

JOHN CURTIN PRIME MINISTERIAL LIBRARY
CURTIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

INFORMATION UPDATE

SEPTEMBER 2012

The caption below for photo JCPML00382/53 is incorrect. The correct caption is Elsie M Curtin aged 17. Curtin Library apologizes for this error.

Left to right:

Records of the Curtin Family, Elsie Needham aged 17, n.d. JCPML00382/53
Records of the Curtin Family, Mrs Elsie Curtin nee Needham, July 1942.
JCPML00376/15.

The Secret Life of Elsie Curtin



Associate Professor of History at Curtin University, Bobbie Oliver, is the JCPML Visiting Scholar for 2012.

Over the course of the year Professor Oliver has been researching the life of Elsie Curtin, John Curtin's wife.

Bobbie Oliver

Her research is being incorporated into the development of an online resource and will be the foundation for the lecture, *The Secret Life of Elsie Curtin*.

The website will be available via john.curtin.edu.au in October, soon after the Visiting Scholar Lecture.

Although she was the wife of one of Australia's best-known Prime Ministers, what do we know about Elsie Curtin?

Elsie was married to John for 28 years – exactly one third of her life of 84 years. Apart from being a wife and mother,

she was a daughter, a sister, an ALP member, an activist, a treasurer, a musician, a traveller, a copious letter writer, a much-loved grandmother and, by all accounts a very sensible, practical woman with a great sense of humour. Yet she remains both little known and seriously misunderstood.

This lecture explores the life of Elsie Curtin in the context of herself rather than that of her husband, and aims to put to rest some enduring myths about her role as Prime Minister's wife.

You are warmly invited to attend the Visiting Scholar's Lecture by Bobbie Oliver on Wednesday 17 October 2012.

Your invitation to the lecture is enclosed.

THE FREMANTLE CANDIDATE: ABSORBING AND COMPELLING

JCPML staff on the move



The Fremantle Candidate Deckchair Theatre, Dress Rehearsal 21 July 2012, Performed at PICA, copyright Jon Green Photographer 2012.

Clockwise from left:

Steve Turner as John Curtin

Geoff Kelso (Professor Walter Murdoch) and Steve Turner (John Curtin)

Christie Sistrunk as Elsie Curtin, John Curtin's wife

Benj D'Addario (Labor political activist Sydney Barber)

and Igor Sas (Labor premier Phil Collier)



David Wylie

One of JCPML's foundation staff members and Archive Technician, David Wylie, will retire in October after taking several months leave. David helped develop the collection from the beginning and staff will miss his extensive knowledge of the collection.

David has contributed regular articles to the newsletter, provided tours of the archives for library students and interested members of the community and promoted the archive at every chance he got. His last major project was the digitisation of the Hazel Hawke collection.

The JCPML greatly appreciates David's commitment and dedication to the John Curtin archive and we wish him all the best for his retirement.

JCPML Librarian, Kate Robertson, is also on the move in August as she commences 12 months parental leave.

Kate was responsible for collection development, in particular the recent special folklore collection.

She has been busy the past few months providing copies of photos, newsprints and images of John Curtin from our collection for the Digital Media Unit, Deckchair Theatre and National Trust (WA) to assist them in their various promotional activities in the lead up to The Fremantle Candidate and the Curtin Family Home program. We wish Kate all the best for the future.



Kate Robertson

Review by JCPML Historical Consultant, Professor David Black

The Fremantle Candidate began life in the vision of playwright Ingle Knight who set out to write a second play about John Curtin, arguably Australia's greatest prime minister.

Certainly Curtin's life in so many respects represents the stuff heroes are made of, especially in that he overcame addiction and hardship before rising to the challenge when asked to lead Australia through what were unquestionably its darkest hours since 1788.

Previously Ingle as joint author of 'Shadow of the Eagle', had focussed in his dramatic writing on one of the most widely canvassed aspects of Curtin's life, the effective partnership of a mild mannered former trade union leader and journalist with one of the high profile generals of US history.

