

4. Women's International leadership

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Leading the world

Internationalism as both ideal and practice exerted a powerful appeal for Australian women activists in the twentieth century even as they moved to the forefront of world history in winning full political rights at the national and State levels at home. These developments were interrelated. Australian women initially presented themselves to international audiences—and were received—as leaders of the world's women, as pioneers of democratic rights, able to report on their unique experience as politically empowered women and show the way forward.²

In 1893, Catherine Spence and Margaret Windeyer joined hundreds of American and European women gathered at the astonishingly large Congress of Women, held in the Woman's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition (or World Fair) in Chicago, where Spence gave a talk on 'Effective Voting' (or proportional representation). She also attended the International Conference on Charities and Corrections, as a representative of the SA State Children's Council. Her visit was part of an American lecture tour during which she addressed hundreds of audiences across the United States and made many new friends.

'To that celebrated journalist, poetess and economic writer, Charlotte Perkins Stetson [Gilman], who was a cultured Bostonian, living in San Francisco', Spence wrote in her autobiography, 'I owed one of the best women's meetings I ever addressed. The subject was "State Children and the compulsory clauses in our Education Act" and everywhere in the States people were interested in the splendid work of our State Children's department and educational methods.'³ Margaret Windeyer, a commissioner to the Chicago Exposition, also attended

1 The University of Melbourne.

2 Marilyn Lake, 'Between Old Worlds and New: Feminist Citizenship, Nation and Race, the Destabilization of Identity', in *Suffrage and Beyond*, eds Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1994), 277–94; Marilyn Lake, 'Between Old World "Barbarism" and Stone Age "Primitivism": The Double Difference of the White Australian Feminist', in *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought*, eds Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 80–91; Angela Woollacott, 'Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms: Australian Women's International Activism in the 1920s–1930s', *Gender and History* 10 (1998).

3 Susan Magarey, ed., *Ever Yours: CH Spence: Catherine Spence's 'An Autobiography' (1825–1910), Diary (1894) and Some Correspondence (1894–1910)* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2005), 147.

the second world congress of the International Council of Women, and on her return home, helped form the first Australian National Council of Women in New South Wales, the sixth in the world, in 1896.

In 1902, Vida Goldstein travelled from Melbourne to the United States to attend the inaugural International Woman Suffrage Conference in Washington, DC, when she was granted an audience with the US President, Theodore Roosevelt, who was keen to meet this representative of the only nation that had extended full political rights to women: the right to vote and to stand for the national parliament.⁴ She toured the United States presenting lectures to a wide variety of audiences. As American suffragist Alice Stone Blackwell wrote in Goldstein's autograph book:

She has a stirring tale to tell,
And modestly, yet undismayed,
With facts and figures well arrayed,
She tells her tale to folks intent,
From Congressmen to President.⁵

In the United States, Australian women's achievement was hailed as an 'object lesson', as one feminist called it, in helping 'the cause of human liberty throughout the earth'.⁶ 'While the principles of democracy were first enunciated in the United States', noted suffragist leader Carrie Chapman Catt, 'Australia has carried them furthest to their logical conclusion'.⁷

Before World War I, Australian feminists took to the international stage as self-conscious international leaders. Vida Goldstein saw her role as a teacher who could offer the lessons of experience and precedent, which she set out in her publication *Woman Suffrage in Australia*, commissioned by the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in 1908 and published as number two in their series on women's suffrage.⁸ As an international leader and self-styled ambassador, Goldstein was pleased to address audiences across the United States on the effect of women's enfranchisement in Australia in advancing the interests of women and children.

In international feminist debates over 'equality' and 'difference'—over the question of whether feminists should promote the distinctive interests of women

4 Clare Wright, "'A Splendid Object Lesson': A Transnational Perspective on the Birth of a Nation", *Journal of Women's History* (forthcoming).

5 Blackwell verse in 'Autograph Book', in Vida Goldstein, Papers, Women's Library, London, previously the Fawcett Library, now relocated to London School of Economics [hereinafter Goldstein Papers].

6 Josephine Henry, *Commercial Tribune*, 20 July 1902.

7 'Proceedings 36th Annual Convention, 11–17 February 1904', in National American Woman Suffrage Association, Papers, 324.06 v.36, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Boston.

8 Vida Goldstein, *Woman Suffrage in Australia* (New York: International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1908; reprinted Melbourne: Victorian Women's Trust, 2008).

or pursue the same rights as men—Australian feminists initially advocated the cause of 'difference', emphasising distinctive women's values and interests, as mothers and wives and their exploitation as 'creatures of sex'.⁹ These interests were what Goldstein emphasised in the United States in 1902—priorities shared by the leaders of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), who sponsored her speaking tour. In farewelling Goldstein, Alice Blackwell of the NAWSA hailed Australian women's international leadership:

Australia had led the way
 Our land will follow some glad day.
 When that occurs, or soon or late,
 Come back and help us celebrate!¹⁰

In the early years of the twentieth century, Australian women were recognised as international leaders in advancing women's political rights.

