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A Hall of Selective Mirrors
Feminism, History and Identity
1919-1969

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This thesis is in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

My thesis 'A Hall of Selective Mirrors: Feminism, Identity and History' offers a history of feminist history-making in Australia with particular reference to the 1919-1969 period. Those fifty years will alternatively be referred to as the 'between the waves' period of Australian feminist history, indicating that this work is a critical response to the waves model of feminist historiography which came to dominate histories of feminism from the 1970s. The waves model established historical links between the suffragette movement (the first wave) and Women's Liberation (the second wave), effectively erasing the contribution of feminists who campaigned between those signposts. One major response to the waves model has been to insist on continuity of feminist activity, thus filling the historical gap. However, arguing for presence is not the only way to counter the absence of between-the-waves feminists in influential histories of Australian feminism.

This thesis advances a critical response to the waves model that seriously examines reasons for the erasure of between-the-waves feminism. I consider why 1970s feminists sought to renounce campaigners of a generation before. I do this primarily by exploring notions of historical significance and feminist tradition advanced by between-the-waves feminists. This critical work also encompasses a historical examination of those women campaigners from the 1919-1969 period who were reclaimed by feminist history. These were primarily communist women who, aided by feminist labour historians in particular, were able to write themselves into a new tradition of feminist activism.

My thesis is a sustained engagement between the present and the past and as such is necessarily episodic and discontinuous. I take as my focus the hopeful beginnings and sad endings of between-the-waves feminists. These disconnected stories often did have one preoccupation in common – the timing of feminism. It is that theme that forms the narrative basis for my own preoccupation – the relationship between feminism, identity and history.
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Writing a thesis is never easy, so it helps to be blessed with guidance, resources and wonderful family and friends. I was blessed with all of these.

My supervisor Dr Penny Russell deserves to be mentioned first and at greatest length. Penny’s particular skill is in the academic equivalent of alchemy. At our meetings, my half formed thoughts would be given vital sustenance and sent on their way. Inevitably, under Penny’s influence, these ideas would eventually come back polished and meaningful. It is impossible not to be inspired by such an expert editor, beautiful writer and dedicated individual. I hope to always have her as a friend and mentor.

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Early in the project, I was also blessed in meeting Union of Australian Women’s one-time president and historian Audrey McDonald. Audrey was kind enough to loan me her complete set of Our Women magazines, an invaluable source. I am grateful for her generosity, kindness and continued activism.
I thank every friend who has encouraged and entertained me for the duration, but I must pay special tribute to the following posse: Marina Bollinger – for being my cyberspace life-support system and co-conspirator in grand schemes; Clare Corbould – for her laughter and generosity; Cath Kevin – for being the friend I always hoped for, and Maggie Pickering – for trailblazing inspiration and encouragement.

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List of Abbreviations

ACTU - Australian Council of Trade Unions
AFWV – Australian Federation of Women Voters
ALP – Australian Labor Party
BCL – British Commonwealth League
CAEP – Council of Action for Equal Pay
CPA – Communist Party of Australia
ERI – Equal Rights International
IWD – International Women’s Day
IWSA – International Women’s Suffrage Alliance
ML – Mitchell Library
NCW - National Council of Women
NLA – National Library of Australia
ODI – Open Door International
UA – United Associations (of Women)
UAW – Union of Australian Women
UN – United Nations
WCTU – Women’s Christian Temperance Union
WEB – Women’s Employment Board
WSG – Women’s Service Guild
Introduction

The title of this thesis, 'A Hall of Selective Mirrors', indicates my emphasis on how producing histories, a necessarily selective process, is intimately tied to the production and re-production of political identities. I apply this understanding to the 1919-1969 period of Australian feminist history. This period was largely erased from the Australian feminist histories that emerged in the 1970s. But it was reclaimed by a new generation of feminist historians, who cited the scope and breadth of feminist activity as evidence of a strong Australian feminism. The context of such historical erasures and recoveries reveals the extent to which contemporary feminism looks to the past to find evidence, or 'mirrors' of their own politics and preoccupations. An idea of feminism is thus continually imagined and re-imagined, reflecting or refracting different trajectories and identities. Those feminists of the 1919-1969 also participated in this process. I position my own historical mirror to reflect the narratives they offered to account for their own origins, successes and failures. Accordingly, I consider twentieth century Australian feminism in terms of its discontinuities, rather than continuities, as stories begun optimistically in one context that end raggedly and pessimistically in another.

Yet an overarching narrative of Australian feminism may also offer a context for understanding the variety of narratives produced about this period. In the years between 1919 and 1969, Australian feminists responded to the challenge of defining what citizenship meant for Australian women by advocating a hierarchy of feminist representation, observing due government process and fashioning a tradition for Australian feminism that would assist in reflecting feminism's origins as a legitimate political movement. What they sought was to incorporate their feminism into the political, social and cultural fabric of Australian society. In pursuit of this ambition, they utilised their citizenship, the establishment of the League of Nations in 1919, a strong international women's movement and a
political rhetoric that argued for equal pay and opportunity on the one hand, and the special contribution of mothers on the other.

This process of creating a political space for Australian feminism did not go uncontested, within the movement or outside of it. The establishment of national feminist organisations like the Australian Federation of Women Voters (AFWV) in 1921 and the United Associations (UA) in 1929, defined the character of inter-war Australian feminism. These organisations, established and led respectively by privileged and influential feminists Bessie Rischbieth and Jessie Street, explicitly championed a feminism which they distinguished from more philanthropically-inclined women's organisations. This feminism was non-party political and committed to ensuring the presence and influence of women at all levels of Australian life. Sometimes collaboration with other women's organisations, whether they were philanthropic, labour or communist, was encouraged. At other times, joint campaigning was a more problematic endeavour. In any case, left-wing women pursued their own political activism, independent of the feminist scene.

World War II was the first serious test for Australian feminists. In 1943, prominent feminist campaigner and self-identified socialist Jessie Street, eager to capitalise on economic and social advances for women, called together women from a range of organisations to gather in conference. The aim was to produce a charter for Australian women that would address their needs within a broader programme for post-war national reconstruction. Over ninety organisations were represented, which seemed to indicate the relevance and broad vision of Australian feminism. By the time of the second Australian Women's Charter Conference in 1946 however, Australian feminism was divided by Cold War politics. The ascendant post-war domestic ideology further marginalised the influence of Australian feminists. By 1954, the AFWV and the UA had split. The coming of age for Australian feminism, promised by World War II, had failed to eventuate.
Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, a unifying idea of Australian feminism disintegrated as organisations pursued their own interests. The Australian Women’s Charter movement was kept alive predominantly through the efforts of left-wing women. Within this context, the communist-associated Union of Australian Women (UAW) formed in 1950, citing both their socialist and feminist origins, though never explicitly claiming the identity of either. Wedged between the start of the Cold War and the beginning of Women’s Liberation, the UAW’s greatest success was in asserting their identity as political housewives, rather than in influencing or challenging government policy. Meanwhile, other communist women sought to campaign for women’s rights within the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) that had ill-defined and conflicting ideas about the role of women. All of these discussions about what constituted communism, feminism or effective political activity were conducted within the increasing marginalisation of both communism and feminism. This sense of marginalisation was reflected and resisted in the stories many of these activists began to tell about their pasts. These were alternately narratives of loss, failure or pride, all produced to respond to their marginalisation.

In the 1970s, the Women’s Liberation movement revitalised the struggle for women’s rights, but this was a new feminism, with new preoccupations. One of the first projects of the Women’s Liberation movement was to locate a history of both women’s oppression and women’s activism and they did not find this reflected in the generation of feminists that preceded them. Women’s Liberationists turned their historical gaze away from the preceding generation, preferring instead to see their own work reflected in the activism of the suffragettes. The result of this was the waves model of conceptualising the feminist past. Between-the-waves feminists were among the first to contest this model, but their lack of success was one example of the model’s pervasiveness and influence.

The Union of Australian Women and the United Associations, for example, both sought to make contemporary and historical connections with the new feminism,
but in this they were not successful. These efforts were reflected in the histories such organisations produced after the rise of Women's Liberation. Such organisational histories - which typically reflected on the triumphs of women, rather than their oppression - were at odds with the historical focus of second-wave feminists. The feminists of the 1970s, increasingly in alliance with social history, were more interested in collective, rather than individual histories and when their historical gaze did glance across the 'trough' of between-the-waves feminism it was to establish a connection with communist, rather than feminist, women. Some of these communist women re-cast their own pasts accordingly, fashioning themselves as forerunners to 1970s feminism and therefore distinct from the earlier feminist movement. In this thesis, I also take up their stories and find within them more evidence of the re-invention and re-imagining of feminist pasts, presents and futures.

The mirror second-wave feminists used to locate a particular feminist past, and the effects of this model, are explored in this introduction. I also canvass other debates and themes that have preoccupied feminist historians and theorists similarly interested in interrogating the relationship between feminism, identity and history. Many of these discussions are informed by the notion that what we say about the past reveals much about what preoccupies us in the present. The currency of this idea owes a particular debt to the work of Michel Foucault and his notion of a search for the genealogy of the present. For my own work, I am particularly interested in Foucault's analysis of how histories are created for contemporary politics and identities.¹ Foucault's interest in the discontinuity of

¹ It is important here to distinguish between Foucault's critique of various uses of history for the present and his own idea of effective history - ie. a genealogy of the present that opposes itself to the search for origins. A Foucauldian genealogy is necessary discontinuous and anti-essentialist and interrogates how particular and dominant truths are developed within specific historical and cultural contexts. To do this sort of history has political implications for the present as it destabilises categories and ideas that have currency or truth status in contemporary society. This idea of a history of the present must be distinguished from other sometimes ahistorical uses of history for the present. It is Foucault's critique of other histories that informs my approach to the history-making I analyse in this thesis. Drawing on F. W. Nietzsche and his identification of 'monumental', 'antiquarian' and 'critical' histories, Foucault has critiqued how and why particular historical models have been employed and the ramifications of these applications. See Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' in The Foucault Reader, ed. Paul Rabinow, Pantheon Books, New York City, 1984.

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history, impressively adapted for the specific preoccupations of feminist history and feminist historiography by Joan W. Scott, has prompted me to ask different questions about the between-the-waves period. Rather than locate evidence of feminist activity in this period to advance a continuous narrative, I instead consider how particular feminists, women's activists and organisations, who were alternatively ignored or reclaimed by later feminisms, historicised their own contribution to feminist culture. The evidence I produce in this thesis indicates a series of sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting ideas of historical significance. This thesis, then, is a history of history-making where exalted beginnings and sad endings don't amount so much to one story about feminist activity between 1919-1969 as a series of disconnected stories, some of which are later taken up in new contexts to create new narratives.

The influence of post-structuralist thought has surfaced in various guises in debates peculiar to feminist historiography, particularly those interested in defining feminism, de-stabilising and/or historicising the category of 'woman' as a foundation for feminist identity and problematising a notion of feminist tradition and/or feminist generations. My thesis engages with all these issues, implicitly and explicitly. I explore them in this introduction, which begins with a specific discussion of Australian feminist history and its treatment of 'between-the-waves' activists.

Australian Feminist History and Histories of Australian Feminism

Women's history, and later feminist history, were both products of the women's liberation movement. These types of history were distinguishable from the earlier uses of history by feminists in their scope, ambition, systematic critique of mainstream histories and historians, attention to a wider range of women's experiences, engagement with social history and explicit feminist politics. 1970s feminists, and feminist historians in particular, sought both a history of their politics and the history of women's oppression. As a result, women's and feminist history flourished, within the women's movement and significantly,
within the academy. These were new developments in the deployment of history for feminism. Yet there was also some overlap with the history-making of previous feminists. Women's history in Australia emerged from within the women's movement itself, rather than from inside the academy (which typically occurred in the United States). A preoccupation with writing against or in the context of Australia's national history, and its masculine character, also defined early women's and feminist history in Australia. And while the earlier Australian women's movement did not produce any professional feminist historians, it can be argued that what they shared with the more recent feminisms was a radical stance of claiming history for their respective politics. Women had for several centuries written about the role of women in particular societies, but it was only when they claimed a 'history' for themselves, for their politics, that this was considered radical. Claiming feminism as a form of reason, rationality and truth drew on the terms of other masculine movements, but claiming a history for that feminism not only confronted masculinist assumptions of what constituted history, but also asserted that women were makers and agents as well as subjects of histories. This radical claim to history came to the fore with women's liberation, but it had also been nascent in the women's movement previously. This is an important point – the history-making used as evidence in this thesis indicates that 1970s feminists were not the first to make historical claims for their feminism.

One way of telling a story about the development of Australian feminist history and historiography is to look at the presence or absence of women activists such as Street. Recently many of the feminist historians whose careers were established in the context of women's liberation and the development of women's and feminist history in the academy have chosen to take stock of their own

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historical contribution and preoccupations. Additionally, revised editions of the major historical works produced in the 1970s, such as Anne Summers Damned Whores and God’s Police and Miriam Dixson’s The Real Matilda, have been released, both to commemorate their original impact and to argue for continuity of themes in feminist history. In the case of Summers, the controversy over the publication and reception of ‘second-wave’ feminist Helen Garner’s book on sexual harassment in the academy, The First Stone, was an occasion to address the generational divide that had developed between second and third wave feminists. In a Letter written to the next generation she argued for continuity between second and third wave feminisms, a continuity she did not extend to include the feminists who had come directly before her. To Summers, the instance of her younger self meeting the elderly Ruby Rich, one time President of the Australian Federation of Women Voters, and not being able to establish common ground was evidence of an insurmountable chasm between earlier and later feminists. She acknowledged in the letter the initial enthusiasm of earlier women right’s campaigners for women’s liberation, but asserted that differences in approach and language could not be overcome.

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4 In April 1996, Australian Historical Studies published a special issue titled ‘Twenty Years On’ to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the publication of four key texts in Australian women’s and feminist history. These texts were written by Miriam Dixson (The Real Matilda), Anne Summers (Damned Whores and God’s Police), Beverley Kingston (My Wife, My Daughter, and Poor Mary Ann) and Edna Ryan and Anne Conlon (Gentle Invaders). Many of Australia’s leading feminist historians, including Ann Curthoys, Joy Damousi, Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Susan Magarey, Jill Matthews and Jill Roe used the occasion to reflect on and reconsider and reconceptualise Australian feminist history and historiography since 1975. See Judith Smart’s editorial, Australian Historical Studies, Vol. 27, No. 106, April 1996, pp. iv-v


Summers' letter was criticised by some feminist historians, most memorably by Mary Spongberg in ‘Mother Knows Best?’ for its continued allegiance to the waves model of conceptualising the feminist past and present. But the letter differed from her previous representations of the past insofar as she explicitly mentioned the feminists of ‘the intermission’ period. The use of history for 1970s feminists was conceptualised in radically different ways to between-the-waves feminists. Those feminists had faith in the positive progress of history and nations, but early women’s liberation journals such as Refractory Girl expounded the necessity of rejecting, attacking and critiquing what they identified as masculinist nationalist histories. The sorts of triumphalist histories produced by earlier feminists, together with the tradition of championing pioneer Australian women, were dismissed in the first editorial of Refractory Girl as an ineffective historical tradition for feminism on the basis that ‘virtually the only women ever recognised to have existed in Australian history are the pioneer women and those who fought for the vote’. Damned Whores and God’s Police and The Real Matilda were both conceived and represented as counter-histories to Australian national histories and instances of privileging the lives of real women over exceptional women, ‘pioneer’ or ‘heroine’ women. Beverley Kingston’s My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann, published in 1975, was similarly interested in the oppression of women and revealed women’s history indebtedness to social history at this time.

These three successful works were to have a lasting effect on feminist history, and the history of feminism, in Australia. Jill Matthews, writing on the early years of Refractory Girl, traced the reception and influence of the ‘pioneering’, yet ‘negative’ histories produced by Summers, Dixson and Kingston, which inevitably

9 In her general history of western feminism Faces of Feminism, Olive Banks referred to the 1920-1960 period as ‘the intermission’. Olive Banks, Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement, Martin Robertson, Oxford, 1981, p. 151
10 Refractory Girl, 1, 1972/73, p. 3
gave way to a backlash, epitomised by a shift towards calling for the inclusion of 'exceptional' women such as Labor's Muriel Heagney, a women's right activist and contemporary of Street's.\textsuperscript{11} Yet the backlash would take some time to negate the pervasive influence of those three early histories, described elsewhere by Ann Curthoys as 'nightmares.'\textsuperscript{12}

The re-claiming of women such as Heagney was hindered by the historical models employed in the key Australian feminist history texts of the 1970s. The nature of Summers' project, for instance, ensured that the history of feminism was filed away as a topic to be comprehensively covered at a later date. In the first edition of \textit{Refractory Girl} Summers surveyed existing works on Australian women's and feminist history and concluded that 'We still lack a comprehensive history of feminism in Australia. The entire feminist movement in Australia, of which the suffrage campaign was merely one, albeit, an important, episode, needs to be carefully investigated and appraised'. Uncertainty about previous Australian feminisms, Summers wrote, 'simply serves to indicate the pitiful neglect of this chapter in our history'.\textsuperscript{13} Neither \textit{Damned Whores and God's Police} nor \textit{The Real Matilda} took up this challenge. The former offered a cursory treatment of the suffrage movement, with later feminists subsumed under the crippling effects for women of two world wars and the Depression. Dixson maintained a sharp focus – Australia's deeply misogynist past – and confined her discussion of feminism to turn of the century feminists.\textsuperscript{14}

The union of feminist and labour history proved to be a more fruitful site for discussing the contributions of earlier Australian feminists. Typically, these considerations focused on how various social movements had previously


\textsuperscript{13} Anne Summers, Editorial, \textit{Refractory Girl}, 1, 1972/3

\textsuperscript{14} Further Dixson concurred with Norman MacKenzie's observation that Australian women played a comparatively slight part in promoting the causes of Australian women from the later 1880s on. Miriam Dixson, \textit{The Real Matilda}, p. 212
addressed the issues of women’s work and equal pay. Edna Ryan and Anne Conlon’s history of women’s waged labour, *Gentle Invaders*, published in 1975, was exemplary of this form of history.\(^\text{15}\) Ryan and Conlon wrote in this instance primarily as activists – both were active in the Women’s Electoral Lobby and the labour movement. Their collaborative project formed while the two women were preparing the case for a minimum wage for women in the national wage case of 1974. *Gentle Invaders* has since been praised as a valuable summary of the history of the regulation of women’s wages and working conditions, rather than for its analysis or detail.\(^\text{16}\)

*Women at Work*, a collection of essays produced and published in 1975 by the Australian Society for the study of Labour History, made a more ambitious contribution to Australian feminist history. The editors and contributors sought to ‘rescue some women from the oblivion of the past’,\(^\text{17}\) advance a model for feminist labour history\(^\text{18}\) and challenge recent feminist histories. In the first article, Winifred Mitchell advanced an early critique of the historical method of 1970s feminists and called for historical recognition of earlier radical women. She wrote:

> The women’s movement of the 1970s displays a qualitative difference from similar movements in Australia’s past, and its rummaging in the attic of history for forgotten female heroes is being done more with the purpose of correcting a falsification of history by omission than of finding old slogans for a new cause. It would seem that the new movement owes little or nothing to radical women of the past, whether of the middle or working class.\(^\text{19}\)

Mitchell’s article was one of the first to begin to write the history of left-wing women into the history of Australian feminism.\(^\text{20}\) The inclusion of privileged


\(^{16}\) Ann Curthoys, ‘Visions, Nightmares, Dreams’, p. 6

\(^{17}\) Ann Curthoys, Susan Eade, Peter Spearritt (eds), *Women at Work*, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Canberra, 1975, p. ix

\(^{18}\) Ann Curthoys, ‘Towards a Feminist Labour History’, *Women at Work*, pp. 88-95

\(^{19}\) Winifred Mitchell, ‘Wives of the Radical Labour Movement’, *Women at Work*, p. 1

\(^{20}\) Mitchell, a member of Street’s organisation the United Associations, was also persistent in arguing for the contribution of earlier middle-class feminists. She wrote the official history of the United Associations
middle-class feminists such as Street was more problematic and typically accompanied by a class critique. Yet, in its treatment of both working-class and middle-class activists *Women at Work* was a significant early attempt by women's and labour historians to acknowledge the presence and scope of mid-twentieth century feminisms.

The first two women and labour conferences, held in 1978 and 1980, produced the edited collections *Women, Class and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia 1788-1978* and *Worth Her Salt: Women at Work in Australia*. Both of these works were further evidence of the growing allegiances and overlap between feminist, socialist and labour histories and as such included both feminist and communist women as contributors and subjects. The introduction to *Worth Her Salt* also firmly positioned the project as trying to find a way through the impasse between optimists and pessimists that had claimed Australian feminist history to that point. That particular collection was noteworthy for two of the first historical treatments of the United Associations, the first in the context of collaborations with left wing women, the second an exclusive treatment of the feud between Jessie Street and Bessie Rischbieth, historicised in this instance as ‘the end of first wave feminism in Australia’.

The establishment of feminist presses such as Sybylla Press and the enduring relationship between activist feminism and history also resulted in increased attention for communist women and their contribution to women's rights in Australia. Joyce Stevens, identified amongst the contributors to *Women, Class and History* as 'active in a number of Sydney women's liberation campaigns since

21 For example, Andree Wright’s article ‘Jessie Street, Feminist’ in *Women at Work*.
23 Patricia Ranald, ‘Feminism and Class: The United Associations of Women and the Council of Action for Equal Pay in the Depression’, in *Worth Her Salt*.
24 Kate White, ‘Bessie Rischbieth, Jessie Street and the end of first wave feminism in Australia’ in *Worth Her Salt*.
it began',\textsuperscript{25} began to historicise communist women, including herself, in the context of second wave feminism. Her history of International Women's Day, published in 1985,\textsuperscript{26} and \textit{Bringing the Revolution Home}, her part critical history part oral history, published by Sybylla Press in 1986, indicated an interest in both historicising feminism in terms of its changing meanings over time and including these women in an overall history of Australian feminisms.

Meanwhile, historical interest in those feminists that communist women had defined themselves against was continuing to grow. Peter Sekuless' biography of Jessie Street,\textsuperscript{27} commissioned by her family and criticised by feminist labour historian Pat Ranald as inattentive to the relationship between feminism and social change, was published in 1978.\textsuperscript{28} In that same year, the United Associations published their official history, written by Winifred Mitchell. But the treatment of the between-the-waves feminists by Marian Sawyer and Marian Simms in \textit{A Woman's Place: Women in Politics in Australia}, published in 1984 was more typical of explanations for previous historical neglect. Sawyer and Simms ultimately represented interwar feminists in particular as failures for their apparent inability to get elected as representatives to parliament. They conceded these feminists had been ‘very active’ during World War II, but ‘nominal presences’ otherwise.\textsuperscript{29} This interpretation – active during the war, otherwise unsuccessful – came to the fore in Gisela Kaplan's 1994 history of the women's movement in \textit{The Meagre Harvest}, in which she declared between ‘1901 and 1968 there was no single noteworthy reform on women's issues taken in Australia’.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{25} Elizabeth Windschuttle (ed.), \textit{Women, Class and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia 1788-1978}, Fontana/ Collins, Melbourne, 1980, p. 15

\textsuperscript{26} Joyce Stevens, \textit{A History of International Women's Day: in words and images}, IWD Press, Sydney, 1985

\textsuperscript{27} Peter Sekuless, \textit{Jessie Street: A Rewarding but Unrewarded Life}, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1978

\textsuperscript{28} Pat Ranald, 'Jessie Street: an adequate assessment?', \textit{Hecate}, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1979

\textsuperscript{29} Marian Sawyer and Marian Simms, \textit{A Woman's Place: Women and Politics in Australia}, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1984, p. 171

It was against such interpretations that Marilyn Lake began to advance her critique of the nullifying effects of the waves model of feminist historiography, primarily in an essay in a collection to honour Jessie Street, published in 1990, and in the 'Twenty Years On' edition of *Australian Historical Studies*. Lake had resisted a reading of the poverty of Australian feminism since early in her career and increasingly she directed her research interests to discussing previously neglected Australian feminisms, including their notions of citizenship and championing of Aboriginal rights. By the 1990s, Lake was hardly alone amongst Australian feminist historians in her critique of the waves model. Judith Allen, in her introduction to her biography of Rose Scott, usefully charted various revisions to the waves model. Lake's reappraisal of earlier Australian feminisms was also a project of Susan Magarey's. But Lake's documentation and analysis of those feminists who fell 'between the waves' was the most comprehensive and insightful. By 1999, Lake had produced *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism*, which effectively restored 'between-the-waves feminism' and thereby created a continuous history of feminist activism in Australia.

In her introduction to *Getting Equal*, Lake outlined the critical task of her project. Primarily, she sought to correct four common misconceptions that have defined analysis of past feminisms since the 1970s. These popular misconceptions were

32 Marilyn Lake, 'Feminist History as National History: Writing the Political History of Women', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 106, April 1996
33 In 1976, for example, Lake wrote a review of Dixon's *The Real Matilda* for *Hecate* in which she disputed Dixon's dismissal of earlier Australian feminisms by using examples of active women's organisations at the turn of the century as evidence. Marilyn Lake, 'To Be Denied a Sense of Past Generations', *Hecate*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1976
35 See Judith Allen's discussion of 'presentism' in her introduction to *Rose Scott: Vision and Revision in Feminism*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 12-16
that there were two waves of feminism with a long lull in between, that once enfranchised Australian women did little with the vote, that lack of success in parliament meant Australian feminists were political failures and finally that Australian feminists were only concerned to advance the interests of white, middle-class career women. Lake’s response to these misconceptions, in keeping with her earlier scholarship, was to emphasise the length and scope of particular feminist campaigns and the efforts in particular of feminist organisations such as the United Associations and the Australian Federation of Women Voters. She was attentive to the historical and cultural specificity of earlier feminisms and the label ‘feminist’, though Lake was keen also to establish connections across feminisms in her focus on particular campaigns, such as equal pay and Aboriginal rights. Like *Creating a Nation*, the history of Australia Lake co-authored with Patricia Grimshaw, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly, *Getting Equal* is ambitious both in its scope and challenge to previous histories. Both works are counter-histories to dominant narratives of nation and feminism, and offer rich accounts of women’s political and cultural agency. They testify to Lake’s earlier contention that while it is important to deconstruct the universal categories of historical analysis, ‘feminist history must also, simultaneously, construct the history of women. ... We must constitute women as historical subjects and show not just that women have a history, but argue the significance of that history’.

In contrast to Summers’ and Dixson’s earlier works, *Creating a Nation* and *Getting Equal* are positive histories in which the authors argue for women’s important contribution to the nation. Most critics have lauded Lake’s achievement in addressing so comprehensively and passionately the work of between-the-waves feminists, though it has been suggested her positive narrative

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38 Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath, Marian Quartly (eds.), *Creating a Nation: 1788-1990*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1994
39 Marilyn Lake, ‘Women, Gender and History’, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 7 & 8, Summer 1988, p. 6
obscured for instance the racist discourse in feminist politics at this time.\textsuperscript{40} For Joan Scott, Lake’s narrative of continuous feminist activity - which to Scott accorded equal weight to individual protest, small organisational efforts and large-scale collective movements - had the effect of dehistoricising feminism by riding over discussions of the impact and influence (or not) of feminist politics.\textsuperscript{41} Scott has elsewhere revealed an interest in thinking about the sorts of questions that lurk behind histories of feminism - questions about how identity was established, how women with vastly different agendas identified with one another across time and social position and the mechanisms of such collective and retrospective identifications.\textsuperscript{42} Lake’s critical project goes some way to answering these questions within a history of feminism, while also raising some new ones.

This thesis attempts to answer some of the new questions raised by Lake’s history. I consider, for example, how the waves model led some feminists to historicise themselves in particular ways. This consideration is necessarily steeped in the history and identity-making of between-the-waves feminists and activists. How, for instance, did post-suffrage feminists seek to legitimate their political identity? To what extent did the white middle-class women’s movement define itself in relation to other groups such as communist women? I address these questions by interrogating what notions of ‘history’ and ‘feminism’ informed the historical and contemporary identities of feminists and other women activists of the 1919-1969 period.

This survey has indicated the diverse and challenging ways Australian feminist historians have both constructed and contested histories of Australian feminism. Increasingly, the trend in Australian feminist history has been to fill the gap left by the waves model in nuanced and comprehensive ways. Yet as Scott’s review of Lake’s \textit{Getting Equal} reminds us, a continuous narrative of feminist activity is

\textsuperscript{40} Lyndall Ryan, book review of \textit{Getting Equal}, \textit{Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies}, Vol. 5, No. 1, June 2000, p. 99
\textsuperscript{41} Joan W. Scott, book review of \textit{Getting Equal}, \textit{Australian Historical Studies}, Vol. 115, 2000, p. 359
not the only way of accounting for the absence created by the waves model. The trough created by the waves model was not the result of masculinist neglect; rather, it was feminists themselves who repudiated the generation of feminists that came before them. In this thesis, I take this repudiation seriously by exploring the stories 1970s feminists chose not to read and the traditions they neglected. The history-making of between-the-waves feminists traced in this thesis reveals a series of historical approaches and stories, or ‘mirrors’ of the past, which do not amount to a continuous story about Australian feminism. These often disconnected stories reveal that second-wave feminists were rejecting a period of feminist history which was characterised by disunity, debates about representation, thwarted optimism, quietude, a sense of loss and failure and a different sense of what it meant to be ‘feminist’. I take some of these narratives produced by between-the-waves feminism as my analytic focus and I both implicitly and explicitly incorporate the following critical discussions.

Feminist Identity

The thesis begins in 1919, after World War I, when Australian women had had their first significant opportunity to exercise the vote meaningfully. The year 1919 saw the first of several Royal Commissions and or Government Inquiries that were crucial to the campaigns of feminist groups over the next fifty years: the 1919 Royal Commission into the Basic Wage. In addition to this local activity, 1919 also marked the beginning of a new kind of feminist internationalism, inspired to a significant extent by the spirit of the Versailles Treaty and the formation of the League of Nations at the end of World War I. In 1921, Bessie Rischbeith formed the Australian Federation of Women Voters (AFWV), the umbrella group for feminist organisations, in the context of these developments.

The particular challenge for post-suffrage feminists was to secure legitimacy for the women’s movement by developing a distinct idea of citizenship. Appropriating the liberal democratic discourse of the League of Nations for feminist purposes offered one way of potentially imbuing feminism, and feminist
citizenship, with political legitimacy. Another way of doing this, for explicitly feminist organisations such as the AFWV and the United Associations (who were formed by Street in 1929), was to give their feminism a history. Sometimes this history-making took on the particular challenge of creating a feminist tradition.

Typically, the making of a feminist tradition has been recognised as a problematic and recurring dilemma. As Maria Grever has stated, 'knowledge of the feminist past is generally not self evident. It must be explained and acquired again and again'.\textsuperscript{43} Barbara Caine has further acknowledged that feminist historiography has been hampered by a lack of functioning feminist tradition, developed around certain dominating and legitimating figures and texts that are passed from one generation to the next.\textsuperscript{44} Particular features that have inevitably hampered an ongoing feminist tradition – the selective use of feminist heroines to suit contemporary feminist purposes for example – were in evidence in the history-making of between-the-waves feminists. These feminists persisted in the creation of a feminist tradition and what was unique about this was that many of them had actively participated in the campaign for the vote, which would form the touchstone of their historicisations of feminism. They were not interested in perpetuating a feminist generational divide. Later feminisms may have disqualified them from a narrative of feminism's progress, but post suffrage feminists figured themselves differently. They were part of feminism's continuing project, of which the vote had been a significant historical milestone within their own lifetimes.

Some of these feminists also sought to situate feminism within a broader, progressive history of western democracy. Both 'feminism' and 'history' were thus figured as profoundly modern and linear projects of truth, progress, and rationality that were dependent on unified identities; in feminism's case this was the identity of 'woman', which was typically posited as subsuming other

\textsuperscript{43} Maria Grever, 'The Pantheon of Feminist Culture: Women's Movements and the Organisation of Memory', \textit{Gender and History}. Vol. 9, No.2., August 1997, p. 364

differences such as class, nationality and race. The tendency to equate ‘feminism’ with ‘woman’ was not exclusive to this period and has formed the basis of many critiques of feminism’s uses of history. Despite, or because of this, various feminist movements have looked to history to establish ‘woman’ as a coherent, unified and collective political identity. The history of feminism and the women’s movement, for example, are assumed to be co-terminous; this is evidence of the self-image of contemporary feminism, which tends to suppress a history of feminist thought in favour of histories of feminist activity. An effect of this has been to inadvertently quarantine feminism to the ‘narrow world of women, the marginal world of women’s issues, cut off from the general field of women’s endeavour’.45 Both the professed feminists of my period of study and communist women of the same generation tried to resist this narrow definition of political women’s sphere of influence, the former by situating feminism within a progressive history of western democracy and the latter by renouncing feminism in favour of the more far-reaching ideology of communism. Interestingly, this often made alliances with men, for both sides, less problematic than alliances with one another.

As feminist historian Genevieve Fraisse has succinctly stated, a feminist ‘is no more a citizen than any other woman’.46 Yet feminism’s claiming of the category of ‘woman’ has also resulted in the recurring tendency to have the figure of the ‘feminist’ represent ‘woman’. Inevitably, this tendency to absorb the category of ‘woman’ for feminism has been contested throughout feminism’s history. For Rosalind Delmar, discussion about ‘woman’, as the subject of feminism, was most pronounced during the 1970s, where same (essentialist) versus difference debates about womanhood were testimony to the category of ‘woman [being] too fragile to bear the weight of all contents and meanings now ascribed to it’.47 Following from this, some feminist historians, including Delmar, have been persistent in historicising the various ways feminists have invoked the category of ‘woman’ at

47 Delmar, p. 28
discrete moments in time, and in doing so shift discussion to discontinuities of feminism, or to the contexts of the production of feminist histories. Some of these critiques have emerged from specific debates about the meaning and historicity of the term ‘feminism’. Nancy Cott, for instance, who has insisted on recognising the historical specificity of the term ‘feminist’ (and therefore rules out using it ahistorically), refers to ‘woman’ as the ‘ruling fiction’ of feminism.\textsuperscript{48} Others such as Denise Riley seek to trace the ‘impermanence of collective identities’ to ask questions about what lies beneath particular invocations of ‘woman’ by feminists.\textsuperscript{49} As Joan Scott has argued, the ‘identity of woman ...was not so much a self-evident fact of history as it was evidence – from a particular and discrete moment in time – of someone’s, some group’s effort to identify and mobilize a collective’.\textsuperscript{50} For Scott, thinking about the deployment of ‘woman’ in histories of feminism is intimately tied to analysing the relationship between feminism, identity and history.

These discussions about feminism and identity are integral to my thesis. I argue that feminist identity in the twentieth century has been constantly contested and re-constructed. Not surprisingly during the period under consideration the feminist claim on the identity of ‘woman’ was contested both within feminism and from outside it. The debate was one of the many instances of feminism’s marginality, a marginality feminists continually resisted. During World War II, for instance, some of these feminists flirted with the idea of ‘making history’, but this sense of historical occasion was soon undermined by social change and a fractured women’s movement.

Communism was one of the most divisive issues for Australian feminism, between the wars and especially after the Second World War. Communist women and feminists may have come together to campaign around particular issues for women, but they also defined themselves, and their activism, against the other.

\textsuperscript{48} Nancy F. Cott, \textit{The Grounding of Modern Feminism}, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1987, p. 6
\textsuperscript{49} Denise Riley, ‘Am I That Name?’: \textit{Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History}, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1990 edition, p. 9
\textsuperscript{50} Joan Scott, ‘Fantasy Echo’, p. 2
Feminism, it has been said, in many of its forms, has been in a permanent state of rapport with communism and socialism. They have a common emergence, a relationship of dependence which is positive some of the time, but also sometimes negative.51 For women activists in Australia, between 1919 and 1969, this uneasy or broken alliance was clearly in evidence. During the 1970s, some communist women ‘re-invented’ themselves as feminists, or women liberationists, and their personal stories and histories offer another perspective from which to consider the relationship between feminism, history and identity during and after the period 1919-1969. Feminists of the 1970s re-cast the feminist past in numerous ways, including a renunciation of those feminists that had come a generation before. One of the effects of this was the promotion of the waves model of conceptualising feminist history, which established connections between earlier feminists who had secured the vote and the women’s liberationists, who presumably would complete the liberating process. The acceptance of this model implicitly and explicitly involved an erasure or diminishing of the contribution of the ‘between-the-waves’ feminists, who in turn have responded to this historical revision with revisions of their own. These historical revisions have included staking a claim for feminist continuity, by establishing connections between various feminisms, or as in the case of some communist women, re-casting their previous political experiences according to their understanding of a later, and radically different, conception of feminist identity.

This thesis concludes in 1969, a familiar ‘turning point’ year in feminist history, otherwise known as the beginning of the ‘second wave’. In Australia, the first women’s liberation groups met in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney and many of these meetings were attended by women disenfranchised from the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and the New Left. The year 1969 was also significant for those women activists, feminist and communist, who had been campaigning for decades for equal pay. It was in 1969 that the Commonwealth

51 Fraisse, ‘The Forms of Historical Feminism’, pg. 7
Arbitration Commission accepted the principle of equal pay. And it was in 1969 and after that many of the politically active women of an earlier generation became acutely aware of the emergence of new feminisms, new modes of practice and discourse and new conceptions of feminist history. Within this context, nostalgia for a lost or ignored feminism became a consolation for a lack of success or recognition.

**Feminism and History**

Feminists have turned to history to account for and legitimate success, to explain or re-write failure and to refigure feminist identity. In my thesis, I turn a mirror back onto those stories to see what they can tell me about the relationship between feminism, history and identity in and about the 1919-1969 period. To do this it is important to be attentive to the historical and cultural specificity of both ‘feminism’ and ‘history’. Feminist historians and theorists such as Joan W. Scott, Claire Colebrook and Gail Reekie have done important work on historicising and contextualising the history-making of feminists and I locate my own analysis within this field of inquiry. Key ideas, and their relevance to my project, are raised in this section on feminism and history.

Colebrook, while attentive to the discontinuities and specificities of feminist thought, has pointed out that historicism and feminism have a long history. Liberal feminism emerged in western thought at a moment when history appeared to be a vehicle for emancipation. So while it was true that earlier forms of liberal feminism tended to ground their claims for women’s rights on the universal character of individual rights, even eighteenth century liberal writers relied upon a radically historical vision. The longevity of women’s oppression was no argument for its validity; therefore an insistence on the historical character of human beings was necessary. This focus on historical change only intensified in the twentieth century, making it difficult for feminisms to avoid historical narratives of progress or development.
Furthermore, Colebrook has also recognised that the feminist embrace of historicism is necessarily theoretically incoherent as feminists argue for the liberating effects of historical relativism on the one hand (because recognising difference disrupts oppression) and posit a feminist ethics, evidenced in the political investment in history and the notion of ‘women’ as a political unity, on the other. Colebrook has traced how one way of responding to this contradiction between an embrace of historicism and ethical relativism on the one hand and the moral and political use of historical continuity and retrieval on the other has been to draw a line between critical (ie. academic) and tactical (ie. activist) feminist histories. But such distinctions, she argues, are blurred by the overlap in forms and evidence in both approaches. Deference to ‘women’s experience’, for instance, is hardly exclusive to grassroots feminisms.\footnote{Claire Colebrook, ‘Feminist Ethics and Historicism’, \textit{Australian Feminist Studies}, Vol. 11, No. 24, 1996, pg. 295-307}

I agree also with Colebrook’s related assertion that those ostensibly ‘naïve’ forms of feminist history – which seek to improve the present by restoring those lost and ‘other’ voices of the past (a feature of the feminisms of my period and after) – are best read as examples of positive histories, at once descriptive and ethical.\footnote{Colebrook, pg. 303} Read in these terms, the production of feminist histories in the period - typically expressed through plays, speeches, magazine profiles that celebrate feminist achievement, organisational histories that do the same and the commemoration of feminist victories – can be interpreted as political acts and as examples of feminisms’ radical claims for a history, rather than ‘good’ or ‘bad’ feminisms, determined by contemporary feminist objectives.\footnote{Judith Allen has identified this practice of interpreting past feminisms as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ using contemporary feminism as the starting point for critique as ‘presentism’. See Judith Allen, Introduction to \textit{Rose Scott: Vision and Revision in Feminism}, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 12} For many women, including those under investigation, the materiality of history represents a different voice, or a shadow history, inherited from an intellectual tradition and world view not necessarily their own.\footnote{Gail Reekie, ‘Feminist History after Foucault’, \textit{Foucault: The Legacy}, ed. Clare O’Farrell, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, 1997, p. 299} Yet this hardly precludes historical radicalism. Feminists
such as Jessie Street who located their activism within imported historical models, may have mirrored other discourses, but in doing so they were challenging the bases and uses of traditional historical models.

Some feminist theorists have staked a claim for feminism as profoundly post-modern in its destabilising of the Enlightenment, and while Street's faith in the institutions of liberal democracy such as the League of Nations and the United Nations may seem to reproduce Enlightenment concepts rather than challenge them, her life story – the way she expressed it and the content – offer evidence of both feminism's lack of tradition (in her use of wide-ranging theories and philosophies) and a radical remedy to that problem. Street's autobiography, to be further explored in the context of its production and reception in Chapter Four, is a patchwork of twentieth century political and cultural theories; everyone from Bernard Shaw to Karl Marx to John Curtin caught her interest. But it was the suffragettes who were featured as her kindred spirits. Street was a minor participant in the suffragette struggles in England early in the twentieth century, but assuming the role of historian of their movement she devoted a chapter to their activities. Street concluded that 'history has shown that the suffragettes were justified in their claim for political rights'. Writing in the context of declining interest in the sort of feminism she had espoused for decades, Street fashioned a feminist history to stake a claim in the past and the present. This brings to mind Gail Reekie's assertion that 'feminist historical practice...makes less safe the demilitarised zone between past and present [and in this context is] a disruptive and explicitly political action'.

Reekie's call to study 'history AND feminism' rather than feminist history, or its variants, is also a useful way for thinking about the relationship between history

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57 Jessie Street, Truth or Repose, Australiasian Book Society, Sydney, 1966, p. 53
58 Reckie, 'Feminist History After Foucault', p. 303
and identity formation. This approach explains the historical and cultural specificity, and the grounding in particular discourses, of both ‘feminism’ and ‘history’. It may also highlight the affinities and tensions between particular feminisms and modes of history. For instance, liberal feminist organisations such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters and the United Associations sought legitimacy for their politics via the proper processes and hierarchies of liberal democratic thought and governance. This included an alignment with a progressive and modern historical model. It was in institutions such as the League of Nations, and through their own exercising of democratic rights, that these feminists saw confirmation of the historical destiny of feminism. Bessie Rischbieth’s appointment as Australia’s Government representative at the League of Nations in 1935 and Street’s participation in the United Nations were duly celebrated as proof of feminism’s progress. ‘History’ and ‘feminism’, in this understanding, were mutually compatible and affirming. But when this progressive sense of history faltered for Australian feminism, as it did increasingly throughout the 1940s and 1950s, this union between feminism and history was figured from a marginal position. History, typically expressed in organisational histories such as Rischbieth’s The March of Australian Women and UA member Winifred Mitchell’s Fifty Years of Feminist Achievement, became a consolation for a lack of success. The relationship between a certain feminism and a particular historical model shifted from a synchronic one to that of consoling effects.

It is this shifting approach to an idea of ‘history’ and its possible applications for a sense of feminist identity that forms the central focus of this thesis. Colebrook and Reekie’s discussions about the radicalism of the feminist embrace of history offer a useful framework for approaching the history-making of particular feminists at specific historical moments. My chapters typically begin with an idea of Australian feminism expressed in relation to a particular idea of historical significance. The narrative thread that unites all of these distinct episodes of

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59 Reekie, p. 304
Australian feminist history-making, whether feminist identity was expressed contemporaneously or retrospectively, is a consideration of the timing of feminism.

Within the period 1919-1969, Australian feminists and Australian communists experienced a sense that history was on their side and eventually a sense that history was not. In chapter one, I discuss how the Australian Federation of Women Voters (AFWV) announced themselves as a new, essential and relevant organisation on the basis that the formation of the League of Nations in 1919 demanded a more robust network of feminist representation, nationally and internationally. Furthermore, by insisting that their affiliates have a political platform – i.e. be ‘feminist’ rather than merely philanthropic – the AFWV asserted that feminists were the most appropriate representatives of Australian women. Yet this representative status would not go unchallenged. The AFWV’s affiliate base was slow to develop and would never be substantial. Clearly other women’s organisations had different ideas about who should represent Australian women. One feminist organisation that did affiliate with the AFWV – the United Associations (UA), who were formed in New South Wales in 1929 by Jessie Street – would become arguably more effective in lobbying government and organising campaigns. By the end of the 1920s, the AFWV’s stake in the historical emergence of post-war western democratic internationalism was already on shaky ground.

Inter-war Australian feminists continued their pursuit of a cohesive and legitimate political identity into the 1930s. Another way of doing this was to locate their politics within a feminist tradition. Songs, plays and poems in praise of a feminist tradition were composed and performed at conferences and other feminist gatherings, both in Australia and internationally. In May 1933, when the AFWV gathered in conference in Adelaide, one of the featured events was the performance of a pageant play entitled ‘The Springs of Power’. Playwright and AFWV member Ellinor Walker presented a cast of feminists and feminist inspirations, ranging from Zenobia the Arabian Queen through Mary
Wollstonecraft to South Australia's Catherine Helen Spence. Other features - a generic woman pausing on the road to women's emancipation and a procession of international representatives of feminism - indicated the extent to which the play was written in the context of contemporary feminism's anxiety about their development and legitimacy. The divisions between feminist and other women's organisations had become more pronounced. In chapter two, I read the 'The Springs of Power' as an expression of the anxieties of inter-war Australian feminists over their legitimacy, their representative claims and their political position. The invocation of history in "The Springs of Power" revealed the extent to which feminists at this time were performing power, rather than securing it.

The Second World War was welcomed by some feminists such as Jessie Street as a chance for Australian feminism to come of age. Street organised the Australian Women's Charter Conference in 1943 and promoted it as an opportunity for women's activists of diverse backgrounds to come together to discuss what the war, and the post-war period, would mean for Australian women. It was Street's intention that feminism rise to the occasion of war by continuing its fight for women's rights. The presence at the first Charter conference of representatives from over ninety organisations, ranging from temperance unions to the Communist Party of Australia, suggested that her visions for the future of mass-campaigning for women's rights were shared by others. However, by the time of the second Charter Conference in 1946, Australian feminism was fractured by a rising anti-communism that exacerbated previous debates about who was qualified to represent Australian women. Australian feminism's historical moment had apparently passed. In chapter three, I trace how a new age for feminism was identified, contested and ultimately deferred.

In her autobiography *Truth or Repose*, Street described World War II as the most satisfying time of her life.60 Twenty years later, when she came to write her memoirs, Street chose to conclude them - possibly in anticipation of a second

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60 Street, *Truth or Repose*, p. 6
volume that would record the next phase of her activist life — in 1945, the year that her friend and supporter Prime Minister John Curtin died at the United Nations Conference in San Francisco. In chapter four, I discuss how the production of and response to Street’s autobiography, released in 1966, offered an opportunity for feminists, communists and other commentators to reflect on Street’s particular contribution to Australian public life and the feminism that she represented. Street spent much of the 1950s overseas, alienated from Cold War Australia, but still interested and invested in key social questions. Yet, the women’s movement had become more diffuse, with some sections gravitating towards productive collaborations with left-wing women, while others insisted on patrolling the borders of feminist identity. In any case, feminist and communist organisations occupied an increasingly marginalised position in Australian life. In this context, Street’s autobiography can be read as an example of how Australian feminists came to understand and figure their feminism in the context of declining interest and relevance for the sort of feminist politics they were espousing.

Street’s interest in communism, or more specifically socialism, meant that she encouraged collaboration with the left, but though she was typically remembered fondly in the historical recollections of communist women, her difference from them also underscored the extent to which communist women and feminists defined themselves against one another. In chapter five, I bring communist women and their identity politics and history-making into sharper focus. The Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was formed in 1920 and offered different, though occasionally overlapping, emancipatory options for women from those promoted by the women’s movement. Membership of the CPA held the promise of revolutionary historical change for not only women, but the world. However, the Party’s marginal and contested role in Australian public life and its predominantly masculinist culture meant that women’s work in the CPA was never properly defined and was sometimes circumscribed by working-class morality and a male-dominated bureaucracy. Later, some communist women would critique their experiences in the Party through a feminist lens. Others
would insist on the historical specificity of the term ‘feminism’, explicitly differentiating their activism from that of middle-class feminists, while simultaneously establishing a connection with Women’s Liberation. At work here was a complex claim to a proto-feminism that came before the second-wave, but was distinct from the feminism of Street and her peers.

The Union of Australian Women (UAW), an organisation committed to women’s rights and peace, was formed in 1950, at the height of the Cold War. As an organisation dominated by communist women, the Union asserted their separate identity from contemporary feminism, while simultaneously invoking a sense of feminist tradition in the pages of their magazine Our Women. In this way, and through various shared campaigns with feminists, the UAW revealed its origins in both feminism and communism. Street and her Charter Conferences were invoked as historical precedents for the sort of work they were doing. Their championing of maternalist politics further revealed the UAW’s indebtedness to both feminist and communist modes of campaigning. In chapter six, I discuss the UAW in relation to both the histories of communist and feminist women in Australia and as an organisation that never seemed to have history on their side. The UAW campaigned for the union of women at a time when the women’s movement in Australia was more fragmented than it had ever been. The Cold War and a resurgent post-war domestic ideology also meant that anti-communism and anti-feminism both flourished. The emergence of Women’s Liberation in the late 1960s initially offered some hope of solidarity – both movements were active in the peace movement and committed to equal pay for example – but the difference in methods and culture ensured the UAW remained marginal.

Some communist women were less problematic for Women’s Liberationists. Left women, such as communist and writer Jean Devanny, fitted more comfortably into the sort of history second-wave feminists were seeking for their movement. Devanny, a vocal advocate of women’s political and sexual freedom, had recognised in her writings and speeches that the personal was indeed political.
Additionally, the shabby treatment she received from the Party over her supposed sexual misconduct offered evidence of the ultimate inability or refusal of masculinist politics to incorporate the possibility of women's liberation. And finally, as a writer, consistently torn between her creativity and her activism, Devanny could be located in another tradition second-wave feminists cultivated; that of women writers. Yet her autobiography, written during the 1940s and never published in her lifetime, insisted on the historical specificity of feminism. In chapter six, I consider both the content and retrieval of Devanny's autobiography by Women's Liberationist Carole Ferrier as examples of the relationship of left women to feminism at different points in time.

Chapter six also features former communist, self-identified feminist and writer Dorothy Hewett. Of the major figures discussed throughout the thesis, it is Hewett who seemed to have history on her side. She joined the CPA when all the rebels did and left in 1968 after the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia. Hewett didn't join Women's Liberation, but she didn't need to. Her bourgeois background and writing had always set her apart from other communist women and provided her with crucial escape routes when the demands of Party life became too overwhelming. Writing was her liberation. By the time she came to write her autobiography *Wild Card* in the late 1980s she was able to use feminist and modernist narratives and language to figure her experiences historically. Some of these experiences were similar to Devanny's and they shared in common the particular dilemma of being a female writer in the CPA, but Hewett's rendering of them spoke volumes about the feminism that separated the two women. If Devanny was ahead of her time, Hewett belonged to hers. I conclude the thesis with these two women to emphatically illustrate the complicated relationship between feminism, identity and history.

The feminist historiography canvassed in this introduction indicates the relationship between feminism, history and identity has increasingly been a topic of analytical and political interest. I draw on these debates to recast a problematic period of Australian feminist history. The stories featured in the
chapters were told from different perspectives and I follow those winding paths to trace how feminists and communists negotiated and re-negotiated feminism, history and identity. I track optimistic beginnings that celebrate the League of Nations and its potential for feminism and stories of decline that continued to express hope in western democratic internationalism. The lives of some women such as Jean Devanny may have been ultimately sad for them, but such lives were also taken up by later feminists as trailblazing and proto-feminist. Celebration, tradition, hope, vision, loss, failure and rejection are all stories about between-the-waves feminism which do not amount to a seamless, progressive narrative. In tracing the exalted beginnings and ragged endings of these stories my thesis critically engages with a fundamental question for feminist history: that of how our histories are produced and reproduced for contemporary feminist politics and identity.
Chapter One: The Politics of Association: Inter-war Feminism

The feminist culture that developed in the 1920s and throughout the 1930s was characterised by a professed spirit of association, federation and internationalism, all premised on the idea that ‘woman’ was a unifying category with identifiable characteristics and aspirations. A typical maxim of Bessie Rischbieth, long standing President of the Australian Federation of Women Voters, was ‘the things that unite women are greater than those that divide them’. Ideally and rhetorically, this idea of ‘woman’ was thought to subsume or over-ride distinctions of class, race and geography, but contests over which organisations were qualified to represent Australian women revealed the fragility of ‘woman’ as a unifying category. And though this was a period with marked continuities with earlier feminisms, the feminist culture that developed demonstrated that it was also a period firmly located in place (Australia, Empire then the world) and time (post-war, post-League of Nations).

In this chapter, I draw on existing histories to develop a general portrait of the culture and debates peculiar to inter-war Australian feminism. This will establish a background for the more specific discussions of feminism and history that follow in later chapters. Within this discussion, I highlight how two integral feminist organisations of the inter-war period -- the Australian Federation of Women Voters (AFWV), formed in Perth 1921 and the United Associations (UA), formed in Sydney in 1929 -- accounted for their origins and politics by referring to the development of the League of the Nations and insisting on the importance of a corresponding, nationally and internationally-focussed feminism. These two groups shared much in common: formidable and dynamic founding leaders in Bessie Rischbieth and Jessie Street respectively, connections to international feminist bodies and commitment to a certain kind of female citizenship, not to mention some of the same members and resources. But the characteristics and peculiarities of inter-war Australian feminism can be most usefully traced via an analysis of their differences.

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The differences between the AFWV and the UA have been typically traced through a focus on the rift that developed between Rischbieth and Street.\(^2\) It was an antagonism that built up slowly in the inter-war period, accelerated during World War II and solidified in the Cold War period. The distance between the two feminist leaders was further underscored by their geographical positions. Rischbieth and her key organisations, the Women’s Service Guilds of Western Australia and the AFWV, were based in Perth, while the New South Wales-based UA enjoyed campaigning in closer proximity to the nation’s capital and within the most populous state. The idea of basing the national executive of the Australian Federation of Women Voters in Perth was no doubt a contributing factor to the organisation’s relatively small affiliate base, though the culture of feminism in Perth was strong enough for one visitor to observe that isolated Perth was ‘the Mecca of the Women’s Movement in Australia’ and the source of ‘streams of inspiration and knowledge to the rest of the continent’.\(^3\)

In any case, Rischbieth was a wealthy widow, who had the time and means to travel extensively and was a regular and influential presence on the international feminist circuit. She attended the overseas conferences of the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance from the 1920s to 1961 in her capacity as board member and Australian representative, helped establish the British Commonwealth League in 1926, led the Australian delegation to the first Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference in Honolulu in 1928 and was alternate delegate to the League of Nations in 1935. In 1955, she was made life member of the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance. At a Women’s Service Guild Conference in 1933, she was described in a history of the AFWV as ‘an international feminist

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\(^3\) Dianne Davidson, *Women on the Warpath: Feminists of the First Wave*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1997, p. xiii
with a vision far beyond Australia'. This was certainly an image she cultivated and it was one that dove-tailed with her theosophist beliefs. Theosophy was articulated by Rischbieth and her fellow theosophic-feminists as a commitment to a spirit of co-operation, in which there was no place for barriers of sex, race or class; in citizenship the human consciousness of oneself could find full expression. In campaign terms, this meant a focus on raising the status of women and also the child, who represented the key to the future. Theosophy and feminism thus formed Rischbieth's belief that humanity was on the threshold of a new era of 'reconstruction' at which point 'women [would] claim [their] place in the sun in the new social order'.

Born in Adelaide in 1874, Rischbieth grew up in the home of her wealthy uncle, politician and theosophist William Benjamin Rounsevell. In this household, Rischbieth was educated in a feminist manner and exposed to theosophy, though there is no certainty about when she became a theosophist. She re-located to Perth in 1898 when she married merchant Henry Wills Rischbieth and moved into 'Unalla' in Peppermint Grove, a grand mansion that was the site of feminist gatherings. The couple had no children and after her husband died in 1925, Rischbieth was able to direct her considerable energies and ambition almost exclusively to theosophy and to the women's movement, in Australia and internationally.

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4 Emily Bennett, 'History of the Formation of the Australian Federation of Women Voters' Societies', presented to the 4th Triennial Interstate Conference, May 1933, Women's Service Guild Papers, State Archives of Western Australia, 1949/A/30
5 Marilyn Lake, Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1999, p. 51
7 Jill Roe has speculated that Rischbieth may have committed fully to theosophist at any number of points. She was raised in a theosophist household, heard and met theosophist leader Annie Besant during her 1908 visit to Perth and attended theosophist and feminist meetings in London during her 1913-1914 trip. And though the language and ideals of theosophy explicitly informed her political writings and feminism, she was notoriously private about her theosophy. This was in keeping with her natural reserve and her belief that the Theosophical Society was 'very much a secret society'. What is known is that Rischbieth once stayed in Gandhi's ashram and throughout her career worked through a theosophical network. Jill Roe, Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia, 1879-1939, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1986, p. 199-204
In the first half of the twentieth century, the Theosophical Order of Service and their leader Annie Besant had their greatest impact in Australia in Perth. This was especially obvious in the women’s movement where thesosophist-feminists were on the executives of the Women’s Service Guild, the National Council of Women’s state branch and the AFWV. It was Rischbieth who epitomised theosophical-feminism’s New Woman. As Jill Roe remarks, the image of her ‘stepping off the plane after one or another national and international conference on equal citizenship remained a familiar one in Perth until the 1950s’. The AFWV’s official historian Dianne Davidson has emphasised the diverse membership base of Perth women’s organisations such as the Women’s Service Guilds and the AFWV, but it was the glamorous and ambitious Rischbieth who towered over the Perth feminist scene. Nationally, she shared a formidable leadership role with Street. And while it was a promising friendship to begin with, eventually Street would join the ranks of other feminists and women reformers Rischbieth had fallen out with, including Edith Cowan, Mary Montgomerie Bennett and Ada Bromham. As Marilyn Lake has observed, Rischbieth’s idealistic belief in the unity of humankind and her relentless drive for political pre-eminence stood in curious and ongoing tension.

Street had in common with Rischbieth a wealthy background, national and international connections and influence and considerable determination and drive. But her ambition was more diffuse and her philosophy less consistent in its origins and allegiances. Street’s father was in the Indian Civil Service and she was born in Chota Nagpur, India in 1889. When her mother inherited Yulgibar station on the Clarence River in 1896, the family moved to New South Wales. As

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8 Jill Roe, p. 201
9 Dianne Davidson, p. xv
10 After the Australian Federation of Women Voters Triennial Conference in 1936, Street wrote to Rischbieth to say ‘I did so enjoy the Conference and also the time with you in Canberra. It is such a pity that distances are so great that all who are working for our cause cannot get to know each other better’. 28/9/36, NLA, Bessie Rischbieth Papers. This letter, of course, could be interpreted as a standard feature of this form of feminist networking. In private correspondence to Linda Littlejohn, however, early in her encounters with Street, Rischbieth wrote ‘I was very taken with Mrs. Jessie Street. She is a sweet thing and so enthusiastic’ October 1930. Bessie Street Papers, MS2004/5/1141, NLA This indicates, at least initially, a mutual affection.
11 Lake, Getting Equal, p. 51
was often the case for daughters of the landed gentry, Street was educated by governesses and in England, but her decision to go to the University of Sydney was less typical. She graduated in 1910, married lawyer Kenneth Street six years later and by the time the UA was formed in 1929, Street already had four children. She'd also travelled extensively, participated in the suffragette struggle in England, worked at Waverly House, a reception centre for young women arrested as prostitutes in New York, helped establish the Racial Hygiene Association of New South Wales and an employment agency for domestic servants and ran her own dairy farm. The ambit of her reforming zeal was, and remained, extraordinary.\textsuperscript{12}

Street's career was characterised by initiative, confidence and an enthusiasm that was sometimes interpreted by others as power-seeking or high-handed. Her reputation for leaving organisations such as the National Council of Women and the Feminist Club reinforced this image,\textsuperscript{13} but Street seemed genuinely impervious to such criticisms. Proposals for social reform such as her General Social Insurance Scheme which she presented to the Minister for Home Affairs in 1932 epitomised her approach to public life. Street firmly re-iterated the UA and the AFWV's non-party political line within the context of actively encouraging cross-political collaboration for important causes. This position was intermittently controversial, untenable and never straightforward. Typically, Street championed collaboration for as long as possible, then moved on, in pursuit of what she considered effective social reform rather than in defiance. It was in this spirit that she withdrew from the Feminist Club to form the United Associations in 1929.

Historians such as Kate White and Dianne Davidson have identified the feminism espoused by the AFWV and the UA as a continuation and/ or ongoing part of the


\textsuperscript{13} Dianne Davidson, p. 202
‘first wave’ of Australian feminism. The fact that many of the same women who campaigned for the vote in Australia continued to work for women’s rights within the Australian women’s movement, and the expressed links between pre and post-suffrage feminists, validate such interpretations. But the separate and intersecting activist career paths of Rischbieth and Street, and their eventual ideological conflicts, were played out in a historically specific context that was distinctive from previous Australian feminisms. In this chapter, I explore the origins and culture of the AFWV and UA respectively and comparatively in terms of how both organisations made claims for their existence on the basis of historical change and feminist innovation.

‘This remarkable advance': The Australian Federation of Women Voters embraces internationalism.

Bessie Rischbieth formed the Australian Federation of Women Voters in 1921, under the title The Australian Federation of Women’s Societies. Rischbieth had been one of the founding members of the Women’s Service Guilds of Western Australia in 1909. The AFWV continued the work of the state organisation, particularly its emphasis on service and ‘good works’. But it also expressed a new, more robust form of internationalism and an abiding and explicit commitment to using the vote effectively. The AFWV added new emphases to the agenda of national women’s organisations in its insistence that only women’s groups with political platforms would be accepted as affiliates. The National Council of Women (NCW) would re-emerge in 1931 as another national co-ordinating body.

14 Kate White, ‘Bessie Rischbieth, Jessie Street and the end of first wave feminism in Australia’ and Dianne Davidson, Women on the Warpath: Feminists of the First Wave
15 The Women’s Service Guilds of Western Australia (WSG) was established in 1909 as a non-party organisation which had as its stated aim the support of any movement to protect, uplift, and defend humanity and to establish equal rights of citizenship for both men and women. Responding to concerns about the high rate of infant mortality, the WSG contributed to the establishment of a number of institutions designed to improve standards of mothering and childcare. Rischbieth was President from 1911-1922 and expanded the agenda of the organization to include more recognisably ‘feminist’ campaigns such as equal pay and women parliamentarians. In 1921, Edith Cowan, a founding WSG member, was elected to state parliament, becoming Australia’s first woman parliamentarian. The WSG affiliated with the Australian Federation of Women Voters when it was first established and continued to be active into the 1950s. See, Barbara Caine, ‘Women’s Service Guilds of Western Australia’, Australian Feminism: A Companion, ed. Barbara Caine, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p. 526-7
for women's organisations, but the AFWV continued to insist upon its greater effectiveness in demanding feminist citizenship and international representation. Not until World War II would the United Associations directly challenge the dominance of the Australian Federation of Women Voters in this field. The AFWV's embrace of internationalism was crucial to that success.

The AFWV was ushered in with signature Rischbieth flair. Her contributions to *The Dawn*, the AFWV journal, and other forums, including pamphlets and radio broadcasts, typically displayed a sense of drama and emphatic significance; clear characteristics of the theosophist movement, which had an inclination for somewhat flowery pronouncements about universal brotherhood, justice and a special kind of moralistic spirituality.\(^\text{16}\) Theosophists extolled the virtues of cooperative models of human organisation, unity with nature and respect for the value in non-Western people's cultures and religions and accordingly championed a national identity which could transcend class, state and party-based politics.\(^\text{17}\) Rischbieth, perhaps paradoxically considering the League of Nations' western democratic emphasis, consistently championed these ideas. As such, she had a tendency to situate the position of the AFWV in an informal hierarchy of significance that stressed co-operation at all levels.\(^\text{18}\) In this trajectory, the AFWV was part of a national, Commonwealth and international network, with each level of affiliation advancing in order of importance. This sense of larger communities was expressed with specific reference to the significance of the League of Nations. This then was a new form of women's

\(^{16}\) The 'Women's Litany', performed at conferences and other key gatherings for inspirational purposes, offered evidence of this, particularly with the closing lines: 'Then let your soul shine out and the Spirit become supreme, So be it'.


\(^{18}\) For example, during World War II, Rischbieth was detained in England and sent many letters home emphasising the national, commonwealth and (western democratic) international model of relationships and mutual interests/ideas. In Christmas greetings sent from London to members of affiliated organisations, Rischbieth wrote: 'Australia is held in high regard for all the unstinted voluntary aid she has rendered the old country in this struggle for human freedom. We know, of course, that Australia could do no other, because she is indissolubly linked to a system of Government under which the Empire has developed - a system which has brought about the free association of self-governing Democracies'. Letter dated 8/10/40, *Bessie Rischbieth Papers and Objects 1900-1967*, National Library of Australia (NLA), MS 2004/5/1910
activity that operated within a reinvigorated national, commonwealth and international context.

