

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa – ‘The future of our pasts’ (Ruby Rich)

Launch of Elizabeth Reid’s Whitlam Institute Legacy Paper, NAA, 28/09/2023

****I would like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the land we meet on and pay my respects to Aboriginal Elders, past, present and emerging, as well as any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people here today.*

****Thanks to Elizabeth for inviting me and the Whitlam Institute for hosting me.*

In the Legacy Paper that we are here to launch tonight, Elizabeth Reid refers to her time as convenor of the National Advisory Committee for International Women’s Year 1975. One potential project for the Committee stands out to me given my research into women as keepers of their own memory:

“Consultations had advanced [Elizabeth writes] on the establishment of a National Women’s Centre on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra ... dedicated to a special collection on the history of feminism in Australia, along with meeting spaces ... for women’s organisations...

Unfortunately, discussions on a National Centre were still at an informal stage and so fell through with the change of government.

However, [She adds] most of the Whitlam reforms survived, in one form or another.” (p.26)

Whitlam “created the space for feminism to bring new insights into the polity” (p.30) and his government oversaw revolutionary reforms that directly and indirectly benefitted women.

But, focusing solely on the success of those reforms has the unfortunate side-effect of supporting a myth that has arisen from feminist history, namely that the 1970s were the “2nd wave” of feminist activism, with the first ending as far back as the 1910s.

We tend to be told that feminist history happened in disconnected chunks – in 1st, 2nd, 3rd and now 4th “waves”.

We are told that women’s libbers regarded the women who actively campaigned for reform before the 1970s as obsolete and conservative in their demands and tactics; and, that those now older women scorned women’s liberation for its radicalism, its bra-burning and wot-not.

While there were certainly generational differences, if we peel back the curtains on this one failed reform in Elizabeth’s Legacy Paper, what we find is a rich history of multiple generations of feminists, whatever their differences, all working together to protect and preserve feminist memory – knitting the feminist past, present and future together – all campaigning for a women’s library and archive.

The shared dream of a feminist archival future

It is a little-known story but across the 20th century, many Australian women poured their souls and energies into campaigns for feminist archives – beginning with people like labour activist Alice Henry and the international women’s library movement, and extending much later to the now, unfortunately, defunct Adelaide Women’s Centre and the, thankfully, ongoing Jessie Street Library in Sydney.

Ok, but why is this a Whitlam era women's story?

Because of the pressure on Australian feminists to transform Whitlam's moral and financial support for IWY into revolutionary change.

At the inaugural meeting of the advisory committee, Whitlam asked members to use the year to make "a lasting contribution" and would "ensure a lasting recognition" of women's worth.

The committee dreamed that long after 1975, "women may not only be heard, but taken seriously".

Looking back on the year that was, feminist Joyce McConnell reiterated this positive but no less burdensome desire: 'It is up to us all to make sure that what has been achieved doesn't slip through our fingers.'

In mid-1975, a Committee report said: "The NAC felt strongly that a National Women's Resource and Documentation Centre was perhaps the highest priority for International Women's Year."

This was the solution for ensuring that IWY lived beyond simply 1975.

It would achieve this by:

- (1) Collecting materials and memories of older feminists before they passed away,
- (2) Resurrecting women from the clutches of historical invisibility, and using their stories to inspire future feminists in their struggles,
- (3) Assisting women themselves to undergo a consciousness-raising exercise, which they could then lead the rest of society in...,
- (4) Specifically in relation to IWY 1975, as the Legacy Paper reveals, this library would provide a physical space of connection and healing for a fractured feminist community.

It is impossible to convey the extent of all the women participating in this complex web of intergenerational memory activism.

But let's look at a moment in 1974, when a 32-year-old Elizabeth wrote to feminist organiser Ruby Rich, who was then in her mid-80s, informing her that the bureaucrats tasked with facilitating the IWY Committee's proposals just did not "grasp" the very concept of or need for a women's library.

At this intergenerational juncture, Elizabeth asked Ruby for more information on her archival activism so Reid could "continue the fight which you [Rich] and others started", signing off "in sisterhood".

