

Pursuing justice for women: The consummate qualities of Ruth Gibson (1901-1972) as teacher, inspector and international activist

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Abstract: This article aims to elucidate the qualities of a successful teacher and school inspector, namely Gladys Ruth Gibson (1901-1972), in a highly bureaucratic Australian education department. Using a feminist theoretical framework and traditional archival research into correspondence files, newspapers and documents from relevant organisations, the article traces Gibson's schooling and career in the South Australian education department as a teacher and school inspector, intertwined with her feminist activism in teachers unions and women's organisations. Successfully negotiating the entrenched structural inequalities between men and women in the education department, Gibson ascended the «service ladder» by demonstrating qualities such as pedagogical expertise, scholarship, cultural attainments and commitments to professional service to become a school inspector. The same qualities underpinned her feminist activism. Although relegated to a relatively lowly position as an inspector in the education department's senior management, Gibson's leadership and commitment to the advancement of women expanded exponentially when she served as president of the National Council of Women, being the peak organisation for Australian women, and as a vice-president of the International Council of Women. In essence, Ruth Gibson was a consummate teacher-inspector-activist in her pursuit of justice for women in the mid-twentieth century.

Keywords: women teachers; school inspectors; career advancement; education bureaucracy; feminist activism.

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1. Introduction

Dating from the early to mid-nineteenth century, there is a long history of school inspection across Anglophone countries. In the British context, James and Davis (2009) posit school inspection as a mode of social control and a means of securing accountability while Fletcher (1982) portrays inspectors as agents of imperialism in

colonies such as Natal in South Africa and Mauritius. Curtis (1992) focuses on the origins and development of school inspection in Canada. Turney (1970), Jones (1985) and Moore (2019) do the same for bureaucratic education departments in Australia. That school inspection was a male domain is taken for granted in these studies. Nevertheless, women school inspectors were appointed from 1893 in Britain and a separate and subordinate woman inspectorate was established in 1905 (Goodman & Harrop, 2000). The woman inspectorate expanded slowly in Britain and lagged in the white settler dominions. Australia's first woman school inspector was appointed amidst vigorous resistance from headmasters in 1897: The position was abandoned in 1902 and reinstated in 1917 (Whitehead, 2021). There were no women school inspectors in Canada and New Zealand until 1919 and 1926 respectively (Mileweski, 2012; Morris Matthews, 2005). Studies of individual women inspectors show that resistance was ongoing in some cases (Goodman & Harrop, 2000; Theobald, 2000). Women constituted about one third of the British school inspectorate when Percy Wilson, the Senior Chief Inspector of Schools in England and Wales visited Australia in 1963: He reported «a marked and unfortunate paucity of women inspectors» across Australian education departments and concluded that «a certain amount of male prejudice is still holding women back» (Wilson, 1963, pp. 53, 61). Although feminist historians concur with Wilson and have interrogated the patriarchal structures that circumscribed women's work in state education systems, they have also highlighted women's agency in negotiating, subverting and expanding their roles (Goodman & Harrop, 2000; Morris Matthews, 2005; Whitehead, 2005; Trethewey, 2006; Hunt & Trotman, 2002; Roca & Marti, 2018). Women educators did so variously through their prolific publications in the case of Spanish inspector, Lenor Serrano (Roca & Marti, 2018), personal and professional networks; and mobilising teachers unions and women's organisations (Theobald, 2000; Hunt & Trotman, 2002; Trethewey, 2006).

Noting the overall dearth of studies of women school inspectors, this article explores the life and work of an Australian inspector, Gladys Ruth Gibson (1901-1972). Gibson's feminist activism has been foregrounded in previous research (Pitt, 1981; Fletcher, 1996; Lokan, 2013; Quartly & Smart, 2015) but her extensive career as a teacher and inspector is barely mentioned in these accounts. This article elucidates the characteristics of a consummate teacher and inspector in relation to Gibson's career in the South Australian education department and demonstrates how her professional skills and qualities transferred to her activism on behalf of women in Australia and transnationally. A feminist theoretical framework is deployed to encapsulate Gibson's life and work, and the analysis is underpinned by traditional archival research into official reports and correspondence files of the South Australian education department, along with teachers unions, the Australian National Council of Women and other relevant organisations, supplemented by newspapers. While these texts address Gibson's public work, Gibson left no personal records so her shared private life with colleague, Margaret Murphy, remains relatively opaque.

The first section contextualises Ruth Gibson's childhood and education within the workings of the bureaucratic and patriarchal South Australian education department. The second section focuses on her teaching career and participation in teachers unions and women's organisations from 1921 to 1940, and shows how she ascended the «service ladder» by demonstrating the qualities of a successful teacher

and inspector. The following sections discuss Gibson's controversial appointment as a school inspector in 1941 and subsequent career until her retirement in 1961. While these sections support Wilson's (1963) conclusions about the Australian inspectorate, Gibson's activism on behalf of women was expanding exponentially. The final section highlights her leadership of women in South Australia, nationally and internationally which continued until her death in 1972.

2. Schooling in a bureaucratic education department

Born in December 1901, Gladys Ruth Gibson was the eldest of Emma (nee Keeley) and James Gibson's four children. The Gibsons lived in Goodwood Park, a suburb of the capital city of Adelaide in South Australia and were devout members of the Church of England (Fletcher, 1996). «One of the best educated deaf mutes in Australia», James Gibson was a travelling collector for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind Society. He «rarely spent more than a day or two at a time in Adelaide» and was well-known throughout rural South Australia (*News*, 16 March 1931, p. 3). Given his peripatetic occupation, Emma was largely responsible for domestic duties and the children's upbringing. In 1900, Emma also instituted a Deaf and Dumb Young Women's Society «to do useful work among deaf young women», thereby signalling a commitment to active citizenship which would be embraced wholeheartedly by her daughter Ruth in later years (*Advertiser*, 23 October 1900, p. 9).

