

Lady Helen Munro Ferguson and the Australian Red Cross: Vice-regal Leader and Internationalist in the early Twentieth Century

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Abstract: This chapter examines the leadership role played by Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, the wife of Australia's sixth Governor-General, in the formation, administration and direction of the Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society from August 1914. With her familial and lifelong experiences of philanthropy and female citizenship and as a vice-regal woman in Australia, Lady Helen provided positive leadership to Australian women during a period of significant upheaval and war. Her connections with Australia continued long after leaving as she represented Australian Red Cross at the League of Red Cross Societies until the mid-1930s. The article muses on the need to reassess the roles of vice-regal women on the development of women's leadership and democracy in Australia in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Australian Red Cross, philanthropy, vice-regal women; Australian women's history; women and leadership

Introduction

All who gained an intimate knowledge of her ... recognized that Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, as she was then, was obviously born for public life. She had all the qualities of leadership—outstanding ability, determination, organizing powers and not a little touch of the aristocrat. This last was usually tempered by her humanness.¹

Reflections on the history of women, leadership and democracy in Australia during the early years of the 20th century rarely consider the influence that vice-regal wives had on Australian women. At the apex of Australian society, responsible for reinforcing a sense of British womanliness and upholding notions of propriety and virtue, the wives of our various governors and governors-general are generally perceived as largely irrelevant appendages in the making of a modern Australia. But I argue the need to reassess the roles of these female representatives of the British monarchy, especially as leaders of Australian women in the first decades of the 20th century. The figure at the

centre of this chapter, Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, was among a number of vice-regal women who were important conduits in the transference of ideas and institutions across the British Empire, shaping imperial and national ideologies at a time of rapid social, economic and political change. Their lasting influences on Australian women, especially in terms of leadership, cannot be underestimated.

Vice-regal women showed leadership acumen through charitable and philanthropic endeavours, traditional areas of female engagement in the public sphere. These British ‘ladies of rank’ were leaders in upholding late Victorian and Edwardian ideas of women’s social and charitable obligations. Many were established philanthropists and activists, believing that female citizenship rested in the active participation of women within their local communities and within the ‘community’ of the British Empire. They upheld a duty to serve that rested on philanthropy and public service as the key to women’s citizenship and a plausible alternative to party politics. Unlike Australian women, these vice-regal representatives, most of whom in the first half of the 20th century came from Britain, had not enjoyed the experiences of the ballot box, with female suffrage in Britain not won until after World War I. Some of them were remarkable and colourful women who pushed the boundaries, established projects and were enthusiastic innovators and agents for change, especially in terms of women’s and children’s health and wellbeing. They established hospitals, nursing schemes, major voluntary organisations and children’s charities. Often more intelligent than their husbands, these ‘first ladies’ bequeathed legacies to society that have outlasted those of their better known husbands. Early vice-regal wives who stand out as leaders include Lady Marie Galway in South Australia and Lady Rachel Dudley, wife of our fourth governor-general, who, despite a range of personal challenges that included her husband being named in a sensational divorce case while in Australia, threw her energies into establishing a bush nursing scheme similar to an initiative she had undertaken in Ireland.²

The focus of this article, Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, later Viscountess Novar, was perhaps the most influential Australian female vice-regal leader of the early 20th century. As the wife of our sixth governor-general, Lady Helen played a key leadership role among Australian women during and after her six years here. In this chapter, I will explain her importance in terms of the development of leadership and women’s democratic participation in Australia and discuss her role in the transference of ideas and institutions across the British Empire.³ This is especially relevant with regard to her role in the Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society (commonly referred to as Australian Red Cross), which became a vehicle for Australian women’s

public activism for much of the 20th century. I will explore Lady Helen's leadership qualities as outlined in the above quotation, especially her 'outstanding ability, determination, organizing powers' and her aristocratic demeanour, though this last quality was not necessarily held in high regard in Australia.⁴

Lady Helen, on leaving Australia at the conclusion of her husband's vice-regal appointment, continued her close association with Australian Red Cross, representing it on the international stage through the 1920s and into the 1930s at the newly established League of Red Cross Societies. There is little known about this phase of her work and the fact that she kept in touch with Australia through this international representative activity. We generally do not associate 'internationalism' or Australian women 'internationalists' with the work of International Red Cross, the League of Red Cross Societies or Australian Red Cross. Rather, we tend to connect Australian women's international activity to a range of other organisations, such as the International Council of Women, the International Women's Suffrage Alliance, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and the World's YWCA. Some of these important Australian women are represented in this biographical collection.⁵

Although scholars have begun to examine the League of Nations in terms of feminist internationalism during the interwar period and the role of Australian feminists in organisations such as the British Commonwealth League and the Pan-Pacific Women's Association, the League of Red Cross Societies has not received the same attention.⁶ Yet, from the mid-19th century, the Red Cross movement was one of the original transnational and global non-government bodies, with its members pursuing a range of policies that incorporated values of justice, human rights and international law. And, certainly in the Australian context, Red Cross was predominantly a women's organisation in everything but name, especially in those vital early years. From its formal beginnings during the outbreak of war in August 1914, Australian Red Cross rapidly became an iconic women's organisation led by the governor-general and state governors' wives as titular heads. Because of this vice-regal association, news of Red Cross activities was generally placed in the social pages and/or women's pages. This created the impression that Red Cross was a socially elite body, though it rapidly became much more than that. Red Cross branches were local, community-based organisations and not necessarily part of the women's movement *per se*, but the work these women undertook was of significant value at a local, national and international level both during and after World War I. A study of women's leadership through the experiences of

