

## LYRA VERONICA ESMERALDA TAYLOR OBE MA LLB (1894-1979)



Lyra Taylor not only made a significant contribution to the establishment of the social work profession in Australia, but her support of the profession continues today through the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Victorian Branch's *Lyra Taylor Fund* which was established with a legacy she left to the Branch. Taylor was a founding member of the Australian Association of Social Workers and one of six members of its founding executive body. Her historical importance beyond the profession of social work is evidenced by the fact that she has an entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and that a sound recording of her being interviewed by Victorian social worker Marjorie Glasson is held in the National Library of Australia<sup>i</sup>. She also has a Wikipedia page<sup>ii</sup>!

Lyra Taylor was one of four children born at Ngairie (Stratford) New Zealand to Robert Taylor, a farmer from England, and his New Zealand wife Mary (nee Morrison). She attended Victoria University College in Wellington NZ, graduating with an LL.B. in 1918. She was the first woman to be admitted to the Bar in Wellington and was made a partner in a law firm in 1925. In that year she attended the conference of the International Council of Women held in Washington DC. She then entered Johns Hopkins University Baltimore to study social work, graduating with an MA in Social Services and Social Economics in 1927. As part of her MA studies she conducted research for the Juvenile Court, Boston, Massachusetts. She also worked for the famous Family Welfare Agency in Baltimore that had previously been headed by Mary Richmond. The young Gordon Hamilton used to come from New York to give classes in the agency and Taylor recalls her as young and very beautiful. In her interview with Marjorie Glasson she recalled that her Baltimore experience, where she received excellent supervision, had coloured her whole life and her professional practice. Because of restrictions on Australians working in the USA, in 1929 she moved to Montreal where she worked as the district secretary of the Family Welfare Association. Here she found the attitudes very British and her more psychiatrically-oriented American ideas were not approved of. She taught at the Montreal School of Social Work and later worked at the Montreal YWCA to gain experience in group work.

From 1940 to 1942 she was General Secretary of the YWCA in Sydney. According to the entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 'She introduced more liberal policies, encouraged self-reliance, tolerated smoking and drinking (in moderation) and invited servicemen to the Y for 'Open House'. Her ideas were too advanced for the YWCA Board and Taylor decided not to renew her contract with them. During this period she served on the New South Wales Council of Social Services, the University of Sydney's Board of Social Studies, and lectured part-time to social work students<sup>iii</sup>.

Taylor returned to Canada where she undertook personnel work for Dupont, the main arms manufacturers for WWII. In 1943 Taylor was phoned by the Australian High Commission in Ottawa and invited to establish the Commonwealth Department of Social Services (national) Social Work and Research Section that was based in Melbourne, and to advise on social service legislation. She initiated a program to train social workers under the Colombo Plan and encouraged Australians to take up United Nations scholarships in this field in the United States. After her retirement from DSS in 1959, Taylor became Assistant Director of the Old People's Welfare Council of Victoria, and from 1965 to 1969 held the post of Director, Australian Council on the Ageing. In 1969 she acted as Director of the West Australian Council on the Ageing<sup>iv</sup>.

Taylor's most important contribution to the social work profession was the establishment in the Commonwealth Department of Social Services of a social work section that was to provide a service in every state. She succeeded in this, despite the fact that working in a predominantly male government department was not without its challenges. Early on she had to rebut the expectation that as a woman she would take part in the tea trolley roster and deliver tea to the men's desks.

Speaking to Marjorie Glasson, she explained that at that time air services were not available to all Australian states, so she would have to accompany new young social workers to their new cities and help them set up their offices. The advent of the Department of Social Services' Social Work Departments strengthened the young social work profession, as this Department made social work services made available throughout Australia, even in the states of Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania that did not have social work training at that time.

