

‘Stacks of friends’: Kathleen (Kay) Gordon Cameron (1899–1987) and the Broadening International Focus of the Country Women’s Association of Victoria in the 1960s

Karen Crook

Independent Scholar
karencrook@bigpond.com

Abstract: The paper examines the increasing international focus of the Country Women’s Association of Victoria in the 1960s under the leadership of Kathleen (Kay) Gordon Cameron (also known as Mrs N.W. Cameron), state president 1961–1963.

Keywords: Country Women’s Association of Victoria, Kathleen Cameron, leadership, internationalism, conservation

Kathleen ‘Kay’ Cameron’s influence as a community leader with a focus on women’s citizenship, conservation and internationalism, spanned several decades, but it was during the 1960s, as a leader of the Country Women’s Association of Victoria and a national president of the Country Women’s Association of Australia, that Cameron’s commitment to raising public interest in the complex and emerging issues facing Australia and the world found its greatest expression.

Cameron was born in 1899 at Tambo, Queensland, the only child of John Gordon Browne, an Australian-born grazier of Scottish Huguenot descent and Annie Amelia Nicol, the daughter of the manager of the London Bank in Geelong. Cameron always had a particular interest in the Geelong district as her grandfather was one of the earliest white settlers there, arriving in 1839 and taking up land near what is now Drysdale.¹ An accident with a horse when she was seven left Cameron’s father a paraplegic and the family moved to High Street, Malvern, in Melbourne. Despite her father’s inability to work, the family had a more than comfortable income from the Queensland property and from investments. The family, nevertheless, led a quite isolated existence. Cameron attended Lauriston Girls’ School from which she matriculated as dux. She was also editor of the school’s paper, the *Lauristonian*. Against her father’s wishes, she enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Melbourne, where her studies included biology and botany. Cameron finally bowed to family pressure and transferred to the National Gallery Art School.

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She was known for her beautiful landscape watercolours. She married Neil Wilson Cameron at the Malvern Presbyterian Church on 15 April 1925. They had met through Cameron's cousin, who had a property near the Cameron brothers' farm at Wallan. Just before their marriage, Kay and Neil bought a property at Glenspean, near Meredith. In contrast to her own family, Neil and Kay were known for their hospitality and entertaining, and Kay had 'stacks of friends'.² Many of her women friends were unmarried as a result of World War I.

Cameron's family considered her a good housekeeper who would have liked to be more involved in farming but faced opposition from the male employees, particularly as she had no farming background. Nevertheless, while Neil served in Palestine for two and a half years during World War II, Cameron ran the farm, with the assistance of one elderly male employee. A history of the Country Women's Association, recalled that Cameron was 'keenly interested in anything concerning country life, particularly pasture improvement and modern methods of farm management and living'.³ She was also a keen gardener. In 1952, coming home from a visit to the UK, Neil had a heart attack and died on the ship. Her two sons then took over the running of the property, leaving Kay with plenty of opportunity to pursue her own interests.

Cameron and her husband were very community minded. When the CWA was founded in Victoria in 1928, Kay set up the first branch in her area. The association was an enduring commitment for Cameron. As a member of state council, state president (1961–1963) and national president (1963–1965), she stressed the importance of redressing problems of rural loneliness and the drift of families to cities, highlighting the need for expanded educational and health facilities in the country. Holding office when the CWA was broadening its focus, Cameron encouraged 'better citizenship' to fit women 'to take our true part in the life of the country and the world'.⁴ She had a keen awareness of her responsibility to raise public interest in a wide range of causes.

