie’s decision to move Nora into her own studio might have been to protect Hans but it was beneficial for Nora that her aspirations were taken seriously at a young age. In her painting Eggs 1927 the sixteen-year-old Nora demonstrates her understanding of composition and her affiliation with the everyday objects of domestic life at The Cedars, but her still lifes were often at risk. The purloined objects she was painting could be requisitioned for the making of afternoon tea. She faced similar disruptions later in her own home when well-meaning assistance with ‘tidying up’ meant a still life she had set up was inadvertently demolished or cooked. Nora’s friends quickly learned to leave any arrangement remotely resembling a tableau
well alone.

Craig Dubery, Nora’s friend and carer in her later years when she lived alone in Hunters Hill, recalls Nora’s eye for beauty in the most casual of moments—a bag of apples he had left on a chair in the vestibule by the back door late one night became a beautiful pastel drawing by the time he went to get them the next day; and he recalls a half eaten pawpaw that could not be finished until she had captured it on paper. Dubery says, ‘She picked up on things that were natural, random ... like someone had come in and placed them down without intent—she picked up on things like that immediately’. This spontaneity and affinity with the natural order of things is revealed in 1929, when having completed a commissioned egg painting for Jacqueline Whyte, Nora wrote in a letter accompanying the painting of the perils involved:

Our hens have only just begun to lay again after an unusually long holiday so I had to pounce on the eggs as soon as they were laid, before they were seen and gathered by Michael for kitchen use. I used to hear the fowls cackling from the studio and rush down to get the egg while it was still warm and had that exquisite bloom on it. Sometimes it was days before a special hen would lay the exact shade I wanted for my study.

Nora’s plans for her paintings were not only at risk from a cook in a hurry but from a father who had helped train her eye for composition. Having meticulously set up a still life of onions to work on in her spare time, she returned to it to start work after her week at art school had ended. She was irritated to see that
her father had set up his easel and had already painted them. Hans Heysen was also prone to touches of insensitivity in his enthusiasm to guide his daughter; Nora was generous in her memory of him despite finding charcoal corrections covering a freshly finished work:

... [he] genuinely tried not to influence me so I could try to develop my own style. Sometimes he couldn’t resist, of course. I remember one day I left a painting of a basket of eggs in the studio— which I thought was pretty good—but when I came back I found Father had drawn squares all over it showing where my draughtsmanship was wrong. I was furious. Of course, he was right, but it took me a long time to see it.

When she was twenty-two Nora held a highly successful solo exhibition raising sufficient funds to cover three years at art school in London.

Nora had never been away from her family and to make her own way in London came as quite a shock for the retiring country girl. Her solution was to invite her closest friend Everton Stokes, a sculpture student, to come from Adelaide to London and share her flat.

This was met with deep dismay from her parents who did not approve of Evie as they believed she was a lesbian and that Nora’s reputation would be harmed. Despite her love and respect for her parents, this resulted in perhaps the first openly defiant act by Nora when she refused to succumb to parental pressure and continued her friendship with Evie, quietly persisting and hoping for acceptance.
London breakfast painted in 1934 shows Evie at their table. Mary Eagle bought the work from Nora for the National Gallery in 1996 and she commented: ‘Nora Heysen was at her best in the 1930s (before during and after the trip to London), when she produced a group of remarkable portraits. The intimate reflective London breakfast, though less immediately gripping than the single portraits, is a fine painting in its own right, and will achieve a ready recognition from the public’. Eagle suggested that this friendship and the security it provided Nora was central to the equilibrium she was able to find and that it showed in her work. She had painted Evie in a Jaeger dressing gown a luxury brand item that was a special gift to her from her parents:

This is a simply lovely present you have given me. I was so excited when it came, it is a beauty, the most gorgeous dressing gown I have seen, so soft and warm. It is the colour I love best. A lightish soft blue grey ... with a buff coloured lining. Did you tell Mr. McGregor exactly what I wanted?

