

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE0492

Moss, Alice Frances Mabel (May)

(1868 - 1948)

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| Born | 18680427, Ballarat Victoria Australia |
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| Died | 19480718, East Melbourne Victoria Australia |
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| Occupation | Welfare worker, Women's rights activist, Women's rights organiser |
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Summary

Over the course of her life Alice Moss worked with a number of women's organisations, as well as various education, child welfare and Red Cross societies. Educated at Presbyterian Ladies' College, Melbourne, she married I H Moss in 1887 (deceased 1938) and they had two daughters. In 1914 she relinquished her position as vice-president of the Australian Women's National League to become the only female member of the Victorian recruiting committee for the Armed Services. Later she became the only woman member of the Victorian Centenary Celebrations executive committee (1933-1934). At the same time she was president of the Women's Centenary Council of Victoria as well as being the first president of the National Council of Women (1931-1936). On 4 June 1934 she was appointed Commander of the British Empire.

Details

Alice Frances Mabel (May) Moss was the first elected president of the National Council of Women of Australia from 1931-36, her leadership qualities serving to establish the new organisation on firm foundations during a time of political and economic crisis. She was a member of the National Council of Women of Victoria from 1904. Though associated with the politically conservative Australian Women's National League, she was a committed campaigner for the rights of women.

During much of her life, May worked with various local education, child welfare and women's organisations but also played a leading part in the international outreach of Australian women as a government-appointed alternate delegate to the League of Nations in 1927, where she was the first woman to sit on a finance committee, and as the Federal Council of the NCWs of Australia representative to the International Council of Women executive meeting in the same year.

In 1934, she chaired Victoria's Women's Centenary Council and in the same year was appointed CBE as well as being awarded the NCWV gold badge for distinguished service.

May Moss played a significant role in the women's movement in Australia between the First and Second World Wars. She was born on 27 April 1869 at Ballarat, Victoria, the daughter of English-born John Alfred Wilson, a sharebroker and later a licensed victualler, and his Scottish wife Martha Brown, née Lamb. She was educated at Presbyterian Ladies' College, East Melbourne, and at the Sorbonne in Paris. Aged just 18, she married Isidore Henry Moss, a grazier (d. 1938) in a civil ceremony in Melbourne on 10 March 1887. They lived on a sheep station, Dandeloo, in New South Wales for thirteen years until a very bad drought caused them to leave their property and return to the home they had retained in East Melbourne where Isidore Moss became a wool classer.

While her two daughters were young, May began work promoting the rights of women. While vice-president of the conservative Australian Women's National League from 1906, she campaigned for female suffrage in Victoria, a cause the League as a whole did not enthusiastically embrace. In 1914, on the outbreak of the Great War, she relinquished office in the AWNL in order to become the (then) only female member of the Victorian recruiting committee for the armed services.

As a member of the National Council of Women of Victoria from 1904, May Moss took a special interest in the plight of small children and the education of girls. In 1923, she prepared a report for NCW (Victoria) 'on the need for stricter control of street trading by juveniles', and she urged the government to raise the school leaving age to 15 and to make more opportunities available for girls in technical education. Other issues she took up were equal pay for female teachers, the evil of white slave trafficking, and opportunities for girls to work on the railway stations, trams, cabs and other vehicles.

In 1927, Moss was appointed by the Australian government as the alternate delegate to the Assembly of the League of

Nations in Geneva where she was the first female member of the finance committee and also served on other committees. Her fluency in French and German no doubt facilitated her League work, as well as her participation in the International Council of Women. She was also Australian delegate to the first World Population Conference at Geneva and the first Women's Peace Study Conference at Amsterdam, Holland. After attending an executive meeting in Paris of the League of Nations Union, she returned to become vice-president of its Victorian branch in 1928.

While in Europe in 1927, Moss represented the Australian National Councils of Women at the International Council of Women executive meeting at Geneva. The following year, she was elected a vice-president of ICW, a position she held until her death. In 1930, as an Australian delegate, she attended the ICW congress in Vienna and the Codification of International Law Conference in The Hague. Among other things, this conference considered the problem of the nationality of married women, a matter of justice that was of particular concern to women's organisations around the world.

After many years of service on the NCWV executive, Moss was elected state president from 1928 to 1938. She also served as the first elected president of the National Council of Women of Australia from 1931 to 1936. Her period of office was one of consolidation for the new body, including the admission of the WA Council in mid-1932 and NCWA's decision in 1934 to become a full member of both the Australian Women's Co-operating Committee of women's national organisations with international affiliation and the Pan-Pacific Women's Committee. She also actively canvassed the Australian government on behalf of the NCWA on the issues of a uniform federal marriage law, full nationality rights for married women and the right of married women to work.

