Obituary: Kondelea (Della) Elliott (1917-2011)

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Abstract
In 1902 Lenin published the political tract which became a basic text for left-wing activists titled 'What is to be Done?'. Della Elliott tended not to ask that question; rather she saw what had to be done, and got in and did it. In the process, her doing was careful, meticulous, and professional; all the metaphorical 'i's were dotted, and the 't's crossed. Moving away from metaphors to actualities, spelling had to be correct, and meanings clear.

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Obituary

Kondelea (Della) Elliott (1917-2011)

Rowan Cahill

This is a eulogy given by Rowan Cahill at the Ceremony celebrating the life of Della Elliott, held at the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney, Sydney, 31 October 2011.

In 1902 Lenin published the political tract which became a basic text for left-wing activists titled ‘What is to be Done?’ Della Elliott tended not to ask that question; rather, she saw what had to be done, and got in and did it. In the process, her doing was careful, meticulous, and professional; all the metaphorical ‘i’s were dotted, and the ‘t’s crossed. Moving away from metaphors to actualities, spelling had to be correct, and meanings clear.

What Della did was done in a modest self-effacing way, though her demeur was forthright. When others who led behind easy-to-follow paper trails and explanations for the historian to follow, she did not. This was not because she sought anonymity, but rather because her senses of justification and self-worth were in the here and now and in the doing, working for a world and a future in which social justice and peace prevailed. Being mentioned in dispatches, as it were, and becoming part of recorded history, was not the object of the exercise, not the reason you acted.

Thus Della tends to be missing in action when it comes to the historical record of Australia. In the substantial entry on her husband Elliot Valens Elliott (1902-84), General Secretary of the Seamen’s Union of Australia (SUA) from 1941-78, in the Australian Dictionary of Biography (2007), Della rates a 50-word mention, as the ‘politically active’ wife of Elliott and as ‘a journalist and accountant’. Correct, but it comes nowhere near to capturing her humanity as an independent human being, nor her significance and her agency in history.

For her part, Della was not too keen on historians. As she said to me on many occasions, ‘I don’t trust historians; they always get it wrong’, a suspicion based on an understanding that many historians worked in the interests of what Claud Cockburn termed ‘the big-battalions’. Despite this general suspicion, I proved my credentials, and we had a long and close continuous relationship, from when we first met in 1970, when I began work on a commissioned history of the SUA, until her death.

About a year before she went into care, Della asked me to write her obituary during the course of one of our long phone conversations. One thing readers need to understand about Della is this; she had a way of framing a request, and a tone of voice, that managed at once to be suggestion, request, and direction; it did not brook refusal. So with this as background, I honour Della’s request.

Della Elliott was born Kondelea Xenodohos in Carlton, Melbourne, in 1917, the year the legacies of Lenin’s pamphlet helped convulse Russia in revolution, and the abattoir of World War I still had a year to go. The social justice visions of socialism and communism, and the senselessness of war, would forever be part of Della’s life.

Her father, Nicholas (Nicholas) Xenodohos, had migrated from Greece in 1910, and then worked his way from the Queensland canefields via Sydney to Melbourne’s fish and chip shops. He returned to Sydney and became proprietor during the 1920s of two cafés, in lower George Street close to Circular Quay, frequented by maritime workers and their families. Della’s first-generation Australian-born mother, Agnes, had left school at eight and had variously worked cleaning floors and as a multi-talented performer in a travelling circus. By 1925 there were four Xenodohos children: Sylvia, Della, Merle, and John.

The politics of the parents were socialist; Nicholas and Agnes were both members of the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP). Interviewed in 2001, Della’s eldest sister Sylvia recalled being taken to the Yarra Bank to hear VSP speakers, and to VSP socials and lectures. Many members of the VSP later became members of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). In the same interview, youngest sister Merle recalled her father’s advice: ‘When you’re reading something, always look for the truth between the lines and try to see what they are not saying’.

The Depression brought an end to Della’s schooling at the age of 14, and the family business was forced to close soon after in 1932. Della’s father found work as a fish-cleaner in the Hotel Australia, and her mother became a shop-window hair-colouring model. Della was able to train as a shorthand typist, but due to the lack of clerical work went waitressing and did paid housework.

