



Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

## Talk on the 95<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of WILPF in Canberra, 28 April 2010 Marilyn Lake

It is a great honour to speak at this occasion to commemorate and celebrate the 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of WILPF, the longest-lasting women's peace organisation in the world. In Australia WILPF joined with the Sisterhood of International Peace, which had been founded in Melbourne in 1915, the same year as the Gallipoli Landing which also has its anniversary this month.

As we wrote in our book *What's Wrong with Anzac?* in a chapter called 'Whatever happened to the Anti-War Movement' :

Just as the Anzac legend was born in an attempt to comprehend and transcend the terrible loss of life in World War I, so too was the widespread anti-war movement. Indeed revulsion against war and the rejection of long-held ideas that a nation's worth must be proven through blood sacrifice were among the most significant outcomes of Australian participation in World War I. As Eleanor Moore, who became a leader of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom wrote of the effect of the study circles she joined: 'Our hearts had told us the war business was all wrong; now we began to see it with understanding also'.

I'm pleased to say that I was able to play a small part in commemorating the work of Eleanor Moore by having her name enshrined in the Victorian Women's Honour Roll in 2008. Although those in charge of this Victorian government project do admit the entry of historical figures onto the Roll, and it's been going for ten years now, there is an overwhelming bias in favour of women still alive, even if less distinguished. This has some unfortunate effects, I think, not least adding to the marginalisation of women in history.

One reason we wrote our book on Anzac was to promote historical understanding, including understanding of why the history of the anti-war movement in Australia has virtually been lost to public memory, while histories and tributes to our endless engagement in foreign wars proliferate at every turn and in every medium: statues, museums, TV documentaries, feature films, newspapers, books, textbooks, new editions of old books, school curricula, posters, web pages, study kits ...on and on so with the effect that Australia's condition of always being

at war is valorized and naturalized. We calculated that books on Australians at war increased from less than 60 in the 1970s, to over 250 in the 1980s, to more than 360 in the 1990s, a number exceeded in the current decade. By contrast, in the decades following World War I, at a time when people still remembered the bloodbath and wastefulness at first hand, when people knew relatives or friends or neighbours who died or lived with their terrible wounds, it was explicitly anti-war books that boomed. Indeed the RSL then called for all war books to be censored; when people spoke of war books in the 1920s and 1930s they meant anti-war books. As Lord Robert Cecil, founder of the League of Nations Union and patron of the world-wide disarmament movement noted, the 'horror of war' was 'an argument for peace'. Surely this observation is still relevant.

I'm also so pleased to present this lecture because it prompted me to go back to read Eleanor Moore's *The Quest for Peace as I have Known it in Australia*, a wonderfully informative memoir and account of an Australia and Australian history now almost completely forgotten. The book includes a number of key historical documents as appendices and long lists of the many people active in the peace movement in Australia and the numerous organisations affiliated to peace alliances.

In 1915, horrified by the indiscriminate mass slaughter unleashed the great war in Europe, over 1000 women activists (the vast majority from the Netherlands) gathered in The Hague between 28 April and 1 May, at the behest of the prominent Dutch suffragist, Dr Aletta Jacobs, a conference representing both neutral and belligerent nations, to demand the war be ended through negotiations – a negotiated settlement – and to devise ways to prevent such catastrophes ever happening again. They resolved that international disputes should be settled by pacific rather than violent means, by talking rather than fighting and that the franchise should be extended to women, because they thought women wd be more likely to insist on peace.

Australian women were among the minority who already had the vote, who sent delegates to this historic occasion. In their opening statement, the participants protested 'against the madness and horror of war, involving as it does a reckless sacrifice of human life and the destruction of so much that humanity has labored through centuries to build up'. A destruction of families, homes, communities and civilizations. They also argued in their own self-defence: 'protesting vehemently against the odious wrongs of which women are the victims in time of war and especially against the horrible violation of women which attends all war'. They demanded that countries embark on peace negotiations based on the principles of justice including that there

be no transfer of territories without the consent of the people of those territories, there be no secret treaties and that all future conflict be referred to arbitration courts.

In Melbourne, in the same year, feminist anti-war activists had formed the Sisterhood of International Peace in reaction to the outbreak of jingoistic win-the war propaganda in Australia and moves towards military conscription.

Eleanor Moore, then 40 years old, recalled:

'It is pleasant to record the charm of working with this exceptional group, most of whom were then in the full beauty and intelligence of fresh young womanhood. Nearly all of them were already leading busy lives, either running households without assistance or engaged in some kind of salaried work, yet they managed to give an amazing amount of time and energy to their self-chosen cause'. ( p.39) Their stated aim was:

To promote mutual knowledge of each other by the women of different nations, goodwill and friendship; to study the causes, economic and moral, of war, and by every means in their power to bring the humanizing influence of women to bear on the abolition of war, and the substitution of international justice and arbitration for irrational methods of violence.

