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Hunger

The Depression changed Lucy Woodcock. Until then, she had been an activist within her profession – helping to shape the NSW Teachers Federation and speaking out for women teachers and particularly women *assistant* teachers. Her university education had introduced her to wider circles of ideas and people – drawing her into Sydney’s bohemian world and sharpening her critique of the economic processes shaping Australia. At Darlington, she had experienced the tough life of inner-city poverty but also, as she had done in London, had consolidated her commitment to new learning, with its encouragement of creativity and cultural expression, in working-class schools.

It was not till some tragic events at Cessnock that Lucy’s activism moved outside the school boundaries into the wider community. She found that quality learning was impossible unless hunger among her students was addressed. For the rest of the decade, she battled with poverty, overcrowding as well as plain starvation. Lack of food was the urgent issue, but there was hunger for other things too – for safety, for space and for beauty. She campaigned passionately for these things and they became her focus in the later 1930s.

The coalfields city of Cessnock was already doing it tough before the Depression. Although rural employment in New South Wales had increased by 80 per cent between 1911 and 1929, the emergence of alternative sources of power cut the state’s mining by 18 per cent.¹ These reductions had been bitterly fought at every step and, by 1929, the

1 Annette Salt, ‘Women of the Northern Coalfields of NSW’, *Labour History*, no. 48 (May 1985): 44.

mining unions, having faced decades of dangerous working conditions and poor pay, were militant and angry. The Teerman family came from Broken Hill. Jack Teerman had been a miner in the BHP lead, silver and zinc mines, and exposure to lead had severely damaged his health. Jack, accompanied by his family, and forced to leave mining in the west, came to the coal-mining districts of Elrington and Rothbury near Cessnock to work as a shaft sinker. Unfortunately, the coal dust exacerbated his already damaged lungs. Jack and his wife Ethel were vocal advocates for the miners as they had been at Broken Hill. Jack was the secretary of the Elrington Miners' Lodge from 1925 to 1930, leading three successful strikes. Ethel, like many miners' wives, was not literate but determined to oppose injustice. She joined the Militant Women's Group in Cessnock, which affiliated with the Communist Party in 1927. In August 1928, her description of the poverty faced by miners' families after a decade of mining cuts was reported in a *Labor Daily* article, headed 'Dire Poverty on the Coalfields: How it is affecting the children'.² The women's group went from 'house-to-house' to ask about nutrition status and found that many children suffered chronically from poor diets. They demanded that the authorities recognise that poverty affected whole families. They used World War I experiences to point out the damage done to the nation's health as a whole. The lengthy article focused on overcrowding for families in flimsy structures, poor nutrition and precarious, casualised work.

As the year wore on, the mining companies threatened further pay cuts, which unionists refused to accept. In March 1929, the mine owners locked the workers out to force them to accept lower pay and, to increase the pressure, the owners brought in 'scabs' – non-union strikebreakers whom the companies called 'free labourers'.³ The coalminers refused to concede defeat, which meant they had no income for the impending winter. This coal dispute was symptomatic of company attempts to reduce costs at workers' expense. Waterside workers around the country were already in revolt: in September 1928, the federal government had imposed the 'Dog Collar' Act, intervening in waterside workers' shifts and conditions.⁴ In Melbourne, in November 1928, a wharfie protesting at the use of scabs had been shot dead. In February 1929, in Glebe, timber workers were locked out for refusing a pay cut. The coalminers, embittered after years of struggle, now joined them in their symbolic repudiation of these

2 *Labor Daily* (Sydney), 18 August 1928, based on information from 'E. N. Teerman, organiser'.

3 *Workers Weekly*, 26 April 1929, 2.

4 The *Transport Workers Act 1928* (Cth), assented to 24 September, applied to all sea trade ports.

consequences of the Depression. The leadership of many Miners' Lodges was initially wary of outside assistance but it soon became essential to call on miners' families and wider community support. Ethel Teerman assured the unions that women's auxiliaries were useful while Jack Teerman, advocating a Citizen's Relief Committee, was at pains to explain that none of these tactics would undermine the Strike Committee's leadership.⁵ Jack and Ethel's militancy was heroic – at one stage Ethel led 500 women in a deputation to local shopkeepers, threatening a consumer boycott if they served the police protecting strikebreakers.⁶ In spite of this heroic resistance, the impoverished conditions of mining families made for a bitter winter.