Gendered internationalisms

In 1909, Carrie Chapman Catt, who had hosted Goldstein's visit to the United States, referred to the prevalent 'spirit of the 20th century the world calls Internationalism'.¹¹ As Leila Rupp pointed out in her path-breaking book *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement*, in many ways the years between the two world wars were the 'high tide of internationalism' for women.¹² With the International Council of Women (ICW), the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (later the International Women's Suffrage Alliance) and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) all active across the world, it was common for feminists to speak of their era as 'the century of internationalism'.¹³ By 1920, when the newly formed League of Nations issued a handbook of international organisations, 500 groups, almost all new, claimed that identification in their title. Many of them were women's organisations.

Like women activists from other countries, Australian women looked to the international domain for solidarity, empowerment, respect and validation and to secure the support that would augment local campaigns for full equality as citizens, mothers, workers and individuals, or, as the International Alliance for

9 Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 49–86.

10 Goldstein Papers. For further examples, see Marilyn Lake, 'Stirring Tales: Australian Feminism and National Identity, 1900–40', in *The Politics of Identity in Australia*, ed. Geoff Stokes (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 80–4.

11 Leila Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 108.

12 *Ibid.*, 34.

13 *Ibid.*, 108.

Suffrage and Equal Citizenship put it in 1920, 'a real equality of liberties, status, and opportunities between men and women'.¹⁴ Women of all backgrounds were inspired by the turn to internationalism and looked to the international domain to advance their rights.

Australian men, for the most part, concentrated on seeking and retaining power in the national domain, in federal and State politics, whether on the side of capital or labour, manufacturers or farmers, city or country, or in non-parliamentary, but powerful civil society organisations such as churches, trade unions and the Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA; later the Returned Services League, RSL). They weren't so theoretically and practically engaged with the idea of internationalism, even though after World War I, national delegations (all male) attended meetings of the League of Nations and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Geneva and many men took leadership positions in the League of Nations Union in Australia.¹⁵

The labour movement sent representatives to the ILO as part of the national delegations, but they tended to see such activity as internationalism in the national interest, a means of raising global working conditions to match those of white Australia, thus keeping the threat of international forces at bay.¹⁶ A number of women interested in labour issues—Muriel Heagney, Ethel Osborne, Eleanor Hinder and Mary Bennett—engaged with the ILO on an informal level. In later decades women joined delegations to the ILO as advisers or secretaries, but an Australian woman was not appointed as a full delegate to the ILO until 1980.

There is a gendered dimension to the history of Australian internationalism. For women in this period, their international engagements arose from their work in civil society and reform organisations, such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), whereas for men such as former prime minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce and Labor leader H. V. Evatt, participation in the international domain tended to be an extension of their formal positions and roles in national politics.¹⁷ Women's experience of international activism produced convinced internationalists, such as Eleanor Hinder, Constance Duncan and Jessie Street.

14 Ibid., 23.

15 Nicholas Brown, 'Enacting the International: R. G. Watt and the League of Nations Union', in *Transnational Ties*, eds Desley Deacon, Penny Russell and Angela Woollacott (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008), 75–94.

16 James Cotton, 'Australia in the League of Nations: Role, Debates, Presence', in *Australia and the United Nations*, eds James Cotton and David Lee (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade/Longueville, 2012); Marilyn Lake, 'The ILO, Australia and the Asia-Pacific Region: New Solidarities or Internationalism in the National Interest?', in *West Meets East: The ILO from Geneva to the Pacific Rim*, eds Jill Jensen and Nelson Lichtenstein (New York: Palgrave, 2014 [in press]).

17 David Lee, *Stanley Melbourne Bruce: Australian Internationalist* (New York: Continuum, 2010); Neville Meaney, 'Dr HV Evatt and the United Nations: The Problem of Collective Security and Liberal Internationalism', in *Australia and the United Nations*, eds James Cotton and David Lee (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade/Longueville, 2012).

Australian science graduate and reformer Eleanor Hinder was, as Sarah Paddle, Sophie Loy-Wilson and Fiona Paisley have pointed out, at the forefront of 'International Action' in the service of political and industrial reform, in her work in China from the 1920s.¹⁸ As director of the Industrial and Social Division of the Shanghai International Government, Hinder worked with about 50 Chinese colleagues to create a system of factory inspection, health and safety regulation and wage regulation. In the YWCA newsletter, *Threads*, she mused self-consciously on the novelty of her political work:

International Action is remarkably new to all of us and the first casting of small threads across the spaces that divide us may seem as futile as the spider's filament. But watch them by degrees strengthen into unbreakable bonds. A weaving has started that cannot easily be stopped ... Slogans and posters and handbills, in terms people can understand, distributed broadcast at such times, have led to common thinking and engendered a group mind.¹⁹

Common thinking and collective action might not always have produced a group mind, but certainly such activism was central to the cause of labour reform and the international women's movement, and offered Australian and other women the opportunity to exercise leadership in reform organisations at the international level, which was mostly unavailable at home.

