

For Labour and Humanity

R.G. WATT AND AUSTRALIA'S INTERNATIONAL CONSCIENCE



Unknown photographer
*The Australian Delegate
to the League Assembly,
Mr Raymond G. Watt, and
Mrs Watt, Leaving the New
Palais de Nations Building,
Geneva, 1936*
Papers of Raymond Watt
Manuscripts Collection
MS 1923

A 'FIERY ORATOR' WAS HOW PROFESSOR J.D.B. Miller (b.1922) recalled Raymond G. Watt's presence around Sydney in the inter-war years: a 'man of very deep convictions', ubiquitous in his commentary on radio and in the press, at public meetings, rallies and lectures. In the process, Miller added, Watt (1889–1967) made the League of Nations, of which he was national secretary from 1930 to 1945, 'a significant body' in the life of the city and beyond.

Miller, who became a leading international relations academic tracking Australia's 'dogged low-gear idealism' in dealing with the world, remembered the excitement of schoolboy visits to Watt in the League's office in Castlereagh Street, Sydney. Like thousands of Australian children, Miller might have worn the League's badge and pledged himself to its 'credo', as published in school magazines: 'I believe that all human beings are members of one family'. This was the cause Watt espoused.

In 1967, Peter Heydon (1912–1971), one of Australia's early career diplomats and then secretary of the Department of Immigration, wrote to Watt's widow, Eileen, praising the 'idealism, energy and persistence' Watt had displayed in bringing the affairs of the world to the attention of Australians. Watt had

NICHOLAS BROWN EXAMINES THE IDEALISM AND INFLUENCE OF A TIRELESS LEAGUE OF NATIONS SUPPORTER

fostered, Heydon noted, an open, critical engagement with issues—an approach that had become rare in more polarised debates since 1945.

These testaments, from figures associated with the postwar professionalisation of Australia's foreign policy, indicate the extent to which Watt's devotion to marshalling an essentially voluntary, informed interest in international cooperation seemed quickly to become anachronistic in the 1940s. Yet Miller and Heydon also expressed an element of nostalgia for such advocacy. It was not just that Watt's principles had been lost amid the more pragmatic, jaded practices that followed World War II. It was also that a climate or style of discussion had passed: a shared civic conscience that underpinned what it meant to care for such causes.

Watt's extensive personal papers in the National Library of Australia evoke much of that style. They record the ways in which the events of the world were seen, or made, to matter. They also reflect the dedication of an individual who shaped a career as a respected commentator while lacking the status and support of the diplomatic or academic expertise that, within a generation, would dominate such discussion. And they convey that distinctive sociability of inter-war political culture—the meetings, the talks, the largely self-educated fellowship that underpinned social and political concern.

Nostalgia expressed by Miller and Heydon is underscored by the frustration Watt experienced in the postwar years. While his youngest brother, Alan, was Secretary of the Department of External Affairs in 1951, Raymond made a precarious living selling *e Chambers' Encyclopedia* door-to-door. Although still sufficiently well known to be engaged by an Australian Security Intelligence

Organisation (ASIO) operative in conversation about the war in Korea (which noted that Watt 'appeared genuine' in his opposition to the southward march of communism), Watt was by then a fading 'figure of interest', irrelevant in the world of Cold War confrontation.

Today, world events have the immediacy of CNN and prompt the selective compassion shown in response to humanitarian crises. A virtual world is with us in highly personalised ways. For Watt and others in that inter-war period, the international was framed by ideas of solidarity and public opinion. If the ideals such an approach generated now seem naïve, they might nonetheless prompt us to question what we have in their place and why.

Born at Gosford in 1889, Watt was the fourth of nine children of a strict Congregationalist family. Five of eight sons served in World War I. Raymond, however, stayed at home, abandoning study at Camden College (now United Theological College) and the University of Sydney to help his father's business as a manufacturer's agent. A poem he wrote in 1917 shows ambiguity in his stance towards conscription but is clear in espousing the glory of military sacrifice. A manifesto of 1918 pledges him 'to work so that others will not have died in vain'.

