



Campaigning Great-Grandmothers

Unknown photographer
Australian Delegation to the
International Woman Suffrage
Alliance Congress in Rome,
1923
b&w photograph; 18.1 x 24.1 cm
Manuscript Collection MS2004
nla.pic-vn3279316

Judy Cannon dips into the Library's collection of records of suffragettes and feminists who galvanised the movement before and after Federation

Today, most western women regard having the vote and the freedom to have a career as a right and would be astonished to realise just how hard their great-grandmothers had to fight for women's suffrage and how fiery they were. They were passionate, determined, noisy; fortunately, some of them were financially independent, and therefore free to pursue their mission.

A dip, at the Library, into the manifestos, speeches and letters written by suffragettes

and activists, especially at the turn of the 20th century, shows their sturdy sense of purpose, toughness and spirit of resilience. While there were generations of feminists before the vote for women was won, it is possible here only to highlight one or two from the succeeding generations. Although sometimes accused of hating men, their protest was rather against the situation of women; the fight was political, not personal.

For example, during the lead-up to Federation in 1901, Mary Sanger Evans of Ashfield, New South Wales wrote, on 24 June 1898, that she thought it 'manifestly unjust that this great question of Federation should be decided on the votes of only one half the adult population of NSW'. Evans was writing to Rose Scott (1847–1925) of Sydney, a well-known campaigner

for women's suffrage. The Library holds extensive material by and about Rose Scott. Scott, who enjoyed an independent income, had firm views which were sometimes at odds with other feminists. When interviewed in 1923, on her retirement from years of public life and battling for women, she advised them against being involved in party politics: 'Drop party politics,' she said, 'Have friends in all parties, that is the only way to win anything'.

Scott believed that once women went into party politics they became 'the cats paws of men'. She had regularly held soirees at her Sydney home and guests included a number of prime ministers ('I could write a book on prime ministers I have met') and other influential people. She had an astute appreciation of Sir Edmund Barton, Sir Henry Parkes and others, adding wryly that, although she liked Sir George Reid (prime minister in 1904) personally, 'he treated me as a cat does a mouse'.

Rose Scott took up suffrage work in Sydney in 1891, forming the Women's Suffrage League. The NSW Woman's Suffrage Bill was eventually passed through parliament in 1902; it had taken 11 years. She also worked for other reforms, including the legal status of women, arrangements for women prisoners, and for children and children's courts. She advocated that women should avoid distinctions of class and creed and, 'above all, be loyal to your sex'.

After the death of her colleague, the influential Annette Bear-Crawford in 1899, Vida Goldstein (1869–1949) took on a leadership role in Victorian women's suffrage. In 1934, she wrote on women's progress in Victoria, saying that when the Women's Franchise League (Vic) was formed in 1884, women in the colony had practically no rights. She said university entrance, political freedom, the right to enter the professions, to act as inspectors, police officers, matrons and justices of the peace were among the new measures woman suffragettes had won, and to achieve this they had had to face 'obloquy and the cruellest ridicule'. Federal franchise came in 1902. While Victoria was the first colony to demand votes for women in 1864, this goal was not achieved until 44 years later—years, according to Goldstein, of 'unceasing work'.

Decades after the franchise was applied to women, and in aggravation at the continuing criticism of the women's movement, Goldstein wrote to a friend in 1946: 'Did you see Bernard Shaw's throw



above:
Phyl Waterhouse (1917–1989)
Portrait of Vida Goldstein 1944
oil on composition board;
45.5 x 37.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an2292721

below:
Unknown photographer
Great Suffragette Demonstration in London: Mrs Fisher, Mrs McGowen and Miss Vida Goldstein from Australia 1911
stereograph; 9.5 x 17.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23371784





above:
Unknown photographer
Portrait of Bessie Rischbieth
1938
hand-coloured photograph;
7.5 x 6.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an8328137

opposite top:
Bert G. Covell
Delegates and Accredited
Visitors to the First Women's
Pan-Pacific Conference,
Honolulu, August 1928
sepia toned photograph;
16.5 x 22.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3279324

opposite bottom:
Unknown photographer
Photograph of Jessie Street
with Women at Bethnal Green
c.1945
b&w photograph in the
Papers of Jessie Street,
1814–1968
Manuscript Collection
MS 2683/11/3 Box 30

off at votes for women? The audacity of the man! Men have governed the world since time began, and see what they have made of it. Yet he blames women for not making a brave new world in 30 years!' But she also wrote, 'I am nevertheless still bewailing the colossal failure, on the surface though it be, of women. Where are the women in England, in U.S.A., who are holding up a light to the world? No organised protest against the Atomic Bomb, against

