

# Florrie Hodges: On Being Brave

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with Helen Morgan

## Abstract

*In 1926, a teenage girl from Powelltown named Florrie Hodges became a national celebrity owing to her bravery in the face of extreme bushfire danger. She was awarded a medal by the Royal Humane Society of Australasia for the selfless act of courage that saved the lives of her three younger siblings, but she suffered terrible physical and mental injuries in the process. With the help of the descendants of Florrie's extended family, who shared their memories of Florrie after the fires, this historical note reflects upon the relationship between celebrity and heroics and the inter-generational impact of untreated trauma.*

John Schauble's excellent article about 'Victoria's Forgotten 1926 Bushfires' (published in this journal in December 2019) reminds us of the importance of this event in reframing the relationship between Victorians and their environment.<sup>1</sup> It also reminds us how quickly events can be forgotten, when bigger, seemingly more catastrophic, events happen subsequently. The 1926 fires in Gippsland have been 'jettisoned to a more distant past', barely memorialised in art, literature or history, despite killing more Victorians, proportionately, than any fires before or since except the 1939 fires. Schauble makes a strong case for the 'Great Fires of 1926' to be remembered better, as a turning point, a moment in time when Victorians reviewed their relationship to 'the bush' and reorganised their 'social and practical responses to bushfire'.<sup>2</sup>

As well as understanding the social and political lessons learned from them, we should remember the 1926 fires better because of their human cost. They devastated small communities in Gippsland, and the impact of that trauma is a living memory for descendants of some survivors. Through the story of Florrie Hodges, a teenager who

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survived the fires and became a celebrity for her heroic actions, we can explore themes that resonate nearly 100 years later, such as the nature of celebrity, gendered narratives of heroics and the inter-generational impact of unresolved trauma. It is the last of these themes I would like to reflect upon here, with passing reference to the nature of fame and heroics.

Schauble highlights the remarkable story of Florrie Hodges, a 14-year-old girl from a mill settlement near Powelltown, whose heroic actions captured the national imagination. On Sunday 14 February 1926, she was at home with members of her family when the fire exploded about them. Instructed by her mother to take the children to safety, she walked for some miles with her three younger siblings, Rita, Vera and 17-month-old Dorothy, finally lying down on a train track and shielding them with her own body when there was nothing to do except allow the fire to burn over the top of them. They all survived, but Florrie received horrific burns to her legs and back. She was hospitalised for several months and was left disabled and disfigured.

Stories of the heroics of 'the little bush girl of Powelltown'<sup>3</sup> emerged quickly after the fires were put out, and Florrie Hodges became something of a celebrity. Her bravery was recognised far and wide; she was awarded a Royal Humane Society medal, and a testimonial fund launched and administered by the Timber Workers' Union raised some £1,000 to be placed in trust until she was 21, her father being very anxious about her future and the need to make sure that the funds were to be clearly available for her own use.<sup>4</sup> Politicians, unionists, even famous actors were keen to share the stage with Florrie at various events held in her honour during 1926. Important Labor Party figure Jean Daley spoke at an event held in May, and the actor, Louise Lovely, appeared at one in September, along with a range of other artists and the Returned Soldiers Memorial Band.<sup>5</sup>

If, as Schauble suggests, the 1926 fires produced little in the way of cultural product, it seems that what did emerge was focused on a 14-year-old girl. A souvenir booklet was published, 100,000 photographs distributed to schoolchildren across the nation, Queen Mary and the Duchess of York proudly received photographs of the 'Australian Heroine', a gramophone recording of Florrie telling her story was released, and Mary Grant Bruce wrote a special version of her story that was published in the *School Magazine*.<sup>6</sup> Florrie, through her deeds, was

variously described as ‘carrying the spirit of many a pioneer mother’,<sup>7</sup> exhibiting ‘the endurance of a Spartan and the pluck and fortitude of Nurse Cavell’,<sup>8</sup> and equalling the heroics of soldiers in both the Boer War and the Great War. ‘The battlefields of South Africa, Gallipoli and Flanders,’ said Jean Daley at her testimonial, ‘had not furnished a braver deed than the act of heroism performed by the little bush girl of Powelltown.’<sup>9</sup> Florrie was very proud of the various honours and accolades she received, but, when asked to speak, she used the modest hero’s refrain familiar to all of us, telling people ‘she thought that any Australian girl would have done what she did’ (Figure 1).<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 1: Souvenir certificate of the Disastrous Bush Fires, 14 February 1926, showing presentation by medical staff to Florrie Hodges of Powelltown for her self-sacrificing heroism (RHSV Collection: VF 033112)**

The tributes were marred only by a poorly attended Sydney event, organised by the Feminist Club and the League of Child Helpers, after which Sydneysiders were scolded for rushing to greet ‘every visiting celebrity’ but not the girl ‘descended of the race that gave the world the Anzacs’, who exhibited ‘the most outstanding act of heroism of the year, if not the decade.’<sup>11</sup> Florrie’s story still resonated some years after the events. In a 1931 issue of the *Freeman’s Journal*, children’s submissions were published under the title ‘My Favourite Heroine.’ Ten-year-old

Enid Casey asked her readers, 'Do you remember the story of Florrie Hodges' and explained why she was 'her favourite Heroine'.<sup>12</sup> During 'fire season' in 1934, the story of 'the 'Heroine of Black Sunday' was retold in the wake of severe fires in Tasmania and the Victorian timber country.<sup>13</sup> From this time, there is little to be found about Florrie and the trajectory of her life after the fires. Perhaps, following the 1939 fires, all other fires paled into historical insignificance.

