

The ‘Monster Petition’ and the Women of Davis Street

Brienne Callahan

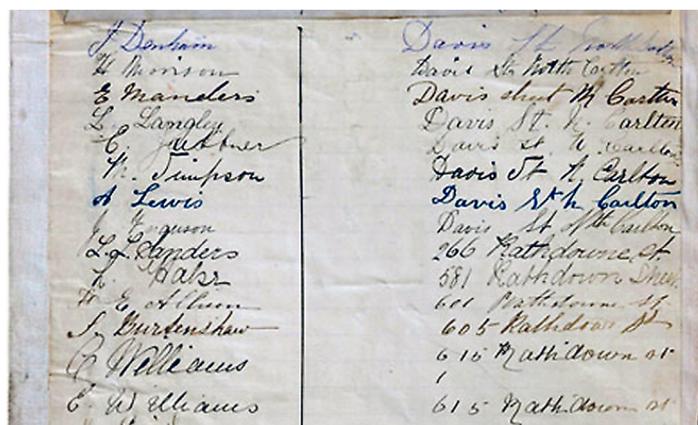
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Abstract

In 1891, women’s suffrage advocates collected the signatures of some 30,000 Victorians, all supporting the vote for women. Quickly dubbed the ‘Monster Petition’, it remains one of the largest documents ever presented to Parliament. Some of the most famous names in the suffrage movement grace the ‘Monster’, but the majority of women who signed it were not well-known names. This paper explores the lives of seven women who were left out of the history books. Working-class and living in Davis Street, North Carlton, Agnes, Eliza, Helen, Ellen, Sarah, Ada and Jessie were not ‘history makers’, yet they still made history. Their stories paint a fuller, more accurate picture of women’s history and the history of the suffrage movement in Victoria. This paper argues for the significance of all historical figures, and suggests that the smallest of us can play a role in major historical events.

This year, 2008, marks the centenary of women’s suffrage in Victoria. Some of the greatest names in the history of the movement are being rightfully celebrated across the state. Suffrage, however, did not come about without decades of struggle. In this, our year of remembrance, it is important to contextualise this milestone event. Examining the conditions of the time and exploring the lives of ordinary people are ways to provide a background for the struggle for the vote and to situate the ultimate victory as one step in a historical process. This paper examines the lives of seven such ordinary women who signed a petition for women’s suffrage in 1891, some seventeen years before the passing of the *Adult Suffrage Bill* in 1908. By getting to know these women who participated in the campaign for enfranchisement we can gain a deeper understanding of both their challenges and their achievement.



‘Monster Petition’, 1891, showing eight of the signatures collected in Davis Street, North Carlton. PROV, VPRS 3253/P0, Unit 851, p. 434 (detail). The 1891 Women’s Suffrage Petition database, on the Victorian Parliament website, can be searched by the name and address of signatories.

It took just six weeks in the spring of 1891 to collect nearly 30,000 signatures on the ‘Monster Petition’ for women’s suffrage. Dedicated suffragists collected an average of 5,000 signatures a week (over 700 per day) before the petition was presented to the Victorian Parliament in September 1891. The six-week drive proved the determination of the suffragists, and was one of first major steps along the road to 1908 and the achievement of women’s franchise. Now a prized possession of the State of Victoria, the petition itself was truly a ‘monster’, running 20 centimetres across and 260 metres in length.[1] Several men were required to carry it into Parliament. Its sheer size and unique shape make it a marvel; a stack of paper with an equal number of signatures would not be nearly as impressive as the huge, winding roll presented to Premier James Munro. Yet perhaps even more marvellous is the vast variety of women who backed the effort to expand women’s rights.

Common wisdom has it that women's suffrage was a middle-class movement, that it was a challenge taken on by those with the education and the means to turn their passions into political action. The names of Henrietta Dugdale, Bessie Lee, Vida Goldstein and the like grace the pages of many Australian histories; their sacrifices and achievements have warranted such an honour. But what about the other suffragists? Although Jessie Ferguson of 49 Davis Street may have ruled her home, she was not among the lofty names on the petition; she was the wife of a bootmaker. And in 1891, the year she became a suffragist, she lived in a five-roomed rented house on a small North Carlton street.

In 1891, the one-block Davis Street boasted fifteen signatories to the Monster Petition. This paper will tell the stories of seven of them in an attempt to paint a picture of the working-class women who belie the stereotype of women's suffrage. In doing so, I hope to expand the definition of a suffragist to include what I would call the 'backbone' of the women's suffrage movement. We will also be able to recover from history some of those who rarely warrant a mention. Each of them has something to tell us about the female experience at the time and the extraordinary ordinariness of some of those who stood up for women's rights in 1891.

