

Angela Clarke



100  
YEARS OF WOMEN'S  
SUFFRAGE  
1908-2008



*Reflection and Celebration*





*Angela Clarke*



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& School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning

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Project Partners: Women's Electoral Lobby and League of Women Voters Victoria

Adjunct Professor Judith Smart background material on women's suffrage in Victoria

Shawn Callahan of anecdote for opening question techniques

Meg Minos for background material on bookbinding

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Interview of Angela Clarke edited by Cara Jeffery

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*I would like to dedicate this to all women fighting for equality*

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Sarah Costanzo



# Introduction

The 24th of November 1908 marks the day when the Legislative Council passed a suffrage bill enabling women for the first time to vote in state elections of Victoria, Australia. For the centenary celebration Liam Fennessy and Soumitri Varadarajan, RMIT Industrial Design Program, Kerry Lovering Women's Electoral Lobby, Sheila Byard Victoria League of Women Voters Victoria and artist Fern Smith worked in partnership; facilitating RMIT students to produce handmade limited edition books of twelve significant women in Victoria.

Four students Emma Brelsford, Sarah Costanzo, Cara Jeffery and Diana White conducted twelve two hour interviews with Gracia Baylor, Elleni Bereded-Samuel, Ellen Chandler, Angela Clarke, Ursula Dutkiewicz, Beatrice Faust, Pat Goble, Professor Patricia Grimshaw, Mary Owen, Marian Quartly, Associate Professor Jenny Strauss and Eleanor Sumner.

The students had never interviewed, edited nor produced handmade books it is a fantastic achievement with in a twelve-week semester. Their background work informed from in-kind assistance of historian Adjunct Professor Judith Smart; expert in narrative techniques and director of Anecdote, Shawn Callahan; writer, artist and bookbinder Meg Minos.

For all of us who have participated in the project it has given us time to reflect on the achievements and persistent struggle toward gender equality in Victoria. What shines through these twelve wonderful interviews is the strength, persuasive insistence for equality within our community and their huge generous hearts.

Fern Smith 2007

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### **On getting into Koori Health...**

I live it... I live it.

I'm part of a community that's been exploited and dispossessed and all those sorts of things. I started working in Koori health about 15 years ago. I started as the liaison officer over at the children's hospital... But health isn't something that you switch on and switch off to; it's there, it's part of your life... **And I'm talking health in a holistic way, so talking about emotional well being; factors around land and culture- a holistic view of health.**

### **That has always been the Koori approach to health.**

It doesn't surprise me that the holistic approach is spreading throughout the wider community. I know that here at the hospital, our model in the Aboriginal Family Support Unit was... People, at first, criticised the unit and people that worked in there thought that we were given special treatment or that we had all this extra money, that kind of thing but when it came to them chasing money and wanting to provide a better service they looked to the Aboriginal model in the hospital – it actually happens quite a bit the legal services, community health centres. They all started after the Aboriginal community organisations had started and had that model.

### **Koori Heritage Trust...**

I'm currently the chair person over there. The Trust is a great place; it's different to a



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museum. The trust deals with living culture and also looks to the future as well as the past. It was started by my uncle, Jim Berg, who just over 20 years ago took Melbourne University to court because they had skeletal remains here, as they do in other universities. Being the Koori community, we are very aware of what's happened to us as a people and there's not too many people that can say that the bones of their ancestors are sort of scattered all over the world in boxes. So the Trust was started by Jim Berg who fought with Melbourne University to get skeletal remains looked after properly. ...the Trust started as a place to protect the community's interests around that stuff. We have a huge education program over there - you know people talk about reconciliation but before it was the trendy thing to do; the Trust was doing that and has always had that philosophy of working with mainstream Australia to raise awareness around Koori issues.

Koori women's issues are incredibly important. In the oral history that we did, we heard stories of women in the 60's and early 70's- Aboriginal women- not being able to have their babies in hospitals. They had to have their babies on the veranda and had to get relatives to come in and wash them down and help look after them because they weren't given the same access as other women. You know aboriginal people, we weren't recognised as citizens until after the referendum in 67, so issues for Aboriginal women have been I think considerably worse than for white women.

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### **On Celebrating Suffrage...**

Personally, I mean other Aboriginal women might disagree, but I think that any benefits that women have, regardless of race or ethnicity, or whatever benefits all of us. I know my great grandmother used to march on the streets for land rights. That wasn't a gender issue, but she did that, I'm sure bearing in mind what it would mean for her daughters and grand children; you know the people that were to come after her.

### **On the situation now...**

It has relaxed a little bit with and that's because most of the Koori population are under 21; the services are in place now and the younger generation has always known them to be there – women in their late 30's onwards they didn't have the services that are there now so I think that younger people take it for granted a little bit and are a little bit complacent because they are enjoying access to services that just weren't there before so they take it for granted the health service and the legal service and the other services that are around – so they're not as... hungry if you like - they are a lot more complacent. Whereas some of our elders ... there's probably hundreds if not thousands of people you should be interviewing instead of me ... they were women who were out in the streets campaigning for these services.



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Oh, I suppose access to education has improved; certainly I've benefited from that there's more scholarships around. There are places like the Institute of Koori Education (I.K.E.) which is down at Deakin University. They run courses for Aboriginal students and that gives you cultural safety and you don't have that in necessarily in other universities 'cause they don't... Well, other universities do have them but my experience is I.K.E. - I wouldn't have done a Masters of Public Health if I wasn't able to do it down there; if I wasn't able to do it with other Aboriginal students and have that cultural safety. Cultural safety is a big issue for us at the Children's Hospital, we've worked a lot on improving it. There's lots of definitions around and people have different views of it - but for me **cultural safety is about just being able to be who you are** and not thinking that you're being judged or that it affects the way people treat you - so yes, just to be able to be who you are. I used to have an office at the end of the social work department at the Children's and the mums would come in with their kids and always you'd hear them say "Be quiet, be quiet. People here might put you away or take you away", because the children's hospital actually continued to removed kids until the late seventies.

Social workers and other people who worked in the hospital until the late seventies would automatically tell Children Services, or whatever it was called at the time, and children would be removed simply because they were Aboriginal and not because

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they were being neglected or because there were any issues around their care. It was simply because they were Aboriginal kids and that was the policy at the time and the children's hospital staff played into that. There's a great woman who has since retired from the Children's. She worked there in the sixties and seventies and realised what she was part of and was suffering because of it. So she got involved with a lot of our Aboriginal projects happening over at the hospital and that was her way of feeling better about herself and trying to undo to a degree what she'd done.

Things have shifted, though, in mainstream community; I think that people are careful to be more politically correct than they were a few years ago. I know walking into work, if there's been a headline on something Aboriginal, people would sometimes be uncomfortable to talk to me or not want to talk to me or walk the other way because they were concerned about saying the wrong thing or to expose their own thoughts that they thought might not have been okay to verbalise in my presence. Still though, **we have to keep on fighting for what are basic human rights:** Access to education, access to health services... To me, it's around having choices; where you can go for different services. There's the Health Service, the Aboriginal Health Service and there are mainstream services. Aboriginal people still should be given the choice about where they go because in a mainstream service you still get treated, often, not all the time, but you get treated differently. It would be nice if Aboriginal kids could go



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to school and not be subjected to racism from the teachers or their other classmates. That's still fairly rife.

You still hear stories, I actually heard one the other day where an Aboriginal girl and a non-Aboriginal girl were fighting, I don't know how it started or whatever, but the Aboriginal girl had her arm and nose broken. The non-Aboriginal girl got suspended, but the Aboriginal girl got expelled. The principal said that he chose to only suspend the non-Aboriginal girl for a couple of days, rather than expelling her because he didn't want it to go on her record, as she wanted to get into child care...There are still a lot of racial assumptions people make. I remember working in the hospital and I went up to one of the wards and the nurse in charge, who knew who I was, said, "What are you doing here?" and I said I was looking for such and such a family, and she said "Oh, they're not Aboriginal; the dad works." I just thought, what am I doing here; I pay taxes too and I work. Being in an environment like that every day you just somehow get, it's still a slap in the face every time, but unfortunately you get a bit used to it.