As a young adolescent she was, as she later put it, ‘an adherent of the Socialist credo’; she became involved in Young Communist League activities, and joined with her mother, sisters, and brother, in left-wing amateur theatre productions that were the forerunners of the New Theatre. Della subsequently joined the CPA, and was followed by her parents and elder sister Sylvia. Della’s membership of the CPA did not mean she surrendered her forthright approach to life, nor her pronounced sense of independence. During her decades as a party member she appeared at least four times before the party’s Control Commission, the internal disciplinary organ and guarantor of orthodoxy.
When Della eventually obtained clerical work, it was variously on voluntary and paid terms with a succession of left organisations—the International Labour Defence, the Friends of the Soviet Union, the Militant Minority Movement. She also became an accomplished public speaker on the CPA stump in Sydney’s Domain on Sundays.

Della met young communist activist Laurie Arons, future leader of the CPA, during this period, they married in 1937; they were both 19 at the time, and divorced in 1945. During their partnership they were active in organising young people, and in illegal underground activities when the party was banned (1940-41), Laurie in charge of maintaining the party’s organisational capacity in Sydney’s inner-west.

Della joined the NSW Branch of the Federated Clerks’ Union in March 1936. She immediately became active in this union, and was elected to the union’s Central Council in 1940, elected an organiser in 1942, and the following year became Assistant Secretary, the first woman in the union’s history to hold high office. In 1944 she was, according to The Clerk, ‘an officer of outstanding capabilities’. She held the Assistant Secretary position until resigning in 1948 for reasons that were officially claimed to be of ‘ill-health’; in reality she was a casualty of intermecine union politics. Commenting at the time upon Della’s career, the union’s journal The Clerk noted ‘since her election ... she has become recognised as one of the leading personalities of the Trade Union Movement’. Other comments expressed amazement that Della had in fact successfully done a job the equal of any man. Throughout this phase of her life she was known as Della Nichols.

The status of women and the issue of equal pay were of great importance to Della, and she pursued these vigorously as a delegate to the NSW Labor Council during the 1940s and as an ACTU delegate in 1945 and 1947. She was successful on the Labor Council in having policy on equal pay laid down. And in September 1947 at the ACTU Congress, she was successful in moving the first resolution to set forth a positive action program for the equal pay campaign, giving life to the paper decisions.

Although she had relinquished her executive position with the Clerks’ Union, Della maintained her association with the union and remained a delegate to the NSW Labor Council. She was also prominently involved with the Trade Union Equal Pay committee, established in 1946 and chaired by Jessie Street. Della served on the executive of this activist organisation from its outset—Committee Member 1946; Acting Joint Chairman, January 1947, in the absence of Jessie Street; Joint Secretary from October 1948; Secretary, 1949-50.

Along with her trade union and status-of-women activities, Della was prominently involved throughout the period and subsequently in progressive campaigns and organisations, for example Sheepskins for Russia during the war; the League for Democracy in Greece, post-war as Secretary; and, with her two sisters, in the Union of Australian Women, founded in 1950.

During the Cold War, a period of intense anti-communism which saw numerous attempts by Labor and conservative governments to cripple militant trade unions, especially those representing seamen, wharflers, and miners, Della worked for the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF); she was in charge of its office, and secretary to General Secretary Jim Healy. During the 1949 Coal Strike trade union funds were frozen under the National Emergency Coal Strike Act in an attempt by the state to prevent unions financially supporting striking miners. Anticipating this tactic, the WWF withdrew $6,000 from its coffers in a bid to thwart authorities, and Della was entrusted with its care. This money was placed in food containers and hidden under her parents’ house, with the assistance of her father.

A police raid and the seizure of union records ensued in the quest for the funds. Subpoenaed and cross-examined in court, Della was not directly asked about the whereabouts of the money. Sexism apparently triumphed; in those times trade unionism, especially militant trade unionism, was regarded as a male preserve. General Secretary Healy, and Assistant General Secretary Ted Roach, claimed ignorance regarding where the money was, and truthfully, since they had given Della carte blanche regarding its safety, and genuinely did not know where it was. Della did not need direction, and was trusted implicitly. The two WWF union leaders each received a 12 months sentence for contempt of court.

In 1951, Ted Roach was again doing time; another 12 months for contempt of court, some of the sentence served in isolation. Della was one of the people who provided a link between Roach and his union, visiting him in prison and smuggling in comfort items to help him survive incarceration. That same year, Della worked on the coordination and distribution of Australian union donations in support of striking New Zealand workers during the 151 days of the New Zealand wharf strike; a significant exercise, since, all up, Australian unions contributed some £50,000 to the New Zealand strikers.

