

Patricia Grimshaw



100
YEARS OF WOMEN'S
SUFFRAGE
1908-2008



Reflection and Celebration





Patricia Grimshaw



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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

Jackie Ralph for transcribing

Interviewee: Patricia Grimshaw

Interviewed by: Diana White and Sarah Costanzo

Interview of Patricia Grimshaw edited by Diana White

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

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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“ Working mothers dream of sleep like hungry people dream of food”

When I did an undergraduate degree in history at the University of Auckland we studied almost nothing on women at all. There was one topic on the suffragettes burning things down in England and the fight for the vote there.

I found it exciting. New Zealand gave women the vote in 1893, which was very early. Nobody had really carried out history work on this issue in New Zealand because there had been very few women historians working on New Zealand history. The opportunity was there to do a Master of Arts. I matched the topic that I studied in British history with a gap in knowledge in New Zealand. I found it really fascinating. It also led me into a whole lot of other areas about women. Not that I covered them in that book but it made me realise how much there was about women that I thought was very important, but to which nobody was giving any attention to. That book, *Women’s Suffrage in New Zealand*, was published in 1972. It was my Master of Arts thesis and the National Council of Women in New Zealand decided to provide a subsidy to publish it. Nobody else wanted to publish it because they didn’t think anybody would buy it. It’s still republished and I have received a royalty cheque from it every year since 1972. That’s a long time ago, 35 years. The National Coun-



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cil of Women supported it, but of course in 1972 there was suddenly the beginning of a resurgence of concern about women's social disadvantage.

I had completed the M.A. in the 1960s, so when the women's movement really became prominent in the late sixties I felt I'd already canvassed a lot of those things personally. I can remember when I researched my M.A. thesis thinking that Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was the most exciting book I'd ever read. By that stage I had four young children. I was living isolated here from my family of origin in New Zealand, so I had little family support to look after the children and my husband who was moving up the academic food chain rapidly. But I took an intense interest in all the activism that occurred in the early seventies, especially around my neighbourhood in Carlton. When a position came up at the University of Melbourne where I was working part-time in the History Department, students raised the question of women in history. They kept saying they wanted to do an essay on women; why can't I do an essay on women? In the end the Department had a temporary vacancy coming up because a lecturer was going away for three years; somebody said: why not make a three-year appointment for somebody to teach women's history and meet these women students' demands? Some staff no doubt thought this would be a temporary task, and that the new lecturer would kick-start some ideas and reading lists and then move on. In the mid seventies I was one of the few applicants who had a postgraduate degree in women's history and

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I was initially a short-term position. So there was a bit of luck along the way.

Once I came in and I had that position, things took off very rapidly because there was a great demand for women's history both in the community and here in the University for women's history. That was flowing through of course from the ground-breaking research that was going on across the country. If you think of the mid 70s there were remarkable books from Miriam Dixson, Anne Summers, Beverley Kingston, Edna Ryan, and Anne Conlan. Those were really path-breaking. Also there was a lot of pressure from the women's movement that when you have an issue about women it's not necessarily resolved through one discipline. History doesn't explain women's place in society. History is a major component, but you have to look at issues of representation in literature, in film. You have to look at the psychology. You have to look at sociology, economics and so on. The notion that it was in fact the inter-disciplinary project of women's studies rather than just women's history, or women in sociology and so on, led to a lot of collaboration among feminist scholars. It was a very exciting period of people discovering other insights they had not considered before. Then there was the pressure from the feminist community outside. People wanted to know what was happening so there was not the usual breakdown between academia and people in the community. Women's history became a very collaborative kind of pursuit, so it was actually part of an interdisciplinary narrative based on women's studies. It's now usu-



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ally called gender studies. It was very exciting to be part of it at the beginning stage.

