

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE6038

Ferber, Helen Layton

(1919 - 2013)

Born 15 February, 1919, Adelaide South Australia Australia

Died 17 December, 2013, MelbourneMelbourne Victoria Australia

Occupation Historian, Researcher, Social justice advocate, Women's rights activist, Writer

Summary

Helen Ferber's lifelong engagement with public affairs and social welfare, both in Australia and Europe, reflected her commitment to the common good. She began her working life in World War II, monitoring and translating enemy radio broadcasts for the Australian Short Wave Listening Post. After the war, her language skills, love of other cultures and strong sense of social justice led her to work with United Nations refugee agencies in Europe.

In 1948, Helen married David Ferber, US Vice Consul in Melbourne, and took up the work of a 'diplomatic wife'. In the mid 1950s the family returned to Australia and Helen spent much of her time caring for their disabled son. During this period she undertook volunteer work with women's organisations in Melbourne, and rose rapidly to positions of authority.

In 1965 she took a part-time position with the Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne. Initially employed to interview non-English-speaking households, she soon progressed to writing and editing reports, becoming the editor of the institute's publications and a respected writer on social policy. Throughout her life she developed and cherished many deep friendships and was both an inspiration and support to other women as they developed their skills and careers.

Details

Helen Ferber was born in Adelaide on 15th February 1919, the eldest daughter of Richard Francis Hockey and Kathleen Isabel Hockey (née Butler). Her grandfather, Sir Richard Butler, was a premier of South Australia, as was her uncle of the same name.

Ferber completed a BA at Melbourne University in 1939, majoring in French and German. During a gap year in 1938, she completed a teaching diploma at Munich University and a course in Italian at Perugia University. She described her time in the tense atmosphere of pre-war Munich in a memoir published in *Meanjin* in 2006.

During World War II she worked as an interpreter for the Department of the Army, censoring foreign language mail, and later for the Australian Department of Information Shortwave Listening Post, monitoring enemy broadcasts in German, French and Italian.

After the war she worked with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, firstly in the UNRRA Yugoslav Mission, later with refugees in the UNRRA Displaced Persons Headquarters in Paris and Berlin. She wrote the official history of the Yugoslav Mission. She also worked with the Preparatory Commission of the International Refugee Organization in Geneva. In 1945 she investigated and reported to the International Federation of University Women on the postwar situation of the Yugoslav and Czechoslovak federations.

In 1948, Ferber married an American diplomat, David Ferber. Travelling with David, she undertook a series of lectures across Victoria, seeking support for a United Nations appeal to help displaced children in Europe. Further diplomatic postings took the Ferber family to America and the Philippines. They returned to Melbourne in 1953, and Helen spent the next decade raising two daughters, Jenny and Sarah, and a son, Michael. Michael suffered from severe disabilities and died in 1970, aged 19.

Helen Ferber became actively involved with a number of women's organisations in Melbourne. She joined the Australian Federation of University Women-Victoria, becoming national Convenor of International Relations for AFUW in the late 1950s, and President of AFUW-Vic. in 1962. She was also an active member of the Melbourne Catalysts group and the Lyceum Club, becoming vice-president of the latter organisation. She also served on the Australian Broadcasting Commission's Victorian Talks Committee, and later its State Advisory Committee.

In 1965 Ferber took up a part-time position with the Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne. She worked there until 1981, variously filling the positions of research fellow, business manager and editor of the institute's publications, including its journal, the *Australian Economic Review*. She contributed to ground-breaking study of Australian poverty, the 1975 Henderson Report, and authored a seminal engagement with public policy, *Citizens' Advice and Aid Bureaux in Victoria*.

Helen Ferber also undertook autobiography and family history, writing a record of her experiences in America and Europe from letters she had written to family and friends, and publishing *Stagecoach to Birdsville*, an account of her grandparents' ill-fated 1894 journey to Birdsville. The breadth of her engagement with public life can probably be best gauged from the lengthy biographical interview recorded with her by the National Library in 2006.

In 2010 Helen Ferber was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM). The award was 'for service to the community, particularly as a social policy researcher and historian, and through contributions to the advancement of women'. She died in 2013. She was remembered in her obituary as 'a woman of action who was 'clear-eyed' but with a commitment to social justice'.

Published resources

Book

40 Years 40 Women: Biographies of University of Melbourne Women, Published to Commemorate the 40th Anniversary of the International Year of Women, Flesch, Juliet, 2015,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/4040/>

Citizens' advice and aid bureaux in Victoria, Ferber, Helen, 1975

Stagecoach to Birdsville, Ferber, Helen, 1995

Newspaper Article

Helen Ferber: Writer, historian, volunteer: Woman of action who inspired others, McClelland, Alison and Romanes, Glenys, 2014

Book Section

Citizens' Advice Bureau, Ferber, Helen, 1977

Foreign Correspondence, Ferber, Helen, 2016

Journal Article

Missives from Munich, Ferber, Helen, 2006

Resource

'Czechoslovak Women's Organizations at the end of World War II' and 'Yugoslav Federation of University Women December 1945', Ferber, Helen,
<http://gradwomenvic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Helen-Ferber-1945.pdf>

Edited Book

Public expenditures and social policy in Australia: The Whitlam years, 1972-75, Ferber, Helen and Scotton, R.B., 1978

Public expenditures and social policy in Australia: The first Fraser years, 1976-78, Ferber, Helen and Scotton, R.B., 1980

Diary of social legislation and policy 1982, Ferber, Helen, 1983

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Helen Ferber interviewed by Susan Marsden \[sound recording\]](#)

Author Details

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