Lady Helen and Australian Red Cross in the first decades of the 20th century therefore helps to extend our analysis beyond the binary of feminism and women to uncover a range of ‘alternative feminist histories’ incorporating more than the ‘creation of a self-consciously international women’s movement’ and certainly more than one understood solely within the context of ‘international socialism’.⁷

Family Background and Leadership Influences

Lady Helen Hermione Blackwood was born at Clandeboye, County Down, on 14 March 1865 and was named after her father’s beloved mother, who was the granddaughter of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the famous Restoration playwright. Helen was the eldest daughter and second child of distant cousins Frederick, Lord Dufferin, later the 1st Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, and Hariot, née Hamilton, from Killyleagh Castle, County Down. Seven siblings followed in quick succession, with two boys dying shortly after birth in 1867 and 1868. The Blackwoods were part of the landed Anglo-Irish aristocracy having arrived from Scotland in the 18th century. The estate of Clandeboye, near Bangor on the Belfast Lough, is within easy commuting distance of Belfast and remains in private family ownership.⁸ Helen’s father was a professional diplomat under the patronage of Queen Victoria and his impressive career began with the governor generalship of Canada, 1872–1878. This successful posting was followed by the ambassadorship to Russia, 1879–1881; Constantinople, 1881–1884, and then the prize, viceroy of India, 1884–1888. Later appointments included ambassador to the King of Italy, 1888–1891, and the French Republic, 1891–1896. Dufferin retired in 1897 only to become embroiled in a mining scandal that left him penniless. He died at Clandeboye in February 1902.

From all accounts, this was a very close and tight-knit family. The large and ever-expanding brood of children travelled with their parents to many foreign postings, with the two youngest children born in Canada. While the boys, eldest son and heir Archibald, Earl of Ava, Terence, Basil and eventually Frederick, were all educated at Eton like their father, the girls, Helen and sisters Hermione and Victoria, largely stayed with their parents or remained at home at Clandeboye with their grandmother. Despite the separations, the bond between the siblings and their parents remained strong. As I have argued elsewhere, these ‘imperial girls’ were influenced by both their parents, with Lady Helen’s mother, Hariot, an influential character in her own right with her own imperial career.⁹ She was involved in many philanthropic organisations, including what Antoinette Burton has referred to as the

‘centrepiece of colonial philanthropic work into the twentieth century’ in India, the Countess of Dufferin’s Fund for Supplying Female Medical Aid to the Women of India or the Dufferin Fund.¹⁰

With this pedigree it is perhaps not surprising that Lady Helen was destined to become a leader in her own right. The Blackwoods are a great example of what David Lambert and Alan Lester have termed an imperial careering family—people who moved from colony to colony, inhabiting ‘imperial spaces’ as part of their ‘imperial careers’ thus creating ‘meaningful connections across the [British] empire’ both in times of peace and war.¹¹ Helen, her two sisters and mother all outlived their four brothers, two of whom died in war. The eldest, Archibald, died of wounds in 1900 during the Boer War, and third brother Basil Blackwood was killed in action in July 1917 on the western front. Second son Terence died of pneumonia in 1918; and the youngest son, Frederick, died in an aeroplane accident in July 1930. His son, Basil, who lived as a young child with Lady Helen in Australia during World War I, died fighting in Burma in 1945.

In 1889, at the age of 25, Lady Helen married Ronald Munro Ferguson, a Scottish Liberal parliamentarian, and moved to his estate, Raith, at Kirkcaldy. Apart from setting up home and accompanying her husband to London when parliament was sitting, where she regularly visited parliament and sat in the visitors’ gallery to observe her Munro Ferguson and other parliamentarians at work, Helen threw herself into local charitable activities and ‘good works’, thereby carrying on the traditions of her class and importantly developing her leadership skills. In October 1890, both Helen and Ronald attended a meeting of the new Scottish Women’s Benefit Society in Glasgow, then established a branch in their locality. The society, registered under an Act of parliament, provided for marriage, sickness and funeral allowances and annuities for ‘working women in all classes of employment’, and was the brainchild of another ‘lady of rank’ and leader of women, Lady Ishbel Hamilton-Gordon, Marchioness of Aberdeen and Temair.¹²

Lady Helen’s other public interests revolved around developing district nursing (a passionate commitment supported by her mother and especially sister Hermione, who became a nurse) and raising funds for a Queen Victoria nurse in Kirkcaldy. Revealing a sound head for figures and fundraising skills from her early twenties, Lady Helen raised over £100 for a nurse. The vexed question of the state registration of nurses, an issue to dominate leading British women’s groups for the first decade of the 20th century, also directed Lady Helen’s public work and provided her with an avenue to further display her increasingly well-respected leadership qualities. As a vice-president of the

