

NATIONAL OBITUARIES

Freda Whitlam: educationalist passionate about her girls

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Freda Whitlam, a formidable educator and church leader, was principal of a prominent Sydney private girls school, helped establish the University of Western Sydney and the University of the Third Age, and became Moderator of the Uniting Church of Australia. She died on Wednesday, May 30, at the

age of 97.



Freda Whitlam prepares before accepting an honorary doctorate at the UNWS, Parramatta Campus

Photo: Nick Moir

She was forthright without flamboyance, determinedly independent, sometimes eccentric, somewhat naive about matters worldly. She also was Gough Whitlam's younger sister – he telephoned her every Sunday morning until shortly before his death in 2014 – but she was her own woman.

Freda Leslie Whitlam was born in Mosman on September 11, 1920, to Fred Whitlam and his wife, formerly Martha Maddocks, devout Christians. Martha had prayed for a second son, to be a church minister called Fred. Fred junior became Freda.



Fred Whitlam was an avid gardener. (L-R) Gough, Freda and Fred Whitlam. Chatswood, 1924.

Photo: Photograph courtesy of Gough Whitlam.

As children, books were Gough and Freda's world. Frivolous distractions, even radio, were to be avoided. Martha disapproved of fairy stories, so they read about Greek and Roman legends and European history. Freda's big brother taught her the Greek alphabet when she was five, before she went to Presbyterian Ladies College, Pymble.

The family moved to Canberra soon after its founding in 1927, where Fred became Australia's Crown Solicitor. Freda went to St Gabriel's local school, which became Canberra Church of England Girls' Grammar School. Her early education came as much from her father's extensive reference library as from school.

Fred and Martha practised their Christianity and raised their children so that worldly possessions, apart from books and Freda's dolls, meant little to them. Martha packed lunches every day. During the Depression, she packed extra, for unemployed men who might call. Freda even gave away some of her father's clothes. "We were brought up to believe that our role in society was to serve," she said later. "Gough chose politics and I chose education."

Finishing school at Abbotsleigh in Sydney, she enrolled at Canberra University College, which Fred had helped establish and which was to become the Australian National University. She studied English, French and German.

In 1943, Freda Whitlam joined the WAAF. Gough was already flying and, according to Noelene Martin's biography, *Freda*, she had another motive, love for a young man who had enlisted. He was killed. She never talked freely about him, although she did say in 1977: "But for the war, I would have married." She added, however, that she might be better off single, being "too much of an individual".

After the war, Whitlam earned an arts degree from Melbourne University, studying English, French, German, economic geography and philosophy. She led a Girl Guides group and learnt the viola.

Her teaching career began with French at Canberra Boys Grammar and German at the Girls Grammar. She added Latin and Esperanto before completing her diploma in education, with honours, at Melbourne. Gaining a Fulbright scholarship to Yale, she became the first Australian woman to study at the university.

Fred Whitlam had worked on the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in the early 1950s and when his daughter met Eleanor Roosevelt at a United Nations conference in New York she was delighted to find that Roosevelt remembered Fred.

She also was pleased to meet Ezra Pound, the poet and critic jailed for treason in the United States, then sent to a mental hospital. Pound and Whitlam talked for 90 minutes in the Washington hospital and later corresponded. At Yale, she listened to poetry readings by W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot and Stephen Spender.

Graduating as a master of arts in 1955, Whitlam joined a group of evangelists in the French Pyrenees, explaining Protestantism to Roman Catholic villagers with plays and songs. Enrolling at London University, she visited schools around Britain before heading home, via India, a country she grew to love.

She taught English, Latin and geography at Frensham for two years before becoming headmistress of Presbyterian Ladies College, Croydon, in 1958. The relationship between school councils and principals had often been unhappy, but Whitlam knew none of this. She had no experience in administration, but her mind was rich with education theory based on social equity. She was confident and it was her ambition to be a school principal.

Whitlam spent 18 years at PLC and much of that time was happy and rewarding. She was passionate about her girls and good at spotting various talents and fostering them. She introduced Japanese lessons, physical education, the Duke of Edinburgh awards scheme, a sports carnival, a Christmas party for mentally handicapped children, and Crinkle, her golden Labrador, who attended assemblies, even interviews.

Yet she had quickly discovered that PLC life would not be easy. Frank Thompson, a school councillor since 1929 and chairman since 1931, asked her to report for the first council meeting. She reported that the school was shabby and neglected. Thompson wanted her dismissed, but was overruled by council.

The council was made up of conservative Presbyterian men with authority over girls reaching womanhood at a time, from the early 1960s, of growing social unrest and change. Whitlam was a spirited, highly educated woman who loved the Beatles and bought their recordings for the girls to play.

She had no control over the budget. When a new carpet was needed but no funds available, girls made one by stitching carpet squares together. The council wanted teachers proud to work there, but on poor pay. Thompson made staff appointments without consulting Whitlam, while questioning her appointment of a woman in a wheelchair.

Freda's forthright, sometimes abrupt, manner could challenge council, staff, parents and pupils. She avoided discussing politics at school, but her life there grew more troubled after Gough became prime minister and introduced "needs based" education policies. A new teachers pay award added to PLC's troubles. Then there were differences over the formation of the



Freda Whitlam at the Presbyterian Ladies College Croydon, 1976.

Photo: Fairfax

Uniting Church, the union of most Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists to take place in 1977. Whitlam voted to join the new church; the Presbyterian Ladies College would remain just that.

Thompson stood down in 1974, aged 86, but Whitlam was forced to resign in 1976. At her final speech day, at the Opera House, she thanked council members – "who designed the new hat" – before speaking of leadership, tolerance and vilification by "intolerant, small-minded and small-souled" people. "Do not copy them," she advised. The ovation lasted 10 minutes.

After a meagre severance payment (she later accepted a pension) Whitlam went to live in a two-bedroom townhouse at Penrith. "I felt I could offer more to the people of the western suburbs," she said. She threw herself into unpaid community work with the NSW Higher Education Board, Premier's Drug Review Committee, the AIDS Council, NSW Women's Advisory Council, local health and hospital boards and the Q Theatre. As Moderator of the Uniting Church in 1985, she urged Christians to build bridges with secular Australia.

Whitlam was made a member in the Order of Australia (AM), had a University of Western Sydney building named after her and finally returned to PLC in 1998 for the opening of the Freda Whitlam School of Science. She taught at U3A, wrote a book about India, *Light in the East*, and took Arabic lessons at 80. "My God, you're eccentric," her brother said.

Freda Whitlam leaves her nephews, Antony, Nicholas and Stephen, niece Catherine and their families.

Tony Stephens



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