Ruth Gibson's elementary schooling took place at Goodwood Public School, a medium-sized government school comprising 700 students aged from five to fourteen. There were three male and six female staff, all of whom were employees of the bureaucratic South Australian education department (*Education Gazette*, 26 January 1910, p. 5). All appointments and transfers between schools were decided centrally, promotion was by seniority and merit, and the «best» schools were located in Adelaide, being the capital city. With the marriage bar firmly in place, the women teachers at Goodwood were single. Women were also excluded from leading schools of more than thirty students so Goodwood was led by headmaster Carl Bronner whose career profile was typical of the times. He had graduated from the training college in 1882 and climbed the «service ladder» as a teacher and then headmaster in rural schools of increasing size before being appointed to suburban Goodwood in 1896. As one headmaster explained, a man «should be ambitious to leave and take all that experience he has obtained into other schools. He blocks promotion when he remains a first assistant. It is different with a woman teacher; her goal is first [or chief] assistantship; she can get no higher» (cited in Whitehead, 2005, p. 593). Ruth Gibson's women teachers at Goodwood had also graduated from the training college and taught in rural schools before being transferred to Adelaide's suburban schools, with a few of the largest being divided into boys, girls and infant departments. The headmaster had ultimate authority over all departments so the pinnacle of a woman's career was to be appointed «chief assistant» of a girls or infant department. In 1916, there were twenty-two such positions and 1,200 women teachers in the South Australian education department; and thus «practically nothing for the brilliant, the ambitious, the progressive woman to aspire to» (*SA Teachers Journal*, April 1916, p. 27). In essence, the women who taught Ruth Gibson were

qualified, mature and experienced teachers whose service ladder was truncated and whose employment was contingent on remaining single.

The annual inspections and examinations were key events for both students and teachers at Goodwood. The early twentieth century inspectorate comprised thirteen former headmasters, selected from Adelaide's largest schools and thus senior in terms of age and length of service. Each school was visited twice-yearly by an inspector, the first visit being «without notice» to report on school organisation, and the second to examine the students. The annual examination at Goodwood usually took place in December. Students were examined collectively and individually in various subjects with their results determining their progress to the next grade and signifying the teacher's efficiency and prospects for promotion (Jones, 1985). Ruth Gibson experienced the technologies of inspection and examination first-hand as a student during her elementary schooling and her success opened the potential for post-compulsory education at Unley High School.

Opened in 1910, Unley High School was one of four government secondary schools that prepared students for public examinations of the University of Adelaide. Unley was «a school for the clever few; it was a privilege to attend for the most part» (Campbell, 2010, p. 38). Boys and girls were taught separately and the staff profile was the same as Goodwood in that men managed and women taught. University study (and preferably a degree) was required of high school teachers who claimed elite status in the profession. Appropriately qualified elementary teachers were also promoted into high schools in the early years. In 1916, Unley's staff comprised the headmaster, three men and five women teachers (*Education Gazette*, 25 January 1916, p. 3). Chief assistant Hilda Hill had commenced her career in a rural school and ascended the service ladder while completing her arts degree part-time. Hill taught English and was choir mistress at Unley High until her retirement in 1944, by which time she had been surpassed by her former student, inspector Ruth Gibson (Campbell, 2010).

Having successfully negotiated Unley High School, Ruth Gibson joined the education department as a «junior teacher» at Goodwood Public School in January 1919 and studied at the Adelaide Training College in 1920 (*Education Gazette*, 15 March 1920, p. 86). Junior teachers were selected for their scholarship, physical fitness, character and aptitude for teaching; with qualities such as determination, ambition, enthusiasm and commitment to service being highly prized (Whitehead, 2005). The headmaster provided instruction in the theory and practice of teaching before morning school and junior teachers then spent the day in classrooms. Both junior teachers and training college students were paid an allowance by the education department. Gibson was inducted into «the science and art of teaching» at the training college and studied some subjects at the University of Adelaide to develop subject knowledge and «a cultured outlook» (Whitehead, 2005, p. 586). Graduates were required to commit to teaching anywhere in South Australia at any point of their career in the education department. When Gibson completed her training in December 1920, she was already familiar with many of the structures and processes of the education department, including its staffing profiles, having experienced them throughout her primary and secondary schooling as well as her teacher education.

3. Ascending the service ladder as a «successful, modern, attractive» teacher

Gibson graduated with a IIB certificate and spent the first decade of her teaching career at Westbourne Park Public School near her family home. Aside from winning the «cotton winding race» for women teachers, Gibson and her colleagues» work was marginalised in favour of the headmaster's leadership in press reports about Westbourne Park's annual flower and pet shows, Arbour Day and Empire Day celebrations (e.g. *News*, 23 November 1925, p. 5; *Advertiser*, 28 May 1923, p. 16). Gibson also assumed responsibility for domestic duties and her siblings, including eleven-year-old Edna, after their mother's death in 1923. Their father died in 1931 (Lokan, 2013). Additionally, Gibson met her life-long companion, colleague Margaret Murphy, at Westbourne Park but they did not set up home together until 1939.

By 1922, Gibson had joined the Women Teachers Progressive League (WTPL) which was affiliated with the South Australian Public School Teachers Union (SAPTU) (*SA Teachers Journal*, 28 February 1922, pp. 267-268). SAPTU comprised many teachers» associations, the largest by far being the WTPL led by Adelaide Miethke who was the only woman on SAPTU's decision-making council. Women teachers were mostly overlooked when SAPTU prosecuted teachers» salaries in the Industrial Court, but their deputations to the director of education brought incremental improvements to their working conditions (Whitehead, 1996). By joining the WTPL, Gibson signified her ambition to serve the profession and was inducted into the network of women activists in the education department. Another indication of her ambition was her part-time study for a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Adelaide. University study was a requirement for promotion to senior positions and a marker of general culture and scholarship.

