

ANNETTE COOPER

The surgeon and the fashion icon: in search of Florence Cooper and Reta Findlay

Women of outstanding gifts

At her retirement as honorary surgeon from Melbourne's Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital in 1951, Florence Cooper spoke of her early struggle for recognition as a doctor and said that all medical women owed a debt of gratitude to the hospital's committee for the opportunities it had given them. 'They have done much ... to break down the feeling of prejudice towards women in what were once regarded as men's professions.'¹

Two blocks further south, in the prestigious 'Paris End' of Collins Street, Reta Findlay was at the height of her creative powers in one of Melbourne's most elegant department stores: Georges. She had been working there since the 1930s, becoming Australia's first female advertising manager in 1937, and had moulded the store into what we remember as Georges today – elegant and exclusive.

Both women were gifted practitioners in their fields. Both were admired for their business acumen. Both were committed to furthering the cause of women, in both politics and their profession. Both worked tirelessly to support the war effort in World War II and charitable causes.

And both have captured my imagination, based on personal connections and research. The first, Florence Cooper, is my late great-aunt. I was almost five years old when she died, and although it's possible I met her, I don't have any recollection. But, over the years, I heard stories about her brilliance

and achievement in medicine through my late aunt. In my aunt's photo album, there is a picture which shows her ('Aunt Florence') being presented to the Queen Mother in 1958. On the opposite page is an old newspaper clipping entitled 'Doctors honoured', detailing her retirement from the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital. And lying loose at the back of the album is another clipping, noting her death, in 1963, some nine years after Reta Findlay died. It includes a photo of an elderly Florence holding a small dog, looking very happy in a sun-dappled garden. The text concludes, 'Her wise counsel and forthright approach to affairs, her business acumen, and her loyalty to the Hospital and to her profession have ensured her place in the annals of the Hospital'.²

Reta Findlay likewise ensured her place in the annals of Georges. I became aware of her during research for my book *Remembering Georges*.³ Time and again, people would refer to her in interviews – her importance in setting the tone for the store, her flair for advertising and her ability to make women feel important whether or not they shopped at Georges.

Both women lived through dynamic and turbulent times. Theirs was the time of Federation, Phar Lap, Don Bradman, Nellie Melba, two world wars, Einstein's theory of relativity, Dior's 'New Look', the suffragette movement, the discoveries of penicillin and DNA, the building of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the sinking of the *Titanic*, the first Holden car and the last-known thylacine. They were shaped by this world and were active participants in it.

I wanted to find out more about these two women: their professional and personal development and their contributions to Melbourne life. My research included scanning newspapers from the period for mentions of them, as well as accessing the Presbyterian Ladies' College archives for back copies of the school's magazine, *Patchwork, in Prose and Poetry*. I began to build a picture of the lives of these women and, through this, discovered some connections between the two. Indeed, I started to wonder whether they may have actually met. On one level, it seemed likely, given their prominence in Melbourne circles. But, then again, one was a surgeon, the other a fashion icon. Would medicine and fashion have ever come face to face?

Wise counsel

Florence May Cooper was born in 1891 and attended the Presbyterian Ladies' College in East Melbourne between 1908 and 1910. She was actively involved in the debating society and Christian union, won the class prize for physics and chemistry in her final year and was also head prefect.⁴

She maintained contact with the school after she left, attending a reunion in 1928 at which the famous opera singer Dame Nellie Melba was guest of honour⁵. Dame Nellie paid tribute to her father, David Mitchell, never forgetting that he had built the first buildings of the school.⁶ Coincidentally, in 1884 her father built the premises of the Equitable Store at 162 Collins Street, which became Georges' home four years later.⁷

In 1911, Florence started to study medicine at the University of Melbourne.⁸ During her third year, she attended lectures at the Melbourne Hospital, on the corner of Lonsdale and Swanston streets (later the Royal Melbourne Hospital and Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital). Florence was one of only two female students in that year's class.⁹

