



Curtin University

JOHN CURTIN PRIME MINISTERIAL LIBRARY
CURTIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

INFORMATION UPDATE

FEBRUARY 2013

New web resource - Elsie Curtin: a biography

A lifetime of service to the community, including work with prison inmates, interest and support for the Australian Labor Party and her husband, Prime Minister John Curtin, saw Elsie Curtin awarded a Commander of the British Empire in April 1970.

Find out more about this remarkable woman, Elsie Curtin, a loving wife and mother, musician, activist, traveller and copious letter writer through our new resource, *Elsie Curtin: a biography*. Written by Associate Professor Bobbie Oliver, JCPML Visiting Scholar for 2012, it covers Elsie's life from:

- her early years in South Africa
- her budding romance with young socialist John Curtin
- her official engagements as prime minister's wife, and
- her achievements in her own right after John Curtin's death.

Although described by the media of the day as 'home loving' and 'a silent partner', Elsie was pivotal to John Curtin's political career, inspiring and supporting him to run for office after two electoral defeats.

Left: Mrs Curtin speaking from balcony at the Lodge at opening of garden fete in aid of Canberra Hospital Auxiliary Fund, 29 November 1941.

Records of the Curtin Family. JCPML00376/31.

Right: Mrs Elsie Curtin, Cottesloe, 8 October 1941. Records of Australian Consolidated Press Pty Ltd. JCPML00410/10.

Elsie always downplayed her importance to John's success, humbly maintaining that 'Some women are equipped for public life, while others are best suited for a domestic role. I'm one of those women who belongs in the home'.

According to Professor Oliver, 'Consequently her role has been little understood and seriously under-valued by the public at the time [of John Curtin's prime ministership] or afterwards'.

We're updating our mailing list!

If you would like to continue to receive the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library *Information Update* please let us know.

You can email jcpml@curtin.edu.au or call us on 08 9266 4205 to advise us whether you would like to receive a print or electronic version.

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HER COUNTRY WAS HER PRIDE, HER FELLOW MAN HER CAUSE



Left to right: Elsie Needham aged 16, Cape Town, Records of the Curtin Family, JCPML00376/228.
Mrs Elsie Curtin, 1938, Records of the Curtin Family, JCPML00376/120.
Elsie Curtin, October 1958, Records of the Curtin Family, JCPML00381/42.

The Elsie Curtin story provides an illuminating perspective which emerged from the lecture given in October 2012 by JCPML Visiting Scholar, Associate Professor Bobbie Oliver. Professor Oliver, the author of the official history of the Australian Labor Party in Western Australia, described Elsie Curtin as ‘an activist in her own right with well defined political views’ and one whom she believed John Curtin would have recognised from the outset as a ‘comrade in arms’.

In the years after their marriage in April 1917, Elsie was a devoted wife, loving mother of two children and the provider in more than one sense of the family home which was almost certainly partly funded by her parents, the Needhams.

Moreover in the early years, at a time when Curtin himself was unable to undertake his editorial role, his father-in-law Abraham Needham (a long-standing friend and colleague) was able to carry out many of Curtin’s editorial duties.

In Professor Oliver’s words ‘Elsie had always been close to her father and no doubt depended on him for support during this very difficult time early in her marriage’.

Securing his first election to parliament did not come easily to John Curtin but at the fourth attempt in 1928 he was elected to the House of Representatives as member for Fremantle with Elsie’s constant encouragement based on the proposition, so significantly eventually fulfilled, that ‘You were meant for Parliament’.

Then in 1931–1932 Elsie’s comment was ‘Never mind...You’ll be back in Parliament again,’ after Curtin lost the Fremantle seat as a consequence of Labor’s devastating defeat in the Great Depression December 1931 election.

‘You must stick to politics,’ Elsie said, ‘that is where your heart is,’ and Curtin having managed to regain Fremantle in 1934 then became ALP leader, against all odds, in October 1935.

It was at this time that Professor Oliver points out that while the media had ‘discovered’ Elsie as wife of (at least on paper) a potential prime minister, they had little or no interest in her personal political views and politics, rarely if ever acknowledging her absolute long standing personal and family commitment to the Labor movement.

The next few years after Curtin’s election as opposition leader were difficult and full of hazards. Overcoming the major split in the ALP and the growing European threat posed by Hitler (and by Communist Russia) placed Curtin under great pressure.

In the September 1940 election he came within a few hundred votes of losing Fremantle again, yet barely a year after that self-same election he became the only Australian politician since the First World War to become prime minister as a consequence of the passage of a no confidence motion in the House of Representatives.

On 7 October 1941, three days after Elsie’s 51st birthday, two Independents, Arthur Coles and Alex Wilson crossed the

floor to bring down the non Labor Fadden government. That night Curtin sent a telegram to Elsie: *This is your birthday gift. Coles and Wilson are providing it...*

Thus began the three and a half years which were to become among the most crucial and in many respects remarkable years in Australian politics.

