



# NEWSLETTER

## JESSIE STREET NATIONAL WOMEN'S LIBRARY

Vol 20 No 1  
February 2009

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Website [www.nationalwomenslibrary.org.au](http://www.nationalwomenslibrary.org.au)

### OUR ARCHIVES COLLECTION

Women have been without their own archives for most of their history. In 1935 Mary Ritter Beard, a women's rights activist and historian founded the Women's Center for Archives in the United States out of frustration at trying to locate women's archival papers. She realised that, before historians could interpret women's contribution to civilisation and incorporate their accomplishments, they needed to find primary source material. The motto of the Center is 'No Documents, No History'.

Jessie Street National Women's Library is performing a similar service to women and to researchers of women's history. We are the only library in Australia whose archival collection consists solely of material from women. We preserve material from women's organisations and from individual women, which does not fit into the collections of other libraries. This material would otherwise be lost and with it the history it contains.

Our archive collection began in 1993 when Jessie Street National Women's Library (JSNWL) took over the custody of the Canberra Women's Archives (CWA), in response to their cry for help. Due to lack of funds the CWA was forced to cease operations in the early 1990s. Thirty-seven collections of archival material which documents the activities of a number of ACT women's organisations was gathered between 1975 and 1987. The papers were donated to

JSNWL under strict conditions that the collection was kept intact and not subsumed into a major collection where the uniqueness of the material would be lost.

The Canberra women were inspired by the example of the Fawcett Library in London (now The Women's Library). The collection consists of pamphlets, manuscripts, periodicals, banners, stickers, unpublished papers, photographs, ephemera and some sound recordings. The papers represent the history of the women's movement in Canberra during a politically significant time for women and are invaluable source material for researchers. The collection includes records from groups such as the Abortion Counselling Service, Canberra Women's Liberation, Abortion Law Reform, Rape Crisis Centre, Canberra Women's Refuge, and Women for Survival which includes the Pine Gap photographic collection.

In Jessie Street National Women's Library are collections of papers from women's organisations, which document their history. Some of these organisations such as Women Church, the Nursing Mothers Association, the NSW branch of the Association of Non-English-Speaking Background Women of Australia, Women and Management and the Louisa Lawson Centre are now defunct. We hold personal papers of feminists such as Josie Conway, Betty Searle, Helen Leonard and Helen Ruby. Political activist Joyce

*continued overleaf*



*Cover of a song composed by Meta Maclean in 1925.*

### JSNWL FUNCTIONS

#### Lunch-Hour Talks

**Venue:** Seminar Room 2, Ultimo Community Centre, Bulwara Road, Ultimo

**Date and Time:** Third Thursday in the month from 12 noon to 1.30 pm

**Entry:** \$15 (JSNWL members) \$20 (non-members)

**To Book:** Phone (02) 9265 9486 or email [info@nationalwomenslibrary.org.au](mailto:info@nationalwomenslibrary.org.au)  
Light refreshments served

#### SYDNEY

**February – Thursday 19th**  
**Wendy Sharpe – Documenting a War through Art**

Wendy Sharpe has won scholarships, as well as numerous awards and prizes for art, including the Archibald, Sulman and Portia Geach Prize (twice). She was the Australian official artist to East Timor, commissioned by the Australian War Memorial Canberra, the first woman to be appointed to this position since WWII. Wendy talks about what her work has involved and shows us the results through a powerpoint presentation.

**March – Thursday 19th**  
**Aziza Abdel-Halim, AM – Muslim Women: Adapting to Life in Australia**

Aziza Abdel-Halim migrated from Egypt over 30 years ago, with her husband and two children. She talks about the problems that face Muslim women in trying to integrate into the Australian community. Aziza was a founding member of the Muslim Women's National Network of Australia and was chosen to represent Muslim women on the Prime Minister's reference group in 2006. She was awarded the Order of Australian Medal in 1988 for her services to the Muslim community, especially women.

**April – Thursday 16th**  
**Mary Bentley – Women and the Royal Flying Doctor Service**

Mary Bentley is a trained nurse who has travelled widely in the inland and has been interested in the RFDS for many years. About six years ago she became a volunteer speaker for the Service. In her talk, Mary outlines the early history of the Service and talks about the women pilots, the bush nurses, and the dependence of the Service on the urban women GPs who, in their 'spare' time, run the health program for women in the outback.

#### CANBERRA

**February – Thursday 26th**  
**Wendy Button, MVO – Life at Government House and Beyond**

For full details see page 6

### IT'S MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL TIME AGAIN!

Membership year runs from January to December. Please send in your subscription for 2009 early. Forward your payment along with the completed membership/donation form on page 11 of this newsletter.

If you have not yet paid your 2008 subscription, we would appreciate it if you paid it along with your 2009 membership.

If you pay by AutoDebit or have already renewed your membership, please disregard this notice.

## JESSIE STREET NATIONAL WOMEN'S LIBRARY

The Library is open to the public  
Monday to Friday, 10 am to 3 pm

*Australia's national women's library is a specialist library with its focus on collecting and preserving the literary and cultural heritage of women from all ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds.*

### Aims

- to heighten awareness of women's issues
- to preserve documents on women's lives and activities
- to support the field of women's history
- to highlight women's contribution to this country's development

### Borrowing Policy

The public may borrow items on interlibrary loan. A loan collection is available to financial members.

**Location:** Ultimo Community Centre  
523-525 Harris Street, Ultimo

### Public Transport Services

**Trains** Central Station or Town Hall Station

**Buses** No. 501 from Railway Square (Central Station) or from George Street (opp Town Hall Station)

## GETTING TO THE LIBRARY

**Location** We are situated in the Ultimo Community Centre on the corner of Harris Street and William Henry Street, directly opposite the new Ian Thorpe Aquatic Centre.

**Entry** Main entrance is at 523-525 Harris Street (just beyond convenience store). Ring the bell for admittance. The Library is up a flight of stairs. The other entrance is in Bulwara Road. We are on the level, directly across the courtyard.

### How to Reach Us

#### By Bus from the city

Catch the No 501 bus in George Street opposite the Cathedral or at Railway Square near Central Station. It runs every 20 minutes and it's a 5 minute trip to the Library. The stop for the Library is opposite the Powerhouse Museum in Harris Street.

#### By Train

Get off at Central Station. To catch the bus at Railway Square, walk through the Devonshire Tunnel and up the escalator on the left.

#### By Foot from Central Station

From Railway Square, walk along Broadway, turn right into Harris Street and continue to William Henry (takes about 15-20 minutes). For a slightly shorter route, walk to the end of the Devonshire Tunnel, along the open space with the tram lines, down the lane beside the ABC building, left along Ultimo Road, and right into Harris Street.

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Clarke also gave her papers to the Library. We do not hold any of Jessie Street's personal papers. Jessie died in 1970, before JSNWL was established, and her papers were donated to the NLA by the family.

We hold small collections from individual women or small groups. Here are examples of just a few.

Member **Wilga Pruden's** papers document her struggles against discrimination to achieve promotion as a woman to the position of Principal Grade 1 in TAFE.

**Gloria Mortimer Dunn**, designer, donated her papers which include designs of swimsuits she made for Speedo which were created and worn in the Olympics.

