

Mary Owen



100  
YEARS OF WOMEN'S  
SUFFRAGE  
1908-2008



*Reflection and Celebration*





*Mary Owen*



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& School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning

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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

Jackie Ralph for transcribing

Interviewee: Mary Owen

Interviewed by: Diana White and Emma Brelsford

Interview of Mary Owen edited by Diana White

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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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### **A realisation of inequality**

During the Second World War somebody told me that the Department of Labour and National Service was wanting women to put on as clerks so they could release the men to go off and be killed in the war. The person warned me - don't tell them you can write shorthand because they are desperately short of stenographers, but stenographers only get paid four pounds a week and the basic male clerk gets five pounds a week. This really set me off on realising the inequality. These boys who had only gone to Intermediate level (year two of high school) could get into the public service as a grade one clerk and gradually move up the scale; but I, who had a matriculation certificate, if they took me in normally I could only get four pounds a week. So I took this woman's advice and didn't tell them I could write shorthand; so I got a job as a grade one clerk at five pounds a week. But isn't it outrageous? It was a temporary job while the men were away and to attract women to go and do the work because they wanted to call the men up who were at that age. They wanted to be able to release them but, because they were in the public service, they couldn't make them go...I knew it was only a temporary job and my husband was in the navy. We got married during the war and he was posted to Brisbane.

### **Changes that have occurred in superannuation**

Superannuation is the other thing I've been plugging since 1984. Women are never



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going to get enough out of it. You don't have any choice. They put you in automatically. What Howard has been trying to do is to encourage people to put in a whole lot extra. The government sent me a 30-page booklet, posted at the tax-payers' expense, that tells you how wonderful superannuation is and how you should get into it when you are really young because the compound interest makes a difference. But of course when do women have their children? When they're young, don't they? So you miss out on those early years. And then, he says, you only put it in if you are working. Here he says that with the new generous contribution limit you get, it's all tax deductible. Any you put in is tax free and he says anyone can top it up to \$50 000 a year before tax. Anyone? How many women earn enough to put in \$50 000 a year?

It's just going to get worse though because women's wages are still not on a parity with men's. So women are always going to be second-class citizens when they retire. I really get quite steamed up about that. My daughter would have been conned into putting it in, but her taxman had a good look at it and told her not to put any extra in. She hasn't got the money to do it and you're not going to get it out. It's subsidising the other people who do have it. Now this aunt of mine, the painter, she used to work for Swinburne Technical College... She taught drawing classes. She compulsorily had to contribute to superannuation. Only government employees had to in those days so she paid into the superannuation fund a percentage of what she earned - the small

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amount she earned as a teacher. And when she married she had to resign from the superannuation fund. She got none of the government contributions, no interest. All she got back was what she had put in. When I did research on this in 1985, 86, I was shocked to find it was still the same. If you worked for the government and you never married and you retired before 55, you got nothing back except what you had paid in - no interest, no government contribution.

### **Early career**

I worked for a union which produced a monthly journal for its members called 'Blueprint'. It used to be a typical union journal - as boring as anything. I was not the editor - the federal secretary of the union was the editor and he used to supply the editorial. But I did all the proof-reading and rewrote all the stuff that was sent in; and then I revamped it and made it look a lot more attractive. They were a comparatively lively union - what you call these days left wing. It was almost all male. They had all these organisers in various factories and I found, when I was at the Association of Architects, Engineers, Surveyors and Draughtsman of Australia (AAESDA). that was when I really started to get interested in women. In the early days I was interested in equality, not just for women ...I didn't really get caught up on the women's issue until the Women's Electoral Lobby came along.



