The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5822

Harford, Lesbia Venner

(1891 - 1927)

Born	18910409, Brighton Victoria Australia
Died	19270705, Fitzroy Victoria Australia
Occupation	Activist, Lawyer, Poet, Writer

Summary

Lesbia Venner Harford (1891-1927), poet, was born on 9 April 1891 at Brighton, Melbourne, daughter of Edmund Joseph Keogh, a well-to-do financial agent, and his wife Helen Beatrice, née Moore, both born in Victoria. Her mother was related to the earl of Drogheda. About 1900 the Keoghs fell on hard times and in an effort to retrieve the family fortunes Edmund went to Western Australia, where he eventually took up farming.

Lesbia was born with a congenital heart defect which restricted her activity throughout her life. Nettie Palmer remembered her at a children's party as 'a dark-eyed little girl who sat quite still, looking on'. She was educated at Clifton, the Brigidine convent at Glen Iris, and Mary's Mount, the Loreto convent at Ballarat, but she rebelled against the family's staunch Catholicism: in 1915 she conducted services for Frederick Sinclaire's Fellowship group.

In 1912 she enrolled in law at the University of Melbourne, paying her way by coaching or taking art classes in schools. She graduated LL.B. In December 1916 in the same class as (Sir) Robert Menzies. During her undergraduate years she had become embroiled in the anti-war and anti-conscription agitation, forming a close friendship with Guido Baracchi (son of Pietro Baracchi) who claimed later that 'she above all' helped him to find his way 'right into the revolutionary working class movement'.

On graduation she chose what she considered to be a life of greater social purpose and went to work in a clothing factory. Much of her poetry belongs to this phase of her life and she shows a growing solidarity with her fellow workers and an antagonism towards those whom she saw as exploiters. She became involved in union politics and like her brother Esmond (later a Melbourne medical scientist) joined the Industrial Workers of the World. She went to Sydney where she lived with I.W.W. Friends and worked, when strong enough, in a clothing factory or as a university coach. On 23 November 1920 in Sydney she married the artist Patrick John O'Flaghartie Fingal Harford, a fellow I.W.W. Member and clicker in his father's boot factory: they moved to Melbourne where he worked with William Frater in Brooks Robinson & Co. Ltd and was a founder of the Post-Impressionist movement in Melbourne.

For many years Lesbia had suffered from tuberculosis. She tried to complete her legal qualifications but died in hospital on 5 July 1927. She was buried in Boroondara cemetery.

Lesbia transcribed her poems into notebooks in beautiful script; she sang many of her lyrics to tunes of her own composing. Some she showed to friends or enclosed in letters. She was first published in the May 1921 issue of Birth, the journal of the Melbourne Literary Club, and then in its 1921 annual. She provoked much interest at the time and Percival Serle included some of her poems in An Australasian Anthology (Sydney, 1927). In her review of the anthology, Nettie Palmer singled out Lesbia's poetry for special praise, and in September and October 1927 published four of her poems in tribute to her. Lesbia mistrusted publishers, explaining that she was 'in no hurry to be read'. In 1941 a collection edited by Nettie Palmer was published with Commonwealth Literary Fund assistance. No complete collection exists. On her death her father took custody of her notebooks and they were lost when his shack was destroyed by fire.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016, http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers

Book
Somewhere here the future's hid : the extraordinary life of Lesbia Harford, Sparrow, Jeff, 2026

Archival resources

State Library of New South Wales
Betty Roland - collected and miscellaneous papers, 1934-1990

Author Details
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