

C a n t e r b u r y   V i g n e t t e

grace

BUTLER

1886 - 1962

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*cover - Grace Butler painting out-of-doors c 1950. Photo courtesy of Grace Adams.*

g r a c e **BUTLER**

Neil Roberts

Grace Butler - A Personal Memoir

*Jenny Barrer*



Robert McDougall Art Gallery

for Christchurch City Council, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Shortly after Grace Butler died in November 1962 an old artist friend, Rona Fleming, commented that; *'anybody who paints in New Zealand's alps, paints under conditions that are a searching test of character, and never once in 35 years of friendship did I see Grace Butler show any signs of irritation or annoyance under adversity. Her physical make-up was feminine and petite, but her mental and spiritual make-up was large. She so completely identified herself with the forest and the Arthur's Pass region that the inherent hardships and frustrations left her unruffled and serene. Snow overnight probably meant a picture had to be delayed a whole season. Sudden torrential rain could mean the destructive gauging away of a promising composition. She never compromised with nature by working from notes. Identification with the elements was for her a necessity.'*<sup>1</sup>

There is no question that Butler's painting was born of a steadfast commitment to painting nature out of doors with total honesty. She spent more than forty years analysing and painting the Canterbury landscape, dividing her time with great regularity between the environs of Arthur's Pass and New Brighton.

The origins of her work stylistically lay in the plein-air painting traditions of the late nineteenth century with those 'Realists' who painted with full-bodied bravura brush strokes to capture as spontaneously as possible the freshness of light, tone, colour and atmosphere in what lay before them. Their work was impressionistic without being 'Impressionist', but the need to render 'truth to nature' was a prime objective.

Butler was no exception in this and she once described her aims as; *'an attempt to capture something loved intensely, a response to the piled up cloud or soft mist breaking the contour of rugged hills - there's an inner vision that you yearn to express'*<sup>2</sup>

In December 1962 her former teacher and old friend, Leonard Booth, wrote of her approach to painting; *'When viewing the landscape, Grace Butler was primarily concerned not with its fixed physical features. Always she aimed to express in her work a sense of motion and change. She followed no 'school' of painting. Her executive methods she developed logically from the assumption that her mission was to express in terms of her art her emotional reactions to nature as she presents herself in the mountains and valleys lakes and rivers of this country.'*<sup>3</sup>

Butler was an avid naturalist with a passion for plants. She searched the alpine region with the enthusiasm of an explorer, often tolerating arduous conditions and hiking long distances to achieve her objective, the right subject for her canvas. She was very much part of what has been termed 'The Canterbury School' and is an important figure in that family of Canterbury landscape painters that included Sydney Lough Thompson, Archibald Nicoll, Cecil and Elizabeth Kelly, Ivy Fife, and Colin and Rata Lovell-Smith -all heirs to the inspiration of Petrus van der Velden. Even though Butler's interpretations of the Canterbury alpine landscape was unrivalled in her lifetime, she has remained largely unrecognised since her death.

Over the past 37 years Butler has received sparse attention from art historians and the rather dismissive attitude that began in the 1950s has lingered and only recently have landscape painters like Grace Butler been judged in the context of their time not the present. Similarly the exhibitions that have been held have been largely a result of the initiatives of her daughter, Grace Adams, and granddaughter, Jennifer Barrer. The first of these comprising just 12 works opened at the Canterbury Society of Arts in July of 1972 and later through the organisation of the Department of University Extensions was toured to the principal university campuses around New Zealand. In 1985 a slightly larger combined exhibition of Butler's work and that of her eldest artist daughter, Margaret Barrer who died in 1982, was held at the Heathcote County Council offices. The most recent exhibition, organised by Grace Adams, was held at the Canterbury Society of Arts in 1986. Each of these, along with the current exhibition, acknowledge the contribution made by Butler but a much more substantial survey of this important Canterbury artist is yet to be achieved.

*Neil Roberts*

*Curator*



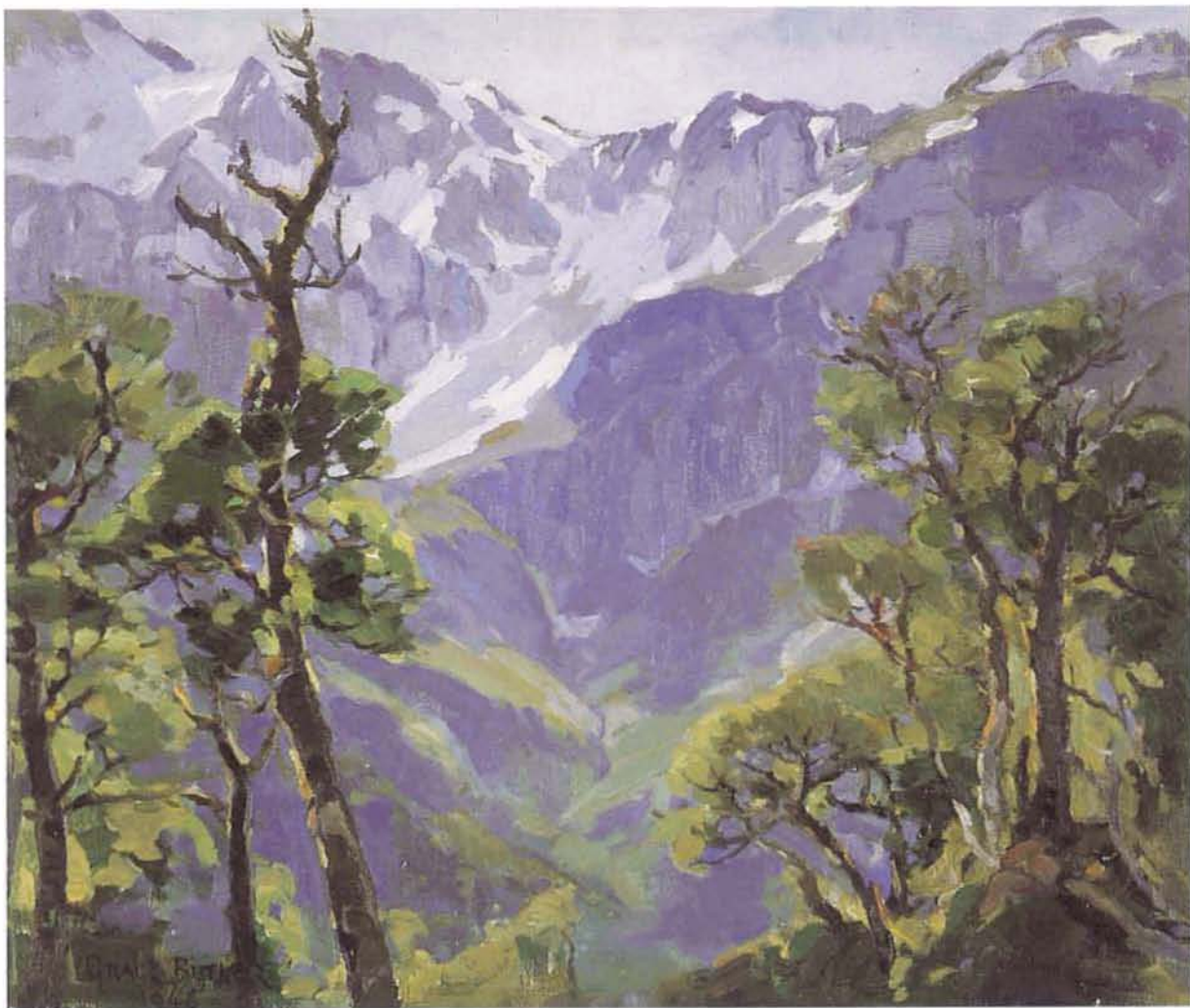
*Grace Butler c1916*

#### Early Years 1886 - 1909

Grace Ellen Butler was born on 23 December 1886 at Richmond Grove East, Invercargill, the youngest daughter of William Forbes Cumming and Jane (née Cameron).<sup>4</sup> Both of Grace's parents were born in Banffshire, Scotland - William in 1830 and Jane in 1842. They were married there and came to New Zealand as assisted immigrants in 1863. By the time Grace was born there were already six children in the family, the eldest approaching adulthood. William Cumming ran his own small business in Invercargill as a carter and haulage contractor. In 1887 he had a severe accident from which he did not fully recover, leaving him in a semi-invalid state for many months. Early in 1889 his health declined further and he died leaving a widow and largely adult family. Jane Cumming relied on the support of her older daughters; two of whom were accomplished dressmakers who ran a small dressmaking business in Don Street, Invercargill. But it was to be Margaret Cumming that Grace and her mother came to depend on most.

Grace's early education began in 1892 when she started attending Middle School, Invercargill where William A Mcchaffey was principal. The School had a roll of more than 600 pupils and a staff of fifteen.<sup>5</sup> Grace maintained good results in her work at the school and her ability in drawing did not go unnoticed.

In 1899 Margaret Cumming, who had been a teacher in Invercargill, was appointed to the staff at Norsewood School in Hawkes Bay and at the beginning of the following year took up her appointment. Her income was £110 per annum.<sup>6</sup> Grace and her mother remained in Invercargill a further year before joining Margaret at Norsewood. There Grace attended the Norsewood District School which had a roll of close to 200 pupils



*Summertime Arthur's Pass* c1945, oil on canvas/board. Robert McDougall Art Gallery Collection.

and a staff of three. Norsewood was a small town at that time serving a largely rural community that relied on dairy farming. The environment was totally different from the one that Grace had experienced in Invercargill, but being rural it would have been to her liking. Grace achieved well at Norsewood District School and in 1902 was its dux; successfully gaining a State School Scholarship that enabled her to attend Napier School of Art the next year. Napier School of Art, later Napier Technical and Art Schools, had been formed in 1899 and in 1903 was under the direction of Robert N. Anderson.

Grace boarded in Napier during the week returning home to Norsewood by train each weekend. Her special friend at this time was Ethel Hay, younger sister of the architect Louis Hay. Ethel live on Roslyn Road, Bluff Hill with her widowed mother and Grace developed a close relationship with Ethel and the Hay family.