Author **Irene Coates** who wrote *Whose Afraid of Leonard Woolf?* donated her papers and with them a large collection of valuable Virginia Woolf literature she used for her research. (See the article 'Virginia Woolf Special Collection' in the August 2007 newsletter.)

We hold the papers of song writer **Meta Maclean** who sailed from the UK during WWII with a group of British children on a boat designated the 'Singing Ship'. Her collection includes correspondence, sheet music, press clippings, audio tapes and the original manuscript of her book entitled *Drummond of the Far West*.

The papers of **Emily Winifred Nell** date back to 1910 and document her career as a cookery teacher at Sydney Technical College and follow her career overseas and back. We were offered these by State Records NSW. They would have been destroyed had JSNWL not taken them.

The **Josephine Downing** collection is a very small and unusual collection. The papers were donated by Josephine's granddaughter who discovered them on

top of a wardrobe when clearing out her grandmother's house. Josephine, a single woman from Ireland, purchased a block of land in Perth in 1905, and the papers show receipts for five instalments, the final payment and a map with the property marked. There is also a photo of the Josephine's wedding and a copy of her marriage certificate.

We have a **menstrual calendar** kept by a woman from 1980 to 1990. This unique document records the lead-up to menopause, and the follow-through to the actual 'pause' as it were. This may seem an odd document to preserve, but although there is plenty of medical and pharmaceutical information about menopause there is little written personally by women.

We also have in our archives, a collection of letters donated by **Elizabeth Evatt AC**, when she was head of the Law Reform Commission. The letters were received from women lawyers in response to a request from the Commission asking them to detail their experiences of working in law companies.

Papers from the **King George V Advocacy Group** form a small collection made up of minutes, correspondence, reports, petitions, newspaper clippings and audiotapes. The material documents the activities of a group of women doctors and nurses working in the King George V hospital. The hospital had a policy of appointing only male residents to positions in the hospital and discriminating against the women residents. After several years of struggle, the policy was overturned.

If you are carrying out research into any aspect of women, contact the Library. We may hold papers that would help you.

*Beverley Sodbinow, Archivist & Shirley Jones, Public Relations Officer*

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 2009

### SATURDAY 4 APRIL, at 10.30 am

Seminar Room 1

Ultimo Community Centre  
corner Harris and William Henry Streets  
(enter via Bulwara Road)

### Notice of Motions

We remind members that notice of motions to be presented at the AGM must be received by the Secretary no later than **Wednesday 18 February**.

### Nominations to the Board

We are calling for nominations to the Board. Forms for these may be obtained from the Secretary or downloaded from the website. Completed forms must be received by the Returning Officer no later than **Wednesday 18 March**.

### Proxy Voting

Financial members of Jessie Street National Women's Library may appoint a proxy to vote for them at the AGM. Proxy forms may be obtained from the Secretary or may be downloaded from: [www.nationalwomenslibrary.org.au](http://www.nationalwomenslibrary.org.au).



# LIBRARY MATTERS

## LIBRARY NEWS

### WORK ON OUR POSTER COLLECTION

Over the past six months we have been working to prepare the posters for digitisation. This has involved getting them into numeric order as per their accession numbers in the original indexing file, and relating their dimensions to standard poster sizes so we could work out an approximate cost for the digitisation. It appeared the cost would be in the thousands of dollars. As the Library has a Memorandum of Understanding with UTS, we decided to approach Drew Sandford, Manager of UTS Digital Imaging Services. He has offered to help by putting some of the posters through the UTS equipment, but this can only be used on completely undamaged posters. (This disqualifies those with small tears or damaged edges.) This will cost a fraction of the amount anticipated. The remaining posters will be professionally photographed by Anita Pollard, using her own digital equipment and lighting. She has very kindly volunteered her services.

We also have a volunteer for work on the several hundred posters received over the past ten years and not previously indexed. Debbie Leigo, a library student who is also taking an archives course in materials management, has agreed to take on this project for us. Our thanks to Dr. Peter Orlovich for providing us with her contact details.

### DONATIONS

#### Booklet from OWN

We were very pleased to receive a copy of a small booklet put out by the Older Women's Network (OWN). Called *Grit in the Oyster*, it is a collection of the articles Muriel Hortin had contributed to the newsletters for over 17 years. Some of the research was done at the Library. We held early issues of these newsletters which were not among the OWN collection.

#### From the Woodlands Archives Museum

We have received an unusual donation from Woodlands Archives Museum. This consists of material published by the Woodlands Girls' Grammar School and the Old Scholar's Association in Glenelg in South Australia. The school, which was founded in 1923, closed in 1998. It was highly regarded in the State for its academic successes, as well as for its sporting and extra curricular activities. The Old Scholars' Association remains very active and the Archives Museum has been established to ensure that the history of the Education of South Australian women is recorded and circulated.

Among the publications we have received from the Archives Museum is *Per Crucem ad Lucem (Through the Cross to the Light)*, which is an account of the student contributions to the war effort 1939-1945. Another book, *Woodlands Reflections*, is the memories of old scholars. Perhaps the most important of the publications is *A Woodlands Book of Biography*, put out to celebrate the 85th anniversary of the school's foundation.

This donation from the Old Scholars' Archives Museum is a valuable contribution to our Research Collection and adds to the histories of girls' schools that we already have on our shelves.

#### Woman Suffrage in Australia

We have received a small booklet from Anne Haskell of the International Alliance of Women (IAW) in the US. It is called *Woman Suffrage in Australia* and is a reprint of a booklet first published in 1908 by the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, and reproduced in 2008 by the Victorian Women's Trust to celebrate the centenary of the vote for women in Victoria.

The booklet begins with an article by Vida Goldstein, the well-known Australian suffragist and activist. This is followed by testimonials received in response to her letter asking for support for women's right to vote, from influential people such as the then Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin, the Postmaster General, Sir William Lyne of the Department of Treasury, and the Premiers of NSW, South Australia, Queensland and West-Australia [sic].

Anne notes that Vida Goldstein was the recording secretary at the first committee meeting held when the IAW was forming in 1902. We thank Anne and her group for the continued interest they take in the Library and for the many donations they have made over the years.

#### Visitors to the Library

In November, Anne Barber, from WEL, came into the Library to photograph several of the IWD posters. WEL are planning to use them to promote International Women's Day this March.

Other visitors in November and December included: a woman who was browsing through national feminist journals from the 1970s-1990s; another looking at material on feminist and gender theory; and someone researching material on Louisa Lawson for a talk.



### REORGANISING OUR SHELF SPACE

Very little cataloguing has been done over the past three months, but books continue to arrive whether requested or unsolicited and we have for some time been aware of space running out for books in the Research Collection. We have therefore made the difficult decision to reduce the Loan Collection to free up much-needed shelving. Books removed (all of which are second copies of titles in the Research Collection) are primarily non-Australian fiction and non-fiction, but all topics will still be represented.

Books removed from the Loan Collection will be available in the Library for members to buy at bargain prices.

Most of our regular Library volunteers are back at work again after the Library was closed for four weeks over the Christmas period. I hope everyone had a good break and I thank them all for their contribution during 2008 and look forward to working with them again. Very best wishes for 2009 to all the Library volunteers and to all JSNWL members.

