

JESSIE STREET

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A Heroine of Mine

She was a high-born lady from the gentry of the land
She never had known poverty but she seemed to understand
That her privilege depended on the labour of the poor
And she spent her life in working just to even up the score

She married a young lawyer and Chief Justice he became
She could have spent her whole life in the shelter of his name
But not for her the glory of reflections in the glass
She saw the vast injustice and she couldn't let it pass

Chorus:

She was an inspiration to the women of her time
And Jessie Street will always be a heroine of mine

She never had to work but still she fought for equal pay
And she fought for Aborigines to the silver tails' dismay
She was a woman for the people her commitment
clear and strong
And she used her wealth and influence to help the cause along

She saw the waste of human life in wars that make men rich
Her work for peace was endless but they put her on the list
They branded her a traitor called her Communist and more
But Jessie's voice was never still against the crime of war

Chorus:

She was an inspiration to the women of her time
And Jessie Street will always be a heroine of mine

And Jessie your example helps us all along the way
Foundations that were laid back then we're building on today
And the struggle isn't over there are mountains still to climb
But the legacy you and your sisters left is our lifeline

Chorus:

You were an inspiration to the women of your time
And Jessie Street you'll always be a heroine of mine

EXPEDITION 1 PAGE 3

STREET, Jessie Mary Grey (1889-1970), feminist, was born on 18 April 1889 at Ranchi, Bihar, India, Eldest of three children of Charles Alfred Gordon Lillingston of the Indian Civil Service and Mabel Harriet Ogilvie, sixth daughter of Edward David Stewart Ogilvie of Yugilbar station, near Grafton, New South Wales. When Mabel inherited Yugilbar in 1896, Lillingston resigned from the Service to take up residence there. Jessie began her formal education with a governess. In 1904-6 she attended Wycombe Abbey School, Buckinghamshire, England. She matriculated by private study and enrolled in Arts at the University of Sydney where she met her future husband, Kenneth Whistler Street. She graduated BA in 1911.



Jessie captained the University women's hockey team, attended the inaugural meeting of the New South Wales Ladies' Hockey Association and played in its first interstate match. She was a founding member (1910) and president (1925-26) of Sydney University Women's Sports Association. She travelled with her parents in Europe in 1911 and again in 1914. She worked in London as a volunteer at Bishop Creighton House, a Church of England Settlement, and in New York at Waverley House, a reception centre for young women arrested as prostitutes, run by the New York Protective and Probation Association.

On 10 February 1916 at St John's Anglican Church, Darlinghurst, Jessie Lillingston married Kenneth Street, a barrister, who was then serving as legal officer at Holdsworthy Internment Camp and subsequently became chief justice of New South Wales (1950). They were to have four children, the youngest born in 1926.



In 1920 Jessie was secretary of the National Council of Women of New South Wales. She thought to liven up interest in the Council's work by calling elections for office-bearers, their practice being to co-opt, and meeting opposition she resigned. From 1921 to 1950 she was a Councillor of Women's College as was her father-in-law in 1917-34. She became an executive member of the Feminist Club and briefly its president (1929). When she invited the Women Voters' Association, the Women's Service Guild and the Women's League to join with the Feminist Club to form the United Associations (later United Associations of Women) some club members objected and she resigned. Jessie chaired the provisional committee and was elected president of the United Associations in 1930. She stood down from time to time to allow other women the experience of office, ending her last term as president in 1950.

The United Associations became the New South Wales branch of the Australian Federation of Women Voters (AFWV), which had been founded by Bessie Rischbieth in 1921 to give women a voice nationally and internationally. Rischbieth was Australia's leading feminist and mentor to Street. She confided her plans for the AFWV, suggested issues for action, used Street to interview ministers, and arranged for her to meet prominent overseas feminists. The AFWV's journal Dawn was well established and a useful medium for United Associations' publicity.

The overriding objective of the Federation and its affiliates was 'real equality' of status and opportunity – an end to discrimination against women in the workplace, in law, in appointment



to public office, as a consequence of marriage or as mothers. The welfare of children and the promotion of international peace were associated aims. The strategy of post-suffrage international feminism, which Rischbieth had helped to develop, was to mobilise nationally and internationally to bring pressure on government, both directly and indirectly through the League of Nations.