The classes offered at Napier School of Art were in both elementary and advanced drawing and painting. There Grace received a grounding in these. Her success at the school was such that in 1906 she became a pupil teacher. That same year her sister Margaret moved from Norsewood to take up a new position teaching in Gisborne and, with her mother, established a new home there at an address in Palmerston Street. Grace continued her weekend commuting with longer stays between terms. It was during one of these that she met a young Gisborne law clerk, Guy Butler, who she was later to marry.

At the end of Term III in 1907 Grace left Napier to live permanently in Carnarvon Street, Gisborne with her mother and elder sister. During the next year she also rented a room in a commercial building at 113 Gladstone Road<sup>7</sup> setting herself up as an independent teacher of painting and drawing. How successful this venture was is uncertain but what was clear was that she was keen to develop as a professional artist and to do this she would have to further her studies. Any thought of overseas travel in order to achieve this was out of the question, as neither she nor her family had the means to make this possible. At that time although New Zealand had several schools of art, the most progressive with regard to painting was Canterbury.

Grace's descendants believe that one of the principal reasons for her going to Canterbury was the opportunity to study with an artist she greatly admired, Sydney Lough Thompson, who was on the staff as life master. Thompson had developed quite a profile as a portrait painter and had visited the Taupo region painting local Maori between 1906 an 1910, but it is not known if he also travelled to Gisborne at this time. It seems unlikely. How Grace became acquainted with his work is not known but there is no doubt of her regard for his work in later years.





*Women Students, Canterbury College School of Art, 1910. Grace Butler middle back row.*

## 1910 - 1930

At the beginning of 1910 Grace travelled to Christchurch and enrolled as an adult student at Canterbury College School of Art. The Director of the School was the flamboyant Robert Herdman Smith who was keen that the school should be progressive in its teaching and encouraged courses that complimented this view. There were ten on the staff in 1910 with just three teachers, Sydney Thompson, Leonard Booth and Cecil Kelly<sup>8</sup> in the painting and drawing department. Grace attended both day and evening classes. During the day she attended the advanced course in drawing and painting that comprised Drawing and Painting the Landscape from Nature, Drawing and Painting from the Living Model, Figure Composition and Anatomy and also classes in Modelling and the Antique. Morning classes were held from 10 am to 1pm and afternoon sessions from 2 to 4-30. In the evening, between 7.30 and 9.30pm, Grace took classes in Antique and General Drawing with Leonard Booth on Mondays, Drawing from Life with Sydney Thompson<sup>9</sup> Wednesdays, Art Crafts with Frederick Gurnsey on Thursdays and on Fridays, Drawing from Life, again with Sydney Thompson.

For the year's tuition it was costing Grace close to £8 per term and, like many students, the only opportunity to relieve this financial burden was a scholarship. In the November 1910 examinations she entered for an Advanced Art Scholarship (day). This was awarded annually to the student gaining the highest marks in annual examinations in Painting from Still Life, Drawing from the Antique, and Modelling. A requirement for the award was also the submission of a set of finished studies executed during the year. Such studies comprised three from still life or flowers in colour, two from the antique figure and one modelled head from the antique. Grace's excellent examination results gained her the scholarship,<sup>10</sup> taking care of most of her tuition fees for the following year. In addition to this award she, and fellow student Ruby Partridge, received the J. W. Gibb prize for landscape.

Among the other promising students at the school that Grace studied with at this time were Daisy Osborn (1888-1957), Stephanie Buckhurst (1888-1936), Gerard K Webber (1888-1916), Rose Zeller (1891-1975), Caroline (Carrie) and Alice Polson.<sup>11</sup>

In the summer of 1910/1911 Grace travelled home to Gisborne where she married Guy Butler on 1 March 1911.<sup>12</sup> On returning to Christchurch with her husband soon after, she resumed advanced day classes at the School of Art although reducing her evening classes to just 2 nights each week.<sup>13</sup> In terms one and two she took Drawing from Life with Robert Herdman-Smith on Mondays and Art Crafts with Frederick Gurnsey, while in term three she studied Drawing from Life with Richard Wallwork on Wednesday nights and Art Crafts with Frederick Gurnsey on Thursdays.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1911 examinations she continued to receive excellent results and gained a life class scholarship which was awarded to the student gaining the highest marks in Drawing from Life and from Memory. Butler was also, for a second year, the J. W. Gibb landscape prize recipient.<sup>15</sup>

In 1912 she continued attending day classes but suspended them in the evening.<sup>16</sup> In the examinations of 1912 Butler was again awarded an Advanced Art (day) scholarship.<sup>17</sup> The following year she attended day classes and for part of the time resumed evening life drawing classes with Richard Wallwork. Guy Butler also enrolled for evening classes with her during the first term.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of 1913 she continued to achieve well in the annual examinations. When the submissions were exhibited at the student exhibition in February 1914 Butler and several fellow students received a good notice for their work in a review written by Dick Harris of *The Sun*. He stated 'in a design for a mural of a hall of commerce Mrs G E Butler, Miss Ruby Partridge, Miss Stephanie Buckhurst, and Miss Carrie Polson produced the best work. Mrs Butler's decorative poster for the exhibition nicely achieved a balance between convention and realism and her broad decorative treatment and fine colour sense made it altogether pleasing'.<sup>19</sup>

Butler returned to day classes in the third term of 1914 but stopped them in the evening. By June, Butler had become pregnant with her first child and this probably influenced her decision to curtail her art school studies the following year. During the time that she had been a student Butler had been an honorary member of the Canterbury Society of Arts (CSA). As a result of receiving a first order of merit in two categories - Study of Land or Seascape from Nature in Colour and Painting from Still Life in the CSA's annual student competition, Butler exhibited at the 1913 Annual Exhibition. Previous to this her work had not been shown. She had, however, become an exhibiting member of the Auckland Society of Arts (ASA) and in May 1914 showed three paintings at their Annual Exhibition.<sup>20</sup> Two of these were subjects gleaned from the local environs of New Brighton. By the end of 1914 Butler had become a working member of the CSA and exhibited four paintings, all landscapes of the New Brighton area, in the 1915 CSA exhibition which opened on 18 March just a week after Butler's first daughter, Margaret, was born. Review notices for her first real showing were sparse with the exception of *The Sun* which described her work as 'showing thorough craftsmanship, but none of unusual merit'.<sup>21</sup> Her prices varied from two to ten guineas, but she does not appear to have made a sale.

In the months following the birth of her first child Butler was not well and her illness lingered. Later in the year she and her husband took a holiday in Kaikoura where she painted. The works from this excursion were among those she showed at the 1916 CSA Annual Exhibition. Included were also two paintings of New Brighton subjects. One of these, *The Beach New Brighton* (cat no 1) aroused much interest and was



*The Beach New Brighton, 1916, oil on canvas. Robert McDougall Art Gallery Collection.*

purchased for the Society's collection. In a notice for *The Press* a reviewer wrote; '*The Beach New Brighton* by Grace Butler, another of the Municipal pictures is also a meritorious piece of work. The atmosphere of the locality is well caught and the living surf is most successfully presented.'<sup>22</sup> *The Lyttelton Times* called it 'a notable beach picture'.<sup>23</sup> The purchase of *The Beach New Brighton* by the CSA was a measure of the regard in which she was held and represented a considerable achievement for a 29 year old woman artist at that time.

Through much of 1916 Butler's health had not greatly improved and her doctor recommended another holiday. Two locations at that time were highly regarded with Canterbury artists. One was Kaikoura, which she had visited, the other Westland. One of the Butler's friends, the artist Alfred Baxter, encouraged her to visit Westland and in particular Lake Kanieri 20 kilometres east of Hokitika where he had a bach.<sup>24</sup>

On Tuesday 26 December 1916 Butler and her husband travelled to Arthur's Pass by train then took a coach over the Pass to Otira before journeying to Lake Kanieri where they stayed at Baxter's hut. Butler made paintings of the lake, mountains and bush. It was her first real encounter with the alpine landscape that was to become such a significant subject in her work in the years that followed. After several days at Lake Kanieri they travelled back to Otira and stayed overnight at the Terminus Hotel. The next day they took the coach through the Otira Gorge to a camping site opposite a roadman's hut a few kilometres from Arthur's Pass, where they camped. Early in January 1917 they returned to Christchurch and Butler and her husband moved to Fisher Street, South Brighton. As New Brighton had low cost housing and cheap rents it was an attractive place for artists at this time. Cecil and Elizabeth Kelly lived nearby in Richmond Terrace.

In March Butler exhibited eight of her Westland paintings at the CSA Annual Exhibition. Later in the year she returned with her husband to Arthur's Pass camping and painting from the same site. When some of the works from this trip were exhibited at the 1918 CSA Annual Exhibition the reception was less than enthusiastic. In *The Press* Butler's treatment of these early alpine works was described as lacking colour and vitality. 'Her tone throughout is sad and in some cases thoroughly gloomy and a touch of sunshine occasionally would be a relief'.<sup>25</sup> *The Lyttelton Times* referred to one work as 'distinctly Van der Velden in Style'.<sup>26</sup> Van der Velden's death five years earlier had revived interest in him and his standing as a prime master of the Bealey and Otira landscapes. It was clearly this lead that Butler was trying to follow. But the difference was that where Van der Velden was primarily a studio painter working from studies and notes made out of doors and his imagination, Butler worked totally plein-air and could not escape from the subject before her eyes. It was inevitable that the Van der Velden palette would eventually have to be given up even though it lingered for a few more years.

Butler's health was still not good and during 1918 she and her husband moved to live briefly in Auckland where they rented a house in Norman's Hill Road, Onchunga. Over the months that they were there they spent time with their good friends Alan and Marguerita Mulgan with whom they holidayed in the summer of 1918/19 at Manganese Point near Whangarei. Alan Mulgan, later a prominent New Zealand author, was then literary editor of *The Auckland Star*. Butler painted around the environs of her home and the Auckland Harbour. Some of these works she exhibited at the Auckland Society of Arts, the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts in Wellington and the CSA in Christchurch.

