



**VERA DEAKIN AND THE RED CROSS
BOOK LAUNCH
Tuesday 25 May 2021**

The Honourable Ted Baillieu AO, former Premier of Victoria
Emeritus Professor Richard Broome AM, President, Royal Historical Society Victoria
Ms Carole Woods OAM, Author, *Vera Deakin and the Red Cross*
Dr Garry Nolan, Chairman, Victorian Advisory Board, Red Cross
Shrine of Remembrance Trustees and CEO, **Mr Dean Lee**
Vera Deakin's daughter, **Ms Judith Harley**, and all **family members**
Distinguished guests

First, I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land upon which we are gathering and pay my respects to their Elders past and present and to any Elders here with us.

Tom Harley, (now forever known to me as *Tom Tom*, having read that it was his grandmother's pet name for him – at least when he was a baby), did not have to ask me twice to launch *Vera Deakin and the Red Cross*.

There were several reasons why Carole Woods OAM's skilfully written book immediately raised my interest and enthusiasm.

First, Vera Deakin's role in Cairo and London during the Great War is an integral part of our ANZAC history, and must be told – and the story of the strong, courageous and dedicated women who served in wartime, never overlooked or forgotten.

Secondly, Government House and the Governor's role share the history of the Red Cross in Australia.

When I say *the Governor's role*, I should be more precise.

Across many decades, it has most often been the devotion of the Governor's spouse that has kept the strong connection alive. I am grateful that Tony has continued that, as the Patron of Red Cross Victoria, across the last six years.

When I received a copy of the book, I realised there was another connection.

It has been published by a patronage of mine, the Royal Historical Society of Victoria Inc. We can be grateful that the Society so often ensures that essential parts of our history – otherwise untold – are not lost to us.

Reading this both informative and charming book divulged yet another reason to enthuse about my role in launching it today.

The narrative of Vera Deakin's life is the narrative of world, national and local history: some particularly local, delivering insights into rolling decades in the history of Victoria, but also Melbourne, and especially this precinct in which we gather today.

In describing Vera Deakin's life, I was keen to avoid the cliché of hers being 'a remarkable life'. But it was. From many perspectives.

How else do you convey a childhood with a ringside view of important history?

Her father was, of course, a central figure in the movement to achieve Federation.

As a nine year old, Vera was invited to attend the Opening of the Australian Parliament in 1901.

When she was 11, her father became our second Prime Minister.

When she was 21, she was present at the laying of the foundation stone for Australia House in London and then attended again in The Strand when the building – familiar now to so many Australians – was opened by His Majesty King George V, on 3 August 1918.

Of course, those remarkable experiences were not of her own making. They were collateral to the family into which she was born and her father's achievements, including as leader of a fledgeling nation.

But this biography shows that it was as she forged her own path, that her life was truly remarkable.

Vera Deakin was a plucky young woman. Not in a loud *Look at me!* kind of way. Not to seek recognition or for the sake of leading a movement. If she was seeking to make a statement, it was simply a statement that she wanted to help at a time when her country needed her help.

Although frustrated by it, she was not put off by the rebuff that women were not welcome in a myriad of roles that she saw as of direct assistance to the war effort, as WWI started. She simply turned her attention to how and where she COULD contribute.

Here, the action – as it were – moves to our Government House. Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, wife of Australia's 6th Governor-General, founded the Australian Branch of the British Red Cross Society on 13 August 1914, in our ballroom, the home at that time of the Governor-General and his family.

Lady Stanley, wife of Victoria's 14th Governor, then started a Victorian division, and Vera's mother, Pattie Deakin, was appointed to the provisional committee.

Thus began Vera's lifetime of work for the Australian Red Cross, as she joined her mother and other women, packing consignments of clothing, food and comforts, for despatch to soldiers. The young woman was struck by the scene in the otherwise exquisite ballroom: of trestles piled high with the goods to be sent.

But Vera Deakin wanted to do more. To that end, on 21 September 1915, at the age of 23, with her friend Winifred Johnson, she boarded a P&O liner bound for Egypt.

For the next several years, she served the war effort, opening the Australian Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau in Egypt on 21 October 1915, and the equivalent in London in the following year.

