

# The Australian Women's Register

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**Entry type:** Person  
**Entry ID:** AWE6102

## Zainuddin, Ailsa

(1927 - 2019)

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**Born** 1 January, 1927, Box Hill Victoria Australia

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**Died** 25 March, 2019, Victoria Australia

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**Occupation** Academic, Historian, Writer

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### Summary

Ailsa Thomson Zainuddin is a writer and academic who taught at the Faculty of Education at Monash University, specialising in the history of education. Her undergraduate courses at Monash on the history of education in Southeast Asia and the history of education for girls and women, were among the first of their kind in Australia. Her published writing in these fields includes the text-book, *A Short History of Indonesia*. Ailsa has maintained a close and enduring association with Indonesia, the country where her husband Zainu'ddin was born and raised, and where she herself lived and worked during the 1950s. Ailsa was awarded a PhD for *They Dreamt Of A School*, the centenary history of Methodist Ladies' College, Kew; the school she herself attended.

### Details

Ailsa was born to Boyd and Thelma Thomson on 8 April 1927 at Fairbank Private Hospital in Box Hill. Both Boyd and Thelma were teachers and the Thomson family was Methodist. Ailsa attended Methodist Ladies' College (MLC), Kew from 1933 to 1944.

Ailsa graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in history and english from the University of Melbourne in 1947. After graduating, Ailsa was a tutor in the history department, having been invited by Professor Max Crawford to join the teaching staff as part of the Postwar Reconstruction Training Scheme. During this time, Ailsa was active in the Australian Student Christian Movement.

In 1953, Ailsa graduated from Melbourne University with a Masters on *The Bulletin and Australian nationalism*, supervised by Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Manning Clark. Ailsa was research assistant to Manning Clark at Canberra University College from 1952 to 1954.

At Havelock House in Canberra, Ailsa met Indonesian diplomat and former freedom fighter, Zainu'ddin. Ailsa and Zainu'ddins' friendship was decisively platonic at first: both of them felt that romantic involvement was out of the question on account of the religious difference between them, and, in Zainu'ddin's case, for reasons to do with his career as a diplomat. However, the two friends fell in love, and decided to marry. Zainu'ddin was adamant that before Ailsa made any final commitment, she must first experience for herself life in Indonesia, where the couple planned to live. Ailsa – her mind already more or less made up – departed for Jakarta in 1954, in a move she envisaged at the time as a permanent one. Ailsa and Zainu'ddin married in Jakarta on 10 December 1954.

For eighteen months from August 1954, Ailsa worked in Jakarta at the English Language Inspectorate, part of the Ministry of Education. The Inspectorate was set up to establish english as Indonesia's first foreign language, and Ailsa's role included contributing to syllabus and assessment development, and delivering lectures on english literature to Indonesian teachers of english. Ailsa's employment for the Indonesian Government was undertaken through the newly established Volunteer Graduate Scheme for Indonesia.

In March 1956, the Zainu'ddins left Jakarta and returned to Australia, as Zainu'ddin had been appointed first Indonesian language teacher in the newly established Department of Indonesian Studies at the University of Melbourne. Upon entering Australia, the couple were obliged to apply for exemption under the Immigration Restriction Act for their infant daughter, Nila. A second daughter, Lisa, was born two years later.

In 1964, Ailsa graduated with a Bachelor of Education from the University of Melbourne.

In 1965, Ailsa joined the Faculty of Education at the newly established Monash University. As the Faculty's first appointment in the history of education, Ailsa developed and taught undergraduate courses in the history of education in Southeast Asia, with special emphasis on the Netherlands East Indies and Indonesia in the 19th and 20th centuries. In her courses on the history of educational thought and practice, Ailsa added to the Western thinkers included in the course, figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, Shinichi Suzuki, and also Raden Ajeng Kartini, an Indonesian national heroine celebrated for her advanced ideas about national independence as well as equality for girls and women. Additionally, from 1975, Ailsa pioneered a separate course on the history of education for women. This course had its origins in a suggestion made by Ailsa for a female counterpart to an 'Images of Man' course then offered in the history and philosophy of education.

