

This is an edited version of the speech given by Mary Crooks, Executive Director of the Victorian Women's Trust, delivered at the closing ceremony of the exhibition *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives*, held at the Telstra Centre Melbourne, 8 March 2002.

WOMEN AND THE PUBLIC RECORD

A CLOSING REFLECTION ON *ORDINARY WOMEN, EXTRAORDINARY LIVES*

We don't often stop to think about the public record. It is, however, a critical part of our society. The public record is made up, over time, of myriad records, stories, and accounts of who we are; what we do; how we are governed; the way we live. The public record consists of preserved evidence, all of which testifies to the memory or knowledge of key facts or events.

How is the public record constructed?

It evolves from numerous witness sources and chronicles-through historical studies and archival records; newspapers, film, song; and literature. Importantly, it is embedded in the curriculum materials used in our schools. When young people access this record in their formal schooling, we can safely assume it is part of an intensely fortifying experience.

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Let me take up this theme on a personal, individual, level. As an eighteen year old girl studying Australian History at secondary school level in the 1960's the prescribed text, was '*A Social and Political history*' edited by Professor Gordon Greenwood, published in 1955. When I returned to this text some decades later, I read that six university teachers had combined to produce this work.

These were all male.

I read in the flyleaf that:

'Anyone who wishes to gain a knowledge of the historical movements that lie at the back of present-day social and political activity will find this book illuminating. Many new factors that have been overlooked by earlier scholars have been brought to light and interpreted by modern analysis.'

I move past the flyleaf to the early pages of the book. The list of illustrations contains references to men only, including John Macarthur Esq., Sir Francis Forbes, William Charles Wentworth, Dr John Dunmore Lang, Sur Samuel Griffith, Henry Bourne Higgins and John Curtin.

On checking the eleven page index, I find few references to women.

I decide to look more closely at the particular treatment of Macarthur. Describing the pastoral ascendancy, Macarthur is located as part of the social elite of New South Wales. He, along with other well-to do landowners, 'had pioneered sheep farming, agriculture and viticulture, but by 1830, their pioneering days were over. They were now wealthy men with the time and interest for politics.'¹

Imagine my surprise and disquiet decades later when, casually perusing through the chart of Australian women's achievements at the back of 'The Women's Power Handbook' compiled by Joan Kirner and Moira Rayner, I find that in 1807, wool merchant Elizabeth Macarthur shipped the first consignment of wool to London.

And that in 1822, John Macarthur received the Society of the Arts Gold Medal, for the quality of his wool.

Elizabeth was not mentioned, despite having run the farm and business, entirely alone in the years 1801-1805 and 1809-1818².

No wonder John had the time and interest for politics! It appears that Elizabeth (the nameless wife according to distinguished historians) was actually running the show, keeping the farm together, employing 30-40 stock-keepers and gardeners, and overseeing the production of the first stud flock.

Let's look a decade later into my understanding of Australia's social and political history.

As a tutor at the Economics Faculty at the University of Melbourne, I had the privilege of meeting Mollie Bayne, formerly the Head of the Economic Geography department, and, through Mollie, Kathleen Fitzpatrick (nee Pitt) distinguished and retired historian at the University of Melbourne.

About this time, I had bought a copy of Don Watson's book '*Brian Fitzpatrick: A radical life*', published in 1979. I was particularly interested in his treatment of the formation of the Labor club at the Melbourne University.

At one point, Watson mentions the Labor clubs women members- Joan Finlayson, Mollie Bayne, Mary Lazarus and Kathleen Pitt.

He describes these women as a:

*'...Formidable quartet although, of course, as was the custom of the times, it was the men who generally occupied the stage. Throughout Fitzpatrick's lifetime, women, says Watson (1979: 18) 'made essential contributions to radical movements but in almost every case it was taken for granted that their organizing and instigating roles would be awarded with no more than Minutes Secretary.'*³

Watson proceeds to assert that the original Labor club was composed of a remarkable array of talented young intellectuals, and the direction of their later careers makes an intriguing point of comparison with Fitzpatrick's:

Sir Robert Fraser became Chairman of the Independent Television of the United Kingdom. Ross was a communist union leader in the 1930's and an anti-communist ALP intellectual in the post-war period. Ball, after a distinguishing diplomatic service, became Professor of Political Science at Melbourne...Perhaps the most extraordinary of all, Ralph Gibson, established the basis of a successful academic career by 1913, then became....a Communist Party functionary⁴.

Significantly, this tracing of the talent young intellectuals fails to mention the achievements of the two women I had come to know and respect for their contribution to academic and intellectual life- Mollie Bayne and Kathleen Fitzpatrick.

The very same person who had noted wryly that these formidable women of considerable talent were usually rewarded with the status of Minutes Secretary does not see fit to include these same women as part of the remarkable array of talented young intellectuals.

For the record, Kathleen Fitzpatrick completed a brilliant undergraduate degree, gaining first and second class honours in History and English. She completed a second Arts degree at Oxford and, ultimately, became the first woman to reach the rank of Associate Professor in Australian History department. Mollie Bayne, among other achievements, served as Head of the Economic Geography Department at the University of Melbourne.

What is happening here? Why are women invisible when it comes to constructing the mainstream public record.

THE CLOAK OF INVISIBILITY

Perhaps you have read or seen the film, 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.'

Harry is given a very special present- an invisibility cloak. When it is wrapped around him, he becomes invisible. The invisibility cloak proves to be a critical defensive weapon in Harry's ultimately successful.