Early in 1919 Butler returned to Christchurch, while later that year she had her first showing with the Otago Art Society with just two paintings.<sup>27</sup> At that time Butler and her husband were about to embark on an extended stay of almost six months camping at Arthur's Pass which provided her with the opportunity to paint in an environment to which she was becoming strongly attached. Over the summer the Mulgan family joined them and they enjoyed a pleasant holiday together.

In March 1920 Butler was still at Arthur's Pass and most of the works she submitted to the CSA for exhibition were largely those done earlier during her stay in Auckland. One of these, *Evening Glow*, (cat no 3) depicted fading evening light in a home paddock, which is thought to be next to the Norman's Hill Road house, in which a cow is grazing watched by two children. One was her daughter Margaret and the other one of the children of friends Alan and Marguerita Mulgan. This picture aroused some enthusiasm from Art Society Council who purchased it for the permanent collection. The press reviewers were far from enthusiastic about the painting. *The Sun* described its purchase as being 'a circumstance that one can only record with regret—*Evening Glow* is far from reaching permanent gallery standard'. It was suggested that Butler should paint out the focal point of the picture that was described as 'the unhappy cow'.<sup>28</sup> *The Lyttelton Times* similarly did not like the cow and commented 'the unconvincing position of the cow in the middle distance suggests some alteration which would be so easy to so an accomplished an artist as Mrs Butler'.<sup>29</sup> The criticism was shared by certain members of the Council of the Society and conveyed to Butler on her return from Arthur's Pass in late May. In response she agreed to paint the cow out. As a result one of the points of interest of the painting was lost.

The months spent at Arthur's Pass exploring the landscape, particularly of the Bealey River, resulted in a sizeable number of paintings and at the 1921 CSA Annual Exhibition Butler exhibited a total of 10 works mostly of the environs of Bealey. The opinion of *The Lyttelton Times* reviewer was that Butler's work was under threat of becoming formulaised; 'there is always a danger of sacrificing ones freshness of seeing even to the best of formulae'. However, the best work was considered to be a larger riverbed painting *In the Bealey Gorge, Arthur's Pass*.<sup>30</sup> In contrast most of the six works that she exhibited at the ASA in September 1920 were of New Brighton landscapes.

During 1921 Butler continued to make paintings near Brighton and the Estuary between visits to Arthur's Pass. In the summer of 1921/22 she spent some time in the Otira Valley with her husband and 6 year old daughter. She had access to some remarkable Otira scenery. Some of the works from this visit were shown at the CSA in March while others were among the six works that she showed at the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts in Wellington in September and the 10 paintings she exhibited with the Otago Art Society in November.

In November 1922 Butler gave birth to a second daughter, Helen, and, as she had done on an earlier occasion, spent time staying with her sister Margaret in Auckland, who by this time had married and become Mrs Howard. Over the time she was there she made a number of paintings of Auckland Harbour. Some of these were included with the work she exhibited the following year. The interest in Butler as an artist had also grown in Auckland where she was now a regular exhibitor. As a mark of this, the painting *Glaciers Rolleston Mountains* was purchased from the Auckland Society of Arts Annual Exhibition and presented to the Auckland Art Gallery. This was her first representation in that collection.

One of the areas of the South Island that had been popular with artists painting out of doors since the 1880s was the landscape at the head of Lake Wakatipu north of Glenorchy. The valleys of Paradise, the Dart and Rees rivers were, by the early 1920s, particular favourites among artists and trampers alike. Butler was encouraged to visit the area and over the many weeks during late summer and early winter that she, her husband and daughter Margaret stayed in the accommodation cottage there she found it almost as captivating as Arthur's Pass. Butler painted a great deal in the Paradise Valley and a number of these works, including *Farmlands Paradise Valley* (cat no 7) were shown with the three Art Societies and the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts during 1924 and 1925.

In August 1923, after many years in construction, the Otira tunnel was finally opened, thus providing easier access to Westland. Roadmen were one of the casualties. Many became redundant and many of the Public Works buildings were either demolished or sold. Guy Butler bought the old roadman's hut opposite where they had camped over many summers naming it 'Jack's Hut' after the last roadman to live there. This was to become Butler's retreat and base during her painting excursions to the Arthur's Pass region over nearly forty years.

The major event for many New Zealand artists was the approaching British Empire Exhibition of 1924 at Wembley, London. In 1923 the work of a number of prominent Canterbury artists, including Butler, had been selected. In a review of the exhibits her paintings *Early Snow Mt Rolleston Mountains*, a work painted during 1922 and *Farm beyond the Marsh* painted in 1923, were singled out for special mention.<sup>31</sup>

In November 1923 Sydney Thompson, then regarded by many as Canterbury's supreme expatriate artist, returned to Christchurch after an absence of 12 years living and painting in France. Within a month he held a large exhibition at the Durham Street Art Gallery. Thompson's bright impressionistic canvases, mostly painted out-of-doors, struck a chord and found immediate favour among many local artists. His treatment of both the figure and landscape in terms of light and colour was fresher and more direct than many had seen before. Butler, who had always admired Thompson's work, was just as enthusiastic about his recent painting as she had been in the past. When Thompson began holding out-door 'master' classes in Mrs H.J. Beswick's garden at 91 Carlton Mill Road, Butler attended a number of sessions with other, mostly women, artists. At one of these she painted *Model in a Garden* (cat no 9) which reveals something of the Thompson's influence of light and colour.

The time at Thompson's Summer School was not immediately apparent in Butler's work. Soon after an infantile paralysis scare, Butler was encouraged to take her eldest daughter to what she considered to be a more healthy environment, and with her husband they travelled to Oira staying at a roadman's hut at Candy's Bend. This afforded her again the opportunity to paint in a landscape she had not visited for some time.

After several months she returned to Christchurch but later in the year, over the summer of 1924 /25, with her husband and both children, she returned to the retreat at Jack's Hut where she began a new set of works. On this occasion she climbed up to higher levels beyond Bealey, just below the snow line, as always, seeking new imagery to paint.

Unfortunately only two of her paintings from the previous year were shown at the 1925 Canterbury Society of Arts Annual Exhibition. The reception by reviewers of her eight exhibits was mixed. Dr Lester writing for *The Press* did not support what he described as 'her fondness for blue colour'<sup>32</sup> in her painting, *Winter in the Dart Valley*, which he felt detracted 'from the appeal of her picture'. He was, however, in admiration of her 'bold sure brushwork' and 'sound drawing' but considered her best work was a small painting of *Mountain Stream Oira Gorge*.<sup>33</sup> Professor James Shelley writing for *The Lyttelton Times* opened his remarks with 'Mrs Butler is steadily making her way into a position of settled and considerable importance' although he was critical of her foregrounds which he felt was a prevailing weakness of many contemporary artists. In contrast to Dr Lester he described her painting *Winter in the Dart Valley* as 'a masterly piece of landscape painting'.<sup>34</sup>

In the same exhibition Sydney Thompson showed several works from his summer visit to Mount Cook and Shelley felt that Butler could benefit from the lessons of his painting. 'Mrs Butler can yet learn a lot from the study of Mr Thompson's mountain work - and she has the capacity to absorb rather than imitate.'<sup>35</sup> Butler may or may not have felt a need to heed these comments as no dramatic change in her work occurred immediately.



With the success of the British Empire Exhibition in London a decision was made to reopen it in 1925 and artists were approached to contribute a further selection of works for display in the art section of the New Zealand Court. Butler sent four paintings, mostly works from the excursion south in 1923. Included were; *Rain Squall Avon Estuary*, *Winter Mists Jordan Valley Paradise*, *Farmlands Paradise Valley* and *On the way to Routeburn*.<sup>36</sup>

In Dunedin preparations were well advanced for the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition (17 November 1925 - 1 May 1926). Several Canterbury artists were represented in the Fine Arts gallery, as was Butler, with a recently completed winter study of the Arthur's Pass settlement titled *Holiday Houses, Arthur's Pass Winter*.<sup>37</sup>(cat no 12)

By 1925 her profile as a New Zealand landscape painter was steadily rising and, without doubt, the mid 1920s was a high point in her career. The National Art Association of New Zealand, to which Butler had become an early member, was formed in late 1924 and comments in its *Bulletin* described her as a major figure in New Zealand landscape painting.

There was also the usual enthusiasm for her work from Professor James Shelley, reviewer of CSA Annual Exhibitions for *The Lyttelton Times*. In his review of the 1926 exhibition he remarked; 'For many years Mrs Butler has got deeper and deeper into the spirit of the mountains and now it seems safe to say that no other artist in New Zealand has quite the same sympathy as this artist. Of the mountains, she loves them and partakes of their moods and worships them; some of her pictures are veritable prayers to the mountains and some are breathless with fear'.<sup>38</sup> Of the painting *Rata in the Gorge Otira* (cat no 8), he stated that it 'shows well the artist's power which is not possessed to the same degree by any other artist'.<sup>39</sup> These laudatory comments by Shelley are important as he was certainly not one to give praise unless it was due.

That year even Dr Lester for *The Press*, hitherto rather critical of her painting, was almost as complimentary as Shelley with such remarks as 'fine composition', 'colour is brilliant' and 'mountain scenery painted with courageous realism'.<sup>40</sup> Although Butler, ever self effacing, would not have concerned herself with any measure of adulation about her work, such comments of endorsement must have encouraged her to think that what she was doing in her painting was right.

During 1926 she gave birth to a third daughter, Grace, and now, with three children under 12 years, the domestic demands on her time increased yet there was no neglect of her painting or exhibiting.

Early on the morning of 8 October 1927, while the Butler family was away at Arthur's Pass for the weekend, fire raised to the ground their 6 room home of 10 years in Fisher Street.<sup>41</sup> The loss was considerable, as all the works Butler had kept over her career to that time were destroyed as well as many by other artists. She was greatly distressed at what had happened. When her sister, Margaret Howard, in Auckland received news of the catastrophe she immediately, as in the past, rallied in support offering Butler a haven at her Epsom home in which to recover from the shock. Butler accepted the invitation and travelled north with her children and stayed in Auckland for five months.

