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# In honor of a poet, lover and pacifist

By JOHN HARBER PHILLIPS

**T**ODAY, it will be my privilege to deliver the first Lesbia Harford Oration on behalf of the Victorian Women Lawyers. The oration commemorates a truly remarkable woman. Harford graduated in law at the University of Melbourne in 1916. Another in her class was an up-and-coming young fellow from Jeparit, Robert Gordon Menzies, who would become both a King's counsel and a minister of the Crown before his 35th birthday.

Harford had other ideas. She was already a committed socialist with profound feelings of identity with the underprivileged. And so she went to work in clothing factories and in domestic service. Within a few years she had moved to Sydney, to support the members of the Industrial Workers of the World movement, some of whom had been imprisoned under the provisions of the Unlawful Associations Act for membership of an illegal organisation.

Her childhood is likely to have played a large part in developing her attitudes. The Keogh family enjoyed comfortable circumstances when she was born in Brighton in 1891, but by 1900 her father was bankrupt. He left to work on the rabbit fence in Western Australia which, I suppose, was the Australian equivalent of joining the Foreign Legion. Her mother, a woman of spirit and purpose, struggled to maintain and educate Lesbia, her sister, Estelle, and her brother, Esmond.

Just as it took raw courage for the diggers of World War I to go over the top of the trenches, pacifists in 1918 required their own brand of fortitude. Lesbia Harford was a devoted pacifist. She used her experiences in Sydney as the basis for a remarkable novel, *The Invaluable Mystery*, written in the early 1920s.

One of the muses from Mount Helicon started to speak to Harford in her later teenage years. Thereafter the poems came in a steady stream until she seems to have left them for the novel. In them, in a strong, clear voice, she speaks of women's lives — the restrictions and attitudes that beset them; the loves and pains; the striving for independence.

A congenital heart problem affected the condition of her blood throughout her life. Her work constituted a serious aggravation. The condition was to kill her when she finally undertook articles of clerkship in 1927.

Harford experienced intensely loving relationships. The first was with a tutor in logic, Jenny Lush, the aunt of my distinguished colleague, Sir George Lush. Many of the poems were dedicated to Jenny.

The second was with Guido Baracchi, the son of the Government astronomer, whom she drew into left-wing circles. Harford wrote some of her poems to sing, and composed accompanying music. And sing them she did, whenever the mood caught her, as it did on the Manly ferry from time to time, where the spectacle of a young woman singing love songs to a handsome Italian revolutionary must have gladdened the hearts of workers returning home.

In November 1920 Lesbia married a struggling Redfern artist, Patrick John O'Flaghartie Fingal Harford. His drunkenness and violent tendencies led to the marriage being dissolved within a few years.

Interest in Lesbia Harford's life and work is increasing. Let us celebrate this wonderful Victorian.

*John Phillips is the Chief Justice of Victoria.*



**Lesbia Harford in 1916.**

Picture: STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA