

Women Going Global

Australian and British Feminist Internationalists,
1919–39

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February 2023

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
The Australian National University

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is wholly my own original work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'mstaff', written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michelle Claire Staff

17 February 2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

This thesis was written on unceded Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country. I pay my respects to elders past and present and acknowledge the violence that historic and present-day feminisms have inflicted and continue to inflict on First Nations peoples.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people to thank for helping bring this thesis to fruition. Angela Woollacott has been an incredibly supportive supervisor and mentor over the past four years. Since I first emailed her in mid-2018 she has responded to my ideas with generosity, enthusiasm, and a great amount of care. Angela's fine eye for detail and wealth of knowledge has undoubtedly made this a better project, and her unfailing support has made me a more confident scholar. Her emphasis on celebrating every win, whether big or small, is a tradition I will joyfully uphold. Special thanks must also go to Carroll Pursell, whose warmth and support (and delicious cooking) has also been hugely appreciated.

As associate supervisors, Carolyn Strange and Melanie Nolan have both been very encouraging and have enriched this project through their insightful feedback on draft versions of its various parts. Many other members of the ANU School of History have also made invaluable contributions: Maria Nugent, Tania Colwell, Nicholas Brown, and Martin Thomas as HDR convenors; Frank Bongiorno as head of school (especially for making sure I was not stranded in London in 2020); Ben Mercer as a teaching mentor; Karen Fox, Karen Downing, and the Gender & History reading group; and the many other academics, teachers, and researchers with whom I have been fortunate enough to work these past four years.

Many others outside the School of History have also added to my PhD experience, especially the ANU Gender Institute, the Sydney Feminist History Group, the *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal* editorial collective, the Histories of Feminism reading group, the Global Feminisms reading group, and the Australian Women's History Network. I am thankful to the editors of the *Journal of Women's History* and *Australian Historical Studies* and to the peer reviewers of each for the care they showed the articles I published with them. James Keating and Kate Laing have also kindly shared their knowledge and advice and very generously taken the time to read parts of this thesis: thank you to both.

When I began this project, I had grand plans to trace my historical subjects' footsteps and travel to the various places in which they lived and worked around the world. I certainly did not anticipate that a global pandemic would get in the way. However, the generosity of

various librarians and archivists made sure the project remained viable. Special thanks must go to Jacques Oberson at the United Nations Archives for providing me with advance access to the League of Nations' digitised records. Thanks also to those who went out of their way to help me access material, whether in person or from a distance, especially: Anne Yoder, Wendy Chmielewski, and Chloe Lucchesi-Malone at Swarthmore; Oliver Mahoney at Lady Margaret Hall; Fiona Caratozzolo and Wayne Eades at the State Library of Western Australia; Bing Zheng and Sarah Jaensch at the National Library of Australia; Clive Wilson, Indy Bhullar, Wendy Lynwood, and Daniel Payne at The Women's Library/London School of Economics; Sabrina Elias at the Australian Jewish Historical Society; and Marguerite Gillezeau at the Ascham School Archives. Countless other archivists and librarians have answered my many questions and fetched boxes upon boxes of material, for which I am very appreciative.

Thanks also to those who provided the financial support that allowed me to travel for research (during the chaos of March 2020 and then again on a much more successful trip in 2022) and to present my work at conferences: the ANU School of History, the ANU Vice-Chancellor's Research Travel Fund, *Australian Feminist Studies*, and the Australian Women's History Network. My candidature has been funded by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship, without which the work would not have been possible.

Writing a thesis can be a lonely and difficult task, but I am lucky to have been joined in the process by wonderful friends and sharp scholars in the PhD and ECR cohort. Jess Urwin, Josh Black, Emily Gallagher, Richard Reid, Tess Gardner, James Watson, Saskia Roberts, Ruby Ekkel, Zoe Smith, Michele Horne, Shane Breynard, Daniel May, Wilbert Wong, Nick Hoare, Rohan Howitt, Amy Way, and many others have all read various chapters and/or offered feedback, advice, and general camaraderie in the corridor and over Zoom. So did Scott Dempsey, who I wish was still here with us.

Thank you to my friends outside of academia who have kept me sane, especially to my various housemates who provided excellent company while we were housebound for many months during the lockdowns. A huge thank you must go to my parents, Diane and Michael, whose belief in me has been unflinching and who have supported me in too many ways to name (including through some painstaking proofreading), as well as to my sister Nicole and the Walker family. Finally, my partner Callum has seen all the highs and lows that come with completing a PhD during a pandemic. His humour and kindness have kept me plied with laughter, love, and, most importantly, a steady supply of top-notch baking.

ABSTRACT

This study of eight significant Australian and British feminist internationalists harnesses the complex details of individual lives to examine feminist internationalism as it developed over the course of the interwar period. While such stories have often fallen in the trough created by the “waves” metaphor, a growing body of scholarship is currently enriching our understanding of this formative moment in feminism’s past. This thesis makes an original intervention into this historiography, turning away from the oft-studied North Atlantic to consider the British Empire and Commonwealth’s metropole and periphery in one frame of reference and thus expand existing knowledge of Western feminism. Applying the methods of group biography, it sits at the intersection of social, political, and intellectual history. It draws together a wide range of primary source material from several countries—including individuals’ and organisations’ archival papers, published reports and pamphlets, feminist periodicals, women’s magazines, the general press, memoirs, oral history recordings, and photographic evidence—to explore why these women were committed to internationalism, what it meant to them during its post-1918 ascendancy, and how they developed their ideas and practices.

These varied life stories demonstrate how feminist internationalism became more expansive and assertive as a form of activism, a political practice, and an intellectual tradition during the interwar years. Whereas before the First World War feminists saw internationalism primarily in terms of connecting with like-minded people, from the 1920s they considered it as a means of remodelling the very nature of global society, including its gendered dimensions. My group developed confidence as activists, public political actors, and even experts, staking a claim to wider political discussions and entering traditionally masculine arenas. At the same time, they responded to the critiques advanced by their non-Western “sisters” and took steps to make their networks more diverse, even as they continued to be influenced by imperial logics and realities. The rapid developments of this period, especially the much-anticipated birth of the League of Nations, created the conditions in which feminists could interrogate the boundaries of their movement, tackle a wider range of causes, and assert their newfound political power. As my research reveals, the interwar period was a critical juncture in feminism’s longer history, initiating key changes that would shape later decades.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAWC	All-Asian Women's Conference
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
AFWV	Australian Federation of Women Voters
AIWC	All-India Women's Conference
BBC	British Broadcasting Company (later Corporation)
BCL	British Commonwealth League
BDWCU	British Dominions Women Citizens' Union
BL	The British Library
ERI	Equal Rights International
IAW	International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship*
ICW	International Council of Women
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IPC	International Peace Campaign
IWSA	International Woman Suffrage Alliance*
JSC	Joint Standing Committee of International Women's Organisations
LMH	Lady Margaret Hall
LNU	League of Nations Union
NCW NSW	National Council of Women of New South Wales
NLA	National Library of Australia

* In 1926 the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) was renamed the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW). For simplicity, throughout this thesis I refer to both as "the Alliance."

NSW LNU	New South Wales League of Nations Union
NUSEC	National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship
NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
ODC	Open Door Council
ODI	Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker
PDCWIO	Peace and Disarmament Committee of the Women's International Organisations
PPWA	Pan-Pacific Women's Association
PPWC	Pan-Pacific Women's Conference
RHA	Racial Hygiene Association of New South Wales
SLNSW	State Library of New South Wales
SLSA	State Library of South Australia
SLWA	State Library of Western Australia
SPG	Six Point Group
TWL	The Women's Library
UA	United Associations of Women
UN	United Nations
WCTU	Woman's Christian Temperance Union
WIL	Women's International League
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
WPC	Women's Peace Crusade
WSG	Women's Service Guilds of Western Australia
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

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INTRODUCTION

Women Going Global



Figure 1 Margery Corbett Ashby speaking at the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship's 1929 congress in Berlin. Collection LAV–Atria: Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History.

On a sunny morning in June 1929, Margery Corbett Ashby took her place among her fellow feminist leaders and pioneers at the front of Berlin's Kroll Hall. Hundreds of people were packed into the ballroom, having come to Germany from forty-six countries to celebrate the twenty-fifth birthday of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (the Alliance), a major feminist organisation that had been born in that very same city just a few years after the turn of the century. The scene did not at all anticipate the troublesome period of economic hardship that was around the corner. Crystal chandeliers were

suspended from the ceiling, illuminating the crowd's many faces, while the flags of the world's nations hung down from the balconies, filling the room with vibrant and varied colours. As Corbett Ashby rose to deliver her address, the audience watched and applauded—their president was a renowned public speaker whose voice, exuding that potent mix of authority and charisma, was projected across the room by electric amplifiers.¹ Gliding between English, French, and German, she praised the many years of hard work her organisation had undertaken to date.² But she also had one eye fixed on posterity. “Historians of the future,” she declared, “in dealing with the opening quarter of the twentieth century, will record the rise and success of the woman's movement as of profound social and political importance. They will rank it with the rise of democracy, of nationalism and internationalism, those spiritual counterparts of the marvellous material inventions which mould modern civilisation.”³ Women, she stressed, were making history.

Feminists of the interwar period had no doubt that what they were doing was historically significant. Alongside pressing for change in their domestic contexts, during the 1920s and 1930s socially and politically conscious women from around the world worked together to improve their rights and opportunities globally. In so doing they built on the efforts of their nineteenth-century forebears, who had forged connections across the North Atlantic and created the first formal international women's organisations.⁴ War interrupted their movements and ability to work together, but after 1918 feminists' transnational networks became larger, stronger, and aspired to be more diverse than before. In the wake of a suite of suffrage victories they were able to afford much more space to other pressing issues in their agendas and tackled topics such as economic and working rights, family endowment, the double moral standard, birth control, higher education, divorce law, and nationality rights. As the world hurtled towards another major conflict, they became increasingly concerned with

¹ Bessie Rischbieth, “Great Historic Gathering. Women of Forty-Five Nations at Berlin,” *Dawn* (Perth), 21 August 1929, 1; “Berlin, 1929,” *Woman's Leader* (London), 28 June 1929, 163.

² International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (hereafter IAW), *Report of the Eleventh Congress. Berlin, June 17th–22nd, 1929. Twenty-Fifth Anniversary, 1904–1929* (London: International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, 1929), 45–8.

³ “The President's Address,” Papers and objects of Bessie Rischbieth (hereafter Rischbieth Papers), National Library of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NLA), Box 21, File 9, MS 2004/8/384.

⁴ Bonnie Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement, 1830–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Margaret H. McFadden, *Golden Cables of Sympathy: The Transatlantic Sources of Nineteenth-Century Feminism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999); Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

the topic of peace, too. In their quest for equality, these activists and the very idea of women's rights were both going global. Individuals developed cosmopolitan, border-crossing lives and looked beyond their own nations to conceptualise gendered subordination—and the means to fix it—as a truly transnational phenomenon. Yet there were limits to their global visions. While some promoted the idea of a worldwide “sisterhood,” others had to remind them that experiences of womanhood were far more diverse and disconnected than they might like to think.⁵ White feminists' internationalist worldviews rarely encompassed all parts of the world equally and promoted a Western model of reform. Yet the idea of breaking boundaries to deal with gender equality on a global scale was both powerful and empowering.

This thesis is about how one connected group of interwar feminists understood, thought about, and practiced internationalism and what this meant for their development—both individually and collectively—as activists, political actors, and public figures. In response to the predominance of women from either side of the North Atlantic in interwar feminist networks and the historiography alike, it reorients the frame of analysis to centre on two far-apart but deeply connected ends of a changing empire, Australia and Britain, to extend our knowledge of the possibilities and limits of Western feminists' internationalist efforts. Over the course of seven thematic chapters I grapple with multiple related lines of enquiry. Why were interwar feminists interested in internationalism? What did it mean to them and why did they remain committed to it? How and where did they develop their ideas and practices? And what changed during this period? This is a project in social, political, and intellectual history that adopts a capacious understanding of what it means for women to do politics and produce ideas about their worlds.⁶ While most interwar feminists may not have been writing treatises

⁵ On this, see: Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, chapter 3.

⁶ In 2011 Karen Offen made the case for the history of feminism as political history. See: Karen Offen, “The History of Feminism is Political History,” *Perspectives on History* 49, no. 5 (May 2011), <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2011/the-history-of-feminism-is-political-history>. On women's alternative modes of doing politics, see: Marilyn Lake, “Feminist History as National History: Writing the Political History of Women,” *Australian Historical Studies* 27, no. 106 (1996): 154–69. On women's intellectual thought, see: Linda K. Kerber, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Patricia Owens, “Women and the History of International Thought,” *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2018): 467–81; Linda K. Schott, *Reconstructing Women's Thoughts: The International League for Peace and Freedom before World War Two* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), especially the introduction; Hilda L. Smith, “Women's History as Intellectual History: A Perspective on the *Journal of Women's History*,” *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 1 (2008): 26–32; Hilda L. Smith, “Women Intellectuals and Intellectual History: Their Paradigmatic Separation,” *Women's History Review* 16, no. 3 (2007): 353–68.

or working from within the halls of the world's parliaments, their visions for how to remould contemporary norms had important ramifications for their societies and for feminism itself.⁷

The method of group biography is the cornerstone of this project. To ground my analysis, I focus on eight important feminists who were deeply engaged in ideas and practices of internationalism throughout this period. I explore the complicated, sometimes contradictory, and often unpredictable details of their lives, contending that studying historical subjectivities holds great potential for disrupting and contributing to our knowledge of the past. Examining these women's experiences on both an individual and collective level reveals some of the otherwise unseen complexities of interwar feminism and allows us to pull apart generalisations to consider how the fabric of this movement was woven from many different threads. Each of them inhabited and performed multiple roles that they deployed as needed and developed throughout these years; they were simultaneously students, teachers, thinkers, activists, citizens, professionals, "amateur politicians," and experts, as well as women, mothers, wives, sisters, aunts, and daughters.⁸ They were also located in distinct geopolitical spaces with their own histories and connections to the changing empire and the world. These women entered the period with varying degrees of experience, but each of them emerged from it as confident public figures who had been influenced by its distinct innovations and challenges. Their lives encapsulate many important historical currents of the day, including the structural nature of gender norms and the ongoing effects of imperialism on interwar societies. Telling their stories is one way to re-evaluate and add texture to existing understandings of this moment in feminism's past.

Together, my selected group's lives reveal how feminist internationalism became more expansive and assertive as a form of activism, a political practice, and an intellectual tradition during the interwar years, albeit one with significant limits. These women were driven towards the international sphere for multiple reasons: their ongoing subordination in their respective

⁷ Helen McCarthy offers a compelling critique of the concept of "the canon" of international thought, asking "what would it mean to write a history of women *doing* international thought, structured not around individual thinkers and texts but around the groups, spaces and practices which are brought so vividly to life in the pages of these volumes?" Helen McCarthy, "Women's International Thought: A New Field?," *International Politics Reviews* 9, no. 2 (2021): 254; Patricia Owens, Katharina Rietzler, Kimberly Hutchings, and Sarah C. Dunstan, eds., *Women's International Thought: Towards a New Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁸ Marilyn Lake describes interwar Australian feminists as "amateur politician[s]" and "activist citizen[s]." See: Marilyn Lake, "The Inviolable Woman: Feminist Conceptions of Citizenship in Australia, 1900–1945," *Gender & History* 8, no. 2 (1996): 198.

countries; their awareness of the ever-growing entanglements between the national, imperial, and international spheres; and the realities of the changing world around them, especially the much-anticipated birth of the League of Nations (the League). In this new era, they came to understand internationalism as being about more than building connections among themselves as they had previously done, although this continued to be important. Now, they considered international cooperation both idealistically and pragmatically as a potentially more effective way to achieve gender reform on a global level and exercise their agency as political actors, as well as the sole means of saving humanity from violence and war. This evolving understanding of internationalism saw feminists enter new, traditionally masculine arenas—from diplomatic meetings to popular media outlets—and develop a sense of themselves as experts with the knowledge and experience needed to garner the public support that was so crucial to their cause. My group and their colleagues also responded to (and sometimes made) critiques of their movement’s Eurocentrism, attempting to diversify their networks by including more women from outside the Western world (with varying perspectives on what their participation would look like). There were limits to the lofty aspirations for global harmony their project entailed, however. The changing yet persistent dynamics of empire continued to wield significant influence during the interwar years, ensuring that my group’s shared status as white women propelled them onto the international stage and shaping their interactions with their non-Western “sisters” in complicated and sometimes contradictory ways.⁹ Through its emphasis on internationalism, interwar feminism started to become more inclusive, but it was still largely a movement of and for white women.

In proposing this argument, this thesis makes an original contribution to the historiography by revealing the interwar period to be a critical juncture in feminism’s longer history. The global developments of the 1920s and 1930s—from the impact of new technologies that brought the world closer together, to the internationalist visions of various communities, to the shifting dynamics of European empires—created the conditions in which feminists could interrogate the boundaries of their movement, tackle a wider range of causes, and assert and extend their newfound political power. Whereas before the war they understood

⁹ Angela Woollacott’s argument that historians should not group settler-colonial states “as the ‘neo-Europes’ together with Europe itself as a single global formation of women of European origin” has significantly influenced my thinking here. See: Angela Woollacott, “Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms,” *Gender & History* 10, no. 3 (1998): 445 (footnote 3).

internationalism primarily in terms of connecting with like-minded people to build morale and bolster their efforts at home, exploring my group's activist lives demonstrates that during the interwar period they and their colleagues came to consider internationalism as a means of remodelling the very nature of global society, including its gendered dimensions. This paved the way for women in the second half of the century to adopt more central roles in processes of national and international governance. Australian and British interwar feminists at once understood feminism and internationalism through the lens of imperialism and challenged the logic of empire in efforts that, while flawed and only partial, responded to the critiques made by women of colour, which anticipated later twentieth-century ideas about intersectionality. This research sheds new light on the entanglements of nationalism, internationalism, and imperialism in the making of a Western women's rights tradition. Exploring the complicated dynamics of the interwar period is essential for understanding how organised feminism has evolved from the nineteenth century to the present day.

DEFINING FEMINISM & INTERNATIONALISM

The term “feminism” is an elastic one that denotes an ever-shifting, multiple, and contested set of ideas about gender and society, especially about how cultural, social, political, and legal norms produce gendered oppression and exclusion. It is historically contingent; as Susan Kingsley Kent articulates, “[i]t, like the ‘women’ it speaks for and about, exists only in history.”¹⁰ At different points in time—and in different places—some ideas have dominated, but there has always been an undercurrent of variation, rethinking, challenge, and debate. Many scholars have critiqued the overly static “waves” framework, searching for other, more useful metaphors. Nancy Hewitt, for example, suggests replacing existing oceanic imagery with that of radio waves made up of various frequencies, while Karen Offen has chosen volcanic eruptions and flows as her analogy.¹¹ For her part, Lucy Delap contends that “[f]eminism is

¹⁰ Susan Kingsley Kent, “Definitions: An Overview,” in *The Routledge Global History of Feminism*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith and Nova Robinson (London: Routledge, 2022), 10. Denise Riley similarly argues that “women” is “historically, discursively constructed, and always relatively to other categories which themselves change.” See: Denise Riley, “Am I That Name?” *Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 1–2.

¹¹ Nancy A. Hewitt, “Feminist Frequencies: Regenerating the Wave Metaphor,” *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 658–80; Karen Offen, “Eruptions and Flows: Thoughts on Writing a Comparative History of European Feminisms, 1700–1950,” in *Comparative Women's History: New Approaches*, ed. Anne Cova, 39–65 (Boulder; New

better understood as a conversation ... but a conversation with many registers” that “has taken place under unequal conditions, where some voices are amplified and some are routinely ignored.”¹² The origins of the term (which was born of the French *féminisme* and exported to the English-speaking world in the 1890s) foreshadowed the domination of white European and North American voices in many settings. Because of this, feminism has been critiqued as a Western tradition imposed on other parts of the world.¹³ But as scholars working at the intersection of gender and race have argued, if we loosen our restrictive grasp on its meaning(s) we can see how, whether or not past non-Western women have explicitly labelled their efforts in this way, feminist movements and moments have emerged in different forms in different places and do not simply emanate from a Western genealogy.¹⁴ From a historical perspective, we can see that feminism has been a broad but not always open church—one that has excluded in the name of inclusion and oppressed in the name of freedom.

When Corbett Ashby addressed her audience in Berlin in 1929, she did so as a self-identified feminist. The meaning of this label—what it meant to be a “feminist”—was far from fixed during the interwar years. As Delap explains, on either side of the North Atlantic the term initially had avant-garde origins but from the First World War “became a much more generalised term” that was synonymous with “the women’s movement” (although Caitríona Beaumont warns against conflating the feminist and women’s movements, arguing that “the women’s movement needs to be liberated from its exclusive association with feminism”).¹⁵ Yet throughout the interwar decades this term was debated, contested, embraced, and rejected; for some, it merely denoted “an out-of-date struggle,” while for others it signalled a forward-

York: Social Science Monographs/Columbia University Press, 2006). For some other critiques of the oceanic waves metaphor, see: Caitríona Beaumont, “Beyond Women’s Liberation: Intergenerational Female Activism in England, 1968–1970s,” Inaugural Lectures at London South Bank University, delivered 12 October 2022, published online 19 October 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eB_2Jm3yqI; June Hannam, *Feminism* (Longman: Harlow, 2012), 5; Katherine M. Marino and Susan Ware, “Rethinking ‘First Wave’ Feminisms: An Introduction,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47, no. 4 (2022): 811–16.

¹² Lucy Delap, *Feminisms: A Global History* (London: Pelican, 2021), 20.

¹³ Kent, “Definitions: An Overview,” 9; Bonnie G. Smith and Nova Robinson, “Introduction,” in Smith and Robinson, *The Routledge Global History of Feminism*, 2.

¹⁴ For a recent discussion of this, see: Tiffany N. Florvil, Kaiama L. Glover, Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel, Katherine M. Marino, Robin Mitchell, Jacqueline-Bethel Mogoué, and Samantha Pinto, “New Directions in Feminism and Global Race Studies: A Book Conversation,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47, no. 4 (2022): 1013–40.

¹⁵ Lucy Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters of the Early Twentieth Century* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2, 22, 321; Caitríona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women’s Movement in England, 1928–64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 3.

looking, emancipatory worldview.¹⁶ Australian and British feminists were particularly concerned with their rights and responsibilities as newfound citizens of their national and imperial communities. Through their international networks, they would meet colleagues from places as diverse as Egypt, India, and Jamaica who understood feminism in different ways, including through the lens of anticolonial nationalism.

Ideas about feminism also varied within each locale depending on a host of factors, from politics to religion to family history. In her presidential address, Corbett Ashby said: “We realise that many questions appear as yet insoluble, e.g., the apparently conflicting claims on society of the woman as a free individual with the ordinary, political, social and economic freedom of the adult and her claims on society as the mother of the race.”¹⁷ Here she identified one fissure along which interwar feminists were ostensibly split: the view that women should press for full social, political, and legal equality with men (labelled in different ways at the time, including as “equalitarian” or “equal rights feminism”) as opposed to a social reformist line of argument centring on women’s difference and special qualities (which acquired the label of “new feminism”).¹⁸ It is important not to overemphasise or be constrained by this divide, however, especially when looking internationally.¹⁹ Beaumont has argued that “it would be wrong to suggest that this split resulted in two diametrically opposed factions,” echoing the words of some interwar feminists.²⁰ In a 1927 letter to the editor of *Time and Tide*, for instance,

¹⁶ Circular letter from Margery Corbett Ashby to Presidents of Auxiliaries, 5 February 1936, Records of the Australian Federation of Women Voters Papers (hereafter AFWV Records), NLA, Box 5, File 28, MS 2818.

¹⁷ IAW, *Report of the Eleventh Congress*, 47.

¹⁸ For discussions of these different stances during the interwar years, see: Barbara Caine, *English Feminism, 1780–1980* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 189; Karen Offen, “Women’s Rights or Human Rights? International Feminism between the Wars,” in *Women’s Rights and Human Rights: International Historical Perspectives*, ed. Patricia Grimshaw, Katie Holmes, and Marilyn Lake (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), 243–53; Hannam, *Feminism*, 69–72. For a discussion of relational and individualist takes on feminism more generally, see the debate generated between Karen Offen, Ellen Carol DuBois, and Nancy F. Cott in the pages of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* over 1988 and 1989: Karen Offen, “Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 1 (1988): 119–57; Ellen Carol DuBois, “Comment on Karen Offen’s ‘Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach,’” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15, no. 1 (1989): 195–7; Karen Offen, “Reply to DuBois,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15, no. 1 (1989): 198–202; Nancy F. Cott, “Comment on Karen Offen’s ‘Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach,’” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15, no. 1 (1989): 203–5; Karen Offen, “Reply to Cott,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15, no. 1 (1989): 206–9.

¹⁹ An example of work that has emphasised this divide is: Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²⁰ Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 47. See also: Caitríona Beaumont, “Citizens Not Feminists: The Boundary Negotiated Between Citizenship and Feminism by Mainstream Women’s Organisations in England, 1928–39,”

sex reformer Edith How-Martyn said of these two schools of thought: “at bottom there is no real antagonism—there is room for both.”²¹ Feminists across the spectrum shared many common aims, and within their various organisations there was also a diversity of ideas (even if they officially held particular stances).²² Many interwar feminists—including Australians—eschewed this two-camp model altogether, as Marilyn Lake has shown, “refus[ing] this impossible choice” and claiming both “equal” and “distinctive” rights.²³

The meaning of internationalism also should not be taken for granted. The world after the armistice of 1918 was in many respects different to that of before. Rather than prompting a return to inward-looking, chauvinistic nationalism, the First World War propelled people from various quarters to try to establish a new way of coexisting in the world. This supposed “age of nationalism” was thus also an “age of internationalism.”²⁴ As Akira Iriye and Glenda Sluga have demonstrated, though this built upon a longer tradition originating in the nineteenth century, during the twentieth century interest in ideas about international cooperation grew, responding to changing political realities and conflicts.²⁵ In one manifestation of the new “spirit of internationalism,” politicians proposed increased interstate cooperation as a means of reconfiguring the norms of global politics. Switzerland became the home of this state-directed effort when the League settled into its first official headquarters, the Hôtel National (later renamed the Palais Wilson), on the banks of Lake Geneva in November 1920. The liberal version of internationalism the League epitomised coexisted

Women's History Review 9, no. 2 (2000): 413; Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 140; Marie Sandell, *The Rise of Women's Transnational Activism: Identity and Sisterhood Between the World Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 6; Harold L. Smith, “British Feminism in the 1920s,” in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Harold L. Smith (Aldershot: Edgar, 1990), 48; Susan Zimmermann, “Equality of Women's Economic Status? A Major Bone of Contention in the International Gender Politics Emerging During the Interwar Period,” *The International History Review* 41 no. 1 (2019): 203.

²¹ Edith How-Martyn, “Equality,” *Time and Tide* (London), 4 March 1927, 218.

²² See: Krista Cowman, *Women in British Politics, c. 1689–1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

²³ Marilyn Lake, “From Self-Determination via Protection to Equality via Non-Discrimination: Defining Women's Rights at the League of Nations and the United Nations,” in Grimshaw, Holmes, and Lake, *Women's Rights and Human Rights*, 264–5. See also: Lake, “The Inviolable Woman,” 204; Marilyn Lake, “A History of Feminism in Australia,” *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, ed. Barbara Caine et al. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), 132–42.

²⁴ Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

²⁵ Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*.

with—co-constituted, even—currents that were seemingly contradictory, including imperialism and the ongoing importance of the nation-state.²⁶

But the story of internationalism is not solely one of diplomats and high statesmen. Various other groups developed their own understandings of transnational collaboration, intercultural harmony, and global governance—feminists among them. Given the great diversity of internationalists themselves, internationalism is not a singular or easily definable ideology. The term emerged from a nineteenth-century British context but was adopted and adapted by a whole range of people in subsequent decades, from peace activists to socialists to Black activist-intellectuals and anticolonial nationalists.²⁷ Some of these people were adherents of a “cultural internationalism,” a term Iriye uses to designate “an idea, a movement, or an institution that seeks to reformulate the nature of relations among nations through cross-national cooperation and interchange.”²⁸ Various other visions of international cooperation—which, as Daniel Gorman explains, “entailed ongoing, organized, and collaborative interactions between groups of people in different countries”—were developed at this time.²⁹ One of these was feminist internationalism. Though it was not a unified ideology, Hilary Charlesworth has identified some general characteristics, describing it as “the elaboration of transnational principles and standards to advance the position of women” and pointing out that while the category of “woman” encompasses a wide range of experiences, “[i]n practice, women from very different backgrounds have worked successfully together at an international level to raise awareness of oppressive and discriminatory practices.”³⁰

Internationalism was (and is) simultaneously an ideal, a worldview, a political strategy, and a way of being. Many feminists did not explicitly theorise internationalism; instead, they developed their ideas through practice—through living it. As Leila Rupp explains, for them it

²⁶ Patricia Clavin, “Introduction: Conceptualising Internationalism between the World Wars,” in *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements between the World Wars*, ed. Daniel Laqua (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 6.

²⁷ On the diverse understandings of internationalism, see: Daniel Gorman, *International Cooperation in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 5–7; Daniel Laqua, “Internationalism,” *European History Online* hosted by the Leibniz Institute of European History, 4 May 2021, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/laquad-2021-en>. On the Black women who engaged in internationalism in different ways to the largely white feminist movement, see: Keisha N. Blain, Tiffany M. Gill, and Michael O. West, eds., *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019).

²⁸ Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism*, 3.

²⁹ Gorman, *International Cooperation in the Early Twentieth Century*, 1.

³⁰ Hilary Charlesworth, “Martha Nussbaum’s Feminist Internationalism,” *Ethics* 111, no. 1 (2000): 64, 72.

was really “a spirit rather than a formal ideology” and “a vaguely defined force,” often defined by its complicated relationship with nationalism.³¹ These women wanted to become world citizens—a term that, as Megan Threlkeld argues, was “no mere rhetorical flourish” but rather constituted a meaningful argument for gender equality.³² Largely based in a liberal tradition (although with many variations, including a socialist wing), feminist internationalism was constantly in motion and continually being renegotiated as a result of individual encounters and experiences. Rather than offering a tidy definition of it from the outset, I seek to continue expanding our understandings of this term, the various practices and experiences it entailed, the different spaces from which it emerged, and the full range of possibilities it presented in the wake of the First World War.

HISTORIES OF FEMINIST INTERNATIONALISM

While interwar feminists like Corbett Ashby believed that they were undertaking historically significant work, their story has largely failed to capture imaginations in the same way as that of the generation before them. Historians and the public alike have all too often overlooked this period in favour of the more spectacular women’s suffrage campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in the British context. The 2018 centenary of “Votes for Women” in Britain reinforced the country’s fascination with suffrage, prompting public events, exhibitions, conferences, and scholarly works reflecting on the years up to 1918 (and sometimes up to 1928, when the franchise was extended).³³ Similarly, suffrage holds an important place in Australian historiography, largely due to the fact that in 1902 Australia

³¹ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 108 (see chapter 5 generally).

³² Megan Threlkeld, *Citizens of the World: U.S. Women and Global Government* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 1–2.

³³ The works are too numerous to list here—as of 13 February 2022, entering the search term “women’s suffrage” in the Bibliography of British and Irish History returns over 230 results from the start of 2017 alone (up from over 130 entries in November 2020). *Bibliography of British and Irish History*, last updated 7 February 2023, <http://cpps.brepolis.net/bbih/search.cfm>. Conferences held during 2018 include: “2018 Conference—The Campaign for Women’s Suffrage: National and International Perspectives,” *Women’s History Network Blog*, 5 September 2018, <https://womenshistorynetwork.org/2018-conference-the-campaign-for-womens-suffrage-national-and-international-perspectives/>; “Women’s Suffrage and Beyond: Local, National and International Contexts, Oxford University,” held by Women in the Humanities at the University of Oxford, 4–5 October 2018, last accessed 13 February 2023, <https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/event/womens-suffrage-and-beyond-local-national-and-international-contexts>; “Women’s Suffrage and Political Activism: Cambridge, February 2018.” *Women’s History Network Blog*, 10 July 2017. <https://womenshistorynetwork.org/womens-suffrage-and-political-activism-cambridge-february-2018/>.

became the first country in the world to give women the dual rights of voting and standing for parliament (although the battle would continue for Indigenous and migrant women for much longer).³⁴ For some, women's suffrage represents a founding moment for the nation. Clare Wright has suggested that Australia's progressivism regarding women's issues at the turn of the century has the potential to provide an alternative origins story for the country.³⁵ Yet this is not without complications; as James Keating argues, "if the suffragists are enshrined as nation-builders, offering Australians a founding story bound to the principles of democracy, justice and progress, we must reckon carefully with the extent of their complicity in the Commonwealth's foundational injustices"—namely, the ongoing violence perpetrated against Indigenous peoples.³⁶

The interwar years have in comparison been less galvanising. As Corbett Ashby identified during the early years of her Alliance presidency, during this period the movement shifted "out of the romantic pioneer stage" and entered its "sober middle-age" in which it was stretched across a range of causes.³⁷ In Britain in particular it was once assumed that organised

³⁴ For some key works in this field, see: Judith A. Allen, *Rose Scott: Vision and Revision in Feminism* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994); Janette M. Bomford, *That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman: Vida Goldstein* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1993); Barbara Caine, "Vida Goldstein and the English Militant Campaign," *Women's History Review* 2, no. 3 (1993): 363–76; James Keating, "An Utter Absence of National Feeling: Australian Women and the International Suffrage Movement, 1900–14," *Australian Historical Studies* 47, no. 3 (2016): 462–81; James Keating, *Distant Sisters: Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); Jacqueline Kent, *Vida: A Woman for Our Time* (Sydney: Penguin Random House Australia, 2020); Kirsten Lees, *Votes for Women: The Australian Story* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995); Susan Magarey, *Passions of the First Wave Feminists* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001); Susan Magarey and Susan Sheridan Rowley, *Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993); Audrey Oldfield, *Australian Women and the Vote* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Audrey Oldfield, *Woman Suffrage in Australia: A Gift or a Struggle?* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Myra Scott, *How Australia Led the Way: Dora Meeson Coates and British Suffrage* (Canberra: Office of the Status of Women, 2003); Ana Stevenson, "Imagining Women's Suffrage: Frontier Landscapes and the Transnational Print Culture of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States," *Pacific Historical Review* 87, no. 4 (2018): 638–66; Robert Wainwright, *Miss Muriel Matters: The Fearless Suffragist Who Fought for Equality* (London: Allen & Unwin, 2017).

³⁵ Clare Wright, *You Daughters of Freedom: The Australians Who Won the Vote and Inspired the World* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2018). See also: Clare Wright, "Golden Opportunities: The Early Origins of Women's Suffrage in Victoria," *Victorian Historical Journal* 79, no. 2 (2008): 210–23; Clare Wright, "A Splendid Object Lesson: A Transnational Perspective on the Birth of the Australian Nation," *Journal of Women's History* 26, no. 4 (2014): 12–36. On the militarisation of Australia's "origin story," see: Marilyn Lake, "1914: Death of a Nation," *History Australia* 12, no. 1 (2015): 7–24.

³⁶ James Keating, "Review Article: Denise George, *Mary Lee: The Life and Times of a 'Turbulent Anarchist' and her Battle for Women's Rights*; Myra Scott, *How Australia Led the Way: Dora Meeson Coates and British Suffrage*; Clare Wright, *You Daughters of Freedom: The Australians Who Won the Vote and Inspired the World*," *Australian Journal of Biography and History*, no. 2 (2019), 141.

³⁷ Margery Corbett Ashby, "A Message from Our New President," *International Woman Suffrage News* 17, no. 9 (July 1923), 145.

feminism faltered at the outbreak of the First World War and entered an enduring period of decline until the 1960s and the Women's Liberation Movement.³⁸ In Australia, too, the interwar period has sometimes been a victim of the waves metaphor, particularly outside of specialist circles. Over recent decades, however, scholars have successfully challenged this assumption.³⁹ The supposed period of fallow that encompassed the interwar years was in fact a dynamic one for feminists, bringing increased opportunities, expanded concerns, and new challenges.⁴⁰ This was especially true of women's international organising; as Angela Woollacott asserts, these years were "a time of crucial growth and consolidation for feminist internationalism."⁴¹ It is therefore vital to continue exploring this significant and formative period to fully chart feminism's dynamic history.

While historical imaginations frequently overlook these years, there is a growing body of work that, in conjunction with earlier ground-breaking efforts, is illuminating different dimensions of interwar feminist internationalism around the world. Various longitudinal surveys of women's rights movements cover these years, such as Marilyn Lake's *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* and Barbara Caine's *English Feminism, 1780–1980*.⁴² Some of these texts focus on particular themes, including socialism and anti-militarism, demonstrating

³⁸ According to Olive Banks, "there is no doubt that for the whole period of this study it seemed to be a movement in decline," and Barbara Caine asserts that "feminist activities declined in the course of the 1930s." See: Olive Banks, *The Politics of British Feminism, 1918–1970* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1993), 6; Caine, *English Feminism*, 209. Brian Harrison attributes the "gradual decline" in British "domestic feminism" to feminists' departure to pacifist and internationalist causes. See: Brian Howard Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists Between the Wars* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1987), 7. See also: Susan Kingsley Kent, "The Politics of Sexual Difference: World War I and the Demise of British Feminism," *Journal of British Studies* 27, no. 3 (1988): 232–53; Martin Pugh, "Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism, 1930–1950," in Smith, *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, 144–64.

³⁹ Adrian Bingham discusses the different challenges to this conventional wisdom that have since emerged in Britain. See: Adrian Bingham, "'An Era of Domesticity'? Histories of Women and Gender in Interwar Britain," *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 2 (2004): 225–33.

⁴⁰ See: Patricia M. Thane, "What Difference Did the Vote Make? Women in Public and Private Life in Britain Since 1918," *Historical Research* 76, no. 192 (2003): 268–85.

⁴¹ Woollacott, "Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms," 425.

⁴² Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999); Caine, *English Feminism*. See also: Banks, *The Politics of British Feminism*; Paula Bartley, *Women's Activism in Twentieth-Century Britain: Making a Difference Across the Political Spectrum* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); Caine et al., eds., *Australian Feminism: A Companion*; Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly, *Creating a Nation* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1994); Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914–1999*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Zora Simic, "A Hall of Selective Mirrors: Feminism, History and Identity 1919–1969" (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2003); Smith, *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*.

the diverse interests of women who worked within or alongside feminist circles.⁴³ Other scholars have explored particular women's organisations across their lifespans, providing detailed reflections on the growth and demise of the bodies through which women protested gender norms.⁴⁴ However, in adopting such a broad timeframe these works have not been able to delve into the specificities of the interwar years—including the tensions and opportunities brought by the important changes that characterised this period—in great detail.

In the Australian context there is a relatively contained but innovative body of literature that specifically assesses interwar feminism, exploring how ideas about gender and citizenship developed in the post-suffrage era.⁴⁵ What is striking about this historiography is its emphasis on situating Australian feminists within a global context, including in relation to both the British Empire and Commonwealth and the Asia-Pacific region. Woollacott, for instance, explores how Australian women interacted with their colleagues in Britain through imperial networks such as the British Commonwealth League (BCL) while at the same time turning to the Pacific.⁴⁶ Noting this juxtaposition of older, imperial frameworks and progressive engagement with their geographic region, she reveals how “multivalent and even contradictory

⁴³ Sue Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism, and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1920–1939* (New York: Garland Pub, 1986); Joy Damousi, *Women Come Rally: Socialism, Communism and Gender in Australia 1890–1955* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994); June Hannam and Karen Hunt, *Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002); Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham: Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820* (London: Virago, 1989).

⁴⁴ Dianne Davidson, *Women on the Warpath: Feminists of the First Wave* (Perth: UWA Press, 1997); Patricia Grimshaw, “Gender, Citizenship and Race in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Australia, 1890 to the 1930s,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 13, no. 28 (1998): 199–214; Sarah Hellawell, “Feminism, Pacifism and Internationalism: The Women's International League, 1915–1935” (PhD thesis, Northumbria University, 2017); Kate Laing, “Fighting for a New World Order: The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in Australia 1915–1975” (PhD thesis, La Trobe University, 2017); Fiona Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific: Cultural Internationalism and Race Politics in the Women's Pan-Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009); Marian Quartly and Judith Smart, *Respectable Radicals: A History of the National Council of Women of Australia, 1896–2006* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2015); Leila J. Rupp, “Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women's Organizations, 1888–1945,” *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1571–1600; Leila J. Rupp, “Challenging Imperialism in International Women's Organizations, 1888–1945,” *NWSA Journal* 8, no. 1 (1996): 8–27; Rupp, *Worlds of Women*; Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, “Forging Feminist Identity in an International Movement: A Collective Identity Approach to Twentieth-Century Feminism,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 24, no. 2 (1999): 363–86; Ian R. Tyrrell, *Woman's World/Woman's Empire: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

⁴⁵ Marilyn Lake has an extensive body of work that thinks through feminists' conceptions of citizenship. See, for example: Marilyn Lake “Childbearers as Rights-Bearers: Feminist Discourse on the Rights of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Mothers in Australia, 1920–50,” *Women's History Review* 8, no. 2 (1999): 347–63; Lake, *Getting Equal*; Lake, “The Inviolable Woman”; Marilyn Lake, “Personality, Individuality, Nationality: Feminist Conceptions of Citizenship 1902–1940,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 9, no. 19 (1994): 25–38.

⁴⁶ Woollacott, “Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms.”

currents” shaped Australian feminism.⁴⁷ Fiona Paisley has shown how Australian feminists became embedded in their local region through the Pan-Pacific Women’s Association (PPWA), where they at once promoted intercultural harmony and capitalised on racial hierarchies to adopt leading roles.⁴⁸ Her and others’ work on feminism, internationalism, and Aboriginal rights further interrogates settler colonialism to demonstrate how this activism was tied up with both genuine attempts to advocate for Aboriginal women and the desire of white women to become full national and imperial citizens.⁴⁹ Other scholars have examined particular issues that arose during this period—such as married women’s independent nationality rights, eugenics and motherhood, schemes for family endowment, and the peace movement—evoking how changing imperial and global dynamics were an important basis of feminism in the Antipodes.⁵⁰

In contrast, while the historiography of British interwar feminism is certainly growing it is less outward looking. Compared to the suffrage literature there is still more to be done to

⁴⁷ Ibid., 425.

⁴⁸ Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific*.

⁴⁹ Fiona Paisley, “Citizens of their World: Australian Feminism and Indigenous Rights in the International Context, 1920s and 1930s,” *Feminist Review* 58, no. 1 (1998): 66–84; Fiona Paisley, “Cultivating Modernity: Culture and Internationalism in Australian Feminism’s Pacific Age,” *Journal of Women’s History* 14, no. 3 (2002): 105–132; Fiona Paisley, *Loving Protection?: Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women’s Rights, 1919–1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000); Fiona Paisley, “The Spoils of Opportunity: Janet Mitchell and Australian Internationalism in the Interwar Pacific,” *History Australia* 13, no. 4 (2016): 575–91. For more on interwar feminists’ engagement with Aboriginal rights, see: Alison Holland, *Just Relations: The Story of Mary Bennett’s Crusade for Aboriginal Rights* (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2015); Marilyn Lake, “Colonised and Colonising: The White Australian Feminist Subject,” *Women’s History Review* 2, no. 3 (1993): 377–86; Marilyn Lake, “Feminism and the Gendered Politics of Antiracism, Australia 1927–1957: From Maternal Protectionism to Leftist Assimilationism,” *Australian Historical Studies* 29, no. 110 (1998): 91–108.

⁵⁰ Emma Bellino, “Married Women’s Nationality and the White Australia Policy, 1920–1948,” *Law & History* 7, no. 1 (2020): 166–92; Jane Carey, “The Racial Imperatives of Sex: Birth Control and Eugenics in Britain, the United States and Australia in the Interwar Years,” *Women’s History Review* 21, no. 5 (2012): 733–52; James Keating, ““Woman as Wife, Mother, and Home-Maker”: Equal Rights International and Australian Feminists’ Interwar Advocacy for Mothers’ Economic Rights,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47, no. 4 (2022): 957–85; Laing, “Fighting for a New World Order”; Kate Laing, ““The White Australia Nettle”: Women’s Internationalism, Peace, and the White Australia Policy in the Interwar Years,” *History Australia* 14, no. 2 (2017): 218–36; Harriet J. Mercer, “Citizens of Empire and Nation: Australian Women’s Quest for Independent Nationality Rights, 1910s–1930s,” *History Australia* 13, no. 2 (2016): 213–27; Anne Rees, ““The Quality and not Only the Quantity of Australia’s People”: Ruby Rich and the Racial Hygiene Association of NSW,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 27, no. 71 (2012): 71–92; Malcolm Saunders, “Are Women More Peaceful than Men?: The Experience of the Australian Section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915–39,” *Interdisciplinary Peace Research* 3, no. 1 (1991): 45–61; Malcolm Saunders, “The Early Years of the Australian Section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom: 1915–49,” *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 82, no. 2 (1996): 180–91; Malcolm Saunders and Ralph Summy, “Odd Ones Out: The Australian Section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom: 1919–41,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 40, no. 1 (1994): 83–97. There are also several pieces that profile various individual feminists, including some of my subjects; these works will be cited in the next section, “The Cast.”

understand this period and how it shaped British feminism's development over the twentieth century. In the late 1980s Brian Harrison interviewed numerous individuals for his book *Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists Between the Wars*; this effort was accompanied by a couple of others that highlighted the existence of feminist agitation between the wars, but did not immediately spark a sizable body of work focusing on this period.⁵¹ In recent years scholars have worked to fill this gap, writing about topics including antifascism, eugenics, nationality, international relations, and the media, as well as women's organisations that were not explicitly feminist.⁵² Few texts consider British feminism within a wider, transnational context, however, and those that do tend to focus primarily on connections to North America or Europe.⁵³ These links are certainly important but are not the only ones that need studying. Some historians in this field have been influenced by—and have contributed to the development of—new imperial history's emphasis on bringing the metropole and periphery

⁵¹ Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries*. Other early efforts include: Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace, 1914–28* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism, and the Women's Movement in Britain*; Anne Clendinning, "Reconciling Equality and Difference: British Interwar Feminism and the Debate Over Protective Legislation" (Masters thesis, University of Windsor, 1993); Harold L. Smith, "British Feminism and the Equal Pay Issue in the 1930s," *Women's History Review* 5, no. 1 (1996): 97–110; Smith, *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*.

⁵² Lucian M. Ashworth, "Feminism, War and the Prospects of International Government: Helena Swanwick and the Lost Feminists of Interwar International Relations," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 1 (2011): 25–43; M. Page. Baldwin, "Subject to Empire: Married Women and the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act," *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 4 (2001): 522–56; Beaumont, "Citizens Not Feminists"; Caitríona Beaumont, "Women's Organisations, Active Citizenship, and the Peace Movement: New Perspectives on Female Activism in Britain, 1918–1939," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 31, no. 4 (2020): 697–721; Carey, "The Racial Imperatives of Sex"; Catherine Clay, *Time and Tide: The Feminist and Cultural Politics of a Modern Magazine* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Catherine Clay, Maria DiCenzo, Barbara Green, and Fiona Hackney, eds., *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918–1939: The Interwar Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Clare Debenham, "Grassroots Feminism: A Study of the Campaign of the Society for the Provision of Birth Control Clinics, 1924–1938" (PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2010); Daniel Gorman, "Empire, Internationalism, and the Campaign against the Traffic in Women and Children in the 1920s," *Twentieth Century British History* 19, no. 2 (2008): 186–216; Julie V. Gottlieb "The Women's Movement Took the Wrong Turning?: British Feminists, Pacifism and the Politics of Appeasement," *Women's History Review* 23, no. 3 (2014): 441–62; Julie V. Gottlieb and Richard Toye, *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender, and Politics in Britain, 1918–1945* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Karen Hunt, "The Local and the Everyday: Interwar Women's Politics," *Local Historian* 42, no. 4 (2012): 266–79; Jane Martin, "Beyond Suffrage: Feminism, Education and the Politics of Class in the Inter-War Years," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 29, no. 4 (2008): 411–23; Laura E. Nym Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860–1930* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵³ Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981); Ann Taylor Allen, "Feminism and Eugenics in Germany and Britain, 1900–1940: A Comparative Perspective," *German Studies Review* 23, no. 3 (2000): 477–505; Christine Bolt, *Feminist Ferment: "The Woman Question" in the USA and England, 1870–1940* (London; Bristol: UCL Press, 1995); Christine Bolt, *Sisterhood Questioned? Race, Class and Internationalism in the American and British Women's Movements, c.1880s–1970s* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004); Christine Bolt, *The Women's Movements in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993); Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde*.

into one frame of reference. In so doing, scholars such as Antoinette Burton and Clare Midgley have demonstrated how the empire shaped British feminism.⁵⁴ Burton, for example, has pointed out “the historically imperial context out of which ‘international’ female solidarity was initially imagined and has continued to be unproblematically reproduced by some.”⁵⁵ But such work is largely limited to the pre-war period; as a result, feminism and the rapidly changing imperial dynamics of the interwar period come into dialogue less frequently.⁵⁶ I seek to build on this scholarship to show that the interwar years were a formative period for the development of feminism in Britain, even more so than the suffrage era.

The focus on the Northern Hemisphere in these British texts reflects a tendency of the literature on feminist internationalism more broadly. In 1997 Rupp’s *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women’s Movement* brought much-needed attention to the international character of feminism and has had a formative impact on the field, not least through insisting on the transnational character of the feminist past.⁵⁷ Through focusing on three of the major international women’s organisations that developed between the late nineteenth century and the Second World War, she showed how women collaborated across national borders and revealed the limitations they faced, adopting a largely transatlantic perspective which has been reflected in much of the broader scholarship.⁵⁸ While historians have often focused on North

⁵⁴ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Antoinette Burton, “The Feminist Quest for Identity: British Imperial Suffragism and ‘Global Sisterhood’ 1900–1915,” *Journal of Women’s History* 3, no. 2 (1991): 46–81; Barbara Bush, “Feminising Empire? British Women’s Activist Networks in Defending and Challenging Empire from 1918 to Decolonisation,” *Women’s History Review* 25, no. 4 (2016): 499–519; Philippa Levine, ed., *Gender and Empire* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Laura E. Nym Mayhall, Philippa Levine, and Ian Christopher Fletcher, eds., *Women’s Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation, and Race* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000); Clare Midgley, “Bringing the Empire Home: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790s–1930s,” in *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 230–50; Clare Midgley, *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790–1865* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁵⁵ Burton, *Burdens of History*, 3–4. Recently Carolyn Eichner has explored feminism and imperialism in the context of the French Empire. Carolyn J. Eichner, *Feminism’s Empire* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2022).

⁵⁶ A notable exception is Mrinalini Sinha’s work on the *Mother India* debate: Mrinalini Sinha, “Suffragism and Internationalism: The Enfranchisement of British and Indian Women Under and Imperial State,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 36, no. 4 (1999): 461–84.

⁵⁷ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*; Francisca de Haan, “‘Worlds of Women’ Making a Difference,” *Journal of Women’s History* 29, no. 1 (2017): 140–48; Megan Threlkeld, “Twenty Years of *Worlds of Women*: Leila Rupp’s Impact on the History of U.S. Women’s Internationalism,” *History Compass* 15, no. 6 (2017), DOI: 10.1111/hic3.12381.

⁵⁸ Anderson, *Joyous Greetings*; Patricia Ward D’Ittri, *Cross Currents in the International Women’s Movement, 1848–1948* (Bowling Green, O.H.: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999); Alison S. Fell and Ingrid Sharp,

Atlantic networks, this is changing. Significant efforts have been made to counter the Western-centric nature of the literature; a number of edited collections and monographs, for example, have brought the Asia–Pacific and Latin American regions more firmly into the discussion.⁵⁹ Recently, there has been a growing desire to complicate our understandings of what transnational feminist action looked like by shifting the focus beyond the white, Western elite to specifically consider women’s collaboration both with each other and with the League in the Middle East and Asia.⁶⁰ These efforts are broadening our understandings of transnational feminist endeavours in new and exciting ways.

eds., *The Women’s Movement in Wartime: International Perspectives, 1914–19* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Oliver Janz and Daniel Schönplugg, eds., *Gender History in a Transnational Perspective: Networks, Biographies, Gender Orders* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014); Kimberly Jensen, “War, Transnationalism and Medical Women’s Activism: The Medical Women’s International Association and the Women’s Foundation for Health in the Aftermath of the First World War,” *Women’s History Review* 26, no. 2 (2017): 213–28; Pernilla Jonsson, Silke Neunsinger, and Joan Sangster, eds., *Crossing Boundaries: Women’s Organizing in Europe and the Americas, 1880s–1940s* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2007); McFadden, *Golden Cables of Sympathy*; Carol Miller, “Lobbying the League: Women’s International Organizations and the League of Nations” (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1992); Carol Miller, “Geneva—the Key to Equality?: Inter-war Feminists and the League of Nations,” *Women’s History Review* 3, no. 2 (1994): 219–45; Karen M. Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Sandell, *The Rise of Women’s Transnational Activism*; Schott, *Reconstructing Women’s Thoughts*; Tyrrell, *Woman’s World/Woman’s Empire*; Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe, eds., *Aftermaths of War: Women’s Movements and Female Activists, 1918–1923* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011); Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe, *Women Activists Between War and Peace: Europe, 1918–1923* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Deborah Stienstra, *Women’s Movements and International Organizations* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1994); Jo Vellacott, “A Place for Pacifism and Transnationalism in Feminist Theory: The Early Work of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom,” *Women’s History Review* 2 no. 1 (1993): 23–56; Susan Zimmermann, “Liaison Committees of International Women’s Organizations and the Changing Landscape of Women’s Internationalism, 1920s to 1945,” in *Women and Social Movements, International, 1840 to Present*, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2012), 1–44, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2476959?account_id=8330&usage_group_id=111575; Zimmermann, “Equality of Women’s Economic Status?.”

⁵⁹ Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan, eds., *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); Francisca de Haan, ed., *Women’s Activism: Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013); Delap, *Feminisms*; Kimberly Jensen and Erika A. Kuhlman, eds., *Women and Transnational Activism in Historical Perspective* (Dordrecht: Republic of Letters Publishing, 2010); Karen Offen, ed., *Globalizing Feminisms, 1789–1945* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010); Katherine M. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific*; Taeko Shibahara, *Japanese Women and the Transnational Feminist Movement Before World War II* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014); Mrinalini Sinha, Donna Guy, and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Feminisms and Internationalism* (Oxford; Malden: Blackwell, 1999); Smith and Robinson, *The Routledge Global History of Feminism*; Woollacott, “Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms.”

⁶⁰ Over recent years there have been several important works in this area. See, for example: Sumita Mukherjee, “The All-Asian Women’s Conference 1931: Indian Women and their Leadership of a Pan-Asian Feminist Organisation,” *Women’s History Review* 26, no. 3 (2017): 363–81; Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018); Shobna Nijhawan, “International Feminism from an Asian Center: The All-Asian Women’s Conference (Lahore, 1931) as a Transnational Feminist Moment,” *Journal of Women’s History* 29, no. 3 (2017): 12–36; Rosalind Parr, *Citizens of Everywhere: Indian*

To date there has not been a substantial amount of work relating to feminism and internationalism within the context of the interwar British Empire and Commonwealth.⁶¹ This was a period of significant change, marked by developments such as the 1926 Balfour Declaration and the 1931 Statute of Westminster, which recalibrated relations between Britain and the white dominions, as well as claims to independence made by colonies like India. By reorienting the emphasis of the historiography to consider how the empire's evolving dynamics intersected with—shaped, even—the new spirit of internationalism, this thesis helps to recast our understanding of feminist internationalism in this period. In focusing on activists from Australia and Britain, I draw on and bring the historiographies of feminism in these two national contexts into dialogue with one another as well as with the ever-growing international literature. In this respect I heed Keating's argument that "[o]nly by examining its antipodes, as well as its metropolises, can a comprehensive story of Western women's internationalism be written."⁶² Investigating the range of stances that shaped Western feminism offers new opportunities for comparison and allows us to consider its full intellectual weight as a political and social movement that had lasting effects.

THINKING TRANSNATIONALLY & BIOGRAPHICALLY

This thesis is, at its core, about "lives lived in motion"—lives that were dynamic, crossed borders (both physically and in spirit), and were constantly evolving.⁶³ It rests on two central

Women, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism, 1920–1952 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Nova Robinson, "'Sisters in Asia': The League of Nations and Feminist Anticolonial Internationalism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47, no. 4 (2022): 987–1012; Marie Sandell, "Regional Versus International: Women's Activism and Organisational Spaces in the Inter-War Period," *The International History Review* 33, no. 4 (2011): 607–25; Charlotte Weber, "Between Nationalism and Feminism: The Eastern Women's Congresses of 1930 and 1932," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4, no. 1 (2008): 83–106; Charlotte Weber, "Making Common Cause?: Western and Middle Eastern Feminists in the International Women's Movement, 1911–1948" (PhD thesis, Ohio State University, 2003); Rumi Yasutake, "The Rise of Women's Internationalism in the Countries of the Asia-Pacific Region during the Interwar Years, from a Japanese Perspective," *Women's History Review* 20, no. 4 (2011): 521–32.

⁶¹ There have been studies incorporating both national contexts, however these do not cover the interwar period. See, for example: Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, *Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash: Britain, Ireland and Australia, 1890–1920* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2018); Richard J. Evans, *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America, and Australasia, 1840–1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1977).

⁶² Keating, *Distant Sisters*, 209.

⁶³ This phrase is used in the introduction to Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700–Present* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2.

conceptual pillars: first, a transnational lens, and second, group biography. Given the centrality of these approaches to the project's historiographical contribution, it is important to spend some time discussing each in turn.

Since the 1990s the growth of transnational and global approaches to history have constituted, in the words of Iriye, "a major historiographic transformation."⁶⁴ In *Transnational History*, Pierre-Yves Saunier explains that "transnational history deals with trends, patterns, organisations and individuals that have been living between and through these self-contained entities that we use as units of historical research."⁶⁵ Though seen by some as a buzzword, conducting history from a transnational perspective allows the historian to see what is happening in the spaces across and between nation-states, especially on the level of non-state actors. Gender historians have been among those drawn to such an approach which promises to look in the cracks where stories that have not traditionally been considered "proper" history may have fallen. In the Antipodes in particular, where nationalist narratives have historically been very masculine, scholars working on histories of women have looked beyond the nation's shores to tell their stories.⁶⁶ Alison Bashford goes so far as to contend that, in Australia at least, "'transnational' is now an orthodoxy," although this overlooks the many histories that still sit squarely within a national framework.⁶⁷ Here (as elsewhere), transnational history coalesces with new imperial historical approaches, which have demonstrated the inadequacy of purely domestic-focused, nation-based histories that do not consider the complex interactions between metropole and periphery within the British Empire.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Akira Iriye, *Global and Transnational History: The Past, Present, and Future* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 17.

⁶⁵ Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3.

⁶⁶ On the tensions between national and transnational frameworks for feminist historians (like for historical feminists themselves), see: Ann Curthoys, "A Feminist Voice," in *Australian History Now*, ed. Anna Clark and Paul Ashton (Sydney: NewSouth, 2013), 56–72; Marilyn Lake, "Nationalist Historiography, Feminist Scholarship, and the Promise and Problems of New Transnational Histories: The Australian Case," *Journal of Women's History* 19, no. 1 (2007): 180–86; Marilyn Lake, "Histories Across Borders," in Clark and Ashton, *Australian History Now*, 269–87.

⁶⁷ Alison Bashford, "On Nations and States: A Reflection on 'Thinking the Empire Whole'," *History Australia* 16, no. 4 (2019): 638.

⁶⁸ See, for example: Antoinette Burton, "Rules of Thumb: British History and 'Imperial Culture' in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Britain," *Women's History Review* 3, no. 4 (1994): 483–501; Hall and Rose, *At Home with the Empire*; Levine, *Gender and Empire*.

A transnational perspective allows me to explore the various ways in which interwar feminists were connected, including by patterns of mobility, networks of communication, the flow of ideas, and more formal institutional structures. As Sharon Crozier-De Rosa does in her work on shame and anti-suffragism across Britain, Australia, and Ireland, I use the nation and the empire (as well as the burgeoning international community) as complementary frames of analysis.⁶⁹ I aim to think holistically about how feminists created communities that traversed borders within the context of a changing imperial landscape and how those communities were shaped internally by imperial and settler-colonial dynamics. While not strictly comparative, this process necessarily involves elements of comparison that take into consideration the specificities of each place. Though they aspired to break down borders, these historical lives were still to a large degree shaped by the contours of their nations. Seeing where their experiences converged and differed is an important part of this project.

Australian and British feminists were connected in multiple ways; studying them together offers a new perspective on the interwar feminist movement, one that emphasises the ongoing importance and multiple manifestations of empire. Each of these countries was embedded in multiple networks that connected them to different parts of the world. Britons were closely tied to Europe, while some Australians were beginning to accept their geopolitical reality as part of the Pacific region. Several scholars have emphasised the importance of the United States for both nations at this time (including the multidirectional flow of ideas and practices between each pair), especially as the empire's underpinnings were being challenged by anticolonial nationalists and the white dominions.⁷⁰ Yet the British Empire and later Commonwealth still shaped the lives of its inhabitants in significant (but not uncontested) ways. Connections across the Atlantic and the Pacific were certainly important for interwar feminists in their quest to create a global community, but so too were the historic yet changing imperial networks in which some of them were enmeshed. Studying the connections between women from these different ends of the empire is therefore crucial work.

⁶⁹ Crozier-De Rosa, *Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash*.

⁷⁰ This argument underpins several works focusing on connections to the United States: Bolt, *Feminist Ferment*; Bolt, *Sisterhood Questioned?*; Bolt, *The Women's Movements in the United States and Britain*; Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde*; Marilyn Lake, *Progressive New World: How Settler Colonialism and Transpacific Exchange Shaped American Reform* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2019); Anne Rees, "Travelling to Tomorrow: Australian Women in the United States, 1910–1960" (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2016).

Group biography provides my second foundation and has allowed me to access both individual and collective feminist thought. Through examining the lives of a select group of individuals—to varying degrees and with different emphases throughout, depending on the contours of their life stories and the historical records they have left behind—I aim to understand on a more personal level how and why they committed to feminist and internationalist ideals and to draw broader conclusions.⁷¹ I am centrally concerned with what we can learn through studying personal experiences. In her influential 1991 article “The Evidence of Experience,” Joan Scott argued that documenting experience should not be the only goal of or form the basis for explaining the past; instead, it is the historian’s task to explain that experience.⁷² She argues that “[i]t is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience.”⁷³ This notion is fundamental to the way in which I approach the subjects of this study. Women involved in feminist campaigning did not arrive fully formed in 1919, nor did they remain unchanged throughout the period. I aim not only to document their personal encounters and interactions but to use these as a basis for understanding the larger questions of why internationalism appealed to them, how they chose to act upon this interest, and how the changing social, economic, and political circumstances of the period shaped their approaches.

There is limited theoretical literature on group biography, but it is a method that has been used effectively by several historians working in the field of international feminist history.⁷⁴ Group biography is one subset of the more commonly discussed collective

⁷¹ Olive Banks similarly justifies a focus on the individual by arguing that it “makes possible an exploration of the way in which personal experiences interact with ideological perspectives and indeed with the level of commitment to feminism itself.” Olive Banks, *Becoming a Feminist: The Social Origins of “First Wave” Feminism* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1986), 6.

⁷² Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–97.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 779.

⁷⁴ Caine notes that women were among the first subjects of group biography. See: Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 61. Key examples from the historiography of nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminism include: Banks, *The Politics of British Feminism*; Barbara Caine, *Bombay to Bloomsbury: A Biography of the Strachey Family* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Eichner, *Feminism’s Empire*; Hannam and Hunt, *Socialist Women*; Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries*; Beryl Haslam, *From Suffrage to Internationalism: The Political Evolution of Three British Feminists, 1908–1939* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999); Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*; Imaobong D. Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

biography.⁷⁵ It centres on multiple lives that are connected in some way, including through family ties, professional identity, political ideology, religious affiliation, location, or any number of other factors. Sometimes the group will be self-evident (such as in Caine's book on the Strachey family), whereas in other cases—such as mine—the historian delineates the contours of their group with a heavier hand, informed by the particular object of their research.⁷⁶ In both cases the aim is similar to that of single-subject historical biographers: to examine a life story not just for its own interest but to shed light on a particular moment in time or historical phenomenon. However, group biography allows for varying and even contesting experiences and ideas to come to the fore. As Daisy Hay writes: it is “a capacious form which allows for odd angles, non-linear narratives, and a rethinking of the nature of the constituent parts of individual life stories.”⁷⁷ In Hay's work, as in mine, this methodology illuminates new connections by putting historical figures into dialogue with one another in new ways rather than simply reproducing “pairings and relationships made important by posterity.”⁷⁸

Some have criticised group biography as being less rigorous or methodical than, for example, prosopography, which uses biographical data to produce a broader social history.⁷⁹ But, as Krista Cowman argues, group biography is not simply a “watered down” version of prosopography. “[R]ather,” she explains, “it is a distinct methodology which self-consciously retains a focus on the individual even when it sits within work which aims to use individual lives to explore collective experiences, or within studies of communities (geographically, socially or culturally defined).”⁸⁰ Group biography's very strength is in its focus on the details

⁷⁵ Caine defines collective biography as “any biographical study which has more than one subject,” including but not limited to biographical dictionaries and edited collections as well as monographs focusing on particular groups of people. Caine, *Biography and History*, 47.

⁷⁶ Caine, *Bombay to Bloomsbury*.

⁷⁷ Daisy Hay, “Adventures of an Unromantic Biographer,” *Life Writing* 14, no. 2 (2017): 254.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Lawrence Stone offers the following definition: “Prosopography is the investigation of the common background characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives.” See: Lawrence Stone, “Prosopography,” *Daedalus* 100, no. 1 (1971): 46. K. S. B. Keats-Rohan describes prosopography as “impersonal” and “only interested in individuals in so far as they relate to groups of connected persons sharing one or more common characteristic[s].” See: K. S. B. Keats-Rohan, “Introduction: Chameleon or Chimera? Understanding Prosopography,” in *Prosopography Approaches and Applications: A Handbook*, ed. K. S. B. Keats-Rohan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 16.

⁸⁰ Krista Cowman, “Collective Biography,” in *Research Methods for History*, ed. Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 85.

of people's lives.⁸¹ Caine emphasises the importance of studying the connections and relationships between the people in the group—"their importance for each other"—rather than those parts of their lives that take place outside the group's "ambit."⁸² In the course of completing this project I have discovered that we need not necessarily limit ourselves in this way. Studying a group that was connected by broader ideas and common goals, sometimes sustained by personal relationships but sometimes characterised by more fleeting encounters, can still be very illuminating. Considering lives in parallel, not only where they connect, contributes to building a more detailed picture of the internationalist and feminist worlds of the interwar years.

Deciding on the exact composition of my "group" has been a difficult task. Here the question of representativeness arises. How wide should the net be cast? Should people who exist on the fringes of or do not conventionally fit in the definition of a feminist be included? To what extent can individual historical subjects be used to represent wider experiences or schools of thought? Here I think is where some degree of modesty, a recognition of the limitations of group biography, is needed. Rather than thinking about how representative my selected group is (in the vein of a tick box exercise), I have tried to prioritise those life stories that have something important and different to reveal about interwar feminist internationalism, accepting that there will be experiences, views, and beliefs that I cannot explore in any great depth. There is a risk of including someone simply to stand in as a symbol for part of the story being told, which would reduce them to a two-dimensional figure. Therefore, I have aimed to achieve diversity rather than representativeness, based on the varying amounts of historical evidence that survives.

I have focused on women who were primarily activists (rather than politicians or philanthropists) and who were involved in international networks. Fuller biographical sketches are offered after this introduction, but for now it is worth noting their names: from Australia, Bessie Rischbieth, Ruby Rich, Jessie Street, and Linda Littlejohn; and from Britain, Margery Corbett Ashby, Kathleen Courtney, Chrystal Macmillan, and Helen Archdale. As a result of the available sources, I have settled on investigating these prominent women whose lives are reasonably accessible in the historical record. While this may seem to run counter to feminist

⁸¹ Keats-Rohan, "Introduction: Chameleon or Chimera?", 16.

⁸² Caine, *Biography and History*, 47, 61.

history's radical foundations in history from below, exploring the lives of notable figures is important for understanding this movement and the ideas that trickled down to the rank and file (without assuming that ideas could not be projected up as well). Ranging in age across their thirties and forties when they entered this period, they mostly reflect the ageing demographic of women who were interested in organised feminism at this time.⁸³ Yet in this group there are people with different understandings of feminism and a range of life experiences. Some of them were interested in other social issues, such as Aboriginal and children's rights, but I focus mainly on their feminist efforts. Out of the eight, five were educated at university level and four engaged in various sorts of professional activity before or alongside their activism. Six were married at some point, and four had children. Of the British women, two were "equal rights" feminists while two were "new feminists"; the Australian members challenge this binary altogether. Their religions range from Protestantism (adhered to with varying levels of faith) to Judaism to theosophy and Christian Science. Some travelled widely and outside the West whereas others were more firmly ensconced in the transatlantic world. All were relatively well off financially (a common characteristic that afforded them the time and means to engage with the wider world in an active way), but even here they cannot be said to be homogenous—some had vast fortunes while others recorded their worries about money troubles.

Politically, these women largely belonged to a liberal feminist tradition, rather than a socialist one. It is important to continue examining this middle-class, liberal milieu as it claimed to be the voice of all women (however untrue this was in reality) and engaged closely with the League and national governments.⁸⁴ Yet here there was more nuance than may be assumed, too. Some of my group were "big L" liberals, while others were "small l" liberals closely linked to left-wing women.⁸⁵ Others, especially in Australia, were fiercely non-party and supported

⁸³ On this point, see: Leila J. Rupp, "Is Feminism the Province of Old (or Middle-Aged) Women?," *Journal of Women's History* 12, no. 4 (2001): 164–73.

⁸⁴ As Rupp contends, "the international women's movement *was* bourgeois and dominated by women of European origin" (at least until the emergence of pro-communist international women's organisations such as the Women's World Committee Against War and Fascism and the Women's International Democratic Federation, although even then feminism maintained a strong liberal flavour). Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 5. See also: Jasmine Calver, *Anti-Fascism, Gender, and International Communism: The Comité Mondial des Femmes Contre la Guerre et le Fascisme, 1934–1941* (Oxford: Routledge, 2023); Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)," *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (2010): 547–73.

⁸⁵ Betty Archdale described her mother Helen Archdale and Lady Rhondda as a "liberals with a small l." Betty Archdale, *Indiscretions of a Headmistress* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972), 9.

different political candidates based on what they promised to do for women. As Paula Bartley and Delap (among others) have argued of other manifestations of feminist activity, the idea of a left–right binary is not always the most illuminating when trying to understand women’s activism.⁸⁶ Rather than trying to represent the full political spectrum (which would include looking at more conservative women as well) I have chosen to focus on those lives which are most illuminating and accessible. To contextualise their stories, at various points I also comment on some of their contemporaries: people like Helena Swanwick, a socialist feminist and Courtney’s colleague in the Women’s International League; Edith How-Martyn, a British birth controller; Marjorie Chave Collisson, whose life traversed the United States, Australia, and Britain; and Eleanor Moore, a Melbourne-based peace activist.

Like other histories of Western feminists, this project reproduces the violence and exclusion of past feminisms. Indigenous women—including well-known figures such as Pearl Gibbs, who was active in interwar Aboriginal politics—are notably absent, as even those white women who challenged assimilationist policies saw themselves as needing to speak on behalf of Indigenous people; so too are the many migrants and Black and other minority ethnic women who lived across the empire.⁸⁷ This reflects the silencing that was enacted by my group and their peers, who elevated their own voices and all too often spoke for rather than with women of colour. Examining Western feminism remains an important project, but one that must take on board the critiques Indigenous women and women of colour have been making for decades.⁸⁸ To grapple with this, I discuss in detail imperialism’s pervasive hold over the movement. I also point to and include the words of a range of activists from outside the Anglo-Australian world, such as Huda Sha‘rawi and Saiza Nabarawi from Egypt, May Oung from Burma, Soong Mei-ling from China, and Dhanvanthi Rama Rau and Shareefa Hamid Ali from

⁸⁶ Bartley, *Women’s Activism in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 4; Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde*, 3, 55.

⁸⁷ Heather Goodall and Jackie Huggins, “Aboriginal Women are Everywhere: Contemporary Struggles,” in *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation*, ed. Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 399–424; Victoria Haskins, “Lovable Natives’ and ‘Tribal Sisters’: Feminism, Maternalism, and the Campaign for Aboriginal Citizenship in New South Wales in the late 1930s,” *Hecate* 24, no. 2 (1998): 8–21; Paisley, *Loving Protection?*, 7, 34.

⁸⁸ For just a few particularly influential examples, see: Hazel V. Carby, “White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood,” in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, ed. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 211–34 (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1982; London: Taylor and Francis, 2005); bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2015); Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000).

India. Including their words wherever possible is one way to situate my group in their broader context and give voice to some of the women who they were not always so good at including.

TELLING THE STORY

There is a rich primary source base that sheds light on my subjects' lives within the context of their multiple broader worlds. Individuals' papers are crucial as they illuminate the development of each woman's thinking and activism over the course of her life. The depth of the available material varies significantly from person to person. Some have substantial personal archives and have left behind memoirs or oral history recordings that provide detailed insights from various vantage points. Others have either limited or no personal papers; to fill in the gaps in their stories, as well as to glean a more holistic picture of the wider movement, it is therefore necessary to look further afield. The records of different feminist organisations—whether they be Australian, British, international, or regional groups—alongside those of the League and the other individuals with whom my group interacted provide evidence of their activities and ideas. Congress reports, published pamphlets and books, feminist periodicals, women's magazines, the general press, and photographs all supplement these sources, providing access to my subjects' voices and illuminating the relative importance of various issues and events. It is often their public rather than private lives that are most accessible. Rather than being a limitation, I see this as a reflection of how they wanted to be seen and remembered: as political actors.

The following chapters are organised thematically but provide a sense of how these women's ideas, priorities, knowledge, and confidence developed throughout the period. While representing the diversity of my group's lives, each chapter also reveals shifting priorities within the movement. In turn they explore the various spaces in which women nurtured and disseminated their ideas, illustrating Delap's argument that "[c]ontestation of space has been central to feminism."⁸⁹ Interwar feminists created their own communities in which they could collaborate, confront, and speak to one another before taking their thinking to wider audiences and expanding the arenas in which they operated as political actors. Feminist internationalism was an ongoing process of learning, teaching, knowledge sharing, challenging, and rethinking,

⁸⁹ Delap, *Feminisms*, 103.

shaped by individuals' growing confidence and sense of themselves not just as citizens but as experts with valuable contributions to make.

Chapter one, "Organising Internationally," begins in familiar territory with the formal international women's organisations of which my group were members, often as part of leadership teams. It engages closely with Rupp's ground-breaking work to show how, if we look at both individual and shared experiences, we can see that feminists' attachments to their organisations were sometimes more fluid than previously thought—a fact that enabled them to build a more diverse, more multifaceted, and bolder movement not entirely constrained by the agendas of existing organisations. It captures the fracturing of feminists' interests during this period, as well as the processes of disagreement and discussion that led to them seeing the need to incorporate a greater range of women in their ranks, even if this goal was not always attained. This chapter shows how international women's organisations were central to the expansion of feminist internationalism—in terms of its scope, its power, and its global reach—during the interwar years.

Chapter two, "Meeting at the Congress," then narrows in on the international feminist congress, the flagship event of these organisations. By considering how my subjects felt about their experiences at such meetings and their encounters with an increasingly diverse set of feminists, I present these as educational spaces or training grounds where women from different nations developed their knowledge and ideas through conversation, cooperation, and contestation. These events provided a place for women to build confidence and portray a sense of unity that would help them engage in wider political debates underway in Geneva. Non-Western women seized this opportunity to challenge the dominant characteristics of the movement, forcing white feminists to confront its exclusionary nature. While by the end of the period some people were questioning the utility of these large events, throughout these twenty years feminists wanted to meet in person to maintain a sense of solidarity, project a vision of unity, and strengthen their claims to political power.

Chapter three, "The International at Home," continues thinking through the bases of feminist internationalism, casting an eye to their domestic contexts. While they aspired to be world citizens, my group's lives were deeply grounded in their local settings and they often spent long stretches of time engaging in activism in their home countries. Exploring their participation in domestic feminist organisations, this chapter shows how they lived and produced their internationalism from within national borders, focusing on how they

simultaneously brought their interest in internationalism into their local work and extended their domestic interests beyond the nation's borders. It explores the entanglements of the national, imperial, and international spheres to show how feminists' transnational work was both a practical response to the political realities of the British imperial community and how "the international" was fundamentally mediated through the lenses of the nation and the empire.

Chapter four, "Women and World Governance," is critical to my overall argument. It considers how feminists responded to the new internationalist climate of the interwar period, inspired particularly by the founding of the League. It evokes the sense of persistent hope coupled with mounting disappointment that sustained my group's engagement with this institution throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In it I emphasise the League's formative influence on interwar feminism, showing how feminists used this institution to expand their remit beyond their own organisations and typically feminine topics. The League's emphasis on technical expertise, coupled with feminists' increasing self-confidence and sense of themselves as experts with contributions to make to public political life, allowed them to stake a claim to this space to advance feminist interests and tackle gender inequality globally. By drawing attention to Europe, it also reinforced the inequalities in the movement that amplified the voices of women living on either side of the North Atlantic.

Chapter five, "Travelling the World," breaks free from the structures of organisations to explore how feminists' global travels contributed to their evolving internationalism. Given the privileged class position of my group (which was characteristic of many of their peers), travel was an activity they enjoyed not only for leisure but also for political purposes. This chapter explores the very different journeys they undertook, framing them as political travellers or tourists. I show how they sought to build a strong public support base for their cause and explore their different reactions to the places they visited and people they met while abroad, revealing how they actively sought to learn about the wider world. As the period wore on, Western feminists showed increasing interest in exploring the non-Western world. Yet their responses to what they encountered varied greatly and were often (though not always) shaped by imperialist worldviews. These journeys were sometimes transformative though frequently highlighted the persistent influence of the racialised hierarchies generated through empire.

Chapter six, "Feminists and the Media," explores the interface between my subjects—who were all prominent feminist figures—and wider publics. It engages with ideas of voice,

citizenship, knowledge, and expertise to show how feminists seized both old and new forms of media to share their ideas, reach new audiences, politicise broader communities of women, and increase the support base for their movement. In the pages of newspapers and magazines and on the radio's airwaves, these women cultivated a public image that allowed them to fulfil personal career ambitions, build support for their organisations, and stake a claim to public debate. My group's media usage reveals how they saw generating public support as central to the success of both feminism and internationalism as well as how they increasingly harnessed their reputations as worldly women to position themselves as experts with valuable contributions and knowledge to share beyond the confines of feminist circles.

Finally, chapter seven, "Peace: A Feminist Issue," examines how interwar feminists brought their ideas about women's rights to bear on campaigns for peace. Anti-war discussions were given extra urgency during the First World War and were a prominent feature of the interwar period. Right from the 1919 peace accords, feminists sought to have their say on how to reconstitute relations between the world's nations to avoid future carnage. This cause occupied more and more of their energies throughout the 1930s, as the failures of collective security became impossible to ignore. This chapter extends current literature on feminists' anti-war work by exploring the various conceptions of peace they advanced, including their use of maternalist rhetoric and their visions of East–West cooperation. In so doing, this final chapter shows how my group successfully managed to involve themselves in global political discussions beyond strictly feminist issues, at once capitalising on their status as women and being taken seriously as political thinkers and actors.

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Speaking of Delap's *Feminisms: A Global History*, Zora Simic notes that the author "wants her readers to comprehend feminism as emotion, experience, and embodiment, rather than only or primarily as a movement aggregated into national, regional, and international organisations."⁹⁰ Likewise, in her work on feminism across the Americas, Katherine Marino aims "to recover what global feminism felt like," contending that "these feelings and

⁹⁰ Zora Simic, "A Feminist Mosaic: Feminism as Experience and Embodiment," *Australian Book Review*, no. 430 (April 2021), <https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/archive/2021/april-2021-no-430/962-april-2021-no-430/7592-zora-simic-reviews-feminisms-a-global-history-by-lucy-delap>.

relationships were important to the movement's political outcomes.”⁹¹ In this vein I want to use personal experience to try to understand what feminism and internationalism meant to some of the women who were activists during the interwar years. By highlighting different transnational connections to those that are typically considered and through focusing on both their individual and collective stories, this study adds to the growing literature on international feminism, offering a new perspective that will help us better understand this formative moment in feminism's long, complicated, and multifaceted past.

⁹¹ Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 11.

THE CAST

In conceptualising this project, I have found myself comparing it to a character-driven play or film. Considering it in this way helps to clarify how group biography functions and the roles that individuals have in advancing the story I wish to tell. My narrative is driven by eight central characters whose life stories I weave together, showing where they overlap, connect, diverge, and differ. I allow them to move in and out of the spotlight as needed depending on the theme at hand and the available evidence; at times they appear in the scene together—clustered around a table in a meeting room, sitting side by side at the front of a conference hall, or crossing paths during their journeys through a foreign country—while at others they stand alone on the stage, sharing their own ideas and actions. Each of these characters’ lives constitutes a distinct thread in my story and reveals something different about the broader tale of interwar feminism as it developed globally.

Because of their extensive records and leading roles in the movement, two figures feature especially prominently: the British suffragist and feminist campaigner Margery Corbett Ashby, and the Adelaide-born, Perth-based feminist and social reformer Bessie Rischbieth. Though less famous (or infamous) than other early twentieth-century British feminists, Corbett Ashby (1882–1981) was an important figure in both national and international feminism, especially during the interwar years.¹ She came from a strong Liberal and feminist family: her mother Marie Corbett was a suffragist, one of the first women to be a poor law guardian, and a rural district councillor, while her father Charles Corbett was a businessman and landholder turned Liberal member of parliament who shared his wife’s feminist sentiments.² The family clearly valued girls’ education, with their son and two daughters all

¹ For other biographical sketches of Corbett Ashby, see: Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide, 1866–1928* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), 18; Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists Between the Wars* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1987), 185–206; Jenifer Hart, “Ashby, Dame Margery Irene Corbett (1882–1981),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/30970>.

² For more on Marie Corbett, see: Crawford, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement*, 141.

attending university. Corbett Ashby ventured to Cambridge and read classics at Newnham College, where she was not the most academic student.³ But her mother reassured her that her future did not depend on getting good grades. “Ed[ucation] means more than knowledge it means how to use it & you will find that out in your intercourse with other women up there,” she told her daughter.⁴ While Corbett Ashby only graduated with a third, she found at Newnham a training ground for her later involvement in national and international political life.

Corbett Ashby followed her undergraduate studies with a teacher training course, but her mind was quickly absorbed by feminist politics. In 1904 she attended the International Woman Suffrage Alliance’s (the Alliance) foundation meeting with her mother and sister in Berlin. This introduction to the world of suffrage and internationalism defined the rest of her life’s work. In 1907 she became the secretary for Millicent Garrett Fawcett’s National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). By 1912 she had risen the ranks to join the executive committee, although her strong identification as a Liberal meant she resigned in 1914 when the organisation aligned itself with the Labour Party through its Election Fighting Fund policy.⁵ The archival record gives the impression that she must have spent almost all her time in committee meetings, on deputations to political leaders, giving talks, or at feminist conferences. Throughout the interwar years she chaired the Alliance (1923–46), the British Commonwealth League (BCL, from 1925), the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC, from 1929) and one of its successors, the Townswomen’s Guilds (until 1935), as well as the Women’s Liberal Federation (1927–29).⁶ Her name appears in the records of many other organisations from the 1920s right up until the 1970s. Alongside all this activist work, Corbett Ashby stood (unsuccessfully) for parliament eight times between 1918 and 1944 and was included in Britain’s official delegation to the Disarmament Conference (1932–35).

³ Her letters from Newnham complain of being behind and finding the work difficult. See: letters from Margery Corbett Ashby to Marie Corbett, Papers of Margery Corbett Ashby (hereafter Corbett Ashby Papers), The Women’s Library, London (hereafter TWL), Box FL474, 7MCA/A/18.

⁴ Marie Corbett to Margery Corbett Ashby, 18 October 1901, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL474, 7MCA/A/18.

⁵ See: Executive Committee Minutes, March 7, 1912–July 31, 1913, Records of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, TWL, Box FL083, 2NWS/A/1/4; Crawford, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement*, 18.

⁶ “Congratulations to Mrs. Corbett Ashby on Her Appointment to the Disarmament Conference at Geneva,” *Liberal Woman’s News* (London), February 1932, 699.



