

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO WOMEN'S HISTORY IN AUSTRALIA AT THE BEGINNING OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM?

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Abstract

In 2003 Australian feminist historian Jill Matthews declared that what feminist historians should do now is “acknowledge our successes graciously and turn our hands to other things.” Her recommendation was not received with enthusiasm, but her audience did publish it. What was going on? This article sets out to answer that question by tracing four strands in the story of Women's History in Australia during the past three decades.

Introduction

Surveying the ‘Present Intellectual Structure’ of the discipline of history in 1998, Stuart Macintyre declared that, above all the changes of the previous twenty years, “Aboriginal history and women's history recast the study of Australian history”.^[1] Feminist historian, Jill Matthews, agreed with him. But for her, what followed from that was rather different. Writing five years later, in 2003, she announced that what feminist historians should do now was “a form of self-destruction”. We should, she wrote, “acknowledge our successes graciously and turn our hands to other things”. Other things? The challenge, now, for feminist historians, she contended, is

to write good history. By good I mean fearless and respectful. That means recognising that sometimes gender does not matter; that the presence or absence of women sometimes does not matter; that the fact of someone being a man or a woman may not be the most important thing about them and their behaviour. It means sometimes using gender as a tool to analyse other more important historical categories, rather than making it the central issue; using it as one tool among many with which to trace the operations of power.^[2]

Matthews delivered these thoughts to a gathering of feminist history postgraduate students at the University of Melbourne. The students found them so heretical that when they published them in their journal, *Lilith*, they included a ‘Reply to Jill Matthews’ by New Zealand feminist historian, Barbara Brookes, who commented, “I am not as confident as Jill that ‘the broad social and personal agendas of feminist politics have succeeded’”. Rather than self-destructing, she predicted, feminist history “will enrich new forms of interpretation”.^[3]

Whatever is going on?

Jill Matthews could not – usually – be accused of talking nonsense. But nor could the *Lilith* postgraduate students and Barbara Brookes. Let me answer that question by sketching four strands in the story of how women's history has developed in Australia over the past thirty-five years or so. It is a narrative that necessarily includes voices from other, mostly Anglophone, cultures, and from other, interweaving, stories as well – concerning feminist politics and theory, just for instance. Presenting all of those accounts properly would take too long for an article. By focusing on only four strands, I should be able more readily to identify perspectives that could point to failure as well as those that

celebrate achievement, assumptions that are in tension with each other, approaches that conflict. Doing that should help understand these conflicting views of women's history – as cause for fireworks and rejoicing, according to Macintyre, Brookes and the *Lilith* postgraduate students, or, according to Matthews, an occasion to fall on one's sword. I will begin with the simplest strand, a story that can be considered an unmitigated triumph from any perspective.

Refocusing the historical lens: from absence to agency.

The prosperity that followed the years of the Second World War brought a major expansion in tertiary education and important changes in the technology of communication. Young women left school and went to university in unprecedented numbers. Those who took history courses found them dominated by political and constitutional processes in which Australia often appeared as only one aspect of the British Empire, in which there were very few people, almost all of them men. Even with the development of courses in Australian history, and a new radical nationalism among labour historians, women were absent from any national narrative. In Russell Ward's famous work, *The Australian Legend*, published in 1958, the "typical" Australian was exclusively male.[4] Kathleen Fitzpatrick was one of only eight women to have gained posts teaching history in a university before 1960. She gave a lecture to the Victorian Women Graduates' Association in 1958 in which she observed:

When we read books which deal with such concepts as the Australian National Character or the Ethic of the Australian we learn that the Australian referred to is inevitably male, and that ethic is something called mateship, which means comradeship among men. It is rather terrifying to live in a country where half the inhabitants have no character and no ethic and to know that one's place is in that featureless herd.[5]

"We had no past", wrote Ann Curthoys, a historian a generation younger than Fitzpatrick, in 1975: "– or so, at first we thought".[6]

But there was a social and political yeast at work during the 1960s that erupted in 1970 in Australia in a resurgence of feminist activism: the Women's Liberation Movement. One of the movement's central beliefs was that, as formulated by English feminist Juliet Mitchell, the persisting oppression of women "must be based on something more than conspiracy, something more complicated than biological handicap and more durable than economic exploitation".[7] It was not inevitable. It could be examined, explained, overcome. Many of the burning questions raised by Women's Liberation demanded historical answers. As another English feminist, Anna Davin, wrote: "we must examine the struggles of earlier generations of women to help us win our own".[8] But the histories in which we had been schooled were incapable of answering those questions and told us nothing of those earlier generations of women. And because the Women's Liberation Movement was, at least initially, so closely associated with the second generation New Left, the women whose stories we sought were not like Caroline Chisholm, subject of an excellent biography by Margaret Kiddle,[9] one of Kathleen Fitzpatrick's few female colleagues.[10] She was, we argued,