By contrast this new play was to centre on a very different and much less widely investigated stage of Curtin's career. In both these stage dramas however the author(s) can claim that the very lack of evidential material allows for scope in providing a dramatic representation of what took place based on 'a premise rather than historically verifiable proof'. History is said to sometimes imitate art and watching The Fremantle Candidate emerge on stage strongly reinforces one's belief that the underlying dramatic conflict being portrayed really did take place if not necessarily in the specific manner portrayed.

Launching the play in July, as part of the annual commemoration of Curtin's death in 1945, is itself

testimony to the fact that Curtin's life is remembered as much in the manner of his leaving it as in any other aspect. Like Franklin Roosevelt, Curtin died on the eve of a great victory—having led his country throughout an unprecedented challenge.

However, The Fremantle Candidate, by contrast with Shadow of the Eagle, which was also launched in place of the annual lecture, focusses on the three year period between 1931 and 1934. These years, along with the conscription crisis years 1916 to 1918, constitute the two periods of time when Curtin could easily have sunk into depression and alcoholism but instead from which he arose unquestionably to triumph over his demons.

In 1917 he had moved to Western Australia and there built his reputation and his family life; in 1934 he found a way back into federal politics by winning back the Fremantle seat and this after being left bereft of employment and totally disillusioned following Labor's crushing federal election defeat in December 1931 and with the country still lodged in the depths of the depression. His successful opponent in 1931 (but who did not contest the seat in 1934) was small goods manufacturer William Watson.

The time period encompassed in the play was full of twists and turns at both the state and federal level. In April 1933 the Collier Labor government came to power and the Premier James Mitchell lost his own parliamentary seat. Yet on the same day the proposal for Western Australia to secede from the federation was overwhelmingly supported by the electorate despite the opposition of the Collier-led Labor Party.

At the time and in the lead up to the 1934 federal election

the Douglas Credit movement was also in discussion in Western Australia with its advocates arguing along the lines of a theory advanced by a British engineer that one major solution to economic hardship would be to create credit to give extra purchasing power for the working classes.

University Professor Walter Murdoch, with whom Curtin had worked over the years to promote educational classes for trade unionists, was a leading proponent of the theory in WA and in The Fremantle Candidate Murdoch uses every endeavour to have Curtin embrace Douglas Credit. Certainly there were elements within the Labor Party who gave support to the idea though as it eventuated a Douglas Credit candidate did oppose Curtin in Fremantle in 1934 but directed preferences to his main opponent.

The play itself provides an absorbing and compelling drama centred on the interplay between the characters with a particular focus on the role of Walter Murdoch played by Geoff Kelso, who had appeared as Curtin himself in 'Shadow of the Eagle', and on Curtin, with Steve Turner in the role.

Others within the State ALP and more especially state party leader and then Premier Philip Collier were also portrayed in ongoing conflict concerning whether Curtin had any future in Labor politics.

The interplay and conflict centred on three key areas: Curtin's disillusionment following the disastrous collapse of the Scullin Labor Government; the debate over whether he should continue in West Australian federal politics or take over the seat in Victoria being vacated by his long term mentor Frank Anstey, or seek to advance the Douglas Credit cause as advocated by Murdoch; and above all Curtin's alcoholism which was manifestly affecting his relations with wife Elsie.

The drama generated an increasing level of conflict and emotional mood swings but with ultimate victory for Curtin over his personal demons and those standing between him and a return to federal politics. The powerful dramatic climax on stage is all the more significant because audiences are aware that Curtin's success in his personal battle in the real world made possible the leadership and inspiration that took Australia through its darkest hours in the early 1940s.

To find out more about The Fremantle Candidate visit [youtube.com/user/CurtinUniversity](https://www.youtube.com/user/CurtinUniversity) and watch the seven part series about the play.

Jules Black collection expands

The library's Jules Black Sexology Collection is expanding with the inclusion of Jules Black's personal papers. The Jules Black Personal Papers collection had originally been sourced from Jules Black's extensive archives and was donated to the library in 2010.

This soon-to-be completed addition of personal papers have been categorised and include: articles by Jules Black, ASSERT materials, conferences, conference brochures, letters, newspaper/magazine articles, posters, reprints of journal articles, booklets, courses, newsletters, and Jules Black signed articles.

