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## Introduction: A Transnational Life

Lucy Woodcock was a passionate and fearless campaigner for justice. Her long-time friend and ally Dymphna Cusack said that Lucy was ‘well known as a fighter’. All her long life, from 1889 to 1968, Lucy worked for Equal Rights for women, for real access to good-quality and progressive education for girls and working-class children, and for an end to racism and international warmongering.<sup>1</sup>

These campaigns alone would make her life remarkable, but there are other, even more cogent reasons to explore her story. It challenges all the stereotypes about how organisations were built, where movements drew their support and how class intersected with commitment. Lucy’s life demands that we consider how women might be involved in politics, not only in Australia but in the broader world. We argue her life was ‘transnational’ rather than ‘international’ and that her experience was shaped by gender and class. Her political commitments changed over time, according to the historical contexts in which she worked. She was a woman with a long career of activism, but she had distanced herself from the conventional and heterosexual world of many women activists on the Left. It was age and, perhaps, gender-orientation that have shaped

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1 The term ‘Equal Rights’ has been capitalised where it was a political goal. Lucy expanded her understanding of this concept over her lifetime, as this book explains. By the end of her life, it meant for her equality of the sexes in income, opportunity and respect, regardless of class, race, religion, marital status or sexual orientation.

the way she is remembered. How would she herself have understood and engaged with the contemporary forms of the movements to which she was so committed?

Lucy's life was not transnational because she travelled widely. Born in 1889 and growing up in Sydney's Granville, Lucy worked first in rural Australia and then in inner Sydney. In fact, before World War II, she was only able to go overseas for a single year, in 1927, after which she was unable to travel internationally until she retired in 1953. Then, after a brief time in Europe, she travelled to China, Japan and India, before spending further time in Europe, including the socialist countries and finally at a Peace conference in Helsinki.<sup>2</sup> She went again later in the 1950s to socialist Europe as well as the United Kingdom and then in 1964 once again to China.

Yet even without extensive travel in her early life, Lucy Woodcock lived a transnational life because she framed all her understanding of politics – local, national and international – through transnational parameters and comparisons. Unlike the stereotypes of a Britain-focused Australia, Lucy was not particularly interested in European examples as models of achievement. On the contrary, she was acutely aware of European racism from the earliest years of her teaching career in the South Coast fishing village of Eden, where she was befriended by a family of refugees who had fled the Russian pogroms. Shaped by later experiences, Lucy worked ever harder to challenge racism as well as gender discrimination. Rather than turning to Europe, Lucy saw leadership in social justice and progress emerging not from the old colonisers but from the new and emerging countries of the formerly colonised world. She championed their independence and decolonisation movements but she was not interested in nationalist goals. Instead, she tried to build links between women and workers across borders, recognising the common ground that existed in spite of cultural differences. Her politics crossed the borders not only of old and new 'nations' but of organisations and movements. Analysing only one movement or another will not clarify the way Lucy – or many other activists – actually worked.

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2 'Peace' is capitalised when used as the name of a political goal, as it is here, meaning the vision of an end to armed warfare. While for Lucy conflicts were inevitable – and even welcomed – conflict was best solved through negotiation and communication, a strategy she pursued all her life.

With these commitments to links across national borders, could Lucy be seen as a ‘transnational activist’? Scalmer, Berger, Manjapra and others have written about activists they describe as ‘transnational’ because they took political stands in a number of different places, moving ideas and strategies from one area to another or, in the case of Gandhi, being the symbol mobilised by people in very different places.<sup>3</sup> There were, however, gendered constraints on activism. Access to travel and mobility was far easier for the men described by these analysts than for women. There *are* women identified as ‘transnational activists’ in the recent volume edited by Berger and Scalmer, notably the Australian Jessie Street.<sup>4</sup> Yet here is another key gendered constraint; it was Street’s class position, her social and political status and wealth, from inheritance and marriage, which enabled her mobility. For working-class or professional women like Lucy Woodcock, physical mobility was far harder to access than for upper-class women, who were themselves more constrained than working-class men who might travel as seamen or soldiers.

