

ELSIE LOCKE

About *Woman Today*

In preparation for this occasion¹ I did something I had not done before: I went right through the file of *Woman Today*, recalling as well as I could the different writers and circumstances of each contribution. I have used my file a great deal over the years but always for a specific purpose, not in this way. And I was overwhelmed with feelings of affection for the women I worked with, including some with whom I had quite fiery disagreements, and I realised how much I had learned from them. Nearly all of them were older than I was.

None of us would have dreamed, at that time, that our very amateur magazine would one day be regarded as such an important resource that the Turnbull Library would put the entire file on microfiche, complete with index, and so it would be made available to anyone with access to a library which has bought the microfiche.² My warmest appreciation to the Library for this valuable contribution to women's history. The topics covered are many and various: sex equality and the status of women, equal pay, childcare and early education (and education generally), birth control, nursing conditions, teacher issues, housing, women in Parliament, social security and other new legislation, rural women, women in history, freedom in broadcasting, animal rights. I haven't covered everything: the index is a splendid asset.

There are two research papers on *Woman Today*, one from Victoria University, one from Canterbury.³ It is

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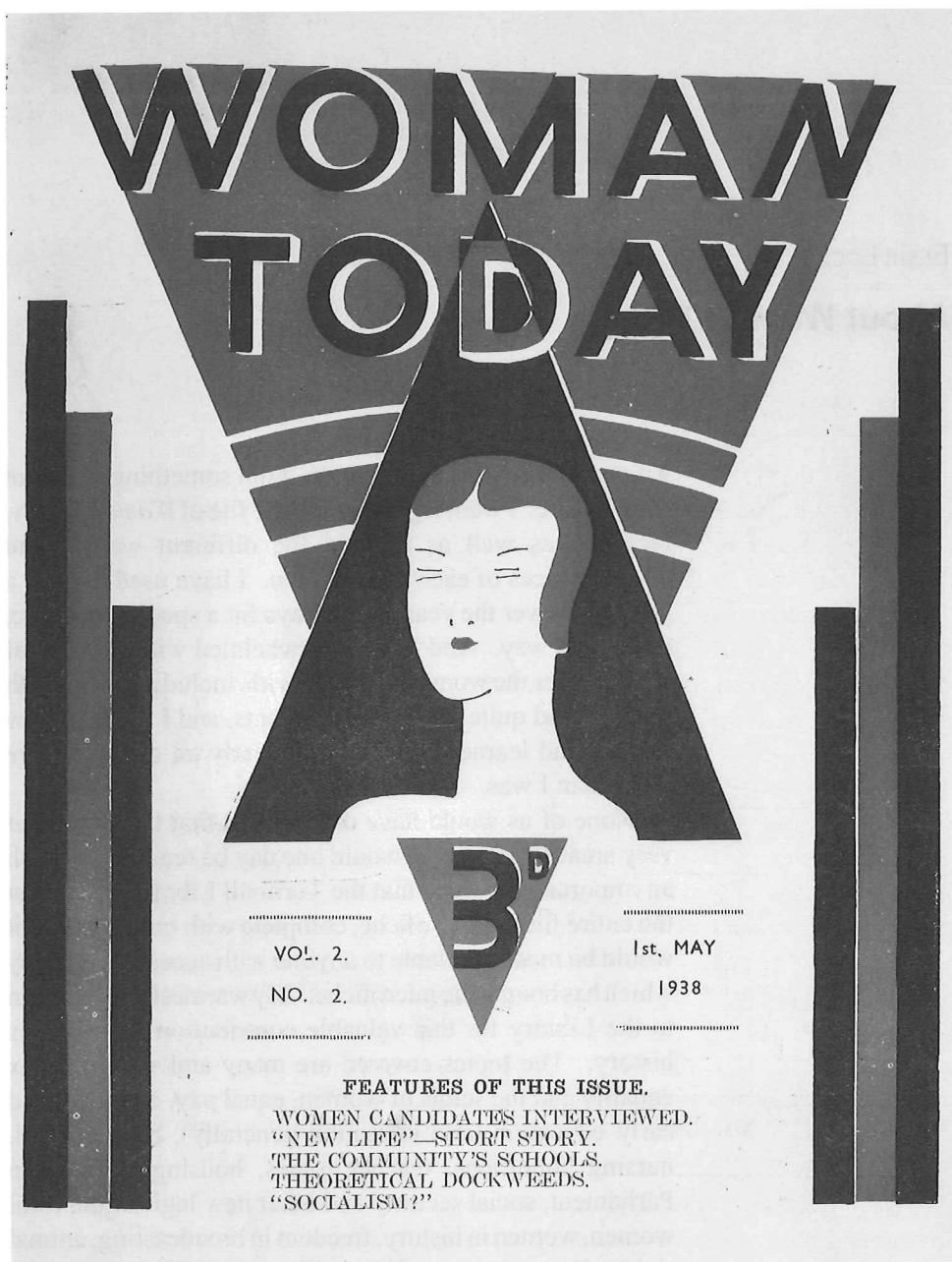