During this operation, which involved the clandestine transfer of funds across the Tasman via unionists crowing the trans-Tasman motor vessel Wanganella, Della worked closely with SUA leader E.V. Elliott. In unsuccessful attempts to prevent funds reaching striking workers there were police raids on offices of the WWF and SUA in Sydney and Melbourne. Healy was charged under the Crimes Act, convicted, and sentenced to 6 months imprisonment; this was reduced upon appeal to a
fine of £100. For Della and E.V. Elliott, the New Zealand transfer operation was the beginning of a life-long relationship.

From 1955 until retirement in 1988, Della worked for the SUA, administering its federal office in Sydney, and editing the union’s monthly *Seamen’s Journal*. She brought to these tasks nearly two decades of clerical and administrative skills and experience developed and honed in leftist organisations. In a trade union sector that had, since Australian seamen formed a union in 1872, not consistently demonstrated rigour in maintaining records, nor procedural and financial transparency, Della initiated procedures that ensured the union developed and maintained comprehensive records.

Under her administration, union records generated since E.V. Elliott came to office in 1941, were scrupulously saved, filed, cross-referenced, as was all documentation created subsequently. The system was a blend of clerical best practice and maritime logbook best practice. Everything was ‘logged’, from phone calls, to correspondence ingoing and outgoing; every penny cent of petty cash was scrupulously accounted for; an accounting rigour that became a feature of the union generally.

Overall, the result was the creation of a record base, filing system, and financial accounts that empowered and protected the union, facilitating the mounting of effective industrial relations campaigns, and transparency when it came to responding to the clamours of powerful anti-union interests. Most of these records have been deposited with the Butlin Archives of Business and Labour at the Australian National University; and are amongst its most consulted and utilised holdings.

As editor of the *Seamen’s Journal*, Della also functioned as copy-writer, sub-editor, and production manager; she dealt face-to-face with the printer, and saw the journal through the press. The publication she produced from 1955 until her last issue in May 1988 was, and remains, a significant literary and journalistic achievement, designed as a magazine, printed on quality paper, and intended to be more than tomorrow’s proverbial fish and chips wrapping.

Della initiated a policy of inclusion; rank-and-file seamen were motivated to contribute significantly to the content of the journal, such that it did not become, like others, a sort of vanity preserve and the sotte preserve of elected officials. In her hands the *Seamen’s Journal* was lively and interesting, an important and indispensable membership forum. Each issue published a wide range of rank-and-file letters, articles, discussion pieces, and sometimes poems, cartoons, and stories. Overall, it created a sense of community and camaraderie. As one SUA veteran reflected, ‘[t]he journal has played a key role in our rank and file by encouraging them to write, write, write: “sing the blues”, complain, criticise, praise but don’t remain mute with something stuck in your craw that only floats free with a beer; but put it into print so all can debate it.’ In the judgement of historian Diane Kirkby, Della was a ‘highly skilled editor with a brilliant intellect’; she only drew the line at material likely to result in legal proceedings, or which might create inter-union tensions/conflict.

Della and Eliot married in a private ceremony in their Roseville home in September 1962, after the death of Eliot’s former wife. For decades previously Della and Eliot had lived together and formed a partnership that made them synonymous in the eyes of many. Della had changed her surname by deed poll to Elliott to avoid confusions and problems. When it came to the SUA, the two functioned as a team; for Eliot, Della was partner, confidante and sounding board. Speaking in 1972 as he paved the way for the entry of women into the ranks of ‘seamen’ and union membership, Eliot spoke of his relationship with Della. Rather than use the word ‘partnership’, he described it with the more organic and marvellous word ‘collective’, and went on to explain that it was this collective ‘that has strengthened me in the difficult tasks that often have to be faced’.

For Della, the SUA was more than her place of work, more than an industrial organisation, more than a part of her *politics*. In many ways the union, the members and their families, were her extended family. Symbolic of this was her role as honorary secretary of the Noongab Fund, from its inception in 1969 until its work was completed in 1992. In 1969 the Australian freighter *Noongab*, carrying a cargo of steel, sank off the east coast of NSW in high seas, the wind blowing at 110 kilometers per hour; 21 of its 26 crew members were lost. The seven sea-going unions created a Trust Fund to support and assist the dependents of these seafarers. Della administered the Fund in a voluntary capacity, and took an active interest in the lives of the beneficiaries, especially the children, earning great respect in the process. The NSW government acknowledged her role with a Community Service Award in 2000.