In 1934, May Moss became the only female member of the Victorian Centenary Celebrations executive committee. On her appointment, she called a meeting of presidents of all women's organisations. These women formed the Women's Centenary Council and Moss was elected president. After broad consultation among the constituent organisations, the women's committee decided to mark the state's centenary by holding an international conference of women (*Citizenship: Its Opportunities and Responsibilities*), and establishing the Pioneer Women's Memorial Garden in Melbourne's Domain Gardens. Opened in 1935, the garden remains a site for acknowledging the significance of women in Victoria's history. Under the sundial were placed hundreds of sheets of remembrance signed by thousands of women, men and children. Under Moss's leadership, the Women's Centenary Council also produced a *Book of Remembrance* containing records of around 1200 early women settlers and a *Centenary Gift Book* (edited by Frances Fraser and Nettie Palmer and featuring articles on the part played by women in public life). In recognition of her community contribution, Moss was appointed Commander of the British Empire on 4 June 1934 and, in the same year, was awarded the gold badge of the Victorian NCW for distinguished service.

As war loomed in 1939, Mrs Moss approached the state government to discover how women could best be organised to assist but was rebuffed. Refusing to be discouraged, NCWV took the initiative to set up a register for women who agreed to be available for wartime emergency services. They formed a Comforts Fund and a Red Cross Society branch, of which Mrs Moss was elected president.

Actively interested in other community organisations such as the (Royal) Women's Hospital, the Collingwood Crèche and the Free Kindergarten movement, Mrs Moss also served on the board of management of the City Newsboys' Society from 1906 to 1948 and was the first woman lay-member of the National Health and Medical Research Council from 1936 to 1945. May Moss was widely recognised for her distinguished contribution to the community, as well as for her dignity, charm and grace. As her biographer, Ada Norris, noted, she was always quick to praise the work of other people: 'I like to give a rose to someone who can smell it'. Like many women of her class, she enjoyed playing bridge and her bridge parties became a significant source of income for the NCWV in the late 1930s and war years. A member of the International and Lyceum clubs, she was also interested in the theatre, painting and woodcarving. She died in East Melbourne on 18 July 1948, aged 79.

Prepared by: Jan Hipgrave, Marian Quartly and Judith Smart

Events

1931 - 1936

1st President of the National Council of Women of Australia

1930 - 1930

Accredited delegate for the Conference on Nationality of Married Women at The Hague

1927 - 1927

Accredited delegate to the Conference of International Council of Women in Geneva

1927 - 1927

Alternate Delegate to the League of Nations Assembly in Geneva

1936 - 1945

Appointed by the Commonwealth Government as a Lay Member to the National Health and Medical Research Council

1927 - 1927

Australian delegate to the first Women's Peace Study Conference in Amsterdam

1927 - 1927

Australian delegate to the first World Population Conference in Geneva

2008 - 2008

Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

1928 - 1948

International Council of Women

1887 - 1887

Married I H Moss

1906 - 1906

Member of the Board of Management City Newsboys' Society

1927 - 1927

Member of the Executive for the League of Nations Union in Paris

1933 - 1934

Member of the Victorian Centenary Celebrations Council and Executive Committee

1928 - 1938

President of the National Council of Woman of Victoria

1933 - 1934

President of the Women's Centenary Council of Victoria

1928 - 1928

Vice-President of the League of Nations Union of Victoria

1930 - 1930

Victorian delegate to the Congress of the International Council of Women in Vienna

Published resources

Resource Section

Moss, Alice Frances Mabel (1869-1948), Norris, Ada M., 2006,
<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A100584b.htm>

Edited Book

Who's Who in Australia 1944, Alexander, Joseph A, 1944

Book Section

Moss, Alice Frances Mabel (1868-1948), 1996

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Victorian Honour Roll of Women 2008: Inspirational Women from all Walks of Life, Department of Human Services, Victorian Government, 2008,
<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/documents-and-resources/reports-publications/victorian-honour-roll-of-women-c>

Book

Champions of the impossible: a history of the National Council of Women of Victoria, 1902-1977, Norris, Ada, 1978

Journal Article

Extraordinary Women: Mrs I. H. Moss CBE Inaugural President NCWA, Penrose, Patricia, 2002

Site Exhibition

Stirrers with Style! Presidents of the National Council of Women of Australia and its predecessors, National Council of Women of Australia, 2013,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ncwa>

Archival resources

State Library of Victoria

[National Council of Women of Victoria](#)

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[Minutes \[1904-1960\] \[microform\]](#)

[Records of the National Council of Women of Australia, 1924-1990 \[manuscript\]](#)

Author Details

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Digital resources



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