The standard early promotional pamphlet for the AFWV\textsuperscript{19} contained many of the hallmarks of inter-war Australian feminism. The sketch of a koala on the front of the first Australian Federation of Women's Societies pamphlet evoked a nationalism that had been growing stronger in Australian feminism since Federation. But that developing nationalism assumed a new significance in the inter-war period as groups such as the AFWV and their affiliates tried to merge it within a wider British patriotism and an even broader sense of western internationalism. Therefore, the cute koala was featured on the same title page as the line: 'Affiliated with the International Woman Suffrage Alliance'.\textsuperscript{20} The new Federated Body was at once national and international in focus.

Inside the pamphlet, Rischbieth charted a brief history of both the recently formed Federation and the international women's movement, making explicit her belief that the two were inter-related. For Rischbieth, the fact that Australia had nine representatives at the 1923 International Women's Suffrage Alliance Conference in Rome was proof of the strength of the national organisation: 'This remarkable advance was due to the formation, in the interim, of the Australian Federation of Women Societies'. Feminist activity within the Empire was also a

\textsuperscript{19} Pamphlet, 'The Australian Federation of Women's Societies', Bessie Rischbieth Papers, NLA, MS 2004/5/1

\textsuperscript{20} Otherwise known as the International Alliance of Women and later, the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship. Formed in 1904 in Berlin at an International Council of Women congress, the original goal of the organisation was 'to secure the enfranchisement of women of all nations'. Australia was among the first six national sections (along with Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United States and Britain). Margery Corbett Ashby, president of the Alliance from 1923 to 1946, distinguished the new organisation from the more conservative International Council of Women by calling the Alliance the oldest political union of women organised on an international and non-party basis. As such, the vote (and later) what to do with it were central concerns from the beginning, along with peace, equal pay, prostitution and slavery. See Leila J. Rupp, Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, p. 21-26. Rischbieth was to form close links with both Corbett Ashby and Carrie Chapman Catt and sent AFWV representatives to the Alliance's triennial congresses in Europe – Rome in 1923, Paris in 1926 (Rischbieth became a member of the board at this congress) and Berlin in 1929. Marilyn Lake writes that the 'maternalist and moral orientations of the Alliance spoke to and shaped the goals of inter-war feminism in Australia'. Marilyn Lake, Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1999, p. 163
crucial contributing factor as 'the work of the British Dominion Citizens Union...had brought Australia into closer contact with the other self governing Dominions and with India as regards work for equal citizenship within the Empire'. The true catalyst for change, however, was the First World War and the formation of the League of Nations in particular: 'By the constitution of the League of Nations in 1919, Australia gained national status and it was felt that women's organisations should be brought into line with the altered conditions'.

The pamphlet went on to outline the consequent international activity of the new national organisation, with an emphasis that was distinctly British. The British Dominion Citizen's Union was a founding member of the AFWV and would determine much of the nature of early internationally focussed campaigns. For instance, reciprocal rights for deserted wives within the Empire and the enfranchisement of South African women were early concerns. As Rischbieth insisted: 'Many of our social laws, both within the Commonwealth and within the Empire require[d] co-coordinating'. In accordance with the favoured methods of many of the bourgeois feminist groups, the Prime Minister of Australia was approached to advance this cause at the Imperial Conference in London in September 1923. And in keeping with the typical standard of response from the political head quarters of the country to the polite demands of women's organisations, Prime Minister Bruce, equally politely, praised the efforts of the activities of women's organisations, 'recognising the important share which they have in the social and political development of the Empire', but offered little in the way of tangible assistance.

Rischbieth's Presidential Address concluded the pamphlet. She stated that through its affiliation with the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 'the Australian Federation unites with the women of all Nations who are working for the cause of equal citizenship and for all that enfranchisement means for the welfare of Humanity'. Such statements would become the standard pronouncement on the value of this particular type of western feminist internationalism. The address also highlighted the centrality of liberal
conceptions of citizenship to an understanding of what constituted proper emancipation for 'Humanity'. This focus on liberal democratic values allowed a commitment to individual values, the nation and of course, general 'Humanity'. The list of affiliates at the end of the document assist in anchoring this triple embrace of the self, nation and the world in particular types of women's groups, most typically those of the Women's Christian Temperance Union variety (from New South Wales) and Non Party Women's Leagues and Associations (from Tasmania and South Australia). These were very specific types of women's groups, avowedly non-party political, but political in intent. Furthermore, in their support for liberal democratic values, these women's groups were in accordance with the general political mood of the time in the winning Allied nations.

From the beginning, however, the Federation's capacity to represent Australian women was debated and disputed. In 1922, Rischbieth, in one of her first initiatives as President of the newly formed Federation, persuaded Prime Minister William Hughes to appoint a woman as Alternate Delegate to the League of Nations; namely playwright Marguerite Dale, who was also the former President of the Feminist Club, one of the Federation's first affiliate organisations. This frustrated the executive of the WA National Council of Women, in particular Roberta Jull, who lamented the fact the Council's nominations for the position hadn't been acknowledged. Edith Cowan, Australia's first female Parliamentarian and a co-founder of the Women's Guilds, was another early and vocal opponent of the AFWV. Cowan disputed the right of the Federation to speak for Australian women and argued instead for the NCW's status as 'real representatives'.21 At the time, the National Councils were state-based, with no central federal organisation, but this did not deter Cowan and her NCW ally Jull from pursuing a discrediting campaign against the AFWV, within the women's movement and in the press. At stake was the question of what qualified a national organisation to represent Australian women nationally and

21 An article printed in Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper on 20th February, 1923, titled 'What's in a Name?'. Author unknown, but widely believed to be Edith Cowan, who had been visiting the east coast of Australia at the time of publication. See Dianne Davidson, *Women on the Warpath: Feminists of the First Wave*, p.3
internationally and it was a question that was asked consistently, usually by those within the women’s movement, throughout the inter-war years into World War II.

As their promotional pamphlet demonstrated, the AFWV did not make their claim for national and international relevance on the basis of their numerical strength or the broad inclusion of varieties of women’s organisations. Rather, they explicitly linked their foundation and modus operandi to two developments: the establishment of the League of Nations in 1919 and the increasing enfranchisement of (white) western women. Both of these demanded, in the AFWV’s understanding, the establishment of a national women’s organisation committed to promoting and advancing feminist citizenship. For this reason, the organisation was to be political in focus rather than philanthropic or charitable. Consequently, they argued for their position on a variety of levels – nationally, regionally, as part of the Empire and internationally – because commitment to citizenship rights, whether it be through championing the vote for Aboriginal women or campaigning for female parliamentarians, was thought to cut through or override differences of race, class or party political affiliations. This didn’t prevent the AFWV from promoting their own version of Australian nationalism, or championing the importance of the Commonwealth to the Pacific region. Instead, their liberal feminism allowed them to argue for the universality of their ideals and their possible applications. For the AFWV, a hierarchy, or series of related levels, of representation was clearly the most effective way to ensure the maintenance and spread of liberal democratic values. Feminism, in this reading, was understood as part of the general progress of liberal democracy, epitomised in the establishment of the League of Nations.

Rischbieth, in particular, had been arguing for the establishment of a national political organisation of women since 1915 when the Women’s Service Guilds were rejected for affiliation with the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage
on the grounds that they were not a national organisation. But it was the birth of the League of Nations that provided impetus for the national organisation. The League also stood as testimony to the various successes of the Federation in the inter-war years; particularly the appointments of Marguerite Dale as the first female Alternate Delegate to the League in 1922, from which point the Australian delegation would always include a woman delegate, often nominated by the AFWV and including Rischbieth herself in 1935 and the official accreditation of AFWV member and journalist Linda Littlejohn as representative of the Federation's official paper *The Dawn* to the Press Gallery of the League.

Rischbieth was also actively involved in the formation of the Western Australian branch of the League of Nations Union and remained a member of the Executive until 1939. After returning from Geneva following her own stint as Alternate Delegate in 1935, Rischbieth spoke widely and positively about the experience, particularly the move to impose sanctions on Italy after its invasion of Abyssinia. As she would continue to do after the League's demise, Rischbieth acknowledged the League had problems, but she ultimately believed it 'had justified its existence by demonstrating the complete interdependence of nations and by establishing the nucleus of a world system'. The Federation was also especially active in putting together Status of Women in Australia reports for the League of Nations, and later the United Nations. It was this sort of activity that the AFWV offered as evidence of the necessity of a national organisation campaigning actively for women's rights. The Federation argued that they existed to represent Australian women politically on a radically altered world stage.

In championing the League of Nations, together with increased suffrage, as part of 'a fundamental change' where 'literally the whole trend of the women's movement changed from the domestic field to the international field of action',

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22 Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal*, p. 154
23 *The Dawn*, July 1936
the AFWV were not alone. Unlike the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the other post-war development, which initially seemed to offer women's groups a new forum to campaign for equal pay, the League was much more a vehicle for the specific interests of women's groups in the western world. In its promotion of national self-determination, equal employment and international governance, the League offered bourgeois women's groups representation in the international arena on the basis that since women were commonly denied the intrinsic right to forms of citizenship and nationality, they had 'no fatherland'. In its early stages, there was intense debate about whether there should be a separate organisation set up for women by the League (never realised) and it was within this context of optimism that western women's movements, whether explicitly political and citizenship oriented or more goal specific (temperance, prostitution, married women's nationality) began to lobby animatedly within an international framework.25

What was distinct about the AFWV's embrace of the League was neither their enthusiasm, for this was shared by other women's organisations in Australia and throughout the world, nor their enduring optimism about its potential. Rather, it was the fact that the AFWV attributed their very existence to the League. This was highlighted by Rischbieth in her book March of Australian Women: A Record of Fifty Years of Struggle for Equal Citizenship. In chapter ten, 'An All Australia Outlook', Rischbieth directly linked the formation of the AFWV with the changes ushered in by the end of the war. Combined with the full member status offered to Australia by the League of Nations as a self governing Dominion, Australian feminists were now in a position where they had to co-ordinate their activity at a national level to provide an 'All-Australia outlook'.26 This was intimately tied to a promotion of a federalised standard of social law, therefore building a nation in keeping with the League of Nations Charter. This outlook, while clearly international in spirit, was expressed specifically in terms of the

26 Rischbieth, p. 139
Empire and its values. In contrast to Europe, 'split up into a multitude of peoples with different languages, customs, and too often deep hereditary enmity against their neighbours', Australia could pride itself on its 'unity of speech, a common British tradition, and a freedom from war within our homeland'.

For the Australian Federation of Women Voters, the connection between the Empire and democracy underpinned their particular version of internationalism. In the 1920s western internationalism was still compatible with strong allegiance to the British Empire and the British model of parliamentary democracy. American influence would continue to grow, but in the 1920s at least, faith in Empire and British democracy and diplomacy was central to western internationalism. This pro-British espousal of democratic internationalism remained dominant discourse until well into the years of World War II.

The Australian women's movement already had a history of active participation, co-operation and exchange with other western feminists internationally. This activity was consolidated in the buzz of the inter-war years that began with the International Peace Conference in Paris in January 1919 and the formation of the League of Nations a month later. The request of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance, the conference was attended by several Australian feminists including Vida Goldstein and Eleanor Moore. The presence of international women's organisations at the Peace Conference ensured that women would have

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27 Ibid., p. 75
28 It is important to note, however, that the sort of internationalism espoused by the AFWV, the sort I identify here as rooted in Anglo democratic values, did not mean that these feminist groups were primarily interested in campaigns just relating to the Anglo world – rather it suggests that they chose to campaign across a wide spectrum of interests within a liberal democratic framework intimately tied to faith in the Empire and its values. As Barbara Caine has demonstrated in the inter-war period, Australian feminism shifted away from a primary interest in British and American developments to a greater concern with developments in the Soviet Union and the Pacific region. Caine writes that the 'very meaning of internationalism changed over this period'. Barbara Caine, 'International Links', Australian Feminism: A Companion, p. 158-168. Marilyn Lake has also argued that for Rischbieth and other Australian feminists, developing a growing history of lobbying for women’s rights and married women’s nationality at an imperial level, '[t]heir sense of British identity shaped their sense of who they were'. Getting Equal., p. 159
29 Both Rischbieth and Jessie Street, for instance, had travelled to England during the English suffrage campaign. This was an especially informative experience for Jessie Street. See Truth or Repose, Australasian Book Society, Sydney, 1966. Chapter Five.
some input into the process of drafting the consequent League of Nations Covenant, which in its final version contained three articles relating to women. These were Article 7, that declared all positions on the League were open to men and women; Article 23 (a) which promoted fair and humane labour conditions for men and women and finally Article 23 (c) which entrusted the League with general supervision of laws executed in relation to prostitution. While there has been some debate as to how and why these articles came to be included, it has been generally agreed that the discourse around women’s work within international organisations had changed. From 1919, international women’s groups such as the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance and the International Council of Women began to wield some influence within international forums. In practice, however, the scope of the women’s proposals were limited to women’s issues that would not fundamentally alter the direction of the League. This model of new, though limited, interaction between members of the League and of women’s groups in the formative period provided a framework for international women’s organisations and the League until its demise.30

The increasing enfranchisement of western women also demanded and facilitated a new sort of internationalism, with a more pronounced interest in advancing the importance of connection with international organisations.31 In this sense, the Australian feminist experience of feminist internationalism was hardly unique, for as Leila J. Rupp has traced, the ‘high tide of internationalism’ between the wars saw a whole range of constituencies come together, often with conflicting goals, interests or political sympathies, though underpinned by a commitment to peace that formed, for example, a fragile thread between socialist and non-socialist women.32 This process of aligning the national and international contexts of feminism was something most women’s organisations had to

negotiate in this period. The AFWV, with their firm sense of belonging to nation, region, Empire and finally the world, offer an especially illustrative example of this process.

Still, this professed consistency between national and international ideals was not without complications. Angela Woollacott has recognised the challenge to the Euro-centric dominance of feminist internationalism with the development of more regional networks of feminist groups, such as the Pan Pacific Women’s Association, in which the AFWV played a leading role. This increasing awareness of the specific needs of Commonwealth feminists was further complicated by the privileged position from which the AFWV were able to campaign on behalf of indigenous women and other women of colour. As white women of affluence they had a vested interest in the dominance of the Empire.33

To recognise the need for a strong national representative body was easy; to develop one was much more difficult. The AFWV’s hierarchy of representation, anchored in feminist internationalism, did not go uncontested. Feminist internationalism relied on a universal idea of ‘womanhood’ that implied shared interests and objectives, but women’s groups in Australia did not respond with overwhelming enthusiasm to the AFWV. Addressing the 1923 first Australian Triennial Conference in Adelaide, President Rischbieth acknowledged criticism relating to the relatively small group of affiliated bodies (seven, from four states) at the time and offered an explanation: ‘This is evidently due to a total misunderstanding of the place we seek to fill in the Women’s Movement in Australia. The strength of the Federation must depend on the growth of individual membership of each specific body composing it’. Furthermore, the ‘proportionally small’ number of women actively engaged ‘in helping to gain equal citizenship’ was ‘surely indicative of the need for such an Organisation’. The seven affiliated bodies at the time – The Women’s Non-Party Association of South Australia, Tasmanian Women’s Non-Party Political League, the Women’s

League of New South Wales, the Council of Women’s Union of Service N.S.W., the Women’s Christian Temperance Union of N.S.W (WCTU), the Feminist Club and the Women’s Service Guilds of Western Australia – shared common ideas about what constituted proper citizenship. Central to this shared understanding was belief in another version of Rischbieth’s favourite maxim: ‘This Federal Chain...realises that what unites women goes deeper than what separates them’.34 Inevitably, however, this was a tenuous claim to universality that papered over differences between women generally and feminist, or women activists, specifically. Within a decade, the cracks were beginning to show.

The AFWV were never entirely successful in linking more specific women’s concerns to a larger internationalist feminist vision. Instead, their success was located in the areas most accommodating the processes of national and international representation, such as securing female representation at such forums as a League of Nations Congress. Jessie Street’s later success at the United Nations can be at least partially attributed to this germinal feminist interest in national and international networks of women activists. As Deborah Steinstra has acknowledged, it was Street who made the strongest link between her national women’s movements and the 1945 United Nations Conference on International Organization. Street distributed to all heads of delegations at the opening of the conference copies of telegrams sent by 1200 trades and women’s groups which urged for the elimination of sex discrimination.35 Though present as part of the official Australian delegation, rather than as an official representative of a woman’s organisation, Street was not one to miss an opportunity to advance the cause of equal rights within such an influential international body.

34 Ibid., p. 70
35 Deborah Steinstra, Women’s Movements and International Organisations, p. 77
The Feminist Club goes Bung!: The necessity of the United Associations

On the 13th March, 1930 Ellinor Walker of the AFWV sent best wishes to Mrs. Emily Bennett, the Honorary Secretary of the United Associations, the new New South Wales women's organisation. 'Dear Mrs. Bennett', she wrote, 'we were extremely interested and glad to hear of the amalgamation between the Women's League of N.S.W. and the N.S.W. Women Voters' Association, including too the Women's Service Club. The more real union of that kind that can be achieved the better, both from the practical and economical point of view and with regard to the strengthening of fellowship of spirit'.

The AFWV welcomed the UA with good will and philosophical kinship. Once again, co-ordination at state, national and international levels was at the centre of change in the Australian, and in particular the New South Wales, feminist community.

Increased effectiveness through co-ordination formed the basis of Jessie Street's appeal for amalgamation. As she wrote in her letter of invitation to the three organisations that would dissolve into the United Associations, feminist activity and success was best served by a tight union of affiliation at the various levels, both strategically and ideologically. Speaking on behalf of the Executive of the Feminist Club, of which she was President during the late 1920s, Street wrote: 'We consider that the aims, objects, works and methods of these three organisations and the Feminist Club of N.S.W. are identical. We are all affiliated with the Australian Federation of Women Voters, which is in turn affiliated with International Bodies with identical aims and methods of the aforesaid organisations'.

More specifically Street was motivated by her growing dissatisfaction with the Feminist Club, the one organisation that explicitly professed its feminism while

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36 Mrs. Ellinor Walker to Mrs. E. Bennett, 13/3/30, Bessie Rischbieth Papers, NLA, MS2004/5/983
37 Letter to form the United Associations, addressed to Mrs. A.V. Roberts, President, Women's League of New South Wales, 13/8/29, Jessie Street Papers, NLA, MS2983/3/14
simultaneously adopting an increasingly narrow set of interests and approaches. To casual observers and political opponents in particular, the Feminist Club typified what it meant to be a ‘feminist’ in the 1920s. The Feminist Club was formed in 1914 as an ostensibly non-party political organisation and later had as its President for many years Millicent Preston Stanley, an organising Liberal Party Member and member of right-wing organisations such as the Sane Democracy League and the Women’s Movement Against Socialisation. Whilst the Feminist Club campaigned actively for a number of worthy causes, including the introduction of the Women’s Legal Status Act and equal guardianship, these campaigns had distinctly middle-class imperatives. More generally, the Feminist Club was considered little more than a social organisation that promoted family values and the sanctity of motherhood and felt that women could be more active if domestic servants were easier to find (a class-based sin of which Street was also guilty). To women from the left, the Feminist Club epitomised the feminist cliché of the time – well-to-do and politically narrow. After joining the Militant Women’s Group in 1928, for example, communist-to-be Mary Lamm (who later, as Mary Wright, would enjoy a strong working and personal relationship with Street) was warned against such feminists, who according to her comrade Edna Ryan came from the leisured classes.38 When The Sydney Morning Herald reported on the proposed amalgamation on the 25th September 1929, it described the groups as ‘social and philanthropic’ rather than political or even reformist. The SMH also reported that ‘the tremendous overlapping of women’s activities ... has been recognised for some time. It has meant unnecessary expenditure of time, labour and money. Women engaged in public work are usually members of several societies. The proposed amalgamation would remedy this situation and, it is thought make for greater efficiency and usefulness’.39

It was inefficiency that Street offered as her basis of resignation from the Feminist Club. It was a frustration shared by Street’s colleague, Linda Littlejohn,

39 Sydney Morning Herald, 25/9/29, Jessie Street Papers, NLA, MS2683/3/19
who like Street typified the over-extended, overlapping active feminist. At the
time of the UA amalgamation, for example, she was both President of the Women
Voters’ Association and Vice President of the Feminist Club, who extended to her
a further invitation to fill the post of Chairman of Committees in October 1927.
She responded with a list of complaints testifying to her reluctance to take up the
position, the primary reason being that the Feminist Club was operating at a
financial loss, which included arrears of rent and unpaid loans by members. In
short, Littlejohn did ‘not feel inclined to shoulder the burden which [was] none of
[her] making’.\(^{40}\) Not surprisingly, Littlejohn was an active supporter of the
proposed amalgamation that in the end did not include the Feminist Club, which
voted to remain a separate organisation.

Street’s letter offered this decision as a secondary motivation for resigning from
her Feminist Club Presidency, but it was clear that the various shortcomings of
the Club were on her mind. She wrote that ‘[a]s conditions are at present in the
Executive Committee it is quite impossible to do any Feminist work, or indeed,
any work at all; the whole of the time of meetings being taken up in constant
recrimination’.\(^{41}\) The severity of Street’s split from the Feminist Club was
worsened by her further decision to withdraw her hundred pound guarantee with
the bank, which had buoyed the cash-strapped organisation for some time. She
did temper this with a twenty-five pound gift, a gesture that revealed the
importance of financially independent women such as Jessie Street and Bessie
Rischbieth to the Australian women’s movement during this period.

For the Feminist Club, not amalgamating with the other groups came down to a
question of identity.\(^{42}\) As one member stated, ‘[w]e are not militant, but we do
wish to preserve our name of Feminists’\(^{43}\). For Street, what constituted
‘feminism’ was evidently something different. This was illustrated in her close

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\(^{40}\) Linda Littlejohn to Jessie Street 20/10/27, Jessie Street Papers, NLA, MS2683/3/9
\(^{41}\) Jessie Street to the Feminist Club, 14/10/29, Jessie Street Papers, NLA, MS2683/3/22
Hecate, Vol XIV, no. 1, 1988, pg. 56-67, pg. 61
\(^{43}\) Daily Guardian, 20 November 1929, Feminist Club Papers, Mitchell Library, MS K21803
friendships with Labor women such as Annie Golding and Kate O'Dwyer, who with her formed the New South Wales Social Hygiene Association to oppose the growth of commercialised prostitution. Street recalled in her autobiography that this particular organisation was slow to get off the ground, due to its association with prostitution. As Gail Griffith observes, the fact that the Feminist Club became a more pronounced conservative organisation following Street's resignation, and the new leadership of Millicent Preston Stanley, was indicative of the fact that Street never enjoyed full support of the membership of the Feminist Club during her time there. Street and the Feminist Club also had different concepts of what constituted proper feminist activity. Following Street's departure to found the UA, the Feminist Club reinforced their previous commitment to maternalism. They did this primarily through the battle for the Guardianship of Infants Act and by gravitating towards philanthropy rather than activism. These moves underscored their conservatism and links to the Liberal Party with increasing identification with the conservative elements of the 'women's movement' as opposed to the 'feminist' movement.

The Feminist Club’s decision also illustrates the first instance of resistance towards the UA's particular brand of feminist politics. As the AFWV's experience had shown, a broad canvas that stressed solidarity in representation was often not broad enough. Or alternatively, the specific interests of smaller or more narrowly defined women's organisations were not met. It was around the same time the Feminist Club voted to continue as an independent entity that the Women's Christian Temperance Union of NSW made a decision to withdraw their affiliation with the Australian Federation of Women Voters' on the basis that their interests were not entirely mutual. Perhaps it was not therefore surprising that the number of affiliated state organisations of the AFWV never met the expectations of its founders, in which case the subsequent relative success of the United Associations as a representative organisation should be explored.

44 Jessie Street, Truth or Repose, p. 79
Despite the controversy over its origins, the UA's successes were greater than those of the AFWV. The far reaching connections of Street and Littlejohn, the geographic location of the organisation and the numerical strength of the Association were all reasons for this success, but only tell part of the story. The UA's successes, and failures, can both be explained by the nature of its representational goals and the strategies the organisation employed to ensure that its key campaigns were well supported. Pragmatism and initiative defined the politics and practice of the UA and it was these qualities that ensured the widening of the feminist agenda during the 1930s and into the Second World War. The UA were active in either starting or advancing most of the crucial feminist campaigns of this era, primarily those relating to equal pay, the rights of married women, divorce, custody and nationality reform and the increased representation of women in public life, in particular in party politics, on juries and on committees relating to health, education, women and children. These campaigns brought the organisation into close contact with a variety of activists and political approaches and the success of the first Australian Women's Charter Conference in 1943 testifies to this broadening consensus. By the end of the Second World War, the UA, and Street in particular, were condemned for this inclusivity, which in the growing Cold War climate of the late 1940s came to be viewed as Communist in sympathy. The culture of feminism promoted by the United Associations was an example of a particular kind of feminism that constantly sought to respond to contemporary culture and the historical moment.

The birth of the AFWV had marked the beginning of inter-war feminism; the amalgamation in New South Wales set its tone: pragmatic, confident and ambitious. Rischbieth had recognised the importance of national and international representation, but it was Street who dared to critique national feminist politics. This critique, evidenced first in her resignation as Honorary
Secretary of the National Council of Women of New South Wales in 1920\textsuperscript{46} and later in her resignation letter to the Feminist Club, marked a shift, radical in parts, from the culture of feminism that had emerged from the suffrage campaigns. The non-party ideal promoted by earlier feminists such as Rose Scott remained a commitment, but the United Associations added new emphases, including frequent, and sometimes fruitful, contact with activists from the left. This was in contrast to the non party politics of some women’s organisations, including the AFWV, who by the late 1920s were promoting an ‘all-party’ government, with Rischbieth supporting such conservative groups as the ‘Who’s For Australia League’ in their denunciations of party government.\textsuperscript{47} Furthermore, as an ostensibly state-based organisation, the approach of the United Associations appeared to be more obviously pragmatic and campaign based, with less of the theosophically-inspired verse or performance that framed the AFWV conferences and events. This experience in state-based campaigns added to the potential of the United Associations as international representatives of Australian feminism and more than once, the AFWV had to step in and remind the UA of the hierarchy of representation in Australian feminism. With their experience and long-term interest in equal pay and women’s work, Linda Littlejohn and Jessie Street, in particular, were natural choices to hold office in international organisations such as Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker (ODI) and Equal Rights International (ERI).

While Street shared Rischbieth’s admiration of the International Suffrage Alliance President, Margery Corbett Ashby, she and Littlejohn gravitated towards more narrowly defined, and therefore presumably more effective, organisations. Littlejohn travelled to Berlin in 1929, the year the UA was formed, for the establishment and inauguration of Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation for the Worker (ODI). This organisation aimed for absolute

\textsuperscript{46} This resignation was on the basis that the National Council of Women of NSW, in Street’s view, had become little more than a ‘recording’ body. She also claimed it was undemocratic as it placed voting rights in the hands of a clique. 26\textsuperscript{th} October 1920, National Council of Women Papers, NSW, Minutes. Mitchell Library, MSS 38/50/3

\textsuperscript{47} Marilyn Lake, Getting Equal, p. 145
equality in the work place for men and women. This included attacking the anti-
feminist Labour Bureau of the League of Nations.48 A year later, Street was in
Geneva for the formation of Equal Rights International (ERI), which shared with
ODI a commitment to complete equality in the right to work. The chief goal was
to ensure that an equal-rights treaty was adopted at international level. Street,
who would later participate in the realisation of that goal through her work with
the United Nations, was inaugurated as vice-chairman. With this formidable task
before them, and through associated work with the ODI, ERI were the most
active international women's group in the years prior to the Second World War.49
Around this time, Street was also active, together with American and European
feminists, in lobbying for an official committee of the League of Nations to
organise the codification of international law relating to the status of women. In
her autobiography, Street recalled that working for women's rights within the
male-dominated League of Nations was 'uphill work', though 'a sprinkling of
male delegates who were intelligent and sympathetic' made the experience
valuable.50 Collectively, these developments typify the sort of feminism espoused
and practiced by the UA in this period - innovative and focused with an explicit
commitment to promoting equality as the basis of feminist action.

The United Associations offered both a familiar and new feminist activism that
had continuity and discontinuity with received feminist philosophy and practice.
Marilyn Lake has pointed out that the organisation's professed non-party
political stance and commitment to a certain kind of citizenship was typical of the
time, while also recognising that such initiatives as holding meetings at times
suitable for working women were characteristic of the UA's initiative.51 In this
sense, the UA were highly responsive to their contemporary environment and a
product of their time. Barbara Caine has pointed out for example that during the
1930s, the UA ran a number of feminist campaigns which were similar to those
under way in other Western countries, primarily the battle to end the marriage

48 As cited in Deborah Stienstra, The Women's Movement and International Organisations, pg. 66
49 Ibid., p. 66
50 Truth or Repose, p.162
51 Ibid., p. 148
bar for female teachers, reform of divorce and custody laws, and campaigns to
increase the number of women in public life and enable women to keep their
nationality after marriage. On the basis of this activity, Caine concurs with the
interpretation of the official UA historian Winifred Mitchell who claimed that the
UA were one of the most radical feminist groups of the inter-war period.52

In her contribution to Heather Raci's edited essay collection on Jessie Street,
Mitchell implied this radicalism, rather than made it explicit, by focussing her
narrative of the UA's history on the campaign for equal pay. Concentrating on the
1930s, Mitchell traced the campaign for equal pay, and other related campaigns,
using a progressive narrative. She figured the work of the UA as pioneering and
fiery, particularly in regards to Street's dispute with Labor stalwart Muriel
Heagney over the best way to implement equal pay. This contest was played out
in class-based terms and ultimately, as a crucial step in the eventual gaining of
equal pay, foreshadowed by teacher's earning equal pay, a campaign led by the
UA's Linda Littlejohn. When the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)
decided to eliminate differences in pay for men and women in 1969, 'Jessie was
too ill ...to know that another step had been taken on the road to wage justice'.53
Radicalism here becomes equivalent to a certain kind of visionary perseverance.

According to Mitchell, it was in the 1930s that the UA established themselves 'as
a leading force in the Australian feminist movement. There was no issue affecting
the status of women with which the organisation was not concerned'. It was also
in the 1930s that the organisation's methods, primarily circulars, meetings,
discussions, mock debates, receptions, deputations, lobbying and fundraising,
'began a permanent feature' of Australian feminist culture. The Depression, and
in particular the closing of the Government Savings Bank, affected both members
and those that aided the organisation, but 'rather than limiting their work the
U.A. felt constrained to redouble their efforts to help women suffering the

52 Barbara Caine, 'United Associations of Women', Australian Feminism: A Companion, , p. 507-8

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depression's effects'. Mitchell's work was defined by this theme of re-directing energies to positive enterprises, to enduring and indeed flourishing in a time of hardship. In this way, Mitchell's history gave voice to the aspirational visions of the UA held at the time.

The circumstances leading to the formation of the United Associations and the debates over representation that riddled the women's movement during the Second World War testify to the fragility of the concepts of 'united' and 'association'. They also highlight the perseverance of the UA in promoting so rigorously and consistently their own particular version of feminist activism. While deputations, meetings, letters, surveys, commissioned reports and pamphlets formed the basis of their activism, their regular radio broadcasts on the ABC and 2GB on a wide range of issues and their ongoing promotion of women's skills as debaters and public speakers especially illustrated their intention that women's issues were communicated as effectively and broadly as possible. The UA's feminism was not a retiring feminism, content to pursue women's issues within a demarcated sphere of women's influence. Rather, they argued that women's issues were not separate from mainstream political issues, a stance also shared by the AFWV, though not so consistently, nor so loudly.

This participation of women in the public sphere was premised on the idea of women's unique role as citizens. The UA argued in a 1930s promotional pamphlet that 'woman's point of view is not the same as man's', but nonetheless the 'centuries' of influence women had exerted within their families was no longer enough and so it 'behoves women to use their power to the fullest extent possible to bring greater security and happiness into the lives of the community'. This could be done 'by forming themselves into an organisation in which they can

55 Note, for example, Jessie Street's invitation for members to join a speakers discussion group during the 1940s. In the promotional material, she stated that 'I believe one of the most important functions of the United Associations is a) to train speakers and b) to train informed speakers on the aims and objects of the Association'. Letter from Street to UA members, 30/12/46, United Associations Papers, Mitchell Library, MS 2160, Box Y789
confer with each other and through which they can bring pressure to bear to give effect to their decisions'. The UA believed that by uniting as women, such organisations could hope to influence decisions relating to them and society in general; a society in which women and men were figured as different but equal.

Jessie Street recalled, with some understatement, in her autobiography that the United Associations had:

For some years...carried on various negotiations with successive governments about questions concerning domicile, divorce, nationality and kindred subjects without making very much headway, but we were preparing the ground which eventually bore fruit.

In terms of the UA's contemporary relevance, however, they were at least partially successful in their claims to expand women's influence in the public sphere, in association with women, both 'feminist' or not. The UA's ditty that proclaimed 'Some think we're too right and some think/ too left, well mebbe we're both - I dunno' reflects both their own self awareness and the unique political space they occupied.

Like the Feminist Club and the Australian Federation of Women Voters, they were non-party affiliated, but unlike either of those groups, the UA did seem to at least actively strive to incorporate a wide range of views over a broader political spectrum, as evidenced most clearly in the first Australian Women's Charter Conference in 1943. Many members were from a privileged background, either married into money or with their own incomes. 'Working' women were also involved in the UA, with a Teachers and Nurses Association. The policy was to support all women Parliamentary candidates, regardless of party affiliations, and although this wasn't always possible - on one occasion four women left the UA,

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56 Undated circular to encourage women to join the United Associations Home Women's Group, probably 1933 if nearby material is any indication., United Associations Papers, Mitchell Library, MSS 2160, Box Y789
57 Street, Truth or Repose, p. 182
58 Undated circular, United Associations Papers, Mitchell Library, MSS 2160, Box Y879
not wanting to split votes or ruin their husbands' business prospects\textsuperscript{59} - generally it was a manageable policy, including Street's almost successful campaign for a Federal Labor seat in 1943.

Less successful was co-operation with more working class groups, though this changed over time with the increased emphasis on 'peace' as a crucial issue and by the 1950s, the UA-instigated Australian Women's Charter Committees were dominated by women from the left. Although supportive of the Union of Australian Women, the Council of Action for Equal Pay and other union/communist affiliated groups, particularly in the campaign for equal pay, the UA did fall out with these groups over methods. Or some UA members could not offer their full support due to their 'non-political' stance. For instance, the UA's 1934 discussions with the Australian Railway Union Women's Auxiliary over the campaign for better wages and conditions were compromised by the UA's reluctance to publicly support the campaign and therefore publicly align themselves in political opposition against the governing United Australia Party. Instead, only some members, accompanied the ARU women on a delegation to the Premier, with the disappointing result attributed by Street to the violent outbursts of Miss Watt (not a UA member).\textsuperscript{60}

Despite an increasingly antagonistic relationship between Jessie Street and Bessie Rischbieth during the 1940s, it wasn't until 1954 that the UA and the AFWV split for good. This split was typical of the decline of the Australian women's movement in the 1950s, linked as it was to the issue of communism. For the NSW branch of the AFWV, the split was especially painful as they shared premises with the UA, and many members too, including NSW President of the AFWV and UA member, Ruby Rich. From the beginning, the NSW section of the AFWV had been one of the constituent bodies of the UA with its leader Emily Bennett a founding Vice President of the United Associations. Therefore, Bennett

\textsuperscript{59} Street, \textit{Truth or Repose}, p. 91
\textsuperscript{60} Patricia Ranald, 'Feminism and Class: The United Associations of Women and the Council of Action for Equal Pay in the Depression', in \textit{Worth Her Salt: Women at work in Australia}, p. 275
was also the UA's state representative on the federal body, the AFWV. According to Mitchell, this complex arrangement suited all concerned as the constituent bodies carried out their own programmes and came together in triennial conferences, while the federal body acted as a national pressure group and as a liaison between affiliated organisations and similar bodies overseas. However, with the UA pursuing many of the same campaigns as the AFWV, especially in regards to electoral reform, divorce, widows' pensions, child endowment and Aboriginal welfare, at times the two organisations were almost indistinguishable, particularly when Rischbieth and Street were making joint representations to federal politicians.\textsuperscript{61}

In the end what distinguished the two organisations was communism. Directly, the split was attributed to the AFWV withdrawing support for long time UA office holder Lucy Woodcock's overseas trip on the suspicion one of her planned meetings was communist-linked - though as Mitchell states, this was merely the last incident in the 'train of events leading to the severing of ties with the Australian Federation of Women Voters'.\textsuperscript{62} The United Associations further underscored their difference from the AFWV, by publicly citing the reason for the split as indicative of different priorities. The UA's annual report that year claimed that 'the scope of the AFWV was much wider than that of the UA's and depart somewhat from the truly feminist viewpoint; it would be better to concentrate on the work for equal status and opportunity for women'.\textsuperscript{63}

Over twenty years earlier in 1930, Ellinor Walker had written to Miss Emily Bennett praising the formation of the United Associations. Shortly after, she had also written to Bessie Rischbieth, with her less public concerns. She wanted to make sure the United Associations were affiliated to the Federation as soon as possible to ensure they were represented 'on a perfectly constitutional footing, which cannot be challenged'. Then, relaying the instance of former Feminist Club

\textsuperscript{61} Mitchell, \textit{50 Years of Feminist Achievement}, p. 41
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p. 44
\textsuperscript{63} As cited in Mitchell, p. 43
members defecting to the new Association, she wrote 'I do so much hope that it will not make any difficulties in the N.S.W. Committee [of the AFWV]. Such concerns reveal both the desire to adhere to the hierarchy of representation as 'perfectly' as possible and the awareness of the possible fragility of such unions. That it took over twenty years for the relationship between the United Associations and the Federation to disintegrate is indicative of the commitment of both organisations to proper process and similar feminist politics.

The Australian Federation of Women Voters was formed with explicit reference to the democratic liberalism pronounced in the League of Nations Covenant (by 1954, superseded by the United Nations Charter, to which Street had contributed). The United Associations, meanwhile, formed from a desire to more effectively unify the means and methods by which feminism impacted on the public sphere. However, for two groups developed with the intention of harnessing the presumed mutual interests of women, the notion of non-party politics that assumed a commonality of female interests, represented in a hierarchy of representation, was, in the end, revealed to be an elusive goal. This was evidenced in debates about what constituted proper feminism and/or political involvement.

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One simple and effective explanation of the rise and fall of inter-war Australian feminism is the increasing antagonism between Rischbieth and Street and the organisations that they joined and led. For Kate White this feud was an ideological one that can be used to explain the failure of the Australian women's movement, or 'first-wave feminism'. According to Marilyn Lake, the history of Australian feminism has been marked by a series of rivalries between strong women, usually hidden, but publicly manifested in the case of Street and Rischbieth during 1940s contests over representation. I argue in chapter three, where feminism's response to World War II is the focus, that the tensions over

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64 Ellinor Walker to Bessie Rischbieth, 7/4/30, Bessie Rischbieth Papers, NLA, MS 2004/5/1009
65 Kate White, 'Bessie Rischbieth, Jessie Street, and the end of first-wave feminism in Australia', p. 319
66 Marilyn Lake, Getting Equal, pp. 202
ideology and representation that changed the landscape of Australian feminism in numerous ways were exemplified by Rischbieth's damning attack on Street's politics, political motivations and political ascent.

In this chapter, however, I have discussed the two leaders in the context of a feminist community to which they both belonged. This was a period in which Rischbieth and Street maintained a co-operative relationship, extending to letters of introduction overseas, affectionate correspondence, support for various positions and many mutual campaigns and members. The ample files devoted to the Australian Federation of Women Voters in the United Associations archive in the Mitchell Library in Sydney testify to a once fruitful alliance. In the idealised version of the relationship, the United Associations brought together state organisations to form a more effective umbrella group that in turn had membership to the federal body, the AFWV, who represented Australian feminism overseas. And while the United Associations pursued their own overseas affiliations and eventually supplanted the more conservative AFWV as national co-ordinating body for women's organisations, they continued to acknowledge this hierarchy of representation. It was really only in the 1940s and 1950s, in the climate of the Cold War, that the issues of international representation and national co-operation became a real problem between the two organisations.

67 When Linda Littlejohn informed Rischbieth of Street's planned overseas trip in 1930, Rischbieth wrote to Street with a letter of introduction to various luminaries in the international feminist scene, including Carrie Chapman Catt and leaders and secretaries of 'sister bodies' such as the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, the American League of Voters, the Women's Pan-Pacific Committee and the British Commonwealth League. Street was introduced as 'one of our very valuable women and the wife of a prominent Australian judge'. June 1930, Bessie Rischbieth Papers, NLA, MS2004/5/1079

68 In 1930, Bessie Rischbieth promoted Jessie Street as a candidate to be considered as a delegate for the League of Nations, though the Acting President of the AFWV Ellinor Walker was not, at that point, familiar with Street's work. She wrote to Rischbieth in April 1930 that 'they (the New South Wales branch of the AFWV) sent her name without a word of information, and it supplied none even when asked for it, and we know nothing about her save her former Presidency of the Feminist Club'. Bessie Rischbieth Papers, NLA, MS 2004/5/1018

69 Janette Joy Prichard supports this view in her biographical entry on Bessie Rischbieth in Australian Feminism: A Companion, p. 482
Both organisations were formed with the intention of advancing the potential of female citizenship, a contested notion in the post-suffrage period. Helen Irving has described this era's campaign for effective citizenship as including claims for political status on one hand and for political recognition of the domestic on the other. These twin interests were reflected in the currency of notions of the 'citizen soldier' and 'citizen mother' in feminist circles in this period, beginning with the first world war and changing shape in the second, when women were finally allowed a role in various armed services and in the Land Armies.\(^{70}\) Street's essay 'The Army of Mothers', printed in the October 1944 edition of the United Associations magazine *Australian Women's Digest*, typified the arguments for this version of citizenship, primarily the argument that 'motherhood is a national function and should be a national responsibility', with associated remuneration.

As Heather Radi has suggested, Street was no theoretician. The ideas she espoused were grafted together from international feminism, Marxism and residue from nineteenth century feminisms that centred on woman's sexual vulnerability and degradation.\(^{71}\) This observation could easily be extended to many Australian feminists of her era, with the crude Marxism perhaps excepted. Inter-war Australian feminists did not articulate any concern about possible contradictions between arguments based on maternal qualities or those stressing equality. In commemorating Street's contribution, Radi stressed her energy, vitality and organisational skills.\(^{72}\) Again, these qualities were also characteristic of the movement Street belonged to. In fact, so vigorous and frequent were the representations from the AFWV or the United Associations to government bodies that it became a standard joke to ask 'is it from Jessie or Bessie?'\(^{73}\)

Like all the best jokes this one, recalled by Street's biographer Peter Sekuless, has its basis in the truth. In the archives, documents relating to deputations to

\(^{70}\) Helen Irving, 'Citizenship', in *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, p. 27

\(^{71}\) Heather Radi, 'Introducing Jessie Street' in *Jessie Street: Documents and Essays*, p. 12

\(^{72}\) Ibid, p. 12

\(^{73}\) Peter Sekuless, *Jessie Street: A Rewarding but Unrewarded Life*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1978, p. 41
government bodies and associated research far exceed the vexed correspondence between Street and Rischbieth and their respective organisations. If a lack of theoretical sophistication defined the citizenship these organisations championed, it also freed them to campaign widely, using their most favoured method, direct lobbying of government. With an adherence to non-party politics, these organisations were committed to mounting campaigns on the basis of civic rights and responsibilities.

Using a familiar discourse of liberalism, and a consistent commitment to both equality and difference, the AFWV and the UA went about their business of espousing the civic virtues and practical benefits of citizenship. This was indicative of the embryonic nature of post-suffrage feminism and the strategic pragmatic reform that defined the activities of these women’s groups. As Carol Lee Bacchi has pointed out, paradigms such as sameness/difference are grounded in historical specificity. For inter-war feminists, constrained by inflexible political and conceptual systems, the language of sameness and difference was the most accessible means by which they could hope to influence legislation and advance the rights of women. What was at stake was not an essential truth about the destiny of women, ‘but competing ways to organise social relations’. It is hardly surprising then that many of these feminists were pre-occupied with making palatable and possible various schemes for the ‘greater good’, from women’s farms to domestic service training centres to a general wage (Street’s particular pet project).

75 It is important to note here the history of feminist debates relating to equality and difference. Gisela Bock and Susan James remind us in their edited collection, Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist politics and female subjectivity, Routledge, London, 1992 that the two terms, and their usage, have histories that highlight different meanings which do not necessarily correspond strictly to national or other demarcated contexts. Nor are they debates they originated in the feminist academy of the 1970s and 1980s. These different meanings and contexts range from the emphasis placed on republican motherhood and gendered virtue in the American and French Revolutions to more contemporary discussions about what constitutes the primary goal/s of feminism: erasing gender difference in a society based on equality (with men) or a feminist practice based on the ideal of difference in which women are not subject to male-defined values and institutions which pretend to universal validity (Introduction, pg. 1-13). Related debates include an impatience with the binary use of the two terms. Joan W. Scott has persuasively argued, for example, that ‘equality-versus-difference cannot structure choices for feminist politics; the oppositional pairing
Feminist campaigns and projects that highlighted the practical possibilities of citizenship were also indicative of what Judith Allen has labelled ‘expediency feminism’, her term for the feminist politics that emerged in Australia during and after the suffrage period. For Allen, the Australian women’s movements were, from the beginning, more interested in what could be achieved with the vote than with the symbolic value of citizenship, which asserted a greater significance in the British and American experiences. Allen, who dates the Australian women’s movements from the 1880s (and therefore relatively late compared to the United States and Britain), argues that it was the peculiarities of the larger Australian political scene (for example, feminist reforms weren’t being implemented because there weren’t enough effective women’s lobby groups) that led to the development of a feminism that ‘sought to domesticate political life’. This meant that Australian feminists, in the 1890-1920 period at least, tended to be more openly hostile to patriarchy, though less critical of attendant power structures. Instead the emphasis was on programs of reforms (such as temperance, reform of the double standard and raising the age of consent) that were seen to apply with uniform significance to women of all classes simply because they were women. As such, class, race and other distinguishing features of social status were obscured in favour of addressing the ‘key variable’ of sex and its associated discriminations.\(^7^6\)

Inter-war feminists were well-versed in ‘expediency feminism’ and indeed many of them began their lobbying careers within this context. The development of the

maternal welfare state also clearly had its origins in the feminist politics of feminists such as Rose Scott. However, if Scott’s emphasis on sexual degradation meant she was ultimately unable to incorporate her politically distinct feminism into a large range of other Australian economic and cultural politics, many of the feminists who ascended after her were more willing to engage with other discourses, whether it be theosophy, socialism or a familiar liberalism, in their feminist politics. Inter-war feminists, with their dual commitment to both difference (which conferred a particular status) and equality (which equalled independence), added new emphases to expediency feminism.

The commitment to a non-party based feminism was another instance of continuity between pre-war and post-war feminisms, though it was a goal that wasn’t exclusive to feminist organisations. Judith Brett has recognised, along with Marilyn Lake, that the non-party ideal was intimately linked to a moral conception of citizenship that emphasised citizenship in terms of service and obligation rather than rights and claims. For Brett, the fact that conservative women’s groups such as the powerful Australian Women’s National League (an antecedent of the Liberal Party) also eschewed the ‘strident voice of party politics’, attests to the bourgeois claim on moral citizenship: ‘If the middle class was the class defined by its possession of superior moral values, then women were the middle class par excellence’. The idea of moral citizenship complicates Allen’s idea of expediency feminism, with its emphasis on what the vote could do, rather than what it meant, but does not necessarily contradict it. Inter-war feminists, buoyed by an international feminist community and a re-invigorated and wider sphere of access as citizens, found new frameworks in which to both practice and preach an expedient feminism. Citizenship was conceptualised both

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77 Judith Allen, "‘Our deeply degraded sex’ and ‘The Animal in man’: Rose Scott, Feminism and Sexuality 1890-1925", Australian Feminist Studies, 7 & 8, Summer 1988, p. 66
as a status, carrying a wide range of rights, and as a practice, involving both obligations and political participation.79

In the inter-war period, optimism was more than strategic. It was also an enthusiastic response to the end of the war, or more particularly the sense of opportunity for women activists offered by the Treaty of Versailles and the formation of the League of Nations. It is hardly surprising that concepts such as the right to self determination would have resonance for women activists seeking full emancipation; which they generally linked with equal pay and equal opportunity. The reality of women losing jobs to returning soldiers and general issues of female equality receding into the background after World War I, was occurring alongside a general mood of optimism in feminism, both in Australia and throughout many parts of the western world; an optimism that was firmly linked to a new discourse of rights and responsibilities that carried with it enormous cultural and social significance and potential for change. And as war typically meant a lull in general feminist activity, especially in terms of international feminism, the end of war meant an opportunity to re-group and re-focus on women’s issues specifically.

World War I had provided some opportunity for Australian women, including the Australian women’s movement, to exert their rights as citizens. Active women decided this meant serving their country in whichever way seemed relevant and important; a debated topic that galvanized primarily around the question of conscription. Both the anti-conscription campaigners and the conscription camp appealed to women on the basis of their motherhood. The Women’s Peace Army, formed in 1915 with Vida Goldstein as President, toured the country and set up branches in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. Their meetings were often opened with office holder Cecilia John singing the anti-war song ‘I didn’t raise my son to be a soldier’ and together with other feminist pacifists they decried a pro-

79 This idea of citizenship was discussed by Ruth Lister in Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives, MacMillan, London, 1997, p. 41 in terms of reconciling various emphases in citizenship theory, especially in regards to women and feminism. This definition was her synthesis of various positions and I found it applicable to the inter-war feminisms I discuss in this chapter.
conscription vote as a 'blood vote'. Bessie Rischbieth's organisation, the Women's Service Guild, aimed for neutrality then split down the middle, with Rischbieth finally declaring herself pro-conscription, using protection of national interest as her argument. The National Government's special 'Call to the Women of Australia' sought to appeal with a similar argument, using conscription as a test-case for women's new enfranchisement. And amidst all this, many feminists advanced the prohibition cause further and the large vote in favour of the early hotel closings in referenda held in Australia in most states during 1915 and 1916 was attributed to women's disproportional electoral influence. The prohibition campaign, like both the conscription and anti-conscription campaigns that ran contemporaneous to it, was again argued on the basis of national interest.\textsuperscript{80} Rischbieth emphasised this elsewhere in her depiction of the prohibition lobby group, the Women's National Movement as 'an army of men and women'.\textsuperscript{81}

However, while World War I had brought the issue of women's citizenship to the forefront of domestic politics, this did not automatically translate into an opportunity for women's groups to exercise a comparable influence. With national concerns taking centre stage, other objectives were sidelined. In many instances, this meant women's groups re-directed their energies, rather than curtailed activity. For example, the leading members of the Women's Political Association formed the Women's Peace Army, while the various branches of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union used the vote and the war context to bring issues of prohibition to national prominence. But in any case the ubiquitous term 'national interest', employed across the spectrum of political engagement, obscured or clouded discussion about women's rights and instead shifted the focus to, or re-emphasised, women's status as mothers and/ or custodians of the moral fibre of the nation, particularly its children. For post suffrage feminists, citizenship, motherhood and the development of the nation were intimately

\textsuperscript{80} For more detail, read \textit{Creating a Nation: 1788-1990}, (eds), Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quatley, McPhee and Gribble, Melbourne, 1994, p. 211-220

\textsuperscript{81} Rischbieth, \textit{March of Australian Women}, p. 24
linked for those women who had campaigned for the vote. As such it is hardly surprising that the First World War, where discourses about serving and making the nation proliferated, provided an impetus to women's organisations campaigning within a maternalist nationalist framework, while campaigns fought on the basis of women's equality were largely suspended or muted. It was only after the war, with the 1919 Royal Commission on the Basic Wage, that discussions about women's economic independence, whether as mothers or workers, came to the forefront of general debate about issues such as equal pay and childhood and motherhood endowments. It was also after the war that umbrella organisations and/or national co-ordinating bodies began to form.

I have anchored my discussion in this chapter on two related processes, tracing first the growth of a specific kind of feminist internationalism, and second the changing and consistent emphases in ideas about women's citizenship. Both of these processes were linked with a desire to encourage both a consistent and universal feminist identity. Feminist internationalism, for instance, despite the imperialism that could characterise its politics in practice, was based on a universal idea that shared womanhood implied shared interests and objectives. In this way international women's networks provided an alternative discourse and site of feminist power. On the other hand, however, discussions about female citizenship and what that entailed ensured that Australia's practical and expedient women activists maintained a feminist presence rooted in more recognisably 'legitimate' social and cultural frameworks. These processes included the development of alternative sources of feminist campaigning and strength and the promotion of feminist objectives in mainstream political forums such as Royal Commissions or the championing of women candidates for parliament. In practice, these processes were not mutually exclusive or contradictory. The post-war context and the development of the League of Nations in particular meant that women's internationalism, for example, stood both apart from mainstream politics (as a distinct form of internationalism) and

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82 Lake, *Getting Equal*, p. 49
as part of it (through the formation and promotion of national and international groups as representative bodies to the League for instance). As Marilyn Lake has noted, post-suffrage feminists were exemplary citizens; 'they gloried in the new possibilities of civic and political life and effectively blurred the boundaries between the two'.

It was the category of 'woman' that gave feminist internationalism its specific focus. Central to the idea of both feminist internationalism and feminist tradition was one basic tenet, the commonality, and related exceptionalism, of women. As Bessie Rischbieth's maxim about women being more united than divided suggests, the supremacy of female identification over other forms of identification such as class and race held a lot of currency for this generation of feminists. Leila J. Rupp has emphasised the enduring currency and related usefulness of this pronounced belief in the universality of the term 'woman': 'what is striking from an international and historical perspective is how deep the roots of the idea of difference between women and men go'. I would add that a universal idea of what constitutes 'woman' is one way of mediating between the national and international commitment.

The rhetoric of feminist internationalism also obscured or detracted from what made such an international community of feminists possible in the first place - the means to travel. If raising funds to attend overseas congresses was a regular feature of communist narratives, discussions of how international travel was possible were far more muted in accounts and correspondence from the members of the organised women's movement. As Penny Russell has noted, feminism in this period was an international movement and the willingness to travel was made more possible by class position and privilege - the two were linked. That Street and Rischbieth were so often travelling and networking also made the idea

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83 Lake, Getting Equal, p. 139
85 Penny Russell, 'Jessie Street and International Feminism', in Jessie Street: Documents and Essays, ed Heather Radi, p. 181
of mutually affirming national and international feminisms seem workable and real. Occasionally the various problems associated with maintaining an international presence and community were alluded to, though more often than not these were subsumed into discussion of a transplantable feminist ethos.86

Both the Australian Federation of Women Voters and the United Associations announced themselves as new, essential and relevant. Accordingly, in this chapter I have located their idea of historical significance in a discussion of their origins and the feminist culture they both promoted. A pragmatism tempered by idealism, or an idealism tempered by pragmatism, defined the beginnings of both the Federation and the Associations. Each organisation situated themselves as continuing the work of groups who had campaigned for the vote, but significantly the AFWV and the UA also justified their respective existences by expressing the need to respond to historical change. The AFWV was formed in 1921, with explicit reference to the precedent of the League of Nations and with acknowledgment of women having passed the major test of citizenship through their efforts in the First World War. Thus, it was thought to be time for a national co-ordinating body to capitalise on these developments. By the time the United Associations formed in 1929, from the debris of four New South Wales based organisations, there was a professed need for an even more effective form of feminist activism. To this end, the UA were successful and part of this success could be attributed to their eschewing the hold of the respective individual histories and practices of the women’s groups that formed their initial membership base in preference of what they considered to be a more culturally, politically and historically appropriate feminism. In contrast, the AFWV were more constrained in their effectiveness by firm adherence to the rhetoric of universal womanhood, or ‘brotherhood’, and the internationalism that begot them in the first place.

86 In a letter from Rischbieth to retiring AFWV Victorian Vice President Mrs. Jones, written in June 1929, the national president wrote: ‘Having had such close experience of the Federation’s activities, you should be able to serve it well in the old country by helping to bridge the gulf which distance and ignorance of differing conditions are still apt to cause. We hope, too, that you will not lose touch with Australia, and that we shall hear from you sometimes, thus maintaining another of those links with England we so value’. *Bessie Rischbieth Papers*, NLA, MS2006/5/916
Chapter Two: The Springs of Power: Locating a Feminist Tradition

On the 22nd of May 1933, the Australian Federation of Women Voters gathered in conference in Adelaide. The hostess organisation was the AFWV’s South Australian affiliate the League of Women Voters, formerly the Women’s Non-Party Association. South Australia’s special significance in the history of women’s rights was not lost on the League of Women Voters. They organised an exhibition in the conference hall illustrating the progress made by women towards equal citizenship and the performance of a pageant play entitled 'The Springs of Power', written by office holder and South Australian Ellinor Walker to dramatise the aspirations of the Women’s Movement.1

'The Springs of Power' is a short play, with only eight pages of dialogue. Its brevity, however, didn’t prevent massive leaps across time and space and no doubt inspired its clarity and easy symbolism. Bessie Rischbieth called it a 'new departure' and 'an excellent dramatised representation of the aspirations of the Women’s Movement'. The Adelaide Masonic Hall, where the play was performed by artists from the Repertory Theatre, the Little Theatre and the Abindo Studio, was filled with inter-state delegates, local representatives of women’s organisations and citizens of Adelaide. When the curtains opened ‘great women of past ages came forth to remind the women of our time of the contribution they had made on the long road travelled towards women’s emancipation’. Generic ‘Woman’, located in the present, called forth these women to give her strength to continue the journey. They were, to paraphrase Rischbieth further, Zenobia, Arabian Queen; Hypatia, Alexandrian philosopher; St. Teresa, Spanish church-woman; Caroline Herschell, Hanovian scientist; Rosa Bonheur, French artist; Mary Wollstonecraft, English writer; Lady Constance Lytton, English worker for woman suffrage; Elizabeth Fry, Reformer of English prisons; Josephine Butler, English

1 Ellinor Walker, 'The Springs of Power: A Short Pageant-Play of the Woman Movement'. The copy I use in this chapter was found in Bessie Rischbieth's Papers at the National Library of Australia, MS 2004/5/764-85. It is undated and scribbles in the margins suggest that it was a draft Rischbieth was making suggestions on or that the annotations were Walker's. Rischbieth's mention of the details of the play's content and performance in her history of the Australian Women’s Guilds dovetails with the copy in her collection. Bessie Rischbieth, March of Australian Women: A Record of Fifty Years' Struggle for Equal Citizenship, Paterson Brokensha, Perth, 1964, pg. 79. The play was also published, in abbreviated form in Hope and Fear: An Anthology of S.A. Women’s Writing, 1894-1994, (eds.) Anne Chittleborough, Annie Greet and Sue Hosking, Flinders Press, Adelaide, 1994, p. 144-149

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reformer and finally Catherine Helen Spence, South Australian and only woman present at the conference that resulted in the Australian constitution. Re-invigorated though not yet at full strength, 'Woman' implored her 'sisters' from every Continent to reach out their hands. In response, 'Europe', 'Asia', 'Africa', 'America' and 'Australia' all gave a short oration 'on women awakening in their country'. Now replenished by woman of the past and women in the present, 'Woman' asked the springs of power to send her one final aid. This arrived in the form of the 'Ideal of the Woman Movement', draped in the only white garment of the play, with a star on her forehead and a lamp in her hand. The ideal then delivered an inspiring monologue that proclaimed Woman and Man as 'humans free and equal'. This was the goal of the Movement and had to be pursued to reach a complementary universe, where 'The mother-heart' completed 'to the round/ That circle which is yet but half-described'. The final tableau, with the Ideal surrounded by Great Women of the Past, the Continents and generic 'Woman' was held for a moment, to emphasise the significance and importance of their relationship. Then together they left the stage, with the Ideal leading.

In this chapter I argue that the idea of tradition, as articulated by Walker, did not celebrate for Australian feminism the position of marginality. I analyse the play with this theme in mind and within the context of the politics of inter-war Australian women's movement. Walker's 'The Springs of Power' offered evidence of engagement with popular mainstream discourses of human rights and responsibilities and thus sought to legitimise the feminist project with reference to this wider framework. This process of feminist legitimisation was also evident in the embrace of feminist internationalism, which in some ways asserted a complementary ideal of democracy to that offered by general western internationalism in this period. In other fundamental ways, however, both the attempts at creating a feminist tradition and the promotion of an international network of women activists only served to re-inscribe the exceptionalism of women and therefore their marginal status within mainstream masculinist politics. In 'The Springs of Power' Walker dabbled with a series of arguments – women are equal to men, women offer something

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2 Rischbieth, March of Australian Women, p. 79
different to men – that demonstrated both the pragmatic drive of inter-war feminism and the complications inherent in aiming for both equality and an exceptional role for women in public life.

The writing and performance of this play can be read as part of a more general desire by inter-war feminists to establish a cohesive and legitimate identity as a movement of women with shared aspirations and a shared history. This search for origins, for an identifiable and consistent feminist tradition, was both pragmatic and idealistic. It was idealistic because it was expressed within the same discourse that promoted citizenship, internationalism and the hierarchy of representation; indeed the championing of a feminist tradition provided another forum within which to expound further on the unique contribution women could make to civic and political life. Simultaneously, the quest for feminist tradition was also pragmatic and strategic, evoked meaningfully to bolster existing campaigns, enhance status and encourage a sense of feminist identity for a contested movement. An analysis of 'The Springs of Power' allows for a discussion of how and why feminist traditions were promoted in this period and in doing so draws attention to the problematic relationship between feminism and history.

Why Tradition?

Songs, plays and poems in praise of a feminist tradition were composed and performed at conferences and other feminist gatherings, both in Australia and internationally. Within this context, 'The Springs of Power' can be read as an attempt to imbue Australian feminism with a history that would confer it legitimate status as a political movement. In addition, the creation of a feminist past offered another crucial source of feminist identity, another 'mirror'. This was done in numerous ways. By the 1930s, it had become typical AFWV protocol, for example, to recommend that feminist 'pioneers' still alive be invited to represent Australian women's organisations overseas, even if the invitation was only token (which it often was). The process of historicisation was further evident in attempts to build a memorial to Vida Goldstein in Victoria and at various times in different places, a permanent museum in
honour of the suffragist movement. Exhibitions that honoured the achievements of the women’s movement, such as the one in the Hall at the 1933 AFWV Conference in Adelaide, were also championed. Speeches, correspondence and circulars all reflected this same tendency towards a veneration of the recent feminist past. A longer tradition of feminist thought and action could also be invoked when necessary or appropriate. ‘The Springs of Power’ is one example of this.

Parallel to this pursuit of an identifiably feminist history was the desire to insert women into the history of the nation. As Marilyn Lake has argued, the self-conscious writing of women into white Australian pioneer history was a necessarily problematic endeavour. Australian feminists were both ‘colonisers and colonised’ as they sought to either depict or underplay their own suffering, often at the expense of Aboriginal Women. Australian feminists in the inter-war period took the opportunity three times to revise or supplement the history of the nation: in 1934, when Victoria commemorated the centenary of the state’s settlement, in 1936 when Adelaide did the same thing and finally in Sydney in 1938, for the sesqui-centenary of Australian settlement. For South Australia’s celebrations in 1936, for example, Ellinor Walker took the opportunity to compose and stage her second historical pageant since ‘The Springs of Power’. Titled ‘Heritage’, Walker’s play was commissioned specifically for the centenary and ran for ten nights at Adelaide’s Tivoli Theatre, attracting large audiences and raising impressive funds for the establishment of the Flying Doctor Service at Alice Springs, which was South Australian Women’s Centenary Memorial to the Pioneer Women of their state. Walker’s research for the ‘pioneer women’ section of ‘Heritage’ included a visit to one of the pioneer women of the South Australian town of Glenelg. Her subsequent recollections of the preparation and staging for the event are full of details about such careful research and the various demands of combining history and entertainment, but little on the potential anxieties about depicting

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colonization - possibly because, for Walker, the spirit in which South Australia was founded was 'so different from any of the other Australian colonies'.

For others, the apparent benefits of including women in national histories were less straightforward. Writer Miles Franklin, a feminist who loathed organised feminism, was especially scornful about the International Women's Conference that was associated with the 1938 celebrations in Sydney. She condemned it as the worst of colonialism and depressingly revisionist in its depiction of feminist pioneers. On the appearance of parliamentarian Dame Enid Lyons, for example, Franklin wrote: 'Other women condemned as freaks and perverts have gone before and made it possible for her to thus air herself on the public platform'. Franklin's comment is an implicit critique of the consequences of attempting to advance a feminist or female nationalist tradition. Inevitably, the quest for mainstream status meant the sacrifice of women, white and black, who didn't fit the over-arching narrative.