Figure 2 Margery Corbett Ashby. *The Women's Library, London, TWL 2003 570.*

By all accounts much of Corbett Ashby's power came from her very likeable character—she was “renowned for her imperturbable good humour and gaiety.”⁷ She perhaps self-consciously challenged the contemporary image of the hysterical suffragette, chained to railings and refusing food in Holloway Prison. She took up her role in public life by emphasising her status as a mother, wife, and woman (she had married the lawyer Brian Ashby in 1910 and had her only child, Michael, in 1914). As a result, some argued that she was not

⁷ “Prominent Liberal Women. Mrs. Corbett Ashby, J.P.,” *Liberal Woman's News* (London), March 1925, 30.

feminist enough. Nevertheless, her contemporaries almost unanimously commented on her special blend of ability and charisma; she was “a woman of charm and authority, an accomplished linguist, and extremely able” and a “most attractive and a perfectly wonderful chairwoman.”⁸ Corbett Ashby continued to be a public figure well into her old age. A 1972 BBC documentary, “Times Remembered,” caught on camera an elderly but still passionate activist recounting what it was like to live in the time of votes for women.⁹

Across multiple oceans and continents, Rischbieth (1874–1967) was working for many of the same goals as her British colleague.¹⁰ She lived most of her life in Perth, but as a girl grew up in her aunt and uncle’s house in South Australia. It was here that she was first exposed not only to support for women’s suffrage and education but also to spiritualism and theosophy, all of which would become central tenets of her life.¹¹ Although her uncle believed in tertiary education for women, Rischbieth did not go on to university after her schooling. Instead, in these early years we see a more conventional life pattern: she married the wealthy wool merchant Henry Wills Rischbieth in 1898 and moved to Perth with him the following year. The couple, however, remained childless, quite possibly not by choice. Without any children of her own, Rischbieth became involved in social welfare work, initially as a founding member of the Children’s Protection Society (1906) and then as a prominent member of the Women’s Service Guilds of Western Australia (WSG), which was formed three years later (Rischbieth served as one of the first vice-presidents and led the group from 1915 to 1922 and again from

⁸ Adele Schreiber and Margaret Mathieson, *Journey Towards Freedom: Written for the Golden Jubilee of the International Alliance of Women* (Copenhagen: International Alliance of Women, 1955), 34; Linda Littlejohn to Bessie Rischbieth, 1931, Papers and objects of Bessie Rischbieth (hereafter Rischbieth Papers), National Library of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NLA), Box 18, File 3, MS 2004/7/118.

⁹ “Times Remembered—Dame Margery Corbett Ashby,” originally broadcast on BBC Two, 13 December 1972, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/times-remembered--dame-margery-corbett-ashby/z6r8vk7>.

¹⁰ For other biographical sketches of Rischbieth, see: Dianne Davidson, “A Citizen of Australia and of the World: A Reappraisal of Bessie Mabel Rischbieth,” *Studies in Western Australian History*, no. 19 (1999): 99–113; Nancy Lutton, “Dear Family: Letters from Bessie Rischbieth,” *Early Days Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society* 9, part 5 (1987): 16–29; Nancy Lutton, “Rischbieth, Bessie Mabel (1874–1967),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, published first in hardcopy 1988, online 2006, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/rischbieth-bessie-mabel-8214/text14373>; Carly Millar, “Bessie Rischbieth: A Biography” (PhD thesis, Monash University, 2008); Carly Millar, “The Making of a Feminist: Bessie Rischbieth Encounters the English Suffragettes,” *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, no. 12 (2003): 78–94; Jill Roe, “A Shadowy Figure? Bessie Rischbieth, Theosophic Feminist,” *Futures Exchange: Australian Cultural History* 23 (2004): 79–95; Kate White, “Bessie Rischbieth: The Feminist,” in *Westralian Portraits*, ed. Lyall Hunt (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1979), 214–21.

¹¹ G. L. Fischer, “Rounsevell, William Benjamin (1843–1923),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, published first in hardcopy 1988, online 2006, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/rounsevell-william-benjamin-8281/text14511>.

1946 to 1950). She was also involved with the National Council of Women's Western Australian branch, though later left the organisation. The records of her life at this time are patchy, but it appears that Rischbieth soon became more actively interested in feminism and internationalism. In 1911 she accompanied her husband on a business trip to Japan, and two years later they made the journey to London, where Rischbieth encountered the militant suffragettes as well as prominent American feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman.¹²

From the 1920s Rischbieth really emerged as a key figure on the Australian feminist scene. In 1921 she formed the Australian Federation of Women's Societies (later renamed the Australian Federation of Women Voters, or AFWV) and remained its president until 1942. Through this group she sought to strengthen feminism across the country by uniting it under the banner of a federal organisation, aiming simultaneously to give Australian women a stronger foothold in the international women's movement. Through her role as president Rischbieth became renowned nationally and internationally. She attended her first international feminist congress in 1923; seven years later one newspaper claimed "[t]here is probably no other Australian woman who has had such wide and frequent experience of international gatherings."¹³ She also was heavily involved, at times as editor, with the *Dawn*, a feminist periodical connected to both the WSG and the AFWV. In 1925, her husband's death left Rischbieth a widow at fifty years old. The wealth the couple had generated through his business endeavours was essential for sustaining her feminist and charitable activities for the rest of her life (he left an estate worth £300,000).¹⁴ That year she co-founded the BCL and from 1928 she became involved with the fledgling Pan-Pacific Women's Association (PPWA). Her status as a leading feminist also saw her form part of the Australian delegation to the League in 1935. Throughout the rest of the interwar period Rischbieth continued travelling the world, heading to destinations further afield such as Hawai'i, Egypt, Palestine, and India. Her decisions here were in no small part driven by her interest in alternative spiritualities

¹² Letters from Bessie Rischbieth to her sister, Olive Evans, 1911 and 1913, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 1, File 1, MS 2004/1/2–12. See also: Millar, "The Making of a Feminist."

¹³ "Views and News. Mrs. B. M. Rischbieth. Women's International Organisations," *Argus* (Melbourne), 26 April 1930, 25.

¹⁴ "Rischbieth, Henry Wills (1869–1925)," *Obituaries Australia*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, originally published in the *Pastoral Review*, 16 September 1925, 781, <http://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/rischbieth-henry-wills-858/text859>.

inspired by non-Western cultures, especially theosophy.¹⁵ This sets her apart as a rather interesting figure who does not easily sit within assumptions about white Australia at this time.



Figure 3 Bessie Rischbieth, c. 1939. State Library of Western Australia, image number 005189D.

It can be hard to gain a real sense of Rischbieth's personality from the historical record. While her archives are rich, personal notes have frequently been left out. One of the most intimate portraits we have comes from her friend Ruby Rich, who interviewed Rischbieth in Geneva at the 1935 League Assembly. Rich wrote that when the topic of humanitarian efforts

¹⁵ Roe, "A Shadowy Figure?."

to assist refugees was broached, Rischbieth's "two brown eyes [flashed] firelike" as she talked about the importance of assisting victims of sex trafficking and those fleeing Nazism in Germany.¹⁶ This is one of the most personal descriptions of the passion that underpinned Rischbieth's decades-long commitment to feminist and reform work. Rich's admiration for her friend's dedication is palpable and perhaps indicates why Rischbieth was so successful as a feminist leader for decades. This passion continued into her old age when, while being labelled as too conservative by younger feminists, she turned her eye to environmental activism—a famous photograph shows an elderly Rischbieth standing barefoot in the Swan River to protest the land being reclaimed for development.¹⁷

Ruby Rich (1888–1988) was also a major feminist figure in her own right, one whose life adds much to my story.¹⁸ Born in Walgett in rural northern New South Wales to a German father and an Australian mother, she grew up as part of Sydney's Jewish community based in the eastern suburbs. The family had quite conservative views on girls' education; her father thought it was more important for Rich and her sister "to find husbands and to be good housekeepers and above all good cooks."¹⁹ Instead of attending formal learning institutions like some of her contemporaries, she was educated by governesses—who taught her French, German, and music—and was encouraged to speak with a British rather than Australian accent.²⁰ Rich was a talented musician and in 1905 she and her sister Vera went overseas to study the piano in Berlin and Paris. She performed in London and returned there in 1911 at the height of suffragette militancy, which stimulated her interest in women's rights. During the First World War she worked in a Voluntary Aid Detachment, spending time in Britain and Switzerland. She tried her hand at nursing but did not quite have the constitution for this hard,

¹⁶ "Interview with Mrs. Bessie M. Rischbieth O.B.E. J.P. Alternate Delegate for the Australian Government to the Sixteenth Assembly of the League of Nations (1935)," Papers of Ruby Rich (hereafter Rich Papers), NLA, Box 86, Folder 541, MS 7493.

¹⁷ "A Symbolic Protest," *Canberra Times*, 30 April 1964, 25.

¹⁸ For more on Rich, see: Audrey Tate, "Rich, Ruby Sophia (1888–1988)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, published first in hardcopy 2012, online 2012, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/rich-ruby-sophia-14202/text25214>; Anne Rees, "'The Quality and not Only the Quantity of Australia's People': Ruby Rich and the Racial Hygiene Association of NSW," *Australian Feminist Studies* 27, no. 71 (2012): 71–92.

¹⁹ Ruby Rich interviewed by Hazel de Berg, 4 June 1975, Hazel de Berg collection (hereafter de Berg collection), NLA, ORAL TRC 1/836, Session 3 of 9, 1:30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

sad, and sometimes gruesome work; she later told her interviewer, Hazel de Berg, that she believed she “was really not meant to be either a voluntary or any kind of a nurse.”²¹



Figure 4 Ruby Rich. Wireless Weekly (Sydney), 26 August 1938, 13.

It was during the interwar years that Rich became politically active as a feminist. In Australia, she was involved with the Sydney-based Feminist Club, the United Associations of Women (UA), the Racial Hygiene Association of New South Wales (RHA), and the AFWV,

²¹ Ibid.

although she later felt that her trips abroad had interfered with her work at home.²² Indeed, Rich spent much of this period overseas. From 1929 to 1935 she lived in London, where she took her adopted nephew to be educated and where she served as a point of contact between Australian feminist groups and international organisations like the Alliance and the BCL. She was also greatly interested in peace and spent the remainder of the 1930s dedicating her time to women's and mixed-gender peace efforts. She continued her work for these causes after the Second World War, being involved in organisations such as the United Nations Association of Australia and the Pan-Pacific and Southeast Asia Women's Association of Australia.

Rich witnessed almost a century of women's activism in Australia and abroad, passing away just a month before her one-hundredth birthday. She collected masses of material related to Australian feminism; as Sharon Crozier-De Rosa notes, Rich was an "archival activist" as well as a feminist one.²³ Her amiable personality shines through in the historical records, especially in her oral history recordings. Rich's contemporary, Julia Rapke, described her as "the essence of femininity," with "an amazingly fertile brain allied to abundant physical energy" and a "sweetness & vivacity and altogether such an engaging personality that people are quickly attracted to her."²⁴ Such qualities stood Rich in good stead for a career in the public eye, including on the radio. She was a strong public speaker (a fact she attributed to her political education at the Feminist Club) and a tireless campaigner.²⁵ In one reference letter she was described by a colleague as "full of initiative, individuality and resource" with "the happy knack of working with her colleagues."²⁶ Such a personality made her an effective feminist campaigner.

Rich's interest in nationality rights brought her into contact with the eldest member of my group, the Scottish activist and barrister (Jessie) Chrystal Macmillan (1872–1937).²⁷ Hailing

²² Ibid.

²³ Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, "Memory Keepers: Women Activists' Strategies to Preserve History," National Library of Australia Fellowship Presentation, 21 April 2022, <https://youtu.be/r4fkLwuGjTY>.

²⁴ Julia Rapke, "Ruby Rich," Papers on Various Australian Women, NLA, MS 842.

²⁵ Ruby Rich interviewed by Hazel de Berg, de Berg collection, NLA, 4 June 1975, ORAL TRC 1/837, Session 5 of 9, from 11:04.

²⁶ J. S. Purdy, Metropolitan Medical Officer of Health, To Whom it May Concern, 1 June 1931, Rich Papers, NLA, Box 68, File 427, MS 7493.

²⁷ For more on Macmillan, see: Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, 363; Helen Kay, "Chrystal Macmillan: From Edinburgh Woman to Global Citizen," *Deportate, esuli, profughe*, no. 18–19 (2012): 125–152; Helen Kay,

from a large middle-class family based in Edinburgh (consisting of nine children, eight of whom were boys), she benefited from her parents' Liberalism and commercial success. The Macmillans clearly valued girls' education: their daughter studied first at the progressive St Leonards School, St Andrews, and then turned down a scholarship to Girton College, Cambridge in 1892 in favour of being part of the first cohort of women to study at the University of Edinburgh. A bright student, she graduated with first-class honours in mathematics and natural philosophy in 1896 and, after a period studying in Berlin, completed an MA in 1900. It was through her time at university that Macmillan was alerted to the issue of women's suffrage. In 1908, after controversy surrounding women graduates' voting rights in the Scottish universities' parliamentary seat, she famously (but unsuccessfully) argued their case before the Bar of the House of Lords in London. This moment transformed her from a student into a committed activist. Macmillan became very active in the suffrage movement, favouring the non-militant NUWSS. She quickly became involved in the international scene, too, and at various points during the suffrage campaigns worked with the Alliance and the International Council of Women (ICW). In 1915 she helped plan the International Congress of Women, a major feminist peace meeting that took place amid the fighting of the First World War, demonstrating her understanding of the links between feminism and peace.

During the interwar decades Macmillan became involved in multiple battles within the feminist movement. These were mostly centred around the tension between "new" and "equal rights" feminists. Macmillan believed in the importance of obtaining complete legal equality rather than enforcing special conditions for women, especially in relation to protective legislation for women workers. For this reason, she helped form the Open Door Council (ODC) in 1926 and its international body, the Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker (ODI), three years later. Her stance on the question of women's employment also led her to resign from the NUSEC's executive in 1927, ending a long affiliation with that group. Throughout the interwar years Macmillan was perhaps best

"Remembering Chrystal Macmillan: Challenging Authority, Championing Equality," *Dangerous Women*, 24 March 2016, <http://dangerouswomenproject.org/2016/03/24/chrystal-macmillan/>; Helen Kay and Rose Pipes, "Chrystal Macmillan, Scottish Campaigner for Women's Equality through Law Reform," *Women's History Review* 29, no. 4 (2020): 716–36; Laura Noakes, "Chrystal MacMillan and Elsie Bowerman: First Women Barristers' Negotiation of Professional and Political Identities" (PhD thesis, The Open University, 2021); Sybil Oldfield, "Macmillan, (Jessie) Chrystal (1872–1937)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/38526>; Michelle Staff, "Women's Rights on the World Stage: Feminism and Internationalism in the Life of Chrystal Macmillan (1872–1937)," *Journal of Women's History* 32, no. 3 (2020): 38–63.

known for her advocacy of women's independent nationality rights. She approached this topic through her activist networks, including those centred on the League, and in her capacity as a lawyer; after the professions had been opened to women in Britain in 1919, she had begun her studies in law and was admitted to the Bar in 1924. It was this focus on legal equality that meant she did not show as much interest in other topics concerning women such as sex reform.²⁸



Figure 5 Chrystal Macmillan. Private collection of John Herdman.

²⁸ On this, see Macmillan's correspondence with Marie Stopes: Stopes Papers, British Library, London, Add MS 58713.

Macmillan may not have left a personal archive, but the breadth and vigour of her activity is evident in the wider historical record. She was well known by many of her contemporaries both at home and abroad; her letters asking for support for her various campaigns and updating her colleagues on progress that was being made can be found as far away as Sydney and Canberra. She was a formidable figure, remembered as a sometimes obstinate but passionate campaigner. The actress and journalist Cicely Hamilton wrote for *Time and Tide* that Macmillan was “the right kind of lawyer, one who held that Law should be synonymous with Justice” and “the perfect committee-member [*sic*]; she never lost her temper, however hotly discussion might wage, and never showed rancour in defeat.” An influential and experienced campaigner, Macmillan was also “a friend well worth having.”²⁹

Macmillan’s fellow Scot, Helen Alexander Archdale (1876–1949), is the third British actor in this story.³⁰ She was the daughter of the journalist and newspaper editor Alexander Russel and Helen Evans, one of the famous Edinburgh Seven (a group of women who battled to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh).³¹ The only girl alongside two brothers, she too was educated at St Leonards School, St Andrews—where her “own laziness aided by a natural intelligence carried me lightly over academic problems”—as well as the University of St Andrews.³² Yet she did not immediately become involved in feminist activism during or after her studies. As she remarked in her unpublished autobiography: “Looking back on my life as it was lived before becoming an active feminist I can only see the years passing without event. I see myself acquiescing in and passively accepting conditions as they were.”³³ In 1901 she followed a rather conventional route, marrying Theodore Montgomery Archdale, an army

²⁹ Cicely Hamilton, “Chrystal Macmillan,” *Time and Tide* (London), 2 October 1937, 1292.

³⁰ For more on Archdale, see: David Doughan, “Archdale [née Russel], Helen Alexander (1876–1949),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, revised 28 May 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/58331>; Crawford, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement*, 15–16.

³¹ H. C. G. Matthew, “Russel, Alexander (1814–1876),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, revised 28 May 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/24292>; M. A. Elston, “Edinburgh Seven (*act.* 1869–1873),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, revised 28 May 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/61136>.

³² “Manuscript of An Interfering Woman’, being typescript manuscript of Helen Archdale’s autobiography, including handwritten annotations,” Betty Archdale Papers (hereafter Archdale Papers), State Library of New South Wales, Sydney (hereafter SLNSW), chapter 1, 3, MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

³³ *Ibid.*, chapter 1, 2.

man she had met during a stay in Egypt, with whom she had three children.³⁴ They moved to India, where Archdale lived the restrictive life of an army officer's wife and "filled the ordinary duties of daughter, wife and mother" before moving back to England. But this all changed when she became introduced to the "Votes for Women" campaign on a visit to Scotland in around 1908. As she recalled, after that moment she "took part in the militant fight for the vote in Britain and later in national and international feminist politics."³⁵ Unlike the other members of my group, Archdale was a member of Emmeline Pankhurst's militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and was imprisoned on at least two occasions. Following in her father's footsteps, she also worked on the suffrage periodicals the *Suffragette* and *Britannia*.

Like many of her fellow suffragettes, Archdale embraced various forms of war work between 1914 and 1918. After the conflict and the granting of partial enfranchisement, she became more firmly embedded in not only British but also international feminist efforts. From the early 1920s she edited a new feminist-run weekly newspaper, *Time and Tide*, and was a founding member and the international secretary of Lady Rhondda's Six Point Group (SPG). Along with Macmillan she was an original member of the ODC and the ODI, advocating for complete equality in the realm of work, and in 1927 became a co-opted member of the Liaison Committee of Women's International Organisations. From 1930 to 1934 she was president of the Equal Rights International (ERI), an organisation she formed to push for an equal rights treaty to be adopted by the League, which saw her spend much time in Geneva.³⁶ Sometime during this period Archdale converted to Christian Science. She appears to have been less active in the final years of the 1930s. During the 1940s she visited her children, who had moved overseas to Australia and Canada, before her death in 1949.

³⁴ Archdale's daughter, Betty, became an interesting and important figure in her own right, as a cricketer, principal of the Women's College at the University of Sydney, and headmistress of Abbotsleigh School for Girls. Philip Jones, "Archdale, Helen Elizabeth (Betty) (1907–2000)," *Obituaries Australia*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, originally published in the *Guardian* (Sydney), 16 February 2000, <http://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/archdale-helen-elizabeth-betty-27663/text35200>.

³⁵ "Manuscript of An Interfering Woman," chapter 1, 1, MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

³⁶ Doughan, "Archdale [née Russel], Helen Alexander (1876–1949)."



Figure 6 Helen Archdale. State Library of New South Wales, Betty Archdale Papers, Box 2, MLMSS 9091.

Like Macmillan, Archdale did not leave a personal archive, although her words and ideas can be traced in the pages of the newspapers she edited, in her manuscript autobiography (held in her daughter's papers in Sydney), and through the ERI's papers. The historical records reveal her to be a strong and sometimes difficult personality. Archdale could be inflexible, single-minded, and authoritarian. Her former suffragette colleague and SPG member Dorothy Evans complained about her "undemocratic administration" of the ERI, which she led with a "tiny clique" of almost exclusively British women.³⁷ Another colleague, Winifred Mayo, wrote

³⁷ Dorothy Evans to Winifred Mayo, 29 July 1932, Records of the Equal Rights International Group (hereafter ERI Records), TWL, Box FL331, 5ERI.

that despite “all her imperfections of manner and so on” Archdale had “managed to get the E.R.I. on to a solid basis, and made it thoroughly respected in Geneva,” contributing her own money to keep the group afloat.³⁸ Archdale maintained a strong identification with her militant suffrage roots, viewing herself as a radical committed to achieving change through practical action.

The journalist and broadcaster (Emma) Linda Palmer Littlejohn (1883–1949) succeeded Archdale as the ERI’s president in 1935, the first Australian to hold such a high-ranking position internationally.³⁹ Littlejohn had been educated at Ascham School in Sydney (and sustained connections to her alma mater through the Ascham Old Girls’ Union) but, like Rischbieth, did not continue to university. Little is known of her early years, although she seems to have lived a conventional upper-middle-class life: she married Albert Littlejohn in 1907 at the age of twenty-three, raised four children, and was engaged in social and philanthropic work. From the 1920s she became involved with several Sydney-based women’s organisations, which contributed to her politicisation as a feminist. Her colleague Jessie Street dated Littlejohn’s public activism to around 1925, noting that until that point she “had never made a speech, and knew very little about social conditions.”⁴⁰ Throughout the following years she served on various executive committees, including those of the National Council of Women of New South Wales (NCW NSW), the Feminist Club, the League of Women Voters, the UA, the RHA, and the New South Wales League of Nations Union (NSW LNU). This rich résumé, coupled with her growing public status through her work on radio and her writing for the new and very popular *Australian Women’s Weekly* (the *Weekly*), ensured that she became well-known as an important feminist figure.

³⁸ Winifred Mayo to Jessie Street, 20 May 1932, United Associations of Women Records (hereafter UA Records), SLNSW, Box Y790, MLMSS 2160.

³⁹ For more on Littlejohn, see: Meredith Foley, “Littlejohn, Emma Linda Palmer (1883–1949),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, published first in hardcopy 1986, online 2006, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/littlejohn-emma-linda-palmer-7208/text12473>; James Keating, “‘Woman as Wife, Mother, and Home-Maker’: Equal Rights International and Australian Feminists’ Interwar Advocacy for Mothers’ Economic Rights,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47, no. 4 (2022): 957–85.

⁴⁰ “‘Great Factor in World Peace.’ Position of Russia. Mrs. Littlejohn Welcomed,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 December 1937, 7. Street’s words are paraphrased in this quote.



Figure 7 Linda Littlejohn, c. 1939. National Library of Australia, PIC Row 14/8/4 #PIC/15611/10694.

This experience provided a basis for Littlejohn to become an active participant on the international feminist scene throughout the 1930s. She represented Australia at international feminist congresses including the ODI's 1931 Stockholm conference and the Alliance's 1935 Istanbul meeting, where she addressed her colleagues from around the world in French.⁴¹ In 1935 she replaced Archdale as the ERI's president and spent much time in Geneva working alongside the League.⁴² Like others in this group, Littlejohn's international activity necessitated

⁴¹ "Women's Status. International Congress at Istanbul. Enthusiastic Gathering," *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 24 April 1935, 13.

⁴² On Littlejohn and the ERI, see: Keating, "Woman as Wife, Mother, and Home-Maker'."

extensive travel; as letters and reports she sent home to the *Dawn* and the *Weekly* attest, she toured Europe and the United States to prepare and present a series of lecture tours, stopping in various British Empire ports along the way. Experiencing a marriage breakdown in the late 1930s, Littlejohn divorced her husband and went to the United States in 1942, where she married Charles Joseph Tilden and lived until 1944.

Littlejohn successfully created a strong public profile based on her charisma, diplomacy, and ability to articulate her ideas for various audiences. She was well-liked and respected by her colleagues in Australia and abroad. When after a three-year stay in London she left to return home to Australia in 1937, Littlejohn was farewelled by British feminism's best and brightest who "stressed the vivid personality of the guest, her intelligence, vivacity and forceful character, and their admiration and appreciation of the help she had given in so many directions for women."⁴³ Indeed, towards the end of the period the British feminist and preacher Maude Royden commented that Littlejohn "has all the dignity and charm and individuality that are such inestimable gifts in the work of a pioneer"; likewise, the English actress Sybil Thorndike said she had "a real clear brain and a real deep grasp of her subject. She is vitally interesting and has such a fund of real knowledge."⁴⁴ This stylish, cultivated woman certainly made an impression.

In the archival records—and in this thesis—Littlejohn's name often appears alongside that of her fellow leader of the Sydney feminist movement, Jessie Street (1889–1970).⁴⁵ From the beginning, Street's life was defined by imperial mobility; as one historian has put it, "Street, in a sense, was born transnational."⁴⁶ She was born in India to Charles Alfred Gordon Lillingston, a member of the Indian civil service, and his wife Mabel Harriet, who inherited

⁴³ "Farewell Party to Mrs. Littlejohn, J.P.," *Dawn* (Perth), 17 November 1937, 3.

⁴⁴ "Under Contract to Lecture in U.S.A. Mrs. Linda Littlejohn," *Dawn* (Perth), 21 September 1938, 7.

⁴⁵ For more biographical portraits of Street, see: Lenore Coltheart, "Citizens of the World: Jessie Street and International Feminism," *Hecate* 31, no. 1 (2005): 182–94; Heather Radi, ed., *Jessie Street: Documents and Essays* (Sydney: Women's Redress Press, 1990); Heather Radi, "Street, Lady Jessie Mary (1889–1970)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, published first in hardcopy 2002, online 2006, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/street-lady-jessie-mary-11789/text21089>; Peter Sekules, *Jessie Street: A Rewarding but Unrewarded Life* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978); Zora Simic, "'Mrs Street—Now There's a Subject!': Historicising Jessie Street," *Australian Feminist Studies* 20, no. 48 (2005): 291–303; Chloe Ward, "Jessie Street: Activism Without Discrimination," in *The Transnational Activist: Transformations and Comparisons from the Anglo-World since the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Stefan Berger and Sean Scalmer (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 227–55.

⁴⁶ Ward, "Jessie Street: Activism Without Discrimination," 231.

her father's property at Yulgilbar station near Grafton in 1896, where the family subsequently moved. After beginning her studies under a governess, Street boarded at Wycombe Abbey School in Buckinghamshire between 1904 and 1906, studying under a headmistress from St Leonards School.⁴⁷ Street's tertiary education continued back in Australia at the University of Sydney's Women's College, where she held various leadership positions including president of the women's hockey club. Her studies in history and philosophy generated a self-described "sense of direction and a faith and self confidence [*sic*] which have developed with every experience."⁴⁸ In 1911 she met the English suffragettes through her cousin Winifred Mayo, an experience that made an "indelible impression" on her.⁴⁹ After spending some more time in Britain during the First World War she worked at the New York Probation and Protective Association, helping women who had been arrested for sex work. At the age of twenty-six she married Kenneth Street (of the famous Street family of lawyers) and over the next decade had four children.⁵⁰

Street became one of the leading feminist figures of interwar Sydney. She was involved with numerous feminist organisations during this time, including the NCW NSW and the Feminist Club. In 1929 she formed the UA, feeling that a group was needed to undertake unapologetically feminist work. During her overseas travels she forged connections between Australian women and international feminist organisations, too, including the BCL, the ODI, and the ERI. Most notably, in 1938 she visited the Soviet Union where she saw that women had freedoms not experienced elsewhere; her sympathy for the Soviet Union earned her the nickname "Red Jessie" in later years (even though she never joined a communist party). Street is most well remembered for having been a delegate at the foundation conference of the United Nations (UN) in San Francisco, where she ensured that sex was included in the forms of discrimination condemned by the organisation. She continued to work for women's and Indigenous rights as well as peace throughout the following decades until her death in 1970.

⁴⁷ Jessie Street, *Truth or Repose* (Sydney: Australasian Book Society, 1966), 17.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁰ On the Street legal dynasty, see: Karen Fox, "Australian Legal Dynasties: The Stephens and the Streets," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, originally published 17 February 2015, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/essay/10/text36680>.



Figure 8 Jessie Street, c. 1930s, Falk Studios. National Library of Australia, PIC Box PIC/6938 #PIC/6938.

Street was a formidable figure. While much has been made of the later animosity between the two (due to their divergent politics in the context of the Cold War), in 1938 Rischbieth described her as “a vital personality: a good speaker & keen feminist.”⁵¹ Later on, Street constructed a narrative of her life that presented her feminism as an inherent quality, pointing to the keen sense of inequality she felt as a child at being treated differently from the

⁵¹ Bessie Rischbieth to Mrs. A.E. Joyner, 21 February 1938, Records of the Australian Federation of Women Voters (hereafter AWFV Records), NLA, Box 4, File 28, MS 2818. For more on the changing dynamics between the pair, see: Kate White, “Bessie Rischbieth, Jessie Street and the End of First-Wave Feminism in Australia,” in *Worth Her Salt: Women at Work in Australia*, ed. Margaret Bevege, Margaret James, and Carmel Shute (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1982), 319–29.

boys. She also established a strong family lineage of social justice, highlighting her parents' and grandparents' supposedly favourable treatment of Aboriginal peoples.⁵² This story gained traction in the wider community: in the *Weekly's* obituary Street was called a "remarkable woman" and "a fighter" who "fought injustice wherever she thought she saw it."⁵³ Although she is usually remembered for her postwar work, it was during the interwar years that Street found her footing as an important feminist figure.

Kathleen D'Olier Courtney (1878–1974), suffragist turned peace campaigner, is the final figure who rounds out this group of eight.⁵⁴ She was the fifth of seven children born in Kent into a large family of the Anglo-Irish gentry. Like some of her contemporaries she benefited from the expansion of women's education in England around this time. From a young age Courtney was exposed to foreign languages and was even internationally mobile: she was schooled at an Anglo-French college in Kensington, the Manse boarding school in Malvern, and spent seven months studying German in Dresden. In 1897 she began her studies at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford (LMH), reading French and German, where she received second-class honours. Courtney's time at LMH was pivotal for the development of her political consciousness. Here she met her lifelong friend (Agnes) Maude Royden. Both would go on to be centrally involved in the battle for the vote. While Courtney's roots were in the south of England, she first became active in the suffrage movement in Manchester, where she worked as secretary of the North of England Society for Women's Suffrage from 1908. In 1911 she moved back down to London and became the NUWSS's honorary secretary, joining both Corbett Ashby and Macmillan.

Courtney's relationship with the NUWSS became tense, however. She was among those who opposed Garrett Fawcett's patriotic stance on the war. In 1915 she resigned from her position. In her view, the organisation's decision not to engage in any pro-peace work was

⁵² Street, *Truth or Repose*, 11–12.

⁵³ Kay Keavney, "Street, Lady Jessie Mary (1889–1970)," *Obituaries Australia*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, originally published in the *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 5 August 1970, 4, <https://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/street-lady-jessie-mary-11789/text35298>.

⁵⁴ For more on Courtney, see: Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, 143–44; Janet E. Grenier, "Courtney, Dame Kathleen D'Olier (1878–1974)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/37316>; Beryl Haslam, *From Suffrage to Internationalism: The Political Evolution of Three British Feminists, 1908–1939* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

“a refusal to recognise one of the fundamental principles of the Suffrage Movement.”⁵⁵ Alongside Macmillan and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, Courtney was the third British woman who attended the International Congress of Women in The Hague that year. She was also involved in more practical work in response to the war, working with the Friends’ War Victims Relief Committee first in Serbia and then in other European countries throughout the early 1920s. From then on, Courtney’s feminism was inextricably bound up with peace work. She continued advocating for voting rights and other measures like motherhood endowment. Alongside these activities Courtney worked for peace through many groups including the Women’s International League (WIL), the Women’s Peace Crusade, and the Peace and Disarmament Committee of the Women’s International Organisations. Her internationalism and peace work also led her to the League of Nations Union (LNU), a mixed-gender organisation; she joined the executive in 1928 and became a vice-chair at the end of the period in 1939. She travelled extensively, including through North America and as far as the Antipodes. Her interest in international governance stayed with her through the Second World War, when she was a prominent advocate of the UN.

Courtney’s family wealth ensured she had the means to be “a free agent” and undertake voluntary work for whatever group or cause about which she felt passionate.⁵⁶ Historian Janet Grenier describes her as “a forceful personality who did not suffer fools gladly,” with a “sternness” that “was accompanied by grace and Victorian courtesy.”⁵⁷ Indeed, her colleagues praised her “clear judgement and wise leadership.”⁵⁸ Courtney had strong principles and a clear vision of the issues for which she felt it was important to fight. She left and joined organisations as they and she developed different priorities over time, revealing a pragmatic side to her character. One New Zealander who heard her speak during her 1938 tour of the Antipodes described her as having “a knowledge and directness which command instant attention and confidence. Her manner is easy, her diction delightful; in fact, it is an education in many ways

⁵⁵ Kathleen Courtney to the NUWSS executive, in minutes of NUWSS executive committee meeting, 4 March 1915, Records of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, TWL, Box FL084, 2NWS/A/1/7.

⁵⁶ Francesca Wilson, “Dame Kathleen Courtney,” extract from unpublished manuscript “Three Twentieth Century Women of Action: Dame Kathleen Courtney, Margaret McFie, Gem Jebb,” 9, Dame Kathleen Courtney Papers, Lady Margaret Hall Archives, Oxford, LMH/MMP/3/2/1.

⁵⁷ Grenier “Courtney, Dame Kathleen D’Olier (1878–1974).”

⁵⁸ “Editorial. Resignation of Miss Courtney,” *Women’s International League Monthly News Sheet* 14, no. 12 (December 1933), 1.

to listen to her.”⁵⁹ Courtney garnered the respect of men and women alike, making a significant impact on various communities of social reformers.



Figure 9 Kathleen Courtney, c. 1950. The Women's Library, London, 7KDC/K/10/19.

These eight main characters lie at the heart of the story that follows. While they may be the centre of attention, they are supported by a selection of secondary characters whose lives offer alternative perspectives and gesture towards a bigger picture. The words and actions

⁵⁹ F. P. Taylor, “Miss Kathleen Courtney. Impressions and Appreciation of a New Zealander,” *Woman To-Day*, no date, news clipping, Papers of Kathleen D’Olier Courtney, TWL, Box FL455, KDC/D5/71–105.

of people like Shareefah Hamid Ali, Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, May Oung, Huda Sha‘rawi, Saiza Nabarawi, and Soong Mei-ling provide important insights—and critiques—that enrich my portrayal of interwar feminism. Though there is only enough space to provide brief glimpses into their stories, their inclusion is important for contextualising this project and showing the diverse interpretations of feminist internationalism during these formative decades.

CHAPTER 1

Organising Internationally

In January 1920 the American feminist leader Carrie Chapman Catt made a long-awaited announcement: a meeting of one of the world's largest feminist organisations, the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (the Alliance), was finally possible. Years of war in Europe had largely prevented feminists from crossing national borders to gather and sustain the transnational communities they had been cultivating before the conflict began. Now that the fighting was over, and in the context of the renewed vigour given to internationalism by the freshly formed League of Nations (the League), they were once again able to meet with their colleagues from abroad and start to expand their networks even further across the globe. The official call to the Alliance's eighth congress—its first since it met in Budapest in 1913—was circulated far and wide.¹ Questions about the organisation's future now that more and more countries were giving women the vote were paramount. "Is our work together at an end?" Catt asked. "Or shall we go on until the women of every land are likewise emancipated? Is the emancipation of women complete, or is there other work yet to be done before that end is attained? Do the women of the world send a call to us for additional service which bids us march on farther?" She encouraged feminists to travel to the congress so "that we may hear together the marvellous story of our movement since last we met, and that we may counsel together how best to use our newly won power for the good of all nations."² A few months

¹ The congress was initially to be held in Madrid; however, plans were hindered due to some Spaniards' belief that the Alliance was hostile to Catholicism. As a result, the location was changed to Geneva. See: "Why the Location of the Congress has been Changed," *International Woman Suffrage News* 14, no. 6 (March 1920): 82.

² Carrie Chapman Catt, "Call to the Eighth Congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. Madrid, Spain, May 2nd to 8th, 1920," *International Woman Suffrage News* 14, no. 4 (January 1920): 49. This call was updated to reflect the new location of Geneva and reprinted in the March 1920 issue of the *International Woman Suffrage News*. See: Carrie Chapman Catt, "Call to the Eighth Congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. Geneva, Switzerland, June 6th to 12th, 1920," *International Woman Suffrage News* 14, no. 6 (March 1920): 81.

later, delegates from thirty-six countries made the journey to Switzerland (the host nation), where together they reflected on the Alliance's role in this new internationalist era.³

Catt's call to the Geneva congress highlighted several important questions that feminists faced in the wake of the First World War. Most immediately, they had to ask themselves: what role were international women's organisations to play moving forward? A succession of suffrage victories emboldened them to question the many other ways in which gender subordination functioned in society with even more force than before.⁴ Moreover, the war—which had “multiple and contradictory effects” for women—had simultaneously given them a taste of freedom and reinforced the fact that their inequality extended well beyond voting rights.⁵ Under Catt's guidance, therefore, the Alliance “decided that the emancipation of women is not complete, and with hardly a dissentient voice it resolved to continue work to secure the vote for women in the unenfranchised countries.”⁶ The delegates also saw the need “to promote such other reforms as are necessary to secure a real equality of liberties, status and opportunities between men and women” because the “full enfranchisement of women is now interpreted to include not only political equality but equality in all spheres, social, moral, and economic.”⁷ As comparable problems could be found around the world, they decided that this expanded quest for equality was to be an international one.

International women's organisations—some of which defined themselves as explicitly feminist—were a core pillar of both feminism and internationalism during the interwar years. They provided formal structures through which women could discuss and experience “the international” and were crucial for the development of feminist internationalism as an intellectual tradition that aspired to transcend national, religious, and cultural differences.

³ International Woman Suffrage Alliance (hereafter IWSA), *Report of Eighth Congress, Geneva, Switzerland, June 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 1920* (Manchester: Percy Brothers, 1920), 22.

⁴ While some women did advocate a range of causes before the war, for the mainstream women's movement the granting of suffrage allowed these other issues to adopt a more central place during the interwar years. On earlier manifestations of feminism not centred on suffrage, see: Lucy Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters of the Early Twentieth Century* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵ Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2013), 5.

⁶ IWSA, *Report of Eighth Congress*, 22.

⁷ Ibid.

Accordingly, these groups hold a prominent place in the historiography.⁸ Scholars such as Leila Rupp have used various organisations as lenses through which to examine gender-based activism and international cooperation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁹ This scholarship has revealed the complexity of these associations, which provided space not only for consensus building, social connection, and knowledge creation, but also innovation, debate, and contestation. Seeking to build on Rupp's foundational work, others have explored different regional organisations or networks (even those which existed only fleetingly) with the aim of displacing the transatlantic from the centre of analysis.¹⁰ These studies have revealed

⁸ These organisations have often commissioned or written their own histories as well. For example: Gertrude Bussey and Margaret Tims, *Pioneers for Peace: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915–1965* (London: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, British Section, 1980); Liaison Committee of Women's International Organisations, *An Experiment in Co-operation, 1925–1945: The History of the Liaison Committee of Women's International Organisations* (Essex: W. Hart & Son, c. 1946); Anna V. Rice, *A History of the World's Young Women's Christian Association* (New York: Woman's Press, 1947); Adele Schreiber and Margaret Mathieson, *Journey Towards Freedom: Written for the Golden Jubilee of the International Alliance of Women* (Copenhagen: International Alliance of Women, 1955); Arnold Whittick, *Woman into Citizen* (London: Francis and Company, The Athenaeum Press, 1979); Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915–1938: A Venture in Internationalism* (Geneva: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1938).

⁹ For select examples of work on international women's organisations (not including studies of their various national sections), see: Mineke Bosch, and Annemarie Kloosterman, eds., *Politics and Friendship: Letters from the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1902–1942* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990); Leila J. Rupp, "Challenging Imperialism in International Women's Organizations, 1888–1945," *NWSA Journal* 8, no. 1 (1996): 8–27; Leila J. Rupp, "Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women's Organizations, 1888–1945," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1571–1600; Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, "Forging Feminist Identity in an International Movement: A Collective Identity Approach to Twentieth-Century Feminism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 24, no. 2 (1999): 363–86; Marie Sandell, "Regional versus International: Women's Activism and Organisational Spaces in the Inter-war Period," *The International History Review* 33, no. 4 (2011): 607–25; Marie Sandell, *The Rise of Women's Transnational Activism: Identity and Sisterhood Between the World Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015); Ian R. Tyrrell, *Woman's World/Woman's Empire: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Jo Vellacott, "A Place for Pacifism and Transnationalism in Feminist Theory: The Early Work of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom," *Women's History Review* 2, no. 1 (1993): 23–56; Susan Zimmermann, "Liaison Committees of International Women's Organizations and the Changing Landscape of Women's Internationalism, 1920s to 1945," in *Women and Social Movements, International, 1840 to Present*, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2012), 1–44, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2476959?account_id=8330&usage_group_id=111575.

¹⁰ For select works on areas outside the North Atlantic, see: Katherine M. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Sumita Mukherjee, "The All-Asian Women's Conference 1931: Indian Women and Their Leadership of a Pan-Asian Feminist Organisation," *Women's History Review* 26, no. 3 (2017): 363–81; Shobna Nijhawan, "International Feminism from an Asian Center: The All-Asian Women's Conference (Lahore, 1931) as a Transnational Feminist Moment," *Journal of Women's History* 29, no. 3 (2017): 12–36; Fiona Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific: Cultural Internationalism and Race Politics in the Women's Pan-Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009); Charlotte Weber, "Between Nationalism and Feminism: The Eastern Women's Congresses of 1930 and 1932," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4, no. 1 (2008): 83–106; Charlotte Weber, "Making Common Cause?: Western and

how women from areas such as Latin America, the British dominions, the Middle East, and the Pacific challenged the Eurocentrism of the larger international women's organisations (which, at least early on, could appropriately be conceived of as transatlantic regional groupings) through forging their own webs of connection. This chapter continues extending such work by examining the North Atlantic sphere and other arenas, especially the British Empire and Commonwealth and the Pacific, in tandem and from the perspective of my selected individuals.

Each of the eight members of my group was involved with at least one international women's organisation—whether old or new, large or small—throughout the interwar period and beyond. Shifting the analytical focus from the organisation itself to the level of the individual, in the following pages I explore how each of them engaged with such groups (especially those that followed a feminist programme) and respond to the following questions. What did international women's organisations represent to interwar feminists? How did they use these associations to develop and share their ideas? How did they negotiate the range of groups that existed at this time, and what does this reveal about the nature and priorities of interwar feminist internationalism more generally? Answering these lines of enquiry requires delving into the archives of these organisations as well as my subjects' own collections to see how each activist engaged with and thought about organising across borders in her pursuit of gender equality.

Together, their stories show that international women's organisations played a crucial role in the growth and development of both my group and the wider feminist movement during the interwar period. These bodies not only provided a forum for women to share their experiences with one another and model intercultural unity, but also helped them consolidate their efforts and embark on united action. These associations thus helped transform feminists' conceptions of international cooperation; whereas before the war they understood it primarily as a morale-boosting exercise intended to bolster their efforts at home, in the interwar context internationalism also became a method for organising women's political interventions and asserting their power globally. But these organisations were not entirely harmonious. Through them, women witnessed firsthand the possibilities and limits of transnational cooperation.

Middle Eastern Feminists in the International Women's Movement, 1911–1948" (PhD thesis, Ohio State University, 2003); Angela Woollacott, "Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms: Australian Women's Internationalist Activism in the 1920s–30s," *Gender & History* 10, no. 3 (1998): 425–48.

After the initial excitement of the early 1920s, the shortcomings of groups like the Alliance encouraged individuals to give voice to a fuller spectrum of feminist viewpoints, whether by enlarging existing organisations or creating new ones. The unmistakable transatlantic focus of the first international women's organisations encouraged some—especially those non-Western women who were initially excluded—to challenge the conflation of “international” with “Western,” “European,” and “transatlantic” and to push to make feminist internationalism a more inclusive tradition. My group and their colleagues responded to such critiques, although their reactions were shaped in different ways by their positions as white women and imperial subjects. In all of this they were enabled by their often-fluid relationships with their organisations, which saw them negotiate a range of interconnected networks and move between existing and new groups to fulfil various goals and experience new approaches. The relationships between feminists and their organisations were dynamic and allowed them to rethink what internationalism meant, whom it served, and what role it might play in their quest for equality.

THE ORIGINS OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

To fully understand the interwar context, it is important to look to the longer history of international women's organisations. While some of my subjects were visible in these networks during the first few years of the twentieth century, they are largely absent from this early picture as they were of a younger generation than people like Catt, who was born in 1859—over a decade before Chrystal Macmillan (the eldest of my group) and thirty years before Jessie Street (the youngest). This story begins in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when some socially and politically conscious women sought to formalise the transnational connections they and their forebears had been building for decades through more diffuse or personal activities such as letter writing, travel, the circulation of texts, and the development of friendships.¹¹ Some of these women had already attempted to participate in international meetings held under the auspices of other social movements, such as the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention, which

¹¹ Bonnie Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement, 1830–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Margaret H. McFadden, *Golden Cables of Sympathy: The Transatlantic Sources of Nineteenth-Century Feminism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999/2015); Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 14.

famously did not allow women to sit with the men.¹² Over time, they began to organise international meetings centring on issues directly affecting them and in which they were guaranteed participation. These formed the basis of the first formal international women's organisations.

The earliest international meeting focusing on women's rights—the *Congrès international du droit des femmes* (International Congress of Women's Rights)—was held in Paris in 1878 alongside that year's World Exposition.¹³ Delegates from Belgium, Brazil, England, France, Germany (Alsace-Lorraine), Holland, Italy, Poland, Romania, Russia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States were present, making the meeting a largely European affair.¹⁴ Numbering over two hundred, they discussed what one newspaper described as "subjects which are generally considered prurient," including the regulation of sex work, economic rights, and education.¹⁵ Yet a decade passed before the efforts made in Paris were consolidated in any substantial way. In 1888 the National Woman Suffrage Association (of the United States) hosted an international women's conference in Washington, D.C., which resulted in the formation of what Rupp describes as "the first lasting multipurpose transnational women's organization," the International Council of Women (ICW).¹⁶ The organisers lauded the congress' role in bringing "added power" to women fighting against gendered inequality in their various countries.¹⁷ "It is impossible to over-estimate the far-reaching influence of such a council," they remarked. "An interchange of opinions on the great questions now agitating the world will rouse women to new thought, will intensify their love of liberty, and will give them a realizing sense of the power of combination."¹⁸ Through creating an apparatus to foster

¹² Donald R. Kennon "‘An apple of discord’: The Woman Question at the World's Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840," *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 5, no. 3 (1984): 244–66; Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Women Who Speak for an Entire Nation?: American and British Women Compared at the World Anti-Slavery Convention, London, 1840," *Pacific Historical Review* 59, no. 4 (1990): 453–99; Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 14; Ana Stevenson, *The Woman as Slave in Nineteenth-Century American Social Movements* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 50–67.

¹³ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 14.

¹⁴ Congrès International du Droit des Femmes, *Congrès International du Droit des Femmes Ouvert à Paris le 25 Juillet 1878, clos le 9 Août Suivant. Actes. Compte-Rendu des Séances Plénières* (Paris: Auguste Ghio, 1878).

¹⁵ Ibid.; "Paris Items," *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper* (London), 11 August 1878, 7.

¹⁶ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 15.

¹⁷ International Council of Women (hereafter ICW), *Report of the International Council of Women: Assembled by the National Woman Suffrage Association, Washington, D.C., U.S. of America, March 25 to April 1, 1888* (Washington, D.C.: National Woman Suffrage Association, 1888), 10.

¹⁸ Ibid.

feminists' emerging internationalist worldviews, these Americans also entrenched their status as key players in the story of feminist internationalism.

The later nineteenth century also witnessed the emergence of international women's organisations underpinned by specific religious and political beliefs. Ian Tyrrell has documented the internationalism embodied by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), which was established in the United States in 1884.¹⁹ He explains that the WCTU's missionary journeys were "part of a much larger outreach of American power and culture" and ultimately led to the formation of the World's WCTU, which boasted branches as far as the Antipodes.²⁰ In 1894 the World Young Women's Christian Association was formed in London; it became an important body in the women's internationalist landscape, especially from the 1920s.²¹ Organisations like these had ongoing significance for religious women's activism. Likewise, socialist women also developed their own associations. The International Socialist Women's Conference, which was held in Stuttgart in 1907, marked their first major step towards organising across borders. While some socialist women, such as Britain's Helena Swanwick, were involved with mainstream feminism during the interwar years, others practised their internationalism outside of feminist networks.²²

Of particular significance for the interwar feminist landscape was the creation of two other organisations by members of the ICW. Rupp describes this process as one in which these groups "gave birth" to one another, referring to them as "grandmother, mother, and daughter" organisations.²³ In 1904 the Alliance was formed at the ICW's Berlin congress, cementing the efforts initiated two years earlier in Washington, D.C. to establish a separate international suffrage organisation.²⁴ A rift had formed within the ICW, which was reluctant to take a stand on voting rights; as a result, some members seceded to form this new, more radical organisation.²⁵ In 1915 history repeated itself. Though the Alliance opted for neutrality during

¹⁹ Tyrrell, *Woman's World/Woman's Empire*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

²¹ Rice, *A History of the World's Young Women's Christian Association*, 52; Tyrrell, *Woman's World/Woman's Empire*, 3.

²² June Hannam and Karen Hunt, *Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), chapter 7.

²³ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 13.

²⁴ "International Women's Suffrage Conference at Berlin," *Women's Suffrage Record* (London), 1 June 1904, 20; Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 21–6.

²⁵ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 21–6.

the First World War, many feminists wanted to meet “to discuss what the women of the world can do and ought to do in the dreadful times in which we are now living.”²⁶ Led by the Alliance’s Dutch members, they hosted an International Congress of Women in The Hague. The distinct focus of this meeting on the twin issues of women and peace resulted in the founding of yet another long-lasting, specialised organisation: the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).²⁷

In forging connections between women from different countries, these organisations provided a training ground in internationalism for people who would go on to be prominent during the interwar years, including some of my group. The 1904 Berlin congress, for example, was Margery Corbett Ashby’s introduction to this world at the tender age of twenty-two. She and her sister accompanied their mother Marie Corbett (who was a member of the British delegation) to this event. Though she had travelled overseas before, this was Corbett Ashby’s “first contact with women from other countries” in a political sense.²⁸ She later recalled “the thrill of gazing down on women from many European countries, and especially on the brilliant delegates from the USA.”²⁹ She was “tremendously impressed” by these Americans, whom she regarded as “really most remarkable pioneers in the feminist movement.”³⁰ Her mother likewise considered this a landmark event, writing to her daughter the following month: “On Saturday I go to London to greet the Great Susan B. Anthony—you remember her at Berlin on the Suffrage night when we all stood on our chairs & roared.”³¹ Given that Corbett Ashby became the Alliance’s president in 1923, her later framing of this moment as the “chance which set the direction of my life’s interest” was apt.³²

²⁶ “International Congress of Women, The Hague, Holland, April, 1915. Call to the Women of All Nations,” *Jus Suffragii* 9, no. 6 (1915): 245.

²⁷ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 26–33.

²⁸ Margery Corbett Ashby interviewed by Brian Harrison, 8 April 1975, Oral Evidence on the Suffragette and Suffragist Movements: The Brian Harrison Interviews (hereafter Harrison Interviews), The Women’s Library, London (hereafter TWL), 8SUF/B/006.

²⁹ Margery Corbett Ashby with Michael Ashby, *Memoirs of Dame Margery Corbett Ashby* (Horsted Keynes: M.G. Ashby, 1996), 57.

³⁰ Corbett Ashby interview, 8SUF/B/006.

³¹ Marie Corbett to Margery Corbett Ashby, 12 July 1904, Papers of Margery Corbett Ashby (hereafter Corbett Ashby Papers), TWL, Box FL475, 7MCA/A/024.

³² Corbett Ashby, *Memoirs*, 57.



Figure 10 International Congress of Women, 1915. LSE Archives, WILPF/2011/18. Macmillan is seated fifth from the right.

This early story was very much centred across the North Atlantic, and some of the other British members of my group also became involved prior to the interwar period. As a suffragist based first in Scotland and then in London, Chrystal Macmillan attended congresses hosted by the ICW and the Alliance from 1908.³³ Internationalism was a central part of her approach to campaigning; she pointed to the common demand for women's suffrage around the world to strengthen her arguments in favour of the vote at home in Britain.³⁴ In 1915 she was among those who helped organise the International Congress of Women, which reinforced her understanding of the links between feminism, internationalism, and peace. So was Kathleen Courtney, who also travelled to the Netherlands. They and their fellow organisers announced: "as women, we ought to face the responsibility of making some constructive contribution towards the solution of problems arising out of the present war and the peace settlement which is to follow. Since these problems are essentially international, such work will be most effective if organised on an international basis."³⁵ Peace would become even

³³ The Alliance's 1908 congress report records her attendance as a fraternal delegate representing the ICW. See: IWSA, *Report of the Fourth Conference, Amsterdam, Holland. June 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 1908* (Amsterdam: F. Van Rossen, 1908), 10.

³⁴ For more on Macmillan's suffrage internationalism, see: Michelle Staff, "Women's Rights on the World Stage: Feminism and Internationalism in the Life of Chrystal Macmillan (1872–1937)," *Journal of Women's History* 32, no. 3 (2020): 38–63.

³⁵ "International Women's Congress," *Common Cause of Humanity* (London), 26 February 1915, 737.

more central to feminists' goals as the interwar period, beset by worsening international tensions, wore on.

Up until the 1920s all these organisations were based in the Northern Hemisphere and were essentially transatlantic networks. Rupp and Verta Taylor have emphasised the strength of women's organisational allegiances—a perspective that illuminates the often-intense loyalties of those Euro-American women in the upper echelons of established organisations.³⁶ Britons were among those who frequently adopted leadership roles, and this would continue to be the case throughout the interwar years. Australians played a much less significant role, primarily due to their geographic distance. While figures like the Melbourne-based Vida Goldstein did make trips abroad to connect with colleagues overseas, as James Keating has shown, on the whole Australasian women's participation in the first international organisations was in fact quite limited.³⁷ Between 1904 and 1920 Australia only sent eleven delegates and two alternate delegates to the Alliance's congresses overall; as some of the same women attended multiple times, only nine in total experienced these meetings firsthand.³⁸ This is certainly not to say that Australian women were excluded in the same way that women of colour and Indigenous women were, however. During the pre-war era, feminist internationalism was dominated by Western worldviews and deeply influenced by imperialist logics.³⁹ Empire would continue to be a major (though not uncontested) prism through which feminists understood internationalism throughout the following decades.

³⁶ Rupp and Taylor, "Forging Feminist Identity," see especially 367–71; Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, chapter 2.

³⁷ James Keating, "An Utter Absence of National Feeling': Australian Women and the International Suffrage Movement, 1900–14," *Australian Historical Studies* 47, no. 3 (2016): 462–81; James Keating, *Distant Sisters: Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

³⁸ These figures have been compiled from the 1904 to 1920 Alliance conference reports. IWSA, *Report, Second and Third Conferences of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, Berlin, Germany, June 3, 4, 1904, Copenhagen, Denmark, Aug. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 1906* (Copenhagen: Bianco Luno, 1904); IWSA, *Report of the Fourth Conference*; IWSA, *Report of Fifth Conference and First Quinquennial, London, England, April 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, May 1, 1909* (London: Samuel Sidders and Company, 1909); IWSA, *Report of Sixth Congress, Stockholm, Sweden, June 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 1911* (London: Women's Printing Society, 1911); IWSA, *Report of Seventh Congress, Budapest, Hungary, June 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 1913* (Manchester: Percy Brothers, 1913); IWSA, *Report of Eighth Congress*.

³⁹ On feminism's links to imperialism, see: Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

COOPERATION & CONFLICT

After the end of the First World War feminists were energised by the prospect of resuming their connections in person. During this period the number of international women's organisations multiplied as people turned their attention towards an ever-broadening selection of topics. Throughout these two decades women formed new political, professional, regional, service, and religious associations while also maintaining connections with existing bodies. This was part of a larger trend that saw international nongovernmental organisations number approximately 730 by the end of the period—a massive increase from the five that existed before 1850.⁴⁰ This fact has led some scholars to go so far as to describe the interwar period as the “second ‘golden age’” of international organisations.⁴¹

With a new system of international governance being set up in Geneva, international women's organisations acquired a new function: to consolidate feminists' thoughts and speak with a singular, united voice to the League. Their leaders often framed them rather idealistically as harmonious communities where women demonstrated the possibilities of cross-cultural unity—a model they wanted the wider world to follow. There was still a strong emphasis on the moral support that these groups offered; as Corbett Ashby later reflected, “giving women a sense of solidarity” was one of their central purposes.⁴² In 1923—almost twenty years after she was first introduced to this world—she was elected as Catt's successor, becoming the Alliance's second international president. Her job was to foster the organisation's growth and cement its status as one of the largest such groups of the time in an effort to increase its legitimacy as a lobbyist body. Corbett Ashby emphasised the group's cooperative dimensions in her public commentary. Ahead of its 1926 Paris congress, for example, she highlighted “the value of steadfastness and co-operation” for women's “conquest of the Promised Land of justice and goodwill,” smoothing over any disunity that existed within the organisation.⁴³ Rupp

⁴⁰ Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 63; Glenda Sluga, “Was the Twentieth Century the Great Age of Internationalism?,” Hancock Lecture, Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2009, National Library of Australia, Canberra, Australia, <http://www.humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/AAH-Hancock-Lect-Sluga-2009.pdf>.

⁴¹ Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*, 63.

⁴² Margery Corbett Ashby interviewed by Brian Harrison, 23 November 1976, Harrison Interviews, TWL, 8SUF/B/116b.

⁴³ International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (hereafter IAW), *Report of Tenth Congress. Paris, France. May 30th to June 6th, 1926* (London: International Alliance of Women, 1926), inside of back cover.

and Taylor's model of organisational loyalty is illuminating here, as Corbett Ashby emulated her predecessor in her steadfast commitment to her group (no doubt a function of the president's role). The Alliance's strong public image was an important foundation for her own public standing, too, which allowed her to participate in wider conversations about war, peace, and international governance as the period wore on.



Figure 11 Ruby Rich and Bessie Rischbieth at the Alliance's 1935 congress in Istanbul. National Library of Australia, PIC Box #PIC/20680/2.

Leaders like Corbett Ashby deliberately fostered a narrative that could galvanise action and encourage people from different parts of the world to join them and thus increase their groups' pressure power. Tales of women meeting across borders in far-away lands provided a thrilling narrative that inspired some newcomers to the scene, such as the Australians Bessie Rischbieth and Ruby Rich, who both became keen advocates of the Alliance. As colonials they initially felt disconnected from the movement's North Atlantic heartland, but they desperately wanted to be involved. Rischbieth—who up until this point had been involved in social justice efforts in her home city of Perth—felt that Australian women should take their place on the

world stage and saw the Alliance as an effective means for them to do so. After creating a federal feminist society in 1921, she led an Australian delegation to the Alliance's 1923 Rome congress, marking the beginning of her long relationship with this organisation. Reporting back to women at home, Rischbieth's admiration for this "great assemblage of the women of the nations," especially "those splendid women known to us in name only," was palpable.⁴⁴ She was aided in this venture by her friend Rich, who provided a vital link to the country's eastern states. Rich was also deeply invested in the Alliance, especially during the time she lived in England (1929–35). She referred to the women grouped together under this banner as her "international family," later saying that she was "happy as always to be with them, and always welcomed, so warmly, by them, so lovingly."⁴⁵ These Australian feminists aspired to adopt an active role in the Alliance, seeing its broad membership and high status as an important conduit to a role in international affairs. As white women, they could easily envision themselves fitting into it.

Some issues proved to be more unifying than others and provided the foundations for productive collaboration not only within but also between international women's organisations. One common issue was women's independent nationality rights; according to Rich, this was "the subject about which organised women in the world are nearly all united, agreed upon."⁴⁶ In many places a woman's nationality was dependent on that of her husband. In both Australia and Britain, which were united by imperial law, women who married a foreign national automatically lost their citizenship of birth.⁴⁷ Feminists condemned this measure as a matter of principle, believing that women should not be forced to give up their own citizenship. But this was a practical problem, too. Due to differences in naturalisation laws

⁴⁴ Bessie Rischbieth, "World Citizenship. Ninth Congress International Woman Suffrage Alliance," *Dawn* (Perth), 14 July 1923, 6.

⁴⁵ Ruby Rich interviewed by Hazel de Berg, 4 June 1975, Hazel de Berg collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NLA), ORAL TRC 1/838, Session 7 of 9, 27:56.

⁴⁶ Ruby Rich, "Adelaide Congress. Broadcast from 2 GB," 10 October 1936, Papers of Ruby Rich (hereafter Rich Papers), NLA, Box 3, Folder 25, MS 7493.

⁴⁷ For select scholarship on the nationality rights issues in both countries, see: Emma Bellino, "Married Women's Nationality and the White Australia Policy, 1920–1948," *Law & History* 7, no. 1 (2020): 166–92; M. Page Baldwin, "Subject to Empire: Married Women and the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act," *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 4 (2001): 522–56; Helen Irving, *Citizenship, Alienage, and the Modern Constitutional State: A Gendered History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Harriet J. Mercer, "Citizens of Empire and Nation: Australian Women's Quest for Independent Nationality Rights 1910s–1930s," *History Australia* 13, no. 2 (2016): 213–27; Dorothy Page, "A married woman, or a minor, lunatic or idiot? The Struggle of British Women against Disability in Nationality, 1914–1933" (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 1984).

around the world, statelessness was an issue (for example, a British woman marrying an American lost her British citizenship but, from 1920, did not automatically acquire American citizenship).⁴⁸ While nationality rights had been a common grievance since the late nineteenth century, feminists afforded it more space in their discussions following the first suffrage victories and after the First World War accentuated the severity of this problem.

Given the complexity of the nationality issue, feminists decided that in addition to petitioning their own governments—the only option available to them before the war—they would take their grievances straight to the League, which was developing a new system of international law. Doing this under the banner of their international organisations offered greater legitimacy, allowing them to claim to speak for all the world’s women—an act that in turn helped build their confidence as public political actors. Macmillan was an especially strong advocate of the nationality issue, approaching it in her capacities as both a seasoned feminist activist and, after 1924, as a barrister.⁴⁹ She worked with numerous local groups, but believed that the nationality question would “ultimately have to be dealt with by the League of Nations.”⁵⁰ She therefore soon extended her work into the international realm, serving as chair of the Alliance’s nationality committee.⁵¹ A significant moment came in 1930, when she coordinated with the ICW to lobby the League’s Conference for the Codification of International Law together. Standing alongside Corbett Ashby, Rich, and several other leading figures, Macmillan claimed that “besides our own organisations, we have the support of many other organisations, international and national,” revealing her belief in the power the wider transnational feminist community wielded.⁵² With the League now an important force in

⁴⁸ Candice Lewis Bredbenner, *A Nationality of Her Own: Women, Marriage, and the Law of Citizenship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 101.

⁴⁹ H. A. C. Sturgess, ed., *Register of Admissions to the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple: From the Fifteenth Century to the Year 1944, vol. 3, 1910–1944* (London: Butterworth & Co, n.d.), 858, <https://www.middletemple.org.uk/library-archive/archive-information-contacts/digitised-records/registers-admissions>.

⁵⁰ Chrystal Macmillan, “The Nationality of Married Women,” *International Woman Suffrage News* 13, no. 5 (1919): 59.

⁵¹ The first evidence of Macmillan’s chairmanship of the nationality committee is in 1923. See: IWSA, *Report of Ninth Congress, Rome, Italy, May 12th to 19th, 1923* (Dresden: B. G. Teubner, 1923), 4.

⁵² League of Nations, *Acts of the Conference for the Codification of International Law: Held at The Hague from March 13th to April 12th, 1930: Meetings of the Committees, vol. 2, Minutes of the First Committee: Nationality* (Geneva: League of Nations, 1930), 178, League of Nations Archives (hereafter League Archives), United Nations Archives & Library, Geneva, C-351-(a)-M-145-(a)-1930-V_EN. See also: IAW, *Report of the Twelfth Congress, Istanbul, 18–24 April, 1935* (London: Wadsworth and Company, 1935), 144–51.

international politics, feminists like Macmillan shifted to consider internationalism as a pragmatic means of achieving reform, rather than only a symbolic or morale-boosting exercise. Their international organisations helped them to make this leap.



Figure 12 Women's Consultative Committee on Nationality for the League of Nations. Madeleine Zabriskie Doty Papers, Smith College Special Collections, Box 3, Folder 32. Corbett Ashby and Macmillan are seated on the right of the front row.

Feminists' international organisations provided a vital link between them and Geneva. Few women gained positions of power within the League, despite its theoretical commitment to gender equality. Yet they still wanted to engage in discussions about international law, cooperation, and global governance, and as representatives of official women's organisations they could speak with greater authority than they could alone. This sense of speaking for the world's women was amplified by a trend that saw different organisations work together in various committees.⁵³ In 1931 the League formed the Women's Consultative Committee on Nationality (Consultative Committee), which consisted of two members from eight different international women's organisations, including Corbett Ashby, Macmillan, and Helen

⁵³ Zimmermann, "Liaison Committees of International Women's Organizations," 1.

Archdale. Participants were mostly from North America and Europe, although the Burmese feminist May Oung—who highlighted that women had achieved certain rights in her country with much less struggle than in the West—sat on the committee as a representative of the All-Asian Women’s Conference.⁵⁴ The Consultative Committee was plagued by disagreement over its scope and approach to ensuring equality of nationality rights. Though it was only short-lived, it precipitated other similar, more enduring efforts (which will be discussed in later chapters). Conflicts between women did not substantially dent their faith in internationalism, only revealed its messy realities and the need for pragmatism. The politics of international women’s organisations reflect the shift in feminist internationalism during this period from a morale-boosting activity to one in which women became increasingly vocal participants on the global stage.

This sort of conflict also happened within each organisation. Several members of my group were prominent in various international women’s groups but were less singularly committed to them in the vein of Rupp and Taylor’s model. Feminists’ affinities for their organisations were not unshakeable, nor did they necessarily preclude individuals becoming involved in other networks for a range of different reasons. This was particularly true of those who were not comfortably part of each group’s Euro-American elite, although even then some leading women adopted a more pragmatic view of such ties. Macmillan and Courtney, for instance, were both among the WILPF’s founding members and held strong beliefs in the links between feminism and peace work. Yet, due to “an excess of business” and as her priorities shifted over the course of the period—seeing her devote most of her time to the nationality cause as well as to issues regarding economic rights—Macmillan became less active within the WILPF.⁵⁵ For her part, Courtney maintained a strong connection to it throughout the 1920s as president of its British branch, the Women’s International League (WIL). There was much disagreement within this transnational organisation, however. By the early 1930s this led

⁵⁴ Around this time Oung also represented her countrywomen at the Burma Round Table Conference, where Burmese separation from India and Dominion status was discussed. “Miss May Oung,” *Schoolmistress* (London), 17 December 1931, 345–6; “Miss May Oung, M.A., B.Litt. Burmese Feminist and Educationalist,” *Vote* (London), 21 August 1931, 269; Sumita Mukherjee, “Miss May Oung at the Burma Round Table Conference 1931,” *Untold Lives Blog*, hosted by the British Library, 18 August 2015, <https://blogs.bl.uk/untoldlives/2015/08/miss-may-oung-at-the-burma-round-table-conference-1931.html>.

⁵⁵ Women’s International League executive committee minutes, 18 September 1919, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, British Section Papers (hereafter WIL Papers), Politics, Economics, and Social Science Collections, London School of Economics Archives, London (hereafter LSE), WILPF/1/2.

Courtney to resign as WIL president, as she resented the international executive's tendency to speak for its worldwide members without consulting them. While an advocate of internationalism, Courtney experienced firsthand the challenges of transnational collaboration; she argued that the WILPF was "not at all a homogeneous body" as some sections preached more radical social change than others.⁵⁶ Courtney resigned from the WIL presidency "with regret" in 1933 and instead focused her efforts for peace through other groups centred on the League.⁵⁷ In this case, dissent pushed her beyond the confines of her established networks and led to her becoming increasingly involved in other activist groups, including the mixed-gender League of Nations Union (which I explore elsewhere in this thesis). Having trained as an activist through the WILPF, she aspired to take part in, and bring a feminist perspective to, other conversations about the world's future.

The increasing cultural and racial diversity of this movement generated tensions and encouraged new discussions—an important feature of this story that I explore in the final part of this chapter. Debate also occurred among compatriots and even friends. Though Corbett Ashby was almost unanimously elected as the Alliance's new president in 1923, she recounted that Macmillan voted against her because "she did not think I was a strong enough feminist."⁵⁸ This anecdote points to the differing conceptions of feminism that developed during the interwar years. Subscribers to "new feminism" like Corbett Ashby emphasised women's essential qualities that rendered them useful citizens with unique contributions to make and advocated for gender-based rights. On the other hand, "equal rights" feminists like Macmillan held that men and women must be treated completely equally by the law. Along with the myriad other differences between women, these conflicting views tested the possibilities of international cooperation and, ultimately, resulted in a degree of fragmentation that saw new groups form over the late 1920s and 1930s.

⁵⁶ Kathleen Courtney to WIL colleagues, 5 May 1933, WIL Papers, LSE, File 2, WILPF/2009/5/1. Several high-ranking members of the WILPF were socialists (Courtney was not among them) and, as Sarah Hellawell has argued, the group sat at the nexus of various social movements including socialism. Sarah Hellawell, "Feminism, Pacifism and Internationalism: The Women's International League, 1915–1935" (PhD thesis, Northumbria University, 2017), chapter 5.

⁵⁷ Courtney to WIL colleagues, WILPF/2009/5/1.

⁵⁸ Corbett Ashby, *Memoirs*, 115–6. See also the following recordings from the Harrison Interviews, TWL: Margery Corbett Ashby interviewed by Brian Harrison, 28 May 1974, 8SUF/B/004; Margery Corbett Ashby interviewed by Brian Harrison, 21 September 1976, 8SUF/B/106; Corbett Ashby interview, 8SUF/B/116a.

One especially lively and persistent debate that gained momentum during the 1920s concerned protective legislation for women workers. In Britain, industrialisation had prompted new anxieties about women's place in society. From the 1840s a series of laws introduced gender-differentiated rules that restricted women's hours of work, prevented them from working with certain harmful materials, and enforced maternity leave.⁵⁹ The rationale was to "protect" mothers to maintain the health and order of the nation.⁶⁰ In reality, this excluded women from certain roles and industries. Similar measures (with similar motives) were implemented in Australia from the late nineteenth century; however, as Renate Howe notes, in this context there was generally greater acceptance of state intervention and so this was somewhat less controversial.⁶¹ In fact, Australian feminists had been among those who advocated for greater protective measures in industry, although they were disillusioned by the resulting laws, which disadvantaged women workers.⁶² Such moves were compounded on an international level when, from its first meeting in Washington, D.C. in 1919, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) discussed protective measures for women's employment.⁶³ Corbett Ashby recalled that this was "one difficulty when there was a real controversy" in the Alliance. "Could you have protective legislation and equality? That would be where Miss Macmillan and I would perhaps see differently," she later told her interviewer, Brian Harrison.⁶⁴ While we should be careful not to overemphasise the "new" and "equality" divide, these different conceptions of feminism did result in some fracturing within international women's organisations.

Even before Corbett Ashby took the Alliance's chair, at its 1920 Geneva meeting the discussion of gender-based labour legislation "was one of the most important that took place." Though the congress agreed that night work was generally undesirable, "there was considerable

⁵⁹ Jane Lewis and Sonya O. Rose, "Let England Blush": Protective Labor Legislation, 1820–1914," in *Protecting Women: Labor Legislation in Europe, the United States, and Australia, 1890–1920*, ed. Ulla Wikander, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Jane Lewis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 91–124.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 93–4.

⁶¹ Renate Howe, "A Paradise for Working Men but Not Working Women: Women's Waged Work and Protective Legislation in Australia, 1890–1914," in Wikander, Kessler-Harris, and Lewis, *Protecting Women*, 331.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 318–36.

⁶³ International Labour Office, *The Labour Provisions of the Peace Treaties* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1920), 13, http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/1920/20B09_18_engl.pdf; Susan Zimmermann, "Equality of Women's Economic Status? A Major Bone of Contention in the International Gender Politics Emerging During the Interwar Period," *The International History Review* 41, no. 1 (2019): 200–27.

⁶⁴ Corbett Ashby interview, 8SUF/B/116a.

difference of opinion as to whether the prohibition for women only was or was not a wise first step towards that end.”⁶⁵ Eventually the Alliance resolved “that no special regulations for women’s work, different from regulations for men, should be imposed contrary to the wishes of the women themselves.” They also concluded “that laws relative to women as mothers should be so framed as not to handicap them in their economic position, and that all future labour regulations should tend towards equality of men and women.”⁶⁶ Yet after attending the Alliance’s Berlin congress nine years later, Rischbieth reported that “[t]he question of protective legislation for women in industry remains very vexed,” as a different viewpoint was becoming dominant.⁶⁷ According to her, this was “the most important and difficult problem of the woman’s movement.”⁶⁸ While these organisations did allow debate, there were limits to the degree to which individuals could challenge the main programme. As feminists were increasingly viewing internationalism as a practical means of achieving equality at home and globally, rather than simply a show of solidarity, some of them looked for alternatives.

In several cases, disagreements led to the formation of breakaway, more specialised groups, especially from the later 1920s once these debates had persisted for several years. Macmillan and Archdale both created new international women’s organisations to work towards their own interpretations of feminist goals and were guided by a strong equal rights ethos. In 1926 they, along with some of their British colleagues, formed the Open Door Council (ODC) to provide a dedicated body to work for economic equality, specifically along anti-protection lines.⁶⁹ This was an inherently internationally-minded group that believed that “eventually only by international activity on sound lines can the unfairly restrictive tendencies of the Conventions adopted year by year by the International Labour Organization be countered.”⁷⁰ Three years later at the Alliance’s 1929 Berlin congress they formally created the

⁶⁵ IWSA, *Report of Eighth Congress*, 39.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶⁷ Bessie Rischbieth, “Great Historic Gathering. Women of Forty-Five Nations at Berlin,” *Dawn* (Perth), 21 August 1929, 1.

⁶⁸ Bessie Rischbieth, “Report of the Eleventh Congress of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage & Equal Citizenship held in Berlin June 1929. (Submitted to 3rd Triennial Conference A.F.W.V. Melb May 1930),” Papers and objects of Bessie Rischbieth (hereafter Rischbieth Papers,) NLA, Box 21, File 9, MS 2004/8/326.

⁶⁹ Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker (hereafter ODI), *Report of the Conference held in Berlin June 15th and 16th*, 1929 (London: Open Door International, 1929), 5; “The Open Door Council,” *Vote* (London), 4 March 1927, 66.

⁷⁰ “The Open Door Council,” *Woman’s Leader and Common Cause* (London), 16 December 1927, 360.

Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker (ODI) in a move that paralleled the Alliance's own emergence twenty-five years earlier.⁷¹ The organisation lived by the refrain that all economic legislation and restrictions "shall be based upon the nature of the work and not the sex of the worker."⁷² Yet this move was not without controversy. A private note in Rischbieth's papers states that Macmillan—who was the ODI's chair for the remainder of her life—and the other ODI supporters "became very unpopular with the old Board Members" as they "did not appear to be loyal to the Jubilee Congress."⁷³ Macmillan certainly seemed aware of this feeling, asserting in 1931: "[o]ur policy is condemned because it is new. But a new idea opposed to an accepted traditional policy had always been criticised, ridiculed and condemned."⁷⁴ Her movement between organisations here reveals her pragmatic conception of internationalism as an important method of obtaining reform in a changing political landscape—one that could be hindered by divergent opinions.

Macmillan and Archdale both believed that, for internationalism to be effective, they could not simply be subscribers to an established programme of action. Though she had never belonged to the Alliance, in June 1928 Archdale wrote to the editor of its newspaper, lamenting that the group had "deserted feminism for humanism."⁷⁵ She sought to give voice to what she perceived as a more radical or truer feminist perspective. In particular, she wanted to put the topic of an equal rights treaty—"a form of agreement between nations to assert the equal rights of men and women"—on the League's agenda and have it adopted around the world.⁷⁶ Archdale therefore formed the Equal Rights International (ERI) in 1930 and served as its first chair until 1934.⁷⁷ This group operated on the belief that "the most dignified and the most

⁷¹ ODI, *Report of Conference 1929*, 9.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷³ "Private Comment," Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 14, File 3, MS 2004/6/152.

⁷⁴ ODI, *Report of the Second Conference, held in Stockholm August 17th—21st, 1931* (London: Open Door International 1931), 7.

⁷⁵ Helen Archdale, "Correspondence," *International Woman Suffrage News* 22, no. 9 (1928): 40.

⁷⁶ "The 'Equal Rights Treaty,'" *Scotsman* (Edinburgh), 2 February 1931, 12; "News From Societies. St. Pancras S.E.C.," *Woman's Leader and the Common Cause* (London), 10 April 1931, 78; "The Equal Rights International," *Vote*, 311.

⁷⁷ "The Equal Rights International," *Vote* (London), 26 September 1930, 311; "Manuscript of An Interfering Woman', being typescript manuscript of Helen Archdale's autobiography, including handwritten annotations," Betty Archdale Papers, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney (hereafter SLNSW), chapter 11, 7–8, MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

permanent method” of obtaining equality for women was to be found internationally.⁷⁸ Whereas the larger international women’s organisations “embraced every injustice under the sun,” she felt it was more effective to concentrate on a specific issue. The ERI “must have one aim only—equality,” she said, and “must work for equality, refusing all divergences into tempting paths down which many would try to lead it.”⁷⁹ The ERI was not intended to supplant existing organisations but rather to advocate a different approach. Creating a new organisation offered an opportunity to refocus feminists’ goals and forge a new pathway to the League.

The degree to which the ERI was truly international was a point of contention, however. Alongside complaining about her “undemocratic administration,” Archdale’s former suffragette colleague Dorothy Evans asserted that the group’s leadership consisted of a “tiny clique” of almost exclusively British women.⁸⁰ Archdale refuted this, pointing to the several nationalities represented in the organisation.⁸¹ Most were from Europe, with Oung again one of the only non-Western members of the executive (although Archdale did write to others asking them to join, including India’s Dhanvanthi Rama Rau).⁸² Upon her resignation in 1934 Archdale explained that “while numerically our membership is small in comparison with that of older organisations and of organisations with a less concentrated object,” her group consisted of a dedicated community of women “who understand and who believe in the basic principle of the equality of the sexes.” “In this solidarity lies the root and the sources of our strength,” she said.⁸³ Her actions reveal how, through their participation in international organisations, feminists came to see internationalism as a practical way to achieve gender reform on a global level.

⁷⁸ Equal Rights International, *Status of Women* (London: Equal Rights International, c. 1938), 3.

⁷⁹ “Manuscript of An Interfering Woman,” chapter 10, 10, MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

⁸⁰ Dorothy Evans to Winifred Mayo, 29 July 1932, Records of the Equal Rights International Group (hereafter ERI Records), TWL, Box FL331, 5ERI.

⁸¹ Helen Archdale, “To All Members of the Equal Rights International,” 10 September 1934, United Associations of Women Records (hereafter UA Records), SLNSW, Box Y790, MLMSS 2160.

⁸² Minutes of Annual General Meeting of the Equal Rights International, 5 September 1931, ERI Records, TWL, Box FL330, 5/ERI 330.16; Helen Archdale to Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, 24 July 1933, ERI Records, Box FL333, 5ERI.

⁸³ Archdale, “To All Members of the Equal Rights International,” MLMSS 2160.

These new associations largely replicated the traditional transatlantic support base of the older international women's organisations. Some Antipodeans also participated, harnessing their status as white colonials as well as their personal wealth to travel to meetings. While they both had connections to the Alliance, the Sydney-based feminists Jessie Street and Linda Littlejohn—who built reputations as formidable figures in their home city throughout the 1920s—became increasingly involved with Macmillan's and Archdale's groups and were considered "well informed" about feminists' international efforts.⁸⁴ They both showed an ambivalence about the "new" versus "equality" divide that was typical of Australian feminism more broadly. In 1930 Street took an around-the-world trip which saw her visit Margaret Sanger's birth control clinic in New York before crossing the Atlantic to continue investigating birth control and social insurance schemes in London and Geneva.⁸⁵ During this journey she was introduced to Archdale, likely through her former suffragette cousin Winifred Mayo. Archdale organised in turn for Street to meet various feminist groups based in London, which created a basis for her involvement in the ERI as a founding member and one of its initial vice-presidents.⁸⁶ Though her distance from the organisation's headquarters in Geneva limited how active her role could be, she corresponded extensively with Archdale; in 1932, for example, Archdale asked Street to come up with some resolutions for the ERI's annual meeting (noting that "[s]omething from those we know but whom we rarely see would be so welcome") and to "increase the Australian representation on the Council."⁸⁷

Street worked closely with Littlejohn, who also joined the ERI's executive before being elected the group's new chair in 1935 in "probably one of the greatest international honors ever paid an Australian woman."⁸⁸ As I discuss in chapter three, Littlejohn both furthered the ERI's central goal of obtaining an equal rights treaty and brought Australian feminists' interest in family endowment into its remit. But she was not solely tied to this group. Just as Street had met with the ODI in 1930 (she was asked to speak to an "At Home" hosted in its Geneva

⁸⁴ Ruth Vandeer Litt to Elizabeth Abbott, 25 April 1930, Papers of Jessie Street (hereafter Street Papers), NLA, Box 1, Folder 6, MS 2683/1/239.

⁸⁵ Jessie Street, *Truth or Repose* (Sydney: Australasian Book Society, 1966), 103–7.

⁸⁶ Helen Archdale to Jessie Street, 1 August 1930, Street Papers, NLA, Box 1, Folder 6, MS 2683/1/269; "Equal Rights. Women's International Organisation," *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 15 September 1930, 6.

⁸⁷ Helen Archdale to Jessie Street, 2 March 1932, UA Records, SLNSW, Box Y790, Item 19, MLMSS 2160.

⁸⁸ "Linda Littlejohn is Off Again to See the World," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 16 February 1935, 10; "Noted Feminist In Perth. Mrs. Littlejohn on Way to Europe," *Daily News* (Perth), 25 February 1925, 3.

headquarters, where tea was followed by brief speeches), Littlejohn solidified Australian feminists' connections to this group, attending its 1931 conference as a representative of Sydney's United Associations of Women.⁸⁹ She believed that "[w]omen are full adult citizens, paying all taxes, subject to abiding by all laws, and should be free to engage in any work they so desire—to have economic independence quite unhampered with 'protections' and restrictions, just because they are women."⁹⁰ Littlejohn returned again to the ODI conference in 1935, having set up an Australian branch with Street.⁹¹ That year she made the most of her trip to Europe and attended the Alliance's Istanbul congress, too, before settling into her role with the ERI in Geneva. For this Australian who wanted to further the feminist cause while battling the tyranny of distance, negotiating different international groups (whose official positions sometimes only partly aligned with her own views) was an important strategy.

Being far removed from the international feminist movement's North Atlantic hub and without the status of its pioneers, the Australians in my group often had to maintain connections to multiple organisations to meet their needs and carve out a space for themselves. Rischbieth's actions, for example, were underscored by her multilayered commitments to the nation, the empire, and the world as well as by her developing conception of Australia's place in it. While she was a strong advocate of the Alliance, she wanted to reshape parts of the organisation's programme and became increasingly vocal about the need for the Southern Hemisphere to be represented. Rischbieth was elected to the board in 1926, although her distance from Europe and the requirements of feminist work in Australia prevented her from being an active participant. Writing to Corbett Ashby in 1928 to explain this (and fearing she might be removed from the board) she asked: "Why should the Southern Hemisphere be unrepresented on the Board of the Alliance? Why? This is the new World."⁹² Especially from the mid-1920s, feminists from outside the Euro-American elite began to call into question whom feminist internationalism really served.

⁸⁹ Vandeer Litt to Abbott, MS 2683/1/239; ODI to Jessie Street, Street Papers, NLA, Box 10, Folder 1, MS 2683/3/30; ODI, *Report of the Second Conference 1931*.

⁹⁰ Linda Littlejohn, "Protective Legislation for Women in Industry," *Dawn* (Perth), 18 April 1934, 6. This quote was bolded in the original text.

⁹¹ Linda Littlejohn, "Open Door International. Annual Conference, 1935," *Dawn* (Perth), 16 October 1935, 2; "Open Door International. Australian President Resigns. Dr. Laura Keating Appointed," *Dawn* (Perth), 18 December 1935, 4.

⁹² Bessie Rischbieth to Margery Corbett Ashby, 29 December 1928, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 21, File 10, MS 2004/8/465.