The Monster Petition

The Monster Petition was presented to Parliament on 29 September 1891 in co-ordination with a bill that included an amendment for women's suffrage. While the campaign had been gaining momentum for some time, the 1891 amendment appears to have been the first time the matter was taken seriously by parliamentary leaders. Premier James Munro, a firm supporter of the temperance movement entwined with women's franchise, spoke on the floor for the proposal. *The Age* noted, however, that 'The House was so unsympathetic that the Speaker had to stop the shower of banter with which the Premier was assailed.' Mr Gillies, Leader of the Opposition, argued against the proposal with classic rhetoric used to oppose the expansion of women's rights. Gillies said that women should not be given the vote as they '[could not] perform some of the services required by the State, such as those of soldiers, sailors and police'. *The Age* refuted his statement, saying, 'the objection raised by Mr. Gillies [does not have] a great deal of force when it is remembered that old and weakly men are not called upon to perform such services, and yet they are not denied the franchise'. The newspaper, however,

did not support the amendment, an interesting stance considering its strong support of women's 'intelligence', the 'tyrannous' effects of 'taxation without representation', and its general thought that there was 'no logical reason why women should not vote at political elections if they are generally minded so to do'. The usually progressive *Age* saw women as a 'wholly untried class of voters' and believed that women's suffrage should be presented to the voters at the next election.[2]

Suffragists, however, saw no reason to wait for the franchise. A contingent of women attending the reading of the bill

even went so far as to depart from the ordinary decorum observed by 'strangers' ... and applauded the more telling points made by the Premier. Mr. Gillies ... aroused the antagonism of his critics in petticoats, who once gave decided expression to their disapproval by hissing the leader of the Opposition.[3]

Not all women were so impressed with Munro's hour-long speech either, which *The Age* notes was 'quite a long speech for the Premier, who is not noted for his word spinning powers'. In the midst of socialite news, *The Sun* stated:

The ladies owe a debt of undying gratitude to the Premier for the almost pathetic manner in which he pleaded their right to vote, on Tuesday night, and especially for his convincing poetic quotation [which follows] ... Without a doubt this alone would have won the day, but for that sad wag, G. D. Carter, who immediately capped it with [another poem].[4]

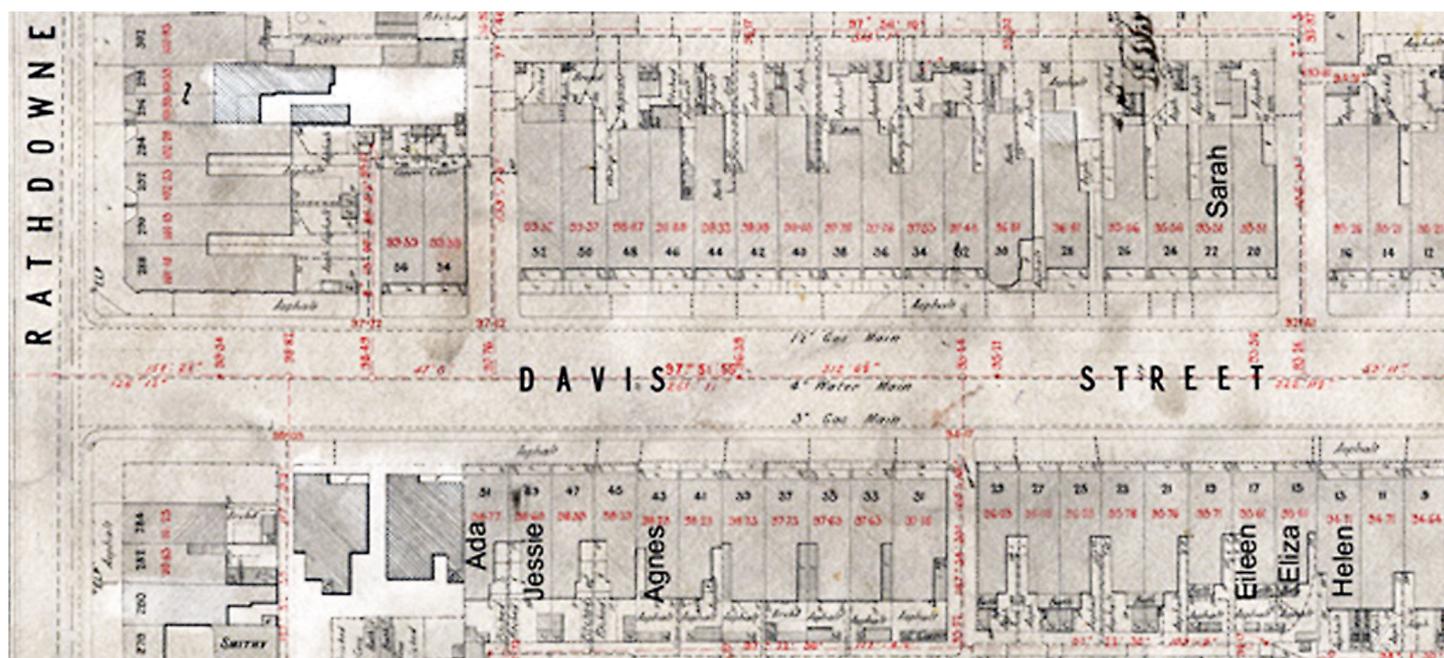
It is difficult to say exactly how this quotation should be read. One could argue that the women were sincere, and that they appreciated Munro's efforts on their behalf. Historians have noted, however, that Munro's attention to women's suffrage may have been a mere 'token gesture', as it was quickly dropped from the bill before it went to the Upper House.[5] Might there be a double entendre in the *Sun*'s 'almost pathetic' or a hint of contempt towards men who attempted to placate the suffragists with poems instead of action? Sadly, we cannot know exactly what went through the minds of women when their calls for suffrage in 1891 were refused. Given the sharp wits and tongues in the suffrage movement, however, it is not surprising that they did not end their struggle there. Suffragists had to fight for another seventeen years to gain the right to vote in Victoria, but in the end, of course, they were successful.

