Book reviews

CRACKS IN A GLASS CEILING: NEW ZEALAND WOMEN 1975–2004

Joyce Herd

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Reviewed by Jenny Coleman

Is traditional marriage still traditional? Have women really made significant gains in the paid workforce? Have improvements in women's health been slow because women have not been willing to take an active part in our own health? Does our schooling system provide an adequate preparation for life? In what ways does gender bias still operate in our society? Have the changes in attitudes towards sex and sexuality given women more freedom and autonomy in their lives or do they still disadvantage women and girls? These are some of the issues canvassed in Joyce Herd's *Cracks in a Glass Ceiling: New Zealand Women 1975–2004*.

Published thirty years after the United Nations International Women's Year, *Cracks in a Glass Ceiling* was commissioned by the Otago Branch of the New Zealand Federation of Graduate Women to follow up the 1975 surveys *What Price Equality?* and *Women at Home*. Having collaborated in each of these earlier studies, as well as having published in a number of other areas and been involved in a number of women's organisations for many years, Joyce Herd is eminently qualified to write this book. Her brief was to rewrite the information gathered in research completed by sociologist Claudia Bell, so that it would be accessible and relevant to 'the ordinary person'. In this she has more than succeeded. *Cracks in a Glass Ceiling* is thoroughly readable and of interest to anyone who has lived through part or all of these thirty years of significant change for New Zealand women. For the student of women's/gender studies, sociology, or New Zealand history, it provides a valuable overview of first hand and reflective accounts of how women's lives have changed since the 'second wave'

of feminism. The Otago Branch of the Federation of Graduate Women is to be commended for their initiative in commissioning this research and for the production of such a valuable publication.

As Dame Miriam Dell notes in her Foreword, the thirty years since the United Nations International Women's Year have seen momentous change in the legal, economic, social, cultural and spiritual status of women in New Zealand. This book seeks to document aspects of that change, through the experiences and views of New Zealand women. To this end, *Cracks in a Glass Ceiling* offers a comprehensive overview of changes in New Zealand women's lives, the driving forces behind these changes, and how women think the changes have affected them. Intent on ensuring 'a demographic, geographic and socio-economic spread in the commentary' (p. 114), three groups of women were interviewed for the study: sixty-eight 'high profile' women (whose names and occupations are listed in the Appendix), focus groups of women who discussed their opinions about change, and a group of mothers and daughters who compared stories in joint interviews. Generous quotations from these interviews and focus groups are interspersed throughout the book and this approach provides a strong sense of the commentary being grounded in the lives of real women and encompassing the views and experiences of both '"ordinary"women and experts of different ages, races and occupations, from all over the country' (p. 1).

Beautifully presented in an appealing format and liberally illustrated with black and white photographs, *Cracks in a Glass Ceiling* will be an interesting read for those women who have been involved in the women's movement in its many guises over the past three decades, for their children and grandchildren, and for women who, for whatever reason, missed the wave. It is particularly fitting that with only a few exceptions, the photographs were taken by Gil Hanly, who has documented the women's movement over several decades. While it's fascinating to pore over some of the older photographs and recognise faces from the past, captions would have been a welcome addition.

The scope of the book is wide with chapters on family, work, health, education, and the sexual revolution. The opening chapter, 'Studying Change', provides a snapshot of the advent and influence of the Women's Liberation Movement and how the concerns and priorities of the Women's Movement shifted over the ensuing three