'exceptional', code for middle class. What we wanted to know about was the lives of 'ordinary' women, those of the working classes. So we set out to find those women "hidden from history" as English feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham so famously dubbed them.[11]

The imperative for reclamation, coupled with the Women's Liberation contention that "the personal is political", generated a growing body of memoirs and memorials, autobiographical and biographical sketches and, more recently, book-length biographies. Zelda D'Aprano's autobiography, *Zelda*, was a life-story of a trade union activist and pioneer of the Women's Liberation Movement.[12] Joyce Stevens' *Taking the Revolution Home* included interviews with ten women, as the second part of her account of the personal, domestic and political lives of more of the women active in the Communist Party of Australia.[13] Justina Williams' story of her life of struggle and commitment in the west, *Anger & Love*, was also about her days in the Communist Party.[14]

Some autobiographical works coupled personal recollection with political reflection in a way that made them also illuminating historical analysis. Audrey Blake's account of joining the Young Communist League in 1932, in *A Proletarian Life*, shows a fine irony: three young men interrogated this fifteen-year-old about her 'social origin', a question that she did not understand. She was relieved to learn that her father's job as a metal worker rendered her sufficiently proletarian.[15] Daphne Gollan's description and discussion of her life with the Communist Party, Trotskyism and the Women's Movement combines an understated but searing account of growing up during the Depression and a hard-hitting critique of Leninist elitism and patriarchal attitudes with moments of hilarity. The article is titled 'The Memoirs of "Cleopatra Sweatfigure"', a pseudonym that Comrade Gollan tried to adopt while the Party was underground in the 1950s.[16]

Aboriginal women's life-writing appeared as political assertion as much as for personal validation. Margaret Tucker's autobiography, for instance, was titled *If Everyone Cared*. [17] Sally Morgan's prize-winning *My Place* combined autobiographical writing with the heart-wrenching life-stories of her mother and grandmother.[18] Lilian Holt had to insist that in writing about her identity, she was writing for herself and not on behalf of all Aboriginal women.[19]

Memoirs continued to appear, some by those who had been feminist activists in the 1970s. Among them was Susan Ryan's *Catching the Waves*, a work that offered insight into her years as Labor's Minister for Education and Minister for Women and her carriage of the Sex Discrimination Act of 1984 – landmark legislation being steadily eroded in the early twenty-first century by an aggressively conservative government.[20] Hilary McPhee, co-founder of the eminent and adventurous publishing house McPhee-Gribble, wrote a memoir titled *Other People's Words*. [21] Another autobiographical work, Ann Curthoys' *Freedom Ride: a freedom rider remembers* was also an unconventional memoir; like both Ryan's and McPhee's it was also both political and social history, in Curthoys' case of a symptomatic political protest against the position of Aboriginal Australians in the mid-1960s.[22]

The political engagement, indeed activism, elaborated in these splendid stories demonstrated unequivocally what had, by the 1980s, come to be called women's 'agency': recognising women not merely as subjected to power, victims, whether that power was wielded by individual men, or all men, or the bourgeois nuclear family, or patriarchy (each successively deemed the cause of the oppression of women, as long as the search for a single overriding cause continued), but rather as self-determining actors in their own lives and in the shaping of their societies and polities. This allowed a widening of the historical lens that we directed towards the women of the past; we wanted to know about women shaping the conditions of their lives. We wanted to know this, it then became clear, even if those women were 'exceptional'. There emerged, gradually, a wealth of full-scale newly researched biographies of women, including my own study of Catherine Spence, *Unbridling the Tongues of Women*, Diane Kirkby's *Alice Henry: the power of pen and voice*, Judith Allen's *Rose Scott*, Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins' *Auntie Rita*, Carole Ferrier's *Jean Devanny: romantic revolutionary* and Marilyn Lake's *Faith*.^[23] There are others well on the way, too: Margaret Allen's study of writer Catherine Martin, Jill Roe's biography of writer Miles Franklin, Lyndall Ryan's biography of her mother, Edna Ryan, and Penny Russell's analysis of explorer and governor's wife, Jane Franklin.

