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## Craftswoman followed path of her artistic heart

Helen Wilmot Mason

(nee Valentine), potter: b Darfield, Canterbury, April 30, 1915; m Malcolm Mason (diss), 3s, 1d; d Taradale, August 22, 2014, aged 99.

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HELEN MASON, who for 60 years was a backyard potter, is considered by many to be the mother of this country's pottery movement.

In her memoirs, entitled Helen Mason's Scrapbook, she recalled how by the early 1950s the round of socialising and family life had begun to get boring for many women, who began looking for something more out of life.

Mason first came across what was to become the artistic love of her life during the centennial exhibition in Wellington in 1940 when she saw Elizabeth Matheson and Olive Jones demonstrating and selling their pots.

The year 1940 was a difficult one for Mason. It was the year she farewelled her husband Malcolm Mason, then a member of the 25th Battalion of the 2NZEF as he left for war in Greece and North Africa. It was also the year she gave birth to her first child after her husband had sailed out of Wellington harbour.

Mason was born in Darfield, on the Canterbury Plains, in a railway house next to the station. Her own father and mother were New Zealand-born children of settler families.

Henry Valentine was the son of a Waikouaiti farmer and her mother, Dorothy, the daughter of an itinerant bank manager.

Mason was their only child and after moving around various railway settlements the family settled in Wellington. Dorothy Valentine died when her daughter was just five.

Mason was educated at Northland School and Wellington Girls' College (for two years) before travelling south to board at Archerfield School for Girls in Dunedin in 1931.

Following her secondary education, she returned to Wellington where she studied shorthand typing at Gilbeys Business College.

While at Gilbeys she also studied English at Victoria University where she met a well- built, dark accountancy student.

Malcolm Mason's mother had also died when he was a boy. He and Helen Mason married in 1939, a month after war was declared, and settled in a house in Oxford Street, Tawa.

During fighting in Libya in 1942, Malcolm was taken prisoner at Sidi Rezegh. He spent two years as a POW and on the run in Italy and his three escapes earned him the Military Cross.

The couple's first child, daughter Julia Stuart, was born in 1940 and the young mother and daughter spent the war years living in Motueka, Carterton (when the Wairarapa earthquake struck in 1942) and at her old alma mater Archerfield School, where she worked as a house mistress.

The war years were tough times for Mason. She eked out a living while providing housekeeping services for a Nelson farming family. She also hand-milked a cow and traded butter for groceries in the Wairarapa.

When the family was reunited late in 1944, after Malcolm's repatriation from Italy, they settled at an Everest St home in the Wellington suburb of Khandallah. Life was also far from plain sailing there for Mason.

Her first postwar baby-boom baby, Max, died soon after he was born and she herself nearly died in childbirth. Her family was completed with the birth of Tim and Andrew.

During this time her love of pottery grew. She attended pottery classes and converted the chook-run of the Everest St family home in to a kiln shed.

Malcolm and Helen Mason separated in 1965 in what was a significant turning point in the middle-aged mother's life.

Her two sons, Tim and Andrew, were both studying at the time and remained based at the Khandallah home with their father.

In her own words, the separation occurred at a time when all the pent-up emotions of the war years burst "an emotional dam" within her. The parting of the ways followed soon after Mason had attended the 1965 Ninth NZ Potters Exhibition where a critic described her work as "embodying complete despair".

Mason became a rolling stone, just as she had been during the war years, for the remaining 50 years of her life.

In becoming an established potter in her own right, she embarked on a long and distinguished involvement with various arts and craft communities throughout New Zealand.

She followed the path of her artistic heart, no matter how difficult or uncertain her future might become because of it.

Driving along this challenging road, sometimes in the Bedford housetruck she had built for her travels, also inspired others to boldly walk their own artistic roads.

IN THE final half of her life she lived at various times in the Wairarapa, Auckland, Otane, Tokomaru Bay, the Coromandel, Porangahau, Waipukurau and finally Waiohiki in Hawke's Bay.

In all her travels she viewed herself as a craftswoman with something to give to the world while boldly making a living from her work.

The pottery movement in New Zealand had grown out of backyard kilns, like her own Khandallah kiln and the meeting of kindred spirits taught her a lot about people and their quest to build balanced lives.

In Tokomaru Bay she respected the fact the Maori people put people before money. Her coastal township home there was a lively meeting place for artists, craftspeople, local Maori and anyone else who happened along.

In her latter years she was happily settled into Helen Mason House at Waiohiki in Hawke's Bay, opened in her honour by then-deputy prime minister Michael Cullen in April 2006, when old-age troubles in the form of falls and broken bones finally began catching up with her.

Here again the artist realised it was time to move on, this time to the Atawhai Home in Taradale, Hawke's Bay, where she died last month. TIM DONOGHUE

Sources: Julia Stuart, Barry Brickell, Wailin Elliott, Denis O'Reilly, Gemaux and Baye Riddell, Henry Blair Valentine.

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