

**OPENING OF 86TH ANNUAL GENERAL CONFERENCE, TWEED HEADS,  
2008**

**Mrs Margaret Roberts, State President, CWA of NSW**

**Mrs Judy Richardson AM, Immediate Past State President, CWA of NSW**

**Mrs Ruth Shanks AM, President, South Pacific Area  
Associated Country Women of the World**

**Official Guests**

**Assembled Members of the Country Women's Association of NSW**

Good morning to you all. Thank you, Madam President, for the kind invitation to perform this important task. My wife, Brigitte, apologises for not being able to be here this morning. She is particularly disappointed not to be able to view the beautiful books on Malta, as she has a Maltese background.

As I stand here today, I note firstly, that times really have changed, haven't they? Not only is there a *female* Queen of Australia, a *female* Governor-General Designate, a *female* Deputy Prime Minister and a *female* Deputy Leader of the Opposition in our fine nation and a *female* Governor in our state, there is by contrast a *male* who will shortly open the 86<sup>th</sup> Annual State Conference of the Country Women's Association of NSW. There certainly has been a lot of 'breaking through the glass ceiling' happening with both sexes of late. I think today especially of my late grandmother, Mary Ward, of Nashdale Branch of the CWA, who attended many State Conferences as a devoted and energetic regular member for well over 50 years. She may well have imagined that a descendent of hers could have attended or even opened the Conference, but she would have been thinking *grand-daughter*, not *grand-son*!

How truly honoured I am, to be asked to do so. When the State President, Mrs Margaret Roberts issued the invitation, I immediately responded, "Are you sure? The

Governor and the Governor-General have done this over the past two years, have you called the wrong number?" I was assured, however, that the Master of Earle Page College at the University of New England was the man for the job. (I did note that it was at least a *male* Governor-General last year, one of the other very few males to have ever carried out this task. While I am on the *male* topic, I was very interested to learn recently that Dr Richard Arthur, MP for North Sydney was a driving force for the establishment of the CWA of NSW in 1922, so I am in esteemed, though limited male company). As most of you know, I do attend the State International Meeting to award the International Book Prize each year and the College has hosted the CWA of NSW Country of Study School each year for most of its 38 years at the University. The CWA of NSW generously supports four \$2000.00 Equity Scholarships for new University students who are residents of Earle Page College. These funds come from the Lady Fairfax Fund and are greatly appreciated. I am, therefore, all things considered, truly delighted to be here this morning.

I do not intend to speak for long, however, given a microphone and an audience, particularly an audience with which I have a strong connection, it would be out of character for me not to provide some of my thoughts. I'm a strong advocate for the Country Women's Association and have had some lovely personal and professional experiences with your organisation. There are so many things that I want to mention that are admirable about the CWA. A few of these are: you identify community needs, you lobby politically, you set a vision and set goals, you work for the good of the many, your charitable works totaled \$1.25 million this year alone, your contributions to the wonderful work of the Associated Country Women of the World international organisation, your environmental concerns, your contribution to education, your development of the individual as well as your obvious enjoyment of working together - your camaraderie. I note that I try to engender a similar charitable spirit, at least, in my college students who did raise \$30,000.00 for the Children's Medical Research Institute last year; the cheque was just presented on Saturday night. My students don't have a lot of problem establishing camaraderie.

Today I've chosen to reflect on just a few of these attributes of the CWA as an organization at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, merely as an outsider, and I shall do this by contrasting the experience of two members of my family who have established branches of women's organisations in different locations and points in history, in fact, sixty years apart.

The first was my grandmother, Mary Ward, who, like my grandfather on that side of my family, was born near the Lake District in the north of England. As a newly married farmer's wife near Appleby in the 1920's, my grandmother and a few other local women were motivated, in 1927, to form a branch of the then 12 year old Women's Institute. Her world was a very different one in 1927: the first trans-Atlantic telephone call was made that year as was the first long distance demonstration of a television image; the first Trans-Atlantic flight and the first "Talkie" movie with synchronized sound; the world's population was a mere 2 billion people and life expectancy was much closer to 50 years than 80; the family unit was stronger, divorce rates lower, birth rates higher; The King was George V and Britain sent troops to China and severed diplomatic relations with Russia as Stalin took over; 1000 people per week were dying of an influenza epidemic and penicillin was not developed until the following year; and, the Great War had been over for 8 years and the Menin Gate war memorial was just dedicated.