In the 1920s, career opportunities expanded for some women under the progressive leadership of director McCoy. Firstly, infant departments in schools such as Westbourne Park were reconfigured as separate infant schools under the independent leadership of infant mistresses rather than chief assistants. Secondly, McCoy encouraged post-elementary education by establishing some boys and girls «central schools», the latter led by women. Advantaged by her ongoing university studies, Gibson was transferred to Goodwood Girls Central School in 1931. Thirdly, Lydia Longmore was appointed as the inspector of infant schools and Adelaide Miethke was the inspector of girls central schools from 1924 (Trethewey, 2006). Although inspectors maintained their union membership, they customarily refrained from active involvement in union affairs. Miethke joined the National Council of Women (NCW), an umbrella organisation of representatives from women's groups whose chief object was equal citizenship with men across domestic and public life. Miethke became president of the NCW in South Australia and then national president in the 1940s (Quarty & Smart, 2015).

Director McCoy also made some changes to the education department's senior management. He introduced a new administrative layer of superintendents of elementary and secondary education and selected them from the ranks of male inspectors. He also recruited inspectors on the grounds of suitability for the task rather than seniority, resulting in the promotion of younger men in their late thirties

and forties. Additionally, inspectors» roles were redefined to focus on the quality of teachers» work rather than students» examinations (Jones, 1985). Qualitative judgments about teachers» character and personality were entwined with assessments of their «organisation», «government» and «methods of instruction»; and the resultant «skill mark» was a key factor in determining salary increments, transfers between schools and advancement on the service ladder (Whitehead, 2005). With «modern progressive girls like Ruth Gibson» in mind, inspector Miethke sought clarification of anomalies regarding skill marks. Ruth Gibson did the same in separate correspondence because «the question of promotion» was «of vital importance» (cited in correspondence files, Government Record Group [GRG] GRG 18/2/1940/384).

Although women teachers» position improved under McCoy's leadership, most of their gains were reversed by his conservative successor from 1929 (Tretthewey, 2006). Furthermore, existing disparities between men's and women's salaries were exacerbated by the economic depression and inequalities in SAPTU. Gibson became increasingly vocal as women teachers endeavoured to win equal representation on SAPTU council. In 1930 she seconded a motion for equal representation and was opposed by the male president who responded vehemently that «the men have been afraid for many years that someday the women would arise in their might, use their numbers and utterly swamp them» (*News*, 18 September 1930, p. 6). The motion was defeated in 1930, and again and again in subsequent years (Whitehead, 1996).

In March 1932 Gibson transferred to a rural school where she spent two years and participated in the local teachers association (*Kadina and Wallaroo Times*, 25 October 1933, p. 2). A period of rural service was deemed essential to career progression and Gibson's sister had just graduated as a teacher and was no longer a dependent sibling. Teachers who refused rural positions were penalised severely in terms of promotion along the service ladder. Gibson returned to Adelaide and suburban Unley Girls Central School in 1934. According to one student, Gibson was «a firm teacher» and well-liked (Jolly, 2001, p. 182). Gibson completed her Bachelor of Arts and a postgraduate Diploma of Teaching at the University of Adelaide while teaching at Unley (Lokan, 2013).

In the mid-1930s Gibson and her companion Margaret Murphy were embroiled in the escalating tensions between men and women in SAPTU and joined the NCW. In 1934, Gibson was selected to give evidence about women teachers» salaries and working conditions in the Industrial Court (*Advertiser*, 13 December 1934, p. 3). She was elected president of the Women Assistants Association in 1935 and was one of only three women on the SAPTU council in 1936 (*SA Teachers Journal*, 21 August 1935, p. 11; *SA Teachers Journal*, 22 June 1936, pp. 11-12). To say the least, gender relations on the council were acrimonious. Unable to achieve justice for women teachers, Gibson was among the strategists who organised for 600 women to resign and form their own feminist union, the Women Teachers Guild (WTG) in August 1937 (Whitehead, 1996).

Gibson's profile in teacher unionism is indicative of her feminist networks and high regard among women teachers as well as her ambition and commitments to the profession. Education department administrators thought similarly when she and Murphy applied for twelve months leave without pay to travel overseas in

1938. An internal memorandum attached to her application contained the following complimentary descriptors from her service record: «strong, fine tone and attitude, intelligent teaching, successful, modern, attractive» (GRG 18/2/1937/560). Coined by inspectors, these descriptors indicate that Gibson was perceived as a pedagogically and socially progressive woman teacher (Whitehead, 2005).

Departing Australia in March 1938, Gibson and Murphy represented the Australian NCW at the International Council of Women (ICW) jubilee conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, before travelling through Britain, Europe and the United States. Gibson's letters to the WTG, subsequently published in its magazine, the *Guild Chronicle*, stated that she had collected pamphlets on «equal pay» from the feminist National Union of Women Teachers in England. She «confessed that we didn't see much in the way of schools or schoolwork in England», her justification being that «it is extremely good for us in our profession to get right away for a while at least ... and mingle with people in other walks of life» (*Guild Chronicle*, 15 February 1939, pp. 6-7). Already «entranced» by the Christmas decorations in Harrods department store in London, Gibson and Murphy proceeded to the United States where they had a «thrilling» Christmas in New York. They investigated conditions and salaries in American schools, returned to South Australia looking «remarkably "chic" in their New York clothes», and gave talks on their educational and tourist experiences abroad (*Guild Chronicle*, 15 April 1939, pp. 11-14; *Guild Chronicle*, 16 November 1939, p. 7; *Guild Chronicle*, 4 December 1939, pp. 9-11). The equal pay pamphlets were published in the *Guild Chronicle* and Gibson was elected secretary of the WTG in May 1939 (*Guild Chronicle*, 15 August 1939, p. 7; *Guild Chronicle*, 12 June 1940, p. 7). Within a year, however, her rapid ascent through the ranks of women teachers would be the subject of enormous tensions, the core problems being the structural inequalities and lack of promotion opportunities for women in the education department.

