

Miss Mary Ellen Roberts (Teacher & Lecturer-in-Charge)

Few teachers have contributed more to technical education than Miss Mary Ellen Roberts who was first employed at Sydney Technical College in 1900 to teach dressmaking. She took on an active role in College life, especially during the war. Roberts supported vocational training as a way of working towards equality of status and opportunity for women whether they were homemakers or in the paid workforce.

Roberts was appointed Lecturer-in-Charge of Dressmaking at Sydney Technical College in 1908. In 1909, she organised and was responsible for the administration of the Women's Handicrafts Department which included the teaching of tailor's cutting (previously the man's domain), lace making, corsetry and millinery in city and country classes across New South Wales. She was influential in curriculum design, insisted on high standards and was highly respected by former students. She was prepared to work within the education system to achieve this goal.

Roberts wrote a number of texts to support these courses including 'The cutter's guide' (1907), 'Garment cutting for girls' (1911) and 'Dress-cutting measure book for students' (1913). From 1917 onwards, her department offered Certificate courses in dressmaking, millinery, white work (corset making and underclothing) and special professional courses in clothes designing and cutting, lace making and art needlework. Bookkeeping and workroom management were included as professional course components. The Women's Handicrafts Department also offered an instruction course for women interested in teaching dressmaking, millinery and white work.

As the war progressed, resources became scarce caused by the huge costs of war. To address this, in 1916, Roberts wrote the booklet entitled: *Thrift in time and talents** published by the Australasian League of Honour. Women, in particular, were encouraged to be thrifty on the home front. Organised by the League of Honour, thrift campaigns and thrift clubs were held in Australian cities to encourage the

real skills, endless possibilities

practice of thrift whilst contributing to the war effort. Robert's belief in the work ethic and in independence of women through learning skills was promoted to women through this booklet:

“The nation’s needs can only be met by skilled workers. Every woman must have a skilled occupation, developed to a degree of possible self-support, if she is to serve her country.” p22, 1916.

Source: nla.gov.au/nla.obj-37891026

Roberts established a club for ex-students which became the Technical College Vocations Club for Women in 1917 and was elected Vice-President of the New South Wales Feminist Club which was founded in 1914 with the aim of working towards “equality of status, opportunity and payment between men and women”. Although her teaching career was cut short by her death in 1924, her teaching methods remained in practice until the 1960s.



TA1232, Commemorative book with binding of embossed leather presented to Miss Roberts, it contains signatures of 12,000 students, ex-students and teachers in recognition of her contribution to Women's Handicrafts at Sydney Technical College. Sydney TAFE Heritage Collection.