### **On being a feminist...**

I'll tell you, when I was younger I was a sole parent. I had three kids, I was on my own ... I was at home, I was doing family day care and I had a waitressing job, just meandering along, just trying to survive, and yes, I thought I was very strong on women's

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issues. Then I got a job as a social action worker with the Brotherhood and I was probably in my mid twenties. I got involved in a lot of their stuff, their projects and you know then later on I went to work in neighbourhood houses with women, particularly recently arrived refugees.

You know we'd talk, I just love that stuff – I just love learning about other cultures, hearing people talk about how they grew up and sharing food... Sometimes the women would come in and they'd have henna on their hands and I'd go, "What's happening for you?", and they'd go "Oh, I am very happy, I'm leaving my husband." And I'd have to kind of clarify, "Oh that's good...is that good?" And they'd go "Oh, yes, yes."

I remember this particular, beautiful Indian woman who I felt was so oppressed and felt like I needed to help her in some way; I was a lot younger then. I went around to her house because she'd invited me and I said "What do you want to do?", and she said, "I want to go back home". I said "Well, what do you want me to do? Do you want me to help you raise some money or whatever?" She said "Yes", but what I later realised was she was just being polite; she might have wanted to go home, but she couldn't because she would be utterly disgraced. I didn't understand all that at the time. I often wonder about her, if she's alright... So, I mean - in my life and in my working life I have always tried to help or be a part of empowering other women and through my



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own empowerment I know that that has helped, or made other women around me realise what they can do. The thing is I see myself as still grounded in community. Often people will tell me things or I'll see things and so I bring them here and try to change them; put policies and practices in place that make a difference. So yes I do consider myself a feminist.

### **On inspiring others...**

My kids and my grandkids, all of them because they live with me... I whinge about it sometimes but I'm actually quite fortunate that they're with me ... I'm able to influence their lives around the cultural stuff and just them as people so that they don't end up lost. I think that over the years that I've worked with younger women and yes I'd like to think that I've had some kind of influence, and they have publicly said that, so that's really nice but it's not why you do it. You just do it because it's like family. It's a community and we treat each other like we would family members. You want the best for your people; you want them to do well. ... Some of the girls who have been part of the stolen generation and are just coming into their Koori-ness, if you like... I think I have been a help to them. At my time at the hospital we've taken on Koori students and most of those students who wanted to stay on stayed on and I got to encourage them to do further study. A couple of them went off to uni and I felt like on a personal level that I had some kind of influence, as have the older women in my life.

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There are quite a few inspiring women around Melbourne; Auntie Joan Vickery is one who has really taken me under her wing and inspired me. Also Auntie Alma Thorpe, she was someone behind the health service getting started, she is quite a remarkable woman and still a out there fighting fights. **I just feel so privileged to be around the older women because they are such great role models**, and I admire them for what they've been able to achieve. In times it hasn't been easy for them, Aboriginal health status has been classified as fourth world conditions and they've still been able to keep families together and nurture kids along in such harsh circumstances not having proper housing, living in poverty ... they are women to be admired. The women do all the work... The men, you know, they've got the big jobs with the big money but it's the women behind them doing all the hard yakka. The men couldn't do what they do without the women. The women are the ones sort of holding the foundation up.

I think that Aboriginal women have carried the dispossession and the oppression as well as men have, or anyone could... it's the women who have stood strong through-out. Often women will be the ones with sole responsibility around family, I know I certainly did, so yes, I am very strong I feel around women's issues... They still motivate me... keep me percolating.



# Final Notes

I would like to thank Angela Clarke for taking the time to share her stories with Diana and myself. The passion with which she speaks of her work and the warmth which is conveyed as she talks about the people who have and continue to influence and inspire her make her a captivating and engaging character. I am truly grateful to have been able to meet and speak with someone who has achieved the things she has whilst keeping herself firmly grounded in her community.

Photo taken from website [http://www.chs.unimelb.edu.au/about/staff/ms\\_angela\\_clarke2](http://www.chs.unimelb.edu.au/about/staff/ms_angela_clarke2) with the permission of Angela Clarke