Ailsa was the Education Faculty representative at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) at Monash University's Clayton campus. Among many other events at the Centre, Ailsa organised, and delivered a paper at, a CSEAS lecture series in 1979 commemorating the centenary of Kartini's birth. She also edited the publication that resulted from the lectures, entitled *Kartini Centenary: Indonesian Women Then and Now*.

From 1976 to 1994, Ailsa and her friend and colleague Marjorie Theobald ran a monthly discussion group for those undertaking or interested in research into the history of education for girls. The aim of the History of Education for Girls Group (HEGG) was to provide a supportive environment for women, including those returning to study later in life.

Ailsa maintained an association with Methodist Ladies' College, Kew for over fifty years. She was awarded a PhD from Monash University in 1983 for her centenary history of MLC, entitled *They Dreamt of a School*.

Ailsa retired as a Senior Lecturer from the Education Faculty at Monash University in 1992.

As a writer, teacher and scholar, and also through her involvement in the Indonesian community in Melbourne, Ailsa has influenced many people. This includes historian Janet McCalman, who has acknowledged the importance of Ailsa's centenary history of Methodist Ladies' College, Kew, for her own work, *Journeyings: the biography of a middle-class generation 1920-1990*.

Ailsa's love of history reflects the influence of her mother, Thelma, among other people. Thelma was a member of the 16 Club, a monthly reading group of women graduates of Melbourne University which ran for sixty years. In her published essay documenting the Club's history and members, Ailsa describes the Club as having been present in the background of her own childhood. This is one example of an autobiographical element which is present in Ailsa's writing as a whole.

A prolific letter writer, Ailsa has maintained correspondence with a wide circle of friends, including many former colleagues and students. Among her correspondents was Kurnianingrat Ali Sastroamijoyo, a teacher and academic who was widely involved in the field of English language teaching and training in post-independence Indonesia, and with whom Ailsa worked in Jakarta during the 1950s. Kurnianingrat's memoir, entitled 'Other Worlds in the Past', was published in 2017 in a work co-edited by Ailsa called *Bridges of Friendship*. Ailsa's correspondents also included Manning and Dymphna Clark. In 1957, Manning dedicated his book, *Sources of Australian History*, to Ailsa and Zainu'ddin. Additionally, the publication *Ever, Manning: Selected Letters of Manning Clark 1938-1991*, includes excerpts from Ailsa's correspondence with Manning Clark.

Ailsa stopped using the apostrophe in her surname in 2015.

## Events

### **1985 - 1986**

Australian and New Zealand History of Education Society (ANZHES)

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### **1957 - 1963**

'Djembatan' – Quarterly newsletter of the Volunteer Graduate Association

### **1948 - 1951**

The History Department of The University of Melbourne

### **1961 - 1964**

The Law School (British constitutional history) at The University of Melbourne

### **1963 - 1963**

The Indonesian Studies Department at The University of Melbourne

### **1954 - 1956**

Ailsa lived and worked in Jakarta under the Volunteer Graduate Scheme for Indonesia

## Archival resources

### **The University of Melbourne Archives**

[Zainuddin, Ailsa](#)

[Remembering the Immigration Reform Group: Witness Seminar](#)

### **Monash University Archives**

[Personal archives of Zainu'ddin, Ailsa Gwennyth Thomson \(1927-\)](#)

### **Private Hands (These regards may not be readily available)**

[Papers of Ailsa Thomson Zainuddin](#)

### **National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection**

[Ailsa Zainu'ddin interviewed by David Walker in the Australia-Asia studies oral history project \[sound recording\]](#)

### **Author Details**

Ann McCarthy & Ailsa Zainuddin

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