



Women and dissent



Delegates to the 1915 Women's International Congress aboard the MS Noordam

“The woman movement... will force upon Governments the necessity of finding other means of settling international disputes.”

Women's Political Association newsletter, the Woman Voter August 4, 1914 – the day Britain declared war on Germany

International Congress of Women, The Hague, April 1915

Despite many practical difficulties, more than 1,000 women from 12 countries met together to express their opposition to war and to consider ways and means of ending the conflict.

‘This International Congress of Women of different nations, classes and creeds and parties is united in expressing sympathy with the suffering of all, whatever their nationality, who are fighting for their country or labouring under the burden of war.

Since the mass of the people in each of the countries ... believe themselves to be fighting, not as aggressors but in self-defence ... there can be no irreconcilable difference between them ... an honourable Peace might be established.’

Sisterhood of International Peace

Founded in March 1915 in Melbourne, the Sisterhood aimed to promote:

‘mutual knowledge of each other by the women of different nations, goodwill and friendship; to study the causes, economic and moral, of war, and the substitution of international justice and arbitration for irrational methods of violence.’

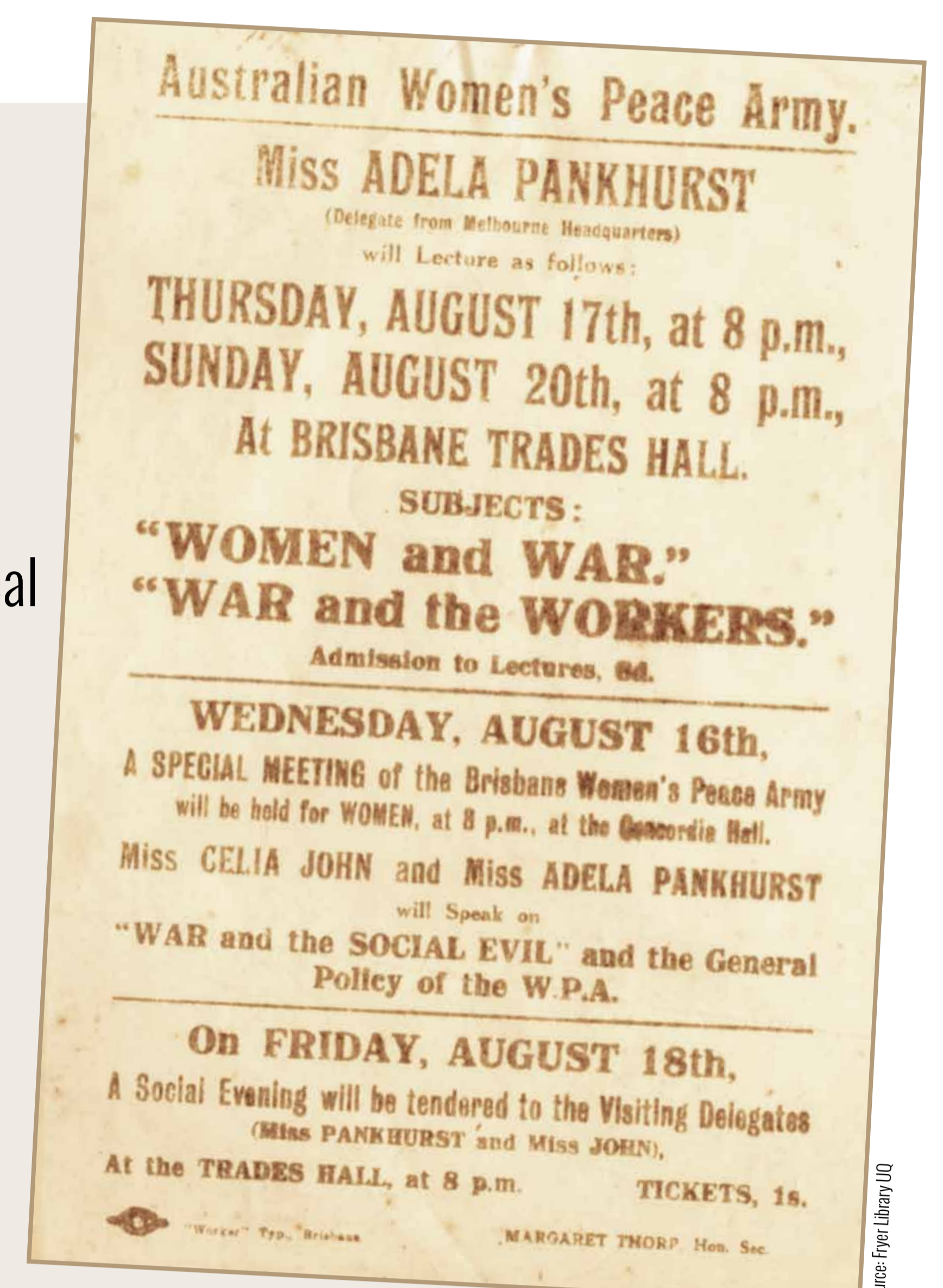
Both the Sisterhood and the Women's Peace Army affiliated with the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace (formed after the 1915 Congress), which became the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in 1919.

Women's Peace Army (WPA)

The WPA grew out of the Women's Political Association founded by Vida Goldstein in Victoria in 1903. Once the war broke out it was resolutely pacifist. In 1915 the WPA was established to oppose militarism and war. It attracted many women looking for a way to work for peace, writing letters, addressing public meetings and visiting prisons, particularly people jailed for their opposition to war.

