Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE0592

Board, Ruby Willmet

(1880 - 1963)

Born	18801015, Gunning New South Wales Australia
Died	19631225, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Community worker, Welfare worker, Women's rights activist, Women's rights organiser

Summary

Following her education in Sydney, Berlin and Paris, Ruby Board devoted her time to social welfare issues. She became a Member of the Board of the Rachael Forster Hospital and for a period was President of the National Council of Women of New South Wales. During World War II, Board was president of the Women's Voluntary National Register, a member of the executive of the Australian Comforts Fund and Defence Director of the Women's Auxiliary National Service.

Details

Ruby Board was the third president of the National Council of Women of Australia, assuming office in November 1942 in the depths of World War II. With her long experience in the organisation, she provided a steady hand during the two years of her NCWA leadership, focusing on issues relating particularly to treatment and pay of women in the services, postwar reconstruction (especially housing), and the perennial matters of uniform marriage and divorce laws and the nationality of married women (now made urgent by wartime marriages between Australian women and American soldiers). She had earlier led the Australian delegation to the International Council of Women in Washington in 1925 and served as treasurer of the Federal Council of the National Councils of Women of Australia and as interim treasurer of the new National Council of Women of Australia until the first board was elected in October 1931. Ruby Board also filled a number of offices in the NSW Council from before World War I, culminating in the presidency from 1938 to 1948.

The daughter of the renowned progressive NSW director of education, Peter Board, Ruby was educated in Sydney, Berlin and Paris, and, with no need to work for a living, devoted her adult life to social welfare and issues relating to justice for women. In addition to her NCW work during World War II, Board played a leading in NSW war support as president of the Women's Voluntary National Register, a member of the executive of the Australian Comforts Fund, Defence Director of the Women's Auxiliary National Service and president of the Housekeepers' Emergency Service. Board's other significant organisational work included membership of the Board of the Rachel Forster Hospital, local leadership of the Country Women's Association in the 1930s, and leading roles in the Diabetic Association of New South Wales from 1949-61.

Ruby Board was born on 15 October 1880, at Gunning, New South Wales, the only child of Peter Board and his wife Jessie Allen, née Bowes. Her social conscience was moulded by childhood happiness in 'this small and closely linked family' and by the progressive ideals of her father, who served as the first NSW director of education from 1905-22. Reform ideals and issues concerning justice for women (including suffrage) were also instilled by her maternal grandmother, Euphemia Bowes, who was a founder and early president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in NSW. Ruby also received a broad education, owing to her father's travels during periods of leave; she attended schools in Sydney, Berlin and Paris. Having independent means, Ruby was free to combine her aptitude for language with an interest in welfare. She published pamphlets on *Australian Pronunciation: A Handbook for the Teaching of English in Australia* (1927) and the *Pupils' Practice Book for Vowel Sounds* (1928).

In the early 1920s, Ruby Board moved with her parents to Leura, where she nursed her mother until her death in 1932. There she became a leading figure in the Country Women's Association and was president of the Blue Mountains branch from 1930 to 1938. A member of the National Council of Women of New South Wales for 50 years, she was honorary general secretary 1914-1918, interstate secretary 1919, president 1938-1948, and state delegate to the national conferences in 1946 and 1948. She led the Australian delegates to the sixth quinquennial convention of the International Council of Women in Washington in 1925. In 1931, she was interim honorary treasurer of the National Council of Women of Australia,

president from 1942 to 1944 and Australian convenor for home economics for the period from 1944 up to 1952. As national president, she focused on war work but with an emphasis on the issues of importance to women-treatment and pay of women in the services, postwar reconstruction (especially housing), and uniform marriage and divorce laws and the nationality of married women, an issue of particular moment because of wartime marriages between Australian women and American soldiers. She was particularly proud to preside over the women's reception to Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife and emissary of the US president, in Sydney Town Hall in 1943.

Board's period in office also saw the establishment of the Australian Women's Charter movement and conference by Jessie Street, a challenge to the claims of the NCWA to speak for Australian women. Board made it clear to the Australian government that this conference did not have the support of the Councils or speak for the majority of women's organisations, while also encouraging state Councils to hold their own conferences to demonstrate they were not necessarily opposing the main points of the Charter. Many of the same issues were considered and approved at the 1944 national conference, which Board chaired.

Though Ruby Board served as NSW president from 1938 to 1948, she refused appointment as MBE because she believed that her office, reflecting the work of the Council, deserved higher recognition.

From 1939 to 1958, Ruby Board was also a vice-president of the Rachel Forster Hospital for Women and Children. During World War II, she was a member of the NSW executive of the Australian Comforts Fund and founding president of the state Women's Voluntary National Register in 1940, as well as defence director of the Women's Auxiliary National Service, helping to co-ordinate the work of women's organisations for the war effort. In 1943, she was a founder and first president of the Housekeepers' Emergency Service of NSW.

A diabetic from the 1930s, she demonstrated effectively how little this condition need interfere with a busy and productive life. She was an office-bearer of the Diabetic Association of New South Wales from 1949 and served as president from 1951 to 1960. Anxious to inform the public of the problems associated with the disease, she organised a lecture tour in 1953 by two world authorities and, in 1955 and 1958, attended congresses of the International Diabetes Federation at Cambridge, England, and Düsseldorf, Germany. In 1957, she was founding president of the Diabetic Association of Australia and chaired its first conference held in Sydney.

From 1960, Ruby Board lived at the Mowll Memorial Village, Castle Hill, until she had a fall in December 1963; she died on Christmas Day in the Rachel Forster Hospital.

Selfless and generous, with boundless energy, she inspired those around her to similar enthusiasm and commitment. She was not interested in power for its own sake, or in office for its prestige, and always sought to provide opportunities for individual expansion and development. Her obituarist in the NSW NCW newsletter judged her to be 'balanced, judicious, tolerant, serene' and to have 'the saving grace of humour'. Her work for diabetics was commemorated by the naming of the diabetic wing of the Rachel Forster Hospital after her in 1966.

Prepared by: Jan Hipgrave, Marian Quartly and Judith Smart

Events

1940 - 1940
Women's Voluntary National Register

Published resources

Resource Section
Board, Ruby Willmet (1881-1963), Wright, Andrée, 2006,
http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A070335b.htm

Edited Book
Who's Who in Australia, 1947, Chisholm, Alec H, 1947

Book
Australian pronunciation : a handbook for the teaching of English in Australia, Board, Ruby W, 1927

Pupil's practice book for vowel sounds, Board, Ruby W, 1928

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

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

Newsletter
NCW News (NCW NSW), February 1964

Archival resources

Mitchell and Dixson Libraries Manuscripts Collection
National Council of Women of New South Wales records, 1895-1976

Jean Fleming Arnot - personal and professional papers, 1890-1995

National Council of Women of New South Wales further papers, 1895-1981

National Library of Australia
[Biographical cuttings on Ruby Board, public servant, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals]

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

Author Details
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Digital resources

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