Bessie Rischbieth presented a paper at the Conference on 'Forces which have advanced or hindered Women's Progress in Public Life'. The Conference was recalled by her as part of an 'event of great national importance [in] the historical records of our country'. Further, the Conference itself, which attracted women from the international women's movement, was said to have met with 'general approval' from women's groups, though not until after some protest about the manner in which women pioneers were initially depicted; as wives with no mention made of the leading part they played in early settlement. These negotiations with government over what constituted official history, together with the calling of three other conferences to coincide with the larger International Conference, by the AFWV, the National Council of Women and the Federation of University respectively, illustrated how it was that organised feminists chose to stake a claim within contemporary mainstream social and political culture. Many inter-war Australian feminists saw nothing wrong in engaging directly with the leading institutions and

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5 Lake, p. 182

6 Bessie Rischbieth, The March of Australian Women, p. 82-84
traditions of their time, provided they were accorded some agency and recognition in the process.

Internationally, women activists were equally keen to use history to encourage feminist identity and solidarity. The convenors of the June 1929 International Woman Suffrage Alliance Conference, for example, sought to include and recognise 'pioneer' feminists who had either attended the first Conference in Berlin in 1904 or contributed significantly to feminist activity since. Rischbieth's response to this request indicated that this was a matter that she had given significant thought. She was able to provide details of the whereabouts of Australian feminists present at the inception of IWSA. Vida Goldstein was in London and though eighty year-old Mrs. Henry Dodson of Tasmania was expected not to be able to attend, Rischbieth felt sure 'an invitation sent to her would be greatly appreciated'. In regards to 'outstanding pioneer workers for suffrage', Rischbieth offered the name of Mrs. James Cowan, O.B.E, J.P., Perth, W.A, as the first woman member of parliament. 'She does not belong to an international body but would appreciate an official invitation even if not received in time'. This suggestion indicates, if nothing else, an informal network of feminists, aware of the significance of gestures of recognition and the need for such acknowledgment, both for the interests of contemporary feminists and the creation of a feminist tradition in general.

'The Springs of Power' typifies the process of the creation of a feminist tradition, both real and imagined. I add this distinction between real and imagined not to suggest that what Walker was invoking in her celebration of feminism was somehow false, but to recognise the imaginative capacities required for such an illustrious catalogue of feminist heroines, ranging from Hypatia to Catherine Helen Spence. Furthermore, and most significantly, how the past is imagined offers an understanding of the present mind, of contemporary concerns, for it is this present mind that dictates what it is that is needed for a tradition to offer something of value in the present context. Joan Scott's 'Fantasy Echo' is an apt metaphor for discussing this process. Scott recognises that the finding of resemblances between actors past and

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7 Bessie Rischbieth to Madam Emile Gourd, Geneva, Switzerland, 27/3/1929, MS2004/5/816, NLA
present and other forms of retrospective identifications is a form of ‘fantasy’, whereby plays of the mind are creative and not always rational\(^8\) - though Walker does offer a historical logic that is persuasive on its own terms. Echoes, meanwhile, are specific sorts of repetitions; that is, incomplete reproductions, usually only giving back final fragments of a phrase, and spanning large gaps of space.\(^9\) Analysed on these terms, 'The Springs of Power' is a fragmented history, grafting together isolated episodes of female empowerment into a fantasy of female progress, culminating in feminism. Furthermore, the play was necessarily fragmentary in its historical approach, both deliberately (to serve contemporary needs) and inevitably (as a reflection and product of the discontinuities of feminism).

Collectively, these moves towards anchoring feminist identity and achievement in a knowable past further illustrate the methods and motivations behind what Eric Hobsbawm has labeled the 'Invention of Tradition'.\(^{10}\) Hobsbawm explains how and why groups look to the past to legitimate the present. He identifies 'invented tradition' as a series of practices, normally governed by rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. This is distinct from custom in that insofar as tradition posits a reference to a historic past, it is partially fictitious and characterised by selectivity, rather than formal adherence to precedent. For Hobsbawm, invented traditions have proliferated in the modern period as products of and facilitators for the growth of the nation state and the various social changes that have made it possible, namely industrialisation, modernity and in some instances, revolution. Adaptation to change therefore often encourages a turn to tradition such as using old models for new purposes. Indeed some political institutions, ideological movements and groups were 'so unprecedented that even historic continuity had to be invented'.

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\(^9\) Ibid., p. 287

\(^{10}\) All references to Eric Hobsbawm are from his introductory essay 'Inventing Traditions' which opens the edited collection, *The Invention of Tradition*, (ed) Eric Hobsbawm, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983
To use Hobsbawm for my analysis, I would include feminism as an unprecedented movement in need of history. Further, Walker’s episodic leaps through time, assembling a cast of Great Women to people the road to emancipation, offers an example of this point. Gathering in conference, meanwhile, was an instance of ritual that evoked continuity with the past; in this instance a recent past as betrayed in the ostensible title of the conference, ‘Third Triennial Australian Federation of Women Voters Conference’.

Hobsbawm’s essay on tradition additionally offers two other observations that I apply to the tradition-making efforts of Australian inter-war feminism. Firstly, he has identified a series of possibly overlapping types among the groups who have invented traditions since industrialisation. Feminism corresponds to two of them – a) those establishing or symbolising social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities and b) those establishing or legitimising institutions, status or relations of authority. Cohesive identity and political legitimacy were both coveted by inter-war Australian feminists. Internationalism and citizenship offered two ready solutions to these problems. The anxieties evident from the beginning of ‘The Springs of Power’, however, indicate that identity and legitimacy remained elusive or tenuous goals, at least to the extent that they required reinforcement, or what Michel Foucault has called ‘the consoling play of recognitions’.11 The fact that the play opened a conference, primarily preoccupied with the promotion of federalism as the most effective way of organising political representation, and thereby justifying the existence of federal bodies such as the AFWV, further illustrated the connection between historical claims and legitimacy.

Secondly, Hobsbawm implored the historian to be aware of her own role in contributing, consciously or not, to the creation, dismantling and construction of images of the past which belong not only to historical inquiry, but also to what he calls ‘the public sphere of man as a political being’. Hobsbawm’s call

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forms part of my larger focus of inquiry in this chapter: the historical contexts of invented traditions. His insistence on more self-reflexivity also has some intersection with the work of feminist historians on the specific problems various feminisms have encountered when attempting to advance a feminist tradition. Joan Scott, for example, has similarly alerted us to the imperative that historians be attentive to their own role in this tradition-building making process. Feminist scholars, for instance, have often succumbed to the temptation to pile up counter examples as demonstrations of women's political capacity and to neglect the changing, and often radically different, historical contexts within which women as subjects came into being.\textsuperscript{12} I extend this critique to feminist activists such as Ellinor Walker, who in her pageant play imagines feminism to be both historically transgressive and historically specific. It is her enfranchisement and the citizenship so venerated by her movement that makes such an invocation of the past possible.\textsuperscript{13}

Feminist historians have also asked questions about why it has been so difficult to advance a feminist tradition. Most basically, feminism has not had access to the sorts of rituals and arts that usually make traditions possible. Elaine Showalter has stated that women 'still lack a sense of the feminist past ... women have no national holidays, no days or deaths of our great heroines'.\textsuperscript{14} In discussing this 'lack', it is simultaneously possible to recognise the following: the characteristics often associated with tradition (a national holiday for instance) are usually outside the jurisdiction of feminists; the difficulties faced by feminists in promoting such a sense of the past when they are, for example, without one 'nation' or singular identity (no matter what essentialist ideas about 'woman' or initiatives such as International Women's Day suggest in response to such dilemmas); the feminist critique of patriarchy which has included in its scope male-dominated institutions and traditions

\textsuperscript{12} Scott, 'Fantasy Echo', p. 285
\textsuperscript{13} Joan Scott writes in 'Fantasy Echo' that it 'is useful to consider fantasy as a formal mechanism for the articulation of scenarios that are at once historically specific in their representation and detail and transcendent of historical specificity', p. 286. Ellinor Walker's play 'The Springs of Power' is evidence of such a fantasy.
\textsuperscript{14} Elaine Showalter, Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage, Picador, New York, 2001, p. 19
and finally the lure of the ‘fantasy’ of a continuous history in response to historical absence or political isolation.¹⁵

Barbara Caine has argued that inventing tradition was hardly a defining characteristic of the women’s movement at this time or at any particular juncture in the history of feminism.¹⁶ Caine’s persuasive analysis begins with recognition of the suffragist’s own sense of historical specificity and exclusiveness and related to this, the feminist habit of creating new traditions to accommodate new objectives. This argument applies to later epochal periods of feminist history, most noticeably the Women’s Liberationists intentions to reject earlier feminisms for a model with more contemporary relevance. Caine’s sign-posting of the suffragist period as a useful analytical tool in which to investigate the problems of creating a feminist tradition also offers a neat segue into the peculiar dilemmas facing the post suffrage feminists, who had to contend with a variety of ‘feminisms’, all competing over what to do with the vote now that it was secured. The result was a series of ruptures, forcing discontinuity and precluding the possibility of a single feminist tradition.

Caine also raises the vexed question of legitimacy when she explores the issue of why there has not been a continuing functioning feminist tradition. For instance, conflicts over the meaning and usage of the term ‘feminism’ demonstrate the marginality of women and their inability to function as legitimating figures for each other. Caine is also aware of the lack of resources and institutional frameworks usually required as the basis for tradition making. So while groups such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters attempted to transmit a feminist consciousness, through the promotion of a feminist tradition (in addition to other forms of consciousness raising), in journals, at conferences and in the wider media, these attempts were constrained by financial limitations and lack of institutional power. This is not

¹⁵ Showalter herself, in her introduction to Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage, is explicitly claiming a feminist past, framed by a profoundly ahistorical link between the sufferings of Mary Wollstonecraft and Princess Diana.
to deny that the AFWV and Rischbeith in particular sought to access wider financial and institutional frameworks, but as Caine points out, these attempts were rarely more than partially successful with any women's organisations in this period.¹⁷ Unlike the early political economists or the philosophical radicals, feminists from this period lacked the necessary resources to establish schools of thought or formal ways of transmitting their ideas. More importantly, feminist writers, theorists and activists lacked the power and prestige that would have induced members of later generations to seek status-enhancing connections.¹⁸

Caine suggests that a lack of tradition could be liberating since 'marginality itself confers freedoms and possibilities of reworking the past in accordance with contemporary needs'.¹⁹ The experiences of the AFWV and many of their state affiliates, however, suggests that the sort of tradition those women activists aspired to had much in common with the kind of model Hobsbawm offered as typical. This was a model of tradition that sought mainstream political legitimacy and a hierarchy of representation. In contrast, an alternative tradition would engage with new or refigured discourses. The idea of power would be significantly altered and new locations of authority would be posited. As the title and content suggest, 'The Springs of Power' flirts with the possibilities of an alternative tradition. 'The Great Women of the Past' for instance clearly sought to identify a new source of authority, a specifically feminist authority. However, this process of creating feminist authority and power had only partially succeeded. On the road to 'fullest freedom' there was still much to overcome before the final goal could be achieved. Walker recognised that in order for a social, philosophical or cultural movement to succeed it first had to aspire to the creation of a legitimating tradition consistent with other recognised traditions. The Woman Movement had to be legitimised according to a less ephemeral or imaginative sense of 'power'. 'The Springs of Power' cannot be read independently of the wider ambitions of the

¹⁷ This is not to say they didn't try. As I discussed in the previous chapter, organisations such as the United Associations were concerned with promoting a culture of active public participation, including public speaking and debates, which exist in proximity to tradition in terms of establishing a legitimate public presence for their form of feminist politics.
¹⁸ Caine, op.cit., p. 3
¹⁹ Ibid., p. 13
AFWV in general. In the end, the tension between feminism as an alternative discourse and feminism as a legitimate political movement is an inevitable effect of a pragmatic and idealistic politics. Or to put it another way, any transcendental claims for feminism's identity and values were ultimately undermined by historical specificity.

So why tradition? Hobsbawm has alerted historians to the importance of tradition and to the various strategies that constitute the invention of tradition (rituals, such as the performing of symbolic plays for instance). Feminist historians and the tradition-making efforts of feminists themselves, meanwhile, have suggested that the historical and cultural specificity of feminism, its fragmentary nature and the impossible dream of a cohesive feminist identity ultimately reveal that what tradition implies or aspires to – a stable past and a stable identity – are tenuous at best. The content, performance and historical context of 'The Springs of Power' vividly illustrate the instability that thwarted the development of feminist tradition in inter-war Australian feminism.

**The Road to Woman's Emancipation**

In 'The Springs of Power', the familiar trope of the journey was used to maximum effect by Walker. The generic Woman paused on the path, 'as one weary with a journey'. She then 'Look[ed] backward, Year by year' to the achievements and setbacks on the path to the goal of 'fullest freedom'. Interestingly, in the opening sequence, 'feminism' was not directly invoked. Instead we hear of aspirations towards the 'sacred human right of liberty' and in this way the Woman Movement was firmly positioned within the larger journey towards human rights more generally. Historians of feminism such as Caine have frequently referred to the transition from the suffragist period to the era of the women citizen as the period in which the use and appropriateness of the term 'feminist' and/or 'feminism' was first properly explored and contested.\(^\text{20}\) This process had a different time frame and development in Australia, compared to the English example offered by Caine,

\[^{20}\text{Ibid., p. 8}\]
but 'The Springs of Power' still fits into this hypothesis and stands as exemplary of the inter-war refiguration of what the Woman Movement would have to become in the post suffrage era. The struggle to continue the journey towards full emancipation depicted in the play would also testify to this sense of a period of redefinition.

The opening sequence, a passionate and protracted litany of woes tempered with the glory of achievement, also suggested that the play might have had a dual function. While the absence of the term 'feminism' may have pointed to the period in which 'feminism' was being redefined for the new demands of the women's movement, it also suggests that perhaps the author was aiming to have her play function as a source of inspiration to feminists and women activists beyond the period of writing and performance. This sense of timelessness was reinforced by the invocation of Great Women of the Past and the symbolic aspirations of the play as a whole. Despite the performance of the play at an Australian Federation of Women Voters Conference, there was also no direct reference to that organisation or even the Australian women's movement in general (though the positioning of Catherine Spence and Miss Australasia at the end of their respective sequences can't help but betray both cultural and historical specificity). Instead, the internationalism that was professed in the inclusion of the continents extended to embrace the history of both the struggle for women's emancipation and even the history of women in general.

The travails encountered on the journey to emancipation were similarly broad. 'Woman', clothed in her generic 'simple tunic of dull, soft blue' and located in the present, speaks of a crisis in general terms, such as 'unforeseen forces [which] drag me back/ And thrust me from my path'. Further, she is 'lost within this maze of worldwide pain', where she confronts the 'sneering face/ Of mine undying ancient enemy/ Slow-moving Prejudice'. The audience would have been well aware of various obstacles to female empowerment at that particular point in time, but here they are figured as 'ancient' and 'slow-moving'. The source, or 'springs' of female power are located in the fact of the struggle itself.
At the same time, the quest for 'liberty for soul and mind and flesh' and "To learn, to work, to serve, to grow, to live", located 'The Springs of Power' within a specific discourse of female emancipation. The subtitle that referenced 'The Woman Movement' offered the first instance of historical specificity. Walker's powers as a dramatist were not strong enough to absorb these liberal feminist touches into an organic and timeless piece of eternally serviceable art. More hints of the essential liberal feminist nature of Walker's aspirations littered the text. Queen Zenobia was 'liberal in [her] rule', Mary Wollstonecraft strove for women's rights and to 'rank/ As citizen' and Catherine Helen Spence embodied the service at the heart of the Australian Federation of Women Voters' form of feminism, living her life in 'service to the world'. Josephine Butler was historicised in that 'she set the march/ For evermore towards social purity', but this quest towards moral sanctity was close enough to Walker's own feminism to contribute to the overarching sense of historical specificity. It is noteworthy then that Walker selected to highlight from Butler's various writings and protests, which ranged from promoting women's education to campaigning against slavery, the campaigns which constituted an effort to promote social purity, namely her campaigns against prostitution and the contagious diseases acts. Walker's professed aims for symbolic resonance were ultimately undermined by her strong commitment to the ideals that characterised both the Woman Movement and the feminism that followed.

Each page of the eleven-page play is ripe with meaning and resonance (or 'echo'). The title offers the first clue. The author is aiming to access the source, the 'springs', of feminist strength and 'power'. Later, this intention is fleshed out with the suggestion of an impasse in feminist achievement that necessitates a stronger connection with feminist strength, both throughout history and throughout the world. The subtitle 'A Short Pageant-Play of the Woman Movement' connects contemporary feminism explicitly with the suffragist campaign of a couple of decades earlier. For Walker, the Woman Movement was still very much in active mode. The distinctions that can now be made between campaigns for the vote and post-suffrage activity around what to do with the vote were, for Walker and her contemporaries, not
distinctions at all, but rather fundamental parts of a continuing feminist process. 'The Woman Movement' also offers connections between the campaigns of the suffragist era that extended beyond the campaign for enfranchisement. For the turn of the century Woman Movement, issues of female protection were paramount. While these related issues of surveillance and moral authority are not pronounced in the text, the general character of the Woman Movement is. The inclusion of social reformers Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in the pantheon of Great Women of the Past is testimony to this commitment to Woman Movement ethos.

This ethos Marilyn Lake recognised when she cited Ellinor Walker as a great defender of an earlier feminist tradition. In Lake's history of the Australian women's movement, Walker appears as an emblematic figure of her era.21 'The Springs of Power' is further evidence of the author's passionate commitment to the feminism that emerged as a direct result of the suffragist campaigns. Walker was born in 1894 and joined the Women's Non-Party Association in 1914. She stayed with the League of Women Voters until its end in 1979. She was also an office holder with the AFWV throughout its history, including Acting President when Rischbieth was away during World War II. In 1971, at the height of Women's Liberation, she became President of the Women's Christian Temperance League, which she had been a member of since 1935. For Walker, there was no question that feminism, or the Woman Movement as she called it, was continuous and evolving. In an address written by Walker and delivered on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Women Suffrage in South Australia in June 1954, Walker introduced 'Mrs. 1894', who took the audience back to the 'intense struggle' for the vote. Mrs. 1894 recalled the early suffragist efforts of future office holders with the League of Women Voters and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, to whom 'our whole movement owed a great deal'.22

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21 Lake uses the instance of Walker's clash with a young Women's Liberationist over the vexed issue of laws dealing with female sexuality to illustrate Walker's long and intense involvement with the ideals of suffrage and post suffrage feminism. Marilyn Lake, Getting Equal, p. 7
22 Ellinor Walker, 'Golden Jubilee of Woman Suffrage in South Australia', June 23rd 1954, Ruby Rich Papers, National Library of Australia, MS7493, Box 10, Folder 74
‘The Road to Women’s Emancipation’ that runs through the play locates the Woman’s Movement within a similar sense of progress towards feminist values and goals. The stage instructions declared that no scenery was needed, that the ‘whole’ was symbolical and also that the time was the present. By fixing the generic ‘Woman’ at a point on the path (the present), Walker was alerting or reminding her contemporary audience of the ‘unforeseen forces’ that drag Woman back on the road to ‘[her]/ fullest freedom’. A perhaps unintended effect of her symbolic intentions, however, was to suggest a continuous present, in which feminism, or woman’s emancipation was constantly under threat. It is the language, the characters and the instance of performance at a national feminist conference that remind both the viewer and the historian of the contemporary significance of Walker’s play.

From the outset, Walker’s fidelity to historical detail jostled with her symbolic artistry. Costume instructions gestured towards the archive (the picture of Josephine Butler in the League of Women Voter’s own library), portraiture (of Catherine Helen Spence, for instance) and texts (to provide details of Caroline Herschell’s Georgian costume). But when these were lacking or deemed unnecessary, Walker opted for easy indicators of nationality (‘America’ in her ranch girl costume), personality (the bi-sexual artist Rosa Bonheur in ‘man’s trousers and gaiters’) and temporality (or in the instance of the generic woman, and transcendent Ideal, a lack of period detail). Such instructions were par for the course for amateur performance, but are also indications of how to most effectively evoke the ‘past’ for the ‘present’ in the historical context of inter-war Australian feminism.

This was a crisis on the road to woman’s emancipation where ‘Woman’, located in the ‘present’, looked ‘[I]nto the Past’ for ‘aid’, to ‘those great woman souls/ Who erstwhile wore the flesh, and fought the fight’. It is these ‘great souls’ that offer the next hints as to what constituted historical significance for 1930s Australian feminism. Who was selected (or not) and for what reasons offer invaluable commentary on inter-war feminism. Walker’s Great Women of the Past, in her construction at least, were hardly marginal figures. In her feminist path, the journey extended right back to Zenobia and Hypatia.
Christianity was represented by St. Teresa, the first true 'reformer' and the first female Christian saint. Hypatia was a 'famed philosopher' who attracted 'eager students' who flocked from 'all the East.../To hear [her] teaching'. St Teresa had the legitimacy of the Church on her side as '[the] only woman whom the Church has named/ As Doctor'. Scientist Caroline Herschell was introduced with reference to her own position within the scientific tradition: 'Upon the scroll/ Of science read my name'.

Even the problematic figure of artist Rosa Bonheur was figured within the tradition of Great Artists, albeit with a stinging coda to remind the audience of the potential conflict between tradition making and sex. So Rosa declared by way of introduction:

My name rings out
In the deathless roll of artists clear and strong.
This Cross – the Legion of Honour! But (half humorously)
for twelve long years after it was acknowledged due,
It was withheld – because I was a woman.

With that quote Walker was able to both covet and critique the making of tradition. She indicated the hallmarks of mainstream political tradition – 'This Cross – the Legion of Honour' – while simultaneously recognising the problem of creating a similar tradition for feminism. However, an alternative tradition does not seem to have been what Walker had in mind. Her canon of Greats belonged to other longer, more legitimate traditions. In Walker's configuration, the 'power' offered by Zenobia, Hypatia, St Teresa and Caroline Herschell in particular alluded to sources, or 'springs', of power that had everything to do with already established male dominated traditions. The inclusion of Rosa Bonheur and her problematic position in terms of established male traditions did not so much challenge these existing sources of power and tradition as reinforce their significance.

Walker clearly revealed her desire to legitimise feminism by drawing attention to the position that some of her Great Women occupied within more established traditions. Yet women such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Josephine Butler and Catherine Helen Spence were not so easily slotted into this framework. Still, Walker seemed to have hoped to secure legitimacy for them
by including their experiences alongside more recognisably ‘powerful’ women such as Zenobia and Hypatia. But because she was not always able to invoke other legitimating traditions in the potted biographies of her Woman Movement heroines, the conferring of traditional power was not entirely successful. In this way, the idea of an alternative tradition was foregrounded in the concluding sections of the Great Women of the Past segment of ‘Springs of Power’.

The early feminist icons were prototypes or inspirations rather than leaders. In ‘The Springs of Power’, Mary Wollstonecraft holds the honour of the ‘Herald of the Woman’s Movement’. So the journey is made explicit in the late 1700s and from this point more familiar feminists litter the path; reformers Fry and Butler, suffragette Lady Constance Lytton and Catherine Helen Spence. Interestingly, it is the Lady’s renouncing of her ‘tranquil cultured happiness’ and the sacrifice of her health and ultimately her life in order to ‘rouse a nation to be just’ that holds the most allure for the dramatist. Lady Constance Lytton qualifies, in this historical narrative, along with Mary Wollstonecraft, as a feminist martyr. And martyrs, of course, are often crucial to the stories that nations, institutions and organisations with a ‘cause’, tell themselves about their origins.²³

Overall, however, the list of greats testifies to a form of feminist tradition making where achievement, service and leadership are perhaps the most celebrated characteristics of all. The generic ‘Woman’ that seeks guidance is meant to look and learn from the examples offered by the Great Women of the Past. What was it that drove them to the pursuit of excellence and even more importantly what sacrifices did they make for the greater good? Service stands in close proximity to achievement and leadership. It was also a sense of service and duty that allowed feminist inspirations to transcend their class and associated comforts for the greater cause. So Josephine Butler loved the quiet/ of home, shunned public glare, was gentle, shy’, yet ‘went forth to crude

²³ The exclusion of any of the celebrated Pankhursts could suggest that the form of radicalism espoused by Christabel in particular was not compatible with the reformist tendencies of the Woman Movement, though Lady Constance Lytton’s own efforts in the campaigns included several stints in prison and life-threatening hunger strikes.
publicity' on her 'Great Crusade'. In this feminist history, expressing the values of the profoundly middle class Australian women's movement, middle class fore-mothers such as Elizabeth Fry 'went down into all the filth, / Vice, misery, squalor, sickness', their less well-off sisters were not spared. These reformers were respectable women, drawn from the 'comfortable' ranks, but committed to reform on behalf of all women.

'The Springs of Power', with its simultaneous recognition of the importance of the campaign for the vote (especially through the figure of Lady Constance Lytton) and the amount of work still to be done on the road towards 'fullest freedom', positioned the suffrage campaign as both part of a continuing feminist tradition and as an event already assigned to the 'past'. Even a writer with such transparent tradition-inventing impulses as Walker was careful to emphasise the changing aspirations of the women's movement. So while her colourful cast and symbolic impulses strove towards an eternal conception of women's activism, her language, her selection of Great Women and her occasionally crude internationalism all betray the needs and gestures of a historically specific feminism.

In 'The Springs of Power', Wollstonecraft served a double purpose. Firstly, she marked the shift from proto to actual feminism. It was here that the slippage between legitimate and alternative traditions was most pronounced. Previous 'powerful' women such as Zenobia and St Teresa were able to exercise their power within legitimate and male dominated power structures. While they were clearly talented women, this was a conferred power, granted them despite their gender, rather than because of it. Wollstonecraft's 'power' was altogether different. At first it read like no power at all – 'Oh, how they hated me;/ The storm; The invective; And the fury of it all' – but what Wollstonecraft left behind was the beginnings of the Woman Movement and the 'springs' of a different sort of power, born from suffering. This was a power that was firmly located within women themselves, as Walker's lines, as spoken by Wollstonecraft, demonstrated:

I was the first to write in English word

Of Woman's Rights, her power to learn, to serve
Wollstonecraft, as figured by Walker, symbolised, in an overly symbolic play, the shift to a new source of Power. This new power was the origin of what made citizenship for women possible – that is, the power of women to write, to articulate 'Woman's rights'. Woman's voice therefore functions here as the foundation, or 'herald' of the Woman's Movement and of a new tradition. Women could now open up the possibilities of citizenship, for example, by writing about and applying specifically 'female' qualities to public life. This is consistent with the AFWV conception of citizenship and also with the co-existing preoccupation with women's difference and women's equality that marked this era of feminist activity.²⁴

The Great Women of the Past who followed Wollstonecraft in Walker's impressive parade were less problematic in terms of applicability to the campaigns and ethos of the Woman Movement and later, the Australian Federation of Women Voters. Wollstonecraft's sexual history and politics were not mentioned in her introduction. Instead the audience was introduced to Wollstonecraft the feminist martyr. On that level, Wollstonecraft was clearly symbolic. As the 'herald of the day', Wollstonecraft was used to signpost an emerging tradition rather than pronounce its contemporary aims and objectives. She unleashed the possibilities of feminine power – namely 'her power to learn, /to serve/ In healing work' – while the social reformers and more respectable suffragettes went about the actual work of the Woman Movement. That Walker chose to highlight Wollstonecraft's promotion of education, service and more specifically 'healing work' illustrated her own conception of what the Woman Movement represented and what was most characteristic of female power. These qualities of service and duty and useful education were hardly alien to the ways that other more culturally dominant discourses expressed the ideal public role of women. Again, Walker strove to argue for and create a feminist tradition within existing discursive and cultural spaces.

²⁴ Carol Bacchi, Same Difference: Feminism and Sexual Difference, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1990
Wollstonecraft's usefulness for feminist history-making had been extensively noted and discussed, though as Maria J. Falco has pointed out the 'often scurrilous denunciations and gross misinterpretations of [Wollstonecraft's] ideas over the years prevented her from being fully appreciated as a 'founding mother' of feminism until almost after the World War II period'.25 I would assume Falco is basing this observation on the increasing enfranchisement of western women throughout the world and the associated needs of legitimising a new or renewed movement beyond the granting of citizenship. In any case, as Falco implicitly recognises, enough time has passed since Wollstonecraft's death for her to be reclaimed in numerous ways for a variety of purposes. Wollstonecraft scholar Miriam Brody has described Wollstonecraft's historical legacy thus: 'She has been very generous to us after her death. We can all find what we are looking for'.26 Joan Scott has similarly reminded us that 'the history of Wollstonecraft as a feminist...is the history of the uses made of her by subsequent generations'.27 For the interwar Australian women's movement, Wollstonecraft was clearly useful in terms of feminist origins.

Elaine Showalter has read Wollstonecraft's particular appeal as 'modern and iconic because [she] represent[s] a seemingly timeless division in the feminist psyche', between recognition for work and achievements and the need for love. So, it is Wollstonecraft's 'life story that makes her our contemporary'.28 This aspect of Wollstonecraft's legacy however, was downplayed in the 'Springs of Power' in favour of Wollstonecraft the founding mother and feminist martyr, a more explicitly political image befitting a location of feminist origins. Penny A. Weiss has labeled the 'founding mother' tendency 'misleading', because there were other women who could have been called feminist before and after Wollstonecraft who have consequently had their

26 Miriam Brody, 'The Vindication of the Writes of Women: Mary Wollstonecraft and Enlightenment Rhetoric' in Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft, p. 105
28 Elaine Showalter, Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage, p. 13-16
contribution obscured, thus obliterating crucial connections.\footnote{Penny A. Weiss, ‘Wollstonecraft and Rousseau: The Gendered Fate of Political Theorists’ in \textit{Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft}, p. 25-26} Dale Spender reached a similar conclusion in her history of women’s ideas, noting that so ‘frequently is the women’s movement dated from Mary Wollstonecraft that initially I did not even ask myself whether indeed [she] was the first.’\footnote{Dale Spender warns of the problem of ‘overaccentuating Wollstonecraft’s iconoclasm’ as it ‘obscures the degree to which her demands are typical of a wide spectrum of women writers’, Dale Spender, \textit{Women’s Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them}, Pandora, London, 1982, pp. 44} Still, the Australian feminists clearly had a certain sort of representativeness in mind; their use of symbolism and emblematic women was pronounced and circumscribed by a particular politics.

Walker’s final Great Women of the Past were testimony to the values that she associated most closely with the Woman Movement. These were middle-class ideals about duty and service and morality that were remnants of Victorian feminism that still had immense currency in the post suffragist period. In the National Library of Australia’s copy of ‘The Springs of Power’, a reader, presumably Walker herself or one of her AFWV colleagues, has scribbled ‘Nightingale’ next to the introduction of Josephine Butler. Perhaps Florence Nightingale had been considered or suggested as an ideal embodiment of Woman Movement values. She certainly could have seemed an appropriate addition and like the Great Women of the Past who are introduced earlier in the play, Nightingale may have had the added cachet of holding an esteemed position within the more established tradition of medicine or more specifically female service. The possibility of Nightingale reinforces the idea that Walker was very much concerned with promoting a type of female power that had currency within more legitimate traditions and discourses. Additionally, as Mary Poovey has traced, Nightingale has been venerated by other women, including feminists, both in her own time and after it, for many of the characteristics associated with Walker’s other Great Women; duty, service and following from this a simultaneous ability to embody both the normative
definition of the middle class woman and a likeness to a tough-minded administrator or politician who encountered opposition, but persevered.31

However, such a reading would also have to include a consideration of why Nightingale had not been included. The introduction of Wollstonecraft into the play 'heralded' a shift in focus from other forms of tradition making to the possibility of a truly feminist tradition. For those purposes, Butler offered a more appropriate example. Butler slipped more comfortably into a pantheon of Greats that began with Wollstonecraft and concluded with Catherine Helen Spence, a local heroine. Butler, Spence, social reformer Elizabeth Fry and suffrage worker Lady Constance Lytton all offered a sense of what had happened to women's power and what women were doing to advance and nourish this specifically female power. They belonged distinctly to the western women's movement, whereas Nightingale was more ephemeral in terms of her relationship to feminism. She may have died the same year as Spence (1910), but their last days held different meanings for the history of feminism. One of Spence's last acts, for instance, was to form the Women's Non-Party Association in 1909. In contrast, Nightingale's most defining moment – her nursing and administration in the Crimean War – was over fifty years earlier and after her return from the East she spent most of her time issuing directives on various sanitation, nursing and hospital reforms from her couch in London.32 Hagiography or invented traditions can often ignore such specificities in order to highlight larger meanings, and indeed Nightingale has been commonly misrepresented on a number of levels for various ends,33 but for Walker's trajectory she wasn't a comfortable fit. In thinking about the positionality of Nightingale, Walker's Hall of Fame can be revealed as a cleverly plotted claim to feminist legitimacy.

32 Ibid., p. 165
33 Poovey argues, for instance, that Nightingale has been so misrepresented she emerges from nineteenth century accounts almost solely responsible for creating modern nursing, when this wasn’t the case. Poovey sees this as a product of both Nightingale's own self fashioning and of the contradictory Victorian assumptions about gender that made resistance to male-dominated culture possible through championing the same female characteristics domestic ideology expounded. Ibid., p. 166
Walker’s final four Great Women of the Past – Fry, Butler, Lytton and Spence – remind us of the importance of contemporary objectives to the process of feminist tradition making. Each Great Woman espoused the values that continued to be cherished by Walker in the 1970s exchange with a Woman’s Liberationist that Lake uses as an introduction to the changing character of twentieth century Australian feminism. In the printed exchange over the vexed issue of laws dealing with the regulation of sexuality, Walker reminds Ann Pengelly, President of the South Australian Branch of Young Labor and an avowed Women’s Liberationist, of the struggles and values of earlier feminists who had been concerned with promoting an equal moral standard of a different sort (emphasis on chastity, rather than liberation!) within the legitimating framework of international feminism. To Walker, to ignore the findings of bodies such as the League of Nations and the United Nations, ‘would not be modern rationality’.34 In ‘The Springs of Power’ this modern rationality was probably best expressed by Walker’s exemplary Woman Movement figures.

Catherine Helen Spence, Adelaide’s most recognisable reformer and writer, was the only local character in the play, though she hadn’t directly participated in the suffrage campaign that resulted in South Australian women becoming the first enfranchised women in Australia in December 1894 (the second in the world, after New Zealand). Her claim to fame here was explicitly as a ‘Pioneer Worker for electoral and other reforms’ or more specifically as the only woman member of the historic convention which met in Adelaide in 1897 to frame the enabling Act for the Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth.35 She was also a founding member and President of the hostess organisation in its original form, the Women’s Non-Party Association. Her inclusion amongst women such as Hypatia, Mary Wollstonecraft and Josephine Butler highlights two particular interests of the AFWV in the 1930s. The first was a desire to espouse ‘An-All Australia Outlook’ that championed the benefits of federalism. On this basis, Catherine Helen Spence, with her long time commitment to electoral reform and her

34 Lake, p. 8
35 Bessie Richbieth discussed the particular significance of Catherine Helen Spence in these terms in *March of Australian Women*, p. 79
historic role as the only woman present at the founding of the Constitution, served a particular contemporary need. On another level, she represented Australia's symbolic place in the historical narrative selected as ideal to illustrate the aspirations of the Women's Movement. Clearly, in "The Springs of Power", history-making and the contemporary needs of the AFWV were inter-related. For these reasons, the choice of Spence to represent Australia's role on the road to female emancipation over Vida Goldstein and Rose Scott, for example, becomes clear.

Together, the pantheon of Greats offered 'Woman' power in the form of 'help and hope', but it was not enough to lead 'into the future'. For this, 'Woman' called on 'the wide fellowship/ Of women round the circle of the world'. Clearly, on the Road to Woman's Emancipation internationalism was progress. Like the Great Women of the Past, The Continents - Europe (presumably including the Soviet Union, but possibly not), Asia, Africa, America (including South America) and Australasia - serve a didactic function, but in this instance the value of cultural differences to a larger international feminist community is the source of inspiration. Angela Woollacott has recognised contradictions inherent in inter-war feminisms' championing of internationalism, where feminists on the one hand fought for a less Euro-centric and more inclusive feminist internationalism, while on the other insisting on a western white-Anglo leadership and framework for feminist internationalism.36 In terms of representing internationalism then it was the western gaze that produced the particular effects of cultural difference, which were never quite absorbed into a transcendent identity of 'woman'.

Perhaps for these reasons, and for the purposes of brevity and symbolism, Walker's international types are somewhat stereotypical. Much like contestants in a beauty pageant, the continents are introduced by way of their national dress and other short hand indicators of 'national type'. So 'Europe' is welcomed in her peasant dress, and she 'responds in five and twenty

languages/ That speak one spirit's language'. 'Asia', in unspecified Japanese
dress, is further evoked by referencing Asia's 'great tree of wisdom'. 'Africa',
curiously without costume details in the stage directions, is similarly informed
by her great past, in this instance 'ancient mysteries'. It is 'sunny South Africa/
new sprung from a handful of decades' that signals the turn to the new world
(and a turning away, perhaps, from the less 'sunny' consequences of
colonialism). 'America', in her ranch girl costume (sadly obliterating the
tantalising costume possibilities of the wider Americas), shifts attention back
to the western world, '[w]ith [a] pledge of comradeship'. And finally Ms.
Australasia in her Wattle-blossom dress, toting a stuffed Kiwi (auxiliary New
Zealand!) brings both 'good cheer' and a return to the present moment. It is a
moment that cannot be obliterated through reference to generic womanhood,
time and place, particularly considering the play was written with an intended
audience of Australian feminists gathered in conference in Adelaide in 1933.

The collective expression of The Continents offered the ultimate vision of the
ideal of global sisterhood that underpinned western feminist internationalism:
'From every continent, colour, creed and race/ From every quarter of the
rolling globe/ From more than two-score nations, linked as one/ Comes
sisterhood to help and strengthen you'. That this sense of internationalism
was offered as a way of overcoming adversity and disillusionment in the
feminist project was telling. Clearly feminist internationalism was understood
at this time as a supportive network. What is less clear was whether this sense
of solidarity was envisioned from the margins or in parallel to the general
spirit of internationalism that permeated the western world in the inter-war
period. The activities and rhetoric of the Australian Federation of Women
Voters suggested complementary development – indeed, it was the League of
Nations that was attributed significance in the formation of a national body of
women's organisations. The final scene of 'The Springs of Power' also offered a
reinforcement of the ideals of the League of Nations, liberal democratic ideals
that propounded the importance of self-determination and freedom from
tyranny.
In the end, the Great Women of the Past and the collective expression of global sisterhood were not enough to fully revitalise the disenchanted woman. Enter, 'The Ideal', in a 'long robe of pure white, with flowing sleeves. Touches of silver. A star on her forehead and a lamp held in her hand. The only white dress in the whole pageant'. This quasi Statue of Liberty figure was invoked to complete the process of feminist rejuvenation. The ideals that she embodied – freedom, service, humanity and dignity – were needed to re-focus the project of the Women's Movement. These ideals were consistent with liberal democratic thought, but could be accommodated within a more specifically woman-centred vision – 'The mother-heart completing to the round/ That circle which is yet but half described'; 'No woman holding her white chastity/ At the cost of her sister's shame' and finally 'the power/ That bears life and conserves it'. Thus, the figure of liberty was the embodiment of post war democratic ideals about democracy, especially self-determination, equality and freedom and of the women's movement conceptions of these animating ideals. Again, the idea of a default alternative tradition seems to apply – Walker, with her insistence on liberty for 'half of all the race', clearly sought to position feminist politics as central to the processes and goals of democratic life, but in her use of both examples of equality (in Great Women of the Past) and female difference (the Ideal) she merely re-enacted the tension and slippery status of women's movements politics at this time.

The image of the rejuvenated woman, holding hands with the Great Women of the Past, the Continents and the Ideal, concluded the play. The Woman's final speech emphasised the importance of this solidarity and connection with the past, but most emphatically insisted on the importance of this internationalism and tradition for the future: 'Toward that New Era of Humanity'. Clearly, this future-oriented vision testifies to Caine's idea that feminist tradition is most possible and most likely to be utilised if serving the contemporary needs of feminism. Walker was part of a women's movement that had found promise in the ideals of the post war western world, yet by the time she came to write her play, the women's movement was clearly feeling significantly less powerful and significant. To remedy this, Walker sought the legitimation of tradition using the discourse of democratic rights that had
been so confidently asserted by the peacemakers at the end of World War One. However, immersion in this discourse was not without complications for Walker sought to both emphasise the equality and difference of women, a contrary impulse that found larger expression in the supposedly universal ideals of feminist internationalism. At once, Walker's attempt to locate female power only served to re-emphasise the difference of women and the extent to which they still had to strive in order to reach full equality – token examples of women achieving this status throughout history was not enough.

If anything, Walker's isolated examples of 'equal' women point to the incredible illegitimacy of her enterprise – her proto-feminists, however 'central' and despite the validation of traditional sources of legitimation and authority, are essentially marginal figures, lone examples of equality and thus default examples of the 'difference' of women. This type of history making also illustrates what Scott has identified as the continuous history of feminism, which overrode a story of discontinuity that 'feminist activists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries [turned] into a vision of uninterrupted linear success'.37 It was the very fact of the play's composition and performance at a particular time in the history of the AFWV, combined with a narrative that highlights a sense of feminist impasse, that betrays inter-war feminism's discontinuity with earlier feminisms and indeed, the AFWV's difference from other contemporary women's organisations.

Enacting the Springs of Power

'The Springs of Power' opened with the contemporary predicament of the Woman Movement. Generic 'Woman' halted on the Road to Woman's Emancipation 'as one weary with a journey'. This image indicates an inter-war feminism in crisis, though the nature of the crisis is not specified. To understand the play's sense of current or impending crisis, it is necessary to look more broadly at developments in inter-war Australian feminism. The AFWV were certain their origins were central to a united feminism, but contests over what constituted feminism and which organisations were

37 Scott, 'Fantasy Echo', p. 285
suitable to represent Australian women indicated some of the tensions that presumably informed Walker's depiction of a feminism in crisis. The AFWV and their affiliates, which included in the inter-war period the newly formed and highly active United Associations, responded to threats to their own form of feminism – political, though avowedly non-Party, hierarchical in representation and international in scope – by reinforcing the importance of representation and internationalism to an effective feminist politics. An appeal to tradition was one way of doing this.

In 1930, the Women's Christian Temperance Union of New South Wales sought to withdraw affiliation with the Australian Federation of Women Voters. Ellinor Walker, then Acting Honorary Secretary of the AFWV, responded to the WCTU, appealing to the group on the basis of the importance of their shared history. This was the history of the formation of the AFWV. She reminded them of the moment when a 'small and venturesome band of organisations ... united in taking that new step forward in the history of the Australian woman citizen'. The WCTU, she added, had been particularly 'associated with the early work and agitation for woman suffrage and emancipation'. As one of the AFWV's 'first supporters', Walker encouraged the WCTU to 'reconsider the point of affiliation'. If not, Walker hoped they would maintain contact, as national bodies, through other organisations such as the Australian Women’s Co-operating Committee and the Australian Women’s Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference Committee.38

Walker's letter reveals that the important links between representation and history. The WCTU had affiliated with the AFWV less than a decade previously and in Walker's history of the Australian woman citizen this was deemed historically significant. The Australian women's movement, or more particularly the AFWV, had a particular historical legacy that it sought emphasise; a legacy that dove-tailed with its own ambitions as the national women's representative body. For an organisation still seeking to establish position and legitimacy, this link with the WCTU constituted an important

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38 Ellinor Walker to Miss E. Bowles, Secretary of the N.S.W Women’s Christian Temperance Union, 12/4/30, Bessie Rischbieth Papers, NLA, MS2004/5/1023
piece of its history. In this emphasis on political community and organisational affiliation, the AFWV echoed an international feminist community similarly concerned with establishing a role and heritage. As enfranchisement spread throughout the western world, these efforts at history-making, via an appeal to tradition and shared experiences, amounted to a claim for legitimacy as the political status of women changed.

In the years following World War I, Australian feminists struggled to determine how they should use the vote. Political reform began to part company with philanthropy. Though winning the vote had united the movement, figuring out what to do with it demanded increased debate about the precise role and function of women's organisations. Walker wrote to the Temperance Union, 'we realise that your own work lies in one distinct channel, and understand how you may feel it better to concentrate, as a society, on that alone'. She then identified the Federation's own 'distinct channel' as 'work for equal citizenship and socio-political progress', via a national network.\(^{39}\) In her private correspondence with Bessie Rischbieth, Walker voiced a lack of surprise that the WCTU had resigned because concentrating on the own area of 'speciality' had meant that the Temperance Union were 'out of place' in the AFWV,\(^ {40}\) which presumably canvassed a wider or more political range of issues. Elsewhere, Rischbieth concluded that the majority of women's organisations, or 'charitable bodies' were not interested in political matters.\(^ {41}\) Contemporaneous to this was the federation of existing state-based National Councils of Women, who were primarily interested in social rather than political reform.\(^ {42}\)

As Meredith Foley has pointed out, the differences between the respective feminisms of the AFWV and the National Council (for instance, striving for

\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) Ellinor Walker to Bessie Rischbieth, 7/4/30, Bessie Rischbieth Papers, MS2004/5/1009, NLA.

\(^{41}\) Bessie Rischbieth, 'Should our charitable bodies be involved in Political Controversy?', Bessie Rischbieth Papers, MS2004/5/86, NLA undated. The fact she refers specifically to the National Council of Women suggests she wrote this piece after 1931.

\(^{42}\) The National Council of Women of Australia was formed in 1931, partially to ensure official Australian representation at the International Council of Women conventions. State Councils, also called National Councils, however, had existed since the formation of Australia's first NCW, the sixth in the world, in New South Wales in 1896. Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia all followed.
equality versus maintaining a separate sphere of women’s influence) can be over-stated. They shared class position and proximity to the ideological tradition which had informed middle-class feminist and social reform efforts since the turn of the century. Walker, for instance, was able to move comfortably between the AFWV and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and wrote historical pageants for both. Such cross-organisational affiliations between the two networks further blurred differences such as the Council’s inclusion of women’s voluntary organisations of all kinds in contrast to the Federation’s insistence on limiting affiliation to those which campaigned for political objectives. However, in terms of the wider social and political context of the Depression, the differences between the two national bodies diminished the relatively united front of women’s societies that had existed previous to and during the first world war. As other social issues took precedence in the 1930s, the anti-feminism of the wider community began to set in with various NCWs and it was left to the AFWV and the United Associations to argue the case for feminism as the Councils vacillated over controversial issues and maintained their self-imposed restriction to more traditional areas of the women’s programme.

In the official history of the National Council of Women for Victoria, *Champions of the Impossible*, Ada Norris charts a historical lineage for the NCW which resembles Walker’s road to women’s emancipation, beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft and including Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler — and also, without reservation, Florence Nightingale. For Norris, however, the truly defining moment for the activism embraced by the NCW was the formation of the International Council of Women in 1888. Like the National Councils, the ICW did not have suffrage and/ or equal rights as a central

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43 According to Mrs. M. Moore of the United Associations, however, distinctions could be made between the membership of the National Council of Women, who were clearly ‘high society’ and the UA, for instance, which was populated below Executive level by women’s workers such as teachers, nurses and doctors. See Meredith Foley, *The Women’s Movement in New South Wales and Victoria, 1918-1938*, thesis, University of Sydney, 1985, p. 370


45 Meredith Foley, p. 362

46 Foley, p. 363

platform and instead sought to represent ‘women workers along all lines of social, intellectual, moral or civic progress and reform’. So while the AFWV was pursuing international representation by promoting the significance of the League of Nations for women’s political representation everywhere and through the more explicitly political and feminist International Alliance of Women (and while the United Associations gravitated towards the more radical Open Door International and Equal Rights International), the National Council continued to carve out larger possibilities for women’s influence that weren’t necessarily tied to political systems and institutions, but rather the special contribution made by women to public and private life. Their ambitions, compared to the AFWV and the UA, were modest. A speaker at the Council’s 1929 national conference, for example, stipulated the main tasks of the organisation were to ‘collect and circulate information bearing on social problems, so that women’s opinions may be based on facts’ and ‘to focus and give clear expression to those views’.

Jessie Street continued to critique the Australian women’s movement and remained committed to equal rights in the face of political opposition and division. Her commitment made her impatient with women more inclined towards philanthropy than what she saw as genuine political progress. For example, in 1936, when the United Associations were assisting the AFWV to prepare a report on the civic and political status of women in Australia for the League of Nations, Street wrote to Bessie Rischbieth of the increasing divide in the Australian women’s movement between those interested in political status and groups more concerned with philanthropic endeavour. She lamented that fact that ‘with the exception of the AFWV’, there was a real lack of national attention to the civic, political and economic status of women. Street recommended that Rischbieth obtain assistance in her report from ‘real experts’ in law who ‘possess the feminist point of view’. She dismissed the National Council of Women as irrelevant to this project, as it was an organisation that consisted ‘of various affiliated societies, the vast majority of which are purely philanthropic and the major part of their work does not deal

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49 *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 September 1925, p. 12
with the legal aspects of women's status. The division would become more marked during the Second World War, as would the anti-communism (most commonly directed at Street and the UA) fostered by more reactionary women's groups such as the Australian Women's Guild of Empire.

In the 1930s, however, the tensions within the Australian women's movement/s took place within a particular historical context, where the very validity of women's organisations was called into question as women's employment and the family wage were widely debated. It was no coincidence that the Guild of Empire, for instance, was formed in Australia during this period. Industrial unrest prompted a pronounced opposition between radical and conservative responses to social problems. Inspired by the English version, Adela Pankhurst Walsh formed the Guild to promote the causes close to her heart and the hearts of others in the Empire at the time: anti-communism, the importance of family and Christianity and particularly, industrial peace, buttressed by the idea of a powerful, united British Empire. Starting with less than a thousand members in 1930, by 1938 the Guild had close to six thousand members, including women from the United Associations, the AFWV and the National Council of Women. Pankhurst-Walsh took special care to distinguish her organisation from separate feminist organisations, which she argued promoted 'women's issues' at the expense of the 'broad viewpoint of National Welfare'.

This debate about what constituted the primary role of a woman's organisation — advancing the greater social good or women's rights in particular — was vividly illustrated in various responses to the proposal to dismiss Married Teachers from paid employment in 1931. The UA swiftly launched a comprehensive campaign in opposing the proposal, which was eventually passed in 1932 and not reversed until 1947, while other women's organisations either supported the Government (the Feminist Club) or couldn't reach consensus (the National Council). At the same time, the UA

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50 Jessie Street to Bessie Rischbieth, 6/8/36, Bessie Rischbieth Papers, NLA, MS2004/5/1785
52 Adela Pankhurst, Pioneers, p. 1
found themselves co-operating with other women's organisations on less divisive issues such as child endowment and promoting women for jury service. Indeed, in Jessie Street's autobiography, there is little mention of the tensions with other women's organisations during the 1930s, though she did note, perhaps naively, that she did not receive the support from labour and union groups that she would have hoped for in the campaign for equal pay and opportunity.53

Meanwhile, the AFWV continued to argue for the significance of a national coordinating body for women's organisations, but their insistence on privileging the political possibilities of the vote meant that their list of affiliates increased at a slower rate than that of the National Council. By 1930, the AFWV had twelve constituent organisations, still a small number compared to the booming National Council and their own affiliate, the UA. The themes and preoccupations of the conferences continued to vigorously promote the existence of the AFWV, championing 'An All-Australia outlook' in positive terms and more pessimistically, pondering such questions as: 'why have Australian women, who were among the first to be enfranchised, been less successful than women of Great Britain and the United States in gaining political honours?'54

The 1933 Adelaide Conference, where 'The Springs of Power' was performed, took up this question of the lack of women in Parliament by holding a replica of the Historical Convention which met in Adelaide in 1897 to draft the enabling act for the Australian Commonwealth Constitution. Catherine Helen Spence, Great Woman of the Past, had of course been present. The AFWV staged their version of this event, 'A WOMAN'S MODEL FEDERAL CONVENTION' in the Adelaide Town Hall in response to an abortive series of Royal Commissions appointed by the Federal Government for the revision of the Constitution. Shortly after the Conference, AFWV officers petitioned a conference of state premiers in Melbourne to champion the proposed reforms to the Constitution and the establishment of a Federal Department for 'our

54 Ibid., p. 73
Native race'. Neither petition had any immediate or direct effect, though Rischbieth recalled the Model Convention had been discussed directly in the press.\footnote{Ibid., pg. 81}

'The Springs of Power' was a lament for Australian feminism's continuing fringe position. Even in its most basic features — Great Women of the Past, The Continents and The Ideal of the Woman Movement — the play illustrates the central concerns of inter-war Australian feminism. Firstly, there was a desire for legitimacy to be found, perhaps, in Great Women of the Past and evidenced elsewhere in a commitment to a hierarchy of representation. Secondly, inter-war feminists had an abiding commitment to internationalism both as a form of effective activism and as a source of feminist identity. And finally, these women expressed an idealistic belief in the idea of feminism as the highest expression of citizenship (The Ideal of the Woman Movement). The relationship between these three central features was both organic and linear. Contemporary feminism, as it was then figured, could be situated in both a grand feminist tradition and as part of a continuing feminist journey that was still striving for the ultimate fulfillment — The Ideal of the Woman Movement.

Throughout the 1930s, the Australian Federation of Women Voters had aimed to expand their affiliate base in order to strengthen the ties between national and international women’s organisations that identified themselves as feminists. Their growth, however, was tempered by their promotion of a particular idea of feminism that didn’t necessarily correspond with more philanthropically inclined women’s organisations. Both the staged convention and the historical pageant ‘The Springs of Power’ can be read as attempts by the AFWV to promote and legitimise their form of feminism; a feminism that was, in the 1930s, under threat within the women’s movement itself and within society generally. In the end, both the play and the staged convention relied on a performance of power that did not correspond to their contemporary position. It was not until the 1940s that Australian feminists began to feel properly rewarded for their efforts.
Chapter Three: A New Age?: Australian Feminism and the 1940s

‘Women have grown up’, asserted Mrs M. Warhurst during the regular United Associations of Women radio broadcast on 2GB in Sydney in January 1944. ‘Troublous times and serious tasks have served to show what little effort was required for the needs of the community and the needs of the nation to crowd out personal desires from the needs of women’. Her opening set the backdrop for the more specific discussion that followed on the increased importance of Australian feminism in the 1940s. She noted that at the recent Australian Women’s Charter Conference in 1943, ‘there was evidence on every hand of the awakening and increasing interest of women in vital problems. There was evidence of a desire to co-operate and make whatever contribution possible towards winning the war and peace....Those present were united in the belief that every nerve must be strained to win the war and eradicate fascism if we would continue to live in a world in which equality, liberty and justice exist. They voiced the belief that the Government should make fuller use of the vision, enthusiasm and practical wisdom and capabilities of women’. Thus Mrs Warhurst voiced the common rhetoric of many Australian feminists during World War II – let us prove ourselves, we have what it takes. When she announced that ‘women have grown up’, Mrs Warhurst wished to signal the coming of age of Australian feminism.

This is a chapter about what happened to Australian feminism during the 1940s, a decade in which Australian feminists frequently spoke of coming of age. Contemporary and retrospective representations of that time reveal how Australian feminism responded to, recorded and revised the idea of historical significance in a period in which the idea of making history was itself especially pronounced and ideologically inscribed. As an alternative political and/ or social movement that sought to express itself within the mainstream discourses of the time both to secure legitimacy and out of genuine ideological commitment, Australian feminism was also profoundly affected by historical change in the 1940s. By the end of the decade, earlier discussions about the validity and efficacy of the Australian women’s movement had exploded into a

1 Australian Women’s Charter Committee Archives, National Library of Australia, MS 2302/ 1-3
series of severed or fragile alliances, with representation and ideology as the key issues at stake. This pattern of a rhetorical faith in feminism’s ‘coming of age’, in continual tension with actual disagreements about who should represent Australian women and how it should be done, is best exemplified in the troubled history of the Australian Women’s Charter Movement.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Australian feminists had explored various options as to how to create a feminist history. During the Second World War they simply seized the opportunity to take to the historical stage. If war made men out of boys, it also made feminists out of women. The oft-stated alignment between the work of women’s organisations and the needs of the nation made possible the expression of a new relationship to capital H ‘History’. Rather than look to the past for evidence of Great Women or female activity to legitimate contemporary feminism, women’s organisations in the 1940s seized on the present moment in order to project feminist demands onto a general vision of the New World Order. Whether this process represented the sort of disavowal of the past that characterised feminist activity a generation later is debatable, but it certainly represented something new in the relationship between feminism and history. Its implications would have profound effects on the women’s movement of the 1950s and 1960s. For if the time had come for feminism to assume a position of proper responsibility, commensurable with the new opportunities for women, what form this feminism would take was to become hotly contested. More than anything, the 1940s attested to the price of maturity.

It is hardly surprising that, of the period from 1919-1969, the 1940s alone have enjoyed considerable attention in terms of general histories of women and of feminism. In addition to the obvious historical gains for women – work, parliament, Women’s Employment Board – the fact of war has imbued the 1940s with an historical significance that permeates all treatments of historical subjects of this period. In Australia this significance is further underlined by a preoccupation with war as the primary site for the development of nationhood, albeit a distinctly masculinised nationhood. As Marilyn Lake and Joy Damousi have observed, this equation of masculinity
and nationhood has obscured or simplified the contribution of women and a key project for them and other feminist historians has been to make women visible as historical actors and as subjects of the narrative. Arguably, feminist historians in Australia have almost been too successful in recasting this period in terms of female experiences. The development of the Women’s Employment Board, women’s experiences on both the frontline and at home, increased employment opportunities and the development of a new form of sexual independence are just a few of the topics covered comprehensively by leading feminist scholars. One curious side effect of this detailed attention to the meaning of war for women has been a corresponding relative lack of discussion about what feminists were doing. It is as though the visible achievements of World War II stand as sufficient testimony to their work. Feminist activity has possibly been assumed to lie behind World War II achievements or is dismissed as irrelevant because it was the fact of war, rather than the effort of feminists, that caused the valuable achievements, some of which were reversed after the war in any case.

This sporadic historical treatment of war time feminist activity could also be read as reflecting the disunity in the Australian women’s movement over the war. While all the major women’s organisations, including the United Associations and the Australian Federation of Women Voters, were agreed that feminists should direct their considerable energies to the war, what form this work would take was a more contested issue. Some organisations such as the National Council of Women and branches of the AFWV advocated putting aside unrelated campaigns for the duration. Others, such as the UA and


particularly Jessie Street, sought to redefine the nation's needs in a way that acknowledged the contributions and needs of women and therefore advanced the feminist cause. The one instance where feminists, and other women activists, appeared to come together as women and for women's rights, was the Australian Women's Charter Conference in 1943.

It was perhaps the Charter Conference's explicit intention to foreground women's issues in the context of war and peace that has attracted the interest of historians. Gisela Kaplan, consistent with her theme of a post war feminist wasteland, admittedly acknowledges the importance of Jessie Street and the United Associations while at the same time failing to mention the Australian Women's Charter. But generally, others have been more attentive to the Australian Women's Charter as a key moment of unity and activism and have singled it out for special attention. Norman Mackenzie's 1962 sociological study *Women In Australia* accords the Australian Women's Charter a synthesising role for a generation of women's organisations which usually varied in their approaches to 'women's problems'. In *Creating a Nation*, the 1943 Australian Women's Charter Conference is figured as the culmination of the burgeoning feminist activity of the 1920s and 1930s. In *Getting Equal*, Marilyn Lake expands on this theme, noting that the Conference 'was the largest, most representative women's conference yet held in Australia, in many ways a high point in the history of Australian feminism'. For Joy Damousi, World War II and the Australian Women's Charter in particular, represented the first time that women's organisations of the centre and Left united. MacKenzie similarly describes the Charter as 'politically left wing'.

The sum total of this brief historiographical survey suggests the integral

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5 However, as Marilyn Lake has pointed out, histories of the period that don't take women as their focus have been more silent on the Charter, providing either scanty mention or nothing at all. 'Jessie Street and feminist Chauvinism', *Jessie Street: Documents and Essays*, (ed.) Heather Radi, Women's Redress Press Inc, Sydney 1990, p. 20
7 *Creating a Nation*, p. 263
10 Norman MacKenzie, *Women in Australia*, p. 303
importance of the Australian Women's Charter as a key event in this period of Australian feminism. However, this consensus on the success of the 1943 Conference was also dependent on the recognition that it was a singular event. The divisive nature of the Australian women's movement, and the end of the war, ensured the success of the 1943 Conference was impossible to repeat and that it therefore carried within itself the seeds of failure.

The reasons for the ultimate failure of the Australian Women's Charter movement to represent the goals of Australian feminism and Australian women are more complicated than the existing historiography suggests. The factors that made the first Conference a success – the unification of women's organisations from the centre and the left, for example – can assist in explaining why the second Australian Women's Charter Conference in 1946 was less successful as a representative phenomenon. However, an overarching analysis of the Australian women's movement in the 1940s requires more than attention to ideology and the politics of representation. In this chapter, therefore, I focus on two further critical explanations for the rise and fall of the Australian Women's Charter movement. Firstly, I argue that the competing versions of the relationship between feminism and war that held currency within Australian feminism at the time and beyond reveal why unity of purpose in the Australian's women's movement was tenuous at best during the 1940s. The complexity of positions on 'feminism and the war' are revealed with particular clarity in retrospective histories of the 1940s, where the specific responses of the women's movement are reworked and stitched into a celebratory narrative of Australian feminism.

Secondly, in response to the question of whether or not Australian feminism came of age in the 1940s, I consider what it meant for some feminists to argue, from an increasingly marginalised and splintered position, that they were making history in a social and cultural context where everything was imbued with historical significance. The idea of a 'coming of age' for, or a 'new age' of, Australian feminism, so popular in some sections of the Australian women's movement during World War II, and so vividly expressed with reference to the 1943 Charter Conference, was paradoxically short-lived. The fleeting
alignment of Australian feminism with the historical moment came and went while women activists argued about the appropriate feminist response to war.\textsuperscript{11} So while many feminists agreed that the circumstances of war made it possible to think of a new age, how this would actually happen was a debate that continued after the war – by which time the moment had passed. Would they work as they always had? Would feminists put aside their own goals for the duration in pursuit of larger ones that would, in the end, affect women too? Or would feminists, like Jessie Street for instance, continue to advance the liberation of women as pivotal to human freedom in general, thereby attempting to make ideals such as equal pay historical reality? What was appropriate? This chapter explores the failure of a ‘new age’ to materialise for Australian feminism in the 1940s.

**War – What is It Good For?**

Mrs Warhurst’s broadcast, that asserted ‘women have grown up’, offers us one version of the 1940s experience for Australian feminists; namely that of the New South Wales based United Associations of Women and their most reliable affiliates. In this version, the United Associations responded to the unique challenges of war time by organising a conference that tackled both what the war meant for women and what these gains would mean in peace time. The overarching objective of the conference was to produce the Australian Women’s Charter, which was subsequently revised in 1946 and later in various state conferences, systematically listing various demands and goals. All women’s organisations had been encouraged to participate, thus promoting the conference, the Charter and the organising committee that emerged from it as truly representative (of the women’s movement and of women). In this version of the 1940s, Australian feminism had reached maturity and for evidence one needed to look no further than the Charter

\textsuperscript{11} This brings to mind what Robyn Ferrell has identified as the ‘paradoxical double burden’ implicit in the utopian hope of advancing a revolution when there is no historical precursor and the current historical reality suggests otherwise. For Ferrell to ‘imagine that historical time can make conceptual relations causal . . . is to confuse the genres of historical and theoretical time’. Robyn Ferrell, *The Timing of Feminism, Hypatia*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Winter 1999), p. 44
Conferences, the activities of the United Associations and the awesome career of their founder and President Jessie Street.

In her autobiography *Truth or Repose*, Jessie Street asserted that World War II was one of the most satisfying periods of her life.\(^\text{12}\) It was during the 1940s that Street joined the Australian Labor Party, ran (unsuccessfully) for a seat in parliament three times, organised the Woman’s Forum for Social Reconstruction, lobbied for women’s rights at the first United Nations Conference in San Francisco in 1945 (the same year she attended the Women’s International Democratic Federation conference in Paris), represented the Australian government twice at Commissions on the Status of Women and of course, in her capacity as President of the United Associations of Women, organised the first Australian Women’s Charter Conference. Street’s exceptional career illustrates her crucial role in Australian, and increasingly in international feminism in this period. But the satisfaction she associates with World War II could easily be extended to feminism in general. The first Australian Women’s Charter Conference in 1943, officially titled the Australian Women’s Conference for Victory in War and Victory in Peace, attracted over ninety organisations, from trade unions to Christian Temperance Groups. The end result of this conference was the Australian Women’s Charter, a set of twenty eight resolutions on issues of equal pay and opportunity, childcare, Aboriginal welfare, social security and moral standards. The organising committee ordered an impressive print run of 5000 copies of the first Charter, which soon doubled to 10000, with an imperative to distribute widely and influentially, including to important feminists and political figures overseas and among all the Federal members of parliament.\(^\text{13}\)

World War II offered an ideal opportunity for these Australian feminists to respond to the call of national interest. Vision and industry were advocated. Letters to the editor, circulars to members of various and affiliated organisations, deputations and other appeals to politicians, radio broadcasts and conferences all gestured towards a sense of historical occasion. As more


\(^{13}\) Notes from the July 13 1944 Meeting of the Federal Committee of the Australian Women’s Charter Committee, Australian Women’s Charter Committee Archives, Minutes Book, NLA, MS 2302
and more Australian women moved into various workplaces, some of them hitherto never available to women, Australian feminists could not help but wonder what this meant for Australian feminism. If Australian feminism had previously been plagued by a lack of tradition and/or legitimacy, it now dared to hope for an opportunity to integrate long standing demands (equal pay, for instance) and some new ones (access to particular jobs) into the social, political and cultural mainstream. In short, World War II, for Australian feminists, meant the opportunity to make history.

