



PLC
 PRESBYTERIAN
 LADIES' COLLEGE
 SYDNEY
 — 1888 —

STORIES FROM THE ARCHIVES:

EMMIE RUSSELL – Pioneer Orthoptist

Orthoptics is a branch of eye healthcare that helps patients care for conditions such as squint, double vision, lazy eye, cataracts, glaucoma, diabetic eye disease, macular degeneration and the like. An ex-student from PLC Sydney played a pivotal role in establishing the profession.

Emmie Russell was 16 years old when she enrolled at PLC in 1909. She was a day girl from Stanmore, where she had attended the Misses Harriott's school.

She was only with us for one year and records reveal little about her time here. However, issues of the *Aurora Australis* from that year record that, in addition to normal classroom studies, a group of 26 students went to the Palace Theatre to see Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.



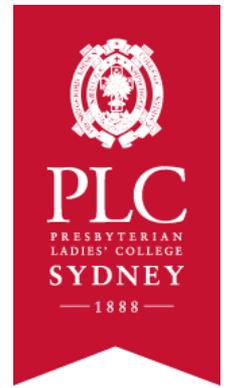
Portrait of Emmie Russell, c1910 by M. Ashby & Co. Art Gallery of New South Wales

A few months later a group of PLC students went to the Town Hall to hear the famous Australian operatic soprano (Dame) Nellie Melba perform.

The Principal, Dr Marden, led Empire Day celebrations on 24 May: after singing a number of patriotic songs he gave an address to the students about Florence Nightingale. The day concluded with a fancy dress dance in the evening.

1727	Andubald Isabel	W. Andubald Esq. Wingham Marrumbidgee	16.	Sup. Pub. School Wingham
1728	Russell Emmie	W. R. Russell Esq. Kirkcaldy Cavendish St Stanmore	16.	Miss Harriott's Stanmore
1729	McLean Jessie	Mrs McLean Glenross. Kogarah	16.	Newcastle High Sch.

Emmie Russell's enrolment entry in 1909 (#1728), Entries & Instructions 1888-1912. Series 47 Registrar's Office, Box 486



Not unusual for the time, Emmie, being the only daughter, assumed “home duties” after leaving PLC Sydney and did not start her own career until the early 1930s. She was drawn to orthoptics because of a family friend who was an ophthalmologist. She did her training at the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne in 1932 and established her own practice in Macquarie Street the following year. Shortly after that she started the Orthoptic Clinic at the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children. During World War II she was one of a number of orthoptists who volunteered to train RAAF pilots in stereoscopic vision to increase their flying performance.

Emmie Russell was dedicated to her career and worked to establish the developing profession in Australia. She founded the NSW Orthoptic Association and, in 1944, co-founded the Orthoptic Association of Australia. For many years she served as president, councillor, life member and ultimately patron of the Association. In 1957 she established the Emmie Russell Prize (which continues today) to encourage young members to undertake research in orthoptics.

Her other lifelong interest was art. Her uncle was John Peter Russell, an Australian Impressionist painter, and her cousin was another artist, Thea Proctor. Consequently she acquired a number of paintings, many of which she donated to the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Australia. Emmie Russell died, aged 95, in 1987.



College Hall as it would have looked in 1909 when Emmie Russell was at PLC Sydney

Sources: PLC Sydney Archives, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, *Australian Orthoptic Journal*, 1990.