

More than Mannix: Irish-Australian women who helped defeat conscription in WW1*

Introduction

When we think of the conscription campaigns of 1916 and 1917 the names that spring to mind are Billy Hughes in support of conscription and Archbishop Daniel Mannix and Queensland premier Tom Ryan in opposition. Given the masculine nature of politics at the time it is not surprising that the main characters in the debate were men. After all, none of the seven parliaments in Australia had a woman member. It was not until 1921 that Edith Cowan became the first woman to enter an Australian parliament when she won the Western Australian Legislative Assembly seat of West Perth. It was 1943 before Dame Enid Lyons became the first woman elected to the House of Representatives, the same year that Dorothy Tangney became the first woman Senator.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conceive of the referendum campaigns as all-male affairs. Women featured strongly on both sides of the issue. The National Council of Women and the Australian Women's National League organised meetings and rallies and distributed leaflets for the pro-conscription cause. The Women's Peace Army and the Women's Political Association did the same for the anti-conscription cause. Furthermore, as women could vote in the referendums they were often specifically targeted by the propaganda campaigns of each side, most famously in the 'Blood Vote' poster.

Another misconception is that the anti-conscription campaign was dominated by Catholics of Irish descent, a misconception reinforced by the fact that Hughes' two most recognisable opponents were prominent Catholics, the Irish-born Mannix and Ryan who was the son of Irish immigrants. In reality the anti-conscription movement was led by members of the labour movement, the majority of whom were Protestants of British descent. What is true, however, is that a high proportion of Catholics of Irish descent did oppose conscription. And among their number were women whose contributions to the cause have been crowded out of the historical narrative by the prominence of the two front-line warriors Mannix and Ryan.

In this paper I wish to bring into the foreground just three of those women: Agnes Macready, Agnes Murphy and Bella Guerin, each of whom I have come across over the years while researching the conscription campaigns. Ever curious as to who these women were, my research for this paper has led me to conclude that each is remarkable, not only because of her contribution to the anti-conscription movement but also because of her talents and the amazing life she lived.¹

Agnes Macready

Firstly, let us look at Agnes Macready. Born in 1855 at Rathfriland, County Down, Agnes was the eldest of five children of Presbyterian minister, Reverend Henry Macready, and his wife Jane. In 1867, when Agnes was 12, the family emigrated to Australia, where Henry became

¹ Had time not been so short, others could have been included, such as Annie Golding and her sister Kate Dwyer and Gertrude Phillips, each of whom also participated in the public debates over conscription. For examples of the contributions of these six women to the public debate, see *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 12 October 1916, p. 21; 19 October 1916, p. 19; 26 October 1916, p. 2122 November 1917, p. 17; 29 November 1917, p. 23; 6 December 1917, pp. 11, 25; 13 December 1917, pp. 8, 12, 18, 19; 20 December 1917, p. 17

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the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in NSW. As an adult, Agnes converted to Catholicism, a move described by the *Methodist* newspaper in these terms: '[S]he wandered from green pastures of truth into the enchanted ground of Popery, and is ardent as pervers usually are'.² A manifestation of her alleged perverted ardour for popery was her contribution from 1898 of literary sketches and verse to the *Catholic Press*, some of which were republished in journals in Ireland and America.

During the 1916 conscription campaign Agnes was a regular contributor to the anti-conscriptionist newspaper the *Catholic Press*, penning articles addressed to women in which she opposed what she called 'the vivid scarlet sin of conscription', with headlines such as: 'The Curse of Conscription that Overshadows Australia' and 'The Fate of Your Household: Will the Evil Day Dawn'.³ The latter was coupled with a poem wishing the English would take Billy Hughes off their hands. During the 1917 conscription campaign Agnes once again warned women of the dangers of conscription with articles that bore headlines such as 'Who Now Loves Australia?: True Loyalists' and 'Hunted Like a Wild Beast: The Conscript'.⁴ One of the issues exercising the minds of Catholics during those campaigns was the failure of the government to pass a regulation that would have exempted seminarians and teaching brothers from the call up. Macready wrote an article entitled, 'The Brothers and Their Lives: Will You Stab Them?'. In the same vein as 'the Blood Oath', she asked her readers, 'Is any mother, then, prepared to sign away the life of a teaching Brother to whom she entrusts her son, when he may no longer be kept for his own sake at her knee?'.⁵