The difference between Harry's and women's invisibility cloak, is that for Harry, the cloak actually helps! Moreover, he chooses to wear it. He understands its strategic power.

Women contribute 65% of the value of unpaid household work in Australia.

The value of all unpaid work represents approximately 48% of Australia's gross domestic product.⁵ It is estimated that women in agriculture contribute to \$13.5 billion or 48% of the real farm income in Australia.⁶ Yet this work is not counted in the formal measurement of economic activity.

Every town hall in the country hosts photo portraits of municipal leaders. These are overwhelmingly male. Yet the work of the women in building and sustaining local and regional communities is not part of this important citizen record.

Daily newspapers, such as the *Herald Sun* and *The Age*, 20-30 page sections covering a weekend of sports activity. Commonly these contain few references to women, despite their significant rates of participation in sport. The achievements of a young American male golfer, Tiger Woods, attract greater coverage than Australian female golfer, Karrie Webb.

Media coverage of a recent, high profile conference on population policy reported the views of prominent Australian men, including Steve Vizard, Jeff Kennett and Richard Pratt. According to these reports, population policy was about equipping and strengthening the Australian economy into the future. Yet the critical role women play in reproduction (let alone everything else) and the need for this role to be adequately supported, did not seem to feature in recent debate about population targets.

Thus, a more contemporary part of the public record continues the process of wiping women's experiences, interests and priorities from the slate.

ORDINARY WOMEN EXTRAORDINARY LIVES AS SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITY

During the year of the centenary of Australia's Federation (2001), the Victorian Women's Trust wanted to celebrate women's contributions to Victorian community life and to do so in a way that was special.

We knew that women had a long and proud tradition of activity in civil society, linking political work to social endeavour.

We knew that their efforts and achievements were largely unheralded. With this in mind, we mounted the exhibition, *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives*. In September 2000, we advertised the public nomination process and received over 260 nominations. These were, for the most part, incredibly detailed and insightful. So inspiring were all the stories that we couldn't narrow them down to the small selection we had initially envisaged. There was no choice- we not only had to include them all, but also produce a book that preserved the evidence on display.

Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives- the exhibition and the book- is deeply subversive. This was not uppermost in our minds at the beginning of the exercise. But the decision to include all women gave us a unique snapshot of the lives of the 263 women throughout a century of community life. The collective image is powerful and unambiguous evidence of the enormity of what it is that women do- away from the spotlight, usually unremunerated, and yet not properly accounted for on the public record.

The women included in the exhibition span an impressive range of civic endeavour. They have raised families, worked hard for human rights, broken new ground in science, established important new organisations, including advocacy/self help groups, built local services from scratch in rural areas and cities. They have formed trade unions, cared for others, led the way in many arenas, established kindergartens, crèches, and a network of maternal and child health centres. They have been on active war service, run farms and other businesses, written books, opened up new fields of knowledge, been instrumental in the formation of and operation of major political parties, forge

new understandings of what it means to be multicultural in Australia, and created new forms of cultural and artistic expression. There is no way that this endeavour can be appropriately costed in dollar terms. By any economic and social measure, it is invaluable. This picture of women and their extraordinary effort is subversive because, like it or not, it shows in one great, sharp hit, the falsity of the existing public record. The real power of the exhibition is in showing that the public record is partial, unreliable, invalid and truthful.

As Kathleen Fitzpatrick contends in a speech to members of the Victorian Women Graduates' Association, 1958:

When we read books which deal with such concepts such as Australian National Character or the Ethic of the Australian we learn that the Australia referred to is inevitably male, and that ethic is 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 ones place is in that featureless herd.⁷

How can the existing public record be trusted, be seen as a true reflection of who we are and what it is we do, when more than 50% of the picture is missing? *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives* has been the much-needed trigger to reshaping and improving the reliability and trustworthiness of the public record. It has already generated valuable ripple effects and most certainly will continue to do so. But this is not enough on its own. For all their effort, Australian women are yet to experience the full rights of active citizenship and live in a society free of discrimination and disadvantage. In striving for fairness and equal human rights, women's (and our society's) work is not yet done. When women are accorded a proper part of this record, when their enormous contribution to families, communities and society are accurately represented, they will have achieved an inclusiveness which is a pre-condition of equality. Potentially, everyone can play active parts in shaping the public record- through the myriad accounts, witness sources and chronicles that preserve valuable social, political, and cultural evidence. But it is not just about fashioning this record. It is also about challenging it when it is demonstrably false or misleading. *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives* has been one such challenge.

[*A POSTSCRIPT TO ORDINARY WOMEN, EXTRAORDINARY LIVES*](#)

Eileen Watson and Gladys Nalder are two of the women included in the exhibition and the accompanying book. At recent function in Swan Hill, the Victorian Women's Trust learnt that Eileen, aged 74 and Gladys 78, are currently doing up a 1975 campervan so that they can both drive to Birdsville in July. Now you know what we mean about these 'ordinary' and remarkable women!

¹ Greenwood, Gordon (ed.) *Australia: A Social and Political History* Angus & Robertson 1955 p.55

² Kirner, J., and M. Rayner, *The Women's Power Handbook*, Penguin Books 1999 p.282

³ Watson, D., *Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life* Hale and Iremonger 1979 p.18

⁴ *Ibid.* p.18

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics *Unpaid Work and the Australian Economy (1997)* (Cat. No. 5240.0)

⁶ Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Action Plan for Women in Agriculture and Resource Management Melbourne 2000

⁷ Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Victorian Women Graduate's Association (1858)