*Jane Pollard*  
Senior Librarian



### DONATIONS OF MATERIAL

We thank the following people and organisations who have so generously donated material to the Library.

Lynette Aitken  
Kris Clarke  
Shirley Goodbar  
Anne Haskell  
Fiona Johnston  
Robyn Mathison  
Penelope Moyes  
Joan Patrick  
Philippa Poole

ABC Sound and Reference Library  
Australian Scholarly Publishing  
LaTrobe University  
Older Woman's Network (OWN)  
Pan Macmillan  
Simon & Schuster  
Text Publishing Company  
Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL)  
Woodlands Archives Museum

## OCTOBER LUNCH-HOUR TALK

**SPEAKER: PHILIPPA POOLE**

*Ethel Turner: My Grandmother*

*As reported in our November 2008 Newsletter, on Thursday 16 October, guest speaker Philippa Poole entranced a large audience with nostalgic memories of her grandmother and an array of period photographs. Afterwards, we were all invited to view Philippa's rich display of memorabilia.*

It is a wonderful tribute to my grandmother, Ethel Turner-Curlewis, that you are all here today, including students and teachers from her old school, Sydney Girls High. Sometimes I feel we are rushing headlong into a new world of technology, with a language full of acronyms and I fear that the beauty and power of the written or spoken word may become a thing of the past. It is refreshing to speak with people determined to preserve our literary heritage.

People ask, 'Did you know your grandmother well?' Indeed I did. Her home, 'Avenel', was within walking distance from my parents' place and her three loves (books, gardens and children) gave us many wonderful times together. For my fourth birthday she had a beautiful doll's house built for her verandah at 'Avenel' where we played. Then, especially during World War II when my father, Adrian, became a prisoner of the Japanese and my mother, Betty, was working, after school I often called in on my grandparents. Fortified with cocoa and buttered toast, I would have endless hours with my grandmother Nan – painting, puppet-making, playing. The bane of her existence was deafness. If her bulky earphones whistled when I started to talk, she'd say, 'Wait a minute, my darling, I'll just turn this on a different way.' She frequently told me about her daughter, Jean, but then, trying to show me her baby book, would hurriedly put it back in the cupboard saying 'We shall look at that tomorrow, my darling.' I remember how on an overseas trip in 1953 I wrote excitedly to Nan from London that I had seen *Seven Little Australians* being filmed for BBC television.

My tiny grandmother died in 1958, aged 88. It was then I first became aware of her immense popularity. The steps of Sydney's St. Andrew's Cathedral were like a glorious terraced garden and it seemed that during the singing of the last hymn, *Abide with Me*, each person in the congregation in affection for Ethel privately relived Judy's poignant death in *Seven Little Australians*. Fifteen years later, the ABC television series of this classic sparked much interest in Ethel's life. I had diaries she had recorded for over for 62 years. So began an amazing era in my life. Having known my

grandmother for 25 years in person, I now, through her diaries, got to know her as a young woman—her hopes and aspirations, falling in love, secret engagement, liter-ary career and family life. Photographs converted to slides by Paul Brunton, Senior Curator of Manuscripts at the Mitchell Library (where Ethel's papers and memorabilia will be deposited) will help me take you on a whistle-stop journey through her life.

Ethel's mother, Sarah Jane (Granny), widowed in 1879 for a second time and penniless, brought her three young daughters—Lilian (13), Ethel (10) and Rosie (5), plus two other young girls, to Australia. They arrived in March 1880. That same year, unbelievably, Granny found a third husband, Charles Cope. He proved to be an irascible husband and stepfather, but marriage gave her security and a home for her four children from three different fathers—Rex was born in 1881. A contemporary photo shows Granny's three daughters—Lilian and Ethel from her first marriage, keen writers who would each publish numerous books; and Rosie, something of a tomboy, child of her second husband Henry Turner, whose name Ethel took.

Ethel went to Paddington Public School, and then to Sydney Girls High 1883-1889. A group photo, ca.1889, shows Ethel (book on knee) and her friend, Louise Mack, ex-editor of the school magazine, *The Gazette*. SGHS's memorabilia includes copies of another school magazine, *Iris*, started up by Lilian and Ethel in competition with *The Gazette*. Ethel continued active writing after leaving school and *Seven Little Australians* appeared in 1894.

Unofficially engaged for five years, in 1896 Ethel married barrister Herbert Curlewis (later Judge Curlewis) at St John's Anglican Church, Gordon. Jean was born in 1898, and Adrian, my father, in 1901. Their house 'Avenel' in Mosman overlooking Middle Harbour was completed in 1903. Surviving photographs of their life include *New Idea's* picture of Ethel in the 'Avenel' drawing room (1903); a camping party in 'Avenel' garden; the Blue Mountains, treasured by Ethel as a peaceful writing environment; a Leura holiday house Ethel built in 1903 (sold in 1910 and still extant); Herbert's photo of his family dressed for romantic Sunday boating on the Harbour; Ethel, the children in best bib and tucker, Ethel's father-in-law and his brother; and a Christmas picnic group including Granny, her irascible Charlie, her three daughters and Rex, and grandson Adrian. The family's values



suffuse Ethel's witty, affectionate *Walking to School* written for Adrian: 'Now I'm five my father says, and what he says you've got to mind, that Mother's not to hold my hand, or even follow me behind, to see I'm safe; but down the road and all the way up the next street, I am to walk now, quite alone – no matter what the things I meet'...

In 1910 Herbert was unwell and his doctor suggested the family visit England. Photos include one of Ethel taking the opportunity to meet with her London publishers, Ward Lock & Co. She was quite feted; Lord Tennyson's Aldworth House where Ethel and Jean stayed (Lord Tennyson, son of Alfred, remarked on Jean's 'amazing' knowledge of literature); and on their return, 'Avenel' showing its maturing garden and Ethel's office. Other photos show Adrian in Sydney Church of England Grammar School uniform, and Jean, who at Sydney Church of England Girls School, Darlinghurst, excelled at everything—she was dux of the school, and a wonderful swimmer and athlete.

When war came, Ethel used the power of her pen, writing many letters to newspapers, mainly on alcohol (she strongly favoured abstinence). She organised friends for patriotic causes like rolling bandages and making pyjamas. She brought out a trilogy of books, *The Cub* (1915), *Captain Cub* (1917) and *Brigid and the Cub* (1919), supporting sacrifice for Empire but having a marked Australian nationalist flavour. In 1919, year of the terrible Spanish 'flu epidemic, Ethel approached Sydney's *Sunday Sun* proposing a children's magazine. It took two years of persuasion, but eventually Jimmy Bancks developed her concept of a comic strip character into the unforgettable Ginger Meggs. Ethel became *Sun* magazine's chief 'Sunbeamer' and for 10 years devised games and competitions, receiving numerous children's letters. One week, 4000 arrived.

My father took up Law and became a barrister. Ethel's diary notes, 'a big secret ... [Adrian] and Betty are engaged ... I think we shall grow very fond of her.' Their marriage at St. Philip's Church, Church Hill was a wonderful occasion but shadowed for Ethel by Jean's diagnosis with tuberculosis. Jean died in 1930. Artist Jerold Nathan captured Ethel's sadness in a portrait ca.1933.