Bacteriological Warfare preparations, against the resumption of the methods that produce war, shortages, i.e., against the mesmeric belief that human beings are the helpless victims of an almighty power called Finance. "Time produces the man"—or woman. Does it?'

Another effective campaigner of a later generation, who was eventually to represent Australia at the League of Nations— forerunner to the United Nations—was Bessie Rischbieth (1874–1967). She was born in Adelaide, but subsequently lived in Perth with her husband, the wool merchant Henry Wills Rischbieth. Her papers include family and personal correspondence (1911–59), travel diaries, articles and broadcasts, documents relating to both English and Australian suffragette movements, her appointment as an Australian delegate to the League of Nations and her various interests relating to the formation of the United Nations.

Rischbieth's active engagement in issues of women's suffrage and women's rights began in London in 1908 when she attended a suffrage meeting and was inspired by the organisation and enthusiasm of her English peers to take up the cause at home. This early engagement led to her becoming a foundation member, and later president, of the Women's Service Guilds of WA in 1909. Her involvement with the Women's Service Guilds also led her to become an active contributor—for a period as honorary editor—to that organisation's monthly journal, *The Dawn*. In the 1920s,

Rischbieth contributed to the foundation of the Australian Federation of Women Voters (1921–42) and she acted as its first president.

Rischbieth's international activities spanned her lifetime and included acting as a co-founder of the British Commonwealth League of Women in 1925. In 1928, she led the Australian delegation to the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference in Honolulu and, in 1935, she acted as the government-appointed delegate to the League of Nations Assembly in Geneva. A later visit to England resulted in Rischbieth being stranded for the duration of World War II.

While Rischbieth was overseas, her Australian colleagues continued their activities, one of the most significant being the mounting of a conference, in 1943, the 'Australian Women's Conference For Victory in War and Victory in Peace', in which women from 90 organisations participated. This conference, initiated by Jessie Street, resulted in agreement on the landmark Australian Women's Charter. A controversial document, the charter addressed such issues as work and pay, health, childcare, pensions and welfare, and encompassed calls for the expansion not only of women's but also Aboriginal rights.

The papers of Jessie Street, 1889–1970, are also held at the Library. This collection has been the focus of much primary research by historians interested in the nature and development of Australia's feminist movement, as outlined in Lenore Coltheart's excellent article on the Street papers in the August 2005 issue of *National Library of Australia News*. As a pivotal figure in the development of feminist policy, Street's legacy continues to weigh into contemporary feminist debate. During her lifetime, as a participant in both national and international forums, Street played an influential role. In 1930 and 1938 she attended League of Nations meetings and she represented Australia at the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945. At this meeting, Street joined with other women delegates from around the world to successfully lobby for the use of non-exclusive language in the UN Charter.

In the 1970s the women's movement again became highly active. A favourite slogan with the media, 'Women's Liberation',



met with mixed responses. But among feminists, passions were still keen. In Canberra, for instance, Beryl Henderson, 1897–1990, an active member of Canberra Women's Liberation and then in her 80s, strode along in a protest march. The 1980s and 1990s saw a great deal of progress for women.

Time will tell whether future generations of women will come to recognise and appreciate the extent of the struggle waged by their campaigning great-grandmothers, and their predecessors on the generational tree. And just how fiery they had to be to achieve what they did. Contemporary generations of women owe them so much. The women mentioned here—there were many others—undertook their work in a tumultuous world which saw wars and economic depression. Yet they persisted in ensuring that a feminist perspective retained its place on the political agenda. This is reflected in their letters, personal papers and writings that are held

by the Library. It will be interesting to see what the next generation does with the opportunities so fiercely fought for by their tenacious forebears.

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