

Marie Byles (1900 - 1979)

Birth: [8 April 1900, Ashton-upon-Mersey, Cheshire, England](#)

Death: [21 November 1979, Cheltenham, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia](#)

BYLES, MARIE BEUZEVILLE (1900-1979), solicitor and conservationist, was born on 8 April 1900 at Ashton-upon-Mersey, Cheshire, England, only daughter and eldest child of Cyril Beuzeville Byles, a railway-signal engineer, and his wife Ida Margaret, née Unwin. In March 1912 the family reached Sydney in the *Anchises*. Marie's parents were Unitarians, Fabian socialists and pacifists. Cyril became signals engineer to the New South Wales railways; Ida was a suffragette, a proponent of dress reform, a temperance advocate and a vegetarian. Marie recalled that her mother disliked housework and warned her against economic dependency.

Educated at Presbyterian Ladies' colleges at Croydon and Pymble, Marie was head prefect and dux at Pymble. She graduated from the University of Sydney (B.A., 1921; LL.B., 1924), winning the [Rose Scott](#) prize in private international law. Articled to J. Stuart Thom, Byles was admitted as solicitor on 6 June 1924 and worked as managing clerk for Henry Davis & Co. until 1927. She studied economics at night and wrote about the inherent instability and injustices in capitalism.

As a student, Byles had earned pocket-money by journalism. She wrote on political issues, legal subjects, bushwalking and mountaineering. Her sense of justice drew her to feminism and her admission as the first female solicitor in the State was welcomed by the women's movement which had campaigned vigorously for woman's right to practise law. Briefed by the National Council of Women of New South Wales and other women's organizations, Byles wrote several pamphlets on woman's legal disabilities for the United Associations (of Women) and was included in numerous delegations to ministers—State and Federal—that sought redress. In particular, she argued the case for equal guardianship, and for a married woman's rights to retain her nationality and to have separate domicile. She was also active in the equal-pay campaign.

Byles was an important publicist for the women's movement, writing frequently in newspapers and magazines on discriminatory provisions in the law and discriminatory practices in the courts. As legal correspondent (1927-36) for the *Australian Woman's Mirror*, she drew attention to recent cases where women had experienced disabilities, and revealed how magistrates and judges interpreted the law to make woman's behaviour the issue on trial. She wrote on other matters (tenancy law, making a will, copyright in frocks), but the main thrust of her journalism was to advise women of their rights and of those denied them. In 'Who owns the housekeeping?' she informed them that the money they received from their husbands was, according to law, held in trust to spend for the husband. 'The moral', she added, 'is that legally there is no reward to you for frugality, and that you may as well spend all you can!'

She briefed women barristers when they were available and in 1926 twice briefed [Sibyl Morrison](#) on the one day. From 1929 Byles ran her own practice at Eastwood,

successfully enough to employ staff (her preference was for married women) and to become a master solicitor. The work was mainly conveyancing and probate, with some matrimonial matters. Byles disliked litigation. She claimed that she became expert in clawing back from a deceased estate, and avoiding payment of duties on property that had rightly belonged to the wife.

Walking holidays were part of Marie's childhood. She built a tiny house, Ahimsa, on a sandstone ridge in open forest at Cheltenham where she lived austere, growing her own vegetables and sleeping on the balcony. Although only 5 ft 2 ins (158 cm) tall and not physically robust, she had great endurance. She loved the grandeur of mountains, climbed Mount Cook in 1928, went twice again to New Zealand and wrote of her unconventional experiences in *By Cargo Boat & Mountain* (London, 1931). In 1938 she attempted to scale Mount Sanseto in southern China, but was prevented by bad weather from reaching its summit. Stopped from climbing by a foot injury which never properly healed, she remained an enthusiastic bushwalker. She was elected a fellow (1939) of the Royal Geographical Society, London.

Executive office in the Sydney Bush Walkers brought her into the Federation of Bushwalking Clubs, of which she was honorary secretary (1943-47). She was the first editor of and a regular contributor to the *Bushwalker*: it appeared annually in 1937-48. The federation established information and search services, campaigned for new national parks and legislation to protect native flora and fauna, and endeavoured to conserve 'primitive' areas. In 1947, when she resigned from the federation, she concluded her letter: 'Finally, Mr Secretary, please don't let your wife waste her valuable time writing a reply in flowery style to this letter. I detest such stuff'. With bushwalking friends, **she had helped to secure the reservation in 1932 of 650 acres (263 ha) of bushland as Bouddi Natural (National) Park on Pittwater and long served as a trustee.** It pleased her that the trust met on the beach. She had retained her connexion with the United Associations of Women, but her other interests left her little free time. She needed rest in 1947.

All her life she opposed the taking of life. She had lectured for the League of Nations Union before World War II and during the war protested against the incitement of hatred of the Japanese. Travelling in 1938 through Burma and Tibet, she had encountered Buddhism and on her return began reading the *Bhagavad Gita*. She resumed worship at her local Unitarian church where a change of ministers left her dissatisfied. She began experimenting with solitude. Each year she spent a week alone on Mount Kosciusko. She began meditation and was an original member (1951) of the Buddhist Society of New South Wales.

After her mother's death in 1953, Marie went first to Rangoon, then to the holy Buddhist sites in northern India and Nepal; for a time she lived as a hermit on the lower Himalayas; she journeyed to Gandhi's ashram and visited Ceylon. It was a healing experience. 'Accept suffering and suffering disappears', was the message she took from Buddhism. In *Footprints of Gautama the Buddha* (1957) and *The Lotus and the Spinning Wheel* (1963) she expounded the teaching of the Buddha: in the former, she disputed the privileged position of the monk as against the nun in contemporary practice; in the latter she set the teachings of Gandhi alongside Buddha's and saw both as necessary in the modern world. Her experiences in

meditation centres in Burma and later in Japan led her to write *Journey into Burmese Silence* (1962) and *Paths to Inner Calm* (1965).

Marie built an ashram which became a centre for a small group of adherents to Buddhist teachings. She suffered persistent ill health and severe pain in her foot. Her spiritual diary of her latter years is a record of a continuing struggle to control pain. She spent long periods in meditation. In 1966 an unknown assailant battered her about the head as she slept alone at Ahimsa. Marie spent several months in hospital and never completely recovered. She retired in 1970.

Marie Byles died on 21 November 1979 at her Cheltenham home. She had left sworn testimony of her wish to be allowed to die naturally and requested the Cremation Society of Australia to collect her body. She asked that a friend, preferably a woman, read designated texts at her memorial service. Her ashes were scattered at Ahimsa which she left to the State branch of the National Trust of Australia.

Select Bibliography

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