Rich obliged, telling Reid that from the 1950s to the late 1960s, she had worked passionately with national and international feminist networks to collect materials for what then Director of the new National Library of Australia, Harold White, promised would be a room devoted to the history of the women's movement in the new Library Building that would open in 1968.

After years of labour and lobbying, her passion turned to anguish when she realised it was not going to happen.

Tenacious as she was, she persisted through despair. The last written plea to the NLA that I have found is one dated 1983, from SLNSW librarian and Equal Pay activist, Jean Arnot, on behalf of herself and Ruby Rich (now nearly 95 years old).

Elizabeth and Jean

The library in Canberra did not eventuate.

It was not to be a legacy of Whitlam or Reid or IWY, in the way that so many other women-centred reforms were.

However, whatever the outcome, what is so powerful in moments like these – like the Elizabeth-Ruby exchange – is the evidence that the women’s movement was a continuous one that touched and connected all generations of Australian women; a reality of longevity and interconnectedness that is, of course, obscured by unhelpful concepts like “waves”.ⁱ

In 1975, Ruby tried to convey this to her interviewer:

She wanted to reveal her [physical and metaphorical] drawer of great Australian women to the generations coming after her – “I feel [she said] they are very often forgotten.’

She had a profound respect for intergenerational solidarity and connection: ‘We have not paid our debt to the past [she declared] unless we leave the future indebted to us.’

In the 1980s, Jean Arnot and Ruby Rich told a reporter: “We didn’t call it women’s liberation, we called it Justice For Women.”

The point was – later feminists were building on the fundamentals, like the vote and equal pay, that earlier generations of feminists had fought for and won.

Now in the 2020s, Elizabeth Reid expresses a profound respect for those on whose hard work she stands and expands, like her mother, Jean, who lived from 1915 to 2022, and who had been, among other things, Federal President of the Catholic Women’s League. It was through Jean, Elizabeth writes, that she “came to know the strengths of the traditional women’s groups”, allowing her to build friendships and alliances with them as National Advisor.

Whitlam era feminism was fractured, but it was also united – across time and place – as Elizabeth’s paper elucidates:

“Nevertheless, sisterhood reigned and still reigns. Some of the richest moments of the job came from the on-going discussions with and support from, the women’s movement and from women all over Australia. We were connected by a deep vein of feminist solidarity and a shared desire to get something of value done.” (p.30)

Thank you.

ⁱ From Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, “‘We called it Justice for Women’: Jean Arnot and feminism between the waves”, SLNSW Visiting Scholar Project 2023:

“This project employs the term ‘waves’ in its framing, referring to a much-used approach to the history of Western feminism which ignores the abundance of evidence of continued feminist activism between the 1910s and 1960s. It strengthens ongoing efforts to problematise the notion of ‘waves’ by demonstrating that its enduringness is due to, among other things, Women’s Liberation activists’ lack of identification with previous generations of feminists. For example, feminist Joyce Stevens (1928-2014) recalls that ‘with youthful arrogance’ she regarded her mother’s feminist colleagues’ concerns ‘as being only of interest to older women’ (in Jocelyne A. Scutt 2014). Certainly, [Jean] Arnot and [Ruby] Rich expressed anger at ‘today’s sisterhood’ because they failed to acknowledge the work of previous feminists (1983). Scutt says as a result, ‘Ruby Rich, Muriel Heagney ... Jean Arnot ... were unknown or relegated to history’ (2014).

Yet, there is much to connect these generations. In 1983, in terms reminiscent of those levelled at Women’s Liberation feminists, journalists in newspapers from *Australian Pensioner* to the *Age* declared that 80-year-old Arnot and 95-year-old Rich were considered ‘militant hotheads by female detractors in their day’. Motivations also link the generations. Stevens said she was active ‘to try to make the world a bit better place than when we came into it’ (*SMH* 2014), whereas Rich said ‘We have not paid our debt to the past unless we leave the future indebted to us’ (interview 1976-7). What more can we learn about the complexities of intergenerational feminisms in Australia?”