Meanwhile Guy Butler remained to run the hostel that he had recently opened at Arthur's Pass to cater for the growing number of tourists and skiers to the area. During the summer of 1926/27 the hostel had more than 30 guests, among them the artist Margaret Stoddart who Grace Butler knew very well.

The fire impacted heavily on the work she had available for exhibition and this may not have been fully understood by the reviewer of the OAS 1927 exhibition in the *Otago Daily Times*. 'For some years past we have been accustomed to see large canvases by Mrs Butler'. The small painting of *The Punchbowl Stream, Arthur's Pass* was not considered to be an adequate representation although he softened his remarks by saying; 'although a fine piece of colour and painting'.<sup>42</sup>

During the months that Butler was in Auckland she made several paintings of the waterfront and shipping on the Manakau Harbour - subjects that had attracted the plein-air watercolourist Alfred Walsh more than a decade earlier. Her visit to Auckland was noted on 13 January 1928 by the author, then a journalist for *The Auckland Sun*, G. E. O. (Eric) Ramsden, who wrote of Butler; 'now she is hard at work trying to make up for time consumed by the disastrous fire. While in Auckland Mrs Butler has found much to fascinate her on our waterfront'.<sup>43</sup> Butler's profile in Auckland was being well maintained.

With the loss of so much recent work in the fire Butler was not able to exhibit at the CSA exhibition in March. It was the first time since 1915. Her absence from the walls did not go unnoticed by her admirers. Professor Shelley, in his review for *The Lyttelton Times* of the 1928 exhibition, wrote with words of encouragement; 'where has Mrs Butler hidden herself, that we should have no work from her brush? We can bear to be deprived of the work of many painters but not of Mrs Butler's - we all need at times "To be taken up into a high mountain" and she is one New Zealand painter who can do it'.<sup>44</sup> However, she did manage to muster some paintings to include in the exhibition 'Paintings by New Zealand Artists' that was opened by the Premier of New South Wales, the Honorable T.R. Bavin at the Grosvenor Galleries in Sydney on 23 March 1928.<sup>45</sup> Butler also



*Summer Morning Arthur's Pass. W.S. and Alison MacGibbon Collection, MacMillan Brown Library.*

found works for showing in Auckland, Wellington and had five paintings in the Otago Art Society exhibition in November 1928. This meant that in spite of her misfortune she was able to maintain some exhibiting presence. When she did resume exhibiting at the CSA in 1929 the works that were shown were a mix of old and new. Of the six works shown, half were from her time in Auckland in 1927 and among the other three she included a still life of hydrangeas in a vase with a china figurine. For many years thereafter she included with her annual exhibits at least one flower-piece. In the late 1920s the flower still life was very popular and reasonably saleable, particularly in Christchurch. Even though they did not usually receive much notice from reviewers, on this occasion enthusiastic comments came from all three papers. *The Sun* reviewer described *Hydrangeas* as 'excellent',<sup>46</sup> Dr Lester in *The Press* described it as 'a very fine still life'. 'The colour and pattern of the hydrangea and the sense of light and gaiety in the whole picture strike a note of beauty which is very welcome'<sup>47</sup> and Professor Shelley in *The Lyttelton Times* wrote; 'The flowers in *Hydrangeas* are beautifully done - there is a fine feeling for texture.'<sup>48</sup>

Following her return from Auckland, and after a short spell of residency at the hostel at Arthur's Pass, Butler and her family decided to return to Christchurch. They initially rented a house at 121 Fendalton Road until May 1928. After that, until late 1929, they rented 46a Hackthorne Road from Cecil Wynn Williams before moving back to live permanently at a new address in New Brighton.

#### 1930 - 1962

During 1930 Butler, her husband and three daughters, moved to 246 Esplanade, New Brighton, a road that ran parallel with the shoreline facing the sea and there they established a new home. Butler had become attached to living near the sea. For more than 15 years the environs of New Brighton had been important as subjects for her brush and this was to continue for many years, as was her new found interest in still life flower subjects. In 1930 three of the four works that she exhibited at the CSA Annual Exhibition were of flowers, but when reviewed they were, as usual, totally ignored. However, by 1934 such works were beginning to be discussed but it was not necessarily what was expected from her. In April 1934 the reviewer of the CSA Annual Exhibition, James Shelley, for *The Christchurch Times* wrote; '*Mountain Lilies* is as good as any flower painting in the gallery, but it is the voice of the mountains, not the scent of the lillies, that we want from our artists in these petty days'.<sup>49</sup>

Butler seems to have taken notice of this and reduced considerably the number of flower still life paintings that she exhibited over the next few years, concentrating on the alpine landscape of Arthur's Pass and environs that had become very much her signature work. By the mid 1930s

Butler's painting had become looser, the bravura handling of paint more gestural, and with it a slight heightening of colour and sense of light. It was in a way almost as if her vision of the landscape she knew so well was being finely tuned.

Apart from 1935, she generally maintained a good presence in each of the annual society exhibitions in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. In October 1937 Butler made an extended visit to Auckland again, and as on previous occasions, was drawn to painting the Manakau Harbour.

Over the summer of 1937 /38 she visited South Westland painting the Franz Josef Glacier and Callery and Waiho Gorges. Many of the works done on this trip and during the time in Auckland were exhibited during 1938 in other centres. In response to those shown in Auckland, Arthur C Hipwell, artist and former student of Canterbury College School of Art, in his review for *The Auckland Star* wrote less enthusiastically about Butler's paintings. He criticised them for not having changed and of her painting he stated; 'they show no divergence of practice from her work over a long period.' A 'modernist', Hipwell felt that pictures of nature made little contribution to the development of art in New Zealand.<sup>50</sup> This was not an isolated view in 1938 and within a decade or so would gather momentum as a new generation claimed their place on the stage of the country's art.

Butler continued to include some of the Westland paintings at the CSA Annual Exhibition during March and April 1939 and in Christchurch there was no waning of acknowledgement of her place as a premier landscape painter of alpine scenery. In his review of this exhibition in *Art in New Zealand*, Leonard Booth, one of Butler's former teachers, paid a special tribute to her and wrote; 'Grace Butler, because she dwells in the mountains, knows the spirit that dwells in the mountains. Because she is developing a technique keeps constantly in view of her aim, which is an expression of this spirit, her paintings exhibit in the apposition of the shapes and in the adjudication of the colours and in the correlation of this adjudication to an effect of unity, rare skill. In this all particulars contribute to an awakening, in the beholder, of memories of emotional experiences of nature'.<sup>51</sup>

By mid 1939 preparation in Wellington for the large centennial exhibition scheduled to open at the end of that year was well advanced and it was of some concern that there would be only a small presence of work by New Zealand artists in the exhibition building. In order that an attempt could be made to change this a New Zealand Society of Artists was formed in June 1939 and after some negotiations was able to secure space in the exhibition building. The Society then invited artists from throughout New Zealand to select works they would like to exhibit. The response was good and 44 artists, including Butler, submitted paintings for hanging. The exhibition eventually comprised 252 works.

Concurrent with the opening of this exhibition in Wellington in November 1939 was the Centennial International Art Exhibition at the National Gallery in Buckle Street.<sup>52</sup> Grace Butler was represented by six recent landscapes, mostly of Franz Josef, Bealey, and New Brighton subjects. This presence in Wellington helped maintain her profile there but unfortunately she was not included in the National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art that toured New Zealand. The exclusion of Butler from this first major touring exhibition of New Zealand artists work, considering her standing as a major alpine landscape painter, must have brought some surprise to visitors in Dunedin where it opened its tour on 19 February 1940. At the 1939 OAS the reception of Butler's work had been enthusiastic. The reviewer for the *Otago Daily Times* had written; 'vigorous landscapes as welcome as ever'<sup>53</sup> and *The Evening Star* had much praise for her landscape *Late Snow* which was described as 'worthy of close attention is Grace Butler's choice landscape *Late Snow*. It is among the best landscapes in the gallery'.<sup>54</sup>

Butler continued to paint and exhibit regularly during the years of the Second World War and, like most New Zealand artists, had to cope with shortages of artist materials and non-gallery exhibition spaces. The response, however, from reviewers continued to be mostly complimentary reinforcing her place as an alpine specialist.

In 1945 after the official removal from the walls of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery of Evelyn Page's out-door nude study *Summer Morn*, a replacement work was sought by the model who had laid the complaint that led to its removal. The artist recommended for an appropriate substitute work was Butler. The painting *Summertime Arthur's Pass* (cat no 24), a recent painting that had been shown at the CSA Annual Exhibition and had been praised for its 'sensitive handling of paint',<sup>55</sup> was the choice. Its gift improved Butler's representation in the Robert McDougall Art Gallery collection, which until that time, held just one work, not an alpine painting.

In 1944 Butler's eldest daughter Margaret Barrer, who had studied at Canterbury College School of Art in the mid 1930s and was a proficient painter, began exhibiting along-side her mother but there was no competition or rivalry with this. Butler still held the principal place as an artist in the family and Margaret considered her mother to be the superior painter. But a whole new generation of New Zealand women artists was emerging and finding a place alongside their male counter parts and beginning to assert their identity as artists.

By 1948 many of the art societies had reclaimed their galleries requisitioned during the war and commenced a reinvigorated activity but the appearance of many older artists at annual exhibitions became more intermittent. Butler was not one of these and held her position well against the onslaught of a younger generation.