To be able to move across borders, women needed either the resources of the upper classes or they needed employment or organisational networks that would set up the infrastructure that allowed mobility. Lucy was a young woman in the years before World War I, when one of the few jobs open to Australian women outside domestic labour was teaching. Education was to become one of the networks that allowed Lucy to be mobile in her later life, as well as expanding her knowledge of the wider world. Teaching had played an important role in the expansion of European colonialism throughout the nineteenth century in Australia and elsewhere – with Christian missionaries often establishing educational institutions in many colonies, including Australia. Yet there were also other women who travelled to take up roles in education who were not Christian missionaries at all. Education by the end of the nineteenth century had become a desired goal of modernisation among middle-class families in British colonies like India and in Dutch colonies like the East Indies, allowing women to travel and sustain employed lives without having the upper-class incomes or family connections of a Jessie Street.

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3 This term has been used by Sean Scalmer in relation to Mohandas Gandhi and by Stefan Berger to describe E.P. Thomson in their edited volume, *The Transnational Activist* (New York: Springer, 2017), and this is the same concept developed by Kris Manjapra in talking about M.N. Roy, in his *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (Routledge, 2010).

4 Chloe Ward, ‘Activism without Discrimination’. In *The Transnational Activist: Transformations and Comparisons from the Anglo-World since the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Stefan Berger and Sean Scalmer. Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movements (New York: Springer, 2017), 227–56.

Educational work allowed Lucy to become aware of the wider world and, in the mid-1920s, to work for a year in working-class, inner-city schools in London, exploring innovative progressive education in challenging circumstances. Before that, however, it enabled Lucy to explore activism and leadership, building her organising skills as she mobilised her fellow women assistant teachers. Her abilities in negotiation were strengthened when she co-founded the New South Wales Teachers Federation in 1918, later taking leadership roles in this union as well as working towards building a national union in future decades. Lucy was to insist throughout her life that, although teaching demanded respect as a profession, in which women should have an equal place, nevertheless teachers were strongest when they united in collaboration and unionism. She insisted that teachers' organisations see themselves *as* industrial unions, taking an active role in the emerging politics of unionism in Australia.

Teaching also offered Lucy a way into tertiary studies. As a night student, she put herself through two Bachelor degrees at the University of Sydney in the early 1920s, first in arts and then in economics. Her humanities studies strengthened her orientation towards the wider world, as did her intense interest in economics. As a student and later close friend of left-wing economics academic Robert Francis (R.F.) Irvine (1861–1941), Lucy strengthened her view that capitalist accumulation happened at the expense of working people, which further confirmed her commitment to unionism and public education. At the same time, Lucy was exploring personal social networks, finding friends in the bohemian cultures of Sydney. Her links with visual artists like Irvine's daughter Ysobel and the painter and fellow teacher Rah Fizelle led her to make her home eventually in the same apartment block in The Rocks in which they and many other artists lived. It was a milieu where gender equality was championed as a way of life. Lucy saw herself as a member of this bohemian network until the end of her life.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Lucy Woodcock hinted to Bruce McFarlane in his interview with her during the mid-1960s, concerning Robert Irvine, that she had mixed in bohemian circles, McFarlane, pers. comm., 8 August 2015; Kit Edwards, interview with Heather Goodall, 30 November 2017, at Kit's home at Hardy's Bay; Peter Kirkpatrick, *The Sea Coast of Bohemia: Literary Life in Sydney's Roaring Twenties* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992); T. Moore, 'Australia's Bohemian Tradition' (PhD thesis, History, SOPHI, University of Sydney, 2007); John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites: Intellectual Traditions in Sydney and Melbourne* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1974); Joy Damousi, *Women Come Rally* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994).

