

CHAPTER XIIIC O N C L U S I O N

The New South Wales Women's Movement was dominated by the ideal of Victorian excellence in womankind and the Victorian ideal of society. The extent to which these ideals had taken root in Australia is remarkable, and they seem to have been equally strongly held in all states. This was the case despite the variations between the dates on which various pieces of social legislation, including the adult franchise, were introduced. Australian women seem to have been gripped by an excessive desire to demonstrate their high standard of social behaviour and, by doing so, were almost certainly reflecting a national self-consciousness about their country's origins. Of this, New South Wales women were particularly aware.

A settled, socially respectable society was far less firmly established in Australia by the 1870's than in England or the United States. Citizens sensitive to certain deficiencies, living remote from overseas centres which they were anxious to copy and to impress, were very conscious of the need of their developing society to be cherished, and its values nourished. Because they were not sure of

the permanent standards of colonial life, most Australian women were far less anxious than overseas women to rebel at current canons of behaviour and extremely anxious to fulfil all the current ideals of womanhood. New South Wales women stepped warily and precisely through each campaign with which they were associated, seldom risking an attack which might question their ability to behave as Victorian society expected.

The bulk of New South Wales feminists both before and after 1900 had no real goal other than the enriching of this ideal of society and their place in it, by the addition of those legal rights which were necessary to complete their complete equality. There was no intention of changing the Victorian ideal altogether and no apparent conception that woman's role in society could be a more active one.

The Women's Movement in Australia was the product of this Victorian-age where the standards and aspirations of a growing middle class had first permeated the activities of the charitable organisations in which women had become involved, and spilt over, seemingly naturally, into other organisations with different principles and potentially different ideals.

Principally the Victorian ideal taught sweet docility; a moderation and a refinement of behaviour that contributed to the peculiar quality of aloofness which kept women, before and after the granting of the suffrage, from exhibiting any militant traits which would have made them suspect in the eyes of the men on whom they depended for the necessary legislation. Nor did they noticeably develop these particular traits before 1914 in New South Wales, or to any great extent for many years afterwards. Overseas movements gave New South Wales women their great inspiration, and the spirit of the mid- and late 19th century which influenced the aims of these organisations were adopted naturally by New South Wales women. When they gained the suffrage and most other equalising legislation without the sacrifice of any of these ideals and without the need to follow the alarming example of militant action, they saw no necessity to change their attitudes or their behaviour. There was in fact in New South Wales no real necessity to consider changing either. The support of men for legislation concerning the legal status of women was based on a firmly held conviction that women were basically unambitious, and

those who before 1914 showed they were otherwise, tapped a strong vein of disapproval which under other circumstances might have developed into outright opposition, and in turn sparked off a much more violent feminist campaign.

Women certainly benefitted from a more liberal attitude towards social legislation in general, partly because of the sheer innocuousness of their aims and the respectability of their behaviour. There appears to be very little real basis in the belief that they had attained a favoured position because they had proved their value and had been particularly appreciated because of their early scarcity in a pioneering country, for except for the franchise women's legal position did not improve earlier in Australia than elsewhere in the world and the franchise was won for other reasons. According to accounts of women's lives in the colonies,¹⁷ many were greater drudges in Australia than elsewhere and had been expected to put up with more. Men appear to have had little reason to indulge women and social legislation does not seem to have been a reward for their past efforts.

17. Mary Gilmore OLD DAYS, OLD WAYS, Sydney, 1934.

Women in New South Wales entered public life by the most traditional of routes, participation in charity affairs. As a route, however, it had greater significance in New South Wales than in many countries. Charity in New South Wales for many years was a private and not public affair and charity organisations achieved an unusual social prominence and importance. They became in time the chief outlets for women's interests outside the home and the chief centres of social activity in the colony. They also attracted the colony's most outstanding and able women, most of whom belonged to the prosperous middle class, and who quite frequently moved in the most socially prominent and influential circles of the colony. Whether or not these women also supported purely feminist causes - and many did - their attitudes, their principles and their interests were frequently, if not always, taken to represent the interests of women as a whole.

This fact certainly had its effect on the attitude of men when they came to consider legislation which particularly affected women. In addition the current concept of ideal behaviour most women revered, was closely associated with the ideal of a feminine influence localised within the home,

and the completely unchallenged belief which was in fact, gaining rather than losing ground in Australia, that a woman's place was quite definitely out of public life and behind her front door. It was this belief which inhibited the encouragement of women working, virtually excluded any marked demand for higher education and made most if not all women content with or submissive to Arbitration Court rulings which placed them at a disadvantage to men in the question of wages.

