This is the published version

North, Louise 2014, Media print news, The encyclopedia of women & leadership in twentieth-century Australia.

Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30064730

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2014, Australian Women's Archives Project. Republished under a Creative Commons attribution, noncommercial, share alike license.
On her first day at work, she (Margaret Gee) was shown around by one of the more old-school editors. "I remember saying to the man who was giving us the royal tour of the editorial floor 'How come there's not many women here?' And he said, 'Butterfly, in between their periods, their boyfriends, and their nervous breakdowns we don't get much work out of women here.' That was my introduction to The Age and I thought, 'That's bloody great'". (Ben Hills, Breaking News: The Golden Age of Graham Perkin, 2010)

Introduction

Journalism has been a male bastion since the evolution of the printing press and, to this day, remains male dominated across every editorial position in Australian newsrooms (Byerly, 217). Moreover, women remain largely excluded from other leadership positions. The history of the newspaper is male, so there is little wonder that, when female journalists began to enter newsrooms in greater numbers just forty-odd years ago, the female body and its functions were used to destabilise or weaken their status, as recounted above by Margaret Gee. Gee was one of the many brave women who began the surge into newspaper reporting ranks in the 1970s buoyed by the influential second-wave feminist movement. Like others, however, Gee was to battle the presumption that women were not meant for the 'serious' work of journalism. Female embodiment, then and now, is constantly drawn to women's attention and used to undermine their ambitions, while the white heterosexual male body stands as normative and immutable (North). Gee joined the Age in Melbourne in the 1970s when the newspaper first
began to employ female journalists. Across the country, in the same era, feminist Shirley Stott Despoja (Henningham, 'Stott Despoja', AWR) fought a long battle for gender equality in the newsroom. She began work as a journalist on a small, but influential church newspaper, lasting just six months before she moved to the Canberra Times, and, later, a long association in various roles with the Advertiser in Adelaide. Stott Despoja recalls how the then editor, Des Colquhoun, told her, 'You know, if you were a man, Shirley, the sky would be the limit' (cited in Henningham, 'Stott Despoja, The Women's Pages). Stott Despoja was the first women employed in the general newsroom at the Advertiser and became the paper's first ever arts editor (Henningham, 'Stott Despoja, AWR). Also at the then seemingly progressive Advertiser in the late 1980s was Julie Duncan, the editorial trainer and development manager. Under her management, the paper's cadet training scheme became known as one of Australia's best. Duncan advocated the hiring of the Advertiser's first Indigenous cadet, whom she trained, and she also lobbied to employ the newspaper's first female photographer (Lemon, 'Duncan', The Women's Pages).

Women's Exclusion from Leadership

Many women today find jobs in news reporting, spurred on by university journalism degree programs that have been female dominated for the past twenty to twenty-five years (Pearson). Yet, even with such long-term female dominance in journalism education, few women have broken through the glass ceiling to reach influential leadership positions (Gallagher; Byerly). The most recent data that includes the print news media indicates that the glass ceiling for Australian women journalists is found at the senior professional level (Byerly) (that is, at the level of senior writers, editors and anchors, among other experienced reporting staff), where women have inched toward parity with men at 40.4 per cent. Women's participation is higher (46 per cent) in the junior professional level. At the top levels, however, the Australian media is male dominated. In the six companies surveyed by Byerly, women constitute only 20 per cent of those in governance (on boards of directors) and 10 per cent in top-level management (as publishers or chief executive officers) (Byerly, 217). The number of women in senior management (22.2 per cent) and middle management (29.1 per cent) is also low. These occupational levels include roles like news directors and executive editors, who decide on news assignments and take part in other tasks associated with shaping news (Byerly, 217). Women dominate in only one occupational category in Australian newsrooms surveyed—support roles associated with sales, finance and administration (66 per cent) (Byerly, 217).
Women's bid to reach leadership positions in the print media has been stifled by its masculine history, ensuring that the first woman to edit a daily newspaper in Australia was not appointed until 1981. Ita Buttrose claimed the title of the first female editor-in-chief of a daily metropolitan newspaper in Australia when she was appointed to edit the *Daily Telegraph*, in Sydney, from 1981 to 1984. It is interesting to again note, however, the undermining tactics employed by some men in that newsroom. It is reported that Buttrose was shocked when hissed at by men as she walked through the editorial open plan office (Barlow). Clearly this did not prove a deterrent, as Buttrose went on to have a long and successful career in journalism across media platforms, best known for her leadership of *Cleo* magazine (1972-1975) and the *Australian Women's Weekly* (1975-1981) (Heywood, 'Buttrose', *AWR*). There was a considerable time lag between Buttrose's appointment and the next leadership milestone for female journalists-Michelle Grattan's appointment as the first female editor of a major daily newspaper, the *Canberra Times*, 1993-1995 (Henningham & Lemon, *AWR*). She remains among the longest serving and is also one of the most respected political journalists in Australia, currently working for news website 'The Conversation'. The charismatic and dynamic Nancy Bates easily takes the title of longest-serving female editor in Australia (Landers). She led the *Fraser Coast Chronicle* in southern Queensland for twenty-one years from 1988, before retiring in July 2009 after forty years in journalism (Mcrae).