Perhaps there are also other reasons to explain Florrie's loss of celebrity over the years, ones that relate more directly to her own life experiences after the fires? Finding an online image of her bravery award and the purse presented to her at the testimonial in her honour created a chain of correspondence between my colleague at the Australian Women's Archives Project, Helen Morgan, and a member of Florrie's extended family, Joy Welch. Helen had been tracing stories of early twentieth-century 'girl heroes' and was immediately drawn to Florrie's tale. She found the name of the donor of the purse to Museum Victoria via their website, and this act of curation provided her with a connection to Joy.<sup>14</sup>

Joy offered to collect stories at a family gathering to be held in early February. Florrie passed away in 1972, but several elderly relatives who remembered her were willing to talk about what they knew and recalled. Many of them became very emotional while doing so but persevered because they wanted Florrie's story to be better known. 'They thought the importance of remembering and recognising her bravery, [talking about] what had happened to her goes quite a way to explaining her life after the event', said Joy.<sup>15</sup> It had not been a particularly happy one.

A nephew, Stan Gleeson, now 87, remembers Florrie well and speaks of his visits to her house in Lyonville, near Trentham. Florrie married her cousin, Bill, soon after the accident, when she was sixteen. Bill worked in the timber mill and he had suffered a couple of serious injuries, so both he and Florrie would have been in constant discomfort or pain. They lived a very simple life. Florrie was remembered as a tough, no-nonsense woman, who did not talk much. She never spoke of the fire, the attention afterwards or the impact it had on her or her body. Her preference was to seek company at the pub, which she visited regularly: an uncommon sight in those days. Most other women were at home with the children, but Florrie was often to be found at the local with her husband drinking. Given the couple's history, it seems that the

extended family looked out for them as much as possible. Everyone knew they both had alcohol issues and everyone attributed that to the trauma they had experienced.

Florrie and Bill had six children, but only four lived to adulthood, and the trauma was inter-generational. Their daughter Nancy had a number of children, who were mainly placed in care as a result of her alcohol issues. Their son Bill did not have children, but he passed away in a Salvation Army home as a chronic alcoholic. Little is known about the two youngest children, but it is known that all of them had been in and out of care owing to Florrie and Bill's inability to care for them. The extended family tried many times to take them all in (especially the two little ones) but the state judged their own families to be too large to permit them taking in any additional children. Some family members with whom Joy spoke still got emotional when they talked about their parents not being allowed to take care of them—they had not wanted their children to be placed in an orphanage. Joy further reported that these family members were acutely aware that, if it had not been for Florrie, their mothers would have perished in the fire and they would not be here, in 2020, telling her story.

It is important to Stan Gleeson that Florrie be remembered because the past lives on in the present. His son, a Country Fire Authority (CFA) member, rescued people in the 2009 Black Saturday fires. He suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), so this nephew's knowledge of Florrie's story helped him to understand the impact similar trauma could have on his own son. He knows how unresolved trauma can continue to play out for years to come. It has made a difference to him as the family creates a pathway to recovery for their son.

In her email, Joy Welch sadly noted that 'in saving others, Florrie lost herself', and, talking about it now, we can see the far-reaching implications for Florrie, her children and her grandchildren. Even at the time, there were commentators who recognised that risk. Dr Irene Stable, the medical officer for the Victorian Education Department, observed with some foreboding that: 'The child will bear the marks of the fire throughout her life, as an external manifestation of her suffering; nothing will ever reveal the deep scar which this terrifying event has left on her memory; nothing will erase it'.<sup>16</sup> It is fair to say that nothing ever did.

Recognising Florrie's story is to recognise the damage that continues to be done when past trauma is not acknowledged. Celebrating bravery as an achievement is not the end of the story; we also need to remember that for very many women and men bravery as 'achievement' has come at a significant cost. Uncovering the history and honouring the stories of brave women like Florrie helps us to reimagine what it means to be brave, and how careful we must be with our heroes.

## Notes

- 1 John Schauble, "'Where are the others?' Victoria's Forgotten 1926 Bushfires', *Victorian Historical Journal*, vol. 90, no. 2, December 2019, pp. 301–17.
- 2 Schauble, pp. 301–02.
- 3 'Heroine of Fires', *Brisbane Telegraph*, 26 May 1926, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/180721688>.
- 4 'Florrie Hodges' Testimonial Fund', *Traralgon Record*, 11 May 1926, p. 3, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/67489537>.
- 5 'Florrie Hodges' Testimonial Fund', p. 3; 'Miss Florrie Hodges', *Argus*, 20 September 1926, p. 21, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/3810119>.
- 6 Schauble, p. 310.
- 7 'Sydney Misses an Opportunity to Pay Tribute to a Heroine', *Sunday Times*, 28 November 1926, p. 3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article128123047>.
- 8 'Florrie Hodges' Testimonial Fund', p. 3.
- 9 'Heroine of Fires'.
- 10 'Miss Florrie Hodges', p. 21.
- 11 'Sydney Misses an Opportunity to Pay Tribute to a Heroine', p. 3.
- 12 'My Favourite Heroine', *Freeman's Journal*, 26 February 1931, p. 43, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/128786841>.
- 13 'Bush Fire Season', *Argus*, 25 January 1934, p. 1, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/11732842>.
- 14 Item HT 33731, Purse—Presentation, Florence (Florrie) E. Hodges, 1926, Museum Victoria Collections, <http://collections.museumvictoria.com.au/items/1973026>; and Item NU 488890 Medal—Royal Humane Society, Florence (Florrie) E. Hodges, Boxed, 1926, Museum Victoria Collections, <http://collections.museumvictoria.com.au/items/1973024>.
- 15 Private correspondence between Joy Welch and Nikki Henningham, 17 February 2020.
- 16 'Florrie Hodges' Testimonial Fund', p. 3.