In response to the 1948 CSA Exhibition the reviewer for *The Press* wrote 'Of the mature landscape painters represented Grace Butler perhaps comes nearest to expressing true feeling for the love of her own country. She is concerned with conventions only as a means of expressing the spirit of what she paints in contrast to so many aspiring artists who are far more concerned with conventions as conventions'.<sup>56</sup>

Early in 1949 the Adult Education Department of Canterbury University College decided to organise two exhibitions in neighbouring regions to show the work of Canterbury artists. During July and August an exhibition of work by 19 contemporary Canterbury artists, including Butler, toured to Timaru. Over the years that Butler had painted the landscape of Arthur's Pass and Bealey her work had rarely been seen in Westland, but in 1949 the opportunity arose for this to change. During November of that year the University of Canterbury Adult Education Department organised an exhibition of Canterbury Artists' work which they toured to venues at Hokitika, Greymouth, Reefton, Westport and Otira. Among the 15 artists represented were Butler, her old friend Rona Fleming, Esther Hope, Ivy Fife and Rata Lovell-Smith.<sup>57</sup> All had painted the backcountry of Canterbury for years but none had got to know the alpine landscape as intimately as Butler.

During the following year Canterbury began its centennial celebrations with a variety of events including exhibitions. One of these, the Living Canterbury Artists' Loan Exhibition, was the first of three to be held during the centennial year. When it opened on 4 September 1950 it comprised 287 works by artists.<sup>58</sup> Butler was represented by four paintings. The earliest, dating from 1924, hung with works by many of the artists she had shown with for more than 35 years.

Around the time that Canterbury was celebrating its centenary, preparations were well underway on the other side of the world for the Festival of Britain that was to be held in 1951. As part of that many artists from throughout the Commonwealth were invited to exhibit. It had been many years since Butler had shown beyond New Zealand. Butler and eight other New Zealand women artists, among them Canterbury painters Rata Lovell Smith and Ivy Fife took part in the Women's International Art Club Exhibition in London during the Festival. The Director of the National Gallery was the New Zealand organiser for the exhibition and had selected the artists that were included. New Zealand, Australia, Canada and South Africa were part of the Commonwealth section of the exhibition. When assembled it comprised over 400 works occupying six rooms of the Royal Society of British Artists' Gallery.<sup>59</sup> The exhibition, when reviewed in the July 1951 issue of the magazine *Studio*, praised the 'high level' of work represented considering the scale of the exhibition.<sup>60</sup> Butler's inclusion was a measure of the position she still had as a senior New Zealand artist. However, changes in attitudes in New Zealand art were moving it in a totally new direction in an attempt at modernisation.

By the mid 1950s Butler and many of her contemporaries found themselves increasingly out of step with the avant-garde, not that it was of any serious concern to her. She still continued to exhibit and though painting a little less frequently out-of-doors, still made regular visits to Arthur's Pass and continued to paint, as in the past, in all weathers.

As her health declined she spent increasingly more time in Wellington with her daughter Helen Brew. In November of 1960 a successful retrospective exhibition of her work was organised by her husband and daughter, Helen, at Fisher's, the dealer gallery in High Street, Christchurch.<sup>61</sup> At the time, although she was unwell, she did put considerable effort into selecting and preparing works. The outcome was a successful exhibition, well received.

In the summer of 1961 Butler with her husband made her last visit to Arthur's Pass and soon after they decided to leave Christchurch to live permanently in Wellington. During 1962 Butler's health failed with the onset of a terminal illness leading to her death on 16 November 1962,<sup>62</sup> a few weeks short of her 76th birthday.

In the period immediately following there were many tributes paid to her by friends and fellow artists but few more poignant than that made by the architect Paul Pascoe, then president of the Canterbury Society of Arts, who stated; "Grace Butler could capture the magic of the mountains. She could tell of the mists, the bush, the whiteness of snow and the dull green of damp moss. She could also appreciate the abstract point of view. Grace Butler has added to the art heritage of Canterbury and of New Zealand. It is one that we need and must treasure. We cannot afford to forget such greatness as was her".<sup>63</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 *The Press*: Tributes by Rona Fleming, Leonard Booth and Paul Pascoe. 1 December 1962 p13.
- 2 J. King *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* p81
- 3 *The Press* 1 December 1962 p13
- 4 Certificate of birth, Invercargill 1886
- 5 *Cyclopedia of New Zealand Vol. 4 Otago - Southland* p820
- 6 New Zealand Government Gazette 1905
- 7 Wisers Post Office Directory 1908/09
- 8 Prospectus, Canterbury College School of Art 1910
- 9 Register of Evening Classes, Canterbury College School of Art 1910
- 10 Register of Prizes and Scholarships, Canterbury College School of Art 1910
- 11 Register of Yearly Enrolments, Canterbury College School of Art 1910
- 12 Certificate of Marriage 1 March 1911 Gisborne
- 13 Register of Day Classes 1911
- 14 *ibid*
- 15 Register of Prizes and Scholarships Canterbury College School of Art 1911

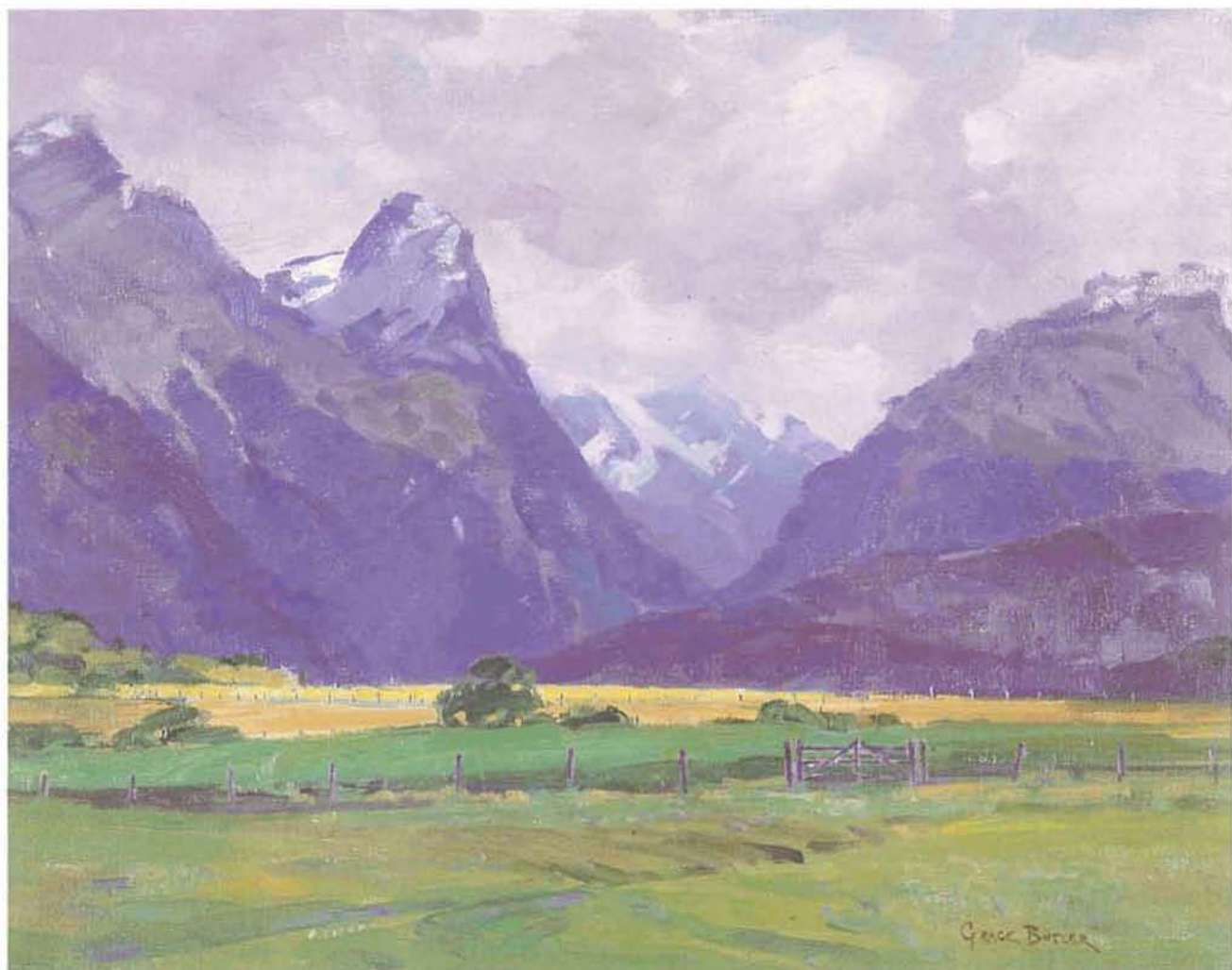


- 16 Register of Enrolments Canterbury College School of arts 1912  
 17 Register of prizes and Scholarships Canterbury College School of Art 1912  
 18 Register of Day and Evening Classes Canterbury College School of Art 1913  
 19 *The Sun* 'School of Arts Show' 24 February 1914 (unpagged clipping)  
 20 List of Exhibiting Members, Auckland Society of Arts 1915  
 21 *The Sun* 19 March 1915 p.9  
 22 *The Press* 31 March 1916 p.9  
 23 *The Lyttelton Times* 3 March 1916 p.9  
 24 Quoted by Grace Adams in *Jack's Hut* p.26  
 25 *The Press* 13 March 1918 p.8  
 26 *The Lyttelton Times* 13 March 1918 p.3  
 27 Otago Society of Arts catalogue 1919  
 28 *The Sun* 22 March 1920 p.6  
 29 *The Lyttelton Times* 7 March 1920 p.8  
 30 *The Lyttelton Times* 24 March 1921 p.7  
 31 *The Press* 12 July 1924 p.14  
 32 *The Press* 25 March 1925 p.11  
 33 *ibid*  
 34 *The Lyttelton Times* 4 March 1925 p.15  
 35 *ibid*  
 36 New Pictures for Wembley *Bulletin of the National Art Association of New Zealand* Nos 2 & 3 February - March 1925 p.9  
 37 Fine Arts catalogue, New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition p.43  
 38 *The Lyttelton Times* 25 March 1926 p.5  
 39 *ibid*  
 40 *The Press* 27 March 1926 p.19  
 41 *The Lyttelton Times* 10 October 1927  
 42 *Otago Daily Times* 21 November 1927 p.14  
 43 *The Auckland Sun* 13 January 1928 p.9  
 44 *The Lyttelton Times* 26 March 1928 p.10  
 45 *The Lyttelton Times* 24 March 1929 p.9  
 46 *The Sun* 15 March 1929 p.8  
 47 *The Press* 16 March 1929 p.11  
 48 *The Lyttelton Times* 15 March 1929 p.15  
 49 *The Christchurch Times* 4 March 1934 p.14  
 50 *The Auckland Star* 20 May 1938 p.9  
 51 Leonard H. Booth 'The 1939 Exhibition of the Canterbury Society of Arts' *Art in New Zealand* Vol. 11 No 4 June 1939 pp. 170-171  
 52 *Art in New Zealand* No 44 June 1939 pp. 180 - 83  
 53 *Otago Daily Times* 22 November 1939 p.6  
 54 *The Evening Star* 22 November 1939 p.13