In Geneva in 1930, Street linked up with the British Commonwealth League, joined a delegation for Equal Nationality Rights, addressed the Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker on the 'iniquity of the Australian Basic Wage', and led a 'spontaneous' deputation to the Director of the International Labour Organisation. The Open Door worked for the repeal of all legislation and regulations that set special conditions for employing women, effectively excluding them from certain jobs and most trades. Street became vice-chairman of Equal Rights International. At home, she called on the Government to respond positively to a League of Nations' resolution that had referred the Pan-American Equal Rights Treaty to member nations for consideration. She appealed (unsuccessfully) for the inclusion of an 'equal rights' clause in constitutional amendments put forward in 1944. Street continued to work with international feminism, publicising their work when in Australia and renewing contact overseas in 1938, 1945 and later years.



The United Associations cooperated with other organisations in campaigns for equal guardianship rights, divorce law reform, the right of a married woman to retain her nationality and to establish separate domicile, the appointment of women to public office and to jury service, and the election of women to parliament. The methods were well established – public meetings, lectures, conferences, letters to editors and politicians, radio talks, deputations to ministers, and public appeals. 'Throughout history', Street wrote, 'vital changes of policy have been brought about by moral pressure.' The United Associations published numerous leaflets and pamphlets including three written by Street: 'Equal Pay for Men and Women and Child Endowment'; 'Woman as Homemaker' and 'How to Achieve Equal Pay'.



RIGHT TO ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

A woman's right to economic independence was the cause she made especially her own. This encompassed a right to income for married women, a right to paid employment regardless of marital status, a right to compete alongside men in the labour market, equal pay, and just remuneration of skills. She lobbied for child endowment to be paid to mothers (1941) and, without success, for a wife's right to an allowance: a wife who left an unsatisfactory husband could claim maintenance, so if she remained with him it was 'only fair' that she be 'legally entitled to the money for her maintenance'. Street devised an elaborate national insurance scheme in 1932 with provision for marriage endowment and child endowment. She ran a long and ultimately successful campaign against the Married Women Teachers' and Lecturers' Dismissal Act (1932, repealed 1947), protested strongly at the Trades and Labor Council of Queensland's proposal (1935) to deny work to married women, and objected to the dismissal of married women by Sydney County Council (1937) and from the Commonwealth Public Service postwar.

Since slavery was abolished, all men were entitled to sell their labour at the highest price, but women were denied this right, which, Street stated, 'is the very foundation of human liberty'. Was it fair that a man with private income could claim a job, and married women be refused employment? Regulations excluding women from certain work (for example with heavy machinery) were also unjust. Industrial safety was as much a concern for men as for women. To enjoy the right to work, women needed access to family planning. Street had started the short-lived Social Hygiene Association in 1916 to promote sex education and moral restraint. Later, through the Racial Hygiene Association of New South Wales she helped set up the first contraceptive clinic in Sydney (1933).

"WOMEN ARE FORCED TO ACCEPT A WAGE WHICH ONLY COVERS THEIR BAREST NECESSITIES AND ALLOWS FOR NO DEPENDANTS"

JESSIE STREET - TRUTH OR REPOSE 1936

EQUAL PAY

The case she argued for equal pay was that it was just, and would eliminate the pool of cheap female labour which 'continually menaces the employment of men and the standards of living of all workers'. This was especially so where technology was changing the nature of work. The United Associations briefed counsel to appear in equal pay cases brought by the Federated Clerks' Union of Australia and the Shop Assistants' Union of New South Wales. It was a foundation member of the Council of Action for Equal Pay (1937) and continued to cooperate despite disagreement on the tactic of phasing in equal pay.

In a major campaign in 1940 with support from twenty organisations, the United Associations briefed Nerida Cohen to intervene in the basic wage inquiry. In the sequel, Street secured a commitment from a number of unions to make applications for equal pay, influencing the Australasian Council of Trade Unions' endorsement of equal pay in 1942. The substantial result was the creation of a Women's Employment Board which set wage rates for women war-workers at 60 to 100 per cent of male rates.



PEACE AND POLITICS



The Street family were foundation members of the New South Wales branch of the League of Nations Union. As the League's failures became more apparent in the 1930s, the United Associations affiliated with the New South Wales branch of the International Peace Campaign. This may have influenced the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR to invite Jessie to visit the Soviet Union when she took her younger daughter to Europe in 1938. Her mother-in-law had earlier chaperoned her older daughter's European tour. After some weeks in the Soviet Union, Street was satisfied that Russian women 'could enter any occupation under conditions of equality'. In Vienna she was deeply saddened by seeing the way that Nazis treated Jews. She became an advocate for the removal of restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine, and for an increased intake of Jewish refugees to Australia. She was to serve on the Aliens Classification and Advisory Board in 1944 and later on the Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council.