At the time of writing (February 2013), newspaper editing remains a masculine landscape. Of the nation's twenty-one major metropolitan newspapers, just one woman is entrusted with the editing role in a daily edition (Kate Cox, Sydney's *Sun-Herald*), although four edit Saturday or Sunday-only editions (Judith Whelan, the Saturday edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald*; Margaret Easterbrook the *Saturday Age* in Melbourne; Jill Baker the Saturday edition of the *Herald Sun* in Melbourne; and Michelle Gunn, the *Weekend Australian*).

**Pioneers**

The path to acceptance—and then success—for female journalists has been a long one. Pearce (1998) suggests journalism's popular image, 'its reputation as a male enclave, a masculine profession' in an industry predominantly owned by rich and powerful men, hid the successes of many women: 'The conspicuous success of individual women journalists could be dismissed as aberrations infrequently tolerated within a patriarchal framework, or, alternatively, they could be overlooked by the more hyped performances of prominent and influential men' (Pearce, vi).
Increasing numbers of women began to secure editorial positions in mainstream newspapers from the mid-20th century but they were often relegated to running and writing the women's pages or social pages. Most of those who held and modelled editorial positions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries did so in weekly or monthly papers they owned themselves or in magazines produced by and for women's organisations, all of which nevertheless discussed general news issues as they affected women as well as matters specific to their sex. Notable among such women were prominent suffragists Louisa Lawson (Radi, ADB; Francis, AWR), who owned, edited and produced Dawn: A Journal for Australian Women (1888-1905), Maybanke Wolstenholme Anderson (Kingston, ADB; Lemon, 'Anderson', AWR), who edited and owned the short-lived Woman's Voice (1894-1895), and Vida Goldstein (Brownfoot, ADB; Land & Carey, AWR), who owned and edited the Woman's Sphere (1900-1905) and, subsequently, the Woman Voter (1909-1919), to publicise the views of the Women's Political Association (and later the Women's Peace Army) of which she was president. Women who worked as editors of leading organisational magazines included poet Marie Pitt (Anderson, ADB), who co-edited the Socialist for the Victorian Socialist Party in 1911. They also included Elizabeth Laurie (Bessie) Rees (Smart, ADB), who edited White Ribbon Signal from its inception as the national voice of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in 1931 to her death in March 1939, and was responsible for the radically progressive tone and content of the journal on matters of race, international peace and social reform, as well as women's rights. May Maxwell (White, ADB; Henningham, 'Maxwell', AWR), long-term editor of the Melbourne Herald's women's page (1910-1934), took on the editorship of the Housewives' Association of Victoria journal, Housewife, when it was revived at the end of 1936. Under her guidance over the following two years, it became a substantial publication and a source of useful information on a range of public issues like housing, industrial conditions and equal pay, as well as on the cost of living, consumer interests and the daily domestic concerns of the association's estimated 60,000 members (Housewife, 1936-1938).