Lucy Woodcock arrived in June 1929, in the middle of that tense winter, as the new assistant girls' teacher at Cessnock Public School. The impact of the lockout on schoolchildren was already visible and, before long, activist coalminers' wives like Ethel Teerman were organising daily soup kitchens to feed the children. All the teachers in Cessnock became heavily involved in the soup kitchen. It was quickly established that children would be fed at the schools and this service would continue in the holidays. The *Newcastle Sun* in August shows some of the schoolchildren being fed.⁷

The conservative NSW Government declared it would not support soup kitchens at schools, citing 'confidential reports that there was no necessity', purportedly from teachers, for additional nutrition. The Citizen's Relief Committee expressed surprise because 'all members of the [school] staff had shown themselves willing to assist the committee in every possible way'. The Cessnock branch of the Teachers Federation, with Lucy an active member, wrote formally to explain that, while financial support for the soup kitchens was a matter for individual teachers, the staff at Cessnock and their union fully supported the Citizen's Relief Committee and the distribution of food to schoolchildren. The Relief Committee emphasised that all teachers had been unstinting in their assistance and it was unlikely that they were the source of criticism. 'We have always felt', the committee continued, 'that we had the support of the teachers.'⁸

5 *Newcastle Sun*, 30 May 1929, 7; *Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder*, 10 September 1929, 19 March 1937, 9; *Workers Weekly*, 26 March 1937, 4.

6 Jean Lewis, 'For a Dancer', a memorial to her mother, Ethel Caroline Lewis. Ethel was the daughter of Jack and Ethel Teerman. Both the older and the younger Ethel at times used 'Nelson' as a middle name (Jack Teerman's brother was called Nelson and it seems to have been a Teerman family name).

7 *Newcastle Sun*, 15 August 1929, 1.

8 *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 4 September 1929, 8.

Relief Work in Cessnock District



School children of a number of schools in the Cessnock district are supplied with soup each day by the Cessnock Relief Committee. This service has been continued during the school holidays.

Figure 3.1: This *Newcastle Sun* photo showed the soup kitchens for the children of locked-out and striking miners.

These soup kitchens were run by the Citizen's Relief Committee, led by Jack Teerman. Lucy and many of her fellow teachers contributed their time to these soup kitchens to feed their hungry students.

Source: *The Newcastle Sun*, 15 August 1929, p. 1. Trove, National Library of Australia.

Like her fellow teachers, Lucy daily faced the real life consequences of the Depression on the bodies of her students, this malnourishment exacerbated by conditions at home as had been described so powerfully by Ethel Teerman, Jack's wife.

The miners continued to refuse the pay cuts and the lockout continued. Despite the Women's Auxiliary and the Citizen's Relief Committee continuing their assistance, conditions worsened.⁹ The miners attempted to organise peaceful demonstrations and established picket lines to deter scab labour at many mines, but the state government tried to intimidate the picketers with armed police. The inevitable happened: on 16 December, as picketers defended their line at Rothbury, the police fired into the crowd and killed a 19-year-old miner, Norman Brown.¹⁰ Shock rippled through the mining community and their supporters in the Cessnock area and ultimately affected the whole country. Despite the mass protests by mining workers, the lockout continued.¹¹ Ultimately, the mine workers were starved into accepting the pay cut and forced back to work early in 1930. They face severely reduced working time and many lost their jobs.

9 *Newcastle Sun*, 2 December 1929, 5.

10 'The Tragic Story of Yesterday', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 17 December 1929, 7.

11 *Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder*, 22 December 1929, 1; *SMH*, 23 December 1929, 11; *Cessnock Eagle*, 24 December 1929, 1.

Lucy was transferred out of Cessnock in February 1930, but she remained in contact with her close friends there and, in particular, the Teermans. The Teermans' daughter, Ethel Caroline, had been studying teaching at Sydney University while Lucy was at Cessnock.¹² But the younger Ethel was as much of an activist as her parents. After she graduated as a teacher she worked in the area from 1930, first at Lithgow and then West Wyalong. She also became active in the Teachers Federation. There she met other young activists, becoming involved in a relationship with Lucy's friend from university Sam Lewis. Lucy was close to Ethel through their common work in raising awareness of the worsening conditions of workers' families and their children during the Depression.