The CWA grew out of the growing social and economic crises of the 1920s. These included years of drought, depressed prices for agricultural goods, and the failure of the soldier settlement scheme. Alongside this was a growing realisation of, and dissatisfaction with, the fact that country areas were lagging behind the cities in terms of health services, educational facilities and general amenities. Providing services for rural areas was not seen as electorally rewarding by politicians. The needs of women and children in country areas during these years were particularly great. Rural women were not sustained by a 'mateship' ethos that had ignored the need to build

communities able to support families, not just individual males. Women of all classes were faced with the day-to-day realities of life in the bush, and the attendant difficulties of feeding, clothing and educating their families. Even when families managed to find the money for boarding school fees, the loss of children at an early age led to increased loneliness, especially for women. Rural women's lives varied a great deal in the 1920s, as they continue to vary today. Nevertheless, despite differences in class, education, religion and race, most women shared the isolation of bad roads, distance, and limited access to resources.⁵

The CWA originated in New South Wales in 1922, and over the next decade, associations also formed in other states and territories, including Victoria in 1928. The earliest Victorian branches were Yarra (a metropolitan branch formed at the 'Open Conference' called by Lady Mitchell in 1928), Cranbourne, Katandra West, Monbulk and Sale. The association grew quickly, with twenty branches and 1700 members by the time of the first annual state conference in 1929. In 1931, branches were formed into district groups throughout the state, a significant step in decentralisation and one that gave tremendous impetus to the expansion of CWA work in country areas, as well as helping to unify the whole movement. The CWA of Australia was formed in 1945 with the aim of enabling closer liaison between the state organisations. The first national president was Helena Marfell of Victoria.⁶

Before mothers' clubs were established in isolated areas, CWA branches helped to stock the libraries of local schools and provided assistance where needed. They also played a big part in fostering the establishment of bush nursing centres. Most of the earlier charitable work, such as maternal and infant welfare centres and home help schemes, was subsequently taken over by government agencies. Each branch was expected to be self-supporting and to work for a local objective, decided upon by its members, whilst benefiting from the interests and contacts with all other Victorian branches. Branches have always encouraged individual members to take active roles in groups and activities in their towns, and the skills and experiences they develop as members have assisted them in participating more effectively in their communities.⁷

The historical division of labour in agricultural settings in Australia, and the extreme difficulties of farming shaped both the rural ideal and the reality of country life for women. It is impossible to understand the CWA's early emphasis on supporting women in their traditional gender roles without recognising the hardships of the lives of many rural women in the period of the CWA's formation. The formation of the CWA in the 1920s and 1930s

allowed rural women to express concerns about the difficulties faced by many of their number and made possible public action about those concerns, at local, state and national levels. In leading this process, the association politicised individual women in ways with which they could feel comfortable. The actions that the association took, and the issues they raised, were directed at improving the lives of women and their families as they were, not at changing the system that brought about those problems.⁸

Most women were members of the CWA not merely because of its effective political advocacy role but because it was an important feature of their social life. Women went to the monthly meetings to get out of the house or off the farm, to see their friends, to catch up with local news, to learn some new craft or skill, and to enjoy afternoon tea. It may be that the CWA's important role in rural communities made it more acceptable for women to take time away from their normal chores, and that the formality of attending a meeting added to the value and perhaps legitimacy of the outing. Nevertheless, for many women, active participation in the CWA provided them with a forum for the expression of their political and social ideas and activities, and a platform to develop a career in public life. For someone like Kay Cameron, whose family and class background and married status meant that she was unable to develop a professional life outside the home, the CWA was the perfect opportunity. The CWA was not, of course, the only women's organisation to offer this opportunity, but it was the main one for rural women. In any case, it was rare for women at senior levels of the CWA not to be active members of several organisations, or to be on the boards of local hospitals or charities.

The encouragement of women to take on leadership roles has always been an important part of the CWA. Women are expected to carry out the duties associated with these roles and are trained and supported to do so. There are a variety of jobs at all levels, suited to different skills and interests. As well as president, secretary and treasurer, other positions at branch and group level, such as international secretary and magazine secretary, mirror state executive offices. In addition, at branch level there are valued jobs for members who may never move up the organisational ladder, such as posy person or trading table organiser. Certain positions on the state executive—such as catering chair or handicrafts and home industries chair, international secretary, presidential club chair, and honorary editor of the official publication, *Country Crafts*—have generally been held by women with specific interests and capabilities in those areas. By the time a woman becomes state president, she has served a fairly lengthy 'apprenticeship' and is likely to have developed the knowledge, skills and attributes she needs to be successful in

the role. She is certainly provided with the mentoring and support of her predecessors in the role.

