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Australian Feminists: The Visit of Maude Royden, 1928

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Introduction

On Sunday, 10 June, 1928, the Principal of the University of Queensland Women's College, the presidents of the Queensland Women's Electoral League and the Women's Non-Party Association, representatives of several other organizations, a Methodist clergyman and his wife, and several journalists gathered at the Brisbane Railway Station to welcome Miss Maude Royden at the beginning of the Queensland part of her lecture tour of the British World, sponsored by the British Commonwealth League. Australian metropolitan dailies gave ample coverage to her tour, which is the more remarkable since at the very same time Charles Kingsford Smith and his team were making their epic first flight across the Pacific – they landed in Brisbane on the same day as the lady arrived by train – while the Church of England was preoccupied with debate in the British Parliament over its attempted revision of the Book of Common Prayer.¹

Who was Maude Royden, and why did she visit Australia? Who were the Australian feminists involved in her visit? What did she do in Australia, and was it successful? These are questions I should like to explore in this paper.

Who was Maude Royden?

Agnes Maude Royden² (1876-1956) was the youngest of the eight children of Thomas Bland Royden, a successful shipbuilder of Liverpool, England, who had entered politics, become Member of Parliament for Toxteth in 1873, a JP in 1874, and Lord Mayor of Liverpool 1878-79. In 1905 he was made a Baronet, in recognition of his concerns for marine insurance and the safety of ships at sea (he later agitated for the introduction of the Plimsoll Line) – Sir Thomas Royden of Frankley Hall, Birkenhead. Maude's eldest brother, also named Thomas, was educated at Winchester College, and Magdalen College, Oxford; he became head of the Cunard Steamship Company, as well as sitting on the Board for Midland Bank and Shell Transport. He inherited the baronetcy from his father in 1917.

This privileged family background gave Royden access to the élite levels of Australian society. She was welcomed and entertained by Governors and Mayors and their wives because of her family connections; such matters still counted in the 1920s, especially

¹ Brisbane *Courier*, Friday 8 June, 1928, p. 13; Monday 11 June, 1928, pp 13-17.

² Sheila Fletcher, *Maude Royden: A Life* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989). Fletcher has also contributed an entry on Maude Royden to the Dictionary of National Biography. Sybil Oldfield, *Women Against the Iron Fist: Alternatives to Militarism, 1900-1989* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), ch. 3, 'The Political Preacher: Maude Royden (1876-1956)'. On-line biographies include 'Celebrated Women: Maude Royden, 1876-1956' http://www.womenandthechurch.org/celebrated_women/Maude%20Royden.pdf.

in the Australia of Stanley Melbourne Bruce. But even more important for early 20th Century feminists was education: a genteel education at home by a governess was not enough to equip them for the work they were to undertake.

Royden was given as good an education as her brothers: at Cheltenham Ladies' College (still one of the leading girls' schools in Britain); and then at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, where she read History and developed an interest in the plight of the poor. But she could not graduate, because until October, 1920, when a new University Statute changed the rules, women were not admitted as full members of Oxford University. Although from the late 1870s women had attended lectures, taken examinations and had gained honours in those examinations, they were unable to receive the degree to which, had they been men, their examinations would have entitled them.³ The situation was even worse in Cambridge, where women were not admitted to full membership of the University and therefore not allowed to graduate until 1948.

Maude spent the next three years after University at the Victoria Women's Settlement at Liverpool, working for the welfare of disadvantaged women. Next she served as an assistant in the country parish of Luffenham where the incumbent, the Reverend Hudson Shaw, recognized that her gifts as a teacher far exceeded the needs of a Sunday School class. A travelling lecturer himself in the University Extension movement, Shaw resolved to get her extension work, lecturing on English Literature. Though the Oxford delegacy then employed only male lecturers, he insisted that they try her out. This was her start in public speaking.

