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Celebrity Humanitarianism in the 1920s: Australian Women at the League of Nations

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I characterise the reception Australian women who attended the League of Nations as a form of celebrity status. While there has been increasing interest in the League and women's role within it, many of these women have rarely been discussed extensively in League accounts. The media was keen to project an exotic aura around participating in the League; these women actively shaped this profile and publicity. I explore how the work of the League was transplanted beyond Geneva and consider new methods of humanitarian advocacy in localised contexts such as that of celebrity humanitarianism.

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One of the key aspirations of the League of Nations from its inception in 1920 was to create, sustain and support peace. This was one of its humanitarian missions. The inter-war years saw the emergence of several international organisations and institutions which fostered this sentiment, but no more powerful, influential and of higher international profile than the League. The hopes of the League were high, especially in relation to sustaining peace, and preventing war specially to safeguard children; it was determined to 'guard our children from any such war again'.¹ Aspiration towards peace, in addition to issues relating to the traffic of women and children formed activities of the League that could be characterised as distinctively 'humanitarian' at the time.

Several of the women Australian substitute delegates to the League were university educated women active in university life and women's organisations prior to representing Australia at the League. These included Jessie Webb (1880–1944), Margaret Dale (1883–1963), Ethel McDonnell (1876–1961), Roberta Jull (1872–1961), Freda Bage (1883–1970) and Stella Allen (1871–1962), who encapsulated the modern middle-class, educated women of the 1920s, fostering a pride in an international, global outlook. They discussed League matters, especially in relation to women and children, which were front and centre of their public pronouncements and which shaped their humanitarianism informed by their League experience.

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In this article, I characterise the reception Australian women at the League received in Australia as creating a form of celebrity status. I consider these women of the League collectively, through the approach of prosopography, to analyse the attention they attracted as Australian substitute delegates to the League of Nations. This generation of white, middle-class women born in the 1870s and 1880s had by 1920, when the League was formed, established flourishing careers, extensive women's networks and in some cases had embedded themselves in policy positions within government agencies. While there has been increasing interest in the League and women's role within it, many of these women have rarely been discussed extensively in League accounts, both in terms of their activities within the League, and then beyond it when they returned to Australia. The significance of positioning these women as central to the story of the League is to move our histories beyond the figures well known in the history of the League to those women who have not received such attention. This widens our understanding of those who engaged and represented the League itself. Further, it recasts their work as humanitarian through their association with the League in the inter-war years. In so doing, it provides new understandings of the changing nature of humanitarian advocacy during this time, which I have characterised as 'celebrity humanitarianism'.

The term 'celebrity humanitarianism' in current parlance typically refers to contemporary efforts by leading international celebrities from the West to promote and advocate for charity causes and social aid.² In the context of the inter-war years covered in this article, I am drawing on the term to demonstrate it has a longer history which predates its current use, by illustrating the way those women who attended the League assumed a type of celebrity status through their attendance at League events and proceedings. Upon returning home to Australia, they were toasted and became public figures, the media focusing on their presence at the auspicious platform of the League. Significantly, Australian women's involvement in the League provided a rare opportunity for women to engage in discussions of diplomacy and world affairs. As ambassadors, the women delegates remained uncritical of the League, focusing on the humanitarian elements of its achievements in areas such as peace, refugees, and slavery of women. The colonial and Western perspectives remained uninterrogated in the points of view they offered, with the clearly articulated message that the League remained the best avenue for world peace and for global support for refugees.

Further to this argument that women were provided with a platform of international advocacy, as a part of this celebrity status, I would argue was a gendered commentary of the *embodiment* of the humanitarian mission. Commenting on the personality, outlook, clothes, and the speaking performance of League women was an integral part of how the humanitarian agenda was conveyed by the press in promoting the League. Such commentary was gender-specific. The qualities of the female humanitarian League advocate encompassed the conventional associations with femininity such as empathy, humanity, and sentimentality, in ways commentary on male delegates did not.

But women were not passive recipients of this celebrity identity. The women of the League under discussion shaped, as well as were shaped by, media representations of themselves. Their agency is articulated through their discussions of the League and how they themselves determined and formulated the public narrative. While the media was keen to project an exotic aura around participating in the League, the women shaped this profile and publicity that accompanied it to further the cause, aims and objectives of the League within the Australian context. As active agents promoting the League's message through celebrity humanitarianism, they embodied what Patricia Calvin has called 'a

company of actors' who shaped understandings of the League.³ A part of this, they publicised, documented, and referenced their own biographies and drew on these not only to establish their credentials but also integrate their League work within their broader careers in promoting social welfare. By necessity, I have relied on newspaper accounts of their public talks, lectures, and speeches. Other sources that may glean further insight into their own perceptions of the reception they received from the public media, or how they engaged with them are not available, but I would argue the available sources point to proactive and not only reaction responses by League women.

