

Commentary: Celebrating twenty volumes of *Women's Studies Journal*

The *Journal's* success story

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A modest New Zealand journal's continued success for twenty years is certainly a cause for congratulation and celebration. The Women's Studies Association deserves applause, too, for the consistent production of the newsletter and the Conference Papers. What an excellent reflection of feminist enterprise – with a passing salute to *Broadsheet* for its twenty-year life.

In a piece I wrote (much too hastily) to mark the tenth anniversary of this *Journal*,¹ I expressed my concern about the impact of e-mails and the internet, however convenient, on its future existence in print. Obviously, my apprehension was misplaced, although I still wonder about problems for our wonderful feminist historians deprived of old-fashioned resources like undeleted letters and diaries.

When, as an ancient monument, so to speak, I was asked to write this article, I first thought there was nothing much to say except that, after a lot of debate at conferences and hectic discussions in between, an Auckland group launched the project. One factor that might have given rise to doubts was that any national organisation was likely to distrust Auckland delegates as representing a city that was too big, too brash and too lacking in real intellect. Then there were the academics (not so many of them then) who worried about the lack of scholarship in something produced outside academia, and believed that without men any publication would be of lesser quality. (A pity really that this notion still crops up, often on the backs of the male students in women's studies classes.) Of course there were technical and financial difficulties but, of course, the support was always encouraging.

This time around I decided to take a retrospective look at the *Journal* from its beginnings. This was over-ambitious, as I forgot to allow for my diminished eyesight, the fact that I don't have all the issues (I kept giving them away) and the amount of time it would take

to happily re-read so many of the contributions from start to finish. And what excellence is there. I ended my enjoyable study in 1998, with an issue devoted to literature. Aorewa McLeod's editorial² pointed out that in the *Journal's* fourteen years there had been relatively little on women's writing; although one such item is a lovely pioneering essay early on by McLeod herself.³

I stopped in 1998, partly because of time, but also because I came to live in Melbourne at the beginning of 1999, therefore slowly lessening my lifelong familiarity with my Kiwi roots. The results of my efforts are, predictably, my own preferences. One concern I have is that I have had to leave out so many significant authors and so much important material.

Such interesting women have written for this journal, one of WSA's flagships. Personally, I believe the Conference Papers also document in many fascinating ways the course of projects, the discussion of new ideas, and the questioning and development of feminist theories. Contributors have gone on to add to their qualifications, to write and/or edit books and journals and to hold down important jobs.

The range of topics provides intriguing titles. One of my favourites is 'Breastfeeding and the Body Politic'. I had forgotten 'the dominance of Plunket ideology' still alive and well as recently as 1997, reminding me of my own anxious maternal experiences. Beasley calls it:

A manifestation of the body politic ... as an agent of social control through its ability to 'normalise' culturally specific infant rearing practices.⁴

However, she does comment that, like one of the new mothers in her study – the only one – many New Zealand women find their contact with a Plunket nurse 'positive and affirming'.

We did not actually use those two words when we started the *Journal*, but I think we hoped it would have something of the same effect. I editorially referred to an interview with playwright and novelist Renee:⁵

She epitomizes the hardworking, versatile NZ woman: wife/mother; cook/cleaner/teacher etc.; extra-mural university student/writer/actor/director.⁶

The idea was to develop theories based on retrieval and validation of women's experience. Which happened. Renee's claim that all plays are political was echoed by a visiting English historian commenting

on historical research.⁷ (And when has feminist writing not been political?) The *Journal* has always published specifically ‘political’ articles about, for example, union activists,⁸ or women and power and social policy, or women MPs and the like.⁹ Anne Else pointed out that the first Wellington collective had a high proportion of articles on history as well as on social policy,¹⁰ and this trend continued. There was, for example, the special ‘Going Public’ suffrage number in 1993 in which, on the whole, contributors had reservations about this anniversary, such as:

For women in 1993, as perhaps for Maori in 1990, there is that odd feeling of being called on to celebrate a victory that doesn’t feel like one ... It should not surprise us, then, that the benefits of suffrage for women have been limited, nor that this year-long party is of dubious value.¹¹

