

Georgina Sweet and Jessie Webb

Two of the Founding Mothers of Graduate Women Victoria



In 1922, two women friends set out to travel the length of Africa, from Capetown to Cairo. Despite dire predictions to the contrary they succeeded, for these were determined women. Not only were Georgina Sweet (1875-1946) and Jessie Webb (1880-1944) pioneering motorists, they were pioneering academics and founding mothers of the Victorian Women Graduates Association (later AFUW-Vic, and now Graduate Women Victoria), Georgina Sweet being its first President in 1922, to be followed by Jessie Webb in that role in 1924. These were two brilliant women, but their histories tell us a great deal about just how hard it was to establish a university career worthy of their talents in the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1896, Georgina Sweet was the third woman to obtain a Bachelor of Science degree from Melbourne University. She went on to complete an MSc in 1898, the year in which she was awarded the prestigious MacBain Scholarship in Biology, and then a PhD in 1904, while working as a teacher and holding some minor university appointments. Her PhD study of the Australian marsupial mole finally earned her a university lectureship in 1908, held jointly at Melbourne University's Biology Department and Veterinary School. It was there that she developed the research work on parasitology that made her one of Australia's foremost scientists. She was awarded the David Syme Medal for her work on a parasite that caused nodules in beef cattle, spoiling the meat for export.

In 1916, during the absence overseas of the Professor of Biology, she became the first female acting Professor in an Australian university, and on his death she was encouraged to



apply for the position, but was passed over in favour of a male candidate. She was, however, promoted to the position of Associate Professor in 1920, the first woman to hold that position in the University.

Jessie Webb entered the more traditionally female Faculty of Arts, graduating in 1902 with first class honours in history and political economy and sharing the J.D. Wyselaskie Scholarship in English Constitutional History, although she would later specialise in Ancient Greece, and travel adventurously in pursuit of its archæological sites.

She completed her MA in 1904. From 1902 to 1908 she found academic employment tutoring in history and political economy at Trinity and Ormond Colleges as well as teaching in a number of girls' secondary schools, but in 1908 she achieved her ambition of an appointment to Melbourne University, after two attempts at which she had been passed over for less qualified male applicants. Her appointment as a night lecturer, the first of its kind in an Australian University, was a part-time one and it was not until 1913 that she became a full-time lecturer. In 1923, she was promoted to a senior lectureship. Like Sweet, she was required to take on the duties of acting Professor during the absence of the Department's Professor and did so in 1925, 1933 and from 1942-44, the year of her death. Unlike Sweet, however, she never achieved the role of Associate professor, despite a 1937 recommendation on her behalf from Max Crawford, the third male Professor of History under whom she served.

Both Sweet and Webb expended a formidable amount of energy on public life outside the university. Neither married, and to do so would have meant the end of their academic careers, as Jessie Sweet's friend and fellow teacher, Ella Latham, had discovered on marriage, but they had an extensive network of friends and shared interests.

Apart from the Victorian Women Graduates Association, both were active in professional associations, with Jessie Sweet a founding member of the Royal Historical Association and Georgina Sweet active in the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, the Royal Society of Victoria and the Field Naturalists' Club.

They supported various women's organisations, particularly those with an educational interest. Both were founding members of the Lyceum Club in 1912 and active campaigners later for the establishment of the University's Women's College (now University College). Webb was Lyceum Club President 1920-22 while Sweet was President of the YWCA from 1927 to 1934. In 1935 Georgina Sweet was awarded an Order of the British Empire for "service to women's organisations".

Both also took a keen interest in international affairs. Sweet was the first President of the Pan-Pacific Women's Association in 1930 and Webb served as an alternate delegate to the League of Nations in 1923.

Unlike many women whose names have disappeared from the records, these two are remembered for their legacy to women's education. Melbourne University still offers Scholarships in their names (funded from their estates). The library of the Department of History in the University of Melbourne is named for Jessie Webb, as is the women's history museum in Sydney. And of course, there is the Georgina Sweet Fellowship of AFGW, funded in part by a legacy from Sweet herself, but supplemented by contributions from members of the Victorian Association and other STA members after her death.

GRADUATE WOMEN VICTORIA

For an account of their African journey, with reproductions of Webb's diary and much else besides, see Margaret Callaghan's website at <https://margocall.wordpress.com/>