In 1916, she graduated with honours: again one of two women out of around 18 students to obtain a bachelor of medicine and bachelor of surgery degree.¹⁰ To put this in historical context, this was 25 years after Clara Stone had graduated in medicine from the University of Melbourne in 1891, the first of two female students to do so.¹¹ Shortly after graduating, Florence was appointed to the Melbourne Hospital as resident medical officer.¹²

Around this time, she was living in a beautiful family home called 'Heyford' in Chaucer Crescent, Canterbury, a suburb of Melbourne.¹³ Built for her father, Louis Cooper, and designed by Herbert Black, it is an arts and crafts style house that was significant enough to be featured in *Table Talk* in 1908.¹⁴ It was named after the village in England from where the Cooper family had come.

Upon completion of her term as resident medical officer, Florence went to India and worked for the next two years in a Presbyterian mission hospital.¹⁵ On her return to Australia in 1919 the Spanish influenza epidemic was raging, and she was placed in charge of an influenza emergency hospital for sick nurses in the Melbourne suburb of Malvern.¹⁶

In around 1920, she went to Ballarat, in central Victoria, and spent five years in general practice.¹⁷ It was noted in a local newspaper that she was the town's 'only lady practitioner'. She also became honorary physician at the Ballarat Hospital in 1923.¹⁸

Florence apparently had quite a gift for public speaking, as reported in a Ballarat newspaper from 1920:

... the speaker, Dr. Florence Cooper, of Sturt Street ... was received with hearty applause. Dr. Cooper gave a very fine address on India, where she had lived for two years ... her knowledge of the land and its customs were most interesting ... Dr. Cooper had a very happy way in telling her story,



Top: Victor E Cobb, *The Presbyterian Ladies' College*, East Melbourne, print: etching, 1938, Pictures Collection, H41857

Above: School prefects, Presbyterian Ladies' College, East Melbourne, 1910, in *Patchwork, in Prose and Poetry*, 2 July 1910, p. 61, Presbyterian Ladies' College Melbourne Archive. Florence Cooper (head prefect) is centre front.



Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital, Melbourne, postcard: gelatin silver photograph, sometime after 1947, Pictures Collection, H96.200/390. The tower on the far right is all that remains of the hospital today.

which quite won the hearts of her hearers, and she was listened to with much interest and enjoyment.¹⁹

In 1949, Florence also regularly contributed to *Your Family Doctor Speaks*, a segment on Melbourne radio stations 3AW, 3UZ and 3DB.²⁰

In 1925, she returned to Melbourne and became a member of the Royal Melbourne Hospital's honorary medical staff as honorary surgeon.²¹ In 1938, she holidayed in Norway then did postgraduate work in London, returning just before the outbreak of World War II.²²

Florence continued as honorary surgeon at the Royal Melbourne Hospital until 1945, then became honorary consultant surgeon and a member of the Committee of Management until her retirement from the honorary medical staff in 1951 (the hospital had become the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital in 1947).²³ She then continued as honorary consultant. Florence therefore worked at the Lonsdale Street site in all its forms: the Melbourne Hospital, the Royal Melbourne Hospital and the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital. She was described as one of Melbourne's most distinguished medical women.²⁴

Florence was a member of the Girl Guides state executive and the Lyceum Club, and she served with the Army Medical Corps in World War II.²⁵ She also had private practices at 20, 61 and 111 Collins Street,²⁶ including one situated across from where Reta Findlay later lived (at 110 Collins Street), just down the road from Georges. She was presented to the Queen Mother in 1958, when the latter opened the Jessie McPherson Block at the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital during her royal visit.²⁷



Top: Luncheon in honour of Lady Brookes at the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital, in *Age* (Melbourne), 24 October 1950, p. 7. Florence Cooper is second from right. Lady Brookes was president of the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital. The luncheon celebrated her return from overseas and the naming of the Mabel Brookes Wing.

