Entry type: Person
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Scotford, Jessie Margaret

(1917 - 2003)

Born	19171110, Casino New South Wales Australia
Died	20030513, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Arts administrator, Community worker, Novelist, Women's rights activist, Women's rights organiser

Summary

Jessie Scotford was president of the National Council of Women of New South Wales (1967-1970), and national president (1970-1973). She brought to her work with the National Councils a strong sense of the importance of history and literature as the creators of national culture and identity. The same concern led her to join the National Trust, where she campaigned for ‘the importance of preserving not only the buildings, but the contents of the buildings’. In 1973, she ran in Sydney the first International Council of Women’s Regional Conference to be held in the Pacific region.

Details

Jessie Scotford was born in 1917 in Casino in outback New South Wales, where her father, Edward Vivian Timms, had taken up farming after returning injured from Gallipoli. The family returned to city life a few years later when Timms and his wife, Alma, decided he was better suited to a career as a writer. Timms went on to become a successful historical novelist; his best-known works are probably *Forever to Remain* (1948) and *The Beckoning Shore* (1950). Jessie Scotford remembered her country upbringing as a time when ‘we put down a lot of very good Australian roots’.

Jessie attended Gosford High School, becoming the school captain in her final year. She went on to become an evening student at Sydney University, working by day at a number of jobs, including journalism. In 1940, before she graduated, she married Herbert Edward Scotford, at that time a sergeant in the AIF. For the next 6 years the couple were separated by war. Mrs Scotford was awarded a BA in 1942.

After the birth of her children – twins, a boy and a girl – Jessie Scotford became involved in a range of community activities. She joined the Women Graduates Association and found herself preparing abstracts of United Nations documents on women’s rights for publication in the WGA newsletter. She joined the mothers’ association at her children’s school and soon became president. She worked as honorary archivist for the New South Wales National Trust for about 7 years, later joining its council. And, as president of North Shore group of the National Heart Campaign in its first year of operation, she became involved in fund-raising, event organisation, and public speaking. She became a speaker for the National Heart Campaign and subsequently for the Freedom From Hunger Campaign, discovering a talent for public persuasion.

Advised by her husband that she needed a professional qualification, in 1955 Jessie Scotford undertook a Diploma of Education in the new education-by-distance program at the University of New England, again studying by night and teaching by day. A thesis written for this program became in Scotford’s words ‘a turning point in my whole life’. Taking a trunkful of 19th-century family letters, she analysed their potential as a means of teaching history. This innovative exercise also involved her in the new discipline of folklore studies, and the popular movement to establish folk museums for the preservation of ‘our Australian heritage’.

After an overseas tour, during which she visited ‘all the major folk museums in the British Isles and on the Continent’, Jessie Scotford began to campaign through the National Trust ‘on the importance of preserving not only the buildings, but the contents of the buildings’. The idea was entirely new to the National Trust Executive Council and its members were difficult to convince. But Scotford established a large collection of historical costumes dating from early Sydney, and, by the mid-1970s, the Trust was persuaded to purchase these as the basis of a future folk museum. She was a council member of the National Trust of Australia (NSW) from 1974 to 1981.

In parallel with this work on the heritage front, Jessie Scotford became involved in the national and international women’s

movement. She joined the National Council of Women of NSW as a delegate of the Women Graduates Association, becoming convenor of the committee for arts and letters in 1965, and president of the Council from 1967. This led to her chairing the Women's Committee of the Captain Cook Bicentenary Celebrations, and effectively managing a range of bicentenary events in 1970, including a women's 'Pageant of Endeavour'-an exhibition in the Sydney Town Hall demonstrating women's contribution to the development of NSW. 120,000 people visited the exhibition. A series of 'Life in the Home' tableaux demonstrated 'family life, costume, customs, household furniture and contents'. Scotford also collected and later published a collection of brief histories of all the 250 women's organisations involved in the 'Pageant'.

In 1970, Scotford also became president of National Council of Women of Australia. As president she carried forward the reform programs of her predecessor, Ada Norris, including the long struggle for equal pay, finally achieved with the Arbitration Court decision to abolish the male basic wage in 1974. She initiated new programs to obtain equal treatment for women in the areas of pensions and taxation, and to improve the standard of care in child-care centres. She raised the issue of Aboriginal welfare within the National Councils, calling in 1972 for reports from all affiliates on the local treatment of Aborigines.

In retrospect Jessie Scotford remembered as the major achievement of her presidency the staging of the 1973 International Council of Women's Regional Conference in Sydney. She got funding for the conference from the United Nations Development Program in New York-'probably the hardest thing I ever had to do'. Scotford was made a life member and a vice-president of ICW in 1979, in recognition of her skills and commitment in organising this and several later events for the ICW Board. She attended the United Nations Mid-Decade Conference for Women in Copenhagen in 1980, the United Nations World Conference for Women in Nairobi in 1985, the UNESCO General Conference in Paris in 1983, and the United Nations Conference on Decolonisation in Port Moresby in 1984.

In Australia, Scotford's work with the National Councils led her to undertake a range of voluntary positions: membership of the State Committee for Human Rights Year 1968; chair of the Sydney Opera House Festival Women's Committee in 1973; membership of the board of governors of the Law Foundation of New South Wales, 1974-1977, the first non-legal woman so appointed; membership of the Council for the Royal Flying Doctor Service; and membership of the Standing Committee of Convocation at Macquarie University.

In 1977, Scotford was appointed executive officer of the Cultural Council of the City of Sydney. This involved the organisation of the City of Sydney Eisteddfod, an event with over 20,000 entrants, and also a more general brief to promote the performing and creative arts in the city.

In her later years, Scotford wrote a historical novel, *The Distaff Side*. It follows her ancestral female lines, to her great grandmothers and beyond. She wrote that 'I wanted to honour my ancestors, not because they were great heroines, but because of the sort of people they were-steady, and good'. The book was published in 1996 by Harper Collins.

Jessie Scotford was active for many years on the presbytery of St David's church, Lindfield, and, with the union of the Presbyterian, Congregational and Methodist churches in 1977, she became an Elder in the Uniting Church of Australia-'perhaps my greatest honour'. In 1976 she told an all-women service in St David's that the impact of International Women's Year was like a huge submerged ocean current whose force was not yet felt. Women are rising in slow persistent waves to effect a 'revolution that is as vital a part of human progress as the discovery of the wheel, the invention of the printing press or the conquest of space'.

Events

1995 - 1995
Central West Region Women's Committee of the National Trust of Australia NSW

1973 - 1973
Festival Women's Committee for the opening of the Sydney Opera House

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 of Australian Women, Lofthouse, Andrea, 1982

Who's Who in Australia, 1971, Legge, J S, 1971

Book
The Distaff Side: An Epic Saga Spanning Five Generations of Women, Scotford, Jessica, 1996

Conference Paper
A Super Achiever, Scotford, Jessie, 1995

Education for Citizenship, Scotford, Jessie, 1970

Journal
NCWA Quarterly Bulletin, National Council of Australian Women, 1974

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

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, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Jessie Scotford interviewed by Hazel de Berg for the Hazel de Berg collection [sound recording]

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

NCWA Papers 1984 - 2006

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Digital resources



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