Rewriting the nation: from stereotypes to gender

The search for historical explanations for the oppression of women prompted a historiographical explosion as early as International Women's Year, 1975. There appeared three major works endeavouring to rewrite the history of the nation, but differently, so that they would account historically for the position of women in the present.

Beverly Kingston was a historian employed at the University of New South Wales. Her book, *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann* (1975) focused on domestic work as an experience in which the great majority of women share, however differently, and proposed – provocatively – “a symbiotic relationship between the great Australian male dream and the Australian woman's suburban nightmare”.^[23] The prize-winning journalist Anne Summers was a postgraduate student in politics at the University of Sydney when her book, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, was published. She described it as “neither history nor sociology”, but it partook of both. Summers explored “women and the ideology of sexism which has governed so much of our lives – an ideology which has determined and limited the extent to which women have been able to participate in Australian society”. Her analysis mobilised the concept of colonisation: all women are “colonised” by men, thereby creating the most important divisions between them that are not structural – economic, ethnic, racial or defined by sexual preference – but rather, the attitudinal division embodied in the stereotypes of good and bad women, “damned whores” and “God's police” – the latter term a quotation from 'exceptional' Caroline Chisholm.^[24] Miriam Dixson was also a historian, at the University of New England. Her book, *The Real Matilda: women and identity in Australia 1788–1975* argued that the formative years of a nation, like those of a child, mark its subsequent history in escapable ways. The

degradation of convict women, she maintained, and their consequent low self-esteem had ensured the continuing misogyny of Australian society.[25]

Writing in 1982, Kay Daniels, the first person to teach a course on women in history in an Australian university, at the University of Tasmania, developed a searching critique of Dixon's and of Summers' perspectives on Australian history. Noting that their focus on ideology allowed them merely to rework familiar material rather than carrying out fresh research, Daniels contended that such material trapped them into an old debate about cultural identity, a debate saturated with the sexist moralising of previous male historians; derivative, they were, of the works of the fathers of Australian history. She concluded:

One of the ironies of the 1970s was the way in which a new history with such confident beginnings, presenting such a challenge to Australian historical writing has at so many points been constrained and reabsorbed, been reinterpreted as conventional and been remoulded in the tradition of the old.[26]

Could this explain why these works have been so remarkably enduring? *The Real Matilda* has been republished several times, once in a revised edition, and *Damned Whores and God's Police* has never been out of print. Indeed, it has been republished twice, each time in a revised and expanded edition.[27] If these two works can be considered to be, as Daniels' critique indicates, the books of the daughters, then can the same reasons be adduced for the success of their successor, a work which Marilyn Lake once described as "a mothers' book".[28]

This was *Creating a Nation*, written by Australian feminist historians Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly (1994). They announced at the beginning:

The creation of nations has traditionally been seen as men's business. ... We wish to challenge this view of history, by asserting the agency and creativity of women in the process of national generation. ... This book explores the myriad ways in which both women and men, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, have contributed to the economic, political and cultural life of the separate colonies and then the nation.

Women and men both. As they noted, "It was the women's movement that pointed out that the woman problem was also a man problem". "Recognition of the interdependence of femininity and masculinity and of the way in which they shape and are shaped by all social relationships and processes", they continued, echoing North American feminist historian Joan Scott, "has led to the identification of gender as a central category of historical analysis". Their introduction also invoked "post-colonial scholarship", rejected "more radical post-structuralist conclusions", acknowledged "the complexity of discussing the category 'women'", and commented: "Women's history is now seen to be a more complex and contradictory saga than was evident in the heady days of the early 1970s".[29]

Indeed it was. Each of these historians contributed a mighty body of fresh archival research to the segments of the book that they wrote, demonstrating the justice of Daniels' critique of the 1970s' works, and of the wealth of

material that has subsequently surfaced in record repositories. A reader has to track the research, though, because the notes provided in *Creating a Nation* refer chiefly to articles that each author has already published; in order to learn about the sources that they have used, it is necessary to find those articles, somewhere else. This makes the book problematic for teaching. Also, the authors note that they aim to “reconceptualise familiar themes in the national story” as well as “to introduce new ones”, but there are moments throughout when familiar themes seem to have taken over, swamping the new ones. Nevertheless, there are new elements in this reworked national narrative. One of the most important innovations is the book’s insistence that men have gender too. The authors echo French pioneer of twentieth-century feminism, Simone de Beauvoir, when they write:

