

**‘The Angel of Kings Cross’  
The Life and Times of  
Dr Fanny Reading**

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Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

A thesis submitted in fulfilment for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

2021

## **CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP**

I, Anne Sarzin, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of PhD in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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June 2021

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...to encourage a looking again at the past from the ever-changing context and knowledges of the present, to stimulate new knowledge and bring it into the intellectual thought arena of the present so that others can engage with it, celebrate it and challenge it. A thesis is a mission to inspire and propagate new ways of thinking, a deeper appreciation for what has been done as well as an enhanced hope for what can be done. (R. Johnston, correspondence with A. Sarzin, 16 March 2021)

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of good people who lived in ways that have informed my journey—my grandfather, Rev. Abraham Levy, who upheld Judaic values and traditions; my parents, Bartlett Arunicus (Ronnie) and Bertha Elizabeth (Betty), whose loving kindness shaped our lives; my gentle sister, Fanny Faye, who infused joy into the world; and my husband Dr Barney Sarzin, who lived his short life in the service of others.

## Foreword

The foreword to this thesis comprises:

- (1) a selection of quotations that convey the thoughts of those who met and knew Dr Fanny Reading; and
- (2) honours and recognition accorded to her for her life of service.

### Dr Fanny Reading—as others saw her

‘[A] woman of distinction in the Jewish community and a woman who has contributed much in time and money towards the social and patriotic causes of Australia’—**Justice Leslie Herron**

‘Her name is a household word for good work in the State of New South Wales. Wherever I go in Australia, I meet people who ask me about her. Work done by people like her, without great publicity, are the greatest deeds of all’—**Premier of New South Wales, James McGirr**

‘She [Dr Fanny] is a foremost contributor to all charities both within and beyond her community’—**Sir Jack Evelyn Cassidy KC**

‘When one has known the life and work of Dr. Fanny Reading, one never again doubts the power of the individual in creating peaceful change’—**Stella Cornelius**

‘She had the gift of persuasive leadership which could inspire thousands of women to follow her and to work with her in fellowship’—**Rabbi Dr I. Porush, OBE**

‘Our community may well be proud and thankful to Dr Fanny Reading — truly a leader and lover of mankind’—President of the Feminist Club, **Mrs Crawford Vaughan**

‘With her boundless enthusiasm, energy and idealism, she activated Jewish women in Sydney and throughout Australia for over half a century’—**Professor Emerita Suzanne Rutland**

‘A dreamer of great dreams with the courage to implement them even in the face of strong opposition’—**Council of Jewish Women’ Minutes**

‘A woman of great culture who has given her life to work for the welfare of every branch of humanity’—**Rev. Isack Morris**



## **Dr Fanny Reading: Recognition and Remembrance**

### ***Buildings***

1. The NCJW War Memorial Fanny Reading Council House, in Queen Street, Woollahra, Sydney, opened in 1963
2. The Dr Fanny Reading Auditorium, in the National Jewish Memorial Centre, Canberra
3. Plaque in the NCJWA Lounge, Wolper Hospital, Woollahra, Sydney. The plaque states:

Dr Fanny Reading, MBE 1884-1974; Founder of the National Council of Jewish Women of Australia 1923; National President of NCJWA 1927-1955; Appointed Life President of NCJWA 1955. Dr Fanny Reading obtained her medical degree from Melbourne University in 1922. She worked simultaneously in practices in both Bondi and Kings Cross, was a consultant to a number of local hospitals and was actively involved in community affairs. She founded the National Council of Jewish Women in 1923 becoming its first President. The Wolper Convalescent House was established by the NCJW's Hospital Visiting Committee during the Presidency of Dr Fanny Reading and officially opened on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1953. In 1961 Dr Fanny Reading was involved in the amalgamation of the NSW Jewish Hospital and the Wolper Convalescent House which became the Wolper Jewish Hospital. Dr Fanny Reading's life and work is celebrated by the NCJWA on Founder's Day in December each year. This Lounge is dedicated to her memory.

