

Three inspirational Australian women of Queen Street, Norwood

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In 2009 when I moved into the house at 43 Queen Street, Norwood, I was keen to find out the history of the place. I am a bit superstitious about houses, and this one had a long history for Adelaide, a bluestone place built around 1863. According to the Sands and MacDougall directories, Joseph Harper had lived there with his sister Margaret in 1915. I did a web search and came up with the WW1 digger who had lived there. Joseph Cyril Harper, born in Liverpool, England, was a 'marine firefighter'. It was November 1915 that Mr Harper signed up for the 'Great War', having previously been rejected from the military in Melbourne 'on account of his teeth'. The records describe him as being 26 years old, of dark complexion, brown eyes and dark brown hair, and catholic. In May 1916, he joined the 50th Battalion – coincidentally, this was the very same battalion of two ancestors of my step-fathers (cousins to one other). Whilst Harper returned home, Fredrick Battams died aged 23 on the 18th July 1917, and was buried in Belgium. Less than a year later, Joseph Battams died at the same age, on the 5th April 1918, and was buried in France. All that returned from the cousins were, from Joseph, a black cat and kangaroo charm and, from Fredrick, a small German calendar and military rejection certificate, as he had also once been declared unfit for service.

Whilst much has been written about the various wars and Australians' roles within them, especially the men as heroes and cannon fodder, much less has been written about the lives of women from the past. So I was excited to find out more about the three famous Australian women who had all lived on Queen Street at different times in the past. These included Catherine Helen Spence (1825-1910), Saint Mary MacKillop (1842-1909) and May Gibbs (1877-1969). Two of these women are well known as famous Australian writers. Two of these women were social reformers who experienced battles with the establishment in their championing of causes. All of them were dedicated to helping the lives of children, particularly underprivileged children, although none of them - like myself - would have children themselves.

Perhaps the most famous during her lifetime was Catherine Helen Spence, whose childhood ambition was to be 'a teacher first and great writer afterwards'. She was indeed a teacher, journalist, author (of articles, novels and children's literature), suffragist, Unitarian preacher (SA's first woman preacher), social and political reformer, lecturer and public speaker. Spence was born in Melrose, Scotland in 1825, the fifth of eight children and she arrived in SA in 1839. She was red-headed, short, with a Scottish accent, a strong sense of self-belief and sense of humour, and reportedly careless in dress (according to the stereotypical focus on women's appearance!) until after her lecture trip to the US.

Spence began her professional life as a governess and teacher, starting up her own school with family members. She later became the first professional woman journalist and the first woman to write a novel about Australia. However, her first two novels were initially published anonymously; she wrote under a pen-name for 30 years and often assumed the identity of her brother in order to not miss journalistic writing assignments. Her first novel, *Clara Morrison* (1854), includes a self-satisfied unmarried woman character with a strong sense of self who is said to provide the point of view of Spence. A later work entitled 'The Handfasted' (referring to trial-marriage, what we might now commonly know as defacto relationships) was rejected as being '*calculated to loosen the marriage tie ... too socialistic and therefore dangerous*'.

In 1859 Spence started writing about the proportional representation system of voting, or 'effective voting' as she would call it, and would strongly advocate for this, along with women's suffrage, for the rest of her life. She spent 1864-1866 in Europe during which time she discussed with John Stuart Mill and Thomas Hare this voting system. In 2001, she was on the five dollar 'federation' commemorative bill (due to her role in introducing the Hare-Clarke voting system). Spence also assisted Irish woman Mary Lee, who inaugurated the SA Women's Suffrage League, and helped make South Australia the first place in the world to enable women the right to vote in 1894 and to stand for parliament (a right unclaimed till 1959). Whilst she was highly political, she was decidedly non-partisan, being President of the Women's Non Political Party Organisation.

Spence never married (rejecting two proposals as a teenager and young adult) or had children, although she raised three families of orphaned children, including her sister's children, and also cared for her mother. Spence was also a strong advocate for women and children, especially those in need such poor women and orphans. In particular, she was an advocate for the education of girls and women's working conditions. Amongst her achievements was being the co-founder (with Caroline Emily Clark) of Children's Courts (a world first) and of the Boarding Out Society in 1872, the first foster scheme for children in South Australia which was imitated throughout Australia and New Zealand. She also supported the establishment of the first government secondary school for girls in 1879.

Thinking about the value of the efforts of Catherine Helen Spence reminds me of the plight of my own family at the time. My great-great grandfather Stephen White died at age 27 years, leaving behind three children and a five-month pregnant wife Sarah James who would be a 26 year old single parent with four young children in 1869. The baby that was born posthumously, his namesake Stephen White, tragically died only a year after his birth. Sarah James's mother-in-law also died just 5 weeks after her son died. Within the space of a year and a half Sarah James had lost a husband, a son and a mother in law, and had three children to raise. There are no records of this family in the Destitute Asylum, so it is likely that they were assisted by their family.

Catherine Helen Spence continued working throughout her life and was particularly active in her 60s and 70s. She was appointed to the State Children's Council (in 1887) and the Destitute Board (in 1897) and became Australia's first female political candidate in the 1897 Federal Convention. In 1893 at the age of 68 she lectured throughout the US (Chicago's World Fair and Congress of Women) and Canada, Switzerland and the UK on 'effective voting'. Her Chicago address included the lines

It is said that many of us women spend our lives in waiting for the coming man, who often does not come at all, and sometimes when he does come she might have done better without him. I have waited long enough for the coming man, and I as a single woman have had to take up lecturing myself, and, in point of fact, I have done fairly well, both with life and with lecturing.