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## NOVEMBER LUNCH-HOUR TALK

**SPEAKER: CECILE YAZBEK**  
*Life in a Black and White Country*

*On Thursday 21 November, Cecile Yazbek gave a most interesting talk about her childhood in South Africa. Whilst thoughtful and often sombre, her talk was also humorous. She delighted her audience, who responded at the end with numerous questions and comments.*

After arriving in Australia in 1986 I began to realise how different my childhood was from people around me, so I began to write down my dreams and pictures from the past for my children who might not remember why we uprooted them. Not for a better lifestyle, but because of the hateful situation in which they were growing up. My story is written mostly in the voice of a child or young person because it was as a child that I saw things for which I didn't have words.

I grew up speaking English with my parents, Arabic with my grandmother and Afrikaans with my nursemaid and the other servants. At school I learned German from the nuns. Despite all of these languages, when I arrived here, I had difficulty understanding people who spoke Strine.

When I was five and about to start school, my African nursemaid, Rosie, was no longer required. I refused to speak English, in fact I was silent for a few weeks. My mother's mother, Granny Isabel, was determined to make me speak, so she engaged me in the most Lebanese way possible—with food and Arabic language. The Lebanese of my grandmother was the beginning of my awareness of another language and of growing within an extended family.

Aunt Susie, my father's youngest sister, was a great story teller. She had never got over the loss of her mother who died when Susie was 32, so we had weekly cemetery scenes. Plaster saints and photographs framed in her bedroom were thickly layered with lipstick as she kissed them all every morning. But her stories also taught us about sickness and death, and it was so much part of our life that we were never afraid of it. On Saturday afternoons we, the cousins, went around to her house, and she'd tell us stories and then we'd go and visit someone who was sick, one of the older people in the community, and then we'd go to the cemetery and to church. As a small child, that was quite a ritual for me.

My father was a very important influence in my life. He never treated me differently because I was a girl. I spent a lot of time with him and he encouraged me in all my endeavours. He loved to sing and recite poetry and he carried us all along in the slipstream of his

exuberance. He died in 1992, about the time that I began writing. I once described the feeling of grief at the loss of someone close, as a wall that comes crashing down and briefly the past stands fully disclosed.

Both my parents were born in South Africa. In 1918, when my father was three years old, his grandfather died and in 1920 when he was five, his own father died. Their mother was too poor to feed them all, so my father and two of his sisters ended up in an orphanage run by the Nazareth sisters in Kroonstad in South Africa. They stayed there for quite a few years. After school my father was awarded a scholarship to study law and graduated in 1937. At the same time Hitler had sent his messengers around South Africa warning people of the danger of these dark Syrians in their midst, people who would dilute their Aryan purity. My father applied to law firms in East London on the coast of South Africa, but was refused and vilified as dago, darkie or Arab. Disillusioned, he borrowed £5 from his brother and hired a shabby office in a run-down part of town to start a practice. Then war broke out. He desperately wanted to enlist, but he was partially sighted and failed the medical. And as other lawyers left to go to war, my father's practice grew and became very successful.

In 1948 the Nationalist government won power and began to implement apartheid through the legal system. South Africa rapidly became a morally disordered society. In the 1960s, race classifications like those in Nazi Germany were constituted. People appearing in those courts were, for example, children classified too dark to live at home with their lighter skinned parents, Africans wanting to be 'coloured', 'coloured' wanting to be Chinese for marriage purposes. Pencils were stuck in hair, nostrils widths were measured—all dehumanising practices.

My father and my eldest brother appeared in those courts on behalf of clients. But they soon realised this was colluding so they stopped. My father was a sensitive man with experience of poverty and powerlessness, and became a fiercely anti-racist lawyer. People came to our courtyard from all over to ask for help. From the time I was about eight, I heard tragic stories of the impact of the myriad race laws sustaining apartheid. Until I was 17 and went away to university, I sat in that desperate waiting room and listened to the stories of life in South Africa for black and brown skinned people. Partly because I spoke also in Afrikaans, they told me their



stories. Mostly, however, I think it was my whiteness that allowed them to hope that, child as I was, I could help. I suppose the irony of it was that, as Lebanese people in South Africa, we weren't really white but were a kind of a Lebanese white.

Our materially privileged status enabled my mother to employ a large staff of men and women who worked in our house and garden. We had a large garden, with our own water, fruit and vegetables. My mother had a number of gardeners who lived in a cottage at the back. The servants we had were not anonymous factotums. They were people who we grew to love, as mother laid down very strict rules for politeness and respect in all our interactions. Some of the women were my closest friends, including Rosie, my African mother. I developed a view of the world that was subversive in the South African context. I'm not trying to put a gloss on what was a racially driven situation: those people were our servants, my parents continually reminded us, because their colour kept them educationally deprived.

The terrible thing that happened to Victor, one of the gardeners, fuelled my fury at the daily injustices inflicted by apartheid. When I was writing I'd say, 'What am I writing this for? Who's going to be interested in this?' And then I thought, 'I want my children to know what it was that fired their mother up and made her so furious from time to time about injustice in the world.'

And this experience was the seed I suppose. I was 15. Victor had been with us for four years, when David, his assistant came running calling, 'Madam! Madam! Victor's sick!' My mother was out, so I followed him to the gardeners' cottage. Victor was standing in the doorway and as I got closer I could see he was vomiting blood. I raced back to the house and dialled the general emergency number for an ambulance.

Fifteen minutes later, seeing the ambulance arrive, I rushed to direct them to the scene. I was relieved to see that Peter, one of our church members, was the driver. He got out and followed me to where Victor was lying on the ground. 'But he's black!' Peter said to me. He turned and walked away. 'Why didn't you say it was a black?' I rounded on

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## OPENING OF THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

On 3 December 2008, Janet Tomi, convener of the Canberra lunch-hour talks, together with local committee member Christine Lancaster, represented the Library at the official opening of the National Portrait Gallery. The new portrait gallery, an impressive 14,000 square metre contemporary building located near the High Court and the National Gallery of Australia, was officially opened by Prime Minister Rudd. Its chief patron is Therese Rein and the Director is Andrew Sayers. As the notes in the inaugural magazine note, the collection, which commenced in 1998, comprises, in the main, gifts of donors.

The Library has loaned the portrait of Jessie Street to the National Portrait Gallery for two years, thus ensuring it will be seen by the many local, interstate and international visitors to the Gallery. Jessie's portrait is prominently displayed and the portrait's annotation provides a clear outline of her significant contribution to the social and economic issues of her day. We hope that all members will visit the gallery and see Jessie's portrait when they are next in Canberra.

*Janet Tomi, Canberra Talks Convenor*



*Portrait of Jessie Street, painted by Jerold Nathan in 1940. The portrait was donated to JSNWL by Philippa Fingleton, Jessie's younger daughter.*

## NOVEMBER LUNCH-HOUR TALK

**SPEAKER: SUE CONDE, AM**

### *UNIFEM Australia and the White Ribbon Campaign*

On 6 November 2008, the newly elected President of UNIFEM Australia, Sue Conde AM addressed a large audience about UNIFEM (The United Nations Development Fund for Women) and also spoke about the White Ribbon campaign designed to stamp out violence against women.