Above: Florence Cooper being presented to the Queen Mother at the opening of Jessie McPherson Hospital's new home in Lonsdale Street, alongside the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital, 3 March 1958, author's collection



Florence Cooper, from her obituary, in unknown source (probably a Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital newsletter), c. 1963–64, author's collection

Florence Cooper died on 3 October 1963,²⁸ aged 72. She was cremated at the Springvale Crematorium.

In the 1990s, most of the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital was demolished. The only structure that remains of the Edwardian complex built in 1910, which once occupied the entire block bounded by Lonsdale, Swanston, Little Lonsdale and Russell streets, is a solitary tower, now housing the Queen Victoria Women's Centre.²⁹

An accidental businesswoman

Reta Findlay was born Reta Mildred Carrad in Sydney in 1893 and was educated at Fort Street Model School.³⁰ A listing for a 'Reta Carrad' from the 'Model Public School, Fort-street' appears in Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* in 1910 and has her receiving a silver medal for botany and achieving second-class passes in English history, geography and English; third-class in French and geometry; and first-class in botany.³¹

Her father, William James Carrad, was a bookbinder and had an extensive library.³² As a teenager Reta 'loved the unusual, had an idea a minute but never the remotest idea of business. She was gay, adventurous, and had "day dreams" of being wrecked on a desert island'.³³

Reta married George Lanark Findlay in 1923 at St Mark's Anglican Church, Darling Point, Sydney, and, prompted 'by the needs of his import business, the couple moved to Melbourne about 1930. Through "force of



Georges, Collins Street, Melbourne, photograph: gelatin silver, c. 1913 – c. 1920, Pictures Collection, H2004.89/25

circumstances”, Reta began work as a commercial artist for a colour-printing and advertising firm, and rapidly rose to publicity manager³⁴ According to her sister, Vera Dunster (née Carrad), it was the Depression of the 1930s that drove Reta to commercialism. During her work at the firm, she handled the advertising account for Georges. Douglas George, then managing director of the store, thought he’d better secure her talents and get her on the staff. Reta accepted his offer, on one condition: that she would be able to go on a tour to London and Paris to survey the fashion scene for the store.³⁵ Her condition was accepted, and so began a full-time relationship with the famous Collins Street store and the first of her many travels overseas.

Douglas George sought her advice on the store’s image, and she replied,

‘You try to do too many things. It’s not for you to compete with a popular store like Myers. You’ll never win. You need to be exclusive, different.’ To which Douglas George replied, ‘You don’t understand our problems ... we



Left: Reta Findlay as a teenager and as advertising manager of Georges, in Dorothy Glasscock, 'Woman's world. Three women recall their youth', *Herald* (Melbourne), 15 June 1950, p. 18

Right: Reta Findlay, from Keith Dunstan, *The Store on the Hill*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 1979, p. 105

are between two churches and on a hill. It's a fact of life: people won't walk up a hill to shop.' 'Mr George,' Reta Findlay replied, 'You don't want the people who walk up hills. You want the customers who come in carriages.'³⁶

For most of its history, Georges had been 'famed for [its] superior quality of goods and moderate prices'³⁷ and took pride in its motto, 'What we do, we do well'. However, Reta is credited for taking this to a new level, making the store even more elegant and exclusive.

Reta rose through the ranks of Georges, becoming the 'first' in many things, including Australia's first female advertising manager, the first to introduce formal mannequin parades to Melbourne and the first to bring to Melbourne prominent London fashion designers: Peter Russell, Aage Thaarup (the queen's milliner) and Teddy Tinling.³⁸ In 1946, she was appointed associate director of Georges, one of only a few female board members of an Australian public company.³⁹ In interviews at the time, she described her feelings:

'I feel I have been fortunate in gaining this recognition ... Many women worked hard in responsible positions, but did not reap the benefits of their work because they were women.' She felt she was lucky to be working with a progressive, broad-minded firm ... Since women knew from first-hand experience what women shoppers wanted, it seemed only sensible that they should have some say in what was offered for sale. In Britain and the United States many women had reached highly responsible executive positions.⁴⁰



Refill!