Society for the State Registration of Trained Nurses and a member of its parliamentary bills committee, Lady Helen advocated widely through public speaking, chaired large public meetings, deputised at parliamentary enquiries, and published articles and letters in various magazines and newspapers. She was remembered in nursing circles as:

the most eloquent woman speaker in the world ... from time to time we have listened to them all, on both sides of the Atlantic, and no woman's voice exquisitely modulated, ever appealed in such golden speech, in competition with that of Lady Helen Munro-Ferguson, when pleading in support of a great cause.¹³

She presented papers at the Jubilee Congress of District Nursing in May 1909 and the International Congress of Nurses held two months later. She published an article in the prestigious *Nineteenth Century* journal on the state registration of nurses issue that was described as 'brilliant'; it was deemed especially helpful that 'one so respected in the public and political world as the writer should grasp this intricate question so perfectly, and sum up the situation in such lucid language'.¹⁴

Other activities by Lady Helen included work on the local education board as well as on the District Juvenile Court Panel in Kirkaldy, committee work with the Victoria League and the South African Colonisation Society (founded in 1901 and 1902 respectively), and with the Kirkaldy Unionist Association as well as the National Union of Women Workers, at whose conference in 1908 she presented a paper on 'The early training of boys and girls in citizenship'. This topic led neatly into an area of interest that was to dominate the rest of her life, for Lady Helen required all her skills, experience and leadership qualities in helping to inaugurate the Scottish Branch of the British Red Cross Society in June 1909. Elected to the executive committee in September that year and as foundation president of her home branch in Fife, she became a passionate and active advocate and leader of the Red Cross movement, its ideals and its principles for the rest of her life.¹⁵

Lady Helen's leadership style was strong, direct, and hands-on. The experiences of both success and failure in the various voluntary and advocacy roles through the middle years of her life provided her with invaluable leadership experience. Unable to have children, she threw herself into these philanthropic causes with heightened intensity. She became committed to the Red Cross movement, seeing its ideals as a perfect public vehicle for educating women to display active citizenship in first aid, home nursing and

preparations for the eventuality of war through ambulance training and the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VAD).

Lady Helen was invited to speak about Red Cross organisation and work on her first visit to Sydney in July 1914, two months after arriving in Melbourne, the temporary national capital and home of the federal government and governor-general.¹⁶ In an address to the Double Bay Ambulance Class, she explained how the Red Cross worked in Britain and, specifically, Scotland. She spoke broadly to ‘those wishing to partake in this important work of “national service”’, and stressed the value of training and organisation in first aid, home nursing and medical cookery.¹⁷ Australian women had dabbled in aspects of Red Cross work since the Boer War but their activities in this respect were disjointed and ad hoc.¹⁸ They had nevertheless demonstrated capacity for effective work in other parts of the public sphere through voluntary and advocacy organisations such as ladies’ benevolent societies, missionary support groups, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and, most recently, the National Council of Women (NCW); in all of them, they were showing an ability to manage their affairs competently, and to chair meetings, speak in public, and organise budgets, especially at a local level.¹⁹

Once war was declared in August 1914, Lady Helen threw herself into leading the Red Cross movement, which in Australia became primarily a women’s organisation. Through her custody and direction of Australian Red Cross, she set an example to her own sex by demonstrating that a woman could lead a federated national organisation, oversee large budgets and chair finance committees dominated by men, both on the national and international stage. Since the Red Cross movement overseas was supported and often led by the aristocracy and upper classes, Lady Helen sent telegrams to the various Australian state governors’ wives, asking them each to establish a local Red Cross branch.²⁰ Her reputation as a leader to be obeyed preceded her, as Lady Galway, the wife of South Australia’s governor, later wrote: ‘when she [Lady Helen] lifted a finger, I stood, metaphorically speaking, to attention’.²¹ Wives of state governors and governors-general assumed the position of patron in many philanthropic organisations, and a number of them also provided leadership and expertise in the establishment of such organisations. In Britain, securing royal patronage was an important and frequently used strategy for voluntary organisations, whatever their makeup. Queen Victoria used her position to support many female initiatives, from nursing (the Queen’s Victoria Nurses were established in 1887) to emigration societies. This tradition continued with British Red Cross, most notably when Queen Mary

appealed 'to all the women of the Empire to assist me in carrying out this great scheme, which is essentially a women's work'.²²

Lady Helen concurred with Queen Mary that Red Cross work was primarily the domain of women. She saw it as a woman's way of contributing to the war effort, and did not want men to take it over at any level. Under Lady Helen's leadership, therefore, Red Cross in Australia was pitched to women and, where possible, organised and run by women. Australian women responded by flocking to the organisation with its extensive web of branch networks, all focusing on the war effort and amelioration of the suffering of soldiers and non-combatants affected by the war. 'Undoubtedly these women are heart and soul in the war', Lady Helen wrote to friend Elizabeth Haldane, and 'the Red X has hitherto given them a chance of showing their capacity'.²³ As I have written elsewhere, the growth of Red Cross in Australia was unprecedented in terms of the speed of branch formation, the numbers of women involved, and the range and size of its activities.²⁴ The corresponding influence of the press, especially newspapers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Sydney Mail*, the *Melbourne Argus* and those in the other state capitals, provided a constant focus on the role of women in war with daily coverage of one sort or another.

