

15

Young in Hope

This last chapter will address themes raised in earlier chapters and then return to finish Lucy's story with some of her own words.

Biography as method

This book has demonstrated for us the strengths of biographical method. Following one person's life has allowed us to pull together the threads from diverse movements and see some of the interconnections between them. In Lucy's life, this means her work with Jewish refugees in the 1930s and her work with Chinese Australians and students in the 1960s can be understood in terms of her commitments to economic justice, education, feminism and peace. This quality of intersecting movements has not been shown in studies of one movement or another, which characteristically focus on what differentiates movements rather than what draws the same person to more than one. Nor do movement studies shed light on those who do not seek the limelight for themselves. Those people who do the hard back-room work but do not tell their own story in some other way are also neglected. But following one person's life allows an insight into how various movements overlapped and diverged, who was in all and who was in only one, how all were influenced by wider political currents.

Limits of memory: Ageing and sexual orientation

This book has also, however, demonstrated that there are limits to memory and personal experience as we try to use oral history to investigate the people of the past. Two important factors have limited people's insights into Lucy's life. The first is that ageing separated her from many of those she worked

with in her later life. The women who were young activists during the 1960s knew her only as a 70-year-old who filled what seemed to be figurehead roles. They have proved to have very little understanding of her long, active and passionate life.



Figure 15.1: Lucy Woodcock with Sam Lewis, Ethel Teerman Lewis and a friend at Sam's farewell event.

Source: NSW Teachers Federation archives, undated photograph P7579.

The second is that Lucy herself may have limited what people could know about her. She had faced the constraints of living an unconventional life – living as a single woman and possibly in same-sex relationships – in a time and culture when ‘spinsterhood’ and same-sex relationships were both condemned. She was a senior teacher, so she faced the judgemental attitudes not only of her fellow activists but of her state employer as well as those of colleagues and parents. She was intensely guarded about her private life. The people who have proved to have most insight have been those people who came to know her as teacher, and who then developed a friendship with her through that earlier one-on-one interaction.

Transnational vision

Throughout this book, Lucy's global vision has been repeatedly demonstrated. In her interests, her knowledge and her vision for the future she looked far beyond the borders of Australia for her goals and admired examples of achievement. This imaginative transnationalism had been evident from her earliest career in her awareness of the wider world. Characteristically, Lucy demonstrated a critique of the Europe of racist and religious pogroms and of ‘tradition’ – which she regarded as a deadweight. Her vision became more engaged with women of Asia, probably from her involvement with the New Education Fellowship from 1937 and certainly from 1946. She saw the decolonising countries as leading the way towards the recognition of civil and economic gender equality – of women as citizens. For Lucy – it was as *global* citizens. Yet while she saw the decolonising countries as inspirational in gender equality, she saw Asia and Africa as equal partners, rather than as distant leaders, in the as-yet unfinished project they all shared of the quest for progressive education

and for international peace. Her view went far beyond nationalism or the celebration of any one nation state. Instead, hers was a vision in which cultural differences were recognised and respected, but where borders posed no barriers. It was a vision of a world where peaceful negotiation and mutual understanding would resolve conflict. This was the vision that inspired all her campaigns till the end of her busy life.

Gender, travel and activism

Yet Lucy – even as a single professional woman – was still dependent on her employment to sustain not only herself but, for many years, an aged mother. Family networks could be important too for safety and security, but Lucy had none that would assist her even in Britain, and certainly none outside the Anglophone world. So, for reasons of income, safety and – in the Cold War – state intervention, travel for her was seldom possible.

This was just as much a difficulty for her as it might have been for women of her limited means who were the carers of children. It was even less possible for working women to travel, and the few who did were those, like Betty Reilly and others, who could find occasional organisational funds for conferences.

The means of transnational mobility that were available to working-class men, such as seafaring or military service, were largely unavailable to women in the period of Lucy's lifetime. Women might travel as the wives of mobile men, whether merchants or migrants, but otherwise employment was necessary. The cross-border employment available to lower middle-class women in the period of Lucy's life, 1889 to 1968, was sometimes as nurses but most often as teachers. In this lay the importance of education in offering some structures by which women might become mobile across borders. While early mobility in this role might be associated with Christian missionary work, as it was with Eleanor Rivett, there were others who travelled in association with other institutions, such as another focal subject of our project, Leonora Gmeiner, who was recruited by Theosophists to teach in India in the 1920s. Lucy Woodcock was able to use teaching exchange in 1927 to structure her year in London.