Women's suffrage is generally seen throughout the world as a middle- and upper-class movement. Vida Goldstein in Victoria, Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the United States of America and other well-known names all come from the higher echelons of society. While it may be true that at the leadership and organisational level most suffragists came from middle-class homes, when we look at the Monster Petition these are not the only names we see. The petition is now searchable online, and keying in Carlton, North Carlton, Collingwood, Footscray or St Kilda, all working-class and slum areas at the time, yields many names. There are significantly fewer results when entering Armadale, Kew or Toorak, examples of more affluent suburbs. Perhaps the reputation of Munro, who originally entered the Legislative Assembly as the member for Carlton, encouraged many working-class and poor women to sign. Perhaps the signature collectors took advantage of the women's lack of education. Perhaps they simply wanted to vote! Ironically, many of the women who signed the petition, including the seven on Davis Street, would have been ineligible to vote had the measure alone passed. The women's franchise clauses were tied to a provision that would have removed property restrictions to voting, a tactic decried by many suffragists as a hindrance to their chances. [6] We can only wonder what the signature collectors told the women of Davis Street and those like them. Without property, they would have been as ineligible to vote at the time as their husbands. Did the suffragists

explain this to the women in the rented houses and tenements? Or did they emphasise the 'one-person one-vote' proposal, even though they knew it would be likely to fail? Why was it easier to get the signatures of the poor than the signatures of the affluent? Were working-class women simply bolder than their wealthier sisters? These are broad questions that we may never be able to fully answer. Instead, we can look at a number of the women who did sign, to see what their personalities and lives can tell us about the ordinary women who became suffragists.

Davis Street and North Carlton

Davis Street sits at the southern end of Carlton North. The one-block street is sandwiched between Rathdowne and Canning streets east to west, and Lee and Princes streets north to south. Though Melbourne and surrounding suburbs developed around it, Davis Street did not even exist until 1873. The area bordered by Princes Street to the south, Rathdowne Street to the west, Fenwick Street to the north and Canning Street to the east was known as the Collingwood Stockade from 1853 until 1866. The area included a large bluestone quarry that provided work for prisoners 'not utterly steeped in crime'. [7] The actual prison barracks sat half a block north of later-day Davis Street, but were expanded when the gaol grew from a modest sixty prisoners to nearly 300 in 1854.



Davis Street, North Carlton, showing where each of the seven women featured in this article lived. MMBW Detailed Plan No. 1158, P ROV, VPRS 8601/P1, Unit 24.

When the prison closed in 1866, the City of Melbourne happened to be looking for a place to house some of its overflow: 'quiet, harmless, incurable lunatics'. [8] Originally, the conversion from gaol to asylum was conceived as a temporary arrangement, and few structural changes were made to the buildings. As the barracks had consisted of 'tiered canvas hammocks', this must have been an interesting situation for the new residents and their caretakers! Melbourne's booming growth, however, was quickly converting rural land into city streets. In 1873 the asylum closed and the property was converted into blocks, including Davis Street.[9]

By 1891, Davis Street had forty-five residences, nearly all of them three-, four- and five-roomed brick houses. Most of the people on Davis were renters, while their neighbours on Rathdowne, Canning and Lee tended to own their homes. Of the surrounding blocks, only Princes Street had a comparable number of renters. [10] Many landlords had multiple homes for rent: Jessie Ferguson shared a wall and a landlord with fellow signatory Ada Simpson. Ellen Louisa Langley and Eliza Emma Manders lived down the block; they also shared a landlord and an interest in women's rights. Helen Morrison lived in the smaller house just next door.

