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CONCLUSION
Stories of our Founders – Women of the PWMU in Australia and Vanuatu

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This paper gives some historical background to the ‘Returning Mission’ visit. It aims to outline the connection between the women of the Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Union in Australia and Vanuatu. It draws on the material kept in the archives of the Uniting Church in Australia in Melbourne. It tells a story of a long connection with the New Hebrides that is not remembered as clearly as it should be in Australia. The visit of the PWMU of Vanuatu in November 2011 was an important prompt for us. I was one of the many who had not really heard of Miss Amy Skinner and who knew little of Miss Catherine Ritchie’s work in the Pacific. The ‘Returning Mission’ visit helped me to see more of their significance, and to understand how important it is that we find ways to build on their work in partnership with the PWMU of Vanuatu, so as to truly honour their memory.

1. Stories and perspectives

We tell stories from a perspective, always making choices about what it important. We see different angles and different issues depending on our perspective.

The constellation of the Southern Cross that lights the night sky across Australia and the Pacific is a focus of stories told from distinct perspectives. The Spanish and Portuguese navigators who sailed into the Pacific from Europe in the sixteenth century, knew about early legends that said such an arrangement of stars had once shone in the northern hemisphere. The Cross appears on charts in ancient Egypt and is reported in letters of early explorers, but legend says that the stars of the Cross had slipped below the northern horizon. They had not been seen in the northern sky since the time of the crucifixion of Jesus. But the Spanish and Portuguese sailors remembered the legend, so when they sailed south and saw the four stars in the sky, they were ready to recognise a banner of faith. Their name for the constellation, Southern Cross, became important for missionaries too.

Those Spanish navigators were also ready to recognise a land in the south that would balance the land in the north on their maps. As you know, the expected to find a land mass they called ‘Terra Australis del Espiritu Santo’ or ‘South Land of the Holy Spirit’. The island of Santos in Vanuatu carries that name because originally the Europeans thought it was Terra Australis. The two countries share this history of European exploration, misunderstanding and naming, as we share the stars in the night sky.

Other cultures and peoples saw the stars differently from the Spanish and Portuguese. English sailors knew the legend of the Cross, but they did not see a
banner of faith. Instead for them the constellation was primarily a clock, the stars were part science, used in navigating distance and measuring time.

Navigators among the Pacific peoples, and the Aboriginal communities in Australia had other names. For the Maori of New Zealand they are ‘Te Punga’, meaning the Anchor. For the Kanda people near the border of Victorian border, they are the ‘Mirrabooka’, the four unmarried daughters of a group elder. His two bright eyes watch over them from the vantage point nearby.

For the people of the Groote Eylandt in the Northern Territory, these same stars are a stingray just before it encounters a shark coming in from the side.

In another legend, two of the stars are the eyes of a hunter who fell exhausted under a great tree because he would not kill ancestral animals in the drought. When death drew him up into a tree, two white cockatoos pointed the way for the whole tree to move into the sky.

There are many stories of the same stars. Sometimes they are remembered and shared, at other times they are not shared and begin to be forgotten.

It is the same within the shared memory that is the history of a people or a place: some stories are remembered and shared, others get forgotten and are neglected. Stories of women and of the connections between people often fall into the category of forgotten stories.

For example, we do not remember as clearly as we should that there is a long shared history of contact through the PWMU of Victoria and Vanuatu. One strand of this history is the fundraising done through the Sammy Stamp collections.

In 1921 Mrs D. Lyall returned from Korea, where her husband had died while serving as a missionary. She was employed in the Foreign Mission Office of the Presbyterian Church and through the PWMU she organised the collection of stamps to raise funds. Stamp sales run by the PWMU raised money to bring children from the New Hebrides, Korea, and Indonesia to Melbourne for medical treatment.

For example, in 1962 a baby called Leitangi Solomon was born in the New Hebrides without hands or legs. From the time she was about three years old, the PWMU helped with expenses to bring her to Melbourne every two or three years to be fitted with artificial limbs. At thirteen she attended a special school in Fiji where she learnt to type and operate a switchboard. And today, as you know, she works as a receptionist, telephonist and tele-radio operator at the Ministry of Health in Vila.