This period in the early twentieth century saw the expansion too of new political organisations with international networks, notably the Communist Parties but also the international governance bodies like the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the League of Nations,

with both of which Lucy interacted. Each of these – the political networks and the governance networks – circulated information around the circuits of an expanding press and cable infrastructure, relaying both news and opinions around the globe. By mid-century, radio, film and the new air transport were, as Lucy was very aware, intensifying the circulation of images, ideas and people.

Even with her limited access to overseas travel through much of her life, Lucy took all opportunities available to her to learn about and interact with international networks. Whether it was through migrants like the Robinovitz family, refugees like the Fink family, through conference attendees like Kapila Khandvala and Mithan Lam or through students like those she was tutoring in the 1960s, Lucy learned through all of her friendships to develop her knowledge of and interaction with networks that stretched far beyond Australian shores. Letters remained for her a crucially important means of communication and learning. Her long and warm correspondence with Rewi Alley gave her insights of his experiences at the same time as it allowed her to clarify her own. She was able to maintain contact with Kapila Khandvala as well as with Jessie during her long periods in London, and through them made new friendships like that with Reba Lewis in 1956.¹

Transnational identity, knowledge and imagination are both shaped by gender and change over time. While Lucy was not one who took political action in places outside Australia, she brought all her knowledge and experience of the transnational world into the visions she had for Australia's future.

Legacies: Equal Pay 1963

Lucy made an enormous and sustained contribution to the campaign for Equal Pay for all women, across Australia, in all areas of work. She began campaigning on behalf of teachers in the earliest days of the NSW Teachers Federation from 1918. Then, from 1932, when the NSW Government legislated for the dismissal of women teachers who were married, Lucy opened up another front on that score too, which was only won when the Act was rescinded in 1947. As well as her work at the state level, Lucy had continued to work at the national level for teachers. This meant she

1 Lucy Woodcock to Rewi Alley, 14 March 1956, Rewi Alley Papers, MS-Papers-6533-307, NLNZ.

was acutely aware of the continuing discriminatory attitudes to married women in all states and, at times, among women unionists as well as men. So it was a very long campaign, and when Lucy made her first speech to the United Associations of Women (UA) in 1954 she made that point:

No-one knows better than I do how long it takes to achieve reforms. For 30 years, the Teachers Federation has fought for equal pay, but it was not until 1952 that the women teachers' pay was raised from 80% to 85% of the male rate.²

In 1963, the strategic incremental increases in women teachers' wages led to parity with men. Lucy hailed it as a victory, assessing the achievement as worth fighting for. Nevertheless, she made it very clear that she regarded it as only a small step along the way. She wrote for the UA:

The next step is the implementation of the principle in all avenues of employment. This will not take 50 years, for the winds of change have brought many new factors into the situation: (1) public opinion has changed; (2) the attitude of male trade unionists is different; (3) women themselves are – numerically – more active; (4) the wholesale recognition of the principle in the newly developing countries.³

She pointed out the other battles still to be fought, including 'protective' discrimination, but continued:

Equality of opportunity will be the hardest nut to crack for there is resolute resistance to women as equal partners in world affairs. When women sit in on the policy-making conferences of all nations, then it may be said that the opportunities for women are equal. A long view, indeed!⁴

Lucy was as always generous in giving most credit to those women – the 'Brave Souls' – who had been her colleagues in this long struggle.

The first champions of equality are often forgotten – and yet they are so worthy of remembering! Among them were Miss Elizabeth Fordyce, Miss Rose Symonds, Miss Edith Symonds, Miss Margaret Swann, Miss Rebecca Swann, Miss Effie Macintosh, Miss Jess Rose – these and many others carried on the fight.⁵

2 UA *Newsheet*, March 1954, 1.

3 Ibid., February 1963, 4.

4 Ibid.

5 *WA Teachers' Journal*, May 1963, 106; *Our Women* (UAW), March–May 1964, 26.

She added even earlier names to these when she wrote again in 1964: Anne, Kate and Belle Golding, Dame Mary Gilmore, Bertha Lawson and many others.