I wonder if it irked them when Nora wrote to her parents saying she was painting Evie wearing the gown. She might have been a little provocative in her choice of costume for her sitter in at least two works that are known, including London breakfast and its partner picture Interior 1935, a work barely a foot square, imbued with the same intimacy of the larger piece. There is a touch of willfulness in her choice, whether conscious or not. London breakfast was never exhibited and this fact appears in the provenance report for the NGA. It had been in the artist’s possession since it was painted. Nora had kept it for herself but
in 1996 she was happy to have it go public. Eagle describes the painting further:

The serenity, amounting to exaltation, of this and other London images, was new in Nora’s art and probably owed more to personal circumstances than to the criticism of Central School art instructor Bernard Meninsky who told Nora her drawings lacked any emotional quality. After her parents left London in 1934, Nora, who had spent one night apart from her family, was thrown headlong into loneliness and fear. The trauma this naïve and reserved young woman experienced through exposure to the sexual advances of a man in the street and the sexual behaviour of one of her neighbours, was only relieved when an Australian friend Evie ... arrived in London. The London breakfast shows how Evie’s presence settled Nora, allowing her to achieve the serenity and absorption in her art that had been disrupted by loneliness and fear.

Eagle relates that Nora described Evie as her ‘alter ego’, and that she was ‘the model for some incandescent images, portraits and interiors, including London breakfast. She is always shown wearing blue. The blue of her eyes, her Jaeger dressing gown, her woollen jacket [seen in Portrait of Everton (Evie) 1936], is airy and uplifting.’

Nora maintained her friendship with Evie. She wrote to her mother and father in September 1935 when she was happy and productive, working on a flower piece that she described as ‘ethereal’ as a result of how she treated light and atmosphere in the work. She wondered if it
would appeal to her parents. Her parting paragraph is a pointed final report on Evie:

‘Evie is staying with me until December when she is marrying. It is wonderful to have her, and we do not get tired of each other. I think it a very good test if two people can share a flat, and be happy and work together. She helps my work. You will not believe that’.

Nora was not only dealing with the disapproval of her parents but with continual adverse criticism from her male teachers and from her father’s friends. It would all finally take its toll on her buoyant and optimistic approach to hard work. Her teacher at the Central School of Art, Bernard Meninsky, did not make life easy:

His work, with a widely acknowledged basis in sound draughtsmanship, was unappealing to Nora with its impressionistic and unbroken strong lines. Meninsky suggested that she would improve if she were to draw in his mode, fundamentally forcing a modernist technique on Nora. It is not surprising, given the climate within the male-dominated schools, that the non-compliant Nora would not be ‘welcomed’, as was so often the case. Nora writes to her parents:

“He said that I had a good idea of drawing and proportion but unfortunately I had been taught the wrong way but it was likely with a few years of training I might be able to see the way he does and do Meninsky drawings.”

It was not only her teachers who challenged Nora. Like her father, Nora was passionate about nature and the transient beauty of flowers
and it would be a subject that would sustain her throughout her fluctuating career. She claimed her religion was ‘growing things and sunshine. Light and life’. Her love of nature was the essence of her flower pieces and still-life works that she turned to in her darkest hours. But her path to these more intimate works, dominant in her oeuvre, was influenced by two men, recommended to Nora by her father while she studied in London, who would have a disastrous effect on her sense of worth and artistic ability. The first stinging criticism came from the Royal Academician James Bateman whom Nora had enjoyed listening to in conversation some eleven months earlier with her father in a fellow artist’s London studio. Nora wrote home to her parents on 19 May 1935 that Bateman and his wife had joined Nora for dinner at her studio and he took the opportunity to review her work. The trio was headed to the theatre afterwards but how much Nora enjoyed that is in doubt:

I got a gruelling criticism from Bateman. He doesn’t like my work evidently, and hasn’t a good word to say for it. He thinks that it lacks tone, that my technique is mechanical and that I am trying to get light and vibration in the wrong way. All of which is very disheartening. But then he is very biased against women painters...we nearly came to blows discussing women artists and their merits. In wishing to condemn someone’s work he said ‘Oh just like a woman’s work’ and that made me furious, and I stood up for them and defended them with all I had ... Probably his criticism will do me a lot of good. At the moment I feel sore about it and a little resentful ... his words didn’t tally at all with what Miss Pissaro [sic] thought, so where is one?