Although granted the right to vote and stand for election to the National Parliament in 1902, no Australian woman was successful in gaining a seat in the House of Representatives or the Senate until 1943, when Enid Lyons was elected to the House of Representatives as Member for the Tasmanian seat of Darwin (later Braddon) and Dorothy Tangney entered the Senate on the WA Labor ticket. Moreover, no Australian women were elected to leadership positions in trade unions, business organisations or churches in these decades.

Formally equal citizens in the new Commonwealth of Australia from 1902, women were yet marginalised politically at the national level for several decades. They also remained subordinate to men in terms of pay, conditions and opportunities in the workforce, as well as in matters of the custody of children, divorce, domicile and nationality rights until the decades after World War II. Paradoxically, Australian women, the first in the world to win full political rights

18 Sarah Paddle, 'For the China of the Future: Western Feminists, Colonisation and International Citizenship in China in the Inter-War Years', *Australian Feminist Studies* 16(36) (2001); Fiona Paisley, 'Cultivating Modernity: Culture and Internationalism in Australia Feminism's Pacific Age', *Journal of Women's History* 14(3) (2002); Fiona Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific: Cultural Internationalism and Race Politics in the Women's Pan-Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009); Sophie Loy-Wilson, "'Liberating Asia": Strikes and Protest in Sydney and Shanghai, 1920–39', *History Workshop Journal* 72(1) (2011).

19 Quoted in Paddle, 'For the China of the Future', 327–8.

at the national level, were more likely to feel at home when abroad, and to find opportunities to exercise political influence and leadership in the international domain.

In studying the history of Australian women's leadership and, in particular, women's political leadership, we need to understand the conditions and contexts that both enabled and constrained women's exercise of leadership, such as the development of the two-party system in Australia and men's investment in securing and maintaining national power. Given the constraints of word length, this chapter focuses on the first half of the twentieth century, when Australian women's international engagement reached a high point, but when the women's movement also changed in its goals and aspirations, moving to more fully embrace the goals of equality and equal opportunity, as enunciated by new organisations such as Open Door International (ODI) and Equal Rights International (ERI), which advocated an end to all sex-based distinctions in employment. Sydney-based feminist Linda Littlejohn was a leading member of ODI, whose founding conference she had attended in Berlin in 1929, while Jessie Street became vice-president of ERI in 1930.²⁰ Street later became vice-president of the Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations.

International action on behalf of women and children

In the first decades of women's internationalism, women such as Catherine Spence, Eleanor Hinder, Harriet Newcomb, Eleanor Moore, Bessie Rischbieth, Mary Bennett and Jessie Street took the opportunity to exercise leadership in international civil society organisations working on behalf of women and children. Such transnational activism was facilitated by the common understanding that the interests and needs of 'women' and 'children' were universal in nature, transcending national borders, just as women's paradigmatic exploitation as 'creatures of sex' or 'sex slaves' also crossed borders and boundaries—an understanding encoded in the League of Nations Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, in 1921.

The 'mother' like the 'woman' was seen as a universal figure, whose needs and rights crossed the boundaries of nation, race and class. As Vida Goldstein stated in opposition to the racial exclusions of the Maternity Allowance 1912:

20 Marilyn Lake, 'From Self-Determination via Protection to Equality via Non-Discrimination: Defining Women's Rights at the League of Nations and the United Nations', in *Women's Rights and Human Rights: International Historical Perspectives*, eds Patricia Grimshaw, Katie Holmes and Marilyn Lake (London: Palgrave, 2001), 254–71.

'Maternity is maternity whatever the race.'²¹ The 'spirit of motherhood' was invoked by feminist activists across the world as a collective transnational force.²² In Australia and London, Aboriginal women's rights as mothers—in particular in relation to the guardianship of their children—were prioritised by some feminist advocates, such as Mary Bennett and Constance Ternente Cook, who worked with the League of Nations, the ILO and the British Commonwealth League to seek recognition of Aboriginal women's human rights.²³

And it was as mothers—as life-givers—that women were called upon to oppose world war in 1914. As early as 7 August 1914, Goldstein's Women's Political Association (WPA) invoked the assumed universality of women's interests when she declared:

This Association hopes that women everywhere, the life givers of the world will work henceforth with one mind to destroy the perverted sense of national honour and demand that international disputes shall be adjusted by arbitration. This Association resolves to cable to the President of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance, asking that women of all nations be urged to support the actions of President Wilson and lead for immediate arbitration.²⁴

In 1915, antiwar activists in Melbourne formed the Women's Peace Army and Sisterhood of International Peace, which affiliated with the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace in The Hague, later renamed the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom—a long-lived organisation, soon to celebrate its centenary in Australia in the same month and year as the centenary of the landing at Gallipoli. Activists such as Eleanor Moore were inspired by the internationalism of this new organisation, which she hoped would serve to prevent another world war.