This is the version of the 1940s advanced in both Street's autobiography and in the official history of the UAW, 50 Years of Feminist Achievement: A History of the United Associations of Women, by Winifred Mitchell. In the Foreword to the History, author and UAW member Dymphna Cusack charted her own coming of age in terms of feminist identification. Significantly, this coming into feminism coincided with the war:

I did not join the U.A.W., til the outbreak of War, or later. ... Some time in 1941, when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, I spoke at a meeting saying we should support the Soviet Union because they are the only country that gave equality of rights, equal opportunities and equal pay. I said I was not a Feminist because we had to do more than push Feminist aims. After the meeting Vivienne Newsom came up to me and asked why I should deny being a Feminist and then give a completely Feminist talk? I gave my reasons lamely and Vivienne ... explained clearly to me that in U.A.W.'s terms a Feminist was not only a Woman's Movement person; a Feminist was an activist who worked for Women's Rights as an integral part of the struggle to improve the position of men as well as women, to get men as well as women to end the exploitation of Society as a whole, and to ensure that Peace should come for the Whole World. From then on I regarded myself as a Feminist.\textsuperscript{14}

What is noteworthy about Cusack's experience is firstly, the perceived initial conflict between feminist aims and larger struggles and secondly, the ultimate ability of Cusack to reconcile her communism with the feminism of the UAW.

\textsuperscript{14} Dymphna Cusack, Foreword to 50 Years of Feminist Achievement: A History of the UAW, by Winifred Mitchell, United Associations of Women, Sydney, 1979
For other women in the women's movement, including some in the United Associations, such reconciliation wasn't always possible. The flipside of Cusack's narrative of the 1940s was an alternative version wherein feminism was subsumed, or downplayed, by larger historical forces for the duration of the war. Related to this were heated discussions about what constituted feminism, and whether or not communism or socialism had any place within it. Not coincidentally, such discussions were amplified in more mainstream debates about what the world would or should be like after the war. Contests over what form feminism, or women's activism, should take during and after the war, then make up the alternative version of the 1940s. The dwindling numbers at the conferences over the course of the decade testify to the legitimacy of this counter narrative. So does the fact that other large umbrella organisations such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters and the National Council of Women chose to downscale their activism or redirect their main focus to the war effort itself rather than organise or attend conferences. Debates about the most appropriate response to the war also took place within ongoing discussions about the relevance and importance of women's organisations – both inside and outside the women's movement. When 'the Woman Next Door', the everywoman author of the Sydney Morning Herald's 'The Women's View' column dismissed the first Charter Conference as 'an orgy of talk in which a couple of hundred women have been indulging' she was voicing a not uncommon frustration about both the methods and representativeness of the Australian women's movement.

Tensions are revealed in the Australian Federation of Women Voter's President Bessie Rischbieth's contemporaneous correspondence and subsequent historicising, which articulate a sense of historical occasion that is also obliterated through historical revision. In 1939 Rischbieth went to London. She stayed for seven years. In a letter from London to her colleagues in the Australian Federation of Women Voters, dated the 27th June

15 The Woman Next Door, 'Is a Charter for Australian Women Really Necessary?', The Sydney Morning Herald, August 10, 1946
16 During this time, Rischbieth worked with the International Alliance of Women in London and with the Australian Women's Voluntary Service at the Boomerang Club of Australia House preparing literature for troops.
1940, she revealed that Australia, and the Australian Women's Movement, was still very much on her mind:

Dear Friends,

In these days of great suspense, your hearts and minds are riveted, I feel sure, on this old country.

There has been and is treachery at every corner until it would seem that every individual and every nation is challenged to take a stand before humanity can proceed towards that new age that many seers have dreamed, including Tennyson have dreamed [sic]; and towards which our women's movement was and is directed.

Do you feel at times, as we do here, that all this is a hideous nightmare? However, as we know we have worked hard and worked well in the women's movement for a co-operative world basis.

It is distressing to witness the constructive work of international and social organisations in which we have all so intimately in Australia and elsewhere participated, being superseded. We have, however, all done our best for human welfare movements in the International and Empire Field. We know that no effort is lost. Our great movement is on the side of human freedom and in due course, never fear, that harvest will be reaped.17

This letter contained the usual Rischbieth flourishes, commonly expressed in her love of country and the Empire. What was different this time around was the fact that the experience of another world war meant the ultimate challenge for these closely held, if vaguely expressed core beliefs. Should the challenge be met, she argued, 'humanity [could] proceed towards that new age that many seers have dreamed...and towards which our women's movement was and is directed'. Allied victory in the war would mean that the hard work of the women's movement would be rewarded - 'that harvest will be reaped'. Generally, this harvest meant human freedom, but in terms of the women's movement, the form this harvest would take was less clear. Much later, Gisela Kaplan would figure it as 'meagre'18 but at the beginning of the 1940s, the Australian women's movement had higher hopes. To write of a 'new age' is to draw lines between the past, the present and the future. In this way, Rischbieth imbued the women's movement with utopian possibility, and she did so in a way that aligned this promise with that of western democracy. As

17 Letter, dated 27/6/40, Bessie Rischbieth Papers, NLA, MS2004/5/1884
always, she had no wish to suggest that the women’s movement ran counter to the aspirations of the country (and by extension Empire) from which it had emerged.

To speak of a new age also allows for the possibility of reconciling earlier goals and discourses with their contemporary fulfilment. Rischbieth was especially adept at utilising the possibilities of historical moments and pinning them down in terms of the overlapping and (for her purposes anyway) complementary discourses of liberalism, nationalism and her brand of feminism. During World War II, her writings conveyed a sense not just historical occasion, but also of historical responsibility. In a report filed from England during the bombing of London, Rischbieth recounted her experiences seeking shelter from the air raids in terms of historical significance. She wrote, as ‘an Australian I have found it a distressing but interesting experience to be in the Old Country at this period, because every hour makes history of a nature never known before’. Hence, she was happy to remain put for the sake of the ‘valuable experience’.

In this understanding of historical significance, history is happening elsewhere – in the Old Country. It is because she is ‘an Australian’ and therefore usually peripheral that she is finding the first hand experience especially ‘interesting’. Her special pride in the ‘fine impression’ created by Australian soldiers amplifies this proximity to real ‘history’. In terms of the place of England, or London more specifically, in the Australian imaginary, Rischbieth was thus located in a curious place - England was ‘home’ but not ‘home’. As Angela Woollacott has pointed out, before the Second World War England occupied a special place in the mental landscape of Australian women eager to embrace the opportunities of modernity, a signal characteristic being the belief in the possibility of personal transformation. Rischbieth’s comments indicate a wider application of this idea, with ‘history’ and ‘valuable experience’ being the line in the sand between the old country

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19 Bessie Rischbieth, ‘Seeking Zones Away from Zooms’, report filed from England dated 30/1/41, Bessie Rischbieth Papers, NLA MS2004/2/57
and the new. Still as Woollacott also states, during and after World War II Australian identity underwent a transformation, with a new emphasis on autonomy and unique characteristics.  

21 Australian feminism, and by extension Australian feminists in an international context, were affected by this transformation, often slowly over time. For example, the British Commonwealth League, of which Rischbieth was an early President, eventually changed its name to the British Countries' League, by which point their agenda had become wider than feminist issues.  

22 To locate Rischbieth and her organisation within this wider context is to recognise both their historical and cultural specificity and what these revealed about the AFWV’s feminism and conception of what constituted ‘history’. By extension, and perhaps paradoxically, Rischbieth’s idea of what constituted a new age was articulated in terms of what she already knew. This was expressed through a sense that Australians, and Australian women, could now take their place in ‘real’ history.

In Rischbieth’s later official history, however, World War II - despite her acknowledgement earlier that ‘once again this phenomenon of war had provoked a veritable psychological and social revolution of a wide order’  

23 slipped between the cracks of her progressive history. It was depicted as instrumental in creating the conditions for the formation of the United Nations, and in turn the Equal Rights amendment, but it had also meant a suspension of AFWV conferences for the duration and a tricky ideological conflict. World War II is a curious diminished presence in the history. The Second World War problematised what a ‘new age’ meant for women and feminists in particular. During the war, the tantalising promise of consensus in the post-war ‘new age’, first splintered then fell apart all together. Not only did some feminists stop talking to one another, they also seemed (more than ever perhaps) to not be talking to women. Yet, as Rischbieth’s history illustrates, some of these feminists continued to claim to be responsive to the historical moment – a modus operandi which became increasingly ineffectual.

21 ibid., p. 16
22 ibid., p. 136
23 Bessie Rischbieth, ‘The Development and Significance of the Women’s Movement’, 1951, Bessie Rischbieth Papers, NLA MS 2004/2/50
This is the flipside, or the depressing coda, to the spirit of 'psychological and social revolution' that for a few months at least, seized the women's movement as they worked together to conceive of what the New World Order would mean for Australian women. More prosaically then, in terms of Australian feminism, Rischbieth's sense of historical occasion was actually compromised by her apparent closer proximity to 'real' history, as her absence and war-time restrictions on inter-state travel led to a malaise in the activities of the AFWV.²⁴

Ada Norris' official history of the National Council of Women of Victoria, *Champions of the Impossible*, offers another example of the alternative place of World War II in the histories of Australian feminism. Taking its cues from the International Council of Women, the NCW 'became more and more directed towards war work and money raising for patriotic activities and less to other activities'.²⁵ Prior to the actual outbreak of war, the NCW had already begun to ponder the contribution women had to make and to this end, had invited Major-General Jess to address the Council on 'The Defence of Australia' and the Rt. Hon. W.M. Hughes, then Minister for External Affairs, to speak on 'Certain Aspects of the International Situation'. And despite some resistance from the Minister of Defence about female volunteers, the NCW decided in February 1939 to set up a register of women available for emergency services, throughout Australia. The office remained open until November 1944, during which time over 30,000 women and girls enrolled for work they were willing and able to do. This contribution was later recognised with praise and appreciation from Major General Jess and is subsequently the centrepiece for the NCW's history of this period. A reception for Eleanor Roosevelt is briefly mentioned - fittingly as her visit was an occasion for the recognition of women's contribution to the war effort - but it was Major General Jess' praise for placing 'their services at the Government's use and without any glamorous uniform', that set the tone.²⁶

²⁴ Kate White, 'Bessie Rischbieth, Jessie Street and the end of first-wave feminism in Australia', *Worth Her Salt: Women at Work in Australia*, (eds) Margaret Bevege, Margaret James and Carmel Shute, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1982, p. 326
²⁶ Ibid., p. 87
As in Bessie Rischbieth's history, the War is figured in terms of national duty and the appropriate response and as such is over in a chapter, with little or no mention of the Women's Employment Board, or women getting elected to Parliament, or the Australian Women's Charter Conference. It was only after the War that the National Council of Women gathered again in conference, this time in synchronicity with the United Nations Conference in 1945, to discuss migration, post-war housing, post-war reconstruction and many earlier goals that had been left in abeyance, such as women on juries. This is a history of sacrifice, that figures the Council's response to the war as appropriate. And while the National Council of Women may have been at the forefront of inter-women's movement squabbles over representation and proper response at this time, this official history makes no mention of it; a contrast to the coming into their own narrative employed by the United Associations of Women. Or rather, the NCW's coming of age was not explicitly signposted. War was not the chance for feminists to stake their claim, but rather the chance for women to serve the nation. By not mentioning debates about what constituted the proper response of the women's movement to the War, the NCW effectively, in this instance at least, privileged their account and the sort of feminism they wished to espouse. The National Council of Women co-operated with the government, with the United Nations and with their international governing bodies. The War is assimilated into an ongoing narrative of campaigns, conferences, good works and so on.

These retrospective readings of the appropriate feminist response are further complicated by a consideration of how Australian feminisms have subsequently incorporated one of the most documented occasions of the 1940s, the visit to Australia in September 1943 by the American First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, into their representations of the period. At the time, the visit seemed to cut across any perceived differences in the women's movement. The reception for held Mrs Roosevelt in Canberra was the largest since the outbreak of the war. The next day there were reports of over 50,000 people lining the streets of Melbourne to greet Mrs Roosevelt who was

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27 SMH, 5/9/43
due to address a meeting of 3000 women at the Town Hall, the most enthusiasmastic public response since the last Royal visit. When the cheering finally died down in the Hall, Mrs Roosevelt praised women for their war efforts and the larger consequences of this: ‘The whole world is waking up to the fact that women can do almost anything to which they turn their hands’. Not surprisingly both the National Council of Women and the United Associations of Women had allotted 100 seats each for the Sydney Town Hall visit the next day.28

The Sydney Town Hall women’s welcome was declared a ‘tumultuous success’. Sydney women spontaneously expressed their enthusiasm for the occasion with a mass coo-ee greeting. Those gathered outside were disappointed that loud speakers were not erected. What they would have heard was praise for the variety of work done by women in Australia and a reiteration of her position that men and women must work together particularly in regards to economic issues. In thinking about what life would be like after the war, Mrs. Roosevelt could only speculate as ‘we do not know what conditions will be, what the problems will be. We do not know what resources we will have, but there is one thing we can be sure of – a spiritual preparation for peace’. With this goal in mind, Mrs Roosevelt urged the gathered women to help the men fighting on behalf of the United Nations ‘to achieve their dreams’.29 There was also a screening of Mrs. Roosevelt’s personal film about women’s work in England. The rest of Mrs. Roosevelt’s Sydney visit was devoted to visiting servicemen and women and again she commented favourably on the efforts of Australian women.30

Eleanor Roosevelt’s proclamations clearly had some overlap with some of the central ideas of the women’s organisations that so attentively greeted her in 1943. The idea of different, but complementary points of view was especially definitive for this generation of women’s activists and was central to an overarching discussion about what it means to be equal (or in Roosevelt’s terms, ‘human’). The appeal to governmental process, the United Nations and

28 SMH, 7/9/43
29 SMH, 7/9/43
30 SMH, 9/9/43
the potential of women also situate Eleanor Roosevelt’s rhetoric firmly within contemporaneous feminist discourses. Despite the symbolic value ascribed to the Australian Women’s Charter, I argue that the visit by Eleanor Roosevelt had greater contemporary currency as a symbolic occasion for both women activists and women generally. A combination of various factors – extensive media coverage, larger national and international significance, public participation and the recognition of the contribution of women to the war effort – meant that the visit was the feminist equivalent of a Royal visit, a comparison mentioned in the press that extended beyond the women’s movement. The First Lady’s particular status as wife of the President of the United States and reformer in her own right ensured that the visit had legitimacy as both a major national event and as a landmark for women’s organisations. With her no fuss clothing, smooth speaking voice, straight shooting speeches, inexhaustible energy, American cachet and rousing talks that sought to utilise female potential for the national and international fight for peace, Eleanor Roosevelt was the acceptable face of the female reformer. For women, including activists, her visit was a nod in their direction and one of the most tangible gestures during war time that their contribution was noted.

However, the fact that Eleanor Roosevelt’s visit has received little or scanty attention in general histories of Australian women and/ or feminism and limited treatment in specific histories, has prompted me to ask the sorts of questions Jane Connors has posed previously in regards to the 1954 Royal Visit: why so much attention at the time and so comparatively little since? Connors concluded that histories of Australia have tended to ignore the Royal visit because it conflicts with nationalist imperatives, royal watching has been dismissed as a female interest and the social history emphasis on ‘history from below’ disqualifies the Royal Visit, no matter who turned up to wave. To apply a similar sort of thinking about how and why we write history and what constitutes an appropriate historical subject to feminist history-making I argue that Eleanor Roosevelt’s ‘historic’ visit in 1943 was not compatible with

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31 For example, no mention of the visit in Creating a Nation or Getting Equal
the sense of history various groups subscribed to. More generally, there is plenty of evidence from this period to suggest feminist success and the advancement of women without dwelling on why a visit from the American President’s wife should have generated such enthusiasm and hype. Eleanor Roosevelt’s visit had symbolic importance, as the press was prepared to seize upon, but in the end, Australian feminists were mere handmaidens to the main drama. As discussed in previous chapters, a sense of legitimacy was crucial to this generation of the Australian women’s movement and having limited access to so significant a woman reformer as Eleanor Roosevelt clearly didn’t impress in terms of the status of women’s groups.

It is also interesting that the one group most noteworthy for their sense of ‘history making’ vis-a-vis World War II, the United Associations of Women, were the group most hindered in their efforts to secure an audience with Mrs Roosevelt. Despite, or possibly because of this, Jessie Street offers one of the few feminist accounts of the First Lady’s visit in her autobiography. However, despite the futile struggle to hold a private reception for Mrs Roosevelt, Street chose a light and breezy tone for her recollections. The 1940s, after all, was a time of history making for the UAW and this was not to be undermined in subsequent historical representations. According to Peter Sekulless, Jessie Street’s biographer, the United Associations of Women were at the zenith of their success and influence in 1943 when Eleanor Roosevelt visited Australia. Indeed, Street mentioned in Truth or Repose that the war period saw the work of the United Associations steadily ‘increase in importance’.33 Therefore it was not surprisingly that when Street, who had already been in touch with the First Lady over the issue of maintenance for the wives and children of US servicemen, heard news of Mrs. Roosevelt’s visit to Australia she decided to use her influence with Dr Evatt to try and ensure that the United Associations of Women could hold a special reception for the First Lady. However, a series of miscommunications with the American Department of Defence meant the reception never took place.34 In her autobiography, Street recalls that news of the First Lady’s first visit ‘certainly encouraged us whatever our political

33 Jessie Street, Truth or Repose, p. 250
34 Peter Sekulless, Jessie Street: A Rewarding but Unrewarded Life, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1978, p. 43
sympathies. We were all delighted. War time conditions were blamed for American authorities taking over the security and bulk of the itinerary for the visit and Street wryly commented that 'you would have thought we were an enemy country and that Mrs. Roosevelt had to be protected against a possible attack on her route to Government House'. Still, Street was able to personally meet the First Lady at the reception at Government House the next evening and thank her for assistance with the maintenance of US soldiers wives and children, to which Mrs Roosevelt graciously responded: 'She told me that the representations we made and the information we submitted had been of the greatest assistance'.

The histories of the National Council of Women and the United Associations of Women (the two organisations that booked 100 seats each at the Sydney Town Hall), also feature Eleanor Roosevelt, but the coverage is brief. Ada Norris mentioned the reception held for Mrs Roosevelt during the war, but Winifred Mitchell chose to discuss the President's wife only in reference to the campaigns conducted on behalf of cross-national war marriages. This last example is telling and offers some clues as to the diminished presence of Eleanor Roosevelt in histories of mid twentieth century Australian feminism. Mitchell wrote:

The U.A.'s next step in 1943 [in the campaign for the rights of Australian women marrying American servicemen] was to get Jessie Street to write to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt with a copy of the Australian schedule of allowances. Mrs. Roosevelt's reply indicated that congress had actually dealt with the matter and that in future wives and dependents of U.S. servicemen would receive allowances and that they would not be subject to the usual immigration restrictions. ... A large number of Australian women with American partners were thus benefited.

In this sort of history making, it is access that is highlighted. In this example, Street clearly had the ability to influence policy, thereby contributing to feminist success in this period. However, during the course of Mrs Roosevelt's visit, access for feminists such as Jessie Street was largely confined to public

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35 Street, Truth or Repose, pp. 260
36 Ada Norris, Champions of the Impossible, p. 87
37 Winifred Mitchell, 50 Years of Feminist Achievement, pg. 29
38 Ibid., p. 29
events such as the talk at Sydney Town Hall. For the National Council of Women, determined to cement in their history their emphatic stance that war was not a time for feminist advancement, but rather co-operation to ensure peace, it was fitting that they mentioned the reception for Eleanor Roosevelt in passing and with reference to other war time activities. For the UAW, keen at the time and in hindsight to advance the cause of the Australian Women’s Charter, as typical of their enthusiastic and committed response to dealing with war and post-war conditions, it is equally fitting that Eleanor Roosevelt should be used to demonstrate their success in campaigning rather than their inability to secure a personal visit during her time in Australia. At the time of Mrs Roosevelt’s visit, the UAW were also well absorbed in preparations for the first Australian Women’s Charter Conference, to be held two months later in Sydney.

1943: ‘A War to Win, A World to Gain’

‘Chin up! Cheerio! Carry On!’

There’s a call that rings throughout our land today
And it’s a call to you and me
That the world to come when peace is here
Shall be the one where all are free,
Then we should stand beside our men,
And share the world’s big tasks.

[Chorus] Carry on, fellow members, let’s be ‘stout fellahs’
Chin up, Cheerio, Carry on!
We’ve got a big job ahead – it needs your help members
Chin up, cheerio, carry on!
There’s a fight to be had for our place in the sun
So when women stand for Canberra let’s shout ‘stout fellah’
Chin Up, cheerio, carry on.39

39 ‘Chin Up! Cheerio! Carry On!’; United Associations songs, author unknown, date unknown, though the references to the coming of peace and women standing for parliamentary positions indicate the song was composed and probably performed in the 1940s. United Associations Papers. Mitchell Library. MS 2160, Box 7879
The United Associations ditty ‘Chin up! Cheerio! Carry On!’ captures much of the UA ethos during the 1940s. Clearly committed to peace and recognising the unique difficulties posed by war, the UA were simultaneously determined to ensure that women’s rights and feminist campaigns were not side-lined for the duration. The ditty explicitly parodied war-time jingles, with women and peace at the centre, rather than men and war. The title and message of the song also indicated that this was an organisation acutely aware of the particular burden of maintaining a commitment to women’s rights in such a context. Their response to this set of circumstances was to ‘carry on’, in this instance by ensuring women had equal say with men in public debate, possibly best achieved by promoting the election of women to Parliament.\(^{40}\)

To this end, UA President Jessie Street had campaigned to join Margaret Tangney and Enid Lyons in Federal politics, though ultimately she, along with nineteen other feminists who also stood as candidates in 1943, wasn’t successful. Her other main initiative was the Australian Women’s Charter Conference.

Street would later recall that, despite the travel limitations imposed by war time conditions, the inaugural Australian Women’s Charter Conference ‘was a big undertaking, but we found it much easier than expected [and] discovered that the particular and general problems that affect women were very similar in every state’.\(^{41}\) The logistics of convening the Conference were indeed considerable,\(^{42}\) and began in 1941 when the United Associations held several discussions under the banner ‘A Woman’s Forum for Social and Economic

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\(^{40}\) In terms of specifically maintaining solid membership and financial security for the United Associations, the organisation regularly sent out circulars to members, reminding them of the particular need for organised feminism. In a circular seeking subscriptions from the treasurer F. Webster, dated 3rd October 1941, she wrote that ‘[w]hile we are fighting our enemies abroad, we must maintain the gains towards the achievement of those ideals which have been won so laboriously at home’. Fundraising was also not without some frivolity. In December 1940, for example, President Street held a fundraiser on the grounds of her Darling Point home where famous Australian tennis players participated in an exhibition Match, followed by a screening of tennis champ Adrian Quist’s home movies from his time in Hollywood. Fortune tellers and handwriting experts also put in an appearance. *United Associations Papers*, Mitchell Library. MS 2160, Box 7879

\(^{41}\) Jessie Street, undated notes on the Charter, though the notes do mention that the Charter had been held twenty years earlier. *Jessie Street Papers*, NLA, MS2683/3/1191

\(^{42}\) It should be noted that Street was well-positioned to both travel promoting the conference and to organise travel permits for delegates. She was a member of the Labor Party, a close friend of Minister for External Affairs Dr Evatt and she had permission to travel during the war to promote the ‘Sheepskins for Russia’ campaign.
Reconstruction’. In August 1942, the UA held a Sydney forum on ‘Problems concerning women under war conditions’ and it was at this meeting that the idea of a national conference of women’s organisations was first entertained. Jessie Street headed the committee selected to organise the Conference, which included AFWV members such as Ruby Rich. This committee established a separate organisational identity from the UA, though they used their facilities and resources. Preparation included ‘the amassing of the resolutions and comments from the widest possible consultations with the various women’s and community associations throughout the Commonwealth’ and securing travel permits for the twenty three interstate delegates. The ninety two organisations that were represented overall were as diverse as this sample list from New South Wales suggests: the Australia India League, the Australian Institute of Sociology, the Australian Labor Party, Care of the Child in War Time Committee, Fellowship of Australian Writers, Eureka Youth League, the National Council of Jewish Women, Domestic Employees Union, Federation of Infants Schools Club, the Fellowship with Russia League, the AFWV NSW Branch and the Women for Canberra group.

Still, there were some ominous signs about the ‘true’ representativeness of the Conference from the beginning. The first Conference, held in Sydney in August 1943, was foreshadowed in the Sydney Morning Herald by a small item in the Women’s News section of the paper in which Jessie Street vented her frustrations about the apathy of some sections of the women’s movement. Jessie Street spread the word about the forthcoming conference through her various travels and in the meantime state Charter Committees were established. With other large women’s organisations such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters postponing national conferences for the duration of the war and international feminist networks significantly affected by war time conditions, it was not surprising that Street identified a ‘disintegrating effect’ on women’s organisations brought about by war. At the same time she recognised that the ‘increasingly vital’ part women were playing in the war created an ideal opportunity for the women’s movement to make

43 Mitchell, 50 Years of Feminist Achievement, p. 33
44 SMH, 10/11/43
itself 'strong and virile' in response, lest the experience of World War I be repeated where women would once again be 'relegated...to an inferior economic status and be removed from public positions of importance'. For Street, the most practical way to revitalise the movement 'was to call women together in conference'.

So while a conference was not in itself an example of the 'new approaches [that] were necessary to cope with new conditions' that Street advocated, the idea of a Charter and a conference so wide in scope certainly was. At a time when it was becoming increasingly common for public debate to centre on what the post-war world would look like and how it would work, the Australian Women's Charter Conference was yet another example of public discussion directed towards the future. And unlike earlier conferences held by women's organisations, there was no longer the same sort of emphatic sense of justification, of explaining the necessity for women's groups and of charting the various ways they had contributed to public life and the lives of women in particular. There was a sense that the women's movement had arrived, that its purpose was self evident and that it had a real contribution to make to both government policy and general social change. This contribution was underlined by a sense of national co-operation and faith in post-war policy, as evidenced in the motto of the conference 'A War to Win, A World to Gain'. Such a motto clearly had double meaning for feminism as women organisations gathered to discuss what could be gained for women in particular.

There was also a sense (conveyed by the UAW at least) that women's groups were leading the way in these sorts of discussions. Mitchell claims the UAW were one of the first groups in the community to begin positive planning for reconstruction. Indeed, one of the earliest responses of the organisation to the war effort was the establishment of a rifle club, proclaimed as an expression of both commitment to the war effort and equality. The organisation also

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45 Truth or Repose., p. 251
46 Ibid., p. 251
47 Winifred Mitchell, 50 Years of Feminist Achievement: A History of the United Associations of Women, p. 23
formed a Council for Women in War Work, offered membership to nurses engaged in the war effort, extended the campaign of equal pay to war work, participated in the process that established the Women's Employment Board in 1941, campaigned against the government banning contraception advertising in 1942 and lobbied for the rights of Australian women marrying and having children with foreign servicemen: the campaign that established contact with Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. Separately from this UAW-endorsed activity, Jessie Street also travelled the country in her capacity as chairman of the Russian Medical Aid and Comforts Committee and ran for parliament on a campaign very much focussed on what post-war reconstruction could offer for women.

Considering all of this activity, it perhaps wasn’t surprising that Street was compelled to complain to the Sydney Morning Herald nine days before the conference began that some sections of the women’s movement had proved 'unco-operative' in their attitudes to the forthcoming conference. Street put this down to the apathy associated with particular sorts of methods and emphases: ‘Women’s organisations can be divided into two groups: one, those which take a tremendous amount of time doing philanthropic work; and two, those which work for the changing of social conditions’. The former displayed a tendency ‘to take no part in controversial matters, and in that way escape criticism, evade the effort to work, or the need to show any initiative’.\(^48\) This criticism was probably directed at the National Council of Women, who had grown increasingly distant from Street in light of her increasing party politicisation and who limited their involvement in the conference to state level. The following day Miss Ruby Board, the President of the National Council of Women, refuted the claims of apathy and lack of co-operation by pointing out that ‘women had combined to produce a volume of achievement which could only be the result of a definite unity of purpose’. Additionally, a national conference had been discussed, but deferred in preference for concentrating on national work. \(^49\) The issue here was historical appropriateness, a theme that was reiterated in a brief outrage over a

\(^{48}\) SMH, 10/11/43
\(^{49}\) SMH, 11/11/43

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pamphlet produced by the United Associations which coincided with the conference and was available on the day. The pamphlet, titled ‘Australian Women’s News’, contained a parody of the Lord’s Prayer, and caused offence to both delegates\textsuperscript{50} and the general public. Noreen Danger, of Edgecliff, wrote to \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald} in protest, stating ‘[m]any denominations look to the Lord’s Prayer to express their true feelings at such times as this. Tramping on such feelings will not gain for women their much vaunted equality.’\textsuperscript{51}

Coverage of the last day of the conference amplified the Lord’s Prayer dramas, but it was the request of the Government for 30/ a week for Homemakers that dominated the headlines. Mrs. Jessie Street was reported as describing the Conference as ‘epoch-making’ and seven key points from the Charter were printed (Woman as Citizen/ Mother and Homemaker/ Voluntary Worker/ In the Services/ In the Country/ In Public Life/ As peacemaker). Mrs Street also explained that delegates would take copies back to their own states for approval from state organisations. Provision had been made for signatories to sign the full charter or only that the part of it to which they could subscribe. The Charter would also be sent to all Allied countries.\textsuperscript{52} Various debates between women on such topics as marriage were also highlighted, indicating both the desire for the conference to be seen as representative and the vulnerability to caricature of the women’s movement. If coverage of the first Australian Women’s Charter Conference, held in Sydney in November 1943, had a formula it was this: reporting of key issues, debates and speakers, usually in relation to areas deemed fit for intervention by women’s groups (family, health, home); some discussion of scope and representativeness of the conference, soon undermined by reference to squabbling over minor points or procedures; followed by an effective display of leadership from Mrs Jessie Street and wrapped up with a distracting minor controversy over a parody of the Lord’s Prayer or whether or not to take afternoon tea.

\textsuperscript{50} Jessie Street explained to \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald} that the “pamphlet has nothing to do with the conference or the conference committee. It is regrettable that it should have been linked with the conference in publication”. \textit{SMH}, 23/11/1943

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{SMH}, 22/11/1943

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{SMH}, 23/11/1943
That Jessie Street felt the need to highlight the myriad of ways the Charter was as representative as possible, down to point by point discussion passed through a daisy chain of state affiliates, gestures to her awareness of brewing debates about what and whom the Charter actually represented. For instance, even before Ruby Board’s letter to the Herald there had been points of disagreement between the two women. Shortly after it had been announced that a Women’s Voluntary Services would be established in 1942, newly appointed head of the services Miss Board invited Street over to her home to discuss the possibility of the UAW President taking on the deputy position. However Street’s proposal that the Women’s Voluntary Services take orders from their own appointed officers, rather than from male members of the military whatever their rank, was not adopted and she refused the position.\textsuperscript{53}

In her autobiography, Street gets the anecdote over with in characteristic taking-care-of-business style - ‘[h]owever, there was plenty to do and everyone was busy, and we were all doing something to help in the defence of Australia should it be necessary’\textsuperscript{54} - but it seems significant to me that Street should have begun her chapter on the Second World War with that telling incident. She had clearly held firm ideas of what changes could be effected by the war for women and compromise wasn’t always an option. In Street’s bid for historical posterity she argues for getting the job done, much like many of the women active in this period, but in her case how she represents herself retrospectively is especially significant as she was such a divisive figure at the time.

Still, in 1943 the cracks were only just beginning the show in the Australian Women’s Movement. Even if the National Council of Women only sent voluntary state delegates rather than official national ones, the conference was still overwhelmingly representative in terms of organisations present. The United Associations of Women may have already had a reputation for sticking to their favoured approach and not making compromises, but in 1943, a

\textsuperscript{53} In her autobiography, Street claimed such a proposal ‘would have avoided many disputes and incidents had they been far sighted enough to see the inevitable consequences of subjecting this fine body of women to the foibles arising from the vanity and desire to dominate of a number of inexperienced young men who just because of their sex believed they had a God-given right to control and direct women’. Truth or Repose, p. 223

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 223
national conference instigated by them was still able to attract 92 organisations from various political and avowedly non-party political parties. In Dianne Davidson's history of the Women's Guilds she points out that the contents of the Charter 'basically summarised the goals for which most of the feminist organizations had been striving, and the Charter certainly reflected fairly accurately the principles and aims of the Guilds.'

The *Dawn*, the official paper of the Guilds and the Australian Federation of Women Voters, published the Charter in their December 1943 issue, alongside an enthusiastic editorial about the concept of the Charter movement, both published to coincide with Jessie Street's visit to Perth in that month for the state Australian Women's Charter Conference.

According to Street the conference and charter had been met with 'tremendous response' by interested parties, an enthusiasm that extended to wider society: 'The proposals finally adopted had been debated at length. Public interest was aroused and press and radio commentators took part in the discussion.' Her discussion of the first conference concluded with a summary of the main points and a reflection on historical significance:

> Perhaps those at the Conference that formulated this Charter could be called visionaries, but history reveals that it is only when society adopts ideas which are always regarded as visionary when they are first proposed that progress is made.

This latter point is made specifically in regards to the equal rights principle applied at the United Nations Conference in San Francisco in 1945 (Street was Australian delegate), but in her narrative the two conferences - one localised and in the end largely ineffectual, at least in terms of influencing policy, and the other international in scope and significance - are collapsed into a progressive story about having vision. Furthermore, by presenting her vision of this historically significant period Street is in effect writing herself back in.

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56 *Dawn*, December 1943
57 *Truth or Repose*, p. 252
58 Ibid, p. 253

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Promoting the Australian Women’s Charter was something that Street would do for the rest of her active life, whether it was through holding office in the Federal and New South Wales Australian Women’s Charter Committees, distributing the Charter to other UN delegates in 1945, presenting radio broadcasts or through other avenues. The hope expressed in the first Charter that it be a ‘living document, capable of presenting continually the contemporary aspirations of all who work for the improvement of the status and opportunity of women’ was the rationale behind continued conferences and revisions of the Charter, but as the 1946 Conference illustrated, this goal was to prove increasingly more elusive.

1946: No Peace Without Unity

Undeterred by the debates over whether or not the first Australian Women’s Charter truly represented Australian feminism and Australian women - and no doubt confident that it did - Street and her colleagues in the Australian Women’s Charter movement set about the task of promoting the Charter as widely and effectively as they could. State conferences were held in Perth in 1943 and the following year in Adelaide and Melbourne. In March 1944, Street led a delegation of thirteen Sydney women to Canberra to present the Charter to the Prime Minister John Curtin, a move that upset some sections of the women’s movement, who had yet to endorse some of the resolutions or officially affiliate with the Charter movement. Increasingly, the debate was played out in parochial and ideological terms, as discussion in the Australian women’s movement returned to their own distinct preoccupations, rather than what these meant in terms of war (and peace).

Bessie Rischieth returned to Australia in June 1946, the year of the second Charter conference. Her two organisations, the AFWV and the Women’s Guilds, had both responded positively to the first Charter conference. But

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59 Australian Women’s Charter Resolutions, 1943, p. 2, Jessie Street Papers, NLA, MS 2683/3/1189
60 An article in the West Australian newspaper stated that the National Council of Women had written to the Prime Minister dissociating itself from the Charter on the basis that it hadn't been discussed by a broad range of women's organizations and was merely the product of a small, unrepresentative conference held in Sydney. West Australian, 11 May, 1944
between the two conferences Rischbieth had come increasingly to see the growth of the Charter movement, and its enthusiastic inclusion of left women's organisations, as threatening to both the federal status of the AFWV and the politics that they espoused.\textsuperscript{61} Additionally, she objected to what she perceived to be a New South Wales monopoly of the Australian women's movement, writing in a letter to the Women's Guilds to dissuade them from affiliating with the Charter movement, that 'knowing the mentality of Sydney through years of difficulty and experience, they are creating machinery embodying their honest conviction that they really are Australia'.\textsuperscript{62} Hovering beneath all of these objections was a growing antagonism towards Street as the alternative leader of Australian feminism, which had already been publicly aired when the two leaders clashed in October 1945 at the International Alliance of Women Congress in Paris.\textsuperscript{63}

This feud, and the preparation and staging of the 1946 Charter Conference took place in a radically different political context to the first Charter Conference. In 1943, Street's public profile had never been higher. Her loss in the state elections of that year had been a narrow one (she was ahead on primary votes for the seat of Wentworth), she was synonymous with the popular 'Sheepskins for Russia' campaign and press coverage for the Charter conference was prominent and mostly positive (at worst, it was merely dismissive). She also had the most political influence of any feminist in Australia, enjoying good working and personal relationships with Minister for External Affairs H.V. Evatt (a fellow 'friend' of Russia) and Prime Minister John Curtin. And while the United Associations had by that stage already attracted some controversy over Street's associations with the labour movement and the Soviet Union, evidenced in The Daily Telegraph casting aspersions about the political persuasion of guests at a farewell function\textsuperscript{64} for

\textsuperscript{61} Dianne Davidson, \textit{Women on the Warpath}, p. 216
\textsuperscript{62} Bessie Rischbieth, published in \textit{The Dawn}, October 1944
\textsuperscript{63} Kate White, 'Bessie Rischbieth, Jessie Street and the end of first-wave feminism in Australia', p. 327
\textsuperscript{64} In 1938, Street traveled to the USSR for the first time. She returned 'convinced that the new way of life which they were developing in the USSR would put an end to the exploitation of man by man, and of women by men as well'. Street, \textit{Truth or Repose}, Chapter 12.
Street as early as March 1938, during the war years any negative national feeling toward Russia was balanced out by the Labor Government’s pro-Soviet position, particularly towards the end of the war. Additionally, the Russian Medical Aid and Comforts Committee, where Street held office and through which the ‘Sheepskins for Russia’ campaign was launched, dispatched more than £150 000 worth of medical supplies and comforts to Russia. Much like Street herself, the Communist Party in Australia (of which Street was never a member – she identified as a socialist, and was a member of the Labor Party) was considerably buoyed by the election of the Curtin Labor Government in October 1941, after which it regained the legality it lost under Menzies’ Coalition Government and trebled its membership, peaking at more than 20,000 members at the close of the war. It was this political and cultural context that ensured that Jessie Street’s and the UA’s move to the left was seen as ‘almost respectable’.

For those associated with both the Communist Party and the labour movement, however, the end of World War II signalled the beginning of the Cold War. First, anti-communism divided the Labor Party at state and federal level, before hardening into federal policy. This was symptomatic of a general public shift in attitudes about the Soviet Union, reflected in growing media speculation about the prospect of war with Russia, which began in earnest with the Peace Conference held in Paris in 1946. With Street the

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65 In response, the United Associations issued a circular on the 11th of March 1938, assuring their constituency that the UA was ‘non-party and non-political, and neither the politics nor the religion of any individual has anything to do with our work. The reception for Mrs. Jessie Street was purely a social gathering, at which all organisations and individuals desirous of paying tribute to our leader were welcome’. United Associations Papers, Mitchell Library, MSS 2160, Box 7879

66 As Meredith Burgmann has pointed out, the Labor Government went to ‘extraordinary lengths during 1945 to demonstrate its friendly attitude towards the Soviet’. This included flying flags in celebration of Red Army Day and holding receptions for the same occasion, which were attended by representatives of all the major parties. Meredith Burgmann, ‘Dress rehearsal for the Cold War’, Australia’s First Cold War: 1945-1953 Vol 1: Society, Communism and Culture, (eds.) Ann Curthoys and John Merritt, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1984, p. 491

67 SMH, 13th January 1945

68 See Truth or Repose


71 See Burgmann, op.cit, for more details.

72 For an example, see ‘Answers to Reader’, by Walter Murdoch, SMH, August 10, 1946. Murdoch, University Chancellor and well known essayist at the time, had a popular column in which he answered
public face of both 'friendly' relations with Russia\textsuperscript{73} and the Charter movement, it was inevitable that the second Charter Conference, held in Sydney in August 1946, would be implicated in the increasing anti-left sentiment. The Catholic press claimed the conference was inspired by the Women's International Democratic Federation, formed in Paris in 1945, which was alleged to be Communist-inspired.\textsuperscript{74} Rischbieth amplified this sense of the wider international implications of the Charter movement in her contemporaneous and later criticisms of the Charter movement.\textsuperscript{75}

A letter sent to \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald} by seven NSW women's organisations in the months before the Conference re-iterated the criticisms some of them (the National Council of Women of NSW, for instance) had already raised in regards to the 1943 conference – namely, that the Charter movement was not representative, or more specifically, that they did not consider the leadership to be 'entitled to claim that they are truly representative of Australian women'. What was new about this letter was that it was addressed to Street directly – her qualifications with the Prime Minister were dismissed as 'personal' rather than 'representational', while references to 'your Charter' and 'your conference' made the position of the signatories - from the National Council of Women, the Sydney Business and Professional Women's Club, the Country Women's Association, the Feminist Club, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Women's Voluntary Services and the Young Women's Christian Association of Sydney - clear.\textsuperscript{76} Street responded promptly, noting previous successful campaigns with several of the signatory organisations and their general sympathy for the aims of the Charter and asserting she had 'never made any claims to represent all women's organisations, either at San Francisco or anywhere else'. She critiqued their

\textsuperscript{73} Burgmann has commented that Street was an interesting choice as Australian delegate to the United Nations Charter Conference in San Francisco in 1945, because even though she was officially chosen as representative of women's interests, her name was synonymous in Australia and Russia with the 'Sheepskins for Russia Campaign', Meredith Burgmann, 'Dr Evatt and the Russians', \textit{Australia's First Cold War: 1945-1953}, p. 82

\textsuperscript{74} See Ronald, p. 48

\textsuperscript{75} Rischbieth to Ruby Rich, 24 July 1937, \textit{Bessie Rischbieth Papers}, NLA, MS 2004/9/530

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{SMH}, June 19, 1946
letter as 'an open declaration of the policy of non co-operation on the part of the signatory societies', a common response from Street to such criticisms, which Rischbieth in particular had little time for.

The Federal Australian Women's Charter Committee also sent a letter to The Herald, questioning the National Council of Women's own capacity to represent 'many thousands of women, particularly in the trade union movement...and with whose problems and difficulties it is not intimate'. Further, the National Council of Women 'cannot give a progressive lead on many subjects, as the majority of the organisations affiliated with the council are not free to associate themselves with social and political matters'. This letter, even more so than Street's, typified the accelerating split in the Australian women's movement between the philanthropic and reformist strands that had been simmering since the 1920s and had consequently inspired many of Street's actions and initiatives. It also made explicit that any claim to 'representative status' was undermined, in the Charter movement's view, if women from the left were not included.

To this end, the organisations that sent delegates to the August 1946 conference reflected the increasing inclusion of left groups and also a heavy New South Wales presence. Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia combined sent sixteen delegates, compared to forty nine from NSW. Those forty nine organisations were dominated by unions, auxiliaries and organisations associated with the Australian Communist Party, who also sent delegates. Writer Dame Mary Gilmore, a champion of the labour movement, opened the conference. But Dr Lena Stern, the Director of the Physiological Institute in Moscow, and the rest of the Soviet delegation to the Conference, were in the end prevented from entering Australia after being delayed in London because their request for air-travel priority had been

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77 SMH, June 21, 1946
78 When Street claimed that any organisations refusing to participate in a meeting of women's organizations she called in 1947 to 'heal the rift' in the women's movement should claim responsibility for any ongoing tension, Rischbieth wrote to Ruby Rich 'Yes - very J.S. in style - talk about the tail wagging the dog'. Rischbieth to Ruby Rich, 24 July 1937, Rischbieth Collection, NLA, MS 2004/9/530
79 SMH, June 22, 1946
refused. This incident has subsequently been historicised as an embryonic Cold War incident, variously attributed to an anti-Communist High Commissioner in London at the time, yellow-fever inoculations and Australia's 'iron curtain' (by Soviet paper Pravda no less), though it remains difficult to establish whether the incident was the deliberate anti-Soviet act the Russians assumed or merely a departmental blunder. That international delegates from the United States and China were also prevented from attending due to travel restrictions further precludes any conclusive statements.

In any case, the other international delegates from France, Ceylon, New Zealand, Yugoslavia and India were deemed sufficient for the press and the Charter movement to claim international status for the conference and Mrs. Mitham Lam, India's first woman barrister and Miss Kapilla Khandvala, Deputy Director of Education in Bombay, proved to be especially popular in press coverage. Miss Khandava's report of the Conference was distributed throughout the Charter movement. In it, she accentuated the 'very friendly atmosphere' that pervaded the conference. Culturally, she noted the New Theatre movement in Australia. Jessie Street was acknowledged as a 'famous feminist of Australia and a woman of dynamic personality' and she quoted extensively from Street's speech on the importance of non-partisan concern for social welfare, education and culture. Miss Khandvaka also cited Mary Gilmore's speech on the importance of such gatherings as 'international and individual progress grows, for the history of woman is the history of civilisation'. She re-iterated the messages from prominent feminists overseas, including Nina Popova Chairman of the Anti-Fascist Committee in the Soviet Union who stressed solidarity and peace and mentioned the Charter itself which 'in a business-like manner ... put forward plans to end the injustices done to women', including various resolutions relating to improved work conditions, equal status and opportunity. The peace demonstration that concluded the conference, where 'nearly 1,500 to 2,000 women marched in the procession with banners and slogans through the streets of Sydney' was

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80 See Burgmann, 'Dress Rehearsal for the Cold War', pg. 54
81 Their arrival, for instance, made pg 3 of the SMH, Aug 3, 1946
enthusiastically recalled. And finally Miss Khandava concluded with the following:

Summing up, everything I have to say, I cannot help stating that, [after] hearing all that the Australian and the other overseas delegates had to say at the Charter conference, women's problems after all, are fundamentally the same the world over.82

This report from Miss Khandava was exemplary in its articulation of the sentiments of both liberal democratic and socialist feminisms. Its conclusion could have been dispatched from Street, or even Rischbieth, after attending one of their many international conferences. But, during the course of the 1940s, the dividing lines between types of feminisms became more rigid. That the Charter movement could generate such friction within Australian feminism was indicative of both the extent to which internal disputes about representation had become fixed positions, which were merely underlined by a national and international context that insisted on a growing chasm between left, right and reformist political positions. That the Charter movement aimed to resist such polarisation was commendable, but in the end its broad agenda, reflecting concurrently and often contradictorily83 the long-standing demands of both the middle-class non-party political women's movement and those of women in the labour movement, combined with resistance within the Australian women's movement, undermined its effectiveness, though perhaps ironically not its claim to represent a broad range of women's (and other) organisations around the country.

Its wider representative potential, however, was more uncertain. 'The Woman Next Door' in the Herald, for example, satirically questioned the necessity of the Charter in her regular column, writing that 'not being delegates we have tried to discover from Press reports just what has been going on and all we could find was a repetition of statements which have been made year in and year out for a long while'. Meanwhile, the 'Woman in the House Opposite' suggested that if the women at the conference 'could forget the silly notion of

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82 Report by Miss Kapilla Khandvala of India, Dated 1946, Jessie Street Papers, NLA. MS2683/3/1199
83 See Kanald, for discussion on debates about the right to work and greater childcare versus alarm about the declining birth rate and the need for increased child endowment as an incentive, p. 49
wages for wives and concentrate for a while on home deliveries of meat it would at least do something'.

Marilyn Lake has noted that many women who attended the two conferences in the 1940s were well into their fifties and increasingly losing touch with a younger generation of potential feminists, who were no doubt alienated by an increasingly out-dated focus on moral standards and sex as degrading. In 1949, a national conference was indefinitely deferred and while national and state committees continued into the late 1960s, membership of the Australian Women’s Charter movement declined from 1946.

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By the end of the 1940s, to speak of the women’s movement, human freedom, the Empire or even a particular kind of ‘Australia’ would mean something different. Rischbieth herself would come to participate in related contests over what form(s) feminism would take post war and Cold War, culminating in a letter-writing campaign that reminded various politicians such as Senator Dorothy Tangney and the then Minister for External Affairs Dr. H.V. Evatt of the suspicious political affiliations of various Australian feminists, especially those in the Australian Women’s Charter Movement. So after her return to Australia after the war, Rischbieth assumed the position of custodian of a particular type of non-party political liberal feminism that manifested itself primarily in a dismissal of Street as an appropriate representative for Australian feminism, exemplified by Rischbieth politely but pointedly refusing to chair a public meeting in the Town Hall in Perth in June 1947, organised as a vote of thanks for Jessie Street by the West Australian Committee of the Australian Women’s Charter Movement.

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84 SMH, August 10, 1946
85 Marilyn Lake, ‘Feminist Chauvinism’ in Jessie Street: Documents and Essays, p. 25
86 Report of the Australian Women’s Charter Meeting, 9 July 1949, NL, MS2683/ Box 5
87 For example, in a letter to Senator Dorothy Tangney written in 1947, Rischbieth pointed out to the Senator what she felt were the pronounced leftist ‘political sympathies’ of both local feminists such as Dorothy Irwin and Jessie Street and the international feminist organisations, such as the Women’s International Democratic Federation, to which they were often affiliated. For Rischbieth, the ‘strong communist element [was] clearly directing the [international women’s] movement’ and thus impacting on local feminism. Bessie Rischbieth Papers, NLA, MS2004/12/1969

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By the time Rischbieth was writing her own history of the Australian Women's movement in the 1960s, her sense of a 'new age' for feminism was revised in accordance with what had happened to Australian feminism in the interim. As the title *March of Australian Women* suggests, this was a history aligned with progress. But, along with other Rischbieth writings, both during the war and after it, this is a 'dated' history - meaning one that reveals, through its language and narrative emphases, its relationship to a particular conceptualisation of the past. Her schema of history - the constant march toward true democracy, exemplified by the full equality of women - showed she was the product of an age that had become increasingly contested and/ or revised. Thus the United Nations was figured as a direct descendent of the League of Nations that had inspired the formation of the Australian Federation of Women Voters. The New World Charter also included a demand for a new basis of equal citizenship rights for all nations, thereby making manifest, for Rischbieth, the potential of the earlier League. In turn, fascism and/ or Communism were inserted into the narrative of progress as 'disruptions' or threats to the goals of western democracy. During the war these goals and ideals were at stake, after it they were staunchly defended against communism,\(^\text{89}\) and by the time *March of Australian Women* was published in 1964, the ideological contests of the war period were relegated to a couple of short paragraphs:

It is essential to record that during the War period 1939-1945 Federal Presidents constantly had to deal with all the frustrations and difficulties inescapable in an Australia at war.

In addition to this, Mrs McDonnell had to deal with a grave problem during her term of office - an attempt of a serious nature to gravely influence the world-wide Women's Movement by an ideology foreign to Australia. It took all Mrs McDonnell's wisdom and tact to combat this influence. If she had failed, it is doubtful if the Australian Federation of Women Voters would have survived.\(^\text{90}\)

\(^{89}\) In a speech entitled 'The Development and Significance of the Women's Movement' submitted by Rischbieth for the Ninth Triennial Conference of the Australian Federation of Women Voters, held in Perth in 1951, she wrote of the hazardous influence of communism on the international women's movement: "We are well aware that the international women's movement is involved in the present struggle, and this is causing much confusion of thought and purpose within the movement". *Bessie Rischbieth Papers*, NLA, MS2004/2/50

\(^{90}\) Bessie Rischbieth, *March of Australian Women*, p. 89
As it was, the Australian Federation of Women Voters survived in diminished terms, but the documenting of various conferences, local and international, deputations and declarations in Rischbieth's history suggests a continuous 'new age'. In her last chapter she wrote that 'a marked feature of our times is the rapidity with which changes come about – deep seated changes that alter the course of nations'.\(^1\) Then to conclude: 'It is the task and the immeasurable opportunity of younger women to continue the work that has already been carried out to such splendid heights. .... If the years ahead are to be happy years, it will be by the full acceptance and implementation by the nations of the Declaration of Human Rights'.\(^2\) Once again women, and the women's movement in particular, are invested with the potential to seize the historical moment, thereby deferring another 'new age' to some culminating point in the future. By this point however, 'the moment' seemed to function as little more than a rhetorical device, expressing a brand of feminism that had lost currency, influence and appeal. The 'new age' was by now an old one.

Were the 1940s a new age for Australian feminism? This chapter has answered: yes and no. Yes, because World War II, two women in parliament, the Australian Women's Charter, increasing discussions about sexuality, more women in the workforce and more productive collaborations between activist women in the centre and activist women on the left all testified to dramatic change. And yes, because feminism was not the same after World War II. However, while many of these feminists insisted on telling us about the new age, many of them continued to express and campaign for various demands in much the same ways as usual. Although their goals seemed to dovetail nicely for a time with general social change, liberal feminism somehow managed to slip to the sidelines after the war. If World War II was the most exciting time of Jessie Street's – and perhaps Bessie Rischbieth's - life, it wouldn't be a stretch to say that the period after was one of the most frustrating. This, then, was the legacy of the 1940s: a new age identified, contested and deferred.

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\(^{1}\) Ibid., p. 175
\(^{2}\) Ibid., p. 177
Chapter Four: Staking a Claim: Historicising Jessie Street

Jessie Street’s autobiography *Truth or Repose* was written in the early 1960s and published in the 1966 at the author’s expense, after the book failed to entice interest in publication through other channels. Once it was published, the book and Street’s career were reviewed and chronicled in both the mainstream and alternative media, with the general press especially favouring an almost eulogistic tone. Street had become an historical artefact. Her feminist and socialist peers, meanwhile, used the instance of publication to argue for the continued relevance of Street’s politics and to correct or address outstanding issues in the women’s movement. Street herself participated in a particular historicisation of her achievements through her interviews with the press and by concluding the autobiography in 1945 with the sudden death of Prime Minister John Curtin, thereby possibly consigning the following fifteen years of activism to dubious significance. She had planned a second volume of her autobiography, but the fact that she chose to finish *Truth or Repose* in 1945 is important as it appeared to signal the end of a particular kind of feminism. In this chapter, I chart the effects of various representations of Jessie Street, including her own, to consider how an increasingly diffuse sense of feminist identity (or identities) was fashioned into particular historical narratives and subjectivities. These narratives were often offered to counter the popular idea that a certain kind of feminism or activism was no longer relevant to contemporary society.

In 1979, over a decade after Street published *Truth or Repose*, the United Associations published its official commemorative history, *Fifty Years of Feminist Achievement*, written by Winifred Mitchell. These two texts can contribute significantly to our understanding of the ever-shifting relationship of feminism to history. Earlier I identified the creation of a feminist tradition, whereby an organisation in its formative period looked to the past to suggest a lineage and sense of entitlement. Now I proceed from a different direction. I ask questions instead about how a feminist and/or an organisation, both committed in the prime of their lives to a robust engagement with the world,
came to understand and figure their feminism in the context of a declining interest and relevance for the sort of feminist politics they were espousing. How did feminists, for instance, stake a claim for their politics and their own experiences in response to how others saw them, whether those opinions were refracted through mainstream society, the press (as mouthpiece for any number of societies) or other feminists?

Jessie Street is the ideal figure through which to consider the question of what happened to feminist identity in Australia after 1945. As I’ve argued in previous chapters, there was an identifiable women’s movement in Australia between the wars, divided at times between the philanthropists and the reformers and then increasingly by politics, as evidenced in debates around about the Australian Women’s Charter movement. I focussed my discussion of the issues of representation, identity and politics on a narrative about two organisations, the United Associations and the Australian Federation of Women Voters, and their leaders Street and Rischbieth. Their initial affinity, buoyed by a commitment to use the vote as effectively as possible, was eventually overwhelmed by the politics of representation, geography, ego and the Cold War. The two organisations did not formally split until 1954. The split itself, despite the accelerating antagonism between Street and Rischbieth, was not inevitable. The two organisations (and especially the UA and the New South Wales branch of the AFWV) shared members, premises and a history in common. In her history of the UA, Mitchell makes a case for the split as the inevitable outcome of various pressures facing the women’s movement, but this reading was implicated in the author’s larger project. That is, Mitchell was primarily concerned with presenting the UA as a relevant, contemporary organisation and their past was refracted through that lens.

By the time of the 1954 split, Street and Rischbieth were no longer Presidents of their organisations, though they continued to hold some symbolic currency as definitive Australian feminists. Street spent most of the 1950s overseas and was by that stage most well-known for her communist sympathies. By the time Street and Rischbieth were writing their accounts of their feminist activity in the 1960s, their activist lives had moved increasingly away from
organised feminism. Rischbieth maintained membership and honorary leadership in her organisations of choice, but the Women's Service Guilds in particular diversified their activities to the extent that environmental issues came to consume much of their time. In 1967, Rischbieth made the newspapers when she waded in front of bulldozers to protest against the reclamation of the Swan River foreshores in Perth. She died the same year, aged ninety two. 1967 was also the year that Australian Aborigines were granted full legal citizenship, the result of a lengthy campaign in which Street had been a prominent figure.

By the 1960s then, the identity of Australian feminism had become much more diffuse, as those involved grew older and more inclined to rally around specific issues rather than the agenda of particular organisations. Meanwhile, newer organisations such as the Union of Australian Women (UAW), who were formed in 1950, articulated a feminism (and not usually by that name) grafted together from socialism, communism, various internationalisms and the politics of maternal citizenship. This feminism made a point of campaigning for issues relevant to the 'ordinary woman', though ironically the UAW's affiliation with the Communist Party precluded the possibility of widespread appeal. Later histories of the Union of Australian Women would begin with Street and her integral influence to a particular feminist politics. In this narrative of women's rights and organisations Jessie Street was re-inscribed as a pioneer, though many of the already aging members of the Union were her contemporaries.

This thesis illustrates the way that Street, and also Bessie Rischbieth, can be fashioned to be indispensable to a story of Australian feminism between the wars. The scope of their activities and influence, the sheer volume of their historical records, their central place in the histories of their organisations and their respective public profiles offer more than enough evidence to advance a narrative of feminist presence and identity in mid twentieth century Australia. Not surprisingly, historians and feminists who have been interested in making

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visible this period of Australian feminist history have turned to Street. The centenary of Street's birth in 1989 was a particular focus point, inspiring academic symposiums, such as the one that generated Heather Radi's edited collection of essays *Jessie Street: Documents and Essays* and initiatives such as the Jessie Street Library in Sydney. Folk singer Judy Small marked the occasion in song, producing the lyrics 'A Heroine of Mine' with the chorus 'She was an inspiration to women of her time/ And Jessie Street will always be a heroine of mine.'² Prime Minister Bob Hawke's message to the Centenary celebrations further accentuated Street's apparent transcendent appeal, as he insisted 'It is clear that Jessie Street was a woman ahead of her time'.³ This was a consistent effect of representations of Street, which in their attempt to reclaim or recast her importance, often obliterated her historical context at the same time.⁴

More recently, Street has been invoked as a possible leading figure in an alternative Australian history, imagined by Helen Irving as a counter-narrative to war-centric mainstream Australian history. In this representation of Street, she would be thoroughly historicised in order to privilege Australia's contributions to world peace, particularly in the post World War II period. For Irving, Street, together with her friend and colleague H.V. Evatt, 'embodied idealism, intelligence and doggedness, virtues Australians should he happy to call our own'. In this critique of Australian history, Street's absence from mainstream narratives isn't explicitly attributed to her feminism or her communism, but rather to the dominance of the Anzac Legend, which has ensured that Australian efforts in war eclipse Australian contributions to peace. This enduring currency of the Anzac Legend is considered as integral to a process of cultural selection and myth-making that continues to reap benefits for contemporary politicians.⁵ Irving's call for re-inscribing what

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³ 'The Prime Minister's Message to the Jessie Street Luncheon, 17 April 1989', in Radi, p. 8
⁴ Jessie Street continues to be figured as visionary and somehow outside time. In 2002, the ABC programme 'Dimensions in Time' commemorated Street for her 'colourful' and 'controversial' career and added, 'In many ways, she was a woman way ahead of her time'. 'Rebels: Jessie Street', 'Dimensions in Time', 21/10/2002, see http://www.abc.net.au/dimensions/dimensions_in_time/Transcripts/s707499.html
⁵ Helen Irving, 'Give peace a chance', *Spectrum, Sydney Morning Herald*, May 24-25, 2003, p. 6-7
constitutes significance in Australian history also has some cross-over with the critiques that informed the ambitious feminist revisionist history of Australia, *Creating a Nation*. Irving and the authors of *Creating a Nation* both argued for alternatives to particular narratives of nation that privilege certain men and their sustaining mythologies. Such critiques of and contributions to an idea of the nation are figured in some ways in the same terms that Street and her peers argued for female inclusion in re-building post-war Australia at the Australian Women’s Charter Conference in 1943. The Conference, Irving’s critique and *Creating a Nation* are alternative narratives of nation by default – it is the pervasiveness of masculinised politics that insists on their marginality, rather than the women themselves.7

In editing the commemorative essays on Jessie Street, Heather Radi was well aware of the exclusionary effects of mainstream Australian history’s preoccupation with war and its associated legends. And while she recognised that women have not forgotten Street, Radi also pointed out that the ‘unsatisfactory’ documentation of the activist’s life, in her autobiography, Mitchell’s history and the biography by Peter Sekuless, hadn’t especially helped the cause of historicising Jessie Street appropriately. Street’s autobiography suffered from the effects of age, bad editing and incompletion. Sekuless later downplayed Street’s feminism and diminished her independent spirit as a result. Radi deemed Mitchell’s history most successful in capturing Street as feminist, but thought its organisational focus and small distribution lessened its impact.8 As an assessment of the shortcomings of individual commemorative works, Radi’s criticism is entirely valid, but I wish to broaden the focus of my own critique to consider the context and effects of these historical representations, and others also, as implicit commentaries or responses to changing ideas about Street and her significance to both

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6 Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath, Marian Quarty (eds.), *Creating a Nation*, McPhee Gribble Publishers, Melbourne, 1994
7 Indeed, one of the most vocal critics of *Creating a Nation*, historian John Hirst insisted on assessing the book’s merits in terms of how the authors represented Gallipoli, ‘the great test’ for a history of the Australian nation. It was hardly surprising then, particularly considering Hirst’s proclamation that ‘defining the nation, ruling the nation and defending the nation have been done mostly by men’, that *Creating a Nation* was declared a failure as a historical narrative of nation on the basis of its overwhelming feminist emphasis. See John Hirst, ‘Women and History: A Critique of Creating a Nation’, *Quadrant*, Vol xxxix, Number 3, March 1995, pp. 35-43
8 Radi, p. 13-14
Australian and feminist history. It may be the case that a fitting biography of Street still hasn’t been written, but of greater interest are the questions of how and why Street came to be represented in particular ways and what these representations say about a particular Australian feminism.

The process of re-assigning historical significance to inter-war Australian feminism began with Street and Rischbieth themselves. As the scope of their campaigns and historical records demonstrated, both of them had national and international ambitions for their work and this is reflected in the historicisations of their contribution to Australian society. They were not writing explicitly against a dominant national historical narrative, though inevitably the climate in which they were producing their histories ensured their works would be received as accounts of a politics that were in decline or defunct. Writing an autobiography, rather than the official history of an organisation, Street had more scope to evoke a sense of historical place and it is in this spirit perhaps that the book is best read, particularly considering her biographer’s warning that its factual inaccuracies may render it suspect as a primary source. In any case, both Street’s autobiography and Rischbieth’s official history attest to a particular kind of history making that privileges an emphasis on public life. Street’s autobiography also featured some of the usual characteristics of feminist autobiography, namely a narrative of becoming, but though domestic life peppered the narrative, she rarely reflected on how it illuminated her work or vice versa. Rischbieth’s history was prefaced by Professor Walter Murdoch, Western Australia’s most recognised and respected academic at the time, who bolstered the author’s position ‘in the history of her country as the intrepid champion of a better-ordered society’.

Rischbieth released March of Australian Women in 1964 and its subtitle ‘A record of Fifty Years Struggle for Equal Citizenship’ indicated the nature of her project. Using her own activities in the Women’s Service Guilds of

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9 Indeed her family have commissioned yet another biographer, Lenore Coltheart for this task. See ‘Rebels: Jessie Street’, ABC Broadcast, 2002
10 Peter Schuless, Jessie Street: A Rewarding, but Unrewarded Life, University of Queensland Press, p. 291
11 Preface by Professor Walter Murdoch, Bessie Rischbieth, March of Australian Women: A record of Fifty Years’ Struggle for Equal Citizenship, Paterson Brokensha, Perth, 1964
Western Australia and the Australian Federation of Women Voters as primary material, Rischbieth advanced a progressive history of feminist activism, offering conferences, deputations and inter-state and international travel as evidence of a continuous, goal-oriented feminism. When she wrote, this feminism was facing the sort of generic challenges ('deep-seated changes') that had been highlighted in 'The Springs of Power', which Rischbieth, in her concluding chapter, proposed would be met in the usual way – through recourse to the United Nations, the placement of more women in politics and organised feminism. Rischbieth argued for a 'new internationalism' in which 'human rights' would take the place of 'women's rights', but this slight shift in rhetoric could not conceal that the author herself was becoming dated. The image that accompanies the last chapter of the work underscores this point. Rischbieth, in full fur, hat and gloves, stepping off a plane, is pictured just returned from representing Australia as the alternate Government Representative at the League of Nations in Geneva in 1935. The image at once reinforces Rischbieth's authority to speak on the topic of the United Nations (which was probably her intention) and consigns her relevance to the past, rather than to the present or future (which was clearly not her desire).

