The Library has received a donation which honours the role of women in the Australian Red Cross, and their leadership in Australian society in the early 20th Century. In 2016, the New South Wales State Division of the Australian Red Cross donated a collection of 35 framed pictures and objects, which highlight the prominent role and impact of women on the formation, direction and administration of the organisation. Whilst overseas posts and key administrative positions were historically held by men, many of its founders and presidents were in fact women, who were active in the running of the organisation. The Red Cross provided a means by which women could become prominent philanthropists, community organisers and strategic leaders - roles previously reserved for men.
Lady Helen Munro-Ferguson
Founder Australian Red Cross Society

August 1914
This collection contains portraits venerating outstanding female founders and presidents; like the politically adept Lady Helen Munro-Ferguson (Australia branch) and Eleanor MacKinnon (NSW State branch), a leader widely known for her social and political activism and charitable work. It also contains awards and shields named after some of its most active female Presidents: Lady Gowrie and Lady Wakehurst. At the outbreak of World War I, Lady Helen Munro-Ferguson telegraphed various Australian state governors’ wives, asking them each to establish local Red Cross branches. Many of these women took on roles as State Presidents, positions rarely afforded to women, making the Red Cross ‘an important and influential women’s organisation’.

Helen Munro-Ferguson

Helen Munro-Ferguson defied the conventions of a vice-regal figurehead by becoming directly involved in the management and financial administration of the organisation. Through her management of the Australian Red Cross, she demonstrated her ability to lead a federated national organisation, oversee large budgets and chair finance committees on a national and international stage. Her leadership, determination and organising powers played a vital role in cementing the formation and growth of the Red Cross, thereby encouraging the active participation and leadership of Australian women in their communities during a period of significant social upheaval and war.

Helen Munro-Ferguson established and ran the national headquarters from government house in Melbourne - the location of the federal government in 1914 – and spearheaded the establishment of state divisions led by the wives of State Governors. She oversaw the establishment of a comprehensive network of local branches in Australian suburbs and country towns and the frenzied activity of volunteers from women's organisations like the YWCA, the Overseas Club and the Patriots League as they sewed, packed and despatched food, clothing and money received from all over the country to organisations across Europe.

Eleanor MacKinnon

Another influential leader in the early history of the Australian Red Cross was Eleanor MacKinnon foundation honorary secretary to the State division of the Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society, member of the State executive and finance committees and a delegate to the Central Council. In August 1914, Eleanor MacKinnon established and founded one of the world’s first Junior Red Cross Divisions in New South Wales. Conceiving 'the idea of using the idealism and generosity of young people to relieve suffering and distress', and providing its motto, 'The Child for the Child', the Junior Red Cross was open to girls and boys up until the age of sixteen. Its initial aim was to involve children in the support of recuperating soldiers, which was later expanded to addressing the needs of suffering and needy children, particularly those of ex-servicemen. The movement quickly gained support and momentum – by 1918 the Australian Junior Red Cross was formally established in fifty-two countries. At an annual meeting of the Junior Red Cross in 1921, Dame Clara Butt proclaimed:

“I have just heard that the Junior Red Cross movement has been started in England, and I am so glad to think that Australia has given them the lead. The movement is a wonderful one, and the report astounded me.”
Early days of the Junior Red Cross, Eleanor MacKinnon (left) and Lady Strickland (right) at Government House, Sydney [ca. 1918], PXD 1438/no.3, State Library of New South Wales

Eleanor MacKinnon also held the positions of honorary publicity officer, editor and founder of the Red Cross Record and the Junior Red Cross Record (the Society’s monthly newsletters), member of the State Council for Voluntary Aid Detachments, and director of the Red Cross Produce Depot. On 15 February 1938, her twenty-one years of service were commemorated with the opening of the Eleanor MacKinnon Memorial Junior Red Cross Home by Lady Gowrie, wife of the then Governor-General, and friend of Mrs MacKinnon.
The Lady Helen Challenge Shield, New South Wales Division of the Australian Red Cross, June 1920 / designed by Professor L. Wilkinson; executed by Eirene Mort and Nora Weston, LR 110, State Library of New South Wales

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In order to address the decline of Voluntary Aid Detachments after WW1, and the loss of potential VA’s above the age of sixteen years in the Junior Red Cross, Eleanor MacKinnon formed the Junior Red Cross Auxiliaries for girls from 16 to 18 years, to encourage them to become a VA or become involved in other areas of the Red Cross. Another method was the inauguration of the Lady Helen Challenge shield, which was awarded annually to the detachment which showed the highest level of competency across a variety of duties including stretcher drill, first-aid, home nursing, and bandaging. This beautiful woodcut shield, hand painted in gold and black with a red cross in the centre and decorated with brass plates, was designed by Professor L. Wilkinson of the University of Sydney and executed by Eirene Mort and Nora Weston, two well-known Sydney woodcarvers and artists who taught craftwork to returned servicemen through the Red Cross. It was presented to the Western Suburbs Detachment No. 56 in 1920 by Chairman Hanbury Davies with Lady Helen’s approval.

In conclusion, the role and impact of the Australian Red Cross in the successful prosecution of the Great War on the home front is largely due to the charitable and philanthropic endeavours of the women who helped it to become one of the most successful voluntary organisations in 20th century Australia. It was through the ground-breaking work of founding presidents like Helen Munro-Ferguson and Eleanor MacKinnon that women became active and visible leaders and participants in the social and political life of their communities during the first decades of the 20th century.

Stephanie Volkens, Librarian, Collection Access & Description Branch

Further Reading:


Find out more about the Red Cross Archive [14]

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