International links were important to the CWA from the start and, following an invitation from the Marchioness of Aberdeen and Temair, president of the International Council of Women (ICW), the association provided representation to the first Rural Women's World Conference in London in April 1929. In doing so, the CWA was one of 23 rural women's societies from around the world that met to discuss the possible formation of an international organisation.⁹ The ensuing conference, held in Vienna in 1930, determined that rural women preferred to have an organisation separate from the ICW. As a result, a 'liaison committee for rural women's and homemakers' organisations' was set up.¹⁰ At the 1933 conference held in Stockholm, the name Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW) was decided upon, and Mrs Hubert Fairfax of New South Wales was elected one of the eight vice presidents. Until the 1980s, the CWA of Victoria was represented at all triennial conferences of the ACWW, with the exception of Washington in 1936, and usually a full delegation attended these congresses. At the Edinburgh triennial meeting in 1959, it was decided that the tenth triennial conference would be held in Australia in 1962. This was to be a highlight of Cameron's time as state president.

Kay Cameron was well known for her work as international secretary and, from the late 1950s until the 1970s, she was very involved with the ACWW. She was also CWA nominee and later president (1962–1969) of the Pan Pacific and South East Asia Women's Association (PPSEAWA), and an energetic member of the British Empire League and the Australian–Asian Association. She loved travelling, and often her trips were to international conferences or to visit friends made through her community involvement. In addition to participating in ACWW triennial conferences in Ceylon and Edinburgh, as well as the 1962 Melbourne conference, she also attended three PPSEAWA conferences in Manila (1955), Tokyo (1958) and Canberra (1961). She travelled to Great Britain, New Zealand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Bali, Burma, Tonga and the United Kingdom. International visitors were often entertained at Glenspean. Her family recount how she was 'always entertaining Japanese'.¹¹

A commitment to conservation was another of Kay Cameron's life-long passions. Learning that back in 1938 every CWA branch had fostered a lively interest in tree planting, with members encouraging a knowledge and love of trees in their children, Cameron sought to re-stimulate this interest in the late 1960s. She offered prizes to the branch that planted the most trees, resulting in

fierce competition and the planting of thousands of saplings. In 1978, she organised a state-wide garden competition, as part of Premier Rupert Hamer's scheme to establish Victoria as a 'garden state'. Then, in 1963, Cameron presented a motion at the CWA state conference requesting that world governments reduce atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. She remained a key supporter of the garden state movement of the 1970s, and was an early member of the Keep Australia Beautiful Council, as well as president (1974–1975) of the Natural Resources Conservation League, where she was the third woman of seventeen presidents since 1944. Concerned by 'the growing pressures of world population and modern science and technology', she urged campaigners to adapt imaginatively to changing circumstances.¹²

Cameron had experience in every leadership role at group level, except secretary, and every position on state council, except secretary and handicrafts and home industries chair. But she was particularly noted as a passionate international secretary, serving in that role twice. Cameron's approach to international issues was broader and more nuanced than most and she was always reading to improve her knowledge. She maintained an active network of pen friends all over the world, who were mainly women she had met at conferences.