Though she had worked to secure Australian women's representation within the Alliance, Rischbieth was not solely committed to this organisation. She had learnt the value of transnational cooperation through her participation in it, and in 1925 turned her hand to forming her own group, co-founding the British Commonwealth League (BCL) with her London-based compatriot Marjorie Chave Collisson.⁹³ This group amalgamated and replaced the Alliance's British Overseas Committee and the British Dominions Women Citizens' Union in a move that recognised that "the International cannot and does not wish to deal especially with problems relating to the British Commonwealth."⁹⁴ The BCL's formation was part of an interwar trend in which feminists worldwide began to organise in "regional" associations based on political or geographic ties. Non-Western women were among those who sought to discuss feminism and internationalism on their own terms. Though short lived, the Eastern Women's Congresses of 1930 and 1932 and the All-Asian Women's Conference of 1931 reflected Middle Eastern and Asian women's desires to formulate their own versions of feminist internationalism.⁹⁵ Similar but more enduring efforts in the Pacific will be explored shortly. This broader trend can be read as in part a response to the restricted composition of existing associations; at least initially, organisations like the ICW, the Alliance, and the WILPF were mainly Euro-American groupings.

Despite their whiteness, Australian feminists did not have the same experiences as their Northern Hemisphere counterparts; as Marilyn Lake has described, they were both "colonisers and colonised."⁹⁶ Rischbieth and Collisson believed in the need to "awaken" British women and to give a voice to those living in the empire's dominions. Collisson recalled saying to Rischbieth: "here are all these splendidly educated Englishwomen, they have background behind them ... a kind of intellectual training which you don't get on the other side of the

⁹³ Jill Roe, "Collisson, Marjorie Chave (1887–1982)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, published first in hardcopy 2007, online 2007, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/collisson-marjorie-chave-12338/text22165>.

⁹⁴ Marjorie Chave Collison to Bessie Rischbieth, no date (possibly circular letter), Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 18, File 2, MS 2004/7/66.

⁹⁵ Sumita Mukherjee, "The All-Asian Women's Conference 1931: Indian Women and their Leadership of a Pan-Asian Feminist Organisation," *Women's History Review* 26, no. 3 (2017): 363–81; Shobna Nijhawan, "International Feminism from an Asian Center: The All-Asian Women's Conference (Lahore, 1931) as a Transnational Feminist Moment," *Journal of Women's History* 29, no. 3 (2017): 12–36; Charlotte Weber, "Between Nationalism and Feminism: The Eastern Women's Congresses of 1930 and 1932," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4, no. 1 (2008): 83–106.

⁹⁶ Marilyn Lake, "Colonised and Colonising: The White Australian Feminist Subject," *Women's History Review* 2, no. 3 (1993): 379.

world ... and they haven't even troubled to look what's there ... they just don't know what they're talking about."⁹⁷ Rischbieth concurred; as the *West Australian* summarised, she felt that British women's "eyes had been glued on Europe, their space psychology was at fault, and they failed utterly to realise the present power and tremendous potentialities of the distant Dominions."⁹⁸ Over a decade later, Littlejohn echoed these sentiments in speaking of her election as president of the ERI; the *Herald* reported that "[i]n a way, she admits, it will be difficult directing the group's affairs from Australia, but it was desired to divert the centre of its government from London."⁹⁹ From the mid-1920s imperial politics, alongside feminists' experiences of international organising, were beginning to recast the landscape of Western feminism organised on an international level.

Angela Woollacott highlights how the BCL embodied the "changing intra-imperial dynamics of the interwar period," as the British Empire became the Commonwealth, a network in which the dominions intended to adopt a more prominent role.¹⁰⁰ Australian feminists were certainly cognisant of these changing political relations and used their new organisation to challenge the predominance of Britain and the Northern Hemisphere within the international women's movement. The very existence of the BCL signalled a shift: by highlighting that the lives of dominion women could not be explained by a worldview that centred on the Euro-American experience, Antipodean women helped expose and address the hitherto narrow scope of feminist internationalism. This had its limits, however. The group was based in London and chose Corbett Ashby—an Englishwoman—to be its president for the next fifteen years, perhaps due to the symbolic power she would bring. While the BCL questioned the boundaries of the movement, this was ultimately restricted by the fact that this was primarily (though not exclusively) a white women's organisation mirroring the structures of the empire itself.

During the interwar period feminists did not simply devote themselves to a single organisation. They were at times guided by intense loyalties and rivalries, but feminist

⁹⁷ Marjorie Chave Collisson interviewed by Brian Harrison, 16 November 1976, Harrison Interviews, TWL, 8SUF/B/114.

⁹⁸ "News and Notes," *West Australian* (Perth), 27 August 1925, 8. Rischbieth's words are paraphrased in this quote.

⁹⁹ "Noted Feminist Returns. Impressions of Tour in Europe," *Herald* (Melbourne), 29 November 1937, 13.

¹⁰⁰ Woollacott, "Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms," 443. The 1926 Balfour Declaration and the 1931 Statute of Westminster cemented the white dominions' equal status with Britain.

internationalism was also driven by motion, negotiation, and development. As these two decades wore on, some were willing to pragmatically negotiate various networks and even form new ones rather than simply follow established programmes, resulting in a more expansive and multifaceted international feminist scene. Through their international organisations feminists experienced both the possibilities and limits of cross-border cooperation, generating a realistic vision of internationalism as a tool they could use to pursue women's rights issues globally, including by getting closer to the experiments in global governance happening in Geneva.

EXPANDING HORIZONS?



Figure 13 Board members of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship at the Berlin congress, 1929. Collection LAV–Atria: Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History. Rischbieth is on the far right, standing next to Huda Sha'rawi, and Corbett Ashby is seated in the middle.

Members of pre-war international women's organisations were mostly white, middle-class Europeans and North Americans. While this largely continued to be the case during the interwar period, an awareness of the need to become more truly global grew and the movement's composition began to change. In her report on the Alliance's 1920 congress,

Macmillan—who, as far as the records show, never ventured beyond the Northern Hemisphere—emphasised that “the gathering was more widely representative than any previous meeting.”¹⁰¹ “For the first time,” she wrote, “women from India and Japan came to tell of the beginnings of the organised movement among the women of the East. It was only the difficulties of travel which prevented the delegates who had started on their journeys from China, Egypt, and Palestine, from arriving in time for the Congress.”¹⁰² In greeting “representative women of the East,” the Alliance “recognised the difficult work that lies before it in helping to raise the status of the women of all races.”¹⁰³ In this new era, Macmillan and others realised, feminist internationalism could no longer be for improving the lives of white, Western women only. Their international organisations provided a structure through which they could address this imperative and try to measure their increasing diversity.

Western women largely remained at the helm of most interwar international women’s organisations, especially the smaller Europe-based groups such as the ODI and the ERI, however. In the BCL, Australians and Britons held the most sway, drawing on their shared status as white women.¹⁰⁴ This mirrored the empire’s political dynamics more broadly; the BCL’s very existence was predicated on the belief that the British Commonwealth—a group directed by its white members—continued to hold “enormous influence in world politics.”¹⁰⁵ Most of the leaders of the various other international women’s organisations were also white and middle to upper-middle class. A few women of colour successfully asserted their place among the leadership of these groups, but this was not widespread. In 1935, for example, only five out of the twenty-one Alliance board members came from outside Europe or North America: Egypt’s Huda Sha‘rawi, Brazil’s Bertha Lutz, Türkiye’s Latife Bekir, India’s Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, and Australia’s Rischbieth.¹⁰⁶ This small degree of diversity—primarily considered in terms of race or culture rather than class—in part prompted Corbett Ashby to later claim that the Alliance “was a proud pioneer in multi-racial relations,” revealing the degree

¹⁰¹ IWSA, *Report of Eighth Congress*, 22.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰⁴ See: Collisson interview, 8SUF/B/114.

¹⁰⁵ British Commonwealth League (hereafter BCL), *Report of Conference “The Citizen Rights of Women within the British Empire.” Caxton Hall July 9th & 10th, 1925* (London: BCL, 1925), 9.

¹⁰⁶ “New Members of the Board,” *International Woman Suffrage News* 20, no. 9 (July 1926): 132; “The Alliance Board,” *International Women’s News* 27, no. 8 (May 1933): 61; IAW, *Report of the Twelfth Congress*, 3.

to which very limited progress was exalted by white women.¹⁰⁷ Corbett Ashby similarly recalled that the BCL was “the first international association to have a coloured woman, a Jamaican, really intelligent.”¹⁰⁸ Here she was speaking of the Jamaican writer, feminist, and nationalist Una Marson, who addressed the 1934 BCL conference on racial discrimination facing black nurses in Britain.¹⁰⁹ But as Rupp explains, there was a “difference between diversity as window-dressing and a real commitment to the inclusion of women from outside the Euro American world,” and this was something of which interwar women of colour were sharply aware.¹¹⁰

Over time international women’s organisations offered at least some space for non-Western women to take to the podium. Smaller groups such as the ERI and the ODI remained largely European, but the BCL provided a platform for women from non-white British colonies, especially India. In 1927 the organisation hosted an event to allow two Indians to speak on the *Mother India* controversy (which will be explored further in chapter three).¹¹¹ Yet some women of colour resented their treatment in these larger groups. Reflecting on the Alliance’s 1923 congress, the Egyptian journalist Saiza Nabarawi criticised feminists’ orientalism (while also displaying her own racism), recalling how Egyptian women were “deeply disappointed” that their Western colleagues’ “horizons remain so closed” and asking how they could place Egyptians in the same category as “the savage tribes of Central Africa.”¹¹² Enabled by their formal inclusion in these groups, non-Western women like her highlighted their experiences to their white colleagues, but on the whole this did not radically alter the structure or priorities of many international women’s organisations. And some groups of

¹⁰⁷ Corbett Ashby, *Memoirs*, 171.

¹⁰⁸ Corbett Ashby interview, 8SUF/B/116a. In her memoirs she also mistakenly wrote that “The Istanbul Congress was the first international congress of any international organisation of women at which a black woman, from the West Indies, was elected to the Board.” There is no evidence that there were any black women on the Alliance executive at this time. See Corbett Ashby, *Memoirs*, 171.

¹⁰⁹ BCL, “*Woman, Work and Pay Within the British Commonwealth*,” *Report of Tenth Annual Conference. Held on June 13th, 14th & 15th, 1934* (London: BCL, 1934), 61; For more on Una Marson see: Denise deCaires Narain, “Marson, Una Maud Victoria, (1905–1965),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/69624>.

¹¹⁰ Leila J. Rupp, “‘Speaking Truth to Power’ in Transnational Feminist History,” *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, no. 38, (2013): 19.

¹¹¹ “Conferences on ‘Mother India’,” *Woman’s Leader and Common Cause* (London), 28 October 1927, 306; “Mother India: The Indian Point of View. From a Correspondent,” *Woman’s Leader and Common Cause* (London), 18 November 1927, 329.

¹¹² Céza Nabaraouy, “Impressions de Congrès,” *L’Égyptienne* 5, no. 50 (October 1929): 5. This translation from French to English is my own.

people remained left out entirely, notably Australian Aboriginal women, who turned instead to Indigenous activist networks—which looked to communist internationalism more than liberal internationalism—as they emerged over the 1930s.¹¹³

The logic of empire was a key foundation of feminist internationalism. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Western feminists were compelled to confront this fact. This reflected their wider context. Over these two decades the British Empire was changing: the white dominions were gaining more power as the empire became the Commonwealth, and anticolonial nationalists were revolting against British governance of their societies. Some groups actively worked against imperialist ways of thinking. Of the Europe-based organisations, the WILPF was the most critical of colonialism.¹¹⁴ It became increasingly unhappy with the League's mandates system, in which the defeated nations' colonies were redistributed to other Western countries to guide these so-called "backwards" peoples towards civilisation. While she felt that taking Germany's colonies had been a misguided strategy, Courtney believed that "it would be a step backward to hand over colonies that had been under mandatory government, to any country whatever, to be governed purely as colonies," arguing that "all countries not self-governed" should be "turned into mandated areas."¹¹⁵ She was opposed to nineteenth-century style colonialism but still considered Western peoples as more "advanced." This sort of attitude, combined with the WILPF's primarily North American and European leadership team, meant that even progressive groups reinforced imperialist logics in various ways.

An important reason for some feminists' mobility between organisations was a desire to reorient the movement away from the North Atlantic and combat its imperialist foundations. Through this process they expanded their very conception of internationalism and even challenged the equation of "international" with "Western" by thinking about the concepts of diversity and interracial harmony. The Pacific was a key arena for this. In 1928, representatives from Australia, Canada, China, Fiji, Hawai'i, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, Samoa, and the United States gathered in Honolulu for the inaugural Pan-Pacific

¹¹³ Fiona Paisley, *Loving Protection?: Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights, 1919–1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000), 114–15.

¹¹⁴ Hellowell, "Feminism, Pacifism and Internationalism," 18–19.

¹¹⁵ "Poor Outlook. The World and Peace. Individual Problem. Miss K. Courtney's Address," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 20 April 1938, 12.

Women's Conference (PPWC).¹¹⁶ This meeting laid the foundations for the Pan-Pacific Women's Association (PPWA), which aimed to "strengthen the bonds of peace among Pacific people by promoting a better understanding and friendship among the women of all Pacific countries" and encourage cooperation among them "for the study and betterment of existing social conditions."¹¹⁷ In many ways, truly challenging the traditional basis of the movement was only possible by physically displacing networks from the transatlantic hub; as Jane Addams said: "Perhaps it could have been started nowhere else, for you have here, through the mutual friendliness of many races, settled problems which are perplexing the rest of the world."¹¹⁸ Yet the picture was more complex than she thought. American imperialism in Hawai'i (and elsewhere in the Pacific) was very much alive, and at this time some of the countries involved in the PPWC governed others: Samoa was a New Zealand mandate territory, and the Philippines only gained full independence from the United States in 1946.¹¹⁹ These asymmetric power dynamics simmered beneath feminist cooperation in the Pacific.

Some Australian feminists were very interested in this initiative, although Rich, Street, and Littlejohn all had their gaze fixed more so on Europe until after the Second World War. Rischbieth led the Australian delegation from Sydney to Honolulu for the 1928 PPWC.¹²⁰ "We have come a long way in order to be present," Rischbieth told the conference when they arrived, "but we have come with great faith in our hearts. We belong to the woman's [*sic*] movement which stands for equality. We have come to consult with you on the great problems of the day, fully realizing the important part our respective nations are likely to take in the

¹¹⁶ Several historians have provided a Japanese perspective of this event. See: Courtney Sato, "'A Picture of Peace': Friendship in Interwar Pacific Women's Internationalism," *Qui Parle* 27, no. 2 (2018): 477; Taeko Shibahara, "'The Private League of Nations': The Pan-Pacific Women's Conference and Japanese Feminists in 1928," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 41 (2011): 3–24; Rumi Yasutake, "The First Wave of International Women's Movements from a Japanese Perspective: Western Outreach and Japanese Women Activists during the Interwar Years," *Women's Studies International Forum*, no. 32 (2009): 13–20; Rumi Yasutake, "The Rise of Women's Internationalism in the Countries of the Asia-Pacific Region during the Interwar Years, from a Japanese Perspective," *Women's History Review* 20, no. 4 (2011): 521–32.

¹¹⁷ Pan Pacific Women's Conference (hereafter PPWC), *Women of the Pacific: Being a Record of the Proceedings of the Second Pan-Pacific Women's Conference which was held in Honolulu from the 9th to the 22d of August, 1930, Under the Auspices of the Pan-Pacific Union* (Honolulu: Pan-Pacific Union, 1930), 395.

¹¹⁸ Jane Addams, "The Opening of a Woman's Congress," *Mid-Pacific Magazine* (Honolulu) 36, no. 4 (1928): 306.

¹¹⁹ Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific*, 17.

¹²⁰ "Great Gathering of Women of the Southern Hemisphere," *Dawn* (Perth), 17 July 1928, 12; PPWC, *Women of the Pacific: Being a Record of the Proceedings of the First Pan-Pacific Women's Conference which was held in Honolulu from the 9th to the 19th of August 1928, Under the Auspices of the Pan-Pacific Union* (Honolulu: Pan-Pacific Union, 1928), 278.

future development of the Pacific.”¹²¹ By this point Rischbieth was recognising the realities of Australia’s place in its local region. In a 1929 letter to the PPWA’s future president, Georgina Sweet, she wrote: “I believe that this regional international grouping (such as the Pan-Pacific) is the new step ahead in making present international work more effective. ... It will enrich present international organisation & it brings all the inter: [*sic*] organisations of the day into a fair & just position for co-operative effort & research while maintaining their own status.”¹²² The PPWA’s existence pushed Rischbieth to enlarge her view of who should be included in networks of international feminist cooperation, introducing her to a host of women whom she had not met before. From that point on she became increasingly interested in learning about women from “the East” (broadly conceived) and embarked on extensive travels to meet them firsthand. Though the 1928 conference was the only PPWA meeting she attended until its 1961 meeting in Canberra (where she was joined by Rich, who became more involved in this arena in the postwar period), as Fiona Paisley notes, Rischbieth’s contributions to politics in the Pacific were “substantial, and her sense of its value unshaken throughout.”¹²³ Her interest in this organisation had a formative influence on her understanding of feminism and on her belief that East–West cooperation was critical for creating a more just world.

It was in the Pacific, where there was a more pressing desire to contest the hierarchies that shaped the rest of the international women’s movement, that feminists did what Northern Hemisphere organisations could (or would) not: foster connections between women from a greater range of cultural and racial backgrounds, including current and former colonies, through a genuine effort at interracial cooperation. In her exploration of the PPWA, Paisley has shown how this organisation modelled “a new way of being in the world, one combining social reform with an anti-racist politics built upon ideals of cross-cultural exchange and interracial harmony.”¹²⁴ Despite its limitations, she argues that the culture of sociability and affect it cultivated was important, with the intercultural relationships women forged there

¹²¹ PPWC, *Proceedings of the First Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference*, 15.

¹²² Bessie Rischbieth to Georgina Sweet, 10 July 1929, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 14, File 3, MS 2004/6/152.

¹²³ Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific*, 35; Pan-Pacific and Southeast Asia Women’s Association, *Women of the Pacific and Southeast Asia: A Record of the Proceedings of the Ninth Conference of the Pan-Pacific and Southeast Asia Women’s Association. Held in Canberra, Australia, January 7–18, 1961* (New South Wales: Pan-Pacific and Southeast Asia Women’s Association, 1961), 6, 17; Pan-Pacific Women’s Association, *Women of the Pacific: A Record of the Proceedings of the Sixth Conference of the Pan-Pacific Women’s Association. Held in Christchurch, New Zealand, January 11th to January 25th, 1952* (Christchurch: L. P. Christie, 1952), 8.

¹²⁴ Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific*, 1.

representing a significant achievement.¹²⁵ The interwar period was especially critical as it witnessed the development of new modes of thinking that embraced “diversity and difference.”¹²⁶ While British and European feminists largely remained uninvolved with the PPWA, Australian feminists displayed a willingness to at least partly shift their focus from the Northern Hemisphere, as well as a clear rejection of discriminatory national policies such as the White Australia policy. Australian women saw trans-Pacific cooperation as a way to expand the geographical and cultural scope of feminist internationalism; as Rischbieth reported back to the Alliance: “whilst there is no desire to replace the international by the substitution of any regional grouping, at the same time, the international may become the more real b[y] means of the regional grouping.”¹²⁷ Rischbieth realised that this was “the new world and it stands to reason that the Old world cannot represent it.”¹²⁸ Spurred on by the birth of this new organisation, she came to see the limitations of existing international women’s networks more clearly than she had before.

But how did the establishment of this Pacific network influence feminist internationalism more broadly? Initial newspaper reports published in the Northern Hemisphere favourably suggested that the PPWC represented a momentous step. In 1930, for instance, the *Woman’s Leader* wrote: “Probably few of us realize the extent to which the women in countries bordering on the Pacific Ocean, [*sic*] are internationally organized. ... A Conference which brings together women from countries with such diverse problems will be of deep interest all the more because European countries which are so apt to predominate at most International congresses will be excluded.”¹²⁹ Corbett Ashby and the Alliance similarly expressed “extreme satisfaction” that “a permanent Regional Grouping of women has been established in the Pacific” and offered their “whole hearted co-operation” with this project.¹³⁰ But historic and contemporary geopolitical ties prevailed. Over the ensuing decades

¹²⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 5–6. For more on the PPWA and Australian women, see: Woollacott, “Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms.”

¹²⁷ “Report to the Board (submitted by Bessie M. Rischbieth, Australia). The Pan Pacific Women’s Conference, Honolulu, August 1928,” Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 16, File 11, MS 2004/6/305.

¹²⁸ Bessie Rischbieth to Rosa Manus, 4 February 1929, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 21, File 10, MS 2004/8/464.

¹²⁹ “The Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference,” *Woman’s Leader* (London), 6 June 1930, 134.

¹³⁰ “Berlin Congress. June 17-22, 1929. Resolutions Adopted,” Congress Supplement, *International Woman Suffrage News* (July 1929), 156.

international feminist coverage of the PPWA was relatively limited. Courtney attended the 1937 congress, although she did so when it was held in the closer city of Vancouver.¹³¹ While pivotal for the women of the Pacific and Pacific rim, on the whole European feminists showed little real interest in this project. In these broader terms, the PPWA was only able to expand the scope of feminist internationalism to a limited degree and for a select number of people by the end of the 1930s—an effort not helped by the global economic depression and the tensions simmering in the lead up to another world war.



Figure 14 Australian delegates to the first Pan-Pacific Women's Conference, Honolulu, 1928. National Library of Australia, PIC/8996 LOC Box PIC/8996. Rischbieth stands fourth from the left in the back row.

The idea of responsibility was central to white feminists' conceptions of the role they and their international organisations played in relation to women of colour—not all women

¹³¹ PPWA, *A Record of the Proceedings of the Fourth Triennial Conference of the Pan-Pacific Women's Association, Held in Vancouver, Canada, July 1937* (Vancouver: Pan-Pacific Women's Association, 1937), 24–8.

were considered equal partners in the feminist project.¹³² Developing from late-nineteenth century modes of thinking, this became a central tenet of their internationalism and both pushed the movement to become more inclusive while maintaining racialised hierarchies that assumed that white women would uplift their less fortunate “sisters.”¹³³ Australian and British women alike frequently pointed to their newfound duties as voters and aspiring world citizens to explain why they needed to guide the world’s unenfranchised women. They presented their responsibility as emanating from their shared identities as white, imperial subjects, and their international organisations allowed them to enact this responsibility. This was very apparent within the BCL. As its president, Corbett Ashby praised the group for “shouldering the responsibilities of any section of the British Commonwealth which is oppressed”—with the idea of oppression drawn along racial lines.¹³⁴ This reinforced one of the central concerns of the BCL’s members, who in 1926 had agreed on “the Moral Responsibility laid upon Citizens of the British Commonwealth in regard to members of the less advanced races within its boundaries.”¹³⁵ Paisley’s argument that responsibility for Aboriginal women was a core part of Australian feminists’ internationalism at this time can thus be expanded to describe white feminists’ relationship to women of colour more broadly.¹³⁶ Through their organisations some of them strived for a feminism that worked to improve the lives of all women—a notable change from the pre-war period—although all too often they assumed they would speak on behalf everyone.

In trying to make feminist internationalism more truly international, Western feminists thus reinforced imperialist hierarchies among women. As Woollacott argues, while making significant changes to the configuration of feminist internationalism, both the BCL and the PPWA reproduced the “white English-speaking women’s hegemony of the larger international women’s organisations, and in some ways reconstituted other or older forms of

¹³² Fiona Paisley discusses the idea of responsibility in her book on Australian feminists and Aboriginal rights. See: Paisley, *Loving Protection?*, chapter 2.

¹³³ See: Burton, *Burdens of History*.

¹³⁴ BCL, “Marriage from the Imperial Standpoint.” *The Civil Rights of Married Women. Inter-racial Unions. Report of Conference held on June 7th, 8th & 9th, 1932* (London: BCL, 1932), 32.

¹³⁵ BCL, *Women and Oversea Settlement and Some Problems of Government. Being a Report of Conference Held June 22nd and 23rd 1926* (London: BCL, 1926), 10.

¹³⁶ Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific*, 89; Paisley, *Loving Protection?*, chapter 2.

imperialism.”¹³⁷ In the Pacific, Australians displayed a belief in their preordained leadership potential as white members of a relatively wealthy British-based democracy in a largely non-white region. This was only bolstered by the fact that the PPWA’s presidents were all white women from the United States and Australia, until Japan’s Gauntlett Tsune took on the role in 1937.¹³⁸ Rischbieth simultaneously questioned Europe’s ability to represent Pacific women and assumed that white women from Western democracies would play a particularly important role. At the 1928 conference she said: “We realize the responsibility that rests on our shoulders, and we pray that we may be equal to it.”¹³⁹ Later, in her memoir she emphasised that “Australia’s opportunity, and we hope her destiny, in the Pacific, is to help liberate the awakening East to a free partnership of nations by freedom of growth.”¹⁴⁰ Such ideas echoed the reformist impulses that had driven missionaries in the region for decades, highlighting the deep-seated connections between imperialism and internationalism that persisted well into the 1930s.

Yet the reality was complex, as the PPWA did more than simply reproduce existing power structures. Australian feminists were among those who showed a capacity to recognise the mutual benefits of regional cooperation. In her address to the first conference, Rischbieth said that the women of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States “come with the privilege of the vote in their hands to greet the women of the older lands; and in turn will gather something of the spirit and inspiration of older civilizations.”¹⁴¹ The Victorian pacifist Eleanor May Moore (who was also part of the delegation to Honolulu in 1928) even more explicitly saw this as a learning experience for Australian feminists. The *Dawn* reported that “Miss Moore convinced her listeners that contact with Oriental women would result in much profit to the English-speaking women as well as to the Orientals themselves.”¹⁴² What is important to note

¹³⁷ Woollacott, “Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms,” 442.

¹³⁸ PPWC, *Proceedings of the First Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference*; PPWC, *Proceedings of the Second Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference*; Pan-Pacific Women’s Association (hereafter PPWA), *Women of the Pacific: Being a Record of the Proceedings of the Third Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference which was held in Honolulu from the 8th to the 22d of August, 1934, Under the Auspices of the Pan-Pacific Women’s Association* (Honolulu: Pan-Pacific Women’s Association, 1935); PPWA, *Fourth Triennial Conference of the Pan-Pacific Women’s Association*.

¹³⁹ PPWC, *Proceedings of the First Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference*, 15.

¹⁴⁰ Bessie Rischbieth, *March of Australian Women: A Record of Fifty Years’ Struggle for Equal Citizenship* (Perth: Paterson Brokensha, 1964), 122–3.

¹⁴¹ PPWC, *Proceedings of the First Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference*, 15.

¹⁴² “Tasmania,” *Dawn* (Perth), 23 September 1931, 3.

here is the fact that white women's leadership could at times be qualified by a vision of internationalism as a reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship. By bringing them into direct contact with their non-Western colleagues, new organisations like the PPWA went some way to challenging feminists' presumption that the West was there to lead and not to learn.

But again, the full picture is complicated. The responsibility that these women felt was linked to a duty to do something with their newfound political freedoms, and their organisations allowed them to fulfil this duty in a concerted way. Western feminists across both Australia and Britain believed that "[p]rivilege cannot stand without responsibility."¹⁴³ When she moved to London in 1929, Rich connected with various feminist networks, including the still young BCL. At that year's conference, she said: "As the privileged custodians of less advanced races we feel that it is our responsibility to take a part in the improvement of the situation."¹⁴⁴ The degree to which Western feminists like her saw themselves as agents of this oppression, or linked their privilege to other peoples' subordination, is doubtful. Indeed, Rischbieth's understanding of history—in which Australia was built on "virgin territory," when "[a] handful of people were endowed with a continent without any racial conflicts" and "no wars of conquest or defence"—revealed a dangerous obliviousness.¹⁴⁵ Yet this drove them to think about how womanhood and oppression were experienced by people unlike themselves. And, sometimes, they were capable of recognising the need for a greater range of voices to be heard. In her capacity as a representative of the BCL's Committee of Less Forward Races, Rich wanted to commission two papers on the topic of interracial marriage, specifying that she would like one to be written by a white woman and one by a "coloured woman." "I know that it will be very difficult to get a coloured woman to write this kind of paper," she acknowledged, "but perhaps, at least, it might be possible to get her to put down some ideas, as we are very anxious to have her point of view put forward."¹⁴⁶ Perhaps this awareness was a result of the greater degree of contact with non-European women that Rich would have had in the cosmopolitan city of London and especially through the BCL. Though certainly not the

¹⁴³ BCL, *Report of Conference 1926*, 4.

¹⁴⁴ BCL, "Women and the Future." *Report of Conference held June 5th and 6th, 1929* (London: BCL, 1929), 25.

¹⁴⁵ Bessie Rischbieth, "Pan-Pacific Women's Conference. The Influence of Women in Government," *Dawn* (Perth), 26 September 1928, 5.

¹⁴⁶ Ruby Rich to Bessie Rischbieth, 21 January 1932, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 18, File 3, MS 2004/7/136.

prevailing perspective, Rich's words demonstrate at least some white feminists' ability to consider that they could not speak for all women.



Figure 15 Bookplate in *Report of Conference held on June 7th, 8th & 9th, 1932* (London: British Commonwealth League, 1932).

In forming the BCL both Australian and British feminists affirmed the importance of the empire, differentiating the new British Empire and Commonwealth from “bad” forms of imperialism. This “good” version of empire was, they thought, a model for a new, internationalist world. The BCL’s 1929 conference report relates that “Mrs. Ashby pointed out that the British Empire was challenged to prove that it served a purpose absolutely different from and better than that which any other Empire had served.”¹⁴⁷ Here she displayed a sense

¹⁴⁷ BCL, *Report of Conference 1929*, 13.

of exceptionalism, drawing a sharp (and inaccurate) distinction between the British model and other European empires. While she rejected the “hopelessly old-fashioned idea” that involved “patronising the Dominions, of talking to them for their good, of feeling thoroughly superior in every way,” this only explicitly extended to white communities.¹⁴⁸ She encouraged women to “take their share in building up the work of the Empire” with the goal of “trying to solve such problems as the just and fair relationship of one race to another, of one culture to another, pouring into the pool of common knowledge each special gift of race and tradition.”¹⁴⁹ However, the BCL was first and foremost a space for white dominion women to amplify their voices and was in many ways underpinned by imperialist thinking. Steps to move beyond this sort of thinking were slow.

During the interwar years, feminists expanded their international organisations to incorporate a more diverse range of women, both in response to non-Western women’s invocations and to legitimise their claims to represent the world’s women. The new “regional” associations that formed during the later 1920s rejected the idea that the international women’s movement was to be led by women from the Northern Hemisphere only. Some progress was made by Australian and British feminists (among others) to address the experiences of colonised women and engage with feminists outside of Europe, yet all too often this reproduced imperialist hierarchies in which white women spoke for those outside the West. These tensions were central to interwar feminist internationalism, pushing it—however piecemeal—towards greater diversity and inclusion.

CONCLUSION

Interwar feminists navigated a range of international women’s organisations, adding to them from the mid- to late 1920s. These associations provided important spaces in which women established the core tenets of feminist internationalism, viewing it not only in terms of morale-boosting cooperation between women, but also as a means of reforming national and international politics through concerted feminist action. Though each organisation aimed to foster a unified constituency, individuals were constantly in motion. Some moved between

¹⁴⁸ BCL, *Report of Conference 1926*, 15.

¹⁴⁹ BCL, *Report of Conference 1929*, 13.

groups to find the most useful arena in which to fulfil their goals, while others maintained multilayered commitments to national, imperial, and international networks. These experiences fostered a vision of internationalism that was at once idealistic and pragmatic. At their best, international women's organisations offered a model of what cross-border collaboration could look like. On a practical level, they brought feminists closer into the League's orbit while also demonstrating the challenges of uniting a wide range of people under the universalised category of "woman." Feminists saw these groups as not simply symbols of international harmony, but—in the new context of the League's experiment in international governance—as practical tools for attaining women's rights.

Interwar feminism was characterised by the coexistence of forward-thinking, progressive ideals and persistent imperial logics, making this a formative moment in feminism's longer history. From the mid-1920s, feminists from outside the transatlantic sphere challenged the movement's assumed purview, asking: feminist internationalism for whom? Australians were among those to assert that international cooperation needed to extend beyond the Northern Hemisphere to be truly international, and their associations provided a space in which this began to be enacted. Yet their and other Western women's visions were significantly limited by the persistent white hegemony that characterised the movement and their wider societies. Though international women's organisations provided a platform for addressing the particular issues facing Indigenous women and women of colour, imperial assumptions prevailed and limited the degree to which Indigenous and non-Western women could influence the underlying priorities of the movement and participate on an equal footing.

International women's organisations offered an important basis from which feminist internationalism grew in scope, size, and composition throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The experiences they provided their members were varied and, at times, contradictory, revealing both the possibilities and challenges of cross-border collaboration. Creating consensus and unifying an ever more diverse assortment of feminists from around the world became an increasingly difficult task. While international women's organisations and feminist internationalism were not synonymous, these groups provided a vital forum for practising and experimenting with transnational collaboration. Investigating how Australian and British women engaged with them illuminates a primary mechanism through which feminist internationalism began to become increasingly diverse, complex, and powerful over the course of the interwar period.

CHAPTER 2

Meeting at the Congress

An article in the February 1938 issue of the Australian feminist newspaper the *Dawn* may have surprised some readers. Published in Perth under Bessie Rischbieth's guidance, the monthly publication had a strong global outlook and was highly celebratory of feminist internationalism. But in this issue a piece titled "Conferences Not the Way to Save the World. Madame Chiang Kai-Shek's Wonderful Message to Australian Women" brought to light a different view of women's collaborative activities. "When I look at the international situation as it is developing after years of existence of large international women's organisations, I must confess that my feeling is far from pride," the Republic of China's first lady said. She suggested that there had been "a tendency to follow the line of least resistance, the beaten track of international conferences, meetings and more meetings, at which long strings of beautiful words are said, but very little practical work is ever accomplished" and concluded that "this is not the way to save the world." Soong Mei-ling (Madame Chiang Kai-Shek) made these remarks just months after the outbreak of war between her home country and Japan—an experience that brought the failures of internationalism sharply into focus for her. She included feminists among those responsible for the persistence of aggression globally, urging "that we recognise our failure mercilessly" as "[w]e are guilty, every one of us."¹ In this demoralising context, Soong gave voice to a school of thought that was becoming sceptical about some of the methods of feminist internationalism.

Gathering at international congresses and conferences was one of interwar feminists' key practices. Usually held under the banners of their various international organisations, these highly anticipated events provided a forum in which delegates from member countries could meet one another, share their experiences, discuss the major issues affecting women across the

¹ "Conferences Not the Way to Save the World. Madame Chiang Kai-Shek's Wonderful Message to Australian Women," *Dawn* (Perth), 23 February 1938, 4.

globe, and work towards developing united programmes of action. Feminists were brought together across borders in several other ways, too—including at board meetings, “At Homes,” fundraisers, demonstrations, and summer schools—but the international congress held special significance as the largest and most inclusive event. As Leila Rupp explains, congresses could bring “together a more diverse crowd of women than either headquarters or committees” and “could be by turns ponderous, conflict ridden, and celebratory.”² Each new organisation that emerged adopted this tradition, tailoring the format to suit its respective size, capabilities, and priorities. The optimism regarding internationalism’s future that characterised the years immediately following the First World War fostered the growth of these meetings, which quickly expanded in size, diversity, and number. While from 1929 the global economic crisis and increasing political tensions within and between nations proved challenging for organisers, these events endured until the outbreak of the Second World War brought a temporary halt to easy movement across borders.

For those with the time and funds to travel, attendance at these events often represented their most direct and thrilling involvement in the international feminist movement. Around fifty Australian and 130 British women attended congresses of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (later the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, the Alliance) alone throughout these two decades, some of them multiple times; they and many others participated in similar events hosted by the various other associations explored in chapter one as well.³ These meetings provided the primary arena in which feminists outside of executive committees experienced the possibilities and limits of transnational cooperation firsthand. Although in her article Soong voiced a concern shared by others, many continued to espouse the benefits of these events (or at least continued to participate in them) right up until 1939. The question I am concerned with here is not so much whether congresses

² Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women’s Movement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 171.

³ These figures have been compiled from the 1920 to 1939 Alliance conference reports. International Woman Suffrage Alliance (hereafter IWSA), *Report of Eighth Congress, Geneva, Switzerland, June 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 1920* (Manchester: Percy Brothers, 1920); IWSA, *Report of Ninth Congress, Rome, Italy, May 12th to 19th, 1923* (Dresden: B. G. Teubner, 1923); International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (hereafter IAW), *Report of Tenth Congress, Paris, France, May 30th to June 6th, 1926* (London, England: International Alliance of Women, 1926); IAW, *Report of the Eleventh Congress, Berlin, June 17th–22nd, 1929. Twenty-Fifth Anniversary, 1904–1929* (London: International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, 1929); IAW, *Report of the Twelfth Congress, Istanbul, April 18th–24th, 1935* (London: Wadsworth and Company, 1935); IAW, *Report of the Thirteenth Congress, Copenhagen, July 8th–14th, 1939* (Ashford: International Alliance of Women, 1939).

were effective instruments for achieving women's rights. Rather, to better understand feminist internationalism as a multifaceted social, political, and intellectual tradition, it is important to think about how the congress figured in and shaped it as an idea and practice. In this chapter I ask: what did feminists consider the purposes of international congresses to be? How did they conceptualise them as part of their movement's broader project? How did their experiences of these gatherings shape or change their views? And why did they remain committed to using this forum? As my answers to these questions show, feminist internationalism was not just an idea that was enacted, but rather one that was constantly evolving through its very practice.

While international congresses could be cumbersome and may not always have brought immediate results, through them interwar feminists not only sustained but expanded their networks, all while rethinking their ideas about gendered oppression, their movement's scope, and the purpose of internationalism itself. My group and their contemporaries experienced congresses as morally and politically empowering and, most importantly, educative events. Through modelling intercultural cooperation, they hoped not only to boost each other but to lead the world away from the rampant nationalism that had made the First World War so devastating. These events were where they tried to generate unified programmes of action—or at least present a united front to the outside world—in order to increase their pressure power in conversations with national governments and the League of Nations (the League). But not everyone experienced these events as solidarity building, especially those non-Westerners whose inclusion was often tenuous. As Rupp highlights, “internationally minded women formed a community as much through struggle as through agreement.”⁴ International congresses were neither fixed nor prescriptive but rather reflected (and contributed to) feminists' consideration of the limits and possibilities of their transnational networks. They provided a chance for women to connect with an increasingly diverse range of people, including those who vocalised their criticisms of the movement, and slowly led to a growing emphasis on the urgent need to bridge the East–West divide. Congresses thus functioned as both consolidating and educational spaces that could transform feminists' visions of internationalism and whom it served. By fostering personal, transnational, and interracial connections and by providing a platform for other viewpoints to be shared, these meetings

⁴ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 208.

helped push the movement to become at least somewhat broader in its vision over the course of the period.

RECONSTRUCTING THE CONGRESS

Congresses were important fixtures in my group's calendars. The varying demands of time, money, and mobility were critical factors for both individuals and organisations; while some smaller groups brought their members together annually, larger gatherings—such as those of the Alliance or the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)—took place only every three or four years. To understand how my group and their colleagues used international congresses in their ongoing negotiation of feminist internationalism, it is important to explain what the experience of attending one of these events was like. Delving into the archives—from accounts published in feminist newspapers, to official congress reports, to delegates' personal correspondence and photographs—reveals many details that help reconstruct in general terms the interwar international feminist congress.

Most meetings were hosted in Europe (or occasionally North America)—a fact that simultaneously reflected the movement's Eurocentrism and ensured this bias persisted. Most of my group attended several congresses throughout the period, with their first exposure to such events taking place in cities like Rome, Amsterdam, The Hague, and Berlin. London was a popular choice, being a global and imperial centre. After having experienced her first international feminist congress at Rome in 1923, when Rischbieth co-founded the British Commonwealth League (BCL) along with her colleague Marjorie Chave Collisson in 1925, she immediately turned to the congress format. But, in a move that was seemingly at odds with the pair's desire to shift away from the metropole, the BCL always convened in London—a choice that limited the group's radical potential (and meant that Rischbieth could not attend each year) but increased its visibility and, perhaps they hoped, its force. Other organisations moved around to reach a range of audiences and embody an internationalist spirit. Sometimes a city was chosen to help local women in their quest for equality, as was the case with the Alliance's 1923 Rome congress. Relatively recently enfranchised herself, Margery Corbett Ashby—who was elected president at that meeting—hoped the gathering “may convert the

Italian Government to a belief in Women's Suffrage.”⁵ On the other hand, feminists sometimes saw the host city as a source of inspiration. After forming the Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker (ODI) in 1929, Chrystal Macmillan hosted its second conference two years later in Stockholm. In her presidential address she explained that this location had been chosen because women there had “a better position as wage-earners than we have elsewhere.” She encouraged Swedish women “to lead and not to follow,” appealing: “The women of other countries need your help.”⁶ The choice of location contributed to the specific atmosphere and focus of each gathering and reflected feminist internationalism's multiple functions.



Figure 16 Delegates at the International Woman Suffrage Alliance's Rome congress during the reading of Mussolini's speech, 1923.
State Library of South Australia, SRG 116/15/14.

⁵ Margery Corbett Ashby, “The Call to Rome,” *Woman's Leader and Common Cause* (London), 23 March 1923, 60.

⁶ Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker (hereafter ODI), *Report of the Second Conference, held in Stockholm. August 17th—21st, 1931* (Geneva and London: Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker, 1931), 11.

This period witnessed the first (if limited) efforts to host large-scale meetings outside the North Atlantic sphere. Most organisations still met in Western Europe or North America; from the 1930s members sometimes journeyed to gatherings held in the eastern parts of Europe as well.⁷ Of the large international women's organisations, only the Alliance pushed outside the West's boundaries. In 1935 it met in Istanbul. Here multiple members of my group—Corbett Ashby and Rischbieth, as well as the Sydneysiders Linda Littlejohn and Ruby Rich—met with new and old colleagues outside of a Western setting (for some of them for the first time). Writing to her family in Perth afterwards, Rischbieth—who by this point was becoming increasingly interested in “the East”—praised the event for being “more representative of oriental thought than on any previous occasion” due to the presence of “so many near East delegates.”⁸ She echoed the comments made by the leader of the Turkish host organisation, Latife Bekir, who pitched Istanbul as a useful location because it sat “at the crossroads of two continents.”⁹ More consistent efforts to include other parts of the world were spearheaded by “regional” women's organisations. A few years earlier in 1928, Rischbieth and several other Australian women had attended the first Pan-Pacific Women's Conference (PPWC) in Hawai'i. Apart from meaning that they met with a much wider range of people than they ever had, the unique landscapes in which they met—surrounded by palm trees and beaches—were a constant reminder that they were deliberately pivoting away from Europe.¹⁰ While there they experienced a set of complex interracial encounters with women from across the Pacific, and Rischbieth subsequently promoted Honolulu as “the Geneva of the Pacific ... a wonderful inter-racial meeting ground.”¹¹ Non-Western women soon hosted meetings elsewhere at which they could adopt a leading role. Representatives from across the Middle

⁷ The International Federation of University Women met in Kraków in 1936, while the International Council of Women convened in Dubrovnik that same year. The WILPF hosted a congress in Luhačovice in 1937. See: International Federation of University Women, *Report of the Seventh Conference, Cracom, August 22 to September 1, 1936* (London: International Federation of University Women, 1936); Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, *Report of the Ninth Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Lubacovice, Czechoslovakia, July 27th to 31st, 1937* (Geneva: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1937).

⁸ Bessie Rischbieth to family, 30 April 1935, Papers and objects of Bessie Rischbieth (hereafter Rischbieth Papers), National Library of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NLA), Box 1, File 3, MS 2004/1/42.

⁹ “Acceuil de la Turquie. Un Message de Mme. Latife Bekir,” *International Women's News* 29, no. 7 (April 1935): 51.

¹⁰ Fiona Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific: Cultural Internationalism and Race Politics in the Women's Pan-Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 41.

¹¹ Bessie Rischbieth to Margery Corbett Ashby, 29 December 1928, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 21, File 10, MS 2004/8/465.

East and Asia met in Damascus (1930) and Tehran (1932) under the banner of the Eastern Women's Congress.¹² Thirty-six Asian women also met in Lahore in 1931 for the only All-Asian Women's Congress.¹³ In holding such gatherings, non-Western women began to reformulate the geography of feminist internationalism.



Figure 17 Gatherings of delegates to the first Pan-Pacific Women's Conference in Honolulu, 1928. Above: delegates at the Japanese Consulate. Below: Jane Addams addressing a Monday luncheon of the Pan-Pacific Club. *Mid-Pacific Magazine* (Honolulu) 36, no. 4 (October 1928): 302.

Congresses ranged from being relatively small affairs to quite spectacular occasions. In histories of feminism, the notion of spectacle has often been invoked to describe the dramatics and striking visual imagery of the turn of the century women's suffrage campaigns.¹⁴ Spectacle

¹² Charlotte Weber, "Between Nationalism and Feminism: The Eastern Women's Congresses of 1930 and 1932," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4, no. 1 (2008): 83–106.

¹³ Sumita Mukherjee, "The All-Asian Women's Conference 1931: Indian Women and their Leadership of a Pan-Asian Feminist Organisation," *Women's History Review* 26, no. 3 (2017): 363–81; Shobna Nijhawan, "International Feminism from an Asian Center: The All-Asian Women's Conference (Lahore, 1931) as a Transnational Feminist Moment," *Journal of Women's History* 29, no. 3 (2017): 12–36.

¹⁴ See: Mineke Bosch, "Between Entertainment and Nationalist Politics: The Uses of Folklore in the Spectacle of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance," *Women's Studies International Forum* 32 (2009): 4–12; Katherine E. Kelly, "Seeing Through Spectacles: The Woman Suffrage Movement and London Newspapers, 1906–13,"

was also a part of interwar feminism.¹⁵ Fiona Paisley has highlighted the glamour that characterised the Pan-Pacific Women's Association (PPWA) and its conferences, where women from places like Japan and China negotiated traditional and Westernised dress as the organisation tried to establish a modernity characterised by diversity.¹⁶ Spectacle took other forms, too. While many meetings held during congress weeks were administrative or procedural, at large gatherings there was also a strong public-facing element of ceremony and performance. When Corbett Ashby, Rischbieth, and the other Alliance board members arrived for the first day of the 1929 Berlin congress they took to the stage to the sounds of "a full band playing overhead" in a "vast hall, ablaze with lighted crystal chandeliers."¹⁷ Alongside the delegate-only sessions there were public meetings. Rischbieth reported that "the event of most thrilling interest was the public meeting of international women members of parliament in the Reichstag," which was so popular that an "overflow meeting was held in the vestibule, which is of immense dimensions."¹⁸ The People's Peace Pageant held at the end of that week was reminiscent of women's suffrage demonstrations and incorporated speeches, a theatrical performance, and the ceremonial presentation of national flags at the Altar of Peace.¹⁹ Large congresses like this one could be highly public, inspiring, and powerful displays of feminist solidarity.

These gatherings could bring together quite large numbers of people. Individuals attended as part of "fraternal" delegations from unaffiliated organisations, as observers, on behalf of the League, and as representatives of governments. Most commonly they came as members of national delegations. But travelling was an expensive ordeal and, as Corbett Ashby emphasised (and historians have done since), "the guidance and leadership and cash" to sustain

European Journal of Women's Studies 11, no. 3 (2004): 327–53; Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907–14* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹⁵ As Helen McCarthy has shown, spectacle was also part of League internationalism. Helen McCarthy, "The League of Nations, Public Ritual and National Identity in Britain, c.1919–1956," *History Workshop Journal* 70, no. 1 (2010): 108–32.

¹⁶ Fiona Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific: Cultural Internationalism and Race Politics in the Women's Pan-Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 49–51, 112.

¹⁷ Bessie Rischbieth, "Great Historic Gathering. Women of Forty-Five Nations at Berlin," *Dawn* (Perth), 21 August 1929, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

the feminist movement necessarily had “to come from a class which had money and leisure.”²⁰ For those who could make the journey, the congress offered a chance to meet others, including those celebrated as the great pioneers of the movement. This was a particularly compelling reason for Australian women—who had historically been quite disconnected from the original transatlantic networks—to make the long journey overseas. When Rischbieth travelled to her first congress in Rome in 1923, she made much of the fact that “for the first time many of us saw in the flesh those splendid women known to us in name only, who have been patiently building the international bridges of better understanding over which the younger generation will pass.”²¹ Attendees usually represented their home countries, and the flags of the world were “symbols of nationalism” that together “became symbols of world-wide co-operation.”²² Even the WILPF, which as Rupp shows was more truly transnational than its predecessors, was kept afloat between meetings by distinct national sections.²³ As head of the British Women’s International League (WIL) and a member of the founding conference in 1915, Kathleen Courtney led the British contingent to multiple congresses, including Dublin (1926) and Prague (1929).²⁴ As this common structure shows, these gatherings embodied interwar feminists’ vision of internationalism as cooperation between and across national borders.

Congresses were busy occasions. The official proceedings—which included things like reports from committees and national delegations, debate, voting on resolutions, and private meetings—could last beyond a week; Courtney wrote home to her siblings from the PPWA’s 1937 Vancouver conference explaining how tired she was already, just halfway through the two-week event.²⁵ For organisers the work began even earlier. In the lead up to the Alliance’s

²⁰ Margery Corbett Ashby interviewed by Brian Harrison, 28 May 1974, Oral Evidence on the Suffragette and Suffragist Movements: The Brian Harrison Interviews (hereafter Harrison Interviews), The Women’s Library, London (hereafter TWL), 8SUF/B/004.

²¹ Bessie Rischbieth, “World Citizenship. Ninth Congress International Woman Suffrage Alliance,” *Dawn* (Perth), 14 July 1923, 6.

²² IAW, *Report of the Eleventh Congress*, 5.

²³ Leila J. Rupp, “Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women’s Organizations, 1888–1945,” *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1590.

²⁴ Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, *Report of the Fifth Congress of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Dublin, July 8 to 15, 1926* (Geneva: Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 1926); Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, *Report of the Sixth Congress of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Prague, August 24th to 28th, 1929* (Geneva: Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 1929).

²⁵ Kathleen Courtney to siblings, 18 July 1937, Vancouver, Papers of Kathleen D’Olier Courtney (hereafter Courtney Papers), TWL, Box FL455, KDC/D4/1–11.

1923 Rome congress, Corbett Ashby corresponded with her mother from Italy. “I do neglect you badly,” she apologised, explaining that in between her congress preparations and exploring Rome with her son she found “little time or strength for letter writing.”²⁶ Over a decade later, she detailed her daily schedule at the Alliance’s 1935 Istanbul congress in a letter to her husband, revealing the diverse activities that occupied her days:

7.30 rise 8 breakfast 8.15 interviews, questions, papers, letters 9am depart in a bumpy taxi with Rosa Manus, Margaret Mathieson & Erica Jacobi her niece. We turn out at the bottom of the hill. 9.30 interviews, letters, complaints (very few) in my magnificent presidents [*sic*] room with windows wide open to glorious view of water & hills. 10–1 presiding or at least sitting in commissions or plenary sessions 1–2.30 sandwiches & an attempt to walk on the terrace in the sun thwarted by enthusiastic delegates, photographers & journalists. 2.30–6 more sessions & then generally a party followed by a hurried dinner & an emergency meeting with some one [*sic*] or other till 11.30pm when after a short gossip we drop into bed Rosa & I with swollen ankles & half closed eyes!²⁷

Congresses were intensive experiences that combined work and pleasure. As Corbett Ashby’s letter indicates, they often included several social functions, which allowed women to engage with their overseas colleagues less formally, meet local figures, and explore the host city.

Yet some began to question the utility of large international feminist meetings as Soong did in 1938. In 1937 Littlejohn—who at the time was in Geneva leading the relatively small Equal Rights International (ERI)—doubted the importance of size, writing: “The promoters beg for these large attendances believing (I think, falsely) that large numbers promise a successful conference, whereas good results from discussion with different minds should be the measuring rod.” She noted that most delegates “cannot take part in the discussion of the business and though they are invited to public meetings (of which there are too few) and to ‘squashes’ they are not welcome at smaller intimate gatherings.” Littlejohn described the practice of inviting visitors from other organisations and governments as “plainly ‘de trop’” and solely intended “to add prestige to the conference in question.” Moreover, she argued that large gatherings “defeat the object of a conference for there should be time and opportunity ‘to confer,’ to get to know others, to exchange ideas, but when hordes are urged to come then

²⁶ Margery Corbett Ashby to Marie Corbett, 14 April 1923, Papers of Margery Corbett Ashby (hereafter Corbett Ashby Papers), TWL, Box FL477, 7MCA/A/32.

²⁷ Margery Corbett Ashby to Brian Ashby, 20 April 1935, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL484, 7/MCA/C18.

their very numbers make it so difficult to find people or to meet them.”²⁸ Littlejohn came to see great problems with the congress format and instead opted to direct her energies to the smaller ERI from the mid-1930s.

Like Littlejohn, her predecessor as ERI president, Helen Archdale, also questioned the effectiveness of international meetings. Though she identified some benefits she also indicated the limitations of congresses and, by extension, the hindrances facing large, multi-focus international women’s organisations. “They have no driving force available for quick action,” she wrote. “A speech heard one day, a word spoken by a delegate, might seem to a wise and experienced listener to necessitate immediate adjustment of presentation or of action. By the time consultation had brought decision by the numerous organisations represented, the speech or the word had vanished into nothingness.”²⁹ This reflected her sharp focus on working with a relatively small committee of women through the ERI on a single issue—the equal rights treaty—to bring about quick and targeted change through the League. As her and Littlejohn’s words show, even among the small sample of individuals whose lives I am exploring there were some who expressed disillusionment about the congress system, especially as the limits of internationalism became clearer as the 1930s wore on.

There were other significant challenges that even those who remained dedicated to the format noted. One was the problem of languages. The use of multiple European languages—usually English, French, and sometimes German or, later, Spanish—could prove obstructive. Some women were impressive linguists. Courtney had read French and German at university, which helped her participate in several of the WILPF’s congresses until she drifted away from the organisation in the early 1930s. Corbett Ashby described herself as “almost bilingual in French and very fluent in German”; as one of her contemporaries praised, she could “say the right thing in four languages.”³⁰ Australian newspapers reported that Littlejohn addressed the Istanbul congress in French and “received a tremendous ovation,” while six years earlier in Berlin Ruby Rich had addressed the Alliance’s peace demonstration in German in a speech

²⁸ Linda Littlejohn, “Some Thoughts on International Conferences. Do They Need Re-Organising?,” *Dawn* (Perth), 24 March 1937, 2.

²⁹ “Manuscript of An Interfering Woman’, being typescript manuscript of Helen Archdale’s autobiography, including handwritten annotations,” Betty Archdale Papers, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney (hereafter SLNSW), chapter 10, 7, MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

³⁰ Margery Corbett Ashby interviewed by Brian Harrison, 8 April 1975, Harrison Interviews, TWL, 8SUF/B/006; “Women’s Congress in Paris,” *Courier and Advertiser* (Dundee), 14 June 1926, 10.

that was “accorded a warm reception and was highly eulogised by the Berlin press.”³¹ Attempts to use these various languages did not always go smoothly, however. As the monolingual Rischbieth wrote to her family: “It takes some following & understanding these days I can assure you.”³² This would have been even more noticeable for those delegates from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, for whom these might have been their second, third, or fourth languages.



Figure 18 Opening of the Alliance's Berlin congress, 1929. The Women's Library, London, 2LAW/1/J/1/5/01. Corbett Ashby is seated on the right.

The size and composition of the crowds drawn to these gatherings varied throughout these two decades. Trends differed somewhat between organisations. The Alliance, the

³¹ “Great Ovation. Sydney Women's French Talk in Turkey,” *Telegraph* (Sydney), 24 April 1935, 8; “The Enfranchisement of Women. A Review of 25 Years' Work. International Congress at Berlin,” *Age* (Melbourne), 27 August 1929, 5; Bessie Rischbieth, “Women of 45 Nations Meet in Berlin. Australian Delegation Led by Former South Australian,” *Observer* (Adelaide), 17 August 1929, 52.

³² Bessie Rischbieth to family, 30 April 1935, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, MS 2004/1/42. Emphasis in the original.

WILPF, and the PPWA hosted their largest gatherings in the years up to 1930, before they (and their members) faced the financial challenges posed by the global depression and the increasing unrest that mounted in the lead up to the Second World War. On the other hand, the ODI's congresses—about which much less is recorded—continued to grow through much of the 1930s. But the most important legacy of interwar international feminist congresses was their increasing diversity. In this respect, the 1920s was a formative decade. The Alliance's 1926 and 1929 congresses were its largest and most diverse during this period, with almost forty national delegations consisting of well over three hundred delegates in total at each.³³ This was a marked increase from the pre-war years; at the 1913 Budapest meeting, for instance, only twenty-two (mostly European) countries were represented.³⁴ Nations from the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and beyond began to send delegations and were even occasionally represented on executive committees. By 1939, larger groups seemed unable to maintain the momentum they had generated a decade earlier; the Alliance's Copenhagen congress shrunk back to consisting of twenty-two delegations and just over two hundred participants.³⁵ Nevertheless, the 1920s were significant in the move to bridge the East–West divide within the global feminist movement.

MORAL & POLITICAL POWER

Throughout the period feminists used international congresses as tools of internationalism. “Some may pour cold criticism upon these triennial gatherings of feminists,” the editor of the *Woman's Leader* wrote in 1929, “and say, pointing to their resolutions or to the printed record of their discussions, that here are a series of pious and very generalized opinions which will leave practical statesmen unruffled and make little or no difference to the constituent organizations working out particular problems in particular countries.” But she rejected the idea that they had no use, highlighting that these events were “ends in themselves as an education in internationalism.”³⁶ Rich expressed a similar idea when, upon her return from the

³³ IAW, *Report of Tenth Congress*; IAW, *Report of the Eleventh Congress*.

³⁴ IWSA, *Report of Seventh Congress, Budapest, Hungary, June 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 1913* (Manchester: Percy Brothers, 1913).

³⁵ IAW, *Report of the Thirteenth Congress*.

³⁶ “The End of the Berlin Conference,” *Woman's Leader* (London), 28 June 1929, 161.

Alliance's 1935 Istanbul meeting (the culmination of over seven years living overseas), she said: "Women everywhere were realising the importance of these international gatherings, and too much emphasis could not be laid on the increasing interdependence of women of the different races: a retrograde step taken in any country reacted against women all over the world."³⁷ By providing a forum in which feminists from around the globe could meet and discuss how to improve women's lives—which they saw as connected by global patterns—the congress was considered a bastion of feminists' moral and political power.

The importance of the fact that international congresses showed feminists they had like-minded counterparts all around the world should not be underestimated. In her interviews with the Australian oral history pioneer, Hazel de Berg, Rich spoke fondly of how such gatherings allowed her to be reunited with her "international family"; Jessie Street who also attended some meetings of this kind similarly said that "[i]t is really wonderful when you are interested in world-wide movements, wherever you go you find friends."³⁸ This rhetoric is striking and reflects how many Western feminists conceptualised connections between women around the world. Though Australians and Britons wielded different amounts of authority within feminist networks, their shared status as white women allowed them to easily see themselves as part of a transnational collective. Some scholars have pointed to the importance of social connections and friendship within international feminist networks, including during this period.³⁹ Paisley, for example, argues that the PPWA "was an association deeply interested in the role of inter-personal relationship and affect in the formulation of a truly international world order."⁴⁰ This reflects what Glenda Sluga identifies as a broader characteristic of the turn to "a new, 'real' internationalism with social as well as political dimensions" in the

³⁷ "Miss Ruby Rich Returns," *Dawn* (Perth), 20 November 1935, 4. Rich's words are paraphrased in this quote.

³⁸ Ruby Rich interviewed by Hazel de Berg, 4 June 1975, Hazel de Berg collection, NLA, ORAL TRC 1/838, Session 7 of 9, 27:56; Jessie Street, *Truth or Repose* (Sydney: Australasian Book Society, 1966), 103.

³⁹ See, for example: Mineke Bosch and Annemarie Kloosterman, eds., *Politics and Friendship: Letters from the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1902–1942* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990); Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, "Loving Internationalism: The Emotion Culture of Transnational Women's Organizations, 1888–1945," *Mobilization: An International Journal* 7, no. 2 (2002): 141–58.

⁴⁰ Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific*, 3, 12. See also: Courtney Sato, "A Picture of Peace?: Friendship in Interwar Pacific Women's Internationalism," *Qui Parle* 27, no. 2 (2018): 477; Fiona Paisley, "Performing 'Interracial Harmony': Settler Colonialism at the 1934 Pan-Pacific Women's Conference in Hawai'i," in *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility, and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire*, ed. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette M. Burton (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 127–146.

twentieth century.⁴¹ While interwar feminists maintained such relationships through activities like personal letter writing in the long stretches of time that these communities were apart, congresses provided a vital space to develop these connections in person.⁴²

This social dimension allowed delegates to develop a sense of camaraderie in the face of their persistent exclusion within their various national communities even once they got the vote, symbolised by issues such as women's struggle to be elected to parliament and their persistent experiences of inequality in marriage. Many feminists emphasised the motivation they drew from the colleagues they met at international congresses. Before she voiced her concerns about their effectiveness, Littlejohn reported favourably on her experience of the Alliance's 1935 Istanbul meeting, which she attended as she went to Europe to take up the ERF's leadership. "I do not think anyone could attend such a conference without catching some of the great spirit of faith and hope of these splendid women," she told readers of the *Australian Women's Weekly*. "In a day or so all will have parted, but all are going back to their respective associations and countries determined to be ever watchful to guard the rights and liberties won ... earnestly believing that they have an immeasurable contribution to give to the world."⁴³ Similarly, Archdale conceded that congresses were "of inestimable value" as they "awaken the dormant, they give courage and hope to the isolated, they inspire the sluggish, they inform the ignorant and are altogether a necessity for the women's movement."⁴⁴ For many, these events provided a positive, even inspiring experience. While these effects were not exactly measurable, congresses were important psychologically for sustaining feminist internationalism across vast distances throughout these two very tumultuous decades and provided an essential basis from which these women could look to extend their influence into the realm of national and international politics.

Interwar feminists increasingly conceptualised transnational solidarity as not only a moral but a practical force. In addition to sustaining the movement from within, through hosting and attending these events they aimed to coordinate women's efforts and combine their ideas and experiences. As the Alliance's president, Corbett Ashby was responsible for

⁴¹ Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 5.

⁴² Mineke Bosch, "Gossipy Letters in the Context of International Feminism," in *Current Issues in Women's History*, ed. Arina Angerman et al. (Oxford: Routledge, 1989), 131–52.

⁴³ Linda Littlejohn, "Most Important Women's Conference," *Australian Women's Weekly*, 18 May 1935, 20.

⁴⁴ "Manuscript of An Interfering Woman," chapter 10, 7, MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

cultivating cohesion to make this lobbyist group more effective and to project a self-assured image to the wider community. The various congresses she hosted across Europe and in Türkiye was one way to encourage the Alliance's members to build a sense of common purpose. In the context of worsening divisions within the organisation over issues like protective legislation and the group's diversity, she proposed that "the vital service" of the 1929 Berlin congress was to resolve tensions "by debate and experiment and the pooling of international experience."⁴⁵ In doing this, she and her contemporaries hoped to present a unified front and thus augment their political power, asserting their legitimacy as actors in the wider worlds of domestic and international politics.

This notion that congresses were practical rather than simply rhetorical tools only strengthened throughout the period as feminists increasingly sought to build a dialogue with the League and influence its policy. Since its inception in January 1920, the League had served as both a source of hope and, increasingly, frustration as it did little to challenge the gendered norms of international politics. Soon after its creation, Macmillan argued that "just as hitherto its [the Alliance's] political work has had to be directed towards the education of individual national parliaments, so in future its work must also include the organising of international co-operation in order to influence the League of Nations."⁴⁶ The congress provided a forum in which this cooperation could take place as well as a symbol to the outside world that women were (supposedly) united; as the *Woman's Leader* stated, congresses were "a demonstration of strength vital to the success of our work with the League of Nations."⁴⁷ The yearly meeting of the League's assembly mirrored the international feminist congress in many ways, bringing together national delegates to discuss matters of shared concern. In this context feminists could see themselves actively engaging with Geneva. In 1935, when the world's faith in the possibilities of international governance was being severely tested by a succession of crises in Spain, Manchuria, and Abyssinia (Ethiopia), Corbett Ashby told her organisation's members that "[o]ur resolutions may be 'scraps of paper' or they may be the signal for energetic concerted action," encouraging them to undertake real, feasible action.⁴⁸ Congresses allowed

⁴⁵ IAW, *Report of the Eleventh Congress*, 47.

⁴⁶ IWSA, *Report of Eighth Congress*, 22.

⁴⁷ "Is an International Congress Worth While?," *Woman's Leader* (London), 25 June 1926, 187.

⁴⁸ Margery Corbett Ashby, "What of the Future? 1935–1938," *International Women's News* 29, no. 7 (April 1935): 53.

feminists to hammer out a shared programme for working with the League. These women thus considered these events as a route to taking a seat at the table of not only domestic but world politics.

The eight women in my group lived in multilayered local, national, international, and imperial worlds. Within the context of the evolving British Empire and Commonwealth, the idea that congresses could consolidate women's power responded to the realities of imperial governance, too. When Rischbieth and Collisson established the BCL, they did so with the aim of "building up a strong WOMAN'S EMPIRE POLITICAL power to be used for good."⁴⁹ Here they reacted not only to the internationalisation of political life more generally but also to the changing dynamics within the Commonwealth, where heads of state met and made decisions at the Imperial Conference, a forum from which women were excluded. The BCL argued that "all alike we need to learn of each other's problems, and of the great duties and responsibilities involved in the decisions at present laid down for us at Commonwealth Headquarters."⁵⁰ In order to confront this problem, the BCL's "first undertaking" was a congress, "which was felt to be essential if a closer understanding between the women of the different parts of the Commonwealth was to follow."⁵¹ By hosting annual meetings like this, Rischbieth and Collisson's group aimed "at giving every woman who comes from overseas the opportunity of realizing what her demand for citizen equality means in terms of power" and "at helping the English citizen woman to realize the enormous reservoir of strength and help through educated opinion and common action on issues of Equal Citizenship which lies in the British citizen women from Overseas."⁵² Whether or not it was effective, the perception that the congress was an important forum through which to build up women's political power in response to their disenfranchisement elsewhere was strong. The quest for women's rights was understood to be entangled across multiple spheres: from the nation, to the empire, to the world.

⁴⁹ British Commonwealth League (hereafter BCL), *Women and Oversea Settlement and Some Problems of Government. Being a Report of Conference Held June 22nd and 23rd 1926* (London: BCL, 1926), 8. Capitalisation in the original.

⁵⁰ BCL, *Report of Conference "The Citizen Rights of Women within the British Empire." Caxton Hall July 9th & 10th, 1925* (London: BCL, 1925), 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵² BCL, *Report of Conference 1926*, 8.

At these meetings, participants also sought to strengthen the feminist movement back home. Reflecting on her leadership of the Alliance, Corbett Ashby explained that “we had congresses at which we tried to hammer out a universal programme that could be interpreted and expanded or reduced according to the national conditions.”⁵³ She further recalled that “at one time each country could send 20 delegates” to Alliance congresses, “so you got a very well-informed forum for discussing what pressures could be put on separate governments.” The organisation was “never allowed to approach a government without the prior consent of the national [committee]”, however, as “foreign interference might do more harm than good.”⁵⁴ Rather, on the international level feminists sought to draw attention to common problems and discuss solutions that could be taken home at the end of the congress week. In this spirit, Rischbieth’s attendance at the first PPWC was an effort to grapple with Australia’s geographic reality. She told the delegates: “May we hope that one of the outcoming results of this first Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference will be a deepened interest into the examination of our respective government’s programs when dealing with problems which are likely to interact.”⁵⁵ In addition to the inspiration feminists derived from these meetings, they also found practical support for their domestic campaigns, especially when they were dealing with shared issues.

Within the context of the British Empire and Commonwealth, the idea of convening on an international or imperial level to achieve progress at home was particularly strong. At the first BCL conference—centred on the topic of “The Citizen Rights of Women within the British Empire”—Corbett Ashby took on the role of president. She said: “We feel that by bringing together in close contact the women of the Commonwealth who believe in equality and liberty we shall speed up the passage of laws extending such equality.”⁵⁶ Here she had in mind issues such as women’s nationality rights, which were legislated on an empire-wide level. Indeed, when Rich spoke to the 1932 BCL conference several years later (a time when she was living in London and acting as a liaison between Australian women and organisations like this one based in the metropole), she echoed such sentiments. Focusing on efforts to implement

⁵³ Corbett Ashby interviewed by Harrison, 8SUF/B/006.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference (hereafter PPWC), *Women of the Pacific: Being a Record of the Proceedings of the First Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference which was held in Honolulu from the 9th to the 19th of August 1928, Under the Auspices of the Pan-Pacific Union* (Honolulu: Pan-Pacific Union, 1928), 183.

⁵⁶ BCL, *Report of Conference 1925*, 24.

the compulsory testing of sex workers in Queensland, she said: “But by your unanimous support of this Resolution we shall strengthen the hands of those working on this matter in Australia, and may help to bring Queensland into line with the rest of the Empire, and thereby help towards a levelling-up which is one of the fundamental aims of the British Commonwealth League.”⁵⁷ In part, the sharing of experience that occurred at congresses was intended to help boost local feminist efforts by offering advice on how best to tackle problems of gender equality. As Corbett Ashby put it in her oral history interviews, part of the congress’ work was “to exchange experience as to the best way to getting publicity over, and how to put pressure on governments.”⁵⁸ Whether or not this was always effective, feminists largely seemed to believe in the value of such efforts. This points to the fact that congresses often operated on the level of psychology or morale, sustaining feminist efforts throughout the period.



Figure 19 International Congress of Women, The Hague, 1915. LSE Archives, WILPF/2009/18/1.

⁵⁷ BCL, “Marriage from the Imperial Standpoint.” *The Civil Rights of Married Women. Inter-racial Unions. Report of Conference held on June 7th, 8th & 9th, 1932* (London: British Commonwealth League, 1932), 28.

⁵⁸ Margery Corbett Ashby interviewed by Brian Harrison, 21 September 1976, Harrison Interviews, TWL, 8SUF/B/106.

This is not to say that congresses were always unifying events. They were also sites of contestation and debate where feminists articulated their diverging opinions and rethought their priorities, goals, and approaches as the period wore on and the dynamics of their wider political contexts shifted. By the early 1930s Courtney was in conflict with the WILPF. She identified the WILPF's 1926 Dublin congress as a flashpoint that revealed major divisions within the organisation. A deep-seated "difference of opinion" had been present from the WILPF's founding, she explained, saying that it was "difficult to characterise" but "at the moment it expresses itself in the view of the one party that nothing can be achieved without revolution as opposed to the other attitude of mind which looks for progress by evolutionary methods."⁵⁹ This group sat at the intersection of different worldviews, and some of its members believed the possibilities presented by socialism.⁶⁰ While each delegate would have interpreted the course of events differently, for Courtney, meeting in person with her WILPF colleagues cemented her worries rather than alleviating them. As the following section shows, non-Western women also experienced congresses in ways that called into question the sometimes-idealised visions of solidarity that were promoted, drawing attention to the many ways in which they and their experiences were overlooked and excluded.

My subjects and many others attended international feminist congresses throughout the interwar period, even when finances became more limited over the course of the 1930s. They believed in the symbolic and practical benefits these flagship events offered. By facilitating a range of personal, transnational, and—as the next section explores—interracial interactions, congresses could generate a sense of feminist solidarity that transcended borders and project this image onto the world to strengthen the feminist cause. Moreover, by offering a space for women to pool their knowledge and experience, congresses were conceptualised as an important tool for tackling inequality across various levels, from the local to the international. While they could be characterised by conflict and contestation, many emphasised a view of the congress as an empowering experience that reinforced their internationalist

⁵⁹ "The British Section W.I.L. and the International W.I.L.," Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, British Section Papers (hereafter WIL Papers), Politics, Economics, and Social Science Collections, London School of Economics Archives, London (hereafter LSE), File 2, WILPF/2009/5/1.

⁶⁰ Sarah Hellowell explores the different intellectual traditions that coalesced in the WILPF and its British section. See: Sarah Hellowell, "Feminism, Pacifism and Internationalism: The Women's International League, 1915–1935" (PhD thesis, Northumbria University, 2017).

beliefs and provided a strong foundation from which they began to stake a claim as political actors in other, non-exclusively feminist spaces as well. Through meeting with each other they gained the experience needed to take their ideas to the meetings of other bodies such as the League.

AN ONGOING EDUCATION

Congresses did not simply reinforce a closed vision of who was included in the international feminist community or of internationalism, however. The logistics of travel and the luxuries of time and money meant that it was largely those with personal (or family or friends') wealth who could afford to venture abroad for an international feminist meeting; class was thus a core foundation of interwar feminist internationalism, just as it had been in earlier decades.⁶¹ Yet, while it was often wealthy, white women who made up the congress body (especially in the earlier years), over time increasing numbers of elites from outside the West (but notably no Australian Indigenous women) also represented their countries. These gatherings thus provided fora for delegates to build cross-cultural relationships and to encounter firsthand a growing range of perspectives, problems, and people. Moreover, they functioned as educative spaces in which non-Western women could voice their concerns, share their own experiences, and encourage their Western colleagues—who sometimes actively engaged in these discussions, if to varying degrees—to rethink their assumptions about the purposes of feminism and internationalism. In this respect, the interwar period was crucial for the piecemeal development of feminist internationalism into a somewhat more multifaceted and inclusive tradition. Through learning about the varied experiences of women around the world, some began to problematise the core assumptions of feminist internationalism, including its imperial legacies, privileging of Western voices, and inherent focus on white women's rights.

From the late nineteenth century many feminists uncritically invoked the notion of "sisterhood" to describe and cement their bonds with women overseas. Such rhetoric persisted during the interwar years and after. In 1923 the *West Australian* reported that "Mrs. Rischbieth had pleasant memories of several meetings of the [Alliance's Rome] congress, when women

⁶¹ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 52–55.

representing the various nations met as sisters and talked as in the parliament of the world.”⁶² Women outside the West, too, used such language to highlight women’s unified purpose and take up their position in existing networks.⁶³ This concept has been rightly critiqued as unproblematically lauding women’s commonalities and obscuring how race, class, nationality, sexuality, and other factors intersect with gender to produce varied experiences of womanhood.⁶⁴ In some cases, the cross-cultural encounters fostered by international congresses led feminists to reinforce the universality of women’s oppression. Macmillan, for example—who only attended North American and Europe-based events throughout the period—asserted in 1920 “how similar are the difficulties of the women both of the East and of the West,” demonstrating an ignorance of the specific burdens suffered by Indigenous women and women of colour.⁶⁵ Yet at the same time, as Paisley asserts of the PPWA, the fact that women met across cultural lines was significant.⁶⁶ While obscuring differences, attempts at finding a sense of commonality and connection allowed the movement to develop an awareness of the need to represent more than just a white, Euro-American woman’s experience.

Feminists placed increasing emphasis on intercultural connections and the diversity of delegates at international congresses to demonstrate the great extent of women’s solidarity, epitomised by Corbett Ashby’s claim that the Alliance “was a proud pioneer in multi-racial relations” (a statement that obfuscated the efforts made across Asia, the Middle East, the Pacific, and elsewhere that much more forcefully pushed for diversity).⁶⁷ For her part, Rich felt that the Alliance’s 1935 Istanbul congress was “particularly important, in that it provided an opportunity for the women of the East and the West to meet on common ground to discuss their individual problems and benefit by their individual experience.”⁶⁸ This idea of congresses providing an intercultural meeting point was particularly prominent in the BCL. Reflecting on

⁶² “Rome Congress. Enfranchisement of Women. World-Wide Solidarity. Australian President Interviewed,” *West Australian* (Perth), 20 October 1923, 12.

⁶³ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 82–3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 6, 82–3.

⁶⁵ IWSA, *Report of Eighth Congress*, 26.

⁶⁶ Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific*, 3, 12.

⁶⁷ Margery Corbett Ashby with Michael Ashby, *Memoirs of Dame Margery Corbett Ashby* (Horsted Keynes: M.G. Ashby, 1996), 171.

⁶⁸ “Miss Ruby Rich,” *Argus* (Melbourne), 9 November 1935, 18. Rich’s words are paraphrased here.

her experiences of the organisation's events, Rischbieth wrote: "These Conferences have provided a meeting ground for Dominion women, and for the many women of all races, creeds and colours living under the British flag."⁶⁹ By emphasising the racial diversity of these meetings, these women portrayed feminist solidarity as transcending the East–West divide—a feat that international politics needed to accomplish, too.

It was primarily through such gatherings that Australian feminists were able to begin expanding their circles and engaging with women outside the West. From the late 1920s, Rischbieth and her Australian colleagues made deliberate efforts to establish connections with non-Western women, including in the Pacific. Before they made the journey to Hawai'i they had already experienced some opportunities to meet non-Western women through Europe-based networks. While Rischbieth made much of this fact in letters to the *Dawn* from the Alliance's 1923 Rome congress, she also used orientalist language and invoked racial stereotypes when recording these experiences. She relayed her explorations of Rome, writing about how she was "accompanied by a little Japanese delegate in full national dress," a "quaint little figure" who "added an extra charm to the occasion."⁷⁰ Over time, Rischbieth and some of her compatriots sought to connect with non-Western women more meaningfully. The PPWA congresses held in Honolulu—"a laboratory of social and racial relationships"—was one site for experimentation with new modes of interracial feminist cooperation.⁷¹ In a letter to Rischbieth, the Japanese feminist Inouye Hide expressed her view that "[t]he Pan-Pacific Women's Conference has been a great success in bringing together the women of the Pacific countries."⁷² But such relationships were governed by complex power dynamics and "often consolidated, rather than dismantled, hierarchies of race, nationality, class, gender, and sexuality."⁷³ While this is important to bear in mind, the fact that congresses fostered such connections at all represented a significant shift in interwar feminism. Though limited in some respects—including by white women's presumption that they would be leaders in the Pacific

⁶⁹ Bessie Rischbieth, *March of Australian Women: A Record of Fifty Years' Struggle for Equal Citizenship* (Perth: Paterson Brokensha, 1964), 121.

⁷⁰ "Letter from Mrs. Rischbieth," *Dawn* (Perth), 14 August 1923, 2.

⁷¹ "The Pan Pacific Women's Conference Honolulu T.H., August, 1928. Report of the Australia Delegation," Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 15, File 9, MS 2004/6/261.

⁷² "Links of Friendship with Pacific Countries," *Dawn* (Perth), 12 December 1928, 14.

⁷³ Sato, "A Picture of Peace," 479. In her work on New Zealand delegates to the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference of 1934, Paisley has examined the complex dynamics of the relationships between Pākehā (white) and Māori women. See: Paisley, "Performing 'Interracial Harmony'."

and the exclusion of Australian Indigenous women (among others)—the fact that women formed interracial connections from the late 1920s helped expand the scope of the movement to at least some degree.



Figure 20 Australian delegation to the International Woman Suffrage Alliance congress in Rome, 1923. National Library of Australia, PIC Box PIC/8995 #PIC/8995a. Rischbieth is seated in the middle of the front row.

Discussion, debate, and reflection were central to the congress experience. These gatherings allowed feminists to share their widely differing experiences and learn about women's subordination—and efforts to resist this subordination—around the world. The Australian women in this study in particular saw this as a learning opportunity, especially at the beginning of the interwar period. When Rischbieth first experienced one of these events in 1923, she described this as a “valuable experience” that had been highly anticipated by the Australian delegates. “We have seen and talked with many of the delegations from other

countries,” she said, “and this personal contact helps to create a better understanding.”⁷⁴ She later remarked: “Australia is 10,000 miles removed from Europe, and such international contacts with the Old World as the Rome Congress provide our Australian women with valuable educational opportunities in World Citizenship.”⁷⁵ Even at the end of the interwar period Rischbieth maintained that “the development of Australian women has been very greatly influenced in recent years by international contacts. Our women have gone overseas to international conferences in considerable numbers. It is impossible to estimate the broader vision that has come to us.”⁷⁶ From her perspective, there was much that Australian women could learn from the transatlantic feminist pioneers.

But congresses did more than simply pass on established wisdom from the “old world” countries to the new. While at first the teaching was somewhat didactic and shaped by imperialist assumptions, with women from the centre intending to uplift their supposedly less fortunate “sisters,” over time this educative dimension came to be more reciprocal, involving teaching as well as learning, sharing as well as receiving. One writer noted that “[i]f one is an advanced philosopher from an efficient society of a progressive country, one is more likely to give than to receive at a Congress,” however they also questioned: “But is there any nation so self-satisfied and so perfect that it can learn nothing from intercourse with other nations[?]”⁷⁷ During the days of women’s suffrage campaigning in the early twentieth century Macmillan had painted Britain as a leader of the struggle who would guide other countries.⁷⁸ But by the interwar years she was looking elsewhere for inspiration, too (although did not look beyond Europe’s boundaries). Echoing the comments that she had made at the ODI’s congress in Stockholm, in 1935 she said: “The Open Door International is proud and happy to be meeting here in Copenhagen, in the beautiful House of Parliament of the country of our upstanding Danish sisters, who are showing the way to the women of the world in their struggle for the

⁷⁴ Rischbieth, “World Citizenship,” 7.

⁷⁵ Rischbieth, *March of Australian Women*, 136.

⁷⁶ “Women in Public Life. Forces Which Have Advanced or Hindered their Progress,” c. 1938, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 2, File 5, MS 2004/2/48.

⁷⁷ “Is an International Congress Worth While?,” 187.

⁷⁸ Chrystal Macmillan, *The Struggle for Political Liberty (A Lecture Given on February, 16th, 1909)* (London: National Women’s Social and Political Union, 1909), 2–3.

economic emancipation of the woman worker. ... This support gives new courage.”⁷⁹ Congresses like this one provided opportune spaces for British feminists to learn and derive hope from their overseas colleagues.

Over time, the teaching and learning that occurred at congresses became an increasingly two-way (though still asymmetric) exchange. For those who had not been at the helm of international women’s organisations since their early years, the interwar period offered chances to teach these “pioneer” women about the feminist movement back home. For Australians this impulse became increasingly strong, especially after the BCL and the PPWA were formed from the mid-1920s. Rischbieth saw this as a particularly important opportunity for Australian women, who were geographically distant from the traditional Northern Hemisphere epicentre of feminist internationalism. In a 1925 letter to the American-born British politician Nancy Astor, she wrote: “If I may be permitted to say so it appears to one that women & men pin their faith so much to Europe for a solution of their problems & seem to have little real realisation of the enormous potentialities of the great Overseas Dominions with their vigorous new life.”⁸⁰ Similarly, the *Sydney Morning Herald* quoted her saying that “[t]he women of Britain were great students of international questions, but they concentrated on Europe generally. They forgot, before the league was formed, to study the policies of the dominions, which had to be dealt with before Britain could voice her policy internationally.”⁸¹ From its very inception, the BCL and its conferences were intended to give dominion women a voice and to allow them to open the minds of their British colleagues.

This was even more significant when non-Western women used congresses, including those in Europe, as platforms to challenge the core assumptions of Western feminist internationalism. The presence of non-Western women at congresses did not on its own directly lead to the movement becoming meaningfully more diverse, but the congress allowed these women to voice their opinions and push their Western colleagues to rethink their ideas about international cooperation among women. When in explicitly international spaces such as these, my group could not ignore the issues of race and diversity that were becoming more and more visible. In Istanbul in 1935, several of them—including those who had only

⁷⁹ Open Door International, *Report of the Fourth Conference in Copenhagen, August 19th—23rd, 1935* (Geneva and London: Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker, 1935), 8.

⁸⁰ Bessie Rischbieth to Lady Astor, 9 June 9 1925, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 7, File 7, MS 2004/5/329.

⁸¹ “Woman’s Vote. International Affairs,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney), 16 October 1926, 12.

participated in European meetings—were confronted with the problems of expanding what was essentially a white women’s movement into a more global one. At the Sultan’s palace they would have heard the Indian Muslim, feminist, and nationalist Shareefa Hamid Ali speak on the topic “East and West in Cooperation.” Her words were powerful. “We desire your help in friendliness and fellowship, we need your moral support and your vast organising capacities to enable us to discard hampering customs and traditions which have been strangling us,” Ali explained. She felt that feminists’ goals could be achieved by “uniting our forces, by strengthening one another, by exchange of data and experience concerning the condition of women in our respective countries.” But she cautioned her Western colleagues against patronising “Eastern” women. “We seek your Co-operation in attaining this ideal—common to all countries and to all civilisations,” she told the congress, but warned them that “any arrogant assumption of superiority or of patronage on the part of Europe or America ... will alienate Asia and Africa.” She asserted that the “women of the East” wanted their Western sisters to be “friendly and not enforced guides” who would provide “cordiality and human fellowship” rather than “tutelage and patronage.” “We in Asia have also our own contributions to make to the civilisation of the world. ... Let us try and give of our best to each other,” she told her audience.⁸² Throughout the period non-Western women increasingly took to the podium to share their views and voice their criticisms of the movement.

