Entry type: Person
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Muscio, Florence Mildred

(1882 - 1964)

Born	18820428, Copeland New South Wales Australia
Died	19640817, Ryde New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Feminist, School principal, University lecturer, Women's rights activist, Women's rights organiser

Summary

Mildred Muscio’s association with the New South Wales National Council of Women began in 1922. She became press secretary of the Council before serving as president from 1927-38, including a term as federal president.

Details

Mildred Muscio was the second president of the Federal Council of the National Councils of Women of Australia. Her leadership was the crucial factor in the creation of the National Council of Women of Australia, which in 1931 succeeded FCNCWA and became the single channel for Australian representation at the International Council of Women. Possessed of a fine intellect and more progressive than her predecessors and many of her successors, Muscio also had gifts of persuasion, which she used to overcome fears of change and loss of autonomy among delegates to the Federal Council conference of 1929. She then acted as caretaker president after the NCWA formally came into being about July 1931 until elections could be held in October. Muscio’s association with the New South Wales National Council of Women began in 1922. She became press secretary of the Council before her election as president of both state and Federal Councils in 1927. She remained president of NCWNSW until 1938. She was a member of many other political and welfare organisations, including the Lyceum Club and the Australian Red Cross Society. She served on the Bruce-Page government’s national royal commission on child endowment in 1928, was an alternate Australian delegate to the League of Nations in 1937, and was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1938.

Florence Mildred Muscio was born on 28 April 1882 at Copeland, New South Wales, eldest daughter of English-born Charles Fry, telegraph master, and his native-born wife Jane, née McLennan. Known as Mildred, she was educated at the Sydney Girls’ High School and the University of Sydney, graduating BA in 1901 with first-class honours in logic and mental philosophy and MA in 1905. The following year, with her sister, Edith, she published *Poems*. Edith subsequently earned renown as an artist in Britain. Mildred worked as a teacher while completing her studies, and was principal of the Brighton College for Girls, Manly, from 1906 to 1912.

Prior to the outbreak of war, Mildred travelled to England, where she taught at Crosby, Lancashire, and at Windsor, before marrying Bernard Muscio, demonstrator in experimental psychology at Caius College, Cambridge University, on 31 March 1915. She shared her husband’s interests, and his university posts allowed her to continue studying and to enjoy the company of students and graduates. With Louisa McDonald (first principal of Sydney University’s Women’s College), she attended the first congress of the International Federation of University of Women in London in 1920. Back in Sydney permanently from 1922 after Bernard was appointed Challis professor of philosophy at the University of Sydney, she helped establish the university women’s movement in Australia and was elected president of the Sydney University Women Graduates’ Association (1923-26) and the Sydney University Women’s Union (1927-28). She later became an executive member of the Sydney University Settlement. After her husband’s death in 1926, she helped to form the Institute of Industrial Psychology in Sydney, and lectured in psychology for the University Extension Board.

Mildred Muscio’s association with the National Council of Women of New South Wales began in 1922 when she was invited to help organise the Good Film League of which she became vice-president. She joined the Council’s executive as press secretary in 1924 and served as president from 1927 to 1938. A woman of perspicacity and vision, she brought a modern understanding of women’s roles to the Council, arguing that ‘No gulf separates the interests of the professional woman from those of the non-professional woman’, for ‘education, science, logic and experience of the outside world’ were now

inseparable from ‘the fundamental interests of the home and family’.

Muscio was also the second (and final) president of the Federal Council of the National Councils of Women of Australia (predecessor to the National Council of Women of Australia) from 1927 to 1931 and led the Australian delegation to the Vienna conference of the International Council of Women in 1930. Her clear vision, logic, organisational skills and courage were the crucial factors in the decision of the Federal Council conference in 1929 to recommend to the states the formation of a fully national body to represent Australia at the ICW. In light of the states’ jealous protection of their autonomy and direct links to ICW, this was a major achievement. The minutes of conference record that Muscio left the chair, taking control of the argument for a national Council and dealing effectively and firmly with all the traditional sources of opposition and fear. She remained federal president as each state debated and eventually ratified the decision (WA excepted) by July 1931, and she continued to hold the fort during the transition period before new officers were elected in October.

During the Depression, she defended the right of women to employment and a fair wage, and maintained that a separate women’s movement was necessary to ensure that gains hard won were not lost as was occurring in European nations. In 1931, convinced of the need to challenge conservative attitudes to women participating in Australian politics, she announced her intention to stand as a candidate for the Senate but did not proceed.

Mrs Muscio served on the Commonwealth royal commission on child endowment in 1927. The minority report she submitted with John Curtin called for the immediate introduction of federal means-tested endowment for third and subsequent children. She also served on the state government committee inquiring into the system of examinations and secondary education in 1933. Before the 1934 inquiry into the NSW Child Welfare Department, she stressed the need for welfare officers trained in psychology and advocated the establishment of counselling clinics.

In 1929, in the wake of the NCW’s campaign to establish a university social work course, Muscio had become a founding member of the Board of Social Study and Training, which, in conjunction with the University of Sydney, issued a certificate for professional training in social work. When the two-year diploma course was taken over by the university in 1940, she continued on the supervisory board. In view of her role in social work education and her experience in the Sydney University Settlement, Muscio was also elected vice-president of the Council of Social Service of NSW from 1938 to 1943.

Among her many other activities, Mrs Muscio wrote occasional reviews and articles for the *Australian Quarterly* on politics and education and undertook radio broadcasts on topics of interest to women. She was also president of the Lyceum Club 1929-35 and chair of the women’s council and vice-president of the NSW Society for Crippled Children, and worked for the Racial Hygiene Association, the Australian Red Cross Society, the NSW Bush Nursing Association, the Australian Aerial Medical Services, the Travellers’ Aid Society, and various theatrical groups. She chaired the Women’s Executive Advisory Committee for the NSW sesquicentenary celebrations in 1938. Active in the state branch of the League of Nations Union, she was appointed alternate delegate for Australia at the League’s general assembly at Geneva in 1937. A friend of Margaret Bailey, for many years she served on the council of Bailey’s Ascham School where her sister, Eva, was senior mathematics mistress from 1917 to 1945.

Mildred Muscio was appointed OBE in 1938. As her *ADB* biographers write, she was a gifted speaker, fluent, logical and persuasive, and was also admired for her organising ability, generosity, impartiality and ‘sympathetic spirit’. She died in hospital at Ryde on 17 August 1964.

Prepared by: Jan Hipgrave, Marian Quartly and Judith Smart

Events

1929 - 1935
Lyceum Club (Sydney)

Published resources

Resource Section
Muscio, Florence Mildred (1882-1964), Foley, Meredith, and Fulloon, Gillian, 2006,
http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A100633b.htm

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Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,
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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

Edited Book
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

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Journal Article
Education: Paper Read before the Australian Federation of University Women, Hobart, January 1930, Muscio, Mildred, 1930

Review: Thoughts that Breathe, By P. Board, Muscio, Mildred, 1932

Archival resources

Mitchell and Dixson Libraries Manuscripts Collection
National Council of Women of NSW - program for the launch of the Centenary Stamp Issue and a complete set of the issue, 1996

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

National Council of Women of NSW Inc. - further records, 1926-1927, 1937-1990

Papers relating to National Council of Women of New South Wales, 1895-1897

National Council of Women of New South Wales further records, 1895-1997

National Council of Women of New South Wales records, 1895-1976

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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