decades. This is preceded by a very useful seven-page chronology listing important events and organisations, pieces of legislation, social and economic policy, key appointments of women to senior positions within the public and private sector, and other changes which have impacted on women's lives, such as the admission of women into the Anglican clergy, legalisation of Saturday morning trading, and the shifting percentages of women in the labour force. Against this backdrop, the individual chapters blend descriptive detail of actual changes, personal accounts of women's experiences, and critical reflective commentary from participants in the study and the author in a manner that often raises more questions than are answered. The chapter on family, for example, opens with the observation that over the last three decades legislation has increasingly been directed toward dealing with actual situations rather than idealised prescriptive ideologies. The sections within this chapter then consider such issues as: how marriage has changed from traditional models; the irony that de facto relationships are now covered by as much legislation as marriage; the increasingly casual nature of relationships; the ways the phrase 'blended families' can obscure the very real difficulties and problems associated with changing family patterns; how social policy impacts on solo parent families, extended families and whanau arrangements; and changing attitudes toward and state recognition of services for families with same-sex parents. Key controversies such as the Matrimonial Property Act of 1976, which provided for more equal division of matrimonial property on separation or divorce, the 2002 amendments which provided for de facto and same-sex partnerships, the Domestic Purposes Benefit first introduced in 1973, and changing public attitudes toward and legislation around domestic violence are also addressed in some detail.

Relatively predictable in content, the chapter on Work includes sections addressing the 1970s debates on women in the workforce, the unpaid and invisible nature of much of women's work and how women, in particular rural, Maori, Pacific and migrant women, are systematically disadvantaged in the labour market. Issues around unemployment, self-employment and childcare are addressed alongside more recently emerging trends of women achieving high profile positions at the top of their professions, the feminisation of some professions, the continued absence of pay equity and the increasing gap between the pay and conditions for women in

professional occupations and women in low-paid semi- and unskilled occupations. These changing patterns of workforce participation are considered within the context of the effects of the deregulation of the labour market and the changing face of the unions, particularly with respect to the Employment Contracts Act of 1991, and the impact of advances in technology on previously labour intensive workplaces.

A constant theme within the book is that while we may have come a long way, can we claim with any real confidence that women have arrived at a better place? At the end of the chapter on Work, Herd makes the observation that '[a]ny attempt now to suggest that "woman's place is in the home" is rightly scorned, but it must be acknowledged that some women may prefer it that way, and many working women have a hard life' (p.51). This unevenness of change is perhaps most evident in the chapter on Health. Advances in reliable contraception, access to abortion, reproductive health and maternity care, and greater sexual freedom have been offset to some extent by steep increases in sexually transmitted diseases and high teenage pregnancy rates, increasing medical intervention in childbirth, reduction in the time new mothers spend in hospital and increased pressure on all aspects of maternity services. The Cartwright Inquiry into the treatment of cervical cancer patients at National Women's Hospital has resulted in vastly increased scrutiny in research ethics procedures in relation to informed consent, but recent scandals relating to disgraceful conduct and sexual assault on the part of male doctors towards female patients, the cervical screening fiasco at Gisborne, and the uneven progress of the breast screening programme are testimony to the fact that women's health needs in New Zealand are far from being adequately addressed by the medical system. Divergent health needs and priorities are especially marked between Maori and Pakeha, and the need for cultural awareness and sensitivity with the changing cultural face of New Zealand is also raised.

In the chapter on Education, questions such as whether schooling is or should provide a preparation for life, take on different resonances than when they were posed in earlier decades. Over the past thirty years, concerns regarding gender bias and equity have shifted from the content of school text books to the impact of the student loans scheme. With nga kohanga reo and kura kaupapa now firmly established, what mainstream provisions are there for a generation of students seeking tertiary education in Te Reo? Even the ways that success might be

measured are questioned. In an age in which television, the internet and popular media leave little to the imagination, the young women of today 'could hardly imagine the repressive attitudes to sex which were the rule in the youth of their mothers and grandmothers' (p.90). But has this sexual revolution given women more freedom? Pornographic images of women and children have proliferated on the internet and there is little to suggest that incidents of sexual violence, rape and abuse are declining. Prescriptive ideologies of fidelity within the heterosexual marriage have been superseded by an acceptance of a range of sexual identities and relationships. As the debates around prostitution law reform in 2003 clearly illustrated, the conservative moral right continues to be a powerful force in promulgating the sexual double standard. Moreover, increased openness on sexual issues has not meant that women are necessarily any safer in their own homes.