4. 'Proving herself an able and dependable officer'

In 1940 the reconfiguration of central schools as junior technical schools by a new director Fenner was a fillip for Gibson's career. Whereas central schools had been considered as an extension of elementary education, Fenner classified technical schools as secondary education alongside high schools, and appointed some headmistresses as well as chief assistants to the girls technical schools. Fenner's special interest was technical education and he was keen to ensure the best possible staffing (Trethewey, 2006). Gibson was promoted to chief assistant at Unley Girls Technical School, second only to the headmistress. However, high school teachers continued to claim elite status, followed by technical and then elementary teachers.

Notwithstanding incremental improvements for some women teachers, the inequalities between men and women were stark: In 1940 a mere 120 women earned more than the minimum salary paid to men in the education department (*Advertiser*, 1 May 1940, p. 8). Keeping wartime exigencies in mind, the WTG campaigned to protect and advance the interests of women teachers. WTG secretary Gibson was involved in prosecuting the case for registration in the Industrial Court and integral

to deputations requesting «more avenues of promotion and administrative positions for women teachers» (*Guild Chronicle*, 21 February 1940, p. 12; *Guild Chronicle*, 29 April 1940, p. 9). Claiming that the lack of opportunities for women at the top of the service ladder had a «very deteriorating effect on the service as a whole», the WTG factored complex issues of age and marriage into their arguments.

Up to forty years of age, the woman is, perhaps, not concerned with the idea that she will go on teaching all her working life – there is always the possibility of marriage. After forty, I suggest that in common fairness, the woman's salary should approximate more nearly that of the man's of equal status – she has her old age to provide for, and has in an astonishing number of cases to be responsible for a home, aged parents and other dependents (*Guild Chronicle*, 21 February 1940, p. 12).

Aged thirty-nine, Gibson was no longer caring for her siblings and had established a home with her companion Margaret Murphy.

The WTG was a vibrant organisation with a membership of more than 800 women, and strengthened by cross membership with likeminded groups and sharing an office assistant with the NCW (*Advertiser*, 16 May 1939, p. 7). Gibson «stressed the value» of affiliation and was a delegate to the NCW with Murphy as proxy (*Guild Chronicle*, 12 June 1940, pp. 7, 9). In May 1940, the WTG co-opted the NCW to lobby the education department to ensure that large classes of girls were always taught by women (*Advertiser*, 8 May 1940, p. 9). Given that inspector Adelaide Miethke was president of the NCW, there was a mutuality of interests. Politically astute, Miethke, Gibson and their colleagues were embedded in an unequal bureaucratic system but making the most of their networks with other associations to advance their interests.

During the war years inspector Miethke took charge of the complex Schools Patriotic Fund in addition to her normal duties. The extra workload took its toll and Miethke applied to director Fenner for assistance with the inspection of girls schools in October 1941, appending a description of Gibson's age, «superior academic qualifications», «professional skills» and «other experiences» (GRG 18/2/1940/1700). In so doing, she articulated her ideal of a modern woman teacher and potential inspector. Miethke stated that Gibson «possesses initiative, tact, and is proving herself an able and dependable officer of more than usual ability in her present school». Drawing on her insights as NCW president, Miethke added that Gibson

Has been overseas and visited England, Europe and America, gaining much through intelligent observation and conclusion. Appointed delegate for Australia to the International Congress of the National Council of Women held in Edinburgh in 1938, where she met the most brilliant women for the countries of Europe and elsewhere, and joined with them in the deliberations of the Standing Committees dealing with social problems. The Australian delegation regarded her as an exceptional delegate, and her reports on the Congress Sessions as presented to the Australian Board of Officers were unique in the discretion and judgment, showing the grasp and accompanying commentary. Miss Gibson is now a member of the NCW Board of Officers for Australia (GRG 18/2/1940/1700).

Director Fenner interviewed Gibson and recommended her appointment because he was «impressed by her school work as I had previously been impressed by her personality at conference meetings. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree, and

will complete a Diploma of Education this year. She has travelled abroad and has very capably represented Australia at an International Congress» (GRG 18/2/1940/1700).

There was immediate push-back from senior women teachers to Gibson's appointment as an «assistant inspector of girls schools ... for the time being» (*Education Gazette*, 15 November 1940, p. 222). The position had not been advertised and previous practice had been to co-opt headmasters as assistant inspectors in the case of men. The first of three deputations came from headmistresses who registered «our protest at the indignity placed upon us and upon the position of headmistress» (GRG 18/2/1940/1700). The most senior women in the education department in terms of age, experience and position had been overlooked in favour of Gibson who had been «merely an assistant» in 1938 and «elevated to a chief assistantship» only nine months previously. Fenner refused to reconsider his decision and intimated that the optimum age for promotion to the inspectorate was around thirty-five, thus implying a lack of confidence in older women. Furthermore, it was well-known that inspector Miethke had almost reached the statutory retirement age of sixty for women, thereby opening a rare, perhaps once in a lifetime, opportunity for a woman to access the pinnacle of a profession mired in structural inequalities.

According to custom, Gibson resigned as WTG secretary and withdrew from active involvement in its politics (*Guild Chronicle*, 5 December 1940, p. 7). The WTG president and eleven prominent members took a second deputation to Fenner in December 1940, claiming that he was «casting aside all considerations of experience and seniority» and arguing that «age» should not be a determinant in matters of promotion. Given that Gibson would be inspecting girls departments in high schools, the high school women were also anxious to protect their status and queried the «relevance» of Gibson's experience in elementary and technical schools to their work (GRG 18/2/1940/2160).

Fenner not only failed to assuage the WTG's concerns but also fuelled dissatisfaction by extending Gibson's temporary position into mid-1941 pending Miethke's retirement. His actions prompted a third deputation in March 1941. Calling for more chief assistant positions, this deputation reiterated previous concerns and accused Miethke of «advancing the interests of a friend» in Gibson (GRG 18/2/1940/2160). Asked for her response, Miethke protested that this «contemptible innuendo» reflected on her «integrity» and claimed to have «had no personal acquaintance with Gibson whatever». Given Miethke and Gibson's NCW activism, this statement might be contested. Miethke's response compared the career profiles of several women who were «mentally dead to modern educational and cultural trends» with Gibson's «continuous reading, lectures and achievements from 1920-1940». She reiterated that Gibson was chosen for her «outstanding ability in grasp and reach», «mental alertness», academic achievement and general culture», «successful superprimary experience» and «cultural contacts in England, Scotland, the Continent and America» (GRG 18/2/1940/2160). The creation of several new chief assistant positions soon after this deputation was welcomed by the WTG (*Guild Chronicle*, 18 April 1941, p. 6).