Declining interest among young women

Well, people report that but I don't observe it myself. There's a strange hesitation of course about the word feminism and being called a feminist. I think a lot of younger people don't want to be labelled. They're not interested in ideology. They want the freedom to define themselves as individuals and don't want to be labeled. When other people use the word 'feminist' they don't know what the speaker considers a feminist to be - it may be a derogatory term. But you don't usually find young women who would oppose the concerns that feminists have defined.

What about affirmative action?

I think we still need affirmative action. There are a lot of unresolved issues about women. That's why gender studies is thriving here as it is in many places. Now it doesn't have the 'f' word pushed to the fore. It's not heralded as a feminist perspective on history or society. 'Gender' is the word, which is less politically oriented than a word like feminist. But there are so many of the old issues that remain unresolved. I'm writing a history with two colleagues on the history of working mothers, on the notion of the working mother and on working mothers' experiences from the 19th century through to now. Look at the issues about the absence of systematic support

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for women working and how much is it really impinging on men's involvement in the home. Quality child care is fundamental, but it is patchy; paid maternity leave is erratic, as is parental leave for illnesses or going to schools when you need to for your child. Look at the support structures that, say, Scandinavian countries offer women, because they really want women in the work force. They really need them and approve of women having jobs. Then the issue is how much is it assumed that men will pick up (the involvement) at home. Typically, men still work full time and women part time and that full time may include very long hours, lots of absences. At the end of the day - and they usually do it cheerfully and amazingly well - women do pick up a complex series of tasks in a way that really makes their lives very pressured. I read the other day that working mothers dream of sleep like hungry people dream of food. I think affirmative action - targets to improve numbers of women and proportions of women - has gone off the agenda. Rather than feminists thinking and hoping that there's a momentum that won't stop, with the new work choice laws women are slipping backwards. There's not this sort of graduation that you can move to a job with responsibilities, incrementally move up.

One of the issues for women with children is that they come back into the work force and still carry a whole complex series of involvements: with elderly parents, keeping wider kinship networks, and community involvement particularly for children and teen-



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agers. They're keeping a lot going, so part time work may well have suited them; but a lot of them have been caught in a ghetto of very low paid part-time work which may not even be very secure - and of course the AWAs are a threat to women already in those jobs. They are going to get increasingly ghetto-ised. Whereas women who are in double-income professional households are actually increasing the gap between the poor and the rich. Some women's success of getting professional training and education, and then marrying men of comparable or higher salaries is actually intensifying the rift. I'm not blaming women for this, I'm blaming a system: workforce and labour arrangements that are going in that direction and are politically directed.

Women in politics

Women got into politics initially nearly 100 years ago... at a very hopeful time, thinking that individuals would be able to enter parliaments and pursue reform agendas. I don't think any of them quite understood in the late 19th and early 20th centuries how the party system would negate individual activities....First of all we have to get enough women into Parliament so that they don't feel that every time they open their mouths, somebody says 'there goes that woman again'. You need a critical mass for women to be effective. In any case not all women have progressive ideas about issues, so you need enough in there to try and change the culture, and I don't think that has happened up until now. Look at some of the women who have got up, been prepared to

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play that game, to be prominent as politicians, look at the fate of Amanda Vanstone and Bronwyn Bishop, Cheryl Kernot and Carmen Lawrence. There are sharp political practices that are not changing the culture but trying to be effective within it. I'm a great optimist. The number of women in parliaments has markedly increased and without affirmative action we wouldn't have had this. The activism I've been involved in has been through the ALP, where I was part of a move to get quotas for women candidates. The Liberals said: Oh we don't like quotas, we nurture talent. We don't do anything as crude as quotas. No woman would want to get in if she thought it was only because she was a woman.