[Image 1 Leitangi Solomon 1960s]

Sometimes we do not tell the stories because they are shameful. In Australia, we have forgotten that the famous activist Faith Bandler has a Pacific heritage. Faith was an important campaigner for the rights of Aboriginal
Australians to be counted as citizens in Australia. She is pictured here with other members of the churches who worked for the ‘Yes’ vote to recognise Aboriginal citizenship in the 1967 referendum. We recognise the significant role she played in that campaign, but we do not remember so well that she is a woman of Vanuatu. Her father was kidnapped from Ambrym in 1883 and brought to Australia to work in the cane fields in Queensland. The ‘blackbirding’ part of our connection to the Pacific is shameful to us, and we do not tell the story as we should to truly acknowledge the contribution of this Pacific woman.

**Image 2: Faith Bandler**

Today we are reclaiming the stories of Amy Skinner and Catherine Ritchie in relation to their work as Presbyterian deaconesses, and founders of the PWMU in the New Hebrides. It is a rich and important story for Australian women and as you have told us, for Pacific women also. Their missionary work is also part of a longer history.

**2. The Missionary Century 1800-1914**

The nineteenth century saw a great expansion of Christian missionary work from Europe through the rest of the world. Churches fanned out across the routes established by trade, protected and encouraged by the links of empire between European powers and their colonies. In many standard textbooks on church history, these years are often simply called the ‘missionary century’.

The influence of Europe expanded rapidly around the globe in these years. In 1800 Europe claimed 55% of the territory of the globe, and was actively in charge of 35%. By 1878 that influence had expanded by an additional 83,000 square miles every year so that by then Europe was in charge of 67% of the world’s land. From then, the rate of expansion increased to 240,000 square miles a year, so that by 1914 European powers held 85% of the globe. Most of the globe, including the New Hebrides and Australia was under European influence through these years.

Within this expansion there was enormous interest in missionary work. In 1900 around the globe one estimate says there were 13,600 Protestant missionaries mostly from English-speaking backgrounds (about 5,900 were sent from Britain, and 4,100 from the USA). There were about 70,000 Catholic missionaries at the same time, including 53,000 women many of whom were French. Mission to overseas countries was very popular in European churches, and missionaries were admired for their faith and their courage. One historian calls the spread of British and American evangelical missions in this period ‘the most spectacular diffusion...in world history’. The outreach to the New Hebrides was part of this movement.
3. Missionary Links between Scotland, Australia and New Hebrides

The Presbyterian Church in Victoria shared the missionary enthusiasm, and focused their mission effort quite specifically on the New Hebrides and Korea. Their commitment to the New Hebrides helped sustain with the wider political interest in the New Hebrides in Australia. Members of the church lobbied political leaders in Melbourne and Sydney through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, asking for closer connections to secure British (and Presbyterian) interests through the Pacific. Australia's ties with Scottish missionaries were important in increasing contact with the New Hebrides. John Geddie who with his wife Charlotte ministered in Aneityum from 1848 visited Melbourne on furlough. When John died in 1872 Charlotte retired to Geelong, and became a key leader in the PWMU. She was the first President when the organisation was established formally in 1890. Mission boxes with supplies and resources had been sent from Victoria since the 1860s and continued to feature in Australian reports of mission activity.

The work of raising funds to fill the boxes and then packing them was undertaken by the PWMU, although the reports show the men of the congregations would seal them up firmly with twisted wire for the voyage to the New Hebrides. For example, we know that in 1897 Victorian branches of the PWMU sent 46 boxes to the New Hebrides. They contained materials the missionaries were keen to use: cotton wool, eucalyptus oil, Vaseline, shirts, trousers, dresses, fabric for clothing and for dressing wounds, tinned food, books, magazines, thimbles, and dolls - especially dolls with dark hair.