Lady Helen's leadership of Australian women during World War I comprised a number of features. The first was vision, a quality she demonstrated when she established the Red Cross in Australia on a 'national' federated basis rather than as a traditional state-based organisation. As wife of the governor-general, she took on a central position and a role that she made very much her own. By situating the new federal Red Cross headquarters in her own home, Government House in Melbourne, Lady Helen maintained tight control of her fledgling empire, another feature of her leadership style and a quality that many did not appreciate. Not only was this rent-free arrangement a cheap option for Red Cross, it meant that Lady Helen kept a very close eye on matters while also delegating tasks to other volunteers, another key quality of leadership. For the duration of the war, the main Red Cross Depot was housed in the ballroom under the direction of Dr Edith Barrett and her 'packing and despatching committee'.²⁵ It was a hive of production, organised and run on industrial and business lines. There were areas for machinists and linen separating, and for the medical and knitting sections, as well as for books, soft and hard goods, the sorting and unpacking section, a packing and distributing section, and a men's section that took over the stables. Over 200 women, many associated with other local women's organisations, arrived daily for work, supervised by a roster system that the National Council of Women organised. This 'Red Cross invasion of Government House' extended to the

dining room where Philadelphia Robertson, secretary to Lady Helen and Red Cross, worked.²⁶

Australian Red Cross quickly developed into a very large, often unwieldy and complex organisation—with both a national and an international component. To make it run smoothly and effectively, Lady Helen had to be a good organiser, co-ordinating activities that ranged from the operation of the depot to fundraising appeals and running the VAD detachments, and to staffing convalescent homes and kitchens. Then there were the other state divisions to keep an eye on, not to mention the international aspect of Australian Red Cross work, led by commissioners based in Egypt, France, and Britain. Wounded and missing bureaux were established in London and all states as well as the prisoners of war enquiry centres based in London. All were managed from Lady Helen's desk in Australia.

The key central council and finance committees met regularly in the state drawing room at Government House. Once again, use of the vice-regal space allowed Lady Helen, as president, to maintain control and direct Red Cross, although not without difficulties. Another of her leadership qualities was tenacity, and Lady Helen certainly needed plenty of that as she faced sustained pressure, both publicly and privately, to be a figurehead only and to leave the business management of the organisation to the men. Despite having 'mental vigor and clear thinking' and a 'mind quite unrivalled for business', Lady Helen still faced a battle against the innate prejudice of the male members of the finance committee for her right to chair these committees.²⁷ According to her husband, Lady Helen's 'business faculties' were 'like those of a well trained man',²⁸ but she was constantly forced to prove her financial credentials. In 1915, the *Age* printed a letter arguing that the management of Red Cross funds and distribution of Red Cross goods should be placed in the hands of men, for 'women with no training in either business or organizing capacity are utterly incapable of the task'.²⁹ And, as one member of the finance committee whinged to a Red Cross commissioner in London, 'we are up against a brick wall with Lady H. She likes to have her finger into every pie ... am sure we could do much better work, if we had a man in the chair as the Canadians have'.³⁰

The idea that a woman could manage the business affairs of an international organisation the size of Red Cross with its million pound budget—it raised nearly £5 million during the war—was highly unusual in Australia at the time. But Lady Helen refused to bow to pressure and relinquish control. She chaired the monthly meetings of the central council, and the smaller weekly finance committee meetings during her tenure as president. The finance committee's

responsibilities included directing the state divisions, managing the commissioners in the field, and directing and accounting for Red Cross spending both in Australia and abroad. As president, Lady Helen dealt with correspondence on all matters relating to the federal Red Cross. Today we would call her a micro-manager, holding on tight to keep control. But to do so would be to overlook how hard it must have been for anyone, let alone a woman, to run a 'national' organisation at a time when the powers of the federal government were weak as compared to those of the states. The 'looseness' of the federal ties that bound all Australian states together continually tested the federated nature of Australian Red Cross. This mirrored the ongoing difficulties Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson had with the governors, and especially with the governor of Victoria, Arthur Stanley. Melbourne was too small for both vice-regal parties.³¹