Eliot died in 1884; Della retired from the SUA in 1988. Retiring was not easy. As she said at the time: ‘The Journal has been part of me for so long, and through it the Seamen’s Union, that I feel akin to an over-zealous mother reluctant to cut the ties’.

In retirement Della enjoyed the friendship of many in the maritime community who had become part of her life over the years. She continued to follow the ebb and flow of the maritime industry and maritime unionism through her reading of daily newspapers, the *Seamen’s Journal*, and following the amalgamation of the SUA with the WWF to form the Maritime Union of Australia in 1993, *The Maritime Workers’ Journal*.

A few historians sought her assistance in understanding the past, and to these she obliged by way of interview and/or correspondence. In
1993/94 she was, along with members of the former Brisbane Seamen’s Union Women’s Committee, responsible for organising and creating the plaque at the Australian National Maritime Museum commemorating the contribution of Australian merchant navy seafarers and their families to the World War II war effort, a civilian contribution and death toll traditionally overlooked by historians. On another front she was amongst the small group of women, including Quentin Bryce, Shirley Jones, and Marie Muir, who worked to establish the Jessie Street National Women’s Library, a specialist library focused on women and women’s issues. Jessie Street and Della had been close compatriots in the 1940s.

As she aged, Della felt increasingly depressed, especially at her own increasing inability to do anything about that against which she railed: pollution; environmental vandalism; racism; the billions of dollars spent globally on armaments; wars and civil wars; poverty; the resurgence of right-wing extremism; the confidence of global capitalism; at home, the abandonment by the Australian Labor Party of any hint of socialism, and her growing inability to detect an Australian Left. In her darkest hours she looked at the world and reckoned humanity had stepped back in time, 200 years was her bleakest estimation.

The deaths of friends and family members, especially those much younger than she was, increased her sense of depression, as did the weakening of her own body. Until she could no longer do it, gardening was a source of hope. As she wrote in 1996, her garden was no showplace, but its roses had been planted in memory of past loved ones, and she regarded gardening as a healing activity; she found a sense of refreshment tending her plants, and hope for the future when flowers bloomed. And always there were her dog companions, Scottish Terriers, which she had bred, raised, and shown competitively. The Scottish Terrier Club Inc. (NSW) was another site of her organisational involvement, and she was a Patron of this organisation.

Each year during her retirement, until 2005/06 when the task became overwhelming, Della sent to what she addressed as ‘my extended family and friends’, a Christmas/New Year letter in which she reflected on the past year and anticipated the New Year. I quote from one of the last of these letters, dated 12 January 2003. In doing so, I let Della, aged 86, speak for herself, and so acknowledge her essence, and what she was about:

War is no solution to humanity’s problems. What is needed is a caring society that safeguards the environment and wisely uses the Earth’s natural resources … a society that channels its scientific research and knowledge into nurturing and improving the conditions of all life—flora, fauna and human … a society that recognises the need for a more equitable distribution of its knowledge and wealth so that all may live free from the fear of want, of starvation and disease … a society that recognises the right of all, irrespective of race or creed, to have the opportunity to develop their full potential … a society that recognises each country has the right to sovereignty, and has the responsibility to ensure the democratic rights and liberties and of its citizens and to direct its energies to developing in a tolerant and harmonious world.

She recognised that this was a big call, and ended her letter thus:

As well as keeping up our fighting spirit we must never lose our sense of humour or our faith in the people and that united we are an invincible force. Let us all unite for peace, and progress will follow.

Della’s last contribution towards a better world before she went into care was the gift of a scholarship to the University of Sydney Women’s College to assist a female Aboriginal student each year. Strong support of Aboriginal causes had long been part of her life, and that of Eliot’s, as well as a significant part of the work of the SUA.

Rowan Cabill co-authored a history of the Seamen’s Union of Australia (1981), and currently teaches at the University of Wollongong. His most recent publication is Radical Sydney, co-authored with Terry Irving.

Sources:
For this account of Della Elliott I have used private information, interviews I had with Della over the years on a long friendship, and correspondence. The papers of Morris John Rodwell Hughes (Jack), when they were temporarily controlled by the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur Library in 1993, were useful; Hughes was a prominent communist and a colleague of Della in the Clerk’s Union. Published sources included:
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