Elsie had spent three months in Canberra in 1929 soon after her husband’s first election to Parliament, but during his six years as Opposition leader she had seen ‘her primary duty as maintaining the family home in Cottesloe for her teenage children’.

This was all the more necessary because ‘the lengthy journey by train or sea to Melbourne, and a further rail journey to Canberra, added weeks to any stay in the eastern states’.

In this context it need be emphasised that Elsie was and still is the only prime minister’s wife whose husband represented a Western Australian seat and whose family home was in the suburbs of Perth.

To this had to be added the demands resulting from the outbreak of war with Japan within weeks of Curtin’s accession which effectively ended Elsie’s hopes of spending the Christmas at home with her husband or she with him in Melbourne or Canberra.

As the prime minister’s wife Elsie gave interviews, answered phone calls, hosted dignitaries at the Lodge and managed a staff of servants. Bobbie Oliver’s assessment was clear and to the point: ‘By all accounts Elsie took it in her stride’.

With reference to Elsie’s political commitments it is important to note that this was an era when federal parliamentarians did not have the support now accorded them with electorate officers.

Elsie filled a gap as a ‘visible presence in the electorate’, as ‘a morale booster for Western Australians during the anxious days of the Pacific War, when the North West coast was under attack from enemy planes’, and as one well placed to provide her husband ‘with information about the mood of the electorate’.

And in daughter Elsie’s words, ‘My father was determined to retain the Cottesloe home as the family residence, and he considered that by my mother returning to Cottesloe for various periods it reassured the people of Perth, who at that time were living in a real fear of Japanese invasion.’

Indeed, even then in the first year of Curtin’s Prime Ministership, Elsie spent over five months either travelling with him or living with him at the Lodge.

Having undertaken a plane flight for the first time in September 1943 she then accompanied Curtin on an overseas trip from

April to June 1944 during the course of which she gave her first press conference to 20 women journalists in the US.

In February 1945 during the period when Curtin suffered a series of bouts of illness leading to his death in office in July, Elsie gave her first Australian press conference in which ‘she dealt with her work in the labour women’s movement’.

From the end of February until her husband’s death, and contrary to later assertions, she remained at the Lodge.

During the earlier part of the last thirty years of her life she continued to serve in the labour women’s movement and in 1970 was awarded a CBE for ‘her services to the community’ including her work with prison inmates and as a Justice of the Peace.

She died on 24 June 1975 and was buried alongside John in Karrakatta Cemetery. In Bobbie Oliver’s opinion her husband’s epitaph would have been just as appropriate for her: ‘Her country was her pride, Her fellow man her cause.’

- Professor David Black, JCPML Historical Consultant

John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library staff update



Sally Laming

The John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library welcomes Sally Laming as our new Library Archivist. Sally started in December and during her career has worked in libraries and archives, including several government libraries, the State Records Office of Western Australia and Curtin University Library.

Please contact Sally for any research archive assistance by email s.laming@curtin.edu.au or by phone 08 9266 4205.

NATIONAL HISTORY CHALLENGE 2012



Cameron Allan receiving his award from Anne Lyons, Assistant Director-General of the National Archives of Australia. Photo: Steve Keogh, used with the permission of the History Teachers' Association of Australia.

The National History Challenge is a research based competition held annually with a different theme each year. It gives students a chance to be a historian by researching world history, examining Australia's past, investigating their community and exploring their own roots. The competition has award criteria, several entry levels and accepts entries in various formats.

The national prize winner in the JCPML special category "The Life & Times of John Curtin" for 2012 was Cameron Allan of Merewether High School in Newcastle, New South Wales. His essay is titled John Curtin: A Collage of Consequence. State prize winner in the JCPML special category was Deveena Bahree, a Year 9 student from Rossmoyne Senior High School in Perth, Western Australia.

The State Award ceremony was held at Curtin University in October 2012. The event was extremely well attended, attracting approximately 150 people including award winners, their family members and dignitaries.

For more information on the National History Challenge visit our website: john.curtin.edu.au/education.

Pursuit of Knowledge now available online

The *Pursuit of knowledge: Curtin, looking ever forward* exhibition is now available as an exciting online resource.

You can take a virtual tour, view the exhibition film or explore the exhibition panels to learn more about John Curtin's own learning, his passionate commitment to education and the pursuit of knowledge and the initiatives of his wartime government in furthering tertiary education.

John Curtin's values resonate strongly with the university named after him in its vision to be a leading university in education and research.

The physical exhibition was on display from March 2008 until August 2012. View the online exhibition: john.curtin.edu.au/pursuitofknowledge.



John Curtin aged 34, 1919. Records of the Curtin Family. JCPML00376/136/2.

September 2012 Newsletter Correction

In the September 2012 issue of the newsletter photo JCPML00382/53 was captioned as Elsie Needham which is incorrect. The photo is of Elsie M Curtin and the correct caption is Elsie M Curtin aged 17. Curtin Library apologises for this error.

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A handwritten signature in dark ink, which appears to read "John Curtin". The signature is fluid and cursive.