Jessie Street joined the Australian Labor Party in 1939, convinced that the organised labour movement promoted much needed reforms. In 1943 she failed to obtain pre-selection for Eden-Monaro (which the ALP won), but was endorsed for Wentworth (which the Labor Party had never held) which she lost after distribution of preferences. In 1946 she was again defeated for Wentworth.

WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION

Three causes especially engaged her during the war. One was the infringement of the civil liberties of women who, on suspicion of having sexual relations with servicemen or as a result of an anonymous accusation of venereal disease, became liable under National Security Regulations to summary arrest, compulsory examination and incarceration if found venereally infected. One in three so accused were free of disease.

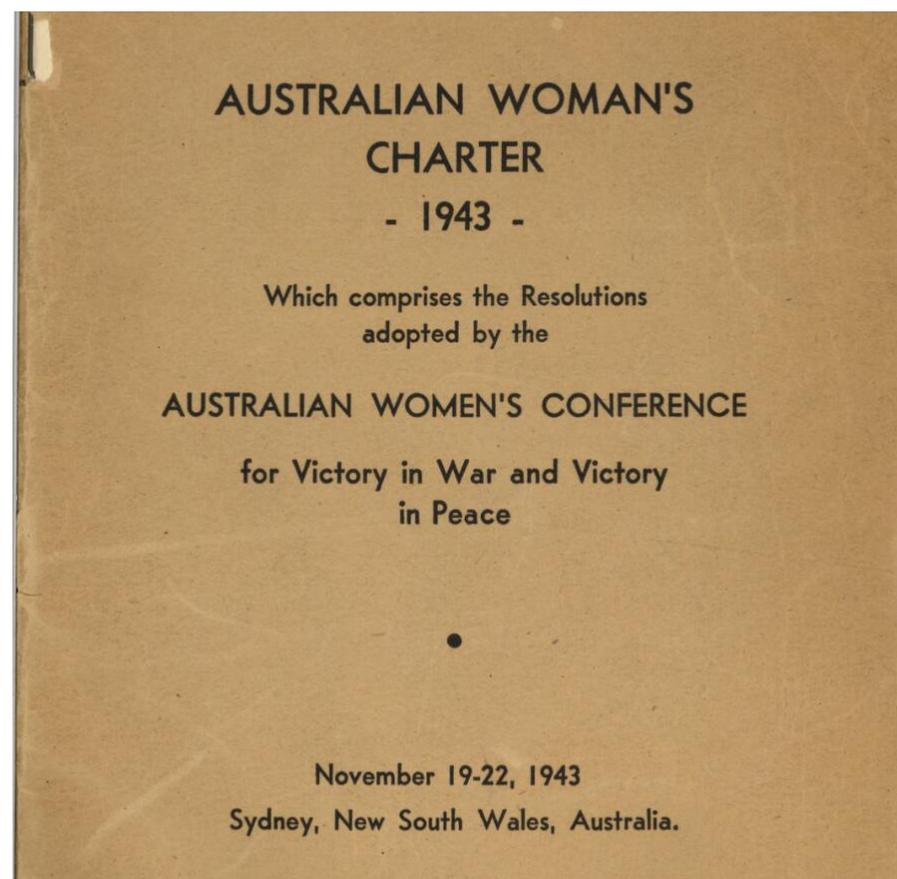
Another cause was aid for Russia. In 1939 Street became president of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (later Australian Russian Society). Following Germany's attack on the Soviet Union, she mobilised and chaired the high-powered Russian Medical Aid and Comforts Committee; when war with Japan shifted priorities for medicines, she organised the 'Sheepskins for Russia' appeal. Help for the heroic Red Army made Jessie a popular figure.

Her third great wartime achievement was the mobilisation of women behind a national program for reconstruction.

Over ninety organisations, with all States represented, at the Australian Women's Conference for Victory in War and Victory in Peace approved the Australian Woman's Charter (1943), a detailed program of reforms for incorporation in government postwar planning. To bring together so wide a body of support was an end Street had in mind when writing in 1934 that women must organise. 'The vote is respected much more than justice and liberty'. In 1943 Jessie Street was indisputably Australia's leading feminist. Street financed the publication of the Australian Women's Digest (1944-47), a forum for discussion of Charter reforms and the reporting of other news. She was generous with money for good causes.