The advertisement for inspector Miethke's replacement invited women teachers «of not less than ten years» experience» to apply for the position, stating their professional training, teaching experience, professional studies in recent years, and

the «high and junior technical school subjects which she is competent to examine»; adding that «it is not essential that applicants should have been in charge of a large school» (*Education Gazette*, 15 April 1941, p. 90). Six applicants were interviewed. They included three senior mistresses and one teacher from high schools, and a teacher and chief assistant from junior technical schools, the latter being Gibson (GRG 18/1941/473). Ranging in age from Gibson's forty to fifty, all had studied at the University of Adelaide and some had completed degrees. Gibson and another applicant had travelled overseas. Four applicants were activists in the WTG and one had remained in SAPTU (*Education Gazette*, 15 February 1940, pp. 4-9, 13-14). Unfortunately, their applications are no longer extant but Gibson won the position.

The new woman inspector was lauded in the press as a «thoroughly efficient woman» with a «distinguished career». Gibson's overseas travel was highlighted along with her university studies (*Advertiser*, 8 July 1941, p. 6). Aside from a congratulatory message from the Women Assistants Association, there was little acknowledgement in the *Guild Chronicle* (15 October 1941, p. 7). A deputation from high school teachers that included three of the unsuccessful applicants, subsequently met with director Fenner to «express the feeling of insecurity and almost dismay» regarding Gibson's appointment. To «improve the status of high school teachers, they requested avenues of promotion comparable to men's and a «woman high school inspector selected from high school ranks». Furthermore, they «respectfully requested that if experience abroad is to be made a special factor, this should be stated in the regulations» (*Guild Chronicle*, 26 November 1943, p. 13). Little did they know that Gibson would continue as the only woman inspector of technical and high schools until her retirement in 1961?

5. 'Characteristics of the really successful inspector'

During inspector Ruth Gibson's twenty-year tenure, the education department's hierarchical senior management comprised director Fenner who was replaced by a more conservative director Mander-Jones in 1946, four superintendents, one staff inspector and seventeen inspectors, the latter including three women. Besides Gibson, there was a woman inspector of infant schools and one for domestic arts. Mander-Jones increased the number of infant school inspectors to three in 1956, and promoted Marjory Mead to «assistant superintendent» in 1959, making her «the first woman in the department to be appointed to a rank higher than that of an inspector» (*South Australian Parliamentary Papers* 1960, no. 44, p. 4).

Sometime later, director Mander-Jones presented the «characteristics [and duties] of the really successful inspector» to a national conference of school inspectors (Mander-Jones 1967, p. 4). He commenced with the inspector's «professional characteristics» which were «high academic attainments, wide and sufficient, and successful experience as a teacher. He must be one who keeps himself or herself up-to-date with educational thought through wide reading, critical examination and retentive memory». He added overseas travel as one way of keeping abreast of contemporary issues (p. 5). Turning to «personal characteristics», Mander-Jones nominated «self-control», «clear thinking», and being «logical and objective». Although an inspector's private life was «a matter for his or her own concern»,

the successful inspector was «a pattern to all teachers under his charge. In his or her appearance, dress, manner, speech, ways and attitudes he or she must be an example to the young men and women teachers» (p. 5). As for «leadership» characteristics, the inspector was a «guide, adviser and friend to all under his jurisdiction and additionally he must be a firm judge and a candid critic» (p. 6).

Exemplifying these professional, personal and leadership qualities, Ruth Gibson was re-designated as an «inspector of secondary schools» in 1952; but remained in that relatively lowly position in the educational department's senior management. Correspondence files show that she was consulted by senior management sometimes but her work was rarely acknowledged in departmental publications. Her position in the education department was never commensurate with her national and international leadership of women which will be addressed later in this article. Nevertheless, she made the most of her inspectorial duties to influence education and proved a very effective ambassador for the government school system in South Australia.

Routine inspection was Gibson's principal duty and to this end she had to negotiate productive working relationships with male colleagues as well as women teachers. Whereas the women inspectors of infant schools and domestic arts assessed women teachers exclusively, Gibson usually accompanied a team of men in the inspection of technical and high schools. It seems that Gibson «chose to base her authority on expertise [in girls and technical education] and collegiality so as not to alienate the men with whom she had to work» day-by-day, while pursuing justice for women through other avenues and networks (Hunt & Trotman, 2002, p. 285). During the war years she refrained from using her car as a patriotic gesture. She was reimbursed for its use from the 1950s but had to request that her car allowance be the same as male inspectors (GRG 18/2/1944/814). Extensive travel in rural South Australia was germane to most inspectors» work and sometimes reported in the press. In March 1948, for example, Gibson inspected Balaklava High School with two male inspectors (*The Producer*, 25 March 1948, p. 4). Accompanying inspector Haines to Penola in December 1953, Gibson «inspected the girls» work ... and expressed satisfaction with what she saw» (*The Pennant*, 10 December 1953, p. 1). Each inspector produced an annual report and Gibson used her institutional position to insist that technical schools «were not trade schools but modern schools» which taught practical subjects alongside academic subjects including English, social studies and arithmetic (*Education Gazette*, 15 May 1942, p. 111). She consistently advocated for progressive, «democratic» schooling and supported pedagogical reforms such as the project method (*Education Gazette*, 15 May 1943, p. 113). In 1949 her annual report summarised her stance:

As I constantly stress, the aim of girls technical schools is not to give highly-specialised training in craft subjects, nor to prepare girls for the trades, but to give a soundly planned education which will help fit the girls, not only to earn a living, but also take her place in the community as a capable thoughtful citizen, as well as helping to fit her for many of her duties as future wife and mother (*Education Gazette*, 15 September 1949, p. 181).

