Entry type: Person
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Giblin, Eilean Mary

(1884 - 1955)

Born	18840806, East Molesey Surrey England
Died	19551004, Surbiton Surrey England
Occupation	Diarist, Feminist, Potter, Social worker

Summary

Eilean Giblin (born Burton) arrived in Australia in 1919 with a shipload of war brides following her marriage the previous year to AIF officer Major L F Giblin, DSO, MC. She came with a commitment to women's rights and social justice developed through the suffrage movement and left-wing social and political circles in London. During the next three decades in three Australian cities she worked to advance her feminist, humanitarian and educational ideals. In Hobart in the 1920s she campaigned for 'equal citizenship'; in Melbourne in the 1930s she led a committee that built and opened University Women's College; in Canberra during the Second World War she was one of small minority who championed the cause of the enemy aliens deported on the *Dunera*, This is recorded in her wartime diary which is a unique social record and a powerful witness to the immense suffering and futility of war. She was a pioneer Canberra potter some of whose work is in the National Gallery of Australia.

Details

Eilean Mary Burton was born at East Molesey on 6 August 1884 into an affluent London family, the third of six children and the only daughter of Ada Maude (born MacRae) and Edward Pritchard Burton. Her father was joint owner with his brother of a prosperous tobacco manufacturing business, Pritchard and Burton, in the City of London. Eilean was educated at Wycombe Abbey, from 1899 to 1902, a school founded in 1895 by the famous educationist Dame Frances Dove who saw education as a preparation for a life of service and public duty. Australian feminist, Jessie Street was also educated at Wycombe Abbey.

After a year in Paris studying painting Eilean Burton returned to London to train as a social worker at the United Girls' School Settlement (later known as the Peckham Settlement) in Camberwell, one of the poorest parts of south London. At the Peckham Settlement she worked with the Apprenticeship Committee and the Children's Care Committee. Later the Children's Care Committee was taken over by the London County Council and Eilean worked for the Council as Assistant Organiser of Children's Care. Already radicalised by her work with severely deprived children living in acute poverty, Eilean also came under the influence of the Pankhurst-led militant suffrage movement, the Women's Social and Political Union, through her aunts Georgina and Helen MacRae. Both were imprisoned on separate occasions in Holloway Gaol following violent suffrage demonstrations; Helen was one of the women prisoners who was force fed.

In 1913 Eilean visited Australia, a country of interest as female suffrage had been achieved so early. As she travelled around Australia she took a variety of jobs, including as shearers' cook in outback Queensland, recording her adventures in a manuscript which she hoped would be published. In Tasmania, through mutual contacts in the Bloomsbury Group and the Fabian Society, she met Lyndhurst Falkiner Giblin, an orchardist, a Labour Member of the Tasmanian House of Assembly, and a member of a well-known Tasmanian establishment family.

By 1917 both were involved in the First World War, Giblin on the Western Front as an officer in the in the AIF's Tasmanian 40th Battalion and Eilean in an industrial relations job with the British Ministry of Labour. Their correspondence reveals both to be out of sympathy with the Allied prosecution of the war, censorship and restrictions on free speech. They married at the Kingston-on Thames registry office on 29 July 1918 when Giblin was convalescing after he had been wounded for the second time. A few weeks later he was again seriously wounded. Eilean travelled to Australia on a war-bride ship *HMAT Katoomba* landing in Melbourne in 22 September 1919. In the next three decades she followed her feminist agenda in three cities as her husband moved from positions as Tasmanian Government Statistician to Professor of Economics at the

University of Melbourne then to Canberra to chair the Federal Government's Financial and Economic Committee which had a major role in running the war economy.

