**Entry type:** Person
**Entry ID:** IMP0297

# Miethke, Adelaide Laetitia

(1881 - 1962)

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| **Born** | 18810608, Manoora South Australia Australia |
| **Died** | 19620204, Woodville South Australia Australia |
| **Occupation** | Educator, Feminist, Peace activist, School inspector, social activist, Women's rights activist, Women's rights organ |

## Summary

Adelaide Laetitia Miethke began training as a teacher in 1899, and soon became active in women teachers' and union affairs. She was the first woman vice-president of the South Australian Public School Teacher's Union in 1916, and in 1924 gained both her Arts degree and her position as the first female inspector of high schools. She was South Australian state president of the National Council of Women from 1934, and national president, 1936-1942. Miethke was appointed as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (Civil) on 1 February 1937 for her role as President of the South Australian Women's Centenary Council, particularly in organising the Pageant of Empire on 27-28 November 1936. Miethke went on to work with the Royal Flying Doctor Service, and establish the School of the Air for outback children.

## Details

Adelaide Miethke was the second president of the National Council of Women of Australia and remained in office from 1936 to 1942, a period extended beyond the normal 5-year term owing to the wartime disruption of meeting and conference schedules. Before the war, Miethke-renowned for her organisational skills and clarity of vision and the first national or federal president from outside the dominant states of NSW and Victoria-worked hard to establish more systematic communication between the state Councils and to provide financial assistance to delegates travelling to NCWA conferences from the most distant states.

Miethke was a South Australian schoolteacher and inspector, and her role in union affairs resulted in significant gains for the state's women teachers and for girls' domestic science and commercial education. It was her role in the union that led to her association with the NCW. As well as serving as NCWA president from 1936 to 1942, she was NCWSA president from 1934 to 1940. Like her immediate predecessors as federal/national president (Mildred Muscio and May Moss), Miethke chaired her state's Women's Centenary Council (1936) and was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire on 1 February 1937 for this work. Unlike all of her predecessors and many of her successors at the helm of NCWA, Miethke was in fulltime paid work for most of her period as president.

On resigning from the South Australian Education Department in 1941, she assumed direction of the SA Schools Patriotic Fund and from 1941 to 1946 edited the magazine, *Children's Hour*, distributed monthly to South Australian schoolchildren.

Part of the funds raised for the centenary in 1937 and for the wartime Schools Patriotic Fund went to establishing the Royal Flying Doctor Service of which Miethke was state president. She also went on to establish the School of the Air for outback children in 1950.

Adelaide Laetitia Miethke was born on 8 June 1881 at Manoora, South Australia, sixth daughter among 10 children of Rudolph Alexander Miethke, a Prussian-born schoolmaster, and his wife Emma Caroline, née Schultze.

Educated at country schools and Woodville Public School, in 1899 she became a pupil-teacher and between 1903 and 1904 attended the University Training College; she soon became active in women teachers' and union affairs. In 1915, Miethke was founding president of the Women Teachers' Progressive League. The following year, she became the first woman vice-president of the South Australian Public School Teachers' Union. From her first appointment to the Le Fevre Peninsula Primary School, she rose steadily through the ranks in the Education Department, while also helping to open career opportunities for women and wider educational choices for girls through her leadership in teachers' unions and her speeches and articles.

In 1915, Adelaide Miethke addressed SA's Women's Non- Party Political Association, supporting the view that 'technically gifted

girls should have a chance of developing their bent' to the same extent as boys. Like many teachers of her generation, she studied part time and, in 1924, she gained both her BA and her position as the first female inspector of high schools (girls' departments). In 1925, Miethke initiated technical schools for girls (central schools), which focused on domestic science and commercial education, training girls for careers in office work, millinery and dressmaking as well as for home life. By the late 1930s, she was on the executive of the New Education Fellowship, which explored progressive methods. She also took up the cause of the Girl Guides Association, becoming commissioner of the schools division from 1925 to 1939.

In 1920, Miethke joined the newly re-formed NCWSA as a delegate from the Women Teachers' Progressive League and was elected president of the state Council from 1934 to 1940. In 1936, this led to her being one of 2 women appointed to the State Centenary Executive Committee and president of the Women's Centenary Council of South Australia, which, as a memorial to pioneer women, raised £5000 to establish the Alice Springs base of the Australian Aerial Medical Service (later the Royal Flying Doctor Service). It also built the Pioneer Women's Memorial Garden in Adelaide and produced *A Book of South Australia: Women in the First Hundred Years*. On 27-28 November 1936, Miethke produced a grand 'Pageant of Empire', her stentorian voice being suited to rallying 14,000 costumed schoolchildren on the Adelaide oval. She was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire on 1 February 1937 for her centenary work.

