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Jessie Street
Jessie Street
A Rewarding but Unrewarded Life

Peter Sekuless

University of Queensland Press
To
Hamish Mackay,
Chris Ronalds
and
John Iremonger
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Foreword

Jessie Street will be remembered for her practical compassion. With boundless energy she directed her mental resources towards relieving the misery suffered by those less fortunate than herself.

Deep was her understanding of the problems confronting women and Aborigines. She saw the discrimination against both groups, which was firmly entrenched in Australian society, as based on that society’s need to exploit human resources. Thus she concentrated her efforts on removing all forms of discrimination from the statute books and in the workforce.

She was single-minded in her determination to eliminate injustices, and some of her dedicated followers have continued with the same single-mindedness.

Leaders both in Australia and abroad respected her. Blacks, women, peace fighters gave generously of their time with unquestioning dedication to her. She expected loyalty, because she herself was loyal to her beliefs and aspirations.

She was often accused of being a traitor to her class. On the other hand, some considered her an alien in the territory of the working class. But it was within the working class that she spent a great part of her life working for social reforms. She understood the needs of the have-nots and the greed of the rich. Because she knew that in a capitalist society there must always be many who were poor, she supported the whole concept of socialism. After visiting the USSR she passionately believed that within that social system lay the answer to the removal of both sexual and racial inequalities. If towards the latter part of her life she doubted the
Soviet Union's plans to remove racial discrimination, she showed this only by no longer referring to these plans.

Her ability to direct — rather than lead — was revealed particularly in her work for the removal from the statute books of legislation discriminating against Aborigines. The callousness of Native Affairs officers, the so-called welfare officers, and pastoralists who controlled the lives of the Australian Aborigines shocked her. In the 1950s, after visiting the Aboriginal reserves in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, she returned to Sydney with a firm determination to rally her trusted colleagues in the voluntary organization, the Aboriginal Australian Fellowship. She urged them not only to work for the removal of legislation that discriminated against Aborigines in New South Wales, but also to influence their friends and acquaintances, particularly in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, and Queensland, to do the same. She herself drafted the petition for a referendum to remove the discriminatory legislation from the federal Constitution. Quietly but persistently working in the background, she pressed the AAF to circulate the petition over a broad area of the community — among churches, social clubs, professional associations, and Aboriginal reserves. Eventually the referendum was held, and Jessie Street lived to see it carried by the people.

Jessie Street believed that regardless of what the despoilers of humanity may do to the underprivileged, whether to enslave, segregate, despise, or reject, they could not destroy the will of the people to achieve justice and dignity and a decent way of life.

This book clearly depicts the all-embracing personality of Jessie Street and reveals aspects of her life that many people may have only dimly discerned.

Faith Bandler
General Manager, Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders
For what I hope is an understanding of Jessie Street, I am indebted to her children and grandchildren, especially Belinda Mackay and Sir Laurence Street, who granted access to early photographs of their mother, and to Sir Kenneth Street’s book on the family. Of her friends and associates, Faith Bandler, Jean Thurlow, Shirley Andrews, Irene Greenwood, Muriel Tribe, Millicent Christian, and Phyllis Johnson have been more than generous with their time, and in some cases, with their private papers. In relation to her family history and early life, thanks are due to the Baillieu Myer family for allowing me to visit Yulgilbar; and to their manager, Allan Rogan, and his kinsman, Jack Rogan, for their recollections of Yulgilbar when the property was owned by the Ogilvies.

Former senators Joe Fitzgerald and Bill Morrow and a former member for Eden-Monaro, the late Allan Fraser, gave me valuable insights into Jessie Street’s political career; while William Wentworth and political journalists Alan Reid, Jack Fingleton, Kevin Power, and the late Don Whitington delved into their remarkably clear memories at my behest. Professor L. F. Crisp and Sir Alan Watt gave me considerable assistance with the chapter dealing with the United Nations, as did Bill Mountier of the Australia-USSR Society in relation to the friendship with Russia movement.

I consulted many records for which special permission is required for access, and I thank custodians of the Australian Peace Council papers and the New South Wales branch of the
Australian Labor Party as well as the Industrial Registrar in Melbourne, the Soviet Embassy in Canberra and Women's College at the University of Sydney. In addition, John Fairfax and Sons Ltd in Sydney and United Nations Office of Information in New York, thanks to the help of Chris Lamb, assisted with access to photographs. Robert Geddes kindly lent me his mother's copy of *Truth or Repose*

Of the many public and university libraries and archives I visited, the following gave me far more time and showed greater interest than their jobs demanded: Catherine Santamaria and her staff of the manuscripts section of the National Library of Australia; the Fryer Librarian, Margaret O'Hagan, and her staff at the University of Queensland; and Janet Reid at Australian Archives in Canberra, whose work with Kathie Oakes in preparing a *Women's Guide* of material relating to women in Australia has made archival work in this field considerably less of a lottery.

Those who help most are often left to last or forgotten because their contribution is intangible. Among those are two modern feminists, Carmel Shute and Pat Vort-Ronald, who did not know Jessie Street but whose knowledge of her has helped immeasurably. Eric Fry of the Australian National University was an invaluable mentor in the early stages. For assistance and support with research and typing the following cannot be adequately rewarded: Jacqueline Rees, Diana Palmer, Murr Hinchliffe, and Kyrsty Macdonald.

The main source of reference for this book has been Jessie Street's papers in the National Library. As these papers are uncatalogued references have not been footnoted, but references to Jessie Street in other collections have been.
An illuminated address presented to the Lillingston family by the staff at Yulgilbar on the family's return to the property after World War One. (Courtesy Mrs Belinda Mackay)
Introduction

The task of this book is to fill the void left by Jessie Street’s inability to complete her memoirs. Her autobiography, *Truth or Repose*, ends with the death of Australia’s wartime prime minister John Curtin in July 1945. Curtin endowed Jessie Street with her greatest reward: appointment as the only woman member of the Australian delegation to the foundation conference of the United Nations at San Francisco. Thereafter her political power and influence waned, and a few years later she was subjected to government harassment and physical assault by people who did not share her beliefs. Her last quarter-century, from 1945, can only be understood in terms of what went before, which is described without trespassing overmuch on her own book.

This book is not the definitive biography of Jessie Street. The definitive biographer will need to research all the government files relating to her activities, and those records will not be made public until thirty years after her death in 1970. By the end of this century a competent historian should be able to weigh the consequences of the successful referendum of 1967 which eliminated the legal discrimination against black Australians from the Australian Constitution. Jessie Street initiated the popular movement which led to a record ‘yes’ vote in favour of allowing Commonwealth jurisdiction in Aboriginal affairs and including Aborigines in the national census. The referendum victory was the crowning achievement of her rewarding but unrewarded life.

Her life does not lend itself to strict chronological treatment. Her feminist, socialist, and political activities reached such a
pitch, especially in the 1940s, that the different strands need to be
separated, otherwise the events overlap into an incomprehensible
jumble. In 1943, for instance, she stood for Federal Parliament,
chaired the main committee providing medical and other aid to
the Soviet Union, organized a national women’s conference, and
ensured the legal rights of Australian women who married
United States servicemen, to mention only her more outstanding
activities. She tried to separate her public life from her private
family life, but that was impossible: just as her socialist and
feminist activities were entwined, so were her public and private
lives. This book delves into her private life only to the extent
necessary to describe her public life, not least out of respect for
the feelings of her four children and fourteen grandchildren.

Jessie Street’s grandfather, Edward Ogilvie, arrived in Sydney
on 23 January 1825 in the company of his father, Commander
William Ogilvie, from whom he inherited a domed forehead and
high-beaked nose, and his mother, Sarah, with whom he shared a
notable strength of character. The Ogilvies took up a grant of land
in the Upper Hunter district, and named their property Merton
after their British home. It was also named after Lord Nelson’s
country seat in the same vicinity, where he lived in style with his
mistress Emma Hamilton. A more tangible connection at Merton
on the Hunter was a wash-stand which had formerly belonged to
Nelson.

Despite persistent efforts, Commander Ogilvie did not make a
fortune as a farmer, so Edward and a small party, which included
his brother Fred, trekked northward in search of greener, or at
least more profitable, pastures. Their arduous journey of more
than six hundred kilometres ended when they discovered the
Clarence River flowing languidly between lush banks ripe for
grazing. In other places, majestic rock faces rose straight up from
the water and the broad slow-moving reaches were interrupted by
rapids and rocky chasms.

By 1841 the brothers had repeated their remarkable journey
over the Great Dividing Range, but this time with twelve
thousand sheep and three heavily loaded bullock drays. Fred died
of a sickness and so did not live long enough to see their
selection, Yulgilbar, meaning “place of many fishes” in the local
Aboriginal dialect, developed into one of the finest properties in northern New South Wales. That was left to Edward, who later became a member of the squatters’ bastion, the Legislative Council. Although his dream of founding a line of pastoral peers was not realized, he belonged to that rare breed of pioneers who have sufficient breadth of vision to see their land as something more than a patch of income-deriving dirt.

Jessie Street’s long and interesting life, which spanned eighty-one years, began on 18 April 1889 in the Indian district of Chota Nagpur, now Bihar province. She was the first child of Captain Charles and Mabel Lillingston (nee Ogilvie). Lillingston was a well-connected Englishman employed in the forestry branch of the Indian Civil Service. The most notable member of his family was Sir Edward (later Lord) Grey, who became British foreign secretary in the years before the First World War, and he was related by marriage to the anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce.

Jessie’s mother was the sixth of Edward Ogilvie’s eight daughters. While Ogilvie was in England with his family, he struck up a friendship with the poet Robert Browning, who described the eight girls as his “Australian Octave”. Browning liked all of Ogilvie’s daughters and Mabel in particular, as her fondness for poetry and sweetness of singing voice exceeded that of the others. She always carried a personally autographed photograph of Browning. Also while in England, Mabel met and married Lillingston, a distant relative. Soon after their marriage the couple went to India, where Jessie Mary Grey Lillingston was born. She was named Jessie after one of Mabel’s sisters and Mary Grey after Lillingston’s mother. A brother, Edward, was born three years later, then ten years elapsed before the birth of a sister, Evelyn.

Jessie spent her first six years in India. The Lillingstons were waited on by a “fleet of servants”, and when travelling the family had its own marquee, team of elephants, and turbanned bearers. In 1896 Edward Ogilvie died and the Lillingstons abandoned the opulence of colonial India for the relative austerity of self-governing New South Wales. Elephants they did not have, but in Australian terms the Ogilvie inheritance was worth a maharaja’s ransom.
Edward Ogilvie’s property consisted of the best cattle-raising country in the Clarence River valley and a two-storey homestead built in the style of a Moroccan castle from imported materials by imported craftsmen. Ogilvie had been obsessed with founding a dynasty, but quarrelled with and alienated his two sons. He had been left with the problem of choosing from among his eight daughters, and Mabel was his favourite. She also had the dual advantage of a son and a husband who could manage the property. Under the terms of Ogilvie’s will, Yulgilbar passed to Mabel, who would hold the property in trust for her eldest son on condition he changed his name to Ogilvie on gaining the inheritance. The will also stipulated that Ogilvie’s other children be paid annuities from Yulgilbar profits.

Yulgilbar was not the same after Edward Ogilvie’s death. The dynasty he dreamed of never came about, but he unwittingly bequeathed his personality to the granddaughter he met a year before he died, when the Lillingstons came to Australia on leave. Vigour and determination, a love of horses, and an understanding of Aborigines were among the traits noticeably passed on to Jessie from her grandfather. Yulgilbar was part of Jessie Street. It was home for twenty years, and she tried hard to preserve it after her mother’s death. The income from its eventual sale was the basis of her private wealth which she used to further the causes she espoused. Her memories of Yulgilbar remained vivid: “One of my greatest pleasures in the evening was to sit on the verandah outside the drawing room window, and look over the broad expanse of lawns and river at the star-spangled sky above, sometimes with the moon shining and listen to mother singing. I have heard many celebrated singers, but they never had the perfect setting mother had.”

As a life-long feminist, she naturally remembered the girlhood restrictions which limited her freedom, such as riding side-saddle and conforming to the dress and code of behaviour demanded of a young lady of standing. She recalled riding side-saddle until the homestead was out of sight, then mounting astride and galloping off to join the mustering. Riding was a particular pleasure, and years later one of her favourite pieces of advice was “when you’re on a good thing stick to it”. She illustrated this advice by
Yulgillar, the Ogilvie family homestead in the Clarence River valley, northern New South Wales (Photo: Sydney Morning Herald)
The interior of one of the rooms of Yulgilbar. The chandelier is a copy of those in the Palace of Versailles (Photo: Sydney Morning Herald)
reference to her own horse, a little black mare, which she invariably rode. Jack Rogan, who worked the Yulgilbar horses until the First World War, helped select and break in that mare. He remembered Jessie and her mother as the best horsewomen in the family. Smiling behind his walrus moustache, Rogan recalled saddling the horses early one morning. Lillingston had instructed him to side-saddle the black mare, but Jessie, who was first down to the stables, was quick to complain. “Don’t blame me, ask your father,” Rogan told her, but instead of taking his advice, she mounted her father’s horse, which was standing near by already saddled, and rode away defiantly astride, showing the hack’s heels to a furious Lillingston and an amused Rogan.

The Lillingston children were taught by governesses, but in 1903 Jessie was sent to school in England. Her earliest surviving photographs, taken during adolescence, show a determined mouth and slightly dimpled chin set in a firm jaw, which became more prominent as she grew older. By late teens she had developed into a singular, if not conventional, beauty. The Edwardian hair-style, centre-parted and swept away from the face, highlighted the warmth and compassion in her sensitive grey eyes; they could also narrow to steel or granite.

She returned to Australia in 1906 and, although her parents would have preferred otherwise, continued her education at the University of Sydney, graduating as bachelor of arts in 1910. Her first year at university was difficult, as schooling had prepared her inadequately for university studies, and social and sporting distractions were legion. She lived at Women’s College and was a frequent guest of the wealthy, whose mansions surrounded Sydney Harbour. Also during first year, she met a law student, Kenneth Street, whose father was a judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales. They attended some of the same classes, and he helped her sort out the accounts of the Drama Society with which she was having difficulty. During their sixty-year relationship, circumstances often forced them apart, and the first separation followed her graduation, when she went to Europe. While in England she was introduced to the suffragette movement, and she found an outlet for her latent feminism with the suffragettes which influenced the rest of her life.
Jessie Street in her early twenties (Photo: Sir Laurence Street)
A life of idleness preparing for marriage was not for Jessie. She returned to Yulgilbar after a year abroad, and, this time with full parental support, set up as a dairy farmer. Her father built the dairy and his workers milked the cows, but she had researched the venture thoroughly and introduced the district to testing milk for cream content, which later became standard practice. At first she was considered “a bit dotty”, but the other dairy farmers gradually became clients for her separating equipment. “They’d come up on their horses.” she recalled years later, “and, as they do in the bush, they wouldn’t get off. They’d just sort of lean on the front of the saddle and talk to me . . . .” She had a herd of about forty cows herself, but by the time she sold out in 1914, the milk testing alone was providing her with a living.

After she sold the dairy herd she went overseas with her parents, who were going to England to visit their son Edward. On this occasion, England was a disappointment to her, despite renewed contact with the suffragettes. Her attempt to help the war effort as a car or lorry driver was rejected, so she went to New York in 1915. There she found unpaid employment in a home for wayward girls and was asked to found a similar institution in Vancouver on condition that she would stay for a year. As Kenneth Street and she were engaged at this time, she cabled him for advice. He suggested she return to Australia, which she did, and they were married in Sydney at St John’s, Darlington, on 10 February 1916.

The marriage linked two third-generation New South Wales families. The first member of the Street family to come to Australia arrived in Sydney Town three years before the first Ogilvie. John Street landed in Sydney in 1822 as a free settler and was granted two thousand acres (809 hectares) of land near Bathurst. Three years after his arrival, he was married by the Reverend Samuel Marsden to Maria Wood Rendell, whom he had met on the outward-bound ship. One of the founders of the Bathurst Hunt Club, Street “constantly associated with all the prominent men of the day in public affairs”, particularly Lieutenant William Lawson. His second son, John Rendell Street, became the first managing director of the Perpetual Trustee Company, and member of the Legislative Assembly.
Jessie Street on her wedding day (Photo: Sir Laurence Street)
representing the electorate of East Sydney.\(^3\)

John Rendell Street’s first son, John William, was the father of Geoffrey Austin Street, who won a Military Cross and was promoted to brigadier in the First World War. After the war, G. A. Street lived in Victoria and collected an extensive library of cricketing books. In 1934 he was elected to the House of Representatives from the electorate of Corangamite and was elevated to the Ministry of Defence in 1938, then transferred to the Army portfolio. On 13 August 1940 he was one of three cabinet ministers killed in an air disaster on the approach to Canberra airport. His only son, Anthony Austin (Tony) Street, later followed his father as member for Corangamite and to the ministry.

John Rendell Street’s second son, Philip Whistler, became a lawyer as did his progeny, and this branch of the family was as successful in the law as his elder brother’s family was in politics. Born in 1863, Philip Street was appointed to the bench of the New South Wales Supreme Court in 1907, where he sat until 1933, for the last eight years as chief justice. He was knighted in 1928.

Kenneth Street was Sir Philip’s eldest son. He graduated in law from the University of Sydney in 1914. Although an injured knee precluded active service, the war did interrupt his professional career. He was commissioned and posted to the staff of the internment camps for enemy aliens, which involved spending most of his time at Holsworthy, south of Sydney.

Such was Kenneth Street’s occupation when he married the twenty-six-year-old Jessie Lillingston. Their marriage was an excellent match; the son of a Supreme Court judge and the daughter of a fecund branch of the landed gentry, with titled British connections. Her first married home was a flat in Darlinghurst. She had casual domestic help and was lucky to find a second-hand car which she garaged near the flat. She joined a number of women’s clubs and societies and became reacquainted with some of her former university friends. In the year of her marriage she was one of the founders of the New South Wales Social Hygiene Association, which planned to carry on the type of work she had been doing in New York. But in Sydney in 1916 it
failed to attract public support. Jessie Street never commented on her husband's attitude to her public activities. Knowing he had married a woman of restless energy faced with a frequently absent husband, he may have encouraged her to follow up her interest in social hygiene, although he knew she would be campaigning for the eradication of unmentionables like prostitution and venereal disease. He may have thought that these radical ideas were a passing fad and that she would soon settle down to more conventional charity work, possibly joining a number of the many committees of which his mother was a patron.

Perhaps Jessie Street decided to continue her feminist work regardless of everyone's views, her husband's included. More likely, in light of their future relationship, the couple struck a mutually satisfactory agreement. At the beginning of their marriage, Kenneth Street was removed from his wife's activities by wartime contingency; later, Jessie Street tried to isolate her socialism and feminism in a neat compartment that would not contaminate her husband.

Apart from social position and despite his reserve, they shared a lively sense of humour which came to the aid of the relationship in later years. She was and remained a product of her heredity and early environment. The role of wife and mother was a natural and inevitable consequence of her birth and was entirely consistent with the pursuit of feminist and humanitarian goals. She was related to Wilberforce, emancipator of the slaves, and felt akin with the sorority of suffragettes, whose leaders were women of the upper middle class. With this background she could not appreciate later generations who saw a contradiction in a servant-employing socialist, but her origins did produce "a fantastic mixture of that supreme upper-class confidence and authority with humanitarian and socialist ideas".

In 1917 Kenneth Street was transferred to army headquarters in Melbourne, where he, his wife, and their first child, who was born in 1918, remained until he was demobilized two years later, after which they returned to Sydney. The congratulatory letters that followed the birth of baby Belinda indicate that Jessie Street wanted a girl. Other New South Wales correspondents found
difficulty imagining her as a mother, or added to their congratula-
tions complaints about the difficulty of finding domestic servants. She helped overcome this problem a few years later by founding a company that hired out domestic help.

Next year, 1919, Philippa was born, followed by two boys, Roger in 1921 and Laurence (later Sir Laurence) in 1926. The two girls were named after their paternal grandparents, which is not surprising, as Jessie Street was devoted to her parents-in-law and she had a lot in common with her father-in-law. Philip Street had subscribed towards the foundation of the Women's College at the University of Sydney and became a member of the college council. Jessie Street herself was a member of the college council from 1920 to 1950, and left her book collection to the college library. They also shared an interest in and were executive members of the League of Nations Union.

The affairs of her own family occupied her mind after her mother died in an Asian influenza epidemic in 1925. Her brother Edward had been sent to an English school, Winchester, at the age of eight, and had continued his education at Oxford and Sandhurst military academy. After the war, in which he served as a cavalry officer, he wanted to marry a second cousin and pressed his mother for a marriage settlement. Although contrary to the spirit of Edward Ogilvie's will, other possible claimants were bought out and Edward Lillingston was granted half Yulgilbar's proceeds until his mother's death. He married in 1921, but the settlement caused so much bitterness that no member of the family communicated with him again, except by solicitor's letter. The remainder of the property's income was split between his sisters, Jessie and Evelyn. On their mother's death, Edward inherited the estate of Yulgilbar but only half its income, so he tried to have the agreement that had been the basis of his marriage settlement annulled. When that failed, he tried to force his sisters' hand by threatening to sell out completely; he would neither compromise nor listen to entreaty, even to the eminently sensible suggestion of selling the land and retaining the home- stead together with four hundred hectares of surrounding parkland. The dispute went to law and was settled by the Equity Court, which found in Edward Lillingston's favour. Yulgilbar was
sold to a pastoral company in 1926 for ninety thousand pounds.

Never again would there be a family living permanently in that expansive turreted mansion. No more formal parties in the long drawing room. No grooms to hold the visitor's horse at the entrance between those Canova lions. No more evenings of music around that mellow rosewood grand. For half a century it had seemed as if the sounds of singing were part of Yulgilbar.

The quotation above and the narrative of Yulgilbar's sale are drawn from George Farwell's account, which is endorsed by Australian recollection. But the British branch of the family disagrees. An English relative described the impression given of Edward Lillingston in Farewell's book, *Squatter's Castle*, as completely wrong and a "blot" on the book. "He [Edward] . . . had always wanted to live at Yulgilbar — if it had been possible for him to do so." The relative did not offer much evidence to support that contention, and had Edward really cared about the family estate he would not have been a party to its ruination.

Ruined it was; used as a barn and stripped of building materials during and after the Second World War. The late Samuel Hordern, whose daughter Sarah married Sidney Baillieu Myer, acquired all the shares in Yulgilbar Pastoral Co. Pty Limited in 1949. After his death, the Baillieu Myers bought the property from his estate, and then converted the crumbling castle in 1966 into a "manageable-sized family country home" with the help of architect Guilford Bell. The upper storey was beyond repair, but the restored single-storey structure, framed by the Clarence with Mount Ogilvie as a backdrop, is still an imposing sight, particularly from the height of the stone temple-like sketch house perched atop a cliff rising sheer from the river about half a mile downstream.

Soon after Yulgilbar was sold, the Kenneth Streets put down permanent roots. In 1927 they paid the not inconsiderable sum of £8,500 for a house in Greenoaks Avenue, Darling Point, which was home for the rest of their lives. The house was double-storeyed with a tennis court in the garden and overlooked Double Bay. It was a stone's throw from St Mark's Anglican church, and other parishioners remember Jessie Street, invariably running late for Sunday morning service, ushering her curly-haired angelic-looking brood into their pew.
By her own standards Jessie Street was inactive during the early twenties when her children were young. She had a freedom from household chores which was shared by increasingly fewer women as domestic servants became harder to find. How she made use of her time is described in later chapters, but her feminist activities and other committees combined with the stress of child rearing bought on a duodenal ulcer in the later twenties. She recuperated slowly on an overseas trip in 1930, and thereafter was careful with her diet. The following year Kenneth Street joined his father as a judge of the Supreme Court, the only known occasion in English legal history when father and son sat on the same bench at the same time. Sir Philip retired two years later, but continued on as lieutenant-governor until his death in 1938. The previous year he had been acting governor, which enabled his eldest granddaughter, Belinda, to have her coming-out party at Government House.

During the thirties Jessie Street became a socialist. For ten years after 1939 she was a member of the Australian Labor Party, and twice a Labor candidate for Federal Parliament. She became a very public figure often quoted in the press. The division between her private and public lives became harder to maintain during the forties. The less scrupulous of her detractors used aspects of her private life to damage her public standing. She was a political oddity at a time when most good men who came to the aid of the Labor Party were horny-handed sons of toil. Even the son of a store-keeper, Dr Herbert Vere Evatt, was treated with suspicion because of his university education; what chance Jessie Street, a woman as well. Her failure to fit a conventional mould was a problem also for her political opponents. To brand her as a Communist was an obvious ploy, but that was not enough for an opponent who enjoyed credibility as the wife of a Supreme Court judge with impeccable motherhood credentials; so an additional tactic was used to isolate her from the respectibility of her family. The whispering campaign that accused her of being a Communist also spread the word that she had deserted her home and family. Neither was true; she was never a member of the Communist Party, but she did leave home and live with a friend who was a Communist for the duration of one election campaign. During
Jessie Street in characteristic pose—with telephone (Photo: National Library of Australia)
the 1946 campaign she stayed with a friend who was acting as her driver, purely for convenience.

As the cold war intensified, prominent socialists were under particular attack. Members of the Roman Catholic Church, to whom communism was an anathema, were foremost in the anti-socialist crusade, and Jessie Street was a favourite target as she opposed their beliefs on other matters such as birth control. The relationship between Kenneth and Jessie Street was built to withstand their political differences, but the circumstances of the late forties imposed extraordinary strains. Her political associates were not invited to Greenoaks Avenue unless they were the type of person who would normally grace the Streets' table. Senior protestant clerics connected with the peace movement might be asked to dine, but discussion of the forthcoming march or congress would not be raised at dinner. At an appropriate moment after the meal, the lady of the house would ask the cleric if he would like to take a stroll in the gardens or to retire to her study, and only then would they discuss matters of mutual concern.

Although Kenneth Street's public aspect was formal and reserved, he was not without humour. When answering the telephone, he used to say, “Are you there?”, in imitation of the first words spoken by telephone by Alexander Graham Bell. His wife was a prodigious telephone-user, and her first act on reaching her office each morning was to pick up the receiver and say rhetorically, “Whom shall I ring?” One morning she followed her usual practice, but instead of dialling she slowly replaced the receiver. She then told the other women in the office that the previous evening her husband said he had seen in court that day a woman wearing a dress that he would like to buy for her. The dress material was pink decorated with hundreds of little black telephones.

The defeat of the federal Labor government in 1949 and the imminence of her husband's appointment as Chief Justice of New South Wales made the climate in Australia even more uncomfortable for Jessie Street. The difficult situation was aggravated by the visit to Australia in 1950 of Dr Hewlett Johnson, the “Red Dean” of Canterbury, an internationally
renowned peace worker. Jessie Street was one of the main organizers of the visit. Dr Johnson had impressed her when she heard him speak for the first time shortly after the war in England. He was reporting on a recent visit to the Soviet Union and praised the heroic struggle of the Russian people against fascism. In Dr Johnson, Jessie Street found a twin soul, a man from a privileged background who had embraced the Russian brand of socialism. In her travails she turned to him for advice and guidance. They agreed, in concert with her family, that if she was to stay true to her ideals she must leave the country to save her husband from intolerable embarrassment. For the next six years she based herself in England but travelled extensively, usually in connection with the peace movement. She worked just as hard as before, and friends remember her passing out from sheer fatigue. She would then take sleeping tablets, sleep for twelve hours, and return to the fray. She maintained contact with her interests in Australia, and her London flat was strewn with papers. The telephone was seldom not in use.

Naturally enough, for a grandmother in her sixties, she keenly felt the separation from her family. Although she had always been a tireless traveller, she had never been away from Australia for so long. After some of the family visited her in 1953, she wrote to a friend in Australia, "I miss them very much — but I was lucky to have them here for so long." Apart from occasional visits, she often wrote to the family. Letters from "Gar", as she was affectionately known by the grandchildren, were a regular feature of family life.

Through her many non-family correspondents she stayed well informed on political events in Australia. She also developed an interest in the problems of Australian Aborigines, which was one reason for returning home in December 1956. More importantly, she returned to see her family and friends, more than two hundred of whom gathered to meet her at Sydney's Mascot airport and to bedeck her with flowers. Her husband, knighted that year, was also on hand: the press revelled in his embarrassment as he hustled her away while she tried to read aloud a prepared statement.

The cause of Aboriginal rights occupied increasingly more of
her time after her return, until recurring bouts of pain in the late fifties ended in a serious operation from which she took some months to recover. However, she did not let her age or illness stop her travels. By this time, her husband, like his father before him, was lieutenant-governor as well as chief justice, and this involved periods of residence in Government House. Jessie Street particularly disliked the formality of vice-regality, and on at least one occasion prolonged an overseas trip to avoid returning to be acting first lady of the state.

Because she did not fit the conventional image for a judge’s wife, Jessie Street and her relationship with her husband were the subject of gossip among their social peers and the socially pretentious. The gossip has survived its subjects, and a belief has persisted that her leftist activities precluded Sir Kenneth’s appointment as governor of New South Wales. Another canard concerning their relationship is often quoted out of context. The Streets were at a dinner and Jessie was holding forth loudly when there was a sudden lull in the conversation. Sir Kenneth’s neighbour asked him, “who is that woman?” Tongue in cheek he replied, “I have never seen her before in my life.” Jessie Street actually used to tell that story by way of poking fun at herself.

In the early sixties she settled down to write her memoirs. Neither the writing nor finding a publisher was easy, yet she was sustained, not by vanity, but by the thought that her book might be a help to others. Neither was her life’s work motivated by vanity. She unconsciously revealed her own philosophy in a speech to a disarmament congress in Stockholm in 1958: “Perhaps communism may be a new revelation of principles Christ expounded. ‘From each according to their ability, to each according to their need’ is surely a principle more in conformity with Christ’s teaching, than a society which accepts the principle of ‘each man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost’.” She was a forceful, if disorganized, speaker who seldom read from a prepared text. She found that restricting “because very often, when you’re speaking about something, you suddenly have a brainwave; you see another point, and so you wouldn’t be able to bring the new point out”. Her conversational speaking voice was low and resonant, modulating to command, yet alive with the lilt
of a chuckle which was often aimed at herself.

As one of the few women delegates to the San Francisco Conference which founded the United Nations, Jessie Street was frequently interviewed by Australian and overseas newspapers. The articles commented on her grey eyes and the almost absence of grey in her brown hair, which was cut for utility rather than style. She had little time for the vagaries of women’s fashions, and usually wore one of her expensively tailored costumes over a silk blouse, with a black cameo broach at the neck. Outdoors, a hat was de rigueur.

The strength of her convictions was such that she was seldom beset by the doubts that assail most men and women. Once she settled on a course of action she followed it with single-minded courage and tenacity. Socialism sustained her, and her idealism generated a vision for the future which she effectively transmitted to others whose loyalty transcended attraction to a common cause. One newspaper commented: “Mrs Street is associated with admirers whose enthusiasm is such that you rather wonder whether Mrs Street goes round the world, or vice versa.” The same article remarked that “less moneyed contenders for women’s leadership” resented her previous record of globe-trotting, which in fact had not been extensive when the article was written early in 1945. Apart from a short trip to New Zealand during the war, she had been overseas only twice since she was married in 1916.

Irene Greenwood, an associate in the women’s movement since 1930, explains her leadership qualities differently:

Jessie’s conception of a project of whatever kind, was always on a grand scale. She lacked the powers of organizing, and failed (for reasons quite apart from the merit of her schemes) to find ways of putting them into application. Her range was too wide. She was before her time, that was her tragedy. She thought she could carry Australian women into the 21st century of international brotherhood/sisterhood. Others did not share her dream; thought her dangerous, and brought her down. It was not merely jealousy, nor envy, rather distrust of where she was leading. Such is the fate of prophets and prophetesses.

Taken in isolation, Irene Greenwood’s view overlooks her
many personal achievements and successful campaigns. As well as being a source of inspiration, she usually picked loyal and competent lieutenants to manage the details. For her acolytes, life with Jessie Street was full of mislaid papers, almost missed trains and aeroplanes, and disorganized schedules. In contrast, she was meticulous with her correspondence. Possibly as a result of her close association with the law, she kept copies of all letters, including handwritten notes. Corrections to original letters were often carefully transcribed onto the carbon copies.

Jessie Street believed that people with particular talents that could benefit others should be free to develop and use those talents. On one occasion she chastised Aboriginal rights leader Faith Bandler for wasting time preparing elaborate refreshments for a party, apparently little realizing that the cost of outside catering was beyond Faith Bandler’s means. A similar attitude is revealed in one of her own favourite stories which she told repeatedly. After buying a dishwasher, she was surprised to find her maid still using the sink to wash up. Asked why, the maid said she did not have anything better to do with her time. Jessie Street told her to read a book or otherwise improve her mind, and that in future she was expected to use the dishwasher. A few days later when the maid was still not using the dishwasher, Jessie Street gave the maid notice. In telling the story, she expressed dismay that the maid was stupid enough to prefer washing up to reading. On the surface, her attitude to the maid was callous; however the dismissal was consistent with her motto: “God helps those that help themselves, and God help those that don’t,” but inconsistent with her generous treatment of other servants.

In the last ten years of her life her memory faded, but she remained as energetic as before. In addition to writing her memoirs, she travelled overseas four times, the last occasion being in 1967, shortly after her seventy-eighth birthday and the launching of her book, Truth or Repose. Apart from memory, her faculties were intact, but by 1968 her lapses were such that she went to live in a nursing home, where she stayed until she died on 2 July 1970 at the age of eighty-one.

Sir Kenneth Street survived his wife by two years. He was a regular visitor to the nursing home where she was a patient. The
strong bond of affection that existed between them lasted until the end, although politically they had grown apart, to their mutual embarrassment. A few close friends of Jessie Street’s remember receiving a telephone call from her husband in 1968, an unprecedented event. Obviously upset, Sir Kenneth told his wife’s friends that she had gone to a home and would most probably stay there. That series of phone calls, perhaps half a dozen, left no doubt in the minds of those who received them of the lasting ties between husband and wife.

Notes

2. Interview with Jessie Street, de Berg tapes, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
3. Details on the Street family are drawn from *Annals of the Street Family of Birtley*, by Kenneth Whistler Street, published privately in 1941.
7. Interview with Jessie Street, de Berg tapis.
Many women, and even some men, have held feminist beliefs as strongly as Jessie Street, and some could articulate those beliefs better than she could; but the attributes that made her the leading feminist of her day were exceptional qualities of leadership, especially an ability to command unswerving loyalty. Her followers were unstinting in their efforts on her behalf, but the women’s movement as a whole was never unanimously behind her. Her opponents and rivals claimed that she was interested in self-aggrandisement, and that she used her private income to buy success. Of course, there was some truth in both charges, but criticism of Jessie Street was tinged with envy. Internecine squabbles and jealousies are endemic to the type of small, voluntary organizations with which she worked. A certain amount of petty back-biting was inevitable, but after the Second World War, attacks on Jessie Street developed an increasingly political and sectarian flavour.

Political ideology did not enter the mind to the vivacious tomboy Jessie Lillingston who resented having to ride side-saddle because she was a young lady. Unwittingly, her parents contributed to Jessie’s latent feminism by sending her to school at Wycombe Abbey in the English county of Buckinghamshire. She was fourteen when she went to England in 1903, and she spent three happy years there. Wycombe Abbey was a progressive girls’ school which encouraged sport and other activities frowned on at the time as likely to impair child-bearing. Its pupils were also
expected to read the newspapers every day, and hence take an interest in public affairs.

Hockey was one of the activities thought to be injurious to the health of young women. Jessie was introduced to hockey at Wycombe Abbey, and she continued to play the game after she became an undergraduate at the University of Sydney in 1908. The growth of women’s hockey at the university was inhibited because a men’s club controlled the facilities. To overcome this problem, she formed a separate women’s hockey club which in 1910 spawned the Sydney University Women’s Sports Association. That was the first instance of Jessie Street meeting entrenched opposition by setting up her own organization, then gathering those of like mind behind her.

She repeated the same exercise two decades later after disputes with two established women’s groups, the National Council of Women and the Feminist Club. The outcome of those disagreements was the founding of the United Associations (later of Women) which under Jessie Street’s presidency initiated the Australian Women’s Charter movement during the Second World War. In half a century of feminist activity, Jessie Street was often at odds with women belonging to organizations whose principles and practice were more conservative than her own. On some occasions she was also in conflict with groups that represented working women.