Lucy's transfer in 1930 was also a promotion – she became Headmistress of Girls at Grafton. Lucy was uneasy about her promotion given her long commitment to junior 'assistant' teachers. But in Grafton she found a different type of Depression poverty to that she had seen in Cessnock. Rural agriculture in Grafton was not in as desperate a state as mining in Cessnock, but it was far from the images of idyllic rural prosperity imagined in urban centres. As early as 1928, a severe drought had begun to undermine the families of her students. Lucy's experience of this rural distress was clear during her 1932–33 national role as president of the Federated State School Teachers' Association, when she frequently raised the needs of rural schools for better funding and more appropriate training for teachers.¹³ Lucy sustained this concern when she was transferred to urban schools, often speaking out during her long career to protest about the marginalisation of rural schools and the failure to admit girls to agricultural occupations.

After Grafton, Lucy spent a brief time at Abbotsford and, in August 1933, was transferred to be second-in-charge at Erskineville. A co-educational inner-city school, it catered to primary school students in classes segregated by gender. A headmaster had the final control over the school and Lucy's work. In general, however, as 'Mistress of Girls', Lucy had charge of girls in the infants' and primary schools (attended by both boys and girls), and the girls' high school, in what was sometimes referred to as the Home Science Department. The Erskineville boys generally went

12 Ethel graduated BA and Diploma of Education, majoring in, and later teaching, Latin.

13 *Education*, 11 March 1935, 161.

off to Newtown Technical College (Tech)¹⁴ for their secondary education, but the girls (except for the few who went to the academically selective Sydney Girls' High) stayed on at Erskineville, learning 'Home Science', till they reached the school-leaving age of 14 or until they had completed three years of high school, when they could, if they chose, sit for their Intermediate examination.

Erskineville was a proud, industrial area, but it had been badly affected by the Depression when Lucy arrived. Popularly known as 'Erko', the suburb had, two years earlier, witnessed a bloody battle in Union Street when police tried to evict families who were behind with their rent. Thousands of militant unemployed workers massed in the streets to defend their homes against the police, leaving casualties on all sides. With her two university degrees and her long career in teaching, Lucy could have used this appointment to leverage a much more comfortable posting at an eminent selective high school, like Sydney Girls' High. Instead, Lucy declined a number of attractive promotion offers and stayed working with the community, close both to students and their parents, particularly their mothers. This community role was the one she had always liked best.

What struck her immediately was the condition of the children whose parents were unemployed. Her experience at Cessnock as well as her economics training under Irvine had shifted her to the Left.¹⁵ Lucy believed that the Depression was caused by human financial mismanagement, and she supported expansionary fiscal measures to overcome its effects:

It is no use offering the financial position as an excuse for unemployment and for a starved child endowment. The financial situation is man-made and can be overcome by man.¹⁶

By early 1934, Lucy had drawn other staff members at Erskineville into her concerns about the children. They observed that many children were listless and became increasingly sleepy in the afternoon. Lucy organised a house-by-house survey of the children's families, and realised that these problems related to poverty and poor nutrition. In her speeches at the Federated State Schools Conference in January 1935, Lucy said:

¹⁴ Newtown Technical High School – from which one could only go on to an apprenticeship, not to matriculation or to a university degree. This site is now Newtown Performing Arts High School.

¹⁵ Mitchell, 'Lucy Godiva Woodcock'.

¹⁶ *Australian Worker* (Sydney), 16 January 1935, 5.

In my district, Erskineville, 60 per cent of the people knew no other income but the dole. They never saw butter on the tables, and the mothers were fortunate to have a new dress in six years.¹⁷

Her focal target was the fundamental inadequacy of the dole offered as relief to unemployed workers. With little food in the house, the children often came with very little money to purchase lunches. There was no cafeteria in the school grounds so pupils had to walk across surrounding roads to the nearby shops, where they invariably made poor nutritional choices such as sweets – which gave them a fast ‘sugar hit’, but did not sustain them for the afternoon’s lessons. As Lucy explained, ‘with virtually not enough food to keep their strength up for the afternoon, they soon became drowsy and listless’.¹⁸