As the image from the archives of the Uniting Church shows, women were recorded and remembered as essential to the missionary team. While their husbands were given the title formally, the missionary wives were involved from the very beginning. [Image 3 Early workers in the New Hebrides mission (Uniting Church Archives, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania)] It was unusual for a missionary not to have a wife with him, and something of a disadvantage. These images of the Synod Breakfast from 1900, and a medical mission station in 1897 show the strong involvement of missionary families. The women, daughters as well as wives, were especially important in building bridges with the Island women and children. Their contribution was not always obvious or acknowledged. [Image 4 and 5: Synod breakfast 1900, Medical mission 1897]

Sheila Jamieson remembers that during her time alongside her husband the medical missionary Dr Knox Jamieson, people in Australia would ask, ‘But what do you do there?’ Sheila would answer simply: ‘I am first emergency for everything.’

4. After 100 years: attaching the outrigger of women’s ministry

In 1944, after nearly one hundred years of church work in the New Hebrides, it seemed to many that missionary work needed a new approach. In the same way as a canoe without an outrigger had little stability or proper
direction, so the mission needed to work with women as well as men in order for the church to be whole and to really grow in the life of the people. The Presbyterian Church in Australia decided to send two deaconesses to investigate the possibilities for better connection with Pacific women of the New Hebrides, or as the minutes of the conference said, ‘to find out the needs for the development of women’s work in the New Hebrides.’ Miss Amy Skinner and Miss Catherine Ritchie travelled through the war zone of the Pacific in 1944, and visited islands from Tanna in the south to Santos in the north. On 12 December 1944 the PWMU in Victoria heard their report and resolved to support the new advances in the New Hebrides. Specifically they wanted to make possible:

1. A teacher for Vila
2. Another staff member for Paton Memorial Hospital
3. One or more deaconesses
4. A team of nurse and teacher for Paama

In March 1945, the Melbourne newspaper the *Argus* reported a ‘wider field for women missionaries’ on page 10. The announcement was surrounded by news of weddings and engagements, new kitchen equipment, a beauty competition, and other items assumed to of particular interest to women. It advised readers that deaconesses had left Australia to begin this new work. Miss Amy Skinner and Miss Eileen Hillebrand (later Stephens), together with Miss Marjorie Alexander who was to be a ‘missionary housekeeper’ at Vila Hospital were the first party.

[Image 6]

Catherine Ritchie remained vitally interested in Vanuatu but was never stationed there; instead her work was fundamental to the success of Rolland House, the deaconess training centre in Carlton. Others who worked in Vanuatu included Jean Lockwood Eddy McLeod, Shirley McRae (Iririki), Joan Beel Amos (Paama), Peg Maloney Goddard (Paama), Meg Cranston, Joyce Trudinger McLeod (Aulua, Malekula), Lyn Walker (SW Bay, Malekula, Vila and S. Islands Presbytery), Nance Smith (youth convener, Santo), Vilma Sinclair Collard, and Dorothy Rutter Regenvanu (TTI).

The vocation of the deaconess was of long-standing. Young women of at least 18 years were encouraged to consider this calling if they had within their Christian commitment, a particular concern for other people, a desire to serve, an interest in study, a willingness to work, good physical and mental health and a sense of humour. Many considered their most significant quality ‘the capacity to learn and grow’.

In 1948 just as the mission to the New Hebrides was gaining momentum the training centre at Rolland House celebrated 50 years, and the training of some 150 women. The students there reflected on what it meant to respond to the ‘insistent challenge’ and to be ‘set aside’ as deaconesses at this time.

We all were for years members of the Church, active leaders in Sunday Schools and the PFA, and as we went about our ordinary everyday duties
we served Christ ...but there seemed to come an insistent challenge that would not be denied or stifled, and which could find satisfaction only in full service for Christ through His Church.

Each of us then had a decision to make - to leave our usual occupations of typist or teacher, or whatever it was, leave our PFA, leave even our home folk, and begin a 3 year training course. We made our decision and are deaconess students of the College.