FIGURE 1. The cover of *Woman Today*, 2, no. 2 (1 May 1938).

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interesting to me to read what students of a similar age to what I was then have made of our magazine. Our background and conditions were very different. It is my

contention that a 'second wave' of feminism came at that time and was building up when it was cut short by the war, and much of it was expressed in and concentrated around *Woman Today*. The first wave, of course, was in the 1890s with the winning of the franchise, and the first National Council of Women.

How did I get into it? One commentator said that I was a frustrated writer who couldn't get my work past the male editors. Not so: I wasn't even doing any creative writing at that time, it was all journalism. The introduction to Robin Hyde's book *Nor the Years Condemn*, recently republished by the Women's Press, calls *Woman Today* 'a pioneer Marxist-feminist magazine'.⁴ Whichever of the three editors wrote that couldn't really have read it. There is no Marxism in it, and incidentally the term 'feminist' wasn't much used in the thirties; we generally talked of women's rights.

I was a Communist at that time, though I left some years later. My views were shaken up by the slump, I was politicised if you like, and when I moved from Auckland to Wellington I joined the Communist Party, which incidentally did not treat me as a mere female. But very little was being done to make women active, and this was also true of the unemployed movement with which I then got involved, being mainly unemployed myself.

I hadn't been around long when someone had to be found to deal with 'work amongst women'. One of these modern commentators has said this was 'orders from Moscow'. I never saw any orders from Moscow; it was more like prodding from Australia, and there was nobody available but me, and no-one either who was able to tell me what to do. I had virtually sole charge. So where did I begin? With a very modest monthly newspaper called *The Working Woman*. Partly this was my own inclination and partly we knew the value of a newspaper as an organising medium. The most active women in the unemployed movement, and some others, soon rallied round it. This was in 1934. As it was largely concerned with immediate problems and happenings, 'Working Women's Committees' were formed by its sellers and readers. In November 1935, it went into magazine form and had a much broader content. I solicited articles from people right outside our movement on topics like the women who won the franchise, peace, and childcare. It also published verses and stories. The Working Women's Committees were strong enough to hold two national conferences which drew up a 'Guide to Action'. Here it is, as amended at the 1936 conference:

- For peace and democratic rights.
- Equal pay for equal work.
- Right of married women to work.
- Adequate unemployment relief without sex discrimination.
- Adequate pensions for the aged, disabled and widows.
- Free dental, medical, surgical and maternity attention.
- Improved conditions of education, and establishment of free state kindergartens.

No discrimination between Maori and Pakeha.
Free birth control clinics.⁵

1935 was a watershed year. The first Labour Government changed the political scene radically. On the world scene, fascism was in power in Germany and Italy; there was war in Abyssinia and in China; the continuing slump and the looming of a wider war had got people thinking in new directions. The late thirties were a time of much debate and activity among the broad 'left', extending into liberal circles. This affected the women's movements too. I was surprised when I read Eve Ebbett's book *Victoria's Daughters* to find the women of that time depicted as largely passive.⁶ That wasn't my experience, though perhaps I exaggerated the extent of the militancy.