Another feature of Lady Helen's leadership, mentioned in the opening quote, was her own personal detachment and distance. She was often described as aloof and hard: an unfriendly, imperious woman who looked down on people, or, more kindly, one 'with the touch of the aristocrat'. She certainly did not suffer fools but those who got to know her well, such as Philadelphia Robertson, who worked closely with Lady Helen and maintained a friendship long after the war, felt that she was misunderstood by many and that underneath the stern exterior was a shy, compassionate and kind person.³² Clearly, Lady Helen was not in Australia to make friends. It was not her choice to come here but she supported her husband and wrenched herself away from family and her extensive networks and made the best of her situation. She came to like Australia, especially Australian women, and, on her departure, it appeared the regard was reciprocal. At one of the many farewell functions, Mary Hughes, wife of the prime minister, referred to the 'warm feeling of affection and esteem in which her Excellency was held by the women of Australia', especially 'through the interest which she had taken in their social well being' and in causes such as infant welfare, kindergartens and bush nursing.³³ Evidence of Australian women learning from Lady Helen's wartime leadership is shown through the development of Australian Red Cross into one of the most important voluntary organisations of the 20th century. At the end of the war, Lady Helen was keen to develop an organisation that could focus on peacetime activities such as 'civil hospitals, maternity homes, bush nursing and health associations'.³⁴ The new female leaders of Australian Red Cross, women such as Philadelphia Robertson, Edith Barrett, Eleanor Mackinnon, Lili Skene, Kathleen Kyffin Thomas and many others, all continued to work with the organisation through the 1920s and 1930s on the secure foundations cemented by Lady Helen's leadership as the organisation's first president.

Internationalist and Representative of Australian Red Cross

Lady Helen did not sever her connection with Australian Red Cross when she left Australia in late 1920 and returned home to Scotland. With the formation of the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in 1919, Lady Helen (now Viscountess Novar) agreed to become Australian Red Cross's representative on the newly constituted board of governors. Australia was one of over 50 countries that joined the league in the post-war period.³⁵ Australia had individual representation at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and at the newly formed League of Nations as a dominion within the British Commonwealth of Nations. Independent representation on the international stage further expanded as a result of greater autonomy acquired by the dominions through the Balfour Declaration (1926) and the Statute of Westminster (1931). Australian women in this period also began to extend their international links. However, the historiographical context for exploring feminist international engagement has rarely included the Red Cross movement and the women who championed this particular organisation. Instead, the focus has been on women's rights, suffrage and peace movements and their international dimensions.³⁶

Australian Red Cross archives reveal Lady Helen's active representation of Australia within the international forum of the League of Red Cross. Formed in early 1919 by five major Red Cross societies—Britain, America, Italy, France and Japan—its mandate for peace mirrored what the International Committee of the Red Cross, based in Geneva, did in war. The reason for the creation of the league as a distinct entity was simple, argued its founder, American Henry Davison. Although the guns had ceased and the long four-year war was over, the chaos of the post-war period and sheer colossus of human misery continued unabated.³⁷ The focus of the league, therefore, was on social, medical, educational and humanitarian issues in peacetime.³⁸

Lady Helen represented Australian Red Cross through the 1920s and into the 1930s at the League of Red Cross. She was involved in discussions that led to Australia joining the league in mid-1919, although the records suggest that she was, initially at least, uncertain of what could be achieved and uncertain of what her role would involve. She wrote in 1920:

In time, no doubt, as the League of Red Cross Societies becomes better established and its usefulness become more apparent, the outlying Red Cross Societies such as ours will be more interested in it, and will better understand the need for cooperation, but meanwhile I think to force the pace would be a mistake.³⁹

Like others, Lady Helen was confused as to the difference between the league and the continuing International Committee of the Red Cross, and this topic dominated the early meetings of the board of governors and council of the league.⁴⁰

Lady Helen was the first Australian representative on the league's board of governors and attended meetings from 1921–1924, and 1927, 1930 and 1932. She also attended the International Conference of Red Cross meetings in 1921, 1928 and 1930. During the 1928 and 1930 conferences, she was elected a member of the 'Commission permanente', which was to arrange the subsequent conference.⁴¹ Lady Helen was also appointed to the international advisory committee of the League of Red Cross Societies' Nursing Home, later called the Manchester Square International School of Nurses.⁴² Despite believing that an Australian should hold the position, Lady Helen was the perfect representative for Australia at the league in its early days. As well as being a highly experienced leader, Lady Helen had a fluent understanding of French, a very useful accomplishment given that much of the proceedings were conducted in that language. After some initial reservations, she threw herself into the meetings, chaired various committees, and actively contributed to discussions and outcomes.⁴³ She also continued her support and promotion of Australian Red Cross in an international capacity through writing articles that were published in the leagues' magazine, *The World's Health*, and the *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, on the role of Australian Red Cross and invalid soldiers, the latter article written in French.⁴⁴

Conclusion

In the mid-1930s, Lady Helen managed to extricate herself from all her duties as Australian representative at the League of Red Cross, having served the Australian Red Cross for twenty years: six and a half as its president and over thirteen as its international representative. During that time, she displayed clear leadership strengths in terms of ability, organisational skills and determination of purpose. Along the way, she mentored a number of Australian women who went on to have distinguished careers within Red Cross—notably Philadelphia Robertson, Kathleen Kyffin Thomas and Dr Edith Barrett. During the war, Lady Helen worked closely with Robertson, who first began at Red Cross as a personal secretary and ended up running both the Victorian and national divisions, as secretary and secretary-general respectively. The two women corresponded regularly, with Lady Helen

explaining her personal perspective on a range of issues that dominated the League of Red Cross in its early years. She saw Australia's role at the league as one of support, to help less developed countries benefit from the league's health work and services in particular.⁴⁵ Robertson, in turn, kept Lady Helen up to date with developments of Australian Red Cross, continuing to rely on her advice and opinions and, when visiting Britain, always making time to stay with Lady Helen.

