

## BOOK REVIEWS

### HELENA RUBINSTEIN: THE AUSTRALIAN YEARS

*By Angus Trumble*

*Melbourne, La Trobe University Press, 2023*

Several books and articles have been written about this vivacious individual who smashed through the glass ceiling and attained great heights as a businesswoman. One biography describes Rubinstein as a makeup mogul ‘with flair’ who attained amazing achievements and left her mark in many ways, mostly attributable to her larger-than-life personality.<sup>1</sup>

Rubinstein left Krakow, Poland in the late nineteenth century and settled in Australia where the young entrepreneur first found success. Her revolutionising of women’s beauty routines soon took off globally. By the time she died in 1965, Rubinstein had created a global beauty empire and unsurprisingly several biographies ensued, most of these laudatory.<sup>2</sup>

Art historian Angus Trumble’s *Helena Rubinstein: The Australian Years*, by contrast, makes for tougher, more concentrated reading, so much so that I found myself highlighting parts of his work like a student with a textbook, especially with quite a significant lead-in via a Forward, Author’s Note, Introduction, and at the end Acknowledgements, Afterword, Endnotes, Chronology, List of Figures, Bibliography, and Index. Trumble explains how he was inspired to pen this latest work by distinguished British artist Graham Sutherland’s portrait of Rubinstein. In one of Graham’s portraits of his friend, Rubinstein wears a Cristobel Balenciaga brocade gown as vivid as Rubinstein’s life. This painting now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra.

During her lifespan, many artists wished to paint Rubinstein, including Australian luminary William Dobell, who was well-known for his disregard for hierarchy, power, or fame. However, Dobell soon became obsessed with Rubinstein, and she sat for him for several days. He created eight full-sized portraits, of which the best known

was acquired in 1964 by the National Gallery of Victoria. You can see Rubinstein there today in all her splendour.

Writing through the prism of three distinct book sections – *I came, I saw, I conquered* – Trumble’s account of Rubinstein’s life jumps back and forth in time, sometimes dizzyingly, to piece together the mogul’s business, fashion, family, and social life. As the focus expands to describe what ultimately became Rubinstein’s unique life aesthetic, we discover how she also found time to relish the pleasures of art, jewellery, fashion, architecture, furniture, and interior design.

Rubinstein’s trajectory is also recounted, with many signposts to her style and vision. Her beginnings in Australia in 1896 from her birth city, with little English and on her own, are fascinating. She joined her uncle in the rural outpost of Coleraine, Victoria, and began her working life as a salesgirl. Initially, there was little to indicate that a cosmetic and beauty empire was about to be born.

Within six years of arriving in Australia, Rubinstein introduced her first product, *Crème Valaze*, which quickly became a hit with Melbourne society. Rubinstein subsequently opened her first salon in fashionable Collins Street, bringing her sister Ceska and cousin Lola Beckmann from Poland to assist her before she moved to Sydney in 1904 to open a salon on Pitt Street and another further north in Brisbane.

The dynamo also consulted in several different rural and city locations across the east coast of Australia and later established her brand in New Zealand, with a salon opening in Wellington in 1907. A gossip piece at the time spread the word of Rubinstein’s signature product which read:

Several of our mutual friends have been appearing lately with new faces. Mary, who is developing into a golf maniac, came to see me yesterday, with her complexion so presentable that her manners were thrown to the wind. I demanded the reason for her facial rescue from a weather-beaten appearance that was nothing short of lamentable.

Naturally, the reason for the friend’s transformation was, you guessed it, *Valaze*.

Soon, London and New York beckoned. In London in 1908, she met and married Polish-born American journalist Edward William Titus

and two sons followed, Roy born in 1909, and Horace in 1912. Family life aside, Rubinstein soon discovered that English and Australian complexions differed markedly. The result? In 1912, the innovative businesswoman established the first system for classifying skin by type and providing skincare tailored for each – it is *de rigueur* today of course but was revolutionary more than 100 years ago.

As a result, her name and products were soon on women's lips across the globe. Her family moved to Paris in 1909 and there Rubinstein opened another salon. In 1914, the family moved to New York, and many salons were opened in US cities. By 1926, the company was registered in Australia and the U.S.

Husband Edward was indefatigable in his support of his wife in terms of publicity, marketing and media material, but his unfaithfulness ultimately led to the dissolution of their marriage in 1937. A year later, Helena married an impoverished Russian prince 23 years her junior. Helena was eager for a title and pursued Prince Artchil Gourielli-Tchkonia, her handsome aristocrat, even naming a male cosmetics line after her catch.

Helena lived and worked through the torrid times of World Wars One and Two, the Wall Street Crash, and the Great Depression. Throughout these difficult periods, her product range continued its success, and business flourished. She also took the opportunity to pioneer many ideas that linked nutrition and beauty.

In 1928, Rubinstein sold her controlling interest to the Lehman Brothers for US\$7.3 million and in 1931 following the Wall Street Crash, reacquired full control of the company. In 1973, after her death, the Helena Rubinstein Corporation was purchased by Colgate-Palmolive for US\$142.3 million. L'Oréal acquired the Helena Rubinstein brand in stages during the 1980s 'for several hundred million francs.'<sup>3</sup> By 2011, the Foundation had wound up its operations in New York and disposed of its remaining assets, including the portrait by Graham Sutherland.

Trumble writes that Rubinstein was a sad woman despite her stratospheric success. Personal problems aside, Rubinstein was hugely philanthropic, and many foundations, organisations, galleries, and scholarships today bear her name. With more than a nod to her Jewish roots, she established the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion of Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv and the America-Israel Cultural Foundation which provides scholarships to Israelis. She also established the Helena Rubinstein

Travelling Art Scholarship and Portrait Prize and the Helena Rubinstein Women in Science Award.

Whilst Trumble's version of Rubinstein's life highlights occasional nuggets, it is unfortunately one of my least favourite readings of a truly remarkable woman. This is because of its complicated structure and failure to ensure that this story flows so that it is easily readable.

Ruth Lilian

### Endnotes

- 1 'Helena Rubinstein was a makeup mogul with a flair for the dramatic', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Svke4gmAAA>. Accessed 5 June 2024.
- 2 See for example: Patrick O'Higgins, *Madame: An Intimate Biography of Helena Rubinstein*, London, Vintage Books, 1971.
- 3 *Financial Times*, May 1988.

## THE ANGEL OF KING'S CROSS: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF FANNY READING

By Anne Sarzin

*North Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd,*

*2023, viii + 357pp.*

*notes, bibliography, index, illus.*

*ISBN: 9781922952509 (paperback)*

Anne Sarzin has produced a wonderfully detailed and illustrated book about Fanny Reading, a woman of worth whose name is synonymous with the National Council of Jewish Women in Australia (NCJW). An indefatigable worker for women both as a doctor and community leader, 'Dr Fanny', as she was known, was a force to be reckoned with.

Sarzin has done extensive research for this history using a large number of primary and secondary publications, as evidenced by her notes and bibliography, and has also interviewed family members and acquaintances to provide an intimate portrait of this amazing woman. A striking cover illustration of Fanny, from the collection of Leigh and Lynne Reading, gazes confidently at the reader.