This article also seeks to capture through a biographical approach a generation of women for whom the Great War was a formative experience as their social and political convictions were shaped during the war years. Their work with the League provided a particular platform within Australia giving rise to a specific type of humanitarian advocacy. All of them focused on issues of children and women in their engagement with the humanitarian programmes of League, and they continued this focus during the latter part of their lives and careers. While a consideration of the full biography of each woman is beyond the scope of this article, most did transition their humanitarian work with the League to engaging with social welfare issues after they had completed their role with the League. This transition was enhanced and strengthened by the various women's organisations that provided the platform for engagement on a range of social welfare issues.

The League, and the women who participated in it has drawn substantial attention from historians, generating a voluminous body of work. This has ranged from the role of inter-war feminists and women's organisations in the League, female abolitionists and the League, international sex trafficking, and the League's role in undertaking work on the status of women. Women of the League have also been positioned within wider international movements as well as diplomatic history and the work women undertook in the mandates system. Studies of high profile League actors such as Karen Jeppe and Fridtjof Nansen have also been undertaken.⁴ Much of this literature has focused on the discussion, policies, actions, and activities that took place in Geneva.

This article in contrast focuses attention on lesser-known women delegates when they returned to their home countries and how the achievements of the League were promoted within this local context. Further, focusing on how the League's message and work is transplanted in local, national context allows for a transnational perspective to be applied to the League's work. The media was central in reporting this and women delegates enjoyed considerable media coverage. While the field of the media and its representation of humanitarian causes has attracted scholarly attention,⁵ a consideration of individual humanitarians requires more exploration. Some work has focused on the impact of League ideas domestically through the League of Nations Union,⁶ but the arrival of delegates from Geneva to create a form of celebrity humanitarian based on work at the League is a distinctive perspective I offer to draw together the themes of biography and humanitarianism during the inter-war years. In doing so, I introduce a new characterisation of how the work of the League is disseminated by these women to provide an understanding how modernity helped to create a distinctive and new form of humanitarian advocacy in the inter-war years.

To explore these themes and to illustrate the intimate connection between a biographical methodology and this aspect of humanitarian history, I focus on three women in particular – Marguerite (Margaret) Dale, Jessie Webb and Freda Bage – whose

high individual profile in the media drew significant focus and attention to their humanitarian advocacy.

Australian women and the League of nations

As James Cotton has argued, Australia's involvement in the League of Nations was a significant development both for its place on the diplomatic world stage, and in its training in international citizenship.⁷ Each nation at the League had a single vote, allowed up to send three delegates and several substitute delegates. Australian women served as substitute delegates during the life of the League; none were appointed as full delegates. As with other nations where the League of Nations became popular, the League's mission was also disseminated through the local national League of Nations Unions branches which were from 1920 established throughout the capital cities across Australia. Women's involvement in the League during the interwar years in Australia coincided with an increased engagement of women's organisation with international matters.⁸ The significant involvement of women in the Australian League of Nations Union branches reflects what Helen McCarthy has perceptively observed in inter-war Britain as a widening democratic participation.⁹ Through this association of League Union branches, a respectable humanitarian advocate emerged which allowed women an active voice and participation in commenting on world affairs. Gender politics remained embedded within the League in the roles and activities women assumed and undertook, but as McCarthy argues the League branches combined 'elements of tradition and modernity; they preserved tokenism and male power whilst simultaneously offering opportunities for female leadership and self-assertion'.¹⁰ The attractions of the League in Australia to those such as the Attorney General and later Minister for External Affairs, John Latham, an energetic supporter of the League was that Australia would have separate representation to Britain in the global arena thus theoretically at least, expressing an independent voice.¹¹

Throughout the League's history, women lobbied male politics to be nominated as full delegates. Prime Minister Stanley Bruce refused to appoint a women full delegate because he believed the time was not right despite pressure exerted from women's groups such as the National Council of Women.¹² Others argued that women were naturally promoters of peace and that the League was their 'natural' home and so deserved to be full members.¹³ In a deputation to Bruce in March 1923, women representing the National Council of Women made their position clear to Bruce that they believed women were 'entitled' to full representation 'were not contended to take a substitute delegate'.¹⁴ Further, they advocated women representatives should be provided with adequate resources, so that all their expenses were paid, and if she were expected to lecture across the country on the League's work that these costs should be incurred by the Commonwealth government. The delegation noted that the delegate of 1922, (Margaurite Dale) lectured in all States 'but 'when it comes to the women of Brisbane requiring her services there, the Brisbane people have to find the where withall (sic) for her to go there. We do not consider that a fair thing'.¹⁵ League of Nations Union branches also discussed this issue. In 1923, at the second annual conference of the League of Nations Union, it was noted that there should be a woman supported to provide advice on matters relating to women and children.¹⁶