Housing conditions at the time were dismal, at best. Houses were small and families large. Melbourne did not have a viable sewerage system until 1897, and Carlton as a whole was known for its dirty water, widespread disease and frequently pungent aroma. [11] North Carlton seems to have escaped some of the fate of the southern part of the suburb. The presence of single family homes, instead of the tenements and share houses of Carlton, would have helped the crowding and resulting human waste. North Carlton, however, would not have been considered an elegant address. It is unsurprising, then, that so many families were transient. Some only lived on the block for a year or two; perhaps they moved on once they could. The Lewis family moved out, only to move back during the Depression of the 1890s. Other families seem to have made a life for themselves on the street: the Fergusons chose to move to a bigger house on the street rather than leave. Perhaps they could not afford to leave, or perhaps they had ties in the community. It is easy to romanticise these women as living simple, honest lives but there can be no question that their day-to-day existence was difficult. Over half the women we will look at lost at least one child; Helen Morrison lost four of her six. Perhaps this can help us account for why so many working-class and poor women signed the

petition. Perhaps they understood better than some of their middle- and upper-class contemporaries how important having a voice would be in legislating to change the conditions of women's lives.

All told, fifteen of the women on Davis Street signed the petition. The number is small compared to 30,000 total signatories, but the one small block of Davis shows the intense interest of women in the franchise. We must remember that signature collectors had only six weeks, and that women's suffrage was in its youth in Victoria and around the world. Given the number of areas they had to cover and the patterns of the signatures (almost all of the Davis Street names are close together on the petition), we have to assume that the collectors only went down Davis Street the one time. Unlike many other streets where mothers and daughters signed together, all the Davis names are those of individual women at individual residences. On that day in 1891, nearly one-third of Davis Street women signed the petition for the franchise. Did Agnes Lewis sign happily? Did Sarah Coulthard need to be persuaded? We will never know the answers, but these are not idle questions. In 1891, these women were willing to challenge the status quo even though they were working-class, immigrants (in the cases of Jessie and Ada) and mothers.

The Women of Davis Street[12]

Agnes Lewis was above all else a mother. She had eleven children over the course of seventeen years. Putting that in perspective, she would have been pregnant for the first time at twenty-one and delivered her last child just before she turned forty. Agnes was the youngest of the women we will get to know, but not by much; she married at nineteen or twenty, and in this was almost perfectly typical of her neighbours. The women of Davis Street were on average a little younger than their peers on the surrounding streets, and this may help us understand why they were also less likely to own their homes.

Agnes and her husband, John James, were new North Carlton residents. They married in the city in 1887, and moved to 43 Davis Street sometime in 1891 with their two children, Ada May, 3, and Mary Adeline, 1. The family lived in a four-roomed brick house that was both smaller and more expensive than those of most of their neighbours. They had moved off the block by 1893, but five years after the signing of the petition they had returned to Davis Street.

Like so many other families during and after the Depression, they needed financial help. By 1897, Agnes and John had moved one house east to number 45, a five-bedroomed house with a bathroom. The building, however, was owned by the Northern Assistance Society, perhaps one of the aid agencies that sprang up to help families in need. Unfortunately, Agnes's historical record is tied almost exclusively to her children; after Doris's 1907 birth record, which shows they were still in North Carlton, the Lewis family virtually disappears until Agnes's death in 1945 in St Kilda.

The story of Agnes, incomplete as it is, is a powerful reminder of how long it took Victorian women to gain suffrage. Between the time she signed the petition and achieved the right to vote, Agnes would have nine more children, losing two of them. Her last child, Doris, would have been a toddler by the time suffrage for women was enacted in 1908. It is a striking fact that the fight for the vote encompassed the entire childbearing years of many women.[13]



Eliza Manders and family, c. 1912. Courtesy of Bernie Manders.