In one of her lead columns, Alice Sewell, Cameron's predecessor as honorary editor of *Country Crafts*, demonstrated common CWA attitudes towards migrants in the late 1950s; it was welcoming but wary:

We realise that for migrants of non-British countries our lives or way of life in Australia differs a good deal from theirs but probably they will introduce to many of our people something of **their** way of life. Our women will certainly be prepared to adopt some of their cookery!¹³

Cameron's interest in other cultures extended far beyond cooking and she worked hard to encourage members to educate themselves about the wider world, the growing number of migrant providing her with a means of doing so. The social changes brought about by post-war migration were only beginning to be felt in the late 1950s, and more so in the cities than in country areas. Cameron stressed the importance of the CWA in bringing attention to the needs of women and their families, at home and internationally. After discussing in detail the situation for women in the Australian trust territory of Papua New Guinea, she pointed out that the CWA was regarded by authorities as a reliable source of information on the conditions of life for women and children in the territory, and as a means of gauging their opinions.¹⁴

During Cameron's tenure as international secretary (1957–1959), the main focus of her reports was Asia and the South Pacific region. Each year, the CWA state executive chose a 'country of study', which became the focus of the annual International Day, an essay competition, and various displays. Under Cameron's leadership as international secretary, there was greater emphasis on Asian countries. Members were provided with substantial amounts of information on the country of study and given very practical suggestions on how to go about learning more about the chosen nation and its people. Trying new recipes was a very small part of that for Cameron. Ceylon was the country of study in 1958, and branches were encouraged to run a competition to see how many newspaper articles on Ceylon any single individual could collect. But the main suggestion was for members to entertain a Ceylonese student or students in the May vacation. 'To meet and get to know someone from that country is worth a dozen books!' wrote Cameron, urging CWA members to 'open the windows of our minds to the world, to learn to think internationally, of the good of the whole world and not only our part of it'.¹⁵ While confirming that their 'first duty' was to their 'own family, district and country', she also stressed that understanding other countries was very important:

And it **is** happening, for women everywhere are taking a wider interest in world affairs, and particularly the Societies of the Associated Country Women of the World are taking a leading part in this movement—so let all of us do our best for international understanding by doing something ourselves. For important things are happening all over the world today and how can we know what to think if we don't know the background? You remember the saying "What women think today, men will think tomorrow, and the world the day after", well, what happens if we **don't** think?¹⁶

Cameron's reports in this period provided a great deal of detailed information on a number of countries, including Papua New Guinea, Kenya, Laos and British Columbia. Social, political and economic matters were discussed, with a particular focus on the work of international agencies in those countries such as the Red Cross and the United Nations. In 1959, Laos was not a member of the ACWW, but a visit to the country by the president that year gave Cameron hope that it soon would be.

The year 1958 was particularly busy for Cameron. In July, she marvelled at air travel and the difference it made to the life of the world. Travel by air to the first regional ACWW conference of the South Pacific took hours, rather than the days a trip by sea would take. While physical distance was shrinking,

Cameron was concerned that ‘mental distance’ still remained—‘the distance that is made up of the difference in ways of life (which is largely a matter of climate), differences in the countries themselves and in the historical backgrounds of the people who live in them’.¹⁷ Cameron saw it as her role to break down this mental distance. Though she did not explicitly mention the threat of nuclear weapons, this was clearly on her mind. ‘And we must remember always that today misunderstandings between nations may have dire and dreadful results to others perhaps far away and in no way connected to the dispute’, she wrote.¹⁸ Cameron believed it was vitally important for ordinary people to learn as much as possible about the daily lives and problems of people in other countries in order to influence public opinion and the policy process and thereby avoid the destruction that war would bring. In October 1958, Cameron attended the PPSEAWA conference in Tokyo.

