

CATHERINE HELEN SPENCE

Catherine Helen Spence was born on 31 October 1825 near Melrose in Scotland. She was the fifth of eight children of a banker and lawyer. She was educated in Melrose, but plans for her to attend an advanced school for girls in Edinburgh were abandoned when financial failure caused the family to emigrate to South Australia in 1839.

Comparatively early in life, Catherine Helen Spence decided against marriage and motherhood, apparently influenced by religious despair at the doctrine of predestination and dissatisfaction at her first earnings as a governess. Ironically, she brought up three families of other people's children during her life.

After a brief attempt to set up her own school, Spence embarked on her career as a novelist. *Clara Morison* was published in 1854, and was the first novel set in Australia to be written by a woman. Several other novels followed, but Catherine Helen Spence struck trouble with her later novels. *Gathered In* was summarized by the *Adelaide Observer* in 1881-2, but not published until 1897. *Handfasted*, submitted for a prize offered by the *Sydney Mail* in 1880, was rejected as 'calculated to loosen the marriage tie ... too socialistic and therefore dangerous'. It was finally published in 1984, more than a century later. Her work received belated acclaim in the twentieth century. *Clara Morison* has been published in three new editions since 1971.

Catherine Helen Spence retained her interest in religion. Her last major fiction work was the allegory, *An Agnostic's Progress from the Known to the Unknown* was published in 1884. Spence was also interested in the future. In 1889, the future-vision novella, *A Week in the future*, was published.

Writing was not her only career. She worked hard for the Boarding-Out Society, founded by Caroline Emily Clark in 1872, which selected children from industrial schools, boarded them with families, and checked regularly on their welfare. Spence was appointed to the State Children's Council in 1887 and to the government's Destitute Board in 1897.

Spence also remained interested in education. She argued strongly for the establishment of the Advanced Girls School, which opened in Adelaide in 1879. The Education Department invited her to write *The Laws we live under*, the first Social Studies textbook used in Australian schools. It was published in 1880, some twenty years before the other colonies' produced their own texts.

Journalism was another compelling interest. In 1878, after thirty years of seeing her articles published under a pen-name, Spence was appointed to the South Australian daily paper, the *Register*, as a regular 'outside contributor'. She was thrilled by this appointment and produced articles on literary, social and economic issues. These articles reflect her development from conservative concern at the effects of male suffrage to the rights of minorities. Many articles promoted her favourite causes.

Electoral reform was her primary political interest. She advocated proportional representation which she considered to be 'effective voting'. Spence became a familiar public speaker in her advocacy of this reform. In claiming her right to speak, Spence was unafraid to challenge convention. In 1871, when invited to speak at the South Australian Institute, she delivered her own lecture, rather than writing it and allowing it to be delivered by a man. It was important to Spence that women who felt they had something to say should be able to stand up and say it. In promoting electoral reform, Spence stood for election to the 1897 Federal Convention. She was the first Australian woman to be a political candidate.

Spence worked hard for women's suffrage, and was vice-president of the Women's Suffrage League from 1891 until 1894, when South Australia became the first Australia colony to grant votes to women. She publicized this struggle in the United States and Britain and established contact with leading overseas suffragists as well as assisting suffragists in other parts of Australia.

Women in the workforce were also one of her concerns. From 1901 until her death, Spence chaired the management board of the Co-operative Clothing Company, a shirt-making factory owned and run exclusively by women, in which both workers and owners held shares. In 1909, just before she died, Spence chaired the meeting which established the Women's Non-Party Political Association.

On her eightieth birthday in 1905, Spence was proclaimed as Australia's 'most distinguished woman'. She was mourned on her death in 1910 as the 'Grand Old Woman of Australia'. In 1986, a statute in her memory was erected in Light Square, Adelaide¹.

¹ S Margarey, 'Catherine Helen Spence' in Radi, pp23-24; C H Spence, *Autobiography*.