She wrote again about the way the world had changed to recognise the justice of the call for Equal Pay:

The world itself after World War II changed in its attitude to women. Newly emerging independent nations wrote equality into their Constitutions. The UN Status of Women Commission was established. The Australian Council of Trade Unions and the International Labor Organisation interested themselves in the claims of women ... The year 1963 brought partial victory, but much still remains to be done to ensure full recognition of women in the community.⁶

The Union of Australian Women offered her this tribute in 1960, republished in the *UA Newsheet*:

A graceful tribute has come to our president from the Union of Australian women, who wrote to thank her for her outstanding contribution in the fight for Equal Pay and for the many years she has spent in untiring work in the interests of women.⁷

Working-class schools and public education

Another important area of her legacy is her sustained commitment to progressive education in working-class schools. As senior vice president over many years in the NSW Teachers Federation and with her refusal to leave Erskineville Public School, Lucy was a fearless advocate for working-class communities. She demanded better food and unemployment relief during the Depression, better housing in the community's existing location and good-quality, highly resourced education for all working-class children – boys as well as girls, Aboriginal and immigrant children as well as locally born – and facilities for lifelong learning for mature women as well as men. Lucy's commitment to progressive education was always engaged with her socialist economic analysis and commitment to working-class communities. In 1962, a speaker from the Teachers Federation addressed the UA and said of Lucy:

6 *Our Women* (UAW), March–May 1964, 26.

7 *UA Newsheet*, July 1960, 4.

During her long career as a teacher, Miss Woodcock had been a shining light, not only to her fellow teachers, but to all the children who had been her pupils over the years. An inspiration to all who worked with her, she would always be remembered by the Teachers' Federation for her forthrightness and courage, in the face of all opposition.⁸

The recognition of Lucy's energy and courage was a theme of the speeches at the Teachers Federation when Lucy retired in 1953. Then Federation President Harry Heath, the anti-communist campaigner (who had opposed Lucy's tenure), said that she had 'immense energy'. Lucy's tenacious activity – perhaps a sign of her determination and commitment rather than any innate 'energy' – was demonstrated many times over throughout her life. She attended countless meetings, wrote hundreds if not thousands of letters for many organisations, made speeches, took part in deputations to state and federal politicians and was a delegate to many conferences.⁹

Yet, as she herself said, 'I am very good at giving but not at taking'. She made sure that the schoolchildren at Erskineville had enough to eat and warm clothes – and shoes – to wear in the winters of the Depression. But she never took credit or sought the limelight. Nor did she ever put herself into the headlines deliberately – but if she ended up there, she never took a backward step! Rather than the spotlight, she preferred to make practical, real progress – real change.

The NSW Minister for Education R.J. Heffron spoke at the Federation retirement dinner where he paid tribute to Lucy's courage and intelligence. He knew her, as he admitted, 'from the other side of the table' as a committed unionist. Yet he commented many times on how much courage it had taken to do the things she had done – to stand up for the Federation, to study for her degrees at night school, to demand equal pay, to insist on decent housing and childcare for working-class mothers and to defend older sisters' rights to school and training.¹⁰

8 Ibid., March 1962, 1. Sheila Cleary, Leading Equal Pay advocate, Teachers Federation.

9 Transcript of speeches from Lucy Woodcock's Teachers Federation Farewell, on her Retirement in December 1953. UAW Files, Extracts *Education*, 3 February 1954, 2, AU NBAC, Z236, NBABL.

10 Ibid.

Visions of a teacher's role: As courageous – and constructive – leader

Sam Lewis, her friend and close ally on the Federation, spoke warmly at this dinner about her many tenacious campaigns, and pointed out how fine a negotiator she was – and how widely respected. She was, he explained, the only person in the Federation who would be listened to by all sides with attention and respect. He reserved perhaps his greatest praise for her work for peace:

She championed the cause of world peace when peace was being treated as a dirty word. She has dared to work so that the children of Erskineville, Australia and the world should live free from war and pestilence.¹¹

Lucy herself stressed leadership – she used the word many times in her short speech in response – insisting that this was the teachers' responsibility. She had said this in Kempsey in 1940 when she spoke to a large gathering of North Coast teachers at a regional Federation conference.¹² Again, at her 1953 Federation farewell, she spoke directly to all teachers:

You are leaders! You are the people who make the way forward, not the way backwards. You should take the lead and keep the lead ... As a teacher, I have never retreated from public life! Teachers must lead if they are going to get something for education!¹³

She had taken risks to lead on so many issues because, she explained, 'I have retained my fundamental conviction of the worth of the common man. I have believed in him fully ... I know he can do mighty things if given a chance!'¹⁴

11 UA *Newsheet*, April–May 1968, 2.

12 *Macleay Chronicle*, 16 October 1940, 2.