Another argument that Bruce stressed was that it was unclear to him what the National Council of Women had done to promote the cause of the League itself. Bruce then did not believe it 'wise' to send a woman delegate as a full member, not because a woman could not be found, but because the NCW has active enough in promoting the League 'in the minds of the people of Australia'. He accepted women were 'qualified' in the role: 'Women have suffered very much more than the men from the war, and they realise more what the suffering of war is. They have all the qualifications to make a success of the League in Australia ...' But he asked, what has the NCW done to make the League a 'live force'. He believed that the NCW has not 'done nearly enough'. It was not sufficient, he sternly said, 'to be merely sympathetic'. This was because the people of Australia did not know what the League stood for. He instructed them to 'create a proper appreciation of what the League is in the minds of Australia – if you do that, I would say I agree to the full delegate'.¹⁷ This appointment never eventuated. Women's organisations failed to convince Bruce or any other Prime Minister during the existence of the League of their worthiness or readiness to represent Australia as a full delegate.

Notwithstanding these discussions about women's rightful status, the place of women in the League, however, received considerable coverage during the interwar years in their roles as substitute members. While I focus on three women specifically in this article, it is important to note that all of the women who travelled to Geneva receive a high profile in the press and were the subject of considerable scrutiny when they returned.

Margaurite (Margaret) Dale (1883–1963)

Margaurite (Margaret) Dale (1883–1963) was the representative on the Traffic of Women and Children Commission of the League. Her work was recognised by the Australian Federation of Women Societies.¹⁸ By the time she was appointed as alternate delegate to the third general assembly of the League in 1922 she was highly experienced in political women's organisations, belonging to a range of groups which included the Lyceum Club, and various feminist and women's clubs such as Women's Reform League and National Council of Women. In theatrical and literary circles, she had a major profile in the 1920s and 1930s and was a key playwright.¹⁹ Her talks drew the attention akin to a celebrity. Few tickets were available to her lecture and the reception for instance when she spoke in Melbourne in December 1922, where she delivered only one lecture.²⁰

As the first alternate delegate, the coverage of Dale's appointment was extensive. The *Perth Dawn* devoted a one-page interview with her. Her appointment was seen as the 'outstanding event of the year in the women's movement'. In speaking at a civic reception sponsored by various organisations, Dale 'charmed all her hearers, men as well as women, by her bright and vivid personality and her powerful mentality, which gave her a deep grip upon the big questions which are related to world welfare at the present time'.²¹ Dale conveyed the excitement of attending the League itself: a 'marvel to behold'. But for Dale it was not Australia's presence that caused all the excitement, but in fact that Australia as part of the Empire could occupy the same place. In an expression of imperial feminism, Dale had 'never before been so proud of being a member of the British Empire as she was at the Assembly of the League of Nations'.²²

Dale was according to these reports the embodiment of the humanitarian: 'vivacious and self-possessed'.²³ Other descriptions noted her 'attractive personality' as well as

being a 'gifted and fluent speaker'.²⁴ Her enthusiasm for the League marked her public speeches. 'Always an enthusiastic believer in the League', reported the *Melbourne Herald*, Dale conveyed how 'highly delighted' with the prospects of the League she was, and the 'invaluable service to humanity' the League had already performed. Like the other women who attended the League, Dale was keen to promote the humanitarianism.²⁵ This contribution was seen especially in representing the interests of women and children.²⁶

Dale's firm, emphatic and at times strident lectures point to how she was able to interject her own influence in the reportage by projecting her own persona. In 1923, Dale spread the message of internationalism in a lecture in Brisbane, which attracted a large audience. Dale gave a description of the League, its composition and the work of each of the branches. The League itself was established she noted, as an effort to introduce 'the spirit of international justice and court of law into national affairs'.²⁷ Dale was prepared to be outspoken on the issue of trafficking of women and children and she believed her League experience in Australia gave her a unique position. In 1922, she argued erroneously that she had the advantage of having come from Australia where fortunately there was no traffic in women and girls. In show of international solidarity, she noted, Australian women felt 'very strongly against the existence of these evils in countries with which Australia had intercommunication'.²⁸ Dale was a sought after speaker on a range of platforms regarding the work of the League and children in particular. In 1922, Dale 'loudly applauded' when speaking at a women's rally in Perth under the auspices of the Women's Service Guild of Western Australia. The crowd was responding to her comment that the 'most iniquitous traffic that exists on the face of this earth – worse than the traffic in arms or the manufacture of poisonous gases'. Women such as Dale also applauded women's role in the League's work and how they have been prominent on the international stage.²⁹