Her considerable eloquence and her profound convictions as a Christian led her into the campaign for Women's Suffrage. She joined the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and soon became one of the organization's main public speakers, although she did not engage in the violent demonstrations of more militant members. In 1909 she helped form the Church League for Women's Suffrage. Two years later she was elected to the executive committee of the NUWSS and from 1913 to 1914 she also edited its newspaper, *The Common Cause*. When war broke out in 1914, she found herself unable to be convinced that the War was just or that the suffering it entailed was justified. Although her pacifism

³The new University statute of 1920 which admitted women to full membership of the University, and which came into effect from October that year, enabled women who had previously taken and gained honours in University examinations to return to matriculate (go through the formal ceremony of admission to the University) and have the degree to which they were now entitled conferred on them (again, at a formal ceremony). Consequently, at the very first ceremony at which women were able to graduate more than forty women did so. Oxford University Archives, <http://www.oua.ox.ac.uk/enquiries/first%20woman%20graduate.html>.

put her at odds with most of her colleagues in the Women's Suffrage movement, she was uncompromising in her belief that war was wrong.

The 'great adventure' for her was peace, and when it came she worked actively for a better world for both women and men, in the belief that thinking women would have fresh insights and visions to contribute. Her own contributions were many, and increasingly she spoke more often from a religious than a political rostrum, employing her gifts of oratory as a preacher.

A woman preacher was unheard of in the Church of England at that time. Women were not allowed to play any part in the conduct of worship, not even to read a lesson, let alone preach.

Deacons, choristers, churchwardens, acolytes, servers and thurifers, even the takers-up of the collection are almost exclusively men. If at any time not one male person can be found to collect, the priest does it himself, or, after a long and anxious pause, some woman, more unsexed than the rest, steps forward to perform this office.⁴

Royden found her pulpit in the City Temple, not an Anglican but a great Nonconformist church in London. She was first invited to preach there in March, 1917, and after the success of her first sermon she was persuaded to accept a position as 'pulpit assistant'. She remained an Anglican nevertheless, and she continued her work for the disenfranchised women of the Anglican Church. She became a member of the first Church Assembly, the new governing body of the Church of England, which met in mid-1920. Of the 646 members of this body, 357 represented the laity, but only 40 of the 357 were women.⁵

In June, 1920, she preached to women delegates attending the conference of the International Alliance for Women's Suffrage in Geneva – and she preached from Calvin's pulpit, from which no woman had ever preached before. In the same year she moved from the City Temple and with the Reverend Percy Dearmer founded the Fellowship Guild; they made its headquarters in a former Congregationalist church in Eccleston Square, which became known as the Guildhouse.

It was from the Guildhouse that Maude Royden made her visit to Australia in 1928. After some weeks in the USA, she sailed to New Zealand, then to Australia, where she visited every State except Tasmania, before returning home via Hong Kong, Singapore and Colombo.

⁴Maude Royden, *Women and the Church of England* (1916), pp. 8-9, quoted by Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, p. 150.
⁵Gail Malmgreen (ed.), *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1760-1930* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 277.

The Purpose of the Tour

The position of women in the Anglican Church at that time was no better in Australia than in England. New Zealand clergy, however, seem to have had more liberal views than many of their Australian colleagues. On 15 May, a fortnight before her arrival in Sydney, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported news of 'the wonderful reception accorded to Miss Maude Royden on her arrival in New Zealand.'

She was welcomed by the Bishops of Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin, and the Prime Minister, and civic authorities in every city. Dr Sprott, Bishop of Wellington, offered Miss Royden a parish in the dominion, if she would stay. There was also a reception at Bishopscourt.⁶

The Australian *Church Standard* was less enthusiastic about her approaching visit, having commented in its Editorial Notes on 13 April, 1928, that

She is undoubtedly a remarkable woman, and one who intends to be on the side of right and truth. Some of her books are, like the curate's egg, most excellent in parts, indeed for the most part, but she sadly lacks balance, and her demand for the priesthood is not the only case in which her zeal outruns her discretion.