There were two structures within which Lucy moved, education and unionism, as well as her personal 'bohemian' orientation. There were more dimensions as well. Lucy must have been interested in the political ferment of the 1920s and the political parties active in that ferment. Some social movements, which had gathered momentum previously, were interrupted by World War I. These included the union movement in Australia, which had already generated the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Just as important for Lucy were the women's movements, which were continuing their demands for a voice for women in parliament and policy. The Peace movement, however, expanded the scope of the social movements of the time. It drew opponents of war into the resistance to newly imposed conscription and then, as the conflict dragged on, it forced Lucy and others to recognise that the slaughter in Europe affected not only Europeans but soldiers and families in colonies around the world. In Russia, the Communist Party emerged from the carnage, defining itself as a revolutionary socialist party that offered visions of new worlds for working people and, sometimes, for women. Yet while such visions generated some hope, the massive displacement in Europe after the war only increased in the 1930s as dictatorships arose and persecutions accelerated. Again, refugees were forced to escape their homes. In Australia, the attempt to build a 'White Australia' through an exclusion policy was being challenged from the outside by Britain and India among many others, and, from the inside, through increasing Aboriginal assertion in the 1920s and 1930s.

Where did Lucy stand in this plethora of progressive movements? There have been important studies of each of these movements and parties. Tracing the life of one individual allows us to see how politically active people might have navigated their commitments in practice. Lucy in fact circulated within and across many of these movements, building strategic alliances and sometimes leveraging her involvement in one movement with her role in another.

Her commitments were not static – her evolving political activism was shaped as the context changed or as she gained knowledge. A very real constraint she faced was that the state had control over her movements while she was employed as a teacher in NSW. Lucy made no secret of her interest in left-wing causes and political activism. In the rising anti-communist hysteria in Australia after World War II, Lucy's desire to travel was seen as suspicious and she was refused permission to travel until her employment

ended. Only when she retired, in December 1953, was she able to leave Australia to attend conferences organised by Peace movements, women's organisations and the United Nations, as well as visit China, Japan, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and western Europe.

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The stories of the many activist women in the 1930s to 1960s period have remained untold. Jessie Street, who was certainly very involved with politicians, diplomats and international institutions, and who left the most extensive diaries, has received the most attention in histories of this period. Yet Jessie was unusual, as noted above, in being an affluent woman of high social status, despite her membership of the ALP and her sustained interest in the Soviet Union. Most other women activists in this period were either more unassuming or less affluent, and so did not attract the media or diplomatic attention that Jessie did.

This book attempts to remedy some of these gaps by tracing Lucy's activism across a number of fields, including her cross-border work in India, China and Japan, as well as her vigorous trade unionism and defence of public education. She insisted that working-class schools needed high-quality progressive educational methods while her refugee and peace advocacy allied her strategically with more bourgeois women's organisations. Lucy's life challenges a commonly held view that the 1950s was a period of conservatism and conformity, when any political expression at all – let alone left-wing expression – was stifled by threats of anti-communist persecution. Her sustained activism, across many movements, gives the lie to that myth.

We discovered Lucy as a transnational activist only because she travelled with Jessie Street to a Peace conference held in India in 1954. In our project, 'Countering the Cold War', we searched for connections between the left-wing women's movements in India and Australia, since archival and oral history evidence recorded these ongoing interactions during the mid-twentieth century. We found that Jessie Street had attended a conference in Madras (now Chennai) in December 1954 in the company of a Miss Lucy Woodcock. Our research into who 'Miss Woodcock' might have been, and why she was travelling in India, led us to the life of this extraordinary activist. While Lucy was very involved in many of the Australian movements we had been researching, she had seldom been

the spokesperson until, in the later years of her life, she became president of the United Associations of Women and the NSW Coordinator of International Women's Day.

As this book demonstrates, Lucy Woodcock's life is evidence of the common and frequent contacts between Australians and Indians, more so than Jessie Street's, important though her work was. Lucy's life foregrounds the active role that non-missionary education took in these connections. We interviewed women in India and Australia and consulted newspapers and archives. The connections between Australian and Indian women have been multiple – political work through international organisations, whether communist, liberal or Christian, and the Peace movement. Education – particularly the teaching of girls and the teaching of literacy skills to adult working women – emerged as a crucial factor. Understanding how women in India and Australia became involved in secondary and tertiary education in this period emerged as an important theme, as did tracing the experience of those women who undertook such interactions as teachers or learners.