Gibson's progressive educational vision complemented her stance on women's citizenship for which she was working tirelessly in women's organisations such as the NCW.

Given the controversy surrounding her appointment, Gibson had to renegotiate her relationships with women teachers. They included a few of her previous teachers at Unley High School, former colleagues in junior technical schools, and WTG and SAPTU members. At first, there was a legacy of tensions, but Gibson's institutional position as an inspector conferred power and authority vis a vis teachers, if not among inspectors. Gibson's assessment and disciplinary functions mediated some interactions with individual women teachers and her advisory role facilitated others. One teacher remembered that «Gibson fretted over my well-used and dog-eared marks book. The grimy record of my students» progress could not have been the mark of a dedicated teacher» (Jolly, 2001, p. 233). Given that Gibson assigned the all-important skill marks, this assessment had a potential adverse impact on the teacher's career. Another teacher recalled that «Inspector Ruth Gibson was very understanding. We were very fond of her and she was very helpful indeed. When teachers were newly appointed she used to spend a lot of time with them» (Jolly, 2001, p. 469). However, joint inspections were complex. In 1959 inspector Glastonbury angrily challenged a senior mistress because she had discussed communism in her social studies lesson. She responded that she was presenting a «balanced picture» of contemporary world politics: «Mr Glastonbury whose field of expertise was mathematics continued the attack. In the group ... was Miss Ruth Gibson, holding her black handbag firmly in front of her and staying equally silent» (Jolly, 2001, p. 419). For whatever reason, Gibson did not intervene even though her expertise was social studies. Although disappointed by this incident, the same senior mistress applauded Gibson's advocacy for girls technical schools and her insistence on the inclusion of academic subjects in their curriculum. Furthermore, Gibson used her position to identify and transfer highly competent teachers to these schools (Jolly, 2001, p. 15).

Although Gibson withdrew from public activism in the WTG, she maintained her membership and deep knowledge of women teachers» working conditions. Much of her work took place in schools, thereby keeping her informed of issues, and her shared domestic life with Margaret Murphy was likely equally important. Murphy was the chief assistant at Croydon Girls Technical School from 1942-1948 and completed her career as the highly respected headmistress of Norwood Girls Technical School from 1948-1953. One former colleague commented, «small, exquisitely neat, [Murphy] visited every room daily and missed nothing. She had quite a sense of humour and she knew what she wanted and saw that she got it» (Jolly, 2015, p. 211). Another stated that Murphy, like Gibson, «was not afraid of new ideas» and encouraged innovation (Jolly, 2001, p. 328). However, the appointments of a few men teachers to girls schools such as Norwood «did cause a little dissension as women did not then receive equal pay for equal work and his pay packet was larger than even that of the headmistress!» (Jolly, 2001, p. 330). Although constrained by her institutional position in the education department, Gibson was never silent about such injustices and used her external networks to advantage. For example, she raised the issue of equal pay at the NCW annual conference in 1954 and was

appointed to the new South Australian Equal Pay Commission in 1961, contributing incisive arguments on behalf of women teachers (Lokan, 2013).

As director Mander-Jones (1967) pointed out, inspectors had a number of extra duties connected with the organisation of schools and curriculum and were expected to engage with the general public on behalf of the education department. Gibson represented the education department on the Public Examinations Board in social studies, home science and commercial subjects and co-opted skilled, innovative women teachers to some committees (*Education Gazette*, 2 October 1972, p. 319; Jolly, 2001, p. 217). She was the chief supervisor for the women's section of the annual Royal Adelaide Show, completely reorganising and renovating the 3,000 exhibits in the 1940s (*Mail*, 2 August 1947, p. 12). Here, her «chief regret» was that it was not possible to display more of the «academic work» from girls technical schools (*Education Gazette*, 15 September 1949, p. 181). Gibson also addressed groups all over South Australia on education matters. For example, she was guest speaker at a three-day conference of 350 School Welfare Club members in 1952, and joined in the Tanunda School Welfare Club's birthday social in 1954 (*News*, 20 August 1952, p. 24; *Leader*, 14 October 1954, p. 9). Generous and gregarious, Gibson was a consummate publicist for government schools in South Australia.

In 1949, the education department selected Gibson and newly appointed inspector Albert ('Alby') Jones as recruiting officers to conduct a state-wide publicity campaign to attract more secondary school students to train as teachers. The post-war baby boom resulted in a 226% increase in elementary school enrolments between 1945 and 1960, and a critical shortage of teachers in South Australia (Jones, 1985, p. 258). Five hundred married women had been re-employed as temporary teachers by 1949 but another 1,000 teachers would be required by 1956. The recruitment strategy was applauded by the teachers unions and the *Advertiser* which stated that «there are few women with as wide a knowledge as Miss G. R. Gibson of the teaching, its ramifications and conditions, particularly as they apply to women» (*Advertiser*, 19 October 1949, p. 11; *Guild Chronicle*, 1 December 1949, p. 1). Gibson and Jones travelled widely, addressing students and parents, and showing films in public meetings (*Quorn Mercury*, 17 November 1949, p. 4). Thereafter, Jones was promoted to superintendent of recruitment and training in 1959, then deputy director in 1967, and director of the education department (1970-1979). Jones later opined that Ruth Gibson was one of the «great women» of the education department but she did not advance beyond the level of inspector (Jones, 1985).

While the education department never made the most of her knowledge, skills and experience, Gibson's leadership extended into professional organisations. She belonged to the Guild of Inspectors of Schools, serving as vice-president and presenting papers at its conferences (*Advertiser*, 2 September 1954, p. 15). Furthermore, she was foundation treasurer of the South Australian chapter of the Australian College of Education from 1959-1967 (Lokan, 2013, p. 29). When she attained the statutory retirement age for women teachers in December 1961, her work in the education department spanning forty years was acknowledged with a solitary sentence to the effect that she had had «a notably successful career» (*South Australian Parliamentary Papers* 1962, no. 44, p. 4). Acting with agency and purpose, and displaying the qualities of a successful inspector, Gibson had cultivated extensive

professional networks and influence among educators, but the institutionalisation of male privilege in the education department had proved intractable. It was Gibson's concomitant activism in the NCW and community organisations which exemplified her feminist politics in the 1950s and 1960s.