This contributed to a shift in which Western women became increasingly (but not fully) cognisant of the limited scope of their movement and sometimes inspired them to extend their education beyond the confines of the congress through activities such as self-directed travel. As Paisley has said of the PPWA’s conferences, they “were intended to be transformative experiences.”⁸³ From the late 1920s, there was a sense that non-Western women had special knowledge and experience that could benefit the movement more broadly. In light of the changing power dynamics of this period, in which non-Westerners demanded to be seen as autonomous political agents, congresses also offered an education in this changing world. After the first PPWC, Rischbieth and the Australian delegation reported that the event had

⁸² Shareefa Hamid Ali, “East and West in Cooperation: Speech Delivered to the Conference of the International Alliance of Women, Istanbul, April 1935,” International Alliance of Women Records, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Libraries, Northampton, MA, SSC-MS-00313, Box 3, Folder 2, accessed via Women and Social Movements, International, database, hosted by Alexander Street Press, <https://search.alexanderstreet.com/wasi>.

⁸³ Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific*, 41.

“wakened Australian women to the realisation of a new focus in international affairs, and a new relationship with the Woman Movement of the world.”⁸⁴ This new focus extended beyond white women’s rights only. As Rischbieth had said at the conference: “We women of the new world come with a new symbol in our hand, ‘the symbol of opportunity,’ to meet the women of the East steeped in the rich experience of civilizations stretched down the ladder of time.”⁸⁵ Commenting on the 1939 BCL conference, she said: “In such a gathering as this, Australian women have a great opportunity of meeting women from East and West, living under the British Flag—This is an education in itself.”⁸⁶ The educative function of congresses, alongside the social connections they fostered, were important for pushing individuals to develop their thinking and bridge the East–West divide.

Finally, international congresses also provided a means of learning about internationalism itself. As the *Woman’s Leader* article quoted earlier argued: “it is certain enough that the citizens of a world whose national survival depends on the efficient functioning of international machinery must learn the difficult technique of internationalism or perish.”⁸⁷ With the world having just witnessed the potentially devastating effects of jingoism, internationalist ideals were presented as a better alternative. Indeed, Rischbieth identified that one task “of these gatherings is to sow the seed of internationalism.”⁸⁸ This drives home the fact that internationalism was an ideal developed in motion and in tension with the growing nationalism of the 1930s. Meeting across national borders, forging personal, transnational, and interracial connections, and seeking to learn all formed part of the development of this education in internationalism. By incorporating non-Western women into these events, even in incremental degrees, the very conception of internationalism among the feminist community grew to incorporate a greater emphasis on interracial cooperation and inclusion—an important legacy of this period.

⁸⁴ “Australian Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference Committee, Report presented to the Third Triennial Conference of the Australian Federation of Women Voters, May, 1930,” Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 15, File 6, MS 2004/6/164.

⁸⁵ PPWC, *Proceedings of the First Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference*, 186.

⁸⁶ “British Commonwealth League Conference,” *Dawn* (Perth), 15 February 1939, 4.

⁸⁷ “The End of the Berlin Conference,” 161–2.

⁸⁸ “Forth-Coming Congresses—Empire and International,” c. 1926, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 2, File 5, MS 2004/2/56.

CONCLUSION

International feminist congresses were a significant feature of interwar feminist internationalism. For the women at the heart of this thesis they provided exciting opportunities to travel abroad, meet colleagues from overseas, share their own ideas, and learn from one another. In her memoirs, Corbett Ashby proudly pointed out that between 1904 and 1976 she had only missed two of the Alliance's congresses: one when she "was newly married," and the second in 1976, "only because at 94 I felt too old to travel."⁸⁹ After growing substantially in size and scope throughout the 1920s, the economic and political pressures that shaped the remainder of the period posed challenges to congress organisers. Nevertheless, my group and their contemporaries continued to place great importance on these tangible expressions of feminist internationalism until the outbreak of the Second World War, travelling abroad to meet with their colleagues from around the world right up till 1939.

Despite their limitations, feminists frequently saw congresses as a means of building strength within their community, developing connections, and solidifying women's political power both at home and internationally. Throughout the period, delegates from an increasing range of places around the world were able to meet and develop relationships that generated solidarity in the pursuit of a common goal: better rights for women. The sense of community garnered in these forums was in itself very important for sustaining the growing movement, although at times these events highlighted rising tensions and conflicts within organisations. Despite this, most of my group hoped that by pooling experience they could strengthen their efforts at home. And, by displaying women's solidarity to the world, they aimed to augment their political power on an international level and enter a serious dialogue with the League.

Congresses did not reinforce a static or rigid vision of feminist internationalism, however. Rather, they provided spaces in which the parameters and core assumptions of the movement could be expanded and contested. Although racialised power dynamics shaped the encounters that were had at these meetings, over time there was an increasing emphasis on bridging the East–West divide. By incorporating a wider range of women into the "sisterhood" of this community, these meetings helped to make feminist internationalism more inclusive and look beyond the rights of white women only. This was bolstered by their strong educative

⁸⁹ Corbett Ashby, *Memoirs*, 57–8.

dimensions. They presented a learning opportunity: attendees could learn from one another, share their experiences, challenge established views, and go home equipped with more knowledge and confidence than before. While initially it was assumed that enfranchised (and almost exclusively white) women would be able to uplift their less fortunate “sisters,” the learning, sharing, and teaching that occurred here became slightly more fluid and reciprocal over time. Australian feminists began to speak up about their own experiences in the 1920s. Increasingly, they too had to listen as non-Western women challenged the Eurocentrism of the movement. This pushed feminist internationalism to become somewhat more cognisant of the limits of its global vision by the end of the 1930s.

As my group’s experiences show, congresses were critical to the development of feminists’ ideas about gender, power, and internationalism. As the *Woman’s Leader* summed up: “An international headquarters and monthly paper are useless unless the organization finds soul and voice and personality in a congress.”⁹⁰ By facilitating a range of personal, transnational, and interracial encounters within an educative framework, congresses enabled the incremental growth of feminist internationalism into a more inclusive and politically assertive tradition, allowing its members to gain experience and build confidence as political actors. Considering the congress as a constitutive component of internationalist thought, rather than merely an expression of it, helps to illuminate the development of this intellectual tradition during the interwar period, revealing these two decades to be formative for the longer trajectory of feminism as a social movement.

⁹⁰ “Is an International Congress Worth While?,” 187.

CHAPTER 3

The International at Home



Figure 21 Bessie Rischbieth in her study at her home Unalla, 5 View Street, Peppermint Grove, 1927. State Library of Western Australia, 014475PD.

Internationalism did not always bring movement and adventure. While feminists made much of their visits to vibrant hubs like Geneva and Honolulu and sometimes enjoyed extended periods abroad, practical and material necessities meant that they spent most of their time within their nations' borders. Here they participated in local activist networks, passing countless hours in committee meetings and on administrative work, sharing their ideas with broader publics, and lobbying governments, all while preparing for future jaunts abroad. Bessie

Rischbieth was famed for having travelled widely, but as her contemporary Julia Rapke noted, this never “spoilt her for the work that lay at hand in her native Australia.”¹ Throughout these years Rischbieth maintained residence at her stately home in Peppermint Grove, one of Perth’s most affluent suburbs, and frequently travelled across to the east coast to meet with politicians and colleagues.² Despite enjoying much shorter distances between key cities, many British feminists coalesced around London. Chrystal Macmillan, for example, took her place among her fellow barristers at 4 Pump Court in Temple, the legal heart of the city, while Kathleen Courtney would regularly have been seen traversing Bloomsbury and Fitzrovia, flitting between meetings of the various organisations to which she belonged. The day-to-day fabric of these women’s lives was closely woven into their local settings. But this did not mean that they were isolated—materially or conceptually—from the rest of the world when they were at home. The evolving British Empire and Commonwealth fundamentally shaped their political realities, imaginations, and approaches to activism. And in an increasingly connected international context—epitomised by the League of Nations (the League)—these aspiring global citizens saw linkages between their immediate settings and the wider world, envisaging their fight as part of an even larger process, too.

In a bid to challenge the primacy of the nation-state in historical research and access the border-crossing dimensions of women’s activism, stories of feminist internationalism have often focused on explicitly international spaces, as I have also done so far in this thesis.³ Nationally bound histories of interwar feminism have sometimes incorporated women’s international connections into their narratives, including through comparison, but to varying degrees. Scholars have for some time rejected conventional timelines centring on the demise of feminism in the British Isles after the First World War. Whereas in the 1980s Brian Harrison

¹ Julia Rapke, “Bessie Rischbieth,” Papers on various Australian women, National Library of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NLA), MS 842.

² Dianne Davidson asserts that “[d]uring the inter-war period Rischbieth spent more time on the eastern coast and overseas than she did in her home base of Western Australia, and she was a familiar figure in Canberra.” See: Dianne Davidson, “A Citizen of Australia and of the World: A Reappraisal of Bessie Mabel Rischbieth,” *Studies in Western Australian History*, no. 19 (1999): 111.

³ Just a couple of key examples of this approach include: Carol Miller, “Lobbying the League: Women’s International Organizations and the League of Nations” (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1992); Fiona Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific: Cultural Internationalism and Race Politics in the Women’s Pan-Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009); Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women’s Movement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Marie Sandell, *The Rise of Women’s Transnational Activism: Identity and Sisterhood Between the World Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

attributed this supposed decline in domestic activism to the fact that feminists “moved off into pacifist and internationalist work,” since then historians have been less rigid in drawing a boundary between these spheres.⁴ But many maintain an inward-looking focus or, as Julie Gottlieb puts it, a “‘domestic’ framework” that has largely focused on the decade after suffrage only.⁵ In the Australian case, scholars have explored feminists’ global connections in a more sustained way. This has been influenced by the particularities of Australian historiography, which was shaped by a later adoption of the nation as a category of analysis, early feminist challenges to the mainstream narratives of Australian national history, and a strong emphasis on transnational and new imperial frameworks.⁶ Fiona Paisley, for instance, has revealed the connections between feminists’ participation in international and imperial networks and their advocacy on behalf of Aboriginal women.⁷ James Keating and Zora Simic have also explored Sydney-based feminist organisations and their connections to the international arena.⁸ Largely, however, discussions of Australian interwar feminists’ international connections look to their experiences overseas rather than how the international shaped—or emerged from—their lives

⁴ Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists Between the Wars* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1987), 7. Sarah Hellawell, for example, places the Women’s International League (the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom’s British branch) “firmly in the British women’s movement.” See: Sarah Hellawell, “Feminism, Pacifism and Internationalism: The Women’s International League, 1915–1935” (PhD thesis, Northumbria University, 2017), 3.

⁵ Julie V. Gottlieb, “‘The Women’s Movement Took the Wrong Turning’: British Feminists, Pacifism and the Politics of Appeasement,” *Women’s History Review* 23, no. 3 (2014): 445.

⁶ On the novelty of the nation in Australian history, see: Ann Curthoys, “We’ve Just Started Making National Histories, and You Want Us to Stop Already?,” in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking With and Through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 70–89. On feminist challenges to Australian national history, see: Marilyn Lake, “Feminist History as National History: Writing the Political History of Women,” *Australian Historical Studies* 27, no. 106 (1996): 158–69. On the tensions between national and transnational frameworks for feminist historians (like for historical feminists themselves), see: Ann Curthoys, “A Feminist Voice,” in *Australian History Now*, ed. Anna Clark and Paul Ashton (Sydney: NewSouth, 2013), 56–72; Marilyn Lake, “Nationalist Historiography, Feminist Scholarship, and the Promise and Problems of New Transnational Histories: The Australian Case,” *Journal of Women’s History* 19, no. 1 (2007): 180–86; Marilyn Lake, “Histories Across Borders,” in Clark and Ashton, *Australian History Now*, 269–87.

⁷ Fiona Paisley, *Loving Protection?: Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women’s Rights, 1919–1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000), especially chapter 2. See also: Marilyn Lake, “Feminism and the Gendered Politics of Antiracism, Australia 1927–1957: From Maternal Protectionism to Leftist Assimilationism,” *Australian Historical Studies* 29, no. 110 (1998): 91–108; Fiona Paisley, “White Women in the Field: Feminism, Cultural Relativism and Aboriginal Rights, 1920–1937,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 21, no. 52 (1997): 113–25; Angela Woollacott, “Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms: Australian Women’s Internationalist Activism in the 1920s–30s,” *Gender & History* 10, no. 3 (1998): 425–48.

⁸ James Keating, “‘Woman as Wife, Mother, and Home-Maker’: Equal Rights International and Australian Feminists’ Interwar Advocacy for Mothers’ Economic Rights,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47, no. 4 (2022): 957–85; Zora Simic, “A Hall of Selective Mirrors: Feminism, History and Identity 1919–1969” (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2003).

and work at home (a space I conceptualise in terms of their imagined and physical positioning within their local and national settings).⁹ There is more yet to be done in both contexts to better understand how feminists' ideas about cooperation across borders developed in spaces we would not typically think of as "international"—how local experience produced and influenced internationalist ideas.

To give a multi-dimensional picture of the eight members of my group and their stories, it is important to recognise that the less globally mobile moments that dominated their lives were still deeply connected to their wider imperial and international worlds. They all participated in various local and national feminist organisations throughout the period. Over the following pages I focus on a selection of these sites of activism, referring to them collectively as "domestic" feminist organisations. My approach here responds to some recent invocations to look for ideas about cross-border cooperation and global governance in alternative spaces. In 2019, for instance, a special issue of the *Journal of Australian Studies* titled "Everyday Cultures of Australian Internationalism in the Mid-20th Century" (edited by Kate Darian-Smith, Catriona Elder, and Paisley) sought to examine internationalism "within and beyond formal international activity enacted overseas," challenging readers to reconsider where they look for evidence of such thinking.¹⁰ In response, in this chapter I ask: How did the international feature in domestic feminist efforts? Were ideas about internationalism developed in local or national feminist contexts, and how did these locales shape such thinking? Did feminists' internationalism direct their campaigns at home (or vice versa)? The minute books, correspondence, newspaper clippings, and policy documents that are collected in both organisational and personal archives allow me to trace my group's varied activities and offer some answers to these questions.

An internationalist outlook was central to my group's domestic activism; in turn, the different priorities that emerged from their daily lives shaped their hopes for transnational collaboration and global governance. As in the pre-war period, they frequently discussed developments overseas to bolster their efforts at home. On top of this, the obstacles they

⁹ The international in interwar feminism (mostly with a focus on overseas groups such as the British Commonwealth League) features in the following important texts: Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), especially 154–75; Paisley, *Loving Protection?*; Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific*; Woollacott, "Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms."

¹⁰ Kate Darian-Smith, Catriona Elder, and Fiona Paisley, "'Are We Internationally Minded?' Everyday Cultures of Australian Internationalism in the mid-20th Century," *Journal of Australian Studies* 43, no. 4 (2019): 406–7.

encountered in achieving reform beyond voting rights, as well as the introduction of new global conventions, drove them to direct their energies internationally towards institutions like the League as well. These activists engaged in conversations about women's rights across the globe not only to maintain a sense of transnational feminist solidarity but also to assert their place as actors in national and international politics, which they saw as increasingly connected. Internationalism, then, was a means to fulfil their full potential as equal citizens. Importantly, as white Australian and British women, their perspectives were also mediated through a third framework: empire.¹¹ In the context of growing debate about maintaining imperial unity and mounting anticolonial dissent, the international could not be divorced from the imperial. From their distinct positions within imperial power structures, to create change these women had to contend not just with their own governments and legal systems but with those across the empire. This led them to promote an idealised pan-imperial feminist community—a romanticised vision that was undermined by the experiences of non-white members of the British Empire and Commonwealth, including Indian and Indigenous women. Even when tackling domestic issues, my subjects were constantly thinking of their work within the multilayered and co-constitutive frameworks of the nation, the empire, and the world and understood internationalism as a strategic way to effect change across these interconnected arenas. Their ideas about and practices of internationalism were thus continually in motion even when they themselves were relatively still.

BECOMING FEMINISTS, BECOMING INTERNATIONALISTS

Before they became involved with the international scene, domestic women's organisations had been central to my group's early politicisation as feminists. As June Hannam argues in her work on suffrage activism beyond London, the local sphere reveals much about "the process by which women became politicised and the meaning of political activity in their lives."¹² Understanding how and why these women became ardent feminist internationalists requires

¹¹ Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton argue that "European empires created a kind of 'cartographic imagination' that was central in the emergence of how the domain of 'the global' was understood during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." See: Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, "Empires and the Reach of the Global," in *A World Connecting 1870–1945*, ed. Emily S. Rosenberg (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2012), 285.

¹² June Hannam, "I had not been to London?: Women's Suffrage—A View from the Regions," in *Votes for Women*, ed. June Purvis and Sandra Stanley Holton (London: Routledge, 2000), 229.

looking to their roots and to the mechanisms that allowed them to expand their thinking beyond their immediate settings. They usually did not jump straight into international organising, instead expanding their visions outwards from their own contexts as they became more experienced and connected with wider circles of like-minded people. Personal relationships, family ties, and higher education all helped women develop their feminist thinking, introducing them to groups where their feminist sympathies crystallised and were turned into action. Here, their own encounters with the limitations that society imposed on women met with a sense of collective experience that allowed them to conceptualise gender oppression as a much larger, more varied phenomenon. In time, this feminist consciousness grew into an internationalist one, too.

For those members of my group based in Britain, the women's suffrage movement underpinned their birth as active feminist campaigners. It is worth briefly revisiting this earlier period of their lives to show how central domestic causes such as the vote were to their journey towards internationalism and to give context for their involvement in interwar feminist organisations based in London. The increasing access to higher education that women were beginning to enjoy was one important route to organised feminism. For Chrystal Macmillan, this took place at the University of Edinburgh.¹³ In 1906, the Scottish universities' parliamentary seat was up for election, but women did not receive ballot papers.¹⁴ Macmillan helped form the Committee of Women Graduates of the Scottish Universities (Parliamentary Franchise) and challenged this decision not only in the Scottish courts but at the Bar of the House of Lords in London.¹⁵ Her arguments fell on deaf ears, yet this personal experience of exclusion sparked a lifelong commitment that saw Macmillan connect with other suffrage groups based in Scotland and London under the banner of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). This soon paved the way for her to become active in international suffrage politics and point to developments abroad to boost her case.¹⁶ Kathleen Courtney

¹³ Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866–1928* (London: Routledge, 1999), 363.

¹⁴ J. Chrystal Macmillan, "The Scottish Women Graduates' Lawsuit," *Votes for Women* (London), December 1907, 34.

¹⁵ Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, 363–4; *Report of the Scottish Women Graduates Appeal in the House of Lords, November 10th and 12th and December 11th, 1908* (London: Woman Citizen Publishing Society, 1908).

¹⁶ Chrystal Macmillan, Marie Stritt, and Maria Vérone, *Woman Suffrage in Practice* (London: International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1913).

entered suffrage activism around this same time. While her trajectory was less explicitly connected to her student experience at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, it is notable that while there she was socialised into a culture of service where students “thought we ought to do some good in the world.”¹⁷ After her studies she worked for a club for working-class girls in Lambeth, London, and from there became involved in suffrage campaigns, first in Manchester as a paid secretary for the local NUWSS branch and then in London as part of the organisation’s executive committee (where she met Macmillan for the first time).¹⁸



Figure 22 Kathleen Courtney (to the right of the central figure, in light-coloured clothes and a large hat) at a suffrage debate in Manchester, 1909. The Women’s Library, London, TWL/2004/550.

¹⁷ Francesca Wilson, “Dame Kathleen Courtney,” extract from unpublished manuscript “Three Twentieth Century Women of Action: Dame Kathleen Courtney, Margaret McFie, Gem Jebb,” 9, Dame Kathleen Courtney Papers, Lady Margaret Hall Archives, Oxford (hereafter Courtney Papers, LMH), LMH/MMP/3/2/1.

¹⁸ Ibid.; Crawford, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement*, 143.

The NUWSS directly connected British suffrage campaigners to their counterparts in North America and Europe through its membership of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (the Alliance). From the early twentieth century it began to frame women's enfranchisement more explicitly as a global rather than purely national issue. From the beginnings of their activist careers, then, the British members of my group were ensconced in an internationalist milieu and had the opportunity to travel to some of the early congresses hosted by this association (and others). A young Margery Corbett Ashby had the reverse experience of many of her contemporaries, however, accompanying her mother to the Alliance's 1904 foundation meeting in Berlin before becoming involved with the NUWSS in London from 1907. But her early experiences of internationalism were very much filtered through the priorities of Millicent Garrett Fawcett's group, setting up the understanding she developed over the course of her life of internationalism as in part a means to reinforce and extend national efforts.

The British suffrage movement was not homogenous, however. A more controversial, militant ethos was fostered by Emmeline Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which focused on targeting the British parliament to achieve reform through dramatic acts and massive demonstrations. It was here that the thirty-two-year-old Helen Archdale found her feet as a feminist. She became involved with the WSPU on her return to Britain from India, first in Scotland and the north of England and then in London.¹⁹ From around 1908 she "hotly flung" herself into the group's activities and discovered that "it included a great amount of slogging, continuous work."²⁰ She engaged in militant tactics, which led to her being arrested for "breach of the peace" during Winston Churchill's visit to Dundee in 1909.²¹ Two years later Archdale was again imprisoned in Holloway and forcibly fed.²² Though the WSPU was not actively involved in forming a transnational women's movement like the NUWSS, Archdale's early experiences here had great resonance for her interwar

¹⁹ "Manuscript of *An Interfering Woman*", being typescript manuscript of Helen Archdale's autobiography, including handwritten annotations," chapter 3, 4–5, Betty Archdale Papers (hereafter Archdale Papers), State Library of New South Wales, Sydney (hereafter SLNSW), MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624

²⁰ *Ibid.*, chapter 3, 3.

²¹ Suffragettes' Activities in Abernethy and Dundee, National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh, HH55/323, <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/exhibitions/women-suffrage/hh55-323.html>.

²² David Doughan, "Archdale [née Russel], Helen Alexander (1876–1949)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, revised 28 May 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/58331>.

activism. The suffragettes' desire to achieve practical action through "deeds not words" influenced her lifelong desire to pursue precise, practical goals that, in the context of the League and the growth of a global feminist consciousness, took on an internationalist flavour.



Figure 23 Surveillance image of Helen Archdale. Museum of London.

The Australians in my group were not part of the suffrage generation in the colonies, who had been successful in obtaining votes for women earlier than their British counterparts. Some of them were exposed to the British suffrage movement through their visits overseas; Jessie Street commented on the "indelible impression" the movement made on her, and Bessie

Rischbieth was similarly energised by what she experienced in London.²³ This led them to become involved in feminist work in Sydney and Perth respectively. They were also enabled by the rich landscape of women's clubs and societies that had been growing across the continent since the nineteenth century and forging a new public space for women.²⁴ After moving to Western Australia, Rischbieth engaged in social work through groups like the Children's Protection Society and the National Council of Women, which precipitated her involvement in more explicitly feminist organisations. In 1909 the Women's Service Guilds of Western Australia (WSG) was formed, and the thirty-five-year-old Rischbieth joined as vice-president before serving as president between 1915 and 1922.²⁵ This was a non-party organisation that aimed "[t]o educate women on social and economic questions" and "to support from the standpoint of women any movements to protect, defend and uplift humanity."²⁶ From the beginning, the group declared that its members would be "loyal citizens of State, Commonwealth and Empire."²⁷ This outward-looking focus allowed Rischbieth to begin thinking about how internationalism could serve Australian feminists, which she would make her special cause during the 1920s.

The slightly younger Street was more globally mobile in these early years and worked at the New York Probation and Protective Association during the First World War. Following this, her involvement in Sydney-based groups paved the way for her to become a nationally and internationally recognised activist. The Feminist Club (formed in 1914) was one association through which she gained experience.²⁸ While it was originally envisioned as a sort

²³ Jessie Street, *Truth or Repose* (Sydney: Australasian Book Society, 1966), 44. For Rischbieth, see letters in: Papers and objects of Bessie Rischbieth (hereafter Rischbieth Papers), NLA, Box 1, MS 2004/1.

²⁴ Jennifer Donovan, "The Intellectual Traditions of Australian Feminism: Women's Clubs and Societies, 1890–1920" (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2004).

²⁵ Nancy Lutton, "Rischbieth, Bessie Mabel (1874–1967)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, published first in hardcopy 1988, online 2006, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/rischbieth-bessie-mabel-8214/text14373>.

²⁶ "Amended Constitution Suggested by Women's Service Guild of Western Australia," Women's Service Guilds of Western Australia records (hereafter WSG records), State Library of Western Australia, Perth (hereafter SLWA), ACC 1949A/3, MN 826. This document dates from the 1920s, however these aims were the original ones of the WSG. See: Dianne Davidson, *Women on the Warpath: Feminists of the First Wave* (Perth: UWA Press, 1997), 23–4.

²⁷ "Amended Constitution Suggested by Women's Service Guild of Western Australia."

²⁸ Jane Carey, "Feminist Club of New South Wales (1914 -)," *Australian Women's Register*, hosted by The University of Melbourne and The National Foundation for Australian Women (NFAW), Published 14 February 2001, last modified 22 July 2004, <https://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE0090b.htm>.

of “intellectual ‘salon’,” the Feminist Club quickly grew into an activist group for social reform that campaigned for “equality of status, opportunity and payment between men and women in all spheres.”²⁹ Here Street met both Ruby Rich and Linda Littlejohn, who became her close colleagues in the following decades. “The Feminist Club seemed to me a very foreboding institution,” Rich told her interviewer, Hazel de Berg, in 1975. “... they gave one the feeling of their potential, their ambition, the opportunity for one’s own development through that club.”³⁰ Members worked on campaigns to get women elected to parliament and for equal guardianship laws, among many others.³¹ During the early 1920s these three figures also worked for other women’s groups in the city, including the National Council of Women of New South Wales. These groups provided all of them with a practical education in activism and allowed them to develop a personal interest in causes such as wages for housewives that they later expanded on both in Australia and overseas. For all my eight subjects, it was their grounding in local feminist work that provided a pathway to international campaigning and, crucially, set the foundations for their emphasis on the entangled nature of the national, imperial, and global realms.

INTERNATIONALISING AUSTRALIAN FEMINISM

Each woman in my group turned towards internationalism at some stage between the early twentieth century and the 1920s. The issue of women’s voting rights was ostensibly resolved in the Australian and British contexts by the end of the First World War (although most Indigenous and migrant women in Australia remained disenfranchised until the postwar period, and in Britain it took until 1928 for the property and age qualifications to be revised). White feminists could thus focus more systematically on a range of other topics, including welfare provision and married women’s independence, emboldened by their stronger political status as voters. Yet, even when they were working to obtain local reform, they understood that gender subordination—and politics more generally—crossed multiple scales and spaces.

²⁹ Gail Griffith, “The Feminist Club Of NSW: 1914–1970: A History of Feminist Politics in Decline,” *Hecate* 14, no. 1 (1988): 56; Carey, “Feminist Club of New South Wales (1914 -).”

³⁰ Ruby Rich interviewed by Hazel de Berg, 4 June 1975, Hazel de Berg collection (hereafter de Berg collection), NLA, ORAL TRC 1/836, Session 4 of 9, 29:27.

³¹ Ruby Rich interviewed by Hazel de Berg, 4 June 1975, de Berg collection, NLA, ORAL TRC 1/837, Session 5 of 9, from 7:00.

In response, they sought to bring the domestic and the international into dialogue with one another.

The exact link between these two spheres was contingent on each place's unique geopolitical and historical context. For Australians, their geographic distance from Europe as well as the nation's historic dependence on Britain (a status that was in the process of being challenged during the interwar years), combined with the limitations of domestic feminist organising, initially stymied their internationalist aspirations.³² Historically, campaigns for women's rights on the continent had been separated along colony lines, and even after Federation Australian representatives to international women's congresses could not at first technically claim to represent all their countrywomen, as they were still siloed into state-based organisations.³³ Different groups vied to become the voice of Australian women and, at the war's end, creating a national feminist body was a priority.³⁴ One such effort gained momentum after the WSG and the Australasian Woman's Christian Temperance Union met in 1918, forming a provisional national committee. In 1921 Rischbieth then led the charge to create the Australian Federation of Women's Societies (which in 1924 was renamed the Australian Federation of Women Voters, AFWV) at a meeting in Melbourne.³⁵ This group was "received with enthusiasm" by the Alliance and made its first international appearance in Rome two years later.³⁶ It continued the non-party tradition of early Australian feminism (including

³² On these limits, see: James Keating, *Distant Sisters: Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

³³ In the Alliance's case, Vida Goldstein's Melbourne-based Women's Political Association temporarily "held the fort" for its Australian members. International Woman Suffrage Alliance (hereafter IWSA), *Report of Eighth Congress, Geneva, Switzerland, June 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 1920* (Manchester: Percy Brothers, 1920), 108.

³⁴ Although it is not covered in depth in this thesis, the National Council of Women (NCW) was another important actor here. A rivalry developed between it and the Australian Federation of Women Voters (AFWV). See: Lake, *Getting Equal*, 159–60; Simic, "A Hall of Selective Mirrors," 40–1. Archival evidence of the NCW's opposition to the AFWV can be seen in Rischbieth's archival papers, for example: Bessie Rischbieth to Harriet Newcomb, 6 November 1922, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 6, File 4, MS 2004/5/156. For more on the Australian NCWs, see: Marian Quartly and Judith Smart, *Respectable Radicals: A History of the National Council of Women of Australia, 1896–2006* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2015).

³⁵ Emily Bennett, "Federation Meant International Status," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 5 August 1933, 25. For more on the AFWV's "new, more robust form of internationalism," see: Simic, "A Hall of Selective Mirrors," 36–47. On the creation of the AFWV, see also: Lake, *Getting Equal*, 154–63.

³⁶ Women's Service Guilds Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, 7 April 1922, WSG records, SLWA, ACC 1949A/3, MN 826.

Rischbieth's own education through the WSG), offering "a direct non-party channel for the growing national-political consciousness of Australian women."³⁷

Rischbieth somewhat reluctantly took on the role of the AFWV's president.³⁸ Her location in Perth—at once a gateway to Europe and geographically isolated from the rest of the country—no doubt contributed to her desire to link up with hubs of activity on the east coast. The federal government was now another force shaping Australian women's lives, and feminists saw the need to coordinate with each other to tackle topics such as health and marriage.³⁹ As Marilyn Lake argues, they were "self-conscious nation-builders" who wanted the new nation to avoid perpetuating the gendered norms of the "old world."⁴⁰ Elevating both feminist activism and policy to the federal level was also important for improving Aboriginal rights. Rischbieth—among others both in and outside the feminist movement—demanded that the federal government take responsibility for Aboriginal affairs in the hope that this might help the young nation retain the progressive spirit that had seen it introduce women's suffrage ahead of much of the rest of the world.⁴¹

Federalising feminism was also about participation in the international arena. Already needing to work across state borders domestically, Australian feminists extended this logic as they looked overseas. Rischbieth wanted to forge stronger connections to international women's networks, which could happen only by consolidating activism through a "Federal machinery."⁴² A certain nationalism drove her here, shaping her understanding of internationalism as a means of connecting with overseas activists while also representing the

³⁷ AFWV Interim Report June 1938 to May 1929, Records of the Australian Federation of Women Voters (hereafter AFWV Records), NLA, Box 15, File 118, MS 2818.

³⁸ Marilyn Lake suggests that the AFWV's creation was not only a "response to both local and overseas developments," but also "the result of Bessie Rischbieth's ambition for political leadership in the national and international domain." See: Lake, *Getting Equal*, 154. This may be so, although we should not dismiss her as simply the self-serving figure that Lake portrays or overlook Rischbieth's own reservations about taking on the role; as she wrote, "[m]y own personal inclination is to let someone else do the spade work, someone more in touch with the other States than I am in W.A. but Mrs Nicholls who I have begged to be president will not undertake the office." See: Bessie Rischbieth to Mrs. Jamieson Williams, 19 July 1921, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 6, File 2, MS 2004/5/68.

³⁹ Lake, *Getting Equal*, 155–6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴¹ Paisley, *Loving Protection?*, 83–4 (see chapter 5 more generally on this topic); Fiona Paisley, "Federalising the Aborigines? Constitutional Reform in the Late 1920s," *Australian Historical Studies* 29, no. 111 (1998): 248–66.

⁴² Bessie Rischbieth, *March of Australian Women: A Record of Fifty Years' Struggle for Equal Citizenship* (Perth: Paterson Brokensha, 1964), 55.

(white) Antipodean experience in international feminist programmes. She believed in the important contributions Australian women could make given their position outside of the dominant transatlantic sphere (and, implicitly, due to their status as white women). Rischbieth's nationalism was thus fundamentally internationalist. She traced the nation's genealogy not to 1901 but rather to the postwar moment, which saw the country become an independent member of the League; as she put it, "Australia's nationhood really began when her Prime Minister signed the Covenant of the League in 1919."⁴³ Federalising feminism, she thought, was a vital step in expanding Australian women's spheres of action from the local right up to the global.



Figure 24 "An All-Australia Outlook." Members of the Australian Federation of Women Voters, Melbourne 1930. State Library of South Australia, SRG 116/15/16.

⁴³ Pan-Pacific Women's Conference (hereafter PPWC), *Women of the Pacific: Being a Record of the Proceedings of the First Pan-Pacific Women's Conference which was held in Honolulu from the 9th to the 19th of August 1928, Under the Auspices of the Pan-Pacific Union* (Honolulu: Pan-Pacific Union, 1928), 213; Simic, "A Hall of Selective Mirrors," 43.

Beyond feminist groups, Rischbieth had an important institution in mind: the League. She wanted Australian women to extend their reach beyond feminist circles to have an influence on not just domestic but also imperial and international politics. Developing an “All-Australia Outlook” (a phrase that, as one 1930 photograph shows, became the AFWV’s rallying cry) was an important first step; as Rischbieth later explained, “[b]efore women could approach the Commonwealth Government to state their point of view on International questions, their work had to be co-ordinated at Federal level.”⁴⁴ Though the AFWV petitioned Australian politicians on various domestic matters, its members saw Geneva as an important new actor shaping their rights and opportunities. “[W]ith our Commonwealth Government committing us to International Conventions and representing us Overseas it is so very important that the Federal Constitution of our Women’s Organisations should be built up in order to communicate with each other quickly to meet this new need,” Rischbieth told Corbett Ashby in 1928.⁴⁵ A cause she and her colleagues took on as part of their domestic lobbying was to have women represented on Australia’s delegation to the League’s assembly. As early as 1920 the WSG (affiliated to the AFWV and also under Rischbieth’s leadership) resolved that “one of the three Australian Representatives should be a woman” and that “the Government should see to it that women, no less than men, should be considered for nomination as members of the Bureau & Commissions which are intended to be formed under the League.”⁴⁶ As the WSG records show, these proposals were mixed in with resolutions regarding issues confronting regular Western Australian women, such as motherhood endowment and the prohibition of alcohol.⁴⁷ This tells us something important about the psychology of interwar feminists in Australia, who saw domestic issues and matters of international representation as part of the same feminist political project.

The AFWV’s origins were equally rooted in empire; as Paisley asserts, women of this era “were determined to play a role in the changing imperial politics of the British Commonwealth.”⁴⁸ Though the AFWV ended up being an independent organisation, when

⁴⁴ Rischbieth, *March of Australian Women*, 59.

⁴⁵ Bessie Rischbieth to Margery Corbett Ashby, 29 December 1928, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 21, File 10, MS 2004/8/465.

⁴⁶ Women’s Service Guilds 1st State Congress Resolutions, WSG records, SLWA, ACC 1949A/3, MN 826.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Paisley, *Loving Protection?*, 81. Zora Simic also identifies that the AFWV was situated in national, imperial, and international networks. See: Simic, “A Hall of Selective Mirrors,” 37.

they were setting it up Rischbieth and the South Australian feminist Blanche Stephens had envisioned their purpose as being “to form an Australian Branch of the BRITISH DOMINION WOMEN CITIZENS’ UNION” (BDWCU, a group formed in 1913).⁴⁹ This endeavour was thus considered a means of strengthening white Australian women’s standing within imperial networks, too. The empire was an important political and legal reality that still exerted much power—emanating from London—over the lives of its subjects. Rischbieth pressured governments to send women as representatives to the Imperial Conference, a forum where British and dominion prime ministers gathered to make decisions affecting all their constituents. In 1926 she asked that “Australian women be represented in an advisory capacity at the forthcoming Imperial Conference” (at which the Balfour Declaration would be enacted), suggesting Marjorie Chave Collisson as a suitable candidate.⁵⁰ No women attended, but Rischbieth nevertheless pointed to the principle of gender equality enshrined in the League’s covenant to implore on behalf of her organisation that the prime minister “uphold the equality of men and women.”⁵¹ She and her fellow activists understood that the decisions made at this forum would affect their daily lives, and their domestic activism was conducted with the multilayered nature of their world in mind.

The equally multilayered nature of feminists’ activism is apparent in the records they left behind. Maintaining global connections was important to them and took up hours of their time.⁵² At the AFWV’s executive meetings and conferences, reports of the organisations to which it was connected—the Alliance, the British Commonwealth League (BCL), and the Pan-Pacific Women’s Association (PPWA)—were read out, keeping members up to date with how

⁴⁹ Letter from Bessie Rischbieth and Blanche Stephens, 27 January 1921, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 6, File 2, MS 2004/5/30. Newcomb explained: “The name ‘Australian Branch of the B.D.W.C.U.’ does not really describe what your new organisation is. You are now federated, and ready for affiliation as Australian Women with any outside body of women, whether they are within the British Commonwealth or International.” Harriet Newcomb to Bessie Rischbieth and Elizabeth Webb Nicholls, c. 1920, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 6, File 4, MS 2004/5/130.

⁵⁰ Bessie Rischbieth to Stanley Bruce, 19 July 1926, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 7, File 8, MS 2004/5/364.

⁵¹ Bessie Rischbieth et al. to Stanley Bruce, 25 August 1926, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 7, File 8, MS 2004/5/379. No Australian women are recorded as having attended in the official Australian Imperial Conference report. Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, *Imperial Conference, 1926. Summary of Proceedings* (Melbourne: Government of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1927).

⁵² The AFWV’s annual report of 1931–32 noted, “[a] great deal of correspondence is involved through the task of keeping our Associations linked up into a living whole,” with 320 letters and fifty telegrams, lettergrams, and cables being “despatched to Australian States, Empire and International quarters” in the preceding year alone. See: AFWV Annual Report June 1931–May 1932, AFWV Records, NLA, Box 15, File 118, MS 2818.

their efforts fitted into wider transnational feminist campaigns and motivating them to continue agitating for change. In her account of the 1933 AFWV conference in Adelaide, the South Australian feminist Ellinor G. Walker said: “Our affiliations called for hours of attention, well-rewarded in the revived consciousness of fellowship within Empire, Pan-Pacific and International bonds.”⁵³ But interwar Australian feminism was a white women’s feminism, and this had implications for activists’ conceptualisation of transnational cooperation. Ahead of the AFWV’s founding meeting, Rischbieth and others explained that it was “imperative that there should be greater bond of union and understanding amongst the womanhood” living in the British Empire, as through developing “a united voice” they would “increase their power in demanding reform.”⁵⁴ But their vision of this “united voice” did not incorporate all women living within the empire’s grasp equally. Cooperating across national borders was a pragmatic choice, but the nature of settler-colonial society in Australia had implications for these women’s romanticised visions of a trans-imperial feminist community.

Rischbieth was aided throughout these years by equally passionate colleagues and friends. Ruby Rich was among them. Her work for Australian feminism was not limited by national boundaries. Usually based in Sydney, she was one of the AFWV’s vice-presidents and, while calling London home between 1929 and 1935, acted as the group’s overseas officer.⁵⁵ In this role she represented the AFWV at the BCL’s and the Alliance’s meetings and had many informal interactions with feminists from various countries. Having spent a long time as a colonial in London—at once the imperial metropole and a global hub—Rich conceived of Australian nationalism through both an imperial and an international lens, seeing it as “based on pride in our own British Traditions and heritage” at the same time as working “towards world citizenship, world betterment and world peace.”⁵⁶ Her global mobility and exposure to the world of Geneva led her to see local activism as inextricably bound up with the international realm. In a talk she gave on Brisbane radio in 1936 shortly after her return home, Rich asked her listeners: “Is Internationalism in opposition to Nationalism?” Her answer was

⁵³ Ellinor G. Walker, “The Australian Federation of Women Voters. Fourth Triennial Inter-State Conference. Adelaide, May 22–26,” *Dawn* (Perth), 28 June 1933, 5.

⁵⁴ Australian Federation of Women’s Societies (B.D.W.C. Union). *Vital Reasons for an Australian Federation*,” Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 6, File 1, MS 2004/5/7.

⁵⁵ “News from Miss Ruby Rich,” *Dawn* (Perth), 19 September 1930, 7.

⁵⁶ “Station 4 QY. Brisbane, Nov. 1936. Is Internationalism Opposed to Nationalism? By Miss Ruby Rich,” Papers of Ruby Rich (hereafter Rich Papers), NLA, Box 3, File 25, MS 7493.

clear. “I believe it is not. Surely a sane Nationalism is compatible with the collective system; is in fact a component part of an international system and order,” she said. Rich was “convinced” that national loyalty and a commitment to the League were “not conflicting forces” but rather both “necessary for their own security.”⁵⁷ In her view, nationalism was a fundamental component of, rather than antithetical to, the new international way of being.

Other domestic organisations also fostered an internationalist outlook among Australian feminists; as Simic notes, “[t]he feminist culture that developed in the 1920s and throughout the 1930s was characterised by a professed spirit of association, federation and internationalism.”⁵⁸ On a more localised scale, in 1929 Street (then president of the Feminist Club) proposed that amalgamating Sydney’s several existing women’s groups would bring “greater efficiency and economy” and allow women to “speak with a much stronger voice.”⁵⁹ Although the Feminist Club had been at the forefront of these plans, it ultimately decided not to join the union; by mid-October Street resigned from the group, feeling that it had become “quite impossible to do any Feminist work, or indeed, any work at all” as part of it.⁶⁰ She pushed ahead with creating the United Associations of Women (UA), which became the most prominent feminist group in the city throughout the 1930s. Over the following decade the UA’s leadership was shared between Street and Littlejohn as they worked around the long list of commitments each kept, including overseas travel. The group aimed to tackle more explicitly political topics than other existing organisations in Sydney, such as equal pay, economic independence, and an equal moral standard.⁶¹ Indigenous rights, however, did not form a major part of its programme and did not drive these women towards the international

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Simic, “A Hall of Selective Mirrors,” 31.

⁵⁹ Jessie Street to Mrs. Irvine, 9 October 1929, Papers of Jessie Street (hereafter Street Papers), NLA, Box 10, File 1, MS 2683/3/21.

⁶⁰ Jessie Street to the Feminist Club, 14 October 1929, Street Papers, NLA, Box 10, File 1, MS 2683/3/22. As Simic explains, “Street and the Feminist Club... had different concepts of what constituted proper feminist activity.” See: Simic, “A Hall of Selective Mirrors,” 51.

⁶¹ Nikki Henningham, “The United Associations of Women (1929–),” *Australian Women’s Register*, hosted by The University of Melbourne and The National Foundation for Australian Women (NFAW), published 29 June 2004, last modified 1 May 2009, <https://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE1023b.htm>. For more on the UA’s domestic campaigns, see: Patricia Randal, “Feminism and Class: The United Associations of Women and the Council of Action for Equal Pay in the Depression,” in *Worth Her Salt: Women at Work in Australia*, ed. Margaret Bevege, Margaret James, and Carmel Shute (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1982), 270–85.

as was the case for some of their contemporaries (Street, however, would more systematically tackle this topic in the postwar period in her work for the 1967 referendum).⁶²

Alongside its more locally oriented goals, the UA aimed “[t]o promote international peace and understanding.”⁶³ The awareness these women had of their international context and their engagement with transnational feminist issues and groups abroad is abundantly clear in the archival trail. The UA’s archives are divided into thematic folders. While many of these are about state-based campaigns, concerning topics such as married women teachers and domestic workers, several also cover international subjects: the proposed equal rights treaty, the status of women, and the League, for instance.⁶⁴ Members of the group saw internationalism as central to their work; as Rich put, it just as the Alliance worked “for better international understanding ... we work in the state in the same way.”⁶⁵ Letters from organisations including the BCL and the Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker (ODI) were frequently read out at committee meetings, which would have allowed attendees to hear about campaigns to improve Aboriginal welfare and updated them on global labour conventions, providing them with information about both their immediate and international contexts.

Among these records are the minutes of a 1931 meeting where the UA executive decided to reserve the first Thursday afternoon of each month for discussion of an “International topic.”⁶⁶ Sessions included a talk by Adela Pankhurst Walsh on “Russia and International Peace” and one from the Australian doctor Leila Keating on her time studying and working in Britain and Europe.⁶⁷ Such international knowledge was used to contextualise and add moral and practical force to local endeavours. In her 1934 presidential address, for

⁶² Keating explains that Littlejohn did not use international conferences to bring light to the injustices facing Aboriginal peoples like some of her contemporaries did. Keating, “‘Woman as Wife, Mother, and Home-Maker,’” 969. See also: Alison Holland, *Just Relations: The Story of Mary Bennett’s Crusade for Aboriginal Rights* (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2015); James Keating, “The Feminist Club at War,” *SL Magazine* 12, no. 2 (2019): 27; Paisley, *Loving Protection?*; Woollacott, “Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms.”

⁶³ “The United Associations of Women (1929–).”

⁶⁴ United Associations of Women Records (hereafter UA Records), SLNSW, MLMSS 2160.

⁶⁵ Ruby Rich interviewed by Hazel de Berg, 4 June 1975, de Berg collection, NLA, ORAL TRC 1/838, Session 8 of 9, 9:21.

⁶⁶ United Associations Executive Committee Minutes, 20 March 1931, UA Records, SLNSW, Box 4477, MLMSS 2160.

⁶⁷ “United Associations,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 June 1931, 3; “United Associations,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 February 1931, 5.

example, Littlejohn spoke in protest of the Married Women Teachers' Bill (which saw women in New South Wales dismissed from their teaching roles upon marriage), pointing to a similar law that had been passed in the United States which had caused 700 divorces to be filed in one state alone.⁶⁸ The UA cultivated a strong sense of itself as part of a global network where knowledge and experience could be shared among countries to advance the cause in each. As Street put it to the British former suffragette Flora Drummond in 1932, the issues of equal pay and women's economic independence were "incorporated in feminist platforms all over the world."⁶⁹ These women identified commonalities between their struggles and those taking place overseas; from this basis, they understood internationalism as a means of combatting the disenfranchisement they sometimes felt in their home cities. The solidarity-building nature of pre-war feminist internationalism thus had continued resonance in the interwar years.

The UA's leaders spent much energy building ties to international feminist organisations, hoping to make their work more effective. Just before Street travelled to Europe in June 1930, she said that "she would take the opportunity of getting in touch with kindred associations in various countries with a view to closer co-operation."⁷⁰ The UA linked up with some of the new groups that were formed in the 1920s. It affiliated to the ODI and sent Littlejohn as its representative to the 1931 Stockholm conference.⁷¹ Two years later she and Street led the move to create an Australian Open Door Council (Australian ODC) to strengthen this connection, with Littlejohn taking up the role of president and Street acting as vice-president for New South Wales.⁷² The UA also affiliated to the Equal Rights International (ERI), with both Street and Littlejohn corresponding extensively with Archdale throughout her tenure as president. In 1932, for example, Archdale wrote to Street asking her to come up with some resolutions for the ERI's annual meeting, "[p]erhaps something concerning the special needs of your own country."⁷³ All these organisations had specific causes and goals in

⁶⁸ "United Associations," *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 23 February 1934, 10.

⁶⁹ Jessie Street to Flora Drummond, 29 November 1932, UA Records, SLNSW, Box Y790, Item 19, MLMSS 2160.

⁷⁰ UA Council Meeting Minutes, 8 May 1930, UA Records, SLNSW, Box 4477, MLMSS 2160.

⁷¹ Linda Littlejohn, "Open Door International," *Dawn* (Perth), 18 November 1931, 2.

⁷² "New Society to Protect Women Workers," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 7 October 1933, 26.

⁷³ Helen Archdale to Jessie Street, 2 March 1932, UA Records, SLNSW, Box Y790, Item 19, MLMSS 2160.

mind, and Street's and Littlejohn's emphasis on the commonalities of women led them to seek ways to collaborate with their colleagues overseas.⁷⁴



Figure 25 Lady Street performing the official opening of the United Association's new Club rooms at Shirley House, Market St., 29 May 1936. State Library of New South Wales, MPG/208. Jessie Street is on the left of the photograph.

In time, both Street's and Littlejohn's leadership of the UA provided a steppingstone for them to take on important roles in these international groups and bring an Antipodean flavour to the international women's movement. While Archdale's presidency of the ERI saw it focus almost exclusively on the equal rights treaty, when Littlejohn took over in 1935 she brought a new perspective that drew on the work she and Street (among others) had been

⁷⁴ For more on Australian feminists' universalising understanding of the category of "woman," see: Simic, "A Hall of Selective Mirrors," chapter 1.

doing in Sydney on wages for housewives.⁷⁵ She not only brought the ERI's attention to this matter but also raised it with the League through the status of women inquiry. In his recent work on this topic, James Keating argues that this move can be read in part as "an ambitious attempt to internationalize the UA's agenda."⁷⁶ The priorities of the international women's movement were thus born of feminists' own domestic concerns.

In the early years of the twentieth century Australian women had struggled to represent themselves internationally, but the League's emergence and the continued growth of international women's organisations encouraged them to consolidate their efforts in a bid to adopt a more active role on the global stage. They saw the international realm as a way to realise their local goals and add power to their arguments. Even when at home in cities such as Sydney or Perth, their feminist work was conducted with the wider world planted firmly in their minds.

LONDON: AN IMPERIAL & GLOBAL CENTRE

The entanglements of the national, the imperial, and the international did not only affect feminists based in the dominions. As new imperial historians have made clear, understanding British history means exploring the multidirectional flows between the metropole and the empire at large, including how they shaped life in Britain.⁷⁷ British feminists had a different spatial relationship to internationalism. Many of them had moved to London by the 1920s, the home of Westminster and therefore the focal point of many domestic feminist campaigns. It was also a major imperial and global centre. International women's organisations were often headquartered in the city, where they hosted executive committee meetings, conducted extensive administrative work, and produced their periodicals. British women therefore did not have to make a concerted effort to be included in international feminist networks like their Australian counterparts did. In fact, they often assumed they would have a leading role, as Chrystal Macmillan showed when, in the throes of the suffrage campaign, she said: "the *storm*

⁷⁵ Keating, "Woman as Wife, Mother, and Home-Maker'."

⁷⁶ Ibid., 972.

⁷⁷ See, for example: Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Alan Lester, "Spatial Concepts and the Historical Geographies of British Colonialism," in *Writing Imperial Histories*, ed. Andrew S. Thompson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 118–42.

centre of the movement is in this country ... the women of the world are looking to us with hope that our speedy enfranchisement will do much to encourage the women of other countries to work for the successful issue to their fight.”⁷⁸ British women continued to assume they would be at the forefront of global feminist progress into the interwar years.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the four British members of my group participated in a range of existing and new domestic feminist organisations. Some of these had grown directly out of the suffrage context. The National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), for example, was the successor to Garrett Fawcett’s NUWSS. After British women had won limited enfranchisement in 1918, the NUSEC expanded its remit to agitate for “all such reforms as are necessary to secure a real equality of liberties, status and opportunities between men and women.”⁷⁹ Alongside notes about pressing local concerns—such as labour laws, access to the professions, and family endowment—its archives are littered with references to campaigns being conducted abroad as well as League initiatives, revealing that the international was constantly on its members’ minds.⁸⁰ This group was already affiliated to the Alliance and had been sending representatives to its international congresses for some time. A leading member of both, in her memoir Corbett Ashby explained that there was “a strong link at the national level” between them (while noting that “[t]he tightness of the connection varied enormously in its branches”).⁸¹ Without overstating it, as local campaigns certainly formed the backbone of this organisation’s work, it is fair to say that the international had an important influence on the NUSEC’s programme and how it situated its work for women’s rights.

This was no doubt spurred on by some of its key members—including Corbett Ashby, Macmillan, and Courtney—and their personal internationalist convictions, which were only strengthened by the experience of the First World War and the League’s creation. The NUSEC’s priorities accordingly shifted over the course of the period, as peace and the

⁷⁸ Chrystal Macmillan, *The Struggle for Political Liberty (A Lecture Given on February, 16th, 1909)* (London: National Women’s Social and Political Union, 1909), 2–3.

⁷⁹ National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (hereafter NUSEC), *Annual Report for the Year 1920* (London: NUSEC, 1921), 37, Records of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (hereafter NUSEC Records), The Women’s Library, London (hereafter TWL), Box FL342, 2NSE/C/3.

⁸⁰ See the NUSEC’s executive committee minutes and annual reports, NUSEC Records, TWL, Boxes FL341–2, 2NSE.

⁸¹ Margery Corbett Ashby with Michael Ashby, *Memoirs of Dame Margery Corbett Ashby* (Horsted Keynes: M.G. Ashby, 1996), 134.

League's functionality became more pressing issues. In 1920 the committee admitted that "the pressure of our Parliamentary work" had meant they had not spent as much time promoting "a democratic League of Nations" as they would have liked, instead focusing on extending the franchise and getting women into parliament and other professions.⁸² Over time, however, they responded to their changing world, in which the League and its shortcomings became increasingly important to address and international women's organisations were growing in size and scope. Executive committee minutes from 1927 reveal that Corbett Ashby chaired the NUSEC's international sub-committee, whose tasks included proposing suitable women to serve on the League's various commissions.⁸³ As the final sections of this chapter show, the influence of the League and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on domestic topics such as women's nationality and economic rights meant that the NUSEC (which came under Corbett Ashby's leadership in the late 1920s) had to have one eye fixed permanently on the international sphere.

Local branches of transnational organisations had a slightly different dynamic but were equally important avenues through which some interwar feminists came to see internationalism as deeply entwined with their own domestic contexts. This was something that Courtney had to negotiate as a leader and member of the Women's International League (WIL), the British branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The WIL was formed after the international parent body, rather than being a pre-existing group. For almost twenty years Courtney remained deeply involved with it. In 1923 she took over from the socialist feminist Helena Swanwick as the WIL's president, inheriting an organisation of "advanced feminists" who, seeing the connection "between feminism and the abolition of war," aimed to "find the causes of war and abolish them, whether the war is one between nations, or between classes, or between the sexes."⁸⁴ Though peace was a thoroughly international issue, most peace activism actually took place within national borders.

⁸² NUSEC, *Annual Report for the Year 1920*, 15, 2SE/C/3.

⁸³ Minutes of the Executive Committee, 26 July 1927, NUSEC Records, TWL, Box FL341, 2NSE/A/1/5(9).

⁸⁴ Helena Swanwick, "Regiment of Women," *Women's International League Monthly News Sheet* 4, no. 10 (January 1920) 1–2. On Swanwick's resignation, see: "League Notices. Chairman of the W.I.L.," *Women's International League Monthly News Sheet* 11, no. 1 (May 1923), 3.



Figure 26 British delegation at the second international conference held by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Zürich, 1919. LSE Archives, WILPF/22/1. Many of these women subsequently formed the British WIL. Courtney is seated in the front on the left.

Given its formation after the WILPF—which Leila Rupp argues was the most truly transnational of the major international women's organisations—the WIL was inherently internationalist in its outlook.⁸⁵ Local campaigns, like extending the vote to women under thirty, were discussed alongside issues that extended beyond Britain's borders, such as the treatment of South Africa's Black population and plans for international summer schools.⁸⁶ Yet working across these various scales could bring tension. Courtney increasingly felt that the international executive was presuming to speak for all its members without taking into consideration their different views. This came to a head in April 1933, when the international executive rejected the WIL's proposal to "take action only upon resolutions agreed to

⁸⁵ Leila J. Rupp, "Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women's Organizations, 1888–1945," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1590.

⁸⁶ Women's International League, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, Friday, 5th November, 1920, at 2.30pm, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, British Section Papers (hereafter WIL Papers), Politics, Economics, and Social Science Collections, London School of Economics Archives, London (hereafter LSE), WILPF1/3.

unanimously.”⁸⁷ Courtney’s idea had been to include representatives of the WILPF’s national sections on the international executive. But she did not want this to be interpreted as a self-interested or anti-internationalist suggestion. “I do not think we should assume that the National Sections are Nationalist in outlook, and would appoint Nationalist members. To assume this is to admit the failure of the League,” she told her colleague Mary Sheepshanks. “Surely each of our sections is a body of people trying to see things from an international point of view. But an international point of view is not one which ignores the needs and views of any country; it is rather an attempt to give weight to every point of view and so to arrive at a harmony.”⁸⁸ Courtney resigned from the WIL presidency shortly after, though she continued to be involved with it for a couple more years. Her story shows the practical challenges feminists sometimes faced in trying to bridge national and international efforts.

The empire and later Commonwealth influenced British feminists’ international thinking, though in a different way to their Australian colleagues. Their location in the metropole led them to consider themselves as imperial and world leaders—a mindset that influenced their domestic activism. Early in the 1920s the NUSEC had resolved to keep “promoting Woman Suffrage in other parts of the British Empire,” using British women’s newfound status as voters to lead the way in an evolution of Victorian-era thinking that had seen white Britons claim responsibility for their less fortunate Indian “sisters” to win their own suffrage.⁸⁹ By the end of the interwar period, the NUSEC had explicitly brought together the imperial and international contexts in its sixth central goal: “[t]o support the League of Nations, and the practical application of the principle of equal opportunities for men and women within it” and “to assist women throughout the British Empire to achieve the rights of equal citizenship and equality of status and opportunity.”⁹⁰ Under the direction of Corbett Ashby—who embodied the multilayered realities of feminist activism through her leadership of various British, imperial, and international women’s organisations—the NUSEC came to unite the international and imperial realms.

⁸⁷ Kathleen Courtney to WIL colleagues, 5 May 1933, WIL Papers, LSE, File 2, WILPF/2009/5/1.

⁸⁸ Kathleen Courtney to Mary Sheepshanks, 2 May 1929, WIL Papers, LSE, File 2, WILPF/2009/5/1.

⁸⁹ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁹⁰ NUSEC, *Annual Report 1929* (London: NUSEC, 1930), 2, NUSEC Records, TWL, Box FL342, 2NSE/C/12.

Like in earlier decades, India occupied an important place in British feminists' thinking and provides a useful example of how domestic feminist activity was infused with imperial and international dimensions.⁹¹ In 1927 the American journalist Katherine Mayo published *Mother India*, a polemical attack on Indian society and culture that centred on questions of gender and sexuality.⁹² This text captured many Western feminists' attention and initiated heated debate. At the time the NUSEC was under the leadership of the left-wing feminist and future member of parliament Eleanor Rathbone, who "felt strongly that the conditions of women in India, as alleged in the book, were the concern in particular of British women" and—with no recorded opposition from her executive committee (including Corbett Ashby and her mother)—organised a conference to discuss it.⁹³ This meeting was controversial.⁹⁴ The Indian women's rights activist and future family planning pioneer Dhanvanthi Rama Rau later recalled her outrage that no Indian women were invited to speak and that as an audience member her "anger [had been] steadily soaring," especially because "every speech stressed the fact that the eradication of social evils in Indian society was the responsibility of the British—the White Man's Burden."⁹⁵ In the end Rau was given fifteen minutes to speak to the conference. She stressed that "grateful as we were for any British support, all it could be was *moral* support. The practical work had to be done in India by Indians themselves."⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the conference resolved that "a responsibility rests upon all British citizens and not least upon British women, to interest themselves in and study these problems and to assist, by every means in their power, those whether Indians, British or of other races, who are working effectively for the social amelioration of India."⁹⁷

⁹¹ Christine Bolt, *Sisterhood Questioned? Race, Class and Internationalism in the American and British Women's Movements, c.1880s–1970s* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 60–64.

⁹² Mrinalini Sinha, "Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and Nationalism in Late-Colonial India," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 623–44; Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁹³ Executive committee minutes, 27 September 1927, NUSEC Records, TWL, Box FL341, 2NSE/A/1/5(10); "Mother India," *Vote* (London), 18 November 1927, 363.

⁹⁴ On this conference, see: Sybil Oldfield, "Eleanor Rathbone and India: Cultural Imperialist or Friend to Women?," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 3, no. 3 (1997): 157–168; Shampa Roy, "Cross-Cultural Sisters? Eleanor Rathbone and the Indian Feminist Movement in the 1930s," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 12 no. 3 (2006): 7–34.

⁹⁵ Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, *An Inheritance: The Memoirs of Dhanvanthi Rama Rau* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 170.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 172. Emphasis in the original text.

⁹⁷ "Conference on 'Mother India'," *Woman's Leader and Common Cause* (London), 2 December 1927, 346.

Corbett Ashby's own stance on the matter is somewhat ambiguous, but it seems that she upheld a vision of British women as world and imperial leaders. The month before the NUSEC's event she had presided over the BCL's own conference about *Mother India*, which, as she later recalled, was held because "[t]he Indian community in London was furious & called a protest meeting."⁹⁸ Mrinalini Sinha has described the BCL's approach as "somewhat less 'maternalistic'" than the NUSEC's; as Corbett Ashby explained, the meeting gave "representatives from India an opportunity of stating their views on the social problems in India described by Miss Mayo."⁹⁹ Corbett Ashby felt that "[e]motion dominated the proceedings" but did not offer any comparison with the NUSEC's approach.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, she described herself as a "devoted follower" of Rathbone and her efforts to secure the vote for women in India (she presumably attended Rathbone's conference).¹⁰¹ As Sinha explains, this campaign saw the future member of parliament "argue for a much more active role for enfranchised British women on the question of Indian women's franchise."¹⁰² Corbett Ashby was at once a supporter of listening to Indian people and speaking for them in ways that would elevate white British women's visibility in the political life of the empire and Commonwealth. In both cases she saw domestic feminist concerns as being tied up with broader imperial issues.

Interwar feminists did not simply reproduce the worldviews of their Victorian forebears, however. The changes of these decades—from the increased power given to the dominions as the empire became the Commonwealth to the protests of anti-colonial nationalists—encouraged white women to rethink imperialism and what it meant moving into a new era. Members of the WIL were similarly influenced by their positioning in the metropole, but instead responded to anticolonial invocations by promoting Indian women's agency. In a

⁹⁸ "Woman Suffrage & Child Marriage in India," handwritten notes, c. 1934, Papers of Margery Corbett Ashby, TWL, Box FL483, 7MCA/C/1.

⁹⁹ Mrinalini Sinha, "Suffragism and Internationalism: The Enfranchisement of British and Indian Women Under and Imperial State," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 36, no. 4 (1999): 465; "Mother India: The Indian Point of View. From a Correspondent," *Woman's Leader and Common Cause* (London), 18 November 1927, 329. Corbett Ashby's words are paraphrased here.

¹⁰⁰ "Woman Suffrage & Child Marriage in India," 7MCA/C/1.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Sinha, "Suffragism and Internationalism," 465–6. For more on Rathbone's approach to Indian women's rights, see: Sumita Mukherjee, "Radhabai Subbarayan: Debates on Indian Female Franchise in the 1930s," *Women's History* 2, no. 6 (2016): 10–14.

pamphlet titled *Mother India's Daughters*, the group asserted that “the emphasis needs to be laid on the capability of the Indian women themselves to deal with the causes and consequences of these bad customs, if they were given the power.”¹⁰³ The WIL devoted much time to the issues of Indian independence and Indian women’s political rights. Their 1919–20 annual report records that, under Swanwick’s guidance, they urged the British government to apply the principle of self-determination to its imperial territories, namely Ireland, India, and Egypt.¹⁰⁴ The WIL also explicitly demanded that Indian women be given “equal political and educational status with men, so that the principle of equal human rights, so slowly recognized in our own country, may be adopted immediately in our Eastern Empire.”¹⁰⁵

As president, Courtney was part of the group’s India sub-committee, which was formed (as far as the records show) in 1930 as a response to the first of the Indian Round Table Conferences, a series of three meetings held to discuss constitutional reform in India. They landed on a resolution to send to roundtable delegates. “Fully realising that if India remains an integral part of the British Empire it can only be of her own free will and accord, the members of the Women’s International League believe that responsible Government involving Dominion Status should be handed over to the Indian people at the earliest possible moment,” they wrote, “and urge British Representatives appointed to the Round Table Conference to make every possible effort to work out with their Indian colleagues a plan which would not only be acceptable to them but which may secure the co-operation of all parties in India.”¹⁰⁶ They also argued that Indian women should be included in these discussions.¹⁰⁷ Courtney’s sub-committee largely consisted of white feminists, although Indian representatives sometimes sat in on meetings and offered their thoughts. In November 1930, for example, Rameshwari Nehru (an Indian social worker and newspaper editor) and Dorothy Jinarajadasa (a Scot married to a Sri Lankan theosophist) offered their view that “the best way to help India at the present time was to continue our educational work throughout the country

¹⁰³ Women’s International League (hereafter WIL), *Mother India’s Daughters: The Significance of the Women’s Movement* (London: Women’s International League, 19—), 8.

¹⁰⁴ WIL, *Fifth Yearly Report. October, 1919–October, 1920* (London: Women’s International League, 1920), 8, WIL Papers, LSE, WILPF/2/1.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.; “Resolution Passed by the Council of the W.I.L. at its Meeting on October 30th, 1919,” WIL Papers, LSE, WILPF/4/2.

¹⁰⁶ Minutes of India Sub-committee, 31 October 1930, WIL Papers, LSE, WILPF/4/2.

¹⁰⁷ Minutes of India Sub-committee, 28 March 1931, WIL Papers, LSE, WILPF/4/2.

by means of meetings, press work, etc.”¹⁰⁸ British feminists’ imperial context had a significant influence on the sorts of issues they tackled in their local work and on how they envisioned their place in the world. Even when they adopted less paternalistic mindsets, their engagement in the empire’s affairs still provided a basis for them to exert and extend their power as political actors.

An important development in interwar British feminism was the diversification of feminists’ standpoints, which saw the birth of new organisations. One of these was the Six Point Group (SPG), of which Archdale was a founding member. This organisation was formed in February 1921 in response to a feeling that there was a “state of stagnation” since the vote had been won.¹⁰⁹ As indicated by its name, the SPG adopted six main causes centring on women’s rights as mothers and as wage earners. These were all practical issues that could be changed by legal reform (rather than those “which can be achieved only by alteration in public opinion or custom”).¹¹⁰ These women focused on lobbying the British government as the most immediate and effective means of achieving change and embraced its radical origins in suffragette militancy.¹¹¹ Archdale remained involved with it until she resigned from the executive sometime between late 1933 and 1934.¹¹²

While the SPG was primarily focused on achieving domestic legislative reform, like other British feminist groups it also situated itself within an international context. Again, this was largely thanks to the overlapping roles of some of its key members in other organisations. The limitations of the archival trail make it hard to fully grasp Archdale’s place in it during the 1920s, however she later commented that her work to extend the franchise was “active if intermittent,” limited by the practicalities of mothering school-aged children.¹¹³ During the early 1930s Archdale was simultaneously the SPG’s honorary international secretary and the

¹⁰⁸ Minutes of India Sub-committee, 8 November 1930, WIL Papers, LSE, WILPF/4/2. Nehru and Jinarajadasa’s words are paraphrased here.

¹⁰⁹ “The New Group,” *Time and Tide* (London), 25 February 1921, 176.

¹¹⁰ “The Six Point Group,” *Time and Tide* (London), 19 January 1923, 52.

¹¹¹ Elizabeth Robins, “The Six Points and their Common Centre,” *Time and Tide* (London), 19 January 1923, 60; “Annual Report November 1933–November 1934,” Records of the Six Point Group (hereafter SPG Records), TWL, Box FL525, 5SPG/B1–5.

¹¹² “Annual Report November 1933–November 1934,” 5SPG/B1–5.

¹¹³ “Manuscript of An Interfering Woman’, chapter 7, 2, MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

chair of the ERI (to which it was affiliated).¹¹⁴ Although preoccupied with achieving tangible change at home, its members engaged with feminist conversations happening overseas. Those who had attended the ERI's meetings reported on the Consultative Committee on Nationality's work in Geneva, and the group urged the Imperial Conference to settle on uniform nationality laws favouring women's independence.¹¹⁵ Together with feminists from the Americas, in 1930 Archdale and the SPG spoke to the League's Conference for the Codification of International Law, expressing "the wish that it might adopt the principle of equal legislation for men and women in matters of nationality, and embody it in its final convention."¹¹⁶ In the new internationalist context of the interwar period, taking practical steps towards reform could not mean lobbying national governments alone.

The SPG also contributed to international discussions of an equal rights treaty; Archdale published on this topic from her position as international secretary and, with her daughter, discussed how such a treaty might be implemented in Britain with the home secretary, identifying the complex linkages between national and international politics.¹¹⁷ Archdale became adamant that the solution to reaching the SPG's overall goals was to be found internationally. In 1932 she proposed that the group affirm "its unwavering opinion that the basis of the eventual equality between men and women is to be found in an international agreement which lays down the principle of the [*sic*] equality," noting that it should "do all in its power to obtain the support of the British Government."¹¹⁸ The logic underpinning Archdale's involvement in local campaigns directed at the British government was thus extended to her desire to institute equality on an international level. Her experience with the SPG (like with the WSPU) thus helped produce and shape her ideas about the purpose of internationalism, which she saw as another avenue to achieve the goals feminists were working towards domestically in Britain.

¹¹⁴ Six Point Group, "Annual Report 1931, 1932 and News Sheet," SPG Records, TWL, Box FL525, 5SPG/B1–5.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ "Nationality and Women. Deputation to the Hague. (Exchange Telegram). Amsterdam, Tuesday," *Manchester Guardian*, 2 April 1930, 18.

¹¹⁷ Helen A. Archdale, "International Developments in the Woman's Movement," *Current History* 29, no. 1 (1928): 48–52; Six Point Group, "Annual Report 1931, 1932 and News Sheet," 5SPG/B1–5.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

British feminists did not have to work to be involved in international feminist networks but, like their Australian counterparts, saw the connections between the domestic and international realms. In an evolution of pre-war thinking, their ideas about feminism and internationalism were also filtered through the lens of empire; looking abroad helped them assert their status as key political players across all three spheres.

BORDER-CROSSING CAMPAIGNS

The nature of some causes necessitated action across national, imperial, and international fronts, ensuring that domestic feminist work could not remain isolated. To a degree, therefore, feminists' internationalism was a pragmatic response to the realities of the changing world around them, rather than only an idealistic vision of a new world model. In the final part of this chapter, I briefly explore two causes that have already been touched on, but which illustrate the connections between the domestic, the imperial, and the international especially well: campaigns for women's independent nationality and campaigns for economic equality.

Married women's nationality was an issue that gained significant traction during the interwar period. In 1870 women's nationality rights across the British Empire were restricted when the *Naturalisation Act* incorporated the clause "[a] married woman shall be deemed to be a subject of the State of which her husband is for the time being a subject."¹¹⁹ This was entrenched in 1914 by the *British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act*, which specified that "the wife of a British subject shall be deemed to be a British subject, and the wife of an alien shall be deemed to be an alien" and drew together imperial subjects under a single British identity (Australia passed this act in 1920).¹²⁰ Feminists had opposed this rule for many years, but it was after the First World War—which highlighted the major problems such dependency could create, such as statelessness and deportation—and the end of suffrage campaigning that they

¹¹⁹ "The Naturalization Act 1870," 12 May 1870, 33 and 34 Vict., c. 14, http://www.nzlii.org/nz/legis/imp_act_1881/na187033a34vc14256.pdf.

¹²⁰ *British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act*, 1914, 4 & 5 Geo. 5, c. 17, s. 10(1), http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1914/17/pdfs/ukpga_19140017_en.pdf; M. Page Baldwin, "Subject to Empire: Married Women and the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act," *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 4 (2001): 526–528; Harriet J. Mercer, "Citizens of Empire and Nation: Australian Women's Quest for Independent Nationality Rights 1910s–1930s," *History Australia* 13, no. 2 (2016): 215–7.

had more time to tackle this topic. Women from around the empire and the world agreed that this legislation treated women as “chattel” and must be changed.¹²¹

Macmillan made a name for herself as a leading figure of the nationality campaign both in Britain and internationally. She drew on her standing as an experienced activist and, from 1924, as a legal expert to bolster her work in this area, encapsulating some of the different ways in which feminists could frame their legitimacy to participate in public debate.¹²² Her knowledge of the intricacies of British and imperial law, as well as her hopes for developing a new international legal system that could overcome the antiquated values that persisted at home, meant that she approached nationality campaigns across these interconnected domains, ultimately arguing for women’s autonomy.¹²³

Almost all interwar feminist organisations in both Australia and Britain adopted nationality as one of their causes. In 1929 a combined deputation representing over thirty of these groups marched to Westminster, just down the road from Macmillan’s chambers in Temple.¹²⁴ As one of its leaders, Macmillan was “anxious to bring up not only the national aspects but the Imperial aspects of the matter” and asked: “Will you urge the Dominions to adopt similar legislation?”¹²⁵ Corbett Ashby, representing the NUSEC, added that her group “very much hope[d] that Great Britain and the British Empire will give a lead in this matter.”¹²⁶ Speaking for the dominions and the BCL, Collisson said: “what is done in England has a profound significance for those parts of the Empire which have not yet full administrative liberty ... The Dominions do look, particularly the women of the Dominions, to see what forward step you will take on this matter.”¹²⁷ In a context in which white settler colonies were

¹²¹ For uses of the term “chattel,” see: “The Nationality of Married Women,” *International Women’s News* 24, no. 9 (June 1930): 139; Chrystal Macmillan, *The Nationality of Married Women* (London: Nationality of Married Women Pass the Bill Committee, 1931), 15; “Australia,” *International Women’s News* 29, no. 2 (November 1934): 10.

¹²² On Macmillan’s legal career, see: Laura Noakes, “Early Women Barristers and the Negotiation of Professional and Political Identity,” *Women’s History Review* (2022), DOI: 10.1080/09612025.2022.2138202.

¹²³ Macmillan, *The Nationality of Married Women*, 15.

¹²⁴ “Report of the Deputation to the Home Secretary from Various Women’s Organisations on the Nationality of Married Women,” 29 January 1929, Records of the British Federation of University Women (hereafter BFUW Records), TWL, Folder 1, Box 50, 5BFW/05/54.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

gaining recognition as separate nations yet were still tied to Britain, these women knew that concerted action across borders was necessary if they were to have the law repealed.

As the period wore on, committees were formed and different groups collaborated to focus their efforts. In mid-1930 the British National Council of Women formed the Nationality of Married Women “Pass the Bill” Committee (Pass the Bill Committee). Macmillan was elected to be its chair, while Corbett Ashby, representing the NUSEC, and Archdale for the SPG were both executive members.¹²⁸ The group’s primary aim was for the British parliament to pass a bill proposing independence in matters of nationality. While feminists sometimes held strong allegiances to certain groups over others, there was also a degree of flexibility in how they navigated organisations based on what they provided, from time to money to connections. After the bill had passed its second reading, Macmillan’s group started turning their attention to how they could ensure its success. They resolved “[t]o urge the Women’s Organisations overseas to campaign vigorously during the ensuing twelve months so that their Government representatives may go to [the Imperial Conference at] Ottawa pledged to support the principles embodied in the Nationality of Married Women Bill.”¹²⁹ They stressed to the dominions that the League would consider the topic, and they should lobby their governments with the view to have them press for reform on this international level, too.¹³⁰ Macmillan also formed and led an international committee to lobby the League, as explained elsewhere in this thesis.¹³¹ She believed that “[t]o improve the law in individual countries ... is not enough ... some international agreement is necessary.”¹³²

Australian feminists similarly conceptualised this as a multijurisdictional cause, as well as one of concern to women around the globe. As Harriet Mercer explains, Australians “were at once citizens of the Australian nation state as well as the wider political community of the

¹²⁸ “Nationality of Married Women Pass the Bill Committee,” *Woman’s Leader and Common Cause* (London), 13 June 1930, 147; Nationality of Married Women “Pass the Bill” Committee Minutes, 16 April 1930 and 23 June 1930, Records of the Nationality of Married Women Committee (“Pass the Bill”), (hereafter Pass the Bill Records), TWL, Box 1, 5NMW/A/01.

¹²⁹ Nationality of Married Women “Pass the Bill” Committee Minutes, 1 December 1930, Pass the Bill Records, TWL, Box 1, 5NMW/A/01.

¹³⁰ Nationality of Married Women “Pass the Bill” Committee Minutes, 12 January 1931, Pass the Bill Records, TWL, Box 1, 5NMW/A/01.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Chrystal Macmillan, “The Coming Imperial Conference and the Nationality of Married Women,” *Time and Tide* (London), 4 May 1923, 465.

British Empire.”¹³³ They petitioned the government, writing letters to politicians and newspaper editors and visiting key ministers to argue their case.¹³⁴ In 1936, for instance, Rischbieth wrote to John Curtin (as leader of the opposition) to argue the related point that children should derive their nationality from their mother and father equally, noting that “[a]ll international organisations of women suggest this point of view.”¹³⁵ When in 1934 Western Australian senator George Pearce introduced a bill to alter the *Nationality Act* in favour of women’s independence Rischbieth was full of praise, asserting that “Australian women will welcome it from one end of Australia to another.”¹³⁶ She framed this as “the fundamental right of citizenship” globally, explaining how “for 25 years women all over the world, after gaining enfranchisement, immediately turned their attention to the question of nationality as being one of the great principles of citizenship.”¹³⁷ At the same time, Rischbieth saw London as a focal point for this issue. Correspondence between her and Collisson reveals that Rischbieth suggested the BCL present a petition from the women of the empire to the British House of Commons, highlighting her understanding of the multilayered nature of imperial law.¹³⁸

In September 1939 Street wrote to the secretary for the dominions in Britain to highlight “the urgent need that exists to-day for the amendment of the law which governs nationality rights of married women.” Capitalising on the new wartime context, she said: “Women are being called upon in every sphere to assist the nation, and they are responding with promptness and enthusiasm as we would expect. It is unbearable that those women who have married foreigners should no longer be entitled to those rights and privileges of which British subjects are so proud.”¹³⁹ Despite the fact that feminists astutely recognised the multilayered character of the nationality issue, their goal was not achieved before the Second

¹³³ Mercer, “Citizens of Empire and Nation,” 214.

¹³⁴ “Nationality of Women. Representations to Minister,” *West Australian* (Perth), 11 October 1934 (news clipping), AFWV Records, NLA, Box 4, File 25, MS 2818; Bessie Rischbieth, “Nationality of Women. To the Editor,” *West Australian* (Perth), 16 August 1934 (news clipping), AFWV Records, NLA, Box 4, File 25, MS 2818.

¹³⁵ Bessie Rischbieth to The Hon. John Curtin, 8 May 1936, AFWV Records, NLA, Box 4, File 25, MS 2818.

¹³⁶ “Nationality of Wives. New Australian Bill,” *West Australian* (Perth), 27 July 1934, news clipping, AFWV Records, Box 4, File 25, MS 2818.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Marjorie Chave Collisson to Bessie Rischbieth, 30 November 1934 AFWV Records, NLA, Box 4, File 32, MS 2818.

¹³⁹ Jessie Street to Secretary for the Dominions, 22 September 1939, UA Records, SLNSW, Box Y791, Item 29, MLMSS 2160.

World War (in Britain the law was changed in 1948, and the right was not obtained internationally until 1957). But this case highlights how local priorities directed feminists' international action as well as how internationalism—filtered through the framework of empire—was a pragmatic and even necessary way to face these challenges.

Interwar feminists also embraced the plight of the working woman. While the world of work was governed by the nation, in the face of obstinate governments my group and their contemporaries extended their efforts to tackle economic gender inequality into the international arena in the hope that this might bring about much-needed change. This move recognised the similar problems women were facing around the world, as well as the influence wielded by new bodies of international governance, especially the ILO. As members of the middle class, their efforts in this area were not always welcomed by working-class women, who sometimes wanted to advocate for themselves, having the lived experience to know what would help them in their day-to-day lives. Nevertheless, my group and many of their colleagues persisted in their efforts to secure freedoms and rights including equal pay, better working conditions, and family endowment, recognising the many forms that women's participation in the economy took.

In 1927 divisions between British feminists on the topic of protective legislation reached a tipping point. There had for several years been debates about the wisdom of imposing special restrictions on women workers, for example prohibiting them from roles that would expose them to lead paint or that would require them to work overnight. Some embraced these measures; others, however, felt that they differentiated between men and women in such a way that would harm women's economic opportunities. Such discussions were especially fierce among the NUSEC's members. This reached a head when several members of its executive committee—including long-time member Macmillan—resigned, arguing that the organisation was showing “an increasing tendency to overlook the fundamental object of ... equal status of women with men.”¹⁴⁰ Here, the differences between “new” and “equal rights” feminists were largely irreconcilable. In comparison, in Australia—

¹⁴⁰ “Statement by the Eleven Resigning Officers and Members of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship Executive Committee,” *Woman's Leader and Common Cause* (London), 11 March 1927, 38.

where feminists mixed the two schools of thought much more freely—this difference was not so acute.¹⁴¹

Some of these women instead focused their energies on forming a new organisation: the Open Door Council (ODC). The ODC was formed in 1926 at a meeting hosted at Macmillan's house, with both Macmillan and Archdale being members of the first executive committee. From the beginning this group saw its cause as not only a British one, but an international one. They argued that "[t]o impose special legislative restrictions on women not imposed on men, while leaving men free in these respects to make and vary their own conditions as may best suit their own interests, is a policy open to grave abuse."¹⁴² This move inspired Antipodean feminists, especially Littlejohn and Street, who soon created an Australian ODC branch. Both groups lobbied their respective governments to stop them instituting laws that would restrict the types and hours of work for women. In 1936, for example, Street wrote to the relevant federal minister, saying: "We do not believe that it is in the interest of the community as a whole, that there should be any discriminations based on the sex of the worker in regulations concerning conditions of labour."¹⁴³ The British ODC consistently petitioned their government along similar lines.

In the interwar environment, however, it was not just national governments who had an influence on labour conditions and laws. As part of the League experiment, the ILO was formed in 1919 to help advance the League's central aim of promoting peace. Its governing logic was that unjust conditions of labour produced "unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled"; improving people's economic and working rights would therefore facilitate peace between nations.¹⁴⁴ At the ILO's first meeting in Washington, D.C. it took up the topic of women's employment and passed multiple resolutions that imposed gender-based restrictions. The Maternity Protection Convention, for example, stated that

¹⁴¹ Marilyn Lake, "From Self-Determination via Protection to Equality via Non-Discrimination: Defining Women's Rights at the League of Nations and the United Nations," in *Women's Rights and Human Rights: International Historical Perspectives*, ed. Patricia Grimshaw, Katie Holmes, and Marilyn Lake (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), 264–5.

¹⁴² Open Door Council, *First Annual Report. 1926–1927* (London: Open Door Council, 1927), Records of the Open Door Council (hereafter ODC records), TWL, 5ODC/A/1.

¹⁴³ Jessie Street to the Minister for Labour and Industry, 13 February 1936, UA Records, Box Y 793, MLMSS 2160.

¹⁴⁴ International Labour Office, *The Labour Provisions of the Peace Treaties* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1920), 1, http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/1920/20B09_18_engl.pdf.

women were entitled to an hour per working day to nurse their children and payment during maternity leave; at the same time, it made it clear that a woman “shall not be permitted to work during the six weeks following her confinement.”¹⁴⁵ The Night Work (Women) Convention stated that “[w]omen without distinction of age shall not be employed during the night in any public or private industrial undertaking, or in any branch thereof, other than an undertaking in which only members of the same family are employed.”¹⁴⁶ Such measures reflected and reinforced existing legislation in both Australia and Britain.¹⁴⁷

Feminists therefore did not only locate the danger to women’s working rights within their home countries. “The tendency shows itself not only nationally, but internationally,” the British ODC asserted at its first annual meeting. Pointing to the ILO—“a body so constituted that the women’s point of view cannot be adequately represented”—the group argued that they needed “to get into touch, not only with sympathisers in this country, but also with men and women in other countries who realise the increasing danger of this attack on women’s right to work.”¹⁴⁸ In a letter they wrote to the *Times*, members of the British ODC drew a connection between the new Lead Paint (Protection against Poisoning) Bill being introduced by the British parliament and the ILO. “The policy of the International Labour Office—and it is reflected in national labour legislation—has been to treat women as a class apart, without the same personal rights as men,” they wrote.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, as leader of the Australian ODC Littlejohn spoke a few years later about the ILO’s restrictions on women’s ability to work with materials made from lead, arguing that it “was too protective in its policy.” She instead suggested that any rules introduced to protect workers’ health should apply to men and women

¹⁴⁵ C003—Maternity Protection Convention, 1919 (No. 3), International Labour Organisation, http://www.ilo.ch/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO:12100:P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312148:NO.

¹⁴⁶ C004—Night Work (Women) Convention, 1919 (No. 4), International Labour Organisation, http://www.ilo.ch/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:6867510400076::NO::P12100_SHOW_TEXT:Y:.

¹⁴⁷ Jane Lewis and Sonya O. Rose, “‘Let England Blush’: Protective Labor Legislation, 1820–1914,” in *Protecting Women: Labor Legislation in Europe, the United States, and Australia, 1890–1920*, ed. Ulla Wikander, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Jane Lewis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 91–124; Renate Howe, “A Paradise for Working Men but Not Working Women: Women’s Wamework and Protective Legislation in Australia, 1890–1914,” in Wikander, Kessler-Harris, and Lewis, *Protecting Women*, 318–36.

