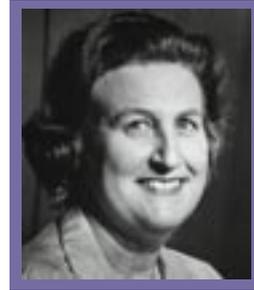


Gracia Baylor



100
YEARS OF WOMEN'S
SUFFRAGE
1908-2008



Reflection and Celebration





Gracia Baylor



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& School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning

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Meg Minos for background material on bookbinding

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Interviewee: Gracia Baylor

Interviewed by: Emma Brelsford and Cara Jeffrey

Interview of Gracia Baylor edited by Emma Brelsford

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

Sarah Costanzo



Mementos



Scrapbook articles



Scrapbook articles

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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I was one of the delegates who went to the Commission of the Status of Women at the United Nations (UN) in 2000, which was a great experience.

It was held in New York. Every year there is a Commission on the Status of Women, which is a separate meeting from the other UN meetings.

I was part of the delegation, because, at the time, I was President of the National Council Women of Australia (NCWA). The International Council of Women (ICW) has five permanent representatives at the UN, and NCWA is part of the international body. The delegation went from Australia to New York – the main issue at this meeting was a discussion the Optional Protocol to CEDAW. CEDAW stands for The Convention of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. The convention itself was passed in 1983 or 84 or around about then

The Australian Government signed off on the original Convention - which was to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. Victoria actually, was the first State Government to set up an Equal Opportunity commission under Dick Hamer, who was the Premier at the time. Later, the Federal Government set up the Commission for Equal Opportunity and Human Rights. This took place as a result of their agreement with CEDAW which aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination or to deal with matters to do with discrimination, which on the whole I think they have fulfilled that role quite well.

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Many people, both men and women, have taken cases to the Commission. - In 2000 a resolution was put before the UN to take CEDAW a bit further, because in many countries there were no Commissions for Equal Opportunity to start with. If a woman felt she was discriminated against she could take the matter to a local authority. However in some countries there are problems with this arrangement. Women can take their cases to some government authority but in 99% of cases it would be dismissed. What the Optional Protocol was about was allowing them to go outside their country and go to a human rights forum such as the International Court in Hague which hears human rights cases. A person has a right to go to the international court on a global scale, so that a woman could appeal her case outside her own country's jurisdiction, and have her case heard. That had a great deal of merit for meeting the needs of millions of women in the world who still suffer from discrimination.

We encountered a lot of difficulty in getting the wording right in CEDAW. I remember I was attending that New York meeting for about 10 days and they would argue over one word and there were many countries who didn't want any part of it, which gave me an insight into how difficult it really is to get a consensus of the member countries. So we were divided up into groups to try and reach a consensus. We eventually did agree, even though the final wording was a bit bland, but we were able to proceed with the Optional Protocol. We brought it back to our government here, as passed in the



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meeting at New York and our government has so far refused to sign off on it.

“...Women, I think are first class negotiators, but I don’t think they utilise the skills they do have for their own benefit. They’re too compliant, too ready to accept what the boss says. But they do need some legislative power to back them up and to give them stronger ground”

There are very frustrating moments in public life generally, when you just don’t get your proposal or project or point of view realised. When you can’t persuade your colleagues around a table that what you’re saying is right and what they think is wrong, that becomes frustrating, but I think if you go into public office you have to accept those frustrations because you’re not going to win every round and you just have to bear with your frustrations and come at it in another way. Be a little bit subtle perhaps or a little bit manipulative, take up an extra challenge to find another way around.

So there are certain frustrations which I experienced when I got into parliament and the biggest one was not being able to act as an individual anymore and not having the individual freedom that I had had as a Municipal Councillor. Instead, you were part of the Party system.

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I was a teacher before I went into politics, and I learned the process as I went along. My motivations in standing for public office were to do things in the community like build a kindergarten in my town (Healesville), which got me started. That's how I was first elected.