Watt's friendships were extensive, arising from religious and study circles. They included his university mentor, the Christian Idealist philosopher Francis Anderson (1858–1941), later a long-serving president of the League, the poet and academic Randolph Hughes (1889–1955), later a self-declared Tory pagan, Eleanor Hinder (1893–1963), who pioneered industrial welfare in Australia before travelling to similar work in China and later Geneva, and historian and public servant Hessel Duncan Hall (1891–1976), who brought a



ABOVE
Unknown photographer
A young Watt (front) on
an outing with friends
reproduced from the booklet
'Souvenir of a Blow-up by
the Sea'
Papers of Raymond Watt
Manuscripts Collection
MS 1923

remarkable synthesis of interests to his study of international affairs during a diverse career. Watt's papers record the intense introspection that characterised such relationships. Causes were tests of character but, for Watt in particular, a tension between selflessness in embracing an issue and the imprint of personality in conveying its importance would recur in assessments of how he should advance the work of the League.

Intense, energetic and restless, Watt had ambition, but his devotion was unquestionable. He was a member of the first council of the League's New South Wales branch in 1921 and founded the Federal League of Nations Union in 1930. Yet his employment by the organisation was always tenuous and poorly-paid. The support of the family required that his equally intrepid wife, Eileen, work in fields as diverse as school teaching and consulting on the psychology of selling. Through his position, Watt built extensive networks with individuals, organisations and social movements that found a connection between their disparate agendas and an ideal of internationalism.

Over 1000 people initially joined the New South Wales branch but membership fell to 200 by 1925. It recovered quickly after Watt's appointment as general secretary in 1926, rising to 1417 in 1929, 1555 in 1930 and 3560 by 1938. Leading members were a solid core and from a distinct social stratum: overwhelmingly Protestant, academically educated (law being the largest disciplinary background) and frequently academics by profession. Around 40 per cent of such members were women, reflecting in part the League's commitment to women's equality. Association with the League was often one

BELOW LEFT
Les Dwyer/Canberra Studios
League of Nations Corner at
Telopea Park School
Papers of Raymond Watt
Manuscripts Collection
MS 1923





ABOVE
Unknown artist
Souvenir Programme of League of Nations Pageant, Theatre Royal, Adelaide, December 7-14, 1929
Papers of Raymond Watt
Manuscripts Collection, MS 1923

RIGHT
Ralph Gibson
Australia's Delegates Leave for Geneva
reproduced from *World Peace: A Monthly Magazine of Peace, Freedom and Progress*, September 1936 (Sydney: E. Wakefield)
Papers of Raymond Watt
Manuscripts Collection, MS 1923

BELOW
Unknown photographer
Delegates at the Australian League of Nations Annual Meeting and Conference, Canberra, 28-31 January 1938
(Watt front row, second from left)
Papers of Raymond Watt
Manuscripts Collection, MS 1923



affiliation among many, including the English-Speaking Union, the racial hygiene and student Christian movements, the Victoria League for Commonwealth Friendship and the Town Planning Association. But if prominent members led activities, they were joined, watched and listened to by many others from broader backgrounds who contributed their labour, time and money.

In 1930, for example, Watt coordinated a program of over 2000 lectures in metropolitan Sydney and visited branches in many major country centres. Around 1200 people attended the annual International Ball, held in Sydney at either the Theatre Royal or the Trocadero—Watt's initiative in 1926, later copied by other branches, including in the United Kingdom. His attendance with Eileen at the 1936 World Peace Congress was partly funded by money raised during a 100 car-based treasure hunt in northern Sydney, which ended in fireworks, a bonfire, community singing and dancing. The League of Nations was, indeed, conspicuous.

Watt's commitment to mobilising public opinion was particularly evident in his regular radio broadcasts on 2KY, 2CH, 2BL and 2GB. He finely crafted talks with elements of informality yet authority, drawing listeners into an open, enquiring consideration of the news, the trends behind the big events, and



the principles appropriate to interpreting them. Talks for schools encouraged students to imagine places, people and exchanges—and provided the basis for one of the League's most successful areas of recruiting. By 1940, there were over 26 000 subscriptions to the international correspondence scheme coordinated by the League.

