

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6621

Govan, Elizabeth Steel Livingston

(1907 - 1988)

Born	18 October, 1907, Hamilton Scotland
Died	6 July, 1988, Uxbridge Ontario Canada
Occupation	Educator, Social scientist, Social work educator, Social worker

Summary

Elizabeth Govan was recognised by her peers as having ‘played a big part in the expansion of the social studies courses and social welfare work in Australia’ from her time in Australia (1939-1946) at the New South Wales Board of Social Study and Training in Sydney and later Sydney University. (Sydney Morning Herald, 15 March 1945)

Details

Some short-term women residents of Australia made a significant contribution to its history. One such was Elizabeth Steel Livingston Govan. Born in Hamilton, Scotland, to William Arthur Winsleigh Govan and Elizabeth Livingston, who were committed Scottish Presbyterians. The family soon migrated to Canada, where in 1930 Elizabeth obtained a BA from Toronto University, which was followed in 1932 with a BA from Oxford and then a Masters degree in public welfare administration and a diploma in social work from Toronto.

In 1939 she came to Australia to be a tutor in Social Work for the existing independent New South Wales Board of Social Study and Training in Sydney, responsible for the problems of unmarried mothers and their children, which she did for a year. The training of social workers, however, was undergoing significant changes in that year and was being put for the first time under the control of the university. In February 1940, the Senate of Sydney University agreed that a Board of Studies in Social Work be established and Govan was appointed acting director of the newly formed department. She supervised students’ field work and taught social case work. In the next few years as a member of the Delinquency Committee of the Child Welfare Advisory Council, she and Norma Parker also played a leading role in upgrading the NSW Child Welfare Department. She became director of the university department three years later when a male economics lecturer who was the successful applicant could not leave England. By this time her unqualified capacity to manage a department and her devotion to the subject had been recognised. Her work made the subject completely accepted both academically and in the community. In 1944 she was elected to the senate of the University of Sydney and in the same year she became a member of the earliest committee of the newly formed Sydney Association of University Teachers.

Nevertheless, at the end of the war she returned to Canada to take up a junior position as an assistant professor at Toronto, having obtained a letter from the president of the University of Toronto, Sydney Smith, regarding salaries of faculty members, which ensured her the same salary as a male in the position. After finishing her thesis in 1951 from Chicago (which was on an Australian topic – Public and Private Responsibility in Child Welfare in NSW 1788-1887) she left academic work for a time to work on special projects for the Canadian Welfare Council, but in 1958 she became a full professor in social work. She remained an executive director and from 1962-4 Director of the Canadian Association of social work.

In Canada she was a major contributor to the development of the area of social work.

Archival resources

University of Toronto Archives
[Elisabeth Steel Livingston Govan fonds](#)

Author Details

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