

## HELEN LAYTON FERBER

15/2/1919-2013



Founding members of the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economics and Social Research. Helen Ferber is fifth from the left amongst those standing. Source: [Voice vol. 8, no. 10, November 2012](#)

Helen Ferber was born in Adelaide on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1919. She was the eldest daughter of Richard Francis Hockey and Kathleen Butler. Her grandfather Sir [Richard Butler](#) was premier of South Australia, as was her [uncle of the same name](#).

Ferber completed a BA at Melbourne University in 1939, majoring in French and German. During her university years she completed a teaching diploma at Munich University, a course in Italian at Perugia University, and summer schools at Dijon and Poitiers Universities in France. She described her time in Munich in a memoir published in *Meanjin* in 2006.

During World War II she worked as an interpreter for the Department of the Army, censoring foreign language mail, and later as a monitor for the Australian Department of Information Shortwave Listening Post, monitoring enemy broadcasts in German, French and Italian.

After the war she worked with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, firstly in the UNRRA Yugoslav Mission, later with refugees in the UNRRA Displaced Persons Headquarters in Paris and Berlin. She wrote the official history of the Yugoslav Mission. She also worked with the Preparatory Commission of the International Refugee Organisation in Geneva.

In 1948 Ferber married an American diplomat, David Ferber. In the same year her husband was appointed American Vice-Consul to Melbourne, and Ferber undertook a series of lectures across Victoria seeking support for a United Nations appeal to help displaced children in Europe. Further postings took David and Helen Ferber to America and the Phillipines. The Ferber family returned to Melbourne in 1953, and Helen Ferber spent the next decade raising two daughters, Jenny and Sarah, and a son Michael. Michael suffered from severe disabilities and died aged 19.

Helen Ferber became actively involved with a number of women's organisations in Melbourne. She joined the Australian Federation of University Women-Victoria, becoming national Convenor of International Relations for AFUW in the late 1950s, and President of AFUW-Vic in 1962. Her experience of international affairs made her particularly suited to be the international representative in an organisation devoted to the education of women and the furtherance of peaceful international relations. She was also an active member of the Catalysts Club and the Lyceum Club, becoming vice-president of the latter organisation. She also served on the ABC's Victorian Talks Committee, and later its State Advisory Committee.

In 1965 Ferber took up a part-time position with the Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne. She worked there until 1981, variously filling the positions of research fellow, business manager and editor of the Institute's publications, including its journal, the *Australian Economic Review*. Working with Ronald Henderson she made a major contribution to his ground-breaking study of Australian poverty, the Henderson Report. For the Victorian Council of Social Services she wrote another seminal engagement with public policy, *Citizens Advice and Aid Bureaux in Victoria*.

Helen Ferber also undertook autobiography and family history, writing a record of her experiences in America and Europe from letters she had written to family and friends, and publishing *Stagecoach to Birdsville*, an account of her grandparents' journey to Birdsville in 1894. The breadth of her engagement with public life can probably be best gauged from [the lengthy biographical interview](#) recorded with her by the National Library in 2006.

In 2010 Helen Ferber was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM). The award was "for service to the community, particularly as a social policy researcher and historian, and through contributions to the advancement of women".

Helen Ferber contributed generously to the Graduate Women Victoria scholarship program, and a scholarship was named for her in 2008. She died in 2013, after a busy life well-spent. She was remembered in her obituary as "a woman of action who was 'clear-eyed' but with a commitment to social justice".

*Felicity Lorains of Monash University won the Helen Ferber Bursary in 2008.*

**Publications of Helen Ferber**

*Citizens Advice and Aid Bureaux in Victoria* I.A.E.S.R. Melb.Uni, 1975.

R.B.Scotton & Helen Ferber (eds) *Public Expenditures and Social Policy in Australia, Vols 1 and 2*, Longman Cheshire, 1978 and 1980.

*Stagecoach to Birdsville*, Kangaroo Press, 1995.

'Missives from Munich', *Meanjin*, Vol. 65, No. 2, 2006: 16-24.

Other periodicals: *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria*, *Australian Outlook*, *University of Melbourne Gazette*, *Journal of the Huguenot Society of Australia*.

**Other Sources**

Alison McClelland and Glenys Romanes 'Helen Ferber: Writer, historian, volunteer: Woman of action who inspired others', *The Age* March 24 2014.