### ***Scholarships***

1. National Council of Jewish Women of Australia\_Fanny Reading Scholarship in Hebrew Language, Melbourne University
2. Fanny Reading Travelling Scholarships for attendance at NCJWA conferences

### ***Events***

1. Dr Fanny Reading Human Rights Lecture, NCJWA Vic
2. Dr Fanny Reading Founder's Day, NCJWA NSW Div. On 3 December 2018 in Sydney, Dr Anne Sarzin gave the Founder's Day lecture entitled 'Dr Fanny Reading: a visionary for all time
3. Fanny Reading Human Rights Lecture, Australian National University, Canberra.

### ***Artefacts***

Dr Fanny Reading MBE Honour Award (trophy) for contributions to NCJWA

Dr Fanny Reading DVD, launched 4 March 2019, NCJW Western Australia

### ***Awards conferred on Dr Reading***

Life Governor of the Benevolent Society of New South Wales

Life Governor of Crown Street Women's Hospital

Life Governor of Dalwood Children's Homes

Commonwealth citation for War Loans work

Commonwealth citation for provision of servicemen's canteen in Hyde Park

1935 King George V Silver Jubilee Medal

1937 King George VI Coronation Medal

1961 MBE

### ***Positions***

Honorary Medical Officer Rachel Forster Hospital

Honorary Medical Officer St George District and the Community Hospitals

Honorary Medical Officer Dalwood Homes

Honorary Medical Officer Crown Street Women's Hospital

Senior Vice-President Youth Aliyah (Australia)

Vice-President of the International Council of Jewish Women

1923-1929 President of the Council of Jewish Women, Sydney

1929-1955 National President of the National Council of Jewish Women

1955-1974 Life President of the National Council of Jewish Women

***Journal articles on Dr Reading***

1. 'Sailing from past memories towards safe harbours: Sea-change, healing and transformation', by Anne Sarzin, *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol XXX1, 2018
2. 'The law of loving kindness', by Anne Andgel, *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal*, June 1998, Volume X1V, Part 2, pages 199-260
3. 'Dr Fanny Reading v Smith's Weekly', by Morris Ochert, *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal*, June 1996, Volume X111, Part 2

***PhD thesis***

*Dr Fanny Reading, 'A clever little bird'*, by Jeanette Debney-Joyce, Federation University, Ballarat.

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## Abstract

Dr Fanny Reading (1884–1974) was a medical doctor, a social activist, a feminist, a humanitarian, an educator and a Zionist. In 1923 in Sydney, she founded the Council of Jewish Women, which evolved in 1929 into the National Council of Jewish Women of Australia. This socio-cultural organisation addressed the isolation and marginalisation of women and empowered thousands of members to move from domesticity into the realms of public debate, policy and social justice. She helped the disadvantaged at home and welcomed refugees from abroad. On the national stage, she contributed to Australia's Second World War effort, providing amenities for military personnel throughout Australia and abroad. She contributed to the wellbeing and healthcare of mothers and babies in Mandatory Palestine and, post-1948, in Israel. Through Youth Aliyah, she supported child survivors of the Holocaust who migrated to Palestine.

This thesis explores Dr Reading's multi-faceted life and places her biography within a global context, interrogating the effects of historic events on her identity and her mission to change her world for the better. The thesis focuses on her work as a general practitioner caring for women and children in Sydney's Kings Cross and elsewhere; and on her national organisation dedicated to creating a tolerant and harmonious society. Her agenda—education, religion, philanthropy, social welfare and social justice—aimed to develop members' abilities, broaden their mental horizons, and provide an organisational framework within which they could realise their potential.

In 1949 in the Supreme Court in Sydney, Dr Reading appeared as plaintiff in a defamation case that became a cause célèbre around Australia. This core chapter casts new light on her ideals and ideology that emerged when subjected to cross-examination over three days by two leading barristers. Detailed textual analysis deconstructs the transcript—for the first time—in terms of Dr Reading's persona, character, mental acuity and ideological convictions. Anchored within national and international events, this chapter conveys the breadth of her connections at home and abroad and articulates her role as a champion of justice.

The research draws substantially on primary sources, mainly contemporary newspaper reports, interviews with surviving family and friends, and relevant archival resources and memorabilia. The thesis also relies on secondary sources of scholarship in the fields of sociology, culture, theology, history, psychology, politics and interdisciplinary studies.