Now, many of the supporters of *The Working Woman* had been unhappy all along about its bearing the hammer and sickle and the name of the Communist Party. They said, we're not Communists. Why do we have to have it, making the magazine harder to sell? The short answer was that although it paid its own way, the Communist Party backed it and made its printery available, where I personally fed the sheets into the machine, collated, and stapled them; so the Party felt entitled to claim the credit. But the more the content widened, the more inappropriate the label appeared. At this time, communist parties worldwide were broadening their own outlook and were ready to join their energies with other groups opposed to fascism, having realised that Hitler could not have achieved power so easily, if at all, if the Communists and Socialists had not been at one another's throats. 'United Front' and 'Popular Front' movements were rapidly gaining strength and influence.

After much discussion, the women agreed to close down *The Working Woman* and put our energies into a more representative magazine. Preliminary approaches showed that a wider spectrum of women were ready and willing. The last issue of *The Working Woman* came out in November 1936. *Woman Today* emerged in April 1937 and ran until October 1939.

I was secretary of the committee until May 1939 and on the editorial sub-committee of three throughout. I never had control over the contents and never sought it. Some contributions were disputed within the committee. I was criticised for the immoderate language in my reply to Nina A. R. Barrer's views on socialism. These two articles sparked a lively controversy.⁷

We were very amateurish. That will be obvious to today's readers and researchers. They'll find vast numbers of proofreading errors, for instance. We had difficulty in finding a good printer who was not too expensive. Berta Sinclair Burns, who was there at the beginning, was one of the few with journalistic experience, having been 'Aunt Hilda' of the Christchurch *Star*. She wanted to be sole editor and said it wouldn't work otherwise. In a way she was right; a single editor does work better, but we didn't have the perfect choice acceptable to all. We were a collective. If the contents appear unbalanced and things are missing that you would expect to find, it's

probably because nobody sent in that material. We hardly ever sought contributions because there was no shortage of stuff coming in. When, at a late stage, a correspondent complained that there was too much left-wing material, another replied, quite honestly, that very little was being sent by conservative women.

We always had controversy over our slogan 'Peace, freedom and progress', and whether *Woman Today* should be a forum with no discernible tendency or whether we should be advocates for particular objectives. We defined our aims a little more precisely in this statement, which appeared several times over the years:

Woman Today wants to help you in the solution of your problems. Its objective is to provide a medium of expression for women of all opinions, to educate and arouse interest in present-day problems (such as education, housing, etc.), to encourage New Zealand literary talent, to assist in the development of every movement which will give happier lives to women and children, to improve wages, hours and conditions of women workers, to bring closer unity between those in different organisations or spheres of work by giving common ground for exchange of ideas and activities, and to promote international friendship. For -

Peace, freedom and progress,
Advancement of women's rights,
Friendship with women of all nations.⁸

Don't be surprised by what in modern terms would be considered sexist language. At that time, the male pronouns and the word 'man' were taken to embrace the female as well. They had a general as well as a particular sense, and I don't remember anyone raising the question.

We gave a lot of attention to working conditions and wages. That this was necessary is clear from this short letter:

In your article on 'Women in Industry' I was pleased to note that the writer recommends a ten minute relaxation during work. My daughter, on leaving school, began work in a soft goods manufactory. She found she was required to sit on a backless cushionless stool before a table on which she must on no account rest her elbows, and sew steadily and smartly from 8 to 11 [*sic*-12], 1 to 5. No relaxation whatever was permitted, and this for girls fresh from the varied and active routine of a primary school. Imagine the difference if seat-backs were introduced and the bowed forms occasionally allowed to straighten and rest.⁹

Fresh from a primary school! Few girls went on to high schools until after the war.

The Working Woman had established a readership among working-class women and I wanted that sustained. This was one reason why, when there were financial problems, I didn't want *Woman Today* to raise its price. This was a cause of conflict within the committee. We never had reserves. Financially, we lived from month to month. For me that was normal — I had never lived any other way — and we did keep clear of debt, but I see more clearly now why it worried other people. I should not have been so rigid.

You will notice also the emphasis on housewives' problems and domestic service. At that time, most women were not in paid employment after marriage, and very few were in professions. There had been a lot of protest over the dismissal of married women teachers during the slump from a profession in which they had often stayed on after marriage, and many wanted to be reinstated. There were still a good many live-in domestic servants.