In her first year at university, Jessie lived at the Women’s College, then moved to private lodgings for the remaining two years. Her recollections of life at the University of Sydney are similar to those of her contemporaries. They remember the parties and other social events; academic work was secondary. The pleasant side of undergraduate life dominates the memories of most graduates, and for the sons and daughters of the well-to-do, university life was an enjoyable interlude between school and career or family responsibility. This was particularly so for women, an accepted minority of students, who were under no pressure to produce outstanding academic results because for most of them their degrees would be an irrelevant qualification for their future roles as wives and mothers.

Following graduation, Jessie spent most of 1911 in Britain and
touring Europe. This trip was vital to her future, because by chance she met a relative, Winifred Mayo, an actress involved with the suffragettes who were agitating for women's franchise. Winifred Mayo was probably a member of the Actresses' Franchise League, which was actively associated with the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), among whose leaders were Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst.

In 1960 Jessie Street recalled helping to carry a banner in a demonstration that gathered outside Holloway Prison to greet Emmeline Pankhurst, who had been on a hunger strike. Her memory must have been slightly awry, as the violent phase of suffragette action finished after the British election of December 1910, when Prime Minister Asquith promised to widen the franchise. Jessie Street was in Australia during the hunger strike period in 1909 and 1910. In addition, Emmeline Pankhurst spent much of 1911 in the United States, but a huge suffragette procession did take place in London on 17 June 1911, which was probably the source of Jessie Street's recollection. An army of women marched five abreast through the streets of London. At its head was Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, one of the most famous suffragettes. Among the marchers were a contingent of women who had been in prison. They were dressed in white and each carried a small silver pennant. Above the white-clad throng waved a banner showing a woman holding a broken chain with the inscription "From Prison to Citizenship". Maybe it was that demonstration which moved Jessie Street to recall fifty years later: "It created a bigger impression in my life than practically anything else I've ever seen." ¹

After returning to Australia, she went to Yulgilbar and established her model dairy, along the latest scientific lines. During the Second World War she made the following comments about her first business enterprise:

Of course I was not then as socially conscious as I am today. I acted more or less instinctively, driven by my restless enthusiasm and energy. Anything I knew I just had to tell other people . . . . had I been more socially conscious I could have made a much greater contribution to the life of community farming.²
She was back in England when the First World War began and tried to contribute to the war effort as a driver, but the authorities were less than interested. This rejection was a disappointment at the time, but it was a lesson learned. A more experienced and determined Jessie Street did not accept no for an answer when early in the Second World War she was told that Australian government regulations prevented women from joining or forming rifle clubs in order to learn the arts of self-defence. Although told by the permanent head of the Department of the Army that the discriminatory regulation would not be repealed, the United Associations of Women (UAW) set up its own Home Defence Reserve involving instruction in drilling and shooting. The instructors, three non-commissioned officers of the militia, trained a dozen UAW members to instructor standard. For practical training, two sporting goods firms were persuaded to provide the use of their shooting galleries.

Jessie Street’s expectations of finding useful activity in England were not realized in 1914. The following year she went to New York in the hope of finding an outlet for her rather directionless energy. By this stage she was imbued with feminist philosophy and had a desire to help those less fortunate than herself, but she had no definite aims. She contacted an American woman she had met briefly in Europe, who arranged for her to work as an under-matron in a home for girls who had been arrested for soliciting but who were not regular prostitutes. This occupation gave her feminism a focus that she followed for the rest of her life. She saw how women were exploited by prostitution, and how the women were arrested while their male clients usually escaped. She saw that proper sex education could alert young people to the dangers of prostitution and venereal disease.

The institution where she worked was run by the New York Protective and Probation Association, and her duties included bathing, delousing, and de-nitting the new inmates who had been referred by the courts. Knowledge acquired in far-distant New South Wales proved beneficial. “The information imparted to me by the housemaid [at Yulgilbar] who brushed my hair at night came in very useful,” she wrote in her autobiography, “I asked for some kerosene and applied it when necessary with most successful results.”
After several months in New York, the association asked her to go to Vancouver and be matron of a new institution being established on the Canadian west coast; instead she returned to Australia to marry Kenneth Street. She was married in 1916, and put her American experience to use in the same year. In association with social reformer Annie Golding, Jessie Street formed the New South Wales Social Hygiene Association. This organization failed to attract public support, and its existence was short-lived. Its failure did not abate her enthusiasm for sex education and the eradication of prostitution and venereal disease. Records of the Social Hygiene Association have not survived, but in November 1916 she delivered an address “The Place of Treatment of Venereal Disease in Social Reform” to a conference about teaching sex hygiene. She concluded her thorough and forceful address with:

Whatever steps we take let us take them with full consideration of the claims of all the spheres of life influenced by promiscuity. The moral sphere, the social sphere and the physical sphere . . . . Those willing to combat venereal disease in the social body cannot disclaim responsibility of moral and social obligations . . . . The whole subject must be treated as a social malady and all the symptoms must be considered and treated in relation to each other . . . . We who are optimists will not admit that the prevailing conceptions of sex are inevitable human conceptions. Mankind will in the long run develop truer and higher conceptions. Let us put an end to this present system which produces unhealthy bodies and unhealthy minds and which perverts human nature from the development of the finer possibilities which lie inherent in it. Let our object not merely be the eradication of venereal disease. Rather let our aim be the building up of a nation with an honest and true sex life. A nation of individuals who will scorn to barter for money the most sacred bond.

Although the Social Hygiene Association did not succeed, there were two important consequences. For the first time, Jessie Street came into contact with people like Annie Golding, who was a prominent woman in the Australian Labor Party as well as a social reformer. More than twenty years later she became convinced that the way to social reform was through the Labor Party. The other result was that the work of the association was revived a few years later.
The lack of preparation for marriage means

WE SAY

KNOWLEDGE means SAFETY

GIVE THEM LIGHT!

Illustration from the Racial Hygiene Association's annual report of 1929
How does your boy get his knowledge of Life?

Support the Racial Hygiene Association of N.S.W.
Because they advocate
SEX EDUCATION

Wingello House, Angel Place, Sydney

Illustration from the Racial Hygiene Association's annual report of 1929
On 27 April 1926 the Women’s League of New South Wales called a meeting out of which grew the Racial Hygiene Association of New South Wales. Its aims were to promote statewide campaigns on sex education and for the prevention and eradication of venereal disease, and to educate the community on eugenic principles. The Women’s League was one of the three organizations which amalgamated to form the United Associations in 1929. The association’s records do not indicate why the word Racial was selected. Perhaps the word was chosen to distinguish the new organization from the previously unsuccessful Social Hygiene Association. The Racial Hygiene Association was affiliated with similar societies in Britain and the United States, both of which used “Social Hygiene” in their names. Jessie Street was one of several vice-presidents of the new association, and was party to its clandestine birth-control activities. During a trip to Europe in 1930, partly to convalesce from an illness and to visit the League of Nations, she attended an international birth-control conference in Zurich, where she made contact with the British Birth Control Association. In July 1934 she told the British organization that the Racial Hygiene Association had been conducting a birth-control clinic in Sydney for about a year. It carried out general education work for venereal disease prevention and had appointed a medical officer who gave birth-control advice for two hours a week. She specifically mentioned that any publicity would cause “various social organizations” to rally in opposition. She concluded that the only way to ensure that contraceptive information was generally available was to make such information part of the medical school curriculum.

Later that year, the contraceptive advocate Dr Ralph Worrall wrote to Jessie Street, saying that for the senate of the University of Sydney to sanction an innovation such as a lecture on birth control would raise a hurricane “owing to the attitude taken up by the R. C. church on this question”. Well might the Roman Catholic Church maintain eternal vigilance, because Dr Worrall was prepared to circumvent official channels. He told Jessie Street that birth-control instruction could be introduced into the final year gynaecology course, which would solve the problem of
Roman Catholic objections as the university senate "would not have any official cogniscance of the matter".

A later report on the birth-control clinic is included in the Racial Hygiene Association’s records. It was published separately from the association’s report for the year ending 30 June 1937 and presumably was not as widely circulated. The birth-control report said that the clinic had been in operation for three and a half years, and during the first eighteen months had advised 677 patients in person and 239 by letter. The numbers were down for the 1936/37 year “due to the depression of previous years having passed”. Implicit in that statement is the fact that procreation is less popular in an adverse economic climate. Interestingly, the report included a paragraph on terminating pregnancies, but the word abortion was not used.

We have had this year ten people who have come for Illegal Operations, but usually they say, "Well, we heard you did not do that work, but we hoped you would help us." Some of them return, saying their trouble is over, and come to us for help for the future. Others are persuaded to carry on.\(^5\)

Jessie Street was a persistent supporter of birth control, and her open conflict with the Roman Catholic Church on this matter in 1946 is described in chapter 5. In 1961, the Racial Hygiene Association became the Family Planning Association of New South Wales, which is one of the main agencies for distributing contraceptive devices and disseminating birth-control information. It receives government assistance, and its work is recognized and appreciated, even by Roman Catholics. Jessie Street’s contribution represents one of her greatest achievements in the cause of feminism. That she was opposed by the Roman Catholic Church was inevitable, but it was not the first time she had disagreed with those more conservative than herself.

In 1920 she became secretary of the National Council of Women of New South Wales, but resigned before the end of her first term. The council was formed in New South Wales in 1896, and in its early years had been active in suffrage work, but its effectiveness was always inhibited by the basic concept that membership in no way affected the independence of the indivi-
dual organizations. The council’s interests in 1920 were evident from Jessie Street’s one and only report. The council had been represented on a government committee formed to help overcome the effects of the influenza epidemic of 1919, and in the same year, the first interstate conference of National Councils of Women had been held. Detailed work was carried out by standing committees which covered education, public health, peace and arbitration, equal moral standards, and professions and trades of women, which dealt with equal pay matters. Jessie Street had been instrumental in and contributed financially to the establishment of the full-time office, and she tried to expand the council’s activities.

We feel that there is an urgent need for some organization which will indefatigably press for the removal of all sex disability from women, for legislation to protect and assist them, and for reforms in the general health and morals of the community, and we feel that no organization is more fitted to do this than the National Council with the able assistance of its 40 affiliated societies.6

Resentment against Jessie Street’s methods grew when she attempted to throw the chairmanship of the standing committees open to election. The incumbents who had been appointed objected, and she resigned. The 1921/22 biennial report simply recorded that Mrs Kenneth Street, who had been elected in March 1920, resigned in November of the same year, but the president’s report contained a veiled reference to the discord: “Co-operation means working together in every relation of life, private or public. It cannot exist in any very fruitful way where there is selfishness or antagonism among individuals or groups.”

Her dispute with the National Council of Women was the first of many with women’s groups both conservative and progressive. Describing the incident in her memoirs more than forty years later, she wrote: “It was the first experience I had had of the control a clique can get in an organization or movement, and carry it on without, I believe, even reading much less concentrating on implementing its aims and objectives.” 7 What she actually thought of the National Council closer to the event is recorded in a letter written in 1936 to Western Australian
Feminist Bessie Rischbieth, who had been one of the founders of the Australian Federation of Women Voters: "The National Council of Women is an organization which consists of various affiliated societies, the vast majority of which are purely philanthropic and the major part of their work does not deal with the legal aspects of women's status." 8

After the birth of her third child in 1921, apparently disillusioned with women's organizations, Jessie Street devoted her energies to a much-needed commercial enterprise. After the war, properly trained domestic servants were in short supply. This problem was a frequent topic of conversation among Jessie Street's social peers, and in 1923 she established the House Service Company, which trained and supplied domestics. The company was one of about half a dozen organizations in Sydney which supplied domestics on a daily basis as cooks, waiters, cleaners, nannies, gardeners, and the like. Jessie Street believed the problem was not a shortage of labour but unacceptable conditions of work, so she devised a system where workers were paid overtime and penalty rates, which was not the usual practice. The experiment proved successful and by 1931 the company had three hundred domestics on its books.

One of the company's regular employees, Mrs Sue Ryan, recalls that the company helped many unemployed, including her husband, to find jobs. However, although her husband would be paid thirteen shillings a day, he was very resentful of the shilling deducted from that amount which went to the company to cover costs. Jessie Street regarded the venture as a success, but Sue Ryan was adamant that the company lost money. It might have been profitable had Jessie Street not established a training scheme for full-time domestics as an adjunct to the company.

One thing that was most necessary to attract girls to this type of work was to remove the stigma that was attached to domestic work in private homes. This was a heritage of the bad old days arising out of the bad conditions for domestic work. It was also necessary to combat loneliness and lack of opportunity for making friends experienced by resident domestic workers. Another essential was to provide that the girls had proper leisure time and suitable recreation. 9

The training scheme folded during the depression, but at its peak
Jessie Street and her family. *Back row, from left:* Evelyn Lillingston (Jessie's sister); Jessie, holding Laurence (now Sir Laurence Street); K.W. (later Sir Kenneth) Street; *Front row, from left:* Belinda; Philippa; Roger. (Photo: Mrs Belinda Mackay)
there were ninety-two trainees attending three-year diploma courses at three technical colleges around Sydney. Attendance for classes at least half a day a week was compulsory and part of the contract drawn up between the company and the employer of the trainee. A popular though not compulsory adjunct was the sports club run by Laurie Ingram, Jessie Street’s associate in this venture, in which the girls participated on their afternoons off, usually after their morning at college. As unemployment rose during the depression, workers were prepared to undercut the House Service Company wage rates and conditions, and employers could afford to ignore the provisions of the trainee contracts, so the training scheme collapsed.

The company continued to supply domestics by the hour until after the Second World War. Jessie Street claims that she unsuccessfully tried to form a domestic workers’ union, which would have covered the company’s employees. At least one worker did not find the absence of a union cause for complaint. “I found Mrs Street . . . a very just and fair woman . . . you wouldn’t ask for anyone better,” Sue Ryan said.

After the birth of her fourth child in 1926, Jessie Street was elected president of the Feminist Club, with which she had been connected since her marriage. The club had its own premises. Linda Littlejohn, whose feminist interests included birth control, was also a member of the executive committee. In 1929 a thoroughly unpleasant financial wrangle took place. Jessie Street and another member had provided guarantees of a hundred pounds each against the club’s overdraft. On checking the records, she found an irregularity which she rectified without obtaining the approval of the committee. As well as correcting the anomaly, she made of a donation of twenty-five pounds, which placed the club account in credit. There now being no need for a guarantee, she cancelled it.

The surviving records of the Feminist Club begin in October 1929, when the dispute over the guarantee was already in progress. The tone of committee discussion recorded in the minutes suggests that there had been previous discord. One executive member was reported as saying, “Mrs Street had let the Club down badly in withdrawing her guarantee and promise
of £100, and in influencing another person to withdraw hers." The upshot was that Jessie Street and Linda Littlejohn resigned. A week after the Feminist Club committee reversed its decision to endorse her financial transaction, a meeting was held which inaugurated the United Associations, the leaders of which were Jessie Street and Linda Littlejohn. The United Associations was an amalgamation of the Women’s League, the New South Wales Women Voters’ Association, and the Women’s Service Club. The three had similar aims, and agreed to submerge their identities into one organization on 18 December 1929. They were probably in decline in the late twenties, which explains why they agreed to amalgamate. This was certainly true in the case of the Women’s League (formerly Women’s Liberal League) whose president since 1909, Laura Bogue Luffman, died in 1928. Jessie Street had hoped to include the Feminist Club, which, although suffering financial difficulties, had its own club rooms. This may have been the real reason for the disagreement with the club committee. She always implied that the formation of the United Associations followed her break with the National Council of Women, despite the nine-year gap between the two circumstances. Later in life she may have confused her resignation from the National Council with that from the Feminist Club; or, in her mind, the formation of the United Associations may have been a consequence of her resignation from the National Council.

In an unpublished book, Laura Bogue Luffman describes the work of women’s organizations in New South Wales which preceded the United Associations. In 1902, when the Commonwealth government extended franchise to women, Laura Luffman was working as a journalist in Sydney. Her assignment was to write about the women’s groups and what they were doing to take advantage of suffrage. Of the four groups she investigated, three were directly or indirectly connected with political parties, in marked contrast with the women’s movement of later decades. “One, headed by the lady who had been instrumental in gaining the vote for women, remained purely academic. It [the league] did not descend into the arena.” Next she visited a labor women’s organization “disguised under another name”: “Here I found the leader animated by genuine enthusiasm for humanity,
extremely well-informed and especially interested in all movements for the benefit of women and children.”

There were two Liberal Leagues. Laura Luffman did not like the leader of the break-away group, but was particularly impressed with the other leader, whom she referred to as “Mrs Ericson”. She used pseudonyms throughout, and “Mrs Ericson” was probably Hilma Molyneux Parkes, who founded the Women’s Liberal League of New South Wales in 1902. Laura Luffman succeeded to the leadership of the last-mentioned league after the founder’s death in 1909. From her account, the organization appeared to be the women’s arm of Alfred Deakin’s Liberal Party.

I... found myself established in an office, a telephone receiver on my table, a typist at my elbow... Outside the office, meetings were held in city and suburban branches, and organizing tours were made in the country... Sometimes on my arrival [in country towns] I heard the town crier furiously ringing his bell and proclaiming my arrival... Occasionally, a brass band preceded me to the Hall, playing lively tunes to draw the crowd.

Women’s response to gaining franchise was a disappointment to her.

Outside the League there were women who refused to vote at all, on the grounds that it was “not ladylike”. Inside, their energies were concentrated on the elections and they showed little interest in the promotion of good legislation, the improvement of social conditions, and the progress of the great women’s movement throughout the world.

The status of women did not improve following the First World War, according to Laura Luffman’s description of celebrations in Sydney to mark the visit of three ships of the Australian Navy.

Receptions, balls and garden parties were the order of the day, and an official banquet was held in the Town Hall, magnificently decorated and converted into a flower garden. While I, in company with other women, was graciously permitted to sit in the gallery, listen to the speeches, watch the Lords of Creation eat — and starve!

After the three women’s organizations, including the Women’s Liberal League, merged into one, the resultant United Associations adopted an emblem of a faggot of sticks with the
Jessie Street in the 1930s  (Photo: Sir Laurence Street)
names of the three on the sticks, which were bound together by a cord inscribed with the legend “Unity is Strength”. The motto was “For Freedom, Equality and Status and Opportunity”. Its objects, as approved in the constitution, were the achievement of equal status and equal pay for women, improvement of the legal status of mothers, promotion of an equal moral standard for men and women, endorsement of women candidates for public office, promotion of the welfare of children, study of social, economic, and political questions, and support for the League of Nations.

Although, like so many women’s groups, very much a middle-class organization (membership five shillings a year, plus service fee of sixteen shillings), the United Association pursued its aims of justice for nurses and married women teachers, child endowment, and humanitarian objectives not solely related to women’s issues more vigorously than older women’s groups. So vigorous were their representations that in at least one Commonwealth government department it was a standing joke to ask “Is it from Jessie or Bessie?” when letters were received from women’s organizations. The latter sobriquet referred to Bessie Rischbieth of the Australian Federation of Women Voters based in Western Australia.

In 1930, its first full year of operation, the United Associations organized regular women speakers for broadcasts over station 2BL, and a luncheon was held at David Jones’s restaurant to honour aviatrix Amy Johnson, who made the first solo flight by a woman from England to Australia. The 1931 general meeting approved the granting of financial as well as moral support to women candidates including for municipal elections. In May 1932 a full-time organizer, a woman teacher, was appointed at a salary of three guineas a week. In the same year, the practice was adopted of circulating all candidates at general elections with a questionnaire seeking their views on equal pay and other women’s issues. With other women’s groups, the United Associations campaigned for women’s nationality rights, which resulted in the Nationality Act of 1936. This legislation recognized the national status of women who married British subjects, and the status of British women who married aliens was clarified and improved; previously they legally acquired the nationality of their husbands.
“Status for women, indeed. I am not going to permit Jessie Street to do anything to my status.”

One of Smith’s Weekly’s “Smith’s Socialite” cartoons by Hallett
For some members, the United Associations was more of a social club than an organization dedicated to improving the status of women. One of the first matters the executive dealt with was the rights of members to use the club rooms for playing bridge. In 1931 the largest sub-committee was devoted to entertainments. "Social afternoons" were popular, and in 1936 Jessie Street held such a function at her home in Darling Point. For a subscription of half a crown, members and their guests could play tennis or bridge. Entertainment was provided for non-players, and gifts, jams, and produce were sold from stalls. Afternoon tea was included in the price. Serious intent more than balanced the social activities, and towards the end of the thirties the United Associations became heavily involved with equal pay. In 1937, a trade-union-sponsored Council of Action for Equal Pay was formed with the United Associations as one of its members. The activity intensified during the war.\textsuperscript{12}

When war broke out in 1939, the United Associations of Women (UAW) was the predominant women's group in New South Wales. In an article in the \textit{Australian Women's Weekly} early in 1940, the writer selected an Australian women's ministry. Her suggested portfolio distribution was: Dame Enid Lyons, wife of the recently deceased prime minister, as prime minister; second, UAW leader Linda Littlejohn as minister for external affairs; third, Jessie Street as minister for home affairs, because she was "specially interested in women's domestic problems. Keen organizer. Efficient budgeter. Legal background as wife of a Judge; brings judicial calm to committee affairs."\textsuperscript{13} The UAW reached its zenith of status and influence in 1943 when Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the United States President, visited Australia.

Jessie Street's first contact with Eleanor Roosevelt was in June 1943, when she wrote to the president's wife about the problem of the Australian wives and children of U.S. servicemen: "Apparently there is no provision made for the maintenance of Australian wives of American soldiers or their children, and neither has any consideration been given to what is to happen to these girls after the war is over." A gracious and pleasing reply was sent in August. Mrs Roosevelt wrote:

I do not believe you should be under any apprehension concerning
the admission into the United States of any Australian girls who happen to marry American soldiers. . . . I am pleased to be able to inform you that recent legislation passed by the Congress of the United States appears to make full provision for the maintenance of wives of American soldiers.

Jessie Street and the UAW were understandably pleased to have seemed to have resolved this problem so quickly and easily, but that was not the end of the matter. A year later, in October 1943, Jessie Street had cause to write to Prime Minister Curtin, "We have had reports made to us from time to time that the American authorities disclaim any responsibility for girls marrying American soldiers, and that the same authorities inform the girls that they have no claims for maintenance and neither will provision be made for them to enter America." She enclosed an American Red Cross document requiring parents and their daughter to sign away claims on the United States Army and charitable societies for assistance and transport to the United States. Jessie Street asked Curtin to make inquiries, as this was in "direct contradiction" to Mrs Roosevelt's letter.

Two weeks later the Australian Department of External Affairs wrote to the United States Embassy. Three weeks after that, Jessie Street wrote a "hurry up" note to the permanent head of the Prime Minister's Department. A week later, the third secretary at the United States Embassy replied to External Affairs. His name was Randolph A. Kidder, and his reply was a reflection of his name. The letter was vague and ungrammatical. A glaring error of syntax was underlined by an Australian official who added a sarcastic annotation, "Americanism apparently". More correspondence followed, but it was not until early 1944 that the matter was resolved satisfactorily. The Americans admitted that the policy as explained by Mrs Roosevelt a year and a half before was in fact the case.14

Mrs Roosevelt's visit to Australia in 1943 was the subject of another Australian/American bureaucratic tiff which involved Jessie Street. Once it was known that Mrs Roosevelt was coming to Australia, women's organizations began vying for the honour of hosting functions in honour of the distinguished visitor. Jessie Street bypassed normal channels and contacted the minister for
Jessie Street addresses the United Associations of Women (Photo: National Library of Australia)
external affairs, Dr Evatt. On Evatt's instructions the permanent head of the External Affairs Department, Colonel Hodgson, sent the following telex to the Department of Defence: DR EVATT IS VERY ANXIOUS THAT RESERVATION IS MADE IN ITINERARY FOR RECEPTION AT TOWN HALL SYDNEY BY THE UNITED WOMEN’S ASSOCIATION [sic] PRESIDENT OF WHICH IS MRS JESSIE STREET. Hodgson had sent the telex to the Department of Defence under the incorrect assumption that Australian authorities were responsible for Mrs Roosevelt’s itinerary. This had been the subject of a series of messages on previous days. Australian authorities disputed General MacArthur’s claim that he had direct orders from Washington charging him with Mrs Roosevelt’s reception, entertainment, safety and itinerary. From the tone of MacArthur’s messages, one would gather that the Australian government was a disobedient schoolboy.

Hodgson tried to carry out his minister’s instructions, and a reception was arranged, but the itinerary was changed. The reception was to be reduced in scale: Jessie Street obviously wasted little time in letting her displeasure be known. A week later Hodgson was sending messages about the same subject, this time to General Eichelberger, who was the member of MacArthur’s staff responsible for the visit: STRONGEST POSSIBLE REPRESENTATIONS HAVE BEEN MADE THAT ORIGINAL IDEA BE REINSTATED ESPECIALLY AS IT HAD BEEN APPROVED AND TENTATIVE ARRANGEMENTS MADE WITH LADY MAYORESS AND HEADS OF WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS CONCERNED. THESE ASSOCIATIONS IN SYDNEY ARE . . . MAIN ONES IN AUSTRALIA.  

Eichelberger’s reply was negative and arrogant, and the UAW reception never took place. There was no mention of such a reception in contemporary newspapers, which recorded every detail of the visit, and in her memoirs Jessie Street refers to meeting Mrs Roosevelt at a Government House reception. “She [Mrs Roosevelt] told me that the representations we made and the information we submitted had been of the greatest assistance.”

General Robert L. Eichelberger himself did not remember Mrs Roosevelt’s visit with much relish. His ghost-written
memoirs include a chapter on his experiences with Mrs Roosevelt during the war. He said the visit of the president’s wife was “one of the most hazardous assignments” of his career, and described the ridiculous lengths to which both General MacArthur and the Australian Government, notably Evatt, were prepared to go. Eichelberger and Hodgson were dispatched to Noumea by their respective masters, both charged with trying to persuade Mrs Roosevelt to leave her itinerary and arrangements to them. She displayed the type of common sense which was sadly lacking in the two camps whose representatives pressed their suit before her in Noumea. Mrs Roosevelt decided that she would spend the first few days in Canberra as guest of the Australian government, and then hand herself over to the United States forces for the remainder of her visit.17

Jessie Street was thwarted in her wish to hold a reception for Mrs Roosevelt, but her influence was such that she could ensure that her cause was pressed ahead of all the others. In the same year, 1943, she stood for Federal Parliament and organized the first Australian Women’s Charter Conference, both of which are dealt with in later and separate chapters. Also, many women working in wartime industries received substantial wage increases following the establishment of the Women’s Employment Board, a tribunal set up under national security regulations to expedite the entry of women into the work-force.

Many feminist goals were achieved during the war, and feminists had high expectations that these gains would be consolidated when the fighting ended. Activities of women’s organizations like the United Associations of Women reflected their hopes. In 1944, a monthly magazine, the Australian Women’s Digest, was launched, and the Charter movement expanded. However, the ideological and sectarian dissention which would divide the women’s movement after the war was already apparent. Those divisions were accentuated by Jessie Street, because she was a Labor Party candidate and because she became increasingly associated with leftist causes.
Notes

4. *Truth or Repose*, p. 64.
5. Racial Hygiene Association records, Q 613.906/R, Mitchell Library, Sydney. Correspondence with British Birth Control Association and Dr Ralph Worrall are in Jessie Street’s papers.
9. Material on the House Service Company is mainly drawn from a document in Jessie Street’s papers, “An Experiment that Succeeded”. It is a more complete account than is contained in *Truth or Repose*, and was probably written in the forties or fifties. Sue Ryan was interviewed by A. R. Cottle for his BA (Hons) thesis at Macquarie University, “Life Can Be Oh So Sweet, On the Sunny Side of the Street: A Study of the Rich of Woollahra during the Great Depression”. The thesis is in the National Library, MS 5383, and the accompanying tape recordings (including Mrs Ryan) TRC 491. Sue Ryan is incorrectly referred to as “A. Ryan” in the text of the thesis.
14. Marriage of Australian Women to Members of Visiting Allied Forces, Prime Minister’s Department, series A 1608 item D45/1/10, Australian Archives, Canberra.
15. Visit of Mrs Roosevelt, Department of Defence Coordination, series A 816, item 19/312/97, Australian Archives, Canberra.
Socialism and Russia

“For many years after I got a vote, I had no political affiliations but I generally voted conservative.” Jessie Street in a letter to British Labor Party backbencher Harold Wilson, 8 March 1952.

According to Jessie Street, her conversion to socialism occurred during the Depression. The scales fell from her eyes when she saw families being turned on to the street, and particularly when she realized that “the man who looked after the car” would be unable to find a job if the Streets economized by trimming him from their staff.

Her metamorphosis was not really so simple. Firstly, in her feminist and humanitarian work she became disillusioned with politicians who would not rectify obvious wrongs; secondly, the Depression brought home to her in a very personal way the division between rich and poor; thirdly, and most importantly, during a visit to the Soviet Union in 1938 she found a political system under which men and women were apparently equal. Her road to Damascus was the railway line from the Soviet border to Moscow, and the light was provided by the locomotive furnace which revealed that the engine driver was a woman. From then on socialism and feminism became inextricably entwined in her mind, and she never deviated from her chosen road, although it led to persecution and exile.

The road began in earnest in 1930 at the League of Nations library in Geneva. Forty-year-old Jessie Street had been ill and had visited Europe as part of her convalescence. It was her first overseas trip since returning to Australia in 1916 to marry. While
the Depression descended on Australia, she devised a cradle-to-grave “General Social Insurance Scheme” in Switzerland. The scheme was grandiose, like many of her other plans, such as trying to unite all Australian women in one movement or campaigning for a referendum to eliminate the discrimination against Aborigines. Her social insurance scheme aimed to provide everyone in New South Wales with food and shelter sufficient to prevent want and privation while preserving health. Other aims were to encourage home life, to banish the fear of poverty, sickness, and unemployment, and to relieve the financial position of the state “by putting social services on a contributory basis”.

She blithely admitted that the scheme could only be costed accurately by implementing it, then keeping careful records over several years. Other questions went begging; for instance, she proposed two categories of unemployment benefits — one for genuine unemployed and the other for unemployables — but failed to define unemployable. The scheme was open to criticism both from socialists, who could object to dividing the unemployed into categories, and from bureaucrats, who would find such a division unworkable. Overlooking these problems, she concluded grandly, “A General Social Insurance Scheme requires courage to launch, but it is necessary to dare greatly to achieve greatly.”

Seven years earlier the 1923 royal commission inquiring into national insurance had recommended a national insurance scheme paid for by compulsory employer and employee contributions covering sickness, invalidism, maternity, and superannuation, with a separate scheme for medical benefits. The Nationalist — Country Party government, led by S. M. Bruce and Dr Earle Page, introduced a National Insurance Bill incorporating some of the royal commission recommendations in 1927, but the legislation lapsed and the onset of the Depression prevented its revival.

Jessie Street's scheme was therefore not particularly new, but it was unusual for a prominent woman with a conservative background to take such an active interest in social welfare, as distinct from charity, and to recognize government responsibility for health and welfare. The social insurance scheme was stillborn, as
were her other Depression activities. A plan for rebuilding the Glebe in Sydney was rejected by the state government, which baulked at the estimated cost of ten million pounds. The same concept cost considerably more when implemented by the Whitlam Labor government, which acquired the Glebe lands from the Anglican church. However, she was able to get a hearing for her ideas, thanks to her name and social position, and her attempts to get her schemes realized provided valuable experience in lobbying politicians and officials.

She did not become publicly associated with the labour movement until 1939, but her inclination must have been apparent much earlier. Otherwise the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR would not have suggested that she and her nineteen-year-old daughter include a visit to the Soviet Union in their forthcoming European trip. The society, together with the Communist Party, had been growing since the mid-thirties as a result of the Spanish Civil War. The Society’s suggestion was taken up, although its offer to pay travel costs was not, and Jessie and Philippa Street visited the Soviet Union in 1938. As a result, whether by accident or design, the friendship with Russia movement recruited its most steadfast prominent recruit. She devoted a seventeen-page chapter of her autobiography to the Russian visit. “Since I became a suffragette while I was at school in England,” she wrote in Truth or Repose, “I had worked for equal rights, status, pay and opportunity for women, and at last I had found a country where these principles were observed. My mind was at rest on this subject during the rest of our stay in the U. S. S. R.”

The gruelling round of interviews with officials, visits to farms, factories, museums, embassies, and theatres was not totally without relief. Jessie Street’s apprehension about bathing naked in the Black Sea was justified when she and her daughter were subjected to male eyes as they returned from the water to their dressing-shed. She made light of the incident despite her embarrassment at the time.

Her new-found faith was not found wanting. On her return she gave public lectures about the Soviet Union and became a member (and was soon elected vice-president) of the Society for
Cultural Relations with the USSR. Many respectable middle-class folk had become Communists or Communist sympathizers during the Depression and the Spanish Civil War, but their activities were generally regarded with distrust and suspicion which turned to hostility and official censure when Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia signed a mutual non-aggression pact in August 1939, just before the start of the Second World War. This was the period of the “phony war” when Australia was far removed from the reality of war in Europe. The shaky coalition government led by Robert Menzies reacted by banning the Communist Party, and harassing Jehovah’s Witnesses and Australia Firsters who were seen to be interfering with the war effort. One side effect was that the Society for Cultural Relations lost many members — but not Jessie Street, whose conviction was built on firm ground.

She was a trusting soul throughout her life, rarely divining base motives in others and expecting others to divine the purity of her own intent. Similarly, she did not see herself as others saw her. Blinded by the justice of her cause, she did not perceive the anomaly of a daughter of the squattocracy and wife of a Supreme Court judge being immersed in left-wing politics. The combination was described as “rather unusual” in an official Labor Party publication, but at least one Trotskyite was less restrained. Certain bourgeois liberals loved to live capitalism in Australia while dreaming socialism in Russia, Guido Baracchi told Nettie Palmer. A month later he was moved to doggerel by the words of Jessie Street at a “Soviet-Friendship Congress”.

So! “Every cook must learn to run the state”.
Rants “gentle” Jessie (wife of Justice) Street
And dares quote Lenin, limelighting elate
In Congress, where such “friends of Russia”’ meet.
Could Lenin only meet her tête à tête,
He’d bring this piece of impudence to book
By calmly daring her to tempt her fate
And try it on her “own” exploited cook.

The front page of the letter is annotated (presumably by Nettie Palmer) “Isn’t G incredibly juvenile”. 
In June 1941 Hitler brought the mutual non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union to an end by attacking Russia. The dramatic switch from foe to friend meant that friendship with the former foe was now applauded. Friends of Russia in Australia were quick to react. A month after Hitler’s invasion, the Society for Cultural Relations set up a provisional committee under Jessie Street which joined with an existing committee of local Russians, and on 21 August the lord mayor of Sydney chaired a meeting that officially inaugurated the Russian Medical Aid and Comforts Committee (RMACC) “for the purpose of sending medical aid and supplies and comforts to the USSR”. Jessie Street was confirmed as chairman, and an impressive list of office bearers was added, including the premier, William McKell, an archbishop, a brace of bishops, and assorted knights, professors, and other notables.

Moved by the plight of the Soviet Union, Jessie Street worked tirelessly for the RMACC. She told a radio audience: “Just think of the millions of wounded lying on snow-covered battlefields, and of the unnumbered millions in the invaded areas of Russia who have been rendered homeless and have lost all their possessions. These people suffer incredible hardships because of the cold — nothing is as valuable to them as sheep skins.”

Compassion and the desire to help a gallant ally were quite sincere, but the older friends of Russia had another motive, as explained in the RMACC’s first report.

Since Russia’s entry into the war the people of Australia have been anxious to know more about life and conditions in the U.S.S.R. and we feel that we have made a substantial contribution to a united war effort by the way in which we have helped to break down the mountain of prejudice that had been built up between our people and the people of Soviet Russia.

Similar committees were set up in the other states, and an interstate conference was held in Canberra late in September 1941 which resolved to press the government for material help and assistance with the necessary approvals to export and procure needed supplies. Australia did not have a legation in the Soviet Union at that time, and Jessie Street as chairman of RMACC was the best channel of communication — she had direct contact with
Jessie Street examines fleeces for the “Sheepskins for Russia” campaign (Photo: Sydney Morning Herald)
Russia's Department for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) and with the equivalent medical aid organization in Britain, led by Clementine Churchill, wife of the prime minister. The conference in Canberra put its requests to the government, which considered them at the end of October, shortly after the Curtin government took office. The war cabinet agreed to supply surplus items of medical equipment at Commonwealth expense, approved public appeals, authorized the treasurer to spend money overseas on medical supplies not available in Australia (quinine from Java), and the Department of Commerce was told to report on sheepskins.