Feminist scholarship has drawn attention to the sexual specificity of men, who have for so long been able to disguise themselves in history books as sexless, neutral, historical subjects – as squatters, convicts, workers, politicians, Australians.[30]

It is a point that Lake made earlier in her monograph, *The Limits of Hope*.^[31] This leads them to gender, to the premise that “gender is integral to the processes that comprise the history of Australia”, and to the contention that “political and economic as well as social and cultural history are constituted in gendered terms”.^[32]

I doubt that anyone would seriously quarrel with this, then or ten years later. But I do wonder if this premise would have gained such general assent if the term used had been ‘sex’ not ‘gender’. ‘Gender’ has become a euphemism for ‘sex’ in Anglophone cultures, resulting in statements that are nonsense. Someone telling me in alarm about experiences facing her adolescent son, recently, said that there were children of different genders sleeping in the same tents! And in many other cultures, there is no linguistic distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, so that in a number of European countries, North American Joan Scott’s missionary zeal for the term ‘gender’ prompts indignant rejection as United States’ imperialism.^[33.] I have another question, too. In an article published in the journal *Labour History* in 1986, Jill Matthews made a strong distinction between women’s history and feminist history, defining it like this:

Women’s history seeks to add women to the traditional concerns of historical investigation and writing; feminist history ... seeks to change the very nature of traditional history by incorporating gender into all historical analysis and understanding.^[34]

The authors of *Creating a Nation* would, no doubt, argue that what Matthews has called “the traditional concerns of historical investigation and writing” are themselves gendered. But that then blurs the distinction that Matthews was making. Does it matter? It did in the mid-1980s. By the early 1990s, it seemed less important.

Whether defined as women’s history or feminist history, *Creating a Nation* must be defined as a success. It won a Human Rights Award in 1995. It is, indeed, “a mothers’ book”, though not in the sense in which the works of Summers and Dixson can be called works of the daughters of the fathers of Australian historiography. It is a mothers’ book in its focus: from the dedication

to the authors' children on the fly-leaf, to the breathtaking opening scene depicting Aboriginal woman, Warreweer, giving birth – an event in which the watching settler women then intervened with scissors, soap and water – to the characterisation of the women's movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – suffrage-era feminism – as placing “increasing emphasis on motherhood as a basis for women's acceptance as full citizens”, to the outraged assessment of the landing of Australian troops at Gallipoli in Turkey during the First World War as part of a military campaign that ended in inglorious retreat in December 1915 after which “Gallipoli was hailed as the nation's birthplace”.

The metaphor of men's procreation involved a disappearing act. In this powerful national myth-making, the blood women shed in actually giving birth – their deaths, their courage and endurance, their babies – were rendered invisible. In determining the meaning of men's deeds – their landing at Gallipoli – women's procreative capacities were at once appropriated and erased. Men's deeds were rendered simultaneously sacred and seminal. Though women gave birth to the population, only men it seemed could give birth to the imperishable political entity of the nation.[35]

There are good reason for fireworks, here: powerful analytical contentions, splendidly depicted in the book's project, a story that integrates women into the national narrative – a goal that owes something to the reinvention of social history as well as to feminism.

Muting the political?: from diversity to difference.

At roughly the same time as the Women's Liberation Movement exploded onto the streets and into the classrooms and kitchens and bedrooms of Australia, there surfaced another development of concern specifically to historians, including women's historians. Mary Hartman described it as a “maturation of social history” in the United States,[36] an approach promoted by other North American feminist historians: Lois Banner, Ann Gordon, Mari Jo Buhle and Nancy Schrom Dye.[37] It appeared as the ‘new’ social history in Britain, analysed by such doyens of the profession as Eric Hobsbawm,[38] promoted by Janet Blackman and Keith Neild who established a new journal called simply *Social History*. [39] It appeared first in Australia in an article that I wrote for *Labour History* in 1976; that journal subsequently modified its subtitle to include social history.[40] Strongly influenced both by a general historicisation in the social sciences, and by the structural Marxism of French philosopher Louis Althusser, it focused on structures and causation. This offered a very satisfying way in which those burning questions asked by Women's Liberation could be answered, because it offered a way of presenting a history of women as integral to – indeed necessary to – a history of the whole society. As Kay Daniels declared in her Introduction to *Women in Australia: an annotated guide to records*:

