Entry type: Person
Entry ID: IMP0043

Curtin, Elsie

(1890 - 1975)

Born	18901004, Ballarat Victoria Australia
Died	19750624, Cottesloe Western Australia Australia
Occupation	Community worker

Summary

Elsie Curtin maintained an interest in social issues and politics throughout her entire life. Her work in these areas continued even after the death of her husband, Prime Minister John Curtain. For her service to the community, Elsie Curtin was appointed Commander to the Order of the British Empire (CBE) on 1 January 1970.

Details

The youngest daughter of Abraham and Annie Needham, Elsie was born in Ballarat on 4 October 1890. The family migrated to South Africa in 1898 and it was here Elsie received her education. At the age of 17, she joined the Social Democratic Federation in Cape Town, however in those early years, she maintained a strong commitment to the Methodist Church.

The family returned to Australia in 1908, settling in Hobart. She met John Curtin (Prime Minister of Australia, 1941-1945), the newly-appointed Secretary of the Victorian Timber Workers' Union, whilst he was in Hobart working on Labor's State Election campaign. The pair were married in Perth on 21 April 1917 and later had two children; Elsie Milda in 1917 and John Francis in 1921.

Elsie maintained an active membership in the Perth branch of the Labor Women's Organisation (LWO), which she had joined in 1917. In 1924, she became the founding Treasurer of the Fremantle branch and also served on the committee responsible for building the Cottesloe Infant Health Clinic and the Subiaco Choral Society, where she sang contralto.

During John Curtin's prime ministership, Elsie spent time at The Lodge in Canberra, as well as maintaining the family home in Cottesloe and assisting with the electorate work in her husband's absence. She supported her husband in all aspects of his prime ministership and undertook many public engagements as his wife including launching ships, entertaining official visitors, attending diverse functions, and promoting the austerity campaigns and war loans. For almost four years, Elsie managed her duties in Canberra, electorate work in Fremantle, and two households on opposite sides of the continent, with the capable assistance of her daughter in Perth and Lodge housekeeper Mrs Pincombe in Canberra. Each year she lived for several months at The Lodge, scheduling as many official events as possible into these months. After her husband died in office on 5 July 1945, Elsie took part in public funeral services in both Canberra and Perth, aware of the widespread national mourning of the wartime leader.

Elsie was elected as the Western Australian President of the LWO in 1944; a position which she held until September 1946. She continued to maintain an active association in the proceeding years. During the war, Elsie had also been patron of the Cottesloe Surf Life-Saving Club and served on the Central Council of the Red Cross Society. In October 1949, she was a guest of the Chifleys at The Lodge while she was in Canberra for the ceremonial founding of the John Curtin School of Medical Research. Elsie was also a guest at The Lodge during Prime Minister Menzies administration, after a visit to New Zealand.

In 1955, Elsie became a Justice of the Peace and served on the Married Women's Court and as a visitor to Fremantle Gaol. She was also awarded life memberships of a number of organisations, including the Perth branch of the Association of Civilian Widows, the Royal Association of Justices, the Women's Justice Association and the Fremantle LWO. She was also a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Cottesloe Women's Service Guild and was president of the Ship Lovers Society. In 1970, Elsie was appointed Commander to the Order of the British Empire for 'services to the community'.

Elsie Curtin passed away at Cottesloe on 24 June 1975.

Events

1970 - 1970
For 'services to the community'

1924 - 1924
Labor Women's Organisation (Fremantle Branch)

1917 -
Labor Women's Organisation (Perth Branch)

1944 - 1946
Labor Women's Organisation (Western Australian)

Published resources

Book
Prime Ministers' Wives, Langmore, Diane, 1992

Reflections : profiles of 150 women who helped make Western Australia's history; Project of the Womens Committee for the 150th Anniversary Celebrations of Western Australia, Popham, Daphne; Stokes, K.A.; Lewis, Julie, 1979

The matriarchs: twelve Australian women talk about their lives to Susan Mitchell., Mitchell, Susan, 1987

Edited Book
Monash Biographical Dictionary of 20th Century Australia, Arnold, John and Morris, Deirdre, 1994

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

Resource Section
John Curtin/Elsie Curtin, National Archives of Australia, 2002,
http://primeministers.naa.gov.au/meetpm.asp?pmId=14&pageName=wife

Journal Article
Civil Engineering Branch. Miss E. Curtin farewelled.

Site Exhibition
Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

National Library of Australia
[Biographical cuttings on Elsie Curtin, wife of the former Prime Minister, Mr John Curtin, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals]

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
Papers of Hector Harrison, 1915-1978 [manuscript]

National Archives of Australia, National Office, Canberra
[Personal Papers of Prime Minister Curtin] Correspondence 'G' [Mrs F R Gale - Gordon Branch Australian Labor Party, includes poem sent to Mrs Elsie Curtin by Dame Mary Gilmore]

[Personal Papers of Prime Minister Curtin] Mrs Elsie Curtin's Personal File [includes letters sent and received, drafts of telegrams, list of callers at The Lodge, Dec 1941]

Subject files of Prime Minister John Gorton

State Library of Western Australia
Sir Frederick Samson personal film [videorecording]. Reel 6

Women's Service Guild Silver Jubilee dinner [picture]

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