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Well, the women's movement...It was Betty Friedan who started it all off. Wendy, my daughter, caused me to read Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*. I was working for AAESDA at that time and I can remember sitting in the office at lunchtime reading this fascinating book. We did just accept that was the way it was. You thought you had to get married because you couldn't earn enough as a woman; and I remember two women in my dad's office who slaved away, good secretaries; and I remember one of them coming to see Dad after he'd retired and he wasn't at all well, and she had no money and no job and she was about 70. Her parents had died. She'd been brought up in a genteel household with no skills other than to write shorthand. You didn't realise until it was too late what happened to people. Some man was supposed to support them. Men ran out during the war. The working women were mostly lower-class women who worked in factories. When I went out to work my father and my husband were embarrassed, especially when I went around selling Supermixes and I went around knocking door-to- door.

### **Bertram Wainer**

My daughter Wendy told me I must go and see this wonderful man, Bertram Wainer. He was to speak somewhere near Monash University at the house of a woman called Daphne Thorne, who was a member of the Labour Party. She and her son were sacked from the Labour Party because they disagreed with the secretary or something. Any-

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way I was impressed with Bert too and he set up the Progressive Reform Party and I was their minute secretary and later on their full secretary. I don't think they ever got anyone into Parliament but I tell you what - it stirred things up. Bert was attacked by the police because a woman was brought into his surgery who'd had a backyard abortion somewhere and she was bleeding to death and died on the table in Bert's surgery. Bert hadn't operated on her but she was already 'stuffed up' and that was what set him off campaigning for proper legalised abortion and that's really how I got involved. And, you see, we talk about what's changed but now we are still trying to get abortion decriminalised. It should be readily available and a basic right for women to decide. I had already been involved in it in a way with Bert but what I was more concerned about was that my daughter Rosemary and I did all this investigation into people who had complaints against the St Kilda police, and I remember we interviewed one chap whom they had treated abominably and those three senior policemen finally went to jail. Rosemary and I wrote it all up.

Kevin Child wrote a book called 'Why isn't she dead', about a women called Peggy Ber-man who had lived with one of those senior policemen, Homicide Squad Chief Jack Ford. She had previously worked for a gynaecologist who performed abortions and knew that the police took bribes. The police set Bert up and broke into his surgery and ruined his practice. And so what would happen? The police would invade surgeries



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of qualified people who were carrying out abortions and women would be driven to go to unqualified, unhygienic backyard abortionists. I don't remember exactly what happened. I know with Bert they came in and took away all his stuff and wouldn't allow him to practice. They wanted him, in a sense because he was advocating better conditions, but also he was finding out that the police were getting payback from the prostitutes and the abortionists. Well, I think it was mostly from the prostitutes. I think it was the prostitutes who were going to the backyard abortionists, recommended by the police no doubt, and they probably all had their hands in their pockets. So that was where I got involved in that lot and I went from there to the Women's Electoral Lobby.

### **Women's Electoral Lobby**

A woman called Liz said to me one day: 'what about joining the Women's Electoral Lobby?' I said very primly 'I don't believe in women-only organisations;' and she said: 'well, we've got some men as members' and we did have. We had a Maori chap and Ian Macphee (federal member of Parliament) and somebody else. There were three men; so I joined. I don't remember very much about the early days, but there were all these women who, I realised later, were younger than I was, and they all had young children. They were all your typical women at home, not in paid employment. They were all there running families, and they were fed up with the way things were

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going and thought it high time that women had more say in things. Most of them had been to the university, which I hadn't. I was just so impressed with how much they knew and the things that they did; and they got involved in the abortion issue too.

### **The Working Women's Centre**

At the Working Women's Centre women would come to us with a problem for us to solve and that's exactly what we did. We got to know people. You'd know where to go and how to get it dealt with. Sometimes you could; sometimes you couldn't. Women used to go to the union. Of course the unions weren't very good in that early stage and Sylvie Shaw (my colleague at the WWC) wrote a whole lot of papers, and I wrote some of them; but she was the one who had the idea to go to the unions and tell them what they ought to be doing. That was in 1979. We produced a book called 'Working Women: discussion papers from the Working Women's Centre Melbourne'. Another thing we did, which I thought was very good and it's been stolen by someone else, was to set up a register of women in non-traditional occupations...We had a speakers list, and we used to pick people from women who worked in these non-traditional roles, to go out to schools and give talks to the kids so that the girls could be apprentices in all these trades. Then the Trades Hall or someone else took it over, and then they didn't know what to do with it and they let it lapse.