6. The NCW's «golden years»

Gibson was an officer holder in the Girl Guides, Red Cross, Young Women's Christian Association, Royal Flying Doctor Service and Soroptimists (with Murphy) to name but a few community organisations from the 1940s to the 1970s (*Education Gazette*, 2 October 1972, pp. 319-320). As previously stated, Gibson and Murphy had represented the Australian NCW overseas in 1938, and it was Gibson's concentrated activism in the NCW which advanced the cause of women locally, nationally and internationally. The NCWs in various states and the national body were the «principal means by which representative women in Australia could come together, exchange views, learn from each other and often speak publicly with one voice» both nationally and internationally in the 1950s and 1960s (Quartly & Smart, 2015, p. 1). Indeed, Gibson's leadership was pivotal to the period nominated by Quartly & Smart (2015, p. 245) as the «golden years» of the NCW.

Numerous women teachers belonged to the South Australian NCW and convened standing committees on the cinema, trades and professions, and education of course. Inspector Adelaide Miethke was South Australian NCW president from 1936-1940 and national president from 1936-1942 (Pitt, 1981). Until Miethke's presidency, NCW leadership had been the prerogative of married women from the social and political elite (Quartly & Smart, 2015). A single woman, Miethke was the first NCW president in full-time employment and Gibson became the second in 1950 when she was elected president of the South Australian NCW (Quartly & Smart, 2015).

In 1950, ninety-two associations «with all shades of thought, creeds and politics» were affiliated with the South Australian NCW. President Gibson was required to skilfully negotiate points of agreement on public health and legal issues, the assimilation of post-war migrants and the rights of Aboriginal children to education to name but a few topics (*Advertiser*, 12 October 1950, p. 21; Pitt, 1981, pp. 8, 40). Commitments to the family as the bedrock of society and to women's equality with men in domestic and public life underpinned the NCW's stance on most issues. In 1951, Gibson stated that the «NCW stood not only to help women and children, but for practical cooperation with men» (*Advertiser*, 11 May 1951, p. 11). While she effected the latter in her daily work as an inspector, she led the NCW in lobbying the state government for women to be given a voice in public policy with appointments to male-dominated bodies such as the South Australian Housing Trust (*Advertiser*, 9 June 1950, p. 13). Gibson represented the South Australian NCW on several government committees including the «Rent Control Enquiry» in 1951 (Pitt, 1981, p. 76). Known for her «masterful efficiency and enthusiasm for the task», Gibson's multiple memberships and networks empowered her in the realm of public policy, but she was equally able to engage smaller groups by using «an admirable blending of serious thought and happy humour» (*Advertiser*, 13 March 1951, p. 11; *The Pennant*, 21 September 1950, p. 8). The South Australian government awarded her an Order

of the British Empire for services to the community in 1953 (*Chronicle*, 4 June 1953, p. 2). Prior to completing her presidency in 1954, Gibson inspired the purchase of office and meeting rooms which would also commemorate women who had served in World War Two. By dint of hard work, «NCW Memorial House» was purchased in 1957 and is still in current use (Pitt, 1981).

Gibson's tenure as South Australian NCW president from 1950-1954 overlapped with her national leadership. She was president of the Australian NCW from 1952-1956 and the national headquarters relocated to Adelaide during those years (*The Age*, 18 October 1952, p. 7). In 1952 the Australian NCW represented 500,000 women and 490 affiliated organisations so credit must be accorded to Gibson's highly skilled leadership in negotiating the rights and responsibilities of women's citizenship at the national level (Quartly & Smart, 2015, p. 254). The reform of divorce laws was a contentious issue during Gibson's tenure. Gibson affirmed the NCW's commitment to the traditional family at the 1954 national conference, argued that the marked inequalities between men and women in divorce laws must be removed, and allayed concerns that divorce would be easier as a result. In so doing, she was able to unite the state NCWs to campaign for national legislation regarding equal marriage and divorce laws (Quartly & Smart, 2015, pp. 278-279).

Equal pay was another national issue, and both personal and political for Gibson and Murphy. Gibson's agitation regarding salaries dated back to the 1930s and again she united the state NCWs to campaign for national legislation. Married women's right to paid employment was an associated issue and a NCW national commitment (Quartly & Smart, 2015, pp. 291-295). However, Gibson was conflicted on this issue because of her intimate knowledge of South Australian women teachers' situation. Faced with post-war teacher shortages, the WTG had agreed to the employment of married women «in special circumstances» but argued that their employment disadvantaged single women. The crux of the issue in South Australia was that married women insisted on teaching near their metropolitan homes, thereby displacing single women. Senior single teachers in terms of age and experience were required to leave their metropolitan homes and teach in rural schools under junior headmasters with consequent loss of status and promotion. Gibson's ambivalence on the question of married women's employment stemmed from this complex situation (Whitehead, 1996). As a single woman and as a teacher/inspector who valued her domestic companionship with Murphy, Gibson was well aware of her colleagues' situations. The South Australian NCW passed a motion that married and single women should be subject to the same conditions of employment (Quartly & Smart, 2015).

Governments readily accepted the authority of the NCW to speak for Australian women during the 1950s and 1960s, which led to Gibson's appointments to several national as well as South Australian boards and committees during and following her presidency (Quartly & Smart, 2015). For example, she was vice president of four Citizenship Conventions convened by the national government in the 1950s (*News*, 11 October 1951, p. 17; *The Mail*, 17 January 1953, p. 8; *Canberra Times*, 26 January 1956, p. 2). Gibson was also selected to represent Australian women at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953, and was granted two months leave by the education department to travel to England (*Advertiser*, 23 April 1953, p. 11). Given the patriotic fervour in Australia, the honour accorded Gibson was widely reported,

including details of her frock being mauve chantilly lace over taffeta (*Advertiser*, 1 June 1953, p. 11). Gibson included visits to British schools but it was intimate details of the coronation and «the lighter side of her experiences behind the scenes» which engaged audiences upon her return to Adelaide (*Advertiser*, 16 June 1953, p. 9; *Advertiser*, 14 August 1953, p. 11; *Advertiser*, 3 October 1953, p. 19).