The sense of trust Watt established as a broadcaster figured prominently in letters from listeners. He did not seem 'puffed-up'. Yet as the many meticulously sorted files of drafts, press clipping, extracts and notebooks in his papers indicate, he worked hard to get the information in order and cultivate a persona suited to the new domain of radio commentary—all the while canvassing issues ranging from the headlines on Abyssinia to a fresh perspective on scientific cooperation, the power of medicine, the causes of industrial unrest, the pressures of population, the traffic in people and drugs, and international standards in labour, health and housing.

If the League was steadily compromised in its failure to secure peace, for Watt its achievements remained unquestionable in generating an awareness of international

affairs. He had seen new values in action, he insisted, as a delegate to assemblies in Geneva in 1931 and 1936, where representatives spoke for their societies more than for their states. His mantra through the 1930s was ‘we must either trade or fight’—trade meaning equal access to the world’s resources, ensuring an end to a psychology among the least favoured that their only solution was violence, and among the most favoured that their only defence was the same. Watt expressed in bold terms a commitment to the League that was, as W.J. Hudson observes, strong, creative and influential in Australia.

By 1938, events had moved beyond such faith. Undaunted, Watt argued for commitments to postwar reconstruction and to meet the needs of refugees. In 1940, he took leave from the League to stand for the Australian Labor Party, his campaign featuring the endorsement from the soon-to-be Minister for External Affairs, Dr Herbert Vere Evatt (1894–1965), ‘in the world of international movements, Raymond Watt has rendered magnificent service in the cause of Labour and Humanity’. Watt sought pre-selection in 1943 and 1946, and contested Bennelong in 1949, but political success eluded him. During the war, his skills were recognised in government publicity work but in 1945 this came to an end. There was nothing in the Department of External Affairs, where the focus was on younger, university-educated cadets; only part-time jobs teaching English in migrant hostels, or writing promotional copy for the Department of Trade, keen to sell goods, ranging from prefabricated homes to snail repellent, into Asia—a very different aspect of world trade. Even in the Workers’ Education Association, where for years his classes had been popular, preference went to teachers with more academic credentials.

It would be easy to characterise the obscurity into which Watt fell as reflecting the maturing of Australia’s engagement with the world: as marking the transition from an amateur publicist’s view of international events, framed by duty and fellowship, to one marked by expertise and specialisation, couched in objectivity. To some extent Watt cautiously welcomed such changes, although he warned, shortly before his death, in a letter of thanks for enduring support from the Australian Journalists’ Association, that while radio stimulated public discussion, ‘whoever controls

television will sooner or later control governments’. He and the culture of engagement he represented were a casualty of the times.

In August 1945, the League was subsumed into the United Nations Union, which appointed a ‘National Organiser’, whose first recommendation was that the lectures, meetings and talks which Watt had programmed for nearly 25 years (sometimes with musical interludes, even with prayers) should be replaced by documentary films shown in suburban halls, perhaps with a cartoon ‘thrown in for entertainment value’. Gatherings informed by ideals of duty, conscience and perhaps residual missionary fervour became instead the occasions for the sampling of cultural difference, the celebration of modernisation and ‘development’, the monitoring not of social standards across the world but of the attainment of a newly proclaimed doctrine of ‘human rights’.

Part of the interest of a life such as Raymond Watt’s is that it prompts us not to take for granted the ways in which we see the world. International engagement is perhaps inevitably selective and disappointing, but it is also a product of shifting times, a mirror of its advocates as much as a window to the planet. Looking over Watts’ voluminous papers raises the question of what shapes and limits the phases of Australia’s ‘dogged low-gear idealism’ in finding a role and voice in international affairs.

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TOP
Unknown artist
The election logo for Watt’s campaign
Papers of Raymond Watt
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ABOVE
Unknown photographer
Raymond G. Watt, *Selected and Endorsed Official Labour Candidate for the New Federal Seat of Bennelong*
reproduced from a 1949
Australian federal election
campaign leaflet
Papers of Raymond Watt
Manuscripts Collection
MS 1923