Eliza Emma Manders gave birth to her eleven children over a period of twenty-one years, making her the only woman to stretch her pregnancies out for longer than Agnes. Eliza met her husband, John Edward, when he lived in her family's boarding house in Port Melbourne. John rented a room in the boarding house for ten years, and the two married in 1885, when Eliza was just eighteen. They quickly moved north, and Eliza gave birth to their first two children, William Edward and Florence Beatrice, in Carlton. They moved on to Davis Street in 1890, and had their third child, Robert Cecil,

the year Eliza signed the petition. Nine of Eliza's eleven children were boys, which must have been a challenge in the small houses in which the family lived. Their five-roomed house would have filled up quickly with the four children they had by 1892. Eliza, it seems, had endless patience for children. Family memory indicates that she also served as a wet nurse for a number of children, and may even have fostered them in her home. By 1893 the Manders family had left Davis Street, but they remained in North Carlton until John Edward's death in 1921. When she died in 1947, Eliza was living in East Brunswick with nearly her entire family in close proximity.[14]

Despite its large size, or perhaps because of it, the Manders family seems to have been particularly close. In her will, Florence Beatrice, the eldest daughter, stipulated that although the East Brunswick house was to go to her brother Walter, he must allow three other siblings, George, Eileen and Francis to live in it rent-free. When Walter died nine years later, he also passed the house on, this time to his niece, Florence Eileen. Again, his will required that Francis be allowed to remain. This emphasis on taking care of family, as well as the family names given to Florence Eileen, demonstrates the strong bonds they must have had. When Eliza signed the petition, she may have been pregnant with her second (and last) daughter. Perhaps she signed it for Florence Beatrice and the daughters she hoped to have; little did she know that Eileen would be followed by seven (and seventeen years of) boys. The women in Eliza's house may have been outnumbered by more than three to one, but in 1891 she took a strong step towards levelling the playing field for all Australian women.[15]

Living just to the east of Eliza was Helen Morrison. Helen is unique among our women on two counts: she was older than her Davis Street peers, and she appears to have been part of the gold rush. All the other Davis Street women either came from Melbourne and surrounding suburbs, or moved straight to the city upon their arrival in Australia. We do not know where Helen and her husband, John, married in 1865. It seems likely that it was somewhere in eastern Victoria or in Scotland, as both Morrison and McRae, Helen's maiden name, are traditional Scottish names. They had their first child, John Alexander, in Stanley, Victoria in 1866, followed by four more children in El Dorado (both near Beechworth). The family settled for several years in El Dorado, a town nearly 300 kilometres northeast of Melbourne. Presumably they, like so many others, were prospecting or making their living providing services for other gold prospectors.

Life appears not to have been easy: Helen and John lost two of their five children shortly after birth. Whatever happened in El Dorado, the family had moved to Fitzroy by at least 1881, where they had Christina, their first child in six years. They appear to have moved frequently, as Christina's birth in Fitzroy and death the following year in Carlton suggests.

In 1891 the Morrisons had lived on Davis Street for around a year. Their house was one of the smallest and least expensive on the block, with just four rooms and a rent of £1 8s. Given that their three surviving children would have been 25 (John Alexander), 20 (George), and 18 (Helen), it is possible that they lived on their own, though also likely that Helen, being unmarried, was still at home. The signature on the petition reads 'H. Morrison' and not 'Mrs. Morrison', so perhaps the younger Helen signed rather than her mother. With no small children at home, Helen senior may have found work to support the family's income and missed her chance to make history. Though the family lived on Davis Street for several more years, they had moved on when their son, George, died in 1897.

It seems as though the Morrison family had had their fair share of loss and strife by 1891. Did the elder Helen sign the petition with hopes of putting a sad past behind her? Did the young girl sign with dreams of a bright future? Like Agnes, and probably thousands of other women, Helen's history is tied up in her children. After George's death, no further records exist for Helen, and she quite literally disappears from history.

These stories come from public records, and the variety in the tales they tell is amazing. While details of Helen's birth, marriage and death remain unknown, the early life of her neighbour Ellen Louisa Langley is a virtual open book. Ellen lived two doors down from Helen, just on the other side of Eliza at 17 Davis Street. Her family, the Stokes, was originally from Tasmania, but they moved to Bacchus Marsh, about 55 km from Melbourne, around the time Ellen was born in 1864. The town was a stopover on the way from the goldfields in Ballarat and provided produce for Melbourne markets. Ellen eventually married Thomas Edwin Langley in Collingwood in 1883, and their daughter, Florence Beatrice (apparently a popular name at the time, perhaps in homage to Florence Nightingale), was born the same year in Carlton.

The Stokes/Langleys seem to have been another close family. Ellen's mother, Mary, and father, Henry William, lived nearby until their deaths. It appears, however, that Ellen may have favoured her mother over her father, as two of her children bore her mother's name (Mary

Louisa and Linda Mary), whereas her two boys, though given three names each, had not a Henry or William among them. Then again, the names Thomas and Edwin were also notably left out; perhaps it had become a bit *too close* in their five-roomed house by the time the boys were born in the mid-1890s.