¹⁴⁸ Open Door Council, *First Annual Report. 1926–1927*, 5ODC/A/1.

¹⁴⁹ Elizabeth Abbott, Helen A. Archdale, Millicent G. Fawcett, Helen Fraser, Cicely Hamilton, Vera Holmes, E. Knight, Chrystal Macmillan, F. de G. Merrifield, Christine M. Murrell, Alison Neilans, Margaret Wynne Nevinston, Rhondda, Jane Walker, and Monica Whately, “Restrictions on Women’s Work,” *Times* (London), 31 July 1926, 8.

equally.¹⁵⁰ Though governed by national laws, they believed that women's working rights needed to be confronted by women as an international collective. In the interwar world, where the League and the ILO were new forces governing people's lives, any reform needed to be approached in a multi-pronged way.

These two campaigns neatly illustrate the entangled nature of politics and law across the national, imperial, and—in the interwar context—international spheres. Feminists were sensitive to this fact and directed their lobbying accordingly, envisioning internationalism as a way to achieve change in their local and wider settings alike.

CONCLUSION

For various practical reasons, feminists spent much of their time within national borders. Even when they were at home, however, they were constantly engaging with and formulating ideas about international cooperation. To fully understand what internationalism meant to my group across the different facets of their lives, it is important to consider these more grounded moments alongside their exciting adventures overseas to places like Berlin, Geneva, and Honolulu; as Darian-Smith, Elder, and Paisley identify, the local sphere should be considered a site of production for internationalist thought and practices.¹⁵¹ Tracing this part of their lives reveals the important effects that each geopolitical location had on how people viewed their worlds and what they saw as pressing priorities. Whereas British women were at the geographic heart of various internationalist movements and imperial networks, Australians had to make more concerted efforts to be included and were keenly aware of the complex and changing relationships between the various parts of the British Empire as it became the Commonwealth. They all aspired to be world citizens but necessarily approached this goal from the vantage point of their distinctive national contexts.

Throughout the period feminists participated in various new and old domestic feminist organisations, through which they campaigned on a range of local issues, from extending the franchise to motherhood endowment to Aboriginal rights. Now that their lives were being

¹⁵⁰ "United Associations," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 April 1932, 4. Littlejohn's words are paraphrased in this quote.

¹⁵¹ Darian-Smith, Elder, and Paisley, "Are We Internationally Minded?," 406–7.

governed not only by national and imperial law but also potentially by an international legal system, they all envisioned their work as part of a larger global endeavour, too. Australian feminists created a national organisation in the hope that this would help them adopt a more prominent place in the international women's movement and in national, imperial, and international politics. They saw gender subordination as a global phenomenon and worked to build strong connections to feminists overseas to garner practical and moral support, and sometimes brought their own concerns—such as wages for housewives—into the international arena. British feminists were similarly influenced by the changing interwar context. They were driven by both idealistic visions of the power of transnational cooperation and by the realities of political life. The interwar context was very different to that of the pre-war period; now that the League had come into the picture, they needed to direct their appeals to it as well and hoped it might be able to institute reform where national governments were dragging their heels.

Crucially, these women's understandings of internationalism were mediated in different ways through the lens of empire. The British Empire and Commonwealth continued to have a structuring if changing influence on all its subjects' lives, governing laws and cultural norms; feminists understood this reality and approached their activism in a multi-layered way, seeking to establish trans-imperial solidarity (among white women, at least) and take action across the intertwined national, imperial, and international levels. It also influenced their domestic priorities. While British women continued advocating on behalf of Indian women in both a continuation and an evolution of Victorian-era thinking, their Antipodean counterparts were energised by the changing relationships between Britain and the white dominions and aimed to stake a stronger claim to feminist and political activity taking place beyond the nation's shores. In both cases, the work they conducted through their local and national feminist organisations was intimately bound up with the politics of their broader contexts, from the nation to the empire to the world.

CHAPTER 4

Women and World Governance

Geneva was, for many, the home of interwar internationalism. The newly established League of Nations (the League) first convened in January 1920 and by the end of that year had moved to the lakeside city, marking neutral Switzerland as a meeting ground for internationalists of various persuasions.¹ This was a much-anticipated development. People from around the world came to work in the League's civil service, eventually overfilling the cramped halls of the Palais Wilson (formerly the Hôtel National) on the lake's edge.² Each September saw even greater numbers flood into the city to participate in or observe the assembly's yearly sitting, which brought together representatives from all member nations. Men in suits dominated, but women—feminists among them—saw a chance to change the status quo and made a home for themselves in Geneva. Various women's organisations set up headquarters there, and feminists lobbied the League on a range of issues, coordinating across organisational lines to form groups that had consultative status. Some even managed to secure a place on national delegations, although women mostly struggled to rise through the ranks of the institution itself—the British social reformer Dame Rachel Crowdy was the lone woman to head a section.³ From the outset, feminists saw in the League an opportunity to remould gendered norms and secure equality on a global level. In response to this new context, their visions of

¹ As Susan Pedersen highlights, other cities were “much more polyglot and cosmopolitan” than Geneva, but Switzerland's neutrality proved a determining factor. Susan Pedersen, “Back to the League of Nations,” *American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (2007): 1112.

² Karen Gram-Skjoldager, “‘Utterly below Criticism’—Working Conditions in the Palais Wilson 1930,” *The Invention of International Bureaucracy* blog, hosted by Aarhus University, 4 July 2017, <https://projects.au.dk/inventingbureaucracy/blog/show/artikel/utterly-below-criticism-working-conditions-in-the-palais-wilson-1930/>.

³ Alice Prochaska, “Crowdy, Dame Rachel Eleanor (1884–1964), social reformer,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, revised 4 October 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/32647>.

internationalism expanded as they began to see cross-border cooperation as a means of transforming not only their local but their international worlds.

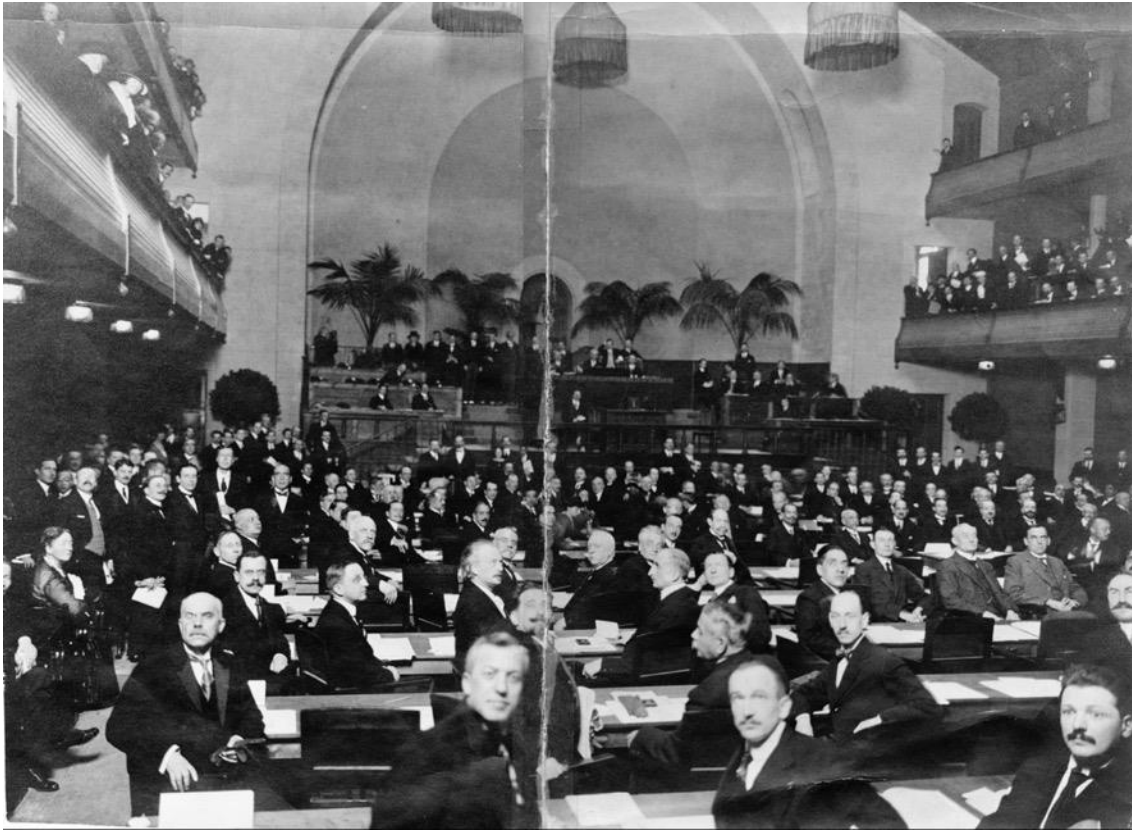


Figure 27 The many men of the League of Nations. Geneva, Salle de la Réformation, first meeting of the Assembly of the League of Nations, 15 November 1920. United Nations Library & Archives, A1-019.

The League courted controversy over its relatively short lifetime as member states tried to settle disputes, establish collective security, and internationalise various social, cultural, and economic issues. It not only shaped but was shaped by other visions of internationalism circulating at the time, including those promoted by feminists, socialists, and Black or “race internationalists.”⁴ As Patricia Clavin explains, the League provided one stage “where a

⁴ Simon Jackson and Alanna O’Malley, “Rocking on its Hinges? The League of Nations, the United Nations and the New History of Internationalism in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Institution of International Order: From the League of Nations to the United Nations*, ed. Simon Jackson and Alanna O’Malley (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2018), 4. On Black or “race internationalism” see: Imaobong D. Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Keisha N. Blain, Tiffany M. Gill, and Michael O. West, eds., *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019).

plurality of views about global and regional coordination and cooperation were generated, and where they could be compared and could compete,” making it “a multiverse: an international space–time that could and did spawn multiple universes.”⁵ While not the only generative site of internationalism, Geneva held a certain aura—a sense of possibility and power—that attracted feminists who were seeking pathways for making change.⁶ It completely captured the attention of each member of my group. Understanding their thoughts on and relationships with this institution is essential for understanding them and how feminist internationalism as a movement changed throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

This chapter explores how my group engaged with the League right up until the outbreak of war in 1939. The League era was formative for them, seeing them develop reputations as important public figures in their home countries and abroad (which was in no small part thanks to their participation in Geneva’s activities). In the following pages I ask: to what extent did the League spur on or shape feminist internationalism? What did it mean and represent to these women? What were the consequences of their engagement with the League? And why did they remain so committed to this institution even though, especially in the 1930s, its ability to stabilise international relations and improve conditions for women was demonstrably limited? Using personal and organisational records, including material held in the League’s vast archives, I show how feminists brought their own ideologies to bear on other internationalist projects (with varying levels of success) as well as how feminism developed alongside and was in many ways influenced by other versions of internationalist thinking.

Before the First World War, feminists conceptualised internationalism primarily as a transnational community-building exercise that would bolster their confidence to confront their national governments. The League changed this. As soon as it emerged as a new force in the world, feminists saw this institution as a means of surmounting the ongoing challenges they faced in their various national contexts, considering it a novel and hopefully more effective means of revising contemporary norms that sustained women’s subordination. The

⁵ Patricia Clavin, *Securing the World Economy: The Reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

⁶ Carol Miller goes so far as to say that “during the inter-war years, Geneva became the international centre of the women’s movement.” There is truth in this statement, although it does overlook other manifestations of transnational feminist action that emerged in Asia, the Pacific, the Americas, and the Middle East. Carol Miller, “‘Geneva—the Key to Equality’: Inter-war Feminists and the League of Nations,” *Women’s History Review* 3, no. 2 (1994): 220.

League thus represented an opportunity to revision the world along internationalist and feminist lines.⁷ When they were let down by Geneva, they did not retreat but rather returned time and again to push for action, driven by both hope and mounting disappointment and believing (whether idealistically or pragmatically, and sometimes both) that the League was the way forward. In the context of the League's elevation of technical expertise they forged a sense of themselves as feminist experts and were emboldened to take part in broader political discussions. Although the League failed to make the great strides towards gender equality that they had hoped for, it had a major influence on feminist internationalism, not least by reinforcing the Eurocentric, imperialist tendencies of the movement—a fact that means the Australians whose lives I am investigating are slightly less prominent in this chapter (although their enthusiasm for the project was no less pronounced). Feminists' internationalism might have predated the League, but this institution helped bring about a major shift in how they operated during these two decades and after.

HISTORIES OF THE LEAGUE

The story of the League was once one of failure: failure to develop a system of collective security, to stem a series of international political crises, and, ultimately, to prevent a second world war. Rejecting this narrative, an ever-growing body of scholarship has been working to reinterrogate various dimensions of “this much misunderstood international organization.”⁸ As Susan Pedersen put it in her 2007 review essay, the most pressing question now is not “why the League failed” but instead “the more properly historical question of what it did and meant over its twenty-five-year existence.”⁹ Recent generations of scholars have worked to understand its ideas, dynamics, successes, and failures more fully.¹⁰ This has involved revisiting

⁷ Glenda Sluga argues that despite their differences, “many women looked to the League of Nations to offer them the political representation their own nations did not provide.” Glenda Sluga, “Female and National Self-determination: A Gender Re-reading of ‘the Apogee of Nationalism’,” *Nations and Nationalism* 6 no. 4 (2000): 509.

⁸ Pedersen, “Back to the League,” 1092. See also: Susan Pedersen, “Foreword: From the League of Nations to the United Nations,” in Jackson and O'Malley, *The Institution of International Order*, x.

⁹ Pedersen, “Back to the League,” 1092.

¹⁰ Key works in this area include: Omer Aloni, *The League of Nations and the Protection of the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Clavin, *Securing the World Economy*; M. Patrick Cottrell, *The League of Nations: Enduring Legacies of the First Experiment at World Organization* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2018); Joy

the classic topics of international security and peacekeeping and questions of sovereignty and statehood with a fresh eye.¹¹ It has also meant expanding the focus to include the “third ‘League of Nations’”—the League that, by the end of the 1930s, was devoting over fifty percent of its budget to its “technical” work, which encompassed a wide variety of specialist social, economic, and humanitarian activities, from projects relating to health to communications to the trafficking of women and girls.¹² Historians have also examined the changes and continuities between the League and the postwar United Nations (UN), despite the latter organisation emphasising its novelty.¹³ Mark Mazower, for example, advocates focusing on the League’s “enduring influence” as a model of international governance that rejected older forms of international cooperation and “offered the promise of democratization and social transformation through technical expertise.”¹⁴

Work that explores the entanglements of League internationalism and imperialism is also important for this thesis. The League was heralded as something that signalled a break with a more conflict-ridden, unjust past. Yet there is ample evidence that this rupture was not quite so absolute. Mazower has described the institution as “a bridge between the world of nineteenth-century empire and the twentieth-century rise of the nation state.”¹⁵ During the League’s lifetime, critiques of its limitations and Eurocentrism were made by those it

Damousi and Patricia O’Brien, eds., *League of Nations: Histories, Legacies and Impact* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2018); Daniel Gorman, *The Emergence of International Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ruth Henig, *The Peace That Never Was: A History of the League of Nations* (London: Haus Publishing, 2019); Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Jackson and O’Malley, *The Institution of International Order*; Sakiko Kaiga, *Britain and the Intellectual Origins of the League of Nations, 1914–1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012); Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009); Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism c.1918–45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011); Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, eds., *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹¹ Pedersen, “Back to the League.”

¹² *Ibid.*, 1108.

¹³ See, for example: Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*; Jackson and O’Malley, *The Institution of International Order*; Mazower, *Governing the World*; Jaci Eisenberg, “The Status of Women: A Bridge from the League of Nations to the United Nations,” *Journal of International Organizations Studies* 4, no. 2 (2013): 8–24.

¹⁴ Mazower, *Governing the World*, 153.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

excluded.¹⁶ Member states engaged with it with their own interests firmly in mind—Australia, for instance, was desperate to safeguard its White Australia policy at all costs—and much power rested in the hands of Western nations such as Britain and France.¹⁷ Pedersen has suggested that the League could therefore reasonably be described as a “League of Empires.”¹⁸ Yet the reality was complex. As Daniel Gorman has shown, interwar internationalism was “under the direct influence of both imperial and anti-imperial dynamics”; the League expanded European empires and states including Britain threw their weight behind it in order to maintain control of the global system, but ultimately internationalism and the accompanying discourses of self-determination that were emerging were “corrosive” for imperialism.¹⁹

There is a relatively small but invigorating body of scholarship that adopts a gender focus, often by examining the spaces that women were able to craft for themselves either within or in conversation with the League. From the outset—and in no small part thanks to feminist lobbying—the organisation’s covenant stipulated that “[a]ll positions under or in connection with the League, including the Secretariat, shall be open equally to men and women.”²⁰ It is this subject of women working in the League’s civil service that forms the basis of novelist Frank Moorhouse’s much-acclaimed *Grand Days*, which is often cited as one of the fullest, most engaging, and most thoroughly researched portrayals of the heady spirit and gender dynamics of Geneva between the wars.²¹ However, while some did gain a foothold, on the whole women were under-represented and mostly employed in the secretariat’s second division—not simply restricted to boring, manual work, but certainly not considered competent enough to be leaders and high-level analysts—leaving the higher-ranking positions

¹⁶ Pedersen, “Foreword,” xi–xii.

¹⁷ James Cotton, *The Australians at Geneva: Internationalist Diplomacy in the Interwar Years* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2022), 3–4, 24.

¹⁸ Pedersen, *The Guardians*, 403. See also: Tomoko Akami, “Liberal Internationalism Reconsidered: Inter-Imperialism, Liberalism, and the League of Nations in Asia and the Pacific,” in *East Asians in the League of Nations: Actors, Empires and Regions in Early Global Politics* ed. Christopher R. Hughes and Hatsue Shinohara (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 11–36.

¹⁹ Gorman, *The Emergence of International Society*, 3. See also: Mazower, *Governing the World*, xvi.

²⁰ Article 7, Covenant of the League of Nations (Including Amendments adopted to December, 1924), The Avalon Project hosted by Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp#art7.

²¹ Frank Moorhouse, *Grand Days* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1993). For an analysis of the book see: Martin Leer, “‘Being International?’ Edith Campbell Berry’s Geneva in Frank Moorhouse’s *Grand Days*,” *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: JASAL* 16, no. 1 (2016): 1–11.

for men.²² Meanwhile, although almost two-thirds of member states included a woman in their delegation during the period, if only delegates or substitute-delegates are included (excluding secretaries and the like) the proportion is more like thirty-nine percent.²³ Geneva was still primarily a masculine space, as the photographs of rooms filled with men in suits attest.

This meant that women mostly engaged with the League as lobbyists—a fact that shapes the historiography. Leila Rupp points to the importance of Geneva in the final chapter of *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement*, arguing that “[i]t was through the League of Nations that feminist internationalists succeeded in putting their issues on the international agenda” and that “the history of international governance would not have been the same without the participation of the transnational women’s groups.”²⁴ Carol Miller’s unpublished doctoral thesis provides the most thorough account of feminists’ engagement with the League, if centring mainly on British and other Northern Hemisphere actors.²⁵ Some scholars have specifically examined the status of women inquiry of the mid- to late 1930s, discussions of women’s independent nationality rights, and feminists’ engagement with efforts to suppress sex trafficking. Others have written about the various consultative committees that formed throughout the 1920s and 1930s in an effort to bring a united feminist voice into sustained dialogue with League decision makers.²⁶ What we see is how Geneva was a site of

²² Susan Pedersen provides a thorough account of women’s work in the secretariat in: Susan Pedersen, “Women at Work in the League of Nations Secretariat,” in *Precarious Professionals: Gender, Identities and Social Change in Modern Britain*, ed. Heidi Egginton and Zoë Thomas, 181–204 (London: University of London Press, 2021). See also: Miller, “Lobbying the League,” 77. For a contemporary account of women’s involvement with the League, see: Dorothea Mary Northcroft, (*Women at Work in the League of Nations*. London: Page & Pratt, 1923).

²³ Miller, “Lobbying the League,” 102.

²⁴ Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 210, 210–22.

²⁵ Miller, “Lobbying the League.” See also Miller’s published article based off chapter 6 of the thesis: Miller, “Geneva—the Key to Equality.”

²⁶ Important works across these various topics include: Elisabeth Anna Bubbers, “The Work of International Women’s Groups at the League of Nations and the Pan-American Union, 1919–1939” (Masters thesis, Leiden University, 2017); Eisenberg, “The Status of Women”; Gyoung Sun Jang, “The Sexual Politics of the Interwar Era Global Governance: Historicizing the Women’s Transnational Movements With(in) the League of Nations, 1919–1940” (PhD thesis, Clark University, 2009); Marilyn Lake, “From Self-Determination via Protection to Equality via Non-Discrimination: Defining Women’s Rights at the League of Nations and the United Nations,” in *Women’s Rights and Human Rights: International Historical Perspectives*, ed. Patricia Grimshaw, Katie Holmes, and Marilyn Lake (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), 254–71; Katarina Leppänen, “The Conflicting Interests of Women’s Organizations and the League of Nations on the Question of Married Women’s Nationality in the 1930s,” *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 17, no. 4 (2009): 240–55; Regula Ludi, “Setting New Standards: International Feminism and the League of Nations’ Inquiry into the Status of Women,” *Journal of Women’s History* 31, no. 1 (2019): 12–36; McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations*, chapter 7; Miller,

both cooperation and conflict among feminists, especially as debates over feminism's core essence and the best approach to adopt mounted throughout the 1930s.²⁷ Given the League's European base, much of this literature is focused on North American and European women, although some English-language studies of how non-Western women engaged with it are emerging.²⁸ The historiography has captured very well what some feminists did at the League, but does not always reflect back on how the League influenced feminist internationalism itself or what it meant to various individuals in the broader context of their lives and activism. This is a fertile topic with more still to learn, especially about the thoughts and experiences of the individual women who engaged with the League in theory or in practice: a task to which this chapter now turns.

EARLY HOPES FOR THE LEAGUE

By the time of the postwar 1919 peace talks, many feminists were well-practised at organising internationally. They were also already deeply invested in the idea of international cooperation

"Lobbying the League"; Miller, "'Geneva—the Key to Equality'"; Nora Natchkova and Céline Schoeni, "The ILO, Feminists and Expert Networks: The Challenges of a Protective Policy (1919–1934)," in *Globalizing Social Rights: The International Labour Organization and Beyond*, ed. Sandrine Kott and Joëlle Droux, 49–64 (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Susan Pedersen, "Metaphors of the Schoolroom: Women Working the Mandates System of the League of Nations," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 66 (2008): 188–207; Myriam Piguët, "Gender Distribution in the League of Nations: The Start of a Revolution?," in *The League of Nations: Perspectives from the Present*, ed. Haakon A. Ikonomou and Karen Gram-Skjoldager (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2019), 62–73; Jessica R. Pliley, "Claims to Protection: The Rise and Fall of Feminist Abolitionism in the League of Nations' Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children, 1919–1936," *Journal of Women's History* 22, no. 4 (2010): 90–113; Nova Robinson, "'Women's point of view was apt to be forgotten': The Liaison Committee of International Women's Organizations' Campaign for an International Women's Convention, 1920–1953," in Jackson and O'Malley, *The Institution of International Order*, 136–62; Susan Zimmermann, "Liaison Committees of International Women's Organizations and the Changing Landscape of Women's Internationalism, 1920s to 1945," in *Women and Social Movements, International, 1840 to Present*, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2012), 1–44, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2476959?account_id=8330&usage_group_id=111575; Susan Zimmermann, "Equality of Women's Economic Status? A Major Bone of Contention in the International Gender Politics Emerging During the Interwar Period," *The International History Review* 41, no. 1 (2019): 200–27.

²⁷ See: Lake, "From Self-Determination via Protection to Equality via Non-Discrimination."

²⁸ See, for example: Andrea Germer, "Japanese Feminists After Versailles: Between the State and the Ethnic Nation," *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 3 (2013): 92–115; Rosalind Parr, "Solving World Problems: The Indian Women's Movement, Global Governance, and 'the Crisis of Empire', 1933–46," *Journal of Global History* 16, no. 1 (2021): 122–40; Mona L. Siegel, *Peace on Our Terms: The Global Battle for Women's Rights After the First World War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020). There is also scholarship on the traffic of women that focuses on how the League worked on issues that affected non-Western women, rather than on these women as active participants at Geneva, such as: Julia T. Martínez, "The League of Nations, Prostitution, and the Deportation of Chinese Women from Interwar Manila," *Journal of Women's History* 33, no. 4 (2021): 67–91.

and had seen firsthand the opportunities and challenges such activity offered through their involvement in international women's organisations and congresses. This experience set the stage for them to receive news of a proposed intergovernmental institution with great interest and, initially at least, optimism. This new organisation, they hoped, could be the path to improving women's lives the world over.

Feminists wanted—in fact, felt that they needed—to contribute to plans for the proposed League even though they were excluded from the formal peace negotiations that took place in Paris after the armistice of 1918. The French Union for Women's Suffrage took the lead, quickly organising an Inter-Allied Women's Conference in the French capital. Like the peace conference itself, it controversially excluded representatives of the defeated countries and was an exclusively Western affair, with the most sizeable and active delegations coming from France, Britain, Belgium, and the United States.²⁹ Between February and April these women met to discuss their ideas for the future with each other and with the peace conference delegates. As Mona Siegel explains, they believed that “a stable and democratic world order depended on women's political enfranchisement, and a lasting peace hung on international recognition of women's fundamental rights in the home, the economy, and society.”³⁰ They had multiple setbacks, such as the rejection of their idea for a women's commission, but by mid-March they won the chance to speak to the peace conference, including the group workshopping ideas for the proposed League. This was perhaps “little more than a fig leaf,” but they took it as a win.³¹

At this point, Margery Corbett Ashby travelled from London to Paris to fill the gap left by the famed suffrage leader Millicent Garrett Fawcett, who returned home from Paris in late February.³² Corbett Ashby had recently (and unsuccessfully) run for parliament in Britain; it is notable that her message to voters in her campaign opened by affirming her support for the proposed League.³³ She later explained that she was asked to go to Paris because she was

²⁹ This event is treated extensively as the subject of chapter 1 in Siegel, *Peace on Our Terms*, 12–50.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

³² *Ibid.*, 26, 41.

³³ “To the Electors of Ladywood What I Stand For. A Progressive Platform for Men and Women,” Papers of Margery Corbett Ashby (hereafter Corbett Ashby Papers), The Women's Library, London (hereafter TWL), Box FL482, 7MCA/B/06.

fluent in French and was much more interested in international affairs than Garrett Fawcett.³⁴ At thirty-seven years old, Corbett Ashby was one of the younger women on this Inter-Allied delegation, but one who wanted to take on a more prominent role in international feminist networks moving forward. When the group met with the peacemakers she asked them for equality for women in the League's various offices, while her colleagues added requests for the principle of women's suffrage to be promoted and raised issues including the international sex trade.³⁵ It was Corbett Ashby's request that was most readily agreed to (in principle at least).³⁶ While Miller characterises their efforts as "cautious" and "conciliatory," defined by "gradualist" style proposals, Siegel argues that these women successfully established precedents that would have long-lasting impacts and showed the potential of international conventions for achieving reform.³⁷ Certainly, these women were celebrated at the time with headlines like "They Got Equality for Women in the League of Nations."³⁸

Corbett Ashby later echoed such words, telling her interviewer that "we got ... the equality clause in the constitution of the League of Nations."³⁹ Yet this group was not the only one to lobby the peace conference. In May there was a separate feminist meeting in Zürich.⁴⁰ Unlike the French gathering, the second International Congress of Women—a follow-up to the 1915 women's peace congress held in The Hague—was hosted on neutral territory in a combination of English, French, and German. It also included women from the defeated nations. Jo Vellacott argues that, unlike the Paris group, these women "insisted on expressing opinions on all subjects and in all spheres, even the most traditionally male-dominated." Whereas the Inter-Allied feminists "besought the statesmen in vain to admit them to their consultations," the Zürich group created a separate space "where at least they could speak

³⁴ Margery Corbett Ashby interviewed by Brian Harrison, 28 May 1974, Oral Evidence on the Suffragette and Suffragist Movements: the Brian Harrison Interviews (hereafter Harrison Interviews), TWL, 8SUF/B/004; Margery Corbett Ashby interviewed by Brian Harrison, 23 November 1976, Harrison Interviews, TWL, 8SUF/B/116a.

³⁵ Siegel, *Peace on Our Terms*, 43–4.

³⁶ Article 7, Covenant of the League of Nations, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp#art7.

³⁷ Miller, "Lobbying the League," 22; Siegel, *Peace on Our Terms*, 46–7.

³⁸ "They Got Equality for Women in the League of Nations," *Chicago Tribune*, 29 April 1919, 5.

³⁹ Corbett Ashby interviewed by Harrison, 8SUF/B/116a.

⁴⁰ Jo Vellacott provides a comparison of the two conferences in: Jo Vellacott, "Feminism as if All People Mattered: Working to Remove the Causes of War, 1919–1929," *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 3 (2001): 375–94. See also: Jo Vellacott, "A Place for Pacifism and Transnationalism in Feminist Theory: The Early Work of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom," *Women's History Review* 2, no. 1 (1993): 23–56.

freely and publicly.” Nevertheless, both groups suffered from being excluded from the official decision-making channels.⁴¹



Figure 28 “They Got Equality for Women in the League of Nations,” *Chicago Tribune*, 29 April 1919, 5. Corbett Ashby is standing in the back row, fourth from the right.

Some of those who had led the 1915 meeting returned for this conference, including Chrystal Macmillan (a board member of this group) and Kathleen Courtney (a leading member of the British delegation). By this point both were already seasoned campaigners. Macmillan and her fellow executive members divided the conference work among three committees—one political, one “on matters affecting women’s status,” and one on educational, social, and ethical questions—each of which prepared submissions for the peace conference and, in preparation for its possible establishment, the League.⁴² Macmillan played a central role in

⁴¹ Vellacott, “Feminism as if All People Mattered,” 383.

⁴² Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (hereafter WILPF), *Rapport du congrès international de femmes. Zurich. Mai 12–17, 1919* (Geneva: Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 1919), 49.

determining the group's stance on the proposed League. She was very much in favour of it—surprised, even, that the idea had been taken up by the peace brokers—but had many reservations and suggestions.⁴³ She and Courtney advanced the idea of a women's charter to be inserted in the League's covenant, which covered points as varied as women's suffrage, equal pay for equal work, and motherhood endowment.⁴⁴ These women saw the proposed League as an important step forward, but only if it enshrined certain principles about women's rights and opportunities.



Figure 29 Chrystal Macmillan and Jane Addams, 1919. Swarthmore College.

Macmillan was part of the delegation the congress sent to Paris to meet the peacemakers who, as she later reported, were embroiled in disagreement and “irritation.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., 83–6, 168–74.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 93–7.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 241, 465; Chrystal Macmillan, “Deputation to the Peace Conference,” in *Towards Peace and Freedom*, produced by the British Section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (London: British Section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1919), 17.

They told the men gathered there that “the peaceful progress of the world can only be assured when the common interests of humanity are recognized in the establishment of a League of Nations which shall represent the will of the peoples and promote international cooperation.” While they expressed “satisfaction that the idea of a League of Nations ... has become so widely accepted,” they also critiqued the men’s proposal, as they felt it was not truly formed on the basis of Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points.⁴⁶ They urged for a women’s charter to be included in the covenant, centring on the principle that “the status of women, social, political and economic, is of supreme international importance.”⁴⁷ Though they had been met with “the liveliest sympathy” from some, ultimately these more complex requests were not enacted.⁴⁸

Feminists showed great interest in the idea of the League and were keen to have their say on what it should look like. Having been practising internationalism for years, they already saw themselves as true political actors who had the knowledge and experience to contribute to political life—they extended this to see themselves as important contributors to the discussions taking place in Paris. They were in part driven by great hopes for this new body of international governance but were also astutely sensitive to changing political realities, aware of the significant implications a new system could have on women’s lives around the world. These women were almost exclusively from the Northern Hemisphere, although a few representatives from elsewhere—Victoria’s Eleanor May Moore, Cecilia John, and Vida Goldstein, for example, as well as one representative from Argentina—were also involved.⁴⁹ Feminism’s relationship to the League was thus set up on Eurocentric, imperialist foundations—something that continued to shape both League internationalism and feminist internationalism in the years to come.

⁴⁶ WILPF, *Rapport du congrès*, 243–9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 246–8.

⁴⁸ Macmillan, “Deputation to the Peace Conference,” 17.

⁴⁹ WILPF, *Rapport du congrès*, 442.

A DRIVING FORCE

The League's covenant was adopted in April 1919 and two months later became part of the Treaty of Versailles. Feminists realised that this new institution would require them to shift their approach to activism and reconsider their understanding of internationalism in this new era. Whereas before there was no higher body than the state to which they could appeal for reform, they hoped that the League would offer a way to override obstinate governments and force change from above. They were already committed internationalists and were excited at the prospect of being able to harness the spirit of the age to turn their ideals into practical reform.

When the Alliance gathered for its first post-war meeting in June 1920 it met in Geneva, where the League would hold its first assembly in just a few months' time. Though this was coincidental (Madrid was originally envisioned to be the host city, but the location had to be changed due to local controversies), it foreshadowed the close association the group would seek to develop with the League. At this point, before divisions emerged over the issue of protective legislation, Macmillan was one of the organisation's central figures. Ever the pragmatist, she saw the League as an important new player in the world of feminist activism. She asserted that the Alliance had "not been slow to recognise that, just as hitherto its political work has had to be directed towards the education of individual national parliaments, so in future its work must also include the organising of international co-operation in order to influence the League of Nations."⁵⁰ The congress as a whole made the following resolution:

That the women of thirty-one nations assembled in Congress at Geneva, convinced that in a strong Society of Nations based on the principles of right and justice, lies the only hope of assuring the future peace of the world, call upon the women of the whole world to direct their will, their intelligence, and their influence towards the development and the consolidation of the Society of Nations on such a basis, and to assist it in every possible way in its work of securing peace and goodwill throughout the world.⁵¹

Ellen Carol DuBois emphasises the importance of the League for the Alliance, arguing that "without a focus on Geneva-based activities and interaction with the LoN [League of Nations],

⁵⁰ International Woman Suffrage Alliance (hereafter IWSA), *Report of Eighth Congress, Geneva, Switzerland, June 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 1920* (Manchester: Percy Brothers, 1920), 22.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

the history and activities of the Alliance after the late 1920s are impossible to appreciate.”⁵² As part of this group, Macmillan was led as much by hope and idealism as by an ability to react quickly to changing circumstances and a keen eye for what would be most likely to bring about swift action. In her view, the very existence of the League meant that feminists must engage with it. If they did not, it would not only be a missed opportunity, but risked allowing the old style of masculine diplomacy to dominate.

Despite their different stances on feminism, Macmillan and Corbett Ashby shared this belief that the League would direct feminist work in the years to come. “True, in one sense, our task is easier because we have now in the world a permanent international authority, the League of Nations, whom we can help and who in turn can assist us,” Corbett Ashby wrote after taking over the Alliance presidency in 1923. She argued that “the machinery of the League enables us to work simultaneously in all countries” and used the example of married women’s nationality to suggest that rather than painstakingly working “piecemeal” for change in each country, the League could pass a convention that “can be ratified quickly by individual Governments.”⁵³ In these early years, Corbett Ashby was buoyed by optimism. Her faith in this institution was severely tested several times, but this did not displace the League from her programme for the Alliance; her 1938 presidential message centred on the status of women inquiry, telling readers: “we women have an immense but hopeful task before us.”⁵⁴ Right up until the eve of war, she remained positive that this could be the way forward.

It was natural that feminist internationalists, especially those already based in Europe, looked to Geneva and sought a seat at the table there. But it is important to note the effects that this focus had on the international women’s movement. While international feminist networks began to make some efforts to expand beyond the West and incorporate a wider range of women into their ranks, they were still underpinned by strong Eurocentric and imperialist currents. The advent of League internationalism only reinforced such modes of

⁵² Ellen Carol DuBois, “The IWSA/IAWSEC in the Age of the League of Nations,” in *Women and Social Movements, International, 1840 to Present*, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street, 2012), 1–2, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2476927?account_id=8330&usage_group_id=111575.

⁵³ Margery Corbett Ashby, “A Message from Our New President,” *International Woman Suffrage News* 17, no. 9 (July 1923): 145–6.

⁵⁴ Margery Corbett Ashby, “The President’s New Year Message,” *International Women’s News* 32, no. 4 (January 1938): 25.

thinking. The League simultaneously disrupted and reinforced the logic of empire and, while its secretariat did employ people from various parts of the world, as Klaas Dykmann argues, its non-Western civil servants “were neither socially particularly diverse nor truly representative of their home countries” as an “adherence to European culture and norms were sort of the qualification for the job.”⁵⁵ Against this backdrop, and with the League occupying so much time at feminist conferences and in the pages of their periodicals, Europe continued to be foregrounded in many feminists’ minds over other centres of transnational collaboration, such as Tehran, Honolulu, or Lahore.

Even some of those who worked to decentre feminist internationalism from the North Atlantic maintained the League’s importance. Australian women have not featured much in this story so far; while a few individuals were present at the 1919 meetings (notably Moore, John, and Goldstein), their distance from Europe and (until 1921) their lack of a national organisation meant that they were less active in these early discussions.⁵⁶ But they soon became some of the League’s keenest advocates, influenced by the greater sense of autonomy and legitimacy that Australia’s independent membership of the League brought to the country.⁵⁷ Although Bessie Rischbieth critiqued the Southern Hemisphere’s exclusion from Europe-based networks and showed increasing interest in feminist projects being undertaken in “the East,” she was very enthusiastic about what was happening in Geneva. From the vantage point of the 1950s she went so far as to say that “[a] fundamental change came with the birth of the League of Nations ... at that period literally the whole trend of the women’s Movement changed from the domestic field to the international field of action.”⁵⁸ This emphasis on the League’s role in the birth of an international feminism is certainly overstated and reflects Rischbieth’s later entry into the movement compared to some of her British colleagues.

⁵⁵ Klaas Dykmann, “How International was the Secretariat of the League of Nations?,” *The International History Review* 37, no. 4 (2015): 733, 738.

⁵⁶ WILPF, *Rapport du congrès international de femmes*, 52, 131.

⁵⁷ Fiona Paisley, “Being International at Home: Australian Public Opinion in the League Era,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 43, no. 4 (2019): 430; Cotton, *The Australians at Geneva*, 7.

⁵⁸ Bessie Rischbieth, “The Development & Social Significance of the Women’s Movement,” 1951, Papers and objects of Bessie Rischbieth (hereafter Rischbieth Papers), National Library of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NLA), Box 2, File 5, MS 2004/2/50. Emphasis is in the original.

Nevertheless, her labelling of Geneva as “a world focal point, a ‘Mecca’ for women” encapsulates the League’s energising effect—one which still resonated years later.⁵⁹

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

Although the League’s covenant stipulated that all positions would be open to men and women equally, the institution (especially its upper echelons) remained overwhelmingly masculine. Rather than deterring them, this only spurred on feminists’ desire to take a seat at the table. The context of the League’s emphasis on technical expertise is important here. While its political authority increasingly came into question, its status “as a source of expertise and international action” grew and even began to challenge the Eurocentrism of the organisation.⁶⁰ Increasing consultation with women’s organisations formed alongside (even part of) this shift towards technical expertise.⁶¹ This meant that feminists were not only trying to be involved as political actors akin to politicians, nor were they simply voluntary social reformers. The League environment fostered their sense of themselves as experts: experts as feminists, internationalists, politically conscious women, and public figures. This helped fuel their confidence to stake a claim to broader political discussions and contributed to their persistently close engagement with Geneva right up until 1939.

One avenue that Rischbieth and her compatriots pursued in their efforts to represent themselves was the national delegation the Australian government sent each September for the assembly’s sitting. Thanks to their advocacy, every year from 1922 a woman was included on the party, albeit as an “alternate” or “substitute” delegate with no voting powers. Rischbieth saw this as an important step. She wrote many letters to members of the government over the following years, making sure they would uphold this commitment. In 1927, for instance, she urged the treasurer and acting prime minister, Earle Page, to select a woman from a state that had not yet had the honour. “The experience gained by an Australian woman alternate delegate,” she explained, “by being brought into contact with some of the world humanitarian movements at Geneva must prove of great value, not only to the individual, but to like

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Mazower, *Governing the World*, 143; Pedersen, “Back to the League,” 1110.

⁶¹ Robinson, ““Women’s point of view was apt to be forgotten,”” 145.

movements taking place in each State, thereby obtaining a better chance of Commonwealth co-ordination.”⁶² When no woman was scheduled to go to the Disarmament Conference in 1932, she wrote to her friend Ruby Rich: “Of course we will not take this sitting down!! ... I feel that we will eventually get a woman appointed but it may take time.”⁶³ She pressed the point with the prime minister, Joseph Lyons, arguing that it was “truly fitting” that a woman gain the “invaluable experience such an Assembly of the nations must provide at this critical juncture in the world’s history” while also “adding her measure of usefulness and vision to the Australian Delegation.”⁶⁴ However, her words fell on deaf ears (the attorney-general, John Latham, and the high commissioner, Granville Ryrie, attended on Australia’s behalf).⁶⁵ For Rischbieth, going to Geneva was as much about representing feminists’ views as about strengthening the national movement and learning more about new internationalist ideas.

Rischbieth took on this role in 1935 when the League was embroiled in the Abyssinian crisis.⁶⁶ She was one of only eighteen women delegates allowed into the assembly, but one of hundreds who descended on Geneva to appeal the League in other ways.⁶⁷ She participated in the social and humanitarian committee, which dealt with topics ranging from drug trafficking to child welfare (on the latter of which she presented a twenty-minute speech).⁶⁸ Rich, who was living in London at the time, was also in Geneva as an observer and interviewed her friend at the end of the first week. She reported that Rischbieth “seemed depressed and unwilling to answer” her questions, chiefly due to the struggle to tackle Italian military aggression. Rischbieth told Rich that “the political clouds are black, but in the humanitarian sphere we have made a start,” referring to plans to assist refugees (especially women) and urging the

⁶² Bessie Rischbieth to Dr Earle Page, 13 January 1927, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 23, File 3, MS 2004/9/62.

⁶³ Bessie Rischbieth to Ruby Rich, 23 January 1932, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 9, File 20, MS 2004/5/1367.

⁶⁴ Bessie Rischbieth to Joseph Lyons, 14 March 1932, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 9, MS 2004/5/1394.

⁶⁵ Cotton, *The Australians at Geneva*, 15.

⁶⁶ For more on Rischbieth and the Abyssinian conflict, see: Fiona Paisley, “The Italo-Abyssinian Crisis and Australian Settler Colonialism in 1935,” *History Compass* 15, no. 5 (2017), DOI 10.1111/hic3.12363; Fiona Paisley, “Australian Women at the League of Nations: A Spotlight on Settler Colonialism in the 1930s,” *VIDA: Blog of the Australian Women’s History Network*, 7 February 2017, <http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/australian-women-league-of-nations/>.

⁶⁷ Bessie Rischbieth, “The Challenge to Collective Security. An Australian Woman at Geneva,” *Mercury* (Hobart), 20 November 1935, 12.

⁶⁸ Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, *League of Nations. Sixteenth Assembly (September–October, 1935.) Report of the Australian Delegation* (Canberra: L.F. Johnston, 1936), 5, 12–3; Bessie Rischbieth, “League’s Humanitarian Work. Issues That Vitaly Affect Women,” *Mercury* (Hobart), 27 November 1935, 11.

League to create a permanent, dedicated body to coordinate work happening in this area.⁶⁹ She found it “[i]nspiring to look round & see people of all races, creed [*sic*] & colour [*sic*] struggling for closer Co-operation.”⁷⁰ She was particularly struck by some of the women delegates, including the Soviet Union’s Alexandra Kollontai—“a woman of outstanding ability, a great orator and linguist”—and a member of the Chinese party, Madame Yen Chenn, whom she described in orientalist terms as “not only picturesque to look at but ... well informed and a good speaker.”⁷¹ Despite its challenges, Rischbieth found this to be an invigorating experience. And, like other delegates before and after her, she spoke much about it on her return to Australia; as James Cotton and Joy Damousi have both shown, Australian women were quite free to share their opinions when they came home and were “toasted and became public figures” and even celebrities of a sort.⁷²

British feminists similarly petitioned for women to represent their country at the League.⁷³ From 1922 Britain included women on their delegations, with the suffragist and Liberal politician Winifred Coombe Tennant being the first to take up the role.⁷⁴ This success was notable given the fact that women were barred from the diplomatic service until 1946 (and provided evidence for women who argued that they could successfully represent Britain internationally).⁷⁵ Unlike their Antipodean counterparts, the British also sent a woman—Corbett Ashby—to the Disarmament Conference. More will be said about this in chapter

⁶⁹ Ruby Rich, “Social Work at League Assembly. An Interview with Mrs. B. M. Rischbieth,” *West Australian* (Perth), 11 October 1935, 5.

⁷⁰ Bessie Rischbieth, Typed draft of “Work of 16th Assembly and After,” c. 1935–6, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 24, File 14, MS 2004/9/509.

⁷¹ Bessie Rischbieth, “The League Assembly, 1935. Noteworthy Women,” *Argus* (Melbourne), 20 November 1935, 14.

⁷² Quote from: Joy Damousi, “Celebrity Humanitarianism in the 1920s: Australian Women at the League of Nations,” *Cultural and Social History* (2023): 2, DOI: 10.1080/14780038.2023.2170523. See also: Cotton, *The Australians at Geneva*, 112–30.

⁷³ Copies of letters to this effect are collected in the League of Nations Archives. See folder on “Representation of Women on the Assembly—Miss Eleanor F. Rathbone, Liverpool,” 31 July 1920, League of Nations Archives (hereafter League Archives), United Nations Archives & Library, Geneva (hereafter UN Archives), R1359/26/5840/5836.

⁷⁴ Robert Laker, “Gendering International Affairs: Winifred Coombe Tennant and the League of Nations Assembly, 1922,” *Women’s History Network Blog*, 23 August 2021, <https://womenshistorynetwork.org/gendering-international-affairs-winifred-coombe-tennant-and-the-league-of-nations-assembly-1922-by-robert-laker/>.

⁷⁵ Helen McCarthy, “Petticoat Diplomacy: The Admission of Women to the British Foreign Service, 1919–1946,” *Twentieth Century British History*, 20, no. 3 (2009): 285–321; Helen McCarthy, *Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 86–150.

seven, but it is illuminating to highlight here how she felt stifled by her position within an official national delegation; she “admitted that as a Delegate her style was necessarily somewhat cramped.”⁷⁶ While attending on behalf of the nation brought a certain sense of legitimacy to the feminist cause, their engagement with the League in this way was checked by their status as non-voting delegates lacking the authority of official politicians.



Figure 30 Bessie Rischbieth returning to Australia, 1935. March of Australian Women: A Record of Fifty Years' Struggle for Equal Citizenship (Perth: Paterson Brokensha, 1964), 177.

⁷⁶ Press release from Disarmament Committee of the Women's International Organisations, 11 February 1932, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL484, 7MCA/C/9.

While the League did not fully live up to its supposed commitment to equal opportunity, feminists continued to push for this to become a reality. Some of them banded together under the banner of the Joint Standing Committee of International Women's Organisations (JSC, formed 1925), which worked "for the appointment of suitable women on Commissions or other bodies in the League of Nations."⁷⁷ Corbett Ashby and Courtney were members of this group from its inception and helped define its remit. They lobbied the League to include women in all its areas of work; in 1929 a JSC delegation—including Corbett Ashby, Courtney, and Rischbieth (who was in Europe at the time)—met with Eric Drummond, the League's secretary-general, to push for women's greater representation across the institution.⁷⁸ While they had only limited success, their persistence reveals a deep commitment to remoulding the institution and reforming the gender norms of international politics.

Feminists were on the whole outsiders and so acted primarily as lobbyists, pressuring the League to tackle various issues affecting women and to include them in these discussions. One of the causes they hoped the League could address was women's nationality rights. As chapter three showed, women across the world were lobbying for independent nationality rights in their home countries, and many of them saw the League as somewhere they could elevate their campaigns and hopefully achieve tangible results. The most notable success was had in the Americas, where in 1933 at the Pan-American Union's meeting in Montevideo, Uruguay, twenty countries ratified the Convention on the Nationality of Women, which stated: "There shall be no distinction based on sex as regards nationality, in their legislation or in their practice."⁷⁹ The League was seen as somewhere that this could be extended to a truly global level; as Macmillan told her Swiss colleague, Emilie Gourd, as early as 1918: "It is not sufficient that we each in our own country should ask for the reform, we must all aim at having the

⁷⁷ Minutes of Joint Standing Committee of International Women's Organisations meeting, 31 October 1925, London, Liaison Committee of Women's International Organisations Archives (hereafter Liaison Committee Archives), International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam (hereafter IISH), Folder 1, ARCH00819.

⁷⁸ "Note on Subsequent Deputations to the Secretariat of the League of Nations," 1929, Liaison Committee Archives, IISH, Folder 1, ARCH00819.

⁷⁹ "Convention on the Nationality of Women (Inter-American)," 26 December 1933, The Avalon Project hosted by Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/intam02.asp. See: Bubbers, "The Work of International Women's Groups"; Francesca Miller, "Latin American Feminism and the Transnational Arena," in *Women, Culture, and Politics in Latin America*, ed. Emilie Bergmann et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 10–24; Julia Roth, "'Manifiesto De Solidaridad Continental' Alliances and Inequalities: Inter-American Feminist Networks 1840–1948," *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 15, no. 3–4 (2017): 204–20.

matter agreed to internationally ... it is important that we should be able to point to the demand coming from the organised women in all countries.”⁸⁰ Just as Macmillan finished her law studies in 1924, the nationality issue came to the League’s attention through the Committee of Experts on the Progressive Codification of International Law.⁸¹ In the wake of the First World War, some aspired to develop a global legal system based on the League’s internationalist principles that would offer an alternative to violence.⁸² Macmillan was among them, and harboured hopes that this system could institutionalise feminist principles on a global level, too.

This was a challenging process. In the end, The Hague provided the setting for feminists to unite and clearly express their hopes for an international legal system. In 1930 the League hosted the Conference for the Codification of International Law (Codification Conference) there. Macmillan presided over a large demonstration held in the Dutch city, which harked back to the massive suffrage protests she had attended before the war. Rich, fresh from her move to Britain, attended as an Antipodean representative, estimating that she was joined by almost one thousand people.⁸³ In an interview she described the international flag pageant that the Dutch feminists held—in which flag bearers representing countries where women did not have independent nationality rights dressed in black—as “most tellingly effective in its simplicity and directness,” expressing her shame to see Australia among the countries who had not yet given this right.⁸⁴

Following the demonstration, Macmillan led a joint delegation of the Alliance and the International Council of Women to address the Codification Conference. Corbett Ashby also spoke, not “as a woman lawyer, but as a quite ordinary married woman who is interested as

⁸⁰ Chrystal Macmillan to Emilie Gourd, 9 April 1918, Archive of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, University of Manchester Library, Manchester, IWSA/1/54/5.

⁸¹ Helen Irving, *Citizenship, Alienage, and the Modern Constitutional State: A Gendered History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 199.

⁸² Emily S. Rosenberg, *Transnational Currents in a Shrinking World 1970–1945* (Cambridge, M.A.: Belknap Press, 2012), 33.

⁸³ Isabel Ramsay, “Married Women and Nationality. International Feminist Conference Gets Busy. Australian Delegate Talks,” *Sunday Times* (Sydney), 18 May 1930, 18.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

such, and as a mother, in the freedom of choice for women on marriage.”⁸⁵ Her carefully thought-out speech, highlighting the social and legal disadvantages of contemporary nationality norms, belies this framing of herself as an ordinary woman. Corbett Ashby did not think she was there simply as a mother or woman, but as a highly informed expert on women’s rights. Her maternal self-framing was simply a tool to win support. And it was an effective one—she had a reputation as “a brilliant speaker” but one who “retain[ed] a homely simplicity which is one of her greatest charms.”⁸⁶ Rich, who commended Corbett Ashby for her “rare intelligence and force,” spoke about the problem of empire disunity on the subject, making a point to highlight Australians’ contributions to the move towards equal nationality rights.⁸⁷ These three women all believed that making the feminist point of view heard could pave the way for change. They also believed they had a right, as feminist experts, to be there. But they were sorely disappointed. Macmillan charged that the conference “approaches the question from a wrong angle, regarding the woman as a chattel, whose change of nationality is dependent, not on her own will, but on purely external circumstances.”⁸⁸ The League failed to provide the avenue for change they had hoped it would.⁸⁹

Interwar feminists therefore had to continue to find ways to push their case. One way they did this was through building various other consultative or liaison committees like the JSC. As Susan Zimmermann explains, these bodies functioned as “institutionalized links” between the different women’s groups, especially those that saw Geneva as central to their mission, thus facilitating interactions between feminists and the League.⁹⁰ They largely represented the interests of bourgeois, liberal feminism and did not incorporate socialist or workers’ views.⁹¹ They were also highly Eurocentric, incorporating very few members from

⁸⁵ League of Nations, *Acts of the Conference for the Codification of International Law: Held at The Hague from March 13th to April 12th, 1930: Meetings of the Committees, vol. 2, Minutes of the First Committee: Nationality* (Geneva: League of Nations, 1930), 319, League Archives, UN Archives, C-351-(a)-M-145-(a)-1930-V_EN.

⁸⁶ “Prominent Liberal Women. Mrs. Corbett Ashby, J.P.,” *Liberal Woman’s News* (London), March 1925, 30.

⁸⁷ Ramsay, “Married Women and Nationality.”

⁸⁸ Chrystal Macmillan, *The Nationality of Married Women* (London: Nationality of Married Women Pass the Bill Committee, 1931), 15.

⁸⁹ Ellen Carol DuBois describes the conference’s outcomes as “conservative and circumspect.” Ellen Carol DuBois, “Internationalizing Married Women’s Nationality: The Hague Campaign of 1930,” in *Globalizing Feminisms, 1789–1945*, ed. Karen Offen (London: Routledge, 2010), 207.

⁹⁰ Zimmermann, “Liaison Committees of International Women’s Organizations,” 1.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

outside the transatlantic sphere. Their existence is evidence of feminists' desire to engage with the League as closely as possible and reveals some of the mechanisms through which the Western bases of feminist internationalism were reinforced at the same time that the movement sought to embrace diversity.



Figure 31 Group portrait of women who spoke at the Conference on the Codification of International Law, Vereeniging Fotobureaux. Collection LAV–Atria: Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History. Macmillan (front row, middle), Corbett Ashby (front row, third from right), and Rich (back row, far right) are pictured.

Among these groups were specialised committees, such as the Women's Consultative Committee on Nationality (the Consultative Committee) and the Peace and Disarmament Committee of the Women's International Organisations (which will be discussed in chapter seven). When the League formed the Consultative Committee in 1931, it was seen as a signal that the institution was going to take the question of nationality rights more seriously. As the *Woman's Leader* reported: "The existence of this Committee appointed by the Council of the League certainly does seem to bring the question out of the region of vague discussion into

the ring of action.”⁹² This group consisted of two representatives each from eight different international women’s organisations. Its members were mostly from North America and Europe—including Corbett Ashby and Macmillan—although the Burmese feminist May Oung participated as a representative of the All-Asian Women’s Conference.⁹³ The group rejected The Hague’s nationality convention and continued to advocate equal nationality rights, “[r]ealizing the far-reaching consequences for women—for greater freedom or greater subjection—involved in the project of the League of Nations for the codification of international law.”⁹⁴ However, the Consultative Committee was plagued by disagreement. Some members, including the American Alice Paul, wanted to turn it into a formal League body and use it to push for an equal rights treaty.⁹⁵ Corbett Ashby opposed the idea of extending the scope and power of the Consultative Committee, believing it “would be a backward step from the principles of the Covenant [of the League], by putting women in a separate, and therefore an inferior category.” She instead advocated for “women experts” to be appointed to League committees on the same basis as men.⁹⁶ In 1933, Corbett Ashby and Macmillan withdrew from the committee on behalf of the Alliance and the International Federation of University Women respectively; it collapsed shortly after.⁹⁷

Conflicts like this did not substantially dent feminists’ faith in either internationalism or the League, however. The Liaison Committee of Women’s International Organisations (Liaison Committee) was another group that grew through 1930 and 1931. From the beginning, Corbett Ashby and Courtney were actively involved in defining its scope and purpose; they were soon joined, for various lengths of time, by Macmillan (especially for discussions of nationality) and Helen Archdale. While in March 1931 representatives from the All-Asian Women’s Conference attended, later that year Paulina Luisi (Uruguay’s leading feminist) had reportedly “spoken to several members complaining that the membership of the

⁹² “The Nationality of Married Women,” *Woman’s Leader and Common Cause* (London), 10 July 1931, 178.

⁹³ “Miss May Oung, M.A., B.Litt. Burmese Feminist and Educationalist,” *Vote* (London), 21 August 1931, 269.

⁹⁴ “(Geneva Draft) Report to the Assembly of the League of Nations by the Women’s Consultative Committee on Nationality,” 1931, Papers of Doris Stevens, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA, Box 95, Folder 7, MC546.

⁹⁵ Miller, “Geneva – the key to equality,” 227–30.

⁹⁶ “Women’s Consultative Committee on Nationality,” *International Women’s News* 26, no. 7 (April 1932): 72.

⁹⁷ International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, *Report of the Twelfth Congress. Istanbul, April 18th–24th*, 1935 (London: Wadsworth and Company, 1935), 147–51. See also: Zimmermann, “Liaison Committees of International Women’s Organizations,” 20–24.

Committee was too European.”⁹⁸ Occasionally some Indian women joined the meetings, and in the mid-1930s the Australians Rischbieth and Linda Littlejohn attended, although this did not radically diversify the group.⁹⁹ This composition reflects the effect the League had on feminist internationalism—by making Geneva the centre of an “official” internationalism it did little to challenge its existing Eurocentrism. According to Corbett Ashby the group “wasn’t really belligerent enough,” being “very good educationally” but “really weighed down by the YWCA [Young Women’s Christian Association].”¹⁰⁰ Coordinating women’s points of view—as important as that may have been for projecting a united front—was riddled with challenges.



Figure 32 Inaugural Session of Women’s Consultative Committee on Nationality, Geneva, 2 July 1931. Madeleine Zabriskie Doty Papers, Smith College Special Collections, Box 3, Folder 32, SSC-MS-00049. Macmillan and Corbett Ashby are on the right of the photograph.

⁹⁸ Minutes of meeting “Nationality of the Married Woman,” 17 March 1931, Liaison Committee Archives, IISH Folder 1, ARCH00819; Minutes of meeting held 14 September 1931, Geneva, Liaison Committee Archives, IISH, Folder 1, ARCH00819.

⁹⁹ Minutes of meeting 15 May 1935, London, Liaison Committee Archives, IISH, Folder 2, ARCH00819.

¹⁰⁰ Corbett Ashby interviewed by Harrison, 8SUF/B/116a.

Archdale was an active member of the Liaison Committee, which often met in London and, around the assembly's sitting weeks, in Geneva, where she lived for four years from 1930 as president of the Equal Rights International (ERI).¹⁰¹ She did not pretend that the Liaison Committee was free from tension. "At first it seemed that all of us were only too anxious to be led, by someone, somewhere. Then we began to feel slight resentment at being expected to follow and the many who wished to lead began to clash," she later wrote, confirming that "[w]e all believed our own direction was best."¹⁰² Nevertheless, she was enthralled by the possibilities of inter-feminist cooperation. She first encountered this at the Codification Conference, where she saw "the splendour of the millions of women speaking through their representatives."¹⁰³ Archdale strongly believed in the important link the Liaison Committee provided between women and the League; in November 1938 she even donated £2 of the money she had earned on her North American lecture tour to help sustain it.¹⁰⁴ While she toyed with the idea of having a separate women's commission within the League, she felt this was a "ravishing temptation and to be resisted" as it would run counter to her equal rights ethos.¹⁰⁵

This reflected her view of the League itself. She described her first visit to Geneva in 1929 as "wonderful" and commented that being an onlooker provoked "pure joy."¹⁰⁶ "Here really is co-operation, international," she affirmed. "Here is being made an international community, a world entity."¹⁰⁷ Revealing an entrenched sense of European superiority, she described the League as somewhere characterised by "the primitive and the highly civilised finding a meeting place, finding a common ideal, able to confer by their common understanding of that ideal, surmounting all obstacles of language and traditions."¹⁰⁸ However, she was driven in this work as much by enthusiasm for what the League represented as much

¹⁰¹ "Manuscript of *An Interfering Woman*,' being typescript manuscript of Helen Archdale's autobiography, including handwritten annotations," chapter 11, 8, Betty Archdale Papers (hereafter Archdale Papers), State Library of New South Wales, Sydney (hereafter SLNSW), MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

¹⁰² Ibid., chapter 8, 1–2.

¹⁰³ Ibid., chapter 10, 8.

¹⁰⁴ Minutes of meeting 14 November 1938, London, Liaison Committee Archives, IISH, Folder 2, ARCH00819.

¹⁰⁵ Helen Archdale to Jessie Street, 17 January 1932, United Associations of Women Records, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, MLMSS 2160, Box Y790, item 19.

¹⁰⁶ "Manuscript of *An Interfering Woman*,'" chapter 11, 1, 4, MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., chapter 11, 4.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., chapter 11, 3.

by disappointment in its exclusionary nature. “A feeling of revolt against exclusion became, in myself, always stronger as the years passed in international work,” she wrote:

Women scarcely counted in it at all. Allowed to sit on endless committees, to deal with matters which men and, alas! one must admit, many women, consider as “suitable” for women; occasionally acting as delegates, sometimes because of their outstanding and obvious fitness, sometimes for far other reasons, never were women really part of the great machinery.¹⁰⁹

For Archdale, despite the flaws of both the Liaison Committee and the League itself, the world of Geneva was the only place she felt she could pursue her work for true equality for women worldwide.

A key issue that animated Archdale and the rest of the Liaison Committee was the idea of an inquiry into the status of women. Some wanted to keep any such initiative quite open, with the goal simply to improve women’s rights and opportunities, whereas others envisioned this more specifically as a path towards an equal rights treaty, which would seek complete parity under the law for men and women globally.¹¹⁰ This cause gained ground during the 1930s. It was given extra momentum by happenings in the Americas where, although the proposal for an equal rights treaty was not adopted wholesale at the Seventh International Conference of American States in Montevideo in 1933, four states did sign: Cuba, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Uruguay.¹¹¹ This set the stage for discussions about the status of women and a potential equal rights treaty to come within the League’s line of sight.

The mid- to late 1930s saw the topic of the status of women come increasingly to the forefront of feminists’ interactions with the League. In 1934 ten Latin American delegations successfully had it placed on the Assembly’s agenda for the following year.¹¹² Leading feminists endorsed this action—Corbett Ashby and Littlejohn were among those who signed a letter from the Liaison Committee to push for an “international Convention based on the principle

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., chapter 10, 9.

¹¹⁰ Miller, “Geneva—the Key to Equality,” 226.

¹¹¹ Paolo Amorosa, “Pioneering International Women’s Rights? The US National Woman’s Party and the 1933 Montevideo Equal Rights Treaties,” *European Journal of International Law* 30 no. 2 (2019): 433. See also: Eisenberg, “The Status of Women”; Ludi, “Setting New Standards”; Katherine M. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019), chapter 4; Miller, “Geneva—the Key to Equality”; Miller, “Lobbying the League,” 209–35; Zimmermann, “Liaison Committees of International Women’s Organizations,” 15–6.

¹¹² Miller, “Geneva—the Key to Equality,” 231.

of equality of rights for both sexes.”¹¹³ Women’s organisations responded to a call to send in their thoughts, which the League’s secretariat published and circulated in 1935.¹¹⁴ Corbett Ashby’s statement on behalf of the Alliance pointed to “the increasing closeness of international relations” and argued that an “International Convention which, without in any way infringing on national sovereignty, should ask the contracting States to agree that the participation of their citizens in the affairs of the State shall not depend on sex, would be truly in the interests of international life.”¹¹⁵



Figure 33 Deputation of Women, 1935. United Nations Library & Archives, M005, LN 266. A copy of this image is also filed in Bessie Rischbieth's Papers, noting that this deputation was arranged by the Liaison Committee of Women's International Organisations.

¹¹³ Liaison Committee of Women's International Organisations to President of the Council, League of Nations, 11 June 1935, League Archives, UN Archives, R3755-3A-15980-13900, III.

¹¹⁴ League of Nations, "Nationality and Status of Women. Statements Presented by International Women's Organisations," 30 August 1935, A.19.1935.V., League of Nations Collection, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, LN.V.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

This topic galvanised almost all Western feminist internationalists who were interested in the League for the rest of the 1930s. Indeed, the possibility of the question being postponed due to a lack of response from the world's governments induced Corbett Ashby to write to Hugh McKinnon Wood (a barrister and counsellor of the secretariat's legal section) to express her anxiety over the matter.¹¹⁶ She not only thought it was important that the League tackle the question, but also that feminists' time and energy was not wasted by a futile investigation.¹¹⁷ McKinnon Wood described the relationship between the League and the women's organisations to a colleague as both "difficult and important," revealing that feminists—or at least their support—had a bearing on the League's priorities.¹¹⁸

This topic animated feminists associated with the ERI, which was formed specifically to achieve an international equal rights treaty. Archdale, the group's first president, as well as her successor Littlejohn strongly believed in this course of action. Littlejohn considered this topic to be among those "humanitarian questions of such world-wide importance as to necessitate international treatment," confirming that "women, comprising as they do half the population of the world, should be considered internationally."¹¹⁹ She was in Europe for almost three years between 1935 and 1937, during which she spent much time in Geneva and joined Liaison Committee meetings.¹²⁰ She witnessed the slow process of getting the status of women question properly addressed by the League, which did not happen until 1937.¹²¹ But rather than causing despair, Littlejohn focused on the positives of feminists' collaboration; when she returned home she told Australians of "the amazing cooperation of women at

¹¹⁶ Hugh McKinnon Wood, "International Organization and World Peace—A Critique of the League of Nations Covenant," *Minnesota Law Review* (1943): 43–63, <https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2506&context=mlr>.

¹¹⁷ Margery Corbett Ashby to Hugh McKinnon Wood, 24 March 1937, League Archives, UN Archives, R3755-3A-19192-13900, XII.

¹¹⁸ Hugh McKinnon Wood to L.A. Podesta Cosa, 9 June 1936, League Archives, UN Archives, R3755-3A-19192-13900, VIII.

¹¹⁹ Linda Littlejohn, "Equality of Status Between the Sexes," *Dawn* (Perth), 19 January 1938, 5.

¹²⁰ "Mrs. Littlejohn's Impressions of Women's Work Overseas," *Age* (Melbourne), 29 November 1937, 4.

¹²¹ Littlejohn, "Equality of Status Between the Sexes"; "Woman Delegate To Assembly League of Nations, 1936," *Dawn* (Perth), 15 January 1936, 4.

Geneva.”¹²² She commended the pressure that the international women’s movement placed on the League, saying that it was “entirely due to their power” that this question was being addressed.¹²³ In describing the 1937 assembly, Littlejohn again emphasised the active role feminists were playing in Geneva. “The lobbies were always full of them,” she wrote, “interviewing delegates and urging them to really **do** something internationally for the women of the world—the women who are the mothers of the race, who are the greatest peace-lovers on the earth, and whose claim for equality is based on an ardent desire to help solve the problems confronting the world.”¹²⁴ Despite the slow rate of progress on this matter, Littlejohn believed that the League was the best avenue for equalising men’s and women’s rights and opportunities and was optimistic that their work would eventually lead to an international treaty.¹²⁵

Feminists might have been central to making sure this topic stayed front and centre at the League, but they were not included in the expert committee of jurists that was formed in 1938 to run the inquiry, revealing the limits to what the League considered their role to be. The Liaison Committee selected Corbett Ashby to go to Geneva in 1938 while the new expert committee met, should they want to discuss the matter with her.¹²⁶ In the end, representatives of women’s organisations were allowed to attend. Corbett Ashby reported that the “excellent team” had worked up until the last minute, leaving the women observers “little time to consider it but all points seemed covered except migration.”¹²⁷ She praised the feminist credentials of the expert committee, concluding that “we shall have the facts fully and fairly stated ... Propaganda and education are left to us: the Committee will provide the unassailable basis of fact.”¹²⁸ However, the committee decided to limit its initial investigation to European

¹²² “Women’s Influence. Work in European Countries. Mrs Littlejohn Impressed,” *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 8 December 1937, 4. Littlejohn’s words are paraphrased in this quote.

¹²³ Linda Littlejohn, “Impressions of the 1936 Assembly,” *Dawn* (Perth), 18 November 1936, 4; “Mrs. Littlejohn’s Impressions of Women’s Work Overseas.”

¹²⁴ Littlejohn, “Equality of Status Between the Sexes.” Emphasis in original.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Minutes of meeting held 15 February 1938, London, Liaison Committee Papers, IISH, Folder 2, ARCH00819.; Elsie M. Zimmern to Member of the Committee of Experts for the Status of Women, 25 March 1938, League Archives, UN Archives, R3755-3A-15980-13900, XIII.

¹²⁷ Margery Corbett Ashby, “Status of Women at Geneva. Meeting of the Committee of Experts,” no date (c. 1938), Liaison Committee Papers, IISH, Folder 2, ARCH00819.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

legal systems (and possibly some Muslim and Asian ones).¹²⁹ Feminist groups pushed the inquiry to expand its scope; the Liaison Committee asked it in 1938 to investigate the status of women across Africa and the following year the British Commonwealth League (BCL) wrote asking the League “to set up a Committee competent to deal with the Status of the Women of the Primitive Peoples.”¹³⁰ Corbett Ashby agreed, asking the committee not to make a final decision on this point until she could send in a formal statement; after its Copenhagen congress, the Alliance shared a similar resolution.¹³¹

Interwar feminists saw the League as such an important sphere of action that they were willing to collaborate across organisational lines and agendas to maximise the effect they could have. As chapter one showed, the demarcations between organisations were not always so strict; many individuals, including people like Macmillan and Littlejohn, moved between multiple groups. Yet there were different opinions and focuses among broader international women’s networks. To have women cooperating with one another really signified how important they felt the League’s work was. In turn, the very existence of the League shaped much of their activism throughout the period, encouraging a focus on international law and the European sphere.

A STEADFAST BELIEF

A key part of understanding what the League meant to my group and their contemporaries is to explain why they remained so committed to (the idea of) it right up until 1939. Throughout the 1930s there were many reasons to lose faith in this institution: the rise of fascism in Europe, the organisation’s inability to deal successfully with the crises that emerged in Manchuria and Abyssinia (Ethiopia), and the general failure of collective security. So too did the League fall

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Elsie M. Zimmern to the Secretary-General of the League of Nations, 9 November 1938, League Archives, UN Archives, R3755-3A-15980-13900, XVIII; H. M. Todhunter to Professor Gutteridge, Chairman of the Committee on the Legal Status of Women, 11 July 1939, League Archives, UN Archives, R3756-3A-24466-13900, VI.

¹³¹ League of Nations, “Committee for the Study of the Legal Status of Women. Second Session. Held on Saturday, January 7th, 1939, at 3 p.m. C.S.F./2nd Session/P.V.8(1),” Liaison Committee Papers, IISH, Folder 2, ARCH00819; “Resolution Voted at the XIIIth Congress of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship. Copenhagen, July 8–13, 1939,” League Archives, UN Archives, R3755-3A-19192-13900, XIX.

short of its potential to generate reform in the area of women's rights: the issue of independent nationality rights remained unresolved, women were still underrepresented in the higher echelons of the institution, and the status of women inquiry emerged too late to amount to any clear resolution before the outbreak of war. Nevertheless, my group did not denounce the League. They had their criticisms, but ultimately their faith in it compelled them to press on; as Rich said on her return to Australia in 1936: "I believe in the League ... and in its ultimate triumph ... the best has yet to be."¹³²

Feminists' confidence in internationalism as a means of revisioning gender norms predated the League. They did not attribute the League's difficulties to the idea of internationalism itself but rather connected them to the lack of real commitment from member states. Even though she witnessed some of its shortcomings, Rischbieth's faith in the League was bolstered by her involvement in the Australian delegation in 1935. She believed that the institution was equipped to prevent another war, saying "[i]f the covenant triumphs, future wars will be far less likely."¹³³ At the same time she recognised that in practice its members could let it down. Nevertheless, she told her fellow Australians that even if the League failed to prevent war, its technical bodies "will continue to live and ... will form the nucleus of a new League," encouraging them "to keep a positive attitude of mind, for only in this way is it possible to establish an international synthesis which will be characterised by unselfishness."¹³⁴ She described the League as "the Life Boat of the Nations," declaring: "It is the hope of the world! It is for us to re-inforce [*sic*] the Covenant and make it work."¹³⁵ Courtney was compelled by another metaphor. In 1937 she travelled to Vancouver to attend the Pan-Pacific Women's Association's fourth conference. In an after-dinner speech she addressed the question: "has the League failed?"¹³⁶ Courtney compared the League to a fire engine, telling her audience a story about an imagined village that had a new fire truck but left it unattended.

¹³² "Miss Ruby Rich in Brisbane. Noted Feminist A League of Nations Believer," *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 24 October 1936, 10.

¹³³ Bessie Rischbieth, "League's Humanitarian Work. Issues That Vitrally Affect Women," *Mercury* (Hobart), 27 November 1935, 11.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ "The Future of the League of Nations. Broadcast Sydney Nat. Station 1936," Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 2, File 9, MS 2004/2/132.

¹³⁶ Pan-Pacific Women's Association, *Women of the Pacific: A Record of the Proceedings of the Fourth Triennial Conference of the Pan Pacific Women's Association, Held in Vancouver, Canada, July 1937* (Vancouver: Pan-Pacific Women's Association, 1937), 27.

“What are the villagers to say?” she asked. “Will they say, ‘This fire engine is no use, take it away and throw it into the sea’. Not if they are sensible men.”¹³⁷ Like Rischbieth, in her view the League had not failed but was simply being mismanaged. “The machinery is there and is as good as ever it was,” she argued, “but it has not been used.”¹³⁸



Figure 34 Australian League of Nations Union members attending the annual meeting, Canberra, January 1938, PIC/14686 LOC Cold Store. National Library of Australia. Littlejohn, Rischbieth, and Rich are all in this image.

Feminists were also sustained by the ongoing discussions about the League that they had at home in between their trips to Geneva. In both Australia and Britain, the League of Nations Union (LNU) was a powerful force. As Helen McCarthy has argued of the British context, the LNU—with over 400,000 members at its peak—“inspired a rich and participatory culture of political protest” and was “a powerful advocate of democratic accountability and

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

popular engagement in the making of foreign policy.”¹³⁹ In Australia, where LNU branches existed in the various states before a national group was formed in 1930, forty percent of members were women.¹⁴⁰ It allowed those who were not always given the opportunity of going to Geneva themselves a space to discuss and promote the League’s internationalist ethos. Many of my subjects were active members of the LNU and were involved as part of its executive committees.¹⁴¹ Through this organisation they met like-minded people—according to Nicholas Brown the organisation “thrived on sociability”—and, together, sustained high hopes for the League.¹⁴² This locale also reinforced the idea that internationalism was a spirit that needed to be cultivated among the broader population in order for world affairs to really change; as the New South Wales branch argued: “If the People take the matter up with enthusiasm, Governments must follow.”¹⁴³

The increasingly dire international situation, combined with feminists’ unattained goals, only reaffirmed their belief that a true internationalist spirit was needed to save the world. In 1936 Jessie Street wrote to the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* saying that supporters of the League were “daily increasing,” but they needed to find a way to make the organisation more effective. She proposed a system of “preferential trade treaties” as the way to encourage states to enforce League conventions by appealing to their own self-interest.¹⁴⁴ Less than two years later she was in Geneva during the League’s 1938 assembly. She described how “many of the women leaders from different countries were present” and explained how she represented Sydney’s United Associations of Women at the meetings of the various feminist groups that had gathered there, pointing to the ongoing importance that women placed on the League. Street discussed her feminist goals with the few women delegates who had been appointed to represent their countries and found that “[a]s a rule” the men “still believed in the ‘weaker sex’

¹³⁹ McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations*, 1–4.

¹⁴⁰ Nicholas Brown, “Enacting the International: R. G. Watt and the League of Nations Union,” in *Transnational Ties: Australian Lives in the World*, ed. Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008), 84. For more, see: Hilary Summy, “From Hope ... To Hope: Story of the Australian League of Nations Union, Featuring the Victorian Branch, 1921–1945” (PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 2007).

¹⁴¹ Evidence of their involvement can be found in: League of Nations Union Papers, Politics, Economics, and Social Science Collections, London School of Economics Archives, London, LNU; Papers of Raymond Watt, NLA, Boxes 1–4, MS 1923.

¹⁴² Brown, “Enacting the International,” 84.

¹⁴³ Australian League of Nations Union New South Wales Branch, *A Vital Question* (Sydney: The Branch, c. 1923).

¹⁴⁴ “To Strengthen the League,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 December 1936, 4.

theory,” noting that they “had a vested interest in the economic dependence and inferior status of women.” “Their limitations in this wide field shook your faith in their competence to deal with the important problems before the League of Nations,” she wrote. “It was a depressing thought that these were the men upon whom rested the responsibility to implement the decisions and fulfil the aims of the League.”¹⁴⁵ While Street was in Geneva, Adolf Hitler mobilised the German army and, soon after, the Munich Agreement—which allowed Germany to annex the Sudetenland—was signed.¹⁴⁶ Street’s experience highlights how women’s goals for greater gender equality were shrouded by an increasingly ominous international situation. They saw the connections between the two and, rather than abandoning the League, advocated reforming it.

For both Australian and British feminists, this faith in League internationalism was informed by their ongoing but distinct experiences of empire. Like many of their contemporaries both within and outside the feminist movement, they saw the British Empire and Commonwealth as a sort of model for the League, conveniently leaving aside colonisation’s violence.¹⁴⁷ In the context of a shift towards the Commonwealth in which some of its constituent parts were becoming more autonomous, they maintained faith that cooperation between countries was indeed possible. In 1938, Rich asked the listeners of 2GB radio “IF there is not a similarity of the utmost importance between our British Commonwealth of Nations and the League of Nations Ideal? ... If there is not a call for the Empire to help the League?”¹⁴⁸ Like their justifications for the BCL, for Australian and British feminists the imperial model provided a model framework for the League—and for their ongoing faith in it. Having travelled the world and initiated efforts to decentre feminist internationalism from the Northern Hemisphere, Rischbieth held complex views on empire and how it could provide a model for feminist and League internationalism alike. When discussing the League, she emphasised Britain’s responsibility to lead the way into a new internationalist world order. Also speaking on radio, in 1936 she pointed to the imperial metropole, saying: “The heavy responsibility to lead the world out of the present chaos rests

¹⁴⁵ Jessie Street, *Truth or Repose* (Sydney: Australasian Book Society, 1966), 162.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁴⁷ Other League enthusiasts in Britain, for example, drew similar comparisons. See: “The Empire for the League,” *Headway* 19, no. 6 (June 1937): 104.

¹⁴⁸ “Broadcast 2 GB by Ruby Rich. 10 March 1938,” Papers of Ruby Rich, NLA, Box 3, File 25, MS 7493.

on Britain the upholder of the Democratic system.”¹⁴⁹ Women like her believed in the League and viewed it through the lens of their identities as feminists, internationalists, and citizens of a changing global empire.

Moreover, in the new technological age international cooperation was a necessity. These women often commented on how the increasing accessibility and speed of travel, epitomised by the advent of commercial aeroplanes, had brought the world closer together like never before. In a radio broadcast—another one of those modern technologies superseding distance—Rischbieth said that Australia was no longer “the far flung [*sic*] outpost of Empire.” She explained to listeners that “[t]his annihilation of distance has made the inter-dependence of the whole world a very real thing and the people of the world are faced with the choice of developing some form of world planning or otherwise civilisation goes down in utter chaos.”¹⁵⁰ Internationalism was a sensible and practical option given the changing nature of the world at large.

CONCLUSION

The League did not prevent the Second World War, nor did it survive it. But right up until the late 1930s, many feminists still believed in its reformist potential and saw it as a valuable instrument that had just not yet been used properly. “The fact that the League has not succeeded one hundred per cent does not provide any reason why it should be doomed to eternal failure,” Rischbieth put it in 1936; as late as 1938, she maintained that “the League has shown the way to establish a World System—a world system with Democracy at the helm!”¹⁵¹ From the outset, these women were enthusiastic about the prospect of an institution that would coordinate global governance and legitimise internationalism in the eyes of the world’s leaders. As feminists and as internationalists, they truly believed that this initiative could remould social, political, and economic life globally. While they were excluded from the initial planning meetings, they were adamant that a feminist perspective would be heard and

¹⁴⁹ Bessie Rischbieth, “International Issues of Today, to be broadcast 16 June 1936, 6.15pm, 3AR,” Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 2, File 9, MS 2004/2/118

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.; Bessie Rischbieth, “Women in Public Life. Forces Which Have Advanced or Hindered their Progress,” c. 1938, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 2, File 5, MS 2004/2/48.

continued their work as lobbyists in this vein. With women around the world still facing obstinate governments and inequality at home, the League represented a chance to supersede traditional avenues and secure a more gender-equal future.

Feminists engaged with the League in many ways, both formal and informal, with their relationships epitomised by the liaison and consultative committees that brought them together across organisational lines. Through these groups they regarded themselves as experts with valuable contributions to make to international public debate—a view fostered by the League’s growing emphasis on technical expertise. This buoyed them and encouraged them to continue working with the League even in the face of severe disappointment. In fact, their growing sense of disillusionment equally propelled them to stay engaged with Geneva to prevent the League replicating the problems of older world systems.

While feminists tried to influence the League, the world of Geneva also had important repercussions for the international feminist movement. Zimmermann argues that the League “presented both a new space of opportunity but on some levels also a new political strait-jacket.”¹⁵² She suggests that feminists were all too often reactive; rather than “pro-actively promoting women’s interests in relation to official Geneva it seemed that more often than not they were reduced to *post facto* trying to add women’s interest to what was going on in official Geneva or to altering Geneva politics from the point of view of women’s interest and representation.”¹⁵³ The League certainly did constrain feminists’ work at times and hindered the expansion of the women’s movement beyond its transatlantic origins. But it was also an energising force that provided a unifying focus for international women’s organisations and propelled them to expand their activism beyond the realm of explicitly feminist spaces and into public political arenas. They were acutely sensitive to the changing political realities of the world around them and grasped these in a bid to bring gender to the centre of discussion. The League was not the only influence on interwar feminist internationalism, but it was a major one and was centrally important to the eight women at the heart of this thesis. As a result of their interactions with Geneva they became more assertive and ready to stake a claim to the world of mainstream politics—an attitude that had important repercussions for the movement throughout the following decades.

¹⁵² Zimmermann, “Liaison Committees of International Women’s Organizations,” 2.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3.

CHAPTER 5

Travelling the World

Passports are perhaps the most tactile artefacts left behind by interwar feminists. These compact documents travelled the world with their owners; now, a century later, researchers can pick them up, rifle through their pages, and discover where the passport bearer ventured over the course of their lifetime. Six of Kathleen Courtney's passports have been preserved in her archival papers, held at The Women's Library, London.¹ They were issued between 1919 and 1961 and their pages are filled with endorsements, entry stamps, and visas for some of the countries she visited over the years. Each document contains a range of personal information, too: name ("Miss Kathleen D'Olier Courtney"), place and date of birth ("Chatham, 11 March 1878, England"), nationality ("British Subject by birth"), and a photograph accompanied by a physical description (hair colour "dark," eye colour "brown," and height "5 ft. 4 ½ in."). The line drawn through the section for the passport holder's wife draws attention to contemporary patriarchal presumptions as well as to the fierce independence of those women who travelled in their own name. Scholars have shown how passports operated as a tool for shoring up the boundaries of the nation-state and controlling the composition of its community.² Especially in the wake of the First World War—during which more stringent border controls were introduced—these documents became an often-unwelcome necessity for international travellers.³ But for feminist internationalists like Courtney they also signalled an opportunity.

¹ Passports and permits, Papers of Kathleen D'Olier Courtney (hereafter Courtney Papers), The Women's Library, London (hereafter TWL), Box FL457, 7KDC/K/04.

² Martin Lloyd, *The Passport: The History of Man's Most Travelled Document* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2005), 25; John C. Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). For more on passports, see: Martin Anderson, "Tourism and the Development of the Modern British Passport, 1814–1858," *Journal of British Studies* 49, no. 2 (2010): 258–82.

³ John C. Torpey, "The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Passport System," in *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*, ed. Jane Caplan and John Torpey (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 256–70; Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport*, 142–50.

They were a ticket to the world beyond their nation's shores—a world in which they could live their internationalist ideals and try to remake the world along feminist lines.



