

Biography

Jessie Collins – 1894 -1928



The street was ‘full of horse manure, waste papers, empty tins, rabbit entrails, dead cats and such-like flotsam, whilst the channels contained a quantity of malodorous slush.’

Thus wrote one resident of South Richmond’s Cubitt Street in 1916. Located in a highly industrial area, near tanneries, boiling down works, a cork factory and the tip, Cubitt Street was in the heart of the flat, narrow streets of this Richmond slum. It was also the location of Deaconess Jessie Collins’ workplace, the South Richmond Presbyterian Mission.

By the time of Jessie Collins’ death in 1928, Richmond was in crisis. Unemployment was high and the need for assistance great. By August of that year the nearby Salvation Army’s Relief Kitchen at its Lennox Street Barracks was serving cocoa and bread and jam to 200 young children each afternoon, as well as handing out bread and soup to destitute families. Similar relief was provided by the Presbyterian Mission.

Jessie had been working at the South Richmond Mission for a number of years. She’d graduated from the Deaconess and Missionary Training Institute in Rathdowne Street, Carlton, near her family home, in 1919, only four years after the Institute was established.

The Deaconesses were Home Missioners. Unlike their sisters who served overseas in missions in Korea and India or those who worked as nurses as part of John Flynn’s Flying Doctor Service, young women like Jessie Collins served in the inner suburbs of Melbourne. Theirs was a less publicised, but much needed calling. Some assisted the ministers of Melbourne’s larger parishes. Others worked in schools. Yet others, like Jessie Collins, worked in Melbourne’s inner suburban slums. In their words, they were there to provide a friend for those in ‘material, moral, social and spiritual need.’ In effect, they were social workers and they relied on the goodwill of groups such as the Morwell PWMU (Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Union) who each Christmas sent boxes of groceries and clothing to Deaconess Collins at the South Richmond Mission.

Just why Jessie chose this work is not known, but no doubt she had heard stories of her father’s early years in Bethnal Green in London’s East End where living conditions were appalling and overcrowding was rife. By the late nineteenth century Bethnal Green was officially designated the poorest area in London.

Her grandfather, a wood carver, escaped the slums of Bethnal Green in April 1874 when he brought his young family out to Australia, ironically settling in Fitzroy, which was to become one of Melbourne’s worst inner suburban slums.

Jessie’s father, William Weldon Collins, settled in Carlton and earned his living as a travelling salesman. He married Jessie Henry in 1891, just as the Depression hit. Their five children were born in Carlton in the 1890s, at a time when Carlton fell into decline. The many middle and upper class families who had made Carlton their home had moved south of the Yarra, many of their grand homes had been divided up into boarding houses and Carlton was gaining a reputation as one of Melbourne’s slum areas.

Agencies in the suburb were providing relief to large numbers of unemployed and many destitute families, a situation that did not change very much over the next forty years.



So, from a background of poverty, Jessie Collins chose to make a difference in the world by taking up a vocation that aspired to minister to the less privileged. The Mission Hall at South Richmond, like all Mission Halls, was designed to be a social as well as religious centre. Jessie, and those who worked alongside her, ran boys and girls clubs, mothers' meetings, sewing classes and kindergartens as well as handing out food and clothing. In a way they were the Neighbourhood Houses of their time and they provided a little respite for those who lived in areas like South Richmond where houses were 'poky, old, dilapidated' and there was 'poor hygiene, overcrowding, poor sanitation, open drains and illness.'

From the time of her graduation from the Carlton Training College in 1919 until her death in August 1928, this was Jessie Collins' world. She lived and worked among the poor of South Richmond. The work took a toll on her health and for years she suffered from a gastric ulcer. In August 1928 she had it operated on and on the 30th of August, she died in a private hospital in Surrey Hills, of post-operative complications. She was only 34.

She and her parents are buried here in the Church of England section of the cemetery, despite her calling as a Deaconess of the Presbyterian Church. There is no way of knowing for certain, but it likely that the Church of England did not offer many opportunities for women whereas from the 1890s, the Presbyterians had encouraged women to take an active role in the life of the Church.



Find out more

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