Ellen's family was one of the most stable, at least in terms of accommodation. They lived in their house on Davis Street for at least seven years, far outstripping their neighbours in longevity. Their consistency helps us measure the true effects of the Depression that hit Victoria in the 1890s. In 1891, their house was rented for £1 10s; six years later, they were only paying 18s. Nearly every house on the block saw a comparable decline in rental prices. Similarly, several landlords with multiple houses either lost their property or apparently sold it as best they could. As we saw with the Lewis family, four of the houses on the block were converted into larger homes managed by the Northern Assistance Society. In their variety of experiences, the women of Davis Street are nonetheless extremely average, representative of their time.

Sarah Josephine Whelan was born in 1867 in Sunbury, the eldest of ten children. How she met her husband William Coulthard is unknown, but they married in the Melbourne parish of Boroondara in 1888. William had been born in Boroondara, but the new family relocated to North Carlton in time for the birth to their first daughter, Lillian (Lillie) Mary, the same year they married. By 1891 they had another daughter, Eveline (Evelyn in later records). It appears they lived on Davis Street just long enough to sign the petition; Sands & McDougall only place them on the street for one year. The couple had five more children, losing two of them, in Carlton or North Carlton. As any mother would, Sarah seems to have had difficulty accepting the loss of her children. Veronica Maude was born and died in 1901; another daughter, Elise, died shortly after in 1903, at age nine. Sarah waited another four years before giving birth again, this time to her last child, Albert Joseph, in 1907.

Sarah's will and probate records paint a fractured picture of the Coulthard family in later days. It appears there was a dispute amongst Sarah's children after her death in 1947. Albert Joseph was named executor, but Evelyn, George and Vincent contested her will. They stated that they were her children, 'All of whom are entitled as some of her next of kin to share in her property'. The complaint was withdrawn five months later. It would be unwise to read too much into the family's personal business, but it does paint a sad portrait of Sarah's last days.

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According to an affidavit in her probate record, Sarah was sitting up in bed when she wrote out the will. Both her frail signature and her death a month later indicate that she may have already been bedridden. If she did deliberately exclude three of her children in her final days, we can only wonder at the effect of the years on the woman who had signed the petition in 1891.[16]

Ada Riley married Walter Simpson, a man ten years her elder, in London in 1881. The trip out to Australia must have been challenging, as she gave birth to George Henry in Carlton the following year. Morning *and* sea sickness could not have been a pleasant combination. The couple seem to have moved to the block on Davis Street by the time the last of their five children, Agnes Maude, was born in 1890. The Simpsons, like the Fergusons, Manders and Langleys, lived on Davis Street for a number of years. In fact, they lived next door to the Fergusons, sharing a landlord and a floor plan. Jessie and Ada must surely have known each other. We are left to wonder, however, whether or not they were friends. Between the two of them, there would have been eight children under ten years of age in 1891, six of whom were girls around the same age. We can safely hope that Ada and Jessie had time for tea and a chat while the girls played, though let us also hope – given the sanitation conditions at the time – that they played inside the house.

The Simpsons had their last child before they left Davis Street, so their whereabouts immediately afterwards are a mystery. Eventually they settled on Holden Street in North Fitzroy. Walter must have been a hard worker; he is still listed in the rate books as a confectioner just before his death in 1925 at the age of 73. Like most of his neighbours from Davis Street, he owned his own home at the time of his death. He wrote his will just a day before he died, leaving everything to Ada. She followed him a year and a half later, passing her house and ‘furniture very old in use for 50 years’ to her children.[17]

It seems unsurprising that a woman who travelled halfway around the world for a better life would sign a petition for women’s rights, but each of the 30,000 who signed the Monster Petition did something extraordinary. We must not forget that many of the women at the time could not read or write; there are many places on the petition where several neighbours are all signed by the one hand. We should also remember that for some of them it may have been risky if their husbands were unsupportive. Whether or not Walter would have approved, Ada’s signature moved her towards gaining the right to vote that women in her

native England would have to wait an additional ten years to achieve.[18] The promise of new opportunities is most likely what brought the Simpsons to Australia; Ada found at least two of them in the Monster Petition of 1891 and the *Adult Suffrage Bill* of 1908.