We have shared a commitment to writing the history of women not as a separate study but in the context of social history: if women are to be put into a history from which they have been excluded it will be into a history of society and a history that is radically different because of the inclusion of women in it.[41]

One important effect of the new social history was an immense expansion of the concerns that could now be considered proper to historical research, writing and discussion. Patricia Grimshaw, historian of the struggle for women's suffrage in New Zealand[42] before she moved to Australia, pointed to one such broadening of concern in a collection of essays, *Families in Colonial Australia*:

Of themselves, an exposure of women's unpaid work, of inequalities between families headed by labourers and farmers, of family breakdown or of hidden ritual within the family, do not tell how social classes were formed or how they acted towards each other. But they do broaden political history to take into account the personal worlds of farm wives, of casual workers and of mining families. They extend questions of economic history and class politics into the home.[43]

Such widening concerns, such diversity, was more than spillage from the constraints of historiographical tradition into the cornucopia offered by 'new' social history, which was itself constrained by its concentration on structures and causes. That expansion of history's scope also expressed a redefinition of what counted as political, and hence a broadening of the political from the narrow definition assumed by masculinist left-wing parties and groups. Feminism's insistence that "the personal is political" became a charter for a new emphasis on the politics of personal identity, in all their plurality, seen in an expansion of new considerations of economic class, possibly in unfamiliar locations as Grimshaw indicated, and into other categories, notably race, ethnicity, and sexuality. As Kay Daniels observed in 1977, with considerable prescience, firstly: "we have been concerned ... with the things that divided women as well as the things that united them".[44] Then, she went on to note a second concern, one heralding an issue that would become a matter of mainstream public politics, though not until two decades later, with the publication in 1997 of the Human Rights Commission's report on the stolen children of Aboriginal societies.[45] The documents that Daniels had surveyed "reveal not only the sexual and economic exploitation of Aboriginal women" she wrote, but also "the way that government-sanctioned controls exercised over Aboriginal women and their children posed a systematic threat to the Aboriginal people of the same magnitude as the expropriation of their land".[46]

Slowly, feminist historians took up research concerning racial diversity. The collection of papers from the first Women & Labour conference in 1978, *Women, Class and History*, included non-Aboriginal Ann McGrath's discussion of work carried out by Aboriginal women in the Northern Territory in the early twentieth century.[47] White Australian, Lyndall Ryan, produced *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* – its title a neat reversal of colonial conventions – in 1981, breaking new ground.[48] Not until the late 1980s, though, did such analyses appear that were being conducted by women who were also Aboriginal, as in Jackie Huggins' discussion of the work of Aboriginal domestic servants between the two world wars, published in the interdisciplinary feminist journal, *Hecate*. [49] Ethnic diversity surfaced, too, notably in a paper that Stania Pieri, Mirna Risk and Anne Sgrò presented to the second Women and Labour conference in 1980.[50] Even sexual diversity appeared, in Kay Daniels' collection of articles on prostitution, *So Much Hard*

Work,[51] and in her superbly stitched together portrait and analysis 'The Flash Mob: rebellion, rough culture and sexuality in the female factories of Van Diemen's Land'.[52]

I have always considered such widening of our historiographical scope, and its greater inclusiveness, as a sign of increasing acceptance of the feminist in the patriarchal world of scholarship. But clearly not everyone would agree. Jill Matthews describes it in a tone that signals, by contrast, regret at a loss in feminist politics ever more focused on individual identity rather than political solidarity. As more and more women, she wrote,

learnt the feminist language of suffering and invisibility, they laid claim to it in order to constitute themselves as distinct groups demanding liberation – lesbian, immigrant, indigenous, differently-abled, rural, abused, working-class women. Many understood themselves not only as victims of patriarchy but also as having been relegated to the margins of feminism. In response, feminism embraced a politics of difference and diversity, attempting to recreate itself as a collective politics without either centre or margins.[53]

Is this the beginning of an explanation of the differences in view between Matthews and Brookes?