The production of Rischbieth's history, like Street's autobiography and Mitchell's history of the UA, took place with an often self-reflective understanding of increasing historical insignificance. This chapter examines these feminist excursions into the past, present and future. The representations of Street alert the observer to the especially loaded role of Jessie Street, as both typical and atypical of her age. Considering the press attention accorded to Street and Rischbieth and their own sense of historical significance, it is hardly surprising that various historical accounts of this era of Australian feminism choose to shine the spotlight on the Jessie and/ or Bessie show. I am not interesting in writing against that tendency because the reasons for the attention bestowed on those two formidable leaders of the Australian women's movement are straightforward enough. That this era of Australian feminism has been lost in wave-centred historiography is one important and obvious point. That revisionism of this historical oversight should often begin with Jessie Street is another. How Jessie Street, the United
Associations of Women, other feminists and activists and various biographers and historians understood her historical role takes a historical consideration of Australian feminism a step further, to consider the effects of various forms of historicisation on writing the self and in turn, writing the history of Australian feminism.

'Mrs Jessie Street – there is a subject!'

The Jessie Street we find depicted in communist writer Jean Devanny’s book *Bird of Paradise* is at the height of her powers. World War II is still raging and the first Australian Women’s Charter Conference has been a success. Devanny had attended the conference as a delegate for the Australian Fellowship of Writers and from this experience and her interview with Street, the writer and Communist had declared the Charter Conference ‘great’ and ‘the most representative...ever yet held in Australia.’ 12 Shortly after the Conference, Devanny received a Fellowship Grant and used it to finance a trip down the eastern seaboard of Australia, interviewing various Australians to find out what ‘our people think about the war and the kind of society they would like to see arising from it.’ 13 Reflecting both Devanny’s politics and her wide ranging interests, from botany to literature, the author’s portrait of Australia was heavily populated with Northern Queenslanders and activists of various kinds. In her final subject, ‘Jessie Mary Grey Street, publicist and social worker’, the theme(s) of the work crystallised. If we accept Street’s own assessment of the war years as the most exciting of her life, Devanny’s portrait offers further evidence. At the time of writing, the Charter had yet to be printed and distributed, but Street was ‘confident’ that it would ‘be an inspiration and guide to all who are interested in the part that women can play in winning a lasting peace’. 14

Writer Marjorie Barnard would later write to Devanny that the idea of putting on ‘a cavalcade of living, representative Australians’ was ‘brilliant’, but that linking the project to the war dated the book, ‘which would have been quite as

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13 Ibid., p. 1.
14 Ibid., p. 282
valid without it.' As it stands, Jean Devanny's portrait offers contemporary validation of Street at the time of her greatest Australian influence and success. Her narrative also pre-figures Street's own autobiography, with its focus on key events as turning points in Street's activism, which is hardly surprising considering the profile was fashioned from an extended conversation with the subject herself. And while Devanny would later reject the accusation that she had shoved her own opinions into the mouths of her subjects (though she did concede 'I agree with most of them'), it's easy to see how Street's recollections of her visit to the Soviet Union in 1938 and the consequent validation this provided for her feminist politics lent themselves to hagiography by a writer with similar political sympathies.

At the time of Devanny's interview in early 1944, Street already had firmly in place a personal narrative that made explicit the connection between her own experiences and her politics. Embryonic feminist moments in childhood would be added to this narrative once Street fashioned her life into autobiography. To Devanny, Street summarised the first couple of decades of her life thus: 'I was not then as socially conscious as I am now'. Other key episodes – driving an ambulance in England during World War I, working as an under-matron in a New York home for delinquent girls, having children of her own and of course, the 1938 Soviet Union visit – she figured as integral to an ever-expanding feminist agenda and identity: a feminist identity that easily incorporated socialism, domestic servant schemes and a commitment to social hygiene. Street's tone throughout her writings and speeches had demonstrated her belief that her campaigns and solutions were beneficial to everybody and therefore sensible rather than say, radical or revolutionary. Her excursions into autobiography were no different and reflections such as the following excerpt from Devanny's interview illustrate how Street typically chose to represent what were ultimately political and/or personal failures. Of the aftermath to her first visit to the Soviet Union, Street recalled that:

16 Jean Devanny to Frank Ryland, 16th November 1944, see Carole Ferrier, Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1999, p. 223
17 Bird of Paradise, p. 275
I left Russia with the intention of reporting my experiences to my friends in England and Australia and dispelling some of the wrong ideas they had about the Soviet Union. But I found that when people apprehended that I had been favourably impressed with what I had seen, they did not want to listen to me. And when I insisted on expressing my opinions they did not believe me.

When I returned to Australia the same thing happened. ...I was branded as a communist. That is, except by the Communists themselves.

The reception I had in Geneva, which I visited on my way back from Russia, was entirely different. There I attended a big dinner given by the International Alliance of Women.18

The narrative arc Street presented Devanny here was one that would come to dominate her autobiographical recollections some two decades later. These are stories in which Street encountered or formulated new ways of living, which she then eagerly shared with the world only to discover the timing was wrong, the social and political context wasn’t accommodating or previous allies in the struggle disagreed with what she was proposing. Occasionally she offered an analysis of the failure, such as her reflections on the Australian Women’s Charter in which she lamented that vision is often not appreciated until after the fact,19 but usually Street presented herself as being too busy getting on with things, or sufficiently comforted in the responsiveness of like-minded people, to feel the need to pause for the purposes of extended analysis. Devanny did occasionally prompt Street to flesh out her experiences, asking her for instance whether it was difficult to get into Russia, but Street’s short reply in that case – ‘certainly not’ – was indicative of the relative ease Street had in travelling the world as a well-connected feminist of independent means. This contrasts with the experiences of communist women, like Devanny herself for example, whose autobiographies are peppered with details about the problems, financial and otherwise, endemic to the big visit to Russia or other European cities.20

18 A Bird of Paradise, p. 279
19 See discussion in previous chapter, also Truth or Repose, p. 245f
20 Devanny’s first international trip as a Communist was to the world congress of Worker’s International Relief in Berlin, in 1931. As Australian delegate, her Congress related travel expenses were paid for, but her recollections of traveling elsewhere in Europe at the same time – including to Russia – were littered with anxieties about money. See Jean Devanny, Point of Departure: The Autobiography of Jean Devanny, ed. Carole Ferrier, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1986, p.
Street’s lack of reflection or behind the scenes detail of her various journeys and episodes could be explained the sheer volume of significant experiences she had to draw on. It was hardly surprising that writer Eleanor Dark responded to Devanny’s news of her upcoming profile on Street with the exclamation, ‘So glad to know that you’re ‘doing’ Mrs Street – now there’s a subject!’ Street’s extensive travels, omnipresence in Australian public life and numerous campaigns were of such magnitude and variety that Devanny’s description of her as ‘publicist and social worker’ seemed at first to barely skim the surface of the life. But, read in the light of the intersections of Street’s activism (feminist, communist, aid worker) and tirelessly promotion of her causes, Devanny’s description had an effect of harnessing Street’s work into something manageable and apt. Devanny’s intention to record her encounters with various Australians during World War II for the purposes of anticipating the post-war world also offered a thread to run through Street’s life story and probably appealed to Street, who would have been eager at the time to promote the Australian Women’s Charter in such a context. Indeed, Street’s hopes for a post-war world, in which ‘the system of co-operation will replace the system of competition and that women in every country will have equal opportunities with men’ concluded both Devanny’s portrait of Street and the larger book itself. Through Street, the consummate activist and publicist, Devanny was able to tie together several of the preoccupations at the heart of her work, namely feminism, communism and the future.

By the time Street came to promote her autobiography, her campaigning style was more vulnerable to mockery. The mainstream press alternately focussed on the controversies of her long career, her enduring and perhaps for that reason comical activism and her ‘conversion’ to communism. All of these

p. 136f. When Topsy Small was sent as a delegate by the Women’s committee of the Communist Party to the 1934 International Women’s Conference in Paris, her fare one way was raised by fundraising. When she set off, her return ticket had yet to be paid for. See Audrey Johnson, Bread and Roses: A Personal History of Three Militant women and their friends 1902-1988, left Book Club, Melbourne, 1990, p. 70

21 Eleanor Dark to Jean Devanny 11 January 1944, As Good as a Yarn with you, p. 109
22 Bird of Paradise, p. 285
23 Street was never a member of the Communist Party of Australia, though she was active in associated organizations such as the Russian Friendship Society.
focus points indicated an interest in Street that was primarily historical, rather than contemporary – hardly surprising considering the occasion of an autobiography lends itself to such a perspective. What was particularly interesting, however, was the extent to which Street willingly participated in or resisted being represented as a figure of the past. In Devanny’s portrait, there was a real sense of a woman in control of how she was represented and for what reasons. By the time she hit the promotion trail for *Truth or Repose*, however, Street’s activism was more diffuse (because she now concentrated on Aboriginal rights and peace campaigns rather than organising through or behind a particular cause or organisation) and less visible. As a consequence, Street’s media appearances suggested that she was taking her cues from others in terms of how and why she was represented in particular ways. Sometimes Street was an active collaborator, particularly with the left media or with personal friends, such as Bob Johnson from *The Sun Herald*, whose notes for an article eventually titled ‘Tale of Controversy in Truth or Repose’ are archived in Jessie Street’s personal papers.24 At other times, however, Street seemed to willingly surrender to being depicted as a historical curiosity and/or an activist out of context. This may have had as much to do with her own ambivalence about the autobiographical project and her general political fatigue as it did with the vagaries of the media.

**Defining Feminist Achievement**

Street was persuaded by friends to write her autobiography and had to physically remove herself from an active political life in Sydney and take up residence at friend Lorna Moore’s place in Tweed Heads to complete work on it. All up, the writing took more than three years. Even in her relative isolation, her time was still taken up with lengthy correspondence, some travel and her health problems (a symptom of which was a declining memory which meant the autobiography was factually dubious in parts). In a letter to fellow Aboriginal rights activists Mary Montgomery Bennett and Ada Bromham, Street sounded apologetic for her decision to suspend activism to write her

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24 See *The Sunday Telegraph*, October 30, 1966 and ‘Notes’, *Jessie Street Papers*, NLA, MS2683/2/1723-1732
memoirs, hoping her colleagues would ‘agree with [her] decision’ and that the book ‘would be a help to others’. She felt the Aboriginal cause already had such ‘grand champions’ that the addition of her ‘efforts would not make very much difference’. Typically, Street linked her project here with a larger political cause, though she added ‘I am so disillusioned politically’. The lengthy process of finding a publisher would have added to her weariness. Street’s travels in 1963 took her to New York and London, with an early manuscript in tow, but she had no success in luring the interest of publishers there or in the Soviet Union. All the major Australian publishing houses rejected the final manuscript and the left publishing group the Australasian Book Society could only afford to publish the autobiography when Street subsidised the publication costs. The sloppy editing and presentation of the book were mentioned in even the most partisan of reviews. Meanwhile, the light blue dust-jacket, featuring the flags of the United Nations with Street’s disembodied head bobbing in the corner, further marked the book as dated, signalling Street’s association with a glorious moment in recent history that had since faded from public memory.

Labor stalwart Arthur Calwell, then leader of the Federal Opposition, launched the book in Sydney on Street’s 78th birthday in February 1967 and in doing so argued for the autobiography’s important contribution to Australian history. He lamented the paucity of biographies in the Australian canon and doubted that many could match her past and present contribution to the ‘well-being of Australia’. This praise for Street’s ‘deep feeling of humanity’, ‘love of peace’ and ‘dedication to justice and social uplift’ was situated within a general condemnation of a materialist society, expressed in the discourse of tempered socialism that defined Labor politics at the time. One effect of this was that Street’s feminism disappeared into a general rhetoric about improving society through a commitment to ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’. For the Opposition leader, Lady Street was ‘an historian who saw much history made and by her own contributions, helped make history’. Therein resided her historical significance. In a speech that praised Street in equal parts for her ‘charm of femininity’ and ‘strong force of character’, her feminism was never

25 See Sekulless, p. 197
explicitly referred to. Her achievements were represented as comparable to those of other Labor luminaries such as H.V Evatt and Senator William Cooper, with the scope of her other political activities gestured at through an acknowledgement of the diverse crowd present at the launch rather than any defining activist moments. So while it was a tribute that insisted on Street's crucial role in the 'history of our times', there was also the sense that Street was exceptional, that she hovered above her various organisational affiliations (except perhaps the Labor Party!) rather than speaking through or for them.

When Calwell read *Truth or Repose*, he would have found a narrative to inspire his portrait of Street as a Labor-style social reformer and visionary. It was the Depression that developed Street's 'political consciousness', inspiring her to formulate her General Insurance Scheme and to join the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Prior to this, Street was steadfast in her resistance to party politics, but the intention of the 1930s ALP to socialise the means of production, distribution and exchange seemed to offer to Street 'a way to prevent a recurrence in the future of depressions and the shocking conditions under which the unemployed and their families lived'. She became an enthusiastic advocate of the virtues of a planned economy and joined the ALP.26 When the Labor Party came to national government in 1941, Street increased her commitment, regularly attended meetings of the Labour Leagues and ran for the seat of Eden Monaro. For Street, this was a golden period for the ALP: 'The Curtin Government came into power at the most critical period in the history of Australia'.27

Street enjoyed friendships with Prime Minister John Curtin, Treasurer Ben Chifley and Dr. H.V. Evatt, Minister for External Affairs and this meant more government access for the United Associations and their affiliates. The appointment of the Women’s Employment Board during the Second World War was depicted in the context of these warm relations with the Labor Party.28 Inspired by this development, Street, despite being 'quite well known' at the time, disguised her identity, called herself 'Miss Jane Smith' and went to

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26 *Truth or Repose*, p. 116-117
27 Ibid., p. 209
28 Ibid, p. 215
work in a munitions factory in Footscray, where she got to experience the effects of the WEB first hand. Street found the work boring and repetitive, but enjoyed discussing beer and gossiping with her co-workers. The high point of this episode was a telegram from Dr Evatt accepting the workers’ wage proposals.²⁹ Street’s delight in capturing the experience was obvious and reinforced her depiction of the Second World War as the most exciting time of her life. In this recollection, it was also the best of times for the ALP.

Calwell’s location of Street amongst a pantheon of then-recent Labor greats was no doubt also inspired by the concluding pages of *Truth or Repose*, where the author fondly recalled intimate lunches with Curtin and the man himself. Her praise for the ‘qualities’ that made him a ‘true leader’ offered hints of her own approach to leadership:

He was farsighted, decisive, sympathetic and courageous. He had initiative and at the same time was one of the most self effacing men I have known. His main aim was to get things done.³⁰

His sudden death in 1945, during the United Nations San Francisco Conference, was depicted as especially tragic. It was a ‘critical time’ for Australia and it seemed also for Street. She ended her autobiography acknowledging her personal ‘great debt’ to Curtin:

It was due to his confidence in me that I was given opportunities to develop greater self confidence, and to experience much of what I have written about in this autobiography.³¹

A curious ending to a feminist biography, but Street’s experiences, travels and politics were so diverse and numerous that she could have feasibly concluded her book by tying up any of several narrative threads that ran through her life story. Her visits to the USSR, her less favourable critique of the ALP and their anti-communism (and in some instances, anti-feminism) and her championing of socialism were as extensively covered, if not more so, than Street’s depiction of her life and times in the Labor Party.

By the time Calwell paid tribute to Street, the Labor Party were languishing in opposition. Yet clearly, he still had a recognised tradition of Labor greats to

²⁹ Ibid., 216-221
³⁰ Ibid., p. 336
³¹ Ibid., p. 338
evoked historically. Feminism, it seemed, wasn’t so blessed. But of all the narrative threads in Street’s autobiography it was feminism that was the most persistent of all. It was a feminism that was constantly evolving under the influence of other forms of politics and because of Street’s own experiences. Reflecting on her politicisation during the Depression, for example, Street wrote: ‘Ever since I was a child I had been a feminist and resented the discriminations against women, but it wasn’t until much later that I connected feminism with politics’. Street discovered the Labor Party, and embraced the Soviet Union, but her feminism she dated back to childhood. She didn’t abandon feminism in 1945, but by drawing attention to the tragedy of Curtin’s death, Street was implicitly lamenting the end of an era for a certain feminist politics; a feminist politics that had recently enjoyed the support of the ruling ALP. However, there was never an explicit move away from feminism. Street left Cold War Australia for most of the 1950s, but her feminism, primarily expressed through the Australian Women’s Charter movement and at international feminist conferences, endured. In the light of this activity, and the narrative Street presented of her life-long feminism, the writing and production of *Truth or Repose* can be read as one of her last significant feminist acts.

*Truth or Repose*, together with Rischbieth’s *The March of Australian Women*, and a decade later Mitchell’s *Fifty Years of Feminist Achievement*, was one of the earliest examples of a generation of Australian feminists staking a claim for their particular feminist politics. The context in which these texts were produced is significant. If the post suffrage feminists sought to argue for their political significance through the creation and promotion of a feminist history, these same feminists were, decades later, confronted with the consensus that their moment had passed. World War II had represented the apotheosis of feminist ‘becoming’, but after that period, the women’s movement resumed a marginalised position - and this time a much less promising one. However, the fact that Street produced her autobiography and in her promotion of it was still ‘carrying the flag for women’s rights whether anybody wants to see it or

32 *Truth or Repose*, p. 114
not\textsuperscript{33} testified to the persistence of a particular feminist politics and identity. In a period where feminists struggled to justify their continued existence to others, and to some extent, to themselves, history-making provided a way to re-inscribe their feminist identities onto a contemporary context.

Sekuless has noted that Street might not have been able to maintain her autobiographical style, which stressed positive achievements and turned defeats into victories, if she had moved on to chronicle the late 1940s and beyond.\textsuperscript{34} Interestingly, this emphasis on feminist achievement was similarly favoured by Mitchell when she to came to produce the official history of the United Associations in the mid 1970s. What divides the two works, however, is time. Street was writing before the ‘explosion’ of women’s liberation and by pausing in 1945, she made her emphasis distinctly historical. As such, the materials of her life, voluminous as they were, were moulded into a narrative of feminist becoming and continuous feminist engagement. Truth or Repose is feminist history-making that stakes a contemporary claim through its insistence on the enduring category of ‘feminist’. In Mitchell’s work, written at least implicitly in response to the emergence of new feminisms, the emphasis was different. Street’s feminism may have been unpopular at the time of writing, but it was still identifiably ‘Australian feminism’ and by offering her life story as an example she was providing a history for it. In contrast, Mitchell sought to account for the continued activism of the UA by providing them with a history that had connections with contemporary feminisms. That she should do so in similar ways to Street illustrated the historical specificity of the UA’s feminism.

Still, there were crucial differences in approach too. Street’s personal narrative of becoming feminist was contingent on a critique of patriarchy that could account for feminist failures or resistance on that basis. In Mitchell’s history, a history of an organisation rather than an individual, such a critique was present, but muted. The various successes of contemporary feminism, the granting of equal pay in 1969 for instance, allowed for continuity in a narrative

\textsuperscript{33} Jessie Street to April Hersey, ‘A Rewarding, if Unrewarded Life’, \textit{The Bulletin}, January 21 1967, p. 23

\textsuperscript{34} Sekuless, p. 203
of feminist achievement. Mitchell’s task was to coax out the connections between feminisms. Street’s feminism, in contrast, was contested in different ways and as such she occasionally sought recourse to different historical explanations. What was persistent in both works however was a strong sense of what constituted feminist identity. Their feminism made sense of other injustices in society and endured.

Street made her historical approach explicit by recalling her time as an undergraduate student at the University of Sydney. The then Jessie Lillingston was especially impressed by Professor Wood of the History Department. When she came to write her autobiography some fifty years later it was his teachings that she recalled in the development of her understanding of historical inevitability and cause and effect. Prior to his lecture, she had been convinced that history was a ‘series of more or less isolated events’, but Professor Wood ‘opened her eyes to the fact that everything that happened was the result of something that had happened before’.35 Thus, he was enormously influential in the development of her social consciousness, in terms of both comprehension and conviction. It was this model of historical development, or progress, that would come to underpin Street’s understanding of her own feminism and the historical position of that feminism. In this model, the initiative of Street and the UA were examples of a particular historical feminist destiny. Explanations for why campaigns often met dead ends, or lasted for years without much progress, or were resisted and contested, resided outside the feminists themselves; the causes were in society, a society in which they were constantly striving to effect change. That the campaigns of the UA were not always fruitful was not testimony then to any particular failure on their part, but was rather an example of the fact that feminism was figured as an ongoing project, dependent on particular sets of historical circumstances, or what Street would explain as ‘cause and effect’. In Mitchell’s work this idea was progress was borne out in her narrative of persistence. The United Associations, as historicised by Mitchell, argued for strengths based on their past glories and the (fading) possibility of future ones.

35 Jessie Street, Truth or Repose, p. 35
In resisting a reading of history as a series of isolated and not necessarily related events, Street fashioned a life story in which nothing was extraneous. Everything she did and felt was tied to a larger meaning and narrative. So her early encounters with Indian servants accounted for her lack of racism,\textsuperscript{36} while her grandfather's being 'very good to the aborigines' foreshadows her own work in indigenous affairs.\textsuperscript{37} In this same formative period, she revealed a childhood propensity for following through with cause and effect when she almost misapplied the principles and disposed of her baby brother after she'd concluded he was making her mother sick. Later in girlhood, her critical faculties became more finely honed when some defining experiences with prescribed gender roles cemented her feminism for life. An early act of feminist resistance was opposing a forget-me-not costume for a fancy dress party.\textsuperscript{38} A short time later, the various injustices she had to endure as a young girl had Jessie praying to God to convert her into a boy. Her prayers weren't answered, but rather than lose faith Street took solace in the truth of the matter ('I accepted the fact of my sex') and pledged, at the age of ten, to never allow her sex to interfere with anything she wanted to do and in the future 'to exert all my efforts to remove discriminations against women and to gain for them equal status, rights and opportunity'. Still only on page fifteen of her almost 400 page life story, Street then asserted 'I think I can say I have faithfully carried out this pledge'.\textsuperscript{39} Here, the narrative of her life's work was signed, sealed and delivered.

By the time Street formed the United Associations some twenty years, and sixty pages later, her feminist credentials were well established. She had pioneered women's sports at the University of Sydney and immersed herself in the English suffrage movement. Street was especially attentive to the nuances between 'suffragists' and 'suffragettes' in her feminist history and described the procession that followed Emmeline Pankhurst leaving Holloway as 'one of

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 2
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 10
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 4
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 15
the most memorable occasions of my life'. She'd also attended international conferences held during World War I, driven an ambulance and worked at Waverly House in New York during the same period. There were also, of course, her experiences in Australian feminism. As discussed in chapter one, the formation of the United Associations in 1929 was not without controversy, but Street represented the initiative characteristically - it was a practical, inevitable move to co-ordinate existing New South Wales' women's groups into a more effective political organisation. When the Feminist Club withdrew their membership and premises at the last minute, Street wrote that 'of course we were all disappointed as we had looked forward to strengthening the feminist ranks', but the UA continued regardless, setting up office elsewhere. Street's narrative then switched to her domestic service scheme, her proposed solution to both the servant shortage and some of the employment woes brought on by the Depression. Her critique of the scheme's failure typically concentrated on the 'serious loss to all sections of society', rather than engagement with the scheme's inherent flaws or implicit class prejudices.

Street represented the activities of the UA in much the same fashion. The organisation's campaigning was comprehensive - 'we took up the question of sex discrimination and studied the relevant laws and regulations in every field' - and their growth swift. An early attempt to field a UA member's bid for state election was foiled, but Street stressed the larger picture, writing 'in spite of these various setbacks, the United Associations was growing all the time. Very soon we had to find bigger premises'. And when Street's other activities came to the fore of the narrative, the UA would remain a constant, enduring and progressive presence. When the Depression had the effect of politicising Street and she began to connect 'feminism with politics', the UA, in her life story, fell in behind this shift in focus. And though her later membership of the Labor Party and association with communism did cause some problems in the UA, forcing the organisation to declare their independence from their

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40 Ibid., p. 49
41 Ibid., p. 82
42 Ibid., p. 86
43 Ibid., p. 91
44 Ibid., p. 114
President's politics in the Daily Telegraph in the late 1930s, there was little sense of this in Street's positive depiction of the activities of the UA.

In her foreword to Mitchell's official history, writer and UA member Dymphna Cusack invested the United Associations with a crucial role in the history of Australian feminism. At the time of writing, Cusack was still active politically and reported attending Women's Electoral Lobby meetings and making herself unpopular by 'comparing the position of women today with that of 50 years ago'. While such thinking in 1978 offered both a critique of second wave feminism and those feminists active before the 1970s, what is of primary interest to me here is Cusack's next point, which is that for her, much of the progress over that fifty year period could be attributed to the United Associations. Cusack was happy to 'leave the story of [the UA's] vicissitudes to our historian', framing her own historical recollection in terms of its enduring strength and relevance. On the occasion of the organisation's 50th Jubilee, Cusack congratulated the UA on 'its survival as a fighting force into the 80's and on the fact that it has reared a generation that will go on fighting'. In this spirit, Cusack clearly counted herself amongst the fighters, now reminding the W.E.L or 'WOMEN'S LIB [her capitalisation] groups that they must not forget or underestimate the pioneer work done by the United Associations'. These central ideas about contribution, pioneering work and crucially not forgetting or underestimating such endeavours framed Mitchell’s history. This was a history that put forward a version of the feminist past, present and future challenged or not properly comprehended by new feminisms.

Mitchell did not hesitate to emphasise these same themes in the first page of her commemorative history, which she did by way of insisting on a connection between past and present feminisms, made possible by reasserting the fact that the United Associations on the occasion of the 50th Jubilee of the group were still very much an active organisation. This is a history of continuity, of origins, of locating historical significance through contemporary relevance. Mitchell started off by staking a claim for the founders of the UA, 'who would

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45 Daily Telegraph, 11th March 1938
46 Dymphna Cusask, 'Foreword'. Winifred Mitchell, 50 Years of Feminist Achievement
have rejoiced in the gains made by women, for women, in the 1970's'. Further, '[m]uch of the success of the women's liberation movement of today is owed to the work of earlier feminists. And its methods as well as its aims the United Associations pre-dated the modern movement by fifty years'.\(^47\) With this point to prove, Mitchell then set about tracing the women's organisations' scene in 1929, the year of the UA's formation, retrospectively identifying conservatism, only incidental commitment to women's issues and a unnecessarily complicated organisational and representational structures as impediments to truly effective feminism. Consistent with the UA's general tendency to stay abreast of international developments, Mitchell also identified increasing dissatisfaction with existing feminist groups in England, where in 1926 an organisation called the 'Open Door' had been established to concentrate on women's economic needs. Jessie Street was a subscriber to the organisation's journal and Mitchell implicitly posited this influence as a contributing factor to her resignation from the Feminist Club early in December 1929. By that stage, Street had already proposed that the Feminist Club amalgamate with fellow women's organisations the Women's League, the Women's Service Club and the Women Voter's Association, three organisations that were keen on the proposal, displaying enthusiasm by throwing a party for Street that was reported in the press the next day. An effusive speaker on the night identified Street as having 'not only the cause of humanity at heart but a mind and brain big enough to grasp what would happen in 100 years' time'.\(^48\) In Mitchell's narrative, the United Associations were effectively imbued with the sort of foresight and initiative to not only critique contemporary feminism, but to also offer a new, more relevant version, designed to cut back on unnecessary overlaps in order to maintain commitment and focus on key issues. It is primarily for those reasons that Mitchell made her claim for the continued contemporary relevance of the United Associations.

1930 was the first year for the UA to develop and promote their particular conception of feminist culture. Larger receptions were held for the likes of visiting American feminist Mrs. Vander Litt of the American Women's Party

\(^47\) Mitchell, *50 Years of Feminist Achievement*, p. 3
\(^48\) Ibid, p.6-7
and Open Door International and pioneer woman flyer Amy Johnson, while smaller occasions included a variety of activities, ranging from an afternoon talk by Dorothea Mackellar on preserving Australian trees to a debate opened by Mrs. Earle Page on 'whether the woman of today was better fitted for her mission in life than her grandmother'. An early deputation involved a visit to the Attorney General and the Minister for Justice to press the issue of equal guardianship of children. And while Mitchell acknowledged the leisure time and resources necessary to maintaining such an active and social feminist life, she also stressed, possibly in response to contemporary critiques of the organisation's particular version of bourgeois feminism, that typically eating and drinking were combined with the educational and cultural aims of the organisation and that their members were 'intelligent able women whose interests extended beyond what might be expected of members of their social grouping'. It was while defending the UA's feminism on these terms, however, that Mitchell's advocacy of their radicalism was most muted. She noted that the groups relevance to working class women was indirect — through campaigns in common with more ostensibly left wing organisations rather than through membership and participation — and that their political ties tended to be conservative rather than radical.\footnote{Ibid., p. 10} From then on, Mitchell listed the various campaigns the organisation had been involved in, stressing endurance and commitment over any instant, flashy success.

Mitchell's chapter on the United Associations in the 1930s was typical of her style and framework. For an official historian, Mitchell was quite willing to acknowledge failure or hardship, though always in the context of positive steps taken by the organisation to deal with such 'vicissitudes' (to borrow Dymphna Cusack's word). It was in this decade that the UA established themselves 'as a leading force in the Australian feminist movement. There was no issue affecting the status of women with which the organisation was not concerned'. It was also in the 1930s that the organisation's methods — primarily circulars, meetings, discussions, mock debates, receptions, deputations, lobbying and fundraising — 'became a permanent feature' of Australian feminist culture. The Depression, and in particular the closing of
the Government Savings Bank, affected both members and those that aided the organisation, but 'rather than limiting their work the UA felt constrained to redouble their efforts to help women suffering the depression's effects'. This theme of re-directing energies to positive enterprises, to enduring and indeed flourishing in a time of hardship, defined Mitchell's work and had clear consequences for an organisation keen to promote a sense of relevance and adaptability.

Mitchell did not shy away from representing the organisation's less successful endeavours, but was particularly attentive to essentially positive outcomes. One scheme launched by the UA in particular, the farm settlement to encourage women farmers established in Glenfield on the outskirts of Sydney in 1932, was an especially traumatic failure, typified by sensationalist reports when a young resident drowned while swimming. Mitchell recorded some setbacks, before concluding the story with a typical moment of faith and generosity from Street, who had wanted to continue with the scheme after a continued lack of support from the State Government and did so at her own expense. Eventually, at the end of 1934, Street 'too had to recognize defeat' and sold the farm and contents for one hundred pounds, which she then dutifully re-directed to liquidate the UA's printing debts.\textsuperscript{50} It is interesting that this failure was offered as the first defining UA activity of the decade. Other defining activities had included the success of having teacher and UA member Beatrice Taylor re-instated after the Director of Education suspended her for speaking at public meetings about her then recent trip to the Soviet Union or the more limited success of having legislation banning married teachers from working somewhat tempered. Still, Mitchell's central theme of surmounting difficulties meant that the incident was not entirely inconsistent with her episodic framework, which privileged the idea of working hard and adapting to adverse circumstances over any discussion of why something failed beyond, as in this instance, the lack of government funding and strained UA resources.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 12-15
Mitchell’s reading of the women farmers scheme is also, in many respects, consistent with that offered by Street in her autobiography, though Street’s treatment was longer and more reflective. What binds them is a sense that the UA were trying to do something positive within the context of increasing difficulty, disinterest and apathy. Both authors were also keen on pointing out any related successes, the small victories that became crucial currency in historical recollections of this period. Thus Street mentioned that the first meeting to canvas the issue of unemployed women was ‘crowded’; that she was able to interest some influential people for securing vacant land; that a deputation to the Lands Department by the United Associations impressed the Minister for Lands; that a committee chaired by Lady Gordon organised a home decoration competition fundraiser that was a ‘great success’ and helped pay for initial supplies; that the UA were able to attract participants such as Miss Fern, who had a first-class certificate in farming and Miss Peden, ‘a woman architect’; that the farm initially attracted positive publicity including the production of a Cinesound newsreel that featured the women at work and was shown in many picture theatres. Finally she commented that the ‘whole enterprise was going like clockwork. The women were becoming expert, and were well and happy, and production was increasing’.\footnote{Street’s discussion of the Women Farmer’s Scheme can be found on pages 118-124 of Truth or Repose} \footnote{Mitchell, p. 14}

It was the drowning episode that distinguished the two narratives from one another. For Mitchell, the ‘unpleasant publicity and disheartening rumours’ that occurred as a result of the drowning were able to be surmounted and the co-operative grew to sixteen members.\footnote{Mitchell, p. 14} For Mitchell, it was ultimately the lack of government assistance that doomed the project. Street, however, located the beginning of the end in the bad publicity generated by the drowning. In Street’s recollection, the farm was portrayed in idyllic terms, removed from the negative energies of the metropolis. Or so it seemed. In Street’s rendering, the demise of the women farmers’ scheme was depicted as a kind of Paradise Lost, with Street herself a fellow innocent, similarly ensconced in rural retreat, without a phone and with only late-arriving newspapers, when the news came through that there had been a drowning.
She recalled that the press reported the drowning had been a suicide, prompted by the misery of the farm, described as a 'labour camp', akin to those established by the Nazis over a decade later. The women 'had no protection from these sensation seekers and they were terrified at the invasion by this riff-raff'. The bad publicity turned off any future women farmers (no mention here of the collective actually growing in size after the drowning), 'the Labour Movement as a whole was entirely taken up with trying to help the unemployed men', while Street herself was away from Sydney and returned too late to take any effective action. By then 'irreparable damage had been done...by the hordes of scandalmongers'. Street argued she would ask for police protection and invited the press to come with her to inspect the camp, but it was all too late. In the end, '[t]here are always those who love a scandal'. Street, typically, located responsibility for the demise of the visionary scheme in 'socially backward people whose main idea is to keep women within the old man-made customs'.

For Street, the women farmers' episode was read retrospectively in terms of her overarching narrative of the trials of feminism within a sexist society. Street illustrated her particular reading of the various challenges to feminist vision with a contrast. At the farm, women were bathing in a river and selling their produce by a country road. Meanwhile, male critics of the scheme who dismissed farming as too difficult for women, capitalised on their labour in the home. Her idea of historical significance therefore intersects here with an ongoing discussion about possible historical insignificance or in this instance why a visionary scheme failed despite the author's best efforts. The UA President made claims for her own historical significance based on the value of attempts to change the world, however thwarted they may have been. Following from this, the fact that her autobiography stopped in 1945 further identifies her work as concerned with locating her contributions within a particular historical context.

Mitchell, though an official historian for the UA, was less concerned, in her initial chapters at least, with explanation than the fact of endurance and/or

53 *Truth or Repose*, pp. 123
ability to cope with change. Her stake is a contemporary one. She argues ultimately, as does Dymphna Cusack in her foreword, for the continued relevance of the United Associations. In listing the various campaigns of the UA, for example, it was Mitchell's habit to either state the culminating moment of a particular campaign in terms of specific UA lobbying (for example, the Married Women's Teacher's Act was repealed in 1948) or a successful outcome with UA contribution along the way. In 1979, for instance, Aboriginal lawyer Pat O'Shane became the first woman part-time paid member of Sydney's Water Board, a reward at last in the campaign for female representation on boards and committees.54 Particularly lengthy campaigns such as that for equal pay were addressed in each decade/chapter respectively, highlighting the UA's ongoing contribution and their ability to respond to new conditions such as war.

If the 1929 formation of the United Associations was the emblematic episode of the beginning of a new form of feminism, epitomised by the UA's sense of initiative and pragmatism, then the 1954 split between the UA and the Australian Federation of Women Voters was, in Mitchell history, the defining moment of the denouement of the Australian women's movement in the 1950s. For Mitchell, the 'train of events leading to the severing of ties with the Australian Federation of Women Voters...illustrate[d] clearly all the difficulties facing the women's movement in the 1950s'. The 1954 split was directly linked to long term UA member Lucy Woodcock losing her AFWV endorsement during a trip to Europe to attend the Danish Summer School because a visit to the Stockholm Peace Meeting that July was reported in the communist press. Following from this, a special board meeting, held because Lucy Woodcock did not want the matter discussed in the open forum of the Women Voter's Triennial Conference in August, saw a bitter row erupt over the incident in the context of a larger discussion about what constituted proper feminism. After many meetings, the UA finally decided to sever ties with the AFWV, citing in the annual report excessive fees charged by the organisation and a wide scope that departed from the UA's 'truly feminist viewpoint', rather than the 'real reasons' which in turn prompted a flurry of

54 Mitchell, p. 19
resignations. Mitchell framed this episode within a larger discussion about forms of feminist politics that were losing relevance and strength due to the rise of other forms of campaigning, specifically for equal pay through the trade union movement, and the advancing years of many feminists, many of whom died during the 1950s and 1960s.\textsuperscript{55}

This acknowledgment of decreasing contemporary significance, however, was counter-balanced in Mitchell's account by a discussion of the role held by the UA in the women's movement as a unique one because it was not led by Communists, nor was it affiliated to any particular political party and finally it welcomed all women regardless of any connection with the left.\textsuperscript{56} It was on this basis that Mitchell's chapter on the 'New Women's Movement' staked a claim for the UA as not only a descendent of the new women's liberation, but also, initially at least, an active participant. She noted that UA members read Betty Friedan's book The Feminine Mystique and that some of the members were involved in the 1971 establishment of a Women's Liberation group on the North Shore. For Mitchell, it 'was not misgivings about maintaining its identity within the expanding ideological horizons of the 1970s' that hampered the UA at this time, but finances, typified by rising rents and members having to bring their own lunch to meetings rather than have it catered for them. Yet despite the decreasing size of the organisation, according to Mitchell, the UA continued to offer a vital contribution, this time as a pressure group, working alongside and with the Women's Electoral Lobby. The UA were also part of a feminist culture that held annual awards lunches from 1975, often at the Journalist's Club, which as Mitchell noted was where Germaine Greer refused to speak in 1972 because the club discriminated against its women members.\textsuperscript{57}

This is an ending dependent on a feminist happy ending – something that Street, wearily writing in the 1960s, wasn't so assured of.

\textsuperscript{55} Mitchell, p. 42-55
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p. 44
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p.73-86
Defining Feminist Failure

In early 1967, *The Bulletin* published an article on Jessie Street to coincide with the publication of her autobiography. It was an article equally concerned with depicting Street as exceptional and as emblematic of a particular feminism, which no longer had contemporary relevance. Titled 'A Rewarding, if unrewarded, Life', 58 April Hersey's profile drew attention to the contemporary status of feminism, depicted in Street's case as 'obsessive' and 'unpopular', but nonetheless 'lively' and 'enthusiastic'. Various features of Street's life, from being born with the 'most ornate of silver spoons in her mouth' to the 'turning point' visit to the USSR, clearly offered a compelling narrative arc for a magazine profile. But Street's own fashioning of her life was summed up by the article's title. It was a view taken by both the magazine and Street herself - or rather, she was resigned at that point in her life to a lack of recognition for her achievements.

Her particular brand of 'obsessive feminism' was depicted as both historical, in the sense that it was born and nurtured in the context of a Depression and two World Wars, and peculiar, with Street taking on 'the unpopular role of feminist', suggesting here also her emblematic position as the feminist of her generation. Feminism was also figured as integral to her development, dating from her early years in India where she blamed her new baby brother for her mother's ill health. This anecdote was lifted from the autobiography, suggesting a conflation of narratives. To a significant extent Street's own historicisation set the tone of the piece. Street, in turn, allowed her rewarding, but unrewarded life to provide the coda to her exciting, but possibly futile experiences. Street modestly admitted to a sense that she had achieved very little, 'except that most people - including women - regard me as slightly potty about the rights of women' and revealed the manuscript went to many publishers over many years 'before the Australasian Book Society decided to take a chance.' Even this revelation, however, wasn't quite modest enough,


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concealing the fact that Street had financed the publication of the autobiography herself.\textsuperscript{59}

A comparison between \textit{The Bulletin} article on Street's life and a review of the autobiography written by Irene Greenwood, Street's Western Australian contemporary, for the Union of Australian Women's magazine \textit{Our Women} offers an especially illuminating way of charting the different historical effects of representations of Street. Hersey, for instance, wrote with a firm line drawn between the escapades of the young, promising Jessie Street and the older, unrewarded 'very able woman'. Her life had been summed up. Greenwood, meanwhile, read the book within a framework of a continuing Australian feminism. So while both articles were keen to highlight Street's commitment and hard work, the fact that Greenwood was writing from within the women's movement, from a position of increasing marginalisation, clearly produced different effects in terms of emphasis and significance. If April Hersey was writing about that marginalisation, about the unpopularity of feminism, Irene Greenwood was writing, perhaps with futility, against it. Greenwood's review offers an example of feminist history making at a time of transition. The draft of Greenwood's review, located in a folder in the Jessie Street collection at the National Library of Australia,\textsuperscript{60} also indicates the care these feminists took in producing this historical significance collaboratively.

Like Hersey's story of Street's life, Greenwood's account absorbed Street's privilege and radicalism into a rollicking historical yarn, underpinned by the assertion that Street 'was and has always been a feminist'. In this sense, Greenwood, like Hersey, accepted and highlighted Street's depiction of her own feminist origins. Each reviewer also seized on the excitement of international travel and the social mobility (or immunity) of Street as defining characteristics of her life story. Both depict Street's life as full of significant moments, whether it be the Depression encouraging the formation of the United Associations (Greenwood) or visiting the USSR in 1938 as part of a Grand Tour of Europe. Hersey wryly noted, in regards to this formative visit,

\textsuperscript{59} Sculness, p. 199
\textsuperscript{60} All references to this review are from Irene Greenwood, draft review for \textit{Our Women} magazine, undated, \textit{Jessie Street Papers}, National Library of Australia, MS2883/2/1744
that ‘unless conversion to another ideology is unsafe, no harm came to the Streets’. There was no suggestion from either that Street’s life was or is in any way dull, even if for Hersey feminism generally wasn’t so blessed. But while Greenwood’s review was not without its criticisms - particularly of the sloppy editing, type-face and lack of index - the general tone was appreciative, focusing especially on the achievements, rather than the failings of Street’s career.

Greenwood chose to begin her discussion with a sense of occasion befitting one of the key feminists of her generation:

Jessie Street, Australian feminist, unofficial ambassador for international understanding and peace, by birth and marriage a member of privileged classes, but by political persuasion a radical, has written her memoirs. With this introduction, Greenwood alerted an intended audience presumably responsive to feminism, radicalism, peace and understanding, to both the distinctiveness of Street’s life and her solidarity with the aims of the publication. Greenwood and Hersey clearly had different ideas about historical significance and were writing for different audiences. Greenwood, for instance, took advantage of the opportunity to address or correct outstanding partisan issues in the Australian and international women’s movements of that period. Most particularly, Greenwood chose to reinforce Street’s position that the anti-Communism that spread through international feminism, and into Australian feminism, during World War II and just after was ultimately a futile response, which left the author of the autobiography (and by extension the author of the review) with ‘bitterness and frustration’ at the ‘failure of women of the so-called ‘free-world’ to join hands with those of communist groups’.

For Hersey, it is Street’s peculiarity that marks the autobiography as interesting, her life that makes her the subject for a magazine profile. Her lack of reward could be attributed to feminism’s unpopularity or socialism’s decline, but for Hersey these were not factors worth dwelling on for clearly Street’s life, and her fashioning of it, were now consigned to the past. Hersey cited the death of Prime Minister John Curtin in 1945 as a key episode in the
arrest of Street's international diplomatic career, a fact borne out in Street's own decision to conclude the autobiography with the end of World War II and the formation of the United Nations. In this way, Hersey accepts, and validates, Street's own reflections that she has achieved very little, despite the considerable effort and energy expended over her long career.

In her review, Greenwood revealed a more vested interest in exploring the larger historical significance of Street's experiences. As a fellow feminist and radical, Greenwood welcomed the publication of Street's autobiography as a significant event within those circles. She was also able to comprehend (and therefore to promote) the potential power of the book to act as an historical corrective or a counter-history for the women's movement. For Greenwood, it was important to chart the formation of the United Associations because the chapters on the organisation 'put on the record the community services of one of the lesser-known organizations'.61 Further, Jessie Street's role in the drafting of Clause 8 for the first United Nations Charter was one way she 'left her mark for all time'. Greenwood, a long-time feminist in a period of hard won or scarce victories, was heartened by this clause, which asserted equal rights for men and women in the United Nations. So for her, 'Chapter twenty, which deals with the birth of the United Nations is perhaps the most valuable of all'. This notion of what constitutes historical value is entirely consistent with Greenwood's feminism, Street's feminism and the feminisms of the inter-war period, which had increasingly directed their energies to equality as a core feminist issue and goal.

Greenwood concluded her review with the vain hope that Street, then in the last years of her life, would produce a second volume of her 'varied life'. In this way, Greenwood offered an argument for continuity – clearly Street was still doing good work and had plenty more to say. For Hersey, the image of Sir Kenneth Street joking that he didn't know his then young wife after she made a gaffe at a party was a more appropriate concluding scene to a portrait of a

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61 Greenwood mentioned, for instance, that the UA were not mentioned in Norman MacKenzie's *Women in Australia*, published in 1962. It is particularly interesting that she locates historical significance here in terms of a book commissioned and published at a time when this generation(s) of feminists were fading from public life.
woman 'who even now at an age when most women are content to potter about and live vicariously through their children, is President of the Australian Soviet Friendship Society, carries about a copy of the United Nations Charter for ready reference, and dashes on carrying the flag for women's rights whether anybody wants to see it or not'. Not only did Hersey locate Jessie Street's historical value in her unusual experiences and singularity, she also offered that final coda of Jessie Street as something of a contemporary anachronism, flying her feminist flag with futility.

Perhaps Peter Sekulless, Street's biographer, had Hersey's review in mind when he subtitled his 1978 work Jessie Street, 'A Rewarding, but Unrewarded Life'. In his introduction, he used the phrase in regards to the 1967 referendum victory which eliminated the legal discrimination against Aboriginals from the Australian Constitution, a campaign to which Street had been characteristically passionately committed to. For Sekulless, the 'referendum victory was the crowning achievement of her rewarding but unrewarded life'. His concern, even preoccupation, with assigning achievements and historical significance to Street's life is attributed to her memoirs, which ended in 1945. As with Hersey (and others), Sekulless recognised the significance of the death of John Curtin, Australia's war time Prime Minister, who had endowed Street with 'her greatest reward: appointment as the only woman member of the Australian delegation to the foundation conference of the United Nations at San Francisco'. Sekulless stated his own task as filling the void left by Street's inability to complete her own memoirs, thereby insisting on historical recognition for her entire life, while also conceding that her 'last quarter century from 1945, can only be understood in terms of what went before'.

Sekulless also revealed in his introduction his awareness of the problems associated with assigning Street a tragic prophetic status. In a letter to Sekulless, for example, Irene Greenwood had commented that Street 'was before her time, that was her tragedy. She thought she could carry Australian women into the 21st Century of international brotherhood/sisterhood. Others

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62 Sekulless, p. 1
did not share her dream. ... Such is the fate of prophets and prophetesses'.

For Sekuless, such a view takes Street's career out of context and overlooks many personal achievements and successful campaigns. For Street's biographer, historical context is depicted as all important in grasping both Street's successes and her failures, though he himself favoured a narrative of failure. After Street's death, Greenwood felt still more strongly the pull to understand the life in terms of what hadn't been achieved. These two readings offer yet another way into understanding the various impulses that underpin the location, or withdrawal, of historical significance. Sekuless' desire to complete the memoirs Street never finished indicated his intention to imbue her whole life with historical significance, via a recognition of the different yet connected facets of her career (the chapters are trotted out dutifully, for instance, on feminism, socialism, the peace movement, Aboriginal Rights) but also by situating her within an historical and organisational context. In contrast, Greenwood's letter to Sekuless indicates that she had now found a different way to account for the failures of feminism – she was advancing the idea of Street as exceptional, as outside time.

In the end, a representation that focussed on Street's rewards, or lack thereof, dovetailed with representations of Street as exceptional and/or exceptional in one significant respect. All these interpretations contain an implicit or explicit critique of the feminism she promoted. To dwell on Street's exceptionalism is to recognise her impressive contribution, ubiquity and symbolic place in a popular understanding of a particular Australian feminism. At the same time, it suggests Street's perceived individuality within this feminism. That Arthur Caldwell could launch her autobiography without mentioning the United Associations revealed the extent to which her activism had come to be associated with a certain spirit of the times, now consigned to history, rather than an identifiable contemporary movement. That Street should write and launch an autobiography in the hope others may possibly find it useful, while at the same time gently mock herself as a figure known to be slightly potty about women's rights, reveals her ambitions were enduring,

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63 Irene Greenwood to Peter Sekuless, 4 July, 1977, cited in Sekuless, p. 22
64 Sekuless, p. 23
but diluted with a sense that her best and most productive days were behind her. Street’s lament to Hersey that she was unable to convert either of her two daughters or any of the girls amongst her fourteen grandchildren to feminism further underlined a generational chasm and the redundancy of a particular feminist politics.

When Sekuless picked up on Hersey’s ‘rewarding, but unrewarded’ theme for his biography of Street, it was his treatment of her feminism that best suited this summation of her career. In his conclusion Sekuless reflected that while Street is ‘best remembered as a feminist’, it was ‘her contribution to the war effort in the Second World War and later to the Aboriginal rights movement’ that were ‘probably more significant’.\(^{65}\) In this reading, an unrewarded feminism is superceded by the more tangible rewards of either raising lots of money for the sheepskins to Russia campaign or the securing of the Aboriginal vote. By prefacing the biography with words from Faith Bandler, Street’s friend and ally in the Aboriginal rights movement, Sekuless further argued for her significance to history on the basis of the rewards she had secured. This is a reading of Street and her feminism not too far removed from Gisela Kaplan’s in its critique of inter-war Australian feminism reaping a ‘meagre harvest’. It presents a history-making pre-occupied with success and defined by goals achieved. In a commemorative lunch for Street in 1997, Bandler returned to this narrative of Street’s life, celebrating her old friend as a feminist and pacifist whose ‘greatest reward’ ultimately was the success of the 1967 Referendum which gave indigenous people citizenship. Bandler wrote: ‘[Street] initiated it, she worked for it, she saw it carried out’.\(^{66}\) With this recipe for success as a yardstick, Street and the feminism she championed were, in regards to most of their campaigns, only two thirds successful.

Street’s autobiography was not a best-seller and was never re-printed. Press for the release of *Truth or Repose* dwelled on both her historical contribution and her then contemporary insignificance, a not altogether uncommon combination when public figures offer their life story after their main work is

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\(^{65}\) Sekuless, p. 208


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perceived to have been done. In Street’s case, this work was feminist, and in some instances ‘communist’, and by the late 1960s both understandings of these terms were in their twilight moments. For a time, Street had felt her efforts were on the verge of being amply justified and rewarded. Devanny’s 1940s portrait and Street’s own recollections of the first half of that decade revealed this. Street’s historical significance at the time of writing was still considerable enough for Arthur Calwell to argue for her exceptional contribution in terms of a general Australian history, but by the time Mitchell was writing her history in the 1970s, Street’s historical role in public life, and the feminism she championed, was confined to the history-making of the remnants of that feminism.
Chapter Five: Left of Feminism: Alternative Political Identities

1920-1970

All I knew about other women's organisations in Sydney was that they were what the Militant Women's Group used to call 'boss class' organisations; none of us knew any middle class women or how to talk to them. What we didn't know was that they felt the same way about us.¹

- Mary Wright

Daughter of a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, Mary Wright might easily have presented her long activist career as inevitable. Instead she chose to deliver her life story as a narrative of increasing politicisation, punctuated with tentative steps into new areas of activism. It was the ordinary struggles of everyday life that pushed her to join a union, discover the Militant Women's Group, run for a seat in parliament, join the Communist Party and eventually work with middle class feminists previously deemed outside or alien to her activist interests. And while Wright's feminist activity was more visible than that of most of her communist friends, it was not atypical, particularly during the World War II period. After the Second World War, some of the collaborations between certain feminists and communists would endure, particularly with the Australian Women's Charter movement, the United Associations and the Union of Australian Women. Yet Wright's initial concerns about communicating with middle-class feminists also demonstrated the extent to which communism and feminism defined themselves against one another. This is a chapter about the separate and intersecting histories of communism and feminism. The personal stories and histories offered by communist women such as Mary Wright indicate how their political and personal identities were negotiated within the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), in relation or contrast to feminist women and historically.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first considers how communist women were defined by the CPA, the second how communist women defined themselves against feminists and the third section explores how left women came to define themselves historically. Defining the role of the communist woman, typically under the banner 'work among women', was an ongoing process from the Party's inception in 1920. It was a project subject to the vagaries of Party policy, the shifting emphases in communist theory and practice and the initiative and the work of the women themselves. It was also a project conducted within and against the masculinised culture of the CPA and the union movement.

Defining the communist woman also involved defining what she was not. From 1920 through to the split in the CPA in 1968, it was understood that communist women were not feminists. This did not necessarily preclude working with feminists, but typically there were boundaries to these collaborations. The second section of this chapter picks up the ways in which communists and feminists worked together, while maintaining distinct political identities. The 1940s and 1950s were hardly the first time communism and feminism had come into contact. Both movements had histories that dove-tailed around particular causes or parted ways over others. The increasing antagonism in the Australian women's movement over whether or not communism was compatible with feminism as a social and political movement had antecedents in long standing debates on both sides about what 'communism' and 'feminism' meant. One way of simultaneously engaging with women's rights and maintaining a commitment to communism would be to renounce the term 'feminist' altogether, indicating a critique of feminism's assumed class position. Alternatively, however, the strong communist presence in the Australian Women's Charter movement and the Union of Australian Women, and to a lesser extent, the United Associations, demonstrated the potential of 'woman' as a unifying category for activists interested in women's rights, though not necessarily in the explicit identity of 'feminist'.
As Juliet Mitchell insists, left and/or working class women, or non professed feminists, are crucial to a study of feminism in past or contemporary societies. Mitchell reminds us of the existence of two traditions - one of confessed 'feminists', women fighting as 'women' as a socio political category, and the other of those women who are active and demonstrating as oppressed 'people'. These strands converge 'at the moment of a women's liberation, at the moment of feminism'.

However, while Women's Liberation may be the most pronounced moment, shared goals and concerns - equal pay and child care, for example - naturally resulted in occasional exchanges, struggles and mutual campaigns. That these campaigns weren't always conducted in the name of 'feminism' indicates that feminism was not the only emancipatory ideal available to women across all classes. Moreover, feminism could seem prescriptive and confining.

The experiences of left women point to other perceived emancipatory options and also remind us of the historical specificity of the term 'feminism'. The CPA-dominated Union of Australian Women (UAW), for instance, 'did not see itself as a feminist organisation but [as a group who] fought for equal rights for women'. This negation of feminist identity is largely historical – put simply, feminism meant something different then. In a study of the relationship between feminism, identity and history, such negations qualify as instructive episodes of why it was that politically active women did or didn't claim particular identifies.

Juliet Mitchell's recognition of two traditions of female activism, one 'feminist' and one not, also offers a starting point to considering how these traditions were incorporated or significantly revised by later feminists interested in fashioning their own traditions. The waves model of understanding the feminist past.

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3 For example, as a young journalist dispatched to cover the women's movement, Justina Williams dismissed women's organisations as 'dull and boring', preoccupied with 'the small rise in the price of bread' or plagued by 'internal factional fighting'. Justina Williams, Anger and Love: A life of struggle and commitment, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1993, p. 61
championed by 1970s feminists may have erased historical connections with post-suffrage feminists, but the influence of Marxism and the prevalence of former CPA members in the Women’s Liberation movement meant that the history of left women came to be written into the history of Women’s Liberation. Or more specifically, the development of feminist labour history provided an impetus and framework in which to re-cast earlier communist activity as embryonic of a later feminism. Earlier generations of left women began to recover and fashion their own personal histories according to a contemporary idea of feminism. The life stories analysed in the third and last section of this chapter illustrate how left women, writing and reminiscing during and after the second wave, remembered themselves as proto-feminists. In these narratives, Women’s Liberation would sometimes explode into the text, making sense of earlier campaigns and struggles, but also announcing itself as new and distinct from previous feminisms. Any earlier feminism was necessarily embryonic, waiting to be ‘awakened’, for these women were similarly concerned with depicting their first ‘awakening’, their embrace of communism, within historical context. The discovery of communism always came first.

Defining the Communist Woman

In 1919, Vladimir Lenin declared his government had done more to emancipate Soviet woman in two years than has been done during the past 130 years by all the advanced, enlightened, “democratic” republics of the world taken together. Six years later, Joseph Stalin addressed an International Women’s Day Rally with a speech that claimed the victory or defeat of proletarian revolution was dependent on ‘whether the reserve of women will be for or against the working

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6 Justina Williams recalled, for instance, that ‘after all the years kicking shit uphill’ in the CPA and various sections of the women’s movement, Women’s Liberation ‘was heady wine [that] went straight to the heart of our oppression’, Anger and Love, p. 233

7 V.I. Lenin, On the Emancipation of Women, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1972, p. 69
class'. In 1926, Alexandra Kollontai, Soviet champion for women's rights, insisted that the New Woman 'certainly...exists'. The words of Lenin, Kollontai and Stalin conjure a series of images of women under Communism that were not necessarily uniform, but each was positive in their own way. Lenin was concerned primarily with the working woman. He recognised that the woman at home had yet to be emancipated, even under his radical reforms, and that a complete reassessment of women's relationship to 'unproductive' housework was necessary for this complete emancipation to occur. Kollontai's New Woman was also a working woman, but as a New Woman herself, Kollontai was able to flesh her out, to explore her sexuality, to celebrate her strengths and to confess to her weaknesses. Kollontai placed her in her historical context, separating the New Woman from her mother and her grandmother and all the women that came before. Kollontai exhorted the New Woman to embrace her sexuality, to demand sexual freedom and sexual pleasure, to challenge conventional morality. They are sentiments we find echoed in the writing of Australian communist Jean Devanny, but Kollontai's voice, within the context of the Soviet Union and Stalinism, was an increasingly muted one. With Stalin, we find something approximating a more recognisable communist woman - as a 'reserve', as support, as wife, mother, daughter and perhaps worker. Women were rank and file members of the Communist Party and less occasionally could be found within the higher ranks, but it was usually a more complicated role than any of the above images suggest. She was not simply the 'New Woman' nor the emancipated worker or the ever willing 'reserve'. Whether she was a mother, wife, daughter, lover, writer, New Woman, worker or some of the above, the communist woman did not always have a clearly defined role.

Historically, the differences between Lenin, Stalin and Kollontai point to the various advances, promises and setbacks for women in the Soviet Union. The

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8 Joseph Stalin, "Women and Communism", Selections from the Writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1950, p. 34
10 Lenin, op.cit., p. 69
remarks also suggest that for Australian women, in the period from the beginning of the Soviet Union through to the split in the Australian Communist Party, the Soviet position on women and communism in general had a definite attraction. For example, Edna Ryan, in her reflections on her brief experience in the CPA from 1927 to 1931, recalled that Kollontai, together with Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg, had been a personal model. In addition, Lenin’s statement ‘every kitchen maid a politician’ had captivated her. As the 1920s drew to a close, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) shifted away from the Marxist-Leninist position of the immediate post 1917 Revolution era to the Stalinism that came to define the Australian Party and Ryan left the Party as a result. However, a CPA based on the Soviet model and the official Soviet position on women, no matter how removed from the reality, still held appeal to working-class women (and the occasional middle-class passenger). Mary Wright recalled that in the 1920s, for instance, the CPA newspaper Worker’s Weekly ‘was the only place you’d read about bad conditions and poor pay in women’s industries’. Grace Peebles, one of the few female ‘Red Raggers’, the slang term for those involved in the heavily active Unemployed Workers’ Movement during the Depression, was similarly drawn to the CPA for its championing of worker’s, and in particular working women’s, rights. Equal pay for equal work was championed from the inaugural issue of Working Woman, first produced and published by women in the CPA in August 1930.

From its formation in 1920 through to the 1970s, the CPA can be roughly divided into three broad periods: the initial optimism of the first decade, increasing Stalinisation (and membership) from 1930 through to the 1950s and the disillusionment of the period after Stalin’s death in 1953. The middle period

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12 Mary Wright in Bread and Roses, pg. 16
13 The Sydney based Unemployed Workers Movement (UWM), a loose association of mostly homeless and intermittently violent young men, whose first executive included John Anderson, professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney, then in the Marxist stage of his career. Its most visible leader was Jack Sylvester, said to be a former sergeant major in the British Army. These ‘red raggers’ were a strong presence in the anti-eviction protests during the Depression. See Bread and Roses, p. 37

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established the dominant character of the CPA - bureaucratised, largely male leadership, significant union influence and the prevailing adherence to the double standards of working-class morality. It was also the period of the sharpest rise in Party membership and influence. A national referendum on a proposal to ban the Party was narrowly defeated in 1951, but the CPA’s moment of biggest influence and appeal - namely after the Soviet defeat of German troops - had passed and anti-Communism became more firmly entrenched as the Cold War set in. Communism continued to exert a strong influence in some of the larger left wing unions such as the Waterside Workers’ Federation and the building industry unions, while the Union of Australian Women, formed in 1950, provided a larger forum for promoting women’s issues. Still, the Cold War context ensured that maintaining membership and validity became a constant struggle. The split in the CPA over the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was in many ways a catalyst for many women - and men - leaving the Party behind and seeking new political forms, not necessarily party oriented, to address their shifting agendas. Younger women, in particular, gravitated towards women’s liberation, rather than sticking with the CPA as it tried to unsuccessfully reinvent itself.

The CPA was formed in Sydney in 1920 through an amalgamation of various socialist groups, none of them, including the Australian Socialist Party, particularly large. Only three women were present at the initial meeting of twenty six - Adela Pankhurst Walsh, daughter of suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst and sister of Chrisabel and Sylvia, solicitor Christian Jollie-Smith and Marcia

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15 Walsh left the CPA in 1923 and eventually became one of the more conservative leaders of the right wing women’s movement and a vehement opponent to strike action. Her experience suggested that neither the suffrage movement or left politics, could have catered to her need for a particular type of female authority within an essentially socially conservative framework. Despite her family pedigree, she had actively resisted articulating a form of female emancipation that rested on the predominantly bourgeois feminist notion of equality. In an article she wrote for the Australian Communist in January 1921 titled ‘Capitalist Home Life and Communism’, Walsh claimed ‘emancipation does not consist of driving buses or entering munition factories, nor in possessing a latch key or studying the law’. It was an observation that contained both revolutionary and reactionary potential and within a short period of time, Walsh made her decision and left the CPA.
Reardon. All three had partners present.16 Author and former suffragette Katharine Susannah Prichard was a founding member, but as she was based in Western Australia she was not present at the inaugural gathering. Prichard, Jollie-Smith and Pankhurst Walsh had all been associated with the suffrage movement at home and overseas, and had actively opposed conscription during World War I.17 Only Prichard remained on the Executive a decade later. Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, female membership to the Party was small. As late as 1935, only two hundred of the total membership of three thousand had been female.18

As Stuart Macintyre has argued, the experience of Jollie-Smith was especially indicative of the position of women in the CPA. Her legal services ensured she remained an important member, but by 1924 she was no longer on the Executive. Her personal life may have been responsible. She had been romantically involved with two married leading Party members and both relationships had ended unsuccessfully. The bohemian mores that flourished within the left offered a stark contrast to the highly conventional domestic lives of Party men.19 Read in the light of her personal experiences, Jollie-Smith's assertion that 'it is at least twice as hard for a woman to be a communist as a man' carried particular weight. Jollie-Smith also advised in the same article published in The Communist in 1922 that communist women forget their 'personal resentment' lest it carry the sex war, 'disruption, strife and bitterness and misunderstanding' into the class war.20 This notion of a struggle on two fronts, with the class war assuming primacy, informed both Communist women's critique of the Party and their enduring commitment to its politics and culture. It was a view that was also diametrically opposed to the non-party politics of Australian feminists of the same period.

17 Joyce Stevens, Taking the Revolution Home, p. 14
19 The Reds, p. 125
20 cited in Stevens, p. 24
By the time of the Third Period in the early to mid 1930s, with the focus on an idealised working-class morality, the sort of hypocrisy that defined Jollie-Smith’s experiences had become even more pronounced with potentially disastrous results for women who chose to pursue both political and personal emancipation. The experience of twice-expelled activist and author Jean Devanny perhaps offered the most infamous example. The CPA was clearly ‘manly’ with the female activist ‘a disturbing, transgressive presence in a men’s party’. Unglamarous tasks were usually her job, unless she happened to be young and/or talented with platform skills.  

The prevalence of workers wives’ also ensured that the prevailing ideology of working-class morality was rarely challenged. Equal pay, child care and women’s work were the most common women’s issues, rather than abortion, divorce reform or sexual autonomy. Moreover, even those base issues rarely received more than lip service from the Party itself. As Joyce Batterham recalled, ‘if you wanted childcare you had to get a group of women around it and do something about organising it yourself’.