Finally, there is Jessie. Jessie McKay married Adam Ferguson in Glasgow, Scotland in 1885, a bit later than most of her peers. At twenty-four, she would have been a fairly mature woman when she married. Jessie and Adam arrived in Pitt Street, Carlton in time for their daughter Elizabeth’s birth in 1886 after what appears to have been another pregnancy at sea. They had eight children together between 1886 and 1901, including one named Jessie and another named Stanley Adam. The Fergusons appear to have progressed fairly steadily through life. Adam was a bootmaker, and they left Carlton for Davis Street shortly after their arrival. They rented 49 Davis Street, the five-roomed house next to Ada’s, for a few years, before moving to the six-roomed house across the road in 1894. When Adam died in 1926, they owned their home as well as a piece of land in Spotswood.[19]

Jessie’s will, written just two years before her death in 1931, pays special attention to the debtor among her progeny. While Alexandra May received the piano and Olive the dining-room table, William James could only receive his portion of the inheritance after the £26 he owed his brother Stanley Adam had been deducted. Jessie wrote that ‘such deduction is a condition to my said son William James Ferguson receiving anything under my WILL and not subject to any objection by him’.[20] We can only speculate about the origin (and length!) of the debt that required her to intercede, but though her signature is shakier than when she signed the Monster Petition, Jessie Ferguson’s spirit seems just as strong as that day in 1891.

Jessie’s records also tell us something about the Great Depression in Australia. Her son, Stanley Adam, was the executor of her estate and his notes in her probate file paint a sobering picture. Although the family wanted to sell the house and divide the proceeds (minus £26 for William James, of course), they had trouble getting a good price. Stanley Adam wrote that the family had decided to rent the house for a while to see if ‘things will get better and [we] might get a fair price for it’.[21] Jessie’s real estate was valued at £780, but the family eventually took £500 for it nine months after her death.[22]

It is Jessie's forcefulness in her will that makes her stand out, but she was not alone in her attention to detail. Another woman, Louisa Lettis Robb, whose residence on Lee Street leaves her mostly out of this story, also left detailed instructions to her children. Specifically, she left eleven pages of handwritten notes, detailing some two hundred items that were to be doled out to assigned individuals. Door mats were divided up among the children, while the silver smelling salts went to Valerie alone. Next to 'back brush' she has written 'anyone'.^[23] What is striking here is the care with which these women treated their possessions. On the long, slow climb up from renting to owning, they learned the value of their belongings and their familial relationships. It is difficult to imagine that women like Jessie and Louisa took something like signing a petition lightly.^[24] More likely, they thought carefully before signing, understanding the impact of their names on the lines.

Leaving Davis Street

What purpose is there in learning about the lives of seven women who appeared for a moment in history and disappeared again? What do their stories, pieced together through public records and some speculation, have to offer the study of the women's suffrage movement? Despite the fragmentary nature of some of the records and the numerous dead ends, I have been surprised at the attachment I have formed to these women. I was sad going over Sarah's probate records. I smiled when I learned that Ada's husband ran a sweets shop. I laughed out loud at Jessie's will. Too often we forget to look for the extraordinary in people's ordinary lives. While these women were certainly ordinary, average and representative, they were also funny, sad and wonderful. In 1891 they did something extraordinary by anyone's standards: they participated in one the largest petitions ever presented to Parliament. They stood up for themselves, for their neighbours and for women all around the world. Maybe Eliza understood the enormous impact her small signature would have on the lives of future generations of women. Perhaps she had more important things to do that day, and only signed to get the petition collector off her doorstep. That does not make her life any less significant or less worthy of study.

These seven women help us paint a more complete picture of women's suffrage, one that includes all women and not just those who made the headlines and gave the famous speeches. It was working-class women like Agnes, Eliza, Ellen, Helen, Sarah,

Ada and Jessie who formed the basis of the 1891 Monster Petition and, ultimately, the popular support that swayed politicians. The women of Davis Street represent only a tiny proportion of those who made women's suffrage a reality in Victoria. Though they laid only a few small bricks in the road to 1908, we know that every brick was essential. It is important that we thank and remember equally those who laid them.

