

"Lions and wyvens and dolphins, oh my!": Jessie Mitchell Elmslie's Arts and Crafts furniture

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ABSTRACT: Jessie Mitchell Elmslie was in her early twenties when she carved an intricate and highly decorative oak and kauri sideboard. The 2.5 metre high sideboard is dripping with Arts and Crafts iconography, including wyverns, lions and a Green Man with a flowing beard. Elmslie also incorporated copper tooling into her design, with beaten copper handles and repousse heraldic dolphins. Elmslie's father, Dr Rev John Elmslie, was the minister at St Paul's Presbyterian Church in Christchurch and one of his parishioners taught Elmslie to carve. She produced at least two large pieces of furniture during the 1890s: the sideboard now in the collection of Canterbury Museum and a walnut settle in the collection of Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand.

Woodcarving became popular with New Zealand women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Arts and Crafts movement, along with the establishment of art and design schools from the 1870s, meant that women were able to engage in practices formerly reserved for men. This paper will look at Elmslie and her work in the context of Arts and Crafts practice in New Zealand and consider the work of another talented carver, Evelyn Vaile.

Introduction

I first encountered Jessie Mitchell Elmslie's work in an auction catalogue in 2015.¹ I was working as a Curator History at Canterbury Museum and looking for objects with a connection to Canterbury. I was delighted to find an enormous sideboard, intricately carved by a young Christchurch woman. Elmslie was in her early twenties she carved the sideboard which features mythical creatures and a Green Man. In the course of my research for the acquisition, I discovered Elmslie had also worked a memorial tablet for her father, the Reverend (Rev) John Elmslie, which was on display at St Paul's Trinity

Presbyterian Church. In 2017, Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand acquired another example of Elmslie's work, a carved walnut settle. In this article I will look at Elmslie's work in the wider context of the Arts and Crafts movement in New Zealand and also briefly consider the work of Evelyn Vaile, an Auckland-based contemporary of Elmslie.

Jessie Mitchell Elmslie

Jessie Mitchell Elmslie was born in 1869 to the Rev John Elmslie and his first wife, Jessie (née Mitchell).² Rev Elmslie, his wife Jessie and their eldest two children arrived in New Zealand from Scotland in 1867, called to the

Presbyterian congregation in Whanganui. Jessie was born in Whanganui two years later and attended a private school run by a Mrs Macdonald at Royston House.³ The Elmslie family moved to Christchurch in 1876, and Jessie's mother died two years later, when Jessie was just nine years old. Her father married Jeannie Harper (née Anderson) in 1881 and they had two children together. Rev Elmslie was the first minister at the new St Paul's Presbyterian Church on the corner of Cashel and Madras Streets which opened in 1877. This building was lost in the 2011 Canterbury earthquakes but the church lives on as the new St Paul's Trinity Presbyterian Church on Fitzgerald Avenue, along with many salvaged treasures. Rev Elmslie was

¹ Please note that the artist will be referred to as Elmslie, rather than her married name Campbell, throughout this article.

² Birth record, Jessie Mitchell Elmslie; "The Rev. John Elmslie" p 198.

³ Elmslie *John Elmslie 1831-1907* p 41.

held in high regard in the Presbyterian church and was twice Moderator of its General Assembly. He lectured widely and taught at Canterbury College.⁴

Jessie married James Colin Campbell on 14 October 1891 in the drawing room of the St Paul's manse. They were married by Jessie's father. Jessie and Campbell possibly met through their fathers: James' father William Campbell was a Presbyterian minister in Dunedin.⁵

Campbell, who preferred to be known as J Colin Campbell or Colin, was born in Scotland in 1851 or 1852 and arrived in New Zealand with his family at an unknown date.⁶ He joined the Bank of New South Wales in 1882 and worked in New Plymouth and Melbourne, before taking up a post in Christchurch. Once married, his work took the couple all over the country, with Colin managing banks in Geraldine, Masterton,