It might therefore be considered courageous of the Rector of St Mark's Darling Point, the Reverend Howard Lea, to offer Maude Royden the hospitality of his pulpit. She preached at the main morning service to a large and appreciative congregation. That evening she preached at the Pitt Street Congregational Church to a very much larger gathering. 'So dense was the crowd that clambered to gain admission' the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported, 'that police officers were dispatched to control the surging throngs.' The queue to get in overflowed along Pitt Street, and after every available seat and standing space inside the church was occupied the church doors were closed and about two thousand people were turned away.⁷

But this celebrity speaker did not tour the British World solely or even primarily as a preacher, although she was an exceptionally good one; the purpose of her journey was to encourage women to carry further the aims for which they had worked so hard to gain the franchise. Having achieved the status of equal citizenship, women still had to work for equality of opportunity, for the continuing improvement of conditions for women at every level of society, for the education, health and welfare of women and children. The tour was intended to bring together groups of women and women's organizations engaged in such

⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuesday 15 May 1928, p. 4.

⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Monday 4 June 1928, p. 9.

work for mutual understanding and support in their common purpose, and to encourage them to find appropriate means of tackling the big problems confronting people in the early Twentieth Century.

This goal was the object of the British Commonwealth League.⁸ It was founded in London in 1925 by two Australian women, Mrs Bessie Rischbieth and Miss Marjorie Chave Collisson.⁹ Born in the USA, and brought to England as a baby, Miss Collisson arrived in Australia with her parents when she was nine. She was educated at the Collegiate School, Hobart, and then at Sydney University, where she graduated in 1916 (B.A. with first class Honours in History). She was one of those women mentioned by Angela Woollacott who went 'to try her fortune in London', in this case via the USA. Early in 1928 she returned to Australia as advance agent for Maude Royden's Australasian tour, which she financed and managed for the BCL. She was Royden's agent, manager and companion for the duration of the tour, sailing with her to Hong Kong (where Royden was the guest of the Bishop and his wife), then returning to Adelaide to spend some time with her parents before joining Royden again at Colombo. Her biographer, Jill Rowe, records that Chave Collisson was commemorated by her colleagues for 'her brilliant mind, dedication to fighting injustice, booming voice, warm sense of humour, and infinite compassion.'

Her colleague in the British Commonwealth League, Mrs Bessie Rischbieth,¹⁰ was based in Western Australia and handled that part of Royden's tour. Rischbieth was involved in an impressive array of women's organizations as a founder of the Women's Service Guilds of Western Australia, which promoted the health and welfare of women and children, and for thirty years edited its monthly journal, *The Dawn*; she was the prime mover in the foundation of the Australian Federation of Women's Societies (later Voters) in 1921 and was its first president until 1942. Her biographer, Nancy Lutton, describes her as a beautiful woman who lived in style, but one driven by the desire for social reform and improvement of the status of women, by means of legislation rather than revolution. She never stood for Parliament herself, but she gave substantial support to Edith Cowen in her successful campaign to become the first woman elected to an Australian parliament in 1921. Like Maude Royden, these women – and many others associated with them in organizing the tour at the local level – were educated at private girls' schools, schools which

⁸ *The Queenslander*, Thursday 23 February 1928, p. 46.

⁹ Roe, Jill, 'Collison, Marjorie Chave (1887–1982)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/collison-marjorie-chave-12338/text12163>, accessed 2 May 2012.

¹⁰ Nancy Lutton, 'Rischbieth, Bessie Mabel (1874–1967)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/rischbieth-bessie-mabel-8214/text14873>, accessed 2 May 2012.

not only equipped intellectually able pupils to proceed to higher education but encouraged all pupils to think of others less privileged than themselves and to engage in activities for the welfare of their community. Such schools also provide young girls with role models of their own gender in teachers and prefects, and opportunities to exercise leadership within the school, as a captain of some group, or as a prefect. Several of them had also attended an Australian university, which unlike Oxford had admitted women on the same basis as men since the 1880s.

