Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2165

Fairfax, Mary Elizabeth

(1858 - 1945)

Born	18580315, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Died	19450520, Bellevue Hill New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Community worker, Philanthropist

Summary

Only daughter of Sydney newspaper proprietor Sir James Reading Fairfax, Mary Elizabeth played an active part in Sydney society, lending her support to numerous charitable and women's organisations from the RSPCA to the YWCA.

Details

Born in Sydney to Lucy (née Armstrong) and (Sir) James Reading Fairfax, newspaper proprietor, Mary Elizabeth was the eldest of seven children and the only girl. From 1877 the family lived at Ginahgulla, with the exception of two years abroad, and from 1884 they spent the summer months at their country house in Moss Vale. Mary was educated at home.

Mary Fairfax never married and had no children. Known as Miss Mary from childhood, she became 'the quintessential maiden aunt' according to Caroline Simpson in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Fairfax was, says Simpson, 'among the last of the great Victorians'. She was a foundation member of the executive of the Queen's Jubilee Fund in 1887, and was councillor of the University of Sydney's Women's College from 1893 until her death. She was associated with the RSPCA, the YWCA, the Kindergarten Union, and District Nursing Association (Sydney) and the Bush Book Club. She was a State council-member of the Girl Guides' Association. During both world wars Mary worked for the Australian Comforts Fund and the British (Australian) Red Cross Society. She joined the Victoria League in England and was a founder of its New South Wales branch in 1917. Mary was president of the Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales from 1912-19, and was a foundation member of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra Ladies' Committee in 1936.

In 1925, Lucy Fairfax passed away and Mary inherited the properties at Ginahgulla and Moss Vale, as well as 2,196 shares in John Fairfax & Sons Ltd, publishers of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. She took a keen interest in the paper and visited its offices regularly. She was known for her hospitality at Ginahgulla where she entertained leading society figures. During wartime her dining room was used to billet servicewomen.

Mary's 'spontaneous generosity' leads Simpson to surmise that 'the full measure of her philanthropy will never be calculated'. On her death, most of her £428,278 estate went to the Fairfax family, along with bequests to charities and employees, including £1,000 for the Women's College.

Published resources

Resource Section
Fairfax, Mary Elizabeth (1858-1945), Simpson, Caroline, 2006,
http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A140137b.htm

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Thesis
In Her Gift: Activism and Altruism in Australian Women's Philanthropy, 1880-2005, Lemon, Barbara, 2008

Book
Some Houses and People of New South Wales, Griffiths, Glynde Nesta, 1949

The History of the Women's College within the University of Sydney, Hole, W. Vere and Anne H. Treweeke, 1953

Site Exhibition
In Her Gift: Women Philanthropists in Australian History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2009,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/wiph/home.html

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

Archival resources

State Library of New South Wales
Fairfax family - papers, 1804-1948

Sir James Reading Fairfax - papers, 1871, 1882-1883

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