Elizabeth Arden

SAVE MONEY
SAVE METAL

GEORGES WILL BE HAPPY TO REFILL
YOUR E.A. LIPSTICK CASES WITH MISS
ARDEN'S FLATTERING SATIN-SMOOTH
WAR TIME SHADES STOP RED,
BLUSH ROSE, BURN'T SUGAR, PRIMULA
AND PRINTEMS

Elizabeth Arden

GEORGES LTD. 162 COLLINS ST. MELBOURNE. TEL. CENT. 9730.



Left: Advertisement for Elizabeth Arden at Georges, in theatre program for *Let's Face It*, His Majesty's Theatre, season commencing 20 November 1943, La Trobe Theatre Programme Collection

Right: Reta Findlay, 'The queen's dressmaker' ('Air mail diary'), *Herald* (Melbourne), 10 September 1946, p. 15



Edwin G Adamson, Australian Imperial Force recruitment window display at Georges, Collins Street, photograph: gelatin silver, c. 1940 – c. 1945, Pictures Collection, H98.86/7

Reta Findlay ... described herself today as an 'accidental business woman'. Nine years ago she joined the firm as advertising manager. At that time she said it created a mild sensation to have a woman in charge of the advertising of one of the larger stores ... Miss Findlay does not think that being appointed to the board will make any changes in her everyday job of advertising and fashion promotion. Now instead of submitting ideas to the board, she will have a voice on it.⁴¹

In 1946, in the third-floor administration offices, there were four women executives in a row: Reta Findlay, Dorothy Taylor (secretary), Gladys Macarthur (credit manager) and Hazel Field (chief clerk). 'The Georges board had faith in the power of women.'⁴² And Reta's office was apparently something to see: an article in the *Australian Women's Weekly* described it as having lime and aubergine walls, ruby-red carpet, chairs and lampshade; though, interestingly, it says that the colour scheme was designed to be 'restful'.⁴³

In 1949, she was made acting general manager when John George, the managing director, went overseas on an extensive business trip.⁴⁴ In 1950, she became a full director, the 'first woman in Australia to have received the full directorship of a public company': another first.⁴⁵ Described as one of Melbourne's 'best-known business women', 'the city's best-groomed woman ... [and] a by-word in social circles', in 1949 she was 'reputed to be one of the highest-salaried women business executives in Australia'.⁴⁶



Valentine & Sons' Publishing Co., *Collins Street, showing Congregational and Scots churches, Melbourne*, postcard: printed, colour, c. 1909, Pictures Collection, H96.200/113. Reta Findlay's future flat can be seen on the lower right, with Georges in the background, just behind the spire of the Scots Church. Florence Cooper's private practice at 111 Collins Street would probably not have been built at this stage but was eventually situated near the lower left (she was listed here in 1950 and 1952).

It appears that Reta's marriage to George Findlay did not last, and that they separated sometime after she moved to Melbourne. I haven't found evidence that they formally divorced. Reta, however, continued to use her married name and was always referred to as 'Miss Findlay'. 'There is no hope for a Mrs in business', she said.⁴⁷

When Georges closed, in 1995 (this was around the time that the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital was being demolished), it had been trading for 115 years. Reta Findlay worked there for some 15 of those, and her impact was significant. As well as being the 'first' in many things, she introduced minimalist and elegant window displays, causing traffic jams when people flocked to her display for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth.⁴⁸ She was also a tireless worker for charities and the war effort, setting up a women officers' club in Georges.⁴⁹ She even initiated the 'Watchful Spending' series, which urged people to put their money into the war loan⁵⁰ – a rare moment in retail history in which a department store urged its customers not to spend.