Following on, Gibson played a leading role in welcoming Queen Elizabeth to South Australia in 1954. As NCW president, she hosted 1,000 women at a reception on 24th March, inviting the art teacher at Nailsworth Girls Technical School to make a special vellum programme for the Queen (*Advertiser*, 25 March 1954, pp. 9, 17; *Chronicle*, 1 April 1954, p. 35). In stark contrast, inspector Gibson was relegated to convener of the «dress and colour scheme committee» for the school children's display two days later. Gibson coordinated the production of 6,600 costumes but male inspectors' leadership was foregrounded in reports, thereby upholding the gender order of the education department (*Education Gazette*, 15 April 1954, p. 108; *News*, 23 March 1954, p. 19).

Amidst «occasional mumblings in the “old guard” inspectorate» about her absences, Gibson's overseas travel on behalf of the NCW proceeded apace during and after her presidency (Lokan, 2013, p. 31). Believing firmly that personal contact was the basis of international understanding, Gibson was keen to represent Australians abroad and kept abreast of transnational issues affecting women. Furthering international understanding was a key theme in her presentations to diverse groups including the Soroptimists and Institute of School Inspectors (*Advertiser*, 3 December 1954, p. 21; *Advertiser*, 6 September 1954, p. 15; Quartly & Smart, 2015, p. 260). She was vice-president of the ICW from 1953-1956 and attended ICW conferences in Venice in 1956 and Istanbul in 1960, assiduously reporting back to the South Australian and national NCWs, and school welfare clubs, for example, informing the latter about her «fascinating experiences whilst abroad, emphasis being placed on Istanbul» (*Victor Harbour Times*, 18 November 1960, p. 3; Pitt, 1981). Nevertheless, most of Gibson's international expertise and leadership was not recognised by the education department, the exception being her appointment by the national government as Australia's delegate to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women:

Miss G. R. Gibson OBE, BA, Dip Ed, Inspector of Secondary Schools has long taken a leading part in the NCW. In 1956, Miss Gibson was chosen by the Minister of External Affairs, after consultation with a large number of women's organisations, to represent Australia at the tenth session of the United Nations Status of Women at Geneva in March. While abroad Miss Gibson took the opportunity to widen her knowledge of matters relating to secondary schools (*South Australian Parliamentary Papers* 1957, no. 44, p. 4).

Gibson also participated in the eleventh session in New York in 1957 and was elected rapporteur to the commission. Discussion at this meeting included tax legislation affecting married women workers and women's access to education and economic opportunities (Quartly & Smart, 2015; Pitt, 1981).

Gibson's local, national and international political activism in the NCW and other organisations continued after she retired from the education department in 1961. For example, she was a member of the South Australian Equal Pay Council until

1964 and convened the South Australian NCW's standing committee on education in 1967. She was made a life vice president of the Australian NCW in 1967, and was a delegate to ICW conferences in Washington (1963), Rio de Janeiro (1965) and Tehran (1966), being the first such conference in a non-western country (Pitt, 1981). She was elected to the ICW committee of honour in 1969. She was awarded a Commander of the British Empire in 1970 and also attended the ICW conference in Bangkok where she was nominated as ICW president. However, she did not accept the position (Pitt, 1981, p. 27). Still carrying out the responsibilities of citizenship, Gibson was president of the South Australian section of the Royal Flying Doctor Service when she died of cancer in August 1972 (Fletcher, 1996).

7. Conclusion

A memorial service attended by more than four hundred people was held in Ruth Gibson's honour; and an obituary in the education department's *Education Gazette* pointed to her «distinguished career as an educationist» as well as her work in women's and community organisations. The *Education Gazette* repeated the description of Gibson from the memorial service as a

kindly, thoughtful, generous, humble person, not a militant suffragette but ever ready to put all her tremendous energy and efficiency into any cause which she believed would be in the interest of women generally and would raise their status in the world (*Education Gazette*, 2 October 1972, 319).

There was a brief account of Gibson's personal service ladder and references to some education committees but most of the obituary was devoted to her work in the NCW and community organisations. It concluded that Gibson was «a notable figure in South Australian public life». The NCW coordinated fundraising to place a bronze sundial on the plaza of the Adelaide Festival Centre as a permanent memorial to Gibson. It was unveiled by the ICW president in 1978 (Pitt, 1981). Gibson was included in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* in 1996 (Fletcher, 1996) and a metropolitan electorate of the South Australian parliament was named «Gibson» as recently as 2013.

None of these testimonies reflect the agency and ambition with which Ruth Gibson concomitantly built her career and challenged the gender order. She learnt her lessons as a student and constructed her life and work to exemplify the qualities of a consummate teacher and inspector in a bureaucracy that disadvantaged women at every level. At the same time she deployed those qualities to mobilise overlapping personal, professional and feminist networks to address inequalities between women and men in public and domestic life. None of the testimonies mentioned Gibson's union activism which doubled as service to the profession and indicated an assertive (if not militant) feminism which troubled men and ultimately led to the formation of the feminist WTG. She strategized to cooperate with rather than openly confront male inspectors while lobbying assiduously as NCW president to challenge governments and public institutions such as the education department to redress inequalities to do with all women. In their recent book, Quartly and Smart (2015) nominate NCW women as «respectable radicals» for their capacity to work within and challenge existing inequalities and structures. Ascending the service ladder to the pinnacle of

her profession, leading the NCW as the peak body representing Australian women, and serving the ICW and Australian women internationally, Ruth Gibson was surely a respectable radical in the mid-twentieth century.

8. References

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