In the opening chapter, Joyce Herd comments that 'instead of calling the women's movement of the 1970s 'the second wave of feminism', it is perhaps more appropriate to call it the 'seventh wave': that exceptional occurrence which dwarfs what has happened before, but then subsides, while a more *normal* pattern reasserts itself' (italics added) (p. 5). But this metaphor sits uncomfortably in a book that testifies to the diversity of women's lives, the unevenness of change, and the contested nature of what constitutes 'success' within a feminist framework.

Politics 101

Anna Smith

Canterbury University Press, 2006

Reviewed by Michelle Lunn

The press release accompanying *Politics 101* emphatically states that the author is no longer a political animal. The book on the other hand, is packed with political content of the old fashioned Left/Right variety. Given the current smoke-free climate, even the back cover photo of the author, cigarette in hand, is political. All in all I liked the idea of the novel before I had even begun to read.

Crafted around 1970s student politics, the book describes the lives, loves, ambitions and losses of four main characters. Kaleidoscopes of merging experience are recounted through the eyes of each. The story begins with Meg, an empathetic character with a passion for handicrafts. We next encounter Henry Ballantyne, the irritating, politically obsessed misogynist. Steph, Henry's girlfriend is softer and somewhat captivating in a dippy hippy kind of way. Her passion for writing – despite the fact that Henry considers that it is hopelessly bourgeois, softens the mind and has nothing to say to the world – defines her as a character. Finally, we meet Diana the prickliest of the four. Her uncompromising pursuit of what she believes to be right, makes her character the most political and her story certainly adds a spicy finishing touch to the story.

The characters in this novel are real people and their stories are familiar and intriguing. The language is wonderful and the book is a pleasure to read. The gradual unfolding of each character through the eyes of another adds depth and complexity. Meg, Henry, Steph, and Diana are all delightful, fascinating, and repugnant in their own special ways. This is an excellent book, one that captures your imagination, making you wonder what will happen next. I was, however, disappointed to find it less and less compelling as I progressed. This is a book that needs to be read from beginning to end within a short period of time. I will certainly make a date to take Anna Smith's next novel away for a weekend and I don't expect to be disappointed.

Assume Nothing

Rebecca Swan

Boy Tiger Press, 2004

Reviewed by Geraldine Christmas

'Like a moth to a light', with this book photographer Rebecca Swan is interested in people beyond the male/female binary code – that is, 'people whose gender is uncertain, fluid and challenging' (p. 6).

Thus Swan's photographic essay, with photos taken from 1995 to 2003, challenges the popular notion that we must be strictly male *or* female – *never* a shade in between. Her photos suggest that gender is 'embodied, expressed, transgressed, transformed and performed in many different ways' (p. 7). As gender rights activist Leslie Feinberg would say, when we look through the pages of *Assume Nothing* we see the hues in between pink- and blue-tinted categories. In *Trans Liberation* (1998) Feinberg states, '[e]ach person should have the right to *choose* between pink and blue. At this moment in time, that right is denied to us. But together, we could make it a reality' (p. 1).

Refreshingly, *Assume Nothing* shows us that this *is* a reality. On pages 22–23 we meet James, who says, 'I think it's a lucky thing to have a gender that is so fluid … Sometimes I feel very positive about it, in that not that many people get to experience a multi-faceted gender in which anything is possible' (p. 23). The two photos of James have a classical quality; behind a nude James is a concrete wall with peeling paint or plaster, and s/he is shrouded by an archway in the wall. There is also a boyish, prepubescent quality about him/her – thus James challenges the reader about the myth of a 'true' gender. S/he also appears blurred – no doubt representing gender in motion. But despite James appearing blurred, when looking closely at the photos there are signs of a double mastectomy on his/her chest.

Pages 24–27 contain an informative foreword by Judith 'Jack' Halberstam. And despite the 'rosy optimism' (p. 27) James feels in the preceding pages, Halberstam reminds us that since 9/11, 'shifts towards conservative regimes' highlight the myth about 'any belief in the forward motion of social justice'. She raises the classic example in the USA, where 'military aggression [is] coupled with the dangerous merging of state and church in the White House' (p. 27). Hence Halberstam remarks that despite Swan's images of 'bold and beautiful expressions of gendered embodiment … their fragility, their vulnerability … show us precisely how far we still have to go' (p. 27).