She also introduced an American method for approaching fashion called 'personalysis': clients would visit the store and have their personality



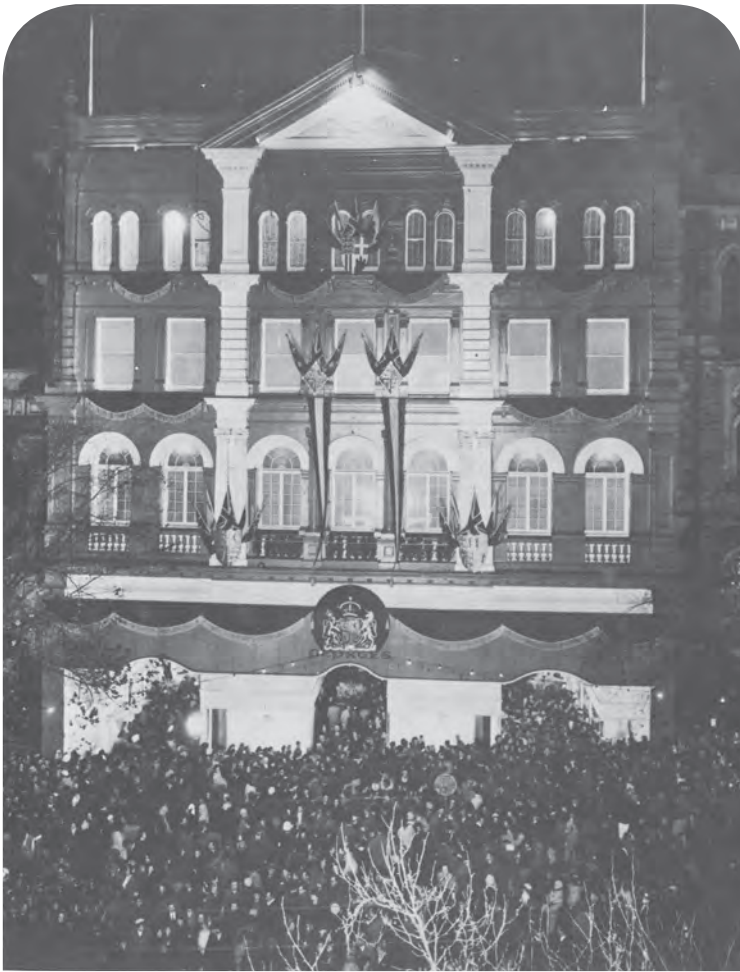
Lyle Fowler, millinery at Georges, Collins Street, c. 1943, Harold Paynting Collection, Pictures Collection, H92.20/1087

type analysed in the ‘personalysis bureau’. One advertisement described the approach: ‘Your temperament should determine the mood of your clothes. Personalysis can help you define your type. Are you romantic or conservative; ingenuous or sophisticated; artistic or executive? Your clothes should express your inner as well as your outer self.’⁵¹ Reta had regular timeslots on 3UZ radio in which she spoke about this new fashion trend.⁵²

Reta also became involved in the Women for Canberra Movement, encouraging women to enter politics.⁵³ She was a member of the inaugural Victorian committee.

During her travels overseas in 1946, she sent back to the Melbourne public news of the latest fashion and culture via a column in the *Herald* called ‘Air mail diary’. ‘This novel approach was typical of her talent for creating subtle and effective publicity.’⁵⁴ She commissioned contemporary artists, including surrealist artist Klaus Friedeberger, to produce the artwork for the famous *Georges Gazette* and employed the sculptor Clifford Last to redesign Georges’ crest for the building’s facade.⁵⁵

Like Florence Cooper, Reta had a flair for public speaking, providing lively commentary at fashion parades and regularly speaking on radio about fashion trends. She made a direct broadcast to Melbourne at the time of the



