



NOT ALL **GLITZ** AND **GLAMOUR**

Linda Carr tells the story of a Hollywood star who married a local farmer and set up home in Skipton on a property now owned by the National Trust ... and you can stay there

When Hollywood silent movie star Claire Adams and her Victorian pastoralist husband Donald (Scobie) Mackinnon fought alongside others with hoses and buckets to save their art deco home from the devastating 1944 bushfire their heroic effort surprised no one. Least of all the Skipton locals who knew their 12,000 acre property Mooramong well.



Photographs supplied by National Trust of Australia (Victoria)

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In a later letter to her friends, Claire wrote "At the front door. . . . Donald yelled at me (the noise was that bad) to get in the pool – we hadn't a chance, and I yelled at him, 'Nonsense, not yet', and ran back into the house to get buckets."

This was a woman who entered the US film industry at the age of 18, was a great horse woman, did all her own stunt work and had the strength of character in 1928 to retire from silent movies when talkies began to take hold.

Her husband of seven years at the time of the fire was the sort of man who converted his Bentley into a ute to move his Corriedale lambs around the property. The sort of man who was unconcerned that his wife was 10 years his senior. He loved her. She loved him. They were devoted to each other and their property Mooramong.

But wait, how on earth did they meet? Very few Australians travelled overseas at this time. The year was 1937, Europe was inching towards war, economic depression gripped the world and King George VI was to be coronated in London following the



Photograph by Jess Hood. Supplied by National Trust of Australia (Victoria)

abdication of his brother Edward. Donald, Victoria's most eligible bachelor, had studied at Cambridge and was in London attending many coronation parties. Claire was in London to perform for BBC Radio pursuing her new career as a singer. They saw each other across a crowded room, were married three weeks later, then following a long honeymoon, arrived at Mooramong in 1938. The property had been bought for Donald by his father as a 21st birthday present. Its homestead was a staid Victorian building constructed in the 1870s but this was about to be touched by a blaze of Beverly Hills glamour. Enter Claire Adams MacKinnon.

The original architectural features – including Gothic external details – were all removed and replaced with Art Deco designs in tones of green. Lots of green – curtains, crockery, bathroom fittings and a huge green leather cocktail bar in the games room. A walnut-wood piano from Germany graced the living area. It is said that Claire introduced Skipton to the cocktail hour – certainly a change from



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the men-only pub environment of that era. The one piece of renovation that really caught everyone's attention was the large swimming pool built behind the walled garden – an almost unimaginable delight in a region periodically brought to its knees by drought. At the time it was the largest privately owned pool in the Southern Hemisphere and heated no less. In that same post-fire letter Claire expressed her awe of that wall protecting them.

"...God bless that wonderful wall – it really saved us – and gave us a chance to fight the fire..."

The 1944 fire destroyed 6000 acres of their grasslands and they lost 800 sheep. Nonetheless Claire's closing words in that letter to her friends speak volumes about them both:

"We saved all our cattle and cows, and horses, all dogs but three who ran into smoke and were suffocated and one calf that did the same and eight chickens. We were extremely fortunate. We have our home and each other, which is the big thing."



Photograph supplied by National Trust of Australia (Victoria)

Influenced, no doubt by her early career, Claire was an avid home video maker. A number of her videos feature pool parties – some were glittering affairs attended by very famous people who had driven up from Melbourne but invitations were also extended to locals to enjoy the pleasures of a home pool.

As much as they loved Mooramong, its pool and garden, Claire and Donald frequently travelled down the rough Glenelg Highway to Melbourne in their Silver Ghost Rolls Royce to attend parties, functions at Government House, horse racing and the cinema. The MacKinnon Stakes in the Spring Racing Carnival was named after Donald's father who had been chairman of the Victorian Racing Club for 20 years.

Donald died in 1974 and Claire four years later. They were both cremated and as per their instructions their ashes were buried within the walled garden.

After bequests to family and friends, Claire left Mooramong to the National Trust with much of its contents including reels of her Hollywood silent movies and



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colour home videos. One stipulation in her bequest was that a wildlife sanctuary be set up on Mooramong – in particular to protect the eastern barred bandicoot. That work continues today as does her annual bequest to Skipton Primary School for the yearly school trip.

Moora (probably from Gunditjmara language) means 'place of water' and a large dam remains on the property – its quiet waters playing host to migratory birds. It is visible from the tiny homes and original out-buildings accommodation available on the property.

Visitor accommodation is available in the original outbuildings saved by Claire and Donald and in luxury tiny homes – named for characters Claire played in movies – amongst the paddocks. The main building is currently under refurbishment but guests are free to visit all other original buildings. For further information visit www.nationaltrust.org.au/places-to-stay/



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