Women such as Lady Helen and her protégés who were involved with Red Cross at an international level developed an international consciousness and worked across national borders to deliver a range of programs associated with the new League of Red Cross. These relationships were developed within a framework of shared commitment to the job; for them, the symbol of the Red Cross and what it stood for was above gender, race and identity. The international collective identity of Red Cross was a powerful and meaningful one that Australians, both men and women, championed during the interwar period.

Lady Helen was one of many individuals who helped to develop Australian Red Cross from its beginnings in August 1914. She brought her own knowledge, expertise and experience to Australia and, through personality, position and circumstances, used those skills to guide Australian women in an organisation that, at a branch level at least, became a key part of the women's movement and, at a national level, one of the most successful voluntary institutions in 20th-century Australia. She is a major example of the positive role and impact that many vice-regal women had on the lives and leadership skills of Australian women during the first decades of the 20th century.

¹ Nance, 'Women in Parliament. Lady Novar's Ambition', *Evening Sun*, Melbourne, 28 July 1924.

² See Amanda Andrews, 'The Great Ornaments: New Vice-Regal Women and their Imperial Work, 1884–1914' (PhD thesis, University of Western Sydney, 2004), for a detailed study of Dudley's work and life in Australia.

³ I have been researching aspects of Lady Helen's life for some time now in anticipation of writing a full biography of her and her two sisters, Lady Hermione Blackwood and Lady Victoria Plunket. See Melanie Oppenheimer, "'The Best PM for the Empire in War?': Lady Helen Munro Ferguson and the Australian Red Cross Society, 1914–1920", *Australian Historical Studies* 33, no. 119 (April 2002): 108–24; ' "Hidden Under Many Bushels": Lady Victoria Plunket and the New Zealand Society for the Health of Women and Children', *New Zealand Journal of History* 39, no. 1 (April 2005): 22–38; 'The "Imperial Girl": Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, the

Imperial Woman and her Imperial Childhood', *Journal of Australian Studies* 34, no. 4 (December 2010): 513–26.

⁴ Nance.

⁵ The historiography of women's internationalism has been led by Leila Rupp, who argued in her 1994 article that we can trace the beginnings of women's organisation across national boundaries based on shared and mutual interests from the end of the 19th century. See Leila Rupp, 'Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women's Organisations, 1888–1945', *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (December 1994): 1573; and *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). In the Australian context, scholarship has been led by Jill Roe and Marilyn Lake. See, for example, Jill Roe, 'What has Nationalism Offered Australian Women?', in *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought*, eds Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 29, 39; Marilyn Lake, 'Feminists Creating Citizens', in *Creating Australia: Changing Australian History*, eds Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997), 96–106; and 'Feminism and the Gendered Politics of Antiracism, Australia 1927–1957: From Maternal Protectionism to Leftist Assimilationism', *Australian Historical Studies* 29, no. 110 (April 1998): 91–108. The first longstanding international women's organisation was the International Council of Women formed in 1888 in the USA. The ICW was led for many years by Lady Ishbel Aberdeen (1893–99; 1904–20; 1922–36) one time Canadian governor-general's wife and one of the 'new vice-regal women' discussed by Andrews.

⁶ Angela Woollacott, 'Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms: Australian Women's Internationalist Activism in the 1920s–30s', *Gender & History* 10, no. 3 (November 1998): 425–48; Fiona Paisley, *Glamour in the Pacific: Cultural Internationalism and Race Politics in the Women's Pan-Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009).

⁷ Mrinalini Sinha, Donna J. Guy and Angela Woollacott, 'Introduction: Why Feminisms and Internationalism', *Gender & History* 10, no. 3 (November 1998): 345–6.

⁸ The Dufferin Papers, an extensive collection of family papers, are deposited in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland; additional papers are held at Clondeboyne.

⁹ See Oppenheimer, 'The "Imperial" Girl'.

¹⁰ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 26.

¹¹ David Lambert and Alan Lester, 'Introduction: Imperial Spaces, Imperial Subjects', in *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, eds David Lambert and Alan Lester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.

¹² Album containing press cuttings for the Scottish Women's Benefit Society, 1890–92, Haldane Papers, MS 20225, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

¹³ 'The Passing of Viscountess Novar: A Golden Voice Is Silent', *British Journal of Nursing (BJN)* 89, no. 2074 (May 1941): 84.

¹⁴ Editorial, *BJN* XL, no. 1033 (18 January 1908); *BJN* XLII, no. 1113 (31 July 1909): 90–2; ‘The State Registration of Nurses’, *Nineteenth Century* 55, no. 324 (January–June 1904): 310–17. Another article was ‘The Problem of the Trained Nurse’, *National Review* 46 (1905–06): 309–18.