Sue's address focused on what UNIFEM is currently doing in the South Pacific and what it proposes also to do in the future. Sue emphasised how well-designed programs can perform an innovative and catalytic role in development. She provided the example of how female market vendors in Fiji will be involved in a project designed to improve their market place conditions. UNIFEM had also been active in training over 1000 women to stand in local elections in Timor Leste as a way of working towards overcoming the low levels of women's representation in parliaments in the Pacific region and

their absence from mainstream political processes.

Sue also described UNIFEM plans to establish a Pacific UNIFEM Trust Fund to deal with violence across 15 Pacific countries, noting that combating violence against women constituted one of the four key UNIFEM priorities.

Speaking about the White Ribbon campaign, Sue noted that the White Ribbon Foundation had men as its focus to promote cultural change as a means to end violence against women. Within Australia there were currently 230 White Ribbon ambassadors working to achieve this.

The talk provided an excellent conclusion to the year for Canberra members and guests.

*Janet Tomi  
Canberra Talks Convenor*

## FEBRUARY LUNCH-HOUR TALK

**SPEAKER: WENDY BUTTON**  
*Life at Government House and Beyond*

Wendy, who served five Governors-General, left the position in late 2008 and is now Personal Assistant to the former Governor General, Major-General Michael Jeffery. Wendy gives us insights into her years at Government House.

**Venue:** Legislative Assembly Reception Room (Civic Square)

**Date & Time:** Thursday 26 February 2009, 12 noon for 12.30 start

**Entry:** Small note donation. Light refreshments available from 12 noon

**To book:** Email the following address: [jsnwlcanberra@yahoo.com.au](mailto:jsnwlcanberra@yahoo.com.au)  
OR phone Janet on 0448 348 559

### **NANCY-BIRD WALTON, JSNWL GUEST SPEAKER**

We are saddened to learn of the death of Nancy-Bird Walton, the first woman in Australia to hold a commercial pilot's licence. Nancy was guest speaker for JSNWL at the inaugural luncheon in Parliament House in 1995. She was then 80 years of age. Her talk, in which she mentioned meeting Jessie Street who, she said, encouraged her in her career, was a fascinating account of a life filled with endeavour and achievement. At a state funeral service held in St Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney, on Wednesday 21 January, her granddaughter said of her 'What a life. What a woman. Way to go, Nan.' (See the obituary on page 10.)

*NOTE: Our April lunch-hour talk, given by Mary Bentley, is about the Royal Flying Doctor Service, in which she mentions Nancy-Bird Walton as the earliest woman pilot with the organisation. For details of the talk see page 1, column 3.*

## GRANT APPLICATION RESULTS

We are delighted to announce that we have been awarded a project grant for \$4999 by the NSW Arts Council to enable us to mount an exhibition of our Pine Gap material. The exhibition will go on display in Parliament House in Macquarie Street, Sydney, in September, as part of our 20th birthday celebrations.

Unfortunately, we were not successful in our application for a program grant from the NSW Arts Council, which would have enabled us to employ two part-time salaried staff. Being able to employ staff at the Library is crucial to our future development.



A warm welcome to our new members

Pamela Bradley  
Phyl Crawford  
Vicky Cullen  
Roslyn Dundas  
Susan Gregory  
Diana Hill  
Bernice Lee  
Sue Stenning

**REACHING OUT TO WOMEN  
IN RURAL AUSTRALIA**

The Library is trying to let women in rural Australia know about the Library and its importance. Late last year, JSNWL sent 70 rural newspapers an article on the Library and the Tapestry Project that we hoped they would publish. Only four newspapers printed the material, the *Palerang Bulletin*, the *Kangaroo Valley Voice*, the *Ridge News* and *The Senior*. More recently, we have sent a similar article to 25 branches of the Country Women's Association.

We have been very pleased at the response from readers of *The Senior*. To date, we have been contacted by: an editor from the Rural Press requesting an article on the Library; a reader from Lisarow who has donated a book she has written; another reader phoning to offer her mother's memorabilia; and a request from the community radio station 2NBC in Sydney for an interview on the Library.

The Tapestry Project received a welcome stimulus in November 2008, when Inner Wheel District A51 in Sydney proposed a joint competition centred on Australian women's stories. (See enclosure for details of this competition.)

**A COMBINED JSNWL AND  
INNER WHEEL COMPETITION**

Jessie Street National Women's Library, in conjunction with Inner Wheel District A51 in Sydney, is holding a competition called 'Weaving Women's Stories'. We are asking women throughout Australia to contribute stories of 'ordinary' women's lives--their own, their mother's, their grandmother's or that of a friend.

Contributions will be judged by a specially selected panel and some of the entries will appear on the JSNWL website. Two prizes will be awarded at a special luncheon to be held on Wednesday June 17th. Author Libby Gleeson will be guest speaker.

For more information please see enclosed leaflet. The entry form can be downloaded from the JSNWL website at [www.nationalwomenslibrary.org.au](http://www.nationalwomenslibrary.org.au)

**WOMEN'S HISTORY MAP OF  
SYDNEY**

For some months towards the end of 2008 a small subcommittee in the Library, working with Emma Grahame and Lisa Murray from the Sydney City Council's Dictionary of Sydney Project, drew up the content for a map of the city of Sydney of particular interest to women. The Council has published a series of free maps as guides for tourists and others who might be interested, each focused on a special aspect of the city.

The Library suggested that a map drawing attention to historical and contemporary sites of special interest to women would be worth doing. This was agreed upon and work was begun. It proved both fascinating and challenging to locate specific sites, factual detail, and suitable illustrations. A long list for possible inclusion was drawn up by late last year. Since then the Council staff responsible for the design and production of the map have been hard at work.

It is hoped that the final product will be launched before the middle of this year.

**COMPLETION OF 'NATIONAL  
WOMEN'S DIGITAL LIBRARY'  
PROJECT**

Five students from the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) who spent time at Jessie Street National Women's Library carrying out a digital library project for their course have now submitted their assignment. They constructed a digital version of JSNWL so that those with computers could remotely access the Library collection. This involved constructing an easily accessible and organised program, complete with photographed posters, scanned photos, and video interviews of question and answers explaining the collections and aims of the Library.

The project was awarded a high distinction. A link to it will be put up later on our website.

The students said they were delighted to work at the Library, where the volunteer staff were so helpful. This turned what they had previously thought of as a dry, theoretical assignment into a project for real people with real concerns. They thought the Library collections were superb and appreciated all the hard work that had gone into building them up over the years.

Note: For a report about the first stage of this project, see page 3 of the November 2008 newsletter.

**VOLUNTEERS PRE-CHRISTMAS  
GET-TOGETHER**

On 9 December at 3 pm, the Board held its pre-Christmas get-together for the volunteers. This is an annual event, which enables volunteers to get to know each other and members of the Board and learn about what part everyone plays in the organisation. The table with its food looked most inviting and there was champagne, wine and cold drinks to keep everyone happy.