13 Transcript of speeches from Lucy Woodcock's Teachers Federation Farewell, on her Retirement in December 1953. UAW Files, Extracts *Education*, 3 February 1954, 2, AU NBAC Z236, NBABL.

14 *Ibid.*



Figure 15.2: Opening of the Lucy Woodcock Hall, Erskineville Public School. Heather Goodall with Kit Edwards, 2016.

Source: Helen Randerson.

View from today?

Given the breadth of Lucy's activism, it is unhelpful to look at her work from the perspective of any one 'movement', but it is important to realise how she foreshadowed many contemporary activist trends. Her championing of economic justice for women was rewarded with some success during her lifetime, with the final stage in the incremental granting of 'equal pay' in 1963 in the New South Wales Public Service.¹⁵ Lucy had not wanted gradualist approaches – she had often said that there should be immediate change rather than incremental advances. But she was also such a practical and determined leader, with a view to the long struggle, that she always sought to recognise the most minor of successes and plan pragmatic ways to develop them further. There is no doubt that the continuing struggle for gender justice could draw strength from Lucy's multifaceted legacy.

A consummate negotiator and strategist, Lucy was nevertheless uncompromising in her defence of working-class communities and public education. Similarly, the demands Lucy made for a recognition of decolonisation and an end to racism have been partially recognised in the developments of feminist theory – towards socialist feminism

15 Lucy Woodcock, 'Brave Hearts Led Bid for Equality', *Our Women*, March–May 1964, 26.

and intersectionality – where Lucy would undoubtedly have felt more comfortable than she did with many of the more right-wing, racially hierarchical and bourgeois of the feminist organisations with which she made alliances.

While she did not identify the ‘personal as political’ in the ways that the emerging women’s liberation movement was doing in the later 1960s, Lucy had nevertheless made sustained demands for recognition of women’s rights to personal safety and dignity. She had campaigned, with Lotte Fink and others, for sexual safety for women, for sexual education for all schoolchildren and for safe and freely accessible contraception. She had insisted women should have equality of access with men in all hotels, with no more humiliating ‘ladies lounges’ and, in the hotels in the bohemian community where she chose to live, she and others had made that a reality. And, in the pages of the *UA Newsheet*, she demonstrated repeatedly that women had the right and the capacity to embrace complex economic and legal arguments affecting their employment, lifestyle and legal conditions.

Where she did not act in any public way was to challenge the pressures on women to live a heterosexual domestic life. Her deep silence on her own personal choices was a successful protective shield throughout her lifetime, but it was the one area where she perhaps chose self-protection rather than risk.

Young in hope ...

But by the 1960s, Lucy herself had recognised how great a gulf age was creating between herself and the younger activists. She wrote about a demonstration and forum held by the Trainee Teachers’ Association in 1962. These were young teachers who had in Lucy’s early career been thrust into the classrooms with no training and called ‘Assistant Teachers’. In 1962 they were receiving better training but little recognition. Lucy had enjoyed supporting their demands and was humbled by their interest.

At the Town Hall Meeting, I was particularly impressed with the high quality of the speeches made by the students, especially by the young women. Miss Cathy Bloch and Miss Sally Kerr helped tremendously to lift the tone of the meeting. I felt very proud of these young women and others; for so long there have been regrettably few women to take up the challenge.

The invitation of the young people for me to take a seat on the platform was a gracious tribute to someone whom so few knew but who was as young as they were in the hopes and aspirations of the students to achieve their objectives.

L.G. Woodcock¹⁶

Perhaps Lucy's defining qualities were her warmth as well as her courage and tenacity, suggested in the caricature of her speaking at the Teachers Federation, so the microphone is gasping, 'What? Again?'

Lucy closed her final speech to the Teachers Federation by telling the members how much she had relished her time with the union:

I, with you, have shared in that great work.

It has been a very happy time and I have enjoyed every moment of it.

I have enjoyed the fights very much indeed!

And I think we have done a lot together.¹⁷

16 UA *Newsheet*, June 1962, 2–3.

17 Transcript of speeches from Lucy Woodcock's Teachers Federation Farewell, on her Retirement in December 1953. UAW Files, Extracts from *Education*, 3 February 1954, 2, AU NBAC Z236, NBABL.

This text is taken from *Teacher for Justice: Lucy Woodcock's Transnational Life*, by Heather Goodall, Helen Randerson and Devleena Ghosh, published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.