The major parties are still very male dominated. The ones that aren't, like the Democrats, women have been able to get up partly because there have not been as many men who have wanted to, frankly. It's a minor party and doesn't look like it's going any place. That whole idea of personal assassination may happen to a degree with men, but it's certainly seems to happen quite frequently to talented women...not all women, but any woman who looks like she could get to be a real leader of a party. You feel some are quite frightened of their opponents getting a really competent woman up as a potential prime minister ...After all you don't need to sway everybody; you just need to sway three or four per cent ... who'd go for a party because they've a really outstanding woman at the head of it. I think that was in their minds when Cheryl Kernot



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was sidelined. She looks like she could be the head of a major party. People admired her. I'm just waiting to see what the Coalition are going to do to Julia Gillard.

Celebrating a hundred years of suffrage in Victoria

I think we should celebrate a hundred years of suffrage in Victoria in a very honest way. It's got to be one of the major transformations of the modern world. Women have become people who can have fulfilling lives in the public as well as private arenas. They can have children but can also contribute their very considerable talents in any area they want to and are allowed too and have the courage to do, despite difficulties. It's been a really remarkable thing. In a way political citizenship really did epitomise that. Once you've actually said, as the federal system did, that you could vote on equal terms as men and stand for office on equal terms as men to run a country, that is a very affirming thing. Everywhere the arrival of political citizenship was a milestone...It was early here, and I think that needs to be really celebrated; but in the end you know historical things just don't happen out of some box of idealism, there's a whole bunch of things going on.

Now in Victoria, Aboriginal men and men of colour had the right to vote before 1908, and all women, including Aboriginal women, therefore received the vote when it passed

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in 1908. By contrast when they brought in white women in a couple of other states they shunted Aboriginals out. But we should not pretend it was all equal in practice: the truth is it was assumed that Aboriginals couldn't vote if they were in receipt of government funds, or didn't vote. Then, when the federal Constitution was interpreted to deny Aborigines the vote unless they were on the rolls by 1901, the Victorian right went into abeyance till 1949 .

How things have changed for the status of women in Victoria in your lifetime?

The movement of married women into the work force has been a quite startling, change, and from the 1990s this has included a considerable proportion of mothers with young children under two years. In the 50s women of Anglo background were supposed to get married, stay home, and start practising your cooking. In the 1960s we saw married women, especially those with skills that could get them a good income, staying in work till they had a child, then leaving the workforce when they had children. But by the mid 60s when I came to Australia, especially those women who could get good jobs, jobs they really liked to do and they got a good salary, were starting to go back to work when their children were in school, and also working when they did have children.



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As for migrant women, from the 1950s there were thousands in the factories who had young children, and they were managing this one way or another; but it's almost as though they weren't seen as women. They were migrants - migrants can go and do those things. We don't expect them to live like 'us'. Anglo women were supposed to be home with preschool children and primary school children. Then there'd be the worry that if you weren't home with high school children they'd all be delinquents and running around after school smoking and other things if mothers weren't there to observe them. But the startling thing is the normalisation of the notion that married women with children have waged work. I think the marked shift of mothers into the work place probably reflects the rising cost of living, particularly for housing. If you've got a family and you've got a house, the mortgage is really more than one parent is usually going to manage.

Feminists of the 70s said women are not likely to have much autonomy if they are for their lifetime dependent on a male relative for their income. In some way or another women ought to be able to earn their own living. They saw it in terms of women's freedom, fulfillment, autonomy, even if the job wasn't a very pleasant one. Increasingly women's wages actually make it possible for a family to make out financially at all. But admittedly some parents have high expectations: private school fees, very large houses, investments in material goods that the woman's income is helping purchase.

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A huge number of pre-school children are in care at least three days a week and nobody even knows how they are all being looked after, because if you count up every child care place and long family day care place it doesn't amount to a fifth of the children whose parents are both at work. We assume it's the grandmothers who are supplying much of the care . With women now having children relatively late, eventually grandmothers will be a little past the stage of wanting to run around after little people all day.