Pictured in the jubilee booklet with their bicycles and in the chapel, the women paid tribute to the quality of the training they were receiving through the work of Cath Ritchie and others. Rolland House itself was a powerhouse for service in the region, including the New Hebrides.

5. Establishing the Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Union in the Pacific

When Amy Skinner arrived in the New Hebrides, she was already an experienced missionary and a mature woman of some 50 years of age. Her experience in Korea had shown that partnership with the local women was the most secure way to build an understanding of Christianity.

Amy Gertrude Maud Skinner was born 1889 in Beechworth, Victoria. She came from a talented family. She was one of the few women to study at the University of Melbourne in the first years of the twentieth century, and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree and took a Diploma of Education with a sense that her vocation lay in teaching. In 1913 she attended a women’s meeting of the Student Christian Movement in the Wyselaskie Hall at Ormond College. (This large room where the ‘Returning Mission’ gathering was welcomed and farewell during the 2011 visit.) Amy left that meeting, chaired by Ruth Rouse, Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation with ‘unswerving purpose’ and a clear sense of her Christian calling. Her education had prepared her well for Christian ministry. The elders of the missionary movement remembered that

She came to us in 1914 prepared and equipped not merely with special secular and religious training but charged with these deep spiritual
energies which were at that time and under the leadership of Frank Paton were lifting our church in Victoria to new levels of devotion and effort. She had a gifted for languages, and for making good friendships. She was a wonderful storyteller, and people remembered her characteristic laugh and the laughter she shared with others.

Amy Skinner left Australia first to work in Korea. She served there from 1914 until 1940 when the missionaries were expelled during World War II. She was posted to Kuchange 1914-1916, 1927-28, Masan 1916-1920, and Tongyoung 1920-1940. From 1940 until she was posted to the New Hebrides she served in Whyalla, in South Australia. Following her visit to the Pacific with Cath Ritchie in 1944, Amy Skinner worked in the islands of Vanuatu for the remainder of her missionary service. She died in Melbourne in 1954.

Her first priority in the New Hebrides was to call together the women who were already associated with the church. Amy reported to the Missionary Chronicle that there was a meeting on Fila Island on the 9 August 1945 to explore what would be possible.

We really wanted to see whether or not the women would like some form of women’s meeting. Seventeen women turned up when we rang the bell in the afternoon, and we initiated what I believe to be the first PWMU in the Islands.

From that gathering an approach developed where women went in teams of three to visit villages across the whole network of islands. On Fila the local organisers were Tounali, Salome, and Leiruk; on Pango: Leikarie and Donnnis; on Mele: Rachel and Leitamat; on Eratap: Leimas and Lilo. The local structure of the PWMU went from strength to strength, and the women invested their time and energy generously. This was not always appreciated by the men who found there was plenty of other work to do also. A message sent to one party of missionary women on a village visit, said simply: ‘Tell our wives to come home. We tired.’

The deaconesses assisted with the visitations, and also worked alongside the missionaries already established in the hospital and school. Near Vila Leitmat organized a program that involved Amy Skinner and Sheila Jamieson in weekly visits to villages near by. Sheila Jamieson remembers how remarkable Miss Skinner was through these years, sometimes at risk of her own health.

She was diabetic. But when we got to any village there would be a huge number of little children arrive, and Skinner always sat down and played games with the little children. She was just wonderful.

When we got to a village the first thing was Miss Skinner played with the kids and we all joined in and played ring-a-rosie and goodness knows what, and then after that it was time to scale the babies.

The weighing of the babies (‘to scale the babies’) had a practical and clear impact on tracking their health. The Australians were not so sure about the effectiveness of the games they played. But if they needed any reassurance it was the speed with which the rhymes and actions travelled through the communities. They
would arrive at a village where they were not known, only to find that the games and the expected routine had preceded them and already been enthusiastically taken up as a form of play.

Image 10 Amy Skinner in her time at Rolland House, c.1914.

Amy Skinner’s death in the Royal Melbourne Hospital in 1954 was met with deep sorrow in the Pacific. The PWMU in the New Hebrides recorded a memorial minute on 9 October in that year. They noted her significance in founding the organisation and her wise pastoral presence that had sustained their work for many years.