It was no easy option: overseeing the demands of staffing, the forensic intricacies of finding soldiers missing or wounded in battles on different fronts, the sadness of visiting the wounded in hospital and the delicacy of informing families of tragic and unwanted news.

The volume of work too was unrelenting. In 1917 alone, Vera's Bureau received nearly 27,000 cabled enquiries from Australia and sent close to 25,000 replies.

All this, managed by a young woman, in her early to mid-twenties, on the other side of the world – more than a century ago!

Truly remarkable. As was her capacity, at the same time, to make the most of the adventure. She rode camels in the desert, sailed in a felucca on the Nile, explored her beloved England, cemented lifelong friendships and, above all, managed to see the beauty around her, despite the gruelling nature of the work she was doing.

In a passage she wrote in 1915 – well chosen by the author – the young Vera poetically described the beauty of an evening at The Citadel, writing:

The sun went down with little ceremony or warning as usual, then the sky turned to amethyst, harebell blue & silver in the east while the west gleamed with amber, gold & apricot over the pyramids and shimmering Nile.

In March 1918, Vera Deakin was appointed an officer in the Order of the British Empire, in an official recognition of her service, invested at Buckingham Palace by His Majesty the King.

The import of her work though was poignantly captured in a less formal way, in an excerpt of a letter from an unnamed man, obviously responding to the devastating news from the Bureau of the loss of a soldier – most likely his son – when he wrote a letter expressing his gratitude, saying:

May I thank you most sincerely for your kindness in this matter. Such human sympathy does more to soften the agony of bereavement than your kind and devoted workers can possibly realise.

And in a tribute to her when she left to sail home in March 1919, she was recognised as *an irreparable loss* as the Bureau's head since its inauguration, and as *its chief inspiration and motive power*.

Apt summaries of the wartime work of Vera Deakin and those with whom she worked in the Bureau that she helped to establish.

Of course, the book recounts how her work did not stop when that war stopped. She continued to serve for the remainder of her life.

Like many of her generation, Vera Deakin White (as she became in 1920 when she married Captain Tom White, (later the Hon Sir Thomas White KBE DFC VD), supported her husband in his political career which spanned several decades – and ten election victories – as the Member for Balaclava, in his Ministries under Prime Ministers Lyons and Menzies, as he served in WWII, and by his side when he was Australia's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom from 1951 to 1956.

But, throughout her marriage, she continued to serve in her own right too, continuing devoted work with the Red Cross, including in the Red Cross Bureau for Wounded, Missing and Prisoners of War and other leadership roles during WWII, and well beyond.

Vera was a driving force in Victoria as Vice-Chairman, and she assisted with the transition to peacetime activities. Later, she became one of two Vice-chairmen of the national Red Cross, until her husband's new role took them to London.

Although the book to be launched here today is entitled *Vera Deakin and the Red Cross*, and it facilitates an excellent overview of Vera Deakin White's almost half a century of dedicated service to Red Cross, it also highlights that service was so innate to her that she dedicated her time to many causes and organisations beyond. Amongst them, The Lyceum Club, Merton Hall, the Australian Council of Educational Research, the Free Library Movement, the Children's

Hospital, the Victorian Society for Crippled Children and Adults and the ANZAC Fellowship of Women.

At her funeral in August 1978 at Christ Church, South Yarra, Sir John Nimmo, (then a justice of the Federal Court of Australia, but previously a searcher selected by Vera in WWII and later Vice-Chairman with her of the Australian Red Cross), described his colleague and friend as *an organiser, an innovator and a leader*. He eulogised that she *was at ease with people of all classes and kinds*. She was someone, he said, *who could walk with kings without losing the common touch*.

A great epitaph for a remarkable woman. One whose dedication to a cause was an inspiration to many and, thanks to this important biography, her memory will endure to inspire new generations to service, generosity of spirit and the confidence to get over or around any barriers encountered. And to do all that with humility.

With congratulations to the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, Carole Woods OAM, the Red Cross, Vera Deakin's family and in particular Judith Harley, it is now my great pleasure to commend to you and officially launch *Vera Deakin and the Red Cross*.