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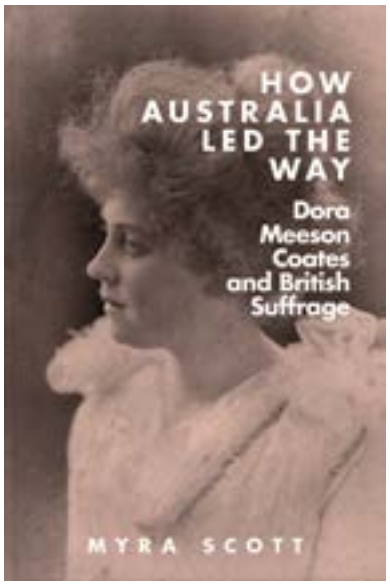

How Australia Led the Way: Dora Meeson Coates and British Suffrage

by Myra Scott

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Historian Myra Scott has achieved a tour de force in reconstructing the story of a woman who is both an important Australian artist and a truly imposing figure in the struggle for women's rights. If Dora Meeson were simply an early modernist painter, her story would be much the same as that which most women face when they enter what Germaine Greer has called 'the Obstacle Race.' True, Meeson was helped by the fact that her husband, George Coates, was also an artist. They shared a studio in London. Dora did, however, say that she preferred to paint outdoors on the banks of the Thames; she discreetly avoided mentioning whether this was a matter of physical space or of head-space in the studio …

Meeson's name will therefore be familiar to those who study early modernist art in Australia, but few might suspect that she provides a compelling example of an trenchant activist for women's rights in both Australia and Britain. Her story is an extraordinary one, and will inspire our students to empathise with the struggle for rights that now seem obvious.

Meeson became an activist on the world stage, and played a crucial role in an episode in which the former colony, Australia, presumed to lecture the 'Mother Country,' Britain, on the value of women's suffrage. New Zealand had been the first country to give women the right to vote (1893), and Australia was the first to give them the right to vote and to stand for parliament (1902). Meeson designed a visual image – a banner – that served as the flashpoint for that momentous historical moment when a progressive Australia rebuked a fearful, conservative and sexist Great Britain. The slogan on her banner, 'Commonwealth of Australia. 'Trust the Women Mother As I Have Done,' is one of the most glorious injunctions in the long struggle for women's rights. Dora and husband George carried this banner in London in the Women's Coronation Procession of 1911. The banner has survived, and now stands proudly on permanent display in Parliament House, Canberra as a reminder of this remarkable aspect of Australian democracy.

Teachers know that students struggle to imagine a much earlier world in which women had been denied the vote and many other rights. Myra Scott's book is useful because evokes a very different world in which a woman was originally denied a vote because she was 'covered' by the vote of her husband.

Myra Scott usefully contextualizes Meeson's career not only in terms of the women's suffrage movement, but also the gathering momentum in Australia for Federation. She writes:

> The women's movement burgeoned at the same time as the move towards Federation was initiated, and at the Commonwealth Convention in 1897 it had been suggested that the new nation could enhance its status by leading the world with progressive legislation. The campaign for women's franchise was a growing world-wide movement, and the young nation establishing its constitution, parliaments and legislation was viewed as a testing ground for idealistic free-thinking experiment. It was widely believed that the women's vote would be conducive to greater morality and stability in the community. (pp. xii–xiii)

Thus, the important campaign for women's rights – which is compelling in itself – becomes even more significant as part of an emerging national consciousness and a surge of social experimentation that would

create a raft of very liberal and liberating legislation in Australia.

In Britain, however, campaigners would face a much more adversarial reception. Dora Meeson not only supported The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (founded 1897), but was a founding member of the Artists' Suffrage League (founded 1907). She understood that she could use her art not merely for publicity, but for persuasion. A deeply sexist male public mocked suffragettes as 'men in petticoats', by implication, 'unwomanly women' or perhaps lesbians (p. 12). The famous 'Mud March' (9 February 1907) showed that women could demonstrate en masse in public, thus deconstructing residual Victorian expectations of 'seemly behaviour'. Commentators recorded their naïve surprise that these activists came from all classes, and that many came from the upper classes, and that they were not bullish activists at all.

Meeson understood that she needed to counter the sexist image of the suffragette campaigner. She did so by providing illustrations to booklets such as Cicely Hamilton's *Beware! A Warning to Suffragists* and Mary Lowndes' *The A.B.C. of Politics*. Scott explains:

> Meeson's suffragettes depicted in her cartoons were distinctively lively, intelligent young women and university graduates, as distinct from anti-suffragist imagery of gross harridans, wielding gamp umbrellas. (p. 12).

In another telling postcard cartoon, *Taxation without Representation*, Meeson is careful to depict the campaigner, confronting a male politician about how her taxes are spent, as a well-dressed, thoroughly respectable woman. Meeson and her fellow artists also produced some 2000 campaign posters and myriad postcards for sale. Scott reminds us that these artists became the first professional group to align themselves formally with the suffragette movement.

Myra Scott's survey also usefully examines the contribution of women from New Zealand and Australia (notably Dame Nellie Melba) who contributed to the British suffragette movement. Sadly, the battle for women's rights would be a protracted one, primarily because of political conditions in Britain. Scott outlines the attitudes of the new Prime Minister, Asquith, who came to the leadership firm in his absurd conviction that women really did not want the vote. His resistance became more and more obdurate and desperate, especially in the face of massive demonstrations that brought an unprecedented army of women to the streets of London, thereby disproving, by sheer weight of numbers, his absurd theory. On 13 June 1908, for example, some 10,000–15,000 women marched in an orderly and dignified procession representing all social classes, and including doctors, writers, nurses, artists, every profession de facto demolishing the fictive image of a 'shrieking sisterhood.'

In 1910, Asquith's stubborn resistance provoked a truly astonishing political initiative from Australia: the recently founded Australian Federal Parliament actually presumed to send a Resolution to the British parliament, recommending the franchise for women. Senator Arthur Rae drafted the statement, saying that women's suffrage in Australia 'has had the most beneficial results' and that 'all nations enjoying representative government would be well advised in granting votes to women.' Conservatives here snorted that this was like a child presuming to tell a parent what to do. In terms of the traditional power relationships between the 'Mother Country' and a former colony, this was indeed a most remarkable reversal. Predictably, Asquith did not even respond, and in 1911 admitted that he had been 'too busy' to read the document. Clearly, this was going to be a prolonged campaign. Myra Scott elegantly traces the excruciatingly slow progress of the suffragette project in subsequent years. The full franchise for British women was not granted until 1928.