Adelaide Miethke became president of the National Council of Women of Australia in 1936 and served in this role until late 1942. The first NCWA or federal president from outside the dominant states of NSW and Victoria, she worked hard in the early years of her office to establish more systematic communication between the state Councils through the launching and distribution of a typescript 'Quarterly Bulletin' and to provide financial assistance to delegates travelling to national conferences from the most distant states. Issues she fostered in addition to the ongoing ones of equal pay and uniform marriage laws included a national policy for Aborigines and equality of provision for married women in the projected national insurance legislation. During the first part of her presidency, it was also anticipated that the International Council of Women conference scheduled for 1942 would be held in Australia (along with the conferences of the Country Women's Associations of the World and the International Federation of University Women) but the outbreak of World War II in 1939 stymied these plans, and the ICW suffered serious disruption in the ensuing years.

When the scheduled national conference took place in January 1941, Miethke was elected for another term of office in the context of the wartime need for stability but subsequent restrictions on travel in Australia, especially to and from the smaller states, limited communication between the Councils and, in July, Miethke and her board suggested they should hand over to a Sydney-based board. It was another 16 months before this occurred. A conference planned for Easter 1942 in Sydney had to be abandoned and the new board was not elected until a meeting could be held in Melbourne in November. The broad prewar concerns had dissipated in these early wartime conferences as the state Councils all turned their attention to local war work and policy issues related to the war effort.

After completing her terms as state and national NCW president, Miethke continued to work for the Australian and SA Councils from 1943 to 1948 as convenor of the national and state education standing committees. In 1944, she was made an honorary life member of NCWA and honorary life vice-president of NCWSA.

In 1941, Miethke retired from her position as an inspector in the South Australian Education Department to general praise. She had been both respected and feared by teachers. Some associates found her abrasive and excessively managerial. An ex-pupil recalled: 'You couldn't get away with much with Miss Miethke. They had authority in those days'. Although she was a stickler for formality, her outspoken methods helped to improve teachers' industrial conditions and to raise the status of women in the Education Department. From 1941 to 1946, in the wake of her retirement, she directed the Schools Patriotic Fund, just as she had during the Great War. Part of the £402,133 raised went to establishing Adelaide Miethke House, a city hostel administered by the YWCA for country girl students, and part to the Royal Flying Doctor Service of which she was state president. She also served on the Women's War Service Council and edited both the magazine, *Children's Hour*, distributed monthly to South Australian schoolchildren, and the newsletter of the Royal Flying Doctor Service, *Air Doctor*.

In her role as president of the Flying Doctor Service, Miethke observed outback children's shyness, and, in order to 'bridg[e] the lonely distance', she inaugurated the world's first school of the air. It began operating as a branch of the Flying Doctor Service from the Alice Springs Higher Primary School in 1950, using individual pedal-wireless sets on remote homesteads to link the children.

In 1942, she was founding president of the Woodville District Child Welfare Association, which established 4 pre-schools. The Adelaide Miethke Kindergarten (opened 1953) still flourishes. 1949 saw her last organising feat-the United Nations Appeal for Children. Miethke once admitted, 'I fear work has become almost a disease with me!' She maintained unabated her appetite for clubs and committee work, and was active in the Royal Commonwealth Society, the Adelaide Women's Club and the Catherine Helen Spence Scholarship Committee. She was also the first honorary life member of the Royal Agricultural & Horticultural Society in 1941. Miethke continued her involvement in most of these organisations until her death on 4 February 1962 at her home in Woodville.

Prepared by: Jan Hipgrave, Marian Quartly and Judith Smart

## Events

**1915 - 1915**
Women Teachers' Progressive Leauge

**1936 - 1936**
Women's Centenary Council of South Australia

**1942 - 1942**
Woodville District Child Welfare Association

## Published resources

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Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

**Resource Section**
Miethke, Adelaide Laetitia (1881-1962), Edgar, Susan and Jones, Helen, 2006, http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A100484b.htm

**Edited Book**
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200 Australian Women: A Redress Anthology, Radi, Heather, 1988, https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20071105022623/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/78644/20071105-1315/www.200australianwo

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Six years with the SPF / story of the Schools Patriotic Fund of South Australia, Jan. 1940-Jan. 1946, Miethke, Adelaide L, 1946

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Greater than their knowing: a glimpse of South Australian women 1836-1986, National Council of Women of South Australia, 1986

**Report**
Patriotic work in our schools : a report on the South Australian Children's Patriotic Fund ... showing administration of funds and some phases of the work, Sept. 1915-17, Miethke, Adelaide L, 1917

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Adelaide Miethke, Edgar, Suzanne and Jones, Helen, 1988

**Journal Article**
The City as a Site of Women Teacher's Post-suffrage Activism: Adelaide, South Australia, Trethewey, Lynne and Whitehead, Kay, 2003

**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

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

## Archival resources

**State Library of South Australia**
Notes and letter on the characters in 'We of the Never Never'

National Council of Women of S.A. : SUMMARY RECORD

**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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