The Women's Institute in the UK had been formed in 1915 with two clear aims: to revitalise rural communities and to encourage women to become more involved in producing food during the First World War. Women, like my grandmother, had been actively involved as part of the Women's Land Army during the Great War to assist with food production whilst the men were at war. It was a time of enormous social change when women from various social classes, from the Lady of the Manor to the maid, worked side by side for the good of their country, probably for the first time in history. The Women's Institute was a natural development from there as women sought to continue relationships formed, gain support from other women, work together to improve community conditions, build new skills, gain educational opportunities and campaign on issues that mattered to them and their families, now

that women in Britain finally had the vote. Australia was, of course, a world leader in this area, decades before but I note tragically not for Aboriginal women, nor men, for several more decades. The aims of the Women's Institute obviously broadened in the post - First World War period but continued to reflect the balance between meeting the needs of communities and meeting the needs of individual members.

My Grandmother's story continued to include migration to Australia, some time after establishing the Hilton and Murton Branch of the Women's Institute, a period of share-farming and farming near Parkes and Forbes and finally fruit growing in Nashdale, near Orange, where I grew up. Her commitment transferred naturally to the sister organization of the Country Women's Association of NSW. Interestingly, in recent discussions with Mrs Betty McDonald, here today from the Nashdale Branch, the Hilton and Murton Branch of the WI forged a strong link with the Nashdale branch of the CWA, a link created by my grandmother's personal involvement, which continued to unite the two women's organizations across the world, even after her death. In addition, I note, that I was privileged, along with my cousin, to accompany Grandma back to the UK in 1977 to attend the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner of the Hilton and Murton Branch of the WI which she had been involved in forming...that's how I know that it was formed in 1927! It was a wonderful evening that I shall always remember as my grandmother was feted for her contribution to a small community on the other side of the world.

The influence of the CWA on the small orcharding and farming community of Nashdale was all-pervading during my youth. I always note at the CWA Country of Study School formal dinners at Earle Page College, that in the International area alone, the CWA International Days, Poster competitions and the associated beautiful picture books about the country being studied all sitting in neat piles on my grandmother's coffee table when I visited, contributed to my life-long interest in countries of the world, their cultures and languages. I enjoy travel and have studied in Paris and have, with my wife Brigitte, lived and worked in Japan. We also lived in the Torres Strait, though not a foreign land, certainly a culturally rich and diverse area, when I was a curriculum developer for children in the island schools. I also spent an enriching time

as a teacher in Yarrabah Aboriginal community near Cairns. I always reflect back to my life as an only child growing up on a property in a small rural community (there's a school and a community hall) and thank the CWA for contributing to the broadening of my horizons. It is always interesting for me that I now help to host the CWA Country of Study School at Earle Page College, later in life.

*[And just to be tiresome and repetitive for those of you who attend the Annual Country of Study School each year, here is the now famous CWA Zone-prize winning Project that I completed on Indonesia in 1969. Of course, I also brought the prize book presented to me all those years ago by Mrs Betty McDonald. You can tell that I'm an only child, my mother keeps such things from my childhood in a cupboard in Cudal.]*

The CWA's contribution in Nashdale did not stop there, of course, and in common with clubs around the State, continues to raise funds for needy projects locally and overseas, provide social support and highlight issues affecting its community in order to effect positive change.

My second Ward family member who has established a branch of a women's organization is much more recent and even more pertinent to my audience today. This family member, my cousin's wife, a couple of generations later did so in a different world to that of Mary Ward. In 2007, when Kate Lorimer-Ward's Byng-Emu Swamp Evening Branch of the CWA was established near Orange, the world had a population of 6.6 billion people, our life expectancy is the highest in history, our birth rate is the lowest ever; we have the lowest marriage rate for 100 years and people are marrying at an older age; and, our divorce is at 40% . Hugh Mackay well-known social commentator notes that this in combination with an aging society our households are shrinking and now the single-person household is the most common household in Australia; there are, however, more working women and dual income families than before. In addition, with record levels of wealth at one end of society there are record levels of debt at the other and Rural communities are challenged as never before. Mackay notes also that Australian society has become more self-centred, less compassionate, more prejudiced and more concerned about things that we can

