

**UNVEILING OF THE RESTORED HEADSTONE OF
JESSIE SPINKS ROOKE
SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE BARBARA BAKER
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
WIVENHOE CEMETERY BURNIE, THURSDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2021**

Thank you, Vicki/Rodney. I am honoured to be here and I thank you for your invitation to join in honouring an outstanding leader for women. I am delighted to be here, as this is my first visit to Burnie as your Governor.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land— the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and who continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

And may I acknowledge the Honourable Ruth Forrest MLC, Burnie City Council Mayor Steve Kons and colleagues here today.

I would like to talk to you about Jessie Spinks Rooke's life; and make some observations about her and her commitments, and her place in our history.

Born in London on the 10th of September 1845, Jessie Rooke as a young woman migrated to mainland Australia in the 1860s. After the death of her first husband, she moved to Burnie in the early 1890s with her second husband, Charles Rooke.

There, she became involved with the Burnie Women's Christian Temperance Union, the WCTU. She was elected as its president in 1894. Under her guidance, the WCTU emerged as a leader of the Tasmanian suffrage campaign. The WCTU believed that women's right to vote was essential to protect the safety and dignity of women and children.

Jessie conducted two arduous tours around Tasmania with fellow women's suffrage advocates. They gathered many thousands of signatures for their petition calling for votes for women. When their petition was presented to Parliament, it came up against fierce opposition as well as gaining some support.

Jessie was appointed Tasmanian president of the WCTU in 1898, and she became the Australasian president of the WCTU in 1903.

In 1902, she made the then long journey to attend the first international women's suffrage conference in Washington DC. There, she worked alongside other prominent Australian suffragists, like Vita Goldstein, to highlight Australia's leadership on women's suffrage.

On the 16th of September 1903, the Tasmanian Parliament finally passed legislation allowing women the vote. But Jessie did not rest there. In that same year she founded the Tasmanian Women's Suffrage Association, which mobilised women for the next election and attracted a wide membership.

This association was later called the Women's Political Association and worked to educate women on all laws relating to women and children, on wider political questions and to encourage women to enrol to vote.

Jessie became president of the Women's Political Association and continued right up to her death from heart failure in South Burnie in January 1906.

What do we know regarding Jessie's character and the nature of her work? Newspaper reports can give us some insights into the challenges of what she and her colleagues faced in the Parliament. In September 1895, in a debate on the Suffragette Bill, the Legislative Council member for North Esk, Henry Rooke (no relation) opposed the Bill and he was quoted that:

He strongly opposed bringing women down to the vortex of politics ... The whole idea of woman suffrage was absurd in the extreme, as it must result in women coming into the House [of Assembly]. [The members] did not want women in politics; their proper sphere was in the home to minister to man's comfort after he had undergone a hard day's work in politics and business.¹

I must confess that I have no idea how to minister to a man's comfort after a hard day's work!

Henry Rooke's colleague, William Dodery, the member for Westmorland – now Windermere – was more blunt in his opinion that, I quote: "Women should not bother about politics, as they knew nothing of it."²

Fortunately, Jessie and her colleagues did have support. From Frederick Piesse, Legislative Council member for Buckingham – now Elwick. He was of the opinion that, I quote:

"Woman suffrage was worthy of support, and ... hoped in future to find women instructing men."³

Jessie's determination to secure the women's right to vote became well known. Hobart's *Mercury* newspaper in October 1897 noted, I quote:

"We have a lady orator in Burnie in the person of Mrs Rooke, who ... ignoring the injunction of St. Paul, is not afraid to lift up her voice in what she believes to be the cause of right."⁴

¹ *The Tasmanian* (Launceston), Saturday 7 September 1895 page 9.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Mercury*, Wednesday 6 October 1897 page 3.

The Women's Christian Temperance Union of Tasmania and its President, Jessie Spinks Rooke had other widespread and fascinating concerns and interests. In 1895, it was reported that:

In the afternoon a [WCTU] meeting was held, which was opened by devotional exercises conducted by Mrs Rooke. Reports on the various branches of the Union work were read by Mrs Stanfield on literature, Miss E. Searle on coffee-rooms, Mrs. Cunningham on unfermented wine, Mrs. Norris on sailors' work; and papers were read by Mrs. Hugill on the action of alcohol on the mind, Mrs. Kirk on the duties of officers, and Mrs. Rooke on " Our motto."⁵ That motto being: *Agitate, Educate, Legislate.*

Incidentally, that particular meeting went on into an evening session, at which no less than nine speakers addressed the members on Women Suffrage, pledging to do "all in their power to have it established".⁶

Jessie Spinks Rooke kept up her reformist agenda and on Friday the 5th of January 1906 the *North Western Advocate and the Emu Bay Times* newspaper recorded this:

The death occurred at South Burnie yesterday afternoon of Mrs Jessie S. Rooke, wife of Dr Charles Rooke, after a lingering illness of five months. Deceased had a large circle of friends throughout the Commonwealth, who will learn with much regret of her demise. Deceased took an active part in church, mission and temperance work, and for nine and a half years had been president of the Burnie branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. The results of her work in this connection have been very far-reaching, and for two years she has filled the office of Australasian President of the WCTU, which position she held till her death. Active interest was also taken by the

⁵ *Mercury*, Thursday 28 March 1895, page 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

deceased lady in the National Council of Women (Tasmania), and her place in public matters which particularly concern women will not easily be filled.

The Launceston *Examiner*, in an equally praiseworthy obituary stated that:

She was widely known for her efforts to uplift humanity, and her womanly nature was ever felt in the cause of distress or charity. Mrs. Rooke took a keen interest in the welfare of the state, and in the political world her efforts were always directed towards purity and temperance. The deceased lady will be remembered by large numbers, and in the town where she had spent very many years her life will be held in remembrance with deep affection.⁷

Similarly, in the next scheduled Convention of the Australian WCTU in 1908, reference was made:

“to Mrs Rooke having been called to higher service a few weeks ago and whose loss is much felt by our workers ... One and all spoke of her loving disposition and her desire to help in every possible way the cause we represent.”⁸

May I, on behalf of all of us here today, say thank you to Vicki and Rodney for your wonderful commitment and dedication to this project to acknowledge and celebrate the life and work of Jessie Spinks Rooke, a remarkable and outstanding woman. I hope that if she has not already been nominated, she will be nominated for the Tasmanian Honour Roll of Women for her significant contribution at a state and national level for democratic reform on behalf of women.

⁷ *Examiner*, Saturday 6 January 1906, page 5.

⁸ *The Australian Christian Commonwealth*, 23 March 1906 page 7.