Prominent among those who organized the Queensland part of the tour was Miss Freda Bage,¹¹ who graduated from Melbourne University with a BSc in 1905 and MSc in 1907. She was now a lecturer in charge of Biology at the University of Queensland and foundation Principal of its Women's College. She was also involved in many women's organizations and activities, including the National Council of Women, and had been President of the Brisbane Women's Club in 1916 and the Lyceum Club in 1922-23. At the time of Royden's tour she was President of the Australian Federation of University Women. She joined Miss Margaret Ogg, Secretary of the Queensland Women's Electoral League, and Miss Ross Patterson (Women's Non Party Association) and representatives of about two dozen other organizations to plan the event.¹²

What did she do?

It is worth looking at the programme for the Brisbane part of the tour to get some idea of what Royden actually did, and the demands made of her.¹³ It is a closely packed schedule, with three or even four separate functions every day. In less than a week she gave one sermon, three public lectures, and at least two other addresses. She spoke on issues of public concern. She met and was entertained by men's organizations as well as women's; the Mayor gave her a Civic Reception, the Governor of Queensland a luncheon. She was especially eager to meet young people, because they represented the future; her first public lecture was held especially for youngsters between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. At her meeting with the clergy she was no doubt questioned on her views about the ministry of women, perhaps the most controversial of the issues she addressed; but she did not shy away from controversy: in her talk to the Constitutional Club she drew attention to the power of multi-national businesses, for better or for worse.

¹¹ 'Bage, Anna Frederika (Freda) (1883-1970)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bage-anna-frederika-freda-5090/text8+97>, accessed 28 June 2012.

¹² Brisbane *Courier*, Wednesday 25 April 1928, p.21.

¹³ See appendix.

On Thursday, 31 May, she had addressed a meeting of ministers of religion in the Chapter House of St Andrew's Anglican Cathedral Sydney, not on the advertised subject of 'Christianity and Industry' but on the more specific and controversial topic dear to her heart, 'Women and the Ministry'. According to a letter in the *Church Standard* published on 8 June, 1928, the majority of the audience were Nonconformists – it is safe to say that none were Roman Catholics – but 'Miss Royden directed her words to members of the Church of England in particular'. The correspondent 'thoroughly enjoyed the address' although he claimed to have been entirely unconvinced by it. The Church of England in Australia was not going to change its attitude to women for several decades; some may argue that the Anglican Church in Sydney never would, but that is unfair to the many Sydney Anglicans who do not fit the stereotype.

On the Sundays she preached in various churches, St Mark's Darling Point being the first – in more senses than one, because that made her the first woman ever to preach from an Anglican pulpit in Australia, and the Rector had to obtain a special licence from the Archbishop of Sydney to allow her to do so. 'Her message,' he recalled, 'which reviewed man's age long history, which sympathetically indicated some of the problems which beset the scientific mind, was listened to, appreciated, and absorbed by every thoughtful member of the congregation, whether young or old.'¹⁴ That evening she preached at the Pitt Street Congregational Church to a crowd so great that the ushers were obliged to close the entrance doors and about two thousand people were turned away. The following Sunday she was in Brisbane, and preached at the Albert Street Methodist Church to a large congregation.

The Brisbane Press gave generous coverage to every meeting, reported the gist of every address she gave, and recorded in detail the guest list for every function. She met an impressive number of Brisbane's leading citizens, including both Archbishops (Dr Sharp and Dr Duhig) the Mayor and Aldermen, the Chief Justice, the Governor and Lady Goodwin, and of course the Presidents of all the Women's Clubs and service organizations.