Knowing that Russians wanted drugs, hospital equipment, and ambulances, the RMACC had not waited for formal approval. The first consignment was dispatched by Soviet ship in September, and by the end of 1941 the organization was in full swing. The next consignment, sent in December, consisted of fourteen bales of processed sheepskins, three cases of rubber gloves, one case of hospital equipment, twenty-seven cases of ether, three cases of drugs, one case of “knitted comforts”, eleven cases of hospital dressings and clothing, two cases of papier mache hospital equipment, one case of hypodermic outfits, needles and syringes, three cases of sterilizers, £325 worth of cocaine, and £1,250 worth of quinine. Early in 1942, £10,000 was sent to the Soviet consul-general in San Francisco to buy an ambulance. By this time the RMACC had twenty-eight suburban and country branches in New South Wales, conducted appeals, button days, church services, and art exhibitions, and had enlisted the support of several trade unions.

The idea of using one of Australia’s most plentiful resources to warm and protect gallant Red Army soldiers was a masterstroke. “Sheepskins for Russia” soon became a slogan. Sheepskins were a tangibly Australian contribution which were still available when Australia itself was under threat and locally produced drugs and hospital equipment were needed uncomfortably close to home.

Jessie Street travelled the country organizing the purchase and processing of suitable fleeces. As this work was part of the war effort, she was permitted to travel interstate. She used the oppor-
tunity, denied to most, to promote her feminist interests, in particular by organizing a national women’s conference. When travelling, she tested fleeces from potential suppliers by soaking them in cold water in her hotel room bathtub to see if they were still pliable when they dried out. Even the most experienced hotel staff had difficulty containing their surprise when confronted with a bath full of fleece.

The sheepskins campaign was a success and a valuable part of the war effort, but it was not without problems. After the initial cabinet approval, Jessie Street approached the government again for permission to buy two thousand pounds worth of manufactured woollen goods. Her request was considered in December 1941 and supported by the Department of Defence Co-ordination, but vigorously opposed by the minister for supply and development, J.A. Beasley. His grounds were that although supplies of manufactured woollen goods were adequate for current demands, and the quantity sought was small, “it might be the forerunner of heavier demands which could become seriously embarrassing”.

At the 1940 federal election Beasley had been chief lieutenant in Canberra for former New South Wales premier Jack Lang. He was a clever man, but a virulent anti-Communist who was convinced Jessie Street was a dangerous woman. Either to thwart her, or fearing a potential shortage of woollen goods, Beasley persuaded cabinet to reject her request. His nickname, “Stabber Jack”, was most appropriate; this was the first of several attempts to thwart her endeavours by underhand means.

Jessie Street’s request was refused because, according to the official cabinet minute, Soviet authorities had not included such items in their shopping list; but later when the Russians did specially ask for woollen clothing their requests were ignored. Department of External Affairs files of 1943 show that Australian officials were told by two Soviet organizations, one being the Red Cross, that clothing was needed more than sheepskins, as the population in large areas of previously enemy-held territory were inadequately clad. After hearing for the first time that needs had changed, the Australian legation cabled the information to Canberra, but concluded, “it seems to us that it would
probably be best to continue to concentrate on sheepskins”.

No one cared. The Department of External Affairs conducted a desultory correspondence with the Australian Red Cross without any sense of urgency, but no one passed on the information to higher authorities who could have acted on it, and no one told Jessie Street whose compassion for the freezing Russians would have moved the Urals. The Soviet as well as the Australian bureaucracy was at fault. No hint of changed priorities appeared in the letters she received from VOKS. As a result, when the Australian government decided to give ten thousand pounds in Russian aid early in 1944, the money was spent entirely on sheepskins. Other more local problems emerged. The Victorian Sheepskins for Russian Sick and Wounded Fund asserted its independence, although continuing to use RMACC as a clearing house.

More damaging were accusations that money collected was not used for Russian medical aid. An Australian Workers’ Union official claimed that false tickets were being sold in a “Sheepskins for Russia” art union, and the money so collected was being used for pro-Soviet and Communist propaganda purposes. He later admitted in court that his allegations were based on one book of art union tickets found by accident, and the claims were made in an attempt to make political capital for his union against the Communists. The union official’s admissions, early in 1944, showed that hatred and suspicion of Russia and communism was only temporarily submerged, not buried.

Despite these minor setbacks, about half a million dressed sheepskins were sent to Russia, and the efforts of Jessie Street were directly or indirectly responsible for most of them. The RMACC itself dispatched almost 300,000 fleeces, 36 cases of drugs and 200 bales and cases of medical supplies. When disbanded in January 1946, its total receipts had been £184 11s 6d. Jessie Street was unhappy about the demise of the RMACC particularly as the decision was taken while she was overseas and at the behest of a vice-president, Dr Grahame Drew, whom she heartily detested. The feeling was mutual: when she was late for meetings, as she frequently was, Dr Drew used to assume the chair and was extremely reluctant to vacate in favour of its rightful occupant, even though he was aware of her
presence. Dr Drew ensured that the disbanding decision was irreversible by sending the remaining funds, amounting to £16,000, to the British Aid to Russia Committee, which arranged for a hospital at Minsk to benefit in the form of X-ray equipment and surgical instruments. During a later visit to the Soviet Union Jessie Street saw the commemorative plaque thanking the RMACC for its donation.

Jessie Street fully expected that "Sheepskins for Russia" would lead to her appointment as leader of Australia's first diplomatic mission to the Soviet Union. She had been pressing for a diplomatic exchange since her first Russian visit, and her efforts were rewarded after her friend Dr Evatt became external affairs minister in October 1941. She knew Evatt and his wife, Mary Alice, from meeting them at legal functions. In 1930 Evatt had been appointed a judge of the High Court of Australia, while Kenneth Street was a judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales. In 1941 she was trying to visit the Soviet Union to assess its wartime needs for herself. Hardly surprising, as the Nazis were advancing, her persistent efforts were in vain, but from the tone of her letters she was positive that if a visit could be arranged, accreditation as an official Australian government representative would be a matter of course. Her diplomatic aspirations, also in vain, may have been wishful thinking.

The first Soviet diplomats arrived in Australia in 1942. They were eagerly welcomed by the correspondent for the Soviet newsagency, Tass, who had preceded them, and by the friends of Russia with Jessie Street in the vanguard. The arrival of the Australian Mission to the Soviet Union early in 1943 completed the first major diplomatic exchange effected by Dr Evatt.

The Australian diplomats in Russia had to endure privation and frustration. As Moscow was under military threat, they were stationed with the bulk of the diplomatic corps about eight hundred kilometres east of Moscow on the Volga, at Kuibyshev. Living and working conditions were primitive, and gaining audience to ranking Soviet officials involved a round trip of several days to Moscow with no guarantee of success. Compared with fighting men they had little to complain about, but an early casualty was the leader of the legation, former Victorian attorney-
general and Speaker William Slater, who lasted only three months. Illness was the official explanation for his precipitate departure, but his appearance and demeanour left no doubt that the physical and mental strain had been too great. Slater was replaced by J. J. Maloney, member of the Legislative Council and president of the New South Wales Trades and Labour Council.

Jessie Street suspected that the Roman Catholic Church was behind her non-appointment; and so it was, but not in the way she thought. Dr Evatt feared Roman Catholic censure over the diplomatic exchange with the Soviet Union, and as his long-serving private secretary, Alan Dalziel, recalled in his memoirs, leading members of the Catholic hierarchy were approached in an attempt to secure the compliance if not the support of the Church. In their reply the bishops expressed the hope that the new relationship between the two countries would not be exploited for Communist propaganda. Dalziel’s book is far from faultless, but that recollection has a ring of truth, and in the circumstances Jessie Street would have been a most inappropriate choice as leader of the mission.

Meanwhile, the RMACC was supplying material aid to Russia and working closely with the other friendship-with-Russia organizations which carried out normal propaganda activities such as public lectures, social evenings, and, later, films. Pro-Soviet feeling was running so high during the war that queues stretched several blocks down George Street in Sydney waiting to see the more popular Russian films. Those active in the movement at the time maintain that there was a clear division of labour between propaganda work and medical aid. However, after the war, with need for medical aid diminishing, RMACC, the Friendship with Russia League, and the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR combined to form the Australian Russian Society. The Friendship with Russia League was called the New South Wales Aid Russia Committee early in the war, but the name was changed at the request of Jessie Street; she thought the repetition of the word Aid in the names of both organizations would cause confusion. The amalgamation was approved in September 1945 at a meeting chaired by Dr Drew.
In the new organization Jessie Street was invited to be a vice-president along with author Eleanor Dark and politicians E.J. Ward, Leslie Haylen, and Clive Evatt. Dr Drew was elected president, Rev. E.J. Davidson chairman, and the Bishop of Goulburn, Rt Rev. E.H. Burgmann, patron. If Dr Drew's intention was to reduce Jessie Street's role, his success was short-lived. In the next year at the society's first annual meeting she was welcomed home and elected president. Dr Drew resigned, ostensibly because of an injured knee. However, the society had more to worry about than internecine squabbles, because the end of the Second World War heralded the beginning of the cold war. Jessie Street wrote to her British counterparts in mid-1946: "It is uphill work doing anything to help Russia just now." But although public sympathy was falling, they were not being harassed.

Moves were afoot to set up a national body and Jessie Street and Jean Ferguson, one of the leading friends of Russia, undertook a national tour in May of 1947. Nevertheless an ambitious drive for new members and readers of the magazine *Russia and Us* was "not very successful". Ominous signs of serious trouble were evident by mid-1948. By the time Jessie Street left for overseas two years later, the society had been evicted from its rented premises, and an alarming proportion of its membership including several prominent Labor politicians resigned after the Labor Party in 1948 ruled that it was a Communist auxiliary.

The Society had successfully avoided Labor Party proscription since 1946 thanks to influential friends in room 32, the ultimate "smoke-filled room" in Trades Hall which housed the New South Wales branch of the Labor Party. Proscription meant that Labor Party members, including politicians, had to choose between the party and the society. Some of the active Communist members of the society were partly to blame for the resignation of another stalwart friend of Russia, Rev. E.J. Davidson, who resigned when a majority of the committee outvoted his suggestion that *Russia and Us* should include articles critical of the Soviet Union. This occurred in July 1948, although he agreed not to stand down until the next general meeting in September. He actually resigned before the September meeting, immediately
after receiving a society leaflet through the post with several from the Communist Party. Davidson, like some others, may have been looking for an excuse to dissociate himself, as not all friends of Russia had Jessie Street’s chain mail of conviction to withstand embarrassment. Shortly before Davidson’s resignation, several letters to the editor in the Sydney Morning Herald publicized the City Council’s refusal to let part of the Town Hall to the society for a function. The newspapers may not have been as biased as the friends of Russia believed, but there was no doubt about the bias of the letter-writers. One such letter, purportedly written by a former friend of Russia, gave a highly coloured history of the society’s development including the intelligence that the central committee of the Communist Party had decided “to liquidate” one friendship-with-Russia organization and instructed a “paid functionary . . . trained in a revolutionary school in Moscow” to approach Jessie Street to form another organization. This was one of four letters attacking the society published in the Sydney Morning Herald. Two letters, out of four sent, appeared in reply.

In the short term the society gained from the publicity. The 15 members who resigned were replaced by 18 new members, bringing the total to about 550, and donations totalled more than a hundred pounds which must have been welcome as shortly before a weekly radio broadcast was abandoned due to lack of funds. Subsequently the society felt the effects of being ostracized, and by the time Jessie Street left Australia in June 1950, supposedly only for six months but in fact for more than six years, membership dropped to about 300. Following eviction, new premises could not be found, so the office furniture which Jessie Street had donated was sold. Activities were curtailed considerably. Bishop Burgmann asked that his name be removed from the letterhead (this was interpreted as resignation), and the committee had to make a special appeal for support, as it was becoming increasingly difficult to publicise its functions.

Interest in the Society, which changed its name to the Australia-Soviet Friendship Society in 1953, did not revive until the following year when its activities were again well-publicized at the Petrov Royal Commission hearings. The change of name also indicated the formation of a national organization in the place of
Jessie Street on her arrival in Moscow from Warsaw, December 1950

Jessie Street in Moscow with Nicolae, Metropolitan of Moscow, December 1950
independent state bodies. In practical terms the change meant that officers of the New South Wales branch doubled as both state and national officials. After Jessie Street left Australia in 1950 she retained the position of president of the New South Wales branch of the Australian Russian Society. Rev. Edgar Collocott was chairman and Jean Ferguson was secretary. The same three were elected to the same positions in the national body formed in 1953.

The Petrov Affair was either the exposure of a Soviet spy-ring in Australia, which was endangering national security, or the chance defection of a Soviet diplomat which was exploited by the Menzies government and security forces for political gain. Whatever the real truth, Menzies' victory at the subsequent elections and the discrediting of opposition leader Dr Evatt are indisputable; but the prelude, course and aftermath of the Royal Commission into Espionage appointed in April 1954 remains one of the most controversial events of Australian politics. The many books and articles written on the Petrov Affair pay scant regard to Jessie Street. This is hardly surprising, as she was overseas while the commission conducted its protracted hearings, at which more questions were raised than answered. One question that remains unanswered is why the nation's most prominent friend of Russia was ignored by the commission.

At the end of 1953, with an election due in May of the next year, the indications of the 1953 Senate elections, a federal by-election, state elections in Victoria, and opinion polls showed that support in the nation was evenly divided between Labor and the Liberal-Country Party coalition. The anti-communist cacophony, so damaging to Labor, was muted. The Korean War was over, and the Menzies government could not make an issue of recognition of mainland China because Britain had established diplomatic relations with Peking in 1949 and wanted Australia to do likewise. Nevertheless, communism was a major issue in the 1954 federal election.

On 13 April, shortly before Parliament was due to rise for the election, Menzies told the House of Representatives that the Soviet Embassy's third secretary, Vladimir Petrov, had defected. Petrov, who supposedly headed the Soviet spy network in
Australia, brought with him material relating to Soviet espionage in Australia. A royal commission appointed to inquire into the allegations held its first hearing in Canberra on 17 May, less than two weeks before the 1954 election. Public interest in the Petrov affair was heightened by the dramatic rescue of Mrs Petrov at Darwin airport while she was being escorted back to the Soviet Union.

In public statements during the election campaign, Menzies did not mention the affair, but members of his ministry, especially the deputy prime minister and Country Party leader, Arthur Fadden, were not so constrained. With Mrs Petrov's rescue and the initial royal commission hearings, the affair dominated the press before and during the election campaign. The result was that the Menzies government retained power, although with its majority in the House of Representatives reduced from fifteen to seven. Evatt's unrealistic election promises and the resurrection of the Communist issue helped to prevent Labor from gaining the few thousand votes it needed in a handful of crucial electorates. Evatt became more directly involved in the Petrov Affair after the 1954 election.

On 15 July 1954 three members of Evatt's ministerial staff were named in connection with "Document J", which senior counsel assisting the commission, W. J. V. (later Sir Victor) Windeyer, had earlier described as a "farrago of facts, falsity, and filth". The thirty-seven-page document was part of the material allegedly supplied by Petrov and written by Australian Communist journalist Rupert Lockwood. Although much quoted, the manuscript was not, and has not been, made public, because in the commission's view a further sixty people would be "smeared" with guilt by association, presumably because Document J names them as having had contact with Soviet officials. Jessie Street was almost certainly among the sixty not publicly named. Lockwood maintained that although he was responsible for much of Document J, portions had been altered or added. It was said to contain information on Japanese and American influence in Australia, and included a section on local politics.

Evatt appeared before the commission on behalf of his staff
members, but later the commission withdrew Evatt’s leave to appear on the ground of conflict between his roles as a politician and an advocate. He ignored his duties as leader of the opposition while the Petrov Affair occupied his mind, which caused dissension in the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party. This contributed to the split in the Labor Party in 1955 which preceded the formation of the splinter Democratic Labor Party and was one of the main reasons for Labor’s failure to win a federal election until 1972.

As a leading friend of Russia and peace worker, Jessie Street knew most Soviet diplomats in Australia. She was among several prominent and respectable members of the Left who were not called to give evidence, notably a daughter of the president of the Arbitration Court, Judge Beeby, and several clerics. She actually wrote and offered to return to Australia to give evidence, but her offer was ignored, although the commission claimed that it responded to all offers of assistance. Jessie Street was the only Australian specially taken by the Russians to attend Stalin’s funeral the previous year; she was the national president of the Australian Russian Society and inaugural president of the New South Wales Peace Council; she travelled behind the Iron Curtain almost at will (one trip to Russia was more than enough for most witnesses); she was a regular visitor to the Soviet Embassy in Canberra, a regular correspondent with VOKS in Moscow, and personally known to the people’s commissar for foreign relations, V. Molotov — surely such a person would be worth questioning about, in the words of the royal commission’s terms of reference, “communication of information or documents and generally the facts relating to and the circumstances attending any such espionage or any such communication of information or documents”.

The overlooking of Jessie Street and others is easy to explain by accepting the Petrov Affair as a political exercise initiated by the Menzies government or the security forces to sabotage Labor’s electoral chances. Such well-connected people had credibility in the public eye, and this would damage the carefully contrived portrait of espionage and Communist influence so damaging to the Labor Party. While not dismissing that argument
completely, another probability exists for Jessie Street’s exclusion. The chairman of the royal commission, Mr Justice Owen, was the senior puisne judge of the New South Wales Supreme Court, so the chief justice, Kenneth Street, must have agreed to release Owen from his normal duties. This raises two possibilities. Was the exclusion of the chief justice’s wife from the proceedings a condition of Owen’s release, or was there an understanding to that effect between Street and Owen? Kenneth Street was a figure of such probity that it is hard to imagine anyone even approaching him with such a proposition. Attacks on his wife were a continuing embarrassment after she left Australia in 1950, particularly allegations by the minister for immigration, Harold Holt, of misrepresentation in obtaining a passport. The most likely explanation is that the members and staff of the royal commission agreed to overlook Jessie Street and to suppress her name to protect Kenneth Street from further embarrassment. For whatever reasons, the gambit was not totally successful. Windeyer, QC, referred to a person not called because the person was not in Australia, which may have been her; and Dr Evatt’s private secretary, Alan Dalziel, who was named in Document J, is believed to have been about to mention her name in evidence when he was stopped and told to write it down, so the name would not become public. But Jessie Street wrote to one prospective witness, Jean Ferguson, a trusted friend, asking her to mention her name whenever possible. Jean Ferguson had been a member of the Communist Party since 1940 and had been an unpaid worker in the friendship with Russia movement, serving variously as secretary and executive member of the different organizations. According to evidence before the commission, she was code-named “Raphael” by the MVD (Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs). The transcript of her evidence shows that the commission were at pains not to swallow the proffered bait. Asked about a particular Soviet diplomat, she replied that she had seen him six or eight times.

Q — Were those occasions in Sydney?
A — He spoke to the Society [Australia-Soviet Friendship] on two November the Seventh celebrations. I saw him once or twice in Sydney, and I had dinner at his house with Mrs Jessie Street in Canberra one night.
Jessie Street toasts the Soviet Union at a National Day reception at the Soviet Embassy, Canberra, on 7 November 1962 (Photo: Dwver.)
Q — Is it perhaps a fair statement to say that your acquaintance with all these Soviet officials and diplomats . . .

Shortly thereafter her questioner tried to establish a link between the Communist Party and work with the friendship with Russia movement. She conceded readily that she was a party member and had worked for the movement.

Q — That was your task as a Communist member, was it?
A — Well, I just went into it, as a matter of fact. I think, as far as I can remember, Mrs Jessie Street asked me to go and work . . .

Q — But you regarded that as your task for the Communist Party — carrying out that work?
A — Not carrying out the work of the Communist Party. I was merely carrying on the work of . . .

Q — Carrying on the work of what?
A — Of Australia-Soviet friendship.

Jessie Street followed the commission hearings as closely as she could from England. Before the hearings began she wrote an open letter to members of the Friendship Society noting that the timing of Petrov’s “decision to turn coat [was] a piece of singular good fortune for the Menzies Government”, and warned that people named would have little chance of protecting their rights and that members of the society might be “framed”. Later she wrote to a number of labour leaders accusing Menzies of introducing legislation to prevent Rupert Lockwood taking libel action, a common charge at the time. In the copy of the letter sent to the deputy opposition leader Arthur Calwell, she added a sympathetic postscript: “I know that you are mentioned in the Document and this must be hurtful to you but it is no worse than the things that have been said about me and I have survived.”

The Australia-Soviet Friendship Society survived and prospered. Notoriety had a different effect from that in 1948, when adverse publicity caused a drop in membership. After the Petrov affair, membership rose to former levels. Funds had been swelled from unusual sources. Dr Michael Bialoguski, the undercover agent who induced Petrov to defect, had been a member of the society. He paid his subscriptions regularly and
contributed generously to the periodic fund drives for which he was recompensed by Australian Security.

After Jessie Street returned to Australia in December 1956, about a hundred people attended an Australia-Soviet Friendship Society function early in the new year to welcome her home. She remained president until she died in 1970. By then the society had been renamed the Australia-USSR Society. She was indeed matriarch of the friends of Russia and her influence lived on after her death. She left ten thousand dollars to the society, the only major non-family beneficiary in her will.

Notes

1. *Truth or Repose*, p. 113.
2. Ibid, p. 146.
4. Correspondence between Nettie Palmer and Guido Baracchi, Palmer papers, MS 1174, National Library, Canberra.
5. "Sheepskins for Russia" material is drawn from Jessie Street's papers in the National Library and Australian Archives, Canberra External Affairs, Aid to Russia Patriotic Appeals, series A 989, item 43/845/7/2 and War Cabinet Agendum no. 399 of 1941, Defence Co-ordination, Russian Medical Aid and Comforts Committee.
8. Transcripts, Royal Commission on Espionage hearing, 15 February 1955.
9. The records of the friendship with Russia movement since the war are in the National Library, catalogued under "Australia-USSR Society", MS 3084.
Equal Pay

Equal pay for equal work is as basic to feminism as womanhood suffrage. Yet while Australian women gained the vote in 1902, the principle of equal pay was not recognized officially for more than seven decades. Until the Second World War, Mr Justice Higgins' judgement in the Harvester Case of 1907 dominated the thinking of wage-fixing tribunals in relation to women's wages. Higgins established the idea that the minimum wage should be adequate to provide for a man, his wife, and three children. As a result, a man was adjudged to be the family breadwinner, and women's wages were fixed at 54 per cent of the male rate. Until the war effort required women to work in place of men, equal pay was far from the minds of government, wage fixers, and trade unions.

This indifference stirred hostility among feminists and a small group within the trade union movement concerned with wage justice for women. As the nation slowly recovered from the Depression of the thirties, working women and their more affluent sisters coalesced. The latter included Jessie Street. A common front was necessary in response to an actual reduction in women's wages. In May 1936, the New South Wales Industrial Commission reduced the female basic wage by 1s 6d to £1 15s 6d a week.

In 1937, a coalition of organizations committed to equal pay formed the New South Wales Council of Action for Equal Pay. The joint presidents were Muriel Heagney and George Weir. Muriel Heagney's father had been the first paid official of the
Victorian branch of the Labor Party, and she spent a lifetime in the labour movement. She had been actively involved in the cause of equal pay since 1918, and published a booklet, *Are Women Taking Men’s Jobs*, in 1936. At this time she was an official in the Federated Clerks’ Union.

After the formation of the equal pay council, Muriel Heagney and George Weir wrote to the prime minister, Joseph Lyons. Their letter acknowledged the existence of different views on the best method of implementing equal pay, but called for progressive achievement of their goal “within a reasonable period”. In the same year, the Federated Association of Australian Housewives held a national conference. One of the resolutions urged the government to adopt a policy of equal pay for women, and the association’s resolve was communicated to the prime minister.

Jessie Street was president of the United Associations of Women in 1937. Her organization joined the equal pay council and made separate representations to the government. She urged the prime minister to include the topic of equal pay in the agenda for the forthcoming Premiers’ Conference. In her letter she warned that the existence of a “large class of cheap labour”, meaning women, was an evil which threatened the standard of living of all male workers. She consistently developed this argument, and when the government did act to improve women’s wages in 1942, the threat of women taking men’s jobs was crucial to government thinking.

In 1937, when the prime minister received several representations about equal pay, the government did not apparently question the upsurge of interest in this subject, but did ask the Attorney-General’s Department for an opinion. The department advised that the Commonwealth government, as an employer, paid its women workers 77 per cent of the male rate, but opined that “questions relating to the conditions of women should be left for the determination of the Tribunals set up by the law”. Those were the words used in a letter to Muriel Heagney early in 1940, based on the attorney-general’s opinion. The file copy of that letter is annotated, “Sec says no action”; presumably “Sec” was the secretary (permanent head) of the Prime Minister’s
Department. No action was the Commonwealth government’s byword, and the attorney-general’s opinion stamped the official attitude until after Labor formed a government in 1941.¹

Lack of action by the government was not reflected in the equal pay movement, but the activity was not always in concert. The coalition of trade union women and feminists was an uneasy alliance. The trade unionists did not regard themselves as feminists. In their parlance, a feminist was a member of a middle-class women’s organization. The two groups — trade unionists and feminists — had different views on the best method of implementing equal pay. The unionists believed in an all-or-nothing approach, whereas the feminists favoured gradual achievement of their common goal. Different class attitudes lay behind these divergent views. The working-class unionists saw equal pay for equal work as a principle which was more important than the ability of employers to meet their demands. The feminists, who were mostly from middle-class backgrounds, adopted a more pragmatic attitude which took into account the likely acceptance of their proposals by governments and wage fixers. Hence, one of their considerations was the capacity of industry to meet the inevitable added cost of equal pay.

Jessie Street outlined the gradualist approach in the Sydney Truth on 21 July 1935, and her ideas were included in a United Associations of Women pamphlet entitled, How to Achieve Equal Pay, Incorporating a Five Year Plan for Equal Pay. The plan advocated an immediate increase of women’s wages from 54 per cent to 60 per cent of the male rate, followed by increments of 2 per cent every three months until equal pay was reached at the end of five years.² The pamphlet argued that industry’s capacity to pay was a limiting factor on the immediate introduction of equal pay. Many businesses which had “all been laboriously built up on the present wage basis” would have to close if equal pay was granted at once. The feminists seemed oblivious to the fact that their arguments revealed their middle-class preconceptions just as clearly as their day-time meetings which precluded attendance for the majority of working women.³ The two groups within the equal pay council co-existed, despite their divergent views, until the annual meeting in September 1939. At that
meeting the gradualist approach was soundly rejected, and as a result the United Associations resigned from the council. Having failed to get its view accepted, the UAW in effect took its bat and ball and went home. Reconciliation attempts were to no avail, not least because of personal antagonism between Jessie Street and Muriel Heagney. In November 1939 the president of the Feminist Club, P. A. Cameron, tried to arrange a “round table conference” in an attempt to heal the breach. Uncompromisingly, Muriel Heagney replied that she would not participate if Jessie Street was present.

It always seems so strange to me that nearly all Australian organizations always work up much more enthusiasm in opposing movements than in working with them, and after a period of apparent unanimity in the work of the council we are suffering from this opposition from a minority just at the moment when all our energies should be devoted to preventing the exploitation of women who are replacing men for military purposes.

Although its intentions had been apparent since the annual meeting in September, the UAW formally tendered its resignation late in November. The final straws were the council’s lack of response to a challenge to a public debate, and an article by a council committee member in a Labor paper accusing United Associations members of bowing to the dictates of their “bourgeois husbands”. The resignation letter said: “The United Associations believes that the cause of equal pay could best be served by the United Associations and the Council of Action for Equal Pay working independently, until such time as there is a prospect of the two bodies working together in friendly cooperation.”

The rift was probably irreparable following the resignation, but whatever hopes remained were dashed a year later when the feminists, led by Jessie Street and a barrister, Nerida Cohen, took the equal pay battle to the Australian principal wage-fixing authority, the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. This action was supported by about twenty representative women’s organizations, including each state chapter of the National Council of Women, Labor Women of South Australia, and the Women’s Educational Circle of the United Australia Party. The aim of this
new coalition was to seek leave to intervene in the Basic Wage Case of 1940 to put a case for the granting of equal pay. This move was typical of Jessie Street’s general approach. Having failed to impress her views on the equal pay council, she left that group and struck out on her own, gathering behind her whatever support she could muster. She behaved the same way when she encountered opposition in the National Council of Women. She resigned, and then established the United Associations.

The equal pay council had no knowledge of the feminists’ intention to intervene in the Basic Wage Case until a few days before their scheduled appearance before the Arbitration Court on 21 November 1940. No doubt the council was not informed deliberately. Muriel Heagney heard of the move when the president of the Feminist Club, telephoned her in the mistaken belief that she was privy to all details of the legal challenge. She immediately contacted the secretary and advocate of the Australasian Council of Trade Unions, C. Crofts, by telephone and telegram, and enlisted the support of the president of the Labor Council of New South Wales, John Hughes, who was a colleague from the Clerks’ Union. In her report to the 19 November equal pay council meeting, she said that she and Hughes had telephoned Crofts, making “perfectly clear to the ACTU representative that Miss Cohen and Mrs Street were wilfully and definitely carrying on a campaign against equal pay after having debated their policy with representatives of the Trade Unions, the Public Service Association and the Teachers Federation who unanimously opposed the STREET-COHEN POLICY” (her capitals).  

The “Street-Cohen policy” was not opposed to equal pay, but merely opposed to the equal pay council’s policy on the best method of implementation. However, Heagney and Hughes persuaded Crofts to oppose the feminists’ intervention, but the court found itself unable to entertain Nerida Cohen’s application for other reasons. None of the seventy odd unions seeking an increase in the Basic Wage had made any reference to women’s wages in their applications.

Crofts told the court that a special claim on behalf of women was intended later, which may have been true but sounded rather
lame. Trying another tack, Nerida Cohen sought leave to intervene in the public interest, but the court held that only the Commonwealth attorney-general could so do. Particularly relevant were the remarks of Chief Judge Beeby, who indicated the court’s attitude to equal pay. Even in the most favourable circumstances, said Beeby, he did not think that the court in the current economic position would make a fundamental change involving complete economic reorganization.5

“Court Bars Women in Wage Case” announced the Sydney Daily Telegraph on the day after the hearing, and most other daily newspapers told the same story, albeit with more restraint. Capitalizing on the publicity, Jessie Street and Nerida Cohen approached the Melbourne Trades Hall and convinced the appropriate officials to call a meeting of all Melbourne unions with women members for the following week, the last of November. Both women addressed the meeting, at which more than thirty unions were represented, ranging from agricultural implement makers and cigar makers to felt hat trimmers and theatrical employees. The meeting called on the ACTU to pursue equal pay with vigour. This resolution followed Jessie Street’s address, during which she spoke on the same theme as that in her letter to the prime minister three years earlier. To protect men against undercutting and women against exploitation, payment for work should be addressed on its value, and not according to the sex of the worker, she said.

In Sydney meanwhile, Muriel Heagney used the Street-Cohen intervention to consolidate and strengthen her position. On writing to Cameron of the Feminist Club, she described Jessie Street’s methods as “subtle and dangerous . . . which can only militate against the action taken by the workers . . . it is impossible to overlook or under-estimate the damage that has been done to the equal pay movement at present by Mrs Street, Miss Cohen and the United Associations of Women.”

The equal pay council, and Muriel Heagney in particular, obviously felt threatened, and appealed for support to the rest of the labour movement. The unions, which had shown indifference in the past, were moved to protect a workers’ organization under threat. The council sought and got, for the first time,
special recognition from the ACTU and the New South Wales Labor Council. Early in 1941, Crofts wrote to the state trades and labor councils supporting the equal pay council and warning the state bodies to beware of “organizations of women claiming to represent the interests of female unionists”.

In addition, the ACTU Emergency Committee called a conference of federal unions with women members for April 1941. Muriel Heagney was a Clerks’ Union delegate to that conference. She continued to report on Jessie Street’s activities in relation to equal pay at each equal pay council executive meeting. The council minutes, which she wrote, were no dispassionate record of the decisions taken. They were personalized and coloured accounts of the meetings, which are as revealing of the author as of the meetings she was recording. According to the minutes of an executive meeting on 19 August 1941: “Miss Heagney stated that Mrs Street as president of the United Associations of Women was again active in attempting to sabotage the work and policy of the Council of Action of Equal Pay.”

What exerted more influence on the ACTU — Jessie Street’s spectacular failure before the Arbitration Court or Muriel Heagney’s persistent agitation? Probably a combination of both, but the Melbourne Herald described the April conference as being a consequence of the feminists’ court challenge; in other words, the Herald had no doubt in attributing the existence of the conference to the work of Jessie Street and Nerida Cohen. The twenty-four unions represented at the April conference urged the ACTU to endorse the principle of equal pay and called on the executive to set up a committee of six to keep the matter under review. The ACTU Congress of June 1941 unanimously adopted the April conference recommendations, and Muriel Heagney was selected as a member of the committee of six.

Thereafter events moved with considerable speed. The agitation for equal pay, especially at ACTU level, alerted unions to the dangers of cheap female labour, and union committees did not hesitate to put pressure on the new Labor government to protect their male members from the encroachment of women. These unions were not concerned about the rights of women to
Jessie Street at her desk in Greenoaks Avenue, Darling Point (Photo: *Sydney Morning Herald*)
receive equal remuneration for equal work. The Commonwealth Council of Amalgamated Engineering Unions told the new prime minister, John Curtin: “To allow for lower rates of pay will mean that the wage standards of men at present serving in the Forces will be considerably lowered.” According to the federal and state Public Service Defence Council, steps were necessary to ensure that “the growing use of cheap labour would not result in the permanent unemployment of the nation’s natural breadwinners”. Other correspondents drew the prime minister’s attention to the equal-pay plank in the Labor Party’s platform, and to an opinion poll published in the press which indicated 60 per cent support for equal pay.

Jessie Street knew perfectly well that there was little support for the principle of equal pay among union leaders, and her approach was predicated accordingly. She had warned consistently since 1935 that low women’s wages represented a threat to men’s jobs. That the government took cognisance of such views is clear from a letter to Jessie Street from the minister for war organization of industry, John Dedman, in January 1942: “The proposed general increase of the use of women in . . . industries [normally restricted to men] is a war measure only, and is to apply only where sufficient men cannot be secured and until such time as they again become available.”

After Labor formed a government in October 1941, the trade union movement adopted new tactics, and the government was forced to act, otherwise events would have overtaken its plans. In February 1942 the Commonwealth attorney-general intervened in an Arbitration Court hearing of an equal pay application by the rubber and tanning industries. The attorney-general sought an adjournment to permit the Commonwealth to undertake a national examination of women in industry. The major result of that examination was the establishment of the Women’s Employment Board, which was to set wage rates for women working in wartime industries.

The government was in a difficult position in relation to women’s wages. The unions wanted equal pay to protect their male members, but women were replacing men too quickly for the backlogged wage-fixing tribunals. The government also
wanted wage rates established for women in wartime industries; firstly to free more men for the services, and secondly to appease the unions. The problem was that any increase in wage or imposition or regulations would cause protest from employers at a time when the government did not have a Senate majority.

Predictably, the chambers of manufactures and commerce protested when they heard that the government, in consultation with the ACTU, had decided to establish a Women’s Employment Board under national security regulations. The chambers complained that the board would interfere with and overlap the jurisdiction of existing wage-fixing tribunals, but their real fear was that the board would increase women’s wages. Their howls of protest became roars of rage when the government announced that the so-called employer representative on the board (the other members were an employee representative and an independent chairman) was a trade union official. She had been appointed at the bidding of the minister of labour, E. J. Ward, out of what must have been a devilish sense of mischief. Ward’s outrageous choice tickled even a former prime minister, Robert Menzies, who described it as “a piece of impudence rising so high as to become magnificent.”

Explaining the reasons for the board’s existence, Curtin said that unless additional machinery was established, the estimated additional requirement of sixty-four thousand women for various war industries could not be met.

The government believed that women who entered industry should be adequately protected while the rights of male employees were also preserved. He went on to give a telling example concerning a hundred women who had been trained as telegraphists: “Naturally telegraphists who are being replaced by women want an assurance that when they come back they will not be excluded from their old jobs because it was discovered, while they were away fighting, that women could be got to do their work more cheaply.”

