



Jane Elizabeth Runciman, born at Waterford, County Waterford, Ireland, on 4 June 1873, was the eldest child of Susan Probert Williams and her husband, William Edward Runciman, a grocer. Susan Runciman and four daughters, including Jane, travelled to New Zealand to join William in Timaru in 1883. A fifth daughter, Violet, was born there in 1885. The family moved in the late 1880s to Dunedin, where William worked as a clerk and accountant and where two other children, Isabel and Robert, were born.

After attending Macandrew Road School, Jane (or Jeannie, as she was known to friends and family) served an apprenticeship and became a first-class tailoress on a weekly wage of 25 shillings. She worked mostly at the New Zealand Clothing Factory. After a brief stint in Wellington she returned to Dunedin and became involved in the Dunedin Tailoresses' Union (DTU) about 1897. She was a member of its committee of management and gave evidence on its behalf to the Court of Arbitration in 1902. After 20 years' experience in the industry she became full-time secretary of the DTU and of the New Zealand Federated Tailoresses' Association in May 1908; she later established a branch of the union in Invercargill.

Runciman became active in labour politics. She was DTU delegate to four United Federation of Labour conferences between 1915 and 1920, and was one of the three women elected to the New Zealand Labour Party's national executive in 1918.

Jane Runciman's concern for the position of women extended beyond politics and union activities. The family attended the local Methodist church, and she was involved in a range of welfare organisations. By the late 1890s she belonged to friendly societies run by the DTU and the New Zealand Clothing Factory. These provided medical benefits and, if necessary, grants of money.

From 1918 Runciman was periodically a delegate to conferences of the National Council of Women of New Zealand, regularly serving on the executive until 1933 and being made a life member on retirement in 1944. From 1921 to 1927 she was one of the three labour union representatives on the board of management of King Edward Technical College. Runciman had opposed the report of the General Council of Education in 1917, which advocated an emphasis on domestic training for girls, on the basis that girls needed a sound training in general education. As a board member she took a particular interest in the training of girls as clerks and she sat on a special committee on domestic training.

Her public profile led to her being one of the first 18 women justices of the peace appointed in New Zealand in December 1926. She was a member of the Ladies' Benevolent Advisory Committee of the Otago Hospital Board from 1915 until 1927 and of the board itself from 1927 until 1938.

Runciman should have retired as secretary of the DTU in 1939; indeed, in that year she received a watch from the union for her services. The members agreed, however, that she should remain secretary for the duration of the war. She spent much time contesting manpowering orders and directions that meant women were unable to leave their existing jobs. Runciman did not retire until 1943 when she was 70 years old. At a large gathering, she received cheques from several unions, totalling about a year's salary. It was a relief to her since, like many women, she had small savings and no superannuation.

Much to the disgust of Jane Runciman and other leading DTU officials, John Roberts, general secretary of the national clothing trades federation, engineered the amalgamation of the women's and men's unions in 1945 just after Grierson had resigned. The women felt Roberts had painted glowing pictures of the results of amalgamation and worked behind the backs of the women's executive. Nevertheless, female workers voted overwhelmingly for amalgamation.

Jane Runciman never married. After the death of her mother in 1908 and her father in 1910 she assumed responsibility for her younger siblings, providing a home for Violet, Belle and Robert from 1909 to the early 1920s. Soon after Robert married in 1921 she bought a house in Cumberland Street. Janet Lowe, another spinster, lived with her as housekeeper and companion for many years. Belle and Violet nursed Jane in her last years before she died at Dunedin on 13 November 1950.

Jane Runciman, a firm and practical woman, was one of the few leading woman trade unionists of her era. Few unionists, male or female, could match her record of 35 years' service. She was also involved in most major Dunedin social organisations in the first half of the twentieth century. Above all, she had devoted herself to improving the lot of women, trying to provide them with a measure of security in the era before the welfare state.