Mostly, the earlier issues leaned towards fact-finding, to the demolishing of myths, rather than to the theoretical, which, on the whole, developed later. Exceptions were from Michele Dominy with her analysis of the 1979 Convention, and Christine Cheyne, who said:

The claim that ... there is a significant body of women artists who have simply been overlooked by conventional art historians, should not be the goal of feminist artists and historians, but the point of departure.¹²

Eleven years later, Judith Collard took off with:

During recent years ... the history of NZ art has been undergoing a reappraisal. Artists who had previously been dismissed or given only a minor position in the canon have been receiving greater critical attention.¹³

Geraldine McDonald also added to the thinking:

There are three kinds of research on women. There’s the kind in which women are the subjects but they are looked at exactly as if they are men ... Then there is research which is concerned with the basis of women’s oppression and explanations for their role and status. The third kind is research in which women are the subject and research methods are developed that capture the facts of their lives as they experience them. I think my research has been of the last kind.¹⁴

The two latter research modes are, naturally, those most favoured as contributors debated, discarded, reworked, expanded, as the articles by Cheyne and then Collard show. In 1988 there was a piece on

spirituality,¹⁵ with a whole issue devoted to the topic in 2006 (20:2). In her review article, Dann expressed the wish that: 'Prue Hyman will go on to publish something definitive on women and economics', and in the next issue there it was, a review of Hyman's *Women and Economics*.¹⁶ Another angle on research came from Dianne Snow:

There can be no doubt that the conceptual dichotomy between public and private obscures the reality of women's everyday lives and the nature of their work, and that feminist materialism is an effective tool for such analysis.¹⁷

Early on there were several articles on, and references to, lesbianism.¹⁸ (Eleven years later Quinlivan's study echoed Rosier's comment in 1985 that it was unfair to expect a gay student to educate classmates and teachers on lesbian life and times.) And, as could be expected in a women's journal, domesticity, motherhood and child-rearing filled quite a lot of pages,¹⁹ but, unlike the popular picture in the popular magazines, they depicted a kind of parallel universe (often rather bleak) to Plunket's Ideal Home.

In my reading, I found that, as far as I could see, most aspects of women's occupations and experience were described and analysed. However, apart from a 'checklist' by Mary Ann Crick²⁰ (she was a prop and stay to women's studies programmes I was involved in years ago), there is no study of, or by, a feminist librarian, although there may be a reference to one in a footnote here or there. Librarians are often crucial for researchers and perhaps deserve more recognition.

In 1988 the *Journal* moved to a Wellington collective, who were the first to produce an issue devoted to just one subject, which, in this case, was Katherine Mansfield. The editorial says of the contributors:

All approach Mansfield with the vigour of feminist challenges to orthodoxies in biography and literary criticism. But far from this leading to any uniformity, what emerges is a variety of new ideas.²¹

This was a delightful reversal of what Anne Else called 'the insipid doctrine'.²² (I recall a conversation with the late Sarah Campion, a writer probably better known in Australia than New Zealand, she impatiently inclined towards the 'insipid' version of her, whom she regarded as the Other Woman while she was married to biographer Anthony Alpers.)

In 1992, the *Journal* went academic, into the capable hands of the Women's Studies section in the English Department at the University

of Otago. In thinking about the Olden Days, I suspect that one factor in the original extra-curricular production is often overlooked: that is the ongoing worry about the actual lack of resources, such as readily accessible photocopiers, computers, paper, co-operative printing firms and the rest – not to mention the time spent in gaining access and the cost thereof. Once a relatively large institution takes on a project (however grudgingly), it removes one layer of anxiety about the existence of technical aids close at hand.

There were other anxieties of course. Jacquie Matthews's beautifully crafted 'Reflections' said of Victoria University:

Women's Studies has been subject to hostile rhetoric from both the Old and New Right and the Old and New Left outside and inside the university. It has suffered the silent indifference of much of the staff and student body ... Academic opponents of Women's Studies dismiss it as a Minnie Mouse subject but are apprehensive of its consequences. With reason, if you study the aims of the Women's Studies Association ...²³

Anne Smith, discussing the marginalisation of women university teachers agrees:

If Women's Studies offers this ... challenge to traditional values and methods it is hardly surprising that it is viewed with profound mistrust by many outside and within the university.²⁴

(I have to say here that I do hope conditions for university women – not to mention the majority outside academia – are better now than in 1992 when both these articles were written. Are they?)

