

Vera Deakin and the Red Cross

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Carole Woods

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In Carole Woods's biography, *Vera Deakin and the Red Cross*, there is no room for speculation on the internal life and thoughts of its subject, Vera¹. This readable and fast-paced biography is a welcome addition to the limited scholarship on Vera and will hopefully lead to a wider interest in her life and legacy that, until now, has mostly been confined to the work of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria.² The work focuses primarily on Vera's experiences during World War I (WWI) as she established the Australian Red Cross Wounded and Missing Bureau (RCWMB), but glosses over her post-war life and work in World War II (WWII). This book provides an important foundational text for further research, although is stretched a bit far in trying to provide a comprehensive biography of both Vera Deakin and the Red Cross in Australia, as implied by the title.

One of few women to serve in an official capacity in both world wars, Vera opened the Australian branch of the RCWMB in 1915. The RCWMB would move from Cairo to London as the Australian Imperial Force moved from the Ottoman Empire to Europe. Woods deftly combines the personal effects the war had on Vera and her wide circle of friends, many of a similar stock to her privileged background, with the wider military and political context of Europe. The book assumes

1 Vera Deakin is referred to by her first name due to the plethora of Deakin family members in the book.

2 This is the first book about Vera alone, though she has featured in monographs published by the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and the Australian War Memorial. Vera and her work are also briefly referenced in Marina Larsson, *Shattered Anzacs: Living with the Scars of War* (Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2009); Bruce Scates, Rebecca Wheatley, and Laura James, *World War One: A History in 100 Stories* (Melbourne: Viking, 2015).

a basic level of knowledge about the major elements of WWI including the socio-political breakdown of Europe and the Australian conscription debates. The section on the battles of Bullecourt in April and May 1917 is a good example of this, deftly combining Charles Bean's reflections on the battle with a longer section considering how Vera was personally impacted. This book is clearly well researched, drawing on under-utilised primary resources and personal accounts Woods received from Vera's descendants. It engages well with secondary literature when it discusses the difficulties suffered by Australian families mourning their absent kin. As for primary sources, we get a sense of Vera's voice, her foibles and her strong, sometimes autocratic personality, much more than most Australian women who served in the Great War are usually allowed. This is a treat to experience.

Vera worked with the RCWMB until her father, former prime minister Alfred Deakin, began to ail in February 1919. After Australia entered WWII, Vera opened the Victorian branch of a new iteration of the RCWMB. She served as a co-director over a widening purview, as the Red Cross dealt with missing and dead soldiers and civilians across Europe and Asia. Yet, the ambition of Woods's book, in trying to cover both the complexities of Vera Deakin's life and the history of the RCWMB, is also a flaw. Although the book covers Vera's life pleasingly, the complexity of the RCWMB in WWI alone means we receive only an overview into the bureau's work. For instance, Vera's work during the 1943–44 bushfire crisis is reduced to two lines. The focus, as with so much to do with Australia's military history, is squarely on WWI.

Another, larger, issue arises from Woods working closely with Vera's descendants. Vera's early life was entwined with Alfred's political career and the text reflects this, especially when Alfred's protectionist party lost an election. We learn about Alfred's love of spiritualism, *The Wind in the Willows* and his begrudging support for women's suffrage, yet there is scant reference that he formulated what would come to be known as the White Australia policy. This does not need to be a major focus, but ignoring the White Australia policy while discussing Alfred Deakin and Federation-era Australia demonstrates a problematic and one-sided view of the colonial past. This is particularly egregious in the book's earlier chapters, which discuss the effects of Alfred Deakin's political career on his family.

This is a much-awaited and well-developed book for those interested in the Red Cross and the world wars, focusing on a woman almost unique in Australian history for her international influence. It never pretends to present Vera's life as one normal for a woman of her era and it couldn't: her life and work was simply too wide and complex to be easily discussed. Vera Deakin's life was daunting and, despite some flaws, this book is a meaningful contribution to scholarship on women in WWI-era Australia. I eagerly anticipate the further scholarship that will develop around Vera and the RCWMB in the future with this text as a base.

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