I always remember when I put my nomination in for the Council election, the shire secretary who was the equivalent of a CEO of municipalities today, walked across the street when he saw my nomination (the municipal offices were opposite my husband's office) and he didn't speak to me but he spoke to my husband, who he knew and said "Is your wife fair dinkum?", as if it was some trick or joke. At that time the municipal council was dominated by mainly old men who were mostly farmers, so it was very difficult to get through the social agenda that I had.

I eventually became Shire President and that was a saga in itself. There are press cuttings about how they would never elect me; these men really couldn't stomach a woman Shire President. Eventually my colleagues were shamed into electing me their Shire President as people in the community were saying how unfair it was that I had been re-elected three times and had strong support and so on. I did have a lot of support and was a well known Liberal activist. I had been active in the Liberal party for some time, but you know I got a huge number of votes from Labor people and I was



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good friends with many of them because they could see the things that I was trying to get through Council were things for the whole community.

'The merits of the project are the things women look at, they don't look at an issue from the political side of it'

There was a time in Parliament when the government was actually running very short of money. They were strapped for funds and they brought in a Bill to sell a lot of Crown land dotted around Victoria, like disused railway land or court houses in small country towns that had been closed down but the land was valuable. So there were a huge number of blocks of land in this bill which was called the 'Miscellaneous Lands Act', there were bits of land everywhere which, when they were sold, would reap millions of dollars. Buried in the middle of this Bill was the site of the Queen Victoria Women's Hospital right in the CBD. It had been hidden in the middle of the Bill. Anyway, of course we found it, and the women all around Victoria were up in arms about this. Women from across the board were dismayed because of the history of the hospital. The Queen Victoria Women's Hospital had been started by a young woman called Constance Stone, who was the first woman to become a doctor in 1896. She was the daughter of a Welsh pastor who had come out to Melbourne and was the pastor of the Welsh church which still exists. She must have helped him [her father] I think in

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his parish work... because she was shocked at the mortality rate of women who died needlessly of diseases through lack of hygiene in childbirth. She was determined she wanted to become a doctor and she was a highly motivated young woman. She enrolled in the medical course at Melbourne University, and she was the first woman to do so, but she could not complete her medical degree. It was considered unseemly for a young woman to do certain things like be in the anatomy room for example, probably because of nude males. So she couldn't graduate and had to go to America to complete her medical degree. Eventually she came back to Australia and set up a small clinic next to her father's church and of course in no time it was crowded with women. You can imagine they just came in droves from day one and so she decided she needed a hospital. Women banded together and raised the money themselves to purchase the land and so the hospital was built for women, and run by women. It was unique. This was in the 1890's.

In order to prevent the sale of the Hospital we had some high level talks with the Premier at the time John Cain and some of his Ministers. I managed to get my colleagues in the Upper House Liberal and national Party members who, between them, had the majority They had the numbers and to their great credit and to some degree my powers of persuasion, but mostly very much to their credit that they agreed to stand firm and would not pass that Bill unless the hospital site was taken out of the Bill.



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John Cain was very annoyed and really hit the roof because of the delay in passing the Bill. But we were able to negotiate and finally the Bill went ahead minus the Queen Victoria Hospital site, which is now the Queen Victoria Women's Centre.

Another thing we were able to do in parliament was to get baby capsules for the safety of small babies in cars. I had the idea, because many small babies were getting killed in car accidents because they were not properly secured and when there was an impact they would be thrown out of their bassinets and banged against a window and killed. So I put up a proposal that the government should fund the buying of proper baby capsules which had big nets over them to secure the baby while in car.

Parents did not buy these capsules because they were quite expensive and they had the idea that the baby would grow out of them very quickly and so they didn't buy them. For a short time they would just put them in bassinets on the back seat. That's how babies were carried around in cars, in the early days, in the 70's. And finally they were made available for hire through the infant welfare centres. I remember we did a pilot scheme at Knox, The Government bought a quantity of plastic baby capsules which the parents could hire for a minimal charge and their babies were securely strapped in while travelling in a car. This initiative is now well established and has probably saved the lives of many infants over the years since we introduced it. Things like that were highlights, things that you could do as a Member of Parliament which

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you can get straight through.

