



SPENCE, CATHERINE HELEN
5 June 2006

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders): I recently attended a Port Lincoln Caledonian Society women's lunch where the chairman, Roger Inglis, gave a brief history of a famous Scottish woman, Catherine Helen Spence, whose portrait is part of the tapestry on the wall in this chamber. Mr Inglis was kind enough to allow me to use his fascinating speech, which he based on an article from *Australian Heritage Magazine*, to put it on the record in this place. My grandmother's family were from Gattonside in Melrose, Scotland, and his opening statement sparked my immediate interest.

Catherine Helen Spence was born on Halloween 1825, in the village of Melrose on the Tweed River, that is, in the heart of Sir Walter Scott's country and, coincidentally very near the birth place of my Scottish great grandmother. She spent the first 14 years of her life in and around Melrose, and the literature, legends, words and tunes of the Scottish border were ingrained in her childhood and were instrumental in the formation of her character. Catherine was the fifth of eight children born to David and Helen Brodie Spence. The Spences were an unusual family. David Spence once attempted to be a creative writer and then was a naval surgeon who retired from the sea to practice his own brand of natural medicine in Melrose. Helen Brodie wrote letters to the local press setting out her ideas for social reform. Unknown to Catherine, her father was a heavy speculator in foreign grain and, after a failed attempt to raise capital through creative investments, he was financially ruined. In April 1839, after Port Lincoln was settled, Catherine learnt from an aunt of her father's ruin, that he had to leave Melrose and Scotland forever and that the family must all go to Australia. David Spence then left for South Australia, where he was joined by the rest of his family in November.

Catherine Spence was shocked by her father's failure and, again, by the dusty collection of tents and shacks that was Adelaide when they arrived. The latter so upset her that she later wrote that she sat down on a log and cried. These shocks, and the change in the family's fortune, helped consolidate her determination to be self-reliant and not to be dependent on any man's support. She became a governess in 1843, established her own school in 1846, and began to contribute articles to the *South Australian* newspaper. In 1850, she decided to earn her living by writing and began her first novel, *Morrison: A Tale of South Australia During the Gold Fever*, the first novel about Australia by a female author.

Her success as a writer brought her into contact with young men and women who had taken up the faith of Unitarianism, and this association enabled her to throw off the shackles of Calvinism. She travelled to America—

The Hon. M.J. Atkinson interjecting:

Mrs PENFOLD: Yes—for the Unitarians and, while there, was invited to preach. On return to Australia she became the first woman to preach from the pulpit in South Australia. Catherine travelled to England in 1865 where she met leading Unitarians who were at the forefront of social reform. When she returned to South Australia, Spence established the State Children's Council in 1871, and the Boarding Cut Society in 1886, which placed hundreds of neglected children into foster homes. She wrote a book, *The Laws We Live Under*, which was used in schools to teach children citizenship duties. She contributed to their education through donations of royalties and fees from journalism.

Catherine Spence was an enthusiastic proponent of female emancipation and women's suffrage, and she published her book *Plea for Pure Democracy* in 1880. Her persistence assisted South Australian women to be the first in any Australian colony to gain the right to vote in 1896, when, for the first time, women were also eligible to stand for election. After the death of her mother in 1887, Spence (now 62, and free from the need to provide constant care and companion-

ship) embarked on a new period of activity in support of her favourite cause—proportional representation, which she renamed 'effective voting'.

In 1894 she accepted an invitation to undertake a lecture tour of the United States. She said:

I felt that it was a big order for a little woman of 68 to undertake the conversion to electoral reform of 60 million of the most conceited people in the world. Still I went.

It seems that the only difference today is that there are many more of them. Catherine became the first female political candidate in Australia when she nominated for election in the 1897 federal convention, standing on the issue of proportional representation. Regrettably, she was not successful.