The 'Women's Pages', to which female journalists employed in mainstream newspapers were largely confined, generally focused on soft 'news' like fashion, food, social events and gossip, leaving little space for hard news reporting, and therefore limiting the possibility of promotion (promotions then and now are most often based on continued 'breaking' of hard news stories).
An image of former *Age* editor Graham Perkin with senior staff reporters in 1971 clearly indicates the closed door to leadership roles for women. The one female in the photograph is Nancy Dexter (Nolan, *ADB*), who was famed for her weekly women's column. Jane Sullivan, a former *Age* reporter from the 1970s, in 2004 wrote short biographies of *Age* 'legends' and notes that:

"For most of its existence, The Age has been a man's world. As with other newspapers of its vintage, women entered that world as office workers or copytakers. A few women worked as journalists, but only in their special ghettos on the bland women's and society pages." (Sullivan)

According to Sullivan, Dexter secured her job at the *Age* in 1967 by mistake. Perkin thought he had hired the writer Nancy Cato. The 44-year-old former *Herald* women's section journalist, however, quickly made her mark in the first of her 'Nancy Dexter Takes Note' columns, with an item about sanitary pads, in an era when no one dared mention such things in print. As pioneer feminist Beatrice Faust said: 'She took the banality out of the women's pages and put guts and substance into them' (cited in Sullivan).

The women's page in Australian newspapers evolved from the late 19th century and proved to be a 'mixed blessing' for women journalists (Lemon, *The Women's Pages: Introduction*). In previous years, though greatly hindered by their gender, women who submitted unsolicited contributions to newspapers were able to write on a variety of topics. The arrival of specially named 'women's pages' saw female writers pigeon-holed as only able to write about women's issues. Women journalists were able to publish under their own names but, in many cases, this served to reinforce the stereotypes that were restricting them in the first place. It meant that they remained confined to writing superficial news, bland social notes and household hints (Lemon, *The Women's Pages: Introduction*).

The *Sydney Mail* began a 'women's page' in 1871, employing Mrs Carl Fischer to oversee it in the 1880s. Other papers followed suit but only the *Sydney Morning Herald's* weekly 'Woman's Column' offered articles on serious topics rather than just fashion and household hints. The confinement of women journalists to lightweight issues in the women's pages was enduring-lasting in some cases until the swift changes in the 1970s (Lemon, *The Women's Pages: Introduction*). By then, many argued their content was patronising and that women's issues should not be marginalised or trivialised but, rather, be part of mainstream news. But,
even while they remained entrenched in the 'women's pages', some exceptional women journalists successfully pushed the boundaries, their determination demonstrating that women were capable of achieving excellence in the field beyond narrowly defined women's issues. Under their leadership, the style and content of the 'women's pages' began to change in the interwar period. For example, Winifred Moore (Lemon & Henningham, 'Moore', AWR) included a political column profiling public personalities in the 'Home Circle' section of the Brisbane Courier from the 1920s. But the most impressive 'women's pages' editor of the period was undoubtedly New Zealand-born Stella Allan (Keep, ADB; Lemon & Henningham, 'Allan', AWR), writing as 'Vesta' for the Melbourne Argus's 'Women to Women' from 1908 to 1939. A committed professional, she was in 1910 a foundation member of the Australian Journalists' Association, and, throughout her career, she modelled cadet training in investigative reporting for those who worked under her. Her columns were serious and authoritative discussions of children's interests, social and community welfare and women's issues, among which she included political debates of the day and international affairs. An active member of several organisations, including the National Council of Women and the Country Women's Association, she was appointed Australia's alternate delegate to the League of Nations in 1924 and was also a delegate to the Pan Pacific Women's Conference in 1930. In 1938, just prior to her retirement, Victoria's major women's organisations held a special meeting at the Melbourne Town Hall to pay tribute to Allan's work and influence (Keep, ADB).