Coronation windows, Georges, Collins Street, 1953, in Keith Dunstan, *The Store on the Hill*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 1979, p. 119

coronation of King George VI, in 1937, which was aired by 3DB, and conducted an interview in New York with cosmetics queen Elizabeth Arden in 1940 for 3UZ.⁵⁶

Reta is famously quoted as saying ‘There’s no virtue in deliberately becoming drab’,⁵⁷ and certainly no-one could describe her as such. While she transformed Georges into a beacon of understated style and elegance, she herself was often flamboyant in her dress: ‘Three pheasant feathers, one grey, one green, and one bronze, rose perkily from [the] front of Miss Reta Findlay’s ... corn-coloured ... toque’.⁵⁸ Perhaps there was a reason. Describing herself, Reta said, ‘I am a plain woman. No one would look twice at me if I didn’t startle them into it’.⁵⁹

Two months before Reta’s death, an article about her appeared in the *Herald* accompanied by a photo of her in her Collins Street flat. It is revealing in its personal detail:



Princess Elizabeth (right) and Reta Findlay (centre), Lancaster House, England, in *Argus* (Melbourne), 9 June 1951, p. 14

She is a woman of fashion; she dictates fashion, sets fashion, loves fashion ... Reta Findlay, slightly reserved, is as calm and serene in business as her perfectly-groomed appearance would lead you to expect ... her father had an excellent library and she had free use of it. She could paint – and she had a flair for designing clothes for herself and friends ... In her youth she had no special business training and no urge for a career, but later, through force of circumstances she began as a commercial artist and advanced rapidly into other branches of advertising and publicity. She feels that her dilettante interest in painting and writing and the general background of knowledge she had gained from reading helped her rapid advance.⁶⁰

Her status was such that following her death, in the Mercy Hospital on 14 June 1954 at the age of 62, her funeral service was held in St Paul's Cathedral, and Georges was closed for half a day.⁶¹ Representatives of various institutions attended, including the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital, the Young Women's Christian Association and the Red Cross.⁶² John George said, 'I don't think there was another advertising woman in the whole of Australia

to touch her. She led the field. In fact she had a touch of genius about all she did'.⁶³ The accolades continued: 'Always gracious, always immaculate, always with her alert brain producing new and original promotional ideas, Miss Findlay insinuated a new era for women in business throughout Australia by her own quiet, yet forceful example'.⁶⁴ Reta Findlay was cremated at the Springvale Crematorium.

A long-handled umbrella

In my search for information about whether the two might have met, there were a number of tantalizing clues, though nothing definitive. In the *Weekly Times* in May 1949, there was a description of a one-day appeal to raise funds for the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital. It included a hat competition, and one of the judges was 'Miss Reta Findlay'.⁶⁵ There was no specific mention of Florence Cooper, but the chances of the two women meeting there could be fairly high.

Then there was an article in *The Age* in 1953 discussing a fashion parade to be held as part of a gala dinner to raise funds for the Queen Victoria Hospital, organised by 'Miss Reta Findlay of Georges'.⁶⁶ Again, there was no mention of my great-aunt, but it was another occasion when they could well have crossed paths.

In the *Herald* at the time of Reta's death, she was described as having been a life governor of the Queen Victoria Hospital.⁶⁷ As life governor, she would have presumably attended events associated with the hospital and possibly met Florence.

Of course, having various private practices in the 'Paris End' of Collins Street would have afforded my great-aunt ample opportunity to savour the delights of Georges, just down the hill. From one of her rooms she may even have glimpsed Reta coming and going from her flat just across the road – impeccably groomed and carrying her trademark long-handled umbrella.

Although evidence of a meeting remains elusive, my research has uncovered new information about these two women's lives and the important institutions with which they were associated. It has also highlighted the intricate connections that can exist between people, whatever their background or career path.

Today, the ashes of the two women lie in the Springvale Crematorium, a short distance apart. Again, tantalisingly close.