A major problem for our research is that Lucy Woodcock chose to leave no personal papers. She appears to have been very careful to conceal facts about her personal life. Most of the archives we have are those of the organisations in which she was active, like the NSW Teachers Federation or the New Education Fellowship, as well as the newspaper reports of her many political speeches. She wrote some political books, *Justice vs Tradition* (1925) and *The Lewis Case and You* (1956), but neither of these offers direct insight into her personal life.<sup>6</sup>

We can glean some ideas from those speeches and archives. They display her political passions, her tenacious campaigns, her energetic and practical contributions to organisations and alliances, and her trenchant, logical campaign writings. There is a caricature in the Teachers Federation journal from 1939 that depicts this tenacity. It shows her speaking energetically as she clutches a microphone – which the cartoonist draws as gasping: 'What? Again?'

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6 Lucy's friend and biographer, Bruce Mitchell (in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*) understood Lucy to have been the principal author of the book *Justice vs Tradition*, published under the collective authorship of the Women's Propaganda Committee.

These give us little insight into Lucy's personal life. Lucy never married, and perhaps she may have become increasingly reticent about her private life because of the intensely scrutinised and policed moral world of public school teaching. Rebecca Jennings has discussed the challenges posed for historians by silences, which exist because many women living unconventional lives faced 'the continued impact of a culture of silence in discouraging women who became aware of their own same-sex desires in the 1930s, '40s and '50s from openly discussing them'.<sup>7</sup>

It was difficult to make unconventional lives public in any way. Women who were involved in same-sex relationships were unable to acknowledge their lovers or their lifestyle on pain of severe social ostracism and, in the case of teachers, the loss of jobs and income. Furthermore, the internalisation of silence may have led to fluidity in personal identification, and Jennings calls for recognition of the 'sophisticated ways that women forged lives for themselves' without making any definitive statements on their own personal lives.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the people to whom historians turn for memories through oral histories are often silent about such aspects of other people's lives. Lucy always avoided discussing her personal life and was never explicit about her lifestyle, other than her reference to 'having bohemian friends'. Yet her lifelong relationships were with women and she left no children or immediate family.

This differentiated her from many women with whom she might have found common ground in political parties. There were few women leaders in the ALP at that time, and women's activism was marginalised. The constraints on women's activism were also disappointingly evident in the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), which promised liberation for women but was structured entirely on heteronormative assumptions.<sup>9</sup> Homosexual men and women were rarely visible in the party and faced patronising toleration. Women's work in the party was often narrowed to ostensible 'women's issues', such as the nurturing of children, the environment of working-class neighbourhoods and domestic economics like the Campaign Against Rising Prices. Women comrades were expected to be married with children and

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7 Rebecca Jennings, *Unnamed Desires: A Sydney Lesbian History* (Clayton, Vic.: Monash University Publishing, 2015), xiv–xxii. Sally Newman had made a similar point about silences in analysing the diaries of Aileen Palmer, a woman to whose family Lucy was very close: 'Silent Witness? Aileen Palmer and the Problem of Evidence in Lesbian History', *Women's History Review* 11, no. 3 (2002): 505–30, doi.org/10.1080/09612020200200333.

8 Jennings, *Unnamed Desires*, 27.

9 Joy Damousi, *Women Come Rally* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994).

limit their activities to supporting their comrade husbands from the home. While this did not deter a number of strong women from demanding – and taking – an active role in the CPA, it was a difficult challenge. Betty Reilly, for example, devoted both to the CPA and to her organising work in Sydney textile factories, had left her husband in Melbourne to take up activist work in Sydney. She designed and made her own flamboyant clothes and took a sequence of men as lovers. While such sexual activity was tolerated among male CPA members, women members did not have the same latitude. Although, surprisingly, Reilly's devotion to the party remained undimmed, she faced harsh criticism from the CPA leadership for her sexual and lifestyle choices.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the interwar period, Lucy took active leadership roles in the NSW Teachers Federation – as elected senior vice president from 1934 till her retirement in 1953 – and the Australian teachers' union (variously known as the Australian Teachers' Federation (ATF) and the Federated State School Teachers' Association (FSSTA) in different periods) in which she served a term as president in 1931–32. All these teachers' unions were deeply masculinist – not only were the state Education Departments committed to maintaining male leadership of schools, but male teachers took dominant roles in the various state teachers' unions. Lucy was bitterly frustrated by many of her male fellow unionists and, as this book demonstrates, she developed strategic alliances in the 1930s with more bourgeois women's movements in order to challenge male teachers' opposition to equal pay for women teachers.