In the conditions of the time, raising a family really was a full-time job, needing many economies, like making clothes at home. The basic wage for a man was estimated to cover the cost of keeping a wife and three children in a fair and reasonable standard of comfort. As men had control of the pay packet, 'wages for wives' came up. Personally, I never thought this was feasible on a very small wage, but it did count for the wives of professional men.

One researcher expressed surprise at the space given to the Women's Food Value League. Well, they sent in their contributions. And it *was* an important movement before the days of nutritional advice on a popular scale, and anything that helped to budget better was welcome.

But we were also 'anti-domestic' in that we didn't think women should be totally wrapped up in domesticity. This view would have been common to us all, and our magazine carried many articles on matters outside the home, such as politics and world affairs and the work of women's organizations.

The literary content was not marvellous. I've been tackled over the Mills and Boon-type story in the first issue,¹⁰ so I read it again, and roared with laughter all the way. I assure you that it had nothing to do with me, and perhaps objections were made at the time, because later short stories were different. They tended to be very earnest, with a 'purpose'. The criticism that we had little humour or light-heartedness in our pages was justified. But I raised a few chuckles in re-reading 'How to Receive with Rapture' in the 1937 Christmas number, with a mixture of amusement and sadness at this paragraph, which could apply today:

The best instance I know of good gift receiving happened with three girls rooming together. As girls will be, they were all pretty short at Christmas. So they made a plan, stood in the centre of the room, and reverently passed a half crown from one to the other. And each, on receiving the half crown, bestowed a smacking kiss on the presenter. By



FIGURE 2. Elsie Freeman (now Locke), 1939. This portrait, taken during preparations for the promotional tour described in this article, appeared in *Woman Today* in February 1939.

the time the little game had been finished, the original owner had the half crown and everybody was square.¹¹

We didn't pay contributors, but we did provide a place to publish, and carried a fair amount of good, unpretentious writing on topics like 'A Day in My Life' and 'My

Family Problem'. Contributors widely known at the time were Gloria Rawlinson, Isobel Andrews, and Lyndal Chapple Gee, Maurice Gee's mother. Robin Hyde had nine contributions in *Woman Today*, and three in *The Working Woman*. She was dependent on her literary earnings and this was very generous of her, but then she had strong convictions. In 1929, she wrote to her friend Schroder (editor of the Christchurch *Sun*) that she hoped to start a women's sheet of her own.¹²

In retrospect, I found some contributions very surprising. An article by Rose Margaret Zeller, 'To Teachers [Not All in Schools]', posed a whole page of questions, beginning 'Why do we teach?' and including this:

When is it possible for a child, if he chooses, to sit and dream without other apparent consequences than a few naggings at home or at school, or a few impositions for failure to pass some specific test? Can his natural energy be expected to parade itself for inspection?

By harnessing energy to purpose, dreams are made manifest. Cathedrals, sculptures, bridges, music, all are dreams in manifestation. Not dreams turned sour little by little though first formed sweet, but plans for doing things encouraged and guided intelligently by 'educators'

The energy that in childhood dances through the fields all day and questions till the questioned one is tired, could surely build a paradise, if wisely guided and given constructive objects on which to satisfy itself.¹³

I would have read this twenty years before I began writing for children, and now I wonder what effect it had on me.

How did we run the show? We had an Advisory Board of women all over the country, which did not meet but did get called on and really did advise. We had a Sponsors' League, a great help in selling the magazine, publicising it, getting articles sent in, and helping to assess what readers wanted. Towards the end, in Wellington at least, it became quite social. We happened to have some musical people who arranged musical afternoons and evenings in private homes. And then there were discussion groups. As they grew in strength, the Sponsors' Leagues became more definite in what they wanted. The committee came up for election at conferences in May 1938 and May 1939.

