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**Jean Beadle**  
**A LIFE OF LABOR ACTIVISM**

**Bobbie Oliver**



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*In Memory of*  
*Dorothy Elsie Cargeeg*  
*(1925–2003)*

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- 15 Jean pictured outside the Beadle and McLeod newsagents on the corner of Charles and Newcastle Streets in West Perth. The building was later demolished to widen Charles Street at the entrance to the south-bound freeway.  
(*Courtesy Cargeeg family*)
- 16 The Beadle/Miller family kept in close contact throughout Jean's life. Bill, with wife Victoria and daughters, Jean (back) and Dorothy (foreground) lived nearby and visited her every day.  
(*Courtesy Cargeeg family*)
- 17 Jean in the garden at Carr Street with brothers George and Jim, the former on holiday from Victoria, after Harry's death in 1928.  
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- 18 The focus of the family and the community: Jean Beadle's last home, 31 Carr Street, West Perth (1927). The fine, old home was later demolished and a commercial building now stands on the site.  
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(*Courtesy Cargeeg family*)

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Dorothy Cargeeg did not live to see the publication of this biography, and the book is dedicated to her memory in acknowledgement of her contribution to its fulfilment.

Bobbie Oliver, Curtin University

## INTRODUCTION

The autumn sunlight shining through the leaves cast patterns of light and shade as Jean Beadle's funeral cortege crossed the green lawns of Karrakatta Cemetery, in Perth, Western Australia. As well as the mourners, crowds of people had turned out to pay their last respects on a beautiful May day in 1942. A few snowy clouds floated in the deep blue sky, but the weather was perfect—more suited to a celebration of life than a funeral for the dead.

The world was at war. European Australians had often feared invasion by a foreign power, but, for the first time in their history, it was a very real possibility. Barely three months earlier, Japanese forces had captured the British fortress at Singapore and with it thousands of Allied troops; they had bombed Darwin, killing 243 people—although the Australian public did not know the death toll or the extent of damage—and then had attacked Broome. Australia was receiving thousands of American service personnel and gearing up for a war effort unlike any that the country had previously experienced. Yet the Prime Minister, John Curtin, spared the time to send flowers and a message in honour of a colleague from the Western Australian Branch of the Australian Labor Party (ALP).<sup>1</sup> He wrote:

Mrs Beadle was truly noble; her work was of untold value to the Labor Movement, to the State of Western Australia, and to the nation...She never

wavered in her ideals; she never laid down the torch; she never failed to look forward to the day of a better life for all...Australia can be proud of Jean Beadle.<sup>2</sup>

In the funeral procession, women enjoyed an unusual prominence. Nurses from the King Edward Memorial Hospital formed a guard of honour. The cortege included representatives of practically every welfare organisation in the state, as well as youth and soldier's organisations. Labor women gathered from all over the metropolitan area. The pall-bearers included three Labor members of the state parliament and the Lord Mayor of Perth. In summary, the cortege represented the numerous fields of endeavour and paid tribute to a physically small woman with an enormous capacity for work that would bring about practical reform.

Who was Jean Beadle? Why did John Curtin regard her as being 'truly great' and why was her work for the labour movement of such value? Why, today, is she virtually unknown, with only one memorial to her name? This biography of Jean Beadle examines her commitment to the labour movement, and her motivation and philosophy in the context of her public life and work. It discusses her perceptions of women's struggles and the injustices that they frequently encountered even within the organised labour movement. Where possible, Jean Beadle's private story has been reconstructed from family papers, photographs and the recollections of her grand-daughters, Mrs Jean Qnarrill and the late Mrs Dorothy Cargeeg. In conclusion, taking up the theme of Curtin's tribute, the biography will explore her contribution to the labour movement, the state and the nation.

Inevitably, with a study of this nature, there remain questions that may never be answered. While existing material from collections of private and public papers makes it relatively easy to portray the public Jean Beadle, the private woman has been much more elusive. Many political biographies do not contain much in the way of personal details about the subject. This is sometimes at the request of the subject.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the lack of the personal seems to be, even now, less acceptable when the subject is female. Consequently, some biographers have resorted to the pointless exercise of speculating about why their subject remained single; or, if married, how their husbands and children coped with their active public lives.<sup>4</sup> I suspect that Jean was an intensely private person. Although—as we shall see—when pleading a particular cause, she sometimes revealed glimpses of her private life to

her audience,<sup>5</sup> she would have thought that such details were, on the whole, irrelevant and of no interest to anyone but herself and her near ones.