Lucy and the Erskineville staff initiated a number of practical strategies. First, they developed a series of lessons to educate the children during schooltime about how to make better food choices at the shops. Lucy then negotiated with each of the shopkeepers where the children spent their lunch money. She persuaded them to provide nutritious foodstuffs and have them on display for the children who came into the shop. In later years, worried by the danger of crossing the busy roads, Lucy changed this approach. The children would order their lunches in the school from a list of healthy recommendations and then two lunch monitors would collect and bring back the lunches.¹⁹ Later, the staff campaigned to have a cafeteria installed at the school, so that children did not have to cross the road at all. Overall, Lucy argued that the dole needed to be supplemented with an increased child endowment payment.²⁰

Lucy took her demands to the federal and state education union conferences in the beginning of 1935, where she called for an increase of the mandatory minimum school-leaving age as well as the level of child endowment. She also wanted the latter to be continued till the minimum

17 *Daily Standard* (Brisbane), 10 January 1935, 5; *Mercury* (Hobart), 11 January 1935, 11; *Northern Miner* (Charters Towers, Qld), 11 January 1935, 4, all reporting the FSSTA Annual Conference Brisbane.

18 Lucy was interviewed at length in 1938, giving more details of the strategies used in 1934 at Erskineville. *SMH*, 12 December 1938, 12.

19 Beverley Bates, interview with Heather Goodall, Devleena Ghosh and Helen Randerson, 1 September 2016.

20 *SMH*, 12 December 1938, 12.

leaving age so that families would not be disadvantaged if children continued at school rather than being sent to work. As she explained, Erskineville was an area in which many casual labourers lived:

Since the depression conditions had grown steadily worse. The older girls were kept from school, to look after the smaller ones while their mothers went to work ... Child endowment in NSW ceased when children reached 14, and before a child reached that age parents pleaded that it be allowed to leave school to 'earn the rent.' ... We go on muddling, and refusing to give the children the heritage which is their right.²¹

There was some ambivalence about this issue among unions with predominantly male members as well as in the Communist Party. These organisations considered child endowment as undermining the basic wage (set by the Harvester Judgement in 1907 as the fair and minimum male wage, on the assumption that it was only male breadwinners who provided for dependents).²² Lucy stressed that the government's obligation was to the whole family and child endowment offered a way to target resources towards children. 'The children were the sufferers', she said, 'under conditions which were appalling in any country calling itself a democracy.'²³

Lucy's call for improved nutrition for children of unemployed families was strongly supported by the NSW Teachers Federation and received wide publicity because it tapped into a general public concern about the ongoing effects of the Depression. The NSW Education Minister D.H. Drummond insisted there was no problem – he cited studies done in Cessnock in 1930 and, during 1935, in four unnamed urban areas, two industrial and two 'better off'. Drummond argued that in 1935 the Education Department doctors found that the 'better off' areas showed poorer nutrition than the industrial areas – although he did not produce the actual reports. The issue kept surfacing and the Sydney press was eager to quote doctors in inner-city hospitals, particularly Dr Harvey Sutton, of the newly established Sydney University School of Public Health. Professor Sutton drew on research into growth patterns in NSW and on a coming survey in Victoria to assert that a quarter of NSW schoolchildren suffered

²¹ *Daily Standard* (Brisbane), 10 January 1935, 5; *SMH*, 13 August 1936, 17.

²² Commonwealth Court of Arbitration and Conciliation, 8 November 1907, before Justice H.B. Higgins.

²³ *SMH*, 20 July 1939, 11.

from growth retardation due to malnutrition. Neither minister nor professor were careful in their references but this dispute reflected a widespread public uneasiness reflected in repeated parliamentary questions. For example, the Sydney City Council made statements about international perceptions of Australia's reputation because of Sutton's assertions.²⁴

Lucy had, by 1935, returned to the role of senior vice president in the NSW Teachers Federation, a role vacated when she was in the United Kingdom and when she had later been president of the Federated State School Teachers' Association. This gave her a highly visible presence so her determination to investigate and improve the conditions faced by the families of unemployed workers had wide repercussions.²⁵ Lucy shaped the work, for example, of the writer Dymphna Cusack, then at Sydney Girls' High, who had spent some time teaching at Broken Hill. Cusack's biographer explained:

Dymphna soon entered Woodcock's sphere of influence. Following her appointment as SGHS School Counsellor in 1936 Dymphna became involved with Lucy Woodcock's social justice agenda, and in particular her field research study reporting on the welfare of children of the unemployed.²⁶