A postwar congress held in Zurich in 1919 was attended by three Australians, Goldstein, Cecilia John and Moore, who became the secretary of WILPF in Australia and author of its history, *The Quest for Peace, as I Have Known it in Australia*.²⁵ That year a conference was also organised by socialist feminists in Melbourne to applaud the 'growth of Internationalism', which they defined as a kind of 'cosmopolitanism'. They called for an end to xenophobia and

21 Lake, *Getting Equal*, 76.

22 Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds, *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

23 Fiona Paisley, 'Citizens of their World: Australian Feminism and Indigenous Rights in the International Context, 1920s and 1930s', *Feminist Review* 58 (1998); Lake, *Getting Equal*, 116–25; Fiona Paisley, *Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights 1919–1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000).

24 Lake, *Getting Equal*, 63.

25 Eleanor Moore, *The Quest for Peace as I Have Known it in Australia* (Melbourne, 1948).

isolationism and questioned the wisdom of the White Australia Policy. 'Is Internationalism only a word', asked the writer Mary Fullerton, 'or is it a fact?' 'Does not Australia pride herself on being the land of experiments', asked schoolteacher Clara Weekes. 'Why fear the experiment of admitting Asiatics?'²⁶ Internationally oriented women—such as Goldstein, Hinder and Duncan—led campaigns to end racial discrimination in immigration.

The League of Nations, the pan-Pacific conference and the United Nations

International women's organisations mostly met in Europe or the United States. The Australian Federation of Women's Voters delegations, led by Bessie Rischbieth, attended the triennial congresses of the International Alliance for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship in Rome in 1923, in Paris in 1926 and in Berlin in 1929. But it was Geneva, as Rischbieth explained in a radio broadcast called 'The League of Nations and World Motherhood', which was the 'focussing point for [women's] efforts for peace and social humanitarian work'.²⁷ Australian women went to the League of Nations as alternate delegates from 1922. The third delegate, Melbourne journalist Stella Allen, returned feeling completely elated. 'In no other place in which she had been', she declared, 'were women and men on such equal terms as in Geneva. The mental attitude was one of absolute equality.'²⁸ This was the promise of the new international order.

The League of Nations also offered exciting opportunities for networking, socialising and celebrity spotting, as evident from E. C. McDonnell's breathless, but vivid account to Rischbieth in 1928, written from the Hotel de la Paix. She also referred to her efforts—amidst all the socialising—to address issues of sexual morality:

There is so much to tell you this week I hardly know where to begin. The Assembly has been meeting all this week and on the whole the proceedings have been rather dull. Everyone reads set speeches whether in French or English and then when it has been read especially if in French, there is generally a big exodus and much chatter and movement so that it is rather difficult to follow the translation, added to which the Salle de la Reformation is stuffy to a degree, dreadfully badly ventilated.

26 *Woman Voter*, 3 July 1919. See Lake, "'Stirring Tales'", 86.

27 'The League of Nations and World Motherhood', Radio broadcast, in Bessie Mabel Rischbieth, 'Papers and objects 1900–1967', Manuscript Collection, MS2004, National Library of Australia, Canberra [hereinafter Rischbieth Papers].

28 Lake, *Getting Equal*, 159.

... My Commission has sat three times and I have had remarks to make in support of the proposal that the Joint Standing Committee of Women's International Organizations should have a representative on the International Cinematographic Institution which is being set up in Rome ... [I] made a prepared speech on the questions of licensed houses, age of consent, and marriage and women police.

... I met Sir Eric and Lady Drummond, Lord Lytton and his wife, Lady Duff Cooper (the famous beauty, formerly Diana Mainwairing), a prince of Siam, a most enlightened person who spoke English with an Oxford accent, Monsieur Benes, Mr Mackenzie King etc I also had a little talk with Dame Edith Lyttleton whom I like very much. Dr Georgina Sweet gave a little luncheon party. I sat next to Princess Radziwill, a very able woman belonging to the Secretariat ... The Joint Standing Committee of Women's International Organizations gave a little dinner at which I made a little speech and the ICW gave a reception. I have been to several little informal luncheons and have seen a lot of the Scandinavian women delegates whom I like exceedingly. Madame Appouyi of Hungary is rather a dear too. To-day Senator Mc Lachlan is giving a lunch to the Empire delegation and on Friday I go to a Danish Delegation Dinner.²⁹

'It may seem a lot of festivity', she concluded somewhat apologetically to Rischbieth, 'but there is plenty of hard work'. She then listed all the committee reports and newspapers she had to read.