The opportunity to represent Australia was a source of great pride for Dale. At the end of her term at the League she wrote to Prime Minister Bruce with gratitude for her service to the League and to Australia more broadly: 'If my efforts have helped, even in the smallest degree to further the interests of the League and the principles for which it stands I shall feel amply repaid for the time and trouble I have expended'. Dale described their duty in putting forward the interests of the League in Australia and characterised serving the League as 'a pleasure than a duty'. Dale also commended the choice of Jessie Webb as the next delegate, noting, the appointment of the 'all woman delegate was not nearly so simple as that of all the men delegates', observing that she was sure 'that in selecting Miss Webb the Cabinet will never have any reason to regret its choice'.³⁰ This was a very gracious letter given that several organisations had attempted to renominate Dale in 1923, including the Australian Federation of Women's Societies, the Tasmanian Women's Non-Party League, Women's Reform League of New South Wales, the Council of The Women's Union of Service in Australia, and the National Council of Women of South Australia.³¹ As Dale predicted, Webb was an effective choice, and she continued the high-profile advocacy by League delegates adopted by Dale.

Jessie Webb (1880–1944)

Jessie Webb, the renowned classics lecturer at the University of Melbourne was a leading figure in Melbourne's intellectual and liberal progressive circles during the inter-war years.³² Like her contemporaries, Webb was actively involved in women's organisations, and had broad connections through her university life. Webb was founder of the Women's College at the University of Melbourne, the Victorian Woman Graduates Association, the Catalyst society of professional women, and the Melbourne Lyceum Club.³³

In 1923, Jessie Webb became the substitute delegate of Australia to the League of Nations. By then she was the key teacher, scholar, and researcher of ancient history. The applications for her nomination set out her suitability for the task. The Victorian branch of the National Council of Women listed several qualities that were clear evidence of her capacity to lead.

Miss Webb has frequently lectured in public, and she is noted for her wit and readiness of apprehension, as well as for her learning, and the fresh and vivid manner in which she presents the most difficult subjects. Those who know Miss Webb best value her highest, not only for her personal charm but for her clear and judicial brain.³⁴

Webb's internationalism, above all, equipped her well for the task. 'We feel that she understands European problems from the point of view of those who are most affected by the solution of them – she has an international mind'.³⁵ The announcement of her appointment 'was received in academic circles with pleasure and gratification'.³⁶ She was even a favourite among conservatives; the *Farmers' Advocate* noting that her qualities and capacities as well her 'personal side' are 'bound to make her a success'.³⁷ Webb certainly put this aspect of her leadership into place. She was a member of the League of Nations Union which was formed in Melbourne in 1921 and included the leading international law academic William Harrison Moore. Webb spoke of the need for the League to undertake properly organised humanitarian work.³⁸ She expressed her support for Karen Jeppe, a member of the Commission on the Deportation of Armenian Women and Children, who began a colony for women and children who had survived the Armenian genocide.³⁹ Webb believed Jeppe was

doing some of the noblest work with which I have ever come in contact . . . It is a sad state of bondage that is endured by these Armenian women. Torn from homes and families, and I do wish a few hundreds of pounds could be promptly raised by the Australian States.⁴⁰

Webb was effective in raising these funds in Melbourne⁴¹ and promoted funding Jeppe's home for women, estimating £200 could be raised for her to continue her work.⁴²

Webb also defended the League's stand in Corfu in 1923 where, following the murder of Italian diplomats in Greece, diplomatic relations between Greece and Italy deteriorated until the Italian navy bombarded the Greek island of Corfu. Greece appealed to the League of Nations and, while the dispute was finally settled, the outcome was to the advantage of Mussolini's Italy. In the League's first test of averting a major crisis its actions were widely seen as weak and ineffectual.⁴³ Webb defended the League's role, as 'the League had been created to secure justice to the smaller nations and to avoid war'.⁴⁴ The incident, however, highlighted for Webb some of the shortcomings of the League, namely 'the great nations America, Germany, and Russia were not included in the

membership'. It was in the League's humanitarian work Webb saw it making a difference and where Australia could offer a significant contribution. She argued in defence of the League and against claims that it was 'futile', defending its humanitarian efforts.

The League was doing excellent work in its humanitarian sphere, but unfortunately such work indirectly weakened the League for the fulfilment of its main object, namely the maintenance of peace with justice. Moreover, the League could not carry out the recommendations of its Humanitarian Committee without having some money at its disposal. Australia held an honoured place in the League, and the first thing to strike an Australian delegate upon returning home was the question whether Australia could not do more for the League than she was doing in the one department in respect of which all the nations were very ready to co-operate, namely its humanitarian work.