In February 1937, a federal government survey in Melbourne identified malnutrition among schoolchildren, adding fuel to the concerns of the NSW public and teachers.²⁷ In March, a deputation of industrial unions and teachers, including Dymphna Cusack, met with the NSW education minister and argued that there needed to be a careful study of the nutrition levels among children of the unemployed. Disputing Drummond's statements that the Education Department doctors were best placed to survey children's health, Cusack pointed out that local doctors – as well as those like Professor Sutton – had repeatedly expressed concern that

24 *SMH*, 16 October 1935, 13; 17 October 1935, 12; *Labor Daily* (Sydney), 17 October 1935, 7; *Sun* (Sydney), 20 October 1935, 11; *Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder*, 22 October 1935, 6; 25 October 1935, 9; *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 24 October 1935, 10; *Newcastle Sun*, 17 October 1935, 12; 21 November 1935, 13.

25 *SMH*, 13 August 1936, 17.

26 Marilla North, 'Dymphna Cusack and the Hunter: A Reciprocal Impact', in *Radical Newcastle*, eds James Bennett, Nancy Cushing and Erik Eklund (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2015), 144–51.

27 *Australian Worker* (Sydney), 17 February 1937, 8.

children of the unemployed were going hungry.²⁸ Drummond continued to deny the necessity but agreed to survey the children living in coalfields to assess nutrition levels.²⁹

The survey dragged on. Dymphna Cusack and Lucy Woodcock continued their campaign for careful investigation and fast, practical remedies. They found some important arenas for their concerns in the series of conferences held by the NSW Teachers Federation in June 1938, which held sessions in each of the major cities in coastal and inland NSW. The theme of the conferences was 'Education for a Progressive, Democratic Australia'. Outlining the goals of these conferences for the Newcastle press, Cusack argued that attention to health and nutrition were a crucial part of education reform for a stronger democracy:

The present system of annual medical and dental examination (in country districts they are not even annual!) is wholly unsatisfactory and one of the most important demands of the conference is the establishment of efficient health services, and, where necessary, provision of meals and milk services.³⁰

Lucy's major contributions to the conferences were based on the conditions of the unemployed, in nutrition, housing and environmental health and overall amenity. In September 1938, in Wollongong, for example, Lucy argued for greater attention to these issues, insisting that there was:

a lot of malnutrition in N.S. Wales. This was not due to ignorance, but to the low standard of living. Everyone was entitled to a decent standard and all should cooperate in seeing that slums and poverty were wiped out.³¹

Finally, in December 1938, the results of the survey of Cessnock schools were released. Drummond offered many media interviews, arguing that the average of nutrition status in the three schools in Cessnock was not below the state's average. However, the crucial figures compared the three schools – one of which, Cessnock West, was in a wealthy area, the second in a middle income area while the third, Cessnock East, drew its pupils primarily from the adjacent land where unemployed workers' had set up makeshift camps. The results showed that, though the average percentage

28 *Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder*, 9 March 1937, 2.

29 *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 8 March 1937, 9.

30 *Ibid.*, 8 June 1938, 4.

31 *South Coast Times and Wollongong Argus*, 30 September 1938, 17.

of malnutrition in all three schools was slightly higher than the state's average, individually, malnutrition was much higher in the school adjacent to the unemployed workers' camps – at 2.5 per cent.³² The arguments made by the Cessnock teachers and the coal unions in 1929 and Lucy Woodcock's survey in Erskineville in 1934 were vindicated. The children of unemployed workers were indeed undernourished.

Drummond had by this time – perhaps partly to strengthen Australia's national reputation for fitness with the prospect of looming war – agreed to support better nutrition and physical fitness in schools.³³ The worst of the Depression had passed and, with more jobs available, there were more resources available for families. Nevertheless, the NSW Education Department only supported the provision of free milk to schools, benefiting NSW dairy producers, a law enacted in 1941.³⁴ Lucy Woodcock, however, had argued for the provision of lunches, not just milk, and, more fundamentally, for an increase in unemployment benefits and child endowment to improve overall nutrition for children and for their families. There is irony, therefore, in the enduring association of her name with the free school milk program. In fact, in 1942, Lucy protested about the inept and discriminatory way in which this poorly conceived policy was being implemented.³⁵