## Preface

This thesis traces the trajectory of Dr Fanny's Reading's life and thought, concerns and actions. Hers was a life celebrated in its day but eclipsed by time in the national consciousness. It seemed right and timely to re-examine and re-evaluate her role as a changemaker in the Jewish and general communities and as a former nationally significant figure in Australia. The narrative of her life followed an all-too-familiar Jewish trajectory of persecution, flight, adaptation, education, renewal and achievement. Yet there was so much in her life that differentiated her from her contemporaries, including her drive to emancipate the women in her community from age-old societal expectations and constraints. All this and more drew me to her.

While playing a leading role in the Jewish community in Australia, Dr Reading also belonged contextually to Australia and to the wider world, as events both at home and abroad shaped her life's mission and vision. This thesis demonstrates the many ways in which her life intersected with world affairs: the Russian pogroms of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century triggered the family's migration to Australia; and the Holocaust of the Second World War drove her to devise pragmatic solutions to problems encountered by refugees fleeing Nazi tyranny. I show how historic events influenced her socio-political agenda, leading her to lobby the Australian Government for an increased immigration quota prior to the Second World War. I demonstrate how her belief system, her ethics and philosophy—'The Law of Loving Kindness'—underpinned her humanitarian program that included personally meeting migrants arriving on ships in Sydney Harbour and welcoming Holocaust survivors and refugees to Australian shores.

I have included a Foreword in this thesis to provide proof of the esteem in which Dr Fanny Reading was held by influential personalities in Australia; and to validate her position within Australian history for those potentially encountering her life and times for the first time. As my research and writing progressed, research questions arose, which are embedded in the totality of the thesis. The answers to these questions emerge across multiple chapters. I have chosen to address these questions where they arise naturally in the biographical narrative rather than devoting specific chapters to particular research questions.

While the thesis explores background historic forces and events that impinged directly on her thoughts, decisions and actions, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to revisit millennia-old antecedents of antisemitism. Additionally, this thesis avoids speculation on Dr Reading's views

when there is no evidence in the historic record to support a speculative analysis. This is especially relevant when evaluating her failings as a leader, as society's perception of her was uniformly that of a 'saintly', gentle and kind person. Without adequate proof to the contrary, one cannot falsify the historic record. While I have documented a few instances of 'bullying' recalled by those who knew Dr Reading, Overall this thesis lays bare the bones of a life devoted exclusively to the wellbeing of others. There was nothing she asked of others that she was not prepared to do herself.

In evaluating Dr Reading's responses to national and international events, I have drawn on research within the academic discipline of interdisciplinarity, which interconnects and integrates findings from diverse areas of scholarship. Especially relevant to this thesis are the areas of sociology, culture, religion, psychology, politics, feminist studies, education, history and biography, all of which have contributed to the selection and presentation of research material in this thesis, and to the critical assessment of a multi-faceted life. This aspect of the thesis is discussed further in Chapter 2: Literature Review.

My thesis contains original material that appears for the first time in print. This original material constitutes a contribution to scholarship on Dr Reading, enhancing our understanding of who she was, what she set out to do, and how she achieved her goals. A core chapter breaks new ground—the deconstruction and analysis of the court transcript of the 1949 defamation trial, *Dr Fanny Reading v National Press Pty Ltd*, in which she was the plaintiff. The chapter is framed with retrospective material relating, in particular, to Dr Reading's attendance at the 14<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress in 1925 in Vienna, which elucidates her early commitment to Zionism, as well as providing points of contrast with the evidence she gave in court almost three decades later.

The thesis also includes excerpts from rare interviews I conducted with surviving family members, friends and colleagues, who provide insights into her character and *modus vivendi*. These oral histories generated new information concerning Dr Reading's life and times. I was given access to her collection of musical scores, which is in private hands and which had never been examined or photographed before by any other academic researcher. This new material revealed the breadth of her musical knowledge, the depth of her passion for music, and the promise of an artistic life abandoned for a career in medicine.

Dr Reading was a changemaker within the Jewish community and a progressive thought leader seeking societal transformation. She created an innovative socio-cultural organisation, the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), a public space within which she mentored

thousands of women as they journeyed from domesticity towards social activism. With her guidance, they became trailblazers for a new socio-political, cultural and educational dispensation that liberated Jewish women from many patriarchal constraints that had previously stifled their advancement in the wider world. Dr Reading accomplished these goals with her brand of idealism and pragmatism. She deserves to step out of the shadows of history.