Shifting Sands

The great shift for Australian women in print journalism, as in so many professions, came with the advent of World War II (Lemon, 'The Women's Pages: Introduction'). Women began to fill the gaps left by men who were conscripted to fight in the war. Women were appointed to more senior roles. Pat Holmes, for example, was appointed press photographer for the Sydney Sun in 1943 and is thought to have been the first full-time female photographer on an Australian newspaper (Lemon, 'Holmes', AWR). Elizabeth Riddell, appointed to the Sydney Sun in 1939, opened and ran the New York bureau of the Daily Mirror during the war years (Henningham, 'Riddell', AWR). Women were also allocated more hard news stories. Lorraine Stumm was the first Australian woman accredited as a war correspondent (Lemon, Stumm', AWR), and Pat Jarrett's first assignment on return from a stint as press agent to Australian ambassador Richard Casey in the United States was to cover the Leonski murders for the Melbourne Herald. After the war and until 1973, she edited the 'women's pages' for the Sun News-Pictorial but, like
Allan and Dexter, she refused to be confined to social and domestic subjects and published stories on equal pay, higher education for girls and other broad social issues (Lemon, 'Jarrett', AWR).

After the war, opportunities for women in journalism were once again limited. Historian Sharyn Pearce notes that the ubiquitous small printing press of the 19th century had by the 1950s been replaced by fourteen metropolitan daily papers that were all producing similar content. Women were largely excluded from writing or editing general news and were restricted in subject matter. Despite this, some women did manage to carve out a niche for themselves, though many, like Jarrett, had to do so through the 'women's pages'. However, Betty Osborn (then Roberts) was well known as the 'girl reporter' for the Argus; after a short stint on the 'women's pages', she was assigned to report on the Legislative Assembly before being appointed to cover the Olympic Games in Melbourne in 1956 (Lemon, 'Osborn', AWR). Margaret Jones joined the Sydney Morning Herald in 1954 and became the paper's first Washington correspondent in 1965 during Lyndon Johnson's presidency. She was appointed the paper's foreign correspondent in Beijing in 1973 and European correspondent in 1980. In 1972, she joined the successful campaign to allow women full membership of the Sydney Journalists Club (Lemon, 'Jones', AWR). Catherine Martin joined the West Australian in 1957 and specialised in medical reporting. Her groundbreaking investigation twenty years later into the high incidence of death and disease among asbestos mine workers and their families at Wittenoom won her the most prestigious award in journalism—the inaugural Gold Walkley Award in 1978. She won two more Walkleys and, in 1982, was appointed a Member of the Order of Australian for services to journalism (Francis, Henningham & Lemon, AWR; SMH, 1 May 2009). When the Walkley Awards began in 1956, female cadet Eva Sommer (Henningham, 'Sommer', AWR) won 'best news story' for the Sydney Sun, but it would be another twenty-two years before another woman would win the same category.

The emergence of second-wave feminism alongside various other social movements caused enormous upheaval in the newspaper world from the 1960s through to the 1980s, as in society in general. One especially prominent woman journalist of the 1960s was Charmian Clift (Wheatley, ADB; Lemon, 'Clift', AWR), who wrote a weekly column on controversial social and political issues for the Sydney Morning Herald and the Melbourne Herald from 1965 until her death in 1969. Asked to write from a woman's point of view, she instead wrote essays on issues such as the Vietnam War, world hunger and the Greek junta. But she was not so rare among women journalists of note by this time. Two editors in particular were now realising the benefits of drawing on the wealth of under-
utilised female talent. Barbara Lemon ('The Women's Pages: Introduction') notes that John Pringle of the *Sydney Morning Herald* promptly tapped into a 'rich and completely unexploited resource by using women journalists. I begged, borrowed and stole such brilliant writers as Margaret Jones, Helen Frizell, Sandra Jobson and the brilliant if wayward Lillian Roxon'. Roxon (Milliken, *ADB*; Lemon, *AWR*) had fled with her parents from Mussolini's Italy, arriving in Australia in 1940. During her student years at Sydney University, she was involved with the Sydney 'Push' and, after graduating in 1955, worked as a reporter and section editor for Frank Packer's *Weekend*. Later she became the first full-time female employee at the New York office of the *Sydney Morning Herald* but also wrote for many other publications. Her main interest by the 1960s was rock music and she is best known for her remarkable *Rock Encyclopedia*, first published in 1969 and republished in 1971 and 1980. She died from an asthma attack in 1973.