Was this a mark of her success, and the success of the enterprise she had come to promote? She certainly gave her audiences a great deal to think about, and the organizers of her visit could not fail to be encouraged by the positive reception she was given. She made a great impression on the State Governor and Lady Goodwin, who insisted on having her to stay at Government House rather than at the Montpelier private hotel in Wickham Terrace.

¹⁴ St Mark's *Parish Messenger*, 28 June, 1928, pp.2-3.

So, why was her tour important? It brought important issues to public attention, not only concerning gender equality and women's welfare, but maintaining peace, resolving apparent conflicts between science and spirituality, striving for the best in humanity.

It gave good publicity to the feminist cause, not least by breaking the stereotypes that bedevilled it: reporters who interviewed her were surprised to discover that she did not cut her hair in an 'Eton crop', nor dress unfashionably in 'baggy tweeds'; she did not have a booming voice nor a bone-crushing handshake.

You could talk with her for some time without realising that she was the really famous Maude Royden . . . Miss Royden is the real type of feminist. If you want to see what sort of people won Englishwomen the vote you must go and study her. While the more spectacular and excitable members of the sex were knocking policemen's hats over their eyes . . . Miss Royden was talking about the spiritual side of emancipation, what women could make of it intellectually.¹⁵

It encouraged women to persevere in the cause of peace, justice and equality, for all – women and men. It may not have solved the problems, but it made people think about them.

Conclusion

One of the most interesting consequences of this part of the tour might well have been the nomination by the Queensland Women's Electoral League of a former President of the Queensland branch of the National Council of Women, Mrs Irene Maud Longman, as a candidate in the next State election.¹⁶ The first woman ever to stand for parliament in Queensland, she won the seat of Bulimba from Labor for the Country and Progressive National Party. As a Member of Parliament, Mrs Longman was able to transform some of the aims of the Australian Feminists into actual legislation. To find other positive results of Miss Royden's tour for the feminist cause is part of my 'work in progress'.

¹⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald* 30 May, 1928.

¹⁶ Mary O'Keeffe, 'Longman, Irene Maud (1877–1964)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/longman-irene-maud-7228/text12515>, accessed 29 June 2012.

Brisbane Programme

Date	Time	Event (Organized by/Chair)	Venue	Topic
Sunday 10 June	7.00 pm	Sermon (Rev'd H.M. Wheller)	Albert Street Methodist Church	'Christ and the Common People'
Monday 11 June	10.00 am	Welcome (Miss Freda Bage)	Brisbane Women's Club	'Beauty and Everyday Life'
	11.00 am	Civic Reception (Mayor, W.A. Jolly)	City Hall	
	1.00 pm	Rotary Club Luncheon		
	3.00 pm	Meeting with Clergy	YMCA	
	Evening	Youth Meeting (Miss Freda Bage)	Exhibition Hall	
Tuesday 12 June	11.00 am	Morning Tea (Mrs F.H. Wedd)	Brisbane Women's Club	
	1.00 pm	Luncheon (Mmes Firmin McKinnon & Cumbrae-Stewart)	Lyceum Club	
	Afternoon	Afternoon Tea (Queensland Welcome Committee)	Country Press Café	
Wednesday 13 June	11.00 am	Morning Tea (Affiliated Societies of British Commonwealth League)	Rowe's Restaurant	'What Sort of a World do we Want?'
	1.00 pm	Luncheon (H.E. Sir John Goodwin)	Government House	
	8.00 pm	Public Lecture (Chief Justice, Hon J.W. Blair)	Exhibition Hall	
Thursday 14 June	11.00 am	Women's Meeting (Miss Freda Bage)	Albert Hall	'Women and the 20 th Century'
	1.00 pm	Luncheon (Mr J.A. Walsh)	Constitutional Club	'Business Men and International Problems'
	8.00 pm	Public Lecture (Mayor, W.A. Jolly)	Exhibition Hall	'Can the World be Set in Order?'
Friday 15 June		Return to Sydney		