



North Sydney

# Heritage Leaflet 25

## THE WORLD OF MAY GIBBS

**Cecilia May Gibbs, author, artist, illustrator and cartoonist, was born on 17 January 1877 in Surrey, England. She is most famous for her Australian children's classic, *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie*.**

Her parents, Herbert William and Cecilia May Gibbs emigrated to Australia in 1881 settling first in South Australia, before moving to Perth, Western Australia in 1887. Both her parents were amateur artists and encouraged May to draw and paint from a young age. At the age of 12, May's illustrations were published by the *West Australian Bulletin*.

May furthered her studies in London where she obtained experience as a contributor to newspapers, magazines and books. It is likely that her entrepreneurial skills were developed at this stage of her career. May returned to Australia in 1913 and settled in Sydney where her adult career as an illustrator/cartoonist grew from strength to strength.

Always the entrepreneur, May produced handmade calendars for sale by a number of retail outlets such as *Hordern and Sons*. May would cut out her designs from sheets of printed paper and create calendars of all shapes and sizes. It was during World War I that May produced her unique Australian flavoured postcards to boost the morale of our troops overseas.

The art of May Gibbs is full of charm and diversity, ranging from cartoons to portrait sketches to her Australian bush babies. May drew her inspiration from her environment including that of Nutcote, her home on the Neutral Bay waterfront for over 40 years.

May's enchanting stories of bushland adventures have continued to entertain children of all ages from the first edition of *Gumnut Babies* published by Angus and Robertson in 1916. What followed was a cavalcade of tales from *Boronia Babies* (1917), *Tales of Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* (1918), *Little Ragged Blossom* (1920) and *Mr. and Mrs. Bear* (1943).

May Gibbs' Australiana work inspired a cult all of its own. Her use of Australian native flora and fauna captured the spirit of Australia. The time was post-Federation, a time to look away from the colonial past and towards an Australian future. May, like many artists and writers of her era, depicted that unique flavour in her creations. Many of her designs have been incorporated into a variety of retail merchandise from postcards and calendars to curtain fabric and wrapping paper.

Apart from her books, May also drew a regular cartoon strip known affectionately as Bib and Bub and several children's colouring-in books for playtime. Considered to be an early environmentalist, her first major adventure of *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* appeared with the message: 'Humans, please be kind to all bush creatures and don't pull flowers up by the roots.'

May and her husband, J. Ossoli Kelly, moved into their waterfront cottage, Nutcote, designed for them by the renowned Sydney architect, B.J. Waterhouse, at 5 Wallaringa Avenue, Neutral Bay. May lived there until her death in 1969 and lovingly cared for her gardens, the front being an English style cottage garden and the harbourside, an Australian native garden. She drew much of her inspiration from both gardens.

### **Nutcote**

Designed in 1925 by the renowned Sydney architect, B.J. Waterhouse for May Gibbs and her husband, J.O. Kelly, Nutcote has been preserved for the nation as a historic house museum.

May Gibbs lived at Nutcote for 44 years (1925-1969) and it was here that she created her famous characters in the studio overlooking her Australiana garden. Nutcote was saved from redevelopment by the efforts of the May Gibbs Foundation (a voluntary group of concerned citizens who campaigned for many years to save 'Nutcote for the Nation'). North Sydney Council purchased Nutcote in 1990. Now a Museum in honour of May Gibbs and her work,

Nutcote is managed by the Nutcote Trust who leases the house and gardens from North Sydney Council. The Nutcote trustees have responsibility for the day-to-day management of Nutcote and its associated cultural and educational activities.

Visitors can tour the house and garden and examine the wonderful displays of Gibbs' personal artefacts, pictures, sketches, letters and other memorabilia.

**Hours:** 11am-3pm, Wednesday to Sunday

**Location:** 5 Wallaringa Avenue, Neutral Bay

**Phone:** 9953 4453

**Website:** [www.maygibbs.com.au](http://www.maygibbs.com.au)

### **May Gibbs Bibliography**

- 1912 About Us
- 1916 Gum Nut Babies (pamphlet)  
Gum Blossom Babies (pamphlet)
- 1917 Boronia Babies (pamphlet)  
Flannel Flowers (pamphlet)
- 1918 Wattle Babies  
Snugglepot and Cuddlepie
- 1920 Little Ragged Blossom
- 1921 Little Obelia
- 1923 Nittybub and Nittersing
- 1924 Chucklebub and Wunkydoo
- 1925 Bib and Bub Their Adventures
- 1927 The Further Adventures of Bib and Bub
- 1928 More Funny Stories About ...
- 1929 In Gumnut Town
- 1932 Bib and Bub Painting Book
- 1940 Gumnuts
- 1941 Scotty in Gumnut Land
- 1943 Mr and Mrs Bear and Friends
- 1953 Prince Dande Lion A Garden Whim Wham
- 1984 Alphabet Frieze



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