In keeping with the masculinist character of the Party, female recruits were often hard to come by. Then, once in the Party, the role of women was hard to define - a contrast to the image of the proletarian man. Women could be addressed as wives and mothers, which was more common than being addressed as workers. Macintyre points out that more often than not this sort of portrayal was suitable to the bulk of women either in the Party or associated with it. The idea that directing women to the inequalities and injustices of their own sphere of experience would lead them to reflect on larger problems pertaining to the entire working class may have suggested a link in party policy between sexual and class oppression, but most women were content with offering a supportive role to their husbands. Even in the early period of the Party, the women’s group was generally opposed to feminism and figured their primary role was as a support to their spouses. One woman wrote to Workers’ Weekly in March 1927 posing the question: ‘Why should I neglect my family in order to sit at meetings or sprout on

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21 The Reds., p. 126
22 Joyce Batterham in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 210
soap boxes? I do my duty as a rebel by sympathising in my husband's activity.²³ Clearly, female emancipation was not a specific concern.

What to actually do with the women was a recurring question in the CPA during the 1920s and throughout the 1930s and 1940s. What the Party termed 'work among women' was partially inspired by their belief that women were 'politically backward' and therefore needed to be educated and organised in working class politics. This often meant setting up auxiliary organisations to support men's struggles, such as the railway and miners' unions in the 1930s, rather than separate women's organisations or through the promotion of women's sections in industries heavily populated by women. Typically, 'work among women' was co-ordinated and directed by women's committees or departments of the CPA and these were under the leadership of a male party leader, though the female secretary or organiser usually did most of the work. There was constant debate about what constituted a separatist or specialist women's organisation and whether or not these were appropriate for the CPA in general. The Militant Women's Groups that began in Sydney in 1927 were an early attempt to properly co-ordinate women's activities, but related debates about whether or not wives (as opposed to women workers) were political or not (and usually it was considered they were not) offered one vital clue to their demise a couple of years later.²⁴ Generally, the CPA's attitude to 'work among women' then was ad hoc, vacillating and inconsistent. Mary Wright's experiences in 'work among women' in the 1930s were typical. She remembered:

The first time they put me on the District Committee and I'm saying to Bill Mountjoy I haven't got the least idea in the world what work among women is and I don't know how to go about it and I don't know anyone who can tell me. And he had to end up saying 'well, we know, none of us know anything about it but until we get someone better we'll have to have you.²⁵

²³ *The Reds*, p. 124
²⁴ Joyce Stevens, *Taking the Revolution Home*, p. 10-30
²⁵ Mary Wright in *Bread and Roses*, p. 51-52
For some of women, however, the early period of the Party is often remembered as a time of relative freedom and encouragement, tempered by a paternalistic approach and the dichotomy between the actions of Party men within politics and at home. Edna Ryan recalled that as 'a bright twenty three year old and a young woman [I] always got a hearing'. Hettie Ross nee Weitzel (she later reverted back to her maiden name when her marriage broke down), a member of the Executive in the late 1920s and the person in charge of 'work amongst women', was a model for Ryan, who felt that 'if there'd been more women around like Hetty there'd have been more women on the Executive'. For Ryan, male comrades 'didn't show discrimination or hostility' and generally, she felt she was being encouraged, although she didn't recognise the paternalism at the time. Ryan had been confident enough to express criticism of Party Secretary Jack Kavanagh over the 1929 Timber Workers' Strike and stated that 'there was never any question that anybody was free to criticise a leading party member. You would not feel disadvantaged or ostracised - there was a completely open spirit'.26 Later, Jess Grant, who joined the Party in 1932, the time of the 'new line' that saw the first split in the Party as the CPA followed Soviet policy and rejected potential 'social fascists', recalled a similar experience with then Queensland Secretary J.B. Miles.27

Later, when J.B. Miles became National Secretary of the CPA, he would begin a long standing affair with Jean Devanny. In her autobiography Point of Departure, she thinly disguised him as 'leader'. Miles was depicted as simultaneously supportive of her political career and largely dismissive of her creative pursuits. Her outspoken position on the importance of female sexual autonomy was a problem area that was never quite resolved between them. These negotiations are instructive - encouragement from male comrades was clearly evident, but it was

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26 Ryan in Stevens, Taking the Revolution Home, p. 124-129
27 Jess Grant to Joyce Stevens: The Old Man (J.B. Miles) let me sit in on some of the party discussions and took me to meetings, although he was preparing to go overseas. That was quite helpful to me. In fact, I couldn't have asked for more help than I got from him. I suppose he was interested in me as a young cadre coming into the party but on the other hand he was so feudal in his approach to his own wife and family. Ibid., p. 173
conditional. In the main, young talented women were encouraged to pursue a political career, but creative endeavours and an agenda for female autonomy, sexual and otherwise, did not sit easily within the broader program for emancipation of the working class, and proved to be more problematic. Sex, in particular, was an issue that was largely stumbled around rather than addressed directly. The working-class morality that came to prevail as the social orthodoxy at the height of the Stalinist era meant that sexual hypocrisy was more likely than a progressive approach.

By the 1940s, the CPA was more active in recruiting female members, commencing at the Party’s first National Women’s Conference in 1942. In that year, there were more than four thousand women in the CPA, approximately a quarter of its membership, but the Party was aiming for more. CPA member Phyllis Johnson remembered the Conference as ‘really wonderful’ and representative of the general mood at the time where ‘Work Among Women’ was a popular statement and was on practically every agenda where communists met to discuss policy questions. The Party was illegal from June 1940 to December 1942, but the switch in policy to support rather than oppose the war in 1941 led to a surge in popularity and a radical restructure of the Party’s organisations and ethos. Many CPA men went off to war, leaving women to take prominent leadership roles, though some were reluctant to do so. Elna Serle, elevated to the position of South Brisbane District Secretary, didn’t feel as though she could do it, but she was ‘almost forced into it’ and got a lot of help in any case. Women became the public face of the CPA, often as a first point of contact, and it was in this capacity that many of them became aware that men in the Party rarely asked women directly to join and that female contribution to the highest levels of the organisation was typically token. Louise West, who joined the CPA in 1942,

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28 J.B. Miles, Work Among Women. How to Organise. Series 6, ACP, Sydney, 1943, p. 3
30 Phyllis Johnson in Taking the Revolution Home, pg. 197
31 Lyn Finch, ‘Could ‘Winnie the War Winner’ Organise Women?’, p. 14
recalled there was a lot of talk about how women could be helped more to participate, but in 'the main, men didn’t help and women played a very secondary part'.\textsuperscript{32} And while the National Women’s Conference was noteworthy for its resolution to move communist women into industry in an effort to promote their chances in the union movement, ultimately the Conference and its effects represented a short-lived redirection in communist history where the Party grappled with developing a role in its ranks, and in society for communist women.\textsuperscript{33}

Female networks of support and encouragement were not established or promoted at leadership level. Left women obviously formed strong networks amongst themselves and within their auxiliary bodies, but within the Party itself this supportive network was not as evident at a higher level. Once in the Party, the high proportion of male members and the lack of females in leadership roles could result in a very intimidating experience for the young and inexperienced female comrade. Paternalism was almost inevitable. Daphne Gollan identified this as the problem of 'overshadowed development', where inexperienced young women found their 'way to the wider reaches of the outside world in the protective custody of men friends'. She recalled:

> I had managed to find my way independently into the Communist Party but once there was speedily headed off, cornered and captured. At the very beginning of a new intellectual venture one fell silent before learning to open one's mouth to make the essential blundering attempts to arrive at a position for oneself. Others would expound everything so much better.\textsuperscript{34}

As Gollan pointed out, this problem was in no way exclusive to the CPA and was a common experience for women entering predominantly male organisations. What makes the CPA case peculiar was the revolutionary potential for women, at least at a theoretical level. It was this potential that often drew women into the

\textsuperscript{32} Louise West in \textit{Taking the Revolution Home}, p. 147

\textsuperscript{33} Finch, p. 20

Party, but once inside the increasingly entrenched bureaucratic leadership, the predominantly male membership and prevailing social morality could severely limit this inherent revolutionary potential for women.

Gollan's experience of working with the Communist led Ironworker's Union in the 1940s alerted her to the essential hypocrisy at the core of the idea of working class morality or what she labelled 'dual standards of morality'. Gollan came to realise that proletarian morality was only really distinctive from the bourgeois variety in that it served the interests and needs of the working class. Furthermore, while the working-class family was upheld as an institution to be admired for its stability and enduring equal partnerships, puritanical standards were applied to women in their domestic role. These standards were not extended to the husbands, who often sought companionship and stimulation elsewhere, returning to the home for rest and recreation.35 Such a damning critique indicated that the role of wives in the CPA had continued to be problematic. Partnerships where both partners were active and supportive of each other were not uncommon, but the wife at home, helping the cause by looking after her husband and children, was a more familiar role, especially for men at leadership level - 'Mrs. Miles' was typical. Joyce Batterham, who joined the CPA in 1937 and later conflicted with the leadership over her decision to have a baby and remain active, recalled that 'as a young militant I never intended to get married and this idea was quite prevalent. If you wanted to work and be involved in the movement and be involved in things, you didn't get married'.36

Within the auxiliaries and women's committees and the Party's own women's groups, women, including mothers and wives, were more obviously 'active', although the primary cause was almost always that of protecting and advancing the rights of the proletarian male. This is hardly surprising - general working-class emancipation held the promise of emancipation of women. Still, the experience of being a woman in the Party, and particularly a woman who sought

35 Ibid., pp. 324
36 Taking the Revolution Home, p. 209
to challenge working-class morality or introduce a political critique of
domesticity, and the benefit of hindsight has resulted in many former Communist
women reevaluating the potential of the CPA in terms of female liberation. Gollan
offered this summary:

Thirty years ago we saw the struggle for women's emancipation as a minor
part of a much larger struggle and equated their liberation with their entry
into the workforce, socialisation of housework and provision of child care
services. The solution of women's problems lay in lifting women, as far as
their disabilities and biological role allowed, to the level of men. The worse
thing about this approach was that it neglected the simplest political lesson of
all - that the winning of freedom cannot be the by-product of someone else's
struggle. Those who are oppressed must liberate themselves.37

Ostensibly, feminist groups did offer a space to address women's issues on a
primary level. Still, the fact that women such as Gollan, with a strong interest in
female emancipation, did not seek out feminist groups illustrates a fundamental
ideological divide. By the time 'feminism' was recast and reinvigorated in the mid
1970s, left-wing women were well established in the women's movement.
'Feminism' had come to mean something altogether different, although the
middle class character would reassert itself. Significantly, 'communism' had also
been refugured. Tensions and splits over first the 1956 invasion of Hungary and
Khruschev's denunciation of Stalin and later, the 1968 Soviet intervention in
Czechoslovakia, broke the supposed 'United Front' of the Party. The Depression,
World War II and the threat of illegality - all of which had made Communism
seem so vital and a real alternative to the capitalist system - were now in the past.
Women's liberation offered a form of critique for left women to understand and
politicise their experiences within the context of a demoralised Communist
movement. According to Gollan, after 1968, women who had always resented the
traditional female tasks allocated to them in the CPA, became increasingly
interested in 'the explosive quality of Germaine Greer' and the American
feminists. The Party were unable to suppress the literature and even though

37 Daphne Gollan, 'The Memoirs of 'Cleopatra Sweatfigure'', p. 326
Communist women ‘could reject an enormous amount’, what was left over was enough ‘to be highly explosive’.38

Feminism: A Point of Departure

Before I joined the CPA, I’d read about feminism and the suffragette movement and thought it was a good thing. But I was told in the CPA that feminism was a bourgeois concept and that one eschewed feminism, but one could support the sort of things that were taking place in the Soviet Union; that is equality for women. However, while these things were said about equality, women weren’t equal in the CPA or anywhere else.39
- Gloria Garton

In 1929, Edna Ryan offered reassurances in the CPA paper Worker’s Weekly that the recent launch of the Woman Worker was not ‘meant to entice women away from the class struggle’, but was aimed instead at the ‘special task of reaching working-class women’. In response to the related fear that a ‘separate woman’s bulletin might become “feminist”’, Ryan wrote ‘it is enough to say that women taking part in the class struggle cannot be feminist. The working class movement has no time or room for feminists; they belong to and come from the leisured classes’.40 Later in the same year Ryan’s husband Jack was expelled from the Executive and the Party itself, after he refused to renounce his connections with non-communists or ‘social fascists’. Ryan didn’t resign in his wake, thinking the new line was ‘an aberration.’41 She also asserted to the Worker’s Weekly that it was her right not to be considered an extension of him.42 But in 1931, she was called before the Control Commission, the organ set up by the CPA to orchestrate the new line and though she was never formally expelled, it was implicitly assumed from that meeting that she was no longer in the Party.43 Ryan later

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39 Gloria Garton in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 228
40 Edna Ryan, Worker’s Weekly, 18th January 1929, p. 3
41 Edna Ryan in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 132
42 Edna Ryan to Worker’s Weekly, 20th March 1931
43 Edna Ryan in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 132

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remembered feeling ‘very upset’ about the fallout from the expulsion and having lived all her life as ‘a rebel’ she wasn’t immediately inclined to join the Labor Party. Besides she had no close friends outside the Party. Agitation, Propaganda and Organisation had consumed all her time.\textsuperscript{44} Later, Ryan would become prominent in the labour movement, particularly around the issue of equal pay.

I offer her narrative here as an example of a woman activist, later a passionate campaigner for a range of women’s issues, who had on occasion expressed dissatisfaction with the CPA’s position on various policies relating to women, but who also during her time in the Party agreed wholeheartedly with their critique of feminism. She and her husband had flourished in the CPA during the 1920s where work with fellow travellers was encouraged and commonplace. At the same time, it was clear that feminists were not included in that category. That the class struggle and feminism were opposed was considered axiomatic. ‘Feminism’, a luxury of the leisured classes, did not speak to communist women such as Ryan and this was reiterated to the extent that newcomers to the Party were warned early on the avoid feminists, usually by other communist women. Mary Wright recalled in particular the anti-feminism of Hettie Weitzel, Edna Ryan and Nellie Rickie, all leading communist women during the 1930s.\textsuperscript{45}

Rickie, an active unionist and champion of women’s rights, had come to Sydney in 1924, to be in time for the revolution. A year later she ran for a seat in state Parliament. She wasn’t successful and the fact that Millicent Preston Stanley, then President of the Feminist Club and organiser for the National Party, did get elected was ‘particularly galling for communist women’. For Audrey Johnson, the differences between Rickie, who represented shop assistants on the Labor Council, and Stanley, the head of an organisation that championed the idea that women could get active if there was more domestic help, were highly significant in explaining the communist position on feminism at this time.\textsuperscript{46} Culturally and

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 133
\textsuperscript{45} Mary Wright in Bread and Roses, p. 17
\textsuperscript{46} Audrey Johnson, Bread and Roses, p. 16-17
politically, the Feminist Club, committed on the one hand to equal pay and opportunity and on the other, to right wing organisations such as the Sane Democracy League and later the Women's Movement Against Socialisation, embodied a contemporary understanding of 'feminism' that only seemed to reinforce the general Party position that the women's movement was essentially bourgeois and in some instances, anti-communist. In 1932, for example, the women's section of the Sane Democracy League, chaired by Stanley, resolved unanimously to aim for the 'deportation of communists [and] the punishment of sedition by the forfeiture of all citizen rights'.

Some communist women did identify as feminist, or at least embryonic feminists, in their recollections of their time in the CPA, indicating perhaps that their memories were informed by a later conception of feminism or that their communism and feminism were not entirely incompatible (or both). Jess Grant, came to communism in the 1930s via the Queensland Teachers' Union, Friends of the Soviet Union and the Workers Educational Association (WEA). During her time organising 'work among women' she was dismissed as an inappropriate leader of the women's movement in the Party on the basis that she 'made them too much like [herself]'. This criticism didn't prevent her ascent, however, and during the Second World War she was promoted to branch secretary and later, to the CPA's Central Control Commission, a position rarely held by women. And while Grant didn't think of herself 'as a woman in respect to the Party', she chose to remember herself as a feminist, which she defined thus: 'I was strong for women's rights in the teaching profession and I defended women anywhere I heard them spoken against'. Yet this was a qualified feminism, circumscribed by what was possible within the Party. Grant didn't see herself as a typical woman within the Party because as an executive member she was 'right into politics, which was a bit unusual'. Party politics did not extend to the sorts of problems faced by most women. Grant recalled 'I wasn't involved in housework or being

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47 The Daily Telegraph, 10th September, 1932
48 Jess Grant in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 172
49 Ibid., p. 184
kept at home. These problems didn’t apply to me’.\textsuperscript{50} Louise West similarly remembered her childlessness gave her with a kind of freedom. She recalled going out of her way to keep women with babies informed during World War II, explaining ‘I didn’t have a baby so I worried for nothing’.\textsuperscript{51} As a Party executive, Grant heard the membership’s personal problems and complaints, ranging from infidelity to unwanted pregnancy, yet the issue of a woman’s right to abortion, for example, ‘never came up at all’. Yet it was her personal experiences as a woman – as a teacher at the time of the Married Teacher’s Dismissal Act for example – that motivated her feminism. Communist politics, in this sense, was one thing and feminism quite another. For Grant, it was only later, presumably during the 1970s, that feminism emerged in the ‘fullest sense’.\textsuperscript{52}

Phyllis Johnson similarly drew a line between the women’s movement as it was then and as it was articulated later, or more specifically in 1975 when she began to see that a ‘woman must look at herself, must be aware of herself, as well as being protective towards her husband and her children’. For Johnson, the women’s movement prior to the 1970s ‘didn’t see the woman as the modern women’s movement sees her’. She included herself in the earlier women’s movement: ‘we saw the woman as putting a protective umbrella over herself and her children, and so we were fighting for free milk in schools’.\textsuperscript{53} The Union of Australian Women embodied this kind of activity. For both Grant and Johnson, it was Jean Devanny who was really an ‘active feminist’.\textsuperscript{54} Johnson recalled hearing Devanny speak on International Women’s Day in 1936 on the topic of women’s sexuality and finding it ‘entirely out of place’. Johnson also reflected that perhaps the women’s movement may have ‘advanced more quickly’ if the women had properly understood the implications of Devanny’s critique.\textsuperscript{55} In both these instances, Devanny heralded the feminism that was to come. For Grant and

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 185
\textsuperscript{51} Louise West in \textit{Taking the Revolution Home}, p. 144
\textsuperscript{52} Jess Grant, pg. 186
\textsuperscript{53} Phyllis Johnson in \textit{Taking the Revolution Home}, p. 191
\textsuperscript{54} Jess Grant, p. 185
\textsuperscript{55} Phyllis Johnson, p. 198

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Johnson, feminism wasn’t the Feminist Club, but rather that which came later. When Johnson said ‘I had a feminist consciousness, but I didn’t call it that’, she was resisting the feminism of middle-class women’s organisations in order to set the agenda for a ‘real’ feminism later. Grant was placing her feminism on an activist path that would eventually result in women’s liberation. In such instances communist women were defining themselves retrospectively as pre- rather than anti-feminist and in doing so obliterated the feminism of the time out of historical existence.

These different examples of communist women engaging with or renouncing the idea of feminism indicate the multiple ways the issue of the relationship between feminism and communism can be addressed. Firstly, feminism can be understood historically and culturally, as denoting organised, middle-class feminism, in the inter-war years in particular. As Joyce Stevens has pointed out, feminist organisations such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters and the United Associations who pronounced themselves ‘non-political’, as in non-party political, were in opposition to women in political parties, no matter how much the latter group campaigned for women’s rights. Communist women therefore stood wedged between two incompatible views about women’s place in politics. And while feminists and communist women occasionally campaigned for the same causes, feminism rarely offered appeal as an alternative politics. As a university student drawn to communism in the 1940s, Amirah Inglis couldn’t recall any particular resentment about the lack of women in executive positions in the Labor Council or local branch of the Communist Party. For Inglis and her friends, whose eyes were ‘focused on the root inequality of class’, feminism simply meant ‘equal pay’. From that perspective, campaigning with feminist groups for particular causes, rather than in the name of a shared political vision, could be understood and/ or justified. Phyllis Johnson campaigned for a number of the same causes as the United Associations, for example: the economic

36 Phyllis Johnson, p. 192
37 Joyce Stevens, Taking the Revolution Home, p. 15
38 Amirah Inglis, The Hammer and Sickle and the Washing Up: Memories of an Australian Woman Communist, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1995, p. 16
emancipation of women and against prostitution, but her participation in those campaigns did not make her a feminist.

Secondly, therefore, some communist women have chosen to represent their own experiences in the CPA as a stepping stone to, or fledging version, of a later feminism. In this historical connection, women’s liberation has, for instance, alternatively been understood as arising partially as a result of the increasing fragmentation of the left (the split in the CPA, the rise of the New Left) or in opposition to a communism whose weaknesses were increasingly laid bare, firstly after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and more emphatically when Czechoslovakia was invaded in 1968. Sheila Rowbotham’s summation that women’s liberation arose from both an earlier equal rights feminism and a revolutionary socialist connection, but that it was ultimately something more than either of those, ⁵⁹ offers clues as to how both middle-class feminists and communist women were able to stake a historical claim to new feminisms. The context of such claims then is crucial. The experiences of communist women such as Phyllis Johnson and Jess Grant were recorded and ‘recovered’ after or within the cultural moment of 1970s feminism. In their particular case, it was Joyce Stevens, a former CPA member and women’s liberation activist, who sought to make ‘visible’ the historical contribution of women to communism, which had been left ‘silent’ in mainstream political histories. ⁶⁰

The community that did develop among communist women has in such narratives been figured as both evidence of an embryonic feminism and in contrast to the organised feminism of the time. What emerges from a study of communist women’s personal narratives is a sense that women were clearly in the minority in the CPA, that marriage and motherhood often curtailed or circumscribed a woman’s communist activity and that for those select women who did manage to be active in the Party, there was a women’s culture of sorts, sometimes arising from the CPA’s formal initiatives and other times from shared

⁶⁰ Joyce Stevens, Taking the Revolution Home, p. 15-16
experiences and the passing of information. Much of this knowledge was personal, later to be re-conceptualised as political by women's liberationists. Where and how to get an abortion, for instance, was information that circulated in women's networks 'inside and outside the Party'. Communist women also had their own canon of female greats, primarily communists Clara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg and Alexandra Kollontai, but also birth control pioneers such as Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger. And significantly, communist women did have a critique of the CPA's official position on women and family, though rarely to the point of suggesting policy alternatives to the Party's anti-contraception stance for example. As Ryan recalled, what made Jean Devanny distinctive was that her stance on contraception and sexual liberation was as political as it was personal.62

Nor were communist women always able to toe the party line on women’s issues. Ryan, reflecting on the introduction of child endowment in NSW in 1927, recalled that she and her mother, a single mother of twelve, would have welcomed child endowment. And while women in the Communist and Labor Parties were generally overjoyed with the introduction of child endowment, the trade union movement and the CPA felt the working class had been robbed - in principle. Ryan added, 'if the choice lay between a bigger increase in the basic wage or child endowment, I would choose the latter. Many radicals do not agree with me.'63

There were also more productive instances of contact between feminists and communists in the pre-World War II period, including a heavy left presence at a large rally held in the Domain and convened by the New South Wales branch of the Australian Federation of Women Voters to protest against the Sydney Council's decision to sack married women.64 Feminists and communists also both contributed to the communist-initiated magazine Woman Today, which was first

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61 Edna Ryan in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 135
62 Ibid., p. 136
63 Ibid., p. 126
64 Stevens, pg. 65
published in 1936 and reflected the CPA’s recent moves towards unity with fellow travellers.\textsuperscript{65}

The CPA’s shift to a United Front ethos in the second half of the 1930s encouraged contact with other groups to form a broad anti-fascist alliance. Activists such as Mary Wright, who were inclined to favour meaningful collaboration, embraced the shift. Successful examples of organising with non-CPA women included the founding of the Miners’ Federation Women’s Auxiliary in 1937, the Women’s Organising Committee of the Sheet Metal Worker’s Union, CPA branches that flourished through collaboration with fellow travellers\textsuperscript{66} and an ever-broadening recognition of International Women’s Day. In 1944, Wright broadened representation at the annual IWD conference to include more than one hundred visitors from unions, women’s organisations and national, political and youth groups. At the same conference, Mary Gilmore and Marion Piddington were present and honoured as ‘pioneer’ campaigners for women’s causes, reflecting a general promotion of a shared reservoir of key figures and causes. At this time and through these collaborations, Wright found she had common interests with United Associations members such as Ada Bromham and Isabel McCorkindale and gladly accepted an offer to join the UA, where she helped formulate the first Australian Women’s Charter. It was from these feminists that Wright ‘learned a lot more — things that were second nature to them about the rights of women. ... My knowledge before was small and on the surface’.\textsuperscript{67}

World War II, of course, was a catalyst for most collaborations between communist women and feminists. Jessie Street was another. Through the Council of Women in War Work and her Sheepskins for Russia campaign, she encouraged contact between feminist and non-feminist groups and middle-class and non-working class women. The 1943 Australian Women’s Charter conference was the apotheosis of those collaborations and in terms of representation, it was a clear

\textsuperscript{65} Stevens, pg. 70
\textsuperscript{66} Topsy Small was active in the Katoomba Branch of the CPA during the 1940s and remembered with fondness community endeavours such as a library and a day care centre. \textit{Bread and Roses}, p. 125
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Bread and Roses}, p. 126
success. But reservations about what the Charter represented were not confined to those in the women's movement. The traditional concerns of the Charter were praised as being 'already included in the programme of the CPA', while other initiatives such as paid housework and the removal of discriminatory clauses from industrial legislation were opposed on the basis they conflicted with communist objectives.\textsuperscript{68} Ultimately, it was the communist women who did want more recognition of women as wives and mothers that sustained the Charter movement. These were the women active in establishing the New Housewives Association (NHA) in 1948, a breakaway organisation from the more conservative Housewives Association that was abandoned by the CPA in 1949, the ethos and nucleus of which resurfaced the following year with the formation of the Union of Australian Women.

This shared history, however, was episodic and fragmented. Prior to World War II, contact with middle class feminist groups was not encouraged. Similarly, women's groups didn't actively seek out connections with left women. In 1934 when the Australian Railways Union (ARU) Women's Auxiliary approached the United Associations for assistance with their campaign to improve wages and conditions, the UA decided it could not publicly support the campaign because as a non-party political organisation it didn't want to be seen as part of a political alignment against the United Australia Party. In the same year, the UA asked for the auxiliary's assistance in sending a deputation to parliament to examine the question of reducing hours and 'to determine what formula of pay' would be needed for this. Not surprisingly, the auxiliary were extremely reluctant to support any campaign that threatened wages and as such accused the UA of 'cant and hypocrisy and camouflage'.\textsuperscript{69}

The Council of Action for Equal Pay, established in May 1937 at an equal pay conference convened by the New South Wales Clerks Union at which fifty-three

\textsuperscript{68} Joyce Stevens, \textit{Taking the Revolution Home}, p. 92

\textsuperscript{69} Patricia Ranald, 'Feminism and Class: The United Associations of Women and the Council of Action for Equal Pay in the Depression' in \textit{Worth Her Salt: Women at Work in Australia}, (eds) Margaret Bevege, Margaret James and Carmel Shute, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1982, p. 275
organisations were present, signaled an important step forward for collaborative women's activism. The CAEP was initially supported by the CPA, a number of key unions and also feminist organisations including the United Associations, the Feminist Club, the Progressive Housewives Association, and the Women's Justice Association. The CAEP argued for equal pay and equal job opportunities and their diverse campaigning methods – conferences, public meetings, questionnaires sent to members of parliament, deputations to government, applications to industrial courts and broadcasts on Labor-owned radio station 2KY – reflected the varied styles of their mixed membership base. The Council was led by Muriel Heagney, a researcher, writer and organiser for trade unions and the Labor Party, who had been campaigning for some time for the rights of working-class women in particular. In the first couple of years of the CAEP Jessie Street also played a prominent role, until she and Heagney fell out over the issue of how to best implement equal pay. Street's support for the gradual implementation of equal pay, along with her promotion of a right for wives' legal entitlement to a portion of their husband's wage, was consistent with her earlier critique of the basic wage as inadequate. However, this approach was also in conflict with Heagney's call for immediate and full equal pay, a demand that was firmly located in her critique of the working conditions of working-class women.

While, the CAEP has been represented as the pinnacle of left-wing activism, with the soured relations between Street and Heagney depicting the ultimate failure of feminist organisations and left women to work collaboratively, some historical accounts, including those by communist women, have complicated this narrative. In doing so, communist women and others have drawn attention to how such splits between feminists and left women were never entirely straightforward. Prior to the conflict over approach, Street and Heagney had worked productively

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70 Barbara Caine, 'Council of Action for Equal Pay', Australian Feminism: A Companion, p. 401
71 Marilyn Lake, Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1999, p. 74
72 See, for example, Patricia Ranald, 'Feminism and Class' and Caine 'Council of Action for Equal Pay'
and along mutual paths for the cause of equal pay. According to Winifred Mitchell, UA historian, Street and Heagney had also continued to work together after their different points of view were established until Heagney denounced UA as 'bowing to the dictates of their bourgeois husbands' at the Equal Pay Conference in September 1939. Street persevered, and along with lawyer Nerida Cohen petitioned the Australian Council of Trade Unions (the ACTU) to pursue the female basic wage. In this, they (and others) were eventually successful. Marilyn Lake has also speculated that Street's 'upstaging' of Heagney when she led a deputation to intervene in the Basic Wage Inquiry the Federal Arbitration Court in 1940 may have contributed to the rift between the two leaders.

CAEP official and communist Flo Davis recalled that the Council was established by Heagney, but that it '[a]ctually grew from feminist demands – the United Associations of Women were very much at the fore'. For Davis, the main task and value of the CAEP was in the 'reams and reams of information' they distributed about equal pay. Elsewhere it was hamstrung by its small size – important female dominated unions such as the Textile and Clothing Union hadn't joined – and the Second World War, which made both Heagney and Street's positions on equal pay untenable. This assessment also suggests how diffuse even shared campaigns were. Equal pay was the one cause that had the potential to bring women activists of various political backgrounds together and indeed this was the area of the most ongoing contact, particularly during World War II and after, most notably through the Women's Employment Board (WEB) and in 1949 and 1950 in appeals to the Basic Wage Inquiry. However, there was never an organised equal pay movement so much as politically active women coming together around that particular issue when the need arose. While writing her

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73 Both women, for instance, wrote and published pamphlets about women's wages. Heagney wrote Are Women Taking Men's Jobs?, published in 1935, while Street produced The Justice of Equal Pay and Equal Opportunity in 1936. As an official of the Melbourne-based Clerks' Union, Heagney was also warmly welcomed to Sydney by the United Associations in 1935 at a lunch presided over by Street. She also joined the UA at the same time. See Winifred Mitchell, 'Campaigning for Equality' in Jessie Street: Documents and Essays, p. 61
74 Mitchell, op.cit, p. 64
75 Lake, p. 185
76 Flo Davis in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 219
biography of CPA member and equal pay campaigner Kath Williams, Zelda D’Aprano was struck by the lack of contact, for instance, between Williams and Heagney, concluding that it was their allegiance to ‘their male-dominated political parties [that] prevented them from combining their efforts in the campaign for pay justice for women’.77

The conflict between Muriel Heagney and Jessie Street also compromised some communist women at the time. Topsy Small recalled that Heagney ‘re-edited’ a reply Small had written on behalf of the CPA to Jessie Street’s statement on equal pay published in the Daily News in October, 1939. Heagney’s re-write suggested that the gradualist position on equal pay was evidence that Street’s main concern was ensuring that profits weren’t lost, rather than ‘the principle itself’. Street, a long time advocate of equal pay, was understandably offended. Small, meanwhile, was upset and embarrassed over the incident, particularly as ‘she wouldn’t have hurt [Street] for the world’. Small’s fond recollection of Street as a gregarious woman, interested in all sorts of people and confident of her ability to deal with all them without compromise, was shared by other communist women who had worked with Street over the years. It was an image that also contrasted with her memory of Heagney as a ‘lonely woman who worked hard for the cause but lacked close friends.’ Small mused that ‘[p]robably neither woman understood the other’, though for a time ‘the breach was healed by those who were allies of both women’. An ‘uneasy alliance’ was established.78

Street, sympathetic to communism, well-to-do and feminist, occupies an interesting space in the histories of left women. She has been invoked at various times to illustrate her significance to Australian communism,79 the possibility of

77 Zelda D’Aprano, Kath Williams: The Unions and the Fight for Equal Pay, Spinifex, Melbourne, 2001, p. 219
78 Topsy Small in Bread and Roses, p. 118-119
79 Justina Williams recalled that Street’s frequent visits to Perth after the Second World War ‘were a political asset, helping to draw support from anything that could be even remotely construed as a front for communists. Her accent, presence, her old family background and personal achievements, not to mention her marriage to Mr Justice Street, made it hard to stick on her the label of ‘fellow traveller’ during the Cold
feminist-communist union and as emblematic of a bourgeois feminism that was alien to most communist women. This chapter was prefaced with a quote from Mary Wright recalling that she and her female comrades didn’t know how to talk to middle-class women. Later, she would learn that feminists didn’t know how to talk to left women either. It was Street who both prompted these fears and provided the later insights. When Wright and her colleagues first approached Street in 1936 about a feminist contribution to International Women’s Day, they were ‘terrified. Jessie Street was a very well-known Sydney woman – rich, the wife of a judge, often in the papers: we didn’t know how to approach someone like that’. But they discovered Street was ‘quite unpretentious’ and most enthusiastic about promoting International Women’s Day. It was around this time that Street started to expand her interest in socialism and through Wright she was introduced to leaders of the Labor Council, including Mary’s future husband Tom Wright, who apparently initially inspired Street’s interest in the Soviet Union.

Chapter Three on the Australian Women’s Charter demonstrated how Street attempted to find ways of getting left and feminist women to talk to one another, while Chapter Six on the Union of Australian Women will illustrate how Street has been figured as instrumental to the development of the UAW and their politics. Yet, however much Street has been featured in the histories of communist women, it is rarely as one of ‘us’. Her communist sympathies may have set her apart from other feminists, and provided an avenue for more fruitful collaborations with left women, but her socialism was born from different experiences and nourished in different circumstances. Street, by virtue of her work, generosity and sheer uniqueness, came to represent the positive side of feminist encounters in communist histories. But she was always a guest star, never a main character. Personally, she was able to cultivate friendships and

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War. We often wondered whether the learned judge winced at her outspokenness [as] she proclaimed her socialist ideals. Anker and Love, p 231

80 This was especially true in regards to the Australian Women’s Charter. See Williams, p. 231 and Jean Devanny, Bird of Paradise, Frank Johnson, Sydney, 1945

81 Mary Wright in Bread and Roses, p. 116-117
inspire shared campaigns and projects, but however much communist women benefited from Street’s contribution, she alone was never enough to bridge the chasm between left and feminist women. At most, the shared history of communist and feminist women was that of an ‘uneasy alliance’.

**My Life as a Communist: (Extra)Ordinary Tales**

Joy Damousi has stressed that there was no ‘universal’ Communist woman experience and that reasons for women joining the CPA were various and complex. Historical specificity, not to mention age, marital status, occupation, motherhood and class must all be acknowledged in attempts to assess the appeal of Communism to women. Damousi, however, does venture that generalisations, rooted in historical specificity, can be made. The war and the depression, for example, were crucial in understanding the appeal of Communism to working-class women who were hardly likely to find the 1920s flapper a sympathetic or recognisable figure or aspiration. The Soviet model offered working-class women an emancipatory ideal. Damousi’s assertion that the discourse of Communism was central to Communism’s appeal to women is a valuable point. On this level, Communism can be understood as a moral system, above and beyond politics. Feminism, in this critique, didn’t have quite the same appeal as it promoted middle-class interests. Class is crucial. Damousi writes that the Communist Party ‘gave meaning to working class women’s experiences and provided them with a language through which to interpret it and make sense of their reality’. It is to this understanding of communism as moral and conceptual system, as a way of life, and as a way of recording a life, that I now direct my attention.

Jessie Street’s ‘conversion’ to communism during her trip to the Soviet Union in 1938 was never complete (she was a self-proclaimed socialist and during the 1940s a member of the Labor Party) and her fame and wealth ensured she has been mostly remembered by her communist friends as exceptional, whatever her

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skills for getting on with ordinary people. And while her communist affiliations and experiences offer evidence of the multiple possible reasons politically inclined women had for gravitating towards communism, her life story would seem misplaced in the histories that have aimed to redress silences about the contribution of communist women in the twentieth century. These histories - those produced by the Union of Australian Women and also Audrey Johnson's *Bread and Roses: A personal history of three militant women and their friends 1902-1988* and *Taking the Revolution Home: Work Among Women in the Communist Party of Australia: 1920-1945* by Joyce Stevens - have tended to stress the way that the experiences of ordinary life, experiences rooted in the family and the workplace, led to an embrace of communist politics. This emphasis on everyday politicisation is reflected in the use of oral history accounts and narratives that begin with the implicit (or explicit) question, why did you join the Communist Party?

The recording, recovery and writing of the life stories of earlier generations of left women was facilitated by the development of women's history and the growth of feminist presses such as Sybylla Press and Spinifex Press. Former communists and second wave feminists such as Joyce Stevens, Daphne Gollan and Mavis Robertson began to write histories within this context, using themselves and their female comrades as subjects. The parallel and related growth of labour history was reflected in publications such as *Women, Class and History* (1980) and *Worth Her Salt* (1982) that highlighted the activism of contributors in their profiles. Activists such as Zelda D'Aprano offered their life stories as political

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documents. The title of Amirah Inglis' second volume of memoirs *The Hammer and Sickle and the Washing Up*, published in 1995, indicated the extent to which a gendered critique of the communist experience had become almost customary. Writers Justina Williams, Oriel Gray and Betty Roland took advantage of a feminist culture responsive to earlier generations of women writers and women activists to write their autobiographies. Like the autobiographies of communist men, these writings were often produced as a political act, but what constituted the political was different for women. Joy Damousi has pointed out that the writing of the communist self is gendered. The intersection of the personal and the political in the life stories of communist women, and their modes of telling, are indicative of this. Such characteristics also indicate the extent to these life stories were informed by particular notions of feminism and history. The politics of identity were often at once the motivation for and subject of history-making.

Both Joyce Stevens and Audrey Johnson prefaced their collective histories with a summation of their own political lives and interests. Johnson's short profile followed the narrative arc that she would use at greater length for her subjects in *Bread and Roses*. In these life stories, family background was typically offered to provide historical context and personal motivation. In Johnson's case, her parents were working people driven out of Sydney by unemployment in the 1930s. She returned to Sydney to study, but Johnson's main passion was politics, specifically within the labour movement and CPA. The highlight of her student days in the 1950s was meeting Jessie Street and Katharine Susannah Prichard. And like 'many of her women contemporaries', Johnson 'began a new life in the 1960s' when she moved into academia. Johnson's profile identified her as sharing a common culture with her subjects. Her personable writing style offered further evidence of the bond between the author and her subjects. The lives and voices of

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85 D'Aprano explicitly positioned her work as a contribution to Women's Liberation in her preface. She wrote: 'Until women write truthfully of their personal experiences and involvement in the outside world, we will continue to be ignored and unrecorded, and generation after generation of young women deprived of this information will continue to make the same mistakes'. *Zelda* D'Aprano, *Zelda*, Spinifex Melbourne, originally published 1977, 1995 edition, p. xii

86 Joy Damousi, *Women Come Rally!*, p. 200

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the three main subjects, Mary Wright, Topsy Small and Flo Davis directed the flow of the text, including byways to consider the related experiences of their friends.

Stevens, like Johnson, shared communism and sometimes feminism in common with her subjects, but also like Johnson, she took care to mute her experiences in order to privilege those of her subjects. *Taking the Revolution*, part academic treatment of the first twenty five years of the CPA in Australia, part oral history, concludes in 1945, the year Stevens joined the Communist Party, because the author didn't want her own political involvement to be ‘too intrusive’. Her personal profile cited her immersion in the culture of Women's Liberation - Stevens helped produce *MeJane*, the first Women's Liberation newspaper in Australia and Australia’s first socialist-feminist magazine *Scarlet Woman* – and it is in this context that she seeks to ‘throw light on this period of women's history’. More specifically, Stevens sought to counter historical narratives that have depicted the Depression as a ‘golden age’ of left activism, ‘assuming that what benefited men of the working class always benefited women’. Stevens was also attentive to the historical specificity of feminism, never claiming her subjects as feminists and charting instead the contextual meanings of feminism in the period. Yet, Stevens did insist on the historical significance of her subjects for contemporary feminism. In claiming for her subjects a place in history to inspire ‘new generations of socialists and feminists’, Stevens etched out a left-wing tradition for contemporary socialist feminism.\(^7\) Previous feminisms, while not ignored, were thus repudiated in favour of emphasising a distinct left-wing feminist history.

The left-wing feminist tradition championed by Stevens and Johnson stressed the importance of historical subjects speaking in ‘their own voice’, yet as Johnson’s method of alternating chapters suggested, these voices were best understood in relation to one another. Both *Taking the Revolution Home* and *Bread and Roses*,

\(^7\) Stevens, p. 15
histories about the minority of women within a minority political party, privilege the communal narrative and stories of identity negotiated within a community. We are told these women are at once marginal, extraordinary and ordinary. It is the women themselves who most consistently insisted on the ordinary context of their activism. ‘Exceptional’ women like Street or CPA members such as writers Jean Devanny, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Dorothy Hewett or those infamous in the Party including Hettie Weitze/ Ross, ‘the undisputed leader of the Militant Women’s Group’\textsuperscript{88} and Joy Barrington/ Higgins, advocate of ‘free love’,\textsuperscript{89} featured in these narratives as points of contrast or focus points for discussions about particular issues relating to the Party’s attitude on women.

Some of them, particularly those women who joined the Party and pursued their creative life simultaneously, would go on to write of their own experiences in the Party by taking a different perspective. These women usually favoured an account of their own individual development, with communism figured as a rite of passage or way of life that fueled or conflicted with their other ambitions. The self-fashioned life stories of Jean Devanny and Dorothy Hewett will be explored in chapter seven, but the autobiographies of playwrights Oriel Gray and Betty Roland are examples of the variety of reasons women became active in Party life, in particular, the lure of the wider communist culture – the New Theatre, the company of fellow artists-activists, the general ‘revolutionary atmosphere’. The very titles of such memoirs – \textit{Exit Left: Memoirs of a Scarlet Woman} and \textit{An Improbable Life} – signify narratives that are out of the ordinary.

By virtue of their art and romantic lives, both Gray and Roland were drawn to the Party or more particularly the New Theatre, an avenue of Party activity not as alienating for women as entering Communist politics.\textsuperscript{90} Gray had humble

\textsuperscript{88} Johnson, p. 10
\textsuperscript{89} Edna Ryan recalled that in the 1920s and into the 1930s, Esmond and Joy Higgins were an ‘exception’ to the standard Party position on sex in that they ‘led a very free sexual life – both of them practiced complete freedom. In one of these situations Joy was having an affair with one of the men in the party who had a wife and a couple of kids and we had a bit of a kerfuffle over it. …It all became a cause celebre’. \textit{Taking the Revolution Home}, p. 124pp
\textsuperscript{90} Damousi, p. 209
beginnings in the New Theatre, working first as an usher, later as an actress and finally as a playwright. Her early accounts of life in the Theatre recalled a heady mix of politics, sex and fun: ‘They argued and laughed and squabbled and made love’. Soon enough, she was drawn to actor John Gray, rumoured to be both ‘a good mate and a bloody bastard’. Gray quipped: ‘He sounded impossible. I could hardly wait to meet him’. They married just as the Soviet Union signed a pact with Germany. When the CPA was banned during the Second World War a year later, the theatre faction went underground, ‘loving every minute of it’! Married life proved to be difficult, but Gray kept herself busy with writing radio plays for 2KY and following the changing Party line on the war. The New Theatre moved to bigger premises in Sydney, a city ‘full of soldiers and women and rumours and goodbyes. It was alive with gaiety and good times’. Gray and her sister Gracye joined the National Emergency Service together, just as they’d joined the New Theatre. In ‘the hard winter of the forties and fifties’ Gray also began to take herself seriously as a playwright. Later, after the war, Gray’s marriage fell apart and she fell in love with her sister’s lover. They had two children. But her final coming of age came with her departure from the Party. Gray’s ‘personal crisis’ was the 1949 Coal Strike. Gray left the CPA: ‘For me that night’s decision was the very last step into the loneliness of being ‘grown up’. It was the last leaving home’. Gray’s romantic romp had become a sober coming of age tale.

Roland’s personal journal wasn’t so intimately tied to the CPA. Her life story was evidence of hard won maturity, of which radical politics was but one part. The first volume of her autobiography opened with a tally of the men she had slept with (sixty four initially, revised to sixty five to account for an especially regrettable experience) and concluded with a voyage out of Australia, with Guido Baracchi, a suspected ex-lover of Katherine Susannah Prichard. By that stage,
Roland had already endured a failed marriage and the death of her seven year old son. She'd also already written her first full-length play *A Touch of Silk* by the age of twenty-four. Roland joined the Party in 1933, when she returned to Australia after a year in the Soviet Union. Volume Two of her memoirs *Caviar for Breakfast* picked up this thread in Roland’s life – it was mostly a diary account of her year in the Soviet Union, offered as ‘one woman’s view of a stupendous moment in history, aware of its limitations but with faith in its veracity’.98 Roland’s narrative was personal, idiosyncratic, historically significant for its individual account of momentous events.

Yet, as Damousi has highlighted, these examples of ‘exceptional’ narratives share in common with other life stories of communist women the distinction of locating the self in relation to networks, communities, friendships and politics: “Their communist self is only one dimension of their political identity; it is not the only one and it is shaped and informed by their other identities”.99 Collectively, these life stories testify to both the uniformity of particular narratives of communist experiences and the sheer variety of reasons women offered for joining the CPA. The appeal of communism to women, for instance, ranged from the prosaic (Grace Scanlon’s husband Harry, a coal-miner, was already in the Party100) to the utopian (Phyllis Johnson was convinced socialism was ‘just around the corner’101), though it was rare that communism’s position on or potential for women was cited as a primary factor. For many of the Communist women, the decision to join the Communist Party in the first place was motivated less by a desire to seek an alternative to the predominantly middle class feminist groups than the desire to embrace an entire alternative political, cultural and social belief system. Louise West saw the Party as a ‘champion of oppressed people’.102 Jess Grant came to join the CPA because she was ‘getting more and more interested in what was

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98 Betty Roland, *Caviar for Breakfast*, Imprint, Sydney, 1979, 2000, p. ix
99 Damousi, p. 201
100 Grace Scanlon in *Taking the Revolution Home*, p. 111
101 Phyllis Johnson in *Taking the Revolution Home*, p. 189
102 Louise West in *Taking the Revolution Home*, p. 143

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happening under socialism’. Edna Ryan, a self-proclaimed ‘rebel’, didn’t fit in with the Labor Party. Phyllis Johnson spoke on behalf of both herself and others when she recalled that ‘[w]e believed that the people of Australia would sweep the injustices of the capitalist system away and introduce a different society where men and women would be equal and there would be no poverty, no war and no economic depression’. Far less women joined the CPA during the early Lenin era when abortion was legalised and major divorce law reforms introduced than in the regressive Stalinist period that championed a more traditional role for women. Historical circumstances, primarily the lingering effects of the Depression and the Second World War, had a lot to do with this. Joyce Batterham, for instance, said that during World War II, the peak years of recruitment in the Party, ‘we all believed that there would be a new world order at the end of the war’.  

Some communist women chose to represent the Party as their teacher. This was hardly surprising considering the CPA’s own conception of their role. As Amirah Inglis wrote: ‘Party education in Marxism-Leninism, paying dues, attending branch meetings and belonging to your trade union, were basic obligations of all party members: you only became a communist inside the Party’. Before Louise West starting reading the Party literature, she was self-conscious among those with more education, but the more she read, the more confident she became: ‘after I’d done some reading, I was sometimes the tutor of a class’. Phyllis Johnson joined the biggest CPA branch in Australia in 1936, the Woolloomooloo branch, and it was a baptism of fire that she felt stood her in good stead for years to come. She told Joyce Stevens:

The work I did with the CPA...gave me a knowledge that few women possess. Many of them are more articulate than I am, but they have not got a basic class position, they have not occupied positions within the labour movement,

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103 Jess Grant in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 170  
104 Edna Ryan in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 133  
105 Phyllis Johnson in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 189  
106 Joyce Batterham in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 211  
107 Amirah Inglis, The Hammer and the Sickle and the Washing Up, p. 32  
108 Louise West in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 145
and they know very little indeed, almost nothing about the labour movement. They know nothing about the tactics of political movements, of being able to assess and analyse a question, to take it a little further in its development, to see what the objectives are and how to go about achieving a tactical objective.

I learnt all this in the CPA. 109

Often the pedagogic aspect of the CPA experience was fashioned as a coming into self, as the new recruit was initiated into new forms of protest and organising. Grace Scanlon joined the CPA in the 1930s to support men in the mining industry, but this auxiliary role expanded and the miner’s auxiliaries became recognised as a ‘fighting force for social and economic achievements’. From fundraising they moved into radio broadcasts, conferences and press coverage. Scanlon started to ‘write a lot’, including for the miners’ union paper Common Cause where her depiction of people’s problems, thinly veiled with false names, ‘became quite notorious’.110 In fact, Scanlon became such a forthright chronicler of campaigns and causes that her small stature came as a shock to an audience gathered to hear ‘big upstanding’ Grace Scanlon speak.111 Flo Davis, meanwhile, ‘learnt to speak’ during the Depression, on the streets of Redfern and Woolloomooloo, where you ‘ran out with the box, jumped up and started talking’.112 Mary Wright, in contrast, managed to run (unsuccessfully) for the state seat of Annandale without giving a single speech because she’d had her teeth extracted and couldn’t afford dentures.113 In 1931, Smith’s Weekly published a ‘who’s who of communism’ and depicted Wright as ‘a fiery speaker’. At the time she had never spoken publicly, and had no desire to.114 But her story in Audrey Johnson’s Bread and Roses is one of constant growth and movement. When she joined the Militant Women’s Group in 1927, she was in awe of colleagues like Edna Ryan and Hettie Weitzel, who could both write an article or address one of the regular Sunday night meetings, tasks which she considered beyond her. Door to door canvassing was

109 Phyllis Johnson in Taking the Revolution Home, pg. 189
110 Grace Scanlon in Taking the Revolution Home, pg. 117
111 Ibid., pg. 115
112 Bread and Roses, pg. 2
113 Bread and Roses, pg. 29
114 Ibid., p. 41

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more suited to her personality, but the more politicised she came, the more Wright was able to extend her talents to broadcasting and speech writing and to get others to do the same. Topsy Small, another of Audrey Johnson’s subjects, similarly remembered herself as shy when she first joined the Party, but her political passions motivated her to overcome her insecurities: ‘I was moving nearer and nearer the platform and before I knew it I was up on the platform’.  

These were narratives, then, where political and personal selfhood blurred and indeed, informed one another. Strikes and raids, the hallmarks of many a communist life story were prominent in both *Taking the Revolution Home* and *Bread and Roses*, but more often than not these women chose to recall major political episodes with reference to what was going on with them personally. Jess Grant was having a partial hysterectomy when the Munich Agreement was signed in 1938. A one-night stand found Flo Davis pregnant and in need of help. Mary Wright encouraged her to move to Redfern where she got into politics by talking with her neighbours. Family tragedies (Mary Wright lost a baby in the flu epidemic of 1919, Grace Scanlon’s father died in a mining dispute) opened several narratives and were implicitly and explicitly invoked in accounting for politicisation. Such events were also depicted within the realm of ‘ordinary’ experience, where getting political seemed to make most sense. Wright, for instance, felt estranged from the leadership battles that plagued the Party in the late twenties and it was the ‘the timberworkers’ lockout, that was ordinary people struggling for ordinary things, that suited me very well because that was what I wanted to do’.

This insistence on privileging the ordinary, the collective above the individual, is reflected in the format of the historical collections themselves – they are communal, conversational, suitably respectful to mentors and other formative figures and experiences. But, at the same time, the women in those pages were

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115 Ibid., p. 60
116 Jessie Grant in *Taking the Revolution Home*, p. 174
117 *Bread and Roses*, p. 114
118 Ibid., p. 26
exceptional insofar as they were active in a minority political party, a party that was outlawed twice. The CPA was a party on the margins. It was also a party whose female membership never exceeded a quarter at its height. For every Mary Wright that went canvassing door to door with a pram, there were many more housebound women who either weren’t able to or didn’t feel inclined to get active. These anonymous women lurk in each narrative. Louise West wants to keep them informed during World War II because she knows having a baby means not being able to stay political. Joyce Batterham did have children, and stood her ground and organised childcare, but she also knew that the general consensus was that ‘if you wanted to be involved in the movement and be involved in things, you didn’t get married’. Babies typically precluded the possibility of being a ‘professional revolutionary’.119

Joyce Stevens acknowledged that her historical project was by its nature partial, a reflection of both the modesty of those women she canvassed, who often suggested that she talk to someone else instead,120 and the Party’s own position on women. She also only had a ‘small army of near full-time activists’ to draw upon. The life stories in Taking the Revolution Home and Bread and Roses therefore represent a partial sample of an already small group. Furthermore, the long activist careers that allowed Audrey Johnson a tremendous chronological scope in Bread and Roses – 1902-1988 – were truly exceptional. Her history opens with Mary Wright, Flo Davis and Topsy Small as grass roots activists in suburban settings, but the depth and scope of their campaigning lives ultimately works to both reinforce and undermine the ‘ordinariness’ of the political housewife. This is a theme I will pick up in the following chapter on the Union of Australian Women, a group who nod to the wider political implications of their activist image in the title of their official history, More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade.

119 Joyce Batterham in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 209
120 Stevens, p. 109
The communist women in this chapter have all, to varying degrees, had their marginality re-written or re-claimed as historically significant by 1970s feminists. Women’s Liberationists rejected the feminism that had preceded them and in doing so created the space for communist women to fill the historical space in a different tradition of women’s activism in Australia. Second-wave feminism in this way fashioned for itself a left-wing tradition that continues to have contemporary currency. 121 This necessarily involved a repudiation of earlier feminisms, though the life stories and histories of communist women have revealed the extent to which communists and feminists both worked together and defined themselves against the other. The remembered identity of left women was not as feminists, but as of politically active women who rejected the idea of feminism as it was then understood. Typically, these left women were communists first, then feminists second. To chart this process of identification historically, any present identification with feminism had to be erased or subdued. But an understanding of what feminism would come to mean in the 1970s was also needed to remember why they weren’t feminists earlier. In a study of the relationship between feminism, identity and history, such negations qualify as instructive episodes of why it was that politically active women did or didn’t claim particular identities. Furthermore, how these identities have been understood and figured historically also reveals the extent to which the histories of feminism and communism have intersected, parted ways and been subject to reinterpretation.

121 Democratic Socialist Party, Feminism and Socialism: Putting the Pieces Together, Resistance Books, Chippendale, 1997, pg. 16
Chapter Six: Butter Not Bombs: The Union of Australian Women

Inspired by the Unions of Women in Italy and France, and finding the label of 'housewife' too constricting, the Union of Australian Women was formed from the ashes of the New Housewives Association in August 1950 in Sydney. From its inception, the UAW was determined to represent the interests of both working class mothers and workers, but it was the image of the political housewife that would come to define them. A regular dictum of the Union of Australian Women was 'wherever there are mothers, the talk is the same'. This idea was expressed within an internationalist framework, socialist in origin and dissemination, but also within the context of 1950s suburban Australia and the Cold War. When the UAW formed, the Communist Party of Australia and their affiliates were banned by the Menzies Government and facing permanent illegality in the form of the proposed Communist Party Dissolution Act. That proposal would be defeated at a national referendum in 1951, but the Union of Australian Women never quite escaped or transcended the communist associations that defined their early days. They were also similarly implicated in the decreasing relevance and effectiveness of a certain kind of feminism. The formation, representative strategies and historicisation of the Union of Australian Women therefore offer particularly vivid examples of a form of activism at the crossroads of feminist and communist traditions and discourses. The effect of this was an especially pronounced maternalist feminist politics that aimed to speak to ordinary women and their experiences. This hope of engaging directly with housewives and women workers in particular was significantly compromised in a Cold War climate in which feminism's influence was also diminished.

This is a chapter in three parts. I will begin with a discussion of how the UAW located themselves historically, with particular reference to the ways in which they invoked both their communist and feminist influences. The historical narrative the UAW offered as an account of their origins and inspirations said much about their contemporary context. As an organisation dominated by communist women, the UAW sought various changes for women and children in
a climate increasingly suspicious of their political affiliations. As a women’s organisation, the UAW also campaigned for unity at a time when the women’s movement in Australia was more fragmented than it had ever been. During the war, organisations such as the United Associations and the Australian Women’s Charter movement, both of whom the UAW would work closely with in the 1950s, had been able to take advantage of women’s increased bargaining position and public profile to expand their membership and influence. After the war, however, the combination of the Cold War and a resurgent domestic ideology that encouraged women to return to the home had the effect of both furthering splintering the women’s movement along ideological lines and diminishing the influence of all women’s organisations, regardless of their politics. Anti-feminism and anti-communism both flourished in this context.¹

Like many women’s organisations before them, the UAW insisted on their independence from political parties, but their high profile in the peace movement in particular ensured an ongoing association with communism. The peace movement’s distance from the mainstream of political life was related very closely to the intensity of the Cold War mentality. So while peace was a popular cause, indicated by large turn outs to major marches and in surveys, organisations promoting peace failed to attract a comparable membership due to the communist taint.² The UAW’s response to this marginality was to insist on the universality of motherhood, a discourse that was popular in communist rhetoric, but they tempered it with their own distinct form of Australian nationalism and suburban ordinariness. These local touches firmly located the UAW within the wider context of 1950s Australia, where the emergence of a new consumer society and the re-figuring of women as citizens by the conservative Prime Minister Robert Menzies resulted in ‘women’ being addressed as a group in new and significant ways. The combined effect of these social forces was to encourage a cohesive identity for women as a group with shared interests, needs

² See Barbara Carter, ‘The peace movement in the 1950s’, Better Dead Than Red
and experiences in common, that were socially important. Due to their marginality, their insistence on simultaneously addressing women as workers and as mothers and the nature of some of their campaigns, some of which encouraged women to use their power as consumers politically, the UAW necessarily subverted the image of the suburban housewife. At the same time, however, the UAW's magazine *Our Women*, where recipes and household hints jostled for space with the latest union news, revealed the extent to which the UAW was a product of both mainstream and left culture. The middle section of this chapter will explore representations of the UAW’s maternalist politics in their magazine *Our Women*.

In the late 1960s and into the 1970s, the UAW would both be renewed in their previous campaigning efforts by the growth of the anti-Vietnam movement and compromised by the split in the Communist Party of Australia and the rising profile of the women’s liberation movement. In the final section of the chapter, I therefore take up the issue of how the UAW responded to Women’s Liberation. Unlike some of the communist women discussed in the previous chapter, the UAW was not so easily incorporated into new feminist politics. Caught between the Cold War and Women’s Liberation, the UAW had increasingly resisted their marginality through recourse to the discourse of peaceful motherhood and by establishing themselves as the historical custodians of women’s organisations in Australia. And while these strategies may have been successful in allowing for meaningful collaborations with communist, labour and women’s groups during the 1950s and 1960s, by the 1970s the UAW’s desire to make connections with the new women’s movement proved to be ineffectual. The theme that runs through all three sections of this chapter therefore is that of the curious timing and position of the UAW. They were essentially marginalised twice – first by Cold War politics, then by Women’s Liberation. Within that marginal space, they began to promote a new version of Australia’s feminist past, but in this they were thwarted. History was not on their side.

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‘Our proud heritage’

Within their own historical accounts of their origins and in the pages of the organisation’s magazine Our Women, the UAW acknowledged their debt to both particular Australian feminist and international socialist traditions. Their feminist lineage was most frequently expressed through kinship and overlap with the United Associations and the Australian Women’s Charter movement. With the UA, they shared members, modes of organising and the same initials. At first, the name was a source of tension; the United Associations objected and Mary Wright, a member of both organisations, remembers it ‘was a great grievance to me when we did that’. But compared to the two other proposed titles for the new organisation, the Democratic Federation of Australian Women and the Legion of Australian Women, the Union of Australian Women clearly spoke most directly of the organisation’s aims to draw membership from ‘all women, without distinction as to their political beliefs’ and their international network of like-minded women. In any case, the new organisation was to maintain a close friendship with the United Associations. This was a shared history most commonly evoked with reference to the 1940s.

Two histories of the Union of Australian Women, More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade, a history of the national organisation written by long-standing office holders Barbara Curthoys and Audrey McDonald, and Left Wing Ladies, a history of the Victorian branch of the UAW, produced by commissioned historians Suzane Fabian and Morag Loh, begin with a discussion of the 1940s and the decade’s significance for campaigners of women’s rights. In particular, the 1943 Australian Women’s Charter and the efforts of Jessie Street were evoked as instances where activists of various political and class backgrounds came together to rally for specific causes. Fabian and Loh mentioned the Charter Conference

4 Barbara Curthoys and Audrey McDonald, More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade: The Story of the Union of Australian Women, Bookpress, Sydney, 1996, p. 7
was considered ‘too radical’ by some and that its central platforms were echoed in the Communist Party’s 1944 ‘New Deal for Women’. Later UAW members Win Graham and Ruth Crow had attended the Charter Conference and helped formulate and implement the New Deal. Barbara Curthoys traced the origins of the UAW through the Housewives’ Association movement, which in New South Wales had conservative leadership that opposed a more active political engagement with issues pertinent to housewives. A breakaway group, led by women from the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and the Australian Labor Party (ALP) formed the New Housewives Association (NHA) with Jessie Street as Vice-President in October 1946. The Sydney Morning Herald reported in its women pages the following day that the NHA had added to its program a number of objects ‘many of which state in more general terms some of the objects of the Australian Women’s Charter’. For Curthoys, this amplification of the Charter’s aims in the program of the NHA was significant as it highlighted the connections between Jessie Street and the United Associations and many members of the NHA, including Mary Wright. These ties were ‘very close’ and further cemented in August 1947 when the New Housewives affiliated with the Australian Women’s Charter Co-ordinating Committee on the Status of Women.

In significant respects these connections between organised feminists and women from the left offer a narrative of what happened to Australian feminism after the turbulent 1940s. The ongoing project that was the Australian Women’s Charter movement was an important site for the collaborative work that Street had proposed as crucial to the continued effectiveness of Australian feminism. National and state Charter committees endured into the late 1960s, heavily populated by women from the Union of Australian Women and the United

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7 Barbara Curthoys joined the UAW Newcastle branch in 1954. She was Secretary of that branch until 1960. She was elected to the national body throughout the 1960s. She wrote the first half of *More than a Hat and Glove Brigade*, covering the period until 1970. I will therefore refer to her as the author for this chapter.

8 ‘The Women’s View’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19/10/46

9 Barbara Curthoys and Audrey McDonald, *More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade*, p. 2-3
Associations. For the committees, the focus points for their activism were the Charter conferences and International Women’s Day, a significant annual event on the communist calendar, though from the late 1940s on, they struggled to maintain the affiliate base they had. In 1949, for example, Street personally visited the New South Wales branch of the Nurses Association to appeal to them to not withdraw affiliation. They withdrew anyway, citing the fact that ‘they had a number of conservative members on their Committee’ who were presumably opposed to left-wing dominance of the Charter movement. In the same year, the Federated Clerk’s Union, a left organisation, also withdrew affiliation, though they did promise to help on special occasions. This time Mary Wright was dispatched to urge them to reconsider.\textsuperscript{10} So there was a gradual exodus from the left and more conservative women’s organisations which said much about the disintegration of the feminism that had developed in the inter-war period and flourished, however briefly, during World War II.

The Union of Australian Women was formed in a climate where the Australian Women’s Charter movement was increasingly preoccupied with defending their project against charges of communist affiliation and violating the representative hierarchy of the Australian women’s movement. In July 1948, Labor Senator Dorothy Tangney raised the question of the Australian Women’s Charter’s possible affiliation with the communist associated Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in the Western Australian Parliament. The Charter movement, particularly those in the New South Wales executive committee which included Jessie Street and Mary Wright and other key office holders, were preoccupied for some months with trying to get access to Senator Tangney to explain both that the Charter was not ‘affiliated with the WIDF’ and ‘the real set up of the WIDF’.\textsuperscript{11} They had no success. It was around this time that Street, facing imminent expulsion after the Australian-Russian Society was

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\textsuperscript{10} Australian Women’s Charter Minute Book, New South Wales Committee, 20\textsuperscript{th} September 1949-15\textsuperscript{th} November 1960, \textit{Australian Women’s Charter Collection}, NLA, MS2302/1-3, Box 1
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\textsuperscript{11} Notes taken at July 27\textsuperscript{th} 1948 meeting, Australian Women’s Charter Minute Book, New South Wales Committee, \textit{Australian Women’s Charter Collection}, NLA, MS2302/1-3, Box 1
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banned by the New South Wales Labor Party, resigned from the ALP. The New South Wales Executive of the ALP had also listed the United Associations in a list of possible communist front organisations in 1948, but it was a spurious claim as the UA had always been very careful in delineating between the politics of particular members and the general ‘non-political’ stance of the organisation.