At Gallipoli that year the older son of one of the Vice-Presidents, Mrs Kerr, was killed, and she consoled herself by thinking that he had perished before he had done any harm to any other boy. Rather than seeking to avenge her son's death she determined, like HB Higgins, who also lost his son and was similarly afflicted, to devote the rest of her life to abolishing war and promoting peace.

The British leader Winston Churchill one of the architects of Gallipoli, had said about the campaign: 'No operations in history are more worthy of being pushed on with the utmost vigour and an utter disregard for life than those at Gallipoli. I regard it as a legitimate war gamble for a prize of inestimable value'.

Outraged at his callous 'disregard for life', Mrs Kerr wrote a pamphlet called *An Appeal to Women* to mobilise them in which she testified:

I think it was then that the iron entered my soul and I finally decided what my life's work should be. Was it *my* loved one's life they gambled with? What a degradation to motherhood! 'Australia makes no complaint' I read elsewhere. Women have you no hearts who can 'utterly disregard' this?

Of Gallipoli and Anzac, Eleanor Moore wrote: 'it was true enough that Australia, in general, made no complaints, even though the lads of Australia and New Zealand, who had enlisted in all good faith to deliver

Belgium from the invader, were thus thrown away on an invasion of Turkey. The “gamble” was not even justified by success, and it is deeply unfortunate that an incident in which there is nothing to be proud of from any point of view should by some strange error of evaluation, be held in sacrosanct remembrance every Anzac Day’. A few days after the landing at Gallipoli, a play by feminist and socialist Mary Fullerton called ‘Punch and Judy Modernised’ was performed in Melbourne by the Women’s Peace Army at a celebration of the international women’s conference in The Hague. They were such internationalists in their political orientation. The women at The Hague had formed the Committee for Permanent Peace; in 1919 they adopted a new name, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, of which the Melbourne women wd form a chapter. In 1919 a second conference in Zurich was attended by Eleanor Moore and also Vida Goldstein and Cecilia John of the Women’s Peace Army. Upon their return to Australia branches of WILPF were also formed in NSW, Queensland, Tasmania and WA in addition to that in Victoria. As their historian, Rhona Ovedoff has written, its members had mixed interests: ‘some members were strict pacifists; there were some for whom feminism was a primary motivation; others focussed equally on the need to change the political system to achieve a more equitable society’. All were committed to the prevention of war; and all were internationalists. WILPF had always recognised that a larger social transformation was necessary to achieve its goals of peace, Justice and democracy. Thus the founders in The Hague and then at Zurich had lobbied hard for women’s rights. The Australians liked to believe that one source of the ‘NO’ vote in the conscription referenda in 1916 and 1917 was Australian women’s enjoyment of full political rights and with so many men gone to war they exercised greater influence in the electorate: certainly Prime Minister Hughes feared this wd be the case when he issued his special call to women voters to recognise their duties as citizens even as they contradicted their instincts and duties as mothers and wives. He implied that Australian women were on trial as citizens: would they rise to the occasion? That NO vote meant that Australia was alone among Allied nations in resisting militarism to the extent of having to rely on a voluntary army to fight. Still more than 60,000 died. How many more young Australians wd have lost their lives if Australians had voted YES? The anti-conscriptionist movement should be commemorated as having saved lives.

WILPF saw education as crucial to their task. Members set up study circles, went on the lecture circuit, wrote pamphlets, and established a peace library. The Misses Clara and Dora Baker, professional musicians, took charge of the library. At their own cost they bound scores of booklets in neat blue cardboard covers, and carried

the whole collection to and fro in a huge suitcase for the convenience of members at meetings. ( I wonder where it is now?) They also sent deputations to the Education department with regard to the contents of the *School Paper* and inaugurated a peace scholarship.

This list of activities reminds me of the work now carried out with far more resources at its disposal – millions of dollars in fact – by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, which since the late 1990s has educated Australian schoolchildren in the history of our military engagements, and the so-called national values produced by those engagements and they run essay competitions with the prize being a trip around the world to Gallipoli or the battlefields of France where children are encouraged to identify with the dead soldiers. They called one of their commemorations program, unashamed: 'Targetting Initiatives at Young People'.

In 1918, the Victorian *Educational Gazette* instructed teachers to replace its current list of inspiring 'notable deeds' – including the bringing of Christianity to Saxon England and Wilberforce's abolition of slavery – with 'stirring stories of heroic deeds in the present conflict'. 'Do not,' the Gazette advised, 'dwell on the horrors inseparable from war, but emphasise the qualities which will make such stories immortal'. Plus ca change... Qualities such as courage, sacrifice, mateship... WILPF noted indignantly that the April, May and July editions of the *School Paper* for 1918 contained no lessons on any other subject matter than war. Protests arose. The subject matter of school curricula became a hotly debated issue in the 1920s as we reported in *What's Wrong with Anzac?*. Many groups including the Women Teachers' Association and the Methodist Church called for military material to be banned from schools. WILPF was active in educating themselves and others and invited speakers including Professor W Harrison Moore, Maurice Blackburn MP, Frank Brennan MHR, John A Brailsform BA, Rev F Sinclair and Nettie Palmer, the poet and writer to speak to their meetings.