Whanganui, Napier and Dunedin.⁷ The couple's longest posting was in Whanganui, from 1900 to 1912. Jessie and Colin did not have children. The couple appears in newspapers through their involvement in fundraising, croquet and golf; Colin was the president of the Wanganui Golf Club and Jessie handed out the trophies. The couple supported the local museum with a £5 donation in 1910.⁸ Jessie and Colin also appeared in the social pages; they were frequent domestic travellers and took a nine month long overseas holiday in 1911.⁹

J Colin Campbell retired from the Bank of New South Wales in 1920 and the couple settled in Auckland. They lived on Poto Street in Remuera, in a home called "Ormelie," which is no longer standing. Campbell died at home on 5 August 1932 aged 80.¹⁰ Jessie survived her husband by almost 12 years, passing away in a private hospital on 28 February 1944. Her obituary notes that she

was the "loved widow of Collin[sic] Campbell."¹¹

New Zealand women and the Arts and Crafts movement

Jessie Elmslie was one of many New Zealand women inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Beginning in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Arts and Crafts movement was a reaction to the Industrial Revolution and the increasing commercialisation of work and society. Practitioners returned to historical ways of working, especially the methods of the medieval period, which they perceived to be a simpler and more dignified time for workers. William Morris, one of the main proponents,

believed passionately in the importance of creating beautiful, well-made objects that could be used in everyday life, and that were produced in a way that allowed their makers to remain connected both with their product and with other people.¹²

Instead of factories, the home or small workshops were the favoured units of production and many forms of handcrafts flourished. As Ann Calhoun notes, the "mark

¹¹ "Deaths" p 1; Death record, Jessie Mitchell Campbell.

¹² "Arts and Crafts: an introduction" np.

⁴ "The Rev. John Elmslie" p 198; "John Elmslie" np.; Smith. Pers. Comm (1 May 2015); John Elmslie, G R Macdonald Dictionary of Canterbury Biographies, E111.

⁵ Marriage record, James Colin Campbell and Jessie Mitchell Elmslie; "Marriage" p 4; Elmslie *John Elmslie 1831-1907* p 54.

⁶ "Obituary Mr. J. Colin Campbell" p 12.

⁷ "Presentation to Mr J. C Campbell" p 2; "Obituary Mr. J. Colin Campbell" p 12.

⁸ "Golf" p 7; "Wanganui Croquet Club" (12 March 1912): 4; "Help the Museum!" p 5.

⁹ "Personal" p 5; John Elmslie, G R Macdonald Dictionary of Canterbury Biographies, E111; "Wanganui Croquet Club" (12 March 1910): 4.

¹⁰ "Obituary Mr. J. Colin Campbell" p 12; "Deaths" p 1.

of the hand" was the hallmark of the movement.¹³ As well as revitalising historical techniques, practitioners also embraced medieval, Gothic and Renaissance subjects, motifs and forms.

Calhoun has written extensively about women Arts and Crafts practitioners in New Zealand. They engaged in a variety of practices, including embroidery, woodcarving, painting, metal work, jewellery-making and calligraphy. Alongside the burgeoning popularity of the movement in New Zealand, formal training became available to women as art and design schools began to open around the country. The first school opened in Dunedin in 1870, then Christchurch in 1882, Wellington in 1886, Auckland in 1889 and Whanganui in 1892.¹⁴

Art and design schools in New Zealand were influenced by the South Kensington School in London, which was closely associated with the Arts and Crafts movement.¹⁵ The New

¹³ Calhoun *The Arts and Crafts movement in New Zealand* p 16.

¹⁴ Calhoun *The Arts and Crafts movement in New Zealand* p 21; lloyd Jenkins & Hammonds "Crafts and applied arts" np.