Marie Muir, Vice-Chair welcomed everyone. She read a note from Jozefa Sobski, the Chair, who sent apologies

**OUR MULTICULTURAL  
VOLUNTEER TEAM**

Every week throughout the year volunteers travel to the Library from near and far. Some live locally in Ultimo and Pyrmont and others travel from all points of Sydney and from as far away as Bowral, the Blue Mountains and the Central Coast. Over the year we have had volunteers whose origins are The Philippines, mainland China, Brazil, Germany and Sri Lanka as well as some from Britain and New Zealand.

Volunteers usually have a preferred regular day per week and consequently get to know the other volunteers of that day. Morning tea and lunchtime provide a chance to socialise and many people work together, sharing a common interest or being a support in busy times. Very often people learn new computer techniques from each other or meet new challenges together (like copying DVDs or using the new scanner). If you would like to join this great group of people in the new year, please contact the Library by phone, email or letter.

Not all volunteers come into the Library to work. We have a transcriber of Lunch Hour talks in Queensland, various members who send in obituaries or articles about women found in newspapers in different States and, of course, the Canberra lunch-hour talk volunteers who do such a great job promoting the Library in the ACT.

If you are too far from Sydney to meet other JSNWL members, but would like to offer your services, why don't you get in touch and we can discuss some options with you.

The Board would like to thank everyone who has contributed their precious time to the Library this year.

*Christine Lees, Board Member*

and wished everyone a Happy Christmas. Marie then called on each person present to introduce themselves, say how long they had been with the Library and give a short account of their role as a volunteer. Everyone enjoys these functions and the get-together was voted a great success.



*L to r: Bernadette Kerrigan, Michele Ginswick, Janet Peadon, Lyn Eggins (serving), Ruth Robinson, Connie Peters, Kris Clarke*

VIETNAM WOMEN'S MUSEUM

In November 2007, my husband and I went to Vietnam to join a small group tour from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). We arrived a few days early in Hanoi as we had booked a cooking class. The day before the tour was to start we planned to visit several places of interest, but it had begun raining overnight and was still raining hard in the morning. We decided to take a taxi to the Women's Museum although we knew we could have walked the distance.

The museum is housed in an ugly old concrete building of four storeys built in a U-shape around a large courtyard. We bought our tickets and were told we could access the museum on the ground floor and the exhibition on the third floor – the other floors were closed.

The museum was founded, and is administered still, by the Vietnam Women's Union. The exhibition consists of photographs, ephemera, articles of clothing and work tools, as well as reconstructions of living quarters in the forest and underground. The women featured range in age from about 12 years to wrinkled, bent grandmothers. The photographs speak volumes, which is just as well as, apart from laminated boards in English or French placed beside different exhibitions, there was little to help with interpretation.

These women, 'Heroes of the Revolution' or 'Mothers of Vietnam', served over decades to free Vietnam from the French, the Japanese, the Americans. What was so moving was the absolute courage shown by these women. The very young and the old served as couriers relaying messages and information hidden in food baskets, beneath their hats, in folds of specially designed clothing. Women from about 18 years joined the military force, Viet Minh. Women worked in the fields with digging sticks that had hollow handles hiding knives or ammunition. Dressed as fishermen they ferried soldiers hidden under nets to get them

across rivers and bays. They lived like animals in underground tunnels and forest camps and suffered brutal treatment, often death, if caught by the enemy. During the 'American War' they were also tortured in vain attempts to obtain information.

Many of these women received official recognition from 'Uncle Ho' himself, and today children of these women get special assistance for education and health. I spent an hour at this exhibition which also included many photos from the international women's movement protesting the Vietnam War, including some scenes from Melbourne.

On the third floor we encountered an art exhibition formal opening. Many dignitaries, men and women, plates of French pastries and glasses of champagne! (How wise not to reject all things French.) We felt conspicuously out of place but wanted to see the art. There was no English signage here but all the paintings were done by women on the one day and were of A3 size. They appeared to be the output of a workshop on domestic violence. The scenes were heartbreaking: simple wishes for sunshine and flowers, a home and food, safety and love.

Very moved by the experience of these two exhibitions, we decided to walk back to the hotel. We got absolutely soaked but didn't care. It was our last outing that day as the deluge increased and the streets became rivers. In nine hours there fell 450 mm of rain, the heaviest falls in Hanoi for 35 years.

As a footnote, I would like to add that we were interested and impressed to find recently among our collection of posters at Jessie Street National Women's Library, a reproduction of an item on display at the Vietnam Women's Museum. (It's not only people that travel.)

*Jane Pollard, Senior Librarian*

A MUSEUM OF WOMEN PLANNED FOR MEXICO

The Mexican Federation of University Women (FEMU) are planning a Museum of Women and are petitioning the Mexican government to provide permanent premises to house it. It will be a cultural centre showing the history of women in Mexico and promoting respect for human rights. This will be the first women's museum in Mexico and only the second in all of Latin America.

FEMU is asking for women worldwide to show support by signing the Mexican

petition. If you wish to do so, email your name, city and country to femumex@yahoo.com.mx and say that it is for the Museum of Women petition.

Australia has the Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame in Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, but no other museum dedicated to the history of women.

OUR PERIPATETIC VOLUNTEERS

Our volunteers very willingly give a lot of their time to the Library. But everyone needs time off and during 2008 various volunteers were off on trips, most of them overseas.

**Kris Clarke**, who is assistant editor and also works on the Tapestry project, holidayed for ten days with her husband in Vietnam in the middle of the year.

**Barbara Henery**, who deals with requests for donations to publishers, spent two weeks on a self-guided tour of Japan and was specially interested in attending the samurai festival in Nikko.

**Bernadette Kerrigan**, our secretary, was in Seattle early in the year for the birth of her daughter's first baby and again in October to settle her new granddaughter into early Child Care while her daughter returned to work. **Roslyn Leal** and her husband had a holiday in the Greek Islands, visiting among others, Mykonos, Santorini, Rhodes and Crete. Ros is convenor of the Sydney lunch-hour talks.

**Christine Lees**, who attends to much of the administrative work in the Library took two months off; she and her husband drove their car and caravan on a leisurely trip across the Nullabor to Perth and back. **Elizabeth Mooney**, a stalwart volunteer with the lunch-hour talks group, had booked a tour taking her to Spain, Portugal, Finland and Estonia but unfortunately, after a fall in Gibraltar, was forced to return home from Madrid.

**Marie Muir**, Vice-Chair, was away for several weeks visiting her daughter and grandchild in Perth and **Lorna Paviour**, convenor of the Tapestry project, holidayed in the US and the UK. **Janet Peadon** and her husband spent time in Egypt, visiting Cairo and doing the Nile trip as far as Abu Simbel. Janet is our regular Monday volunteer, overseeing various administrative matters. **Jane Pollard** is our senior Librarian. She has recently returned from a five-week trip she and her daughter made to San Miguel de Allende in Mexico, where she and her daughter rented a house looking down on the town and over the Santa Rosa mountains. **Beverley Sodbinow**, our archivist, and her husband enjoyed time away doing a bus tour in Cuba.

Further News

Volunteer **Janet Peadon** is taking three months off from Library duties. She is undertaking a BA in Ancient History at Macquarie University.