The issues became clearer as time went on. I think the article on 'The World Demand for Sex Equality' in September 1938 represented a genuine consensus. And in the November 1938 issue there was a peace appeal which drew a strong response from readers. How to keep the peace had become a key issue everywhere after Munich. The 1939 conference formulated a statement on what should be done, and opinions on peace were printed on a 'Discussion' page to show we didn't all think alike.¹⁴

In August 1938, we received a letter from the Women's World Committee against War and Fascism inviting a New Zealand delegate to a conference in Paris. It was too late to send anyone, but eleven groups got together and forwarded the invitation to two New Zealanders in London. Mrs Jordan, wife of our High Commissioner, could not go, but Miss I. M. Jamieson did. She was prominent in the Free Kindergarten movement and was overseas on National Council of Women business. She was much impressed by the Peace Days during Armistice Week and wrote up her experience for the February 1939 issue. Two delegates were selected for another women's peace conference in Havana, but this was cancelled when war broke out.

Then, as now, everyone wanted peace but opinions differed about how to attain it. Pacifists, traditional patriots, supporters of collective security, and those with many questions had a go in the discussion pages. I'm puzzled now at the lack of reference to the Labour Government's boldness at the League of Nations, where, for the first time, our representative Bill Jordan took a different line from the British. Maybe nobody got round to writing about it.

Early in 1939, we were going well in everything but finance. I offered to go on a promotional tour, and this was approved, not without enthusiasm. This was managed on the cheap. Billets were provided, and I travelled at quarter fares on the railways where my husband, from whom I was only separated, was employed. Where there was no railway I hitch-hiked. This shocked some of the more conventional women, but I enjoyed it and never missed a meeting. I spoke to 56 audiences from Northland to Invercargill, with a break between North and South Islands, and the response was most encouraging.

But — just before I returned in time for the May conference, the National Party paper *National News* came out with an attack. In Taumaranui, one of my Communist colleagues, Gordon Watson, had turned up at the meeting and talked with me afterwards. We just happened to be there at the same time, and I still have a letter from my Taumaranui hostess saying there was nothing in it, but *National News* claimed I was using *Woman Today* for Communist purposes: Communists were always said to be subverting something, whatever they did.

Some of the committee had already shown embarrassment at my Communist connections, and one of them asked me to retire quietly. The Sponsors' League conference, however, expressed confidence in me and in the way the tour was conducted.

This did not end the matter. The rest of the year was stormy. A section of the committee was openly hostile, and in the confusion the positive results of the tour were dissipated and the financial situation grew worse. The October issue — skimpy to match the available finance — had an SOS which brought in a good response, but on 9 October the committee had voted to close the magazine down. They did not consult the Advisory Board or the Sponsors' Leagues, and the Auckland members in particular were ropable. They wanted to call another conference and were prepared

to resume with headquarters in Auckland. All the local groups except one wanted to carry on, including several new ones formed during my tour. We now had a long list of subscription agents in no less than 32 places!

The Sponsors' League did hold a small conference on 25 November, although support had been further weakened by a scurrilous and unjust attack by the Labour Party weekly, *The Standard*.¹⁵ The Auckland women tried to revive *Woman Today*, and the opposition who had bowed out issued a prospectus for a new venture to be called *The New Zealand Woman*. Neither effort got off the ground. In truth, it would have been impossible to maintain either magazine in wartime conditions. We went down in a shower of sparks when people's minds were elsewhere — on the war which could not be stopped.

For me personally there was a curious irony. While I was being accused of nefarious purposes on behalf of Communism, my Communist colleagues mostly considered I was wasting my time!

I now give you two postmortems. One I wrote myself in my column in the Communist *People's Voice*:

There were always two trends in the movement supporting *Woman Today*. Remember that all committees were democratically elected, and various shades of thought were represented there. It was only to be expected that there would be differences of opinion from time to time, but complete harmony was never gained on the matter which was most essential — a clear picture of what was the function of *Woman Today*, a united outlook on fundamentals.

One trend was towards a magazine which would be simply an open forum for expression of ideas, without giving any clear-cut lead of its own; that all kinds of views should be advanced, but anything 'extreme' avoided; it aimed to please everyone and offend nobody. As was put in a resolution to the 1938 conference (this motion was rejected), it should 'seek to promote a constructive attitude of mind'

The other trend aimed to influence the 'woman in the street', the unconverted, and to discuss with her in simple, popular language the most important local, international and personal problems confronting her. It held that *Woman Today* should be practical, and should be fearless in giving a lead where circumstances warranted; that it was not possible to avoid offending somebody, but that if the magazine spoke plainly it would attract to itself the most progressive section of women and assist them in their activities