Reading and research were considered prerequisites to international activism, which at one level was thought of as an educative process necessary to the exercise of leadership in the vital work of promoting cross-cultural understanding. At the founding pan-Pacific conference of women in Honolulu, in 1928, delegates were asked to study key questions with reference to prescribed texts and prepared papers. Dr Georgina Sweet reminded E. C. McDonnell, who had been so busy in Geneva, that only papers of 'outstanding merit' were called for.³⁰ Sweet, a University of Melbourne research scientist, elected international president of the Pan-Pacific Women's Association in 1930, was an ardent reformer, whose leadership in urging women to join together in overcoming national and racial prejudices inspired others to join her crusade in 'cultural internationalism'.³¹

In 1932, delegates were asked to consider 'National Policies Affecting International Relations' and in particular the following questions:

29 'McDonnell to Rischbieth', 12 September 1928, 2004/9/120, Rischbieth Papers.

30 'Sweet to McDonnell', 30 April 1929, 2004/6/22, Rischbieth Papers.

31 Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific*, 52-7.

Is national control of immigration, especially any exclusion policy, liable to endanger world peace or at least to create political, social, racial and economic complications ... Does your country exclude or limit the immigration of any racial or national type. If so, what justifications are given? What reactions have resulted among the people so treated?³²

By the 1930s, Australian feminists were well aware of the resentments caused by the White Australia Policy in their region, which were clearly an impediment to true internationalism. Vida Goldstein told an annual meeting of the Australian Federation of Women Voters (AFWV) that our 'Eastern neighbours' deplored Australia's 'arrogant discrimination against them'.³³ Criticising the Australian tendency to identify exclusively with European nations, Eleanor Hinder sent a circular letter to her friends:

We are, as you know, very isolated with a population 98 per cent British in origin: we have a national religion—the White Australia policy, every organisation looks in affiliation to international groupings which centre in Europe. For the majority of the women in Australia, the women of Oriental countries simply do not exist.³⁴

The pan-Pacific conferences showcased a very different and more diverse women's movement.

Muriel Heagney, representing labour women in Honolulu in 1928, reported to her friend Martha Mutt in Geneva: 'It was a great experience and a very fine conference.'

The oriental women—particularly the Chinese—were charming and remarkably able. I went as a delegate of the Labor Women's Committee endorsed by the Trade Unions of Victoria and NSW. It is the first time a woman delegate has been sent abroad like that to a conference so we are slowly making progress ... The industry section was first class—many of its members you know—Mary Anderson, Elizabeth Christman, Jo Coffin and Mrs Katherine Edson of USA—Miss Bae-tsing Kyong of China (YWCA) made a fine contribution and Miss Yoshi Shoda—lecturer in Sociology—Japan Women's University—Tokyo was also good.³⁵

Heagney regretted she was not able to go to the next pan-Pacific conference in 1930, because of the deteriorating economic situation in Australia: 'things

32 'National Policies Affecting International Relations', *Bulletin of the Pan-Pacific Union* 154 (1932), quoted in Lake, *Getting Equal*, 162.

33 *Ibid.*, 163.

34 Hinder, 'Circular letter', 12 February 1930, 2004/4/17, Rischbieth Papers.

35 'Muriel Heagney to Martha Muntt 28 December 1928', in International Labour Organisation Archives, WN 12/4/1, Geneva [hereinafter ILO Archives].

are too bad here and the expense so great that it was impossible to get away.'³⁶ International activism could be expensive and was dependent on independent means, professional incomes or community fundraising. No women were paid by the Australian Government to attend these women's conferences.

Heagney was pleased that Dr Ethel Osborne, an expert in industrial health, was able to attend the 1930 conference and would report back to labour women. Osborne also represented Australia the following year as an alternate delegate at the League of Nations. As Paisley has pointed out, many Australian women saw themselves as perfectly placed—in geographical and historical terms—to mediate between the women of the West and those of the East.³⁷ Delegates challenged the racial exclusions that underpinned the White Australia Policy at home, even as their pan-Pacific activism often reinscribed the assumed dichotomy between 'advanced' and 'backward' women, between white women and natives.

