

From the President

In November 2013, the Workers' Educational Association celebrated its centenary in Australia. WEA had been established ten years earlier in England by Albert Mansbridge (1876–1952) and his wife Frances Jane Pringle (1876–1958). Mansbridge, the son of a carpenter, established his association to give working people access to liberal adult education studies (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences), to provide them opportunities to develop a richer and deeper understanding of the world in which they lived. Mansbridge travelled to Australia to chair the Sydney meeting at which an Australian WEA would be established. In 1908, Scottish-born carpenter David Stewart (1883–1954) migrated to New Zealand. Two years later, he moved to Sydney. An enthusiastic participant in, and organiser of, adult education activities, he was closely involved in plans to bring the WEA to Australia, and he was elected unopposed as the general secretary of the Workers' Educational Association of New South Wales. Nearly forty-one years later, still general secretary, Stewart died of heart disease after a day at work at the WEA. In association with the University of Sydney, the WEA had lived up to the vision of providing liberal education through its tutorial classes to workers, and in fact to all who subscribed to the objects of the association. During the 1920s, carpenter David Stewart with volunteers built a summer school at Newport. But his skills as an adult education advocate more broadly built the WEA we know today. He resisted pressures for WEA to endorse particular political positions, for example in opposition to conscription during World War I, or for WEA to become some sort of trade union training organisation.



Leth Maitland, President

I did not know David Stewart. My mother remembers seeing David Stewart when she visited his house as a little girl, because his first wife was related to my mother's side of my family. I do however remember members of WEA's Sydney board and council who knew Stewart, or who became involved with WEA shortly after Stewart's death, people like Madge Eddy (widow of W.H.C. Eddy), George Shipp, Neville Cohen and Keith Wake, who for decades made sure that WEA remained true to its mission to provide liberal adult education, to teach people how to examine all sides of a question and form their own views.

I remember the contribution made by executive director Pat Tsykalas, as WEA Sydney's enrolments built to what was to be, to date, their historical peak. When the University of Sydney severed its ties with WEA in the 1980s, Pat and her team had to rise to the challenge of recruiting all tutors, rather than largely providing a venue for tutors supplied by the University of Sydney. WEA also, with other educators, rose to the challenge of training a generation of office workers how to use newly introduced personal computers. I remember the contribution made by Pat's successors Richard Pinder and Michael Newton, and the staff of WEA.

For more than a century, WEA Sydney has remained remarkably faithful to its liberal adult education mission. There are challenges ahead with costs and revenue. Volunteers are now staffing the WEA Library four days a week to ensure we can continue to keep the library open. But the major challenge we face for the coming century is to remain as steadfastly committed to the ideals of liberal adult education as those who have gone before us have been.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Leth Maitland'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Leth Maitland
WEA Sydney President