Despite the prime minister’s explanations, the board had to face challenge and disallowance after its establishment as a wartime tribunal under national security regulations promulgated on 25 March 1942. Its work was interrupted by a High Court
Muriel Heagney (Photo: State Library of Victoria)
challenge to its constitutional validity and by a successful motion in the Senate, where the views of industrialists and manufacturers held sway, disallowing the regulation. The opposition had a majority in the Senate until the Labor landslide at the 1943 election. The government met the objections with revised regulations, and the board was able to continue its work.

Under the chairmanship of Judge Foster, the board adjudicated on the wages of more than seventy thousand women, who represented about 10 per cent of the women in the work force. Its determinations increased the wages of women affected by its decisions to between 75 per cent and 100 per cent of men's wages; the average was about 90 per cent. Late in 1944 the government brought the work of the board to a halt; then a regulation of August 1945 fixed the wages of women in vital industries at not less than 75 per cent of the male rate. This was reinforced in the Basic Wage Inquiry of 1949 and 1950 which set the rate for all women workers at 75 per cent of men's wages. The equal pay movement wanted the board to remain in existence, but the government considered there was no further need for the board once the rapid expansion of wartime industries was over.

Half a loaf is better than no loaf at all, and 75 per cent of men's wages was better than 54 per cent; but the next step to full equal pay did not come about until thirty years after the war. Jessie Street did not live to see the principle of equal pay fully accepted by the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Court in 1975; nor did Muriel Heagney, but the Whitlam Labor government foreshadowed the implementation of equal pay before she died in 1974.

Apart from a passionate belief in equal pay, the two women had little in common. At different times they had both been unsuccessful Labor candidates and both devoted their considerable energies to helping the Soviet Union, but there the similarities ended. They could never have worked happily together under the same yoke. Personality differences aside, they each had a totally different concept of how equal pay should be achieved — all at once or gradually over five years — but that was as sounding brass to the underlying causes of the rift. Suckled and weaned in the labour movement, Muriel Heagney naturally saw equal pay in

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terms of the continuing worker-led struggle for wage justice. If feminists wanted to lend their support and back the unions, well and good. Therein lay the root of the schism.

Jessie Street strongly believed that feminist aims should be achieved by an independent feminist movement free of outside pressure. Like-minded bodies, such as trade unions, could be gathered in, but united women’s organizations should be the spearhead. Her rationale was that a trade union-led equal pay group would be beholden to its male-dominated leadership, and therefore could be bound to policies inimical to feminist objectives. Jessie Street completely overlooked that working women did not have the resources to maintain a secretariat, for travel and accommodation, and to meet all other expenses of lobbying and conducting campaigns. Even had the equal pay council wanted to work outside the trade union movement, it could not have afforded to do so.

The irony was that divided they stood, but united they would probably have stood for very little. The very discord within the equal pay movement promoted their cause. Jessie Street made a spectacular opening by confronting the Arbitration Court, and the unions responded in two ways: by reacting to the threat of cheap female labour and by officially recognizing the equal pay lobby within its own ranks. As a result, when a government at war needed more women in the work-force, the unions impressed on the decision-makers the need for an improvement in women’s wages. It is extremely unlikely that Muriel Heagney or Jessie Street could have planned a more effective strategy if they had been working together.

Notes
1. Equal Pay for Men and Women, Prime Minister’s Department, series A 461, item Q351/1/1, part 1, Australian Archives, Canberra.
2. Truth, Sydney, 21 July 1935. In Truth or Repose (p. 207), she referred to a two-year plan, which may have been UAW policy at one time, but not immediately before and during the war.
3. Muriel Heagney papers, MS 9106, boxes 1169 (a) and (c), La Trobe Library, Melbourne.
4. CAEP minutes, 1940/42. Heagney papers, box 1166/1.
5. Strenuous efforts to locate a transcript of the 1940 Basic Wage Case have been in vain. Neither the Industrial Registrar nor Australian Archives can find a copy. The account of the hearing is based on press reports.
6. Prime Minister's Department file, series A461, item Q351/1/1, part 1, Australian Archives, Canberra.
"After watching the men in high places closely in Canberra, I came to the same conclusion about mankind as the author of the book of Ecclesiastes, as the Greek tragedians, as Shakespeare, and many others — namely, that men suffered from a fatal flaw in their being, which stood between them and what they wanted to achieve."

Manning Clark, Boyer Lectures, 1976

Between Jessie Street and political office lay two fatal flaws: she refused to countenance compromise; she tried to achieve too much too quickly. The former was the more deadly. There can be no doubt she wanted to become a member of the national parliament. At her first attempt, in 1943, she surprised everyone herself included, by almost winning a blue-ribbon non-Labor seat. Confident of victory, she contested the same seat in 1946. She retained much the same vote as three years earlier, but victory eluded her again.

The development of her thinking to a stage where she was prepared to seek parliamentary office is not hard to follow. In 1934 she wrote to Western Australian feminist leader Bessie Rischbieth: "The more work I do in connection with Feminism, the more I am convinced that it is only by organizing women that we will get anything done. The vote is respected much more than justice and liberty." A decade later her thinking had progressed to:

As things are, when we have done all the work possible outside Parliament we have to depend on persuading someone inside of the urgency of our claims before anything is done. If we had members of
Parliament who are informed, experienced and convinced about women’s aspirations and aims, we would have more chance of getting the reforms we ask for. Most people, when they enter Parliament, are interested in particular phases of public life and those are the objects they work for. It stands to reason that the same holds good for the promotion of women’s interests.

To put those ideas into practice she joined the Darlinghurst branch of the ALP in 1939 and quickly became involved in committee work relating to issues such as health and education. The following year she contributed an article, ‘What Labor Has Done for Women’, to the major ALP publication *Fifty Years of Labor*, which marked the party’s golden jubilee. She also campaigned on behalf of the party in state elections and by-elections, sometimes travelling to provincial cities and towns. As she explained in her own policy speech for the 1943 federal election, her enthusiasm was more than active support for a new cause:

> For many years I was a genuine independent. I believed all parties were anxious to eradicate poverty, disease and crime and war — that if constructive suggestions were made to any party, they would gladly put them into effect. For years I worked with others at various schemes for the improvement of social conditions. The conservative[s]... were in power most of the time, and in spite of receiving much praise and encouragement, nothing was done. Gradually I woke up to the fact that, though there were many earnest, sincere people in the conservative parties, the powers which controlled them were not interested in social improvement, eliminating poverty, slums, malnutrition, unemployment etc. All statements by them on these subjects were only windowdressing which deceived not only the public but many of their own followers. The controllers of the party were interested in, and the *only* things they were interested in, were profits and the opportunity for making profits. If profits could not be made, they were completely indifferent. They had rejected God entirely and worshipped mammon unashamedly and unreservedly.

During the 1941 state campaign she spent two weeks working with campaign organizer J. S. Seiffert in the Monaro electorate. In *Truth or Repose* she recalled organizing a meeting in one town and having to find a substitute speaker when the candidate was forced to pull out. A suitable local identity was rounded up, but unfortunately his redoubtable abilities as a speaker were more
than matched by a fondness for liquor. Extensive arrangements were made to keep him sober during the day of the meeting. These efforts extended to securing the self-sacrificing cooperation of the local publicans during the day of the evening meeting. But that was not enough, as Jessie Street found out.

I met Harry after breakfast on the morning of the great day and reminded him of his promise [to stay sober] which he renewed. I kept him busy doing different jobs. Towards late afternoon, every now and again he would be missing and I would take a walk round and would see someone gesticulating to me outside a bar and would hurry over and put my head round the door. Sure enough there he would be. "Just distributing a few leaflets, Mrs Street", he would say, and I would have to invent something for him to do and drop hints about his promise.

The experience in the 1941 state campaign attracted her to contest pre-selection for the 1943 federal election in the electorate of Eden-Monaro, which encompassed the New South Wales seat of Monaro. In a typed document headed "My Claims for Selection", presumably prepared for addresses to local Labor Party branches, she said she was convinced the seat could be won for Labor. "I made up my mind that, if I did present myself for selection, it would be for the Eden-Monaro electorate." Jessie Street was one of several contestants, including a local publican and the Canberra journalist Allan Fraser, who won pre-selection and the subsequent election. Fraser recalled that he had given little thought to standing until a local Canberra Labor Party official suggested he nominate for pre-selection shortly before nominations closed. In one of his many books, Ring the Bells, the late Don Whitington wrote that Allan Fraser's pre-selection win in Eden-Monaro in 1943 was "probably largely as a result of Prime Minister Curtin's influence". In conversation about a year before his death in May 1977, Whitington reinforced the view expressed in his book with the recollection that Fraser was one of a group of journalists known as "Curtin's Circus" who regularly travelled with Curtin.

Although Jessie Street expressed surprise at the outcome of the pre-selection, she never really had a chance of beating Fraser, who had influential support. She stumbled into the Eden-Monaro
pre-selection as a political neophyte. Although unsuccessful, her
dogged determination in the pre-selection contest, and later as a
candidate in Wentworth, contributed to her good standing in the
party. Not the least of her problems was the location of the
electorate, which spread to the south and east of Canberra as far
as the Victorian border. To add to her difficulties, petrol rationing
precluded her from driving to and around the electorate in her
own car. She did manage to attend some of the meetings at which
the candidates spoke to local branches. During one such meeting
at Jindabyne, near Cooma, Jessie Street spoke of “the social ills
we all suffer from”. She was referring generally to the condition
of society at the time, but, in view of her well-known views on
venereal disease and prostitution, some of the audience chose to
read a double meaning into “social ills”. The pre-selection
campaign also introduced Jessie Street to an unpleasant side of
Labor politics. One of the candidates, not Fraser, wore a lapel
badge which indicated he was a member of a Roman Catholic
society. He was not a member of that faith, but hoped to attract
Catholic support by deceit.

Of Jessie Street’s surviving annual diaries, which span thirty
years, the 1943 diary is the fattest and most annotated volume.
Time would have not weighed heavily after her pre-selection
defeat in Eden-Monaro. During April, her “Sheepskins for
Russia” campaign was continuing, as was preparation for a
Women’s Charter Conference planned for later in the year. But
her political endeavours for the year were not over. According to
her account she was drafted into standing for the electorate of
Wentworth. On 9 July, the New South Wales ALP executive
endorsed Jessie Street’s candidature following the resignation of
the originally endorsed candidate, Norman Smith. The Street
papers contain the following roneoed letter from Smith, dated 8
July:

Dear Friend,

As the result of a certain recommendation made at a
meeting of the Wentworth Federal Electorate Council, I have
tendered my resignation as the endorsed Labor Candidate. This
action has been prompted by a sincere desire to further the interests
of the movement and to allow a candidate possessing greater
resources and possibilities for winning the seat to represent the Party.
The circumstances of Jessie Street’s selection were unprecedented, according to Joe (later Senator) Fitzgerald, who was her campaign manager at the 1943 elections.

Smith had been selected. We arranged a meeting of friends and supporters to rally help, workers, etc., for his campaign. In the course of his address, Smith, a printer by trade, ranted on about what he had done in the 1940 campaign, and [that he] could not afford to spend the same this time [1943]. By the time he had finished, the meeting was so confused no one was prepared to help financially or otherwise. Jessie rose with great dignity and said, “Mr Smith, you don’t appear very confident of your chances of success and as this appears to be the case you should not go on. If you resign, I will run for Labor and finance my own campaign, and will put in 1,000 pounds to commence the campaign.”

One thousand pounds, in those days, was like one million dollars today. Norman Smith was rattled and embarrassed. After his pitiful introduction, he pleaded, “I can’t do that, Mrs Street. It has already cost me money.”

“How much?” said Jessie. “I’ll give you 200 pounds. Will that take care of your cost?”

Norman, who probably had not spent 200 pence, said, “Yes.” Someone at the meeting suggested we carry on the meeting as a friends and supporters meeting for Jessie Street. This was agreed to.

Fitzgerald was a member of the party’s state executive, and recalls that some other members opposed this irregular procedure, but her selection was endorsed on the grounds that Labor was lucky to have a candidate at all for Wentworth.

Smith had not been an impressive candidate. In 1940 he only polled slightly more than a third of the formal vote after the distribution of preferences, which had been necessary because there were two United Australia Party (UAP) candidates, Eric (later Sir Eric) Harrison, the incumbent, and Norman (later Sir Norman) Cowper.

The proposed Communist Party candidate for Wentworth in 1943, Phyllis Johnson, has suggested another reason for the ALP executive’s decision. Women’s organizations within the ALP pressured the executive to endorse women candidates, and Jessie Street’s endorsement was a convenient way to acknowledge these demands. The party would be seen to be responding to the demands of its women members because her candidature would
be well-publicized, but there was little chance of her being elected. The concern of the Labor women was readily understandable.

In the absence of Labor women candidates, the Party could lose votes to groups such as the Australian Women’s Party and the Women for Canberra Movement, which were among the many independent groups fielding candidates. A record twenty-four women stood for parliament in 1943, and two of them, the first of their sex, were successful: Dame Enid Lyons was the first woman Member of the House of Representatives, and Dorothy Tangney the first woman senator. Neither success could really be described as a victory for feminism. Dame Enid was returned as member for the Tasmanian seat of Darwin, which adjoined Wilmot, formerly held by her late husband who had been a popular prime minister. Dorothy Tangney was placed fourth on the ALP Senate ticket in Western Australia, where there were four vacancies compared with three in all other states. She was elected as a result of a bigger swing to Labor than in any other state. In the 1940 election the three seats being contested had been won by the non-Labor coalition, so Dorothy Tangney’s election prospects had not been bright.

In Wentworth the UAP incumbent, Harrison, had represented that electorate since 1931 and could reasonably have expected a more serious challenge from his own side of politics than from Labor. Harrison was a Menzies man, a member of the National Service Group which became the core of the Liberal Party. The year 1943 was a low point for non-Labor parties, and contemporary pundits would have needed clairvoyance to predict that the Albury conference which gave birth to the Liberal Party in 1944 would be the beginning of that party’s progress to electoral success in 1949. Harrison’s loyalty to Menzies was rewarded after the 1949 election. He held senior ministerial positions until his resignation, late in 1956, to accept an appointment as Australian high commissioner to Britain, a position he held for eight years.

At the 1940 Federal election, Harrison had been faced with the inconvenience of another endorsed UAP candidate. This prevented him securing an absolute majority. Nevertheless, he
emerged a clear winner after preference distribution. Harrison, a man of humble origin, was the representative for an electorate where birth and social position were matters of consequence. At the next election, in 1943, he was opposed by two candidates whose families were among the oldest and most distinguished in New South Wales: on the right, William Charles Wentworth, great-grandson of the original William Charles Wentworth, after whom the electorate had been named; on the left, Jessie Street, of the Clan Ogilvie, pioneers of the Clarence River district of northern New South Wales.

Wentworth’s challenge grew out of a meeting at Bondi Junction in April 1943, which had been attended by Menzies. Discord had been apparent, but the meeting resolved to support Harrison. Refused the right to address those present, Wentworth had walked out after announcing that supporters of a national government were worried lest the inevitable failure of Menzies would block that objective.

Two months later, Wentworth announced that he would oppose Harrison as a “National Government” candidate. At the age of thirty-six, Wentworth’s anti-communist views were firmly established. In his election manifesto, Wentworth made his attitude quite clear: “There is no safety any longer in Party, because the bitterness of Party cleavage is the main internal danger ahead of us. The Communists are planning to exploit that Party bitterness, and are therefore, doing all in their power to thwart National Unity, and are influencing Labor against co-operation with other Parties.” Wentworth had established his independence by leading a mock commando raid on Sydney which embarrassingly pointed up Sydney’s vulnerability to enemy attack. The result was Wentworth’s dismissal from the army on medical grounds.

There were two other candidates; a Liberal Democrat and an independent, but they had no effect on the outcome. Their combined vote would not have changed the result even if all, rather than about one-fifth, of their second preferences had been directed to Jessie Street. On the question of allocating preferences, she deviated from Party wisdom. In the second week of August, the Labor Party published how-to-vote instructions in
its official organ, the Standard. For the electorate of Wentworth, the Party’s card was:

Jessie Street
Wentworth
Whitehouse (Ind.)
Mayo (Lib. Dem.)
Harrison

A few days later, 18 August, Jessie Street issued her own how-to-vote card, which was different:

Jessie Street
Mayo
Harrison
Wentworth
Whitehouse

The discrepancy did not escape the notice of the Press. The following morning the Sydney Morning Herald quoted Wentworth as saying: “I think that Mrs Street may be feeling a little sore because I would not give her my second preference when she asked me to. However, a woman is always entitled to change her mind... I don’t think Mrs Street’s decision will affect me.” The same article went on to quote Jessie Street, confirming that the how-to-vote card distributed in her name was her final decision. She had not made up her mind at the time the Standard was published. The article concluded by quoting the Labor Party’s assistant state campaign director, W. Dickson, MLC as saying that official instructions were not mandatory on candidates who printed their own cards and were intended mainly as a guide for servicemen and absentee voters.

The afternoon press picked up the story. Under a headline, “Stir Over Labor Preference”, Wentworth was quoted as saying, “Mrs Street, of course, has no chance of winning.” But Jessie Street herself said that she had used her own discretion. The fact that she had been put last on every candidate’s card was acknowledgement that they all feared her, she told the Sydney Sun.

From the vantage point of more than thirty years later, it is hard to imagine a Street-Wentworth preference deal being seriously considered by either side. But in 1943 the proposition that the two candidates should exchange preferences may not
"My dear, you should have seen the expression on James' face, the other night, when I was listening to Jessie Street's broadcast talk!"

Jessie Street was a favourite target of Hallett's "Smith's Socialite" cartoon in *Smith's Weekly*. 
have seemed so preposterous. Wentworth was a strong advocate for unabated prosecution of the war effort, and Jessie Street was successfully doing her utmost to that end on the home front. Although such a deal would not have endeared Jessie Street to her left-wing and Communist supporters, it would almost certainly have ensured her election. Had half of Wentworth's second preferences gone to Jessie Street, she would have been the victor with a majority of more than seven thousand votes. However, in the absence of such a deal, Wentworth's preferences were distributed four-fifths to Harrison and one-fifth to Jessie Street, which gave Harrison a majority of more than two thousand votes.

Wentworth recorded his recollection of the 1943 campaign in a letter on 22 June 1976: "I had, of course, known Jessie all my life. She asked me to come and see her early on in the campaign. She requested me to exchange preferences with her, which, of course, I very definitely refused to do and, subject to a faulty recollection, I think that her abandonment of the ALP list of preferences followed this conversation."

Unlike most other Labor candidates, Jessie Street did not run solely as the Curtin candidate. She did not ignore Curtin ("Our Prime Minister, Mr Curtin, saved Australia and he is winning the war for Australia," she said in her policy speech). But it was as though she used him as an electoral asset in much the same way as she used her son-in-law, the test cricketer Jack Fingleton, whose home club Waverley was in that part of the Wentworth electorate where his mother-in-law polled best. An interesting feature of Jessie Street's campaign was her courting of the Jewish vote, particularly by calling for the reopening of the borders of Palestine. Advertisements in the Jewish press described her as "social worker and humanitarian, the fearless champion of minorities, active member of the Kimberley Jewish Settlement Committee". The advertisements also drew attention to four meetings, two of which were to be held in Masonic halls. Her general press advertising did not stress her support for Jewish causes, nor was it mentioned in her policy speech. Palestine and Jewish refugees were more important to Jessie Street than as a potential vote-winning issue.
Political opponents were quick to turn Jessie Street's street-sign posters to their advantage

(Drawing: John Knox-Knight)
The chairman of the Jessie Street Election Committee, Ruby Rich, was active in the Women’s International Zionist Organisation (WIZO). During the campaign, Ruby Rich chaired a meeting of the Bellevue Hill branch of the WIZO when Jessie Street was the speaker. Her interest continued after the election. In November 1943 the president of the National Council of Jewish Women, Dr Fanny Reading, addressed the Australian Women’s Conference in Sydney. The conference, which had been inspired by Jessie Street, passed a special resolution urging the government to increase its assistance to Jewish refugees. Judging from her poor showing in the subdivision of Bellevue Hill, her wooing of the Jewish vote had little effect there; but in the Rose Bay subdivision her vote was a considerable improvement over Labor’s performance in the 1940 federal election.

The campaign was run with near-military precision. The electorate was extensively canvassed by an army of volunteers called-up particularly from the ranks of the United Associations of Women. Stapled in the back of canvassers’ notebooks was a roneoed sheet headed “Hints”, which said, “Report in your book which candidate the elector will vote for. If they have promised their first vote, please ask for their second. This is important.” Considering Jessie Street was last on every other ticket, not least significantly Wentworth’s, the 20 per cent leakage of second preferences towards her was an achievement. Included among her papers are lists of people nominated to man booths on polling day. To each booth was allocated a “captain and vice-captain” as well as other workers, and from the number of ticks beside the names, these lists would appear to have been reality rather than fond hopes. Similarly there are neatly typed lists of the numbers of tables and chairs needed at each booth.

The organization was a tremendous effort, particularly considering that Jessie Street’s campaign only began on 10 July, six weeks before the election. Imaginative cunning, as well as good organization, was a feature of the campaign. Posters saying simply “Jessie Street” were pasted on corner buildings and street-corner light posts. Her opponents did not fail to capitalize on this gimmick. Some of the posters were prefixed with the words, “The Road to Moscow via”. 
Jessie Street officially launched her campaign at Harris Hall, Bondi Junction, on 29 July. Harrison and Wentworth launched their campaigns at different halls on the same night. The main speaker for Jessie Street was the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Honourable J. S. Rosevear, supported by theatrical entrepreneur and philanthropist, Sir Benjamin Fuller, Dr Lucy Gullett, and Mr J. McLean, with Joe Fitzgerald in the chair. Other speakers who supported her at other meetings included Fred Daly, candidate for the neighbouring seat of Martin, and Dame Mary Gilmore.

She delivered her policy speech to the meeting. She denied any connection between the Labor Party and the Communist Party in accordance with her prepared address, but then departed from her text: “A whispering campaign will be started that I am a Communist because I am chairman of the Russian Medical Aid Committee . . . I am not a Communist, although I have been to Russia and have the greatest admiration for the Russian people.”

A wiser line might have been that she chaired the aid committee to ensure that the Soviet Union had every possible assistance for fighting the Axis.

Her policy speech was strangely negative for such a positive person and dotted with references to overseas situations. Only towards the end of the eight-page typed document did she “thump the tub”. She began by pointing out that the government elected in 1943 would probably be in power after the end of the war. She moved on to expand on the theme that “conservatives cannot govern in a crisis”, drawing on British and United States, as well as Australian, situations during the First World War. She continued by accusing the non-Labor parties of calling for a national government and raising the communist bogey to divert attention from their internal divisions. Next came a series of denials — that the ALP had any connection with the Communist Party; and that Labor members were dictated to by caucus, the party conferences, and trade unions. She then scorned the notion that a conservative government would put an end to strikes. In the last page and a half she concluded with a very brief summary of Labor’s achievements in twenty months of office, concentrating on the conduct of the war and women’s and
welfare issues — not forgetting to add, on one of her favourite topics, “Steps have also been taken to combat drunkenness, V. D. and prostitution”. She finished with a traditional appeal for votes.

Jessie Street probably only fuelled the rumours of her Communist associations by denying them publicly, but it was typical of her approach to meet the issue head-on. She was more vulnerable to guilt-by-association than most Labor candidates because of her prominence in the “Aid to Russia” movement. This remained true despite the fact that the leader of the equivalent committee in Britain was Clementine Churchill, wife of the prime minister. Moreover, suspicion was cast on her denials a few days after the campaign opening, when it was reported that Phyllis Johnson, the Communist candidate, had withdrawn. The report, misleadingly headed “Communist Party Aid for Labor”, quoted a Communist Party spokesman as saying, “The Communist Party has withdrawn Mrs Phyllis Johnson because she might spoil the chances of Mrs Street.” But according to Jessie Street herself, the Communists were a help as well as a hindrance, inasmuch as they assisted with such activities as sticking up posters.

Being dubbed a Communist by her opponents was far from Jessie Street’s only problem. She had to contend with divisions within her own team. On 2 August, Ruby Rich, as chairman of the Jessie Street Election Committee, wrote to J. Wright, Wentworth campaign director:

I write to make the position clear regarding finances in Mrs Street’s campaign.

The above committee is endeavouring to raise money to assist the campaign, but they will not hold themselves responsible for any expenditure that is not authorised by them in advance. Mrs Street has informed us that she, too, is not prepared to be responsible for any expenditure by this or any other committee unless such expenditure has been approved by her in advance.

We have been told that it is quite easy for election expenses to run away with large sums, and we therefore felt it necessary to clarify the position in order to protect all parties concerned.

In addition, Joe Fitzgerald was described as “Jessie Street Campaign Director” at the bottom on a fund-raising letter, while
"Dear me, Mrs. Street must be terribly worried. Wouldn't it be dreadful for her to be a Labor member!"

Another of Hallett's "Smith's Socialite" cartoons
his name appeared on campaign advertisements in the local newspapers with the title, "President, Wentworth Electoral Conference". Other advertisements appeared authorized by J. Wright. The confusion was caused partly by Fitzgerald being sent to direct the campaign in another electorate, and partly by antagonism between the official Labor team and Jessie Street's own supporters who were mostly women. As Fitzgerald remarked: "People outside the Labor Party see it as a well organised machine which does great work during elections. This is not the case."

As the early returns were being counted, Jessie Street appeared to have a strong chance of success. Her scrutineers were confident, as they often are, but their optimism was not completely misplaced in the early stages of counting. They could have seen that she was receiving about 20 per cent of the other candidates' second preferences.

The service vote, however, was a disappointment. About 42 per cent of service voters gave her their first preferences — about the same proportion as the civilians, whereas throughout Australia the service vote was about 5 per cent higher for Labor than the civilian vote was. Predictably, soldiers, sailors, and airmen would have been more likely to support male candidates. No doubt her supporters were buoyed by press reports which gave prominence to the progressive counting in Wentworth. It was the most interesting "cliff-hanger" electorate. "Army Favours Mrs Street" said a headline in the *Daily Telegraph* on 30 August, which was true in that she outpolled Harrison 1,373 votes to 1,072. It generated false hopes, however, because Harrison's vote combined with that of Wentworth exceeded Jessie Street's by 300. Before preferences were distributed, Jessie Street was 11 per cent ahead of Harrison on the formal vote, but after Wentworth's and other preferences were allocated she was 4.36 per cent behind.

Her strongest support naturally came from subdivisions such as Waverley and Bondi, where the Labor candidate had polled best in the 1940 election. The highest proportion of informals was also recorded in the subdivisions that favoured her, reflecting the conventional wisdom that less-well-educated Labor voters waste
more votes than better-educated non-Labor voters. Although she achieved a massive 20 per cent swing, she did not, as might have been expected, make undue inroads into the non-Labor vote in the wealthy suburbs of Vaucluse and Bellevue Hill. The swing to Labor in NSW House of Representatives voting was 18.5 per cent. She bettered the state average and, more significantly, she achieved a bigger swing than either most Labor incumbents or other new candidates in the Sydney area.

Noteworthy events in the Wentworth election did not end when the result became known. They extended to the declaration of the poll, which is normally little more than a formality. In Truth or Repose, Jessie Street recalled that Harrison refused to shake the hand she proffered after the formalities. While writing her memoirs in the early sixties, Jessie Street wrote to Vivienne Newson, who had been a member of her 1943 campaign committee, asking for her version of the events at the poll declaration. "I hope you will find time to write a description which I can insert as having been written by a member of my election committee," she wrote. That letter and the following account are in the same folder of Vivienne Newson's papers in the National Library, but this deliberately exaggerated account may have been written purely for the amusement of fellow members of the United Associations of Women.

After the Returning Officer declared the Poll, Harrison rose — as I thought — to make the usual speech of thanks. But no! He intended, he said, to depart customary formality, because he had a few things he wanted to say about this campaign. Whereupon he embarked on the most virulent attack on Wentworth and that section of the Liberal Party which had endorsed him. His voice thundered and his face purpled, as he accused these — "the members of my own Party!" — of gross disloyalty, calumny and treachery; and he related how even his advertisements were refused by the Press, which supported Mr Wentworth. Finally, he turned to Jessie. "And as for the Labor Candidate, I congratulate you Mrs Street, on coming closer to winning this seat for Labor than any candidate ever has — or ever will again, Mrs Street!"

Then Wentworth spoke. By contrast, he was white with rage and his voice crescendoed to a scream, as he hurled back epithets and denials, while Harrison roared back at him.

And then Jessie rose — and ah! the difference! All smiles and
Jessie Street, with her mother-in-law, Lady (Belinda) Street, c. 1944. (Photo: Mrs Belinda Mackay)
good humour, she thanked her committee for the wonderful support they had given in fighting — and so nearly winning — this election campaign. She likened herself to a young race-horse, coming to a track unfamiliar to it and contending against well-schooled racers; and just as horses love their race, she had revelled in every moment of her campaign. And she warned Mr Harrison that, contrary to his prediction, she had learnt much from her experiences and next time would enter the field as a much more seasoned performer. After the Kilkenny cats exhibition we’d just witnessed, her gallantry, her gaiety, her freedom from bitterness (and she could have been pardoned that, seeing that all the four men candidates had placed her last on their How to Vote cards, while her own Party had given her the scantiest of support) showed up in marked contrast to the nauseatingly bad sportsmanship of Harrison and Wentworth.

More than ever, we had reason to be proud of “Our Candidate.”

Jessie Street’s gallant electoral defeat in 1943 established her credentials with the federal Labor Government and led to her greatest rewards, notably her United Nations appointments. Her effectiveness as a campaigner had a side-effect which showed that the depth of her convictions was not understood by all. After the election she was approached with the suggestion that she leave the Labor Party and contest the next election as a non-Labor candidate. Either a UAP official or a leading newspaper proprietor made the approach. One of Hallett’s cartoons in *Smith’s Weekly* reflected the same total lack of understanding of Jessie Street’s motives by most of her social peers. The cartoon, one of a series poking fun at the socially prominent, depicted one ample matron saying to another, “Dear me, Mrs Street must be terribly worried. Wouldn’t it be dreadful for her to be a Labor member.”

In 1946 she tried again to become the Labor member for Wentworth. Although she received slightly more first preference votes in 1946 than in 1943, her proportion of the vote was slightly lower, as the number of constituents had grown. She was a particular target for anti-communists: the Langites called her a “fellow traveller” and worse; to Catholics, a pro-communist who advocated birth control was a dangerous foe. Her effort in the 1946 election was a testimonial to her personal prestige and abilities, for her enemies had already blocked her appointment as Australian envoy to the Soviet Union and effectively dimmed the lustre of the 1946 Women’s Charter Conference. (Thanks to
Curtin's public support they had failed to reverse her appointment to the San Francisco United Nations Conference.

The bases of her support were illusory, rather than real. The gains that women made during the war were due to circumstance and were not automatically consolidated after the war. So were Jessie Street's electoral hopes. Without detracting from her significant achievement in improving the Labor vote in Wentworth in 1943 by more than 20 per cent, the fact remains that had the incumbent Harrison not been opposed also by Wentworth the campaign would not have been so exciting. Jessie Street's prospects were enhanced by two major opponents who were fighting each other as much as opposing her.

In 1946 there were only three candidates, compared with five in 1943. Apart from Eric Harrison and Jessie Street, there was only a Lang Candidate, and he set out directly to take votes away from Jessie Street because he represented the primarily anti-communist faction of the labour movement in New South Wales. The Lang candidate polled poorly, receiving less than 4 per cent of the vote. Even if all his votes had gone to Jessie Street, Harrison would still have won comfortably.

Jessie Street realized that without consolidation women's wartime gains would be lost, but she deluded herself about her own electoral prospects. Certainly her name was more familiar in 1946, thanks to participation in such events as the San Francisco Conference. But she was also well known for her pro-Soviet activities. Her delusion may have resulted partly from her success in running the gauntlet of the ALP machine, emerging with her pre-selection intact. She may have reckoned that the electorate would be a push-over compared to the intrigues within the New South Wales Labor Party.

The Labor Party's anti-communist crusade blossomed at the annual conference of the New South Wales branch in June 1946, three months before the federal election. At the conference, the branch adopted an eight-point anti-communist manifesto. There was more to this crusade than pandering to the right wing and Lang factions. New South Wales was seen as the key state in the forthcoming election, and the question of the Labor government's attitude to the Communist Party was a live issue. Con-
sequently, Jessie Street’s candidature was a potential embarrassment.

Lang’s weekly newspaper, *Century*, goaded the Labor Party with its dilemma over Jessie Street. In the issue of 16 August 1946, a headline described her a “Room 32 Problem Child”. She was a prominent citizen, wife of a judge and confidante of the prime minister and minister of external affairs. She also had a chance of winning a seat for Labor, but for the political hard-heads she was too far left of centre. Her leftist connections were not only the concern of the rabidly anti-communist *Century*. The *Sydney Morning Herald* in its report of the New South Wales branch conference on 18 June 1946 quoted a delegate’s claim that in Wentworth in 1943 most of the solid election organization and canvassing was carried out by Communists and left-wingers.

The same was true of Jessie Street’s 1946 campaign. The “Communists and left-wingers”, most of them women, shared with her a vision of the future which included social equality and equal opportunity regardless of sex. During the most intense period of electioneering, she lived with Jean Ferguson, who was a close friend. Jean Ferguson remembers driving her from meeting to meeting towing a suitably adorned campaign caravan. In some respects, the 1946 campaign was similar to that of 1943. The street-corner “Jessie Street” poster tactic was used again, and her opponents were equally prepared with a riposte. The opposition’s posters showed a hand pointing to the left, and the words, similar to before: “To Moscow — via Jessie Street”. As previously, her campaign attracted press interest, and the following story was published in the *Sunday Telegraph* on the day after the poll, 29 September:

At Vaucluse there was a trim, efficient young woman, personable with a chic knitted skull-cap of a hat, who asked an elderly man at the Labor booth how he thought Jessie was going.

“Going? She’s gone,” he said dismally.

“Don’t be an ass,” said his pert inquisitor. “Do you think doctors and lawyers and such in a place like this are going to give themselves away to the neighbours and customers if they intend to vote for Jessie by coming to your table.”

Unfortunately for Jessie Street, nine thousand more electors of
Wentworth voted for Harrison than for her, giving him an absolute majority with more than 54 per cent of the vote.

The result was the same as in 1943, and so was the discord between Jessie Street’s own supporters and those of the Labor Party. In retrospect, some of her campaign workers maintained that Fitzgerald, the official campaign director, did not want her to win. They say he did not organize a maximum effort because he intended to contest future pre-selection for the electorate. On the other hand, Fitzgerald recalls arranging a post-election function, with her consent and approval, at which Jessie Street would be the guest of honour. On the appointed night, the guest of honour did not arrive. Members of the Labor Party regarded her non-attendance as a rebuff when they learned later she had been at a function at the home of a member of an organization suspected of being a Communist auxiliary. Missing the Labor Party function was probably an oversight, rather than a deliberate slight, but the damage was done.

Despite the strength of anti-communism, Jessie Street ensured that the Australian Russian Society, of which she was chairman, escaped Labor Party censure. The scanty official ALP records of the period are not illuminating on this matter and not clear on exactly which organizations were banned. According to the documents, party officials themselves seemed confused, which was not surprising, as the vigilant executive played cat-and-mouse with leftist groups. No sooner was one organization banned than its members would regroup under a new name. Jessie Street’s own papers and Century are more enlightening. Century recorded that the Australian Russian Society escaped the ban because the executive ruled that it was non-political. The party had proscribed a number of organizations, some of them defunct, thereby making membership of the banned body and the ALP mutually exclusive. At an executive meeting the general secretary, Jock Stewart, was supposed to have said: “Apart from the Russian Embassy, Jessie’s turnout was the only show that could get fair dinkum information about Russia, and it should be kept alive so that Australians could continue to get fair dinkum news about Russia.” More surprisingly, the ALP actually publicized its decision not to ban the Australian Russian Society
after the press assumed, not unreasonably, that the society was among the banned organizations. The press reports prompted a prominent member of the society, Rev. E. J. Davidson, to write to the ALP expressing his own concern, that of several Anglican bishops and of the president-general of the Methodist Church of Australia:

Most of those to whom I have spoken are aware that a number of organizations listed [as banned] are actually not in existence and that the Australian Russian Society is not on the list.

You will therefore appreciate our perturbation upon reading in the Press that we were in some way connected with the Communist Party, a connection we unhesitatingly refute.