¹⁵ Calhoun *The Arts and Crafts movement in New Zealand*

Zealand art and design schools taught everything from drawing to woodcarving and many of their students were women. Some of these women went on to earn a living from their training, becoming teachers or professional artists, while others pursued their practice privately.¹⁶ Calhoun notes that the Arts and Crafts movement provided "an alternative to the commercial system that excluded women."¹⁷ For working class women, Arts and Crafts practices were an acceptable way to earn a living, and for women who did not need to work, they were a sign of accomplishment. Because it was "art" rather than a trade, women could safely be involved without overstepping the bounds of social propriety.¹⁸

Calhoun writes that woodcarving was the "pre-eminent Arts and Crafts activity for women in New Zealand, Australia, Britain and the United States" between 1890-1910.¹⁹

pp 20, 33, 56; Calhoun *Simplicity and splendour* p 14.

¹⁶ Calhoun *The Arts and Crafts movement in New Zealand* pp 168-197; lloyd Jenkins & Hammonds "Crafts and applied arts" np.

¹⁷ Calhoun *The Arts and Crafts movement in New Zealand* p 9.

¹⁸ Calhoun *The Arts and Crafts movement in New Zealand* pp 16-17.

¹⁹ Calhoun *The Arts and Crafts movement in New Zealand* p

Woodcarving was seen as feminine, while woodworking was perceived as masculine: "the finer, more nimble movements" of carving were considered to be suited to women.²⁰ Woodcarving was exhibited at both art and industrial exhibitions, often in the home industries section.²¹

As well as the formal training available, the templates and patterns for Arts and Crafts designs for needlework, jewellery, woodcarving and many other handcrafts were readily available. Publications such as *The Studio* and *The House: the journal of home arts & crafts* are known to have been available in New Zealand. Transfer patterns were available in *Arts & Crafts: a monthly practical magazine for the studio, the workshop and the home* from 1904.²²

Arts and Crafts societies were established throughout New Zealand during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They

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²⁰ Calhoun *The Arts and Crafts movement in New Zealand* pp 56, 86-87.

²¹ Calhoun *The Arts and Crafts movement in New Zealand* p 88.

²² Calhoun *The Arts and Crafts movement in New Zealand* pp 69, 109.

gave women the opportunity to exhibit their work and to engage with the work of others. There were arts societies where Elmslie lived: the Canterbury Society of Arts was established in 1880 and the Wanganui Arts and Crafts Society in 1901.²³ Newspaper articles indicate Elmslie was on the organising committee of, and an exhibitor at, the Whanganui society's 1905 exhibition and that she exhibited both woodcarving and needlework.²⁴

Elmslie's woodcarving

How did Elmslie, at such a young age, come to carve the monumental pieces of furniture which survive in museum collections today? Family correspondence records that Elmslie carved the pieces now held by Canterbury Museum and Te Papa prior to her marriage in 1891.²⁵ Family history also records that the Elmslie sisters (likely the elder girls, Alexa, Jessie and Sophia) were taught to carve by a member of their father's congregation.²⁶ But who was the teacher? I have explored one

²³ Calhoun *The Arts and Crafts movement in New Zealand* p 60; MacLennan "Arts Societies" np.

²⁴ "Wanganui Society of Arts and Crafts" p 5; "Arts and Crafts Exhibition" (10 April 1902) p 7.

²⁵ Art + Object *Decorative Arts auction catalogue* p 57.

²⁶ Art + Object *Decorative Arts auction catalogue* p 57.



Figure 1: The oak and kauri Elmslie Sideboard, carved by Jessie Mitchell Elmslie circa 1891. It features carved wyvern, heraldic dolphins, sunbursts and owls, as well as copper repousse work. Credit: Elmslie Sideboard, by Jessie Elmslie. CC BY-NC, 2015.61.3, Canterbury Museum.

possible contender, Charles Kidson. Kidson arrived in Christchurch in 1891 and went on

to teach at the Canterbury College School of Art. However, as he was a Wesleyan with strong ties to other congregations and there are only a few months between his arrival in Christchurch and Elmslie's marriage, it is not likely to be him.²⁷

While it is known that Elmslie made the memorial tablet for her father after his death in 1907, I wanted to determine the extent that Elmslie continued to carve after her marriage. Woodcarving was an appropriate pastime for the daughters of a prominent minister and it is notable that there is no record of Elmslie displaying her work publicly prior to her marriage. But what about after her marriage?