The new material will be available shortly from the Jules Black Sexology Collection homepage john.curtin.edu.au/julesblack.

NEW MATERIALS FOR THE FOLKLORE ARCHIVE

The Foothills Connection Community Heritage Project is a part of Curtin University's WA Folklore Archive.

The Project (1988-1990) is a rare example of a local government authority encouraging a community to collect its own history.

A pioneering aspect of the Project was its multi-faceted nature. It was seen as one of the first times in Australia that a project of such breadth attempted to delineate and document the history, folklore, community arts and crafts, visual record and essential sense of local identity.

The interviews conducted as part of this project comprise synopses, transcripts and audio recordings of

approximately 75 oral histories of residents of the Foothills region.

By advertising in The West Australian's Can You Help section this year, the staff at the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library have been able to locate and receive permission from a large majority of the families of individual interviewees, in order to digitise the interviews on our Electronic Resource Archive.

To view this recently expanded collection of valuable oral histories see the Foothills Connection Community Heritage Project at john.curtin.edu.au/folklore and follow the links.

The subject areas are a fascinating insight into early life in the Foothills area of Perth and include:

- childhood
- transportation
- marriage
- farming
- schooling
- migration
- family
- social life
- home remedies
- the Depression years
- religion
- local associations
- gardening
- poetry
- racism
- community work
- recreation
- superstitions/ghost stories
- medicine/midwifery.

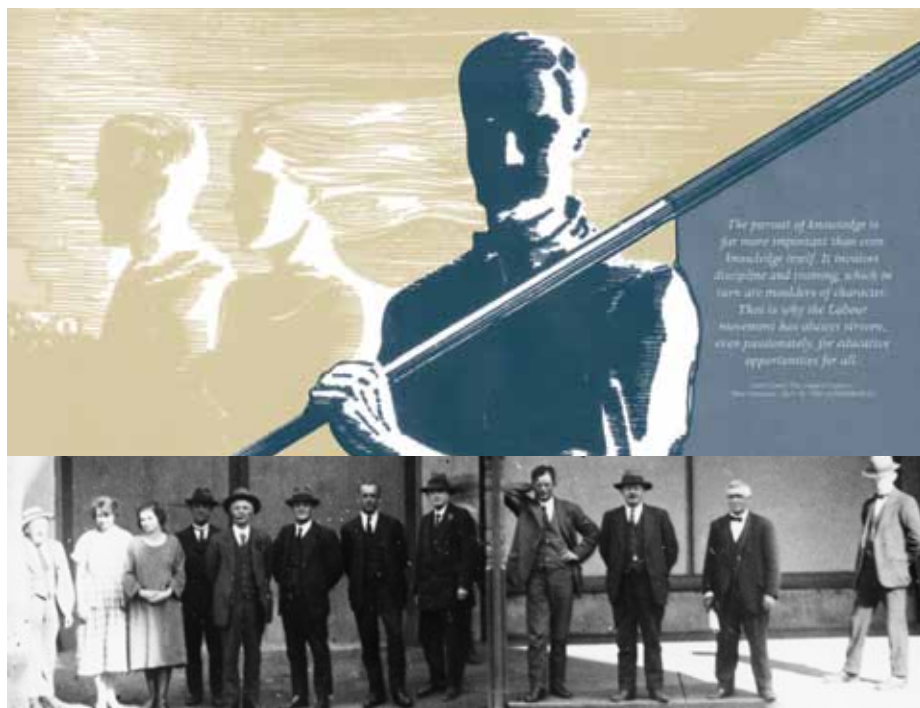
For more information see john.curtin.edu.au/folklore.

PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE EXHIBITION

The exhibition "Pursuit of Knowledge: Curtin, looking ever forward" has been on display in the Curtin Gallery for 5 years.

In line with previous exhibitions it will now be recorded and become available on the JCPML - Past Exhibitions webpage later in the year.

Visit john.curtin.edu.au/exhibitions/pastexhibitions.html.



Top: An image from the Pursuit of Knowledge exhibition.

Bottom: Records of the Australian Labor Party WA Branch, Westralian Worker staff, c1920. JCPML00379/2.

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