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How I got into the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) was that the Working Women's Centre was part of The Australian Council of Salaried & Professional Associations (ACSPA), which amalgamated with the ACTU about 1980 and part of the deal was that we went with them. We didn't quite fit into the ACTU scheme of things as we had almost complete autonomy over what we did, and so after a while Bill Kelty, the secretary of the ACTU, came to me and suggested I might like to retire. I've forgotten how old I was then. About 64, I think. The men retired at 65; the women were supposed to go out at 60. And I said no, I was going to stay till I was 65. Bill Kelty wasn't game to make me go in those days because I would have just rung up the press. I could always get good coverage; and so he let me stay on but he sort of moved the Working Women's Centre sideways. I retired at 65 and we had the Mary Owen Dinner, which lasted 20 years after that.

### **Education**

When I left school in 1936 very few women went to university, and I didn't get there until Gough Whitlam brought in free tertiary education in 1974. When I met him at a conference recently I told him that the most important thing he did for women was free tertiary education, which we've now lost. When you ask me where have we gone, I can't help thinking so much has gone backward. The abortion issue, you know. All right, you can have an abortion, you say, but only if you know someone who will do it

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and if you can pay for it. At one time we were getting people coming over from Tasmania to have abortions in Melbourne in a place in Punt road. I helped with a couple of these young girls who came across and we met them and took them to the abortionist and looked after them. I remember bringing one back and ringing her mother up and telling her that she was alright. Terrible.

But I also remember from my early days before I was involved in any of these things, I used to do 'good works' down in Montague (a station on the Port Melbourne line that used to be a railway line which isn't any more). Montague Street used to be a slum in those days, there was a family there - this woman had 5 children, I think, and she was expecting another one and one of my 'do-gooding' friends took the woman into her house in East St Kilda, a large house, until she went to hospital to have this last baby, and my friend looked after her and then the poor thing had to go back into this slum where she lived; and her eldest girl was 13 and she was pregnant. At 13 what hope did she ever have? I think that's when I began to realize the appalling things that could happen to people. Not being educated; not knowing how to avoid pregnancy in the first place; and then, if anybody did anything, it would be a back-yard abortionist; or she probably had the baby and what happened to the baby? That would have been about 1950, just after the war. Oh, terrible times. To that extent it's improved a little bit. But you see it going backwards to that stage. I do. And the lack of education is



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what bothers me. That people aren't getting properly educated. I've got three things if you ask what I care about: government money that goes to private health insurance, private superannuation and private education. Instead of giving tax concessions, which are of far more benefit to the rich than to the rest of us, the Federal Government should be investing in public education, public health services and a decent retirement pension for everybody; not subsidising those who have had high incomes all their lives; and not encouraging people to send their children to private schools. I went to a private school; my two daughters went to a private school, but I totally oppose any money going from the government to private schools; and I just think that the state should provide free education at a much higher standard for everybody. I think that trying to buy votes with tax cuts, tax concessions, is quite wrong. And this notion that government shouldn't have any debt, I'm totally opposed to this also because...why should this generation pay all the money for things that are going to benefit the next two or three generations? Government should have government loans to provide essential infrastructure and services that are going to last a long time.

Another thing is that when government has loans, it's somewhere for.. the mums and the dads John Howard is so fond of talking about to invest their money in a safe secure investment. I had Victorian Government bonds and I had Northern Territory bonds; and when I got the last lot of Victorian Government bonds I took some for two year and

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some for five years and some for ten years. What I'm saying is that's a secure place for people who really don't know much about investing money to put their money, instead of encouraging them to put their money on the stock exchange, and look how many of them have lost it. Yes so that's another of the things that I care about.