Spence died aged 84 at 64 Queen Street, Norwood in 1910, where she was living with the Quilty family (Mrs Quilty had been her maid) and with her niece Lucy Morice by her side.

A contemporary of Catherine Helen Spence who briefly lived on Queen Street was Saint Mary MacKillop who was born in Melbourne in 1842, the eldest of eight children. Like Spence, she had Scottish heritage (with both parents migrating from Scotland) and large, intense blue eyes. Also

similar to Spence, she began her professional life as a governess, later helping to found the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart in 1866, dedicated to the education of poor children and establishing a number of schools around SA from the 1860s. She lived on the corner of William and Queen Street after her excommunication from the Catholic Church in 1871, when she was wrongly accused by Bishop Sheil of inciting 'the sisters to disobedience and defiance' and many of the Josephite schools were subsequently closed. MacKillop was exonerated five months later, just before Sheil's death in 1872. As stated in my book 'The Secret Art of Poisoning'ⁱ

'The excommunication was associated with MacKillop uncovering and making a complaint in 1871 about the sexual abuse of children by Father Keating and others at Kapunda (with the Vicar General taking action and sending Keating back to Ireland). Kapunda priest Father Horan, one of these priests, now worked with Bishop Sheil and wreaked revenge on MacKillop and the Josephites, changing their rules to break them up, which MacKillop refused to comply with'.ⁱⁱ

Shortly after this she travelled to Rome to have the rules of the Order approved, and when she returned she became Superior-General of the Order. On the grounds of St Ignatius (Queen Street) the Order established a Women's Refuge where women ex-prisoners, unmarried mothers and homeless women lived and were taught to be self-supporting. An orphanage was also created along with a home for older women. The Order was established throughout Australia and in New Zealand where she spent 3 years. Later in 1883, Bishop Reynolds of Adelaide attempted to destroy the Josephites and Mary as their head as she advocated for a more centralised, equalitarian and less hierarchical organisation: she was exiled and removed as Superior-General of the Order. The Josephites transferred its headquarters to Sydney and Mary MacKillop was eventually reinstated as Superior-General. She was beautified by the Pope in 1995 and in 2010 she was canonised to become Australia's first Saint, and the first Saint ever to have been excommunicated from the Catholic Church.

Another famous resident of Queen Street was May Gibbs, who lived at 67 Queen Street sometime between 1881 and 1885. She is famous to many Australians through children's characters and literature. Gibbs was born in 1877 in Kent, England and arrived in SA when she was 4 years of age, with her parents and two brothers. She was tall with thick reddish dark brown hair, brown keen eyes, refined features and a strong nose. Her parents were also artists (although her father had lost an eye as a teenager) and she was encouraged in her art from a young age. She studied art in WA and England, and regularly travelled overseas before settling in Sydney after she returned from England in 1913. She struggled to get her Australian stories accepted in the UK. Despite being considered 'apolitical', she initially did political cartoons for a magazine (under the pseudonym Blob). She became famous as a children's illustrator and author, and her Australian characters and stories. These included the 'Gumnut Babies' characters in 1916 and the 'foster brothers' and Australian icons 'Snugglepot and Cuddlepie' in 1918.

Gibbs love for the Australian bush was evident in her characters and throughout her work, and she was also an advocate for the preservation of native flora and fauna. She was a shy and retiring person who married for the first time at aged 42 (in 1919) a mining agent, Bertram James Ossoli Kelly. However, she was also tough and her dissatisfaction with the page allocation of her comic characters 'Bib and Bub' led to the cartoon being withdrawn from the newspaper for two years. It

was the war period and 1920s that she was most famous. Her uniquely Australian work was used to boost morale during the war effort (e.g. postcards containing the 'gumnut corps'). Like Spence, she used pseudonyms for some of her work (e.g. Stan Cottman). Gibbs continued to work into her 80s and was made an MBE for her services to children's literature in 1955, although towards the end of her life she became a virtual recluse in her 'Nutcote' house which still exists and is now a museum.

At the present time, a large portrait of Spence can be found in the State Library of South Australia, her statue is in Light Square, Adelaide (where she first arrived with her family), a commemorative plaque is on Queen Street, Norwood and a scholarship for women in her name commenced in 1911. Her legacy to various causes including children's education, political reform and foster care was immense, and she said that she most wanted to be remembered as '*one who never swerved in her efforts to do her duty alike to herself and her fellow-citizens*'.

The Josephite Order Saint Mary MacKillop helped to establish continues through various community projects, both in Australia and overseas. As for the memory of May Gibbs, The May Gibbs Children's Literature Trust was established in 1998 and her books continue to be published, with the copyright of her stories and characters having been donated to services for children with disabilities and the remainder of her estate to the UN Children's Emergency Fund.

I feel a special connection to these great women of the past, which this street has led me to get to know better. These were inspirational and compassionate women, all different in character, but pioneers in some way. They made an enormous contribution to the Australian community, helping to shape the social landscape throughout their lives and beyond.

ⁱ Battams, S. (2019). *The Secret Art of Poisoning: The True Crimes of Martha Needle, The Richmond Poisoner*. Samantha Battams, Adelaide, Australia. (NB some of this short story was published in this book)

ⁱⁱ ABC. (2010). MacKillop banished after uncovering sex abuse. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2010-09-25/mackillop-banished-afteruncovering-sex-abuse/2273940>

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National Archives of Australia. WW1 Records: Joseph Cyril Harper,

<https://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/records/296013>

The Northcott Society and Cerebral Palsy Alliance 2016. About May Gibbs. [https://www.maygibbs.org/Sands and MacDougall Directories](https://www.maygibbs.org/Sands%20and%20MacDougall%20Directories).