So, what else do we know about Agnes Macready? In 1880 she commenced training as a nurse at Sydney's Prince Alfred Hospital, after which she worked at Melbourne Hospital before being appointed matron of Bowral Hospital in New South Wales.⁶ When war broke out in South Africa in 1899 Macready volunteered to serve as a nurse. But her request was denied. Undeterred, she paid her own passage to Durban and was the first nurse from Australia to arrive there. But not only was she the first Australian nurse at the Boer War, she also became Australia's first-ever female war correspondent.⁷

Having been commissioned by the *Catholic Press* to send back reports on the war, her first article appeared in the issue of 20 January 1900. In it she wrote that she saw the war 'with a woman's eyes', in contrast to the heroic battlefield accounts of her male counterparts.⁸ In her 2015 book on Australian women war reporters, Jeannine Baker wrote:

Macready's newspaper articles focused on what she called 'the grey side of a campaign' - the aftermath of battle and the role of women and other civilians. Like

² *Methodist* 17 February 1900, p. 3.

³ *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 19 October 1916, p. 19; 26 October 1916, p. 21.

⁴ *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 22 November 1917, p. 17; 13 December 1917, p. 18.

⁵ *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 20 December 1917, p. 17.

⁶ Jeannine Baker, *Australian Women War Reporters: Boer War to Vietnam*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2015, p. xx.

⁷ Patricia Clarke has claimed that Edith Dickenson was Australia's first female war correspondent, but Dickenson arrived in Durban in March 1900, after Macready's articles began appearing in the *Catholic Press* (Patricia Clarke, 'Australia's first female war correspondent: Edith Dickenson at the Boer War' in Barry Turner, et al (eds), *Reporting from the Wars 1850 – 2015: The origins and evolution of the war correspondent*, Vernon Press, Wilmington, 2018, pp. 39-62).

⁸ *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 20 January 1900, p. 3

many of the women who followed her, Macready felt herself to be on the periphery of the battlefield.⁹

Baker notes that women war correspondents would later challenge the idea that they should cover war only from the so-called 'woman's angle'. Nevertheless, although she was not permitted to visit the front, her reports had a certain power that came from the unique perspective from which she wrote:

And being a woman I feel that I want to cry, for it does not fall to my lot to see any of the 'glory of war'; it is mine only to look upon the maimed limbs, the ghastly wounds, the suffering, the after results of an engagement be it a victory or a defeat. And being a woman I feel that I want to cry, too, for the Dutch woman on her lonely farm beyond the veldt, whose grey-haired husband and little son, scarce strong enough to hold the rifle, died together in the trenches yesterday morning. For Rachael is weeping for her children 'on both sides of the sea'.¹⁰

The *Catholic Press* was clearly pleased with Macready's reports, claiming they were 'beautiful and pathetic' and 'are acknowledged to be among the best war correspondence published here or in the old world'.¹¹ In her articles Agnes frequently referred to the Irish troops who came under her care, reflecting on whether their service would lead to a reconciliation in her native land: 'Has Ireland no wrongs to avenge? or has the time arrived for the lion and the lamb to lie down in peace together?'¹²

In September 1901, after almost two years in South Africa, Macready was invalided home to Australia. The *Catholic Press* reported:

[S]he left [Australia] with a heavy heart, believing there was nothing to justify the war, and she saw and heard nothing in South Africa to change that opinion. ... Of the heroism, the lofty motives, and the chivalry of the Boer her admiration is boundless. But it is an admiration blended with tears. 'Why are we destroying these people?' That was a question which occurred to her every day as she met the Boers – prisoners in towns, or in hospitals, or in refuge camps – old men, women, and children.¹³

After recovering her health Macready travelled to Ireland from where she sent literary sketches to the *Catholic Press*. On return to Australia she resumed her nursing career, taking positions as matron at hospitals in mining towns in New South Wales, such as Wyalong and Kurri Kurri. All the while, she continued her literary contributions to the *Catholic Press*.¹⁴

In 1904 Macready gave a paper at the Second Australasian Catholic Congress. In the paper she spoke in favour of education for girls, warning that 'in ignorance lies the danger of the vote in the hands of the woman'. She contended that education should promote both the domestic and public spheres of women's lives: 'upon the ideal of the woman depends the

⁹ Baker, *Australian Women War Reporters*, p. xx.

¹⁰ *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 24 February 1900, p. 3.

¹¹ *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 21 July 1900, p. 10; 26 May 1900, p. 16.

¹² *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 3 February 1900, p. 3.

¹³ *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 21 September 1901, p. 19.