The growing expansiveness that followed from the new social history coincided with the shift in historiography from social structure to cultural forms. As Stuart Macintyre observed:

During the 1980s cultural history replaced social history as the dominant intellectual paradigm. This in turn brought a discernible realignment of the discipline, away from the social sciences towards the humanities, though it did not resolve methodological and epistemological challenges. Once assailed for its failure to conform to the positivist standards of hard social sciences, history was now arraigned for its humanist naiveté. History followed, rather than led, the linguistic turn.[54]

It coincided, too, with a new emphasis among feminist theorists – from the diversity of the personally political to the politics of difference. In the language of some feminist theorists – looking once again towards France where post-structuralist and post-modernist theorists had already elaborated concepts of difference – questions of difference could concern difference within. This meant not only within the Women's Movement as a political entity, now recognised as including women of different races, ethnicities and sexual orientations, just as it had always included women of different economic classes, but also within the unstable and never to be completed process of formation of subjectivity, and also within understandings of meaning itself. For feminist historians, the last of these signalled a shift from a search for – or construction of – explanations for the subjection of women, especially explanations that tried to identify a single overriding (totalising) cause, to an exploration of an array of meanings of the interactions and relationships among women, and between women and their worlds. For some, who could be said to have had an over-literal view of the concept of 'discourse' deployed so influentially by French historian of ideas, Michel Foucault, this historiographical moment came to be known as the linguistic turn to which

Macintyre referred. For others it was broader: a turn to cultural history, young cousin of the new social history.

Sylvia Lawson's brilliant, prize-winning study of the *Bulletin*, the journal that became an icon of Australia's masculinist nationalism – *The Archibald Paradox: a strange case of authorship* – anticipated many of the new emphases in cultural history by some years.[55] The collection that I edited, together with Sue Rowley and Susan Sheridan, *Debutante Nation*, linked literary and artistic with historical analysis.[56] Penny Russell's "A Wish of Distinction" was a discussion of "an endlessly reworked notion of 'gentility'" in nineteenth-century Melbourne. She pointed out the difference effected by her focus on a concept and its meanings, rather than a specific category of people:

Attempts to deal with the gentry as a finite social category tend to privilege the experience of men, who possessed the wealth, titles, honours and professions which can most readily be used to define and select the group. Investigating the concept of gentility itself focuses attention on the experience of women.[57]

Katie Holmes explored the meanings that women gave to their lives in their diaries in the 1920s and 1930s in *Spaces in Her Day*. [58] In 1996 *Australian Historical Studies* included Raelene Frances' examination of the Australian discourse on prostitution "as part of a wider, international concern with 'the white slave traffic' and venereal disease", [59] and Ruth Ford's consideration of the challenges offered to identity politics by queer, post-structuralist and feminist theorists in her reading of lesbian Monty Punshon's scrapbooks from the 1920s to the 1950s. [60] Joy Damousi turned to a history of the very internality, with its exploration of meaning and the shifting and evanescent, that had been an impulse in the development of cultural history, in her cultural history of psychoanalysis in Australia. [61] Women's history has travelled a long way from the 1970s' histories that Kay Daniels criticised for their focus on the ideological.

Does any of this work account for Jill Matthews' recommendation that women's historians should now self-destruct? It is excellent work, thoroughly researched, marshalling its material with the aid of conceptually sophisticated theories, exploring texts for nuance and indeterminacy as well as for definition and statement. It is also, in Matthews' words, "fearless and respectful". But, while it is all written by women, all of whom define themselves as feminists, these authors wear their feminism lightly. They note differences of sex, as one difference among several – differences of class, race, ethnicity and sexual preference, sometimes as a subject for comment, sometimes as the subject of analysis (as in Ford's essay), but seldom as central. Is the 'f' word – feminist – still an appropriate descriptor of these histories?

Turning the world inside out: from the post-colonial to the global

Not all women's historians moved on from the politics associated with the new social history into historical interpretative studies associated with cultural studies, however. The politics of recuperation for Aboriginal history continued to fuel some research, and with it developed a fresh political perspective increasingly referred to as colonial. Some post-colonial women historians

essayed histories of non-Anglo-Celtic settlers. Susan Jane Hunt's *Spinifex and Hessian* was an exploration of the lives of women – “Asians, poor Europeans, single working women and Aborigines” – as well as the wives of settler European men, that focused on the differing hardships of their work in the north-west of Western Australia in the late nineteenth century.[62] Regina Ganter traced the economics of another female occupation in *The Pearl-Shellers of Torres Strait*. [63] Jan Ryan considered the lives of Chinese people in colonial Australia in *Ancestors*[64] and Diana Giese charted “changing perspectives on the Top End Chinese experience” in *Beyond Chinatown*. [65] Diana Giese's particular talent was with oral history, demonstrated in *Astronauts, Lost Souls & Dragons: voices of today's Chinese Australians*. [66] Rebe Taylor pursued and found stories of the lives of Aboriginal women thought to be lost forever: *Unearthed: the Aboriginal Tasmanians of Kangaroo Island*. [67]