Of course, the development of technology has made a positive contribution to communication and information. In 1994 Cahill introduced 'the first electronic discussion lists for women's studies in New Zealand', which she hoped would create 'a "virtual community" of feminist scholars'.²⁵ This was also the first *Journal* to include photographs, for:

Engaging with visual media can be seen as part of a wider agenda to extend the journal's subject areas and challenge notions of what counts as valid subject matter for academic discussion.

As the publication traveled round collectives there seemed to be a growing tendency for issues round a particular theme. One that impressed me was the 'Special Issue: Educating Sexuality', edited by Alison Jones and Sue Middleton. Education is one of the topics that has received much *Journal* attention over the years, from a variety

of contributors, but, according to the two editors:

only slowly has *education* come to be understood as a key site where bodies and sexuality are engaged and produced ... much of the research and writing on women and education placed little emphasis on issues of embodiment ... there was little sustained analysis of sexuality itself as discursively produced in educational settings.²⁶

A range of writers, including Middleton herself, contributed to this kind of analysis of how sexuality is learned in various locations inside and outside schools. I was struck by the courage of the Samoan contributor who, 'as a young Samoan woman [I] have no acquired right and privilege to speak of and about the Samoan culture'.²⁷ I thought this issue was a good example of how women's studies extends across disciplines and cultures for important presentations of what the editors said was ongoing research. Not that it extended far enough, in their view. This issue included yet another debate (sigh) about the exclusion of male contributors.²⁸

In 1997 Alison Jones was again an editor, this time of 'Special Issue: Indigenous Women in the Pacific', which I believe represents an important, fraught and reasonably successful development for WSA. The exact date eludes me, but I think it was in the 1980s when a WSA conference decided on an addition to WSA's aims, recognizing Maori as *tangata whenua* and therefore adopting 'particular responsibility to address their oppression'.

While this conference decision was probably a form of consciousness raising, good intentions and missionary zeal did not always work. We Aucklanders were perhaps a little further along in bi-cultural awareness than in some other places, as Maori and Pacific Island nationals were a far more numerous and visible presence. I remember an interview with Maori activist Ripeka Evans (in one of my missing issues), while McLeod, in her 1986 review article lays great stress on the importance of Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* as Aotearoa's first bi-cultural novel. In 1998, McLeod put forward the reasons why those whom she calls 'colonial settler-women novelists' stopped writing. Some were social and economic, to do with the Plunket style of their time with little intellectual stimulus and, for at least two, their isolation as lesbians. But mainly, says McLeod, it was because:

Our geographical home is not an empty country, but someone else's home

which we, to make our home, have taken from them. ... these writers, situated in a country where the presence of the indigenous other was inescapable, were unable to write about them ... [these writers] could not write about ... [their] complicity in the dominant position of race.²⁹

In the beginning, it was sometimes the indigenous other who had little interest in, or was suspicious of, WSA's overtures. In the suffrage issue, for instance, Cahill regretted the lack of Maori voices. She says:

Silence does speak louder than words, particularly when words make the pluralities of 'us' disappear.³⁰

There were, of course, misunderstandings. Before WSA was trying to go bicultural, McDonald 'wrote two papers on misconceptions which researchers had about Maori people' (Rosier). In 1988 she was writing about inequality for women, Maori and non-Maori:

In academic achievement girls as a group surpass boys. To this extent the social order is not reproduced. Non-Maori as a group do better in school than Maori. To this extent the social order is reproduced.³¹

Jill Chrisp outlined the impossibility of running an introductory women's studies course in Rotorua with both Maori and Pakeha tutors and students. She explained:

The development of a political and social awareness of the contemporary position of women in society from personal experience was difficult when those experiences were worlds apart.³²

The result was the separate development of Mana Wahine, or Maori women's studies. Hinematau McNeill, a tutor in this programme reported:

Maori women, many of whom had left school before the legal leaving age, produced outstanding work of the highest calibre that also showed their understanding of difficult, sophisticated material.³³

Whatever the initial difficulties, the *Journal* now has plenty of writers with high standards like that, both Maori and those from Pacific Islands, as well as Pakeha. But a discordant note is struck by Mai Chen, a Taiwanese immigrant who documents far too many examples of discrimination she has suffered – a national tendency which she claims is institutionalised. She says:

Women and Maori have helped to increase tolerance of difference ... however, they have also acted, knowingly or not, to marginalize other

groups who experience discrimination.³⁴

This is the kind of challenging proposition that makes the *Journal* so interesting, raising as it does more questions, such as: is Kiwi intolerance so entrenched in, say, universities?