Lucy eventually found some staunch male allies in the national and state teachers' unions. This enabled her to take policy initiatives to defend both married and unmarried women teachers and the implementation of progressive education for all working-class children in public schools. She promoted girls' education but refused to leave the working-class coeducational Erskineville Primary and lower secondary school to teach in more affluent suburbs in academically elite girls' high schools. Although her sympathies and political alliances were clearly in close alignment with those of her CPA teaching colleagues like Sam Lewis and Ethel Teerman in the 1930s, she does not appear to have joined the CPA or any other party.

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10 Betty Reilly articles in *Communist Review*, March 1950, 465 and August 1951, 879; Betty Reilly Papers, AU NBAC N188, NBABL; Clare Anderson, Reilly's niece, interview with Heather Goodall, 2013.

There are, however, some more direct glimpses of the woman whom close friends like Sam Lewis remembered so warmly after her retirement from teaching. During her decade as president of the United Associations of Women, Lucy frequently contributed to the organisation's *Newsheet*. Her concise and often satirical entries show her as an effective polemicist: witty, insightful and hard hitting. Lucy formed a close working relationship with Vivienne Newson, the editor of the *Newsheet*; in Newson's reflections, Lucy becomes visible as the skilled negotiator, able to achieve the outcomes she wanted without leaving others feeling bruised or short-changed. Instead of cutting down her opponents, Lucy could nurture a shared sense of purpose and commitment. Lucy told Newson about many of the extraordinary episodes in her life of organising, struggles and travel. Newson explained in an obituary that she had begged Lucy to write a memoir to capture some of this diversity and drama. Lucy had shrugged off the request, saying she was too busy. Another friend, Kit Edwards, was tutored by Lucy for his matriculation in the early 1960s when he was a teenager. He remembers with some embarrassment that he had asked her directly why she had never married. Lucy had replied – as no doubt many women have to such intrusive questions – that she had 'never met the right man'.

There are as well a series of 18 letters from Lucy to Rewi Alley, the New Zealand socialist and cooperative activist, whom Lucy met in China during her first visit in 1954. Rewi asked her to keep him informed of politics and people in Australia and Lucy wrote to him at least twice a year over the next 10 years. Her letters were kept carefully – unknown to Lucy – in Alley's voluminous archive. They confirm Newson's impressions that Lucy was a witty and well-informed observer of national and international events and a strategic thinker, committed to seeking outcomes through conciliation and communication. She discussed, for example, the Suez conflict, pointing to its fundamental economic roots in the oil trade, and was scathing in her contempt for the 'trigger-happy fellows' on all sides who, she said, 'are always a menace to civilisation'.<sup>11</sup> In Lucy's long correspondence with Alley, her writing was always astute and politically informative, but was also always warm and affectionate, with each letter signed off with 'Much love, Lucy'.<sup>12</sup> Alley valued Lucy's letters, replying: 'I look forward very much to your accounts of how you find things as

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11 Lucy G. Woodcock to Rewi Alley, 1 September 1956. Rewi Alley, Inward Correspondence – Lucy Woodcock, MS-Papers-6533–307, NLNZ.