It also contributed to the confusion which marked the aims of women's organisations after the suffrage was achieved. Few women had thought clearly about their goals, other than of the possibility of obtaining equal legal status as a mark of complete social equality. Gaining equality seldom implied any intention of taking a more active part in public life, but mainly represented to them the further enhancement of womanhood and the strengthening of women's roles as inspirers and guardians of moral behaviour.

Women as a whole felt more keenly the injustice of a situation which gave rise to the need for legislation on the Age of Consent, or Guardianship of Infants, than they did a situation which called for legislation to allow them to sit

on juries or become Members of Parliament, or which actually prevented them assuming public responsibilities. Inequality of status concerned them far more than inequality of opportunity. For this reason they had worked hard for adult suffrage, but had shown almost total lack of interest in securing the right to sit in Parliament.

For most Australian women the gaining of the right to vote was an end in itself. They did not dream of a franchise which would lead in a few years to the election of lady Prime Ministers and even in South Australia where the right to sit in Parliament came earliest, it is doubtful if women seriously agitated for this. The most common attitude at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, was the one expressed by members of New South Wales women's groups, who wrote to Catherine Spence in South Australia congratulating her on her courage in allowing herself to be nominated as a delegate to the Federal Convention.

The Australian women's political ambitions, far from suffering a decline after 1902, have represented a very slow but definite acceleration, especially since the end of the first world war. In 1902 a bare handful of women in any part of Australia wished to sit in Parliament. By 1914

the numbers with the same ambitions, although greater, were yet so small that individual aspirants are relatively easy to trace. But their attitudes were still so unusual that few other women supported them and almost no men took them seriously.

This limitation of legislative ambition had its origins almost solely in the ideals of Victorian feminine behaviour. Federation, the South Australian example, Labour Party pressures all played their part in the granting of women's franchise, but what was most appealing to the male politicians in New South Wales was the spectacle of a body of unambitious women whose voting interests might be doubtful, but whose individual aspirations were very safely circumscribed.

Nevertheless the suffrage campaign did uncover a remarkable font of energy in New South Wales women. The enthusiasm which had sent them into many charitable organisations now sent them into the new political and semi-political organisations as well. At first sight this activity had much to offer the national women's movement; but ultimately it was enthusiasm without definite direction and in New South

Wales women were offered neither definite leadership nor example. With no acceptable overseas model to follow after their almost unprecedented franchise successes, and with no clear or satisfactory goal which all or most of them could accept, women failed to emerge in New South Wales or Australia as the shining examples to which the granting of the adult suffrage appeared to point. Instead women concerned themselves with immediate social aims, and as they were gained, found few other goals to take their place. Those who took up some form of political activity were frequently swept up in political questions over which they attempted and gained little control.

The Women's Movement was virtually fragmented in New South Wales by the granting of the suffrage. Without discussion on personal preference, women opted to organise along individual lines of interest despite their sharing of a common outlook on the role of women generally. As a result they themselves placed obstacles in the way of acting together in organised groups, or of joining men's organisations on equal terms with them. In fact, women chose to stand somewhere midway between these two possibilities, fighting for their independence and an independent viewpoint on one hand yet on the other hand completely unable to unite successfully on those questions on which they could agree.

No really strong independent organisation ever came into existence in New South Wales to fulfil such a double function.

Independence achieved through such an organisation may have made the women's movement in New South Wales a much stronger force by 1914. Certainly it would have met outside antagonism which might have given its goals added impetus and patience. It might, as easily have developed a militant or aggressive element among women in the community, and a greater sense of apartness in those who became associated with it. With current attitudes no movement was, however, at all likely to be formed and with the passage of subsequent legislation, at all likely to develop. The new organisations which were beginning to come into existence in or near 1914, were groups with much more limited aims, though most still intended to operate within the old ideal of non-political involvement. Very few developed aggressive traits; most in addition sacrificed the idealistic motivating force of a Political and Educational League, for ideals which also left more room for social activities. As a result, most could look forward to a longer working life.

How ver, involvement in politics usually became official policy, not the individual policy of an organiser. The organisations themselves were composed of members with similar working backgrounds, special interests or vague watching briefs on the interests of women in general.

By 1914 the women's movement in New South Wales had achieved most of its immediate aims in regard to legislation affecting the social and legal status of women. It had done so without particularly altering the ideals of those concerned with it or enlarging their vision of themselves. The movement had not produced any remarkable alterations to the place of women generally in the state's social life, and social pressures to retain the status quo were sufficiently great to prevent most women from feeling, or expressing, any particular wish to break out. Change, when it did come, was gradual. Women did not upset their ideal themselves; rather it was affected by a multitude of outside influences beginning with the 1914 war and accelerating with the shift in social attitudes, standards of behaviour, and the widening of occupational opportunities which followed it.

It was, and remained, a slow process in New South Wales. By 1914 only the first steps towards the greater participation of women in public life on an equal basis with men had been taken.