THE VOTE IS RESPECTED MUCH MORE THAN LIBERTY AND JUSTICE

JESSIE M STREET



UNITED NATIONS

In 1945 Street was the only female adviser in the Australian delegation to the United Nations Conference on International Organization, held at San Francisco. In cooperation with other women she secured the insertion of the word 'sex' in the clause 'without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion' wherever it occurred in the Charter of the United Nations. The women canvassed widely for Article 8 which acknowledges the eligibility of 'men and women' to participate 'in any capacity and under conditions of equality' in the principal and subsidiary organs of the United Nations. 'Where the rules are silent', Street said, 'women are not usually considered'.

She believed the lobbying for Article 8 generated the favourable reception of Bertha Lutz's motion that the UN Economic and Social Council establish a commission on the status of women with a special charge to investigate discrimination. Street was Australia's first representative (1947-48) on this commission, and its vice-president. By then the Cold War had changed the climate for reform. Street's intention had been for the commission to scrutinise the work of all UN bodies, but it was inadequately staffed and limited in its times of meetings. Her proposal for nationally based committees to support its work was endorsed, and she travelled Australia to establish a network of committees.



Street was never attracted to, nor a member of, the Communist Party. After San Francisco she toured devastated Europe and was a guest of the Soviet Union. She was convinced it had suffered too great destruction and loss of life to want another war. In working for better understanding of the Soviet Union she saw herself helping to promote peace. She was president (from 1946) of the Australian Russian Society. In Paris, she clashed 'openly and bitterly' with Bessie Rischbieth at the congress of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship. In Sydney, she was labelled a 'Red' in a smear campaign. The second Australian Woman's Charter Conference (1946) became the occasion for sustained questioning of Street's claim to national leadership. The rift developing in the women's movement was the result in part of Street's abandonment of the strategy of non-party politics, but was also profoundly influenced by Cold War fears.

Street stood for the new federal seat of Phillip in 1949 as an Independent Labour candidate and lost. She had been overseas for much of 1948, coming home via India and Japan. Seeing Hiroshima was among the 'most unforgettable' of her experiences. She became deeply committed to banning nuclear weapons. As president of the New South Wales Peace Council she invited Dr Hewlett Johnson, the 'Red Dean' of Canterbury, to the first postwar congress of the Australian Peace Council in 1950. Refused the use of Sydney Town Hall, she moved the conference to Melbourne. She went to England that year to help the British Peace Council organise a world peace congress, eventually held in Warsaw because of difficulties obtaining visas. She had expected to return after six months but on becoming an executive member of the World Peace Council she established her residence in London.



Street travelled constantly, to peace meetings and conferences and to report on United Nations meetings for various Australian publications and to old United Associations associates. She rejoined feminist friends in the British Commonwealth League, the Six Point Group and the World Women's Party. The British Anti-Slavery Society appointed her to its executive and, at its request, she returned in 1956 to report on the situation of Aboriginal Australians.