¹⁴ *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 6 September 1902, p. 8; 18 August 1904, p. 17; *Newcastle Morning Herald* 8 September 1904, p. 6.

rise and fall of the home, and upon the character of that home follows the advance or retrogression of the State, for what is the State but a collection of homes?'.

After the war Macready continued to contribute articles and poems to the *Catholic Press* up until close to her death in 1935. She died in Sydney and is buried at Rookwood Cemetery.

Agnes Murphy

Agnes Gillian Murphy was born in about 1865 at Tullamore, King's County (now County Offaly) and travelled to Australia at the age of 15 years to visit her sister, who was living in Melbourne. A reversal of the family's financial fortunes meant that Agnes remained in Australia.

Like Macready, Murphy contributed to the conscription debates by means of articles and letters published in various newspapers, particularly during the 1917 campaign. Many of them were addressed specifically to women. One example is an article in the *Catholic Press* entitled, 'An Appeal to Women: Freedom or Slavery?'.¹⁵ In a letter headlined 'Conscription a Tragedy for Bush Women', which appeared in the *Catholic Press*, the *Australian Worker* and Melbourne's *Tribune*, she wrote:

Conscription will be a hideous nightmare for the lonely women of the bush. ... The new chivalry is the chivalry of women for women. Chivalrous women of the city, vote 'No,' and save your brave sisters in the country from conditions of hardship against which all your best nature protests.¹⁶

Murphy did not confine her letter-writing to the women's perspective: she criticised the open-endedness of the government's proposal compared to Canada's which limited conscription to 100,000 men; she defended the Irish from the 'monstrous insult' that they were pro-German; and she argued that conscription of Australian men meant years of exile from their homes, their country and their kin.¹⁷ She also wrote letters in support of Archbishop Mannix, who was under attack from conservative Catholics.¹⁸

Although not publicly prominent in the 1916 campaign, Agnes did her bit by addressing personal letters to men of influence. In a letter to Hugh Mahon, Minister for External Affairs, she wrote:

I am sorry for many things in connection with the conscription issue, but most of all to find you among its supporters. I feel I have a right to express my disappointment, because like you I was bred and born in Tullamore. You must know, much better than I do, the terrible tragedies that are going on in Ireland. To my mind every vote for Conscription extends the licence of these tragedies. Surely you have not forgotten Kilmainham? At the same time let me say how very sorry I am to hear of your continued ill health – the sorrow of a town's woman, and one who gratefully remembers that you once suffered for Ireland.¹⁹

¹⁵ *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 6 December 1917, p. 25.

¹⁶ *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 13 December 1917, p. 19; *Australian Worker* (Sydney) 13 December 1917, p. 19; *Tribune* (Melbourne) 13 December 1917, p. 2.

¹⁷ *Tribune* (Melbourne) 13 December 1917, p. 2; *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 13 December 1917, p. 12; *Advocate* (Melbourne) 15 December 1917, p. 12; *Evening Echo* (Ballarat) 18 December 1917, p. 4.

¹⁸ *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 22 November 1917, p. 21; 29 November 1917, p. 23.

¹⁹ Letter 1 October 1916 Murphy to Mahon, Mahon Papers NLA MS 937/196. Agnes Murphy was a very talented journalist and author. She was a friend, secretary and biographer of Dame Nellie Melba.

Her letter had some effect, for three weeks later, under pressure from both sides, Mahon came out against conscription. She also wrote to Major General John Monash (as he then was), whom she had known in Melbourne before the war, setting out her arguments against conscription. Monash replied, 'I fully agree with many of the sentiments you have expressed ..., although it would be inconvenient of me to be quoted'.²⁰

So, who was Agnes Murphy? She is perhaps best known as the author of *Melba*. Published in 1909 it was the first biography of the great Australian opera singer for whom she was both social secretary and a friend. After being marooned in Melbourne as a young girl, Agnes had found work as a legal copyist before landing a job with a new magazine *Table Talk*, thus launching her career as a journalist, which saw her become a contributor to the *Bulletin* and *Melbourne Punch* and then social editor of the latter. She was a foundation member of the Austral Salon, which she established in 1890 as an association for the intellectual advancement of the women of Australia with fortnightly meetings to discuss questions bearing on literary, musical, scientific and artistic matters. Murphy addressed its first meeting on the topic of 'Australian Federation'.²¹

In 1895 she decided to try her luck in London, taking with her the manuscript of a novel which she had written about late nineteenth-century Melbourne and its society. It was published by Routledge under the title *One Woman's Wisdom*. It provoked a libel suit and was withdrawn from sale. Nevertheless, she climbed the social ladder in London's literary and artistic world. According to literary critic Lucy Sussex:

[Agnes Murphy] provides an object lesson in how a colonial journalist without existing family or literary connections could make the contacts to succeed in London. Indeed she became perhaps the supreme Australian networker in London. ... [S]he was the first Australian woman journalist to try and also succeed in London.²²

It was there that Agnes met Melba. She returned to Australia on numerous visits often with Australian artistes, for whom she acted as an agent/entrepreneur. She travelled extensively giving talks and lectures in the world's major capitals, often advocating for women and for Irish independence. She died in London in 1931 and is buried in Hampstead Cemetery.

