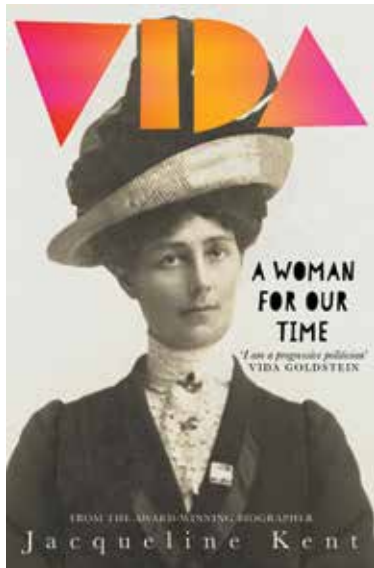


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## Vida: A Woman for Our Times

By Jacqueline Kent

September 2020

Viking

Paperback, 336 pages

RRP: \$34.99

ISBN: 9780670079490

Reviewed by Ingrid Perkins,  
St Patrick's College, Ballarat

*Vida: A Woman for Our Times* by Jacqueline Kent recounts the life of an extraordinary Australian suffragist and pacifist. Born in Portland, Victoria, Vida Goldstein led a relatively privileged early life in Melbourne. For much of her life Goldstein was a practising member of the Unitarian Church, with her primary focus to improve the lives of Melbourne's working poor. Kent explores in depth Goldstein's trailblazing quest to not only achieve women's suffrage in Australia, but also to become an independent member of parliament whose focus was to represent the underprivileged.

The strength of this biography lies in its accessibility; it is written in straightforward prose, and is predominately situated in familiar inner suburban Melbourne in areas such as Parkville, St Kilda, Richmond and South Yarra. The work would best serve senior students seeking an overview of nineteenth and early twentieth century labour movements in Australia.

The charitable circles in which Goldstein operated are of particular interest as Kent explores the tensions and political constraints that existed between leaders, factions, and their philanthropic missions. Indeed, Goldstein's world reads like a 'who's who' of politically active women in late Victorian Melbourne, such as Lady Janet Clarke, Stella Franklin and Annette Bear-Crawford.

Yet this work is irksome at times, especially when the author overreaches by attempting to gauge Goldstein's probable stance on contemporary political issues. For example, Kent resorts too often to surmising what Goldstein 'would probably have' thought about diverse topics such as the location of the Victorian parliamentary seat named after her, or the #metoo movement.

While effective biography does require a degree of inference to flesh out the character, there are some absolute clangers. Kent's pronouncement that Goldstein's grandmother's pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage was 'clearly a case of rape in marriage' without any other evidence than the pregnancy, is supposition at best but presented as fact. The epilogue is particularly grating in its anachronistic treatment and assumptions of what Goldstein would have thought about the treatment of our former Prime Minister, Julia Gillard.

The major flaw in this biography seems to lie in the author's attempt to retrofit twenty-first century values and aspirations to this remarkable woman. Kent's stated purpose was 'to show how much Vida was not simply a woman of her time, but someone whose views and beliefs are refreshingly contemporary—and so who is equally a woman of our time'. The reader is left wondering if the biography would have been better served if the author had worked on the premise that Vida Goldstein was a unique woman for her own time.