- 55 *The Arts in New Zealand* Vol. 17 No 67 April - May 1945 p.48  
 56 *The Press* 22 April 1948 p.3  
 57 Catalogue 'Art Exhibition - Collection of Work by Canterbury Artists West Coast 1949'. This exhibition organised by the Adult Education Department Canterbury University College the second of two that year was sponsored by the Hokitika, Greymouth, Westport, Reefton Arts Councils. It opened in Hokitika on 8 November and toured to Greymouth, Westport and Reefton until 29 November 1949. It later was shown in Otira and Leeston.  
 58 Catalogue - Living Canterbury Artists Loan Exhibition held at the Canterbury Society of Arts September 4- 30 1950  
 59 *The Press* 28 March 1959 p.2  
 60 *Studio* magazine July 1951 Vol. 141 No 670  
 61 *The Press* 8 November 1960 p.1  
 62 Obituary *Evening Post* 19 December 1962 p.10  
 63 *The Press* 1 December 1962 p.13



*Snow Scene from Jack's Hut, oil on canvas/board, collection: private*



## GRACE ELLEN BUTLER - A PERSONAL MEMOIR

*Jenny Barrer*

*Jenny Barrer had a special relationship with her grandmother, Grace Butler. What follows are remembrances interspersed-with extracts from correspondence that adds meaning to the person of Grace Butler.*

My grandmother's skin was soft and white like the petals of a Romneya poppy; her dresses were simple. Round and comfy, her long grey hair was woven into a bun at the nape of her neck. She played games with me in the garden at 246 Marine Parade, New Brighton, showing me how to plant potatoes and she wrote down 'pretendy' stories I made up, illustrating them with little sketches. In the bush opposite Jack's Hut at Arthur's Pass she taught me how to nurture flora and find fairies in the mossy hollows of beech trees - she even encouraged me to talk to the little people! Standing back, no doubt Grace Butler chuckled to herself. A bond was formed with respect for the natural world, tinged with a hint of magic and a large dose of spirituality.



On August 16th 1943 Grace Butler writes to Nina Barrer from 246 Esplanade, New Brighton.

Our Dearest Other Grandma,

Yesterday the family were all down and it was one of those windless blue days when all things seemed serene and beautiful. Guy and I got out early into the garden and hoed up the peas and beans and I put in a few lettuce plants. The family found us in our old duds and a very receptive mood for advice. The things we could do to improve the garden are too many to write about and they have only the one drawback to them, that Guy and I are both past the age of aggressive gardening - that means throwing out this, cultivating that, enlarging the borders, putting flower borders in front of the vegetables. No! We are content to let things grow that will do so with the least help from us - and to do a lot of walking about and looking - lots of other things seem more important. Still if we had a John gardener, I am sure Margaret's ideas would make a wonderful garden - her ideas were all good, only the workman is missing ...



Jenny is a bundle of joy and helped me very much, she did her best not to stand on the new plants, but occasionally when she spotted a potato tuber in the soil she dived at it gleefully and said - "there is another little tatar for Jenny - I will plant it here Nana". Jen's tatars are patted down into the earth with a flowing commentary upon life in general ... she also gave the plants their little 'drinks' to make them grow .....for this we used our best kettle. So you see Jen and I were pals. The others went on the beach ...

With love from the Christchurch Gran x Grace B.

Jack's Hut  
Arthur's Pass  
Feb 17th 1948

Dearest Margaret and Family,

Here we are at the most lovely spot looking out at our very loved Peaks. The hut was most inviting. You must have worked very hard to leave everything so nice and clean. Guy and I had our usual rush to get away to catch the train. Brake was here, so we got up to the hut quickly and over the gorge road to the top of the zigzag. They have about 40 men working there and are to build a road and a wall 30 yards high by 18yards wide, so that must be good for the Gorge Hotel business. I expect by the time we are ready to get our old shed timber and iron there won't be any left.

I tried to sketch from the top of the Gorge but it was terribly difficult. The day was fine to start with, but within an hour had greyed all over - So poor sad Artist took out the pieces of sunlight and painted grey. I just muddled along. However, next time things may take a turn for the better. I was painting over an old canvas to make things more distant. Today it rained and the leak came in at the foot of the bed by the window.

We have had two good walks, one to the top of Pegleg and back, and yesterday all the way home from the top of the Gorge, after painting nearly all day. We were rather tired last night so rather welcomed the rain. We need weather and colour and a good run of painting.

Our love to all from Granny x and Pom Pom (Guy Butler)

At Jack's Hut Granny Butler wore her painting hat. The smell of a pot roast mixed with a whiff of kerosene from the lamp and the fire burning filled the air. Calling 'cooey' when we walked to Margaret's Tarn to make sure we were safe, we'd then return and come across her painting by the Bealey, completely absorbed. Guy was busy seeing to things, intelligent, warm and cultured - a solicitor by profession - he cut many early tracks and helped form the National Park.

At Brighton - cups of tea and Madeira cake greeted us - always the smell of oil paints and a large canvas newly painted at the end of their huge living room. Time after time I listened and watched as Grace would crinkle her nose up and declare her painting unfinished - "I'm not happy with the sky. What on earth did I do that for, I can't stand that tree." My mother Margaret would declare "You must not do another stroke". They would have a heated debate. Guy would butt in diplomatically and Grace would say "You know nothing about it". Gracious and kind she might be, but her work was her work. She found it hard to part with her paintings. I noticed she avoided conflict and the intense sibling rivalry of her three different but talented daughters by becoming removed. Devoted to her, 'Guy Butler - a visionary, called himself her batman.'<sup>1</sup> He cooked breakfast, and when his wife was inspired her face changed. She seemed like a different person. - "Quick Guy, fetch my easel - where is that new brush, hurry, hurry."<sup>2</sup> He moved and they were off! Considering they had no car until late in their lives, it is remarkable how they managed to access some painting spots.



My mother Margaret Barrer wrote in her speech notes for the Arthur's Pass Association Jubilee Dinner.

'My love affair with Arthur's Pass began when I was six in 1920-21. We stayed five months beside Jack and his hut. I saw my first snow on a white tent fly. I saw a Prince ride by on a red coach, but I didn't hold Jack's hand as the book says. I watched from the bottom of the little dry creek. I had enough sense to realise that sometimes men must be alone. - -

There was Grace, Guy and I. We ate Mick Fitzgerald's chops, Guy did the cooking. Grace did the painting. I happened upon a little tarn (Margaret's Tarn) and I was hooked. She later wrote 'Artistic drives or ambitions were respected in our home life. When mother was painting nobody was allowed to disturb her.'

Of Grace Butler, Helen Brew, her second daughter, said her mother had bouts where 'she couldn't function.' "I do not have a quiet mind". I knew my grandmother was sometimes sick in bed and didn't paint. Illness and hardship had had a dramatic effect on her early life, as it had on the whole Cumming family. Her father, William Forbes Cumming, had died in 1889 of a painful illness, following an injury and cancer<sup>3</sup>, leaving his widow Jane (née Cameron) of clan Cameron, Erracht with a family of six daughters and one son. Married at New Mill, Keith in Banffshire,

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*Grace and Guy Butler and their daughters Margaret and Helen in the garden at Fisher St, South Brighton*

Scotland in 1860, they had emigrated on the 2nd voyage of the 'Robert Henderson' in 1863 from Glasgow and settled in a humble dwelling in Invercargill. Similarly, Guy Raphael Butler, born in Gisborne and one of seven children, had a grandfather who emigrated on the 'Avalanche' in 1862. His father, Charles Butler, married Agatha Theresa Everett McGarvey (formerly O'Donoghue), a musician whose family were originally from Londonderry, Ireland and had come to New Zealand via Australia in 1838 on the 'Parland'. The family was among the first Europeans to live in the Ureweras. They were of English/Irish stock. Before his death Guy Butler wanted to return to Gisborne, Whakatane and the Urewera country.

⇒



My relationship with Grace Butler was at all times clear and lovely and I see her as a protective spirit. When I was acting in plays she understood the process of hard work, the part the audience doesn't see before the performance and she understood the need to re-approach the role again in a different way.

Grace Butler gave family members paintings, and was very generous. In 1960 she presented my father, Bryan, with a painting of the gladioli he had grown at 'Four Winds'. She also gave me a Rata painting (cat no 15) for my 21st birthday and a little gold ring just before she left Christchurch.

She stood by our back door in her black and red speckled wool coat and we had a private time together.

I realised she was unwell.



*An early home of the Cumming family, Invercargill*

*Jane Cumming (nee Cameron), Grace Butler's mother*

*Agatha Theresa Butler, Guy Butler's mother*

*Guy Raphael Butler*

On several occasions when I was in Wellington I spoke to Dorothea Mulgan who invited me to visit her. The Mulgans, Pickmeres and Butlers often had holidays together, particularly at Manganese Point, and the Mulgans camped in a tent opposite Jack's Hut in 1920 with the Butlers. These visits revealed the close relationship my grandmother had with several artists and friends. I read letters from her past friends and opened her address book; Mrs Chrystella, David Fisher, Mr Genet, (Fisher & Son Fine Art Dealers), Daisy Osborn, Mrs E.B. Friberg, Mrs Vera Curtis, Miss Peggy Spicer, Sydney Thompson, Hilda Wiseman, Ruth Ffitch, Mrs Robert Blair, Ivy Copeland, Mrs Alan Mulgan, Marjorie Naylor, Mrs Gundry, Ella Spicer, Miss K. Buckhurst, Miss Jessie McLeod, Rhona Fleming, Kennaway Henderson and many relations - all were there. I also discovered that Grace Butler and my mother had exhibited together as late as 1961 in the Floral Festival Loan Exhibition at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery.