Lucy never lost sight of that fundamental hunger – the very basic lack of food – which haunted her years at Erskineville and Cessnock. In this period, anxiety about war escalated. It was not only about the battle in distant Europe – news of which was brought to Australia in the 1930s by refugees. Anxiety was more acute about events closer to home: the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the continuous 'incidents' that followed led to the Australian Chinese community calling for support for mainland China. In August 1937, the Japanese invasion of northern and coastal China began with the terrible battle of Shanghai and by December they were at the gates of Nanking. The disturbing news about the bombing of Chinese communities in the port cities reached Australia. Australian racism meant, however, that condemnation of the Japanese was not usually

32 *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 16 December 1936, 11; Drummond had used the statistic misleadingly (reported in *Newcastle Sun*, 16 December 1938, 7) when he stated that he was explicitly excluding the children of the unemployed when he asserted that the average level of malnutrition in Cessnock schools was the same as that for the whole state.

33 *Newcastle Sun*, 16 December 1938, 7.

34 *SMH*, 22 February 1941, 13.

35 *Sun* (Sydney), 11 April 1942, 2.

accompanied by compassion for the Chinese victims, nor for the continuing terrible casualties of the Depression. When a member introduced a motion at a meeting in August 1937 arguing that the Teachers Federation should express support for the Chinese victims of the Japanese bombing and protest to the Japanese Consul General, Lucy added:

members must not forget, while expressing sympathy with the Chinese people, that thousands of children in New South Wales were suffering under a more refined cruelty than bombing ... the children of the unemployed.³⁶

Yet hunger for food had not been the only issue that made Lucy step outside the school fence at Erskineville. When she first arrived in 1933, she had realised that the severely crowded conditions endured by many unemployed families also took a toll on their lives and health.

One of her students in the 1930s was Betty Makin, who was born in 1926 and had always lived in the area around Erskineville. She had grown up in Waterloo, attended primary school at Redfern Public and high school at Erskineville under Lucy. Her adult life was spent in a Housing Commission house in Redfern.

This is how she described her 1930s childhood in the area:

Most people that were born in Waterloo or Redfern usually married women within a mile around because they never went any further. They worked there because there were heaps of factories and you knew everyone as you were growing up. Both my mother and father were born and grew up in this area.

I was born in 1926 and grew up in the Depression years. Mum was having babies and Dad wasn't getting any more money at work [but at least he always *had* work]. You didn't get any child endowment in those days if your husband was working. We always had Nanna living with us and lots of aunts and uncles who couldn't afford to live anywhere else. The kids were just piled into beds, on floors, anywhere we could put them. I was the second one out of nine children.

36 *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 27 September 1937, 7.

Without my Nanna, I don't know how we would have survived. Nanna was blind, but I'll never forget her sitting washing socks ... I'd chop the wood and boil the copper. At that time, we had our gas cut off ... When Nanna's little pension came in, we paid the gas bill. Everyone in the area helped each other and if your gas had been cut off, then someone would cook at their place, or they had that penny-in-the-slot gas then, and you'd run around there and say 'Could I just put a shilling in your slot?'

... The boys never wore shoes and the girls had sandshoes. Mum had to buy them in turns and if it wasn't your turn, you had to put cardboard in the bottom. On hot, sunny days, when they had black tar footpaths, if it was bubbling, you'd have to walk along the kerb because your feet would be burning. But this happened to every family, not just ours.³⁷

Betty Makin's description of the overcrowded home in which she grew up and lived for much of her early married life was not unusual. Lucy was acutely aware of the impact of housing on the children at her school and on their mothers. From 1937, Lucy was involved in the debate around the plans to build model housing in Erskineville, known as the 'Erskineville Housing Scheme'. This scheme produced 16 blocks of flats and the Lady Gowrie childcare centre on parkland at Erskineville, a housing scheme criticised in later years as isolating and constricting.³⁸ At that time, however, many of the old, rented Victorian workers' cottages and terraces in Erskineville were dilapidated, damp and in need of extensive repairs. Lucy considered that the new flats provided a healthier, more pleasant environment for families.