12 Rewi Alley, Inward Correspondence – Lucy Woodcock, MS-Papers-6533–307, NLNZ.

you go around ...’, although mostly he sent pages of his diary and his poems, all later published.<sup>13</sup> Accounts of Rewi Alley’s life in China have argued convincingly that he chose to remain in China not only because of his deep commitment to the Chinese people but because of the cultural freedom he found there for his homosexuality, a freedom he had not found in his homeland of New Zealand.<sup>14</sup> It may have been this dimension of Alley’s lifestyle that had aligned him to Lucy, consistent with the traces in her writing and the memories of friends suggesting that Lucy may have been in a same-sex relationship for at least some time. This may have been why she was so reserved about her personal life. While there can never be certainty, nevertheless the memories in oral histories may give us insights into her bohemian friendships, her lifelong sorrows and her emotional vulnerabilities.

A final glimpse of Lucy may lie in the rare, unexpected – and now treasured – letters that colleagues received from Lucy when they were experiencing distress, illness, the loss of a loved one or a personal crisis. These warm letters voiced unexpected concern and a surprising degree of personal knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Lucy had clearly kept a nurturing eye on her younger colleagues, though she seldom allowed her concerns to show.

This book raises the issue of gendered constraints acting on all women – particularly working-class and lower middle-class women like Lucy – who engaged in political action. This includes the important constraints imposed on those who challenged the heteronormative privileging of marriage and heterosexual lifestyles across both left- and right-wing political attitudes in Australia. Lucy defied such constraints and carved out a life for herself; her tenacious activism was always both practical and conciliatory.

Lucy Woodcock’s story challenges stereotypes about unionism, teachers, feminism and nationalism. It highlights the fact that an Australian woman in the postwar mid-twentieth century – at a time when there was supposedly little left-wing political activity, especially in the area of gender – could play a sustained role in union and women’s politics.

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13 Rewi Alley to Lucy G. Woodcock, 17 October 1955. From her belongings, which were gathered after her death and have been cared for by Kit Edwards.

14 Anne-Marie Brady, *Friend of China: The Myth of Rewi Alley* (Abingdon: Routledge Curzon, 2002).

15 See, for example, Lucy Woodcock to Audrey McDonald, 1962, when she took leave as secretary of the International Women’s Day committee to give birth to her son, Darren.

It points to her transnational strategies in championing the hopes and possibilities offered to women and working people by social change in India and China. The narrative of her life enables questions about the impact of gender and sexual orientation on activism at home even more than activism in the transnational arena.

This book is organised around the key periods in Lucy's life. The first section, 'Learning – Unions and the World', has just two chapters, giving an overview of Lucy's developing interests as a young, working-class woman living in the shadow of World War I. She threw herself into teaching and immediately began to challenge the limits on women's role in it, taking an active part in forming an effective teachers' industrial union, and exploring bohemianism and economics during her hard-won university degrees.

The 'Scars' section follows, in which all five chapters trace different impacts of the hard Depression years on Lucy and on her strategies in working-class education, in union organisation for women's rights and Equal Pay, and in building alliances with feminist organisations to challenge the ambiguities in the teachers' unions. Yet those years also brought to Lucy the excitement of implementing progressive learning in public schools, the joys of love and community solidarity and the visions of new futures. Next there is another short section, 'Expanding Visions', charting in two chapters the intense impacts of World War II for Lucy – in undermining the rights of women still further but also in foregrounding racism and decolonisation, bringing into view the exciting advances in women's rights being promised in decolonising nations.

Characteristically, Lucy put her new insights into action. 'Crossing Borders' traces in five chapters the next major period of Lucy's life, from the end of World War II until her death in 1968. First, in her final decade as an employed teacher, she challenged the conventional teaching orthodoxies as she campaigned for Peace, for women's Equal Pay and for international communication in education. Then, retired and free from government obstruction, Lucy herself travelled to cross the borders she had seen retarding advances for women and damaging the chances for Peace. During the final years of her life, she worked perhaps even harder to cross cultural borders inside Australia – between settler Australians and Aboriginal Australians – and to continue the campaign for peace, for progressive and informed education in working-class public schools and

for international communication. She brought the world back home to expand the vision of all Australians. The outcomes of these major periods of Lucy's life are charted in the final section, 'Legacy', when some of the continuing questions about her life can be raised, at the same time as reflecting on the great strengths of her visions and the endurance of her achievements.

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