**So is there a new wave of women who are taking up the role?**

No, and that's my worry. There isn't; and this happened, I think, with the women's movement and going back to women's suffrage, which is when we started, wasn't it? You know, there was tremendous enthusiasm for Vida Goldstein and all those women and all the things they did. Then it all slid back. We all forgot about it; and then came the war and women reappeared. That was the Second World War. I think that kicked people along. That was really the cause of me being in the workforce, in an area that I hadn't been before. Then we slipped back again.

The two things that I think have been most important for women in recent years were the contraceptive pill and the washing machine. When I was married I lived with my mother-in-law and for a time we had a wood-fired copper. You had to go out and make the fire and fill the copper and you put the sheets and the towels into the copper with whatever it was we used - velvet soap grated up - and then you brought them to the boil; and when it all sank down you hauled them out on a copper stick and rinsed them



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all by hand. And then the next thing we got was a drier and that was a vast improvement. But I really think that the contraceptive pill and the washing machine have done more to liberate women than anything else.

### **The idea of women's organisations**

I'm getting younger women to join, looking for younger women to join my Older Women's Network and other things like that, because they do have to realise that it'll all slip back again if the young ones don't take it on; and the first stage, of course, is Howard with this industrial relations thing. That goes very badly against women. I think he's going to lose out on that one but he's already made an enormous difference to the union membership. We do have to make women aware that if they want to have a 'fair go', certainly they need to know about this jolly superannuation that you've somehow got to get the message out. I wrote to Kevin Rudd and told him what he ought to be saying and he sent me a letter of acknowledgment and said it would be considered; but I said then that their one weak spot in people's eyes - their economic management. I said what you should be saying is that this government's economic management isn't so good as they think; that it's not in a good state with high interest rates and people not able to meet their house mortgage payments. And now at last that's what they're saying and it's showing up; and I pointed out all these things. When people are up to their neck in debt to pay for their houses and things, you know

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it's not such a good situation.

It's such a joke that - the idea of economic management. I think that's one of the problems when the government are spending so much money on glossy magazines and then people are so uninformed about the real issues.

### **Affirmative action?**

I think there has to be. I mean it isn't equal yet, is it? So, if it isn't equal, there's got to be affirmative action; but my worry is who is going to do it? Somebody has got to take up the issue, or are we just going to sit back? I mean the only people doing anything much at all are the unions with their industrial relations campaign.

And the Victoria Police now has a female head and holds a special breakfast on International Women's Day; and this year they invited me to address them on the subject of 'What Progress has Feminism Made in the last 50 Years?' They gave me a very good reception.



# Final Notes

Mary Owen was one of the two founding co-ordinators of The Working Women's Centre Melbourne, the other being Sylvie Shaw. The WWC was sponsored by the Australian Council of Salaried & Professional Associations (ACSPA) and funded initially by the Whitlam Government in 1975 (International Women's Year) and later received funding from the Fraser Government and a number of unions. When ACSPA amalgamated with the ACTU the WWC went too and when Mary retired in 1986 it was absorbed into the ACTU. Prior to her service with the WWC Mary had been a staff member of the Association of Architects, Engineers, Surveyors & Draughtsmen of Australia (AAESDA) (1965-75). She has been a member of WEL since 1972 and was a member of the La Trobe University Council (1983-1990) In 1989 she was appointed Deputy Chancellor.

## **Career Highlights**

Awarded Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal 1977; Awarded Order of Australia Medal 1984. Mary Owen is known for founding the Working Women's Centre, Melbourne and for her work in the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) Victoria. In 1986 the first Mary Owen Dinner was organised in Melbourne to celebrate Mary's retirement. Now held annually the dinner has a female speaker and is attended by 600 women wearing the feminist colours of purple, green and white.

## **Published Sources**

Edited Books:

Mary Owen & Sylvie Shaw. (ed.) 1979, *Working Women: Discussion papers from the Working Women's Centre Melbourne, Melbourne Sisters,*

Mary Owen has also made many contributions to Melbourne Journals