One article I found especially significant is Jane Vanderpyl's detailed account of the problems involved in setting up and maintaining a rape crisis centre by a collective with differing forms of feminist beliefs. This strikes me as a handy reference for feminists who, often for economic reasons, are drawn into mainstream enterprises like universities and struggle to uphold their principles. According to Vanderpyl:

Conflict remained a central aspect of feminist collective organising. The herstory of this collective clearly demonstrates the ways in which feminist collective organising remains an unstable but valuable site of feminist organising for social change.³⁵

From where I sit in Melbourne, New Zealand's rare mentions in the media often include the notion that the place is run by women, which seems to me an Australian put-down (I believe this country to be a sexist nation). This is a social change of course, but how much of it can be attributed to women's studies? No doubt universities have been repositioned to some extent, and individual women in women's studies courses have improved their own lives but ... what about everybody else? The rates of domestic violence remain high, for instance.

However, I hope I live long enough to see a *Journal* article that measures the extent of changes made by feminists. And I expect to enjoy it as much as I have this foray into the *Journal's* life. My apologies to all those women I have not mentioned for time and space reasons, and my thanks to everyone in WSA for including me in their achievements.

Notes

- 1 Margot Roth, 'Dear Journal – With Love', *WSJ*, 10:1 (1994).
- 2 Aorewa McLeod, 'Editorial', *WSJ*, 14:2 (1998).
- 3 Aorewa McLeod, 'An Innocent's Look at New Zealand Women Writers', *WSJ*, 2:2 (1986).
- 4 Annette N. Beasley, *WSJ*, 14:1 (1998), 74.
- 5 Claire-Louise McCurdy, 'Feminist Writer Renee: All Plays Are Political', *WSJ*, 1:2 (1985).
- 6 Margot Roth, 'Editorial', *WSJ*, 1:2 (1985), 5.