Miss Amy Skinner came to the New Hebrides in 194[5] as Principal of Irikiki District School, and in a very short time became the true friend of every woman in the district. She founded the PWMU and was the first Secretary of the Executive. There were many things about Miss Skinner that the women in the five villages will never forget; her wonderful teaching of the Bible, her understanding of other people’s troubles, her love for small children, the way she could always make other people laugh, her way of giving all that she had in the service of Jesus Christ.

The women she had worked with so closely concluded simply and powerfully:

*We loved Miss Skinner and Miss Skinner loved us, and we give thanks to God that her life and example have been an inspiration to so many, and that has made for the PWMU of all the New Hebrides a ‘wise and sure foundation’.*

In September 1954 *The Missionary Chronicle* gave details of the Memorial Service that had been held for her in the Vila district on 22 July. On that Thursday PWMU members from the five villages near Vila, the students from Iririki District School, nurses from the Paton Memorial Hospital, gathered in the Margaret Whitecross Paton Memorial Church.

As the church bell was tolling, the women came silently into the Church, and except for the words of the service itself, no word was spoken until the last person had left the church.

The Church had been made beautiful with tributes of flowers, roses, gerbera, cannas, lilies, hibiscus and many-coloured leaves. Leitamat, the President of the PWMU presided, and opened the service with the words of Jesus ‘I am the Resurrection and the life, he …shall never die.’

The *Chronicle* noted there were tributes in English and in the local language, naming the strong connection between Amy Skinner and the women who had moved into active Christian faith and ministry because of her encouragement.

Salome, President of the PWMU in Erromango, said, ‘We have come here today because our Mother in Christ has died,’ and then she went on to tell how Miss Skinner had first asked her to help in founding the PWMU in the New Hebrides; how she had taught her and inspired he and been her true
friend and mother in Christ. Anna, an old lady from Erakor, spoke in her own language, and said quite simply, ‘Miss Skinner loved me very much, and I loved her very much.’

The service proceeded with hymns and further testimony about her earlier life and concluded with a powerful appeal from Leitamat to members of the PWMU to remain committed to Miss Skinner’s vision for their work.

The 23rd psalm and the hymn Safe in the arms of Jesus were sung. Sister Edgar spoke about Miss Skinner’s work in Korea and in the New Hebrides, and told how she had used her many gifts of wisdom, knowledge, understanding, friendship, music and laughter in the service of her Lord and master Jesus Christ: how it was her way of life to give back to God all the He had given to her.

Leitamat then spoke about her first meeting with Miss Skinner of the steady growth of the PWMU under her guidance; of Miss Skinner’s constant urge that members of the PWMU must take the gospel to the women of other islands, to places still in the darkness of heathenism. Leitamat stressed that this work of evangelism, begun under Miss Skinner should go on and on until the women of the New Hebrides were won for Christ. Then followed the singing of the Hymn from Sankey containing the PWMU command, ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel, and lo I am with you always.’

6. Fostering education that supported and formed women for ministry

Memories of Catherine Ritchie are widespread, and she was better known than most other deaconesses. She looms large in the stories, and it even seems likely that some of what she is remembered for in Vanuatu was work that other missionary women carried out. But in a way that is appropriate. Even though Cath Ritchie visited the New Hebrides only for the initial assessment with Amy Skinner in 1944, her role as the Principal of Rolland House meant that her ministry resourced other women in a myriad of ways. She was a life long advocate of spiritual formation and theological education for women, and as one of her former students remembered, ‘Her influence was for unity and wholeness in our thinking.’