The WIDF was formed in November 1948 at the World Congress of Women held in Paris. The Congress was attended by feminist leaders from across the western world, including Street and Bessie Rischbieth and those representing existing international feminist organisations such as the International Council of Women and the International Alliance of Women. It was proposed at the Congress to form a new organisation which would be an international federation of existing international feminist organisations, a co-ordinated effort that clearly would have appealed to Street, but the older, established groups decided against joining the WIDF on the basis of its inclusion of communist women and organisations. In her autobiography, Street recalled with some bitterness that the fact that the WIDF was ‘immediately branded “communist”...because it had communists among its members [was] typical of approaches in other and wider spheres. [These developments] were all very disappointing and frustrating’. 

Back in Australia, it was unsurprisingly Bessie Rischbieth who led the anti-communist, anti-WIDF charge. It was Rischbieth who wrote to Senator Tangney to inform her of the ‘strong communist element clearly directing the [international women’s] movement’ and thus impacting on local feminism. And when Street visited Perth in 1949 to promote the Charter, Rischbieth wrote to The West Australian to ‘explain’ that press notices of the Communist Party

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12 In the late 1940s, the NSW Executive of the Australian Labor Party was especially active in its anti-communism. The Federal Labor Party wasn’t as consistent in its position. See Meredith Burgmann, ‘Dress rehearsal for the Cold War’, Australia’s First Cold War: 1945-1953 Vol 1: Society, Communism and Culture, (eds) Ann Curthoys and John Merritt, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1984, p. 60-71
13 In 1941, for example, Jessie Street explained that in her capacity as UA President she would not speak on the same platform as the CPA Secretary. See Pat Ranald, ‘Women’s Organisations and Communism’, p. 50
14 Jessie Street, Truth or Repose, Australasian Book Society, Sydney, 1966, p. 327-8
15 Bessie Rischbieth to Dorothy Tangney, May 1947. Bessie Rischbieth Papers, NLA, MS2004/12/1969

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indicated that they had supported the Charter movement in several states. She further insinuated that the Charter movement was affiliated to the WIDF. When the WIDF was founded in Paris in 1945, Street was present and elected to the international executive. Rischbieth explained that 'this federation is considered by the pre-war international organisations of women to be Communist directed, and is today dividing the world wide women's movement into two distinct camps with rival ideologies'.\textsuperscript{16} The day before this letter appeared in \textit{The West Australian}, Irene Greenwood had raised the topic with Street on her radio programme. Street explained that she had 'advised against affiliation with this body because...it would destroy the nature' of the Australian Charter movement which was 'purely an Australian organisation', accredited to the United Nations, but not to any other overseas groups.\textsuperscript{17} Clearly, Street was well aware of perceptions in the women's movement that the Australian Women's Charter was a rival to the Australian Federation of Women Voters as a national and international organisation, rather than being a purely co-ordinating body.

The UAW were formed in the context of the Cold War splintering of the Australian women's movement and as their involvement in the Australian Women's Charter movement indicated, some UAW members were also in the thick of defending a particular kind of feminist activism that emphasised co-operation and shared campaigns, regardless of political affiliations. This was the sort of feminism they acknowledged as formative in the various histories of the UAW. The title of Curthoys' and McDonald's UAW history \textit{More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade} acknowledged a debt to a particular style of campaigning they shared with feminist organisations such as the United Associations who observed the formal processes of lobbying government via letters, petitions and deputations. As Marilyn Lake has pointed out, the UAW's mode of attire suited their mode of doing politics; 'its sartorial style denoting its respect for political

\textsuperscript{16} Bessie Rischbieth, letter to \textit{The West Australian}, 3 May 1949, pg. 15
\textsuperscript{17} As cited in John Richardson, 'The Limits of Authorship: The Radio Broadcasts of Irene Greenwood, 1936-1954', \url{http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/Richo/Charter.html}
convention and institutional ritual'. And though their clothes may have changed, the UAW continued to favour these modes of organising throughout their history, situating them within a history of activism that is closely engaged with the state.

But, as the title of the history further indicated, the UAW also arose from different activist traditions, with much of their core membership and campaigning style drawn from the Communist Party and the labour movement. In arguing that the UAW were more than their modes of dress and organising suggested, Curthoys and McDonald were staking a claim to a more radical history. The Union of Australian Women had no reservations about affiliating with the WIDF. In *More than a Hat and Glove Brigade*, Curthoys cited the WIDF as a key influence in the decision to form a new organisation that represented the interests of all women, not just housewives. In 1949, the New Housewives Association sent Daphne Gollan, the NSW state secretary, to the World Congress of Defenders for Peace in Paris. The WIDF was a host organisation for the Congress, which called for activists to speak out 'in defence of peace' within an increasingly hostile international environment. Curthoys wrote that such 'contact with the WIDF was to have a profound effect on the NHA, some of whose members were already feeling the need for change. [Increasingly] there was a view that the concept of a housewives organisation was too constrictive'. Curthoys' historical sketch of the WIDF's origins, which paid tribute to its founder French 'intellectual' and 'feminist' cum resistance fighter Eugenie Cotton, clearly located the UAW within the post-war emergence of unions and federations committed to bring women together to campaign for

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19 This history of closely engaging with the state saw the UAW work closely with feminist agencies within government, but this tradition of lobbying also extends beyond women's movements in Australia. Marian Sawyer has persuasively argued that campaigning for political change directly to the state has defined Australian political history and that this can be accounted for historically by acknowledging the historic importance of social liberalism in Australia's nation building period, the tradition of radical movements looking to government to meet their demands and the tradition of administrative innovation in response to those demands. See Marian Sawyer, 'Reclaiming Social Liberalism: The Women's Movement and the State', pp. 1-21 in *Women and the State*, edited by Renate Howe, special edition of *Journal of Australian Studies*, La Trobe University Press, Melbourne, 1993.
relevant causes, particularly peace. The UAW’s own formation and agenda were therefore historically indebted to the WIDF’s pioneering efforts to unite women ‘regardless of race, nationality, religion and political opinion so that they might work together to win and defend their rights as mothers, citizens and workers and to ensure the rights of children to education, health and happiness in a peaceful world’.  

As organisations that formed in the wake of the Second World War and campaigned within the context of the Cold War, the UAW and WIDF had parallel and intersecting histories that were well documented in the pages of Our Women magazine. It was a collaboration that reached its apex in 1975 when UAW office holder Freda Brown was elected WIDF President. Articles from the WIDF’s monthly journal Women of the Whole World were syndicated to Our Women, while regular reports from the international organisation and its various conferences promoted a sense of international solidarity. The editors of the tenth anniversary issue of Our Women magazine, published in 1963, made this shared history explicit, locating it firmly in the context of the Second World War failing to deliver the promised ‘New Order’. It was then up to women, if they wanted a peaceful world, to unite ‘and present a strong front against the forces who wanted to plunge the world again into war’. It was noted also, that in the same year that the UAW formed and ‘joined forces’ with the WIDF that Canadian women established their first women’s organisation for peace and that Cuban women held the first national conference of their women’s organisation. By relating these developments, the UAW fashioned a narrative of post-war women’s protest where the marginality of such organisations was disguised behind the cohesive identity of pacifist women.

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20 More than a Hat and Glove Brigade, p. 6
21 Freda Brown was UAW President from 1967-1975. In her capacity as WIDF President, she traveled the world extensively, including Africa and the Eastern Bloc. She recalled in More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade that the ‘simplest thing to say is that I visited and worked with women’s organisations on every continent’. p. 39
This narrative of international solidarity was picked up again in More than a Hat and Glove Brigade and Left Wing Ladies, though more enthusiastically in the former history, written by UAW members. Fabian and Loh noted in Left Wing Ladies that in many of its general campaigns and activities, the UAW took its lead and inspiration from WIDF policy and international conferences. The WIDF Conference in Deference of Children, held in Vienna in 1952, was cited as especially influential, inspiring UAW delegate Dorothy Hewett to start Our Women magazine and establishing International Children’s Day on the UAW calendar. Curthoys also emphasised the importance of the international conferences, particularly the opportunity accorded to women who would not have been able to travel overseas otherwise. The authors of both histories, however, tempered accounts of the WIDF’s influence with less glowing reports from WIDF sponsored trips to communist countries and examples of the UAW not supporting particular WIDF campaigns if they were only partially informed. In this way, the histories consistently circled back to privilege the experiences of the ‘ordinary’ women that made up the bulk of their constituency. They were also histories written after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which encouraged in both histories a certain revisionism.

The tenth anniversary issue of Our Women was an especially evocative account of the UAW’s own conception of their origins and constituency. Running through the entire issue was an emphatic sense of the UAW’s political and cultural identity, which within the parameters of their own rhetoric easily incorporated a variety of historical precedents and influences. The historical narrative

23 Left-Wing Ladies, p. 46
24 More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade, p. 33
25 Barbara Curthoys cited the instance of UAW delegate Pauline Feighan speaking ‘truthfully’ of what she had seen on her visit to Poland in 1953: ‘She had been quite unprepared for the poverty she found in the Polish countryside, expecting a much higher standard of living under a communist government. ‘Seeing the world through rose-coloured glasses’ is a charge often leveled (with some justification) at those who gave uncritical reports on their return from visiting socialist countries as a result of invitations issued at the WIDF congresses. Some became disenchanted, but many of those who went developed a greater realisation of the immensity of the task facing women in socialist countries who wished to change things for the better. Pauline Feighan was one of them’. More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade, p. 35
26 Fabian and Loh noted, for example, that in 1957 the UAW declined to protest about the arrest of an Argentinian activist because it did not know enough about the reasons for her detention. Left-Wing Ladies, p. 47
championed in the tenth anniversary issue spoke generically of a history of women's activism, though certain features and emphases betrayed a range of specifically communist and feminist discourses. Birthday greetings from Katharine Susannah Prichard, Edgar Ross, Editor of the Miner's Federation newspaper Common Cause and women's groups in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, a lengthy article acknowledging women's contributions to strike efforts, the obligatory nod to the WIDF and the winning story in the annual Mary Gilmore short story contest were all features that positioned the UAW within the history of communism and communist culture in Australia. Meanwhile, a history of the Women's Peace Army, re-prints of suffragette postcards and tributes to Jessie Street and Vida Goldstein positioned the UAW within a history of Australian women organising as women for women.

What made the UAW's historical identity distinctive was the extent to which they successfully incorporated these various historical traditions into a cohesive political and cultural identity that absorbed potential conflicts between feminism and communism or communism and the labour movement. For instance, their histories of International Women's Day and the equal pay campaign emphasised the diversity of organisations who have observed the day, therefore writing, in regards to IWD for example, both within a communist framework (in their tribute to the day) and against it (in their insistence on the wider significance of the occasion). Our Women also acknowledged their magazine foremothers from both the left (Working Woman) and the women's movement (Australian Women's Digest). They further cited the influence of Woman Today, the magazine that was launched in 1936 to promote the CPA's new united front. As such, and like the UAW, it was therefore a non-party affiliated publication, though also like the UAW, its influences and rhetoric located it within the communist tradition. In many ways, Woman Today with its mixture of politics and the popular interests of women, was a template for Our Women.27 Other

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27 The aims of Woman Today were published in the first issue encapsulated the ethos of Our Women: 'This monthly publication pledges itself to the task of helping women who work in the home, in the factory, in the office, in the school, in the hospital and the farm. Woman Today supports the efforts of all women and
tributes to magazine pioneers such as Mary Gilmore and 'Hypatia', the pen-name for Florence Stuart, who 'was less a feminist than a socialist' further revealed the extent to which the UAW were open to a tongue-in-cheek recognition of the vexed history of how women activists identified themselves. A history of hair styles throughout the centuries similarly off-set the gravitas of charting a 'proud heritage'.

Of all the pioneers showcased in the tenth anniversary edition of Our Women it was 'that grand old lady of the labour movement' Henrietta Greville who was most consistently championed. She was interviewed in the first issue of Our Women and her birthday was observed each year. Greville had been President of the Australian Workers' Union in the 1890s and was 89 years old when the UAW first formed. She was the first speaker at the inaugural UAW meeting and a foundation member. In Curthoys' history she was remembered by UAW members as 'a symbol of women's past struggles and their link with the present and each year they arranged a party for her on her birthday as a sign of their love and respect'. When she died in 1964, aged 102, the UAW lobbied state government for a memorial in her honour.28 The UAW's concerns with the economics of daily life, the welfare of children and domestic traditions also placed the organisation within the distinctive Australian tradition of labour movement feminism. As such it was fitting that Henrietta Greville should have been chosen to embody both the UAW's historical tradition and its contemporary concerns, though Greville's earlier feminist advocacy of the independence of married women didn't dovetail with the UAW's position, who because of a commitment to solidarity with the men of their class, didn't explicitly identity as feminist.29 In any case, Greville's life story, featured in Bread and Roses, presented her politicisation, life

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28 More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade, p. 43
29 Marilyn Lake, Getting Equal, p. 210
experiences and tireless campaigning efforts as emblematically UAW: 'for much of her life Henrietta Greville had been a shopkeeper...with a political message'.

The Rebel Housewife

*Our Women* was a regular mix of chat, recipes, fashion, handy hints and short stories ending with positive affirmations. *Our Women* was also a consistently subversive missive that sought to redefine the potential of women, and mothers and housewives in particular, along political lines. Central to this political potential was the idea that women, especially mothers, had a special interest in world peace due to their reproductive capacities. In this way, the Union of Australian Women was informed by essentialist ideas about the role of women in society. If peace was women's work, politics and warfare were implicitly aligned with men. While the connection between men and violence was toned down in deference to the UAW's professed family values, the occasional attempt to grapple with the possibility of a gendered analysis of sex roles offered a peculiar mix of essentialism and gendered critique that was not entirely consistent. Still, more than anything, the UAW was an organisation that celebrated the practical qualities of the best type of housewife - down to earth, resourceful, hard working and compassionate. Theoretical consistency was hardly a motivating factor; instead the UAW aimed to utilise the discourse of peaceful motherhood for positive ends.

The connection between women's groups and the peace movement is a long one, and the use of motherhood as a basis of protest has a similarly lengthy history. In *Peace as a Women's Issue* Harriet Hyman Alonso cites four factors common to the discourse of peaceful motherhood: motherhood as a socially acceptable cover for highly political work; motherhood as bestowing on women a unique position that men cannot share and therefore cannot argue against; the moral superiority

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offered by the motherhood position; and finally motherhood as the most successful organising tool available. Each of these factors is applicable in the case of the Union of Australian women. As an organisation with links, formal and otherwise, to the CPA and various left wing trade unions, the UAW were campaigning for peace in an increasingly hostile political and cultural environment. Barbara Curthoys recalled that in the Cold War period, the connection between peace campaigns and communism was so strong that even to ‘discuss peace issues with one’s neighbour was seen to be outside the range of normal behaviour and to actively work for peace could place one on the fringes of society - an object of suspicion, a “fellow-traveller” or even, a “communist”. I argue here that the use of the discourse of peaceful motherhood served both a moral and a functional purpose. Motherhood was figured in universal terms and provided a way for the UAW to attempt to protest from within, rather than from the fringes of, mainstream society. Motherhood was emphasised as a universal common language and set of beliefs and in this way, socialist internationalism was accommodated.

Additionally, there was a strong connection between feminism and the peace movement at this time; a connection that included the use of the discourse of peaceful motherhood both for the purposes of establishing a specifically female conception of peace and for arguing for the rights of women on the basis of motherhood as a crucial component of citizenship. To paraphrase Virginia Woolf, the Union of Australian Women (and other groups such as the United Associations and the WIDF) adhered to the feminist logic that women would only be able to effectively demonstrate that they were more peace loving than men if they acquired genuine equality.

The equation between feminism and peace, however, was not confined to the 1950s. In her book Power and Protest, Verity Burgmann charts the history of

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32 More than a Hat and Glove Brigade, p. 70
33 Virginia Woolf, Three Guineas, Hogarth, London, 1938
feminist and/or female mobilisation against militarism in Australia. This is a history that begins with the Women's Peace Army mobilising against conscription during World War I to the Save our Sons anti-conscription movement of the Vietnam War era (Save Our Sons were a group with UAW membership and their various campaigns were well documented in *Our Women*) to the anti nuclear protests of the 1980s. Burgmann also notes that the wider peace movement itself also had, and continues to have, a far greater proportion of female activists than political movements generally and that this female activism has been complimented by the contributions made by feminist political theory and new ways of looking at war and peace. Karen J. Warren and Dyane L. Cady further explore this connection between feminism and peace in their edited collection *Bringing Peace Home: Feminism, Violence and Nature* by arguing that feminism and peace share important conceptual connections; most notably a criticism of and a commitment to the elimination of coercive power-over privilege systems of domination as the basis of interaction between individuals and groups. For Warren and Cady these conceptual connections, rooted in critiques of power, are further strengthened through empirical, historical, political and symbolic connections that highlight how women, children, people of colour and the poor have been affected by environmental destruction and various forms of violence, especially war. Furthermore, feminists and peace activists have also drawn attention to the female experience of war historically (especially the experience of rape) and the ways in which language is a site of symbolic and linguistic connections between gender and war.

The Union of Australian Women drew attention to, and were also implicated in, all of these connections identified by Cady and Warren. An analysis of their use of the discourse of motherhood is therefore valuable in identifying the complementary power critique of the peace and women's movements (the conceptual connection), the focus on women, children and other cultural

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minority groups as victims of violence (the empirical and historical connection), the use of peaceful motherhood as a basis of political protest, including women’s rights (the political connection) and finally, the appropriation of essentialist language, which naturalises women and feminises nature, as a basis of protest, rather than a method of patriarchal reinforcement (therefore subverting what Warren and Cady identify as the symbolic and linguistic connection of sexist-naturist-warist language).

The discourse of motherhood by the Union of Australian Women was developed within a particular set of historical and cultural circumstances. The necessity for such a discourse was at least partially prompted by the Cold War climate that relegated Communist ‘tainted’ groups such as the UAW beyond the mainstream. Concurrently, the emphasis on the nuclear family and traditional gender roles also reflected a growing conservatism in post World War II Australia generally. In this sense, the UAW, at least insofar as they adopted the discourse of motherhood as an effective barometer of their own daily existence, were merely situating themselves within a populist conception of daily life; a conception that was ‘real’ to many of the UAW members. The discourse of motherhood was also figured as a response to a historically specific threat, the threat of nuclear war. It is also important to reiterate again the historical specificity of the definition of ‘feminism’ itself. The pages of Our Women reflect an uneven and tentative embrace of ‘feminism’; the term was alternately used with pride and ease (usually in terms of labeling specific people) and with caution (as a group identity). However, the UAW also, along with more explicitly feminist organisations, used the discourse of motherhood as a basis of citizenship rights.

The connection or severed connection between the UAW and Women’s Liberation also situates the UAW within a feminist framework. While many left women, particularly those on the anti Soviet side of the late 1960s split in the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), went on to figure prominently in the Women’s Liberation era, others did not make such an easy transition to a new form of feminism and women’s activism. The UAW continued to exist after 1970,
but in an altered and somewhat diluted form. The combined effect of the new feminism, the split in the CPA and the earlier split in the UAW along the lines of the Sino-Soviet conflict (adherents to Maoism insisted on a focus on independence struggles rather than the peace emphasis centralised by Soviet internationalism) resulted in a significantly diminished Union of Australian Women, with some state branches seceding (especially in Victoria), defections to Women's Liberation and a general membership decline; typical of most women's organisations with an aging membership and lack of recruiting success. A reading of the discourse of motherhood offers a way of charting this transition and understanding the membership basis of the UAW.

In a memoir essay, Joan (Justina) Williams, a prominent member of the Western Australian UAW, writer, feminist and peace activist, stressed the ordinary lives and concerns of many UAW members. Williams, like her colleague and fellow Western Australian Dorothy Hewett in *Wild Card*, chose to recall the time of the formation of the UAW in the present tense, therefore capturing the immediacy and dynamism of the activism and in particular, the politicisation of the ordinary housewife. She writes:

In the 1950s the worldwide petition to ban the A-bomb draws housewives and working women into action for peace. We support a new progressive national organisation, the Union of Australian Women (UAW). Its policy includes price control, equal pay and opportunity, friendship with women of socialist countries and world peace.

Although immediately branded a communist-front organisation, the UAW is an independent body, but includes party members in the rank and file like Katharine Susannah Prichard and myself, and the Secretary, Mary Lester. Work on practical issues – child care, better living standards, equal pay – wins support; housewives though new to politics, are quick to understand their oppression.
Women in the UAW leadership like Mary know they must listen carefully to those making their first step outside the home.\textsuperscript{36}

This passage captures many facets of the UAW experience – the marginal position of the communist-front, the wider international peace movement and the influence thereof and most crucially, the typical UAW recruit, the housewife making her first steps outside of the home and her first steps towards understanding her own oppression. In terms of reconciling, or at least accommodating, both the larger Soviet internationalism underpinning the UAW and the 'practical issues' concerning the increasingly politicised housewife, the discourse of motherhood was especially useful and it is through this double reading – motherhood as both a universal experience that can be incorporated into Soviet internationalism and motherhood as the daily experience of the typical UAW member – that I locate my analysis.

In the pages of \textit{Our Women}, letters, vox pops and surveys demonstrated the clear appeal amongst readers of the discourse of peaceful motherhood. While the UAW's membership base was made up predominantly of women who belonged or had belonged to traditional Communist affiliated organisations, primarily in the union movement whether directly or through women's committees and auxiliaries, generally \textit{Our Women} chose to stress the everyday lives of these working women and/ or mothers, rather than their Party affiliated left wing activism. For a professed non party affiliated organisation, this distancing from party politics was especially crucial. The content of \textit{Our Women} clearly reflected this tendency to position politics as a natural result of everyday experiences and it was in the recording of these experiences that the discourse of peaceful motherhood was most evident and convincing.

Clearly, the equation of motherhood and peace had powerful resonances and currency. In issue one, for example, the editors surveyed a small group of UAW members in an article entitled 'Why I joined the UAW' and common features of

\textsuperscript{36} Joan (Justina) Williams, 'Women Carrying Banners', in \textit{Carrying the Banner: Women, Leadership and Activism in Australia}, (eds) Joan Eveline and Lorraine Hayden, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 1999, p. 23
politicisation and identification were evident. Participation in other activities, usually associated with the concerns of mothers and housewives, such as the maternity hospital and high prices campaigns, would lead to a ‘discovery’ of the UAW and their solid, peaceful and above all women and children centred values. Mrs. Bessie Miller joined because she felt women had to solve their problems themselves and because she believed that a ‘Union of women in every country in the world [would] bring peace and goodwill to all nations’. For Mrs. Mitchell, a member of the Parramatta Maternity Campaign Committee, the discovery that the UAW was working for a better life for women and children and most particularly for peace, led to a decision to join. Mrs. Vera Edwards discovered the UAW through word of mouth, via another woman living in her housing settlement and she declared that ‘the UAW provided a long felt want in my life. ...[Joining the UAW was] the happiest thing I ever had happen to me’.37 Together, the experiences of these working class women, usually mothers and wives, revealed a gradual politicisation. Party politics were not featured. Instead, the discourse of motherhood offered a way of expressing a more organic conception of the connection between everyday experience and politics. Peace issues were central to this expression of a distinct type of female activism.

Alternatively, the discourse of motherhood could be utilised in the interests of women's rights in terms of support for national war efforts. This was articulated most directly in Jessie Street’s article ‘An Army of Mothers’, published in 1944 Australian Women’s Digest.38 The UAW were formed after World War II, and while it can be confidently suggested that they may have also supported the Second World War due to their left wing affiliations, the Cold War was less problematic for them and encouraged a promotion of the concept of peaceful motherhood as a universal condition. As Chris Healy has pointed out, support for war usually requires the citizen to identify with the nation. One common feature of antiwar movements is that they have tried to redefine the link between citizen

37 Our Women, Union of Australian Women, March 1953

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and nation.\textsuperscript{39} With the UAW, these problems were negotiated by reconstituting motherhood on international, rather than national, terms.

When Australia was figured in \textit{Our Women} magazine, it was in ostensibly patriotic terms – with the familiar adjectives of lucky, sunny and happy – but a strong focus on motherhood as a universal condition meant that this potential for overt nationalism was subsumed into a larger concern with international issues. The relatively comfortable conditions of Australian women, and mothers in particular, meant that Australian mothers had even more of an obligation to focus on the plight of women and children everywhere and world peace in general. Note, for example, the report filed from a WIDF Council Meeting in Berlin by Freda Brown, UAW office holder and later WIDF President:

\begin{quote}
Over in Europe, deep in winter, one loves our Australia all the more. We are so lucky with our beautiful warm sunshine, a land of abundance, untouched by the horrors of war.

"Australia", we told the women, "is a long way away, but we are close to all women in our desire for peace and our determination to see a world freed from the horror of war".\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

This sense of Lucky Australia was possibly best captured, however, not in reports filed from Europe, but instead, in the local expressions of concern for world affairs, commonly framed in the context of an idyllic national experience. This method of aligning peaceful motherhood with the machinations of daily existence was possibly the most effective UAW device. Motherhood was the great leveler and this sense of common experience was most effectively captured in daily ritual. In the first edition of \textit{Our Women}, published in 1953, an article titled 'Bullets or Ballots?', by Joan Jackson, charts the writer's growing political consciousness through everyday experience. The tone was familiar and inviting. The reader was clearly encouraged to identify with the experience of the writer or at the very least, consider it in reference to her own experience, with the opening

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\textsuperscript{39} Chris Healy, 'War Against War', \textit{Staining the Wattle}, (eds) Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee, McPhee and Gribble, Melbourne, 1988, p. 208 - 27
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Our Women}, 10\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Issue, 1963, p. 7
\end{flushright}
words: 'I wonder if you feel like I do'. Jackson then goes on to extend this process of identification:

I wonder if every time you are putting a fresh clean sunsuit on an excited little one in preparation for a family trip to the beach, or when you see this little one laughing madly and being awfully silly, something terrible happens inside and you suddenly stop and think of thousands of little ones in Korea who know nothing but war, disease pain and perhaps a killed mummy. I wonder if when your little one comes in crying with a scratch as Janey does, and you kiss that scratch better, you suddenly think of those children in Korea that no kissing or cuddling or even medical attention will ever make it better again.

Well, in our street, Alma, Molly and Betty felt that way too, particularly after the very happy Christmas party we held for thirty children in our local park.

Together, Joan, Alma, Betty and Molly decided to start campaigning for an end to conscription and again the process of politicisation was captured in accessible ways, such as nervous Alma who had never campaigned door to door. To conclude, Jackson featured an older woman, with a 'wonderful face' that 'showed years of toil and anxiety in the rearing of her three children — three sons, who when they grew into men were all killed because not enough people had united in their millions throughout the whole world' to oppose war. The broad message suggested by Freda Brown's sweeping statements about Australia and its position in the world was, in Jackson's article, modified to have daily currency with the women the Union of Australian Women considered its main constituency — working class women, workers and mothers alike. For these purposes, the discourse of peaceful motherhood, tempered by a restrained nationalism rooted in everyday experience within the context of an overarching internationalism, was especially resonant.

Clearly, as an organisation in a marginal position, the UAW sought to appeal to as many women as possible and the discourse of peaceful motherhood offered a very powerful identifying force for those purposes. The Union of Australian Women

41 Our Women, March 1953, p. 20
was formed in New South Wales in 1950 shortly after the beginning of the Korean War, and their consequent campaigns protesting against atomic warfare, war in general and the Vietnam War illustrate the endurance of the essentialist discourse of war and peace. By this stage, the UAW were almost solely responsible for the observation of International Women's Day, which had shrunk in direct proportion to the growing anti Communist sentiment of the Cold War period, meaning it was increasingly difficult to stage events of the magnitude of the 1930s and 1940s. Typically, left wing women's groups, such as the UAW would focus their peace campaigns around International Women's Day. Always internationalist in spirit, IWD appealed to the commonality of female experience throughout the world, but it was a particular kind of internationalism - that of the Soviet Union and communism.

In his history of the Communist Party in Australia, Stuart Macintyre notes the importance of IWD on the Communist calendar, particularly after the re-establishment of a CPA women's group in 1926 and the increasing bureaucratisation of the international Communist movement throughout the 1930s. In this way, IWD became firmly entrenched as an expression of Soviet internationalism. Former Communist Party and UAW member Joyce Stevens, in her history of International Women's Day, drew attention to this close connection between socialist internationalism and IWD. Stevens charted the growth of activism on and around IWD from its German socialist origins and socialist founder Clara Zetkin to the famous IWD protest in revolutionary Russia in 1917 to UAW member Doris Webb attending 50th Anniversary celebrations in Copenhagen in 1960 and beyond. After the formation of IWD organising committees in 1939, and through the shared experience of the war against fascism, IWD came to incorporate a more varied range of feminist and socialist agendas, but by the time of the UAW's formation and peak period of activity, 1950-1970, the cultural and political climate of the Cold War ensured that IWD was once again negatively associated with socialist activity, resulting in restricted

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42 Curthoys and McDonald, *More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade*, p. 41
access to public spaces and declining influence in terms of establishing a wide basis of support and consensus amongst women’s groups. As former Sydney IWD secretary Vera Deacon recalled: ‘During the war everyone wanted peace, ...but [after WWII] all the marvelous idealistic dreams we had seemed to fall by the wayside because the cold war broke out almost immediately.’ Deacon then adds that the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan changed the world ‘irrevocably and that [now] peace was a central issue for all politically conscious women.’ The task for UAW was to identify the politically conscious woman for the nuclear age and the discourse of peaceful motherhood offered one way to expand the definition of activist women in an era increasingly hostile to socialist activity.

While International Women’s Day sought to recognise the conditions of women locally and internationally, the UAW maintained a specific focus on the internationalist aspect. Again this was consistent with Soviet internationalism and international delegates, usually from Communist countries, were a regular fixture at IWD events. Musical concerts and other artistic expressions of international solidarity further consolidated the international focus, while posters and leaflets featured the common symbols and slogans of internationalism and the international peace movement, with a multi cultural array of children as a typical fixture. The 1964 visit of Madame Katz of the French Union of Women was illustrative of a typical UAW-organised International Women’s Day of the Cold War era – an international delegate, an anti nuclear focus (against the French tests), posters and leaflets with children highlighting the danger of the tests (‘Protect Children in the Pacific’) and an impressive national organising effort that ensured Madame Katz was able to speak in a number of locations around the country with a positive response.

Traditionally, the alignment between the discourse of motherhood and socialist internationalism positioned the mother alongside the worker in her contribution

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45 Ibid, p. 18
46 Curthoys and McDonald, *More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade*, p. 45

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to the socialist struggle. Capitalism and war were therefore twin enemies to a peaceful universe. This continued in the Cold War context with a special emphasis on the particular demands, setbacks and advances of the nuclear age. Note, for example, the report from UAW delegate Norma Chambers from the 6th World Congress Against A and H Bomb in Tokyo in 1960:

In the struggle for peace there are those who spread hatred between worker and worker; between mother and mother. Those who plan extension of military occupation, equipping foreign bases, military alliances with nuclear weapons. Those who intervene in independent and semi independent nations by use of threats and economic blackmail. Those who finance thugs and pimps to break union solidarity.

These are the enemies of peace.47

At the same time, the discourse of motherhood, even within an international socialist framework, could still be utilised by the UAW for the purposes of advancing women's political rights within Australia. Clearly, with world peace as the ultimate goal, women, and especially mothers with their innate peaceful qualities amplified after childbirth, would need to play a stronger role in government policy. In a letter to the editor, a UAW member wrote:

Today, men dominate the affairs of the nation. Women, for all practical purposes, have no say in the decisions and actions of government. This has proved a disaster, for despite almost infinite potential of scientific method, resources of modern technology, abundance of food and material of all kinds, the world today is in a sorry plight...[Note] the unbelievable stupidity of the arms race. The old evil conditioning that [women] are the inferior of men is the only thing preventing women from taking their rightful place as moulders of policy and as a power for peace in this war ravaged world.48

While this letter did not specifically privilege mothers amongst women, common features of the UAW's discourse of motherhood were featured - especially the recurring idea that men, for all their achievements, had not been able to attain

47 *Our Women*, March - May 1961, p. 23
the ultimate goal of peace. In this understanding, modern technology was a site of potential good that has been corrupted by the men in charge of world affairs. Women, in contrast, were figured as a 'power for peace'. The discourse of peaceful motherhood, as the ultimate expression of female peacekeeping, was therefore as crucial to the UAW's campaigns beyond the peace cause - most notably the campaign for women's rights, using the same type of essentialist ideas that typified many a feminist campaign from the vote through to conscription.

The campaign for increased women's rights meant that the UAW sought to participate in an ongoing campaign that extended beyond the Communist Party and the larger context of Soviet internationalism. The professed non party political stance of the UAW was therefore crucial and while the Cold War antagonisms that plagued the 1946 Australian Women's Charter Conference and the Australian women's movement in general continued into the period after 1950, the UAW still sought to appeal to a wider community of female activists in the campaign for women's rights and for these purposes, the discourse of peaceful motherhood was especially useful. Again, the commonality of female experience offered a powerful identifying force. In the Cold War period, the UAW collaborations with the United Associations and the Australian Women's Charter movement meant that the particular language of female citizenship that defined the United Associations, a mixture of essentialist and liberal ideas that professed both the equality and exceptionalism of women, found its way into the pages of Our Women. Clearly, within this exchange of ideas and influences, the discourse of motherhood offered a way of identifying common ground.

An article featured in Our Women, titled 'Woman as Citizen' – the sort of article to feature regularly in the pages of the short lived Australian Women's Digest and United Associations circulars and broadcasts - was written by Caroline Scrimgeour, United Associations President at the time of writing (March 1953), in the language common to most United Associations office holders from Jessie Street to lawyer Nerida Cohen to Australian Federation of Women Voters and Australian Women's Charter Committee stalwart Linda Littlejohn. Typically,
such features would list a series of inequalities experienced by women and the familiar distancing from party politics on the grounds of incompatibility with the campaign for women's rights. Following from this, women would be called on to accept some of the blame for these continuing inequalities, because along with the rights of citizenship went a series of responsibilities of which political participation was crucial. To accentuate the seriousness of this point, Scrimgeour went on to utilise the discourse of peaceful motherhood:

We panic over the suggestion of further wars. We shudder in the knowledge that international meetings of male politicians are held in secret, knowing that such meetings probably mean life or death to the children we spend so many years in lovingly rearing.49

The range of possible differences in the experience of child rearing for the predominantly working class UAW in comparison with the middle class constituency of the United Associations were therefore obscured beneath the commonality offered by the discourse of peaceful motherhood. This is one of the central tensions associated with the use of the discourse of peaceful motherhood. For while on the one hand, the discourse of motherhood offered a context in which to accommodate Soviet internationalism, on the other class was obscured in an effort to depict motherhood as the great leveler. Still, to further complicate an analysis of the discourse of motherhood, the desire to use the discourse as a way of transcending class could be interpreted in itself as an act of class-consciousness. Therefore, the twin goals of accommodating Soviet internationalism and situating the UAW within the general campaign for women's rights were not necessarily contradictory goals. For above all, the UAW was a consistently pragmatic organisation that, unlike the CPA, did not view women's rights and the socialist struggle as uneasy bedfellows. Rather, the campaigns concerned for the full emancipation of workers and women in particular were part of a general philosophy and approach that sought to situate women as political agents, arising from everyday experience. The discourse of

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49 *Our Women*, March 1953, p. 9
peaceful motherhood encapsulated this connection between personal experience and politicisation.

For the UAW, the discourse of peaceful motherhood offered a way of repositioning the role of women within a traditional framework. The essentialism implicit in the binary terms of passive/active, private/public and defended/defender was therefore subverted. What they argued made women unique, their motherhood, was a way of defending children and protesting outside of the private sphere using the very biological traits - their capacity for motherhood - which would usually preclude such activity and visibility. Marilyn Lake and Joy Damousi have pointed out that the meaning of warfare for the sexes has traditionally been understood through a series of conceptual oppositions. For instance, home front/battle front, passivity/activity, weakness/strength, private/public, staying/departing, defended/defender. In each of these, women were defined as passive flesh, irrelevant to the making of nations, yet needed on the home front. An addition to this series of binary terms is peace/violence. The equation of women with peace and men with violence is in keeping with the logic of the aforementioned binary terms and by extension the logic of biological essentialism that many feminist groups have used to their advantage, and disadvantage, in the twentieth century struggle for women’s rights.

Central to the UAW discourse of peaceful motherhood was the sanctity and security of the child. The child represents the senselessness of war and in some cases the collapse of oppositional terms. In World War Two and the Cold War, in particular, the increased incidence or possibility of civilian death reached its most dreadful apotheosis in the loss of a child. The home front was no longer separate from the battle front. During the Cold War, the child was an especially common feature of anti-nuclear war propaganda. Children were frequent Our Women cover stars, usually caught in play and cuddling up to an equally cute and

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precious small animal. As an evocative contrast, images of such carefree western children would also be juxtaposed alongside tragic pictures of Asian children ravaged by nuclear and military warfare. If the image itself was not enough, slogans such as 'All Wars Are Against Children' would reinforce the maternalist objection to modern warfare.

Typically, many of the baby images would be syndicated from WIDF and would feature the familiar trope of a cute baby smiling and playing amongst a collection of newspapers with apocalyptic and/ or tragic headlines such as 'Atom Bomb Explodes' or 'Whole village destroyed by Germ Warfare'. The March - May 1959 edition of Our Women featured a typical call to women the world over to act in the interests of peace, syndicated by Our Women from the Bureau of the WIDF to coincide with International Women's Day in 1959. It illustrates the UAW's particular brand of internationalism, the universality of motherhood and the connection between women's biological role and the peace campaign – 'Act now to defend the life we create!' [see Figure One on pg. 30] The grinning baby offered a contrast to the bleak newspaper headlines. An editorial on the same page offered these encouraging words: 'How heartwarming it is to know that there are women in every country in the world who are interested in the same things that we Australian women take so seriously. Of course it is natural for sweet hearts, wives and mothers of all nations, colours and creeds to be gravely concerned about world peace. Language differences are no barrier to this common concern.'

51 Our Women, March-May 1959, p.2
For International Women's Day, 1959, the Bureau of the Women's International Democratic Federation has issued a special.

CALL TO WOMEN THE WORLD OVER

"Act Now To Defend The Life We Create!"

On International Women's Day, millions of women the world over will express their hopes and demand their rights.

On March 8 this year, we women who make so great a contribution to the life of the world, to its prosperity and its beauty, affirm our determination to protect the happiness of our children, the security of our homes, the full enjoyment of our rights. We want humanity to enjoy in peace the fruits of labour and the discoveries of science. We regard the armaments race and primarily the race with nuclear weapons as the greatest obstacle to the realisation of our fondest hopes.

Figure One: Typical UAW use of the image of the child.
In a later issue of *Our Women*, the image of a baby crawling in sweet ignorance amongst the horrible news of the day, was still common. This time the image was not syndicated and instead featured an accompanying poem titled ‘I am the Child’. The title of the poem both identified the female author explicitly with the child victim and invested the hitherto unheard child's voice with emotional currency. The machinations of war were also represented according to familiar binary terms. Soldiers were figured as glorious in battle and defeat with their deeds associated with ‘might’. Children, in contrast, were depicted as the passive victims of war: ‘There are monuments to soldiers, / And to those who died at sea,/ To might horse backed generals, / But none to a child like me’.\(^{52}\)

In *Our Women*, poetry was commonly used for the purposes of promoting peace and frequently children would figure as the emotional centre of such verse. 'Grow in Peace', by J.C. Gillet, was typical of the connection between children and innocence ('Smiling with misty eyes/ That know no hate or greed or/ Fear') and the peaceful potential of well mothered children ('My school child – watch and/ learn/ Peace is man's destiny'). Other titles such as 'Dead Hiroshima Girl' employed the recurring device of allowing a hitherto unheard child to speak. Another common poetic device was the loving parental observation trope. Typically, the parent poet would be inspired to write verse in both loving tribute to a growing child and in fear of a bleak future plagued by war. The idea of 'growth', in contrast with the nullifying effects of war, was central to such poetry. Clearly, mothers were on the side of life. Dorothy Hewett's 1964 poem 'Rozanna Lies Sleeping' was an ideal example of the centrality of maternal love, protection and fear to anti war poetry as featured in *Our Women*:

Rozanna lies sleeping
So safe and so warm,
Oh! How can I keep you
Rozanna from harm!

From atom bomb blast,
From danger and doom,
Tread softly, Rozanna's
Asleep in this room

\(^{52}\) *Our Women*, July-September 1966, p. 2
But just as she struggled
To sunlight from womb
Rozanna must cast off
This warm, little room

And I must give bravely
All I have to give,
The door to the world
Where Rozanna must live.

And I must stand silent
And I mustn’t grieve
While Rozanna goes bravely
To battle and believe.

From atom bomb blast
From danger and doom
Tread softly, Rozanna’s
Asleep in this room

But so that Rozanna
Is strong in the storm
I keep her and tend her
And cover her warm.53

The idea of home as a maternal space, set against the potential dangers outside the ‘door’, the clearest danger being that of war, established both the importance (‘I must give bravely’) and the vulnerability of the motherhood role (‘I mustn’t grieve’). In this context, children were figured as the connection between the mother and the outside world. If the mother’s work was done successfully within the maternal space (‘so that Rozanna/ Is strong in the storm’) the child would be well equipped to deal with the ‘storm’ outside. Such poetry offered the most pronounced examples of the public/ private split, but the connection between the spheres was a dynamic one and the mother’s role was crucial to this exchange.

The slogan ‘The Child Needs Peace as the Flower Needs Sunlight’, a product of the International Conference in Defence of the Child held in Vienna in 1952, was another popular dictum in the pages of Our Women. The same conference produced the extensively syndicated call to peace ‘Mothers and Fathers of the Whole World Listen to Us’, an appeal to all countries to support the Geneva

53 Our Women, June –August 1964, p.18
Protocol which sought to outlaw the use of all bacterial weapons. Again, children and parenting were figured as central to the peace cause. The use of contrasting images, in this case a cherubic Australian child cradling a possum against an image of a damaged Asian child fleeing from war, was again in evidence. Universalism was similarly pronounced: 'Let us devote all our strength/ and unite our efforts to ensure for/ all the children of the world/ the right to life.'

This excerpt was syndicated in the first issue of the magazine, and together with the slogan 'The Child Needs Peace as the Flower Needs Sunlight', the use of contrasting images of children, the significance of parenting, and especially mothers, and the overarching theme of universalism and common experience would be recurring themes in the discourse of peaceful motherhood as expressed by the UAW, via the internationalism of a wider group of movements, feminist, pacifist and otherwise.

Sometimes, however, the peace campaign was expressed in more practical terms. In an article, titled 'Mothers Against Conscription', Mrs. W. Garland of Waverly wrote:

> It's wrong that 20 year olds with no right to vote can be sent overseas to be maimed. My son's call up must dampen his prospects at the bank. He will be two years behind in pursuing his career. He has also joined other boys in working up a band. They were just getting started and now the combination will be disrupted.

Such a prosaic protest against war perhaps found its natural expression in some of the favoured forms of UAW protest. Aprons and paper shopping bags, those familiar symbols of the 1950s housewife, were frequently utilised by the UAW as sites of protest against peace and for other campaigns relating to the security and comfort of home life, such as the cost of living. A short story by Gloria Fowler, published by *Our Women* in 1959, titled 'The Calico Apron', drew attention to this practice, its potential for subversion and the positive and negative results of appropriating seemingly benign objects for the purposes of female protest. The

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54 *Our Women*, March 1953, p. 20  
55 *Our Women*, August 1965, p. 20
story's protagonist Elsie was arrested, and photographed, at an anti war protest wearing an apron with the slogan 'Butter – Not Bombs!' In an interesting narrative device, various associates, old friends, acquaintances and teachers of Elsie responded to the image in the newspaper. With the use of flash back, the 1959 reader was able to chart Elsie's steady move towards protesting. Elsie the niece, school girl and friend was both striking in her ordinariness and exceptional due to the possession of qualities required for such protest - primarily, conviction and compassion. The responses to her public protest were varied - Aunt Em was embarrassed for her, old school mate May was proud and former sports mistress Miss Hackett found the behaviour consistent with Elsie's rebellious spirit. Furthermore, the story highlighted the possibilities of public protest, the infiltration of the protest into the private home and the plethora of possibilities resulting from such a display. The opening paragraphs immediately suggested the power of the image:

It all came out in the papers, how Elsie and two other women paraded down the main street on a Saturday morning, all wearing calico aprons printed in big square letters.

Elsie's apron had "Butter - Not Bombs!" printed in marking ink, and the Sunday paper next morning had a photo of her wearing it.

"Arrested for Obstructing Traffic" was the title under the picture, and as you opened the page it certainly hit you in the eye.

Elsie was not the skinny kind. The apron was cut broad and generous, and there was plenty of her to fill it out. In one hand she held up a paper covered with names she had collected, and in another a paper shopping bag with "Ban the Bomb" in big letters. Elsie was holding it up in full view of the camera, bold as you like.

A lot of people read the story that went with the picture. Some of them recognised Elsie.56

56Our Women, September - November 1959, p. 13
The final paragraphs of the story re-emphasised both Elsie's ordinariness - her forty year old middle aged spread, her biscuits and cuppa with a neighbour, the practicality of her decision to re use the apron - and her exceptionalism - the daring of chasing down the camera man for a good cause, the thrill of the display and the decision, in the end, to keep the apron as a momento of her brazeness. 'The Calico Apron' was a perfect expression of the UAW protesting ethos, using the everyday symbols of domesticity to subversive effect. More than anything, the UAW woman was practical, daring and knowing; as Elsie told her neighbour ruefully: 'If we'd had 'Buy Brindie's Tea' or something printed on us, they wouldn't have cared how much we stopped the traffic.'

In *Our Women*, the UAW's marginal position was toned down in preference to an avowed suburban ordinariness that seemed to fit, most of the time at least, alongside a consistent internationalism. Regular columns stressed the familiar comforts and habits of suburban life with titles such as 'Over a Cuppa', 'Down Any Street' and 'As You Were Saying'. Internationalism was accommodated using a similar approach. WIDF and UAW office holder Freda Brown was a regular contributor with an informal column in the magazine that offered a glimpse into the lives and struggles of women throughout the world and in particular the political, cultural and social utopia of the Soviet led Eastern Europe. Typically, these columns would stress the commonality of female experience. They argued that difference would be the result of active campaigning and an ideal government - as in Russia where, according to Brown, women were able to work, have access to child care and experience the satisfaction of genuine equality. Ideally, this sense of common female experience would be reinforced even through inclusion of and attention to cultural difference. Recipes from around the world would sit comfortably alongside casserole suggestions. The discourse of peaceful motherhood was crucial to this commonality.

This was an internationalism that passed with the split in the Communist Party in the late 1960s. This was also a period in which women's groups such as the UAW

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57 Ibid, p. 19
became increasingly less effective and relevant as The Vietnam War encouraged a more youthful expression of protest, this time around issues that included a gendered critique of sex roles and sexuality, this time explicitly including violence. The Women's Liberation movement would emerge from this period and, despite the successes of the Save Our Sons Movement, the discourse of peaceful motherhood was not appealing to the new women's movements, eager to distance themselves from previous modes and discourses of organising.

(Severed) Connections

In some ways, the UAW with their explicit connection between personal and political life, were a precursor to the women's liberation movement. Aprons and paper shopping bags could be read as giving way to burning bras as the discourse of peaceful motherhood was dismissed or interrogated. The women's liberation movement made explicit connections between gender constructs, particularly masculinity and patriarchy, and militarism and everyday violence, especially against women and children. The UAW, in the pages of Our Women, displayed a tentative grasp of the same issues. For example, 'Flashpoint' was a regular column in Our Women that encouraged women to contribute and explore controversial topics. The 'Flashpoint' in the July-September 1966 edition illustrated the common connection between motherhood and peace, but in addition the topic of war toys encouraged a consideration of the possibility of gendered violence, that is Nurture over nature. Media and war toys formed the rubric of this exploration. The editorial 'Is Brutality the Norm?' included a gendered critique of war: 'These methods are being taught to our sons conscripted into the army. They have to be taught to hate, to accept brutality as a norm, to be able to kill'; with an essentialist conception of female response: 'Can we, the women of Australia allow this brutalisation of our children?' Throughout the editorial was a consistent questioning of the relationship between cultural expressions of war, whether through the media or war toys, and the real incidence of everyday violence. This is a connection that would be consistently highlighted and critiqued by the Women's Liberation Movement. In the end, the
limits of the discourse of peaceful motherhood would be exposed by the increasingly sophisticated critiques by the women's liberation movement, but the UAW could make some claim for posing the questions in the first place.

Apart from the perennial UAW favourite, the cherubic child, typical Our Women cover stars had included union officials, trailblazing working women, Aboriginal activists and up and coming female athletes. By the time women's liberation had come to dominate feminist politics in the early 1970s, the magazine had been reduced to half its size, had ditched the chit chat and recipes in favour of more earnest reflections on the position of women in Australia and had even replaced the unique spin on the cover girl with a minimalist sketch of a budding flower. Most tellingly, the essentialist title Our Women had been replaced with Women's Equality, a title that engaged with contemporary feminist concerns using the rhetoric of a previous generation of women's rights campaigners. Clearly it was on the basis of the ongoing campaign for women's equality that the UAW hoped to find common ground with the new movement.

Before the first issue of Women's Equality was published in 1972, signs of change were already beginning to surface in Our Women. The Vietnam War was regularly featured from 1968. In the June-August 1969 issue conscientious objectors told their tale, squeezed in between 'What's for dinner?' and 'Girl Fridays on the Computer', an article that grappled with the relationship between women and office technology. The middle pages of the same issue were devoted to pictorial and editorial coverage of the 1969 equal pay campaign in courts around the country. Titled 'The Day the Girls Stepped Out', the feature photograph emphasised the inclusiveness and everyday ordinariness of the campaigning Meat Industry Union worker – men in their Sunday best, alongside the hat and glove brigade, and a sassy late 1960s career girl with Jackie O sunglasses and spiky heels. A few pages later, in the letters page a reader from Western Australia mused about future change in women's organisations. However, it clearly wasn't women's liberation she envisioned when she
suggested: 'As a separate women's organisation, the UAW is doing good work, but wouldn't this be more effective if carried out side by side with men?'

In the following issue, cover girl Beth Phayer, an Industrial Research Officer and journalist for the Muncipal Officer's Association, was praised as a modern Pankhurst. Clearly, the UAW were still advancing here a notion of a tradition of women's activism, with a particular emphasis on identifying the aspiring Pankhurts amongst the under thirties set. Thus, Beth was described in the following terms: 'She's attractive, she dresses fashionably, she writes poetry, adores Yevtushenko, Mayakovsky and Spike Milligan and one day hopes to write a politically-oriented book. The Pankhurs would love her'. While Beth's somewhat antiquated tastes and the Quick and Easy holiday recipes and a pattern for a cool summer nightie in the following pages may have detracted from the aspiring, youthful ambitions of the cover girl, Our Women was not without some sense of a changing tide.

In September 1971, the last issue of Our Women was published, this time with a black and white cover and significantly reduced page content. Ominously, a feature article was titled 'Looking at Women and Liberation', a two page exploration of the recent shift in the women's movement within its immediate social and cultural context and with historical perspective. Mary Stewart directly addressed the UAW response to women's liberation writing: 'While we may or may not agree with everything we hear and read on this subject, there are many things worthy of our attention'. Astutely, Stewart began her consideration with an attack on the media for its coverage of the trivialities of women's liberation, in particular the pub campaign to earn women access to the public bar. In typical UAW fashion, Stewart insisted on mentioning the women so often marginalised in public debates about women's issues and feminism — widows, single mothers and other women living below the poverty line. Further on, the author grew impatient with the emphasis on the new feminist discourse: 'Liberation! Equality! Call it what you like! The whole point of equality in my mind is the right of

58 Our Women, June-August 1969, centre-spread
59 Our Women, September-December 1969, p. 2
women to choose for themselves what they want to do’. The personal and sexual politics so essential to the new feminism was thus subsumed into a larger, continuous narrative that situated equal rights at the centre of women’s activism. What was different about women’s liberation was later picked up as something cosmetic and in conflict with ordinary women. Stewart wrote: ‘Concern about losing femininity is a restraining influence on most. Will the wearing of greasy overalls mean a masculine appearance? Will she be less attractive to the opposite sex if she is bold enough to argue with a man at a public meeting?’60 As usual, the UAW sought to appeal to the common woman, but more than ever this constituency was not listening or appreciating the effort. The mixture of ordinary and political concerns had found new expressions outside of the increasingly narrow world of older left activist women.

The launch of *Women’s Equality* represented a final effort by the UAW to engage with the new feminism. With an aging and diminishing membership, the UAW realised they had to grow to maintain any sort of influence. Still, the new magazine did not seem enough. The differences between the new and old feminisms was too pronounced. The slight, black and white missive, printed on cheaper paper than ever before, seemed to typify the UAW’s declining fortunes (or a mis-placed effort to mimic the aesthetics of the new feminism). [see figure two on pg. 40] A lead article on the position of women in Australia featured a consideration of the new feminism that recognised both a feminist tradition and a radical shift in what constituted feminist organisation:

At the present time we are witnessing the development of a new interest among primarily young women in their conditions and quality of life. Like their mothers and grandmothers before them they are questioning the double standards, the inequalities and the pressures of society. ... While some of its attitudes and methods have been unacceptable many of its aims are shared by long established women’s organisations who seek to break down

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60 *Our Women*, September-December, 1971, p. 10-11
the barriers of prejudice which continue to bar the way to women's complete equality.\textsuperscript{61}

Figure Two: Women's Equality, Issue One, 1972

\textsuperscript{61} Women's Equality, Issue One, 1972, p. 5
In her memoir *Intimate Union*, former UAW office holder Audrey McDonald mused over the shift towards women’s liberation and more than half a century later remained bemused over questions of organisation and approach. One particularly colourful episode was used to illustrate the generational split in the women’s movement. She wrote: ‘I can recall in one march in the 1970s when women liberationists were distributing rubber penises and feeling shock and horror when I trod on one. It was never clear to me what message this sort of action was intended to convey’. These tensions, so vividly symbolised by the ricocheting dildo, were down-played in the UAW press, but what remains most significant, for the purposes of accessing an understanding of the fraught process of creating a feminist tradition, with such fundamental divisions to contend with, is the fact that the UAW remained determined to somehow both move with the times – hence the march – while staying true to their constituency, working class women and mothers. In the end, it wasn’t enough and the UAW moved further to the periphery of the women’s movement, gutted by inter-state and cross-party splits.

Audrey McDonald picked up the UAW’s historical narrative in *More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade* from Barbara Curthoys in 1970, indicating a significant historical shift for the UAW. This was so much so that McDonald felt it necessary to pause in the overall narrative of campaigns to include a prologue, titled ‘The UAW enters a New Era’ which listed the various political and cultural changes facing the UAW as they entered their third decade. Chief amongst these was ‘the emergence of modern feminism – a “second wave” of women’s movement activists whose ideas and concepts of organisation were, at times, at odds with the practiced approaches of the UAW’. Changing social attitudes about motherhood and work further impacted the UAW’s work by ‘depleting the ranks of volunteers who were now in the labour force and upon whom the UAW had traditionally relied’. The split in the Left, ‘of which the UAW was a part’ further affected the constituency of the UAW, as the CPA split ‘spilled over into the UAW.

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The UAW's leadership was weakened as some UAW members left and gave their support to the newly formed Women's Liberation Movement. Earlier in the history Curthoys had located her history of the UAW in the context of the Cold War. McDonald then shifted focus in the second half to consider how the UAW was marginalised in significantly new ways. What united both narrative threads was the enduring commitment of the UAW to their key causes – namely peace, Aboriginal rights, consumer rights, children and women's rights – and a sense that history, it seemed, was never on their side.

63 More Than a Hat and Glove Brigade, p. 109
Chapter Seven: Points of Departure: Writing, Feminism and History

The autobiographies of Jean Devanny and Dorothy Hewett, *Point of Departure* and *Wild Card*, offer rich examples of the possibilities and limitations of writing the self. Devanny, writing in the 1940s in the wake of a painful departure from the Communist Party, passionately expressed her commitment to liberty for women, yet refused the label 'feminist'. Hewett, writing decades later as a celebrated writer and feminist icon, had less trouble embracing the identity of 'feminist'. Women’s Liberation stood between them. Second-wave feminists, eager to make historical connections with earlier women who fought for political, creative and sexual freedom, reclaimed left women and women writers as feminists or feminist inspirations. The publication of both autobiographies was facilitated by the efforts of the feminist culture that emerged in the 1970s, but only Hewett’s was written in that context. In this chapter, through an analysis of their autobiographical writing, I trace how Devanny and Hewett understood themselves historically as political and sexual subjects. Their respective subjectivities both reinforced and conflicted with other historical understandings of their significance as feminists and writers, revealing the extent to which feminism and identity are continually re-negotiated across different historical contexts.

The feminism that emerged in the 1970s was both indirectly and directly responsible for the publication of Devanny and Hewett’s autobiographies, providing resources, a responsive audience and a new cultural context in which the lives of the two authors could be imbued with contemporary significance. Previous chapters traced how left-wing women were or were not incorporated into the new feminist culture. In chapter five I discussed how the history of left women in Australia, with the assistance of feminist labour historians in particular, came to be written into the history of Australian feminism. Communist women were able to be re-write their radicalism and anti-feminism of the interregnum period as proto second-wave feminism. The Union of Australian Women was not so successful in establishing connections with Women’s Liberationists. Wedged
between the Cold War and Women’s Liberation, the UAW became custodians and proponents of an earlier women’s activism, whose moment had passed. This sense of the timing of feminism is further developed in this chapter in which I argue that Devanny’s sexual politics were in advance of her contemporary context. In her autobiography, she laments the lack of receptiveness for her ideas and is bitter at the Communist Party’s treatment of her. Hewett, in contrast, offers a life story in which communism and feminism were able to be reconciled successfully.

The experiences of Devanny and Hewett are therefore analysed as an extension of the discussion of communism, feminism and history in chapters five and six, but I also add new emphases. The stories of communist activism explored in preceding chapters were typically expressed collectively, a testimony to their style of politics and sense of collective identity. By contrast, I locate Devanny and Hewett within the tradition of communism women writing of themselves and their experiences as ‘exceptional’. Devanny and Hewett pepper the collective histories – Devanny was frequently sign-posted as an emblematic proto or actual feminist in communist histories, while Hewett, in her capacity as Our Women editor and activist for women’s rights, featured in the histories of the Union of Australian Women. Yet in all these instances, their reputations preceeded them – Devanny and Hewett have primarily been remembered as writers and trailblazing activists. Their exceptionalism could not easily be incorporated into histories and identities that promoted the ordinariness and commonality of women’s experiences. They belong to a tradition of communist women’s activism that was picked up by feminist historians in the 1970s, but they also belong to the separate and sometimes overlapping traditions of communist women writers and Australian women writers generally.

Feminist historians, particularly feminist labour historians, found in communist women earlier evidence of class and sex-based struggles. Feminist literary historians, meanwhile, turned to literature and language in order to identify a tradition of individual women writing within and against patriarchal culture. As in women’s history, feminist literary critics and historians sought to recover
women's voices and to counter and critique dominant traditions, primarily in this case, the male-dominated literature canon. In the introduction to this chapter I will discuss the development of a tradition of women's writing in Australia, the particular contexts in which Devanny and Hewett's autobiographies were published and the ongoing process of assigning and reinscribing their historical significance. An extended comparison of the authors and their autobiographies will anchor this introductory discussion in particular examples of historicising the self.

Throughout the 1919-1969 period women writers took up the themes of national identity and the politics of women's freedom with passion and enthusiasm.¹ Not surprisingly then it was women writers such as Flora Eldershaw, her frequent collaborator Marjorie Barnard, Miles Franklin, Eleanor Dark, Dymphna Cusack, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Jean Devanny that later generations of feminists would turn in order to fashion their own narratives of Australian women's history and identity. The 'second-wave' feminist movement in Australia re-examined central literary texts and previous perceptions of them. The lives, problems and attitudes of a range of women writers, some of whom were formerly dismissed as minor, or untypically Australian, have thus been reassessed from a contemporary perspective and the political and personal aspirations, cultural, sexual and racial assumptions in the work of such writers have also been subjected to a feminist reassessment.²

Women writers were 'rescued', individually and collectively, after the emergence of a feminism more responsive to the connections between the personal and political. Dedicated feminist scholars such as Dale Spender,³ Drusilla Modjeska and Carole Ferrier have rehabilitated the writings and reputations of earlier

¹ See, for example, Flora Eldershaw (ed), The Peaceful Army, Penguin Australian Women's Library, originally published in 1938 to coincide with the Sesquicentenary of white settlement in Australia, Melbourne, 1988
³ Dale Spender is the author of the Penguin Anthology of Women's Writing, Penguin, Melbourne, 1988
Australian women writers for both literary and explicitly political reasons. Looking back at the lives of these women writers, contemporary feminisms saw some connections with their own struggles. Modjeska wrote at the beginning of her literary history *Exiles at Home* that her project wasn’t just social history, but was also about ‘feminism and fiction, about the contradictions of class and gender. These are the issues that bring this period into our present’.4 Ferrier, in comparing Devanny to Simone de Beauvoir and Doris Lessing – those second-wave exemplars of fashioning narratives of the personal as political – refused to assign her subject ‘yesterday’s heroine’ status, preferring instead to argue that ‘she still offers a great deal in terms of the meanings her texts – and her life – can continue to yield’.5

Women writers of the 1930s and 1940s, in particular, were noted for their politics, but reconciling politics and literature was never straightforward. These writers wrote of subjects and preoccupations that were pertinent both at the time (the nation, women’s rights, class) and across generations (work, love, family, liberation). Sometimes these writers identified as feminist, sometimes as communist, sometimes just as ‘writers’. In any case, they were sensitive to their own and others’ subjectivity. Identity and history, personal and political, fascinated them. Furthermore, their life stories were rich tapestries in themselves that often articulated explicitly both the possibilities and limitations of womanhood.

Devanny and Hewett’s life stories also offer evidence of just how de-stabilising ‘exceptional’ women, such as writers, could be to cohesive political identities or alternatively how constricting organised politics could be to women writers. In some respects, explicitly feminist organisations were more welcoming of creative women as they were able to celebrate such women’s dedication to their art as evidence of the success of feminism and/or as proof of women’s equality. Some

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women writers such as Flora Eldershaw and Miles Franklin felt the same way, regarding women’s entry into literature as part of the emancipation of women and something to thoroughly applaud. Others, including Dymphna Cusack, who joined the United Associations, were drawn towards organised feminism. However, as Drusilla Modjeska has highlighted, the anti-fascist struggle of the 1930s saw many of these women writers drift away from their earlier feminist preoccupations towards left politics. Justina Williams, a writer who joined the CPA during the 1930s, remembers it as a decade where ‘there were so many political events...one had to take a side on one or the other’. This was ripe soil for ‘socialist ferment’ and Williams was just one who began to find the women’s movement ‘dull and boring’ and comparatively lacking in scope. One of the results of this was that some writers struggled to find an expressive and political framework which could incorporate both their broader political and specifically female concerns: ‘The Communist Party was unable to take the feminist protest seriously; liberalism was incapable of providing a political analysis that would do so.’ Some writers, such as Eleanor Dark, refused to accept any limitations and continued to expand their canon in new and interesting ways, while others, such as Devanny, became bogged down in the grind of a political life at the expense of their writing.

For those like Devanny and Hewett who joined, rather than merely collaborated with the CPA, the freedom to write of women’s experiences was further curtailed by the Party’s stance on both writers and women. They struggled to get writing recognised as a contribution to communism and the writing they did produce was subject to the aesthetic and political criteria of the CPA. Playwright Betty Roland, for example, has looked back on her time in the Party in the 1930s as a ‘farewell to art’, as her writing skills were deployed for the CPA:

I was writing propaganda – articles and playlets – political agit-prop. No art....They were just about topical political situations, strikes, lock-outs and

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6 Modjeska, *Exiles at Home*, p. 9
8 Modjeska., p. 256
women’s rights – not much then, because the women’s lib hadn’t been thought of. Women just accepted their role. So for several years I just did that political thing.9

From this perspective, the autobiographies of Devanny and Hewett can be read as sustained responses, ‘feminist’ perhaps, to communist culture and its treatment of women writers. In this sense, they are political: alternative narratives produced within the feminist and communist revisionist historical traditions. Even within the more specific area of communist feminist historical revisionism, they again occupy an in-between position, standing both alongside and apart from their female comrades.

Michelle Arrow has pointed out that communist women writers often stood apart from other women writers. Arrow reminds us the activist lifestyles of communist women were often in contrast to the lives of other women writers ‘rescued’ from the period. She further suggests that communist writers such as Devanny and Hewett, who struggled to get writing recognised as work, stand in contrast to the image of writing as a vocation that dominates feminist literary histories of the period.10 This contrast between the dedicated writer and the writer/ activist was explored in the autobiographies of both Devanny and Hewett, but particularly by Devanny in both her correspondence with other writers and in her autobiography. Her awareness of how her identity as an active communist conflicted with her identity as a writer both accounts for and complicates Devanny’s status in the canon of Australian women writers reclaimed by later activists and writers.