- 7 Margot Roth, 'Anna Davin: History Research is a Political Act'. *WSJ*, 2:2 (1986).
- 8 Margot Roth, 'Union Organiser: Passion for Justice', *WSJ*, 2:2 (1986); Kris Bennett, 'She was "only a bloody Sheila" Who Battled for Workers' Rights', *WSJ*, 3:1 (1987).
- 9 Margaret Wilson, 'Women and Power: Law, Economics, Politics and Decision-making', *WSJ* 3:1 (1987); Penny Fenwick, 'Royal Commissions Can Be Good for Women', *WSJ*, 3:2 (1988); Allannah Ryan, 'Playing at Happy Families: the State and Fertility Control' *WSJ*, 2:2 (1986); Christine Dann, 'The Political is Political', *WSJ*, 10:2 (1994).
- 10 Anne Else, 'Editorial' *WSJ*, 7:2 (1991).
- 11 Maud Cahill, 'Going Public/ Suffrage At Issue', *WSJ*, 9:2 (1993), v, vii.
- 12 Michele Dominy, '1979: A Cultural Analysis', *WSJ*, 2:2 (1986); Christine Cheyne, 'Looking at Feminist Theories Looking at Women's Art Practices', *WSJ*, 3:1 (1987), 49.
- 13 Judith Collard, 'Painted with a Smile: Art and Representation in New Zealand 1928–1940', *WSJ*, 14:1 (1998), 85.
- 14 Pat Rosier, 'Geraldine McDonald: Her Life, Her Times, Her Research', *WSJ*, 3:2 (1988), 20.
- 15 Jill McLaren, 'If You Want to See the Goddess ... An Introduction to Feminist Women's Spirituality', *WSJ* 4:1 (1998).
- 16 Jan Pahl, 'Reviews', *WSJ*, 11:1/2 (1995).
- 17 Dianne Snow, 'On Women's Work', *WSJ*, 5:2 (1989), 90.
- 18 Dominy; Hilary Haines (now Lapsley), 'D for Psychology: Distorts, Devalues, Damns Difference', *WSJ*, 3:1 (1987); Kathleen Quinlivan, "'Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise": Lesbian Students Respond to the Regulation of Same Sex Desire', *WSJ*, 12:2 (1996); Pat Rosier, 'Lesbian Issues in Women's Studies', *WSJ*, 1:2 (1985); Belinda Trainor, 'Having or Not Having Babies – What Power Do Women Have?', *WSJ*, 3:2 (1988).
Note: This article was compiled from Belinda's meticulous files after her untimely death in 1986. This young lesbian feminist scholar made a large contribution to our feminist thought and action and her work is a fitting memorial.
- 19 Jo Aitken, 'Wives and Mothers First: the New Zealand Teachers' Marriage Bar and the Ideology of Domesticity, 1920–1940', *WSJ*, 12:1 (1996); Jane Chetwynd, Susan Calvert and Virginia Boss, 'Caring and Coping: Life for Mothers of Intellectually Handicapped Children', *WSJ*, 1:2 (1985); Helen Cook (now May), 'Images, Illusions of Harmony: The 1950s Wife and Mother', *WSJ*, 1:2 (1985); Liz Gordon, 'The Ideology of Family Life and the Transition to Work', *WSJ*, 5:1 (1989); Haines; Anne Meade, Margaret Rosemergy and Raylee Johnston, 'How Children Affect Family Style: The Hidden Contract', *WSJ*, 1:2 (1985); Deborah Montgomery, 'War and Women: Work and Motherhood', *WSJ*, 2:2 (1988); Rosemary Novitz, (now Du Plessis) 'Caring: The Advice of the "Experts" and the Reality of

- Experience', *WSJ*, 1:2 (1985).
- 20 Mary Ann Crick, 'Women's Studies Resources: A Checklist', *WSJ*, 8:2 (1992).
- 21 Charlotte Macdonald, 'Editorial', *WSJ*, 4:2 (1988), 4.
- 22 Anne Else, 'The Insipid Doctrine: Joining the Resistance in New Zealand', *WSJ*, 4:2 (1988).
- 23 Jacqui Matthews, 'Reflections and Recollections of a Retiring Woman', *WSJ*, 8:1 (1992), 1–2.
- 24 Anne B. Smith, 'Women in University Teaching', *WSJ*, 8:2 (1992).
- 25 Maud Cahill, 'Editorial', *WSJ*, 10:1 (1994), 1,4.
- 26 Alison Jones and Sue Middleton, 'Editorial: Educating Sexuality', *WSJ*, 12:2 (1996), 5.
- 27 AnneMarie Tupuola, 'Learning Sexuality: Young Samoan Women', *WSJ*, 12:2 (1996), 59.
- 28 Linda Hill, Alison Jones, Aorewa McLeod, 'Commentary: The Nineties ... Men in Women's Space', *WSJ*, 12:2 (1996).
- 29 Aorewa McLeod, 'A Home in this World: Why New Zealand Women Stopped Writing', *WSJ*, 14:2 (1998) 73–74.
- 30 Maud Cahill, 'Going Public/Suffrage at Issue', *WSJ*, 9:2 (1993), ix.
- 31 Geraldine McDonald, 'The Construction of Inequality: The Role of Education and Occupation on the Lives of Maori and non-Maori Women', *WSJ*, 4:1 (1988), 16.
- 32 Jill Chrisp, 'Women's Studies: Kitchen Sink or Lecture Theatre?', *WSJ*, 8:1 (1992), 61.
- 33 Hinemataua McNeill, 'The Mana Wahine Uni-Tech Programme', *WSJ*, 8:1 (1992), 69.
- 34 Mai Chen, 'Discrimination, Law, and Being a Chinese Immigrant Woman in New Zealand', *WSJ*, 9:2 (1993), 18.
- 35 Jane Vanderpyl, 'An Unstable Achievement: Conflicts in Feminist Collective Organising', *WSJ*, 14:1 (1998), 35.