

Cook, Freda Mary 1896 - 1990

Community worker, socialist, feminist, peace activist, social reformer, teacher

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Freda Mary Pym was born on 9 November 1896 at Alvescott, Oxfordshire, England, one of four children of Emma Bertha Harrison and her husband, Samuel Arnott Pym, a solicitor. Freda attended Cheltenham Ladies' College from 1905 until 1916 and won a scholarship to Oxford University. She studied at Lady Margaret Hall from 1916 to 1919, gaining an honours degree in English language and literature. At university she made her first contact with socialist thought, reading the *New Statesman* and taking part in student discussions. After graduating, she taught at Bridgnorth, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Oldham and Plymouth.



In 1924 Freda followed her brother to New Zealand and from mid 1926 until early 1927 worked in Auckland as girls' work activity secretary for the YWCA. In 1927 she moved to Christchurch, and then in 1929 to New Plymouth, where her brother lived. In both places she worked for the YWCA.

At New Plymouth she met her future husband, Eric Kingsley Cook, a teacher who shared her ideals. Both were active in the communist and unemployed movements, and from 1931 were members of the League Against Fascism, an international organisation which aimed to influence governments to isolate Nazi Germany.

Moving to Wellington in 1934, Freda Pym was secretary of the Wellington women's section of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement from 1935, and worked tirelessly to improve the conditions of the unemployed, especially women. She helped organise demonstrations and deputations to Parliament, local authorities and landlords for better housing, cheap meals and improved legislation. She recounted a protest at Parliament: 'We shouted from the Gallery every time a member made some speech attacking the unemployed and the poor... I was the first to shout, as secretary, and the policeman who escorted me out was really shocked and told me that the lady sitting next to me was a Presbyterian minister's wife and that one ought to behave more decently in such company. But I knew she was the next one on the list to start shouting.'

During this period Freda became involved in the communist Working Women's Movement, and helped organise its second conference in 1936. She also was much involved in the preliminaries to the establishment of the Sex Hygiene and New Zealand Family Planning Association) in Wellington in the mid 1930s. She arranged a representative meeting of women's organisations, and study groups were set up, but she had left for England by the time the society was formed.

Freda Pym and Eric Cook were married in Wellington on 12 September 1935, and went to England the following year. They did not have children. In London the couple founded an alternative news service called the General News Service (later Democratic and General News), to ensure that the progressive press of the world had independent news and analysis of the international situation. Freda made contacts with people in the anti-fascist movement, and worked for the WEA and in after-school child-care centres. During the war she drove trucks for the Women's Army Auxiliary Force, and joined the China Campaign Committee. She became a member of the League



the war she drove trucks for the Women's Army Auxiliary Force, and joined the China Campaign Committee. She became a member of the League Against Imperialism and worked for V. K. Krishna Menon in the English headquarters of the India League, which struggled for Indian independence until this was achieved in 1947. Throughout this period she sent articles to New Zealand periodicals: the *Working Woman*, *Woman To-day*, *Workers' Weekly* and *Tomorrow*. Immediately after the war Freda visited countries such as Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia on behalf of Democratic and General News. In 1948 Eric Cook died, but, with the help of friends, Freda kept the news service going for another two years.

Freda Cook returned to New Zealand in 1950 and worked as a cleaner at Wellington Hospital, and as a teacher at Wellington College and at the Correspondence School. She also travelled to India, Russia and China. In 1960 she was invited to North Vietnam as the first full-time English teacher at the university of Hanoi. This she described as 'next in line to the UWM the most absorbing, interesting and beautiful period of my life'. The letters she wrote to the *New Zealand Monthly Review* during the 1960s were a great assistance to the New Zealand anti-war movement.

In 1968 Freda Cook returned to New Zealand to attend the Peace, Power and Politics in Asia conference in Wellington. Krishna Menon had agreed to attend the conference if Freda would introduce him. Freda delivered a message from Vietnam at the conference to an enthusiastic reception. The war was worsening and she was unable to return to Vietnam. She became involved in the New Zealand anti-war movement, joining the Committee on Vietnam. She visited Vietnam in 1974 and again after the war in 1976 at the invitation of Premier Pham Van Dong.



Freda Cook continued to work for socialist causes, campaigning against apartheid in South Africa as a member of the Halt All Racist Tours movement (HART) and the Citizens' Association for Racial Equality (CARE), and joining the Maori land protests at Bastion Point in the late 1970s. Mailouts on behalf of organisations were her forte. She was determined to take part in political activities even when she reached old age. Her last march was an anti-apartheid family march to Parliament at the end of the 1981 Springbok tour: she had to be helped and supported, but she made the effort to be there.

Freda Cook cared about people more than political theories. In her opposition to the Vietnam conflict it was the effects of war on the Vietnamese people that disturbed her most, and inspired her most trenchant observations. She had a special empathy with those experiencing trouble - prisoners, patients in mental hospitals, drug addicts - and kept in touch with a vast number of people in New Zealand and around the world.



Freda was small and at times she would exploit this apparent frailty, which contrasted with the fearless statements she was accustomed to make. She was morally and physically courageous: even in her 80s she loved to ride on the back of a motorbike. All her life Freda

Cook was a true rolling stone with virtually no possessions apart from her papers. She was always on the move; as she tired of one scene, she would be off to another. In the last nine years of her life, however, she lived in a rest home at Titahi Bay, Wellington. She died there, aged 93, on 20 January 1990.

CATH KELLY

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