A newspaper article confirms Elmslie participated in the Wanganui Arts and Crafts Society and displayed her work at their annual exhibition in 1905:

There is a very handsome exhibit of panels and side brackets for sideboard, designed and carved by Mrs Colin Campbell. There is no doubt that carving would be far more interesting if people designed their own work.²⁸

This snippet not only tells us that Elmslie's

²⁷ *Charles Kidson 1867-1908* p 4.

²⁸ "Arts and Crafts Exhibition" (7 April 1905) p 7.

interest in carving continued after her marriage, but that she exhibited her work publicly and that she designed her own pieces.

Canterbury Museum's Elmslie sideboard

The first object to consider is the Elmslie sideboard, part of Canterbury Museum's collection (**Figure 1**). It is a monumental sideboard made from oak and kauri, finished with copper work and brass fittings. It measures 1850mm (width) by 2560mm (height). The sideboard features carved wyverns and heraldic dolphins as repeating motifs. The wyvern is a kind of dragon with two legs, two wings, and a pointed, stinging, tail. The creature often appears in heraldry and is said to represent strength and victory over one's enemy.²⁹ In heraldry, the dolphin is considered to be the king of fishes and represents safe travel, kindness and charity.³⁰ In this piece, the wyverns and dolphins are intertwined (or nowed, in heraldic terms).

The figure of a Green Man dominates the top of the Elmslie sideboard. The Green Man is

²⁹ Vinycomb *Fictitious and Symbolic Creatures in Art* p 99; Grant *The Manual of Heraldry* np.

³⁰ Vinycomb *Fictitious and Symbolic Creatures in Art* p 268; Grant *The Manual of Heraldry* np.

both a character from European folklore and also a carved architectural feature. The folkloric Green Man is usually portrayed as covered in leaves or moss and is associated with rebirth and springtime. Carved Green Men usually have leaves or vines sprouting from their face, mouth or beard. This figure is sometimes found in European churches from the Gothic period, where it tells the story of Adam and his son Seth. The Green Man was repopularised by the Gothic Revival and Arts and Crafts artists and practitioners.³¹

The sideboard includes a number of other intricately carved elements: sunbursts appear in several places, including as scrolling decoration; there are also some delightful owls with twisty turned tails, elephant-like creatures on the brackets and lion's face drawer handles. The hinges and lock plates are made of hammered brass. The hinges are sinuous and almost floral in shape.

Central to the sideboard is a copper repousse panel. The large egg-shaped convex mirror is highly polished and is surrounded by four angry-looking heraldic dolphins. There is a

³¹ "Green Man" np; Winick "Introducing the Green Man" np; Winick "What Was the Green Man?" np.



Figure 2: The Elmslie Sideboard on display in Jessie and Colin Campbell's home in Whanganui in 1906. Credit: Photograph of Mrs Campbell's sideboard. Tesla Studios: Negatives of Wanganui and district taken by Alfred Martin, Frank Denton and Mark Lampe (Tesla Studios). Ref: 1/1-016283-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

small crest to the top.

In 1906, the sideboard was photographed by

Telsa Studios in the Campbell's home in Whanganui (**Figure 2**). Elmslie must have been proud of her work, and the image shows the copper work gleaming like a mirror and reflecting back a glimpse of the room. Displayed against some distinctly William Morris inspired wallpaper and carpets, the sideboard has pride of place in what is presumably the Campbell's drawing room.³²

Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand's settle

Another of Elmslie's pieces can be found in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa's collection (**Figure 3**). In 2017 Te Papa acquired the walnut settle carved by Elmslie. The settle measures 1260mm (width) by 1040mm (height) by 440mm (depth). Like the Canterbury Museum piece, the carvings include wyverns and fat heraldic dolphins. Here they are sea wyverns, as they have webbed tails, rather than stingers. It also includes a face (possibly an imp) and a small egg-shaped detail – in this instance it is carved from wood rather than beaten copper. The settle features lion's paw feet as well as naturalistic scrolling leaves along the bottom. The arm rests are also carved with leaves. The

³² Photograph of Mrs Campbell's sideboard.