Endnotes

- [1] Victorian Parliament, 1891 Women's Suffrage Petition – Background, available at <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/WomensPetition/background.htm> (accessed 30 April 2007).
- [2] *The Age*, 'News of the Day', 30 September 1891, p. 4.
- [3] *ibid.*
- [4] *The Sun*, 2 October 1891, p. 2.
- [5] A Oldfield, *Woman suffrage in Australia: a gift or a struggle?*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 140 and K Lees, *Votes for women: the Australian story*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, New South Wales, 1995, p. 118.
- [6] Oldfield, p. 140.
- [7] *The Argus*, 8 April 1857, quoted in *Carlton: a history*, ed. Peter Yule, Melbourne University Publishing, 2004, p. 22. Regarding the Collingwood Stockade, see also Peter Andrew Barrett 'Her Majesty's Collingwood Stockade: A Snapshot of Gold Rush Victoria', *Provenance*, issue 6, September 2007.
- [8] *ibid.*, p. 24.
- [9] *ibid.*, pp. 22-5.
- [10] A comparison of rate books and Sands & McDougall Melbourne directories for 1890-92 (all held by PROV) yields this information. Rate books provide the name of the owner, whilst Sands & McDougall identify the residents of the property at the time.
- [11] Yule, p. 393 and 'Sewage treatment: Melbourne's history', published on the Melbourne Water website http://www.melbournewater.com.au/content/sewage/sewage_treatment/sewage_treatment_-_melbournes_history.asp?bhcp=1 (accessed 30 April 2007).

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[12] The bibliographic information contained in this section comes from a variety of sources. To ease readability, I have compiled some of this information here. The names and addresses on the petition were matched with those listed for Davis Street in the Sands & McDougall directories for the years 1885-97, that is, covering several years either side of 1891. Sands & McDougall clearly compiled their North Carlton information after August/September, when the petition was signed. For instance, Sarah Coulthard is not present in 1891, but is present in 1892. Therefore, I used the 1892 Directory as the basis for my research. Basic bibliographic information, such as birthdates, death dates, marriages, children, etc. comes from the Births, Deaths, and Marriages databases located at both the State Library of Victoria and at PROV. Probate records at PROV were used to find the wills and probate and administration papers of the women and their families. Rate books for various years (1885-97), located at PROV (VPRS 5708/P2, various items and unit numbers), were used to determine house size, rent, landlords, etc. Other sources include MMBW Street Blocks Maps, 1890-1950 and Melbourne Probate Records, 1900-83.

[13] See PROV, VPRS 28/P4, Unit 3598, Item 633/342 (probate and administration of John Cyril Fookes Lewis) and PROV, VPRS 7591/P3, Unit 612, Item 633/342 (will of John Cyril Fookes Lewis).

[14] Some of this information was provided by Bernie Manders, Eliza's grandson, with whom I have been in contact.

[15] Some information provided by Bernie Manders. See also PROV, VPRS 28/P7, Unit 424, Item 787/262 (probate and administration of Florence Beatrice Manders); PROV VPRS 28/P13, Unit 217, Item 924/889 (probate and administration of Walter Leslie Manders); PROV, VPRS 7591/P4, Unit 509, Item 787/262 (will of Florence Beatrice Manders); PROV, VPRS 7591/P9, Unit 45, Item 924/889 (will of Walter Leslie Manders).

[16] See PROV, VPRS 28/P3, Unit 4582, Item 393/906 (probate and administration of Sarah Coulthard); and PROV, VPRS 7591/P2, Unit 1379, Item 393/906 (will of Sarah Coulthard).

[17] See PROV, VPRS 28/P3, Unit 1593, Item 205/014 (probate and administration papers of Walter Simpson); and PROV, VPRS 7591/P2, Unit 723, Item 205/014 (will of Walter Simpson); PROV, VPRS 28/P3, Unit 1764, Item 215/362 (probate and administration papers of Ada Simpson); and PROV, VPRS 7591/P2, Unit 757, Item 215/362 (will of Ada Simpson).

[18] In fact, universal suffrage was not granted in the United Kingdom until 1928. British women over the age of 30, with some property restrictions, were given the vote in 1918.

[19] PROV, VPRS 28/P3, Unit 1691, Item 210/948 (probate and administration of Adam Ferguson).

[20] PROV, VPRS 7591/P2, Unit 842, Item 215/261 (will of Jessie Ferguson).

[21] PROV, VPRS 28/P3, Unit 2180, Item 215/261 (probate and administration of Jessie Ferguson).

[22] Stanley Adam's will, however, demonstrates the upward mobility of the family. With only a small house on Davis Street in 1891 and through the Great Depression, Stanley Adam is listed as 'gentleman' in his will and probate records. PROV, VPRS 7591/P3, Unit 729, Item 665/681 (will of Stanley Adam Ferguson); and PROV, VPRS 28/P4, Unit 4285, Item 665/681 (probate and administration of Stanley Adam Ferguson).

[23] PROV, VPRS 28/P3, Unit 3341, Item 312/281 (probate and administration of Louisa Lettis Robb); and PROV, VPRS 7591/P2, Unit 1100, Item 312/281 (will of Louisa Lettis Robb).

[24] Louisa's surname was mistranscribed as 'Rodd' on the petition. She lived at 75 Lee Street, North Carlton.