Webb stressed the humanitarian element in a letter to the *West Australian*: 'the humanitarian work of the League is so admirable, and it is so wholly desirable that Australia should understand and help this work'.⁴⁵

Webb's arrival to and departure from Geneva received wide media coverage. In February 1924, the *Adelaide Mail* announced a reception at Adelaide Town in honour of Webb under the auspices of the National Council of Women and the League of Nations Union. The anticipation of hearing 'first hand news' from the 1923 Assembly caused excitement.⁴⁶ In Sydney, it was announced that 'Australian women had reason to be proud of Miss Webb for she was doing splendid work for humanity interesting her country women in the League of Nations', covering the work of the committee, especially its women delegates.⁴⁷ Webb was adamant the League was 'not yet a failure' despite the fact it had not yet played a 'decisive' role in international politics.

Webb's own journey to the League drew particular attention because of her research work in Ancient Greek history, and her own romantic travels throughout Greece. She 'wandered practically all over Greece in pursuit of relics of ancient history'. While she was travelling in Greece, the Prime Minister dramatically summonsed Webb to Geneva. 'And so, from studying remote ancient history, she was suddenly called upon to help in the making of modern history'. She travelled to England, and then proceeded to join the Australian delegation to Geneva.⁴⁸ The sense of the history making event of the League propelled Webb into a new limelight.

Following her term at the League, Webb became a celebrity humanitarian, giving extensive public talks and presentations, especially on the Armenian genocide. The Armenian genocide brought together the work of the League with Armenian relief efforts around women and children. Both were working to redefine forms of humanitarianism especially in relation to child refugees which was framed around the need to maintain international peace. Activists who travelled abroad perpetrated this message but fundraising efforts at home similarly reflected this view. A humanitarian peace was a value which was imparted to children at home as well as overseas. The League of Nations Unions constructed this ideal as did Armenian relief efforts.

Webb's promotion of both the League and Armenian relief were lauded, publicised, and celebrated in the press and she was deemed a worthy recipient of the League nomination. She was effective in capturing the attention of the press and elevating the League's profile within the media.⁴⁹ Webb discussed 'humanitarian subjects' such as traffic in women and children and opium traffic. Webb described the work done by Jeppe and Armenian women victims of the genocide, describing Jeppe's work in rescuing

Armenian women, and establishing a refuge in Aleppo. But there were limited funds to support such endeavours from the League. Jeppe had assumed that 'women in Australia would do as those of America do, and that was to voluntarily collect the money to enable a brave woman to carry on such humane work'.⁵⁰ Webb used her position to promote Jeppe's work with Armenian women. In May 1924, she reported the National Council of Women had raised funds for this cause.⁵¹ Webb's appeal to women especially was the 'first definitive work the women delegates had asked Adelaide to do, and it is hoped that the response will be liberal and prompt'.⁵² With the League ending its support of Jeppe's work for Armenian women, Webb saw this as an opportunity to raise funds in Australia.⁵³

Lectures by Webb around the country were greatly anticipated. In Brisbane, those from a wide cross section in attendance included those from Government, municipal councils, churches, educational institutions, consuls, and 'many prominent citizens'.⁵⁴ In Brisbane, a major occasion was hosted in Webb's honour. Organised by the National Council of Women of Queensland, the Women Graduates' Association, the Brisbane Women's Club and the Lyceum Club hosted a welcome. Webb's talk inspired a call for more women to be involved in international politics. There was a campaign from the Women Graduates' Association for the 'necessity for women to endeavour to follow the course of world events'. One of its advocates argued for a 'compulsory University course established for all women, not necessarily involving a degree, but providing for tuition in modern history ... If women took a more intelligent interest in international affairs, as well as in the affairs of their own country, the world, in one or two more generations, would probably be a much better place to live in'.⁵⁵ Webb's itinerary around the country followed similar events with talks extensively reported and lauded in the press. There was a luncheon at the Lyceum Club in Webb's honour; a public reception by the Mayor at the Town Hall and a lecture; and an evening lecture hosted by the National Council of Women and the League of Nations Union.⁵⁶

Webb's public lecture circuit drew attention to her League work. Wherever she spoke, she attracted crowds curious to learn about Australia's place on the international stage and her role in promoting humanitarian causes. The optimism and confidence she conveyed on what the League had achieved and could achieve went in tandem with the celebration of her speaking prowess, and prominence in commenting on international affairs. Freda Bage followed Webb in this endeavour and she too generated and received similar visibility and acclaim in the reportage of her talks, underpinned by a hope for a future humanitarian peace.