White women also discovered that what they thought of as 'internationalism' might be understood by colonised peoples as a new form of 'imperialism'. Thus Hinder was challenged by the leader of the Chinese delegation in 1928, medical doctor Mei Iung Ting, who told Western women that if a conference were to be planned for China, it should be Chinese women who should make that decision, but she thought they had more pressing national priorities.³⁸ As the director of the Pan-Pacific Union reminded Georgina Sweet, they must 'go slowly and gently with [their] Oriental companions ... in Japan and China ... they resent any forceful leadership of the Occidental'.³⁹

Another leading internationalist, active in the peace movement between the wars and secretary of the Victorian branch of the League of Nations Union and of the Bureau of Social and International affairs, was Constance Duncan, who, like Hinder, first went to Asia as a 'missionary' for the YWCA, living, working and learning the language in Japan in the 1920s. Her knowledge of Japanese culture and politics led her to become an expert in the emergent masculine field of 'international relations' and to join delegations to high-level conferences on the Asia-Pacific region. In 1936, she was Victorian delegate to the Institute of Pacific Relations conference in California, and on her return toured Japan and China on behalf of the Bureau of Social and International Affairs and the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC). Her task was to gather and disseminate information that would make 'Australians better informed and

36 Ibid.; 'Heagney to Muntt', 31 July 1930, in *ibid.*

37 Paisley, 'Cultivating Modernity', 105–6.

38 M. I. Ting, 'Report of Chinese delegation', 2004/6/37, Rischbieth Papers; Paddle, 'For the China of the Future'.

39 'Director Pan-Pacific Union to Sweet', 15 January 1929, 2004/6/66, Rischbieth Papers.

more curious about our neighbours in the Orient'. An enlightened public was considered essential since 'Australia is destined to be closely associated with the Orient, which to us is not the Far East but the Near North'.⁴⁰

The rights of women as human beings

Australian women also played a leadership role in turning to the international domain to secure recognition of Aboriginal rights. They were founding members of the British Commonwealth League (BCL), formed in London in 1925, one of whose major goals was the advancement of indigenous rights across the Empire. As a delegate to the founding conference put it in 1925: 'Liberty must go beyond the boundaries of race and sex.'⁴¹ Imperial-minded Mary Bennett was active at the BCL, but also saw the possibilities of internationalism in the conventions promulgated by the ILO, the League of Nations and the United Nations.

In these conventions, she identified novel ways of addressing and ending the multiple oppressions suffered by Aboriginal Australians: their forced labour, their removal from country, the sexual slavery of the women, the removal of their children.⁴² Bennett's approach to reform depended on extensive research, but with a small independent income she was able to work without the support of an academic institution. An indefatigable researcher and archivist, she was assiduous in gathering relevant and up-to-date information, in all its detail, and in documenting, always with footnotes, every letter, submission to the authorities and the books she wrote on behalf of Indigenous people from the 1920s through to the 1960s.

Austere in manner, Bennett eschewed the soirees and dinners that characterised the season in Geneva, but forged solidarities with like-minded women reformers such as Ada Bromham, Constance Cooke and Edith Jones. Both her books, *The Australian Aboriginal as a Human Being*, published in 1930, and *Human Rights for Australian Aborigines*, published in 1957, pointed to the new possibilities for gaining recognition of Aboriginal human rights through working with international organisations. 'The founding of a just relation of the white and the dark races is not our problem alone', Bennett wrote in *The Australian Aboriginal as a Human Being*. 'It is a world problem. It is described as the most important business of the century.'⁴³

40 Hilary Summy, 'From Missionary to Ministerial Adviser: Constance Duncan and Australian–Japan Relations 1922–47', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 54(1) (2008).

41 Report of Conference, 'The Citizen Rights of Women within the British Empire', in British Commonwealth League Papers, 2160/box Y 792, 37, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

42 Marilyn Lake, 'Colonised and Colonising: The White Australian Feminist Subject', *Women's History Review* 2(3) (1993).

43 Mary Bennett, *The Australian Aboriginal as a Human Being* (London: Alson Rivers, 1930), 11.

In 1930, Bennett addressed the BCL in London on the treatment of Aborigines in Australia and invoked in her speech, as she did in her book, the 1926 Convention on Slavery, which defined slavery as 'the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised' and the slave trade as 'all acts involved in the capture, acquisition or disposal of a person with intent to reduce him to slavery'. When the Convention on Slavery was broadened to include forced or compulsory labour in 1930, with the passage of ILO Convention 29, which defined forced labour as 'all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily', Bennett immediately brought these provisions to the notice of the Australian authorities. In speeches in London, she charged the Federal Government, which was responsible for the administration of the Northern Territory, with breaking Convention 29 in three ways: employers were using forced labour on private property, they were refusing to pay wages to working natives and they were removing natives from their tribes and families to work in Darwin.

The news story in the *Manchester Guardian* based on Bennett's claims was reprinted in Perth by the *Dawn*, the journal of Rischbieth's Women's Service Guild, which declared that 'never in history' had the welfare of Aboriginal peoples received such publicity as at that moment, at the very heart of the Empire.⁴⁴ (It is ironic and poignant that feminists always had such an eye to history, when it would prove to be so uninterested in them.) In the same year in which Bennett addressed the BCL in London, her friend SA feminist Constance Ternente Cooke presented a paper on 'The Status of Aboriginal Women in Australia' to the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference in Honolulu. Cooke explained the position of Aboriginal women historically, providing an early version of what would later be called 'black armband history'. The settlement of Australia, wrote Cooke, was characterised by two great wrongs: first, the settlers took the land, then they took the women.⁴⁵

The first great wrong, she wrote, was when

the original inhabitants were deprived of all their lands by the legal device of declaring them the property of the Crown. Women as well as men were relegated thus to the position of serfs ... The second great wrong to the race has been the interference of the white man with the native women.⁴⁶

44 *Dawn*, 16 July 1930, quoted in Lake, *Getting Equal*, 115.