A copy of that letter is in Jessie Street’s papers, and it may have been written at her suggestion. Whatever its origin, the letter shows that members of the Roman Catholic Church are not the only clerics who have sought to influence the Australian Labor Party. Jessie Street skilfully remained within the Labor pale in 1946, but she was overseas, mostly on United Nations business, for much of the following three years. This gave her enemies, and those who just wanted to displace her, plenty of time and opportunity to organize. More was at stake in the 1949 federal election than at the two previous polls. The 1948 enlargement of parliament and consequent electoral redistribution created a new seat called Phillip out of the pro-Labor parts of Wentworth, leaving the rest of Wentworth more blue-ribbon non-Labor than before. On previous figures, Jessie Street would have easily won the new seat of Phillip with a majority of several thousand votes, but her prospects, even of pre-selection, were slender.

She was warned that a split between the ALP and her was almost inevitable. In the latter half of 1948, friends wrote and told her of the gathering clouds. The Australian Russian Society had been declared Communist by the ALP, and the United Associations of Women was next on the list, wrote one correspondent, “They are after you of course, but you must not let them get you. . . . The position is very serious.” In less dramatic terms, another correspondent urged her to return to Australia with despatch to avoid expulsion from the ALP. The same letter told her that Phillip was a lost cause, as the former
president of the Wentworth Electoral Conference, Joe Fitzgerald, "had the numbers".

The New South Wales executive handled her ejection carefully. Her power and influence were on the wane, but she still had some powerful patrons, though they may not have rallied to her cause. She returned to Australia just before Christmas 1948, to be greeted by an ultimatum. The executive had endorsed her right to be a pre-selection candidate, and therefore required her resignation from the Australian Russian Society before the pre-selection ballots were held early in the new year. Jessie Street chose to resign from the Labor Party instead of the Australian Russian Society. In her letter of resignation to the New South Wales president of the ALP, Jack Ferguson, she said: "I joined the ALP because I agreed with and wished to work for the ALP objectives as set out in the Rule Book. This I have always done to the best of my ability and wish to continue to do so, but I feel I can promote them more effectively unhampered by the restrictions placed on ALP members by the present Executive." Copies of the resignation letter were sent to Chifley, Calwell, and others with a covering note which gave a different reason for her resignation. A number of societies had been banned while she was away and, as a result, several leading members of those societies had resigned. Jessie Street said that she had not been able to contact any of those who had resigned and was not prepared to resign from the societies herself until she had done so.

The New South Wales executive seemed to be in a quandary. It did not wish to accept her resignation, nor to expel her. After avoiding the issue at one meeting, Jack Ferguson wrote her an ambiguous letter saying that her reluctance to dissociate herself from the banned organizations "results in expulsion from the ALP which you seek to cover by tendering your formal written resignation and for which please accept thanks". The next executive meeting simply endorsed the president’s letter, which did not clarify the matter. Thereafter members of the executive told the press that Jessie Street had been expelled, which she vigorously denied at every opportunity.

Did she fall or was she pushed — it matters little. Less than a
month after returning to Australia, she was out of the ALP permanently. She moderated her stance not a jot during 1949, and ran as an Independent Labor candidate for the seat of Phillip in the December federal election. She also considered standing in Wentworth. Her election literature reveals her feelings towards the ALP and some of the difficulties she had faced previously. In a statement entitled “Why I Am Running as Independent Labor” she wrote:

I do not believe that the Labor Party ever wanted to see me in Parliament. I would have won the Wentworth seat in 1943 if I had received any assistance whatever from them. The only assistance I got was from individuals in the electorate who were my personal friends.

The 1943 campaign was very strenuous and I put all my energies into it and nearly won. When the matter was being discussed at the central executive of the ALP surprise was expressed that I had nearly won the seat and the statement was made “That had they known that Labor could have won Wentworth they would have put up a decent candidate.” The only word of congratulation I got was from Mr Curtin... I believe that the naming and banning of all these societies by the ALP executive was deliberately done to embarrass me.”

And in another statement in a similar vein, she wrote: “I want to warn you against listening to whispering campaigns. I ask you to remember that some people make all sorts of accusations and launch a whispering campaign against those with whom they disagree. I have been the victim of such whispering campaigns... I am not a communist and I have not left my husband, or home or family.”

Allowing for distortion caused by bitterness, it is quite apparent that in 1943 and 1946 Jessie Street received little more than endorsement from the Labor Party. This accords with Les Haylen’s recollections about his successful campaign for the electorate of Parkes in 1943: “Head Office hadn’t any money — not for hopeless causes anyway. They gave me nothing. In this, headquarters have been magnificently consistent in my twenty years in Parliament.”

The 1949 election was a bitter disappointment for Jessie Street. Fitzgerald, her former campaign director, received an absolute majority of more than 51 per cent of the vote. She polled
less than 5 per cent of the formal vote and lost her deposit. On the basis of the 1946 election statistics in Wentworth, she would have gained an absolute majority of about five thousand votes in the new electorate of Phillip had she been the endorsed Labor candidate. She and her friends were sure that the ALP was running a “Get Jessie Street” campaign. On grounds of political expediency, the party could be excused for doing so. Could a political party pretend to be anti-communist while harbouring a “fellow traveller” in its ranks? The question remains: Would she have resigned from the ALP had her prospects of winning pre-selection for Phillip been good? Would a safe seat have been a great enough inducement for her to abandon her principles by abandoning the banned organizations? Australian politics is full of people who compromised their ideals in pursuit of power. For Jessie Street, such a course would have been inconceivable.

The years between the 1943 and 1946 federal elections were the most rewarded and fulfilling of her life. In the second half of 1943 she ran an all but successful election campaign, followed by a significant women’s conference which produced the first Australian Women’s Charter. From these beginnings she could reasonably have expected to become the first truly feminist member of parliament and to lead the most cohesive women’s movement in the nation’s history. Had she concentrated on those aims and abandoned her controversial links with the Soviet friendship societies, she might have achieved those goals. But being Jessie Street she had to fight the good fight on all fronts at once, and would not compromise her beliefs.

Nearly twenty years later, while researching her memoirs, she wrote to a friend saying how difficult the work was becoming: “Now I’ve got into the 1940’s . . . I seem to have had a finger in so many pies.” To mention but a few of her activities: she was a member of Arthur Calwell’s Aliens Control Committee and of various post-war reconstruction groups; she campaigned for the 1944 referendum; she unsuccessfully tried to become Australia’s second minister to the Soviet Union; she successfully became the publisher of a women’s magazine. She undertook all this in addition to her heavy round of feminist and Soviet friendship engagements, meetings, and deputations.
The year 1949 could have been the time of her ultimate reward: a safe Labor seat was in the offing. But she made her continued membership of the Labor Party untenable by refusing to resign from societies branded as Communist auxiliaries, and she spent too much time overseas. Not surprisingly, her former campaign director was able to rally enough support in the local branches to win the pre-selection which might have been hers.

Notes

4. Material on women and the 1943 election was drawn from an unpublished honours thesis by D.J. Kingsmill, “The 1943 Federal Election” (Sydney University, 1958). Copies are available from Department of Government, Sydney University, and The National Library. In addition Phyllis Johnson made a personal contribution.
6. Ibid., 3 August 1943.
7. Vivienne Newson Papers, MS 4603, folder 6, National Library of Australia, Canberra. Letter from Jessie Street, 22 September 1962. Folder 5 contains a more dramatized version of the same event.
9. *Century*, 26 July and 16 August 1946. The former referred to the Society for Cultural Relations with Russia, but probably meant the Australian Russian Society, as the ALP records list the Society for Cultural Relations as having been banned at the June 1946 conference. In any case it had not existed since early in the war.
The Australian Women's Charter

Jessie Street's desire to bind Australian women into one united feminist movement came closest to realization at the 1943 Australian Women's Charter Conference. The organization of a national conference during the war, when permits were needed for interstate travel, was an achievement in itself. More significantly, two hundred women, representing ninety-one organizations, agreed on a set of resolutions which were incorporated into the Australian Women's Charter.¹

The Charter was a platform of women's hopes, reflecting their growing confidence engendered by their role in the war effort and solidarity in the face of a common enemy. For feminists, 1943 was a memorable year: the Women's Employment Board granted equal or near-equal pay to thousands of female workers in wartime industries, and two women, the first of their sex, were elected to Commonwealth Parliament. The theme of the conference, "A War to Win, a World to Gain", was a statement of women's post-war expectations, based on their wartime experience.

Women's aspirations were not realized after the war, nor was the second Charter Conference in 1946 as effective as the first. The 1946 conference lasted six days, two days longer than the first, and was planned on a grander scale, but several influential women's groups dissociated themselves from the movement, and the conference was subjected to an anti-communist barrage. In 1943, no women's voices had been raised against Jessie Street's brand of feminism, nor against her pro-Soviet activities,
which at that time were an important part of the war effort.

The Women's Charter was conceived at a meeting called by the United Associations of Women in August of 1942 which resolved to hold an Australia-wide conference of women to consider the problems of women under war conditions. This resolution was endorsed at a public meeting later that month held to celebrate the anniversary of women gaining the vote in New South Wales. A preparations committee was set up early the following year, but its plans to invite overseas visitors were stopped by the federal government, on the not unreasonable grounds of wartime travel restrictions.

The conference was identified with Jessie Street, who was president of the United Associations of Women and chairman of the conference committee. She had the added advantage of untrammelled permission to travel interstate for "Sheepskins for Russia", and she used the opportunity to rally support for the Conference. No doubt using her contacts in the Commonwealth government, probably Dr Evatt in his capacity as attorney-general, she secured travel permits for six delegates from each state (only two from Western Australia) to travel to Sydney for the conference.

The New South Wales chapter of the National Council of Women participated in the work of the preparations committee, but declined further involvement, although the Queensland and Tasmanian chapters sent representatives to the conference. The New South Wales chapter had an equivocal attitude to Jessie Street. Its goals were much the same as hers, but her methods were too radical. The National Council had been one of the women's groups that supported Jessie Street and Nerida Cohen's attempt to intervene in the Basic Wage Case of 1940 to put the case for equal pay, but over the next three years Jessie Street had become blatantly involved in politics. Established women's groups such as the National Council, which was founded in New South Wales in 1896 with eleven affiliates, traditionally eschewed political connections, and many had clauses in their constitutions proscribing political affiliation. Jessie Street rejected this approach in the thirties when she realized that political parties were more easily influenced from inside than outside, and that her social and
feminist aims were compatible with those of the Labor Party.

After the biennial conference of the National Council of Women of Australia in 1941, a copy of the resolutions were sent to the Commonwealth government. A departmental note on the relevant official file described the National Council as a non-party movement, and "A break-away from the United Associations of Women", while the reverse was in fact the case. As related in an earlier chapter, Jessie Street was instrumental in establishing the United Associations of Women in 1929 following a disagreement with the New South Wales chapter of the National Council. Although involved with women's suffrage in its early years, the New South Wales chapter's role gradually subsided to one of servicing its member organizations, of which there were about eighty in 1943.

The four-day Australian Women's Conference began on 19 November. It was attended by representatives from women's groups, philanthropic and patriotic bodies, church societies, trade unions, and political parties. Speaking at the opening ceremony, Jessie Street said the conference was the most representative meeting of women yet held in Australia. Mary Alice Evatt, wife of the federal attorney-general and minister for external affairs, officially opened the conference, and spoke about housing. The government recognized the need for "a home for every Australian family", she told the women assembled at the Oddfellows Hall.

Another speaker on the first day was Dr Hilda Bull, a medical officer from Melbourne. She said that reports of rapidly spreading venereal disease were exaggerated; the only significant increase was among young girls, which symbolized the nation's failure to give them any sense of discipline. Information on venereal disease should be disseminated like information on any other health matter, "not served up as a spicy morsel for young girls to giggle over".

The second and third days of the conference were on the weekend. The New South Wales Minister for Education, Clive Evatt, spoke of education as a means of achieving a new and better world. He also outlined plans for community centres which would include libraries, playgrounds, nursery schools, swimming
pools, and other facilities. His ideas were welcomed warmly by at least one of the delegates, Lucy Woodcock, who was vice-president of the New South Wales Teachers Federation. Other speakers included the author Katharine Susannah Prichard, and two women from the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of South Australia, Ada Bromham and Isabel McCorkindale.

On the final day, the twenty-eight resolutions agreed to at the conference were incorporated by agreement of the conference into the Australian Women’s Charter. The press highlighted the resolution calling for a weekly wage of at least thirty shillings for women homemakers, to be paid on the same basis as child endowment. Generally, the reporting of the conference was fair, if not extensive, apart from the articles on a parody of the Lord’s Prayer.

An issue of Australian Women’s News, a newsletter published by the United Associations of Women, carrying the parody was freely available to delegates. Although it apparently caused no comment at the conference itself, the Sydney Morning Herald published the parody at the end of its report of the first day’s proceedings.

Our Prime Minister, which art in Canberra, democracy be thy aim; may liberty come and equality be won for women as well as men; give us this day equal status and forgive us our accident of sex, as we forgive those conventions which discriminate against us; lead us not back to inferiority, and deliver us from exploitation; for thine is the party, the power and the policy to give us equality for Evatt and Evatt — A woman.

The same newspaper then asked a number of clerics to comment, but their remarks were so mild that the issue merited little space, and scarcely detracted from the Charter.

According to the official Charter Conference booklet (price 1s 6d) —

The members of the Conference believe that the framing and launching of the Women’s Charter at the present time will focus the attention of the public on the reforms for which women are striving . . . At the outbreak of war, women diverted all their time, thought and energies to war work. While continuing with this women must prepare for the post-war period . . . The Charter should be a living document, capable of presenting continually the contemporary
aspirations of all who work for the improvement of the status and opportunity of women, and that the Charter should be capable in incorporating new needs as they arise out of changing conditions.

The first half of the Charter contained predictable resolutions about equal status, pay, and rights for women in general, and some specific demands on behalf of servicewomen and nurses. The second half dealt with wider issues, such as health, education, and housing, and in looking to the future the Charter showed confidence in the efficacy of central planning. On health, the Charter called for a "Nationally-planned comprehensive system of free health services", with a strong accent on preventive medicine. The education clause was also in favour of nation-wide planning by the federal government for the provision of free schools, technical and cultural colleges, universities, and sports and recreational facilities. Under housing, the Charter advocated that national town-planning schemes be formulated by the Commonwealth; a national children’s bureau with headquarters in Canberra was put forward under child care. The Charter also sought to entrust to Commonwealth control all questions pertaining to the welfare of Aborigines, marriage and divorce, and other legal matters.

The women’s overwhelming desire to transfer functions to the Commonwealth was the result of the unusual wartime situation which endowed the national government with extraordinary powers. Women’s wages and status improved as a result of the war, so they naturally equated the improvement with the government in Canberra, which a few weeks previously had achieved a landslide election victory. The Curtin government’s electoral success was partly due to its successful leadership of the war effort. By the end of 1943, the Japanese had been pushed back over the Owen Stanley Ranges in New Guinea, and Australian soil was no longer directly threatened. Consequently, the central government, which was winning the war, could realistically begin planning for peace. The conference occurred at a time of great confidence in the future, and women expected that the gains made during the war would be consolidated afterwards. Years later, Jessie Street told an interviewer: "Although the war was on and it was terrible in many ways. [ The war years were ] some of
the most satisfying years of my life, because you really felt you were doing something useful."3

But for the wartime powers vested in the Commonwealth government, federal control for most of the functions sought under the Charter was normally state responsibility. Jessie Street campaigned vigorously for the 1944 referendum proposals which would have transferred most of the necessary powers to the Commonwealth permanently. However, the Commonwealth subsequently acquired most of the functions by a variety of other means. Responsibility for social services and Aboriginal welfare were transferred by referendums in 1946 and 1967 respectively: the establishment of a federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs was a result of the 1967 referendum, and the Whitlam Labor government introduced a universal free health scheme, Medibank, in 1975. Federal control of marriage and divorce was achieved by Commonwealth legislation in 1961. The Commonwealth government has gradually assumed greater powers since 1942, when the High Court confirmed its right to collect income tax revenue. This has tended to centralize government functions such as education and housing. The Australian Women’s Charter called on the central government to assume these responsibilities, but the women could not have anticipated the means of their transfer from state to Commonwealth.

The 1943 Charter Conference was followed by state Charter conferences in Perth, Adelaide, and Melbourne over the next twelve months. A total of twenty thousand copies of the Charter booklet were printed and distributed to Parliamentarians, trade unions, local councils, and local and overseas women’s groups. Half were printed with a cardboard cover, and half with a paper cover, price sixpence.

Speaking in the Senate more than four years later, Senator Dorothy Tangney recalled that parliamentarians had been “inundated” with copies of the Women’s Charter, “a publication which contained some sound material. However, most of that material had been purloined from other women’s organizations.”4 Senator Tangney often made caustic remarks about Jessie Street and her activities. While they were usually made in the context of communism, she bore a grudge over Jessie
Street’s appointment as a delegate to the San Francisco Conference which founded the United Nations.

In March 1944 Jessie Street led a determined delegation to Canberra to present the Charter to the Commonwealth government. The delegation of thirteen women made an impression on Parliament House, but the press chose to record their visit in the derogatory style which so often predominates when men report on women’s affairs. The following quote from the Sydney *Sunday Telegraph* of 5 March 1944 shows that the journalist did not take the Charter seriously.

> Up and down the lobbies in groups and sometimes in phalanx formation stalked determined predatory women bearing with them — price 1/6d — a copy of the “Australian Women’s Charter”. They were led by Mrs Jessie Street. Prime purpose of their descent on Canberra was to present their charter to John Curtin; but he, more wily than his colleagues, evaded their tempestuous embrace. They pressed into Ben Chifley’s office, they invaded the almost inaccessible rooms of Attorney-General Evatt. Dazed men read paragraph four of the charter and laughed hollowly: “... whereas they [women] are submitted to many discriminations and limitations imposed on account of their sex...” Canberra will never believe that after seeing Jessie’s tough girls in action. Returning to Sydney, I saw three of them — full of fight to the last — ear bashing Joe Langtry on Goulburn Station. Fortunately, Joe is hard of hearing.

The Women’s Charter movement itself recorded a different version of the same events. The prime minister had been unable to receive the deputation owing to ill-health, but had arranged for Dr Evatt to act in his stead, according to a report in the 1946 Charter Conference booklet.

The Women’s Charter movement revolved around Jessie Street in Sydney, but it was a national organization with branches in other states. The *Australian Women’s Digest*, which is covered in a later chapter, became the official organ of the movement, and Charter activities were reported every month. With wartime travel restrictions over, a committee began planning the second conference on a grander scale than the first, but as the meeting date drew close considerable opposition became apparent. The *Catholic Weekly* devoted the front page of one issue to attacking the conference as a Communist front instigated at the request of
an international women’s organization formed in Moscow. The New South Wales executive of the Australian Labor Party ruled that the Women’s Central Organizing Committee of the party could not participate, but individual members could as private citizens. In contrast, the federal Labor government gave the conference a grant of £250, following a request to Dr Evatt from Jessie Street asking for £1,000.

More damaging than the New South Wales executive’s ruling and Catholic defamation was the public actions of seven women’s organizations dissociating themselves from the Charter. The seven groups were led by the New South Wales chapter of the National Council of Women, whose attitude had been the same three years earlier. In 1943 the National Council merely declined to take part in the Charter Conference, but in 1946 it took a public stand. On 19 June a letter was published in the Sydney Morning Herald signed by the president of the National Council, Ruby Board, and the presidents of six of its New South Wales affiliates: the Sydney Business and Professional Women’s Club, the Country Women’s Association, the Feminist Club, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, Women’s Voluntary Services, and the Young Women’s Christian Association of Sydney.

The letter said that the seven organizations had refused to participate in the conference. Although they were in general sympathy with some of the aims of the movement, the Charter did not and could not claim the sponsorship or support of the great majority of women’s organizations in Australia. Their real reason for dissociating themselves from the Charter, and from Jessie Street, lay in the sentence which said: “We feel that our own methods, though unspectacular, are more likely to achieve success in matters affecting the well-being of women and children, and of the community as a whole, which are our joint concern.”

Jessie Street’s methods were, by definition, “spectacular”, which meant she used forceful tactics, including open association with a political party. Her reply was published two days later. Although the original letter made no mention of her political affiliation, she described the National Council’s action as “the cul-
The following day, 22 June, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a less evocative but more telling letter from twelve members of the Charter committee, including the deputy chairman, Isabel McCorkindale, and secretary Millicent Christian.

The idea held by the National Council of Women that it has a monopoly in representing women of Australia, is absurd. There are many thousands of women, particularly in the trade union movement, for instance, which the National Council of Women does not represent, and with whose problems and difficulties it is not intimate. The National Council of Women cannot give a progressive lead on many subjects, as the majority of the organizations affiliated with the council are not free to associate themselves with social and political matters.

The Women's Charter movement defended itself vigorously, but the damage had been done. Whereas in 1943 the conservative women's groups expressed their opposition passively, in 1946 they voiced their objections publicly, thereby significantly weakening the movement. The withdrawal of the National Council and six of its affiliates undermined the Charter's aim of uniting women's organizations, and their absence left the conference with a leftist slant which played into the hands of Jessie Street's critics.

The elements of friction which were subdued at the 1943 Charter Conference were magnified in 1946. Jessie Street had become more prominent and more aligned with the Labor Party owing to her selection as a delegate to the San Francisco conference and other political appointments. Her pro-Soviet activities were attracting attention as anti-communist sentiment grew, and her prominence made her a target for the right wing of the labour movement. She came under particular attack from Roman Catholics for her Soviet sympathies, and because she had
led a campaign against a New South Wales bill to ban contraceptive advertising. "The use of contraceptives has improved the morals of the community," she told the Sydney Daily Telegraph. "Most Australian married couples obviously use contraceptives. If they don't, the present birthrate means that the sterility of the race has set in."^5

Despite the problems, the second Charter Conference was a significant event. The theme, "No Justice Without Equality, No Peace Without Unity", was ironic in view of the notable lack of unity in the previous weeks, and the accent on peace, which was carried throughout the proceedings, did not escape the notice of those who equated the peace movement with Communist influence. Sixty-four organizations were represented, including the Victorian and South Australian chapters of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, whose New South Wales chapter had been one of the signatories to the National Council of Women letter. There were overseas visitors from several countries. They were given a reception by the People's Council of Culture, hosted by its president, Walter Bunning, whose wife was involved with the Charter movement. Jack Lang's weekly newspaper, Century, noted for its anti-communist stance, described the People's Council as the "latest hoity toity commo outfit". Jessie Street also held a reception at her home in Darling Point.

Dame Mary Gilmore opened the six-day conference on 4 August. This coincided with her eighty-first birthday. Numerous messages of support and good will greeted the opening: Eleanor Roosevelt and Dame Sybil Thorndike were among those who sent messages wishing the conference well. Associated events included the first-ever exhibition of paintings, including a portrait of Jessie Street, by Australian women artists at the Sydney Art Gallery; and a play, Caroline Chisholm, produced by Doris Fitton at the Independent Theatre, was staged in the same week. The grand finale was a procession for peace through the streets of Sydney, with bands and floats which attracted about two thousand marchers escorted by a convoy of motor-cycle police. The climax of the procession was a service at the Cenotaph conducted by Brigadier Barbara Auton of the Salvation Army, who later conveyed her hearty congratulations to Jessie Street for the
successful and valiant way she strode through all the difficulties and problems to bring the Conference to such a successful conclusion.”

The press coverage was far more extensive than in 1943, and the articles were generally fair and serious, although not uniformly flattering. The Melbourne Herald described the discussion as “rather like a damp squib” compared with 1943. In his regular column in the Sydney Sun, Mungo MacCullum snr criticized the organization. “The voting arrangements were like those at a Stone Age meeting,” he said.6

The most concentrated reporting concerned the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the non-appearance of a delegation of six Russian women.

The inability of the six Russians to reach Australia was a great disappointment to Jessie Street. Although their proposed visit was peripheral to the conference itself, their attempts to make the trip developed into an early cold war incident which involved the prime minister of Australia, the foreign ministers of the Soviet Union and Australia, officials of the foreign ministries of Britain, the Soviet Union, and Australia, including the Australian high commissioner in London and his deputy, an Anglican bishop and an Australian scientist, as well as the newspapers of several countries ranging from Pravda to the Australian Women’s Weekly.7

The Soviet Union was one of several countries invited to send a delegation to the 1946 Charter Conference. The Soviets accepted the invitation, but when no more was heard from them Jessie Street cabled the people’s commissar for foreign affairs, V. Molotov, whom she knew from the San Francisco peace conference and later in London and Moscow. This produced the desired response, but not until 6 August after the conference had begun. The message said the Russian women, led by engineer Comrade Z. Gourina, were on their way with the mistaken belief that the conference began on 10 August. The conference was due to finish, not begin, on that date; but how the mistake occurred was not clear. The Soviet Foreign Ministry made the travel arrangements in an odd manner. The British legation in Moscow was asked about the quickest way of reaching Australia, then the
Soviet Foreign Ministry approached the Australian legation saying that transport had been arranged from London to Australia; so visas to enter Australia were issued. The cable from the British Embassy in Moscow to the Foreign Office claimed that the Soviet Foreign Ministry "misled" the Australian legation. However, if the Russians were capable of confusing the starting with the finishing date, they could equally have been under the misapprehension that travel arrangements had been made.

The Australian High Commission in London remained ignorant of the arrival of the delegation until 5 August, when they hurriedly cabled the Department of External Affairs in Canberra for instructions. External Affairs cabled back the next day saying there was no objection to the visas, but left the transport problem with the high commissioner. Transport was a problem; the only means was the regular Qantas Empire Airways flying-boat between Australia and Britain. Although four seats were reserved on each flight for passengers sponsored by government departments, the wool sales were imminent and the deputy high commissioner, in the absence of the high commissioner, was loath to give the Russian women priority over wool-buyers. From the point of view of export earnings, his was a commendable view, but he had other reasons.

The Deputy High Commissioner was Norman R. Mighell. He had been a Commonwealth coal commissioner from 1941 to 1946, during the period when J. A. Beasley was minister for supply and development. Beasley became high commissioner, and Mighell his deputy, in 1946. It was suggested at the time that the dual appointment was no coincidence. Though Beasley no longer followed the lead of Jack Lang, his anti-communism remained strong, and he regarded Jessie Street as a danger. As related earlier, in 1941 he had thwarted her plans to expand aid to Russia.

Mighell arranged seats for four of the Russian women on 13 August, with the remaining two leaving three days later. But that was not good enough for the Russians or Jessie Street, who had prepared a contingency plan. Although she had not expected as many as six Russian women, she quickly arranged for them to visit all states on a good-will mission. On the basis of the new
arrangements, the Russians lodged a protest through their embassy in London; Clive Evatt, whose responsibilities as a New South Wales government minister included tourism, sent a cable, and the British National Committee for the Celebration of International Women’s Day organized a deputation to wait on Mighell.

Aggravating the issue further, Pravda published an article about the detained delegation which accused the external affairs minister, H. V. Evatt, of complicity. The British Embassy in Moscow reported that the space devoted to “this relatively trivial matter suggests that Soviet authorities wish to inflate it into a major grievance”. Dr Evatt, who was in Paris at the time, anticipated developments and sent a message to Jessie Street before the article appeared in Pravda, assuring her that Mighell had handled the matter without reference to him. Jessie Street must have wondered who to believe; shortly after Evatt’s cable she received a cable from Comrade Gourina claiming that Mighell had acted after consulting Evatt.

In fact, Beasley’s role was more crucial than Evatt’s. On 19 August Beasley cabled Chifley: “REGARDING TRANSPORT OF RUSSIAN WOMEN I AM BOUND TO SAY THAT ARRIVAL IN AUSTRALIA AT MIDDLE OF ELECTION CAMPAIGN MAY NOT BE DESIRABLE. FEEL SATISFIED THAT GOOD WILL MISSION IS PHONEY AND THAT REAL PURPOSE MAY BE TO HELP COMMUNIST CANDIDATES AND PERHAPS HARM GENUINE DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES.” Chifley was quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald of the next day as saying that even if air priorities had been available, the Soviet women would still have arrived after the conference. Bishop Burgmann, the Anglican bishop of Goulburn, warned of the serious danger of grave misunderstanding if transport was not made available for the women. The chairman of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, Sir David Rivett, who had been in London at the time, praised Mighell’s handling of the situation.

A few days later Jessie Street went to Canberra and discussed the whole matter with the acting secretary of the Department of External Affairs, Alan (later Sir Alan) Watt, whom she knew, as they were both at the San Francisco conference. Reporting on the
conversation, Watt told Mighell that she seemed to accept that neither the government nor Mighell could justly be criticized for the failure of the Soviet women to arrive in time for the conference. She still wanted the women to come on a good-will mission, and had written to Chifley to that effect, Watt reported. Mighell replied that seats were available, but by that time the Russian women had gone home.

Mighell skilfully handled the tricky situation, but had the Australian press been more vigilant or had Jessie Street been aware of who had obtained air passages to Australia at the time, the incident could have concluded differently. Mighell was aware of a potential problem and wrote to E. G. Bonney, director-general of information in the Department of Information, about a number of French mannequins who were about to arrive in Australia for an *Australian Women's Weekly* fashion exhibition. The London office of Australian Consolidated Press, publishers of the *Women's Weekly*, had used its influence to arrange non-priority seats for the mannequins. Mighell warned, "I can imagine the Comm. Press saying that Australia House has refused to allow Russian ladies to go out on a goodwill tour and yet allows French mannequins to go for a prominent newspaper." Fortunately for Mighell, the press did not pursue that angle.

The net result of the incident was that Jessie Street’s attention was diverted from the conference, and her public statements supporting the delegation gave her critics new material with which to tarnish her reputation. Some members of the Charter committee were apprehensive about the Russian delegation, fearing rightly that the Soviet presence would distract attention from the real aims of the Charter.

The second conference was a worthy successor to the first, despite the controversy. The revised Charter took account of changing conditions. The twenty-eight previous clauses were reorganized into thirty-five, and the new document recognized that the Commonwealth government no longer had wartime controls over so many aspects of life in Australia. The Charter still reflected the women’s desire for the central government to take a firm lead in planning for the future. The education resolution urged the formulation of nation-wide plans; the child
care recommendation called for a "national program for promoting the welfare of children", and the housing clause advocated the establishment of national and regional town-planning authorities. In addition, there were some items, such as prison reform, suggesting more emphasis on rehabilitation than punishment. The booklet published after the conference also contained sixteen resolutions which covered other matters, such as food for India and restoration of a democratic government in Spain, which were not directly germane to questions of women's status and opportunities.

The 1946 conference was the last nationally representative gathering under the aegis of the Women's Charter movement. Jessie Street contributed to the dissension among women's groups which undermined its effectiveness, but, more importantly, interest in women's issues declined after the war finished. The division between progressive women's organizations, of which Jessie Street was a leader, and the older more conservative groupings, like the National Council of Women, became deeper and divided along ideological lines. This reflected the fear of communism which dominated the post-war Western world. In an anti-communist atmosphere, Jessie Street was a prominent apologist for the Soviet Union, and an influential feminist leader. Inevitably, the Charter Conference, with which she was identified, became a target for women members of the Labor Party and Roman Catholics who thought that she was leading women closer to communism.

Charter conferences were held thereafter, but of diminishing size and relevance. A third conference was held in Sydney in 1949; it was almost a totally New South Wales gathering. Only seventeen organizations were represented, and Jessie Street was a member of four of them. She was overseas when a fourth conference was held in 1952. Even she would have been dispirited to hear the president say that the conference opened in a period of crisis. "The amendments to the Charter . . . [are] an indication of how few have been our gains, how many our casualties,"
Notes

1. Charter Conference material is drawn from Jessie Street’s own papers, those of
the United Associations of Women in the Mitchell Library, and Australian
Women’s Charter records (MS 2302 — Volume Two of “Women in
Australia”, an annotated guide to records, incorrectly lists the Charter records
as MS 2303. AGPS, p. 102.)
2. Australian Archives, Canberra: Department of Post-war Reconstruction, series
CP/43/1, item 43/140.
3. Interview with Jessie Street, De Berg tapes, National Library of Australia, Canber
7. Material on the Soviet women’s delegation is contained in Jessie Street’s
papers in the National Library, newspaper reports, and the Australian High
A2910, item 430/3/233, Australian Archives, Canberra.
Appointment as a member of the Australian delegation to the foundation conference of the United Nations Organization, which was held in San Francisco in April and June of 1945, was Jessie Street’s greatest reward. She was the only woman in the considerable Australian delegation led by the deputy prime minister, F. M. Forde, but dominated by the external affairs minister, Dr Evatt. Prime Minister John Curtin took personal and public responsibility for Jessie Street’s selection, thereby elevating her to pre-eminence among Australian women in public life. But hers was the most controversial appointment.

She had qualifications to represent Australia apart from friendship with the prime minister and the external affairs minister and nearly winning for Labor a normally safe UAP electorate. She had been a foundation member of the Australian League of Nations Union in 1920, frequently serving on its executive, and twice attended as an observer sessions of the league in Geneva in 1930 and 1938. Also, in addition to her contribution to the war effort and feminist work, she was a member of the Commonwealth government’s Aliens Control Committee, which reviewed internment decisions, and she took an active part in post-war reconstruction planning discussions.

Pressure had been growing since 1943 for inclusion of women in Australian delegations to major international post-war conferences. Women had helped to win the war and felt therefore that they should help to plan the peace. Official files of the day show that women’s groups, apparently unsolicited, wrote to the
government nominating representatives. More numerous were letters inspired by Mrs W. J. Stelzer’s 2GB Happiness Club, which deluged offices of ministers and parliamentarians, particularly those from Sydney.¹

Once the composition of the delegation was announced, Curtin had to defend his choice of woman delegate. The earliest critics were a group of New South Wales Labor parliamentarians led by members of the former Labor Party (Non-Communist) whose spiritual leader was the former New South Wales premier, Jack Lang, and whose parliamentary leader was Jessie Street’s old adversary J. A. Beasley. Under the understandable misapprehension that Evatt had been responsible for her selection, the angry caucus members complained to Curtin that she was a “dilettante liberal-socialist” who had joined the Party as recently as 1939. They also claimed that her appointment was a reflection on Western Australian senator Dorothy Tangney. Similar expressions came from the central executive of the Victorian branch (“political outrage”), the women’s central organizing committee (“Senator Tangney . . . is a proved orator with a wide outlook on international affairs”), and the Darlinghurst branch, of which Jessie Street was a member.

These criticisms exhibited jealousy and malice, suspicion of a person who was not a horny-handed daughter of toil, and fear of Communist influence. They provided a foretaste of more trenchant attacks. Her critics were not confined to the Labor Party: in parliament a question without notice about her appointment gave Curtin the opportunity to identify himself publicly with her selection. New South Wales Country Party member, H. L. Anthony, asked Curtin if Jessie Street had been chosen because of her social position or because she was a defeated Labor candidate, and why she had been given priority over Dame Enid Lyons and Senator Tangney. Curtin replied: “I regarded Mrs Jessie Street as a very competent and cultured woman, one who has a broad view which is shared by a large section of the people of Australia.” “Yes, too broad,” interposed publican and Lang supporter Daniel Mulcahy. Curtin added that he did not regard success or failure in politics as relevant to a person’s qualifications to serve the government or the people of Australia,
Jessie Street about to board a plane at Mascot to attend the United Nations (Photo: Sydney Morning Herald)
and concluded by saying that several people might have been considered. "The two lady members of the Commonwealth Parliament are the first of their sex to be elected to it, and I considered that it would be wrong to ask them at this stage to give up their parliamentary work in order to attend the conference. I invite the honourable member to say which of them he would have chosen."

The Curtin-Anthony exchange was one of several about the delegation. The other complaints were more predictable. Country Party members called for the appointment of a primary producer representative, thereby overlooking the inclusion of one of their number, the member for Indi, John McEwen. There was dissatisfaction also among Labor members concerning the industry representative. The furore over these appointments was out of all proportion to the role the government expected the non-official delegates to play. The delegation was made up of two elements: the "advisers", some fifteen diplomats, economists, and high-ranking officers of the armed services; and a slightly smaller number of "consultants and assistants" drawn from the ranks of parliamentarians and representatives of major interest groups in the community such as the chambers of manufactures and returned servicemen. The latter were mostly window-dressing.

