

Frances Penington

July 12, 1972

This obituary was published in the year of Frances Penington's death, in the V.W.G.A Newsletter August 1972. It was written by Dorothy Coverlid, who like Penington was a founding member of the Victorian Women Graduates Association.

It is with regret that we record the death of Miss Frances Penington on July 12, after many months of illness. Miss Penington was an active member of the V.U.W.G.A. from its beginnings fifty years ago. In fact, she was present at its inaugural meeting and later held the office of President of the Victorian Association, and then of A.F.U.W. She attended several international conferences of I.F.U.W. and represented Australia at the first I.F.U.W. Regional Conference, held in Manila in 1953. The affairs of I.F.U.W. and its member associations concerned her deeply, doubtless because its ideals of friendship without distinction of country class, or creed coincided with her own convictions.

After a brilliant History course at the University of Melbourne, Miss Penington was among the first tutors appointed in the History School when the tutorial system was inaugurated by the University. Before long, she went to Fiji to carry out historical research on life in the villages there. In retrospect one can see that her choice of project was a pointer to her subsequent career, although it was not obvious at the time. In 1936 she received an I.F.U.W. international award to Smith College, Mass., where she studied Child Guidance and Psychology. Two years later she became a member of the newly-formed Housing Commission of Victoria, of which she was the only woman member. To the Commission's task of slum clearance and of resettling slum dwellers she brought her training and sympathy to solving the practical human problems of people exchanging old ways of living for new.

After some fifteen years of service as a Housing Commissioner she gave her time partly to teaching and partly to child guidance and welfare work with delinquent girls. Hers was a career with diversity indeed – historical research, slum clearance, teaching, child guidance, delinquency – but to quote from her own title to her Presidential Address to the A.F.U.W. Conference in Sydney in 1956, it was 'diversity with unity'.

Underlying everything that she undertook was a concern for human beings as individuals, never losing faith in them and never giving up.

Her gift for friendship was remarkable and there are many, both old and young, who will always be grateful for it, as well as for the delightful wit that was part of the joy of being with her. Even in the last weeks of her illness her friends who visited her recognised the courage that kept her sense of humour alive, and were cheered by it.