It would be wrong of course to suggest that the two trends were always as clear-cut as this, for many supporters vacillated between the

two, and there were intermediate stages. Most women did not think it out at all

As one observer aptly put it, *Woman Today* fell between all possible stools.¹⁶

The other postmortem appeared in the periodical *Tomorrow* and was written by Nancy Parsons, who came on the committee that same year:

Woman Today was an independent progressive women's monthly. It ran for two and a half years, and has now ceased publication. The magazine foundered ostensibly on finance. It sold 2000 copies at threepence each including postage, and, on these figures, subsidies were always necessary. However, financial crisis is no stranger to voluntary organisations, and it is doubtful whether it was in itself necessarily fatal. We failed because, even from the beginning, we had three or four different visions of what we were trying to do. We accepted a slogan of three words, Peace, Freedom and Progress — and then failed to define them. We failed because we had less business efficiency than the venture demanded. We failed because for an editor we substituted an editorial committee. But above and beyond these reasons, we failed because we distrusted each other. Someone noticed that we had a prominent Communist on our Committee. They called us a Communist paper, and thereafter we were always disunited and afraid. Increasingly we refrained from the contentious. We diluted our copy to the palest pink. In vain — the label stuck. Our supporters wavered and some fell away. Our undefined aims became a battlefield. Time and energy were wasted in unending argument. And so, after many months, we died of weariness.

The story has a moral. It is difficult for any enterprise to be at once broadly based and forceful. It becomes almost impossible unless those concerned either are agreed on fundamentals or are extremely tolerant.¹⁷

Nancy Parsons gave the circulation as 2000. At its peak, on my figures, it was around 2500, and *The Working Woman* about half that number.

Very much later, Nancy Parsons wrote this: 'It seems to me that *Woman Today* had a unifying force ... [It had] women of widely differing views working on it, but they had a strong common concern with women, women's concerns and women's place in the world'.¹⁸

And looking at the contents now, as they will be seen by today's women seeking information and insights about that second wave of the women's movement, perhaps

their very unevenness and lack of direction is a bonus. I give you another comment from my column in the *People's Voice*:

In making a long-range estimate, readers will form their own opinions about the closing down of *Woman Today* — I will not say failure, for its contribution to the women's movement has, on the whole, been good and its influence will not really pass.¹⁹

Now, wasn't that prophetic!

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5. 'Guide to Action', *Working Woman*, 3, no. 3 (February 1936), 8.
6. See Eve Ebbett, *Victoria's Daughters: New Zealand Women of the Thirties* (Wellington, 1981).
7. The original article was Nina A. R. Barrer, 'Socialism by Legislation', *Woman Today* [hereafter omitted], 2, no. 1 (April 1938), 308–09. Discussion was invited; see Elsie Freeman, 'Socialism? A Reply to Nina A. R. Barrer, M. A.', 2, no. 2 (May 1938), 38; M. P., 'Socialism by Sheer Necessity', 39; P. McLachlan, correspondence, 46. Then Barrer, 'Socialism, a Reply to Mrs Freeman and M. P.', 2, no. 3 (June 1938), 64; Amy G. Clark, 'Socialism by Education', 65. Then, under note 'Concluding a Controversy': C. Doris White, 'Party Politics', and Eva Cryer, 'Socialism by Legislation', 2, no. 4 (July 1938), 86–87; correspondence, 94.
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11. Alison Power, 'How to Receive with Rapture', *Woman Today*, 1, no. 7 (December 1937), 194.
12. See 'Introduction', in Hyde, p. viii, note 4.
13. Rose M. Zeller, 'To Teachers [Not All in Schools]', *Woman Today*, 1, no. 4 (July 1937), 6.
14. *Woman Today*, 2, no. 9 (December 1938), 14–15. In subsequent issues, comments were numerous, but not in a special section.
15. *Standard*, 2 November 1939.
16. *People's Voice*, 20 October 1939, pp. 6, 8.
17. *Tomorrow*, 5, no. 1 (1939), 29.
18. Nancy Parsons, letter to author, 16 January 1992.
19. *People's Voice*, 20 October 1939, p. 8.