In June 1960, Cameron took on the role of acting honorary editor of *Country Crafts*, in addition to her responsibilities as state deputy president. While she recognised that the journal needed to reflect the values of the association, Cameron also realised that the role of editor would provide her with a reasonably broad scope to put forward her own point of view. She took up this opportunity with relish, continuing many of the themes that came through her reports as international secretary, though with an increasingly philosophical flavour. In particular, she used the opening afforded by a prominent editorial—always on the first page, before the state president’s report—to comment on world affairs. In one such opinion piece, she urged members to:

train ourselves to study and to understand the new problems of the world, both in our own country and in those of our neighbours for we are not born with understanding but must work to obtain it! This may not be an easy task, but one worth attempting, for if we can understand, we can lead public opinion towards understanding and towards acting on this understanding.¹⁹

For Cameron, the problems facing the world were real, human and urgent and Australians—among ‘the people of the fortunate countries where life is free, full and secure’—needed to make an effort to understand, for example, the conditions that refugees found themselves in, particularly during World Refugee Year (1960). She wrote that, in the past few months, people across the world had been asked to imagine the difficulties facing refugees:

those people who, from no fault of their own, have been forced to flee from their own countries and take refuge in another, and who must leave all their worldly goods behind them, relying for a chance to build

another life for themselves entirely on the sympathy and understanding of the country which has given them asylum.

She reminded readers that, even in 1960, refugee camps remained in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. 'In these are people just living, waiting for a chance to begin a real life again and becoming daily less and less fit to do so', she wrote.²⁰

Cameron became state president of the CWA in July 1961 and served until 1963, later taking on the national presidency from 1963 until 1965. Unfortunately, a major accident in Toorak Road in November 1961 meant her period as state president was hampered by injuries—the lower half of her body was 'mashed up'—from which she never really recovered. Cameron's deputy, Mrs Lang, undertook many of the president's duties on her behalf. Responding to the terrible bushfires and their aftermath in the hills surrounding Melbourne in January 1962 occupied a great deal of the association's attention, problems at home thus dominating the association during that period.²¹

The two-year period office as state president is exhausting and challenging for any woman, with huge demands on her time to attend meetings and functions. And, in addition to the ceremonial duties, administration is a heavy workload and the bureaucratic requirements can be overwhelming. Her state president reports still reflected Cameron's engaging personality but CWA business, and not her broader concerns, became more of a focus in this period. 'DO please read the notices sent to the branches from headquarters', she urged in her May 1962 report to members.²² In April 1962, Cameron's recovery was still limiting her ability to get to meetings, and it was not until the following month that she was able to attend the club headquarters in Toorak. Issues to do with mobility and travel remained, and it was not until September 1962, ten months after the accident, that she was able to return to Glenspean. She had planned to visit every CWA group, if not every branch, during her time as state president and it was a great disappointment to her that she was unable to do so.²³

After the ACWW accepted the invitation of Australia to host the tenth triennial conference, the CWA of Australia decided that the venue of the conference should be in Melbourne. A co-ordinating committee consisting of representatives from every ACWW society in Australia was set up and Victoria had the task of making the local arrangements. Cameron, as Victorian CWA deputy state president, was a member of the organising committee. With 1200 participants expected, it was a massive task—

arrangements had to be made for accommodation, venues, catering, as well as detailed planning for the conferences sessions and functions. Aides were provided for the world president, honorary secretary and general secretary. Couriers were organised and a 'Mass Choir' established. Plays were written and performed, usually based on some historical event and there was a picnic at the Healesville Sanctuary. ACWW triennial conference delegates came from member societies all over the world, and delegates had the opportunity, in plenary sessions, committees and study groups, to bring forward ideas and issues.²⁴ From this exchange of ideas, broader plans were developed, personal relationships formed, and the understanding that carried the influence of the conferences even further was fostered.

During the 1960s, Cameron once more undertook the honorary editorship of *Country Crafts*. Again, she used it as a forum to express her beliefs and ideas and was surprised but not rattled by concerns raised about these views:

Our Country Women's Association has always held high ideals and high aims for which to work and one of these aims, as set out in the Constitution is the encouragement of International understanding. Yet surprisingly we have heard lately from a few members—only a few—that there is too much International in "Country Crafts"! Your Editor could hardly believe her ears when she heard it, for so many times we've heard how much members enjoy International articles of all sorts; also as it is one of our aims to interest our members in the doings of our fellow members overseas, surely we **want** to hear as much as we can of what goes on in other countries!²⁵

Cameron happily used this opportunity to emphasise some of her key themes: that it was important that Australia no longer be an insular country; that Australia must take its place as a sophisticated nation in the councils of the world; that people must understand each other; that good government relies on educated and sensible public opinion; and that women have an important role to play in each of these activities. Despite never fully recovering from her accident, Cameron continued to use whatever means were available to her to influence public opinion.