Figure 35 Kathleen Courtney's passports. *The Women's Library, London, 7KDC/K/04.*

Travel was a common experience shared by many interwar feminist internationalists. While my group participated in a range of different activities and causes throughout their activist careers, they were all united by the fact that they were globally mobile. Enabled by their privileged class positions, many had been going overseas since at least the early years of the twentieth century (if not before). Considerations such as finances and time shaped patterns of mobility, as did geography, which was a significant and differentiating factor between the two nationalities (shown so sharply in Bessie Rischbieth's reproach to Chrystal Macmillan: "you little realise the enormous distances between the Australian states").⁴ British women often travelled around Europe and North America, with any ventures further afield to sites like India or the Antipodes standing out as deliberate efforts to learn about other places or reach new audiences. Australians, on the other hand, had no choice but to travel long distances and so

⁴ Bessie Rischbieth to Chrystal Macmillan, 7 March 1923, Papers and objects of Bessie Rischbieth (hereafter Rischbieth Papers), National Library of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NLA), Box 7, File 5, MS 2004/5/174.

incidentally saw much more of the world on their journeys abroad.⁵ While their British colleagues could return home relatively quickly and easily, Australian feminists spent months at a time travelling to different countries to make the trip worthwhile. Some of them, including Ruby Rich and Linda Littlejohn, spent several consecutive years living overseas. Their patterns of mobility differed, but the act of travelling was a shared experience.

This chapter explores just some of the various journeys my group undertook during the interwar period before the outbreak of the Second World War temporarily halted their movements (and unexpectedly kept Rischbieth stuck in Britain until the end of the conflict). It responds to the following questions. For what purposes did these women travel abroad? What role did they see travel playing in their education and efforts as feminists? How did the British Empire feature in their experiences of the world? And how did their travels influence their ideas about feminism and internationalism? A wide range of sources—including letters home, newspaper reports, photographs, and memoirs—shed light on their reactions and thoughts during and after their various journeys and show how individual subjectivities coalesced with broader or shared tenets of feminist internationalism. After commenting on the place of travel within histories of feminism and the early life stories of these women, I explore the idea of travelling feminist work, focusing on international congresses and lecture tours. I then offer an extended analysis of my group's travels beyond the West and what they reveal about changing conceptions of feminism and internationalism during the interwar period.

For these women, travel was deeply political. Most obviously, the act of travelling offered a way for them to embody their internationalism beyond the confines of official organisations and posture themselves as women of the world: a position that was vital to their capacity to generate public profiles and intervene in contemporary popular debates. By visiting new places, they were able to teach different audiences about women's rights and generate the public opinion that was a foundation of their internationalist project. Yet feminist internationalism was not static, but rather a set of ideas developed in motion—through the very act of living it. A fundamental development of the interwar years was the fact that Western feminists began to seriously consider the limits of their supposedly “international” movement.

⁵ On this, see: Ros Pesman, “Australian Women Encounter the East: The Boat Stops at Colombo,” *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 84, no. 1 (1998): 82–96; Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), chapter 1.

Travel was critical to this shift. My group and their contemporaries sometimes chose to venture outside the North Atlantic sphere, including to “the East” (which, for Australian and British women often meant encountering other parts of the empire), either for the express purpose of expanding their organisations or due to a desire for personal development. These journeys built on the work being done by non-Western feminists and some international women’s organisations, further exposing them to new thoughts, cultures, and experiences. Like the international congress, travelling thus operated as a two-way channel of education through which feminists both shared their ideas and had the opportunity to refine or rethink them. Such interactions led some of these women to maintain the importance of Europe in leading the way; for others, being faced with rising anticolonial nationalism and humanising encounters with “the other” pushed them to challenge their existing views. Individuals could even do both things at the same time, exposing the deep-seated contradictions at the heart of interwar feminist internationalism. As their stories show, travel and personal experience were central to feminist internationalism as an evolving intellectual tradition.

HISTORIES OF TRAVEL

The concept of “mobility” has captured the imaginations of scholars across the humanities in recent decades.⁶ Those working in gender history have been among those drawn to it; as Georgine Clarsen explains, feminists have often seen the transgressive nature of women’s mobility as something “especially pervasive and powerful.”⁷ They have interrogated the intersections of gender and mobility in the context of topics like migration, travel, and transport, showing how gender mediates the ways that people move through space and how the very act of moving can challenge contemporary norms and expectations. Gender historians and others have also explored how other factors, especially class and race, influence mobility. There is a large international body of work on women’s travel writing that forms part of this

⁶ See Peter Adey, David Bissell, Kevin Hannam, Peter Merriman, and Mimi Sheller, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*, ed. Peter Adey, David Bissell, Kevin Hannam, Peter Merriman, and Mimi Sheller (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2014), 1–20.

⁷ Georgine Clarsen, “Feminism and Gender,” in Adey et al., *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*, 94.

broader literature and which has illuminated travel's gendered dynamics.⁸ Sidonie Smith, for instance, has shown that travel has historically “functioned as a domain of constitutive masculinity” and “a defining arena of agency.”⁹ Given this context, she raises the question: “What does it mean for a particular woman to gain access to this defining arena of agency in the West?”¹⁰ As she and others note, women have always travelled.¹¹ While status and money have often been central to this freedom, mobility has defined the lives women across the social spectrum, including those who were driven out of their communities by violence or poverty, accompanied their employers as servants, or were forcibly moved through slavery.¹² Thinking through what it means for women to travel thus involves teasing apart the gendered and racial dynamics of societies over time.

Many studies of gender and travel are centrally concerned with the dynamics of empire. As Tony Ballantyne notes, “[m]obility was the life-blood of empires.”¹³ Historians have shown how white women travellers often functioned as agents of empire, whether explicitly through their roles as missionaries or more implicitly through their very presence in imperial outposts.¹⁴ Scholars of Australian history have shown how the settler-colonial nation's persistent ties to the metropole had a major influence on patterns of mobility, with many Australians travelling “home” to Britain even as the nation began to show interest in other areas of the world,

⁸ For a brief overview of women's travel writing, including in the context of empire and colonialism, see: Hsu-Ming Teo, “Travel,” *Companion to Women's Historical Writing*, ed. Mary Spongberg, Caine, and Curthoys (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 551–9.

⁹ Sidonie Smith, *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), ix.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, x.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Anne Rees, “Travelling to Tomorrow: Australian Women in the United States, 1910–1960” (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2016), 8, 19–20, 46–7; Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London*, 7–9. These different bodies of literature are too extensive to cite here, but one notable recent example that examines non-Western, working-class women's mobility across the empire is the collaborative project *Ayabs and Amahs: Transcolonial Servants in Australia and Britain 1780–1945*, Australian Research Council funded project DP200100375, last accessed 27 January 2023, <https://ayahsandamahs.com>.

¹³ Tony Ballantyne, “Mobility, Empire, Colonisation,” *History Australia* 11, no. 2 (2014): 7.

¹⁴ Elizabeth A. Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716–1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Sutapa Dutta, ed., *British Women Travellers: Empire and Beyond, 1770–1870* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2020); Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996). For a general account of travel and imperialism, see: Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

including the United States and local Pacific region.¹⁵ Yet as Angela Woollacott argues, women's capacity to travel, and the acceptance of this mobility, was mediated by race; while some privileged women of colour did travel (and others joined their employers as servants or workers), at least in the early twentieth century it was primarily white Australian women whose cosmopolitan hopes and dreams were "evidence of refinement and feminine respectability."¹⁶

The idea of orientalism is important for understanding histories of travel. In 1978 Edward Said explained orientalism as a Western mode of thinking that conceptualises "the Orient" or "the East" in opposition to the West in a bid to maintain the West's power.¹⁷ Gender historians have complicated this definition; Reina Lewis, for example, stresses the contingency of white women's privilege and access to imperial power.¹⁸ In 1993 Joyce Zonana coined the term "feminist orientalism" to describe how Western feminists invoked images of the harem and the veiled Muslim woman to present feminism "not as a radical attempt to restructure the West but as a conservative effort to make the West more like itself."¹⁹ But orientalism is neither homogenous nor static. In the interwar period non-Western women simultaneously criticised Western feminists' orientalism and reclaimed this language to assert their own rights as women.²⁰ Moreover, some Western feminists began to challenge negative orientalist and imperialist attitudes, viewing "the East" more positively as a source of renewal

¹⁵ See, for example: Stephen Alomes, *When London Calls: The Expatriation of Australian Creative Artists to London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Carl Bridge, Robert Crawford, and David Dunstan, eds., *Australians in Britain: The Twentieth-Century Experience* (Melbourne: Monash University ePress, 2009), <http://books.publishing.monash.edu/apps/bookworm/view/Australians+in+Britain%3A+The+Twentieth-Century+Experience/137/xhtml/covers.xml>; K. S. Inglis, "Going Home: Australians in England, 1870–1900," in *Home or Away? Immigrants in Colonial Australia*, ed. David Fitzpatrick (Canberra: Australian National University, 1992), 105–30; Ros Pesman, *Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996); Richard White, "Bluebells and Fogtown: Australians' First Impressions of England, 1860–1940," *Australian Cultural History* 5 (1986): 44–59; Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London*.

¹⁶ Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune*, 7, 13–14. Angela Woollacott has worked extensively on Australian women's travels. For more, see: Angela Woollacott, "'All This Is the Empire, I Told Myself': Australian Women's Voyages 'Home' and the Articulation of Colonial Whiteness," *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 4 (1997): 1003–29; Angela Woollacott, "White Colonialism and Sexual Modernity: Australian Women in the Early 20th-Century Metropolis," in *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*, ed. Antoinette Burton (London: Routledge, 1999), 49–63; Angela Woollacott, "The Metropole as Antipodes: Australian Women in London and Constructing National Identity," in *Imagined Londons*, ed. Pamela Gilbert (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 85–99.

¹⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978), 1–3.

¹⁸ Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996), 4.

¹⁹ Joyce Zonana, "The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of 'Jane Eyre,'" *Signs* 18, no. 3 (1993): 594.

²⁰ Fiona Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific: Cultural Internationalism and Race Politics in the Women's Pan-Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 23.

for feminism and international relations alike.²¹ An understanding of this concept and its critiques underpins this chapter.

Scholars of international feminism and the historical actors alike have noted that there were basic material conditions that made trips abroad possible; as Margery Corbett Ashby said in her oral history interviews, the two most important things for feminist leaders were “leisure and money.”²² Some have gone beyond this to think explicitly about what travel meant for feminists’ internationalist consciousnesses. Mineke Bosch and Charlotte Weber have both explored the 1911–12 world tour of Carrie Chapman Catt and Aletta Jacobs, during which they travelled to China, Egypt, India, Japan, Palestine, the Philippines, South Africa, and Syria in a bid to recruit new members to the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (the Alliance).²³ In relation to the interwar period, Margot Badran’s research on the Dutch feminist Rosa Manus and her time in Egypt shows how travel could form part of optimistic efforts to engage in interracial cooperation, as well as the challenges of this in the face of persistent European imperialism.²⁴

In this chapter I build on these works by showing the diversity and contingency of such journeys. While historians have considered feminists’ travels in terms of official business conducted under the auspices of feminist organisations, I aim to show how each woman’s own subjectivity also played an important role in determining her encounters and the impact of her experiences.²⁵ As Imaobong Umoren’s group biography of three “race women internationalists” has shown, travel shaped and reshaped people’s political and feminist beliefs

²¹ Ibid.

²² Margery Corbett Ashby interviewed by Brian Harrison, 21 September 1976, Oral Evidence on the Suffragette and Suffragist Movements: The Brian Harrison Interviews (hereafter Harrison Interviews), The Women’s Library, London (hereafter TWL), 8SUF/B/106.

²³ Mineke Bosch, “Colonial Dimensions of Dutch Women’s Suffrage: Aletta Jacobs’ Travel Letters from Africa and Asia, 1911–1912,” *Journal of Women’s History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 8–34; Charlotte Weber, “Unveiling Scheherazade: Feminist Orientalism in the International Alliance of Women, 1911–1950,” *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 125–57. See also: Karen Hunt, “Towards a Gendered and Raced Socialist Internationalism: Dora Montefiore Encounters South Africa (1912–14),” *African Studies* 66, no. 2–3 (2007): 321–41.

²⁴ Margot Badran, “Rosa Manus in Cairo, 1935, and Copenhagen, 1939: Encounters with Egyptians,” in *Rosa Manus (1881–1942): The International Life and Legacy of a Jewish Dutch Feminist*, ed. Myriam Everard and Francisca de Haan (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 184–206.

²⁵ Marie Sandell’s chapter titled “The Travels of International Women’s Organisations in the Interwar Period” frames travel in relation to these associations; instead, I want to recognise that this was a more fluid experience that did not simply reproduce the agendas of these groups. See: Marie Sandell, *The Rise of Women’s Transnational Activism: Identity and Sisterhood Between the World Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 137–70. See also: Bosch, “Colonial Dimensions of Dutch Women’s Suffrage”; Weber, “Unveiling Scheherazade.”

in various ways.²⁶ The impacts of travel were dependent on multiple factors, from each individual's personality to the particular opportunities and encounters they had along the way.²⁷ In exploring these journeys I interpret travelling as a political practice. In her work on the Australian suffragist Dora Montefiore, Karen Hunt argues that "travel becomes *political travel* when the travellers make connections between disparate experiences located in political spaces which are foreign to them" and that this "is as much about how these foreign experiences were deployed as about the experiences themselves."²⁸ Joan Sangster similarly defines political tourism as "a practice that involved visiting another country in order to explore, enjoy, and tour the foreign land" while also "observ[ing] a place's distinct political, cultural, and social organization."²⁹ Both of these concepts are important frameworks that inform my analysis.

EARLY EXPERIENCES OF TRAVEL

My group did not first begin travelling in the 1920s. While travel was not exclusively the domain of the rich and wealthy, as members of relatively well-off families they enjoyed a level of economic and social freedom that allowed them to go overseas multiple times. Many of them were seasoned travellers well before they became interested in ideas of international cooperation and even feminism. Their exposure to other cultures and places provided an important basis for their later interest in internationalism.

From an early age, some of them travelled with or because of family. Jessie Street migrated across the British Empire, moving to Australia in her youth after having spent her childhood in India, where her father worked for the civil service (she later framed her time

²⁶ Imaobong Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

²⁷ In his work, James Keating shows the importance of contingency, context, and personality, explaining that suffragists' interactions abroad were shaped by "the political cultures of their destinations, as well as their personal compatibility with those they encountered on their journeys." James Keating, *Distant Sisters: Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 195.

²⁸ Karen Hunt, "Whirl'd through the World': The Role of Travel in the Making of Dora Montefiore, 1851–1933," *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 22, no. 1 (2011): 45. Emphasis in original. See also: Karen Hunt, "Transnationalism in Practice: The Effect of Dora Montefiore's International Travel on Women's Politics in Britain before World War I," in *Crossing Boundaries: Women's Organizing in Europe and the Americas, 1880s–1940s*, ed. Pernilla Jonsson, Silke Neunsinger, and Joan Sangster (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2007): 73–94.

²⁹ Joan Sangster, "Political Tourism, Writing, and Communication: Transnational Connections of Women on the Left, 1920s–1940s," in Jonsson, Neunsinger, and Sangster, *Crossing Boundaries*, 103.

there as the reason she “never developed any colour consciousness”).³⁰ This was just the beginning of a lifetime of travel. As a child and young woman Street travelled “home” to England multiple times. In the early years of the twentieth century, she attended Wycombe Abbey School in Buckinghamshire. She recalled in her memoirs that at the school students would read newspapers; participating in this practice facilitated her curiosity about “international politics—an interest that grew with the years.”³¹ She visited England again at the height of suffrage militancy when her cousin Winifred Mayo introduced her to the suffragettes. While Street’s first international experiences were contained within the British Empire (which continued to provide important pathways for her mobility for the rest of her life), the interwar years would see her expand her horizons and visit more unfamiliar places.

Marriage was key driver of mobility. From early on Helen Archdale had been no stranger to travel: a couple of years after her father died the family spent “two or three years wandering in France and in Italy” before returning to Scotland.³² She met her husband, an army captain, during a winter in Egypt and followed him to India.³³ The historical record does not capture much about her time there, except that she felt the life of an army wife was very “restricted.” “Small wonder that intelligence tends to atrophy, scandal to grow and boredom to lead to degeneracy,” she later wrote.³⁴ In 1908 she returned to Britain and from 1913 seems to have been estranged from her husband, who died just a few years later. Rischbieth also accompanied her spouse, Henry Wills Rischbieth, on his work overseas before he died in 1925. In 1911 the couple spent time in Japan; two years later they made the much longer journey to London, where Rischbieth encountered the militant suffragettes as well as prominent American feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman.³⁵ Similarly, Linda Littlejohn honeymooned in Asia, although apart from a note in the Ascham newspaper *Charivari* that after her wedding

³⁰ Jessie Street, *Truth or Repose* (Sydney: Australasian Book Society, 1966), 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³² “‘Manuscript of An Interfering Woman’, being typescript manuscript of Helen Archdale’s autobiography, including handwritten annotations,” chapter 1, 2, Betty Archdale Papers (hereafter Archdale Papers), State Library of New South Wales, Sydney (hereafter SLNSW), MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

³³ *Ibid.*, chapter 1, 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, chapter 1, 6.

³⁵ Letters from Bessie Rischbieth to her sister, Olive Evans, 1911 and 1913, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 1, File 1, MS 2004/1/2–12.

she was going away for eight months to visit places including Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Calcutta (Kolkata), the historical record is rather quiet on this point.³⁶

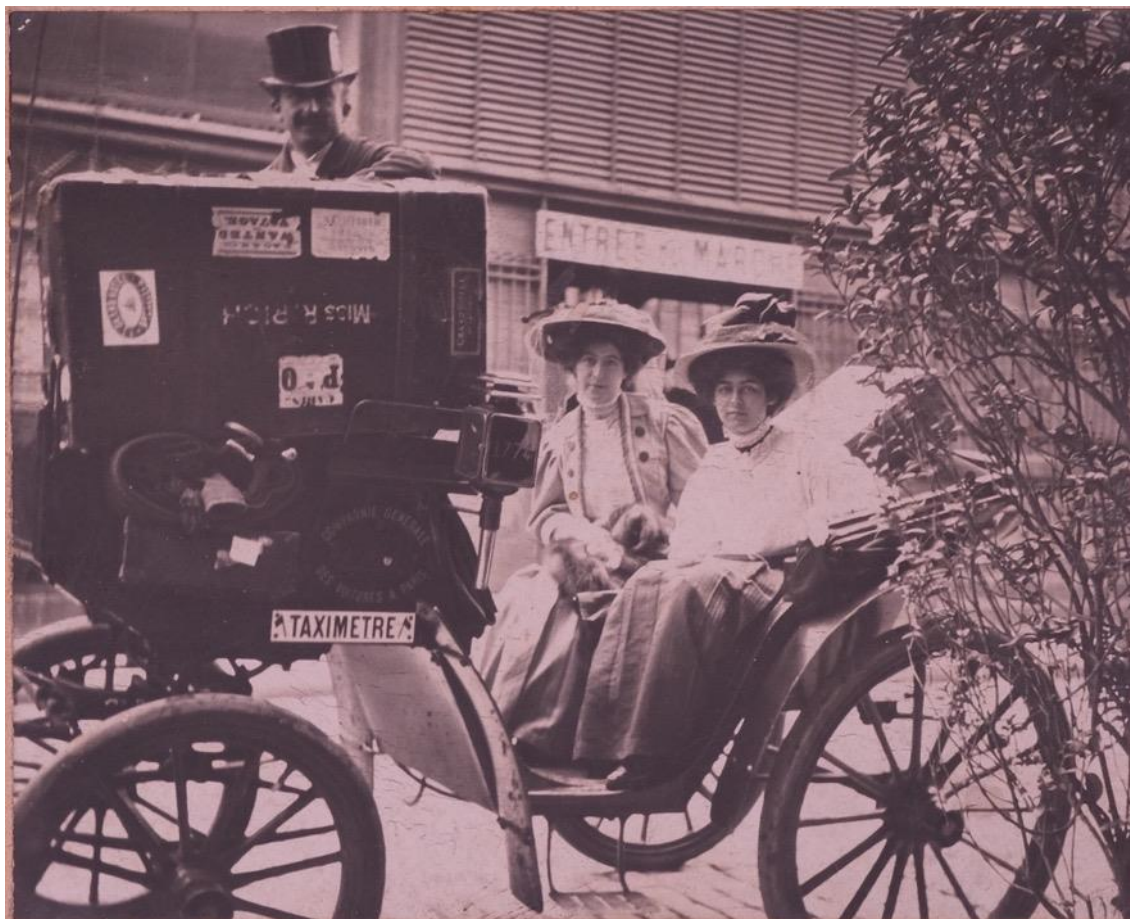


Figure 36 Ruby and Vera Rich in Paris, 1907. *Australian Jewish Historical Society*, PP/SCHALITRR/1/1/001/001.63.

For others, education and even career prospects prompted such journeys. Britain and Europe were focal points here. Courtney, for example, extended her multilingual education by spending seven months studying German in Dresden in the 1890s.³⁷ Later that decade Macmillan also studied in Germany, passing a year in Berlin after she had finished her

³⁶ “Old Girls’ Column,” *Charivari* (Sydney), June 1907, 14, *Charivari*, 1903 to present, Series 22, Ascham School Archives, Sydney.

³⁷ Janet E. Grenier, “Courtney, Dame Kathleen D’Olier (1878–1974),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/37316>.

undergraduate degree.³⁸ The historical record does not document their thoughts on their experiences in Western Europe, but this firsthand experience would have surely had some influence on their later interest in internationalism and predominant focus on the transatlantic sphere. Going abroad could provide an education out of the classroom, too. A budding musician, Ruby Rich's career aspirations led her to Europe. Though her desire to be a pianist caused much conflict with her father, who held quite traditional views regarding women's work and education, in 1905 Rich and her sister went abroad to study in Berlin and Paris with esteemed musicians. "I was always begging my father to take me abroad so I could finish my musical education," she later recalled. "I wanted to go alone, I didn't care how, and he could never make me understand that I, girls couldn't travel alone, they had to be chaperoned."³⁹ Rich travelled to Europe again in 1911, this time via the United States. She relished the opportunity to experience the European hubs of art and culture and was introduced to more active social work as well (which I will explore more in chapter seven).

For Australian women travelling to Britain at this time, the increasingly dramatic suffrage struggle completely captured their attention. The Australians in my group had not been involved in local suffrage campaigns and were enthralled by what they found in London. Later in life, Rich framed her exposure to the suffragists during her first trip to Britain as an important first step on her feminist journey, saying: "it was then that I first heard of the suffrage movement: Mrs Pankhurst, Mrs Fawcett, and others, and quietly became more interested in things a little away from music."⁴⁰ She returned in 1911 at the height of suffragette militancy. This was the same year that Street also revisited England and briefly met the suffragettes in a moment that made an "indelible impression" on her.⁴¹ At this time, Emmeline Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was taking to the streets of London en masse to bring attention to the fact that British women still did not have the vote. A couple of years later Rischbieth too witnessed the spectacular suffrage struggle. Though she did not agree with militant methods, she described the suffragettes as "fearless speakers" and argued that "the times are too strenuous and too full of deeper meaning for one society of women

³⁸ Sybil Oldfield, "Macmillan, (Jessie) Chrystal (1872–1937)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/38526>.

³⁹ Ruby Rich interviewed by Hazel de Berg, 4 June 1975, Hazel de Berg collection (hereafter de Berg collection), National Library of Australia, Canberra, ORAL TRC 1/835, Session 2 of 9, 13:54.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 12:14.

⁴¹ Street, *Truth or Repose*, 44.

suffragists to be critic[ising] another.”⁴² She attended a protest against the infamous “Cat and Mouse Bill” and gushed about hearing American suffragists speak, saying: “Oh, how these women speak so logically & with such zeal & knowledge.”⁴³ Visiting England—where the suffrage struggle was far more protracted, and also far more spectacular, than in Australia—helped politicise these women and was an important step on their journeys to internationalism.



Figure 37 Emmeline Pankhurst speaking at a WSPU meeting, 1912. *The Women's Library, London, 7JCC/O/02/004a.*

British feminists also were energised by their encounters with women overseas. Since the late nineteenth century women had been travelling across the North Atlantic to meet with like-minded women.⁴⁴ Once they had formalised their connections by establishing groups such as the International Council of Women (ICW) and the Alliance, feminists' mobility gained a newfound purpose as greater numbers of women journeyed across the Northern Hemisphere to attend these organisations' congresses. In 1904 Corbett Ashby attended the Alliance's first meeting in Berlin with her mother, Marie Corbett. She had already travelled for leisure

⁴² Bessie Rischbieth to Anna Donnelly, 19 May 1913, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 1, File 1, MS 2004/1/6.

⁴³ Bessie Rischbieth to Olive Evans, 23 May 1913, Box 1, File 1, MS 2004/1/7. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁴ Bonnie Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement 1830–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Margaret H. McFadden, *Golden Cables of Sympathy: The Transatlantic Sources of Nineteenth-Century Feminism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999); Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

throughout Western Europe and the Mediterranean, where she encountered veiled Turkish women (whom she described as “unsightly objects with their black veils and black umbrellas”).⁴⁵ The Berlin congress allowed her to meet foreign feminists and introduced her to ideas about political activism in an international context. Macmillan also attended meetings of this organisation from 1908 when she travelled to Amsterdam as an ICW representative and in 1911 when she went to Stockholm as proxy for Millicent Garrett Fawcett.⁴⁶ In 1909 she sailed to the ICW’s congress in Toronto, although the shallowness of her historical footprint means we do not have her reflections on this adventure.⁴⁷ In 1915, Macmillan along with Courtney went to The Hague to host the first International Congress of Women (which became the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, WILPF). Her global mobility was closely tied to her work for international women’s organisations.

Travel was a major part of my group’s early lives. Their capacity to venture abroad for leisure, study, family, and activism reveals their privilege as people of independent means—a fact that would become significant for facilitating their subsequent involvement in international feminist activism during the interwar years. While geography shaped patterns of mobility in different ways—allowing Corbett Ashby to venture to the European continent for short holidays in places like Greece, Germany, Norway, and France while requiring Rischbieth to travel for months at a time—the very fact of experiencing other cultures and places was a shared one.⁴⁸ These women’s experiences of travel stimulated their interest in ideas about international cooperation, as they could imagine a world beyond their nation’s shores and had sometimes already witnessed the transnational nature of gender issues. Their cosmopolitan

⁴⁵ Margery Corbett Ashby to Marie Corbett, 6 April 1903, Papers of Margery Corbett Ashby (hereafter Corbett Ashby Papers), TWL, Box FL475, 7MCA/A/23.

⁴⁶ International Woman Suffrage Alliance (hereafter IWSA), *Report of Fourth Conference, Amsterdam, Holland* (Amsterdam: F. Van Rossen, 1908), 10; IWSA, *Report of Fifth Conference and First Quinquennial, London, England* (London: Samuel Sidders, 1909), 20; IWSA, *Report of the Sixth Congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, Stockholm Sweden, June 12–17, 1911* (London: Women’s Printing Society, 1911), 14.

⁴⁷ “The International Council of Women. Fourth Quinquennial Conference,” *Common Cause* (London), 24 June 1909, 144; International Council of Women, *Report of Transactions of the Fourth Quinquennial Meeting, held at Toronto, Canada, June, 1909* (London: Constable, 1910), 21.

⁴⁸ See Corbett Ashby’s travel letters from these places in Boxes FL474 and FL475, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, 7MCA.

lives—partly born of “the vortex of empire itself”—formed a solid basis for an interest in internationalism.⁴⁹

TRAVELLING FEMINIST WORK

The First World War brought most feminists’ travels to a halt. As the world divided into alliances, moving freely across borders was not so easy (although not impossible, as the WILPF’s foundation meeting in 1915 showed). Yet the conflict only reinforced feminists’ internationalist convictions. The large-scale devastation that had been caused by states resorting to war showed them that a new way of conducting international politics—one that included women as well as men—was needed. As the war ended and movement across borders became possible again, feminists started to meet with one another and join forces to demand representation not only on a national level, but also in the international realm, especially in the newly established League of Nations (the League).

From 1919 international women’s organisations began to reconvene the congresses that had been a hallmark of their growing movement before the war. The WILPF—being highly invested in the reconstruction process—met first in Zürich that year. This was followed by meetings of the Alliance in Geneva and the ICW in Kristiana (Oslo) in 1920. These meetings were an important prompt for women to resume travelling. Travelling was exciting and offered a chance for these women to live the cosmopolitan lives to which they aspired; it also represented an opportunity to learn and gain experience. Indeed, as Corbett Ashby wrote to her mother from the Inter-Allied Women’s Conference in Paris in 1919: “I am amassing such stores of interesting experience, seeing & meeting all kinds of people that it ought to do me much good.”⁵⁰

After the First World War, Western feminists’ patterns of travel continued to reinforce the Eurocentrism of the movement. International feminist congresses, which mostly continued to take place in Europe, had a major role in defining where these women went when they left their home countries. In 1923 Rischbieth prepared for her first trip overseas for the

⁴⁹ Jane Haggis et al., *Cosmopolitan Lives on the Cusp of Empire: Interfaith, Cross-cultural and Transnational Networks, 1860–1950* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 4.

⁵⁰ Margery Corbett Ashby to Marie Corbett, 1919, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL477, 7MCA/A/31.

purposes of activist work. She embarked on the long voyage to Italy to attend the Alliance's ninth congress and was eager to meet pioneer feminists from overseas and visit Rome, which she described as "the original birthplace of human citizenship."⁵¹ Ideas about the destination, as much as the experience itself, shaped her travels and how she shared them with her colleagues back home. Her journey included sightseeing within the city: the Roman forum, the Capitoline Hill, and other key ancient sites.⁵² She presented ancient Rome as a source of inspiration for women aspiring to become equal democratic citizens. Being in Western Europe also allowed Rischbieth and the other Australian representatives to hop across the border to Geneva for a few days to learn more about the League and then on to Paris (to catch up with French feminists) and the Somme (as part of early battlefield tourism) before arriving in London.⁵³ At this early stage in her career, European travels were a way for Rischbieth to become a full, contributing member of the international feminist movement. While this was a European trip, this journey also brought Rischbieth into contact with some non-Western women; she made special note of the delegates she had met from China, Egypt, India, and Japan in a letter for the *Dawn*.⁵⁴

The geography of these meetings started to shift during the interwar period. In 1935, for instance, the Alliance held its congress in Istanbul. This provided a reason for feminists to travel to Türkiye and, for those coming from the West, exposed them to a very different culture. Members of the Australian delegation that year included Rischbieth, Rich, and Littlejohn. Rich had just spent several years living in London; the Istanbul congress was her last stop on her way home to Sydney. She later reported on her experience to radio listeners in Australia, praising the advancements she had witnessed there. "But the greatest of all changes is in the Status of the Turkish women," she explained:

Gone is the veil, so typical of the former eastern woman, gone the Harem, for polygamy is no longer allowed, while equality of the sexes is to be seen in the schools, the university, in the judiciary (there are about 13 women judges) [*sic*] in suffrage, in eligibility to municipalities, and to the National Assembly, where there

⁵¹ Bessie Rischbieth, *March of Australian Women: A Record of Fifty Years' Struggle for Equal Citizenship* (Perth: Paterson Brokensha, 1964), 136.

⁵² "Letter from Mrs. Rischbieth," *Dawn* (Perth), 14 August 1923, 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 2–4.

⁵⁴ "World Citizenship. Ninth Congress International Woman Suffrage Alliance," *Dawn* (Perth), 14 July 1923, 6.

are no less than 17 women members in their Parliament. How many are there in Australia?⁵⁵

Rich's reflections on what she had learned in Türkiye encapsulate some of the core tensions and contradictions in interwar feminism. Her orientalist words reveal how she saw women's emancipation strictly in Western terms; at the same time, she used Türkiye's progress as leverage to press the ongoing need for reform in Australia (in the vein of the feminist orientalist that Zonana describes). However, formal meetings like this one only very rarely gave Western feminists a reason to visit places outside of Europe and North America during the 1920s and 1930s and therefore did not do so much to expose them to other cultures and experiences of womanhood. To have these experiences, women often had to take the initiative to travel further afield.

Congresses were not the only form of travelling feminist work. The tradition of the feminist lecture tour was established well before the First World War and continued after its end. In 1909, for example, Corbett Ashby delivered a series of talks in the Netherlands on the topic of "women in society."⁵⁶ Such lectures were intended to share ideas with audiences beyond one's local community. During the early twentieth century they were framed in terms of helping women around the world win the vote; as the suffrage was extended by each country in turn, feminists tackled a much broader range of topics, from birth control to industrial legislation. Travel was therefore not only about learning, but also about teaching—about sharing ideas and experiences in the hope of building up both local and the international women's movements.

Throughout the interwar years, prominent feminist figures toured entire countries and continents to spread their ideas about issues concerning women's rights and, often, world peace. For Archdale, this provided her with a reason to go abroad for the first time in many years. She had been involved in the British suffrage campaign right up until equal franchise was won in 1928. Although she did develop an internationalist consciousness during this time, her activities were largely confined within national borders. Shortly after the vote was extended

⁵⁵ "Some Impressions of the Istanbul IAW Congress 1935 by a Delegate of the Australian Federation of Women Voters. Given at 2FC, c. April 1936," Papers of Ruby Rich (hereafter Rich Papers), NLA, Box 3, File 25, MS 7493.

⁵⁶ Margery Corbett Ashby with Michael Ashby, *Memoirs of Dame Margery Corbett Ashby* (Horsted Keynes: M.G. Ashby, 1996), 69. For more on suffragists' lecture tours, see: Keating, *Distant Sisters*, chapter 5.

she travelled to North America. This truly opened her eyes to the international nature of women's subordination. "In 1928 immediately after the winning of equal franchise in my own country, I felt in some way released, and went off to Canada where my daughter was finishing her second year at McGill," she wrote in her manuscript autobiography. She noted that until that point she had been so focused on the vote in Britain that "it came as astonishing news" that, while Canadian women were enfranchised, in Quebec they were still refused the provincial vote, could not own property, become lawyers, or have their own money.⁵⁷ While Archdale knew of the international suffrage struggle, it was the experience of going abroad that truly brought her into touch with the transnational nature of gender inequality.

During the following months, Archdale and her daughter Betty toured the United States, attending conferences and roundtables and getting to know American feminist groups. She gave lectures in places like Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore "on my one topic, equality between the sexes."⁵⁸ Archdale's speeches would have been delivered almost exclusively to white women, as the American feminist movement largely excluded women of colour from its ranks and its priorities.⁵⁹ Her tour did bring incidental encounters with the United States' racially diverse communities; Archdale recalled taking the bus and seeing the "back seats reserved for negroes, a sight deeply offending my equalitarian soul."⁶⁰ Yet this did not prompt her to think much about the issues of race and racism in the context of the international women's movement. Over the following years she became more involved with international women's organisations, but in a way that largely reinforced the European focus of the movement. Travel, it seems, was not always wholly transformative.

Littlejohn also lectured across North America. In 1938 she set off on a paid three-month lecture tour of the United States.⁶¹ The *Dawn* noted that this was "probably the first time that an Australian woman has been engaged before sailing to go all that way to speak."⁶²

⁵⁷ "Manuscript of An Interfering Woman'," chapter 9, 1, MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

⁵⁸ Untitled, *Sunday Star* (Washington, D.C.), 3 June 1928, 8; "Manuscript of An Interfering Woman'," chapter 9, 7b, MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

⁵⁹ This does not mean that Black women did not campaign for the vote. See: Martha S. Jones, *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).

⁶⁰ "Manuscript of An Interfering Woman'," chapter 9, 7a, MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

⁶¹ "Appalling Lack of Interest.' Women and Political Affairs. Mrs. Littlejohn's Attack," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 October 1938, 4.

⁶² "Under Contract to Lecture in U.S.A. Mrs. Linda Littlejohn," *Dawn* (Perth), 21 September 1938, 7.

Opening at New York City Hall with a talk on “Democracy in the Pacific with special relation to Australia,” Littlejohn also spoke on a range of other topics: “Must Home Life Perish?,” “Use and Misuse of Radio,” “America and the British Empire: our Likes and Dislikes, or our Similarities and Dissimilarities,” and “Do Women Count in World Affairs?,” among others.⁶³ While there she encountered an increasingly isolationist attitude. One of her key messages, as she articulated in an interview at the National Woman’s Party headquarters in Washington, D.C., was that people needed to make “a well-drawn-up plan on the aims and purposes of democracy.”⁶⁴ As she later suggested to readers of the *Dawn*, this “may be a task for our women’s movement, for if we lose democracy we lose all our pioneers fought and died for.”⁶⁵ This experience allowed Littlejohn both to share her own ideas—including the concept of wages for housewives—and see the world situation from a new angle.⁶⁶

Australian feminists held onto a faint hope that some of the preeminent Northern Hemisphere feminists would come to visit their shores. Rischbieth’s correspondence is peppered with comments to this effect. In 1924 she wrote to the American suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt, regretting that she could not fund a tour to Australia for her but hoping that Catt might consider coming all the same. “Australia offers such tremendous possibilities: it is the youngest of the great continents in development, and a comparatively small population makes it possible to sow the seed now of the sort of civilisation women of all countries dream about,” she wrote. “Those who can express the ideal in a practical form to inspire others, would find Australia an easy ground, I think, for establishing good precedents—and who knows how far-reaching such an effort might prove.”⁶⁷ The following year she wrote to Nancy Astor, Britain’s first woman member of parliament, saying: “I should have used such an opportunity to try & persuade you to visit Australia for I am sure it would prove a mutual benefit to both British women at Home & Overseas if [a] more definite exchange of ideas could take place between women within the Empire.”⁶⁸ This desire to bring feminist pioneers

⁶³ Ibid.; “What Women Are Doing,” *Australian Women’s Weekly* (Sydney), 3 September 1938, 26.

⁶⁴ Mary Padgett, “Mrs. Littlejohn Warns Women,” *Washington Times* (Washington, D.C.), 29 December 1938, 13.

⁶⁵ Linda Littlejohn, “Impressions of America,” *Dawn* (Perth), 15 February 1939, 8.

⁶⁶ “Housewives’ Pay Urged by Australian. Clubwomen Hear Mrs. Littlejohn ask for Law,” *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), 29 December 1938, 11.

⁶⁷ Bessie Rischbieth to Carrie Chapman Catt, 4 December 1924, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 18, File 2, MS 2004/7/62.

⁶⁸ Bessie Rischbieth to Nancy Astor, 9 June 1925, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 7, File 7, MS 2004/5/329.

from the Northern Hemisphere reveals the persistent view among white Australian women that these colleagues had a certain degree of credibility and expertise—a feeling that sat in tension with their own desire to take a more prominent place in the movement as well as with their growing recognition of the importance of other arenas of action such as the Pacific.

Some intrepid travellers did come as far as the Antipodes. In 1928 the British feminist preacher Maude Royden famously came to Australia as part of her world tour to promote an approach to religion that was compatible with the lives of modern women.⁶⁹ This tour was organised by the British Commonwealth League (BCL) and managed by Marjorie Chave Collisson, who travelled via India and New Zealand and said that it was “a tremendous thrill ... to pass from place to place [in Australia] and meet everywhere the representatives of the forward women’s movement.”⁷⁰ Almost a decade later, Kathleen Courtney—Royden’s close friend from her days at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford—also came to the Antipodes to share her views on world peace and women’s role in achieving global stability. She had already undertaken a lecture tour in the United States in 1930, during which she was affronted by the extravagance of American culture. “I vary between thinking Americans extraordinarily kind and utterly ruthless,” she wrote in the journal she kept during her trip.⁷¹ Her 1938 adventure would take her even further from home.

In 1938 Courtney travelled by steamship through the Panama Canal and across the Pacific to Australia and New Zealand. This venture brought her into contact with a range of people for the first time. Along the way she met the Jamaican feminist and Black activist Una Marson and was intrigued by her stop-off at the Pitcairn Islands. At Paraparaumu in New Zealand, she was given a Māori welcome. She was annoyed that her New Zealand hosts did not explain what the ceremony involved ahead of time, but believed she had not “made any faux pas.” Of the Māori welcomers she said “[t]hey are an attractive looking people at their best & I should like to know more about them.”⁷² Here the racialised nature of her remarks

⁶⁹ Laura Rademaker, “Religion for the Modern Girl: Maude Royden in Australia, 1928,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 31, no. 89 (2016): 336–54. On the complexities of “the modern” for women, see: Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁷⁰ “Woman’s Realm. Chatter. Miss Chave Collisson, M.A.,” *Queenslander* (Brisbane), 23 February 1928, 46.

⁷¹ Kathleen Courtney journal, in the train Minneapolis–Des Moines, Courtney Papers, Box FL454, TWL, KDC/D2/30–39.

⁷² Letter from Kathleen Courtney (no addressee), Paraparaumu, 11 March 1938, Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL455, KDC/D5/1–16.

sat alongside a wish to correctly observe traditional customs—whether out of respect for the Indigenous people or because of an English sense of propriety (or both) is unclear.



WELCOME EXTENDED TO WELL-KNOWN WOMAN SPEAKER AT THE Y.W.C.A.
Miss Kathleen Courtney, who is to lecture in New Zealand, was welcomed yesterday in the Y.W.C.A. assembly hall by a gathering representing almost every women's organisation in Auckland. From left: Miss E. Bennet, general secretary to the Auckland Y.W.C.A., Mrs. A. D. Campbell, a former president, Miss Courtney and Mrs. M. Rudd, president.

Figure 38 Kathleen Courtney at a YWCA event in Auckland, 1938. "Welcome Extended to Well-Known Woman Speaker at the Y.W.C.A.," *New Zealand Herald (Auckland)*, 16 February 1938, 5.

Courtney considered it her job to educate Antipodean women, and she does not seem to have felt that she had much to learn from them in return. The letters she sent home to her siblings reveal that she did not much enjoy her time in Australia and New Zealand, in part due to a busy schedule and homesickness. She was also distracted by the political crises taking place in Europe, especially Germany's annexation of Austria and Britain's policy of appeasement, and was clearly feeling isolated, remarking "[o]ne does feel most awfully cut off out here."⁷³ She told her siblings that New Zealand was "a beautiful country & the people kind, but I must say I think they are for the most part decidedly dull."⁷⁴ She was scathing about their "abysmal ignorance ... about world affairs" and the "most elementary questions" they asked her about the League. Her only consolation was that her visit might encourage greater organisation among New Zealand women.⁷⁵ Her impressions of Australia were not much better. "So far I

⁷³ Kathleen Courtney to siblings, 27 February 1938, Hamilton, Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL455, KDC/D5/1–16.

⁷⁴ Kathleen Courtney to siblings, 4 March 1938, New Plymouth, Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL455, KDC/D5/1–16.

⁷⁵ Kathleen Courtney to siblings, 8 March 1938, Palmerston North, Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL455, KDC/D5/1–16.

have found Australia toilsome & not very repaying. Of course all the happenings in Europe make things all the more difficult,” she wrote home.⁷⁶ Yet Courtney was an able and experienced activist and did not pass on the opportunity to build up public support for internationalism and the League. In a speech she delivered in Australia she said:

I conclude by making an appeal to every one of you to feel enthusiasm and a sense of personal responsibility. We are citizens, fellow citizens with men—in taking over the right to vote, we have taken over a great duty. We can no longer sit back and say that these things are no concern of ours; we share the responsibility for good government. Do not say that Australia is so far away—it is, in some ways, not so far away. In spite of all distance, the Commonwealth of Australia has a much bigger part to play than some of its citizens realise.⁷⁷

Courtney’s travels allowed her to try to persuade women to do their bit for the peace movement. She clearly felt she had more to offer than to gain from these experiences. Her mindset astutely reveals the persistent sense even among progressive women that the “old world” of Britain and Europe was at the forefront of global change.

Travelling feminist work was central to the educative function of feminist internationalism. Going to congresses and embarking on lecture tours were fairly structured experiences, although they did expose individuals to new places and ideas. They helped women cement and expand their international networks, share their thoughts, and develop confidence as activists, but ultimately the patterns of mobility they prescribed only allowed my group and their colleagues to challenge the imperialist, Western-centric nature of the interwar international feminist movement to a limited degree.

TRAVEL AS FEMINIST WORK

Travel itself also constituted feminist work. My group’s experiences abroad were not strictly limited to the sites of their international congresses or the stops along their lecture tours. Often these moments provided an opportunity for them to extend their travels and build their journey into a much richer, more multifaceted one that brought them into contact with a wide

⁷⁶ Kathleen Courtney to siblings, train Sydney to Canberra, 27 April 1938 with a postscript from Canberra, 28 April 1938, Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL455, KDC/D5/1–16.

⁷⁷ “Precis of Miss Courtney’s Speech, May 3rd. 1938,” Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL455, KDC/D5/65–70.

range of people and places. Assuming the role of political tourist or traveller, they understood travel to be a useful way for them to develop their feminist and internationalist ideas through lived experience of the world at large. These women embarked on self-directed trips during which they visited foreign countries to learn about local cultures and social issues, including women's status. Throughout the second half of the interwar period in particular, several members of my group travelled beyond the West, prompted in part by the increasing visibility of activists from places like India and Egypt in their international networks. They did so with varying attitudes and degrees of openness, embodying the core tensions and paradoxes within interwar feminist internationalism.

The rise of two major, opposing ideologies—communism and fascism—cast a large shadow over these decades. Liberal feminists could clearly see how countries like Germany were quickly curbing the gains women had made in recent years, and although many of them remained suspicious of communism (which Corbett Ashby labelled a “wicked regime”), for some the Soviet Union posed an intriguing example of how society could accommodate gender equality.⁷⁸ In 1938 Street visited Russia “to see what the status of women really was in that country.” Tracing her feminism back to her days at school and her interest in the suffragettes, she explained: “After so many set backs [*sic*] and disappointments, after having won the vote, I was very sceptical about the claims made by enthusiasts that women really had equality in Russia.”⁷⁹ What she found put countries like Australia and Britain to shame. She recalled seeing men and women working together on the railways en route to Moscow, with women fulfilling the roles of train, tram, and bus drivers, station masters, police, bricklayers, and artisans. She travelled with an interpreter who was “completely mystified” by Street’s “barrage of questions about the status of and opportunity for women.” Street saw equality everywhere she looked, and “soon lost interest in the conditions and opportunities for women workers as I found that there really was no discrimination based on sex.”⁸⁰ This was a journey made of her own initiative—the transatlantic-based international women’s movement did not hold meetings in the Soviet Union at this time, and so it remained politically an alien world to many feminists. Indeed, while her colleague Littlejohn could appreciate the social progress and equality she

⁷⁸ Corbett Ashby, *Memoirs*, 138.

⁷⁹ Jessie Street, “Some Impressions of Russia,” c. 1939 or 1940, Papers of Jessie Street (Street Papers), NLA, Box 14, File 15, MS 2683/4/1322.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

witnessed in Russia when she visited the year before, she felt there was “too much regimentation” and commented “I should by no means like to live there myself.”⁸¹ In contrast, although Street traced her interest in socialism to the Depression era, as Lenore Coltheart argues her 1938 trip was the catalyst that saw her increasingly use the language of socialism and point to the Soviet Union as a model for gender relations.⁸² Travel could thus have potentially transformative effects.

From the late 1920s, my group began to venture to even more culturally unfamiliar places. Some of them had by necessity already been to places outside the West, especially those Australians who had to travel over 15,000 kilometres to reach “home” in Britain, a journey that required multiple stops at the many port cities of the British Empire along the way.⁸³ For internationally minded people, this may very well have reinforced a conflation of “imperial” with “international,” “the empire” with “the world,” and explain why they eventually looked beyond Europe in their internationalism. A publicity booklet for the R.M.S. *Orama*—part of the Orient Line’s fleet and Rischbieth’s mode of transport to the 1929 Berlin congress—detailed that the ship took a route through the Suez Canal and regularly called at Colombo, Aden, Port Said, Naples, Toulon, and Gibraltar along the way.⁸⁴ Other vessels took passengers around the cape of Africa and up through the Atlantic Ocean. This was the case when Rischbieth travelled to Rome in 1923. Her letters recording her impressions of South Africa are full of racialising language that rather uncritically accepted the fact of empire. In them she recounted riding on a rickshaw “drawn by a Zulu ... a very handsome fellow, tall and straight, and like a bronze figure to look at, and most graceful” and regretted the shortness of her visit in Durban, writing that she left “with a longing to return some day to go further inland and become better acquainted with this part of the great Empire overseas, for it offers similar possibilities to our own great continent.”⁸⁵ In Cape Town she found a city that “possesses a romance and history of which its citizens are justly proud” and visited the home of Cecil

⁸¹ “Returning Soon. Mrs. Linda Littlejohn,” *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 28 October 1937, 19.

⁸² Lenore Coltheart, “Citizens of the World: Jessie Street and International Feminism,” *Hecate* 31, no. 1 (2005): 188.

⁸³ Woollacott, “All This Is the Empire, I Told Myself,” 1004–5.

⁸⁴ “Publicity Brochure—RMS *Orama*, Orient Line,” c. 1920s, Museums Victoria Collections, Melbourne, Item HT 26609, <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/1705928>.

⁸⁵ “The President Writes a Letter. S.S. Nestor, April 11, 1923,” *Dawn* (Perth), 14 May 1923, 4–5.

Rhodes, calling him the “great Empire-builder.”⁸⁶ In the early 1920s, before anticolonial movements gained greater momentum, it was relatively easy for white feminists like Rischbieth to view such experiences through a rose-tinted imperial lens.

Over the following years, women from the Pacific to the Middle East were increasingly vocal in their challenges to international feminism, pointing out that they were not equally included in the supposedly global “sisterhood.”⁸⁷ In response, some Western feminists became more aware of the need for racial diversity and started to question their own conceptions of the world, race, and empire. They became increasingly interested in what they generally called “the East”—a homogenising term they used to designate places across Asia and the Middle East—and this shift was reflected in their patterns of mobility. This was not an entirely new phenomenon; as Billie Melman explains, the Middle East was “Westerners’ oldest destination of travel, seasonal migration, and colonisation.”⁸⁸ Yet this period did witness significant changes in how feminists encountered these places.

Throughout the second half of this period several of my subjects embarked on parallel journeys which saw them travel through three non-Western countries under the control or influence of the British Empire: India, Egypt, and Palestine. After travelling to Berlin for the Alliance’s landmark twenty-fifth anniversary congress in 1929, Rischbieth visited Egypt and Palestine before spending several months in India.⁸⁹ Having worked with people like the Egyptian feminist leader Huda Sha‘rawi in Berlin, she wanted to see “at first hand something of the background of Oriental women who come in delegations to the international conferences.”⁹⁰ Several years later in 1935 (when the Alliance held its Istanbul congress), three other members of my group embarked on mirror image journeys. Rich, a Jewish woman and a Zionist, spent three months in Palestine towards the end of her seven-year stay abroad in London. Here she ran into Littlejohn, who was stopping off in Egypt, Palestine, and Greece

⁸⁶ “Letter from Mrs. Rischbieth,” *Dawn* (Perth), 14 June 1923, 5.

⁸⁷ Marie Sandell suggests that they were considered at best as “younger sisters.” Sandell, *The Rise of Women’s Transnational Activism*, 14.

⁸⁸ Billie Melman, “The Middle East/Arabia: ‘The Cradle of Islam,’” in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 105.

⁸⁹ For an extended analysis of Rischbieth’s journey through these countries, see: Michelle Staff, “Encountering ‘the East’: Travel and Internationalism in Bessie Rischbieth’s Interwar Feminism,” *Australian Historical Studies* 53, no. 1 (2022): 97–118. See also: Haggis et al., *Cosmopolitan Lives on the Cusp of Empire*, 85–105.

⁹⁰ Bessie Rischbieth, “The East Awakens. Travels in Asia,” *Dawn* (Perth), 19 March 1930, 3.

on her way to the Istanbul congress with a view to investigate women's rights in each place.⁹¹ The pair also crossed paths with Corbett Ashby, who had recently flown in from India—having just attended the All-India Women's Congress (AIWC)—to speak to Arab and Jewish women before continuing to Egypt and then Istanbul. This moment captures the serendipity of some feminists' interactions, as well as the mobility that was central to their mission. Indeed, they were not alone in travelling to these places; during these journeys they also crossed paths with women involved in birth control efforts, such as Margaret Sanger and Edith How-Martyn, who also travelled throughout “the East” to advance their goals.⁹²



Figure 39 “Arab Women Unveil for the First Time in History,” 1929. National Library of Australia, MS 2004/11/525.

Meeting with local feminist leaders and groups was a key objective of these travellers. In Palestine—a place riddled with bitter conflict as Jewish and Arab nationalist movements staked opposing claims to the territory—Rischbieth met with women from both communities

⁹¹ “Linda Littlejohn Is Off Again To See The World,” *Australian Women's Weekly* 16 Feb 1935, 10

⁹² For accounts of Edith How-Martyn's travels throughout India and the surrounding region, see: Papers of Eileen Palmer and of Edith How-Martyn, British Library, London, Mss Eur D1182.

(as Corbett Ashby would do a few years later).⁹³ She wrote about the “marvellous” members of the Arab Women’s Congress (which had met for the first time just weeks before her arrival), praising the group for “showing great Executive ability & determination.”⁹⁴ “They are awakened from their long sleep,” she wrote in a letter to her sister at home in Perth.⁹⁵ Using such language was common for Western feminists and was sometimes used by non-Western women themselves, too.⁹⁶ Yet while Rischbieth held an assumption that Western women’s experiences were the model of progress to which others simply had to catch up, through her interactions with women in Palestine she also demonstrated a capacity to view them as agents of political change worthy of being heard. She told her sister that the local feminists “were so pleased to welcome us cigarettes & coffee were handed round & then we listened to their story.”⁹⁷ Her recognition of Middle Eastern women’s agency is notable, given the ease with which many contemporary white feminists cast them as passive subjects. This perhaps reflects in part the success of Middle Eastern feminists in asserting their place within international feminist circles during these decades.

In contrast, Littlejohn was far more prejudiced. She wrote about her 1935 travels in a series of columns for the *Australian Women’s Weekly* (the *Weekly*). Her views on Arab women stand out as particularly offensive, despite the fact that the magazine identified her as “one of the most alert and open-minded of travellers.”⁹⁸ She commented to readers that the veils worn by Muslim women “look most weird and hideous” and prevented them “bettering their condition,” going so far as to say: “Some of them are so ugly that they could leave their veils off with impunity, so I think they must like it as a sop to their departed or never-posessed beauty!”⁹⁹ This stood in contrast to Rischbieth’s more tempered comments a few years earlier,

⁹³ Margery Corbett Ashby, “From Egypt to Turkey,” *Liberal Woman’s News* (London), March 1935, 29.

⁹⁴ Bessie Rischbieth to Olive Evans, 14 November 1929, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 1, File 2, MS 2004/1/27; Ellen L. Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its “New” Women: The Palestinian Women’s Movement 1920–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 115–19.

⁹⁵ Rischbieth to Evans, 14 November 1929, MS 2004/1/27.

⁹⁶ In 1929 the Palestinian women’s movement specified a “women’s awakening” as one of its goals. See: Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its “New” Women*, 137.

⁹⁷ Rischbieth to Evans, 14 November 1929, MS 2004/1/27.

⁹⁸ Linda Littlejohn, “Highlights from an Australian’s Trip Across the World,” *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 20 July 1935, 3.

⁹⁹ Linda Littlejohn, “Women in Palestine Make a Bid for Freedom!,” *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 8 June 1935, 30. Text bolded in original.

when she simply noted that “the Christian Arab & Moslem Arab Women are making common cause & for the First Time in History they unveiled when on Deputation before the High Commissioner of Palestine.”¹⁰⁰ It also recalled a young Corbett Ashby’s description of Turkish women as “unsightly objects with their black veils and black umbrellas” from over three decades earlier.¹⁰¹ Littlejohn held more rigid orientalist and imperialist views than her Western Australian contemporary, writing for the *Weekly*: “One hopes that contact with British and European races will awaken them, for to these races life is quite enjoyable.”¹⁰² Meeting with local women through travel did not always shift Western feminists’ existing mindsets, instead bolstering their own sense of racialised superiority.



Figure 40 Rischbieth (back row, far left) with members of the All-India Women's Congress, 1930. National Library of Australia, MS 2004/11/569.

¹⁰⁰ Rischbieth to Evans, 14 November 1929, MS 2004/1/27.

¹⁰¹ Corbett Ashby to Corbett, 6 April 1903, 7MCA/A/23.

¹⁰² Littlejohn, “Women in Palestine Make a Bid for Freedom!,” 30.

While these women's travels were not only for the express purpose of conducting work for their international feminist organisations, this context was often at the forefront of their minds. For Rischbieth, the experience of travelling and meeting non-Western feminists on their home ground solidified her already growing ideas about the need for greater interracial cooperation within international feminist networks. Her own feeling of exclusion due to geographic distance is important to remember here. Even more pertinent is the fact that Rischbieth was interested in a range of alternative spiritualities and was especially drawn to theosophy, a Western tradition inspired by "Eastern" religions like Hinduism and with a strong internationalist streak.¹⁰³ A photograph filed in her archival papers shows her with members of the AIWC, including the anticolonial activist Sarojini Naidu and the Irish theosophist Margaret Cousins. The AIWC (established in 1927) was the most significant India-wide women's organisation during this period, and at the time of Rischbieth's visit some of its members were organising the All-Asian Women's Conference (AAWC), which was held in Lahore in 1931.¹⁰⁴ Rischbieth expected that by providing a chance for Asian women to take "stock of their own achievements and position" the conference would enable them to "come again to world conferences of women and benefit more from them, and at the same time make a richer contribution to them."¹⁰⁵ It is important to note, however, that part of the impetus for the AAWC was the barriers they faced from Western women and their oriental gaze.¹⁰⁶ Although Rischbieth did not record further details about her interactions with Indian feminists, this reflection suggests that she wanted them to be afforded a platform to actively participate in the international women's movement.

Corbett Ashby approached her encounters with "Eastern" feminists with a more explicit intention to secure participants for the Alliance's upcoming congress and to boost its

¹⁰³ Jane Haggis et al. suggest that "it was often people who were in some way outside the religio-cultural mainstream that took the lead in forging cosmopolitan connections across the coloniser/colonised binary." Haggis et al., *Cosmopolitan Lives on the Cusp of Empire*, 110. See also: Jill Roe, *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia, 1879–1939* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1986); Jill Roe, "A Shadowy Figure? Bessie Rischbieth, Theosophic Feminist," *Futures Exchange: Australian Cultural History* 23 (2004): 79–95.

¹⁰⁴ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 78–83. On the AAWC, see: Sumita Mukherjee, "The All-Asian Women's Conference 1931: Indian Women and their Leadership of a Pan-Asian Feminist Organisation," *Women's History Review* 26, no. 3 (2017): 363–81; Shobna Nijhawan, "International Feminism from an Asian Center: The All-Asian Women's Conference (Lahore, 1931) as a Transnational Feminist Moment," *Journal of Women's History* 29, no. 3 (2017): 12–36.

¹⁰⁵ "International Representative. Mrs. Rischbieth Returns," 1. Rischbieth's words are paraphrased in this quote.

¹⁰⁶ Mukherjee, "The All-Asian Women's Conference 1931," 368.

diversity credentials. She met with Sha‘rawi on her visit to Egypt, and her command of French would no doubt have allowed them to have in-depth conversations about the state of women’s rights in their respective countries. She wrote to her husband that “we have had a very good time and our hostess is tremendously pleased with the result of our visit. I think quite a number of ladies will come to our Congress in Istanbul.”¹⁰⁷ This intention to bring more women into the Alliance’s fold somewhat limited what she took away from her time in Egypt. Rather than learning about local feminist issues, Corbett Ashby travelled in her official capacity as the organisation’s president and so was more focused on achieving certain goals than on learning about local women’s experiences. This is abundantly clear in the note she sent to her husband from India, too: “Our coming has been immensely appreciated, quite touchingly so.”¹⁰⁸



Figure 41 Corbett Ashby (second from right) with Sha‘rawi (third from left) in Egypt, 1935. The Women’s Library, London, 2LAW/1/J/5/2.

¹⁰⁷ Margery Corbett Ashby to Brian Ashby, Port Said, 23 January 1935, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL484, 7MCA/C/17.

¹⁰⁸ Margery Corbett Ashby to Brian Ashby, Karachi, 1 January 1935, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, 7MCA/C/17.

Throughout their travels, these women wanted to have an authentic encounter with each place. Rischbieth explained to readers of the *Dawn* that “rather than make a point of seeing tourist India we preferred to seek the constructive reforms engaging the attention of Indian men and women for the betterment of their own country.”¹⁰⁹ In a similar vein, Corbett Ashby wrote: “We are having the most marvellous time, seeing in 3 weeks more of India than others see in 3 years.”¹¹⁰ But such experiences were mediated by each traveller’s own “tourist gaze,” which was shaped by their own cultural background.¹¹¹ Through this process they confronted some of these countries’ major social and political problems, including those emanating from British colonisation. These experiences posed a problem for their idealistic views of international cooperation. While they frequently pointed to the British Empire as a model of intercultural harmony, in their interactions with local people they were shown the messy and violent realities brought by colonialism’s imbalanced power dynamics.

The anticolonial discontent in Palestine was palpable following years of British interference in the region, first in connection with local rebellions against the Ottoman Empire and then through its ongoing presence as a League mandatory power from 1922.¹¹² During her visit, Rischbieth noted that both the Arab and Jewish communities were discontented and commented: “how the B.G. [British government] is going to justify their promise to both I do not know.”¹¹³ But again, she displayed ambivalent views regarding racial superiority and Western models of progress. She claimed to have greater sympathy for the Arabs, “who are so King like in many ways” and “fought with the Allies” yet also invoked harmful stereotypes, writing that they were “such a handsome looking people but oh the dirt & want of hygiene methods is awful.”¹¹⁴ She wrote that the Arabs, “so fine in their own way,” were “having a bad

¹⁰⁹ Rischbieth, “The East Awakens,” 3. For more on Rischbieth’s philosophy of travel, see: Nancy Lutton, “Dear Family: Letters from Bessie Rischbieth,” *Early Days Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society* 9, part 5 (1987): 16–29.

¹¹⁰ Margery Corbett Ashby to Charles Corbett, Delhi, 8 January 1934, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL484, 7MCA/C/17.

¹¹¹ See: John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 2nd ed. (London; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002).

¹¹² Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 21–3.

¹¹³ Rischbieth to Evans, 14 November 1929, MS 2004/1/27.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.; Bessie Rischbieth to Olive Evans, 3 November 1929, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 1, File 2, MS 2004/1/26.

time in this transition stage of civilisation ... they cannot come along [to] our system & yet it is so essential that there should be a synthesis of prevailing standards of civilisation.”¹¹⁵ Her view was more tempered than Rich’s Zionist, imperialist outlook, however. She more directly described Palestine as “[a] land being made great by British administration and Jewish enterprise and industry ... A land of supreme importance for the unity of the British Empire and therefore for the maintenance of World peace.”¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, a view of progress along Western lines clearly coexisted with—underpinned, even—both women’s desire to create better interracial understanding.

British and dominion feminists who visited India encountered a comparable situation. Just over two years before Rischbieth’s ship docked in India, the American journalist Katherine Mayo had published *Mother India*, a highly popular but also highly controversial and offensive “polemic against Indian self-rule” that provoked a resurgence of nationalist sentiment.¹¹⁷ Rischbieth saw her prolonged stay in India as a valuable learning opportunity. Around halfway through her trip she told her sister “I hesitate to give any opinions or impressions at this stage”; when she finally wrote a piece for the *Dawn* a month later, she commented that it was “the most difficult job I have ever done.”¹¹⁸ When Corbett Ashby visited in 1935, discussions about the governance of India were escalating following the Round Table Conferences of 1930–32, where British and Indian leaders discussed constitutional reform on the subcontinent. These two feminist leaders shared the privilege of being white members of the Commonwealth but, due to each woman’s unique combination of placement within the empire, religious and political beliefs, and experiences, they adopted rather different approaches during their travels.

Both met with anticolonial nationalists during their visit. During her trip Rischbieth spent a week at Visva-Bharati, the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore’s university in Santiniketan. After winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, Tagore gained prominence

¹¹⁵ Rischbieth to Evans, 3 November 1929, MS 2004/1/26.

¹¹⁶ Untitled piece on Palestine, no date, Rich Papers, NLA, Box 4, File 29, MS 7493.

¹¹⁷ Mrinalini Sinha, “Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and Nationalism in Late-Colonial India,” *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 623; Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2006), 41.

¹¹⁸ Bessie Rischbieth to Olive Evans, 30 January 1930, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 1, File 2, MS 2004/1/30; Bessie Rischbieth to Olive Evans, 24 February 1930, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 1, File 2, MS 2004/1/32.

internationally and used his visibility to promote universalism and internationalism.¹¹⁹ Rischbieth gushed about her meeting with him, writing that it was her “privilege” to be his guest and “to contact personally the Poet’s great mind and individuality.”¹²⁰ Her personal encounter with Tagore bolstered her faith in the mutual benefits of intercultural cooperation and was important for pushing her internationalism to expand beyond cooperation among white women and nations. Although she did not record much about her meetings with Mahatma Gandhi, Corbett Ashby did when she visited the country six years later.¹²¹ She journeyed throughout India with Maude Royden, who had previously visited as part of her 1928 world tour, when she met with Gandhi and discussed Indian independence.¹²² Corbett Ashby noted that Royden “admires him passionately for his faith in non violence [*sic*],” but she did not make such a strong connection herself, supposing that “perhaps the setting is as yet too alien.” While she did find the conversation “amazingly interesting,” her reflections indicate the challenges of intercultural interaction.¹²³

Rischbieth and Corbett Ashby both encountered these places as white women of the empire. But they responded differently to what they learnt there. Rischbieth’s firsthand experiences fostered empathy for the Indian people; she wrote that “India has gone to my heart with its hard conditions & problems.”¹²⁴ On one level, she concluded that the country was simply not ready to modernise in line with a Western model, writing: “It almost seems as though civilisation had marched too quickly for the bulk of the population on our globe and in this surely consists ‘the Eastern Problem’,” without suggesting that there was any inherent problem with British imperialism.¹²⁵ But she also offered a critique of British governance, arguing that some problems were “created for the want of proper re-adjustment of

¹¹⁹ Biswajit Ray, “Rabindranath and His Times,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 41–2.

¹²⁰ Rischbieth, “East and West. Their Friendship a World Responsibility. Dr. Rabindranath Tagore in Geneva,” *Dawn* (Perth), 19 September 1930, 9.

¹²¹ Rischbieth, “The East Awakens,” 12; Untitled and incomplete manuscript article, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 27, File 20, MS 2004/11/634.

¹²² Rademaker, “Religion for the Modern Girl,” 336–54; “Interview with Gandhi,” 17 December 1928, Papers of Agnes Maude Royden (hereafter Royden Papers), TWL, Box FL219, 7AMR/9.

¹²³ Margery Corbett Ashby to Brian Ashby, Delhi, 4 January 1935, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL484, 7MCA/C/17.

¹²⁴ Bessie Rischbieth to Olive Evans, 23 January 1930, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 1, File 2, MS 2004/1/29.

¹²⁵ Rischbieth, “The East Awakens,” 12.

Responsibility in Government” and blaming Indian tradition as well as “modern industrialism imposed from without & being ruled from a distance” for causing unrest in the country.¹²⁶ Rischbieth concluded that “[i]f thinking Indians who are grappling with these problems consider that full dominion status within the Empire will help them, on what grounds should it be refused?”¹²⁷ The contradiction and inconsistencies here reflect how Rischbieth developed an increasingly ambivalent position in relation to imperialist thought, which was especially significant in the context of the ongoing White Australia policy.¹²⁸

Corbett Ashby, on the other hand, identified the problems facing Indian society but confronted her own positioning to a lesser degree than Rischbieth had. She was aware of the problems in contemporary proposals to reform India’s status within the empire and, while she was there “primarily to attend the Women’s Conference at Karachi,” she and Royden also wanted to “incidentally to ascertain the views of Indians and specially of Indian women on the proposed Indian constitution.” The pair encouraged the people of India to make their own decision but advised them to “take what was offered but ask for more,” with Corbett Ashby noting that a “more generous” offer was unlikely to be on the horizon.¹²⁹ But in private correspondence she seemed not to believe that the root of the problem was British imperialism. “The difficulty out here is the social one first, then the economic & only away last the political but we will face neither the first nor the second so we are enmeshed in the third & most complex,” she told her husband. “I think we entered India by the wrong end, we entered south & worked north so that we met the people small dark primitive & having settled our standards carried them to the north to people more like ourselves than they are like the south & that has meant trouble.”¹³⁰ She found India a “grim country” but seemed unwilling

¹²⁶ Bessie Rischbieth to Olive Evans and family, 4 January 1929, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 1, File 2, MS 2004/1/21 (this letter is dated incorrectly—the year should be 1930); Rischbieth to Evans, 23 January 1930, MS 2004/1/29.

¹²⁷ Rischbieth, “The East Awakens,” 12.

¹²⁸ Kama Maclean, *British India, White Australia: Overseas Indians, Intercolonial Relations and the Empire* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2020), 2.

¹²⁹ “Impressed by Indian Opposition. Reforms Ungenerous. Dr. Maude Royden and Mrs. Ashby Interviewed,” *Hindustan Times*, 5 January 1935, news clipping, Royden Papers, TWL, Box FL219, 7AMR/9.

¹³⁰ Margery Corbett Ashby to Brian Ashby, Karachi, 16 January 1935, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL484, 7MCA/C/17.

to view British imperialism as one of the core problems.¹³¹ Perhaps her positioning at the heart of both the empire as a Londoner and the international women's movement as president of the Alliance stymied her willingness to contest British imperialism.



Figure 42 Royden (second from left) and Corbett Ashby (far right) in India. The Women's Library, London, 7AMR/3/01/08.

CONCLUSION

Travel was central to the development of feminist internationalism during the interwar period. It provided a way for feminists to enact their internationalism and come into contact with new people and places, with these encounters sometimes having transformative effects on each woman's own worldview. For the members of my group, international mobility—especially

¹³¹ Margery Corbett Ashby to Brian Ashby, Delhi, 8 January 1934, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL484, 7MCA/C/17.

across the British Empire—had been an important part of their lives from early on. Whether they travelled abroad with their families or alone, for work or for leisure, the awareness and experience of the world beyond their nation's shores that they cultivated during the early years of the twentieth century provided a strong basis for their later interest in internationalism. While people from across the class spectrum travelled during this period, the financial independence that my subjects enjoyed underpinned their ability to travel multiple times and often for extended periods.

Travelling was necessary for these women to conduct their feminist internationalist work. Going to congresses and meetings around the world and embarking on lecture tours were important means for them to spread their ideas. In this way they extended the educative goal that they fostered at international congresses and within their organisations, aiming to share their ideas and build up public support for their cause—a central tenet of their thinking about the purposes of internationalism. But travel itself also constituted feminist work. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the imperative to expand international women's networks—which was a necessity being pushed by non-Western feminists and a challenge that some Western women were taking up—became more pressing. Especially during the second half of the period, some white feminists ventured further afield than they had done to date to experience new places and meet new people. Their travels throughout “the East” could prove transformative for their mindsets, yet orientalism, racism, and dedication to empire still had important bearings on their reactions.

By grounding this story in individual experience rather than in relation to formal organisations, a group biographical study like this shows how which individual attitudes and beliefs shaped feminist internationalism. The extent to which these people could bring their view to bear on the organisations that defined feminist programmes may have varied, but it is still important to consider their unique views in understanding what the priorities and contours of feminist internationalism became during the interwar period. Feminists' global mobility was not only an expression or mere fact of their internationalism, but an important constitutive element of it.

CHAPTER 6

Feminists and the Media

In early 1938 Ruby Rich delivered a series of four talks on Sydney's 2GB radio in which she explored the topic of women's influence on world peace.¹ There are no surviving recordings of these programmes, but it is possible to imagine her soft English accent—carefully cultivated since childhood—gliding over the airwaves and into the ears of Australia's housewives, who were perhaps taking a late-morning break from their daily chores.² Rich had returned to Australia from a long stint in Britain just a couple of years before and by this point had developed a reputation as a worldly, cosmopolitan woman. In these radio sessions—hosted by the Theosophical Society—she answered questions asked by one Jean McLagan, a Scottish-born widow and mother living in Drummoyne who, as Rich put it, represented “the thoughts held on that subject, by the average woman.”³ During one of these talks McLagan drew attention to the domestic context of many middle-class women's lives, enquiring: “How could we women who are forced to be so much in our homes get to understand World Affairs?” As someone who had experienced the wider world firsthand, Rich was well-equipped to advise her listeners. “Well, Mrs. McLagan, though the papers are not perfect we are dependent on them and the Radio for hearing of what happens all over the world,” she counselled. “Read the cables and the Leader articles, and from time to time change your daily paper, as you then

¹ Copies of these talks are held in Papers of Ruby Rich (hereafter Rich Papers), National Library of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NLA), Box 3, File 25, MS 7493.

² Bridget Griffen-Foley writes that “[r]adio was geared to the rhythms dictated by work, housework and school,” with programmes around 10.30 or 11am intended for housewives. See: Bridget Griffen-Foley, “Modernity, Intimacy and Early Australian Commercial Radio,” in *Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity: Essays on the History of Sound*, ed. Joy Damousi and Desley Deacon (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2007), 125. See also: Justine Lloyd, *Gender and Media in the Broadcast Age: Women's Radio Programming at the BBC, CBC, and ABC* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 38.

³ “Broadcast from 2 GB by Ruby S. Rich. Private Manufacture of Arms,” Rich Papers, NLA, Box 3, File 25, MS 7493. Emphasis in original.

won't get a one-sided point of view."⁴ Rich's own programme was part of this media landscape, aiming to make ideas about feminism and global politics accessible for a broader, particularly feminine, audience. While active feminist campaigning was the domain of a limited few, through the media figures like her could bring their ideas about women's rights and world cooperation to the masses, all the while cementing their place in public discussion as experienced political actors and experts with valuable knowledge to share.

11 a.m.	
2BL, 11: Light music.	11.12: Organ music.
11.15: Devotion—Rev. Joshua Robertson.	11.30: Organ music.
11.40: Light music.	11.45: "Sydney Speaks."
11.55: Light music.	
2GB, 11: Light music.	11.1: "Can Women Influence World Peace," Ruby Rich, talk.
11.15: Light music.	11.20: Medical talk.
11.30: Women's Weekly session.	
2UE, 11: Home service session.	11.15: Health talk.
11.30: Household hints, recipes.	
2KY, 11: Special speaker, Mr. Maurice Helsen.	
11.45: Light music.	
2UW, 11: Gardening talk.	11.30: "Dream Wanderer" (talk, music).
11.45: Popular music.	
2CH, 11: See 10.45.	11.30: Janet Austen's scrap book (talk, music).
11.45: Light music.	
2GZ, 11: Light music.	11.5: Household hints, recipes.
11.10: Light music.	11.20: "Health & Beauty," Susan Bell, talk.

Figure 43 Radio programming including Ruby Rich's 11.10 segment on "Can Women Influence World Peace," *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 10 February 1938, 22.

Interwar feminists maintained a keen interest in the world beyond their national borders well after their journeys overseas. During the periods in between their travels they may have remained relatively (though not totally) stationary in a physical sense, but their internationalism certainly was not dormant. Even when they were not embodying their internationalist ideals through crossing borders, these women enacted their internationality in other ways, including by harnessing new technologies that allowed them to speak to audiences

⁴ "2GB. Broadcast. 'Can Women Influence World Peace?' Part 2. Ruby S. Rich. 10/2/38," Rich Papers, NLA, Box 3, File 25, MS 7493. Emphasis in original.

they could not see in the flesh. Their lives crossed various connected scales and spaces, from their local communities to the global stage; to capture the different facets of their internationalism we therefore need to consider those parts of their stories that may not appear strictly “international.” This chapter thus turns to consider the evolving world of the mass media as another important arena that the eight women in my group used to develop, share, and enact their feminist internationalist ideals.

Feminist media history has been a fruitful avenue for scholars wishing to understand past feminisms. A couple of decades ago, media studies and history remained rather separate, with historians often privileging analysis of the content of historical mass media over discussion of the form itself. In recent years, however, this has changed, and the two fields now converse with one another much more freely.⁵ Studies of feminists’ media usage often focus on a particular form or even title or outlet. Print media—from nineteenth-century women’s journals to the “zines” of the later twentieth century—has garnered a lot of attention as a site for sharing feminist ideas and the development of feminist communities. As Lucy Delap explains, “[t]he printed word has been a crucial inspiration for the circulation of feminist dreams and ideas.”⁶ In relation to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in both the Australian and British contexts most attention has been paid to the suffrage era.⁷ Recently, scholars have begun to turn towards the interwar period as well, opening new avenues of enquiry.⁸ Alongside this, historians examining the interwar years and after have written about

⁵ Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange, “Public Pedagogy: Sex Education and Mass Communication in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13, no. 1 (2004): 71.

⁶ Lucy Delap, *Feminisms: A Global History* (London: Pelican, 2021), 169.

⁷ For just some examples of studies focusing on suffrage periodicals, see: Lucy Delap, Maria DiCenzo, and Leila Ryan, *Feminism and the Periodicals Press 1900–1918. Vols. I–III* (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2006); Maria DiCenzo, Lucy Delap, and Leila Ryan, *Feminist Media History: Suffrage, Periodicals and the Public Sphere* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Miranda Garrett, “Interior Decoration and Domesticity in the Women’s Penny Paper/Woman’s Herald,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 51, no. 2 (2018): 289–306; Barbara Green, “The Feminist Periodical Press: Women, Periodical Studies, and Modernity,” *Literature Compass* 6, no. 1 (2009): 191–205; Barbara Green, *Feminist Periodicals and Daily Life: Women and Modernity in British Culture* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Sheila Herstein, “The Langham Place Circle and Feminist Periodicals of the 1860s,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 26, no. 1 (1993): 24–27; Philippa Levine, “‘The Humanising Influences of Five O’Clock Tea’: Victorian Feminist Periodicals,” *Victorian Studies* 33, no. 2 (1990): 293–306; Ana Stevenson, “Imagining Women’s Suffrage: Frontier Landscapes and the Transnational Print Culture of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States,” *Pacific Historical Review* 87, no. 4 (2018): 638–66; Marianne van Remoortel, “International Feminism, Domesticity, and the Interview in the *Women’s Penny Paper/Woman’s Herald*,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 51, no. 2 (2018): 252–68.

⁸ For example: Catherine Clay, “‘The Modern Weekly for the Modern Woman’: *Time and Tide*, Feminism and Interwar Print Culture,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 27, no. 4 (2016): 397–411; Catherine Clay, *Time and Tide: The*

how feminists embraced new technologies like the radio.⁹ By focusing on how my subjects used these fora—specifically, newspapers, magazines, and the radio—this chapter brings discussions of these different media into conversation with one another and examines how they worked together in the service of feminist internationalism. I ask: how did feminists keep their international communities alive in the stretches of time between their travels? What were their goals in using various forms of media and what effects did this have on the development of the feminist movement throughout the period? What does this usage reveal about their conceptions of internationalism and its role in local feminist efforts? And how did feminists' media work contribute to their own trajectories as activists and public figures?

Over the course of the interwar years, feminist internationalists consistently worked in and with the ever-diversifying media landscape to share their ideas, reach wider audiences, and develop public profiles for themselves and for their movement, thereby expanding feminism's remit. They used print and audio media to fulfil both collective and individual ambitions and were directed by an internationalist ethos that saw generating popular support as a vital part of its mission. Throughout the period feminists upheld the longstanding tradition of the feminist advocacy press, producing their own titles to keep their members up to date with relevant activities and recent news and to help build a strong feminist community across vast geographic, temporal, and cultural distances. While their approaches were shaped by their specific geopolitical positionings, they shared the common goal of bringing information about the global movement to those women who may not have enjoyed the opportunity to travel

Feminist and Cultural Politics of a Modern Magazine (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Catherine Clay, Maria DiCenzo, Barbara Green and Fiona Hackney (eds), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918–1939: The Interwar Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Maria DiCenzo and Alexis Motuz, "Politicizing the Home: Welfare Feminism and the Feminist Press in Interwar Britain," *Women: A Cultural Review* 27, no. 4 (2016): 378–96.

⁹ For just some examples, see: Jeannine Baker, "Australian Women Working in British Broadcasting in the 1930s and 1940s," *Feminist Media Histories* 5 no. 3 (2019): 140–67; Jeannine Baker, "Woman to Woman: Australian Feminists' Embrace of Radio Broadcasting, 1930s–1950s," *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 93 (2017): 292–308; Lloyd, *Gender and Media in the Broadcast Age*; Catherine Fisher, *Sound Citizens: Australian Women Broadcasters Claim their Voice, 1923–1956* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021); Catherine Fisher, "World Citizens: Australian Women's Internationalist Broadcasts, 1930–1939," *Women's History Review* 28, no. 4 (2019): 626–44; Kate Murphy, *Behind the Wireless: A History of Early Women at the BBC* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Kate Murphy, "'Brightening their leisure hours': The Experiment of BBC Women's Hour, 1923–1925," *Women's History Review* 29, no. 2 (2020): 183–96; Kate Murphy, "From *Women's Hour* to *Other Women's Lives*: BBC Talks for Women and the Women Who Made Them, 1923–39," in *Women and the Media: Feminism and Femininity in Britain, 1900 to the Present*, ed. Maggie Andrews and Sallie McNamara (New York; Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 71–99; Kate Murphy, "'New and Important Careers': How Women Excelled at the BBC, 1923–1939," *Media International Australia* 161, no. 1 (2016): 18–27.

abroad and experience the wider world for themselves. Yet, as in their politics more broadly, they were not content to be siloed away from the rest of the mainstream media. They used various platforms—from popular magazines and newspapers to the novel technology of the radio—to venture into traditionally masculine spaces, reach new audiences, grow their public profiles, and cement their status as people worth listening to. This meant further capitalising on their international experiences and white identities to extend their claim to public space. In taking up the role of journalist, editor, or broadcaster they were not only enacting the responsibilities that came with the citizenship for which they had so fiercely campaigned; they were also positioning themselves as experts with important knowledge and perspectives to share and, crucially, with the authority to speak to and teach broad audiences. Through the pages of ephemeral publications and on the airwaves these women became important public commentators who hoped to persuade people of the merits of their feminist internationalist worldview.

FEMINISM IN PRINT

Reading has long been an effective way for women to develop a feminist consciousness. As Delap and Maria DiCenzo argue, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's movement “was centrally a reading experience.”¹⁰ For those living during the 1920s and 1930s there was certainly no shortage of material to consume. Local and international feminist organisations produced pamphlets on a host of topics, ranging from equal pay to women's place in the League of Nations (the League), which clearly and concisely summed up the key points that women needed to know.¹¹ For those with more time and curiosity, the works of authors like Virginia Woolf offered a means to delve into ideas about women's place in society in a more

¹⁰ Lucy Delap and Maria DiCenzo, “Transatlantic Print Culture: The Anglo-American Feminist Press and Emerging ‘Modernities,’” in *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880–1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms*, ed. Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 55.

¹¹ Such pamphlets can be found in almost all the archival collections I have consulted for this thesis. The British Library also holds collated sets of pamphlets. See, for example: Miscellaneous pamphlets, National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, General Reference Collection 08415.k.61; Miscellaneous pamphlets, leaflets, etc., Open Door Council, General Reference Collection W.P.15068; Miscellaneous pamphlets, leaflets, etc. British Section, Women's International League, General Reference Collection W.P.3968. All held at the British Library, London.

sustained way.¹² On top of this, feminist periodicals offered a regular stream of information to keep people in the loop with the various campaigns being run in their area and further afield, with titles such as the *Dawn*, the *Woman's Leader* and *Jus Suffragii* being sent out to subscribers both locally and around the world. The connected acts of writing, editing, publishing, and reading created an ecosystem in which ideas about women's rights and international cooperation could be shared, forming a key part of feminist internationalism's general character as a continual process of learning and rethinking. Crucially, as Michelle Tusan has argued, feminists' use of various media also allowed women to imagine themselves as political actors.¹³

Contributing to dedicated feminist print media allowed my group to speak to people who shared their interests. In this respect they followed in the footsteps of their feminist forebears. The emergence of organised women's rights movements around the nineteenth-century world saw feminists seize print culture. In Britain this started as early as the 1850s, when the Langham Place Circle began publishing the *English Woman's Journal*. The increasing numbers of women working as journalists for the mainstream media, as well as the creation of the Victoria Press (an all-women printing press set up in 1860), helped create the circumstances in which feminist periodicals could flourish.¹⁴ This was especially true after the turn of the twentieth century, when a plethora of titles were circulated in the context of an increasingly drawn-out women's suffrage battle. My subjects were not only keen readers of such publications, but also sometimes active contributors; in 1907, for example, Chrystal Macmillan promoted the cause of Scottish women graduates' voting rights in the pages of *Votes for Women*.¹⁵ In Australia, early feminists also established their own publications. Thirty-seven women's newspapers emerged between 1880 and 1910 against the backdrop of widespread developments in the field of Australian journalism more generally.¹⁶ The best known of these

¹² See, for example: Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1938; London: Vintage Classics, 2016).

¹³ Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, *Women Making News: Gender and Journalism in Modern Britain* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 241.

¹⁴ Green, "The Feminist Periodical Press."

¹⁵ J. Chrystal Macmillan, "The Scottish Women Graduates' Lawsuit," *Votes for Women* (London), no. 3 (December 1907): 34.