Figure 3: Te Papa's walnut settle, carved by Jessie Mitchell Elmslie circa 1891. This piece features carved wyvern, heraldic dolphins, an imp and lion's paw feet. Credit: Settle, circa 1891, New Zealand, by Jessie Elmslie. Purchased 2017. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. GH025202, Te Papa.

settle has a panel that lifts for storage: its hinges are simple, unlike the Canterbury Museum sideboard's decorative beaten

hinges.³³

³³ Settle, circa 1891.

We are lucky enough that the settle appears in a photograph by Steffano Webb. The photograph shows the settle in a beautiful Arts and Crafts-style house on St Albans Street, Christchurch. The house was designed by the England Brothers who were active in the first decades of the twentieth century.³⁴ The photograph was published in *Progress* in September 1913 but may have been taken earlier, as other photographs in the series are dated 1908.³⁵ By 1913, the house belonged to a Thomas McBride. McBride does not appear to have a family connection to the Elmslies, but he had an interest in locally produced goods. In 1905, he published a pamphlet entitled *New Zealand's Home Industries: how they may be established permanently*. The pamphlet lobbied for local production over imports.³⁶

Memorial tablet

Elmslie's third piece is the only object that has been identified as being made by Elmslie after her marriage. It is a wood and copper

³⁴ "Robert England (architect)" np.

³⁵ "The Work of Messrs. England Bros., Architects, Christchurch" p 655; for example, House interior, dining room, Christchurch. Ref: 1/1-009152-G.; House interior, drawing room, Christchurch. Ref: 1/1-009155-G.

³⁶ Stephenson Pers. Comm.; McBride *New Zealand's Home Industries* pp 1-12.

memorial tablet which she worked in her father's memory. It survived the Canterbury earthquakes and was salvaged from the St Paul's Presbyterian Church. It is now displayed in the new St Paul's Trinity Presbyterian Church.³⁷

Rev John Elmslie died in 1907, having retired from the church in 1903.³⁸ The memorial tablet is a triptych, comprised of three Gothic arches with minimal decoration and three beaten copper panels. The tree of life is represented on the two outer copper panels and a Christian cross in the middle panel. Pomegranates are carved into two of the wooden surrounds. Both the tree of life and pomegranates were symbols used by Arts and Crafts artists.³⁹ Two of the copper panels have Latin phrases from the Vulgate Bible in Gothic script: on the left is "*Cum Christo / Multo Magis / Melius*," which is from Philippians 1:23 and translates as "I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far"; on the right is "*Defunctus / Adhuc / Loquitur*," which comes from Hebrews,

³⁷ St Paul's Trinity Pacific Presbyterian Church *Heritage artefacts on display* p 3.

³⁸ John Elmslie, G R Macdonald Dictionary of Canterbury Biographies, E111.

³⁹ "Tree of life" np.; Morris, Fruit wallpaper, 1865-66 np.

11:4: "By faith Abel offered to God a sacrifice exceeding that of Cain, by which he obtained a testimony that he was just, God giving testimony to his gifts; and by it he being dead yet speaketh."⁴⁰ The centre panel reads "In / Memoriam / John Elmslie / M.A. D.D. / (King's College Aberdeen) / 1831-1907 / Twenty seven years / of / his life's ministry / were devoted to this church / Fide Fidelis Fidei." "*Fide Fidelis Fidei*" translates as "Faith Faithful Faith."⁴¹

Elmslie's contemporary – Evelyn Vaile

As many furniture makers and carvers did not sign their work, it is hard to know which pieces of furniture in museum collections or homes have been crafted by women. There are tantalising, uncredited pieces in historical photographs and museum collections, as well as pieces that have been identified by authors like Calhoun, William Cottrell and Douglas Lloyd Jenkins.⁴² There is one well-documented

⁴⁰ "Philippenses (Philippians)" np.; "Hebræi - caput 11 Hebrews" np.

