Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE0513

Gibson, Gladys Ruth

(1901 - 1972)

Born	19011229, Goodwood Park South Australia Australia
Died	19720823, Belair South Australia Australia
Occupation	Community worker, Educator, School inspector, Women's rights activist, Women's rights organiser

Summary

During her career Ruth Gibson served on the University Public Examinations Board, the Technical Schools Curriculum Board and the Social Studies Committee. As well she was a foundation member and honorary treasurer of the Australian College of Education, a member of the foundation committee of the St Ann’s College and a president of the South Australian Women Graduates’ Committee. Over many years Gibson was a committee member or office-bearer in the National Council of Women of South Australia; the National Council of Women of Australia; the International Council of Women; the Royal Flying Doctor Service (SA Section); the Adelaide YWCA; The Adelaide College of Education; the Status of Women Commission; the Soroptimists’ Clubs; the SA University Women Graduates’ Association; the Australian Association United Nations; the Good Neighbour Council; St Ann’s Women’s University College; the Junior Red Cross; the Australian Broadcasting Commission; the Churchill Scholarships Foundation; and the National Fitness Council.

Details

Ruth Gibson was the second woman from South Australia to hold the national presidency of the Australian National Council of Women (1953-1956). As president, one of her main actions was to pursue the issue of federal legislation to bring about equal marriage and divorce laws and, with her finely honed negotiation skills, she was successful in persuading the constituent councils of ANCW to adopt a clear and united position on this matter. During her period of office she was honoured to represent Australian women at the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953, and played a leading role in welcoming the Queen to Australia during the royal tour of 1954. She also served as the South Australian Council president 1951-1954, as a vice-president of the International Council of Women 1953-1956 (before being elevated to its Committee of Honour), and as Australia's delegate to the UN Status of Women Commission (CSW) in Geneva (1956) and New York (1957) when she acted as rapporteur. Both the national and South Australian NCWs marked her contribution to their work with life vice-presidencies.

Gibson's main area of expertise and interest was education. Trained as a teacher, she was mentored by and succeeded Adelaide Miethke as South Australian inspector of schools (girls' departments) in 1941. Aged only 39 at her appointment, she served in this position until 1953 when she was promoted to inspector of secondary schools, the only woman among four men at this level. She continued in this work while also leading the state and national NCWs and serving Australia at the CSW, until her retirement from the Education Department in 1961. Thus, like Miethke, she was unusual in combining her ANCW and other Council work with fulltime paid employment. She took on other leading roles in a number of educational areas and was appointed a Fellow of the Australian College of Education in 1963.

Gladys Ruth Gibson, women's rights activist and educator, was born on 29 December 1901 at Goodwood Park, Adelaide, the eldest of four children of James Ambrose Gibson, a travelling collector for the South Australian Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution, and his wife Emma, née Keeley. Gibson was educated at Goodwood Public and Unley High schools. Her mother died after three years of illness in 1923, when Ruth was 21. Ruth assumed most of her responsibilities and became a source of strength in a close-knit family for the rest of her life.

Gibson began work in 1919 as a student teacher at Goodwood. She later taught at a number of primary and secondary schools in Adelaide and the country, studying part-time for her diploma from the Teachers' Training College and her degree at the University of Adelaide (BA, 1937, Dip. Ed. 1940), before being appointed an inspector of schools (girls' departments) in 1941 at the unprecedentedly young age of 39. She served in this capacity until 1953 when she was promoted to inspector of secondary schools, the only woman among four men employed at this level. She held this post until her retirement in 1961. Her predecessor and mentor as inspector of girls' departments, Adelaide Miethke, provided a model for much of Gibson's subsequent career, though Gibson reached beyond her in many ways, especially in her international activism. It was as a delegate from the Women Teachers' Progressive League that she first joined the NCW of South Australia in 1936. Then, when a new organisation, the Women Teachers' Guild, was formed as a breakaway group from the Public Sector Union in 1937, Ruth was elected secretary. On her return from a trip overseas in 1939, she addressed its first conference on 'Women in Education Abroad. She became secretary of NCWA from 1939 to 1941 during Miethke's presidency.

During her career in the SA Education Department, Gibson brought energy, dedication and commitment to women's education and to improving conditions and status for women teachers. She was a founder of St Ann's College (for women attending Adelaide University) and also later played a leading role as president (1960-1961) in the South Australian Women Graduates' Association (state branch of the Australian Federation of University Women). Like Adelaide Miethke, she promoted the careers of promising young teachers in the Education Department.