¹⁶ James Keating, *Distant Sisters: Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 134.

was Louisa Lawson's the *Dawn*, which was published in Sydney.¹⁷ Unlike in Britain or the United States, Australian suffrage periodicals were subscription-only and were limited to small print runs, which meant that their readerships were generally smaller.¹⁸ Nevertheless, there was clearly a common impulse to use the written word to circulate feminist ideas.

Even from this early period, the feminist press was not simply tied to local content and priorities. Transnational connections and international concerns became increasingly prominent as time passed. Ana Stevenson has argued that in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, suffragists "expressed a self-conscious transnationalism in their print culture." The "imaginative significance of frontier landscapes" in these settler-colonial societies' print cultures in turn "enabled and encouraged actual transnational connections between the suffragists themselves."¹⁹ This transnationalism and even internationalism was given further expression on the page when the emergent international women's organisations founded their own newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century to keep their communities connected across borders and share news of what was happening with women's rights activism globally. Yet certain groups of people were not assumed to be part of this readership: Indigenous women, for example, as well as migrants and non-English speaking people.

An internationalist spirit was even more central to interwar feminist print media. Through their periodicals feminists gave expression to an internationalist worldview that focused on collaborating across borders, understanding other cultures, and bringing an awareness of world affairs into people's day-to-day lives. Bessie Rischbieth was a major advocate of the feminist press and was the driving force behind Australia's main interwar feminist periodical, the *Dawn* (which, though bearing the same name as Lawson's earlier paper, was a completely new and separate publication). The *Dawn*, like Rischbieth's own activist career, had its origins in the Women's Service Guilds of Western Australia (WSG). The group's Fremantle branch first produced a newsletter by this name, which was developed into the WSG's official newspaper in 1920.²⁰ Over the following years it became the mouthpiece of the

¹⁷ For analysis of this paper, see: Katie Hansord, "The Literary Dawn: Re-Reading Louisa Lawson's Poetry and Politics," *Hecate* 39, no. 1 (2013): 188–201; Ingrid Mahony, "A New Dawn: Rights for Women in Louisa Lawson's *The Dawn*," *ANU Historical Journal* II, no. 1 (2019): 73–86; Sharyn Pearce, "From Bush Battler to City Editor: Louisa Lawson and the Dawn," *Journal of Australian Studies* 21, no. 54–55 (1997): 12–21.

¹⁸ Keating, *Distant Sisters*, 135.

¹⁹ Stevenson, "Imagining Women's Suffrage," 639, 641.

²⁰ Dianne Davidson, *Women on the Warpath: Feminists of the First Wave* (Perth: UWA Press, 1997), 105.

Australian women's movement more generally, being formally issued under the joint banners of the WSG and the Australian Federation of Women Voters (AFWV) from July 1929.²¹ The *Dawn's* growth mirrored Rischbieth's consolidation of organised feminism in Australia; in her memoir she recalled how after the various state feminist groups had united under the banner of the AFWV in 1921 "the need for a federal journal became ever more insistent."²² Part of this pressure came from without, as the League (and later the United Nations) sent surveys and questionnaires asking for women's opinions or information relating to women's status not from each state, but from the country as a whole.²³ In certain respects, producing the *Dawn* was a practical measure to ensure Australian women could fully engage with and push for feminist goals through Geneva.

References to the *Dawn* pepper Rischbieth's archives. It was the line of communication she returned to time and again to promote transnational cooperation and understanding as fundamental tenets of the modern world. She often wrote to friends asking for submissions and penned pieces during her own travels abroad. These works are scattered throughout the *Dawn's* pages and are important sources of information on the otherwise very private Rischbieth. She was the *Dawn's* honorary editor and director of policy from around 1918–19 until the 1960s.²⁴ This took up a lot of her time. In 1934 Rischbieth wrote to her Victorian colleague, Elizabeth Britomarte James: "P.S. I have taken on the full managing-editorship of the 'Dawn' and want to make it a success and a Federal Paper. It is a huge lot of work, but we must keep in touch with each other."²⁵ In fact, Rischbieth was central to the paper's survival. "Often she has been short-staffed & has practically produced the paper single-handed except for the printing," her contemporary Julia Rapke noted. "'Dawn' has survived many necessitudes mainly caused through lack of finance & it has always been Bessie Rischbieth's privilege to dip into her pocket to find the sinews of war to keep it going ... as long as Bessie

²¹ *Dawn* (Perth), 24 July 1929; Bessie Rischbieth, *March of Australian Women: A Record of Fifty Years' Struggle for Equal Citizenship* (Perth: Paterson Brokensha, 1964), 44. A letter from Isabel Johnston to Ruby Rich notes that the WSG, not the AFWV, had "borne the full cost of the paper" and that "'Dawn' has never paid for itself." See: Isabel Johnston to Ruby Rich, 13 February 1946, Records of the Australian Federation of Women Voters (hereafter AFWV Records), NLA, Box 1, File 8, MS 2818.

²² Rischbieth, *March of Australian Women*, 43.

²³ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁵ Bessie Rischbieth to Elizabeth Britomarte James, 15 January 1934, Papers and objects of Bessie Rischbieth (hereafter Rischbieth Papers), NLA, Box 36, File 68, MS 2004/12/2377.

Rischbieth lives it will live too.”²⁶ In helping to produce this paper, Rischbieth was further cementing her voice within Australian feminism. Though she had never attended university or entered the professions in a formal way like some of her colleagues, working as an editor and writer (even if unpaid) perhaps fulfilled some personal ambitions to buttress hers as an expert voice in the field.



Figure 44 The WSG (with Rischbieth seated in the middle) wrapping the *Dawn* at Viking House, William Street, c. 1925. State Library of Western Australia, BA1272/27.

The *Dawn*'s voice and Rischbieth's were not one and the same, as the paper had many contributors. But Rischbieth's influence clearly shines through. The *Dawn* was self-consciously internationalist. In its pages Rischbieth created a dedicated space for globally mobile Australian women to report back on their overseas adventures to those who had fewer opportunities to

²⁶ Julia Rapke, "Bessie Rischbieth," Papers on various Australian women, NLA, MS 842. On Rischbieth's financial support for the *Dawn*, see also: "Report of 'the Dawn'," January 1935, AFWV Papers, NLA, Box 1, File 8, MS 2818.

experience the world firsthand, as she herself did multiple times. The paper also informed its readership—which, in domestic terms at least, was largely assumed to be white—about developments associated with the League and was even formally admitted to its press gallery under the guidance of the experienced journalist Linda Littlejohn.²⁷ The *Dawn* provided connections to women's movements abroad, both through republishing articles from other feminist journals and producing content on foreign feminist movements. From 1925 it published a section titled "Beyond Our Gates," which reported on international feminist congresses and key happenings among feminists overseas. Over 1929–30—a period coinciding with Rischbieth's travels through "the East"—a feature called "Women of Other Lands" began, which provided summaries of women's status in places as diverse as Chile, China, Germany, Japan, Latvia, Palestine, South Africa, Spain, Russia, and Türkiye. Under Rischbieth's influence this publication aimed to cultivate an international outlook among its readership, revealing her conception of internationalism as a movement that needed to have an impact on individual women's mindsets as much as those of official decision makers. An image taken circa 1925 shows her with members of the WSG in their Perth headquarters. The two dozen women are surrounded by stacks of newspaper copies, which they are in the process of collecting into bundles for distribution. It is a striking reminder of the material dimensions of this story. Feminist internationalists were not just working in the intangible realm of ideas; they were creating practical products that were shared among wider groups to put their theory into practice.

According to Rischbieth, her newspaper "became recognised in the International field of the women's movement as the mouthpiece of Australian women's advancement towards equal citizenship."²⁸ It is not clear exactly how widely the *Dawn* was circulated, but anecdotal evidence suggests it reached at least some international audiences. Rischbieth claimed that "[w]ithin a few years 'The Dawn' became known to key groups of women in many countries," noting that even the Queen of Siam (Thailand) requested to become a subscriber.²⁹ In a letter from London in 1925, just months after the pair established the British Commonwealth League (BCL), Marjorie Chave Collisson wrote to Rischbeith, saying: "Dawn is read with

²⁷ Dianne Davidson, "A Citizen of Australia and of the World: A Reappraisal of Bessie Mabel Rischbieth," *Studies in Western Australian History*, no. 19 (1999): 101.

²⁸ Rischbieth, *March of Australian Women*, 44.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

interest here and favourably commented on, I found, amongst the international representatives.”³⁰ Almost a decade and a half later, the British feminist Alison Neilans similarly commented: “how much I appreciate the paper and how I read it most carefully every month as soon as it arrives here.”³¹ The *Dawn* was envisioned as a means of connecting women globally; a 1930 photograph shows how Rischbieth’s team saw its reach stretching out across the globe, linking “the women of the world.” Its articles were sometimes reprinted in international women’s newspapers, spreading Australian feminists’ ideas in more diffuse ways. Locally produced feminist papers were not simply intended for local audiences. The editor of *L’Egyptienne*, Saiza Nabarawi, for instance, defended publishing her Egyptian feminist newspaper in French on the basis that it allowed Europeans to learn about Middle Eastern women’s rights movements from Middle Eastern women themselves and helped combat prejudice.³² Rischbieth, too, hoped Australian feminists’ news would help assure them an important place in the international feminist community.

This vision of the world was necessarily mediated through the lens of empire. The *Dawn* was embedded in both international and imperial networks; as Rischbieth later recorded, “‘THE DAWN journal, compiled and issued in Western Australia, was again referred to as being a valuable means of keeping constituent bodies of the Federation—the British Commonwealth League, London—and the International Woman’s [*sic*] Suffrage Alliance, in close contact.”³³ The *Dawn*’s content covered matters of interest to women across the British Empire and Commonwealth (who were largely imagined to be white), and as a physical object that was circulated throughout imperial networks it was hoped to be able to strengthen these ties. “You will see by our woman’s paper ‘Dawn’ that we have given much space to its [the Imperial Conference’s] doings & the valuable scope of the British Commonwealth League Headquarters in London,” Rischbieth wrote to Collisson in 1925.³⁴ A few years later she told Dorothy Innes (the wife of journalist Guy Innes): “It would be doing us a great service if you

³⁰ Marjorie Chave Collisson to Bessie Rischbieth, 19 November 1925, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 18, File 2, MS 2004/7/70.

³¹ Alison Neilans to Bessie Rischbieth, 27 January 1939, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 34, File 48, MS 2004/12/1804.

³² Céza Nabaraouy, “Impressions de Congrès,” *L’Egyptienne* 5, no. 50 (October 1929): 6.

³³ Rischbieth, *March of Australian Women*, 80.

³⁴ Bessie Rischbieth to Marjorie Chave Collisson, 19 October 1925, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 7, File 7, MS 2004/5/336.

would speak for ‘the Dawn’ as being a useful means of communication between Australian & women of the Empire!!”³⁵ The empire continued to be an important part of Rischbieth’s worldview and had an influence on the vision of internationalism she presented through the *Dawn*. Yet, as the articles it published on women in various other countries (including those colonised by the British) reveal, this was not a simple pro-imperialist stance, but one fundamentally shaped by and having an influence on the tensions at the heart of interwar feminism.



Figure 45 Advertising the Dawn: Monthly organ of the Women's Service Guilds of Western Australia, 1930. State Library of Western Australia, 101275PD.

Rischbieth and her colleagues also contributed to other periodicals run by international women's organisations that explicitly aimed to sustain their international feminist communities during the long stretches of time between in-person gatherings. These women did so for a

³⁵ Bessie Rischbieth to Mrs Innes, 24 February 1932, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 9, File 20, MS 2004/5/1383.

variety of reasons: to share news of what was happening in their local contexts, to stake a claim to this international space, and to fulfil their own ambitions to be world citizens. As Leila Rupp explains, such publications, “accessible at least to those who knew the official languages, opened a window on the world of international activism to the widest circle of all” and “served both to publicize women’s international activities and to knit members more closely together.”³⁶ While early suffrage periodicals had been formed in the context of local campaigns, this internationalist spirit had a growing effect on feminist print culture throughout the interwar period.

The Alliance began publishing its official organ, *Jus Suffragii* (*Jus*)—meaning “the right to vote”—in 1906.³⁷ Throughout the following decades, however, the paper rested on increasingly unstable financial foundations. In June 1920 *Jus* had 1,046 subscribers; by March 1929, this had dropped as low as 493, which one member of the headquarters committee described as “pitiably small.”³⁸ This lack of financial support, coupled with the declining amount of content received from members, meant that the paper’s viability was questioned several times.³⁹ Yet some held fast to their faith in *Jus* as an instrument for connecting feminists around the globe. In its April 1919 issue, it published messages of support written by feminists from different countries, including this note from Rischbieth: “Your paper is most valuable to us out here. It keeps us in touch with the women’s movement everywhere, and you are to be congratulated on having been able to keep up its publication through most trying times.”⁴⁰ As late as 1939, the Alliance’s headquarters secretary, Katherine Bompas, argued: “if we suppress the paper we shall have nothing to offer in the way of regular contact with our individual

³⁶ Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women’s Movement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 175, 177.

³⁷ This paper was known under the title the *International Woman Suffrage News* from 1917–30 and the *International Women’s News* from 1930–45. For simplicity I will refer to it as *Jus Suffragii* (*Jus*) throughout this chapter.

³⁸ International Woman Suffrage Alliance (hereafter IWSA), *Report of Eighth Congress, Geneva, Switzerland, June 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 1920* (Manchester: Percy Brothers, 1920), 32; International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (hereafter IAW), *Report of the Eleventh Congress, Berlin, June 17th–22nd, 1929. Twenty-Fifth Anniversary, 1904–1929* (London: International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, 1929), 108.

³⁹ IAW, *Report of the Twelfth Congress, Istanbul, 18–24 April, 1935* (London: Wadsworth and Company, 1935), 85–6.

⁴⁰ “Jus Suffragii,” *International Woman Suffrage News* 13, no. 7 (April 1919), 100.

members and subscribers.”⁴¹ Some—like Rischbieth and Rich—even donated their own money to keep it afloat, believing in the moral power and practical information it offered.⁴²

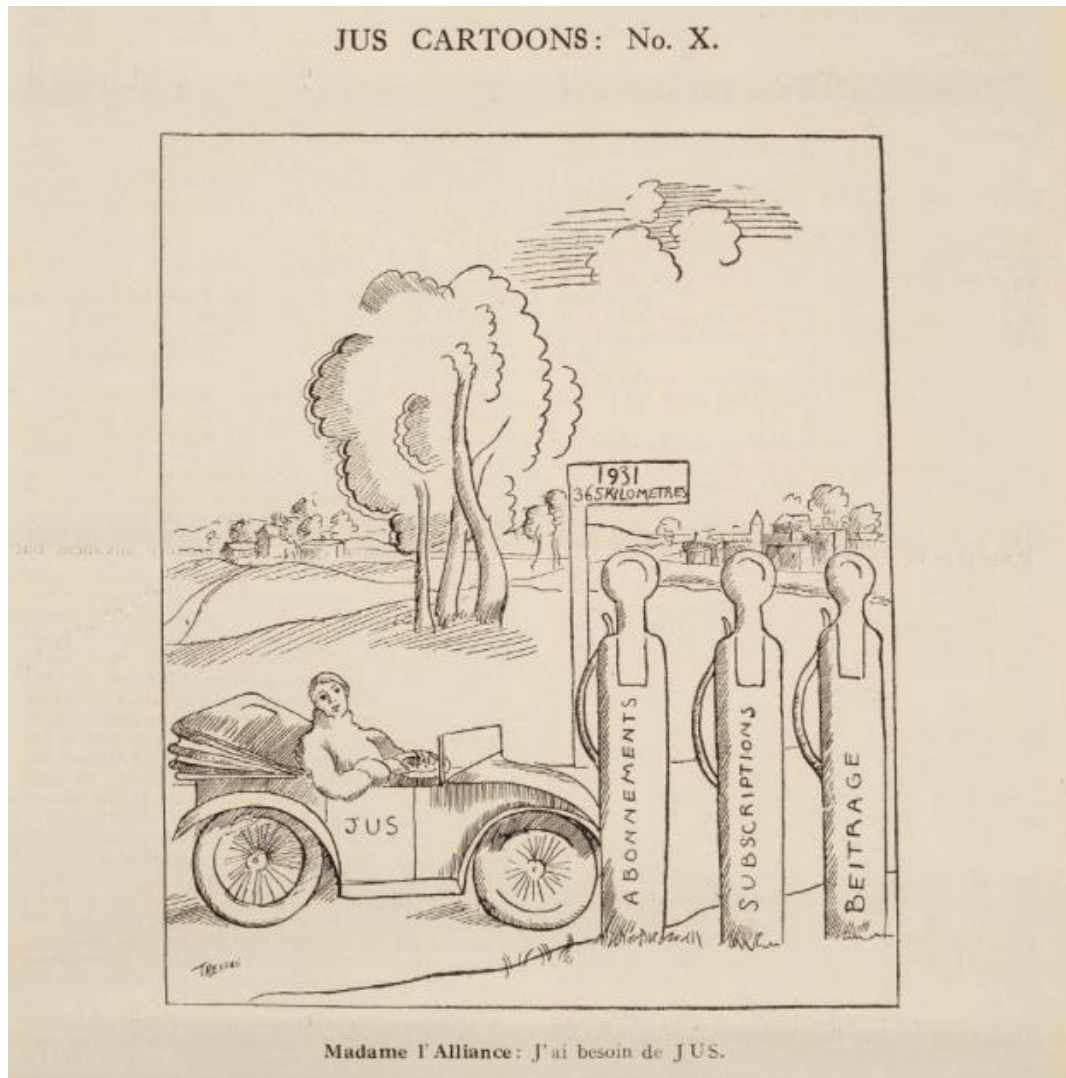


Figure 46 Cartoon highlighting the need for subscriptions to help fund the paper. “Madam Alliance: I need JUS,” *International Women’s News* 25, no. 4 (January 1931), 57.

Even if *Jus* struggled to be viable, it still offered a space for feminists to practise their internationalism and illuminates for the historian what they understood this to mean. The paper was produced in London and news from places like the United States and Great Britain

⁴¹ IAW, *Report of the Thirteenth Congress. Copenhagen, July 8th–14th, 1939* (Ashford: International Alliance of Women, 1939), 84.

⁴² IAW, *Report of the Eleventh Congress*, 145. Rich donated £3 3s and Rischbieth donated £30.

dominated. There are several reasons why: the newspaper was produced for the most part by British women, much of the content appeared in English, and British and North American women held strong positions in the Alliance. But there was always a callout for news from other parts of the world. As the AFWV's president, Rischbieth often responded to such invitations, sending in reports of her organisation's initiatives and extracts of articles from the *Dawn*. For her, *Jus* represented a means to showcase Australian feminists' work to the world and claim a more prominent place in the international movement. Every member of my group had her name feature in this publication at some point during this period, revealing the importance they placed on this line of communication that connected them not only with each other, but with a wider feminist community. This was mostly a Western community, but it was hoped that the readership would expand and become more global.

One person whose name figured prominently was Margery Corbett Ashby. When she was elected as the Alliance's new president in 1923, she embraced the paper, seeing it as an important way for her to articulate her position and gesture towards the organisation's future. In that year's July issue she discussed what the shift to a new leader meant for the group. "What of your new work-a-day President?" she asked. "She must stand, I think, for the sober middle-age of the Alliance." Using the language of imperialism, she continued: "We are out of the romantic pioneer stage and must set to work to occupy and settle and develop the new lands we have won"—a telling metaphor that again indicates the limits to the tentative steps Western feminists had begun to make towards a more truly global, less imperialist outlook.⁴³ She also reinforced the "new feminist" position as the dominant one in this organisation, arguing: "we must for some time remember we are also specialists and experts with special work to do, and our work as humans must not be at the sacrifice of our work as women."⁴⁴ Publishing these words in *Jus* allowed her to spread this message further than she could at a feminist congress, where only a limited number of people would hear her speak.

Jus frequently printed messages from Corbett Ashby and reported on her activities. The pages of the newspaper throughout this period are littered with articles about her visits to feminist organisations overseas and her travels to foreign countries in the name of sharing the Alliance's message and building up its community. In March 1924, for example, the newspaper

⁴³ "A Message from Our New President," *International Woman Suffrage News* 17, no. 9 (July 1923): 145.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

detailed her movements around Europe. It reported that Corbett Ashby had recently visited the Dutch auxiliary, was planning to travel to Stuttgart and Munich to host meetings with German feminists, and intended to host the next board meeting in France. "These visits to different auxiliaries, short though they may often have to be," it read "are a very valuable means of keeping alive the spirit of co-operation, which is the living principle of the work of the Alliance."⁴⁵ In turn, reporting on these visits in the pages of *Jus* helped further establish this ongoing spirit of international cooperation and solidarity. Throughout the ensuing years, readers of *Jus* learnt of Corbett Ashby's tours around Europe to both enfranchised and unenfranchised countries, her journeys across the Atlantic to the United States, and her 1935 trip to India, Egypt, Palestine, and Türkiye. From her vantage point as a British woman and a leader of an international feminist organisation, *Jus* was a way to simultaneously reinforce her position as an internationalist and help her organisation grow.

A MESSAGE FROM OUR NEW PRESIDENT.

THE necessity for a presidential election at Rome must have caused most of us a real pang, as we realized the Alliance was entering on a new epoch of work.

With the usual brilliance of women we have turned the crisis to account and have now two presidents, one, our founder and honorary president, who will continue to embody for us all the glamour and romance of our early work as pioneers. It was a period of desperately hard struggles and of tiny bands of remarkable women in all countries, and in many an astounding development of women's organization which has proved in itself a remarkable education, and of thrilling successes which have enfranchised the women of twenty-five countries. Success has been as wayward, according to our critics, as *la donna e mobile*. For success came sometimes in the night, with war and revolution, sometimes, long wooed, it only followed painstaking and self-sacrificing organization which penetrated, if not every home, at least every street and every hamlet. All this we cherish and remember in Mrs. Chapman Catt.



Mrs. CORBETT ASHBY.

What of your new work-a-day President? She must stand, I think, for the sober middle-age of the Alliance. We are out of the romantic pioneer stage and must set to work to occupy and settle and develop the new lands we have won. Not that our middle age will be dull, far from it. We welcome to-day the gain of the municipal suffrage and eligibility of the Italian women as the foretaste of our elation when we shall hear that the first Latin country has completely enfranchised its women. In Brazil, France and Italy Woman's Suffrage Bills have passed the First Chamber, and we watch with interest the friendly rivalry of the Latin New and Old Worlds.

With a new President the responsibility on each member of the Board, on each National President, and on each individual is greater. True, in one sense, our task is easier because we have now in the world a permanent international authority, the League of Nations, whom we can help and who in turn can assist us. First, we are to stand for peace, and peace must rest on understanding, and common work for a single aim gives us this understanding.

Figure 47 "A Message from Our New President," *International Woman Suffrage News* 17, no. 9 (July 1923): 145.

⁴⁵ "The President's Tour," *International Woman Suffrage News* 18, no. 6 (March 1924): 86.

During the interwar years, women maintained the well-established traditions of producing, reading, and writing for dedicated feminist periodicals. These practices were constantly evolving, and this period saw feminists increasingly seek to connect across borders through the pages of their local and international newspapers. Understanding popular support to be a crucial basis for effective transnational cooperation, they also used publications like (but certainly not limited to) the *Dawn* and *Jus* to build and sustain an internationalist consciousness among their broader feminist communities.

POPULAR WEEKLIES

In the context of a mass media market that was rapidly expanding in various places around the world—seeing print media diversify its forms, increase its circulation, and adopt a more significant place in the daily lives of people across the social spectrum—interwar feminists were not content to write for and produce periodicals that would reach feminist audiences only.⁴⁶ A wide array of new publications were becoming accessible to ever-broader audiences, including women, and brought political discussions into their everyday lives.⁴⁷ A notable development of this period saw feminists delve into the market of weekly magazines and newspapers to add their views to the broader news cycle and speak with authority to audiences who did not necessarily already identify with a feminist worldview. Although some historians have argued that such popular publications reinforced women's domesticity, new research is showing that they in fact had far more complicated relationships with changing gender norms—a conclusion supported by my group's own experiences in this arena.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ On changes to the media landscape during the interwar period, see: Ardis and Collier, eds., *Transatlantic Print Culture*; Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-war Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Adrian Bingham, "An Organ of Uplift? The Popular Press and Political Culture in Interwar Britain," *Journalism Studies* 14, no. 5 (2013): 651–62; Sarah Newman and Matt Houlbrook, "Introduction: The Press and Popular Culture in Interwar Europe," *Journalism Studies* 14, no. 5 (2013): 640–50; Tusan, *Women Making News*.

⁴⁷ Tusan, *Women Making News*, 210.

⁴⁸ Fiona Hackney, "'Women are News': British Women's Magazines 1919–1939," in Ardis and Collier, *Transatlantic Print Culture*, 114–33. For an example of the older narrative emphasising women's domesticity, see: Cynthia L. White, *Women's Magazines 1693–1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1971), chapter 3.

In 1920 an important new title emerged at the intersection of the Fleet Street press and the British feminist periodical scene. *Time and Tide* (1920–79) built on a strong tradition of feminist publishing in Britain, but in complicated ways. It aimed to become a major general audience, rather than women’s only, publication.⁴⁹ What was novel about *Time and Tide* was that it was a generalist newspaper run entirely by women. Founded by the feminist and businesswoman Lady Rhondda (Margaret Haig Thomas), it was non-party but (initially) liberal-left leaning and was more commercially oriented than other feminist periodicals.⁵⁰ The first issue commented on this unique positioning, noting that while the public should not “lay too much stress” on the fact *Time and Tide* was run by a team of women, this was “not without its significance” either. “Women have newly come into the larger world, and are indeed themselves to some extent answerable for that loosening of party and sectarian ties which is so marked a feature of the present day,” the paper noted. “It is therefore natural that just now many of them should tend to be especially conscious of the need for an independent Press, owing allegiance to no sect or party. The war was responsible for breaking down the barriers which kept each individual or group of individuals in a water-tight compartment.”⁵¹ Taking up headquarters at 88 Fleet Street, this new title aspired to become a central part of the British media landscape, all while remaining deeply connected to the feminist movement.⁵² It exemplifies Delap and DiCenzo’s argument that it can sometimes be difficult to easily categorise the feminist press.⁵³

Helen Archdale edited the paper from 1920 to 1926, a role that occupied much of her time during these years. The printed word had always been central to her activism. In fact, it was in her blood: her father Alexander Russel (who died just a month before she was born) was a newspaper editor and had been at the helm of a range of titles including the *Scotsman*.⁵⁴ As a participant in the militant women’s suffrage movement she had worked on the *Suffragette*

⁴⁹ Clay, “‘The Modern Weekly for the Modern Woman,’” 398.

⁵⁰ Clay, *Time and Tide*, 34, 42; Deirdre Beddoe, “Thomas [married name Mackworth], Margaret Haig, suo jure Viscountess Rhondda (1883–1958),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, revised 28 May 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/36479>.

⁵¹ *Time and Tide* (London), 14 May 1920, 4.

⁵² Angela V. John, *Turning the Tide: The Life of Lady Rhondda* (Cardiff: Parthian Books, 2014), 285. For more on *Time and Tide*, see: Tusan, *Women Making News*, 220–33.

⁵³ Delap and DiCenzo, “Transatlantic Print Culture,” in Ardis and Collier, *Transatlantic Print Culture*, 54.

⁵⁴ H. C. G. Matthew, “Russel, Alexander (1814–1876),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, revised 28 May 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/24292>.

and, later, *Britannia* in various capacities, including as sub-editor.⁵⁵ During the interwar years Archdale continued to build a career as a journalist, writing for a range of titles including the *Times* and the *Scotsman* and joining both the International Federation of Business and Professional Women and the Institute of Journalists.⁵⁶ Her role as editor was also facilitated by her close relationship with Rhondda. The pair had first met in 1918 when Archdale took up a role as Rhondda's assistant at the Ministry of National Service; over the following years (and after Archdale's husband's death) they developed a close relationship, with Archdale living in a flat below Rhondda's in Chelsea Court and the pair later taking up a country house, "Stonepitts," in Kent together.⁵⁷



Figure 48 Archdale (left) in the *Time and Tide* office. State Library of New South Wales, Betty Archdale Papers, MLMSS 9091, Box 2.

⁵⁵ David Doughan, "Archdale [née Russel], Helen Alexander (1876–1949)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in print and online 23 September 2004, revised 28 May 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/58331>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ John, *Turning the Tide*, 238–42, 334–43.

Archdale's role as editor of *Time and Tide* was an important way that she enacted her feminism in the early 1920s, which she envisioned through a strict legal equality lens.⁵⁸ In its pages she printed articles promoting the Six Point Group (SPG, whose membership overlapped significantly with *Time and Tide*'s editorial board), reported on various feminist meetings, and profiled significant people (including the Australian politician Edith Cowan and the American peace campaigner Alice Paul). Many prominent women's names appeared in its by-lines, such as the preacher Maude Royden, the British feminist and writer Vera Brittain, and the Australian suffragist Vida Goldstein. Archdale also cultivated a strong international outlook in the paper, which reported on various current and international affairs—from the League's activities to British foreign policy to women's efforts overseas—and even featured contributions from internationalists like the writer Leonard Woolf. *Time and Tide*'s internationalist streak was not simply a reflection of Archdale's increasing interest in the world beyond Britain. Editing the paper and reading these various submissions also shaped her view that the post-war international realm was becoming an increasingly compelling avenue for assuring women's rights. This experience helped produce her internationalist worldview.

Archdale explained in 1924 that *Time and Tide* was created to “fill or, at any rate, substantially bridge an obvious gap ... between those papers which ignore the woman's point of view and those which ignore the men's point of view.”⁵⁹ While it was aimed at a readership of men and women alike, Archdale did feel that “[w]omen have a special responsibility for the development of TIME AND TIDE” and entreated readers to become regular subscribers by saying: “Help TIME AND TIDE to help women and through them all humanity.”⁶⁰ She left the editorship in 1926, likely due to rising tensions between her and Rhondda. David Doughan suggests that “after her resignation specifically feminist concerns were gradually marginalized” in the paper.⁶¹ According to Catherine Clay, the publication's “unapologetic feminism” of the early 1920s—which was dominated by an equal rights perspective—soon gave way to a desire to “move out of the women's paper category” and develop a reputation as a serious news outlet with an increasingly international focus.⁶² But, as she elaborates, *Time and Tide* was doing

⁵⁸ Clay, *Time and Tide*, 19.

⁵⁹ Helen Archdale, “Why and How,” *Time and Tide* (London), 31 October 1924, 1055.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1056.

⁶¹ Doughan, “Archdale [née Russell], Helen Alexander (1876–1949).”

⁶² Clay, *Time and Tide*, 1–5.

something new: “disavow[ing] identification with the ‘feminist’ or ‘women’s periodical’ category at the same time as it remained both of these things.”⁶³ For Archdale, the newspaper represented a way to stake a claim as a feminist to the media landscape centred on Fleet Street and, through this, to various discussions about current and international affairs. As she showed, her expertise was not confined only to the realm of feminist activism but crossed over into the newspaper industry.

The interwar years brought about a significant shift for feminists, who began to see the broader media as a potentially effective space for sharing their ideas, extending their communities, and embarking on public-facing careers in a more sustained way. Women’s magazines—with their own rich and varied history—provided another important avenue.⁶⁴ This was a process that crossed borders, revealing similarities across the English-speaking world and the success of feminist internationalism in establishing itself as a transnational ideology. For Linda Littlejohn, the *Australian Women’s Weekly* (the *Weekly*) allowed her to connect with readers outside the relatively small circle of politicised women who subscribed to explicitly feminist publications like the *Dawn*. It also contributed to her career as a journalist by expanding the scope of her work beyond feminist periodicals (to which she also contributed) and increasing her sense of herself as a professional.

The *Weekly* first appeared in June 1933 and became a mainstay of the Australian media landscape. As Bridget Griffen-Foley notes, it was from the outset a great success and became the “bedrock” of the Packer media empire.⁶⁵ Its first issue was expected to sell 50,000 copies; it reportedly sold over 120,000.⁶⁶ Later figures point to the growing circulation of the *Weekly*, which reached 400,000 by 1938—a stark contrast to the dwindling subscribers to *Jus*.⁶⁷ It has, more than any other women’s publication in Australia, captured the attention of scholars for

⁶³ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁴ On women’s magazines, see: Laurel Forster, *Magazine Movements: Women’s Culture, Feminisms and Media Form* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Susan Sheridan, “Women’s Magazines,” *Companion to Women’s Historical Writing*, ed. Mary Spongberg et al. (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 607–8.

⁶⁵ Bridget Griffen-Foley, *The House of Packer: The Making of a Media Empire* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 1.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 299.

some time now.⁶⁸ Much of this work focuses on the postwar years, when the magazine was read in a quarter of Australian homes and “had the biggest circulation per head of population of any women’s magazine in the world,” with official figures almost doubling the 1938 number by the 1950s.⁶⁹ One line of enquiry for historians has been the political dimensions of the *Weekly*’s journalism, particularly in the context of the late 1940s and 1950s. At this time the magazine frequently published stories on topics of national interest like politics and the economy, as well as on international relations and contemporary global events including the Cold War.⁷⁰ This sort of coverage dwindled during the 1960s, when international news became less common in the *Weekly*’s pages and mentions of the wider world came in the form of travel stories.⁷¹ The magazine’s formative years in the 1930s are often overlooked, however, including how politics and the international sphere featured in it and how people like Littlejohn used the platform for their own political and personal purposes.

From the outset, the *Weekly* firmly positioned itself as a distinctively Australian magazine that printed real journalism.⁷² News was central to its purpose; as the founding editor, George Warnecke—who had climbed the ranks of journalism in Australia and Britain—put it: “Start it Big. Give it an unswerving Australian outlook. Above all, whether the journalists

⁶⁸ The following is a select list of publications on the *Weekly*: Frances Bonner, Susan McKay, and Kathryn Goldie, “Caring For the Family: Fifty Years of Health in the *Australian Women’s Weekly*,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 22, no. 59 (1998): 154–64; Megan Elizabeth Deas, “Imagining Australia: Community, Participation and the ‘Australian way of life’ in the Photography of the Australian Women’s Weekly, 1945–1956” (PhD thesis, ANU, 2018); Griffen-Foley, *The House of Packer*; Kirra Minton, “How to be a Girl: Consumerism Meets Guidance in the *Australian Women’s Weekly*’s Teen Segments, 1952–1959,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 41, no. 1 (2017): 3–17; Denis O’Brien, *The Weekly: A Lively and Nostalgic Celebration of Australia Through 50 Years of its Most Popular Magazine* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1982); Helen Proctor and Heather Weaver, “Creating an Educational Home: Mothering for Schooling in the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 1943–1960,” *Paedagogica Historica* 53, no. 1–2 (2017): 49–70; Lauren Samuelsson, “The Imitation Game: Mock Foods in the Australian Women’s Weekly, 1933–82,” *Australian Historical Studies* 51, no. 4 (2020): 477–93; Lauren Samuelsson, “A Matter of Taste: The Australian Women’s Weekly and the Birth of a Modern Australian Food Culture, 1933–1982” (PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, 2021); Susan Sheridan, “The ‘Australian Woman’ and Her Migrant Others in the Postwar Australian Women’s Weekly,” *Continuum* 14, no. 2 (2000): 121–32; Susan Sheridan, with Barbara Baird, Kate Borrett, and Lyndall Ryan, *Who Was That Woman? The Australian Women’s Weekly in the Postwar Years* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2002); Hannah Viney, “‘Women are born diplomats’: Women, Politics and the Cold War in the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 1950–1959,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 44, no. 3 (2020): 367–83; Kate Warren, “A Brief History of The Australian Women’s Weekly Art Prize, 1955–1959,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 18, no. 2 (2018): 242–58; Heather Weaver and Helen Proctor, “The Question of the Spotted Muumuu: How the Australian Women’s Weekly Manufactured a Vision of the Normative School Mother and Child, 1930s–1980s,” *History of Education Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2018): 229–60.

⁶⁹ Sheridan et al., *Who Was That Woman?*, 1; Griffen-Foley, *The House of Packer*, 299.

⁷⁰ Sheridan et al., *Who Was That Woman?*, 4; Viney, “‘Women are born diplomats.’”

⁷¹ Sheridan et al., *Who Was That Woman?*, 4.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 3–4.

are writing about fashion, cookery, baby care or diet, there has to be an element of news in what they write.”⁷³ The *Weekly* was not just a frivolous magazine designed to occupy the idle minds of Australia’s housewives. It symbolised the modern and balanced conventional features of women’s magazines, such as recipes, with substantive news articles.⁷⁴ It projected an image of inclusion and community through seeking feedback and publishing letters from readers.⁷⁵ The magazine’s view of womanhood was “modestly progressive but ultimately confining,” seeing femininity “as both natural and acquired.”⁷⁶ As Griffen-Foley explains, these multiple positions go some way towards explaining the *Weekly*’s great success.⁷⁷

The *Weekly* outlined its programme in its first issue. Alongside news on fashion and cooking, it aimed “[t]o be a treasure-store to which every woman, stay-at-home, gad-about, intellectual, or just nice-average, will turn for everything she wants.”⁷⁸ As the editors explained: “Women want to dress well. They also want to understand the tangled events of the bewildering world around them, especially when women’s lives and hopes are affected.”⁷⁹ Sharing the page with articles on butter prices and cocktails, the editorial of the second issue directly encouraged women to become politicised. “In Australia there are efficient and intelligently directed women’s organisations that are abreast of feminine movements abroad,” the editor wrote. “Every woman should join some such organisation. Eventually the weight of women’s opinion will force governments of nations to measures which will make the world a better place to live in.”⁸⁰ Over the following months, articles on a wide variety of topics—including Australian women’s failure to enter politics, women’s military training in the Soviet

⁷³ Ibid. See also: Griffen-Foley, *The House of Packer*, 25; Bridget Griffen-Foley, “Warnecke, Glen William (‘George’) (1894–1981),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, published first in hardcopy 2012, online 2012, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/warnecke-glen-william-george-15903/text27104>.

⁷⁴ Griffen-Foley, *The House of Packer*, 25, 34.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ “Splendid New Women’s Paper. Read—and You’ll Be Won!” *Australian Women’s Weekly* (Sydney) 10 June 1933, 2.

⁷⁹ “An Editorial. We Introduce Ourselves,” *Australian Women’s Weekly* (Sydney), 10 June 1933, 10.

⁸⁰ “An Editorial. How it Affects Women,” *Australian Women’s Weekly* (Sydney), 17 June 1933, 10.

Union, and discussions of women's status in places like New Zealand and Finland—were published in the magazine's pages.⁸¹



Figure 49 First issue of the *Australian Women's Weekly*, 10 June 1933.

⁸¹ "Miss Preston Stanley, ex-M.L.A., Discusses Why Women Have Failed in Politics," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 22 July 1933, 6; "Amazons Eager For War," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 22 July 1933, 10; M. B. Soliak, "Progress of Women in New Zealand," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 22 July 1933, 25; "How Finland Treats Its Women," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 5 August 1933, 6.

When the *Weekly* first appeared in 1933, Littlejohn was already a well-known figure on the Sydney feminist scene; soon, she would emerge as the leader of the Equal Rights International (ERI) and make herself better known abroad, too. Littlejohn was deeply involved in committee work, first with the Feminist Club and the National Council of Women and then with the United Associations of Women (UA). She was not a background figure, working away quietly, though. Littlejohn aspired to cultivate a public voice. For her, taking on a public platform was a means of getting a message across, but it also was part of forming her own career beyond the realms of activism. She was described by contemporaries as a “well-known ... journalist, novelist, broadcast lecturer and debater.”⁸² Like Rischbieth, though she was not university-educated, Littlejohn’s feminism allowed her to develop a public profile and career based on her expertise as a feminist internationalist. This in turn extended feminism’s realm of influence.

Littlejohn’s name—whether as author or as the subject of a story—appeared in the *Weekly* eighty times between 1933 and the end of 1940, featuring in articles on topics as diverse as the UA’s work and the latest trends in Christmas cards.⁸³ In her own pieces, Littlejohn wrote on a range of topics, including family life, sex education, and clothes.⁸⁴ The feminist worldview that she brought to readers was shaped by her global mobility and internationalist outlook. After her trip to the Alliance’s 1935 congress in Türkiye, for example, she wrote about the places she had visited and the people she had met, providing those who may never have travelled overseas with a taste of what such a life entailed (and subtly encouraging support for international cooperation in a world that was being increasingly divided over the rise of fascism).⁸⁵ The cover page of the first issue captured the idiosyncrasy of the *Weekly*. Alongside photographs of “Smart Sydney Women” donning the latest fashions was a story titled “Equal

⁸² “Woman Delegate to Assembly League of Nations, 1936,” *Dawn* (Perth), 15 January 1936, 4.

⁸³ “Reviewing the Year. United Associations,” *Australian Women’s Weekly* (Sydney), 24 February 1934, 24; “Changing Fashions in Christmas Cards,” *Australian Women’s Weekly* (Sydney), 16 December 1933, 36.

⁸⁴ Linda Littlejohn, “Family Life Dying Out? Education and Social Welfare Blamed for Change,” *Australian Women’s Weekly* (Sydney), 6 January 1934, 4; Linda Littlejohn, “Sex Education in the Schools?” *Australian Women’s Weekly* (Sydney), 3 February 1934, 28; Linda Littlejohn, “Influence of Good Clothes Indicate Character and Personality,” *Australian Women’s Weekly* (Sydney), 5 May 1934, 26.

⁸⁵ Linda Littlejohn, “Highlights from an Australian’s Trip Across the World,” *Australian Women’s Weekly* (Sydney), 20 July 1935, 3.

Social Rights for Sexes. Mrs. Littlejohn Outlines Big Issues To Be Fought For.”⁸⁶ In it, Littlejohn took up her pen for the *Weekly* (for the first of many times) to report on the recent AFWV meeting in Adelaide. Right from the beginning, then, the *Weekly* allied itself with the feminist cause through its relationship with figures like Littlejohn. She brought commentary on gendered social and political issues to the *Weekly*’s readers; as the following section elaborates, she extended this work as director of its programming with the radio station 2UW.

The interwar period was a distinctive moment as it saw both Australian and British feminists expand their remit beyond expressly feminist spaces (such as the pages of feminist periodicals) and stake a claim to broader publics and issues. By writing for and producing weekly magazines intended for large audiences, my group and their contemporaries hoped to both instil an internationalist consciousness among their communities and to develop public, authoritative profiles for themselves. Individual and shared goals coalesced to bring feminism into the realm of wider social and political life more generally, seeing the movement become more assertive and confident even if limited in which women it represented.

ON THE AIRWAVES

The trend which saw feminist internationalists expand the arenas in which they operated was further propelled by the rise of a new mass communication technology during this period: the radio. Radio—or wireless, as it was commonly known at the time—was exciting because it offered the possibility of reaching different and even wider audiences.⁸⁷ As Ken Inglis put it, “[t]he word ‘wireless’ had magic to the first generation of users.”⁸⁸ And it was popular: 270,000 Australians held radio licences by mid-1928.⁸⁹ In the British context, all broadcasting was public until the 1950s. The British Broadcasting Company (later Corporation, BBC) was formed in 1922 and was characterised by its “newness, its pioneering spirit and its

⁸⁶ “Equal Social Rights for Sexes. Mrs. Littlejohn Outlines Big Issues To Be Fought For,” *Australian Women’s Weekly* (Sydney), 10 June 1933, 1.

⁸⁷ K. S. Inglis, “London Calling: The Empire of the Airwaves,” *Working Papers in Australian Studies*, no. 118 (London: Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, 2000), 1.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ K. S. Inglis, *This is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Commission 1932–1983* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1983), 9.

modernity.”⁹⁰ It provided the model for other national broadcasters, especially in the dominions.⁹¹ In Australia the first broadcasts were made in 1923, and just under a decade later the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) was established. It coexisted with commercial stations, self-consciously adopting a more cultured tone than the popular B-Class stations.⁹² Radio was at once fundamentally transnational and a means of shoring up the nation-state; it was shaped by “both by the demands of the nation and the equally compelling impulse to go beyond.”⁹³ As the BBC’s Empire (later World) Service exemplifies, it reinforced lines of imperial connection as well.⁹⁴ Straddling the nation, the empire, and the world, it offered an enticing avenue for feminist internationalists to extend their mission for gender equality.

In recent years historians have explored the history of the wireless through the lens of gender, showing the various ways in which women engaged with it.⁹⁵ During this period women were involved in radio work as broadcasters or announcers, subjects, and listeners (or listeners-in, to use the contemporary vocabulary).⁹⁶ The concept of a “woman’s hour” quickly appeared across the English-speaking world. In 1923 the BBC debuted programmes for women, being the first nationally funded public service broadcaster to do so. Though it quickly got rid of the title “Women’s Hour,” it continued the practice of broadcasting talks on topics

⁹⁰ Murphy, “‘New and Important Careers,’” 18. For general histories of the BBC, see: David Hendy, *The BBC: A People’s History* (London: Profile Books, 2022); Burton Paulu, *Television and Radio in the United Kingdom* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).

⁹¹ Inglis, “London Calling,” 2–3.

⁹² Fisher, *Sound Citizens*, 2–3; Inglis, *This is the ABC*.

⁹³ Michele Hilmes, *Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting* (New York; Oxford: Routledge, 2012), 2. David Hendy emphasises the centrality of the BBC to the nation, with less emphasis on its transnational dimensions. See: Hendy, *The BBC*.

⁹⁴ On this see: Gordon Johnston and Emma Robertson, *BBC World Service: Overseas Broadcasting, 1932–2018* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Emma Robertson, “Gendering Transnational Radio: Women Listeners and the BBC Empire and Overseas Services, 1932–1967,” *Women’s History Review* 29, no. 2 (2020): 197–214.

⁹⁵ For some recent works in this area, see: Maggie Andrews, *Domesticating the Airwaves: Broadcasting, Domesticity and Femininity* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012); Andrews and McNamara, *Women and the Media*; Baker, “Australian Women Working in British Broadcasting”; Baker, “*Woman to Woman*”; Damousi and Deacon, *Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity*; Fisher, *Sound Citizens*; Fisher, “World Citizens”; Bridget Griffen-Foley, *Australian Radio Listeners and Television Viewers* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2020); Lloyd, *Gender and Media in the Broadcast Age*; Murphy, *Behind the Wireless*; Murphy, “‘Brightening their leisure hours?’”; Murphy, “From *Women’s Hour* to *Other Women’s Lives*”; Murphy, “‘New and Important Careers’”; Robertson, “Gendering Transnational Radio”; Kristin Skoog and Alexander Badenoch, “Women and Radio: Sounding Out New Paths in Women’s History,” *Women’s History Review* 29, no. 2 (2020): 177–82.

⁹⁶ Inglis, “London Calling,” 1.

deemed to be of interest to women.⁹⁷ In Australia, women's programming grew from the late 1920s and appeared in a range of forms, from formal women's sessions to programmes centred on key personalities.⁹⁸ Catherine Fisher argues that across the ABC and commercial radio alike these sessions were more "complex and varied in its content" than has often been assumed.⁹⁹ While there was an obvious focus on domestic topics like housekeeping, motherhood, and fashion, she contends that "the assessment of the women's sessions as solely reinforcing domestic ideals of womanhood neglects that they provided platforms for various women, and men, to speak on a wide variety of topics."¹⁰⁰ The ABC ran its women's sessions for over three decades, but devoted less attention to them than the BBC.¹⁰¹

While historians often discuss individual feminists in their stories of women broadcasters, it is important to bring more sustained attention to the intersection of feminism, rather than only the broader concept of gender, with the radio. We cannot tell exactly how many women listeners-in held feminist convictions, but feminist activists were certainly among those who sought a role in the production of radio programming. It was in no small part thanks to them that women's sessions extended beyond the topics of domestic chores and wifely duties. This was made abundantly clear when in April 1936 the BBC hosted a conference at its London headquarters, Broadcasting House, to discuss women's radio programming. Representatives of the various women's organisations active in Britain and across the empire were invited to attend. Littlejohn—who was in the middle of a three-year stint abroad—attended on behalf of the BCL, one among 500 women in attendance.¹⁰² The discussion centred on the best timing and content for women's segments.¹⁰³ Littlejohn told the conference that "the average woman was more intelligent than was generally believed, and that

⁹⁷ Lloyd, *Gender and Media in the Broadcast Age*, 34–7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35–6.

⁹⁹ Fisher, *Sound Citizens*, 6.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 4. Justine Lloyd also identifies that earlier historiography such as Inglis' *This is the ABC* failed to engage with the place of women's programming that went beyond discussion of domestic matters. Lloyd, *Gender and Media in the Broadcast Age*, 49.

¹⁰¹ Lloyd, *Gender and Media in the Broadcast Age*, 2.

¹⁰² "Social Gossip," *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga), 10 December 1937, 7; Linda Littlejohn, "The B.B.C. Consults the Women," *Dawn* (Perth), 17 June 1936, 4.

¹⁰³ "Women's Conference: Precis of Discussion about BBC programmes," 24 April 1936, Trades Union Congress 1846–2006 papers, Warwick Modern Records Centre, Warwick, MSS.292/787.18/2/1, <https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/tav/id/2783/rec/31>.

she wished, through the wireless, to learn what was happening in the world.”¹⁰⁴ As she later reported to readers of the *Dawn*, the discussion highlighted that there was “a definite desire amongst women to learn of ‘Doings in Parliament,’ to hear discussions on problems arising in every country today, such as equal pay, unemployment relief, restrictions on women’s right to work, travel, biographies of famous women, etc.” She was optimistic about the future of women’s programming: “it really seems likely that the B.B.C. will realise that women are interested in other matters outside those connected with the home.”¹⁰⁵ Littlejohn was among those who made the case for using the wireless to further the task of educating and politicising so-called ordinary women.

Yet while feminists wanted to use the radio as part of their mission, it was not always so easy to do so. Around the time of the BBC’s conference there was a transnational conversation developing about the benefits and difficulties of accessing this medium. The Austrian-German feminist Adele Schreiber wrote about this for *Jus* in 1936, promoting broadcasting as one of the most effective means of sharing feminist propaganda. But she noted that to date most uses of this medium had been individually, rather than organisationally, driven. Schreiber recommended that to persuade radio stations to include women and their viewpoints they needed to use “the right tactics.” She believed “administrations dread a too outspoken feminism” but “diplomatic methods” could prove effective. “A subject presented with the best intentions by a first-class feminist, but lacking in literary and oratorical skill, will prove a failure and bar the way for other speakers,” she wrote. “The very same subject linked up with real life, enlivened by personal and individual touches, so that it finds its way to the hearts and minds of the listeners, will prove a success and lead to a demand for more and more talks of the same kind.”¹⁰⁶

The AFWV had a less optimistic take on the matter. Earlier that year Rischbieth’s group had received a questionnaire about broadcasting from the Alliance, which they sent out to the various radio stations around the country. They wanted to find out whether women’s programming extended beyond topics relating to “domestic questions, dress etc” and to gather statistics about women’s employment in the industry. They asked “[a]re Women’s

¹⁰⁴ “Women’s Conference,” MSS.292/787.18/2/1. Littlejohn’s words are paraphrased in this quote

¹⁰⁵ Littlejohn, “The B.B.C. Consults the Women.”

¹⁰⁶ Adele Schreiber, “Feminists and the Radio,” *International Women’s News* 30, no. 9 (June 1936): 70.

Organisations allowed to participate regularly in radio programmes and can they give information regarding their special work?” and wanted to know whether any programmes were delivered in languages other than English “for the benefit of listeners in other countries.”¹⁰⁷ The responses they received varied. The ABC highlighted its diverse content scheduled “at those times of the day when it may be presumed that women are the chief listeners,” including topics such as “Mothercraft,” literature, travel, women’s sport, and talks coordinated by the National Council of Women. In stark contrast, W.A. Broadcasters bluntly noted that, as a collective of commercial stations, “it is hardly our function to assist Women’s Organisations to participate regularly in our programmes.”¹⁰⁸ A few months later the *Dawn* presented a bleak picture of the broadcasting landscape. “Women in Australia are not getting their fair share of air-time,” it claimed, pointing out that almost all of the high positions in the industry were held by men and riling against the idea of “Women’s Sessions” that claimed to present a singular women’s point of view. “The women’s point of view! What is it? Does it really exist?” the article asked. “... Can it seriously be suggested that women as a whole share the same opinion about any subject? To segregate women as a group unable to think on the same plane as the rest of the adult population is to attempt to imbue intelligence with sex!” Feminist groups did not collaborate to take over the airwaves and had “not seriously considered the possibility of radio as a method of propaganda.”¹⁰⁹ In these early years there were barriers to making the most of this new medium.

Yet some individuals successfully used their growing public profiles to bring a feminist voice to wider audiences through radio broadcasting; in turn, their status as broadcasters helped them cement their popular status and articulate a feminist internationalism that wanted to have a place in the nation’s affairs.¹¹⁰ Part of this process was tied up with the idea of expertise. Women’s programming in both Australia and Britain frequently adopted a didactic

¹⁰⁷ Dorothea Cass (State General Secretary, WSG) to Manager of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, 25 February 1936, AFWV Papers, NLA, Box 4, File 32, MS 2818.

¹⁰⁸ C. J. A. Moses (General Manager, ABC) to Dorothea Cass, 10 March 1936, AFWV Papers, NLA, Box 4, File 32, MS 2818; Station Manager W.A. Broadcasters Ltd to Women’s Service Guilds, 28 February 1936, AFWV Papers, NLA, Box 4, File 32, MS 2818.

¹⁰⁹ “Women in Radio,” *Dawn* (Perth), 17 June 1936, 3.

¹¹⁰ Lesley Johnson explains that, in Australia, commercial stations more readily encouraged the new “informal, friendly mode of radio performance” which allowed broadcasters “to produce personalities for themselves.” Lesley Johnson, *The Unseen Voice: A Cultural Study of Early Australian Radio* (Oxford: Routledge, 1988; 2017), 73. Reference to 2017 edition.

tone, as broadcasters took on the role of experts to educate their audiences and prepare them for their civic duties (a rationale that lay at the heart of much public broadcasting more generally).¹¹¹ For feminists this was an exciting opportunity. By the interwar period, Kathleen Courtney had developed a reputation as a leading feminist peace activist. This standing allowed her to harness the radio to reach new and bigger audiences, including during her travels overseas. In 1938, for example, she talked about “The Present International Situation” on Melbourne’s 3LO. Courtney told listeners that for collective security to work “it needs the understanding and the support of every citizen; every citizen, not only in Great Britain, but in the Dominions overseas of the British Commonwealth of Nations.”¹¹² She also talked about women and peace on American radio, including a remote talk from London on the Columbia Broadcasting System as part of the Conference on the Cause and Cure of War.¹¹³ Her goals here were underpinned by her view that successful internationalism rested on imbuing these values in each member of the community, and she often emphasised “the value of public opinion” for addressing the world’s problems.¹¹⁴

Appearing on the airwaves could further bolster feminists’ claims to expertise and allow them to continue developing a strong presence in the public sphere. Rich frequently appeared on the radio in Sydney; her contemporary Rapke wrote of her: “As a broadcaster as well as a free-lance contributor to the Press she enjoys a widespread reputation for clarity & ability.”¹¹⁵ While this may have fulfilled some personal ambitions, Rich also aimed to share her ideas beyond her feminist networks. The vignette that opened this chapter highlights how Rich saw the wireless as a direct channel into the minds of women whose lives were mostly homebound. By framing her broadcasts as a dialogue with an “ordinary woman” she made a deliberate effort to extend feminist internationalism’s sphere of influence, reflecting at least some degree of awareness of the barriers to participation in activism. Indeed, on behalf of the Imperial

¹¹¹ Johnston and Robertson, *BBC World Service*, 4.

¹¹² “The Present International Situation. By Miss Kathleen D. Courtney. Talk to be broadcast over 3LO. on Wednesday May 4th at 10.40 a.m. in 1938,” Papers of Kathleen D’Olier Courtney (hereafter Courtney Papers), The Women’s Library, London (hereafter TWL), Box FL455, KDC/D5/65–70.

¹¹³ Jean Powers, “Miss Courtney Discusses the Peace of World,” news clipping, Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL454, KDC/D2/47–82; “Columbia Broadcasting System. Conference on Cause and Cure of War. Thursday, January 24, 1935, 4:30 to 5:00 P.M.,” Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL454, KDC/D2/47–82.

¹¹⁴ “Poor Outlook. The World and Peace. Individual Problem. Miss K. Courtney’s Address,” *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 20 April 1938, 12. Courtney’s words are paraphrased in this quote.

¹¹⁵ Julia Rapke, “Ruby Rich,” Papers on various Australian women, NLA, MS 842.

International Committee of the British National Hygiene Council, she was “asked to stress the great responsibility that radio carries to enlighten the public” on important topics. “We believe that radio should not merely reflect public opinion but should also lead it,” she said “and that principle applies particularly in respect of education on venereal disease and sex relationships.”¹¹⁶ Yet it must be said that, given the limitations of the movement itself, she would have primarily imagined her listener as a white, middle-class (if un-politicised) woman. By reaching beyond established activist networks, people like Rich used their status as experts to broaden their feminist community or at least educate the “ordinary” woman and make her sympathetic to their cause.

Like in their use of print media, feminists talked about all kinds of topics in their broadcasts. They did so with the goal of cultivating a feminist and internationalist mindset among their broader communities. For instance, in 1936—the year after she represented Australia at the League—Rischbieth spoke on the topic of “Women’s Influence at Geneva” for the League of Nations Union Radio Club on Melbourne’s 3LO. She described international women’s organisations as “a bridge to the League of Nations,” emphasising women’s roles as mothers. “Our task today is—God knows how urgent—to create the conditions upon which the happy family is fundamentally based,” she said. “This calls for a world-wide and enlightened public opinion ensouling and buttressing a reconstructed League of Nations.”¹¹⁷ Jessie Street also appeared on the airwaves, speaking about “Australia’s Helpless Housewives” and “Incomes for Wives” while also advocating for better pay for women radio announcers.¹¹⁸ As in other areas of their work, these women’s empire context influenced the vision of international cooperation they espoused to their listeners. In a 1938 radio talk, Rich asked listeners “IF there is not a similarity of the utmost importance between our British Commonwealth of Nations and the League of Nations Ideal?”¹¹⁹ More broadly, during the interwar years the radio was one means of solidifying ties across the Commonwealth as it

¹¹⁶ “Broadcasting. Miss Ruby Rich, representing the Australian Women’s Conference Committee, called and examined. 577 To Mr. Francis,” Rich Papers, NLA, Box 4, File 29, MS 7493.

¹¹⁷ Bureau of Social and International Affairs, League of Nations Union Radio Club, “Bessie Rischbieth, ‘Women’s Influence at Geneva,’ to be broadcast Tuesday 16 June 1936, 10.45am, from 3LO,” Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 2, File 7, MS 2004/2/101. For more on this radio club see “League of Nations Union. New Radio Club,” *Argus* (Melbourne), 24 May 1934, 7.

¹¹⁸ “Radio Talks,” *Katoomba Daily*, 11 March 1937, 3; “Today’s Radio Programmes,” *Sun* (Sydney), 1 November 1936, 10; “Want More. Radio Women Air Pay Views,” *Daily News* (Sydney), 24 April 1939, 2.

¹¹⁹ “Broadcast 2 GB by Ruby Rich. 10 March 1938,” Rich Papers, NLA, Box 3, File 25, MS 7493.

slowly started to spread apart.¹²⁰ Feminists contributed to this project through the equivalence they constructed between the British Empire and the ideal world community.

British feminists similarly spread their ideas using radio, although Littlejohn—who broadcast on the BBC during her time abroad—believed that in Britain the radio was “practically neglected” as a tool for “disseminating valuable knowledge.”¹²¹ The National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) used the BBC’s 2LO to share fortnightly talks on topics including women’s relationships with parliament, the law, and the League.¹²² Corbett Ashby’s papers contain various radio transcripts. Though this was not her primary method of reaching out to wider audiences, it is important to recognise as it did form part of her activities and meant that her voice reached people well beyond the scope of her feminist networks. Her leading status also meant she was able to do this even earlier than some of the other women looked at in this thesis. In 1926 she spoke on “Women—East and West”; two years later she broached the topic of peace, a topic “that cannot afford to be neglected by anyone interested in world politics or in the great international feeling of the present day.”¹²³ These recordings have not been kept, nor is it possible to find transcripts for all of them. Though ephemeral, what we can take from this is that the medium presented an enticing opportunity for her to share her ideas on a new platform.

Radio’s early decades have historically been seen as reinforcing women’s domesticity through their coverage of topics imagined to be of interest to housewives listening in from home. Yet the broadcasts made by my group reveal that the content of women’s programmes could be political. As historians are now showing, the positioning of the wireless in relation to a public–private divide is far more complicated than previously thought. Justine Lloyd argues that radio, “through its domestic reception and daytime address to women, neither ‘publicized’ private space nor created new forms of publics, but shifted the relations between public, private, and intimate.”¹²⁴ She suggests that the concepts of “intimacy” and “intimate

¹²⁰ Lloyd, *Gender and Media in the Broadcast Age*, 9.

¹²¹ British Commonwealth League, *Duties and Rights of Women Under Democracy. Contribution of Democracy Towards the Peace of the World. Report of Thirteenth Annual Conference held on May 26th, 27th and 28th, 1937* (London: British Commonwealth League: 1937), 12.

¹²² “Broadcasting Parliamentary News,” *International Woman Suffrage News* 19, no. 8 (May 1925): 120.

¹²³ *Radio Times* 10, no. 123 (29 Jan 1926): 266; *Radio Times* 20, no. 250 (13 July 1928): 108.

¹²⁴ Lloyd, *Gender and Media in the Broadcast Age*, 43.

geographies” are useful as they disrupt “clear divisions and taken-for-granted hierarchies between public and private.”¹²⁵ Radio, like print media, was experienced within the domestic realm of the home. More than previous media forms though, it had a real sense of immediacy. It brought not only people’s ideas, but also their voices, into these private spaces.¹²⁶ Indeed, part of radio’s appeal was its fusion of modernity with a personal, intimate quality.¹²⁷

Part of this intimacy came from a sense of closeness with the speaker. Radio was an important space for women to insert both their figurative and literal voices into the public sphere; moreover, as Fisher argues, it was able to turn hosts into significant media personalities.¹²⁸ Such was the case for Littlejohn. She was involved with radio broadcasting in Australia from the early 1930s. In 1932 she told Archdale that she had begun a part time job with a radio station. “I talk myself or provide somebody competent every afternoon, on matters educational, political, international, but steadily refuse to do the silly stuff that is so often put over in women’s sessions,” she wrote in her letter.¹²⁹ Over the following years she developed a successful career on Sydney’s 2UE and 2UW as well as the BBC during her extended time abroad between 1935 and 1937. Ever keen to record her thoughts on her colleagues, Rapke wrote that Littlejohn “has personality positively oozing from her,” commenting on her “extraordinary ability as a broadcaster.”¹³⁰ At the same time, Littlejohn also saw herself as a professional who should be paid for her work; in a letter to Rischbieth she highlighted the importance of this for maintaining her “status.” “I received your wire re 2. G.B. but I couldn’t accept for they don’t pay a fee,” she commented. “I always get paid for broadcasting & if I did theirs for nothing it would affect my status & I always give my Broadcasting fee to the ‘U. Associations’ & we need the money too badly not to sell our wares.”¹³¹ Rejecting the traditional conception of women’s topics, Littlejohn subverted the

¹²⁵ Ibid., 24. For more on the idea of an “intimate public,” see: Jason Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

¹²⁶ Lloyd, *Gender and Media in the Broadcast Age*, 19.

¹²⁷ Griffen-Foley, “Modernity, Intimacy and Early Australian Commercial Radio,” 123; Lloyd, *Gender and Media in the Broadcast Age*, 19–29.

¹²⁸ Fisher, *Sound Citizens*, 16

¹²⁹ Linda Littlejohn to Helen Archdale, 27 February 1932, Records of the Equal Rights International Group, TWL, Box FL333, 5ERI.

¹³⁰ Rapke, “Bessie Rischbieth,” MS 842.

¹³¹ Linda Littlejohn to Bessie Rischbieth, 1 November 1931, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 8, File 19, MS 2004/5/1283.

conventions of women's radio programming that had already begun to take root, ensuring that her political activity expanded into new spaces.

In 1934 the *Weekly* linked up with 2UW to produce women's radio sessions. Street (who officially launched the new endeavour) believed that this project "would do much to help Australian women to realise their proper status in life."¹³² Already having the necessary experience, Littlejohn supervised the project, which "proved immensely popular."¹³³ She became the venture's central personality up until she left for Europe in 1935. The *Weekly's* sessions took place every day from 9.45–10am and then again from 2–3pm, with Littlejohn providing additional programmes at 4pm on Mondays and Wednesdays and 11.15am on Friday mornings.¹³⁴ A major feature of her many talks was a focus on stories about women and women's rights: in one broadcast she spoke about significant women in history, from Elizabeth Garrett Anderson to Marie Curie; in another series of four talks she explored "the position of women through different ages and under various religions."¹³⁵ Littlejohn also sought to bring the wider world to listeners at home. "Many women are so busy that they have little time to delve into overseas papers and glean news of how women in other parts are faring," the *Weekly* explained in its radio listings in mid-July 1934. It reminded readers that "[f]rom time to time news of women the world over is brought to listeners at 2UW. On Friday at 11.15 a.m. Mrs. Littlejohn will recount many matters of interest to women about their sisters over the seas."¹³⁶ Throughout 1934 Littlejohn spoke on the topic of women in India and, through her "travel talks," whisked away those tuning in to places like Scandinavia, where she had recently attended a conference of the Open Door International (ODI), or the Palace of Versailles, the birthplace of the interwar period's unsteady peace.¹³⁷ Like Rich, she wanted to involve her audience; a note in the *Weekly's* summary of upcoming broadcasts read: "Mrs. Littlejohn will be glad to receive letters from interested women suggesting subjects that they would like

¹³² "2UW's New Women's Sessions. Successful Opening at the New Studios," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 3 March 1934, 21. Street's words are paraphrased in this quote.

¹³³ "The Women's Weekly and 2UW," *Australian Women's Weekly*, 10 March 1934, 16.

¹³⁴ "2UW. Highlights for Readers," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 28 April 1934, 5.

¹³⁵ Ibid.; "2UW. Highlights for Readers," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 21 July 1934, 6.

¹³⁶ "2UW. Highlights for Readers," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 14 July 1934, 7.

¹³⁷ "2UW. Highlights for Readers," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 26 May 1934, 8; "2UW. Highlights for Readers," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 19 May 1934, 8; "2UW. Highlights for Readers," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 4 August 1934, 6.

discussed.”¹³⁸ Through the radio, Littlejohn was able to both develop her own public persona and engage in educating and politicising ordinary women.



Figure 50 Littlejohn and Street at the opening of 2UW's collaboration with the *Weekly*. *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 3 March 1934, 21.

When Littlejohn travelled to Europe in 1935, her reputation as a confident, effective broadcaster followed her. Copies of the BBC's *Radio Times* attest that she appeared on British radio several times during this period. In 1936, ahead of her radio talk on the life of Caroline

¹³⁸ "2UW. Highlights for Readers," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 12 May 1934, 8.

Chisholm, Littlejohn was described as “Australia’s leading feminist and a noted broadcaster.”¹³⁹ Later in 1937, as the ERI’s president she addressed the British public on the topic of the status of women.¹⁴⁰ When she toured the United States in 1938, she embarked on a radio and lecture tour that saw her speak on the subject “How Can Democracies Withstand Dictatorships?” for the National Broadcasting Company.¹⁴¹ Littlejohn was able to forge a career as a broadcaster. In turn, by cultivating a public image she was able to bring greater attention to her feminist and internationalist ideas both in Australia and overseas.

Rather than reinforcing the public–private divide, radio helped feminists refashion the home into a space for the formation and circulation of political thought—one where they hoped to generate support for feminist internationalism. By bringing the voices of feminist activists to their ears, radio had the potential to politicise so-called “ordinary” women. It also allowed those speaking to develop reputations as knowledgeable, confident public figures with valuable things to say. This was important for expanding and popularising feminism as the 1930s wore on.

CONCLUSION

In a 1934 piece for the *Weekly* titled “Radio and the Written Word. A Close Alliance,” Littlejohn evoked the symbiotic relationship between the two media, writing: “And so it happened that the Press would give the news, the wireless would elaborate it with special talks by experts on affairs of interest for which a newspaper could not spare the space.” She explained how the new technology of the radio—with its capacity to reach into ever-increasing numbers of homes—“joined forces with the written word,” as “through the mere turn of a button, folk found themselves listening to something that they might not actually have chosen, but which, nevertheless, held their interest.”¹⁴² Littlejohn herself utilised both media throughout the 1930s in particular to share her ideas with wider circles beyond those of her

¹³⁹ “10.45 The Life of Caroline Chisholm. Linda Littlejohn,” *Radio Times* (London), 29 May 1936, 71.

¹⁴⁰ “4.45 Tea-Time Talks. The Nations Look at the Status of Women. Linda P. Littlejohn,” *Radio Times* (London), 1 October 1937, 64.

¹⁴¹ “What Women Are Doing. Lecture Tour,” *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 3 September 1938, 26; “Social and Personal. To Broadcast in U.S.A.,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney), 6 December 1938, 4.

¹⁴² Linda Littlejohn, “Radio and the Written Word. A Close Alliance,” *Australian Women’s Weekly* (Sydney), 3 March 1934, 10.

feminist organisations. At the same time as enacting the communal goals of the feminist movement, through her writing and broadcasting she also forged a successful career for herself.

In between their ventures abroad, interwar feminists across both Australia and Britain turned to the media to extend their activism and share their ideas with broader audiences. They continued the tradition of the feminist press that had been used by advocates of women's rights for decades; as the period progressed, they also created and wrote for newspapers and magazines targeted at generalist audiences, as well as the new technology of the radio, to sustain their international activist communities across time and space and to reach new sections of society who may not have heard their ideas before. They hoped to politicise women both at home and abroad by teaching them about feminism and the wider world. Through this, they aimed to generate the popular support that they felt was a necessary condition to enact reform in favour of women's rights globally. They also hoped to foster conditions conducive to moulding a new world order based on ideas of peaceful coexistence and cooperation, bringing internationalism into their local contexts.

Throughout the period, feminists' use of these media forms meant that they extended into and appropriated traditionally masculine public spaces for their own purposes. This allowed them to develop their own careers as activists and public figures. In their roles as editors, writers, publishers, and broadcasters they carved out a space in which they could speak with authority and be considered as experts with valuable knowledge and experiences to share. This not only elevated the status of their movement but allowed them to develop confidence and fulfil any personal ambitions they may have had. Through the media, they became career women as well as activists. Feminism, in turn, also became a more professional endeavour, and the movement more boldly asserted the importance of women contributing to the public arena.

CHAPTER 7

Peace: A Feminist Issue



Figure 51 Mass meeting at the Disarmament Conference, 1932, F. H. Jullien. Collection LAV–Atria: Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History.

1932 was a particularly important year for peace activism. After having received much pressure from various quarters for over a decade, the League of Nations (the League) finally convened a conference to discuss the highly contested topic of world disarmament. Members of a range of women's organisations from around the globe were among those who descended on Geneva to contribute to this forum. For just under two years they had been working hard to add as many signatures as possible to their petition demanding disarmament. In their quest to reach vast numbers of people they had hosted countless public meetings and caravanned

across countries and continents; they had also translated their documents into twenty-two languages and even reached out to celebrated figures of the day, from Albert Einstein to Mahatma Gandhi, asking them to add their support.¹ Deliveries of the petition flooded into Geneva over the first weeks of 1932. Eight parcels wrapped in brown paper containing over two million signatures came via train from London's Victoria Station, while the names of more than a million Americans were shipped across the Atlantic.² From further afield came 112,000 signatures from Australia, over 41,000 from New Zealand, 170,000 from Japan, and two thousand from Egypt.³ In total, eight million names filling bundles upon bundles of paper were loaded into the back of a motor truck and driven around the Swiss city's streets under the watchful eye of cheering crowds.⁴ Led by figures including the American Mary Dingman and Britain's Kathleen Courtney, a group of the signatories marched proudly to the Disarmament Conference where, feeling "a profound sense of responsibility" on behalf of the millions of women they represented, they urged the delegates to find a lasting solution.⁵ Archival video footage captures them stacking up their countries' packages one by one, which "piled higher and higher, making a thrilling sight" for all to see.⁶ Women, they showed, felt just as strongly as men—if not more so—about matters of war and peace.

¹ "Women and Peace. Two Years' Vigorous Work. Disarmament Petition in Twenty-Two Languages," *Worker* (Brisbane), 13 January 1932, 18.

² "World Disarmament Petition," *Manchester Guardian*, 27 January 1932, 4; "Monster Disarmament Petition to League. Over Two Million Signatures," *Times of India* (Mumbai), 21 January 1932, 10; "Workers for Peace Parade Tomorrow," *New York Times*, 19 January 1932, 5. Archival video footage captures various moments in this process. See: "American Women Sail For Geneva To Demand Peace. Mrs Hooper Explains Purpose of Delegation Bearing a Million Signatures Asking for Disarmament," 1932, British Pathé Archives, film ID: 582.11, <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/american-women-sail-for-geneva-to-demand-peace-aka/query/disarmament>; "London: 2,071,944 Signatures! Britain's 'Messages of Peace' leave for World Disarmament Conference at Geneva," 25 January 1932, British Pathé Archives, film ID: 641.15, <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/2-071-944-signatures/query/2071944+Signatures>.

³ "Disarmament. The Women's Petition," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 March 1932, 4; "World-Wide Petitions to the World Disarmament Conference," *White Ribbon* (Wellington) 18 June 1932, 5. The figures reported in the press differ slightly, but final numbers are confirmed in: "Official Record of the Declarations and Petitions presented by the Disarmament Committee of the Women's International Organisations to the Disarmament Conference, Geneva, February 6th, 1932," 16–18, Peace and Disarmament Committee of the Women's International Organisations Collected Records, 1931–1940 (hereafter PDCWIO Records), Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, PA (hereafter Swarthmore), Box 1, CDG-B Switzerland.

⁴ "Women's Peace Move. World-Wide Petition," *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), 8 February 1932, 9; "World-Wide Petitions the World Disarmament Conference."

⁵ "Official Record of the Declarations and Petitions," 5–7, CDG-B Switzerland.

⁶ "Historic Scene at Geneva. Australia's Petition for Disarmament," *Scrutineer and Berrima District Press*, 4 May 1932, 2; "Women Petition the League of Nations Geneva Conference," 31 December 1932, British Movietone, AP Archive, BM6660, <http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/youtube/834d573459aa425e851dd859d88f7907>.

Peace was a preeminent concern during the interwar years. This was a time when people had desperate yet genuine hopes that humanity could put an end to violent conflict and instead resolve disputes through mutual agreement. Some grouped together under the banners of local and international anti-war organisations to increase their pressure power, while others supported the cause in more theoretical terms. Not all peace advocates shared the same views on the extent to which war was unjustifiable, however. Martin Ceadel has argued that the peace movement was divided ideologically and distinguishes between “pacifists”—a small group who rejected war “immediately and unconditionally,” including figures like the socialist feminist Helena Swanwick, who saw combatting male violence as a shared goal of the feminist and peace movements—and “pacifists” (a term borrowed from A.J.P. Taylor), a more diverse set of people who believed that, until the current system of international relations was overhauled, force may still be needed for defensive purposes.⁷ While this picture presents a clear split, the line between these two camps was in fact often blurred.⁸ Calls for peace became ever more urgent throughout the 1930s as the League failed to deal with a series of crises, such as the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the Italian assault on Abyssinia (Ethiopia). The rise of fascist regimes also forced peace activists to interrogate their own positions, as the question became: could they continue to renounce violence at all costs?

Many interwar feminists came to adopt a strong focus on peace; for Courtney, the peace movement was “fundamental to every other movement.”⁹ Campaigns for women’s rights and peace have a long and entangled history that stretches back well before the interwar period. Jill Liddington argues that prior to 1915 the women’s peace movement in Britain was no more than a “shadowy undercurrent of isolated groupings and minority ideas, easily overtaken by the growing women’s suffrage campaign.”¹⁰ Yet some Victorian suffragists and

⁷ Martin Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7. On Helena Swanwick’s thinking, see: Lucian M. Ashworth, “Feminism, War and the Prospects of International Government: Helena Swanwick and the Lost Feminists of Interwar International Relations,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 1 (2011): 25–43.

⁸ Sarah Hellawell has shown this of the British branch of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. See: Sarah Hellawell, “Feminism, Pacifism and Internationalism: The Women’s International League, 1915–1935” (PhD thesis, Northumbria University, 2017), 14–15.

⁹ *Report of the Fifth Conference on the Cause and Cure of War. Held in Washington, D.C. January 14–17, 1930* (publishing details unknown), 21, National Committee on the Cause and Cure of War Collected Records (hereafter NCCCW Records), Swarthmore, Box 2, CDG-A.

¹⁰ Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham Common: Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820* (London: Virago, 1989), 13.

especially Evangelicals did debate the role of physical force in society and the empire.¹¹ The First World War was a decisive moment that galvanised many (but not all) feminists to campaign more systematically against state violence. In places like Britain, the suffrage movement was solidly split, with divisions forming between those who turned their attention to peace work (including Courtney and Chrystal Macmillan) and those patriots who followed the example of Emmeline Pankhurst and Millicent Garrett Fawcett, deeming the war effort important enough to temporarily interrupt their campaigns for the vote.¹² In Australia, far removed from the battle front, women also gathered to protest the conflict; the city of Melbourne in particular became a major activist hub.¹³ With the rise of far-right ideologies, many became ardent anti-fascists, too, riling against threats to the democracy they so valued.¹⁴ In light of the interwar spirit of internationalism and the necessarily collaborative nature of achieving peace, during the 1920s and 1930s women coordinated their anti-war efforts across borders. They campaigned against violence right up until 1939 and continued to do so even after.

In the context of the Cold War and women's anti-nuclear protests, from the 1980s feminist scholars began interrogating the connections between women, feminism, and peace in earnest.¹⁵ Jo Vellacott, for example, made the case that feminist pacifism (broadly

¹¹ On nineteenth-century women and peace, see: Heloise Brown, *"The truest form of patriotism": Pacifist Feminism in Britain, 1870–1902* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), especially chapters 1–3.

¹² Jo Vellacott provides an account of this tension in *Pacifists, Patriots, and the Vote: The Erosion of Democratic Suffragism in Britain during the First World War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹³ Carolyn Rasmussen, *The Lesser Evil?: Opposition to War and Fascism in Australia, 1920–1941* (Parkville: History Department, University of Melbourne, 1992), 3–4; Malcolm Saunders, *Quiet Dissenter: The Life and Thought of an Australian Pacifist: Eleanor May Moore 1875–1949* (Canberra: Peace Research Centre, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1992), 97.

¹⁴ Johanna Alberti, "British Feminists and Anti-Fascism in the 1930s," in *This Working-Day World: Women's Lives and Culture(s) in Britain, 1914–1945*, ed. Sybil Oldfield (London: Taylor & Francis, 1994; Oxford: Routledge, 2022), 111–122; Julie Gottlieb, "Feminism and Anti-Fascism in Britain between the Wars: Militancy Revived?," in *British Fascism, the Labour Movement and the State*, ed. Nigel Copsey and Dave Renton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 68–94; Julie Gottlieb, "Guilty Women," *Foreign Policy, and Appeasement in Inter-War Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Julie Gottlieb, "Varieties of Feminist Anti-Fascism," in *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-war Period*, ed. Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 101–18.

¹⁵ Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace, 1914–28* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993); Bruna Bianchi and Geraldine Ludbrook, eds., *Living War, Thinking Peace (1914–1924): Women's Experiences, Feminist Thought, and International Relations* (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016); Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War* (Harlow: Longman, 2002), especially chapter 6; Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton

understood) “deserves an honourable place in feminist analysis, rather than being regarded ... as a potentially dangerous aberration.”¹⁶ Scholarship like hers has demonstrated the diversity of feminists’ and women’s peace activity over time, taking it seriously as not only activism but also as a form of political thought. In relation to the interwar years, a lot of this work has centred on the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)—the organisation that emerged from the 1915 congress held by women in The Hague—including its various national chapters.¹⁷ Historians and peace studies researchers are continually adding

University Press, 1993), especially chapter 6; Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham Common*; Vellacott, *Pacifists, Patriots, and the Vote*.

¹⁶ Jo Vellacott, “A Place for Pacifism and Transnationalism in Feminist Theory: The Early Work of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom,” *Women’s History Review* 2, no. 1 (1993): 24.

¹⁷ Some significant contributions to this literature include: Alonso, *Peace as a Women’s Issue*; Lucian M. Ashworth, “Women of the Twenty Years’ Crisis: The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and the Problem of Collective Security,” in *Women’s International Thought: A New History*, ed. Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler, 136–57 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Laura Beers, “Advocating for a Feminist Internationalism between the Wars,” in *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics since 1500*, ed. Glenda Sluga and Carolyn James, 202–21 (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2016); Monica Burney “The Meaning of a Woman’s Work: Refugees, Statelessness, Nationality, and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 1918–1931” (Masters thesis, Eastern Illinois University, 2018); Catia Cecilia Confortini, *Intelligent Compassion: Feminist Critical Methodology in the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Lela B. Costin, “Feminism, Pacifism, Internationalism and the 1915 International Congress of Women,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 5, no. 3 (1982): 301–15; Josephine Eglin, “Women Pacifists in Interwar Britain,” in *Challenge to Mars: Pacifism from 1918 to 1945*, ed. Peter Brock and Thomas P. Socknat (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 149–68; Catherine Foster, *Women For All Seasons: The Story of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989); Sarah Hellawell, “Antimilitarism, Citizenship and Motherhood: The Formation and Early Years of the Women’s International League (WIL), 1915–1919,” *Women’s History Review* 27, no. 4 (2018): 551–64; Hellawell, “Feminism, Pacifism and Internationalism”; Kate Laing, “Fighting for a New World Order: The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom in Australia 1915–1975” (PhD thesis, La Trobe University, 2017); Kate Laing, “‘The White Australia Nettle’: Women’s Internationalism, Peace, and the White Australia Policy in the Interwar Years,” *History Australia* 14, no. 2 (2017): 218–36; Kate Laing, “World War and Worldly Women: The Great War and the Formation of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom in Australia,” *The La Trobe Journal*, no. 96 (2015): 117–34; Malcolm Saunders, “Are Women More Peaceful than Men?: The Experience of the Australian Section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915–39,” *Interdisciplinary Peace Research* 3, no. 1 (1991): 45–61; Malcolm Saunders, “The Early Years of the Australian Section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom: 1915–49,” *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 82, no. 2 (1996): 180–91; Malcolm Saunders and Ralph Summy, “Odd Ones Out: The Australian Section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom: 1919–41,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 40, no. 1 (2008): 83–97; Linda K. Schott, *Reconstructing Women’s Thoughts: The International League for Peace and Freedom before World War Two* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); J. Ann Tickner and Jacqui True, “A Century of International Relations Feminism: From World War I Women’s Peace Pragmatism to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda,” *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2018): 221–33; Jo Vellacott, “A Place for Pacifism and Transnationalism in Feminist Theory”; Jo Vellacott, “Feminism as if All People Mattered: Working to Remove the Causes of War, 1919–1929,” *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 3 (2001): 375–94.

to this body of scholarship and are now considering non-feminist women's participation in peace activism, too.¹⁸

Peace activism formed a major part of many of my group's feminist identities. Commenting on the British context, in 1989 Liddington argued: "Any history of peace politics which ignores the issue of gender and ignores the powerful language and imagery of women and peace remains inadequate and misleading; so is any history of feminism in Britain which omits peace ideas and campaigns."¹⁹ Taking this invocation seriously, in the following pages I ask: in what ways did my group engage with the issue of peace? How did this shape their ideas about feminism (and vice versa)? In what terms did they conceive of world peace? And what does this say about the development of feminist internationalism over the 1920s and 1930s? Expanding beyond both the WILPF and the Northern Hemisphere context, I rethink how, why, and where feminists developed their anti-violence thinking. This chapter is necessarily selective in what activities it covers but aims to give a rounded impression of interwar feminists' peace work while also delving into the specifics of my group's thinking and campaigns.

Over the course of this period, peace work became increasingly central to how many of my eight subjects saw their world, prioritised their activism, and articulated their ideas about women's rights and internationalism. Emboldened by various developments of the interwar period, including the obvious fact that men's politics had only led the world to disaster, feminists looked beyond the confines of their international organisations and sought to stake a claim to political life more generally. Becoming involved in conversations about peace offered them a chance to prove their worth as citizens and political thinkers and make a bold statement about women's political capabilities. Their experiences in this arena reinforced their views that women needed greater access to formal channels of political power to effect real change, as well as their insistence on internationalism—based on widespread public support—as a remedy to the world's problems. There are common threads in each member of my group's stories that show how they finely balanced the various aspects of their identities as women and as political actors to assert their legitimacy in both national and international

¹⁸ Caitríona Beaumont, "Women's Organisations, Active Citizenship, and the Peace Movement: New Perspectives on Female Activism in Britain, 1918–1939," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 31, no. 4 (2020): 697–721.

