

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Getting Equal. The History of Australian Feminism* by **Marilyn Lake**. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1999. Pp. xi + 316; \$24.95 (paper).

In 1973, in the first issue of the second wave feminist journal, *Refractory Girl*, Anne Summers lamented the absence of “a comprehensive history of feminism in Australia” (33). Twenty-six years later, the first major history has appeared.

Why has it taken so long? When second wave feminist historians began to research the subject, they were confronted with four common misconceptions: that there have been only two waves of feminism, with a long gap in between; that although Australian women were among the first in the world to win the vote, they did not do anything with it; that Australian feminism failed politically because they largely failed to win election to parliament; and that Australian feminists were only concerned to advance the interests of white, middle-class, career women. To address these negative assumptions, feminist historians had to work against the grain of mainstream Australian history. Marilyn Lake, the key feminist historian of twentieth-century Australia, has been engaged in this project for the last fifteen years. Now at the end of the twentieth century, she has produced the long awaited text.

Lake argues that feminism as a movement, a set of ideas, and as a collective force was a major player in Australian history in the twentieth century, but that it always operated against the dominant discourse of masculinity. While decades of feminist activism have won women equal rights to participate in social, economic and political life in Australia, it has been achieved within the masculinist rubric that men’s way of organising the world is natural.

Lake locates Australian feminism in four historical periods: pre-suffrage feminism, from the 1870s to federation; maternal feminism from 1901 to the early 1930s; equality feminism from the 1930s to 1970; and from 1970, liberation feminism. The first three periods can be loosely defined as first wave feminism. It differed from liberation feminism in its distrust of sexuality as defined by men and its concern to elevate the condition of women as mothers and to protect women and children from masculine excess. In the first two periods, campaigns for suffrage and the concept of maternal citizenship were paramount and met with degrees of success within the structures of Australian masculinity. In the third period of equality feminism, the campaigns focussed on women’s emancipation in the workplace and in public life, but this direct challenge to the structures of Australian masculinity prevented much headway. In all three periods, feminists acted as exemplary citizens determined to claim their rights as women. They had defined leaders and belonged to organisations that promoted ideals of citizenship.

By contrast, the fourth period of liberation feminism, usually called

second wave feminism, produced self-styled revolutionaries, who celebrated an active female sexuality and were openly scornful of the politics of reform and respectability of their predecessors. They demanded the removal of stereotypes of women as mothers, as well as discriminatory practices against women in the workforce, and challenged the masculine hegemony of parliamentary politics. Liberation feminists belonged to organisations that practised transformative personal and political behaviour and had no recognised leaders.

Lake addresses these differences by focussing on feminism's continuities. She shows how first wave feminist organisations pioneered the strategy that personified second wave feminism, of polling parliamentary candidates on women's issues. She shows how equal pay and working conditions were as much a rallying point for first as for second wave feminism. And she shows how first and second wave feminists worked across class and cultural boundaries, in international as well as national organisations as well as within and outside the major political parties in order to achieve their aims, even if they were not always in agreement about them. The burden of Lake's argument is that feminism, like any social and political movement that operates against the dominant discourse, is always open to fracture and discord.

In her exploration of some of these differences, Lake sometimes accords each view the same political weight. She implies for example that many Australian feminists in the 1930s supported Mary Bennett's position on the appalling treatment of Aboriginal women. This was clearly not the case. Bennett was a voice in the wilderness. She had no organised group of women behind her and was ruthlessly outflanked by Bessie Rischbeith, the leader of the largest feminist organisation in Australia and an ardent advocate of the removal of Aboriginal children. In this instance the narrative conceals the dominance of racist discourse in feminist politics at this time.

Despite this problem, Lake's narrative produces three significant outcomes. First is the emergence of new heroines of feminism. Muriel Heagney has always lurked in the shadows of first wave feminism. Now she emerges as a central figure. It is time she became the subject of a major biography. Second is the recognition that feminist discord is part of the process of social change. Lake records the row between Jessie Street and Muriel Heagney over strategies to achieve equal pay in 1940 and the conflict between Bessie Rischbeith and Street over the Women's Charter in 1946. She also records the fractures that quickly emerged in second wave feminism about relations with the Whitlam government, the appearance of lesbianism and the critique by Aboriginal women of white feminism's racist agenda. Rather than decrying these differences Lake makes them part of the historical narrative of a major movement for social change and part of the politics of twentieth-century Australia.

Third is the withering indictment of twentieth-century Australian masculinism in its limited understanding of the meaning of equality in relation to women. Lake presents overwhelming evidence to show how unions,

government and business always combined to repress women's claims for equality. Feminism's achievements must be placed within this context. Indeed the male heroes of feminism, A. B. Piddington, H. V. Evatt and E.G. Whitlam, stand as beacons in the sea of male persecution.

If Lake has produced an uneven narrative, it is because our knowledge and understanding of first and second wave feminism is still far from complete. But she has successfully placed feminism as a movement firmly within the mainstream of twentieth-century Australian political history and has clearly demonstrated that the quest for equality has still to be won. This is a mighty achievement.

LYNDALL RYAN  
*University of Newcastle*