I'm a great believer in history. I think it's very instructive for understanding right now the remaining difficulties that are systemic for women. It may be hard to identify problems because they seem normal, until you follow through a historical transformation of those issues. I'm not suggesting that it's all been very bad before and now problems are nearly all solved. Problems come and go but they don't go away entirely. It's good to know that there were women who stood up for other women and themselves and may have been hounded for it but stood firm. It's never easy to do, no one likes to be ridiculed. To take a stand on an unpopular issue opens a woman to mockery and denigration, so I think it's good to know that so many women stood up to be counted ... for somebody else and not just for themselves. Very often they could have had a perfectly quiet and good life but they saw injustices or oppression or suffering and said so. I think that's a good model for women. It's always easier to go along with



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what is accepted in your family or group than it is to find ways to stand outside of that and acknowledge that there are some negative consequences for women in society as a whole. Women still tend to be just a little bit too obliging. It makes them very pleasant people and if the other sex was always very obliging as well, that might be fine. It is seldom so.

Future

It's a little difficult for women now to perceive the force of feminism because quite often the stark issues of discrimination of the past have indeed changed. If there were to arise such stark issues again the women would be in there again as activists. In the 50s and in the 60s a woman couldn't get a bank loan without her husband's signature. Every day there were issues: unequal pay, women not allowed into a whole lot of trades and the professions, blatantly sexist advertising. I think there are echoes of many of these issues that remain and can arise again. Legal abortion is one such concern. When you look at the 70s and the 80s, there were women who were university students who had extra time and space to think. Now most students are working twenty hours a week along with their university studies. There is not so much time, headspace or the physical energy to be politically active.

That's perhaps an indication of why there is so much talk about the work/life balance.

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It's often at that stage when women have a baby, they suddenly realise that they now confronted with a life that has different demands on them from their male partner. If parents want to equally look after the children it's not that easy. The structures are just not set up, and if in the job parents are expected to be very mobile that's another pressure. I have just been reading some recent interviews with women, and one of the interesting things is that even where husbands are staying home, because the wife can earn more or they are unemployed, the woman is still shaping how the children should be cared for. You know she still feels the primary caring, motherhood, as her primary role.

Feminism is an international project. It is difficult for women to say they are fine, when there are other women suffering gender-based discrimination in the same street or suburb or city, Domestic violence remains a serious problem and is the main cause of death and injury for many certain age groups. And this is an international problem also. Women within many societies are attempting very bravely to face these issues. It's important to be part of an international movement so that you're there to offer support when other women want it on their terms, whether they need money or lobbying or whether they want to come here and learn things. You just do what you can.



Final Notes

Patricia Grimshaw undertook her Bachelor of Arts (1960) and Master of Arts (1963) degrees at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. After some years as a high school teacher in Cambridge, England, she settled with her academic husband to Melbourne where she raised four children. In 1973 she obtained part-time work as a research assistant and tutor in the History Department at the University of Melbourne, and was appointed to a lectureship in 1977. She held the Max Crawford Chair of History from 1993 to 2006, and currently holds a position as a Professorial Fellow.

Patricia Grimshaw's teaching and scholarly interests have focused on women and gender, and has taught many subjects and supervised a considerable number of postgraduate theses in the area. With the psychologist Norma Grieve she began the first Women's Studies course at the University of Melbourne in 1979, and has since then sustained a part in the programme that other feminist scholars developed subsequently. For several terms she served as Head of the History Department and Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Arts. She served for ten years as President of the Oral History Association (Victorian Branch), and from 1995 to 2000 as President of the International Federation for Research in Women's History. She has also served as Deputy Editor of the *Women's History Review*, and on the Boards of the *Journal of Women's History*, the *Pacific History Review*, the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, *Australian Feminist Studies*, *Australian Historical Studies* and the *National Foundation of Australian Women*. She is a member of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

Some Publications include:

K. Darian-Smith, P. Grimshaw and S. Macintyre (eds), *Britishness Abroad: Transnational Movements and Imperial Cultures*, Melbourne University Publishing, 2007.

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