¹⁵ See Oppenheimer, “‘The Best PM for the Empire in War?’”, especially pages 114–16, for a brief discussion of Lady Helen’s involvement in the Scottish Branch of the British Red Cross Society before arriving in Australia.

¹⁶ Letter to Elizabeth Haldane, c. June 1914, Sydney, MS 6024.f.118, Haldane Papers, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

¹⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 July 1914, 12.

¹⁸ In 1913 in Sydney, a meeting was held to form an Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society but it was never activated and no branch was officially formed. See Melanie Oppenheimer, *Red Cross Vas: A History of the VAD Movement in NSW* (Walcha, NSW: Ohio Productions, 1999), 9. There is also evidence that during the Boer War Australians were impressed by the work of the Red Cross but again nothing was done on an official level at least until 1914.

¹⁹ For general histories of the WCTU, see, for example, Judith Pargeter, *For God Home and Humanity: National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of Australia: Centenary History 1891–1991*, (Adelaide: National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of Australia, 1995); 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; Judith Smart, ‘A Mission to the Home: The Housewives’ Association, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and Protestant Christianity, 1920–40’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 13, no. 28 (1998): 215–34; and Judith Smart, ‘Modernity and Mother-heartedness: Spirituality and Religious Meaning in Australian Women’s Suffrage and Citizenship Movements, 1890s–1920s’, in *Women’s Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation, and Race*, eds Ian Fletcher, Laura E. Nym Mayhall and Philippa Levine (London: Routledge, 2000), 51–97. For the NCW during the war, see for example, Judith Smart, ‘Homefires and Housewives: Women, War and the Politics of Consumption’, *Victorian Historical Journal* 75, no. 1 (2004): 96–109; and Ada Norris, *Champions of the Impossible: A History of the National Council of Women of Victoria, 1902–1977* (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1978).

²⁰ The Red Cross originated from Henri Dunant’s horror at witnessing the Battle of Solferino in June 1859. The first Geneva Conference was held in 1863 and led to the 1864 Geneva Convention. The role of Dunant and his legacy has become legendary over time. For a general history of the Red Cross Movement, see Caroline Moorehead, *Dunant’s Dream: War, Switzerland and the History of the Red Cross* (London: Harper Collins, 1998). For a view on the militarisation of organised charity and the Red Cross, see John F. Hutchinson, *Champions of Charity: War and the Rise of the Red Cross*, (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1996).

²¹ Quoted in Melanie Oppenheimer, *All Work. No Pay: Australian Civilian Volunteers in War* (Walcha, NSW: Ohio Productions, 2002), 48, from Marie Galway, *The Past Revisted* (London: The Harvill Press, 1953), 231.

²² Quoted in Oppenheimer, “‘The Best PM for the Empire in War’”, 115, from BRCS, Scottish Branch, Minutes of Council, 1920–1939, Scottish Red Cross, Glasgow, Scotland.

²³ Letter to Elizabeth Haldane, 1 February 1916, Government House, MS 6026.f.2, Haldane Papers, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

²⁴ For a detailed analysis of the Australian Red Cross during World War I, see Oppenheimer, “‘The Best PM for the Empire in War?’”; and Oppenheimer, *All Work. No Pay.*

²⁵ Dr Barrett, formerly secretary of the NCW of Victoria, was a key volunteer for the Victorian Red Cross during and after the war and was awarded both an OBE and CBE for her war work. See Lyndsay Gardiner, ‘Barrett. Edith Helen (1872–1939)’, in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 7 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1979), 185–6.

²⁶ Philadelphia Robertson, *Red Cross Yesterdays* (Melbourne: J.C. Stephens, 1950), 15. Here was another individual who was to have an extensive and distinguished career with Australian Red Cross. See Melanie Oppenheimer, ‘Robertson, Philadelphia Nina (1866–1951)’, in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 16, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 111–12.

²⁷ Robertson, *Red Cross Yesterdays*, 15; Extract from diary entry, 12 May 1918, personal diary of Ronald Munro Ferguson. The Australian diaries of Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson (later Lord Novar), governor-general of Australia, 1914–1920, in possession of Ronald Munro Ferguson (Novar, Scotland), copies held by Professor John Poynter, University of Melbourne, and quoted in Oppenheimer, “‘The Best PM for the Empire in War’”, 108.

²⁸ Letter from Ronald Munro Ferguson to his father-in-law, Lord Dufferin, 16 August 1890, D1071 KA/10/1/11, Dufferin Papers, PRONI, Belfast.

²⁹ *Age*, 16 September 1915. This was especially related to the scandal that erupted in Egypt where it was alleged that Red Cross had mismanaged the distribution of goods to troops on the Gallipoli peninsula.

³⁰ Letter from Frederick Fairbairn to Murdoch, 13 December 1917, WWI Box, ARCS Archives, Melbourne, and quoted in Oppenheimer, “‘The Best PM for the Empire in War’”, 122.

