

The Mother of the Labor Movement: BERTHA McNAMARA

BY HER SON, WILLIAM McNAMARA.

BERTHA McNAMARA—mother of the Australian Labor Movement as she was and is still affectionately known—passed her span of 75 years (1856-1931) in a period of world-shaking changes.

Born in Posen, then a province of Prussian Poland, she saw and experienced some of the results of the forceful re-establishment by Bismarck of the re-nascent German Empire and its consequent intensification of world Imperialism; experienced these results in the economic stress which broke up her home and drove her, a mere girl of 15, to Australia, via England, in a windjammer of the period.

So in 1872 we find her obtaining her first real knowledge of Australia at the country town of Bairnsdale, Victoria. Marrying shortly after whilst still in her teens Peter Herman Bredt, who subsequently became Bairnsdale's Shire Secretary, she doubtless found the task of managing a home and a family of six children sufficient to absorb the energies of even a woman of her tremendous vitality; that she managed to imbue into them some of her own charm and vigor of character is proved by the subsequent marriage of one to poet Henry Lawson and another to Labor Premier John T. Lang.

Early Widowhood.

Left almost without resources and with six young children by the sudden death of her husband, she spent a stormy period of alternate job-hunting and working as a travelling saleswoman, selling jewellery, sewing machines, etc.—a period which increased her knowledge of Capitalism and its workings.

So we find her in Hobart in 1891, a young woman of 34, determinedly ignoring her language difficulties and publishing a pamphlet, "Home Talk on Socialism"—probably one of the earliest Australian propaganda Socialist pamphlets.

In Sydney in 1892 we find her married again—to William H. McNamara, who had founded in 1887 the Australian Socialist League in Sydney, and whose energies ever afterwards were unselfishly and courageously given for the Socialist ideal. The radical book-centre they opened in that year in Castlereagh Street (moved a year or two later to the opposite side of the street) subsequently became one of the best-known landmarks in Sydney.

Thither came most of the early pioneers of the Labor Party; among them W. M. Hughes and W. A. Holman, George Black and Frank Cotton, Arthur Rae and John T. Lang, J. C. Watson and Ernie Lane—four of whom subsequently became Premiers or Prime Ministers.

Famous Customers.

There also foregathered protagonists of other political faiths and groups: J. A. Andrews, philosophical anarchist, William Lane, of Queensland and the New Aus-



Bertha McNamara—her plaque, by Lyndon Dadswell, hangs on a wall in the Sydney Trades Hall.

tralia Colony; John Dwyer, of the Active Service Brigade; "Ragor Redbeard," the Nietzschean Might-is-Righter; Thomas Walker, the Rationalist.

Louisa Lawson, editress of "The Dawn," Rose Scott, Mrs. Summerfield, Mrs. Montefiore and other politically active women discussed there with Bertha McNamara the strategic moves for securing an extension of the franchise and other rights to women.

Henry Lawson, E. J. Brady, Victor Daly, Price Warung, and radical writers generally, along with overseas visitors like Ben Tillett and Tom Mann, famous British Labor leaders, Francisco Ferrer, martyred Spanish educationist, dropped in for a sup or a chat at the ever open hospitable back room behind the shop or the reading room above it.

Opposed War.

These were the exciting nineties, the years of the great strikes, of the birth of the Labor Party, of the struggle for Federation, of the Boer War—years of struggle, of heroic effort, when Bertha McNamara and her husband faced angry crowds in Parramatta Park and the Sydney Domain in defence of the Boer's right to freedom.

The strain became too great—not for her, not for her husband. In 1906, after two children had been born of the marriage, she again experienced the personal and economic stress of widowhood.

Then came the war of 1914-1918. Opposed to British and German Imperial-

ism alike she assisted in all possible ways, by personal propaganda, by the sale of banned anti-militarist periodicals and pamphlets, to develop the strength of those who demanded "Peace by Negotiation," and who opposed overseas conscription.

The hectic period of the I.W.W. during the war years found most of the prominent members of that organisation in contact with the famous bookshop; and at that time we find among a never-ending procession of prominent radical visitors Percy Brookfield, M.L.A., from Broken Hill, Tom Walsh and Jacob Johnson, leaders of the great seamen's strikes, and Adela Pankhurst (later Walsh), whose anti-war meetings in the Protestant Hall were memorable indeed.

In the early 1920's Bertha McNamara was energetically helping to found the "Labor Daily"; and in 1920 she launched another pamphlet attack against money-power with "Shylock Exposed."

The old bookshop at 221 Castlereagh Street was demolished in 1922 by the Federal Government to make room for the present City South Telephone Exchange, and from then on in its new locations, for four years in Park Street, and for three years in Castlereagh Street.

Bertha McNamara's twinkling eyes and sweet voice were seen and heard less at these new centres from which radical literature continued to percolate out and leaven Labor thought as it had since 1892, but she was still young and eager of spirit, and her now silvered hair continued to be seen at Party conferences, Women's Organising Committee meetings, in the Domain.

Last Domain Visit.

One Sunday in 1931, although suffering from a severe cold, she determined to visit the Domain to confront Mrs. Pankhurst Walsh, her former friend, with her apparent apostasy. It was a wet and bleak day, and she contracted as a result pneumonia, from which she never recovered, although she lived just long enough to receive the glad news of the birth of a grand-daughter bearing the honored name of Bertha McNamara.

Thus passed into the silence, amid all the turmoil of the 1931 depression and the incipient civil war atmosphere generated by the New Guard, one whose whole life had been given gladly, heroically and completely for the betterment of her fellows through the attainment of Socialism and the Brotherhood of Man.

A plaque by the well-known sculptor Lyndon Dadswell is affixed to the wall of the Sydney Trades Hall, near its entrance, and a Bertha McNamara Hostel, named in her honor, has been opened at Miller's Point; but her greatest memorial is still the memory of her cheerful, courageous faith in Socialism that is treasured in the minds and hearts of all those still living who knew and loved her.