**Roslyn Leal** and her husband are the proud grandparents of a granddaughter, born in the United States on 28 December 2008. They will be going to the US about April to see her. they have three grandsons in Sydney, but this is their first granddaughter!



**Philippa Poole's talk**

Though his painting shows her pen in hand and she lived another 25 years, she never completed another book—contrary to one newspaper photo of her reading to me, captioned 'Ethel writes a detective story'. For 40 years, she had made herself write a book a year—mainly because she couldn't help writing, but also to support family finances.

The first film of *Seven Little Australians* was released just as war was declared in 1939. My father enlisted and left in 1941 with the 8th Division on the Queen Mary for an unknown destination leaving behind a promising law career, Betty, two children (Ian and myself), and a home just built in Mosman. When Singapore fell and Darwin was bombed, we and my grandparents evacuated to Leura in the Blue Mountains, squeezing into 'Garth', a little cottage in Sublime Point Road.

My grandmother had said in 1940, 'Still going strong but I must be stronger.' She needed to be, given that Herbert would die in 1942 and that during those terrible war years nobody knew where the prisoners were. That was when for me, she made 'Avenel' the most wonderful haven. I would tiptoe past my grumpy grandfather (I was unaware he was ill) and hurry to Nan for those long afternoons together. A photo from that time of the very flowery 'Avenel' garden shows my brother, Ian (in long trousers), Nan, Mother and myself. When the war ended and my father came home, we holidayed together in dear little 'Garth' cottage.

Following the 1973 ABC television series *Seven Little Australians* and the change it wrought in my life, I published *The Diaries of Ethel Turner* in 1979, and then *Of Love and War* in 1982 comprising excerpts from my father's prisoner-of-war diaries as well as from Ethel's diaries, plus some family correspondence. In 1994, 100 years after publication of *Seven Little Australians*, Walter McVitty published a beautiful, centennial illustrated edition.

I had for some time been casting around for a biographer when in 1989 Sandy Yarwood, respected historian, approached me, saying he wanted to publish a book about her. I said, 'Oh, Mr. Yarwood, I don't think a man could write a book about my grandmother.' Within two minutes he had assured me that he should be the only one to do it. He wrote a beautiful book about her *From a Chair in the Sun*, published in 1994. My one dearly cherished hope yet to be realised is the production of a documentary film on Ethel Turner's life and times.

*Transcription by volunteer Helen Ruby  
Abbreviated version by Margot Simington*

**Cecile Yazbek's talk**

him furiously. 'Why should I? Isn't his blood the same colour as ours?' 'But it's the law,' he said, walking faster. 'I can't touch him. You have to phone for an ambulance for blacks.' 'You can't leave him,' I screamed. 'He'll die!' He started the engine and left. I was enraged. I rushed back to the house, sobbing and dialled the number for ambulances for blacks.

I went back to the cottage and sat, quietly waiting. 'You'll be all right, Victor.' I whispered. But he wasn't moving anymore. An hour later the ambulance arrived. At five o'clock the hospital rang my father. 'You'll have to get yourself another gardener, Sir. This one's kicked the bucket.'

When I look in the mirror I feel an unresolved heritage—a racial past denied. The motherland of my ancestors, Lebanon, was not hospitable, so they left. Their exile in South Africa was dense with a mute longing. I never heard any of them talk of 'home' the way the English spoke of England as home. In fact when Granny Isabel went back to Lebanon on a visit in 1956, she came back in a hurry and with great relief. 'They are all so Lebanese!' she said.

My book has now been in print for 13 months and I have received letters, emails and phone calls from many people, quite distressed at their lack of knowledge of the facts of those days. There is a lot of shame: we whites are the product of a time and place that gave the world one of the great crimes of the 20th century. We move with a sense of entitlement, even arrogance. When people engage with me, I ask us, as South Africans living in Australia, to be mindful of how our origins affect our interactions today, coming as we do from a society so riven with division based on colour and other arbitrary social markers.

After writing this book and with a deep respect for the practices of other cultures, it is my opinion that for all migrants everywhere, the relevance and value of access to good education is timeless.

*Transcription by Helen Ruby  
Abbreviated version by Kris Clarke*

**GRANT APPLICATIONS**

We are delighted to announce that we have been awarded a project grant for \$4999 by the NSW Arts Council to enable us to mount an exhibition of our Pine Gap material. The exhibition will go on display in Parliament House in Macquarie Street, Sydney, in September, as part of our 20th birthday celebrations. We thank Beverley Sodbinow for the work she put in in making this application.

Unfortunately, we were not successful in our application for a program grant from the NSW Arts Council, which would have enabled us to employ two part-time salaried staff. At this stage of our development, being able to employ staff is crucial to the smooth running of the Library.



**MONETARY DONATIONS**

We thank all those who have so generously made donations to the Library.

- Jennifer Alison
- Jan Burnswoods
- Jill Cahn
- John and Jude Conway
- Liz Fitzgerald
- Judith Newton
- Rosalind Wallis

The WEL book launch held in conjunction with JNSWL on Friday, 27 October 2008, was an outstanding success, both in relation to the numbers who attended and the donations that were made.

We are very grateful to WEL for making the Library a donation of \$250 from the proceeds.

**NOTES & QUOTES**

Why don't you write books people can read?  
*Nora Joyce (to husband James)*

Whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good. Luckily, this is not difficult.  
*Charlotte Whitton (Mayor of Ottawa, Canada)*

If my husband would ever meet a woman on the street who looked like the women in his paintings, he would fall over in a dead faint.  
*Mrs Pablo Picasso*

## OBITUARY

### NANCY-BIRD WALTON (1915-2009)

Nancy Bird was born in Kew near the country town of Taree in NSW, but moved to Mount George, also near Taree, aged 13 to help her father run the general store. Always keen on flying, Nancy saved her money and then took lessons with Kingsford Smith's flying school at Mascot in Sydney when she was 17. She had an Advanced A grade licence within a few months, but had to wait till she was 19 and had done 200 hours of solo flying before she could obtain her licence to carry passengers.

There were few jobs for men pilots in those days, let alone women. In a Gypsy Moth plane that her parents had bought her, she flew around the country to fairs and race meetings and took people up on joy flights for 10 shillings a time. Her co-pilot was Peggy McKillop. Because Peggy was very tall and Nancy was very short, they became known affectionately as Big Bird and Little Bird! The Reverend Stanley Drummond of the Far West Children's Health Scheme hired her to fly nurses around the outback to help mothers and babies. Nancy was the first female pilot working commercially in Australia. Because there were no aviation maps at that time, she navigated with a watch and compass, often following road maps. Landings in the outback were often on bumpy strips and if the wind was blowing from the side rather than from behind, she often landed on one wheel. A grazier waiting to be picked up from an outback property, when he saw Nancy alight from the plane said 'My God, it's a woman!'