Jean Devanny was born in New Zealand in 1894. She left school at thirteen, married at seventeen and by the time she moved to Australia in 1929, she had three children. She joined the Communist Party in 1931. During the 1930s, Devanny became one of the Party’s most hard-working and well-known platform speakers, helped establish the Writer’s League with Katherine Susannah Prichard,

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9 Betty Roland to Giulia Giuffre, A Writing Life: Interviews with Australian Women Writers, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1990, pg. 2
organised women and spoke to them about birth control, wrote and researched one of her most highly regarded novels *Sugar Heaven* and travelled to Berlin for the Congress of International Worker's Relief. She also endured the death of her beloved son Karl, named after Marx, in 1934. It was in the 1930s that Devanny began her affair with Communist Party leader J.B. Miles. In 1940, she was expelled from the Party for alleged sexual misconduct. It was the circumstances of that expulsion which partially inspired Devanny's decision to write her memoirs during the 1940s. Her bitterness over the expulsion partially influenced the tone of the book, but Devanny was still able to also capture the excitement and appeal of Party life. In 1949, she resigned from the Party for the second and time and moved permanently to Queensland. When she died in 1962, her autobiography was incomplete and unpublished.

Dorothy Hewett was born in 1923 in Perth. She grew up on an isolated farm and studied by correspondence before studying Arts at the University of Western Australia. She began writing poetry as a child and was a published author by the age of seventeen. In 1942, aged nineteen, she joined the Communist Party. In 1947, Hewett left her first husband and ran off to Sydney with her lover. They had three sons together and lost one, Clancy, aged three to leukemia. In Sydney, Hewett asked the District Officer for a job in 'the worst factory in Sydney'\(^\text{11}\) and soon after was sent to work in the Alexandra Spinning Mills. It was that experience, and the 1949 Coal Strike that inspired Hewett's first novel *Bobbin' Up*. In the Party, Hewett was highly active. At various times she was a union delegate, a writer for numerous Party publications, an organiser for work among women and a platform speaker. She was also a founding member of the Union of Australian Women. In that capacity, she attended the 1952 Women's International Democratic Federation's Conference in Defence of the Child in Vienna and established *Our Women* magazine. It was those first thirty five years of her life that Hewett covered in *Wild Card*. The book closes with Hewett writing *Bobbin Up* at her kitchen table in Redfern, then leaving Sydney. In 1960, she

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\(^{11}\) Dorothy Hewett's 1985 introduction to *Bobbin' Up*, Virago Press, London, 1985, vii
married Merv Lilley, moved back to Western Australia and had two daughters. In 1968, Hewett left the CPA after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Hewett died in August 2002, the author of twelve collections of poetry, three novels and thirteen plays and the recipient of many awards and accolades, including the Order of Australia Medal for Services to Australia.

Hewett came to write *Wild Card* after she visited the London offices of feminist publishing house Virago\(^\text{12}\) in 1983. Hewett recalled:

> That day ... when I walked into the Virago offices to meet Carmen Callil, its feisty Australian director, was a real milestone for me. “Tell us about yourself”, she said. “We don’t know anything about you”. A bevy of young women editors had been called to meet me, she turned on her tape recorder and fuelled by a couple of whiskey’s, I began to talk. Out of that meeting came not only the reprint of *Bobbin Up* but a commission to write my autobiography *Wild Card*. I began to write prose again.\(^\text{13}\)

At the end of *Wild Card*, Hewett recalled it was male comrades such as Frank Hardy who encouraged her to write prose again, inspiring the ‘miracle’ of writing after ‘ten silent years’.\(^\text{14}\) A quarter of a century later it was the rise of feminist publishing that facilitated another renaissance in Hewett’s writing life. In Australia, *Wild Card* was published in 1990 by McPhee Gribble,\(^\text{15}\) then the only independent publishing house in Australia directed by women.

The ‘rediscovery’ of Jean Devanny began with the communist histories discussed in chapter five, but it was feminist literary critic Carole Ferrier who has been her most consistent champion. In 1975, Ferrier founded the feminist journal *Hecate*:

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\(^{12}\) Virago was conceived in 1973, by founding directors Carmen Callil, Ursula Owen and Harriet Spicer as ‘the first mass-market publisher for 52% of the population – women’. In 1977, inspired by Sheila Rowbotham’s *Hidden From History*, Virago Reprint Library was established to ‘feed an eager new audience’s desire for women’s history’. A year later, Virago Modern Classics was launched to celebrate women writers and the rediscovery and reprinting of their works. Hewett’s *Bobbin Up* was distributed by Virago, before they reprinted the book in 1985. See www.virago.co.uk

\(^{13}\) Hewett, *Bobbin Up*, viii


\(^{15}\) McPhee Gribble were established in 1975 in Melbourne by independent publishers Diana Gribble and Hilary McPhee. One of their first publications was Helen Garner’s debut novel *Monkey Grip*. Hewett’s *Wild Card* was one of their last. The company went broke in 1989. See Hilary McPhee, *Other People’s Words*, Picador, Sydney, 2002.
A Women's Interdisciplinary Journal of Women's Liberation and it was in the pages of that journal that Ferrier began to argue for the historical significance of Devanny as a writer and activist.\textsuperscript{16} It was also Ferrier who edited the draft of Devanny's autobiography, which was published by the University of Queensland Press in 1986. In her introduction to Point of Departure, Ferrier made three claims for the contemporary relevance of Devanny's autobiographical narrative. Firstly, she argued Devanny's evolution as an activist with the Party 'is still of interest to those concerned with socialism and women's liberation now'. Secondly, Ferrier recommended the narrative for the insights it provided into the working-class struggles of the period she lived through and finally, Point of Departure 'provides much information about the development of an important writer whose work is not widely known'.\textsuperscript{17} Here, Ferrier was firmly locating Devanny's historical significance for three distinct, yet related historical traditions — histories of feminism, communism and women's writing.

In the epilogue to Point of Departure, Devanny's daughter Pat Hurd lamented that the autobiography, light on 'name-dropping' and partial in its depiction of the fullness of Devanny's life, did not do 'JD justice, nor does it cover much of her best attributes or effects'. Hurd concluded it 'remains for a biographer to tell the full story'.\textsuperscript{18} Ferrier already had that particular project well under way, though before it was completed she facilitated the republication of two of Devanny's novels Cindie\textsuperscript{19} and Sugar Heaven\textsuperscript{20} and edited the correspondence of Devanny


\textsuperscript{18} Pat Hurd, 'Epilogue', Ibid., p. 322

\textsuperscript{19} Cindie, originally published in 1949, we re-printed by feminist press Virago in 1986, with a new introduction by Carole Ferrier. Jean Devanny, Cindie, Virago Press, London, 1986

and other Australian women writers for the collection As Good as A Yarn With You. In 1999, she published Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary, after almost two decades of writing and research.

In the prologue to the biography, Ferrier continued to discuss a topic she had raised earlier in journals and in conversation with Devanny’s film biographer Kathyn Millard, namely that of the complicated process of ‘constructing and deconstructing’ or ‘re-presenting’ Devanny. Ferrier was attentive to auto/biographical theory and its implications for her representation of Devanny. She hoped to avoid, for instance, the sort of mythologising Luisa Passerini has identified as inspirational rather than true to life. In representations of communist women, by the women themselves and by others, this mythologising typically asserted itself in the stereotypes of ‘rebel’ and ‘bohemian’, two categories Ferrier felt did not fit Devanny’s historical experience. She chose instead for her own ‘reconstruction of the legend of Jean’ to adopt a dialectical approach to such stereotypes, neither privileging her subject’s own self-representation or the perceptions of others, but instead considering them in tandem and dialogue.

Ferrier was in this way attentive to the historical contexts of various representations of Devanny. Her own historical representation of Devanny, spanning two decades of research and writing, was inevitably shifting, yet Ferrier was consistent in her championing of Devanny as a ‘revolutionary’, whose life was pertinent to Women’s Liberationists. Indeed, Ferrier cited Devanny as a women’s liberationist in this attempt to harness her subject’s multiple identities:

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23 Kathryn Millard’s documentary film about Devanny’s life, based on her autobiography and correspondence, is titled Point of Departure. It was financed by the Australian Film Institute and screened in film festivals and on the ABC in 1987. In that year Ferrier interviewed Millard for Hecate, vol xiii/1987-88.
Jean was: a writer ... a revolutionary activist and organiser and a famous public speaker, a mother, a women’s liberationist, someone who looked for integration in the disparate aspects of her experience of writing, activism, sexuality, relationships (what we used to call in the Sixties ‘the public and the private’) — but we didn’t find it.  

In Ferrier’s historical claiming of Devanny, therefore, her subject is made meaningful on both her own terms, by virtue of her work and how she represented her own struggles, and in the context of Women’s Liberation, where Devanny’s earlier struggles were able to at last be properly understood and expressed. Accordingly, Ferrier reassessed Devanny and declared her revolutionary, a view which dovetailed with the reminiscences of other communist women, similarly looking back from a cultural landscape changed by second-wave feminism.

Ferrier further argued for historical connections by explicitly linking Devanny with three younger women from a later generation — her actual daughter Pat Devanny Hurd, her surrogate daughter activist Kay Brown and Dorothy Hewett, ‘in some ways a Jean of the next generation’. In doing this, Ferrier was fashioning her own generational narrative, one that can be read as another attempt to create a feminist tradition. In my reading of Devanny and Hewett’s autobiographical selves in this chapter, I am writing against this, insisting on the historicisation of the two subjects, but in doing this I am still drawn to points in their life stories where all that did seem to separate them was history. Hewett comes to emerge as one of the few subjects in this thesis who read historically appeared to have history on her side. She got to tell new stories or the same stories in new contexts where her potential meanings had more hope of a responsive audience. At the very least, she got to keep trying.

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26 Ferrier, Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary, p. 9
Jean Devanny and Dorothy Hewett: How (Not) to be trusted

After Dorothy Hewett joined the Communist Party, she didn’t write fiction for a decade. When Jean Devanny was in the middle of a book, she abandoned the project to help out with a strike effort. Both women were called before the Communist hierarchy to account for their sexual behaviour. When Hewett eventually wrote a successful book in the Party-sanctioned socialist realist style, *Bobbin’ Up*, some male communists maintained that it was written by her lover Les Flood, who allowed her to put her name to it - even though it was based on her own experience of working in a textile factory. Devanny eventually resigned from the party, after two dubious expulsions, over controversy surrounding her novel *Cindie*. Initially, the CPA refused to review it and when they finally did, the review was littered with personal insults and inaccurate quotations. The Party objected to her depiction of Kanakas, which were based on her own experiences of the sugar industry in Northern Queensland and looking back, Devanny reflected that ‘the book was rejected because it featured historical truth - what they wanted was a spurious *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.’

Together, Devanny and Hewett represented a party dilemma - the female communist writer. As I explored in chapter five, how to incorporate women into the Communist Party has been recognised as a problem facing the CPA in this period. How to incorporate writers and other artists into the Party was another recognised dilemma. Female writers offered a more peculiar problem, particularly if the writer also had a possibly ‘feminist’ agenda that did not always concur with that of the Party. Both Jean Devanny and Dorothy Hewett advocated personal, creative, sexual and political freedom for themselves and all women.

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27 Dorothy Hewett, *Wild Card*, p. 257
While this desire could appear to be potentially satisfied within the CPA or communism more generally, the reality of the Party experience ensured that this was not always the case. Theoretically, communism offered emancipatory possibilities for women. The first years of Bolshevik rule in the Soviet Union offered evidence of significant advances for women. Devanny and Hewett, however, both joined the CPA during the Stalinist era and their experiences indicated that this was a problematic era for both communist women and communist artists. The idealisation of the working class and a specific type of working class male in particular had significant ramifications for Communist women and artists. Working class morality and social realism were results of this increasingly rigid ideology and Devanny and Hewett were hardly immune. Devanny, in particular, embodied the conflict between sex, class, art and politics.

As Joy Damousi has pointed out, it wasn’t unusual to find communist women gravitating towards cultural party activity, such as the newspapers or the New Theatre (‘feminine endeavours, away from the real ‘core’ of masculine politics’), but at the same time, the ‘bourgeois’ possibilities of art and culture could create genuine tension and conflict. Communist theory afforded creative writers significant political status, but in practice it was often viewed as secondary and writers themselves were often suspected of political unreliability. To pursue the solitary craft of writing usually requires some typically ‘bourgeois’ requests - time and space to oneself. Then there is the issue of subject matter. Devanny grew accustomed to having her books banned for their sexual honesty. Her desire to promote female sexual agency and pleasure, as both a personal and political right, earned her a considerable amount of unwanted notoriety within the Party. In Stuart Macintyre’s history of the CPA, Devanny is introduced as ‘that notorious victim of the double standard’. More than any other female member of the CPA, Devanny is used to illustrate the precarious position of women in the Party, or more specifically, outspoken women within the Party. Her experiences, as

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31 Joy Damousi, Women Come Rally!, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 208
33 Stuart Macintyre, p. 126
expressed in her autobiography Point of Departure and through the recollections and reflections of others, are used here to illustrate the uneasy position of the sexualised female writer within the CPA. ‘Sexualised’ is crucial here as both Devanny and Hewett, due to their behaviour, writing or both, were reprimanded, gossiped about or simply remembered for expressing their sexual needs and desires.

Carole Ferrier offers a fitting summation of the complicated position of Devanny and Hewett within the Communist Party in particular and women within left politics generally. For Ferrier, the tensions between class and sex - tensions that can never be resolved by merely recording them on paper - are writ large in the experiences of Devanny and Hewett. She wrote that, together with the experiences of other revolutionary women such as Alexandra Kollontai and Rosa Luxemburg, the life histories of Devanny and Hewett offer us, at least, an example of these unresolvable tensions. The life histories are simultaneously ‘so fine and such a mess’. How to situate the autobiographies of Devanny and Hewett within the ever expanding theory of women’s autobiography is similarly problematic, if only because it highlights the potential conflict between female identity and politics. Generally, female autobiographical theory is committed to recognising the multiplicity of female experiences, but some basic characteristics have been identified. In her survey of female autobiographical theory ‘Autobiography and Gender’, Joy Hooton draws attention to basic features of female autobiography that have been recognised across the theoretical spectrum, primarily the difference in content from male autobiography, the relational identity of women, the potential for collective identity, the focus on the inward life and/ or daily life and a more unified sensibility due to the collapse of the public versus private distinction. With the autobiographies of Devanny and Hewett, these fundamental characteristics were both reinforced and challenged.

Devanny and Hewett were women engaged in public discourse (politics) which

affected their family and love lives (private) and perhaps most significantly, politics impacted on their writing. Devanny’s political involvement precludes the possibility of revealing too much about her private life - hence J.B. Miles, her long time lover and Communist Party General Secretary, is disguised as ‘Leader’ - and one instance of her political career, her 1941 expulsion, comes to cloud over the entire work. Hewett wrote *Wild Card* after her political experiences in the CPA and as a result her autobiography is, if only superficially, more recognisably female with her divided self and competing identities taking centre stage. Yet, Devanny’s autobiography is defined by her experience as a female in a Party and it is this experience that motivates the writing of *Point of Departure*.

The titles of Devanny’s and Hewett’s autobiographies, *Point of Departure* and *Wild Card*, illustrated their own sense of uniqueness within the Party and possibly from other female comrades, not to mention as exceptional women within a conventional framework, above and beyond the politics of the CPA. As such, it would hardly be plausible to attempt an analysis of Devanny and Hewett as ‘typical’ communist women (if such a thing exists), but it is their very uniqueness that makes them essential to an exploration of the relationship between communism and feminism. Contemporary discourses of feminism have claimed Devanny and Hewett as feminists. Both women fought for self expression, on creative, political and sexual levels and dared to pursue their own agendas within, or despite, the constraints of the Stalinist CPA. But it is precisely their struggle within the Party that separates Devanny and Hewett from feminism on an historical and philosophical level. Both autobiographies finish with departure - Devanny left the CPA and settled in Queensland and Hewett left behind her increasingly insane lover and father of her children to head back to her childhood home in Western Australia - but these are not the endings of liberation we often find in the feminist novels of the 1970s. They are endings fraught with regrets and disappointments and a limited, painful brand of emancipation. Crises of communist faith plagued them both. What was it that communism offered these talented, independent women that feminism of the time could not?
In _Wild Card_ there is little sense of conflict between communism and feminism, at least for Hewett. Communism is clearly her favoured belief system. Hewett embraced it as a religion, but she recognised both its theoretical potential in terms of female emancipation and the very real limitations. Hewett was a founding member of the Communist dominated Union of Australian Women and was integral in establishing its paper _Our Women_, but found little sympathy for the cause among working-class men, in particular. She wrote:

> I was in charge of women's work in South Sydney, harrying the Party members' wives to become active. It made me highly unpopular with their husbands. Feminism and the equality of women were not causes dear to the heart of working class Australian men, nor were they particularly popular in the male dominated hierarchy of the Communist Party. Oh, they gave it lip service occasionally - some of them even read Engels on _Women and Communism_, with his concept of the working woman as a 'slave of a slave' - but male supremacy was alive and well amongst the higher and lower echelons of the Party.³⁶

Hewett did not distance herself from feminism, but nor did she explicitly align herself with it. Clearly, she was for 'feminism and the equality of women', but she fought for the cause within the Party, despite the 'male supremacy'. For Hewett it was clearly possible to be both feminist and communist, although not necessarily easy. Her middle-class background could account for this, but it was never made explicit.

For Devanny, the conflict between communism and feminism, or at least feminism as it was then commonly perceived, was more acute. Early in her autobiography, Devanny declared that 'without becoming a feminist, the whole warp and weft of my political aspirations was deeply and ineluctably charged with concern for my own sex.'³⁷ Clearly, for Devanny, communism was able, or at least seemed to be able, to accommodate her political concerns about the position of women and children. Her own experiences within the Party, and of the Party hierarchy in particular, caused Devanny to re-evaluate her position on the CPA,

³⁶ Hewett, p. 175
³⁷ Devanny, p. 66
but to the somewhat bitter end she maintained faith in communism as a social system, as a philosophy. At the end of her autobiography, having endured expulsion, derision and abuse, Devanny assessed what Communism meant to her at the time of writing. She was left with the 'bare bones of scientific theory!' While she still believed that 'the struggle of mankind against nature made inevitable the evolution of capitalism through socialism to communism', she had 'repudiated entirely a party based on the rights of its leadership to practice fraud on the rank and file.' In a letter to Miles Franklin, written during the writing of the autobiography in 1953, Devanny reiterated this separation between communism as a social system and the CPA: 'Communism is a social system like capitalism; it is the organisation of the Communist Party that is at fault.' Theory and practice were in direct conflict. As Devanny declared in the autobiography, 'in my day, theory ran a long way ahead of practice.' It is the theory of Communism that offered the initial appeal of Communism and in turn, the lack of appeal or limited appeal of feminism. The experience of the CPA for Devanny and Hewett, however, was a more complicated issue incorporating sex and class on a more complex level as these categories intersected with creativity and issues of personal expression and freedom.

At the most basic level, communism offered a different version of emancipation, not just for women, but the entire working class and possibly the world. Devanny and Hewett, however, drifted towards Communism from different, although not necessarily opposite, directions. Devanny gravitated towards Communism through her own reading and involvement with the New Zealand labour movement. Paddy Webb, the labour leader, was particularly influential. She joined the women's branch of the New Zealand Labor Party, but her heart was not in it as it 'offered no real channel for work'. She was interested in the 'cataclysmic events of the Russian revolution', yet in the 'feminine sphere of

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38 Ibid., p. 309
40 Devanny, p. 171
41 Devanny, p. 81
Labour politics, the Soviet Union was 'almost ignored'. Instead, Devanny satisfied her interest through literature and the activities of the newly formed Communist Party.\textsuperscript{42} Marxism offered her a class-based philosophy that she could incorporate into her work on sex and in particular, the evolution of the family. Engels' seminal text on the subject was obviously a point of reference, but she disagreed with his assertion that it was the female that was responsible for the evolution from group marriage to monogamy. For Devanny, sexual autonomy was linked with economic position. In her project 'Evolution of the Sexlife According to the Materialist Conception of History', Devanny resisted Engels' depiction of the female's innate moral desire for monogamy, finding this both contrary to Marxism and 'ridiculous' in itself. She posed the question: 'Had the sexes remained economically equal, would a woman have restricted herself any more than a man in the choice of a mate?' To Devanny, the answer was obviously no.\textsuperscript{43} For Devanny, sex and class were thus inseparable and Communism, or at least Marxism, offered an integrating framework for her study on and firm belief in female sexual autonomy. One of the earliest declarations in Devanny's autobiography was her 'stand that the right of a woman to control over her own body was inviolable, irrespective of the marriage bond'.\textsuperscript{44} Her subsequent experiences within the CPA would pose a threat to this fundamental belief, but in the beginning at least, she found communism and female liberation to be compatible.

It was not until Devanny moved to Australia in 1929, however, that she joined the Communist Party and even then, it was not straight away. While her children were immersed in Communist activity, Devanny continued to pursue her interest in female sexuality by working with well-known sex educator Marion Piddington at her Institute of Family Relations. Together they worked towards eugenics reform and increased sex education. It was the riotous unemployment protest marches of March 1930 that finally convinced Devanny to join the Party. Arrested

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 84
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p.97
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 94
during the confrontations with police, Devanny ended up in jail with her daughter Pat. The press seized on this fact, and Devanny’s own public letter declaring that she was a writer and that as soon as she was released from prison she intended to join the Party, with zeal. Devanny stuck to her word and joined the CPA, but first had to endure a three-month probation period as she was a writer, a ‘declassed element’ and therefore had to prove that she could be trusted. This would prove to be a complicated task, but initially at least, Devanny’s Party involvement proved to be a euphoric experience. Her work load was massive - she was involved in Friends of the Soviet Union, the League Against Imperialism, Prisoner’s Aid, the organised unemployed and later Workers International Relief and related arts affiliates, in addition to the hard and often abusive grind of the soap box circuit. But for Devanny, the hard work was well worth it, particularly for the feeling of comradeship. She recalls that ‘for the first time in my life I had a warm, wonderful feeling of belonging!’

While the Party initially offered Devanny both a conceptual framework that seemed compatible with her fundamental belief in and desire for female sexual autonomy (and related economic autonomy) and a strong sense of belonging, Hewett’s move into the Party did not seem as thoroughly integral in comparison. Instead, at first, joining the Party for Hewett seemed simply part of the grand romantic narrative of her life’s progress. Fresh from university and working as a cadet for the Daily News, yet still immersed in love affairs and embryonic bohemia, she was introduced to the CPA, ‘this exciting group of people who meet clandestinely and want to change the world’ by ‘a Jewish boy whose name I can’t even remember’. She covered the routine, yet occasionally heartbreaking and demoralising cases of the Married Women’s and Children’s Courts and gravitated to the Party, thinking ‘if you were ‘a rebel in thought and deed’, there was nowhere much else to go’. She was made branch secretary immediately and endured the study classes and newspaper distribution. Her mother raged and her

45 Ibid., pp. 125
46 Ibid., p. 133
47 Hewett, p. 94
48 Ibid., p. 95
father was 'sarcastic but philosophical.' He attributed his daughter's interest in
the CPA to the process of growing up and doubted she was good or selfless
enough to continue. Soon enough, 'when the romance of it' wore off, Hewett 'just
drift[ed] away'.

Still, this was not the end of Hewett's involvement with the CPA. She moved in
and out of home, married and then 'drifted' back into the Party through her
involvement with the paper Worker's Star. This time however, although still only
twenty one, Hewett was somewhat wiser and more cautious in her involvement.
She didn't join the Party straight away because she 'wanted to be absolutely sure
of what I was doing'. She warmed to the theory and was enthusiastic about the
classes, recalling:

   For the first time in my life I have found a philosophy that seems to make
   sense of the world and promises a positive future. I am like a shy convert to a
   new religion, but I am still divided in my allegiances and my literary
   preferences are deeply suspect.

Still, this tension between her literary preferences and the Party was soon
resolved, at least for the immediate future, when Hewett renounced modernism
for social realism in a scathing attack on Ezra Pound and his Australian disciples
the Angry Penguins in the Party paper. Hewett confessed that 'like any good
convert who needs to nail her new colours to the mast, my conversion has
become absolute'. For Hewett, this about face was essential: 'I wanted so
desperately to believe, and was so afraid of backsliding. I had to attack what I
most loved and admired to make my conversion complete'.

Hewett's 'conversion' was figured with religious imagery and in literary terms.
She wrote that 'Marxism for me was a conversion, an act of personal salvation'. Later,
her 'devotion' reached its peak when Hewett and her new lover set up
house in working-class Redfern on the other side of the continent. She wrote, 'I

49 ibid., p. 96
50 ibid., p. 112
51 ibid., p. 113
52 ibid., p. 114
53 ibid., p. 174
have embraced the working class, and the symbol is this decrepit brick corner house where we squat one dark night'.

Hewett and her lover Les Flood became the ‘centre’ of inner city Communist activity, starting up a lending library of working-class classics and offering their house as a site for the Party paper distribution and for the temporary solace of various down and outs. Hewett had a defacto and a new baby, but they hardly spent any time alone: ‘Our lives are devoted to the betterment of the row on row of little semis surrounding us, whose inhabitants neither know nor care’. This ‘conversion’ and consequent martyrdom for the cause did not come easily or without class antagonism for Hewett was both ‘bourgeois’ and a writer. Writing was suspiciously ‘bourgeois’, but Hewett had the comfortable background to go with it. Proving herself became both paramount and contrary to her true self. She wanted so desperately to believe, but when her sexual behaviour got her into trouble, Party covery only temporarily halted her natural inclinations. Communism seemed, in this context, to be posited as an antidote to her ‘wild’ tendencies - she was both willing disciple and reluctant passenger. A professed desire for ‘order’ from her first failed ‘conversion’ was communism’s most attractive and infuriating lure for Hewett: ‘I need order in my life. I need a pattern, a systematic view of the world - and Marxism will give it to me’. In this sense, communism offered both a form of emancipation - Hewett reminds us that the common held view was that the socialist revolution was only three years away - and a form of personal discipline, a ‘system’ that offered order and a way of understanding the world.

Communism for Hewett was both constricting and liberating. Like any organised religion, doctrine could restrict her autonomy or impose patterns of behaviour, but the end result justified the means. This didn’t stop Hewett from questioning or lampooning communist doctrine, but she adhered to it in any case. When J.B. Miles, communist leader (and ‘secret’ lover of Devanny) complained about Hewett wearing her hair long and loose – ‘this is apparently too bohemian for the

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54 Ibid., p. 149
55 Ibid., p. 150
56 Ibid., p. 111
57 Ibid., p. 140

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general secretary’ - she rolled it up reluctantly and made jokes about it behind communist backs. Hewett critiqued the Communist Party of the Cold War period as a party intent on making itself ‘super respectable’ in accordance with the idealised view of the working class. Intellectuals, bohemians, anarchists and the unorganised lumpenproletariat were not to be trusted. Free love, extra marital affairs or the wrong clothes or hair were discouraged - or at least publicly. It is a specific and therefore limiting view of the working class: the kind of worker ‘who punched the bundy without fail, brought home his pay packet to his wife and kids and mowed the lawn in a white singlet on Sunday morning.’ Hewett started to feel the restrictions and resent them. She questioned: ‘What business is it of theirs, the way I wear my hair? Why can’t I write anymore? What is happening to me? Does this mean that I am hopelessly bourgeois and can never espouse the values of the sacred proletariat?’  

The crisis of faith, however, was soon eliminated when Hewett was reinvigorated by the Aboriginal Stockman’s Strike of 1942. This was more in keeping with Hewett’s idea of the Great Marxist Utopia. Hewett was once again ‘fired with a new project ... [writing of the strike] will be my contribution to the epic struggle going on unheard.’

As ever, class is a good starting point in assessing both the appeal and/ or experience of political and philosophical systems. Class was integral to the problem of the female communist writer, both on a practical and theoretical level. Hewett, from the landed gentry of Western Australia, was ostensibly middle to upper class. She converted to both Marxism and the working class. It was not just her writing that made her suspect, her background did too. Hewett featured her background as something to both overcome and retreat back to in times of crises. Her parents and family loomed at the corners of the narrative, forever ready to rescue her from bad relationships, the grind of children and pregnancies and the Party. One minute Hewett was the working class heroine of Redfern, the next she is cosseted by her family in a Toorak mansion. Before too long, she was back in

58 Hewett, p. 122
59 Ibid., p. 123
Redfern again.\textsuperscript{60} Throughout, Hewett drew attention to her divided self. She was both writer and active participant.\textsuperscript{61} Writing mediated between her various identities and made sense of experience. Still, for ten years Hewett did not write anything meaningful. Instead, the divided self was left to negotiate her various identities - working class mother and wife, political activist, daughter of the gentry, secret writer - without writing it all down. Politics and life in general had distracted and constrained her. The autobiography concluded with Hewett writing a book and fleeing from her life. Writing seems her 'true' identity, the working-class heroine became part of past experience.

As a member of the working class, Hewett was never fully engaged. In her autobiography, she ensured that the reader never quite trusted her conversion to the working class - communism as a belief system was another matter - by figuring herself as an outsider. The family of her lover Les Flood didn't 'approve of me. I [was] something absolutely outside of their experience.'\textsuperscript{62} When Hewett got a job at Alexandra Spinning Mills, later the inspiration for her novel \textit{Bobbin' Up}, she cast herself as 'the interloper amongst these pedigreed poor, condemned to pay penance for the sins of my birth.' Among the female lumpenproletariat, Hewett roughened her accent, disguised her handwriting and discussed the topics of the day, from Bing Crosby to sex to contraception to dirty jokes and of course, men.\textsuperscript{63} The job itself was a deliberate move to reinvent herself and cast off her origins and reputation: 'The new life is beginning. I will proletarianize myself. I will be a heroine of the Marxist Revolution, I will be rehabilitated in the eyes of the Party and the working-class.'\textsuperscript{64} Hewett was always rallying against working-class morality (as expressed by the CPA) or working towards the same sort of idealisation. Hewett the writer exposed the multiplicity of working-class experience, but Hewett as participant in working-class life was never as convincing. Hewett was attracted to Communism for the system it provided her

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 163
\item\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 90
\item\textsuperscript{62} Hewett, p. 160
\item\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., pp. 168
\item\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p. 159
\end{footnotes}
with to make sense of the world, but ultimately the experience of the CPA is never quite her world. She remained removed from it no matter how close she got.

Justina Williams, a party comrade from Western Australia and fellow writer/middle class passenger, offered a fitting summary of Hewett and her relationship to the CPA in her memoir *Anger and Love*. She wrote:

> The young Dorothy Hewett, searching for a theory to explain the contradictions of wealth and poverty, joined in the heady Kremlin discussions and shouting matches and took to Marxism like a duck to water. Appealingly frank and honest, rebellious and beautiful, Dorothy was filled with scorn for the middle class money making values of her family and so disliked her baptismal name that Joy Alcorn christened her ‘Todd’. The other side of her contempt for the middle class was idealisation of the working class. ... Tossing back her wild fair hair, her blue eyes took on a sombre depth as she read aloud ‘I am Spain’, one of her early poems, dazzling us with the beauty of some of its images. We were aware of a rare talent that had come amongst us.⁶⁵

Hewett wanted to escape her class, yet her conversion to Marxism did not make a parallel conversion to the working class automatic or smooth. In the end, it seemed, her writing set her apart from both class positions.

Devanny offered a different perspective on the position of the writer. She left school at a young age and joined the work force immediately. She did not take up writing until after her children were born when she was in her late twenties. Her background was working class. Her father was a miner who died from job related complications. Her husband Hal was also a member of the Party as were her children at various times, most notably her daughter Pat Hurd. Devanny lost two of her children, Erin and Karl, to illness. There was never really enough money to go around. Her time was spent working for the Party, initially she concentrated on platform speaking and she got by on a ‘dole diet’. Still, in the beginning and for some time after that, Devanny was not one to complain. While acknowledging the financial strain, she wrote: ‘Hardship? Not at all. Each of us was buoyed up

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with the satisfaction of fighting back against a relentless foe."\(^{66}\) However despite this apparent stoicism, Devanny was frequently ill and prone to collapse. Her literary career, at least throughout most of her time with the Party, took second place. Getting paid work out of a cash strapped party was hard work. At one point, her ‘benefactor’ (a curious figure, possibly an older male comrade, who wanted a closer relationship, inviting questions about possible restricted autonomy for the economically disadvantaged female comrade) returned to New Zealand after she resisted his attempts to make the relationship a more serious one. She then approached the District Committee for paid work: ‘... was it fair that while persistently requisitioning my services, the Party should repudiate responsibility for my upkeep?’\(^{67}\) She was offered a job at the Worker’s Weekly, but when she came down with pleurisy of the diaphragm (itself related to her poverty), not a word was said about money. Yet her writing and frequent championing of cultural endeavours left her open to accusations of being ‘bourgeois’ or at least having ‘bourgeois’ sympathies.

Writing set Devanny apart. Initially, she had to prove she could be trusted. Later, she had to fight to have writing recognised as valuable Party work. As her struggles within the Party and the various affiliated art and writing bodies indicated, she was never entirely successful. Generally, writing and other artistic endeavours were restricted or defined by Party policy of the time. The rigid Class Against Class principles that defined the Third Period later gave way to the more pragmatic and inclusive approach of the United Front, but in any case, social realism and class loyalty prevailed. Devanny’s work frequently depicted the class struggle, but her treatment of sex and even the worker’s struggle itself were often deeply suspect. Before she even joined the CPA, her reputation as a writer whose work was banned for its sexual frankness preceded her. Edna Ryan, a CPA member at the time of the Devanny family’s arrival, recalls that Devanny ‘arrived with the aura of a successful novelist, her glamour enhanced because her books

\(^{66}\) Devanny, p. 130
\(^{67}\) Ibid., p. 208
had been banned in her homeland'. Her reputation as sexually liberated or perhaps worse, as a ‘feminist’, compounded Devanny’s problems. Feminism and writing were both frequently denounced as bourgeois pursuits. That Devanny frequently sacrificed her writing for the cause and distanced herself from the popular contemporary understanding of feminism did not matter for the reputation stuck. Devanny is now remembered as a feminist pioneer within the left, particularly among women. Comrade Jess Grant recalled that Devanny was ‘an active feminist in the party.’ Fellow Party member and writer Kay Brown has labelled Devanny as ‘so feminist.’ At the time, this reputation had more negative effects, partially as a result of innuendo about her private life. As Ferrier noted, ‘a certain mystique surrounded Devanny and views of her and her writing were coloured by what was known, or assumed to be known about her life’.

Devanny was well aware of her position, but her unique set of circumstances made it hard to know what she could expect in terms of treatment. She noted in her autobiography that she was a special case within the Communist Party - a female in an unconventional marriage (she and her husband Hal frequently lived in the same house and continued to be married, although they no longer had sex and were free to pursue other relationships), a writer and a cash strapped writer at that. In contrast to the other well known female writer of the CPA, Katharine Susannah Prichard, who enjoyed a position of authority within the Party and a comfortable income with a house of her own, Devanny posed a problem. She wrote:

As compared with treatment accorded to other comrades, I had no means of judging. Throughout the entire Australian Party was no parallel with the sum total of my case; with my irregular domestic conditions, my accomplishments and achievements. Katharine Prichard was still the only other writer active and with her, fortunately, the question of sustenance did not arise. Her economic position was secure.

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68 Edna Ryan, ‘Jean Devanny’, Australian Feminist Studies, 4 Autumn 1987, p. 190
69 Jess Grant in Stevens, Taking the Revolution Home, p. 185
71 Carole Ferrier, introduction to Point of Departure, pg. xvi
72 Devanny, p. 210

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According to Party comrade and fellow writer Judah Waten, Devanny lacked the discretion and hypocrisy that were necessary to Party morality and behaviour: 'You had to learn the art of hypocrisy and the art of discretion, ... but Jean was not a hypocrite and she was not discreet so that complicated the ideological side of things.' Following from this, Devanny did not share the same high regard as Prichard who clearly knew how to establish her position. As Edna Ryan noted, there may have been a relaxed and casual attitude to affairs and relationships within the Party, but officially the 'Party wanted no headlines about sexual freedom. A firm patriarchal stance was expected. If we wanted to convert the workers to the social revolution, we must appear to live in the conventional mould.' Ryan added that although Devanny was not alone in advocating or practicing sexual freedom, it was she alone that made it a political and therefore public issue, at odds with Party practice of the time. Joyce Stevens partially attributed the Party's response to Devanny to the general acceptance of double standards for men ('boys will be boys') and the lack of a developed critique of sexuality or the sexual division of labour. In this sense, the CPA was a product of the society it so desired to change. Devanny was clearly in a complicated position. Both extremely loyal – 'I'd never leave the Party. I'd crawl back to it' - and determined to pursue her own interests and relationships regardless of convention, it was hardly surprising that she wound up twice expelled and bitter about sacrificing her writing and life experiences to the CPA. Devanny's idea of freedom was ultimately different to that of the CPA.

Frustrations about writing highlighted the limited possibilities of creative freedom for some female comrades. This limited freedom was determined by both class and ideology. With Devanny, in particular, it was complicated by sex. In Point of Departure, Devanny frequently posited fellow writer Katharine

73 Judah Waten to Ferrier, Ibid., p. xxvii
74 Ryan, op.cit., p. 190
75 Ryan in Stevens, Taking the Revolution Home, p. 136
76 Joyce Stevens, p. 101
77 Ferrier's introduction, Point of Departure, p. xxvii
Susannah Prichard as a contrast to herself. Comfortable, with a home of her own, Prichard was able to pursue her writing career without too many disturbances. Furthermore, Prichard was a member of the Executive - in Judah Waten’s words, she was able to ‘establish her position’. Devanny stood in opposition to this security. Devanny was tireless and committed. She also had a reputation and combined with her desire to serve the Party, this left her open to malicious conjecture and exploitation. As one defiant female comrade spat at her: ‘you, of course, will take anything the Party likes to hand out to you. We all know that.’

During a period of ill health, she asked her lover J.B. Miles if she could write as her contribution to the Party. He decided her platform duties were more important and she obeyed. After her first meeting with Prichard, Devanny reflected on their differences: ‘I saw at once that there was nothing of the jack of all trades about her, such was my bane [and] I thought a lot about the conditions in which Kathie lived: a quiet home in lovely surroundings among the hills. For a writer, the ideal environment.’

Later, in the period of Devanny’s controversial 1940-41 expulsion, Prichard reappeared as a source of contrast and comparison. Devanny wanted Prichard’s support or information about the true nature of her expulsion, but the higher placed Prichard kept her distance. In Devanny’s correspondence with Miles Franklin, during the writing of the autobiography, Prichard once again figured as a counterpoint. She and Devanny had moved further and further apart. In a letter to Franklin, dated 1/5/53, more than a decade after the expulsion, Devanny remained preoccupied with the circumstances of her expulsion and Prichard’s possible knowledge of it, if only because writing the autobiography had forced her to go over it all again. She wrote that, in regards to her general case, Prichard ‘knew a lot more than anybody else’, as Devanny had made her well aware of the exact circumstances of her alleged debauchery with young workers in Queensland. Still, Prichard was never ‘convinced about anything until after I resigned and had

78 Devanny, p. 154
79 Ibid., p. 172
80 Ibid., p. 137
81 Ibid., p. 252
written to the P[arty] of my intention of writing my experiences. ... I hope she doesn’t dare let them [the Party] use her’ Prichard was separated from Devanny and the women of the rank and file. Devanny was aligned to rank and file women, particularly in regards to ill treatment from the Party, but her could use her writing as a weapon: ‘What can she [Prichard] know about my life? and the injuries done to poor women who, unlike myself, couldn’t write up their experiences. Couldn’t even talk of them.’ Devanny, as ever, remained unique. Her position was a peculiar one and as usual, her sexuality emphasised this. She concluded her attack on Prichard by hoping she would ‘have the sense to hold her tongue. Especially in view of the things she told me about her own mode of life. ... I simply had no sex life. And I’m not pretending to be an angel at that.” Prichard was a Party person. She was free to pursue her writing as she wished because she had both economic security and a working knowledge of how to establish her position. Devanny didn’t have the first and she was incapable of towing the line in order to establish a position for herself. In any case, her political and personal stand on female sexual autonomy made a position of authority within the Party an impossibility.

When Devanny compared herself to writers outside the Party, including Franklin and male writers in general, her sense of loss was more acute. To Eleanor Dark, she wrote ‘I wish I could write as well as you. I wish I could get the peace and quiet, of mind and physical surroundings, to write even as well as I think I could write. But life seems to have carved me out of turbulence and strain.’ Yet again, Devanny expressed her fear of being a ‘jack of all trades, with my aspirations so diffused that no one stream can grow strong enough to swell the flood that went into your book [The Timeless Land].’ To Franklin, she depicted herself as a writer ‘torn between twin loyalties’ and later she lamented that male writers had infinitely more freedom: ‘if only they had to go through what we women have to conjure with! Everything goes their way!’ Having read the autobiography of

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82 Jean Devanny to Miles Franklin, 1/5/53, As Good as a Yarn With You, p. 317
83 Jean Devanny to Eleanor Dark, 10/5/42, op.cit., p. 75
84 Jean Devanny to Miles Franklin 26/8/39, Ibid., p. 43
Arthur Koestler and comparing herself to both Frank Ryland and Franklin, Devanny wondered whether she had wasted her life, whether she had missed her opportunity to travel and experience the world and to write to the best of her ability. She envied Franklin her memories of international travel and wondered ‘if I am a fool not to repudiate entirely everything about the Party and try for something for myself yet.’ Still, Devanny stopped herself going further. She was in the midst of writing the autobiography and was consumed by both its possible effects (‘It will do a tremendous amount of good for the internal life of the Party, will benefit the writers, but it won't sell much and it won't gain me any kudos’) and her own past. In the end, she still believed in communism and could ‘never sacrifice my integrity to my yearning for “belonging” and for travel.’ If the book should amount to nought, if it should have no effect at all, Devanny pondered renouncing her belief in the Party and giving up writing altogether, but knew that essentially ‘I shall go on, I suppose’. The CPA had determined the character of her writing career and Devanny was full of regret, yet Communism continued to exert its influence. Her limited freedom - as woman, as female writer, as Communist female writer - continued even after she had resigned from the Party since her essential faith still remained.

With Hewett, the conclusion to Wild Card suggested freedom and a reinstitution of her true identity as writer. Early on in her involvement with the Communist Party, Hewett stopped writing poetry:

I only write political articles for the Worker’s Star. Lloyd says it is because I am always too busy working for the Party. You have to have the leisure to create. But I know the real reason. I have turned myself in to a political creature and dried up.86

Both Devanny and Hewett felt writing and politics were antithetical while they were in the Party. Devanny was never completely free in regards to both politics and writing because she could never completely devote herself to either

85 Ibid., 2/6/53, p. 320
86 Hewett, p., 122
completely. Hewett was able to leave politics, to lose her faith, and was therefore free to write as she wished.

With Hewett, Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation of Stalin marked a turning point and the true beginning of her loss of faith. In this sense, she had history on her side. Devanny, almost thirty years older, was a product of the Third Period. Hewett also experienced the restrictions of Class Against Class and the idealisation of the working class and all of its associated codes of behaviour, but she was still young enough to get out and not be consumed with sort of lingering doubts and bitterness that characterised Devanny's experiences. Most significantly, however, she didn't have Devanny's experience or more specifically, an experience of the sort of demoralisation that typified Devanny's expulsion. Hewett lost her innocence with Khrushchev's revelations and once again set off on a new life: 'we pack up our belongings, leaving Sydney, 'the big smoke' and the class struggle, all that has defined our life for the past seven years, to go back to the bush.'  

She had the capacity, means and desire for endless reinvention. Devanny moved North and resigned from the Party, but her peace was still threatened, if only occasionally, with reminders of her past, with the bitter after taste of her experiences and her lingering reputation. In her isolation, as her letters to Franklin reveal, Devanny reworked and relived the past.

Hewett took the advice of writing colleagues. Devanny was always an eager listener and devoted correspondent, but politics had the final say. Hewett's faith was rocked by the revelations of the Twentieth Congress and consequently she found her way 'back again to the country of the imagination.'  

Frank Hardy, a Communist who refused to let doctrine stand in the way of his literary career, helped her along. He told her that writing was her work and she began to wonder whether she had sold her soul to save the world. Then the miracle happened - after 'ten silent years' Hewett began to write again. Social realism continued to

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87 Ibid., p. 233  
88 Ibid., p. 247  
89 Ibid., p. 181  

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exert its influence and her middle-class characters were initially portrayed as villains, but slowly she began to develop her own style. People gossiped about whether or not she'd actually written her first novel and her mad lover Les threw her writing heap into a bonfire, but in the end Hewett triumphed, if only because she managed to write after so long. Writing was freedom, the 'miracle'.

Point of Departure did not conclude as optimistically. It was clearly motivated, or at least coloured, by Devanny's (in)famous experience in the Party - her 1940-41 expulsion. Devanny's own confusion about the reasons for the expulsion were reflected in her text. Reasons came to her from all sections of the Party - it was 'yarn', her poor health, 'slander', political degeneracy, blackmail, 'a personal indiscretion', her tendency to coddle 'worthless women', the fact that she was 'a homewrecker' and all that seemed clear was Devanny's own anger 'that men daring to call themselves Communists should regard women as nothing but animals!' Devanny was living and working in Northern Queensland in the company of men. Her reputation preceded her, but she continued to rally against the sexism of the small group of comrades. She endured their talk of debauchery and defended their female victims, but in the end it was Devanny who was victim of 'feminine trickery.' She cooked and cleaned for this group, but decided to make an escape and later, sought Party support in confronting these men. Bureaucracy stalled proceedings and in the end, Devanny was expelled. Nothing was made clear. As Joyce Stevens acknowledged it is hard to determine the exact circumstances of the expulsion as the Party was illegal at the time. Most likely, influential male comrades used their power to settle sexual scores with Devanny. At the time, even Devanny's husband didn't support her, a lingering hurt that resurfaced in her correspondence to Miles Franklin.

90 Ibid., p. 246ff
91 Devanny, p. 230ff
92 Ibid., p. 237
93 Ibid., p. 236
94 Joyce Stevens, Taking the Revolution Home, p. 103
95 Jean Devanny to Miles Franklin 2/6/53, As Good as a Yarn With You, p. 322
During the writing of the autobiography, Devanny stressed to Franklin her desire to make the book helpful and not too bitter, but in the end the expulsion determined the character of the book. The expulsion was the climax and the embodiment of Devanny’s experience as a woman writer in the Communist Party. The ‘scandal’ typified her experience and made her denounce communist leadership. If her book was to serve a useful purpose she felt compelled to expose all the facts. She posed this question to Franklin: ‘How can I make it known that I was expelled on grounds of gangsterism, with the assistance of confederates and dupes in the leadership without including it [the expulsion]?’ She added that ‘I simply have to show the types of men ... given absolute control over women of my type’. Devanny had a weapon - her writing. This set her apart from other women, perhaps women of ‘her type’ who were similarly exploited and/ or abused by the Party, but in the end, writing did not give her the same freedom as it did Hewett as she never fully escaped the bitterness of her experiences. With Hewett, there is the sense that writing her autobiography had reduced her Party experience to a mere chapter in the grand romantic narrative that was her life. With Devanny, her marginalisation defined the autobiography, both her marginalisation as a Communist woman and a Communist writer. It was a conflicted work, forever trying to balance loyalty to the Party with her own bitter experiences.

Together, Wild Card and Point of Departure directed the reader to both the commonality and specificity of the Communist Woman’s experience. Feminism was figured as either contrary to the class struggle (Devanny) or as one aspect of a political outlook that was not necessarily supported by the CPA (Hewett). Both of them sought their freedom primarily through other avenues, communism and writing. Personal and creative freedom were compromised by the Party, although not necessarily Communism itself. To both, communism was a faith, a belief system, a religion. Hewett lost faith and gained freedom from the loss of

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96 eg. letter to Franklin dated 26/8/53, p. 332
97 Jean Devanny to Miles Franklin 4/9/53., p. 336
innocence to write. Devanny’s faith was sorely tested, but although she resigned from the Party, her autobiography revealed that she continued to grapple with the circumstances of her disillusionment in the context of enduring faith. Devanny still believed in communism. She wanted her autobiography to help rehabilitate the party, to serve its interests, to help Communist writers in particular, but she could leave out the tragedy of her expulsion. Writing allowed her to record her negative experiences, to speak out about them, but she was still constrained by her lingering faith in Communism. At the same time, recording her experiences led her to reflect on what she had given up for politics. This sense of wasted opportunities was made most obvious in her correspondence to Miles Franklin during the writing of the autobiography: ‘Oh Miles, how I have wasted my life. I’m done for now, and yet I had it in me to do good work.’

Hewett’s autobiography covered her years of relative obscurity - its end really marked the beginning of her artistic career. Devanny’s autobiography was never published in her lifetime and she died less than a decade after writing it. Both women pursued sexual and creative freedom, but their success was dependent on to what extent they could either rally against or work within the essentially masculinist context of the Communist Party. Feminism belonged to a different class or it was only one aspect of a personal political outlook concerned with emancipation. Communism, at least for a time, offered a system to strive for this freedom. Hewett thought she was going to save the world and that the revolution was only three years away. Devanny was less romantic, yet more determined, she perhaps gave too much to the Party as a result. Her regrets were painful. When thinking through the implications of being labelled immoral, when her ‘whole energies were given to gigantic labours and humanitarian principle’, Devanny felt she could strangle herself for her naïveté and submission: ‘Simpleton, idiot, fool!’

99 Jean Devanny to Miles Franklin 14/8/53, As good as a yarn with you, p. 332
100 Ibid., 2/6/53, p. 321
In the end, what remains is the sense, strongly evoked by Devanny herself, that she was tragically ahead of her time. Hewett, in contrast, was a product of hers, despite her fierce individualism. She joined the Party when all rebels did. She left the Party when widespread disillusionment set in. Throughout, she was able to escape both politics and domesticity and its related problems because of her family background. Devanny was thoroughly integrated into the CPA and in the end was victim to it. Her desire to promote female autonomy, personally and politically, established the reputation that became cause to drive her out of the Party. Now, she has been reclaimed as a feminist and trail blazer. Comrade Phyllis Johnson remembered a ‘passionate woman’ who spoke highly of equality for women and openly of female sexuality. Johnson recalled that ‘we were like stunned mullets really. We, ourselves, never talked about such subjects. It’s a damn pity we didn’t.’ Fellow activist Kate Olive celebrated Devanny as ‘a forthright and consistent champion of woman’s right ... to express her sexual desires.’ The hypocrisy that characterised Devanny’s experience was acknowledged – ‘welcomed by men in private and sternly criticised in public’ - and finally, her experience was put down to the lack of positive reception to feminist ideas, including amongst women. Unfortunately, Devanny was never fully trusted by the Party for these ideas and never enjoyed the full fruits of the freedoms she campaigned so arduously for.

Devanny produced her autobiography in fits and starts, squeezing it in between her CPA activities and writing in the shadow of her eventual expulsion and the Party’s illegality. As one reviewer has written, ‘Devanny’s story is essentially about marginalisation’ and indeed her autobiography was produced out of it. Devanny has since been re-claimed as a feminist and historicised in communist history as advanced in her politics, particularly her articulation of sexual politics, but her autobiography reveals that she was so immersed in her political and cultural environment she wasn’t able to perceive herself as anything other than a

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101 Phyllis Johnson in Taking the Revolution Home, p. 198
102 Letter to Tribune as cited in Ibid., p. 102
victim to it. Lacking the benefit of historical hindsight and not living long enough to enjoy politics and culture ‘catching up’ to her own politics, Devanny could only write from within the hothouse climate of the CPA. If she was staking a claim to anything, it was her right to be a female writer in a political party that treated both women and writers with suspicion. Hewett, in contrast, wrote after she left the CPA and embraced her ‘true’ identity as a writer. For Hewett, the past and present were therefore mediated by different narrative options to Devanny. She had both feminist and modernist narratives of ‘becoming’ at her disposal.

In life and in death, Hewett was subject to both the liberation and limitations of her status as a historically significant figure of the left and Australian literature. In 1998, the left journal *Overland* celebrated Hewett as a ‘work-in-progress’, a recognition of both her past, present and future contribution to Australian literary life. Nicole Moore, in assessing Hewett’s impact, noted the author’s shifting significance and reception, writing ‘Hewett is pre-eminently one of those writers whose work, life and reception have been thoroughly (re)generated through and against the various enthusiasms of her audiences’. Hewett has been active in those negotiations, regenerating ‘narratives of the self and history in different forms and contexts’. At the time of writing, however, Hewett’s ‘latest persona, as ageing poet, (un)wise woman and cultural critic’ saddled the author with a ‘lot of history that keeps on needing to be spoken’. To Moore, Hewett seemed ‘to have been ‘aging’ for a very long time’.104 In the same journal, Hewett hinted her own exhaustion with exploring her subjectivity and its meanings, greeting Moore for an interview with: ‘I don’t know what we’re going to talk about – I seem to have talked about everything in my life a thousand fucking times’.105 It has been an interesting exercise also to chart the ways in which her death in August 2002 had some commentators circling back to her communism.106

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106 See, for example, Paddy McGuinness, ‘Why Hewett the Stalinist will be forgiven’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 27, 2002
Hewett's 'escape' from this past, by way of leaving the Party and historicising the self, was possibly not as finite as the production of *Wild Card* may have suggested. Yet Hewett's creativity was never crippled by her politics and her engagements with her own subjectivity were shifting and robust. Writing, particularly writing the self – one of the key forms of expressing feminist consciousness in the 1970s – saved her in a way it couldn't for Devanny. 'You can never go back, only onwards' was a line of Hewett's recited at her funeral. 'I had a wonderful world in my head and three-quarters of it will be buried with me' was another. Even in death, Hewett's words made a claim for the creativity and re-invention of the self. In this chapter, I traced how Dorothy Hewett's creative emergence coincided with the development of a new feminism that championed female creativity and subjectivity. This was in contrast to Jean Devanny, who renounced a different feminism, but was punished for her sexual politics in any case. In the time and space between the writing of their autobiographies stood 1970s feminists.

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Conclusion – Timing is Everything

I began this thesis with the Australian Federation of Women Voters locating their origins in the historical context of the formation of the League of Nations. I concluded with Dorothy Hewett writing the self, post second wave feminism and post modernism. Along the way, feminists and communist women who were politically active in the between-the-waves period turned to history to legitimate their identity, to argue for a feminist coming of age, to explain failure, to counter other historical narratives and to re-write feminist identity and the feminist past. The meanings of ‘communism’ and ‘feminism’ changed, separately and in relationship to one another. I have traced some of these changing meanings and the different ideas of history various feminists and feminisms have engaged with, during and after their peak years of activism. These ranged from the progressive model of history liberal feminists used to define, legitimate and explain their political identity to the explicitly political histories of the Women’s Liberation movement which re-cast Australia’s feminist past in new and significant ways.

While feminist uses of history have varied over time, the investment in telling stories about the past has consistently been informed by contemporary identity politics. Even academic histories interested in deconstructing categories of identity and history have argued for the efficacy of this process in terms of contemporary (and future) feminist projects.¹ Feminists, in Australia and elsewhere, continue to turn to history to account for the success and failure of women’s movements, to argue for the necessity of feminism and to re-inscribe feminist identity. Feminism, in spite of its disunity, diversity and difference, continues to have a profound sympathy with historical relativism; a relativity that embraces history for its liberatory potential.²

¹ For Joan Scott, for example, a more radical feminist politics (and feminist history) requires a more radical epistemology. Joan W. Scott, Joan Wallach Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’ in Gender and the Politics of History, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988, pp 42
This interest in how feminism and history have worked together informs my critique of the waves model of conceptualising the feminist past. In this thesis, rather than write against the waves model by arguing the historical significance of between-the-waves activists for contemporary feminism, I explored the historical claims and arguments of those feminists whose efforts to write their own way into history were erased or diminished or re-figured by the histories of later feminisms. ‘History-making’ encompassed the knowledge feminists produced about the past, the traditions they developed and cultivated, the counter-narratives they put up against other versions of the past, the stories they told about their own organisations and lives and the historical significance they accorded their political activity. I emphasised how they selected what stories they wanted to tell about the past and I discussed this in terms of their contemporary and shifting feminist identity (or refusal of feminist identity).

The structure of this thesis was necessarily selective and episodic and my analysis wove behind and between histories as I traced the myriad ways feminists have assigned (or re-assigned) historical significance to the past, the present and the future. Furthermore, my analysis centred on those activists who chose to write about their feminism, their activism, their experiences and their history. If I ‘recovered’ voices it was incidental, rather than deliberate. Rather than use oral history to transcribe the thoughts and experiences of those activists still alive, relating their attitudes towards later feminist appraisals of them, I discussed those women who actively chose to produce historical accounts of their work, their lives or the lives of other feminists and other women. These women often fashioned themselves as representative of women, communities of women or of feminism and for this reason their historical work is useful for an analysis of the relationship between feminism, history and identity. The voluminous papers and archives of Bessie Rischbieth and Jessie Street and their respective organisations, for instance, offered evidence of particular historical consciousness’. By donating their correspondence and records of their prolific work to the National Library of Australia, Rischbieth and Street asserted national significance for their feminism. Both women died before the full effect of Women’s Liberation. The collective, oral
testimony-based histories produced by activist historians and feminist or left-wing presses eschewed formal, institutional historical records for collaborative, explicitly political feminist history. These eclectic materials that formed the basis of my history were not gathered to produce a continuous story about Australian feminism between 1919-1969, but to illustrate how stories, histories and identities are inter-related, contested and shifting. I moved communist women from the outskirts of my thesis to the centre, first slowly then emphatically, because their politics and subjectivities became increasingly integral to an understanding of how this period of women’s activism in Australia has been understood and defined contemporaneously and retrospectively.

Of course I have also fashioned a historical narrative of my own. What bound my chapters together was an ongoing discussion about whether or not feminism and communism were on the side of history; history in this sense denoting the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times. Both feminism and communism, most notably during World War II, had their moments in the sun, but these were either short-lived or illusory. The three women’s organisations I explored in detail in the thesis – the Australian Federation of Women Voters, the United Associations and the Union of Australian Women – all attempted to shift their politics from the periphery in various ways. The AFWV and UA argued for women’s rights within a liberal, democratic framework and campaigned enthusiastically to get women into parliament and other key institutions. The UAW championed ordinary women. All three organisations argued for the important political and cultural contribution of mothers. In contrast, Women’s Liberationists protested against the oppression of women by directly challenging dominant paradigms. By doing this, and in tandem with other social movements, the ‘second-wave’ feminists were arguably more successful in inserting their political identity into the cultural and political landscape.

This narrative of feminism circling the zeitgeist and never quite getting there until the 1970s could be read as reinforcing, rather than challenging, the waves model of feminist history. Evidence of the Union of Australian Women trying and
failing to make meaningful connections with Women’s Liberationists or Jessie Street flying the feminist flag with futility as she promoted her autobiography advanced further the idea of a new feminism that had plenty of reasons to denounce the previous one (and vice-versa). However, arguing for feminist continuity is just one possible response to the historical erasure of between-the-waves feminism. Producing evidence of extensive feminist campaigns does not preclude recognition of discontinuity in feminist thought and practice before and after 1969. In this thesis, I demonstrated that feminists were active in Australia throughout the twentieth century and that the feminist culture that developed after the First World War in particular, expressed a coherent political identity that aligned feminism with the progress of western democracy. Yet this feminism was always contested or resisted, from within the women’s movement and by other groups. I argued for a strong, identifiable feminist movement in Australia during the 1919-1969 period insofar as those feminists (and their contemporaries) defined themselves as such.

I included communist women to demonstrate the diversity and narrowness of feminist campaigns and identities and as another point of entry into discussing how feminist history and identity are constantly re-written and re-figured. Feminism and communism were social movements that had parallel, intersecting and conflicting histories during this period. After the 1940s, the decade where a new social order had seemed promising for both feminism and communism, Australian feminism became increasingly more diffuse and less of an identifiable movement. Previously, the AWFV and the UA had consistently championed and observed a hierarchy of feminist representation, though not always successfully. The 1954 split between the two organisations illustrated the extent to which the Cold War had infiltrated the women’s movement. During the 1950s, some feminists and communists continued the fight for women’s rights within the Union of Australian Women and the Australian Women’s Charter movement. This enduring feminist activity offered little in the way of connection for the next generation of feminists, who found more solidarity in the struggles of communist women, many of whom renounced previous feminisms for similar reasons as
Women's Liberationists. Some communist women went on to become Women's Liberationists. Others, such as Jean Devanny were reclaimed for being ahead of their time. Dorothy Hewett reached her creative peak after her time in the Communist Party and thus managed to escape Devanny's fate – that of the tragic feminist prophetess.

During the final months of writing this thesis, I viewed for the first time the documentary about Devanny's life *Point of Departure*, written, directed and produced by writer, filmmaker and academic Kathyrn Millard. This documentary was based on the same material I used for my own interpretation of Devanny's life (her autobiography and correspondence). I was struck by the similarities and differences in our respective versions of the writer's life. In many instances we had gravitated towards the same quotations about a woman's right to control her own body, about the sense of belonging Devanny found in the CPA, about having to prove herself and her sad regrets for a wasted writing life. The contrast Millard coaxed out between the historical context of Devanny's politicisation, the black and white footage of poverty, militancy and war, and the carefully cultivated gardens and studies of Devanny's circle of writing friends also seemed to visualise my own perceptions of Devanny's divided life.

One of the chief sadnesses of Devanny's life was the death of her son Karl in 1934. But while these passages in the autobiography had moved me, they somehow couldn't be made to 'fit' the historical story I was trying to tell. For Millard, however, Karl's death was sensitively and evocatively rendered as Devanny's most marked struggle. It was her ability, in Millard's portrait, to continue to work after his death that marked the subject of Jean Devanny as a survivor. In Millard's last shots, Devanny has moved to North Queensland to live in companionable incompatibility with her estranged husband. She stares out to a beautiful sea, musing 'The rest of my life I feel could be spent in these pleasant surroundings, but who would dare to make plans'. With that, the screen fades to

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3 Kathyrn Millard, *Point of Departure*, Documentary Film, AFI Distribution, Melbourne, 1987
black, leaving the viewer with the bare facts of Devanny’s later life – She was admitted to the Party in 1943, resigned in 1950 and died in Townsville in 1962. An interpretation of Devanny’s last years was therefore left open-ended. I feared I had not extended Devanny’s life the same courtesy. To read Devanny’s story as one of tragedy, rather than survival, suddenly struck me as the worst sort of anachronistic interpretation.

Yet my intention has not been to claim Devanny for some sense of trangressive feminism, outside of time and place, but to understand how she figured her own experiences and why later feminists would come to be drawn to her life and politics. In historicising Devanny in this way I myself came to understand her as a woman ahead of her time. The feminism of the time did not fit Devanny’s left politics, but her championing of women’s rights and her own sexuality got her into trouble in the Communist Party. She persisted with communism and died before she had the chance to see a mass mobilisation of women fighting as Women’s Liberationists and espousing the sorts of philosophies she herself had advocated.

Devanny was a woman who believed in historical progress. She wanted revolution and she was enthusiastic about social change. Devanny interviewed Jessie Street in the 1940s, because Street’s visit to the Soviet Union and her Australian Women’s Charter Conference of 1943 all pointed to a way forward. Yet, both women’s autobiographies were never really finished. Street paused her life story in 1945, in anticipation of a second volume that would chart the next, less optimistic period of her life. Devanny abandoned hers. The reasons for leaving their memoirs unfinished are probably numerous, and some of them no doubt prosaic (old age, declining health, lack of public interest). But the fact that Devanny’s rendering of her life story was defined by bitterness, and Street’s ended in sadness, is significant. History, in the end, as expressed in Devanny and Street’s own representations of their lives, had not been on their side.
The autobiographies of Devanny and Street reveal that the idea of a failed feminism or struggle for women's rights did not originate with the historical revisions of 1970s feminists. It was an idea that the previous generation of activists had already explored, advanced or challenged themselves. They continued to do this for several decades. That their moment of recognition and reward had never seemed to come prompted a variety of responses from those women who had been politically active during 1919-1969. Some, such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters and the United Associations, argued that their contribution was meaningful and recorded their histories as those of achievement and progress. Others, most notably the Union of Australian Women, wrote in defence of their radicalism and defined themselves, for instance, as more than a hat and glove brigade. Individuals such as Jessie Street and Jean Devanny were more ambivalent about their own contribution and what it meant.

All of these histories located the success and failure of feminism in historical circumstances. The feminists of the 1970s were hardly the first to critique the success or failure of the previous generation of feminists. Those women had done that themselves, and with an acute awareness of the importance of timing. What the waves model offered was a useful description of the process of negotiating feminism, history and identity. The waves metaphor contains within it the implicit idea that timing is everything. If you manage to ride the wave, you are rewarded. If not, you run the risk of being washed up on shore, possibly to be swept out again. Later generations may not recognise you, though some may see in your efforts a reflection of their own work and rescue you. Or you may catch a wave that takes you somewhere else. As I have shown in this thesis, negotiating history, feminism and identity is never a simple case of sink, swim or ride. For feminism, the complex and crucial processes of history-making will never be uncontested.
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