Catherine Isabel Ritchie was twenty years younger than Amy Skinner. She was born on 16 August 1909 in the Arawata district of Gippsland. She went to Korumburra Higher Elementary and Leongatha High School, and then on to the University of Melbourne graduating with a Bachelor of Arts, and a Diploma of Education. She became a candidate at Rolland House in 1935, and in 1937 she was posted to Masan in Korea. When Japan entered the Second World War, she like others had to return to Australia. She was a travelling youth worker in the years of World War II, working in country districts of Victoria and South Australia, and made the significant visit to the New Hebrides in August 1944. Other appointments were in view, but she was asked to consider the role of Principal at Rolland House. She took on this position in 1945 and held it with
great distinction through until 1968. In retirement she worked as an Overseas Mission Secretary from the Sydney office of the Presbyterian church, and was also involved in the parish work from a base in Korumburra. In December 1974 she ‘retired’ again as ‘one of the best known women in the Australian church’.

When in 1994 the Melbourne College of Divinity approached her to confer an honorary doctorate of sacred theology, she protested that there were plenty of other women who should be recognised for equally important work. The MCD representative in that conversation, Dr Gwen Ince, asked her to ‘name one?’ Cath Ritchie had to admit that perhaps she could represent the achievement of women well, and agreed to receive the degree. The complex environment in which she worked is suggested by the summary of her approach to the Assembly. She was a lone woman who addressed the male gathering. Part of what made her effective was her capacity to juggle this high level administration with the domestic tasks that would never have been expected of her male counterparts in their role as Principal of the Theological Hall at Ormond. Her students ‘burst with pride’, and appreciated her well-rounded abilities.

At a time when women attending the Presbyterian Assembly were relegated to silence in the galleries, Principal Ritchie was escorted annually into the court, her students in the galleries bursting with pride as a hush fell and she addressed the house. Yet the next morning she would be back at college washing the breakfast dishes, a living reminder to her students of the motto on the diaconate Celtic cross: not to be ministered unto, but to minister.

Her autobiography Not to be Ministered Unto was published in 1998 and takes its title from that same motto that signals the deaconess commission. The book gives a thoughtful overview of the development of theological education and women’s ministry in Presbyterian and UCA circles. Catherine Ritchie died in 2003, mourned by many who were conscious of what she had meant to them personally, and what she had meant to the church: ‘The days of a... mortal life may be counted, the results of that life may be measureless.’

7. Returning Mission – an earlier visit to Melbourne

Before we conclude this consideration of the background and history of the PWMU connections between Melbourne and Vanuatu, it is important to also remember an earlier visit of Pacific women to this place.

From April to June 1948, as the church celebrated the centenary of John and Charlotte Geddie’s missionary work in the New Hebrides, representatives visited Melbourne and Sydney. The two local leaders, Salome of Fila and Leitamut of Mele, met members of the local PWMU as well as officials of the board of missions. We have only a shadow-y outline of the way they spent their time, perhaps including some training in health care at the Royal Melbourne. The possibility of exchange was firmly in place however. The connection was
consolidated by a return visit of Mrs Edward Holmes, the President of the PWMU in Victoria, who flew out of Sydney with Amy Skinner to attend a meeting of the local ‘mission synod’ in the New Hebrides in June. The flying boat was a quicker and probably more comfortable way to travel than the regular sea voyage; but the trip itself was still a long way from the normal round of activity for women in both contexts.

Image 11: Salome and Leitamat in Melbourne

In the same year, the Melbourne press reported the visit of Kal-chi-chi, the 27 year old senior teacher at Irikiki, where Miss Skinner was the superintendent. He spoke at several church gatherings of the work of the school and helped to raise funds for books, and equipment including a sewing machine for Miss Skinner. The local ministers Pastor Saurei and Pastor Kalmar also made an extended visit to Australia in the anniversary year. They also addressed meetings and spoke especially about the positive difference Christianity had made to the lives of women and men in the New Hebrides.

In welcoming the women of the Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Union of Vanuatu to Melbourne again, some sixty years and more since the visit of Leitamat and Salome, we are humbled to be reminded of the history that we share. We are grateful for your prompting to recall the stories of Amy Skinner and Catherine Ritchie, and of the local founders of the PWMU of the New Hebrides, as well as the many women who were inspired by the Gospel to share in their work. We look forward to exploring further with the women of Vanuatu in order to understand the deeper vision of your visit: Returning Mission.