⁴¹ John Elmslie, G R Macdonald Dictionary of Canterbury Biographies E111; St Paul's Trinity Pacific Presbyterian Church *Heritage artefacts on display* p 3.

⁴² For example, Photograph of items of carved wooden furniture; unknown maker, Settle; Rhodes, Mantlepiece (1905); Calhoun *The Arts & Crafts Movement in New Zealand 1870-1940*. pp 77-105, 126-153; Cottrell *Furniture of the New Zealand Colonial Era* pp 193-195; Lloyd Jenkins

woman furniture maker who we can consider in relation to Jessie Mitchell Elmslie.

Evelyn Vaile (1884-1961) was an accomplished carver whose work was recorded by her photographer brother Hubert.⁴³ The daughter of Samuel and Sarah Ann Vaile, Vaile was active later than Elmslie but also carved monumental pieces of furniture. Her brother's photographs are in the collection of Auckland Libraries and show us both carved panels and finished pieces. The finished pieces include a wardrobe, a cabinet and a settle, as well as smaller pieces such as salad servers and sewing chairs. She made at least some of the pieces for herself: the wardrobe has her initials prominently carved into it, as well as the year "1911."⁴⁴ All the pieces are richly carved and some feature the same motifs as Elmslie's work: Vaile's settle includes a Green Man and a true dragon (with four limbs, rather than the wyvern's two), and a carved name plate for another brother's farm "Broadlands" also includes a Green Man. The panels of a chair show a wyvern and heraldic

dolphins.⁴⁵ In a series of posed photographs from 1909, Vaile is shown with a chisel and mallet in hand, working on one of the lions that would be part of the settle. She is also photographed alongside her finished works.⁴⁶

As the unmarried daughter of Samuel Vaile, who was a prominent real estate agent, auctioneer and businessman in Auckland, Vaile would have had the means and time to devote to her work.⁴⁷ Vaile exhibited her woodcarving in the home industries section of the 1910 Auckland Metropolitan Show and her paintings were hung in the Auckland Society of the Arts spring exhibition of 1933.⁴⁸ Her will notes how her works, both furniture and paintings, should be distributed; hopefully some of the pieces remain with the descendants of her beneficiaries.⁴⁹ I have not been able to track down any pieces attributed to Vaile in New Zealand museum collections.

Conclusion

Jessie Mitchell Elmslie's pieces exemplify the new opportunities that the Arts and Crafts movement provided to New Zealand women. In her work, Elmslie embraced the ethos and designs of the Arts and Crafts movement, carving sinuous and joyful mythical creatures for furniture that was useful as well as beautiful. Elmslie was in her early twenties when she carved her first pieces, learning not from one of the new art and design schools, but through private classes with a now unknown member of her father's congregation. Her clergyman father may have considered private tuition more appropriate than attendance at the Canterbury College School of Arts. Elmslie's and Evelyn Vaile's position in society as the unmarried daughters of men of standing allowed them the time and resources to undertake woodcarving as their arts practice. It is unclear the extent to which Elmslie continued to carve after her marriage in 1891 but there is evidence that she maintained an interest in the Arts and Crafts movement, particularly during her time in Whanganui, where she became involved with the city's arts and crafts society and exhibited her work. Some years later she designed and worked a memorial tablet for her father, which remains on display more than 115 years

At Home pp 15-21.

⁴³ Birth record, Evelyn Constance Vaile; Purewa Cemetery, Vaile, Evelyn Constance.

⁴⁴ Photograph by Hubert Earle Vaile, 2-V1352.

⁴⁵ Photographs by Hubert Earle Vaile, 2-V1174, 2-V1124, 2-V1211.

⁴⁶ Photographs by Hubert Earle Vaile, 2-V1174, 2-V1145, 2-V1147.

⁴⁷ "Samuel Vaile" pp 303-304.

⁴⁸ "The Winter Show" p 9; "Works of art" p 11.

⁴⁹ Probate for VAILE Evelyn Constance.

after his death. The Elmslie Sideboard travelled around New Zealand with the Campbells and remained within the family into the twenty first century.

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