Despite her bravado, Bateman’s thoughts and words on her work
would strike another blow during a second visit by him to her studio. She succumbed to Bateman’s follow-up attack that alleged her work was ‘mannered’ and ‘superficial’.

Sir Charles Holmes, director of London’s National Gallery, dealt her a blow in late 1936 when he reviewed Nora’s work and delivered ‘a very adverse criticism’. Nora had studied at Central School since 1934 and, while suffering from Bateman’s criticisms, she had still managed to push on, realising that although she was not convinced about new approaches, the constraints of the conservative Academy discipline also had drawbacks. Art historian Jane Hylton notes that Nora addressed the criticism with a clear reply when she viewed Bateman’s ‘vast Academy picture’ which she had seen at his studio, when she found it ‘too worked out and precise. I would have liked to have seen the subject treated more vigorously with freer handling’. But it was her meeting with Holmes that most affected her.

I took my work to Charles Holmes. My father had made contact and made an arrangement ... that he would advise me as to how I was going...He asked me what I wanted to do...and I said figures and landscape—he just laughed at me, and it crushed me. Absolutely. It was a very untimely criticism. And, well, I lost my confidence entirely. I [went] on painting, but my big ideas, you know, Australian landscape and figures ... it was very sad, and devastating. Devastating.

Nora makes this frank comment to documentary maker Eugene Schlusser, when she is in her eighties, seated on the verandah of The Chalet, her home in Sydney. As she delivers these lines her head shakes slowly from side to side as she relives the blows delivered by
the man who would be dead not long after their meeting. How was Nora, an impressionable young woman, to react to the contempt of the man who was known as a great watercolourist, oil painter, author and critic, a man she had been sent to for advice by the father she loved and respected and looked to for guidance? For her twenty-first birthday in 1932 her father had given her an inscribed copy of C.J. Holmes’ *Old masters and modern art*, and here she was, at his mercy. She was aware that there were many ways to paint, to express one’s creativity and vision of life and nature, but the males around her in London were a formidable force. She wrote in a bewildered tone to her parents:

There were several items in Holmes’s criticism that I still cannot fathom. He said that my paintings of flowers looked dead and had no life as if I’d taken no pleasure in painting them. I can’t understand it, if there is anything I love doing and find the greatest joy in doing, it’s in painting flowers. Especially the one I took him of *Spring Flowers*, which I painted at the highest pitch of excitement, and enjoyed every moment of. I can’t help but feel that some of what I felt is in the work, and I can’t agree with his criticism on that point.

When she returned from London Nora had been away for over three years and was clear that it was time to separate from her father, there was not enough room for two artists at The Cedars. Nora moved to Sydney and it was late in 1937 that she completed her two entries for The Archibald. Her win was announced in January 1938 just days after her twenty-seventh birthday. It was a contentious win with the same artists who later attacked Dobell for his 1943 Archibald win, attacking Nora, one going so far as to tell her to return the money. The other detractor, fellow entrant Max Meldrum, declared: A great artist has to
tread a lonely road. He needs all the manly qualities, courage, strength, and endurance. He becomes great only by exerting himself to the limit of his strength the whole time. I believe that such a life is unnatural and impossible for a woman. The Australian Women’s Weekly managed to reduce her win to a cookery column with the headline Girl Painter Who Won Art Prize is also Good Cook.