Cameron was presented with an Order of the British Empire in 1970. She moved to Sorrento in the mid-1980s but, afflicted with Parkinson's disease, she returned to Meredith where she was nursed by her family before dying at Ballarat on 3 November 1987 after a series of strokes. She was buried in Western Cemetery, Geelong.

A passionate internationalist and a keen conservationist, Cameron used her position as a member of the state council to press for the CWA's active involvement in public life at a local, national and international level. Her network of friends and contacts, in Australia and overseas, and her own active involvement in a number of organisations, enhanced her ability to make a difference.

Kay Cameron was known in the CWA as having a delightful personality and a relaxed, friendly manner. People who knew her commented on her ability to fit in, the effort she made to travel to branches and to make people feel at ease. They have recalled that she was relaxed, had a lovely smile and displayed no airs or graces. Her engaging personality and passion comes across clearly in her writings. Observed one article in *Country Crafts*:

Well-travelled, Mrs. Cameron has a broad outlook and wide range of interests. A positive personality, with a good sense of humour, she likes to express her own views about things with great forthrightness, but is a good listener too, with the ability to see the other person's point of view and consider a problem from all angles.²⁶

Cameron's passionate commitment to raising public interest in the complex issues facing Australia and the world, and her focus on the need to consider and understand issues from a range of viewpoints, was her greatest legacy.

¹ *Country Crafts*, July 1961, 7. For more on the history of the CWA, see also Brenda Stevens-Chambers, *The Many Hats of Country Women* (Brisbane: Country Women's Association of Australia, 1997).

² Neil Gordon Cameron (son) and Jean Cameron (daughter-in-law), interview with Karen Crook, conducted October 2002. See also Karen Crook, 'Cameron, Kathleen Gordon (Kay) (1899–1987)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 17, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 179–80.

³ Karen Crook, 'The Politics of Influence: The Work of the Country Women's Association in the Public Sphere' (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1997), 7.

⁴ Crook, 'Cameron, Kathleen Gordon (Kay) (1899–1987)', 179–80.

⁵ Crook, 'The Politics of Influence', 114.

⁶ Country Women's Association of Victoria, *Years of Adventure: Fifty Years of Service by the Country Women's Association of Victoria 1928–1978* (Melbourne: CWA, 1978).

⁷ Crook, 'The Politics of Influence', 115.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹ Country Women's Association of Victoria, 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Neil and Jean Cameron interview.

- ¹² Crook, 'Cameron, Kathleen Gordon (Kay) (1899–1987)', 179–80.
- ¹³ Alice Sewell, 'Editorial', *Country Crafts*, January 1958, 5.
- ¹⁴ *Country Crafts*, February 1958, 20.
- ¹⁵ *Country Crafts*, March 1958, 10.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ *Country Crafts*, July 1958, 30.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ *Country Crafts*, August 1960, 3.
- ²⁰ 'Editorial', *Country Crafts*, June 1960, 5.
- ²¹ *Country Crafts*, February 1962, 5.
- ²² *Country Crafts*, May 1962, 5.
- ²³ Neil and Jean Cameron interview.
- ²⁴ *Tenth Triennial Conference of the Associated Country Women of the World, Melbourne, Australia 2nd to 12th October, 1962: Conference Theme: The Country Woman's Part in a Changing World* (Melbourne: ACWW, 1962).
- ²⁵ *Country Crafts*, April 1965, 5.
- ²⁶ *Country Crafts*, July 1961, 7.