Jessie Street was never one to accept the government's view of her role. She prepared for departure with eager anticipation, which her husband described as "frenzied" because of concern that she might have to leave before the wedding of her son Roger. In the event, she attended the wedding and left on time, but as Kenneth Street wrote to a relative a few days before, "This departure and the wedding are running, at present, neck and neck." The Labor Party in Sydney showed its support for her appointment with a farewell party. The function was attended by wives of federal and state ministers and members, and representatives of most metropolitan branches. Mrs Curtin sent a message of good wishes.

The delegation arrived in San Francisco and divided into two factions. Curtin created the division by appointing Frank Forde and Dr Evatt as "delegates", but selecting Forde as overall
Jessie Street (far right) looks on while Dr Evatt and Australian officials discuss the issue at hand (Photo: National Library of Australia)
leader. The prime minister also sent several senior government officials, distinct from Evatt’s External Affairs officials, to advise Forde. Members of the delegation maintain that Curtin appointed Forde and chose his advisers to act as a curb on Evatt. The External Affairs officials, however, had a jealously guarded advantage: possession of the documentation relevant to the conference. The division between the factions was so apparent that the Forde team occupied the tenth floor of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel while the Evatt team was housed on the seventeenth floor. Ironically, considering her friendship with Evatt, Jessie Street was accommodated on the Forde floor, but that concerned her little, as the rest of the delegation took virtually no interest in the issue relating to women. Sir Paul Hasluck, who was an Australian diplomat at the time and a member of the delegation, has clearly illustrated the division between the two factions.

During the course of the conference the Kaiser shipyards, which were turning out Victory ships at the rate of one a day, conceived the idea of having the launchings performed by the heads of delegations, one ship for each of the United Nations. When it came to Australia’s turn, it was represented most strongly that Australia had two leaders, and therefore needed two ships. The Kaiser shipyards said, in effect, “O. K., we have got plenty of ships!” Therefore, one midnight — the hour being determined by the state of the tide — there gathered at the shipyards two separate groups of Australians, the adherents of Forde and the adherents of Evatt, each at the bows of a Victory ship in adjoining stocks. The Kaiser people had worked out a standard ceremony for these launchings. A shipyard choir sang a song and a shipyard representative recited some elocutionary rigmarole of dedication, then the distinguished foreigner performed the launching; and, in the second half of the programme, a shipyard orchestra played, and an American citizen, chosen for some symbolic association with the name of the Victory ship, said a little piece. In our case, with two ceremonies, the programme was put on in the normal order at one set of stocks and in reverse order at the other set of stocks. Thus, in the middle of proceedings we had the spectacle of the choir getting off its stand and scuttling through the darkness in order to be present at the second half of Mr Forde’s programme, while the orchestra, which had been at the first half of Mr Forde’s programme, came scuttling out of the darkness in order to perform at the second half of our programme. Afterwards we sat on opposite sides of the hall in a supper room as the guests of the Kaiser organization.
Each morning before the conference, Jessie Street would attend the daily “caucus” of the Australian delegation, where issues, strategy, tactics, assignment of delegation members, and other matters were talked over. The war in Europe finished during the weeks of the conference, and she attended Anthony Eden’s “Victory in Europe” reception at the Mark Hopkins Hotel for members of British Commonwealth delegations. Back in Sydney, Kenneth Street would have chuckled knowingly when he read a letter from Mrs Roger Lapham, wife of the Mayor of San Francisco: “I didn’t see much of your wife, except at the big things. She was one of the busiest women I have laid my two eyes on.”

Although Jessie Street took an interest in everything, matters relating to women and status of women were her major concern. The need for active espousal of women’s interests was plain. As Bertha Lutz of Brazil told one committee meeting, only 1 per cent of the delegates to the conference were women, no women had had the opportunity to speak at plenary sessions, and there were no women in the policy-making sections of the conference. This did not stop the women from pursuing their objectives with single-minded purpose. Their three major victories were: (1) specific mention of women in the United Nations Charter preamble, (2) equal employment opportunities for women in the UN and its agencies, and (3) a special agency of the UN to deal with women’s affairs.

The preamble presented no problems. On his own initiative, the South African leader, General Smuts, drafted the following words, which passed through the various committee stages without opposition: “To reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small” (emphasis added). More difficult was enshrining in the charter the principle that representation and participation in the UN and its agencies should be open to men and women on the same conditions. The main objection came from the United States and the United Kingdom, who could not see the need for such a provision. But the women maintained that there was need for specific detailing of women’s rights. As Jessie Street told one
committee “There was nothing specific in the law which excluded women from voting and yet in practically every country the women had to carry on a long agitation before they were given the vote.” The able Bertha Lutz concurred: “We also know that it has always been held that women have been included in the general term ‘men’ throughout the centuries, and we also know that it has always resulted in the fact that women were precluded from taking part in public affairs.”

The women had to struggle to have included in the charter a provision ensuring equality of employment within the UN and its agencies. The eventual wording was not as strong as they had originally hoped, and despite the inclusion of the provision, women still did not enjoy equal employment opportunities at the United Nations.

The women’s third victory was straightforward at San Francisco, but the conference resolve was subsequently diluted. The conference itself resolved that the Economic and Social Council would set up a special Status of Women Commission to study conditions and prepare reports on opportunities for women and the political, civil, and economic status of women, with special reference to discriminations and limitations placed on them on account of their sex. A declaration to that effect was recommended by the Brazilian delegation and was accepted by most countries, much to the glee of Jessie Street. She told a women’s conference after her return to Australia that she saw the establishment of this commission as a “splendid tribute to the work women have done in all countries for the war effort”. The survival of the Status of Women Commission became one of her causes.

After the success and excitement at the San Francisco conference, Jessie Street returned to Australia via Washington, London, Moscow, Paris, and New Delhi. She paid her own fares, apart from Sydney-Washington-Sydney (the Washington stage was included as the minister of immigration, Arthur Calwell, had asked her to go there on his behalf), and she travelled under prime ministerial patronage. J. B. Chifley, who became prime minister after Curtin’s death in July 1945, personally approved her travel plans and instructed the Australian high commissioner
in London to make all her arrangements. Chifley was a kindly man; had he realized the trouble that she would cause Australian diplomats and officials in America, England, and France, he may not have instructed them to give her every assistance. She treated the diplomats as though they were her servants, which they found galling; but in the Public Service the minister's word is law and the prime minister's word is holy writ.

During her peripatetic life, Jessie Street was accustomed to leaving the trivia of travel to those paid to look after such matters. Unfortunately the gears of the Commonwealth bureaucracy could not mesh to her mode of movement. The story of the Public Service's inability to cope with her travel arrangements and frequent ability to mislay her baggage is told on a file aptly entitled "Visit of Mrs Street". A number of folios tell of an official who found himself sending, by the diplomatic bag, large bundles of papers concerning a forthcoming international women's conference to the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Some of the problems were caused by official stupidity and incompetence. The High Commission had a long correspondence with the British Overseas Airways Corporation over a simple airfare refund, and responsibility for a sum of ten shillings for collecting her personal effects and taking them from the Royal Albert Dock to the Mount Royal Hotel took almost two years to resolve.¹

Despite the objections of the External Affairs Department, and unlike most of the non-official members of the Australian delegation, Jessie Street maintained her links with the United Nations, principally through the Status of Women Commission. The foundation conference at San Francisco resolved that the work for equal status and opportunity for women should rank as a commission. However, the first meeting of the United Nations General Assembly in London in 1946 demoted its role to that of a sub-unit of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) which, along with the General Assembly, Security Council, Trusteeship Council, and the International Court of Justice, was one of the permanent organs established by the United Nations Charter. The Status of Women Commission was established on 21 June 1946, to make recommendations and reports to ECOSOC on
promoting women's rights and to develop proposals designed to give effect to the principle that men and women should have equal rights. Nations held membership for three years at a time. Australia was a member for the first three years. Jessie Street was Australia's delegate for 1947 and 1948, and by the time she attended the first session at Lake Success in New York State, the commission had been transferred to the jurisdiction of the Human Rights Division. This was in effect a demotion, as the division was not one of the original organs established at San Francisco.

Delegates to the 1947 session of the Status of Women Commission could not reach agreement about their role. Jessie Street and the other feminists, who were in the majority, saw the commission as an international forum for arousing interest in women's status and opportunity in all countries. The United States, the United Kingdom, and the United Nations administration envisaged a narrower focus concentrating on cooperation with other United Nations agencies. The two-week session in February was supposed to lay the groundwork for future activities, but its report was unspecific.

The United Kingdom delegate, Mary Sutherland, had reservations about the vague nature of the commission's report. She warned against seeking to duplicate the work of other agencies when budget cuts were imminent. "Our aim," she said, "... should have been to send ... a report of an entirely constructive and practical turn, which would focus attention on specific recommendations on matters within the field assigned to us as our immediate program."

Jessie Street, on the other hand, would be satisfied with nothing less than complete freedom to cover all aspects of United Nations work. In a confidential report to Evatt, she complained that the United Kingdom was trying to limit the scope of her commission, that the session had been inadequately staffed, and that the United States had successfully reduced the frequency of meetings. She was primarily concerned with the broad issues, but the commission made two specific decisions which directly affected her own future as an Australian delegate: she was selected as vice-chairman of the Status of Women Commission
and appointed as its representative to a Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva in December 1947. The commission also recommended that member states encourage the establishment of national status of women co-ordinating agencies of non-government organizations.

An attack of influenza delayed Jessie Street's return to Australia until April 1947. By this time rival women's groups had begun to organize their own committee to liaise with the Status of Women Commission. A bitter fight ensued. The protagonists were basically the same groupings as those for and against participating in the 1946 Women's Charter Conference, but the ideological divisions between left and right, between socialist and conservative, had hardened, reflecting the general political climate outside the women's movement. The fight was only ostensibly about control and official recognition of the local status-of-women co-ordinating committee.

The coalition that opposed Jessie Street seemed to have the upper hand in the confusing series of meetings that followed her return to Australia. Her supporters resorted to closed meetings with credential checks at the door. The press was excluded from some of the meetings, which, as always is the case, excited its interest but did not help it to understand the tangled dispute. One journalist, Ronald McKie, made a determined effort to untangle the skeins. He traced the moves and countermoves from April to August 1947, and concluded:

Personally, I feel that behind this wrangle is politics, sectarianism, deep-seated antipathy between women's organizations, hysteria and extremely unhealthy personal egotism.

I feel the Government is indirectly to blame for not moving weeks ago on this female warfare, which included dubious tactics, stopping this nonsense, calling all women's organizations together and appointing a representative co-ordinating agency. McKie diagnosed the problem, but his prescription was an impossibility. The relevant part of the government was the Department of External Affairs, which was opposed to Jessie Street's appointment as delegate to the Status of Women Commission but for different reasons from her rivals in the women's movement. External Affairs regarded her as a nuisance who was
meddling in its preserve. Australia’s foreign office has traditionally resented political appointees, and even other bureaucrats, who usurp what it sees as its function. In Jessie Street’s case, its opposition was shared by the department’s permanent head, Dr John Burton, who had been Evatt’s personal selection.

However, the department was in a quandry. Common sense dictated that it should not become involved in the women’s dispute, particularly as Jessie Street was known to enjoy the patronage of the minister for external affairs. The department steadfastly refused to adjudicate publicly in the dispute, but in October a decision was made that Jessie Street would not represent Australia at the Human Rights Commission in Geneva. One of the reasons for this decision was a shortage of foreign exchange; this was a poor excuse, as the United Nations would have paid her fares. Possibly deliberately, the decision was made known while Evatt was overseas and prime minister Chifley was acting minister for external affairs.

Jessie Street’s supporters organized a telegram campaign urging the government to reverse the decision, and Victorian Independent Labour member, Doris Blackburn, questioned Chifley in the House of Representatives on 6 November. His reply endorsed the decision of the Department of External Affairs.

There has been no discrimination against Mrs Street. As acting Minister for External Affairs, I have reviewed the various committees now operating, the requests for government sponsorship and the meeting of Australian delegates’ expenses. In the case of the committee of which Mrs Street is a member, I believe there is no need, at this stage, for a representative to travel from this country. I do not consider that Australian representatives should be sent to meetings of those bodies, unless some real purpose can be served by their attendance.

Although prevented from attending the Human Rights Commission, she was still a delegate to the Status of Women Commission. She went to its meeting in 1948 no longer confident of the full backing of her government. She was swimming against the national and international tide. A circular addressed to those
who had sent telegrams of support to Chifley summed up her feelings: "It is small wonder that the progress of women is so slow when so many and unjustifiable obstacles are placed in the way of those working in this field."

In 1948 she left Australia for the last time as an official delegate. She had been repudiated by the prime minister, whereas 2½ years before, the previous prime minister, John Curtin, claimed personal responsibility for choosing her as a delegate to the San Francisco Conference. The message was clear: regardless of Chifley’s personal feelings, Jessie Street had become a political liability to her own party. She no longer had sufficient influence to overturn a decision by the Department of External Affairs.

After the 1948 meeting, the department was reluctant to refund the expenses she had incurred; an amount of £450. She was reimbursed finally, thanks to Evatt’s interventions. Being accustomed to bureaucratic delays, she wrote formal, typed letters to the department, then sent the same message in a handwritten note to the minister. Knowing that letters to Evatt often did not penetrate his ministerial staff, she used to post letters to Evatt’s wife, Mary Alice, and ask her to forward the contents to her husband. A less determined person would have abandoned the battle to preserve the effectiveness of the Status of Women Commission, but Jessie Street was tireless in her efforts, regardless of her own status at the United Nations. Sometimes she attended the General Assembly and sessions of other agencies as a representative of bodies such as the British Anti-Slavery Society, which was designated a non-government organization of the United Nations. More often, she was accredited as a press correspondent for a variety of trade union and peace journals. Press credentials were a device that gained her entrance to the United Nations, but she did fulfil her journalistic obligations. She represented an assortment of newspapers and journals from 1950 to 1965; perhaps the most unlikely was the South Australian Farmer, whose editor, M. H. Tossell, was a friend of the South Australian Aboriginal rights leader Dr Charles Duguid. Her press and other credentials were not a guarantee of entry, however; in 1956 the United States refused to grant her a visa to attend a
United Nations meeting in New York on the grounds that she was a member of an international Communist women’s organization.

While her interests were catholic, she never ceased writing letters, organizing deputations, and generally lobbying on behalf of the Status of Women Commission. The main problem was that the rest of the United Nations did not take the women seriously. The spirit of the San Francisco Conference, which recognized that women’s contribution to the war should be carried on into the peace, quickly died. In 1947 Jessie Street wrote angrily to a colleague about a meeting she had attended where some members of ECOSOC had belittled the Status of Women Commission: “The Canadian delegate, Mr Smith, indulged in various irresponsible and inaccurate witticisms which were rewarded by considerable mirth at our expense.”

Unconsciously she contributed to that mirth in her response to a gratuitous comment by the Canadian delegate about women being the “weaker sex”. She told the meeting that women were not necessarily weaker than men, and illustrated her point with an example from her own family, when her daughter had exhibited greater strength than her son-in-law in a domestic situation. To emphasize the story, she said that her son-in-law was the famous cricketer Jack Fingleton, who had faced the onslaught of the English fast bowler Harold Larwood in the pre-war “body-line” test match series. Another Australian who was at the same meeting recalls that the simultaneous interpreter service, a part of all United Nations meetings, had translation problems with cricket and body-line. While most of the English-speakers appreciated her anecdote, the faces of the other delegates, particularly those from South America, were studies of total incomprehension.

The third meeting of the Status of Women Commission held in Beirut in March 1949, was used by the United States as a forum to criticize the Soviet Union. The pretext for the attack was the Soviet Union’s refusal to grant exit visas to Russian women married to foreigners. The Russian delegate, Madame Popova, was the one dissenting voice against an anti-Soviet resolution. Had Jessie Street been present she would probably have
supported the Russian woman, thereby embarrassing the Labor
government in Australia which was trying to remove from its
record any suggestion of condoning communism. On the
particular issue of nationality of women, Jessie Street had a
double standard. As a feminist, she applauded the post-war
legislation in Australia and other British Commonwealth
countries which allowed married women to retain their own
nationality after marriage. As a pro-Russian socialist, she had a
different view. When the same question of exit visas arose in July
1947, Jessie Street publicly defended the Soviet Union on the
grounds that Russian women were needed at home to bear
children to replace the Soviet population so sadly depleted during
the war.

In 1949 the commission also called on the United Nations to
promote its status within the UN to that of a division. This
became one of Jessie Street's causes, which she pursued actively
until 1965. Isabel McCorkindale, who had helped organize the
1946 Women's Charter Conference, was the Australian delegate
to the fourth Status of Women Commission meeting in 1950.
Jessie Street briefed her thoroughly in a letter which concluded:
"Do not forget that in this wicked world, people take you at your
own valuation, so make a big noise. That is what the men do!"

Discrimination within as well as outside of the United Nations
continued, and in 1953 the commission "deplored" the fact that
very few women occupied senior and policy-making positions in
the UN itself, and that no improvement had been discernible. By
the end of the fifties, even Jessie Street was disillusioned.
Women's organizations around the world had not grasped the
importance of the Status of Women Commission, she told the
International Assembly of Women in Copenhagen in April 1960
during the celebrations for the fiftieth anniversary of Inter-
national Women's Day. The commission also had to contend
with government reluctance to change long-standing discrimi-
natory laws and regulations, she said.

Later the same year, the United Nations reorganized its
structure, but the women's pleas were unheeded. Of the three
sections of the Human Rights Division, the Status of Women
Commission had the smallest staff. Jessie Street's disaffection
was apparent in a letter to a friend in December 1960: "A great change for the worse has come about in the atmosphere of the United Nations Secretariat. I find a casualness of attitude among the lower echelons that is very disappointing, as if any thought of carrying out the Charter’s purpose had been quite forgotten."

Her enthusiasm and determination returned in 1964. After more than two years sequestered in northern New South Wales writing her memoirs, she went on an overseas trip which included her first visit to Africa. In Ghana she met a woman justice of the Supreme Court, Judge Naiggi, who restored her faith in the Status of Women Commission.

Writing to the judge after the visit, Jessie Street said she was confident the commission could be promoted to a division with the support of African women. Backing from the Soviet Union and socialist countries was assured, and several other nations were possibilities. In an attempt to secure that support, she sought an interview with the Soviet ambassador to the United Nations, Dr Nikolai Fedorenko, while she was in New York early in 1965 for the General Assembly. Soon after she wrote to the secretary-general of the United Nations, U Thant, saying the United Nations had taken the lead in campaigning against race discrimination. A more intensified campaign was needed to eliminate the more prevalent sex discrimination, and such a campaign was a United Nations responsibility as half the world’s population was being discriminated against.

Her persistent efforts on behalf of the Status of Women Commission were of no immediate avail, but a decade later the United Nations did sponsor such a campaign in the form of International Women’s Year. "I believe it is a responsibility of the United Nations to take a lead in this campaign," Jessie Street had told U Thant in 1965.

The United Nations was an important part of Jessie Street’s life. She believed in the United Nations Charter, just as she believed in the platform of the Australian Labor Party. Her annotated copy of the charter was a constant source of reference. When being interviewed, she used to produce her charter and her membership card for the Ironworkers’ Union as though they
were badges of office. To her, the United Nations represented a
hope for world peace and for an end to discrimination based on
sex. After she left the Labor Party in 1949, the United Nations
assumed more importance in her mind; it was an institution she
could believe in at a time when her beliefs and ideals were out of
step with most of the Western world.

Notes

1. Australian Archives, Canberra, Department of External Affairs, series A989,
   item 43/56/1/39; Prime Minister's Department, series A461, item 2420/1
2. Paul Hasluck, Australia and the Formation of the United Nations, Royal
3. Australia Archives, Canberra, Australian High Commission, London, series
   A2910, item 438/3/638.
5. Jessie Street’s correspondence with Dr Evatt, Evatt papers, Flinders
   University, Adelaide, South Australia.
The Peace Movement

In the years before the 1949 election, when a coalition led by R. G. Menzies ended eight years of Labor administration, life became increasingly difficult for a Supreme Court judge’s wife who combined membership of the Communist-led Ironworkers’ Union with the conservative Macquarie Club. Internationally, Stalin’s red menace was expanding eastwards while Mao’s Communists were taking over in China, lending reality to the yellow peril nightmare. In Australia, prime minister Chifley was attempting to nationalize banking, and continuing irksome wartime restrictions such as petrol rationing smacked of socialism. On the union front, Chifley sent troops to replace striking coalminers, while the waterside workers’ and Ironworkers’ unions were led by Communists.

Judging from the anti-Labor landslide of the 1949 election, many Australians viewed the world in those black-and-white images. In that atmosphere, Jessie Street became a leader of the peace movement. “Red Jessie” was such a well-known and committed socialist that she contaminated everything she touched. On 24 August 1948 an article in the Sydney Morning Herald referred to the United Associations of Women as an organization in which Communists and fellow travellers either formed a majority or wielded undue influence. Their denials may have been effective, as the Labor Party did not actually ban the association until 1950, despite the fact that reference in the press to Communist influence or control of a particular organization often led to a swift Labor Party ban. Her resignation from the Labor
Jessie Street addressing a peace rally in Trafalgar Square, London in 1948 (Photo: National Library of Australia)
Party early in 1949 fanned the flame. The Melbourne Herald of 22 April 1949 quoted a former Victorian Communist Party official, Cecil Sharpley, as saying, "The Communist Party catalogues a number of well-known Australians on whose views it can sometimes trade." Jessie Street headed the list, followed by leading railway union official Jack Chapple, Judge Foster of the Arbitration Court, and author Vance Palmer. She did nothing to avoid her attackers, and on at least one occasion was physically assaulted. According to the Sydney Daily Telegraph of 21 July 1949, punches were thrown at a meeting of two thousand women in the Town Hall.

The meeting was held in protest against the coal strike and the "gate-crashing" Reds caused uproar. Four women tried to throw prominent socialist, Mrs Jessie Street, out of the hall. An elderly woman pushed a communist supporter in the face. The meeting, organised by the Australian Women’s Movement against Socialism, carried resolutions condemning communism and socialisation and of "unrelenting hostility to the lawless and heartless coal strike."

Hecklers from the communist dominated New Housewives’ Association kept the meeting in uproar. They screamed abuse at the three main women speakers who bitterly attacked the strikers and the Communist Party, and kept up a barrage of cat-calls even after the chairwoman (Mrs L. O'Mally Wood) had threatened to have them ejected.

The noise was at its height when Mrs Jessie Street moved to the front of the hall and asked for permission to make a speech urging the Government to take conciliatory steps to end the strike.

Mrs Street, who broke her left leg recently, was limping and leaning on a stick.

The meeting’s organiser (Mrs Preston Stanley Vaughan) shouted over the noise: “Mrs Street wants to speak and we will not let her. She is a well-known socialist. This is our meeting and we don’t want her. Mrs Street is a member of the Ironworkers’ Union which is a party to the present savagery desolating Australia today.”

A group of women caught hold of Mrs Street, crying “Communist” and “socialist”, and tried to drag her towards the door.

Mrs Street shook them off and left the hall.

The substance of that report is correct, except that Jessie Street had a badly sprained ankle, not a broken leg, and the impression of her as a female all-in wrestler is awry. She was not a big woman and was in her sixty-first year at the time.
Jessie Street with Dr Hewlett Johnson, the Dean of Canterbury, during his Australian visit in 1950. (Photo: Sydney Morning Herald)
The "Red Dean" and friends, at La Perouse, Sydney  (Photo: Australian Peace Council)
Three weeks earlier she had attended a less rowdy but more significant meeting in Melbourne which formed the Australian Peace Council. There she was in sympathetic company. The twenty-five foundation members included Doris Blackburn, MHR, Labor intellectuals Dr J. F. Cairns and Brian Fitzpatrick, three nonconformist clerics, writers, trade union officials, and representatives of leftist and religious organizations. The first international peace gathering was held in 1949, and the Australian council was keen to catch up by organizing state divisions and holding a national congress the following year. Jessie Street became New South Wales president and organizer for the visit of the Dean of Canterbury, Dr Hewlett Johnson. He was the principle overseas speaker at the national congress, which took place over four days in Melbourne in April 1950. Like her, the "Red Dean", as Dr Johnson was known, had become a convinced socialist when he first went to Russia in 1938. She had more in common with him than with many of her Australian colleagues, and he became an adviser and friend as well as a fellow worker for peace.

Reaction to the peace movement was predictable. It included allegations of communist control, Labor Party bans, and inability to hire some meeting places, notably the Sydney Town Hall. But the Dean’s visit and the advent of a Liberal-Country Party government added a new twist. Questions were asked in parliament, particularly of the minister for immigration, Harold Holt, about the possibility of refusing to allow the Dean into Australia, and about a statement he had made in 1933 suggesting Australia open its north to Chinese and Japanese. Menzies described the dean as “a singularly foolish person”, but Holt said he would be allowed into the country if his passport was valid. The United States, however, refused him transit visas for Honolulu and San Francisco for his intended return journey.

Despite the difficulties, the Dean’s visit and message attracted considerable public support. Press estimates of attendances at public meetings were ten thousand in Melbourne, seven thousand and five thousand at two separate meetings in Sydney, and five thousand in Brisbane. Newspaper accounts stressed the Dean’s sympathy with communism, and the Dean played into
their hands. No doubt blinded by his idealism, he was indeed “singularly foolish”: the Australian Peace Council’s journal commemorating the Melbourne congress devoted six pages to extracts from his three speeches, and the predominant feature was his praise of the Soviet Union and glorification of Stalin. Other speakers chose to praise and magnify the Dean, comparing him to a reviled prophet. In Jessie Street’s words: “He was treated in exactly the same way as Jesus Christ was treated. He was welcomed by the same people that welcomed Jesus Christ and he was snubbed by exactly the same type of person as snubbed Jesus Christ.”

The Australian Peace Manifesto contrasted sharply with the religious and pro-Soviet rhetoric of the speeches. The manifesto concluded,

This Congress, representing the united voice of 550,000 Australians, resolves to establish a nation-wide peace movement and expresses its confidence that from this Congress will grow such a movement, capable, in co-operation with similar movements in other lands, of securing our country from the menace of atomic war, and of creating the possibility of a peaceful, secure and happy future for our people.

In undemonstrative language, it affirmed belief in the United Nations and called for an end to the arms race, the abolition of international agreements on the atomic bomb, and the establishment of friendly relations with Asian nations, including recognition of mainland China. Opposition was expressed to Australian intervention in South-East Asian wars, to the wars themselves, and to war preparations, including conscription. Neither Australia’s participation in the “Malayan Emergency” nor United States bases in Australia was specifically mentioned in the manifesto, but they were not ignored by the Australian speakers. The talk of rights of national self-determination and of US imperialism had a ring which carried through to the end of the Vietnam War two decades later. Jessie Street did not live long enough to see peace in Vietnam, but she was alive when tens of thousands of protesters sat in the streets of Melbourne, when atmospheric testing of nuclear devices was coming to an end, and when disarmament talks were underway.¹

Although the peace movement was no more than a minor
Jessie Street arrives in Warsaw in November 1950 for the second World Peace Conference
irritant in 1950, Harold Holt energetically exposed alleged Com­munist influence, a role that extended beyond the responsibilities of his labour and immigration portfolios. Ten days after the Dean of Canterbury left Australia on 30 April, Holt produced in parlia­ment an “extremely interesting” document which “showed that there was a definite link between international communism, as planned by the Kremlin, and the peace offensive which resulted in the peace conference”.

At the invitation of the Dean and the British Peace Council, Jessie Street flew to England at the end of June, out of Holt’s sight but not out of his mind. First she went to Canada as a peace speaker and then to Warsaw as Australian delegate to the Second World Peace Conference. This was to have been held in Sheffield, but the British government refused entry visas to many delegates. At Warsaw she was elected to the Bureau of the World Council which was the inner circle of the international peace movement, and, as a result, she joined the not-so-select band of peace workers and others whose freedom of movement was limited by visa and passport restrictions. Because she was born in India and her father was British, Jessie Street was entitled to a British passport, which placed her outside Australian immigration jurisdiction. But that did not deter Holt from harassing her.

The Australian government placed restrictions on Australians travelling to peace conferences. So Jessie Street applied for and was given a British passport at the end of 1950. This gave her the additional advantage of almost visa-free travel in Western Europe. That these simple facts should occupy space in Australian, British, and European newspapers was strange in itself, and the manner of their becoming public knowledge was stranger still. A minister of the Crown has several avenues of gaining publicity, among them issuing a press statement or arranging for a friendly backbencher to ask a question in parlia­ment. In this instance the information came to the attention of the press as a written question which was answered on 16 November, 1951, but not publicized until a week later. It was odd for a minister with a good story to let it dribble out in that fashion — particularly Holt, who usually capitalized on opportunities to expose what he saw as leftist calumny.
Holt's written answer said that someone posing as, or purporting to represent, the Australian resident minister in London telephoned the British passport office asking the officials to help Jessie Street. After the first stories based on the written answer were published, Holt told the newspapers that the telephone call could have originated in the Communist Party rooms in London. Both Holt's allegations and Jessie Street's denials were well publicized. An unfortunate side-effect was that shortly thereafter she went to France but was refused entry, although she resisted efforts to eject her by grasping the airport railings with suffragette determination. Eventually she was manhandled by French security onto a plane back to England. As she explained in a letter to the editors of several newspapers, French authorities recognized her passport after she obtained a letter from the British Foreign Office testifying to its validity, but the French insisted they had been justified in treating her as an undesirable after the responsible Australian minister alleged that she had obtained her passport by fraud.

Holt said the chief migration officer in London was the source of his information for the written answer in parliament, and Jessie Street said the story regarding the telephone call was a fabrication. "It is just a figment of the imagination coming from the fevered brains of people who are preparing for war while I am working for peace," she said to one newspaper. As she pointed out to another: why should anyone telephone when she had had a British passport before and could not be refused one again because of her birth and partiality. An irony of the passport affair was that a decade before, Holt, then minister for labour and national service in Menzies first government, wrote to Jessie Street expressing the hope "that much good will come of the contacts that already exist between you and my Department".2

Despite Holt's efforts, Jessie Street did not lose her Australian passport, but about this time she did lose a badge of respectability in the labour movement — membership of the Federated Ironworkers' Association. She had become a member during the war when she worked in a Melbourne munitions factory for about six weeks to experience conditions firsthand. Working under an assumed identity (Jane Smith, a domestic servant from
England), she travelled to work by car each day from the comfort of a friend’s home in Toorak, but after the war she acquired a union membership card in her own name which she frequently flourished.

Friendship with the Ironworkers’ Association national secretary, Ernest Thornton, ensured continued association with the union and assured accreditation as United Nations correspondent for its journal, Labour News. After government recognition was withdrawn, press credentials enabled her to attend sessions of the UN General Assembly. While she was embroiled in the passport dispute, the new national secretary of the Ironworkers’ Association, Laurie Short, was finalizing his three-year task of wresting the union from Communist control. Winning that struggle, within the union itself and through the courts, was the first major victory for the Industrial Groups, which were dedicated to eradicating Communist influence in the unions and the Labor Party. The Ironworkers’ battle involved John (later Sir John) Kerr, James (later Senator) McClelland of the ALP and Jack (later Senator) Kane of the DLP.

Neither side held the monopoly over virtue or skulduggery. One previously unpublished story concerns an issue of the still-Communist-controlled Labour News immediately before an important union election. The “Groupers” knew that the Communists would use the journal to promote their candidates. To counter the dissemination of Communist propaganda, the Groupers hijacked fourteen mailbags containing the entire pre-election issue from a post office and pulped the copies. Disposal of the mail bags was a more difficult problem. Defamation laws prevent further elucidation, but apparently John Kerr was not involved. Labour News was firmly in Short’s hands by the time of the union’s national conference in January 1952.

Immediately before the conference, Short was confidently predicting that the last remaining bonds with the Communists would be severed and that the conference would “deal” with members who were not really ironworkers, such as Jessie Street, “who had been an ironworker for about two or three days about ten years ago”. Short was an accurate prophet and the conference decided to cable the United Nations in Paris withdrawing her ac-
creditation, but fortunately for her, other credentials were available. Fellow peace worker and friend of Russia, Jim Healy, who was general secretary of the Waterside Workers' Federation, offered her the position of correspondent with his union's journal, the *Maritime Worker*. However, Brian Fitzpatrick, who edited *Australian News Review*, had already stepped into the breach.

The correspondence Jessie Street maintained with people like Healy and former minister for immigration Arthur Calwell kept her in touch with events in Australia, especially the divisions within the Labor Party. The Industrial Groups movement led to the split in the fifties and the formation of the splinter Democratic Labor Party. In October 1951 Calwell optimistically told her, "Whatever divisions there may be in our ranks will not, I feel, show up again until we become a Government." This was not party platitude because Calwell respected her and had appointed her to the Immigration Advisory Panel in 1947. Writing a year later, a pessimistic but more realistic Healy deplored opposition leader Evatt's apparent shift towards the Industrial Groups, and noted, "He could quite easily, before the next election, find himself with a Party split from top to bottom on this question of industrial groups."

Her own vicissitudes and news of Labor dissention served to strengthen her commitment to socialism, although she was no longer a member of the Australian Labor Party. Isolated from day-to-day politics in Australia, she was convinced that Labor's road back to power lay through the socialist objective, and she urged this course on her friends, especially Dr Evatt, who became leader of the opposition after Chifley's death.

The welcome accorded her behind the Iron Curtain contrasted with the invective and harassment elsewhere and acted as a spur to her resolve. She wrote to Evatt from Moscow in December 1950, after the World Peace Congress, of the cheering crowds and flowers in Warsaw and Prague. "We are being feted" in Moscow, she wrote. The happy and vigorous people were enthusiastically and successfully building a socialist economy, which was a reason for anti-Russian propaganda in the west. The next letter was a three-page diatribe dated April 1951 telling Evatt that socialism
was the next step in the evolution of society, and urging him to renew his efforts in the forthcoming election. Then, in total contrast, she concluded, "Have you heard this one?" and told him two jokes, the first being about a canvasser visiting a woman surrounded by numerous children, with one in her arms and another on the way. Canvasser — I have come to ask you to vote Labor, madam. The woman — Well, I don't know. I've been in labour all my life now. I think I'll give them contraceptives a go.

Humour and fortitude dominate, although she was beset with difficulties and defeat, aggravated by separation from her dearly loved family. The same letter contains a trace of self-pity. "I know from bitter experience what they (the great enemies of progress) can do and how insidious their attacks are," she wrote after congratulating Dr Evatt on his successful High Court challenge to the Communist Party dissolution legislation and telling him to disregard the attacks of his detractors. Early the following year, when she wrote again, the fighting spirit had returned and she was putting out feelers about rejoining the Labor Party. In 1953, Jessie Street was taken to Moscow as a Soviet guest to attend Stalin's funeral in March. Her report to the Australian friends of Russia eulogized Stalin with the same biblical hyperbole which marked the Dean's visit: "Stalin was loved and honoured by his people [as] few men in his time have been. To speak metaphorically we may regard Stalin as the Moses of the oppressed people of the Soviet Union. But he was a Moses who not only lived to lead his people into the promised land, but for 35 years was able to guide and help them." Unlike many Westerners who shared her belief in Russian socialism, her faith survived the Soviet invasion of Hungary of 1956. This was shown by her presence in Moscow four years later at the establishment of the Russian branch of the USSR-Australia Society. Australia was officially represented by the first secretary of its embassy, R. A. Woolcott.

Was her faith built on the thin ice of the 1936 Stalinist Constitution, which declared that women had equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, public, and political life? Was such an intelligent woman really a "Communist dupe" who did not realize that despite enormous achievements and
propaganda "Soviet women remain a distinctly second sex"? Doubtless she was ignorant of the worst aspects of exploitation of Soviet women, but her attitude would probably have changed little had she known that equal status and opportunity were not a reality in socialist countries. Jessie Street believed that women's equality in fact would flow from women's equality in law; therefore she could pin her faith to a piece of paper, the Stalinist Constitution, even though the real situation did not match the written word. In a pamphlet titled *Work of Women's Organizations in Capitalist Democracies and Socialist Democracies*, she wrote that progress towards equal rights in the former was slow:

The work of women's organizations in capitalistic democracies consists mainly of raising money, conducting campaigns, organizing meetings, training speakers, arranging deputations, endeavouring to persuade Members of Parliament to take the initiative in or support legislation for equality, obtaining the co-operation of trade unions and other bodies in support of their claims.

The courage, persistence and selfless hard work of these early feminist pioneers in obtaining rights for women contributed greatly to the development of the ideas of quality, justice and democracy in the countries.

