Entry type: Person
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Metcalfe, Thelma Constance

(1898 - 1984)

Born	18980910, Fitzroy, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Died	19840518, Emu Plains New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Community worker, Women's rights activist, Women's rights organiser

Summary

Thelma Metcalfe was president of the Australian National Council of Women from 1957 to1960. She also held office in a variety of other organisations, including as president of the NCW of NSW 1948-1960. During her term of office as national president, she stressed the importance of regional activism and work towards improving social and economic conditions, particularly for women in the Asia-Pacific area, most urgently in Papua New Guinea. Metcalfe’s presidency also saw ANCW attention directed towards redressing inequality issues relevant to women, varying education standards in Australia, the declining value of child endowment, and the financial hardships of deserted wives. In light of her extensive community involvement, an ANCW obituarist claimed she was regarded as ‘the best authority on the women’s organisations in NSW’.

Details

Thelma Constance Vagg was born on 10 September 1898 in Fitzroy, Melbourne, the daughter of Victorian-born parents Harry Vagg, farmer, and his wife Emily Anne, née Sallery. She was educated at Albury District School and the University of Sydney (BA, 1922; Dip. Ed. 1923). She taught languages in NSW public schools before marrying John Wallace Metcalfe, deputy principal librarian of the State Library of NSW, on 3 March 1934. She then accompanied him on a 6-month tour of libraries in the USA and Europe, for which he was funded by a Carnegie Corporation of New York travel grant, and thereafter worked with him in the Free Library Movement, a citizens' group formed in 1935 to lobby for a system of public libraries to serve the needs of all the people. In November 1935, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published an article she wrote on 'Andrew Carnegie: Father of Libraries'. Thelma remained John's loyal supporter in his many library activities as deputy and principal state librarian, founder of the Australian Institute of Librarians (now Australian Library and Information Association) and director of the first university library school at the University of NSW. Thelma's teaching experience, interest in languages and libraries, and her overseas travel fostered a commitment to education and international awareness that she brought to her leadership roles in the National Council of Women.

Thelma Metcalfe was an office bearer in the NSW and/or Australian NCW for 40 years. In the NSW Council she was secretary (1941-1948) under Ruby Board's presidency, then president (1948-1960), a regular delegate to ANCW from 1946, and state convenor for migration from 1962 until 1981. It was through her hard work and dedication as Council secretary in the war years that the Nutritional Advisory Council was set up in1942, and, in cooperation with president Ruby Board, she helped found the Housekeepers' Emergency Service in 1943. Meals on Wheels in NSW began as a pilot project in the early 1950s, operating from a church in Newtown. Under the sponsorship of NCW NSW, led by Metcalfe, the program grew to become a statewide community service. She was also instrumental in establishing the Children's Film Council in 1950 (later the NSW Council for Children's Films and Television) and presided over it during her period as NCW NSW president. The Council provided valuable comment and guidance for parents in a period of rapid growth in the film and television industries. Metcalfe's NCW and other work was acknowledged by an MBE awarded for community services in 1956. In 1970, NCW NSW marked her 30 years of service to the organisation with an honorary life vice-presidency.

Metcalfe was elected to represent the Australian National Council of Women at the Jubilee Women's Convention in 1951 and served as president of ANCW from 1957 to 1960, then as national convenor for migration 1962-1964. During her presidency, ANCW focused on redressing discrimination against married women in the workforce; increasing representation and participation of women in local, national and international forums; urging government ratification of the 1951 ILO convention on equal pay as well as putting its conditions into effect; lobbying state and federal governments for correlation of standards between state education systems; and agitating for measures to deal with the declining value of child endowment as well as the financial hardships of deserted wives. Metcalfe's particular interest and expertise in migration saw her represent the ANCW at the 10th and 11th annual Citizenship Conventions in Canberra in 1959 and 1960, and on the National Executive Committee of World Refugee Year 1959-1960.

In 1959, Thelma Metcalfe also represented the International Council of Women at the conference of the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE, now Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific or ESCAP) held in Brisbane. This experience and her involvement in the Pan Pacific and Southeast Asian Women's Association led her to stress the importance of regional activism and work towards improving social and economic conditions for women in the Asia-Pacific area. All Councils were especially urged to focus on education in Papua New Guinea. The final conference of Metcalfe's ANCW presidency in 1960 saw discussion of the possibility of an ICW conference or executive meeting being held in Australia, or, alternatively, a regional conference. Metcalfe favoured the latter, believing it would gain government financial support in helping cement good relations with Asian countries. Although it did not eventuate during her presidency, an Asia-focused ICW seminar on International Understanding was held in Brisbane in 1964, with some support from the federal government, and the idea of a larger conference simmered in Council circles and came to fruition in an ICW regional conference on population issues in 1973, held in Sydney and supported financially by the UN and the Australian government.

Thelma Metcalfe also held office in a great many other organisations, remaining active in most till her last illness. She was a long-term member and president of the Lyceum Club, a founding member and, later, president of the Good Neighbour Council of NSW, an early member of
NSW Pan-Pacific and Southeast Asia Women's Association from its re-establishment in 1954 and its president from 1963 until 1968, and for many years the Council delegate to and vice-president of the NSW branch of the UN Association of Australia. She was also active in the British Drama League, the NSW committee for International Children's Book Week and the Arts Council of Australia, NSW. She once remarked that she was the 'best Annual Meeting attender in Australia'.

Her NCW obituarist, Jean Arnot, wrote that Thelma Metcalfe would be remembered for her 'significant work … in the cause of human welfare, for her perseverance, for her tolerance, for her good humour and for her great capacity for objectivity'. She died on 18 May 1984 at Emu Plains after suffering physical disability for some years.

Events

1963 - 1968
Pan Pacific and S. E. Asia Women's Association NSW

Published resources

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

Edited Book
Who's Who in Australia 1959, Alexander, Joseph. A, 1959

Resource Section
Metcalfe, Thelma Constance (1898-1984), Jones, David. J., 2012,
http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/metcalfe-thelma-constance-15096/text26160

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

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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