In 1939, at a meeting at Erskineville Town Hall, in a discussion on housing conditions and unemployment, Lucy described living conditions at Erskineville as 'appalling':

Prize stock were housed better than the people of Erskineville ...
The houses had outlived their usefulness, and should be demolished.
They were patched until they could be patched no longer.³⁹

37 Betty Makin, quoted in Mitchell, *The Matriarchs*, 46–47.

38 *SMH*, 24 August 1937, 11; 27 August 1937, 12; City of Sydney, 'History of Erskineville Oval', 27 October 2016, www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/sydneys-history/people-and-places/park-histories/erskineville-oval, accessed 18 October 2018; Betty Makin, 'Betty Makin's Redfern', Documentary for CTV1, DarrenGrayManagement, uploaded to YouTube, 17 July 2011, in two parts, youtu.be/rY9PEHAqDGo and youtu.be/tYfTu2S9Auo, accessed 18 October 2018.

39 *SMH*, 20 July 1939, 11; *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill), 20 July 1939, 5; *Wellington Times*, 20 July 1939, 1; *Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*, 20 July 1939, 1.



Figure 3.2: Erskineville was a working-class industrial suburb that had been badly affected by the Depression.

This Fairfax photograph from 1939 gives a glimpse of the environments faced by many of Lucy's pupils. 'Backyards in Erskineville in Sydney's inner-west, 15 December 1939'.

Source: Metro Media, *Sydney Morning Herald* picture by Tom Fisher, FXB306610.

She pointed out that she had been witness to the conditions in Erskineville in the past seven years as headmistress of the Erskineville Public School, saying she was appalled that any children should have to live under these conditions of poverty in any country calling itself a democracy. Erskineville had the highest birth rate in New South Wales and, therefore, she claimed, its need for redress should be prioritised over other districts. Like Betty Makin, she used shoes as a symbol of distress to explain the corroding effects of poverty. The press reported:

[Lucy] felt hurt when she offered a child in her school second-hand clothing, a child denied good boots and wool clothing. You could not get a first-class personality out of second-hand clothing and she felt that, while alleviating the child's distress, she was destroying its pride.⁴⁰

40 *SMH*, 20 July 1939, 11.

Following this meeting, she spoke on national radio on 28 August 1939 in ‘Slum Clearance and its Problems’, the first of an Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) series called ‘Burning Questions’ in which speakers first spoke separately on opposing sides of various arguments and then in debate. The ABC hoped to make radio interactive by encouraging groups of listeners to take up contentious issues. Lucy’s speech, ‘Living in the Slums’, drew directly on her knowledge of Erskineville. A week later, N.H. Dick spoke on ‘Housing Reform – the problem surveyed’. The next week the two speakers met to discuss ‘What should we do first?’ and answer each other’s questions.⁴¹

Lucy’s concerns with the overcrowded and impoverished state of housing in Erskineville led to her determination that public education for working-class children should take place in surroundings that were both safe and beautiful, to stimulate a desire for learning. She wanted children to value their education and enjoy their time at school. She wanted above all ‘to give the working man’s child a chance to be educated’.⁴²

Lucy’s views on the importance of the physical environment had been shaped both by her teaching experience and also from the ideas she encountered from R.F. Irvine’s work in urban design, the influence of the New Education Fellowship (NEF) and the Children’s Library movement (see Chapter 4) and, perhaps, above all by her many close friendships with creative artists.⁴³ She wanted to improve urgently the physical environment of public schools not only so working-class children would value their education, but also so its value would be better recognised by outsiders.

41 *SMH*, 9 August 1939, 10; 23 August 1939, 9. The second and third ‘Burning Questions’ were to be ‘Defence vs Social Services’ and ‘Australia and the Refugees’. This was clearly the forerunner of the ABC program of today known as *Q&A* that uses email and twitter as well as audiences to bring questions to the speakers as well as to make a running commentary on the points raised. The *Daily Mercury* in Mackay, Queensland, carried a report on 29 August 1939 (p. 9) but only repeated the earlier ABC press release about the overall series, making no comment on the first event, Lucy’s talk, which had gone to air the night before.

42 *Education*, 28 January 1939, 76.

43 Rah Fizelle, Thea Proctor and George Lambert were close friends whom Lucy spoke of during her interview with Bruce McFarlane, the biographer of R.F. Irvine. McFarlane, pers. comm. to Heather Goodall, 8 August 2015.