Freda Bage (1883–1970)

Freda Bage shared with Webb a university education and a life of emersion in a university community. After graduating from the University of Melbourne in 1905 with a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Science in 1907 and a brief period at King's College London on a research fellowship, Bage was appointed lecturer in biology at the University of Queensland in 1913. A year later she became principal of The Women's College at the University of Queensland. She served the University for many years, including an extended period on its senate between 1923 and 1950. Bage took an active part in the Queensland branch of Australian League of Nations Union as Treasurer and vice-

president. Bage served twice as a substitute delegate and the League – in 1926 and 1938 – which made her unique of women delegates to the League. As with other women in this cohort, Bage was involved in the National Council of Women and the Lyceum Club. Her biographer has described her as a ‘forerunner of women in public life in Queensland’.⁵⁷

On the announcement of Bage as a delegate the large farewell afforded her by the Melbourne Lyceum Club, wished her ‘a happy, busy, and useful time while in Geneva’.⁵⁸ Bage’s reply was telling in terms of the celebrity status she would attain:

Miss Bage said it was almost embarrassing to feel she was such a special object of attention at this particular time. She realised the enormous privilege being bestowed upon her, and when she returned she would do everything in her power to further the aims of the League of Nations by talking about it and spreading its objects far and wide, as much as lay in her powers, as a return for the wonderful benefits she herself was receiving from the trip.⁵⁹

The *Australasian* newspaper noted how the news of Bage’s appointment would be met with great interest across Australia and ‘in many circles’.⁶⁰ Her credentials were indisputable as she had a discernible public profile, especially through her association with the University of Queensland. Bage had ‘identified herself in an active and practical way’, not only in various public movements and social questions connected with the ‘general life of the community’. Her work in connection with the National Council of Women, Lyceum Club as well as her ‘diversity of interests’ included the Naturalists Club of Queensland and the Brisbane Ladies Rowing Club. Overseas travel was not foreign to her as she was awarded a research scholarship overseas to pursue her studies. While she was overseas, from 1909 to 1911, she represented Australia in various conferences and associations which included the National Council of Women, International Council of Women, and the Lyceum Club. Her activities in the wider community were recognised by the students of the Women’s College which she ran at the University of Queensland. In 1924 when she returned to the Women’s College, they said: ‘we have learnt from you something of the place which should be taken by women graduates in the life of the community’.⁶¹ This commitment was reflected from within her own familial background as it was reported that her mother and her sister, ‘both take an active interest in all matters concerned with the welfare of the community in this State’.⁶²

Bage became an immediate public celebrity following her term at the League.⁶³ On her appointment, she was aware that women would be expected to assume humanitarian work. In July 1926, Bage predicted that: ‘I do not suppose that I shall be given much to do with economic questions when I get to Geneva, as women are generally allotted to social and humanitarian work’.⁶⁴ Bage was actively involved in the areas of welfare work, the plight of children and refugees from the Near East. Her work was regularly reported, and like Webb, she actively brought the issues of Armenia and the Near East to the attention of the Australian public. ‘Relief work in the Near East is a question which appeals to all women’, she noted. She reported on the work of Karen Jeppe.⁶⁵ Through this high profile, Bage earned a reputation through her speeches, and in her travels around the country she was interviewed by the press about the work of the League.⁶⁶

Bage was energetic, strident and an outspoken commentator on international affairs and on the international standing of the League. The third Assembly she believed was

improving international relations in every way. It is establishing a general belief in its own power to help; the various peoples are beginning to look to the League with greater confidence. In a work, it is creating an international conscience

. Publicising the League's proceedings was vital, she believed. The 'spirit of cordial goodwill that can enter into international relations when secret diplomacy is flung aside'.⁶⁷ She ventured that Germany should be a member, and discussed other questions about countries, and while she was asked further international questions, but was reticent to answer questions, 'too delicate for an offhand statement in a hurried interview', perhaps 'reserving them for more deliberate treatment' in her public address.⁶⁸

Enjoying extensive press coverage, Bage delivered countless lectures and talks, using the platform to shape a distinctive narrative of the League. In February 1927, the *Brisbane Courier* reported the demanding nature of the League's work. 'It was three weeks of really hard and continuous work, but it was an experience which I am intensely glad to have had'. Much of the work she noted was not sensational but quite mundane. Its appeal, however, was not insignificant: 'healing national enmities and feuds of long standing'. One of the areas Bage was especially engaged in was dealing with Fridtjof Nansen as Commissioner for Refugees that she especially promoted and believed she had achieved a 'great deal' through this and the International Labor Office (ILO). The Slavery Convention was another area of activity identified by Bage as a major achievement. While reforms were slow, 'force labour could not be altogether abolished for the present'.⁶⁹ Australian delegates reported back on events at the League and these tasks were awaited with great anticipation. In 1927, it was reported that 'Since her return to Australia, Miss Bage has already given descriptions of her work and experiences at Geneva to several women's organisations in Melbourne and Sydney, and during the next few weeks similar organisations in Brisbane will no doubt enjoy hearing from her fuller details, with that personal touch which she is so well able to impart'.⁷⁰