I think the general public feel powerless very often when dealing with governments at any level, even the local governments, simply because they don't know where to go or who to see. They don't know the channels. But as a Member of Parliament you could always ring up the head of department and get those doors open and get things done. It's not all hopeless shuffling about.

“I've never wasted my time on demonstrations. I feel that demonstrations have their place in a way for people who feel absolutely powerless, but I've always thought that the people to get to are the decision makers. If you want to change something you should get to the people whose job it is to change things.”

We've done that in the National Council of Women. When I left parliament I got involved in the National Council of Women because it was an organization that had the capacity to achieve things. The National Council of Women is a non political body, which is made up of other women's organisations who affiliate with it. It's like an umbrella, and they speak for the women in Australia. The Australian body claims to speak for over 3 mil-



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lion Australian women which means, if you go to a Federal Minister and say “look we represent the views of 3 million women”, they’re going to listen to you because what they’re going to think about is 3 million votes. And so the NCW has a great capacity to achieve things. As President we could go and see the Prime Minister if we wanted but of course we didn’t abuse that privilege too often - , we did go to the Prime Minister on the CEDAW thing. But we always did our homework very thoroughly before we asked to see any Minister. What we didn’t embrace and I don’t embrace either is what I call the lunatic fringe, the single issue factions such as The Right To Life organization, they do not embrace the broader issues and they turn to extreme actions.

One of the things that we did in the National Council of Women is to get mammograms for all women put on to the Medicare rebate. That would have been in the nineties I suppose. If you suspected that you may have a breast cancer it was necessary for you to go to a GP who would then send you to a Specialist who may then order that you have a mammogram taken. On this basis you could claim the cost on Medicare. But there were many women, who just didn’t go near a doctor, and maybe thought because their Mother or a member of their family had had cancer that they would just like to have a mammogram to be sure. They could go and get one but they had to pay for it themselves. A huge number of women either couldn’t afford it or didn’t want to do it. So the National Council of Women proposed that any woman of any age who felt

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the need or wanted to have the test without going to a doctor should be able to just go and get a mammogram done, and she should be able to claim on Medicare the cost. The Government finally agreed and so we got that through across the board.

Feminism as an ideology has died a bit I think, because young women today don't have the same experiences women of my age had. We had issues in our faces. People are more accepting now, it is nothing unusual if you go to some office and you want to see the manager and a woman walks out the door. Nobody turns a hair. It is accepted now that women are going to play more and more an equal role. But I still maintain that women as 51% of the population can come together under the band of gender to talk to governments about issues. And it may not be women's issues - it could be things for the community or even global issues like defence or whatever, but there is still a reason, a valid reason for women coming together to put forward submissions. Governments are always amenable to hear submissions because they tell them what people are thinking.

'There's never a shortage of issues and even though times are changing with technological advances, a new set of issues arise, they never fully go away'



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There are many international issues still there. I'm still involved with the International Council of Women and I think one of the biggest issues they're dealing with is the trafficking of women. Women are bought and sold as sex slaves around the world today, this very moment. Why aren't the women of the world jumping up and down about it, this disgraceful thing?

You know the genital mutilation issue? We played a very big role in getting that outlawed in Victoria. The Victorian government passed a law, it's now illegal to do that operation in Victoria. But we also said legislation wasn't enough. We helped, we gave suggestions. Okay we outlaw it [female genital mutilation] as a practice, but you have to have a strong education program in place as well, which is working in Victoria. I mean it probably still goes on a bit underground here but it is a sensitive issue, it is cultural.

Mementos



Campaign Posters



Scrapbook articles



Final Notes

Gracia Baylor began as a teacher before entering local politics in the Healesville area. She was the first female member of the Australian Liberal Party to be elected to the Victorian Legislative Council in 1979. Gracia is an active member of the National Council of Women and in 2003 was added onto the Victorian Honour Roll of Women.