Amid all of these recoveries, there occurred two further historiographical shifts, both calling into question what was most taken for granted. This was an interpretative move that followed – in form – a succession of such challenges made ever since feminist philosophers first embarked on their critique of philosophical rationality, and its separation of bodies from minds; Aileen Moreton-Robinson described this as feminists “critiquing the disembodied transcendent Cartesian male subject's knowledges and methods of inquiry” [68], an enrichment of interpretations, such as Brookes predicted, if ever there was one. Among women's historians, these shifts occurred in two very different fields: one was the field of Aboriginal history and anthropology, the other was the field of international, comparative history. There was no question, though, but that both were feminist: early signals of each appeared in the journal *Australian Feminist Studies*. [69]

In 2000 a special issue of this journal allocated one of its themes to Whiteness. The lead article, by Aboriginal Australian, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, was titled ‘Troubling business: difference and whiteness within feminism’. Thinking and writing about whiteness had begun to “generate new intellectual and practical approaches to living in a multi-racial society” in Britain and the United States in recent years, she noted. Such work was beginning to register in the study of race in Australia, too. “However,” she continued, “despite – or perhaps because of – feminism's commitment to a politics of difference and the way in which it categorises difference”, the new approach in studies of race had not made any impact on feminist theorising about difference. “White race privilege has not been interrogated as a form of difference, instead it is an invisible and omnipresent norm”. White feminist academics use skin colour and physical features as markers of racial and cultural difference, she pointed out, but they never specify their own – white – skin colour as a racial and cultural marker. “Finding ways to put a politics of difference into practice” she declared,

will require more than including voice or making space for Indigenous women in Australian feminism. It will require white race privilege to be owned and challenged by white feminists engaged in anti-racist pedagogy and politics. Feminists must also begin to question the

ontological basis of how they come to, and what allows them to produce and write knowledge as deracialised subject/knowers.[70] It was a challenge that she issued again, more comprehensively, in her book, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, a work that also showed how the continuing privilege of “subject position middle class white women” extends from past to present, so that non-Indigenous women historians can be as complicit in colonising relationships as their colonising forebears.[71] Some feminist historians were eager to pick up this gauntlet. In 2001 Margaret Allen edited another special issue of *Australian Feminist Studies* on the theme ‘Gender in the “Contact Zone”’. [72] All of the seven articles contributed to the reconceptualisation of Australian feminist history in the light of Aboriginal Australian history, and several made whiteness the object of their analysis, rendering that – whiteness – the problem, rather than the taken-for-granted speaking position of the analyst.

The second moment at which we saw such de-centring of what has been assumed to be central began with challenge to assumptions in histories of the British empire. In another issue of *Australian Feminist Studies* in 2001, Fiona Paisley drew together an array of articles that, following the examples of such feminist historians as Catherine Hall[73] and Mrinalini Sinha[74] in Britain and Antoinette Burton[75] in the United States, sought to de-centre Britain as the heart of empire, making ‘Englishness’ as much a subject of investigation as might be Australian identity in Australia, just as Moreton-Robinson had made whiteness. One historian who pursued this approach was Angela Woollacott; in *To Try Her Fortune in London*, she traced white women from Australia on their journeys to London, discovering themselves to be not only colonials but also colonisers.[76] Another is Margaret Allen in 2005, explored the activities of Australian women working as Christian missionaries in India.[77] A third is Marilyn Lake who, also in 2005, travelled the world as an Associate Editor of the *Palgrave Dictionary of Trans-National History*, a work in preparation.

This interpretative move embraced a wider field too. What Paisley – following North American Sonya Michel[78] – termed “the comparative turn” was what Antoinette Burton described as

a more transnational approach to writing women’s and feminist history ... one that conceives of nations as permeable boundaries, subject to a variety of migrations, diasporic contests, and refigurations not just after colonialism but throughout its history.[79]

Paisley’s contributors set out to apply “the comparative” to “feminist cultural and social history projects”, and went on to show how a comparative approach brought to “an anti-essentialising ‘new cultural history’ allows women’s historians to examine gender cross-culturally and historically, to analyse colonial encounters, and to rethink relationships between gender and other systems of power”. [80]

