CHRISTIAN JOLLIE SMITH

A LIFE

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The Academic Senate on 07 October 2008 resolved that Carolyn Margaret Skinner had satisfied the requirements for admission to the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

This thesis represents a major part of the prescribed program of study.

Abstract

One of the first women to be admitted to practice as a lawyer in Australia, Christian Jollie Smith was also one of the founding members of the Communist Party of Australia. Following a short period of close association with the Party, she established and ran her own legal practice in Sydney for some thirty-five years from the mid 1920s. During this time she established a reputation for defending the unemployed, freedom of speech, and the Communist Party. Yet more than forty years after her death she has been largely forgotten.

Both the early history of the Communist Party of Australia and the history of the legal profession in Australia have been inclined to overlook the contribution of women. As both a Communist and a lawyer, Christian Jollie Smith was something of a paradox in her time which in itself makes her interesting. A biography is also warranted because Smith's life personifies the struggle for autonomy, independence and recognition which many educated women experienced in the early to mid twentieth century. Smith challenged the vigilant respectability of her times by breaking free from the conventional life that was expected of the unmarried daughter of a Presbyterian minister, moving from Melbourne to Sydney to live with a married man. Her political trajectory from strict Presbyterianism to the equally strict secular ideology, Communism, while unusual for a woman, was not unlike the path taken by many men who were prominent in the radical labour movement. Yet, while Smith selflessly served the Communist Party of Australia in its early years to the detriment of her health, her contribution is rarely recognised by Party historians. Although she initially had little success in the legal profession in Melbourne, Smith resumed practising the law in Sydney, successfully demonstrating that a woman could forge an independent career at a time when few women did so but which today is taken for granted.

This thesis contributes to women's history, labour history and legal history by bringing the three fields together in the study of the life and work of a woman who was both a radical and a professional. In so doing it presents further evidence to challenge the traditional view that Australian radicalism was the domain of working-class men and provides a fuller understanding of the early twentieth century Australian left.

I, Carolyn Margaret Skinner, declare that this thesis is entirely my own work, that all sources used have been acknowledged and that no part of the thesis has been submitted for higher degree at any other university.



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Abbreviations

ACCL	Australian Council for Civil Liberties
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
ADB	Australian Dictionary of Biography
AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
AIF	Australian Imperial Forces
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ANU	Australian National University
ARU	Australian Railways' Union
ASOF	Australian Ship Owners' Federation
ASP	Australian Socialist Party
AWU	Australian Workers' Union
BWIU	Building Workers' Industrial Union
CLF	Commonwealth Literary Fund
CPA	Communist Party of Australia
DNB	Dictionary of National Biography
FIA	Federated Ironworkers of Australia
FOSU	Friends of the Soviet Union
ICWPA	International Class War Prisoners' Aid
IWW	International Workers of the World
ILD	International Labour Defence
IRA	International Red Aid
ML	Mitchell Library
MUP	Melbourne University Press
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NBAC	Noel Butlin Archives Centre
NMH	Newcastle Morning Herald
OBU	One Big Union
OUP	Oxford University Press
PLC	Presbyterian Ladies' College
SLV	State Library of Victoria
SMH	Sydney Morning Herald
TWU	Transport Workers' Union
WIR	Workers' International Relief
WEA	Workers' Educational Association
WIUA	Workers' Industrial Union of Australia
WWF	Waterside Workers' Federation

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