In Hobart Eilean became an office holder in the Women's Non-Party Political League (WNPPL) whose main aim was 'equal citizenship' which involved changing society to recognise the right of women to economic independence through equal pay and motherhood endowment; the right of women to retain their nationality after marrying a man of a different nationality; to be appointed to public boards and as justices of the peace; the right to an equal moral standard; and encouragement to women to stand for parliament. In 1923 Eilean represented Tasmanian women at the Ninth International Woman Suffrage Congress in Rome where she worked with the committee on the Nationality of Married Women. In 1924 she was appointed to the Hobart Hospitals Board, the first appointment of a woman to a such a position in Tasmania. In 1928 she represented the WNPPL at the Federal Government's Royal Commission on Child Endowment or Family Allowances. She put the League's case for child endowment, financed by the Federal Government through taxation with all payments to be made to the mother. She drew particular attention to the plight of widows and deserted wives with dependent children and the high rate of maternal mortality. The Government accepted the majority report that child endowment would be too costly. It was not introduced into Australia until 1941.

In the 1930s after she moved to Melbourne, Eilean chaired a committee that worked to establish an independent non-denominational women's college at the university, a longed-for goal since the committee was first established in 1917. In a few years under her leadership a site was secured, funds raised, a college built and an interim principal found. She also negotiated affiliation with the University of Melbourne on the same terms as the existing men's colleges. At the start of the 1937 academic year, University Women's College (now University College) was ready to accept its first students and later in the year, as chair of the College Council, Eilean welcomed Lady Gowrie, wife of the Governor General, when she officially opened the College. Early the following year in London, she took a major role in the selection of Dr Greta Hort as the first permanent principal. In April 1938 after the College had been established as a statutory incorporated body, Eilean was formally elected as President of the College Council. She resigned from this role when she moved to Canberra in 1940 but she remained a member of Council and travelled to Melbourne to attend meetings when possible.

Soon after she arrived in Canberra in 1940, Eilean became involved in supporting the internees deported from Britain to Australia on the *Dunera*. This was part of a move by the British Government, under threat of German invasion, to deport to Commonwealth countries those classified as enemy aliens, many of whom were Jewish refugees from Nazism. When Eilean discovered there was not a great deal of sympathy for the internees among women in Canberra, she decided to visit the Hay internment camp alone to visit some prisoners whose plight had aroused considerable support in Britain. This involved an arduous journey in her small Morris car to Junee then by two trains to Hay where eventually she was able to talk with the prisoners and record the conditions in the camp in her diary, now in the National Library. Her diary is a powerful witness to the tragedy and futility of war. It is the only record of its kind of wartime Canberra and is a rich source for the social, political and environmental history of the city. It conveys the immediacy of events, moments in time undiluted by later insight or judgment, as she records the shock of the lightning advance of the Japanese through Asia; the fear of invasion; the stratagems for coping with war regulations, restrictions and rationing; and snatches of conversation, from all levels of society and government, as the nation faced a crisis. Prime ministers, politicians, diplomats, public servants, and many Canberra residents of those years, flit through its pages, brought to life in a personal and intimate way.

As the war raged, Eilean Giblin became a pioneer potter in Canberra establishing a studio pottery and training other women. She regarded pottery as therapeutic distraction from her anguish at the enormous loss of life and the destruction of war. She believed that she was creating objects of beauty and utility while the rest of the world was destroying so much, even civilisation itself. Some examples of her pottery, much of which was sold to raise funds for war-time charities, are in the National Gallery of Australia.

A few years after the death of her husband in Hobart in 1951, Eilean Giblin returned to England to live with family members. She died on 4 October 1955 aged 71. Her life, while unique, was also typical of the lives of many of the largely unacknowledged feminists in the years between the headlines of the suffrage campaigns and the liberating influences of second wave feminism. Her life in Australia was directed to achieving incremental, unspectacular but important advances in changing the society in which women lived.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Book
The Australian Federation of Women's Societies, The Australian Federation of Women's Societies, 1924

Eilean Giblin: A feminist between the wars, Clarke, Patricia, 2013

Getting Equal: the History of Australian Feminism, Lake, Marilyn, 1999

March of Australian women : a record of fifty years' struggle for equal citizenship., Rischbieth, Bessie Mabel, 1875-1967., 1964

Capital women : a history of the work of the National Council of Women (A.C.T.) in Canberra, 1939-1979, Stephenson, Freda, 1992

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
Papers of Lyndhurst Falkiner Giblin 1885-1965 [manuscript]

Papers of Loma Rudduck, 1944-1968 [manuscript]

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