This approach had some precedents in Australia. In 1997 Patricia Grimshaw and Diane Kirkby compiled and edited a collection of articles from the Third Biennial Conference of the Network for Research in Women’s History, tellingly titled *Dealing with Difference*. [81] It included articles that extended their focus on ‘Gender, culture and history’ to an international array of Anglophone

cultures; articles traversed the globe from India (Antoinette Burton) to Buganda (Liz Dimmock) to Britain (Barbara Caine) to British women writing about travelling in the middle eastern desert (Hsu-Ming Teo).[82] In 2001 another collection appeared, this one a selection of papers from the 1998 International Federation for Research in Women's History conference that Patricia Grimshaw convened at the University of Melbourne. Titled *Women's Rights and Human Rights: international historical perspectives*, it brought together articles from an even wider array of national cultures.[83] What signalled a new departure in this collection were the articles which either considered a specific issue in relation to more than one national culture or explored an international phenomenon. Patricia Grimshaw, for instance, considered the silences about non-white women in campaigns for votes for women, and silences about existing voting rights of non-white men at the same time, in three different settler societies: South Australia, Colorado and New Zealand.[84] North American, Deborah Gray White, took apart any notion of unity and essentialism in the political category 'women' by examining the very different concerns about social justice and citizenship among women of the Black Atlantic, her article embracing black women in Brazil, Britain, Canada, the Caribbean, South Africa and the United States.[85] This is an approach encapsulated, too, in Jan Ryan's consideration of *Chinese Women and the Global Village: an Australian site*. [86]

Again, all of this work is excellent scholarship, intellectually challenging and conceptually sophisticated. And this time, it would be difficult to ask about any loss of political edge, or any disappearance of a feminist speaking position or attention to gender. On the contrary, what the beginning of the third millennium presents is a wealth of feminist history engaging with issues of gender, culture and social interaction across the – Anglophone – world. So there would be no warrant here for the self-immolation that Matthews recommended.

Conclusion

Perhaps it would have been more sensible to have essayed a simpler answer to my question by looking exclusively at Jill Mathews' own work. Her first book, *Good and Mad Women*, was important. It still is, still in print twenty-one years after its first appearance.[87] Its subjects are victims, to be sure. The primary source material of her study was the case notes compiled on sixty women admitted to Glenside Psychiatric Hospital in Adelaide, South Australia, between 1945 and 1970. Matthews had to learn to read her sources against the grain. "Eventually I was able to see the horror was partly produced by the method of recording", she noted. From there she moved on to offer an understanding of the norms for femininity – what made "good" women – by considering the lives of those deemed deviant from or marginal to those norms, an analytical strategy developed by sociologists in the 1960s. Her second book offers a great contrast. *Dance Hall & Picture Palace: Sydney's romance with modernity*, [88] does not mention gender or women, and certainly not feminists – for at least the first eighteen pages of the Introduction.

But Jill Matthews is a feminist historian, even when she is pretending not to be. By page 19 of her Introduction she has singled out the “modern girl, the girl of today, the flapper” as “both the subject and the metaphor at the heart of the international discourse of modernity in Japan, England, Europe and America as well as Australia” – the core of her book, then. “The stories of young women were central to the meanings of everyday modernity in Sydney in the years of prosperity” between the depressions of the 1890s and the 1930s, she tells her readers. Even when “the girl” was not explicitly present, “the many stories told about modernity were nonetheless deeply inflected by gender in their content and underlying assumptions”, she observes.[89] No victims, these women: all acting on their own behalves, their existence – in Matthews account – shaping a new world. This adventurous and richly textured book – in which it is possible to find memories of the goals of the feminist social historians of the 1970s together with those of the cultural historians of the 1980s – belongs with the transnational histories being produced by feminist historians now working in a globalising world, focusing as it does on Sydney – not, Matthews points out, “the last station on the line, a backwater ten years behind Europe and America as some both at the time and since have asserted”, but rather, “a busy port of call in the ceaseless international ebb and flow of commerce and ideas that underpinned cosmopolitan modernity”.[90] This work does not concentrate on matters of sex and gender to the exclusion of other major organising principles; like the difference histories, it wears its feminism lightly. But feminism’s continuing intellectual and political concerns are nevertheless central to it.

Whatever was she saying to the *Lilith* postgraduates, then? Perhaps the answer is – giving provocation, as any good teacher does from time to time. It was successful, too. They were provoked into providing a reply to her, just as I have been provoked into trying to understand what was going on.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Margaret Allen, Patricia Grimshaw and her anonymous colleague/s for their comments on an earlier, and very different version, of this article, and Patricia Grimshaw again for her comments on this version.

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