

She Dared to Speak:
Connie Birchfield's Story.

Reviewed by Bronwyn Dalley

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Maureen Birchfield.

Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1998.

Maureen Birchfield begins the biography of her mother, Connie Birchfield, with a vivid image of Connie as an elderly woman: mother, grandmother, homemaker, and political activist. The sense of personal strength, and the combination of family relationships and political activity, form the threads of Connie Birchfield's story that her daughter weaves together throughout this book.

Connie Rawcliffe was born in Lancashire in 1898 and began work in a cotton mill at the age of thirteen. She emigrated to New Zealand in 1923 to work as a housekeeper on a Taranaki farm, and later settled in Wellington where she lived for the remainder of her life. Connie joined the Labour Party in 1925, but it was as a member of the Communist Party from 1933 that she began an active and public political life. From the 1930s through to the 1950s Connie was a regular Communist Party candidate for local and central government elections, and a regular soap-box orator on Wellington street-corners on Friday evenings. Although never elected to Parliament or the local council, Connie was an ardent campaigner on a broad range of issues: workers' rights, better housing, air pollution, anti-fascism. Her marriage to 'Birchie' in 1936, and the subsequent birth of two daughters, made little difference to her political activity. Maureen Birchfield remembers her mother as different: 'she did things other mothers didn't do: she went to political meetings, she spoke on street corners and she stood for Parliament' (p.12). Like others disillusioned with Soviet Russia in the 1950s, Connie left the Communist Party, but remained committed to socialism and justice for all throughout her life. I would have liked to have known more about the continuation of Connie's activities once she left the Party in 1957; the last 40 years of her life pass by quickly in this. Nevertheless, a photograph of Connie at the 1990 Labour Day celebrations captures her spirit and ongoing commitment: sitting in a wheelchair with a rug over her knees, Connie holds aloft a Labour Day flag in the face of a brisk Wellington wind.

Birchfield's biography is a sympathetic—sometimes indulgent—portrayal of her mother's life. Sensibly, Birchfield does not search for early signs of Connie's later political activity. As a young woman in the Lancashire mills Connie stood up to the bosses, not for others and a general 'worker's cause', as Birchfield notes, but for her self and her own immediate interests. A broader commitment to justice would come later after Connie's move to New Zealand and introduction to local socialists through family, fellow boarders and friends. The discussion of such political networks is one of the strengths of this book. We are given a glimpse of an active socialist and Communist political network which focussed around households and personal contacts. Shared books, conversations over the dinner table with friends and boarders, and local community activities loom large in forming the milieu of socialist activities in post-war Wellington. In capturing this, Birchfield offers us a story of an active woman, and the circles in which she moved.

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