45 Constance Ternente Cooke, 'The Status of Aboriginal Women in Australia', in *Anti-Slavery Papers*, Br. Emp. S22, G 378, Rhodes House, Oxford.

46 *Ibid.*

This radical critique voiced by a feminist in an international forum was so threatening to the Australian Government that the Minister for Home Affairs demanded a right of reply and that two papers prepared by his department in response be published along with Cooke's in *The Report of the Proceedings of the Conference*.

The Australian Government also swiftly moved to ratify the 1930 Convention on Forced Labour, the first convention it chose to ratify after many years of delay with regard to others. In order to demonstrate that Australia was an 'advanced' country in the face of allegations of barbarous treatment of Aboriginal workers, as might occur in a 'backward' country, the Federal Government decided to ratify the Forced Labour Convention immediately. In 1931 the Department of Home Affairs wrote to the prime minister: 'As there is no forced labour in the Northern Territory, it is recommended that the Prime Minister's Department be advised that it is desired that the Convention be ratified.'⁴⁷ By 1932, the ratification was in place, but little changed in Aboriginal employment conditions. In response to lobbying, the ILO stated that Convention 29 was not the remedy needed by women activists, writing to Travers Buxton at the Anti-Slavery Society in London: 'they are ill advised to concentrate on securing international intervention, for which there is hardly sufficient basis, when so much could be done in Australia itself.'⁴⁸

Campaigns for Aboriginal rights continued to look to the international domain for support. In 1938, writing as general secretary of the Aborigines' Progressive Association, Pearl Gibbs, hoping the League of Nations' mandate system extended to jurisdiction over Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, wrote to the president, enclosing the

full report of the general Annual Meeting of the Aborigines Progressive Association that was held at Dubbo on 30 June last. There were present about fifty persons of Aboriginal blood who represented a large portion of NSW. Owing to the ill treatment of the aborigines throughout Australia in the past and the recent happenings in Darwin and knowing that the League of Nations has a mandate over the Northern Territory we appeal to you in the interest of the downtrodden natives to exercise your mandated authority in the cause of justice.'⁴⁹

The enclosed report of the meeting noted that most of the misdeeds committed by 'detrIALIZED and demoralized aborigines' were caused by 'the brutal and stupid treatment of the aborigines by the white man for the last one hundred

47 Department of Home Affairs, 'Memorandum to Prime Minister's Department', 7 October 1931, A1 1931/7727, National Archives of Australia, Canberra. My thanks to Julia Martinez for this reference.

48 'CWH Weaver, ILO to Travers Buxton', 9 August 1931, 206/1/4/0, ILO Archives.

49 'Gibbs to President, League of Nations', 4 July 1938, Political Section 1/34895, ILO Archives.

and fifty years'. Australia's treatment of Aborigines, they said, was incurring 'the contempt of the civilized nations of the world'. The League of Nations official who received Gibbs' plea was not sympathetic, noting on the file: 'I don't think any action is possible or desirable.'⁵⁰

Jessie Street took up the campaign for Aboriginal rights in London in the 1950s, seeking to invoke the human rights set out in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. As vice-president of the Status of Women Commission, she had earlier worked with Bodil Begtrup, the Danish president of the commission, to secure women-friendly amendments to the Draft Declaration. They had to fight hard even to be allowed to participate in discussions. 'It is obvious', Street wrote,

that some of the members of the Economic and Social Council are not sympathetic with the work of the Status of Women Commission and are trying to belittle it and narrow it down. The Canadian delegate, Mr Smith indulged in various irresponsible and inaccurate witticisms which were rewarded with considerable mirth at our expense.⁵¹

Five days later, Street wrote to Begtrup again:

One of the amendments made by the Economic and Social Council to our Report was that office bearers of our Committee should be present only when they discuss particular rights of women. (Canada—Mr Smith again—suggested that we might want to answer something about the rights of nursing mothers which wd give you an [idea] of the thinking of some of them). The intention of our Committee was that the recognition of the rights of women as human beings had been conspicuously absent in the past, for instance in respect of the right to vote, the right to work and own her own earnings, the right to property, the right to guardianship of her own children etc Consequently we believe all phases of the Bill of Human Rights would affect women and think we should be present during the whole of the discussion on the Bill of Human Rights.⁵²

As Street left to return to Australia, she wrote again: 'Do what you can dear Bodil to see that our Commission is not slighted. If we assert ourselves this time they will not try again to discriminate against us. I am sending you a cable tonight. Love from Jessie Street.'⁵³

50 Ibid.

51 Jessie Street to Bodil Begtrup, 2 April 1947, Street Papers, 2683/5/56, National Library of Australia (NLA), Canberra quoted in Lake, 'From Self-Determination via Protection to Equality via Non-Discrimination', 226.