¹⁹ Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham Common*, 5.

arenas. Whether they shared their thoughts with League delegates in Geneva or local audiences in far-away Sydney, they often harnessed maternalist imagery to explain their investment in the cause and rouse public support, all while acting as confident, vocal, and unashamedly political public figures. They understood peace as a multifaceted state: one defined by the end of conflict between nations, the emergence of a new gender order, and, sometimes, a recalibration of East–West relations. Through advocating peace, they at once hoped to prevent future wars and challenge the international community’s masculine character.

BECOMING PEACEMAKERS

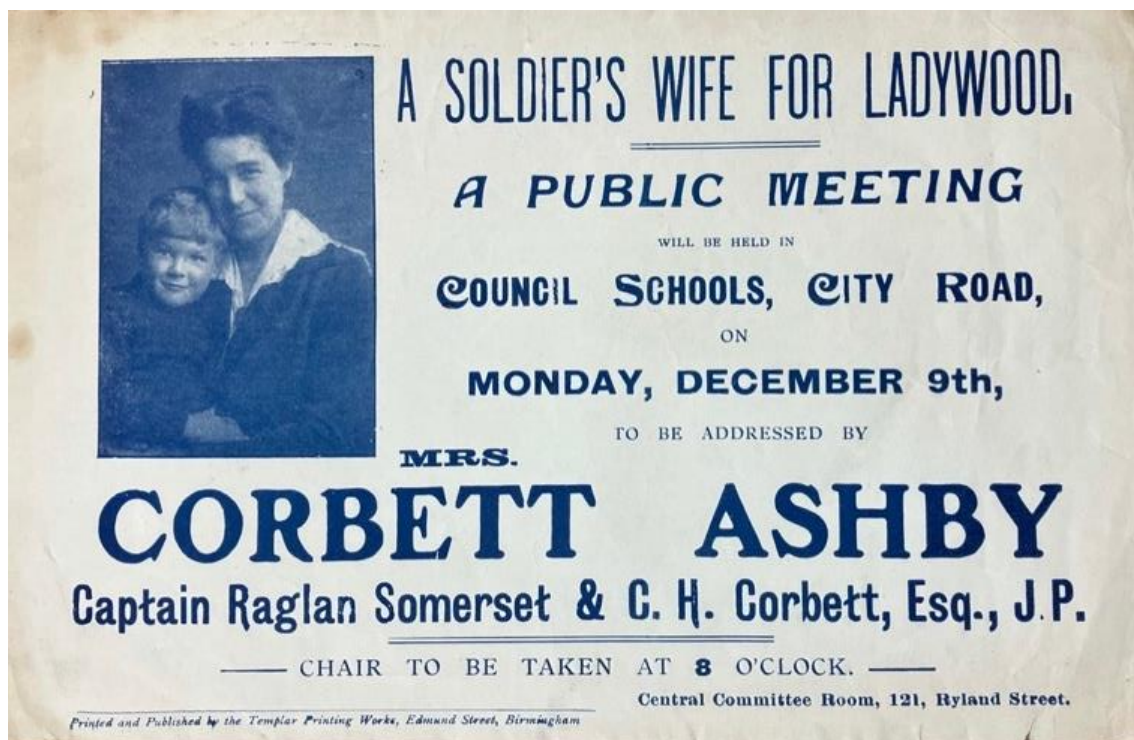


Figure 52 1918 election flyer: “A Soldier’s Wife for Ladywood.” *The Women’s Library*, London, 7MCA/B/06.

The First World War cast a long shadow over the years that followed. People from many different walks of life had been affected: some had survived hunger and physical devastation, while others had lost loved ones—even those who did return home—and the presence of soldiers disabled through combat was a constant visual reminder of the conflict’s far-reaching effects. National leaders had promoted patriotism, but by 1919 peace was at the forefront of many people’s minds. Various communities turned to activism to promote a new, less conflict-ridden mode of international relations, including League advocates and socialists (some of

whom, as Daniel Laqua explains, at least initially championed the League).²⁰ This atmosphere influenced both my group and the trajectory of feminist internationalism during the interwar years. Each of them became interested in peace at different times, to varying degrees, and for a range of reasons. Understanding why they did so helps set the scene for their work over the years to come.

When Margery Corbett Ashby was in her nineties, the historian Brian Harrison asked her to reflect on her involvement in peace efforts. She framed her story in terms of a family tradition, highlighting that her parents were opposed to the turn of the century Boer War in South Africa.²¹ This evocation of family history was common for her; it is how she also explained her interest in politics, Liberalism, and feminism. But to understand her peace work we might look to her own experiences during the years 1914 to 1918. Like many of her generation, Corbett Ashby was left to raise a young child when her husband Brian Ashby was sent to fight in France in 1916.²² Her letters from this time echo the sentiments of many other wives left at home. “I am so tortured at all you and the others are enduring & apparently in vain,” she wrote to her husband, commenting on “the ghastly helplessness of us all.”²³ Corbett Ashby later drew a connection between her role as a mother and her anti-war stance, stating: “The fact that Michael’s birth coincided with the disastrous Battle of Coronel in the South Pacific made me a more passionate pacifist than ever.”²⁴ Whether or not this accurately reflects how her interests unfolded, it indicates the gendered narrative she constructed about herself and her activism. When she stood for parliament after the 1918 armistice, these two facets of her identity—marriage and motherhood—were at the centre of Corbett Ashby’s campaign. Flyers promoted her candidature with the slogan “A Soldier’s Wife for Ladywood,” accompanied by a very feminine photo of her holding her young son, Michael.²⁵ When put

²⁰ Daniel Laqua, “Democratic Politics and the League of Nations: The Labour and Socialist International as a Protagonist of Interwar Internationalism,” *Contemporary European History* 24, no. 2 (2015): 175–92.

²¹ Margery Corbett Ashby interviewed by Brian Harrison, 7 May 1974, Oral Evidence on the Suffragette and Suffragist Movements: The Brian Harrison Interviews (hereafter Harrison Interviews), The Women’s Library, London (hereafter TWL), 8SUF/B/003.

²² Margery Corbett Ashby with Michael Ashby, *Memoirs of Dame Margery Corbett Ashby* (Horsted Keynes: M.G. Ashby, 1996), 83.

²³ Margery Corbett Ashby to Brian Ashby, 1 April 1918, Papers of Margery Corbett Ashby (hereafter Corbett Ashby Papers), TWL, Box FL476, 7MCA/A/27.

²⁴ Corbett Ashby, *Memoirs*, 82.

²⁵ “A Soldier’s Wife for Ladywood,” Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL482, 7MCA/B/06.

together with her proposed programme of action—which centred on women’s rights, free trade, social welfare, and an intergovernmental institution to promote world peace—we can see how her gendered experience of the First World War contributed not only to her interest in peace but also to her legitimacy as a public figure.²⁶

Other members of my group had more active experiences of the war. In the early 1910s, Ruby Rich (who was then in her mid-twenties) went to Europe with her family. When they settled down in London, Rich felt compelled to contribute to society. She became a member of the St John Ambulance service and signed a form to say that if war broke out, she would go wherever she was needed. Over the next few years, she moved back and forth between London and Switzerland, where she was located when the war began. Rich returned to England, taking on nursing work first at Charing Cross Hospital and then at a private hospital in Axbridge. She later admitted to her interviewer, Hazel de Berg, that she was not at all well suited to the role: “I think they would’ve all wished that I hadn’t been taken on,” she chuckled. “... I wasn’t meant for that kind of life, I felt too deeply the sorrows of the men, not only their physical suffering but the whole set up of the war and everything.”²⁷ Abandoning nursing, Rich returned to Switzerland where she instead made the most of her musical talents. With the Young Men’s Christian Association she hosted and participated in concerts for wounded Allied soldiers. She had already personally experienced the damage that war caused to soldiers: her brother Vivien was wounded in France, and she had visited him in a Richmond hospital before leaving Britain. Soon, her youngest brother Carrick would become ill with tuberculosis, and Rich would collect him from Brest and—via Paris and London—bring him home to Australia.²⁸ This very immediate experience of the damages wrought by war forms an important backdrop for her later turn to peace work.

²⁶ “To the Electors of Ladywood What I Stand For. A Progressive Platform for Men and Women,” Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL482, 7MCA/B/06.

²⁷ Ruby Rich interviewed by Hazel de Berg, Hazel de Berg collection (hereafter de Berg collection), National Library of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NLA), ORAL TRC 1/836, Session 3, from 21:37.

²⁸ Ruby Rich provides a thorough account of this period of her life in her oral history interview with Hazel de Berg: Rich interviewed by de Berg, ORAL TRC 1/836. Other sources that shed light on these events include: “Social. Sydney,” *Jewish Herald* (Melbourne), 20 August 1920, 15; “Socially Yours,” *Australian Jewish Times* (Sydney), 9 February 1967, 11; “Anzac Prize to Woman,” *Canberra Times*, 4 May 1982, 10; Audrey Tate, “Rich, Ruby Sophia (1888–1988),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, published first in hardcopy 2012, online 2012, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/rich-ruby-sophia-14202/text25214>.



Figure 53 Rich as a volunteer nurse at St John's Gate during the First World War. Australian Jewish Historical Society, PP/SCHALITRR/1/1/001/001.46.

For others, pacifism was born less of personal experience and was more of a political response. Both Chrystal Macmillan and Kathleen Courtney shunned the patriotism that dominated the British women's suffrage movement in favour of working across borders, including with German women, to protest the conflict. They became founding members of the WILPF when they made the journey to The Hague in 1915. With their colleagues they explicitly linked the goals of feminism and peace. "Since the combined influence of the women of all countries is one of the strongest forces for the prevention of war," they stated, "and since women can only have full responsibility and effective influence when they have equal political rights with men, this International Congress of Women demands their political enfranchisement."²⁹ In keeping with this line of thinking, Macmillan believed that international

²⁹ International Congress of Women, *Report of the International Congress of Women. The Hague—The Netherlands. April 28th to May 1st, 1915* (Chicago: Woman's Peace Party, 1915), 13.

cooperation was key. “The war has focussed the attention of the world on internationalism; we must make use of the new international opportunities,” she wrote in a letter to the British suffrage periodical the *Common Cause*. “To be silent internationally is to put our movement back. We are shirking our responsibilities if we do not keep before the world that women, no less than men, are affected by the war, and are concerned in the terms of peace.”³⁰ She continued to support peace efforts, although other causes took up most of her time during the interwar years.

Similarly, Courtney saw peace and feminism as fundamentally compatible—in fact, indivisible. Her trip with Macmillan to The Hague aroused opposition from some of her suffrage colleagues, leading her to resign from the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) executive. “I have for some months felt strongly that the most vital work at this moment is the building up of public opinion on lines likely to promote a permanent peace,” she told them, “and I am also convinced that such work is entirely in accordance with the principles underlying the suffrage movement.”³¹ Despite her family’s military background (according to her biographer, Francesca Wilson, Courtney grew up “in Woolwich to the sound of trumpets and drums and the tread of soldiers marching incessantly along the road”) she devoted the rest of her life to peace work.³² Courtney reflected on this time in conversations with Wilson, revealing what drew her in this direction. “We women knew nothing about international affairs, nor did the general public,” she recounted (although this was probably an exaggeration). “There was little about them in the papers. They were considered the concern of the Foreign Office. I thought it was essential for us to find out about them, to understand the causes of war, and to work in future to prevent it recurring.”³³ She joined the Serbian Relief Fund and spent around six months during 1916 helping on hospital ships and at refugee camps in Salonika (Thessaloniki, in northern Greece) and Bastia (in northern Corsica).³⁴ This

³⁰ Chrystal Macmillan, “Madam,—,” *Common Cause of Humanity* (London), 15 January 1915, 652.

³¹ Kathleen Courtney to Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 9 March 1915, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, British Section Papers (hereafter WIL Papers), Politics, Economics, and Social Science Collections, London School of Economics Archives, London (hereafter LSE), WILPF/4/1.

³² Francesca Wilson, “Dame Kathleen Courtney,” extract from unpublished manuscript “Three Twentieth Century Women of Action: Dame Kathleen Courtney, Margaret McFie, Gem Jebb,” 3, Dame Kathleen Courtney Papers, Lady Margaret Hall Archives, Oxford (hereafter Courtney Papers, LMH), LMH/MMP/3/2/1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 26–7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26–32.

experience brought her face-to-face with the destructive effects of war and was important for solidifying her already developing convictions.

Although Australia was geographically further removed from the conflict, Antipodean feminists were not untouched by the war. Jessie Street had in fact been in England when it broke out in 1914. After spending a short time on the Isle of Skye, where a lack of news provided blissful ignorance of current affairs, she returned to London where “[t]he press was full of war news and propaganda.”³⁵ Initially, she volunteered at Creighton House, a Church of England settlement in Fulham that helped poor mothers and their babies. Following this she worked with another group that helped the families of volunteer soldiers understand their entitlements and how to obtain their allowances, an experience that brought her into contact with a range of women and taught her about issues such as marital violence.³⁶ But after being turned away from work as an army motor driver she became “completely disheartened about doing anything for the war effort in England” and went to the United States, where she took up a position at Waverley House, a centre for young women who had been arrested (usually as sex workers).³⁷ Street’s wartime experiences were thus thoroughly tied up with her formative feminist experiences.

We should not assume that all feminists emerged from the First World War as committed pacifists, however. For some, this was a longer journey. Though information on Linda Littlejohn’s early life is sparse, press reports documenting social and charitable life in wartime Sydney give clues about her perspective. Rather than opposing violence (as she later would), she focused on helping the war effort. She was one of the speakers at the 1918 Women’s Loyal Demonstration at Sydney’s Town Hall who called “for recruits to reinforce our troops at the front, the repatriation of our soldiers, and the need of personal and national economy in order that we may lend our savings to the Government for war purposes.”³⁸ Similarly, despite trying to maintain an unbiased stance as president of the Women’s Service Guilds of Western Australia (WSG) during the conscription debates, Bessie Rischbieth

³⁵ Jessie Street, *Truth or Repose* (Sydney: Australasian Book Society, 1966), 58–9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 60–7. On the rationale behind Waverley House, see: Maude E. Miner, “The Problem of Wayward Girls and Delinquent Women,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York* 2, no. 4 (1912): 130–38.

³⁸ “Women’s Town Hall Demonstration,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 May 1918, 13.

eventually affirmed that “as much as she detested war she felt we were in honour bound to stand by those men who had gone forward to help the Empire, and we must see this great national crisis through as a Commonwealth.”³⁹ Her other efforts during this period also included the typically feminine job of organising aid in the form of clothing to Belgian refugees.⁴⁰ Perhaps it was the general tide of the feminist movement that shifted Littlejohn’s and Rischbieth’s perspectives on this topic in subsequent years.

Not all feminists became active peace campaigners either, even if they sympathised with this goal. In her unpublished autobiography Helen Archdale explained that “[t]he outbreak of war in 1914 found me quite uncertain [o]f aim or of direction. I fully realised the essential futility of war as a means of arriving at agreement and yet faced with a seeming a[g]gression I did not clearly see where either right or wrong lay.”⁴¹ Like her fellow suffragettes she took on various jobs during these years: a failed project to train women to farm, a role as an “Assistant Lady Clerk” at the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps headquarters, and a post in the Ministry of National Service’s women’s department.⁴² In 1918 her estranged husband was killed while on leave when his ship was torpedoed.⁴³ These experiences, however, did not lead Archdale down the route of peace activism. She saw the connections between the two causes—believing that “‘peace’ included, as an essential part of its foundation, justice and equality of status for men and women”—but she became more and more focused on what she saw as strictly feminist issues.⁴⁴ She disagreed with Carrie Chapman Catt that “‘broad minded feminists should be pacifists’,” arguing that “[h]ere the issue is confused between two different things, that of being something and that of devoting your energies to working for it.”⁴⁵ Responding to a request to join women’s anti-war and anti-fascist efforts in 1934, Archdale

³⁹ Women’s Service Guilds minutes, 13 April 1917, quoted in: Dianne Davidson, *Women on the Warpath: Feminists of the First Wave* (Perth: UWA Press, 1997), 63.

⁴⁰ “Clothing the Belgian Refugees,” *West Australian* (Perth), 4 December 1914, 7; “Clothing to the Belgian Refugees,” *West Australian* (Perth), 19 December 1914, 12.

⁴¹ “Manuscript of An Interfering Woman’, being typescript manuscript of Helen Archdale’s autobiography, including handwritten annotations,” chapter 6, 1, Betty Archdale Papers (hereafter Archdale papers), State Library of New South Wales, Sydney (hereafter SLNSW), MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

⁴² *Ibid.*, chapter 6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, chapter 6, 7; “Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Montgomery Archdale,” Commonwealth War Graves, <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/899503/theodore-montgomery-archdale/>.

⁴⁴ “Manuscript of An Interfering Woman’,” chapter 15, 8, MLMSS 9091, Microfilm CY 4624.

⁴⁵ “To the Editor of JUS SUFFRAGII,” *International Woman Suffrage News* 22 no. 9 (June 1928), 140–1.

countered that until women gained real power—which they would achieve through obtaining equal legal status—they were simply “beating the air.”⁴⁶

MATERNALISM & PEACE

At the end of the First World War it was assumed that the broken world would be remade by men. Photographs of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference show rooms full of dark suits, worn by (mostly white) men with greying hair and serious expressions. Undeterred by the lack of a substantial feminine presence, women made appeals to the conference and presented their visions for the future. While they initially remained on the outer as lobbyists rather than decision makers, over the next two decades they persisted in their quest to put an end to inter-state violence and the related violence that occurred between men and women. To stake a claim to active and ongoing involvement in the work of peace they had to present a case for why their opinions mattered—a claim that often revolved around their shared (and simplified) identity as women.

While there were many different motivations for interwar feminists’ investment in peace, it was common to hear them repeat the refrain that women by nature were inherently peace-loving and that as mothers they were particularly sensitive to the destruction that war caused. Women, so this logic went, could not be expected to raise their sons knowing they may one day be sent to the battlefield as cannon fodder. This made them especially motivated peace activists. As a “new feminist,” Corbett Ashby subscribed to this line of thinking and characterised women as “the great constructive peace force”—a standpoint that became central to the programmes of the different organisations she led, including the British Commonwealth League (BCL) and the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (the Alliance).⁴⁷ Women’s maternal instincts, in her view, were needed to counter the aggression that dominated the world; as she put it just a couple of years before the Second World War erupted: “Perplexed and suffering mankind needs mothering by strong and

⁴⁶ Helen Alexander Archdale to Andrée Viollis, 7 May 1934, Records of the Equal Rights International Group (hereafter ERI Records), TWL, Box FL333, 5ERI.

⁴⁷ British Commonwealth League, “*Marriage from the Imperial Standpoint.*” *The Civil Rights of Married Women. Interracial Unions. Report of Conference held on June 7th, 8th & 9th, 1932* (London: British Commonwealth League, 1932), 32.

valiant women who have won their own freedom, broken their chains, tested their loyalty to their women comrades.”⁴⁸ Such words offered a distinct argument for women’s special contributions to peace campaigns.

Maternalism has long been an important current within feminism. Scholars have grappled with this strand of thought, including in relation to the interwar peace movement. Harriet Hyman Alonso, for instance, has shown how an emphasis on women as mothers provided a “societally acceptable” premise for feminists’ political work and lent them both credibility and moral superiority.⁴⁹ She frames motherhood as both “the most successful organizing tool available to women” and “a very real emotional condition.”⁵⁰ In a similar vein Sarah Hellawell has shown how women’s “moral force” (drawn from their real or imagined connections to motherhood) was “an integral part of their ideology and methodology.”⁵¹ For her part, Linda K. Schott argues that “the idea of complementarity gave them justification for doing work that they believed men had wrongfully neglected and caused them to value the work traditionally done by women.”⁵² Drawing on gender difference, women could stake a claim to public conversations from which they might otherwise be excluded. Yet the image of the maternal figure was not a neutral one; it was shaped by deeply entrenched racial hierarchies, with white motherhood being considered essential to the health of settler nations such as Australia. It was the image of the white maternal figure that feminists were able to capitalise on in their quest to be considered full political citizens—a move that reinforced feminism’s exclusive nature.⁵³

Interwar feminists believed that women had valuable contributions to make to peace discussions. Courtney worked with both women’s-only and mixed gender peace groups and built a widely recognised public profile. She travelled around the country and abroad to generate a global anti-war consciousness, reminding her audiences that peace should not be framed as “a negative theory” (that is, simply the absence of war), but rather as “something

⁴⁸ “President’s New Year Message,” *International Women’s News* 31, no. 4 (January 1937): 25.

⁴⁹ Alonso, *Peace as a Women’s Issue*, 11–12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Hellawell, “Antimilitarism, Citizenship and Motherhood,” 552.

⁵² Schott, *Reconstructing Women’s Thoughts*, 12.

⁵³ Fiona Paisley, *Loving Protection?: Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women’s Rights, 1919–1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000), 82.

constructive, something active, that demands all the efforts of our brain and our heart and the whole strength we can put into it—something we have to build.”⁵⁴ During one of her trips to the United States in 1936, an American newspaper reported that “Miss Courtney does not feel that peace is a problem whose solution lies in the hands of women.”⁵⁵ This misrepresented the story somewhat. While Courtney did value cooperation between men and women and felt that this was the most viable option in the British context, she was still led by feminist principles. She praised American women for being “awake and alert” and for “forming a spearhead of public opinion on international affairs.”⁵⁶ Likewise, on her 1938 tour of the Antipodes she encouraged women to unite globally in their work for peace, saying that “[i]n international thought ... women are equally as advanced as men, and though their outlook may be based on different ideals they are equally ardent in their hope for peace.”⁵⁷ To fight against war was women’s responsibility now they were voters: “We are citizens, fellow citizens with men—in taking over the right to vote, we have also taken over a great duty. We can no longer sit back and say that these things are no concern of ours; we share the responsibility for good government.”⁵⁸

Courtney sometimes mobilised the rhetoric of motherhood in making her arguments. In doing so she, like many of her contemporaries, was presenting more than a “motherhood-and-apple-pie” vision of women’s roles as peacemakers, as Vellacott puts it; rather, she presented a persuasive case for women’s political activity.⁵⁹ On her tour of Australia and New Zealand she asked her audiences to compare international relations to their experiences in their own homes. She told them that “[t]he world situation was not unlike the family one—and every woman knew that to keep peace in a family it was not enough to say merely that there should be no squabbling,” with the mother needing “to be active all the time, constantly

⁵⁴ “Why Blame the Fire Engine?” *World Youth*, 22 February 1936, news clipping, Papers of Kathleen D’Olier Courtney (hereafter Courtney Papers), TWL, Box FL455, 7KDC/D3/42–54; “Precis of Miss Courtney’s Speech, May 3rd 1938,” Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL455, 7KDC/D5/65–70.

⁵⁵ Alice Kuehn, “Distinguished Englishwoman Speaks on Foreign Affairs,” *Plain Dealer* (Ohio), 30 January 1936, news clipping, Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL455, 7KDC/D3/42–54.

⁵⁶ “Miss K. Courtney Gives Views on Peace Project,” clipping from unidentified newspaper, no date, Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL455, 7KDC/D3/42–54.

⁵⁷ “Peace Problems. A Woman Ambassador Visits New Zealand,” *Star*, 12 February 1938, news clipping, Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL455, 7KDC/D5/71–105.

⁵⁸ “Precis of Miss Courtney’s Speech, May 3rd 1938,” 7KDC/D5/65–70.

⁵⁹ Vellacott, “A Place for Pacifism and Transnationalism in Feminist Theory,” 23.

adjusting relationships, smoothing out difficulties, righting real and imaginary wrongs, bringing understanding to bear upon problems that arose.”⁶⁰ Because of their experiences as peacekeepers in the home, she argued, women had “little excuse” for replicating men’s errors.⁶¹ Whether she fully believed in this comparison is doubtful; nevertheless, this was a method she used to convince broad swathes of women to become politically engaged and to make the case for women’s capacities as participants in public political life.

Interwar feminists used the maternalist trope to encourage everyday women to become involved in peace campaigns. Pressuring governments was in part a numbers game, and they wanted as many people to be involved as possible. In Australia, Rich became a vocal advocate of world peace and often emphasised women’s experiences as mothers in her radio talks. “Women have a clearer vision of the horrors of war than men,” she told the BCL conference in 1932. “They are the creators and custodians of life, and feel they have a bigger responsibility to protect it.”⁶² But the real test was for them to transform this feeling into action. As Rich told the Women’s Non-Party Political Association of South Australia, “[e]very woman was naturally a pacifist, but should be a fighting pacifist, fighting for peace.”⁶³ She realised that women did not have the same avenues as men to effect change because they were not “able to get into the same positions as men hold to bring about a peace policy.”⁶⁴ Thinking about whether women have “any special contribution to make to the work for world peace,” she argued that because women’s status was still evolving, they could “more readily than men adjust our thought and ourselves to the quickly changing face of the world—to the need for new solutions to solve the ever new problems.”⁶⁵ Women, then, because of their gender and the limitations that had been imposed on them, had a special opportunity to rethink conventional ways of doing things.

⁶⁰ “‘Work and Study to End Wars.’ World Situation and the Family,” news clipping from unidentified newspaper, c. 1938, Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL455, 7KDC/D5/65–70.

⁶¹ “World Peace. Problem of Nations,” *Herald* (NZ), 16 February 1938, Courtney Papers, TWL, Box FL455, 7KDC/D5/71–105.

⁶² “Women’s Movement for Peace. British League’s Conference. Ruby Rich’s Views,” *Daily Standard* (Brisbane), 11 June 1932, 1.

⁶³ “‘Women’s Work.’ Lecture by Miss Ruby Rich,” *Observer* (Adelaide), 31 March 1928, 60. Rich’s words are paraphrased in this quote.

⁶⁴ Ruby Rich, “Women’s Co-operation in World Peace,” *Dawn* (Perth), 16 December 1936, 2.

⁶⁵ “Given in Adelaide & Sydney & Queensland,” Papers of Ruby Rich (hereafter Rich Papers), NLA, Box 3, File 25, MS 7493.



Figure 54 Rich (right) and her dolls of the world. "International Friendship Through Dolls," *World Peace* 2, no. 11 (November 1937): 168.

Whereas during the war motherhood had been invoked for patriotic purposes, interwar feminists flipped this logic so that it served their internationalist ideals. To a degree, the language of maternalism was one that crossed borders, even if it was incorrectly assumed to mean the same thing in all places. Rischbieth articulated this position when she said that peace was "the outstanding problem which concerns all mothers today irrespective of race [*sic*] creed or colour."⁶⁶ She and her friend Rich—who were both very conscious of the racial diversity of the British Empire—emphasised that the peace issue was one that required interracial cooperation (although this did not extend to seeing Indigenous women as active participants or even necessarily as victims of colonial violence). In one of her more creative initiatives, Rich promoted a collection of dolls dressed in various national costumes that mothers could buy to instil internationalist values in their children—a move that was praised as "the best suggestion that has yet been made to mothers as to how they can teach their children the principles of

⁶⁶ Bessie Rischbieth, "The League of Nations & World Motherhood," Papers and objects of Bessie Rischbieth (hereafter Rischbieth Papers), NLA, Box 23, File 5, MS 2004/9/102.

internationalism.”⁶⁷ This might not initially stand out as an important instance of feminist internationalist thought, but we should take it seriously as a way that Rich shared her philosophy of an intergenerational peace consciousness; as she put it, “[p]eace through the mothers of to-day, peace through the children of to-morrow.”⁶⁸ This vision of peace was one built on international tolerance, diversity, and understanding.

Rich and her colleagues were directly responding to events unfolding around them, including the rise of aggressive fascist regimes in Europe. Coming from a feminist tradition that was centrally concerned with ideas of citizenship and political participation, these women were deeply troubled by the affronts to democracy they were learning about in the news. In a radio talk Rischbieth said that “a hungry world” was desperately in need of the “Spirit of Motherhood,” the very opposite to “the growth of intense nationalism & dictatorship” that was currently prevailing in the world. “I would feel that I had failed in my talk tonight if I did not stress war as a possibility of the future possibly of the near future,” her handwritten notes for this talk read. But she told the mothers and housewives listening in that “it need not take place if women organise for peace in a constructive way” by joining international women’s organisations and focusing their efforts on Geneva.⁶⁹ As she showed, the concept of motherhood could be subverted and made fundamentally political.

As the 1930s wore on, feminists’ calls for women to fight for peace became an increasingly urgent and central part of their work. Littlejohn’s time in Europe in the mid-1930s as leader of the Equal Rights International (ERI) prompted her to think carefully about the opposing conditions of war and peace, fascism and democracy. She too framed women’s capacity for peace as a basis for claiming equality with men. She spoke of “the women who are the mothers of the race, who are the greatest peace-lovers on the earth,” arguing that their “claim for equality is based on an ardent desire to help solve the problems confronting the world.”⁷⁰ And she encouraged women to act on this desire. On her return to Sydney in 1937 she urged “the women’s organisations to take a very active part in the community generally rather than give their attention exclusively to feminist matters,” as she believed that “because

⁶⁷ “International Friendship Through Dolls,” *World Peace* 2, no. 11 (November 1937): 168–9.

⁶⁸ “Towards International Friendship,” *N.S.W. Presbyterian*, 17 November 1937, 15, news clipping, Rich Papers, NLA, Box 77, File 486, MS 7493.

⁶⁹ Rischbieth, “The League of Nations & World Motherhood,” MS 2004/9/102.

⁷⁰ Linda P. Littlejohn, “Equality of Status between the Sexes,” *Dawn* (Perth), 19 January 1938, 5.

the women in these Fascist countries had not used power when they had it” they were now in this situation.⁷¹ Maternalism was not simply empty rhetoric here—it was an important tool to rouse women to action and justify their involvement in this space. It was thus central to the expansion of feminist internationalism, which saw individuals gain prominence and enter discussions outside of purely women’s topics.

Just as the years 1914 to 1918 remained firmly planted in people’s minds throughout this period, the potential of a Second World War significantly influenced feminists as the 1930s progressed, making the prevention of war an increasingly pressing priority. Maternalism was a key concept almost all my group harnessed to rally support from wider communities of women and assert their place as peace activists. Against the backdrop of the League’s formation, feminists used this rhetoric to argue for their inclusion in formal international politics. Some were more active on this issue than others, but most of them at the very least used their public voices to rouse public consciousness and swing it in favour of measures to prevent another war. Yet the image of motherhood they shared was of the white mother, and this reinforced existing currents within feminist networks that saw Western women enjoy a high degree of access and attention that others, despite their best efforts, did not.

FEMINISTS AS POLITICAL ACTORS

Interwar feminists did not simply conceptualise themselves as mothers working to save their real or imagined sons, however. They were also political actors. As Corbett Ashby told the 1930 London Naval Conference when introducing a group of feminists who had come to speak to them: “I think the deputation is memorable because it is introducing women as a new factor in international politics. They come here because they feel that women are not only idealists; they will represent in politics a very practical force.”⁷² Whether as delegates to important conferences, lobbyists, or public commentators, they sought and created new opportunities to have a public voice. Nowhere was this more apparent than around the

⁷¹ “Mrs. Littlejohn’s Impressions of Women’s Work Overseas,” *Age* (Melbourne), 29 November 1937, 4. Littlejohn’s words are paraphrased in these quotes.

⁷² “Women and Disarmament. The Deputation of American, British, French and Japanese Women received by the Chairman of the London Naval Conference at St. James’s Palace on February 6th, 1930,” Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL484, 7/MCA/C8.

disarmament issue, which was a salient topic within peace discussions that gained traction especially from the 1930s. Article eight of the League's covenant recognised that "the maintenance of peace requires the reduction of national armaments to the lowest point consistent with national safety and the enforcement by common action of international obligations," committing the organisation to ensuring states were compliant and transparent on this matter.⁷³ Yet it took several years before this topic was broached in earnest, and even then cooperation was stymied by states' commitment to their perceptions of their interests and security. Throughout the interwar period feminists worked in official and unofficial capacities to push the League to live up to its promise. Far from simply talking about peace, they carved out space within and alongside existing institutions where they functioned as active global citizens and political actors.

In February 1932 the League opened the Disarmament Conference (officially the Conference for the Reduction and Limitation of Armaments) to discuss ways to fulfil the organisation's obligations under article eight. Preparations for this had been brewing for several years, and people were enthused by what they saw as at last a concrete step. Carolyn Kitching explains that at this time people generally understood "disarmament" to encompass "all aspects of armaments: their acquisition, deployment and use, direct or indirect." This did not just mean the reduction of weapons or military spending, but rather their control, whether that be qualitative or quantitative.⁷⁴ Feminists were among those who welcomed the conference. They had long been calling for disarmament; as early as 1921 Swanwick told readers of the *Women's International League Monthly News Sheet* that "all women who desire peace should prepare for peace by urging disarmament."⁷⁵ Over the following years the word littered the pages of feminist periodicals, committee meeting agendas, and conference reports.

Some feminists became very involved with disarmament conversations. Writing about the American feminist Laura Puffer Morgan (who became a recognised arms expert), Rebecca Turkington has shown how developing technical expertise and knowledge could offer an

⁷³ Article 8, Covenant of the League of Nations (Including Amendments adopted to December, 1924), The Avalon Project hosted by Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp#art7.

⁷⁴ Carolyn J. Kitching, *Britain and the Geneva Disarmament Conference: A Study in International History* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 7–9.

⁷⁵ Helena Swanwick, "Disarmament Campaign," *Women's International League Monthly News Sheet* 7, no. 6 (October 1921), 2.

inroad for women to be taken seriously in these forums.⁷⁶ Courtney was another figure who was considered an expert on disarmament, at least within activist circles. Her authority was based on her extensive experience as a feminist and peace campaigner, including as the Women's International League's (WIL) president.⁷⁷ She had been involved in the 1926 Peacemakers' Pilgrimage—which saw women descend on London from around the country—believing that “the psychological moment had come for women to express their views about such things as arbitration and disarmament.”⁷⁸ She was also the honorary secretary of the Women's Peace Crusade (WPC), which from 1928 grew out of an effort with American women to “make the mutual renunciation of war a reality.”⁷⁹ The group focused much of its work on the 1929 election in Britain and, wanting to take advantage of the fact that women voters outnumbered men “by something like a million and a half,” campaigned on the basis that “world peace was *the* issue above all others which women were most concerned to bring to the forefront.”⁸⁰ This wealth of experience allowed Courtney to join Britain's League of Nations Union (LNU) executive in 1928 and quickly become central to disarmament discussions. In January 1931 she was asked to convene its disarmament committee (showing how far the organisation had come since 1920, when women complained that they were not given enough space within the LNU).⁸¹ She also contributed to the organisation's newspaper, *Headway*, which described her as “an authority whose opinions command a respectful hearing.”⁸² Her correspondence with the group's president, Robert Cecil, further reveals the

⁷⁶ Rebecca Turkington, “Making Experts of Ourselves: Laura Puffer Morgan, Pacifism, and the Logics of the Security Sector,” *Global Studies Quarterly* (2023), forthcoming. Referenced with author's approval.

⁷⁷ Courtney resigned from this position in late 1933 due to conflict with the international executive. “Editorial,” *Women's International League Monthly News Sheet* 14, no. 12 (December 1933): 1.

⁷⁸ H. Ward, “Peacemakers' Pilgrimage,” *Women's International League Monthly News Sheet* 16, no. 4 (February 1926): 1. Courtney's words are paraphrased in this quote.

⁷⁹ “Women's Peace Crusade. Election Campaign for the Return of Parliament of Peacemakers,” June 1929, Women's Peace Crusade Records (hereafter WPC Records), Swarthmore, CDG-B Great Britain.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 8–9. Emphasis in original.

⁸¹ “Meeting of Programme & Co-ordination Committee,” 22 July 1920, Records of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, TWL, 2NSE/A/2/1(3); “Minutes of a meeting of the executive committee held at 15, Grosvenor Crescent, S.W.1, on Thursday, January 15th, 1931, at 11a.m.,” Vol 2/10 Minutes of the meetings of the Executive Council of the LNU, 1930–1931, League of Nations Union Papers (hereafter LNU Papers), LSE Archives, LNU, MF 419.

⁸² K. D. Courtney, “Has Great Britain a Policy on the Manufacture and Sale of Arms? The Government's Reply to the Royal Commission's Report,” *Headway* 19, no. 6 (June 1937), 110. See also: K. D. Courtney, “America and the Neutrality Legislation,” *Headway* 20, no. 1 (January 1938), 16–17; K. D. Courtney, “We Must Build a World Community,” *Headway* 2, no. 3 (December 1939): 5.

extent to which her expertise was respected by her colleagues. Courtney's letters reveal a woman who was not afraid to state her opinion, suggest proposals, and disagree with prominent political figures like Cecil.⁸³



Figure 55 General council of the Women's Peace Crusade, Crosby Hall, 11 July 1929. The Women's Library, London, JC/D312. Courtney is seated centre front.

As earlier parts of this thesis have shown, feminists worked with each other across borders and across organisational lines to show that peaceful international cooperation was possible. Courtney was one of the six leaders of the Peace and Disarmament Committee of the Women's International Organisations (Disarmament Committee). Formed in September 1931, it brought together representatives from various international women's organisations "to focus the pressure of Public Opinion upon the Disarmament Conference."⁸⁴ As Mary Dingman and Rosa Manus (two of the other executive members) explained, their group aimed "both to stimulate and to concentrate the work for disarmament which women are carrying

⁸³ See: The Cecil of Chelwood Papers, British Library, London, Add MS 51141.

⁸⁴ "Reader What Are You Doing for Peace?" pamphlet, PDCWIO Records, Swarthmore, Box 1, CDG-B Switzerland.

on throughout the world with such earnestness and zeal.”⁸⁵ Though historians have often overlooked it, according to Karen Garner this body was important as it helped extend women’s participation in international politics.⁸⁶ It at once drew upon maternalist rhetoric—viewing the cause as “[t]he special responsibility of women”—and asserted women’s place as political actors.⁸⁷ In a circular letter, for instance, Courtney encouraged women to take action against trends for which they were not responsible. “People’s minds are hardening, there is a recrudescence of nationalist and chauvinist spirit in various countries,” she wrote. “Can you not make every effort to work for understanding and reconciliation? ... Let us not fail to play our part now.”⁸⁸

One of the most visible activities that this group coordinated was the women’s disarmament petition described at the start of this chapter. Drawing on the well-established tradition of suffrage spectacle, this move drew attention to the fact that women were still wanting to be involved in plans for peace and presented a message that they were able to work across borders to achieve this common goal. It was to signal their ongoing and welcomed presence in Geneva. In 1933 there were rumours that the Disarmament Committee was going to collapse. The chair of the Disarmament Conference, Arthur Henderson, wrote to express his concern about this impending “tragedy,” praising the group for “expressing the opinion of the general public” and “helping to lead public opinion on the new issues which from time to time have arisen.”⁸⁹ Likewise, Cecil hoped there was “no truth” in this rumour, saying the

⁸⁵ Mary A. Dingman and Rosa Manus to League of Nations delegates, 18 September 1931, PDCWIO Records, Swarthmore, Box 1, CDG-B Switzerland.

⁸⁶ Karen Garner, “Global Visions: The Women’s Disarmament Committee (1931–1939) and the International Politics of Disarmament in the 1930s,” in *Rosa Manus (1881–1942): The International Life and Legacy of a Jewish Dutch Feminist*, ed. Myriam Everard and Francisca de Haan (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 131, 150, 159. On this group, see also Denise Ireton, “Fighting for Peace in an International City: The Disarmament Committee of the Women’s International Organizations in Geneva, 1931–1939,” in *Women and Social Movements, International, 1840 to Present*, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2012), 1–18, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2476935?account_id=8330&usage_group_id=111575.

⁸⁷ “Peace and Disarmament Committee of the Women’s International Organisations” pamphlet, c. 1937, PDCWIO Records, Swarthmore, Box 1, CDG-B Switzerland.

⁸⁸ Kathleen Courtney circular letter, October 1932, PDCWIO Records, Swarthmore, Box 1, CDG-B Switzerland. This extract was also printed in the following feminist periodical article: “Disarmament,” *International Women’s News* 27, no 2 (November 1932): 10.

⁸⁹ Arthur Henderson to Clara Guthrie d’Arcis, 8 June 1933, PDCWIO Records, Swarthmore, Box 1, CDG-B Switzerland.

Disarmament Committee's work had been "of the very greatest value."⁹⁰ Buoyed by this support, the women agreed; despite financial hardship, they decided "there is only one certainty: we must carry on, at all costs, at least until the close of the Disarmament Conference."⁹¹ They may not have been able to compel the major powers involved to make meaningful concessions and work together, but their presence showed that feminists wanted to be visible and still believed in international cooperation.



Figure 56 At Victoria Station, 22 January 1932. LSE Archives, WILPF/22/1(13). Courtney is visible centre left.

Feminists' engagement with the Disarmament Conference was not just limited to the role of external petitioners closed off from the conference's proceedings, however. After negotiation with the League's secretary-general, Eric Drummond, the women won the right to

⁹⁰ Lord Cecil to Clara Guthrie d'Arcis, 5 July 1933, PDCWIO Records, Swarthmore, Box 1, CDG-B Switzerland.

⁹¹ "To Our Friends," Disarmament Committee of the Women's International Organisations circular 5 July 1933, PDCWIO Records, Swarthmore, Box 1, CDG-B Switzerland. Emphasis in original.

address the conference as well as a place at public sittings and a ticket to the press gallery.⁹² Although she was not privy to negotiations happening behind closed doors, Courtney observed much of the proceedings from the press gallery, having obtained a ticket as a representative of the WIL's *Monthly News Sheet* (this formed part of her broader media strategy, which aimed to build support for the disarmament campaign).⁹³ Even after she resigned as the WIL's chair she remained a member and acted as Geneva correspondent during sittings. Her multiple articles for the paper provided readers with explanations of the complex (and often fruitless) negotiations that were taking place. Early in 1932 she explained the three different views being put forward at the conference: total disarmament, the maintenance of armed force, and equality in disarmament.⁹⁴ After that first year she was still hopeful, writing that "Disarmament in 1932 has achieved some successes, notably ... in enlarging the aims of the Conference and broadening the public view of what might be done."⁹⁵ She remained relatively optimistic for quite a while, believing in the importance of holding a disarmament conference if not in the way it was being conducted. She remained steadfastly feminist in her work, reminding women that as "the practical sex—as the common-sense sex," they should "unite in a great campaign that our Government should follow the path of common sense to safety in the air."⁹⁶ Enjoying privileged access to the conference, Courtney acted as a conduit between the negotiations taking place in Geneva and wider communities of politicised women at home in Britain, cementing her status as an important political voice.

Some feminists engaged even more directly with the discussions that were being had in Geneva. Rather than being an external observer, Corbett Ashby was an official participant in the conference. In 1932 she was chosen to be part of the British delegation as "a representative of the great women's movement in this country that was demanding

⁹² Garner, "Global Visions," 142–3.

⁹³ Kathleen D. Courtney, *Suggestions as to How Organisations and Individuals Can Help in the Disarmament Campaign* (London: W.H. Taylor, c. 1931). Courtney also had articles printed in other publications, for example: K. D. Courtney, "The French View of Disarmament," *Liberal Woman's News* (London), December 1932, 850; K. D. Courtney, "Whither—The Disarmament Conference?," *Liberal Woman's News* (London), December 1933, 1022.

⁹⁴ Kathleen Courtney, "Some Tendencies of the Disarmament Conference," *Women's International League Monthly News Sheet* 23, no 3 (March 1932): 3–4.

⁹⁵ Kathleen Courtney, "The Disarmament Conference. A New Phase in 1933," *Women's International League Monthly News Sheet* 24, no 1 (January 1933): 4.

⁹⁶ Kathleen Courtney, "The Air Menace and the Answer," *Women's International League Monthly News Sheet* 27, no. 6 (June 1935): 3.

disarmament.”⁹⁷ She credited her appointment to both the pressure placed on the government by women’s organisations and the League’s encouragement of women’s participation.⁹⁸ One of only five women delegates in total, Corbett Ashby could not possibly represent all feminists’ views.⁹⁹ But publicly at least they offered her their resounding support; the Disarmament Committee affirmed that “[h]er wide executive experience and extensive knowledge of International Affairs should make her as valuable to the Disarmament Conference in Geneva as to the numerous Congresses that she has presided [over] in several European capitals of late years.”¹⁰⁰ Corbett Ashby entered this phase of her work with a sense of hope, no doubt buoyed by her colleagues’ enthusiasm. A photo taken at Victoria Station just before her journey to Geneva shows her surrounded by supporters, looking ready to take on the challenge at hand.

The initial excitement among feminists that they had secured official representation at the Disarmament Conference was challenged early on by the forum’s inability to reach any concrete solutions. At the beginning of 1933, Corbett Ashby noted the preceding year’s “slow fading hopes of achievement in disarmament,” but remained cautiously optimistic that this goal could be reached. “Yet 1932 will long be gratefully remembered because it brought us all together, women of every kind and type of organisation, to work together at Geneva,” she wrote for *Jus Suffragii*. “We sank our differences, accepted new leaders, built up wider friendships. It is but a beginning but how magnificent! And 1933 will surely bring us the reward.”¹⁰¹ Her and her colleagues’ faith in the League as the best machinery to bring world peace meant that they continued to look to this forum to achieve disarmament and, in turn, an end to war. The fact that she took on this role alongside her presidency of the Alliance and the BCL and wrote about it for this feminist newspaper emphasises how anti-war work became a central part of feminists’ activity during this time.

⁹⁷ Margery Corbett Ashby, *The Failure in Leadership at the Disarmament Conference* (London: Women’s National Liberal Federation, c. 1935), 2, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL483, 7MCA/C/5.

⁹⁸ Corbett Ashby, *Memoirs*, 140.

⁹⁹ Adele Schreiber, “Women at the Disarmament Conference,” *International Women’s News* 26, no. 6 (March 1932): 54–5.

¹⁰⁰ “Disarmament Committee of the Women’s International Organisations. Press Releases no. 110–113,” 5 February 1932, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL484, 7MCA/C/9.

¹⁰¹ Margery Corbett Ashby, “Courage and Vision,” *International Women’s News* 27, no 4 (January 1933): 25.



Figure 57 Margery Corbett Ashby leaving Victoria Station for the Disarmament Conference, 31 January 1932. Smith Archive/Alamy.

This optimism was to be short lived. “I can only describe my participation in the Disarmament Conference ... as the most unhappy period of my life,” Corbett Ashby later wrote.¹⁰² Such comments were certainly coloured by hindsight, however records from throughout this period show that she had felt increasingly constrained by her position within an official delegation and disillusioned by “the lack of leadership shown by the British Government” (a feeling only made stronger by her belief in Britain as a world leader).¹⁰³ In March 1935 Corbett Ashby resigned from her position.¹⁰⁴ “I can no longer allow myself to be associated with the policy of H.M. Government at the Disarmament Conference,” she wrote to the prime minister, Ramsay Macdonald.¹⁰⁵ She dated the failures of the British delegation

¹⁰² Corbett Ashby, *Memoirs*, 140.

¹⁰³ Corbett Ashby, *The Failure in Leadership at the Disarmament Conference*, 2, 7MCA/C/5.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Margery Corbett Ashby to Ramsay Macdonald, 6 March 1935, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL483, 7MCA/C/5.

to the beginning of the conference, commenting that “[o]ur opening speech contained no indication of considered and constructive policy and was received with amazed disappointment.”¹⁰⁶ Fiercely critical of Britain’s approach, which saw them build up rather than reduce their armaments, she delivered a seething blow to her prime minister: “In fact of such a policy, if I left the delegation, I should feel less useless to the cause of Peace.”¹⁰⁷ Corbett Ashby received countless messages of support. “I heard with a thrill on the wireless last night that you had at last resigned from the British Delegation at the Disarmament Conference,” wrote Gilbert Murray, a leading figure in the LNU, lamenting that she was “the one member of the Delegation in whom believers in a League policy had real confidence.”¹⁰⁸ Similarly, the feminist Elizabeth Abbott congratulated her on “an action right and courageous for which every decent man and woman ought to thank you.”¹⁰⁹ While Corbett Ashby enjoyed direct access to the Disarmament Conference, she found it no easier to effect change than she had as a lobbyist. Expanding women’s political worlds provided new avenues for them but did not necessarily allow them to achieve the reforms they so fervently desired. Rather than quashing their faith in cooperation across borders, experiences like this only reinforced their view that a true internationalism—one unhindered by states’ own interests—was sorely needed.

Despite such challenges, the peace and disarmament issues framed feminists’ activities throughout the rest of the 1930s; as late as 1939 the Alliance agreed that “[i]n these serious times where the fundamental principles concerning the relations between individual and state, and between states themselves are being challenged, it is essential that women should be fully aware of the responsibilities which their feminist conviction entails.”¹¹⁰ In 1936 a new force in peace activism emerged from a conference held in Brussels: the International Peace Campaign (IPC). A number of Australian women (including Littlejohn) had attended and became involved in its Australian branch, which hosted its first national peace congress in Melbourne

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Gilbert Murray to Margery Corbett Ashby, 8 March 1935, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL483, 7MCA/C/5.

¹⁰⁹ Elizabeth Abbott to Margery Corbett Ashby, 8 March 1935, Corbett Ashby Papers, TWL, Box FL483, 7MCA/C/5.

¹¹⁰ International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, *Report of the Thirteenth Congress. Copenhagen, July 8th–14th, 1939* (Ashford: International Alliance of Women, 1939), 8.

the following year.¹¹¹ At that meeting 850 delegates joined forces, while the event's rallies and public procession amassed 3000 attendees apiece.¹¹² Rich convened the group's women's commission, which opened with messages from abroad that she felt "created a strong national and international link in the work."¹¹³ Under Rich's guidance, this section sought to advance the IPC's general aims while also seeking to attain for women "an increasing share in the Government [*sic*] of this country in order to enable them to co-operate more effectively, through the framework of the League of Nations, in the prevention of wars."¹¹⁴ The delegates spoke about disarmament, both moral and material, among various other topics.

In these final years of the period, feminists clung to the promise of democracy and hoped that strong public opinion could stem the tides of war. Street was also involved in the Australian IPC and dealt with the topic of peace as president of the United Associations of Women (UA). For her, peace and feminism were deeply entangled. She linked world peace with wives' economic rights, saying "[w]e cannot have peace in the international, national, or domestic sphere, unless we have justice" (justice here being married women's financial independence).¹¹⁵ Seeking to extend her knowledge of these twin causes, Street travelled to Europe and Russia in 1938. While there she learned about women's experiences in Nazi Germany and sat in on a LNU executive meeting in London.¹¹⁶ In the first months of 1939, she published a series of articles that weighed in on what could be done to address the fact that "the peace of the whole world [was] threatened."¹¹⁷ Writing for the *Dawn* she explained how exporting raw materials that could be used to develop armaments by "the war-loving nations" was fuelling the problem. She pointed readers to other sources they might consult to learn more about this process and encouraged them to make it public knowledge, saying that

¹¹¹ Mary St. Claire, "Australian Women Fight for Peace," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 12 September 1936, 2; International Peace Campaign (hereafter IPC), "Report of Australian Peace Congress held in Melbourne, 16th–19th September 1937," 1–5, Rich Papers, NLA, Box 78, File 488, MS 7493. For more on the IPC's Australian branch, see: Rasmussen, *The Lesser Evil?*, from chapter 6.

¹¹² "International Peace Campaign. Australian Congress, September 16–19, 1937. Women's Commission," *Dawn* (Perth), 20 October 1937, 7.

¹¹³ Ibid. Rich's words quoted here.

¹¹⁴ IPC, "Report of Australian Peace Congress," 20, MS 7493.

¹¹⁵ "Peace Begins At Home. The Economic Angle," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 April 1937, 3.

¹¹⁶ "Visit of Mrs. Jessie Street," *Dawn* (Perth), 20 April 1938, 7–8; LNU executive committee minutes 6 October 1938, Vol 2/16, Minutes of the meetings of the Executive Council of the LNU, 1937–1938, LNU Papers, LSE Archives, LNU, MF 421.

¹¹⁷ Jessie Street, "How Can We Undermine the Threat of War," *Dawn* (Perth), 18 January 1939, 8.

“they might by these indirect means achieve disarmament and revive the faith of a frightened and doubting world in collective security which in spite of all criticism is the only reasonable and civilised method of maintaining the peace of the world.”¹¹⁸ Sydney’s *Daily News* provided her with additional space to publish a running series of articles tackling this topic, speaking as “the leader of Australia’s internationally-minded and public-spirited women.”¹¹⁹ She advocated “peace by trade policy”, that is, halting trade with aggressor nations to reduce their power and thus limit the threat of war.¹²⁰



Figure 58 Women’s Commission of the Australian International Peace Campaign, Melbourne 1937. National Library of Australia, Papers of Ruby Rich, Box 77, File 486, MS 7493.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ “Aggression Answered. Mrs. Jessie Street Writes To-day,” *Daily News* (Sydney), 26 January 1939, 1.

¹²⁰ Jessie Street, “Jessie M.G. Street Tells of a Trade Policy Which Could Halt Bullies,” *Daily News* (Sydney), 26 January 1939, 4; Jessie Street, “To Defeat the Aggressor,” *Daily News* (Sydney), 27 January 1939, 4; Jessie Street, “Withhold Minerals from Aggressor Nations,” *Daily News* (Sydney), 30 January 1939, 4; Jessie Street, “Sapping the Military Strength of Aggressors,” *Daily News* (Sydney), 31 January 1939, 4; Jessie Street, “The Economic Weapon Against Aggressor Nations,” *Daily News* (Sydney), 1 February 1939, 4; Jessie Street, “How Minerals Can be Used for Peace,” *Daily News* (Sydney), 3 February 1939, 4.

Peace was ultimately a transnational issue. In 1939 Rich travelled to Washington, D.C., where she planned to attend a conference on “The Essentials of International Cooperation” hosted by the Disarmament Committee. Due to worsening tensions in Europe the conference did not take place; Rich instead attended the fourteenth Conference on the Cause and Cure of War.¹²¹ She spoke in support of China’s calls to boycott Japan following its military aggression. “We in Australia are definitely opposed to Mr. Chamberlain’s policy [of appeasement],” she said. “The people are formulating their own policies. We are boycotting aggressor nations’ goods and the workers are also striking against the shipping of arms to Japan.”¹²² In America Rich found inspiration and energy. “I had a marvellous time in the States and have brought back so much both in regard to peace techniques and their foreign policy that I do not know where to begin in the work of using it for our Australian Peace Movements,” she told a colleague back home.¹²³ She reported on her time in the United States to the Australian IPC’s women’s commission meeting later that year, saying: “American women are not only quick on the uptake, but quick to carry out their decisions”—a model Australian women should follow.¹²⁴

Mere weeks later, the world was again at war. Rich counselled her fellow activists not to be discouraged, imploring them “[t]o be, and urge others to be, analytical in thought, unprejudiced in feeling towards other nations, and cautious in accepting or repeating statements regarding the international situation.”¹²⁵ Though she was among those who felt the situation required that “the pacifist principle upheld by the majority of women has reluctantly to be laid aside for the time being,” she held onto a hope that peace would one day be achieved.¹²⁶ Despite the fact that the storm clouds had now broken, Rich, like many others,

¹²¹ “Conferred on War Instead of Peace,” *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 19 April 1939, 10; “Crisis Postpones Conference on Peace,” *Sun* (Sydney), 9 April 1939, 26.

¹²² “Boycotting Aggressor. Australian Speaks in Washington,” *West Australian* (Perth), 24 January 1939, 3.

¹²³ Ruby Rich to Mrs. D. Gibson, 27 April 1939, Rich Papers, NLA, Box 77, File 485, MS 7493.

¹²⁴ “‘Example for Our Women.’ Miss Rich Points to America,” *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 9 August 1939, 3.

¹²⁵ “Women’s Commission Congress. International Peace Campaign,” 1939, Rich Papers, NLA, Box 77, File 486, MS 7493.

¹²⁶ Ruby Rich, “Women and Peace,” *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 11 August 1939, 6.

still had faith in international cooperation and women's participation in public life as ways to build a better, more tolerant world.

PEACE EAST & WEST

Interwar peace activism was largely focused on Geneva, as the League presented a machinery that could be used to turn ideas refuting war into a reality. Yet challenges to militarism and violence were also generated elsewhere. Non-Western actors had their own thoughts about this topic, and some white feminists engaged with what they said—to varying degrees and in different ways—to develop their thinking about non-violence and its relationship to women's rights. At a time when Western feminism was becoming more cognisant of its limits and establishing a complicated, imbalanced relationship with “the East,” some women promoted interracial as well as intercultural cooperation, while others saw the “traditional” philosophies of non-Western cultures as instructive for the unstable global political situation. This outreach (however limited) was not extended to Indigenous women, who were not considered as political agents despite their extensive and intimate experiences of colonial violence. It seems as though it was only through looking abroad (and to certain places) that Western feminists could confront the fact that there were other worldviews worth listening to.

Like their Western counterparts, “Eastern” women were also concerned about the state of world affairs. Apart from the long history of European imperialism across various parts of the world, Korea had been under Japanese colonial rule since 1910, and tensions in Asia reached boiling point when in 1937 Japan invaded China. Asian and other non-Western women often viewed peace through the lens of anti-imperialism. Peace was one of the key goals of the only All-Asian Women's Conference, for instance, which met in Lahore in 1931 at the suggestion of the Women's Indian Association of Madras.¹²⁷ Fuelled by an anticolonial spirit, it aimed to foster “a keener realisation” of the “cultural unity” among Asian women and

¹²⁷ On this event see: Sumita Mukherjee, “The All-Asian Women's Conference 1931: Indian Women and Their Leadership of a Pan-Asian Feminist Organisation,” *Women's History Review* 26, no. 3 (2017): 363–81; Shobna Nijhawan, “International Feminism from an Asian Center: The All-Asian Women's Conference (Lahore, 1931) as a Transnational Feminist Moment,” *Journal of Women's History* 29, no. 3 (2017): 12–36; Nova Robinson, “‘Sisters in Asia’: The League of Nations and Feminist Anticolonial Internationalism,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47, no. 4 (2022): 987–1012.

stem the “tides of Western influence.”¹²⁸ Despite the military aggression of countries such as Japan, this group contrasted the industrialism and violence of the West with the traditional, spiritual character of Asia.¹²⁹ In a bid to help the continent “re-attain her former position of the Giver of Light to the World” they promoted bringing Asian women together not only to assist in their campaigns for women’s rights but also to ensure they were “better fitted to preserve the peace of the world.”¹³⁰ For them, women’s rights, anticolonial nationalism, and world peace were inextricably linked.

Some white feminists agreed with this view of “the East,” seeing it as free of the historic animosities that characterised the Western world and therefore more able to provide a pathway to peace. In a speech to the 1926 WILPF congress in Dublin, the famed American peace worker Jane Addams pointed to work being done beyond the European sphere. “This theory of running the world without violence is being tried out; it is no dream, it is an actual living concern for many thousands of people in many parts of the world,” she said. “I believe the East is going to get there first ... if we are not careful, the Western civilization will pass away from us to the new countries in the East who are working out this new technique.”¹³¹ Rather than putting the different parts of the world in competition, other associations like the Pan-Pacific Women’s Association (PPWA) promoted active East–West cooperation. At the first PPWA conference in 1928, for instance, Rischbieth framed the Pacific as “the cradle of the new civilization, free from all the traditional prejudices and hatreds of the old world,” albeit one she assumed would be led in large part by white women from the Antipodes and United States.¹³² Over the course of the period, Western feminists made much of their (often limited) efforts to collaborate with non-Western women not only in the pursuit of women’s rights but also of peace. In Honolulu, Rischbieth tried to generate a sense of common purpose, saying: “[m]ay the women of all Pacific nations, [*sic*] seize this opportunity, and rise to the occasion by

¹²⁸ All-Asian Women’s Conference, *All-Asian Women’s Conference. First Session. Lahore. 19th to 25th January 1931* (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1931), i, vii.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, i, vii.

¹³¹ Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, *Report of the Fifth Congress of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Dublin, July 8 to 15, 1926* (Geneva: Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 1926), 65.

¹³² Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference, *Women of the Pacific: Being a Record of the Proceedings of the First Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference which was held in Honolulu from the 9th to the 19th of August 1928, Under the Auspices of the Pan-Pacific Union* (Honolulu: Pan-Pacific Union, 1928), 183.

exerting their political-social-human interest towards preserving peaceful development.”¹³³ This extended the “sisterhood” rhetoric of the international feminist movement, which encouraged women to develop bonds across borders.

The empire often framed Australian and British feminists’ conceptualisations of interracial cooperation. Ahead of the Disarmament Conference, Rischbieth and her BCL co-founder Marjorie Chave Collisson corresponded with one another about representing the empire in these upcoming discussions. They both assumed that the women from across the Commonwealth’s many countries would share a singular point of view; as Collisson wrote, “it is absolutely necessary to centralise this end some form of group organisation to render help in presenting here in London the point of view of women citizens of the British Commonwealth who may desire this.”¹³⁴ This perceived unity was a far cry from reality, however. Rischbieth’s travels in India in early 1930 had made her acutely aware that there were tensions within the devolving empire; it upset her “tremendously” to discover that the country was “learning to hate Britain,” as she “always thought at heart they really were truly attached.”¹³⁵ While not condemning empire, she realised that it was not necessarily a clear-cut model for global peace, noting that “the Women’s Inter-[national] movement must become more conversant with the position between East & West if we wish to Keep World Peace.”¹³⁶ She at once held this view and promoted a shared Commonwealth feminist viewpoint, revealing the deep-seated tensions that underpinned feminist internationalism at this time.

The words and ideas of some non-Western political actors were relatively accessible to white interwar feminists. The Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore emerges several times in the documentary trail left behind by my group and their broader networks, for instance. Tagore was known internationally not only for his literary works but also for his anti-imperialist activism and critiques of nationalism. His prominence grew especially after his travels to Britain and the United States in 1912 and his winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, however literary scholar Sukanta Chaudhuri explains how this had the effect of “often reducing

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Marjorie Chave Collisson to Bessie Rischbieth, 12 November 1931, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 18, File 3, MS 2004/7/131.

¹³⁵ Bessie Rischbieth to Olive Evans and family, 4 January 1929, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 1, File 2, MS 2004/1/21 (this letter is dated incorrectly—the year should be 1930).

¹³⁶ “India” notes, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 28, File 21, MS 2004/11/681.

himself to the figure of a spiritualist and ‘oriental sage’.”¹³⁷ Western feminists could access Tagore through their feminist newspapers. His message to the WILPF was printed on *Pax International*’s front page in September 1930, for example, in which he claimed that “[w]omen are naturally gifted with the power of Peace and the modern age needs their active co-operation in its effort to unite the different peoples of the world on the basis of mutual understanding,” assuring the WILPF that their Indian counterparts would “be happy to join hands with their sisters in the West in their service to humanity.”¹³⁸



Figure 59 Rischbieth at the Theosophical Society headquarters in Adyar, Chennai. National Library of Australia, MS 2004/11/640.

Among my group, Rischbieth was the only one as far as I can tell to have met Tagore in person. This happened during her trip to India in 1930. It is important to remember that this journey was driven as much by her spiritual beliefs—her adherence to theosophy and interest in other non-Christian spiritualities—as by her feminist convictions. On this trip she

¹³⁷ Sukanta Chaudhuri, “Preface,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), xiii. See also: Kathleen M. O’Connell, “Tagore’s Santiniketan: Learning Associated with Life,” in Chaudhuri, *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, 298.

¹³⁸ “Tagore’s Message to W.I.L.,” *Pax International* 5, no. 10 (September 1930), no page number.

visited Visva-Bharati, Tagore's university at Santiniketan and the latest iteration of his evolving educational experiment there. This was simultaneously an Indian, "Eastern," and global institution, with one of its goals being "[t]o seek to realise in a common fellowship of study the meeting of East and West, and thus ultimately to strengthen the fundamental conditions of world peace through the free communication of ideas between the two hemispheres."¹³⁹ This vision for East–West peace was one of the major lessons Rischbieth took away from her time in India.

Rischbieth recorded her reflections in both unpublished notes and published texts, in which she interpreted Tagore's ideas for Australian readers. She felt an affinity for him as an internationalist and was much moved by her interactions; she noted that Tagore "entered into conversation in an almost intimate way."¹⁴⁰ "His idea, of course, is that this unity cannot be brought about by a **uniformity** of cultures, but rather by a sympathetic understanding of **varying** cultures to the enrichment of the life of the whole human family," she wrote for the *Dawn*.¹⁴¹ She explained that Tagore's "mind is steeped in the ancient culture of India and he sees the value in relation to modern Western development believing that an expression of the best of the ancient culture coupled with the practical ideas of the West would enrich our present civilisation."¹⁴² In sharing his ideas with Australian women, she hoped to influence their own approaches to peace work, wanting to imbue them with an awareness of the world's different cultures and what they could teach the West about creating global harmony.

Rischbieth was to a certain extent an exception in the strength of her conviction that world peace needed to rest on East–West understanding as much as a challenging of masculinist militarism—a product of her positioning as a white settler woman who was becoming increasingly interested in her local geographic region and alternative spiritualities. Yet the visibility of figures such as Tagore within feminist newspapers and the like meant that this idea was gaining some currency in the Western feminist movement more generally. Without overemphasising this point, it is important to recognise as it signals the beginnings of a shift in how feminists thought about peace and its relationship to women's rights and

¹³⁹ O'Connell, "Tagore's Santiniketan," 302–3.

¹⁴⁰ Untitled and incomplete manuscript article, Rischbieth Papers, NLA, Box 27, File 20, MS 2004/11/634.

¹⁴¹ Bessie Rischbieth, "East and West. Their Friendship a World Responsibility. Dr. Rabindranath Tagore in Geneva," *Dawn* (Perth), 19 September 1930, 9. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴² Untitled and incomplete manuscript article, MS 2004/11/634.

internationalism. While still strongly tied to Geneva, some of them were challenging assumptions that the West would lead the way both in terms of improving women's rights and attaining world peace.

CONCLUSION

In October 1939 Linda Littlejohn was directly confronted with the realities of another war. She had been touring the Balkans in search of material for her forthcoming American lecture tour and was experiencing major challenges in her efforts to leave Europe. She provided a dramatic retelling of how she fled Nazi-ridden Vienna for the *Australian Women's Weekly's* readers. "I am no longer a pacifist," she told them, pointing to the importance of protecting democracy over all else.¹⁴³ A couple of months later, Littlejohn was in Washington, D.C. for the National Woman's Party conference. She riled against the notion that women should bear the responsibility for resolving the state of the world. "I am weary of being asked, 'How are the women of this world going to restore peace to the world?'" she said. "At one moment you deny us our rights and in another you expect us to influence policy. That is unreasonable and illogical. We accept no responsibility for the chaotic state of international or national affairs." She explained how women did not hold enough power or influence to remedy the situation, nor should they be expected to. Only once they had won "equal rights and equal opportunities to enjoy these rights" could they then play their "part in building the better world we all so earnestly desire."¹⁴⁴ Almost two decades of speaking up in the name of peace had been unsuccessful, and Littlejohn wanted this fact to be properly attributed to the men who had failed the world.

Throughout these two decades feminist internationalists were active and initially optimistic peace campaigners. Their alignment of feminism and peace work not only allowed them to stake a claim to wider debates about disarmament and the nature of global politics but also to expand the remit of feminism itself. Far from being a period of feminist inaction, feminism in the interwar years thus adapted to changing circumstances and brought a woman-

¹⁴³ Linda Littlejohn, "Australian on Last Train that Crossed Frontier," *Australian Women's Weekly* (Sydney), 7 October 1939, 30.

¹⁴⁴ "Amendment Granting Equal Rights to Women Forecast. National Woman's Party Points to Discriminations as Conference Opens," *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), 16 December 1939, 2.

and equality-centred point of view to larger debates. In this process they often harnessed the language of maternalism. Many feminists—including some members of my group—emphasised women’s traditional roles as carers and mothers, highlighting their unique stake in and therefore valuable contributions to peace debates. But this should not be taken to mean that interwar feminists necessarily fully believed in this trope. Maternalism was a tactic they used to galvanise support and be heard; a way for them to reinforce their standing as important political actors.

Feminists participated in debates over peace and disarmament in a range of ways throughout the 1920s and especially the 1930s. Some were involved in League initiatives such as the Disarmament Conference, while others participated in non-League projects like the IPC. In all cases they donned multiple hats, including those of activist, reporter, expert, official delegate, feminist, and woman. Much of this was League-focused work centred on Geneva. Yet peace was a concern around the world, and discussions adopted different tones across a range of sites, including outside the West. These conversations were on white feminists’ radars, if to varying degrees. In their quest to challenge the militarist and masculinist (if not imperialist) nature of Western societies, some feminists turned to “the East” as a source of peaceful renewal. In so doing, they supported the claims of non-Western feminists and other thinkers while simultaneously essentialising and romanticising pre-industrial, “traditional,” non-Western cultures as more peaceable.

While feminists’ peace efforts may at first glance seem to have sidelined their work for women’s rights, the fact that they were active in this realm reveals the opposite to be true: they saw working for peace to be the ultimate contribution to make in their quest for equality, even if their inclusion was sometimes curtailed or proved to be disappointing. They continued to try to generate a public consciousness opposed to war and violence and favourable to women’s rights up until 1939 and after, not only because they wanted to avoid another global conflict, but also because they believed that the international sphere was the key to gaining equality.

CONCLUSION

Women of the Whole World

In 1938 the Hogarth Press published Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, a book-length essay that articulated her feminist ideas in the context of rising fascism and impending conflict in Europe. The text takes the form of a letter in which she responds to "an educated man" who has written to ask: "How in your opinion are we to prevent war?"¹ Before providing him with the financial support he has requested for his peace organisation, Woolf addresses two other appeals for aid she has received: one from a women's college needing funds for a new building, and one from an organisation wanting to help educated women enter the professions. As narrator of the text, she explains that she has been holding on to the man's letter for three years, feeling that there was "a gulf so deeply cut" between them because of their different genders and "wondering whether it is any use to try to speak across it."² Despite the gains that women had made, the reply she eventually sends emphasises their fragile hold on public life in late-1930s Britain. In the final part of the book, Woolf imagines a scenario in which a fictionalised woman speaks to her brother about war. She rejects having any part in a patriotism harnessed for violence, explaining to him: "as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world."³ With these words Woolf captured a sentiment that had blossomed throughout the preceding years. At the same time as aspiring to become equal members of the nation, some interwar women felt they could more readily and more fully belong to a new, internationalist world community based on the principles of peace, cooperation, and equality. At a time when they continued to face gendered

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1938; London: Vintage Classics, 2016), 113. References are to the Vintage Classics reprint.

² *Ibid.*, 114.

³ *Ibid.*, 231.

subordination at home in their respective countries, they were searching for new forms that global society could take to include women and men equally.



Figure 60 Virginia Woolf by Barbara Strachey, 1938. National Portrait Gallery, London, Ax88536.

Three Guineas was a controversial publication that provoked the ire of some sections of society while finding a receptive audience in others.⁴ The *Scotsman*'s review highlighted the work's "important theme" and "far-reaching arguments," noting that "[w]omen especially will

⁴ Woolf was also questioned on the division she had imposed in the text between "educated" and "working" women. She engaged in what Francesca Wade describes as correspondence on "friendly terms" with a Huddersfield millworker, Agnes Smith, who had written to express this point of view. See: Francesca Wade, *Square Haunting: Five Women, Freedom and London between the Wars* (London: Faber & Faber, 2020), 291.

welcome it for the light it sheds on their place in the scheme of things.”⁵ Woolf’s contemporaries in the interwar feminist movement—including the group at the centre of this thesis—almost certainly would have agreed. Many of them would have read the book or at the very least would have been familiar with its content and the debates it generated. As far away as Australia, Bessie Rischbieth’s the *Dawn* promoted *Three Guineas* in its “Books Worth Reading” column, directing Sydney-based subscribers to find a copy in the “valuable library of over 100 books” that Jessie Street had collected during her recent travels overseas.⁶ Within the text’s pages these women would have identified a range of campaigns for which they had spent years fighting: women’s independent nationality rights, access to education and to the professions, equal pay, the double moral standard, and more. Many of them would have been interested in Woolf’s contention that the process of violence that excluded women from the masculine public sphere was comparable to that which had enabled fascism to grow.⁷ Being activists who sought to have an influence on public debate, they may have disagreed with Woolf’s presentation of women as a “Society of Outsiders” who operated apart from the rest of male-dominated society.⁸ Nevertheless, they too may have taken note of the proclamation about belonging to “the whole world”—they were, after all, internationalists who had spent years generating a sense of community that crossed borders, cultures, and languages in the pursuit of women’s rights.

Through a detailed exploration of eight significant interwar feminists’ lives, activism, and worldviews, this thesis has shown the interwar period to be a critical juncture in the development of feminist internationalism as a political and intellectual tradition. Fostered by developments in women’s access to higher education, employment, and political citizenship, as well as technological change and the broader interest in internationalism that permeated various sections of society, these years saw the international women’s movement mature from a network connecting women across the North Atlantic into a larger, more diverse, and more assertive web of organisations, campaigns, and people. This process involved women gaining

⁵ “Three Guineas. By Virginia Woolf. (7s 6d. Hogarth Press.),” *Scotsman* (Edinburgh), 23 June 1938, 15; Brenda R. Silver, “The Authority of Anger: ‘Three Guineas’ as Case Study,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16, no. 2 (1991): 340.

⁶ “Books Worth Reading,” *Dawn* (Perth), 19 July 1939, 4.

⁷ Christine Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-garde: War, Civilization, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 260.

⁸ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 232.

confidence as they garnered public profiles and staked a claim to hitherto masculine public spaces. It also saw Western feminists respond in often limited ways to non-Western women's challenging of the international women's movement's exclusive nature, revealing both the persistence of imperialist ways of thinking and how individuals could challenge these norms. Though the suffrage era in both Australia and Britain has captured academic and popular imaginations alike, it was the 1920s and 1930s—defined by increasing self-reflexivity on the part of feminists themselves as they debated how best to tackle gender subordination around the world—that constituted an important and formative period in Western feminism's longer and global history.

The eight women whose lives I have explored were incredibly energetic activists who devoted their time to engaging in committee work, lobbying politicians, running feminist newspapers, liaising with their colleagues abroad, and travelling to speak to audiences around the world. Throughout, they thought deeply about feminism's purpose and what role international cooperation could and should play in advancing women's rights. Theirs was a form of political thought produced through action and shared both among themselves and with broader audiences. I have delved into different aspects of their lives across the various spaces in which they operated—from the international feminist congress to the pages of popular magazines—to reveal the multifaceted nature of their work as they sought to expand their reach beyond women's groups and take their place within their broader local, national, and international communities. By examining my selected subjects both as individuals and as a group I have highlighted the diversity of feminist internationalism as a form of activism, a political practice, and an intellectual tradition—a view that can be elided if we look to the organisational level only. As each of these women's choices and priorities show, interwar feminist internationalism was multifaceted and driven by contradictory impulses. It was simultaneously idealistic and pragmatic, innovative and reactive, focused on the wider world and deeply grounded in local contexts. It aspired to greater diversity and inclusion while still being fundamentally shaped by imperial logics and power dynamics. Moreover, it offered a means for some women to develop a sense of themselves as important public figures and even experts but rested on entrenched class structures that meant only some could afford the global mobility that was so crucial.

My group saw themselves as women of the world. They looked beyond their respective nations' borders in their pursuit of opportunity and equality, being in part pushed to do so by

the challenges posed by their local and national governments, which often proved at best indifferent and at worst hostile to women's rights. In setting their sights further afield to find new avenues for generating change, they both contributed and responded to developments in the world around them. As Glenda Sluga articulates, the interwar years in many ways constituted an "age of internationalism" that saw people from various quarters seek an alternative to the rampant nationalism and militarism that had resulted in the First World War.⁹ Feminists had been developing a transnational community since the late nineteenth century, which was centred on the North Atlantic and the goal of building solidarity among women from different countries. But it was from the 1920s—when the world was trying to rebuild after years of conflict and when suffrage victories were gaining pace—that they extended their early efforts and harnessed the enthusiasm growing across their wider societies, hoping to become central players in the new internationalist project sweeping the globe. They were energised by and focused a lot of their attention on the League of Nations (the League), sharing their visions for how this new institution might operate and seeking to have women appointed to its various agencies. Their initial optimism was frequently challenged, yet even in the face of severe political crisis many feminists championed international governance as the way forward; for her part, Kathleen Courtney compared the League to a fire truck that had the capacity to be perfectly effective if it was used correctly.¹⁰ At the same time, some of them turned towards other theatres such as the Pacific, where they promoted intercultural cooperation and understanding in a bid to extend the international women's movement beyond its North Atlantic origins. This responded to the challenges being made by non-Western women, who were simultaneously seeking inclusion in the international women's movement and building their own networks across Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Yet these activists did not wholly reject the nation in their visions of internationalism, maintaining a more complicated set of views on—and different experiences of—women's place in the nation and the world. They aspired to internationalist ideals but were closely tied to the national contexts that structured their everyday realities. These women often spent long stretches of time at home in between their travels abroad, engaging in local committee work,

⁹ Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Pan-Pacific Women's Association, *Women of the Pacific: A Record of the Proceedings of the Fourth Triennial Conference of the Pan Pacific Women's Association, Held in Vancouver, Canada, July 1937* (Vancouver: Pan-Pacific Women's Association, 1937), 27.

meeting with politicians, and rallying support among the wider national community through outlets such as newspapers and the radio. The pressing issues that faced women in their local settings, from the plight of the married woman teacher in New South Wales to the introduction of protective industrial legislation across Britain, directed their work on the international stage. They had already seen how jingoism could produce conflict, and they hoped to forge a new way of being a citizen that amalgamated national, imperial, and international loyalties. Ruby Rich summed this position up when she said to her radio listeners: “Surely a sane nationalism is compatible with the collective system; is in fact a component part of an international system and order.”¹¹ Such multilayered allegiances took on even more urgent tones in anticolonial contexts, where women at once argued for freedom from imperial control and inclusion in their emergent independent nations, all while fending off the international conflict that was on the horizon.

My group’s experiences of being white citizens of a global empire also shaped their approaches to internationalism. Whereas women from either side of the North Atlantic have often dominated in the international literature, in this thesis I have reoriented the frame of analysis towards the evolving British Empire and Commonwealth, bringing the Antipodes and metropole together to reveal how feminists’ worldviews were fundamentally shaped (in different ways) by their positioning within imperial structures. In so doing I build on James Keating’s work, in which he argues that to fully understand Western feminist internationalism we must look to the Antipodes as well as to the North American and European hubs of action.¹² British women often assumed they would adopt a leading position within international feminist networks, epitomised by Chrystal Macmillan’s suggestion that the “*storm centre*” of the suffrage movement was in Britain.¹³ Australians similarly aspired to leadership roles—both internationally and regionally—in claims that were based on their status as white, Western women. Empire—including not only its cultural dimensions but also the ongoing realities of imperial law and governance, which shaped people’s lives throughout the period—

¹¹ Ruby Rich, “‘Is Internationalism Opposed to Nationalism?’ Station 4 QY. Brisbane, Nov. 1936,” Papers of Ruby Rich (hereafter Rich Papers), National Library of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NLA), Box 3, File 25, MS 7493.

¹² James Keating, *Distant Sisters: Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 209.

¹³ Chrystal Macmillan, *The Struggle for Political Liberty (A Lecture Given on February, 16th, 1909)* (London: National Women’s Social and Political Union, 1909), 2. Emphasis in original.

was central to the visions of internationalism my group developed. At the same time, these actors began to be increasingly conscious of the need to make their movement more culturally diverse. Some of them embarked on extensive travels around the world that allowed them to encounter other cultures and places. Here they responded to non-Western actors, who became more and more vocal over the next two decades—as the words and experiences of women like Huda Sha‘rawi, Saiza Nabarawi, May Oung, Soong Mei-ling, Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, and Shareefa Hamid Ali show—arguing that the supposed “sisterhood” was not as inclusive as it purported to be. These two trends sat in uncomfortable and ongoing tension throughout the period.

While existing power structures continued to shape international feminist networks, in many ways the story of interwar feminism is one of opening up—of women asserting their place in a wide range of arenas outside their own discrete organisations and staking a claim as active participants in the traditionally masculine public sphere. Each member of my group entered the 1920s with varying degrees of exposure to feminism and to politics, but these two decades saw them gain experience and confidence as they became involved in an ever-expanding set of causes and organisations, propelling their movement into new territory. Over these twenty years they used international women’s organisations and especially the forum of the international congress to develop their ideas in a dedicated feminist space. Here they debated and discussed their views on women’s rights and learnt what it meant to be involved in transnational cooperation, including its benefits, challenges, and limits. This provided a basis from which they expanded their remit to stake a claim to non-exclusively feminist spaces, too. Over time they were included (to varying degrees) in the League and the broader peace movement. This reflected an evolving status quo which responded to feminists’ injunctions that women should be included in public debate for the benefit of all humanity. In the context of the League’s emphasis on technical expertise as well as women’s increasing access to education and the professions, they came to see themselves as experts by virtue (rather than merely in spite) of their gender. Using both traditional and new forms of media and enabled by their status as white women, they created public profiles for themselves and used their collective and individual voices to reach the masses. In this way they were able to connect with broader and more diverse communities than their forebears had been able to.

Yet this inclusion was precarious. Despite the gains women had made, at the end of the 1930s Australian, British, and global society was still pervasively gendered. Having been

disillusioned by her experiences at the Disarmament Conference of the early 1930s, just weeks after the Second World War had started Margery Corbett Ashby told Rich, her colleague based in Sydney: “It seems more than ever necessary that women should stick together & preserve what contacts & cooperation seems possible.”¹⁴ Certainly, feminists had achieved some of their goals—such as finding a place on national delegations to the League and seeing women begin to enter parliament—but in many respects they had failed to achieve the tangible outcomes for which they had hoped: Helen Archdale’s special project, the equal rights treaty, had not amounted to anything; the status of women inquiry had not produced real results; women’s independent nationality rights were not yet protected on a global level; and the world was again at war. As Linda Littlejohn articulated, however, because men continued to hold the bulk of power in society, they were responsible for the fact that the world had been unable to counter the rise of militarism and fascism.¹⁵ While my subjects were able to make gains that saw them develop into respected thinkers and actors, the bulk of the women on whose behalf they battled did not always enjoy radical change in their everyday lives.

Some of my subjects did not live to see the end of the Second World War, but for many of them the conflict failed to put an end to their lives as feminists and internationalists. Some lived well into their nineties and maintained public profiles. In Australia and internationally, Street became even more well-known in the postwar period than she had been during the interwar years. Though some of this was critical attention due to her socialist sympathies, she became renowned for her work at the United Nations’ (UN) founding meeting in San Francisco in 1945 where, alongside Latin American women delegates, she ensured that women would be eligible for posts in the organisation and secured a permanent status of women commission. Rich and Courtney both remained involved in the women’s and peace movements for many years to come and each received a UN Peace Medal for their services to the cause (Courtney in 1972 and Rich in 1976).¹⁶ Corbett Ashby stood down from the Alliance’s presidency in 1946 but maintained a presence in the feminist movement, making the most of growing public interest in the dramatics of women’s suffrage to share her memories

¹⁴ Margery Corbett Ashby to Ruby Rich, 5 October 1939, Rich Papers, NLA, Box 76, File 481, MS 7493.

¹⁵ “Amendment Granting Equal Rights to Women Forecast. National Woman’s Party Points to Discriminations as Conference Opens,” *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), 16 December 1939, 2.

¹⁶ Copy of speech made when medal was presented to Kathleen D’Olier Courtney, 1972, Papers of Kathleen D’Olier Courtney, The Women’s Library, London, Box FL458, 7KDC/K/05/36–37; “Peace Medals for Helping the United Nations,” *Australian Jewish Times* (Sydney), 12 February 1976, 3.

of that campaign. And in Perth, alongside her ongoing interest in women's rights Rischbieth turned her attention to environmental issues, famously wading barefoot at the age of eighty-nine into the Swan River in front of bulldozers to protest a development project. These women's hopes of averting another conflict may have been dashed, but their desire to claim public space and extend their feminist ideas into new areas never faded.



Figure 61 Street representing Australia at the United Nations, 1945. National Library of Australia, MS 2683/11/10.

Through exploring the lives of these eight women in all their complexity and contradiction, including where they converged and diverged from one another, this thesis has shown the interwar period to be a formative moment in feminism's long history. Whereas before the First World War campaigners for women's suffrage saw international cooperation as a way to bolster their spirits and stimulate action in various national contexts, the post-1918 world—shaped by renewed internationalist zeal, the League experiment, technological innovation, and the momentum of women's enfranchisement—allowed them to stake a bolder

claim not only to national but also global citizenship. For them, internationalism thus came to represent a compelling avenue for challenging the gendered foundations of contemporary global society. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s my group and their colleagues redefined what it meant to do politics, expanding their remit beyond the bounds of their activist organisations and staking a claim to hitherto masculine public spaces. They aspired to make their “sisterhood” more truly global and had some success, although they were also severely limited in this regard by the persistence of imperialist ways of thinking. In person and from a distance, in cooperation and in conflict, they sought to work together to reformulate the gendered norms of their local, national, and international worlds. Studying their lives in detail not only allows us to better understand this critical moment in feminism’s past, but also to see the broader trends and important shifts that have characterised the longer story of women mobilising for equality.

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