*Age* editor Graeme Perkin, as previously noted, also began to employ women as journalists from the 1970s. The shift in the nature of newspaper work available to female journalists was particularly dramatic in the 1960s and 70s because women now began to cover hard news stories. The *women's pages* had virtually disappeared by the end of the period. The long and notable career of Michelle Grattan began in 1970 when she joined Perkin's *Age* as a political correspondent, rising to become its chief political correspondent in Canberra within six years (Lemon, 'The Women's Pages: Introduction'). She received the Walkley Award for journalism leadership in 2006 (Henningham & Lemon, 'Grattan', *AWR*). Anne Summers (Heywood, 'Summers', *AWR*) rose to prominence as a journalist after the publication of her powerful treatise, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, in 1975. Impressed by Summers' book, the then editor of the *National Times*, Max Suich, immediately hired her (ABC, 'GNT Profiles Anne Summers'). In a stellar career that continues today, Summers won a Walkley Award in 1976, edited the American feminist magazine MS, and was editor of *Good Weekend*. She continues to write long-form journalism (most recently for the independent *Monthly Magazine*). Both Summers (1989) and Grattan (2004) were made Officers of the Order of Australia for services to journalism.

**Conclusion**

There is no doubt that woman have made great strides into the once-male bastion of the newsroom. Yet the presence of some high-profile women in the print media almost certainly contributes to a gulf between perception and reality. The same applies to the broader news media, including broadcast journalism, as is demonstrated in the most recent statistical data included in a 2011 global report from the US-based International Women's Media Foundation. This
provides data to show that the glass ceiling for Australian women journalists, print and broadcast, is found at the senior professional level (senior writers, editors and anchors, among other experienced reporting staff), where women have inched toward parity with men at 40.4 per cent. Women's participation is higher (46 per cent) in the junior professional level. At the top levels, however, the Australian media remains heavily male dominated. More detailed discussion of this imbalance, together with an overview of 'aspects of newsroom culture that continue to hamper women's career progression' is provided in my chapter in the edited collection edited by Francis, Grimshaw and Standish, Seizing the Initiative (North, 2013, 262-4). The reality remains that, while there has been some improvement in recent years, female journalists are still employed en masse in low-status, low-income positions, struggling to attain real influence in editorial decision-making roles. Media managers are aware that they have long excluded women from leadership positions. The former Fairfax editor-in-chief, Mark Scott, now the head of the ABC, suggests that women's under-representation in the senior ranks is a concern: 'What we are doing is creating an environment that is less blokey and provides more of an opportunity for women' (quoted in Jackson, 3). Similarly, in 2004 the then editor-in-chief of the Age, Andrew Jaspan, acknowledged the problem saying: 'Quite often newspapers are run by men with very much a male-oriented agenda' (Catalano, 22). Nevertheless, media managers still privilege particular ways of doing journalism that work to underplay women's talents and hold them back from attaining leadership positions.

Published Resources

Australian Women's Register Entries


Books


Book Sections


Journal Articles


Newspaper Articles


Jackson, Sally, 'Equal Work, but Women Journalists Get Less Pay than their Male Counterparts', *The Australian*, 22 May 2003, p. B3. Details


Reports


Online Resources


Kingston, Beverley, 'Anderson, Maybanke Susannah (1845-1927)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National


**Related Women**

Allan, Stella

Anderson, Maybanke Susannah (1845 - 1927)

Bates, Daisy May (1859 - 1951)
Bates, Nancy (1948 - )
Buttrose, Ita Clare (1942 - )
Goldstein, Vida Jane
Gribble, Diana (1942 - 2011)
Jacoby, Anita
Jones, Caroline (1938 - )
Kostakidis, Mary (1954 - )
Lawson, Louisa (1848 - 1920)
Macready, Agnes
Pippos, Angela (1969 - )
Summers, Anne Fairhurst
Syme, Kathleen Alice
Throsby, Margaret (1941 - )
Travers, Carmel
Young, Stella

Work on The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia was undertaken as part of the Australian Research Council's Linkage Projects funding scheme (project number LP100200304).

Published by the Australian Women's Archives Project 2014
ISBN 978-0-7340-4873-8
http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0435b.htm

The Encyclopedia uses the Online Heritage Resource Manager, a tool developed by the eScholarship Research Centre, part of the University Library at the University of Melbourne.

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.
What do we mean by this?