Nora’s War Artist commission shows some of her strongest portrait work and despite the criticisms from Holmes she did produce figures in the landscape that I discuss at length in the book. But there was a poignant moment that perhaps encapsulates the great value of war artists on a very personal level while at the same recognizing service to country. I will end my reading with this excerpt:

Nora flew up and down the coastline of northern Queensland as she accompanied the nurses, known as the ‘Flying Angels’, who flew in and out of the Pacific combat zones delivering supplies and evacuating the wounded to base hospitals in Australia. Nora participated in medical evacuations from Lae and Morotai back to Townsville. She was focused about the kind of material she was after and eventually wrote home late in June that she was on the move from an undisclosed position in the Pacific later revealed as Morotai:

I’ll be away three or four days, then will return here, I hope, with my subject matter. It will be difficult working on the plane full of stretcher cases over the eight-hour flight, I don’t know how it will go ... the air is electric with rumours and every hour brings the peace nearer in talk ... It will be bedlam here if news comes through. Everyone is hanging over the wireless waiting, the guns are ready to go off in the blast of victory. The island
will tremble.

Peace might have been in the air but there was tragedy still to come. Nora was sharing quarters with some of the sisters, and a memoir held at the AWM written by one of these nurses, Flying Sister Beryl Chandler, records the interaction her unit had with Nora, and the death of one of her fellow nurses, Flying Sister Marie Craig. Nora drew Craig three days before peace was declared in the Pacific. Chandler writes:

Nora had approached me many times to sit for her and for one reason or another I did not want to. One day there was only Marie, Nora and myself in the Officer’s Mess when once again Nora asked me to allow her to paint me. Again I wasn’t keen and dithered whereupon Marie said to Nora, ‘Look Nora, you might as well paint me, I’ll pose for you. This job is going to kill me anyway and at least people will know what Marie Craig looked like’. I was aghast at this statement, because she seemed to mean it. I remember saying to her, ‘Marie, it is a volunteer job and no one would mind if you transferred to ground duties’ ... but she was adamant, she was going to fly on and she was just as sure she was not going to make it home to Australia. ‘No Chan, the writing is on the wall. I am just not going to come through’. She loved the work, it gave her immense satisfaction, but she had this strong premonition that she would be killed.

Craig sat for Nora one month before she was lost along with captain, crew and all on board in September 1945 when her plane disappeared. It was found twenty-five years later on the side of a mountain 14,000
feet above sea level in the Carstenz Ranges in Indonesian Papua. In conversation with Michael Cathcart in 2001 for ABC Radio, Nora recalled the event:

NH: I was detailed off for bringing the wounded down from New Guinea and there was always a nursing sister in attendance and I [drew] her. On two accounts they came down and were killed—and I thought well those portraits that I had done of them should go to their families and I sent them to their mothers, I don’t know if for better or for worse, I don’t know, but I did that. The war museum could have objected to that, couldn’t they?

MC: I think in theory, but not morally.

NH: Oh no, it was very sad, because they really didn’t get any recognition.

The lack of recognition for these nurses referred to by Nora, has shifted over the years, with their work celebrated and remembered. Well after peace was declared, operations to locate and repatriate POWs and the wounded continued, and Sister Verdun Sheah’s plane crashed on one of these missions. She was twenty-nine when she died on 15 November 1945. The two women are immortalised in Nora’s work.

The pictures delivered by Nora Heysen as official war artist recording their activities have been instrumental in remembering them and their sacrifice and underscore the valuable role of the war artist in preserving these memories.
In the course of writing this biography I often stopped to ask myself why this extraordinary artist was not better known and I came to the conclusion that Nora Heysen was a woman interrupted. She was interrupted by winning the most prestigious art prize in the country and the expectations that were associated with a win of that kind; by her country’s declaration of war that redirected her work out of the public eye; by love and the associated heartache of falling for a married man in the 1940s. She submitted to the expectations placed on a woman as a homemaker in the 1950s and was devastated by the abandonment by a husband she had waited ten years to marry, for a younger woman in a workplace romance. The final assault was her grief over the death of her unofficially adopted son, from an AIDS related disease.

But through all of this Nora was sustained by her art and hers was a satisfying life expressed though her creativity and her love for nature. She was courageous and she was happy, as long as she could paint.

_Nora Heysen: A Portrait_ is available in all good bookstores and online.