Halberstam's sobering comments about the White House make me think of George W. Bush, the modern-day epitome of 1950s conservative ideals. Mani Bruce Mitchell, who was born in 1953, says, 'The young nurse who first picked me up said, "Oh my god, it's a hermaphrodite"' (p. 54). Soberingly, Mani also recalls when at eight s/he 'travelled in secret with my mum and dad to Auckland

Hospital where genital surgery was performed … No one explained to me what was happening or why' (p. 54). However, on pages 58–59 Mani challenges conservative ideals head-on by looking firmly at the reader (hopefully President Bush!) with herm (pronoun used by Halberstam) arms raised, revealing course hair in armpits, with the statement scratched over a bare-breasted chest: 'WHO'S [*sic*] BODY IS THIS?' (p. 59).

Despite Halberstam's comment about the subjects' 'fragility' and 'vulnerability', Mani enables such constructions to be challenged. Such challenges are also evident through Frankie's account (pp.44-49). In one photo Frankie sits naked, revealing breasts and bold, tattooed artwork on his/her thigh, shoulder and chest, looking confidently and proudly at the reader. 'I don't feel like a man, but I don't feel like [a] woman either,' s/he says (p. 44). And on pages 46–47 Frankie is anything but fragile and vulnerable – we see him/her in heavy boots and leather trousers, then in S/M gear wielding a whip – daring conservative society to respond (or join in even?!)

The image of Frankie in S/M gear also raises thoughts of exhibitionism and shock – hence pretentiousness. I did have a fear of this when I first picked up *Assume Nothing*, but was relieved that this is not so – as on pages 76–77 with Georgina Beyer. Unlike most other subjects in the book, Georgina appears fully clothed proudly wearing her mayoral chains (she was photographed in 1998 when she was then Mayor of Carterton) and a feather in her hair – signifying her Maori ancestry. Georgina, a former sex worker, remarks, '[i]n the street scene it was fun, exciting … gave us the excuse to be outrageous exhibitionists' (p. 76). But then, refreshingly, she denounces pretentiousness and says, 'I started objecting to the waste of human potential that was happening to my contemporaries around me … there were very few in the way of role models, people who got on and knew how to succeed' (p. 76).

Ironically, it was a 'rural conservative heartland area' (p. 76) who knew about her 'outrageous' past and voted for her to be mayor. Then six years later in 1999, it was a rural conservative *region* (Wairarapa) who voted for her to be their MP (President Bush, take note – after all, you're from a rural area in Texas). Vulnerable? Fragile? I don't think so.

On a critical note, I have some issues with the book's format. I feel that Halberstam's Foreword should be *before* Swan's introduction

(pp. 6–7). I feel the reader becomes 'lost' after reading Swan's introduction, then for the next 14 pages is presented with images of four subjects with no text. I would have liked to read the thoughts of Layne, Megan, Jen and Blur – even if only a small paragraph. Likewise other subjects with no text, such as Heather (pp. 29, 60–61), an elegant representation of androgyny, immaculately dressed in attire from the Edwardian era. What are Heather's thoughts on androgyny in relation to a conservative, male/female society?

The text could have also been better proofed. 'Assume Nothing' (p. 7) should be in italics (*Assume Nothing*) not quotation marks as this is a book title. I also get irritated about time periods containing apostrophes when they don't need them – 'the 1950's and 1960's' (p. 26) read better as the 1950s and 1960s.

However, overall *Assume Nothing* is a magnificent portrayal and celebration of those whose identities are a shade in between pink and blue – or who have transgressed from one end of the gender spectrum to the other. Swan's photographic essay is not only a valuable resource to students of gender studies, sociology, media and film, but to students of nursing and medicine too – oh, and American presidents.

Reference

Feinberg, Leslie (1998). *Trans Liberation: beyond pink or blue*. Boston: Beacon Press.