WPA Member's Pledge:

‘I believe that war is a degradation of motherhood, an economic futility and a crime against civilisation and humanity. I therefore pledge myself to active service in the cause of peace... [and] to face unflinchingly criticism, calumny and persecution...’



Women's Peace Army flyer 1916



Margaret Thorp

Women's Peace Army in Queensland and NSW

Margaret Thorp (later Watts), a Quaker, helped establish the WPA in Queensland, and also the Children's Peace Army through her work in state schools. In Sydney, Isabel Swann (later Longworth), became secretary of the WPA.

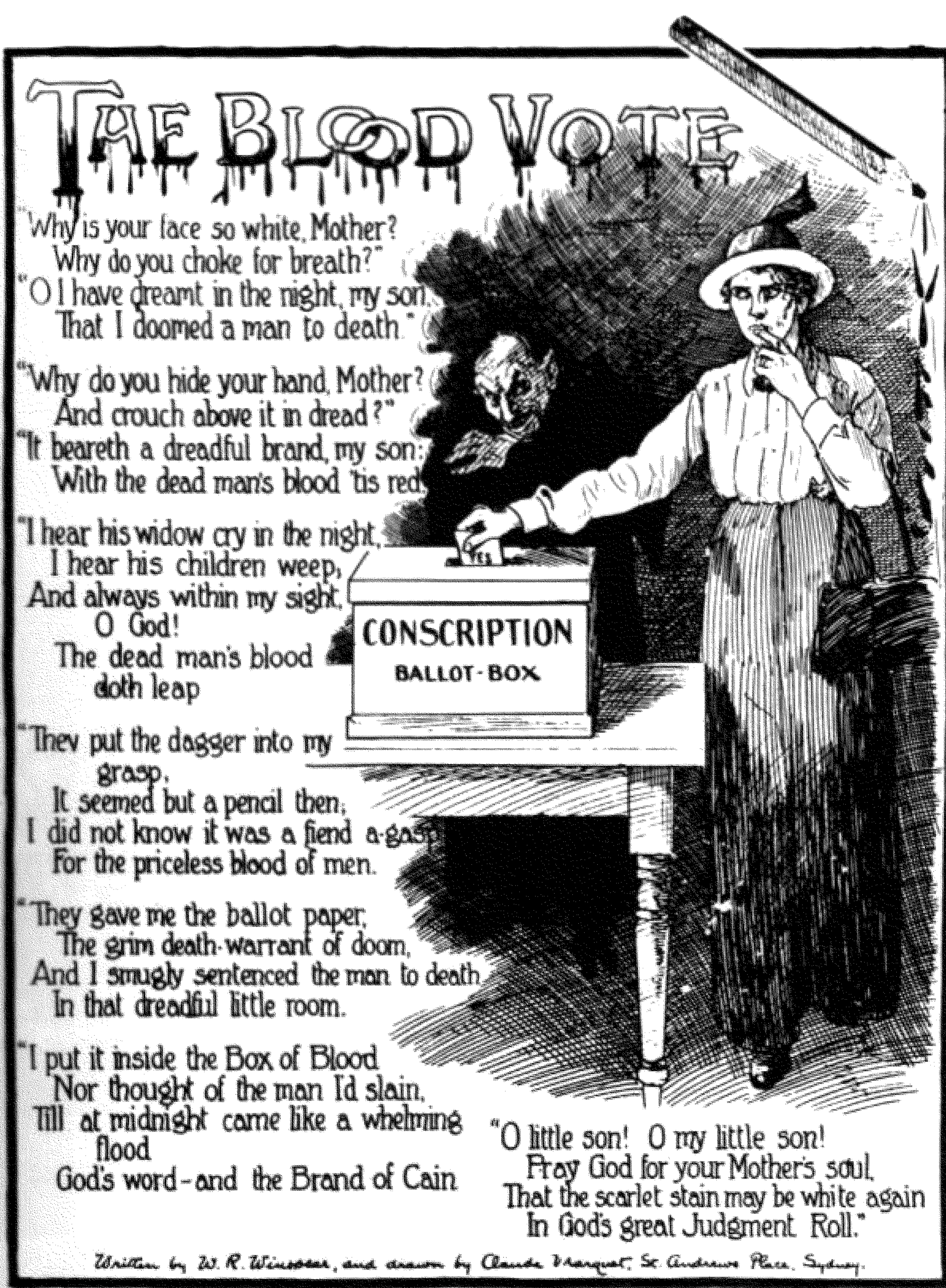
Courage was certainly required by peace activists. Margaret Thorp was thrown bodily out of a meeting by pro-conscriptionists three times and was often jeered and spat upon as she travelled the State. Some felt that she challenged the manhood of returning soldiers.

‘If we really trust God and really believe that national integrity will rise victorious, why do we go out with cannons and guns and slaughter thousands of men against whom we have no personal quarrel – is that trusting God?’

Margaret Thorp



Isabel Swann



Committee of Sisterhood of International Peace, c. 1915 (or 1919).
Back Row (L to R): Mrs Slater, Miss Pierson, Mrs Jefferies, Mrs Levens, Miss Ferguson.
Front Row (L to R): Mrs Drummond, Miss Douglas, Mrs Warren Kerr, Mrs Paling, Miss H. Milliard. (Eleanor Moore, abroad).

Exhibition prepared in 2014 by:
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in NSW
www.quakers.org.au



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