Jessie Street's background, attitudes, and actions were at one with the suffragette sorority, and, as Jean Devanny perceived, she was a woman who dealt with causes, not effects. Hence she was attracted to the philosophy of a nation which incorporated equal rights for women in its Constitution: She believed that once the principle was enshrined, equal rights would become a reality as a matter of course. This was consistent with the suffragettes' belief that "Votes for Women" would precede equality for women. Similarly, when Jessie Street considered joining the Labor Party, she turned first to its official platform and was impressed by the socialist objective contained therein. The same accent on principles and constitutions was apparent in her feminist work.

One of her greatest achievements was the organization of the national women's conference in 1943 which moulded their wartime aspirations into the Australian Women's Charter. Internationally, she placed great faith in the United Nations Charter, which she regarded as a blueprint for peace, and always carried
copy with her. When she took up the cause of Aboriginal rights, she believed that discrimination against black Australians would disappear once the discrimination in the Constitution was removed. The same theme was evident in her memoirs. Writing about her first visit to Russia in 1938 she said: "At last I had found a country where these principles [equal rights, pay, status and opportunity for women] were observed."

In her mind socialism and peace were intertwined. She believed that the profit motive of capitalism led armaments manufacturers to subvert the desire for peace. The makers of implements of warfare wanted war to increase their profits, but the same motive did not exist in socialist countries. Nations on both sides of the Iron Curtain called for peace, and Jessie Street accepted the rhetoric of the Soviet Union but rejected that of the West. Her belief was strengthened by her knowledge of the suffering of the Russian people during the war. Her admiration for their struggle contributed to her exaggerated praise of Russia and Stalin. She was one of many around the world who expressed such views.

In Australia, she was generally regarded as a well-meaning but misguided person gulled by Communist propaganda. She certainly associated with Communists, but never joined the Communist Party. Asked why by a newspaper interviewer, she replied jokingly that she would not join a party which did not have any women on its executive committee.

Notes

1. The peace movement's own records, which are kept at its offices in the Boilermakers' Union building in Sydney, provided the most comprehensive material, particularly of the Dean of Canterbury's visit. The most extensive press coverage was by the Newcastle Morning Herald. Jessie Street's papers and those of former Senator William Morrow in the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland were also useful.

2. Australian Archives, Canberra, Department of Post-war Reconstruction, UAW Representations, series CP43/1, item 43/263. Although signed by Holt, this letter was written, as is usually the case by an official of his department and approved by the secretary, Ronald Wilson. The correspondence dealt with early post-war planning, and Jessie Street was ensuring that her views were taken into consideration.

3. Like most correspondents, Jessie Street found that writing to Dr Evatt was a
one-way affair. At one stage she protested that he would not hear from her again unless he responded. She kept on writing, but he never replied. The originals of her letters are in Dr Evatt's papers at Flinders University, South Australia. Copies of some of them are in her own papers, as is the two-way correspondence with Healy and Calwell.


5. The last chapter of Jean Devanny's *Bird of Paradise* is devoted to Jessie Street.

Aborigines

"Our young men are hunters our old men make songs,
And the words of our people are whiplashed with wrongs.
In the tribes of our country they sing, and are proud
Of the Pilbara men and the white man, McLeod."

Dorothy Hewett, "Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod"

Jessie Street's involvement in the cause of Aboriginal advancement was a crowning achievement. Towards the end of a life dedicated to battling for usually unpopular causes, she initiated and helped organize the movement that culminated in the successful referendum of 1967 which gave full legal citizenship to Aborigines for the first time. The referendum victory was a major breakthrough, although it heralded only the beginning of a fair deal for black Australians. Unlike most of Jessie Street's crusades, such as equal pay for women, the referendum was fought and won in her lifetime.

Although Aboriginal rights did not become one of her causes until late in life, family interest stretched back for more than a century. In Truth or Repose she recalled that her grandfather, Edward Ogilvie, had enjoyed a feudal relationship with the blacks who worked on Yulgilbar. He respected their customs and did not allow his white employees to fraternize or abuse the blacks, or allow them to be given liquor. "My grandfather's treatment of them was patriarchal but under the circumstances it was the best approach," she wrote, and as a result the Ogilvie family and their Aborigines enjoyed mutual respect and affection. One of Jessie Street's aunts, Mary, ran a school for Aboriginal children while
she lived at Yulgilbar. Jessie Street’s mother also took an active interest in the welfare of the property’s Aborigines.

In *Squatter’s Castle*, George Farwell delved more deeply into the Ogilvie/Aborigine relationship. Farwell explained that by 1840 relations between blacks and whites in the Clarence River district had deteriorated to such an extent that it was unsafe for squatters and shepherds to venture far from their settlements. The tense situation arose from the brutal slaughter of blacks, as often as not for sins they had not committed. After one such atrocity, Edward Ogilvie adopted a young black called Pundoon, meaning wallaby, whose mother had apparently been shot. His motive was basically self-interest; he wanted to learn the Aborigines’ language, as he realized he could best master the wild tribes by speaking their tongue. According to his sister Ellen, he quickly achieved fluency in the native language and even wrote a grammar, but no copies have survived. Within a few years Pundo was reunited with his relatives and Edward and Fred Ogilvie were on excellent terms with the local tribes. The brothers brought this about by seeking out the Aborigines and establishing conditions of truce, an extremely difficult task as the tribes had melted into the hills following their first taste of white man’s methods. The Ogilvies kept the peace by respecting tribal attitudes and by ensuring that the tribesmen continued to respect them. The latter was achieved by challenging and often beating sturdy tribesmen in physical contests such as fighting, swimming, and foot racing.

In a long letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 4 June 1842, Edward wrote: “We said we had made war upon them because they had killed white people, but that now our anger was gone, and we wished to live at peace with them; that we wanted nothing in their country but the grass and would leave them their kangaroos, their possums, and their fish.” George Farwell commented that although it was never officially recognized, “the remarkable exchange in the hills changed the whole course of tribal relations. The two races had come to understanding each other, learning something of each other’s strengths and motivations. This did not in the least obscure the fact that, ultimately, there could be only one victor.”
Jessie Street did not become actively involved in the Aboriginal rights movement until the 1950s although she had exhibited earlier concern consistent with her general outlook. Humanitarian and Church-based women's organizations had traditionally taken an interest in Aboriginal problems, and Jessie Street was well aware of this. Faith Bandler remembers her tut-tutting and saying something ought to be done about the sad plight of black Australians at peace meetings in the 1940s.

The original Women's Charter emanating from the conference Jessie Street chaired in 1943 contained a plank calling for federal control of Aboriginal affairs (clause 24). This reflected the policies of several of the organizations represented, including the United Associations of Women. The Australian Federation of Women Voters and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in particular had been lobbying for federal control, and in 1934 had succeeded in having the matter discussed at the annual Premiers' Conference, albeit without positive result. The women's organizations were supporting predominantly white Australian groups interested in Aboriginal affairs and supported by the British-based Anti-Slavery Society and British Commonwealth League, which was affiliated with the Australian Federation of Women Voters.

Jessie Street's first foray into Aboriginal affairs was abortive and had nothing to do with political rights. She tried to organize an exhibition of Aboriginal child art in London to coincide with the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953. The following year she was invited to become an executive committee member of the British Anti-Slavery Society. The main reasons for the invitation were her concern with prostitution and the white slave trade, and the society's desire to have an Australian on the committee.

The Anti-Slavery Society was formed in 1909, incorporating the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society and the Aborigines Protection Society, which had been in existence for more than a century. The patrons and office-holders listed on its letter-head were plucked from the peerage, and, as evidenced by its previous activities, the society was interested in Aborigines before Jessie Street's appointment to the executive committee. The lobbying
of the 1934 Premiers' Conference included a deputation from the society which waited on the Australian High Commissioner in London, S.M. Bruce.

The society's interest was revived in 1956. The annual report for the year ending 31 March 1956 stated under the heading of "The Aborigines of Australia":

The Society hopes to bring together all societies and individuals interested in the advancement and welfare of the Aborigines in an application that their position be made the subject of a special study by the Sub-Committee on the "prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities" acting for the Commission of Human Rights of the United Nations.

Reports of cruelty to Aborigines and the denial of their right to offer their labour freely where they wish have reached the Society and have made some action on their behalf a matter of urgent importance.

Bringing matters before the United Nations was not merely a fond wish, as the society was well-endowed and as a non-government organization of the United Nations had direct access to that forum. Although not the initiator and obviously ignorant of whom to contact, Jessie Street was called on for assistance. She contacted her friends in the peace movement, who quickly referred her to the Aboriginal rights activists.

Her first approach was to the secretary of the Western Australian division of the Australian Peace Council, John Clements. Writing from New York, where she was representing the Anti-Slavery Society at the United Nations, she told Clements that the society had asked her to obtain particulars about newspaper reports alleging murder of five Aborigines which had been sent to the society by Mary Montgomery Bennett of Kalgoorlie. She also asked him to find out names and addresses of all Australian societies "active in promoting the welfare and protecting the rights of Aborigines".

Clements proved an excellent source. He told her of Dr Charles Duguid in Adelaide and Shirley Andrews in Melbourne. He also sent her tape recordings by Don McLeod giving details of the strike of 1 May 1946, when Aboriginal pastoral workers in the Pilbara district of north-west Western Australia stopped work.
The strike was as crucial to Jessie Street’s thinking as it was to the development of the Aboriginal rights movement. Max Brown’s book on the strike and its aftermath was aptly titled *The Black Eureka*, as the events he described were as important to black Australians as were the escapades in Ballarat a century earlier to white Australians.

The strike had its genesis during the war. Aboriginal station hands in the Pilbara, whose coastal outlet is Port Hedland, became restive over their meagre pay (one pound a week, partly paid in kind) and non-existent conditions of employment as station workers; meanwhile, their families were expected to live on creek banks without sanitation or any amenities. The blacks would have struck during the war, but they were advised to delay, as such a move would have seemed unpatriotic. That advice was given by a white, Don McLeod, an extraordinary man who, with Daisy Bates and a handful of others, is one of the few whites ever to have won Aboriginal trust and respect. As a prospector, miner, and general contractor before the war, he shared the conventional wisdom about Aborigines until an Englishman convinced him to use black labour in an asbestos mine he was working, an unheard of idea among Australians. From then on he gradually became more involved in Aboriginal problems and, after moving to Port Hedland, used his trade union experience to help organize the Pilbara Aborigines.

The extent of McLeod’s involvement remains an enigma. Because he was the articulate white spokesman, the group became known as McLeod’s Mob, but McLeod had to meet the Aboriginal leaders clandestinely, as the Native Welfare Act prohibited contact between blacks and whites, except for officially sanctioned whites known as “protectors”. McLeod was gaoled several times for consorting with blacks, as on one occasion was Pastor Peter Hodge, secretary of a sympathetic church group which sent him to the North-West to see the situation for himself. McLeod and thirteen Aboriginal strikers were also gaoled after the strike for enticing and persuading natives to leave their legal employment without permission. Despite trade union help, notably a Seamen’s Union ban of wool shipments from Port Hedland, the strike was only a partial success. Wages and
conditions did improve on some stations. In addition, a sizeable group refused to return to work under the old system and, with McLeod’s help, set up a mining, pastoral, and subsistence cooperative.

More importantly, the strike was the first occasion on which an organized group of Aborigines openly defied the white establishment of landowners, police, and state authorities. According to Jessie Street’s interpretation, the blacks of the Pilbara had had enough of being treated as an inferior race with inferior brains and capabilities and being expected to live in dirty camps with no facilities on sub-standard food and wearing cast-off clothing. “They want to do something for themselves by themselves,” she wrote. McLeod’s continuing dispute with the Western Australian authorities helped activate post-war interest in federal control of Aboriginal affairs, even though the Commonwealth Administration in the Northern Territory was no better than state native welfare departments.

In the early fifties the Aboriginal workers who lived in the Bagot Aboriginal Compound in Darwin went on strike, and the North Australia Workers’ Union organized a nation-wide campaign of support. One outcome of this campaign was the formation in Melbourne of the Council for Aboriginal Rights, which became one of the most effective of such groups.

So by the time Jessie Street adopted the cause of Aboriginal rights, the pre-war idea of federal control had been revived, the Aborigines themselves were involved, and white Australians motivated by compassion and guilt were organizing support. Elsewhere in the world, colonial bonds were being untied, some with unseemly haste, and indigenous people were gaining independence. This made Australia vulnerable to criticism about treatment of its own indigenes.

Jessie Street brought to the Aboriginal rights movement the prestige of her name, the backing of an influential British organization with United Nations connections, and the experience of similar movements throughout Australia for peace, women, and Soviet friendship. By the beginning of 1956, Jessie Street was encouraging friends in Australia to establish Aboriginal rights groups. She devised a course of action for
promoting the Aboriginal cause from which she never deviated. Several correspondents received letters similar to the following to Clements in January 1956.

I believe, and this is my personal opinion, that it would be easier to deal with the question of Aborigines satisfactorily if there was a Commonwealth-wide body concerned with the development of full citizenship for Aborigines and their protection generally. Would it be possible to call an Australian Conference on the subject.

If the subject of the Australian Aboriginals is to be brought before the United Nations, I believe it would help considerably if you had an all Australian organization.

A few months later her thinking developed one stage further, and therein lies the greatest irony of all. She became convinced that federal control was the only way to eliminate discrimination, and the only way to achieve this end was to hold a referendum to eliminate the discriminatory provisions in the Australian Constitution and remove the bars to Commonwealth involvement in Aboriginal affairs. The irony is that the man who first drew Jessie Street’s attention to the constitutional problem was the Western Australian Commissioner of Native Welfare, S. G. Middleton, who McLeod and others regarded as their greatest single enemy. In July 1956 Middleton wrote to the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society in answer to a general letter sent to all Australian authorities as part of the society’s campaign. The paragraph containing the following is sidelined in the original letter, which is in Jessie Street’s papers: “Yet our very Federal Constitution prevents our National Government from taking any legislative measures whatever in relation to the majority of them.” He then quoted from the relevant part of the Constitution and opined that the Commonwealth should have power to legislate for Aborigines. An overall national policy having been determined, the separate state administrations should then be financially assisted to carry out welfare and administrative work in accordance with such a policy.

There were two specific discriminatory references to Aborigines in the Australian Constitution: section 51 (xxvi), which gave the power to the Parliament of the Commonwealth to make laws with respect to “the people of any race, other than the
aboriginal race in any State, for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws’; and section 127, which stated ‘In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted.’ The section 51 discrimination was inserted to give the Commonwealth power to handle situations of a national nature which might have arisen in relation to the Chinese or imported Pacific Islanders, while leaving Native Affairs specifically in state hands. Section 127 was suggested by Samuel Griffith in 1891, possibly owing to the practical difficulties of counting Aborigines in the wilds. Another reason for their exclusion was the need to allocate seats in the House of Representatives according to the population of each state and to share between the states also on a population basis certain revenues collected by the Commonwealth. Whatever the actual reasons, the framers of the Constitution did not seem to realize that the two sections ‘bore the implication that Aborigines were less than human beings’.4

The Australian Constitution has proved a difficult document to alter, particularly by the ordained means of referendum. The selfsame Constitution provides that any law proposing its alteration shall, in addition to being passed by an absolute majority of both federal chambers, be submitted to a referendum of the electors in each state, and must be approved also by a majority of the electors in a majority of the states and by a majority of all electors who voted, before it can be presented for royal assent. When Jessie Street began proposing a referendum, only four out of twenty-four proposals had been successful. Prime Minister Menzies was not disposed to think well of referendums, as voters had rejected his proposal to place a constitutional ban on the Communist Party in 1951.

Notwithstanding official coolness and a referendum success rate of only one in six, in less than two years a national Aboriginal rights organization had been established and, in little more than a decade, the Australian Constitution had been changed to allow the Commonwealth government to act in Aboriginal affairs and to include Aborigines in the national census. Neither the establishment of a national body nor the passing of the referendum would have taken place without Jessie Street. Her
starting point was a questionnaire from the Anti-Slavery Society aimed at bolstering its case by providing information on all points where the treatment of Aborigines did not conform to the United Nations Charter of Human Rights. In fact the six page questionnaire contained ninety detailed questions on all aspects of legal, social, and political rights, which was beyond the capacity of most of the voluntary organizations to answer. The project also faltered as the Anti-Slavery Society's resolve began to waver.

The executive committee meeting on 20 September 1956 decided it would be in danger of antagonizing public opinion and alienating the responsible Commonwealth minister in Australia, Paul Hasluck, by proceeding to the United Nations. "The Committee decided that Mrs Street should discuss this matter with our Australian correspondents during her visit in December and that she should report back to the Committee for their detailed decision before any further action is taken," the minutes of the meeting said. Whether or not she realized the project was being undermined, Jessie Street put considerable time, effort, and money into compiling, circulating, and collating the questionnaire. Much to the annoyance of those who helped, the society did not proceed with the United Nations case, and thereafter the society's role diminished to moral support and activities such as lobbying the Australian High Commission in London and arranging for appropriate questions to be asked in the British Parliament.

More importantly, the society had been the catalyst which aroused Jessie Street's interest in support for the Aboriginal cause. She was only in Australia for nine months (December 1956 to September 1957), but in that time a referendum petition was launched and preparations were well advanced for holding the first ever national conference of interested organizations. On 27 August 1956 Shirley Andrews wrote enthusiastically on behalf of the Victorian Council for Aboriginal Rights supporting the idea of forming a national body to approach the United Nations. This was a response to a letter from Jessie Street urging the formation of a national federation. She also wrote to contacts in New South Wales and Western Australia, and to Women's Charter Conference associate Ada Bromham, at that time
Jessie Street on her arrival back in Australia in December 1956, after six years abroad. Standing behind her is her husband Sir Kenneth Street (Photo: Sydney Morning Herald)
connected with the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union in Queensland, who with Shirley Andrews became a stalwart of the referendum campaign. Support from the wife of the chief justice of New South Wales would give the movement the type of influential backing it had previously lacked. Espousal of the cause by people such as the Labor MPs, Gordon Bryant from Victoria and Kim Beazley from Western Australia and the Liberal MP W.C. Wentworth from New South Wales was still to come.

Jessie Street had other reasons for returning to Australia in December 1956, not least of which was to spend Christmas with her family, as she had been away for more than six years. Her main concern during this visit to Australia, however, was the Aboriginal cause and to renew contact with the local peace movement. Before she left Australia nine months later she had organized a full-scale meeting in the Sydney Town Hall, the first-ever such meeting to be chaired by an Aborigine (Pastor Douglas Nicholls); initiated the referendum campaign; bearded the minister for territories, Paul Hasluck, in Canberra, and spent two months examining Aboriginal living conditions at first hand, mostly in the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

While Jessie Street was still in England, the Australian Aboriginal Fellowship was established in New South Wales. Unlike other groups, the fellowship was led by Aborigines who felt that black leadership was essential to ensure the active support of other Aborigines. The initiators were Faith Bandler, the daughter of a blackbirded Pacific Islander; Mrs Pearl Gibbs, the Aboriginal member of the New South Wales Aboriginal Welfare Board; and Herbert Groves, her predecessor on that board. When Professor A.P. Elkin of Sydney University wrote to the fellowship, he said, “What I like about your Fellowship and similar groups which have existed in recent years, is that persons of Aboriginal descent are taking a positive interest in Aboriginal matters throughout the continent. When I began this sort of work about 30 years ago, nothing like this happened.” After returning to Australia, Jessie Street became a patron of the fellowship, but that was the only official position she held in an Aboriginal rights group.

Pressing for a referendum was central to her thinking, and the
Draft Petition

We hereby petition for the amendment to the Constitution to provide for the equitable treatment of all citizens, irrespective of their race. We request the Commonwealth Council to hold a referendum to consider this matter.

Jessie Street's draft petition calling for a referendum to alter the Constitution in the matter of Aboriginal rights (From Jessie Street's papers, National Library of Australia)
plan was to launch a petition at the meeting in the Sydney Town Hall late in April. Among others, she enlisted the help of Labor intellectual and secretary of the Australian Council for Civil Liberties, Brian Fitzpatrick. In March 1957 she wrote to Fitzpatrick to tell him she would be seeing Hasluck shortly thereafter: “Among other things I wish to discuss with Hasluck, as you know, is the holding of a referendum to vest powers over the aborigines in the Commonwealth Parliament and to make aborigines eligible for all rights to which white Australians are now eligible.” Jessie Street gave scant regard for the difficulties involved in changing the Constitution by referendum, although she did ask Fitzpatrick if there were other ways of transferring state powers to the Commonwealth. She said she had seen Hasluck, who was “very keen on the transference of control of the Aborigines from the States to the Commonwealth and is being very helpful about my proposed visit to the N. T. “.

In the same letter she dealt with the proposed Australian Aboriginal Fellowship meeting at the Town Hall and enclosed a petition she had drafted asking him to vet it. In the initial drafting she was helped by her legal friend, Christian Jollie Smith, and members of the fellowship committee. That draft petition is the most important historical document in the voluminous collection of Jessie Street’s papers. The actual petition which resulted from the draft was the focal point of the referendum campaign. Faith Bandler’s recollection supports the documentary evidence that Jessie Street was the main instigator of that campaign. She recalls being summoned to a small meeting by Jessie Street who, brooking no contradiction, told her, “Girl, what you need is a Referendum”. That, according to Faith Bandler, was the beginning of the referendum campaign. Another original Fellowship member, Jack Horner, had no doubt about who initiated the petition when he wrote to Jessie Street in April 1963 asking for funds for a renewal of the referendum campaign. “I am sorry to ask you in this bald fashion,” Horner wrote, “but way back in 1956 such a petition was your own suggestion, and I am sure that you are keen as ever for its success.”

The preamble to her “Draft Petition” said, “Believing that many of the difficulties encountered today by Aborigines arise
from the discriminations against them in two sections of the Commonwealth Constitution which specifically exclude Aborigines from the enjoyment of the rights and privileges 'enjoyed' by all other Australians whatever their country of origin..." and concluded by requesting the Commonwealth government to hold a referendum.

The petition was officially launched at the Town Hall meeting on 29 April, and the first petition was received and read in the House of Representatives on 14 May, presented by the member for Parkes, Les Haylen, who had spoken at the Town Hall before an audience of two thousand. The meeting was the first large public gathering in Sydney called since before the war to express concern about the plight of Aborigines. The meeting also brought to the fore attitudes that reflected current feelings about Aboriginal rights. The organizers were disappointed when the mayor of Sydney, Alderman Harry Jensen, decided not to participate, but more disappointing was his lame excuse for not doing so: "I have given further consideration to the whole matter and have come to the conclusion that I am unable to accept the invitation to be present. Discussions are now occurring on methods of assisting Aborigines, and my participation in a meeting of this kind may prejudice the prospects of a successful conclusion."

Divisions among the organizers threatened the success of the meeting and revealed splits which continued to plague the movement. Pastor Douglas Nicholls, a former Melbourne football star who was to chair the meeting, decided at the last minute not to appear on the same stage as that "fellow traveller" Jessie Street, who was to move a vote of thanks. Nicholls was persuaded to change his mind, but the division lived on.

The splits were not simply between black and white, nor between left and right. Elements of the latter division did exist, and the known leftists were often accused of trying to turn the Aboriginal question into a "political football" to embarrass the conservative federal government. At the same time there was strong feeling shared by Jessie Street that the "do-gooders" were more interested in serving their own ends than the Aboriginal cause, and were thus detrimental to the movement as a whole.
Nicholls was accused of being too closely aligned with the "do-gooders". Jessie Street disliked Nicholls and actively lobbied against him within the movement. She described him in private as "a performing monkey". Despite last-minute problems, the meeting was a success, although it received little media coverage. The fellowship wrote a letter of complaint to the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, John Douglas Pringle, who replied testily that the newspaper was not prejudiced and had sent a reporter and a photographer to cover the meeting. "We do not send reporters for amusement," he wrote. "I am afraid the only reason no report appeared in the paper was that it did not seem to have sufficient news value on that night."

With the meeting behind her, Jessie Street spent the next two months travelling around Australia interviewing officials and examining living conditions at first hand in South Australia, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory. She had intended to cover Queensland as well, but exhaustion, travelling delays, and cost overtook her. As it was, the trip cost her more than four hundred pounds and the incessant travelling, sometimes in unprung trucks over unmade roads, and camping out at night would have daunted less determined near-septuagenarians. One Perth newspaper reporter was so impressed with the trek that he described her as "one of the most remarkable women Australia has ever produced". The article went on to describe her progress in heroic terms: "At 4 a.m. the other day, when the wind was howling and the rain was pelting down, a 68-year-old grandmother got out of a warm bed in Perth, climbed aboard a plane and set out for Darwin."

While in South Australia she accompanied a young Labor member of the Legislative Assembly, Don Dunstan, and his wife to an Aboriginal settlement. Dunstan was one of the first politicians, federal or state, to espouse the Aboriginal cause. Nearly twenty years later, South Australia became the first state in Australia to have an Aborigine, Sir Douglas Nicholls, as governor. The state government of the day was led by Don Dunstan.

Perhaps in a vain effort to strengthen the Anti-Slavery Society's United Nations case, she wrote a lengthy report on her
observations. Multiple copies were produced and sent to a host of national and international politicians and officials as well as to numerous libraries. A committee which supported McLeod's Mob printed the separate section on her visit to the Port Hedland area and disseminated widely the resulting leaflet:

I have asked various questions about what they had done before they had joined the group, why they had joined, how they organized their work and camp etc. Practically all of them had worked on stations and had left because they had received only five or ten shillings a week plus rations, which was much lower pay than the white men received. Generally, no accommodation had been provided and they lived on creek banks without any sanitation or amenities of any kind. The women had usually received no wages and worked for their clothes and keep. Some of the men considered that their work in breaking and training horses and mustering in the out-back country, was work which many of the white men could not do as well. They resented the discrimination in pay and also the superior attitude of the white towards themselves on account of their colour and their way of life. They are a proud race and resent the demoralisation of so many of their men and women by the bad elements among the white man since his arrival in Australia. Their women are abducted and have illegitimate children, and liquor is given to the aborigines which quickly demoralises them. They are well aware that their country has been taken over from them and their food supplies destroyed to a great extent. They resent the fact that they are not accepted by the vast majority of the white population, whether on the stations or in the towns. This even applies to the aborigines who have been educated at the missions which has cut them off from their own people and not made them acceptable to the white community. Very little opportunity exists for them to lead their own lives in decency and comfort.

Of one of the camps, she wrote, "The whole place was clean and tidy, as were all the people living at the camp." Perhaps realizing that she would not be regarded as a totally unbiased observer, she added a testimonial from Dr Willington of the Western Australian Health Department in Port Hedland: "Matron Lenihan and myself have been impressed by the clean and orderly camps we have seen on our recent visits. The fitness of the children has also impressed us".

Naturally enough, her friends and supporters praised the report, but Hasluck, for one, was less than enthusiastic. In a letter to the Anti-Slavery Society, he said:
I feel that the report submitted by Lady Street was not completely unprejudiced. It left me with the impression that it reported on matters and sought to substantiate preconceived ideas rather than, as I would have expected, an authoritative statement on observations of an effort being made, not only in the Northern Territory but throughout Australia, to fit aborigines for the accepted goal of assimilation towards which they are advancing.

Hasluck’s attitude to Jessie Street was equivocal. They would have been acquainted for more than a decade, as Hasluck had been an official delegate to the San Francisco Conference. He made possible her trip to the Northern Territory, gave lengthy and considered replies to her stream of letters, and received her personal representations with courtesy. For her part, she spoke well of him, but his attitude may have been tempered by a desire not to antagonize the well-connected Anti-Slavery Society. He could well have been referring to Jessie Street in a speech he delivered in Melbourne on Aboriginal Sunday (14 July 1957): “I would say soberly, from the evidence of my own mailbag, that at least half of the people who today invoke the rights of the Aboriginal are not concerned with what happens to him but only what happens to some campaign of their own.”

But her written report was not the most important result of Jessie Street’s trip. During her travels she met the leaders of the Aboriginal rights movement and put them in touch with one another, with herself as the focal point, and in less than a year there was a national organization. Jessie Street, using her money and organizing ability, was the catalyst and driving force.

Her endeavour must have seemed like windmill tilting, but she selected her lieutenants well. Apart from South Australia, where Dr Charles Duguid, a noted authority on Aboriginal problems, led the movement, the main activists in each state were women. Generally this had arisen because women were traditionally elected as secretaries of such bodies, as it was their role to keep minutes and other menial chores, but Jessie Street harnessed their talents for more significant work. Her particular assistant in New South Wales was Faith Bandler. In Victoria her main contact was the competent and energetic secretary of the Council for Aboriginal Rights, Shirley Andrews. Ada Bromham, of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, revived the
movement in Queensland. In Western Australia her contact was Mary Montgomery Bennett of Kalgoorlie, who had been a fighter for Aboriginal rights of long-standing, although the representational work was carried by a rather ineffectual body in Perth.

She was prepared to use her money and influence to ensure that the referendum campaign was launched and a national organization formed, but she was convinced of the need for the Aborigines themselves to take the lead. This explains her attraction to the Australian Aboriginal Fellowship and her uncharacteristic acceptance of a back-seat role. In a little note to Faith Bandler accompanying a present, she said: "Just a token of my appreciation of the work you are doing for a cause I have always been so interested in — and which will never get anywhere until those concerned personally take a leading part — my motto is 'God helps those that help themselves — and God help those that don't.'" Her unswerving belief in the efficacy of constitutional reform for the Aboriginal cause was underpinned by a conviction that black Australians must fight the good fight for themselves. She greatly admired the Aboriginal leader from Cairns, Joe McGuiness, to whom she wrote on 16 August 1963: "At last the Aborigines are fighting for their rights — no section of people anywhere have gained their rights until they themselves have struggled for them — it is the same whether they are men or women."

Notwithstanding her steamroller approach, those who worked closely with Jessie Street insist that she had a tender and compassionate understanding of the problems facing black Australians. As the secretary of one Aboriginal group wrote, "Your compassion for our people is well known." This compassion was not apparent when she pressed Ada Bromham to form an Aboriginal rights group in Queensland so that the proposed national organization would truly represent all states. As the Queensland society dealing with Aboriginals had disbanded, she wrote to Ada Bromham early in 1957 and suggested: "Would it be possible to call a group of sympathetic informal people together . . .". Six months later, Ada Bromham having not complied with Jessie Street's wishes, the tone of the correspondence changed. "If you have not already formed your com-
mittee in Queensland, would it be possible for you to form it before you come down here for the Charter Conference?” Tardy housemaids would be spoken to in the same manner. Later Ada Bromham outlined the difficulties she faced in establishing the desired organization as the Churches, apart from the Church of England, were either satisfied with the contribution of the missions or afraid to support a new program for fear of losing government financial support.

Church resistance, particularly from the Roman Catholic Church, was not isolated to Queensland. With their huge mission establishments, the Churches had a vested interest in the status quo, which made the eventual success of the referendum more surprising. Don McLeod frequently railed against the Catholic Church. He was not alone in holding the view that the missions took Aboriginal children and “educated” them to a level which did not really prepare them for life with whites, but at the same time made them unacceptable to their own people. Jessie Street shared McLeod’s dislike of the Roman Catholic Church, whose views were frequently in conflict with her own. As she wrote to Dr Evatt: an Aborigine who had a regular job chopping down prickly pear was turned away and told that cactoblastis had done the job. Asked why he was back at camp so early, he replied that the Catholic bastards had got there first.

Despite the problems, a national organization — the Federal Council of Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA) — was set up at a conference in Adelaide during February 1958. Jessie Street had left Australia in September the previous year, but she was at the inaugural meeting in spirit. She had goaded and encouraged the state bodies into attending the conference and paid the fares of some of the delegates. She persuaded Dr Duguid to chair the Adelaide conference on condition that Shirley Andrews made the arrangements. She also persuaded Dr Duguid that only active organizations, not missions, should be represented — a difficult task, as Duguid was a stout Presbyterian who persuaded his Church to establish a mission in South Australia.

Although she was out of the country, her numerous correspondents kept her informed. She must have been very gratified to hear from the secretary of the Australian Aboriginal Fellow-
The artwork was uninspired and in some cases of very poor standard; and as to the content — "If the function of this magazine is to give a voice to the masses then the material should deal with the problems which women face themselves, not Mrs Miniver stories of well off neurotics who discover with amaze [sic] the excitement of building castles in the nurseries with their only children."  

That criticism was not applicable to the bulk of the articles, which dealt with serious women's issues. However, material designed to attract British readers, such as an article on the Duchess of Gloucester, was included at the suggestion of the British distributor. The Fortune criticism was unwarranted, and the suggestions for improvement — articles on cookery and fashion — were treated with scorn. Not surprisingly, the agreement ended in October 1946 in a letter to Jessie Street, Landell-Jones described the project, which had been taken on as a business proposition, as "quite a financial loss". Adding to the problems, copies were late arriving in Britain owing to a shortage of shipping space.

From June 1946, the overseas content increased notably, under the influence of Fortune, probably as insufficient local material was forthcoming to fill the sixty-four-page issue. The extra pages and more intricate artwork justified the new cover price of ninepence, as did the introduction of four pages of line drawings depicting a different capital city each issue. The accent on entertainment as well as information did not outlast the break with Fortune. By the beginning of the next year, the Digest was back to forty pages and priced at sixpence. The first issue of the new year carried an article by Dymphna Cusack on the need for X-rays to detect tuberculosis, and an apology for missed issues. The August 1947 issue announced the Digest's third birthday with an optimism ("We're celebrating with a bigger issue which has come to stay") that could not have been shared by the staff in view of the declining circulation.

Thereafter the Digest's downhill run accelerated, with the closure of the British market after October 1947 signalling the final crash. But Jessie Street did not give up easily. She tried unsuccessfully to interest the Fellowship of Australian Writers in
taking it on as a co-operative rather than a business venture. Even
after selling the magazine, she planned a reception to launch a
new larger *Digest.* Whether this reception took place is not clear,
but the *Digest* was advertised for sale (circulation four thousand)
on 18 October 1947, ten days after the Fellowship of Australian
Writers declined her offer.

Several buyers expressed interest, and the magazine was sold
to S. B. Horwitz for an undisclosed sum with Vivienne Newson
to stay on as editor at her previous salary of five pounds a week.
Apart from those issues already in the pipeline, no more
appeared. The sale caused bitterness, because Jessie Street did
not consult anyone, including Vivienne Newson. This is
supported by a letter from Mrs Horwitz to Newson in December
1947 telling her not to bother with the issue for February 1948,
“especially considering your (very natural) tiredness of the whole
thing and desire to retire from the immediate editorial scene”.
Although the price of the sale was not disclosed, an unusually
large amount of £550 was deposited in the Jessie Street account,
Women’s Publicity Agency Committee.

The magazine was not a target for the type of criticism that was
being levelled at Jessie Street personally, but no doubt many
women who disapproved of her brand of feminism would have
demonstrated their disapprobation by ignoring the *Digest.* The
conservative women’s groups which dissociated themselves from
the Charter Conference of 1946 would likewise have ceased sub­
scribing to the *Digest,* which was the official organ of the
Women’s Charter. Like many journals that cater for a specific
interest group, the *Digest* had a tone of preaching to converts, but
women’s endeavours were not automatically accorded favourable
chapter was a laudatory biography of Jessie Street, was harshly
treated in March/April 1946. The reviewer criticized Jean
Devanny for failing to select from her voluminous material
“rather than throwing it together in a heap”.

The *Digest*’s decline in circulation anticipated Jessie Street’s
own decline in power and influence. She laid the blame for the
magazine’s demise at the feet of the British Board of Trade,
which refused to grant an import licence for copies of the *Digest*
ship that the first federal conference of Aboriginal organizations had adopted “the petition launched by this Fellowship in New South Wales last year”. Ada Bromham wrote to tell her that she had canvassed the Queensland coastal towns with the petition and had received considerable help from the trade unions, but was worried that many activists did not regard the referendum campaign as their first priority. Some unions, especially the Australian Workers’ Union, pledged support for the petition, but were less helpful in industrial matters like helping to improve wage rates and conditions of employment for Aborigines.