Bage attracted large audiences to her talks. At the time of Bage's tour in Brisbane, in early 1927, the work of the League was of great interest. In advertising one of Bage's lectures, the *Brisbane Telegraph* reported that 'the League of Nations has focussed the longings of millions and has provided an instrument by which those longings may be fulfilled'. It reported that what the League had achieved could be described as 'an achievement of profound significance and worthy of closer study than many are giving to this greatest of all peace movements'.⁷¹ Accordingly, Bage's movements were also closely monitored and documented. Bage spoke of the need for more women to be involved in the League as delegates – 'much room for improvement in the number of women delegates' with only seven women out of 49 representatives. Bage's observations too, highlighted how Australia was seen, even further heightening her celebrity status. 'Other countries of Central Europe had been particularly stirred by the fact that a woman had been sent from so great a distance as Australia'. The report continued that it was 'indeed good to know that this young and vigorous country of course can be metting lessons to older Powers, and it is obvious that there is need for a woman representative from all countries'.⁷² The 'vital' question of the traffic of women was addressed as well as the need for women police. All the women were all 'alive to their duties' and 'that one and all' were 'united in their duties', and united in their argument for more women representatives.⁷³ Bage was also described as having a 'trained mind and a very earnest feeling

that could not fail to ensure good results'.⁷⁴ The presentation of Bage as an international ambassador was apparently a success. The Adelaide *Observer* reported that one of the male delegates noted how she has displayed 'a thoroughly statesmanlike attitude'.⁷⁵ There was much made in the press of Bage's interest in motoring and her motor travels across Australia. This added somewhat to her notoriety and 'celebrity' status.⁷⁶ The Brisbane *Courier* declared in 1925 'Miss Freda Bage's Tour'.⁷⁷

Bage represented the aura of the League, which she framed through the prestige of attending the meetings in Geneva which caught the attention of the press. In Perth, the *Daily News* in January 1927 announced Bage would be delivering a series of talks about the League of Nations to those who were interested in world affairs.⁷⁸ Bage outlined the work of the League in detail, and of its necessity to maintaining world peace. In her address she 'prefaced her remarks by a reference to the terrible slaughter of the human race in the Great War'. She had visited a British cemetery in Northern France, and 'that toll had impressed her with the very real need for the League of Nations'.⁷⁹ The work of the League has enormous ramifications, its work was mundane and like another conference with minutes, proposals and resolutions. 'Not a minute was wasted, yet there was no atmosphere of rush. The hall was so planned out that each delegation occupied a special position, in alphabetical order – according to the French alphabet'. The 'French and English languages were used to conduct the whole of the business interpreters doing the rest'. The entry of Germany was very dramatic with a 'tense air prevailing' but it did not attract opposition.⁸⁰

But the humanitarian focus was central to her commentary as well. In particular, she spoke about humanitarian work such as child welfare, Russian and Armenian refugees, opium traffic, and traffic in women and children. Australia was a great beneficiary of being linked with this 'noblest possible work'. The functions away from the main sessions were important and this is where delegates fraternised. Her plea in the lecture was for a 'international' outlook with 'far-away' Australia had 'sent delegates, had exerted a splendid influence'. She also 'spoke of the scope and greatness of an organisation that aimed at the greatest of all ideals, the welfare of the whole world'.⁸¹ In particular, she focused on the League's work concerning child welfare and Near East Relief and in particular, work among the Armenian refugees: 'Considerable sums from Australia had been devoted to the Armenian Relief Fund'.⁸²

Bage continued her work in education reform and linked this to the League.⁸³ Bage connected her work of the League with that of education within Australia. In this context, she noted that

if she could in any way help to give some idea of the work of the League of Nations to those who were responsible for the education of the young people of Queensland, she would feel that she had done something to help the cause

. Of significance was the 'settling of Greek refugees as examples of the fine work which was being achieved'.⁸⁴ Bage also connected the work of the League in other contexts. When she spoke in 1930 to the Girls' Friendly Society, she believed that the motto of the Society – 'To live not for ourselves but for others' – was an 'unconscious inward prayer of the League of Nations'. The GFS then was a body that 'should understand the attitude of the League'. The impact of the war remained Bage claimed, with millions still enduring its impact. The League of Nations was the answer 'to what men of thought tried to do to stop

the repetition of the frightful happenings of the Great War'.⁸⁵ To make the connection with the GFS, she even drew parallels, saying the League was like the GFS: they shared the assembly meetings at headquarters.⁸⁶ She then outlined the tasks of the League: 'to do away with war'. Of its work, she noted the humanitarian work with refugees and their repatriation. Triumphantly, she noted how 'one and a quarter million . . . people were restored to health and their livings'. Typhus has been eliminated in Russia and responsible for its extermination.⁸⁷