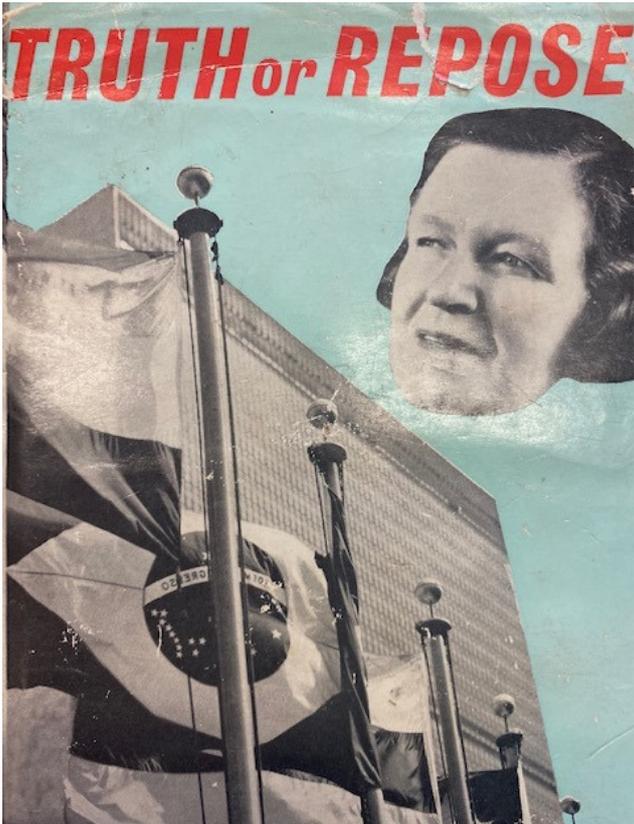
ABORIGINAL RIGHTS

National responsibility for the 'care' of Aborigines was AFWV policy from 1933. It was also the first plank in policy proposals for Aborigines in the Australian Woman's Charter. Responding to Aboriginal protest, the United Associations had recommended the appointment of a woman and an Aborigine to the Aborigines Welfare Board of New South Wales. This brought Jessie and Pearl Gibbs together. In 1956 Street urged Gibbs to start the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship. She believed the support of a national Aboriginal organisation would 'help considerably' if her report were to be forwarded to the United Nations. Advised by Christian Jollie Smith, she drafted an amendment to the Australian Constitution to remove discriminatory references to Aborigines and suggested that the fellowship make it the focus of its first meeting in Sydney Town Hall.

As she travelled interstate collecting information for her report, Street met Aboriginal leaders to whom she explained the constitutional proposals and the importance of national organisation. The Anti-Slavery Society decided against sending her report to the United Nations, but her visit had significant consequences. The Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (later Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders) was formed in 1958 and her suggested amendments to the Constitution were carried in the 1967 referendum.

"SHE DRAFTED AN AMENDMENT TO THE AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTION TO REMOVE DISCRIMINATORY REFERENCES TO ABORIGINES" - Heather Radi

LATER YEARS



Street resumed her work for peace. In 1960 she came home to Australia and began writing her memoirs. A first volume was published as *Truth or Repose* (1966), the second abandoned. When Jessie next travelled, it was mainly to see friends. Though often apart, husband and wife remained affectionate friends. He was a daily visitor in her final months in the Scottish Hospital. (Lady) Jessie Street (her preferred use of title) died on 2 July 1970 at Paddington and was cremated. Her husband, two daughters and two sons survived her. She bequeathed \$10,000 to the Australia-Soviet Friendship Society and the bulk of her estate to her children.



Following celebrations for her centenary in 1989, a Jessie Street Trust was formed which from time to time awards financial assistance to projects in the areas of her main public activities. The Jessie Street National Women's Library was also established in Sydney. The Library holds a portrait (1929) by Jerrold Nathan* in which Jessie is bedecked in finery, but commonly she wore a tailored suit, simple blouse, cameo brooch and comfortable shoes. Of medium build, her brown hair cut for convenience, she had a warm, pleasant appearance and demeanour.

Jessie could charm and cheer, give and win loyalty. She had a talent for friendship and for persuading others to accept office, share responsibility and join the fight for justice and peace. In the words of Judy Small's song: 'She was an inspiration to the women of her time'.

CHRONOLOGY

1889 born 18 April in India

1896 family moves to NSW when mother inherits Yugalbar in northern NSW

1911 graduates BA, University of Sydney

1911-1915 travels to Europe and UK and attends women's conferences

1916 marries Kenneth Whistler Street, later Chief Justice of NSW

1920 Secretary of National Council of Women, NSW

1920 last of four Children (2 daughters, 2 sons) born

1929 elected President of 'Feminist Club. Helps form United Associations of Women (UAW)

1930 In Geneva attends conferences and becomes vice-president of Equal Rights International. Becomes President of UAW

1933 helps set up first contraceptive clinic in Sydney

1936 involved in UAW campaign for more women to be included in Australian Olympics team

1938 tours Soviet Union with younger daughter

1940 with Nerida Cohen takes equal pay case for UAW to Commonwealth Arbitration Court

1942 sends consignment of sheepskins to Russia

1943 stands as ALP candidate for Federal Seat of Wentworth, Sydney

1943 organises first Australian Women's Charter Conference in Sydney

1944 publishes first issue of Australian Women's Digest

1945 sole woman adviser in Australian delegation to San Francisco conference founding UN

1947 Australian representative on Commission of Status of Women at UN

1949 unsuccessfully contests seat of Phillip In Sydney as Independent Labour candidate

1950-60 travels widely throughout Europe for meetings with peace organisations

1957 visits Aboriginal communities in WA and Northern Territory

1966 first volume of autobiography Truth or Repose published

1967 her suggested constitutional amendments to remove discriminatory references to Aborigines from the Australian Constitution carried in referendum

1970 2 July, Jessie Street dies in Sydney