Delivering his tribute to Lyra at the 1979 Victorian Branch AGM, Len Tierney pointed out that at a time when communication with other states was difficult and costly, "she acted as a roving ambassador for the recently formed State Association (of Social Workers) and the nascent Federal body" as she travelled round Australia<sup>v</sup>. Her frequent presence in Queensland, for example, where in 1951 she met with University planners as a representative of the Queensland AASW Branch's Training Committee, lent weight to the campaign being waged by social workers in Queensland as they pushed for the establishment of social work education. In 1954 the University of Queensland decided to establish a Department of Social Studies under the leadership of former Queensland AASW President Hazel Smith, and the new department enrolled its first students in 1956.

Throughout her life she maintained an international view. After taking up her position in the Commonwealth Government she received a Carnegie Foundation grant which enabled her to participate with three other senior Australian policy makers in a study tour of youth welfare services, and in 1953 the United Nations paid her expenses for a study tour looking at social work, social administration and social research in Canada, the USA and the UK. She established international links and was able to bring international experts to Australia.

Lyra Taylor was both admired and liked by her staff. Barbara Sturmfels, one of 'Lyra's girls' who worked in Western Australia in the 1940s, recalls that:

*Lyra had no difficulty in building up a sense of confidence in her (very green) appointees and backed it up by going in to bat for them with their state seniors, by fairly frequent visits, and supplying and encouraging professional reading. We never saw these visits as in any way inspectorial. I remember also Lyra explicitly setting standards and expectations... we were never in doubt about the relationships between the legal framework within which we worked, and our social work principles. Other staff were there to establish eligibility: but we could assist clients who could not easily do this, to demonstrate why they might fall within the rules. And we were there to provide a general social casework service for the Department's clients<sup>vi</sup>.*

John Crisp, whose aunt Kathleen Crisp was Taylor's deputy for many years, and who took over her role on her retirement, always referred to her affectionately as 'L. T.'. The two women were good friends<sup>vii</sup>.

Indeed, Lyra Taylor was an outstanding leader. Again in Len Tierney's words,

*Lyra Taylor's appearance on the social work scene was dramatic. We were incredibly parochial. She was cosmopolitan and used to making things happen. She chivied and persuaded social workers to enlarge their vision of themselves, the world and their profession's contribution.*

Tierney points out that at a time when it was very unusual for a woman to be a director in the public service she had 'a flair for penetrating masculine defences' and helped broaden the Department's horizons ...establishing a library and keeping officials alert to what was happening on the international scene'.

Len Tierney's tribute finishes with a thumbnail sketch of Lyra:

*She was someone you noticed, a persuasive, charming and purposive person. Lyra was elegant – she dressed gracefully. She wore her spectacles on a chain around her neck and used them to adorn her speech*

and finally:

*Lyra was a believer in objective truth. She identified heavily with her own profession, but it had to be a profession that had to be judged by its performance. She would have little patience with a profession that abrogated its responsibilities to conceal an emptiness, or a profession that did not seek to inspire its members to take positions of creative leadership. It is so typical of Lyra Taylor that she should endow our profession with a substantial sum and I am sure of her message to us, "Don't confuse the striving for excellence in the service of others with the striving for power".*

Lyra was made a Life Member of the AASW in 1969 in recognition of her contribution to her profession, and to the AASW.

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<sup>i</sup> [catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/2081014](http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/2081014) External no CD-8498777, Call no. Oral TRC 238/2 CD

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ii [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyra\\_Taylor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyra_Taylor)

iii <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/taylor-lyra-veronica-esmeralda-11831> accessed 14.1.2016

iv K & JC (1979) "Obituary, Miss Lyra Taylor, O.B.E. M.A. LL.B", *Australian Social Work*, 32, ( 3) 49.

v Tierney, Leonard "Tribute to the Late Lyra Taylor" (1979) *Australian Social Work*, 32, (3) 49-50

vi Email to author from Barbara Sturfels 21.2.2017

vii Telephone discussion between author and John Crisp 24.2.2017

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Jane Miller, *The People and the Times, the Founding of the Australian Association of Social Workers in 1946*, AASW National E Bulletin Social Work Focus 2016, page 14, Autumn 2016 Volume 1, Issue 1.