control (like redecorating the house) at a time of uncertainty which is caused by unstable financial markets, climate change, rising fuel and food prices, terrorism etc. The rural landscape around Kate's club has changed as well with larger properties sub-divided to create new more populated hobby farm estates. There are thus obvious impacts on the way that Kate's club needs to respond in order to meet the needs of a very different demographic – night meetings to include both young professional and working women as well as older women who act as carers for their grandchildren during the day. Due to increasingly busy lifestyles, the duties of CWA Branch officers are shared broadly, including the responsibility for hosting meetings and organizing themes and speakers. Shared initiatives with nearby CWA clubs allow Kate's night-time club to contribute to the hosting of evening fund-raisers. I note that your organization is considering holding your conference over a weekend like the Country of Study School. This is a good example of the organization removing barriers for participation of working women. (No, Kate didn't lobby me to say that!)

My discussions with Kate about being the founding President of a new branch of a women's organization reveal something very significant for the CWA. The 25 women interested in forming a club to provide sharing and friendship, community development and learning opportunities actively investigated other women's organizations with which to affiliate but found that the Country Women's Association best served their needs and the needs of their community. This is a wonderful confirmation that the goals of the CWA, and indeed the similar goals of the Women's Institute in another place early last century in my grandmother's youth, are still strongly meeting women's needs today. Society has changed, women's roles have changed, family structures have changed and, as a result, so have the needs of all three. The CWA too has changed and will continue to adapt itself as all organizations must in order to achieve goals that may themselves adapt or change over time. Organisations that are organic and flexible, as the CWA of NSW shows it is, in its inclusion of Kate's style of branch in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia, will always thrive in society.

**An extension of this, is that I have had discussions with various Executive members of the CWA of NSW, including former State Presidents Mrs Ruth Shanks and Mrs Judy Richardson, regarding the possible creation of a younger style of CWA Club to meet the needs of University students, many of whom come to the University of New England with Junior CWA membership and much club experience in their home towns via their families and would appreciate the support of the CWA organization in their new lives in Armidale. I would always support wherever I could, the creation of such a branch if it were to be formed, but knowing university students as I do intimately, it would certainly be a late evening coffee club style with different goals and dreams. Perhaps this is something to consider further in the future and I add it here for reflection.**

**In conclusion, what is different about what Mary Ward set out to achieve and what Kate Lorimer-Ward set out to achieve in working with women in their different communities when establishing a women's service organization exactly 60 years apart? I venture, very little. Both groups, in different points in history set out to meet both community needs and personal needs of women. The service component of both included the aims to develop their communities and to support women and families at both the local level in practical ways and, when necessary, to be a national, united voice for women at the highest levels of government. I heard school principal, Roderick West, once use the line 'The rent we pay for the good life is service', and that sentiment is just as relevant to post-Great War peace time Britain as it is in Australia today. The other main dimension of both groups is the aim to support the personal needs of individual women. People join organizations for various personal reasons which can include meeting the human need for affiliation or belonging, security, goal achievement, education and leadership development opportunities. Feeling valued, competent, empowered and connected, all contribute to the development of self esteem in the individual. CWA and WI members are no different in this regard and both organizations continue to meet these needs. These are worthy aspirations and should be highly valued and much publicized to the broader community.**

**You are to be congratulated, Country Women's Association of NSW, on reaching your 86<sup>th</sup> year. Celebrate your organisation, appreciate it and each other as you come together for your Annual Conference. I have much pleasure in declaring the 86<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference open and wish you every success for your future plans and activities. Keep up the good work of those gone before and continue to be a great strength in Australian society. As a community member, I sincerely thank you.**

**DAVID WARD  
MASTER  
EARLE PAGE COLLEGE**

---

#### **References**

**Mackay, Hugh 'What kind of Society are we Becoming', Conference Paper delivered at the AHAUCHI Conference, Sydney University, 2006**

**Robbins, S.P., Waters-Marsh, T., Cacioppe, R. & Millett, (eds) Organisational Behaviour, Prentice Hall, Sydney, 1994.**

---