In chapter six of *What's Wrong with Anzac?* we detail the vast sums spent by DVA and associated agencies such as the Australian War Memorial in the last ten years in promulgating particular Australian history lessons to schoolchildren. As the young historian Anna Clark has noted in her book *History's Children* 'Anzac history certainly generates more education funding than any other areas of Australia's past'. Once the province of the pressure group, the RSL, a sectional interest group representing returned soldiers, Anzac has been taken over by the nation state through the federal government and its agencies. History, as we have seen during the past 15 years or so has become a key site for the contest over national traditions and the definition of national values and identity. National traditions, we know, rely on forgetting as well as remembering.

The women's movement recognised this when its leaders – Rose Scott, Jessie Street, Bessie Rischbieth – deposited their papers in national and state libraries with the explicit intention of preserving remembrance of their struggles and achievements. 'Representation' had both political and cultural dimensions, as Louisa Lawson recognised, when she wrote in her poem 'The Women of the Bush':

Ah how I bless the pioneers,  
The women lost to fame,  
Who braved the bush for strenuous years  
To make Australia's name.

How should these women 'lost to fame', their goals and achievements, be represented in our history? As a republican and nationalist Lawson was intent on achieving recognition and status for women in the national story as pioneers.

Some years after, WILPF stood for different values: for internationalism and recognition of our common humanity.

They saw artificial national boundaries – and border protection – as a key cause of conflict signifying the triumph of collective aggression, greed and hatreds. Eleanor Moore always wrote about the ways in which national loyalties and nation states disrupted people's natural sympathies with other human beings, with foreigners. This was how she told her story of her time travelling in Europe in 1919. One of the key figures in the international women's peace movement, the American Jane Addams, who would serve as International President of WILPF until her death in 1935, famously appealed to the desire for 'the fruitful processes of cooperation in the great experiment of living together in a world become conscious of itself'.

If national pride could be taught, so, too she wrote could 'international understanding and love'. The most pernicious change in the Anzac story in the last decades has been its rampant nationalism. Remembrance Day, 11 November, the anniversary of the Armistice that ended World War I, bids us remember those who died in war across the British Commonwealth. Anzac Day inculcates national pride based in a colonial experience that, in fact, paradoxically bound us ever more closely to the British Empire. The claim that Gallipoli is where Australian nationhood began is not only dangerous it represents a compensatory fantasy.

Let us celebrate WILPF then in its 95<sup>th</sup> year for its advocacy of internationalism and world peace, as an alternative Australian tradition, now lost sight of.

This was not a minority position in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1931, WILPF took responsibility in Australia for mobilising support for the world-wide petition for disarmament and secured 118,000 signatures. What a magnificent show of strength and support. Let us prod national memory, make films, write books and build

museum installations. Let us remind our fellow citizens of these alternative national traditions and these different visions of an Australian future.

In conclusion:

I received an email the other day from a troubled school teacher who wrote:

I just came across your name from a google search. I am a Head Teacher at a multicultural school in Sydney's west. Yesterday our school had the Anzac Day assembly. I am happy to support Anzac DAY if it is about Gallipoli and what is being symbolised is the waste of human life, futility of war, exploitation of young men etc. What I do not support is how this was hijacked as a vehicle for government propaganda ie that we are also commemorating and supporting the efforts of our soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This also occurred last year and when I complained I was told the students had prepared it themselves. This year I confronted the students and the teacher and I was informed that I would be disciplined if I criticised a teacher in front of students again. When I rang my previous school yesterday I was told that they had a similar mention of our current conflicts and that I was just being left wing. If both schools are doing this I suspect that it may be widespread or even there was some memo sent out at some stage by the Ed Dept.

I would like to take this further so if you could suggest some support articles. I am not interested in tackling the commemoration of Anzac Day but rather the inclusion of references to current conflicts. As the person responsible for conflict resolution and bullying at my school, I feel it is inconsistent if we are obliged to demonstrate "respect" for our country's invasion of other countries.

The other day a young man told me how his six year old son had been taken on a school excursion to the RSL. There is growing concern around Australia about the indoctrination of our young people in schools and on overseas battlefields – and about the distortion of our history that occurs in the process. I feel that the first members of WILPF, in their worst nightmares, could not have envisaged the militarization of our schools and culture that has occurred in the last ten years. I believe that our schoolchildren deserve better. WILPF is celebrating its 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary and its courageous activism has never been more relevant and necessary in Australia.