Jean's grand-daughters recalled her as a loving and kindly grandmother who was delightful company, as well as a busy activist who combined family picnics and holidays with organising and other work for the labour movement. Recollections of Jean's house as the hub of the Carr Street community, with the family phone and car being made available to friends and neighbours when needed, the traditional family gatherings at Christmas and New Year, and outings to the cinema to see popular movies indicate that Jean enjoyed socialising, but that time spent with her family was especially precious. Jean and Dorothy remembered that their grandmother always took a little extra trouble over inscriptions in greeting cards. 'She never ever just put Happy Birthday on the card. She always wrote a very meaningful message...'<sup>6</sup> Their memories, however, were mostly from their childhood, and were doubtless coloured by a child's perceptions of a much-loved older relative. They freely admitted they did not understand many of Jean's activities. The devotion of her children and grandchildren, however, testifies that Jean practised what she preached when she said that a woman could be an activist without jeopardising the comfort and wellbeing of her family.

Apart from Jean's letter to her older son, Bill, on his departure for active service overseas in World War I, however, no family correspondence was available for this study except the tributes that came after her death. Consequently, her relationship with her husband, in particular, and children retain a certain amount of mystery. Apart from Jean and Dorothy's recollection of Harry's devotion to Jean and his support of her work, no evidence has been found that bears any indication of what Harry thought or said about her public roles, although these were unusually prominent for women of her time. Certainly, there is nothing to indicate that her work detracted from her ability to be a good wife and mother. Nor did Jean encourage women to put work or personal ambitions before these roles. Her vision of equal citizenship did not place paid work as anything other than a second best option for women, although she campaigned for their right to professional careers and equal pay for work of equal value.

Similarly, it has been impossible to uncover the full story of some events that significantly impacted upon family life, such as the death of Jean's first grandchild, the failure of Harry Beadle's partnership, the WA Forge and Engineering Company, or the failed marriage of the youngest son, Harrie.

Almost inevitably, family tensions must have occurred; including the anxiety caused by Harrie, as suggested by Jean's grand-daughters. Public comment depicted Jean as 'feisty' and, opponents accused her of being argumentative. She clearly had courage, determination and a strong personality. Yet others spoke of her 'humility', her 'modesty' and her 'retiring nature'—qualities that were revered in women of the period. Jean emerges as an extremely feminine woman, who took pride in her appearance and loved good clothes, most of which she made for herself. Contemporary photographs from her youth reveal fine features and head of thick, wavy, dark brown hair, which she continued to wear in a bun or a plait after it had turned snowy white in old age. Accessories included an assortment of hats and a fox fur.

In summary, testimony suggests that Harry Beadle fully supported his wife in her endeavours and that her children and grandchildren grew up not only loving and honouring her, but also emulating her social conscience.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it is in this way that Jean herself would most prefer to be remembered.

Cartin's funeral message highlighted the factors that were central to Jean Beadle's motivation: a deep love and compassion for women and children, a strong conviction that all people deserve equality, and an unshakeable faith in organised Labor as the only effective means of removing those inequalities and injustices that created poverty and oppression. Jean Beadle cared deeply for the victims of society. A study of her origins reveals that her concerns were rooted in the genuine adversity suffered by those who came unwillingly to Australia's shores as convicted criminals.

# 1

## From a Background of Oppression and Struggle

Almost a century before the funeral service at Karrakatta, Jean Beadle's maternal grandmother arrived in Australia. Born in Glasgow in 1825, Jane Perry disembarked in Van Diemen's Land from the convict transport, *Margaret*, on 19 July 1843, when she was just eighteen. The 164-day voyage had been lengthy, even by contemporary standards, but the four deaths that occurred among the 156 convicts on board was a lower mortality rate than on many transports.<sup>1</sup> At the time of her arrival in Hobart Jane was five feet, two and one quarter inches (approximately 158 centimetres) in height, with light brown hair, a fair complexion and grey eyes set in a small, round, freckled face. Although Jane was literate and had been in employment as a domestic servant and then as a steam loom weaver, she had twice been convicted for housebreaking, and on each occasion had served three months in prison. Records reveal that her father, Nelson Perry, lived in Glasgow and she had a brother, James, but no evidence has been found of other family members. On 15 September 1842, Jane was tried at the Glasgow Court of Justiciary on a