³¹ See Oppenheimer, “‘The Best PM for the Empire in War’”, especially pages 121–2. See also Chris Cunneen, *Kings’ Men: Australia’s Governors-General from Hopetoun to Isaacs* (Sydney: George, Allen and Unwin, 1983); J.R. Poynter, ‘Munro Ferguson, Sir Ronald Craufurd (1860–1934)’, in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 10 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1986), 615–18; and Adelaide Lubbock, *People in Glass Houses: Growing up at Government House* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1977).

³² Robertson, *Red Cross Yesterdays*, 37–8.

³³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 September 1920. Earlier, at a reception in Sydney, over 2,500 mainly women had turned up to another farewell function at Government House. On leaving Melbourne a few days later, Lady Helen was described in the *Argus* as a ‘true and a sympathetic friend to the women of Australia ... and out of

grateful sentiment hundreds of women stood in the rain to wave a last farewell’.

Argus, 25 September 1920.

³⁴ *NSW Red Cross Record* 5, no. 5 (May 1919): 10.

³⁵ For a history of the League of Red Cross Societies, formed by American Henry Davison in 1919, see both Moorehead and Hutchinson. There have been a number of name changes through the 20th century. It remained the League of Red Cross Societies until 1983, when the name changed to the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. From 1991, it has been known as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), which is today the world’s largest humanitarian organisation, representing 178 societies. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which leads the International Red Cross movement, continues to be run by a committee of Swiss nationals from Geneva.

³⁶ See, for example, the 1998 issue of *Gender and History*. The omission is probably because the Geneva-based International Committee of the Red Cross was largely a privileged male affair with women playing minor roles, certainly at the upper echelons, during this period.

³⁷ For example, over 30 million people died of the Spanish influenza pandemic, more than 2 million ex-POWs had to be repatriated and there were 100,000 children starving in Vienna. See Moorehead, 265.

³⁸ Article 25 stated ‘Members of the League agree to encourage and promote the establishment and co-operation of duly authorized voluntary national Red Cross organizations having as purposes the improvement of health, the prevention of disease and the mitigation of suffering throughout the world’. It is outside the confines of this chapter to explore this in detail, but in essence there was considerable discussion as to the particular roles that British dominion Red Cross societies such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand would play when, technically at least at this point, they came under the official umbrella of the British Red Cross Society. But, in 1919, the League was clear about its position on this: ‘In forming plans for national Red Cross representation in the League, it was deemed absurd that the British Dominions Red Cross Societies should be represented only by the representatives of the British Red Cross’. Letter from Director-General, David Henderson, to the General Secretary ARCS, 26 May 1919. Correspondence: League and ARC, 1919–1930, Series 33, Box 225, ARCS National Archives, Melbourne.

³⁹ Letter from Lady Helen to William E. Rappard Esq., Secretary General, 12 July 1920, Series 33, Box 225, ARCS National Archives, Melbourne.

⁴⁰ See personal letter from the league to Lady Helen, 30 March 1920, clarifying aspects of the league and how it differed or complemented the role of the International Committee, ‘of which all members are all Genevese so has unassailably neutral character’. Series 33, Box 225, ARCS National Archives, Melbourne.

⁴¹ Compiled from records in the ARC archives, Melbourne. I would like to thank Grant Mitchell, manager, Library and Archives Unit, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, for his assistance in identifying records concerning Lady Helen and her role on the international stage with both the league and the International Committee. I will travel to Geneva to consult these files in 2012.

⁴² Lady Helen wrote to Philadelphia that the head of the establishment was ‘an American lady which I think is as well as they have a peculiar form of idealism which makes them very enthusiastic over schemes which have very large ultimate purposes and can be considered to foster an international spirit and produce results in all countries of the world’. She also mentioned that six New Zealand students had taken the course and hoped that Australians would take up the opportunity soon too. Letter from Helen Novar to Miss Robertson, Raith, 5 August 1926, Series 33, Box 202, ARCS National Archives. The league later established a school of nurses in Albania. See Lady Helen’s notes of the 14th International Red Cross Conference and 12th Meeting of the Board of Governors of the League, Brussels, 6–12 October 1928, Series 33, Box 225, ARCS National Archives.

⁴³ For example, at the May 1927 meeting of the League, where 52 other nations were represented, Lady Helen was called on to chair a special committee to nominate various officials for specific positions. Meeting of League of Red Cross Societies, 4–7 May 1927, Paris, Series 33, Box 225, ARCS National Archives.

⁴⁴ Viscountess Novar, ‘The Australian Red Cross Past and Present’, *World’s Health*, Monthly Review of the League of Red Cross Societies, November 1926, 430–3; Vicomtesse Novar, ‘La Croix-Rouge Australienne et les Soldats Invalides’, *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, no. 133(January 1930): 1–6.

⁴⁵ The work for countries such as Australia was, therefore, given ‘out of a patriotic spirit in the general cause of the welfare of other peoples’, and hints at Australia’s nascent beginnings in the fulfilment of humanitarian ideals and assistance to countries that expanded rapidly after World War II. See letter to Miss Robertson from Helen Novar, Raith, 12 December 1930, Series 33, Box 202, ARCS National Archives.