Bella Guerin

Julia Margaret Guerin was born in 1858 at Williamstown, Victoria to Patrick Guerin of County Clare and Julia Margaret née Thearney of Dublin.²³

More party-political than either Macready or Murphy, she was active in the Women's Political Association and in the Labor and Socialist parties. During the war she led the Labor

²⁰ Geoffrey Serle, *John Monash*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1998, p. xx.

²¹ *Melbourne Punch* 27 February 1890, p. 141 (13)

²² Lucy Sussex, 'A "Close-Cropped Scribess": Agnes Murphy as Gossip Columnist, New Woman (Lesbian?) Novelist, Opera Entrepreneur and Militant Suffragette', *Southerly*, Vol. 71, No. 1, 2011, pp. 127-142, pp. 127, 138.

²³ Biographical details in this paper are taken from Farley Kelly, 'Guerin, Julia Margaret (Bella) (1858-1923)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*; Victoria Worstead, 'A Profile of Bella Guerin, Australia's first woman graduate', *Victorian Historical Journal*, Vol 53, 1982, pp. 118-29; and Debra Hutchison, 'Bella Guerin: first female university graduate in Australia' State Library Victoria Blog. Some sources give her mother's maiden name as Kearney.

Women's Anti-Conscription Fellowship, speaking at meetings in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia.

So, who was Bella Guerin? She is not an easy person to trace because of numerous name changes. First, Julia Margaret came to be known as Bella, and second, she married twice, on each occasion taking her husband's surname despite her feminist leanings. However, her marriages were unconventional in other ways. In 1891 at age 33 Bella Guerin became Bella Halloran when she married the 80-year-old civil servant and poet Henry Halloran. He died two years later, leaving her with an 8-month-old son, Henry, whom she had to raise without her parents' assistance as both had died. In October 1909 Bella Halloran, aged 51, became Bella Lavender when she married George d'Arcie Lavender, thirty years her junior.²⁴ That marriage was short-lived and they separated.

Bella Guerin is perhaps best known for the fact that she was the first woman to graduate from an Australian university, having been awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree by Melbourne University in December 1883. Two years later she received a Master of Arts degree. Upon graduation she began a career in teaching at Loreto Convent in Ballarat and then at the Ballarat School of Mines. In 1898 she founded her own school, University College, at Bendigo where she taught students for matriculation. As well as teaching she also contributed articles and poems to literary journals. She was an advocate for women's suffrage, which was not finally realised across Australia until 1908, when Victoria became the last state to give women the vote.

After the failure of her marriage to George Lavender she increasingly concentrated on politics and the women's movement. She gave lectures on women's issues with many of her talks reported in publications such as *Labor Call* and *The Socialist*, becoming in 1912 vice-president of the Women's Political Association, of which Vida Goldstein was president. In 1913 Bella co-authored an election manifesto and biographical portrait in support of Goldstein's bid for election to parliament. On the outbreak of war she became more outspoken and more radical. In 1916 Bella was appointed vice-president of the Woman's Central Organizing Committee of the Labor Party, formed for the purpose of organizing and educating the women of Victoria politically and industrially. However, she soon fell out of favour with party elders after giving a lecture critical of the party's treatment of its women members entitled, 'Women in the Labor Party: Poodle of Packhorse?'. After the war she continued to move further to the left, lecturing at socialist meetings and on the Yarra Bank, where she was arrested for flying the red flag.

In the early 1920s she moved to Adelaide to live with her son Dr Henry Halloran, who was a medical practitioner. She died in 1923 and is buried in the West Terrace Cemetery.

Conclusion

By virtue of the limited time available we have only been able to touch briefly on each of these three very talented women. Even so, I am grateful to the organisers of the conference for providing a reason for me to investigate them further and a forum in which to bring them into the foreground.

²⁴ *Argus* 9 October 1909, p. 13.