Gibson believed that the ideal teacher showed 'good humour and tolerance for others' and flexibility with regard to syllabuses and timetables. In her annual report of 1942, she wrote of 'the important part that education should play in the shaping of the post-war world'; she believed that 'actual participation in activities calling for tolerance and co-operation' would foster 'knowledge of the privileges and duties of citizenship' from 'the child's earliest years'. A member of the Public Examinations Board (1942-1963) and of the Technical High Schools Curriculum Board, she convened the English and social studies committees of the latter, foregrounding these objectives and a child-centred approach. As a founding member of the Australian College of Education (later Educators) in 1959, she served as honorary treasurer and was appointed a fellow, the highest honour the College could bestow, in 1963.

Though her educational work was of great importance, Ruth Gibson is chiefly known for her leading roles in the National Council of Women at the state, national and international levels. She did, however, bring her educational expertise into the Australian Councils as state and national convenor of their education standing committees, where she expounded on education as a key factor in national achievement and international understanding.

As South Australian Council president from 1951 to 1954, Ruth Gibson's term in office was extended to include the royal visit, during which she arranged and presided over a women's welcome to the Queen. From 1953 to 1956, Gibson was also president of the Australian National Council of Women, and, in recognition of her role as a leader on Australian women's issues, the Commonwealth government selected her as one of Australia's official guests at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II at Westminster Abbey in June 1953.

A key issue during Gibson's presidency of ANCW was the pursuit of federal legislation to bring about equal marriage and divorce laws. Experienced in negotiation and in dealing with different sensitivities simultaneously, she was successful in persuading the constituent councils of ANCW to adopt a clear and united position on this matter at the 1954 conference.

While reiterating the mantra that ‘the home is the very foundation stone of national life’, she argued patiently that, with regard to divorce, ‘marked inequalities exist in law as between men and women and as between States’ and that establishment of ‘an Australian domicile and of uniform divorce laws’ was not ‘only fair and just’ but would also institute more effective protection. Some frustration with the slowness of progress on matters of equality is evident in her further comment that, although ‘the Council is not an “anti-men’s” society’, ‘we must … begin to prepare more of our menfolk to accept the idea of a partnership between men and women in national and international life … it is sex rather than ability that determines much if not most or all of the policy of this country’.

Gibson’s interest in the International Council movement began early in 1938, when she was one of ten Australian delegates to the Jubilee Conference of the International Council of Women in Edinburgh, Scotland. On her return, she told the members of the Women Teachers’ Guild that they were ‘in tune with the highest inspirations of the International Council of Women since it [the Guild] aimed … at the removal of all disabilities of women in the teaching service’. Her ICW activism culminated in her election as vice-president from 1953 to 1956, and, when her term of office expired, her elevation to the Council’s Committee of Honour. Gibson’s view that her chosen career, education, was also a precondition for the expansion of international awareness and tolerance promoted by organisations like the ICW was reflected in a paper she gave – ‘Education’s Part in Developing International Understanding’ – at a conference of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Institutes of Inspectors of Schools, held in Perth in 1954.

Ruth Gibson’s international experience and awareness were recognised by the Australian government in its decision to appoint her its representative at the 10th and 11th sessions of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women held in Geneva in 1956 and New York in 1957. At the latter, she was elected rapporteur to the Commission. The business of these sessions included the access of women to education and economic opportunity, tax and legal questions and the nationality of married women. In later years, Gibson travelled extensively overseas to attend conferences and executive meetings of the ICW and UNESCO, including in Istanbul, Tehran, and Rio de Janiero.

Ruth Gibson’s ongoing commitment to the Council movement in her home state was reflected in the key role she played in the decision to purchase NCW House (‘a home of our own’) in Adelaide in 1957. Her contributions at state and national levels were recognised with life vice-presidencies of both the NCW (SA) and ANCW. But her active involvement in public life continued. Directly after her retirement from the Education Department in 1961, Gibson was appointed to the South Australian Equal Pay Commission, which reported to the premier, Sir Thomas Playford, in 1964 and included an appendix arguing the ‘Case for Equal Pay for Men and Women Teachers in South Australia’. Equal pay for equal work for women teachers was conceded by the Industrial Court and implemented between 1966 and 1971.

Miss Gibson’s broad interests also led her to play a leading role in the SA division of the United Nations Association of Australia; the Soroptimist (president) and Lyceum clubs, Adelaide; the Good Neighbour Council of South Australia; the state section of the Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia (senior vice-president); the Adelaide YWCA (president); the Adelaide College of Education; the Junior Red Cross; the Australian Broadcasting Commission and the National Fitness Council. She was also a founding trustee and second chairman of the NCW Memorial Fund and on the state council of the Girl Guides Association for many years. In addition, she served on selection committees for Churchill fellowships and Florence Nightingale Memorial Scholarships. These duties never overshadowed her concern for individuals, shown in her many practical acts of kindness and consideration.