Dorothea Mulgan (Lady Turner) spoke fondly and honestly about my grandmother. She said: 'Grace and Guy and young Margaret were all so natural, happy with one another and proud of each other. They weren't conventional - very normal, no carpets on the floors, maybe an odd rug. Margaret ran around the sandhills with bare feet. Young lawyers' children didn't do that in those days. Legal families were expected to have formal 'at homes', the babies looking right and gardens with rows of roses. They were ahead of their time. Guy did the washing and cooking so his wife could paint - I can see a parallel here - just like the relationship between Fred and Evelyn Page.'

I asked Dorothea what my grandmother was like. 'Grace was very beautiful, with piercing blue eyes, black hair and pink cheeks. Like something out of an opera. Reminds me of the heroine in 'La Traviata'. Only an artist could be like that. She was beautiful in an Edwardian way.' (When I later found the striking, slightly singed photo of my grandmother, I knew what she meant.)

'They shifted to Auckland and lived at Royal Oak, near us. It was the liberation of Auckland that helped her. I think she went to a chiropractor. In those days doctors operated at the drop of a hat. The change was wonderful for her. The Butlers were like the Pickmeres and Mulgans. They never had any small talk, there was never any gossip and they were gentle people.'



Margaret Howard claimed an exclusive protection of Grace from an early age and in adulthood this continued - sometimes not with the best of consequences. Always protective, Guy Butler wrote to his daughter, Margaret, of that relationship thus:

Arthur's Pass

21st October 1960

Dear Margaret

When I first met mum (now over 50 years ago) it was plain there never was a happy stable relationship with Aunty Margaret. On two occasions conflict between them resulted in serious breakdowns for mother. The first was when you were only about one year old —. Mum must not live with Aunty again under any circumstances. The immediate difficulty is that mum is coming home on Tuesday next 25th inst. to prepare work for an exhibition at Fisher's which is only a fortnight away, and she will need to be on her own if she is to make a success of her show. I have told Aunty herself that there is no need for her to move until she gets a place that is quite suitable.

Yours affectionately

Dad

☺

My grandparents moved to 17 Nevay Road, Miramar, Wellington on 12th December 1961 and lived next door to their daughter, Helen. Grace's health deteriorated unexpectedly. Dorothea Mulgan told me, in 1983, of Grace's earlier illness, which was the reason for her going to Auckland during 1918. 'I have my own theories about her illness'. It cloaked her in a kind of mystery. Could Grace have painted as she did if it hadn't been for Guy's help and direction? I was told there was no hope for Grace. They said she had only two years to live at the most. There was even talk of an attempted suicide.<sup>25</sup>

My mother was with Grace when she died and helped ease her earthly end. The funeral in 1962 was very disturbing.

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*Mulgan, Pickmore and Butler families taking refreshments on holiday at Whangarei, 1918*

*The camp opposite Jack's Hut with Grace, Guy and Margaret Butler, 1920*





In 1986 Bill Sutton wrote to me after I curated an exhibition of Grace Butler and Margaret Barrer's paintings: 'In my opinion Grace Butler was level with Archie Nicoll in landscape, and a little ahead of Cecil Kelly, and so can be numbered among the top practitioners in the country. - Your mother was a very beautiful girl when we were all students together. - Many thanks for the photos and where to look for fairies.'



I visited Evelyn and Fred Page in Wellington. Evelyn had been my mother's art teacher at Christchurch Girls' High School. She made the following comments to me: 'I had to work for myself when dad died, the estate was mucked up. I'm pleased to meet one of my pupil's daughters. She was quite a character your mother. How lovely she was with the mountain lilies in her hair. When I was a youngster I remember Grace Butler. The Christchurch Art School used to have a prize-giving with a tableau. Your grandmother was a friend of my sister Alice. Alice was Britannia and Grace Butler was all dressed up too - gorgeous! I remember she got married and had a family. 1911-1915 I think. Her work has always been highly regarded. Once Viola MacMillan Brown and I were invited to Grace Butler's for lunch at New Brighton. She was very interested in young people and helpful. I remember her personality - kind and a bit Victorian. That bush those mountains.'<sup>6</sup>



Peter Cape best describes how I feel about Grace Butler's work. 'There are some artists who are concerned with exploration in depth rather than in breadth who will paint one subject in so many conditions of light and weather that they gain some kind of mystical insight into what it really is. And this insight, in the long run, is more valuable to them and to us than a brief painting acquaintance with fifty peaks. Grace Butler was one of these painters.... She was probably one of the most highly skilled and perceptive impressionist painters of the Canterbury high country landscape and her later work comes near to being the highest point in interpretative painting in this field. One feels that behind even the freest brushstroke there are years of deep study. But if there is control, it isn't of the academic sort. She wasn't afraid to break the rules. Grace Butler was a consistent painter and a painter of her time. This refusal to thumb a ride on the latest artistic bandwagon, in some people's eyes, labels her as stuffy and conservative. But it's plain from looking at her work that it was only by keeping with the style she knew that she produced the work that made her outstanding among the Canterbury mountain painters.'<sup>7</sup>

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*Grace with her daughter Margaret c1916*

Grace Butler

*Grandmother and Landscape Painter • 1886-1962*

Peppered beeches fired with rata blossom.  
Dead nerve ends twitch in the wind.  
Dracophyllum bark flakes in  
parchment patches.

Was it an omen laced with clouds  
that sent you to these mountains all  
frosted in green  
to orchestrate on canvas  
the Otira waters raging through the Gorge?  
The kea's grating cry of a lost child  
vibrating on the scoured slopes,  
the piwakawaka flitting past the  
ribbonwood with its doped eyes  
staccato sounds;  
and the steel black pylons marching on and on?

Were you tiny and quivering wrapped  
in oilskins watching the boulders bashed bald,  
the storm clouds gathering through  
streaks of snow and ice and  
gaunt Mount Barron, a white virgin standing aloof?

Or did you become part of  
Nature's tapestry  
thrilled by the splendid sounds  
and shapes that filled the air  
until your brush conducted it all  
in colour with strong strokes?

*Jenny Barrer (Published 'Follow the Sun' Hazard Press, 1992)*



*Grace Butler (nee Cumming) c1903*

1 Helen Brew, April 2000

2 *ibid*

3 Obituary *Southland Times* 14 March 1889. 'Death of an Old Resident' states that William Cumming sustained severe facial injuries while trying to restrain an unmanageable horse. The wound became cancerous and resulted in considerable suffering accompanying a progressing malformation of the face. In the final stage, William Cumming's face was veiled.

4 Conversation between Jenny Barrer and Lady Dorothea Turner, née Mulgan, 1983.

5 *ibid*

6 Conversation between Jenny Barrer and Evelyn Page, 1983.

7 Extract from a review of the Grace Butler exhibition in 1972 at Victoria University.

- 1 *The Beach New Brighton* 1916  
Oil on canvas  
600 x 754mm (sight)  
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery
- 2 *Bealey Glacier* c 1918  
Oil on canvas  
385 x 480mm  
Loaned by Grace Adams
- 3 *Evening Glow* 1918  
Oil on canvas  
857 x 1108mm (sight)  
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery
- 4 *Heathcote River* 1920  
Watercolour  
328 x 427mm  
Collection: Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru
- 5 *The Source of the Bealey* c 1921  
Oil on canvas  
330 x 365mm  
Collection: Mrs Dick
- 6 *Stormy Day Otira* 1922  
Oil on canvas/board  
295 x 344mm  
Collection: Jenny Barrer
- 7 *Farmlands, Paradise Valley* 1923  
Oil on canvas/board  
297 x 378mm  
Collection: Jenny Barrer  
*Exhibited at the British Empire Exhibition, Wembley, London, 1925.*
- 8 *Rata in the Gorge Otira* c 1924  
Oil on canvas  
665 x 660mm  
Loaned by Grace Adams
- 9 *Model in a Garden* 1924  
Oil on canvas  
320 x 230mm  
Loaned by Grace Adams
- 10 *In the Otira Gorge* 1925  
Oil on canvas  
Loaned by Grace Adams
- 11 *Stream and waterfall behind Jack's Hut, Arthur's Pass* c 1925  
Oil on canvas/board  
370 x 440mm  
Collection: Great niece of Grace Butler
- 12 *Holiday Houses Arthur's Pass Winter* 1925  
Oil on canvas  
450 x 600mm  
Collection: Invercargill Licensing Trust  
*Exhibited at the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition, Dunedin, 1925/6*
- 13 *The Otira River* c 1926  
Oil on canvas  
340 x 345mm  
Loaned by Grace Adams
- 14 *Auckland Shipping* c 1927  
Oil on canvas  
350 x 435mm  
Loaned by Grace Adams

- 15 *Rata above Otira Gorge* c 1932  
Oil on canvas/board  
341 x 424mm (sight)  
Collection: Jenny Barrer
- 16 *Looking from the Settlement Arthur's Pass* c 1934  
Oil on canvas/board  
345 x 410mm  
Collection: Great niece of Grace Butler
- 17 *Mountain Lilies (Ranunculus lyalli)* c 1937  
Oil on Canvas/board  
440 x 538mm (sight)  
Collection: Ian Clark
- 18 *Callery Gorge, Franz Josef* 1938  
Oil on canvas/board  
525 x 525mm  
Collection: Margaret Retallick
- 19 *Mt Rolleston Arthur's Pass* c 1939  
Oil on canvas/board  
350 x 440mm  
Collection: Jenny Barrer
- 20 *Temple Peaks, Arthur's Pass* c 1940  
Oil on board  
363 x 331mm  
Collection: Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru
- 21 *Coming into Mission Bay (Marine Drive)* 1940  
Oil on board  
280 x 357mm  
Collection: Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui
- 22 *Study of Kahikatea Trees* c 1941  
Watercolour and Oil on paper/board  
336 x 441mm (sight)  
Collection: Jenny Barrer
- 23 *Mt Avalanche* c 1942  
Oil on canvas/board  
242 x 350mm  
Collection: Jenny Barrer
- 24 *Summertime Arthur's Pass* 1944  
Oil on canvas  
495 x 594mm (sight)  
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery

- 25 *Summer Morning, Arthur's Pass* c1944  
Oil on canvas  
370 x 445mm  
W.S. and Alison MacGibbon Collection, Macmillan Brown  
Library, University of Canterbury
- 26 *Mt Phillistine* c1944  
Oil on canvas  
365 x 440mm  
Loaned by Grace Adams
- 27 *Spring Thaw* c 1950  
Oil on canvas  
440 x 525mm  
Loaned by Grace Adams
- 28 *Jack's Hut* 1950  
Oil on canvas  
423 x 535mm  
Collection: Helen Brew
- 29 *Snow from Jack's Hut* 1953  
Oil on canvas  
425 x 510mm  
Loaned by Grace Adams
- 30 *Arthur's Pass Township* c1956  
Oil on canvas  
750 x 900mm  
Collection: Helen Brew
- 31 *Avalanche Creek* 1960  
Oil on canvas  
420 x 520mm  
Loaned by Grace Adams
- 32 *Snow Scene from Jack's Hut* c 1960  
Oil on canvas/board  
457 x 545mm  
Collection: Jenny Barrer
- 33 *Cottages Arthur's Pass* c 1960  
Watercolour  
235 x 265mm  
Collection: Jenny Barrer

# Chronology

- 1886 Born 23 December Invercargill
- 1889 Death of William Forbes Cumming
- 1892 Attends Invercargill Middle School
- 1900 Cumming family moves to live in Norsewood  
Attends Norsewood District School
- 1902 Awarded dux of Norsewood District School
- 1903 Attends Napier Art School
- 1907 Student teacher at Napier School of Art
- 1908 Teaching privately at studio 113 Gladstone Rd
- 1909 Teaching at Gisborne
- 1910 Moves to live in Christchurch  
Begins attending day and evening classes at Canterbury College School of Art  
Awarded an Advanced Art Scholarship and J W Gibb prize for landscape
- 1911 Marries Guy Butler in Gisborne  
Awarded the J W Gibb landscape prize and a Life Scholarship  
Becomes an honorary member of the CSA
- 1912 Awarded an Advanced (day)Scholarship
- 1913 Awarded 2 firsts for the annual Student competition CSA  
Last year studying at Canterbury College School of Art  
Living at 204 Cashel Street
- 1914 Begins exhibiting at Auckland Society of Art with 3 works
- 1915 Becomes a working member of Canterbury Society of Arts  
Exhibits 4 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition  
First daughter born  
Visits Kaikoura painting
- 1916 Visits the West Coast and Otira Gorge for the first time  
Paints at Lake Kanieri  
Begins exhibiting with the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts with 3 works  
Exhibits 8 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition

- 1917 Spends the Summer camping at Arthur's Pass  
Exhibits 8 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition  
Moves to live at South Brighton
- 1918 Moves to live in Auckland to stay with her sister for health reasons  
Exhibits 4 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1919 Begins Exhibiting with the Otago Art Society  
Exhibits 3 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1920 Spends time at Arthur's Pass camping and painting  
Exhibits 6 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition. *Evening Glow* purchased for the CSA collection
- 1921 Exhibits 10 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1922 Second daughter born  
*Glaciers Mt Rolleston* purchased for the Auckland City Art Gallery  
Exhibits 10 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1923 Guy Butler purchases a roadman's hut (Jack's Hut) and refreshment rooms at Arthur's Pass which is later established as a hostel  
Visits Dart and Paradise Valley, Wakatipu during winter and early summer  
Exhibits 6 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1924 Sends 4 works to the British Empire Exhibition, Wembley, London  
Attends summer classes with Sydney Thompson  
Spends several months at Candy's Hut, Candy's Bend, Otira painting  
Exhibits 7 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1925 Sends 6 works to British Empire Exhibition, Wembley, London  
Has 1 work *Holiday Houses Arthur's Pass -Winter* (cat no 12) included in the Dunedin and South Seas Exhibition  
Becomes a member of the National Art Association of New Zealand  
Exhibits 8 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1926 Third daughter born  
Guy Butler opens a hostel at Arthur's Pass  
Exhibits 7 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition including *Rata in the Gorge Otira* (cat no 8 ) and *In the Otira Gorge* (cat no 10 )
- 1927 on 8 October the Butler home at Fisher Street, New Brighton is destroyed by fire  
Exhibits 6 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition  
Travels to Auckland where she stays with her sister for several months before returning to Canterbury.

- 1928 Living at Arthur's Pass and 46a Hackthorne Road Christchurch  
March, exhibits at the Grosvenor Galleries, Sydney  
Unable to exhibit at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1929 Exhibits 6 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1930 Returns to live at a new address, 246 Esplanade (now Marine Parade), New Brighton  
Exhibits 3 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1931 Exhibits 5 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1932 Exhibits in the Canterbury College School of Art Jubilee Exhibition  
Exhibits 5 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1933 Exhibits 3 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1934 Exhibits 7 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1935 Does not exhibit at the CSA
- 1936 Exhibits 3 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1937 Exhibits 2 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition  
October visits Auckland
- 1938 January visits South Westland  
Exhibits 8 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1939 Becomes a member of the New Zealand Artists Society  
Invited to exhibit at the New Zealand Artists Society exhibition in the Centennial  
Exhibition Building, Wellington.  
Exhibits in the Centennial Exhibition of National Art at the National Gallery Wellington  
Exhibits 8 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1940 Exhibits 3 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1941 Visits Auckland  
Exhibits 2 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1942 Does not exhibit at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1943 Exhibits 4 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1944 Exhibits 6 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1945 Exhibits 4 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition including *Summertime Arthur's Pass* (cat no 24)



- 1946 Exhibits 4 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1947 Exhibits 6 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1948 Exhibits 4 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1949 Included in an exhibition of Canterbury Artists toured to Westland  
Exhibits 5 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1950 Exhibits at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1951 Exhibits with the Women's International Art Club at the Royal Society of British  
Artists' Gallery at the Festival of Britain  
Included in Living Canterbury Artists Centennial Exhibition
- 1952 Exhibits 4 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1953 Does not exhibit at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1954 Visits Auckland  
Does not exhibit
- 1955 Exhibits 8 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1956-58 Does not exhibit
- 1959 Exhibits 1 work at the CSA Annual Exhibition
- 1960 Solo exhibition Fishers Gallery, Christchurch  
Exhibits 6 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition (final year showing)
- 1961 Moves to live at Nevay Road, Miramar, Wellington
- 1962 Dies at home in Wellington on 16 November

## Books and Catalogues

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- Brown Gordon H. *New Zealand Painting 1920 - 1940 Adaptation and Nationalism*. QEII Arts Council of New Zealand, Wellington 1975
- Kay.R &Eden.T. *Portrait of a Century-The History of the NZ Academy of Fine Arts 1882 - 1982*. Millwood Press, Wellington 1983
- Auckland Society of Arts Annual Exhibition catalogues 1914 - 1960 (ATL)
- Canterbury Society of Arts Annual Exhibition catalogues 1915- 1961 (RMDAGL)
- Centennial Exhibition of International and New Zealand Art catalogue, Wellington 1939(RMDAGL)
- Otago Society of Arts Annual Exhibition catalogues 1919 -1958 (HL)
- New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts Exhibition catalogues 1914 - 1955 (ATL)
- New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition 1925-26 Fine Arts Section Official Catalogue, Dunedin 1925 (RMAGL)

## Newspapers and Periodicals

<i>The Christchurch Times</i>	(1925-1935)	(Christchurch)	(RMDAGL)
<i>The Lyttelton Times</i>	(1910-1929)	(Christchurch)	(CPL)
<i>The Auckland Star</i>	(1919-1926)	(Auckland)	(UCL)
<i>The Christchurch Star</i>	(1950 -1962)	(Christchurch)	(CPL)
<i>The Press</i>	(1883 -1974)	(Christchurch)	(CPL)
<i>The Sun</i>	(1914 - 1929)	(Christchurch)	(CPL)
<i>Otago Daily Times</i>	(1925 - 1950)	(Dunedin)	(DPL)
<i>The Evening Star</i>	(1925 - 1949)	(Dunedin)	(DPL)
<i>Art in Australia</i>	(1926- 1928)	(Sydney)	(UCL)
<i>Art in New Zealand</i>	(1928- 1945)	(Wellington)	(RMAGL)



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**Other Sources**

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*Canterbury Society of Arts Minute Books 1914 - 1920 (RMAGL)*

*Christchurch Electoral Rolls 1909- 1935 (CPL)*

*Cyclopedia of New Zealand vol 4 Otago, Southland Provincial Districts Cyclopedia Co Ltd Christchurch 1905*

*Indexes of Births Deaths and Marriages 1886 - 1962 (CPL)*

*New Zealand Government Gazette 1900 - 1906 New Zealand Government Printer Wellington (CPL)*

*Stones Canterbury Nelson Marlborough Westland Directories 1886 - 1928 Stone Son & Co Dunedin (CPL)*

*The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography vol 4 1921 - 1940 Auckland University Press/ Department of Internal Affairs Auckland 1998*

*Wises New Zealand Post Office Directories 1886 - 1930 Wise & Co Ltd Dunedin (CPL)*

**Abbreviations**

ATL	Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand
CPL	Canterbury Public Library
RMAGL	Robert McDougall Art Gallery Library
DPL	Dunedin Public Library
UCL	University of Canterbury Library
UCSFAA	University School of Fine Arts Archive



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