As Lucy explained in a speech about ‘Education for the Future’ in Wollongong on August 1938, the consequences of failing to improve school environments were dire. The only way to ameliorate this was to improve the standard of living and eliminate poverty. Her warning was stark:

War hangs over us – poverty breeds war.⁴⁴

Earlier in 1938, the Department of Education had appointed Lucy and Rev. C.T. Parkinson, a fellow NEF member and former principal of the King’s School Parramatta, to inspect NSW schools. She communicated her findings to a number of key meetings. In June, at a Sydney meeting of the NEF, Lucy described the positive effect that pieces of pottery, pictures, paintings of the school and strips of garden had on the children of Erskineville Public School. ‘Sydney schools had not been planned as schools’, she said. ‘Winds swept through them, and sunshine never reached many classrooms. Their builders had looked for flat pieces of land, not sites for schools. If they had been planned there would have been no trouble about heating them in winter.’⁴⁵

Lucy believed that children needed to respond emotionally to school buildings. Many playgrounds were small and made of asphalt without grassy spaces where children could play comfortably. Lucy’s ideal school had unique characteristics as well as ample space for recreation and sport with trees and gardens. It would be the centre of its students’ lives and have no more than 600 children. She considered the current classrooms too small and hoped that, in future, since children and teachers spent so much time in schoolrooms, that they would be planned by the best architects. Walls and floors should be painted in restful colours to give ease and comfort, not in the common, cold and uninviting grey prevalent in NSW classrooms. She thought that school desks were relics of the past and commented favourably on the Canadian movable desk, which she thought might well be copied in Australia. She wanted most of the heavy schoolroom furniture to be scrapped and schoolroom material stored in presses. She was certain that children, once introduced to beautiful rooms with curtains, bright pottery, surrounded by gardens, would react favourably to such an environment. According to her, every school should possess an adequate assembly hall, rooms for music, art, physical culture

⁴⁴ *Illawarra Mercury*, 30 September 1938, 3.

⁴⁵ *SMH*, 28 June 1938, 11.

and toilet requisites.⁴⁶ It was around this time that Lucy planted an oak tree in the otherwise barren playground of Erskineville Public School to provide the students with some shade.⁴⁷

At the August 1938 Wollongong session of the Teachers Federation Conference on Education for a Progressive, Democratic Australia, Lucy introduced a successful motion:

That the conference is in favour of (1) provision of properly equipped playing fields with an appropriate area with the view to possible expansion; (2) provision of gymnasias in all schools for recreation and for general physical training; (3) provision of suitable public playing spaces, especially [in] congested areas; (4) provision of satisfactory sport equipment in all schools; (5) training of special teachers for physical training; (6) provision of adequate facilities for training of children in hygienic practices, provision of hygienic sanitary accommodation and disposal of garbage (school); (7) appointment of permanent regional medical staffs to include doctors, dentists, nurses and the necessary clerical assistance for them; (8) erection of buildings to accord with modern educational standards, on suitable sites, and the provision of up-to-date equipment, including text books, materials and libraries.⁴⁸

In speaking to this motion, she stressed that standards of living had to rise to ameliorate the malnutrition of children:

War hangs over us – poverty breeds war. In an industrial community such as the one in which they were situated, they should conserve and preserve their rights to a decent standard of living. They should agitate for improved conditions at their schools. They should insist on 10 acres as a playing area, not the two acres as at present exists in the metropolitan area, where children cannot run – all they can do is stand and stare. Schools should be equipped with up-to-date furniture, with new type of classrooms.⁴⁹

46 *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 9 August 1938, 5.

47 Gloria Phelan, *Women in Action in the Federation: A Series of Articles* (Sydney: NSW Teachers Federation, 1981), 8.

48 *Illawarra Mercury*, 30 September 1938, 3.

49 *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

Mr E.C. Barton, who seconded the motion, agreed: ‘An education system should be devised which would train the child to live usefully and happily, and no child could so live without a strong body.’⁵⁰

Some have argued that the attention paid by Lucy⁵¹ and others to school conditions and equipment diverted the NSW Teachers Federation from its campaign for improved wages and broader social change.⁵² Lucy’s career, however, demonstrates that she was driven by her passion for equity for working-class schools and progressive education so as to shape active, independently minded citizens. Her campaign was not just to end hunger for food but to give working-class people – and children – access to safety, space and beauty, to the high-quality and inspirational learning environments available to the wealthy.

50 Ibid.

51 The editorial of *Education* in January 1938 was almost identical, word for word, to a number of her speeches, suggesting she had taken a major hand in its drafting.

52 John Michael O’Brien, ‘The NSW Teachers Federation, 1957–1975’ (PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, 1985), 121–22.

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