She met her husband, Englishman Charles Walton, when she was on her way home from a two-year world tour studying civil aviation. They were married in 1939, at a ceremony conducted by the Reverend John Flynn (Flynn of the Inland). During the war, married women were not allowed to join the WAAFs, so Nancy remained as Commandant of the Women's Air Training Corps. After the war, she had two children and in 1950 she founded the Australian Women Pilot's Association. She published her autobiography in 1990. The title? *My God, It's a Woman!*

She received an OBE in 1966 and was awarded the Order of Australia in the Australia Day Honours in 1990. Last year Qantas named their first A380 jet after her.

Nancy-Bird Walton is survived by a son and daughter, four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

*Compiled from two articles appearing in The Sydney Morning Herald, 14 January 2009*

## WOMEN WRITE HISTORY

### Some Extracts from Elizabeth Macarthur's Letters

*Elizabeth Macarthur, married at 22, came to Australia with her husband and baby son in 1790. During her life, she wrote voluminous letters to her family describing events here. The following is from a letter dated 7 March 1791.*

Elizabeth wrote: 'I do not think there is any probability of my seeing much of the Inland country, untill it is cleared, as beyond a certain distance around the Colony, there is nothing but Native paths, very narrow and very incommodious.'

[She then goes on to describe the event of the capture of Bennelong. She starts with a mention of the plague of smallpox that struck the Aborigines in 1789, before she had actually arrived in Australia.]

'In winter 1789 a dreadful Smallpox was discovered among the Natives. How the disorder was introduced cannot be discovered. ... Amongst the unhappy objects that were discovered were a Boy and a Girl. These were brought in ... and

they were both saved. The Girl ... appears to be about Eleven years old and the Boy about nine. After they began to learn English, it was imagined from their communication that if a Man or two, could be brought to reside with us, that some valuable information might be obtained, respecting the interior parts of the country.

'... The Governor ordered that two men should be taken by force. ... The poor Fellows, I am told exhibited the Strongest marks of Terror and Consternation at this proceeding, believing they were meant to be sacrificed. When they were taken to the Governor's House and immediately cleaned and Clothed, their astonishment at everything they saw was amazing. A New World was unfolded to their view. ... They now walked about the settlement as they liked, only with a Man who was appointed to attend them, that they might not escape into the woods; but as they showed no apparent inclination to do that, the Vigilance of their keeper by

degrees abated, which the oldest of the two (named Coleby) soon observed; and in a very artful manner one night, made his escape. The one who remained, and called himself Bannylong ... then took himself off.'

[The next part of her story relates how Captain Nepean and others, on their way to Broken Bay called in at Manly Cove, where about 200 Natives were feeding on a whale that had been driven ashore. Bannylong and Coleby appeared and were given several weapons, provisions and clothing. In return they gave some whale bone as a present for the Governor. A few days later, the Governor and a small group took a boat to Manly Cove and met up again with Bannylong. A native, for no observable reason, threw a spear at the Governor which hit him above his collar bone.] As Elizabeth writes: 'Bannylong came many times to see the Governor during his confinement, and expressed great sorrow. ... Since that period, the Natives visit us every day, more or less: Men, Women and Children, they come with great confidence without spears or any other offensive weapon. ... A great many have taken up their abode entirely amongst us, and Bannylong and Coleby, with their wives, come in frequently.'

'Mrs Coleby, whose name is Daringa, brought in a new born female Infant of hers for me to see. ... It was wrapped up in the soft bark of a Tree, a specimen of which I have preserved. It is a kind of Mantle, not much known in England, I fancy. I ordered something for the poor woman to Eat and had her take [sic] proper care of for some while: When she first presented herself to me she appeared feeble and faint; she has since been regular in her visits. The Child thrives remarkably well and I discover a softness and gentleness of manners in Daringa, truly interesting.

'We do not in general encourage them to come to our houses, as you may conceive there are some offensive circumstances, which makes their company by no means desirable, unless it be those who live wholly with us. A good deal of their Language (if it may be so called) is now understood, but we can learn nothing from them, respecting the interior part of the Country. It seems they are as much unacquainted with it as ourselves. All their knowledge and pursuits are confined to that of procuring for themselves a bare subsistence. They chiefly abide about the Sea coast; the women appear to be under very great subjection and are employed in the most laborious part of their work. They fish, and also make the Lines and Hooks and indeed seem very little otherways than slaves to their husbands.

*From Two Centuries of Australian Women Writers by Dale Spender*

**FORTHCOMING EVENTS  
OTHER WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS**

**Lane Cove Women's Action &  
Information Group (WAIG)**

**Book Readings**

**February 18**

Robin Porter discusses *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* by A Lady Long Resident in New South Wales, published by the Sydney Gazette in 1841. It was the first children's book to be published in Australia.

**March 2**

Laurinda Blow talks about Louisa Lawson, poet, journalist, publisher and early women's rights activist.

**March 12 Evening Event**

Special evening forum to be held in the Cove Room, Lane Cove Council. Bonney Djuric and Christina Green talk about the Parragirls Project group which they set up in 2006. The project provides a support network for former inmates of the Parramatta Girls Home.

**March 18**

Anne Bates reviews *Infidel*, by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The book tells her life story from a traditional Muslim childhood in Somalia, Saudi Arabia and Kenya to her life in The Netherlands.

**March 30**

Bev Cameron discusses Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* about the tragic decline of an Indian family. The book won the Booker Prize in 1997.

**April 6**

**Book Review Group**

The book group discusses Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, the story of the wife and four daughters of an evangelical Baptist and their difficult life in the Belgian Congo.

**Venue:** The Meeting House, 25 Stokes Street, Lane Cove.

**Cost:** \$6 members/\$8 non-members.

For further information phone 9428 3317 or email [waig@waig.org.au](mailto:waig@waig.org.au)



**MEMBERSHIP / RENEWAL / DONATION FORM**

I wish to:  join the Library  renew my membership  make a donation

Date ..... / ..... / ..... Title: Ms / Miss / Mrs / Dr / Other

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Address .....

Tel (h) ..... (w) ..... mob .....

Email (please print) .....

Member \$50  Concession \$25 (pensioner/unwaged)

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Organisation \$100  Student \$10 (conditions apply)

I wish to make a donation of \$ ..... (donations over \$2 are tax deductible)

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OR Please charge \$ ..... to my  Mastercard  Visa

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Card No ..... Expiry date .... / .....

Signature .....

I was introduced to the Library by .....

**AutoDebit Authorisation**

I authorise JSNWL to charge this, and all future membership renewals as they fall due, to the credit card number given above on this form.

I authorise JSNWL to charge \$ ..... annually to the above credit card as a donation to the Library.

Signature .....

**Special Gift to the Library**

I wish to make a higher-than-usual donation as a Special Gift to the Library. Please charge the amount of \$ ..... to the above credit card. (To acknowledge Special Gifts of \$500 or over, a plaque with the donor's name will be put on a bay of the compactus.)

Signature .....

**Become a Volunteer**

I would like to help the Library by becoming a volunteer  
(You will be contacted so that an interview can be arranged.)

The membership year runs from January to December.  
Members joining after 1st October are financial until December of the following year.

Please forward the completed form to:  
Jessie Street National Women's Library GPO Box 2656 Sydney NSW 2001

**Jessie Street National Women's Library  
GPO Box 2656 Sydney NSW 2001**

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*To keep women's words, women's works, alive and powerful -- Ursula Le Guin*