52 Jessie Street to Bodil Begtrup, 7 April 1947, Street Papers, 2683/5/56, NLA, Canberra quoted in *ibid.*

53 Jessie Street to Bodil Begtrup, 4 June 1947, Street Papers, 2683/5/62, NLA, Canberra quoted in *ibid.*

Begtrup and Street were successful in securing passage of some amendments, with regard to pronouns and nouns, but defeated in more substantial ones, notably their attempt to change the status of mothers so they would no longer be thought of as a group in need of protection, but recognised as rights-bearing subjects with rights to custody of their children, as well as economic and social rights. 'I think it would be wise', wrote Begtrup, 'in the future to talk about the special conditions we want for motherhood as "the rights of motherhood" ... and it will be a help to cut these rights free from "protection" which always gives a sense of inferiority that it will be sound to avoid'. They were defeated. Article 25 specified mothers and children as groups in 'need of care and assistance'.⁵⁴

By the late 1940s, Street was prevented from resuming her position as vice-president of the Status of Women Commission because of political pressure at home, where she was increasingly depicted, including by rival feminists, as a communist or communist fellow traveller. In exile in London in the 1950s, Street followed in the footsteps of Constance Cooke, Edith Jones and Mary Bennett by working with the Anti-Slavery Society, to achieve recognition of the human rights of Aboriginal Australians by invoking the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Invited to join the executive committee in 1953, she suggested that the Anti-Slavery Society take a case about the denial of Aboriginal rights to the Human Rights Commission, but after much discussion they were persuaded that an Australian organisation should do this to avoid the charge of interference with the internal affairs of another country.

Street then wrote to her contacts in Australia to suggest the various State organisations come together to form a national body which could approach the United Nations. 'I believe', she wrote to H. G. Clements, the WA secretary of the Australian Peace Council, in January 1956,

and this is my personal opinion, that it would be easier to deal with the question of Aborigines satisfactorily if there was a Commonwealth wide body concerned with the development of full citizenship for Aborigines ... Would it be possible to call an all-Australian Conference on the subject ... You have sent me Shirley Andrews' address and I know Mollie Bayne who is President of the Council for Aboriginal Rights.⁵⁵

Andrews wrote back in August 1956, conveying the Victorian Council of Aboriginal Rights' full support for the idea.⁵⁶

Street was also in touch with Pearl Gibbs, who had joined Faith Bandler that year in forming the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship in Sydney. The following

⁵⁴ Lake, *Getting Equal*, 205.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Marilyn Lake, *FAITH: Faith Bandler Gentle Activist* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002).

year another international development, the passage by the ILO of Convention 107, laid the basis for recognition of tribal identities and indigenous claims to land. As usual, Bennett saw the implications immediately, obtained a copy of ILO Convention 107 from Thomas Fox-Pitt at the Anti-Slavery Society and passed it on to Shirley Andrews on the Council of Aboriginal Rights. It became a key document for campaigns for land rights later undertaken by the newly formed Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement, which had been formed at Street's behest in 1958. ILO Convention 107 was discussed at their annual conference in 1959.

Conclusion

One of the main political achievements of women's international activism aimed at securing Aboriginal rights was to embarrass Australian governments into taking action, or more commonly, claiming to take action. 'How terrified Australians are of criticism', wrote Mary Bennett to Fox-Pitt at the Anti-Slavery Society, 'when an uneasy conscience knows it to be true'.⁵⁷ Whether our focus as historians is on Aboriginal rights, equal opportunity, the repeal of discriminatory immigration laws or the achievement of equal pay and affirmative action, an understanding of the dynamics of these campaigns must embrace the international as well as the national domains and the interconnection and intertwining of the two. In engaging with international organisations and committees, international covenants and conventions, Australian women activists showed unprecedented historic leadership in introducing their fellow citizens to a new political order of possibility. More research needs to be done on the ways in which the national and international domains were intertwined in campaigns for sexual and racial equality and the ways in which human rights extended citizenship rights.

These very diverse women reformers were not simply leaders among Australian women. They also played a leadership role when considered in the context of Australian political history, pointing to the importance of the new international domain of the twentieth century, with its solidarities, networks and conferences, its institutions, conventions and covenants as instruments that could be used to end racial and sexual discrimination and secure recognition of all people's equal opportunities and human rights.

57 'Bennett to Fox-Pitt', November 1958, S22, Br. Emp. G953a, Anti-Slavery Society Papers.

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