Ruth Gibson, like many women of her generation, found much of the inspiration for her public work in religious faith. She was a devout Anglican and a generous supporter of her church. Although not radical in her views, she was a feminist of her day and a staunch believer in social justice. Her *ADB* entry describes her as ‘tall and strongly built’, with impeccable dress sense and a ‘considerable presence’. No position she held was a sinecure, it says: she worked at all of them, and was impressive both as a chairwoman and a public speaker. Some found her intimidating, but those who knew her appreciated ‘her intelligence, warmth and humour, her generous and unpretentious nature, her skill as a hostess and her attachment to her family’.

Gibson was awarded the OBE in the coronation honours list 1953 and was elevated to CBE in 1970. She died of cancer on 23 August 1972 at Belair. The women of South Australia erected a sundial in her memory at the Adelaide Festival Centre in 1973 and a Ruth Gibson Memorial Fund administered by NCWSA has since 1979 provided assistance to successful applicants for projects of benefit to South Australian women. Ruth Gibson was also honoured in 1986 for her contribution to education and the NCW by a plaque on North Terrace near Kintore Street, Adelaide.

In his address at her funeral, the archdeacon of Adelaide, paid this tribute: ‘Ruth Gibson … was no militant suffragette but was ever ready to put all her tremendous energy and efficiency into any cause which she believed would be in the interest of women generally and to raise their status in the world’.

Prepared by: Jan Hipgrave, Marian Quartly and Judith Smart

Events

1974 - 1974
A bronze sundial was erected in her memory at the Adelaide Festival Centre

1970 - 1970
Appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire for services to the advancement of women

1941 - 1941
Appointed inspector of girls schools

1952 - 1952
Appointed inspector of secondary schools

1953 - 1953
Appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire

1954 - 1954
Arranged and headed a South Australian women's welcome to Queen Elizabeth II

1956 - 1956
Australian representative at the Status of Women Commission, Geneva

1957 - 1957
Australian representative at the Status of Women Commission, New York

1960 - 1961
Chairman of the Co-ordinating Committee for the Soroptimist Clubs of Australia and New Zealand

1938 - 1938
Delegate at the International Council of Women

1954 - 1954
Delivered a paper, 'Education's Part in International Understanding' at the Australian and New Zealand Association of Institutes of Inspectors of Schools conference, held in Perth.

1963 - 1963
Fellow of the Australian College of Education

1939 - 1941
Honorary secretary of the National Council of Women of Australia

1952 - 1961
Inspector of Secondary Schools, South Australia

1970 - 1970
Member of the Committee of Honor for the International Council of Women

1942 - 1963
Member of the Public Examinations Board

1937 - 1937
Obtained BA from the University of Adelaide

1940 - 1940
Obtained DipEd from the University of Adelaide

1952 - 1956
President of the National Council of Women of Australia

1950 - 1954
President of the National Council of Women of South Australia

1960 - 1961
President of the South Australian University Women Graduates' Association

1958 - 1959

President Soroptimist Club, Adelaide

1961 - 1961
Retired from teaching

1953 - 1953
Selected by the Federal government as an official guest at the coronation

1969 - 1969
Senior vice-president of the Royal Flying Doctor Service, South Australia section

1921 - 1941
Teacher with the Department of Education, South Australia

1977 - 1977
The Ruth Gibson memorial award establish to assist women to further their studies and careers

1957 - 1970
Vice-president of the International Council of Women

Published resources

Site Exhibition
Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html

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

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders

Edited Book
Who's Who in Australia, 1971, Legge, J S, 1971

S.A.'s greats: the men and women of the North Terrace plaques, Healey, John, 2001

200 Australian Women: A Redress Anthology, Radi, Heather, 1988,
https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20071105022623/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/78644/20071105-1315/www.200australianwo

Book Section
Ruth Gibson, Fletcher, Philippa L, 1988

Remembered by Many, Smith, Erica, 1986

Resource Section
Gibson, Gladys Ruth (1901-1972), Fletcher, Philippa L, 2006,
http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A140303b.htm

Ruth Gibson: a 'Mighty' South Australian Educator, Lokan, Jan, 2012,
https://austcolled.com.au/sites/default/files/archival_brief_14_ruth_gibson.pdf

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Book
In her own name : women in South Australian history, Jones, Helen, 1926-, 1986

Newsletter
NCWA Quarterly Bulletin, National Council of Women of Australia, 1972

Archival resources

State Library of South Australia
National Council of Women of S.A. : SUMMARY RECORD

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
Records of the National Council of Women of Australia, 1924-1990 [manuscript]

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Digital resources



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