

Women in Journalism Archive

*Maxine McKew's address at the launch at the National Press Club,
Thursday 13 November 2008*

Can I start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land and in line with the theme of this event acknowledge the generations of indigenous women who kept alive their stories of one of the planet's most ancient cultures.

To the many women who've made this project happen...the redoubtable Marie Coleman, truly a national treasure, Dr Nikki Henningham, Director of the Australian Women's Archives Project, journalists Kerry Ann Walsh and Misha Shubert, and of course Zoe Rodriguez from the Copyright Agency Cultural Fund who has generously supported this showcase exhibition.

I'm delighted to have been asked to launch The Women's Pages..an inventory of great stories about Australian Women and Journalism since 1850.

It's a story that certainly warrants special attention. Those who chronicle our national life, the joys the dramas, the shameful, the corrupt, as well as the heroic and the triumphant, should be recognized.

But in Australia, a place that regrettably still practises a form of sexual apartheid when it comes to women, the story of female journalism is especially noteworthy as it tracks many of the battles and advances in the wider workforce.

If we consider broadcast journalism, it's been feminized to an astonishing degree since the time I first took up my trainee cadetship on This Day Tonight in Brisbane in 1975.

My day starts with Fran Kelly and Michelle Grattan. This morning I also heard reports from overseas correspondents Sally Sara and Emma Alberici.

I'm reliably told there are women reporters and presenters on other commercial networks as well but my dial rarely moves so I'll have to take this on trust.

But thirty years ago, when the effects of the second feminist wave were just starting to be felt, it was still exceptionally rare for female

broadcasters to have a specialist focus on political, finance or overseas reporting.

As a rookie journo staring out at the world from a provincial Brisbane, I remember though the exceptions, those who paved the way.

Dianne Wilman's reports from Beirut painted vivid word pictures of a once great city being torn apart by sectarian feuding.

Helene Chung whose story is captured in The Women's Pages was another rare female face on This Day Tonight.

And of course there was the singular presence of the real television trailblazer Caroline Jones.

I remember remonstrating with my male colleagues at the time...they would refer to Caroline as the best FEMALE television journalist in the country.

Those of you who remember the language debates of the 1970's will know that this was considered a highly conditional and somewhat insulting compliment.

If you were the best, you were the best. Forget the bloody gender.

In the print world, there was a rising star. Someone who came from academia, in itself a rarity at the time.

I'm talking of course about Michelle Grattan who joined the Age in 1971 and by 1976 was the chief political correspondent in Canberra for the paper.

Michelle can truly be said to have chronicled the highs and lows of the political class for longer than most and she has done it with great distinction. And with her legendary doggedness and energy.

Her story is also told in The Women's Pages but what's left out are those late night phone calls which any serious political player recalls, sometimes with delight, often with dread.

The call comes at 11 at night..or it used to before deadlines changed.

"Cobber" Michelle would say down the line..."you wouldn't be sitting on tomorrow's headline would you."

If I have a regret it's that I was too junior to have been part of the Gallery in the 1970's..a time when Australia was changing, its politics was changing and women especially were finding their political voice.

Attitudes towards the hiring of women deserves special mention.

My good friend, and someone who has been one of my most important mentors, Max Walsh, was, in the 1970's editor in chief of the Australian Financial Review.

Now Max, is, above all, a practical man. Not much interested in ideology, certainly not in feminist ideology.

But he went out of his way to hire lots of women in the 1970's, because as he said, they worked hard, were pathetically grateful to have the job and never complained."

Always a good talent spotter and someone who has been very generous to a whole generation of journalists, he nonetheless admits to one gigantic miss.

When a young National Times journalist called Marian Wilkinson sought a job at the Fin Review, Max refused to hire her because she turned up for the interview in jeans.

No great fashionista himself, nonetheless Max decided this was not the right look for a financial paper.

But Max, decades on, enjoys telling this story against himself.

I was here in the Gallery in the early 1990's when Marian literally sent shock waves through the big house on the hill with her Four Corners report on the venomous nature of the Peacock/Howard split.

Marion's story is also included in the on line register.

Other award winners and women who charted some of the big stories, and stories which shifted attitudes or public policy include Jan Mayman who tracked the disgraceful figures on aboriginal deaths in custody and Catherine Martin whose investigations exposed asbestos problems in Wyttenhoom.

Pamela Williams deserves special mention. A winner of numerous awards, her capacity to get the gritty details of political campaigns and dark and dirty deals is in a class of its own.

All these women though stand on the shoulders of earlier pioneers, among them, some well known names, others who've attracted little attention but deserve to.

This I think is the great value of The Women's Pages.

There's the story of Mary Fortune who wrote over 500 detective stories from the 1860's onwards under the nom de plume, the Waif Wander.

And there's the story of Connie Robertson the women's editor of the Sydney Morning Herald and of Tilly Shelton Smith who covered the living conditions of troops in Malaya during WWII.

And best of all, there's the story of a plucky Queensland gal called Lillian Roxon, who had a stellar career in New York writing for the Mirror and other publications. She was a friend to many but particularly to Marie Coleman.

As Marie recalls, she was possessed of a cutting wit and was prepared to use it ruthlessly on poseurs.

She moved with a racy set, and claimed to have introduced John Lennon to Yoko Ono.

In 1969 she published her still famous Rock Encyclopedia but as she said of this task "the music tells the story. The book is a companion to that story."

She died too young but packed a lot in.

And she was fortunate in her timing.

Lillian's time as a journalist neatly coincided with those heady bygone days of lunches that turned into dinners, unlimited expense accounts, and the golden rule by which many a foreign based journalist lived.."never complain, never explain."

When I get a minute I shall ask her niece the Health Minister, what her memories are of her legendary aunt.

I will finish by congratulating all those who have worked hard to assemble this material.

It's been a great collaboration and it's produced an on-line archive of genuine significance.

My thanks to all of you and I look forward to seeing regular updates of the coming generation of female journalists as they make their mark and record the first draft of history.