By the time Jessie Street returned to Australia in 1959 the momentum of the referendum campaign had not only died down but was almost forgotten. “What happened about that petition, by the way?” asked Brian Fitzpatrick. What had happened was that Jessie Street had been to see the minister for external territories, Paul Hasluck, in Canberra. Among other things they discussed amending the Constitution. Hasluck expressed interest and suggested that one of the state premiers be persuaded to raise the matter for discussion at the next Premiers’ Conference. She wrote to the premier of New South Wales, J.J. Cahill, who courteously replied, but within days he died. Two weeks later, she followed up with a letter to the new premier, R.J. Heffron, whom she knew well, and the chief secretary, C.A. Kelly, urging them to raise the referendum question at the forthcoming Premiers’ Conference. Heffron granted her an interview late in November. Shortly afterwards she left for overseas again, but did not lose interest in the issue. In May 1960 she wrote to Heffron from London inquiring about the Premiers’ Conference. His reply of some weeks later contained the disappointing news that the matter had not been raised.

Jessie Street had long been convinced of the necessity for establishing Commonwealth control over Aboriginal affairs. As she wrote to Shirley Andrews, “The State Governments have so long exploited not only the Aborigines but the Commonwealth benefits for them and have such archaic laws in respect of Aborigines and the attitudes of Government departments concerned are so ingrained that it would be much easier to get full civil political and social rights through the Commonwealth
government.” Even some of her friends did not share her enthusiasm. Brian Fitzpatrick investigated the possibilities for her, but concluded: “As a matter of practical politics, the suggestion of a referendum is highly unlikely to be adopted. If it were, the referendum would not be carried.” Fitzpatrick’s pessimism did not stop her pressing the cause on Prime Minister Menzies while he was in London. “I feel most humiliated that Australia should be regarded as so backward in her treatment of her native people,” she told the prime minister early in 1960.

Jessie Street returned to Australia early in 1961. After recovering from a bout of laryngitis she stated that it was her intention to retire to Tweed Heads to write her autobiography. In a letter to Mary Montgomery Bennett and Ada Bromham, she said that she was concentrating on her memoirs instead of her usual activities. Her concentration must have wandered frequently, as she continued to take an active interest in the affairs of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement, to agitate for perseverance with the referendum petition, and to lobby for her friends within the movement.

She was too ill to attend the 1962 FCAA conference herself, but she encouraged Faith Bandler to stand for president and Shirley Andrews for secretary. To achieve this end she used her influence with other delegates such as Joe McGuiness, the outgoing president, and Ada Bromham, who had moved to Western Australia by then. She also paid Ada Bromham’s fares and contributed towards the cost of printing and circulating reports from the conference. In addition to the information she received from various correspondents, she insisted on being sent as much documentation as possible.

One of her financial contributions at this time produced a surprising result. She had contributed towards the cost of publishing a Council for Aboriginal Rights (Victoria) booklet, but, as she told Shirley Andrews, “I got a letter returning the amount of money I had advanced for the publication of this, and after I got over the shock — I think it is the first time I’ve ever had anything refunded — I sent it back and suggested they send copies to some of the Parliamentary and Public libraries.” Generally members of the Aboriginal rights movement were
more diffident about asking for money than were members of other groups such as peace organizations, who regularly solicited donations in demanding terms.

With the advantage of hindsight, an advantage which often elevates stupidity to sagacity, it seems as though the Aboriginal cause was progressing inexorably. The last issue of the Bulletin for 1963 saw that year as “The Year of the Breakthrough in Aboriginal Affairs”, and cited as examples legislative changes in New South Wales and South Australia, the wide-ranging reforms recommended by the parliamentary Select Committee into the Grievances of the Yirrkala Aborigines in the Northern Territory, and the federal election of that year in which all Aborigines had been able to vote for the first time.

The referendum campaign had begun to attract political attention some years earlier. The parliamentary Joint Committee of Constitution Review in 1959 recommended the repeal of section 127, which excluded Aborigines from the national population census. In the same year, the federal conference of the Australian Labor Party adopted repeal of section 127 and amendment of section 51 as policy. In August 1962 the member for Fremantle, Kim Beazley, initiated an urgency debate in the House of Representatives calling for a section 51 referendum, and the leader of the opposition, Arthur Calwell, introduced a bill for a referendum on both sections in May 1964.

In November 1965 prime minister Menzies announced that a section 127 referendum would be held in accordance with the recommendation of the Constitutional Review Committee. Menzies rejected a section 51 referendum on the grounds that it would not be in the interests of the Aboriginal people. The proposal, together with another unrelated matter, was to have been submitted to electors within six months, but the government decided to defer the referendums until after the November 1966 House of Representatives election.

Harold Holt resurrected the matter after he became prime minister on Australia Day 1966. On 1 March 1967 he introduced the Constitution Alteration (Aborigines) Bill which proposed referendums for both discriminatory sections. On section 127 his view was quite straightforward: “The simple truth is that section
127 is completely out of harmony with our national attitudes and modern thinking. It has no place in our Constitution in this age."

Holt was less wholehearted about his support for changing section 51. The government had been influenced by the popular impression that the words proposed for deletion were discriminatory, he said — "a view which the Government believes to be erroneous but which nevertheless, seems to be deep-rooted."

Opposition leader Gough Whitlam replied in bi-partisan fashion, but managed to detail the Parliamentary Labor Party’s earlier efforts to bring on the referendums. Neither the then minister for territories, Charles Barnes, nor the previous minister, Paul Hasluck, spoke to the debate. W.C. Wentworth followed Whitlam. He expressed pleasure that the bill before the House contained the same provisions as a private member’s bill he had introduced on 10 March 1966. His bill had also provided for a constitutional guarantee against racial discrimination.

Wentworth had been by far the most tenacious supporter of Aborigines on the government side. His dogged efforts resulted in 1964 in legislation to establish the Institute of Aboriginal Studies to sponsor scientific and anthropological research. Wentworth saw the institute’s role as recording Aboriginal heritage for humanity, thereby adding to Aborigines’ self-respect. In a later debate, Beazley paid eloquent tribute to Wentworth: "[He] has, I think, a quite unique and vital distinction in the politics of Australia in this respect, because in his persistent work which led to the establishment of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies he extracted from the Government of the Commonwealth the first gesture of a basic respect for the Aboriginal people in 50 or 60 years".

Beazley made that remark in March 1966 in support of Wentworth’s private member’s bill. Menzies’ referendum proposal to repeal section 127 had lapsed, and Wentworth proposed the repeal of section 127, the amendment of section 51, and the addition of a new section: "Neither the Commonwealth nor any State shall make or maintain any law which subjects any person who has been born or naturalised within the Commonwealth of Australia to any discrimination or disability within the Commonwealth by reason of his racial origin."
Speaking a year later in the debate initiated by Holt which actually launched the referendum, schoolmasterly Beazley spoke again. Though colourless of feature and dress, his eyes shine with fervour when he speaks on a subject close to his heart, such as Aboriginal rights. He scorned the argument the government had previously used to refute the need for a referendum; namely, that Aborigines were Australian citizens by virtue of the Nationality and Citizenship Act. Beazley pointed out that citizenship was not an intrinsic right, as it had deliberately been excluded from the Constitution, "Anything that the Aboriginals are to get must be deliberately enacted by this parliament," he said.

Gordon Bryant, Victorian Labor member and executive member of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, rose to his feet and patted himself on the back: "I am not going to complain of delays or be presumptuous enough to say that the campaign started with the arrival of people like myself or with the establishment of the organization of which I am an executive officer and which has taken up this case." Fortunately the honourable member for Wills (later minister for Aboriginal affairs in the Whitlam Labor government) was able to keep his presumption in check, otherwise he would have been manifestly wrong, as the beginning of the referendum campaign predated his parliamentary expression of concern and the formation of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement in February 1958.

On 27 May 1967 white Australia expunged two centuries of guilt with a cross. The proposed changes were approved by record majorities in each state, averaging 90 per cent nationally. The other proposal, put at the same time, to allow an increase in the number of members of the House of Representatives without necessarily increasing the number of senators, was approved by 40 per cent of the formal vote, receiving majority support in only one state.

The most overwhelming referendum victory in the history of the Commonwealth was cause for congratulation, but close examination of voting patterns shows why removing constitutional and legal discriminations against Aborigines was only the first step. Detailed figures reveal that the greater the proportion
of Aborigines resident in an electorate, the lower the vote in favour of the proposal. The evolving white backlash against benefits given to Aborigines, as a result of the referendum victory, was already evident in the voting statistics of May 1967. The approval rates varied from 94 per cent in Victoria to 79 per cent in Western Australia, and Northern Territorians as residents of a federal territory, not a state, did not have a vote.\(^8\)

In her enthusiasm, Jessie Street and many like her were guilty of representing referendum victory as a panacea for Aboriginal ills. Naturally, crosses on bits of paper, however many, are not efficacious of themselves, and Aboriginal expectations were deflated as the federal government moved cautiously in its new area of responsibility, showing a great desire to appease the states. Ironically, when responsibility for Aboriginal affairs passed from prime ministerial to ministerial control in 1968, the first minister was Wentworth, Jessie Street’s political adversary of quarter of a century previously.

This account is the story of Jessie Street’s role in the Aboriginal rights movement, not a history of the movement itself. The latter, when it is written, will balance her contribution against that of others. Jessie Street returned to Australia at the end of 1956, after more than six years away, with idealism and drive. To the fledgling movement she lent the prestige of her name and position, but more importantly a lifetime’s experience organizing similar campaigns for other causes. In particular, she channelled the federal control for Aboriginal affairs sentiment into a petition-signing referendum campaign, and used her influence and money to establish a national Aboriginal rights organization.

Notes

2. Australian Archives, Canberra, Prime Minister’s Department, series A461, item 300/1, Aboriginals Policy, part two.
3. Max Brown, *The Black Eureka* (Sydney: Australasian Book Society, 1976). Donald Stuart made a less successful effort to tell the same story in *Yandi* (Melbourne: Georgian House, 1959). Both men were directly involved with the efforts of McLeod’s Mob to survive after the strike, and both fell out with McLeod. See review of *The Black Eureka* in the *Bulletin*, 30 July 1977, by Peter Sekuless.
5. Australian Aboriginal Fellowship correspondence quoted from is in the possession of Faith Bandler.
Publishing and Writing

O God of ours, and all that we command
Who gave to us Australia, happy isle,
Flung far from racial hates and warring foes.
Help us keep peace, Help us keep peace.

Australia’s shores guarded by oceans wide
Australia’s land fertile with sun and rain
Australia’s soil unsullied yet by war
Is Thy great gift. Is Thy great gift.

Help us to rule with love, that all may hope
To banish hate, fear, greed and poverty,
So may our sons and daughters be set free
To do Thy will. To do Thy will.

*Joint winner of the centenary Song Competition conducted by the Victorian Centenary Celebrations Council in 1934.*
*Words by Jessie Street. Music by Lindley Evans.*

Her prize-winning centenary anthem was one of Jessie Street’s first literary ventures. She made money from the three verses, which was not the case with the magazine she published or the memoirs she wrote. Apart from £23 12s 6d which was her share of the prize money, she received royalties from the gramophone record and sheet music sales. When the *Sydney Morning Herald* announced that a local entry had shared first prize in the Victorian competition, its readers were told that the words of the Sydney song were written by a “Miss Jessie Street”. Two days later the newspaper revealed that Miss Jessie Street was really Mrs Kenneth Street, daughter-in-law of Sir Philip.1

Her most ambitious publishing project was a monthly magazine, the *Australian Women’s Digest*, which appeared for
more than three years, reaching an enviable circulation at its height. The first issue appeared in August 1944, the last at the beginning of 1948. At its peak, in 1945, twenty thousand copies were being distributed and most of them sold. At the end of its first six months, the magazine showed a net profit of £37 2s 8d, but lost about £780 for the year ending 30 June 1948.

The *Digest* was high-quality middle-class feminist magazine supported morally and financially by Jessie Street. The magazine was handbag-sized, slightly wider and taller than a paperback. The number of pages varied between thirty-six and sixty-four and the price was sixpence, apart from the last half of 1946 when it rose to ninepence. “Founded by Jessie M. G. Street” was printed in large type on the editorial page of the early issues, together with a quotation from Alfred Lord Tennyson,

> Woman's cause is man's, they rise or sink
> Together, dwarf'd or god-like, bond or free.

The United Associations of Women had been trying to establish a journal to deal with “serious and fundamental problems of women’s status and opportunity” since 1932. In March 1943, a roneoed newsletter *Women’s Cause*, was inaugurated under the editorship of UAW member Vivienne Newson. In May, Jessie Street called the initial meeting of an editorial board to plan a more exciting project, the *Australian Women’s Digest*. The board members included contemporary women writers Marjorie Barnard, Eleanor Dark, and Ada Holman. A year after the first meeting of the editorial board, in May 1944, the UAW was granted a permit and the necessary newsprint allocation to print fifteen thousand copies of the magazine. In June the newsletter ceased operation, and Vivienne Newson, who was also editor of the *Digest*, began work on the first issue, fourteen thousand copies of which were printed. Jessie Street never explained how she managed to obtain a newsprint allocation at a time when such paper was in short supply and strictly rationed. However, it may not have been a coincidence that the minister for information, Arthur Calwell, who controlled the rationing of newsprint, was also chairman of the Commonwealth Government Aliens Control Committee, of which she was a member.

Jessie Street herself almost waxed poetic, in the first issue,
urging support for the Australians Women’s Charter and the referendum proposals put that year seeking greater Commonwealth powers. “We have made plans for a new social order for Australia. Let us create machinery to put it into effect.” Other contributors to the first issue confined themselves to welcoming the advent of a serious feminist journal. Katharine Susannah Prichard: “It has been almost an insult to our intelligence that so many magazines and journals, supposed to be for women, provide only fashion notes and domestic information.” In similar vein, Marjorie Barnard wrote that to talk of women’s books was “to flaunt a rag of the bad old days when inequality of opportunity made inequality of outlook”. The Digest was not without humour, and the first issue warned its readers to beware of male politicians.

In dulcet tones your vote he’ll woo
And everything he’ll promise you.
But after — that’s a different case —
He’ll tell you home’s your proper place.

The magazine was seldom without amusing articles and verses reflecting the founder’s sense of humour and that of Lorna Moore, with whom Jessie Street lived while writing the early part of her memoirs. Praise for the magazine’s lighter side came from an unexpected source. A Swiss newspaper which reviewed the Digest commented that the dominant theme was the point of view of “the new woman”, but often evident was witty lightness of touch which was “usually lacking in our phlegmatic Swiss women”, the Swiss newspaperman wrote wistfully.

Gordon and Gotch handled the distribution, and at the end of August the company’s magazine manager reported that sales were slow in Melbourne and Adelaide but the issue was practically sold out in Brisbane; in New South Wales “sales have been really good and in most instances newsagents have sold out the quantity we sent them”.

In the second issue, September 1944, Ada Holman echoed the anguished poet who deplored men’s attitude to women election campaigners, and, as the wife of a former premier of New South Wales, she was doubtless writing from the heart. Miles Franklin was another woman of letters who contributed. She paid tribute
to Rose Scott, an Australian feminist who died in 1925. Miles Franklin was not a regular, but in October 1946 she reviewed the first of K. S. Prichard's goldfields trilogy *The Roaring Nineties*. Demonstrating that the reviewer was at least the equal of the reviewee, she wrote, "The sisterhood of women, in those basic interests and problems which are shared alike by privileged duchesses and unsheltered charwomen, is clearly shown." The *Digest's* readership did not include many duchesses or charwomen, but a majority of readers, particularly while the war lasted, were working women; however, an article on child care for working mothers contrasted strangely with an advertisement for Romano's "completely air-conditioned" restaurant. Feminist pioneers were applauded, and Nettie Palmer made her first contribution in April 1945 with an article on Victorian journalist and reformer Alice Henry, who died in 1943 aged eighty-six while the August/September 1946 issue paid tribute to Dame Mary Gilmore in celebration of her eight-first birthday.

The distribution pattern continued, and the circulation grew to its peak in April 1945. Gordon and Gotch handled eighteen thousand copies, about half of which were sold in Sydney and three thousand in Melbourne. A further two thousand were distributed from the UAW offices in Sydney. Jessie Street blithely referred to a circulation for the *Digest* of twenty thousand copies, but the official audit figure up to March 1945 was only a little more than twelve thousand. The Audit Bureau of Circulation works on net sales per month averaged over several months, which allows for the copies unsold and returned by newsagents and would take no account of the copies distributed by UAW.

By the time the first issues of the *Digest* went on sale in Britain in July 1945, the antipodean circulation (more than a thousand were being sold in New Zealand) was falling. In the year following October 1945, five issues were lost through printers' strikes. The Gordon and Gotch order, down to ten thousand, dropped to eight thousand by April 1946. Continuity of publication is important for any journal, and the *Digest's* circulation suffered accordingly. Subscribers are less likely to renew their subscription if they do not receive the goods they have paid for, and similarly news stand
buyers lose the habit of purchasing a newspaper or magazine if it does not appear regularly. After the initial strike losses, Gordon and Gotch wrote bluntly saying revamp or pack up.

Layout and format changed slightly from issue to issue, but a major change took effect from the end of 1945 when the list of contents was replaced on the front cover with an illustration or a photograph. By the end of its first year, the Digest had developed a distinct style. The household hints and fashion notes of a normal women’s magazine were replaced with articles on the need for equality for women, women’s wages and conditions of work, and fears that the fruits of victory would be bitter for some women. Generally, articles were hundreds rather than thousands of words long; an exception was Marjorie Barnard’s “The Alabaster Box” which was serialized over three issues. Jessie Street frequently wrote or was written about, as was the Women’s Charter with its various conferences, deputations and other activities. Other regular features were “From the Case Book of a Woman Lawyer”, usually marital problems, “New Australians”, “Pathfinders” (short biographies of notable feminists, including Vida Goldstein and Beatrice Webb), and selections of women’s news from overseas.

In an attempt to revive the magazine, Jessie Street in 1946 made an arrangement with Fortune (Australia) Pty Ltd, an advertising agency, which was to be responsible for advertising, layout, editing, and promotion in return for half the profits. Fortune has become one of the largest Australian-owned agencies under the astute direction of K. C. Landell-Jones; how Jessie Street managed to convince Fortune to embark on an enterprise involving an obviously flagging magazine is a mystery, and a tribute to her powers of persuasion. The association was not a happy one, but Fortune did not have a monopoly on dissatisfaction with the Digest. One colleague, Hattie Cameron, wrote to Jessie Street saying the Digest was a losing proposition, and questioned, “Just how long can you afford to continue meeting debts on this venture?” Although Fortune set to with a will, six staff members were working on the Digest at one stage, there were disagreements over payment, and the agency had some unflattering things to say about the previous issues of the magazine.
entering Britain after October 1947. The Board of Trade’s action was really only the final straw, as circulation in Australia was falling before the first issues were sold in Britain in July 1945. The drop in sales reflected the decline in interest in feminism and women’s rights at the end of the war. Men returned to their peacetime jobs, and women returned to making homes instead of munitions. The fact that several issues did not appear in 1945 and 1946 made matters worse. So the British sales of five thousand copies per issue only provided a stay of execution.

More than a decade elapsed after the Digest’s demise before Jessie Street decided to write her memoirs. When Florence James, an Australian working with a British publishing company, suggested in the late fifties that she write her autobiography, Jessie Street treated the idea as a joke. Nobody else shared the joke, and by early 1959 she was taking the idea seriously herself. She began by collecting the necessary implements, or rather by finding others to collect for her. Fellow peace worker, William Morrow, received a letter from Jessie Street in Peking which expressed hope that the operation he had to undergo in Moscow would be successful (“Although if you are ill I cannot imagine any place where you would get better attention”), then asked him to buy some recording equipment in Hong Kong before picking up a parcel of papers from someone in Indonesia. She specified the exact type and quantity of equipment she wanted. “I would like eight tapes as I want to write a book. I really want two tape recorders — one for myself and one for my typist.” She knew perfectly well that customs only allowed each traveller to bring one duty-free machine into Australia, so she encouraged Morrow to find another traveller who would bring the other machine into the country as personal luggage. The tone of the letter assumed unquestioningly that Morrow would carry out her instructions.

She did not actually begin writing until she returned to Australia early in 1961, after which she settled down in earnest, apart from one overseas trip, until she finished the manuscript mid-1964. She wrote at Tweed Heads, on the north coast of New South Wales near the Queensland border. Her mood and attitude to the work ahead was evident in a letter to two associates in the Aboriginal rights movement, Mary Montgomery Bennett and Ada Bromham.
I have been back a couple of months now and my plan is to try and write my autobiography. Various friends have urged me to do this and offered to help me. So I feel I should at least have a try at it.

One of my friends (Lorna Moore) who I have worked with for about 30 years has a house at Tweed Heads. She has suggested I bring my papers and live here with her away from all meetings etc. that I have in Sydney and concentrate on the book. I feel this is a practical suggestion because it is almost impossible to write a book in Sydney where I have so many calls.

I hope you will agree with my decision to concentrate on writing my memoirs instead of continuing active work for the present. It is physically and mentally impossible to do both together. Maybe my book, if I succeed in writing it, will be a help to others. I feel that the Aborigines have such grand champions at the present that the addition of my efforts would not make very much difference. Besides I am so disillusioned politically.

Most of the book was written while she was living with Lorna Moore, but after an argument, ostensibly over the household dog, Jessie Street moved into a hotel and then with another old friend and secretary, Muriel Tribe, who had retired to Tweed Heads with her husband. When the heat, isolation, and sandflies ("I've been eaten alive") became too intense, she would go to Sydney for a break. As Sir Kenneth Street wrote jokingly to a relative "She says that she gets peace and quiet in that way and if it gets a bit dull she descends upon me and disorganises my peaceful way of life." She applied herself to writing with her usual assiduousness, but found the work harder than she expected and experienced the doubts ("Sometimes I wonder if it is worth it") that assail most authors. She suffered a slight stroke in 1963, which affected her memory but not her determination to finish the book.

Moore lived several miles outside the town of Tweed Heads, and at first Jessie Street was even without her accustomed appendage, the telephone. But the need was too strong, and she remained phoneless for only a few months. Apart from decreasing isolation, she needed that telephone for research. She took considerable material with her and consulted many friends and associates. Some, like Vivienne Newson, came to see her; others, like Jean Ferguson, who was living in the Blue Mountains, she sought out herself.
Her method was to dictate into a tape-recorder and then correct the transcript. Work on the book was frequently punctuated by correspondence, especially on Aborigines and peace. Using the same method for both memoir writing and letters was not totally successful, because greater continuity of thought was necessary for her book than for correspondence. Consequently some of the mistakes caused by loss of memory were compounded. She referred to joining the Labor Party in the context of her conversion to socialism early in the Depression of the thirties. Then she remembered that she had not joined the Party until later, and wrote a note in the margin to remind herself, or a helper, to insert that section about 1937. The alteration was never made; in any case her memory was at fault, as she actually became a Labor Party member in 1939.

Attempts to find a publisher began in 1963. By this time she had written a considerable portion, probably from childhood to the outbreak of the Second World War. She left for England late that year and carried the heavy manuscript from publisher to publisher in London and New York. At the same time a friendly Soviet diplomat who was returning to Moscow from Australia took a copy with him, replete with a forward by Lenin Peace Prize winner William Morrow, in an attempt to interest Soviet authorities. As with later approaches to Australian publishing houses, these efforts were in vain, as her book simply was not a commercial proposition: only a limited audience, mostly Australian at that, would be interested in Jessie Street’s discourse on world events larded with family minutiae. Although she had a long and interesting life, she did not present her memoirs in a commercially publishable manner, her central feminist theme was out of vogue, and, since her long absence abroad, her name alone no longer excited controversy. In mid-1964 she sent a copy of the manuscript, by then dealing with the period up to the end of the war, to former federal Labor parliamentarian Leslie Haylen, who was connected with the leftist publishing organization, the Australasian Book Society. Although her book eventually bore the imprint of the society, its role was more that of printer than publisher; because of the society’s “extremely limited financial resources” Jessie Street paid all the publication
Jessie Street with Dymphna Cusack and Muriel Tribe (right) at the launching of Truth or Repose (Photo: Sydney Morning Herald)
costs. The “publisher” took more than a year to inform her that the manuscript contained much valuable material but a competent journalist would be needed to reduce the book to a more acceptable length.

A journalist, competent or otherwise, never was employed, nor were other suggestions such as finishing the narrative immediately after her trip to the Soviet Union in 1938, then adding as an appendix the four lectures she gave following the trip. In fact the finished product and Jessie Street’s original manuscript are virtually the same.

The book went on sale in December of 1966. Its title, *Truth or Repose*, derived from a quotation from Emerson, “God offers to every mind its choice between truth or repose. Take which you please. You can never have both.” Years before, she had clipped that quotation from a newspaper and tucked the clipping in her billfold for ready reference.

For a cover price of $4.25, *Truth or Repose* offered 338 closely printed pages unrelieved by illustration, except for the frontispiece which was an unflattering and badly reproduced photograph of the author. The dust-jacket did nothing to compensate for the overall shoddy job. The cover illustration showed the flags of several nations fluttering outside the United Nations Building in New York with Jessie Street’s disembodied head floating in the top right-hand corner on a light blue background. Such obvious faults were overlooked at a special launching party in Sydney in February 1967 organized by a group of her friends to coincide with her seventy-eighth birthday. As Arthur Calwell, who was leader of the federal opposition and one of the main speakers, commented, never had so many people with such diverse interests and views been so anxious to attend the launching of an autobiography by such a “remarkable and well-beloved woman”. Indicative of that diversity was another speaker, the chief justice of New South Wales, Sir Leslie Herron.

*Truth or Repose* was reviewed by close friends in feminist and other specialist publications. The general press, particularly weekly newspapers, seized on her autobiography as an excuse to recall her political career and feminist activities, which had been a regular feature of their pages, especially in the forties.
Fellow friend of Russia, Rev. Edgar Collocott, writing in a peace journal, allowed his admiration for the author to overrun his critical faculties, but added a slight note of criticism in that the book lacked an index and chapter headings detailing the contents in brief. Another old friend, Irene Greenwood, writing for a feminist magazine, commented that a good editor would have shortened the material and permitted use of a larger type and wider-spaced lines. She also remarked on the need for an index, and an appendix to bring the book up-to-date. The *Canberra Times* reviewer, who was not a friend, wrote, "Her book is long, sometimes tedious because of too much domestic detail, too much simplified contemporary history. But in the balance it is overweight with virtues, a massive historical record."

Long and tedious it may be, but rarely totally boring, as family and travel details are interspersed with meetings and interviews with the nationally and internationally famous, and leavened with occasional anecdotes. The text reveals her close association with Prime Minister Curtin and External Affairs Minister Evatt, while names like Roosevelt, Churchill, Nehru, and Molotov punctuate her overseas trips. The main story line takes Jessie Street from her birth to the death of Curtin early in 1945, and detours before the end to include the United Nations foundation conference in San Francisco and her peripatetic return to Australia via Washington, London, Paris, and Moscow.

Feminist historians writing since her death and during the renaissance of the women's movement have tended to use *Truth or Repose* as a primary source. This is fraught with risk, particularly concerning the latter part of the book. Like most elderly people her memory dwelt on childhood and adolescence, and her reminiscences of Yulgilbar are sensitively evocative. As the years turned into pages of manuscript, she became more tired, and then she had the stroke which adversely affected her memory. For instance, she confused her 1943 and 1946 election campaigns in the electorate of Wentworth. In the context of 1943 she quoted in full a letter addressed to women voters and referred to living with Jean Ferguson for the duration of the campaign, both of which happened in 1946. She also confused the final count in Wentworth in 1943. The figures she quoted for each
Sir Kenneth and Lady Street in the garden of their home in Greenoaks Avenue, Darling Point
(Photo: Sydney Morning Herald)
candidate were in fact a progress count issued two weeks before vote counting and preference allocation were finished. In the next chapter she accused her main opponent at that election, Eric Harrison, of protesting in parliament about her appointment as an Australian delegate to the San Francisco conference. The protest was made by the member for Richmond, H. L. Anthony; Harrison did ask a written question on notice about the San Francisco delegation, but it did not relate to Jessie Street.

She certainly intended to write a second volume, which would have carried her memoirs through the remainder of the forties and the fifties and sixties, but her memory and energy were spent. With another book in mind, she discussed the development of the peace movement with William Morrow, but Muriel Tribe, who was a friend and adviser as well as unpaid secretary in the mid-sixties, is convinced that the second volume only existed in her head and was never committed to writing. Even if she had been physically and mentally capable of further autobiographical work, her style of writing, which stressed positive achievements and turned defeats into victories, would not have suited description of the vicissitudes of the late forties and early fifties.

Writing *Truth or Repose* was her last significant act. She tried to create a permanent record of her achievement, but her papers, now in the National Library, are a more comprehensive and accurate testimonial. As usual, money was no object in pursuit of a desired objective. She paid for publication, gave away as presents dozens of copies to the very people who were potential purchasers, and instructed the Australasian Book Society to give half the proceeds to Muriel Tribe. After the book's Melbourne launching, a few weeks after the Sydney reception, she left for England via India and Yugoslavia, on her last overseas trip. The Melbourne launch date, 14 March 1967, coincided with the announcement in the House of Representatives that on 27 May the Australian people would be asked to eliminate the two references in the Constitution which discriminated against Aborigines. The announcement was made by the prime minister, Harold Holt, who was apparently not aware that the referendum he was proposing had been initiated by Jessie Street.
Notes

2. Correspondence relating to the *Australian Women's Digest* may be found among the United Associations of Women records in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, which also has an almost complete set of the magazine itself.
3. Material on Jessie Street's memoirs is drawn from her own papers and correspondence between her and William Morrow and his daughter, which are in Morrow's papers at the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland.
6. Ibid., p. 265.
Jessie Street was a woman of the Australian aristocracy who championed unpopular, and sometimes proscribed, causes. She was regarded with suspicion and hostility by many of her associates, and as a “traitor to her class” by her social peers, not to mention those whose fondest wish was to be her social peer.

She was a woman whose ideas on women’s rights and social equality were ahead of her time and out of vogue. She championed women’s rights during the lulls in feminist activity before and after the Second World War, but did not survive to participate in the renaissance of the women’s movement in the 1970s. She was a socialist activist during the cold war, but birth and position did not protect her from the Australian brand of McCarthyism. She was forced to resign from the Australian Labor Party for refusing to abandon pro-Soviet organizations, and suffered official harassment for associating with the international peace movement. Cosmetic surgery cannot remove the hereditary appendage of a silver tail, and the socially pretentious reserve particular scorn for defectors from their ranks.

Jessie Street’s long and interesting life would not have been so rewarding but for the Second World War. Although she regarded those who profited from war as enemies of humanity; in a way, she profited from the war herself. During the war women found a new self-confidence engendered by economic independence through employment and equal or near-equal pay for those in wartime industries. Jessie Street and many like her tried to ensure that women’s new-found status and opportunities would be an
integral part of post-war society. Their aspirations were articulated in the Australian Women's Charter of 1943, an unprecedented document. The gains that women made during the war were not consolidated, and in the post-war period the cold war attitudes which divided the community were reflected in the women's movement. Jessie Street was identified with socialist and pro-Soviet sympathies, and, as a result, became increasingly isolated as the anti-communist crusade gathered momentum.

The extent to which cold war attitudes permeated the women's movement can be seen from the statement in a booklet prepared for the eighth triennial conference of the Australian Federation of Women Voters in 1948: "We are very conscious that the post-war period is full of difficulties, for while the drive for equal status unites women, ideological differences are cleaving the women's movement to its very roots." The federation, one of whose founders was Bessie Rischbieth from Western Australia, was far from the most conservative women's group. Previously the United Associations of Women had been affiliated with the federation, but the booklet added: "The Federation is definitely opposed to any form of totalitarian government or to any methods which challenge the democratic way of life of the Australian people."

Jessie Street had a good war, but subsequently became a victim of the cold war; after the war she suffered a gradual decline in power and influence. At the end of the war she held a number of positions on government committees, was an Australian representative at international conferences, and had reasonable prospects of being elected to parliament. By the early fifties she had been stripped of all official recognition, repudiated by her own political party, defamed in the federal parliament of her own country and refused entry to two foreign countries, France and the US.

The story of her life threads its way through several decades of Australian history, but her career does not fit any of the conventional moulds. She was never a parliamentarian, but wielded more influence than many politicians; she was born into the Establishment, but rejected its conservatism; and she was a feminist, but at odds with, at times, the bulk of the women's
Four generations of the Street family in 1943. From left to right: Laurence Street (Jessie Street’s younger son), Philippa Fingleton (second daughter), Belinda Fingleton (granddaughter), Lady (Belinda) Street (mother-in-law), and Jessie Street. (Photo: Sydney Morning Herald)
movement. Writing in an academic journal in 1977, Maya Tucker said:

After almost 200 years of settlement the women of Australia are at last being accorded a place in Australian history. Until now, Australian historians both male and female, have been preoccupied with exclusively male themes in the history of this country: mateship, nationalism, labour history and others, in which women never appear.¹

To a certain extent that does not apply to Jessie Street. Although she never became a major political figure, she was one of the most interesting Australians of this century. Descended from a most colourful squatter and married into a family with a unique legal history, she espoused beliefs that caused her to be regarded as a traitor to her class and used her wealth and position to further the causes she believed in.

She is best remembered as a feminist, but her contributions to the war effort in the Second World War and later to the Aboriginal rights movement were probably more significant. Half a century of struggle on behalf of women produced a number of individual achievements such as advances in birth control and justice for Australian women married to US servicemen, but they pale beside the resounding victory of the 1967 Aboriginal referendum. She admired the Soviet Union because men and women enjoyed legal equality, but she is remembered in that nation because of “Sheepskins for Russia”. As part of the celebrations marking the thirtieth anniversary of the defeat of Hitler’s fascism in 1975, the Soviet Embassy in Australia published a special bulletin. An article recalling Soviet-Australian relations during the war said: “At the end of that year [1941], Jessie Street, Chairman of the Russian Medical Aid and Comforts Committee in Sydney, announced that the Committee had risen [sic] a considerable sum of money to buy drugs and medical supplies for the Soviet Red Cross.”

However, Jessie Street received her greatest rewards because she was a woman. Until the anti-communist crusade made her politically unacceptable, she was the “token woman” of the Curtin and Chifley Labor governments. At the time, women were prepared to accept token representation; but they were not
always prepared to accept Jessie Street, nor was Jessie Street prepared to accept her token role.

She was selected as a delegate to the San Francisco Conference to meet persistent war-time demands by women for representation at important post-war gatherings. Appointment to that conference, and later to the United Nations Status of Women Commission, were a measure both of her standing with the government and of the dearth of other prominent women in the labour movement. When sections of the Labor Party attacked Jessie Street, they usually criticized the government for choosing her to represent Australia overseas. Western Australian Labor senator Dorothy Tangney had been “twice passed over in the distribution of overseas trips for that voluble vote-losing Friend of the Soviet Mrs Street,” said the Bulletin of 2 July 1947. Repeatedly, Senator Tangney was the only alternative named as a possible substitute for Jessie Street.

Her most tangible and lasting memorial will be the nineteen boxes of her papers which are deposited at the National Library of Australia in Canberra. Although in many ways she led a disorganized life, she was a meticulous record-keeper and an assiduous correspondent, in the manner of a past era. Her most interesting correspondence was exchanged while she was overseas from 1950 to 1956. Letters from friends such as Arthur Calwell, waterside workers’ leader Jim Healy, and Tasmanian senator William Morrow provide an insight into the turbulence of the labour movement at that time.

Material in her papers is not confined to the Labor side of politics. Prominent non-Labor politicians such as Harold Holt, Paul Hasluck, and W. C. Wentworth reappeared throughout her life. Holt put his name to a letter praising her contribution to the war effort, then as minister for immigration a decade later maligned her in parliament, and finally, as prime minister, introduced the necessary legislation for the Aboriginal referendum. She and Hasluck were both delegates to the San Francisco Conference in 1945, and in the fifties she lobbied him extensively when he was minister for external territories, responsible for the Commonwealth’s limited role in Aboriginal affairs. Fervent anti-communist W. C. Wentworth was an opposition
candidate against her in the federal election of 1943, but twenty years later they were major figures on the same side of the fight for Aboriginal rights.

Contemporary feminist historians do not always treat Jessie Street kindly as they rake through the intricacies of the equal pay movement and the interaction between different women’s groups. They rightly point out that she was isolated from the chores of everyday existence and did not understand the problems of working women and mothers who had to look after their own children. Ironically, isolation from the daily grind that faced most women was one of her greatest strengths. Her commitment, energy, and qualities of leadership were combined with what one writer described as “Jessie Street’s instinct for dealing with causes rather than effects”. Independent means and secure social position meant that her view of the wood was not obscured by the trees. Jessie Street was seldom guilty of, in her own words, “keeping an ambulance at the bottom of a cliff, instead of building a fence at the top”.

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