As the threat of war became ominous, and the role of the League came under further scrutiny, Bage defended peaceful solutions. In 1934, she urged countries to promote these methods through the League. Some, she argued were advocating the abolishment of the League of Nations 'because they think it has not come right up to expectations'. It was the responsibility of 'every Australian mother and son [to] work earnestly to make the league successful, for I do not believe any mothers to-day want war, while the young men, without being unpatriotic, are included to ask: Why should we fight; cannot these things be settled otherwise?'⁸⁸ This theme of maintaining peace was a striking one in her talks, and this she connected to war. In an address to the Housewives Association, she discussed the importance of 'maintaining universal peace, always before the world'. Mothers and wives had a role to play in this development. It was reported that Bage argued 'women who had given so much and done so much in the terrible years of the war were the wives and mothers of to-day, and they should never cease in helping to keep the League of Nations and its work before the younger generation'.⁸⁹

Her physical, embodiment of celebrity humanitarianism was evident in these reports. In 1926, 'made an excellent impression on those who hear her brief, pointed, and breezy speeches. She is a cheerful little lady, with sunny grey eyes and a presence which conveys an impression of tremendous capability without self-importance'.⁹⁰ A description of Bage's physicality is not far removed from the descriptions. In 1927, the West Australian reported how:

one is immediately struck by her vivid personality. She radiates a sense of mental alertness which is extraordinary, and her bright smile and contented demeanour are an outward sign that she has her heart in her work which she finds no burden, but a source of happiness.⁹¹

Such a focus on physicality directs the gaze to women and their novelty in taking the public stage and becoming public figures.

Public civic receptions were held in state capitals to welcome Bage back home from Geneva. In January 1927, such a reception was held in Perth, after Bage's absence of 6 months. Her message was one of optimism. There were toasts and accolades, recognising that the people of Australia 'should be proud to know they had such capable men and women to send to the League of Nations, the advice and precept of whom had led to such good results'.⁹² On this same trip, she spoke in Melbourne especially on women's contributions and their work in humanitarian and health matters.⁹³ In April 1927, she delivered another 'interesting and instructive address on the work of the League of Nations and her impressions of the Assembly'. She remarked that while most people believed that the League's sole purpose was to prevent war, its task was multiple such as the repatriation of Greek refugees. Bage was a defender of the League's mandates system.⁹⁴ Bage also delivered talks beyond civic receptions and visited workplaces, and spoke to workers about the work of the League. In April 1927,

Bage addressed the employees of the Ipswich railway workshops, answering questions about disarmament and ominously, what the League was doing to prevent another world war.⁹⁵

In this article, I have focused on one aspect of humanitarian advocacy through the biographies of women who were elected as substitute members at the League of Nations in the early years of its inception. The reception of such delegates in Australia, I have argued, assumed a celebrity status. These humanitarians were given public receptions, their talks and lectures were attended by large crowds, and reported in the mainstream press and media. They were celebrated as international ambassadors. Momentarily, while the League was basking in its moment of hope, optimism, and energy during the 1920s, the women who ventured there were, by association, also smothered with the hope the future would bring a humanitarian peace.

The women themselves projected, shaped, and articulated a ‘humanitarian self’ through their communications on behalf of the League. Through these public lectures they also contributed to shaping this celebrity status, by projecting the agenda of the League and its aspirations. During the early 1920s, the League was perceived as capable of creating world peace and preventing war, and its ambassadors were expected to uphold these objectives. The task of these women was to promote the League and they drew on the media in this endeavour by using the platform it provided to generate high profile coverage.

The humanitarian message was conveyed through them but as the clouds of war rapidly gathered, the confidence for peace which informed their message, their public reception and indeed their celebrity standing ended abruptly. Their roles as League ambassadors of peace became increasingly dampened, then severely challenged and finally in 1939 tragically rendered irrelevant by the violent shattering of the League ideal of a humanitarian peace. But while the media rapidly lost interest, the humanitarian work of women who had been involved in the League continued. A biographical approach can highlight the continuities of women’s political involvements and engagements across several decades spanning a life.

Framing this paper through the concept of celebrity humanitarianism, I have sought to explore how the ideals of the League travelled from Geneva to Australia and were propagated transnationally through a particular style of humanitarian advocacy. The methodology of prosopography allows us to examine the work, activities and engagements of lesser-known humanitarians, a need identified by Del Lago and O’Sullivan, who ironically became celebrities in their home countries through an association with the League.⁹⁶ In doing so, it opens an exploration of how the work of the League was conveyed and transplanted beyond Geneva, and it also allows for a consideration of new methods of humanitarian advocacy in localised contexts during the inter-war years, such as that of celebrity humanitarianism, further providing new perspectives to League history and to the history of humanitarian advocacy.

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